

BLACK OX



黒之牛 **Kuro no Ushi**

A film by TSUTA Tetsuichiro

Starring LEE Kang-sheng, Music by Master SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

Japan, Taiwan, USA
2024 | B&W and Color | 114'



INTERNATIONAL SALES

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BLACK OX

LOGLINE

Inspired by the *Ten Ox-Herding Pictures* from Zen Buddhism tradition, *BLACK OX* is a unique and epic period work that takes us on a journey towards spiritual awakening.

SYNOPSIS

Japan, 19th century. *BLACK OX* follows the life of a Man, a former hunter-gatherer who loses his connection to the gods of nature and to his spirituality in the process of becoming a farmer and “Japanese” during the national phase of westernization and modernization in the Meiji Period. Transitioning from a life in the mountains to a life in the farm, one day he comes across a black ox. He succeeds in leading the animal to his home, and begins living with it. The Ox becomes his companion in a life of seasons in the attempt to reconnect with nature.

BLACK OX

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This story is about a former hunter-gatherer who loses his connection to the gods of nature and to his spirituality in the process of becoming a farmer and becoming “Japanese” during the nation’s period of westernization in the Meiji Period in the 19th century.

Until this point, it was said that hunter-gatherers possessed a spiritual world that transcended time and life and death. The ox, which appears in front of this man who lives an isolated life, can be seen as an embodiment of the death that had been inside him all along. It is only when the man is disconnected from nature that he loses his spiritual senses and becomes aware of physical death for the first time. This is the beginning of our story.

Compelled by his fear of death, the man tries to become one with the ox, but he had lost his spirituality through his newfound agricultural lifestyle. As a result, he is unable to reunite with nature and, on the contrary, loses sight of the ox more and more. This is linked to the way that modern people today are trying to regain their relationship to nature after losing this connection to it after the Agricultural Age and in a materialistic society that has been prioritized by science. By witnessing the man and the ox till the land, we are given the chance to think about how we should be living. This is the theme that our film will explore.

Last but not least, what I have been seeking for in cinema is not drama or a well-crafted plot that revolves around human emotions. Rather, I want to capture the “something” that transcends the humans who appear in the film image. What I am trying to do this time, with this film, is to capture something that is close to a “nothingness” that has rid itself of the contrived and distracting intentions of the filmmaker, and to try to present a nature that goes beyond the limitations of human intelligence.

In this day and age when digital cameras are the norm, I dare to stick to shooting on film to pursue what I believe should be the aim of any film: to search for the power and expressiveness of the images themselves. I hope to use the magical powers of film to capture the original landscapes of Japan as if I am framing a traditional landscape painting. By recreating the nostalgic visions of the “home in our hearts” that live inside everybody, I hope that people can truly feel the gods and the spirituality of nature.

Tsuta Tetsuichiro

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

What is the origin of your film *Black Ox*? How did you develop the idea?

Initially, I had the opportunity to care for Kuroge Wagyu cattle on a ranch for about a week. During that time, I became fascinated by the sacredness of the cattle and was seized by the desire to see how these beautiful black cattle would look captured on black and white film. Then, I developed the idea adding to it the concept of the “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures” from Japanese Zen.



Black Ox is inspired by the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures from Zen Buddhism tradition. How relevant is it for you to translate such philosophy into cinema?

I wanted to make a film centered on oxen or cows, and I was looking for something that could be the core of that film. I came across the "Ten Ox-Herding Pictures" online, and I began researching literature and books related to that concept. The philosophy at its core is the process of achieving nothingness; it connects to what it means to be human and to life itself. And that is an explanation for the entire world. I felt it had a universal quality to inspire the imagination and to explore new understandings.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

The “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures” are generally interpreted as depicting the theme of personal growth: how one encounters a new self, accepts it, reaches a state of selflessness, and returns to others.

