

The 1964 Olympics and the Landscape of Defeat: The Potentiality of *Idaten* within the Genre of Taiga Drama

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Abstract | This paper discusses the significance of the NHK taiga drama *Idaten: Tokyo Olympics Story*, which was the first such drama to thematize the darker aspects of modern Japanese history against the backdrop of the Tokyo 1964 Summer Olympics. In this respect *Idaten* was unprecedented as a taiga drama and was thus largely neglected by viewers. In light of this problematic reception, here we examine the narrative conventions of Japanese taiga drama and how the 1964 Olympics was typically portrayed in visual media, that is, the norms that *Idaten* subverted. The characters in *Idaten*, “running” as a motif, and the drama’s narrative structure are all analyzed in terms of their affinity with rakugo storytelling to identify the dramatic possibilities and limitations exposed by *Idaten*, and the drama’s utility as an authoritative framework for remembering and communicating the history of Japan.

On the surface, *Idaten* places the spotlight on the sports heroes of modern Japan who competed on the international stage for the country’s honor, not for money. At the same time, it highlights how these iconic figures deviated from or fell into conflict with the approved version of the spirit of the times. The drama evokes memories of the Shōwa period, including the most problematic and avoided topics of the era. In other words, it boldly includes characters and events that should have been excluded according to the conventions of taiga drama. For instance, in the final episode, a performance of the rakugo “Tomikyu” is used as a medium for relaying the narrative, as the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics is overlaid with the story of a Japanese soldier who lost his life in colonial Manchuria when Japan was defeated at the end of the Asia-Pacific War. In this challenging manner, *Idaten* inserts uncomfortable themes from the past into the narrative of the 1964 Olympics, using this celebrated sports event to juxtapose Japan’s imperial era crimes of colonial aggression and ignominious wartime defeat relative to the postwar idea of Japan as a “cultural nation” (*bunka kokka*) and economic powerhouse.

Before *Idaten*, the history reflected in NHK taiga dramas had mostly excluded elements of conflict and division. Viewers were thus able to complacently watch characters who were not surrounded by the controversies which still ripple through

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modern Japan. *Idaten*'s focus was discomfiting because it intentionally deviated from the established tacit conventions of taiga drama. However, the discomfort caused by *Idaten* should be seen as indicative of an attempt to open up a new world of possibilities for this prominent television genre.

Keywords | NHK taiga drama, *Idaten*, Kudō Kankurō, Tokyo Olympics, rakugo, Manchuria

Introduction

Idaten: Tokyo Olympics Story (Idaten: Tokyo Orinpikku-banashi, hereafter *Idaten*), the fifty-eighth NHK taiga drama and “last of the Heisei era,” aired from January 6–December 15, 2019.¹ It was promoted as a “delightful and ambitious taiga drama” with an original script by the renowned scriptwriter Kudō Kankurō and content dealing with “Tokyo” and “the Olympics” just ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (“2019-nen no taiga dorama wa” 2016). As a taiga drama, *Idaten*'s subject matter was quite unprecedented. This was the first taiga drama in thirty-three years, since *Life (Inochi)* in 1986,² to deal with modern and contemporary history. More specifically, the story spans the fifty-year period from Japan's first participation in the Olympics in the late Meiji period to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics in the postwar period.

Idaten was also unprecedented in terms of its composition. Structured as a kind of “relay,” the story is divided into two parts. The first half focuses on the story of the Kanakuri Shisō. Known as the “father of the marathon,” he was the first Japanese athlete to participate in the Olympics. The second half focuses on the story of Tabata Masaji, a journalist who campaigned to bring the Olympics to Tokyo. Each of these stories is also framed and conveyed through the “Olympic Story” (*Orinpikku-banashi*), a rakugo performed by Gokontei Shinshō V. While Shinshō himself is a real historical figure and was one of the most renowned rakugo³ performers of the postwar period, his “Olympic Story” exists only in

1. Upon completion of the broadcast, the drama was re-broadcast in two halves on *NHK Sōgō* (NHK General) on December 30, 2019 and again on *BS Puremiamu* (BS Premium) from January 2–3, 2020. An abbreviated version also aired in seven parts on February 23, 2019. Furthermore, from May 2–4, 2020, the “international version” of the drama, titled *Idaten: The Epic Marathon to Tokyo*, aired in six parts (forty-nine minutes each) on NHK World-Japan.

2. From the 1990s up until production of *Idaten*, just three dramas were set in the modern period: *As If Flying (Tobu ga gotoku)*, 1990), *Yae's Cherry Blossoms (Yae no sakura)*, 2013), and *Mr. Saigō (Segō don)*, 2018). All of these are set in the late Tokugawa to Meiji periods.

3. Rakugo is a Japanese storytelling performance art originating in the Meiji period, undertaken by

Idaten. Meanwhile, his personal story is also woven into the narrative.

Idaten's filming also broke with the conventions of a taiga drama. To allow for overseas shooting, something virtually unheard of in taiga dramas, shooting was moved up to April from the typical period of July to September ("Rainen taiga *Idaten* shuen" 2018). Meanwhile, NHK went to great lengths to publicize the show, a rare occurrence for taiga dramas in recent years. The star-studded cast, and even scriptwriter Kudō, appeared on various programs to promote the series. Between the accelerated shooting schedule, massively expensive overseas shoots, luxurious cast and production team, and expansive publicity, one gains a sense of the kind of ambition and elaborate preparation that went into making this "unique taiga" (*ishoku taiga*).

Overshadowing such efforts, however, the most infamous of *Idaten*'s numerous unprecedented characteristics was its suffering of the lowest viewer ratings for a taiga drama in history. By the sixth episode ratings had dropped into single digits and never recovered, ending with an average viewership of 8.2 percent (Kantō area) by the final installment, episode forty-seven ("NHK taiga dorama" n.d.). Therein, ratings reached as low as 3.7 percent (4.1 percent in the Kantō area) by episode thirty-nine. While the shame of setting the record for the lowest viewer rating ever for a taiga drama is at least partly attributable to the misfortune of airing simultaneously with the Japan vs. Scotland World Cup of Rugby match (October 13, 2019), which captured an average of 39.2 percent of viewers, this does not explain why ninety percent of the series failed to exceed single-digit ratings.

Idaten's failure to attract viewers is typically attributed to its content, which featured relatively unknown historical figures, a complicated structure, and the general tone of a "morning drama" (*asadora*) or "serialized TV novel" (*renzoku terebi shōsetsu*).⁴ Perhaps the association with a morning drama could be explained by the biased ideas about the work of scriptwriter Kudō Kankurō and the rest of the primary production staff, who had previously worked on the hit NHK serialized TV novel *Amachan*. However, the divergence of *Idaten*'s characterization and narrative structure from the conventions of taiga drama, while being its most distinguishing characteristic, were clearly also behind its low ratings. Compared with the typical historically famed protagonists of taiga dramas, *Idaten*'s two main characters of Kanakuri Shisō and Tabata Masaji were historical figures entirely unfamiliar to the mainstream public.

a lone performer sitting on a raised platform.

