

Transnational Star-constructing: Hara Setsuko's Early Star Persona and the Changing Images of Japan¹

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Hara Setsuko (1920-2015) is an iconic star of Japanese cinema.² Voted number one Japanese actress of the twentieth century in 2000 (*Asahi Shinbun* 2000)³ in Japan, she is well-known internationally through her portrayal of the quintessential Japanese woman, notably in her collaborations with director Ozu Yasujiro. Looking back at the very beginning of her career, this paper demonstrates how Hara's persona at that point in time was constructed by and fed into an interplay of the global and the local, of international aspirations and national desires. Moreover, this seeming rift constituted the specific quality of Hara's star image as somehow apart from ordinary Japanese in her beauty and at the same time essentially Japanese. In 1937, a German National Socialist Newspaper reported that a German director had discovered a new international star in Japan (*NSZ Rheinfront*, 27.03.1937, cited in Fanck 1938, 17).⁴ Eventually, but much later, she became one of Japan's most iconic actresses, and Japaneseness one of the main attributes of her star image.⁵

Hara is often likened to the Western actress who signified the divine quality of the star most of all: Greta Garbo (e.g. by Yomota 2000b).⁶ Both Garbo and Hara are seen to possess a transcendental quality that removes them from mere mortals. Garbo is named 'The Divine' or 'Dream Princess of Eternity'. Hara is known in Japan as 'Eternal Virgin', and her image is also discussed as 'Goddess of Militarism' and 'Goddess of Democracy' (軍国の女神, *gunkoku no megami*; 民主主義の女神, *minshushugi no megami*) (e.g. by Honchi 2006; Yomota 2000b). During her career, Hara almost consistently embodied the concept of 'the Japanese woman' (as sister, daughter, wife, and sometimes mother). Hara's star persona presents an interesting question, as she stands as an icon of 'Japaneseness' in all its seemingly contradicting variations—militarism, postwar democracy, nostalgia for times past. While her beauty is considered as being 'apart from ordinary Japanese', she never loses the quality of authenticity. Hara emerged with a vengeance in public discourse at the age of 16 in mid-1936. Interestingly, relatively little attention has been paid to the context of the early formation of her star persona.

The film that catapulted Hara into public interest is expressive of the interplay between

industrial, social and political discourses: *Atarashiki tsuchi* (新しき土, *New Earth*) or, for its German release, *Die Tochter des Samurai* (*The Samurai's Daughter*) is a German-Japanese coproduction, conceived of in 1935, produced in 1936 and released in both countries in 1937, a time of political rapprochement. Hara was selected for one of the main roles, a young woman called Yamato Mitsuko, in this high-profile project, which in itself caused a media sensation in Japan. *Atarashiki tsuchi* was her eleventh film, contradicting myths about this being her first main role⁷ or the German director Arnold Fanck having 'discovered her'. Still, with this event Hara began to play a prominent part in public imagination. As seen in the release titles for primarily the German market (*Die Tochter des Samurai*; *Die Liebe der Mitsu* [*Mitsu's Love*]; *Tapfere kleine Mitsuko* [*Brave little Mitsuko*]), Mitsuko and in extension Hara Setsuko took centre stage. In the Japanese discourse, where two versions existed, and both were titled *Atarashiki tsuchi*, images of Mitsuko dominated publicity and press material.

Part of the film's objective was to present Japan's true image to international audiences while at the same time kick-starting Japanese film exports. Within this discourse, previous foreign films on Japan had emanated stereotypical and distorted versions of Japaneseness.⁸ The central question of authenticity influenced Fanck's casting decisions, once he had arrived in Japan. He looked for what he called: 'types': 'the Japanese man', 'the Japanese woman', in order to convey a simplified but authentic image of Japan to foreign audiences (Fanck 1938).

