

Ichi (2008): Female Stars and Gender Representations in the *Zatoichi* Franchise

Jonathan Wroot

The majority of the *Zatoichi* films made in Japan reflect gender biases that are systemic of the contexts in which they were made, as well as the perception of female stars, in terms of their popularity and commercial viability within certain roles. The *Zatoichi* film and TV series have typically been interpreted through its leading Japanese men – from Shintaro Katsu,¹ over later iterations by Takeshi Kitano in 2003, and Shingo Katori in 2010. Katsu originally played the blind masseur who wandered eighteenth-century Japan, with a sword hidden in his cane, in twenty-six films from 1962 to 1989, as well as in 100 TV episodes (broadcast from 1974 to 1979). There was also the gender-flipped reboot released in 2008, *Ichi*, directed by Fumihiko Sori, where Haruka Ayase played the sword-wielding protagonist. This was a potential turning point for the franchise, as well as for *chanbara* (sword action) films in twenty-first-century Japanese cinema. Following earlier examples, such as *Azumi* (2003) and *Azumi 2* (2005), here was another film that could show how one of Japan’s most popular genres can be led by Japanese female stars as much as by male ones. However, since the relative critical and commercial disappointment of *Ichi*, the most successful domestic and international *chanbara* films continue to be male-dominated – from *13 Assassins* (2010) over *Blade of the Immortal* (2017) to the *Rurouni Kenshin* franchise (2012–21). Nonetheless, the production context of the 2008 film demonstrated how the film’s studio and producers were aiming for commercial success, as can be seen from the cast and crew involved in the project.

Despite these aims, the poor reception of *Ichi*, in addition to its aesthetics and narrative content, are illustrative of particular trends related to Japanese cinema. First, notwithstanding the efforts of the film to make its female protagonist as heroic as Katsu’s original incarnations, *Ichi* still falls into tendencies to which other *Zatoichi* titles and *chanbara*

1 features frequently adhere. The Ichi character is shaped by her feminin-
2 ity, particularly through her sexuality, looks and place in society, and this
3 ultimately affects how the narrative is resolved. Ichi instead could have
4 potentially asserted her sword-fighting skills and independence from
5 other (predominantly male) characters, as Katsu's original protagonist
6 often did. The filmmakers intended to incorporate the tropes of popular
7 romantic films in Japan at the time, in order to capitalise on the previous
8 successes of female stars. However, these efforts were not recognised
9 by Western critics, nor did this equate to commercial success in Japan.
10 What the film ultimately illustrates is the way in which female charac-
11 ters have constantly been used in the *Zatoichi* franchise, from the 1960s
12 onwards, as well in other popular Japanese action films. When on-screen,
13 such characters tend to be romantic interests or damsels-in-distress,
14 with villainous or heroic turns being few and far between. As is perhaps
15 expected, especially with a film series that originated in the 1960s, male
16 stars within the franchise do not have this problem, especially when they
17 play the protagonist.

18 This chapter will situate the case-study of *Ichi* within established find-
19 ings concerning franchise media, studio production contexts, popular cul-
20 ture and star personas. The *Zatoichi* films and TV episodes are subject to
21 these trends within their Japanese production history that stretches across
22 five decades. Unfortunately, as these trends are so entrenched, and since
23 the *Zatoichi* franchise is so recognisable due to its popular male protago-
24 nist, it means that these factors also affect the performance of the female
25 cast on-screen – whether or not they are portraying the protagonist.

26 Although this chapter is limited to the case-study of *Ichi* and the
27 *Zatoichi* franchise, these findings do have wider implications for pop-
28 ular *chanbara* films, the production of action cinema within Japan and
29 gender representation on-screen. Derek Johnson states that 'franchis-
30 ing – and the study of it – should remain of significant value to those
31 who want to understand how and why the culture industries reproduce
32 shared culture' (Johnson, 2013, p. 26). Richard Dyer offers a similar
33 argument in his influential study *Stars* (1979) – specifically, that such
34 personas have a significant cultural impact due to their multiple facets:

35 star-as-person : star-as-image
36 star-as-image : star-as-character
37 star-as-auteur : star-as-text
38 star-as-self : star-as-role
39 and . . . star-as-essence : star-as-subject
40 (Dyer, 1998, p. 161)
41

Dolores Martinez (2009) has concluded, by way of investigating Japanese cinema, that by studying films as anthropological artifacts, popular culture is found not to be static, especially when it has a global impact. In a contrast to this notion, however, the history of female characters, stars and gender representation within popular franchises, such as the *Zatoichi* series, shows that some aspects of popular culture and film production can remain static over many decades.