4. Airing since 1961, this is a representative form of long-running NHK drama series. They are referred to as "morning dramas" because they run in the mornings, emulating the featuring of serialized dramas in daily newspapers typically read in the morning.

On the other hand, it is also true that taiga dramas have tended to focus on women and other peripheral historical figures over the past ten years or so (Kim Sö-ün 2018, 81). In this respect, it is difficult to definitively state that it was the relative obscurity of *Idaten*'s main characters that primarily caused such low ratings. Indeed, the more significant "problem" with *Idaten* was perhaps that this supposed taiga sports drama spent almost half of its narrative within the world of rakugo, a problem related to the drama's narrative structure, as its over-arching plot is driven by a rakugo performance.

Like *Idaten*, this article is also an innovative attempt to explore the historical idea of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and, more broadly, modern and contemporary Japanese history and the Olympics in relation to the taiga drama genre.⁵ As mentioned above, *Idaten* was an unprecedented drama, both in terms of depicting the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and as a taiga drama that was ignored by the majority of Japanese viewers. Paying attention to this fact, here I first explore the norms pertaining to the genre and mode of expression to which *Idaten* would have been expected to conform. To do this, I describe the conventions of the taiga drama and how the 1964 Tokyo Olympics have typically been presented in Japanese visual media. I then analyze the characteristics of *Idaten* which were considered to be so problematic precisely because they deviated from such norms and conventions, particularly focusing on the configuration of the main characters, the recurring motif of "running," and the use of a rakugo performance to drive the narrative structure. In doing so, I clarify the potentiality and limitations of *Idaten*'s ambition within the framework of the taiga drama, which has become an authoritative medium for narrating and remembering history in contemporary Japan.

The NHK Taiga Drama, "History," and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics

Viewers of taiga dramas in Japan since in the 2000s have most commonly been

5. Research on visual materials dealing with the Tokyo Olympics typically focuses on movies and news broadcasts. Representative studies include that of Masumoto (1997), who examines the well-known controversy surrounding whether director Ichikawa Kon's official documentary film of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics was a work of art or historical record; and Merklejn (2013), who analyzes the news reports regarding the 1964 Tokyo Olympics Japanese women's volleyball team, which enjoyed considerable popularity. Meanwhile, the majority of research on NHK taiga dramas focuses on the particular historical events, figures, and evaluations of nationalism in terms of their dramatic portrayal. More recent studies have analyzed the attraction of tourists to rural locations featured in dramas and the ensuing economic effects or have focused on how to use taiga dramas as classroom teaching materials.

in their fifties and especially their sixties and seventies.⁶ *Idaten* attracted a similar demographic (Nakayama et al. 2020, 93).⁷ *Idaten*'s lack of popularity can be explained precisely by its failure to please this core demographic for taiga dramas, that is, baby boomers in their seventies.

In that case, how might the "taiga drama," so appealing to this particular generation, be defined? Categorizing taiga dramas produced as of 2020 by historical setting, the following groups emerge.⁸ First, thirty-six percent are "Sengoku dramas," or those set in the Azuchi-Momoyama period. Generally enjoying high ratings and popularity, these are stories of the "heroes" most familiar to Japanese audiences, such as Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. A main reason for their popularity is the widespread familiarity with these themes. As such, viewers know what to expect in terms of the events, relationships between the characters, and ultimate narrative conclusion, but can also look forward to the particular manner in which the events, historical figures, battles, and the like are portrayed.

Second, a large proportion of taiga dramas are "Bakumatsu dramas," set in the late Edo to early Meiji periods. While these dramas' average viewership is lower than Sengoku dramas, they have a particularly passionate following among male viewers due to a focus on assassinations and factional politics, emphasizing such themes as principles, emotional connection, and camaraderie. Third, the next most common type of taiga drama is set in the Genroku period, a kind of "cultural golden age." These are generally dramas the whole family can comfortably enjoy. Fourth, there are dramas set in the Heian to early Kamakura periods, depicting historical events such as the Battle of Genpei while emphasizing themes such as "the warrior's code" (*bushidō*), ethics, and emotional connection.

Outside of these, there are a few dramas set in the Muromachi and Kamakura periods, as well as three dramas set in the modern period, which were produced in the mid-1980s: *Mountains and Rivers Ablaze* (*Sanga moyu*, 1984), the story of a Japanese family living in America; *Waves of Spring* (*Haru no hatō*, 1985), the life story of "Japan's first actress" Kawakami Sadayakko; and *Life* (*Inochi*, 1986), the story of a woman doctor. These dramas obtained relatively low ratings compared to the other taiga dramas that aired during the 1980s, which better

6. This is based on data compiled from NHK Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūjo (2005-20). For back issues of this publication, see <https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/book/monthly/backnumber.html>.

7. For reference, there were no viewers recorded in their teens or twenties.

8. This summary is based on data from Maeda (2019, 138-39).

aligned with viewers' preferences.⁹

In summary, one can judge the primary viewership for taiga dramas to be strongly "stability oriented": Even while enjoying slightly different presentation and direction within each drama, it would seem that viewers crave familiar historical figures and events. The surfeit of productions featuring the same subject matter and familiar "Japanese" sentiments such as "principles," "camaraderie," "emotional connection," and "the warrior's code" can also be understood in this context. Considering this tendency, the overwhelming preference for pre-modern over modern period settings, which naturally evoke conflicting interpretations and evaluations about Japanese history, would seem natural. Meanwhile, this tendency also speaks to the kind of "history" and "narratives of the nation" that taiga dramas have presented over the past sixty years or so. As is well known, a "narrative of the nation" is a composite of a national community's shared stories, historical events, landscapes, symbols, and images (Hall 1992). In other words, narratives of the nation are composed of discourses commonly referred to as "history" or "tradition" that create the bonds of social and psychological solidarity allowing "us" to form a national community. They do not form naturally but through choices and omissions vis-à-vis fragmented historical memories. In particular, historical television programs and films have long served as especially effective mediums for reshaping such narratives by emphasizing a selective image of the nation (O'Connor 1990).

In addition to constituting the core viewership for taiga dramas, baby boomers are also the primary targets for visual productions evoking "Shōwa nostalgia" in dealing with the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (Yoshifuji et al. 2018, 91). In general narrative depictions of the 1960s, the era in which the majority of baby boomers spent their childhoods, exude the clear objective of reminding viewers of past memories and evoking a feeling of nostalgia. *Hiyokko*,¹⁰ the latest NHK serialized TV novel dealing with the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, is a good example of this. In this tumultuous coming-of-age story taking place between 1964 and 1968, the protagonist moves to Tokyo from a small village in Ibaraki Prefecture

9. The drama *Tokugawa Ieyasu* (1983), which aired just prior to these "three modern-period dramas," achieved an average rating of 31.2 percent. Dramas that aired soon after the three modern-period dramas included *One-eyed Dragon Masamune* (*Dokuganryū Masamune*, 1987), which achieved an average rating of 39.7 percent, *Takeda Shingen* (1988), which achieved an average rating of 39.2 percent, and *Lady Kasuga* (*Kasuga no Tsubone*, 1989), which achieved an average rating of 32.4 percent. By comparison, the three modern-period dramas achieved average ratings of 21.1 percent, 18.2 percent, and 29.3 percent, respectively ("NHK taiga dorama" n.d.).

