

## The Short-Lived Stardom of Tony Tani

### -America, Parody, and Popular Culture in Post-Occupation Japan-

トニー谷の短いスターダム：占領後におけるアメリカ、風刺、大衆文化

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#### 要旨

占領終結後の数年間、トニー谷は日本の大衆文化において旋風を巻き起こし、新しいナショナル・メディアとして登場したテレビにおいても中心的なスターになると一部で予想されていた。しかしテレビにおいては朝鮮戦争期のライブ及びラジオで見られた熱狂的な支持を得ることはなかった。本稿では、トニー谷を「占領後」の時代におけるアメリカ・イメージの転換及び大衆文化における再男性化の側面から再検討する。

#### 1. Introduction

Tony Tani was a much hated man. In the summer of 1955, his son Masami was kidnapped as he returned home from school by a man who reportedly resented the vaudevillian's obnoxious style. Japan's mass media closely reported the daily twists and turns of the investigation as the nation held its breath. Some unkindly speculated that the sensational incident was just another performance by the flamboyant showman to attract attention. Others harassed the distressed father with various prank phone calls pretending to be the kidnapper. A week after the kidnapping, the perpetrator of the crime materialized in Tokyo to collect his ransom and was promptly arrested. Masami was found unharmed and Tony was happily reunited with his son.

Unfortunately for Tony, his ordeal did not end there. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the influential magazine *Shūkan Asahi* issued a "warning" to Tony that he needed to rein in his obnoxious performances. Blaming the victim for the incident, the magazine exposed Tony's previously obscure past and conducted an unflattering "social analysis" of the performer. While he continued to make

occasional appearances on stage, in films, and on TV, Tony Tani's public presence diminished considerably after the ransom crisis and ensuing bashing. When he made reappearances on stage and on TV, his shows were subjected to numerous viewer complaints for their indecency and "un-Japaneseness." His presence was offensive even as nostalgic relic: When a TV show organized a retrospective on the postwar jazz boom in which Tony Tani had been a conspicuous presence, Tony was not invited because the musicians refused to perform in his presence. His death in 1987 went largely unnoticed, overshadowed by the death of the national idol Ishihara Yūjirō the following day, whose sudden rise to stardom in the mid-1950s coincided with Tony's public demotion.

Today it is easy to lose sight of the remarkable popularity that Tony Tani enjoyed in the early 1950s. While Nakahara Yumihiko and Muramatsu Tomomi's writings have shed light on Tony Tani based on their personal experiences and interviews,<sup>1</sup> the ephemerality of his popularity has relegated him to the margins of Japan's postwar popular culture. Drawing on contemporary sources, this paper excavates Tony's piercing voice and situates his short-lived stardom within the political and cultural shifts of the post-occupation period.

## 2. Emergence

At the peak of Tony Tani's popularity in the early 1950s, crowds erupted in response to his provocatively indecent performances. Ostentatiously clad in national colors with bright red coat and white pants, his face snobbishly styled with moustache, all-back hair and Marilyn Monroe-style glasses, he would regale audiences with his signature greeting: "Ladies and gentlemen! And *ototsan okkasan!* Good evening, *okonbanwa!* This is Mr. Tony Tani *zansu!*"<sup>2</sup> If audience members jeered him, he quickly retaliated with a Japanese or English version of "Shut up!" as the crowd roared with laughter. Frequently performing as MC during the postwar jazz boom of the early 1950s, he would ridicule star performers like Eri Chiemi and Yukimura Izumi, referring to the popular girls as "Geri (diarrhea) Chiemi" and "Yukimura Nezumi (rat)." During performances, Tony Tani would occasionally intrude upon the stage and perform vulgar dances.<sup>3</sup> The obnoxious MC regularly stole the show.

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<sup>1</sup> Nakahara Yumihiko, *Nihon no kigekijin* (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 1972). Muramatsu Tomomi, *Tony Tani zansu* (Tokyo: Mainichi shinbunsha, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Ototsan okkasan* is a folksy way of referring to father and mother. It provided a comically jarring contrast to the refined, and to some audience members obscure, "ladies and gentleman." *Okonbanwa* is a variation of *konbanwa* (good evening), with the formal "o" incongruously attached. It was a stab against the upper-class habit of attaching "o" to words to sound refined. *Zansu* was a similar stab which became a national joke, as described later.

<sup>3</sup> Nakahara, p.52.

A key skill behind Tony Tani's popularity was his ability to improvise line after satirical line of pidgin Japanese-English in the traditional Japanese 7-5 syllabic rhythm. Tony defined this gift of "ad lib" as follows: "Becoming one with the audience, asserting one's personality but not interfering with others, and improvising lines musically in rhythm with the times, with parodic punch."<sup>4</sup> While his claim of "not interfering with others" is at best dubious, the musical analogy is fitting as jazz music was a central component of Tony's identity.

*Riberaru* (Liberal), a *kasutori* magazine epitomizing the postwar celebration of carnal pleasures, was a publication dear to Tony's heart. He studiously collected the issues until it ceased publication in 1953.<sup>5</sup> In one of the last issues of the magazine, Tony wrote a short memoir in which he recounted his encounter with jazz.