***Ichi* within the *Zatoichi* Franchise: Illustrating New and Constant Directions**

The success of Takeshi Kitano's 2003 remake, *Zatoichi*, opened the door to many new and possible interpretations of the famous blind swordsman. Kitano famously said that he wanted to make his portrayal of Zatoichi as far removed from Shintaro Katsu as possible. Apart from cutting his hair short and dressing in unremarkable period garments, such as brown or grey cloaks and sandals, Katsu did little to change his appearance. However, Kitano would decide to dress in blue and black cloaks, while carrying a red cane concealing his sword and dyeing his hair blond. Five years later, Haruka Ayase would not go to such extremes with her costume in *Ichi*. Her naturally brown hair is kept loose, and her cane sword is concealed in a plain bamboo scabbard, as was the case with Katsu's swordsman. Her kimono is ragged and multi-coloured, which is distinctive visually and also apt, as the character cannot see the clothes in which she dresses. The biggest contrast from previous feature films is that the protagonist is female. But despite this unique hook, in terms of plot and characterisation, *Ichi* would not stray far from the *Zatoichi* formula.

At first, this seems like a strength for the film, as Ayase's protagonist can finally prove that a female swordsman is as capable as the legendary male character. Instead of being a travelling masseur, Ichi is a travelling musician and singer who carries her *shamisen* (three-stringed lute) as well as her cane sword. After being dismissed from one house, she cuts the fingers off a groping male servant after trying to find shelter from the snow. In the next scene, she kills two *yakuza* who are trying to get away from a blind prostitute without paying for her services. Shortly afterwards, Ichi meets Toma (Takao Osawa), a trained samurai who cannot draw his sword, due to a past tragedy – which leads to several moments where he relies on her sword skills (as well as her ability to hear the way in which the dice land in a *yakuza* gambling den). Although coincidence leads to Toma being mistaken for a master swordsman and the pair being embroiled in a local gang feud, the film's scenes and narrative

1 structure do not shy away from presenting Ayase's character as a for-
2 midable warrior. However, this changes after her first encounter with
3 the film's chief villain, the flamboyant, one-eyed and constantly cackling
4 Banki (Shido Nakamura).

5 Banki is not just a clichéd villain because of his outlandish garb, his
6 loud and brawling *yakuza* gang, and the fact that he resides in a shadowy
7 cave. He is also a fan of the monologue. He takes pleasure in first defeat-
8 ing Ichi by countering her back-handed draw of her cane sword. Then
9 Banki explains that he fought the legendary blind swordsman Zatoichi
10 several years earlier, and that he was determined to triumph over his
11 sword-fighting style. Ichi has also been searching for Zatoichi, who may
12 be her father, but Banki simply says that he died of a disease. Ichi is then
13 imprisoned in Banki's cave, where she experiences a flashback to Zatoichi
14 leaving her with a blind musician troupe as a child, but also visiting every
15 now and again to train her in sword fighting. Instead of herself escap-
16 ing, as the original Zatoichi often did (from many a prison), Ichi instead
17 has to be rescued by Toma. Ichi now seems depressed and despondent,
18 although by the end of the film she does not entirely trust Banki's story
19 and implies that she may still look for the man who raised her. However,
20 before she does emerge from her stupor and kill Banki, she and Toma give
21 in to their feelings and spend the night together. This seems to have two
22 consequences – first, Toma can now draw his sword when Banki attacks
23 the local town; and second, Ichi is 're-energised' so that she can face
24 Banki again, but only after Toma has died before she reaches the battle.

