

Umeya Shokichi: The Revolutionist as Impresario

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Umeya Shokichi burst upon the Tokyo film promotion scene in July 1905 like a theatrical Bonaparte. After more than a decade of expatriate life in Hong Kong and Singapore, he had arrived in his hometown of Nagasaki some weeks before with a fortune in cash (the equivalent of 400 million yen, by modern reckoning) made from his promotional activities in Southeast Asia, three brand-new projectors and a “vast packing crate,” stuffed with more than a hundred new, stencil-colored film features produced by the French company, Pathé Freres. On his way toward the capital, he made courtesy calls in Kobe and Osaka at the branch offices of Yokota Shokai and Yoshizawa Shoten, the two major film promotion/production companies of the day. His business card bore the name of his just-established company, “M. Pathé.” It was his own name, however, which caused the greatest stir. The known cohort and financial backer of such Chinese revolutionaries as Sun Yat Sen, he had also been present at the fall of Manila in 1898 in an officer’s uniform of Emilio Aguinaldo’s Philippine Liberation Army. A pioneering proponent of *nanshin-ron*, Japan’s economic thrust into southern Asia, Umeya was a leader of the overseas Japanese community and, in Japan, a close associate of Oi Kentaro, Inukai Ki, Toyama Mitsuru and numerous other major political figures in and out of office.

Arriving in Tokyo, Umeya capitalized on the celebrity the newspapers had given him as a romantic “China ronin” hero. It was customary for Japanese expatriates to attempt to make their return home a

dramatic one; Yokota Einosuke, the great pioneer of Japanese film promotion, having returned from America in 1895 with the first x-ray machine to be exhibited in Japan. “Since the usual means of promotion didn’t appeal as interesting enough,” Umeya’s first move was to plan an overblown premiere for his own *piece-de-resistance*, a gorgeously tinted version of Ferdinand Zecca’s *Life of Christ*. Enormous half-page wood-block print ads went into all the papers to trumpet “The world’s first product of a new film-coloring process! July 4 through July 13, every evening from 6 p.m. Soldiers and students in uniform half price! See the film which astounded the world at the Paris International Exposition!” The entrance to the Shin-Tomiza Theatre was transformed into a cavern of teakwood branches and Japan’s first usherettes greeted patrons while a band played exotic tunes from Malaya. The presence on opening night of such luminaries as Goto Shinpei and Prime Minister Katsura Taro underscored his significance as a political personality. For the rest of his life, Pan-Asianist revolutionary activism would compete for his attention with his role as a film entrepreneur; indeed, during the last two decades of his life, the success of the Chinese revolution would become his prime concern.

Umeya’s early life in his native Nagasaki, as depicted by his main biographer, Kurumada Joji, is studded with vignettes suggesting he had been a prodigy of literally mythic proportions. Born in 1868, his family owned a rice-refining factory and a ship with which they carried on trade with the continent. When he was just a toddler, superstitious locals became convinced he was possessed by a “cat spirit,” a curse which made him bold to the point of recklessness (in fact, 無鉄砲——foolhardiness——was part of the reputation he would carry with him throughout his life and an adjective which appears in all of his subsequent biographies). The immediate cause was an incident at age five, when he fell from a bridge into the river. He was pronounced dead when he was pulled out and plans went ahead for his funeral. Then, just as the lid was being closed over his coffin, he came coughing back to life. At fourteen, he gave proof of his

recklessness by stowing away on the family ship to Shanghai. After his discovery, he jumped ship as it was about to return and slipped back into the city. All alone and almost penniless—his funds having been stolen by a pickpocket—he started work as a live-in servant and, finally, as a coolie.

Not long after his return to Nagasaki, at age fifteen (1883), he caused a city-wide sensation by organizing an armed vigilante group, comprised of eighty young employees from his father's factory, in order to take on and "punish" a hoodlum gang of one hundred twenty, under the leadership of a notorious local yakuza, Amada Denkichi. In an armed, pitched battle on the slopes of Konpira mountain, Shokichi apparently stabbed Amada with a Japanese sword, mortally wounding him. As a result, both Shokichi and his father had to flee town while his grandfather used political connections and a huge amount of money to smooth things over. The incident grew into a legend recounted by the story-board men who plied their trade to children in the city parks. Although there were no legal consequences, the family became convinced that he would eventually be marked for revenge and in 1886, they decided to ship him off to America. The result of this decision was to fuel even more his reputation as a "cat with nine lives."

The ship set sail in March of that year, bound for San Francisco via Shanghai, Hong Kong and Manila. Two days out of Manila, cholera broke out in the unsanitary quarters of the Chinese migrant workers in the hold. The panicked reaction of the Caucasian passengers (who demanded that the infected Chinese be cast into the sea) disgusted the young Shokichi, a detail he would recall with anger many years later. Next a fire broke out onboard causing everyone to abandon ship. Off Luzon, a Spanish gunboat managed to pick up the only two survivors of the disaster: the ship's captain and Shokichi. His return to Nagasaki caused great astonishment, since he had already been reported dead.

At twenty, Shokichi demonstrated his business acumen by taking advantage of a famine in Korea and, with a shipload of his father's rice stocks, making a huge profit. When he sent a second shipment the following year, however, rivals had already created a glut on the peninsula

and the earlier profits were wiped out. This pattern of boom and bust would be repeated throughout his entire career.

Over the next two years, his career alternated between trips to the continent, where he speculated in gold mining operations (with little success, apparently), and much more effective activity in his father's company. By 1891, his leadership skills and charismatic personality landed him the presidency of the Nagasaki Rice Trader's Association. Inevitably, after the boom came the bust. A particularly bold rice speculation venture turned catastrophic and, after he quite literally disappeared into the night and shipped off to Amoy, his family had to sacrifice much of their substantial real-estate holdings to cover the loss. For many years after the incident he became a permanent resident overseas and usually avoided his hometown on the various occasions he was in-country. When he stopped in Nagasaki on his way up to Tokyo for his first film showings, he finally repaid his old debt.

During his stay on Amoy, the young Shokichi met and began to live with a woman named Tomeko and this alliance launched him on a new career. Amoy in this period was an international trading station, much frequented by foreign sailors. Kurumada therefore speculates that Tomeko must have been a slightly up-grade version of a *karayuki-san* or Japanese prostitute working overseas. In any case, Tomeko had had a long-term relationship with an English photographer who taught her the essentials of his trade. These she passed on to Shokichi and, according to Kurumada, his heirs still treasure the ragged notebooks he filled during this tutelage.

