

Translation Notes (General):

Samurai Assassin is loosely based on one of the most important and complex events in Japanese history, namely the so-called "Sakurada-mon-gai-no-Hen" (Sakurada Gate Incident) of 1860, in which a high Shogunate official named Ii Naosuke was assassinated by a group of anti-Shogunate terrorists. Ii's murder marked the beginning of the end for the Tokugawa Shogunate.

It is impossible to summarize the events leading to the assassination or all that happened around that period in Japanese history, but because of the story's rich historical background, and to best appreciate the story, we humbly recommend that viewers familiarize themselves with the following short treatise on the Tokugawa Shogunate. Interested readers are also encouraged to visit the library and consult a good Japanese history book, some of which are listed at the end of these liner notes.

Introduction - the Tokugawa Era

The Tokugawa Era (approx. 1603-1868) is also often called the Edo Period. 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 advances.

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. It was not uncommon for the servitors and followers of a Lord to join him in death.

Almost two-hundred Daimyo-ruled domains and their associated castle-towns existed in the early-Tokugawa period, of various sizes depending on each Daimyo's holdings and the agrarian production of the fiefs they controlled. However, the number of Daimyo decreased quickly during this era, as the Tokugawa Shogunate was always maneuvering to reduce the power of, and if possible, destroy, the Daimyo.

Tokugawa society as a whole was divided into four basic classes. Class was somewhat hereditary, in that once born into a particular class, it was impossible to become a member of a higher class. Although not a wealthy class and owning no land (land was owned by the Daimyo alone), at the top were the privileged class of Samurai (about 10% of the total population), the governing, sword-carrying members of the society. The Samurai class originally emerged around 800 AD, and they were both highly skilled in military arts and highly educated, especially in Confucianism, whose basic philosophy taught virtues of benevolence, propriety, righteousness, fidelity, wisdom and loyalty.

Each person was expected to follow the virtuous examples of the ancient sages. The Shogunate demanded that Samurai closely follow these rules of conduct and ordered that they study Confucian classics. In the early years of the Tokugawa Era, the Shogunate was heavily concerned with the problem of a large number of Samurai who became masterless as many Daimyo fell and lost their domains. These detached Samurai were called "ronin," and many of them went on to become teachers of swordsmanship, Confucian scholars, somewhat-privileged farmers, or simply became townspeople.

Accounting for approximately 80% of the population were the peasants, the class of people whose function was, in short, to serve the Shogunate and the ruling classes' economic requirements. These villagers were required to till the land, producing grain (rice, barley, and wheat), and were taxed harshly; 50% or more of the crop (esp. rice, which often played a role of currency in many official functions). As the Shogunate's expenses (which included expensive constructions and renovations, as well as the extravagant lifestyles of its members) skyrocketed, the tax burden on the peasantry became higher and higher. Many families were severely punished for failing to pay the required taxes, and some had to sell family members into temporary bondage (slavery was illegal, but this form of service was a common practice).

In fact, the brothels (whose customers were largely Samurai) were filled with daughters of these peasants. In addition, the Shogunate considered the peasants to be a readily-available labor force. They regularly called upon the peasants to participate in maintaining public roads and facilities.

The majority of the townspeople consisted of artisans and merchants. Many of these, as well as the retainers of the Daimyo and the Shogunate gathered around castle-towns where most business was done. Among these were wholesalers and money-lenders, some of whom accumulated enormous fortunes and survived into the modern era, transforming themselves into some of Japan's largest companies.

At much lower social rank were the 'commoners,' which the Shogunate classified as a part of the 'outcast' population. These included exiled and ostracized members of villages, as villages had their own appointed chiefs who punished unruly members of their villages by sentencing them to exile. Others, the so-called "non-people" and "lowly-people" included: descendants of slaves, people with physical disabilities and abnormalities, beggars and prostitutes. This class was at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and as such, they were not accounted for in official surveys, and were required to live in certain fixed (and undesirable) areas. Interestingly, actors and performers were officially considered to be outcasts; they were required to live near their theaters, and hide their faces in public.

