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# **The Never-Ending Pacific War: Imamura Shōhei and the Ruse of Memory<sup>1\*</sup>**

Bill Mihalopoulos

In my work . . . I want to enter a character's heart. I want to capture the smallest action, the finest nuance, the most intimate psychological expression because filmmakers must concern themselves with much more than facades.

Shōhei Imamura (Imamura 1999:126)

Imamura Shōhei (1926–2006) is an acclaimed Japanese director of commercial films, and regularly associated with one of the richly creative periods of Japanese cinema – the so called ‘new wave’ (*nuberu bagu*) of the 1960s. He also gained his share of international recognition. He was twice recipient of the *Palme d’Or* for *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983) and *The Eel* (1997). However, for most of the 1970s Imamura turned his back on commercial film-making. After the release of *The Profound Desires of the Gods* (1968) Imamura spent nine years primarily making documentaries. During this period, he made three documentaries for Tokyo Channel 12, bankrolled by his wife’s animation artwork production company (Nakata 1999: 120), that are the focus of this article: *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia* (1971), *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand* (1971); and *Outlaw Matsu Returns* (1973).

All three documentaries were made for a Japanese audience and were framed by the politics of *Beheiren* – the Citizens’ League for Peace in Vietnam (*Betonamu Ni Heiwa O! Shimin Rengo*). From February 1965, when the United States began the grandiosely named Operation Rolling Thunder, the US military was dependent on the unrestricted use of its 148

bases across the Japanese archipelago for their sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Most of the 400,000 tons of monthly supplies needed to sustain the US military in Vietnam also passed through the US bases stationed at Yokosuka, Sasebo and Naha (Havens 1987: 85-7).

Many Japanese citizens saw their government's cooperation in allowing Japan to be used as a base for US war-making in Vietnam as unlawful and a violation of Japanese sovereignty. From mid-1967 to 1970, 18.7 million Japanese took to the streets to protest US bombing raids originating in Japan, seen as an unlawful contravention of Japan's 1947 post-war constitution (Havens 1987: 133; de Bary, Gluck & Tiedemann 2005: 1029-36). Moreover, Articles IV and VI of the 1960 Treaty of Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan explicitly stated that the Japanese government had to be consulted in advance if US troops based in Japan were to be mobilised for combat. Anti-war activists did not buy the fiction peddled by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party under Prime Minister Eisaku Satō that US troops received their combat orders once they were outside Japanese territory (Havens 1987: 12-3). The streets become the theatre for the mass denunciation of the Japanese ruling elite and the means by which citizens thought they could reinstate democratic rule over a government that saw itself above the will of the people (Havens 1987; Marotti 2009).

The Vietnam War also proved a boon for the Japanese economy. Japanese firms were contracted to supply the munitions for the US war effort against enemies of South Vietnam along with a whole range of support services and everyday commodity goods for the US forces fighting in Vietnam (Avenell 2010: 143-4). Between 1966 to 1971 an estimated one billion American dollars entered the Japanese economy per year as a result of the Vietnam war. Another indicator of how Japanese economic growth was chained to the Vietnam war was the fact that between 1965 to 1968 Japanese exports to Southeast Asia increased 18%

annually. By 1970, Japan had surpassed the United States as the leading trading power in Southeast Asia (Halliday & McCormack 1973: 54-6). Prominent *Beheiren* activists produced a series of exposés uncovering a list of ‘Hyena Corporations’ feeding of American military involvement in Vietnam with fixed plans to heavily invest in South Vietnam’s post-war economy. The most prominent names of corporate Japan made up the list: Mitsui Bussan, Mitsubishi Shōji, Marubeni, Toyota and Sony to name a few (Avenell 2010: 143-4). To the anti-war activists, the support and participation of the Japanese government and industry in the Vietnam War and the rise to prominence of Japanese companies in Southeast Asia felt uncannily familiar. They took the Japanese businessmen who started to appear in the cities of Southeast Asia in the 1960s as representing the shock troops of Japan’s new imperialism (Kaji 1973; Shimizu 1973). The Imperial Army may no longer be marching through Asia, but it seemed that the actions of corporate Japan in the region were driven by the same will to dominate that drove Japanese overseas expansion in the first half of the twentieth century.

