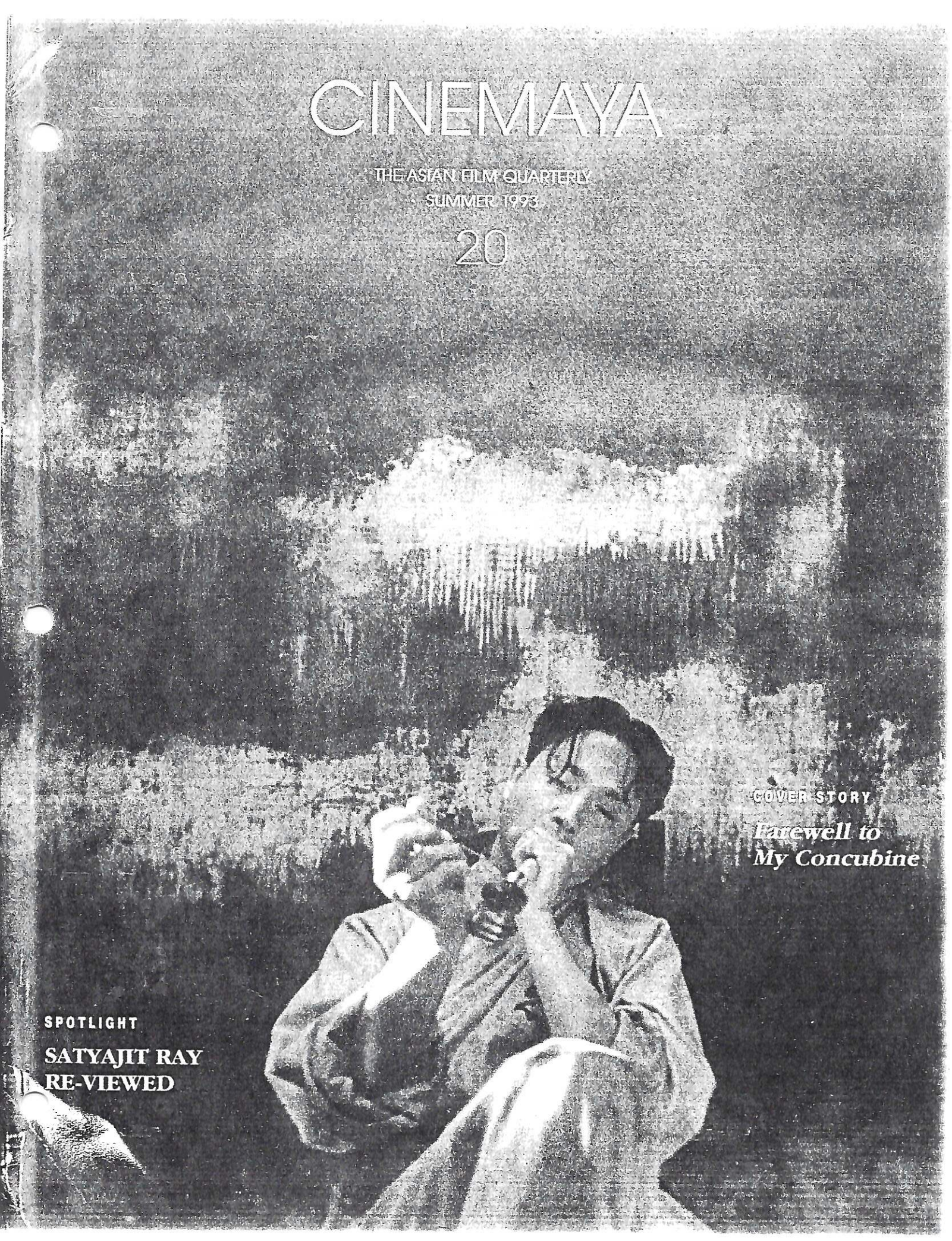
CINEMAYA

THE ASIAN FILM QUARTERLY

SUMMER 1993

20



COVER STORY

Farewell to My Concubine

SPOTLIGHT

SATYAJIT RAY RE-VIEWED

Hasegawa Kazuo

WHAT IS 'TYPICALLY JAPANESE' ?

TADAO SATO

When I'm in Japan, I feel I can attach the label of *nihonteki* ('typically Japanese') to things which strike me as special but, without realising it, when I approach people who have the characteristics that I easily labelled *nihonteki,* I find I'm unable to make such categorical statements.

