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Gambling with the Nation: Heroines of the Japanese Yakuza Film, 1955-1975

Jennifer Coates, Kyoto University, Japan

Abstract: A revamped period drama genre resurfaced after the Allied occupation of Japan (1945-1952), featuring androgynous comic heroines, who cross-dressed to perform male and female yakuza roles. By the late 1960s, they had been replaced by increasingly sexualized figures, and later by the 'pink' violence of the 'girl boss' sub-genre. Yet masculine themes in the 'nihilistic' yakuza films of the late 1960s and 1970s have been the focus of most scholarship on the genre, with scant attention paid to the female yakuza film. This paper offers an iconographic reading of the heroines of the yakuza genre, arguing that re-imagining of a postwar 'Japaneseness' was conducted as much through the yakuza genre's heroines as its heroes. Through analysis of key visual motifs, narrative tropes, and star personae, the image of the female yakuza can be read as a commentary on social conditions in postwar Japan. We can see the rapid social and political changes of postwar Japan reflected and mediated through the changing image of the female yakuza heroine during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Locating the Yakuza Heroines

The Japanese yakuza, or gangster, genre is popularly associated with masculine characters, themes, and narratives. Since the global success of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (2003-2004), however, the Japanese-inspired yakuza heroine has become more visible. In Japan, popular yakuza texts featured female characters from the genre's peak in the late 1960s and 1970s, through long-running series such as *Gangster Women* (*Gokudō no onnatachi*, 1986-2005), and into contemporary art-house cinema in award-winning films like *Memories of Matsuko* (*Kiraware Matsuko no isshō*, Nakashima Tetsuya, 2006). The dominant association of the yakuza genre with masculinity in Anglophone criticism and scholarship is in part due to scholarly and popular writing since the 1970s, which has focused almost exclusively on masculine heroes and narratives. The first Anglophone writers to bring the yakuza genre to the attention of non-Japanese viewers[1] depicted the genre as largely populated by male heroes, stars, and directors, eliding the female characters and stars

[1] For example, Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, and Schrader, 'Yakuza: A Primer'.

of yakuza cinema. This skewing of scholarly focus towards the masculine elements of the genre may have been shaped in part by the strongly auteurist tendencies of Japanese film scholarship in both English and Japanese from the 1950s to the 1970s (and arguably into the present day). An auteur-focused approach to film studies often privileges masculine-identified characteristics such as 'genius', insistence, and leadership, neglecting female roles and star personae. Male directors and stars were lauded for their part in creating iconic male yakuza characters, while writing on female performances tended to restrict analysis to the male director's relationship with his female star.

This narrow focus on male-led yakuza film has missed the vital role that female characterizations have played in the genre's engagement with the changing social and political climate of Japan after 1945. Consideration of female representations in the yakuza genre is particularly relevant to the casting of Japan in a 'feminized' role after defeat,[2] and subsequent anxiety expressed in Japanese popular cultural productions. This article offers an iconographic reading of selected heroines of the yakuza genre, arguing that this re-imagining of a postwar 'Japaneseness' was conducted as much through the yakuza genre's heroines as its heroes. Through analysis of key visual motifs, narrative tropes, and star personae, I argue for the yakuza heroine as a commentary on changing conditions in postwar Japan.

The peak period of the yakuza genre's production and popularity occurred during the rapid social change of the postwar era.[3] As the Allied occupation of Japan

[2] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally*, 5.
[3] According to *Kinema junpō* (*Film Report* magazine) records which list the top ten box office earners, critical successes, and popular hits each year, films featuring yakuza characters entered the box office top ten in 1960 with *Road of Chivalry* (*Ninkyō nakasendō*, Matsuda Sadatsugu, 1960), which made 350,910,000 yen, the highest box office taking that year; *Kinema junpō besuto ten 85 kai zenshi 1924-2011*, 158. While the *Kinema junpō* figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 yen (*man*) and fluctuate over time due to inflation and changes in the tax on ticket prices in 1973, it is evident that the top

(1945–1952) drew to a close, yakuza characters emerged from sub-genres of period drama (*jidaigeki*) developed by studios keen to capitalize on newly emerging demographics in postwar film audiences. The ideological impact of defeat and occupation was swiftly re-negotiated between the end of the occupation and the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, which marked Japan's re-entry into the global political sphere, along with membership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the same year. Following Miriam Hansen's understanding of the cinema as a horizon upon which popular concerns and anxieties are 'reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated',[4] I suggest that a range of nuanced and conflicted popular sentiments related to rapid social change in post-occupation Japan are expressed and mediated through the changing image of the yakuza heroine. After the occupation a revamped *jidaigeki* (period drama) genre developed, featuring androgynous comic heroines played by Misora Hibari (1937–1989), who cross-dressed to perform both male and female yakuza roles. Misora's cheerful, childlike cross-dressing yakuza was followed in the late 1960s by the deadly serious Fuji Junko (1945–) in the *Red Peony Gambler* series (*Hibotan bakuto*, 1968–1972),[5] and later by the sexualized, or 'pink' violence of the 'girl boss' sub-genre epitomized by the films of Ike Reiko (1953–).

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earning film each year was the most popular and widely seen, at least until video rental began. Yakuza films begin to appear in the *Kinema junpō* reader's choice of best ten films in 1972 with *Female Prisoner no. 701: Scorpion/ Joshū 701 gō: Sasori* (Ito Shunya, 1972) in seventh place, *Theatre of Life: Story of Youth, Passion and Spirit/ Jinsei gekijō: seishun, aiyoku, zankyō hen* (Katō Tai, 1972) in eighth place and *Modern Yakuza: Outlaw Killer/ Gendai yakuza: hito kiri yota* (Fukasaku Kinji, 1972) in tenth position; *Kinema junpō besuto ten 85 kai zenshi 1924-2011*, 294. Yakuza films appeared in every box office, readers' and critics' top ten lists each year until 1976, when even this prolific genre began to suffer from sharply declining cinema audience numbers and studios invested less in star-studded productions.

[4] Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses', 342.

