

JAPANESE FILM AND THE GREAT KANTO EARTHQUAKE OF 1923

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The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 was a natural calamity of majestic proportions. It temporarily obliterated the metropolitan hub of Japanese social, political and economic life, and left a lasting imprint on the subsequent development of national culture, including the cinema. Pre-Quake Tokyo had offered startling contrasts between the traditional and the new-fangled. Yet it also seemed to hold out the possibility that the old could merge with the new without the trauma of radical discontinuity. The Great Quake's destruction of Meiji Tokyo had deep symbolic importance. It represented the final disjuncture of Japan from its premodern, precapitalist, pre-Western past. Never again would the ties of traditional culture be quite so secure, so natural or so instinctive. In their place, the mass media (of which cinema was an important part) rose as molders of public taste and agents of national homogeneity.

Clearing the physical landscape merely freed subsurface forces building for some time. The gradual "commercialization" of national culture had been apparent to more sensitive observers for over a decade. But, in the aftermath of the Quake, it became a dominant theme. New mass-circulation magazines—such as the "low-brow" *Kingu* and the "high-brow" *Chuo Koron*, both launched in 1925—began ferocious competitions for a vast new readership. Mass-appeal plus easy and immediate access for all; these were the features of the new concept of Culture. In literature, this period marks the rapid maturing of the *Taishubungaku* (popular literature) movement. Its very name seemed to proclaim a conscious anti-elitism in its break with older literary forms.

The paralleling case of cinema—with its similar impact on mass-consciousness—deserves more attention than it has so far received. To understand the significance of the Great Quake in Japanese film history, we must look at the forces for change already gathering in the years previous.

The distinguishing features of Japanese cinema in its formative years from the

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early 1900s to the Teens — its use of *oyama* female impersonators instead of actresses, its suppression of spoken titles at the behest of the *benshi* film narrators, its ultraconservative camerawork apparently blissfully ignorant of panning, closeups or the Griffith editing techniques — had been under heavy attack by Westernized cinephiles for a decade before the Quake. As early as 1911, the magazine *Bungei Kurabu* was taking the industry to task: “Watching a Japanese film is like watching a slow dirge. It willfully ignores the need to keep the screen in perpetual motion...all this is because the films are slavish recordings of stage plays. What could be more boring?”^{1.)}

By 1915, *Kinema Record* edited by Kaeriyama Norimasa, had established itself as the voice of cinematic reform, lambasting the “retardedness” of domestic films and agitating for a “revolution in style and techniques.” Then, in 1917, Tenkatsu Film Company gave Kaeriyama the chance to make films in the new style, replete with “American” long-, medium- and close-up shots. Not only was all this resented by the industry old-timers, it caused confusion among the majority of viewers who were unable to “read” the new cinematic vocabulary. When Tenkatsu collapsed shortly afterward, throwing Kaeriyama out of work, the “new wave” seemed to be in retreat.

The establishment of Shochiku Film Company in 1920, with the avowed intention of “making films in the American style,” revived the hopes of the reformers. Its supermodern Kamata studios had been designed by Douglas Fairbanks’ set designer, George Chapman, and the company actively recruited actresses (as well as *oyama*). Also recruited was Henry Kotani, a cameraman trained under “Papa” Wycoff at the Lasky Famous Players studio in Hollywood. Arriving on the studio lot in smartly-tailored American clothes and with a less than perfect command of Japanese (having emigrated at a very young age), Kotani set himself to “teaching” the Japanese how to make films. This was of course greatly resented by his colleagues. But by 1921 he had come up with the first box-office hit of the new wave movement, *Poppy* (*Gubijinsō*, 1921). His material was straight from the venerable *Shimpa* stage. It was an old-time tear-jerker celebrating the eternal sufferings of Woman, but shot in the most sophisticated American manner. Contemporary newspaper reports told of “audiences in shock, mesmerized by the dreamy beauty of the woman appearing before them in close-ups far bigger than life.” It soon became apparent however that the secret of the film’s success was not in its exotic camerawork, but its star, Kurishima Sumiko, soon to become “the Sweetheart of the Nation,” “the Mary Pickford of Japan.” This success only staved off the inevitable retribution of the studio’s old-guard faction.

After a few more experiments, Kotani found himself shipped off to Manchuria "to make a documentary," effectively banished from the studio. The same fate awaited other Japanese directors newly repatriated from Hollywood and hired on by Japanese studios (such as Thomas Kurihara at Taisho Studios). The meteoric career of Japan's "Hollywood Contingent" was to last little more than a year.

