

The Lost Studio System: Reconsidering Japanese Film Production after the Bubble's Collapse

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After the collapse of the bubble economy, the “production committee model” of film production, which involved joint investment by multiple companies, became dominant in Japanese commercial films. In this model, television networks, which led the committee, came together with publishers and film software companies, in addition to film companies that are in charge of distributing films, in order to disperse risk and plan secondary sales of television programs, DVDs, and books. As with their American counterparts, Japan film studios had previously used their own staff and cast to produce films independently and then distribute them to theaters for profit. However, this practice has completely disappeared, and now film companies work together with outside companies to create films. The studios also functioned as educational institutions to train the next generation of filmmakers, a role now performed by universities. I myself was involved in such a project, participating as a director’s assistant in the production of a dramatic film called *Miroku*, with both professional filmmakers and college students. The actor Masatoshi Nagase, who had played the Japanese protagonist in Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* (1989), starred in the film. Some college students go from working with first-rate filmmakers in situations like this to later working in the film industry themselves. In any case, the decline of the studio system changed the education system for those working in filmmaking as well as film production practices themselves. A major part of the change came in the 1980s, during the economic bubble period. As the studio system declined, it was supplanted by a system of participation by various external companies in the film production business. In this presentation, I consider the collapse of the studio system as it propelled other businesses to participate in movie production and led to the present state of the movie industry. Below, after discussing the studio system at the height of its prosperity, I will cover the chain of events that led to its downfall.

First, I will examine the Japanese film industry of the 1950s, when studios functioned most successfully. In keeping with Japan’s postwar recovery, the number of moviegoers rapidly increased each year. At the peak, each person in Japan went to the movies at least once a month, theoretically speaking, and movies became deeply

entrenched in people's lives.¹ Starting with the Venice Film Festival's Grand Prix's being awarded to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* in 1951, Japanese films began to draw international attention, with Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu*, *Ugetsu*, and *Sansho the Bailiff* also winning awards consecutively from 1952 to 1954 at the festival. Taking advantage of this trend, the six major studios, Nikkatsu, Tōhō, Tōei, Shōchiku, Daiei, and Shintōhō, released new films every week. Each had its own directors and actors who were bound by contract and could not work for other studios. With these pre-established teams, studios could thus produce a high volume of similar films. It is relatively easy to break down the studios into a list according to genre: Nikkatsu was known for action films; Tōhō for films using special effects, particularly monster films like *Godzilla*, as well as comedies; Tōei for historical dramas and *matatabi* (ruffian and Yakuza) films; Shōchiku for melodrama films and family dramas; and Daiei for popularizing *haha-mono* (films about the lives and suffering of mothers) soon after the war and also for historical dramas in the 1960s. Even Shintōhō, which went bankrupt in 1961, managed to make a name for itself in erotic and grotesque films. Having a fixed staff and cast functioned very efficiently in terms of mass producing the films of each studio's type and led to each studio's having one specialty genre. In this era, quantity was increasingly valued over quality.

Tōei, founded in 1951 and an emerging company at the time, tried using its own films in double feature programs and began distributing new double feature films in 1954. For theaters as well, making a contract with a single studio was cheaper and more convenient than contracting with multiple studios and putting together double features on their own. Therefore, by the end of December 1953, there were 42 Toei-exclusive theaters, and a little more than half a year after, they had begun producing double features, that is, by the end of August 1954, there were 155 such theaters, a nearly four-fold expansion.² The other major studios certainly did not simply observe Tōei's strategy. With the exception of Shintōhō, which was no longer able to produce films, beginning in January 1956, Shōchiku, Daiei, Tōhō, and Nikkatsu also began to increase production.³ Although at some instances only one new film a week

1 If the number of movie visitors published in "Statistics of Film Industry in Japan" on the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan website (<http://www.eiren.org/toukei/data.html>) was divided by 90 million, which was the total population of Japan at the time, people would have gone to the movies 12 or more times per year on average between 1957 and 1959.

2 'Nihondate kyōsō to nihon eiga no sinyō,' *Kinema junpō*, November 1, 1958, p. 65.

3 Since it was difficult to maintain the production of double features, all the studios eventually reduced production. However, they resumed the production of new double features in 1958.

or the same film was shown for two weeks straight, each studio basically released two new films per week in order to obtain more theaters with exclusive contracts.