*Beheiren* led by the writer Oda Makoto and philosopher-historian Tsurumi Shunsuke were one of the first citizens’ movements to use Japanese involvement in the Vietnam war to question the foundation of Japan’s autonomy and affluence. *Beheiren* activists drew attention to the fact that every Japanese going about their daily life was complicit in supporting the US military in Vietnam. Oda and Tsurumi Yoshiyuki in particular claimed that under the Japan-US Security treaty, Japan was a client state of the United States. They pointed to the fact that the supply of special procurements for the Vietnam war by corporate Japan was a permanent and institutionalised feature of the Japanese economy and made possible the affluent daily life enjoyed by most Japanese (Avenell 2010: 143). *Beheiren* spokespeople urged Japanese citizens to critically address their role in the historical circumstances that saw Japan once again perpetrating aggression against an Asian nation—this time by logistically supporting the US military in Vietnam. Some *Beheiren* activists called for an ethical awakening; a

cultural revolution in Japanese sensibilities and values that would enable each individual to see how their ‘lives were completely bound to a culture born of a system forged’ by state authorities (Avenell: 146).

*In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia, In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand, and Outlaw Matsu Returns* are framed by the politics of the *Beheiren* movement in three distinct ways. First, the narrative of the documentaries subscribes to an anti-state agenda. The documentaries are organised around the idea that the workings of power are secret and hidden, concealed by the scenery of public appearances, and that the state and agents of political power are to be treated critically and with caution. In sum, the three documentaries challenge contemporary accounts that valorise the Japanese state as the ultimate political agent of progress.

Second, each of the three documentaries interrogates how the present reality of Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbours is deformed by the ruse of memory and wrong reckonings by focusing on Japanese war responsibility and the unfinished history of the Pacific War: a war that is not a problem of yesterday but of today.<sup>2</sup> In the documentaries, Imamura investigates how the spectre of the war lies heavy on the present, not only for the Japanese people, but also for the peoples who inhabited the regions occupied by Japan that became the bloody battlefields of the Pacific War.

Third, following the cues of *Beheiren* activists Imamura incorporated a victim-aggressor dynamic in his documentaries based on the critique that for Japan to find peace with their Asian neighbours, individual Japanese needed to resist the state locked into supporting the US war in Southeast Asia, otherwise they would remain victims of the state while simultaneously the victimizers of fellow Asians (Avenell 2010: 106-47). In his documentaries, Imamura attempts to locate the origin of this victim-aggressor dynamic in the actualization of belief; the emotional investment and leaps of faith which infused and

affirmed the lived present with possibility and an agenda of action. Belief for Imamura was bound up with choices in a mode of existence, and a notion of self that could not be understood in isolation from its social and relational contexts. Politics and culture were inseparable. In the unreturned soldiers Imamura sought to find an untapped embodied experience of the Pacific War, a knowledge and memory that moved beyond the retelling of events. The documentaries begin with a simple supposition that challenges the dominate place-bound formation of Japanese identity, which chains culture, community and ethnicity to the delimited territory of the Japanese state. Namely, why did soldiers who sacrificed all for the Emperor chose to remain in Southeast Asia rather than return to Japan? In his quest to find what motivated unreturned soldiers to turn their back on Japan, Imamura hoped to unearth the beliefs that gave meaning and direction to their lives, and in the process have his audience actively relive an unalloyed experience of the Pacific War in order to understand the real life uncertainties confronting Japan in the present (Imamura 2001: 234-8).

### **Imamura and Documentary Style in Fiction Film**

Japanese studios of the 1950s and 60s organised film production around the motto ‘quick, cheap, and lucratively’ (Tachibana 1988: 1-2). As a result, contracted directors had little say in the films the studio allocated them, which were a mixture of genre fare and star vehicles. The director’s main role was to maintain production schedules, manage costs under budget, and to make popular films for a general audience. This was especially true for Nikkatsu film studios, which Imamura joined in 1954. Nikkatsu production was tailored around its stars, not its directors, and was renowned in the sixties for releasing low budget double features every week (Schilling 2007).

The film studios gave directors little artistic choice in genre. Imamura chafed at the narrative structures imposed by Nikkatsu and the demands to work on vehicles for studio

stars. He thought the emphasis on stories built around the expectation of resolution and closure produced a heavily clichéd, stagnant cinema that bored rather than enthralled. Early in his career Imamura became keenly aware that the power of cinema lay in its quality of verisimilitude in the eye of the viewer (Imamura 2004: 60). That is to say, the power of cinema to move and engross lay in making visual images on the flat screen more tangible, real and believable via its composition, acting, set, sound, and lighting. Inspired by the work and theories of avant-garde documentary filmmakers Toshio Matsumoto (Raine 2012; Matsumoto 2012) and Susumu Hani (Mellen 1975: 179-97), Imamura embraced documentary film methods to give his work a sense of ‘reality.’ Imamura quickly broke from the dictates of Nikkatsu studio production. He insisted on shooting the majority of *My Second Brother* (1959), his fourth feature film for Nikkatsu, outside the confines of the film studio. This saw Imamura and his production crew experimenting with the latest technological advances in audio recording and film cameras to shoot outdoors on location. Imamura’s production crew proved highly innovative. *The Insect Woman* (1963) was the first Japanese feature film to be entirely produced on location since the advent of the talkies (Imamura 2004: 40; Satō 1997: 70-3). Imamura had the actors fitted with wireless microphones and synchronized sound recording with filming (Imamura 2004: 118; Satō 1997:74).

