

*Missing Itami Juzo*  
The decline of Japanese film

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I begin this brief essay on the next page with my translation of a recent interview with the veteran Japanese actor Yamazaki Tsutomu. It was one of several (Interview 2, pages 44-49\*) conducted by the editors of *Itami Juzo no Eiga (Itami Juzo's Films)*, published in Japanese by Shinchosha in Tokyo in May, 2007). Yamazaki (Yama-san as he is popularly known) is one of Japan's most accomplished actors and a longtime favorite of mine. He appeared in the first three films Itami wrote and directed: *The Funeral*, *Tampopo*, and *A Taxing Woman*, winning a Best Actor award from the Japanese Academy for the first and third.

Following the translation are brief biographies of both the director Itami and his principal actor Yamazaki, together with their filmographies. They lead into short summaries of the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean film industries, including some historical perspective that may be useful as reference points for Asian cinema. I emphasize that these are just summaries and nothing more; full details can be found in the sources cited at the end.

After the films of Kurosawa Akira, Ozu Yasujiro, Ichikawa Kon, Naruse Mikio, Mizoguchi Kenji, Imamura Shohei, and Teshigahara Hiroshi – all giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese film – Itami Juzo has long been my favorite Japanese director. His work shines as bright as a beacon, driving his contemporary peers into the shadows. Although he produced and directed only ten movies, he wrote each one himself. Most of them are comic but biting satires on contemporary Japanese life that attack head-on a number of cultural sacred cows, from corruption (politicians, construction companies, real estate developers) and fraud (in politics, in the stock market, in property development) to hypocrisy, identity theft, and tax evasion (practically everybody in Japanese society). To many, his films cut much too close to the bone: their blunt outspokenness, though softened by humor, directly violates a Japanese cultural norm that pays lip service to understatement and oblique suggestion.

More than a decade after his tragic death, the late Itami Juzo still stands head-and-shoulders above the rest of the contemporary Japanese film makers. With one notable exception – Miyazaki Hayao, who runs Studio Ghibli in Mitaka, just west of Tokyo – Japanese film today consists of two independent, niche-oriented genres: adolescent animation (or *anime*, like *Astro Boy* and *Pokemon*), based on Japan's historical fascination with adult comics (*manga*), and horror (*The Ring*, *Sludge*). Maybe three, if you include *kaiju* – monster movies like *Gojira (Godzilla)* that inspired a veritable cult among moviegoers – but *kaiju* is much less prevalent today than it was a half-century ago. *Anime* alone represents nearly two-thirds of all films now produced in Japan and about seventy per cent of total box office receipts.

Miyazaki is a notable exception because his full-length animated features, like *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Tonari no totoro-chan* are brilliantly crafted stories that have strong moral points as well as compelling plot lines. Miyazaki has become the Walt Disney of Japan; his films are the most popular and the highest-grossing of all time there. His 2001 film, *Spirited Away*, also won an Oscar for Best Animated Feature. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

\* The original Japanese-language version is attached. Written Japanese is read from top to bottom, right to left. Names appear in conventional Japanese-style throughout this essay: surname first, then the given name.

“*Boku wa ‘O-sobiki’ ni wa Itami Juzo no subete ga aru.*” (For me, all of Itami Juzo is in “The Funeral”.) Interview with actor Yamazaki Tsutomu, from *Itami Juzo no Eiga* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2007.)

I appeared in Itami Juzo’s first three pictures – *The Funeral*, *Tampopo*, and *A Taxing Woman*. But after we made *The Quiet Life* (*Shizukana Seikatsu*), I worked in no more of his films.

Which is not to say that I left Itami-san as a result of personal arguments or quarrels – not at all. As proof empirical of this, he still kept coming as a spectator to see me act on stage, and when we would go drinking together after one of my performances, he would often spend the night at my house or I at his. Itami would never gossip about me behind my back; he was not that sort of person.

But after *Marusa no Onna* (*A Taxing Woman*), I never appeared in any of his films again, even *The Quiet Life*, one of his last. I suppose that was because given his role as producer and director and mine as a performing actor, our interpretative approaches seemed to be increasingly in conflict. For myself, as a stage actor, I was used to creating or capturing the roles I played by “imagining” or “photographing” a character in my mind. In stage productions, you rely on your fellow actors for inspiration, too, in addition to the director and his staff. Like the weather, they’re always changing. Which is to say, you never know what the hell is going to happen. But conversely, as a result of all this unpredictable chaos on stage, as a dramatic actor you gradually realize that things you’re not really conscious of will happen too.

So as an actor, I came to expect this volatile “brew” and even looked forward to it. Even in the most scrupulously cared-for garden you will see weeds growing in the most unexpected places, and I think you should take pleasure in that unexpected growth. That’s always been a kind of symbolic ideal for me and for my acting: expect the unexpected.

But Itami-san was the kind of gardener who would plan scrupulously and fastidiously to plant a tree here, a shrub there, and a flowering plant over there. With absolutely no weeds! And he would work with all his might to follow that plan to perfection, in order to create his own kind of perfect garden. As a director, then, he would always oppose the slightest effort or even the most harmless interference with his plan.

For example, “Yama-san,” he would say to me, “in this next scene, I want you to laugh slightly, just enough to create the hint of a small crow’s foot at the corner of your eye.” This was the kind of micromanagement Itami-san tended to have as a director.

Even from my first starring role for him, in *The Funeral*, this tendency of his was apparent. It became even stronger and more dominant as he made his next two films, *Tampopo* and *A Taxing Woman*, in which I also starred. There was simply no place for weeds to grow at all in his garden. (Laughter.) As an actor, I found his technique increasingly suffocating and I think Itami-san himself gradually understood how I felt.

