

**FOUR PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON
THE FILM DOCUMENTARY,**

JAPANESE DEVILS

Confessions of Imperial Army Soldiers From Japan's War Against China

DIRECTED BY MATSUI MINORU

PRODUCED BY MATSUI MINORU
AND OGURI KEN'ICHI

VHS. 160 MINUTES (LONG VERSION)
AND 58 MINUTES (SHORT VERSION)

JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

AVAILABLE AT: www.japanesedevils.com

Japanese Devils is an extraordinarily shocking and courageous film. It is difficult to imagine a more intimate, powerful, and persuasive indictment of Japanese atrocities in the long-ago war against China—or a more remarkable expression of public confession and contrition. The fourteen Japanese who speak to us here are ordinary old men, but their willingness to acknowledge the monstrous crimes of their youth so that others might take warning is rare indeed. Japanese Devils transcends mere history to engage war, madness, and evil themselves. This is a document of major importance.

John Dower, author, *Embracing Defeat*

SYNOPSIS

In the documentary film *Japanese Devils*, fourteen veterans of the former Imperial Army testify to their individual actions in Japan's war against China, from the Manchurian Incident in 1931 to Japan's 1945 surrender. During those years, the Japanese military system molded obedient men, trained to follow orders. After 1940, the Japanese military increasingly targeted Chinese civilians, and by late 1942 had initiated conscription of Chinese peasants for forced labor in Japan.¹ Few veterans of the Imperial Army have been willing to talk about their military service in China. According to the veterans who appear in this film, destruction of civilian life and villages was a routine component of military service in Manchuria and China.

Young Suzuki Yoshio: Sergeant Major, Japanese Army.
Image source: Japanese Devils Web site:

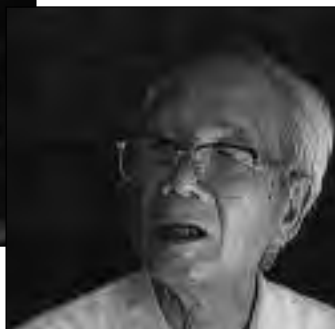


ESSAY FILM REVIEW



Director, Matsui Minoru interviewing Shinozuka Yoshio (Former corporal, Army, born 1923) who was in the Youth Unit of the 731, the notorious biological warfare unit in Manchuria.

Photo courtesy Linda Hoaglund.



LINDA HOAGLUND

When I first saw *Japanese Devils* at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2001, I responded with a mix of horror, fascination, and the searing question: Why had these soldiers waited so long to testify? Their words made my skin crawl, and I had to stifle an urge to run out of the theatre as they described unimaginable acts of cruelty in Japanese, a language I usually associate with politeness and euphemism.

As I sat transfixed, I realized that post-war Japan had indeed been ruled by an unspoken conspiracy of silence.² With the Emperor absolved of culpability, the Tokyo War Crimes Trial finished, and China declared a Communist enemy, it would have been folly verging on lunacy for Imperial veterans to discuss their individual acts. The film wrenches open a door to memories long sealed off. Watching was an unsettling experience.

After the screening, the director, Matsui Minoru, fielded questions from the largely German audience. His thoughtful answers allowed me to understand his simple motives in making this film: He clearly believes that Japan must face its history honestly to protect future generations from repeating errors of the past. He told of rejection by every one of his usual Japanese funders. Six years after first meeting these veterans, he had resolved to make the film independently, as many of the elderly subjects were dying. I decided on the spot to offer to contribute English subtitles to the film, to honor Matsui's commitment to this extraordinary historical undertaking.

Since then, the film has traveled to two European documentary festivals, winning awards at both. Recently, when it was invited to the Toronto Film Festival, both screenings sold out. Each time the film ended, instead of the recriminations and accusations I had dreaded, a sense of relief seemed to pervade the audience. Several people instinctively understood the film's connections to our own under-explored legacy of U.S.-inflicted pain in Vietnam.³ One person thanked the director for making the film, saying "My Chinese grandmother had always told me these stories, but now, for the first time, I've heard Japanese soldiers confirm them."

Japanese Devils opened in a Tokyo theater in December 2001. Although most critics and media organizations initially shunned it,

the film ran for three months in Tokyo and has been shown at numerous international film festivals. The few critics who reviewed it named it as one of the three most important films of the year. Initially, the audience consisted almost entirely of older men, often over seventy, but the demographics have shifted, and audiences now consist primarily of people under the age of twenty-five. Many are college students who discovered the film through the Internet or by word of mouth. The film recently opened in Osaka and Nagoya, where news of its Tokyo success led to radio and television coverage. The opening

weekends in both cities sold out. Perhaps this demonstrates the curiosity and hunger among the new generation of Japanese for knowledge of their country's past.