Growing up in the Ginza district, where his enterprising grandfather had sold gas lamps he purchased from an American merchant in Yokohama, Tony speculates that he would have become a *kabuki* actor under normal circumstances. His mother frequently took the young Tony to *kabuki* shows and hoped for him to become a *geisha* assistant. However, he ended up becoming a boy who "grew up with jazz, was expelled from the country because of jazz, survived through jazz, and was now making a living through jazz." The turning point came one Christmas night when the young Tony was invited to a party in Yokohama through an American family friend. There he heard jazz for the first time and fell in love with the rhythmical music. Much to the dismay of his mother, he began practicing drums and joined a jazz band in Yokohama. He learned English and acquired rudimentary knowledge of numerous other languages through his interactions with the diverse people in the port city.

Jazz became increasingly popular in Japan, but soon the militarization of society began encroaching on the "enemy" music. The military police cracked down on jazz clubs in Yokohama, to which Tony often responded by scuffling with the armed officials. One time he was arrested and beaten after a drunken performance. Tony easily endured the beating because he was ready to "die for jazz." With his music effectively banned in wartime Japan, Tony escaped to Shanghai, where he spent time working at a night club.

For Tony, the inclusive and rhythmic music of jazz represented the passion of his youth that was brutally extinguished by the militarization of Japanese society. Tony returned to a war-devastated Japan where his music could be enjoyed once again. The music was now not simply a manifestation of modern American culture; it became the symbolic music of the occupation forces. Undeterred by

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Tani, "Saizansu jinseikan" *All Yomiuri* (April 1954) p.101.

<sup>5</sup> Yoshiyuki Junnosuke and Tony Tani, "Majime ningen ni tenkō?" *Asahi geinō* (February 12, 1967) p.62.

this association, Tony embraced his music—and the occupation—with unapologetic zeal.

Tony caught sight of the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater (soon to be requisitioned and re-named Ernie Pyle Theater) and a poster announcing the recruitment of dance troop members for the occupation forces upon his return to Tokyo. An English speaker and a lover of beautiful legs, he “immediately knew” this was the place for him to work. He was hired and began busily screening girls for the Ernie Pyle dance troop and their first performance, Gilbert and Sullivan’s “The Mikado.” He was soon recruited to work for the office coordinating entertainment shows for the occupation forces. The sole Japanese to work in the office, he enjoyed the power to freely draft celebrities with the backing of the occupation, sending all bills to the Japanese government. “I felt like I had conquered the world,” he wrote. Having learned the “tastes of white people” in the past, he built his reputation by putting on shows that effectively catered to them.

His job entailed periodically borrowing records at an exclusive club. Here he met his future wife. As they could not afford a wedding ceremony, Tony Tani put on a wedding performance for the occupation forces, himself offering comic English commentary on the rituals. A large crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of the exotic ceremony. “Even Mrs. MacArthur was there!” he boasted. The ceremony, complete with lavish traditional and western costumes, champagne, and live music—including a montage of traditional Japanese court music and jazz—was paid for by the Japanese government.

Such was the way that Tony Tani recounted his transwar relationship with jazz in his beloved magazine. As a good jazz man, Tony took pride in his improvisational skills. His wedding performance anticipated another key element behind his popularity: parodic embodiment. Far from being put off by the orientalist gaze of the occupation forces, Tony catered to it by playing with their stereotypes—and used it to pay for his wedding. Similar to Japanese jazz bands, Tony’s primary audience eventually shifted from the occupation forces to the Japanese people and gained mass support.

Quite possibly, Tony has distorted or embellished portions of his story to fit his postwar persona. One may, for example, question the veracity of Tony’s self-portrayal as a thoroughly anti-military jazz boy during the war. Even after reporters had systematically dug up information about the enigmatic eyesore in the mid-1950s, much remained obscure about his wartime past. Tony was notorious for completing shutting out old acquaintances from his life after his rise to fame. Regarding his stint in the military, he disclosed little except to admit that there was a time when the draft caught up with him and quickly changed the topic with: “Tony Tani in military uniform, dear reader, please imagine this.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Tani, “Boku no jijoden,” *Riberaru*(April 1953) p.148-152.

### 3. Zansu

Tony Tani's skills of improvisation and parodic embodiment gave rise to a host of indecent jokes that spread with remarkable speed in early 1950s Japan. One such expression was *zansu*. Tony explained, "Today, smart children all over Japan have begun to use *zansu* to say 'Yes, that's right.' They also use it as a greeting, facing each other and saying on cue, '*zansu*'."<sup>7</sup>

Tony Tani recalls the origins of this peculiar expression:

The origins of *zansu* can be traced back to when I was working in Takarazuka. I used to go to the Takarazuka dancing hall every day. There I met the madams of Ashiya [an exclusive residential area close to Kōbe]. "Today you look especially pretty," I would say. "Oh my, is that so? [*Ara, saizaamasuno, ohoho*]" they would reply. I modified *zaamasu* to *zansu* and used it on stage. The crowd exploded in laughter. I thought this will be a hit. Yes, that's right [*saizansu*].<sup>8</sup>

Tony was a parodic embodiment of the Japanese-American in occupied Japan. Historically, the Japanese people comprising the major emigration boom to America in the Meiji period tended to be of the less privileged classes. When some of them returned to Japan as members of the occupation forces, they became the object of popular resentment because of their "un-Japanese" and originally lower-class nature, in addition to their privileged attachment to the occupying forces. The fact that they embodied the extensive Americanization of Japan proceeding under the occupation added to the resentment. The incongruous sight of the slickly dressed "Japanese-American" and self-proclaimed "number one handsome boy" speaking like an upper-class madam struck a popular chord. The Ashiya madams were a comically anachronistic object of parodic laughter as survivors of the old order, blissfully out of touch with the turmoil of wartime and postwar Japan. At a time when American Cold War strategy was chaperoning the more fortunate members of Japan's wartime ruling elite out of the postwar purge and back into power as lower ranking prisoners remained incarcerated, the old madams were an especially timely symbol of Japan's state as the occupation drew to a close. While wartime and postwar experiences had transformed the lives and thoughts of many, it was becoming evident that Japan's political order, like the Ashiya madams, would be able to survive remarkably unchanged.

