

## Document Citation

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YOKIHI (EMPRESS YANG KWEI-FEI)

Japan, 1955

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi

Script by Yoshikata Yoda, Matsutaro Kawaguchi, Ton Chin, Masashige Narisawa

Produced by Masaichi Nagata (Daiei) and Run Run Shaw (Hong Kong)

Photography: Kohei Sugiyama

Art Director: Hiroshi Mizutani

Music - Fumio Hayasaka

Color consultant - Tatsuyuki Yokota

Historical research - Lu Sihau

91 minutes. In Eastmancolor. US distribution by New Yorker Films.

CAST: Machiko Kyo - Yang Yu-huan, later Yang Kwei-fei

Masayuki Mori - Emperor Huan Tsung

So Yamamura - An Lu-shan

Sakae Ozawa - Yang Chao, later Yang Kuo-chung

Isao Yamagata - Yang Hsien

Eitaro Shindo - Kao Li-hsi

Tatsuya Ishigoro - Premier Li

Yoko Minamida - Hung Tao

Noboru Kiritachi - Tsui Hua

Chieko Murato - Lu Hua

Michiko Ai - Hung Hua

Bontaro Miake - Commander of the Guards

Haruko Sugimura - Abbess

Shu Maruyama - Chief Musician

YOKIHI, contrary to the notation on our Nov/Dec program notes, was awarded a Silver Lion at the 1956 Venice Film Festival, Mizoguchi's fifth such award in five years; it was also his first film in color. There are conflicting accounts as to where the film was actually shot - some sources claim the Hong Kong or Singapore studios of Run Run Shaw, others the Kyoto studios of Daiei where Mizoguchi, with the patronage of his friend Nagata, was based for all his work from UGETSU MONOGATARI onward. In any event it was a Daiei/Shaw coproduction, the first Sino-Japanese collaboration in film production, and bears remarkably few traces of the usual aesthetic inflation endemic to international, big-budget ventures of this sort. Most of Mizoguchi's co-workers of this period are re-united here: his scriptwriters Yoda and Kawaguchi, his composer Hayasaka, and several of his favorite players (Mori, Kyo, and Ozawa, all in UGETSU, and Shindo, who appears in most of the post-OHARU work.). The only exception to the foregoing is the absence of Kazuo Miyagawa, who photographed most of Mizoguchi's 50's work; here he's replaced by Sugiyama, who'd worked with the director before on WOMEN OF THE NIGHT (1948) and who appears to have been chosen for his work the year before on Japan's first color film -- and how gaudy it looks in comparison with YOKIHI! - Kinugasa's GATE OF HELL.

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From the final installment of Yoda's MEMORIES OF MIZOGUCHI, which appeared in Cahiers du Cinema in November 1968:

"...In the spring of 1955 Mizoguchi directed YOKIHI as a Sino-Japanese coproduction. Run Run Shaw had proposed the project to us. I drafted the scenario with Kyuichi Tsuji and Masashige Narasawa. It was the first time a film had been made inspired by Chinese history. But, if Mizoguchi was a great lover of the art objects of the T'ang dynasty, and a connoisseur of the aesthetics and manners of that period, I on the other hand knew nothing about those things. Mizoguchi brought me along on several occasions to visit museums and temples. Thus I learned how our civilization of the Nara era had been influenced by that of the T'ang era. I was overwhelmed and dazzled by Chinese civilization of this period, which I studied through all the available documents: "The Never-Ending Wrong" (or, "The Song of Endless Sorrow") by Po Chu-I and "Ballad of the Lute" by Tu-Fu, poems which tell of the famous love of Emperor Huan Tsung for Yang Kwei-fei; the revolt of An Lu-shan; the historical significance of the Road of Silk, of the Zone of the West, of the Igre civilization; the role of eunuchs and harems; Chinese holidays and manners, etc. But I had many difficulties. In the initial scenario, to emphasize the fundamentally scheming character of Yang Kwei-fei, I wanted to insist on at least two points (which, furthermore, are historically authentic): 1) Yang Kwei-fei was first the legitimate wife of Tch'iu, son of Emperor Huan Tsung. Later she was promoted to the rank of empress. 2) Once an empress, Yang Kwei-fei no longer dissembled; her pride and egotism were flaunted. But we ignored these elements, first of all to simplify the intrigue, and above all to make Yang Kwei-fei a 'heroine;' we made her a pure and naive woman exploited by the self-interest of those around her. This led me to a melodramatic draft for the scenario and I suddenly felt very detached from it. It was Mr. Kawaguchi who did the final writing of it. YOKIHI was Mizoguchi's first color film. I believe he'd studied the colors of Kyoto's temples and art treasures to find the right colors for his film."

