

## ON THE SCREEN

(See illustrations page 286)

*In connection with the discussion of the "Grossraum-film" in East Asia in the leading article of this issue, we are from now on going to review, in addition to American, European, and Chinese films, film production in Japan. The following review of recent Japanese films is written by a leading film critic, Mr. Hideo Tsumura, known to millions of Japanese newspaper readers as the editor of the film column of the "Asahi Shimbun."*

*During the past ten years Mr. Tsumura has developed a new style of film comment which has found many admirers among his countrymen. In addition to his work for the "Asahi," Mr. Tsumura frequently writes articles on film problems for Japanese magazines, and he has also published three books: "The Film Critic" (1938), "The Second Series of the Film Critic" (1939), and "The Film and Its Appreciation" (1940). Mr. Tsumura is also a student of European literature, particularly that of Germany and Scandinavia. The thesis with which he graduated at Tohoku Imperial University dealt with one of Goethe's works.—K. M.*

### Newsreels

There is a tremendous demand at present among the Japanese people for newsreels of the "War of Greater East Asia." A similar phenomenon could be observed at the time of the Manchurian Incident as well as after the outbreak of the China Affair, when the war spread to Shanghai and the Japanese offensive against Nanking was started. During these latter hostilities more than thirty newsreel theaters were opened in the six big cities of Japan. This number is now believed to have increased considerably. Furthermore, in accordance with government film regulations, all cinemas in Japan include newsreels and educational shorts in their programs. Newsreel cinemas present some four or five reels of film, including a newsreel as well as educational shorts and cartoons. The admission fee is very low, about 20 or 30 sen, an additional stimulus for city-dwellers who lead a busy life to rush to these theaters to see only the newsreels. A common sight of late in Tokyo is that of the queues in front of the newsreel cinemas.

Immediately after the outbreak of the Pacific war on December 8, the Japan Film Company, the organization that produces and distributes films in conformity with the national policy, issued a newsreel containing, among many interesting scenes related to the outbreak of the war, a shot of the Roosevelt-Churchill Atlantic Conference last summer aboard the British battleship *Prince of Wales*, taken from a foreign newsreel. This picture was of special interest in view of the announcement that the *Prince of Wales* had been sunk by Japanese forces a few days before this newsreel was published in Japan. It therefore made a deep impression on the audience since it gave the spectators a most vivid sense of Britain's downfall.

In the following issues there were numerous pictures of actual fighting on practically all fronts from Hongkong to Singapore.

Of all newsreels it was the historic film record taken by the Japanese naval air corps of their attack on Hawaii that impressed the nation more than any newsreel taken by professional cameramen. It showed aircraft carriers on the move, scenes of the actual dive-bombing on Hawaiian airfields, naval pilots on the deck of an aircraft carrier receiving instructions before the take-off, the crew busily engaged in last-minute preparations, and finally an impressive scene of the airplanes taking off one after another. The action shots shown could hardly have been surpassed in vividness by professional cameramen. One must admire the composure of the naval airmen who took these films while actually engaged in fighting. Although the scenes are very short they are for the Japanese a national treasure to be preserved for ever.

As the Japanese Navy is very strict about military secrecy, it was quite impossible for the general public to see a film in peace time even showing an aircraft carrier in the distance. Now this historic film actually shows officers and men at work aboard an aircraft carrier in action. Foreigners cannot imagine the depth of emotion stirred up in the Japanese by this sight.

### War Effects

Film production in Japan has decreased considerably since last September. The reason for this is that the Board of Information has enforced a new film policy. Since July last, when trade with the United States came to an end, the Cabinet Planning Board has re-organized the program for the mobilization of raw materials and has established a war-time

economic structure giving preference to the military use of all important raw materials. As a result, the production of raw film for civilian use had to be restricted, and the monthly production of the five film companies has decreased to some ten pictures from the thirty or forty formerly produced. Although the Board of Information had enforced rationing of raw film since the latter half of 1940, the supply of raw film for civilian use had to be suspended for four months from September 1941.

