

Semi-shigure

The original Japanese title of the film, "Semishigure," literally means "outburst of cicadas," and refers to the loud chorus of the cicadas song, raining down from the trees. "Semi" means cicada and "Shigure" refers to scattered showers. Cicadas are a special and familiar insect to the Japanese people, as over 30 species live in Japan, and they're omnipresent in the summer. Their songs are often representative of summer itself, and sometimes used to express the accompanying heat.

Edo Period

The Samurai I Loved takes place sometime during the Tokugawa Era (approximately 1603-1868, also called Edo Period), the period named for the 15 generations of Tokugawa Shogun (Military Overlords) who ruled the nation, maintaining a relatively static society, for over 250 years. This period of military-rule was characterized by its relatively peaceful order overall, clear division of the social hierarchy, extravagance by the privileged classes, isolation from the West, and a lot of convoluted treachery, as well as many important cultural and intellectual developments.

For many centuries, Japan had a form of feudal system, in which the servants, vassals and palace guards of the Daimyo (the military Lords of independent regional domains, who maintained a castle, a home base, and several strategically-located satellite fortresses) were granted a piece of land (a fief), or in most cases, a stipend that came with a specific official post. In return, the vassals were expected to dedicate their lives to the service of their masters. The relationships between masters & vassals were based on this reciprocity of services and rewards, and were emotionally very strong.

Almost two-hundred Daimyo-ruled domains and their associated castle-towns existed in the early Tokugawa period, whose sizes varied according to the Daimyo's holdings and the agricultural production of the fiefs under their control. However, the number of Daimyo decreased quickly during this era, as the Tokugawa Shogunate practiced strict enforcement over Daimyo domains to reduce their power.

Unasaka Fief

The story of The Samurai I Loved involves a fief called the Unasaka fief. Unasaka is a fictional fief, and is apparently based upon the Shonai fief in Tsuruoka City of the Yamagata Prefecture, where the author Shuhei Fujisawa was originally from. Fujisawa has set several of his stories in the fictional Unasaka fief during the Edo Period, including the stories adapted into The Twilight Samurai, The Hidden Blade, Love and Honor, and Yamazakura, which, save for the latter film, are all available on DVD in North America.

"It was just a garden snake. Don't worry."

Though Bunshiro refers to the snake which bites Fuku as a "garden snake," this is not the case. A garden snake, more accurately known as a garter snake, is any species of North American snake within the genus *Thamnophis*, which are harmless to humans. Bunshiro actually refers to the snake as a "yama-kagashi," which is a venomous snake indigenous to East and Southeast Asia. Also known as *Rhabdophis tigrinus*, or the tiger keelback, this snake is olive-drab green with black and orange stripes, and a white belly. Though they are venomous, they have been attributed to few deaths, due to the location of the fangs in the back of the mouth, which make a successful strike on a large object quite difficult. It's referred to as a garden snake simply to imply its harmless nature.

"-sempai:" Someone senior/older in a group.

Sempai literally means "Senior" and is used to respectfully refer to someone in the same social group as the speaker who is older or more experienced. Thus Bunshiro refers to his dojo opponent, an older student, as "Yada-sempai" or just "Sempai" when he is talking about him to other people. The inverse term is "Kohai," or "Junior." Occasionally we will render "XXX-Sempai" as "Sempai XXX" if the usage is particularly respectful as opposed to casual.

"There's a chance that I might be going to Edo."

Edo was founded in 1457 when famous poet and warrior Dokan Ota established a fort there. Edo's population

swelled and it quickly became one of the world's largest cities. In 1868 the Tokugawa dynasty was overthrown and Edo became the Imperial capital of Japan. Its name was then changed to Tokyo.

“It must’ve been tough, coming here to borrow rice, right after New Year’s.”

The Japanese New Year is one of the most important annual festivals of Japan, and has many unique customs associated with it. Though it has been celebrated for centuries, the date has not always been the same. Modern Japan celebrates the occasion on the same day as the Western world, on January 1 of the Gregorian Calendar. But before 1873, when Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar following the Meiji Restoration, the occasion was celebrated at the beginning of spring, as the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese New Years are celebrated to this day.

Borrowing rice immediately after New Year's meant that Fuku's family were in definite financial trouble. Generally, people at this time would have hoarded their food and money to “splurge” and have at least a little luxury during the holiday, so it's quite uncommon for a family to experience a food shortage so quickly.

“No. At least three other members of the Fushin-gumi were also detained.”

In this story, the Fushin-gumi is a group of samurai and their servants who perform civil engineering jobs, like construction projects and moat excavation, or in this case, breaching the dikes during a storm.

**“(As we recall old Nariyasu’s poem of the beautiful “Kakitsubata” irises...)
...the flowers of “Ayame” irises are very, very similar to “Kakitsubata” irises.
What cries on the branches?
It is the call of the Cicada.**

The white flowers of...”

