

STARS OF JAPAN

By HIDEO TSUMURA

As the reviews of Japanese and Chinese films in our last issues seem to have found interest among our readers, we are now publishing the story of Japan's studios, stars, and directors. The author is a famous expert on the subject who has already been introduced to our readers in connection with his film review in our April issue.—K.M.

THE present trend towards concentration and unification in all spheres of Japanese life has not passed by Japan's film industry, with the result that there are now only three companies producing feature movies: the Shochiku, Dai Nippon, and Toho Film Companies. While until recently there were five companies, each producing eight films a month, the three present companies are now limited to the production of two films a month each. This fact is bound to have far-reaching effects upon current and future productions.

"QUICKIES"

In the past, Japanese films were, with few exceptions, produced as quickly and as cheaply as possible. Their distribution was limited almost entirely to the domestic market; the only export before the war went to Japanese residents in Hawaii and on the Pacific coast of the United States and was limited to a few films a year. Moreover, each film company in Japan had its own chain of movie houses, so that every film was shown in one of these chains only. First-run theaters seldom show a film for more than a week. There were hardly a dozen films a year which could be shown for two consecutive weeks, so that films were generally passed on quickly to second- or third-run houses, where the admission fees are very low.

All this combined to make the film companies turn towards the production of "quickies," as four films costing 50,000 yen each were more profitable and less risky than one film costing

200,000 yen. The new allotment system for the supply of raw film and the ensuing limitation to two films a month for each company have already brought about a change in this practice.

All three companies are now directing their efforts towards the production of great works, and the average budget for each film is now around 200,000 yen, while films costing some 300,000 yen will also be produced in considerable numbers. However, super-productions costing around 500,000 yen will be limited to only a few a year.

A further increase in expenditure on films cannot be expected until the market for them has been considerably expanded, and the South Pacific regions, which are the obvious goal in this direction, will hardly be opened up for Japanese films before next year at the very earliest. French Indo-China, for example, has so far only imported two Japanese feature films, although it is hoped to increase this number this year. The market for Japanese educational and cultural shorts is slightly more favorable.

TWO AGES

An interesting and unique characteristic of Japanese film production is the fact that it is divided into two separate and entirely different types, the historical and the modern. Each type has its own studios, its own directors and actors. This factor, together with the situation created by the amalgamation of former companies, has resulted in each of the present three companies owning several studios.

The Shochiku Film Company has three studios, that in Ofuna near Tokyo where modern films are made, and two in Kyoto producing historical films. Ofuna is a town near the sea, about an hour's train ride from Tokyo and noted for its scenic beauties. The Ofuna studio is the largest in Japan, covering twenty-five acres. It employs some of Japan's best-known directors and a large number of beautiful young actresses and popular young actors. Its specialty is pictures dealing with modern city life.

One of the Kyoto studios, in the vicinity of the beautiful Kamo River, is not being used at present. The other is located in Uzumasa, a suburb of Kyoto, where there are also two studios of the Dai Nippon Film Company. All these studios specialize in historical films, for which Kyoto, with its many historical buildings and its beautiful scenery, provides an ideal background.

The most modern Japanese studio as regards equipment is the Tokyo studio of the Toho Film Company. In it both modern and historical films are produced, and it is noted for its veteran stars rather than for the youth and beauty of its actors and actresses. It is best known for the musical comedies it brings out every year, starring such famous stage comedians as Roppa and Enoken. It also produced *Night in China*, emphasizing popular music and starring Li Huang-lan, an actress of the Manchukuo Film Company.

The Dai Nippon Film Company also possesses two smaller studios in the suburbs of Tokyo producing modern pictures.

THE JAPANESE FACE

Generally speaking, Japanese actors and actresses are considerably handicapped in comparison to their European and American colleagues, for the Japanese face is not altogether suited for the screen. Above all, it is a little too flat to show deep, expressive shadows when lighted up for the camera. In most cases it lacks beauty in the hollow

of the eye sockets and in the shape of the nose. The Western face often lends itself particularly to camera lighting, and it appears in many cases more beautiful on the screen than it is in reality.