In the last years of the Tokugawa Era, the Shogunate's expenses were increasing at a much more rapid pace than their revenues, despite their ability to raise taxes at will (mostly from the agrarian base). Also, the last of the Shoguns had employed many prominent scholars, who showed great interest in western science and technology, in an era when the nation adhered to isolationist disciplines. In 1853, Commodore Perry arrived in Japan. The US was developing its power in the Pacific, and wanted to develop commercial relations with Asian nations. It also had many whaling ships in the Pacific which required shelter and supplies in the vicinity, another reason why it felt a need to open Japan's doors using any possible means. Perry's arrival, coupled with a great scholarly interest in western knowledge, led many leading Bakufu (another word for Shogunate) officials to conclude that the western powers were so far advanced that it would be irrational for Japan to continue to refuse to establish full diplomatic ties. The Shogunate thus felt a great internal pressure to abandon isolationism and anti-foreign sentiments. In 1866, the 14th Shogun, Iemochi, died, and Hitotsubashi Keiki was appointed the 15th Shogun. Keiki appealed for unity, by restoring political power to the Imperial Court (restricted by the Shogunate until then to only handling scholastic affairs). In a matter of months, faced with opposition within the Shogunate, Hitotsubashi resigned. A new provisional government, with no former Tokugawa associates, was formed, and a brief civil war followed. In this power vacuum, it was relatively easy for the Imperial Court to gain influence, and more than 250 years of Tokugawa rule was at an end.

During this era, there were also great cultural developments, many of which could not have been possible without the extravagance of the ruling classes. Such developments include literary works, especially haiku (17-syllable poetry) and fiction. The higher classes enjoyed literature, because education, which included literature among other topics such as military arts, was fairly well organized. Even the commoners could receive some form of education at temples, or from masterless Samurai.

Puppetry and Theater also became very popular, primarily in the Yoshiwara entertainment district of Edo (in 1868, after the new Meiji government was established, Edo was renamed Tokyo), where many Kabuki theaters, tea houses, and brothels were located.

Aside from these were developments in the fine arts. Woodblock printing and painting, originally introduced to Japan from China around the 8th century, while mainly commercial productions subject to the censorship and approval by the city magistrates, took art to new heights. Ukiyo-e, "the pictures of the floating world," and others by such famous artists as Hokusai and Hiroshige, influenced many European artists, especially the French Impressionists. Military crafts were also being perfected by a few artisans, most of whom were employed as retainers of the Daimyo and Shogunate. Prior to the isolation of Japan during the Tokugawa rule, Japan had a short-term trading relationship with the Portuguese, and in 1543, muskets were introduced, and many smiths quickly learned to produce them. Despite the Samurai preference for honorable swordplay, a fair amount of dirty-work "got done with guns."

The Opening of Japan

Japan in late 1700's and early 1800's was beset by many foreign nations who wished to end her seclusionist policies. Russia, Britain, France and United States all sent their ships to her shores in hopes of establishing commercial relations.

Russia was the first nation to make the attempt, sending ships to Japan over a period spanning some thirty years during the early part of this period. However, since all were turned away, she eventually gave up the effort. Later, when Nicholas Muraviev became the governor general of Siberia, in 1847, Russia resumed attempts to establish ties with Japan, only to be rebuffed again. Britain's attempts met similar obstinate resistance, beginning in 1818.

With many ships from foreign nations landing on Japan's shores, the Shogunate (a.k.a. Bakufu) issued an edict in 1825, which ordered the forcible ejection of all foreign ships from the coastal regions of Japan. This edict was somewhat softened by Elder Mizuno Tadakuni in 1842, who directed that ships drifting to Japanese shores be provided with necessities. Still, this relaxation did not affect the basic premises of Japan's seclusionist policy.

Around this time, the United States was becoming a significant power in the Pacific region, and became interested in establishing commercial relations with the nations in the area. In addition, since they had many whaling ships in the area, convenient supply bases were much sought after. In a mission to establish contact, US sent the "Morrison" to Japan, in 1837, but she was driven off immediately. The leader of the mission advised that the US government send a more effective expedition to Japan, in hopes of opening Japanese ports. Commodore Biddle's team, in 1846, for instance, had two warships under his command, but he too failed.

Commodore Perry's arrival in July of 1853, with the four famous "Black Ships", was a different story. Perry brought with him a letter from President Filmore which requested: 1) humane treatment of shipwrecked seamen, 2) permission for American ships to enter Japanese ports for supplies, 3) trade between the two nations. Perry told the Shogunate that he would be back again next year for an official reply.

Having been informed of the Chinese defeat by the British in the Opium Wars, Shogunate officials knew that Japan was incapable of withstanding a military assault by the Western powers. The Shogunate also realized that it could no longer afford to ignore the outside world. It also came to a realization that it was incapable of handling the situation resolutely on its own, and thus turned for advice to the Imperial Court and the various Daimyo lords.