However, I added my own recurring theme of modern humanity's desire to return to nature. I made it a grand film about nature (the universe) and the self-becoming-one, becoming the world itself. Dividing the story into ten pictures isn't exactly a typical cinematic structure, but I thought it could be interesting to apply it to my film. It was my curiosity, first and foremost, that drove me to make a film based on it. It seemed like an interesting challenge.

A part of the Myoshinji Temple in Kyoto, belonging to the Rinzai Zen Buddhist sect, is called Taizo-in, and it is here that the monks in training spend their time. The deputy director of the training center of that temple is Matsuyama Daiko. He gave us a lot of support and taught us a lot about Zen Buddhism. The main actor, Lee Kang-sheng spent some time at that training center and learned about “sitting”, za-zen. However, Lee and I have not had any particular discussions about Buddhism or Zen.

Black Ox is shot in 35mm print - Black & White and in 70mm print - Color. Why this choice?

I decided to shoot exclusively on film. I focus on the visual beauty of my work, and that comes out best when I shoot on film. Shooting digital wasn't an option. For *Black Ox*, I used 35mm black-and-white film and 70mm color film. This is actually the first time a Japanese feature film has used 70mm color film. For someone like me, 70mm film is a dream. While I would have loved to shoot the entire film on 70mm, such a budget was obviously out of reach. Furthermore, 70mm black-and-white film doesn't exist (although Christopher Nolan apparently had it made specifically for “Oppenheimer”), so I shot on 35mm black-and-white film.

The decision to use 35mm black-and-white film was made because the main character in this film is an ox. Shooting on film beautifully captures the intense black color of the ox. Another reason is that this film is a period drama. And I wanted to represent the “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures”. So the 35mm black-and-white film would have definitely worked better on the audience's imagination. Furthermore, the use of 35mm black-and-white film was also inspired by classic Japanese cinema: Ozu, Kurosawa, of course, but especially Mizoguchi's film *Ugetsu*. It wasn't my intention to create something that looked like or felt like an ‘old’ film, but rather to demonstrate the potential of black-and-white effects on the contemporary audiences.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

However, by deliberately using both 35mm and 70mm films, and black and white versus color, I believe we managed to convincingly convey how the film's worldview radically changes, entering a different dimension inherent in its structure. I chose 70mm color film for the final segment in *Black Ox* because I wanted to create a world completely different from the one portrayed in 35mm film. It feels like both the future and the past at the same time, and also an alternate world where humankind is absent. So, in order to show this radical change, I wanted to use different types of grain to accentuate the difference in scale using 70mm film. It's completely different and on a larger scale, so 70mm color film was the right choice.



The cinematography of the film is particularly curated. How did you combine the story and the photography of the film?

This work features minimal dialogue, with the narrative progressing fragmentarily, like a slideshow, shot almost entirely in single-take, single-scene sequences.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

This aligns with the original “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures”, which itself consists of just ten fragments. We deliberately avoided unnecessary narrative elements. Furthermore, the production focused on allowing viewers to appreciate the film's intrinsic visual quality, rather than being distracted by excessive emotional involvement. This stems from a belief that, much like East Asian landscape painting, philosophical and ideological depth can be conveyed through natural scenery settings alone. Therefore, we paid meticulous attention to composition during filming.

The development and the making of Black Ox was a long process. What were the most difficult moments you experienced?

The primary challenge was securing funding. Of the eight-year production period, five years were spent struggling to raise capital. However, the participation of composer Ryuichi Sakamoto and lead actor Lee Kang-sheng proved crucial, allowing the project to gain momentum from that point on.

How was the process in casting the actors and the ox?

Lead actor Lee Kang-sheng, renowned for his work in Tsai Ming-liang's films, was proposed for that role by producer Shōzō Ichiyama. Along with Taiwanese producer Huang Ying-yu, we visited Director Tsai's office in Taipei to meet both Lee and Director Tsai. I explained the film's content and the role, and his participation was confirmed. Fukuyo, the credited ox in the film, was originally raised as beef cattle, but after its owner passed away, it was put up for auction. A cattle breeder contacted me because it was a very docile and intelligent cow. You can't just think of an idea and direct an ox or a cow to move accordingly. However, if you give them a chance to practice and learn something, they do. For example, Fukuyo learned to plow in three months. You also can see Fukuyo with Lee on her back; after a bit of practice, she learned.

