

STRAY CAT ROCK

DELINQUENT GIRL BOSS

女番長野良猫ロック

Directed by Yasuharu Hasebe

Written by Shūichi Nagahara

Starring Meiko Kaji, Tatsuya Fuji, Akiko Wada

Release Date: 2nd May 1970

WILD JUMBO

野良猫ロック ワイルドジャンボ

Directed by Toshiya Fujita

Written by Shūichi Nagahara

Starring Meiko Kaji, Tatsuya Fuji, Yūsuke Natsu

Release Date: 1st August 1970

SEX HUNTER

野良猫ロック セックスハンター

Directed by Yasuharu Hasebe

Written by Yasuharu Hasebe, Atsushi Yamatoya

Starring Meiko Kaji, Tatsuya Fuji, Rikiya Yasuoka

Release Date: 1st September 1970

MACHINE ANIMAL

野良猫ロック マシン・アニマル

Directed by Yasuharu Hasebe

Written by Shūichi Nagahara

Starring Meiko Kaji, Tatsuya Fuji, Noriko Kurosawa

Release Date: 22nd November 1970

BEAT '71

野良猫ロック 暴走集団' 71

Directed by Toshiya Fujita

Written by Tatsuya Asai, Shūichi Nagahara

Starring Meiko Kaji, Tatsuya Fuji, Yoshio Harada

Release Date: 3rd January 1971

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BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES FROM TAIYÔZOKU TO FÛTENZOKU THE STRAY CAT ROCK SERIES

by Jasper Sharp

There are two terms that are particularly helpful when defining the output of the Nikkatsu Corporation against the other major film studios during the purple patch in Japanese cinema that stretched roughly from the late-1950s to the early-1970s. The first of these, *taiyôzoku*, is often translated as 'Sun Tribe'. It broadly refers to a generation of middle-class and relatively affluent baby boomers that emerged in the mid-1950s, who rejected the moral compass and traditional values of the previous era that had ended with the nation's crushing defeat in the war and instead looked westward for inspiration with regards to fashion, music and mores. Specifically, it describes a brief cycle of trendsetting films and novels that took these carefree young hipsters as both their subjects and presumed audience.

The second term, *mukokuseki*, literally means 'no national boundaries', and became something of a mission statement for Nikkatsu. Throughout the 1960s in particular, the company's output was fashioned in a variety of styles and genres that drew heavily from the borderless, international language of cinema, its productions doing their utmost to downplay any uniquely Japanese elements.

The *taiyôzoku* label appeared with the publication of the novel *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyô no kisetsu*) in 1955, written by Shintarô Ishihara, a man whose future political career (he was governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012) seems strangely at odds with his seditious depictions of the sort of shocking shenanigans the nation's youth were up to back in his early literary heyday. However, it was Tarumi Furukawa's scandalous 1956 movie adaptation that saw the term on everyone's lips. This heady portrayal of the

hedonistic sun-worshippers who milled around the Shonan beach near Kamakura echoed Nicholas Ray's seminal *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), itself the subject of some moral concern in Japan.

Furukawa's candid realisation of Ishihara's tale of a curmudgeonly college boy who falls for a more sophisticated rich girl he meets while cruising Tokyo's trendy Ginza district with his friends spelled out all too plainly what the kids got up to out of their parents' view, and was the talking-point title of the day. The rush of similar *taiyôzoku* titles that followed quickly led to a restructuring of Japan's motion picture censorship body *Eirin*. More crucially, it provided Nikkatsu with a brand. Japan's oldest studio had now assumed the mantle of its youngest and hippest.

The company had officially formed in 1912, but its production arm was hived off to form Daiei in 1942 by a wartime government edict aimed at mobilising the film industry as a tool for propaganda. For 12 years, Nikkatsu acted only in the capacity of a distributor of foreign films, but in 1954 it returned to production, with Eisuke Takizawa's *Chuji Kunisada* (*Kunisada Chûji*) and Yasuki Chiba's *Thus I Dreamed* (*Kakute yume aru*) both released on 27 June of that year. The total of 11 films it produced in 1954 rose to 59 in 1955 and up to 80 in 1956. There was some distinguished work among these, specifically films made by Tomu Uchida and Yûzô Kawashima around this time, but still there was little to distinguish the Nikkatsu flavour in general from other companies at the time, such as the other newcomers Shintoho, founded in 1947, and Toei, founded in 1949.

