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# Mifune Toshirō, a World-Class Act

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Culture

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This year the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce announced the selection of Japanese film legend Mifune Toshirō (1920–1997) to receive a star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Almost two decades after his death in 1997, Mifune would be just the fourth Japanese motion picture celebrity to receive that honor—following Hayakawa Sesshū, Iwamatsu Mako, and Godzilla.<sup>(\*)</sup>

Last September, meanwhile, the Venice Film Festival observed the fiftieth anniversary of Kurosawa Akira's *Akahige (Red Beard)*, for which Mifune won Best Actor, with a screening of the newly restored and digitally remastered film. Boosted by such posthumous honors, Mifune's star is again on the ascendant.

Mifune appeared in more than 150 feature films and won numerous honors in Japan and overseas. He was an international star by any measure. Yet his life was by no means a happy one. He was betrayed by the subordinates he trusted, enmeshed in scandal, and hounded by media gossip. To a large extent, he was a victim of his own integrity and compassionate character. Here I chart the turbulent life and career of the legendary Mifune Toshirō.

A typical shot of the actor on set during a break in the shooting. Mifune was a lifelong smoker.



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## From Photography Studio to Kamikaze Base

Mifune was born on April 1, 1920, in China's Shandong Province, and he spent most of his youth—from age 5 to age 19—in the Japanese-controlled



(Manchuria). Because of his photographic skills, he was assigned to work on aerial reconnaissance photographs.

city of Dalian. Helping out in his father's photography studio, he became well versed in the photographer's craft.

In one magazine interview, Mifune described the Dalian of his youth as "a clean city with a sort of cosmopolitan atmosphere set in a bright landscape." He attributed his later popularity among Westerners in part to his cosmopolitan upbringing, noting that he "never felt the slightest inferiority complex toward foreigners."

Drafted by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1939 at the age of 19, Mifune spent the next six years in the military, and the experience had an important formative influence on his character. At first, his duties centered on piecing together photos taken from reconnaissance aircraft to create maps of enemy territory. In this job, he developed a fastidious and conscientious approach to work.

During the final phase of the war, Mifune was assigned to a *tokkōtai* (special attack unit) base in Kyūshū as an instructional officer. Part of his job was to give the young "kamikaze" pilots a proper send-off before they departed on their suicide missions. According to Mifune's account, he would treat each of the doomed aviators to a sukiyaki dinner and admonish him not to yell "Long live the emperor" at the end. "Go ahead and cry out for your mother," he would say. "There's no shame in it." Charged with taking commemorative photos of the pilots before their departure, he focused his lens on more boyish, red-cheeked faces than he could recall.

Sending these fresh-faced youths off to missions from which they would never return was painful in the extreme. In later years, Mifune wept as he related such wartime experiences to his sons. As he saw it, war was nothing but "senseless slaughter."

## From War Veteran to Tōhō's "New Face"

In the spring of 1946, less than a year after Japan's surrender, Mifune took a screen test at Tōhō's Kinuta studio in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward, which was holding auditions for its "new face" talent search. Mifune had originally visited the studio in hopes of landing a job as a cameraman, but finding that there were no openings in the filming department, he reluctantly agreed to an audition on the condition that the studio notify him as soon as a photography position opened up. The selection committee initially voted to reject him, but Director Yamamoto Kajirō, who chaired the committee, decided to put him on the reserve list, saying that "it wouldn't hurt to have one oddball like that" in the wings. Without actually meaning to, Mifune had embarked on the road to movie stardom.

With his 1947 screen debut in Taniguchi Senkichi's *Ginrei no hate* (*Snow Trail*), Mifune came to the attention of Kurosawa Akira, who found the young actor's ferocious intensity and rugged individualism refreshing. In 1948, Mifune took on a major role in Kurosawa's *Yoidore tenshi* (*Drunken Angel*), entering into a partnership that was to leave an indelible mark on motion picture history. Kurosawa directed 16 films starring



In 1946, the 26-year-old Mifune visited the Tōhō motion picture studio seeking work as a cameraman but ended up as an alternate selection in the studio's talent search.

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Mifune, including such internationally acclaimed works as *Rashōmon* (1950) and *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*; 1954). It was not long before their names were household words among international film buffs.

Despite the success of their collaboration, working for a notoriously demanding perfectionist like Kurosawa was no picnic for Mifune. After a grueling day on the set, the actor was known to get roaring drunk and vent his frustration with the director by howling imprecations into the night. During the filming of *Kumonosu-jō* (*Throne of Blood*), when Mifune came under a barrage of fire from arrows shot at close range, the actor was actually afraid for his life. Yet he continued to give the job his all, working tirelessly each day to meet the director's high expectations. His martial arts training was such a success that he astonished seasoned swordfight choreographers with his agility and style. In one scene where he was required to cut down a whole band of attackers, his sword work was pronounced too fast to be captured on 36-millimeter film.