The fact that *zansu* had been an expression used in Edo's Yoshiwara pleasure quarters added a

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<sup>7</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, "Ya konnichiwa," *Shūkan Yomiuri* (May 9, 1954) p.26.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Tani, "Saizansu jinseikan," p.101.

further linguistic layer adding to its parodic punch. Combined with his gaudy Americanism, this made Tony's image overlap with another occupation-era icon and popular object of parodic imitation among children: the *panpan* prostitutes serving the American occupiers. In the post-occupation period, the *zansu* joke proliferated together with discourse on the *panpan* which typically sought to contain their subversive effects on Japan's social body by depicting them as vulnerable and tragic victims.<sup>9</sup> In reality, *panpan*, like Tony Tani, had often been seen as an assertively obnoxious presence that undermined Japan's patriarchal dignity.

In a variation of his *zansu* joke, Tony Tani once enacted an aristocratic youth and spoke in quaint court language. He claimed to be a graduate of Gakushūin (Peer's School), only to qualify the claim with, "That was back when Gakushūin was in Fukagawa [a plebeian district in Tokyo]." Some did not get the joke, with one audience member writing a letter to Tony announcing that he had done some research and discovered the claim to be a lie. "It's difficult when people don't understand my resistance against those types of special schools," Tony Tani commented.<sup>10</sup> However, the remarkable spread of *zansu* shows that many did get the joke and his "resistance" against entrenched class privilege that gave rise to it.

Tony Tani has been characterized as a performer who was unpresentable to the emperor despite his popularity and non-affiliation with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Indeed, imperial continuity was a logical target for his *zansu* joke, which struck a popular chord at a time when calls for Hirohito's abdication were subsiding and the "people's plaza" in front of the imperial palace was being re-claimed from the unruly masses of the early postwar ferment. Tony at times appeared to be yet another postwar claimant to the imperial throne, chanting unholy prayers in Shintō priest garb. As a Ginza boy, he may also have inherited the resentment against imperial arrogance of an earlier era, epitomized by Tokyo's "low city" denizens' avoidance of the newly built Tokyo Station, which haughtily fronted toward the imperial palace.<sup>11</sup>

Later, a more explicit criticism of the postwar emperor came from Mishima Yukio, for whom the target was not the continuity of imperial privileges, but rather the emperor's disowning of imperial traditions and spineless adaptations to serve the postwar status quo. Mishima Yukio and Tony Tani do not appear to have much in common. With his Gakushūin upbringing and ornate writing style, Mishima may well have been yet another target of Tony's Edokko-esque aristocratic parodies. During Tony Tani's heyday in the early 1950s, however, there were striking connections between the two

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa* (New York: Routledge, 2001) p.104-105.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, "Ya konnichiwa," p.25.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City* (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1983) p.79.

with their perilous parodies of Japan's subordinate independence under the American imperium.

Mishima rose to fame in 1949 with his semi-autobiographical "Confessions of a Mask," a deeply introspective novel exploring the torments of a homosexual youth growing up in wartime Japan. This was the same year that Tony Tani emerged onto the national scene by MCing for the San Francisco Seals' Japan tour. Mishima won further popular acclaim in 1954 with his best-selling "The Sound of Waves," a romantic novel set in a traditional island community. Mishima's response to his sudden popularity was far from celebratory: he vowed to make readers uncomfortable and incur their hatred in his subsequent work. Having challenged heterosexual ideology in previous works, in "The Sound of the Waves," Mishima had parodically embraced the established morality by writing a "healthy" romantic story of a young man and woman who overcome numerous obstacles to reach the goal of marriage. However, the element of parody was lost on much of his audience, including subsequent literary scholars.

Mishima's contemporaneous novel "The City of Love," another romantic story culminating in marriage, did not attract nearly as much popular acclaim or scholarly attention.<sup>12</sup> In addition to its form of publication—serialized in the woman's magazine *Shufu no tomo*—this may have stemmed from the stronger element of parody in this novel, with the target of heterosexual marital ideology intertwined with the "colonial" state of Japan after the American occupation. Mishima chose as the subject of this novel the "people living in the most international ambience" in Korean War period Tokyo, "a city reputed as 'the second Shanghai' or 'Tokyo International Settlement' or 'colonial city.'" <sup>13</sup> This was, in another words, Tony Tani's world.

The protagonist, Mayumi, is an attractive English speaking young woman working as manager of a Japanese jazz band catering to American military personnel. She works alongside "Honey Kami" (ハニー紙), an obnoxious MC obviously modelled after Tony Tani. Honey Kami is no more than a peripheral prop in the novel, but it is worth noting that he is portrayed as a reliable colleague who cooperates with Mayumi as she manipulates an American gentleman and rescues her drummer from a sticky situation. The members of Mayumi's all-male band covertly refer to her as "sacred virgin" because of her firm conduct keeping prospective suitors at bay, especially American men who found her hard to resist. Beneath her thoroughly Americanized façade which led some to mistake her for a *panpan*, Mayumi is a fervent nationalist who worshipped the emperor and derived sadistic pleasure from repeatedly flirting with American men, only to deny them at the last moment.