During this scene, the Kendo teacher is demonstrating Inukai's sword-fighting technique with Noh dancing and a white mask. The song is actually a famous poem called “Kakitsubata,” which is associated with a very old story called “Ise Monogatari,” written by Ariwara no Nariyasu. Nariyasu composed this anagrammatic poem on his way to the eastern provinces, when he was struck by the beauty of the irises blooming in Yatsushashi. Each of the five lines of the poem begin with one of the syllables in the name of the flower, Kakitsubata.

The poem in the story was quoted in a Noh play by the playwright Zeami, and this is the version of the song and dance we see in this scene. Though we see only a small portion of the performance, the context is as below:

A monk visited the village of Mikawa (in the current Aichi Prefecture), and while standing in a beautiful field of “Kakitsubata” irises, he met a woman from a nearby village. She told him of an ancient poem written by Nariyasu about Kakitsubata irises, and that the field of flowers were there to commemorate Nariyasu. Then, she invited the monk to her place and appeared in front of him with a magnificent robe. She said she was the “spirit of irises,” and danced in front of him. She told the monk that, thanks to Nariyasu's poem, she could now ascend to plant heaven. As she danced, the monk was amazed to see her disappear right before his eyes.

Since this song is not in the original book of Semishigure, it's unclear why the writer/director decided to include it in the film. The first line refers to two distinct species of blue-purple irises which look very similar, called Kakitsubata and Ayame. The similarity could be mentioned to allude to the similarity between the iris-spirit and the fighting-spirit, and the mention of cicadas again brings to mind the omnipresent summer heat, which is visually represented in this scene with a dry, stark environment and heat waves which obscure the vision as the mask falls.

“Cherry blossoms are blooming, spring is here...”

Cherry blossoms, a.k.a. “sakura,” are an important part of Japanese life, and show up throughout *The Samurai I Loved*. They're indigenous to many Asian states, and over 200 varieties can be found in Japan alone. The cultural experience of flower viewing, known as “hanami,” was borrowed from China during the Heian Period (794-1191), when the upper class would gather and celebrate under the cherry blossoms. The social phenomenon evolved as more trees were cultivated for their beauty, and by the ninth century, the sakura was

the most favored species in Japan.

Each year the public (and now the Japanese Meteorological Agency) tracks the cherry blossom front (“sakura zensen”) as it travels northward with the advent of warmer weather. The blossoming begins in Okinawa in January and reaches Kyoto and Tokyo by March/April, eventually arriving in Hokkaido a few weeks later. These forecasts are taken very seriously, and Japanese turn out in huge numbers at parks, shrines, and temples for hanami festivals.

Many schools and public buildings have sakura trees outside, and since the fiscal and school year begin in April, in some areas the first day of work or school coincides with the cherry blossom season. The cherry blossoms themselves have a rich symbolism in Japan. They can represent femininity, love, good fortune, or clouds, which are an enduring metaphor for the fleeting nature of life. This idea is associated with the concept of “mono no aware,” or the transience of mortality, and is symbolized by the extreme beauty of an en masse blooming, followed by a quick death.

“Do you know of the Keyaki Mansion?”

A keyaki, also known as Zelkova serrata, is a type of deciduous tree native to Japan and eastern Asia. It's a medium-to-large tree with smooth grey bark, a short trunk, and many branches which form a high domed crown. Keyaki Mansion probably gets its name from the many keyaki trees in the area.

“By the way, changing the subject, our Lord has a concubine called Lady Ofuku.”

A concubine is a woman in an ongoing, matrimonial relationship with a man of a higher social status. The upper-class man typically has an official wife and numerous concubines of a lower status. The concubines have some financial support from the man, and their offspring are acknowledged as his children (of course, as a lower status than those born by the official wife). These legal rights, which are akin (though inferior) to marriage, separate a concubine from a mistress, but modern day concubines are widely referred to as mistresses because the term is now anachronistic.

“I must borrow your swords, as many as you can gather.”

This aspect of swordfighting is rarely seen in samurai films, but is very realistic, because after a couple of kills, Bunshiro needs to switch to a new sword in order to -- literally -- maintain his edge!

“...I will enter Byakuren-in this autumn, and be ordained as a nun.”

Byakuren-in is most likely a fictional temple-monastery, which literally means “white lotus hall.” Buddhism is unique in that the Buddha explicitly stated that a woman is as capable of nirvana as a man, and can fully attain all four stages of enlightenment. Female monastics, or nuns, are called Bhikkhuni, and share a monastery with male monastics, called Bhikkhus.

To be fully ordained as a Bhikkhuni, one must go through four steps. The first step involves taking the five “upasika” vows. The next step is to enter the monastic way of life, or “pabbajja,” which includes wearing robes and shaving one's head. Then, one becomes a novice nun, or “samaneri.” The last step is to take all the vows of a bhikkhuni to become a “fully-ordained nun.”

Cast & Crew

Somegoro ICHIKAWA (Bunshiro)

Somegoro Ichikawa was born January 8, 1973, in Tokyo, Japan. The son of Koshiro MATSUMOTO, he was trained as a Kabuki actor from a very young age. He made his Kabuki stage debut at the age of five, and was also the youngest Hamlet in Japanese history at just 14 years old. Since then, he's appeared in at least 15 films and TV shows, and even more theater performances. He's considered to be one of the top young Kabuki actors, and he directed several Kabuki scenes in another wonderful AnimEigo release in which he starred, [Ashura](#).

