

The Daughter of the Samurai: a German-Japanese co-production

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In 1936, Japan, then expanding into the rest of Asia, was looking for ways to both valorize its ambitions and explain its aims. Among the methods chosen was a film co-production with Germany, a country with similar territorial aspirations.

Both Japan and Germany would soon sign the Anti-Comintern Pact. Japan was eager to become a member of the three-way Axis, and Germany thought that such cinematic co-operation could introduce its new partner to Europe. The proposal for the film stressed “the unity of the Nazi group-spirit and the racial spirit of the Japanese as opposed to the weak spirit of the democracies.” It would praise the Japanese family system and particularly underline the “volcano-like sacrificing spirit of Japan.”¹

The volcanic image was appropriate because Mount Aso in Kyushu was to be featured and the director chosen to co direct was Arnold Fanck, a former geologist famous for such mystical “mountain-films” as the silent classic *The Holy Mountain* (*Der Heilige Berg*, 1926) which starred a young Leni Riefenstahl. The Japanese director decided upon was Itami Mansaku, no mountaineer but, rather, one of Japan’s finest directors and also a liberal man, cultivated, apolitical.

The script, written entirely by Fanck, was to be called *The Daughter of the Samurai* (*Die Tochter des Samurai*) and was about the Japanese hero’s conversion from democracy back to a belief in Japanese verities. He (played by Kosugi Isamu) returns home from a stay in Germany filled with awe for its accomplishments. His fiancé (Hara Setsuko) is waiting for him but he has fallen in love with a German woman (Ruth Eweler) he met on the ship. When the fiancé attempts to kill herself (by jumping into Mt. Aso) her father (Hayakawa Sesshu) sits our hero down and brings him back to his senses by listing the accomplishments of Japan. The happy couple decides to move to Manchuria, a location already occupied by the Japanese, and take up farming. The finale shows the father placing their newborn son

¹ Initial Manuscript from Peter B. High, *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years’ War*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2003.

in one the furrows of the fields proclaiming that it too will be a child of the homeland – thus giving the picture its Japanese title, *The New Earth* (Atarashiki Tsuchi).

Conflict between the two directors began almost at once. Itami was alarmed by the raw political intent of the film and by what he considered were the many misinterpretations of Japanese life. Fanck, however, refused all compromise, insisting that this first German-Japanese film collaboration had to have a clear, pro-Nazi message. It soon became obvious that the project would collapse if a compromise was not worked out.

It was – but in the most surprising manner - each director would make his own version of the picture. Fanck shot all of his scenes in the daytime. Itami, using the same sets and locations, shot his at night. Difficult as this was for them, it was even harder on the cinematographer, Richard Angst, who had to shoot both films, and on the actors who had to work all day and all night, and on the studio, where costs for the film doubled.

Both versions premiered in Tokyo in February 1937 – first Itami’s and a week later, Fanck’s. The latter, perhaps because of its novelty (a film about Japan made by a German) was a commercial success though, as the critic Sawamura Tsutomu said, “it is no more than an attempt to form Nazi propaganda out of Japanese raw materials.”² In Germany the Fanck version was very well reviewed, but these were largely due to Dr. Goebbels having sent around a press circular ordering the critics to praise it.

The Itami version was ignored, both in Japan and in Germany, and the director himself fell ill after his ordeal and made only three films, though he did write major scenarios, such as *The Life of Matsu the Untamed* (Muhomatsu no Issho, 1943) and *Children Hand in Hand* (Te o Tsunagu Kora, 1948; both are directed by Inagaki Hiroshi). Even now in the popular mind he remains more famous as the father of film director Itami Juzo than as a director in his own right.

The New Earth may be regarded as both an unfortunate experiment and an historical curiosity. With such beginnings a continuation of the co-production policy between Japan and Germany was no longer considered. This did not mean, however, that after the war more amicable relations were not encouraged. One example of mutual cinematic interests between Japan and Germany is Wim Wenders’ affectionate 1985 appropriation of Ozu Yasujiro in his *Tokyo-Ga*.

² Sawamura Tsutomu, “Eiga Jihyo (Film Review)”, *Eiga Hyoron*, Eiga Hyoron Sha, Tokyo, March, 1937.