

Homage to Takakura Ken on the 1st Anniversary of His Death: Viewpoints from America & Asia

By Richard P. Greenfield & Naoyuki Haraoka

An American Viewpoint (Richard Greenfield)

It was not common for me to take my younger brother to the movies. There are three and a half years between us. In 1974, when Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* was released, the first US film that Takakura Ken costarred in (with Robert Mitchum), my brother was in high school and I was finishing my second year at university. It was the year Nixon resigned, and a year before the American chapter of the wars in Southeast Asia would end. We had had relatives and friends of family who had served in the Pacific but my parents also had friends who were Japanese diplomats assigned to serve at the United Nations and they were frequent visitors.

It was long before the bubble would inflate. Walking and talking with my brother after the movie, he asked something like "Did we just see that?" — meaning all of it: Pollack, Mitchum, Japan and Takakura Ken.

The story begins, as many good *noir* tales do, with a phone call, army buddies, an old debt. Mitchum (Harry Kilmer) and Brian Keith (George Tanner) served in the US Occupation forces. Mitchum had a long love affair with a Japanese woman he met and saved from a skirmish in the black market. It might have seemed at the time that Pollack was hitting two very sensitive notes — inter-racial relations and corruption — very early on. That may have been the experience of some viewers but I had already, and many years earlier, seen a very black Sydney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* and millions of Americans had rotated through Vietnam and been to Saigon and its black market so, in fact, Pollack was making use of what was already in the air.

He had picked the right two actors for the film, and the parallels between their roles are telling. Both did comedy, Mitchum earlier, Ken later. Both did war movies (Mitchum perhaps most tellingly in the destroyer-U-boat duel *The Enemy Below*, and Mitchum twice played the iconic American private investigator Philip Marlowe while Ken in his other well-known role in the West, *Black Rain*, played a police detective).

Yet in those first few moments in the kendo hall when they switch between English and Japanese and Ken learns that the favor Kilmer has come to ask involves the *yakuza*, a life he had left behind a decade before, there is a moment where his eyes blink very quickly. It goes by in less than a second. Yet it is foreshadowing. Pollack, who co-wrote

the script with Paul Schraeder, is up to something subversive that his actors will play and that is a full-blown tragedy disguised as an East-West piece of *noir exotica*.

The curtain rises on the tragic almost immediately when, during the rescue of George Tanner's daughter, three of the *oyabun* Tono's soldiers are killed. For this act of *lèse majesté*, as Tono sees it, he wants both Ken and Mitchum dead. As the circumstances force them closer together another character emerges who will, inadvertently, complete the tragedy. This is Ken's older brother, a kind of consigliere to all the *yakuza* clans.

We do not learn about Harry's past directly, but rather another of Harry's friends recounts it to the younger man who has accompanied Harry to Japan, both as bodyguard and spy. Harry's old friend has gotten into trouble with a *yakuza* gang he was smuggling guns to. Harry's old love, whom he has not seen in 20 years, had a brother who joined the *yakuza* when he returned from the war, six years after it had ended. All we hear is that he was enraged at his sister for putting him in debt to his enemy, for saving his sister and her then infant daughter. It is this man, called Tanaka Ken, played by Takakura Ken, that Harry has come to see.

Ken does not even appear until 22 minutes into the film. Until then he has been almost a rumor. And at first, he does not even appear; it is

photo: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.



The Yakuza

his kendo class we see at practice, and then, only in a very longshot when they have resumed their places, we see a man bowing his face so low and his body so still that he almost seems not to be there, until he rises to show his students how a blade should be pulled and replaced into its sheath.

His movements are almost liquid but when he questions a student about what he was thinking, his face barely reflects the motion. When the student tries to explain what he was thinking Ken snaps “Get rid of thinking! Don’t expect to win. Don’t expect to lose!” His student, now totally confused, asks what he should expect. It is the same moment that Ken has turned and seen Harry enter the kendo hall.

Even then his face does not change, his voice does not change, not a muscle moves as he looks at this man he has not seen in 20 years and answers: “Nothing. Expect nothing.” His face does not move as he speaks; it is almost as if the advice were coming from some sage or Fool offstage. When the rescue of Tanner’s daughter goes bad, even then Ken downplays the danger they are all in. Harry and Dusty, after all, can leave Japan, but he, as he says to them, again in a perfectly still voice, cannot: “If they want me, they will find me.”

Again it is a Western archetype with a very Eastern twist, the still point in the turning world. It is the Westerners and the other *yakuza* who are busy, talking, planning, and scheming. And it is Ken that the camera and story keep coming back to, because he anchors it in two traditions much older than *noir*: one is the flawed hero, and the other is close to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, for it is we, the audience, who feel for this man who seemingly has no feelings.

Nowhere does this show up as more of a duality than in the scene where Harry and Ken argue about one of them taking his sister and her daughter out of Japan. It gets loud, here meaning just a bit over conversational level when Ken ends the conversation by saying abruptly: “It is not your family.”

