

SESSUE HAYAKAWA



Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom

DAISUKE MIYAO

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DAISUKE MIYAO

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In memory of Mitsunori Miyao and Makoto and Kyoko Shibasaki

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ABBREVIATIONS

EH: Exhibitor's Herald

ETR: Exhibitor's Trade Review

MPN: Motion Picture News

MPW: Moving Picture World

NYDM: New York Dramatic Mirror

SHE: Sessue Hayakawa: Locke Collection Envelope 659,
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts,
Robinson Locke Collection

SHS: Sessue Hayakawa: *Scrapbook*,
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts,
Robinson Locke Collection

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INTRODUCTION

Sessue Hayakawa. The greatest movie star in this century. . . White women were willing to give themselves to a Japanese man. . . . When Sessue was getting out of his limousine in front of a theater of a premiere showing, he grimaced a little because there was a puddle. Then, dozens of female fans surrounding his car fell over one another to spread their fur coats at his feet. . . . Valentino was very popular, too, but I think Sessue's popularity was greater. . . . Never again will there be a star like Sessue.

— MIYATAKE TOYO

These words of Miyatake Toyo, the renowned Japanese photographer in Los Angeles in the early 1900s, are astonishing because many popular audiences of cinema remember the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa (1886–1973) for his Oscar-nominated role as a frowning Japanese military officer in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957). No matter how exaggerated Miyatake's words, they indicate that Hayakawa was very popular among white female audiences in the United States, in spite of his Japanese nationality. A film trade journal, *Wid's Daily*, stated in 1919 that Hayakawa had “a particularly large following among women” by the late 1910s.¹ A Japanese film magazine, *Katsudo Zasshi*, noted in 1922 that Hayakawa had “a mouth that all women love. When he opens his mouth and shows his crystal-like teeth, he becomes very attractive.”² That is, Hayakawa had the status of a “matinee idol,” whose career was “perceived as depending upon female fans.”³ Hayakawa himself was once quoted by an American journalist as saying, “My criente [sic] is women. They like [sic] me to be strong and violent.”⁴

In 1917, a film fan magazine, *Motion Picture*, published a letter from a female fan addressed to Hayakawa:

O land of quaint and fascinating people,
 Here's to thy son, who plays so well his art
 That we take side with him in each creation,
 Tho villain, friend or lover be that part.
 Quiet he is, and smiles but very seldom,
 Unerring in his mastery of the art;
 The silent drama speaks in every picture—
 When Sessue comes he leads, whate'er the part.

KATE MAY YOUNG, 842 W. 63d St., Seattle, Wash.⁵

This poem, especially the line “Tho villain, friend or lover be that part,” indicates a (supposedly white) female fan’s enthusiastic but ambivalent fascination with the actor from Japan, despite the fact that Hayakawa’s attraction was obviously difficult for her to define. Was he villainous and evil? Was he an alien monster? Was he an example of the yellow peril, the pseudo-scientific discourse of the time among middle-class Americans who feared a Japanese imperialistic invasion of the United States? In Cecil B. DeMille’s acclaimed film *The Cheat* (1915), Hayakawa was a sensationally villainous Japanese man. Was he friendly and gentle? Was he the representation of the American melting pot? Was he the model minority in American society? In his star vehicles that followed *The Cheat*, Hayakawa frequently played a Japanese or Asian immigrant hero who was eager to assimilate himself to American culture. Or, was he a good lover? In his star vehicles, Hayakawa’s Asian hero often sacrificed himself for a white American woman whom he loved. Yet, in the end, his ethnicity often prevented him from being united with the one he loved. Did he become cruel when his wish was not fulfilled? Did he become erotic, instead, and seduce the woman he loved? What about Hayakawa himself as a person? Was he a villain, friend, or lover in early Hollywood and in American society as a whole? Was he an ideal, or lovable, product as an ideally Orientalized film star at the very beginning of the star system? Was he a villainous alien rebel against the emerging film industry with his unprecedented star image and his extraordinary acting skills? Was he an outsider of the industry and eventually excluded from it? Was he a representative of Japan who strategically embodied exotic Japaneseness for foreign viewers in order to secure a position in international political and economic relations? Or, was he a friendly Westernized Asian immigrant, a representative of Japanese immigrants who are willing to adapt to American society? No matter how difficult it was to define Hayakawa’s star image, according to the film critic DeWitt

Bodeen, “the effect of Hayakawa on American women was even more electric than Valentino’s. It involved fiercer tones of masochism as well as a latent female urge to experience sex with a beautiful but savage man of another race.”⁶ Both ethnic matinee idols, Hayakawa (in the 1910s to the early 1920s) and Rudolph Valentino (in the 1920s), redefined the imagery of a masculine star in new ways that appealed to female fans. The (in)famous Valentino cult was created in the 1920s via female-oriented media in consumer culture, such as women’s magazines, fan magazines, plays, and popular literature, which were widely accessible to a broad segment of the female population.⁷ The feminine quality of Valentino’s star image could have had a subversive effect against “the socially imposed dominance-submission hierarchy of gender roles, dissolving subject-object dichotomies into erotic reciprocity.”⁸ Hayakawa’s star image, which seemed to combine masculinity and femininity, and its tremendous success preceded the Valentino cult.

