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Precarity's Pirate: The Fictive Afterlives of Idemitsu Sazō

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Abstract

When the famously nationalistic Japanese author Hyakuta Naoki published his best-selling novel *A Man Called Pirate* (*Kaizoku to yobareta otoko*) in 2012, which subsequently became both a manga and a major film, he renewed interest in the midcentury oil baron Idemitsu Sazō, using him as the model for the novel's lead character. Hyakuta claims to have aimed to inspire the country, reeling from decades of slow growth as well as the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster, by featuring a visionary Japanese leader motivated primarily by love for his employees and his country. This article traces the efforts across these media to render Idemitsu as a credible character, particularly in dealing with his real-life family as well as his “family” of employees. It argues that the partial disappearance of the “real” Idemitsu in these versions of Hyakuta's novel allowed the production of a more believable one—made believable in part because of the essential Japanese values that he ostensibly represents, even as the constraints on these representations hint at fissures and tensions in contemporary political use of biographical fiction and film.

Keywords: Japan; politics; film; biography; fiction; paternalism; nationalism; gender

Not one to take a perceived slight lying down, and perhaps sensing a looming box-office disappointment, the conservative author and pundit Hyakuta Naoki¹ took to Twitter a week before the opening of director Yamazaki Takashi's 2016 film adaptation of his best-selling biographical novel *A Man Called Pirate*, featuring a lightly fictionalized version of the midcentury oil magnate Idemitsu Sazō (1885–1981), to note that he had been kept out of the publicity. “The movie *A Man Called Pirate* better not be a bomb; it cost a billion yen (about \$10 million) to make.” He continued, “The advertising and PR pros probably thought ‘don't mention Hyakuta Naoki in the promotion.’ You don't want to name a person who's going to attract negative publicity in the media.”² Hyakuta was right to have worried. While not an outright disaster, the film was a rare blemish on Yamazaki's streak of box-office smashes, at least in Japanese cinemas. It ultimately earned about \$16 million in Japan and virtually nothing overseas, far behind Yamazaki's earlier hits, like his award-winning *Always: Sunset on Third Street* trilogy, his sci-fi adventure *Space Battleship Yamato*, or his controversial blockbuster *The Eternal Zero*.

But its having been made in the first place—a big-budget film about a long-dead oil baron, with its most dramatic section following a slow-moving tanker, the *Nisshō Maru* (the real name of Idemitsu's ship), as it makes its way to Iran in violation of a UK/US-led blockade—is a testament to the popular success of Hyakuta's novel, which lionizes its hero's mythical virtues as quintessentially Japanese, making them central to a story of Japan's rebirth. This representation of a historical figure who supposedly embodies the nation's best qualities is hardly unique to Japan. However, the novel's success, followed

¹All translations from the Japanese are by the author unless otherwise noted. Japanese names are given in Japanese order (family-given) except in the cases of authors writing in English who have themselves written their names in Western order. The official English titles of the Yamazaki Takashi films *Eien no zero* and *Kaizoku to yobareta otoko* are, respectively, *The Fighter Pilot* and *Fueled: A Man Called Pirate*. In this article, they are written as *The Eternal Zero* and *A Man Called Pirate*, both for precision and for consistency with the titles of the novels on which they are based.

²Hyakuta Naoki (@huyakutanoaki), Twitter, December 1, 2016, 5:52 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hyakutanaoki/status/804458099343921152?s=20> (accessed April 12, 2022).

by the production of a manga and a film based on it, provides an illustrative glimpse into the ways in which Japanese nationalism is often driven and made more palatable by intense sentimentality. It also displays, more broadly, the continuing, if fraught, appeal of “great man of history” narratives, particularly insofar as they are supposedly made believable through reflection on emotional complexity, even as they typically produce a melodramatic hero whose essential virtue and blamelessness mirror those of the nation he embodies. In doing so, it offers important lessons for studies of politics, particularly the ways in which fiction can become believable history by shoehorning contemporary concerns into narrow genre ones.

Idemitsu might seem like an odd figure for a cultural revival. Although his public image was never badly tarnished and there is much to admire about the loyalty to his employees that Hyakuta’s novel emphasizes, it predictably dimmed over the three decades following his death. The infrequent news stories mentioning his name typically did so in connection with exhibits at the splendid Tokyo museum that the avid art collector founded or, less commonly, in articles about Japan-Iran relations, because of his having sent the *Nisshō Maru* to purchase recently nationalized Iranian oil in violation of the US/UK boycott in 1953. While Idemitsu’s oil company remained one of Japan’s largest, shifts toward nuclear and then renewable energy sources made petroleum giants less immediately appealing possibilities for public representation. But the myriad political figures, writers, media giants, and scholars, particularly on Japan’s Right, who turned their attention to Idemitsu after 2012 largely focused on values: ones almost always linked nationally to Japan, which he purportedly embodied particularly closely. These values are, of course, almost invariably the ones that Japan must recall to overcome its economic, political, social, or cultural malaise. Arguably, these invocations have less to do with the real person that Idemitsu was and more to do with the fictive ones produced by the different versions of *A Man Called Pirate* (*Kaizoku to yobareta otoko*) released between 2012 and 2016. Indeed, even as these versions struggled in different ways to represent Idemitsu as a person, they were so successful in emphasizing his values and beliefs that these fictional representations actually became accepted and depicted as reality.

