

## Division of Labor and Creativity A Case of the Japanese Film Industry\*

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**Abstract:** As Adam Smith pointed out, division of labour is an elementary factor for social development. Dividing work between workers improves their skills and saves time to convert job. As a result, division of labour promotes productivity. In general, the division of labour at a workplace is organized on the basis of the social division of labour, and the former changes the latter through competition. Hence, the development of the division of labour in a workplace, through competition, is a driving force for economic development. Nevertheless, in the Japanese film industry, with the developing division of labour and outsourcing of work it became difficult to accumulate the experience, furthermore the place where workers acquired skills has been disrupted. The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of the workplace as a location where skill and creativity can be fostered as a base of Japanese film industry. I hope that this analysis will contribute to the discussion on content business.

**Key words:** division of labor; creativity; film industry; cooperative of talent

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### 1. Introduction

Akira Kurosawa, the famous film director known for films such as *Seven Samurai* and *Doom*, once said the following about a strike at Toho Studios.

“They (the company’s executives) are shredding apart the precious cooperative of talent that we have worked so hard to raise.” (Kurosawa, 2001, p. 312).

In 1958, Japanese movie attendance increased to more than 1,100,000,000, the highest level in history. Furthermore, the number of films produced in Japan increased to a record-breaking 547 in 1960. This period from the late 1950s to 1960 is considered the golden age of film in Japan. However, in 1963, movie attendance slipped to 511,120,000, approximately half its highest level, and continued to decline.

As in the United States, the recession in the Japanese film industry was caused by the rapid spread of the television. Japanese television broadcasts began in 1953 but did not become popular among general households until the royal wedding in 1959. Then, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics spurred the transition to color television, and televisions became a standard fixture in households.

In turn, the number of films produced continued to decrease, falling to 367 by 1971, or 70% of their previous

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peak levels. Nikkatsu Corp. and Daiei found themselves at the brink of bankruptcy. Thus, one can conclude that the decline in Japanese film was the result of the popularization of television. However, of even greater importance is the fact that, along with the decrease in movie attendance and number of films produced, the production studios that supported the golden age were themselves collapsing. Borrowing from the words of Akira Kurosawa, it was the dissolution of the human structure surrounding film production, the dissolution of the cooperative of talent.

That dissolution was the breakup of the Japanese film, praised by some as the best film in the world, and the collapse of the skilled talent that went with it. As a result, weight was placed on the media concept. In other words, “‘film’ was replaced by ‘data’ and ‘media content’, and production companies gave way to production committees with no outside influence” (Yomota, 2014, p. 38). This paper clarifies the main causes for establishing creativity by reviewing the development of film companies in Japan, along with the changes in film production locations from a division of labor perspective.

As was already noted, along with the dissolution of the human structure supporting film production, greater weight was placed on the concept of media content. If this understanding is correct, reviewing the existence of the media content industry should be possible by examining the dissolution of production locations. To proceed, we must first briefly examine the meaning of division of labor as the basis of this article.

## **2. Division of Labor and Economic Development**

As is well known, Adam Smith clearly stressed that the wealth of civilized society is brought about through the labor of the public. Smith stated, “The greatest improvements in the productive powers of labor, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labor” (Smith, 2012, p. 98). Smith used his famous explanation of pin making to describe the increase in production capacity resulting from a division of labor.

Smith expresses the result by stating, “It is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labor” (Smith, 2012, p. 112). In other words, he suggested that society itself is becoming wealthy. In this way, Smith made clear that the development of division of labor increases production capacity and results in the provision of many manufactured goods, thus increasing society’s wealth. He also indicated the reason for increased production capacity through the implementation of division of labor by stating, “First, to the increase of dexterity in every particular workman; secondly, to the saving of the time which is commonly lost in passing from one species of work to another; and, lastly, to the invention of a great number of machines which facilitate and abridge labor, and enable one man to do the work of many” (Smith, 2012, p. 105).

Smith indicated the craftsmanship of workers, the saving of time, and the invention of machinery as reasons for the increase in production capacity through a division of labor. In particular, the author points out that Smith stated that workers’ craftsmanship improves through job segmentation resulting from the division of labor. Of course, one can state that this craftsmanship represents an improvement in skills that result from job segmentation assuming dissolution of skills through the division of labor. In any case, Smith proposed that human labor is the source of a society’s economic development, and that the division of labor increases production capacity and drives society by such means as the improvement in workers’ craftsmanship.

