

Opening a Storyline in the 2020 Olympics

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Abstract: The Opening Ceremony under the guidance of popular film director Yamazaki Takashi will almost certainly earn it applause overseas, particularly by viewers and writers eager to take stock of a country's creative talents in this once-every-four-years fantasia. As the stuff of international politics goes, it will be mostly inconsequential and harmless, and it will likely be good fun. But it also offers the chance to explore how a ceremony can reproduce moral and historical claims that remain largely unexamined, and how closed to challenge and contestation an Opening might be.

Both highly ritualized and yet supposedly singularly representative of the host nation, the Opening Ceremonies of the summer Olympic games have evolved into one of the truly weird moments of global media attention. Now broadcast live across the world, and generally timed to ensure maximum exposure in leading media markets, the Opening Ceremony of course includes certain formally established practices, like the entrance and march by smiling, waving national teams around the main stadium, and the lighting of the main torch. Other norms dictate the shape of the event – particularly involving spectacle and pageantry – even as they are harnessed in rigorously narrow ways to emphasize the host country's history, people, and culture (see e.g. Arning 2013). But think of how strange it would be if the Tokyo 2020 organizers were to determine that Japan's culture – described by some as reticent, thoughtful, observant, and still – could best be represented by having a

stationary video camera face, say, a reproduction of Kyoto's famed stone garden at Ryoanji Temple, broadcasting that for 60 minutes before returning to show a former Japanese Olympic champion quietly ascend the stairs to the torch and set it ablaze, without music, fireworks, or other fanfare to accompany it. It might be seen as an authentic representation of Japan, but it would more likely be viewed as at best a missed opportunity to engage the world with spectacle, and at worst as an abject failure that ought to cost the organizers their jobs and reputations. This is hardly to argue that a dull but meditative Opening Ceremony would be a better or more accurate representation of Japan than will be whatever razzle and dazzle the designers conjure – just that for all the talk of how an Opening Ceremony is an opportunity for a nation or a city to introduce itself to the world, to communicate its appeal or the rich culture of its residents, the actual space for doing so is highly constrained. Japan's culture can be rich, complex, aesthetically challenging, internally contradictory, and historically contingent – as any culture is – but it will need to really pop at the 2020 Olympics, and to do so within the 3-hour time frame that includes a substantial amount of time for opening speeches, teams' introductions, and the like.

And it will pop, largely thanks to the organizing committee's selection of the creative team running the opening ceremonies. As the overall creative director of both the Olympics and the often overlooked (and certainly far less popular internationally) Paralympic games, Nomura Mansai would seem to be an inspired choice.

The widely respected actor is primarily known for his background in Kyogen – a form of traditional comic theater that is linked historically to Noh theater – but has also had a successful career in film and television, therefore allowing him to nod both to Japan’s traditional cultural traditions and its current entertainment scene. And, like recent and highly acclaimed opening ceremonies in Beijing (2008) and London (2012), the Olympic opening ceremonies themselves will be helmed by a popular film director. Unlike China’s Zhang Yimou and the UK’s Danny Boyle, however, Yamazaki Takashi has a limited international reputation that sits in stark contrast with the immense popularity and acclaim of his films in Japan. A master of spectacle and sentiment, Yamazaki brings to the event both a command of visual effects and a trustworthy read on Japan’s cultural scene. The details of the Opening Ceremony plans themselves are under tight wraps until the event itself – though television announcers will certainly be provided overviews and information to use in describing them to their television audiences – but Nomura and Yamazaki have already unveiled the overall theme as one of “Requiem and Rebirth” (*Eiga Nathalie* 2018).