In the mid-1910s, Hayakawa suddenly emerged at the very beginning of the star system in Hollywood and rapidly became a superstar. As early as May 1916, only five months after *The Cheat* was released, Hayakawa was ranked number one in the *Chicago Tribune* popular star contests.⁹ In 1917, the Madison Theater at Broadway and Grand Circus Park in Detroit juxtaposed Hayakawa in *The Call of the East* (George Melford, 1917) with other big stars, Charlie Chaplin (*The Adventurer*) and William S. Hart (*Double Crossed*), in its advertisement of “A Mammoth Triple Feature Program” (see fig. 1). Hayakawa had thus by 1917 achieved star status equal to that of Chaplin and Hart.¹⁰

Hayakawa’s popularity was not limited to the United States. In Germany, in 1920, the critic Claire Goll named Hayakawa as one of the three “American” actors “most famous and most celebrated throughout the world,” along with Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Charlie Chaplin. Goll describes how sensational Hayakawa was to German audiences: “Wholly spiritual is the great Japanese actor, Sessue Hayakawa. He knows no trivial little feelings, but only primal sensation. One finds no trace here of an art sullied by civilization. When he portrays sorrow, his pain is of ancient dimensions. When he plays the lover, his smile has the grace and aroma of lotus and cherry blossoms. As the avenger, his body explodes in exotic wilderness. Whoever sees him knows everything about Japan, everything of the beauty of the mystical East.”¹¹ In Russia, in 1922, Sergei Yutkevich and Sergei Eisenstein named Hayakawa as one of the “wonderful actors” in America, with William S. Hart, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Roscoe Arbuckle, and Charlie Chaplin.¹²



1 A triple billing featuring Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart, and Sessue Hayakawa, at the Madison Theater, Detroit. Motion Picture News 16.20 (17 November 1917): 3435.

French audiences were even more enthusiastic. The drama critic Louis Delluc named Hayakawa and Charlie Chaplin, “whatever film they appear in,” as “two expressions of beauty” and “the two masterpieces.”¹³ In *Le Film*, on 6 August 1917, Delluc wrote:

Of Hayakawa, one can say nothing: he is a phenomenon. Explanations here are out of place. . . . Once more I am not speaking of talent. I consider a certain kind of actor, especially him, as a natural force and his face as a poetic work whose reason for being does not concern me when my avidity for beauty finds there expected chord or reflection. . . . It is not his cat-like, implacable cruelty, his mysterious brutality, his hatred of anyone who resists, or his contempt for anyone who submits; that is not what impresses us, and yet that is all we can talk about. . . . And especially his strangely drawn smile of childlike ferocity, not really the ferocity of a puma or jaguar, for then it would no longer be ferocity. The beauty of Sessue Hayakawa is painful. Few things in the cinema reveal to us, as the lights and silence of this mask do, that there really are *alone* beings. I well believe that all lonely people, and they are numerous, will discover their own resourceless despair in the intimate melancholy of this savage Hayakawa.¹⁴

Cecil Sorel, a renowned actress of the time, also praised Hayakawa's acting and compared it to classic arts: "Silence is the sum total of the emotions. Leonardo da Vinci expressed this in his 'Joconde,' Michelangelo in his 'Pensur,' and, in our day, in my own realm of the arts, . . . the Japanese, Sessue Hayakawa, condenses in his oblique gaze a whole inner tumult too great for expression."¹⁵

Delluc's claim (and Sorel's comparison between Hayakawa's acting and premodern arts) could be located within the primitivist dichotomy between the civilized West and the premodern East. Delluc insisted that Hayakawa's "beauty" came from "his race and virile style" and connected his "beauty" and acting skill with "a natural force." He even called Hayakawa "childlike" and "savage."¹⁶ Yet, no matter how deeply French intellectuals' views on Hayakawa resided in primitivism and Orientalism, the impact of Hayakawa upon the French film culture was tremendous. Hayakawa's acting style inspired French intellectuals to develop the concept of *photogenie*, the unique aesthetic qualities that motion picture photography brings to the subject it films. The *photogenie* later became a significant theoretical basis of the French impressionist movement, filmmaking that "displayed a fascination with pictorial beauty and an interest in intense psychological exploration."¹⁷

Even when Hayakawa lost his popularity in the United States in the 1920s, French audiences enthusiastically embraced Hayakawa and made his French debut film *La Bataille* (*The Danger Line*, E. E. Violet, 1923), critically and financially successful. In April of the same year, 1923, when Hayakawa's star vehicle *The Swamp* (Colin Campbell, 1921) was released in France as *Le Devin du faubourg* [The neighborhood fortune-teller], the renowned film director René Clair, famous for his fantasy films, such as *Paris qui dort* (*The Crazy Ray*, 1924), and his experimental work, *Entr'acte* (1925), passionately praised Hayakawa:

Everyone knows Sessue Hayakawa's talent, that powerful sobriety he revealed to us in *The Cheat*. Here Bessie Love seems to be inspired by him and worthy of that inspiration. Her frightened eyes, her curt gestures, her sad pout, remind us of the best moments of Lillian Gish. . . . That is where the cinema seems to me to have some advantage over the theater. . . . The expression of a silent face, taken in isolation, can be as beautiful appearing in a bad film as in a masterpiece. Working with mediocre and false material, actors like Sessue Hayakawa and Bessie Love are able to evoke beauty and truth.¹⁸

Consequently, Hayakawa even stayed in France throughout the period of World War II.

The popularity of Hayakawa is remarkable when one considers the fact that there were some popular non-Caucasian actors and actresses in the silent era, but they had mostly supporting roles as foils for white leading characters. From the early days in Hollywood, even when major characters were supposed to be Asians, Caucasian stars usually played the roles and displayed artificial Asian features (“yellow face”). Hayakawa was the one and only non-Caucasian star of the period. Hayakawa’s stardom occupied an extraordinarily unique space in the racial and cultural map of early Hollywood. A Paramount Pictures ad in film trade journals in June 1917 noted that “Sessue Hayakawa has brought to the American motion picture the mysterious, the magic and mystic of Japan. No foreign-born actor of a generation has won so many admirers as this brilliant young Japanese, whose interpretations of the problems of the Oriental in Occidental lands has given him a unique place in the motion picture firmament.”¹⁹ Hayakawa was one of the first and most unusual stars of silent cinema.

