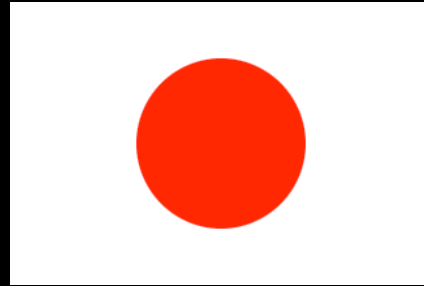


MODERN JAPANESE



HISTORY, CULTURE,  
AND CINEMA

## Brief History

- The decades leading up to World War II were a chaotic time for Japan, both politically and socially.
- Governments came and went rapidly. A struggle ensued between imperial rule and democracy.

- Japan in the 1930s was quite aggressive militarily with neighbors Korea, China, and even the Soviet Union, which came to China's aid. Above all, Japan feared the West and the Soviet Union.
- For this reason and others (including an imperial opposition to Communism), Japan formed an alliance with Nazi Germany.

- Although Japan wounded its enemies, the U.S. included, Japan suffered enormous losses during the war.
- Many of its biggest cities, which were then principally wooden, such as Tokyo, were firebombed repeatedly; 100s of thousands of citizens died in these bombings -- some times in a single night.

- Every Japanese citizen experienced loss first-hand and the war haunted the country for decades thereafter -- Germany and other European countries and cultures experienced something similar, of course.
- After defeating Japan with nuclear strikes against two major Japanese cities (Nagasaki and Hiroshima), the U.S. occupied the country until early 1950s.

- The U.S. occupiers forced the demilitarization and “democratization” of Japan. The influence of Western culture was met with some opposition.
- The U.S. presence also precipitated a new Japanese constitution in 1948; in addition to demilitarization, it also made divorce easier, especially for women, and gave rights of ownership to women, as well.

- Such opposition was no surprise, considering how traditional Japanese culture -- a culture dating back millenia -- was before the War.
- Several noted trademarks of traditional Japanese culture: profound respect for elderly and family (and maintaining its good name); Confucian respect for education and work ethic; emphasis upon public politeness and honor.

# A few Notes on Japanese Cinema

- Like any national cinema, Japan's was influenced by its theatre traditions. Japanese theatre and drama including kabuki and Noh.
- One of the holdovers from the stage in early silent Japanese cinema was the *benshi*, a narrator that narrated the action unfolding on the screen. This tended to mandate a simpler, slower style of filmmaking.

- Each country/region has its own histories, myths, customs, and genres -- Japan is no exception.
- For Japan, the samurai, for instance, stands as an equivalent to Western and cowboy in the U.S.
- Japan's emphasis upon family obligation and duty also has a prominent role in much of Japanese cinema.

- Japanese architecture, interior design, poetry (Haiku) and dining/living habits also influence filmmaking practices.
- Classical Japanese cinema known for having a lower camera height that is more in keeping with *tatami* mats.
- Some cultural and religious tendencies have influenced Japanese art and cinema. Zen Buddhism and Shintoism, w/ their profound respect for nature, appears in Japanese writing (Haiku poetry), painting, and cinema.

- Although Japanese filmmakers were producing important motion pictures well before WWII, the country's most internationally famous films were made in the late 1940s and 1950s.
- Directors such as Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Yasujiro Ozu were embraced by the festival circuit and helped to put Japanese cinema on the map.
- Ozu, in particular, is known for his home dramas (*shomin-geki*). Considered the most "Japanese" of Japan's directors, Ozu has been termed a *transcendentalist* filmmaker for the contemplative nature of his films as well as his "tatami shot" and use of "empty" shots (*mu*).