Imamura also broke studio procedure with his preference to work with non-professional actors rather than studio stars. He valued the ‘raw’ performances of untrained novices as a way of shredding the artifice of the actor. He valued the unconscious and accidental elements that penetrated the performance of untrained actors because it enabled subjective representations that exceed expectation to be captured by the camera (Imamura 2004: 100).

Imamura’s experimental and documentary style fiction film making was ill-suited to the high-volume low-budget production regime of Nikkatsu studios, however. For example,

Imamura always insisted on conducting intensive, time consuming background research. He placed great value in understanding the time, place, cultural context, and beliefs (point of view) before he began writing scripts for his films. He saw background research as providing the raw material from which to build narrative arc and character development that would give his films their singularity and keep the audience engaged (Sato 2012: 3). Moreover, he preferred to work by rehearsing each scene extensively, and would use substantial amount of film by shooting multiple takes. This way of shooting went against the frugality demanded by the studio, where production costs were calculated to be about one-third of all film related expenses. Imamura was renowned within the upper echelons of Nikkatsu for not working to budget. In fact, as punishment for wilfully exceeding production costs for his 1961 feature *Pigs and Battleships*, the studio prohibited Imamura from directing another feature film for two years.<sup>3</sup>

Imamura's move from fiction films to documentaries is well documented (Mes & Sharp 2005: 28-30). No longer willing to work within the regimented production values of Nikkatsu studios, he set up his own production company in 1965. Being a producer found Imamura becoming entangled in the everyday administrative side of film production. He learned that overseeing production and budget added another layer of complexity in his relationship with crew and actors. Imamura discovered that balancing the needs of each actor and crew with his overall vision for a project undermined his ability to work with them as collaborators (Imamura 2001: 235-6).

A pivotal moment in Imamura's career arguably was the making of the critically successful but financially disastrous *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968). Production difficulties and the film's poor box-office return encouraged Imamura to turn his back on mainstream cinema and commercial distribution companies. Shot on location in Okinawa, consistent bad weather delayed production. While waiting for the weather to clear, Imamura



happily immersed himself in the beliefs of the local Okinawan culture. Imamura's interest in local customs and beliefs was motivated by the desire to engage with the actuality of belief. He expanded on this topic in a conversation with Audie Bock. Imamura noted that in order to understand the whole of the contemporary Japanese life, one needed to notice the roof-top shrines or household altars (*kamidana*) dedicated to the local tutelary deities that sit on top of all the high-rise buildings of large Japanese conglomerates and the smaller factories that pock the landscape of urban Japan. For him, it was these 'little shrines' that embody the belief that pervade 'the Japanese consciousness under the veneer of business suits and advanced technology.' Custom, practice and faith assured the mighty Japanese conglomerates and imbued them with the confidence to invest resources and manpower in business ventures (Bock 1978: 287).

The eighteen-month protracted shooting schedule however did not sit well with others and gave rise to frustration and conflict amongst Imamura and his cast and crew. While Imamura was happy to spend his days talking with the local inhabitants, the actors reportedly had little interest in using the delay in production to explore the culture and values of the local inhabitants in order to give authenticity to their performance. This indifference frustrated Imamura immensely who wanted his actors to go beyond affectation and surface expression and seek the subconscious, unseen forces that motivate action. Imamura put down the actors' indifference as a product of their vocation. The primary concern of an actor was their screen presence. Success lay in pleasing an audience and not on any criteria of authenticity. As a result, Imamura came to the conclusion that he no longer wanted to work with actors as they were nihilistically fixated on the surface expressions of their performance and the superficiality of their public persona with little interest in the world 'as it was' (Imamura 2001: 236).

Embittered by the commercial failure of *The Profound Desire of the Gods* and his experience with actors during shooting on location in Okinawa, Imamura retreated to documentary film-making and his aesthetic quest to go beyond representation and create an ordered unity of the world by cutting up and arranging images that would make visible the connectedness between the inner mental state of the protagonist and the world they inhabited. For nine years he devoted himself to finding a cinema that would dissolve the binary between objective and subjective truth; between fact and fiction.