In October 1893, Tomeko and Shokichi moved to Singapore and set up their first photography shop. Although the new business managed to provide a modest living, the twenty six year-old Shokichi harbored ambitions on a far grander scale. Just up the peninsula from Singapore, the first big-business rubber plantations were being established, and this inspired in him a vision of the enormous profits to be made and the potential for large-scale Japanese immigration to the region. Seized by an idea which promised future benefits to the international aspirations of the

Meiji state as well as to himself personally (precisely the kind of balance of motivations characteristic of many of the period's young Japanese pursuing careers abroad), he left the day-to-day running of the shop to Tomeko and set off on a month-long research trip through southern Malaya.

In January of the next year (1894), Umeya took a steamer back to Japan with the intention of approaching individuals of political importance in order to gain backing for his scheme. At this stage, of course, he had no such connections and therefore had to choose his first target with great care. His selection, Oi Kentaro (大井憲太郎), was a stroke of brilliance. During the late 1870s and early 80s, Oi had been one of the ideological leaders of the democratic *Jiyu Minken* movement and, in 1881, had joined the political party backing Itagaki Taisuke as Prime Minister. During the period of riots and incidents accompanying the suppression and eventual destruction of the movement in the mid-80s, Oi was arrested and imprisoned for having participated in the abortive Osaka uprising of 1885. Released in 1889, under a general amnesty, he joined the newly-revived *Jiyu-to* party in 1890 and then dropped out to create his own splinter party, the *Toyo Jiyu-to* (東洋自由党). By prefixing the term *Toyo* (meaning "East Asian") to his own party name, he was signaling a new departure for frustrated Japanese liberals, one which moved the theater of operations away from domestic activity and toward radical, liberationist activity on the continent. In a brochure he issued at this time he criticized the fixation of the Japanese democratic movement on purely domestic issues, saying, "today's world is one of international confrontation. In this era that which is necessary is firming up our international policy, of achieving enrichment of the nation (富国) by moving forward in a coordinated manner on both the military and trade fronts, of economic advancement."

In other words, around the time Umeya Shokichi approached him, Oi himself was re-directing his efforts toward that form of pan-Asianism

which came to be known as *nanshin-ron* (南進論 or “movement toward the south”). Of course, from our vantage-point of historical hindsight, we can clearly recognize in its naïve formulation of the national mission in terms of idealistic, liberationist “internationalism” as containing the seed which would eventually grow into the ultranationalist expansionism of a later era. In 1894, however, there was no way to foresee its subsequent historical development. Quite the contrary; such idealism was wholly genuine, serving to inspire the activity of many young entrepreneurs abroad and of liberal thinkers and political leaders at home. As we shall see, Umeya was about to become one of the most outstanding representatives of the former group.

Without an introduction from an intermediary, the youthful Umeya—dressed in formal attire with top hat, tailed frock and white gloves—presented himself at Oi’s door and asked for an interview with the great man. Apparently, the two took to each other instantly and they formed an alliance which would last until Oi’s death a few decades later. The result was that Oi promised to pull together the funds for Umeya’s plan and to draw in other big-name political and cultural figures. Although there is no direct historical evidence for this, one suspects that the alliance also had an impact on the younger man’s political opinions, providing a little ideological shape to the ideas and passions he felt instinctively. Through Oi, Umeya would meet and eventually form close relations with a broad spectrum of other Pan-Asianist Japanese thinkers (including Toyama Mitsuru, who would eventually become an ultranationalist icon). In fact, up to the end of his own life in 1934, this thread of thinking (frozen, as it were, at the developmental stage it had achieved in the 1890s), along with the democratic/revolutionary ideas provided by his subsequent close cooperation with Sun Yat Sen, would form the alpha and omega of his political “ideology.” (I bracket ideology in quotes here because Umeya was an instinctive activist, rather than a thinker; the motivation for much or even all of his activity seeming to have come from a brash generosity and romanticism of spirit rather than any particular

brand of political theory.)

In April 1894, Umeya returned to Singapore in the company of Oi's son, Chiyuki, and another young Oi collaborator. Apparently, news of their plan to pioneer Southeast Asia for a future wave of Japanese immigration into the region preceded their arrival. Umeya was an overnight celebrity among the Japanese in Singapore, Malaya and even Hong Kong. As it turned out, however, the plans came to nothing. Oi Kentaro never managed to gather the funds he had promised and Umeya himself soon had other projects to dominate his thoughts and activities.

With the outbreak in June 1894 of the war between Japan and China, Singapore's Chinese merchant (華僑) community turned hostile, causing Umeya and Tomeko to move their photography shop to Hong Kong, a hive of anti-Qing activity at the time. With its close proximity to Canton, it had already become the base of Chinese revolutionaries trying to overthrow the Manchu dynasty. And it was here, at his residence on the second floor of Umeya Shosokan (梅谷照相館), his newly established shop, that Umeda first received a visit from Sun Yat Sen (孫文). The encounter, on January 4, 1895, lasted all day and resulted in Umeya's passionate conversion to the cause of the Chinese revolution. Almost immediately, he entered on a life of clandestine meetings and activities. As his shop prospered, he diverted sizeable sums to the collection of arms and other materiel for Sun's planned operations in southern China. In October of that year, Umeya managed to procure six hundred pistols which he hid in barrels of dry cement supplies and shipped off to Sun's revolutionary army which was planning an assault on the military barracks outside Canton. This first foray in military activity proved abortive, however. When one of Sun's men betrayed the plot to Qing authorities on the eve of the uprising, Umeya's shipment was intercepted before it could be unloaded and several of Sun's lieutenants were arrested and executed.

Under pressure from the Chinese government, British colonial authorities proscribed Sun from re-entering the colony for a period of five years, forcing him to slip back and forth across the border in secret for

subsequent meetings with Umeya and his other allies. When Sun decided to move his operations overseas, Umeya arranged for his passage to Kobe. There, Sun was startled to find himself besieged by reporters eager to hear the details of his intrepid exploit. Although the coverage was largely friendly, his new celebrity was sure to make him an easy target for Qing agents in Japan and so Umeya provided further funding to move on to America for a fund-raising tour of speaking engagements. And, since the Chinese community there proved cool to Sun's revolutionary program, Umeya continued to provide him with funds. His diary of the period is sprinkled with such short entries as: "December 20, 1895: Sent Sun \$1,000."