[5] Fuji Junko was the stage name used by actress Shundō Junko for the first part of her career. She starred as Fuji Junko in a series of popular *jidaigeki* and yakuza films in the 1960s, before retiring in 1972 on her marriage to kabuki theatre actor Onoe Kikugoro VII. She returned to television acting as Fuji Sumiko in 1974, before moving back into cinema, this time largely appearing in the melodrama and romance genres. She was awarded the Blue Ribbon Prize for best supporting actress in 1999 and 2006.

Using an iconographic method of analysis, the article draws out the affective resonances of the yakuza heroine image in this era of social change. Iconographic analysis deals with the 'iconic layer' of an image, as it connects to the 'morphological layer' and the 'semantic layer' (the purely physical and the indicative, or meaning-laden layer, respectively). The arrangement of particular material phenomena (such as costume, color, lighting) can structure meaning-making, and recurring material phenomena can create a 'short-cut' to semantic meaning, thereby enhancing recognition and affective response.[6] Reading repetitive motifs in the visual imagery of the yakuza genre, I suggest that the changing image and character of the female yakuza from the 1950s to the 1970s resonates with a broader cultural process of change in popular understandings of what it meant to be 'Japanese', at a time when the nation's occupied and defeated status was transforming into the global economic and cultural power we know today.

Occupation Legacies: The Yakuza Heroine as Shifting Signifier

During the occupation, the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (hereafter SCAP) had prioritized the creation of a new democratic capitalist imaginary among Japanese citizens, using information dissemination and censorship processes that mirrored those of wartime to ensure the production of media that reflected these ideals. Occupation censors and civilian information bureau personnel were particularly sensitive to depictions of women on film, as one of SCAP's stated goals was the emancipation of women, mandated by articles 14 and 24 of the 1947 Constitution.[7] Head of the Civil Information and

[6] Godzic, 'Iconographic-Iconological Method in Film Research', 156.
[7] As early as October 1945 General Douglas MacArthur had suggested equal rights for women as the highest of five priority reforms. Universal suffrage, female admission to national universities, and the

Education division David Conde advised filmmakers not to 'confine women to roles consisting only of childbearing and housework, considering their newly upgraded social status'.[8] Film heroines began to present a more active and independent appearance, though these performances were largely restricted to the contemporary sphere of the *gendaigeki* (contemporary drama) genre, as period films were particular targets for censors intent on removing perceived remnants of Imperial ideology.

After 1952, the rigorous advocacy and censorship pursued by the occupiers were replaced by a Japanese movie-regulating body modeled on the Motion Pictures Association of America.[9] Though SCAP personnel were no longer watching, much of the imagery and characterizations suggested for inclusion in films during the occupation had by the mid-1950s become part of the visual language of Japanese cinema. While the studios took full advantage of the lifting of the ban on *jidaigeki* to revisit themes from which the yakuza genre would develop, female character tropes from occupation-era film, such as the gentle wife, brave mother, and emancipated young woman remain evident in post-occupation characterizations. Misora Hibari's tomboy characters and Fuji Junko's gracious 'Red Peony' Oryū are in many ways symptomatic of occupation-era prescriptions. Their inclusion in the yakuza genre blends the gender ideology advocated and normalized during the occupation with that of an imagined 'traditional' prewar Japan.

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elimination of the prewar adultery law followed, while the Land Reform Law of October 1946 allowed women to inherit equal shares of property. Article 14 of the 1947 Constitution states 'there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of creed, sex, social status or family origin', while Article 24 guarantees 'the essential equality of the sexes'. According to a survey by *Asahi shimbun* in April 1947, 57.9% of respondents supported the family reform while 37.4% were opposed. Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 129.

[8] Hirano, *Mr Smith Goes to Tokyo*, 149.

[9] The Eiga Rinri Kanri Iinkai (Film Classifications and Ratings Committee), reorganized in 1956 as the Eirin Kanri Iinkai and shortened to 'Eirin', classifies Japanese films according to violent and sexualized content. While Eirin does not practice censorship, a film without Eirin certification is often difficult to release in commercial cinemas.

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano suggests that inter-war Japanese cinema was a 'cultural "translation" of ordinary people's desires, needs and hopes'.[10] It is in this sense that I posit the female yakuza heroine as a shifting signifier, or a composite image of occupation-era desires blending into the needs and hopes expressed post-occupation, as Japan grew richer and returned to a powerful position in the global sphere politically, economically, and culturally. I suggest that the yakuza heroine is a visual field of contestation where the concerns of the occupation and its aftermath were negotiated by combining and contrasting postwar gender norms with idealized 'traditional' Japanese values.

'In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun': National Imagery and the Yakuza Heroine

From Hiratsuka Raichō's association of Japanese womanhood with the sun goddess Amaterasu, founder of the Imperial family line,[11] to the rhetorical use of female imagery during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Pacific War (1941–1945), the abstracted female image has a long history as representative of the nation. Noriko Horiguchi observes a link between the image of the female body and concepts of the nation in the organ-theory of the Meiji era, which took the body as a metaphor for Japan itself. Organ-theory was foundational to the 1896 draft of the Japanese Civil Code, following which bodily metaphors became common in legal discourse, developing into a re-popularization of the concept of *kokutai* (the body of the nation-state).[12] During Imperial Japan's military expansion, Horiguchi argues

[10] Wada-Marciano, *Nippon Modern*, 134.
[11] Hiratsuka, *In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun*, 160.
[12] Horiguchi, *Women Adrift*, xix.

'women were imagined in bodily metaphors ranging from the arms and legs to the womb of Japan'.[13]

Naoko Shibusawa observes that the connection between the Japanese nation and feminine gendered attributes and bodies continued into the occupation era, as SCAP personnel, the US government and American citizens imagined Japan as feminine and junior in relation to a senior masculine United States. Shibusawa argues that 'Feminizing the hated enemy or regarding them as immature youths made it easier to humanize the Japanese and to re-cast them as an American responsibility.'[14] While this may have been a useful means of encouraging sympathy towards the Japanese in America, there is no doubt that this framing was experienced as humiliating by many Japanese citizens, and may have struck some as an extension of Imperial ideologies.

