

Historical Background

Before discussing events of great historical significance, some understanding of what led to those events is important.

"Samurai Banners," which climaxes at the Battle of Kawanakajima, where two of the most powerful leaders from the so-called "Age of Warring States" clashed, takes place before the "Great Peace" was imposed by the Tokugawa Shogunate.

This was an era in which Japan was ruled by many powerful warlords who battled each other incessantly each attempting to conquer another's domain.

The Mongol Invasion of 1281, and later, the inauguration of Emperor Go-Daigo in 1318, threw Japan into turmoil, and marked the beginning of the end for the Hojo Regency, which had managed to maintain a measure of peace in Japan since it took power in 1204.

The Regency was created by Hojo Tokimasa (1138-1215), who exercised power as the actual head of the Kamakura-era (1185- 1333) Bakufu, after skillfully executing some rather baroque conspiracies.

In 1333, under political pressure, the Hojo began showing signs of weakness, and the Regency fell, ending the era of the Kamakura Bakufu. The Imperial Throne, beset by its own power struggles, was now dominated and controlled by a new line of Shoguns, beginning with Ashikaga Takauji in 1338. A new government, the Muromachi Bakufu (named after the Muromachi section of Kyoto, where the Shoguns lived) was established.

For almost three centuries -- called the Ashikaga, or Muromachi, Period -- Japan was sundered into small factions and plagued by endless civil war.

In 1367 Ashikaga selected loyal vassals to serve as Constables in the provinces under his control. The post of "Kanto Kanrei," or Kanto Deputy to the Shogun, was created to oversee the administration of the Kanto region (which includes several large provinces). The Kanto Kanrei was more or less the semi-independant ruler of the Kanto.

This post was highly sought after. Uesugi Kenshin, or Nagao Kagetora at the time, convinced then-Kanrei Uesugi Norimasa, whose family was almost destroyed through a series of setbacks, that he would aid him. Norimasa accepted Kagetora(Kenshin)'s protection, and he even adopted him as an heir. Kenshin, now a Uesugi, then asked Norimasa to step down from the Kanrei post. In a highly celebrated ritual, Uesugi Kenshin became the Kanto Kanrei in 1561.

Other Deputy positions, which also reported to Shogun directly, were also created. These were filled by members of powerful families such as the Hatakeyama, Shiba, and Hosokawa. The families that controlled the Deputy positions were known as the constabulary houses.

Yoshimitsu, the Third Ashikaga Shogun, was known for his overindulgence of power and outlandish behavior. One of his mansions was covered entirely in gold. Such expensive projects forced tax increases, leading to many large-scale agrarian uprisings. His death in 1408 marked the start of the Bakufu's decline. The Bakufu experienced great difficulty in controlling the major constabulary houses, whose powers had grown steadily during the past few decades. With the central government preoccupied with its own problems, it could not possibly extend its watchful eye to the outlying provinces. The constabulary houses were thus able to grant themselves growing authority over their provinces.

The quarrels between factions in the deputy families, and the Bakufu's inability, as well as its disinterest, in settling the disputes, eventually led to a decade of civil war known as the Onin War (1467-1477), and so began an era of violence called the "Sengoku Jidai," or the "Age of the Warring States," which refers to the period between the onset of the Onin War and 1568, when a campaign of national unification by force of arms was initiated by General Oda Nobunaga. His efforts were continued by Nobunaga's successor Hideyoshi, and

completed by the victories of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who became the first Tokugawa Shogun in 1603, ostensibly to help bring peace to the nation. The Tokugawa Family maintained the peace for almost 250 years, a period now called the "Tokugawa Era" or "Edo Period."

As the Onin War was fought mainly around Kyoto, most constabulary families, such as the ones previously mentioned, shifted their attention away from their home provinces. This was unwise, because by the time the war was over, some of these families had been overthrown by their own vassals and subordinates! For example, Nagao Tamekage, Uesugi Kenshin's father, assassinated a deputy constable to gain control of Echigo Province.

Other families that survived the war, such as the Takeda Family of Kai Province, came out of the experience greatly strengthened (and certainly, more suspicious!)