Her "ironic resistance" against America was instilled by Maruyama Gorō, a youth member of an

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<sup>12</sup> Takeuchi Kayo, "Mishima Yukio 'Shiosai' to 'Koi no miyako': 'Jun'ai' shōsetsu ni eijiru han heterosexualizumu to sengo nihon," *Jendā kenkyū* (March 26, 2009) p.61-69.

<sup>13</sup> Mishima Yukio zenshū V.4 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2001) p.666.

ultra-nationalist group with whom she had vowed to marry on the day of Japan's victory in the Greater East Asia War. After the war, Mayumi discovered that Maruyama had committed *seppuku* with Japan's defeat. Mayumi supported her illness-stricken parents through her work and continued to clandestinely wage war on behalf of Maruyama—her deceased love, her emperor. Somewhat abruptly, the novel crescendos toward its climax with the revelation that Maruyama had in fact survived the war. The two lovers reunite. Maruyama recounts how he had been sent to Shanghai shortly before the war ended and had become an American spy. Having purchased American citizenship in Hong Kong, he now went by the name of Frank Kondō. He asks her to marry him and go live with him in New York, where he had been offered a high-ranking job.

Overwhelmed, Mayumi defers her answer and seeks the counsel of Sakaguchi, the senior member of her band and a trusted friend. The latter firmly advises her to marry her old love—if not, she would regret the decision for the rest of her life. In the course of offering this advice, Sakaguchi confesses that he himself was about to propose to her in an earlier scene. In the scene, when Sakaguchi began complaining about his marriage, the unsuspecting Mayumi had cut him off, warning him that he might regret pouring his heart out to a woman. Sakaguchi thanked her for the kind rebuke and ventured no further. “I will leave it as ‘family circumstances’, Tony Tani style,” he quipped, to which the two shared a hearty laugh. In the end, wiping away her tears, Mayumi follows Sakaguchi's advice. When Frank Kondō calls as promised for Mayumi's answer to his proposal, she responds with Tony Tani-esque pidgin, in a “clear voice devoid of emotion”: “Yes *desuwa*.”

Readers with the natural penchant to identify emotionally with the fated lovers torn apart by war were not treated to a feel-good denouement. Maruyama Gorō's Americanization and Mayumi's “clear voice devoid of emotion” added strong dissonance to the triumph of matrimonial union. In this denaturalization of mainstream gender ideology and Japan's postwar “embrace” of America, Mishima and Tony Tani stood on common ground in the early 1950s.

#### 4. “Family Circumstances”

“Family circumstances” was another signature joke of Tony Tani. This phrase had been a commonly used excuse, as in “I will not be able to attend due to family circumstances.” Tony rendered this previously legitimate excuse powerless through ridiculous over-usage typified in a line in one of his songs: “Even falling in love is due to family circumstances.” In a conversation with Tony, the cartoonist Kondō Hidezō characterized the phrase as his “number one masterpiece.” Tony replied, “I myself find it scary that this phrase cannot be used seriously anymore.”<sup>14</sup> What he did not mention in connection to the phrase was his own complicated “family circumstances,” brought

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<sup>14</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, “Ya konnichiwa,” p.26.



up by a violent father rumored to have been the older brother of his true father, who had died before Tony's birth.<sup>15</sup> While Tony repeatedly employed his "family circumstances" joke with sadistic glee, it was a phrase that stemmed from his own painful past. It also stemmed from the tendency to value his own family above all else after the disillusionment with wartime Japan's grand ideologies. While he was a meticulous follower of current events and did not shy away from political parodies, Tony's unabashed privileging of his own family reflected his resolve to be true to his postwar self.

*Asahi shinbun* studiously analyzed the popularity of this joke, pointing out that it was the remarkable elasticity of the phrase that made people laugh. It speculated that this all-purpose nature of the phrase may be uniquely Japanese: "In the West, this phrase cannot be used so frequently. Even if it is used, it cannot have a comical effect." It observed that in Japan there was a formal "heaviness" to the phrase which allowed it to be used as a euphemistic shield to protect oneself from prying questions. It concluded by stating that the over-reliance on "family circumstances" excuses was a form of egotism detrimental to the public good. "Today, we cannot afford to be laughingly invoking 'family circumstances' everywhere," it declared.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, Tony's transformation of the phrase into a national joke through his parodic embodiment was far more influential than the newspaper's prudish admonishment issued from a moral high ground. While Tony poked fun at the all-purpose phrase, his critique stemmed from the recognition of people's weaknesses, including his own. This recognition allowed for an inclusive comedic effect, where people could laugh at themselves via his caricatured performance. Tony's jokes were especially infectious among children and youths. In a conversation with Tony Tani, the cartoonist Kondō Hidezō pretended to be one of the many concerned parents. He complained that his young son had become a fan of Tony's Sunday night "radio vaudeville" show and would refuse to go to bed without listening to it. Kondō would order his son to stop listening to such a morally depraved and useless program, but to no avail. Tony retorted by accusing Kondō himself of being a regular listener, to which Kondō confessed that was the case.

Kondō: It's difficult because humans are attracted to things that are considered useless or injurious to public morals.