This association of the female body with the nation is reflected in postwar yakuza film in the frequent costuming of the female yakuza heroine in red and white, the colors of the Japanese flag. From the popular *Revenger in Red* (*Beni dasuki kenkajo*, Kōno Toshikazu, Tōei, 1959) starring Misora Hibari to the red circular hairpin used as a weapon by Fuji Junko's Oryū in the *Red Peony Gambler* series and Ike Reiko's red parasol in *Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture* (*Yasagure anego den: sōkatsu rinchi*, Ishii Teruo, 1973), explicit associations of the female yakuza with the red circle, or rising sun, of the Japanese flag proliferate throughout the genre. The prevalence of the use of red and white in costuming marks a shift in representation in the postwar period from the modern, westernized costumes of the SCAP-approved occupation-era female heroine. Although the female 'punk'

[13] Ibid., vii.
[14] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally*, 5.

(*chinpira*) sidekicks of the early 1950s B-movie yakuza sub-genre played by Mihara Yōko (1933–) wore rockabilly-style clothing and Hawaiian shirts, by the late 1950s and 1960s the yakuza heroine was rarely seen without a fully accessorized kimono, or *hakama* trouser combination in the *Meiji mono* (films set in the Meiji era, 1868–1912) sub-genre. In color, style and time-period, the costumes of the female yakuza heroines reference an imagined 'traditional' Japan, their red and white kimono and *hakama* recalling the clothing of the *miko* shrine maiden.[15]

These costumes combine striking red and white elements with feminized articles of clothing such as decorative accessories and shawls or underwear. A common trope involves the yakuza heroine disguising herself under a shawl before revealing her red costume at the start of a fight scene. Fuji Junko's demure Meiji schoolmistress throws off her shawl in her first scene in *The Bright Red Flower of Courage* (*Nippon jokyō den: makkana dokyo bana*, Furuhata Yasuo, 1970) to reveal a red *happi* coat over white kimono and black *hakama* as she draws her sword to defend innocent travelers. With the dawn of 'pink' or soft-porn yakuza film, this trope developed into strip scenes in which the female yakuza's kimono is cut away during a sword fight, leaving her in a red and white underskirt, or exposing a red tattoo. Ike Reiko's 'girl boss' films open with undressing-fight sequences which leave her topless in a red underskirt, and further compound the visual association between the female yakuza and Japanese national colors by including red in almost all the female costumes. The all-female gangs which Ike's character Ocho encounters in the *Female*

[15] In suggesting that the national image propagated by the yakuza film is that of an imagined 'traditional' Japan, I am referring to Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as 'an imagined political community' (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6). The 'Japan' invoked by the yakuza film is here understood as an idealized concept, rather than historical fact. Reference to this 'traditional Japan' seeks to situate contemporary Japan in positive relation to an imagined national past. The yakuza heroine's connection to and understanding of Japanese 'tradition' is therefore not a connection to any 'real' or actual past, but is an attempt to naturalize idealized national qualities by situating these qualities within an unchanging national history. I thank my anonymous reviewers for the suggestion that the yakuza heroine's costume echoes the *miko*'s.

Yakuza Tale series wear red scarves, even when they wear no other clothing, and the first film closes with Ocho framed against the sun, leading her red scarf gang off into the horizon. Both the costuming and framing of postwar yakuza heroines make a clear connection between the female image and Japanese national imagery.

Red features often on film due to its high color saturation, which is attractive to the eye and has a 'universal salience' useful for highlighting key characters or props.[16] Red is often associated with passion, romance, and adventure, making it an ideal palette for swashbuckling *jidaigeki* sub-genre films such as *Bright Red Flower of Courage*. In a study on color associations across cultures, Japanese participants tended to identify Japan with the color red, and with the image of the rising sun.[17] The association of the sun with red (as opposed to yellow) suggests that red and sun-related imagery would be interpreted as related to concepts of the nation by a Japanese viewer with relative frequency.

Red is also associated with auspicious elements, such as the red and white cord ties around wedding gifts, and with protection, in the many red religious symbols which claim to ward off evil. Since the Edo period (1603–1867), Japanese mythology has propagated the association of red with protection from illness or bad luck. For example, several popular folktales feature a female heroine in red trousers symbolizing the bodhisattva Kannon. In one popular story, a poor woman unable to provide a meal for the visiting employees of her intended husband is assisted by a stranger, to whom she gifts a pair of red *hakama*. The stranger disappears, and the woman later finds the red clothing on a stone Kannon sculpture nearby.[18] The yakuza heroine borrows from the image and characterization of Kannon, both in red motifs in

[16] Osgood and Adams, 'A Cross-Cultural Study of the Affective Meanings of Color', 149.
[17] Jacobs et al., 'Cross-Cultural Color Comparisons', 5.
[18] Nakajima, *Uji Shūi monogatari*, 108.

costuming and background and in her crossing of gender boundaries. Kannon is often depicted as female or gender-neutral; a popular female-gendered manifestation of Kannon in Japanese art history is the Gōran Kannon, adapted from the Chinese bodhisattva Guanyin who could transform into a woman.[19] Kannon is therefore associated with gender-crossing performances such as those of the *onnagata*, male actors who play female roles in kabuki theater.

The gender-crossing element of Kannon imagery has given rise to a number of interpretations of the deity's symbolic potential, exemplified by discourse around painter Kano Hōgai's *Compassionate Kannon* (*Hibo Kannon*, 1888, ink on silk), which shows Kannon creating human life from water. The gender-indeterminate representation of the bodhisattva combined with a maternal motif inspires Okakura Kakuzō to argue that Hōgai's Kannon is of the 'universal mother' genre, a Buddhist Virgin Mary figure.[20] Wakakuwa Midori conversely argues that the image shows a protective Kannon who allegorizes the nationalization of women in Japan in references to reproductive and educational participation coded in the image of the child,[21] while Chiba Kei suggests that Hōgai's Kannon is symbolic of the parental compassion of the Japanese Emperor.[22] All three interpretations link motifs of compassion to the female gender and national concerns.