10. This was NHK serialized television novel no. 96, which aired from April 3–September 30, 2017.

as a member of a “job-hunting crew” (*shūdan shūshoku*).¹¹ The major events of this period, including the Tokyo Olympics, are depicted within the drama.

According to *Hiyokko*’s chief producer Kashi Hiroshi, the year “1964” represents the emergence of Tokyo’s contemporary appearance and “an age in which everyone believed they could ‘achieve their dreams if they only worked hard’” (“Heisei 29-nendo zenki asadora” 2016). Similar to *Hiyokko*, most film and television narratives depicting the 1960s by way of the Tokyo Olympics focus on nostalgia for the (postwar) Shōwa era. The 1960s are depicted as an era of promise for living and belonging, and one during which national goals and beliefs were effectively pursued. Such “Shōwa nostalgia,” also referred to as the “Shōwa retro boom,” having effectively become a kind of formula for success, is easily discernible not just in dramas but all types of visual media, the most representative example being the film *Always Sunset on Third Street (Always san-chōme no yūhi*, 2005) (Thompson 2011, 1315).¹²

The dominant evaluation of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, emphasizing the arrival of the Olympics in Asia and Japan’s image as “cultured nation” that had recovered from the war, is that the event helped to overturn Japan’s image as a nation run by war criminals and showcase its economic and technical achievements to the world. It has also been suggested that the Olympics served to foster an environment conducive to the resurrection of national symbols related to the imperial wartime regime, such as the “emperor,” “national flag” (*Hinomaru*), and “national anthem” (*Kimigayo*). In particular, the national flag has functioned as the most effective device for evoking a sense of national oneness among the spectators depicted within Japanese visual media that depicts the Olympics, with scenes of crowds gripping fluttering flags as they watch the torch relay, closing ceremonies, and so forth (Tagsold 2009, 3-4). The 1964 torch relay was especially sensational, attracting more than one hundred thousand spectators. The torch relay commenced with the hoisting of the “Japanese national flag” in Okinawa, an island still under US military occupation, with representatives of nations that had been victims of Japanese colonial rule in attendance. In this respect, it is difficult to deny this was a display designed to create a new image of the nation, one designed to cover up the “forgotten memories” of colonial invasion, dominance, and violence. This image was reinforced by the relay’s culmination, in which the torch’s final bearer Sakai Yoshinori, a Hiroshima native born the day the atomic bomb dropped, entered the stadium during the

11. This term largely refers to middle and high school graduates who came in groups from the countryside to the city to work for medium- to large-size enterprises or small businesses during the manpower shortage of the 1950s to 1960s.

12. Scherer (2019) also analyzes *Hiyokko* from this point of view.

opening ceremony.¹³

At a glance, it would appear that *Idaten* was not completely free of such nationalistic intentions, not least as it was planned and scheduled to air in 2019 ahead of the approaching second Tokyo Olympics. Indeed, one might say the goal of this drama, focused as it was on the climactic moment of modern Japanese sports history that was the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, was to go beyond the evocation of “Shōwa glory” and, through cutting-edge technology, presage the “Japan” that might emerge from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.¹⁴ Here, it would not be an exaggeration to say that such intentions overlapped with the those of then-prime minister Abe Shinzō, who famously accosted IOC members at a 2013 formal lunch in Tokyo, after singing the 1964 Olympics theme song. Here, Abe implored the members to support Japan’s bid for the Olympics so that Japan might recover from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake as it had from the war through the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (“2020 Gorin shōchi no” 2013).

According to Nam Sang-wook (2014, 175-76), Abe already had a history of linking sports competition with nostalgia for the 1960s. Referring to *Always Sunset on Third Street*, Abe juxtaposed the Japanese national baseball team’s victory in the 2006 World Baseball Classic, achieved through “patriotism” rather than “the pursuit of wealth,” with life in the 1960s, characterized by a “certain ineffable value.” Deftly linking international sports competition with sympathy and nostalgia for the 1960s, Abe successfully induced a sense of patriotism among Japanese people who glorified and yearned for this kind of life.

On the surface, showcasing Japan’s sports “heroes”—not to mention the athletes of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics—and their struggle on the international stage for “national honor” over the pursuit of wealth, *Idaten* should have possessed all the elements baby boomer viewers prefer. However, such expectations soon proved premature: rather than “heroics,” *Idaten* portrays how the sports heroes deviated from or conflicted with the spirit of the times; rather than simple nostalgia for the 1960s, *Idaten* evokes memories revealing the Shōwa era also as one of the most problematic eras in modern Japanese history; and rather than well-known historical figures, *Idaten* daringly “selected” figures and events normally “excluded” from dramas.

As mentioned above, taiga dramas have tended to exclude a considerable amount of subject matter from modern and contemporary history that might be considered to cause or reflect conflict and division in relation to the mainstream

13. For more details, see Shimizu (2011).

14. In anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, in fact, NHK began to broadcast in “Super Hi-Vision” (a term it uses to refer to 4K and 8K) in December 2018, promoting itself as a channel ushering in a “new era of full-scale super high vision” (Allard 2018).

national historical imaginary. Additionally, the great majority of viewers have also preferred to “comfortably” enjoy characters from the distant past whose stories have been reiterated to such a degree over time as to have become myths incapable of arousing controversy. However, it appears that *Idaten* intentionally disregarded these longstanding conventions of sensibility and thematic focus that exist between the makers of taiga dramas and their audiences. In other words, lacking in the nostalgia saturating dramas like *Always Sunset on Third Street*, *Idaten* was an “uncomfortable” drama for many viewers to watch.

Protagonists Neither Taiga Drama “Heroes” nor “Japanese People”

A specific kind of drama that began airing on NHK in 1963, taiga dramas are distinguishable from historical dramas in a broader sense. They have accordingly come to follow a fixed pattern mutually recognized by each drama and the audience. In other words, the taiga drama has its own “genre code,” and it is precisely the “proper” deviation from or “playing with” these rules that appeals to viewers. Featuring entirely “unconventional” characters and narrative structure, however, *Idaten* attempted to disrupt this long-held mutual arrangement between genre and viewer.

