

IMAMURA Shohei (September 15, 1926 - May 30, 2006)

A pioneer of Japan's New Wave movement, Shohei's films are notable for focusing on characters from lowerclass society, such as farmers, pimps and prostitutes.

Born into an upper-middle class family, Shohei enrolled at Waseda University to study history, but spent most of his time in the theater department. Just after WWII, while Shohei was still in school, he worked in Japan's black market, buying cigarettes and liquor from American soldiers and selling them to his professors and classmates.

After graduating Waseda in 1951, Shohei entered Shochiku's Assistant Director Program, where his classmates included OSHIMA Nagisa (*In the Realm of the Senses*) and SHINODA Masahiro (*Double Suicide*). While in the program, he found work as OZU Yasujiro's assistant director on films such as *Early Summer*, *Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice*, and *Tokyo Story*.

In 1954, Shohei transferred to Nikkatsu Studio's training program where he worked as an assistant director on KAWASHIMA Yuzo's largely unseen classics *Burden of Love* (1955), *Suzaki Paradise Red Light* (1956), and *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* (1957). By the late 1950s, Shohei directed his first films, churning out four (*Stolen Desire*, *Lights of Night*, *Endless Desire*, and *My Second Brother*) in the course of two years.

The 1960s saw Shohei's creativity explode with a collection of classic films. In 1961, his wartime satire *Hogs and Warships* received critical acclaim and won Best Film at the Blue Ribbon Awards. His follow-up, *The Insect Woman*, won 12 awards and received a nomination for a Golden Bear from the Berlin Film Festival (*HIDARI Sachiko*, the star of *The Insect Woman*, won the festival's Best Actress award), and 1964's *Intentions of Murder* won five Japanese film awards.

At the age of 39, seeking full creative control, Shohei formed his own independent company, Imamura Productions. His first film under the company, 1966's *The Pornographers*, a story that deals with incest, lowbudget porno filmmaking, and the soul of a dead husband living in a carp, won three more awards. In 1967, Shohei directed his first documentary, *A Man Vanishes*. The innovative film, which blends documentary footage with narrative filmmaking techniques, earned Shohei best director at the Mainichi Film Concours awards. His last film of the decade, 1968's *The Profound Desire of the Gods*, won five awards, including Best Film from the Kinema Junpo Awards and the Mainichi Film Concours.

Although the critical success of *The Profound Desire of the Gods* had afforded him respect in the filmmaking community, the lack of commercial success, coupled with the bankruptcy of Nikkatsu Studios, who provided partial funding for many of his films, forced Shohei to concentrate on documentary filmmaking throughout the 1970s. During this time, he gave back to the profession by establishing the Japanese Visual Arts Academy in 1975; one of its most prominent alumni is MIIKE Takashi.

In 1979, he returned to feature filmmaking with the violent crime-thriller, *Vengeance is Mine*. The film won over 20 awards, including the Japanese Academy Award for Best Film and Best Director. It was also the first of five films Shohei worked on with the legendary OGATA Ken.

During the 1980s, Shohei directed a handful of award-winning films. He won the Palme d'Or in 1983 for *The Ballad of Narayama* and again in 1997 for *The Eel*, becoming the only Japanese director to accomplish that feat. He was nominated for the Palme d'Or three other times for *Zegen* (1987), *Black Rain* (1989), and *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge* (2001). His final film was *September 11*, a co-production with 11 directors from around the world.

He succumbed to liver cancer on May 30, 2006, leaving behind a legacy of 21 films. Overall, Shohei won four awards from the Japanese Academy and was nominated six other times, ultimately culminating in a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.

The Cannes Film Festival

The Cannes Film Festival is regarded as one of the world's most influential film festivals. Established in 1939, it is held annually in the resort town of Cannes, France.

The competition of the festival is split into several categories and takes place in a handful of different theaters. The most popular section involves the 20 films that play at the Theatre Lumiere and compete for the Palme d'Or (Golden Palm).