Hayakawa’s stardom was all the more astonishing because it went against the sociopolitical discourse of the time on Japan and the Japanese people. The period from the 1910s to the 1920s witnessed the rapid increase of anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States along with a xenophobic atmosphere, especially after World War I. Starting in the Pacific states, anti-Japanese movements developed against Japan’s growing military and political power. Such anti-Japanese feelings were crystallized in the movements against immigrants from Japan. In 1920, the Japanese Exclusion League of California was organized. In November 1922, the Federal Supreme Court’s *Ozawa v. United States* decision legally defined Japanese people as “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and denied naturalization to Japanese people.²⁰ Then, in 1924, the new immigration act passed by the U.S. Congress prohibited the entry of “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” thus targeting Japanese immigrants. It is incredible that Hayakawa, in spite of his Japanese nationality, became a superstar under such sociopolitical conditions.

Simultaneously, however, the popularity of Hayakawa seemed to go along with that of Japanese culture. Alongside Japan’s rapid sociopolitical and military modernization, Japan’s image of cultural refinement, especially in the form of *Japonisme*, the European vogue in art and style, fascinated American women. Since the late nineteenth century, the penetration of Japanese goods into the American market brought about a “Japan craze.”²¹ Japanese

art and culture were not only considered exotic but also high art because they were imports of European vogue. Especially after the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia and the other international exhibitions that followed, where many Americans made their first contact with Japanese art and culture, high-class Japanese art and culture became gradually popularized among those of the middle class and fitted to their taste. In 1910, for instance, *Moving Picture World*, a film trade journal, remarked on the popularity of Japanese objects among “the American people”: “The affection of the American people for the Japanese, then, springs from the fact that there is a sentimental link between the two nations. . . . Japanese art, Japanese life and Japanese costumes appeal to the occidental mind for many reasons. The grace, the charm, the poetry of Japan never fail to please us of the West. . . . We love our America, but oh you Japan!!!!”²² Because of his Japanese nationality, Hayakawa had the potential to portray an image of cultural refinement that fascinated many Americans. Hayakawa’s worldwide stardom thus existed in the midst of the dual identity that Japanese people were gaining in international political and cultural relations.

Even though it was unique and extremely complex, the career of Hayakawa has barely received critical attention in film history and was almost completely ignored in star studies. Books on the general history of film rarely mention Hayakawa. There are only a few studies focusing on his career, but most of them are speculative. Was Hayakawa’s career so bizarre and paradoxical that it has been untouchable and hidden in a Pandora’s box?

In these limited numbers of writings on Hayakawa, he has largely been described as a screen villain. Almost all of the obituaries of Hayakawa in November 1973 called him a villain, most likely because of his role as a ruthless Japanese officer in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and his sensational image in *The Cheat*, in which Hayakawa’s character brands a white woman’s naked shoulder. For instance, the *New York Post* stated, “He [Hayakawa] was noted for his silent screen roles as a sinister Oriental during a bygone era of stereotypes.”²³ However, his roles and his star image in silent films were not limited to only one category but were surprisingly varied and ambivalent.

How was Hayakawa able to become a movie star in the second decade of the twentieth century? How did early Hollywood studios construct Hayakawa’s stardom in their formative period as an industry? What did Hayakawa think of his star image? How did the audiences in the United States, in Japan, and in Europe respond to Hayakawa’s star image? The study of “early cinema,” not only as a period term (approximately between 1895 and 1917 in

the United States and Europe) but also as a critical category (films as well as media intertexts, industry, and market), emphasizes the practice of exhibition in film culture as well as that of production. In particular, it highlights the experience of early cinema in its intimate relation to a wide range of social and cultural practices, such as the vaudeville theater, the amusement park, shopping arcades, and so forth, to envisage the cinema in a broader landscape of modern life in the street and in the theater, in the city and in the country, and, as the historian Zhen Zhang insists, “in the West as well as in many other parts of the world.”²⁴ Both at the stages of production and exhibition, Hayakawa’s stardom in early cinema was entangled with many contradictory issues around gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nation, which were spread in the complex network of social and cultural practices and experiences in modern life in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

In his influential work in star studies, Richard Dyer writes that all stars embody a tension, or a paradox. Dyer defines a star as a “structured polysemy” and explains the term as “the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they [stars] embody and the attempt to structure them so that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others masked or displaced.” Dyer believes that a star, as a “real” individual “existence” in the world, succeeds in reconciling the contradictions through “magical synthesis.”²⁵

Yet, was Hayakawa a “real” individual “existence” in the world who succeeded in reconciling such various contradictions through “magical synthesis”? Hayakawa’s career in silent cinema reveals that stardom is not a stable form of synthesis but an ongoing process of negotiation, a transnational negotiation in particular. This process of cross-cultural negotiation sometimes synthetically reconciles contradictions of images, but in many cases, especially in global contexts, it often enhances the contradictions. Cinema has been a transnational cultural form from the early period of its history. As the film scholar Miriam Hansen argues, “To write the international history of classical American cinema, therefore, is a matter of tracing not just its mechanisms of standardization and hegemony but also the diversity of ways in which this cinema was translated and reconfigured in both local and trans-local contexts of reception.”²⁶ Hayakawa’s stardom had different meanings and modes of reception in different geographical and historical sites. It did not necessarily own a synthetic power over various contradictions but kept maintaining ambivalences.