### **In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers**

The two companion-piece documentaries *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers* typify Imamura's new direction. Imamura frames the lived experience of the unreturned soldiers as a counterpoint to post-war Japanese narratives of stability and economic development that effectively tied Japan's prosperity to the United States' global strategic policy aimed at containing communism via military involvement in East and Southeast Asia. Japanese economic prosperity was tied to US Cold War objectives in Asia when Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (who for many Japanese at the time embodied Japan's authoritarian, militarised past) ratified the United States-Japan Security Treaty in May 1960 by dispatching 500 police inside the parliamentary chambers to forcibly extract Socialist members blocking access to the Speaker's office, prior to calling a surprise vote in the Lower House to revise and renew the Treaty. To appease public anger at the cynical measures utilised by Kishi and the ruling LDP, Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda (1960-1964) promised to bring high growth and material prosperity to all Japanese, thus metamorphosing Japanese conservatives from pre-war collaborators to benign liberals. Ikeda's political alchemy was backed up by social welfare programs and the development of a domestic consumer economy, which transformed most Japanese into the middle class whilst simultaneously reinforcing a national narrative

that erased Japanese responsibility and guilt for a fifteen-year war waged on the rest of Asia (Igarashi 1998). Amongst the smoke and mirrors, the benefits procured by Japan's security agreement with the United States went largely unnoticed. This included, amongst other things, trade arrangements enabling Japanese firms to export electronic commodities and heavy industrial machinery to a less economically developed Southeast Asia, whilst US military forces selectively bombed it.

*In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers* is an attempt by Imamura to locate the possibility of an alternative Japan that does not play handmaiden to the United States, nor seeks to economically dominate the rest of Asia. The experience of the marginalised unreturned soldiers was appropriated and utilized to produce a critique of the moral and cultural trajectory of post-war Japan. The unreturned soldiers embodied a disjunction of time and history; the difference of today with respect to yesterday in terms of the transformations in Japanese character and sociability. For Imamura, the lived history of the unreturned soldiers held the possibility of a recoverable 'reality' with the potential to offer the values and template for a Japan which could live together with other Asian countries without being the cause of war or economic and political friction.

Despite the passing of twenty-five years, the unreturned soldiers continued to live out the Pacific War. In the documentaries Imamura takes the embodied experience of the former soldiers to reveal a world of multiple pasts and a present where time has literally come off its hinges. The content of soldiers' lives was a fork in time that diverged from the experience of a post-war Japan, crystallised around dominate public narratives stressing economic growth, consumerism, and a secure and affluent daily life whilst eschewing any WWII and post-war responsibility. In the contemporary national narratives of post-war Japan, Japanese public memory was selective. The dominate narratives of the Pacific War crystallised around suffering and victimhood: the trauma of American fire-bombing Japan's major cities, the

nuclear holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shock of surrender, and the struggle to find food and rudimentary consumer goods in the wake of defeat. In contrast, in the lived experience of the unreturned soldiers the Pacific War never ended. Their direct experience fighting as Japanese Imperial soldiers in Southeast Asia was the moorings that gave meaning and purpose to the lives they led in Malaysia and Thailand, away from their homeland and ethnic community.

Imamura brilliantly presents to the audience the disjunctive non-synchronic present by unchaining and separating the visual from the audial. The dissonance between sight and sound actualised and made visible the gap in time between the lived present of the unreturned soldiers where the Pacific War never ended, and a contemporaneous post-war Japan that has little memory of Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia. By cutting the direct association between image and language, Imamura challenged the audience to go beyond the clichéd stories of the atomic bomb and Japanese victimisation, occupation, recovery, economic growth and stability, and to engage directly with the unresolved and still unfolding consequences of Japanese actions and choices in the Pacific War.

*In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia* sees Imamura engaged on a mission to find Japanese soldiers who chose to remain in Southeast Asia after Japan's surrender and who turned their back on Japan. The narrative and dramatic arc of the documentary is organised around the question: Why would a soldier of the Japanese Imperial Army not return to his homeland after Japan's formal surrender in September 1945? Imamura's search for such an individual unfolds via the use of interviews and carefully choreographed visuals. *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia* is both a riveting exposé which unearths the silenced and overlooked events of the Pacific War and powerful reflection cum investigation into the inconstancies embedded in the memory and lived experience of the Pacific War.

