

# Asian Cinema



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**Review of the Criterion DVD set (#386) of  
*Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho dayu*, directed by Mizoguchi  
 Kenji, 1954, 124 min., b/w)**

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The arrival of any new Criterion DVD is a source of excitement. Even the streamlined series (without commentaries or special features), such as "Silent Ozu" or "Carlos Saura's Flamenco Trilogy," are a delight. How much more thrilling is a Criterion package like that of Mizoguchi Kenji's haunting film *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho dayu*, 1954), with new on-screen commentaries by such luminaries as veteran actress Kagawa Kyoko (who played Anju in the film) and noted Japanese film scholar Sato Tadao, plus an accompanying booklet that includes two accounts of the Sansho tale.

The story of Anju and Zushio is a resilient one. Professor Jeffrey Angles's off-screen commentary skillfully reminds us of medieval *sekkyo-bushi* versions by itinerant Buddhist priests, as well as the 1915 rendition in contemporary prose by Mori Ogai.<sup>1</sup> Ogai (1862-1922), a military surgeon-turned-novelist, fused neo-Confucist ideals with a sense of nationalism in his fairy-tale retelling of the ancient *sekkyo-bushi* tale. Mizoguchi added the anti-military and overtly humanistic angles to the story. While Ogai stressed the sense of the miraculous in the tale, Mizoguchi (influenced by the postwar liberal climate in Japan) focused more on the harsh realities of this tale of sacrifice and redemption.

In their excellent British Film Institute publication about Mizoguchi's *Sansho Dayu* (published in 2000), film scholar Dudley Andrew and Japanese literature scholar Carole Cavanaugh carry out a conversation-in-print that helps make the legend come alive again.<sup>2</sup> We can imagine the Criterion DVD as another stage in this engagement with Mizoguchi's film. In both cases, the approach is one of deep respect and admiration of the original. Andrew calls Mizoguchi's film a "foundational" aspect of Japanese cultural history, and he sees it as a call to consciousness and national pride directed at a people struggling to rise from the rubble of World War II.

While the opening essay by Professor Mark Le Fanu ("The Lessons of *Sansho*") offers a good entry into the film for first-time viewers, it is a shame that other voices were not included. For example, in *The Voice in the Cinema*, Michel Chion has written an unforgettable essay on *Sansho dayu* entitled "The Siren's Song."<sup>3</sup> Just to cite one passage:

The most "secret" moment of *Sansho the Bailiff* occurs when the voice resonates for the first time, when it has not yet been named by Anju, nor clearly been identified by a closeup of the mother calling her children, and

when the spectator, who has registered it, may still not actively attend to it. When nothing has yet named it, it is a phantom and un-situatable object which will continue to wander through the film.<sup>4</sup>

First-hand testimony by actress Kagawa Kyoko and the provocative interpretations by Sato Tadao are treasures from start to finish. Kagawa Kyoko speaks with appreciation of all she learned from her experience as a young actress in Mizoguchi's film. (Although the commentary on the DVD is limited to her reflections on her role as Anju, she subsequently was chosen by Mizoguchi to star in his *Chikamatsu monogatari*).<sup>5</sup> Both Kagawa Kyoko and Sato Tadao note that one of Mizoguchi's favorite phrases was "*hanshya shite imasu ka?*" (are you reacting/reflecting?). Mizoguchi was never content with just a skillful but superficial performance from his actors, and he had a special ability to see through such surface efforts. This tendency, combined with his unwillingness to offer specific corrections to actors, made him a demanding, but inspiring, director. From Mizoguchi, Kagawa Kyoko learned how to think through a role for herself and (at roughly the same age as the character Anju), she discovered the young woman's strength, sadness, and heartfelt desire (*nozomi*) to see her family reunited.

The subtitles are excellent throughout the DVD, but they cannot convey the elegance of the actress's Japanese, with its subtle interplay of polite and humble phrases. As someone who has had the pleasure of interviewing Kagawa Kyoko on two occasions, I know that the unassuming nature of her statements on the DVD stem from a deep sincerity that informs all of her performances on screen.

Sato Tadao's interpretations rest on a lifetime of immersion in the world of Japanese film history. Calling *Sansho Dayu* the "most simple (*tanjun*) in style and expression of all of Mizoguchi's films," he also sees it as reflecting Mizoguchi's greater concern with composition and beautiful form (*katachi no utsukushisa*) in his later years. Of supreme interest is Sato's analogies between Mizoguchi's actor-centered style of directing and inspiration he received from Japanese traditional theatre. In one striking example, Sato compares Anju's meditative walk into the lake with a Noh actor's movement along the *hashigakari*. Sato also praises cameraman Miyagawa Kazuo's exquisite in-between grey tones (intermediate between dark and light).<sup>6</sup>

In his supplementary commentary, Tanaka Tokuzo (assistant director to both Mizoguchi and Kurosawa) displays a youthful mischievousness as he reveals his "tricks of persuasion" to convince the skeptical Mizoguchi of the "authenticity" of created set pieces. An even more profound revelation is Tanaka's discussion of the time Mizoguchi voiced to him his anger at how the studio had "watered down" his exposé of the medieval slave system, turning *Sansho Dayu* into something more sentimental than the director had intended. (This helps explain, in part, why Mizoguchi chose to give the film the name of the heartless bailiff.) Calling *Sansho Dayu* a dark film (*kurai sakuhin*), Tanaka also noted how it expresses hallmarks of Mizoguchi's mature artistic style,

especially in its sense of mystery and futility.

