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YAKUZA LAW

やくざ刑罰史 私刑

Yakuza keibatsu-shi – rinchi

Original release date: 27 June 1969

92 minutes

CAST

Directed by **Teruo Ishii**

Screenplay by **Teruo Ishii, Masahiro Kakefuda**

Produced by **Shigeru Okada, Kanji Amai**

Director of Photography **Shin Furuya**

Lighting by **Hiroshi Watada**

Audio recording by **Hiroo Nozu**

Production Design by **Norimichi Ikawa**

Music by **Sou Kaburagi**

Edited by **Tadao Kanda**

Assistant Director **Tomoomi Yoda**

STORY 1

Ryutaro Otomo Tomozo

Bunta Sugawara Tsune

Renji Ishibashi Viper

Shinichiro Hayashi Shohei

Hiroshi Miyauchi Shinkichi

Ichiro Sugai Boss

Yoshiko Fujita Oren

Miki Obana Setsu

Yukie Kagawa Otami

STORY 2

Minoru Oki Shuji Ogata

Toyozo Yamamoto Amamiya

Masumi Tachibana Sayo

Goro Naniwa Boss Arakida

Hisaya Ito Iwagiri

Ryota Minowada Mino

Ryo Nishida, Ryoji Kozuki Arakida Clan Members

Kyonosuke Murai Boss Yoda

Yoshiaki Yamashita, Shunji Sasaki Yoda clan members

STORY 3

Teruo Yoshida Hirose

Takashi Fujiki Shimazu

Ken Sawaaki Boss Hashiba

Yumiko Katayama Harumi

Hideo Ko, Shotaro Hayashi, Sachio Miyagi, Shogo Igami, Kiyoshi Yoshida, Misao

Kawasaki Hashiba Clan Members

Kenji Ikeda Fukase

Toshio Chiba Boss Omura





THE LONG HARM OF THE LAW

by Tom Mes

In 1968 and 1969, director Teruo Ishii churned out no less than eight films that have collectively become known as his 'torture cycle'. Starting with 1968's *Shogun's Joy of Torture (Tokugawa onna keibatsushi)*, each took the form of a compendium of three tangentially connected stories, intended as accounts of supposedly genuine torture techniques that were used on all manner of offenders during the feudal Edo era, the period in which the Tokugawa dynasty of shoguns kept Japan under its collective iron rule for more than 250 years.

Yakuza Law (Yakuza keibatsu-shi: Rinchi!, 1969) is something of an odd one out in this cycle, in more than one respect. The penultimate entry in the regular series (Ishii's 1973 *Bohachi Bushido: Code of the Forgotten Eight [Bohachi bushido: poruno jidaigeki]* is considered by some as a late final addition), it firstly broadens the fanciful historiography's reach to include more modern times, and secondly it exchanges the playful erotic grotesqueries of its forbears for the testosterone-driven, poker-faced action so typical of the genre mode to which the film's title alludes.

No Sex Please?

In my essay that accompanied Arrow's characteristically sumptuous release of the director's 1969 entry *Orgies of Edo (Zankoku ijô gyakutai monogatari: Genroku onna keizu)*, I noted that Teruo Ishii had been more at home making contemporary gang and action pictures when Toei asked him to helm *Shogun's Joy of Torture (Tokugawa onna keibatsu-shi, 1968)*, which the studio intended as an answer to the growing popularity of independently-made erotic 'pink' films. In *Yakuza Law*, this prior aspect of the director's – otherwise quite diverse – skill set comes back to the fore. Compared to the often phantasmagorical spectacles



he delivered in the previous films in this series, *Yakuza Law* comes off as taut and robust. It is really only during the opening credit sequence that the film wallows in the kinds of blood-gushing, skin-scorching shenanigans that characterised the previous entries, leaving the body of the film to fall more or less squarely within yakuza genre conventions – with an occasional bit of gleeful physical abuse to add spice.

As if to illustrate this point, *Yakuza Law* features a number of familiar faces from the various brands of yakuza film that were churned out before and after by Toei, the studio for which this genre formed a hallmark and house style: there is Minoru Oki, the straight-laced hero of this film's second episode, who was a familiar supporting staple of the *ninkyō eiga* – the classic 'chivalrous' style of period-set gang film – and in the first tale we recognise Bunta Sugawara, who would later become the face of the 1970s contemporary 'true account' style of yakuza movie, but can be found here in *Yakuza Law* still playing second fiddle and wearing an Edo-period top knot (which, it must be said, nicely emphasises that razor sharp pair of cheekbones).

A Matter of Honour

Following the narrative template set by the previous instalments, *Yakuza Law* is divided into three narratively unconnected episodes. While the earlier torture films were universally set during the Edo period, each of these episodes here takes place in a different age: the Edo period of the shogunate, the early 20th Century Taishō era, and the post-World War II period of economic affluence, thus with each successive tale bringing us closer to what was then the present day. (Ishii's next and last official entry in the series is somewhat innocuously titled *Love and Crime* in English, but its Japanese title, *Meiji, Taishō, Showa: A History of Bizarre Women's Crimes*, indicates that it repeated the temporal structure of *Yakuza Law*.)