Yoshino KIMURA (Fuku)

Yoshino Kimura was born April 10, 1976, in London, England to two Japan Airlines employees. In fact, her first professional acting gig was for a Japan Airlines commercial. She was raised in London until she was three, and also lived in New York for a few years in her teens. She speaks fluent English (she majored in English Lit. at Seijo University) and likes to ride horses in her spare time. She won Best Newcomer from the Japanese Academy in 1998, and has gone on to appear in over 40 films and TV series, including *Wakeful Nights* (released by AnimEigo), *Masters of Horror: Dream Cruise*, *The Suicide Song*, and *Sukiyaki Western Django*.

Koji IMADA (Yonosuke)

Koji Imada was born March 13, 1966, in Osaka, Japan. He began his acting career on a comedy sketch show called "Gottsu e kanji," and went on to appear in several TV shows and films. He's currently one of the hosts on a comedy show called "Bakusho reddo kapetto."

Ryo FUKAWA (Ippei)

Ryo Fukawa was born August 19, 1974, in Yokohama, Japan. He began his professional acting career at eight years old, in a variety show called "Waratte iitomo!" More than 20 years later, he resumed acting, and quickly transitioned from television to film. On television he has generally taken on minor roles characterized by a childish temperament and boyish looks. He graduated from the Keio University Department of Economics and is also a member of the owarai (comedy) group, No Plan. He's been in three films since 2005, and is working on a film called *Pandora's Box* at the time of this writing.

Mieko HARADA (Toyo)

Mieko Harada was born December 26, 1958, in Tokyo, Japan, and has had a long successful career as a film and television star. She's been in several internationally-renowned films, such as *Swords of Vengeance*, *Jigoku*, *Ran*, and *Akira* Kurosawa's *Dreams*. She also did the voice for Kaguya in the 2002 anime film *Inuyasha the Movie: The Castle Beyond the Looking Glass*. She's been married to the famous Japanese actor Ryo ISHIBASHI (*Audition*, *The Suicide Club*) since 1987 and has three children.

Ken OGATA (Sukezaemon)

Ken Ogata was a legendary Japanese actor, born July 20, 1937, in Tokyo. He's well known for his numerous film roles, particularly Shohei Imamura's *Vengeance is Mine* and *The Ballad of Narayama*. He also enjoyed a long career in television, from his breakthrough role in the 1965 drama "Taikoki" to the lead of the 1982 "Chushingura." Ogata passed away at the age of 71, on October 5th, 2008, shortly after finishing his role in the TV drama "Garden of the Winds." His long-term contribution to acting has been recognized by the Japanese government with high-ranking awards such as the Order of the Rising Sun.

Mitsuo KUROTSUCHI (Director)

Mitsuo Kurotsuchi was born March 3, 1947, in Kumamoto, Japan. He's written and directed three films, including *Orugoru*, *Jutai* (*Traffic Jam*), and *The Samurai I Loved*.

Shuhei FUJISAWA (Original Writer)

Shuhei Fujisawa was born December 26, 1927, in Yamagata, Japan, and left behind a legacy as the number one samurai novelist when he died on January 26, 1997. Overall, he published over 50 books in his lifetime, and had over 23 million of his paperbacks printed. He generally wrote historical fiction, and focused on the humanity of his characters in his stories, in order to convey aspects of Japanese history and culture in a more real sense. Two of his novels were adapted into TV series in the early 90s: "Kamiya Genjiro torimono hikae" and "Ude ni oboe ari." Sadly, he never saw the adaptations which made his work internationally renowned, as the first of his "Samurai Trilogy," directed by Yoji Yamada, did not hit the big screen until 2002, five years after his death. The first, *Twilight Samurai*, was adapted from three of his novels, *Tasogare Seibei*, *Chikkou Shiatsu*, and *Iwaibito Sukehachi*. The next, *The Hidden Blade* (2004), was adapted from two of his short stories, "Kakushi ken oni no tsume" and "Yuki akari." *Love and Honor* (2006) was adapted from the novel of the same name, *Bushi no Ichibun*. His most recent adaptation, *Yamazakura* (2008), was also based off a novel, but it's not available in North America at the time of this writing.

Taro IWASHIRO (Composer)

Taro Iwashiro was born May 1, 1965, in Tokyo, Japan. He's worked as a composer for several Japanese TV series, but is most known for his film scores. Some of his more memorable works include the scores for *Shinobi: Heart Under Blade*, *Azumi*, *The Prince of Tennis*, and *Samurai X: The Motion Picture*. He was also lead composer for the video game *Onimusha 2: Samurai's Destiny*. His most recent project was the score for the two-part epic *Red Cliff*, directed by John Woo, which, at \$80 million, is the most expensive Asian-financed film to date. The two parts will be shortened and combined into a single 2.5 hour film for international audiences in 2009.