However, this action: "...gave potential opponents of the Bakufu and politically ambitious elements an opportunity to move into the center of the political arena. The Bakufu was forced, reluctantly, to abandon its seclusionist policy, and the opposition then used the issue of 'jooi' (repelling the barbarians) as a means to badger and embarrass it." (HANE)

Some suggested that the Shogunate submit to Perry's demands, but a majority favored retaining the seclusionist policies. Some militant factions even advocated going to war against the foreign intruders. Tokugawa Nariaki (1800-1860), the Lord of Mito, in a famous example, stated that:

"In these feeble days men tend to cling to peace; they are not fond of defending their country by war."
(JANSEN)

Still others acknowledged that the only practical solution was to stall the Americans as long as possible, but this was impossible to do because Perry returned to Japan in 1854 as he had promised (or more precisely, threatened!), this time with eight "Black Ships". Shogunate officials were overwhelmed by the size of the ships and their explicit demonstration of the advanced technologies of the Western world, and they feared that Perry would attack if the American demands were not met. The officials reluctantly signed an agreement to open the ports of Hakodate in Hokkaido, and Shimoda in Shizuoka. This effectively ended Japan's long period of seclusion. Similar agreements were soon signed between Japan and other nations. The end of seclusion, however, signaled the beginning of the end for the Shogunate, and triggered much political strife.

Trivia: a US five-cent stamp was issued on July 10th, 1953, in commemoration of the centenary of the opening of Japan to foreign trade.

As a noted specialist in military instruction in the Choshu domain, Yoshida Shoin (1830-1859) "saw the signing of the commercial treaties as the opportunity to dramatize the failure of the Bakufu." (JANSEN) Furthermore, he "proposed that its officials be punished and the institution dismantled for ignoring an Imperial decree calling for the immediate expulsion of foreigners. In his opinion, the Bakufu had committed a crime of unprecedented magnitude: "It has abjured heaven and earth, angered all the deities... it has nourished a national crisis today and bequeathed national shame to future generations... If the Imperial decree is honored, the realm will be following the Way. To destroy a traitor is an act of loyalty."

Yoshida "worked out a program that would best fulfill the requirements of direct action and loyal behavior. He called for a rising of 'grass-roots' heroes, appealing principally to the samurai and independent villagers, willing to leave their homes and perform what he called meritorious deeds." (JANSEN)

After Perry succeeded in opening the Japanese ports, the United States sent Townsend Harris to Shimoda in August of 1856, in hopes of signing a commercial treaty. Iwase Tadanari, a high official who was given a responsibility of handling negotiations with Harris, was convinced that Japan had to open her doors to allow commercial relationships with other nations and persuaded other Shogunate officials and leading Daimyo to accept this reality. The Lord of Mito, Tokugawa Nariaki, however, refused to agree. Instead, he believed in the "jooi" philosophy, extending it to include "sonnoo" (revering the Emperor). "Sonnoo jooi" (Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians) then became the motto of the Imperialists, and Nariaki did win support of the Court. It was not difficult for Nariaki to convince the Imperial Court of the possible dangers of opening the nation for foreigners, since the Court and the Emperor Komei were ignorant of the world situation to start with, so their support for the anti-foreign movement came more or less naturally.

Meanwhile, Harris and the Shogunate officials were closing a deal on a commercial treaty. An acting chief official, Hotta Masayoshi (1810-1864), told Harris that signing the treaty would need the Court approval, so he traveled to Kyoto in the spring of 1858. In a way, he was seeking a solution to the problem posed by the strong opposition led by Nariaki. The Court instructed him that they were firmly committed to the Jooi policy.

The Americans, Ii Naosuke and the Imperialists

Around the same time, other problems were festering inside the Shogunate, following the death of Shogun Iesada:

"The debates about the Harris treaty next became inextricably interwoven with the problem of Shogunal succession. Tokugawa Iesada, who died in the summer of 1858, had no successor, and so adoption procedures had to be set in motion. The leading candidates were Hitotsubashi Yoshinobu (or Keiki), an able young man who was in fact one of the many sons of Tokugawa Nariaki of Mito, and a still-immature descendant of the Tokugawa house of Kii (Wakayama), the future Tokugawa Iemochi." (JANSEN)

Shortly after Hotta returned from Kyoto, having failed to persuade the Court to sign the Harris treaty, Ii "Kammonokami" Naosuke (1815-1860), who had become the Lord of Hikone (what is now a city in Shiga Prefecture, on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa; it grew around the castle built by the Ii family in 1603) in 1850, became the Shogunate's "tairo" (Great Elder/Councilor; "Kammonokami" is also an honorific of great importance), a post essentially subordinate to only the Shogun. Ii was effectively the dictator of Japan for almost two years, taking the leadership role in the Edo councils. It is the plot to assassinate him that is a central topic in the film.