Not five minutes later he is followed into the men’s room by three *yakuza* freelancers who seek his permission to kill Harry, who now has a considerable bounty on his head. Again, for a split second, there is that look, when Ken denies permission and claims Harry as “family” — meaning that these three, and whoever else they have with them, would have to go up against him if they were to attempt to harm Harry, and it is already clear that Ken is a very skilled killer and they are not in his league and know it.

Tragedy, however, demands blood, and it comes soon enough. First an attempt on Harry which results in a superficial stab wound. Then a home invasion while Ken and Harry are out walking that leaves Dusty and Hanoko both dead (again harking back to the classics where the younger generation pays for the crimes or misdeeds of the parents). Only here does the shock of loss penetrate the mask that Ken has worn and for a moment we see the unfathomable anguish of the man, and, like watching a chemical process, we see it anneal into something

very different, something forged from all the violence he has seen and experienced that turns him into what seems like a force of nature.

It was perhaps that look which gave Ken the nickname of the “Clint Eastwood” of Japan, but I have never liked that because it does an injustice to both men. But this moment, the transfiguration as it may be of possibility into actuality, does have parallels with certain moments in Eastwood films (and many others besides). Mitchum kills Tanner, who set the tragedy in motion, and he then joins Ken for the raid on Tono’s compound. Ken kills Tono easily but it seems as if all Tono’s men are now *kamikaze*. Mitchum guns down many but Ken is left with the most and these he kills sword to sword.

It is here in Tono’s hideout that the third young life will be taken. The oldest son of Ken’s brother had run away and joined Tono’s clan, shaming his father, and actually was present when Dusty and Hanoko were killed. Despite Ken’s promise to his older brother, he is forced to kill the boy, who gives him no choice when he attacks Ken with a sword.

The tragedy has almost unwound, because before the raid Harry learned that the woman he loved, and still loves, Eiko, is not Ken’s sister but his wife. Hanoko was Ken’s daughter but had little memory of him from before the war. Coming back six years after it had ended, and finding his wife and daughter living with a foreigner, pushed Ken into the anger he has carried in the long decades since. He knows that Hanoko was sick and without Harry’s help would have likely died and Eiko might have starved. In the film they use *giri* as the word that describes the burden, the debt that he can never repay.

It is this duality, this love and hate that can only be expressed by an expression that is blank yet smouldering, that is the reason why we do not take our eyes off Ken when he is onscreen.

Just moments after his older brother has forbidden him from cutting off one finger as a symbol of his apology, when no one is looking Ken does exactly that. It may not be enough, it can never be enough for Ken and his brother were estranged for years; yet it is all he has. And it is exactly here that Pollock throws the biggest curveball of the film when Harry, in a taxi to the airport, suddenly orders it to turn around and shows up at Ken’s apartment, where he too follows the ritual, severing his finger and offering it to Ken as a token of apology for all that he did not know, for all that has happened, for everything that separates them and binds them together as two men who have loved the same woman, fought the same enemies, and suffered many of the same losses.

It is not that Ken smiles, rather that his face, which he had carried as a mask, relaxes and we see, clearly, the anguish, hate and even love between the two men when Ken picks up the severed digit and holds it against his forehead saying, “Kilmer-san, no man has ever had a better friend.”

Yet Harry is not finished, because he knows that if Ken can accept

his apology then perhaps he can accept his wife's apology and we can see all the doubt and anguish cross his face, and yet he nods.

When the film began, or with Ken's entrance into it, there was a sense of coiled violence about to be unleashed. At the airport there is none of that. Ken is on the deck, watching Harry board the plane. Ken's eyes are now hidden by sunglasses, and though he gives a brisk nod to Harry's deep bow, it is not difficult to imagine that perhaps the sunglasses hide what might be a tear or two for it is unlikely these two men will ever meet again, just as it is unlikely they will ever forget each other.

It is something neither Pollack nor Ken gives away — there is only the set of Ken's body, no longer taut and coiled but relaxed and released. He had come home from the war decades before, but remained an exile in his own country, from his own heart. In that offhand nod to Harry, there is none of that. There is someone who has come home from another war, even if one of his own making.

Two things are important to remember when watching *The Yakuza*: it was released just a year before the last helicopters would fly off the US Embassy roof in Saigon, and although many of the reviews at the time missed the visual cues, it was a popular film.

Sydney Pollack would go on to make the even more popular *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and this time it would be Robert Redford confronting a man he believed to be his enemy only to be told truths that no one else would tell him. And this time it was another well-known actor, Maximilian von Schell, whose face held an expression of perfect stillness, though he spends far less time onscreen in a movie about the same length as *The Yakuza*.

It is impossible to imagine any other actor who could have taken that role and given it the physicality that Ken did. Toshiro Mifune was a great actor in his own right, yet very often a blur of motion.

We left the theater that day convinced we would see Ken in other, bigger roles. It did not happen that way — not until Ridley Scott cast him as the seemingly straight-laced Osaka detective against Michael Douglas's furious energy to catch a *yakuza* killer in *Black Rain* (1989).

The View from Asia (Naoyuki Haraoka)

In my view, Takakura Ken left us images not so much of the full variety of the characters he played in his films, but of a single man, who is quiet and isolated from others and from the world and needs to struggle with his destiny, made difficult by other people's irrational behavior; a man who always tries to live according to his own ethical standards and to be faithful and sincere. This single image has had a great influence on many people.