Lee Kang-sheng is a very well known actor who is capable of great and memorable acting performances, how was your experience working together?

Mr. Lee Kang-sheng is truly an exceptional and mysterious actor. Even without dialogue, his expressions and physicality evoke different reactions from the audience. He demonstrated it to perfection in this film. His improvisations with the cow are a prime example, and he delighted me and the crew with many surprises.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO



The music of the film is by Ryuichi Sakamoto, the great Japanese musician, composer, record producer, singer, actor. How did you start your collaboration?

I decided to work with Ryuichi Sakamoto because he was an artist with a deep awareness of environmental issues. He was involved in activism, not just music, and I had a great respect for him. While I was shooting the demo reel for *Black Ox*, there was a video competition for Ryuichi Sakamoto's new album.

The idea was to create a video using Sakamoto's music. I entered that competition using that demo reel, a ten-minute pilot footage of *Black Ox*, filmed in 2017. Sakamoto himself was one of the competition's jury members. I heard that our demo reel reminded him of films by Béla Tarr, one of my favorite filmmakers. This made me think we could work together on *Black Ox*. We reached out to him through producer Eric Nyari, and Mr. Sakamoto accepted.

Unfortunately, the original score was not ready in time, but thanks to the kindness of his family, we were provided with a track from his latest album "12". The main sound in *Black Ox* is ambient sound. We used Ryuichi Sakamoto's music here as an overture and as an end roll. It's a bit like wrapping the film.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

Sakamoto-san's music is wrapping around my film, that's the image that I got from the music he composed. Much like the film's visuals, this gentle music, which allows one to simply enjoy the sound itself, envelops my film like the benevolence of nature itself.

How did you work in crafting a soundscape to match the landscape and Sakamoto's music and in making all these elements together?

The sound design was a collaboration of two sound designers, from Taiwan and Japan. The Japanese sound designer, Izumi Matsuno, is actually the sound mixer on the film *Evil Does Not Exist*. From an aural perspective, I wanted to focus not only on realism, but also on something that could amplify the atmosphere. For the first shot, I wanted to make it a little unsettling, using only the ambient sounds we captured. It's just the sound of the wind. Without modern instruments or technology, inspired by Béla Tarr and Andrei Tarkovsky, we used recorded natural sounds to create this atmosphere.

The topic of environmentalism is very present in Black Ox as your previous feature film The Tale of Iya. How would you explain it?

This film aims to question how we can restore the relationship between nature and humans. The film story itself tells of how a primitive mountain tribe is impacted by modernization and how it manages to survive. As humans, we were once connected and integrated with nature, but due to modernization, this bond has been severed. We want to restore that connection, but we can't. We can't go back to our primitive lives; modernization is irreversible. The question of how we can rebuild this connection from where we are now is the theme of this film, and also the central question of my life. While the nuance differs slightly from environmental issues, I make films while constantly questioning myself about how humans and nature should coexist. I believe my films consistently express the longing for a return to nature.

The Tale Of Iya is set in the modern times, while Black Ox is set in the 19th Century. Are you considering a Trilogy dedicated to Environmentalism?

I set this film in the late 19th century because it was a period when Western culture and values were making a strong impact on Japan. It's a story set in a world before Japan adopted Western notions of nature – a world where humans and nature were still perceived as one. It follows human beings who are both human and divine, when separated from nature, as they seek to reclaim that relationship. I believe it resonates with our contemporary desires. I intend to continually update this theme in my films, so it won't be confined to a trilogy; it will likely continue into a four or five-part series.

BLACK OX

IN CONVERSATION WITH TSUTA TETSUICHIRO

Do you feel like your filmmaking style or philosophy have been influenced by any particular Films, or Filmmakers, or Cinema from Japan or outside Japan?