Despite his active involvement with Anti-Manchu seditionists—a fact widely known, at least among his fellow countrymen in Hong Kong—Umeya's relations with the British colonial authority continued to be relatively trouble-free during most of the time he resided in Hong Kong. Among the fairly small colony of Japanese traders and consular officials, he was apparently lionized as a crusader for justice. From this point onward, his photography shop became a favored gathering spot for young Japanese residents and short-term visitors who now took to calling him "sensei" (although the narrow meaning of the term is "teacher," it is also used as a more general term of respect for illustrious individuals in all spheres of activity). Before long, he found himself surrounded by an ever-growing coterie of young men (both Japanese and Chinese) who called themselves his "pupils" (弟子). For some it was the beginning of a life-long commitment, marked by passionate loyalty and service. When, some years later, Umeya embarked on his film promotion career, these individuals formed the core of his new company, M. Pathé.

Umeya's personal charisma, his reputation for largesse and solicitude (he was known as a soft touch for anyone in dire need of a loan, for instance), along with his aura of intrigue, romance and notoriety, were surely the main cause for his allure. Others apparently came to him under entirely different circumstances, however. Such was Harima Katsutaro (播

磨勝太郎), an individual who would figure prominently in Umeya's early film promotion activities both on the peninsula and in Japan. Harima was himself the object of much notoriety of a sort far more sinister than Umeya. Kurumada relates the tale of how Umeya "took possession" of the gangster Harima by challenging him to a round of *hanafuda* (a card game) and defeating him so soundly that Harima ended up betting (and losing) his very person. In this unlikely tale—for which Kurumada cites no documentary source as evidence—Harima and his entire gang were then bound over to Umeya like so many feudal vassals and shipped off to Singapore where he set them up in a Japanese-style inn. The proximity of this account in Kurumada's book to a longish interview with Umeya's grand-daughter, Kunigata Seiko, suggests that she may have been the source, but this remains unclear. Tanaka Jun'ichiro, in his *Nihon Eiga Hattatsu-shi*, meanwhile, states that Umeya first met Harima in Singapore, where he was already running an inn. Around 1905, Harima would enter cinema history as the owner of the first movie theater in Singapore (with close support from both Umeya and Pathe Freres) and as a pioneer film promoter in Thailand and Malaya. Later, when he moved back to Japan, he and some of his underlings worked for M. Pathé. Whether or not Harima and his men did indeed consider themselves to be the "possessions" of Umeya remains completely unclear. On the other hand, the story attests to the manner in which Umeya's biography has become encrusted with apparently legendary details which at this late date are increasingly difficult to separate from fact.

It is, however, clear that Umeya had a penchant for taking on significant personal responsibility for various individuals. Such was the case of his formal adoption, in 1894, of a Eurasian foundling, a girl he named Umeko and raised to adulthood. In 1896, he further increased his local prestige in Hong Kong by founding an orphanage for other mixed-blood children. In later years, he would turn his attention to the welfare of the rather large population of aging Japanese prostitutes (*karayuki*) in Hong Kong, helping establish a Buddhist temple (of the Higashi Honganji

sect) and cemetery for these individuals. As we shall see, Umeya would similarly try to imbue his persona as a film promoter with that of a patron of the public good.

In January 1898, Umeya was introduced to the Philippine independence leader, Emilio Aguinaldo, at a Hong Kong bicycle shop where the latter resided during his “voluntary” exile there. Under the terms of the truce signed with the Spanish authorities at Biyaknabato in Luzon, Aguinaldo had been obliged to leave his homeland in return for an amnesty for his fellow revolutionaries, along with a sizeable payment by the Spanish government as “reparations.” The truce, however, left Spain in control of the islands and all of his followers there had been forced to turn in their weapons. Although the revolution had achieved some moderate successes in the field (hence the truce), achievement of its goal of complete national independence was still far from realized.

As Umeya would report in his autobiographical pamphlet, *Waga Kage* (published by M. Pathé in 1916), he instinctively felt that the struggles being carried out by Aguinaldo and by Sun Yat Sen were two facets of the same phenomenon. They were both part of the greater struggle for Asian autonomy and modernization, the goals of the Meiji revolution. Sun Yat Sen apparently concurred with this view and it was not long before Umeya was engaging in the same sort of services he continued to provide Sun—the collection of funds and the surreptitious shipping of arms.

After the outbreak of hostilities between Spain and the United States the following month, Aguinaldo appointed Umeya as a liaison officer of his Revolutionary Army and hurried back to the Philippines. In August, during the last stages of the Filipino-American assault on Manila, Umeya put in an appearance near the front lines. We still have a photograph, probably taken in the city after its fall, of Umeya in his Filipino army uniform. Thirty-two at the time, he looks every bit the seasoned military man, complete with epaulettes, along with the “Kaiser-style” haircut with waxed Prussian-officer mustachios he made his trade-mark until late

middle age.

Although Aguinaldo and his group had fought alongside the Americans with the tacit understanding they would be allowed to set up an independent republic, they were cruelly disappointed when, during the peace process after the war, they found that their country was designated as a possession of the United States. Almost immediately, Aguinaldo's forces were in the field again, this time against their new rulers.

The ultimately unsuccessful struggle would carry on for years more, while Umeya and his new-found colleague, the swash-buckling fellow Pan-Asianist, Miyazaki Toten (宮崎滔天), worked to coordinate Aguinaldo's resource needs with those of Sun Yat Sen. In October 1899, he used his connections in Japan to help purchase a ship to send arms to the Filipino insurgents. Known in history as the Nunobiki-maru Incident, the result was disastrous failure—the old ship (an oversized yacht, actually) sank with all its cargo soon after leaving port.

In May of 1900 came the Boxer Rebellion and Umeya's attention once again came to be focused on the mainland. He actively supported Sun's efforts to capitalize on the unrest in Peiping (as Beijing was then called) by creating an uprising both on Taiwan and in south-central China. The latter revolt, in October, was on the verge of success when it had to be abandoned because its supply lines were cut. By 1902, the Chinese revolution seemed to be in hopeless disarray as conflict broke out among overseas Chinese, including those in Japan, between Sun's revolutionists and the faction supporting a party of expelled reformist Qing bureaucrats.