Yamazaki Takashi, Executive Creative Director, with Nomura Mansai, Chief Executive Creative Director for the 2020 Summer Olympics, and Sasaki Hiroshi, Executive Creative Director for

the 2020 Summer Paralympics

What should we expect from the Opening Ceremony, and why will it matter? For the most part, barring some YouTube-able clip of disaster striking – like the immolation of a number of doves of peace by the Olympic torch at the Seoul games of 1988 – the Opening Ceremony will be briefly commented upon by announcers seeking to interpret the meaning of specific moments or figures for a global audience who are not entirely familiar with Japan’s cultural scene (who are Perfume? And who is this robot cat who keeps pulling stuff out of his pockets?), for arts critics weighing in on how well or poorly the event works as a spectacle and as a representation of Japan’s vibrant cultural scene, and by cultural commentators critically analyzing the meaning of certain moments and what they socially and politically reveal and conceal. Beyond that, the Opening Ceremony will likely fade into memory relatively quickly as global television audiences turn their attention back to imminent climate collapse, the UK royal family’s struggles, the continuing challenges of film studios trying to reproduce the success of the *Avengers* series, or the question of when Instagram will include scents and aromas, not just video and sound. But we might at that point still think of the Opening Ceremony as a resource, as an opportunity to understand how the Japanese creators and organizers wanted to have the world think about Japan, or what they felt they could say and show about Japan.

Opening Ceremonies: Effective Nation-Branding or Navel-Gazing?

It stands to reason that organizers will seek to

use the Olympic Opening Ceremony to put forth a positive image of the host city and the nation, showcasing history and culture in an entertaining manner. There are even bodies of academic literature dedicated to the idea of “nation-branding” (see Kaneva 2011 for a critical overview) — conscious efforts to market a country in ways that enhance the competitiveness of its goods, resources, and tourist sites in the global marketplace – and “soft power,” or the idea that a country’s attractiveness and appeal allow it to be persuasive in political matters, to have power that is not reducible to coercion or control (see Bially-Mattern 2005 for a critical overview). The Opening Ceremony itself might be viewed as simply a performance of no more consequence than, say, a concert, but organizers and creative directors are clearly tasked with the idea that something more than an entertaining 3 hours rests on their shoulders.

Even when a ceremony’s quality is beyond dispute, its success might be mixed. After the internationally acclaimed film director Zhang Yimou helmed an overwhelming, spectacular Opening Ceremony in Beijing in 2008, *The Guardian* wrote “The ceremony that opened the 29th Olympic games last night outdid all of its predecessors in numbers, colour, noise and expense, demonstrating to the world that the new China intends to make its presence felt” (Williams 2008). Other media sources echoed that sentiment, commenting simultaneously on the awe-inspiring scale and artistry that Zhang marshaled for the event as well as on the political implications (Agence-France Presse 2008). The ceremony’s reputation took a hit when it was revealed that an adorable child singing as part of the ceremony was in fact lip-syncing, and that the girl whose voice appeared on the soundtrack was not chosen to appear in person because she was insufficiently cute. Indeed, this decision, which might have been

viewed as inconsequential, fed into a wider set of global critiques of the obsessively managed nature of the Beijing ceremony, emblematic of China’s authoritarian reach and scope. One study suggested that the Beijing Games left American viewers with a worse impression of China, in part because of the alarming success and suspicious levels of control on display (Gries, Hays, Sandel 2010)

Four years later, the organizers of the London games likely recognized that any ceremony following Beijing’s would be considered a failure if judged primarily on pomp and spectacle, and, perhaps wisely, chose the acclaimed director Danny Boyle – whose oeuvre is known for its visual wit and ebullient energy, such as in his films *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire* – to helm the show. Boyle’s show “Isles of Wonder” presented a cheekily progressive vision of postwar Britain, from patients and nurses dancing on oversized beds representing the country’s National Health Service to the ostentatious multiculturalism of its musical performers and dancers (Biressi and Nunn 2012). Unlike with Beijing’s switch of the child singer, no one complained that the skydivers into the stadium were not in fact Daniel Craig and Queen Elizabeth, part of an elaborate gag for the spectators. While some expressed irritation with Boyle’s political messages, others were more concerned that the celebration of British multiculturalism obscured the cruel colonial legacies on which much of that diversity has rested (Woods 2012; Pope 2014).

