

A BRIEF HISTORY OF JAPANESE YAKUZA FILMS

Film genres rise, fall, but never die (become comatose, yes, die, no). One example is films about Japan's native gangsters, the yakuza, which got their start in the silent days, became huge in the 1960s and 1970s, declined in the 1980s, but returned in force in the 1990s, flooding the video store shelves. In the process, the genre went through a radical metamorphosis, much as Hollywood gang films did en route from *Little Caesar* to *The Godfather*.

The modern-day gangsters played by Takeshi Kitano in *Sonatine* and *Brother* kill with all the emotion of roach exterminators and live according to their own Social Darwinian law: do unto others before others do unto you. Their characters are a far cry indeed from the noble stoics of 1960s icon Ken Takakura, who resorted to violence only after repeated provocation, while following the traditional gangster code of repaying one's moral obligations no matter what the personal sacrifice.

Kitano scorns the old gang films as unrealistic and says that his own, darker view of the gangs lies closer to the truth. Real gangsters, he told me in a 1998 interview, "could [never] take on a whole rival gang with a wooden sword," as Takakura did in film after film. "Stories like that were made into comics," he reminisced. "At the end, Takakura Ken says, 'I'll go alone.' The other guys in the gang say, 'Go ahead, we're not stopping you'" (Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 93).

There are parallels, however, between Kitano's dirty heroes and Takakura's clean-cut ones: Both are contemptuous of death in the best samurai tradition and both define macho cool for their respective generations. Also, as removed from

other similar occupational groups in feudal Japan, from firemen to carpenters. Like them, the yakuza made no secret of their affiliation and were in fact often swaggeringly proud of it. (Postwar gangsters followed this tradition, affixing their gang name and logo on office signs, name cards, and even lapel pins.) They may not have been anyone's idea of a role model—few parents raised their sons to be yakuza—but these men had their uses and place. Thus developed the traditional Japanese tolerance of and sympathy for native gangsters, who have long been regarded less as predatory outsiders than errant members of the same cultural and racial family.

By the time films were introduced to Japan, the yakuza had already put down deep, enduring roots in society. No festival was complete without the stalls of the *tekiya*, no urban amusement district without the gambling dens of the *bakuto*. The latter, in particular, offered a rich source of material for early filmmakers.

Prewar yakuza films were usually set in the premodern past and based on historical figures who had acquired a heavy accretion of legend through centuries of oral and literary traditions. One favorite was Kunisada Chuji (1810–50), who as a young man became enraged by the injustices that a wicked magistrate perpetrated against the poor. Deciding to live outside the law rather than be crushed within it, Chuji joined a gang of *bakuto* and became its leader. In opposing corrupt authority, he emerged as a much-beloved champion of justice. Starting in the silent era, director after director made films about this Robin Hood-like hero, notably Daisuke Ito with his 1927 *Chuji Tabi Nikki* (Chuji's Travel Diary)—a three-part film depicting Chuji alone and on the run but still living strictly according to the *jingi* code, even though doing so endangers himself. Ito's aim was pathos, not simply thrills, and one he achieved well enough to make *Chuji Tabi Nikki* an influential hit.

Though not all versions of the Kunisada Chuji story emphasized his decline, prewar gang films tended to portray their vagabond heroes as sympathetic but lonely figures, forced to live an outlaw existence and longing, however hopelessly, to return to straight society. These characters had little in common with the strutting, wisecracking, bullet-spraying heroes of 1930s Hollywood gang films.

But as noble spirited as Chuji and his fictional fellow *bakuto* may have been, they were deemed not fit as heroes for wartime propaganda films. After the war, Occupation authorities took a dim view of feudalistic themes, forcing makers of

ran until 1967, six of which were directed by Ishii and two by a promising newcomer, Kinji Fukasaku. In depicting contemporary gang life, including gang warfare, semi-realistically, the series was a forerunner to the critically acclaimed *jitsuroku* (true story) gang films that Fukasaku shot in the early 1970s and which subsequently made his international reputation.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF JAPANESE YAKUZA FILMS

The genre's real Golden Age, however, was the 1960s. The films that drove and sustained it came from a specialized variety called *ninkyō eiga*—"chivalry films." Influenced more by the conventions of the samurai period drama and the culture of Japanese gangdom than Hollywood, *ninkyō eiga* were usually set in the seventy-year period from the end of feudalism to the beginning of World War Two. These films may have had a traditional appeal—with the good-guy gangsters being essentially good-guy samurai with tattoos—but they also dealt with relevant issues, such as the social and economic impact of Westernization, which was of interest to their contemporary audiences. The *ninkyō eiga* vogue lasted for more than a decade and generated stars, including Ken Takakura, Koji Tsuruta, and Junko Fuji, who became gangster archetypes for a generation, much as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson did in 1930s America.

The genre's plots usually revolved around the age-old theme of *giri-ninjo*—the dilemma of the hero forced to choose between his own interests and an obligation that may cost him his life. The hero typically finds himself on the side of a gang that seeks to uphold tradition, against stronger, ruthless rivals who have been corrupted by materialism, individualism, and other Western values (or are just plain bad characters). The hero is usually a forbearing type who seeks a peaceful resolution to the struggle between the film's good and bad gangsters until being driven to action by the repeated outrages of the latter.

Despite countless variations depicting this core narrative, the genre's climax usually featured a showdown between the hero, perhaps accompanied by an ally or two, and the bad guys. The resulting one-against-all fight, with the hero wielding a Japanese sword (never an automatic weapon) to deadly effect, was also a standard trope of period drama films (and before that, of period drama plays), one the audience never tired of. *Ninkyō eiga* drew millions of primarily young male fans and accounted for some of the biggest box office hits of the period. What

together to battle the power structure” (ibid., p. 17). Also, with their stories of anti-establishment good guys struggling against establishment bad guys, *ninkyō eiga* “reflected the situation of the period” (ibid., p. 16).

