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“I loved American movies.”

HIROSAWA EI

*A well-known screenwriter today, he was third assistant director of Kurosawa Akira's film Seven Samurai. In 1974, Sandakan Brothel Number Eight: Nostalgia, his powerful rendition of the story of Japanese prostitutes in Southeast Asia early in the twentieth century, won him wide acclaim in Japan.*

*He frequently consults small notebooks in which he has recorded every film he's ever seen since his childhood, where he saw it, and his contemporary reactions. “In 1942, the thirty-three hundred and fifty theaters in Japan were divided into just two groups, Red and White, and movies were allocated accordingly. There were some German films because Germany was Japan's ally, but no matter where you went, they were showing the same movies.”*

I've spoken to my own children about what war is. War's been with me since my childhood, almost like the seasons—spring, summer, fall, and winter. It's part of me; impossible to think of myself without war. What I mean is this: the Pacific War had an overwhelming impact on my life. I, who was born in 1924 and raised as the son of a bookstore owner in the small town of Odawara, was forced to examine concepts like “Japan,” “the Emperor,” and even “War” itself because of my experience. I've been writing about war ever since. Some of it became movies, some didn't, but either way, that Great War became the baseline of my life as a writer.

In 1931, the year I entered elementary school, the Manchurian Incident occurred. It was a plot by the Japanese army. The interminable

Fifteen-Year War had begun. I remember the three soldier-boys who were billeted at our home overnight at about that time, a private first class who had a red shoulder patch with three stars, and two privates with two stars each. They were on military maneuvers. I got really excited. I was so swept up in my admiration for soldiers as a young boy. They interlaced their rifles so skillfully, making a tripod by the door. I timidly approached those Type-38 rifles and saw the chrysanthemum crests on them. “That shows they were bestowed on us by the Emperor,” one of the soldiers told me.

Soldiers had a unique smell, a mixture of sweat and leather. When they removed their uniform blouses, white, crystalized maps from dried perspiration were on their khaki undershirts. I stared at them in surprise. From their sunburned faces, from smiles showing white teeth, came an explanation, “We've been marching since dawn.” The next morning, still in darkness, the three soldiers snapped to attention, formally saluted my father and me, and declared loudly, “Thank you for your kindness.” They left with quick steps. Through the morning mist I could hear the sounds of their unit marching off.

I've been fond of movies since I was a child. I was deeply touched by the simple heroism shown in movies about the Three Human-Bomb Heroes. That's a story from the Shanghai Incident of 1932. Three Japanese sappers carry a lighted charge at the end of a long pole and dash right into the enemy barbed-wire entanglements and are killed in the explosion. It made my boy's heart pound. Those soldiers were played by actors wearing stiffly ironed pale-colored uniforms, each crease etched in as they struck dramatic poses. Those were silent pictures and were accompanied by an ensemble of Japanese musical instruments. It seems strange today, but the sound of the samisen, koto, and *tsuzumi* drum played at the theater seemed to match their image well.

I loved the American movie *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. I saw it in 1936. Gary Cooper's the hero of that action drama set in India under English colonial control. He's an officer in the cavalry. In the climactic scene, he fights his way through the enemy camp until he reaches the tower containing their ammunition magazine, sets fire to it, and dies in the explosion. The same theme as the Three Heroes movies! What sticks in my mind is that I first saw this movie on the beach at Odawara. On summer evenings, they used to erect a tent there. A white cloth was hung as a simple screen, and people sat on either side of it. The movie, though only projected onto one side, was visible from both. That evening I made the mistake of sitting on the wrong side, so all the subtitles were backwards, but it was an action drama, so I could follow it pretty well anyway.

Some army bigwig was there that evening, a lieutenant general, and he sang its praises: "What a wonderful motion picture! Just like the Three Heroes!"

From then on, I became a fan of Gary Cooper. I saw his *Beau Geste*, *Dawn Patrol*, and *Morocco*. Even though he wore a uniform in *Morocco*, it wasn't about war; it was a romance. In *Farewell to Arms*, I couldn't understand why Cooper tore off his military shoulder patches, took off his uniform, and escaped. I didn't know then that the censor had chopped the film up before it was shown in Japan. Still, the hero who dies for the nation and the hero who dies for love both became images of heroism to me. I was thrilled by each of them.

Newsreels now began to come to us directly from over there in China. They were talkies. "*Peww, peww*," the sharp whiz of rifle bullets, and the "*dah-dah-dah-dah*" of machine-gun fire punctuated them. The image of those soldiers who'd been billeted at our home, of sweat and leather, began to appear on screen. Even fiction had to match that reality, so the distance separating us from the soldiers now narrowed.