When visiting the Nikkatsu Studios, Fanck saw Hara on set of Yamanaka Sadao's *Kōchiyama Sōshun* (河内山宗俊, *The Priest of Darkness* 1936). At the very beginning of her career, what was marketed as her 'modern looks' (e.g. *Yokohama Bōeki Shinbun* 1935)—her tall built and clear-cut facial features—predetermined her classification as an actress for contemporary dramas. Crucially, Fanck, looking for 'the Japanese woman' saw her in a kimono and corresponding hairstyle on set of her first period drama. The final casting decision, however, was made only after he had seen a photograph of her in a 'Western-style' suit. The styling of the heroine Mitsuko reflects Fanck's two impressions of Hara and of Japan itself, with Mitsuko as its signifier. But despite his attempt at a balance between 'modern' and 'traditional', the overwhelming visual impression is that of a young woman of times past, anachronistic for a film specifically meant to show contemporary Japan.

Although the film cannot be said to have broken cultural stereotypes, it was a box office hit in Japan. Critical discourse weighed its anticipated success as an export film against its questionable representation of Japan. Hara and Mitsuko, however, emerged as the true stars, and despite the aforementioned anachronisms, their authenticity as quintessentially Japanese remained almost unquestioned.⁹

The discourse on Hara as Japan's new star reached unprecedented heights when her journey to Germany in March 1937 was announced; firstly, in order to attend the film's German premiere

and secondly, to take the main role in Japan's 'second international film', to be produced in Germany this time. The fact that neither *Atarashiki tsuchi* nor Hara's acting were considered as very good and export attempts eventually failed became unimportant within this discourse and were overridden by the promise of 'international stardom'.

Japan, despite being a major producer, had been unsuccessful in positioning itself as a big player in the international film business. Export, however, while being an industrial aim, was also a matter of national prestige, understood as a signifier of Japan being on a par with other major film producing and exporting nations.¹⁰ If this expensive project failed in terms of export, it had to be successful in some other way: The next step towards international recognition then was to have an international film star of their own; and this film was to be her vehicle, so much so that the film was even called 'Hara Setsuko's *The Samurai's Daughter*' (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1937c). At that time only two actors with an East Asian background had reached international fame, namely Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong, and both stemmed from a Hollywood context, the big other in the race for global recognition of a local film industry. Therefore, Hara's anticipated success abroad and heightened status at home reflect a national desire for the international. Wada-Marciano has argued that, at that time, 'in the case of Japanese cinema, modernity was constructed within in already permeating nationalism', and she discerns in woman's film 'both a desire oriented toward the West and a desire for national identity' (Wada-Marciano 2008, 85). Adding to this the understanding of stars as projection spaces for social fantasies and desires, we begin to understand why Hara could be both: a tall modern beauty, travelling the world, and an icon of traditional Japaneseness.

Hara was accompanied by her brother-in-law, director Kumagai Hisatora, as well as producer Kawakita Nagamasa and his wife, Kashiko, who intended to sell the international version and launch Japanese film—and now also its very own international star—worldwide. The Japanese press provides us with all sorts of gossip that is instrumental in forming the 'raw material' of the person into the star image (Dyer 2005, 5). Crucially, in terms of her signifying 'Japan', Hara announced that she was going to wear only *kimono* during her time abroad. She was meant to stand for and advertise Japan and the ideal Japanese woman (*Yamato Nadeshiko*). She packed 5 Western style outfits for convenience on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and 15 *kimono*, including one *shimada*-style wig (*Kokumin Shinbun* 1937).

On their leaving from Tokyo station, a huge crowd of fans had gathered to wave Hara good-bye. The pride in 'the world's sweetheart' (*sekai no koibito*, 世界の恋人) and hope for Japanese film was intermingled with nationalist notions. Hara was compared with and considered at least equal to, for example, the German Leni Riefenstahl or her co-actress in *Atarashiki tsuchi*, Ruth Eweler. The admiring glances Hara's beauty, her Japanese skin texture and her Japanese kimonos drew in Germany and later the US were frequently pointed

out. When Hara returned to Japan after four months, in her new authority as internationally travelled film star, she reported—and at the same time signified—that Japanese culture clearly was not inferior to any other (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1937b).