If the red costumes of 'peony gamblers', 'bright flowers of courage' and 'pink' heroines link the female yakuza image to Kannon, the art-historical association of Kannon imagery with the Japanese nation state and with compassion suggests the deity as a model from which the core themes of the female yakuza character are drawn. Both character tropes enact gendered personal sacrifices to assist others;

[19] Croissant, 'From Madonna to Femme Fatale', 274.
[20] Okakura, *Ideals of the East*, 192.
[21] Wakakuwa, *Kōgō no shōzō*, 416.
[22] Chiba, 'Kano Hōgai no Hibo Kannon o yomu', 56–57.

Kannon is believed to have returned to earth, sacrificing her place in nirvana, to guide humans towards enlightenment, while the yakuza heroine renounces her own romantic happiness to follow the life of a chivalrous yakuza, perceived as masculine-gendered. The *Red Peony Gambler* series features regular references to Oryū's gender performance, both at the narrative and visual levels. Her tattoo, masculine hairstyle, and low voice, juxtaposed with flashback scenes showing a hyper-feminized Oryū before her father's death, emphasize the 'masculine' aspects of her characterization. Misora Hibari's cross-dressing characters adopt a similar low voice, as does Ike Reiko's Ocho in the *Female Yakuza Tale* series. All are frequently assessed by other characters as insufficiently feminine in their gender performances within the diegetic discourse of the films.

While such 'masculine' performances reflected media panics about the nature of the emancipated postwar Japanese woman on one hand, they staged a re-working of Japan as imagined by its occupiers on the other. SCAP, the US government and a number of occupation personnel, as well as the American citizens they informed, discussed the Japanese as a people lacking in 'maturity', imagined as 'ability, wisdom, and self-control'.[23] Shibusawa argues that this perception produced a sense of entitlement in the adult white men who were the major decision-makers in occupied Japan.[24] During and after the occupation, the American view of Japan and its people was transmitted to a Japanese public in the translation and wide dissemination of works such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946, translated into Japanese in 1948). Mari Yoshihara suggests that Benedict's work in scientific anti-racism and use of the culture paradigm 'ironically resulted in

[23] Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally*, 5.
[24] Ibid.

regendering Japan as the feminized racial Other'.[25] The cool heads and judicious behaviors of the yakuza film heroines, who practiced self-control in both love and vengeance and regularly demonstrated their physical as well as mental ability, staged a reversal of this national stereotype.

The yakuza heroine even assumes the role of protective patriarch within her own gang of waifs and strays. Like Kannon, the female yakuza character protects the weak and outcast. Fuji Junko's yakuza roles involve defending women, children and young lovers, while Ike Reiko's yakuza characters protect sex workers. The gender-neutral or gender-crossing elements of the female yakuza are tied to this narrative trope, in that the yakuza heroine's femininity is suggested as the cause of her concern for feminine or domestic happiness, both narratively in other characters' speech, and iconographically in the framing of yakuza heroines in close maternal relation to young women, children and romantic couples. However, the yakuza heroine's ability to protect the domestic sphere is simultaneously predicated on her exemption from the home and from the hetero-normative, in that her renunciation of female gender norms bars her from marriage and the creation of her own patriarchy-compliant domestic ideal. By assuming the position of protective patriarch, and blending this role with maternal and sisterly emotion, the yakuza heroine becomes a hybrid character repeatedly expelled from socially normative communities.

Before analyzing the positioning of the female yakuza heroine between the domestic, professional, and outcast spheres of Japanese society, I wish to briefly note that the antecedents of the yakuza heroine's characterization and imagery in the depiction of Kannon also motivate me to think carefully about my own discussion of gender norms in the yakuza genre. I am concerned that in isolating female-gender-

[25] Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 187; Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally*, 61.

normative or disruptive tropes and characterizations, I may propagate the interpretation of normatively gendered behaviors as positive, and non-normative behaviors as negative. Instead, by examining how the female yakuza image expressed and mediated anxieties around postwar change, I aim to explore how the female image is used to convey abstract qualities and values.

I take Judith Butler's understanding of gender as a social construct as fundamental to this exploration.[26] In thinking of normative female gendered expectations as socially constructed concepts, I am guided by Butler's identification of 'cultural operations',[27] which regulate 'normative ideals'.[28] A film text is just such a cultural operation, regulating the normative ideal of a postwar Japanese female gender performance by presenting a public horizon upon which that ideal is repeated, re-worked, accepted, or rejected.

Yakuza Families: The Yakuza Heroine as Mother

The Japanese nation has been variously imagined as a body, a woman, a family, and a junior female or child throughout modern history. The neo-Confucian-style family structure of the yakuza gang (*gumi*) echoes the idealized structure of the nation state, in that strong bonds between the 'parent' or boss (*oyabun*) and his 'children', or junior employees (*kobun*), are emphasized over peer bonding (*kyōdai*).[29] While yakuza heroines are generally barred from fulfilling traditional romantic female roles, they maintain family-style relationships with seniors and subordinates. Fuji's Oryū

[26] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.
[27] Ibid., 13.
[28] Ibid., 16.
[29] Isolde Standish notes that this trope changes in the *jitsuroku* or 'true account' yakuza films of the 1970s, as narrative themes involving peer bonding and corrupt *oyabun* reflect a general disillusionment with figures of power and authority in the wake of the Lockheed scandal. Standish, *Myth and Masculinity*, 187–88.

skillfully avoids an offer of marriage to a senior *oyabun* (played by Wakayama Tomisaburō, 1929–1992) in the first *Red Peony Gambler* film; however, she frequently acts as a go-between in the love lives of her juniors, building explicitly maternal relationships.