But you know, as one element in the relationship between actor and director, I don’t think that’s necessarily unusual or bad. Both have their preferences and predilections. Must have them. The best work often comes from this kind of creative tension between actor and

director, tension between their opposing styles. Moreover, as a professional actor I don't think you can ever have the kind of relationship where one actor's performance in every one of his films is consistently good. Nor should all films be solely based on input from the actors. Creative tension is healthy. It's inevitable.

"Every bit of Itami was in his first film, *The Funeral*," say people who knew him well. I personally feel the same way, and to this day I think it's still my favorite work of his. Still, it was *his* film. When he had the idea for this story, he phoned me up and said, "I want to make a film. Could you help me do it together?" That's when I decided to play the role he was offering me.

Up to that time, I had performed primarily as a stage actor and had never been in a film before. I was putting all of my energy into my stage work and I didn't even hold the film industry in very high regard – never thought positively or constructively of it, really. Still, in response to Itami-san's personal plea, I decided on the spur of the moment to collaborate with him.

I made the decision personally, as an accomplished actor, because I wanted to work with Itami-san on his first-ever film. In truth, just prior to his call, about a dozen thick tomes on film landed with a thud on my doorstep, sent over to me by Itami himself. I had to wonder if they were in fact a premonition, an omen of some sort issued by an oracle. (Laughter.) But I was impressed by his bizarre cleverness.

Shortly afterward, I remember receiving a highly original script for a new production called *An Autumn of Sadness*. It was a script about an apparent story that was no real story at all, but after I read the script through a couple of times I thought, "This could really be interesting." It was just a hunch, nothing more. It was a "story" about a real event that happened in a real place that gave it a sense of "reality fiction" that was Itami's own idea, and I thought it seemed pretty cool.

Thus the importance, I think, of using what happens spontaneously when you shoot a film. Since *The Funeral* was Itami-san's first work as director, everybody working with him was at the point of really just fumbling or groping around, while as veterans on the set, I and some of the other experienced actors were wondering how this crew was going to deal with us while we were just standing around one day on the set waiting. Itami-san hoofed over to where I was standing to consult with me about what his staff should be doing for us veterans, as if he wanted to scold them all. His true spirit was revealed here because it became patently clear that whatever happened on the set, he wanted this movie to be successful. I remember quite clearly thinking about this afterward. He made a substantial effort every day to remind us that he was committed to making this film a success.

But – and not just limited to one occurrence of trying to keep our energy up – by the time we finished rehearsals and got around to shooting, we did so many takes every day that we constantly found ourselves nibbling or snacking so we wouldn't collapse. Except for one person: Itami-san. The director was putting every bit of his energy into the effort and I could tell he was getting physically weaker by the day. He would say to us – "Hey – our bodies are not the key thing here" – or warn us, saying "No, no, if we're making a film that's

this interesting, our stomachs just don't get empty." But it looked to me as if Itami-san had seriously charged himself with the task of not eating.

The most memorable impression I had was at the time of our first screening (preview). Itami-san was sitting right next to me. He was very nervous and worried about how the audience was going to react to the film. His face had turned as pale as rice paper – milky-blue, almost drained of color. And I was thinking, if this film doesn't succeed – and we really had no clue at that point – my career would be finished! I'll never work again! (Laughter.) But as the film rolled and the audience started to laugh, we both heaved a huge sigh of relief. By the way, I often had occasion to show Itami's films to foreigners, and they laughed from beginning to end whenever I showed them *The Funeral*. From these types of experiences, I deduced that Itami-san's "touch" or "feel" was really a lot closer to that of Westerners than it was even to us Japanese. I thought he had a very good feel for Western sensibilities deep in his own heart.

Itami-san started phoning me on Thursday or Friday every week after *The Funeral* was finally released. Our discussions were high-spirited and full of energy. "Come riding with me," he would say. "I want to practice riding my motorcycle." Me, I had no interest in motorbikes, so I naturally declined. But the following week, he would call and invite me again. "How about it?" he would ask. "Want to join me this week? Got the spirit yet?" (Laughter.)

This went on for about two months until he rode over to my place one day and I saw for the first time that his "motorcycle" was no real Harley – it was just a little scooter that any old lady might ride! "It's really practical, Yama-san," he said. "For making tight turns on the narrow roads in the city." I thought, what a strange and marvelous character this guy was. But since Itami-san was only three years older than I [born in 1933, Yama in 1936], it was probably very natural for him to think of me as a "playmate."

Next I produced a little stage play called *Pizarro*, written by the British playwright Peter Schaffer [who also wrote *Equus* and *Amadeus*]. It was a story of brutality, greed, and lust, centered on the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conqueror of the Incas in Peru. [Released in 1970 as a German film with the title *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, starring Robert Shaw and Christopher Plummer.] It ran for about a month at the Parco Theatre in Tokyo in July 1985. I showed the script to Itami-san and asked him to translate it into Japanese. It was about that time that we had started meeting together more frequently.

After he finished translating the Schaffer script for me, he would come to the theatre nearly every other day to watch me working on the stage. We had a long series of conversations together, often eating and drinking late into the night. On one such occasion, he suddenly said to me, "Yama-san, I have four new films I want to do! One is a story just about eating. [This eventually became *Tampopo*.] One is about money [that became *A Taxing Woman*]. One is about criminals [A Taxing Woman II], and one is a tough urban adventure [*Minbo no Onna, The Art of Japanese Extortion*].