Around this time Umeya became involved in yet another unusual enterprise, conveying a *busshari* (仏舍利), or relic of the true Buddha, to a Japanese monastery. Up to this point, he had evinced little interest in religious matters and it is surprising that Iwamoto Chinawa, a Japanese military education officer attached to the Thai royal court, should approach him for this service. He was probably drawn to Umeya because he reputedly controlled a labyrinthine network of colleagues and acquaintances stretching to the highest places of government and was a

consummate artist at orchestrating these connections for whatever purpose he chose. As Col. Iwamoto explained to him, while on an inspection tour of temples in India, he had been approached by a Brahmin priest who told him of a discovery made during an excavation of an 11th century temple. Since the foreign archaeologists did not recognize it for what it was, a genuine bone of Buddha, he had managed to get possession of it and wanted it moved to a Buddhist country for safe-keeping. The object Iwamoto passed over to Umeya was a ten inch high reliquary shaped like a stone pagoda. Umeya then contacted the head of the Higashi Honganji sect and the object was brought to Japan amid great fanfare. Where it is lodged today, however, is a matter of mystery.

In 1903, Umeya's wife, Toku, whom he had married on one of his short excursions home a few years earlier and who was actually his "sister" through adoption by his father, moved in with him in Hong Kong. His live-in lover, Tomeko, discretely withdrew, moving back to Amoy before going to Australia. The daughter of a one-time samurai, Toku possessed enormous energy and business acumen and worked effectively at Umeya's side until his death. Her no-nonsense personality brought a certain amount of order to the ever-expanding circle of employees and hangers-on who attached themselves to her husband. On several notable occasions, she was able to save him from ruin brought on by his heedless generosity.

Within a year of her arrival, events took another dramatic turn. One April dawn the Umeyas were roused from sleep by an employee who breathlessly reported that Shokichi's activities had been betrayed to the Hong Kong authorities by one of his acquaintances and that he was in immanent danger of arrest. Soon the household was in turmoil as baggage was packed and an employee sent off to get tickets on the next steamer departing port. Almost as an afterthought, Umeya decided to include among baggage he would take with him back to Singapore, an Urban movie projector which had been sent to him some months earlier by his Singapore-based "vassal," Harima Katsutarō.

The traitor was a certain Dr. Kato Tadashiki who in the past had received various favors from Umeya-sensei. Although Umeya had every reason to be outraged at this act of ingratitude, he decided to put it out of mind once he arrived in Singapore and ordered his men to do the same. Back in Hong Kong, however, one of his underlings harbored such a grudge that in the end he sought out Kato and killed him using, appropriately enough, a Japanese sword. The assassin was arrested, deported to Japan, tried and imprisoned. Umeya would never forget his distinctly feudal obligation to this man, his retainer, and provided funds for him and then for his family after he died in prison.

Umeya's fortuitous inclusion of the projector proved a turning point in his career. Although he still had a wide circle of acquaintances and well-wishers in Singapore, despite his several years absence in Hong Kong, how was he to support himself and his dependants (he had an adopted daughter as well as a wife, remember), let alone feed the voracious beast of pan-Asian revolution? In Japan, film promotion had begun seven years earlier and there was even a full-fledged movie theatre, the Denkikan, operating in Tokyo's Asakusa entertainment district since 1902. Even in Singapore there had been a limited number of showings, usually a single evening in the mansion of one or another of the wealthy Chinese merchants. There was, of course, no actual movie theatre; in fact there were very few venues which could provide the amount of electrical current necessary to run a projector. Another unknown was the reaction of the populace. Could he build a large enough base of patrons, among the Malayan and Chinese locals as well as the foreign community, to generate a steady profit? Still, Umeya was used to business gambles and he threw himself into the new venture with his usual élan.

Along with the projector he had brought along the several short reels, probably scenic material, which came with the machine. Calling on his Singapore agent, Harima, he managed to get several more features and then set to work for places to exhibit. His known connection with Sun Yat Sen, the celebrated but as-yet unsuccessful revolutionary, drew to his side

many of the more progressive Chinese merchants and they were the ones who did the leg work. They procured a hall for him, mounted an advertising campaign and, when the issue of electricity arose, had a small generator sent down from Penang.

The showings were a sensation from the start. The early fare was limited to such subjects as “Scenery of Bohemia” and there was no question of employing a *benshi*-style “explainer” as was *de rigueur* for all showings in Japan, but there was an especially lively Malayan band to accompany performances. Before long, wealthy Malayan businessmen were traveling down from Kuala Lumpur to catch a glimpse of Umeya’s marvel. Success impelled the search for new features and Umeya sent off his minions to Hong Kong, and then to Osaka, Kobe and Tokyo. One tendrill of the Umeya network stretched all the way to Paris, and from there he began to import the latest features produced by Pathé Freres. Within the year, new shipments were arriving with almost every steamer from Europe.

This was the heyday of the French chase comedy—Pathé’s specialty—and the pratfalls and other physical humor came through without a problem to the largely Malay and Chinese audiences. Detective features and melodramas, however, were another story. With these, intertitles (rudimentary as they still were at the time) were necessary in order to follow the action. But since the enterprise depended almost exclusively on Pathé fare, they were all in French, a language spoken by very few of Britain’s colonial subjects. Umeya, who was after all a professional photographer, remedied the problem by rigging up a lab where he printed and spliced in new titles in English.

In the 1904-5 period, film features came into the hands of exhibitors by outright purchase, the rental system having yet to emerge. This created the problem of what to do with older stock which had already been played out. One can presume—although there is no documentary evidence for this—that Umeya sold a certain amount to other exhibitors plying the trade in nearby regions; India for instance was already fertile territory. We do know that by 1905, he had outfitted several groups, made up of his

stalwarts, and sent them up the peninsula for showings under tents in urban centers. Harima, who seems to have been operating as a semi-independent agent at this time, tried his hand in Bangkok and then moved on to the Lanna Thai north. According to Tanaka Jun'ichiro, film promotion in Thailand had already been pioneered by Watanabe Jisui (渡辺治水), a rubber plantation owner in Malaya who got into film promotion under a license from Yoshizawa Shoten. When Harima arrived, motion pictures already had a name in Thai, *nang yibpun* (Japanese pictures). Tanaka quotes Watanabe, as recalling having collaborated with Harima “on one or two occasions” in Chiang Mai before discretely pulling away. Apparently he got rumor of the former gangster's past.

