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# Far East on Film

## Rich Johnson

### Week 1

#### INTRODUCTION

A regional overview of the countries covered over the next 10 weeks from the loud and monstrous to the quiet and sublime. Does each country have a distinct approach to their cinematic output? Are there similarities and crossovers; both in the genres they navigate and transnational productions? Via the different countries/regions highlighted below, distinct developments in genre, production and exhibition will be explored.

#### *Japan*

Kaiju, J-horror, samurai movies and anime

#### *South Korea*

Horror, action movies, drama and historical epics

#### *China (including: Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore)*

Martial arts, action movies and crime capers

#### Main films:

#### *Japan*

***Godzilla*** (1954)

**Director(s):** Ishirō Honda

**Studio(s):** Toho

***Akira*** (1988)

**Director(s):** Katsuhiro Otomo

**Studio(s):** Tokyo Movie Shinsha



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### *Hong Kong/France*

#### ***In the Mood for Love* (2000)**

**Director(s):** Wong Kar-wai

**Studio(s):** Block 2 Pictures / Jet Tone Production / Orly Films / Paradis Films

### *South Korea*

#### ***Train to Busan* (2016)**

**Director(s):** Yeon Sang-ho

**Studio(s):** Next Entertainment World / RedPeter Film

#### ***Parasite* (2019)**

**Director(s):** Bong Joon-ho

**Studio(s):** Barunson E&A

### Notes:

The Kinetoscope was first demonstrated in 1891 and went public in 1893.

As with Edison's use of patenting his inventions, the influence of the Kinetoscope abroad was magnified by his decision not to seek international patents on the device and therefore profited on exporting, instead facilitating imitations and improvements of the technology.

90% of Japanese silent films destroyed during the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923.

As with a lot of early examples of narrative form in this new medium, the first films were simple recordings of theatre pieces. In the case of Japan, kabuki theatre.

A kowairo was responsible for dubbing the voices of onscreen actors. This began with filmed kabuki theatre, with them standing at the side of the screen and acting out the dialogue of the kabuki actors.

Benshi (or katsudō-benshi): Japanese performers who provided narration for silent films.

During the 1920s, younger filmmakers began to rebel against the presentation of Japanese filmmaking, wanting film to stand on its own and pull away from the theatrical, without the interpretation of a narrator.

As with any new medium and direction, there was resistance; specifically from the kowairo and the benshi artists, who saw these rebels as a threat to their craft and livelihood. The kowairo, in particular, began to disappear around this time paving the way for the introduction of Japanese film directors.

The first "Talkie": *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Ushered in the end of the silent era. Although the death of silent cinema was almost instantaneous in the West, in Japan, due to technical difficulties



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involved with installing theaters with sound-compatible facilities, silent films survived another decade in the East.

The Japanese film industry was not entirely replaced by talkies until 1935, one theatre, the Inohanakan in Chiba, near Tokyo, not converted until 1939. This allowed the benshi to continue in their art and remaining the leading tradition in the world of Japanese cinema for almost two decades.

First Japanese talkie: Heinosuke Gosho's *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (1931) is Japan's first talkie. Comedy about a playwright working to a strict deadline and getting distracted by his family and a noisy next-door jazz band.

The first Chinese film: *Dingjun Mountain* (1905). As with a lot of films around this time it relied on theatre and the transition from that medium as a narrative form. In this case, Peking opera superstar Tan Xinpei.

*The Songstress, Red Peony* (1931) is heralded as China's "first all-talking and singing sound picture."

Due to the occupation (1910-1945) studios were owned by the Japanese.

There is some contention in deciphering the first Korean film. *Ulha ui Mengse* (1923) is often referred to, while other sources refer to Yun Baek-nam's *Ulha ui Mengse (Plighted Love Under the Moon)*.

*Viva Freedom!* (1946): First film made in the country after achieving independence from Japan. One of the most significant films from this era is director Choi In-gyu's *Viva Freedom!* (1946), which is notable for depicting the Korean independence movement.

Akira Kurosawa: Not only the most influential Japanese filmmaker of all time but also one of the most influential filmmakers in the history of cinema, influencing everyone and everything from Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) to George Lucas' original *Star Wars* (1977) (along with subsequent films/TV shows) and Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* (2018).