I told him we could probably find a British producer to combine all four of these stories into one. "We could have a criminal antagonist eating *onigiri* [sticky rice balls] while climbing a mountain and losing his wallet," I joked, not too keen on his ideas. But he was really eager to do the four films separately. And sure enough, the first of this quartet that we made was

*Tampopo*. And because these were his own ideas, I had no doubt he had already started drafting the other three scripts.

When we were shooting *Tampopo*, Itami-san had a virtual kitchen built right next to the set, complete with a woman who was the food coordinator for the project. When we would break from shooting, he would call her into the “kitchen” and have her make *ramen* [noodles, a key component of the story] for us. Itami-san would puff out his chest with pride and say, “These are *our* noodles!” Of course, when we resumed shooting we had to eat all our own *ramen*, and it was too late to complain about them if they weren’t perfect. And I remember vividly, right after downing a bowlful of *ramen* during one take, I had to do a big fight scene!

Because Itami-san was so intensely focused on the whole process of making this film, you could say he was the “real deal” – *bonmono* [viz. peerless]. If you ask me what makes a stage play work, I think that focus on process is the most difficult of all. Timing (and audience reaction) are much different with stage plays than with film, so when you’re “fighting” on stage, you really don’t fight. But Itami-san didn’t quite get the fight timing right in this film. He would say to me, in the manner of a martial arts coach, “Since [the actor] Yasuoka is your adversary in the story, you should just go ahead and slug him!”

In our next film together, *Marusa on Onna (A Taxing Woman)*, the lead character, a *yakuza* [mafia] fraudster I played named Gondo, was lame. He walked with a limp. That wasn’t actually written into Itami’s script. I added it to the character myself. In the stage production of Pizarro that I did earlier, my character had a limp. When I first tried to incorporate the same element into Gondo’s character, Itami-san was furious – because he hadn’t written it into the script himself! But he relented when he saw how well Gondo’s limp meshed with the music – it really was a perfect fit. He liked it then, and told me to keep it. But when we got to the money-counting scene, when Gondo reveals how many billions of yen he has stashed away through his various frauds, I did that little spontaneous dance for joy almost without thinking because Gondo was so fabulously rich and it just seemed natural for me as a stage actor to do that. That little dance step subsequently became somewhat popular with young Japanese as a kind of “jazz dance.” (Laughter.)

But I am a “practice-less” actor – I prefer to act spontaneously rather than to rehearse relentlessly every little tic my character may have on stage. Itami-san recognized this when we shot *The Funeral*, telling the cast to practice in front of a mirror the moves that came so naturally to me as a stage actor. Itami-san himself wrote this up in his notes to the film [subsequently published as *Diary of The Funeral*], but I don’t think he really practiced it seriously as a director himself.

At that time, Itami-san would sometimes say to me, “Good, good! Keep it, we’ll use it when we shoot!” But on other occasions he would often say, “No, no, Yama-san! I don’t think you should do that.” He also invited a real dance instructor to his house to show us how we should move during a scene [*The Funeral* was shot on location at Itami’s home], and the guy was really good. So we incorporated much of what he taught us and made some really memorable scenes as a result. But I think my creation of Gondo’s character in *Marusa*, particularly incorporating the limp and borrowing from Itami’s dance instructor, helped Itami develop the reputation as a really successful director.

Well, whatever you say, the job of a film director is really hard. As an artist, he's not just drawing with a pencil, he has to "paint" with a motion picture camera. And he's got twice as many "pencils" in the form of all the people he's got to work with. Looking at his own wonderful pencil sketches in two of his diaries – *Tedium in Europe* and *It's the Women!* – they never even come close to imitating (the complexity or beauty of) what he has done with film.

Once Itami-san was asked by the editors of a popular magazine to read a draft manuscript for one of their articles. He agreed to look at it but said at the time that "this thing called a manuscript, you know, if you don't create a 'hook' in the first 200 *kanji* [ideographs] to catch and hold your readers, they'll get bored, give up and go away." And I said to him, "You know, it's exactly the same with acting and film. Even with serious drama, you've got to have a little variation – like humor [what we call comic relief] – mixed in with it in order to relax the tension. Otherwise you will lose your audience and won't be able to hold them." When I said this, he concurred with a stubborn nod.

On the other hand, there were occasions when he would ask for my opinion or comments on one of his scripts. Take *The Invalid*, for example [released as *The Last Dance*]. Itami-san called me one day, having just finished writing the screenplay in longhand and asked me to look it over. Those were the days when he was fully candid with me – taking me into his confidence – and he thought that the dialogue spoken by the doctor to the dying patient in an effort to persuade him to abandon the thought of dying somehow just didn't work. [Itami had himself just completed a long period of hospitalization after a *yakuza* gang had attacked him with knives.] The dialogue wasn't right; it didn't satisfy him. He said it wasn't persuasive, that he just couldn't write the words that captured the logic of a dying patient's spirit. That was the real Itami – he was that kind of a person, always troubled or worried if something wasn't *exactly* right – and that memory of him lives with me to this day.

I no longer remember the reason why Itami's film *Shizukana Seikatsu* (*The Quiet Life*) came out – I wasn't in it – but when I read the script I said, "Right." (*Naruhodo*.) It was powerfully written, I remember thinking at the time. By the way, as background, Itami was as usual convinced that he himself really couldn't write skillfully enough, and that would become one of his peculiar personality traits.

But he would often say, "Well, if Yama-san thinks it's ok, then it must be ok." He was not being sarcastic or cynical. So I guess in a way I helped him write a little more freely and less encumbered because of the frequent feedback he sought from me.