Hayakawa’s star image was initially formed in the early period of the American film industry. Then, Hayakawa’s stardom was appropriated and

articulated within various and contradictory political, ideological, and cultural contexts in the United States, Japan, and Europe during the period of public circulation. Hayakawa's stardom was the site of an infinite struggle between white American (and European) cultural domination and Japanese (and European) cultural resistance for control of representations of Japan. Hayakawa himself struggled within the Hollywood film industry that produced his films, while at the same time his stardom was rearticulated in a continuous cross-cultural dialogue in distribution and exhibition. Thus, there was a transnational war of images in Hayakawa's star persona among Hayakawa himself, the filmmakers, and the various audiences.

First, what was the mechanism that initially formed Hayakawa's stardom at the point of production in the United States? In the mid- to late 1910s, the Hollywood film industry was facing two interrelated structural transformations: the move toward production efficiency and the emergence of the star system. The star system exploited acting personalities as commodities with specific images in order to enhance audiences' horizon of expectations in a rationalized manner. Simultaneously, the Hollywood film industry was moving toward the refinement of motion pictures in order to appeal to broader middle-class audiences.²⁷ How did the Hollywood film industry create Hayakawa's star persona at the very beginning of the star system in accordance with the middle-class discourse?

The Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company devised a specific strategy as to how to publicize and promote Hayakawa's films and control Hayakawa's star image. What Lasky exploited most was Japan's movable middle-ground position in a racial and cultural hierarchy. The image of Japan was caught between the white and the nonwhite, between "uniformity" and "difference," and "between the pull of modernization and the antiquity of native traditions" in a racial and cultural hierarchy in American middle-class discourse in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth.²⁸

Between the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 and the U.S. Supreme Court's *Ozawa v. United States* decision in 1922, a certain discourse existed that culturally and racially differentiated the Japanese from other nonwhites. The popularity of *Japonisme* and Japan's rapid sociopolitical and military modernization and Westernization served to picture Japanese culture as "more advanced" than other "primitive" or "exotic" ones, and, simultaneously, the Japanese race as "closer" to Caucasian. Thus, racial imagery and sociocultural imagery went hand in hand in the case of Japan in the early twentieth century.

Japanese art was regarded as echoing the ancient Greeks through its embodiment of an eternal, universal “spirit of antique time.”²⁹ William Elliot Griffis, in his article in *North American Review* in 1913, juxtaposed the Japanese people, who “transformed their imported Buddhism as well as their exotic politics and social ideals,” with the Greeks, who “transfused the simple, spiritual ethics of Jesus into an elaborate theology,” and the Romans, who “turned it into an ecclesiastical discipline.” Griffis continued: “It is as unscientific to call the Japanese ‘Mongolians’ as to say that Englishmen are Jutes or that Americans are Angles. . . . Their [Japanese] history, language, ethnology, physiology, religion, culture, tastes, habits, and psychology show that instead of being ‘Mongolians’ they are the most un-Mongolian people in Asia. There is very little Chinese blood in the Japanese composite and no connection between languages. Physically the two peoples are at many points astonishingly unlike.”³⁰

This movable middle-ground positioning of Japan in the racial and cultural hierarchy was most typically observed in the world’s fairs of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, where careful racial and cultural classifications were visually presented to naturalize imperialist thoughts. Especially in the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, which was held in Chicago, Japan was placed at an “ambivalent and twisted” position between the “civilized” European countries and the other “primitive” cultures.³¹ The fair’s hierarchical concept that connected culture and race was most symbolically visualized by the dichotomized layout of the fair ground: the White City, rows of white colossal monuments based on Greek and Roman classicism, where the modern technologies, products, and arts of European and North American nations were exhibited, and the subordinating adjacent Midway Plaisance, where “primitive” peoples and cultures were displayed for exotic entertainment.³²

The Japanese exhibit, Ho-o-den, or the Phoenix Hall, was located on the Wooded Island in the Lagoon, a small piece of land near the Fine Arts Building in the White City, in spite of the exotic display of Japanese culture that was obviously different from Greek and Roman classicism or the technological products of the European and North American nations. The racial and cultural position of Japan, located not in the Midway Plaisance, not within but near the White City, typified the middle position between the “civilized” nations and the “primitive” regions.

According to the official guidebook of the exhibition, “Recognizing the radical differences between Japanese art and that of the western world, the

authorities of the Art Department of the Columbian Exposition did not bind Japanese art exhibitors to the rigid classification established for other nations, but urged that the exhibit be made thoroughly national in character—exactly such an exhibit as would be formed under a classification devised for an art exhibition to be held in Japan.”³³ The American studies scholar Mari Yoshihara argues that this passage suggests “the authorities’ recognition of Japanese arts as having high enough standards to be included among those of western civilizations, while, at the same time, containing it in a separate space which allowed for a distance between it and its western counterparts.”³⁴ Even when the American people recognized Japan’s cultural adherence to the Western standard of refinement in its art and craftwork, they simultaneously had a “thirst for exotica” and were unwilling to give Japan more than honorary white racial status.

