

‘The Last Shōgun’: Toshirō Mifune

by Martijn Huisman

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by Martijn Huisman

What do Clint Eastwood and Bruce Willis have in common? At some point in their careers, both well-known American actors derived inspiration from their Japanese colleague Toshirō Mifune, especially from the roles Mifune played in films directed by Akira Kurosawa. Between 1948 and 1965 the two worked together on a total of sixteen films, many of which are regarded today as classic masterworks. While Kurosawa became internationally known as the best and most acclaimed Japanese film director of all time, “Toshirō Mifune was the incomparable actor whose screen presence carried Kurosawa’s work around the world”.¹ While under contract at Toho Studios, Mifune became the best known and most famous Japanese actor of his time, in Japan as well as in the West. “Toho’s, Japan’s, the World’s best actor... All could easily be said for Toshirō Mifune, who has the power to make any film that he stars in worth watching. However, when paired up with Akira Kurosawa the world was exposed to some of the greatest cinema to date”.² In contrast to the life, career and films of Kurosawa (1910-1998), which have been extensively discussed in biographies and other works about Japanese cinema, Mifune’s story is less familiar. This essay presents an overview of Mifune’s life and his career as a distinguished actor. Above all, this document is a homage to Toshirō Mifune, who through his intense performances greatly contributed to the popularity of Japanese cinema abroad.

Although largely based upon the comprehensive biography of Kurosawa and Mifune by Stuart Galbraith (*The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshirō Mifune*, 2002), this essay primarily grew out of an interview with Robert Red-Baer. Red-Baer came to Japan in 1975 and worked for Mifune at his acting school in Tokyo between 1981 and 1984. During the interview Red-Baer among others talked about his memories of this period. This essay, then, tells the story of Mifune’s early years, his career as an actor which would eventually bring him worldwide fame, and the latter years of his life. In order to not simply repeat existing biographies, it focuses on the period when Mifune as an already established actor sought independence from the major Japanese film studios by setting up his own production company. This production company would eventually also include the acting school where Red-Baer worked for three years. By the time Mifune proudly started his own production company, he had already had a long career as an actor. A career which had started almost immediately after the end of the Second World War.

Early Years

While quite a lot is known about his life in the spotlights (largely thanks to the often relentless Japanese press) not much is known about Mifune’s early years, in part because he himself rarely talked about his childhood. Although he was voted in 1984 at age 64 as ‘the most Japanese man’ in a Japanese magazine, Toshirō Mifune was actually born in China on April 1, 1920 in the city of Tsingtao (modern day Qingdao) in central Eastern China. He was the oldest son of Tokuzo and Sen Mifune. Both were Japanese and lived in a Japanese enclave, so that the Mifune family did not really have a lot of contact with the Chinese. After the Pacific War (or Asia-Pacific War) broke out in 1941 and Japan plunged itself into a war with (and invaded) other Asian countries, Mifune

was drafted into the army and served for five years in the Japanese Imperial Air Force. He avoided combat however as he was assigned to training recruits, many of which would die at the war front. Although he first served in Manchuria in China in the Kanto Aviation Training Team, Mifune's company was later moved to Shiga Prefecture in Japan. Already 21 years old, it was the first time Mifune set foot on Japanese soil. In August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers as the war had been lost. In a country ravaged by Allied bombings and faced with devastating losses, Mifune had little to nothing left and did not know what to do with his life. Eventually, he turned to Toho, one of the major Japanese film studios, to try and become a cameraman. Instead, Mifune ended up in the so-called Toho New Face program, where promising and talented actors and actresses would be selected from about 4000 applications and put into a six month training program. Whether Mifune ended up in the contest by accident or intentionally is still not entirely clear, but the aspiring cameraman was ultimately hired together with fifteen other men and 32 women to become an actor for Toho. The New Face program would not only provide Mifune with a job and eventually the world with a great actor, but it was also where he met the young actress Sachiko Yoshimine. Mifune and Sachiko fell in love and married in 1950. The same year their son Shiro was born, followed by a second son, Takeshi, in 1955.

After his training had finished, Mifune quickly gained popularity in front of the camera's as he started to appear in mainstream films for Toho.³ "Coupled with his amazing talent were his rugged, working-class good looks and virile, fierce demeanor at a time when most leading men in Japanese films had delicate, even androgynous features. Against such competition, Mifune was exhilaratingly, refreshingly magnetic, and he became a screen idol almost overnight".⁴ According to the British Film Institute, Mifune's " 'angry young man' presence immediately appealed to film-makers who were beginning to flex their creative wings after strict restrictions imposed by Japanese government censors during the war".⁵ At age 27, Mifune's first role was for director Senkichi Taniguchi in *The New Age of Fools* (*Shin baka jidai*, 1947). The next year, Mifune reached stardom in Japan by playing a gangster in Akira Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore tenshi*, 1948). It was only the third film Mifune appeared in. Kurosawa was apparently so impressed by Mifune's presence and acting that the original idea for the film was changed and Mifune's role expanded in order to 'turn him loose'.⁶ Many years later, Kurosawa would write in his autobiography *Something Like an Autobiography* (1982) that,

Mifune had a kind of talent I had never encountered before in the Japanese film world. It was, above all, the speed with which he expressed himself that was astounding... The speed of his movements was such that he said in a single action what took ordinary actors three separate movements to express. He put forth everything directly and boldly, and his sense of timing was the keenest I had ever seen in a Japanese actor. And yet with all his quickness he also had surprisingly fine sensibilities... I'm a person who is rarely impressed by actors, but in the case of Mifune I was completely overwhelmed.⁷

In the next seventeen years after their first collaboration, Mifune as well as Kurosawa met with critical and financial success as they worked together on a succession of masterpieces during the so called Golden Era of Japanese cinema.