The post-Onin War regional leaders are collectively called the Daimyo (lit. "Big Name"). Thus, the Age of the Warring States is all about the endless wars between Daimyo of various provinces.

"Samurai Banners" takes place in the later years of the Age of the Warring States. It is loosely based on the events leading up to the famous Battle of Kawanakajima ("Kawanakajima-no-kassen"), in which the powerful Daimyo Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin fought each other.

In reality, the Takeda and Uesugi forces fought five times in Kawanakajima, in April-September, 1553, July-October, 1555, February-October, 1557, September, 1561 and July-October, 1564. The battles were inconclusive; there were no clear winners, and both forces lost many men.

Of the five battles, the one that took place in September of 1561 was the largest in scale, and the most famous. It is in that battle that Takeda Shingen, sitting, defended himself from Uesugi Shingen's sword. This memorable scene, as it appears in "Samurai Banners," comes in fact from "Ehon-Shingen-Ichidaiki," the pictorial biography of Shingen, which is among the rarest yet complete historical documents from that era.

As portrayed in the film, Kawanakajima is a large delta, formed by Chikuma and Sai Rivers, in what is now the southern part of Nagano Prefecture. Between fall and winter, thick fogs are common there, thus it is quite understandable how it played a major role in the battle of 1561.

History and Fiction

Most of the characters in "Samurai Banners" are based on actual historical figures

Yamamoto Kansuke Haruyuki

Though a mysterious figure, he is as famous as Shingen when it comes to the Battle of Kawanakajima.

Over the years, historians have published many academic papers, all relying on a single collection of documents (the "Koyo Gunkan") concerning Kansuke, yet legends and works of fiction have been circulating about him since the early Edo Period.

He is known to have been born in the village of Ushikubo, in Mikawa (a.k.a. Sanshuu) Province, which is now part of Aichi Prefecture. Upon becoming a devout follower of a sect of Buddhism, he also became known as Dooki and traveled through many parts of Japan. Through his travels, he amassed a vast amount of information of strategic significance. It is said that some Daimyo hired him solely as a source of information --- in fact, it was during the time Kansuke was visiting the Imagawa Family in Suruga province, that he was requested to become their troop leader, with a stipend of 200-kan.

For nineteen years, until his death in September of 1561, he had served as the "brain" of Shingen, mainly as the strategist. He is said to have been of a short stature, dark complexion, and was also partly blind and crippled, and was missing appendages.

In the Battle of Kawanakajima in 1561, his tactics were said to have been outsmarted by Uesugi. Feeling responsible, so the story goes, he risked his life to protect Takeda's main troop. He died at the age of 69.

Itagaki Suruganokami Nobukata

Nobukata was the most trusted vassal in the House of Takeda. He served under Takeda Nobutora, and his son, Shingen. In 1541, due to bizarre family problems, Shingen (then Harunobu) and Nobukata conspired to oust Nobutora, sending him to the House of Imagawa in Suruga Province.

Shingen always considered him as a mentor, and many times, he trusted Nobukata's military talents to win the day.

In February of 1548, using his tactics, a battle was fought over Toishi Castle, Murakami Yoshikyo's fortress in northern Shinano. However, it met with a dismal failure - and, in order to cover the retreat, Nobukata stayed out on at the front. Nobukata went after the Murakami forces, but was killed.

Takeda Shingen

When speaking of the Age of Warring States, Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin are the two most famous leaders of the era.

Takeda Shingen was born November 3, 1521. His father, the Daimyo of Kai Province, Takeda Sakyodayuu Nobutora, had originally named him "Taro," but renamed him "Katsuchiyo" ("Katsu" means "to win") in hopes that he would win whatever battles he might face in the future.

At the age of 13, his wedding was arranged by Nobutora as part of a wicked scheme to fight Lord Hojo of Odawara. He married the daughter of Uesugi Tomooki, a related family of then-Kanto Deputy Uesugi, however she later died during pregnancy.