As certainly was the case with film promoters in Japan, where the novelty of moving pictures had worn off and the business was beginning to face hard times, the Russo-Japanese of 1904-5 was a spectacular windfall for Umeya. The entire world was riveted by the epic collision of Asia's first modernizing power with one of the European superpowers. In Britain, America and Singapore as well, sympathy was strongly with the “plucky Japanese” and Asian nationals were particularly pleased with every one of their victories. Film crews had already been deployed to regions around Peiping during the 1900 Boxer rebellion, but with the rather more sophisticated equipment of 1904, coverage of the new war was far more extensive. When the first footage began to arrive from Japan and from the European production companies, Umeya quickly mounted special showings. Even the obviously false footage—featuring desultory land skirmishes or mock sea battles with model boats maneuvered by underwater wires (a specialty of the American Selig company)—drew ecstatic crowds, with many journeying great distances to attend. Umeya had for months been reaping handsome profits from the start, but now the box-office was making him a very wealthy man indeed. These profits, minus the very substantial donations to his various political causes, were plowed back into the business to buy new equipment and procure even more of the latest films of every sort. Among the latter was his growing

collection of color-tinted features produced by Pathé. In fact, he was doing such a brisk business with the company that it decided to open a small branch operation in the city in mid-1905 to facilitate the relationship.

Although his stay in Singapore had resulted in fabulous financial success, Umeya, perhaps at the prodding of his wife Toku, now began planning his triumphal return to Japan. In his autobiographical pamphlet, he claims that the original intention of the trip was merely to explore promotional opportunities there for his Singapore-based operations. But once on native ground, and buoyed by the furor his arrival had created, he decided to stay and attempt to elbow his way into the world of domestic Japanese promotion.

The Japanese public's renewed enthusiasm for cinema, thanks to the Russo-Japanese War footage, had made the business lucrative again. Film production too was picking up, sometimes under timber-reinforced tents with flaps to let in the sunlight, but most often shooting was still done out-of-doors, weather permitting. Although there were a few individuals who would emerge to make a few short features at the behest of the owner of a theatre troupe and then return to relative obscurity, the scene was still dominated by two of the great pioneers of the previous decade. One was Yokota Einosuke, the ambitious, autocratic and usually self-serving owner of Yokota Shokai (横田商会). He had been the first to promote the Lumieres Cinematographe, taking over the task from Inabata Katsutaro who brought it to Japan in the early spring of 1897, just when Cinematographes and Vitascope were pouring into the country from every direction.

Yokota's personality contrasted sharply with that of the textile executive, Inabata. A bold gambler where the latter was careful and fastidious, he had all the strengths and weaknesses of the self-educated man. Yokota was cut from much the same cloth as Umeya Shokichi and had plunged into late nineteenth-century America to make his own fortune. He had belonged to that breed of young Japanese called "America-rollers"

(アメゴロ), youths who worked their way across the continent taking odd jobs and picking up a rough-hewn education along the way. Returning with an x-ray machine, which he had purchased after first seeing it at the Chicago World's Fair, he promoted it as an attraction in a wooden hut grandly named Hall of Mysteries. Success in this enterprise had brought him to the attention of Inabata. After his early and very successful promotion of the Cinematographe, he found himself the head of a growing production company with branches in the Kanto, Kansai and the Kyushu regions. Around the time Umeya appeared in Tokyo, Yokota was preparing to approach the Kyoto theatre owner Makino Shozo to undertake the regular production of period-piece film dramas for his company.

The other dominant film promoter was Kawaura Ken'ichi of the Yoshizawa Company, who had been a rival of Yokota's in promoting the Cinematographe in the late nineties. Adopted through marriage into the wealthy Yoshizawa family, and thus inheriting the family company, Kawaura was reputed to have the Midas Touch. Striking out into the most unusual business ventures—selling *ukiyo-e* reproductions by mail to foreigners, being the first to market Japanese stamps to European and American collectors, making and selling attractively hand-colored lantern-slides to schools and civic groups—he made each of his ventures a model of success. When he took up the film promotion business, he already had a network of lantern-show exhibitors working the rural backwaters of the nation as well as the urban centers. Kawaura was therefore in an ideal situation when his old friend Cipione Braccialini, an Italian advisor to the Japanese army, turned up at the Yoshizawa offices in January 1897 with a pair of porters puffing up the stairs under the weight of a huge packing case with the Cinematographe and a stock of films inside. In the following years, he continued to collect projectors from all the major manufacturers in order to give his enterprise an edge in its rivalry with Yokota company. Pioneering the concept of “newsfilms” in 1903, he sent off teams of cameramen to the front during the recent war, as had, of course, Yokota. Kawaura too was now considering how to launch his company into the

full-time production of films.

Therefore, although Umeya faced seasoned rivals in film *promotion* when he arrived back in Japan in the summer of 1905, film *production* was still a relatively fallow field open to new-comers.

After his splashy and financially very successful debut at the Shin Tomiza Theatre, he set about securing business quarters for himself in the capital city and finally settled on a large mansion in Kabuto-cho near the Ichigaya station. His living quarters were on the expansive first floor, with views out onto several enclosed gardens while the upper story was initially used as a warehouse for his films. From the start, the establishment swarmed with employees as well as the same assortment of foreign émigrés, political activists and adventurers as he had had around him in Singapore. Even as he shouldered the burden of starting up a new company, he continued to devote large amounts of money toward the establishment of a Chinese-language magazine, *Minbao* (民報), which was published in Tokyo and distributed to the émigré population. With articles by Sun and other revolutionists, it quickly became a must-read publication among young Chinese intellectuals based in Japan and even on the mainland.

During the first months, business activities focused on importation and exhibition of films. Initially the latter was carried out in the larger cities, but it was not long before Umeya had outfitted bands of exhibitors who took his ware out into the provinces. In time this became a very popular activity among the younger employees since, out in the countryside, they tended to be looked upon as celebrities in their own right, making them the object of the affections of the local girls.