#### Film and History

Japan's film industry was hence in a state of confusion in the autumn of 1941, and no outstanding productions appeared during this period. Toward the end of the year, however, the Toho film *Kawanaka-shima Kassen* (The Battle of Kawanaka-shima), the Nikkatsu film *Yedo-Saigonohi* (The Last Days of Yedo), and the Shochiku film *Genroku-Chushingura* (The Forty-Seven Ronins of the Genroku Period) were issued.

It is a coincidence that these three big historical films appeared almost simultaneously. *Kawanaka-shima Kassen* is the description of a battle between two famous heroes of Japanese history. The film was a failure because it tried too hard to ape the American style: although there is action galore and the story moves fast, it lacks thought.

The picture *Yedo-Saigonohi* depicts the dawning of the Meiji Restoration, when the Tokugawa Shogunate was attacked by the Emperor's forces, and Katsu Awa, a great statesman of the Shogunate, managed through his influence to effect the peaceful withdrawal of the Shogunate troops from Yedo Castle. It is a fine historical film, and in depicting the hard struggle of its hero Katsu Awa it shows the great tragedy through which the Tokugawa Shogunate passed in those days.

*Genroku-Chushingura* (Genroku is an era during the Tokugawa period in which the incident occurred), or the story of the forty-seven ronins, has been filmed more than twenty times in the past, and three times as a talkie. This last release gives the first part of the story. Although the film was not a popular success, there is no question that it is an elaborate production which has aroused much interest in film circles. The reasons for this are: (1) the director of the film is Kenji Mizoguchi, who is famous in Japan and who has in the past two or three years produced several big historical pictures; (2) the story of the film is taken from a play by Seika Mayama, an outstanding contemporary dramatist; (3) some of the parts in the film are taken by popular Kabuki actors from the *Zenshin-za* (Zenshin Theater).

As the picture contains only the first part of the story, it does not show the revenge of the forty-seven ronins for the death of their master, an incident in Japan's history which is known even to many foreigners. Rather does it build up the background for this event,

which is to be shown in a second release. This means that the first part is a little monotonous and lacking in drama. Moreover, Director Mizoguchi has dragged out each scene too long and also made the mistake of practically omitting close-ups. Finally the recording is not as good as it should have been.

However, the Japanese people love the story of Chushingura, for in it the spirit of Bushido is most splendidly revealed. The forty-seven heroes all commanded a will-power and character which transcended life and death. In pursuing their goal they paid no heed to the sufferings of their parents, wives, and children. They started out to destroy the enemy of their master and were determined to commit suicide after achieving their purpose. That this spirit is not dead in the Japanese of today was clearly testified by the many heroes who died for their country in the Battle of Hawaii and the landing operations in southeastern Asia.

One weakness of *Genroku-Chushingura* is that its general atmosphere is rather too negative and sad. However, its presentation of historical detail is minute, and its settings of Yedo Castle and other places are magnificent. As a historical film, it has the solemnity fitting to the spirit of Bushido, and for this reason it excels many Chushingura films produced before. The music was composed by Shiro Fukai and is played by the New Symphony Orchestra, the best orchestra in Japan.

Taking the three films as a whole, it must be confessed that they did not make any very deep impression on the intelligentsia of Japan. Owing to the large number of films imported during the past ten years or so from such countries as Germany, France, and America, the level of the appreciative power of the Japanese intelligentsia has been so greatly raised that they are not satisfied with the standard of these three home-made films.

#### Modern Subjects

The same is true in the case of films dealing with present-day life. Japanese films of this nature are also made for the consumption of the general public. Among those made toward the end of last year was *Jiro-monogatari*, (The Story of Jiro) from the novel by Koji Shimomura. This is probably the only recent film to be appreciated by the intelligentsia. It is the work of a promising director, Koji Shima, formerly an actor. It is unique as a Japanese film in that romanticism forms its keynote. Although there are some defects in the construction, it has a fresh atmosphere aided greatly by the use of a mandolin orchestra and an excellent chorus. While Japanese films are often very poor in their use of music, this film is a step in the right direction.

The films released in January, among them *Soshu-no-Yoru*, with Ri-Koran, and *Otokono-Hanamichi*, with Furukawa Roppa, a famous comedian, are all of low standard and little value.—H.T.