Yes, I have been influenced by many films. It would be endless to list them all, but as masters of visual expression, directors like Andrei Tarkovsky, Theo Angelopoulos, Béla Tarr, Stanley Kubrick, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul have had a profound influence. In Japan, I learned from directors like Kaneto Shindo and Shohei Imamura how to translate Japan's unique climate, spirituality, and folklore into film. I also regard their integrity as independent film producers as a model.

What is your next film project? Anything that you would like to share?

Although I don't have any active projects currently underway, I'm interested in creating several works of fiction based on real historical figures. One is Torii Ryūzō, an anthropologist who explored Japanese roots and conducted field excavations throughout East Asia. The other is Fukuoka Masanobu, who established natural farming methods to Japan. I anticipate soil will be a significant focus in both works.



BLACK OX

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures

Each picture comes with a short poem. The pictures represent the struggle one has as practitioners living in samsara (the conditioned world). The ox (or bull) represents what can be called the true self, Buddha-nature, emptiness, and/or anatta (non-self). The oxherder represents each of us as practitioners. And the pictures tell the story of a practitioner's journey towards greater peace and acceptance with seeing things as they truly are. The Ox-Herding poems are primarily instructional teachings, designed to be reflected upon and practiced with. The poems point to several things one could contemplate within the experience. Together the pictures and the poems can broaden one's awareness of the nature of the path to awakening with all its challenges and benefits. The pictures follow a specific sequencing.



1. Searching for the OX

In the pasture of the world,
I endlessly push aside the tall grasses in
search of the Ox.

Following unnamed rivers,
lost upon the interpenetrating paths of
distant mountains,
my strength failing and my vitality
exhausted, I cannot find the Ox.
I only hear the locusts chirping
through the forest at night.



2. Finding the Footprints

Along the riverbank under the trees,
I discover footprints.
Even under the fragrant grass,
I see his prints.

Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces can no more be hidden
than one's nose, looking heavenward.

BLACK OX

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures



3. Perceiving the OX

I hear the song of the nightingale.
The sun is warm, the wind is mild, willows
are green along the shore.
Here no Ox can hide!
What artist can draw that massive head,
those majestic horns?



4. Catching the OX

I seize it with a terrific struggle.
Its great will and power
are inexhaustible.
It charges to the high plateau
far above the cloud-mists.
Or in an impenetrable ravine it stands.

BLACK OX

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures



5. Taming the OX

The whip and rope are necessary.
Else it might stray off down
some dusty road.
Being well-trained, it becomes
naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, it obeys its master.

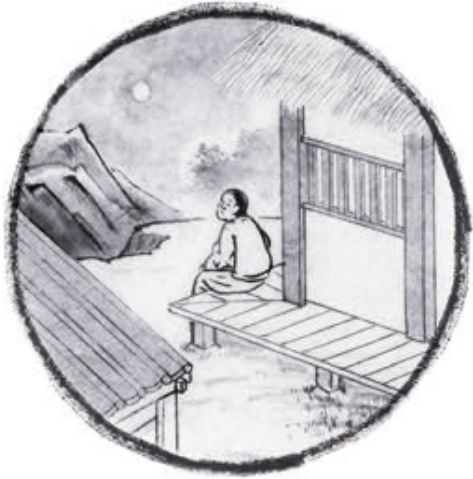


6. Riding Home on the OX

Mounting the Ox, slowly
I return homeward.
The voice of my flute intones
through the evening.
Measuring with hand-beats
the pulsating harmony,
I direct the endless rhythm.
Whoever hears this melody
will join me.

BLACK OX

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures



7. The OX Transcended

Astride the Ox, I reach home.
I am serene. The Ox too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling
I have abandoned the whip and ropes.



8. Both OX and Self Transcended

Whip, rope, person, and Ox -
all merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast,
no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist
in a raging fire.
Here are the footprints of
the Ancestors.