Still, what is notable about the ceremonies is less what they actually earned China or the UK – something that is virtually impossible to know with much certainty, even with the well-known questions about the value of hosting the games themselves – than the commitment of the creators to tell particular if widely shared

stories about each country (Lee and Yoon 2017). For Beijing, it was a story of the magisterial sweep of Chinese civilizational history, symbolized in part through Zhang's artistic representation of the country's calligraphic traditions that provide a singular historical thread unmatched anywhere else in the world; his China was not simply a massive collection of talented people, but talented people connected seamlessly to a distant past and performing together in ways that represented the full historical weight of the country's thousands of years of cultural production (see Chen, Colapinto, and Luo 2012). Boyle, on the other hand, focused on a postwar Britain that became what it is today by increasingly supporting its citizens through national action and celebrating their diverse backgrounds and contributions. Both narratives implied national unity — China's from its civilizational history, the UK's through its progressive embrace of a multitude of cultures — in ways that broadly concealed their politics: the divisive wars, purges, power grabs, and ruthless suppression of alternative moral claims that dot the ragged margins and sometimes invade the central core of public history in China and the UK, as they do in most countries. And if the opening ceremonies in 2008 and 2012 — the two most widely discussed ceremonies in recent years, due in part to the artistic visions of their directors — are useful less for considering the global image of each country after the Games than for examining how domestic viewers are encouraged to think of themselves, 2020 offers the same opportunity for Japan. What story will Yamazaki tell about Japan, and what will likely be suppressed in the process?

Yamazaki's Japanese Stories

While the Tokyo Games are, as of this writing, still more than a half year away, it is not difficult to hazard guesses both about the content of Yamazaki's vision and, crucially, the reactions at home and abroad. In part this is because of the ubiquity of a certain story about Japan's "long postwar" in popular Japanese discourse, in part because of its frequent emergence in Yamazaki's filmography, and in part because of the recent history of debates in Japanese about the appeal of Japanese culture abroad. All of them suggest that the Opening Ceremony will be visually exciting, often beautiful, and sometimes quite funny, and that the Japan that emerges will be one that continually rebuilds itself through collective and shared effort from tragedies that are really no one's fault. After the Opening Ceremony, there will be initial stories in the Japanese press reporting enthusiastically about press reports from overseas praising the talent and spectacle of the opening ceremonies, followed by speculation about how they will have shaped, along with the polite and organized demeanor of the host city's residents and the Games's staff, a positive image of Japan. Perhaps a year or two after that, we will likely see a few critical articles asking what happened, and why had the glow of the Olympics not seemed to matter for Japan's overall global reputation or power.

But first, the story. Along with a number of her colleagues, Carol Gluck (1991), one of the most distinguished historians of modern Japan, has referred to this story as one of the "long postwar," a period that takes an outsized role in considering what Japan is today and how it became that. To be sure, Japanese schoolchildren are trained in Japanese history going back many centuries, and virtually anyone with a secondary education in Japan will know the major artists and cultural icons of the Heian past, consequential military figures of medieval Japan's "period of warring states,"

the basic rules and structure of the early modern Tokugawa shogunate, and the key leaders of the Meiji Restoration. All of these, like with China's civilizational past, are typically understood as essential elements marking or leading to today's Japan. But the postwar itself has been narrated as a story more of collective effort than of individual leaders, of the Japanese people striving to overcome the ravages of defeat in World War II (with substantially less attention to Japan's imperial efforts of the interwar and wartime periods), rebuilding the country through their technological ingenuity and the diligence and hard work that produced Japan's economic miracle. This story touches far less often on the labor disputes, the fractious relations with Japan's neighbors and wartime victims, the pollution calamities, and lingering forms of inequality that mark Japan today, and the story is not primarily told as one of individual leaders heroically bringing Japan forward because of their vision and goals. Instead, this story – as apolitical as most other national histories – becomes one of a collective we who used to be able to get things done, and perhaps offering inspiration for today's generations that have been challenged by economic stagnation, a menacing international environment, and the materialism that helped Japan lose its way in the 1980s and 1990s.

