

Fantasies of War and Nation in Recent Japanese Cinema

Aaron Gerow

Fantasies of War and Nation in Recent Japanese Cinema

By Aaron Gerow

It comes as no surprise that the recent resurgence of neo-nationalist thought in Japan would find expression in cinema.[1] With the issue of the nation and its ability to fight war, currently prohibited by Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, being vigorously challenged by the ruling party and the right, in part through actual deployment of Self-Defense Forces in Iraq and other danger zones, it is significant that the year 2005 saw the release of four big budget spectacles offering particular visions of Japanese fighting wars. Two, *Lorelei* ("Rorerai," director: Higuchi Shinji) and *Samurai Commando: Mission 1549* ("Sengoku Jieitai 1549," director: Tezuka Masaaki), are outright fantasies, albeit ones that offer alternative narratives of historical wars (World War II in the former, the sixteenth century civil wars in the latter).

Another, *Aegis* ("Bokoku no ijisu," director: Sakamoto Junji), depicts a potential scenario for

Japan's current military forces; and the last one, *Yamato* ("Otokotachi no Yamato," director: Sato Jun'ya), presents a spectacular and rather melodramatic retelling of the last days of the famed battleship *Yamato* in World War II. The first three films were all scripted and/or based on stories penned by the successful novelist Fukui Harutoshi, and all four performed well at the box office, with *Lorelei* ending as the ninth highest grossing Japanese film of 2005.[2] Yet not all of them are simple celebrations of the nation at war. While they could potentially serve as the mouthpiece for right-wing dialogue, each of these recent war films has a complex and sometimes contradictory story to tell.

There are certainly factors other than Japan's recent turn to the right for the emergence of such films. The largest is probably the film industry's effort to revive its fortunes, especially as the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has put increasing stress on Japan's content business, now led by anime, games and character sales, as a strategic industry. The Agency for Cultural Affairs has also offered policy suggestions to bolster film culture in Japan. After the industry's precipitous decline following its peak around

1960, bottoming out in the early 1990s, the film business has seen a slight increase in its fortunes in recent years.

The Japanese market is the second biggest in the world, but the share held by domestic producers hovers at only around 30-40%. In contrast, the Korean film industry has been booming, thanks in part to concerted government support not yet seen in Japan. The Japanese industry has not been blind to the success of such Korean blockbusters as *Shiri* (“Swiri,” director: Kang Je-gyu, 1999), *Joint Security Area* (“Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA,” director: Park Chan-wook, 2000) and *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War* (“Taegukgi hwinalrimyeo,” director: Kang Je-gyu, 2004) all war-related action films that were also hits in Japan. It has thus latched onto war spectacles as one means of competing in the film market. Its own war films may have been one factor in the rise in market share, from 37.5% to 41.3%, captured by Japanese films in 2005 compared to the year before, even as the overall market has shrunk.[3]

Recourse to war is hardly a new tactic in the history of Japanese film; indeed war has played a major role in shaping the industry throughout its history. The first movie boom, which eventually gave itinerant exhibitors the capital to build the initial theaters and studios, was due to the success of films showing Japan’s victories in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05. The state

reorganization of the industry during World War II, aimed at making film a more efficient mode of war propaganda, also helped establish the structural foundations for the industry’s golden era in the 1950s. From the 1950s to the 1960s, studios like Shintoho and Toho owed some of their success to war films glorifying World War II martyrs like Yamamoto Isoroku or the young kamikaze pilots. These were not whole-scale celebrations of national victories—the postwar climate probably could not sustain such openly militarist films—but as individualized melodramas of victimization and sacrifice, they helped lay the seeds for later popular neo-nationalism in their reinforcement of Japanese masculinity, the veneration of the sacrificial war dead, and their presentation of wartime Japanese as heroic victims of external forces.[4]

Live action war films declined in the 1970s, as did stories set in actual wars. But fantasy war films, which could be traced back to such films as *Atragon* (“Kaitei gunkan,” director: Honda Ishiro, 1963), a Toho special effects movie in which remnants of the Imperial Navy save the Earth from invading aliens, took up the slack especially in the field of anime. For instance, the successful *Space Battleship Yamato* (“Uchu senkan Yamato,” both a TV series and a 1977 film directed by Masuda Toshio) offered the wishful story that resurrecting the sunken battleship Yamato was the only way to save the human race, and *Silent Service* (“Chinmoku no kantai,”

director: Takahashi Ryosuke, 1995), based on a manga, showed a rogue Self-Defense Force warship independently forcing peace on the superpowers. Such works marked the fact that anime fandom, and related audiences such as those for manga, would increasingly reveal right-wing tendencies in the 1990s. These would eventually be represented by such right-leaning subculture commentators as Sato Kenji and Kiridoshi Risaku, or neo-nationalist manga artists like Kobayashi Yoshinori.