BLACK OX

The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures



9. Return to the Origin, Back to the Source

Too many steps have been taken
returning to the root and the source.
Better to have been blind and deaf
from the beginning!

Dwelling in one's true abode,
unconcerned with and without –
The river flows tranquilly on
and the flowers are red.



10. Return to Society

Barefooted and naked of breast,
I mingle with the people of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden,
and I am ever blissful.

I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees
become alive.

BLACK OX

THE MAIN CAST

The cast includes the Taiwanese actor LEE Kang-sheng (*Rebels of the Neon God*, *Vive L'Amour*, *The Hole*, *I Don't Want To Sleep Alone*, *Days*) the Japanese actor TANAKA Min (*The Twilight Samurai*, *47 Ronin*, *Perfect Days*), and the dancer – choreographer, creator of Moving Earth dance company, TAKEI Kei.

Lee Kang-sheng (1968) is a Taiwanese actor, film director and screenwriter. He has appeared in all of Tsai Ming-liang's feature films. Lee's directorial works include *The Missing* in 2003 and *Help Me Eros* in 2007. Lee has received recognition for his acting by winning the Best Actor Award at the 2002 Cinemanila International Film Festival for *What Time Is It There?* and getting nominated for a Golden Horse Award in 1994 for *Vive L'Amour*. Lee won several awards with his directorial debut, *The Missing*. At the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival, he won the KNF Award, the NETPAC Award and the Tiger Award. The film won the New Currents Award at the 2004 Pusan Film Festival, a special mention at the Ljubljana International Film Festival and the City of Athens Award at the Athens International Film Festival. *Help Me Eros* in 2007, was nominated for a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. It won a special jury award at the 2007 World Film Festival of Bangkok.

Min Tanaka (1945) is a Japanese dancer and actor. Tanaka was trained in ballet and modern dance, but in 1974, he began his solo career with a series of nearly-naked primarily outdoor improvisational dances that took place throughout Japan, often dancing up to five times a day. For a certain time in the 1980s, he was associated with Hijikata Tatsumi and butoh, a loose genre of Japanese dance. From 1986 to 2010, Tanaka hosted dance workshops based in Body Weather, a movement ideology which "conceives of the body as a force of nature: omni-centered, anti-hierarchic, and acutely sensitive to external stimuli." In 1985, Tanaka and his colleagues founded Body Weather Farm. The training workshop that students received was centered on the labor of workaday tasks, primarily in agriculture. Tanaka taught that performing such tasks in their environments functioned as a dance student's teacher itself. He received the Chevalier of l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French government in 1989. He continues to experiment with new ways to use the body, including drawing inspiration from farming. Starting in 2002, he began to appear in movies and on television. He won the award for best supporting actor at the 26th Japan Academy Film Prize for *The Twilight Samurai* (2002).

Kei Takei (1946) is a dancer-choreographer and the creator of Moving Earth dance company. Born in Tokyo, Takei studied a variety of dance styles including folk dances, ballet, and Japanese classical dance. She arrived in New York from Japan in 1967 for a Fulbright Scholarship at Juilliard School of Music based on the recommendation of Anna Sokolow. In 1969, Takei formed her dance troupe, Moving Earth. She has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships (1978 and 1988). Her signature work, *Light*, is an ongoing creation composed of more than 30 parts and spanning 30 years, with the choreographer drawing on both Western dance traditions as well as Japanese dance, martial arts, and theater. Each section of *Light* has a different theme and is both autonomous and woven into the whole opus and is not necessarily performed in chronological order. The parts range from solo performances to works for more than 20 performers. After 25 years in New York City, Takei returned to her native Japan in 1992 and created Moving Earth Orient Sphere.