With the ceremony of Genpuku (which celebrates boys' reaching the age of 15 or 16), he received blessings from then- Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiharu, and was renamed "Harunobu" ("Haru" from Yoshiharu). It is said that he then married the daughter of a vassal, Sanjo Kimiyori, ("Lady Sanjo" in the movie) that year. Her sister was married to Muromachi Bakufu Deputy Hosokawa Katsumoto, thus further establishing important ties.

Harunobu and the older Takeda were not always in good terms with each other. As an example, after Harunobu's maiden combat, even though it was won by Takeda's forces, Nobutora ridiculed him and never fully accepted it as a Takeda victory.

Harunobu took over the House of Takeda after he and his close vassals, Itagaki Nobukata and Obu Hyobushoyu Toramasa (both characters are in the movie), conspired to oust Takeda Nobutora in June of 1541. Imagawa Yoshimoto of Suruga, who was married to Harunobu's sister, also collaborated in the plot.

Harunobu was a well-educated man, who showed great interest in religion. Gishu Genpaku, a scholar-priest, who taught Harunobu since childhood, presented Harunobu the name, "Shingen," in 1559.

Takeda Shingen continued to fight many battles to expand his domain in the 1560's. After the battles at Kawanakajima, most of Shinano province was under his control.

In 1568, he set out to conquer the southern province of Suruga. Having grown up in the mountainous interior, he dreamed of having access to the seas, and Suruga's shores (by the Bay of Suruga, which opens into the Pacific Ocean) offered just that.

The fact that Kiso, which was a small area in the western tip of Shinano that Takeda had acquired, bordered General Oda Nobunaga's Mino province, in addition to the fact that the neighboring province of Hida was on Takeda's "wanted" list, meant that Oda felt it necessary to somehow befriend Takeda, in order that Takeda's

advance to the south-west (and, eventually, to Kyoto) might be stopped. Oda, in his efforts to appease Takeda, made attempts to befriend him by offering his daughter to Takeda Katsuyori, Shingen's son, in 1565. She died after complications from birth. Afraid that his ties with Takeda might be ruined, Oda promised that his 11-year old son, Kimyoumaru (later Nobutada), would marry Shingen's then-6-year old daughter, Omatsu. However, the delicate relationship between Oda and Takeda did not last for long, and by 1570, Takeda, Oda, Uesugi, and Tokugawa, were all involved in a complex series of battles.

Takeda Shingen died in 1573 due to an illness.

Martial Philosophy

"No, we won't be losing many men..." "Kansuke, you ought to watch your mouth!"

Takeda Shingen believed in what can only be called "Don't die fighting" philosophy. This comes from the fact that, it is recorded, Shingen often told troopers, "Don't die fighting... Come back alive!" as they headed off to battles. Such principles contrasts greatly with the samurai motto, "Die, Honorably," of the Edo Period.

Kofuchu

Kofuchu (now called Kofu) is an area in Kai (now Yamanashi Prefecture) in which Tsutsujigasaki Mansion was located.

The "Ko-" in Kofuchu is the first character used in "Kai." "-fuchu" means "capital." Even though the mansion itself was nowhere near as large or stylish as the castles of other Daimyos, Takeda nonetheless made his home there. There were no true castles in Kai either. This is because Takeda believed that the entire province of Kai was in itself a castle. Thus, "People are the castle, People are the walls." Such sayings are actually recorded in the chronicles of the era.

Fuurinkazan (Wind, Forest, Fire, Mountains)

"Fast like the wind..." "Calm like the forest..." "Conquering like the fire..." "Invincible like the mountains..."

These were the words written on Takeda Forces' banners. There are actually 14 kanji characters written on each banner.

Many of these banners, as well as other artifacts such as flags, armors and seashell horns, have been carefully preserved for many generations, and are in the permanent collections of national museums in Japan.

Provinces

The places mentioned in "Samurai Banners" are mainly in the central regions of Japan. The provinces named are:

Suruga (now part of Shizuoka Prefecture) - faces the Pacific to its south.

Kai (now Yamanashi Prefecture) - Suruga's neighboring province to the north.