Foremost among its unconventional features is that *Idaten*'s protagonists are almost confusingly numerous, and none are that exciting, at least in a traditional dramatic sense. Initially there are just two protagonists, Kanakuri and Tabata, but the various characters featured within the narrative soon become too numerous to count. They include: the rakugo figures around Gokontei Shinshō; a young Shinshō and his friends and associates; the Kanakuri family in Kumamoto; the people of Tokyo Higher Normal School and the Greater Japan Amateur Sports Association (Dai Nihon Taiiku Kyōkai), especially the “father of Judo” Kanō Jigorō; the team around Tabata campaigning to bring the 1964 Olympics to Tokyo; members of an elite sports organization called the Tengu Club (Tengu Kurabu); Mishima Yahiko, who was one of the first Japanese to participate in the Olympics along with Kanakuri, and his family; and the national swim and volleyball teams. Among all these characters, at least four occupy enough screen time to be considered primary protagonists: Kanakuri, Tabata, Kanō, and Shinshō.

In a drama dealing with the life stories of historical figures and set against the backdrop of a sports competition, in general, one might anticipate a conventional pattern in which the protagonist enjoys a hard-fought and jubilant victory after a protracted struggle. However, not only does the dramatic pro-

gress unfold slowly due to the abundance of protagonists, even patient viewers' might have been frustrated by the fact that many of the initial protagonists are left behind or excluded at the story's conclusion. For instance, Kanakuri collapses in the heat at his first Olympics in Stockholm in 1912 and returns home to Japan without even crossing the finish line. His next opportunity is thwarted by the intervention of World War I, and when he does finally manage to finish the race on his final attempt, he places just sixteenth. Furthermore, he loses out the position of the last runner in the torch relay for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, one he was all but assured, to the symbol of peace "atomic boy" Sakai Yoshinori. As for Kanō and Tabata, the Tokyo Olympics they have so ardently campaigned for finally take place toward the end of the story. By the time of this momentous occasion, however, Kanō has already died and Tabata has resigned from the Olympic Organizing Committee due to the problem of participation for Japanese athletes in the fourth Asian Games held in Jakarta. Finally, there is Shinshō, who belongs to the rakugo component of the narrative, for which there is no possible element of victory or defeat to be conclusively satisfied. Thus, completely lacking any didactical content, climatic celebration of glorious victory, new depictions of famous battle scenes, or thrilling plot developments, *Idaten* was not especially equipped to entice viewers' interest. Indeed, it would have been difficult for *Idaten* to just satisfy the expectations of viewers anticipating a sports drama, let alone taiga drama viewers. In addition, *Idaten's* main characters largely lacked the kind of virtues supposedly characteristic of the "Japanese people," as even while they are ostensibly engaged in an athletic "war" for the country's honor, these protagonists seem unmotivated by lofty causes or national objectives.

In episode eight, "Tens of Thousands of Enemies" (*Teki wa iku man*), one scene depicts a formal sendoff for the Japanese athletes departing for the Stockholm Olympics. "In Nijūbashi," Shinshō narrates, "lined up in front of the imperial palace, three cheers of '*banzai*' (Long live the Emperor) led by Professor Nagai Dōmei."¹⁵ The scene then shifts to Shinbashi Station, where crowds of spectators waving flags have gathered on the platform to see the athletes off. The crowd begins a passionate rendition of "Tens of Thousands of Enemies," the song from which the episode gets its title, followed by cries of "*banzai*." As is common knowledge for Japanese audiences, the titles of each individual *Idaten* episode are drawn from films, works of literature, and songs. It is also well known that the song "Tens of Thousands of Enemies" was a military song that

15. Broadcast on February 24, 2019. The lines are from Kudō (2019a, 193-94). Outside of this, the song "Tens of Thousands of Enemies" is also featured in episodes nine, ten, twelve, and fourteen.

both preceded and followed the Imperial General Headquarters' (Daihon'ei) announcements of victories during the war. Departing for Stockholm after pledging victory and receiving wreathes and Japanese flags in front of the royal palace and listening to the crowd cheer "*banzai*" and sing a military song at the railway station, the athletes are envisioned as departing soldiers. The song "Tens of Thousands of Enemies" contains the following lyrics: "To be defeated and flee, shame of the fatherland / To readily die, distinguished service." This stark message is echoed in Tokyo Higher Normal School assistant teacher Kani Isao's drunken cheers for Kanakuri before he departs for Stockholm: "Kanakuri Shisō, the one who shall open to us the way of hope! If you are not victorious, return atop your shield! Victory or death!"¹⁶

The Japanese government endeavored to develop institutions of national education beginning in the early Meiji era. The most urgent ideological priority of this education system was to nurture a common "Japanese" national consciousness, a project that was reinforced by the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku Chokugo*). Essentially, this doctrine stipulated behavioral norms and the precepts of "national polity" (*kokutai*), an ideology based on the absolutism of the emperor. In other words, asserting "benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and filial piety" (*jingi chūko*) as absolute values, the Imperial Rescript on Education emphasized the goal of education as unifying the thought of the people and cultivating subjects loyal to the constitutionally based national polity (the emperor) (Yi Kwōn-hŭi 2012, 110-18). In this respect, the scene in which the athletes are seen off from the train station as they depart for Stockholm, taking place in the fortieth year of the Meiji era, provides insight into how the norms of Japan's modern education institutions had come to thoroughly permeate the mindset of common "people" by this time.

Such an environment, in which military-style collective training in gymnastics came to dominate physical education, is reflected in *Idaten*. When Kanō comes to the Ministry of Education (Monbushō) to request funding to participate in the Olympics, the officials angrily reject his request and shout that representing one's country in the Olympics "requires the resolve to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*)!" The Chairman of the Japanese Athletics Association echoes this militaristic sentiment as he holds up a photograph of soldiers from various different countries to demonstrate the physical limitations of Japanese, who "appear as children next to Westerners." "This is why we cannot win," he says, emphasizing the priority that all Japanese develop their physique and create

16. Episode eight, "Tens of Thousands of Enemies" (*Teki wa iku man*), quoted in Kudō (2019a, 190).

“bodies that can fight and win.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Waseda University President Ōkuma Shigenobu says to a frustrated Kanō, “To the people of Japan, now a military victor, victory is worth one’s life” (Episode one, Kudō 2019a, 20). It was as a result of this discourse, that the experience of the military victory over Russia came to dominate the minds of the Meiji-era Japanese people, encouraging a focus on “the rearing of bodies” (*karada o sodateru*) capable of also challenging the West in the world of sports.

