

# The Sword and the Screen

## The Japanese Period Film

### 1915–1960



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David Desser, Emeritus, University of Illinois

Itakura Fumiaki, Curator, The National Film Center, Tokyo

Daniel Botsman, Chair, The Council on East Asian Studies; Professor of History, Yale

Aaron Gerow, Professor of Film Studies and East Asian Languages and Literatures, Yale

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## The Japanese Period Film

### 1915–1960

January 21–February 11, 2012

Sponsored by  
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# Introduction

Aaron Gerow  
Professor, Yale University

For much of its history, Japanese cinema has been represented by period films, called “jidaigeki.” This is not simply because *jidaigeki* have constituted a major portion of Japanese film production, but also because these works have often been what comes to mind when people think of Japanese cinema, ever since the victory of Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* (1950) at the Venice Film Festival. Nagata Masaichi, the head of the Daiei studio that made *Rashomon*, even wrote that it was the *jidaigeki* that should lead the industry’s efforts to sell Japanese film abroad, and that was one reason Daiei went on to produce other period masterpieces such as Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Ugetsu* (*Ugetsu monogatari*, 1953). Samurai movies went on to influence everything from Westerns to *Saturday Night Live* (e.g., John Belushi’s samurai character), from *Star Wars* to *Ghost Dog* and *The Last Samurai*, at the same time they helped define Japan in Western eyes. The image of a samurai businessman was the form of self-orientalization that Japan pursued as well.

Yet *jidaigeki* are not simply allegories for the nation or a globalizing imaginary. Period films are also sites of struggle over history and national identity. Early films such as *Sendaihagi* would be criticized for their overreliance on theatrical performance by intellectuals aiming to modernize Japanese culture, but they also could play with tradition themselves (by for instance inserting women in the usually all-male kabuki world). Silent samurai films could also feature nihilistic rebel heroes in a veiled critique of contemporary Japan, while directors such as Yamanaka Sadao and Itami Mansaku could use a satiric, cosmopolitan touch to critique a genre seemingly too focused on the violent pursuit of loyalty. Mizoguchi Kenji’s wartime *The Loyal 47 Ronin* (*Genroku Chūshingura*, 1941–1942) could be seen as the cinematic epitome of aestheticizing the nation, even though Japan’s military government did not always smile on the samurai movie’s sometimes singular pursuit of kinetic pleasure—which is ironic given the Allied Occupation’s clampdown on the genre as supposedly a den of militarist ideology. The fact that the *jidaigeki* plays with both the past—the usually sacred field of nation building—and the pleasure of bodily violence has made it a rich, dangerous, and often profoundly contradictory site for depicting and experiencing Japan. Samurai films were as much about the present as about the past.

The most basic definition of *jidaigeki*—stories set before 1868—is, on the one hand, so loose it makes outlining this mode as a genre difficult, but on the other, broad enough to allow for an enormous variety of narratives and styles, from romance to comedy, from tragedy to musicals. Those who wanted to experiment with cinematic style or pursue radical politics,

could avail themselves of the period film, not simply because it was a convenient site for hiding from authorities worried about interventions in contemporary culture and society, but also because it was a fruitful ground for playing with *motion* pictures on a mass level. The seemingly most traditional of Japanese genres was often the most cinematic and the most modern.

That pliability—in some perspectives, even amorphousness—of the *jidaigeki* has made it hard to grasp. It has been a fertile screen for many domestically and internationally to project their images of Japan, but that screen itself has been mobile, confounding attempts to fix either the genre or the subjects it depicts. How for instance does one deal with Shimura Takeshi, the actor famed for playing the leader of Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, singing songs to his pottery in *Singing Lovebirds*? Films that do not fit certain images have been shunted to the margins. That is one reason why the *jidaigeki* produced in the 1950s by Tōei, for example—far more successful than those made by Tōhō and Kurosawa Akira—have rarely traveled abroad. Perhaps one reason only a limited set of period films have crossed the oceans is actually a perceived need to corral the unwieldy complexity of the *jidaigeki* phenomenon.

Our series attempts to open the gates and bring a greater variety of period films out into the open. Some of the prints we are showing are only available at the National Film Center of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and we are fortunate that the NFC, for the first time in its history, is co-sponsoring an event with a non-Japanese university. We look forward to further collaborations. We wish to thank everyone at the NFC for making this event possible, particularly Tochigi Akira and Itakura Fumiaki, a curator at the Center and expert on Itō Daisuke who will take part in the symposium alongside David Desser, himself an authority on Japanese and other Asian martial arts films. We appreciate the generous support of the Council of East Asian Studies, the Whitney Humanities Center, and the Film Study Center at Yale, as well as the many graduate students in Film Studies and East Asian Languages and Literatures who helped with the programming and putting together this pamphlet.

As critics have done with the Western, a genre that has often been compared to and interacted with the *jidaigeki*, many have sounded the death knell of samurai movies. Their numbers have declined and artisans with the necessary knowledge in costuming and swordplay have died off. But the *jidaigeki* still persists. In the age of “Cool Japan,” when Japan seems to be represented by games, anime, and manga, stories about the pre-1868 past as well as past films themselves—continue to complicate our notions about Japan and cinema, and the connections between the two.

# The Beginnings of the *Jidaigeki*

Itakura Fumiaki

Curator, National Film Center, Tokyo

*Jidaigeki* (the period film) refers to a category of films with narratives set before 1868, during the Edo period and other premodern periods, which has been used up to the present day as a pair with *gendai-geki*, which are set in the modern world. The roots of the cultural history of *jidaigeki* lie in the traditional stage arts of kabuki, as well as the performances (*koshibai*) of troupes of entertainers who traveled throughout Japan from the Meiji period (1868–1912) to the Taishō period (1912–1926). While there is an overwhelming number of films set in the Edo period (1603–1868), many other works depict the Warring States Period at the end of the sixteenth century (for example, Kurosawa Akira's *The Seven Samurai*) or the spectacular lifestyles of aristocrats in the Heian Period. Excluding the period of the Pacific War (1941–1945) and the occupation under GHQ (1945–1952), *gendai-geki* and *jidaigeki* were produced in fairly equal numbers from 1910 to 1960. Traditionally, a division of roles existed in which *gendai-geki* were produced in studios in the Tokyo suburbs, and *jidaigeki* were produced in studios in Kyoto. The reason was that Kyoto had been the capital before the Edo Period. As the former center of government and culture, Kyoto had many temples and shrines, and the techniques of traditional crafts involving clothing and props were passed down in the city, making it most suitable for the production of *jidaigeki*.

It is said that *jidaigeki* were first produced in Japan in 1908. Unfortunately, we suffered a devastating loss of many Japanese films made before the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, and very few *jidaigeki* from that period still remain today. For this reason, the film *Sendai-hagi*, presumably produced in 1915, is an excellent example of the dominant style of Japanese films from the 1910s. During the screening of Japanese films before the earthquake, multiple *benshi* (narrators called *kowairo benshi*) at the edge of the screen were responsible for the voices of characters appearing on the screen (yet, even before the earthquake, the screening of foreign films was always performed with only one *benshi* at a time). The musical accompaniment was predominantly the *geza-ongaku* of kabuki, using instruments such as the *shamisen* and *taiko*.