Golden Era

Mifune's first film with Kurosawa was followed by *The Quiet Duel* (*Shizukanaru ketto*, 1949) and *Stray Dog* (*Nora innu*, 1949). In the first, Mifune plays a doctor who gets infected with syphilis during an operation. In *Stray Dog*, a crime thriller, he is a young homicide detective who tries to track down his stolen pistol. The next film with Kurosawa behind and Mifune in front of the

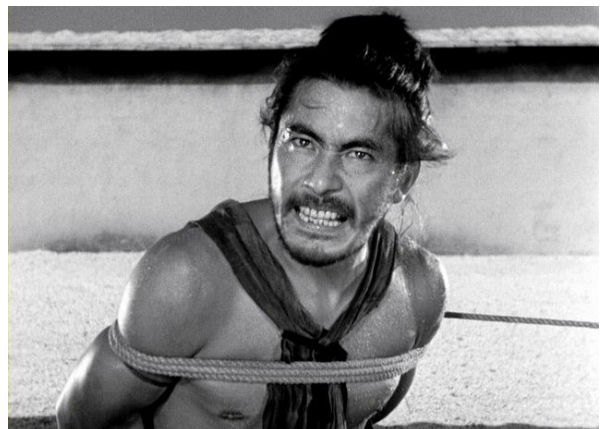


Mifune in *Rashōmon* as the bandit Tajōmaru
Source: Wikimedia Commons / Wikipedia.org

camera appeared at the dawn of the Golden Era of Japanese cinema, which lasted the entire 1950s. *Scandal* (*Shūbun*, 1950) deals with the Japanese paparazzi and tabloid magazines specializing in scandals. Ironically, Mifune himself would become a target of the Japanese paparazzi in later years, similar to the character he portrays in the film. After *Scandal* followed a series of classic Kurosawa/Mifune masterworks like *Rashōmon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no Samurai*, 1954), *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*, 1957), and *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi toride no san akumin*, 1958).

These four films were all period drama's, or *jidaigeiki* as they are called in Japan, and are prime examples of Mifune's acting skills and the creative collaboration between actor and director.

Especially *Rashōmon* and *Seven Samurai* did a lot to bring Japanese cinema to the attention of Western film critics and audiences, while also establishing Mifune as one of cinema's greatest actors. In *Rashōmon*, a film about the nature of truth and reality in a crime and its aftermath are recalled from differing points of view, Mifune lights up the screen with an electrifying performance as the notorious bandit Tajōmaru. The film itself caught the attention of Hollywood and would provide inspiration for generations of film makers to come. The almost three and a half hour long (in its original cut) *Seven Samurai*, about a group of samurai protecting a village from bandits, also proved a masterwork, of which the several (American) remakes such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) are evidence. Mifune plays the role of Kikuchiyo, a farmer's son who wants to be a samurai. Both films showcase Mifune's talents and are really the two films to start with for anyone interested in Mifune and Kurosawa. In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa transposed Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to medieval Japan. Mifune is the ambitious lord who, spurred on by his equally ambitious wife, ruthlessly and ultimately to his own demise tries to fulfil a prophecy that he will become Emperor. *The Hidden Fortress* is somewhat of a light hearted action adventure film and has Mifune play the role of general Rokurota Makabe. With the help of two greedy peasants who are only interested in gold, he has to



As Philip French writes, Mifune was often compared to a wolf because of his "fearsome gaze, menacing walk and the ferocious way he could prance and pounce". Reportedly, he studied footage of wild lions for his roles in *Rashōmon* and *Seven Samurai*. Above, Mifune as the bandit Tajōmaru in *Rashōmon*
Source: Wikimedia Commons / Wikipedia.org

escort a princess across enemy lines. Interestingly, this film was later mentioned by George Lucas as the prime inspiration for the Star Wars films. Between *Rashōmon* and *The Hidden Fortress* Kurosawa and Mifune also worked together on *The Idiot* (*Hakuchi*, 1951), *I Live in Fear* (*Ikimono no kiroku*, 1955), and *The Lower Depths* (*Donzoko*, 1957), the latter being an adaptation of Maxim Gorky's well-known play under the same name. Perhaps Kurosawa's most neglected masterpiece, it tells the story of a tenement inhabited by the lowest of society's strata, struggling to survive, and their greedy landlords. Mifune stars as Sutekichi, a thief and the self-appointed leader of the tenement. *I Live in Fear* provided Mifune with a very different, yet another memorable, role. Under a thick layer of makeup, the 35-year old Mifune convincingly plays a seventy year old businessman afraid of a nuclear holocaust.

During this Golden Era of Japanese cinema Mifune also worked for other directors and he appeared in several much acclaimed films such as Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku Ichidai Onna*, 1952), in which he plays a page who eventually gets executed for having a love affair with a concubine of a *daimyō* (warlord). Mifune also portrayed the legendary seventeenth-century samurai Musashi Miyamoto in the *Samurai Trilogy* directed by Hiroshi Inagaki, which ran from 1954 until 1956. The first part, *Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto* (1954), won the 1955 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. During these years Mifune was in great demand, in some years appearing in no less than eight different films. Sadly, however, many of these films have never been released outside Japan.*

In the same year Mifune celebrated his 40th birthday, *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru*, 1960) was released. Another Kurosawa/Mifune corroboration, the film tells a story about corruption in post war corporate Japan. Mifune is Kōichi Nishi, a young man who marries the daughter of a corrupt executive in order to seek justice for and avenge his father's suicide, which was caused by the same corrupt executive and his henchmen. In the next two films for Kurosawa, *Yōjimbō* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (*Tsubaki Sanjūrō*, 1962), Mifune played a *ronin* (masterless samurai) with which he established the now famous masterless rogue warrior character which would serve as inspiration for future actors to come. In *Yōjimbō*, Mifune enters a town divided by two criminal gangs. In order to free the town from these gangsters, Mifune successfully plays the two gangs against each other. As more or less a follow up to *Yōjimbō*, *Sanjuro* has Mifune intervene in clan intrigues as he helps a young samurai to save his uncle who has been framed and imprisoned by a corrupt superintendent. Three years after its release, *Yōjimbō* was unofficially remade in the U.S. by Italian film director Sergio Leone as *A Fistful of Dollars*, featuring Clint Eastwood as a masterless rogue gunslinger in the style of Mifune's *ronin* character. In *High and Low* (*Tengoku to jigoku*, 1963), a thriller about contemporary Japanese society, Mifune plays Kingo Gondo, an executive of a shoe company. Gondo becomes the victim of extortion when his chauffeur's son is kidnapped and held for ransom. He has to make a choice: pay the money to the kidnapper or go through with the takeover of the shoe company.