Such a history reminds us that the recent resurgence of nationalist images in popular culture is not without precedent. What is different now is first and foremost the fact that popular phenomena that were largely regarded as low culture (Shinto, after all, was a second rate studio that also specialized in sex and horror films), are now much more respected by official media and institutions. Compared to the 1950s works, which tried to find glory while remaining cognizant of the reality of defeat, recent films, supported by the 1990s boom in alternative history novels, are also much more bold in revising history to fantasize Japanese victories, free, in some sense, of the “taboos” of postwar Japanese democracy (*sengo minshushugi*) that so many on the pop culture right complain of. *Samurai Commando: Mission 1549* is a case in point: it offers a more positive ending than its decidedly tragic earlier incarnation, *G. I. Samurai* (“*Sengoku Jieitai*,” director Saito Mitsumasa)

from 1979. We should be careful, however, of perceiving a monolithic quality to right-wing revisionist nationalism in Japanese popular culture. The visions of a fighting Japan presented in these films, precisely because they are often contradictory, having only been effected through certain compromises and ideological contortions that tell us as much about the obstacles nationalism faces in Japan as the gains it has made. Close analysis of these texts is thus essential to understanding the meanings they try to create and represent. In this article, I would like to focus on two films that offer the most prominent image of a “victorious” Japan, *Lorelei* and *Aegis*.

First, let me summarize the stories of these two films. Although the novel for *Lorelei* was actually written concurrent with the script, the film version reduces the long and detailed plot of the novel into a more simple, uplifting story of men on a mission to defend their loved ones, with a focus as much on their loves and friendships as their heroism. The story, set in the last days of WWII, centers on a submarine, the I-507, manufactured by the Germans but acquired by the Japanese after VE Day, that contains the Lorelei System. That system, initially a mystery, is ultimately revealed to be composed of a German-born, teenage girl with paranormal powers who, when attached to elaborate sensory apparatus, provides the sub with extremely accurate mapping and trajectory information,

something that makes the sub virtually invincible. The sub's mission, however, is not to attack America, but to save Japan. Right after the bomb drops on Hiroshima, a member of the Navy command, Captain Asakura, orders Lieutenant Commander Masami to take the I-507, break through US Navy defense lines, and attack the airfield on Tinian Island before more atomic bombs can be launched. There is not much time, for only a few days after they start, the second bomb is dropped on Nagasaki and the Americans are preparing a third.



Lorelei: Origasa (left) and Masami (right)

It soon becomes clear, however, that not all is as it seems. The Lorelei System is rather brutal technology, practically draining the girl Paula of life in order to work. Asakura's men on the sub then try to take command, revealing that the officer's plan in fact is not to stop the next A-bomb attack, but actually to allow it, simultaneously turning over the Lorelei System to the Americans. Asakura's reasoning, very briefly, is as follows: Japan made enormous

mistakes during the war, under a command that was incompetent and irresponsible. In a scene where he confronts the top military brass, Asakura even "proves" their cowardice and refusal to take responsibility for their actions. For Japan to surrender as is, he argues, would be to allow the main government and military leaders to live and, arguably, go on to lead postwar Japan. Asakura worries about the postwar Japan that would be produced by such cowards, one in which no one takes responsibility and thus no one really makes an authentic commitment to their country. He thus effectively advocates the suicide of the nation—or at least its beheading. The atomic bombing of Tokyo, he reasons, would instantly eliminate the wartime leaders, clean the slate, and allow Japan to be reborn into a proper nation after the war.

Masami, the film's hero, will not allow this, however. He and his crew overpower Asakura's men, a turn of events which prompts Asakura's suicide back in Tokyo. They then solidify their camaraderie and continue on with their mission, with Paula willingly enduring the Lorelei System in order to weave these men through American defenses. Masami, looking towards the future, eventually lets Paula and the seaman who loves her, Origasa, off board. The I-507 then makes the final thrilling push, downs the plane carrying the third atomic bomb, and then simply disappears. A brief final scene in the present implies that the I-507 is still out there somewhere.

