

Awards

Special Jury Prize - 1994 Tokyo International Film Festival
Best Supporting Actor - Kiichi NAKAI - 1995 Awards of the Japanese Academy
Best Supporting Actor - Kiichi NAKAI - 1994 Hochi Film Awards
Best Supporting Actor - Kiichi NAKAI - 1995 Kinema Junpo Awards
Best Art Direction - Yoshiro MURAKI - 1995 Awards of the Japanese Academy
Best Editing - Chizuko OSADA - 1995 Awards of the Japanese Academy
Best Sound Recording- Teiichi SEITO - 1995 Awards of the Japanese Academy
Best Music - Kensaku TANIKAWA - 1995 Asia-Pacific Film Festival
Reader's Choice Award: Best Film - Kon ICHIKAWA - 1995 Mainichi Film Concours

Other 47 Ronin Films

The story of the 47 Ronin has been made into a motion picture over 80 times, a testament to its timeless themes of honor and duty. Some of the more notable versions include:

Chushingura 1/47 (TV 2001 dir. Shunsaku KAWAMO)
Chushingura gaiden yotsuya kaidan (1994 dir. Kinji FUKASAKU)
Chushingura - Hana no maki yuki no maki (1962 dir. Hiroshi INAGAKI)
Chushingura: ouka no maki, kikka no maki (1959 dir. Sadaji MATSUDA)
Chushingura (1958 dir. Kunio WATANABE)
Dai chushingura (1957 dir. Tatsuyasu OSONE)
Genroku chushingura (1941 dir. Kenji MIZOGUCHI)
Chushingura zenpen (1939 dir. Kajiro YAMAMOTO)
Chushingura (1934 dir. Daisuke ITO)
Chushingura - Zempen: Akahokyo no maki (1932 dir. Teinosuke KINUGASA)
Jutsuroku Chushingura - Ten no maki, Chi no maki, Jin no maki (1926 dir. Shozo MAKINO)
Chushingura (1912 dir. Shozo MAKINO)
Chushingura (1907 dir. Ryo KONISHI)

As of March 2007, however, only two versions of this epic have been released in North America. These are:

Genroku chushingura (1941)

This 241 minute take on the tale of the 47 Ronin was directed by Kenji MIZOGUCHI, and was commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Information in the hope that it would boost morale. However, it was a commercial failure, as it was released just one week before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Though at the time of release, it was considered to be the best researched, and most historically accurate filmed version yet released, most critics considered it far too slow and serious.

Chushingura - Hana no maki yuki no maki (1962)

The retelling of the 47 Ronin by Hiroshi INAGAKI (SAMURAI TRILOGY) weighs in at just over three hours. The first successful Chushingura film shot in color, its timeless strengths lie in its gorgeous cinematography and fine acting.

The saga of the 47 Ronin has, of course, been retold countless times in many types of media, including TV series, books, theatre, Kabuki, Johruri (traditional puppet shows), manga, anime, and so on... With over 80 feature film versions alone to choose from, AnimEigo decided to release this version of the 47 Ronin not just because it was directed by a master director, Kon ICHIKAWA, and features an all-star cast headed by Ken TAKAKURA, but because it presents a unique perspective on the story, focusing not only on the assault, but also on the behind-the-scenes preparation for the 47 Ronin's revenge, a longer battle of espionage, finance, and propaganda.

Kon ICHIKAWA

KON ICHIKAWA'S 47 RONIN

Born November 20, 1915, in Ujiyamada, Mie Prefecture, Ichikawa first gained western recognition during the 1950s and 60s with several bleak films, particularly two acclaimed antiwar films, *The Burmese Harp* and *Fires on the Plain*. Ichikawa began his career as a cartoonist, and collaborated with his wife, screenwriter Natto WADA, until 1965. His films are generally regarded as dark and bleak, interspersed with sparks of humanity, and he often intertwines comedy and tragedy within the same story. He also has a flair for technical expertise, irony, detachment, and a drive for realism across all genres. After Akira KUROSAWA's departure, no other directors in the Japanese film industry have come close to Ichikawa's level of recognition, the power of his films, and film revenues. At age 92 (2007), he is still active as a film director. Partly because of his eclectic style, which has produced incredibly varied but consistently magnificent films, Ichikawa has garnished almost 30 film awards, including but not limited to:

The Burmese Harp (1956) - WINNER Venice Film Festival San Giorgio Prize, NOMINEE US Academy Award Best Foreign Language Film.