Political science has, over the past three decades, displayed sporadic interest in narrative, though typically focused on the intentional framing of events sequentially and causally by self-aware political actors aiming to persuade an audience (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013), the cognitive framing of political information in narrative form (Patterson and Monroe 1998), or the role of historiography-driven narrative as data or as cases in political science analysis (Büthe 2002; Lustick 1996). Although political scientists have examined fiction as well, this is typically done to read the representation of political issues and identities in popular literature (e.g., Neumann and Nexon 2006) or, less commonly, to examine how these representations take hold in the popular imagination (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). The effects of fiction and the expected demands of audiences in structuring the narratives and embedded claims about history in politically relevant ways have been of less interest to the discipline, even as scholars of history, sociology, and literature have engaged these directly (see, e.g., Brooks 2002; Polletta 2006; White 2010). Thus, Hyakuta’s deliberate crafting of the story of Idemitsu’s life according to the putative needs of post-bubble Japan begs for some account not only of the context in which it succeeded, but also the ways in which the author, as well as other artists subsequently grappling with it, sought to make the character of Idemitsu appealingly recognizable while maintaining a narrative arc and enough fidelity to basic facts that even informed and influential readers could find it not just compelling but deeply persuasive. After all, a fictional narrative with political implications requires attention not just to the politics surrounding it but also to the narrative logics that inform it—meaning, in this case, the logics of biographical fiction or film that confront or efface the messy substance of actual human life.

This article proceeds in five parts. First, it positions Hyakuta’s deliberate production of nostalgic representation within the politics of Japan’s “lost decades” of relative economic stagnation after its high-speed growth and “bubble economy.” It next examines Idemitsu’s place within that earlier era of robust national economic development and his own self-aggrandizing writing late in his life. The article then turns to the narrative at the heart of Hyakuta’s novel, addressing the myriad ways it dovetails with the preoccupations of today’s conservatives, including the behavior of the prewar and

wartime Japanese Empire. Because the core theme of the novel, which resonates with Idemitsu's own writing as well as the messy complexity of his life, is of Idemitsu's "love" for his employees (and, by extension, Japanese) as "family," the article then takes advantage of Japan's "media mix" (see, e.g., Zahlten 2017) that produced several overlapping versions of the story, examining depictions of the lead character's emotional connections, especially his romantic love for his first wife and paternalistic love for his employees, in the novel, the subsequent manga, and Yamazaki's film. Finally, it addresses reactions to the book and the film, particularly those that treat them, sometimes startlingly, as actual and truthful accounts of Japanese history.

Nostalgia from Precarious Terrain

The defining characteristic of political and social debate in Japan over the past three decades has been its focus on national decline. Making this point is not a verdict; after all, even a Japan ostensibly "in decline" is still one of the world's richest nations, with admirably high levels of education, public health, and safety, perhaps even managing the nettlesome challenges of advanced industrial capitalism comparatively well (e.g., Krugman 2014). But former prime minister Abe Shinzō's widely noted 2012 campaign slogan *Nippon o torimodosu*, conventionally translated as "Take Japan Back" but perhaps closer to "Restore Japan," captures strongly the sense that there was something Japan had to be taken back or restored from. Indeed, the 1990s and 2000s have been commonly described as the "lost decades" (e.g., Fukuda 2015; University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science 2005, 2006), with declining economic security and a substantial number of Japanese living in "precarity," as Anne Allison (2013) famously described it. Writers and observers in Japan have widely lamented the apparent national trajectory of a shrinking population facing declining economic fortunes and increasing social disorder (Leheny 2006; Yoda 2000). One of the cultural outcomes has been a pronounced and widely noted nostalgia for a set of postwar decades that are most commonly connected to the country's high-speed economic growth. This "Shōwa nostalgia," named for the emperor whose reign included much of the transwar period as well as the devastation and cruelty of World War II, tends to focus on the mid-1950s through the 1970s (e.g., Hidaka 2017; Kōno 2018). This was an era of economic growth resulting from a variety of causes (rapidly rebuilt industrial facilities, access to a largely open American market, sometimes shrewdly designed industrial policies), but often popularly ascribed to the collective effort, diligence, cleverness, and purpose of the Japanese people (Shimoda 2013).

Hyakuta (born in 1956) deliberately positioned his novel *A Man Called Pirate* in the context of Japan's recession as well as the cataclysmic devastation along the Tōhoku coast caused by the epochal 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster. As he would later say in a conversation that was printed as a full-page advertisement by the famed bookseller Kinokuniya (2013) in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's most popular daily newspaper,

Right after the disaster, with Japan as a whole drifting along in a stagnant mood, I came to know about the "Nisshō Maru Incident." After the war, [Idemitsu] boldly fought against the world's leading oil companies, propelling Japan on the road to its miraculous recovery, and I wanted to say, we had this kind of great Japanese person. "This is it! This is what I have to write," I realized.

While Hyakuta's novel repeatedly discusses the role of fuel in Japan's postwar recovery, the connection he draws between his fictionalized version of Idemitsu and Japan's miracle economic growth is far more focused on the explicitly Japanese values that his character articulates and embodies. It bears noting here that *A Man Called Pirate*, even if closely modeled after Idemitsu's life, is fiction; Hyakuta changes the names of many of the major figures, invents dialogue and internal monologues, and does so in ways that connect Idemitsu's fictional stand-in, Kunioka Tetsuzō, to key strands of early twenty-first century nationalist debates.

Although Hyakuta's political views were not as clearly known in 2012 as they are today, his previous best-seller, *The Eternal Zero*, suggested that they were squarely on Japan's Right, a diverse constellation

of actors largely united by the view that Japan's modern history has been written in a shamefully self-abnegating way, either distorting Japan's interwar and wartime behavior or failing to contextualize it against the purportedly much worse activity of Western imperial powers (see, e.g., Smith 2018). Much of the representation has a distinctively melodramatic quality, in which a pure and virtuous Japan was buttressed by dark, outside forces—especially the efforts of Western imperialist powers—and therefore acted purely or at least primarily in self-defense in constructing its own empire, led by the goal of rescuing Asians from the grasp of Westerners. The melodramatic mode follows not just the frequently Manichean distinction between an evil and corrupt West and an innocent and honorable Japan, but also the way in which the driving forces of history are typically outside of Japan's control, with Japan reacting to cruelties from outside.³

Before writing *The Eternal Zero*, Hyakuta had led a successful but primarily behind-the-scenes career as a television producer and writer, mostly working on variety and talk shows. *The Eternal Zero*, a best-seller about a tormented but highly skilled and courageous Zero pilot determined to keep himself and his fellow airmen alive despite orders for increasingly senseless and finally suicidal missions, catapulted him to fame and made some of Hyakuta's views clear. Although the novel might be portrayed as fitting neatly into Japan's postwar pacifism, because it shows the wastefulness of the kamikaze tactics, its structure and moral representation of the pilots valorize military service and sacrifice. Indeed, its highly cinematic flashback structure resembles a number of Hollywood efforts, such as Edward Zwick's *Courage under Fire* (1996) and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), allowing flattering comparisons of the pilots to the ostensibly selfish, aloof Japanese of today. By writing about a young man in the 1990s searching for the truth of his grandfather's death during the war, Hyakuta can thus celebrate the martial talents and physical bravery of the film's hero pilot and inveigh against callow young Japanese of later generations who cannot understand sacrifice for the nation, all while maintaining a critical stance toward the wartime military that sent so many young men unnecessarily to early graves.

