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September 6, 7, 8, & 9

The Japanese Cinema — Kenji Mizoguchi

Admission free.

September 7 at 3 p.m., September 8 at 7 p.m.,
& September 9 at 9:30 p.m.

**A STORY FROM CHIKAMATSU/
CRUCIFIED LOVERS**

1954

90 minutes

Black & White

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Production Company, Daiei. Original Play by Monzaemon Chikamatsu, adapted by Matsutarō Kawaguchi. Screenplay by Yoshikata Yoda. Photography by Kazuo Miyagawa. Music by Fumio Hayasaka. Print provided by New Line Cinema. Cast: Kazuo Hasegawa, Kyoko Kagawa, Yoko Minamida, Eitaro Shindo.

A Story from Chikamatsu

In Japan today, intellectuals, leftists, salaried men, blue collar workers, students, and "liberated" women continue to accept in obeisance their place in the social hierarchy. Despite a thunderous and violent student movement, which at its height attracted hundreds of thousands, and the life-and-death anti-pollution struggles dotting the country and epitomized by the peasants of Sanrizuka and the victims at Minamata, change eludes. Those traditionally scorned in the culture—Koreans, *burakumin*, foreigners, and women—continue to be objects of unabated discrimination. Only one historically abused group, the merchants, have escaped the social onus they suffered during Tokugawa times. And today the multi-national corporations over which they preside are among the largest in the world.

The merchants began their social ascent when they were courted in the last days of the Edo or Tokugawa period by low-ranking, im-

poverished samurai who, through intermarriage, sold the merchants respectability in exchange for ready cash. By 1868 the Osaka merchants alone possessed seventy percent of the national wealth, and it was their economic hegemony that gained them what no other of the outcast groups has achieved. They were more than willing to share political power with the Meiji samurai, who rewarded them by selling nationally held assets dirt cheap to private enterprise. During the period of the Second World War the merchants exhibited no uneasiness about allying themselves with the military. Unlike other middle classes, they were untroubled by the absence of a democratic facade. They had never challenged feudal authority by creating truly representative institutions through social struggle. Hence, any demand for human rights in the culture at large not only had been unnecessary for the merchants, but the absence of such rights suited their purposes well because it allowed them to exploit their factory work-



ers, particularly women, without transgressing any institutionalized liberties or laws.

The intelligentsia of the second half of the twentieth century, a group that includes Japan's film directors, however occasionally nihilistic in their outlook and hopeless of change, have recorded a particular distaste for the merchant. The merchant as a figure has been a target of abuse and outrage, as if he and his class alone were responsible for the moral ruin in which Japan now finds itself. This satire of the merchant forms an obvious and direct link to the plays of one of Japan's greatest playwrights, a *ronin* named Mozaemon Chikamatsu, who already in the late seventeenth century was ridiculing this class because he felt it vulgarized the true Japanese spirit. Feudal distaste for the merchant, born of aristocratic snobbery and privilege, has been assimilated, along with other feudal attitudes, into the modern era, even when it passes as social protest.

Chikamatsu's revulsion for the merchant was that of a samurai who believed that it was vulgar per se to touch money and that ignorance of the value of different coins was a measure of good breeding. Should he have anything to do with trade, the samurai was always to see that the profit went to the other side. A samurai, speaking of his son's education, had said in the Tokugawa period, "it is abominable that innocent children should be taught the use of numbers—the tools of shopkeepers. What will the teachers do next?" And in late Tokugawa times those samurai already too poor to have servants would wrap their faces in small hand towels and go out in the dark when they had to do errands, so humiliated were they to be seen handling money. Yukichi Fukuzawa, in his autobiography, naively but without tongue in cheek, feels he has to justify the spending of money. " 'This is my own money,' I would say to myself. 'I did not steal it. What is wrong with buying things with my own money?' "

The scorn of the merchant which comes down to the twentieth century reflects the confusion between the feudal and the progressive in Japanese culture. It expresses the disdain of an aristocrat like Chikamatsu even

as it serves the point of view of anti-capitalists who propose, not a return to a pre-industrial value system, but a transformation of Japan which would be at once post-capitalist and post-feudal.

Certainly the finest film of Kenji Mizoguchi, Japan's greatest director, *A Story from Chikamatsu* (*Chikamatsu Monogatari*, 1954), nowhere suggests a return to pre-merchant days. Mizoguchi's aristocrats are as dishonest and unattractive as his merchants, and the film implies that a society that would care for the needs of human beings can be ruled by neither. But, at the center of *A Story from Chikamatsu*, is the merchant Ishun, relentless, hypocritical, and clearly representing the class that will dominate the Japan of the future. Ishun runs his scroll-making factory for profit alone. He cares little for the well-being of his workers, not even for that of the hero, the artisan Mohei (Kazuo Hasegawa), from whose great skill Ishun derives boundless profit. Ishun attempts to seduce the maid-servants. He drives ailing workers to a level of productivity that deprives them of their health (Mohei, at the beginning of the film, is already coughing and feverish). Ishun, in fact, is one of the most contemptible figures in the Japanese cinema and is symbolic of a ruling order in embryo.