Set in the present, *Aegis* features a much less fantastic plot, though again one pared down from the novel. In Tom Clancy-fashion, it imagines a possible scenario for Japan's Self-Defense Forces, but one structured like a *Die Hard* tale of a lone hero fighting terrorists in a confined space. The *Isokaze*, an Aegis class destroyer packed with sophisticated equipment, suffers a mutiny led by its second in command, Commander Miyazu and fellow members of his Emergency Law Study Group. The group had long been engaging in serious criticism of Japanese national policy, especially with regard to defense matters, fundamentally asking, "Is there a future worth defending in a ruined nation (*bokoku*) that has lost sight of its proper direction?" Their nationalist premise is that a country without a full military is not a true country bearing a real sense of purpose. Their plan to kill the captain and take over the *Isokaze* was in part spurred by the suspicious death of Miyazu's son in a car accident, possibly triggered by the government secret agents. To complicate matters, Miyazu's men are not only being assisted by commandos from another nation (unnamed in the film, but presumably North Korea), but they have armed some of the missiles with *Gusoh*, a deadly chemical weapon developed secretly by the Americans. Threatening Tokyo they state three demands: that the USA admit the existence of *Gusoh*, that the government declare who killed Miyazu's son, and that there be a public airing of their national

critique. When another ship tries to intercept the *Isokaze*, the destroyer blows it out of the water, leaving the Japanese government defenseless.



Aegis: "Live! Definitely live!"

The only hope is the *Isokaze*'s Master Chief Petty Officer Sengoku, the highest ranking enlisted man on board and someone who loves the ship and knows it like the back of his hand. After the crew is ordered over board, Sengoku sneaks back and starts wreaking havoc. Soon, divisions between Miyazu's men and the North Korean commandos led by a stern leader named Yong Fa come to the surface, and Miyazu changes his mind. Only through Sengoku's heroism, aided by

the young Kisaragi, a secret agent posing as a seaman, is Yong Fa defeated, the Gusoh disarmed, and the Americans stopped at the very last instant from destroying the Isokaze.

Both of these fantasy narratives can be seen as offering the kind of elements that neo-nationalists in the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho o Tsukuru Kai) might have approved for their textbooks. With the right-wing authors of the “new textbook” arguing that they are presenting a history that established textbooks have ignored, Lorelei even articulates its story as being a tale that “was never recorded in history.”[5] Here are examples of Japanese putting their lives on the line to protect not only the fatherland (sokoku) but millions of fellow countrymen from dying in a single attack, groups willing to put military might to good use—all examples which could imbue young Japanese with “pride” in their nation. These are not the melodramatic tales of young Japanese dying for a losing nation found in fifties and sixties war films, but of battles fought and won with (especially if the I-507 survived) the protagonists living on.

Such films may express the kind of “healthy nationalism” (kenzenna nashonarizumu) that political conservatives heartily advocate, desiring that Japan finally become a “normal nation” (futsu no kuni), that is, one with no restrictions on its military power. The movies in fact give

voice to many of the basic tenets of the Japanese right, the most central of which is that the warped history of the postwar has robbed Japan of its standing as a true nation (which it is why it is called a ruined or destroyed nation in Aegis). In the case of Asakura, this is a prediction: that the inability of Japanese leaders to act independently and responsibly will create a postwar Japan that is weak internationally as well as domestically.

For some of the characters in Aegis, this is the reality of Japan at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The statement, “Japanese have forgotten how shameful it is to have, without a care, allowed someone else to defend them,” underlines the disgraceful condition of today’s Japan as perceived by neonationalists—and proves all the more embarrassing because it is uttered by the North Korean Yong Fa, the enemy. Presumably in order to relearn such shame, as well as to emerge from beneath it, Japan must rediscover the meaning of the nation (especially the sense of collective embarrassment and pride), and eliminate factors that have prevented it from (militarily) standing on its own two feet, such as Article 9 of the Constitution. Neo-nationalists have therefore lauded these films. Nishibe Susumu, a leading conservative intellectual in Japan, has for instance praised Aegis for offering the “first visual images of military intellectual thought.”