On pages 20-75 of the booklet accompanying the DVD are two versions of the Sansho story--the Ogai version (translated by eminent Japanese literature scholar Thomas Rimer) and an account of the Anju-Zushio story by a female shaman (*itako*, in the dialect of the northeastern region of Tsugaru), translated by Susan Matisoff and Jeffrey Angles (who also provides the commentary track that is optional with the film). In the BFI publication, the Ogai version could not be included because of page limitations, so it is especially welcome to have film and text together here in the Criterion DVD.

The only word for the visual design of this Criterion DVD set is the (often misused) Japanese word *shibui*. Its subtle dark-olive tones with flecks of black are soothing to the eye while also unflinchingly realistic. The booklet is richly illustrated with full-page images from the film, plus smaller images of grasses, branches, and rocks along the margins of some pages. Although small, the nighttime fire scene on the credits page (p. 5), and the boat scene on the page about the transfer and the on-screen text (p. 76), effectively underscore the sense of terror of those pivotal moments in the story.

The menu for the DVD is both sophisticated and somewhat confusing at first glance, with the subheadings of "performance" (i.e., Kagawa Kyoko), "production" (Tanaka Tokuzo), and "simplicity" (Sato Tadao). Each of these subheadings also has a helpful short menu of its own. The intercutting of scenes from the films with the interview footage makes for lively viewing.

The compelling commentary by Jeffrey Angles, assistant professor of Japanese Language and Literature at Western Michigan University, underlines the historical and literary contexts, as well as providing relevant interpretations of stylistic matters, such as Mizoguchi's evocative use of diagonals in the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>7</sup> Angles also notes the circular nature of the screenplay, where the young Zushio is first seen running away from his mother, only to return to her at the end. Particularly enlightening are the comparisons Angles draws between the original screenplay and the final version of the film, and his suggestions of overarching themes (some of which seem quite contemporary), such as the efficacy of individual effort in the service of mercy and justice. Professor Angles's commentary fits well within the rhythm and flow of the images. Of course, a viewer should always watch the film first without the commentary, but it is well worth the effort to turn on the commentary for a later viewing.

In the Fall 2007 issue of *Film Quarterly*, UC/Berkeley professor D.A. Miller criticizes the Criterion DVD as an overly pristine and overly accessible "precious Sansho-object" which loses the thrill of watching the "Sansho-aura" of earlier "scratched, dirty prints in run-down theaters at inconvenient hours."<sup>8</sup> While he faults Criterion for doing too much in the transfer, he also complains that they did not go far enough in providing examples of the "pre-modern Japanese scroll paintings and woodblock prints" mentioned in the

Angles commentary (which he feels creates a “pseudo-visuality.”). Well, it’s always a compromise. Criterion has provided well-illustrated video essays as special features on other DVD packages (note the superb blend of image and information in James Quandt’s supplementary essay for the “Three Films of Teshigahara” series). On the other hand, there is no way to provide such images in the commentary that accompanies the actual film. Perhaps they could have done more; perhaps they could have done less. Hopefully the viewer can take the suggestions mentioned by Professor Angles and others in their commentaries and look for (easily accessible) books on traditional Japanese art.

The main on-screen menu page of the DVD shows an image of the landscape setting of the final scene and invites the viewer to enter into a quiet, even contemplative, state through the haunting strains of one of the main musical motifs which mixes traditional Japanese instruments with Western orchestration. While some might find that music difficult to hear at length, it reflects the elegance and Buddhist underpinnings of *Sansho dayu*. Criterion deserves praise for their austere and multi-layered approach to one of the world’s great films.

### Endnotes

1. There was even a short-lived 1954 stage production adapted by Terrence Malick and directed by the great Polish director André Wajda.
2. Andrew, Dudley and Carole Cavanaugh. *Sansho Dayu*. London: British Film Institute, 2000 (79 pp., b/w illustrations). For a review of this publication, note Ehrlich, “*Sansho the Bailiff*.” BFI Film Classics series. *Film Quarterly*. 51:3 (2002): 70-71.
3. Chion, Michel. “The Siren’s Song.” In *The Voice in the Cinema* (translated Claudia Gorbman). N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 109-122.
4. Ibid: 114.
5. For more information on Kagawa Kyoko’s career, see my article on “Kagawa Kyoko: A Life in the Cinema,” *Asian Cinema*. 15:1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 116-142.
6. For a translation of an interview with Miyagawa Kazuo, note: “Miyagawa Kazuo: My Life as a Cameraman.” *Post Script*. 11: 1 (Fall 1991): 5-19 (translated by Ehrlich and Uppuluri).
7. It would have been helpful to include a short biosketch of Professors Angles and Le Fanu in the back pages of the booklet.
8. D.A. Miller. “Second Time Around: *Sansho the Bailiff*.” *Film Quarterly*. (Fall 2007): 65-67.