However, the Japanese face has changed with time, and especially the type of the Japanese woman's face has witnessed a remarkable change during the past ten years or so. The ideal women of the Meiji Era (1868—1912) generally had oval faces with long, narrow eyes. Today the round-shaped face is on the increase, while the eyes are larger and closer to the Western ideal of beauty. Modern city women have entirely given up the style of make-up fashionable during the Meiji and Taisho Eras (before 1926) and have adopted that set by modern Western film actresses. Hair and clothes styles have also changed accordingly.

Thus with this change in the shape of the Japanese face the number of men and women with faces suited for the screen has increased. Moreover, a special technique to bring out the beauty of the Japanese face has been invented simultaneously with the progress in the art of photography. Foreign cameramen can hardly imagine to what lengths their Japanese fellow-photographers go in order to catch the characteristic beauty of Kinuyo Tanaka, a favorite star of long standing.

STAGE vs. SCREEN

Another characteristic of Japanese film actors is that there are only a very few who have come to the screen from the stage. The reason for this is that the Kabuki drama, the favorite theatrical entertainment in Japan, is the art of style. This means that its actors are quite unsuited to the realistic art of the camera. In addition to this, all women's parts in Kabuki are played by male actors known as *Oyama*, and there are no actresses in the whole Kabuki theater. Even in the new school of drama which arose in the Meiji Era, actresses did not appear until some ten years ago.

Even now there are three *Oyama* among its leading actors.

Only those actors who have grown up in the Tsukiji Little Theater are more or less qualified for the screen. After the disbanding of this group, almost all of its members, who had long been trained in the acting of modern Western drama, joined film studios. In the end, however, it is those actors who are exclusively film stars who are popular with the public. Although, owing to lack of stage training, they may not be proficient in the technique of dialogue, they have the freshness of youth and the spirit of modern times.

A third characteristic of Japanese film actors is that they are divided into the two groups mentioned before, namely, those acting historical roles and those representing modern characters of everyday life. Since the very beginnings of Japanese film production, more than thirty years ago, this pronounced difference has been noticeable. Each film company has separate studios for these two types of film, each with its own directors, actors, and cameramen. The main reason for this is that there is too great a difference between Japan's traditional manners and customs and those of the present day, influenced by the West. The average actor can hardly be expected to be good in both modern and historical parts. Nevertheless, during the last two or three years this method of specialization has not been so strictly observed, and there have been several cases of one type acting in parts of the other.

STAR ACTRESSES . . .

For the modern film, the Japanese studios have many young and able actresses, but only very few actors. On the other hand, in historical films able actors overwhelmingly outnumber actresses. Let me introduce some of Japan's young movie stars.

The two outstanding and most popular actresses are *Kinuyo Tanaka* (Fig. 2) and *Isuzu Yamada* (Fig. 3). Miss Tanaka

has had a screen life of some twenty years, yet she is scarcely over thirty-five. She is still immensely popular in young girls' parts, although her face does not represent the pure Japanese type. Her favorite role is that of a modest and tragic heroine in Japanese dress, and her acting is full of passion. She is not married.

Isuzu Yamada is a typical Japanese beauty. She has a rare talent in that she is good in both historical and modern films. Her father was a famous stage actor of the new school of drama, and she received an excellent training in pure Japanese music and dancing. The roles she likes best are those of geisha girls of the Meiji and Taisho Eras and of smart-looking professional entertainers. In a recent production she played the part of a Chinese woman spy. Although *Isuzu Yamada* has been before the public eye for twelve years, she still has a great future ahead of her.

Among the younger stars of the Shochiku Film Company I would like to mention *Mieko Takamine* (Figs. 8,12), who is outstanding for her cultured and refined beauty. She is particularly good as a young lady of rich family. She recently made her first appearance in a historical film, *The Forty-Seven Ronins*.