Additionally, before the earthquake it was the *benshi* in the movie theaters, more than film directors or actors, who had the power to determine the content of the narratives for Japanese films. As a result, there was a conscious avoidance of such forms of analytical editing as close-ups and cutbacks as well as of intertitles so as not to disrupt the rhythm of the *benshi's* narration, and consequently, each film became a succession of long takes. This type of style was later judged to be “backward” by film historians



who took an evolutionary standpoint. However, such films not only utilized the foreground and background of the screen to stage the story within the limits of a fixed frame, but actually also adopted an oblique or angled composition to make use of depth, demonstrating the originality and ingenuity of the producers. Furthermore, due to the influence of kabuki, Japanese films of this period did not have actresses, and almost all the female roles were played by male actors, but *Sendai-hagi* was an exception in which an actress named Nakamura Kasen appeared.

At the end of the 1910s, one group of intellectuals and progressive film producers argued that Japanese films needed to modernize by adopting the same style as films in the West. Their movement enabled film producers to recapture from *benshi* the power to determine meaning within films. Accordingly, starting in 1923, the film industry of Japan began to reorganize, and from the late 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, Japanese silent films entered a golden age. During this time, two main features of Japanese cinematic style were developed. The first was the transparent narration typical of classic Hollywood films, which perfected a form of “natural” editing that made it appear as if no editing had

taken place by means of splicing cutbacks and action and linking shots with lines of sight. Another feature was the use of intense montages to instantly stimulate the senses of the audience, a technique influenced by the films of such directors as Marcel L'Herbier and Abel Gance, who were part of the so-called French Impressionist movement. Around that time in Japan, this technique, called a "flash" (*furasshu*), was adopted in Japanese film in a variety of ways, blending and functioning well with Hollywood-style transparent narration. Itō Daisuke, who directed the films *An Unforgettable Grudge* and *A Diary of Chuji's Travels* (to be shown in this series), is one director known for his skill with fusing Hollywood-style transparency and French Impressionist-style rapid montage.

With Shōchiku's 1931 release of the full sound feature film, *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (*Madamu to nyōbō*, dir. Gosho Heinosuke), Japan entered the era of the talkie. It was not until 1935, however, that the majority of the films made in Japan were talkies, and both silent films and "sound versions" (*saundo-ban*) with score and sound effects but no dialogue continued to be made into the later half of the 1930s. As cinema moved from silents to talkies, accompanists across the world went on strike, and in Japan there were also strikes by *benshi* narrators.

The second half of the thirties saw the *jidaigeki*'s greatest flowering of variety. There were even musicals like *Singing Lovebirds* and films combining musicals and comedies like *Enoken's Kinta the Pick-pocket*. Since men had long made up the overwhelming majority of *jidaigeki* fans, there were a great many films produced with an emphasis on male actors in swordplay (*chanbara*) scenes. But then there is also *Flowers Have Fallen*, a *jidaigeki* melodrama told from a female perspective in which male actors do not appear onscreen at all, and are only heard off-screen. *Kōchiyama Sōshun* is notable for introducing realistic elements to performance at a time when acting in the *jidaigeki* was heavily influenced by the elocution and gestures of the kabuki theater.

When the war with China began in 1937, *jidaigeki* were made faithful to historical narratives with the goal of strengthening Japanese national identity. These movies were grouped together as historical films (*rekishi eiga*). These films limit the action scenes of *chanbara* in favor of a more reserved, graver style, of which Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Loyal 47 Ronin* (*Genroku Chūshingura*, 1941-42) is the most refined example.

The latter half of the 1950s was a golden age for the *jidaigeki*, thanks to the success of the Tōei Kyoto studio. But as the film industry began to decline in the 1960s, the genre gradually shifted its center of activity from the cinema to television. Then with the surge of new types of shows on TV in the 1970s, the spread of video games in the 1980s, and the rise of internet use in the 1990s, the popularity of the *jidaigeki* on TV has waned together with that of the period film, and production in the genre has decreased. For many teenagers today, for whom high school and college exam study have become the only chances to learn about Japan's history, the world of *jidaigeki* is an alien culture, from its language to its customs and morality. Meanwhile, the *jidaigeki* specialty channel on satellite television is extremely popular, especially with older viewers.

But the genre has not been completely left to the past. Elements and motifs have moved into the worlds of anime, manga, and videogames, totally absorbing many young people. Recently there have even been growing numbers of "history girls" (*rekijo*), young women who develop an otaku-like, obsessive romantic attachment to historical warriors. And since 2009, *jidaigeki* have been featured with Westerns and British Heritage films at the annual Kyoto Historica International Film Festival, held in the city that has long been the home of the *jidaigeki*. As the genre moves into the twenty-first century, there is no doubt that it will continue to change and survive.

*Translated by: Grace Ting, Samuel Malissa*



# The Postwar *Jidaigeki*

David Desser

Emeritus, University of Illinois

It is likely that, along with the singular career of Ozu Yasujiro, Japan's major cinematic achievement and contribution to world cinema is the *jidaigeki*. It was, of course, the *jidaigeki* in the form of *Rashomon* that introduced the Euro-American film world to the Japanese cinema in 1951 with its Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival; and it was virtually exclusively the *jidaigeki* which insisted to the West that Japan's cinema, and indeed its culture, were forces to be reckoned with amidst the recovery of the postwar world. Whether it was the atmospheric and hypnotic works of Mizoguchi Kenji, like *Ugetsu* (*Ugetsu monogatari*, 1953) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho dayū*, 1954), the elegant styling of Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*, 1953), the insightful examination into the making of a warrior of Inagaki Hiroshi's *Samurai* (*Miyamoto Musashi*, 1954), or the sheer dynamism and unprecedented power of Kurosawa Akira's *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954), the *jidaigeki* proved itself a supple, versatile and endlessly fascinating look into Japan's past and, for any with eyes to see, its struggles with the present. Few could miss the way that Kurosawa's films like *Seven Samurai*, *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*, 1957), *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi toride no sanakunin*, 1958), *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (*Tsubaki Sanjūrō*, 1962) dealt with personal responsibility in times of chaos; that the magnificently stately, yet explosive works by Kobayashi Masaki, like *Harakiri* (*Seppuku*, 1962) and *Samurai Rebellion* (*Jōi-uchi*, 1967), castigated a system that casually disposed of its best and brightest; that Okamoto Kihachi, the consummate stylist behind the likes of *Samurai Assassin* (*Samurai*, 1965) and *Sword of Doom* (*Daibosatsu tōge*, 1966) found in the struggles leading up to the Meiji Restoration a powerful period in which to examine obsession and madness; and Gosha Hideo, who wielded a movie camera with the dexterity of a master swordsman, painted a gloomy, yet always electrifying portrait of men in extremis in *Three Outlaw Samurai* (*Sanbiki no samurai*, 1964), *Goyokin* (1969), *Tenchu!* (*Hito-kiri*, 1969) and *Hunter in the Dark* (*Yami no karyudo*, 1979). Whether or not all or even many of these films somehow addressed the dark years of the Pacific War, they are all consummately entertaining.

The globalization of cinema that had begun in the silent era, but was put on hold during the coming of sound and then the Second World War, took flight in the postwar era through the establishment of international film festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, and the re-invigoration of Venice, along with new formations of distribution channels in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Anxious to establish their bona fides as

world citizens and major culture-producers, the Japanese not only entered films in the European festivals, but helped establish the Asian Film Festival to repair their image in Asia and find a market for their increasingly sophisticated films. Not surprisingly, it was the *jidaigeki* that led this effort. Many films, some now forgotten, competed at these varied film festivals, a good number of these garnering awards, but as the years have gone by the *jidaigeki* has become synonymous with films about samurai, *rōnin* or any others—men and women—who carried swords that they wielded with astonishing, sometimes magical dexterity. Perhaps best called “chanbara eiga,” these films influenced varieties of war and action cinema the world over. Most significantly the *chanbara eiga* of the 1950s and 1960s that found its way westward over the years influenced the Hollywood and Hong Kong cinemas: two of the most popular and influential cinemas of the postwar era. The circularity of influence, from Hollywood to Japan, Japan to Hollywood, Japan to Hong Kong, Hong Kong to Hollywood, Hong Kong to Japan, can be positively dizzying, but there is no question that whatever influence Hollywood had on Japan in the early postwar era, the Japanese more than repaid later on.