In *Idaten* the protagonist Kanō, however, defies this mentality: “Whether shouldering the nation or committing ritual suicide in the face of defeat, I say no! A hard-fought victory for peace, acknowledging not hating one’s opponent! I’m talking about mutual understanding! That is the Olympic spirit and the spirit of all Japan!” (Episode one, Kudō 2019a, 28). Such resistance is not limited to Kanō. Kanakuri Shisō’s hometown friend Haruno Suyu, who later becomes his wife, attempts to comfort him after he fails to meet the physical requirements for his naval academy application: “Whether for the nation or yourself, you are free to choose how to use your healthy body.” Haruno’s words move Kanakuri, who exclaims in response, “That’s right! My body is mine whether healthy or sick!”¹⁸ With the goal of restoring his family, part of a ruined Kumamoto clan, Kanakuri enters Tokyo Higher Normal School to pursue a successful career. After unexpectedly participating in a marathon, however, he finds that running fills him with an “inexplicable joy.” Furthermore, he confirms the notion that “my body is mine,” that is, for doing things that one enjoys and not merely for serving the nation.

Indeed, the adjectives “pleasant” (*tanoshii*) and “entertaining” (*omoshiroi*) serve as keywords for *Idaten*’s dramatic tone. The drama opens with Kanō returning from the French embassy, where he was urged to participate in the Olympics. To this invitation, he asks the question, “Would that be pleasant or unpleasant?” In the same spirit, while campaigning to bring the Olympics to Tokyo, Tabata attempts to persuade those who feel the timing is yet premature: “We Japanese, who have done dreadful and violent things all over Asia, must do something entertaining!” (*Ajia kakuchi de, hidoi koto, mugoi koto shite kita oretachi Nihonjin wa, omoshiroi koto yara nakya ikenain da yo*). These words move Hirasawa Kazushige, who recalls what Kanō Jigorō used to shout while yearning to bring the Olympics to Tokyo: “From now on, the most entertaining job!” Hirasawa agrees to take part and eventually makes the speech for Japan’s Olympic bid.

17. Episode one, “Before Dawn” (*Yoake mae*), quoted in Kudō (2019a, 19-20).

18. Episode two, “Young Master” (*Botchan*), quoted in Kudō (2019a, 59-60).

Of course, we cannot overlook the risk inherent to Kanō, Kanakuri, and especially Tabata's emphasis on "pleasure" and "fun," that is, the idea that Japan might compensate for the "violent things" it committed all over Asia during the war with "fun things." Clearly, these characters do not possess the reflective or apologetic historical consciousness needed to express their nation's wrongdoings in plain language. At the same time, however, they are still "ambiguous" individuals and not simply "Japanese people" or "loyal subjects" sacrificing themselves for the national polity. These are precisely the kind of characters—people who do not know how to hide or be ashamed of themselves—that *Idaten* inventively frames as the main protagonists of a taiga drama, a role previously the exclusive domain of "heroes." Besides betraying the conventional expectations of viewers, *Idaten* also subverts the conventions by which the taiga drama, as the representative drama form of public broadcasting station NHK, has selected and shed new light on historical figures and recorded and relayed history to the masses.

A Layered Narrative: The 1964 Tokyo Olympics and Memories of Defeat in Manchuria

As mentioned above, any discussion of *Idaten* as a taiga drama must inevitably be accompanied by the qualifier "unprecedented." In this regard, another of *Idaten*'s unprecedented choices was the adding of an annotation at the end of each episode declaring the content to be "fiction based on historical fact." *Idaten* features two important "fictions." First, there is Shinshō's rakugo stage. Shinshō simultaneously serves as the drama's narrator while also appearing in the narrative as a presenter for the program "TV Vaudeville" (*Terebi yose*), which takes place in the narrative "present." "TV Vaudeville" was a real NHK program that aired from 1953–56 and for which Shinshō was an actual host ("Terebi yose" n.d.). In *Idaten*, however, Shinshō presents his fictional rakugo "Tokyo Olympics Story" between 1959 and 1967. In other words, *Idaten*'s "present," that which frames the "story" (*hanashi*), is itself a fiction.

Many viewers complained about the decision to weave a rakugo component into *Idaten*, given it was a taiga sports drama. However, in as much as scriptwriter Kudō Kankurō and production supervisor Kurube Kei, who intended to make a "drama spanning the pre and postwar periods that is not dark," began with the premise of celebrated performer "Gokontei Shinshō journeying to Manchuria to drink his fill during the war" (Kinoshita 2019, 3), rakugo could not but become essential to the plot—perhaps even more so than the Olympics.

As mentioned above, *Idaten*'s composition is such that the stories of Kanō Jigorō, Kanakuri Shisō, Tabata Masaji, and others are conveyed through the overarching *Tokyo Olympics Story*, a rakugo performance by Gokontei Shinshō, who lived through the Meiji to Shōwa periods. The drama's subtitle refers to this fictional rakugo story in the word "*hanashi*," which means both "talking" and "story," and so can be understood to refer specifically to the narrative medium of rakugo. Yet it was precisely this aspect of the story, flitting back and forth between Shinshō's younger days and present life, family, and students, that was widely judged as distracting and overly complex. For an audience anticipating a sports drama relating the story of the Japanese nation and the Olympics, the unexpected weight given to a rakugo narrative would naturally have been confusing.

In taiga dramas, narration typically lies outside the main narrative structure, and is restricted to momentary interjections providing simple explanations and descriptions. In *Idaten*, however, the narrator is also a character within the plot. Furthermore, the story moves back and forth in time between Shinshō and his younger self, who goes by the different name of Minobe Kōzō. Along with this elaborate "passing of the baton" between them, the audience also moves back and forth, as viewers of a television drama and of a rakugo performance. With the distance between audience and story constantly shifting in this manner, viewers cannot but become increasingly aware of the "story" being told, and its basis in fiction from start to finish. In this respect, *Idaten* adopted precisely the opposite of the standard strategy of a narrative text, which is to induce the audience to forget the fictionality of the story, in order that they might more comfortably identify and sympathize with it. This stylistic configuration itself is characteristic of rakugo, a genre of live "monologue" (*hitori gatari*) performance in which the "rakugo = speaker/actor" relates the actions and dialogue of the story while occasionally directly questioning the audience (Wada 2015, 258). Yet here it also serves as a device inhibiting the viewer's identification with one or the other of *Idaten*'s two overlapping histories. These are related through the rakugo performance "Tomikyu," which will be discussed again later in the essay.

The second important fictional aspect of *Idaten* is the characters. Just as with other dramas based on historical fact, *Idaten* also features "fictional" characters alongside historically accurate ones. Among these, the one with the most important role and occupying the most screen time is Gorin, one of Shinshō's students in the narrative "present." The name "Gorin" is pronounced the same as the Kanji characters used to signify the word "Olympics" in Japanese. Gorin grows up without ever knowing his father. Following his mother's death, he comes across Shinshō's name on a postcard sent by his father and seeks out

Shinshō to become his pupil. This is because on the postcard is written, “Shinshō’s ‘Tomikyu’ is a peerless work.” Gorin’s father himself wrote these words after viewing Shinshō’s performance of “Tomikyu” in Manchuria in the 1940s at the end of the Asia-Pacific War.

