



JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

An Inn at Osaka (Ôsaka no yado)

From the archives: a 1956 profile of Heinosuke Gosho

‘The purpose of a film director’s life is to describe the real life around him and create works which express the true feelings of human beings ... all films, as all works of art, must touch the emotions of the audience and touch them deeply, but this must be done without exaggeration ... A director must live in modern society and must be an active participant in all levels of that society’s activities. The personality which he develops as an integrated person in society must be reflected in his work.’ – Heinosuke Gosho

In describing his idea of what a director should be, Heinosuke Gosho not only indicates his personal creed, he also goes a long way towards describing himself. Now 54 years old and having just finished his 78th film, he, along with Yasujiro Ozu, is the director the Japanese themselves most like, and one whose work would hold extraordinary interest for the West. Among the fashions and foibles of the Japanese film world – and they are just as evident in Japan as elsewhere – he stands apart and almost alone. Resembling Chaplin in his broad humanity and de Sica in his compassionate portrayal of the common life, Gosho is essentially concerned in his work with ‘the true feelings of human beings’.

After graduation (his thesis was on the distant subject of ‘The Pricing of Commodities’), Gosho first found a job as an extra in *Obscenity of the Viper*, a film which 30 years later was to be remade with considerably more success as *Ugetsu monogatari*. Then, after encountering some opposition from his family, he went on to enter the Shochiku studios at Kamata in southern Tokyo. He was assigned as assistant director to Yasujiro Shimazu, a man who greatly influenced not only Gosho but many other young directors, among them Shiro Toyoda and Kozaburo Yoshimura.

In 1925, after various vicissitudes including the great Kanto earthquake, Gosho was handed a certificate stating that he was now a fully-fledged director. His first films were neither artistically nor financially successful, though *The Sky is Clear* (*Sora wa haretari*), a quiet love story about a salaried worker and a typist, plainly marked the beginnings of his style. It included a mannerism by which the audience now recognises Gosho’s films, a penchant for *suikyo* settings, towns or places located by a body of water – the ocean in *The Sky is Clear*; the canal in *An Inn at Osaka*; the river in *Where Chimneys Are Seen*, and the ditches in *Takekurabe*.

By the beginning of 1927 he had made eight films, had been recalled into the army and investigated for using ‘too many love stories’, and was beginning to think that he hadn’t made too brilliant a beginning. It is 1927, however, which Gosho now considers the best year of his life; he married his first wife, a young actress, and his first picture of the year, *The Lonely Roughneck* (*Sabishii rambomono*) was a tremendous critical and popular success. It made him a ‘first-line’ director. It also marked the initial appearance of ‘Gosho-ism’, a term of critical praise by which is meant that peculiar union of

pathos and humour embedded in the slice-of-life *shomin-geki*. This is the quality that Gosho has given to most of his films, *An Inn at Osaka* and *Where Chimneys are Seen* being highly developed and significant examples.

Gosho has said that his philosophy of art is simple: 'Only if we love our fellow human beings can we create. From this love of humanity streams all creativity.' His, however, is not the facile and optimistic humanism of a William Saroyan – though the two men have points in common. Gosho's more closely resembles that of Chaplin. In fact 'Gosho-ism' as a style has been defined as 'something that makes you laugh and cry at the same time'. (The Japanese word for this complicated emotion is *nakiwara*.) And Gosho is like Chaplin in that his 'love of humanity' contains not pity – he has already gone through that – but compassion. Like a good many other creators in this century, he finds human individuality the most precious thing in the world; and when it is threatened the result is tragedy.

Gosho's people, like the characters in the novel from which he took *Where Chimneys Are Seen*, are all innocent. Their lives occur almost before they are aware of it. Like the young heroine of *Takekurabe*, designed from birth for a life of prostitution, they are never fully aware of what is happening to them. They do not struggle because they don't really know how to struggle. Only when their lives become insupportable do they fight, and even then they often do not know what they are fighting against. Only Gosho – and we – know. In his hands the *shomin-geki*, the drama of common people, is raised to the level of personal tragedy.

Yet the tragedy is not unmitigated: at the end something has happened, there is a sense of release. The circumstances remain the same, but the outlook has changed and there is even room for optimism. At the end of *Where Chimneys Are Seen*, the husband looks once more at the four factory chimneys, so placed that all four are never visible at once, so that they never appear the same to any two people, and says: 'Life is whatever you think it is. It can be sweet or it can be bitter ... whichever you are.'

The danger of sentimentality is ever present in Japanese cinema, and particularly so in Gosho's films. There is always the risk that emotion will be lavished on unworthy objects. But Gosho, again like Chaplin, skirts the edge of sentimentality: just before the final plunge, something always pulls him up short. In *An Inn at Osaka* there is a famous scene in which the inn-servant, desperately poor, tries to sell a crayon drawing of a cow sent her by her son. After this very affecting episode comes a scene of ferocious cruelty, involving the callous landlady, which is followed by a very funny scene showing the landlady's remorse. Then Gosho includes the really heart-breaking scene in the picture, when the mother is forced to display her few belongings in the search for a missing thousand yen note. Their shabbiness is revealed along with the few small toys she has managed to buy for her child, to take to him on the trip which in all probability she will never make. In the resulting conflict of emotion all idea of sentimentality is lost. Convinced of the emotional validity of the scene, we are prepared to implicate ourselves to the extent of weeping over it.

In this and other ways, Gosho succeeds in making his characters completely human. He never controls them 'from above', as it were, as de Sica occasionally allows himself to do. Rather, he seems to set the cameras rolling on life itself and then gently whispers to you that these people are really worth saving. And they all are, for even his villains are comprehensible and

sympathetic. No-one in Japanese films is ever really to blame for what happens, and this is particularly true of Gosho’s characters. In *An Inn at Osaka*, though everyone accuses everyone else, no one is guilty. Money is the particular problem in this picture, and in it Gosho has used, as he occasionally does, fragments from his own life. When he was a boy in Osaka his grandfather once told him: ‘To have money doesn’t mean that you can afford to be cruel to others. To make money is an important thing but one must stop short of becoming unbalanced about it.’ This bit of homely and prosaic philosophy became the theme of the very unprosaic *An Inn at Osaka*. But beyond money, and beyond Osaka – the commercial centre of Japan – is the austere law which slaughters the innocents and which orders Gosho’s universe. Yet at the end, as always, is the faint light of hope. When the film’s hero is finally transferred to Tokyo he says: ‘None of us can say he is happy and fortunate, but yet things still seem promising ... we are able to laugh at our respective misfortunes, and as long as we can laugh we still have the strength and courage to build a new future.’

**J. L. Anderson and Donald Richie, ‘The Films of Heinosuke Gosho’,
Sight and Sound, Autumn 1956**

AN INN AT OSAKA (ÔSAKA NO YADO)

Director: Heinosuke Gosho
Production Company: Shintoho
Producers: Ryosuke Okamoto, Katsuzô Shino
Screenplay: Heinosuke Gosho
Based on the novel by: Takitarô Minakami
Director of Photography: Jôji Ohara
Editor: Shin Nagata
Art Director: Takashi Matsuyama
Music: Yasushi Akutagawa
Sound: Yûji Dôgen

Cast

Shûji Sano (*Mita*)
Hiroko Kawasaki (*Otsugi*)
Mitsuko Mito (*Orika*)
Sachiko Hidari (*Oyone*)
Nobuko Otowa (*Uwabami*)
Kyôko Anzai (*Omitsu*)

Japan 1954
122 mins

Print courtesy of National Film Archive of Japan

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