Of course, as is frequently noted, Smith does not differentiate between social division of labor and internal division of labor. He also does not consciously point out any relationship between the two. Smith’s awareness of

the issue clarified that the development of division of labor increases the wealth of society as a whole.

Masafumi Nakamura suggested that, by making an issue of the organization of labor from a social perspective, Smith disregarded division of labor in the production process (Nakamura, 1979, p. 57). Charles Babbage, a professor of mathematics at Cambridge University, was the first to clearly separate and analyze internal division of labor from social division of labor. Babbage stated that Smith worked with the assumption that the development of division of labor is a development consistent throughout society, and he performed his analysis on a manufacturing type of internal division of labor.

Through his analysis of the manufacturing process, Babbage stated, “The effect of the division of labor (...) is, that it enables us to purchase and apply to each process precisely that quantity of skill and knowledge which is required for it” (Babbage, 2011, p. 165). In this way, Babbage depicted a rank system of labor, the quality of labor, and a quantitative structure within the production process.

Although Babbage explored the technical aspects of the production process, he did not perform sufficient analysis on issues such as market conditions and the accumulation of capital stipulated by a division of labor. Of course, Babbage investigated the relationship between division of labor and the market but did not necessarily perform enough economic analysis on the production process. Karl Marx performed a historical and specific investigation of the production process.

Capitalistic production assumes a consistent development of division of labor in society as long as the production is related to commercial goods. Karl Marx stated, “A greater number of laborers working together, at the same time, in one place, in order to produce the same sort of commodity under the mastership of one capitalist, constitutes, both historically and logically, the starting point of capitalist production” (Marx, 2013, p. 223). If one considers cooperation as the starting point of division of labor and mechanical production, internal division of labor is stipulated by the capitalistic law of value or, perhaps, even capital surplus-value manufacturing.

In other words, even if one assumes that the development of division of labor within companies is fundamentally prescribed by the machinery systems and technologies within those companies, it must also be dictated by the pursuit of corporate profit. Marx then stated, “In proportion as machinery, with the aid of a relatively small number of workpeople, increase the mass of raw materials, intermediate products, instruments of labor, etc., the working-up of these raw materials and intermediate products becomes split up into numberless branches” (Marx, 2013, p. 301). Division of labor within a company is founded on the assumption of social division of labor but is also propelled by the spread of innovations in technology and profit seeking. Furthermore, the development of social division of labor is also driven by the segmentation of the production process attributable to diversification in commercial goods.

This extremely simple investigation centered on the relationship between development of division of labor in companies and social division of labor. As Smith stated, the increase in social wealth relies on the development of division of labor. The development of society is primarily dictated by the division of labor in companies. As Marx suggested, this corporate division of labor is dictated by aspects such as innovation in technologies and the pursuit of profit. This development influences social division of labor, leading us to the conclusion that social development is dictated by corporate division of labor and the development of the social division of labor that follows. This development of division of labor helps achieve improvements in the skilled work that remains around mechanical production.

With this awareness, we examine the development of Japanese film with a focus on proficiency.

### 3. Development of the Postwar Japanese Film Industry

The number of moviegoers in Japan surpassed 1 billion in 1957, reached a peak of 1.12 billion in 1958, and stayed at the 1 billion level until 1960. Although a sharp decline in movie attendance occurred that is attributable to the spread of television, 547 films were still produced in 1960 — the most in history — and, with the exception of 1962 and 1963, more than 400 films were produced each year until the beginning of the 1970s. What supported this significant number of productions were the program picture and the block booking systems. To understand these systems, we must first observe how films are made (See, Okada, 1991).

Film production starts from the decision made regarding the type of film to make. A plan then comes to life in the form of a screenplay. Although the screenplay is written using the plan proposal, the movie director further develops it using the screenplay. Generally, a producer puts the plan into action and the screenwriter is responsible for the screenplay. At one time, the director was in charge of a good portion of this work.