25 Structurally speaking, *Ichi* follows the formula of previous *Zatoichi*
26 films and many others within the broader category of *chanbara*. Ichi's
27 journey brings her into contact with other travellers and, eventually, a
28 town where a rivalry between *yakuza* gangs is brewing. Through cer-
29 tain coincidences and plot developments (such as killing two of Banki's
30 *yakuza* early on, and Toma being mistaken for a master swordsman),
31 Ichi is forced to face and kill many of the antagonists, including Banki.
32 But the film's rigidity, in terms of plotting and structure, ultimately
33 extends to gender roles within the narrative, which in turn continues
34 long-standing trends within the franchise (and *chanbara* films) from the
35 1960s. While this can be evidenced from the film's narrative and produc-
36 tion context, another figure within the 2008 film also helps to emphasise
37 this point. In the flashbacks to Ichi's earlier life, Zatoichi is portrayed
38 by Tetta Sugimoto, who wears a costume and haircut similar to Katsu's
39 original portrayal. As will be explained, factors relating to Japanese film
40 production in the 2000s will be noted as influencing the film's inception,
41 casting and production. However, the film is also determined to honour

previous portrayals of the blind swordsman and to continue long-standing trends and tendencies within the franchise.

Before further highlighting the shortcomings of *Ichi* in terms of gender representation, by linking it to other portrayals of women within the *Zatoichi* franchise, it is necessary to outline the production context of the film. This helps to explain why the plot of *Ichi* and its character motivations play out in certain ways on-screen. Even though these aspects can be heavily critiqued in terms of the history of gender stereotypes within the *Zatoichi* films and other *chanbara* titles, they also situate the film within wider trends found in Japanese popular films and media at the time. Fumihiko Sori directed the script, written by female writer Taeko Asano. These credits, as well as the portrayal of Ichi by popular actress, singer and model Haruka Ayase, were a likely formula for commercial success, especially considering Sori's previous successful film releases (*Ping Pong*, 2002; *Vexille*, 2007). Ayase's multimedia idol status also fit well into the star-persona-mould shaped by Katsu and Kitano. However, *Ichi* grossed just over \$4 million dollars at the Japanese box office and ranked 84 out of 100 in terms of domestic and international releases for 2008 in Japanese cinemas. This ultimately disappointed Kodansha, Warner Bros and the TV network Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), who had put up most of the funds for production. Multiple theories can be put forward now for the film's lacklustre performance (as will be suggested later). But the focus on a female protagonist and the introduction of a doomed romance between Ichi and Toma was very much part of the zeitgeist in the 2000s, in terms of popular Japanese media narratives.

Japanese audiences love romantic stories, whether in book, film, *anime* or *manga* form (Kono, 2010; MacWilliams, 2014, pp. 137–54; McDonald, 2015, pp. 3–84). The possibility that *Ichi* was trying to capitalise on this success in Japan, rather than simply continue a tried and tested formula, is indicated by the film's acting and script credits. Both Haruka Ayase and Takao Osawa were no strangers to action films before *Ichi*, but a more significant link between the two is that they appeared in television (Ayase) and film (Osawa) versions of the same romantic novel, *Crying Out Love, in the Center of the World*, released in 2004, directed by Isao Yukisada. The novel, originally titled *Socrates in Love* (by Kyoichi Katayama and published in 2001), concerns an engaged young man who suddenly comes across audio tapes reminding him of a romance that he had as a teenager with a young girl who died of leukemia. Despite such a melancholic premise, the novel and its many adaptations have captured the imaginations of audiences in Japan and other East Asian countries (Lai, 2013). Furthermore, the scriptwriter for

1 *Ichi*, Asano, had worked mostly on romantic films and TV series before
2 (and since) her reimagining of Zatoichi – such as *Love 2000* (2000) and
3 *A Symphony of Us* (2006).