Mitsuko Mito (Fig. 6) is especially popular among high-school and college students. She usually plays the part of a timid, lonely heroine in a tragedy. She was discovered at a certain famous hot-spring hotel. Being relatively inexperienced, she, like *Mieko Takamine*, needs the guidance of an able director to bring out the best in her. Both actresses dress well in Western clothes.

Another outstanding star is *Takako Irie* (Fig. 4), born of a noble family and well educated. Her screen life dates back to the period of silent pictures. In her early appearances she usually played the part of a modern girl. Later, when she came under the directorship of *Kenji Mizoguchi* (Fig. 5), she showed great talent for impersonating the women of the Meiji Era. Since severing her connections with

Mizoguchi, however, and establishing her own independent company, Irie's art has been on the decline. Her main weakness is poor dialogue, which is a great handicap in talkies. In her appearance she is comparable to Isuzu Yamada in that she represents the purely traditional beauty of the Japanese woman. While Yamada is a strong-willed personality, Irie is best at expressing pathetic emotion.

Yukiko Todoroki (Fig. 10) was a famous star of the Takarazuka Girls' Opera before joining the movies. She is very popular for her lovely, bright beauty and wit, and is typical of the modern young Japanese girl.

Japanese films suffer from a lack of competent actresses for middle-aged or elderly parts. In fact, there is only one really outstanding actress in this group, **Haruko Sugimura**, who comes from the Tsukiji Little Theater. Her real life is still on the stage, and she is the leader of a new theatrical group known as *Bungaku-za*. If acting talent alone is taken into consideration, and looks and popularity are disregarded, none but Tanaka and Yamada can compete with Haruko Sugimura.

... AND ACTORS

Among Japan's movie actors of modern roles, **Isamu Kosugi** (Fig. 1) is by far the best. His case is unique in that his artistic talent matches his popularity. Although there are other young actors who enjoy great popularity, especially among women, they are hardly distinguished for their acting ability. Isamu Kosugi has come to the top during the last five or six years and has shown great versatility. In *Endless Advance* he acted the part of an unhappy old employee; in *Naked Town* that of a hard-hearted old usurer; and that of a unit commander fighting on the China front in *Five Scouts*, a film-masterpiece accepted for the Film Exhibition in Venice. In all these movies his acting was a sensation. In *Mud and Soldiers* he took the part of a brave soldier on the

China front, and in *Earth* he displayed the love of a poor and unhappy farmer for his daughter. Kosugi is not gifted with a rich or beautiful voice, and he still has a trace of the provincial accent of northeastern Japan, but his elocution is very natural.

His greatest merit is that he acts the purest type of Japanese. Up to now, most Japanese actors were in the habit of more or less imitating foreign film actors. This was particularly noticeable in the affected acting of young stars in modern films. Isamu Kosugi was strong enough to depart from this custom and thereby to influence other young actors for the better. In recent historical pictures such as *The Forty-Seven Ronins*, however, Kosugi was less successful.

Among other actors of modern parts, I might mention **Makoto Saburi** (Fig. 9), whose playing is simple and unaffected but still lacking in charm; **Shuji Sano**, who has been away from the screen for some time due to his being at the front; and **Ken Uehara** (Fig. 7), who has less acting ability than the other two but who is adored by many women fans for his sensitive beauty. However, these three stars do not count for the intelligentsia as does Isamu Kosugi.

Middle-aged **Reikichi Kawamura** is very able in supporting roles. In comparison with European and American films, Japanese films generally suffer greatly through their lack of a competent supporting cast.

MURDER AND SUDDEN DEATH

There are many actors specializing in historical films who enjoy great popularity without, however, having the approval of the intelligentsia. Since the earliest days of Japan's film industry, historical films have been produced in a quantity almost equal to that of modern films, and it is only during the last two or three years that historical films have begun to decline in number.