The film igniting the *ninkyō eiga* boom was Tadashi Sawashima’s *Jinsei Gekijo: Hishakaku*, mentioned above. Koji Tsuruta plays Hishakaku, a gangster on the run with Otoyo (Yoshiko Sakuma), a Yokohama courtesan. With the help of a friendly *oyabun* (Ryunosuke Tsukigata), the two hole up in a Tokyo amusement quarter; but Hishakaku finally turns himself in to repay an obligation. While he is in prison, Otoyo takes up with Miyagawa (Ken Takakura), a studly young gangster. The film’s early-twentieth-century setting and love triangle story may not have broken new ground, but Tsuruta and Takakura brought a stylish dynamism to their roles, while exemplifying the *jingi* code. They made the sword and kimono cool again for fans who had been turning to the small screen for their period drama entertainment.

After the box office success of *Jinsei Gekijo: Hishakaku*, Toei quickly ramped up gang film production, releasing as many as thirty-seven in 1967 out of the fifty-five films in its lineup. Formed in 1951 from a merger of two small film companies, with backing from the Toyoko Railway Company, Toei had begun life as a maker of low-budget period dramas. Under the leadership of its first president, Hiroshi Okawa, the company developed a system for turning its more popular films into series and then block booking them in double bills throughout Japan. By 1954, only three years after its launch, Toei was releasing a new double bill every week, for a production pace of 104 films annually.

By the early 1960s, however, the period drama audience was migrating en masse to television, and Toei was in trouble. The success of *Jinsei Gekijo: Hishakaku* and the *ninkyō eiga* that followed it saved the company. Toei was fortunately able to change production gears from samurai swashbuckers to *ninkyō eiga* with relative ease, using the same sets, staff, and even fight choreography. Toei director Masahiro Makino, who had been directing since 1928 and whose father had been a pioneering director in the early years of the century, was soon turning out *ninkyō eiga* with his usual brisk efficiency.

As in Golden Age Hollywood, Toei’s production system was the sum of many parts. Among its most important were its president Okawa, who knew nothing of filmmaking but was willing to trust those who did, and stars such as Takakura

However far-fetched the story, Shundo insisted on accuracy of atmosphere and detail. For his first *ninkyo* film, *Bakuto* (The Gambler, 1964), he and director Shigehiro Ozawa investigated real gambling dens and invited real gamblers to the set as advisors. Shundo even cast a former gang boss, Noboru Ando, in leading roles in several films. He later insisted that these and other relationships he developed with the yakuza were strictly professional. “[Getting mixed up with the yakuza] is not the way to make good movies,” Shundo told one interviewer (Shundo and Yamane, *Ninkyo Eiga-den* [The Story of the Ninkyo Film], 1999, p. 68).

Shundo also had a knack for generating hit series from successful films. Among the most successful were *Nihon Kyokakuden* (An Account of the Chivalrous Commoners of Japan, 1964–71, eleven entries); *Showa Zankyoden* (Tales of Chivalry in the Showa Era, 1965–72, nine entries); *Abashiri Bangaichi* (A Man from Abashiri Prison, 1965–73, eighteen entries); *Bakuchiuchi* (The Gambler, 1967–72, ten entries); and *Hibotan Bakuto* (Red Peony Gambler, 1968–72, eight entries). These series became brands that enabled Toei to attract a large and loyal following for its films and build an insurmountable box office lead over its rivals.

Also faced with the task of feeding the Toei assembly line with product, Shundo assembled a core unit of scriptwriters, directors, and stars and worked them (and himself) as hard as humanly possible. In his peak year with Toei, 1967, he produced thirty films, of which Koji Tsuruta starred in fourteen and Ken Takakura in six. Among the lesser stars in Shundo’s firmament were Tomisaburo Wakayama, Tetsuro Tanba, Shin’ichi “Sonny” Chiba, Noboru Ando, Saburo Kitajima, Tatsuo Umemiya, Kyosuke Machida, Ryo Ikebe, and Shingo Yamashiro. To keep his stars, particularly the workaholic Tsuruta, busy and boost the marquee value of his product, Shundo often had them appear as featured players in films for the bottom half of the double bill. He would give lead roles to less prominent but promising actors. His biggest casting coup, however, was Ken Takakura, who created a new image of macho stardom and would later become an enduring icon personifying the Japanese male ideal for millions. Think John Wayne with a sword.

Born in Fukuoka in 1931 and educated at the elite Meiji University, Takakura passed a Toei “new face” film audition and made his film debut in 1956 in *Denko Karate Uchi* (Lightening Karate Blow). He didn’t hit his box office stride, however, until he evolved from his early punkish on-screen persona into a stoic loner

right *jingi* thing but was also capable of falling passionately, even desperately, in love.

Shundo's biggest find, after Tsuruta and Takakura, was his own daughter, who took the professional name Junko Fuji. Shundo initially opposed her desire to enter show business. ("The reason was simple," he told Yamane, ". . . I wanted her to find a good husband and marry in the normal way" [*Ninkyō Eiga-den*, p. 150].) But when Makino expressed interest in casting her in his 1958 *Otoko no Sakazuki* (A Man's Sake Cup), Shundo reluctantly agreed; better Toei than rival Shochiku, which had also scouted the almond-eyed teenager. Fuji made an impression and was soon a rising star on the Toei lot. Often appearing opposite Takakura, she quickly became a favorite of fans, playing passionate, strong-willed women who are nonetheless models of *jingi* propriety. In 1968, Fuji starred in Kosaku Yamashita's *Hibotan Bakuto* (Red Peony Gambler) in which she portrayed a wandering gambler who seeks revenge for the murder of her *oyabun* father and finds it with the aid of a lone gangster, played by Takakura.

In the eight *Hibotan* installments, Fuji was convincingly the equal—mentally and physically—of any yakuza tough guy. She was skilled not only at cards but martial arts, tossing her loutish male foes with perfectly timed throws or slicing them with her short sword. With her steely glare and low, penetrating voice, the actress could dominate the room; but she also looked stunning in kimono, with a poised, undeniably feminine presence. Whether facing down a crowd of armed men or crying at the deathbed of a yakuza boss, her performance was all of a piece, her embodiment of the gang code was as powerful as her male costars'—but in her modesty, politeness, and essential gentleness she was also the ideal *yamato nadeshiko*, that is, a woman who exemplified traditional Japanese female virtues.