Gorin’s actual name is Komatsu Kinji. His maternal grandparents are Masuno, who works at a department store in Nihonbashi, and Shima, who works as a servant girl for the Mishima family and is very passionate about women’s sports. These two are friends with Kanakuri. However, Shima disappears in the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and her body is never found. The couple names their daughter and only child “Riku,” which literally means “field,” referring to the athletic “track and field” event that Shima loved. Riku ends up working in a store that makes the *tabi* socks Kanakuri wears for competing in marathons. Meanwhile, Kanakuri has taken on Komatsu Masaru as a pupil, who came to admire Kanakuri after reading his book. Komatsu follows Kanakuri to Tokyo where he continues his training. There, he meets and falls in love with Riku. The two get married and have a son, Komatsu Kinji (Gorin). In this manner, unbeknownst even to himself, Gorin is crucially positioned at the axis connecting the two worlds of *Idaten* that are the Olympic marathon and rakugo.

While *Idaten* is a “story of the Olympics,” just as the word “Olympics” is ancillary to the word “*Idaten*” in the title, from beginning to end the narrative returns constantly to the theme of “running.”¹⁹ The first episode begins with Shinshō in a taxi heading to Shiba for a performance. Unexpectedly affected when he sees a man ahead of the taxi running in white *tabi* socks, he decides to integrate “Tomikyu” into his performance that day. The work of San’yūtei Encho I, a rakugo performer active from the late Edo to Meiji periods, “Tomikyu” has featured in the repertoires of many well-known rakugo performers, including Shinshō. It is a short play in which the main character “Kyūzo” wanders through the streets of Edo (Tokyo) after having been fired from his job as a professional male entertainer (*taiko mochi*) in Asakusa for making a mistake. When he hears a large fire has broken out in Nihonbashi, where his former master resides, he sees this as an opportunity to win back his master’s trust and runs from Asakusa to Nihonbashi. Kyūzo attains his master’s forgiveness, but later as the two celebrate over drinks, he hears the news that his own house has burned down. He runs back to Asakusa, only to find barely a trace left of his home. *Idaten* is bookended by performances of “Tomikyu.” In Shinshō’s performances, however,

19. *Idaten* is known for his swift running among the gods of protection within Buddhist teaching. The word “*Idaten*” has thus also come to refer to someone who runs very fast.

Kyūjo runs from Asakusa to Shiba rather than Nihonbashi.²⁰

While the performance of “Tomikyu” in the first episode serves to display the drama’s chief motif of “running” it is Kyūzo’s “running” in the final scene of *Iraten’s* final episode that is most significant. This final episode focuses on the reconciliation between Gorin and his teacher Shinshō. Although Gorin had abandoned his rakugo training due to his girlfriend’s pregnancy, he experiences a sudden epiphany after participating in the Olympic torch relay and sets off running from the national stadium toward Shiba to apologize to his teacher Shinshō. What is particularly significant in this episode is the juxtaposition of Gorin and the final torchbearer Sakai when the Olympic torch arrives at the stadium. One runs into the stadium and the other toward it. Both are of a similar age, dressed in the same uniform, and performing similar motions. The camera alternates between Sakai and Gorin as one runs up the stadium stairs torch in hand and the other scrambles up a tree to view the torch’s arrival. At this point, Shinshō’s shouts of “Fire! Fire!” from his “Tomikyu” performance are heard over the image of the blazing torch, layering the stories of the international sports event unfolding in the national stadium, the rakugo world of “Tomikyu” unfolding in a corner of Shiba, and the past events alluded to within the performance.

After watching the torch arrive at its destination, Gorin turns and begins to run, heading to Shiba to find Shinshō. When he arrives, Shinshō is in the middle of “Tomikyu.” At this point, a scene is inserted in which Gorin’s father, his face covered in tears, views a young Shinshō (Kōzō) performing “Tomikyu” in Manchuria, acting out Kyūzo’s passionate running. The shot changes, as if this scene is being repeated in the “present,” and the same sequence unfolds with Gorin viewing Shinshō atop the stage, as Shinshō once again acts out Kyūzo’s running (figure 1). After the performance is finished, Shinshō repeats Kyūzo’s master’s words of forgiveness to Gorin, who has run to see him just like Kyūzo runs to his master. Shinshō then asks Gorin about his impressions of the performance. Repeating the words of his father on the old postcard from Manchuria, Gorin replies very simply, “Peerless work.”

20. Gorin’s father Masaru recommends to Shinshō (Kōzo), who has ended up performing rakugo for Japanese who have remained in Manchuria after the war, to perform “Tomikyu.” Recalling the training route that he and his teacher Kanakuri used to run, Masaru also recommends to the hesitant Kōzo to revise the scene of Kyūzo’s run in “Tomikyu,” extending the original “Asakusa–Nihonbashi” route to a new “Asakusa–Shiba” route. Just as Masaru predicts, the audience greatly enjoys Kōzo’s performance of “Tomikyu.” Then, filled with the urge to run after viewing Kōzo’s performance, Masaru bursts out of the theater and into the streets, where he is shot down by Soviet soldiers. Shinshō subsequently continues to perform “Tomikyu” with the “Asakusa–Shiba” route, and in the last episode of the series, Gorin also runs to “Shiba” to find his teacher Shinshō.



Source: *Idaten*'s final episode "Time, Stop" (*Jikan yo tomare*), © 2019 NHK. Images taken from the "Omnibus Edition" (*Sōshūhen*), broadcast on December 30, 2019.

Figure 1. Images from *Idaten*'s final episode

The inserted scene of Masaru, Gorin's father, moved by Shinsō's (Kōzō's) performance of "Tomikyu" first appears in episode thirty-nine, "Manchuria Nostalgia" (*Natsukashii no Manshū*),²¹ the episode that holds the record for the lowest viewer rating in the history of taiga dramas. This scene is also a part of the plot line "Shinshō Goes to Manchuria," which serves as *Idaten*'s starting point. Jumping at the opportunity to "drink to their heart's desire," Shinshō (Kōzō) and his compatriots travel to Manchuria to entertain the troops. There Shinshō and Masaru meet and encounter the end of the Asia-Pacific War together. Despite the news of the Japanese defeat, Shinshō and company decide to go ahead with their scheduled performance. When they arrive at the theatre, however, they find it in ruins. Profanity is written in Chinese on the walls and a Japanese flag lies trampled on the ground. With the Soviet Army closing in, the performers anticipate a meager turnout, yet as many as one hundred Japanese show up. "I might as well go out laughing," they say. The inside of the theatre appears on the verge of collapse from Chinese vandalism and the walls are covered with phrases such as "Japanese devil" (C. *Riběnguǐzi*, J. *Hinomoto oniko*)

21. The title of episode thirty-nine, "Manchuria Nostalgia" is derived from the title of the documentary film *Works of the Manchurian Film Association, Nostalgia Edition* (*Man'ei saku hin bōkyō hen*, 2015), which is part of the DVD series *Manchuria Archive* (*Manshū ākaibusu*) produced by the Manchurian Film Association.