4 Such plotting, however, came across as strange to Western fans of *chan-*
5 *bara*. Following the international success of Kitano's 2003 *Zatoichi* film,
6 a gender-flipped reboot of the character may have also been positively
7 received. As romantic dramas such as *Crying Out Love, in the Center of*
8 *the World* were not being widely exported from Japan, the critical recep-
9 tion of *Ichi* outside of Japan expressed discontent and confusion about
10 some of the characterisation and plotting. For instance, Calum Waddell,
11 writing for *NEO*, a monthly magazine published in the UK focusing on
12 Asian popular culture, stresses that the film is one of two halves, where the
13 second part is a major contrast from the first. In this respect, he believes
14 that it departs too much from the original *Zatoichi* series and becomes
15 too focused on its romance subplot, summing up his views by stating
16 'Less talk, more action please' (Waddell, 2009). Similar comments are
17 put forward by other critics, such as the *London Evening Standard* stat-
18 ing that 'the fight scenes are better than the dialogue' (Malcolm, 2009);
19 *Sight and Sound* said that 'Ayase brings little to the character apart from a
20 doe-eyed demeanour' (Clarke, 2009); *Time Out London* saw it as a 'limp
21 *femme* take on Japan's popular *Zatoichi* franchise' (Jenkins, 2009); and
22 *The Times* thought that it was an 'uninspired reimagining of the *Zatoichi*
23 legend' (Maher, 2009). Yes, these are male critics, from predominantly
24 British publications, but at the time of writing this chapter no critical
25 reception from Japan was accessible. However, the lacklustre domestic
26 box-office performance of the film, at just over \$4 million, is an indica-
27 tor of the Japanese audience reaction to the film. Four years earlier, the
28 film adaptation of *Crying Out Love, in the Center of the World* grossed
29 almost \$73 million. And yet both films were based on popular stories and
30 characters, concerning romantic stories, with popular stars in their casts.
31 Other than the partial view of the critical reception that is currently avail-
32 able, the latter aspect mentioned here – star personas – combined with
33 the long-running popularity of the *Zatoichi* character and franchise, may
34 offer some answers as to why there was such a contrast with the critical
35 and commercial success of *Ichi*.

37 **In the Land of the Blind Swordsman, Star Power and Gender** 38 **Stereotypes Are King**

39 Star power and franchise formulas are significant factors within
40 the study of popular culture and cinema history, as shown in much
41

published research. Certain views of stars given by the *Zatoichi* franchise and its production context align with concepts established by Richard Dyer in *Stars* (1979) – particularly the notions of ‘star-as-image’ and ‘star-as-character’. This is also found within star studies that have continued since Dyer’s work, especially within the East Asian film and media industries, where stars are frequently interpreted as a constellation of images and popular characters. In 2009, Deborah Shamoon investigated the evolution of Misora Hibari’s star image from sexualised child actor to a righteous and virginal young girl. Mats Karlsson is one of several scholars to examine the star persona of Setsuko Hara. His 2015 book chapter situates Hara’s identity within the rigid Japanese studio system, of which Shintaro Katsu was also a product. While such case-studies are historical, parallels are found between stars of the past and present across many national borders, as demonstrated in the chapters of *East Asian Film Stars* (Leung and Willis, 2014), where carefully constructed star images are examined in relation to the careers of Kyo Machiko, Brigitte Lin, Donnie Yen, Chow Yun Fat and Zhang Ziyi, among others, although changes are often necessitated by shifts between East Asian and Hollywood studios. Differing star images have also been found within the study of different genre categories. In 2001, Aaron D. Anderson argued that analyses of martial arts films often reduced female heroines to either sexualised objects, or mobile, athletic and feminine; and although David Brown only writes about male martial arts actors’ bodies in 2008, his categories of ‘martial-artist-as-actor’, ‘actor-as-martial-artist’ and ‘the enhanced martial-artist-as-actor’ can easily be adapted to the successful martial arts actresses now found in East Asian countries. This could have been attempted in the analysis of *Ichi* (2008). However, the characterisation of the protagonist and the performance of Ayase do not emphasise her martial arts skills, as much as they do particular gender stereotypes.