These motherly connections stand in marked contrast to the behavior of an elder female *oyabun*, Otaka (Kiyokawa Nijiko), who in the first *Red Peony Gambler* film refuses to save her weak son by cooperating with blackmailers. Otaka's 'single mother' *oyabun* is reminiscent of the failed mothers of the early postwar *hahamono*, or 'mother genre' film. These postwar mother characters, epitomized by Mochizuki Yūko's (1918–1977) performance in *Tragedy of Japan* (*Nihon no higeki*, Kinoshita Keisuke, 1954), were required to play the roles of father and mother, breadwinner and homemaker in the years after Japan's defeat as male family members were slowly repatriated from war zones. Stretching to cover all parental responsibilities, the mother of the postwar *hahamono* inevitably failed, and was rejected by her children and left to die alone. Kiyokawa's Otaka is similarly left vulnerable by her attempt to enact a 'masculine' style *oyabun* role, forcing her to choose between protecting her work-family and her blood family.

If Otaka represents the failure of the postwar *hahamono* mother to successfully perform the roles of protector and breadwinner as well as maternal nurturer, Fuji's Oryū demonstrates a new approach to family associated with the housewife models of the 1950s. Gracious and soft-spoken, she cares for her subordinates and places particular importance on their home lives and romantic relationships. She is also presented as living a non-sexualized life, though she often becomes the diegetic object of sexual desire, recalling Jan Bardsley's argument that the ideal postwar housewife and mother presented a 'sexless, upright' and smooth asexual surface to the outside

world.[30] By studiously avoiding desire and sexualized contact, Oryū is able to perform both the paternal-protective and maternal-nurturing roles which escape the older *oyabun*, just as Hōgai's Kannon symbolized the Imperial-era emperor's performance of both paternal and maternal roles in Chiba's reading. While the family structure of the male-led yakuza houses reflects the neo-Confucian structure of the Imperial Japanese state, the makeshift families headed by Fuji's 'single mother' *oyabun* more closely resemble a postwar Japanese version of the nuclear family, albeit composed of waifs and strays brought together by necessity.

Misora Hibari's yakuza heroines similarly renounce romantic fulfillment, making lasting bonds by assisting in the unions of others. Misora's characters are positioned as the elder brothers or tomboy sisters of the couples she protects, a narrative theme consistent with her star persona. As a child actor, Misora had repeatedly played homeless orphans in early postwar musical films, arranging new makeshift families of street urchins and lost souls in narratives which connected the rebuilding of Japan after 1945 to the reforming of the Japanese family in a new structure coherent with the occupation agendas. This motif carried into her adult star persona in *jidaigeki* and yakuza musical films in which Misora's character forms her own ragtag band, assists in the love matches of friends and acquaintances, and reunites wanderers with their original families.

While these plots reflect the very real re-imagining of the family unit that took place in Japan after the war, they also speak to individualist consciousness as a legacy of occupation reforms, and to postwar public debates on individualism. The yakuza heroine's renunciation of romance is a clear allusion to the *giri* (duty) versus *ninjō* (personal desires or feelings) trope central to the genre, in that the female yakuza must

[30] Bardsley, *Women and Democracy in Cold War Japan*, 171.

symbolically set aside her femininity to pursue revenge for a dead family member, usually a father. While the yakuza heroine is a model of individualism and female emancipation, the motivations behind her gender performance are embedded in neo-Confucian patriarchal values. In this way, the female yakuza heroines of the 1950s and 1960s suture a Japanese performance of self formed by occupation policy back into an imagined 'traditional' Japanese context.

While renouncing their own romantic desires, the yakuza heroines played by Misora and Fuji work to create meaningful connections and new types of families around themselves. In *The Red Peony Gambler: Notorious Gambler* (*Hibotan bakuto: Tekkaba retsuden*, Yamashita Kōsaku, 1969), Oryū encounters a motherless young girl named Okayo. Her guardian, Okayo's father's killer, entrusts the girl to Oryū. Oryū's attraction to the contrite killer is framed in terms of admiration for his chivalry in searching for the girl's mother; however, the hints of romance constructed by soft lighting, an elegiac soundtrack, and lingering shots of longing eye contact also position the two as the romantic couple at the center of a makeshift family. This bond dissolves as violence breaks out and Oryū is called to defend the local workers from an evil *oyabun*, but the familial narrative is picked up again in *The Red Peony Gambler: Oryū's Visit* (*Hibotan bakuto: Oryū sanjō*, Katō Tai, 1970) as Oryū attempts to re-connect with Okayo in a mission that underpins the rest of the series. The cross-dressing female yakuza heroine of the late 1950s develops in such narrative tropes into a kind of elder sister or mother figure in the 1960s and early 1970s, preceding the often violent and competitive sisterhood of the female-only group relationships of the 1970s 'pink' yakuza films.

The 1960s female yakuza heroine's gendered performances of caring are also evident in the gambling scenes central to any yakuza film, as female yakuza heroines

frequently take the role of host at gambling matches. In *The Red Peony Gambler: Notorious Gambler*, Oryū's female presence at an all-male game of *hanafuda* is articulated as a potential weak point, as the evil boss orders his gang to invite her to host in order to 'rip her off'. Oryū catches the cheating player by throwing her trademark red hairpin into the trick card; the camera zooms in on the red circle of the hairpin on a white background reminiscent of the Japanese flag. While much is made of female yakuza heroines' 'masculine' lifestyles, in fact this generally translates to a chivalrous bravery and prohibition on fulfilling romantic desires, as female yakuza heroines continue to perform the 'feminine' gendered roles of arranging for other characters' happiness, comfort, and entertainment by fostering love-matches, hosting card games, and reconnecting lost children with their parents. In this sense, the female yakuza heroine performs a hybrid self, both the neo-Confucian filial daughter to elder *oyabun,* and a caring young mother to her juniors and peers, connecting the ideals of prewar Japan with the legacy of the postwar occupation.