The documentary exhumes a series of discomfiting facts about the war for its intended Japanese audience. In his investigations, Imamura uncovers that some of the fiercest resistance to the Japanese invasion in February, 1942, was by the 1,500 Chinese communist political prisoners, released by the British authorities in the final days before the fall of Singapore, who fought the invading Japanese army to the last man. This is a jarring revelation if juxtaposed with the facts presented in standard textbooks which inform that General Arthur Percival, the British commander in Singapore, arranged for the surrender of 100,000 Commonwealth troops, or the factual digression found in the footnotes of accounts covering the fall of Singapore that chronicle the commander of the Australian forces, Lieutenant General Henry Bennet, escaping under cover of darkness whilst instructing the 15,000 men under his command to remain at their post.

Imamura's odyssey to find unreturned soldiers also exposed the changes of Japanese character and temperament before and after post-war economic growth. Japanese who had lived in Singapore before the war such as Masaaki Watanabe pointedly avoided the new breed of Japanese businessmen coming into the region in the 1960s. Associations such as the Japanese club, whose membership comprised primarily of newly arrived businessmen, were primarily interested in accessing commercial acumen. Watanabe saw 'no reason' in joining them as they were only interested in gaining a competitive advantage by 'stealing information' from other Japanese, rather than pooling resources and investing in the overall welfare of the Japanese community in the region.

Imamura's search also revealed that for many Japanese soldiers stationed in Singapore and Malaysia, the war did not end in with the official surrender of Japanese forces to Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the Southeast Asian Command, on 12 September 1945 in Singapore. Kenichi Sasaki, whom Imamura found working as a travel guide, did not put down his weapon with Japan's surrender. Instead he fled deep into the

mountains of Malaysia's interior with 300 other Japanese soldiers and kept fighting. They aligned themselves with Japan's former enemy – the communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army which had transformed itself into the Malayan National Liberation Army – in armed resistance against British colonial control.<sup>4</sup> However, after three-and-a-half years of fighting Sasaki came to realise that the Malayan National Liberation Army cause did not benefit Japan, and he ceased being a guerrilla fighter. Other Japanese soldiers chose to remain, however. Sasaki literally bristled at the thought that many in Japan saw him as an army deserter who chose to remain in Southeast Asia rather than return home and face punishment. The Japanese government classified the many unreturned soldiers that Sasaki represented as “deserters” (*dassōhei*) denying them military pensions and humiliating their families in the process. In response, Sasaki squarely faces the camera and with a steely glare fervidly pronounces that he was first and foremost a patriot; all of his actions were motivated by his love and willingness to risk all for his country.

The documentary also records the alarm of the local Japanese population who felt that Imamura and his film crew were raising the war dead by asking Singaporeans to recall their experience of being under Japanese military occupation. Long-term Japanese residents were keen to lay their collaboration with the Japanese military to rest. However the lived memory of the systematic liquidation of predominately Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50 by the Japanese *kempeitai* (military security force) continued to disturb the present.<sup>5</sup> The memory of the massacre haunted every nook and cranny of city. In front of the one of the main spots where the killing occurred, Mr Won, Imamura's Chinese informant and guide, recalls in awkward, broken Japanese the horror of seeing the beheaded bodies of family, friends and acquaintances littering the squares, beaches and main thoroughfares of Singapore. For a Japanese TV audience born after the war, this would be a shocking revelation as the details of such events were suppressed from the public narrative of the Pacific War.

Imamura's odyssey ends with the discovery of Akeem, a former Japanese soldier wholly integrated into a close-knit Muslim community. Akeem provided Imamura with the voice he has been searching to critique the 'false progress' and 'empty democracy' of post-war Japan committed to a model of modern sameness (Imamura 2004: 158-9). Akeem tells the camera that he feels pity for the 'disadvantaged people' of Japan who work long, hard hours for shallow economic success. According to Akeem, the Japanese had developed economically faster than the 'materially poor Malays' not because they were superior, but because they lacked any moral bearings. Economic success came easily to the Japanese because Japanese society was organised around satisfying base desires, void of any higher calling or sense of 'virtue or justice.' For Akeem, it was the ignoble values of greed and instant gratification that underpinned the Japanese economic miracle. Themes that Imamura had explored in his early commercial films such as *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), *The Insect Woman* (1963), and *The Pornographers* (1966) were the main protagonists stood as a metonymy for the transformations in Japanese character and sociability from the interwar years until the second decade of post-war recovery and growth

Imamura however, found Akeem's ire unsatisfactory. It did not account for the passions and forces that brought Akeem to the Malaysian peninsula to kill others. For Imamura, Akeem's adopted faith lacked 'conviction' (Imamura 2001: 236). The trauma of the war and Japanese surrender left Akeem stripped of identity and community. He was literally saved by the local Muslim community who took him in and treated him as one of their own. In return, Akeem uninstalled one system of prescriptions in the name of the Divine in order to install another. His need for certitude drove him to replace the glory and divine quality of the Japanese Emperor/Living Sun God with another set of religious convictions. However, the quality and force of his belief remained unchanged. The name of the Divine may have changed but his want and need for an ordained natural order, a language of

illumination and righteousness, and access to a wrath for any worldly deviation that strayed from the Divine plan, remained the same.

