



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 20=

Seven Samurai

(Shichinin no samurai)

When Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* premiered in Japan on 26 April 1954, it was the most expensive domestic production ever, costing 125 million Yen (approximately \$350,000), almost five times the then 26 million Yen (\$63,000) average for a typical Japanese studio picture.

The troubled year-long location shoot was the stuff of legend before the film had even opened, and Kurosawa's dictatorial approach towards his cast and crew on set and his stance towards his employers, Toho, back in Tokyo, saw him drawing considerable flak from critics.

Donald Richie, in his book *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (published in 1965) reported the director's exasperated response to such attacks: 'You try to give a film a little pictorial scope and the journalists jump on you for spending too much money. That is what I really hate about them – they are only an extended form of advertising.' Kurosawa also pointed out that the expenditure on *Seven Samurai* was but a fraction of the means available to directors in the west, claiming that Japanese films were made too cheaply.

Richie states that the film was a significant commercial success upon its original release. Indeed, it was Toho's biggest hit of the year, grossing 268 million Yen (approximately \$744,500) within its first 12 months, and was the second highest domestic earner of 1954, positioned behind Shochiku's release of the third part of Hideo Oba's romantic saga *What Is Your Name?*

However, within a few years, its impact in Japan had waned, and even its legendary budget had been eclipsed by Shinto's nationalistic war epic *Emperor Meiji and the Great Russo-Japanese War* (1957), which remained the highest-grossing domestic film of the postwar period up until 1964. *Seven Samurai* is not even listed among the top 20 domestic earners of its decade, undoubtedly a victim of its colossal runtime, twice that of the average for a Japanese film of its era. Indeed, the list features only one title by Kurosawa (and moreover the only Toho production): *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), positioned at number nine.

Richie's assertion that the film met with a muted critical response is less easy to support, given that Japan's most respected film journal, *Kinema Junpo*, ranked it as third best of the year in its annual critics' poll. Nevertheless, if we are to go with Richie's claim, and that it was only a decade later that critics began to 'speak in measured terms of this "epoch-making masterpiece"', then we might attribute a large part of its towering status to its overseas reception.

While much of Japanese cinema's attraction overseas rested on its surface exoticism, the *Variety* review filed from Venice on 31 August 1954 after the first foreign screening of *Seven Samurai* points towards the more universal appeal of Kurosawa's epic, exclaiming 'High adventure and excitement are stamped all over this solid-core film,' and that 'Besides the well-mannered battle scenes, the pic has a good feeling for characterisation and time which makes this sort of pic not only strong for arty houses but possibly good in the actioner market.'

In the final assessment, *Variety* claimed *Seven Samurai*'s 'lone drawback is its length, which can be sheared.' The irony is that the 160-minute international version screened at Venice had already undergone considerable pruning down from Kurosawa's original 207-minute cut (which itself had only

screened in a few principal cities in Japan, with a slightly shortened version circulated by Toho to second- and third-run theatres in Japan). Nevertheless, sheared again it was, so that when Kurosawa's longest ever film reached UK shores in April 1955, distributed by Films de France, a further five minutes had gone.

Most reviews drew attention to the influence of the western on Kurosawa, particularly the films of John Ford, with *Monthly Film Bulletin* surmising, 'If all this attests to the way Kurosawa has assimilated the influence of Western directors for his own purposes, it also explains, perhaps, the detached attitude of *Seven Samurai*. Here is a deliberately modern, sophisticated eye looking at the past – in contrast to, say, the films of Mizoguchi, which are overdue for showing in this country.'

When the film went out on its US release some 18 months later, under the title of *The Magnificent Seven*, in his review dated 20 November 1956, *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther was quick to pick up on this western connection, claiming this 'extraordinary film, which matches his first [*Rashomon*] for cinema brilliance... bears cultural comparison with our own popular western *High Noon*. That is to say, it is a solid, naturalistic, he-man outdoor action film, wherein the qualities of human strength and weakness are discovered in a crisis taut with peril. And although the occurrence of this crisis is set in the 16th century in a village in Japan, it could be transposed without surrendering a basic element to the 19th century and a town on our own frontier.'

And this is effectively what happened, when Lou Morheim picked up the remake rights from Toho for a pittance and John Sturges hopped on board as producer-director for an all-American version. When *The Magnificent Seven* remake was released in 1960, Kurosawa's film reverted back to its original title of *Seven Samurai* in the US, but ultimately it was this Hollywood reworking that came to be seen by the most viewers across the world.

Throughout the following decades, viewers of the Japanese original saw it only in its heavily truncated export version, and most assumed it a typical example of Japan's popular *jidaigeki* (historical drama) genre. Most were unaware of just how revolutionary Kurosawa's approach to historical realism actually was, with the film's action sequences shot using multiple-camera setups, meticulously researched sets and costumes, and masterful deployment of natural lighting and weather conditions to enhance the drama.

During its domestic release, Kurosawa had claimed that 'the *jidaigeki* faces a dead-end, there are no talented *jidaigeki* producers,' and to some extent, he was right. While he would push the envelope with mould-breaking historical pictures such as *Throne of Blood* (1957), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962), all of which (unlike many of his contemporary dramas) were sold overseas, the local industry ultimately did not have the resources to support the kind of epics Kurosawa liked to make.