Criticism of this “postwar” world that clutches the Constitution to its breast, preserving it for future generations, has been published in many places in writing. But there is something special about the moving image’s ability to influence. Has there ever been a work that has so baldly brought into relief the cowardliness of the “postwar” [as Aegis]?[6]

It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that films like *Aegis* and *Lorelei* are simply nationalistic propaganda. They are in fact much more complex and contradictory works. Even Nishibe perceptively notices that not all is right with his “intellectual war film.” On the level of the narrative, echoing the complaints of some critics and fans, he criticizes the lack of justification for both Miyazu’s and Yong Fa’s actions, noting that too many factors enter into their reasoning. Nishibe, who is well known for his criticism of Japan’s dependency on the United States [7], would have preferred that what he calls Miyazu’s “coup d’etat” was more clearly articulated as an effort to free Japan from America’s yoke. Furthermore, he critiques the filmmakers’ decision to have Sengoku return to the ship alone. Despite the fact that the lives of millions of Japanese depend on stopping the plotters, Sengoku doesn’t wish to endanger the other crewmen. Nishibe thus fails the film for not depicting the collective effort to sacrifice oneself for the nation.

Some of these criticisms may be peculiar to Nishibe’s personal standpoint, but they serve as a starting point in approaching the contradictions of the films, which suggest a vision of the nation that is not quite the simple unity neo-nationalists dream of. With the exception of articles like Nishibe’s, much of the reaction to the films paid little attention to their nationalist messages. Critics predominantly focused on whether these films worked as action or entertainment [8], and viewer reactions on internet movie sites mostly commented on character and plot development, the realism of the special effects, and general believability and entertainment value of the movies. Such writings could be taken as evidence of a lack of popular resistance to these film’s messages, but they more likely represent both general anxieties over openly voicing expressions of nationalism as well as the films’ own uncertain stance towards their topics. Both movies, for instance, take great pains to create an inoffensive vision of war and the nation, especially by advocating life over death. The two heroes, Sengoku and Masami, repeatedly tell their men “to live” (*ikiro*), a stance which puts them more in line with the liberal anime director Miyazaki Hayao (whose environmentalist film, *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke hime*, 1997), was advertised with the tag line “*Ikiro!*”) than the kamikaze heroes of the wartime or even 1950s and 1960s cinema. Masami, in fact, was relieved of command earlier in the war for opposing the military’s kamikaze tactics. He thus puts Origasa

and Paula off the sub before the final attack so that they may live. Certainly his decision to attack Tinian Island is nearly suicidal, but distinctions are made between this and a suicide attack: the number of participants is kept at a minimum; the I-507 shoots at ships not to kill but to disable, thus reducing the loss of life; and their assault is more clearly articulated as resulting in survival (of Tokyo) than death—and the I-507 does apparently survive itself. What dies in the attack, as Masami intimates when he tells the young couple that it was “adults who started the war,” is more likely to be the dark past, a mistaken history that will justly die so that Japan’s youth can enjoy a bright future.

Neither film totally ignores death and sacrifice. Origasa’s baseball-loving friend, Kiyonaga, must willingly die towards the end so that the Lorelei System can be launched. But such “meaningful” deaths are contrasted with the only true suicides in the film: that of Asakura and his assistant. Aegis does present some of the complications of the “to live” philosophy. Just when Sengoku finally succeeds in individually convincing Sugiura, one of Miyazu’s officers, to give up, Kisaragi bursts into the room and, following his secret agent training, immediately kills him. Sengoku then lectures Kisaragi on the need to preserve life—he himself refuses to carry a gun until the end—but when Kisaragi tries to enact that philosophy in his next encounter with the enemy, he ironically gets shot. Still, the film

ultimately valorizes life because both Sengoku and Kisaragi survive at the end, as do many of Miyazu’s men. This insistence on life can, it must be noted, conversely lead the films to close their eyes to the horrors of death, rendering it less offensive. Paula’s paranormal skills essentially involve vision, and thus she often functions in the film as a witness to death: to Holocaust-like persecution in Germany, to the bombing of Nagasaki, and to the American deaths that I-507’s attacks initially cause. Such perceptions, however, conveniently disappear when the I-507 goes on its attack at the end, meaning the audience is not shown unpleasant images of dying individuals as the heroes head for glory. The films therefore attempt to both encourage audience identification by advocating an easily supportable philosophy of life, as well as prevent spectator offense by viewing death through rose-colored glasses.