This thoroughly unremarkable form of national nostalgia – for a time when we were better and less selfish than today, when we knew how to work together to make all of us better off – is a remarkable element of many of Yamazaki's films. Known first as a visual effects wizard, Yamazaki made the leap into the spotlight of Japanese cinema with his *Always: Sunset on Third Street* trilogy (2005, 2007, 2012). The films, mostly about a lovable community of quirky oddballs in back-alley Tokyo in the 1950s and 1960s, were major box-office successes, and the first in the series virtually

swept Japan's Academy Awards and helped build the careers of a number of their stars. Each film is driven less by a central character-driven story and more by a set of interlocking tales that call attention to the time and spirit of early postwar Japan, and they have for that reason been described as virtually perfect vehicles for "Shōwa nostalgia," or the imagination of Japan's momentous Shōwa Era (1925-1988) as marked less by the imperialism and war that began it than by the economic miracles and largely stable politics that ended it (Asaba 2008). There really is no other "story" to speak of. Influenced by the structure of the original *manga*, Yamazaki seems almost obsessive-compulsively faithful to the logic of Chekhov's gun; in the case of *Always* and its sequels, however, the gun usually appears in something like Scene 2, becomes relevant in Scene 3, is resolved by Scene 4, then forgotten when a new dramatic weapon appears in Scene 5, with the process repeated through Scene 85. Calling the films "episodic" would understate their nearly amnesiac qualities, making in many ways the character arcs successful and meaningful in part because they replicated the hope with which public memory of the era has been retrofitted.

Though released in a small number of markets overseas, the *Always* films failed to make a real splash in any of them, and many of Yamazaki's subsequent Japanese blockbusters seem to have been even more perfectly designed to be largely irrelevant to the global box office. Some of this limited appeal results from the fact that Yamazaki is, at heart, a visual stylist dedicated to his action sequences and digital effects, though operating with budgets that make Hollywood-style visual spectacle nearly impossible even to simulate. *Always's* effects are clever, rendering postwar Tokyo in imagery that looked a bit hinky even at the time but that could pull off the illusion well enough to become only a limited distraction. But the sci-fi

battles of *Space Battleship Yamato* (2010) and his sci-fi two-parter *Kiseijū* (2014, 2015) are unlikely to impress anyone familiar with *Star Wars*, *Avatar*, or even the *Fast & Furious* franchise.

Quite beyond that, however, many of Yamazaki's films are drenched in nostalgia that would likely be mystifying to many audiences outside of Japan. One might enjoy the sentimental lunacy of *Space Battleship Yamato* without thinking too hard about the utter strangeness of the main character's climactic speech, exhorting his crew to be ready to fight just as were the doomed crew of the original World War II battleship *Yamato* were during the ship's suicide run immediately before the brutal, cataclysmic Battle of Okinawa. It is harder to do so, however, with Yamazaki's other "Best Picture" winner from the Japanese Academy, *The Eternal Zero* (2013). The author of the novel (Hyakuta 2009) on which the film is based, Hyakuta Naoki, has denied that it celebrates the *tokkōtai* (kamikaze) pilots of World War II, as the main character is a skilled pilot who wants to return to his family and to save as many of his colleagues as he can from what is understood to be a losing war. But the film also wants to eat its militarist cake, with many of its most dramatic scenes coming in the long and strikingly filmed aerial battles with the Japanese hero besting his American enemies, or scenes of dialogue in which the hero's contemporary grandchildren defend the pilots' legacy from callousness of young Japanese who understand nothing of war and sacrifice. As luridly violent and solipsistic antiwar films go, it nearly matches Oliver Stone's *Platoon* in its ham-handed criticisms of war but eagerness to represent it visually with bravado and spectacle without which, frankly, neither would have made much money or earned their respective nations' Best Picture Academy Awards.