A true-to-life image of soldiers emerged in the movies *Five Scouts* in 1938 and *Earth and Soldiers* in 1939.<sup>o</sup> *Five Scouts* was considered to be of great educational value, so all of us in school were sent to see it. There's one scene in which a soldier sent out scouting doesn't return. All are concerned. At dawn, he comes back. Some of his comrades-in-arms start singing "*Kimigayo*"—the national anthem—and it ends in a chorus, as they express their deep emotion. That's what the Education Ministry today wants our children to sing in school. Of course, when I was a boy, I was made to sing that song at all ceremonies without fail. I was astonished then that the song appeared in a movie, that they sang it together spontaneously, as if to celebrate their friend's return. The comradeship and close rapport between soldiers seemed real to me, but somehow that one thing just didn't ring true.

*Earth and Soldiers* left quite an impression. Soldiers trudging on forever. I realized that what those soldiers had told me in my own home was true. That movie was just marching. Marching to Hsüchow. I was kind of appalled at the thought that I would have to march that much if I became a soldier. About the same time the military drill we had at middle school became more severe and we had to march a lot too. Soon their fate would become mine. I suddenly felt as if I were suffocating. I hated war because it approached me.

They showed *Nihon News* before the features. That was the beginning of state press control. What a title opening! The Japanese golden

eagle stretches its wings over the globe. Then the command, "Remove your hats!" appeared on the screen in huge characters, followed by "Imperial Family News." You had to face the screen directly, bare-headed. Since people were sprawled on the tatami floor of the little theaters waiting for the show to start, when the command came on screen, total confusion reigned as everybody tried to get up and arrange themselves appropriately. "His Imperial Majesty Bestows an Imperial Tour on the Kansai Region" might then appear. That was the subject of the first *Nihon News*, June 11, 1940. The Emperor's Mercedes-Benz comes out of the Nijūbashi Gate of the Imperial Palace. Cars carrying security men flank it. They arrive at Tokyo Station. The Imperial Carriage is seen leaving the station. That was all. Nothing to the story, but the narrator used such difficult words, all reserved for His Imperial Person. Next followed "War News."

In 1941, we heard that Universal, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, Columbia, and MGM were all going to close down their offices in Japan after completing the projected runs of the films already imported. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *The Life of Edison* were among those. Excellent movies. I felt desolate, thinking I wouldn't be able to see American movies anymore. Carefully held back for the 1942 New Year's showings were *Gulliver's Travels* and John Ford's *Gunga Din*. I was really looking forward to *Gunga Din*. Of course, I couldn't see it because of December 8.

I went to see *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* on October 26, 1941, at a time when America and Japan were on the verge of war. It sticks in my mind as a result. It truly captures a feeling of humanity. People are willing to let even a stripling like Smith work his will. We lived in the same world, but in America, a young person's will was valued so much that if James Stewart began to speak in the Senate, nobody could prevent him from finishing. This was "democracy" and something called "social justice." I hadn't known these terms, but they must be good things, nevertheless.

On the Sunday of November 2, 1941, I thought I might be getting my last chance to see American movies. I asked my mother for two meals of rice balls and caught the first train on the Odakyū Line for Shinjuku. There, I ran from theater to theater, seeing *Stanley and Livingstone*, *The Ghost Goes West*, *The Condor*, and *Stagecoach*. Sitting in the darkness, I ate my rice balls and sipped water from my canteen. The last film was *Stagecoach*. I'd seen it twice already; still, I watched until the last possible moment to rush for the final train back on the Odakyū line. I rose from my seat, checking my wristwatch. At the door, I looked back and saw the stagecoach dashing away into the distance, then I bolted for the station.

<sup>o</sup> *Five Scouts* [*Gonin no sekkōhei*] and *Earth and Soldiers* [*Tsuchi to heitai*].

Those American and British movies really formed my mental character. For example, in *The Citadel* (1938), directed by King Vidor, Robert Donat played the role of a young doctor who went to a Welsh mining town, discovered the cause of black-lung disease, and then fought desperately to make the truth known to the world. Because of this movie, I read the original novel by Archibald Cronin, and, thanks to that, I learned the meaning of “humanism” for the first time.

I remember the day the war started against America and England. I was still a middle-school student, commuting from Odawara to Yokohama by train. It was a cold winter morning. Tajiri, my friend who boarded at Fujisawa Station, told me that according to today’s news, our military’s entered into a “situation of war” in a place called “the Western Pacific.” It was December 8, 1941. I knew relations had worsened, but I didn’t think war with America and Britain would ever come. They were great nations for which I was filled with respect. “Is it all right to fight a war against such countries? Can we possibly win? What would victory mean? Raising the *Hinomaru* in Los Angeles? But even then, what would happen next?” I couldn’t imagine. That was the way I felt as a boy of seventeen.