Still, whenever there was a scene with a long speech (by one of the characters), it would reveal the true Itami because the acting in such a scene was trifling if not non-existent! (Laughter.) I remember such occasions well. But they were some of my most pleasant interactions with Itami as we worked out our differences together. What was really super about him was that he not only talked the talk, he actually walked the walk [*genko-itchi*, agreement of speech and conduct].

Whether it's a stage play or a film, if a production doesn't resonate with the audience – in effect, become a "social event" – then we really can't say it's successful. By that definition, all three of Itami-san's first films – *The Funeral*, *Tampopo*, and *A Taxing Woman* – were not only successful, they became true catchwords, all of them. They all became truly "real" events.

When Itami was still in his thirties, I think he was already aware of this. His sentiments were already down on paper, in his various diaries. His personal musings gave birth to many of the scenes in his films and we all learned a lot from them. But for me, as an actor, I was really nothing more than an empty vessel into which Itami was able to pour his ideas. That was an essential part of his true greatness.

Whether he was riding a scooter or writing scripts or cooking in his kitchen, Itami-san was a man of passion, and his passions distinguished him, put him head-and-shoulders above his peers. I was proud to have been one of his “empty vessels.” He put his whole body and soul [*zenshin-zenrei*] into his work. His work was incredibly beautiful and his films were the real fruits of his success.

[End of interview]

**Itami Juzo** (伊丹 十三) – b. May 15, 1933, d. December 20, 1997. Itami-san trained initially to be an actor and only later became a popular contemporary film director. Many have come to regard him as Japan’s greatest director since Kurosawa Akira or Ozu Yasujiro.

Itami was born Yoshihiro Ikeuchi in Kyoto. The name Itami was passed on to him from his father, who had himself been a renowned satirist and film director before World War II. At the end of the war, Itami was picked as a child prodigy to study at Tokubetsu Kagaku Gakkyû (特別科学学級) – “the special scientific education class” – as a future scientist who could help defeat the allied occupation. The class was abolished in 1947.

Itami moved from Kyoto to Ehime, on the island of Shikoku, when he was a high school student. After transferring to the prestigious East Matsuyama High School, where he read *Rimbaud* in French. It was here that he befriended the novelist Kenzaburo Oe, who married his sister. When his grades slipped at East Matsuyama, he transferred to South Matsuyama High School, from which he graduated.

After failing the entrance exam for the College of Engineering at Osaka University, Itami worked at various times as a commercial designer, a television reporter, a magazine editor, and an essayist. He first acted in the 1960 and appeared in about two-dozen films and television series, including the big-budget Western film *Lord Jim*. The most notable movie in which he acted was Yoshimitsu Morita’s 1983 movie *Kazoku Gemu* (*The Family Game*).

Itami first directed the movie *O-sobiki* (*The Funeral*) in 1984, at the age of 50. This film was highly popular in Japan and won many awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Actor (for Yama-san) from the Japanese Academy Awards. But it was his second movie, the “noodle eastern” *Tampopo*, that earned him wide international acclaim. All ten of his films were profitable; most of them were also critical successes.

Itami’s wife, Miyamoto Nobuko, starred in all his movies. Her roles reflected can-do, no-nonsense, assertive characters that gave substance to the meaning of women’s lives in Japan, traditionally a very male-dominant society. Though possessed of a quick wit and a charming smile, she could successfully face down any adversary, male and female alike, in her films.

In 1992, Itami was attacked, beaten, and slashed by five members of the Goto-gumi, a *yakuza* (criminal) gang that was angry at his portrayal of the mafia as bullies and thugs in his two-part film series *Minbo no Onna* (*A Taxing Woman*). The attack led to a government crackdown on criminal gangs, to no discernible effect (an ironic footnote to his films). A long period of hospitalization inspired his next film *Daibyonin* (literally *The Invalid* but released as *The Last Dance*), a somber satire on the Japanese health system.

Itami committed suicide on December 20, 1997, in Tokyo, by leaping from the roof of his office building after the tabloids gossiped in public about a sex scandal in which he was allegedly involved. The suicide note he left behind denied any involvement in such an affair. Some consider his death suspicious; others believe it was a revenge attack by the *yakuza*. At the time, the police treated it as a possible homicide. His surviving wife and children have remained silent on the circumstances surrounding his death. Suicide has deep historical roots in the Japanese culture, but the *yakuza* can never be ruled out. A film museum in Itami's name opened in 2008 in Ehime, on the island of Shikoku, honoring his work.

### Filmography

1. *O-sobiki* (*The Funeral*, 1984)
2. *Tampopo* (1985)
3. *Marusa no Onna* (*A Taxing Woman*, 1987)
4. *Marusa no Onna II* (*A Taxing Woman's Return*, 1988)
5. *A-ge-man* (*Tales of a Golden Geisha*, 1990)
6. *Minbo no Onna* (*The Gentle Art of Japanese Extortion*, 1992)
7. *Daibyonin* (*The Last Dance*, 1993)
8. *Shizukana Seikatsu* (*A Quiet Life*, 1995)
9. *Suupaa no Onna* (*Supermarket Woman*, 1996)
10. *Marutai no Onna* (*Woman of the Police Protection Program*, 1997)

**Yamazaki Tsutomu** (山崎 努) was born on December 2, 1936, in Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture (across Tokyo Bay, to the east, where he still lives). Trained originally as a dramatic actor on the stage, he has appeared in more than a dozen films and was nominated for seven Japanese Academy Awards, winning twice as Best Actor for two of Itami's films – *The Funeral* and *A Taxing Woman* – and twice as Best Supporting Actor in two non-Itami dramas, *Go* and *Departures*. He and Nakadai Tatsuya remain my two favorite living Japanese male actors, together with the late Ryu Chishu, who starred in most of Ozu Yasujiro's compelling postwar dramas.

