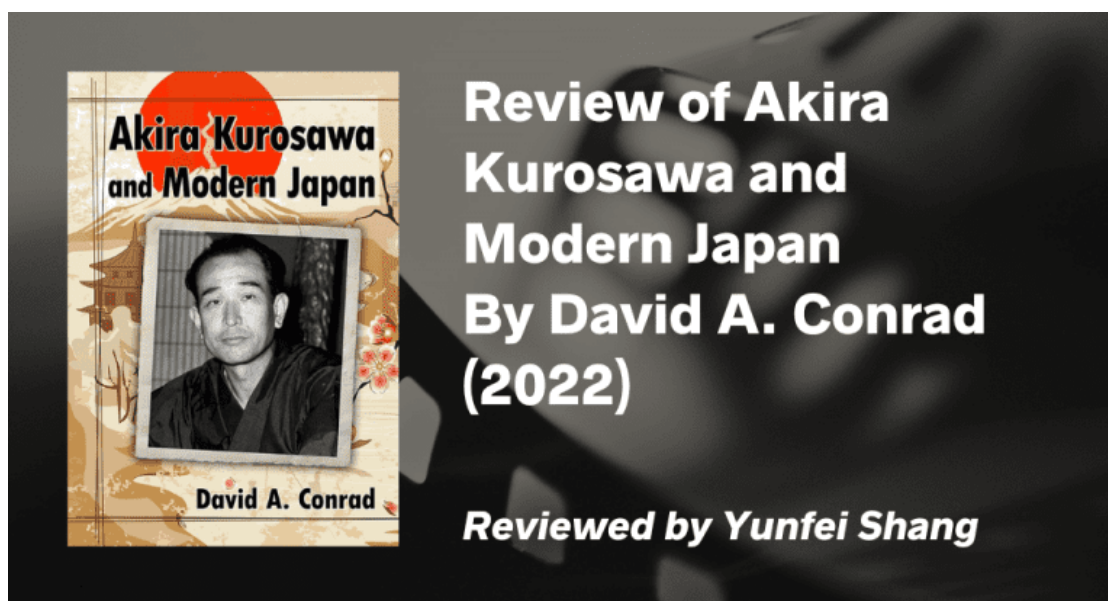


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Review of Akira Kurosawa and Modern Japan (2022)