Although he became best known for his roles as samurai, *ronin* and war lords in period films, Mifune was equally adept at playing other roles set in contemporary Japan, such as the company executives in *High and Low* and *The Bad Sleep Well*. In the same year that *High and Low* was released, Mifune took a big step towards more independence from the major film studios as he started his own production company.

* For an excellent overview of Mifune's most famous and probably best films, see the Criterion Collection at: <http://www.criterion.com/explore/157-toshiro-mifune> For a complete filmography see the website of Mifune Productions at: <http://www.mifuneproductions.co.jp/english/filmography/filmography.html>

Search for independence: Mifune Productions

In 1963, when he was already a well-known and established name in Japan and abroad, Mifune started his own production company in order to be less dependent on the big Japanese film studios and to establish a more independent identity. At the time Mifune had been under contract at Toho for fifteen years, ever since he was hired for the New Face contest. On January 17, 1963, the founding of Mifune Productions was announced in a press conference. From the start it was clear that the production company was somewhat of a risky venture, with his wife Sachiko and Kurosawa among others advising him against it. With his own company, Mifune would co-finance many of the films he starred in later in his career. He would even direct one film himself, the unsuccessful *The Legacy of the Five Hundred Thousand* (*Gojuman-nin no isan*, 1963). His production company led Mifune to being busier than ever: “For the time being, I’m [my company’s] president and its maid. [...] I have so many things to do. I have to go to meetings, location scouting overseas, and direct. It’s hard work”.⁸ Proud of his own company, Mifune from the start in 1963 “garnered a reputation as a meticulous caretaker of his pride and joy”.⁹ In the following years, he not only ran his own production company but also increasingly appeared in foreign films, with which he earned much more money than the Japanese major studios ever paid to their top stars. With the money he made abroad as well as with commercials on Japanese television for among others Sapporo beer, Mifune was able to keep his production company going. However, the films made by Mifune Productions in the first few years were not doing very well, especially compared to Mifune’s films with Kurosawa. Kevin Thomas for example wrote in 1967 in the Los Angeles Times that “none of the pictures Japan’s top star Toshirō Mifune has made for his own company have been very good – to put it mildly”.¹⁰

In 1965, after having been under contract to Toho for seventeen years, Mifune officially went freelance. The same year also saw the release of his last film with Kurosawa, *Red Beard* (*Akabige*). Set in nineteenth century Japan, the film is about the relationship between a town doctor at a charity hospital (Mifune) and his new trainee, a condescending and arrogant recent medical graduate unwilling to work in such a hospital. Eventually, under the influence of town doctor Red Beard, the trainee changes and learns the true meaning of being a doctor. Although it has remained unclear what exactly happened between the two men, Mifune and Kurosawa would never work together again after *Red Beard*. One of the causes for the breakup seems to have been the fact that Mifune had to maintain a beard throughout the long production, which made him unable to appear in other films and resulted in financial problems for his production company. Kurosawa’s long-time script supervisor Teruyo Nogami moreover wrote in her memoirs that scriptwriter Hideo Oguni had told Kurosawa that Mifune’s performance in *Red Beard* was ‘all wrong’. Apparently, according to Nogami, this led Kurosawa to question Mifune’s abilities as an actor for the first time.¹¹ Whether this is true or not and whatever the reasons for their falling out, *Red Beard* meant the end of a collaboration which resulted in sixteen films, many of which classic masterworks, in seventeen years. After *Red Beard*, Kurosawa and Mifune basically went their separate ways. Interestingly, Mifune did win the award for Best Actor at the Venice Film Festival for his role in *Red Beard*. Having already won this prestigious award for *Yōjimbō*, it made him the only actor to have ever received it twice.

At the time *Red Beard* was finally released after a lengthy and arduous production, Mifune was already busy to expand his company with a small studio of his own in Seijo (in Setagaya-ward, one of the 23 special wards of Tokyo), where he also lived. The new, 500-square meter

soundstage cost Mifune no less than \$400 000 from his personal fortune. It was opened in December 1966 and immediately used for the production of *Samurai Rebellion* (*Jōi-uchi: Hairiyō tsuma shimatsu*, 1967), his company's sixth film and one of the last truly great roles Mifune would play. *Samurai Rebellion* as well as *Sword of Doom* (*Dai-bosatsu tōge*, 1966), both period films about samurai, are indeed generally recognized as Mifune's last great films. In *Samurai Rebellion*, Mifune is the father of a samurai who is wronged by his own clan. Eventually, father and son have to decide whether to obey or rebel against their own clan. The film provided Mifune with much needed success, as up until then only one of the six films produced by Mifune Productions had actually made a profit.

Following the introduction and popularization of television in Japan, Mifune also started to appear in television films from 1968 onwards. In January 1969, Mifune Productions began a weekly one-hour television series which was produced at Mifune's own studio. However, the programs apparently did not meet with much (financial) success. According to Stuart Galbraith, "the television programs Mifune produced were sold – by the actor himself – for peanuts. He had undersold himself by acting as his own agent throughout his career, as he was now doing with the entire run of a television series he had produced".¹² Besides underselling his services as an actor, Mifune also embarked on risky business ventures. Galbraith writes that "Mifune's naïve trust in the judgment of others out to make a fast yen extended as far away as Germany, where the actor launched one of his costliest failed ventures". In Munich, the capital of Bavaria in the south of Germany, Mifune tried to set up a restaurant. Due to delays and problems which led to a lawsuit against the City of Munich, Mifune's restaurant only opened after the Summer Olympics of 1972, which took place in Munich, had already finished. The restaurant, where his son Shiro would work for several years, ultimately failed and closed down, causing Mifune to lose a small fortune.¹³