In late 1905, M. Pathé began film production with a film featuring geisha dances shot in a restaurant garden in Meguro. Umeya himself turned the crank of the Urban camera he had purchased less than a month before. For his next project he selected a stage-play, *Tengo Koji*, which was still on the boards at a theatre in Kanda. His third film was even more prestigious, since it featured the great Kawakami Otojiro, the founder of

the *shinpa* (“new faction”) form of drama. The Yoshizawa Company had already shot the Kabuki version of *Tainanko*, and he therefore decided to do a *shinpa* version of the same play. After its successful release, Umeya and Kawakami found they shared basically the same political opinions and they became lifetime friends.

By late 1906, film production—still largely carried out under the open sky—had become an essential arm of the M. Pathé enterprise and the film warehouse on the second floor of his mansion was converted into the company’s development lab. Visitors would invariably be struck by the acrid chemical smells permeating the entire mansion and the surrounding grounds. Focusing on films with an unusual twist, he did one featuring an all-female sumo group. Audiences were fascinated and two years later he employed the all-female Nakamura Kahen Ichiza to make a production of the Kabuki play *Soga no Yauchi*. In this era, real film actresses were virtually unknown in Japan, the cinema industry having chosen to adopt the Kabuki convention of using *onnagata* (called *oyama*, in film) female impersonators. The movie proved to be such a hit, M. Pathé did a string of features with the same troupe. Each showing was a gala event with musicians, sound-effects men (who rumbled sheet-metal and clattered wooden or metal objects). The girls themselves too reproduced the songs and dialog from behind the screen.

For the first two years of its existence, M. Pathé films were shown either in small theatres specially rented for a short-run of performances or, as was inevitably the case in smaller towns, under portable tents. In early 1907, Umeya procured his first permanent venue when he purchased the Izutsu, an old *yose* (a kind of hut used by small Kabuki troupes) in Osaka, and outfitted it for regular film showings. By the end of 1908, he had three theatres in Tokyo—the Dai-ichi Bunmeikan in Ushigomi, the Dai-ni Bunmeikan in Azabu and the Kinen Taikan in the Ueno Park area. Over the next few years, his chain continued to grow until it could boast several theatres in each of the major cities as well as at least one in most smaller urban centers. In even smaller towns, he would sometimes share

ownership with one or the other of his rivals.

In late 1906, Umeya decided the hallmark of his promotion-distribution enterprise should be “public benefit” and he began seriously importing documentary-type features aimed at educating the masses about the principles of modern science. From the beginning, the Lumieres brothers had regarded their invention as a recording device to capture “*actualités*”—the shapes, movements and rhythms of things as they really were. They tended to see it as a tool for the diffusion of culture and scientific knowledge. Thereafter, a sizeable bulk of their substantial production was devoted to such *actualité* features. Later, in both England and France, much effort was devoted to the development of cameras capable of being used under water or affixed to a microscope.

By 1906, the era of “educational film” was already in full swing. According to Kurumada, it was Sun Yat Sen who first suggested to Umeya the educational possibilities of cinema. He may well have had in mind features intended to enlighten the public about the aspirations of his own movement—while never a great military strategist, he was without a doubt a dedicated, consummate propagandist. In any case, the idea clearly struck Umeya as an opportunity to present himself to his countrymen in the role of public benefactor and he threw himself into this line of activity with his characteristic intensity. It is hard to imagine how he thought he could earn back the tremendous investment he made in collecting and promoting such features as *Hermit Crabs* or *Diseases of the Nervous System* (to name just two of the thousands of titles listed in a catalog, *Katsudo Jissha Hyakka Jiten*, issued by M. Pathé in 1911), but he stuck with the project until the company was dissolved in 1912.

As a matter of fact, one of Umeya’s very early ventures into public enlightenment cinema was crowned with a success much heralded in the press. In late 1906, the Yamagata region was undergoing a serious cholera epidemic, with thousands sick and scores already dead. Public health officials in the prefecture were becoming desperate when Umeya approached them with the idea of taking the film *Research on Microbes* (a

German production) on a tour throughout all the towns and hamlets in their region. As a result, the tour went ahead with a health official part of the program to explain the nature of microscopic life forms and the need to boil water to stop the spread of infection. When the epidemic died out the following year, Umeya and his film was given full credit for the favorable turn of events.

M. Pathé itself quickly grew into a prominent producer of documentaries of all sorts, in the fields of science, culture as well as topics of current interest. In the late 1909, for instance, the public had been shocked by the assassination in Manchuria of Ito Hirobumi. A prime minister on several occasions, Ito had been one of the original architects of the Meiji state and, as such, a dominant member of the *genro*, the inner-circle of advisors to the Emperor. However, when Umeya's cameramen applied for permission to shoot the funeral within the Palace grounds, the Imperial Household Agency, apparently sharing the widely held notion that motion pictures were a form of new-fangled vulgarity, contemptuously refused, although they did allow free access to the official still photographers. Undiscouraged, a pair of M. Pathé cameramen secreted themselves within the ground the night before the funeral and, in black tie and tails, joined the cortege to record the event from close proximity. When they were discovered by a security agent who tried to confiscate their footage, they succeeded in substituting an undeveloped reel for the exposed one. Its release in November became a national sensation.

In 1911, M. Pathé elated patrons by the most dramatic documentary footage of the entire era when a cameraman, Taizumi Yasunao, was put aboard the *Kainan-Maru* bound for Antarctica. Umeya had earned this privilege for his company by donating four thousand yen (a huge amount of money for the time) toward the expedition. He had, in fact, been a sponsor from the start and was a close friend of Capt. Shirose, who headed the expedition. Europe and the United States were just then vying for the honor of being the first to reach the South Pole—roughly the equivalent

of being the first to put a man on the Moon. Japan's entry into the competition marked an historic first; never before had a non-white nation competed on equal footing in such a venture. The ship departed in July 1910 and its return the following year, having achieved at least partial success, was considered an event of vast national importance, indeed one of the crowning achievements of the Meiji state. When the film was developed, however, it was discovered that the images had deteriorated badly in the heat during the ship's passage of the equator. Even the scenes that could be retrieved tended to be blotchy. Still, when they were finally released in M. Pathé theatres around the nation, the enthusiasm of audiences rivaled that of those who had wildly cheered the footage from the front during the Russo-Japanese war. The short clips still available for viewing today—of massive, startlingly white icebergs and of expedition members cavorting with a herd of solemn yet fearless penguins—are in fact quite beautiful.

