

Seven Samurai

Shichinin no samurai, 1954, Japan

Film Overview



Seven Samurai tells the tale of a 16th century Japanese farm community that, led by a band of seven warriors, defends itself against a gang of pillaging robbers. When several of the village's men grow weary of the annual raids of the bandits, they decide to act. Since the villagers do not have the martial ability or skill to fight, they seek mercenary samurai who are willing to defend the settlement in return for food and lodging. After teaching the men of the town how to fight and preparing the village for its defense (building fences, flooding the rice fields, and tearing down a bridge), the seven samurai await the inevitable coming of the 40-odd bandits and the battle that will determine the peasants' future. *Seven Samurai* offers us flawed protagonists, some of whom are not skilled fighters, and one of whom is often drunk, belligerent, and decidedly non-heroic in his approach. The odds are impressive, yet, in large part due to the melancholy tone adopted by Kurosawa during the closing scene, the victory is hollow, and almost feels like a defeat. (The lead samurai's final words: "So. Again we are defeated. The farmers have won. Not us.") *Seven Samurai* is an unforgettable masterpiece – the work of one of the world's greatest filmmakers at the height of his powers. —adapted from a review by James Berardinelli, reelviews.net

Akira Kurosawa is one of Japan's best-known filmmakers, responsible for such classics as *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and *Rashomon*. Though he is best known for samurai films, he also directed more modern-themed pieces such as *Ikiru* and *Dreams*. He is also well-known for his collaborations with Toshiro Mifune, who plays the ebullient Kikuchiyo in this film.

Culture Notes

- **Rōnin:** Though the film is called *Seven Samurai*, the seven warriors who come to defend the village could more properly be called *rōnin*, a term that refers to masterless samurai. Normally, a samurai served a feudal lord, but he could become a *rōnin* if dismissed or if his master lost his title and land or died. In modern times, the term is also used to describe Japanese students who fail their college entrance exams and take a year off to study for the exams again.
- **Period of Warring States (mid-15th c. to early 17th c.):** *Seven Samurai* takes place during an extremely tumultuous time in Japan's feudal history, poetically called the Period of Warring States after a previous era in Chinese history. The country was embroiled in battle after battle between powerful landed lords, called daimyo. This period eventually led to the unification of Japan. – adapted from *Asia for Educators*
- **A True Warrior:** The leader of the seven samurai, Kambei, exemplifies many samurai values, especially that of keeping the possibility of death in mind at all times. At the same time, he disregards other conventions of the samurai class; he welcomes Kikuchiyo into the group, though Kikuchiyo is technically from the peasant class. –*Sight and Sound*, British Film Institute: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49287>
- **Magnificent Seven:** A 1960 Hollywood remake of the film, directed by John Sturges, has seven gunmen defending a Mexican village from bandits. Several changes were made in the adaptation process, including the combination of Kikuchiyo and Katsushiro into one character, Chico.