Mifune at Tōhō's Kinuta studio during the filming of *Yōjimbō* (1961).

The creative collaboration between Kurosawa and Mifune—compared by Kurosawa's son Hisao to the relationship between the engine and body of a car—lasted more than 15 years, spanning the Golden Age of Japanese cinema. But the partnership ended with 1965 picture *Akahige* (*Red Beard*). There was much talk of a bitter falling out between the two, but Hisao has denied the rumors, stressing their mutual respect. At the same time, he recalls his father's lament that working with an actor who exuded such a powerful aura was a constant battle, not unlike “taming a wild beast.”

Be that as it may, in the end there was no actor Kurosawa loved and admired more. Mifune, for his part, had the greatest respect for Kurosawa as a director and would have been

happy to team up with him again. But the face of Japanese cinema was changing rapidly. This was in all likelihood the root cause of their professional rupture.

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## Hollywood Debut and the Birth of Mifune Productions

Some 15 years after his debut, Mifune began to translate his international celebrity into an international career. In 1961 he accepted a part in the Mexican film *Animas Trujano: El hombre importante* (*The Important Man*; 1961). Five years later, he made his Hollywood debut in John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix* (1966).

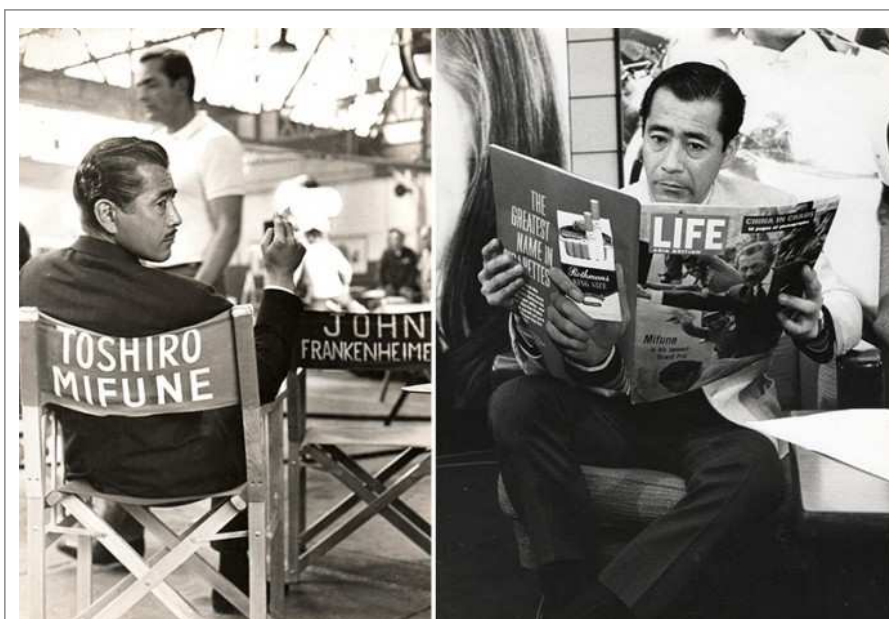
Even as a bona fide international movie star, Mifune never let fame go to his head. By all accounts, he was a hardworking and conscientious actor, considerate of those around him. He was fastidiously tidy, even to the point of cleaning up after others. He was also kind and generous toward the crew that worked behind the scenes. Such character traits earned him the love and esteem of friends and colleagues alike.

Around the time Mifune was making his overseas debut, the Japanese motion picture industry was facing a crisis. The popularity of television was eroding box-office receipts, and the industry was forced to adapt. Tōhō decided to close its Kinuta studio in Setagaya and advised Mifune to launch a production company to make his own films.

Mifune with French actor Alain Delon on the set of *Red Sun* (*Soleil Rouge*; 1971), an eclectic western featuring an international cast, including US actor Charles Bronson and Swiss actress Ursula Andress.



In 1963, Mifune Productions released its first film, ***Gojūmannin no isan*** (The Legacy of the 500,000). It was only three years later, in 1966, however, that the company opened its own studio, a 6,500-square-meter lot in the Seijō neighborhood of Setagaya ward. Over the next few years, Mifune Productions released a number of major motion pictures, including Kobayashi Masaki's ***Jōiuchi*** (*Samurai Rebellion*; 1967), which won the International Federation of Film Critics Award at the Venice Film Festival; Kumai Kei's ***Kurobe no taiyō*** (Sands of Kurobe; 1968); and ***Fūrin kazan*** (*Samurai Banners*; 1969). At this point, Mifune Productions seemed destined for success.