The success of *Season of the Sun* gave Nikkatsu a new formula and a new screenwriter, as Ishihara was enlisted to pen a string of similar scripts. Most importantly, it gave it a new star in the form of the author's younger brother. Yûjirô Ishihara had only played a minor supporting role in this first film, but with *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*, 1956), directed by Kô Nakahira from the older Ishihara's first work as a screenwriter and released within two months of his screen debut, his hotheaded turn as one of the two



yacht-loving siblings jostling for the attentions of a more worldly-wise glamour girl quite out of their league and already embroiled in an affair with an older American man, a legend was born. In his 1958 article 'Is It a Breakthrough? (The Modernists of Japanese Film)', the future luminary of Japanese New Wave cinema, Nagisa Ôshima, wrote of the film "In the rip of a woman's skirt and the buzz of a motorboat, sensitive people heard the heralding of a new generation of Japanese film."

The sun set fairly quickly on the 'Sun Tribe' film, however, and considerably longer than it would take for Yûjirô's star to fade. While Nikkatsu released a number of further works in the same vein right up to more nihilistic offerings such as Koreyoshi Kurahara's *Season of Heat* (*Kyônetsu no kisetsu*, 1960; also released overseas as *The Warped Ones* and *The Weird Love Makers*), there was nothing to tie the *taiyôzoku* exclusively to the studio, nor indeed its scriptwriter. But Nikkatsu did have Yûjirô under an exclusive contract, and Yûjirô is ultimately the reason people still talk about the impact of *Crazed Fruit* to this day, while relatively few remember *Season of the Sun*.

With his later star vehicles, Yûjirô would become as known for his recordings of the theme songs as the films themselves, as Nikkatsu strengthened its relationships with the music industry. Whether he appeared as a volatile drummer and former jailbird who takes on the jazz world in Umetsugu Inoue's *The Man Who Causes a Storm* (*Arashi o yobu otoko*, 1957), or as the kind-hearted airline captain of *Crimson Wings* (*Kurenai no tsubasa*, Kô Nakahira, 1958), his accompanying *enka* croonings, with their traditional Japanese styling combined with Western instrumentation, further bolstered the Yûjirô brand, and by extension, the Nikkatsu brand too. His theme song for *Ginza Love Story* (*Ginza no koi no monogatari*, Koreyoshi Kurahara, 1962), for example, was one of the biggest hits of the day.

Yûjirô was quickly joined by other members in the company's emerging 'Diamond Line' of matinee idols and action heroes - names such as Akira Kobayashi, Hideaki Nitani, Tetsuya Watari and Jô Shishido. The lantern-

jawed tough-guy Kobayashi, for example, was as much known for his sensitivity with a guitar as his prowess with a pistol in such films as the nine-film *Wandering Bird* (*Wataridori*, literally “Wandering Bird”, 1959–62) series of eastern Westerns, in which he wandered from town to town across Hokkaido clad in his black-tasselled leather jacket and red kerchief, fighting for the rights of the indigenous Ainu people and leaving a trail of broken hearts behind him.

The *Wandering Bird* series represents a textbook example of the *mukokuseki* ethos – a film notionally set in Japan but with nothing explicitly Japanese about its setup or execution. Nikkatsu’s ‘Borderless Action’ line arguably reached its acme with such quirky genre mash-ups as Takashi Nomura’s *Fast-draw Guy* (*Hayauchi Yarô*, 1961), another ‘Sukiyaki Western’ that took that one step further away from any sense of a lived-in Japanese reality, or Tan Ida’s tantalizing-looking tale of high-seas swashbuckling, *Pirate Ship: Tiger of the Sea* (*Kaizoku-sen: Umi no tora*, 1964), both starring charismatic tough guy Jô Shishido.