Tony: Humans are by nature scatterbrained. People listen to my show and act offended, criticizing it as injurious to public morals. Then, by the time of the next broadcast, they are back in front of the radio to check if this Tony Tani character has repented...

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<sup>15</sup> "Ōtani Shōtarō toiu otoko," *Shūkan Asahi* (July 31, 1955) p.6.

<sup>16</sup> *Asahi shinbun* (April 16, 1954) Evening edition, p.1.

Later in the conversation, Tony described how a “fighting spirit” bubbles up inside him when he sees a microphone. Kondō replied, “In Japan, a person who experiences fighting spirit upon seeing a microphone is defined as scatterbrained.” Tony shot back with feigned outrage, “Fine, fine. I’ll be the scatterbrained snob. I am scatterbrained. I am a snob. Sorry, but that’s what I am.”<sup>17</sup> Embracing his identity as a “scatterbrained snob” unable to change his ways, and for whom “family circumstances” trumped all other concerns, Tony positioned himself as the target for people’s laughter. Enacting a caricatured mirror image of the Japanese people, he reflected this laughter back onto the people.

A signature prop of Tony that dovetailed with the anti-social tone of “family circumstances” was the abacus. On stage, Tony would often tap the instrument like the jazz drummer he once aspire to be as he rapidly calculated the prices of a dizzying array of things, with the calculations seamlessly segueing into one parodic punch after another. Tony’s abacus debuted during Tony’s performance in the Imperial Theater where he played a pimp, tapping his abacus rhythmically as he auctioned off his naked girls.<sup>18</sup> This scene mirrored the Japanese government’s preparations for the impending American occupation, where it had quickly organized a group of officially employed prostitutes to serve the occupation forces and thereby protect the “chastity of Japan.” The Korean War also made the abacus an especially timely prop, symbolizing the Japanese economy’s recovery thanks to the destructive war on the neighboring peninsula. As Tony’s obscene abacus parodically anticipated, economic prowess would soon become the new basis of Japan’s national identity with the onset of rapid economic growth.

In addition to the abacus, the sword was also a common prop in Tony Tani’s performances. A typically over-the-top example was his 1954 movie “Saizansu nitōryu,” where Tony plays the son of the legendary Edo period swordsman Miyamoto Musashi who is challenged to a duel by an archenemy. Having learned the art of professional wrestling from a group of American women wrestlers, he is able to fend off his enemy until the battle is happily ended through mediation. The poster of this movie shows an exuberant Tony ostentatiously tapping an abacus with both hands, his sword stored safely on his back. During the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese ideologues had emphasized the idealistic nature of Japan’s imperial expansion. Unlike the acquisitive and exploitative Western imperialists, Japan had “overcome the modern” and was acting to liberate Asia. An idealistic sword was flaunted while the vulgar abacus was hidden from view. After the defeat, Japan was deprived of its sword amidst the occupation’s program to demilitarize and democratize the nation. In the realm of popular culture, sword battle scenes were censored out. However by the time of Tony Tani’s rise

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<sup>17</sup> Kondō Hidezō and Tony Tani, “Ya konnichiwa,” p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Tani, “Saizansu jinseikan,” p.101.

to fame, the “reverse course” in the occupation was manifesting itself in efforts to revive Japan’s military while the lifting of occupation censorship allowed for the reappearance of traditional sword fighting scenes in movies. It was in such a context that Tony Tani repeatedly performed outlandish performances with both sword and abacus.

Tony also repeatedly rebuked the remilitarization of Japan with his sharp tongue. Responding to the common criticism that he was degrading Japan’s language and sense of morality, he shot back that the real culprit for such degradation was the Japanese government’s reversion to wartime ways as epitomized in the slogan for recruiting members of the reconstructed military: “The National Safety Forces are real men (*hoantai wa otoko de gozaru*).”<sup>19</sup> In a 1954 New Year’s dialogue with the comedian Tange Kiyoko, Tony noted the accelerated moves toward remilitarization and included these remarks in his otherwise typically rambling comments: “It’s so wasteful to sacrifice your life for the nation. You should feel the joy of life and live a long long life (*long long nagaiki shitene*).”<sup>20</sup> Tony was famous for his close attention to current events, from which emerged his deluge of parodic pronouncements targeting a wide range of topics. Among them, the postwar move to rebuild Japan’s military in response to American strategic demands was a favorite target.

The arbitrary power of Tony’s “family circumstances” was reminiscent of the American occupation’s designation of areas “off limits” to the native population. With the exception of Okinawa and base areas like Yokohama, much of the “off limits” areas were being returned to Japanese rule by the early 1950s. The proliferation of the “family circumstances” joke parodically echoed this previously ubiquitous phrase of the occupation period. As restrictions delimiting areas “off limits” in discourse were also officially lifted with the end of occupation, a series of movies were released in 1953 that were problematized in the American media as “anti-American.” Censorship took another form as Japanese film regulators responded to the pressure by calling on restraint in the portrayal of American military bases and the problem of “mixed blood children” fathered by American soldiers.<sup>21</sup> In addition to American pressure, there was also the general trend of re-establishing prewar propriety through a coercive culture of voluntary restraint. As this trend strengthened, Tony Tani would increasingly be seen as an “un-Japanese” nuisance that violated the nation’s communal understanding to leave “family circumstances” undisturbed.

## 5. Propriety Strikes Back

Even during the peak of his popularity, commentators often cast doubt on the durability of Tony’s

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<sup>19</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, “Ya konnichiwa,” p.24.