### Film in Japan

Kurosawa Akira, Ozu Yasujiro, Ichikawa Kon, Naruse Mikio, Mizoguchi Kenji, Imamura Shohei, and Teshigahara Hiroshi – these were the giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese film. But the master storytellers are gone. Despite efforts by critics to elevate the current crop of Japanese filmmakers above their weight class, they still punch too low. Think about Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, for example: the story of a mid-level Tokyo bureaucrat critically ill with cancer who cuts through reams of cultural and political red tape to help a local neighborhood achieve its dream of a vest-pocket park for their children. Kurosawa saved

some of his best storytelling – *Rashomon*, for example, and *The Bad Sleep Well* (both with his favorite actor Mifune Toshiro) – for works outside his classic *samurai* epics, though *Yojimbo*, *Akabige*, and *Shichinin no samurai* (remade in Hollywood as *The Magnificent Seven*) remain among his most popular films. And all of them featured Mifune in the starring role, too.

Ichikawa Kon's *Harp of Burma* and *Fires on the Plain* remain two of the most powerful antiwar stories ever told on film. His *Tokyo Olympiad 1964* is still regarded as one of the best documentaries ever made.

Ozu Yasujiro's classic *Tokyo Story*, is a touching narrative of two generations in Japanese society, the traditional and the modern. Ozu would go on to direct a number of brilliant dramas, including *Late Spring*, *Early Summer*, and *An Autumn Afternoon*, most (if not all) of them with his two favorite actors, Ryu Chishu and Hara Setsuko. Ozu was also well-known for his drinking. He and his favorite collaborator, the novelist Noda Kogo, used to measure the progress of their scripts by how many 1.8-liter bottles of *sake* (called *issho-bin*) they had drunk while writing, lining the walls of Ozu's study with them. He died of cancer on his birthday in 1960, at the age of 60; his small gravestone, which I treasure, is at Engaku-ji, a major Zen temple in Kita Kamakura, about an hour south of Tokyo. It is embellished with but one simple *kanji* (ideograph): *mu* – nothingness – amid many empty *sake* bottles.

*When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (*Onna ga kaidan wo noboru toki*), directed by Naruse Mikio, is the classic story of a woman struggling against all odds to succeed. Sad but realistic, it was arguably Takamine Hideo's best role and introduced Nakadai Tatsuya in one of his earliest films. This great actor would go on to make more than a hundred movies in his film career, many for Japan's master storytellers like Kurosawa, Naruse, and Ichikawa Kon.

*Ugetsu* and *Sansho the Bailiff* were two *jidaigeki* (period dramas) directed by Mizoguchi Kenji. They remain classics of Japanese film to this day. *Ugetsu*, with its powerful cinematography, and *Sansho*, a compelling mother-daughter separation story, were masterpieces, as much for the minimal dialogue as for the impeccable framing of their scenes. *Hadaka no Shima*, directed by Shindo Kaneto, a *deshi* (disciple) of Mizoguchi, was released as *The Island* in 1960. A story about a family struggling for its existence on a remote island in the Inland Sea, it was acclaimed as much for not containing a *single* word of dialogue as for its narrative.

*Black Rain*, *Eijanaika*, and *Vengeance is Mine* were three of Imamura Shohei's most acclaimed films, each based on a powerful theme: *Black Rain*, the aftermath of the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima; *Eijanaika*, chaos at the end of the Tokugawa [Edo] period; *Vengeance*, an in-depth portrait of a cold-blooded murderer that won a Japan Academy Award for Best Picture in 1979. Imamura also won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for *The Ballad of Narayama* in 1983. And who can ever forget the sand, the heat, or the desolation of Teshigahara Hiroshi's *Woman in the Dunes*? It won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 1964.

But as the masters passed away, one by one, the torch flickered and died with them. With one notable exception: Itami. Try this: ask anyone today what memorable Japanese films they have seen in the past two decades. Chances are (if they're familiar with foreign films at all) they can name but one: *Shall We Dance?* This inspirational story (*Sharu ui dansu?* in Japanese) was a charming comedy directed by Suo Masayuki and released at the Hawaii Film Festival in 1996; the title was taken from the lyrics of a Rodgers and Hammerstein song. An

instantly forgettable Hollywood remake with the same title starring Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez was released in 2004. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers also made a popular musical of the same name (with a totally different plot) back in 1937, so it's not surprising that the title may have come to mind even when asking about recent Japanese films.

By contrast, these were the top 10 films in Japan in 2008, ranked by box office receipts:

1. Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea	¥15.50 billion*
2. Boys over Flowers: The movie	7.75
3. Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	5.71
4. Red Cliff, Part 1	5.05
5. Suspect X	4.92
6. Pokémon: Giratina and the Sky Warrior	4.8
7. Partners: The Movie	4.44
8. I Am Legend	4.31
9. 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Boys, Chapter 1	3.95
10. The Magic Hour	3.92

*Red Cliff* is a Chinese movie; the only Hollywood films to make the Top Ten in Japan last year were *Indiana Jones* and *I am Legend*.

\* ¥1 billion = ¥10 *oku* = ~\$10 million at ¥100/US\$1.- so ¥16 billion = ¥160 *oku* = ~\$160 million.