It is interesting to note that the political, sphere plays no major role in the Japanese reports, apart from being utilised to promote both film and actress. Hara meeting Minister Goebbels or Ambassador Mushanokōji is reported on a similar level as her visits to film studios. During her stay in Germany, Hara travelled across the country and greeted the audiences in over twenty theatres. She met the mayor of Berlin, visited the Olympic village and the UFA Babelsberg Studios, shaking hands with the main stars (Hara 1937). However, the German industry, controlled by the propaganda ministry, was not at all interested in promoting a foreign film industry¹¹ or, in that respect, in building up a Japanese film star.¹² The effective promotion of Hara was exclusively Japanese business.

Although no follow-up project materialised, the Japanese press hailed her as an international actress (e.g. *Yomiuri Shinbun* 1937c), staying at Berlin's luxury hotel Eden, where the diva Marlene Dietrich had been a regular guest. She celebrated her seventeenth birthday on the famous ship *Queen Mary*, on their way to New York. In the US, she met stars such as Marlene Dietrich Joseph von Sternberg and Spencer Tracey. Japanese newspapers reported on the promise of a Hollywood career, but eventually, this prospect was cut short by Hara being re-called home. Following *Atarashiki tsuchi*, she had changed studios; from Nikkatsu to the newly emerging and aggressively advancing Tōhō block. Within the fierce industrial competition, Tōhō's new international star was urgently needed.

A second crucial component of her star image inherited from this project was the seemingly harmonious fusion of the local and the global. Rumours of a mixed racial heritage still abound today, as with Catherine Russell who mentions her 'reputed quarter-German heritage that may account for her slightly Caucasian look' (Russell 2008, 268).¹³ While this aspect seems counterintuitive with regards 'cultural purity' and Japaneseness that, as I have argued, are a major part of her star image, it is clearly based in the transnational cinematic encounters in which her image as both international and national was constructed. In the context of the German-Japanese coproduction and her journey abroad, there were no remarks regarding a part German heritage. The foreign connection was clearly built up within the context of *The Samurai's Daughter*. After her return to Japan, one of Hara's first public appearances was in a musical revue, *Alt Heidelberg (Old Heidelberg)*, a rather kitsch German play containing heavy tropes of nostalgia and Germanness.¹⁴ And Hara, with her international flair, played the romantic German heroine Charlotte (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1937a). Clearly, the local desire for the global was projected on and played out on the actress.¹⁵

To conclude, I will skip over Hara's subsequent films in which she portrayed decidedly Western-style heroines and the wartime stage of her career in which she starred in films intended to 'raise the fighting spirit'.¹⁶ In terms of her star-image, created to represent Japan to the outside, she continued to stand for Japanese womanhood. In 1939 she was 'the face of Japan' at the New York World Fair (Weisenfeld 2009), and, in November 1946, neatly blanking out political and ideological fissures, she appeared on the first post-war colour print poster: a giant add for Shiseido Cosmetics. Hara's smiling face, looking freshly into a new future, for Kramer signalled 'the emergence of the postwar modern nation of Japan, including the new Japanese woman' (Kramer and Watson 2003, 62). Just a few days before, on October 29, Kurosawa Akira's *Waga seishun ni kuinashi* (我が青春に悔いなし, *No Regrets for Our Youth*, 1946) had been released with Hara in the leading role. With this supposedly anti-militarist film, supported by the occupation authorities, Hara became the 'Goddess of Democracy' (Yomota 2000a, 131-32). Again, she stood for something absolute, a concept, rather than a person. The seeming contradiction between the goddess of 'nationalist' militarism and the goddess of 'international' democracy was reconciled by the fusion of the local and the global inherent in her star image, which, always, remained 'the Japanese woman'.