<sup>20</sup> *Yomiuri Shinbun* (January 1, 1954) p.13.

<sup>21</sup> Toba Kōichi, *1950 nendai: “Kioku” no jidai* (Tokyo: Kawade books, 2010) p.99-100.

popularity. His obnoxiously indecent style gave rise to his remarkable popularity but it also contained the seeds of his downfall. How would he survive after his signature jokes grew old? Tony replied that he was working to diversify his repertoire to become a well-rounded entertainer like Danny Kaye.<sup>22</sup> On another occasion, he held up a newspaper and defiantly declared that as long as newspapers existed, his popularity would continue.<sup>23</sup> Yet by the mid-1950s, Tony's peak had passed together with the jazz boom. In 1954, he starred in a four-part "family circumstances" movie series but the reception was relatively cool. One fervent fan reminisces that even he could no longer interest himself in watching these movies.<sup>24</sup> Tony himself would later fondly reminisce the short period from 1952 to 1953, the heyday of the jazz boom and his exhilarating live performances.<sup>25</sup> In March 1955, an incident where Tony Tani reportedly yelled at a little girl made front page news. The article warned Tony that he would be disowned and forgotten by the Japanese people if he did not learn to appreciate his fans.<sup>26</sup> While this was certainly not the first time that Tony had been involved in such incidents, by the mid-1950s public tolerance for his behavior seemed to be wearing thin. The incident foreshadowed the more devastating kidnapping crisis and ensuing anti-Tony campaign that effectively marked the end of his days as a popular performer.

After his son was kidnapped, Tony Tani appeared daily in the mass media as a distressed father. There was not a trace of the flamboyant vaudevillian in him as he desperately begged for Masami's safe return. The mass media's close reporting made the incident a national crisis. School children wrote open letters to the kidnapper, the prime minister worried as a grandfather, and some suggested that the perpetrator of such a heinous crime should receive the death sentence. The ending of the crisis a week later was anticlimactic. The kidnapper came to collect his ransom in Tokyo and delivered himself into the hands of police. Masami was discovered unharmed in Nagano where he had reportedly spent the week playing with the kidnapper's family.

As the nation heaved a collective sigh of relief, Tony Tani and his wife appeared on TV and drew the ire of viewers for failing to show sufficient gratitude.<sup>27</sup> Many chose to neglect the reason for their reportedly cold demeanor, which stemmed from the chaotic situation at Ōmiya station preventing them from meeting Masami upon his return. Tony first received news of his son's safety on the noon NTV news. He and his wife headed to the station to greet him, only to find the platform engulfed in an unruly crowd that had rushed there to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. When Masami

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<sup>22</sup> "Tony Tani tetsugaku no tanjō," *Jinbutsu Ōrai* (January 1955) p.49.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, "Ya konnichiwa," p.24.

<sup>24</sup> Nakahara, p.55.

<sup>25</sup> Muramatsu, p.182.

<sup>26</sup> *Yomiuri Shinbun* (March 22, 1955, Evening edition) p.1.

<sup>27</sup> "Terebi geppyō," *Yomiuri Shinbun* (July 31, 1955, evening edition) p.4.

disembarked from the train, police officers whisked him away by car, leaving the exhausted parents lost in a sea of spectators. After tearfully protesting the situation, Tony got onto a journalist's car in pursuit of Masami.<sup>28</sup> It was after this ordeal that Tony and his wife were placed in front of the cameras to answer reporters' questions.

The most extended post-crisis bashing came from the influential magazine *Shūkan Asahi*, which took advantage of the incident to conduct a "social analysis" of Tony Tani. The renowned social critic Ōya Soichi explained that the incident was a reflection of the "colonial" state of Japan. Ransom incidents reflected the breakdown of the social order that had prevailed in the good old days. The "Shanghai-zation" of Japan marked by the weakening of police powers and traditional family and community ties provided the climate where petty criminals were encouraged to take their chances in challenging the law. The incident was also notable in that the target, Tony Tani, epitomized Japan's colonial state. Ōya related how during the westernization boom of the Meiji period, westernized pen names such as George Tani and Thomas Kitabayashi became popular. However, he vented, at least these half-western names were written in *kanji* characters. Tony Tani's first name was written in obnoxiously un-Japanese *katakana* style. Ōya lamented the colonial state of Japan where such a performer of unclear nationality could gain popularity. Citing the criminal's complaints against Tony Tani's obnoxious broadcasts, Ōya remarked that there was some justification to the crime. Tony was also partly to blame for the hateful pranksters who repeatedly called his home during the crisis, as their actions stemmed from the resentment he had accumulated. Ōya ended his tirade by pointing out that Tony Tani always wore a wig in public to hide his balding head. He also wore a metaphoric wig to hide his past. The fact that such a shady man could become so popular was yet another reflection of the sorry state of colonial Japan.<sup>29</sup>

Ōya's jeremiad against Tony Tani was remarkable for its all-out antagonism and apparent desire to exorcise the "colonial" from postwar Japan. His repeated lamentations to the contrary, the "colonial" in Japan was commonly perceived to have dissipated by this time. The *Shūkan Asahi* "warning" came just a few days after the JCP's Sixth Party Conference which officially repudiated its 1951 party platform calling for armed resistance against Japan's colonization by the American occupation. For leftist activists during the peak of Tony's popularity, "colonization" was the paradigm through which they interpreted the state of Japan and organized their actions. Much of the resulting campaigns took place within a short two-year period coinciding with the formal end of the occupation. With the dawning of rapid economic growth in the mid-1950s, the paradigm was officially discarded.