Almost as short-lived but far more significant were the contributions of the home-grown group emerging from Shochiku's "Film Research Institute." It had been founded in the early days of company reformist idealism and placed under the leadership of Osanai Kaoru, a pioneer of the *Shingeki* or "New Drama" movement. Almost immediately, they too ran afoul of factional rivalries between themselves and the studio's older, Kabuki-trained actors. Exiled to a building far from the lot, they were for a while able to experiment in complete freedom. The little group would descend upon local movie theatres showing recent American films, and after the last showing would spend the night in the projection booth, examining the film's editing techniques frame-by-frame.

Such painstaking scrutiny, along with the expert drama coaching of Osanai himself, resulted in *Souls On The Road* (*Rojo No Reikon*, 1921), a film instantly acclaimed by the nation's younger film journalists as "Japan's first true film." Scripted by Ushihara Kiyohiko—soon to become a major director in his own right—the film was inspired by D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, both in its concern for "social significance" and the manner in which it unified under a single theme several paralleling stories. Osanai and his co-director Murata Minoru "edited associatively, doubling back and forth between the two stories, successfully striving to reinforce not ideas in opposition but emotions in parallel."²) When we look at the film today—as we can, since a nearly complete print survives—we can see what so thrilled the reformist critics of the day. Shining through the often-mawkish sentimentality of its unifying theme, is the bold inventiveness of its execution. Even today its utter sincerity is impressive.

Unfortunately however, the film was a financial failure. A string of even more dismal box office flops—along with young Murata Minoru's habitual inability to stay within budget on a film—quickly made the Film Research Institute a clear liability to the company. After another year, Osanai's little "bohemian salon" was quietly dissolved and dispersed.

Still, even after the disappearance of its most radical proponents, the American style continued to make progress at Kamata Studio. Just as Osanai's group was going into limbo, Shochiku appointed a robust new production chief, Nomura Hotei.

To establish a formula serving as the company's identifying hallmark, he came up with the "Kamata Pattern" (or "Nomuraism" as some derisively called it). What followed was a little "golden era."

Having pioneered the genre of "home melodramas" drawn from the day's newspapers, Nomura astutely observed the crowds of women flocking to the theatre with every intention of crying their eyes out. Tailoring his production plan to just such an audience, he created a model to be emulated by the rest of his directors. The result was *Mother* (*Haha*, 1922), starring Kurishima Sumiko, Moroguchi Tsuzuya and Kawata Yoshiko. The plot features no real villain, other than the standard weak and vacillating male who is indiscreet enough to father a child with a geisha. His wife (Kurishima) decides to remove herself so the two can raise the child. She shaves her head and becomes a nun. The geisha-mother (Kawata) pities the wife and renounces her own child so husband and wife can be reunited.

Exploring the many facets of "motherly love" through its various heroines, the drama was a perfect illustration of the commercial possibilities to be found in a "middle-of-the-road" stance toward social and moral issues. This new Kamata Pattern would soon replace the old wearying images of women in Shimpa dramas weeping helplessly under the weight of the feudal family system. Newly emergent here were screen women awakened to love and self-awareness.

Having established the guidelines for Shochiku's contemporary drama (*gendaigekki*), Nomura tried to forge a similar "compromise formula" for the production of sword dramas (*jidaigeki*). At rival Nikkatsu studios, the vogue for the stodgy features of old Onoue Matsunosuke continued unabated. The formula there was for pompous heroics, stylized sword fighting and intense patriotism. Nomura's counter-pattern was only slightly better: a combination of *kyugeki* ("old drama") themes with actors schooled in Western acting techniques. A spectacular flowering of the *jidaigeki* genre was in the offing. But this would not come until the Great Quake destroyed the status quo.

The growing success of Shochiku's Kamata Pattern was causing some unease among the Nikkatsu people. In early 1921, they tried a few half-hearted "modernizations" of their own. In fact, however, they seemed to be trying to convince themselves that novelty could never really replace the Tried and True. Director Tanaka Eizo--whose reformist sympathies rarely intruded into his actual work--was put in charge of Nikkatsu's new "Section Three" (the other two sections being oriented to producing films for *benshi* narrators). The results were ludicrous. Their "modern" recipe cal-

led for the use of actresses rather than *oyama*. But the plots still stewed with the old *Shimpa* bathos. Even worse, the heroine, invariably played by Yamanaka Utako, looked far less feminine on screen than the comely lads who usually played such parts. Coming from a *Shimpa* stage background, Miss Yamanaka had hard, unyielding facial expressions which were hardly enhanced by her stylized body movements. Adding to the impression that the whole thing was a farce were the spoken titles (the other "innovation"). Each Japanese title was immediately followed by an English translation, taking up so much time audiences groaned with boredom.