In April 1970 Mifune turned fifty. Although still appearing in films and all sorts of television series, Mifune's acting career was slowly ebbing away. Although his name still sold tickets, "he could no longer sell a film on his name alone, nor was he winning awards for these new films. [...] He went from one undistinguished picture to another, working around the world in mostly dismal epics. His production company was in financial trouble".¹⁴ "Mifune had to eat, he had to pay his company's bills, so he took work where he could find it. Mifune [...] was frittering away his talents in instantly forgettable endeavors. Most of his films in the 1970s were mediocre; their quality was well below that of the program pictures he made at Toho. And most of his television work consisted of *chambara* and spy shows that were indifferently written and cheaply produced. [...] Good roles for Mifune were now few and far between".¹⁵

In response to the financial problems which plagued Mifune Productions as well as a personal scandal involving a mistress and his wish to divorce from his wife Sachiko, many of the actors Mifune had under contract walked out of him.¹⁶ Mifune's personal life and so-called scandals certainly provided interesting material for the Japanese press. Mifune would later say in an interview: "I really appreciate the fact that Westerners judge me as an actor. The Japanese are more interested in my private life, my divorce, scandal in general".¹⁷ Despite his personal and financial troubles, the end of the seventies saw Mifune busier than ever as he appeared in no less than five television shows – four period drama's and one contemporary. Mifune simply had to keep working to keep his production company afloat, which then consisted of about 235 people employed as actors or production staff.¹⁸

In 1981, Mifune embarked on another business venture when he proudly opened his own acting school, the *Mifune Geijutsu Gakuin*. With the goal of educating talented young actors and actresses and prepare them for roles in Japanese films as well as foreign productions, one of the people who came to work for Mifune was the American Robert Red-Baer. During a recent stay in Tokyo, I interviewed Red-Baer about his memories of working for Mifune.

An afternoon with Robert Red-Baer

On a Friday afternoon in July during the blistering hot Japanese summer of 2011, I visited Robert Red-Baer at his home in Nagareyama-shi. Located in northern Chiba Prefecture, the town is about one and a half hours away from central Tokyo by train. Red-Baer came to Japan in 1975 and has, despite occasional vacations and trips abroad, stayed there ever since. Now officially retired, he worked at Edogawa University as a lecturer and professor for more than twenty years. In 1981, while working for an English language school as a teacher, Red-Baer was asked to work at Toshirō Mifune’s acting school. He eventually end up working at the *Mifune Geijutsu Gakuin* until 1984. In these three years, Red-Baer – the only non-Japanese employee at the school – mainly taught English and acting to numerous Japanese students aspiring to become famous actors and actresses. Although Red-Baer has already written about his memories of this period on his own website, I talked with him for several hours in more detail about his time at the acting school and about his memories of Mifune.

First, can you explain how you came to work for Mifune Productions?

“I was working for an English school. I taught kids. I didn’t actually teach class, but I was the *gaijin* [foreigner] they never saw before in their lives. Every day I went to different schools. They practiced for months to get ready for this *gaijin* to come to school. Every year they had two events, a summer camp and something at Christmas. Almost all students went, because it wasn’t so expensive or even free. And I designed an act for that. The stage director, a Japanese, was also hired by the English company and really liked the show. In Japan everything is done through introductions. There is nothing done directly. The reason is, they need someone to take responsibility. The person who does the introductions is responsible for what happens in that relationship. Anyway, he recommended me to Mifune.”

To Mifune personally?

“Well, I guess he talked to Mifune about me. And then my boss, the English company boss, calls me one day and says, ‘how would you like to teach at an acting school?’ ‘Yeah, sure’. ‘So, did you ever hear of this guy called Toshirō Mifune? He is opening an acting school in Tokyo’. I said, ‘oh, that’s nice’. I had heard the name some place, in an English book or something. He said, ‘Toshirō Mifune’. ‘Oh, yeah, I will do it’. I was supposed to jump up and down. I told my wife, ‘I am going to teach for Toshirō Mifune’. She flipped out. She said, ‘do you know who he is?’ ‘No...’. I had only heard the name... My wife said, ‘remember we went to that movie in Hawaii?’ I think it was called *Hell in the Pacific*. With a Japanese and an American soldier stuck on an island together. And Mifune was that actor. I didn’t know he was that actor.”

That is how you were introduced?

“Yeah, I didn’t know it was him. That he was a Japanese actor. I had never seen a samurai movie before that. I didn’t come to Japan because I was a ‘Japanese fan’. I came over here because I thought I was going to stay here for two years, make a lot of money and go back. But after I got here, I had to learn some things. Especially the language.”

After you started working there, did you realize you were working for a famous actor?

“When I started working there I did. After I told my wife, she told me about the movie he was in. I guess I didn’t realize how really famous he was until I actually worked there.”

Did you go to Mifune Productions and talk with Mifune before getting hired?

“No, actually, I didn’t talk to him until the day of the opening ceremony. They had the TV-news there, they had set up an opening stage. There were some famous people up there on that stage, plus the teachers and instructors at the school.”



**Opening ceremony for Mifune’s acting school.
Behind the microphone Mifune himself, Red-Baer sits second from left**
Photograph courtesy of Robert Red-Baer

So you met Mifune for the first time at the opening ceremony?

“The first time we met was on the stage at the opening ceremony. After ceremony there were drinks. We took a bus to the school and in the cafeteria there we had a little party. If I remember correctly, that is where we first really talked. We introduced and I asked him, ‘I don’t want to make a mistake in talking with you and everything in Japanese. Can we speak English?’. And he answered me in Japanese, ‘I don’t speak English, so that is why I am hiring you. Because I don’t want my students to be in a movie where they can’t use their own voice. In a Western movie. So you are important to the school’. I was surprised when he told me he didn’t speak English. He also said that he memorized his English lines by the sounds of the words. He never spoke English to me.”¹⁹

In an 1984 interview with Michael Boxall for the Student Times, Red-Baer said about Mifune's intentions with the school and its students: "According to Toshirō Mifune, when I talked to him he said that he thought English is very important for them because he always has problems with it when he appears in foreign movies, so when he started this school he wanted to have an English course so the students could be comfortable [...] if they're ever in an international picture, or something like that".²⁰



Red-Baer and Mifune at the second opening ceremony, this time for the students
Photograph courtesy of Robert Red-Baer

What exactly did you do at Mifune's school?