The Eternal Zero's nationalistic overtones were clear enough that the manga author Sumoto Sōichi, whose previous works had included two about Japanese victims of North Korean abductions (a favorite topic of Japan's right wing), composed his own five-volume comic book version in 2011–12. Japan's former and soon-to-return-to-power prime minister, the famed nationalist Abe Shinzō, also remarked on his admiration for the book. More recently, Hyakuta has thrown caution to the wind in provocatively expressing his political and personal views. After denying that the Nanking Massacre took place, he was forced to resign from NHK's governing board, a position to which he had been nominated by Abe. Hyakuta published another book telling the story of his recently deceased friend's "fierce love" for a much younger woman, resulting in successful defamation lawsuits by the man's daughter and former manager. He then wrote a book ostensibly of Japanese history, one promoted by Prime Minister Abe, that critics charged was littered with obvious errors and contained sections that were lifted verbatim from Wikipedia (see, e.g., Litera Editorial 2018). Indeed, Hyakuta spent the next years as a well-paid but widely maligned figure, difficult even for many mainstream conservatives to defend. This reputation makes it easy to forget that, at the time of *A Man Called Pirate's* initial publication, Hyakuta was a colorful and probably conservative character in the popular literary scene but not the more caricatured, controversial figure he would subsequently become.

The Model Nationalist

It is little wonder that Idemitsu Sazō's long life would capture Hyakuta's imagination. Born into a merchant family, Idemitsu joined a small oil firm directly after graduating from college, becoming independent within a few short years. In a complex business environment—with the Japanese government working assiduously but mostly unproductively to develop a national oil monopoly capable of supplying customers like the military and the country's increasingly mechanized fishing industry—Idemitsu found success by selling lubricant oil to the Japanese Empire's South Manchuria Railway.

³The classic study of the "melodramatic mode" remains Brooks (1976).

This crucial state-owned business was the spine of Japan's early continental empire, and Idemitsu's initial business success, like that of many other firms, hinged on Japanese control of this sliver and later the entirety of northern China. Idemitsu, however, had a sometimes frosty relationship with state authorities, particularly in the postwar era as officials sought to consolidate oil distribution and protect the interests of powerful consumers, especially those in agriculture and fisheries. Idemitsu's firm grew partly by ignoring or working against these constraints.⁴

Besides his impact on the Japanese petroleum industry, Idemitsu's institutional legacy lay in the precedents he helped set in international law. Two years after the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, Idemitsu sent the *Nisshō Maru* to Iran to purchase oil that had been sitting unsold because of a boycott led by the United Kingdom's Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which had lost its concessions in the process. Idemitsu negotiated a price 30 percent below market value, enraging oil producers elsewhere and placing the Japanese government in an uncomfortable position. Still, the Tokyo High Court later sided with Idemitsu in a suit brought by the Anglo-American Oil Company, in a case cited for many years as precedent on oil concessions and on the jurisdiction of national courts (see, e.g., Haight 1972, 545). Advocates of closer relations between Iran and Japan typically point to this case as a seminal moment of cooperation between the two nations (e.g., Azimi 2010). While the overall effects on the Japanese economy were likely minor, as was that of Idemitsu's subsequent and controversial decision to purchase Soviet oil, Idemitsu's immediate impact lay in demonstrating that one could, under some circumstances, defy the United States.

Idemitsu's later writing as a self-styled business philosopher further cemented his image as a wise, visionary economic leader with a keen and cosmopolitan grasp of global affairs, but also fidelity to the values and culture of Japan. In the extended interviews that make up the bulk of his 1969 publication *Working People's Capitalism*, he emphasizes the social core of his enterprise, which he aimed to build economically for the team of people with whom he was working. This was alien, he indicated, to foreign theories of economic development, and was instead rooted in his identity and culture as a Japanese:

Right from the time I founded the company, I managed the company as a Japanese who focused on love and affection (*aijō*), not managing as if I had researched and were learning from capitalism, socialism, or communism. . . . From then on, Idemitsu was managed with love as its basis, and those three "isms" were completely beside the point. (Idemitsu 1969 [2013], 8)

For a writer like Hyakuta, who had already cemented his reputation among conservative readers, Idemitsu was an ideal model for a second novel. A nationalist who attributed Japan's postwar economic strength repeatedly to the country's culture and values, as well as one whose successes were built in part on standing up to the United States and outmaneuvering some of the most powerful American businesses, Idemitsu could easily serve as a model for a character that Hyakuta's fans would likely embrace. Idemitsu's loving commitment to his employees, which becomes the dominant theme in the novel, seems perfectly targeted for a wider reading public that had experienced waves of insecurity in national economic fortune and personal economic prospects.