The Japanese government, however, self-consciously utilized this movable middle-ground status in the racial and cultural hierarchy in order to secure its position in international relations rather than trying to show a modernized and therefore Westernized sociopolitical and cultural status.³⁵ The Western recognition of the beauty of Japanese art had an important impact on the formation of Japanese national identity.³⁶ Japan chose to display not the modernized Japan of the present but the traditional, classical artifacts from Japan’s past because it was “well aware of the Western gaze which valorized the ‘authentic’ artifacts from the Oriental past.”³⁷ At the same time, Japan “longed to learn and appropriate the Western vision for itself, gazing at its own neighbors with imperial and colonial eyes.”³⁸ Positioning itself in a middle ground between Europe and America on the one hand and Asia on the other, Japan was voluntarily, as well as involuntarily, trapped in the middle of a Eurocentric evolutionary ladder in the racial and cultural hierarchy.³⁹

Japan’s movable middle-ground position in a racial and cultural hierarchy also had to do with legal racialization of Asians in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. While Hayakawa was achieving superstardom, racial inassimilability of Asians was gradually but steadily being legalized. In an ongoing process, Asians were gradually categorized as “nonwhite” through various acts of Asian exclusion until the 1940s, for the purposes of American national formation and for the “construction of whiteness” and “a homogeneous citizenry.”⁴⁰ The sequence of laws in 1882, 1917, 1924, and 1934 that excluded immigrants from China, India, Japan, and the Philippines consistently racialized each national origin group as “nonwhite.” Following the Chi-

nese precedent, the legal racialization of Japanese as nonwhite “aliens ineligible for citizenship” was completed by the 1922 Ozawa case. Yet, until the early 1920s, Japanese people were not legally racialized and defined as “non-white” by immigration laws. Japanese people had been able to move around in the middle ground of a racial hierarchy until the early 1920s.

Hayakawa’s star image, initially formed at the Lasky Company, strongly fit into the popular imaginary and legal movable middle-ground position of Japan in this racial and cultural hierarchy. Particularly, Hayakawa’s image, which positioned him in the middle ground, was visualized with regard to the ideological structure of Americanism. Under the conditions of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and increased immigration, middle-class Americans prompted the nationwide “Americanization Movement.” Hollywood studios made Hayakawa’s star image symbolize successful assimilation into Euro-American culture. Through his display of the American way of life, Hayakawa became a representative of the model minority in the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society who attained success in a legitimate industry without threatening the current sociopolitical and economic system or the middle-class sense of values.

In his star vehicles, Hayakawa’s characters become sympathetic because they try to reform their traditional lifestyles to fit into the American way of life and to obey American laws and follow American customs. Or, they become heroic when they sacrifice themselves for white American women and maintain the patriarchal family system. In magazine articles, Hayakawa’s lifestyle was publicized as being Americanized on the one hand, and the uniqueness of Hayakawa as a Japanese actor was emphasized on the other. Yet, this Japaneseness of Hayakawa was safely domesticated within the American middle-class cultural discourse on Japan. The embodiment of *Japonisme*, with its “civilized” high-art connotations, was considered valuable for product differentiation in the star system and effectively connected Hayakawa’s star image to the refined cultural image that was appropriate for middle-class audiences. Thus, Hayakawa’s star image was formed as a complex mixture of Americanization and Japaneseness: the middle ground between “civilized” white and “primitive” nonwhite, between “West” and “East.”

Second, what was the mechanism of the rearticulation of Hayakawa’s star image in transnational contexts? Lasky fit Hayakawa’s Japanese star image strategically within a certain standard for the imagination of middle-class American audiences. Yet, Japanese spectators both in the United States and in Japan had ambivalent attitudes toward Hayakawa’s stardom, an achieve-

ment “made in the U.S.A.” They were often dismayed by the result and protested against Hayakawa’s representation of Japan often in the light of authenticity. They criticized Hayakawa for appearing in anti-Japanese films that were considered as distorting actual Japanese national and cultural characteristics. They called Hayakawa *hi-kokumin*, an insult to the nation, or a national traitor.

At the same time, they praised Hayakawa for his star image, which had a universal appeal well beyond Japanese cultural boundaries. Japanese immigrants in the United States, who had been challenging anti-Japanese movements, tried to utilize Hayakawa’s stardom in Japanese immigrants’ identity politics. Across the Pacific, Japanese intellectuals and government officials, who were also enthusiastic viewers of foreign films, tried to reconstruct Hayakawa’s stardom for their own political or nationalist concerns. They highly valued Hayakawa’s films for their popularity in international markets and nationalistically praised Hayakawa as an ideal representative of the Japanese people. They even called Hayakawa the “Ambassador of the nation.”⁴¹ Since the 1860s, the Japanese government had adopted a modernization policy. Particularly after World War I, Japan tried to participate in world politics and economies as a modern nation. In the course of this effort, Hayakawa’s American stardom was incorporated into Japan’s modernity in a complicated manner. For instance, two completely different ways of appreciating Hayakawa’s acting style simultaneously came to exist. In one case, a Japanese film magazine that praised Hayakawa’s acting style for its fully utilized pantomimic gestures and facial expressions simultaneously acclaimed Hayakawa’s “lack of moving facial muscle to tell tragic love stories with his two Eastern eyes,” simply translating articles from American film magazines and accepting their views.⁴² While Hayakawa’s acting style was highly valued for its Americanized aspect, the rather stereotypical view of Japanese culture that was observed, or fictionalized, by American filmmakers and audiences also became an integral part of the Japanese reception of Hayakawa’s stardom.

Thus, Hayakawa’s stardom functioned as a site of transnational conflicts and negotiations, especially between the United States and Japan. It appeared in a continuing process of cross-cultural dialogue among filmmakers, various audiences, and the actor himself. During the period from the 1910s to the 1920s, Hollywood became a global center of film production and promotion. However, in the context of the globalization of film culture, Hayakawa’s stardom was formed, consumed, and reconfigured in diverse ways within the struggle to define and control the cultural, racial, and national images

of Japan on the part of white America and within the setting of Japanese cultural resistance. Not only did Hayakawa embody American stereotypical depictions of Japanese people, as well as represent a model minority who was successfully assimilated into American society, he also led Japanese spectators to question, “What is Japanese?” Hayakawa’s transnational stardom revealed the volatile intersections between the Japanese and (white) American cultures.