Bringing the Past into the Present: Nostalgia and Star Persona

The yakuza genre engages with nostalgia for an imagined prewar Japan visually in the manners and dress of the yakuza heroine, and by drawing from the imagery and themes of pre-existing character tropes such as the bodhisattva Kannon or the caring mother. In terms of plot and dialogue, however, the motif of the *furusato*, or hometown, is perhaps the most explicit narrative allusion to nostalgia. Both male and female *matatabi* (wandering) yakuza characters make repeated references to their hometowns or prefectures and often form bonds based on shared home connections, alliances, or memories. Fuji's Oryū uses the phrase '*watashi no kuni*', which refers to her home prefecture, but could also be translated as 'my country' (*kuni*). The female

image is simultaneously linked to tradition and nostalgic ideas of 'Japaneseness' in the association of the idealized hometown with female family members. Mothers and sisters are closely associated with *furusato* in film, literature, and song, connoting national nostalgia through the conflation of birthplace with perceived feminine nurturing qualities.[31]

As discussed above, Misora's and Fuji's yakuza characters exhibit these mothering or nurturing tendencies in their care for others' feelings and well-being, often associated with 'home' or nostalgic places in a common sub-plot in which the yakuza heroine reunites a follower with his romantic partner in or from his hometown. Jennifer Robertson argues that the connection of the popular image of the nurturing woman or mother with the *furusato* 'is independent of the actual existence of either; both constructs gain cogency from the process of privileging patriarchy and nostalgia'.[32] Oryū's consideration for the well-being of her juniors is closely connected to ideas of both 'family' and 'home'; members of her father's Yano *gumi*, both past and present, are nostalgically recalled in the context of the Yano 'country' during her travels in the first two 'training' films. Through Oryū's nostalgia, a patriarchal social structure is reasserted in which her dead father is connected to his gang through her proxy leadership, and vice versa. Ike Reiko's yakuza heroines similarly channel the voices of fathers and father figures from beyond the grave, as in *Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture*, where Ocho recalls the kindness of her first *oyabun* in flashback. A dead father figure frequently overshadows the origin stories of female yakuza, containing the modern active heroine within a social structure which places men at the active center of the narrative.

[31] Robertson, 'It Takes a Village', 125.
[32] Ibid., 124.

Robertson argues that both the female body and the *furusato* are popularly imagined as nurturing spaces for 'male-identified "babies", from human infants to things such as values and ideologies'.[33] The yakuza heroine is often associated with a greater commitment to the values and ideologies of the yakuza life and of 'traditional' Japan, including modesty and manners. For example, each *Red Peony Gambler* film begins with Oryū's formal introduction, a trope borrowed from the traveling peddlers (*tekiya*) and entertainers of semi-mythic Japan, who along with the *bakuto* gamblers comprise a large part of the modern yakuza character. Formal introductions were performed by wanderers seeking lodgings, and later by yakuza characters on film before fight scenes as well as in formal meetings. 'Good' characters can be differentiated from 'bad' characters on the basis of this trope alone, as a good yakuza, male or female, never forgets their manners. Even in the hyper-violent pink films of the 1970s, Ike Reiko's characters repeatedly chastise others for rudeness, lack of manners, and inability to follow yakuza codes. This trope posits the yakuza genre and its characters as keepers of Japanese traditions, in that older manners, customs and values are preserved in the formalities of yakuza culture.

The *furusato* or origin story is central to the construction of the female yakuza persona both within the film narrative itself and in the star persona, or 'real life' of the yakuza film star. Origin myths are the basis for the construction of a star persona, just as they provide the yakuza hero or heroine's motivations within a film narrative. In the early 1950s, the development of the female yakuza trope was greatly assisted by Misora Hibari's extant star persona. Misora's yakuza heroines are in the nostalgic wandering gambler mode closest to the *jidaigeki* period dramas, which enjoyed a return after the end of occupation censorship. In films such as *The Young Boss*

[33] Ibid.

(*Hanagasa Wakashu*, Sakei Kiyoshi, 1958) Misora's star persona was used to sketch a female equivalent to the chivalrous gamblers who roamed the countryside unable to return to their hometowns, fusing model yakuza manners with the nostalgia of exile.

Misora's yakuza characters were usually young men, or women in disguise, echoing earlier cross-dressing roles. As a young girl in the first years after defeat, Misora's sexualized child-vamp singer persona was remodeled as a Shirley Temple-esque child film star by inserting strategic cross-dressing performances into her early melodramas.[34] The sexualized nature of her stage performance was diluted by her repeated film appearances as street-orphan characters who dress as young boys to perform in top hats and tails in nightclubs. These early film roles smoothed the way for Misora's Americanized performance style centered on 'boogie-woogie' to enter into a more 'traditional' Japanese mainstream entertainment, eventually culminating in her fame as an *enka* singer. As Misora grew older, she was cast in a series of 'chivalrous' yakuza films (*ninkyō eiga*) beginning with cross-dressing performances in *The Young Boss,* the *Young Rabble* films (*Iroha wakashu furisode zakura*, Sasaki Kō, 1959) and *Ishimatsu the One Eyed Avenger* (*Hibari no mori no Ishimatsu*, Sawashima Tadashi, 1960).

Misora's vocal performances create a link between her child and adult star personae. Christine Yano has noted that yakuza are among those who 'inhabit the *enka* world',[35] and it seems to be no accident that the title songs Misora performed for her yakuza films, which were released in a 'tie-up' promotion beneficial to both the film and record company involved, were in the *enka* style. Yano argues for *enka* as 'one way in which emotion becomes implicated in the highly ideological act of

[34] Shamoon, 'Misora Hibari and the Girl Star'.
[35] Yano, *Tears of Longing*, 23.

producing "the nation"'.[36] In her on-screen vocal performances, Misora not only sutures her adult star persona to her child star persona but also associates the yakuza genre with *enka*'s emotional relation to the imagined nation and its sudden changes after 1945.