The director and the decision to make the film are determined in this manner, and the period between deciding how the film will be made and the start of actual shooting is called “pre-production”. Assistant directors, cameramen, art directors, lighting engineers, and recording engineers are chosen during this period. At the same time, casting is carried out and the cast and costumes are selected. Then, as the art department starts set design and preparation, production personnel begin scouting for set locations and filming preparation continues.

According to the movie producer Yutaka Okada, the on-set film crew is split into “those that are filmed, those who do the filming, and those who make the filming possible” (Okada, p. 74). Those who are filmed include actors, actresses, costumers, make-up artists, and props. In contrast, those who do the filming include the camera, lighting, and sound recording staff. Finally, the filming is made possible by those who manage the movie shooting, including individuals in charge of production and assistant directors. The movie is made through the cooperation of all of these staff members and is then edited and overlaid with sound effects and music before completion. These final processes are known as “post-production”.

However, even if the film can be completed without issue, it should not be made if it cannot be screened. The process of taking the film from the production division and getting it onto cinema screens is called “distribution”. Distribution is widely split into the tasks of booking the movie into theatres and publicizing the movie.

The film industry is divided into three sections: production, distribution, and industry. Film production in postwar Japan was undertaken at the company’s own studios using the company’s own contracted actors and directors, and the film was screened at affiliated cinemas across the country. Through this method, movie companies distributed their own films to specific theatres and attempted to “make the balance between theatres where the film would be shown and not shown about half and half” (Okada, p. 37). This method was called “block booking.”

A type of movie called “program pictures” supported this large film consumption. In general, program pictures were produced to control running times, were comparatively short, and were shot quickly on a low budget. This program picture system was established in film studios such as Toho and Shouchiku at the beginning of the 1950s; however, what further cemented their existence was the arrival of double-feature films from Toei.

Toei was formed in 1951 when Oizumi Pictures, which had fallen into money troubles, absorbed Toyoko Pictures and Tokyo Pictures, which were both plagued by poor performance. However, the three companies’ debt totaled more than 1 billion yen, and as Toei continued to raise funds, it also began to seriously consider “securing theatres through cooperation with Toho” (Yomota, 2014, p. 53). At the time, Toho was also in a dire situation

because of strikes, which caused many of its staff to leave and rendered the company unable to continue to make movies. In January 1951, Toei and Toho decided to join forces in their movie distribution.

However, after one year, both companies ceased this cooperation and Toei once again began to distribute films independently. The problem with this situation for Toei was the fact that few cinemas were willing to show Toei films. At that time, the main cinemas were directly managed by companies such as Toho and Shochiku. Toei concentrated more on independent local theatres that typically screened double features. However, Toei realized that showing just one film meant that another company's film would then fill up half their program; thus, the company began to believe that if it made double-feature films, it could monopolize local cinemas' programs, making it easier to simply build its own Toei cinema.

To satisfy the movie demand for this cinema, Toei began to "release completed films with long run-times in 3 parts" (Yomota, 2014, p. 59). After Toei, other companies followed suit and began to introduce double-feature films, which formed the foundation of this mass-production and mass-consumption system of program pictures. However, given the spread of television, cinema attendance began to decline sharply, starting in 1963.

#### **4. Changing Situation at the Film Production Location**

Most films are said to be "an integrated art form, in which participants from the fields of filming, lighting, sound, and physical art each exhaust their best efforts in their individual responsibilities." The director's role is to "unify these elements as the conductor, so to speak, of this orchestra" (Koi, 1989, p. 175). Films are also produced as a cooperative project based on the division of labor. As individual participants improve the technique of the film's components, the film itself is elevated into the realm of art. The workmen on *Rashomon* were supposedly so skilled that when its set collapsed in an accident, "the master propmen of Daiei restored it in just two days, surprising the director Kurosawa" (Hoshikawa, 1997, p. 66).

The strong technical ability of these workmen may certainly be considered a product of the specialization of their work based on the division of labor. This specialization should allow them to focus their creativity and imagination on improving their craft. Even so, according to Daiei's art director Nishioka, this craft was improved "because it was honed by master (film directors)" (Hoshikawa, 1997, p. 107).

