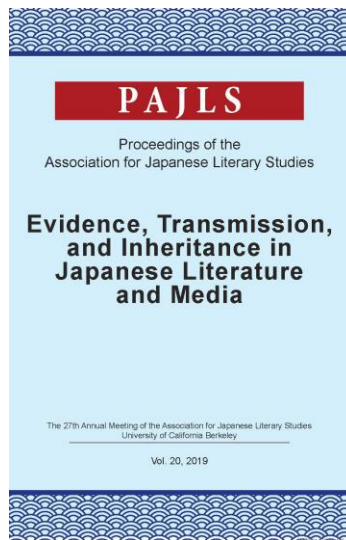


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Kelly Hansen 

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ENCODING AND TRANSMITTING GENDER: THE STAR PERSONA OF HARA SETSUKO

Kelly Hansen¹
Kumamoto University

Hara Setsuko (Aida Masae, 1920–2015) is one of Japan’s most admired actresses of the twentieth century. Between 1935 and 1962 she appeared in over 100 films produced across a turbulent time in history, including militarism and imperial expansion, wartime and surrender, occupation and reconstruction, and post-war economic development. Despite the range of her work, Hara’s persona has been encoded in a select number of films depicting highly idealized images of Japanese femininity. Even in the twenty-first century, she is frequently referred to with epithets such as “the eternal virgin” (*eien no shojo*: Chiba 2001) and “the goddess of the Showa Era” (*Shōwa no bishin*: Nagatomo 2015). As Hideaki Fujiki notes, “the star is not simply an actor, but a peculiar, historical phenomenon that comes about because of an actor’s attractiveness, the circulation of his or her identity (in the form of name and images) in media, and the support of consumers of that media” (2013, 3). In Hara’s case, Iris Haukamp (2014) links the establishment of her star persona as the quintessential Japanese woman to her eleventh film, the 1937 release of the German-Japanese production *Atarashiki tsuchi* (The New Earth, aka *Die Tochter des Samurai*, or Daughter of a Samurai), and the surrounding media frenzy which followed. Although director Arnold Fanck’s goal was to create an authentic portrayal of Japanese culture, the film is replete with stereotypical images, particularly as regards gender.² Hara plays Yamato Mitsuko, a modern young woman being prepared for marriage, and determined to uphold the premodern values of her samurai heritage even at the cost of her own life. Her portrayal transmits a static image of Japanese gender roles as unchanged since the nineteenth century. Despite the film’s shortcomings, it was a box office success in Japan, and fans enthusiastically followed the actress’s four-month tour through Europe and North America to promote the film. *Atarashiki* was not a success overseas, but Hara returned to Japan triumphant. The star persona

¹  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0439-1929>

² The film is frequently described as a joint production between German director Arnold Fanck and Japanese director Itami Mansaku. However, the two could not get along, and each eventually produced his own version. Both versions were shown in Japan; Fanck’s version was released internationally, and is the version most widely circulated today.

established with *Atarashiki* would remain throughout Hara's career and beyond.³

The purpose of this study is to offer a more dynamic depiction of shifting gender roles across the tumultuous period of Hara's career, by focusing on works that contradict her persona as the quintessential Japanese woman. Although such works can be found throughout her career, they are most prevalent in Occupation-period films, due in large part to changes in censorship which took place when control of the film industry was passed from the Japanese imperial government to American Occupation forces. Kyoko Hirano has analysed how the Allied Occupation's film policy aimed to use media to reshape the thinking of the Japanese. This resulted in detailed lists of prohibited subjects, including all films on militarism, wartime, and the atomic bomb, while those promoting democratic values were highly encouraged. In the case of gender depictions, films denigrating female characters or depicting "feudalistic" attitudes toward women such as arranged marriage were expressly prohibited, while those promoting the liberation of women, or equal rights among men and women, were encouraged (1992, 47–73).