Still, the crisis stirred by the Shochiku challenge simply would not go away. In May of 1922, Managing Director Suzuki Yosaburo suddenly announced his resignation from Nikkatsu. "As a result," recalls Tanaka Eizo, "other old-timers resigned and the studio found itself on the crest of a great wave of change."

The wave rolled directly toward the bastion the *oyama* had established for themselves within the company. As Kinugasa Teinosuke (one of the leading *oyama* of the time and later the director of *Gate of Hell*) remembers: "When the first actresses were brought in to produce 'pure film dramas,' I knew a final showdown between actresses and *oyama* was in the offing. We *oyama* were already sensitive to the disadvantages of men playing women, especially when closeups became a routine feature of films. But equally apparent to us was the fact women trailed far behind us in basic acting skills."^{3.})

As an ultimate test of the thesis that the era of film actresses had come to stay, the Nikkatsu Company took up a challenge from Shochiku to engage in a uniquely Japanese film-world phenomenon: the "*kyosaku*" or "competition picture". Two or more film companies would make their own productions of the same story and release them at the same time to see which the public favored. This time the *kyosaku* was *The Eternal Riddle* (*Eien No Nazo*, 1922), based upon a popular novel being serialized just then in the *Nichinichi Shimbun*. In its version, Shochiku fielded its entire troupe of actresses (under the direction of Nomura Hotei) while Nikkatsu brought out its *oyama*. The undeniable box-office victory went to Shochiku. With the writing on the wall, Nikkatsu's humiliated *oyama* troupe found an excuse to thunder out of the company (ostensibly of its own free will) in February of 1923.

Tanaka Eizo, who had been saddled with the picture for Nikkatsu, quickly went on to prove that he had been a closet "reformist" all the time. Two months later he released the great masterpiece of his entire career, *The Kyoya Collar Shop* (*Kyoya Eriten*, 1922), featuring the full compliment of Nikkatsu *oyama* in their last feature. It

was a brisk-moving drama, depicting the bold theme of sex and love in a merchant family. With Ibsenlike naturalism, he makes “egoism” the basic cause of his tragedy. The film was a fitting “swan-song” for the Nikkatsu *oyama*, making aesthetic use of their “decadent charm.” In creating a work with a unique “flowing grace,” Tanaka was able to bequeath a special stylistic legacy to the younger (and greater, in some cases) directors following in his footsteps at Nikkatsu’s Mukojima Studios.

Almost immediately, as if to take up the Tanaka mantle, two extraordinary talents debuted at Mukojima, Suzuki Kensaku and Mizoguchi Kenji. With his *Human Suffering* (*Ningen Ku* 1923) Suzuki was to create the ultimate depiction of a mans interior emotional world in this pre-Quake era. Using nighttime photography for the first time, Suzuki is obviously influenced by the German expressionist films just entering Japan at the time. Of the new breed of film being developed by Suzuki, critic Iijima Tadashi was to say:

Using expressive forms hitherto unknown in Japan, he bequeaths a treasure trove in the depiction of the sadness and loneliness of a human heart searching for salvation. I can only bow my head in reverence before the intellectual vigor of this man.^{4.)}

The other explosive force at Mukojima was the 23 year old Mizoguchi Kenji. In July, 1923—a mere two months before the destruction of his studio—he was to make *Foggy Harbor* (*Kiri No Miyako*), a film steeped in German Expressionism. It was daring in its attempt to tell its story with almost no titles. (Murnau was to omit them entirely in his *The Last Laugh* a year later). Based on O’Neill’s *Anna Christie*, the film had a strong literary underpinning. Dark, with a “psychological brooding” quality, it was the climax of a short vogue at Mukojima, employing the realist style developed by *Shingeki* to present psychological events in a stark, gloomy “European” style.