Both films thus tread a delicate line between viewing war as unnecessarily ending young lives, and constructing certain battles as narratively acceptable. This effort to in essence simultaneously accept and reject war has definite effects on the subject and object of the battles depicted here: who is fighting and what they are fighting for. The primary manifestation of this affect is the fact that the question that consumes the characters of both films is not “what do we fight for?” but “what do we defend?” War is transformed from the horrible space of killing to

a more benevolent and less offensive practice of defending against an attack (the word used is always “mamoru”). This may align the films with the public ideology of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces[9] and conservative efforts to amend the Constitution to justify their existence: they are, it is argued, not for waging war, but only for protecting the nation. Yet it is important to note that neither film makes it evident that what the heroes are defending is in fact the nation. Masami never speaks of the need to save “Japan” from a third atomic attack: he only mentions his desire to preserve the Tokyo that he shared with his now dead wife. Sengoku also seems to act more to save the ship and crew that he loves, and his daughter back home, than to help any abstract entity such as the nation.

The characters who repeatedly refer to the nation (e.g., “Nippon” “sokoku”) are not the heroes, but more ambivalent figures like Yong Fa and Asakura. The dialogue in *Aegis* that manifests neo-nationalist thought in contemporary Japan is actually mostly spoken by Yong Fa or Asami Daisuke, a central official in the Defense Agency Information Service (DAIS), the secret organization which might have been involved in the death of Miyazu’s son. Asami is performed by Sato Koichi, a regular in Sakamoto’s films, who also played a right-wing government agent in that director’s *KT* (2002), a fictional thriller about the kidnapping of Kim Dae-Jung. Just as in that film, Sato here is more a conflicted figure

than a confident nationalist. Yong Fa is more single-minded, but that is in part what makes him disturbing. His plan is to use the *Gusoh* to topple his country’s government[10], but unlike Sengoku, he expresses little care for whoever might die along the way; even the death of his sister, Jong-Hi, who serves on his commando team, does not swerve him from his path.

Asakura is an even more complicated figure. At first, he is portrayed as relatively liberal and modern amongst the military high command, having studied in the USA and currently living in a Western-style house. But these characteristics are rendered problematic when he is revealed to be cooperating with the Americans, not only hoping to provide them with the technology to rule the postwar, but also, in a perverse fashion, providing another argument for dropping the A-bomb that conservative Americans might welcome: that the bomb is necessary for Japan to succeed in the postwar and to become a proper nation. Asakura is thus an odd mixture of nationalisms.

He wants to destroy Japan in order to save it, cooperating with Americans in order to clean up Japan. His background is strongly Western, but he is much more of a “samurai” than any other characters in the film (being the only member of the high brass who commits suicide). He reminds one of the 1930s radical Japanese right wing, yet by implication he wants to kill the emperor.

Demonizing him allows the film to engage in some complicated ideological tightrope walking. First, since his thesis about lack of responsibility actually resembles the postwar debates about subjectivity (*shutaisei*), rejecting him is on the one hand a means of rejecting postwar democratic liberalism with its emphasis on the Western responsible individual. But since he is also "samurai-like," that demonization, on the other hand, refuses the extremes of right-wing Japanese radicalism. The fact that he is partially crippled can symbolize his decadence, but it also helps explain why he is somewhat sympathetic. He is not wholly evil, and the film never fully rejects either his view that the Japanese leadership was the problem in the war or his postwar prognosis about what that corruption would do to Japan. In a peculiar way, he functions as a scapegoat for the Japanese audience's fantastic re-imagining of history: by making Tokyo, the center of Japan, the target of a traitorous third A-bomb attack, and thus a place in need of salvation, he renders regular Japanese "innocent victims" of the war as well as offers Japanese a chance to heroically save themselves.

As some of the filmmakers admitted, the works take care to avoid the excesses of nationalism in order not to prompt a quick rejection on the part of some viewers.[11] Yet by both using and distancing their stances from these more fervent, if perverse nationalists, *Aegis* and *Lorelei* attempt to engage in a more innocuous and thus

amorphous nationalism. Against those who declare they are defending the nation, characters like Masami and his crew are protecting things closer at hand: family, loved ones, hometowns, etc.



