
Setsuko Hara vs. the Press: The Post-war Trolling of a Wartime Icon

By Jennifer Coates

In the past few decades, research on Japanese cinema's most famous actress, Setsuko Hara (1920-2015), has tended to focus on her wartime and early work. Following her recent death, this focus makes a certain sense, as scholars, critics, and journalists commemorate her life by looking back on her youth, beauty, and peak popularity. In thinking about what I could contribute to the discussion at "Setsuko Hara@St Andrews" in January 2018 however, I was drawn towards Hara's more difficult post-war years, when her star persona was re-fashioned from that of a pro-military collaborationist to a champion of the new social order espoused by the offices of the Supreme Commander of the Allies Powers, which supervised the occupation of Japan from 1945-1952. This moment in Hara's career demonstrates the impact she had not only on Japanese cinema, but on Japanese everyday life.



誰が一番おしやれか

流行の尖端をきる映畫人の中で
だれが一番おしやれだろう……

塚本 二郎

二人高峰がナンバー・ワン
映畫人といふものは、職業柄おしや
れが多いが、中にはまるでしやれ氣の
ない女優さえいる。大陸おしやれとい
うものは、その人の教養とセンスが如
實に出てくるもので、御當人は大いに
しやれているつもりでも、見る方では
およそ野暮つたくて同情を禁じ得ない
場合がある。
女優の中でベスト・ドレッサーと云
われているのは高峰三枝子である。こ
の人は、女優の中でも最も経済的條件
のいい人で、今までの環境もめぐまれ
ていたから、趣味もなかなかいい。自
分のからだに合う服装をちやんと心得
ているから、この頃の若い人たちのよ
うにやたらに、スタイルブックからぬ
け出したような、ちくはくな服装はし
ていない。からだつきのため、どちら
かと云えばワンピースなどより、
スーツの似合ひ人で、彼女の衣裳
戸棚には、ほとんどテイラード・
スーツばかりが並ら下つている。
そして、色氣は茶の系統とダレイ

Figure 1: Tsukamoto, Jirō. “Dare ka ichiban oshare ka?” Eiga Bunko vol. 2 (October 1947), 42.

The Occupation era, and more specifically the years 1945-1948, are in many ways the peak period of Hara's unpopularity, driven as well as documented by the low-brow gossip press that scholars tend to avoid in favour of more academic titles like *Kinema Junpō* (The Movie Times) and *Eiga Geijutsu* (Film Art). Digging through the gossip press' treatment of Hara, we can see the moment that certain journalists and audience demographics turned against her. I believe that this moment sheds lights on the posthumous focus on her very early work found in academic and critical media publications alike. Approaching Hara's career and legacy through the lens of star studies, we can understand the Occupation period as an era in which critics and audiences registered a kind of backlash against Hara's wartime star persona, and much of the

commentary that followed as attempted rehabilitation.

As Richard Dyer argues, the star persona is constituted not only by the films in which a star appears (and which the audience supports by purchasing tickets), but also in extra-filmic discourse in various media (which audiences support by buying magazines or posters, and to which they contribute in the form of fan letters or opinion pieces).

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio handouts and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators.[\[1\]](#)

The star persona is constructed not only by the particular roles a star performs, but also by critical and audience reception of these performances, and subsequent media discourse. Hideaki Fujiki's description of the operations of star persona within the Japanese studio system tracks a similar trajectory, albeit with slightly different origins. In the early years of the Japanese star system, as actors began to supersede film narrators (*benshi*) as the focus of audience interest, a distinction emerged between American and Japanese stars, in that Japanese stars were initially not associated with their onscreen roles, whereas American stars were assumed to be similar in personality to the characters they played. By the 1920s, however, audiences began to conflate Japanese stars with film characters to the extent that stars began to explicitly distance themselves from their previous roles in popular press publications.[\[2\]](#) By the post-war era, the roles a star played had a formative influence on their persona and how audiences imagined their 'real lives' and the popular press had become central to the production and maintenance of star persona.

