

Mizoguchi's *Sansho The Bailiff* released on DVD

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The recent release of Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi's *Sansho The Bailiff* (1954) on DVD in the United States provides an excellent opportunity for viewers here to become better acquainted with this major filmmaker's work. Unlike the films of his contemporaries Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, Mizoguchi's work has until recently been very hard to find on DVD in America. The Criterion Collection, a DVD label that specializes in classic foreign films and released *Sansho The Bailiff* in May, also released Mizoguchi's renowned *Ugetsu* in 2005.

Sansho begins with titles setting the film in the late Heian period, "an era when mankind had not yet awakened as human beings." During this period in Japan, spanning the years 794 to 1185, the aristocratic Fujiwara dynasty maintained power and the samurai warrior class emerged. Buddhism, the religion to which Mizoguchi (1898-1956) would convert late in his life, also flourished during this epoch.

A family consisting of a mother (Kinuyo Tanaka), her son Zushio, her daughter Anju and an elderly servant are making a journey on foot through the countryside. In flashback, we learn about the father of the family, an aristocrat and governor who opposed wars and new taxes on rice that struck the peasantry of his province very hard. For this disobedience to his superiors in the imperial court and for daring to argue with "arrogant military men," the kindly governor is removed from his position and sent into exile.

Before leaving his home, he tells young Zushio "Without mercy, man is like a beast. Even if you are hard on yourself, be merciful to others. Men are created equal. Everyone is entitled to their happiness." These words instill in Zushio, the film's major character, principles that will have to be maintained and defended, forgotten or remembered in the face of the most trying circumstances.

Returning to the present, we find the family vulnerable and in need of shelter. No one in the surrounding villages will take them in due to reports of kidnappers and slave traders in the area. As night falls, they are forced to make camp. A wandering priestess comes upon the family and offers to give them food and a place to sleep. But having presented herself to the family as a friend on their first evening together, the priestess reveals herself the next morning to be in league with a band of slave traders.

The turning over of the family to the traders provides the film with one of its most disturbing sequences. The family is violently separated, with the struggling mother taken away in a boat while

the screaming children are held on land. The servant is thrown mercilessly into the water to drown. Clearly, the cruel experiences of the 1930s and the Second World War have a bearing here. Did the filmmakers want their audience to wonder whether they were still living in "an era when mankind had not yet awakened as human beings"?

As fate would have it, the children are very hard to sell, being too young and sickly. But after being rejected by many potential buyers, the traders are finally able to sell them to the film's title character, Sansho the Bailiff, who runs a slave-labor camp owned by a high-ranking imperial government official.

Eitaro Shindo's characterization of Sansho, though not as large a role as the title perhaps suggests, is one of the highlights of the film. The bailiff is just as one might expect him to be. A definite social type, he's utterly mediocre in every way except in cruelty, at which he excels. He is a groveling lackey, ready to do whatever is necessary to curry favor with his superiors. Sansho instructs his underlings to have no mercy on the children he has just acquired. They will have to work as hard as everyone else.

Following this episode, the film cuts from the story of the children's early tragedy and returns to the siblings a decade later. Zushio (Yoshiaki Hanayagi) and Anju (Kyoko Kagawa) are now young adults. The hard life of the labor camp has affected them differently. Zushio has grown cold and isolated. Anju has fared somewhat better having established a certain camaraderie with the other female slaves.

When by chance Anju learns one day the whereabouts of her mother, she is able to inspire Zushio and restore his hope and long-forgotten belief in his father's words about justice and equality. When the two siblings are subsequently ordered to dispose of a sick woman expected to die outside the labor camp's gates, Anju encourages her brother to escape.

While his sister distracts Sansho's guards, Zushio is able to flee to a nearby Buddhist temple where he is hidden by one of the monks. Here he devises a plan to go to Kyoto with a letter of support from the temple's head priest and make an appeal to the chief advisor to the emperor for help in freeing his fellow slaves.

The scene of the appeal rings entirely true. Zushio comes upon the chief advisor surrounded by guards. He appeals to him on his knees for help, but the man refuses even to acknowledge Zushio's presence. As the advisor walks away, Zushio attempts to follow him and is arrested.

In an ensuing sequence, the imprisoned Zushio is by a fantastic

turn of events—far too fantastic—recognized as the son of his famously courageous father. Incredibly, he is then himself appointed governor of the very province that is home to Sansho’s slave camp. With his newly attained power, Zushio is able to fight for the freedom of the slaves.