It is both unfair and unfortunate that the *jidaigeki* has become synonymous with the *chanbara eiga* and that the sword film itself has become synonymous with only a handful of directors and films. As Mizoguchi (inexplicably) fades from cinematic consciousness and other *jidaigeki* filmmakers worthy of note have barely made a dent outside of Japan, so, too, many worthy films and filmmakers who did work in *chanbara eiga* need a bit of historical reclamation. The remarkable malleability of the form led to its astonishing popularity so that in many ways the so-called Second Golden Age of Japanese Cinema was owed in no small measure to the variety and scope of the *jidaigeki* and its off-shoot, the *chanbara eiga*. The vast reservoir of unknown or forgotten films testifies to the limited corpus that the West claims for the genre at the expense of so many marvelously entertaining and subversive uses of the form.

Take, for example, the swordplay movies of Misora Hibari, she of the golden voice, the tragic traditional Japanese pop (*enka*) singer who died too young at age 52 in 1989. Many of her sword films are musicals, thus bending the genre to the demands of her star image. And in many of her *jidaigeki* she plays a man—not a woman playing a man, though she does that, too, in many films—thus bending the gender of the genre, as well. She reverses kabuki tradition in *Benten Kozō* (dir. Sasaki Yasushi, 1960) playing a man

who becomes a righteous outlaw, wielding a sword with creditable skill (especially for an *enka* singer!). She demonstrates some serious martial skills as a spoiled princess in *Bride of Peacock Castle* (*Kujaku-jō no hanayome*, dir. Matsumura Shōji, 1959), a rather more lighthearted film. She plays both a woman and a man in *Ishimatsu, the One-Eyed Avenger* (*Hibari no Mori no Ishimatsu*, dir. Sawashima Tadashi, 1960), singing and spinning her yarn about the famous companion of Shimizu no Jirochō and then inhabiting the role herself. And there's a film like *First Love of Okon* (*Hanayomi shichihenge*, dir. Watanabe Kunio, 1958), which can only be called a musical extravaganza. Such films play havoc with generic definitions of the *chanbara eiga* based solely on the limited corpus scholars have thus far examined.

Or take the serio-comic *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* (1957) directed by the under-studied Kawashima Yūzō, who is hardly known for *jidaigeki*, indeed barely known at all save for *Elegant Beast* (*Shitoyakana kedamono*, 1962), his savagely comic look at contemporary Japan. *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* brings together the first-rate comic star Frankie Sakai with the more stolid superstar of the “sun tribe” Ishihara Yūjirō (and featuring an early performance of soon-to-be superstar Kobayashi Akira). With a script by Imamura Shōhei, it is no wonder that the film qualifies as a deeply piercing political allegory as well as a comic transformation of the super-serious samurai and his “righteous” quest. The film qualifies as an anti-samurai drama at a time when the form had barely even begun; such was Kawashima's and Imamura's sensitivity to emerging social unrest.

Or take Uchida Tomu, a director who began his career in the silent era and by the 1930s was one of the bright lights of the first Golden Age of Japanese Cinema. Not known at that time for his work in the *jidaigeki*, following his return from Manchuria well into the postwar era, he turned to the *chanbara* with a passion and grace that made him the most important director of the genre aside from Kurosawa. He made far more *jidaigeki* than Kurosawa in the 1950s and 1960s and his fate as a forgotten or unknown figure except among avid film scholars is another sad index of the limited corpus of films available in accessible form. For many, Uchida's masterpiece is the 1955 *Bloody Spear at Mt. Fuji* (*Chiyari Fuji*) which, like the later *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate*, already introduces both comic and anti-samurai elements, though Uchida is more of a traditionalist than Kawashima. *The Kuroda Affair* (a.k.a. *Disorder of the Kuroda Clan*, 1956) similarly introduced a clear allegorical connection to modern Japanese society while at the same time working out his particular stylistic interests. These would come to fruition when he made the first major postwar version of Nakazato Kaizan's unfinished masterpiece, *Daibosatsu Tōge*, in the period 1957–1959. A stylist every bit as competent as Gosha Hideo, he was also an economical filmmaker, able to tell complex stories with great compression and suggestion. This is best represented in his five-part adaptation (1961–1965) of the mammoth novel

by Yoshikawa Eiji of the life of Miyamoto Musashi. With the rock-solid Nakamura Kinnosuke inhabiting Musashi and the fight scenes far more imaginatively staged than in the better-known three-part version by Inagaki, Uchida's film is likely the definitive version not only of the novel, but of the myth of Musashi.

If Uchida Tomu is the forgotten master of the postwar *chanbara* film, Mori Kazuo is the quiet craftsman producing the highest quality work within the genre system. His 1952 *Vendetta of a Samurai* (*Araki Mataemon*) is actually the first great postwar sword film, a rehearsal of sorts for *Seven Samurai* with its cast consisting of Mifune Toshirō, Shimura Takashi, Chiaki Minoru and Katō Daisuke. He would direct part III of another version of *Daibosatsu Tōge* in 1960, taking over from the great Misumi Kenji who began working on Japan's first 70mm film, the epic *Buddha* (*Shaka*, 1961). Most significantly in this period, he would give Katsu Shintarō a number of flashy roles that made him a superstar. First would be an all-star version of the Jirochō legend, *Jirochō Fuji*, in 1959, featuring many of Daiei's biggest stars including Hasegawa Kazuo, Ichikawa Raizō, Wakao Ayako, and Yamamoto Fujiko with an extended cameo by Kyō Machiko. Katsu plays Ishimatsu—the same role Misora Hibari incarnated at virtually the same time! The three male leads would appear together under Mori's direction in the sequel the next year. An even more important star-making role under Mori's guidance would be *The Blind Menace* (1960), a *jidaigeki* more than a *chanbara* to be sure, but most importantly featuring Katsu as a blind masseur! Even a casual fan knows of Katsu's long-lived incarnation of Zatoichi, the Blind Swordsman, but two years before finding his most beloved role, he played a scheming, villainous, treacherous and lecherous character who shared with Zatoichi only his blindness and his massage skills. Interestingly, Mori would direct Katsu in the second of the Zatoichi films in 1963 as well as the much later *Zatoichi at Large* (*Zatōichi goyōtabi*, 1972). Whether or not Mori is an auteur to be compared with the likes of Kurosawa, Uchida, Okamoto and Gosha is certainly debatable, but it is a debate that cannot begin until the full range of his films breaks into the canon—where they certainly belong.

The *jidaigeki* would migrate to the period dramas of NHK by the 1970s; the *chanbara* film would enter the realm of fantasy starting in the 1970s. But its influence would continue in every action film made anywhere in the world and the lure and allure of the samurai would capture the likes of directors as different as Yamada Yōji (*Twilight Samurai* [*Tasogare Seibei*, 2002]), *The Hidden Blade* [*Kakushi ken*, 2004], *Love and Honor* [*Bushi no ichibun*, 2006]) and Miike Takashi (*13 Assassins* [*Jūsannin no shikaku*, 2010]). And it lives on in anime, thus introducing both a younger generation in Japan and anime's worldwide audience to the swordsmen and women who have so memorably populated the Japanese cinema from its very start and who, in the postwar era, not only revived Japan's cinema, but its national spirit, as well.