Occupation-period film policies resulted in a wider range of roles for female leads. Some films from this period depict characters who successfully promote female agency while still embracing traditional self-sacrificing values of the "good wife and wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*). Examples in this category include the female doctor with an incurable disease in *Joi no shinsatsu shitsu* (the Lady Doctor's Exam Room, dir. Yoshimura Ren, 1950) who sacrifices her last bit of strength to save her former lover's wife, or the privileged daughter in *Waga seishun ni kui nashi* (No Regrets for Our Youth, dir. Kurosawa Akira, 1946) who turns her back on her elite family to devote her life to her dead husband's proletarian causes. Although these characters show greater agency and initially appear to threaten the status quo, in the end they make decisions which preserve social structure, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Other films, however, depict marginalized women who exist outside the framework of conventional familial roles such as daughter, sister, wife, or mother, and who lack agency to recover any means of entering or participating in mainstream society. These characters exist in the liminal space between wartime and postwar society, and pose a danger to the

³ Today, the films that are most readily available on DVD or through streaming sites transmit this established persona of Hara as the ideal Japanese woman. Films such as *Banshun* (Late spring, 1949) and *Tōkyō monogatari* (Tokyo story, 1954) are examples of this type.

social structure for those with whom they come in contact, especially men. In this article, I briefly examine three films from this category: *Hakuchi* (The Idiot 1951), *Taifū-ken no onna* (Woman in the Typhoon Area, 1948), and *Yūwaku* (Temptation, 1948). Following analysis of the films, I consider how these films problematize the encoding and transmission of gender through the star persona of Hara Setsuko.

THE IDIOT

The best-known Occupation-period film featuring Hara as a character of liminal status is undoubtedly Kurosawa Akira's *Hakuchi* (1951). In addition to Hara, the all-star cast includes Mori Masayuki, and Mifune Toshirō, both of whom had appeared in the highly successful release of Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* the previous year. Based on the nineteenth-century novel of the same name by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Kurosawa transfers the setting of *Hakuchi* from Russia to post-war Hokkaido. Donald Richie suggests that Kurosawa might have chosen this location to be "closer to Dostoevsky's milieu than any another area in Japan," where "the traditional modes of Japanese living are not common" (1996, 81). Lack of overt markers of Japanese culture—clothing, food, and furnishings—may lend the film a more Dostoevskian atmosphere, but it is difficult to overlook connections between the setting—a world of eternal winter where characters struggle to rebuild their lives—and the disorder of early postwar Japan.

As the film begins, the lives of the main characters are in flux. Taeko (played by Hara) has been the mistress of Tohata (Yanagi Eijirō) since the age of 14, but she is a young woman now. She has become increasingly outspoken and difficult to control, and is an embarrassment to Tohata, who has offered a hefty dowry to his secretary Kayama to marry her. Although the money is appealing, Kayama's mother and sister are less than enthusiastic about having a former mistress join the family. As a fallen woman, there is ultimately no place in the community where Taeko will be readily accepted. Meanwhile, Akama (Mifune Toshirō) is returning home after the war in hopes of claiming his inheritance and marrying Taeko. On the trip back, he befriends Kameda (Mori Masayuki), called the idiot because he suffers from epileptic fits related to wartime trauma, which gives him an innocent, childlike nature. Although he frequently sees things in a way that others do not, his odd comments frequently cause others to ridicule him. Kameda gets his first glimpse of Taeko in a portrait displayed in a photo studio window when the two men arrive in town, and is immediately drawn to her for reasons which become apparent later.

Taeko's marginal status and the toll it has taken over the years are reflected in both her appearance and actions. She wears a long black coat throughout the entire film, with hair pulled severely back, highlighting the intensity of her expressions. She is introduced to the audience through the photo before she actually appears on screen. The photo is raised above eye level, creating the feeling that Taeko is looking down on the viewer. Images of Akama and Kameda reflected in the glass show the two men gazing up at the image and establish the love triangle that will develop between the three.