Hara's first post-war role in Kurosawa Akira's *No Regrets for Our Youth* (*Waga seishun ni kui nashi*, 1946) met with mixed critical and public reception. While critic Satō Tadao describes taking courage from the film's "revelation" that some Japanese citizens had opposed the war,[\[3\]](#) many complained that Hara's character Yukie was too eccentric and unrealistic. Kurosawa defended Hara's performance, suggesting that one had to be eccentric to oppose the war in the face of totalitarianism.[\[4\]](#) However, Satō claims that early post-war women in Japan were not like Yukie, but were "traditional and gentle" and that the general view was that such violent female characterizations were not very "Japanese".[\[5\]](#) Kurosawa reinforced many the widespread impression that Hara's portrayal of Yukie was somewhat forced in an interview in the magazine

Eiga Fan in which he claimed to have tutored her heavily in the role, and to have found her initially unsuited for it.[6]



Figure 2: Takada, Hideki. “Hara Setsuko san ni sasaguru koibun,” *Eiga Fan* 9, no. 10 (October 1949), 31

Hara’s spirited and independent early post-war characters, and by extension her star persona, were often accused of Westernisation, echoing the criticism leveled at Tanaka Kinuyo on her return from America in 1950.[7] The two stars were regularly mentioned in articles critiquing the presentation, particularly dress, of high-profile stars, for example, in Tsukamoto Jirō’s *Eiga Bunko* (Film Library) article of 1947 (figure 1). Here Tanaka is ridiculed for her “lack of style” in choosing Western clothing, while Hara is described as “a Western dress person”[8], aligning her public persona with Western fashions as well as behaviours. Such behaviours were not always well received. Tanaka and Hara were the targets of a critical article in *Eiga Goraku* (Film Entertainment) in April 1948, which argued that they had no *iroke*, or sex appeal.[9] Critic Matsubara Ichirō connects this to their wearing of Western dress, claiming that actresses who suit Japanese dress, such as Yamada Isuzu and Mito Mitsuko, have “masses of *iroke*”. [10] In such critiques of female stars’ physical appearance and presentation, we can see subtle criticisms of Occupation era American cultural hegemony presented as gossipy entertainment journalism.

In the early post-war era, the personae of stars such as Tanaka and Hara were engaged in a delicate negotiation between the respective images of an imagined Japan and an imagined West. While an Americanised or European-style persona could indicate a modern attitude, as in Tanaka's "modern girl" (*moga*) persona of the 1930s, it could also suggest the attack on a perceived Japanese tradition that many interpreted in the Allied Occupation's post-war social reforms. Many critics and gossip writers of the period call attention to "Western" aspects in Hara's star persona, from her dress to her striking nose and the popular rumours that she had Dutch, American, or Russian ancestry.^[11] At the same time, she was also celebrated as an example of traditional Japanese femininity as the nation's "eternal virgin" (*eien no shojo*).^[12] Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has written of the post-war nostalgia surrounding the films of the Shōchiku Kamata studios as "evidence of a cultural politics of self-nativizing",^[13] and I believe we can see a similar affect in the nostalgia evoked by stars such as Hara for post-war critics and viewers. In the nostalgic appeal of the values symbolized by Hara's star persona, anxieties about the loss of a unique Japanese cultural quality were allayed by the establishment of a link to the "longed for imagined community"^[14] of traditional Japan in the coding of Hara's postwar star persona as an imagistic link to the past. In this way Hara's persona expanded to include both a celebration of imagined traditional Japanese morals, and sharp critique of their polar opposite - Westernisation.

Male and female viewers of the time seem to have responded somewhat divergently to Hara's appearance, as an interview published in *Eiga Fan* (Film Fan) magazine in February 1949 shows. The two protagonists in this short conversation are simply titled "Woman" (*onna*) and "Man" (*otoko*). While the woman finds Hara a perfect example of natural female beauty, the man disagrees. The woman suggests he is finding fault with Hara in comparison to Western female stars, but the man cites Hara's intellectual and distanced persona as the problem.

Woman: "But you're thinking of women like Bette Davis and such, aren't you?"

Man: "No, that's not it. Hara Setsuko plays rich daughter roles, intellectual women roles; it's hard to get any feeling from them."^[15]

In this analysis, Hara's unpopularity stems from class bias which situates the warmer working class female characters of the *shitamachi*, or downtown, as more approachable and likeable than the elite young women and teachers played by Hara in the early post-war years.