Lorelei: "To protect the fatherland, we had to protect her"

In an ideal form of nationalism, these should all be absorbed in or reduced to the nation, but neither film succeeds in doing this because singular concrete objects of defense always stand out. The aged American officer, who is seen at the end of *Lorelei* narrating the tale of the "Witch of the Pacific Ocean" from the present, actually opines that "they took on the whole US Navy to protect a girl." If the characters then seem divorced from single-minded duty to the nation, it is in part

because Masami and Sengoku are acting on their own, agents free of the national command.[12] Such independence both renders them pure—free of the baggage that burdens Yong Fa and Asakura—as well as enables the audience to fantasize another Japanese nation, one liberated from the historical weight of wartime responsibility and US-Japan security treaties. That is one reason neither film can offer the specificities Nishibe desires, about America and communal sacrifice, since such factors are too rooted in historicity.

With both films refraining from using direct symbols of the nation such as the flag or the emperor, they can only attempt a hegemonic feeling of nationhood that attempts to link quite disparate desires, ranging from the will to protect a German girl (though in a nod to racial notions of nationhood, Paula does have Japanese blood) to the will to live.[13] The desires are so diverse and uncontroversial that the resulting nation is amorphous. By ideologically threading through and bridging various contradictory positions, trying to please everyone and offend no one, the films try to find consensus on the need to “defend what is precious to you”—but this can only be done by evading the clear depiction of that thing. It is thus fitting that what in *Lorelei* comes best to symbolize the nation—the I-507 and its crew—ultimately disappears. The sub, perhaps like today’s Japanese nation, can only function as a symbol, being everywhere (all-

seeing) and no where (invisible), by becoming a zero-sign, an empty container into which diverse audiences can insert their varied fantasies, but without having much substance.

The nationalism on view in *Aegis* and *Lorelei* is thus not that new. Masami and Sengoku are less the rebirth of wartime nationalism or the epitomes of contemporary right wing ideals, than humanists, who value concrete local communities over abstract entities including the nation. Masami is more of a status quo nationalist, one who likes Japan as it is today. He is not a revisionist of the left or right, but someone who basically revalorizes the postwar Japan of high-economic growth, while leaving such controversial issues as American bases and Article 9 out of the picture. He refuses Asakura’s arguments about the Japanese leadership or issues of responsibility, and simply insists on the average person’s ability to keep living and rebuild their lives after the war. This valorizes the everyman—if not the salaryman—who acts not for country, but for family and local community (or company). The humility and resourcefulness of Masami and Sengoku (who gets down on his hands and knees to free his seamen from the police) less point towards a new vision of the Japanese military than reinforce the old ideology of the corporate warrior (*kigyo senshi*) at the end of Japan’s longest postwar economic downturn.

Cinematically, at least, there is also an attempt to bring technology down to a human, “normal” level. *Lorelei* is a film centered on technology, both in having a device serve as a main character, and in using computer graphics to depict the sub and many of the battle scenes.[14] This dependency upon special visual effects, along with the fact that Paula’s character resembles many female fighters from anime hits like *Gundam* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, prompted many to call *Lorelei* a live-action anime film. Higuchi’s choice of the somewhat old-fashioned CinemaScope wide-screen process, however, not only gives the visuals a somewhat dated patina, but helps contrast the tight spaces inside the sub, paradoxically emphasized by the wider screen, with the wide-open ocean views when the sub surfaces. The *Lorelei* System as a technology of vision (opposed to the aural system of sonar) can be thematically connected to the film’s own emphasis on spectacle, but the fact that the I-507 makes its final push—and then continues to evade capture for years afterward—without the System, underlines how the film yet again privileges down home Japanese hard-work over fantastic technology. The fact that Sengoku, aboard one of the technologically most sophisticated ships in the fleet, ends up signaling the all-clear at the conclusion using hand-flags also brings *Aegis* in line with this effort to ground spectacle/vision in the normal, everyday body.