By 1911—which actually marks the last year of M. Pathé's existence as an independent company—Umeya had a full-fledged movie studio up and running in Okubo, a largely uninhabited region immediately adjacent to Shinjuku. When he first moved his operations there in 1908, production of drama films was carried out among the trees and garden paths of the huge mansion, formerly owned by an aristocrat, which stood on the property and which now became the Umeya's new family residence. Scenes using artificial sets were shot in a large, canvass-roofed hut. In a location not far removed—the still densely-wooded Meguro region—Yoshizawa's Kawaura had already thrown up a similar studio in 1907. In 1909, he transformed it into a state-of-the-art production facility by building Japan's all-glass shooting stage. Umeya followed suite with his own all-glass stage in 1910.

Drama film production in those days centered on *shinpa* melodramas, the most common variety being rather lachrymose tales about the troubled lives of women in Japan's male-dominated society. Iwafuji Shisetsu, who was also M. Pathé's leading *benshi* and superintendent of the company's

benshi-training school, was also its most accomplished filmmaker. In his *shinpa* tragedy *Hototogisu* (1909), he experimented with editing techniques just then coming to the fore in the U.S., by cutting back and forth in time. His war story, *Yamatozakura* (1909), was also permeated with sadness, this time for the “little people,” common foot soldiers, caught in the teeth of a war far beyond their comprehension. The theme apparently rang true to contemporary audiences, despite the film’s rather primitive visual effects.

Throughout its six or so years of existence, the financial fortunes of M. Pathé remained in a perpetual state of disarray, reproducing the boom-and-bust career of its founder. Not only were profits regularly diverted to support Sun Yat Sen, Umeya’s managerial style often defied fiscal commonsense. Like the inveterate gambler he was in private life (he was a skilled devotee of mahjong, for instance), he would invest great chunks of the company’s operating capital in new ventures as the inspiration struck him, only some of which paid off. Even on these occasions—and he did have a surprising number of successes—the proceeds would have to be passed on to clamoring creditors. With the entrance in 1910 of another powerful rival, Kobayashi Kisaburo’s Fukuhodo Co., the field was becoming overcrowded at just the time when the whole industry was entering on one of its periodic recessions.

In the winter of 1910-11, with his company now ranking fourth strongest in a field of four, Umeya was stuck by another of those inspirations which periodically set his mind afire. Some twenty months before, the most powerful American production companies had banded together under joint Edison-Biograph leadership in a protective trade association called the Motion Picture Patents Association, or MPPC. In 1910, the new cartel ruled supreme, absorbing or crushing all rivals. With its power and influence even being felt in Europe, it looked very much like the wave of the future for the industry worldwide. Umeya, whose ideas now rolled and billowed like storm clouds, seized on the idea of dissolving all four of the existing Japanese companies, his own included, and

recombining them into one vast monopoly, which he dubbed the Greater Japan Film Equipment Manufacturing Company (大日本フィルム機会製造会社). Once again he began manipulating his famous network of contacts to draw in aristocrats, high-ranking politicians and even *zaibatsu* executives as trustees of his new enterprise. The first meetings of this group, where they incorporated and began issuing stock, were reported prominently in the press. Out of almost nothing, Umeya had launched a revolution which would open a new chapter in Japanese film history.

Dissolving his own company and selling it to the new holding company for six hundred thousand yen (thus making a reasonable profit, part of which he again sent to Sun, who had just become “interim president” of the fledgling Chinese republic), he and his colleagues set about convincing the other companies to join in. Although the press tended to herald these developments as the ineluctable movement of the industry toward an American-style future, the attitude of the other companies was largely negative. A few months earlier, when a group calling itself Japan-Press approached Yokota with the same idea (a move apparently unrelated to Umeya’s activity) Yokota had dismissed it out of hand.

To overcome the resistance, Umeya took out ads in which he opined: “This is truly a Warring States period for Japanese cinema [...] Fierce competition has caused all of us to fall back on low-brow, vulgar entertainments, rather than providing the public with the quality of cinema it needs and deserves. If the present trend continues, over-all qualitative improvement will never be achieved, thus assuring the mutual collapse of all our companies. The writing is on the wall. It gives me the shivers to think of it.”

Whatever his original motives—and one suspects that these included financial distress, a passionate involvement with the historic events just then engulfing China in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Qing imperial state, and perhaps even a certain amount of boredom with the day-to-day running of his own company—Umeya seems to have come to believe in his own propaganda. To everyone around,

he exuded confidence that the other companies would see the reasonableness of his proposition. A more tangible mark of this confidence was his decision to underwrite the daily running expenses of the new corporation out of pocket.

Since Kawaura of the Yoshizawa company seemed the least averse—having actually named a possible buy-out figure of one million—he became the first target for intensive negotiations and on March 15 (1911) he was brought into the trust at the cost of 750 thousand. Then, within days, Yokota became the next target. Kawaura's capitulation had of course put him under great pressure and so he set afoot a scheme to make the best of the inevitable and to artificially elevate the ultimate sale value of his enterprise. It had already been agreed that a company's value would be calculated in terms of the amount of footage of exposed film stock it possessed. Therefore, he sent out word to Makino Shozo, his studio chief in Kyoto, to immediately set to work churning out films: "Do one a day, if possible and quality be damned!" On March 30, Yokota was bought out for 750,000.

Fukuhodo's Kobayashi Kisaburo was therefore the last man left standing. A businessman as wily as they come, he was a past (and future) master of giant corporate maneuvering. Furthermore, he had on his side a keen perception of the absolute illogicality of the entire scheme, one which would soon be validated as correct. He took out ads of his own to point out that the overt aim of the trust, the elimination of competition in the industry, would lead to low quality films and the stagnation of the entire industry. Each ad ended with the declaration, "I will never give in to pressure! I will never be bought out!" One thing he did not advertise was the fact that he had secretly obtained the Japanese patent to a color film system—involving red, blue, green and yellow filters rotating in front of the camera and then the projector—from which he fully expected to make a killing.