For further information about the film and how to purchase it, go to www.japanesedevils.com. ■

NOTES

1. On Unit 731, the Nanjing massacre, "comfort women," and the like, see Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-45, and the American Cover-up* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994); Joshua A. Fogel, ed., *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). On literary and oral testimonies of Japanese wartime atrocities, see Hirabayashi Taiko, "Blind Chinese Soldiers," in Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden, tr. and eds., *Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), and Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992).
2. On the "unspoken conspiracy of silence" in postwar Japan, see T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama, eds., *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Laura Hein and Mark Seldon, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2000); John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton/New Press, 1999), and his *Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: New Press, 1993); and Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994).
3. Coco Shrijber's *First Kill*, a recent documentary about American veterans' recollections of their experiences in Vietnam, offers a striking parallel to *Japanese Devils*. The American veterans express vivid memories of nearly identical experiences in fighting a war in which their enemy was often indistinguishable from civilians. For other documentary and feature films dealing specifically with the wartime Japanese army, see the 1987 documentary *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, directed by Hara Kazuo; the 1959 feature film *Fires on the Plain*, directed by Ichikawa Kon (Los Angeles: Embassy Home Entertainment, 1987); and, from a Chinese perspective, the 1987 feature film *Red Sorghum*, directed by Zhang Yimou (New York: New Yorker Video).

LINDA HOAGLUND was born in Japan, the daughter of American missionary parents, and attended Japanese public schools. A graduate of Yale University, she worked as a bilingual producer for Japanese news documentaries. She currently subtitles Japanese films such as *Spirited Away*, *Seven Samurai*, *Battle Royale*, and many others. She represents Japanese directors and artists and is an international liaison for film producers.

JANET HOAGLUND

To gather feedback from secondary teachers on the feasibility of using *Japanese Devils* in their classrooms, we offered a screening at the Program for Teaching East Asia's Summer Institute, Starting Over: Japan's Occupation Years, 1945–1952. Although attendance at the screening was voluntary, many teachers participated, and the film was followed by passionate discussion.

There was general consensus that the grim content of the film makes it difficult to show in its entirety to high school students. However, there was also a great deal of interest in showing selected clips from the film in history classes about Japan's role in WWII, war crimes tribunals, electives on war and peace, and psychology and sociology classes.

Several teachers feared their students would take away stereotypical images of Japanese. To emphasize that all humans have the potential to commit war crimes, others suggested using clips from *Japanese Devils* in classes on war, where students learn about other atrocities—in Vietnam, in Bosnia, in the Middle East, for example.¹

Several veterans recount their first experience of killing Chinese civilians during military training. Others remember how their consciences tried to speak to them during their first murder. But the power of the group overwhelmed any qualms and soon they were simply numb. This film depicts the ugliest face of peer pressure, a factor in many high school students' lives. For a psychology or sociology class, *Japanese Devils* would provide relevant testimony about this universal issue.

Japanese Devils is a powerful primary source. With careful and selective use by the instructor, it can shed light on critical historical and human issues. ■

NOTE

1. On how "all humans have the potential to commit war crimes," see Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994); Laura Hein and Mark Seldon, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2000); Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Reiko Tachibana, *Narrative as Counter-Memory: A Half-Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); and Ernestine Schlant and J. Thomas Rimer, eds., *Legacies and Ambiguities: Postwar Fiction and Culture in West Germany and Japan* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

JANET HOAGLUND has been a Japan project coordinator for the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado since January 2000. She coordinated the 2001 Japan Summer Institute and TEA's NCTA 2002 Japan Study Tour, and will lead Colorado secondary educators and students on Colorado Consortium for Teaching East Asia's 2003 study tour to Japan in July. Janet and her sister Linda were raised in rural Japan by missionary parents.

BARBARA MARKHAM

Japanese Devils left me with "awful truths" and some of the most searing observations of wartime brutality. Lurid and sobering testimonies reveal a perverted sense of loyalty, duty, competition, and discipline. As one soldier lamented, "That was the true face of war—no matter how shameful."

Like most history teachers, I have read Holocaust literature and have met survivors. I've read works on Japanese atrocities in the Philippines, Indonesia and China, but I have never heard rapists reveal their crimes in their own words. I have never seen their faces. This film left me speechless and practically sleepless.