All leading actors in this group are veterans who have been on the screen



(1) Isamu Kosugi,
famous actor of
modern parts

FIVE
STARS
AND
A
GREAT
DIRECTOR



(2) Kinuyo Tanaka,
star tragedienne



(4) Takako Irie,
who specializes
in women of the
Meiji Era

(3) Isuzu Yamada,
typical Japanese
beauty, and Kazuo
Hasegawa, in a
historical picture

(5) Kenji Mizoguchi,
veteran director of
historical pictures.
*The Forty-Seven
Ronins* is his most
recent production



YOUTH
TO
THE
FORE



(6) Mitsuko Mito,
who was discovered
in a hot-spring
hotel



(7) Ken Uehara,
Japanese matinee
idol



(10) Yukiko Todo-
roki, formerly a
star of the Ta-
karazuka Girls'
Opera

(9) Makoto Saburi,
popular young star



(8) Mieko Takamine
in a scene from
*Brother and Sister
of the Toda Family*



for some twenty years. The foremost of them is Denjiro Okochi (Fig. 11), a character actor whose grim mask earned him the name of "Japan's Emil Jannings." Like Kazuo Hasegawa (Fig. 3), Chiezo Kataoka (Fig. 14), and many others of his colleagues, he came to the top through the vogue enjoyed by the "sword-fighting plays." These pictures featured samurais excelling in the art of swordsmanship, men of chivalrous spirit. They always climaxed in a sensational scene in which these heroes killed off more than a dozen enemies. Although these films dealt with murder and sudden death, they were never unpleasantly realistic. On the contrary, much beauty was lavished on the scenes. In spite of the underlying heroism, however, the authorities prohibited the production of such films when they ran too contrary to historical facts. As a result of this, inferior "sword-fighting films" have disappeared almost entirely, while films dealing with typical events in the history of "Nippon Bushido," with minute description of customs and manners, are being encouraged, as was the case with *The Last Days of Yedo* and *The Forty-Seven Ronins*.

The *Zenshin-za*, a group of young Kabuki actors, produces about two films a year. Kwanemon Nakamura is its leading actor. Although not so popular, his talent is far above that of the stars of the "sword-fighting plays." Nakamura was excellent in *A Family of Abe* and in the second part of *The Forty-Seven Ronins*.

Chojuro Kwarazaki, the head of the *Zenshin-za*, is also an able film actor, and he is good in samurai parts. Both these actors, however, have their strong points in well-trained elocution rather than in facial expression.

DOUBLE DUTY

A peculiarly striking fact about Japanese film directors is that the majority of them write their own scenarios. This is due to the lack of good scenario writers. Hence the director is also responsible for the story of his production and merits

even greater attention than his Western colleague.

It was about 1931 that the first talkie appeared in Japan, but it was not until 1935 that all productions of the leading companies were made as talkies. As in the West, the transitional period from silent pictures to talkies was a time of technical difficulties as well as temporary confusion. Since 1937, however, Japanese films have begun to show considerable progress. Until then only very few great works of literature had been filmed, and among the movies made from popular novels or from original scripts there were not many which expressed the real life of modern Japan.

OUT WITH SEX APPEAL

Simultaneously with the outbreak of the China incident, which brought about a tension in the social situation, Tomu Uchida (Fig. 13) and Tomotaka Tasaka (Fig. 16), both directors of the former Nikkatsu Film Company, gallantly took upon themselves the task of a reform.

Tomotaka Tasaka aimed above all at depicting the simplicity and sincerity of the Japanese. The main contribution made by both directors was the description of country life and country people. Until then Japanese films had dealt mainly with the city life of Tokyo, and their chief theme was the love affairs of men and women of the upper and middle classes. Moreover, their attention was devoted more to the portrayal of women than of men. This emphasis on sex appeal may be attributed in part to regard for box-office returns and in part to the influence of the American films. The works of Directors Tasaka and Uchida dared to run counter to this current. In *Earth*, Uchida described the affection between the father and daughter of a poor peasant family. In *Life Theater* he dealt with the Tokyo college life of a humble country youth and described true Japanese sentiments such as the youth's devotion to his old father in the country. Although not without some clumsiness, he picturized them with deep sincerity.