I wonder if one can say to a person of Korean, or Chinese, or Jewish, or Italian background that the strong family ties in an Ozu film are limited to the Japanese? Or, can one say to a member of a dynamic communal society like Thailand or Indonesia or the Philippines that the kind of humanistic solidarity of the *shitamachi* in a *Tora-san* film is a Japanese peculiarity which non-Japanese will not understand?

Are Ozu and Mizoguchi *Nihonteki*?

It has become universally acknowledged that the sense of quietude in an Ozu film is a Japanese characteristic but, unfortunately, there has only been one Ozu Yasujiro in Japan, and neither imitators nor followers have appeared.

In other words, Ozu was just one isolated genius. And if he is an isolated genius searching for the kind of meditative silence which unsettles the 'fluid' quality of cinematic beauty, aren't there isolated geniuses in other countries, such as Carl Dreyer, Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky? Ozu may definitely be *nihonteki* but, if that is the case, it would be best not to classify his distinctiveness according to nationality, but rather according to a different kind of category which would more clearly reveal that distinctiveness to the world.

In his book *Transcendental Style in Cinema* (1972), Paul Schrader links Ozu with Dreyer and Bresson as directors who are characterised by a search for a spiritual essence in film. I don't always

agree with Schrader's comments, but at least it's interesting how he escapes enclosing Ozu in the framework of being *nihonteki*. This is how we can begin to talk about concepts that transcend national boundaries.

It's also often taught that Mizoguchi Kenji's films are representative of a uniquely Japanese style. Mizoguchi's frequent theme of vicissitudes in the lives of oppressed women also appears in the films of developing countries. In the latter case they are usually nothing more than conventional melodramas. The special Japanese characteristic of Mizoguchi's films may be the way he heightens his films' painterly quality. If one knows films like *Mujer de Destino* (Woman of Fate, 1945) by the Mexican director Emilio Fernandez, or the Chinese film by Wu Yonggang, *Shennu* (The Goddess, 1934), however, a different category for this painterly quality than that of *nihonteki* would have to be found.

Tateyaku and *Nimaine*

Several years ago, the American television show *Shogun* became popular around the world. It told the story of a British sailor who drifted ashore and became the vassal of the *Shogun* in sixteenth century Japan. As an adventure story it was quite interesting but when Japanese people saw the show they felt there were parts that left odd impressions. I'd like to point out just one such section in *Shogun*.

After drifting ashore to Japan, the hero Blackson (Richard Chamberlain) underwent many life-threatening adventures and also had a passionate love affair with the wife (Shimada Yoko) of a high ranking samurai. Setting aside the matter of the adventures, the Japanese could not imagine such a love affair. It is impossible that the wife of high ranking samurai should interact with a foreign drifter, exchanging hot glances before a gathering of samurai, unafraid of what people might think.

Reconsidering the matter, however, I began to wonder if this might not be what is considered 'romance', according to Western customs. If it weren't presented in this way, it wouldn't be considered romantic. In tales of chivalry from the medieval period in Western Europe, not only was the hero exceedingly brave, he also had to worship and love a noble, beautiful lady. Even after these tales of knighthood became obsolete, the connection between adventure and worship of a lady was adapted into Western melodramas. The American Western, until around the 1950s, and even some contemporary films, display patterns that could be called a variation of these chivalrous tales.

From the 1910s to the 1930s in Japanese cinema, however, the incorporation of these fundamental elements of American film presented a very difficult problem. This is because, in Japanese traditional theatre, it was an established convention that the strong male heroes didn't fall in love. It would be boring, however, to have a performance without love scenes, so it was arranged that the love scenes would be performed by the weak, rash, but handsome men who played male roles - *nimaime*.

Wage Seishun ni Kui Nashi (No Regrets for Our Youth), Akira Kurosawa, 1946

The *tateyaku* is a person modelled on the ideal of the samurai. During the feudal period in Japan, when a man had to choose between loyalty to a lord and affection for a wife or lover, it was determined that he must unhesitatingly choose loyalty to his lord. All of the *tateyaku* stars are men of few words but sharp of eye. Even in the rare times when they perform a love scene, they don't whisper words of love but rather only return the woman's expression of love with a cruel glance which says "I'm not allowed to love". This kind of acting is not only something that samurai in *jidaigeki* films performed; it is also a feature of the stars of the *yakuza* films which depict modern times. This style of acting was also frequently repeated in films that depicted kamikaze troops.