When looking back on the history of the *Zatoichi* films and TV series, depictions of gender are very strongly linked to stardom. Judith Butler’s views on gender still underscore much writing and research in this area, especially points such as ‘what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’ (1990, p. xv). This is particularly seen in the consistent performances of Katsu and other actors as *Zatoichi*, in addition to his female co-stars. Across the whole franchise, *Ichi* is often found to be kind, selfless, amiable, as well as morally justified in his bloody actions (he is only reluctant to draw his sword throughout the films made in the 1960s). Portrayals of women support this view of the

1 character and, in turn, the star identity of Katsu. Female co-stars often
2 require saving through Ichi's actions, either through violence or words
3 of wisdom. This can lead to changes of heart in women who are at first
4 villainous, or victims of injustice may fall in love with him – leading Ichi
5 to stress that he is 'no good' as a blind man, a killer and a gambler, so he
6 never settles with any woman. As a result, a changing roster of female
7 stars (both emerging and established) were brought into the films and
8 episodes through these supporting roles. This is perhaps understandable
9 for a long-running franchise about a particular male character, but there
10 was often a limited variety to the supporting roles offered to female
11 co-stars.

12 This partially explains why later portrayals of the Zatoichi character
13 seem to struggle to move away from gender stereotypes, especially
14 in relation to women. This long history and rigid formula will now be
15 explained in this section before the film *Ichi* is re-situated within it. The
16 *Zatoichi* film series began in 1962, with *The Tale of Zatoichi* (dir. Kenji
17 Misumi). The adaptation of a short story by Kan Shimozawa (first pub-
18 lished in 1948), the film was a surprise success for the studio Daiei. It
19 helped to cement Shintaro Katsu's status as one of their top stars, fol-
20 lowing the growing success of the *Akumyo* (*Tough Guy*) *yakuza* films
21 which started in 1961. A sequel was quickly produced in the same year,
22 which included many more fight scenes and villains for Katsu's blind
23 warrior to vanquish. Simply named Ichi, meaning 'one', the 'zato' suffix
24 means 'blind'. The character wanders innocently into nineteenth-century
25 Japanese towns, looking to offer his services as a masseur and take part
26 in some gambling when the chance arises. In every single film and TV epi-
27 sode, this inevitably leads Ichi into violent trouble with the local *yakuza*,
28 requiring him to unsheathe his sword hidden in his walking stick and to
29 use it with deadly force. Zatoichi was not just another popular *jidai-geki*
30 (period drama) character, but also a hero of the *chanbara* (sword action)
31 genre, as well as the *matabimono* (drifter stories) genre. In many inter-
32 views, Katsu claimed to have had a blind servant in his family as a child;
33 alongside his regular training with a sword, this helped him to fulfil
34 what would become his signature role. It would also allow him to incor-
35 porate his other famous talents, such as playing musical instruments,
36 singing, dancing, as well as defending and wooing the female characters.
37 Twenty-five films were made from 1962 to 1973, then 100 TV episodes
38 until 1979, followed ten years later by Katsu directing his final on-screen
39 performance as Ichi. Even after his death in 1997, the role continued to
40 be associated with Katsu, through anniversary celebrations, re-releases,
41 stage performances, as well as official and unofficial lookalike actors.

For better or worse, both star and actor became inseparable. As Donald Richie noted about Katsu in 1978, there was an ‘absence of anything and anyone when Zatoichi is not there’ (Richie, 2005, p. 164).

A recurring trait throughout the *Zatoichi* franchise is the changing roster of female cast members in every instalment, whether a film or TV show. This was varied in the later remakes from 2003 onwards, as the lead actors also changed, but it was also an established part of the formula within the Shintaro Katsu films from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the later TV series. Female co-stars would often try to use the franchise to establish or continue their own success on-screen. If this did not happen, their appearances in *Zatoichi* instalments may become for what they were most remembered. There were sometimes exceptions to these trends, but in most cases star power was drawn into the *Zatoichi* franchise to help promote Katsu’s own image. Two helpful illustrations of this are found in the year 1967 – a particularly significant year, as Daiei’s finances had started to flounder, and Katsu set up his own production company in order to continue making films with his regular crew and colleagues. Katsu was also an accomplished stage actor and singer, and he had started to perform ‘Zatoichi’s Lullaby’ as a recurring theme tune (again, from 1967 onwards). However, Katsu and his colleagues would also vary their formula as much as possible, which led to some musical starlets often featuring in cameo performances. *Zatoichi’s Cane Sword* (1967) included Kiyoko Suizenji as Oharu, the lead singer of a theatre troupe with which Ichi duets and hitches a lift. Famous for *enka* ballads and numerous stage, film and TV appearances, Suizenji is still performing to this day (as of 2022). Another popular performer was cast as a singer in a travelling troupe in *Zatoichi Challenged* (1967). Mie Nakao continues to perform on stage (as of 2022) and previously had a successful career from the 1950s to the 1970s as part of the Three Girls (who regularly released music and appeared in films together). Of course, in both films Ichi has to defend the troupe performers from nefarious *yakuza*. Thus, although popular singers would continue to be cast in later films and TV episodes, they were often damsels in distress that required saving.