In *Five Scouts*, Tasaka showed the spirit of loyal Japanese soldiers, and not a single woman appeared in this film. Quite contrary to the generally accepted idea that a film without women has no appeal, this picture impressed the whole nation. In 1939, Tasaka directed a picture made after Ashihei Hino's famous *Mud and Soldiers*. This film was awarded a special prize by the Minister of Education.

Another director who has been instrumental in furthering this new trend is Shiro Toyoda (Fig. 15). He made his name by the filming of the famous novel *Young People* by the popular author Yojiro Ishizaka. The film depicts the pure love between a man and woman teacher of a girls' school in northern Japan and their affection for an unhappy pupil. In 1940 he produced a masterpiece, *Spring on a Little Island*, which dealt with the life of a woman doctor in a leper hospital in western Japan. Although the story is a simple description of this woman's life at the hospital and her efforts at finding victims and bringing them to the hospital, the film was deeply moving and even a little romantic because it was beautifully harmonized with the lyrical description of the spring sea. His more recent films were less successful.

Although the works of these three reformers command great respect among intellectuals, it cannot be said that they have gained the wholehearted support of the general public yet.

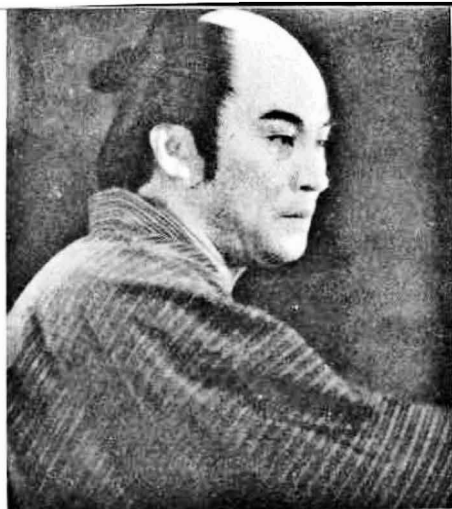
"FILM POETS"

It is difficult to find a director great enough to produce a film which is as excellent as a work of art as it is successful as a commercial undertaking. Kenji Mizoguchi (Fig. 5) comes nearest to this ideal. He is a veteran director and used to specialize in films of the Meiji Era. In his latest work, *The Forty-Seven Ronins*, he handled for the first time the Tokugawa period. His chief talent lies in his exquisite expression of tender emotion and in the beauty of his poetic sentiment. He is unsurpassed in the art of portraying the heroine of a tragedy. His only defect is a slight lack in tempo.

Yasujiro Ozu (Fig. 13) is also a great "film poet," but has a keener sense of tempo. His most recent work, *Brother and Sister of the Toda Family*, describes the psychological complications between a mother and her children in an upper-class home in Tokyo. Although excellent in his artistic skill, Director Ozu's negative character prevents him from keeping pace with Japan's new era. He might be called the antipode of Tasaka, Uchida, and Toyoda.

Japan's film circles are now confronted with a second transitional period. Old-timers like Yasujiro Shimazu and Teinosuke Kinugasa (Fig. 17), who is still the highest-paid director in Japan, together with Yasujiro Ozu form the conservative bloc; while Tasaka, Uchida, and Toyoda, followed by a group of rising young directors, are advancing with a strong determination towards the representation of the realities of Japan's new era.





(11) Denjiro Okochi, "Japan's Emil Jannings"



(12) Mieko Takamine playing the part of Omino in *The Forty-Seven Ronins*. In this scene she commits suicide (as described in our article "The Capital," April 1942)



(13) Directors Tomu Uchida (left) and Yasujiro Ozu (right)

Historical Films and Leading Directors



(14) Chiezo Kataoka, star of his-
torical "sword-fighting plays"



(15) Director Shiro Toyoda,
a leader of the reform
movement



(16) Director Tomotaka Tasaka,
also a progressive producer



(17) Composer Kosaku Yamada,
(left) in charge of the music in
The Battle of Kawanakashima,
with Teinosuke Kinugasa,
highest-paid director in Japan