Source: Kudō (2020, disc 3).

Figure 2. Scene from *Idaten* episode thirty-nine, “Manchuria Nostalgia” (*Natsukashii no Manshū*), © NHK 2020

and “Eastern devil” (C. *Dōngyángguǐ*, J. *Tonyankī*, a term used by Chinese at the time to refer to Japanese soldiers) (figure 2). Despite these circumstances, Shinshō (Kōzō) performs “Tomikyu.” After the performance, Komatsu heads outside and begins to run, gripping his “postcard.” Encountering some Soviet soldiers, however, he is abruptly shot and killed.²²

The climax of this forty-seven-episode drama thus juxtaposes the Olympic opening ceremony—which, in a typical sports drama, would itself suffice as the climax—with a bygone story of a Japanese soldier killed in the aftermath of the defeat in Manchuria, a land that Japan had invaded. The scene of Masaru’s death had already been an “uncomfortable” one when it was originally shown in episode thirty-nine, primarily due to the creator’s refusal to present him as a tragic victim. Although he was killed by Soviet guns, ultimately Masaru’s reason for being in Manchuria was to gun down countless others. But above all else, the graffiti on the walls behind the Japanese spectators, who smile and clap at the performance, clearly reflects the anger of the Chinese. This imagery cannot help but evoke in viewers’ minds an awareness of the anger of the rightful inhabitants of Manchuria at the invasion of their country by the rakugo spectators, and the

22. As Masaru runs with the postcard in hand that he intends to send from Manchuria to his wife, he practices the special breathing technique he learned from his teacher Kanakuri. Likewise, in the series’ final episode, Gorin practices the same breathing technique when running toward Shinshō. This contributes to the layering of Masaru’s last run in Manchuria with Gorin’s run on the day of the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony.

wider force of the Japanese imperial army they represent.

Idaten's presentation of such uncomfortable historical scenes was by no means limited to this episode. In one passage prior to the 1932 LA Olympics, for example, the Manchurian Incident takes place just as Kanō Jigorō campaigns to bring the 1940 Olympics to Tokyo along with Mayor Nagata Hidejirō. While portraying this situation, the scene suddenly changes to a future conversation between Shinshō and Gorin in 1961. Describing his memory of the public mood in 1931, Shinshō states, "The people were cheering on the Kantō Army in the fight over there to get rid of the Chinese and occupy Manchuria." A surprised Gorin replies, "But I learned in school that [the Manchurian Incident] was a deception on the part of the Kantō Army." Shinshō explains, "That's the story from after the war, you see? At the time, not even the newspapers would write anything against Japan. That was the power of the military."²³ The scene then shifts again back to the 1930s, with Tabata and a journalist associate Kōno Ichirō (who would later become a House of Representatives member and minister for the Olympics) discussing the Manchurian Incident in a bar in Nihonbashi. In an expression of resignation, one of them states, "The newspapers are wrong. The military will strip away the freedom of the press any day now."

In addition, episode twenty-three, "Earth" (*Daichi*), depicts the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Running through the ruins of Tokyo searching in the nighttime darkness for his missing wife Shima, Kanakuri is stopped by the civil militia for his use of "dialect." The militia members interrogate him: "Are You Japanese? Where are you from and what are you doing here?"; "Why do you talk like that? You're not Japanese after all!" The bewildered Kanakuri responds, "Kumamoto! I'm from Kumamoto!" (*Kumamoto! Wasya Kumamoto daken*). In the next scene, it becomes clear why the civil militia was suspicious of Kanakuri for his use of dialect rather than standard Japanese. Amid the struggle between Kanakuri and the civil militia, an acquaintance of Kanakuri happens by and vouches for him. After Kanakuri is let go, the acquaintance explains that the men interrogating him were investigating a "groundless rumor circulating amid the chaos unfolding in the wake of the disaster" that "someone has poisoned the well" (*Ido ni dokuyaku ga makarete iru*).²⁴ Here, it is made clear that the "someone" speaking "strange Japanese" the civil militia seeks are "Korean residents in Japan." In this manner, *Idaten's* depiction of this tragic earthquake integrates the hatred and discrimination against Korean residents in Japan that emerged in the disaster's aftermath, not to mention the identity crisis suffered by the prot-

23. Episode twenty-eight, "Run the Earth" (*Hashire daichi o*), quoted in Kudō (2019b), 74.

24. Episode twenty-three, "Earth" (*Daichi*), quoted in Kudō (2019a, 512).

agonist. As the first Japanese athlete to have participated in the Olympics, one might expect Kanakuri to be presented as a “proud Japanese,” yet his very “Japaneseness” is challenged due to his deviation from the “national language.”

Again, this is not to say that *Idaten* exudes a definite sense of responsibility, awareness, and reflection regarding Japan’s history of aggressive invasion, colonial rule, and ethnic discrimination. However, it is apparent that, through a rakugo frame, the narrative inhibits viewers from purely sympathizing with a story of sports and the Olympics. If this inhibition existed at a lower register until the final episode, it becomes unmistakable in the layering of the Tokyo Olympics and the Manchuria story through Shinshō’s final performance of “Tomikyu.” As, while perhaps it is possible to uncover an idea of unitary “history” through a discretely authored documentary history, such singular perspectives can never be created through the intermeshed relaying of diverse individual stories and perspectives about the past. In this respect, within the narrative of *Idaten* a boy born in Hiroshima on the day the atomic bomb is dropped symbolizes a “peaceful Japan” that has been revived after defeat in the war. Through the medium of television, his appearance in front of the world is recorded as a moment in a new history. Meanwhile, another boy born around the same time remembers his father through the medium of rakugo, which is conveyed on the “backstage” of history. Through the juxtaposition of these elements, *Idaten* thus weaves a forgotten past into a narrative of national glory. Just as the taxi driver, played by script writer Kudō Kankurō, remarks as Shinshō makes his way to the rakugo theater before the opening ceremony and Manchuria narrative components begin, “Today, everyone is stopping their cars and just staring at the sky.” In taking on this historical narrative, and depicting a moment when all in Japan are apparently captivated by this Olympic story of peace and revival, *Idaten* attempts to relate its own complex version of the unknown stories that took place *under* the sky during this period.²⁵

Idaten’s director Inoue Tsuyoshi describes how he desired to depict a “small and easily accessible story.” “The material is grand,” he says, “since it is drawn from modern and contemporary history and the Olympics, but the story itself is not one demanding a grand historical figure (“2019-nen taiga dorama *Idaten*”

25. As mentioned above, the airing of *Idaten*’s thirty-ninth episode coincided with a widely watched 2019 Rugby World Cup match. The eighty-minute match, in which Japan emerged victorious over Scotland, would have evoked among the mass of viewers a sense of “we” and “oneness.” Meanwhile, rather than a national rugby victory, only 3.7 percent of viewers would remember watching the story of Japanese living in Manchuria just after defeat in the war. This situation is reminiscent of the scene in which Gorin thinks of Manchuria as he watches “Tomikyu” all by himself while everyone else looks toward the sky and cheers on the Olympics.