Kobayashi did eventually sell out, in May. The price was 976,000 (plus a takeover of its company debts). Considering the fact that Fukuhodo

was still only about fifteen months old at the time and was not yet completely solvent, Kobayashi had scored a coup of sorts and had managed to come away with the largest personal profit of any of the four company presidents.

The buy-outs had cost the new company far more than originally planned. What is more, Mitsubishi, which had promised to back the new concern with its stupendous financial bulk, pulled out a few weeks before it was formally inaugurated. On July 28, the trust company—renamed at the last minute *Nihon Katsudou Shashin Kabushikigaisha* (“Nikkatsu,” for short)—was launched onto troubled seas.

The desertion by Mitsubishi caused Nikkatsu stock prices to plummet and since Umeya had taken the lead in pushing the stocks to many of his acquaintances, he felt obliged to reimburse them as best he could. On January 1, 1913, he decided to quit the new company which he himself had done so much to launch and on whose board of trustees he held a very prominent position (Goto Shinpei being the titular company president). Although he characterized his retirement as an act of penance to the still-unreimbursed share-holders, it appears he had actually grown suddenly weary of his central position in Japanese film production and production. Thereafter his film-related activity focused on projects commissioned by various independent sponsors.

Although the subsequent career of Nikkatsu is beyond the scope of this paper, we might note that Kobayashi Kisaburo had indeed been correct in his prediction. Older film historians with an actual knowledge of the films produced in Nikkatsu’s early period (none of which have survived in their entirety for us to see today) recall them as being of distinctly lower quality when compared to those produced during the time when the four companies were operating independently. Tanaka Jun’ichiro suggests that the major reason for this was the bickering and disarray on the set. Nikkatsu was riven by factionalism among the former employees of the original companies, each of which had had its own, quite different procedures for turning out a film. Within a couple of years, all of the old

company heads—with the notable exception of Yokota, who became company president—withdraw. Kobayashi Kisaburo, for instance, established a new rival company, *Tennnen Katsudo Shashin* (“Tenkatsu”), to make films using his secretly-held color film patent rights.

Umeya had to struggle until 1920 to pay off his debts to his original share-holders. In the meantime he continued as a marginal presence in the industry with a small-scale production company named “M. Kashii” (the “Kashii” being a katakana version of his wife’s family name). In 1913, former employees who continued to feel intense loyalty to their old *oyabun* had joined him in its establishment. From the start it was little more than a part-time venture, dabbling in the promotion of educational features and making a few films to advertise various business concerns.

1913 was also the year in which the Umeyas had a very prominent houseguest—Sun Yat Sen. Although the latter had been named “interim president” after the revolution of 1911, Yuan Shih Kai, the powerful leader of the Baiyang military clique, managed to unseat him and took over the reigns of government himself. Since Yuan had already assassinated Sun’s vice-president, it was clear that his life too was in danger, and so he found himself once again in exile. Arriving in Japan in secret, the date of which is unclear, he was eventually taken into the Umeya household on August 13, 1913, according to Kurumada. We do know Sun’s wedding to Soong Ching-ling was celebrated at the mansion in early 1914, but when he departed is not known for sure.

Two years after Sun’s death in Beijing in 1925, Umeya was seized with the ambition to use his M. Kashii company to make a great docudrama about his Chinese friend and colleague. With Japanese machinations on the continent already creating great tension with Chiang Kai Shek’s Kuomintang government, he saw it as a means of demonstrating Japanese friendship toward China—in these final years of his life, he had become, if anything, even more devoted to politics and amity between the Chinese and Japanese peoples. In 1927, he began

collecting funds for the film and by 1930 had authored a script (still extant) for his “all-talkie” project. As usual, the plans were grandiose, and unrealistic. He envisioned an international cast including Japanese, Chinese and English actors and a shooting budget rivaling the biggest productions then being made in Japan. Needless to say, it came to nothing. M. Kashii by this time was in dire financial straits (at one point Shochiku was going to take it over, but then backed out) and by 1931 was little more than a phantom.

After the Manchurian Incident of 1931, Sino-Japanese relations were in deep crisis. As the army, moving on its own accord, proceeded to annex Jehol and other regions near Beijing, the scent of all-out war was clearly in the air. Umeya, who continued to have close personal relations with many Kuomintang officials and with high-ranking anti-war political figures in Tokyo, tried to play the role of go-between in order to achieve some sort of compromise. In 1933, he sent a personal letter to Chiang himself telling him that he had certain high-level political backing to open a dialogue between their two countries. The contents of Chiang’s reply, some weeks later, were apparently disclosed to the Japanese military. Officers in the High Command were outraged by such meddling and marked Umeya for retribution.

Sometime after one p.m. on February 28, 1933, a party of Kempeitai military police marched in on Umeya as he lay in bed suffering from a particularly severe attack of asthma, an ailment he’d had since childhood. They demanded to know the details of his relationship with Chiang and the names of his backers in Japan. Some days later, he had to present himself at the office of the Thought Police (*tokko keisatsu*) where he underwent a grilling which made it clear they regarded him a serious political criminal. The press got news of his detention and assuming it to be a form of arrest, blared the news to the nation: “KEMPEITAI REACT TO A TREASONOUS LETTER: What is Umeya Shokichi, really?!” Other papers called him a traitor outright, while suggesting that he was also involved in the drug trade.

Umeya had a few secret sympathizers among the political elite, however, and it seems they pulled strings to smooth over the incident. In the end, he was forced to write “an apology to the nation” for his activity, after which he was released. No further charges were brought against him.

The next year, Umeya was again trying to play the role of go-between and the foreign minister, Hirota Koki, apparently felt he could be of use. In the late fall of that year, Umeya was invited in to discuss a trip to China as an unofficial emissary.

Leaving his house at 7 a.m., on November 15, he went to the station of the intra-city train line. Shortly before his train arrived, he suddenly collapsed and had to be carried back to his mansion. For about a year before his collapse he had been suffering from severe abdominal pains which had been diagnosed as an ulcer. It was in fact the final stages of cancer. Umeya lingered on in pain for about a week and finally succumbed on November 23, 1934.

At his funeral, his casket was draped with two flags, the Japanese flag and that of the Republic of China. Displayed prominently next to his black bordered photograph was a quote from the Last Will and Testament of Sun Yat Sen, in which Umeya is singled out for special thanks for his loyalty and service to the Chinese revolution.

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