

The Rebirth of the Japanese Movie Industry – Moviegoers Total 170 Million in 2004 –

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

JAPAN'S movie industry is making a strong comeback after a long slump. The number of moviegoers is on the rise after years of decline, while various Japanese movies are being remade in Hollywood.

Box office receipts from Japanese and foreign movies totaled some ¥210.9 billion in 2004, up about ¥7.7 billion from the previous year. The contributing factor is Japanese movies, rather than foreign movies. While receipts from foreign movies declined by ¥4.3 billion, Japanese movies marked an 18% rise to ¥12 billion. The number of moviegoers surged to 170 million in 2004 from an all-time low of 120 million in 1996, which came as a relief to the Japanese movie makers. The number of movies released in 2004 topped 300 for the first time in 20 years.

The popularity of Japanese movies last year is attributed to animated films such as *Howl's Moving Castle* by the world-famous anime director Miyazaki Hayao, as well as love stories such as *Sekai no Chushin de Ai wo Sakebu* (Crying Love at the Center of the World). This year, various types of movies hit the box office. Among them are *Densha Otoko* (The Train Man), which tells the story of a hapless geek who wins the heart of a beautiful woman with the help of his Internet buddies, and *Negotiator Mashita Masayoshi*, featuring a policeman's fight against crime against the backdrop of the Tokyo subway system.

Japanese Films Remade in US

The Hollywood movie *Shall We Dance?* starring Richard Gere and

Jennifer Lopez is based on a Japanese movie made nine years ago. The story about a businessman, who takes up to study dancing without telling his wife. Dancing is not a social custom in a country to feel a sense of embarrassment. His wife eventually raises suspicion that he is having an affair, because he stays out late and returns home smelling of perfume. She hires a private detective to find out why. This movie stole the show and also created a social dancing boom in Japan.

The Grudge and *The Ring 2* are recent Hollywood remakes of Japanese movies, and both were made by same directors of the original versions. They are quite different in style from Western horror movies. Whereas Hollywood and European horror movies feature many brutal murder scenes, their Japanese counterparts are made to frighten the audiences with implicit images and sounds. Not a few Japanese movie critics wondered whether such Japanese horror movies would be accepted by Westerners. However, both movies topped the box office in the first week of their release in the United States, testifying that Japanese horror movies pass muster in the West.

Is Hollywood Short of Scripts?

The Magnificent Seven (1960), starring Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen, was a Hollywood remake of Kurosawa Akira's 1954 classic *Seven Samurai*. It became such a big hit throughout the world that Hollywood even made a sequel. It was however an absolute exception and no other Japanese movies were remade in Hollywood until *The Ring*. Following *The Ring 2*, *The Grudge* and *Shall We Dance?*, Hollywood is now said to be planning to remake Kurosawa's *Ikiru* and another version of *Seven Samurai*.

What prompts Hollywood to remake Japanese movies? One theory goes that Hollywood is short of good scripts these days. Studios now finds themselves hard-pressed to satisfy moviegoers with sequels of hit movies or with monumental movies full of battle or action scenes employing computer graphics. So Hollywood is taking note of Japanese movies which have a different taste, some movie moguls say.

I myself look forward to the day when original versions of Japanese movies, not foreign remakes, are shown in movie theaters all over the world and win fans.

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A scene from "The Ring 2"