After a failed comeback film in 1989 and Katsu’s passing in 1997, Kitano’s 2003 film would re-introduce the character to both Japanese and international film screens, with a much different costume. Converted from Japanese yen, the film made almost \$24 million for distributor Shochiku, and it was Kitano’s biggest domestic hit in Japan, in addition to winning the Silver Lion at Venice. Looking back upon these achievements now, it seems only logical that Kitano should be the filmmaker

1 to do this, considering some of the career parallels he had with Katsu.
2 Although not a musical performer or singer, his success was first found
3 on stage as part of a *manzai* (duo) comedy act, The Two Beats. As his
4 success grew through comedy routines and television presenting, Kitano
5 soon turned to acting in the 1980s, and by 1989 he was also directing in
6 between his busy schedule of TV appearances. Scriptwriting and editing
7 followed soon after, as did parallel outputs in writing, radio present-
8 ing and canvas artwork, which were maintained even after a near-fatal
9 motorbike accident in 1994. By 2003, Kitano seemed to have a larger-
10 than-life star status due to these multiple facets of his career. This gave
11 him both the reputation expected to fill a huge star's shoes, such as
12 Katsu's, as well as the authority to bring such a radical visual change to
13 the beloved blind swordman character. However, it could be argued that
14 little else changed, in terms of the plot and characterisation expected of
15 a *Zatoichi* film, especially when considering gender portrayals.

16 The film's plot is like many others – Ichi arrives in a town, befriends
17 some locals, but also has to defend them against some violent and con-
18 spiratorial *yakuza*. This includes defending a brother and sister, disguised
19 as *geisha*, who are trying to seek revenge against their parents' killers.
20 The brother character in a *kimono*, Osei, could be seen as a progres-
21 sive twenty-first-century step for both *jidai-geki* and *chanbara* films. But
22 the character's significance is also found in the film's casting, specifically
23 through the actor Daigoro Tachibana – whose only film acting credit
24 is the 2003 *Zatoichi* film. This is because he is known primarily for
25 his singing and acting on stage, specifically as part of a long tradition
26 of *onnagata*, or female impersonators found in Japanese *kabuki* the-
27 atre. Tachibana may have been happy to be the butt of some jokes in
28 a *chanbara* tale, having most likely starred in comedies, musicals and
29 a variety of other on-stage productions. But Osei is frequently used to
30 mock the notion of men wearing make-up, especially when he inspires a
31 farmer (Shinkichi) to try doing the same. This mockery may be expected
32 due to another casting choice, as the farmer is played by comedian
33 Guadalcanal Taka. However, the film is directed by Kitano, with one of
34 his most famous jokes being a V-shaped arm-salute alongside the phrase
35 'Comaneci!' as a reference to gymnast Nadia Comaneci's figure-hugging
36 leotard. While he has not gained the womanising reputation of Katsu
37 (documented in many news articles), Kitano's willingness to stereotype
38 women as certain characters is demonstrated in his *Zatoichi* remake. An
39 argument could be made about the limitations of the genre, but even
40 after arming the *geisha* siblings with hidden swords, the film reduces
41

them to damsels in distress that require saving, like many other female characters in the film.