Where the previous entries in the series built their plots toward a climactic *pièce de résistance* of wilfully inflicted agony, *Yakuza Law* sticks to the convention of the *giri-ninjo* conflict that so marks the classic yakuza film, in which the protagonist's choice between his obligations to the gang code (*giri*) and his personal belief in what is righteous (*ninjo*) will eventually dictate his actions and thereby demonstrate his *jingi* – his honourable human nature. In essence, it is the choice between doing what is asked and doing what is right. Nevertheless, death is the inevitable result here too, though in these climactic moments it is dealt by the more conventionally straightforward means of *katana* sword or bullets. The narrative structure of *giri-ninjo* somehow always forces the only two good guys in a story, at that point still bound by their obligations to their gangs, to face each other in a duel to the death – the injustice of which propels the survivor to do the right thing and give the evildoers (who have of course flagrantly broken their own rules throughout) their bloody comeuppance.

The aspect of *giri* serves as the jumping-off point to each of *Yakuza Law's* three stories, which all begin with an article from the titular yakuza law (although these rules, as presented here, are about as genuine as the rituals of native tribes in Italian cannibal movies). “The yakuza are groups of men bound by ironclad rules,” as the narrator reminds us. Break those rules and punishment shall ensue: being roasted on a spit or crushed by a steam shovel or branded in the face with a red-hot iron, if we are to believe the montage of fanciful execution techniques that accompany the film's opening titles.

It's a Man's World

The yakuza being a rigidly homosocial, male-only society, the film also departs from the template set by its predecessors in that all its victims are male (or nearly, as one gangster is encased in concrete together with his moll, played by Yumiko Katayama, who as a redhead would become a fixture of Toei's pinky violence films and will be best known among Western viewers as Meiko Kaji's undercover cellmate in the first *Female Prisoner Scorpion* film). Thus it throws a



bit of a spanner in the works of those who would condemn Ishii's torture films as uniformly misogynist – though it must be said that misogyny and sexism are hardly rare in populist fare of this period, least of all in Toei productions: the few women that do appear in *Yakuza Law* are either the demure, devoted girl-next-door types that have long formed a Japanese cultural ideal of femininity or they are sex kittens that will jump into bed with any man who holds a modicum of power – or a good haircut.

Throughout the film's first two chapters, characters – male and female – appear strictly in the guise of familiar genre stereotypes. One imagines this to be the inevitable result of the omnibus format, which leaves little room for character development, but then again, character development was never a particular discerning characteristic of Teruo Ishii's films, god bless him. In the first tale, for instance, a very young-looking Renji Ishibashi – best known among Western audiences for his later turns as perverse gang bosses in such films as Takashi Miike's *Gozu* (*Gokudō kyōfu dai-gekijō: Gozu*, 2003) – plays the duplicitous coward role to the hilt, an incorrigible weasel eager to ingratiate himself by means of backstabbing and lies. After one particularly bloody battle, he hacks his sword into a corpse to cover up the fact that he has been sitting out the fighting under cover of nearby shrubbery – and promptly receives a bonus when the boss admires his bloody and nicked blade. Director Ishii throws in a few dissonants during the last of the three tales, though, notably when he casts two of his favourite faces, *Horrors of Malformed Men* (*Kyōfu kikei ningen: Edogawa Rampo zenshū*, 1969) star Teruo Yoshida as a suave, enigmatic assassin reminiscent of Jo Shishido from Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, released two years prior to *Yakuza Law*) and Hideo Ko as a yoyo-brandishing gangster with a penchant for checkerboard patterns.

A Modern Spin

It is in this third tale, in the then-contemporary setting of late-1960s metropolitan Japan, that Ishii is most free to indulge himself, resulting in the most atypical

and entertaining episode. This freedom is likely to have resulted from the fact that, while Toei already had a solid blueprint for its period genre outings, the studio was just beginning to experiment with tales about the post-war yakuza, those front-line profiteers and facilitators of Japan's economic miracle. Directors were feeling out what kind of film style would be more suitable to a modern-day setting than the often set-bound and somewhat staid approach of the dominant chivalrous type of yakuza films. Location shooting amid such exemplars of economic growth as high-rise buildings, teeming harbour docks, swinging night-time entertainment districts and traffic-heavy streets quickly became the norm. Fellow Toei director Kinji Fukasaku would, a mere three years later, pioneer the style that came to define the modern yakuza film – the 'true account' (*jitsuroku*) – but in the late-1960s he was also still very much feeling his way forward, using innovative approaches to on-location work and guerrilla shooting in such films as *Blackmail Is My Life!* (*Kyōkatsu koso waga jinsei*, 1968), with its memorable stabbing scene shot wild on a busy pedestrian crossing in central Tokyo, and *Japan Organized Crime Boss* (*Nihon boryoku-dan: Kumicho*, 1969). Not to be outdone, Ishii here comes up with a creatively painful use for a helicopter and a ruthlessly effective drive-by (or should that be 'drive-around'?) shooting.

While these experiments in a more contemporary style of yakuza filmmaking would eventually lead the genre into the down-and-dirty docudrama territory that would bring Kinji Fukasaku legendary status with his epoch-making *Battles Without Honour and Humanity* series (also available from Arrow and highly recommended), Teruo Ishii's contribution portrays the yakuza of the late-1960s as bands of immaculately dressed urban dandies. They do not hesitate to get their hands dirty, but they always look as if they just walked off a photo shoot for a department store catalogue. Teruo Ishii, god bless him.

Tom Mes is the author of the Arrow Books publications Father, Son, Sword: The Lone Wolf and Cub Saga and Unchained Melody: The Films of Meiko Kaji. He teaches Japanese cinema at Leiden University and is the co-founder of MidnightEye.com.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Yakuza Law is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 and with its original mono sound. The film was remastered in high definition and supplied for this release by Toei Company, Ltd.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artist **Jacob Phillips**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Andrew Kirkham, Tom Mes, Julien Sévéon, Jasper Sharp, Marc Walkow





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