Source: Kudō (2020, disc 1).

Figure 3. *Idaten*'s opening credits, © NHK 2020

2017). This notion is represented in *Idaten*'s opening credits, where a split screen juxtaposes images of athletes competing in the Olympics and “ordinary people” performing similar actions within their daily lives. Crowds of people rushing to work appear next to runners jockeying for position on the track, a weightlifter appears next to a mother hoisting her baby above her head, and so on (figure 3). This imagery encapsulates the “unprecedented” character of *Idaten* explored in this article. These are neither “great heroes” nor “patriotic Japanese” sacrificing themselves for the nation. Instead, they are the ordinary people composing their own stories and offering a counterpoint to the standard historical focus on the glorious performances of national athletes.

Conclusion

As emphasized throughout this article, *Idaten* is not a drama likely to be applauded by those in Asia “outside” Japan who would strongly contest the imperial Japanese history of invasion and aggression cursorily referenced within its narrative. Korean viewers, in particular, may experience outrage at the manner in which the Korean athletes Son Ki-jōng and Nam Sūng-ryong are

represented in episodes thirty-four and thirty-five. Nevertheless, *Idaten* is a drama that also provides uncomfortable viewing for Japanese audiences whether progressive or conservative. Perhaps it can be most accurately defined, then, as an attempt to express a certain “indecision” regarding the narration of a “unitary” history from a single perspective.

In this sense, *Idaten* is a subversive drama. Within the space of the “national stadium” filled with the easily recognizable “symbols” of modern and contemporary history, it boldly sets aside a small theatrical space, presenting viewers with an alternative version of modern and contemporary history. And between the symbols harnessed by the Tokyo Olympics to replace the images of a “war-criminal” and “defeated nation” with those of a “pacifist nation” and “economic superpower,” it inserts the politics of an uncomfortable past. It is precisely in this manner that *Idaten* reveals both the potential and limitations that characterize the genre of NHK taiga drama.²⁶

The fact alone of dealing with the 1964 Tokyo Olympics just ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics meant that *Idaten* would inevitably become entangled in the state project of narrating this global event as an opportunity for a “second” national revival. Indeed, *Idaten* has also drawn criticism and suspicion for this very reason. With this point in mind, perhaps contemporary circumstances “outside” the narrative, thick with the possibility of an unrealized Olympics of indefinite “deferment” rather than “revival,” offer to *Idaten* a more fitting conclusion.

To elaborate on this point, *Idaten*’s official homepage (<https://www.nhk.or.jp/idadaten/r/>) is an interesting case. The fact that it was closed off to overseas access throughout *Idaten*’s airing is rather puzzling. All other taiga drama homepages have been open to overseas visitors during airing, as was the case with *Awaiting Kirin* (*Kirin ga kuru*), the taiga drama that directly followed *Idaten*. Nor did “NHK on Demand” (*NHK on Demando*), a streaming site for previously broadcast dramas, allow access to *Idaten* for viewers outside of Japan. Added to this is the difficulty of having DVD editions, produced once a taiga drama has finished airing, shipped overseas. Therefore, barring real-time access to the original broadcast on NHK’s World Premium channel, there would have been little opportunity for overseas viewers to have watched *Idaten*. This restricted overseas distribution is likely related to *Idaten*’s problematic inclusion of Japan’s history of

26. Since this article focused on *Idaten*’s subversion of taiga drama conventions, audience ratings and primary audience demographics were dealt with in a traditional sense. However, considering the diversification of media platforms, one cannot exclude the possibility that certain viewers were left out of the calculation of audience ratings. It has been pointed out that loyal viewers of *Idaten*, albeit a small number, were active on social media platforms (Kimata 2019).

colonial rule and aggressive invasion, a subject matter for which Japan cannot escape controversy or criticism.

However, the restriction of overseas viewership was somewhat relaxed in early May 2020, when NHK World Japan broadcast an international version under the title *Idaten: The Epic Marathon to Tokyo*, with the original forty-seven episodes edited into six parts including English narration and subtitles. Unlike with the original *Idaten*, this version was available to stream through the NHK World Japan homepage (“*Idaten: The Epic Marathon*” n.d.). The most striking characteristic of the international version was the simplified narrative structure, with the Olympic story now related by an omniscient English-speaking narrator (Shinshō) and all the characters and events within the rakugo world completely omitted. Also removed was the story of “Kumamoto” and the “Korean residents in Japan,” while the Manchuria elements of the plot were presented in a completely different context. For instance, the scene in which Masaru is chased down and shot by Soviet soldiers immediately follows that in which he marches off to war. Furthermore, the scene is shortened and lacks any context regarding the immediate postwar conditions in Manchuria. The story then abruptly shifts to the dropping of the atomic bomb accompanied by the radio broadcast of the emperor’s declaration of surrender. *Idaten*’s unprecedented character as a taiga drama, as evinced in the historical juxtaposition of the Tokyo Olympics and invasion of Manchuria and motifs of the rakugo “Tomikyu” and “running,” is completely effaced, and Masaru is reimagined as an innocent victim conscripted into a war he does not support before coming to a miserable end. In this context, it is also worth noting that the DVD edition of the complete series released several months after the original airing was also re-edited. Specifically, in the final episode, the scenes of Masaru viewing a young Shinshō performing “Tomikyu” in Manchuria and Gorin running to Shiba to watch Shinshō’s “Tomikyu” are no longer juxtaposed. Instead, a scene is inserted reminiscing about Gorin and Shinshō’s time together since their first meeting. Thus, in the editing process for both international distribution and the national DVD rerelease, it was the passage which directly weaves together the stories of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and “Manchuria” that was erased. This very omission, however, testifies to the fact that it is this segment of the story that best demonstrates the depth of the controversy generated by *Idaten*’s “problematic” mode of narrating Japan’s modern and contemporary history.

Just as the transposition of “*Idaten*” into Roman characters from the original hiragana and translation of “rakugo” as “epic” effaced *Idaten*’s original context, *Idaten*’s heavily edited international version represented a missed opportunity to convey to viewers outside Japan the original’s bold, if flawed, revision of

mainstream Japanese history. In today's world of supposed guaranteed spaces for free artistic expression, attempts at creative experimentation may be understood as "manifestations of the artistic spirit of the times." Yet when artistic expression is subject to political demands, it becomes little more than an anachronism (Chin Ũn-yŏng 2012, 280). In this regard, perhaps it is now time to observe how overseas viewers evaluate the anodyne presentation of modern and contemporary history within *Idaten's* "remade" international version, not least since NHK has installed a new managerial administration following the conclusion of *Idaten's* original airing.

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