Yamazaki's much less financially successful *Fueled: A Man Called Pirate*, also based on a novel (Hyakuta 2012) by the noted right-winger Hyakuta, aims to marry assertive nationalism to a sentimental treatment of the country's economic growth. Based loosely on the life and work of oil company founder Idemitsu Sazō, *Fueled* features its main character as a tough-minded and independent thinker whose drive to build a viable energy company for Japan is consistently threatened by foreign oil companies and the Japanese firms that had entered into unholy alliances with them. Indeed, the company Idemitsu Kōsan's decision to purchase oil from Iran immediately after it nationalized British Petroleum's oil fields became a landmark case for international law, but is treated largely in the film as a moment when the fictionalized version of Idemitsu sees an opportunity both to purchase oil on the cheap and also to make a strike for the colonized world against Western imperialism. Given that this scene takes place only nine years after the end of Japan's empire, from which Idemitsu profited as an upstart entrepreneur successfully selling oil to the South Manchuria Railway, it might be viewed as an odd representation of history, but contributes to the kind of Japanese story — like the long postwar — that Yamazaki frequently tells, one of a Japan struggling to rebuild itself from the ashes of defeat, even as Japanese responsibility for the conditions leading to that defeat are left largely unexamined.

There will be no *kamikaze*-piloted Zero fighters or nationalistic oil barons as figures in the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremonies, and the *Battleship Yamato* will play no role despite its crucial spot in not one but two of Yamazaki's films (2019's *The Great War of Archimedes* as the other). Indeed, even as the proponents of these films would likely emphasize the anti-

militarist messages that occasionally pop up between triumphant action set pieces, the idea of celebrating wartime military prowess would be nearly unthinkable for this era's Olympic Games, which supposedly rest more on the idea of peaceful competition than on the lucrative broadcast and advertising rights they earn. Yamazaki is smart, as are the organizers, and ostentatious or chauvinistic nationalism will likely play no part in the Ceremony or elsewhere in the games.

One question about the Tokyo's Opening Ceremony will be the role of race and ethnicity. Despite the official semi-silence on the role of ethnic diversity in the country, there has been pressure to represent the indigenous Ainu, mostly in Hokkaido, in the opening ceremony (Hirayama 2019). The ceremony might do more than that, and in ways that will be internationally visible, but will not be the full-throated assertion of multiculturalism in London 2012. In Abe Shinzō's 2006 book *Utsukushii kuni e* (Towards a Beautiful Country), the current prime minister extols the multiracial character of the French soccer team that won the 1998 World Cup, with players of African and Arab descent proudly contributing to the French victory. It is a fascinating aside, part of a longer discussion of the value of, in his view, those immigrants who move to a country in order to contribute to it rather than simply take from it, (Abe 2006: 85-95) in descriptions that make some uncomfortable claims about American immigration history. It is possible that mixed-race or immigrant athletes will feature prominently in the Opening Ceremony, given the success of mixed-race athletes like tennis player Naomi Osaka, basketball player Rui Hachimura, baseball pitcher Yu Darvish, and sprinter Abdul Hakim Sani Brown, as well as the immense popularity of the Japanese national rugby team, which is comprised largely of mixed-race and immigrant players particularly from South Africa and

Pacific Island nations. That said, it seems inconceivable that Yamazaki would be so bold as to engage in a Boyle-like celebration of Japan's current multiculturalism, with large numbers of foreign residents, particularly from Asian neighbors like China, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Nepal.

But sentimental nationalism - in the form of a story of How We Collectively Rebuilt Our Country - will likely be central, particularly given the "Requiem and Rebirth" theme that Yamazaki and Nomura announced. To be sure, the Ceremony will pay some attention to the 2011 tsunami and perhaps nuclear disaster - an act of Nature for which no people, whether TEPCO or government regulators, will be depicted as bearing any particular responsibility - and it will likely be narrated as a miniaturized version of postwar Japan, of a country emerging from a catastrophe whose victims ought to be mourned and to which surviving Japanese are, collectively and without recrimination, cooperating to respond. Whatever other visual flourishes - spectacular fireworks or laser shows, appearances by Doraemon or Super Mario - play important roles in the Ceremony, we should expect that it will repeat and largely reproduce a story of Japan that serves simultaneously as a challenge to contemporary Japanese to show the collective drive their predecessors did, and to the world to accept and recognize the commitments to peace and development that have allowed Japan's rebirth to occur.

Will The Story Matter?