History of the Palme d'Or

Originally called the Grand Prix du Festival International, the “best film” award changed its name in 1955 to Palme d'Or. From 1964-1974, due to copyright problems with the Palm symbol, the festival was forced to temporarily resume using the Grand Prix du Festival title. Reinstated in 1975, the Palme d'Or (and its symbol) is one of the most famous and coveted awards in filmmaking.

IMAMURA Shohei is one of six directors to win the Palme d'Or twice, and the only Japanese director to win more than once.

Other Japanese directors that have won the Palme d'Or:

KINUGASA Teinosuke (Gate of Hell) 1954

KUROSAWA Akira (Kagemusha) 1980

Other two-time winners:

Francis Ford COPPOLA (The Conversation, Apocalypse Now)

Alf SJOBERG (Torment, Miss Julie)

Emir KUSTURICA (When Father was away on Business, Underground)

Billie AUGUST (Pelle the Conqueror, The Best Intentions)

Luc and Jean-Pierre DARDENNE (Rosetta, The Child)

The second most prestigious prize given at Cannes, known as the Grand Prix (not to be confused with the Grand Prix du Festival), was established in 1967.

Two Japanese directors have been honored with this award:

OGURI Kohie (The Sting of Death) 1990

KAWASE Naomi (The Mourning Forest) 2007

“You could eat anything, pinecones, even fart-beans.”

The heppiri mame (literally “fart-beans”) are actually fava beans (aka broad beans). Fava beans have been cultivated since 6000 BC and remain one of the easiest plants to grow.

“The Akebia fruit is overripe.”

Commonly referred to as the “chocolate vine,” the akebia is an ornamental climbing vine with a faint chocolate aroma. The akebia's edible fruit ripens in the fall and produces oval shaped pods that grow 3-4 inches in length.

Native to eastern Asia, akebia was brought to the United States in 1845 and quickly escaped into the wild. Today, the fast growing vine can be found in 16 eastern states.

“Wow... wow... My cheeks... they're falling off...!” (Hoppe ga ochiru)

Literally translated as “it’s so delicious, my cheeks will fall off”, “hoppe ga ochiru” is a well-known saying in Japan used to signify that you have just tasted something delicious. The closest equivalent in English is perhaps “Mama Mia!”

About the Original Books

FUKASAWA Shichirou's novel, *Narayama Bushiko* (The Ballad of Narayama), has been made into a feature film on two occasions, first in 1958 (directed by KINOSHITA Keisuke) and then again in 1983 (directed by IMAMURA Shohei).

However, IMAMURA Shohei's version blends two books written by FUKASAWA. The first book, *Narayama Bushiko*, provides the main narrative, which includes the legend of the mountain, the story of Tatsuhei's wife, and Matsu-yan's pregnancy. The second book, *Tohoku no Zunmu-tachi* (The “Non-Heir” Son in the Family of Tohoku), focuses more on the story of Orin's second son, Risuke.

FUKASAWA Shichirou (1914-1987)

A professional guitarist turned writer, Shichirou published his first book, *The Ballad of Narayama*, in 1956. The novel won the heralded Chuuou Kouron award for Best New Author and quickly became a best seller, drawing huge applause from top authors such as MISHIMA Yukio. In the years that followed, his writing continued to focus on the details of lower-class life. Books such as *Tohoku no Zunmu-tachi* and *Fuefuki-gawa* (The Fuefuki River) brought Shichirou both critical acclaim and commercial success.

In 1960, Chuuou Kouron published *Fuuryuu Yumemonogatari* (The Story of a Dream of Courtly Elegance), a satire in which leftists attack the imperial palace and behead the Crown Prince and his wife. The release of the book enraged the right-wing ultra-nationalists and on February 1, 1961 a young man broke into the home of HOJI Shimanaka, the president of Chuuou Kouron. The intruder managed to severely wound Shimanaka's wife and kill a house maid (Shimanaka was not home at the time). Shichirou was blamed for the incident and chose to go into hiding. In 1965, he permanently settled on a ranch in the Saitama Prefecture where he lived until his death.