Imamura continued his quest to find out what drove people to war and how the unreturned soldiers coped with the trauma and memory of their actions in the companion documentary *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand*. The documentary was constructed around a meandering conversation, sustained by a healthy intake of alcohol, between three unreturned soldiers of differing background and temperament. Despite lacking any narrative arc, the documentary is a fascinating study on how morality has its own psychological faculty that outstrips rational capacities.

The three men found themselves fighting in Southeast Asia in what they thought was a ‘race war’ against 300 years of European injustice inflicted on the peoples of Asia. They fought firmly believing Japanese presence in China and the Pacific was the means for righting these long-inflicted wrongs (Hotta 2007; Saaler & Szpilman: 2001). This rhetoric founds its crescendo on August 1, 1940 when Foreign Minister Yōsuke Matsuoka announced the Japanese government’s policy to build a ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ (*Dai Tōa Kyōeiken*) which would liberate the ‘Asiatic’ people from the colonial yoke of ‘White’ domination (Dower 1986: 203-90). The term ‘Greater East Asia’ implied that in addition to Japan, Manchukuo, and China, regional ‘co-prosperity’ would include Southeast Asia. Cloaked in the language of “liberation,” the new policy to expand the boundaries of Japan’s empire beyond East Asia was an attempt by the Japanese leaders to seize the opportunity offered to them after France and the Netherlands fell to Nazi Germany in late spring 1940, thus forfeiting their colonies in Southeast Asia. Japan subsequently advanced into French Indochina in June 1940. When diplomacy proved futile in lifting economic sanctions imposed by the United States and British colonies and domains in the Pacific, Japan attacked Pearl



Harbor on December 7, 1941. At the same time the Japanese invaded the Malaysia peninsular in the name of freeing Asians from European domination.

At its most potent, *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand* reveals how the Pacific War was still being lived out by the three unreturned soldiers. Each of the three men represent a prototype of the diverse psychological responses to the experience of the war. Nakayama Namio, now a wealthy doctor, refuses to talk about the war or criticise the Emperor/Living Sun God.<sup>6</sup> Yet the trauma of the war was inscribed directly upon his body. Tattooed on his back were a series of Buddhist-related blessings and protective spells. Fujita Matsukichi, a small land-holding peasant farmer near the Thai-Burma border, remained wholly invested in his identity as an Imperial liberation fighter. With joyful abandon, Fujita retells bloated stories of atrocities he carried out in the name of the Emperor. The kill-or-be-killed theatre of war giving his life meaning and dignity thirty years after it has ended. In contrast, Toshida Ginzaburō served the local poor as a lay doctor, his profoundly personal way of making amends for the violence Japan inflicted upon the region. Only Toshida speaks frankly about the futility and waste of the Pacific War, condemning the Japanese Emperor and his military cronies for robbing him of his youthful aspirations, and for demanding blind compulsion and obligation.

Imamura never hints to the audience which versions of the Pacific War he favours. Each man stands steadfast by his subjective version of reality and the truth about the war. Yet, they do share a commonality. Each refuse to assume any burden of responsibility for his actions during the war. Toshida blames his involvement on a war-mongering Emperor; Fujita excuses his actions by saying he was a loyal soldier following orders; Nakayama deflects any accountability by enigmatically remaining silent.

The documentary ends with an unresolved question and an attempt at prognostication. The unanswered question that hangs heavy at the end of the documentary is: How did a

reckless youth from Nagasaki, a poor farmer from Ibaraki<sup>7</sup> and a tinsmith from Osaka become the agents of brutal atrocities? The viewer is challenged to take up the vexing question: What are the Japanese youth who do not have direct experience of the war becoming? Imamura seems to be suggestion that the Imperial Army may no longer be marching through Southeast Asia, but in relations with other Asians, Japanese attitudes have changed little since the war in terms of assumptions of superiority and right to dominate. The final shot reveals a plane window framing a panorama of the Japanese landscape through cloudy skies. The voiceover factually states: 'The sky over Japan is cloudy.'