Unlike Zhang and Boyle, Yamazaki is not a major figure in international film, despite his

critical and commercial successes in Japan. Both Kitano Takeshi and Miike Takashi have directed commercially successful films that have won international awards, but both have often relied on hyper-violent, even crackpot imagery that would likely be viewed as inappropriate for the director of an Olympic ceremony. Koreeda Hirokazu is one of the world's most respected directors, but slow, contemplative films dealing with the consequences of inequality and precarity seem similarly inappropriate; one might as well build a Ryoanji replica and focus the camera on that. Prime Minister Abe has made little effort to conceal his distaste for Koreeda's work (Blair 2018), and Japan's most globally successful filmmaker, Ghibli's Miyazaki Hayao, has publicly expressed his own contempt for Abe's pro-military position (Yoshida 2015) not to mention Hyakuta's work (J-Cast News 2013), not helping the chances of either, even were Miyazaki 20 years younger and still actively making films. And so Yamazaki, whose films Abe reportedly enjoys, would seem to be a natural fit for the Tokyo Olympic games, even as there is vanishingly little evidence that anyone outside of Japan actually knows about, let alone enjoys, his films. So should we expect that his vision will in fact be internationally successful?

This is virtually impossible to predict, and will be tellingly difficult to assess even after the Games are finished. Much easier to predict is the likelihood that analysts will both assume that there is wide enthusiasm for his vision and that its meaning will be globally transparent. This tendency to project our own views of our countries onto global audiences, to assume that 'they' see 'us' the way we see ourselves, is a common problem in many discussions of 'soft power.'" This term, developed by the esteemed political scientist Joseph Nye (Nye 1990a; Nye 1990b) but ignored and/or derided by most scholars of international relations, makes

frequent appearances in works by journalists or policy specialists eager to show that a country's appeal – often seen in the popularity of its cultural products or "values," whatever one determines them to be – has important consequences for its ability to get what it wants on the global stage. And while few political scientists argue that soft power can be meaningfully evaluated or that it is genuinely important in the rough-and-tumble world of global politics, the term's visibility legitimates observers' own judgments about what their countries represent and their presumptions that other countries share in those judgments and act upon them. For Nye, even writing in the early 1990s, America is a country of openness, democracy, and tolerance – despite its imperial wars and continuing systems of profound racial inequality and religious tensions – and its soft power would be based presumably on that, with the expectation that everyone in the world knew America was the country of *Dead Poets Society*, and not the country of *Rambo*. Similarly, when Japanese popular culture visibly penetrated more international markets in the late 1990s and early 2000s, an article by the American journalist Douglas McGray (2002) helped to cement the idea that Japan too had soft power, and that it was based on the country's "coolness," as demonstrated in a major 2003 "Cool Japan" symposium (*Nikkei Shimbun* 2003; also Tadokoro 2003). As with the American debates, there was very little evidence that the spread of Japanese popular culture had consequences for what Japan could and could not accomplish in global politics, despite the centrality of this to Nye's definition. But instead soft power became an opportunity for journalists and diplomatic thinkers to write, often without much critical reflection, about what their countries meant, and how these meanings were understood and valued elsewhere (Iwabuchi 2002; Leheny 2006; Leheny 2018).

Yamazaki's Opening Ceremony will likely produce the same result. Despite his limited global profile, his demonstrated skill at retelling a national story that is so ubiquitous as to be largely taken for granted in a fair amount of Japanese popular culture will likely make certain aspects of his ceremony highly legible and coherent for viewers in Japan. Its visual touches and good-hearted humor – another trademark of many of his films – will almost certainly earn it applause overseas, particularly by viewers and writers eager to take stock of a country's creative talents in this once-every-four-years fantasia. And we should expect that that international praise, combined with the domestic familiarity of the story, will lead to widely shared and reproduced commentary in Japan that international viewers now understand what Japan really is, having learned the true story of Japan from a master storyteller whose energetic vision will have surely convinced others of the inherent goodness of the nation. As the stuff of international politics goes, it will be mostly inconsequential and harmless, and it will likely be good fun. But it also offers the chance to explore how a ceremony can reproduce moral and historical claims that remain largely unexamined, and how closed to challenge and contestation an Opening might be.

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