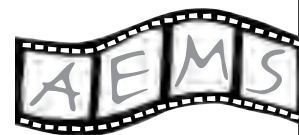
A teacher using *Japanese Devils* in the classroom would benefit from a film guide for pre-viewing discussion and post-viewing reflection. Instructors might include a timeline of events referenced in the film. They could design a survey that asks students to react to the film's content and purpose.

For example, students might respond to the veterans' testimony by commenting on how fear, prejudice, and peer pressure transform ordinary soldiers into ruthless "devils." A more technical analysis might ask students to examine how the filmmaker uses text, images, film footage, editing techniques, close-ups, and scene transitions in order to instruct and provoke. It would be fascinating for Japanese language students to consider the nuances of the English translation, weighing the linguistic options available to the translator.

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ESSAY FILM REVIEW

Instructors may also wish to treat the film itself as a historical event, whose revelations comprise a relatively recent narrative in Japanese WWII history, one increasingly under attack in Japan.¹ Students might consider the veterans' motive for divulging their stories, as well as how these "confessions" are both legacies and lessons confronting the Japanese today.

Given the incendiary nature of the testimonies, I think this film should come with a warning about its content. At the high school level, the film would probably require a parent letter, informing households of the sensitive material and its intended use. ■

NOTE

1. Throughout the spring and summer of 2001, a controversy developed over a textbook published by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. See the *New York Times*, Howard French, "Specter of a Rearmed Japan Stirs its Wartime Generation," June 20, 2001; Howard French, "Japan's Refusal to Revise Textbooks Angers its Neighbors," July 10, 2001; Steven C. Clemons, "Recovering Japan's Wartime Past—and Ours," September 4, 2001; and *Agence France-Presse*, "Most Japanese School Districts Reject Disputed History Textbook," August 16, 2001.

BARBARA MARKHAM is a United States History teacher with twenty-five years in the classroom at Padua Academy in Wilmington, Delaware. She is the Academy's Social Studies chairperson. Barbara saw *Japanese Devils* at the 2001 Teaching East Asia's Summer Institute on Japan's occupation years at the University of Colorado. She also participated in the 1995 NEH Institute on the Pacific War at Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College.

MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS



"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

"INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND"—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

"BEAUTY IN STONE"—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

Also—smaller portable exhibits (mailed via postal service), video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapith University in India founded in 1920).

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PETER FROST

Japanese Devils (in both long and short versions) documents individual Japanese atrocities during World War II in China. While there is a general narrative of historical events, some contemporary photographs, pictures of newspaper headlines from that era, a brief discussion of trials held by the Peoples Republic of China, and even a comment or two on what happened to these veterans after they came home, the work primarily consists of recent testimony of rapes, murder, deadly biological experiments, and even cannibalism by fourteen aging veterans. The Japanese army, these veterans recall, treated Chinese as sub-human "logs" or "Chinks," and insisted that new recruits use live Chinese for bayonet practice. The video's title thus refers both to the ways in which Japanese militarism made decent citizens into "devils," and to the ways in which the Japanese were hated by the Chinese.

On the plus side of things, Matsui's work is chillingly effective (though repetitive in the long version) and clearly important for the Japanese to see—especially those who have trouble moving beyond a sense of victimization to a recognition of military misdeeds. As these interviews can easily be excerpted, the video can also be used in a variety of ways to meet individual classroom needs.

Balancing this is the fact that, as Bob Takashi Wakabayashi notes in a particularly thoughtful review in the *Journal of Japanese Studies*,¹ the fourteen veterans are all members of the "Liaison Council of China Returnees" who returned home after being imprisoned by the Chinese Communists for war crimes determined to atone for their abuses and praise the PRC. "Director Matsui," he notes in his opening sentence, "does not feign political detachment."

Left on its own, in sum, *Japanese Devils* strikes me as a bit harsh on the Japanese (were they the only ones to commit individual atrocities?) and overly romantic towards the Chinese Communists. Brighter students may even, ironically, reject the video's anti-war message precisely because it so consciously wears its political heart on its sleeve. Balancing this is the fact that parts of the video (and I would recommend using only parts) can be used to get beyond the usual cliché that war is hell. Most of all, I suggest that the video can best be used in conjunction with conservative rejoinders as one volley in Japan's current and highly important "culture wars." Director Matsui strikes me as more concerned with Japan's future than its past, and this alone makes the video well worth seeing. ■

NOTE

1. *Journal of Japanese Studies*. Vol. 28 No. 2, Summer 2002: 430–35.

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