These were counterbalanced by more female-oriented titles featuring stars like winsome girl-next-door-type Sayuri Yoshinaga. In Kenjiro Morinaga’s *A Windmill, Tulips and Love* (*Fusha no aru machi*, 1966), she ventured to Holland in search of love, highlighting how within a matter of years the studio’s border-crossing approach had stretched to taking its stars overseas rather than merely creating overseas palimpsests on studio backlots.

Around 1967, however, something changed dramatically within the company. Throughout the decade, attendances for the Japanese studio product had been in free fall against the threat of television and an explosion in independent cheap-to-produce erotic films, the so-called ‘eroduction’ or pink film (*pinku eiga*). This tightening market ultimately led to Nikkatsu’s abrupt turn to its Roman Porno line of adult pictures in November 1971.



The interim years were turbulent ones. A Hawaiian branch office was closed, production was slashed or farmed out to outside interests, and the services of various contracted directors and stars were dispensed of, most notable the director Seijun Suzuki, fired in the fallout of his “incomprehensible” *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967). One of the reasons for this seismic change was that the company’s president throughout its golden years, Kyûsaku Hori (1900-1974), was then in the process of handing over power to his son, Masahiro Hori, who saw Nikkatsu’s future less in motion picture production, than in golf courses, leisure centres, real estate and other non-film-related investments. Various other desperate measures to cut corners were also made, such as the short-lived merger of Nikkatsu’s distribution arm with the ailing Daiei to create the separate Dainichi Film Distribution Company (*Dainichi Eihai*), which lasted little over a year, from June 1970 to August 1971.

Nevertheless, the period resulted in some of the company’s most abrasive titles, as in 1968 the Nikkatsu ‘New Action’ line was launched, inspired by the dawning of the ‘New Hollywood’ era with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), released in Japan in February 1968. The films were darker, harder and more cynical, as befit their unsettled production environment, and were epitomized by Toshio Masuda’s quite outstanding *Gangster VIP* (*Burai yori: Daikanbu*, 1968) starring Tetsuya Watari, which launched a series of six films in total based on the experiences of real-life ex-mobster Gorô Fujita.

This transition from old to new business practices provided Nikkatsu with one of its finest films of the period, *Retaliation* (*Shima wa moratta*, 1968), which not only pitted the old-school performers Kobayashi, Shishido and Nitani together for the very last time; in its gritty tale of rival yakuza gangs, illicit land grabs, ruthless property developments and broken promises – the honourable old-school gangster pitted against the more ruthlessly corporate face of the mob – lay an obvious critique of the new climate within the company that produced it. (The film’s title can be translated to something like “I now own your turf”.)







Retaliation was the fourth film by Yasuharu Hasebe, the director of the first, third and fourth of the five films in the *Stray Cat Rock* (*Nora neko rokku*) series; *Delinquent Girl Boss* (*Onna banchô*), *Sex Hunter* (*Sekkusu hantaa*) and *Machine Animal* (*Mashin animaru*), all released in 1970. Hasebe had begun his career as an assistant to Seijun Suzuki, and his stylistic debt to the older director is clear in his garishly-coloured debut starring Kobayashi, *Black Tight Killers* (*Ore ni sawaru to abunaize*, 1966). However, subsequent films such as *Bloody Territories* (*Arakure*, 1969) right up through his rather notorious exercises in excess within the Roman Porno field, which include *Assault! Jack the Ripper* (*Bôkô kirisaki Jakku*, 1976) and *Rape: The 13th Hour* (*Reipu 25-ji: Bôkan*, 1977), saw him tempering his occasional expressively surreal flourishes with a more documentary-styled realist approach, filming with long lenses to flatten perspectives and in natural light – an approach much in evidence in these films.

Nowadays, the *Stray Cat Rock* films are best remembered for providing Meiko Kaji with her first major roles (like so many Japanese film series of this era, they are not a series as such, in as much as there is no continuing narrative arc throughout, nor any consistency with the actresses and the names of the characters they play: in the first film, Kaji's character is Mei; in the last she's Fujiko, for example). Kaji had been a presence at Nikkatsu since her debut under her birth name of Masako Ôta in *Song of Sadness and Separation* (*Kanoshiki wakare no uta*, Katsumi Nishikawa, 1965), but still a relatively minor one. Hasebe's *Retaliation* had provided her with one of her meatier earlier appearances, but it was only after switching to her more familiar new stage name for Masahiro Makino's *Tales of Remnants of Japanese Chivalry* (*Nihon zankyôden*, 1969), that she began an upward ascent that would ultimately lead to her departing Nikkatsu when it turned to Roman Porno.

