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Letters from Iwo Jima: Japanese Perspectives

Ikui Eikoh

Clint Eastwood's Iwo Jima films, Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima, have enjoyed considerable success in Japan and the United States. Letters from Iwo Jima, which told the story of the battle from the Japanese perspective, made nearly 5 billion yen at the box office in Japan, and won an Academy Award and a number of other major awards in the United States. Critics in America praised a film that, in the era of the war on terrorism and the Iraq conflict, attempted to understand the humanity of the enemy, while those in Japan celebrated the film's anti-war message and its largely unbiased portrait of Japanese. Few, however, have tried to analyze the reasons behind this success and how audiences were approaching these films. One of these rare cases was a short piece in the Asahi Shinbun (13 December 2006) by Ikui Eikoh, which suggested conceptualizing the film against the background of the Iraq War and the fact that to America, having lost many of its staunch allies except Japan, "Japan is the sole country in the whole world that it feels it can understand, that it wants to understand." Japan Focus, in extending a series of articles we have featured on the two films, asked Professor Ikui to expand on his thoughts. This article appears for the first time in Japan Focus and was translated and introduced by Aaron Gerow.

At first glance, Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima may appear out of place in Clint Eastwood's filmography. His works, from his directorial debut film The Beguiled (1971) to the present, have immersed us in a hidden privacy that cannot simply be called mysterious. These two films, however, clearly depict a public, collective memory.

This divergence is directly reflected in the different audience these works have attracted in Japan. In the last ten years or so, the primary viewers for Eastwood's films in Japan have been moviegoers who know the director well. But what stood out most about the theater audience when Letters opened in Japan were the spectators who didn't know Eastwood very much and who rarely went to the movies. Yet young and old they spoke of being sincerely moved by this film, often praising it with such statements as "this was a movie a Japanese should have made." These words show that, to them, it was not that important that Flags and Letters were products of the same director.

Certainly these two films constitute a pair; they augment each other in ways so carefully planned they aren't noticeable at first glance. Yet even though they divide the battle over Iwo Jima into American and Japanese perspectives, they did not cut back and forth between simultaneous events like, for instance, the parallel editing in Tora Tora Tora (1970). The reactions of average spectators came to differ to the degree that these were two independent works. Flags sparked complex and ambiguous reactions among American spectators for smashing the icon of one of the most influential cultural myths in American history. But Japanese viewers knew neither these heroes nor their monument, and thus gave the film no more special attention than they would to any other Hollywood movie. Iconoclasm is only shocking to those who share the icon.

On the other hand, Letters from Iwo Jima was a positive opportunity for spectators in both Japan and America to discover heroes who were wholly (or largely) unknown. One of the main reasons Letters was by and large more favorably received by American spectators was because it unwaveringly presented figures that viewers could intimately relate to. Doc Bradley in Flags and Saigo in Letters perform the same narrative function, but it is interesting to note that Saigo is probably a character closer in spirit to many contemporary Americans (and Japanese). The virtues of Doc's composure, self-restraint, and devotion are, while not necessarily gone, nonetheless marked as conspicuous to the "father's" generation—as the title suggests.

One can say the same thing about Japanese spectators. General Kuribayashi is essentially a "discovered" hero to Japanese audiences, but he neither represents them nor are his values necessarily shared. Even American generals praised Kuribayashi for his tenacious resolve and meticulous tactics, but audiences are not sympathizing with the military man Kuribayashi when he tells his soldiers to rationally choose when to die. The figure who best embodies their values is probably Saigo, who does not possess militant characteristics. It is precisely because Kuribayashi is seen through Saigo's eyes as an officer who can be understood that audiences accept Kuribayashi. Letters was widely supported by Japanese conservatives and right-wingers, but that's just because the fact that a famous American filmmaker favorably depicted the Japanese military tickled their ego. But what the majority of spectators selected as the means of immersing themselves in the story was the perspective of Saigo, the man who senses the absurdity of being forced into a battle in which only death awaits even though he is not a career soldier.

