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### The Japan Economic Review Study Forum

## American entrepreneur delivers a lecture on Japanese silent cinema

“Our mission is to disseminate the unique heritage of benshi-accompanied film screenings to the world”

On May 19, Mr. Larry Greenberg, CEO of Urban Connections and Digital Meme, and Mr. Yutaka Matsuda, Director of Matsuda Film Productions, gave a lecture entitled “Introducing the vanishing Japanese silent film heritage to the world” at an event sponsored by the Japan Economic Review held in Kojimachi, central Tokyo. In their talk, Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Matsuda explained that silent film screenings in Japan represent a unique art form which combines visual images with narration by katsudo benshi, or motion picture narra-

tors, and musical accompaniment by live orchestra. Following are the highlights of their presentation.

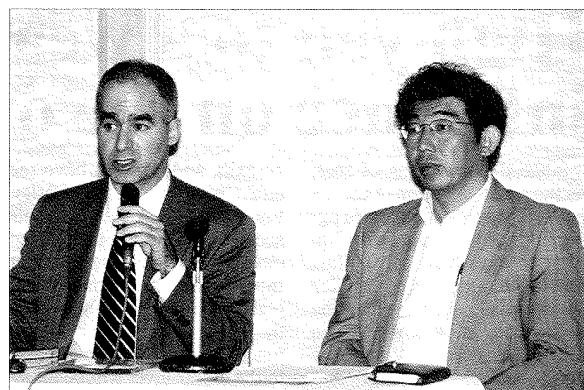
The first silent film was screened in 1895 in Paris, France. As their name suggests, silent films had no synchronized sound and represented merely black-and-white motion pictures. This art form found its way into Japan, and some 12,000 Japanese silent films were created during the 40 years this genre flourished.

In Japan, screenings of black-and-white films were accompanied by live music and the narration of katsudo ben-

shi performers who guided the audience through the presentation of key dialogue which sometimes included commentary on the action.

In theatrical style, benshi spoke for the on-screen characters and assumed multiple roles. The orchestra performed music that complemented the narration, re-creating the mood of the film and enlivening the atmosphere in the theater. Katsudo benshi was a very popular profession at that time.

According to Mr. Greenberg, “The fusion of images, live narration, and orchestral



Mr. Larry Greenberg (left) and Mr. Yutaka Matsuda talk about the significance of silent films

music inspired and moved audiences. This is a unique art form unheard of in other countries.”

Mr. Matsuda is the son of the legendary Shunsui Matsuda, one of Japan’s most prominent benshi. As a young man, he entered Matsuda Film Productions, the only private Japanese collector of silent films, which was established by his father after World War II, and has been actively involved in the preservation and promotion of Japanese silent films around the world. He has produced many of the overseas tours of Ms. Midori Sawato, one of the few active benshi narrators.

According to Mr. Matsuda, only 10% of the 12,000 silent movies created in Japan have been preserved, and Matsuda Film Productions owns most of these films. Many films were lost in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and in the bombing raids during World War II. In addition to silent films screenings, Matsuda Film Productions rents out the classic films to be used in TV programs and contemporary movies.

Matsuda Film Productions has a collection of over 1,000 films (approximately 6,000 reels) from which it has held monthly screenings at the Friends of Silent Films Association since 1959. In July this

year, the Friends of Silent Films Association will hold its 600th event. The company is also actively investing in the nurturing of young benshi performers.

Mr. Greenberg is an expert and aficionado of silent films. His company, Urban Connections has produced and published *Recalling the Treasures of Japanese Cinema* and *The Benshi—Japanese Silent Film Narrators*, books which popularize the heritage of Japanese silent cinema and the unique storytelling art of benshi. In 2000, Mr. Greenberg established Digital Meme, and has been involved in activities to build a digital archive of cultural and artistic legacies from Japan in cooperation with Matsuda Film Productions.

Last year, Digital Meme issued the *Japanese Anime Classic Collection*, a four-DVD set of vintage anime. In October, the company launched the *Talking Silents* series, featuring selected masterpieces of the Japanese silent film era. The films, which feature English, Chinese and Korean subtitles, have attracted the attention of scholars and film aficionados from Japan and abroad.

(<http://www.digital-meme.com/en/index.html>)  
([http://www.matsudafilm.com/index\\_e.html](http://www.matsudafilm.com/index_e.html))



DVDs of the *Talking Silents* series