Hanasaku Minato (The Blossoming Port), Kinoshita Keisuke, 1943

To a western eye, this kind of acting may appear strange, even contrary to human nature. If one thinks of it as a kind of stoicism, however, it will probably seem more comprehensible. A theme which runs through Kurosawa's films is that of the stoic man who manages to beat the enemy intent on defeating him. Before that became a personal theme of Kurosawa's, however, it belonged to the acting tradition of the *tateyaku* stars of the Japanese stage and screen. Kurosawa boiled that down and used that in his *gendaigeki* film, as well as in his historical dramas.

The *tateyaku* type has universal appeal but the personality of the type of actor called the *nimaime* is more problematic. The *nimaime* is a handsome, reckless, and somewhat weak young man. He mainly performs love scenes, but he doesn't rescue fragile females from evil rascals. Rather, women of good character usually devote themselves to the *nimaime* character. The *nimaime* is often the kind of undependable character who couldn't (wouldn't) get along if a woman didn't work for him. Even in his love scenes - rather than strongly embracing his lover - the *nimaime* is especially skilful at standing with head bowed and a pitiful expression which seems to say "I'm sorry I'm so powerless that I can't make you happy".

In describing him this way, you may think that the *nimaime* is indeed a pitiful, unmasculine type of man. After losing World War II, the Japanese threw out the militaristic way of thinking based on the spirit of the warrior (*bushido*). During the American-led reformation, Japan became an unusual country in the world; a country in which the power of the priviledged class was weakened and the systems of royalty, landownership, industrial conglomerates (*zaibatsu*) and the military was dismantled. The postwar Japanese came to hold as ideal the desire to build a society in which, as much as possible, everyone could exist on an equal basis with few who were extremely poor, and also without building up the strength of the upper classes. The image of the *nimaime*, which denies heroism and advocates mutual cooperation, came to possess a very important meaning for the postwar Japanese who came to have the sense of being a group of weak people.

The director Kinoshita Keisuke made a lot of hit

films which skilfully featured *nimaime* actors. Like Kurosawa (*Sanshiro Sugata*), Kinoshita released his first film *Hana Saku Minato* (The Blossoming Port), in 1943 and both films achieved about the same high reputation. Then, until around the mid-1960s, Kinoshita remained as famous as Kurosawa in Japan, but none of his works became well-known internationally.

When there are two directors who have achieved about the same high reputation in Japan, why does one become respected internationally as a master and the other's fame rest in his own country? In contemplating this difference, I think the common features, and the differences, between how foreigners view Japanese movies and how the Japanese view their own films, become clear.

In my attempts to understand the special nature of Japanese cinema, I have attempted such examinations. Recently, I have started to think that the distinction between the *tateyaku* and the *nimaime* is not limited to Japanese cinema. The *nimaime* in Japanese films often cries in front of his lover. It used to be that in American and European films (especially in American films), one rarely saw a performance in which a man cried. However, in the 1970 film *Five Easy Pieces* the 'hippie' pianist, played by Jack Nicholson, returned to his elderly father's place and cried while confessing his own cowardice to his father. In Paul Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman*, the female protagonist's husband cried when he suddenly announced to his wife that he had a young lover and that he wanted a divorce. The actor, Dustin Hoffman, created a new role-type which had not been seen in American films before the mid-sixties. His speciality was a *nimaime* type flavoured with a comical element. In this way, American films held back slightly from merely expressing the strength of men like John Wayne and Gary Cooper: they also showed male weakness.

In other Asian films also, it was common to see performances in which men cried. In those countries this was not considered irrational or unmasculine. Therefore, Japanese *nimaime* stars who were rejected in the West as overly sentimental, enjoyed considerable popularity in the rest of Asia. I think that, in order for the West and Asia to reach a sense of mutual understanding, it is necessary to first understand this kind of problem.

Hasegawa Kazuo

When I spoke about a similar subject at a symposium at Hawaii's East-West Center, I was surprised by a question an American scholar of modern Japanese history asked me: "Then, could one say that, in Japanese culture, the Emperor maintains a kind of *nimaime* position?" My surprise was because I had never thought about this issue to that extent. This was a highly suggestive question which I had never heard before in Japan. When it was unexpectedly asked in a foreign country, I felt I could begin thinking in a new way about concepts like the *nimaime*.