Although the 2010 film, *Zatoichi: The Last*, attempted some significant changes within the formula, much also remains the same. Shingo Katori plays Ichi, most famous for being part of the popular boy band SMAP, which later disbanded in 2016. In 2010, his fame may well have been on par with Katsu's. This title was also funded by Toho, who had previously distributed some of Katsu's *Zatoichi* films from the 1970s onwards and had also attempted to cash in on 'ending' another franchise of theirs with *Godzilla: Final Wars* (2004), before reviving it in 2016. The studio therefore attempted to both provide a new interpretation of the blind swordsman and a definitive ending for the franchise, through the efforts of director Junji Sakamoto and (at the time) emerging scriptwriter Kikumi Yamagishi. Sadly, Japanese and overseas audiences seemed not to care. In 2010, *The Last* only made \$3.68 million in Japan and was the 110th highest domestic and international release of the whole year. Despite the international profile of previous *Zatoichi* films (including *Ichi*), this title was not picked up for overseas distribution. The changes to the formula included introducing Ichi having a wife, Otane, only to have her killed off in the first few minutes, becoming part of the vengeful reasons forcing Ichi to draw his sword. However, Ichi ultimately is unsuccessful; for the first time on Japanese screens, he is shown dying on a beach at the end of the film (hence the word 'last' in the title). Despite this dramatic final scene, the film overall provided much fewer opportunities for proactive female roles on-screen, especially in comparison to *Ichi* (2008).

A brief history of the *Zatoichi* franchise has been necessary in this section, as it demonstrates how much Ayase's character from the 2008 film follows these established trends. At first, she seems to fulfil the role of a wandering and fearsome blind swordswoman, especially after dispatching the first few *yakuza* she encounters. However, her character becomes romantically involved with the male lead, while also needing to be rescued by him. Only after these plot points is Ichi able to tragically witness Toma's death and claim vengeance against the villainous Banki. Ultimately, the film ends with her travelling alone again, in the style of all films and TV episodes in the *Zatoichi* franchise. It remains that *Ichi* seems to require its protagonist to fulfil the stereotypical roles of romantic interest and damsel in distress, while also establishing her as a skilled sword fighter. This demonstrates how the history of the *Zatoichi* franchise, as well as its tendencies towards the representation of female

1 characters and stars, ultimately shapes any later remakes, regardless of
2 whether they attempt to stray from the expected formula.
3

4 Conclusion

5
6 The actors who have starred as the blind swordsman on Japanese film
7 and TV screens have often been established models, singers, presenters
8 and/or actors, learning sword choreography for the role of Ichi. This
9 chimes with a lot of existing research on Japanese screen stardom, such
10 as Christopher Howard's analysis of Japanese idols (2014), who are
11 simultaneously established as singers, actors and brands from a young
12 age, especially when working for large agencies such as Amuse or Johnny
13 & Associates. What is also clear from the various stars of the *Zatoichi*
14 films is that Katsu's shadow still looms large over the franchise, and
15 this extends to shaping gender and character portrayals within it. For
16 instance, it was another male star, Kitano, who had most success with the
17 franchise after Katsu. However, other stars failed to successfully estab-
18 lish their own interpretations of the blind swordsman, especially when
19 the 2008 and 2010 films were so keen to reference previous portrayals.

20 The reasons for Ayase's and Katori's lack of success could be due to
21 age, as well as their star personas and screen careers. Both actors were
22 younger than Katsu and Kitano, in comparison to the years where they
23 appeared on-screen as the blind swordsman. For instance, putting aside
24 the number of films and TV shows from the 1960s and 1970s, Katsu
25 and Kitano both played the character when they were in their fifties
26 (in the 1989 and 2003 films). More significant, however, is the fact that
27 Katsu and Kitano already had acted in several action films before their
28 portrayals of *Zatoichi*. As mentioned earlier, for both Ayase and Katori,
29 this was not the case. Ayase had begun to star in commercially successful
30 romantic films and TV dramas after establishing herself as a model, and
31 Katori had only just turned to acting after his successful music career.
32 Their careers were much closer in comparison to supporting male and
33 female actors brought into the *Zatoichi* franchise, especially over the
34 period of Katsu's starring roles in films and TV episodes throughout the
35 1960s and 1970s.

