

# Sensō Daughters (Senjō no Onnatachi)

PRODUCED BY NORIKO SEKIGUCHI

DISTRIBUTED BY FIRST RUN ICARUS

153 WAVERLY PLACE, 6TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10014

1989. 54 minutes

family gatherings, Chinatown scenes, and interviews with family members and friends. These are interspersed with solo performances by Chinese-Canadian artists to weave the histories of the Dere family and Chinese-Canadian families together since the turn of the century. While it is refreshing to see the filmmaker in the film, making reference to his own role in making this documentary and inserting his own voice to the text, the film remains a largely non-self-conscious autobiography. Dere's voice-over sometimes becomes too overpowering and one-dimensional even as it celebrates the long struggle of his family and all Chinese-Canadians. Furthermore, no contextualization deals with other Chinese populations of Canada today, such as recent Hong Kong immigrants.

Overall, nonetheless, the film provides a wide-ranging and informative history of Chinese-Canadian life. The topic merits even more explorations within the constantly changing landscape and peoples of Canada.

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**S**ensō Daughters is an ambitious, deceptively complex video that participates in an on-going controversy revolving around Japanese behavior during the Second World War. While it deals with the so-called "Forgotten War," Japan's brutal and dehumanizing conquest of New Guinea beginning in 1942, it finds its controversial heart in the vexing issue of the "comfort women" used by the Japanese Army to satisfy the sexual needs of its soldiers.

Until 1992, the Japanese government refused even to publicly acknowledge that the military, from as early as 1932, forced women into sexual slavery to serve the Army overseas. Figures vary as to the number of so-called "comfort women"—as *Sensō Daughters* indicates, record keeping on comfort women was virtually nonexistent, not so much out of a sense of trying to keep criminal activity secret, but rather stemming from a refusal to acknowledge the basic humanity of these women. However, it appears that no less than 80,000 and perhaps as many as 200,000 women were brutalized in this manner. The majority of these comfort women were not Japanese, but instead were primarily Korean or Chinese.

"Comfort Houses" were set

up throughout much of the region of the Pacific that the Japanese conquered: China, Hong Kong, Indochina, Burma, Thailand, Borneo, and New Guinea, among others. That the army, with the government's tacit cooperation and even encouragement, had convinced itself of the necessity to set up these comfort houses, which forced women into sexual slavery, is one of the most horrifying aspects of the whole issue. Embarrassed by the reaction to the "Rape of Nanking," (not the horrors committed by the soldiers, but the world-wide reaction to it) and concerned about the spread of venereal disease among the soldiers or the possibility of espionage occurring in unregulated houses of prostitution, the military made the sexual servicing of its soldiers a high priority. The Japanese government today has so far refused to make reparations to the surviving women.

While public discussion of this issue in Japan has been minor until recently, the Japanese have dealt in film with the issue of war-time prostitution. But these films, such as *Nikutai no mon* (Gate of Flesh), *Sandakan hachiban shokan* (Sandakan No. 8), or Imamura Shohei's powerful documentary, *Karayuki-san*, focused on Japanese women whose forced

prostitution differs in substance, if not in essence, from the non-Japanese women forced into sexual slavery out of racist and misogynistic attitudes.

There is a calm, presentational style to *Sensō Daughters*, thus removing any notion of sensationalism or exploitation of its powerful subject. In accented English, the filmmaker narrates some of the factual material the audience needs to know (though, if anything, factual background and information are relatively lacking here), and we occasionally hear her questions to her New Guinean subjects. More significantly, the voices of the women who lived through the Japanese occupation of their nation provide much of the drama here. Their memories of deprivation and hardship, of the fate of their husbands, of their occasional sexual servitude, is played in sharp counterpoint to the Japanese subjects interviewed. Scenes of an army gynecologist dispassionately discussing the "regulations" surrounding sexual relations between soldiers and comfort women, and displaying photographs of his war-time office; the casual racism of Japanese veterans who still seem to refuse to understand the moral crime of using comfort



Photo Courtesy of First Run Icarus Films

Scene from *Sensō Daughters* by Noriko Sekiguchi.

women; and the images of aging Japanese women outside the Imperial Palace in Tokyo mourning the death of the Shōwa Emperor, bring some understanding of how such crimes came to be committed in the first place, and how refusal to acknowledge these crimes publicly contributes to on-going racism and xenophobia. One of the most telling revelations concerns a New Guinea mother who is embarrassed by her affair with a Japanese officer, which resulted in a daughter, a true "sensō" (war) daughter whose patrimony was kept a secret from her until the production of this documentary enabled the mother to finally reveal her shame.

This video production attains its most subtle brilliance precisely by allowing the New Guineans to speak for themselves. The pidgin English spoken by the women as they relate their tales of Japanese op-

pression serves to highlight the nature of imperialism, whether militaristic or cultural, in a particularly acute manner. The Japanese deprived them of their land, food, sexual desires, their very freedom, but American domination of much of the former Japanese territories has served no less to deprive them of a strong sense of identity and self. Thus, the bilingual title has a real symbolic force. That the women also relate to the narrator, almost in passing, the cruelty of the Australians who helped liberate them from the Japanese, serves to remind us that guilt is not exclusive to the Japanese when it comes to dealing with third-world peoples.

Finally, however, the most telling and chilling character we meet is not a "sensō daughter" at all, but a New Guinean man who proudly reveals to the video makers his total recall of Japanese songs he learned during the war. On two separate

occasions, he sings in quite passable Japanese the war songs he heard the soldiers sing. Their lamentations for home or their paeans to soldierly camaraderie are eerily displaced when sung by a middle-aged New Guinea man. That he should remember these songs is not only a tribute to his intelligence, but also that he should try to impress a Japanese video maker in the 1990s with these memories is testimony to the powerful effects of imperialism on the mind as well as the body. Most disturbing of all, however, is the moment when he sings not a militarist lament, but a song of haunting sadness sung by women, Japanese women, forced prostitutes, brought to the island by the Japanese military. It is the song of these oppressed Japanese women sung by a New Guinean man fifty years later that ends the video on a truly haunting note.

Recommended for advanced high school classes and above.

David Desser

**DAVID DESSER**, Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is currently the editor of *Cinema Journal*. In addition to his extensive work on Japanese cinema, he has published materials on American films of the Vietnam War from the point of view of race, racism, and cultural conflict.

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