In 1955, when statistics for Japanese cinema began to be compiled, there were 5,184 screens in Japan. That year, they showed 423 Japanese and 193 foreign films to nearly 870 million theater-goers at an average ticket price of ¥63.- (less than 20 cents at the time). Attendance peaked at 1.2 billion in 1958, when the aggregate number of movie theaters rose to nearly 7,500, and has been in steep decline ever since, most notably due to the popularity of a new medium, television. By 2008, assisted by new digital PDAs and video games, the total number of movie screens had dropped by more than half, to 3,500, and attendance had declined by nearly ninety percent: only 160 million movie tickets were sold in Japan last year, with Japanese and foreign films splitting the box office take roughly 50-50. From 2000 to 2005, foreign films dominated the domestic market, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all films screened, but since then *anime* has dominated the box office in Japan. (Year-by-year statistics on the Japanese film industry are attached at the end of this essay.)

Shohei Imamura won the Golden Palm for the second time for *The Eel* (1997), joining Alf Sjöberg, Francis Ford Coppola and Bille August as only the fourth two-time recipient. Kitano "Beat" Takeshi, a former TV performer, emerged as a popular domestic filmmaker with his works *Kids Return* (1996) and *Hanabi* (1997), which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, but his films tend to thrive on urban violence and *yakuza* themes.

In 2000 the violent action film *Battle Royale* appeared, based on a popular novel of the same name. In 2002, *Dolls* was released, followed by a high-budget remake, *Zatoichi*, in 2003, both written and directed by Kitano. The horror films *Ringu*, *Kairo*, *Dark Water*, *Yogen*, and *The Grudge* series were remade in English and met with some commercial success. In 2004, *Godzilla: Final Wars*, directed by Kitamura Ryuhei, was released to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Godzilla*. In 2005, director Seijun Suzuki made his 56th film, *Princess Raccoon*.

When Miyazaki Hayao came out of retirement to direct *Spirited Away* in 2001, he broke Japanese box office records and won the U.S. Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. In 2004, Oshii Mamoru released the anime movie *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (known in Japan simply as *Innocence*), which, like the first film, received noteworthy critical praise, as did his 2008 film *The Sky Crawlers*. Satoshi Kon released three quiet, but still successful anime films in 2001, 2003 and 2006 respectively: *Millennium Actress*, *Tokyo Godfathers*, and *Paprika*. Animated films now account for about two-thirds of all Japanese film production.

But Miyazaki aside, there is something missing in Japanese film today. Call it substance, call it compelling plotline, call it *story*, it's all pretty much gone. The quality of acting in Japan, too, is but a shadow of past greats. The US is not alone in defining popular culture – music and film dedicated to younger audiences, who like fast action, special digital effects, ear-splitting volume and blood – preferably lots of it. Japan is contributing its share. Both anime and the cult of horror embrace decidedly younger audiences, with the result that the market for more traditional, story-based film has shrunk to pre-Sanforized proportions.

### The Rise of China and Korea

Among the reasons why Japanese film has suffered decline, the absence of masterful storytellers like Kurosawa and Itami *et. al.* is only one. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, literally and figuratively; in Russia and eastern Europe, Communism evaporated like water on a hot summer sidewalk, and students in China's nascent democracy movement faced off army tanks at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Democracy may have suffered a temporary setback in China, but its film industry sprang back to life, both on the mainland and in Hong Kong. A similar rebirth of cinema was evident in Korea that year, too, as the collapse of martial law was punctuated by national elections and a (restored) free press. After 1990, Japanese film may have emphatically embraced *anime* and horror as its two main themes, but directors and screenwriters in China (especially) and in Korea kept the storytelling tradition alive.

During the Cultural Revolution, in the 1960s, the film industry in China was severely restricted. Nearly all previous films were banned and new feature film production came to a halt. Chinese film revived after 1972 under the strict jurisdiction of the Gang of Four until 1976, when they were overthrown. In the years immediately following, domestically produced films played to large audiences, and tickets for foreign film festivals sold quickly. Chinese directors tried making more innovative films, like their counterparts in the West.

In the 1980s the Chinese film industry fell on hard times, faced with the dual problems of competition from other forms of entertainment and concern on the part of the government that many of the popular thriller and martial arts films were socially unacceptable. In January 1986 the film industry was transferred from the Ministry of Culture to the newly formed Ministry of Radio, Cinema, and Television to bring it under “stricter control and management” and to “strengthen supervision over production.”

By the middle of the 1980s, the rise of the so-called Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers brought increased popularity of Chinese cinema abroad. Most of these filmmakers had graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, including Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang. They were the first group of filmmakers to graduate since the Cultural

Revolution and they soon jettisoned traditional methods of storytelling, opting for a freer and more unorthodox approach. In particular, Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) marks the beginning of the China's Fifth Generation. The most famous of these directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, went on to produce such celebrated works such as *King of the Children* (1987), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), which were highly acclaimed not just in China but throughout the West as well.

Chen Kaige graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982 and rose to prominence as the leader of the Fifth Generation. His first film, *Yellow Earth*, was an immediate success, with its simple yet powerful visual style (Zhang Yimou was his cinematographer). In 1987, he was awarded a fellowship to the NYU Film School, and after a modest film (*Life on a String*) and a music video, in 1993 he made *Farewell My Concubine*. It became his best-known film in the West, was nominated for two Academy Awards and won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. The film is a compelling story about two Beijing opera singers whose careers parallel decades of political change in China during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has made half a dozen films since but none with the critical or commercial success of this one.