"Originally, I taught... Actually, I started figuring out what I was doing when I was doing it. Because it was my first time. It was completely up to me. The object was to get the students to speak English and to teach some acting. Of course, they had other acting classes too. I tried different things. I tried singing, some songs, maybe some dance. I tried some dialogues. Problem was, their English levels were all different. I had forty or more students in that class. A big class. And I also tried some things that I wrote myself."

In the 1984 interview, Red-Baer also talked about his activities at Mifune's acting school: "What I do in this Mifune Geijutsu Gakuin is teach English and acting. Basically, the emphasis is kind of on English, but since most of the students want to be actors and actresses it moves towards the acting part, too".²¹

You worked there fulltime?

"It was fulltime as far as the English goes. Maybe two or three times a week. But I wasn't considered a Japanese fulltime. Because I was working for another company, I was being sent. The language school, that was my company. Mifune was my work place. So actually, Mifune's office asked the language school if they could have me. Because of the recommendation, and probably because I had a reputation for making video's too. And I could speak some Japanese."

Did you often talk with Mifune?

“Mr. Mifune was a very busy man back then, so I didn’t see much of him. But when he was around, he would always come up and greet me as ‘Baer Sensei’ [*sensei* is a Japanese word meaning master or teacher]. There were several occasions however, we talked at least once a month. Not meetings or anything, just talk. Just meet in the hall or by accident. One Sunday, when I was already working for him for a while, I was on some NHK [Japan Broadcasting Corporation] TV show, some kind of family program about recording videos. It was no big deal probably. The next day Toshirō Mifune and I happened to bump into each other in the hallway of the school. Mifune came up to me and the first thing he said to me like I was a TV star, ‘*Bear-sensei, kinou mite yo. Terebi deteta ne.*’ ‘Baer-sensei, I saw you on TV yesterday!’ Very kind. Toshirō Mifune saw me on TV.”²²

“The thing that I remember the best was this new year party. There was a big *bōnenkai*, a ‘forget the year party’ [drinking parties usually held in December with co-workers or friends]. There were about six or seven hundred people in this hotel complex. Entertainment, dancers, drums... And Mifune talked to me for about – it was his party, there were six hundred guests and a lot of things. And he talked to me for a good ten minutes. Just standing there, talking with me. I was just an English teacher, and I taught acting too, but... He didn’t even have to say hello to me, but to spend ten minutes talking with me when this is his party. He got all these famous people. And these parties usually only go for two hours, maybe two and a half hours. I asked him or I asked somebody, is Richard Chamberlain [co-star of Mifune in *Sbōgun*] here? Because that was when *Sbōgun* was on. And he said, ‘no’. I don’t remember if it was Mifune, but someone told me he wasn’t there. But at the end of the party, which is like a wedding, the people who are the reason for the party just go by and say good luck or whatever. Mifune and kind of great people, important people for the school, lined up and everybody greeted and left. And Richard Chamberlain was there. At least I think so, or it was somebody who really looked like him. I was waiting in the reception, said goodbye and we shook hands. I am not one hundred percent sure it was Richard Chamberlain, but he was the only other foreigner at the party that I could see. Why else would he be in that line? He looked like the guy and something was going on. I am sure it was him. I can’t see it being anyone else than Richard Chamberlain. I am 99 percent sure it was him.”



Red-Baer and Mifune at the second opening ceremony
Photograph courtesy of Robert Red-Baer

Which year was this?

“It was probably the first December after the school opened. The first or the second. Around the time *Shōgun* was broadcast or finished being broadcast. It was broadcast in the States before it was shown here in Japan. I saw advertising in the train, but *Shōgun* wasn’t very popular in Japan.”

Did Mifune ever mention *Shōgun* or other films he played in to you? Did you ever talk about it with him?

“I probably did. I remember I once asked him something like, ‘you are so famous, do you ever ride on the train?’. ‘Yeah, I ride on the train sometimes’. Something like that. Probably... I don’t remember what we talked about. I wasn’t thinking about the future back then... I know Mifune didn’t talk about Kurosawa and I didn’t ask about it. Because I had a feeling that it was not a subject to bring up. I know it was a relationship that went bad. If I was studying Mifune, I would have probably asked him. But he might never talk to me again too!”

How famous was Mifune in Japan when you were working for him?

“He is... nowadays people only know Mika Mifune. But they don’t know him anymore. I met Mika – she actually send me a letter. She saw my website, introduced herself and thanked me for the nice things I said about her father. I met her when she was just a baby. One day, Mifune’s mistress came in with the baby. At school. I thought it was his wife, but it was his mistress. I didn’t even know he had a mistress. Mifune told me Mika was his daughter. She was a baby then.”

Although he had been married with Sachiko Yoshimine since 1950 and had two sons, Mifune became a father for the third time in 1982 when he was already in his sixties. The child, a daughter, was named after the mother, actress Mika Kitagawa, who had been Mifune’s mistress for many years.

But was Mifune famous at that time?

“Oh yeah. He was... When *Shōgun* was out... I don’t think he was working for Kurosawa anymore, but those movies were still kind of popular. And he was also in television shows and some other movies. When I was working for him, he was probably still at the peak of his thing. In Japan.”

But the Kurosawa period was already long over?

“I guess the peak years of his career were with Kurosawa. But that was before my time. I guess with peak I mean, before it started going down.”

During the time you worked there, did you notice things were not going so well with the school or with Mifune Productions?