Hara's attitudes and appearance presented a stumbling block for many viewers who struggled to find her believable as a representative example

of everyday Japanese womanhood. Many post-war era magazines, such as the June 1947 issue of *Eiga Fan* focused on her “exotic physical appearance”, describing her as an “incomplete beauty” (*mikansei no bi*), with a strong will and hysterical nature.[\[16\]](#) Her acting ability is recognized only grudgingly, in that she is accorded “all the makings of talent”.[\[17\]](#) However, her “aloof” (*kokō*) and “intellectual” persona appears to have made her particularly unpopular with certain viewers and critics who recorded their opinions in the gossip press.[\[18\]](#)

Hara’s perceived physical otherness or Westernness combined with this “aloof” attitude to great hostility from a number of male critics, who penned mocking critiques such as that published in *Eiga Fan* in October 1949 by Takada Hideki (figure 2). Takada’s article queries such aspects of Hara’s public persona as her lack of a marital partner, and is illustrated by caricatures of her famous scrunched-up smile.[\[19\]](#) A sketch of Hara bearing a cross refers to the self-sacrificing nature of her characters in Ozu Yasujirō’s work and to her perceived “Westernness” (figure 3).[\[20\]](#) Such material pokes fun at the righteous attitudes of Hara’s early post-war characters, combining their hauteur with Hara’s own sharp refusals to answer questions from the gossip press about her romantic life off-screen.

Hara’s star persona became something of a scapegoat for viewers critical of a number of social changes during the Allied, primarily American, Occupation. From the mass importing of Anglo-European and American fashions, languages, and behaviours, to SCAP’s insistence on the centrality of images of emancipated women in Japanese popular media, Hara symbolized all that was wrong in post-war Japan for many traditionalist viewers. While her star persona still carried the taint of her wartime collaboration, viewers on both the left and right of the political spectrum found her appearance, attitudes, and roles troubling.

Hara’s star persona just about weathered the transition from post-defeat to later post-war Japan, retiring to the home in Naruse Mikio’s housewife dramas of the 1950s, and Ozu Yasujirō’s family-focused works of the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet it is fitting that her retirement in 1963 was followed by the nation’s transition to a post-post-war state marked by the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 and Japan’s subsequent accession to the OECD, occasioning a new understanding of what it meant to be Japanese, and a new awareness of Japan’s place in the world.[\[21\]](#) Forever marked by the historical events of her early career, Hara’s star persona now appears sunniest in those early years when she participated, perhaps in all innocence, wartime narratives depicting Japanese colonization as a great adventure with high ideals and moral foundations. In the aftermath of defeat and Occupation, Hara’s persona reminded many of that false hope, its loss, and the subsequent imposition of Anglo-European and American

cultural and moral values on a poverty-stricken Japan. As the economy picked up and a newly futuristic Tokyo welcomed the 1964 Olympics, Hara's star persona was consigned to the post-war past as the nation moved into a post-post-war future

Notes

[1] Dyer, Richard, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 2-3.

[2] Fujiki, Hideaki, *Making Personas: Transnational Film Stardom in Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center; Harvard University Press, 2013), 185.

[3] Satō, Tadao, "Nihonteki dentō to seiyōtekina mono," in *Kōza Nihon Eiga vol. 8, Nihon Eiga no Tenbō*, ed. Imamura Shōhei et al., (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988), 24.

[4] Kurosawa, Akira, "Hara Setsuko no miryō," *Eiga Fan* 6, no. 7 (December 1946): 4.

[5] Satō, "Nihonteki dentō to seiyōtekina mono," 24.

[6] Kurosawa, "Hara Setsuko no miryō," 4.

[7] Satō, Tadao, "Kiki to mosaku," in *Kōza Nihon Eiga vol. 6, Nihon Eiga no Mosaku*, ed.

Imamura Shōhei et al., (Tokyo: Iwanami Shōten, 1987), 11.

[8] Tsukamoto, Jirō, "Dare ka ichiban oshare ka?" [Who is the Most Stylish?] *Eiga Bunko* 2 (October 1947): 44.

[9] Matsubara, Ichirō, "Iroke to joyū," *Eiga Goraku* 2, no. 2 (April 1948): 13.

[10] Matsubara, "Iroke to joyū," 13.

[11] Yomota, Inuhiko, *Nihon joyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000) 18.

[12] Yomota, *Nihon joyū*, 4.

[13] Wada-Marciano, Mitsuyo, *Nippon Modern: Japanese Film of the 1920s and '30s*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 129.

[14] Wada-Marciano, *Nippon Modern*, 129.

[15] Eiga Fan. "Shizen no utsukushisa: Hara Setsuko san" [Natural Beauty: Hara Setsuko], *Eiga Fan* 9, no. 2 (1949), 9.

[16] Kawahara, Michiko, "Hara Setsuko ron" [Discourse on Hara Setsuko], *Eiga Fan* 7, no. 6 (June 1947): 30.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Takada, Hideki, "Hara Setsuko san ni sasaguru koibun," *Eiga Fan* 9, no. 10 (October 1949): 31-33.

[20] Takada, "Hara Setsuko san," 32.

[21] Orr, James, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 138.

Notes on the Contributor

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