As the supervisor of a relentless assembly line, Shundo also needed directors who could both fit into the system and make hit products. He found them not only in Makino but Kiyoshi Saeki, Kosaku Yamashita, Sadao Nakajima, Junya Sato, Shigehiro Ozawa, Yasuo Furuhata, Norifumi Suzuki, and Takashi Harada. Shundo also tolerated types who departed from the norm—as long as they could deliver box office winners. One of these was Teruo Ishii, who specialized in films about modern gangsters and made them with a speed, stylishness, and quirky inventiveness that was the opposite of the *ninkyō eiga* aesthetic. Critics detected a

the aid of an enemy-turned-ally (played in the first six installments by Jo Shishido), while winning and finally spurning the love of a pure-hearted maiden (played in all but the last installment by Ruriko Asaoka).

Kei'ichiro "Tony" Akagi, another top Nikkatsu star, launched a popular *mukokuseki* action series with *Kenju Buraicho: Nukiuchi no Ryu* (Pistol Rap Sheet: Fast Draw Ryu, 1960). Akagi played a gang gunman with the fastest draw in Japan, who nicks his opponents instead of killing them. Once again, Jo Shishido played the role of the rival, though in the course of the four-series installments his character and Akagi's developed a wise-cracking friendship. The series abruptly ended, however, when Akagi was killed in a go-cart accident in 1961.

But as successful as these and other *mukokuseki* action films were, Nikkatsu was struggling at the box office when Toei's *ninkyō eiga* began to fill theaters—and the studio strove to play catchup. In 1963, Nikkatsu released its first *ninkyō eiga*, Akinori Matsuo's *Otoko no Monshō* (Symbol of a Man), a drama about a gang boss's son who becomes a doctor but is forced to take over as *oyabun* when his father is killed by a rival gang. Starring Hideki Takahashi as the son, *Otoko no Monshō* launched a ten-part series that ran until 1966.

Ironically, Nikkatsu's best-known gang films today, both in Japan and abroad, were made by a director that the studio later fired: Seijun Suzuki. Entering Nikkatsu as an assistant director in 1954, Suzuki made his directorial debut in 1956 with *Minato no Kanpai: Shori o Wagate ni* (Toast of the Harbor: Victory Is in Our Grasp), a melodrama whose sailor hero helps his jockey brother fight a charge of fixing races.

Throughout much of the next decade Suzuki toiled away on the Nikkatsu assembly line, grinding out B programers in various genres. A spiritual anarchist with a love of theater and disdain for convention, he began, with the 1963 rogue-cop-on-a-mission film *Yaju no Seishun* (Youth of the Beast), to inject touches into his films that ranged from the gorgeously Kabukiesque to the mind-blowingly surreal. The culmination was the 1967 *Koroshi no Rakuin* (Branded to Kill), whose hitman hero, played by Jo Shishido, botches a job because a butterfly lands on the scope of his sniper rifle and whose femme fatale client decorates the rearview mirror of her sports car with a dead bird. Nikkatsu president Kyusaku Horii found the film incomprehensible, film fans stayed away (save for the small band of Suzuki loyalists)—and the director found himself without a job. *Koroshi no Rakuin* later

lence" (*kosboku rosen*) films. While featuring girl gangsters, such series as Sukeban Burusu (Girl Boss Blues, 1971–77) were less interested in righting the gender balance with the top half of the bill than on simply selling sex, often with rape, torture, and bondage in attendance.

But as popular as some of the "pinky violence" films became, they could not stop the box office slide of *ninkyō* films in the early 1970s. The crowning blow came in 1972 when Junko Fuji quit Toei at the height of her popularity to marry Kabuki actor Kikunosuke Onoe. The loss was so great that Japanese critics commonly date the decline of *ninkyō eiga* from her retirement.

Ironically, the one who revived the genre and reversed Toei's eroding fortunes was Kinji Fukasaku, whose early films Shundo disliked—"He was making them for himself alone," he complained to Yamane (*Ninkyō Eiga-den*, p. 220). Shundo changed his mind about Fukasaku, however, after seeing *Gendai Yakuza: Hitokiri Yōta* (Street Mobster, 1972)—an explosively violent, starkly nihilistic film about a wild-at-heart gangster, played by Bunta Sugawara, who wages a suicidal one-man war against a powerful gang. Though too dark to be a mass audience hit, the film had a raw vitality missing in formulaic gang films. Over strong opposition, Shundo brought Fukasaku to Toei's Kyoto Studio to make *Jingi Naki Tatakai* (Battles without Honor and Humanity)—a studio-saving success.

Released in 1973, *Jingi Naki Tatakai* tells the story of gang wars in early post-war Kure, a port town in Hiroshima Prefecture, with the characters based on real-life gangsters and the story, on actual events. Bunta Sugawara stars as an ex-con named Hirono, sent to the slammer for killing a rival punk in a street fight. Inside, he becomes close to Wakasugi (Tatsuo Umemiya), a lieutenant of the Doigumi gang. Back on the streets again, Hirono is recruited by the rival Yamamorigumi, whose boss (Nobuo Kaneko) likes his take-no-prisoners style. The two gangs maintain an uneasy balance of power until their involvement in a city council election brings them head to head—and a war erupts, with Hirono caught in the middle. Beatings, murders, and betrayals follow in quick succession as the conflict escalates—and the gangster *jingi* code is revealed as a monstrous sham.

Though reminiscent of *The Godfather*, which had been a critical and popular success in Japan, *Jingi* is a far more crowded and chaotic film, shot in a cinema verité style that recalled TV news footage of the era's bloodier revolutions and coups. Sugawara became a star for his all-out performance, though the film also

using locations that had figured in the gang war—gangsters, including models for characters in the film, swarmed on the set, giving advice to the director and cast and performing in front of the camera. "I feel sorry for actors playing yakuza now—they don't have the chance to get to know real yakuza the way we did," said Tatsuo Umemiya in an interview with Taro Sugisaku and Takeshi Uechi for their book dedicated to the series, *Jingi Naki Tatakai: Roman Album* (Battles without Honor and Humanity: Romantic Album, Tokuma Shoten, 1998, p. 178).

