

# The Essentials: *Seven Samurai*

DIRECTED BY KUROSAWA AKIRA  
 1954, FROM THE CRITERION COLLECTION (ENGLISH-SUBTITLED)  
 207 MINUTES (WITH INTERMISSION), BLACK AND WHITE



By Yasuko Sato

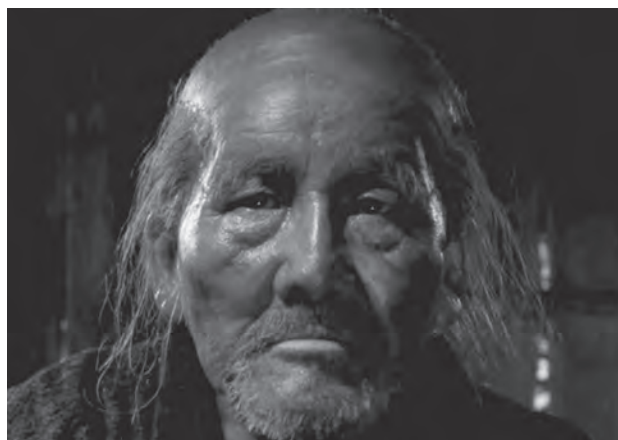
**K**urosawa Akira's *Seven Samurai* is a timeless masterpiece that has been widely recognized as the greatest foreign-language film ever made. The plot concerns a humble village hiring a band of samurai and protecting itself from pillage in war-ravaged sixteenth-century Japan. Since the wretchedness inflicted on the peasantry is evocative of all forms of human suffering, the honorable service conducted by the seven samurai takes on universal significance.

What it takes to be a trustworthy samurai is the central question that film viewers are encouraged to ponder as the story unfolds. Samurai identity is so fluid as to be reframed and redefined throughout the film. This dynamic of exclusivity and inclusivity forms the core of Kurosawa's storytelling. Depicted with immaculate realism, magnetic personality traits attract people to the seven and awaken their inner samurai. Not surprisingly, samurai recruitment alone occupies nearly the first one-third of the film.

Despite its daunting length, *Seven Samurai* is a remarkably fast-paced movie—a series of picture-perfect visuals that manifest Kurosawa's unyielding devotion to its story and characters. Collective viewing may be an exhilarating experience, with students laughing and crying with the film's characters. Online viewings are not free, but this samurai drama makes sense only through immersion in it, because the quality of human interactions, including unspoken thoughts, is of the utmost importance.

To maximize the effectiveness of a film viewing, instructors can mention ahead of time the historical setting of the film plot (the emergence of the *rōnin* [masterless samurai] during the civil wars of the sixteenth century) and the principal facts that students should contemplate (the samurai as the hereditary military nobility, the sacrality of Japanese rice cultivation, etc.), without giving any spoilers. Historically, samurai stipends were paid with rice, with warriors constituting the ruling class. The hiring of samurai fighters by peasant farmers is an intriguing case of role reversal in a time of chaos.

It is also imperative to teach about the widespread perception that the samurai disdained firearms. Whereas real-world samurai unhesitatingly utilized them, Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* (1980), for example, construes the large-scale deployment of matchlock weapons as a frightening tragedy. In *Seven Samurai*, the four deceased samurai are all gunned down, as if to demonstrate that honorable fighting is ineffectual against bullets. Since roving and hungry samurai—according to their alignment—could act either as heroic saviors or as predatory gangs, the thin line between good and evil is noteworthy. The samurai and bandits, figures with military power, are both designated by brushed circles (on the banner and chart, respectively). Additionally, the



Bandits ride to the village and plan their attack to raid and steal the villagers' barley after it is harvested. They assume that rice is no longer grown or available, as they plundered it last fall.

The villagers consult the Old Man (the village elder). He tells them to find hungry samurai, stating, "Even bears come down from the mountains when they are hungry."



movie tells us that desperate peasants become treacherous evildoers.

It would be best if students have some prior knowledge about historically authentic samurai attributes, because the seven are both consonant with and divergent from them. The mental and physical alertness on which samurai candidates are tested in front of a door alludes to the famed duelist Tsukahara Bokuden's (1490–1571) method of assessing his three sons when calling them into a room one by one. It is informative, meanwhile, to learn how the seven samurai's ethos—due to its unconventionality—sets itself apart from Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings* (1643), Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, the vendetta of the forty-seven ronin, the way of the samurai

Katsushirō stands ready to test the samurai Gorōbei when he walks through the door.



A crowd of onlookers watch in shock, as the samurai Kambei cuts his topknot off.

Kyüzō, the sixth to join Kambei's crew, is highly skilled at swordsmanship. When he finishes off an adamant challenger who forces him to fight with real swords, *Seven Samurai* makes a momentous break from *chambara*, a genre that features a stylized, dance-like form of sword fighting.



Heihachi displays the battle banner that he made. The six circles represent the samurai and the triangle is "Lord Kikuchiyo."



A fatally speared woman hands to Kikuchiyo the baby she rescued from the flaming wreck.



## The personal qualities and military roles of the seven samurai are stunningly rich in diversity.

that permeates Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai* (2003), and Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900).

The venerable samurai leader Kambei's (Shimura Takashi) shaved head is particularly important in that the loss of a topknot commonly entailed a loss of samurai status, with such notable exceptions as Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), a charismatic warlord who practiced Zen Buddhism. By impersonating a monk, Kambei rescues a kidnapped child from a madman. Kambei, the first of the seven, recruits most of the other six samurai solely through the power of his character, exuding the calm that comes from great wisdom, benevolence, and strength.