# Sendaihagi



Early Japanese cinema had many connections with kabuki, and many films featured *onnagata*, or female impersonators, a common kabuki convention. *Sendaihagi*, however, while a straightforward adaptation of a kabuki play, features Nakamura Kasen, the star of a women's kabuki troupe. She was among the earliest stars of Japanese cinema, and according to some, the very first female star. Another notable aspect of this film is its production company, M. Kashii. That short-lived firm was founded by Umeya Shōkichi, one of the pioneer film executives. After making his fortune in various parts of Asia, Umeya returned to Japan determined to succeed in the new cinema business and started the company M. Pathé. That company was later merged to form

## Sendaihagi

先代萩 御殿の場 義大夫出語 (1915)

**Production:** M. Kashii Productions

**Director:** unknown

**Cast:** Nakamura Kasen and her troupe

Nikkatsu, after which Umeya started M. Kashii. Financial gain was not the only thing on Umeya's mind, as much of his profits were sent to support the Chinese revolutionary, Sun Yat-sen, whom Umeya befriended during his time roaming around Asia.

*Sendaihagi* looks like a recording of a theatrical scene, with little "cinematic" narration. Audiences got the plot from the *benshi*, or just knew the famous story of Date clan, whose leader, Tsunamune, fell in love with Takao, an entertainer from Yoshiwara, the red-light district of Edo. His guardians, Date Hyōbu and Harada Kai, conspire to reveal this relationship with the intent to install their own favorite as a successor. Against this plot, Tsunamune's loyal servants, led by Katakura Kojūrō, help Tsunamune to retire quietly and install his son, Tsurukio, as the new clan leader.

# The Peerless Patriot



Along with his 1936 film *Akanishi Kakita*, *The Peerless Patriot* is known as one of director Itami Mansaku's representative works and a masterpiece of "nonsense *jidaigeki*." However, the film was lost for decades and has only recently been restored in part from a 9.5mm Pathé Baby print. (First imported to Japan in 1924, the small gauge Pathé Baby was popular among amateur filmmakers) While *The Peerless Patriot* was originally a feature-length film, extant parts of the Pathé Baby print made for home use have been combined with a 16mm Nikkatsu Graph fragment donated by the film critic Kajita Akira and edited to make this twenty-one minute "digest" version of the film.

Itami Mansaku brought many new ideas to the pe-

## Kokushi musō 國士無双 (1932)

**Production:** Chiezō Productions, 21 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Itami Mansaku

**Script:** Iseno Shigenobu

**Cast:** Kataoka Chiezō (*The Fake*), Takase Minoru (*Ise Iseokami*), Segawa Michisaburō (*Obenauchi Shimanōjō*), Atsumi Shūichirō (*Iga Sabasuke*), Ban Junzaburō (*The Ascetic*), Yamada Isuzu (*Oyae*)

riod film in the 1930s, collaborating often with Kataoka Chiezō, owner of Chie Productions. In this film, Kataoka plays a country bumpkin who is picked up by two masterless samurai and made up to impersonate the local ruler. The impostor, tired of the company of the two ronin, sets off on his own while still impersonating the ruler. After casually stumbling upon the castle town of the real ruler, the impostor rescues a young woman named O-Yae from ruffians, bringing him face-to-face with her father...the real ruler! With its sharp sense of satire, the film might be called an "anti-*jidaigeki*," parodying the conventions of the genre and ushering in a new approach to the period film in Japan.

# A Diary of Chuji's Travels *and* An Unforgettable Grudge



## **Chūji tabi nikki** 忠次旅日記 (1927)

**Production:** Nikkatsu, 94 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Itō Daisuke

**Script:** Itō Daisuke

**Cast:** Ōkōchi Denjirō (*Kunisada Chūji*), Nakamura Hideo (*Kantarō*), Nakamura Kichiji (*Ian Saemon*), Sakamoto Senosuke (*Bunzō*), Sawa Ranko (*Okume*), Fushimi Naoe (*Oshira*)



## **Chōkon** 長恨 (1926)

**Production:** Nikkatsu Taishōgun, 15 min. (Tinted Color)

**Director:** Itō Daisuke

**Script:** Itō Daisuke

**Cast:** Ōkōchi Denjirō (*Iki Kazuma*), Kume Jō (*Jirō*), Onoue Utagorō (*Numata Sōzaemon*), Kawakami Yayoi (*Matsue*), Ichikawa Mononosuke (*Tomigorō*)

The director of nearly a total of 100 *jidaigeki* films, Itō Daisuke (1898-1981), often revered as the “father of *jidaigeki*” by critics and movie fans in Japan, is nevertheless known as a stylist who availed himself of all the cinematic techniques arriving from Hollywood and Europe in the 1920s. Itō first came out of *gendai geki* and is credited with helping found the *jidaigeki* as a modern form, distinct from the previous, theatrical *kyūgeki* or “old style” films, one that melded contemporary forms with period stories. David Bordwell names Itō’s style “calligraphic,” filled with fast action, rapid montage and flamboyant camera movement, which earned Itō his by now well-known nickname “Idō daisuki” (a pun on his name meaning “great fan of camera movement”). Itō’s early films, however, go beyond the sheer display of acrobatic spectacle. The portrayal of disgruntled, lonely, nihilistic drifters as protagonists certainly marks his work as socially conscious filmmaking, occasionally referred to as “tendency films,” or left-leaning commercial films produced during the 1920s and 1930s.

*An Unforgettable Grudge* was Itō’s first film for Nikkatsu, as well as his first collaboration with Ōkōchi Denjirō. Set in the late-Edo period, the film tells the tragic story of two brothers, and the surviving frag-

ment centers on a fight scene from the end of the film. While only the last reel of *An Unforgettable Grudge* has been preserved, the fast camera movement and rapid cuts offer an early glimpse into Itō’s distinctive style. The digital restoration shown here includes the color applied by hand to the original black and white print, which was a common technique in the silent era.

Released the year after *An Unforgettable Grudge*, Itō’s trilogy *A Diary of Chūji’s Travels* also survives only in fragments which were obtained by the National Film Center in 1991. One episode of the second part and about one-half of the third part have been restored, including a shortened version of the magnificent finale. The film stars Itō’s frequent collaborator Ōkōchi Denjirō as the legendary late-Edo gambler Kunisada Chūji, portraying him as a man at odds with an oppressive society as he strives to save the geisha Oshina. In addition to Itō’s unique cinematic style, *A Diary of Chūji’s Travels* creatively exaggerates, critiques, and transforms the *jidaigeki* conventions of the time. Rather than conform to the tragically romantic ending in which the protagonist dies a beautiful and heroic death, the film descends into a darkly nihilistic epilogue where the protagonist is reduced to a cripple who can only watch as his followers fall one-by-one in the final battle.