However, these techniques were not improved through cooperation with other specialists alone. For example, in the shooting of the famous *Seven Samurai*, "Most of the workers rejoiced that 'This is what filmmaking is!'," shaking with emotion as they watched it unfold" (Kasuga, 2012, p. 75). The film set itself seems to support the development of craft, the community of talent with which Kurosawa identifies. However, the system of mass production, along with the decline of the film industry, destroyed this community of talent. We trace this process as follows.

In an entertainment industry based on double-feature program pictures, Toei, which established a system of mass production, generated one-third of all of its 1959 revenue from Japanese movies, much of it from period dramas. At the time, Toei made approximately 80 movies each year. This volume led not only to poor reviews from critics but also to a decline in working conditions for the staff. Some films were shot in as few as five days.

Nonetheless, Toei established a subsidiary called Daini Toei in an effort to further increase its share. In 1960, it shot 156 films. This increased mass production not only decreased the quality of the films but also became "a further burden on set" (Kasuga, 2012, p. 87). All of the filming teams were "working through consecutive nights" (Ooshita, 1990, p. 199) in a forced manner.

“Compelled into working under such harsh conditions, for such low wages, they were unable to go on” (Ooshita, 1990, p. 199). At the time, Toei’s Kyoto studio employed many temporary workers on its staff. These workers were employed in large numbers along with the establishment of Daini Toei, but their wages were less than half those of the company’s university graduate employees. Faced with the harsh labor conditions of mass production, these temporary workers revolted. They negotiated with the company and succeeded in securing the promotion of approximately 600 temporary workers to full-time employees.

Meanwhile, Toho also promoted temporary workers to full-time staff. Toho’s experience with strikes indicated that, although it hired workers as temporary staff, it also hired full-time employees as it became more successful. The disparity between the treatment of the regular staff and the temporary staff became a major problem. The temporary staff formed a trade union and, supported by the regular staff, negotiated with the company and succeeded in winning regular employment for all of them. In this way, a community of talent was rebuilt. Sadly, the growth of television and the attendant reduction in film viewership dismantled this community once again.

The mass production of films and accompanying labor conditions gave the trade unions an opportunity to reclaim their influence. For example, the Toho studio supposedly had “many perks to keep the staff willing to engage in mass production” (Kasuga, 2012, p. 156). Mifune Production was said to be established because “films were difficult to produce in an environment where the voices of the trade unions were growing stronger” (Kasuga, 2012, p. 156). Although many other actors founded their own independent production companies, Mifune Production was the only one that went as far as having its own film studio.

The forerunner of these companies was the founding of Kurosawa Production. Kurosawa’s films were increasing in cost and Toho seemed to want “to save money on production costs by making Kurosawa feel responsibility as a manager” (Kasuga, 2012, p. 77). Kurosawa Production was founded for this purpose, and Mifune Production appeared to be created with much the same intent.

Along with reducing the number of films developed, effort was made to rationalize the production set. In short, the process changed to “a system in which five divisions — production, technique (special effects, editing, and dubbing), equipment, administration (studio management), and art — were to conduct autonomous accounting, and production would lease only as many resources as were needed from the other divisions” (Kasuga, 2012, p. 158). Even the special effects division, which became famous for its work on projects such as *Gojira*, was viewed in financial terms as a separate company. Special effects were always expensive, and functioning as a separate company made their management very strict, resulting in the loss of many staffers and the dissolution of a community of talent.

Previously, film companies managed production, distribution, and industrial components as a single body. Now, most of a film company’s income is from distribution. “In the modern film industry, films are not produced — only distributed” (Ooshita, 1990, p. 297). Film production became an unprofitable division. In 1971, Toho cut off its Kinuta Studio from the parent company, turning it into an independent company.

## 5. Conclusion

The increasing division of labor within companies, based on the principles of a commercial enterprise, broadens the scope of cooperation and separates and makes independent the various work processes, resulting in increases in the social division of labor. This division of labor produces many social benefits, as economists

pointed out. In this sense, division of labor is said to be the foundation of social development.

In the case of content production as represented by film, division of labor is certainly intended to create a significant number of products. However, the separation and independence of various specializations resulting from the advancement of division of labor risk destroying the precious production community, the cooperative of talents. As a result media content is regarded as the important things.

Generally movies are said to be a composite art form. The talents of the staffs working on film production are regarded as the most important things. Therefore how this cooperative of talents should be organized is a question that will likely continue to be asked in the future.

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