Zhang Yimou also graduated from the Beijing Academy in 1982 and became a prominent Fifth Generation director as well. His debut film was *Red Sorghum*, released in 1987 to widespread acclaim. Its theme was one for which Zhang would become well-known – a celebration of the resilience of the Chinese people in the face of extreme hardship – and it won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and a Best Foreign Film Oscar nomination. It starred the actress Gong Li, personally picked by Zhang for this story; over time, she would become one of China's most popular film stars together with Zhang Ziyi, Maggie Cheung, and Michelle Yeoh. Though formally trained in cinematography (*Raise the Red Lantern* was his first work with a camera), Zhang turned his attention to directing full-time. His subsequent major films include *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Ju Dou*, two period dramas, and a pair of more recent *wuxia* (martial arts) hits, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*.

Tian Zhuangzhuang was the third famous graduate of the Beijing Academy's class of 1982. His films are less well-known in the West, though two of them – *On the Hunting Ground* (1985) and *The Horse Thief* (1986), both stories about ethnic minorities in China – were praised by Martin Scorsese. Some of Tian's early works were severely censored by the Chinese government, but despite this political interference he kept at it. In 1993, his film *The Blue Kite*, a story about the dark side of Communist rule from Mao's Hundred Flowers campaign through the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s to the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, brought the government hammer down. *The Blue Kite* was smuggled out of China and became both a critical and commercial success in the West. But Tian was blacklisted in China and forced to resign from the Academy; it would be years before he made another film. More than his other contemporaries, he took it upon himself to train younger Chinese filmmakers (including his wife) who would subsequently become the Sixth Generation.

Extremely diverse in style and subject, China's Fifth Generation films ranged from black comedy to the esoteric (for example, Chen Kaige's 1991 work, *Life on a String*), but they share a common rejection of the socialist-realist tradition worked by earlier Chinese filmmakers. The Fifth Generation effectively concluded with the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, although its major directors continued to produce notable works.

More recently amateur filmmakers have returned, as state censorship policies have unintentionally created an underground film movement loosely referred to as the Sixth Generation. Their films are shot quickly and cheaply, producing a documentary feel with long takes, hand-held shots, and ambient sound. Many are joint ventures or projects with international partners. Notable directors include Wang Xiaoshuai, who directed *Beijing Bicycle*, Zhang Yuan (*Beijing Bastards*, *East Palace West Palace*), and Lou Ye (*Suzhou River*, *Summer Palace*). Unlike their predecessors, the Sixth Generation brings a more individualistic, anti-romantic world view to film and pays more attention to contemporary Chinese urban life. Many of their films highlight the negative aspects of China's entry into the modern capitalist world. Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* for example, is a chilling account of two murderous con-men in the unregulated mining industry of northern China. Jia Zhangke's *The World* symbolizes the emptiness of globalization using as backdrop an internationally-themed amusement park.

Chinese films continue to have considerable box office success abroad. Films such as *Farewell My Concubine*, *2046*, *Suzhou River*, *The Road Home* and *House of Flying Daggers* have been critically acclaimed throughout the world. In 2000, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* achieved massive box office success overseas despite being dismissed by Chinese critics for pandering to Western tastes. The film was directed by Ang Lee, a native of Taiwan who had previously directed critically acclaimed films like *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and *The Ice Storm* (1997). After *Crouching Tiger*, he would go on to direct two more blockbuster hits, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Lust, Caution* (2007), a thrilling story about the Chinese resistance movement during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the late 1930s. It starred two of China's most prominent film stars, Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung Chiu-Wai.

In 2002, *Hero*, directed by Zhang Yimou, followed as a second attempt to produce a Chinese film with the international appeal of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The cast included many already-famous Chinese actors popular in the West, such as Jet Li, Zhang Ziyi, Maggie Cheung, and Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (who played the lead in *2046* and *Lust, Caution*). *Hero* was a phenomenal success throughout Asia and topped the U. S. box office for more than two weeks, earning enough in the American market alone to offset its production costs.

The successes of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* have tended to blur the boundary between mainland Chinese cinema and an older, more traditional "Chinese-language" cinema. The cast of *Crouching Tiger*, directed by Ang Lee, included both mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese actors, and the film was coproduced by an amalgam of Chinese, American, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese film companies. Further examples of this collaborative approach include *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *The Promise* (2005) and *The Banquet* (2006).

The cinema of contemporary China, unlike that of Japan today, continues to emphasize the importance of *story*. The leaders of the Fifth Generation in particular have shown that powerful human-interest stories still resonate with the viewing public, resisting pressure, both political and commercial, to pander to more mindless audiences. Their stories have a deep cultural history in China, to be sure, but they also share an unbroken tradition with Japan's masterful 20<sup>th</sup> century storytellers, who mined their own cultural history with such resounding success. That the "story pendulum" has gradually shifted to China is yet further evidence, by contrast, of the decline of film in Japan.

## Korean cinema

After the Panmunjom armistice of 1953, South Korea made an effort to rejuvenate its native film industry by exempting it from taxation. Korean films enjoyed a brief spate of freedom in the early 1960s during the interval between the administrations of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee, when Kim Ki-young made *The Housemaid* and Yu Hyun-mok *Aimless Bullet*, both of which have consistently topped the list of the best Korean films ever made. With the ascension of Park to the presidency in 1961, however, government control over the film industry was strengthened. Films produced (or imported) were strictly limited under a tight quota system, and new regulations cut the number of Korean film production companies from 71 to 16 within a year. Despite the repressive policies, however, the Grand Bell Awards were established in Seoul in 1962 as the Korean equivalent of the Academy Awards.

By the late 1970s, government control over Korea's film industry reached had its zenith. Movie theater attendance dropped from nearly 175 million in 1969 to barely 115 million a decade later. Nevertheless, talented filmmakers like Im Kwon-taek and Kim Ki-young survived the era and occasionally produced works of value.