# Kōchiyama Sōshun



**Kōchiyama Sōshun** 河内山宗俊 (1936)

**Production:** Nikkatsu, 82 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Yamanaka Sadao

**Script:** Mimura Shintarō

**Cast:** Kawarasaki Chōjūrō (*Kōchiyama Sōshun*), Nakamura Kan'emon (*Kaneko Ichinojō*), Yamagishi Shizue (*Oshizu*), Hara Setsuko (*Onami*), Katō Daisuke (*Kenta*), Ichikawa Senshō (*Naozamurai*), Suketakaya Sukezō (*Ushimatsu*), Bandō Chōemon (*Moritaya*)

## PLOT:

The film opens as Kaneko Ichinojō, a *rōnin* working as an enforcer for the Moritaya gang, goes around collecting protection money from vendors in an Edo market. He lets the pretty, young Onami slide on the payment for her tea stall. Meanwhile, her juvenile delinquent brother, Hirotarō, steals an out-of-town samurai's dagger and then goes on the lam. Onami goes looking for her brother at the tavern where he sometimes loiters, owned by none other than Kōchiyama Sōshun, a monk who has broken his vows and runs a small time gambling operation in his tavern.

While the samurai whose dagger was stolen is searching for Hirotarō, the boy runs afoul of the Moritaya gang as well. As the gangsters try to intimidate Onami, Kōchiyama and his wife Oshizu become involved in the local intrigue by trying to protect the boy and his hardworking elder sister from the gangsters. Kaneko is caught between the kindness he feels towards Onami and the pressure his boss is putting on him. Kōchiyama and Kaneko have a misunderstanding that almost results in a duel, but when Kaneko accidentally cuts Onami he calls off the duel. He and Kōchiyama go drinking instead and become friends.

The Moritaya gang continues intimidating Onami, leading to a tearful confrontation between the young woman and her brother about the consequences of his irresponsible ways. Kōchiyama impersonates a high ranking monk and talks his way into a large sum of money from the samurai whose dagger was stolen earlier, enough to forgive the debts owed to Moritaya by Onami. In a final confrontation with the gang, Kōchiyama and Kaneko make a life and death decision to help Hirotarō escape, a decision that makes them feel as if they've become human beings at last.

## BACKGROUND:

This is one of only three extant films out of the twenty-four directed by Yamanaka Sadao in his short lifetime. The rest were all lost during the war, which also claimed the filmmaker's life (he died of an illness on the China front in 1938 at age twenty eight). Of the three extant works, *Kōchiyama Sōshun* is perhaps the most orthodox *jidaigeki*, falling between the light-hearted comedy of *The Pot Worth a Million Ryo* (*Tange Sazen yowa: Hyakuman ryō no tsubo*, 1935) and the bleak realism of *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (*Ninjō kamifusen*, 1937). What stands out in this film is not the originality of the plot but rather Yamanaka's lyrical rendering of familiar material through his trademark techniques: sharp, rhythmic cuts, deep compositions of space in the streets and alleys, and a focus on commoners and people at the margins of society.

It is this last feature for which Yamanaka is best remembered. *Kōchiyama Sōshun* is based on a character from kabuki plays and adventure stories, but the film reworks the stage heroes and villains into contemporary, everyday people who would be familiar to 1930s audiences, despite the film's taking place in the Edo period. One of the ways Yamanaka was able to accomplish this was by collaborating with actors from the leftist *Zenshinza* theater troupe, which specialized in understated, realistic performances.

The film also features a young Hara Setsuko who would later gain fame as the titular role in Ozu Yasujiro's "Noriko Trilogy." Katō Daisuke, who appears in the film under the stage name Ichikawa Enji, is most famous to foreign viewers as one of Kurosawa Akira's "seven samurai."

# Flowers Have Fallen



**Hanachirinu** 花ちりぬ (1938)

**Production:** Tōhō Kyōto, 75 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Ishida Tamizō

**Script:** Yamamoto Shirō (story by Morimoto Kaoru)

**Cast:** Hanai Ranko (*Akira*), Mizukami Reiko (*Tanehachi*), Sanjō Rikie (*Tomī*), Ejima Rumi (*Harue*), Hayashi Kimiko (*Miyako*), Ichinose Ayako (*Matsuba*)

## PLOT:

*Flowers Have Fallen* takes place between the evening of July 17, 1864, and midnight the following day, during a time in which soldiers from the Chōshū domain in southwestern Japan entered Kyoto and clashed with the forces of the Tokugawa shogunate under the slogan “Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians!” (*sonnō jōi*). Tomi, who was born and raised in the Gion district of Kyoto and rose through the ranks from dancing girl to geisha to eventually become the proprietress of the geisha house, is antagonistic toward the decline of the livelihood of women of the Gion brought about by this social unrest. However, while Tomi is unable to see outside of the love and attachment she feels for the Gion, her daughter Akira has been swept up in the revolutionary zeitgeist, and the prospect of spending her whole life in the district is unbearable for the young woman. In addition to this mother-daughter dynamic at the center of the film, various other women of the geisha house command significant screen time: Matsuba, who wants to return to Gion after a failed relationship with a man; Miyako, whose plain looks condemn her to serving the other women, driving her to simultaneously envy and pity the other women; Harue, the star whose time has passed and has turned to drinking; and several others. In fact, one could argue that the “main character” of the film is the community of the geisha house itself, rather than one or two individuals who are taken to be emblematic of the community as a whole. Ultimately, *Flowers Have Fallen* offers us not only an intimate, female-centric perspective on a transitional moment in Japan’s history, but also a glimpse of how such a historical moment was imagined on the eve of another period of social upheaval and war.

## BACKGROUND:

Despite being virtually unknown outside of Japan, the all-female *Flowers Have Fallen* stands out as a truly unique film in a genre often equated with samurai masculinity. Set entirely within a Kyoto geisha house over the course of a little more than twenty-four hours, the film explores the relationships of the women to one another and the rapidly changing society of Japan in the 1860s. While the voices of male customers in the geisha house and clashing forces in the streets outside can be heard off-screen, no men ever appear visually in the film. The most notable cinematic feature of the film is director Ishida Tamizō’s constant renewal of the relatively confined space of the geisha house within which the film takes place by never repeating a shot, winning *Flowers Have Fallen* great praise from Noël Burch in his influential book on Japanese cinema *To the Distant Observer*.

The film was made by the Tōhō studio, which rose to prominence contemporaneous with the advent of the talkie era in the mid-1930s. In 1937, the year before *Flowers Have Fallen* was made, Tōhō acquired both the Tokyo-based PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory) and Kyoto-based JO Studios, basically replacing the signs for those studios with Tōhō Tokyo and Tōhō Kyoto respectively. The original story of *Flowers Have Fallen* was written by Morimoto Kaoru, a talented young playwright for the Bungakuza (“The Literary Theater”), who breathed new life into the theater world of Japan with his intellectual and modern style before his early death in 1946 at the age of 34. Ishida collaborated with Morimoto again for his 1939 film *Old Songs* (*Mukashi no uta*), another film pertaining to the political and social upheavals in nineteenth century Japan.

*FLOWERS HAVE FALLEN* ©1938 Toho Co., Ltd.

# Enoken's Kinta the Pickpocket



## Enoken no chakkiri Kinta

エノケンのちゃっきり金太 (1938)

**Production:** PCL, 76 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Yamamoto Kajirō

**Script:** Yamamoto Kajirō

**Cast:** Enomoto Ken'ichi (*Kinta*), Nakamura Koreyoshi (*Kurakichi*), Futamura Teiichi (*Sanji*), Yanagida Teiichi (*tavern owner*), Ichikawa Keiko (*Otsū*), Yamagata Naoyo (*Oyuki*), Kisanagi Kanta (*Obara*)

## PLOT:

The story opens during a performance at the Edo Nakamura theater, in the days when the Tokugawa government is beginning to falter. Kinta is there, and he steals the wallet of a samurai from out of town. He takes the loot to an upstairs gambling session at a tavern. The girl who works there, Otsū, takes a liking to Kinta, but he pays her no attention. Then Deputy Kurakichi shows up to arrest Kinta. Meanwhile, in the main house of the Satsuma mansion in Edo, the samurai Obara realizes that an important secret letter from his lord that he was to deliver was in the wallet that Kinta stole. When the shamed Obara bumps into Kinta and gives chase, Kinta entrusts the stolen letter to Otsū and leaves town.