The personal qualities and military roles of the seven are stunningly rich in diversity. The taciturn master swordsman Kyüzō makes outstanding contributions to the demise of the bandits. Heihachi, a good-humored fencer of the self-proclaimed "woodchopping school," makes an iconic battle flag and boosts morale. Gorōbei aids the creation of the village's defense plans. Shichirōji buttresses Kambei's confidence by instantaneously accepting the mission that is so risky as to gamble his life away. It is out of compassion that Kambei initially dissuades the young and inexperienced Katsushirō from joining his team. Although a rich boy who has no need to be fed by the peasants, Katsushirō would follow Kambei anywhere. Kikuchiyo (Mifune Toshirō), a farmer's son and the seventh samurai, is the funniest comic relief character. If students are asked which of the samurai figures is praiseworthy or relatable, that will help them appreciate the profound differences that exist among them. This diversity stands in striking contrast to the faceless and nameless anonymity of the forty raiders. Character growth is another key point since the mindsets of major characters—both samurai and farmers—change dramatically. Furthermore, the bravery of village women (a mother who saves her child from a burning mill, Rikichi's wife, and Shino) is worthy of discussion.

*Seven Samurai* ends with Kambei's cryptic remark that the peasants have won, and not the samurai. With the demand for samurai services sadly fleeting, the ending of the movie seems rather anticlimactic. The movie's enigmatic conclusion is a good discussion topic, establishing the meaning of what has been accomplished in the peasant village. This ending may be a homage to Kikuchiyo, who valiantly defeats the chief bandit while sustaining a fatal gunshot wound. In the very next moment, he is lying dead on a narrow bridge, beneath which Kambei earnestly calls his name. Alternatively, this conclusion may be an admiration for the vitality of laboring peasants and a prayer for primary producers like them to triumph over the forces of evil through the power of honest labor. Kambei's seemingly self-deprecating statement also suggests the missed opportunity to die with his boots on, the heavy burden of survivor guilt, and the ethics of stoic warriors who travel on foot (as opposed to marauding pillagers on horseback). Kambei obviously regards this turn of events as part of his *musha shugyō* ("warrior training"), a samurai's spiritual journey to strengthen his moral caliber and

martial arts skills. In any event, with two of the three surviving samurai standing before the graves of their fallen comrades, the majesty of these monuments represents continuing remembrance, encapsulating the everlasting legacy of samurai valor.

The fact that *Seven Samurai* epitomizes the warrior spirit is an indication that Kurosawa himself was a warrior filmmaker. In this regard, it is helpful to deploy a set of epic facts about the making of *Seven Samurai*, including the grueling process whereby the final rain-drenched battle scene was created. The cast and crew gave it all to Kurosawa, who recollected later: "... it's like I'm following someone or something's command. It's like I hear a voice from the heavens. I guess all of us are possessed by something."<sup>1</sup>

*Seven Samurai* is so transculturally influential that it has made incalculable contributions to world cinema. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) was directly inspired by *Seven Samurai*, bringing together the ronin and the cowboy, both of whom were outsiders, loners, and idealists. The 2016 remake of *The Magnificent Seven* features a multicultural lineup like *Samurai 7* (2004), an animated Japanese TV series that procured a revival of Kurosawa's classic film at its fiftieth anniversary. In a futuristic setting with an apocalyptic enemy, *Samurai 7* even portrays the machine samurai Kikuchiyo.

*Seven Samurai* exerted indelible influence on George Lucas's *Star Wars*, which delineates the Jedi Knights, guardians of peace and justice. They are specially gifted and trained, even to the point of detecting invisible threats. Especially notable are the similarities between Kambei and the legendary Jedi Master Yoda, the samurai sword and the lightsaber, the bandit leader and Darth Vader, bandits and stormtroopers. Interestingly, Jedi are clad in samurai-/monk-style robes. When played grandly on brass instruments, the two films' main themes are triumphant fanfares for their heroes. The *Star Wars* galaxy is marked by collaborative heroism, superb master-disciple relationships, the phenomenal diversity of likable characters, and the light and dark side of the Force. "May the Force be with you," a Jedi phrase that captures a sense of oneness with the highest power in the universe, is analogous to the aforementioned belief that *Seven Samurai* was Kurosawa's heaven-ordained mission.

So you'd like to be a fighter who joins forces with others and unleashes your potential in the service of a higher purpose? This is the implied question shared by *Seven Samurai* and related narratives. Their undying appeal illustrates the enduring importance of virtuous warriors—persons of splendid character and exemplary courage—because the two warring powers of good and evil are inherent in the human condition across time and space. ■

## NOTES

1. Stuart Galbraith IV, *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2002), 189; Chapter 11, "The Magnificent Seven," can be a good reading assignment.

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Kikuchiyo offers the armor and weapons that the farmers stole from dead samurai in the past. The offer enrages and saddens Kambei and other samurai. They refuse to take those military gear and equipment, but they forgive the farmers after hearing Kikuchiyo explain why they ended up becoming murderers.



The battle is over. Katsushirō, Kambei, and Shichirōji are the only surviving samurai.



The samurai survivors pay homage to the graves of their fallen brethren, while hearing the villagers play instruments and sing happily in the rice paddies. Katsushirō is attracted to the peasant girl Shino, and his absence from this scene at the very last moment adds extra depth to the story.



Kurosawa on location during the filming of the climactic rain-drenched battle scenes of *Seven Samurai*. Source: *High on Films* website at <https://tinyurl.com/4wmss8fj>