The phenomenon of Sessue Hayakawa’s stardom emerged suddenly. In late December 1915, a film made at the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company and a Japanese actor in it shocked film spectators in the United States, Europe, and Japan. The film was *The Cheat*. The actor was Sessue Hayakawa. Chapter 1 of this book describes how Hayakawa became an overnight sensation through his fully stereotypical screen image of a Japanese man in *The Cheat*. Chapter 2 then goes back in time and discusses Hayakawa’s pre-superstar roles in films about Japan and Japanese people made at the New York Motion Picture Company (NYMPC) under the renowned producer Thomas H. Ince in 1914–15. What was the nature of the cultural discourses toward Japan when Hayakawa entered the film business? Key terms will be Japanese Taste, the middle-class fascination with Japanese artifacts and culture, and the yellow peril, the middle-class fear of Japanese imperialist expansion and Japanese immigrants.

Ince was making films with Japanese subjects, which had certain popularity among American audiences who appreciated other cultural forms with the same subjects: novels, opera, and theatrical dramas. Chapter 2 analyzes Hayakawa’s debut film *O Mimi San* (Reginald Barker, 1914) with regard to the discourse of Japanese Taste and in reference to the intertext of *The Mikado*, or *The Town of Titipu*, a popular light opera with Japanese subjects. Then, chapter 3 examines how *The Wrath of the Gods* (Barker, 1914), one of the first big spectacular productions, or sensational feature films, uses melodramatic imagination to construct an archetypal narrative between East and West and how Japanese actors were exploited in such a film made in early Hollywood. Chapter 4 analyzes *The Typhoon* (Barker, 1914) in reference to the relationship between the discourse of the yellow peril and the spy film genre, one of the first popular film genres in which Japan was a favorite subject matter. Chapter 5 discusses Hayakawa’s Native American films in terms of the issues of racial masquerade and racial hierarchy.

Part 2 of this book deals with the strategy of the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company to form Hayakawa's stardom. How did the early Hollywood film industry invest its stars with images that were fraught with certain sociopolitical and cultural conditions? How did Lasky draw out Hayakawa's own screen persona from the mere cultural stereotypic roles of Japanese people in order to establish Hayakawa's star status? Lasky took a double-barreled strategy that would make Hayakawa heroic, sympathetic, and assimilated enough to become a star while keeping his nonwhite persona safely distanced from white middle-class Americans.

Lasky had roughly four strategies to form Hayakawa's stardom. First, Lasky emphasized the Americanized characteristics of Hayakawa's (and his characters') personas (obedience to American laws, assimilation to the American way of life, and so forth). Second, in Hayakawa's star vehicles, Lasky resorted to melodramatic structure, the clear distinction between good and evil, and the motif of self-sacrifice for white women and white American families. Third, Lasky fully utilized the political conditions of World War I, the allied relationship between the United States and Japan in particular. Fourth, Lasky made clear the aspect of refinement in Hayakawa's image, especially his embodying of Japanese Taste, typified by his acting skill and manifested in his performances. All these tactics were mainly meant to heighten Hayakawa's (and his characters') racial and cultural status beyond that of other nonwhites to the middle-ground position, but not necessarily to equal that of white American characters.

Examining Lasky's strategy of Americanizing Hayakawa's star image, chapter 6 traces the ephemeral discourses of white patriarchal hegemony in American culture and illuminates how the representational means—the film culture—maintained and consolidated dominant sociopolitical and cultural discourses. This chapter reveals the ideological structure of an American pluralism that mobilized a sense of shared American community and shows that films made in Hollywood at that time functioned as a means of maintaining crucial cultural myths about American assimilative capacities.

With a close textual analysis of *Forbidden Paths* (Robert T. Thornby, 1917), chapter 7 examines the melodramatic structure and thematic motif of self-sacrifice in Hayakawa's star vehicles. The motif of self-sacrifice marked Hayakawa's characters as the moral center of the narrative and at the same time depicted them as ultimately inassimilable to white American society.

Chapter 8 turns to Hayakawa's villainous roles. In *The Soul of Kura San*

(Edward J. LeSaint, 1916) and *The Call of the East* (George H. Melford, 1917), Lasky provided Hayakawa with sympathetic and moralistic victim roles despite his villainy.

Chapter 9 discusses the influence of World War I upon Hayakawa's star image. Lasky integrated the allied situation between Japan and the United States after the latter's declaration of participation in World War I into Hayakawa's star vehicles.

Chapter 10 demonstrates how Hayakawa's lifestyle was publicized in fan magazines as overtly Americanized, while the uniqueness of Hayakawa as a Japanese actor was emphasized at the same time. Hayakawa's Japaneseness was codified within the middle-class discourse of Japanese Taste, which effectively connected Hayakawa's star image to the refined cultural image.

In 1918, when his contract with Lasky expired, Hayakawa established his own production company, the Haworth Pictures Corporation. Part 3 of this book documents the establishment of Haworth; this period marked the clear beginning of a triangular conflict in Hayakawa's stardom, consisting of a war of images. In this war there were three elements: cultural stereotypes of Japan versus Hayakawa's star image, which had been formed and popularized at Lasky, versus the identity politics Hayakawa took on as a Japanese entrepreneur at his own company. Part 3 traces how Hayakawa struggled with the horizon of expectations in regard to his star image, not only from American audiences but also from the newly founded film distribution company Robertson-Cole.