“Oh yeah, I noticed. The number of students was decreasing. It was hard, because at first he was taking too many students at one time. Classes were too big, that was one problem. They started doing some kids things, which I know was not the original plan. Learning English, acting. I wasn’t much involved in that. I don’t think it was the school, but the production company that brought the school down. Because it was inside the production company. Next door, but on paper inside. Part of the production company. I don’t know the details, but I think problems with the

production company is what brought the school down. But it was his dream, you know? It just didn't work. It unfortunately folded – long story, but bad management was a big part of it.”²³

When did things go downhill?

“Probably a couple of years after I started working. Around 1984 probably.”



Mifune teaching students at his acting school
Booklet *Mifune Geijutsu Gakuin*. Courtesy of Robert Red-Baer

You left Mifune's school in 1984?

“Well, it just stopped. They continued with some children stuff for a year or two I think, I didn't keep track after that.”

Otherwise you would have worked there longer?

“Oh yeah, probably still working now!”

Did you follow Mifune and his career after you left the school?

“Incidentally. Up until a few years ago I once in a while got together with some of the instructors at that school. Sometimes we talk about Mifune or Mifune Productions. Sometimes I was trying to find out what was happening. I found out that he was sick, of course, dying...”

Does Mifune Productions still exist?

“It is just his son Shiro now. I think his main thing is taking care of copyrights and that.”

On screen Mifune was a powerful and impressive presence. Was he also like that in real life?

“He was always very... I once got an email from this guy. A taxi driver, a chauffeur in England. He drove a lot of famous people. He said that Mifune smoked these long cigarillo things or whatever you call them. He remembers that when he got out of the car and looked at the ashtray, the cigarette butt – Mifune smoked about half – was made out neatly. And I remember when I was sitting with him, talking and smoking, he was very neat. He didn't just crush his cigarette out. He put them out and put them next to each other. The taxi driver also said he was always very polite.”

But what was Mifune like in your experience?

“Mifune is a person that... He is an actor. And when is not an actor, he is not acting. So, in the *Seven Samurai*, I forgot the name of the character, he is that character. But when he is off-set, I don't know how he prepares himself before he gets on the set, he is just a man called Toshirō Mifune. Like I said, he said to me, ‘I say you on TV yesterday morning!’. Like that. A kid would say like, ‘I have seen you on TV!’. You know?”

So off screen he was a normal man?

“He is better than a normal man.”

In what sense?

“He is... it is hard to explain. He has a powerful image. And he is always neat. You know, of stage, of the set. I have never been with him on the set. His clothes were always... you never see a wrinkle or a thread. But he didn't act like a dandy or anything like that. In my personal experience, Mifune is a great guy. I started to watch his movies after I started working for him. A great actor. And a great person. That was probably the problem with his businesses. He was not wicked enough. To run a business you have to have some sort of cruelty I think. To run a big business, a production company. And maybe his goodness hurt him.”



Red-Baer and Mifune talking at (probably) a New Year party
Photograph courtesy of Robert Red-Baer

Lastly, do you have any special memories or anecdotes?

“I think he didn't like Spielberg. We talked about it once. And I don't remember the exact words, I wish I remembered it. He had a poster of *E.T.* He had worked for Spielberg or something and it was signed by Spielberg to Mifune. It was in the cafeteria. It said something like, ‘to a little man with a great heart’. I don't think he appreciated that. He wasn't a big man. He looks big. And being next to him, he feels big. You know? He is a big man with a big heart. Don't quote me on that poster, because I am not sure if those were the exact words. But it was something like that. [...] And also when he saw me on TV. An impressive memory. He was really always very

respectful to me. No reason for him to be, at the times we met. Always called me by my name. That is why I didn't stop smoking, because he always gave me these long cigarillo's. I guess my best memory is talking to him at this *bōnenkai* for such a long time, with so many more important people there, including Richard Chamberlain.”

International career

As his star rose and in order to make money to keep his production company going, Mifune increasingly appeared in foreign, non-Japanese films. The first was a Mexican production called *Ánimas Trujano* (or *The Important Man*, 1962), in which Mifune plays an irresponsible peasant who is obsessed with getting the respect that is denied to him because of his behaviour. This leads to his wish to become *mayordomo*, a socially prestigious and financially demanding position. Once he has gathered enough money and finally becomes *mayordomo*, he is to his anger and disappointment still ignored and ridiculed by his peers. *Ánimas Trujano* was overshadowed by Mifune's films for Kurosawa in 1961 and 1962 (*Yōjimbō* and *Sanjuro*) in terms of publicity and interest from the public. Mifune himself complained that he wasn't given enough credits for his work on *Ánimas Trujano*, although it was nominated the same year for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. *Ánimas Trujano* was the first foreign film for Mifune after he had already been under contract at Toho for fourteen years. Apparently, one of the reasons he did not appear in international productions earlier was that Toho wanted too much money for Mifune's services.

At the end of 1965 Mifune visited Madrid, where he was approached by the producers of the James Bond films. They wanted Mifune to play the role of 'Tiger' Tanaka, head of the Japanese secret service in the upcoming Bond film *You Only Live Twice* (1967). Mifune turned down the offer due to other obligations and the role was eventually played by his colleague Tetsuro Tamba. One of these obligations was to appear in the American race film *Grand Prix* (1966). Two years later, Mifune starred in *Hell in the Pacific* (1968). Set during the hostilities between Japan and the United States in the Second World War, Mifune is a Japanese soldier who is stuck on a small, uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean together with an American soldier. Despite their animosity and mistrust the two have to work together to survive. *Hell in the Pacific* was the first American film in which Mifune had a leading role.

For these aforementioned 'early films' in his international career, Mifune prepared by learning his English lines (or Spanish lines in *Ánimas Trujano*) phonetically. This met with mixed success: Mifune often did not understand what he was saying and his voice was mostly overdubbed by voice actors.