Kuribayashi

What is intriguing is that a hero like Saigo is exceptional less in Japanese history than in the history of Japanese film. It is well known that not all Japanese during the war were fascists and that it was not rare for common soldiers at the front to privately express discontent like Saigo. But the depiction of low-ranking grunts complaining in Japanese film up until now has been significantly different. One basically did not see a soldier who clearly looks as weak and as insignificant as Saigo baring his grievances so openly and incessantly in films by Japan's major studios (the producers' casting of the idol singer Ninomiya Kazuya in this role was

astute). That's why, as the narrative progresses, Saigo gradually approaches the image of the common man one occasionally sees in American cinema. Yet the great majority of Japanese spectators were not conscious of this.

Saigo

Viewed from this perspective, one realizes that the peculiar praise of Letters as "a movie a Japanese should have made" bore a simple meaning for most Japanese viewers that was not at all unnatural. To put it a different way, it suggests how much the manners of American cinema have become close and familiar to today's Japanese audiences. In most cases, the history that cinema depicts belongs not to the past but to the present, and in an interesting fashion Letters foregrounds "which present" contemporary Japanese viewers are living in.

To American audiences as well, Letters belongs not to the past but to the present. Kuribayashi in Letters is represented as a soldier whom it was an honor to fight against. There is no doubt that Eastwood was able to direct with confidence a story played out in a language he is completely ignorant of because he believed that he well understood the character of Kuribayashi.

To well understand is, in another sense, to share the same values. Opponents sharing the same values—standards of right and wrong, good and evil—is an aesthetic that has been praised from long ago in chansons de geste, and today it is one of the moral planes that is hardest to achieve. In fact, what was forced upon American society during the Cold War was not only a face-off against an enemy that could not be trusted, but also an experience in which one's own anxieties and fears were themselves labeled the "invisible enemy." During the Vietnam War, soldiers at the front were tormented by a war that was variously termed "unconventional," "irregular," and even "dishonorable," while society at home was overwhelmed by the loss of a clear distinction between good and evil. Entering the 1990s, the America that supposedly won the Cold War engaged in a number of military actions for ambiguous and even problematic political reasons. From olden days, those who had lost faith in a disloyal ally have tried to rediscover themselves by seeking out a great and honorable enemy. This may help explain why Letters depicts the enemy officers so favorably, why it treats them as individuals with so many admirable human characteristics. We could say simply that fighting against an honorable enemy with whom one can share values and understanding is a clear and present desire on the part of American society.

As the vast number of movies made by both America and Japan after World War II have often shown, war films can be the continuation of war by other means. But at the same time, when it is one's own side that becomes the object of malice, not the enemy, then war films can also become a war tribunal presided over by the public. In Flags of Our Fathers, there is not a single high-ranking officer or politician worthy of respect, while in Letters from Iwo Jima, the most esteemed figure is the enemy who dies. It is for this reason that this combination of films bears a great political significance in American society that is not found in Japan. It appears that Eastwood projected on the invisible screen hung between Fathers and Letters the voice of an American public that is not represented in official discourse. America, while receiving its former enemy as a faithful and calculating ally, has yet to find a contemporary enemy it can be proud of. On the basis of that unconscious desire, the images that popular culture creates do not narrate the past but the present, and that as a myth of the way memories should have been, not as history once was.

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(Empire above the Sky: Aviation Culture and the American Century), published by Kodansha, 2006. Posted at Japan Focus on May 7, 2007.

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See other Japan Focus writings on the Eastwood films:

Aaron Gerow, From Flags of Our Fathers to Letters From Iwo Jima: Clint Eastwood's Balancing of Japanese and American Perspectives

Ian Buruma, Eastwood's War: The Battle of Iwo Jima

David McNeill, Flags of Our Fathers: commemorating Iwo Jima

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