However, the star image's actual nature as never essential but constructed in an ongoing process becomes clear in a crucial editorial intervention: The move from militarism towards democracy was not as smooth as it seems: Around the time *Waga seishun* was released, a magazine article traced Hara's rise to stardom (*Eiga Fan* 1946): The GHQ censor had deleted all references to *Atarashiki tsuchi* and Germany out of the article and hence, at least for a while, out of her star persona.

The star Hara Setsuko—inaugurated at the threshold towards a time of ultra-nationalism characterised by inherent contradictions—mirrors the question of what Japan is or should be, because it was—and kept being—constructed out of this very discourse

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Notes

- 1 This is derived from an article published in *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 6:1 (2014), available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17564905.2014.92939>.
- 2 At the time of the CAAS conference in Seoul, Hara's passing away on September 5 had not been made public yet, in accordance with her instructions. The information was first reported by the media on November 5, 2015.
- 3 The *Asahi Shinbun* reported on the results of *Kinema Junpō*'s ranking '20 seiki no eiga sutā'.
- 4 'With Setsuko Hara, Fanck has discovered a young Japanese actress who will soon enjoy international fame'.
- 5 Unlike, for example, Yamaguchi Yoshiko's (aka Ri Kōran) fluid identity.
- 6 This perceived similarity to Garbo is discussed not only in terms of Hara's biography, but also in terms of her physical appearance and its appeal in terms of her screen attraction (see Yomota 2000b).
- 7 She debuted in 1935 with a leading role in the contemporary teen love story *Tamerau nakare wakōdo yo* (ためらふ勿れ若人よ, *Don't Hesitate Young Folks!*, Taguchi Satoshi). With her first film, Aida

Masae also received her stage name Hara Setsuko: Negishi Kanichi, head of the Tamagawa Studios, took the female protagonist's name 'Setsu' and decided on 'Hara' as an harmonious last name.

- 8 The French film *La Bataille* (*The Danger Line*, 1923, Édouard-Émile Violet) served as a prime example of such a 'national disgrace film' (*kokujoku eiga*, 国辱映画).
- 9 One exception, notably, was by a feminist writer (Ichikawa 1937).
- 10 Export was seen as one necessary step on the evolutionary ladder of national development. On Japan's construction of itself as a 'nation' see for example (Duara 2003).
- 11 Goebbels's remark in context with a binational 'culture film agreement' (*Kulturfilmabkommen*) 1937/1938 (RMVP 1938).
- 12 For both economic and ideological reasons.
- 13 Russell's statement stands in an interesting contrast with High's categorisation of actors corresponding to 'Western standards of beauty' those and 'more traditionally Japanese-looking'; Hara Setsuko, for High, was perceived as the latter (High 2003, 346).
- 14 The title of Wilhelm Mayer-Förster's play—derided in the 1920s for its kitschy nostalgia by progressive German artists such as Bertolt Brecht—had been altered to *Tasogare no Haideruberuhi* (*Heidelberg at Dusk*).
- 15 As Raymond Durnat as argued with regard to the relation of film stars and the the national self image: 'The stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself' (Durnat 1967, 137).
- 16 Her first foray into this genre was with *Shanghai rikusentai* (上海陸戦隊, *Japanese Marines in Shanghai*, 1939), directed by her brother-in-law, Kumagai Hisatora. Hara played the Chinese girl Ming Zhu, whose anti-Japanese attitude changes after witnessing the occupiers' good will. Yomota argues that it is here that Yamaguchi Yoshiko and Hara become distinct in their nationalised star personas, as Hara did not 'work' as Chinese (Yomota 2000b).
- 17 Much of the material consulted stems form a scrapbook collection held by the Kawakita Memorial Film Institute. The age and quality of the cut-outs has, in some cases, rendered some information, such as page numbers, illegible.