However, the multi-national samurai Western *Red Sun* (1971) provided Mifune with a film where his own voice in English could be heard as he played the role of samurai/bodyguard Kuroda Jubie. Unfortunately, despite the presence of big names Charles Bronson, Ursula Andress, and Alain Delon, the film is quite disappointing and rather highlights the slow ebbing away of Mifune's career. Yet, it is notable that Mifune's own voice, although thickly accented and at times difficult to understand, is heard throughout the film. In 1975, Mifune appeared in the adventure drama *Paper Tiger* alongside David Niven. The next year, Japan's greatest actor played the Japanese chief strategist Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto in the American production *Midway*. Chronicling the Battle of Midway, which was the turning point of the Second World War in the

Pacific, the film partly focuses on the actions of Yamamoto. Interestingly, Mifune had previously already played the role of Yamamoto twice in Japanese films. Just before the turn of the century, he also had a role in *Winter Kills* (1979), a not very successful film despite the all star cast which included the likes of Jeff Bridges, Eli Wallach, and Elizabeth Taylor. The same year Mifune appeared in *1941*, a war comedy directed by Steven Spielberg about a panic in Los Angeles after the 1941 attack of the Japanese on Pearl Harbor. Mifune plays the role of commander Akiro Mitamura and is joined by an all-star ensemble cast including John Belushi, Dan Akroyd, John Candy, and Christopher Lee. Although Spielberg's film initially failed to make much of a financial or critical impact, its home video issues eventually made it into somewhat of a cult hit.

The role with which Mifune would become best known by American and European mainstream audiences was still to come however. At the end of the seventies, Mifune was cast as Lord Toranaga in the television series *Shōgun* (1980), based on the namesake novel by James Clavell. Set in the early years of the sixteenth century and loosely based upon actual history, *Shōgun* tells the story of John Blackthorne, a pilot on a Dutch trading ship which gets wrecked on the Japanese coast. After surviving political intrigues and hostilities from the Portuguese and overcoming cultural differences, Blackthorne eventually becomes an advisor to the powerful warlord Toranaga, who will later become *shōgun* (military dictator) of whole Japan. Alongside Richard Chamberlain as the main character John Blackthorne, Mifune plays Toranaga brilliantly and convincingly. Both actors were nominated for an Emmy in the category 'Outstanding Lead Actor in a Limited Series or a Special', but they did not win the prestigious prize. Although the final result was magnificent, the production process of *Shōgun* was long and arduous and riddled with problems and culture clashes between the American and Japanese crews. In evidence of his generous character, Mifune treated his co-stars and the crew once to "a little informal cocktail party", which turned out to be an elaborately catered affair, complete with ship-shaped salmon and ice statues. He later hosted *Shōgun's* wrap party, complete with servants in white jackets and gloves".²⁴ Although unsuccessful in Japan, *Shōgun* became a huge hit in the United States and Europe with millions of viewers tuning in to see the adventures of John Blackthorne. In the process, they also became acquainted with Mifune through his role as Toranaga. At age sixty, *Shōgun* was the last high point in Mifune's career as an actor, although he appeared in no less than eleven television series in Japan in the next four years.²⁵

Despite being the most famous Japanese actor in the West and despite his willingness to learn his English lines phonetically, Mifune to his own disappointment did not have a big career in the West. Besides *Hell in the Pacific* and *Shōgun* he never had any major roles in Western productions. It remains a question to be asked but never answered what Mifune could have done if he had had a better command of English and more opportunities to act in foreign films.

In 1983, retrospectives of Mifune's work were held in cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York. Besides his films being shown, Mifune was also extensively interviewed at these events. Travelling regularly between Japan and the States, "Mifune appeared busier than ever, as his company – which now employed 250 people – took up more time than ever. 'Even if I want to retire, how could I? [...] There are too many other people depending on me, too many mouths to feed. I'm supposed to be an actor, but I hardly have any time to appear in movies. They take too long, and I'm too busy running the company'".²⁶ Retrospectives and other events honouring Mifune were held around the world as he was given all sorts of awards and prizes. Typically, interest in Mifune's work and career in Japan had ebbed away and he was largely ignored there. In 1986, Mifune received a UCLA Medal from the University of California at Los Angeles for "his

contribution as an international film star”.²⁷ However, “Mifune grew increasingly uncomfortable in public, yet he endured such tributes nonetheless; he was forever polite, thanking everyone, including security guards, caterers, and the like, and he felt an obligation to take the time to address his fans individually whenever possible, spending far longer signing autographs than his handlers ever expected him to”.²⁸

Autumn of life

In the 1980s, Mifune was regularly forced to take roles in mediocre films in order to keep his production company afloat and in order to pay for the various business ventures gone awry such as the restaurant in Munich. Stuart Galbraith writes that Mifune appeared in “increasingly ill-starred international productions”, which did little to nothing for the actor in terms of expanding his already vast list of nominations and awards. Already in his sixties, Mifune’s career as an actor was as good as over and other sources of income had to be found. Eventually, the stages of Mifune Productions were torn down, bulldozed and replaced by condominiums as the land the production company was on had become much more valuable than the buildings on it. In his later years it was real estate instead of films that made Mifune most of his income. After the condominiums were built at the place where his studio had been, Mifune moved into one of these condominiums himself. He later said about the closure of his production company: “The company was a great joy. At our peak there were some 200 people working for me and it was the greatest tragedy to finally have to close the operation”. His son Shiro added that his father “was not a businessman. An actor, but not a businessman. His dream, because his father was a cameraman, was to have his own studio, but a movie studio is different [from a photography studio]. He later said he made the same mistake as his father: just like his father, he lost everything. His was the type of personality that wanted to do everything himself, but it was too much”.²⁹

As the 1990s arrived and progressed it became clear that Mifune was sick. In October 1992, he suffered a heart-attack which resulted in him being hospitalized for the rest of his life. By then, his long time mistress had left him and he had returned to his wife Sachiko. For a time, they apparently lived happily together again like in old times. However, in 1995 she died of cancer and Mifune’s mental and physical health declined rapidly. It became clear he suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. On December 24, 1997, Christmas eve, Mifune died at age 77 after a long stay in the hospital, survived by his three children.