Kurakichi and Obara both pursue Kinta on their own, catching up to him at an inn along the road outside of Edo. While Kurakichi and Kinta eventually reconcile, Obara reveals himself to be a coward and a villain, holding a pair of women captive and threatening them in hopes of recovering the secret documents that Kinta inadvertently stole. Kinta enlists some help and rescues them. Meanwhile, there is also a Tokugawa agent searching for the documents, disguised as a candy peddler.

Later, Kinta and Kurakichi meet at an inn outside of Edo, where some *rōnin* get them drunk and rob them blind. The pair duck into what turns out to be the backstage of a ladies kabuki theater. They stumble onto stage when Obara and his group appear and cause a disturbance. Kinta and Kurakichi then encounter refugees from the fighting that has broken out in Edo between Tokugawa forces and those fighting in the name of the emperor. When Kinta's life is threatened by Obara's pursuit, a candy peddler saves him, escorting the pickpocket back to Otsū's tavern to retrieve the secret documents. Kinta and Kurakichi are soon enlisted as soldiers, while Obara takes Otsū hostage. The candy peddler reappears as a mounted samurai, and joins Kinta in attacking

Obara's force and rescuing Otsū.

At the end of the film, Kinta and Kurakichi meet again in the Meiji era, and the two resume their old routine of chase and escape.

## BACKGROUND:

This is the sixth collaboration between Yamamoto and Enoken, Japan's most celebrated comedian. This outstanding work is a series told in four episodes, "Momma the Hat" (*Mama yo sandogasa*), "The Nice Way" (*Yuki wa yoi yoi*), "Returning is Scary" (*Kaeri wa kowai*), and "The Weather Will Clear if You Wait" (*Mateba hiyori*). The film is adapted from Johnston McCulley's detective novel *Subway Sam*, with Detective Craddock's pursuit of the pickpocket Subway Sam replaced by Deputy Kurakichi chasing Kinta. While the story that inspired the film entertains with the back and forth between the two characters in the subway, this adaptation set in the twilight years of the Tokugawa government takes place along the expanse of the Tōkaidō highway, opening up greater possibilities for pursuit and escape. The numerous quirky characters that Kinta and Kurakichi encounter one after the other make for a dynamic unfolding of events. While there are a great many amusing gags, and the film has plenty of chase scenes (which one could consider to be among the fundamental points of fun in a film), the layered enjoyability of this production comes in large part from the skill of the director. This is apparent in the way Yamamoto perceived Enoken's abilities as a comedic actor and brought out a performance worthy of Buster Keaton, where the actor is cavorting about in constant motion. Yamamoto also made serious dramas, including the celebrated wartime film *The Battle at Sea from Hawaii to Malay* (*Hawaii Marē oki kaisen*, 1942), but is best known as Kurosawa Akira's mentor.

KINTA THE PICKPOCKET ©1958 Toho Co., Ltd.

# Singing Lovebirds



**Oshidori utagassen** 鴛鴦歌合戦  
(1939)

**Production:** Nikkatsu, 69 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Makino Masahiro

**Script:** Edogawa Kōji

**Cinematography:** Miyagawa Kazuo

**Cast:** Kataoka Chiezō (*Asai Reisaburō*), Kagawa Ryōsuke (*Kagawa Sōshichi*), Shimura Takashi (*Shimura Kyōsai*), Ichikawa Haruyo (*Oharu*), Dick Mine (*Minezawa Tanbenokami*), Hattori Tomiko (*Otomi*), Fukamizu Fujiko (*Fujio*)

## PLOT:

In the film, Oharu (played by Ichikawa Haruyo, a popular film star and singer) is the daughter of a man with an unrestrained desire for antiques, Shimura Kyōsai (Shimura Takashi, who starred in many of Kurosawa Akira's films, including *Seven Samurai* and *Ikiru*). The problem is that they barely have enough money to feed themselves, as the umbrella-making business they run is not all that profitable. Moreover, all the pieces Shimura buys are fakes. As if that is not bad enough, Oharu is also in love with a poor *rōnin* named Asai Reisaburō (Kataoka Chiezō), who is the favorite of many other girls, including the beautiful Otomi, the daughter of the wealthy Kagawa Sōshichi. Things get even more complicated as the fief's lord and shameless womanizer, Minezawa (played by famous singer, Dick Mine), tricks Shimura into selling Oharu for a worthless painting. The film ends ostensibly following the *chanbara* conventions, with a duel that leaves no doubt as to the genre's lyricism, but this time, not just in terms of the virtuosity of the choreography, but also its operatic style.

## BACKGROUND:

*Singing Lovebirds* is a rare generic hybrid of romantic comedy, musical, and period film. But it is only one film in a quite varied directorial filmography which lists more than 260 films. As the son of Makino Shōzō, often called the "father of Japanese cinema," Makino Masahiro was literally born into film. As a child he appeared in many of his father's films and started directing his own when he was only eighteen years old. He subsequently worked not just for his father's production company, but also for most of the big studios in Japan, such as Shōchiku, Nikkatsu, Tōei, Daiei and Tōhō. The word he is most frequently associated with is speed, both for his cinematic style,

and also, and perhaps more so, for the fast pace he shot his films. Despite the fact that his oeuvre encompasses works from various genres, including propaganda films during the Second World War and yakuza films toward the end of his career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he is chiefly known as a director of *jidaigeki*. Among his many great films, notable are the trilogy *Street of Masterless Samurai* (*Rōningai*, 1928–1929), *Duel at Takadanobaba* (*Chikemuri Takadanobaba*, 1937), and his remakes of prewar hits in the postwar era, such as the *Tange Sazen* series (1956).

It is said that while working on *Shimizu Port* (*Shimizu minato*, 1939), Makino discovered the vocal potential of his star, Kataoka Chiezō, and this led him to make his next project a full-fledged musical. Although silent films dominated the market in Japan until the mid-1930s, many musicals were also produced throughout the decade. Yet, unlike Hollywood musicals, the majority of the early Japanese ones simply featured a few songs which were not an inherent part of the plot. These films were related to stage revues, or to the *kouta eiga*, or (little) song films, that were popular from the silent era (when films would be accompanied by a live singer). By the late 1930s, however, there were many successful musicals, and Makino was clearly a leading figure in operetta talkies. He would continue to add elements of the musical even in wartime propaganda films like *The Opium War* (*Ahen sensō*, 1943), with its Busby Berkeley-like numbers, and *Hanako* (*Hanako-san*, 1943). The last noteworthy fact concerning the film is the camerawork of Miyagawa Kazuo, who is considered one of the greatest cinematographers in the history of Japanese cinema. His impact on many famous films, from *Ugetsu* to *Rashomon*, is certainly visible here as well.