To highlight these characteristics, I would select the three films that I think are his best. The first is *Manhunt* (in Japanese *Kimiyo Fundo no Kawa wo Watare*) from 1976. This film had its biggest success in

China. Thousands of Chinese saw it and were greatly impressed. One of my Chinese friends once told me that many Chinese felt a great sympathy with the hero played by Takakura Ken, a public prosecutor trying to accuse a corrupted politician of a murder. He was entrapped by a group of men working for this powerful politician and hunted by the police for a faked crime. The story was strikingly similar to many cases of innocent men hunted and arrested by the authorities for forged crimes by the politicians in power during the Cultural Revolution in China.

The hero, a quiet public prosecutor lonely and hard-working, did not give in to the hardships he suffered, hunted by the police for a crime he never committed. He continued to maintain his commitment to justice in spite of his difficulties devised by this cunning politician.

The second film, *The Yellow Handkerchief* in 1977, recently remade into a Hollywood film, is the most loved of his films among the Japanese, according to a recent poll. A young couple meet a middle-aged man, played by Takakura Ken, traveling alone on a trip in Hokkaido, the northernmost main island of Japan. In traveling together by car, they become attracted to this mysterious and quiet man, but then by coincidence they learn that he had been in prison for a number of years for an accidental killing, and that he has just finished his prison term. Where was he wanting to go now after his release?

The journey he takes with this young couple, who often appear unintelligent but sympathetic, finally makes this man — hitherto stubbornly reluctant to tell them about his life — confess the true story. He was a poor mining worker and had a wife whom he loved very much. They were expecting a child but one day they found she had a miscarriage. He was so unhappy and went to a pub and drank a lot, and on his way home he got accidentally involved in a fight with a young *yakuza* and killed him by accident. Having regretted so much

photo: ©KADOKAWA 1976



Manhunt (in Japanese *Kimiyo Fundo no Kawa wo Watare*)

photo: ©1977/2010 Shochiku Co., Ltd.



The Yellow Handkerchief

what he had done, he proposed a divorce to his wife when she came to see him in prison, as he thought that would be the best he could do for her.

But when he was about to be released, having been unable to forget his wife, he wrote a letter to her saying he would be leaving prison and would try to return home again, and asked her if she could show a yellow handkerchief outside their house if she would be ready to be his wife again.

He told the couple he felt almost like giving up being dropped off by his home again, since his wife would surely not be waiting for him. Deeply touched by his story, the young couple encouraged him to see if the yellow handkerchief would be there. In the end he finds his faith and sincerity towards his wife are rewarded.

The third film is *Railroad Man (Poppoya)* in 1999. In this film Takakura Ken plays a hard-working, lonely and quiet old railroad man, the chief of a small railway station in Hokkaido. Having outlived both his wife and daughter, he is about to retire and his friends are worrying about his future and trying to introduce new jobs to him. But because he has devoted his whole life to his work on the railroad, he has no interest in a new job and just aims to do his best until the last minute of his working career as railroad man.

He is in truth suffering from a fatal disease, but before his death a miracle is visited upon this lonely and faithful man. For readers who have never seen this film, let this remain a secret.

These three films share similarities in the characters played by Takakura Ken. Firstly, he is lonely and battling with a destiny unreasonably complicated by bad luck, such as a bad politician's intrigue, imprisonment due to an accidental killing, or the deaths of a wife and a daughter. Secondly, he is quiet and does not talk about his bad luck, bearing every difficulty patiently. Lastly, he remains faithful to his own values in spite of the twists of fate that would divert him from

photo: ©POPPOYA PRODUCTION TEAM, TOEI CO.



Railroad Man (Poppoya)

his original commitments, such as to justice, to love for his wife, or to his mission.

He pursues these values even though they have very little to do with money, social status or reputation, or even his own security. He does not speak of morality or try to be a preacher. He shows what he believes to be valuable in a human being's life by his actions and behavior and not by any words. He does seem to believe that "Speech is silver, but silence is golden."

Takakura Ken has nearly always played the role of a man who seemingly hates those ruled by egotism, verbosity and self-assertion. This is how, I believe, he represents well a certain type of working-class man in Japan. I think the virtues embodied by him in such films as the above are considered crucial to be a respectable member of the ordinary Japanese working class. Takakura Ken is a sort of icon for such people whose lives are full of hardships.

His popularity in China, as I mentioned, is mostly due to the striking similarity between what the film *Manhunt* represented and the Cultural Revolution there in the 1960s. But this may not be entirely a coincidence, since what Takakura Ken has portrayed as a model for a Japanese working-class person is very close to what Confucius, the most respected philosopher in China, considered the ideal for an average Chinese. Confucius always recommended that people be sincere and faithful to their original commitments — love, loyalty and friendship.

JS

Richard P. Greenfield is a journalist, editor and consultant living in Japan.
Naoyuki Haraoka is executive managing director, editor-in-chief of Japan SPOTLIGHT.