Fires on the Plain (1959) WINNER Locarno Int. Film Fest. Golden Sail Award, WINNER Blue Ribbon Award Best Director, Best Cinematography.

Kagi (1960) - WINNER Cannes Film Fest. Jury Prize, WINNER Golden Globe Best Foreign Film, WINNER Blue Ribbon Award Best Director, NOMINEE Cannes Film Fest. Palme D'or.

Tokyo Olympiad (1965) - - WINNER Cannes Film Fest. Prize of the International Union of Film Critics Special Prize the Best Film for Youth, WINNER BAFTA Awards Flaherty Documentary Award, UN Award.

2000 RECIPIENT Berlin Int. Film Fest. Berlinale Camera Award.

2001 RECIPIENT Montreal World Film Fest. Life Achievement Award.

Ken TAKAKURA

Known as the "Japanese Clint Eastwood", Ken TAKAKURA is well-known for his stoic, honorable presence throughout numerous Japanese and American film roles. He gained his tough guy persona from the streets of postwar Fukuoka, where he would watch yakuza turf battles, and got his big break at a 1955 Toei audition. The gangster film boom of the 1960s skyrocketed Takakura into success, and he appeared in over 180 films during his 20 year stay at Toei Film Company. His international success can be attributed to Sydney Pollack's 1975 sleeper hit, *The Yakuza*, as well as Ridley Scott's *Black Rain* (1989) and the bankable comedy *Mr. Baseball* (1992). His most recent success was in 2005 with *Qian li zou dan qi* (*Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*), from Chinese director ZHANG Yimou. Takakura has received the Japanese Academy Award for Best Actor on four separate occasions.

Chushingura

The fictional account of the 47 Ronin's tale of revenge is known as Chushingura, and has been told and retold in almost all forms of media. There have been at least 22 different television series, 10 of which were produced in the last 10 years, and almost as many feature films devoted to the subject, and they're often shown in the month of December to commemorate the event. Themes from the tale have shown up in art and pop culture even in the West, including but not limited to: *Ninja Scroll*, *Ronin*, "The Simpsons", "Legends of the Hidden Temple", and *The Tokaido Road*.

Chushingura is the shortened name of KANADEHON CHUSHINGURA, which is the name of one of the most popular acts of Kabuki and Jyoruri (traditional puppet show). This show has consistently filled theatres since its introduction in 1748. Kanadehon refers to the Kana (Iroha kana, an older version of the Japanese syllabic alphabet) which has 47 characters, just like the 47 Ronin, and Chusingura came from a combination of the words Chushin (loyalty) and Kura (warehouse), which means "warehouse full of loyalty". The kanji characters can also be read in a different way, as: Loyal (Oishi) Kura (nosuke)--the leader of the 47 Ronin.

The tale of the 47 Ronin is by a wide margin the most popular story in Japanese history, and is described by some as the country's "national legend". Its lasting resonance in the hearts of the Japanese can be attributed to the timeless appeal of the samurai code of honor, known as bushido. This true story of vengeance is recognized as emblematic of the loyalty, sacrifice, persistence, and honor which all should make prominent in their daily lives, samurai or not. The popularity of the 47 Ronin saga was especially fueled during the Meiji period of Japanese history, when many citizens longed for a return to their cultural roots.

Forty-Seven Ronin (AKA Forty-Seven Samurai, Ako Vendetta, Ako Wandering Samurai, or Genroku Ako Incident)

Though the actual details of the 47 Ronin have been filtered through 300 years of history, here is a summary of the events that transpired, as compiled from wikipedia's large range of historical sources:

In 1701 the ruling shogun, TOKUGAWA Tsunayoshi, selected ASANO Takuminokami as one of two Daimyo charged with organizing an extravagant reception for Imperial Envoys who were visiting Edo. A rude and arrogant official named KIRA Kozukenosuke was responsible for instructing the Daimyo in the necessary court etiquette, but his manner of teaching was harsh and insulting, and would apparently send any self-respecting Daimyo into a murderous rage. While his powerful position in the hierarchy of the Shogunate made Kira "untouchable" enough that the other Daimyo settled for bribing him instead of killing him, Asano could not bring himself to practice such restraint. After numerous insults, the previously stoic Asano snapped, slicing at Kira's face with a sword, and earning himself an order to commit seppuku, because not only did he cause a minor wound to a high official and some slight property damage, but any form of violence was strictly forbidden within the walls of Edo castle, and even drawing a sword was a grave offense. The news of Asano's unjust seppuku reached his principal counsellor, OISHI Kuranosuke, and the rest of his men, and they were incensed to hear the corrupt official had gone unpunished.

Of the over three hundred men that had been employed by Asano, forty-seven banded together, swearing a secret oath to avenge their Lord, no matter what, even though they knew they faced certain death as a reward for doing so. However, Kira was not as stupid as he was cruel, and surrounded himself with impenetrable defenses designed to defeat any sort of attack. He also sent spies to keep an eye on Oishi and the rest of Asano's former retainers, so they were forced to wait for their chance. The ronin dispersed and became tradesmen or monks, nursing their dreams of vengeance for over a year. Some of the ronin even managed to gain access to Kira's house over time, one of them going so far as to marry the builder's daughter in order to obtain its plans.

By the end of 1702, Kira began to relax, convinced he was free from danger, and the 47 Ronin were ready for their assault. They gathered at a secret meeting place in Edo to renew their oaths, and early in the morning of December 14, during a heavy snowfall, they attacked Kira's mansion. Their carefully constructed plan split the group into two, with half attacking the front gate, and the other attacking the back. They were held off at the front gate, but Oishi's party broke into the back of the house, subduing all of Kira's men (16 killed, 22 wounded). The cowardly target of their attack was eventually found cowering in a hidden courtyard. Oishi respectfully addressed Kira and notified him of his impending death in the name of honor, offering him the same sword that Asano had used to kill himself. Unsurprisingly, no matter how much they urged him, Kira made no attempts to commit seppuku, instead remaining crouched, speechless and trembling like a pathetic worm. They eventually pinned down the sad little man, relieved him of his life and his head, and carried the latter to Asano's tomb. They laid his head and the dagger before the grave, offered prayers at the temple, and gave the rest of their money to the abbot before turning themselves in to meet their fate. Forty-six of the ronin did so on February 4, 1703 (TERASAKA Kichiemon was pardoned, possibly on account of his youth, and eventually lived to the ripe age of seventy-eight).

Program Notes:

"The Uesugi clan of Yonezawa, worth 150,000-koku, has a mansion in the Sota-Sakurada district of Edo."

A koku is a unit of volume in Japan, commonly used in the Edo period as a measurement of wealth. A koku of rice weighs about 150 kg (330 lbs) and describes the amount of rice needed to feed one person for one year.

Each fiefdom had an assessment of wealth, the smallest being 10,000 koku, and the largest (besides the Shogun) deemed “a million-koku domain.” During the Meiji period, Japanese units such as the koku were abolished in place of the metric system, though the koku unit is still commonly used in the Japanese lumber industry.

A matter of perspective, according to the film:

Uesugi clan of Yonezawa: 150,000-koku
Chief Vassal Chisaka Hyobu of the Uesugi clan: 10,000-koku/year
Gunbei's new librarian job: 250-koku/year

“Sir Irobe, Chief Inspector Yamazono Shinpachi has returned from Kyoto.” (Kachi-metsuke)

Kachi-metsuke were low-ranking police in the Edo period who could detain samurai. They answered to the metsuke, who were higher-ranking Inspectors who functioned as the Shogun's intelligence agency, reporting to Edo officials and keeping watch over the Daimyo.

“I'm enjoying your luxurious Hinoki bath.”

The Hinoki cypress, also known as *Chamaecyparis obtusa*, is a slow-growing tree native to central Japan, often grown for its high quality timber. The light-colored, lemon-scented wood is highly rot resistant, and has a rich, straight grain. Hinoki wood is also used for building palaces, temples, and shrines, among other things. It's also a popular ornamental tree in parks and gardens, even in Europe and North America.

“I get it. The Kira mansion is huge... 2,500-tsubo.”