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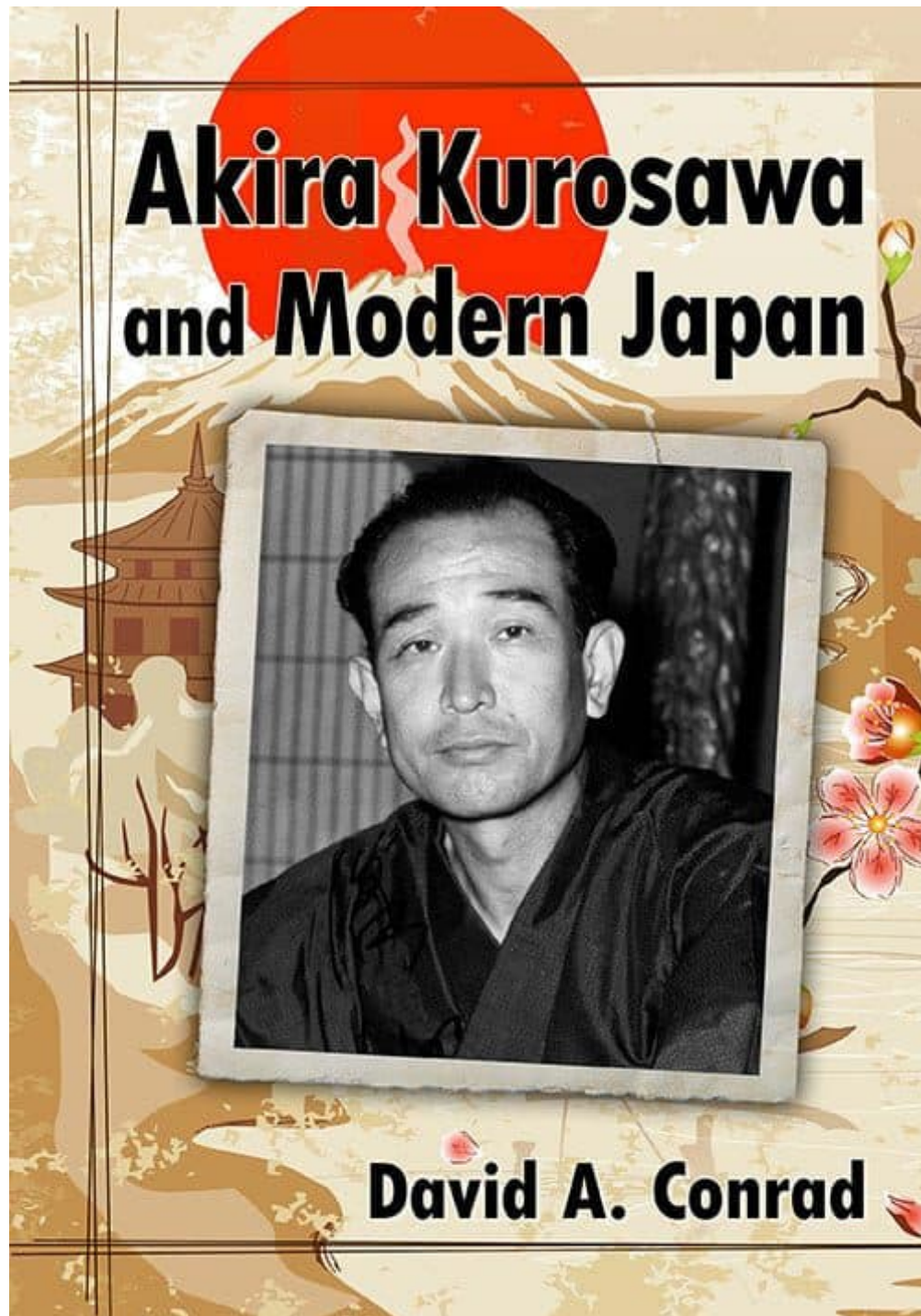
By Yunfei Shang

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) must be one of the most written about directors in film history. There are over 20 books in English exclusively devoted to Kurosawa. These include Donald Richie's *The Films of Kurosawa* (1965), David Desser's *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa*, (1983), Stephen Prince's *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (1991), Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro's *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000), just to name a few—not to mention studies in which Kurosawa serves as a crucial point of reference.

As the first Japanese director to win at an international film festival and the most well-known out of Japan, Kurosawa has attracted prolonged interest and extensive studies not only because of his

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While many existing studies strive to articulate the enticing form and aesthetics of this film master, historian David Conrad's *Akira Kurosawa and Modern Japan* (2022) contributes to the large body of Kurosawa scholarship by putting the turmoil and transformation of Japanese society in the latter half of the 20th century under the spotlight when reading Kurosawa's films.



appreciation of Kurosawa, and he seamlessly interweaves biographical information, anecdotes, and sociopolitical context into his readings. Each one of Kurosawa's films, in their own way, provides a window into a specific moment of Japan's modern history and captures the *zeitgeist* of that moment. In this way, Conrad sees even the "historical dramas" (*jidaigeki*) of the director as "contemporary drama" (*gendai geki*), and as he aptly puts it, all of Kurosawa's films could be treated as "products of the *jidai* (meaning "period" or "era" in Japanese) that make up Japan's dramatic, painful, inspirational, contradictory 20th century" (1).

The author often opens a new chapter by laying out the social backdrop and historical events around the year when the film was released, before diving into the film. Kurosawa's career spanned the Shōwa era (1926-1989), the reign of emperor Hirohito, to the Heisei era (1989-2019), with the accession of his son Akihito. Conrad divided the director's oeuvre into four periods: "The War Years" includes 3 films from *Sanshirō Sugata* (1943) to *Sanshirō Sugata Part II* (1945), "The Occupation Years" with 10 films from *The Men who Treaded on the Tiger's Tail* (1945) to *Ikiru* (1952), "The Miracle Years" includes 10 films from *Seven Samurai* (1954) to *Redbeard* (1965), and "The Global Years" with 7 films from *Dodesukaden* (1970) to *Mādadayo* (1993). This reminds us that this study is as much about Kurosawa the auteur as it is about modern Japan.