Thus, we can see that behind this substantive competition in new double feature films was each studio's plans to improve its own distribution and standing at the box office. The major Hollywood studios from the 1930s and 1940s glorified their status as an oligopoly; distribution strength in major cities and industry-wide networks led to monopolistic control (major studios in 1945 controlled more than 70% of premiere theaters).⁴ However, the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 to end the practice known as "block booking" in which production and distribution companies made contracts to sell groups of films as one block (*United States v. Paramount Pictures*). This dealt a major blow to studios and was a major reason for the decline of the studio system, along with people's moving to the suburbs and the spread of television.⁵ In Japan as well, in the post-war period, there were efforts to prohibit major film studios' control of the industry. By 1955, the Japan Fair Trade Commission had found violations under the "Antimonopoly Act" [*Dokusen kinshihō*] and Excessive Economic Power Deconcentration Law [*Kado keizairyoku shūchū haijo hō*] four times including re-examinations, and film studios promised to make improvements. However, they ultimately did not follow through, and without any legal action to deal with the situation, the studios' control through block booking grew even stronger.⁶ In other words, the studio system's safe functioning depended on control through block booking, which guaranteed that the films they produced would have a stable distribution into the market.

Next, I will move on to the discussion of the 1960s, when Japan's studio system fell into a state of crisis. In this period, there were obstructions to film studios' control through block booking. In 1958, the number of movie spectators was 1.12 billion, but this turned out to be the last year of growth, and five years later, in 1963, the number had sharply dropped to less than half, at 510 million. The television, which began broadcasting programs in 1953 and rapidly permeated society, was seen as a problem, and indeed, the spread of television and the contrastive decline in movie theater attendance began to be noticeable.

Studios were faced with a grim situation as people stopped going to the movies,

4 Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 8–13.

5 Douglas Gomery and Clara Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History: A Survey*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 162.

6 Katō Atusko, 'Eiga kaisha no shijō ninshiki to kankyaku: 1930-1960 nendai o chūshin ni,' in Fujiki Hideaki (ed.) *Kankyaku eno apurōchi* (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2011), p. 102.

and each drastically reduced the number of films it produced. For example, Tōei had distributed more than 100 films per year in the 1950s, but this dropped below 100 in 1961 and declined drastically to 40 in 1965. Other studios had similar decreases, each ending up with around 50 distributed in 1965 (only Nikkatsu distributed more, at 65 films). The practice of releasing new double features every week completely disappeared.⁷ As they produced fewer films, it was inevitable that these studios would have to scale down.

Japanese film studios stopped signing exclusive contracts with staff and cast members and tried reducing personnel. Shōchiku closed its Kyoto studio in 1965, thus putting excess personnel on standby at their homes, while Daiei took similar measures out of necessity to reduce its workforce. Nikkatsu decided to create its own films for television in order to employ those who no longer had any work, having previously dispatched directors and actors to subcontracted companies for this purpose. Now they devoted one stage of their studio to films for television and switched to producing their own.⁸ These types of measures occurred at each studio in the name of rationalization, but one could also see it as their paying the debt for the blind mass production of movies in the more prosperous 1950s.

These changes to major film studios also gave more space to independent productions, which had previously been hidden in their shadow. Without a distribution network like the major studios, these independent studios had, until then, rarely been able to reach a national market. However, reduced production by major studios meant that independent work could receive more attention. Film studios began to purchase independently-made films and distribute them through their own channels. Shōchiku, in particular, having mainly produced melodramas and family drama films, lost much ground to television dramas and began to reconsider their production of movies. In a sense freeing themselves from the conventions of their own genre, they began to actively distribute externally produced films dealing with erotic or other themes outside of family drama. In 1967, one-third of the films they distributed were not produced in-house.⁹ This applied not only to Shochiku; making space for the distribution of independent films in order to maintain a strong distribution network grew more common at other major film studios as well.

Lastly, I aim to summarize the ideas I have presented. The collapse of the studio

7 'Tōkei hen,' *Eiga nenkan 1967 nen ban* (Tokyo: Jiji tsūshin sha, 1967), p. 49.

8 'Nikkatsu ōsōji no toshi,' *Ibid* pp. 126-127.

9 'Daiei no saiken to akaji mondai,' *Gōdō tsūshin tokushin ban*, August 27, 1967, p. 1.

system, which led to the participation in film production of various companies from other industries, began in the 1960s with disruptions to “block booking,” which was closely linked to production, distribution, and screening. Major film studios ceased the mass production approach of the more prosperous 1950s, shifting to a focus on distribution and screening in the less prosperous 1960s. They began to also distribute outside films even if those films did not fit their established image. Through this, the major studios tried to maintain control of distribution and screening.

In 1969, the television networks that play a central role in present-day production committees became involved in filmmaking (Fuji Television joined with Tōhō to create *Goyōkin*). If the studio system had remained stable and continued, the film industry would not have had to accept capital support from the television industry, which had a certain influence on the decline of the film industry. The opening that would allow companies from outside industries to join in film production was already present in the 1960s.