The association of Misora's yakuza heroines with the tomboy children of her earlier films modifies the female yakuza figure, combining the strong female characters popularized during the occupation with the innocent child characters of the early postwar era. In this way, the yakuza genre could avoid the unpopular female characterizations of the early postwar humanist (*hyūmanisuto*) genre. The headstrong and volatile heroines of the humanist or 'tendency' film epitomized by Hara Setsuko in *No Regrets for Our Youth* (*Waga seishun ni kuinashi*, Kurosawa Akira, 1946) were popularly dismissed as too violent, unfeminine, and unrealistic.[37] While the period or underworld setting of yakuza film does not require the genre to be realistic in the same way as the humanist drama, the association of Misora's new cross-dressing yakuza with her earlier childhood performances further mitigated the starker aspects of the emancipated female characters of occupation-era film.

Misora's male yakuza roles are further packaged within female-gendered story lines; the 'young boss' is a young woman in disguise hiding her royal ancestry, while Ishimatsu's story is imagined by a tea-picker named O-Kimi, also played by Misora, in the outer part of a 'story within a story' structure which contains her cross-dressing performances within fantastical 'pretend' scenarios. In this way the 'masculine' characteristics of the chivalrous female yakuza were smoothed both by narrative

[36] Ibid.
[37] Satō, 'Nihonteki dentō to seiyōtekina mono', 24.

structure and by the nostalgic associations of Misora's star persona, framing the female yakuza heroine as a continuation of, rather than a break from, both occupation-era emancipated female gender ideals and the idealized 'traditional' Japanese woman.

Fuji Junko also came to the yakuza genre pre-packaged in a way that did not threaten the patriarchal status quo. Her father Shundō Kōji, the principal producer of *ninkyō* (chivalrous) yakuza films at Tōei, is widely reported to have initially opposed her career as an actress until it became apparent that other studios intended to begin yakuza film production and would likely recruit Fuji. In this way, Fuji's star persona mirrored the narrative of the *Red Peony Gambler* series, in which Oryū becomes a yakuza against the wishes of her dead father for the greater good of the family, as Fuji's fame is framed by both fatherly concern and loyalty to the family studio.

The centrality of the father figure to Oryū's narrative and to Fuji's star persona frames both as filial daughter characters; Fuji had played upright daughter roles in a number of yakuza and *jidaigeki* films before the *Red Peony Gambler* series (*Three Yakuza/ Matatabi sannin yakuza*, Sawashima Tadashi, 1965; *Thirteen Assassins/ Jūsannin no shikaku*, Kudo Eiichi, 1963). While Misora and Fuji brought to life the strong active female gender performances advocated by SCAP and discussed at length in Japanese popular media, their demonstration of a potential post-occupation female mode of being was simultaneously bounded by the 'traditional' norms of patriarchal social structures.

The much-publicized stories of her father's opposition to her career cast Fuji as having grown up in the public eye, as Misora did. This tinged their performances with a paternalistic sense of nostalgia and fondness, even as they enacted new and strikingly different gender performances in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The female yakuza heroines played by Fuji and Misora can be interpreted as 'daughters of Japan'

in that the nation had watched them mature into women in the public spaces of mass media. In this way, the strong emancipated female performances of the 1950s and 1960s yakuza heroine offered excitement for the generations who had been inspired by SCAP's gender-equal ideals, at the same time confining these performances to patriarchal structures recognizable to nostalgic viewers looking for images of a 'traditional' Japan in the yakuza genre. In the 1970s, sexualization was incorporated into the female yakuza image, as Fuji's retirement and the decline of popular interest in cinema following the uptake of television signaled a new era and a new type of film fan. The production of soft-porn images of yakuza heroines continued their association with domestic space, however, as fans brought the sexualized female yakuza image home in the form of pin-up posters, and later video.

Becoming Post-Post-Occupation: Feminine Strength and Feminized Weakness

While SCAP reforms championed female emancipation in popular discourse if not always in practice, pre-existing popular tropes that positioned the feminine as subordinate, contaminated and lesser were employed to articulate the situation of Japan immediately after defeat. The nation's subjugation to the US positioned Japan in a 'feminized' role during occupation.[38] The female image as an allegory for Japan therefore carried connotations of defeat.[39] While American films such as *Japanese War Bride* (King Vidor, 1952) and *House of Bamboo* (Samuel Fuller, 1955) articulated Japan as subordinate to America, and feminized in relation to the US, Japanese films began to readdress this trope after 1952. Developing as a stand-alone

[38] Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 14.
[39] Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy*, 14; Orbaugh, *Japanese Fiction of the Allied Occupation*, 390.

genre for the first time after the occupation, the yakuza film was perfectly positioned to rework the perception of a female-gendered nation as a weaker nation.

The female *oyabun*/ male *kobun* relationships of *The Red Peony Gambler* series and Misora's tomboy character's friendships with men mediated the humiliation of Japan's identification as 'feminized' nation to America's 'masculinity' by setting the genders on equal footing. In the 1970s, the sexualized female yakuza of the 'pinky violence' sub-genre were no less powerful or dangerous for being overtly feminized. In the association of the female yakuza image with Japanese national themes and values, the conflation of female-gendered roles with weakness was challenged. If, as Igarashi Yoshikuni argues, 'the United States, gendered as male, rescued and converted Japan, figured as a desperate woman' during occupation,[40] the post-occupation desperation of Fuji Junko and Ike Reiko searching for their fathers' killers was presented as strong, heroic, and noble by contrast. In *Red Peony Gambler: Execution of Duty* (*Hibotan bakuto: Jingi tooshimasu*, Saitō Buichi, 1972), Oryū ends the series injured and failing to keep her younger ally alive. As she collapses in the snow, the formally attired yakuza lining her walk do not step forward to assist her; instead she struggles up to continue on alone. Like Oryū, Japan after the war was defeated and severely injured, but the female yakuza turns this image into one of strength by battling on heroically.

The female yakuza image as a symbol of postwar Japan offered a way to read the nation's feminization against the grain, as a symbol of strength coded in a particularly 'Japanese' and explicitly post-occupation genre. The structuring of the yakuza plot around codes such as *giri* and *ninjō,* whose neo-Confucian origins were heavily emphasized, situated the female yakuza heroine within a long, proud national

[40] Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 20.

history, a history, crucially, inscrutable to outsiders. A defeated Japan allegorized by the female image takes on a positive affect in the yakuza genre by association with physical and mental strength, violence, tradition, and strong or positive national characteristics.