In 1981, his short story, *Michinoku no Ningyotachi* (translation, rjw), won the Tanizaki Prize, one of Japan's most prestigious literary awards which comes with a cash prize of one million yen (US\$10,000).

Three of his books have been made into feature films. Along with the two adaptations of *The Ballad of Narayama*, ICHIKAWA Kon directed *Tohoku no Zunmu-tachi* in 1957 and KINOSHITA Keisuke helmed *Fuefukigawa* in 1960.

Trunk house (Nekko no ie)

Until the Meiji Restoration in 1968, only samurai and certain members of noble families were allowed to have family names. Therefore, peasants used names associated with characteristics of their homes. In Orin's case, her house was called “trunk house” because a huge trunk of a Zilkova tree sat in their front yard, and similarly, she was often referred to as *Nekko no Orin* (Orin of the trunk).

Why Orin was so embarrassed to have all of her teeth

In remote villages during this time, dental hygiene was non-existent and it was natural to lose teeth at an early age. Orin's full head of strong teeth represented her ability to eat well, but in a poor village with severe shortages of food, old people eating better than the young was considered embarrassing.

Mouse Baby (Nezumikko)

Along with having strong teeth at an old age, becoming a great-grand parent was also considered shameful. In poor villages, late marriages were encouraged due to the shortage of food. Furthermore, young marriages were

regarded as a sign of perversity and a great-grand child was a sign that a “horny” gene had been inherited for three generations.

“Go to the mountain.”

This phrase had two meanings in the village:

1) Go to the mountain for chores, such as collecting firewood or finding food. 2) Go to the mountain to die.

The use of the phrase contained the same intonation for both meanings, but the villagers understood which one they meant.

The significance of snowing on the mountain

The snow that begins to fall once Orin is on the mountain is considered good luck because it represents the existence and favor of the Narayama mountain god, who is providing a quick and relatively painless death.

Apologizing to the Narayama god

The Omay family were forced to “apologize” to the Narayama mountain god for two generations. The act of “apologizing” meant that their family food was shared with everyone else in the village.

Totsan (leader of the house)

Oei called her husband totsan. Totsan is a local variant of “to-san” or “oto-san”, which means father. However, in the book *Tohoku no Zunmu-tachi*, totsan means the leader of the house.

In remote regions during this time, all of the younger brothers called their eldest brother totsan, even though the totsan wasn't technically their father. If the oldest brother died, his son became the new leader of the house and the younger brothers had to refer to their nephew as totsan.

In the film, the oldest brother is referred to as Tatsuhei Totsan.

Yakko

The second or third (or even younger) son of the family were called yakko. These individuals spent their life as laborers and, to help others recognize the totsan, they were not allowed to shave their beards or comb their hair. Furthermore, only the eldest son was allowed to marry, have children and eventually take over the household.

Himeko

The term himeko was once a reference to all girls. During the time of Narayama, himeko were only allowed to marry the totsan. The birth of multiple himeko was considered a welcome sight, because a family with extra girls could easily sell them to another family or to a trader. Most of the women who ended up serving in Japan's red-light districts were sold in this way by parents who were unwilling or unable to feed them.

Kusare

Risuke was called kusare due to the stench of his body and breath. However, another meaning of the word kusare is leprosy (Hansen's disease), therefore, Risuke was discriminated against as if he had the disease.

Leaving the aged in the mountains

Unfortunately, the lack of food resulted in certain customs widely practiced in rural parts of Japan. Abandoning the aged, abortion, and infanticide were common occurrences.

There are many famous legends that refer to these customs.

One, in particular, has a happy ending: A man carried his mother to the mountain but could not bear to leave her. Instead, he brought her back and hid her in his house. One day, a local lord was faced with a tough problem and asked the man for help. Knowing that she would be discovered, the old woman helped solve the problem. Realizing the value of the aged, the lord decreed that the practice should be abolished.