Her cold, dominating presence as the silent but deadly wronged woman at the heart of the Shunya Itô-directed *Female Convict Scorpion* (*Joshû 701-gô: Sasori*, 1971) and its sequels for Toei boosted her to the next level of

stardom. However, it was two films helmed by Toshiya Fujita in particular - the director of the second and fifth *Stray Cat* films, *Wild Jumbo* (*Wairudo janbo*, 70) and *Beat '71* (*Bôsôshûdan '71*) - that provided Kaji with her most iconic role as the kimono-clad avenging angel in the *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayukihime*) double whammy, adapted from the Kazuo Koike and Kazuo Kamimura *manga* set in the late 19th century and released by Toho in 1973. It was with these that so many viewers outside of Japan first found themselves introduced to Kaji's name, by Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003), which borrowed a number of its elements, including the theme tune sung by the actress herself.

Music was a large part of the packaging of the *Stray Cat Rock* films, as the titles spell out quite clearly. Their runtimes came peppered with performances from some of the hippest acts on the horizon, popular beat combos of the era such as The Mops and Zoo Nee Voo, and with Kaji contributing the vocals to 'Gamble on Tomorrow' in the fourth entry, *Machine Animal*. The rather bohemian-looking ragtag assemblage that make up the girl gang featured in the films, of which she is top cat, look very much like they've been kitted out in the garb of the ultimate badass all-girl rock band of the period, an epoch apart from doe-eyed starlets like Ruriko Asaoka or Sayuri Yoshinaga that had graced the studio's product a mere couple of years before.

The *Stray Cat Rock* films represent a clear attempt to capture the countercultural zeitgeist of their era and draw a line in the sand between their pop cultural forebears, be these the solo warblings of Ishihara, Kobayashi or any of the other actors-turned-*enka*-singers from the beginning of the decade, or the various pop combos from the 'Group Sounds' (GS) boom that exploded (and almost as quickly petered out) shortly after the Beatles legendary 4-day Tokyo stopover in 1966.

The films appeared after a decade in which the country's relationship with America and American culture had been comprehensively redefined by the





Vietnam war, following the renewal of the controversial Anpo Joint Security Treaty of 1960 that saw Japan siding with the U.S. as a Cold War ally - a high-handed act by the government that ignored prevailing public opinion and fuelled a lot of the subsequent student protests, countercultural activities and more radical forms of leftist activism that marked Japan in the 1960s.

Stray Cat Rock's characters are social outcasts, disenfranchised from their homeland's rapid economic growth and political trajectory, members of a new 'tribe' a generation removed from *taiyôzoku*, who have turned on, tuned in and dropped out; the *fûtenzoku*, or vagabond tribe, Japan's nascent hippy subculture for whom Shinjuku served as their Haight-Ashbury or Carnaby Street during this era of shabby psychedelic chic.

Throughout the series, the establishment is equated with black-shirted *bôsôzoku* biker gangs, organised crime syndicates with a disturbingly nationalistic bent representing a particularly ugly form of patriarchal masculinity and eager to preserve the status quo. Never does the series have its finger more on the pulse than in *Machine Animal*, in which the gang come to the aid of a US draft dodger hiding out in the multicultural port city of Yokohama in a plot that really pushes the envelope in terms of the series' portrayals drug use – still one of the major no-nos with the Japanese censor to this day.