Japanese national characteristics did not always have positive affect in the early years of the postwar period, as questions of race were at the forefront of popular national anxieties in a new awareness of the Japanese subject as a racialized subject. Sharalyn Orbaugh has argued that 'defeat and Occupation meant coming to a new recognition of oneself as no longer epistemically central, no longer unmarked… young Japanese men discovered themselves to be figured in the visual economy of Occupation as small, "raced", linguistically inept, materially impoverished, abject infants/adolescents.'[41] Many formerly central groups within the Japanese population experienced themselves as 'Other' in the immediate post-defeat period.[42] The image of the exiled yakuza on screen, particularly the female yakuza who renounces her femininity to wander the country, can therefore be understood as mirroring the Japanese nation as Other. Misora's characters are Other-ed both by their cross-dressing and their desire to hide their true identities, while the male characters of Fuji's *Red Peony Gambler* series repeatedly remind her of her Otherness as a woman in a man's world. Fights often break out when Oryū's *kobun* defend her honor on hearing her ridiculed in public spaces; the evil boss of *Red Peony Gambler: Notorious Gambler* refers to her as a 'sight', and an unnatural woman. Ike Reiko's sexuality is similarly presented as aberrant in scenes in which friendly gang members watch in disbelief as she engages in bizarre sexual acts with their boss, and evil gang members

[41] Orbaugh, *Japanese Fiction of the Allied Occupation*, 390.
[42] Ibid.

decide against raping her in favor of setting her up as a killer who preys on young women in the *Female Yakuza Tale* films (*Bad Girl Boss: Inoshika Ocho/ Furyō anego den: Inoshika Ocho*, Suzuki Noribumi, 1973; *Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture/ Yasagure anego den: sōkatsu rinchi*, Ishii Teruo, 1973). Like Kannon, who was associated with the sex workers of the Yoshiwara district in Edo period Japan, the female yakuza character exists on the outskirts of society both literally and figuratively.

While the female yakuza heroine as Other reflects the Other-ed condition of the Japanese nation described by Orbaugh, the power of the female yakuza character mediates this Other-ed image and finds strength and even nobility in her exile. Existing on the margins allows the female yakuza not only the power to go against social norms, but also the distance to observe the workings of society impartially. The 'abject' aspect ascribed to Japan and its citizens during occupation was refigured after 1952 as a kind of strength in itself, in accordance with Hal Foster's argument that a 'special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states'.[43] As an abject condition is often the 'evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against power',[44] the exiled yakuza can testify against injustice. Outsider characters such as Oryū can identify and fight against abuses of power, as in *The Red Peony Gambler: Here to Kill You* (*Hibotan bakuto: Oinochi itadakimasu*, Katō Tai, 1971) where Oryū defends a gambler unjustly exiled as a cheat. By recasting the position of the feminine, the abject and the Other-ed as strong and just in a way that mainstream society is not, the yakuza genre remakes the image of defeated occupied Japan into a legacy of which post-occupation generations could be proud.

[43] Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', 123.
[44] Ibid.

Conclusion: The Yakuza Heroine as Gendered Historical Mediator

Through the image of the female yakuza on screen, Japanese audiences could explore what it meant to be Other within the safe space of the cinema. At the same time, narrative resolutions in which yakuza heroines overcome their situation through stylized 'traditional' violence and swordplay offer a compelling and total means of rejection of occupation Japan's Other-ed image. The female yakuza heroine defeating those who had dismissed, mocked, or tortured her is a powerful proxy through which to throw off the last remnants of Other-edness in the Japanese national image after the occupation.

I have argued here that the female yakuza heroine allegorizes a number of popular concerns particular to the socio-political context of the aftermath of occupation. Such a reading positions the female yakuza heroine alongside her male counterpart in extant scholarship and argues for the yakuza genre film as an example of Hansen's 'reflexive horizon' on which social change was 'reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated'.[45] We can see a variety of issues played out in the female yakuza image and narrative from the 1950s to the 1970s, including national nostalgia, anxieties over female emancipation, and a pervasive sense of Japan as inferior to victor nations after defeat in 1945. Iconic female yakuza characters fuse attractive qualities perceived as gendered feminine, such as nurturing ability and sexual appeal, with reference to the nostalgia of an imagined 'traditional' Japan, and a power and sense of righteousness drawn from this imagined past, and from the position of the Other or exile. In this way, the yakuza heroine maps key elements in the transition to a post-post-occupation Japan.

[45] Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses', 342.

As a feminist heroine, however, the female yakuza character is conflicted. Though her situation outside the confines of hetero-normative society can be understood as a position of power from which to uphold ideological values framed as 'traditional', the characters suffer a number of personal constraints and setbacks due to their exclusion. Characters associated with both the maternal and the masculine are required to give up romance and sexual satisfaction, while the 1970s 'pink' yakuza heroines pursue sex as a bargaining tool, often at the cost of respect. As Bardsley has argued, sexless narratives and characterizations, such as those of the 1950s and 1960s yakuza heroines, do not fundamentally challenge the 'homosocial organization of women and men'[46] that supports patriarchal social organizations by separating the genders. By contrast, the sexualized yakuza of the 1970s embrace the 'dangerous woman trope', yet Nina Cornyetz suggests that this is ultimately the 'inhabiting of a femaleness-as-site as it was already circumscribed by a phallic agenda'.[47] Cornyetz argues that the 'political limitations of empowerment bound by the confines of inhabiting a male imaginary are obvious: the trope becomes a site for enormous ambivalences, resistances, and collusions'.[48] The narrative arc of the female-led yakuza film leaves viewers in no doubt that the position the heroine ends up in is undesirable and unsustainable, painting a decidedly ambivalent picture of conditions for those non-compliant with hetero-normative gender ideologies.

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[46] Bardsley, *Women and Democracy in Cold War Japan*, 171.
[47] Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women, Deadly Words*, 102.
[48] Ibid., 102–103.

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