

SELECTED BY: TOM GUNNING

DAISUKE MIYAO, *SESSUE HAYAKAWA: SILENT CINEMA AND TRANSNATIONAL STARDOM*, DUKE UNIVERSITY, DURHAM 2007

This is a work of great originality, the fruit of thorough and pioneering research. A truly unique attempt, not only to give a thorough account of the career of one of the first and most unusual stars of silent cinema, but also to approach Hayakawa's stardom from the perspective of his dual identity as an ethnic Japanese gaining a new identity in the worldwide stardom that the emerging film industry created. That the author is able to interrogate not only Japanese sources, but the Japanese language newspapers published in the 1910s in the United States makes this perhaps the most thorough – and complex – treatment of the ethnicity of a movie star ever offered by a film historian. Miyao's placing of Hayakawa's stardom within the context of the political and cultural relations between the United States and Japan is nothing less than masterful.

Sessue Hayakawa would be a familiar figure to people aware of silent cinema, but relatively few would know his career beyond its two end points: Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* from 1915 and David Lean's 1957 *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. But beyond these two performances the very fact that early American cinema included a Japanese actor among its major stars represents a fascinating aspect of both film and cultural history. Miyao supplies the first thorough study of Hayakawa's career. He deftly and with both specificity and insight articulates the central paradox of Hayakawa's stardom: At the very beginning of the star system in Hollywood a Japanese star emerged whose attraction was difficult to define. Was he evil and cruel? Was he gentle? Was he a pioneer in an acting style of restraint? Was he an alien monster? Was he the representation of the American melting pot? Was he example of the

Yellow Peril? Was he erotic? Was he a Westernized Asian, or an orientalized film star? The author articulates all of these aspects through careful reading of the films and Hayakawa's "star text" as carried in the trade and fan discourse.

The issue of film acting remains one of the least developed areas of film studies. Miyao offers here an important probe into this still difficult territory. He is most successful in dealing with the issue of stardom, which is somewhat easier to write about than acting style, since it is always already partly verbalized, composed of the discourse of fan and trade press. But following the pioneering work of Roberta Pearson and Lea Jacobs and Ben Brewster, Miyao also makes an excellent foray into a description and analysis of Hayakawa's acting – which is after all the man's main contribution to film history. Hayakawa's stardom was based on his physiognomy – unique and beautiful – but also on his introduction of a complex and dialectical mode of performance at the very origins of narrative film based in characters. Since a large number of his early films exist, this style can be described and analyzed, rather than simply imagined based on descriptions. Watching these films, we find that Hayakawa was an innovator within the early styles of acting in silent cinema. As Miyao insightfully indicates, Hayakawa's facial expressions in his defining role in *The Cheat* do not necessarily convey the character's emotions. This is important. Critics, especially the French cineastes who responded so strongly to Hayakawa's style of performance, praised his mask-like face, the emotional and moral ambiguity he offered in a medium that was striving in most cases for an exaggerated clarity. Thus as an actor Hayakawa took on an emerging style of film acting – the emphasis on facial expressions encouraged by closer camera positions (an aspect of early film style nicely described decades ago by Janet Staiger) – but he *redefined* it with the use of often intense, but inscrutable expressions (which, of course, fit into cultural clichés about oriental characters). Further, in place of familiar

pantomime gestures, Hayakawa used elements of traditional oriental body languages (such as bows or the *mie*-like stances influenced by Kabuki). Hayakawa could be said to employ what Jacobs and Brewster have called the "pictorial style" of acting apparent in early silent feature films based on the coded stances taken from Western theater, but he reworked its traditional meanings and introduced new techniques.

Miyao chronicles Hayakawa's varied fortunes as a movie star and actor in detail. Through his account we see a star emerge from a confluence of the new demands of the one-reel narratives as developed by producer Thomas Ince (who discovered and first promoted Hayakawa but did not quite make him a star) and then more particularly the emergence of the star system with the early feature film. Hayakawa offered a mode of performance and a personality that was at once exotic and ambiguous. His portrayal of villains rarely lacked a powerful erotic charge, but, as Miyao also shows, Hayakawa attempted to channel an American fascination with not only the exotic generally but with the specifics of Japanese style into more positive characters. However, as much as Hayakawa redefined his character in terms of more positive views of the Japanese immigrant or traditional native Japanese culture, the threat of miscegenation and the underlying racism of American culture recurrently threatened its positive reception. Hayakawa attempted, like many emerging stars of the era, to maintain control over both his image and the production of his films, through creation of a production company that he at first dominated, but gradually lost control of. Miyao carefully chronicles the vicissitudes of Hayakawa's star persona with the American public. But, besides describing Hayakawa's popularity with the mass of American viewers, Miyao uniquely details the actor's reception by the Japanese,

both the American Japanese immigrants who had an ambivalent reaction to his screen persona, and the native Japanese reception, especially during his visits back to Japan and his return to act in Japanese films during the sound era. In Japan Hayakawa was viewed as a Westernized creature and often violently attacked (including threats of assassination). Hayakawa's career also included a strong relation to France, both in the enthusiastic reaction to his films by critics and filmmakers such as Louis Delluc and Marcel L'Herbier in the early silent era, and as a long time resident and actor in French cinema in the sound era (with L'Herbier actually directing him in a sound remake of *The Cheat*).

Hayakawa therefore offers one of the most complex and extensive careers of any film actor, and none highlight so extraordinarily the complex issues of international cinema and stardom over many decades. He has found his perfect scholar in Miyao. In an era in which representation of race and ethnicity has become a major theme in cinema and cultural studies, an investigation of a figure like Hayakawa becomes an obviously rich topic (and several scholars have contemplated undertaking it). We are fortunate that it has been accomplished by a scholar as careful and thorough as Miyao, who is able to consult both American and Japanese sources. This gives his study a complexity no previous scholar even contemplated, exploring the reception of Hayakawa in both American and Japanese contexts. Specialists in silent cinema will find this an important book, as will researchers dealing with film stardom generally. Cultural historians dealing with ethnicity, and especially those dealing with Japanese and American relations, will find it an unexpected treasure trove of information. It is an important debut book for a fine scholar.