Less than one year later, Akira Kurosawa died at age 88. Today, most of the sixteen films they worked on together are regarded as classic masterworks and the finest works of both artists. Stuart Galbraith writes that Kurosawa’s later works, mainly samurai period films *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran* (1985), “became increasingly formal, vast exercises in color and composition, and could well have used the life, energy and explosiveness that Mifune always brought to his performances”.³⁰ Moreover, *Ikiru* (1952) is the only Kurosawa film without Mifune which is commonly recognized as a masterwork. On the other hand, only two Mifune films with other directors are regarded as masterworks (Kenji Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu*, 1952, and Masaki Kobayashi’s *Samurai Rebellion*, 1967). Although they became estranged from each other, it seems true that Mifune and Kurosawa were most creative and performed at their best when they worked together.³¹ However, “Mifune was less than happy about being connected so closely to

Kurosawa [...] During his career, he had worked for more than twenty different directors, yet, in publications like *Kinema Jumpo*, he was still joined to Kurosawa's hip; few thought he could achieve greatness on his own".³² In 1984, during a retrospective of his works in New York, Mifune according to Galbraith ruefully remarked: "Why not call it a Kurosawa series instead? I haven't done much else worth showing".³³ The fact remains that the films in which Mifune and Kurosawa worked together are still universally thought of as their best works, their collaboration compared to other actor/ director pairings such as Robert de Niro and Martin Scorsese and John Wayne and John Ford.³⁴ With the luxury of hindsight it can be said that the careers of Mifune and Kurosawa went downhill after they stopped working together. This was in turn certainly caused by the fact that the Japanese film industry slowly fell apart after the introduction of television, which meant fewer cinemagoers and smaller budgets. By the time their last joint film (*Red Beard*) was released, the Golden Era of Japanese cinema was already over.

Throughout his long career which spanned more than forty years and about 170 films and television programs—of which only a very small part has been discussed in this essay—Mifune played a wide range of roles in Japanese as well as international productions. He won more than sixty individual acting awards, while more than seventy of his 134 films won Japanese or international prizes. Although all sixteen Kurosawa/Mifune films have been released (among others through the excellent Criterion Collection), many of Mifune's other works have not been released and remain unavailable even in Japan itself. In Japan, he is nowadays almost singularly remembered for his roles in Kurosawa's films. His oldest son Shiro now manages Mifune Productions and has also appeared in several films, most notably the 1999 film *Ame Agaru* (*After the Rain*), which was based upon a script by the late Akira Kurosawa. Mifune's daughter Mika has become a celebrity in her own right as an actress and musician, while grandson Riki, son of Shiro, has also become an actor. In the States and Europe, Mifune is still mostly recognized and remembered for his role as Toranaga in *Shōgun*.³⁵

Indeed, Mifune became best known for his roles as warlords and especially as coarse and gruff samurai or *ronin* in films like *Rashōmon*, *Seven Samurai*, *Yōjimbō* and *Sanjuro*. Stuart Galbraith writes that "Mifune's unique persona (an ill-kempt warrior-rogue) was adopted by Hollywood heroes from Clint Eastwood to Bruce Willis. [His] screen persona paved the way for thirty years' worth of roaming, warrior rogues. [...] Eastwood, who starred in Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western *A Fistful of Dollars*, a remake of *Yōjimbō*, acknowledged Mifune's influence on his own performances saying that, 'he was definitely an inspiration for me. He will always be the great samurai for us' ".³⁶

Mifune became the best known Japanese actor as he achieved more fame than any of his Japanese colleagues in the twentieth century. With his vivid portrayals of powerful warlords, rugged samurai, noble peasants and disillusioned modern men, Mifune ruled Japanese cinema for many years.

About the author

Ever since watching *Shōgun* and Kurosawa/Mifune masterworks such as *Rashōmon* and *Seven Samurai*, Martijn Huisman has been interested in Japanese cinema. He particularly enjoys so called *jidaigeiki* – period drama's set in the Edo (or Tokugawa) period (1603-1868). For more writings about Japanese cinema and Japan and to contact Martijn, visit his website at www.oneplanetoneworld.info

Notes

- ¹ Galbraith 2002, backcover.
- ² *Toshiro Mifune. Actor/Producer/Director* (n.d.).
- ³ Galbraith 2002.
- ⁴ Galbraith 2002, 7-8.
- ⁵ *Toshiro Mifune: Biographical details and selected filmography* (n.d.).
- ⁶ *Toshiro Mifune: Biographical details and selected filmography* (n.d.).
- ⁷ Kurosawa 1982, 161; as quoted in Galloway 2005, 36.
- ⁸ Galbraith 2002, 364-365.
- ⁹ Galbraith 2002, 411.
- ¹⁰ 1967; as quoted in Galbraith 2002, 406.
- ¹¹ Nogami 2006.
- ¹² Galbraith 2002, 491.
- ¹³ Galbraith 2002, 492-493.
- ¹⁴ French 2002; Galbraith 2002.
- ¹⁵ Galbraith 2002, 530-531.
- ¹⁶ Galbraith 2002.
- ¹⁷ Galbraith 2002, 588.
- ¹⁸ Galbraith 2002.
- ¹⁹ Red-Baer, n.d.
- ²⁰ Boxall, 1984.
- ²¹ Boxall, 1984.
- ²² Red-Baer, n.d.
- ²³ Red-Baer, n.d.
- ²⁴ Barks & Bernstein 1980; as quoted in Galbraith 2002, 541.
- ²⁵ Galbraith 2002.
- ²⁶ Galbraith 2002, 566.
- ²⁷ Galbraith 2002, 589.
- ²⁸ Galbraith 2002, 568.
- ²⁹ Galbraith 2002, 594.
- ³⁰ Biskind 2002.
- ³¹ French 2002.
- ³² Galbraith 2002, 320-321.
- ³³ French 2002.
- ³⁴ Galloway 2005.
- ³⁵ Galbraith 2002.
- ³⁶ Thomas & Reich 1997; as quoted in Galbraith 2002, 7.

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