The fatherly Sengoku (left) with Kisaragi

It should be noted that these everyday warriors are overwhelmingly masculine. If anything is to be resurrected here, it is more immediately the patriarch than the nation. Sakamoto’s films such as *KT* or *Out of This World* (“*Kono yo no soto e—Kurabu shinchugun*,” 2004) have often put conflicted male homosocial camaraderie over national allegiances, and *Aegis* is no different. Both *Aegis* and *Lorelei* feature a crisis in patriarchal leadership, with coups, mutinies, and a general lack of clarity over who is in charge. Alongside this, there are children missing parents (the orphaned Paula; Kisaragi, whose mother committed suicide; and even Origasa, whose family we presume was lost in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki) as well as incomplete families (Sengoku has a daughter, but no explanation is offered for his wife’s absence). The heroes in both films essentially work to fill in these gaps and become the missing parent—Masami for Paula and Origasa, Sengoku for Kisaragi—but in a more benevolent fashion,

with Sengoku allowing Kisaragi to pursue the painting that the young man's own autocratic father did not.

These films thus respond to continued anxieties over masculinity and the family in Japan, where on the one hand, the economic downturn and corporate restructuring have threatened to emasculate the salaryman warrior, and on the other, youth crime and familial instability have been blamed on the resulting weak and often absent (because of overwork) father. Military figures like Sengoku and Masami, if not the nation-state itself, are then posed as models for a stronger patriarchy, but we should again remember that in neither film are these men hypermasculinized like Rambo, or enabled to win over a rebellious wife like McClane in *Die Hard*. Women are in fact absent from their lives, and each film deals with that in different ways. Higuchi's vision of men valiantly defending a pretty girl makes no issue with the gendering of this family, and thus merely assumes that the young couple will replace the older, scarred one composed of Masami and his dead wife. Sakamoto, however, whose films often raise the issue of the absent mother (see his *Another Battle* ("Shin jingi naki tatakai," 2000)), brings in the missing woman at the end in a fashion which may offer criticism of the spectacle of national masculinity we have just seen. In stark contrast to Sengoku's vision of the myriad of military men saluting en masse, we are shown a scene at the

end of Miyazu's wife visiting the graves of the son and now the husband that she lost to this effort to resurrect a "ruined Japan." Her query about what the two now talk about, followed by her statement that they have left her alone, reminds the viewer of what might be missing from this hegemonic effort to reformulate the nation, what is left behind when the men go off into a separate world to play out their fantasies of heroic nationalism.

Aegis and Lorelei thus are more contradictory than they seem at first glance. Those contradictions can be the result of intertextual factors or, as in *Aegis*, even a form of self-critique, but they also reflect a narrative strategy that appears very conscious of an audience that is divided and not universally supportive of militarist visions of nationalism. This is an audience, we must remember, that supports the Japanese national soccer team and even votes for the "Koizumi Theater," but remains unenthusiastic about SDF deployment in Iraq and other openly militarist moves. The structure of these films thus do not merely serve as popular cultural evidence for the rise of nationalism today, but also tell us a great deal about the ideological and emotional complications it is facing.

The conflicts in these films may also point to inherent contradictions within neo-nationalism today, especially with regard to the place of

America in Japan's national consciousness. For while these two films offer narratives of Japanese either solving their own problems, or stopping the Americans from creating even more problems—thus imagining a Japan free of postwar American dominance—the vision they offer of a new Japanese cinema, one sold in advertisements as being “on a scale never seen in Japanese film history,”[15] is ultimately dependent upon America. Just as the Aegis destroyer itself is based on American technology, and the Lorelei System on German ingenuity, so both films rely heavily on foreign know-how. George Lucas's *Skywalker Sound*, for instance, did the post-production sound for *Lorelei*, and both the music and the editing for *Aegis* were done by Hollywood veterans. These facts were not hidden, but widely advertised since the technology of the films, especially the special effects, formed the core of their public image, more than their nationalism.[16] This is reflective of the sad fact that many Japanese audiences still hold to the belief that Japanese films are inferior to the Hollywood fare, and thus must be lured to Japanese films by the promise of Hollywood-style entertainment.

Some critics favorably spoke of these war films as an attempt to break free of the restrictive notion, which long held sway in Japanese film circles, that entertaining war films were pro-war, and that anti-war films had to be heavy and tragic.[17] In some sense, the war films of 2005

were an attempt to make Japanese cinema into a “normal cinema,” one that parallels the push to make Japan a “normal nation.” Yet the irony here is that America remains the model—that Japanese cinema comes into its own only when it can effectively copy *Die Hard*, albeit with a slightly kinder face. All this may also reflect how much the national vision of contemporary Japan, especially as put forward by the Koizumi government, is deeply tied to American policy and technology. Nishibe may demand that the nation—and its filmmakers—think of ways of divorcing themselves from America, presumably in hopes of finding Japan's own vision of the nation, but neither of these popular films is able to do that. In looking at these films, we should not be looking just for signs of a independent Japanese nationalism, but also for the reasons why the nationalism in these works is so warped and tortured, confronted with a myriad of obstacles it takes convoluted paths to avoid, and for the figures like Miyazu's wife who hovers at the edge of these tales of ruined nations and national heroes, reminding us of what nationalism has to erase in order to appear compelling and unproblematic.