Therefore, in the several months before the Great Quake, fresh sprouts were already beginning to break ground in Japan’s film studios. The maturation of perspective, characterized by ever-deepening psychological depictions, was being matched by an advance in stylistic technique. For the moment—except in the rejection of such clear anachronisms as the *oyama*—the new maturity seemed about to outrun the ability of its audience to comprehend it. The general mood of the moment was one of lingering melancholy, more personal than public in quality, a mood captured precisely by Ikeda Yoshinobu’s *Ballad of the Boatman* (*Sendo no Uta*, 1923, starring

Kurishima Sumiko). Its theme song, "Kare Susuki" ("Dried Reeds of Pampas Grass") became the anthem of Japan's underdog classes:

I am but a reed of dry pampass grass
 Waving in the riverbed.
 You too are the same,
 A reed of dry pampass grass.
 In this world, you know, we are but reeds
 Doomed never to burst into bloom.

Japanese cinema, however, was about to burst to into spectacular bloom. It was on the brink of an era of greatness which is only today beginning to be acknowledged by the rest of the world. Before the quake, something was still missing — perhaps it was a fully awakened audience, perhaps it was a liberation and redistribution of talents into other regions and genres. In any case, the events of early September, 1923, at least partly provided the stimulus.

Ushihara Kiyohiko, two years after scripting *Souls on the Road*, had settled in as a director of program pictures for Shochiku. Late morning, September 1, 1923, he was on the set directing a cell block scene in a women's prison. All of his actresses were garbed in the gray uniforms of prisoners. Then, at precisely 11:58, the Great Kanto Earthquake struck:

There was a sudden horrendous growling, as if the heart of the earth were being torn out. We were all tossed to the ground as the landfill upon which the studio stood broke up into gigantic crevasses. The brick film warehouse collapsed before our very eyes with a symphonic crescendo, taking with it the actor's lodgings. Here and there great geysers of mud came spurting out of the crevasses. In an instant the whole studio was a numbing spectacle of chaos and ruin.^{5.)}

In the Asakusa Theatre district, the grand red-brick "Junikai" Tower snapped in two, sending its top five stories crashing onto the throngs below. The violent up and down movement and swarm of aftershocks twisted wooden buildings into bizarre shapes, flattening great districts of dwellings. Dams were cracked or broken, water mains burst, electrical power cut off. City bridges collapsed and main arteries were made impassable due to yawning crevasses or rubble. All train lines south were blocked under tons of soil and debris from landslides and crumpled tunnels. Everywhere there were the shrieks of those trapped under collapsed buildings.

Down at Kamata Film Studio, Ushihara's greatest concern was for the people on his own set. All his actresses were dressed in prison uniform — most unfortunate in this time of chaos — and their clothing was now buried under tons of rubble:

In the midst of incessant aftershocks, they were in hysterics, tearfully begging to be allowed to go home. Rumors about the seriousness of what was happening flew from mouth to mouth. With all this confusion and the rolling shockwaves, I was reduced to the single concern of getting my ladies clothed!...As I lent a hand with the film cannisters from a collapsed storehouse, I heard cameraman Nagai shout into my ear, 'Ushihara-sensei, leave this to us! You'd best go home right away!' He pointed in the direction of Yokohama where I lived and I could see that the whole horizon in that direction had turned into a sea of thick, black smoke. I borrowed a bicycle, pedaling as fast as I could along the highway. Not five minutes away, I discovered that the Rokugo Bridge was down. A little further along, an endless stream of quake victims was pressing toward me across the iron railroad bridge of the Tokaido Line. The other side was a vision of Hell, with fat pillars of smoke rising above a clearly visible forest of flame.^{6.)}

Downtown Tokyo was a similar sea of flame. In the Ginza district, Mitsukoshi Department store seemed to "burn like the sun." In the same region, Shochiku's business manager Kido Shiro (later to become the guiding force of his company's film production) was holed up in the main company offices:

We had continued to work until everything around us began to burn. The fire literally flushed us out of our enclave. The Boss (company president Otani) and I had to grope our way through smoke-filled halls and out into streets of flame, barely escaping with our lives...The next day, the Boss and I took a walking tour of the corpse-strewn streets, getting as far as the Shimodani sector, where we found the independent Ichimura-za Theatre miraculously unscathed. Theatre-owner Tamura met us at the door, expressing unctuous sympathy for our company's plight. He could hardly disguise his glee at the fact that, while all the other theatres had been burned, his alone had been saved. Perhaps my own jaundiced view of humanity made me think Tamura unduly elated by the disasters befalling others. As a matter of fact, however, a vast firestorm sprang up again the next day, ripping through Shimodani and incinerating the Ichimura-za. So it was that Tamura's joy lasted but a single day.^{7.)}