The popularity of *jitsuroku* films about the gangs was brief, however. One reason was the steady decline of Japanese films in terms of both box office numbers and market share with the Hollywood competition. This was a tide that all studios, including Toei and its two main rivals—Daiei and Nikkatsu—had to fight against, some more successfully than others. Daiei went bankrupt in 1971, while Nikkatsu switched production to soft porn in 1972. Also, in spinning out the *Jingi Naki Tatakai* story over eight installments, Fukasaku and his scriptwriters departed farther and father from the semidocumentary realism that had made the first film so fresh. As in the case of *ninkyō* films, the makers of *jitsuroku* films (including a ninth "Jingi" installment in 1979) went to the well too often, and fans began to tire of the taste.

The late 1970s was a time of retrenchment for gang films, as what had once been a top box office genre became a specialty item for an ever-diminishing audience. In the 1980s, the home VCR market drew away more of the single males who had been the genre's biggest fans; they now opted to watch videos in the privacy of their six-mat rooms rather than pay three times as much to see the same films in Toei's decaying downtown theaters.

One exception to this downward trend was the *Gokudo no Onnatachi* (Gang Wives) series, which debuted in 1986. Based on a best-selling, nonfiction book of interviews with wives and girlfriends of gangsters by freelance journalist Shoko Ieda, the first film in the series was an immediate hit. Staying faithful to the outlines of the book, director Hideo Gosha gave the film his usual gloss of sensuality, while Shima Iwashita and Rina Katase played two strong-willed sisters—Iwashita's was married to a gang boss—with imposing diva dynamism. One memorable scene was a knock-down, drag-out fight between the two women that recalled the epic brawl between Marlene Dietrich and Una Merkel in *Destry Rides Again*.

Iwashita played the lead, although not a continuing character, in eight of the

given brief runs in second-run theaters before being relegated to the video bins. As in the 1960s heyday of the *ninkyō eiga*, many were slapdash collections of clichés, but others gave promising young directors and stars chances to push the genre envelope.

One was Rokuro Mochizuki, an adult film veteran who brought a dry-eyed, if downbeat, authenticity to his portraits of underworld life, beginning with *Gokudo Kisha* (The Wicked Reporter, 1993). Eiji Okuda plays a scruffy, bull-headed reporter for a race track tip sheet whose gambling addiction gets him in trouble with the yakuza. Think a Japanese Elmore Leonard hero.

Mochizuki's break-through film, however, was *Onibi* (The Fire Within, 1997), whose middle-aged hitman hero (Yoshio Harada) tries to go straight with a new young lover after serving time for a murder rap. He finds himself drawn back into his old trade, however, first by his old boss and then his girlfriend, who hires him for a hit. The narrative arc may be that of countless other yakuza movies, but *Onibi* is a freshly imagined, closely observed take on a familiar theme, with a powerfully understated performance by Yoshio Harada as a gangster willing to die for love.

Mochizuki's most volatile mix of Eros and violence is *Minazuki* (Everyone's a Moon, 1999) in which a sad-sack salaryman, played by Eiji Okuda, returns home one night to find his wife gone, along with all his money. During the course of his long search for her, the salaryman enlists the help of his psychopathic yakuza brother-in-law and falls in love with a prostitute who more than matches him in loneliness, desperation, and sexual hunger. A disturbing film, steeped in rough sex and raw violence, *Minazuki* is at the same time perceptive, not only exposing the inner demons of its characters but also revealing their capacity for tenderness.

The OV gang film maker who has attracted the most international attention, however, is Takashi Miike. Since making his first theatrical feature, *Daisan no Gokudo* (The Third Gangster) in 1995, Miike has continued to work in the gang genre for the video market, with a freedom, imagination, and energy that some have called manic and others praised as the mark of a world-beating talent. Not content to stay within genre confines, or even within the borders of Japan, Miike finds inspiration in the stranger reaches of *manga* and animation, while ranging over much of Asia. His films are truly borderless, with few limits of any kind, cinematic, cultural, or moral. "Basically, I am not the kind of person interested in

debut feature, *Samehada Otoko & Momojiri Onna* (Shark Skin Man & Peach Hip Girl), was a Tarantinoesque exercise in genre bending about a cool-dude thief, played by Tadanobu Asano, being pursued by a gang of cartoonish hitmen. Impeccably fashionable and deeply influenced by *manga* and *anime*, *Samehada* is less a *yakuza eiga* (movie) than an *eiga gokko* (movie game).

The most internationally honored director now working in the genre, in fact, paid no OV dues whatsoever. A stand-up comedian turned TV personality and actor, Takeshi Kitano had never directed anything when he filled in for Kinji Fukasaku on *Sono Otoko Kyobo ni Tsuki* (Violent Cop, 1989) after Fukasaku left the film because of a scheduling conflict. In this and subsequent films, including *3-4 X Jūgatsu* (Boiling Point, 1990), *Sonatine* (1993), and *Brother* (2000), Kitano rejected both the rigidly structured romanticism of the *ninkyō eiga* and the chaotic semi-documentary realism of the *jitsuroku eiga*. Instead, he developed his own instantly identifiable style—a quirky mix of frontal compositions and elliptic editing, minimalist dialogue, and uninflected acting, brutal violence, and pawky comedy. At the same time, the outlaw heroes in these films, played by Kitano himself, share something of the traditional *ninkyō* stoicism and fatalism, facing death (or dealing it) with barely a flicker of emotion. Also, though Kitano insisted that his portrayal of gang violence was authentic—he had seen plenty of *yakuza* while growing up tough and poor in Tokyo's Asakusa amusement district—he staged many of his shoot-out and punch-up scenes with a stylization more reminiscent of Kabuki or, at times, stand-up comedy than the free-for-all brawls of Kinji Fukasaku. Kitano has exerted a strong influence on many younger Japanese filmmakers, after an international rise to prominence that began with *Sonatine* and culminated with a Venice Golden Lion for *Hana-Bi* (Fireworks) in 1997. But he is less a gang-genre director than a *sui generis* talent, who happens to find gangsters convenient vehicles for his existential meditations on life and death.