An Americanized Japanese image was so successfully created for Hayakawa at Lasky that it set up an entrenched assumption about Hayakawa's star persona. Yet, reactions from Japanese spectators made Hayakawa realize the need to re-create, or at least to adjust, his star image by balancing his already established star image for American audiences with his reputation among Japanese spectators both in the United States and in Japan. Hayakawa understood the relationship among his national identity, his cinematized cultural stereotype, and his star image, as well as how the market encoded his racial and cultural identity in the form of marketing, reviews, and audience reception. As a result, Hayakawa had to negotiate between the star image created by Lasky to appeal to American audiences and a more realistic image of Japanese people. The demands of authenticity from both American and Japanese audiences suggest the contradictions and slippage between the American stereotypical image of Japan, the "real" self-image of Japan, and the actual condition of Japan at a certain historical moment. One of the criteria that

Hayakawa had to use at Haworth was not to represent the reality of Japan at that time, but to conform to the ideal image that Japanese immigrants in the United States and Japanese spectators liked to convey of Japan.

Hayakawa's attempt to reconstitute his star image at Haworth was a product of "triple consciousness." W. E. B. Du Bois uses the concept of "double consciousness" regarding African American people's self image and identity politics: "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."⁴³ Part 3 demonstrates that there were at least two "other" groups that influenced the course that Haworth would take when Hayakawa re-created his own star image, in addition to Hayakawa himself: American audiences and Japanese spectators.

Chapter 11 analyzes the first two films made at Haworth: *His Birthright* (William Worthington, 1918), a feature film, and *Banzai* (1918), a short promotional film for the Liberty Loan Campaign during World War I, in order to examine Hayakawa's intended direction at his own company.

Chapter 12 illustrates the continuous negotiation between Hayakawa and Robertson-Cole, which ended up depriving Hayakawa of his authority over his star image, through a close analysis of three of Hayakawa's star vehicles, *The Dragon Painter* (Worthington, 1919), *The Tong Man* (Worthington, 1919), and *An Arabian Knight* (Charles Swickard, 1920).

Not only at Lasky but also at Robertson-Cole, legitimate acting was the essential element of Hayakawa's stardom. What distinguishes Hayakawa as an actor from his co-stars? Chapter 13 focuses on the actual quality of Hayakawa's acting and examines the status of Hayakawa within the trend of acting styles in the early Hollywood film industry.

Hayakawa's popularity declined under the nativist conditions in the United States in the early 1920s. Hayakawa's farewell to the American film industry resulted from this change of social discourse on race and immigrants, particularly on Japan. Chapter 14 documents the final days of Hayakawa's stardom in Hollywood.

Hayakawa's American-made star image evoked different meanings in Japanese communities in the United States and in Japan. In the United States, Japanese audiences used Hayakawa's image for the purpose of constructing their identity politics; in Japan, audiences wanted to regard Hayakawa's image as an affirmation of Japan's modernization policy. Part 4 of this book examines these multiple modes of reception of Hayakawa's stardom from a cross-cultural perspective.

Chapter 15 first examines how Japanese communities in the United States,

which were fighting against the nativist anti-Japanese movement in the United States, reacted to Hayakawa's stardom. Then, this chapter illustrates how Japanese spectators responded to Hayakawa's American stardom. Japanese reception of Hayakawa's stardom had a complicated relationship with the issues of nationalism, Americanization, and modernization. Japanese spectators, especially intellectuals, intensely felt the need for modernization of Japanese cinema, but their attitudes were extremely ambivalent toward Americanization and nationalism with regard to the representation of Japan in mainstream media. *Jun'eigageki undo*, or the Pure Film Movement, the intellectual attempt to modernize Japanese cinema (not only the practice of production but also that of exhibition) by way of adopting Western film culture, was a tension-ridden process of negotiating between cosmopolitanism, which regarded film as a potential "universal language" or visual Esperanto, and nationalism.⁴⁴ This tension had a huge impact upon the Japanese reception of Hayakawa's stardom and vice versa: Hayakawa's star image also enhanced this tension.

Hayakawa's standardized star image and the ambivalent modes of reception of it continued in his post-stardom career in the era of talking pictures. Examining *La Bataille, Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931), *Atarshiki tsuchi* (*Die Tochter des Samurai*, Arnold Fanck and Itami Mansaku, 1937), *Tokyo Joe* (Stuart Heisler, 1949), *Three Came Home* (Jean Negulesco, 1950), and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, among others, the epilogue discusses the relationship between the lingering star image of Hayakawa, its reception, and the issues of nation and nationalism in Japan and in the United States.

ONE



Emperor, Buddhist, Spy, or Indian

The Pre-Star Period of Sessue Hayakawa (1914–15)

A STAR IS BORN

The Transnational Success of *The Cheat* and Its Race and Gender Politics

On December 13, 1915, a film titled *The Cheat*, produced at the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, and starring Fannie Ward, a renowned stage actress in New York and London, was released in the United States.¹ *The Cheat* soon achieved big box office success² and opened a gate for the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa to become a “full-fledged star.”³ Before the success of *The Cheat*, Hayakawa had already appeared in many films, but it was *The Cheat* that paved the way for him to achieve superstardom.

In *The Cheat*, a rich Japanese art dealer on Long Island, Hishuru Tori (Sessue Hayakawa), offers money to Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward), a white middle-class woman, who has invested money from the Red Cross Fund and eventually lost it, in exchange for her body. When Edith tries to return his money after her husband’s success in the stock market, Tori assaults her and brutally brands his mark on her shoulder. However, Edith fights back and shoots Tori in the shoulder. Knowing everything, Edith’s husband decides to be arrested on a charge of attempted murder in order to save her name. During the trial, Edith confesses the truth, and the excited court audience attacks Tori in the end.