The post-Quake fires consuming Tokyo and Yokohama were to burn on for days, dying down only to leap up elsewhere. Some put the death toll at 91,000, others far higher. It had been a major catastrophe for the Tokyo film industry as well. Of the twenty-nine movie theatres in the Nikkatsu chain, sixteen had been des-

troyed and nearly all the rest badly damaged. Mukojima had just barely escaped total destruction, but like Shochiku, it had lost immense quantities of valuable film stock. Shochiku lost its offices in Kyobashi, Tokyo, as well as almost a hundred theatres under its direct control.

The earthquake which had devastated Kanto sent only mild tremors through Kyoto, the ancient capital to the west. Seismologists in that city registered it at a mere two points (as opposed 7.9 Richter in the Tokyo area)—just enough to rattle doors and window panes. It was not until the afternoon of the second day that any substantive information began to get through. Then the headlines were horrific: “ENTIRE TOKYO REGION ENGULFED IN CONFUSION!” “DEATH TOLL IS STAGGERING!” The administrative heart of the nation had stopped, and there were many who wondered aloud—as did famed novelist Kikuchi Kan—“Does this signal the end of literature, the end of art?”

More scenes of pathos were enacted as refugees spread out across the land, looking for food and shelter. Great lines of shambling vehicles could be seen snaking out in most directions from the ruined city. For the lucky few, the rich or the famous, Kyoto was the ultimate destination. On September 14, the first contingent of actors and actresses from Tokyo stepped from the train at Kyoto Station. Reporters from *Hinode Shimbun* were on hand to cover the event:

There was an instant when fellow passengers suddenly recognized the celebrities in their midst and began to crowd around them, causing a certain amount of confusion at the entrance to the station. But since the objects of their adulation and curiosity were still clad in the scorched and mudstained clothing they had been wearing since the catastrophe struck, they created a pathetic sight and tried to hide themselves by immediately slipping into the automobiles waiting for them.^{8.)}

For a brief interval, the center of national life was to shift to Kyoto. The same was true of Japanese film production. Shochiku’s Kido issued uncompromising orders that, “We shall tolerate not even one instant’s lateness in fulfilling contractual obligations to our distributors.” His company had for some years owned land in Shimogamo, on the banks of Kyoto’s main river. Orders now went out to convert the land into a functioning studio, immediately.

As actors and film-makers continued to pour in from Tokyo, Makino Shozo was on hand to greet them and, where possible, to lend a hand as they began to re-establish themselves. Affectionately known as the “Father of Japanese Film,” Maki-

no had already made Kyoto into Japan's "second film capital," the vigorous center for the production of jidaigeki features. Makino Masahiro, Shozo's son, recalls the post-Quake period: "With Father's help, employees of Shochiku's Kamata Studios were temporarily housed in our own Toji-in Studio. There, they began planning the reconstruction of their Tokyo studio and the building of a new stage at Shimogamo in Kyoto. This no doubt raised the ire of (oldtime Nikkatsu tycoon) Yokota Einosuke."^{9.})

The Shochiku people set to work making their first films around the twentieth of September. The first of these were made in the same fashion as Mack Sennet (who had his camera crews chase fire engines to the scene of a blaze). Stories were worked up around the footage that came back from the smouldering landscape of Tokyo. All the films made in the immediate aftermath were made to exploit the enormous public concern with the event. *The Earth Is Angry* (*Daichi Wa Ikaru*, 1923), Ushihara's film about the Quake, is one such example. Katsumi Yotaro remembers "being forced to act while the aftershocks were still reverberating through the studio...of course none of us had any idea of what the plot would be." Mizoguchi Kenji made his own contribution with *In The Ruins* (*Haikyo No Naka*, 1923), shot immediately before he left for Kyoto: a pair of young lovers is separated when the girl is married off into a wealthy bourgeois family. They meet again, in a temple yard in the midst the earthquake, where they implicitly reaffirm the eternity of their love. It was, in its own way, an appeal for a more democratic world, one free of the conventions which destroy love.