(translated by P.S.)

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BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 550-750 A.D. - Nara era (Japan)
- 618-907 A.D. - T'ang era (China)
- 684 A.D. - birth of Huan Tsung
- 713 A.D. - he assumes control of empire
- 745 A.D. - meets Yang Yu-huan
- 755 A.D. - revolt of An Lu-shan; death of Yangs; abdication of Huan Tsung
- 763 A.D. - Huan Tsung returns to Ch'ang-an, the capital, falls under the influence of a Taoist priest who claims to be able to put him in touch with Yang Kwei-fei's spirit
- 712-770 A.D. - life of the poet Tu-Fu, author of "Ballad of the Lute"
- 772-846 A.D. - life of the poet Po Chu-I, author of "The Song of Endless Sorrow"

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From Andrew Sarris' comments on YOKIHI on its initial commercial release in New York (from the Village Voice, June 24, 1971):

"For the time being I must content myself with an intuitively spirited defense of YANG KWEI-FEI as one of the most beautiful films ever to treat beauty as a subject. Beauty and memory and vanity. The plot proceeds by sections at a very stately pace, and the backgrounds (shot in Run Run Shaw's Hong Kong studios) are unusually fake for a lyrical landscape artist like Mizoguchi. (Renoir enthusiasts tend to have the same problem with the two-dimensional Montmartre backdrops in FRENCH CAN CAN. Significantly, both YANG KWEI-FEI and FRENCH CAN CAN were produced in the still -misunderstood 50's when many realists began experimenting with abstract styles and revolutionary concepts of color.)

"Anderson and Richie tend also to dismiss YANG KWEI-FEI simply because it is a Chinese subject, and hence insufficiently ethnographic. I would argue that Mizoguchi's distance from his subject enables him to contemplate many of his own artistic problems and to express these problems in an oblique manner. YANG KWEI-FEI is ultimately an introspective experience expressed in mordant blues, and when death comes in the form of eternal love it expresses itself through a blue curtain. Of all the filmmakers I have ever seen, Mizoguchi comes closest to expressing through the formal unity of his mise-en-scene something approximating Sophoclean irony. And I would say that YANG KWEI-FEI and THE TAIRA CLAN (SHIN HEIKE MONOGATARI, made later in 1955-ed.) achieve this irony largely by a stylistic rupture of reality at precisely those points when a more sophisticated form of storytelling would have tricked up meta-physical ironies with psychological intrigues. YANG KWEI-FEI and THE TAIRA CLAN proceed very slowly to their destination, but once there the catharsis is complete. Kurosawa huffs and puffs with existential excitement through almost every frame of THE SEVEN SAMURAI and YOJIMBO, and the end result is a sour taste of moral fatigue."

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From a review by Roger Greenspun in the NY Times:

"PRINCESS YANG KWEI-FEI is a love story that becomes a ghost story before it is over. It concerns the Emperor Huan Tsung, the last great power of the T'ang Dynasty, who falls in love and takes for his concubine, one Yang Kwei-fei, formerly a scullery maid in her cousin's house. Huan Tsung is an artist, a musician, and a doting lover, but not much of an emperor....Eventually there is a military revolution....As he dies, the voice of Kwei-fei is heard, calling to him to join her in enending happiness. Slowly the camera turns toward a stone courtyard, empty, gray, without feature; until it is filled suddenly with the lovers' ghostly laughter - in what must be one of the most chillingly beautiful moments in all cinema.

"PRINCESS YANG KWEI-FEI is also full of beauties along the way - beautiful furnishings, draperies, clothes, Kwei-fei herself. But those beauties function as rich hindrances to the true business of living, making music or making love, which in the world as it is have no survival value. Kwei-fei's walk to her execution, a passage of breathtaking power, is presented mainly through a concentration on the clothes, the jewels, even the dainty shoes she leaves behind her -- to achieve in the transformation of death the kind of freedom she had never been granted in life. All the great Mizoguchi heroines (rarely heroes) I know undergo some kind of transformation, often by way of terrible suffering, to become a legend, or a feature of the landscape, or - most devastatingly - the unseen spirit of a deserted place."

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Po Chu-I's "SONG OF ENDLESS SORROW" too long to reproduce here, is available in numerous English translations in the CSCS library.

Notes prepared by Peter Scarlet. Special thanks to Lorri Hagman