Not very many reviewers and audiences were impressed by the film’s leading actress. What fascinated them most was the supporting Japanese actor, Sessue Hayakawa. The *New York Times* insisted, “Miss Ward might learn something to help her fulfill her destiny as a great tragedienne of the screen by observing the man who acted the Japanese villain in her picture.”⁴ *Variety* agreed: “The work of Sessue Hayakawa is so far above the acting of Miss Ward and Jack Dean that he really should be the star in the billing for the film.”⁵

Moving Picture World (MPW) noted that Hayakawa had “a prominent role” in *The Cheat* and added, “It is rumored he is soon to be starred by the Lasky Company in a big feature production.”⁶ Sessue Hayakawa thus became an overnight sensation to the moviegoers in America.

Cecil B. DeMille, the director of the film, recalled later that *The Cheat* was “Sessue Hayakawa’s first giant stride on the road that made him within two years the peer of such contemporary bright stars as Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart, and Mary Pickford.”⁷ The *New Orleans Times* in February 1916 reported how prominent Hayakawa was after the release of *The Cheat*: “Undoubtedly the greatest success ever scored by a Japanese actor on [sic] American moving pictures was that of Sessue Hayakawa in the Lasky-Paramount production of ‘The Cheat,’ and so strong an impression thot [sic] make on New Orleans spectators that when the Japanese appeared for the moment on the screen in the part of a valet in ‘Temptation,’ at the Crescent, a murmur of recognition such as we have never known to greet any other player went through the audience—a most sincere tribute.”⁸ Similarly, *Wid’s Films and Film Folk Independent Criticisms of Features* pointed out that Hayakawa was used in an inappropriate way in a minor role in *Temptation* (Cecil B. DeMille, 30 December 1915), the film that was released right after *The Cheat*: “Our Jap friend, of ‘The Cheat’ fame, is brought in for a very small ‘valet’ part at the finish. I think this is wrong. That boy is too big and too clever to be shoved into such films to do a small bit. It hits you in the eye like it would be to see Blanche Sweet come into the film as a maid.”⁹

The Lasky Company dared not miss this opportunity. Right before the release of *The Cheat*, the studio head, Jesse L. Lasky, praised *The Cheat* as “one of the very best” films ever made, even though his claim should have contained a promotional intention. He said he was “so impressed by his [Hayakawa’s] performance” that he “immediately signed him for a long term” contract.¹⁰ After the box office success of *The Cheat*, the company came to recognize Hayakawa as its new potential moneymaker and to undertake a specific strategy to establish, publicize, and promote his star image.

Motion Picture News (MPN) reported on 15 April 1916: “Partly in response to the hundreds of requests from exhibitors and photoplay goers all over the United States, the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company announces that it will present as a star early in May the well-known Japanese screen player, Sessue Hayakawa, in a photoplay production entitled ‘Alien Souls.’ Hayakawa’s work in ‘The Cheat,’ in which he appeared in leading support of Fannie

Ward, stamped him immediately as a proficient figure in motion pictures.”¹¹ Lasky spent five months before releasing the first star vehicle for Hayakawa, *Alien Souls* (Frank Reicher, 3 May 1916). This long five-month gap indicates the extent of Lasky’s well-prepared publicity for the company’s new star. When *Alien Souls* was finally released, reviews of the film appeared in various local papers such as the *New York Sun*, *Philadelphia Telegraph*, *Detroit News*, *Evening Wisconsin*, *Louisville Times*, *Springfield Mirror*, *Cleveland Daily*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Toledo Blade*, and *Washington Star*, and they unanimously called Hayakawa a “star.” After *Alien Souls*, Hayakawa’s star vehicles were released in approximately two-month cycles.

But stardom has more than a national perspective, and Hayakawa, like Charlie Chaplin, was one of the first stars whose international reputation forms an essential part of his story. American spectators were not the only ones who were immensely impressed by Hayakawa in *The Cheat*. Hayakawa’s performance was sensationally received in Europe and in Japan.¹² In France, when *The Cheat* opened at the Omnia Pathé Cinema in Paris in the summer of 1916, French intellectuals were “dumbfounded” by Hayakawa and the innovative aesthetics of *The Cheat*.¹³ On 3 June 1918, the drama critic Louis Delluc claimed, “No one actually wanted to see anything in it [*The Cheat*] except the Japanese. . . . [The film] inspired nothing but pro-Japanese polemic.”¹⁴ In *Excelsior*, on 7 August 1916, the renowned poet, novelist, and essayist Colette reported, in an excited tone, on the impact of Hayakawa’s performance in *The Cheat* on many artists:

In Paris this week, a movie theater has become an art school. A film and two of its principal actors are showing us what surprising innovations, what emotion, what natural and well-designed lighting can add to cinematic fiction. Every evening, writers, painters, composers, and dramatists come and come again to sit, contemplate, and comment in low voices, like pupils. To the genius of an oriental actor is added that of a director probably without equal. . . . We cry “Miracle!” . . . Is it only a combination of felicitous effects that brings us to this film and keeps us there? Or is it the more profound and less clear pleasure of seeing the crude ciné groping toward perfection, the pleasure of divining what the future of the cinema must be when its makers will want that future . . . ? . . . This Asiatic artist whose powerful immobility is eloquence itself. Let our aspiring ciné-actors go to see how, when his face is mute, his hand carries on the flow of his thought. Let them take to heart the menace and disdain in a motion