# The Kuroda Affair



**Kuroda sōdō** 黒田騒動 (1956)  
**Production:** Tōei, 108 min. (B&W)  
**Director:** Uchida Tomu  
**Script:** Takaiwa Hajime  
**Cast:** Kataoka Chiezō (*Kuriyama Daizen*), Ōtomo Ryūtarō (*Takenaka Unemenokami*), Kataoka Eijirō (*Kuroda Tadayuki*), Nanbara Shinji (*Kurahashi Jūdayū*), Takachiho Hizuru (*Ohide*), Susukida Kenji (Doi Toshikatsu)

## PLOT:

As the film adaptation of a novel by Hōjō Hideji based on a true story, *The Kuroda Affair* takes as its subject one of the most infamous family uprisings (*oie sōdō*) in Japanese history. The story is set at the beginning of the Edo period when the Tokugawa shogunate moved to assert its authority over non-Tokugawa daimyō (feudal lords), pressing forward with plans to crush any opposition. In the region of Kyūshū, where several great daimyō such as the head of the Kuroda clan ruled, there was political turmoil.

In the film, the head of the clan, Kuroda Nagamasa, worries over its fate before finally deciding to allow his son Kuroda Tadayuki to inherit his position as leader. He passes away after entrusting his loyal retainer Kuriyama Daizen with the affairs of the clan. The new head Tadayuki is eventually influenced by the counsel of his concubine Ohide and Kurahashi Jūdayū, his favorite retainer, and begins to train foot soldiers and gather guns and cannons while building a warship prohibited by the shogunate. The people voice their discontent over his harsh use of conscripted labor and doubled taxes, and Daizen also entreats him to stop, fearing for the safety of the clan. Even as the situation escalates, with the Tokugawa shogunate sending Takenaka Unemenokami to investigate the situation, Tadayuki refuses to relent. With no other choice, Daizen reports his master to the shogunate in order to keep his promise to protect the clan.

## BACKGROUND:

While receiving little attention outside Japan, director Uchida Tomu (1898-1970) is nonetheless a prominent figure in Japanese film, one who produced numerous masterworks during the prewar Golden Era and continued to work tirelessly in the postwar until his death

in 1970. In the postwar, he particularly developed a reputation as a major filmmaker of *jidaigeki*. More recently, critics such as Donald Richie have sought to bring greater attention to his work outside of Japan.

Along with the rebellions of the Kaga and Date clans, the incident behind *The Kuroda Affair* is known as one of the three great family uprisings. However, Uchida's film brings a unique twist to the story with his nuanced psychological portrayal of the main character Daizen. Daizen appears in the film as a complex character, one who is not only a faithful retainer conflicted by his loyalty to his master and desire to protect the clan, but also a skilled political strategist during negotiations with the shogunate. At other times, he displays warmth and gentleness towards his own family and retainers. Actor Kataoka Chiezō delivers a charismatic performance as Daizen following his work with Uchida a year earlier on *Bloody Spear at Mt. Fuji* (*Chiyari Fuji*, 1955), the director's postwar comeback film in Japan. Although Ikeda Tomiyasu's film *Kuriyama Daizen* (1936) deals with the same incident, Uchida also takes interest in the perspective of the plotters, who can be seen as victims of the feudal system even while their actions threaten to ruin the clan.

*The Kuroda Affair* was the first of many period dramas that Uchida would continue to produce in the Tōei studio in Kyoto, along with a staff including Yoshida Sadaji (cinematography), Suzuki Takatoshi (production design), and Kosugi Taichirō (music). Tōei was commercially the most successful studio in the 1950s, leading the industry with its bright, entertaining *jidaigeki*. This film is clearly meant for the casual enjoyment of audiences, but at the same time, Uchida's exploration of loyalty, greed, and the feudal system of Japan lends additional depth to the work.

# Dandy Sashichi Detective Story: Six Famous Beauties



## PLOT:

*Dandy Sashichi Detective Story: Six Famous Beauties*, originally written by famed mystery novelist Yokomizo Seishi and adapted for the screen by Akasaka Nagayoshi, is the third in a series of fifteen films featuring the main character and titular detective Sashichi, portrayed for the first time in the series by the great historical drama actor Wakayama Tomisaburō, the brother of Katsu Shintarō (*The Blind Menace*). The film begins *in media res*, with six alluring women standing in line cruelly mocking a portrait commissioned to depict each woman's beauty. But after the artist they mock commits suicide, a strange series of events unfolds as each of the beauties dies under increasingly mysterious circumstances. The obvious suspect, the last living beauty, is arrested, but events spiral out of control as a larger conspiracy unfolds and Sashichi gets wrapped up in the affair.

## BACKGROUND:

Watching *Dandy Sashichi Detective Story: Six Famous Beauties*, one can hardly believe that director Nakagawa Nobuo began his career predominantly as a director of slapstick comedies for Tōhō before WWII. The film was directed during a now famous stint at the short-lived Shintōhō studio, in which Nakagawa created a run of graphic horror movies including *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, 1959), arguably the best adaptation of Japan's most famous ghost story, and culminating in what is largely believed to be his masterpiece, *Jigoku* (1960). While *Six Famous Beauties* is not nearly as grotesque or disturbing as some of Nakagawa's later films for that studio, it is a decidedly mysterious thriller set during the Edo period (1603–1868) amidst an otherworldly backdrop.

While the plot's intrigue is certainly a cut above typical genre fare, one of the most significant draws of the film is Wakayama's now famous sword fighting.

## Ningyō Sashichi torimonochō: Yōen rokushi bijin

人形佐七捕物帖 妖艶六死美人 (1956)

**Production:** Shintōhō, 76 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Nakagawa Nobuo

**Script:** Akasaka Nagayoshi (from story by Yokomizo Seishi)

**Cast:** Wakayama Tomisaburō (*Sashichi*), Hibiya Keiko (*Okume*), Sugiyama Kōtarō (*Yonosuke*), Uji Misako (*Okuyō*), Amachi Shigeru (*Asaka Keinosuke*)

Of the many subgenres that make up the Japanese period piece, *chanbara*, or sword-fighting movies, occupy a substantial place. Often considered one of the greatest sword fighters in the history of Japanese cinema, Wakayama battles through *Six Famous Beauties* as though possessed. He fights with a quiet intensity, employing the absolute minimum amount of action necessary to convey the struggles of swordplay, taking on hordes of enemies at once. Although Wakayama did not fill the role of Sashichi until this, the third film in the series, he went on to play the role eleven more times along with other classics of sword fighting, and embodied and emblemized one of the most crucial components of many Japanese period pieces.

And yet, *Six Famous Beauties* is distinctly not a sword-fighting movie. It is a mystery whodunit that despite its historical attention to detail (and occasional comedic inserts) is firmly rooted in Nakagawa's preoccupation with spectral worlds interacting with our own. *Jigoku* is most famous now for its lengthy, vivid depictions of hellish imagery on screen, but *Six Famous Beauties* intimates the presence of something sinister while very rarely allowing the audience the opportunity to glimpse the phantoms that lurk beneath. Tightly controlled camera movements and cramped interior spaces lurk with a cruelty mirrored by the six beauties' aloof callousness. As each beauty is associated with one artistic form (kabuki, painting, haiku, ballad, geisha, and dance), and the film begins with the savage dismantling of "Edo's greatest portraitist," *Six Famous Beauty's* light-hearted ending insinuated a possible repression of the sinister underbelly of artistic creation portrayed throughout the film; hindsight reveals now, however, that the film's ominous milieu eventually became a central stylistic flourish in Nakagawa's career, leading to the graphically disturbing ghost stories for which he is most well known today.