Harris was promised on June 25th that the treaty would be signed by September 4th. He used the threat of military action to coerce Ii into signing the treaty, which addressed, among other things, issues of tariffs and diplomatic exchanges. Luckily for Harris, this was quite an easy task, since Ii knew of China's fate, and all Harris needed to imply was that British and French were ready to land on Japan after their victory over China. Believing that it would protect Japan, Ii then decided that the treaty should be signed without any Imperial involvement, and on July 29, the Ansei Commercial Treaty (which was in effect until July of 1899, when the two

nations signed the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation) was signed, completely ignoring the fact that many, powerful domains of Imperialists still supported the jooi movement.

Just ten days later, the Shogunate "announced that shogunal succession had gone to the young Iemochi of Kii. Thus Ii Naosuke had decided the two burning questions of the period within ten days, and quite on his own authority." (JANSEN)

Clearly, the Imperialists and other supporters of Hitotsubashi were outraged, and they campaigned to take action against Ii. But Ii immediately made a move against them, punishing whoever lobbied for the succession of Yoshinobu, including Nariaki of Mito.

"Low-ranking agents of the Daimyo who had favored the Hitotsubashi cause urged on inexperienced courtiers in misguided efforts to have the Court insist on a reversal of Bakufu policy, the dismissal of Ii, and a reversal of the Harris treaty. Ii Naosuke had his own agent in Kyoto, one Nagano Shuzen, who reported all this activity to Edo and helped provoke the counterstrokes that followed." (JANSEN)

"All who opposed Ii were exiled, demoted, or executed. The purge suppressed nationalist activity, and Ii tried to harmonize the Court." The so-called "Ansei Purge of 1859" was a part of this effort. Yoshida Shoin, for one, became a casualty of the Purge.

The Assassination of Ii Naosuke

However, Ii Naosuke did not survive long enough to enjoy the fruits of his purge. His efforts to eliminate anti-foreign activists, mainly the ones from Mito, a domain long known for its strong imperialism, ended in his assassination. On one unusually snowy morning of March 3rd, 1860 [see calendrical note below], a gunshot was heard outside the Sakurada Gate of Edo Castle, just as a procession of Great Elder Ii was approaching. The shot signaled that a group of eighteen men (seventeen from Mito, and one from Satsuma) should commence an attack upon Ii. They had spent the previous night at an inn called "Dozou-Sagami" and the teahouse "Inaba-ya" (the "Sagami-ya" in the film is based on these) discussing their plot to ambush Ii.

Ii's procession was not extremely long: his palanquin was surrounded by twenty-six swordsmen, followed by forty foot-soldiers. Because of the snow, however, they were all wearing heavy snowcoats which did not allow them to draw swords quickly enough. One of the Mito/Satsuma men, Mori Goro-no-suke, who was given the job of making the very first attack, just before the gunshot was to sound, approached the procession as if he was to hand them a complaint, very much like in the movie. Around this period, it was fairly common for some protesters to offer letters of complaints, etc., as they would wait for officials to pass by. This practice had been illegal for a long time.

As Mori succeeded in slaying one guard, the other Ii swordsmen panicked, shouted to each other that an intruder was present, and quickly chased after him in an attempt to kill him. By this time, Kurosawa Chuusaburo, who was in charge of signaling his fellow Imperialists to commence the attack, fired a gun. The Imperialists quickly slaughtered most of Ii's men. It is recorded that the entire act only lasted a couple of minutes. Then, Arimura Jizaemon, the only member of the group from Satsuma, proceeded to attack Ii's palanquin, stabbing into it (and Ii) repeatedly before beheading him and to carry his head at the tip of the sword. Niino Tsuruchiyo, played by Mifune, is based on this historical figure. It is written in historical accounts that Arimura was shouting and mumbling in an unintelligible yet overjoyed manner, but the content of what he was saying is unknown.

The Sakurada Gate Incident occurred just outside the gate across the street from what is now the Metropolitan Police Department and Justice Ministry. This is the district in which the central bureaucracy of Japanese government is currently situated. The Gate, designated by the government as an important cultural and historic asset, is now open to the public as part of the Imperial Palace.