Shinano (now Nagano Prefecture) - a large province sandwiched by Suruga and Kai to its south, and Echigo to its north.

Mino (now part of Gifu Prefecture) - Shinano's small, western neighbor.

Mikawa (now part of Aichi Prefecture) - Mino's small, maritime southeastern neighbor.

Echigo (now Niigata Prefecture) - a large northern province, north of Shinano, facing the Sea of Japan.

Timely matters

The units of time went through a few changes, until they were finally standardized (24 hours a day, 60 minutes an hour, etc.) in 1873. The commonly used system originates back to 660 AD, when the Emperor Naka-no-Oo-e-no-Ooji began to signal each unit of time with a beat of the drum or the bell. At the time (no pun intended), he divided each day into 12 units, each unit being called a "koku." (now equivalent to 2 hours). He also named each period after a different animal. At each koku, bells were hit a different number of times to signal what time of the day it was. As an example, "Uma no koku" or "The Koku of the Horse" meant what is now the period between 11am to 1pm, with the bells ringing at 11am. The same system was used during the Edo Period, but the bells were hit in the middle of each koku, so the same "Uma no koku" refers to the period between 12pm-2pm.

Because such phrases can get quite cumbersome in subtitles, we have chosen to use their modern equivalents for "Samurai Banners."

Research Notes:

The Age of Warring States is among the most complex time periods in the history of Japan. The lives of Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin, like all historically significant figures, are full of interesting and surprising tales, so rich that these brief liner notes do them no justice.

Readers are encouraged to consult any of the many books that deal with Japanese history, in particular the references we consulted during our preparation of "Samurai Banners:"

- Sansom, George, "A History of Japan, 1334-1615," Stanford Press, 1961
- Hane, Mikiso, "Japan, a historical survey," Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972
- Gakken Pub., Inc., "Uesugi Kenshin," #8 of the Rekishi Gunso (Historical Figures) Series, 1988
- Gakken Pub., Inc., "Takeda Shingen," #5 of the Rekishi Gunso (Historical Figures) Series, 1988

Production Staff

Japanese Production Staff

Produced by Mifune Toshiro, Tanaka Tomoyuki,
Nishikawa Yoshio & Inagaki Hiroshi

Based on the Novel by Inoue Yasushi
Screenplay by Hashimoto Shinobu and Kunihiro Takeo
Photography: Yamada Kazuo
Art Direction: Ueda Hiroshi
Sound: Fujitsuna Shooichi
Music: Satoo Masaru
Assistant Director: Maru Teruo
Lighting: Satoo Sachiroo
Mixing: Shimonaga Shoo
2nd. Assistant Director: Tanaka Toshikazu
Editing: Araki Yoshihiro
Film Effects: Doi Saburo
Effects: Chiku Choo
Film Development: Tokyo Laboratories

Producer: Koga Shooichi
Set Decoration: Takatsu Movie Decoration
Costumes: Kyoto Costumers
Makeup: Yamada Ya

Special Thanks:
Haramachi City, Fukushima Prefecture Soomanomaioi Committee

Directed by Inagaki Hiroshi
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

Sakuma Yoshiko
Namakura Kinnosuke
Ishihara Yujiro
Nakamura Katsuo
Nakamura Umenosuke

Tamara Masakazu, Ogata Ken, Nakamura Kankuroo, Oozora Mayumi, Harukawa Masumi, Toogo Haruko,
Sawai Keiko, Kuga Yoshiko, Hirata Akihiko, Tsuchiya Yoshio, Kubo Akira, Nakaya Ichiroo, Sakai Sachio,
Tomita Nakajiroo, Sagawa Tetsuroo, Murata Kichijiroo, Mukai Jun'ichiroo, Kagawa Ryoosuke, Shimizu Masao,
Yamazaki Ryuunosuke, Togami Jootaroo, Nambara Kooji, Shimura Ryoo, Tsukigata Ryuunosuke & Nakamura
Naraimon

Fight Choreography: Kuze Ryuu
Mifune Productions: Nana Yookai
Tessen Group: Kanze Shizuo

And Featuring the Greater Japan Mounted Archery Society