Largely dismissed or ignored by foreign critics when first released, gang films from the 1960s and 1970s have since attracted growing overseas interest, with the genre's most atypical director, Seijun Suzuki, becoming its first subject of retrospectives and serious critical attention abroad. Tai Kato and Kinji Fukasaku have also had their moments in the international spotlight in recent years (too late for Kato, who died in 1985). And Teruo Ishii has become known to non-Japanese audiences less for his gang films than his martial arts action and erotic cult items.

reality as the 1960s Golden Age films could be, their makers included quirky surrealists like Seijun Suzuki and cinema verité stylists like Kinji Fukasaku. They made defiantly individual statements—and provided creative inspiration for 1990s gang-movie directors such as Takashi Miike, Rokuro Mochizuki, and (despite his denials) Kitano himself.

THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE YAKUZA

Japanese gangs are ancient in origin. Early in the Tokugawa Period (1600–1867), roving samurai called *batamono-yakko*, who had been left unemployed by the end of the previous era's incessant wars, turned to looting and banditry. Today's gangsters trace their beginnings to the bands of young townsmen, called *machi-yakko*, who organized to oppose the *batamono-yakko*. Living on the fringes of the law themselves, the *machi-yakko* became folk heroes, with songs, stories, and plays retelling their exploits.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Japan's criminal society began to assume its modern form, as the spiritual descendants of the *machi-yakko* evolved into two distinct groups: the *bakuto* (gamblers) and *tekiya* (peddlers), both of whom plied their trade on the famed Tokaido highway between Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kyoto. The *bakuto* came to be called *yakuza*, or “eight, nine, three”—a losing hand in a traditional card game. Later, the term applied not only to *bakuto* but to *tekiya* and other outlaw groups. Both *bakuto* and *tekiya* were organized into hierarchies, with an *oyabun* (boss or, literally, “father”) administering to the needs of his *kobun* (subordinates or, literally, “children”) in return for their unswerving loyalty. This relationship, considered superior to blood ties, was cemented with elaborate ritual and, if necessary, honored with the ultimate personal sacrifice: death.

Though not all *yakuza*, even in the good old days, willingly threw their lives away at the whim of their *oyabun*, they did adhere to a certain code, called *jingi* (chivalry), that set them apart from straight society. Non-*yakuza*, for example, did not chop off a pinkie joint as a gesture of contrition to their superiors for a misdeed. In the popular imagination, certain exemplars of the *jingi* code achieved a romantic outlaw status as friends of the weak, enemies of the strong.

The *jingi* code prohibited *yakuza* from drawing ordinary citizens into their quarrels. Instead, the gangsters constituted a tightly knit guild that resembled

period films to radically redefine the genre and severely limiting the types of stories they could put on the screen. The *giri-ninjo* (duty versus human feelings) dramas of the typical gangster film did not make the cut. When the Occupation ended in 1952, period dramas of all types, including ones about feudal-era gangsters, quickly returned to their place of prewar dominance. The old-style *bakuto*—that brave-but-pathetic hero trailing a cloud of doom—did not. In his place arose a new breed more in keeping with the optimistic, get-ahead spirit of the postwar boom.

One of its members was the title character of Masahiro Makino's Jirocho Sangokushi (Adventures of Jirocho), a hit, nine-part series that ran from 1952 to 1954 and inspired several spinoffs. Once again, inspiration came from a real-life source, the legendary gangster Shimizu no Jirocho, born in 1820 in Shimizu, a town halfway between today's Tokyo and Yokohama. After the death of his adoptive father, a rice merchant, Jirocho inherited the business; but four years later, at the age of twenty, he took to the road and became a gambler. A natural leader, Jirocho formed his own gang and had as many as six hundred men under his command. During the political upheavals of the 1860s that pitted the followers of the emperor against those of the shogun, Jirocho allied himself with the former and ended up on the winning side. When he died in 1893, at the age of seventy-three, Jirocho had become a pillar of the community, a man who may have run gambling games but also had actively contributed to the modernization of Shimizu and even founded one of the country's first English schools. Makino's films, understandably, focused on the early, more cinematic part of Jirocho's career, portraying him as a successful boss who looks out for his men's welfare and punishes the bad yakuza who stray from the *jingi* code.

Along with films about Tokugawa Era outlaws, Toei and other studios began making gang films set in modern-day Japan and influenced by Hollywood models. Among the more notable was Teruo Ishii's *Hana to Arashi to Gang* (Flower and Storm and Gang, 1961), starring a young Ken Takakura as a wild and wacky hood who gets involved in a bank heist that goes wrong, to wry comic effect. Takakura's character, cocky and arrogant, if not terribly bright, was a far cry from the stoic tough guys he later portrayed.

The film, however, was a hit that revived Takakura's flagging career and launched him toward stardom. It was also the first of an eleven-part series that

was the reason for their popularity? For one thing, these films gave audiences a charge of violence that was unavailable from the then-tame medium of television. By the contemporary standards of Clint Eastwood, spaghetti Westerns, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, however, the bloodlettings were less than realistic, although body counts usually ran high.

More than in-your-face blood and gore, the *ninkyō* films relied on other elements for their appeal. First, their stories of the weak confronting the strong for the sake of honor drew heavily from older, enduringly popular forms. One was the *gamangeki* (forbearance drama), whose most famous representative is *Chushingura*. Based on a real incident, this story of forty-seven *ronin* (masterless samurai) seeking revenge for their unjustly disgraced lord, has enthralled Japanese audiences for three centuries in plays, novels, and films.

Second was the audience's identification with the heroes. Not that the fans of gang films wanted to become gangsters themselves, but they could relate to the loner hero—defending traditional values against weasely, often Westernized betrayers of same, while wearing Japanese clothes (symbolizing his all-Japanese virtue)—in a way they could not to Clint Eastwood.

Third was the social and political zeitgeist. Many fans of *ninkyō* films were young males who had moved from the countryside to the raw, sprawling cities in search of education or jobs. While the Japanese economy may have been booming, these young men subsisted at the bottom of the economic and social heap. In cramped offices and noisy factories, they slaved away for long hours for low pay, tightly bound by rules, written and unwritten. They often lived alone in company dorms and rooming houses—and were starved for entertainment.