Taeko's bold demeanor also makes her the focal point of scenes in which she appears. In response to the thinly-veiled feelings of disdain expressed by everyone around her, she reacts with barely contained rage, laughing uncontrollably at inappropriate moments, and frequently going through a range of extreme emotions, from anger to despair, in a matter of seconds. All of the male characters with a stake in Taeko's future attend her birthday party. As the evening begins, guests are seen enjoying food and drink provided by the wealthy Tohata, while Taeko is for the most part ignored, but the atmosphere changes when Akama and Kameda arrive. Akama has managed to raise one million yen, which he intends to use to buy Taeko from Kayama. The conflict over Taeko's future based on monetary offers contrasts with the emotional connection that Taeko and Kameda immediately feel for each other when they meet for the first time at the party. Kameda explains that the suffering he sees in her eyes recalls the look he saw in the eyes of a fellow prisoner moments before the man's execution. Kameda himself narrowly escaped death, but his inability to help his friend continues to haunt him and has led to his present unstable mental condition. Akama proposes to Taeko, but she refuses to give him a definitive answer. Convinced that Kameda is standing in the way of their happiness, Akama's jealousy intensifies over time, until he finally kills her. Kameda arrives shortly after the murder, and the two hold a silent vigil over the body as they grow increasingly deranged. The title of the film suggests that Kameda, as the idiot, is the central character, but it is arguable that Taeko, who destroys both men, is the central character who drives the narrative.

Critical responses to the film have been mixed (Yoon et. al. 2019; Durkin 1995). Donald Richie proclaims the film a failure, based primarily on the disjointed plot caused when the studio cut the 265-minute film by over a third but he is also highly critical of Hara's performance, which he asserts is just wrong for the role because she had too much of a reputation as a "women's woman." Richie's critique reinforces the role which an actor's star persona can play in the success or failure of subsequent films.

To cast the reluctant bride from Ozu Yasujiro's box-office hit *Banshun* (Late Spring, 1949) as a fallen woman who causes the downfall of two men may indeed be difficult to sell to the viewing public.

WOMAN IN THE TYPHOON AREA

Ōba Hideo's 1948 *Taifu-ken no onna* has not received the critical attention that *Hakuchi* has, although it depicts Hara as a fallen woman in a much more dramatic fashion. The film opens with an intense battle scene at sea, as a gang of smugglers attempt to escape capture by a coastguard ship. Pounding waves and gunshots ring out over the militaristic, fast-paced opening of the film score by Ifukube Akira, who would later create the score for *Gojira* (Godzilla, 1954). One smuggler is shot in the first moments of the film, but the gang manages to escape. Being dangerously low on fuel, they decide to head to a small island with a meteorological observatory, in hopes of refueling and restocking. Once there, they learn that an approaching typhoon has delayed the arrival of the supply ship, so they decide to hold the staff of the observatory hostage until the ship arrives. Trapped within the confines of the small station with nothing to occupy their time as the storm rages outside, conflicts among the smugglers intensify, and they eventually end up turning on each other.

Hara plays Kuriko, girlfriend of the gang leader Kijima (Yamamura Akira). She makes her first appearance in the film after the initial battle scene, when she attempts to apply her nursing skills learned during the war to save the injured man. Dressed in baggy men's clothing, with wild hair, heavy make-up, and a cigarette constantly dangling from her lips, Hara's appearance is unlike any other in the extant films from her career. She acts sultry and belligerent as she reflects callously on the man's slim chances of survival, and expresses bitterness over the way her life has turned out. Abandoned as a child, Kuriko has led a precarious existence on her own from an early age. She recalls eating cold rice with strangers as a child, and eventually resorting to prostitution to get by. She states that she remembers the name of her "first" man but not his face, suggesting a life devoid of any meaningful interpersonal relationships. Throughout her life, Kuriko has never been anyone's daughter, sister, wife, or mother. The extreme circumstances of war actually afforded Kuriko a degree of agency by allowing her to have a role in society as a military nurse, but with the end of the war, she is once again reduced to a liminal existence.

Once the smugglers arrive at the meteorological station, the conflict revolves around a struggle to control the wireless radio. The smugglers destroy it because they don't want the staff reporting their presence to the coast guard, but the conscientious staff are determined to repair it. Even at

the cost of their own lives, they are resolved to send out a warning about the impending typhoon. In contrast, the smugglers share no common goals beyond avoiding capture. They are not united through loyalty or familial connections, but simply the fragile power that Kijima is able to maintain. The differences between the two groups are highlighted through two-dimensional portrayals emphasizing either benevolent or self-serving behavior, reinforcing the overall theme of the film that crime does not pay.