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<sup>28</sup> "Masami-chan Tokyo ni kaeru," *Yomiuri Shinbun* (July 22, 1955, evening edition) p.3.

<sup>29</sup>"Tony Tani ni chūkoku suru," *Shūkan Asahi* (July 31, 1955) p.4-5.

Tony's performances at Waseda University—a bastion of leftist student radicalism—have been described as the most intense. As his shows moved from Waseda to Shinjuku and to central Tokyo, they became watered down—a progression running in the opposite direction of most performers.<sup>30</sup> His affinity with these students led the cartoonist Kondō Hidezō to ask Tony if he was a reader of the JCP newspaper *Akahata*. “No, I don’t. I don’t read things that go against my emotions,” Tony snapped. He elaborated in typically quirky fashion that *Akahata* had once misreported his famous folksy reference to “father” as *otossan* instead of *ototsan*. He described this as a fatal error reflecting the paper’s lack of “linguistic sense.”<sup>31</sup> Though unstated, the revolutionary party’s ideological rigidity and military style were also likely responsible for Tony’s allergic reaction. It is worth noting, however, that the JCP’s anti-American military campaign of the early 1950s and Tony Tani’s stardom were overlapping elements of post-occupation student culture which dissipated into oblivion with remarkable speed after the mid-1950s. For his part, Ōya had been a post-World War I leftist student radical who subsequently took pride in his lack of ideology. Ironically, in the wake of the JCP’s repudiation of its anti-colonization campaign of the early 1950s, colonial remnants in Japan were apparently ubiquitous in the eyes of this non-ideological critic.

Following Ōya’s “social analysis,” *Shūkan Asahi* proceeded to tear off Tony Tani’s “wig” with a three-page exposé on “the man named Ōtani Shōtarō” which included a probing look at his complicated “family circumstances.” Hanamori Yasuji, the social critic known for his acerbic commentaries and distinctive cross-dressing, followed with his “warning” to Tony Tani. Many Japanese parents viewed Tony as an “enemy of children” because he was responsible for the spread unwholesome expressions. Hanamori saw poetic justice in the kidnapping of Tony’s child. Tony had yelled at reporters crowding the scene at Masami’s return: “This is not a stage!” Hanamori echoed the same words back at Tony. His “Tony English” did not remain on the stage but was rather broadcast into homes across the nation. The kidnapping incident was an opportunity for Tani to recognize the magnitude of his noxious effects on children and show his gratitude to the Japanese parents who had worried about Masami’s safety by “refraining from teaching the children grotesque words.”<sup>32</sup>

On the page preceding the three-part “warning” to Tony Tani, there was a half-page advertisement for the pesticide *Barusan* introducing the government’s new three-year “national movement” to eradicate pests. It called on people to use *Barusan* to “kill mosquitos and flies, the enemies of healthy living.” Along with these insects, Tony Tani appears to have been among the pests to be eradicated

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<sup>30</sup> Nakahara, p.54.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Tani and Kondō Hidezō, “Ya konnichiwa,” p.25.

<sup>32</sup> “Tony Tani ni chūkoku suru,” *Shūkan Asahi* (July 31, 1955) p10-11.

as the nation moved beyond the occupation period. Tony described his postwar as beginning with a dousing of DDT by the occupation forces as he disembarked from his ship in Kyushu in 1945. It may well have ended with this movement of ten years later, when the Japanese government and mass media coordinated a movement to sanitize the nation with their own hands.

## 7. Conclusions

The mid-1950s was marked by the legitimation of the American presence in Japan. The symbols associated with America shifted from the *panpan* prostitutes serving the occupiers to the *okusama* housewife running a modern household. Military bases on the mainland were transferred to Okinawa, their influence as diffuser of American culture replaced by the television sets rapidly purchased by Japanese families.<sup>33</sup> The Japanese people's memories of the nuclear destruction in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bikini were transformed through the futuristic allure of the "peaceful usage of atomic energy." And as Tony Tani exited the public stage, a new postwar bad boy emerged in the form of Ishihara Yūjirō. He debuted in the movie based on his older brother's sensationalist "Season of the Sun," which depicted the new generation of wild youth living in times of "healthy shamelessness and amorality." Its scene where the main character sells his girlfriend to his brother is reminiscent of Tony Tani's pimp repertoire. Its provocative depictions of sexual desire may also be seen as Tonyesque. In contrast to Tony's obnoxiously visible American connection, however, Ishihara was coolly Americanized with his large physique and privileged Shōnan upbringing. While crowds had laughed at Tony Tani's targets, teenage girls screamed at Yūjirō's manliness.

Another manly figure whose meteoric rise coincided with an earlier part of Tony Tani's decline was the professional wrestler Rikidōzan. While there was much talk of Tony as a future star of television, his popularity on radio was not replicated in the new national medium. The advent of television in 1953, coinciding with the Korean War stalemate, was instead marked by the remarkable popularity of Rikidōzan and his karate chops punishing the evil American Sharpe brothers. (Unbeknownst to most viewers at the time, Rikidōzan was of Korean ethnicity and the Sharpe brothers were Canadian.) Coming shortly after the formal end of the American occupation, Japanese television viewers experienced the virtual triumph over the Americans as a cathartic event. Muramatsu Tomomi makes the apt connection between the popular phenomena of professional wrestling and Tony Tani, both possessing a scandalous air of vulgar carnality.<sup>34</sup> An important distinction, however, was that whereas Rikidōzan embodied Japan's muscular triumph over America, Tony Tani was akin to the simultaneous embodiment of both Rikidōzan and the Sharpe brothers.