Male students at elite universities may have had more personal freedom but were swept along by the same generational currents as their counterparts in the West. They were in rebellion against everything from hidebound university administrators to the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party bosses, who had signed the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and were supporting the U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

These young men, note Tsukasa Shiba and Sakae Aoyama in their book *Yakuza Eiga to Sono Jidai* (Yakuza Film and Their Times, Chikuma Shinsho, 1998), “were isolated in an era of high economic growth and tight social strictures” and “felt a strong attraction to the standard [*ninkyō eiga*] motifs of male comrades banding

and Tsuruta, who could express traditional values with authority and conviction, while injecting their performances with a distinctly postwar sensibility and star charisma.

The catalyst behind Toei's success, however, was one producer, Koji Shundo, who supervised the studio's yakuza movie output throughout its peak years, taking a key role in nurturing its talent and defining the genre's style. Although ranking high in the Toei hierarchy just under the head of production, Shigeru Okada, Shundo was a hands-on type, who worked closely with staff and cast from the script stage on. *Ninkyo eiga* may have succeeded without him—he was not the producer of the first one, *Jinsei Gekijo: Hisbakaku*—but Shundo was responsible for many of the genre's most popular films and enduring series.

Born in Kobe in 1916, he had been drafted into the Japanese Army in 1937 but was later discharged with a diagnosis of tuberculosis. Joining a company that processed magnesium for the military, Shundo spent the war years working in the Kansai—an area in western Japan that included Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe. He also was a regular at a gambling den run by the Goshima-gumi gang and became an intimate acquaintance of its boss, Fukujiro Ono. Through these connections, Shundo came to know gang life from the inside, though he later claimed, despite rumors to the contrary, that he never became a gangster himself. During the war years, Shundo also married his second wife—he had divorced his first after a brief marriage that produced one child—and had three children with her: one boy and two girls. The younger daughter, Junko, would later become the biggest female star on the Toei lot.

After the war, Shundo dabbled in film production with veteran period drama director Masahiro Makino, ran a popular Kyoto bar with an ex-geisha, and acted as a fixer for his film-industry acquaintances. In 1960 Shundo helped Toei to sign megastar Koji Tsuruta and negotiated a deal that brought star baseball manager Shigeru Mizuhara from the Yomiuri Giants to the Toei Flyers, a team associated with the Toei Studio. These services won Shundo the trust of Toei president Okawa—who gave him *carte blanche* when he joined the company as a producer in 1962. Shundo soon justified this trust by turning out a string of hits. One of his early successes, the 1963 period drama *Jirocho Sangokushi* (Jirocho's Tale of the Three Kingdoms), became a four-part series that laid the groundwork for the *ninkyo eiga* he would later produce.

who could spend scene after scene in slow-burn mode before erupting into displays of kinetic violence. His launching pad to superstardom was Teruo Ishii's *Abashiri Bangaichi* (A Man from Abashiri Prison). Takakura played a convict who escapes from the notorious Abashiri Prison on Hokkaido, the northernmost island that has long been Japan's Siberia. Inspired by Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*, the film featured a breath-taking escape sequence in which Takakura and a fellow prisoner flee their pursuers while on a handcar, hurling down a Hokkaido mountainside in mid-winter; Takakura's husky rendition of the film's theme song, based on a prison folk tune, became a chart-topping hit.

Toei's other superstar, Koji Tsuruta, had already had a long run as a matinee idol before joining the studio in 1960. Typed as a romantic leading man at the start of his career in the early 1950s, Tsuruta had broadened his range, appearing in war movies, period dramas, and gang pictures for every major studio but Nikkatsu. He also launched his own short-lived production company; its first release, Masahiro Makino's period gangster film *Yataro Gasa* (Yataro's Bamboo Hat), became a hit in 1952.

Born in 1924 and raised by his grandmother after his parent's divorce, Tsuruta grew up tough in Osaka, running with a street gang. In an incident seemingly inspired by one of his movies, he once fought a dozen opponents single-handedly (though he lost and was beaten with his own *geta* [wooden clogs], an indignity he never suffered on the screen). Trained as an Imperial Navy pilot during World War Two, Tsuruta watched many of his comrades fly off to their deaths and, long afterward, suffered from survivor's guilt. He also carried psychic scars from a torrid love affair with actress Keiko Kishi, his costar in the 1953 *Hawaii no Yoru* (Hawaiian Nights), that his studio, Shochiku, forced him to end. In short, his romantic-gangster credentials were in order in a way that the younger, college-educated Takakura's were not.

By the mid-1960s, at the height of his popularity, Tsuruta was portraying middle-aged gangsters who may have been models of proper *jingi* behavior but cut a wearier, more tragic figure than the younger, more athletic Takakura. On screen Tsuruta was often a tough guy but exuded a deep inner dignity and decency, as well as an air of loneliness. If Takakura was the quintessential *tateyaku*, a player of many roles who was shy with the ladies but fearless with a sword, Tsuruta was the master of *gaman* (stoic endurance), who could be counted on to always do the

strong “butter” (i.e., Western) flavor in his films, but Ishii was also a hitmaker who was responsible for the long-running Gang and Abashiri Bangaichi series.

Still another standout was Tai Kato, a period drama veteran. Best known for his low camera angles—Kato would have his crew dig holes to get the camera low enough—Kato developed an instantly recognizable style that brought a visceral excitement to action scenes but also expressed humanistic concerns, at times with a leftist slant. It contrasted sharply with that of the typical Toei *ninkyō eiga* director, who preferred a statelier pace and less advocatory view.

With his extreme closeups, often shot from below, Kato had a way of making his actors look larger than life—living icons in kimono—but usually wasted few words in his dealings with them. This tactic drove Koji Tsuruta up the wall when he was making *Meiji Kyōkakuden: Sandai Shūmei* (Blood of Revenge, 1965). After hearing “Sorry, that won’t do,” with no explanation for the umpteenth time, a fuming Tsuruta exploded on the set, retreating to his dressing room. Shundo rushed to calm his star while urging Kato to explain himself. The shooting resumed, the film became a hit—and Tsuruta’s performance in it was one of his best. Kato continued to work for Shundo and Toei.