The year is 1683. In a single, deep-focus shot Mizoguchi, varying the direction of motion of the characters, and portraying people behind people, reveals the daily life in the factory. Four layers of laborers are frantically at work on the annual calendar. A foreman orders the workers to hurry. The merchants are already in the employ of the government, and the calendar is a symbol of the onrush of time that will catapult them to the top of the social order. Ishun has striven hard for a monopoly on Imperial calendar production by bribing the requisite officials. In a later scene, in a ceremony honoring Ishun's completion of the calendars. Ishun sits side by side with his arch-competitor, Isan. Their placement in the shot allows Mizoguchi to display visually their parallel characters. For Mizoguchi, Ishun's evil is one intrinsic to his class rather than a personal psychic configuration.

One of Mizoguchi's central concerns is to show that the new prosperity accruing to the merchants has not brought either well-being or human rights to the community. An employee at the scroll establishment asks how one can preach morality, defined as loyalty to the master, to starving people. Mizoguchi depicts how feudal relationships have been transported intact into the new capitalist world. It is in this context that the plot of *A Story from Chikamatsu* unravels. Ishun's wife, Osan, a woman of a better family and much younger than he, is pressured by her mother to ask Ishun for a loan of five *kan* of silver which is owed on a mortgage. Ishun has already paid the family for the "purchase" of Osan herself, and she is reluctant. This demand by her family for further money leads ultimately to the deaths of Osan and Mohei at the end of the film.

More importantly, it is the inhumanity of the merchant which causes the disaster. Ishun refuses her the loan and Osan is forced to ask Mohei for help. He, who has been selling his labor for subsistence alone, has no money. To help her, he forges the merchant's signature and is caught. In feudal fashion, Ishun has him locked in the storehouse. The merchants, in their greed, perpetuate all the worst abuses of the dying aristocracy.

When Osan is later compromised, having been found alone in the company of Mohei, the two flee Ishun's house together. Adultery ensues, and at the end of the film the lovers are crucified; unfaithfulness by a wife brought capital punishment in Tokugawa times. Earlier in the film, in a foreshadowing image, Ishun spies a pair of adulterous lovers being led to their crucifixion outside his window. "A samurai must kill illicit lovers himself," he says, "or lose his rank." Ishun is no samurai, despite the fact that he obviously identifies with his social superiors. Ishun, Mizoguchi and Chikamatsu repeatedly remind us, is one of the lowest of the low. He will later beg for the return of Osan, willing to forgive her even this transgression so that he can keep the favor of the Premier and avoid the disgrace caused by her scandal that will result in the ruin of his thriving business.

Money has supplanted value. For Mizoguchi, the merchant mentality has accomplished the destruction of the Japanese cultural heritage, a destruction that began with the decadence of the aristocracy. The Imperial emissaries, members of the dying samurai class, hate Ishun because, although they are more valuable in the system of rank, they are starving and he is rich. "Merchants are making money while nobles lie awake at night worrying," one of them says in fury. These samurai must sell or pawn their family heirlooms to Ishun to pay the interest on the loans he has made them, for he is also a usurer charging exorbitant interest rates. That they must beg for his favor is so humiliating to them that they are very happy to accept the bribes of his foreman, Sukeymon, now in the service of a competitor, and take away Ishun's title as "Grand Scroll-Maker."

It is still the seventeenth century and while the merchant's influence is growing, he does not yet enjoy the absolute power he will wield in the twentieth. Mizoguchi hates Ishun for his exploitation of women—as with his wife, Osan, and the servant, Otama, whom he tries to seduce—and for his exploitation of his workers, exemplified by Mohei. But merchants like Ishun, he reveals, replaced those whose corruption differed from his only in terms of their capacity for survival.

Japanese directors like Mizoguchi have been well aware of the evils attendant upon the commercialization of Japan. The absence of a tradition of human rights founded on a popular revolution has, however, often stopped them at the point of discovery. There has been little support in the culture at large for any faith in the defeat of the Ishuns. Mizoguchi, therefore, chooses to halt at the moment of revelation, leaving us at the onset of the merchants' ascent to power. He allows his films to pass into aestheticism at the moment when they have reached the ineluctable question: "what then?", a result which, his screenwriter Yoshikata Yoda believes, flows from Mizoguchi's personal and deep commitment to Buddhism.

—Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door*, pp. 16–20