Fictional Pirates, Contested Paternalists

While he is a creative and engaging storyteller, Hyakuta is not a subtle writer, and *A Man Called Pirate's* emphasis on both the spiritual qualities of the Japanese people and the need to prioritize the nation's health and survival emerges on the first full page of the novel, which opens on the eve of the war's end in 1945. Kunioka asks himself whether this is the country's end, facing destruction at the hands of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. "No," he thinks, "as long as there are Japanese people left, Japan won't perish" (Hyakuta 2012a, 9). The novel spans decades, tracing Kunioka's efforts to build his company (Kunioka Shoten in the novel, based on the real Idemitsu Kōsan). In one of the early hints that the novel will jump backward in time, we learn

⁴For an overview, see Samuels (1987, 168–227, esp. 182–202).

from an unusually sympathetic American character in the US Occupation's General Headquarters (which temporarily purged the real Idemitsu for his work with the wartime government) that he has heard that in the "old days," people used to call Kunioka a "pirate." The American shares this with Kunioka as a friendly aside, showing he has done his homework about the Japanese with whom he needs to interact, but also paying homage to the main character's cleverness and industry, both of which he admires, especially because Kunioka "cared so deeply for his nation" (*kuni o omou kimochi no tsuyosa*) (Hyakuta 2012a, 130).

The novel jumps back to Kunioka's humble beginnings, supplying oil and lubricant to fishing boats in the western Japanese port town of Shimonoseki, where he first earned the sobriquet "pirate" because of his use of boats to transfer and sell oil to fishers, undercutting the established supply and distribution lines on land. Too sprawling chronologically to count as a bildungsroman, *A Man Called Pirate* nonetheless echoes what the German literature scholar Tobias Boes (2008, 285) describes as the genre's "link between individual and collective emergence," though it does so by placing the protagonist at the core of Japan's interwar and postwar ascendance. Kunioka's industry and ambition lead him to take the ambitious step of trying to gain a contract for wheel lubricant with the South Manchuria Railway. This places him in direct competition with "the majors," essentially the famed "Seven Sisters" of the global oil industry. Kunioka is seen not only as a crafty businessman, but also as a skilled scientist and artisan, working assiduously to develop an oil that will stay fluid even in the frigid Manchurian winters.

Notably, colonization is a frequent topic in the novel, but nearly always focused on European and American colonization of Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Japan is drawn into a collision with the West during the "era of colonization" (Hyakuta 2012a, 130), and it needed to win the Russo-Japanese War (which resulted in Japanese control of rail lines and creation of the South Manchuria Railway) to avoid being colonized, however improbably, by Russia or other nations. But imperialism is typically depicted as the sin of Westerners (sometimes even using the more openly contentious term "white people" [*hakujin*]), and Japan's control over the South Manchuria Railway as the unavoidable outcome of wars largely forced on Japan. Indeed, Hyakuta takes pains to note that Kunioka was anything but a run-of-the-mill imperial businessman, with one American military character expressing shock that he paid his Chinese employees the same retirement bonus as his Japanese workers (Hyakuta 2012a, 125).

The novel's blindered critique of imperialism continues into its second volume, which focuses mostly on Kunioka's purchase of Iranian oil, including the decisions and circumstances leading to it, as well as its legal and economic implications. In late 1946, Kunioka tells his brother, recently released from a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp, that the United States wants to turn Japan into nothing but a market for its goods, as it did with Southeast Asia. Kunioka continues,

It's a tragedy [*higeki*] how white people have turned the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia into colonies. They don't build any real industry there, just a double exploitation [*sakushu*], extracting resources and then using those resources to build things they then make them buy. This is the way white people have been doing it for a hundred years of their control, turning these countries into places that can't even manufacture a single screw. . . . America denounces Japan for invading the Korean peninsula and Manchuria, but in Korea, in Manchuria, in Taiwan, Japan invested tons of capital, built a variety of facilities, and created legal systems. It built dams, it built electrical power stations, it built schools. And now probably Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan are all going to experience spectacular development as a result. (Hyakuta 2012b, 14–15)

Kunioka then closes his eyes and thinks that while he is sad for Japan's loss in the war and for the resources he invested (as well as built with the blood and determination of his employees) in these colonies, he is at least happy to have made a contribution to their development. This view mirrors Hyakuta's own, though in more sentimental and appealing terms; Hyakuta later published a book sarcastically apologizing to South Korea, a frequent critic of Japanese imperial and wartime behavior, for

leaving it with functioning legal and educational systems, as well as the infrastructure and technical know-how that enabled its rapid industrialization (Hyakuta 2019).

This part of the novel steps away, by necessity, from Kunioka, to chart the course of the Nisshō Maru, as well as its resourceful captain, Nitta Tatsuo (the actual captain's real name), as it evades the British navy and sails toward Iran to purchase the oil. But Kunioka remains a hands-on manager, aware of and guiding the mission, and later shaping his firm's legal strategy in response to the Anglo-Iranian Oil lawsuit. His price negotiations with Iran are treated as controversial primarily because of the downward pressure they threatened to put on global oil, affecting the American and UK firms; they are driven by economic necessity at home, given the need for cheap oil for continued industrialization, and greeted mostly with gratitude by an Iranian government happy that someone is willing to make a deal with them despite the UK-led boycott. Once again, an action that could very well have been understood as exploitative resource extraction—purchasing cheap oil from a desperate seller—becomes an anti-imperialist step, one that shows respect to another country struggling to escape the yoke of white colonization.

But the more consistent themes in the novel—marking Kunioka's character across its more than 700 pages—revolve around his determined independence as well as his fierce commitment to his workers. On dozens of occasions, even when describing Kunioka's time in college and its impact on his later behavior (e.g., Hyakuta 2012a, 167–68), Hyakuta refers to Kunioka's view of his employees as “family,” an ethical position that is perhaps the novel's defining feature. Indeed, when Kunioka faces ruin on several occasions—downturns in the oil business before the war, US purges and business controls in its aftermath, the slow strangulation of Japan's energy sector by “the majors” in the early 1950s—his thoughts are virtually always about his family: not the household family represented fitfully by either of his wives or by his children, but rather that of his employees. When Hyakuta lists the five “company policies” (*shaze*) of Kunioka Shoten, the first is *shain wa kazoku*: employees are family (Hyakuta 2012a, 96).