NIKKATSU AND DAIEI STUDIOS

The success of Toei’s gang films soon had other studios gearing up their yakuza factories. The most serious challenger was Nikkatsu, a studio founded in 1912 that dominated the industry in the early decades of Japanese cinema. During the war years, Nikkatsu suspended production and did not resume until 1954, in a new studio complex built in western Tokyo. The company soon began nurturing its own stable of stars, including Yūjiro Ishihara, a long-legged heartthrob who was Japan’s answer to Elvis Presley and James Dean.

In contrast to Toei’s *ninkyō eiga*, with their home-grown themes and values, Nikkatsu’s *mukokuseki* action (borderless action) films borrowed more blatantly from Hollywood. The purest examples could be found in the *Wataridori* (Bird of Passage) series, starring Akira Kobayashi, and running for nine installments from 1959 to 1962. A boyishly handsome, ruggedly built man with a relaxed manner and crooked smile, Kobayashi played a guitar-strumming, horse-riding hero ranging on the wide-open spaces of Japan’s north country. He moseys into town, finds gangsters or other evil characters harassing innocent folk, defeats them with

became a cult favorite, endlessly revived and borrowed from (Jim Jarmusch used the famous bullet-through-the-water pipe shot in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*).

Also revving up its yakuza production line was the Daiei Studio, beginning with *Akumyo* (Tough Guy, 1961). Shintaro Katsu, the younger brother of Toei star Tomisaburo Wakayama, played a poor farmer's son with a short temper who gets into a fight with a yakuza (Jiro Tamiya) at a brothel, beating him to a pulp. The yakuza becomes his follower and together they set out to rescue a young woman who has been sold into prostitution on the island of Innoshima. Made with a light comic touch and plenty of rough-and-tumble action, *Akumyo* shot both Katsu and Tamiya to stardom and generated a sixteen-part series that continued until 1974.

Another Daiei stalwart, Raizo Ichikawa, had already become enormously popular for his samurai period dramas when he starred in *Waka Oyabun* (Young Boss, 1965). Ichikawa played a young naval officer whose career is on the ascendant following Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). Then, his *oyabun* father is murdered by a rival gang and he becomes the gang's new boss, determined to get revenge. A clean-cut, classically handsome youth, whose pale skin made him a favorite with female fans, Ichikawa had a charismatic screen presence that helped make the film a hit. He appeared in all eight installments of the *Waka Oyabun* series, which ran until 1967, two years before Ichikawa's premature death in 1969.

Still another popular Daiei series was *Onna Tobakuchi* (Woman Gambler), whose seventeen installments were released from 1966 to 1971. Star Kyoko Enami was Daiei's answer to Junko Fuji. Enami plays a cool, calculating gambler whose dealer father commits suicide after being accused of cheating. She sets out to clear his name and get revenge. Enami, however, proved no match at the box office for Fuji, just as Daiei failed to stay the pace with Toei.

“PINKY VIOLENCE” AND JITSUROKU EIGA

Toei, which had been quicker than its rivals in cranking up gang movie production, was also quicker to switch strategies when the vogue for the genre began to wane. In 1967, Toei production chief Okada Shigeru started replacing poor-performing *ninkyō eiga* in the lower half of double bills with so-called “pinky vio-

Meanwhile, films by less-celebrated Golden Age directors that Japanese critics and fans regard as genre masterpieces remain little known abroad. One is Kosaku Yamashita's *Bakuchiuchi Socho Tobaku* (Big Gambling Ceremony, 1968), which elevates its story of a gang succession struggle to the genre equivalent of Shakespearean tragedy, with career-peak performances given by Koji Tsuruta, Tomisaburo Wakayama, and Junko Fuji. It is as though Japanese were to revere the films Humphrey Bogart made with John Huston while ignoring the one called *Casablanca* he shot by that studio hack, Michael Curtiz.

By contrast, today's gang film directors face fewer barriers to international acceptance, using the genre to address, not the threat of Westernization to traditional values, but the globalization of Japanese society, particularly its criminal segment. Overseas attention, however, tends to focus on directors, such as Miike and Kitano, whose work is removed by both its excellence and eccentricity from the mainstream. Meanwhile Mochizuki, whose films are arguably more reflective of real gang life, has largely slipped through the cracks.

One film indicative of the new international approach is Takeshi Kitano's *Brother* (2002), in which the yakuza come to blows with the Mafia in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo. As his production company, Office Kitano, says on its web site: "[*Brother*] will challenge what has never been attempted in the Japanese cinema industry: to fuse the Hollywood film-making method . . . and Kitano's film-making as an auteur." In short, Kitano has made the first American mall-ready yakuza movie.

Brother presents the entire catalog of clichés characterizing Japan to the West since the heyday of "yellow peril" pulp: amputated pinkies, disemboweling, a severed head, suicide, and, in one memorable scene, broken chopsticks jammed up the nose of a rival hit man. Just about all that's missing is a *banzai* charge and *kamikaze* attack (though it considerately furnishes near-equivalents). *Brother* is also a typical Kitano film in its introverted compression—all chopped-up narrative and chopped-down performances. A plate of squid sushi in a soul food restaurant, it makes the Golden Age, by comparison, start to glow again.

making films that are just well done,” he told Julien Fonfrede in an interview for Fantasiafest 2000. “If you make a genre film the way it’s supposed to be done, there are always others who’ve done it better than you.”

One of Miike’s early adventures in cross-border filmmaking is the 1997 *Gokudo Kuro Shakai Rainy Dog* (Rainy Dog), whose hitman hero, played by Show Aikawa, lives alone in Taiwan working for a local gang—until his ex-girlfriend leaves him with a boy she claims is his son. Rejecting the standard plot trajectory (comic confusion, sentimental father-son bonding), the film stays cool and dark in tone as the hitman goes stolidly about his business, treating the boy with all the consideration of a stray dog. In the end, however, it is the hitman who is abandoned—a hunted stranger in a death-haunted land. Though saturated with macho romanticism, the film does not caricaturize or demonize its Taiwanese characters or milieu. Miike assumes, rightly, that we can understand both without the usual filters.