DANDY SASHICHI DETECTIVE STORY: SIX  
FAMOUS BEAUTIES © Kokusai Hoei

# Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate



## PLOT:

The film draws on characters and plotlines from the canon of *rakugo* stories, *rakugo* being a traditional form of spoken performance in which a story-teller recounts often amusing anecdotes while seated on-stage with only a folding fan as a prop. The film captures the lightness and frivolity of *rakugo* in dramatizing the story of Saheiji, who finds himself stuck at a brothel after running up a bill he cannot pay. Like other Kawashima films, this one clearly establishes a familiar present-day setting as a backdrop, in this case what was in 1957 the red-light district around the Shinagawa train station, which was transforming in the face of the postwar anti-prostitution law. The film then moves back in time to the same location in the last days of the shogunate. Amongst the several subplots, Saheiji unwittingly gets involved with a group of samurai plotting against the shogun.

## BACKGROUND:

A 1999 survey of the “All-Time Best Japanese Films” conducted by the venerable film magazine *Kinema junpō* ranked *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* number five. Although the film’s director Kawashima Yūzō has suffered relative neglect, perhaps due to his untimely death in 1963 at age 45 (after having made no fewer than 51 films), this film at least gained something like a cult following in Japan. It has recently been digitally remastered as part of an effort to introduce Kawashima abroad under the auspices of the Nikkatsu Studio’s 100th Anniversary Retrospective, which had its American premiere at the 2011 New York Film Festival.

The noteworthiness of this film is in part a product of its talent. It stars the popular comedian Frankie Sakai, with studio heartthrob Ishihara Yūjirō in a

**Bakumatsu taiyōden** 幕末太陽傳 (1957)

**Production:** Nikkatsu, 110 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Kawashima Yūzō

**Script:** Tanaka Keiichi, Kawashima Yūzō, Imamura Shōhei

**Cast:** Frankie Sakai (*Saheiji*), Hidari Sachiko (*Osome*), Minamida Yōko (*Koharu*), Ishihara Yūjirō (*Takasugi Shinsaku*), Ashikawa Izumi (*Ohisa*), Kaneko Nobuo (*Denbei*), Okada Masumi (*Kisuke*), Aoki Tomio (*Chūsuke*)

supporting role, and was co-scripted by Kawashima’s protégé Imamura Shōhei, who would go on to become a major director with two Cannes Film Festival Palmes d’or to his credit (he would loosely remake *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* with his 1981 film *Eijanaika*). Kawashima himself was known as a director of postwar comedies, in addition to dramatic works, and was engaged to make this film to commemorate the third anniversary of Nikkatsu’s return to film production after the coerced rearrangement of the industry under wartime film policy under which it was divested of its production arm.

Famously, the film was originally intended to end with a return to present-day Shinagawa, with Saheiji fleeing the film set (escape being a common desire among Kawashima heroes) and running off into the contemporary surroundings. This ending was thought too radical and the idea shelved. Indeed, it is a tactic that the avant-garde dramaturge and filmmaker Terayama Shūji would memorably deploy in his 1974 film *Death in the Country* (*Den'en ni shisu*), in which the film set repeatedly falls away to reveal actual surroundings. The contemporary moment works its way into *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* in other respects as well, as the reference to “sun” in the title evoked the controversial “Sun Tribe” films about a new generation of bored, delinquent youth, for which Nikkatsu studio was already in hot water. The 1956 film *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyō no kisetsu*) marked the debut of Ishihara Yūjirō, who also appears in Kawashima’s film. In this way, like many period films, Kawashima’s becomes as much a coded commentary on the present moment as it was a dramatization of the past.

# The Blind Menace



**Shiranui kengyō** 不知火検校 (1960)

**Production:** Daiei, 91 min. (B&W)

**Director:** Mori Kazuo

**Script:** Inuzuka Minoru (from a story by Uno Nobuo)

**Cast:** Katsu Shintarō (*Suginoichi*), Nakamura Tamao (*Namie*), Kondō Mieko (*Ohan*), Tsurumi Jōji (*Fusagorō*), Niwa Matasaburō (*Iwai Tōjūrō*)

## PLOT:

Born with neither eyesight nor wealth, Suginoichi was not content being a talented and diligent apprentice to the master of a school for the blind. He grew up only thinking of how to manipulate others in order to succeed to the rank of *kengyō*, the position of the most venerated blind masseur/acupuncturist who, among others, serves the highest of all including the shogun. His ferocious ambition to attain what he desires only grows exponentially when he falls in with a group of bandits he has in tow. “Shiranui,” the title of the school master, literally means “unknown fire.”

## BACKGROUND:

As David Desser’s opening essay aptly states, the director Mori Kazuo (1911–1989, a.k.a. Mori Issei) is, first of all, a productive “craftsman” who bolstered the golden age of Daiei *jidaigeki* in the 1950s and 1960s. A graduate of the prestigious Kyoto Imperial University (studying aesthetics), Mori started his filmmaking career as an assistant director to Itō Daisuke (*A Diary of Chūji’s Travels*) before making his directorial debut at Shinkō Kinema in 1936 with *Adauchi Hizakurige*. Starting with that, the artisanal filmmaker directed a total of 129 films, mostly so-called “program pictures,” or genre-oriented popular films produced strictly within studio system. Yet the quality of each film never fell in reverse proportion to the sheer quantity of his works. Mori had always been a particular favorite of Nagata Masaichi, the then president of Daiei and the “legendary” producer of such films as Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* (1950) and Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Ugetsu* (1953). Working under Nagata’s solid trust, Mori showcased many of Daiei’s top stars including Ichikawa Raizō (with whom Mori worked for thirty films) and Hasegawa Kazuo.

*The Blind Menace* was the breakthrough film for the leading actor Katsu Shintarō, who would soon become one of the biggest of Daiei’s *jidaigeki* stars in

the postwar era (he appears here opposite Nakamura Tamao, his future wife). Katsu’s role as a malicious blind masseur in *The Blind Menace* finally turned his career around. While he had starred in many films as the handsome lead, he only made a mark by taking on such an ugly role. It was cited as the seminal performance that inspired the Zatoichi series, and laid the foundations for the Zatoichi character (who albeit is still a kinder figure than Suginoichi). Zatoichi’s specter still lives on in such contemporary Japanese films as Kitano Takeshi’s *The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi* (2003) and Sakamoto Junji’s *Zatoichi: The Last* (2010).

While *The Blind Menace* is not a “chanbara film” with plenty of sword fights, the final scene is a famous battle (Mori himself described the scene as a “tachimawari,” the term used for sword fights), which ends with the very impressive long take of Katsu’s close-up. With his bloody face inverted, Katsu’s blind eyes nevertheless “look” back the audience, groaning like a devilish creature in its death throes. The film invites an auteurist perspective on Mori that compares him with such previous masters as Itami Mansaku and Itō Daisuke as well as with contemporaries like Kurosawa Akira (who provided a script for Mori’s 1952 film *Vendetta of a Samurai* [Araki Mataemon])—even though such a view may be debatable, as Desser points out.

The prominent film critic Yamane Sadao, with a touch of exaggeration, fondly recalls that he never had to wait for Mori’s latest work, for his new films premiered almost every other week in the 1950s and early 1960s (indeed, he directed more than 15 films a year in his most prolific years). Despite his voluminous filmography, Mori never won any awards at the major international film festivals. Nevertheless, as Yamane’s fond memory recalls, Mori Kazuo, as a “craftsman” who always worked with and for an audience craving for cinema, was a filmmaker watched and loved by moviegoers in Japan.

*We would like to acknowledge and credit the following film companies for their cooperation in allowing us to screen their films for our event:*

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