It is a mythic portrayal of Idemitsu, though based to some degree in fact. Idemitsu's fabled depiction of employees as family was well known in the business community, and subsequent accounts—ranging from popular hagiographies (e.g., Matsumoto 2013; Takakura 1990) to more sober-minded but still admiring biographies (e.g., Kikkawa 2012)—emphasize his commitment to his workers, particularly in avoiding terminations or layoffs. Indeed, beyond the company's widely noted reluctance to fire its workers under almost any circumstances, it imposed no mandatory retirement age, differing dramatically from other major employers. Although Idemitsu's commitment might have been exceptional in its extent, it was not historically unique, and it was in many ways a hallmark of prewar Japanese employment patterns.⁵ A less literal but perhaps more evocatively accurate translation of “family-ism” would, of course, be “paternalism.” Throughout Idemitsu's life, and in Japanese corporate culture through the vast majority of the twentieth century (and certainly in Hyakuta's novel), the idealized employee was a man, and Idemitsu's care for his “children” spread to women and actual children typically through the programs and subsidies set up for the male breadwinners who were his employees. Even after his death, Idemitsu's nationalism and emphasis on the paternalistic role of his firm continued to make headlines overseas (e.g., Tharp 1981), and the company today articulates guiding principles nearly identical to those listed by Hyakuta (see Idemitsu Kōsan n.d.).

This paternalism—typically described in Japanese as “warm-heartedness” (*onjōshugi*)—represented a widespread institutional solution to problems of labor instability, potential unrest, and upward demands on wages. Companies that adopted the firm-as-family management approach were often able to suppress wages by trading the commitment of relative employment security for salary/wage increases that were limited and incremental. Although this paternalism was hotly contested in the interwar years, with democratic movements mobilizing in part around demands for unionization that were opposed by managers preaching a paternalistic ethos (see Garon 1987; Gordon 1991),

⁵Hazama ([1964] 1978) is the classic study of this issue. Mari Sako and Eri Sako's superb translation (Hazama 1997) includes an incisive foreword by Mari Sako, who neatly balances Hazama's efforts to describe what was ostensibly unique about Japan's labor relations with his subsequent efforts to refine claims about Japanese group- or community-mindedness.

they still depicted it as somehow essentially Japanese, despite practices that mirrored corporate paternalism in Western nations as well (Tsutsui 1997). Idemitsu's postwar writings and interviews not only embraced and promoted corporate paternalism but also linked it directly to the supposedly ordered, communal nature of Japanese society, making his work fit relatively neatly into the broad and much-derided discursive tradition of *nihonjinron*: theories of Japaneseness (see Rear 2016). His fancifully titled book *If Marx Had Been Born in Japan* simultaneously critiques Marxism as inappropriate for Japan and intellectually narrow ("Marx thought only about the proletariat, but I think about everyone," he announces; Idemitsu [1966] 2016, 204) while also viewing it as a logical response to the cutthroat rationalism of Western business practices. Labor unions, in this reading, were not in and of themselves bad things, but inappropriate and unnecessary in the context of his company, a decades-old argument made by numerous Japanese business owners.

Idemitsu was, by all accounts, unusually committed in the postwar era to keeping his end of the paternalistic bargain, but his success after the war likely depended as well on a particular form of postwar capitalism, especially as it was fused to the American empire. Idemitsu remained a critic of the United States, even inking an oil deal with the Soviet Union over the objections of anti-communist Japanese officials concerned in part about the American reaction. The Korean War, however, played a substantial role in jump-starting the postwar Japanese economy (with Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru indelicately referring to the cataclysm as "a gift from the gods"), and Idemitsu's oil business grew alongside expansions of Japanese manufacturing directed partly toward American consumer and military markets. The point here is not to denounce him as hypocritical—he probably was less so than most other captains of industry—but rather to indicate that his ability to make good on a seemingly ethical commitment that he routinely depicted, and that Hyakuta and others would describe, as inherently Japanese in nature rested in part on transnational, institutional, and economic forces over which he had little control.

"Family"/Family

Hyakuta's novel was an immediate hit, with its two volumes together selling nearly two million copies. In 2013, it won the annual Japan Booksellers' Prize (Hon'ya Taishō), an annual literary award chosen by votes from bookstore staff around Japan, a testament to its value to the publishing industry. Sumoto, the manga artist who created a successful manga version of *The Eternal Zero*, quickly began work to turn Hyakuta's novel into a 10-volume graphic novel. While writing the novel, Hyakuta reportedly approached the director Yamazaki, who was at work on his adaptation of *The Eternal Zero*, about the possibility of turning *A Man Called Pirate* into a film as well. Yamazaki reports that he resisted at first, because he could not figure out how to turn corporate and bureaucratic debates into an exciting film. But with the release of Sumoto's manga, he seems to have concluded that the story could be an arresting one on a visual level, not just in printed word (*Gendai* Evening Editorial Staff, 2016). This being Yamazaki, whose films were reliable box-office hits and frequent award winners, he was able to assemble a cast of established actors like Yoshioka Hidetaka and Kunimura Jun, of-the-moment young superstars Okada Shin'ichi (the Japan Academy Award-winning star of *The Eternal Zero*) and Ayase Haruka, and up-and-coming faces like Sometani Shōta and Suzuki Ryōhei. Given the track records of its writers, crew, and performers, as well as the fame of its best-selling source, it had the early hallmarks of an obvious box-office smash.

Converting Hyakuta's Kunioka into an appealing cinematic lead, however, was a challenge. Hyakuta struggles with anything in Idemitsu's personal life that does not directly revolve around distributing oil, protecting his workers, safeguarding the nation, or distributing oil to protect his workers and safeguard the nation. The twice-married Idemitsu was divorced from his first wife, Kidosaki Kei, after eleven childless years of marriage and then married Yamauchi Yasuko, with whom he had five children, among them his daughter, the distinguished multimedia artist Idemitsu Mako (whom he reportedly disinherited upon her decision to leave Japan for San Francisco) and his son Shōsuke, who subsequently ran the family business (see Kin-gendai Keifu Wārudo n.d.). Hyakuta treats Kunioka's second wife, Tatsuko, as a kindhearted afterthought, someone of whom Kunioka is genuinely fond, but the

reader is led to understand that Kunioka's first wife, Yuki, continued to hold a special place in his heart.