BLACK OX

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

TSUTA Tetsuichiro

薦哲一朗

Producer, Director, Writer, Editor

Born in 1984 in Tokushima, Japan. His grandfather, TSUTA Fumiya, was a nationally-renowned coach of the Ikeda High School baseball team and local legend of Tokushima. Tetsuichiro moved to Tokyo and studied film at Tokyo Institute of Technology. In 2013, he debuted with his first feature length film, TALE OF IYA, shot on 35mm color film in the Iya region of Tokushima. First chapter of a trilogy, it World Premiered in Tokyo International Film Festival receiving a Special Mention, followed by the Aurora Prize at Tromsø International Film Festival, the Best Film Award at Pan Asia Film Festival and the Jury Prize at Hong Kong International Film Festival.

Set in Iya, Tokushima, said to be the last uncharted territory in Japan, THE TALE OF IYA depicts the preciousness of living rooted in the earth through the interaction between young people from the city and the people who live in the remote wilderness. Shot on 35mm color film, the film captures the beautiful four seasons of Japan. In 2020, BFI / British Film Institute listed TALE OF IYA as the Best Japanese Film of 2013 in their list, "The Best Japanese Film Every Year—from 1925 to Now."

BLACK OX is TSUTA Tetsuichiro's second feature length film of the same trilogy. With BLACK OX he embarks in even more ambitious work since it is the first narrative feature in Japanese film history to be shot on 35mm film and 70mm film.

BLACK OX world premieres in the Asian Future competition of the 37th Tokyo International Film Festival 2024.



BLACK OX

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

BLACK OX (黒之牛 Kuro no Ushi)

(International Sales: ASIAN SHADOWS)

2024, Fiction feature, 35mm B&W & 70mm Color film, 114'

SONG OF RAIN

2022, Medium length film,

Coach Tsuta: The Truth About the Man Who Changed High School Baseball

2017, Documentary program

FORESTRY

2016, Short

TALE OF IYA

2013, Fiction feature, 35mm Color film, 169'