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<sup>33</sup> Yoshimi Shun'ya, *Shinbei to hanbei* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2007)

<sup>34</sup> Muramatsu, p.95.

Rather than the karate chop, his weapons were his flamboyantly Japanese-American appearance and pidgin “Tony English” with which he sadistically ridiculed star performers, Japanese and American audiences, and the political and cultural conditions of post-occupation Japan. As popular receptivity to Tony’s perilous parodies faded, Rikidōzan’s karate chops, like Ōya Sōichi’s rant, arose like a Tony Tani exorcism ritual. In today’s post-television era, how would Tony have reacted to the farcical repetitions of such efforts to undo the emasculation of defeat and occupation?

Some have characterized Tony Tani as intrinsically unsuited for the new medium of television: his gaudy appearance was “grotesque” when seen on screen.<sup>35</sup> This is retrospective rationalization—he was no less “grotesque” on stage and this had always been the nature of his act. While the peak of his popularity had passed in the early years of television, Tony remained a potential star of the new medium with his remarkable ability to rouse audiences. Recognizing this threat, leaders of mass media, including the increasingly powerful sponsors, sought to phase out Tony’s indecent broadcasts on both radio and television. In 1954, new legislation was passed for establishing a regulatory body for public radio aimed at countering unwholesome comedic programs like the “Tony Tani hour.” Asked about the potential public opposition to such a move, the bureaucrat in charge answered that radio broadcasts had the unfortunate penchant for distorting facts through “rhetorical tricks.” The goal of the new regulatory body was to “construct correct public opinion” by broadcasting legitimate information based on facts.<sup>36</sup>

On television, channels actively sought new talent to host quiz shows—a mainstay of early programming. The hosts of NHK’s new programs were positively portrayed as “bright and clean,” not given to self-promotion and “not undignified” (read: unlike Tony Tani). One sponsor for a private channel lamented that all the applicants he screened could be categorized as imitators of either the NHK announcer Miyata Teru or Tony Tani. “If there is an amateur MC that can treat the contestants with gentle consideration and has good sense, we are willing to pay a high salary,” he declared.<sup>37</sup> In addition to these regulators and sponsors, Tony Tani was also a nuisance to American strategists for whom television was considered an important political weapon for spreading American values and combatting communism. Through the proliferation of American shows on TV screens, the goal was to foster emotional identification with the American protagonists.<sup>38</sup> With his blatantly indecent Japanese-Americanism, Tony Tani’s presence on the TV screen was disruptive to this end—a glaring mirror reflecting back the viewer’s gaze from what needed to be a naturally attractive vision of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>36</sup> “NHK no bangumi wo kisei,” *Yomiuri Shinbun* (June 30, 1954) p.7.

<sup>37</sup> “Quizu shikaisha no yokogao,” *Yomiuri Shinbun* (December 12, 1954, evening edition) p.4.

<sup>38</sup> Arima Tetsuo, *Koushite terebi wa hajimatta* (Tokyo: Mineruva shobō, 2013) p.211.



America.

The end of Tony Tani's short-lived stardom was engineered from above, enabled by the weakening of the fervent popular support he enjoyed during his heyday. Less than two years before the kidnapping crisis, Ōya and Tony Tani had a conversation published in the magazine *Shūkan Sankei* where Ōya's "social analysis" of Tony was less emotionally charged and more insightful than his subsequent attack. Ōya warned Tony that his popularity rested on a precarious foundation because he so closely embodied his time. Touching upon a key characteristic of Tony's performances that he notably ignored in his *Shūkan Asahi* attack, he predicted that people would start resenting his performances on two levels: his pidgin English itself and his "so-called resistance" against Japan's Americanization in the form of parody. Tony seemed to concur as he replied, "I am aware that very repressive times are ahead." He described how crowds would roar with approval in response to his offensive provocations. "I can do this while my popularity lasts," he remarked. "When I am no longer popular and people get angry at me, I will stop talking and I will not go on stage."<sup>39</sup>

The mid-1950s was a watershed moment in Japan. In national politics, the durable "1955 system" crystallized. There was a sharp increase in bankruptcies of small businesses and suicides during this period, dismissed by the MITI minister as an inevitable phenomenon of a transitional economy. A movement arose to rid the streets of disabled veteran beggars, a covert initiative to "repatriate" Koreans in Japan to North Korea later in the decade was concocted, and a movement succeeded in bringing closure to Tony Tani's post-occupation stardom. As if to give voice to all those left behind as the nation transitioned to rapid economic growth under the American imperium, there was a surge of hit songs with the motifs of *miren* (lingering attachments) and *enkon* (grudge).<sup>40</sup> These emotions contained funereal notes not only of the memories of imperial Japan's agents and victims, but also of the volatile possibilities of post-occupation popular culture of which Tony Tani's lively parodies were a defining element.

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<sup>39</sup> *Shūkan Sankei* (December 6, 1953) p.52-55.

<sup>40</sup> Mita Munesuke, *Kindai nihon no shinjō no rekishi* (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1992) p.114-122.