As the only female character in the film, Kuriko serves as the catalyst for many of the conflicts among the other characters. She is tolerated among the smugglers because she is Kijima's girlfriend, but because there is no comradery among the gang, this is a tenuous position. Whenever Kijima is out of sight, she is forced to fend off sexual advances from Kataoka (Yamaguchi Isamu) and sneers from Yoshii, second in command, who is jealous of her intimacy with Kijima. When Kataoka eventually tries to rape her, he is thrown over a cliff by Kijima, who arrives on the scene just in time. Kijima's emotional dependence on Kuriko grows as the situation deteriorates, and he constantly pleads that she promise never to leave. Although Kuriko is devoted to Kijima, she is also increasingly drawn to the altruistic Amano, leader of the meteorological observatory. Under his influence, she decides to change out of the men's clothing she has been wearing to that point and put on a dress, saying that she is ready to go back to being a woman. She is eager to treat Amano's wound when he is shot in the arm by Kijima, although she constantly reiterates how her presence must be repulsive to him. As a woman who has lived on the margins of society since childhood, Kuriko is well aware of society's attitude toward her, and Amano reinforces this through his inability to offer up even a modicum of sympathy. He emphasizes his own lonely life on at the station far from home as a duty which he carries out because it is the right thing to do. He asserts that Kuriko's marginalized status and inability to contribute to society makes her less than human, and undeserving of sympathy. Unlike the smugglers, however, Kuriko is the only character who reflects on her actions and shows a desire to change, or pursue a different kind of life.

The film reaches a rapid conclusion when Kijima is betrayed by Yoshii and shot. As Kuriko attempts to wrestle the gun from Kitajima so that Amano will not be shot as well, she herself is fatally injured, and collapses beside Kijima. It seems that Amano's altruistic nature has rubbed off and influenced Kuriko to sacrifice her life for a higher ideal. Not only will Amano survive, he will be able to repair the radio and send the warning. As Kuriko lays dying, tears finally well up in Amano as he laments what a sad, pathetic creature she is. The film closes with a wide

shot of waves battering against the cliff, above which sits the lonely meteorological station.

Similar to Taeko in *Hakuchi*, Kuriko's status as a liminal woman adds further conflict to an already tense situation. Her presence contributes directly to the death of Kataoka, and to Yoshii's betrayal of Kijima. Ending the film with the deaths of both Kuriko and Kijima follows censorship policies of Occupation Japan, which dictated that "antisocial behavior such as suicide, gambling, murder, black-marketeering, prostitution, and petty crime were unacceptable as a film subject" unless portrayed to emphasize that "justice always wins in the end, and that "criminals were not to be portrayed as heroes" (Hirano 1992, 74–5). Despite the fact that Kuriko intervenes and saves his life, Amano does not offer gratitude, but only pity.

TEMPTATION

Yūwaku (dir. Yoshimura Kōzaburō, 1948) also stars Hara as a young woman on the margins of society due to circumstances beyond her control, but unlike *Hakuchi* and *Taifū*, this is a recent shift in circumstances following the death of her father when she is twenty-one. The opening scene shows Hara as Takako standing alone in a desolate cemetery. She is dressed conservatively in a simple, dark dress, befitting her role as the daughter of a professor, and a student herself. Funeral services for her father have just concluded, and she offers a final prayer in front of the grave. Apparently, she was the only mourner. Just as she is about to leave, she runs into Yajima Ryūkichi (Saburi Shin), a former student of her father's. The two are acquainted but have not met since Taeko was a child. They decide to travel back to Tokyo together, stopping overnight at an inn in Gifu, where they are forced to share a single futon because the hotel is full. As they lie awkwardly beside each other in the dark, Takako shares her story. Prior to her father's death, she had been pursuing the path of a modern, young woman studying medicine, but as she lies weeping beside Yajima with the rain pounding outside, she confesses that her sole reason for studying medicine was to take care of her father in his declining years. Now that he is gone, she sees no point in returning to school. She confesses to knowing no relatives in her father's hometown, where he is now buried, and is essentially alone in the world.