It is in the *Stray Cat Rock* films' evocation of the schism between foreign and traditional cultures that they are at their most sophisticated. Many of the characters appearing within them are more dropouts by birth than by choice, and more specifically, by race. Mixed-race performers were an unspoken presence in many of Nikkatsu's films, and include the half-British singer Jerry Fujio, who played alongside Shishido as one of two hit men hiding out in Yokohama in Takashi Nomura's unique blend of 'Nikkatsu Noir', and Leone-styled Spaghetti Western *A Colt Is My Passport* (*Koruto wa ore no pasupôto*, 1967), and Annu Mari, the exotic half-Indian

femme fatale in *Branded to Kill*. Here race is brought to the fore in the very first of the *Stray Cat Rock* series, which features within its cast the *zainichi* (ethnically Korean-Japanese) singer-actress Akiko Wada, who receives top billing above Kaji as Ako, as well as belting forth the film's 'Boy and Girl' anthem; Yuka Kumari, the real-life sister of Annu Mari, who plays Mari; the half-African American singer-actor Ken Sanders, who plays the boxer Kelly, and the Japan-based Taiwanese actress Bunjaku Han, who plays Yuriko.

And of course the third entry, *Sex Hunter*, is explicitly about racial purity, as the half-Japanese loner Kazuma (played by the half-Italian Rikiya Yasuoka) wanders into a town controlled by a vicious gang of racist thugs led by the Baron, played by Tatsuya Fuji. The raucous nightclub set-pieces, with their elaborate lightshows, that provide a pause from the action in all these films is here given a specifically racialised dimension with the choice of the all-girl five-piece Golden Half, whose half-Japaneseness was very much part and parcel of their marketing.

It is a distillation of the very essence of the series, the play between fear and desire for the exotic other, as Japanese cultural integrity is pitted against these presences encroaching from outside. Baron's sense of hatred for the half-bloods is at one point insinuated to be partially down to sexual inferiority – somewhat ironically, as the actor playing him, Fuji, is best known for bearing all in his priapismic performance in Ôshima's post-Roman Porno exploration of the national mindset of the prewar era with *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no koriida*, 1976). There's also a throwaway visual gag in *Wild Jumbo* in which Fuji, complete with shades and moustache, appears juxtaposed alongside an advertisement for Mandom aftershave, sporting that very poster boy for 1970s American machismo, famed for his appearance in Japanese commercials, Charles Bronson.

Unfolding in the margins and anonymous hinterlands of any recognisable Japan, the *Stray Cat Rock* films possess an ambience that can most certainly be described as *mukokuseki*, like Westerns with horses and six-

shooters traded for motorbikes and Molotov cocktails, all set to a psych-rock soundtrack. Ultimately, however, the untamed, contested spaces in which these conflicts of gender and ethnicity are played out represent a very different "non-Japan" from the Sukiyaki Westerns starring Shishido and Kobayashi less than a decade before, the foreign elements of their iconographies conspicuously inscribed with a more political dimension that renders their landscapes (and soundscapes) so fascinating and pregnant with meaning.

Enjoy the ride!

Jasper Sharp is a writer and curator specialising in Japanese cinema and is the co-editor of the website MidnightEye.com. His books include Behind the Pink Curtain and The Historical Dictionary of Japanese Cinema.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER:

The *Stray Cat Rock* series was transferred from original preservation film elements by Nikkatsu Studios in Japan. All five films were delivered as restored files on master tapes and supplied to Arrow Films.

There are occasional instances where audio synch is loose and the image appears overly coarse and/or dark. These issues are presented as they appeared in the original theatrical releases and are in keeping with the nature of the films' original low-budget productions.

The films are presented in the original widescreen aspect ratios. Additionally, certain sequences in the films appear with blanking to alter the ratios, this is for stylistic purposes and is true to the original theatrical presentation which we have retained for our release.

PRODUCTION CREDITS:

Disc and booklet produced by Francesco Simeoni

Film Credits compiled by Jasper Sharp

Technical Producer: James White

Production Assistant: Louise Buckler

QC and Proofing: Anthony Nield, Francesco Simeoni

Authoring: David Mackenzie

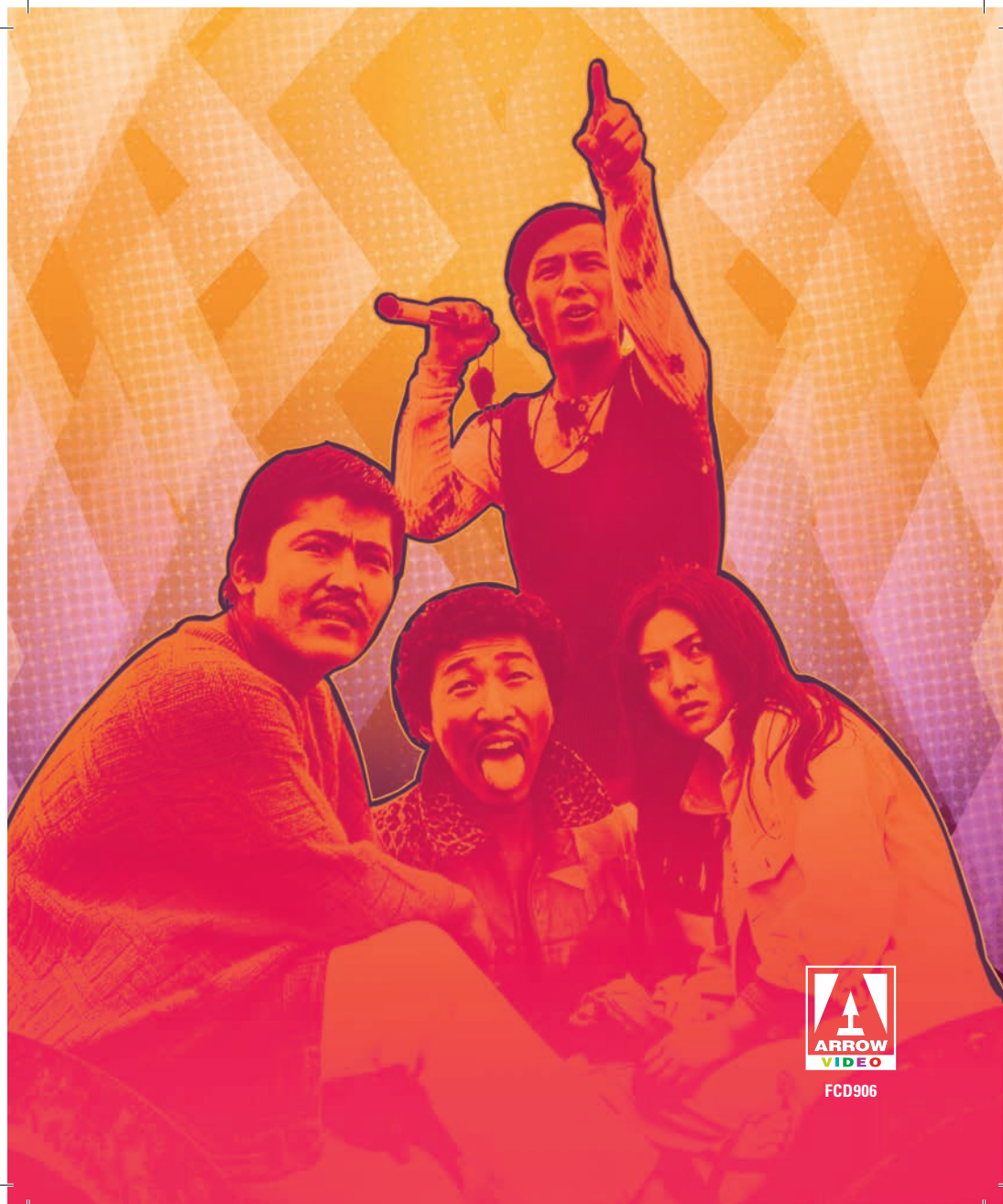
Subtitling: IBF Digital

Artist & Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS:

Chihiro Abiru, Alex Agran, Tom Barrett, EasternKicks.com, Stephen Ford, Andrew Heskins, Takako Hirayama, Graham Jones, Simon Jones, Emico Kawai, Sigrid Larsen, Nikkatsu Corporation, Jasper Sharp, Tom Walker, Marc Walkow

Other films starring Meiko Kaji available from Arrow Video include the *Lady Snowblood* collection and *Blind Woman's Curse*. Look out for more Meiko Kaji films coming soon from Arrow Video!



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