Calendrical Confusion

Because of the lunar calendar system and other forms of counting dates that were in use in Japan at the time the story takes place, the actual dates differ somewhat in our current system. For all intents and purposes, when a date is referred to as "the third day of the third month", we render it as "March 3rd". However, the Gregorian calendar system was implemented in Japan in 1872. According to the new system the date moves over to March 24th. Most history texts ignore this little tidbit.

"...the Mito... one of the three Major Houses of the Tokugawa, would want me dead?" --- Ii Naosuke

The three Major Houses that Ii spoke of are collectively known as "Gosanke", which refers to three families/houses of Owari, Kii and Mito. They became the honorable houses because of blood ties through Tokugawa Ieyasu's children.

"Kisoya... haven't you ever heard... people say that 'lanterns and bells can never go together?'" --- Ichijo Narihisa

This phrase is an old saying which figuratively means two things which are incompatible.

"Today is February 17th. It's our understanding that the Shogun's household and its closest members will be holding a "Ongusoku Iwai no Gi" armor ceremony..." --- Hoshino Kenmotsu

The **Ongusoku-iwai-no-Gi** refers to a ceremony in which the Shogun was to be fully dressed up in armor. Note, however, that Shogun Iemochi was only a child at the time.

"The stomach is a part of the body also, as they say... You should be careful." --- Okiku

Another old saying: Since stomach is also a part of the body, over-eating or drinking would not be a healthy thing to do. Figuratively, it means to be careful from eating and drinking too much.

"...a Joui Day Celebration, important to the Shogun's family, will take place. In other words, the so-called Peach Observance." --- Hoshino

Joui Day is one of the five special commemorative dates called "Sekku": They are Jinjitsu = Jan. 7th; Joui = March. 3rd a.k.a. Joushi, Chousan, Peach Observance. This is essentially a Girls' Day when most households who have girls decorate and display hina-dolls (small dolls of prince and princess); Tango = May 5th Boys' Day. Families who have boys in their household display miniature armor.; Tanabata = July 7th; Chouyou = Sept. 9th.

Note on Names

All Japanese names appear in their original order (family name first) in AnimEigo/Samurai Cinema releases. [The only exceptions are those in our own staff!]

Research Notes:

A considerable amount of historical research was necessary in translating Samurai Cinema's films and in compiling the information contained here. Among the many sources we have consulted, the following were especially helpful:

- 1) "Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan" Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Oishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) "Japan - A Historical Survey" Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) "A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963

4) "A History of Japan: 1334 - 1615" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963

Production Staff

Japanese Production Staff

Produced by Tanaka Tomoyuki
Screenplay: Hashimoto Shinobu
Based on the book "Samurai Nippon" by Gunji Jirosasa
Photography: Murai Hiroshi
Art Design: Akune Iwao
Sound: Nishikawa Yoshio
Lighting: Nishikawa Tsuruzo
Music: Sato Masaru
Mixing: Shimonaga Shoo
Asst. Director: Yamamoto Yuzuuo
Effects: Izumi Minoru.
Editing: Kuroiwa Yoshitami
Line Producer: Suzuki Masao
Developing: Kinuta Labs
Fight Choreography: Kuze Ryuu

Directed by Okamoto Kihachi

US Production Staff (Subtitling)

Executive Producer: Robert J. Woodhead
Translator: Shin Kurokawa
Dialogue Checker: Ueki Natsumi
Cultural Consultant: Hisayo Klotz
Subtitling Director: Robert J. Woodhead

Cast

Mifune Toshiro

Kobayashi Keiju
Aratama Michiyo
Ito Yunosuke
Touno Eijiro
Ebara Tatsuyoshi
Nakamaru Tadao
Yachigusa Kaoru
Sugimura Haruko
Tamura Nami
Ootsude Shiroo
Inaba Yoshio
Hirata Akihiko

Amamoto Hideo, Sawamura Ikio, Tougin Choutaroo, Ogawa Yasuzoo, Nihei Masaya, Kurosawa Toshio, Tajima Yoshifumi, Ichikawa Kouraizo, Kirino Hiro-o, Yamamoto Yasushi, Mukai Jun-ichirou, Iwamoto Hiroshi, Kusakawa Naoya, Tsutsumi Yasuhisa, Hidaka Yurie, Tsuneta Fujio, Hasegawa Hiroshi, Terashima Mitsugu , Shimura Takashi, Fujita Susumu, Nakamura Shikaku, Ichikawa Chuusha, Kita Nagama, Housei Kan

Matsumoto Koshiro