Not only had the physical world been turned upside down, but so had the social world. Such was the meaning in Suzuki Kensaku's *The Earth Is Shaken* (*Daichi Wa Yuruu*). With a plot lifted from Cecil B. de Mille's *Male and Female* (1919), it tells of a party of aristocrats caught in the fiery path of the quake. In order to survive the disaster and the social savagery of its aftermath, they have to become the meek followers of their young cook. Here, for the first time "overt class conflict" was to surface as the main theme in a Japanese film.

Still, there can be no doubt that commercialism rather than "message" underlay the great bulk of the post-Quake films. The titles, however, had crowd-attracting power: *In the Face of Death* (*Shi Ni Chokumen Suru*, Okubo), *11:58 A.M. (Juichiji Goju Happun*, Shimazu), *The Path of Flames* (*Hono No Yukue*, Ikeda), *The Heart of That Day* (*Sono Hi No Kokoro*, Hosoyama).

According to film historian Hazumi Tsuneo, one of the few who has seen and re-

corded a response to this hastily-made fare (none survive today),

They were all uniformly bad and not one of them deserves a place in the annals of film art. But, collectively, they do indicate what people at the time thought of their great Experience. It was the instability and untrustworthiness of human life, a feeling that the old, comfortable ways had been destroyed forever. It was a burning hatred of material culture, while expressing a straight-forward love of humanity. Underlying it all was a basic insecurity about social life and the striations of class.^{10.)}

The spiritual confusion and the pull-haul of ideologies in the immediate aftermath was monumental. While the physical destruction of the Capital had the by-product of liberation from the old world's conventions and ways of thinking, there was a powerful element in society terrified that the new spirit would lead to depravity or the degradation of the nation's traditional norms and values. Government, the Military and elements of the business community combined to launch a kind of "moral re-armament" crusade under the slogan of "Raise and preserve the Spiritual Essence of the Nation."

For the film world, at least, the Aftermath represented a vast liberation from the ghosts which had continued to haunt the screen. Shimpa, the most persistent of these ghosts, was finally exorcised from the screen: "The old Shimpa took one big step back into the shadows while the view of life expressed by the new film took one big step forward." In all of the big companies, the younger generation of film-makers felt themselves free at last to express a personalized vision of society, the world and of Reality itself. A new era of film-as-art was coming into view and the younger, ambitious film-makers were anxious to shuck off the age-old stigma applied to all those concerned with the performing arts — that of "riverbed beggar" (*kawara kojiki*) — and establish themselves as "film artists."

But this had to wait until even the Aftermath had subsided. Seventy one percent of Tokyo had been leveled, creating long vistas of desolation. Here and there, five or six storey ferro-concrete buildings stood out in the landscape like charred, hollow-eyed skulls. But the streets and boulevards between them were being rapidly cleared and within a week or two life was rapidly returning to the city. Soon streets were lined with sellers of water, hand-rolled cigarettes, watermelons and flour dumplings hard as bullets. Those with no wares to sell, were selling their talents. Barbers set up their chairs in the open air. Men walked about with signs slung about their necks proclaiming "I open safes" or "I repair automobiles."

On the first of October, exactly a month after the disaster, the Dentsukan in Koishikawa opened its doors for film showings. It had scraped together all available footage and the effort was a spectacular success. By mid-month, 18,600 admissions had been registered, five times the number before the Quake. The disaster also succeeded in greatly stimulating the number of movie theatres throughout the country. Compared with 703 in 1923, there were 1,013 by the end of 1924.

This phenomenal growth was partly the result of the repeal of an old police ordinance limiting the building of movie theatres. But it also represented a great surge in public acceptance of the film medium. The "liberated spirit," one of the by-products of the disaster, quickly became the theme of many films in the following year. And, this lively new spirit itself came to be reflected in a renewed demand for more and more new films — a fact documented by the doubling of film footage produced over a twelve month period (1923=4,148,000'; 1924=8,177,000').

With production facilities in the Tokyo region temporarily paralyzed and the flood of talent and money pouring in, the Kyoto film world was suddenly jolted out of a fifteen year torpor. In a sense, Makino Shozo was the single big beneficiary of the Great Quake. Only he was in a position to benefit from the riches in human expertise now flooding the city. The world was panting for entertainment—not just any entertainment, but something new, something capable of holding them transfixed in a web of palpably "real" illusion.