Because of Kunioka's focus on his work and because of the sadness hanging over the couple as a result of Yuki's apparent inability to become pregnant, she presses him for a divorce and disappears from the novel late in its first half. Given the novel's commitment to depicting the details of the oil business in interwar and early postwar Japan, as well as its fixation on Kunioka's determination to ensure that Japan has enough oil to meet its industrial needs, there is little to remind the reader of Yuki until very late in the book, when a retired Kunioka sets aside a newspaper report of the 1973 OPEC crisis to read a letter written to him by an unknown man who describes himself as Yuki's nephew. She had passed away in a nursing home, but she had kept, throughout the years, a scrapbook of Kunioka's countless accomplishments, including the famed oil deal with Iran. The moment serves as a significant emotional denouement for the novel, with the aging Kunioka reflecting on unresolved feelings from earlier in his life.

The manga author Sumoto had already solved some of the challenges of streamlining the novel's narrative, but he was confounded by the family issues. In a published conversation with Yamazaki, Sumoto points out that he found it difficult, even in the course of the manga's ten volumes, to cover Kunioka's personal life, "especially the first wife, Yuki. So ultimately we just ran away from that by choosing not to write about her" (*Gendai Evening Editorial Staff* 2016). Perhaps because he was aiming to focus the story a bit more tightly around the protagonist's personal life than the business-as-national-struggle-minded Sumoto, Yamazaki emotionally and visibly amplifies Yuki's role, and indeed makes that love story frame the film, while also seeming aware that her self-abnegating, self-sacrificing portrayal in the novel is potentially so cruel as to be judged, as one critic noted, as a "beautiful domestic violence fantasy."⁶ On the one hand, this allows Yamazaki to give a narratively meaningful—if not especially large or well-scripted—role to Ayase, an eminently marketable superstar, while it also, on the other hand, provides the justification for a denouement that highlights the makeup work on a seemingly ninety-year-old protagonist reflecting on the love of his life. It also, however, makes Yuki even more awkward a cipher, replaced by Kunioka's male employees as the film's emotional core for much of its run time, only to reappear anachronistically alongside them in the film's final images.

In their published conversation, Yamazaki credits Sumoto with an important invention, that of the pivotal character Hasegawa, renamed Hasebe in the film. Played by the boyish star Sometani Shōta, Hasebe is one of Kunioka's most trusted and loyal employees. He is killed while traveling back to the company's oil project in current-day Indonesia when two American fighters gun it out of the sky, allowing one of the few moments of genuine action for which Yamazaki is famed. Hasebe's memory haunts the film's Kunioka, who reflects on him both while planning the Iran oil purchase in order to allow the company to survive, and then when the *Nisshō Maru* departs, evidently still racked with guilt over Hasebe's death.

Yamazaki seems to have made both choices partly to focus on the human aspects of the story, going beyond mere "great man's biography," a concern he raised in pre-release interviews, emphasizing that he worked to tell the human story at the heart of the novel (Okazaki 2016). That said, *A Man Called Pirate* mostly falls neatly within the conventions of contemporary "great man" biopics. It has a major leader as its protagonist; it plays with chronology creatively, keeping the focus more on the character's (limited) development and the ideals he represents than on chronological time; and it uses his relationships largely as opportunities for him to express or to demonstrate his beliefs and his values. Idemitsu is, as he is in the novel and the graphic novel, a grand figure who simultaneously embodies a certain biopic ideal: the great man who makes crucial decisions that become naturally entwined with national developments conventionally viewed as essential, perhaps even fated. In his well-regarded study of biopics, Dennis Bingham (2010, 78) writes, "One of the central myths of biography is that self-determination and destiny absolutely do go together, and that following the crowd and denying

⁶See the comments by writer and critic Sugita Shunsuke in Sugita and Fujita (2020), 166–71.

one's dreams lead the great one away from both his/her destiny and the things that make a singular personality" (see also Epstein 2011, 8; Pettey 2018, 2).

But this framing requires extraordinary self-sacrifice on the part of Yuki—about whose model, Kidosaki Kei, there is virtually nothing written in any of the biographies of Idemitsu—and negligible attention to his second wife or family; after all, the real Idemitsu's relationship with his daughter Mako was so strained that he became a key feature in her self-exploring, emotionally conflicted art in later years (e.g., Idemitsu 1981). In crafting the story this way, Yamazaki wrestles with the already strong homosociality of Hyakuta's novel. Nothing sexual or erotic is implied between Kunioka and Hasebe; but then again, nothing sexual or erotic is really implied between Kunioka and Yuki, other than the statement that they have tried and failed to have children. Outside of Yuki's twenty minutes or so of screen time, men are not only virtually all of Kunioka's interlocutors throughout the film, like the novel, but they also play key roles in mediating even his relationship with her: the final shots of the film have Kunioka inventing a memory of Yuki, smiling serenely in one of the boats with which he sold oil to fishers off the Shimonoseki coast, surrounded by his earnest, singing, and cheering employees across different eras of his life.

This could suggest Yamazaki's (seemingly like Hyakuta's or Sumoto's) basic disinterest in female characters, though his beloved *Always: Sunset on Third Street* trilogy prominently features women (and sometimes children) as the stable, emotional backbone of the community compared with the more ambitious and excitable male adults, whose foibles drive most of the action. In both the Hyakuta and Sumoto versions of *A Man Called Pirate*, Kunioka Shoten's entirely male employees become a none-too-subtle synecdoche for the Japanese nation, gendering postwar Japan in familiar ways, with a firm but kind paternalism at top diffusing through the male employees, each of whom is tacitly understood to be a patriarch in his own home. Kunioka's bonds with his employees seem no weaker—indeed, they are quite a bit stronger—than those with his real family. Yamazaki, however, tries valiantly to have it both ways. The film's Kunioka is, on the one hand, a great man largely because of all he does for his employees and for Japan. Indeed, he loses Yuki in part because of his commitment to his company and its workers, and the inspiration to which he repeatedly turns throughout the film is that of Hasebe, the young, optimistic fellow whose bright future is cut cruelly short. And yet he is not just a great man of history, but also a genuinely good man, in a manner consistent with popular cinematic valorization of the heterosexual romance, marked by the male protagonist's love for a woman.