Sansho The Bailiff is a remarkable film that deserves a large audience. It is brilliantly and thoughtfully directed and photographed. The performances of Kyoko Kagawa and Kinuyo Tanaka are moving and memorable. Nonetheless, there are certain problematic elements in the film, or elements that raise some complicated questions.

Mizoguchi and screenwriters Fuji Yahiro and Yoshikata Yoda wrote the scenario from a story by Ogai Mori, which was in turn based on a folk tale handed down as oral tradition for several generations. The filmmakers stripped the old story of supernatural elements and added more directly social content, including the back-story of the father.

Given the socially oriented theme and character of the work, one has the right to ask: What is the precise attitude of the filmmakers toward the existing order? *Sansho* seems torn between a thoroughgoing rejection of the system represented in the story, on the one hand, and a more cautious approach, on the other. It seems to suggest that if only a person of good conscience were to come to power, someone who would remember basic human kindness and that all men are equal, then maybe something positive could be accomplished. Is this dramatically or intellectually convincing?

How much of this ambiguity reflected the filmmakers’ own conceptions—and it is entirely possible that it *is* reflective of their views—and how much was imposed upon them by the strict censorship of the Japanese film industry remains unclear.

In any event, the argument, embodied in the persons of both Zushio and his father, that the lower class must be set free through the good will and courage of a nobler aristocrat than those commonly available and not through the actions of the slaves themselves appears to be accepted on its face by the filmmakers. This approach, which seems incongruous given the cruel set of circumstances depicted, weakens *Sansho the Bailiff* somewhat, working against its more forceful and memorable first half. A number of factors may be involved.

The political climate in which artists such as Mizoguchi lived and breathed in post-occupation Japan following the devastation of the Second World War was quite complicated. Bristling anti-communism and unbridled capitalist expansion dominated. Japan’s industrial power, nearly obliterated by the massive defeat, was rebuilt with extreme rapidity. After the US withdrew as official occupying force in 1952, the two major political parties of Japan consolidated—with considerable financial backing from American intelligence agencies—in opposition to the country’s Socialist Party, which was gaining in popularity.

Mizoguchi, a filmmaker extraordinarily sensitive to details, was by no means immune to the political traumas of the first half of the twentieth century. Born in working class or lower middle class Tokyo, Mizoguchi and his family suffered economic and emotional ruin after his father, a roofer, made a failed attempt to turn a profit from the Russo-Japanese war supplying raincoats for the troops. The war was over before the family saw their

investment return, and Mizoguchi’s older sister was given up for adoption. She was later sold as a geisha, a devastating event for Mizoguchi that had a profound influence on his artistic and political outlook.

In the mid-1930s, as international tensions sharpened, Mizoguchi began exploring his socialist leanings in a series of serious and understated “tendency” films, which the director maintained marked the beginning of his mature period. Over the two decades that followed, Mizoguchi honed his signature style, hailed as a foundational influence in “new realism,” the demarcation between Japan’s “feudal” and “modern” art periods. His work was tremendously influential on later filmmakers.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Japanese writers and directors also found themselves having to contend with censorship from the motion picture industry. Japan’s Motion Picture Code of Ethics Committee was established in 1949 at the insistence of the US occupying force and was modeled after the United States’ own Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association. The MPPDA was responsible for the infamous Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, which stated that “no picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it.” The best American filmmakers working under these conditions subverted the moral regulations imposed upon them and were able to treat serious social issues in meaningful ways even as the Production Code tried to force them in the opposite direction.

Sansho The Bailiff appears to have been made under conditions of such a battle. In a 2005 interview with *Sansho*’s first assistant director Tokuzo Tanaka, included as a bonus feature on the DVD, the former recalls Mizoguchi confiding in him, saying, “Those studio bastards are forcing me to make it this way.” It had apparently been Mizoguchi’s intention to focus less on the specific tragedy of Zushio and Anju and more on the character of Sansho and the slavery system as a whole.

And Mizoguchi’s own disappointments and perhaps resignation in the face of political and social developments may have played a role too in generating the somewhat contrived ending of *Sansho*.

But whatever problems are contained in the film, it remains a powerful indictment of social inequality and exploitation, and it always treats its subjects with a great deal of compassion. A welcome relief from so much of what passes for art in the cinema today.



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