By a fortunate coincidence, he had taken on a young bohemian scriptwriter from Tokyo, Suzukita Rokuhei, half a year before the earthquake. The young man's first script for producer Makino had been *The Purple Bandana: The Woodblock Artist* (*Murasaki Zukin: Ukiyoe-shi*, 1923), a story filled with demonic personalities, clammy horror and "clouds of blood." As Suzukita himself was to recall:

I presented Makino with a script filled with real violence and real combat scenes, making the point that the fight-scene choreographer must create thoroughly realistic portrayals of the melees. Makino agreed and announced it would be done with real swords ...The swords sent off sparks and the combatants were constantly slipping in the puddles and mud, giving the scenes truly horrific dimensions. Oh, what ecstasy I felt! The eyes of the actors flashed with something beyond mere ferocity. It made the blood boil! Several of the actors were actually hurt by the flailing swords.^{11.)}

This was exactly the formula which would meet the demands of the new era. Now, with this new infusion from Tokyo, Makino could marshal an outstanding

array of acting and directorial talent for his new-style sword dramas. Furthermore, the Tokyo contingent was to bring to Makino's studio the boon of drastic technical improvement as well. Men like Nagahama Keizo and Matsuda Teiji set to work changing the *look* of Makino's films in the development labs, an important but often overlooked stage in the production of a film. Gone now were the baleful results of poor labwork—the flat “egg-shell faces” and “noses and eyes floating on egg-like ovals for faces” (something which had presumably marred his *Purple Bandana*). For a long time, Makino's low technical quality had confined his product to second rate theatres. But, by 1924, he was able to turn out features successfully competing with those of the giant Nikkatsu combine.

With Suzukita's scripts and the Tokyo contingent, the American adventure film idea invaded the time-worn precincts of the *jidaigeki*. Soon Makino's films were rivalling, and perhaps even overtaking, the cinematic power of their American models. 1924 marked the brilliant dawn of the long “Golden Age of the Jidaigeki”. Criminals with no sense of guilt or even of criminality; thieves and robbers who attain heroic stature through the enormity or ingenuity of their deeds — such were the themes which struck a deep, responsive chord in post-Quake audiences. Another of the motifs Suzukita handled so compellingly was that of the Nihilistic Samurai, an image drawn from the pages of Nakazato Kaizan's monumental novel *Great Bodisatva Pass (Daibosatsu Toge)*. Teamed with his perfect star, Bando Tsumasaburo, they were able to produce such miracles of cinematic ingenuity as *Counter Currents (Gyakuryu)*, 1924). Suzukita was not simply creating a few idiosyncratic movies during this high-point of the mid-Twenties. He was inventing a series of new patterns for the samurai genre, patterns which would interconnect to create a deep new texture of meaning for the viewer. And, these patterns survive intact right into recent times. (“When Yojimbo first appears on the screen, swinging his shoulders in his characteristic manner,” says critic Sato Tadao, “he is walking straight out of the tradition of Suzukita Rokuhei.”)^{12.}

One of the paradoxes wrought by the Great Quake was that the earliest full flowering of the “Americanized” techniques did not take place in the cosmopolitan environment of Tokyo. Rather, the relative backwater of Kyoto became the staging ground for the new epoch in Japanese cinema. Shortly thereafter, the flow of expertise and inspiration reversed itself again, returning to its source in the newly revitalized Capital city. But the “golden era” which subsequently blossomed there (with Ozu and others), in its characteristic *gendaiigeki*, continued to be rivalled for many

years to come by the robust jidaigeki pictures emanating from Kyoto.

Footnotes:

- 1.) Tanaka Jun'ichiro, *Nihon Eiga Hattatsushi* (Tokyo 1965)
- 2.) Donald Richie, *Japanese Cinema* (New York 1961)
- 3.) Kinugasa Teinosuke, *Waga Eiga no Seishun* (Tokyo 1977)
- 4.) Iijima Tadashi, *Nihon Eigashi, Vol I* (Tokyo 1955)
- 5.) Ushihara Kiyohiko, *Ushihara Jiden* (Osaka 1961)
- 6.) Ibid.
- 7.) Kido Shiro, *Nihon Eigaden* (Tokyo 1953)
- 8.) Kyoto Shimbun, *Kyoto Eigashi* (Kyoto 1980)
- 9.) Makino Masahiro, *Eiga Tosei, Chi no Maki* (Tokyo 1977)
- 10.) Tanaka, op. cit.
- 11.) Tanaka Jun'ichiro, *Nihon Eiga Hattatsushi, Vol II* (Tokyo 1965)
- 12.) Sato Tadao, *Nihon Eiga Shisoshi* (Tokyo 1970)