BLACK OX

CAST, CREW & CREDITS

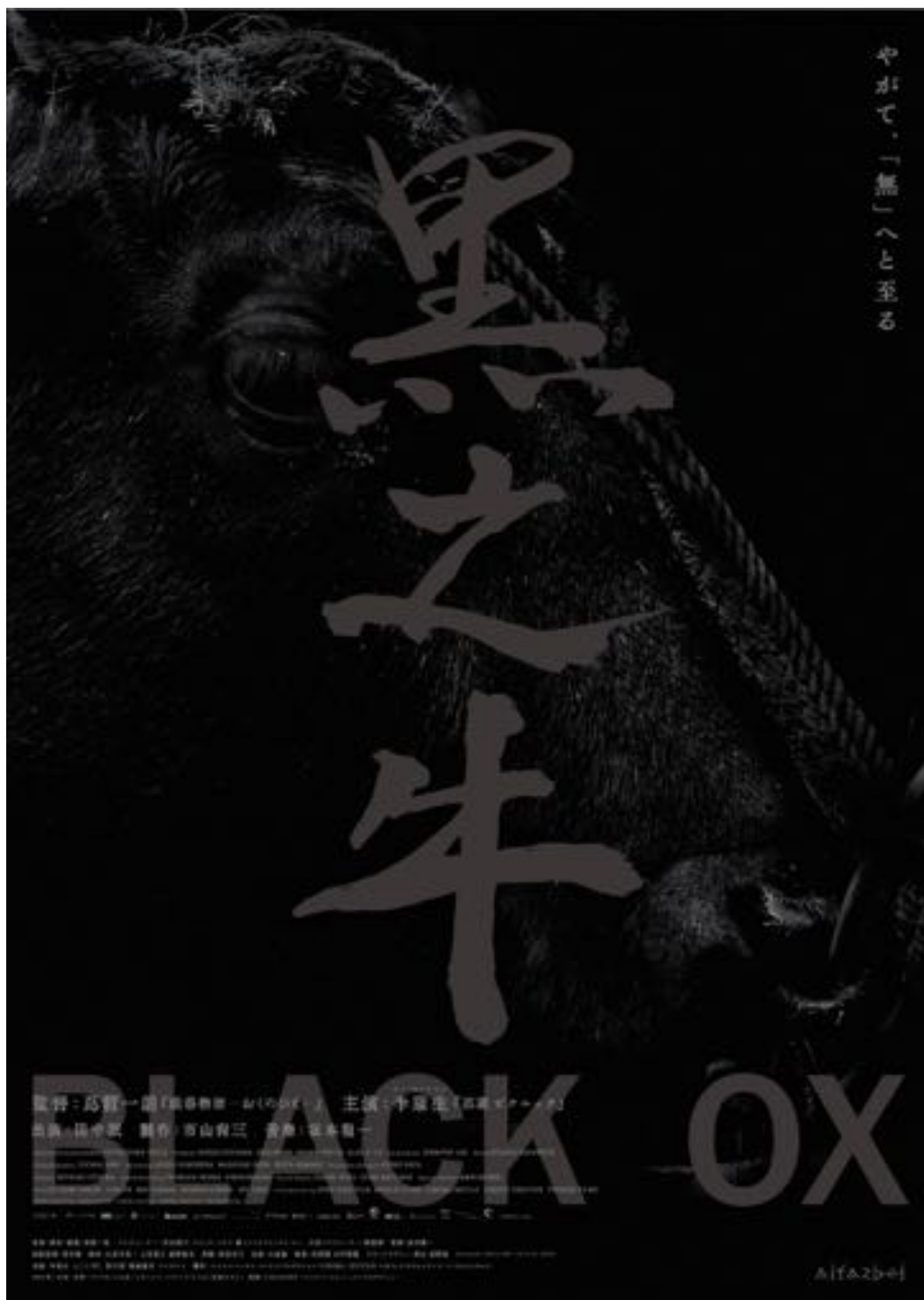
	LEE Kang-Sheng Fukuyo (Ox) TANAKA Min SUMORI Ryubun TAKEI Kei Blanca ADIKA YAMAGUCHI Kouji KISIMOTO Manabu Everett Kennedy BROWN Sandy KAI Kanroku Mokugusha SHIMIZU Rie NINOMIYA Ryutaro IMAMURA Yukiyo TSUTA Tetsuichiro TSUTA Tetsuichiro, KUBODERA Koichi, UEDA Masayuki, KUMANO Keita AOKI Yutaka TSUTA Tetsuichiro SAKAMOTO Ryuichi CHOU Cheng, MATSUNO Izumi IWAMA Tsubasa, OMACHI Hibiki OTSUKA Mitsuru HEYA Kyoko Yvonne FU, MASUBUCHI Aiko Jennifer JAO TSUTA Tetsuichiro, ICHIYAMA Shozo, Eric NYARI, HUANG Yin-Yu, Alex C. LO Niko Niko Film, Moolin Films, Cinema Inutile, Cineric Creative, Fourier Films Asian Shadows Golden Horse Film Project Promotion Asian Project Market Kyoto Film Pitching Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan Ministry of Culture, Taiwan Hualien County Government Hualien Cultural Affairs Bureau J-Lod Taiwan Creative Content Agency Taipei Film Commission Taipei Film Fund Taipei City Government, Department of Cultural Affairs Taipei Culture Foundation
Writer & Director Scriptwriters	
Director of Photography Editor	
Music composer	
Sound Designer	
Sound Recording	
Costume	
Production Designer	
Associate Producers	
Co-Producer	
Producers	
Production Companies	
International Sales Developed at	
Supported By	
Presented by Present/Co-Prod/Co-Marketing	

BLACK OX

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Original Title	黒之牛 Kuro no Ushi
English Title:	BLACK OX
Duration:	114 Minutes
Aspect Ratio:	2.39:1
Format:	DCP
Sound:	Dolby 5.1
Year:	2024
Original Languages:	Japanese
Countries of production:	Japan, Taiwan, USA
Production Companies:	Niko Niko Film Moolin Films Cinema Inutile Cineric Creative Fourier Films
International Sales:	Asian Shadows

BLACK OX



20