I wanted to be a graphics artist, a designer, but everything had changed and that kind of job didn’t exist anymore. The whole country was caught up in loyalty to the Emperor and patriotism. Among my classmates some took the examinations for military-related schools and others crossed the sea for Manchukuo. I didn’t know what to do myself. I was in complete disarray.

“When I graduate from school I’ll be sent to the battlefield. Certain death awaits me. There must be something I want to do before that. But what?”—These were the heavy thoughts I was considering on my commute to school. Suddenly, a man shouted, “Hey you! Why don’t you stand up?” Leaning over me was a man with a square, clog-like face who wore a national uniform and a brown fighting cap. He boarded the train every morning at Ninomiya Station and shouted, “In the midst of the final battle, young ones must stand! Students stand!” and he made all the students stand up. Then he’d turn to some man also dressed in national uniform and say, “Soldier of industry, please be seated. Thank you very much for your great work for the nation.” He was so imperious. He blocked my path and shouted. “Hey student! What’s that smirk on your face? Want me to beat the crap out of you?” I stood up, silent, wondering to myself, On what authority does this man do this kind of thing? Why?

I had the thought that war makes people abnormal. Drives them to madness. My father put it this way: “The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 couldn’t be helped, but the thing called ‘war’ was caused by Man.

There should be some way to prevent it. War is so much more horrible than the Tokyo earthquake because it is avoidable.” Dad was a merchant. He left me a legacy of freedom, maybe from the era of Taishō Democracy. There was nothing like that in my school education.

The Japanese film industry was in a terrible state just before the war, thanks to the introduction of the Movie Regulations. The content of movies was controlled by the government. Examining human character or entertaining audiences were secondary issues. The primary purpose of movies were the “theses” given by the state.

At the scenario stage, movies were censored—and the completed movies were censored again. The people who did this were high-ranking government officials or senior Kempeitai officers. They said whatever they thought, and what they said became orders. “Add this! Take out that! Do it this way! Put in something of that!” Even comedies had to include slogans supporting the war effort—things like “Be frugal to carry out the war properly.” Movies thus became incoherent. Military men and government officials led a splendid existence, like gods, but geishas and saké-serving women were not to appear on the screen, they now said. Eventually, it wasn’t good to show men and women walking together. Such stupid rules were now enforced. There were no longer credit titles because it was necessary to economize on film. Movies bore only the company name and a title, and they became very short. The length of the feature was predetermined—roughly one hour and twenty minutes.

At the beginning of the war with America and Britain, on the other hand, the variety of images expanded and new scenes appeared in newsreels and films—parachutes blooming in the sky over tropical areas, military flags whipping in the wind over the Aleutian archipelago. These shots, moreover, tended to confirm the reports we’d already read in the newspapers, as if to say, “You see, there it is.” Since you couldn’t obtain any other kinds of information, the newsreels had real value. It made you believe what you saw. If you give the national flag to Indonesian kids and tell them to wave it, and then show that in a film with the narrator saying, “Thus goes our Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” people naturally think that’s what’s happening. But movies describing soldiers at the front could no longer raise negative aspects of life there. Only the positive things could be described. There’s no drama if you only look at the positive. Making war movies under such restrictions, what could you do but describe the outstanding heroics of men? In *Torpedo Unit Depart for the Front!* [1944]\* for instance, Fujita Susumu plays an air officer who purposely draws the enemy’s fire, providing an opportunity for his unit to

\* *Torpedo Unit Depart for the Front!* [Raigekitai shutsudō].

launch its attack. If this now looks almost like a forerunner of the special-attack forces, that's only because reality went so far beyond fiction when the Kamikaze Special Attack units were actually created. Japanese movies soon fell behind events and went off track.

Several months prior to my active duty, my wish came true. In May 1944, I was hired by Tōhō Movie Studio as an assistant director. My call-up was scheduled for September, so I knew I had only a very brief time. I was assigned to a movie, *The Sea Rose Spy*, about a female spy of mixed blood, Chinese and Japanese, played by Todoroki Yukiko.\* She's sent in by the U.S. military from the submarine *Sea Rose*. Although she does terrible things, at the end of the picture, she repents after she's run over by a car, or something. On her deathbed she realizes the error of her ways and gives the secret code to her interrogator as she "comes to understand the true meaning of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." She is impressed by a warmhearted member of the Kempeitai. Have you ever heard of anything so stupid? Understanding the meaning of the Co-Prosperity Sphere and then dying? You can't make *that* into drama. Too cerebral a plot. The Kempeitai was featured in the picture, rounding up a nest of American spies. It's all right to give the military police a leading role, but how could a human being who came here with the idea of spying, reform herself so easily? I couldn't write such junk, even if you ordered me to!