The different artists' choices in handling the delicate details of Kunioka-as-Idemitsu's life thus display the challenges inherent in crafting a politically meaningful story that is relevant today while working within the expectations and constraints of the biographical fiction and biopic genres. Turning Idemitsu, the great man of history, into a suitably recognizable leading man requires for Yamazaki a focus, however fraught, on the sacrifices associated with the love of his life, even as she disappears from the picture to make space for a love for his male employees that demands paternalistic responsibility and commitment. The film's ultimately disappointing box-office returns suggest that the choice was not entirely convincing. But it is hard to imagine the film having been made had Yamazaki chosen to eliminate or minimize further this romantic angle. And it is even harder to imagine his having chosen to hew more closely to the complex details of Idemitsu's actual family life.

Responses and Credibility

Given the high-profile cast, the success of the novel, and Yamazaki's track record, expectations for *A Man Called Pirate* were high. Hyakuta's reputational nosedive between 2014 and 2016, however, evidently had some of the film's producers and public relations team members concerned, and much of the film's pre-release publicity ignored him entirely. Stories in industry magazines clearly crafted with the cooperation of the film's publicists focused instead on the narrative and technical challenges that the film's multidecade story posed for Yamazaki (e.g., Okazaki 2016) or on the makeup and special effects teams tasked with aging Okada roughly sixty years (Okamoto 2016). The film's disappointing box-office performance is perhaps instructive—one early autopsy attributed the failure both to

Hyakuta's notoriety as well as to a "feeble" (*usui*) screenplay that wasted the talents of its immensely popular stars (Excite News 2016)—but its actual existence and prominence are at least equally so.

Even a relatively unsuccessful film that opens on hundreds of screens nationwide can reach more people than a best-selling novel does, and indeed, the film seems to have catapulted Idemitsu back into the national conversation more than even the novel. Mentioned only occasionally in random news stories in the preceding fifteen years, and often in association with exhibits at the major art museum that he created in 1966, Idemitsu became a cultural touchstone, especially for Japan's conservatives, with the novel's publication. The strongly right-leaning *Sankei Shimbun*, for example, had carried stories referring to Idemitsu roughly once per year in the twelve years before Hyakuta published his book,⁷ but it ran far more in the years following the publication of the book. Several of the early ones were interviews with Hyakuta about Idemitsu and what he represented. In one, *Sankei* culture editor Kuwahara Satoshi announces that he cried several times while reading the novel, telling Hyakuta that "as a Japanese person, I received courage from the book's heroic drama" (Kuwahara 2013). The more mainstream conservative *Yomiuri* newspaper also featured interviews with Hyakuta and carried articles emphasizing Idemitsu's commitment to humane, family-style management (e.g., *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2016).

But it was after the release of the film that Idemitsu became much more of a public talking point, not just among newspaper writers but in the broader political space. A few months after the film's release, a frequent contributor to the right-wing magazine *Seiron* whose father had worked for Idemitsu contributed a piece extolling the great man's virtues and connecting them intimately to the Japanese national character (Shinbo 2017). Shortly thereafter, he delivered a lecture at the community hall of Yasukuni Shrine, the Tokyo-based shrine to Japan's war dead that is venerated especially on the Japanese Far Right. Excitedly reporting on the lecture (titled "Idemitsu Sazō and the Japanese"), a prefectural assembly politician in Chiba Prefecture emphasized not only that he had learned about Idemitsu, but that Idemitsu's love for Japan stood in direct contrast with the multicultural/diverse direction Japan had more recently taken:

Idemitsu Sazō said "Return to being Japanese," words that are especially necessary today. Thirty years ago, and now seemingly abnormal. People just chase TV ratings, talk about the importance of diversity, and real Japaneseness has disappeared. Have we already become something other than Japanese? (Tanuma 2017)

Top national politicians also focused on Idemitsu, though almost always Kunioka-as-Idemitsu from the film. Liberal Democratic Party heavyweights like Sugimoto Kazumi and former prime minister Asō Tarō explicitly invoked the film in parliamentary debates, referring to the exemplary Japanese virtues embedded in the nation's business practices and postwar economic growth (respectively, Shūgiin gijiroku 2018, line 376; 2017, line 009). Across a variety of topics, Idemitsu emerged as a reliable figure for narrating and explaining Japanese success.

That conservative figures drew from the pop culture icons currently popular among their supporters is unsurprising, but more unexpected is the way in which Hyakuta's novel—again, a work of fiction, and representing fact only insofar as it draws from Idemitsu's own reports of his life and philosophy—has been used as an expression of something real and substantive, whether in Japanese culture or in Idemitsu's own life, even in scholarly sources. At times, the book's Kunioka looms even larger than the real Idemitsu. Fujimori Kayoko, Japan's leading translator and interpreter of the works of Ayn Rand, puts Hyakuta's *A Man Called Pirate* into conversation with the even more preposterously long Rand novel *Atlas Shrugged*, making the provocative claim that Hyakuta largely translated Objectivism for Japanese readers. The problem, of course, is that Kunioka professes to be committed to more than just money (or to Rand's "rational egoism"), given his sometimes risky behavior in the service of his employees' well-being. Fujimori rationalizes this as a kind of self-interest for mutual benefit, offering the opportunity to make the welcome point that paternalism is about owner self-interest at least as

⁷Data drawn from a search of the *Sankei Shimbun Database*.

much as it is about employee welfare. But this is not exactly what motivates Fujimori to write the piece. Instead, she takes Hyakuta's representations of Japanese culture and beliefs at face value, arguing that because of Kunioka's love for his employees, the novel makes the Objectivist take more "understandable" (*rikaishiyasui*) specifically for Japanese readers. Unlike the innate foreignness of Rand's ruthless individualism, Hyakuta's representation of both the ethical value of labor as well as commitment to a larger community usefully captures what are taken to be undeniably Japanese attributes (Fujimori 2018, 35). In making this point, Fujimori largely sidesteps thorny questions about Kunioka's nationalism and particularly the distinctions widely raised between Kunioka's behavior and an idealized Randian/American capitalism. More to the point, however, her analysis rests on essentialistic claims about Japanese culture that take Hyakuta's depictions to be fundamentally true. While Fujimori recognizes that it is a novelistic treatment of Idemitsu's life, the values that the book expresses are understood to be such accurate claims about Japaneseness that they render Rand's commitment to capitalistic individualism comprehensible to Japanese readers.