### **Outlaw Matsu Returns**

The Emperor-loving 'wild boy' Fujita Matsukichi's thirty-year return to Japan is the focus of *Outlaw Matsu Returns*. The documentary conceptually and aesthetically differs subtly from the *In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers* series. Conceptually, Imamura frames Fujita as a metonym for 'the discarded' (*kimin*); Japanese people who gave valuable service to the Japanese state, only to be discarded by the Japanese government in the processes of 'reforming' and 'rationalizing' post-war Japan.<sup>8</sup> Fujita stands in for the sacrifice extracted from the rural poor as objects of State manipulation. Post-war Japan is conceptualized as obsessed with economic progress and material gain at the expense of ordinary individuals such as Fujita: one of the many examples of the rural poor who toiled and sacrificed for a greater Japan only to be discarded and forgotten once they had no utility. The narrative and characterological emphasis of the documentary falls heavily on the tragedy of Fujita caught in circumstances beyond his control or understanding. Aesthetically, the documentary reverts to the practices of *A Man Vanishes* (1967). Whilst employing many of the 'fly on the wall' techniques associated with *cinéma-vérité* to deliver a sense of authenticity, *Outlaw Matsu Returns* is anything but neutral. Imamura stages footage and shamelessly manipulates Fujita,

manufacturing conflicts with his brother and attempts a clumsy, cringe-worthy romantic subplot by reintroducing Fujita to his youthful crush to heighten the dramatic arc of the documentary. In many ways, *Outlaw Matsu Returns* is the harbinger of Reality-TV programming, which blends the aspiration to document events occurring before the camera as they happen with the tendency to imagine reality in order to produce narrative suspense and drama.

*Outlaw Matsu Returns* is organised around two narrative strands. One strand is the domestic drama between Fujita and his brother Fujio on his return to his native home. Through a juxtaposition of the psychological make-up of Fujita and his brother, Imamura aims to convey the whole experience of Japan's post-war transformation into an economic power. On the one hand, Fujita embodies the Japan of yesteryear: honest, fiercely loyal and driven by a strong sense of obligation and duty to family. His grief at the cemetery for his parents and brother's family who died in the nuclear holocaust unleashed on Nagasaki is sincere. His concern for his younger sister Fujiko, divorced from an abusive husband and neglected by Fujio, heartfelt. Fujio, on the other hand, represents the changes in sociability of the Japanese during the two decades of post-war recovery and economic growth. He embodies the impersonal historical forces that give shape to Japan's economic miracle – a love of money, the language of self-promotion, and the transformative power of an economy that robs things of their innate value and distinction by making everything interchangeable with money. The documentary strongly links Fujio's love of money with his decision to abandon his younger sister to destitution, and his 'conspiracy' to have Fujita pronounced dead so that he claim all of his parents' inheritance.

The other narrative strand of the documentary is Fujita's growing awareness that he has no place in the land of his birth despite his fierce loyalty to the Emperor and willingness to die for his country.<sup>9</sup> He literally is a walking ghost. His country has proclaimed him dead,

a victim of the Pacific War. His uncultured Japanese and outdated notions of loyalty and obligation are treated with contempt. His visit to Yasukuni Shrine, one of the iconic symbols of Japanese nationalism built in 1869 to commemorate all who died in the service of the Emperor, leaves him underwhelmed. He has no investment in the nationalist trappings and Imperial myths associated with the shrine as they are the symbolic investments of an aristocratic and military elite. The imperial narratives proclaiming the glory of Japan are not meant for, nor do they include, a simple ‘wild boy’ from Nagasaki. The only time Fujita feels at home in Japan is when he makes contact with his superior officer. Their friendship is forged by the heat of battle, and for a moment, as he hears his officer’s voice again over the phone, time forks and Fujita’s fanatical loyalty to the Emperor returns to take over the workings of his body, the passion educing a pledge from his lips to ‘join the Third Operation again to once more kill the British and Chinese.’

The dramatic climax of the documentary is Fujita taking a guided tour of the Imperial palace with Imamura and his film crew. The imposing size surprises Fujita, as does the guide’s revelation of the expense to build and maintain the palace. The camera captures the feelings of betrayal that begin to shroud Fujita. How could the Emperor live in such opulence when loyal subjects such as he lived in poverty abroad? Infuriated and confused, Fujita wildly speculates that the Emperor started the Pacific War for money. The realisation that he may have been used by the Emperor for the sake of vulgar material accumulation cuts him to the bone, leaving him staring dazed into the camera. Fujita’s nationalist fervour can no longer hide from him from the brutal truth: all his personal sacrifices done in the name of the Emperor have no currency in post-war Japan. He is an example of ‘the discarded’ *par excellence* – Japanese who loyally served the Emperor and pre-war Japanese state only to be disavowed when they are no longer of use.