All the movies had objectives like this. The purpose in making any film was more important than its scenario, and that purpose had to be stated clearly. *The Sea Rose Spy* was to be made "to emphasize the firmness of national defense and arouse the public to prevent espionage." In that way they pushed for impossible things. The soul of the Japanese movie industry was stolen by submissive acceptance of these changes. In other words, the heart of the industry was lost to the bureaucrats.

During filming, military-police officers came to the studio to see the movie. They were my age, and seemed extravagantly arrogant. Each wore an armband with the words "Kempei" on it, and a military sword, its scabbard polished to a high gloss, which jangled at his waist. They looked quite smart. They treated the set as if it were their own. Most of the chairs on the set were just props. I told them once that they couldn't sit on them. They looked at me fiercely and one said, "How dare you tell the Kempei what to do!" They were people who aspired to something completely different from me.

I saw Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* while I was making that picture. It had been confiscated in the Philippines and brought to Japan.

\* *The Sea Rose Spy* [Kanchō: Umi no bara].

It was screened at the company's private preview room, packed with people on a hot summer afternoon. There were no subtitles. It was his first talkie, and at the end, Chaplin talks on and on. One man in the room who understood English gave us a translation in a soft voice, and all around him people listened. As I, too, listened, I thought, "What marvelous things he's saying, accusing fascism and Hitler. What am I doing here, when he's really doing something, conveying frankly his true inner mind?" That's why his movie's so strong.

I saw *Gone With the Wind*, too. Also confiscated in the Philippines. For sound effects alone, I thought it was fantastic. The theme of Tara kept on playing all the way through the intermission, using so much film, while we in Japan had to economize so much that we couldn't even give the director's name. I had the feeling of extravagance and luxury in *Wind*, especially when Atlanta was burned, but Chaplin's words had a much greater impact on me. He spoke directly to each of us: "Hannah, the dawn is near." That really hit me.

My call-up came on September 5, 1944, when I returned from Kobe, where we were shooting *The Sea Rose Spy* on location. We were nearly done with the thing when I went to say farewell to the film people. They all wrote greetings and words of encouragement on a large sun flag made of silk. Even people who had no connection with me. Yamada Isuzu-san—I only knew her by sight, yet she, too, wrote her name under a slogan "Congratulations on going to war."

I wanted to write a scenario before I went, as a proof of my existence and of my desire to be a movie maker. I wrote desperately in the heat of those summer days. But you couldn't really write a screenplay with a deadline like that looming over you. You needed to have your mind free and your ideas firmly arranged. I burned everything I wrote in the corner of the yard.

I was assigned to a field-artillery unit. We dug foxholes in the sand. From there we were supposed to run out and set charges on the sides of enemy tanks. I was supposed to be a human bullet. To die as one of the Emperor's limbs.

My thoughts were severed like a broken film on August 15. The war ended. It was like a daydream. Had it really lasted fifteen years? No, it wasn't a dream. It was all because of the voice of *Chin*, the Emperor, which I heard for the first time that day. His voice spoke difficult words but it conveyed the end of war. I felt faint, filled with pleasure and relief at no longer being one of His Majesty's limbs. I realized I would be able to see American movies again. I would now be able to live. Today, the only document I have that shows I was a soldier is this military notebook I carried.

Everyone made war movies. I did too, although I was little more than the clapper boy. We all had some concern about being punished for our wartime activities. Despite those worries, we immediately started making movies again. Even while our hands were raised in surrender, we got on with it. I went back to my company on August 20. They were already working. I wondered what that meant. I still wonder what the war really meant to us. Mori Iwao, one of the board members, put up a sign with the slogan, in English: "New Face, New Plot, New Treatment." They'd been so tight with the military, they'd worked so closely with them. Now, they could erase it all with those few words! I wondered if it were possible.

It was good that Japan lost, but I couldn't understand why the American military men who now supervised the movies acted so pompously. They, too, stuck their noses into every detail: "No swords, no 'feudalism.'" We had handed our hearts over to the bureaucrats during the war, and now I felt we were doing it again. What a difference from the image I'd gotten in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*! Why were these Americans so arrogant?

Still, I did believe it was our era. The movie houses that survived the fires might not have had any seats—all "standing room only"—but we could now express our feelings freely. The creation of drama is based on exactly the free thinking that war prevents. I feel very strongly about this. For me, that war was the starting point of everything.

If I were asked, "What were you during the war?" I would answer, "I was a victimizer, although I was a victim, too." I made that movie, *The Sea Rose Spy*. I played the role of lantern carrier, helping the military spread the word, and I was a soldier. That I didn't do anything really wrong was just an accident. I was posted to the beach in Chiba. Had I been sent to the China front, I would have done whatever I had to.