More typical of his recent work, and certainly getting more attention abroad, is *Dead or Alive* (1999), featuring Show Aikawa as a street-savvy Shinjuku detective who investigates a war between the yakuza and the Chinese Mafia and finds an unlikely ally in the gangster grandson of a Chinese “war orphan,” played with snarling bravado by Riki Takeuchi. In the opening sequence—a cartoony, speed-crazed montage that presents the Tokyo underworld in all its grossness and glamour, feral violence and frantic sex—Miike creates moments of sheer visceral excitement, while jump-starting the story with minimum wasted motion and maximum cool. The film soon settles into a standard thriller groove, but Miike keeps interjecting similarly manic touches, right up to an ending that is straight out of a worlds-colliding *Dragonball anime*.

The OV mills have not only accounted for the great majority of the genre output in the past decade but served as a training ground for several directors who are now regulars on the international festival circuit, including Shinji Aoyama (*Chinpira*, 1996) and Kiyoshi Kurosawa (six films in the *Katte ni Shiyagare!!* [Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself] series, 1995–96). Directors from non-OV backgrounds have also taken gangsters and gangs for their subjects in the past decade, from celebrated masters like Shohei Imamura, who hired Aikawa to play a hood in his Cannes Palme d’Or-winning film *Unagi* (The Eel, 1997), to indie film upstarts like Kazuhito Ishii, a TV commercial wunderkind. The latter’s 1999

series' ten installments, until the last, *Gokudo no Onnatachi: Kejime* (Gang Wives: Decision), in 1998. She became indelibly identified with her commanding *Gokudo* persona—a vision of perfection in kimono, but hell to cross. After her departure, Toei released the first film of a new *Gokudo* series, starring Reiko Takashima, but it made a quick exit from the theaters.

Though the *Gokudo* films turned profits, Toei's gang films with male stars failed to fill seats. Finally, in 1994, the studio announced that it was making its "last yakuza movie," *Don o Totta Otoko* (The Man Who Shot the Don), starring Hiroki Matsukata. There was one proviso, however: if the film earned more than 4 billion yen (\$4 million) in rentals, Toei execs said, they would grant the genre a reprieve.

Few fans turned out for this tired recycling of genre clichés, however, and Toei announced the closing of its yakuza shop. However, it later reopened for the so-called "new" *ninkyō* films, such as *Gendai Ninkyōden* (A Story of Modern Chivalry, 1997) and *Zankyō* (Remnants of Chivalry, 1999). Both, like *Don o Totta Otoko*, were retro in story and style and offered nothing to young audiences that their fathers hadn't seen a hundred times before. Neither impressed at the box office.

But while Toei was fighting a rearguard action in the theaters, it found a new market for its gang films in the video shops that, in the mid-1980s, were springing up like proverbial bamboo shoots after a rainstorm. In 1990 its group company, Toei Video, began making what it called its V Cinema series—straight-to-video films, or as they came to be called in Japan, "original videos" or simply OV. One was *Neo Chinpira: Teppodama Pyu* (Neo Punk: Bang Goes the Bullet), starring Show Aikawa and directed by Banmei Takahashi, a maker of so-called *pinku* films (soft porn). With his puffy choir boy's face, sandpapery voice, and meticulously sculpted pompadour, Aikawa was a 1950s *American Graffiti* punk transported to 1990s Japan—not the traditional image of *ninkyō* masculinity. But his contemporary brand of cool and the film's semi-comic Yakuza Lite approach appealed to the video shop crowd. *Neo Chinpira* and other V Cinema films became money-spinning hits.

Soon rival companies were grinding out low-budget OVs of their own in various action genres, but Toei Video remained the leader and the gang film, its mainstay. Far cheaper to make than a standard theatrical feature—\$70,000 was an average budget—OVs were often shot on 16mm, blown up to 35mm prints, and

featured the cream of the studio's young acting talent, including Nobuo Kaneko, Tatsuo Umemiya, and Hiroki Matsukata.

Following the success of *Jingi Naki Tatakai*, Toei president Okada told Shundo that he was giving Takakura and Tsuruta a permanent “rest” from their yakuza labors, now that their films were faltering at the box office. Shundo objected strongly, arguing that both stars had carried the studio for years and deserved better treatment. “The past is the past, now is now,” said Okada (*Ninkyō Eiga Den*, p. 220), refusing to budge. Shundo submitted his resignation from Toei soon after—though he later returned.

Both Shundo and Toei kept making films but Takakura and Tsuruta never recovered their popularity as gangster icons. Takakura put his sword and bellyband in storage and went on the straight and narrow as an ex-con (*Kofuku no Kiroi Handkerchief* [The Yellow Handkerchief], 1977); detective (Station, 1981); and baseball manager (Mr. Baseball, 1993). Tsuruta continued to play gang bosses, but roles became few and far between—the actor made only three films in the five years before his death in 1987.

Toei quickly cranked out five *Jingi* sequels before Fukasaku brought the story to a conclusion in 1974. Unwilling to let a profitable franchise die, the studio persuaded the director to return for a new series based on the original story and characters (though many of the principals in the first series had since met violent ends). He produced three highly fictionalized entries before signing off for good in 1976.

But while thrilling younger filmgoers impatient with stale *ninkyō eiga* conventions and in love with the realism of New Hollywood, *Jingi Naki Tatakai* was hardly an easy film to make or, just as importantly for bottom-line-minded Toei executives, to spin into sequels. The original material was based on a series of magazine articles on the life and times of Kozo Mino, a gang boss who had fought in the Kure war and became the model for the Hirono character. Producer Goro Kusakabe and scriptwriter Kazuo Kasahara went to Hiroshima to ask Mino's permission to make a movie and got a blunt “no.” Shunned as a snitch by fellow gangsters for his revelations about the gang's inner workings, Mino didn't want any more trouble.

After weeks of patient persuasion by Kusakabe and Kasahara, Mino's desire to see his story on the screen finally overcame his scruples. He wasn't the only star-struck local gangster as it turned out. When Fukasaku started shooting in Kure—