Mifune on the set of John Frankenheimer's 1966 *Grand Prix* (left) and reading about himself in a cover article of *Life* magazine (right).

## Divorce, Scandal, and Betrayal

Behind the scenes of his successful career, however, Mifune's private life was descending into chaos. By the early 1970s, his heavy drinking and infidelity had taken their toll on his marriage. In January 1972 his wife Sachiko moved out of their home and in with her parents. She then petitioned for a court-mediated divorce. The result was a trial that would drag on for five years.

After the divorce mediation began, Mifune moved in with his mistress Kitagawa Mika, a young actress 28 years his junior, and made up his mind to marry her. Sachiko, however, withdrew her petition, declaring that she would remain Mifune Toshirō's wife until the day she died. She never did grant him a divorce.

In 1979, Mifune suffered a major professional setback when his righthand man at Mifune Productions defected to establish a rival studio, taking most of Mifune Productions' actors with him. Reeling from the blow, Mifune Productions went into a sharp decline. Although stunned, Mifune bore the betrayal stoically, without a word of reproach to the employees that were deserting him. Still, it was said that the formerly good-humored, jocular Mifune grew taciturn, and his shoulders sagged.

As a former employee of Mifune Productions remembers it, "Mifune rewarded the dedicated staff from Tōhō's lighting and sound departments by making them executives in his company, so there was no one there who really knew how to run a business. His sense of personal duty carried him to disaster."

## Decline and Isolation

Mifune Productions closed down its studio in 1984, after 21 years and 13 films. By then Mifune was 64 and physically past his prime, but the job offers kept coming in. Whether working in Japan or overseas, the celebrated movie star invariably traveled alone, unaccompanied by either manager or assistants. When people in the business urged him at least to make use of a chauffeur to transport him and his luggage, he replied, "As long as I can walk, I don't want to trouble others."

In 1990, while on location in Alaska for the filming of *Shadow of the Wolf* (1992), Mifune fell ill and began to suffer memory lapses. Then in 1992, he split up with Kitagawa after 20 years and began living alone. Mifune's eldest son Shirō offered me this explanation for the breakup: "While my father was away filming overseas, she disposed of the Mifune family memorial tablet, which he had treasured. When he found out, he became furious with her."

The media seized on the breakup, suggesting that Mifune's longtime mistress had cruelly abandoned him in his old age. In fact, it was Mifune who had terminated the relationship.



Mifune with Stephen Spielberg, who directed him in *1941* (1979) and stayed in touch with him for years thereafter.

Shirō and his wife did their best to look after the ailing Mifune following the breakup. Then in 1993, after a separation of 21 years, Sachiko came back into Mifune's life. Mifune, whose dementia was worsening rapidly, was known to refer to her only as "the lady." Still, she took an active role in his care, and for a while the two were amicably reunited.

The reunion did not last long, however. In September 1995, at the age of 67, Sachiko died of pancreatic cancer. Mifune grew despondent, muttering, "The lady's dead?"

Two years later, on December 24, 1997, Toshirō Mifune died at a Tokyo hospital at the age of 77. The cause of death was multiple organ failure: He had two blocked coronary arteries, and

his other organs were shutting down. He had poured every last ounce of physical and emotional energy into his life and work until there was nothing left.

Nine months later, Kurosawa died at the age of 88, the victim of a stroke. In the space of less than a year, Japanese cinema had lost two of its most important and celebrated figures.

One of the highlights of last September's Venice Film Festival was a screening of the documentary *Mifune: The Last Samurai* by Japanese American director Steven Okazaki, winner of an Academy Award for short subjects. The film is scheduled to be released in Japanese theaters in 2016. Seventeen years after Mifune's death, the extraordinary screen presence that first mesmerized audiences in the 1950s has lost none of its potency. Mifune remains an international star.

(\*1) ^ Nomination and selection for a star does not guarantee that one will be installed. According to the **Hollywood Walk of Fame** website, the recipient or his representative has five years following the selection to pay the \$30,000 installation fee and schedule a ceremony.—Ed.

*(Originally written in Japanese and published on October 19, 2015. Photos courtesy of Mifune Productions.)*

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## Matsuda Michiko

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Writer. Born in Yamaguchi Prefecture. Worked as a stage and screen actress and married actor Matsuda Yūsaku in 1975. After their divorce in 1981, began working as a screenwriter, novelist, and nonfiction writer. Author of *Ekkyōsha Matsuda Yūsaku* (Matsuda Yūsaku, Crossing Borders), *Samurai: Hyōden Mifune Toshirō* (Samurai: A Biography of Mifune Toshirō), and other works.

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