Kurosawa's fall from grace on his home turf, following *Red Beard* (1965), his last film for Toho, is well-documented. It was a call from overseas that would reinstate his reputation as one of the world's greatest filmmakers, leading to him directing the Siberian-set adventure *Dersu Uzala* (1975) for the Soviet Mosfilm company.

In the meantime, Richie's monograph notwithstanding, *Seven Samurai* had rather fallen out of critical purview. In 1982, however, it made its first appearance in *Sight & Sound's* once-a-decade poll of the greatest films ever made, in joint third position with *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). In subsequent polls, it has jostled for attention with *Tokyo Story* (1953) as representatives of Japanese cinema, with Kurosawa's film the more popular among directors and Ozu's among critics.

Despite airing in a 198-minute restored version nearest approaching Kurosawa's original vision at the BFI's National Film Theatre in November

1994, it was conspicuous by its absence in the 2002 critics poll, but voted joint ninth by directors (alongside Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* and Kurosawa's own *Rashomon*). In the most recent poll, conducted in 2012, it had dropped down to joint 17th position, with *Tokyo Story* positioned at number four.

In Japan, by contrast, the signature film by that 'most Japanese of directors' has now been supplanted in critical opinion by the magnum opus of the least: in the 1995 poll by *Kinema Junpo* held to mark the centenary of cinema, *Seven Samurai* was ranked in second place behind *Tokyo Story* as the best Japanese film ever made, but rose to the top of the list in the 1999 poll, where it remained for the 2009 recount.

Upon its original American release, Bosley Crowther had questioned 'whether this picture is any more authentic to its period or culture than is the average American western film.' At the end of the day, the humanism and potency of *Seven Samurai*'s theme and message have spoken for themselves, with a host of films produced across the world that were either directly modelled on it, referenced it, or acknowledged its archetypal plot setup, in which a team of disparate characters are grouped to undertake a specific mission. These range from *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967), the Bollywood classic *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), George Lucas's own *Star Wars* (1977), *Battle beyond the Stars* (Jimmy T. Murakami, 1980), *Savalan* (Yadollah Samadi, 1990) from Iran, and, returning full circle to Japan, the 26-episode TV anime series *Samurai 7* (2004).

Seven Samurai is now by far the best known and influential film ever to hail from Japan. After all, what do critics know?

Jasper Sharp, bfi.org.uk, 26 April 2014

SEVEN SAMURAI (SHICHININ NO SAMURAI)

Director: Akira Kurosawa

©: Toho Co. Ltd.

Production Company: Toho Co. Ltd.

Producer: Sojiro Motoki

Assistant Directors: Hiromichi Horikawa, Katsuya Shimizu,

Sakae Hirose, Yasuyoshi Tajitsu, Toshi Kaneko

Screenplay: Shinobu Hashimoto, Hideo Oguni, Akira Kurosawa

Director of Photography: Asakazu Nakai

Lighting: Shigeru Mori

Art Director: So Matsuyama

Art Consultation: Seiton Maeda, Kohei Ezaki

Music: Fumio Hayasaka

Sound Recording: Fumio Yanoguchi

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Fencing Director: Yushio Sugino

Archery Directors: Ienori Kaneko, Shigeru Endo

Cast

Takashi Shimura (*Kambei Shimada, leader of samurai*)

Toshiro Mifune (*Kikuchiyo, would-be samurai*)

Seiji Miyaguchi (*Kyuzo, swordsman*)

Ko Kimura (*Katsushiro, young samurai*)

Daisuke Katô (*Shichiroji, Kambei's friend*)

Minoru Chiaki (*Heihachi, good-natured samurai*)

Yoshio Inaba (*Gorobei, wise warrior*)

Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Rikichi, militant villager*)

Keiko Tsushima (*Shino, Manzo's daughter*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*Manzo, Shino's father*)

Bokuzen Hidari (*Yohei, frightened villager*)

Kuninori Kodo (*Gisaku, village elder*)

Yoshio Kosugi (*Mosuke*)

Keiji Sakakida (*Gosaku*)

Fumiko Homma (*peasant woman*)

Sojin Kamiyama (*minstrel-priest*)

Toranosuke Ogawa (*grandfather*)

Yu Akitsu (*husband*)

Noriko Sengoku (*wife*)

Ichiro Chiba (*priest*)

Gen Shimizu (*masterless samurai*)

Jun Tatari (*coolie*)

Atsushi Watanabe (*vendor*)

Yukiko Shimazaki (*Rikichi's wife*)

Shinpei Takagi (*Bandit Chief*)

Jiro Kumagai, Haruko Toyama,

Tsuneo Katagiri, Yasuhisa Tsutsumi (*peasants*)

Kichijiro Ueda, Akira Tani, Haruo Nakajima, Takashi Narita,

Senkichi Omura, Shuno Takahara, Masanobu Okubo (*bandits*)

Japan 1954©

207 mins + interval

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