Whatever one thinks of Fujimori's argument, she at least treats the book as a novel. More strikingly, three business professors—including two senior Japanese scholars, Kimio Kase (the former president of International University of Japan) and Hitotsubashi's emeritus professor Ikujiro Nonaka (arguably the most prominent business studies scholar in Japan)—use Idemitsu as a key example of "phronetic" business leadership. Drawing from an idea of "practical wisdom," the authors locate this business stance largely in "Eastern traditions" (Kase, González-Cantón, and Nonaka 2014, 2) that problematize the subject-object dichotomy central, they argue, to the rational-choice theory at the heart of classical economics. This kind of juxtaposition of holistic/communitarian/nonbinary/nondichotomous Eastern thought with rigid/individualistic/rational Western thought is nothing new, of course. But in using Idemitsu as an exemplar of phronetic leadership, they offer a long appendix about his life drawn from a business school case study in which Hyakuta's novel is cited repeatedly as it were a historical source, without any notice that it is a work of fiction. Indeed, the appendix even goes so far as to change the fictional name Kunioka Shoten to the real company's name of Idemitsu Kōsan, quoting the fictional Kunioka in interviews featured in the novel as comments from Idemitsu himself.

In its dozens of citations to Hyakuta's novel, the appendix makes descriptive claims not just about what Idemitsu ostensibly did, but also how others (all of them characters in Hyakuta's novel) felt about him. It attests, for example, that "Takechi met Idemitsu and was impressed. To Takechi, Idemitsu looked like a valiant general; in Takechi's eyes, Idemitsu possessed the dignity which only a real soldier could possess [Hyakuta 2012a, 115]" (Kase, González-Cantón, and Nonaka 2014, 249). There was, of course, no Takechi, and while the appendix goes on to describe Takechi's subsequent career and death in 1967, even the book's index lists him as just "Takechi," with no given name. That name would be Kōtarō if it were to stick to the novel, but Takechi was modeled after leading Idemitsu manager Tejima Haruo (Ishimura 2016), whom Hyakuta could not have interviewed and who seems not to have left behind a memoir that, even if reliable, would accurately document his feelings on first meeting Idemitsu. Crafting the character is certainly well within Hyakuta's license as a novelist. The decision in a book by noted and well-published academics to represent a work of fiction as a historical study is interesting in many ways, of course, but perhaps it is most notable for what the authors seem to take as the novel's genuinely truthful lessons about business and about the type of character and cultural context that successful business decisions require. After all, Idemitsu's genius, in this analysis, lies not only in his personal characteristics but also in his ability to embody something distinctive that flows from cultural values he embodies—exactly the point that Hyakuta himself makes repeatedly and emphatically in the novel.

Believably Great Men

Like biopics, biographical fiction is far more representative of the environment in which it is produced than that which it ostensibly details. But to the extent that its effect on audiences has something to do with its basic credibility—a reason that of the two 2012 wide-release films about Abraham Lincoln, Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning *Lincoln* is taken more seriously than Timur

Bekmambetov's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*—artists must grapple with the historical figures they aim to dramatize. And so, even a noted political provocateur like Hyakuta, openly aiming to use a nationalistic figure from Japan's recent past to inspire the blighted Japan of today, or a successful director like Yamazaki, hoping to tell a compelling human drama, has to wrestle with the ambiguities and challenges that his historical model's life presents. Whether readers or viewers believe the sometimes questionable representations of Idemitsu's life is in many ways less important than whether they believe in the values, and the Japaneseness of those values, that Idemitsu purportedly represents. If anything, scholarly attention to Kunioka-as-Idemitsu-as-Japan suggests just how credible the artists' representations of cultural values are. As the real Idemitsu receded from public memory, the potential uses of a fictional Idemitsu who had business vision, who loved his employees, who loved Japan, who could represent Japan, only multiplied in an era of diverse anxieties about the nation's future.

But, of course, among those social changes were views of ideal family relationships that fit poorly with the story of an ambitious male entrepreneur and the self-abnegating woman he professes to love, forcing a series of difficult choices for retelling the story to a wider cinematic audience. The film's box-office failure might suggest that the desire for the emotional catharsis that Idemitsu's story could provide to a wounded, precarious Japan was largely limited to a conservative reading public, or perhaps it had faded in the years following the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster. It might simply have been because cinemagoers found it dull. But the success of Hyakuta's novel and the enthusiastic references to the film by conservative political figures are equally instructive. After all, *A Man Called Pirate's* ability to denote a certain Japaneseness as not only real but also laudable and even essential suggests what it means to be nationally heroic: less the actual and ongoing performance of virtue than the retroactive labeling of behavior as virtuous, particularly when its virtues are taken to be those of the nation. This sifting, grasping, redistributing the actual stuff of history through the streamlined narrative of a character's life in order to tell a story of national rectitude is, of course, its own form of piracy, predictable and even scorned by those who purportedly reject the "great man of history" approach to fiction or filmmaking. That approach is more constraining than history itself, and perhaps more revealing for it.

Acknowledgments. For helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts, the author thanks Chelsea Szendi Schieder, Gill Steel, members of the Leheny PhD Zemi at Waseda University (Lauren Altria, Nina Gamell, Scott Ma, Romeo Marcantuoni, and Petr Sosna), and especially three anonymous reviewers for *The Journal of Asian Studies*, as well as conversations and correspondence with Nakamura Naofumi, Satsuki Takahashi, Dan Wallace, and Joshua Winchell. All remaining errors are the responsibility the author. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP18K01422.

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