[1] This article is a reworking of two earlier versions: first, my response to the “Hiroshima as a favor to Japan?” thread on the H-JAPAN mailing list on 17 June 2005, and my article “Nihon eiga no tame ni tatakau koto” published in the summer 2005 issue of *Eiga geijutsu*. I

would like to thank readers of previous drafts for their suggestions.

[2] According to statistics released by the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan (Nihon Eiga Seisakusha Renmei, or “Eiren”). Aegis finished twelfth on the list, and Samurai Commando fourteenth. Lorelei made ¥2.4 billion, Aegis ¥2.06 billion, and Samurai Commando ¥1.76 billion at the box office, all very good figures, but nowhere near those of the top grossing film, Howl’s Moving Castle (“Hauru no ugoku shiro,” director Miyazaki Hayao) at ¥19.6 billion. All probably made a profit, especially if one factors in DVD sales, but because of their relatively high budgets by Japanese film standards (Aegis cost about ¥1.2 billion), and the relatively high take Japanese exhibitors and distributors extract from the box office gross, their producers may not have earned that much money. Yamato was released too late in the year to appear in the top 20 list, but seemed to be well on its way to becoming one of the top grossing films of 2006.

[3] According to Eiren statistics, the market share for Japanese films has risen steadily since 2002, when a share of 27.1% was the lowest in over 50 years. Box office for foreign films has declined each year since then in absolute numbers, although the market as a whole has not shown the steady growth the industry hoped for.

[4] For more on these films, see Isolde Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

[5] See the official pamphlet for Lorelei, sold in the theaters where the film was shown.

[6] Nishibe Susumu, “‘Sengo’ no kanreki ni shutsugenshita hatsu no gunji shiso eizo,” *Eiga geijutsu* 412 (Summer 2005), 12-13.

[7] Nishibe’s voluble critiques of post-9.11 America are one reason why he left the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform, which has generally been pro-American.

[8] See, for instance, Watanabe Takenobu, “Rorerai,” *Kinema junpo* 1426 (first half April 2005), 100.

[9] The Maritime Self-Defense Force in fact fully cooperated with the producers of Aegis in shooting of the film.

[10] Yong Fa’s plan is a rather roundabout way to topple the government. By destroying Tokyo, he assumes his country will be blamed for the atrocity and the Americans will attack and topple the Kim regime.

[11] Hasegawa Yasuo, one of the screenwriters for Aegis, says the producers asked him to rework the Emergency Law Study Group’s manifesto, which is described in some detail in the novel, so as to avoid a “bothersome negative response” (*tsumaranai kyohikan*) . See the interview with Hasegawa, “Shujinko o dare ni suru ka, dare no eiga ni suru ka,” *Shinario* 686 (September 2005), 23.

[12] The narrative device of creating military free agents can also be found in such works as *Silent Service*.

[13] Hasegawa speaks of trying to avoid a single

interpretation of the film's stance toward the nation: Hasegawa 23. That, presumably, would also enable multiple, yet not always exclusive, attachments to the nation.

[14] Viewer reaction on the web was mixed toward these visual effects. Some remarked that the somewhat artificial look helped support the fantasy narrative, while others criticized their lack of convincing realism, concluding that cheap Japanese movies could still not compare to the vastly superior Hollywood product.

[15] A quote from the press pamphlet for *Aegis*.

[16] The official pamphlets and press books for the films devoted most of their pages to

describing the technology, and not the issues involved in the films.

[17] See, for instance, Tsuruta Koji, "Naze, ima, senso eiga na no ka," *Kinema junpo* 1425 (second half of March 2005), 39.

*Aaron Gerow is an assistant professor in Film Studies and East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University. His numerous publications on Japanese cinema include contributions to anthologies such as *Censoring History*, *Islands of Discontent*, and *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, and he is currently finishing a book on Kitano Takeshi. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted February 20, 2006.*