Each chapter deals with one film, and the author reads the scenes, images and dialogues closely to excavate details in which history seeps through. Several recurring motifs come to the fore in Conrad's study of the correlation between Kurosawa and modern Japan. First is the U.S.–Japan relationship. The role played by the U.S. in shaping Japan's postwar domestic and foreign policies cannot be overemphasized, and Conrad maps out a well-rounded picture of the changing power dynamic between the two nations through Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* (1948), *The Bad Sleeps Well* (1960), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Kagemusha* (1980), among others.

The second key issue is censorship, from the wartime military government (1940-1945) to the Occupation forces (1945-1952) and the post-Occupation Japanese government. Referencing both the production records and interviews with the director, Conrad identifies the varying nature and logic of these different censorship regimes and the ways that Kurosawa navigated multiple transitions from one phase to another or within one dominant regime. For example, Conrad points out that despite the fact that "feudal themes" were prohibited after the beginning of the Occupation, *Rashōmon* (1950), a film set in premodern Japan and containing obvious "feudalistic" content, was produced and made its way onto the big screen only because the start of the Korean War (1950-1953) had rendered it imperative for American censors to

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The third topic central to Conrad's reading of Kurosawa is the shifting gender politics of modern Japan. From Taishō women's rights movements in the 1920s to women working in the military factories during wartime, from the *pan-pan* phenomenon (i.e., street prostitutes who served mainly the GIs) during the Occupation to the emerging feminist activists since the 1960s, Conrad shows how Kurosawa engages through his films with matters of women's rights and status in modern Japan.

One of the merits of Conrad's approach is the ways in which he reads the social dynamics and history of 20th-century Japan out of Kurosawa's *jidaigeki* (films situated in premodern Japan before mid-19th century). He argues persuasively that "*jidaigeki* imitate the past but tell us about their present." (101) For example, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) takes place in 1586 *Sengoku* Japan and tells a story focused on seven masterless samurai helping farmers repel a group of bandits who harass the village and loot their crops. Despite the temporal distance between the story's setting (1586) and the time when the film was made (1954), Conrad thoughtfully demonstrates how the 16th-century peasants' conundrum in the film mirrors that of Japanese farmers working under American's land reform policies after 1947. Moreover, the feudal caste structure between peasant and samurai in the film sheds light on the enduring social inequalities and fixed class hierarchy in post-Occupation Japan when the nation as a whole got wealthier. The elaborate village defense plan and the *ad hoc* soldiers in the film offer a political parallel to Japan's *de facto* army, the Self Defense Force, established with the help of the U.S. in 1950 as a reaction to Korean War.





*Three actors in period clothing pose for a photo in front of an American-made Jeep during the filming of Kurosawa's historical drama *The Men Who Treaded on the Tiger's Tail* (1945). Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

This kind of analysis is what makes this book distinct from both the conventional historical textbooks and even film studies. It focuses on the contextual dimension of an auteur's oeuvre without ever losing sight of the films themselves. It uses film as a portal leading its readers to an understanding of the entangled and layered nature of wartime and postwar Japanese history. Readers learn both political and historical "hard facts" but also aspects of Japanese culture including traditional wedding attire, garbage disposal regulations, folk monsters, evolving beauty standards, and even the Japanese obsession with cats.

Akira Kurosawa and Modern Japan is a historically- and culturally-grounded study of the director. It is both an informative and enjoyable read for anyone who finds the director's works appealing and wish to know more about the historical and social condition that made them possible.



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and drama in mainland China since the late 1970s.

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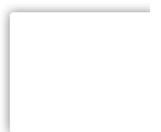
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