The tsubo is the most common Japanese unit of measurement used to describe area, and is still common in discussions of land pricing in Japan. The unit refers to the size of two tatami floor mats, or 35.58 square feet. Tatami mats are a traditional Japanese flooring made of woven straw, and the typical size and shape is approximately 90cm x 180cm x 5cm. Originally a luxury item for the wealthy in lieu of mat-covered dirt floors, tatami gradually reached the homes of commoners around the end of the 17th century.

“They say that the harvest will be poor if the bamboo-flower blooms.”

Bamboo only rarely blossoms, about once every 50 years. This happens in response to changes in the soil humidity or nutritional makeup, and precede the death of the entire bamboo forest, which usually grows from a single root system. The appearance of a bamboo-flower is seen as a bad omen in many Asian countries, not only because soil changes could adversely affect crops or portend coming natural disasters, but also because the flowers produce small fruits called “bamboo rice” which attract and feed large numbers of rats. Recent studies in India have found that the limited appearance of this “bamboo rice” quadruples rat populations, which have then gone on to ransack crops and supplies, thereby initiating devastating famine time and time again.

“I will ask Amakawaya Mercantile to immediately settle our salt futures. The news of this incident will cause a rise in the price of salt. For the samurai of Ako, the money we save by settling now will make all the difference.”

Ako, a producer of salt, has sold contracts promising to deliver salt in the future. When they lose their fief, they will not be able to fulfill these contracts. By buying back their contracts before the price rises, they will avoid large losses.

“When I heard of Yasubei's famous fight at Takada-no-baba, my heart soared.”

Long before the events that transpire in this film, Horibe Yasubei Taketsune had created quite a reputation for himself as a master swordsman. Orphaned at the age of 13, Yasubei moved to Edo and honed his skills to be one of the finest swordsmen of his time. In 1694, at the age of 24, Yasubei defended his dojo mate and

pledged uncle by killing three opponents, gaining him instant notoriety. Horibe Yahei was so impressed by Yasubei's skills, that he invited him to marry his daughter, and become an adopted son of the Horibe family. Yasubei did just that, taking on the Horibe surname and becoming a retainer of the Ako han for several years, until the fateful day he was sentenced to commit seppuku.

“We'll have to have a manhood ceremony for Chikara. Let me give him his manly haircut.”

To mark the rite-of-passage for Japanese boys entering adulthood, ceremonies called Genpuku were traditionally held for 12-16 year old boys. During the ceremony, they were taken to the shrine, given their first adult clothes and haircut, and also given a new adult name. There was a similar ceremony for women called Mogi, also based around the presentation of adult clothing, but both ceremonies have been replaced in modern Japan by annual ceremonies for all 20-year-olds of both sexes, called seijin shiki (Coming-of-Age Day: 2nd Monday in January). Note: Age was determined differently in Japan up until the end of WWII. A newborn would be one-year-old by default. Then, on the new year, everyone would gain a year, so a baby born on December 31 would be 2-years-old after only 2 days of life. Thus, ages 12-16 would actually be closer to 10-14 according to our age system.

“Chikamatsu! It's not a deep cut!”

Chikamatsu Kanroku Yukishige was part of the rear gate squad lead by Oishi's son, Chikara. However, in the editing of the film, his name was not included; it would have appeared over the scene of the ronin running in the snow, when the audio seems to fade out for a few seconds.

“Come on, the Ako folks are waiting.”

This is one of the few depictions in Japanese film of the profession of Assault Catering. After the attack of the 47 Ronin, Assault Catering became extremely popular, and the choice of menu was an important part of all battle plans. Lack of attention to this detail resulted in several major battles in Japanese history being lost because of the defection of allies, lured by the superior entrees and desserts offered by the enemy. In modern times, Assault Catering evolved into a business that supplies late-night comfort food on specially designed combat mopeds, and even the Yakuza think twice about interfering with their delivery boys. And yes, everything in this paragraph is totally made up, except the stuff about the combat mopeds.

“There's a saikachi tree by the well, that's the marker.”

The western name of the Saikichi tree is the Japanese Honey Locust (*Gleditsia Japonica*). Honey Locusts are hardy trees with strong branches, found in many temperate areas of the world.

Sources:

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