After the turbulent year 1979-1980, which saw the assassination of president Park Chung-hee, the coup d'état of December 12<sup>th</sup> and the Gwangju massacre, South Korea began taking small steps toward more openness. Though theater attendance remained low throughout the 1980s, the government's gradual relaxation of censorship enabled the production of more adventurous and interesting films. South Korean film reached an international audience for the first time, in large part through the recognition of director Im Kwon-taek's work. After his 1981 film *Mandala* won the Grand Prix at the Hawaii Film Festival, Im became the first Korean director to have his films shown at European festivals. In 1988, President Roh Tae-woo began the gradual elimination of government censorship of political expression. Korean directors were quick to begin exploring social and political themes in their films. By 1993, nearly four out of five films screening in Seoul were Made in Korea.

By the late 1990s, South Korea was one of the few markets where Hollywood did not enjoy a dominant share. But that would soon change. In 2006, Korean film crews staged mass rallies to protest a quota cut resulting from negotiations with the United States. Today, South Korea's movie market, like that of most countries, is dominated by Hollywood.

The 1999 film *Shiri*, about a North Korean spy preparing a coup in Seoul, was the first in Korean history to sell more than 2 million tickets in Seoul alone. *Shiri* earned more than foreign box office hits such as *Titanic*, *The Matrix* and *Star Wars*. Its success drove other Korean filmmakers to big budgets. In 2000 the film *JSA (Joint Security Area)* was a huge success, even surpassing the benchmark set by *Shiri*. A year later, the film *Friend* did the same. In South Korea the romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* outsold both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, which screened at the same time. As of 2004, new films continue to outperform older releases, and Korean productions continue to be more popular than Hollywood films. Both *Silmido* and *Taegukgi* were seen by more than 10 million people – a quarter of South Korea's total population. *Silmido* is a film based on a true story about a secret task force, the other a blockbuster story about the Korean War from the director of *Shiri*. Their success began to attract the attention of Hollywood. Films such as *Shiri* are now routinely distributed in the American market.

In 2001, Miramax bought the rights to a Hollywood remake of the successful Korean action comedy movie, *My Wife is a Gangster*. More recently, popular Korean movies like *Oldboy*, directed by Park Chan-wook, *My Sassy Girl*, and *JSA* have been purchased by Hollywood studios for American remakes as well. *Oldboy* became the second great victory for Korean film. It placed second in the Cannes Film Festival to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The story traces the life of a man who is put into solitary confinement by someone he never met and doesn't know. He lives in prison for many years until he is released to discover the bizarre reason for his cruel entrapment. Dark and gloomy, *Oldboy* experiments with the themes of psychological madness and sexual distortion.

The 2003 psychological horror film *A Tale of Two Sisters* was enormously successful, motivating Steven Spielberg and Dreamworks to pay \$2 million for the remake rights, topping the \$1 million record previously paid for the Japanese horror movie *The Ring*. At about the same time, Park Chan-wook released *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, the second film in his Vengeance Trilogy. The third, *Lady Vengeance*, appeared in 2005. These two films take up where *Oldboy* leaves off; not for the faint of heart, they drill more deeply into the subconscious worlds of madness, violence, and twisted senses.

Korean film won serious international attention at the 2002 Venice Film Festival, where *Oasis* won second prize. The film not only revealed much about traditional Korean culture, but also highlighted the plight of handicapped Koreans and the general public's inability to understand or accept them. The story is about an isolated young woman with cerebral palsy who falls in love with a simpleminded man who not long before had completed a term in prison for the hit-and-run accident that killed her father. Arguably Korea's most symbolic film to date, it was acknowledged as a turning point for Korea's *avante garde*.

In 2004, Kim Ki-duk won the award for Best Director at the 54<sup>th</sup> Berlin Festival for his film about a teenage prostitute, *Samaritan Girl*. In addition, he won the 2004 Silver Lion award at the Venice Film Festival as director of *3-Iron*.

There seem to be three important "strike points" for Korean film: in 1992, *Marriage Story* was underwritten by Samsung, marking the first non-government-funded film in Korean history. In 1999, *Shiri* was released and led to Korean films taking more than 50 percent of the domestic market. And finally, *My Sassy Girl* became the most popular and exportable Korean film ever. Each brought new strength to the emergence of a Korean film industry that no longer simply imitates Hollywood. Then, too, strong (and enforceable) government regulations against copyright infringement and bootlegging have allowed the Korean film industry to increase production, make a reasonable profit and enjoy good DVD and aftermarket revenues. In addition, South Korea launched the Busan and Jeonju Film Festivals that screen countless new American and European as well as Chinese and even Japanese films, providing yet further incentives for domestic Korean filmmakers.

While Korean film lacks the throw weight of Chinese cinema, it has made an emotional impact (albeit on the dark side) that seems to have pushed Japanese film into even steeper decline. The spotlight is arguably on China now. Only time will tell whether their Fifth and Sixth Generation directors can continue to create the kind of depth that characterized the works of Japan's brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century masters.

The great storytellers like Kurosawa Akira, Ozu Yasujiro, Ichikawa Kon, Naruse Mikio, Mizoguchi Kenji, Imamura Shohei, and Teshigahara Hiroshi, whose films portrayed virtually every aspect of the human condition, whether in the deeply-rooted storytelling tradition of *jidaigeiki* or by spinning more contemporary tales of the modern age. And they treated every dimension – love, hatred, loyalty, vengeance, greed, power, comedy, tragedy, fraud, corruption, and hypocrisy – and they did it with such consummate skill and impeccable artistic accomplishment that we will long remember the immense pleasure they gave us.

Their films seem timeless. As do the films of Itami Juzo.

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