36 What has been most prominent in this chapter is that, despite the
37 efforts to frame Ayase as an action star within an established franchise,
38 it was ultimately the history of the *Zatoichi* series and the memory of
39 popular previous portrayals of the character that seemed to influence
40 her character's portrayal on-screen in *Ichi* (2008). Ayase's own career
41 also seemed to shape this to a certain extent. The characterisation of

Ichi parallels both the success of romantic dramas at the Japanese box office and Ayase's success within this genre. This chapter has allowed me to explore a different perspective on the blind swordsman franchise, in comparison to my book on its global influence, *The Paths of Zatoichi* (Wroot, 2021). The monograph concluded with the argument that the international history of this character demonstrated points made by Martinez and other scholars – that Japanese cinema and popular culture is enormously influential, and it is not static when it moves across national borders. However, on closer inspection regarding the portrayal of women and its influence on star personas within Japanese media, some aspects of the *Zatoichi* franchise remain largely fixed, in terms of gender stereotypes and action film protagonists. Since the release of *Ichi*, the most successful domestic and international *chanbara* films continue to be male-dominated – from *13 Assassins* (2010) over *Blade of the Immortal* (2017) to the *Rurouni Kenshin* franchise (2012–21). Until future Japanese productions move away from these stereotypical trends, it is likely that female characters will continue to be depicted in similar ways, regardless of whether they are sword-wielding protagonists.

References

- Anderson, A. D. (2001). Asian martial arts cinema, dance, and the cultural languages of gender. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 11(2), 58–78.
- Brown, D. (2008). The changing charismatic status of the performing male body in Asian martial arts films. *Sport in Society*, 11(2/3), 174–94.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Clarke, R. C. (2009). *Ichi*. *Sight and Sound*, 19(8), 66.
- Dyer, R. (1998). *Stars* (new ed.). London: BFI.
- Howard, C. (2014). National idols? The problem of 'transnationalizing' film stardom in Japan's idol economy. In W.-F. Leung and A. Willis (eds), *East Asian film stars* (pp. 49–64). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenkins, D. (2009). *Ichi*. *Time Out London*. Retrieved from <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/87344/ichi.html>
- Johnson, D. (2013). *Media franchising: Creative license and collaboration in the culture industries*. New York: New York University Press.
- Karlsson, M. (2015). Setsuko Hara: Japan's eternal virgin and reluctant star of the silver screen. In A. Bandhauer and M. Royer (eds), *Stars in world cinema: Screen icons and star systems across cultures* (pp. 51–66). London: Bloomsbury.
- Kono, K. (2010). *Romance, family, and nation in Japanese colonial literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lai, A. (2013). Reconfiguring the Japanese melodrama: Crying and return in 'Crying out love, in the center of the world'. *Film Criticism*, 38(2), 20–41.
- Leung, W.-F., and Willis, A. (eds). (2014). *East Asian film stars*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MacWilliams, M. (2014). *Japanese visual culture: Explorations in the world of manga and anime*. London: Routledge.

- 1 Maher, K. (2009). Ichi. *The Times Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ichi-7ntx29pbl3k>
- 2
- 3 Malcolm, D. (2009). Fumihiko Sori stays clear of clichés. *London Evening Standard*.
Retrieved from <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/film/fumihiko-sori-stays-clear-of-cliches-7415403.html>
- 4
- 5 Martinez, D. P. (2009). *Remaking Kurosawa: Translations and permutations in global cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 6
- 7 McDonald, K. (2015). *From book to screen: Modern Japanese literature in film*. London: Routledge.
- 8
- 9 Richie, D. (2005). *The Japan journals: 1947–2004*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.
- 10 Shamoon, D. (2009). Misora Hibari and the girl star in postwar Japanese cinema. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(1), 131–55.
- 11 Waddell, C. (2009, August). Ichi. *NEO Magazine*, 61, 74.
- 12 Wroot, J. (2021). *The paths of Zatoichi: The global influence of the blind swordsman*. Lanham: Lexington.
- 13

14 Notes

- 15 1. Editors' note: In this chapter, Japanese names adhere to the Western convention
16 of given name first, followed by family name.
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34
- 35
- 36
- 37
- 38
- 39
- 40
- 41