Feeling a desire to help the daughter of his former teacher, Yajima suggests that Takako move into his home in Tokyo. His wife Tokie (Sugimura Haruko) is ill and has been staying in a facility near Enoshima, so there is no one but a maid to look after the children. As a politician working to promote new liberal policies in post-war Japan, Yajima's intentions toward Takako appear altruistic, but there is a clear attraction

between the two from the beginning. When consulting with his wife about inviting Takako into their home, Yajima leads her to believe that Takako is still a child, glossing over the obvious problem of moving a young woman into his household. As Takako steps into the role of pseudo-wife and stepmother, her character is instantaneously transformed. From a limp, tired girl prone to uncontrollable weeping, she becomes the epitome of a cheerful wife and mother, laughing and smiling as she takes care of the children, prepares meals, and even ensures that a hot bath and change of clothes are ready for Yajima when he returns home. It appears that Yajima was right when he insisted that all she needed was to be in a family environment (*kazoku no kūki ga hitsuyō*).

Yajima's wife Tokie grows suspicious when Takako joins the family on a visit to Enoshima. It is clear that Takako is not a child, and that she represents a threat to their marriage. When Tokie eventually confronts the two sharing an intimate moment, Takako is forced to return to her boarding house, where she receives an offer of marriage from a fellow classmate who is dropping out of school and returning to his hometown in the remote countryside. This would appear to be the best solution, as it will take Takako far away from the temptations associated with Yajima, while giving her a legitimate societal role as a wife. In a surprising twist, however, she is called to Tokie's bedside in her final moments, where the older woman implores her to look after the children, essentially sanctioning the illicit romance.

In the final scene following Tokie's death, Takako returns to the house in the snow. She appears not at the front door, but outside the window of Yajima's study, and when he opens the window, she raises her arms up like a child asking to be picked up. Yajima surreptitiously pulls her out of the snowstorm and into the warm, safe room. By a stroke of luck, she has found a respectable position as Yajima's wife. It is not her status as the daughter of a successful professor, or her decision to take advantage of new educational opportunities afforded to women in the Occupation period, but rather her position as a wife and stepmother that assures her place in society.

Throughout the film, both Yajima and Takako are depicted as fundamentally good people struggling to fight their temptations. Although their restraint may be noble, in the end, it is not their own actions, but rather a chance circumstance that allows them to be together. Despite the happy ending, it is difficult to overlook the fact that Takako readily gives up opportunities to take agency over her own life through new postwar educational opportunities. By eagerly embracing the role of wife to a widower twice her age, the ending suggests that despite legal changes for

women in postwar Japan, gendered perspectives still locate success, or at least social acceptance, within domestic roles.

CONCLUSION

The three films discussed in this short article all depict female characters who exist in liminal states because they lack social roles defined through familial relations. Because of this marginal status, they represent a danger to the men with whom they come in contact. In *Hakuchi*, Taeko's beauty draws men to her, but as a woman who is bought, sold, and passed among men, Taeko has an established and unerasable past that places her in a permanent liminal position. She can belong to neither Akama nor Kameda, and with no means of resolving the situation, she ends up destroying them both, and herself along with them. In *Taifū*, Kuriko's presence among the group of smugglers increases tension and jealousy among the men, causing them to ultimately turn on each other and kill themselves. Sacrificing her own life for a greater good evokes pity, but does not create a path to redemption, even in death. In *Yūwaku*, Takako's future seems bleak despite the fact that she is pursuing a degree in medicine, until the death of another woman offers her a place in a family structure.

It may also be argued that these works have received less critical attention because they are simply not good films. *Hakuchi* is too long, even in the disjointed version presented by the studio's cuts, and drags unbearably at times. *Taifū* depicts two-dimensional characters in a melodrama, ending with a shallow moral message. *Yūwaku* offers a happy ending for a destitute young woman through a contrived ending that diminishes rather than promotes the possibility female agency first suggested early in the film.

However, another possible explanation for the lack of critical attention given to these films is the fact that they do not transmit the persona that has come to be associated with Hara. Richard Dyer's analysis of iconic Hollywood film stars has shown how a star persona is typically defined by a small number of films from the actor's career (2004). In the case of Hara, her defining films come primarily from the postwar films she produced under director Ozu Yasujirō. These depictions of women who sacrifice personal desire in the face of family pressure evoke nostalgia for traditional cultural values before the influence of westernization and democratization. Despite the charming persona of the eternal virgin they transmit, they encode gender images within a limited framework. Examining Hara's filmography from a wider perspective may offer a brief glimpse into the possibility for a new kind of woman with greater agency

that emerged briefly in the Occupation period, and then disappeared from the public imaginary.

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