## Imamura 's History Lesson

At the heart of Imamura's three documentaries for Tokyo Channel 12 is a curiosity about the changing nature of the present in its own right. The documentaries expose the history of post-war Japan by juxtaposing what the Japanese are ceasing to be with what they are becoming via an exploration into the 'reality' of the Pacific War and the subjective self that finds itself enmeshed in the questions of identity and history. Imamura's analysis begins with the 'what is' and proceeds to deduce the conditions out of which the real developed.

The narrative arc of Imamura's documentaries is driven by a deep-seated scepticism for any politics of transcendence. The documentaries are an exposé of how the promise of universal peace encapsulated in the war time slogan *hakkō-ikkyū* (all eight corners of the world under one roof) under the providence of the Emperor and the post-war calls for the Japanese to surrender themselves to the transcendent values of free market democracy are equally fatally compromised. In the process he gives a diagnosis of the 'economic animal' the Japanese have become by tracing how individual and communal relations were transformed; from associations founded on emotional attachments and reciprocal obligation to social relations based on calculations and trade-offs with exclusive reference to the means/ends of making money.

The power of the documentaries lies in the way they disorient the contemporary audience by telling a history of the present that is not narrated from the fixed viewpoint of the Japanese state. They confront the audience not with one single history but with many, each with its own duration, speed, evolution and 'truth.' Imamura uses the power of cinema to render visible the way the human body of the unreturned soldier, via the associations it made with its environment and other bodies, was a site of multiple temporalities incompatible with chronological time/history organised around a series of linear events that solidify the Japanese nation-state. Imamura entrusts the visual medium of cinema to capture the authentic

“moment” of post-war Japan, bringing the audience into contact with a whole new unconscious optics that would reveal the true situation of the present, and in the process, leading the audience away from their zone of passive entertainment to a space of critical enjoyment.

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\*In memory of Peter Williams (1953-2015).

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<sup>1</sup> This article is intellectually indebted to Harry Harootunian’s article in the *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> For the Japanese, the Second World War started in 1937 with hostilities against the Republic of China. Some Japanese historians believe the Second World War started in September 1931 with the invasion of Manchuria.

<sup>3</sup> Imamura fared better than the producer who was sacked.

<sup>4</sup> These events are remembered as the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). The conflict was between predominately Malayan Chinese communist guerrillas and British Commonwealth forces. The term ‘Emergency’ describes the events from the British colonial government’s perspective. British authorities declared a State of Emergency in the newly created Federation of Malaya on 18 June 1948 after guerrillas assassinated three European plantation managers in the northern state of Perak.

<sup>5</sup> The Japanese are estimated to have killed between 6,000 to 40,000 Chinese civilians in the Sook Ching Massacre carried out in the first month of the occupation.

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<sup>6</sup> The Japanese Emperor is believed to be the direct descendent of the celestial sun-goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami (Great Divinity Illuminating Heaven).

<sup>7</sup> Ibaraki prefecture is located to the northeast of Tokyo along the Pacific coast. Once farm land, many of the major cities of Ibaraki prefecture are now part of the Greater Tokyo Area.

<sup>8</sup> The term *kimin* is usually associated with Japanese immigrants who were mostly neglected by the Japanese government and left to fend for themselves. Here Imamura seems to have appropriated this term and adapted it to connote people callously discarded once they no longer had a role to play in the Japanese government's ambitions to become a leading developed nation. Imamura's other documentary dealing with *kimin* is *Karayuki-san, The Making of a Prostitute* (1975), where he discovers that Kikuyo Zendō, a former *karayuki-san*, chose not to return to Japan because of the prejudice she faced coming from a discriminated community (*tokushu burakumin*). For more elaboration on the relationship between overseas Japanese prostitution and discriminated communities see Oharazeki (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Fujita's experience may well have inspired the ending of *Zegen* (1987), where the patriotic Iheij Muraoka has set up his own Japanese colony in Malaysia by surrounding himself with a throng of submissive offspring, only to be brushed aside in his efforts to greet the invading Japanese troops as another 'simple native.'

## Filmography

*My Second Brother* (1959)  
*Pigs and Battleships* (1961)  
*The Insect Woman* (1963)  
*The Pornographers* (1966)  
*A Man Vanishes* (1967)  
*The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968)  
*In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Malaysia* (1971)  
*In Search of the Unreturned Soldiers in Thailand* (1971)  
*Outlaw Matsu Returns* (1973).

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