Waga Koi wa Moenu (My Love Burns), Kenji Mizoguchi, 1949

Certainly, after the military defeat in World War II, the Emperor, who until then had always appeared before the people in the military attire of a commander-in-chief, changed into a suit and went to meet General MacArthur. The photo of the Emperor standing next to the physically imposing MacArthur, dressed in military garb, appeared in the papers. One could say that this showed the Japanese people the transformation of the Emperor's status from that of a *tateyaku* to that of a *nimaime*.

That photo was quite shocking to the Japanese of that time but, as a matter of fact, many postwar Japanese men were trying to stop behaving like samurai and to act instead like *nimaime*. It might have been the result of the conquering American army which halted all films depicting the samurai's heroic actions; and several years following the defeat the most well received Japanese films were

overwhelmingly those in which the *nimaime* starred. Actors like Ikebe Ryo, Wakahara Masao, Sada Keijid, Tsuruta Koji (who afterward became a *tateyaku*), Hasegawa Kazuo, and Uehara Ken were at their peak. Actors like Bando Tsumasaburo, Kataoka Chiezo, Ichikawa Utaemon, Arashi Kanjuro, Fujita Susumu and Okochi Denjiro, whose main selling point was their show of strength, were out of luck.

However, among Japanese men, it seems there was one group which did not wait for the defeat in order to change its consciousness from that of the *tateyaku* to that of the *nimaime*. These were the Japanese soldiers who became prisoners of war. Many Japanese soldiers who became prisoners of the enemy during World War II used a false name because they had been taught that becoming a prisoner was shameful. Many chose the names of popular actors like Hasegawa Kazuo....

Hasegawa Kazuo was mainly active in *jidaigeki*, but he also appeared in *gendaigeki*. The other major *jidaigeki* stars of that period, like Bando Tsumasaburo, Okochi Denjiro, Arashi Kanjuro, Kataoka Chiezo and Ichikawa Utaemon, were all the so-called *tateyaku* types who exclusively played strong samurai. They usually won at swordfights but, when they lost, it was an established convention that they would fight to their death with their sword like Ashura, the Buddhist war deity. The prisoners of war probably thought that using the names of such men of valour as their false names was not suitable....

Hasegawa Kazuo was a typical *nimaime* but he also played strong samurai and, even more frequently, yakuza. In contrast to the *jidaigeki* stars mentioned earlier, however, he also played the lady's man (*iro otoko*) role of the townsman who commits suicide with the woman he loves. In one of his well-known films, *Yukinojo Henge* (An Actor's Revenge, 1960), he even played an *onnagata*. And in his occasional *gendaigeki*, he was able to compete in popularity with a top *gendaigeki* star like Uehara Ken who intoxicated his fans with touching love scenes.

In other words, Hasegawa Kazuo did not just play a strong hero; he was also popular for his performance of the role of the sympathetic weaker man. In contrast to *gendaigeki nimaime* like Uehara Ken who played the weak man of gentle features and manners (*yasaotoko*) with whom one can always empathise (i.e. the lady's man who has 'neither money nor sword'), Hasegawa Kazuo played a variety of roles. Just when one thinks that Hasegawa Kazuo, as a *jidaigeki nimaime*, is playing the role of the one who swings his sword around, showing off a brave form, he turns around and becomes a weak *yasaotoko* who cannot even save the woman he loves. Even as that kind of weak man, however, he was accepted by the fans because of the purity of his dedication to his lover. In that sense, he was an unusual star who could change between these two completely different roles in each new film. This ability to change roles may have contributed to the frequent use of his name by Japanese prisoners of war.

In the same light, there is one thing I experienced which I cannot comprehend, and which continues to remain in my mind. It was amazing how someone like myself - who was fourteen at the time of the defeat and who had resolved to die at the end of the war - received the capture of Japan by the American forces with scarcely any resistance. We changed our minds as soon as we heard that Japan had lost. Even while thinking that this was not supposed to be so, I also moved away from thoughts of an honourable death.

From that point, I continued to wonder why those who had such firm beliefs gave in so easily. When I think about films, I also begin to contemplate these kind of problems. When I speak with foreigners, new and unexpected chains of thought open up. ©

Translated from the original Japanese
by Linda C. Ehrlich

1. This essay originally appeared in *Eiga de sekai o aiseru ka?* (Can We Love the World through Cinema?), published by Iwanami Shoten in 1989.

2. All Japanese names are written the Japanese way with the family name first.

3. The translator would like to thank the students of Asian Studies 471 at the University of Tennessee/Knoxville for their comments on this essay during the seminar on translation held in 1991.