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Famous Last Words: The Serifu in Chambara

By Daniel Furuya

"Hi-yoo Silver, away. . .!" To almost every American television and movie buff for the last 30 years, this famous line is as recognizable as the image of the Long Ranger riding off into the sunset. Although assorted villains may borrow the black mask, and an occasional werewolf hunter may use the silver bullets to stalk Lon Chaney, not even Robin Hood or Indiana Jones would dare to borrow these sacred words. They have become the trademark of the Lone Ranger, the one outstanding feature which distinguishes him from all other heroes.

This dramatic device, in which the hero identifies himself with a key phrase, is also found in chambara movies. The *serifu*, as this device is called in traditional kabuki theater, is an essential element of the hero's characterization; as much the hero's trademark as his skill with the sword and his feats of courage and derring-do. Unfortunately, this heroic element is badly mutilated—if not lost completely—in the subtitles, putting the English-speaking chambara fan at a disadvantage in fully appreciating the films. Since the *serifu* are heavily laden with historical references and poetical allusions, literal translations usually have comic, if not disastrous results. If the beleaguered hero, pausing for a single intense moment before his final duel, were to say, "All right you cheeky bums, you're asking for it," we would be too busy laughing at the hero to appreciate his heroism. In Japanese, it sounds quite normal.

Serifu, along with the *tachi-mawari* (sword choreography), were the two important elements borrowed from the kabuki theater to create the chambara genre as we know it today. The *serifu*, which identified and distinguished the hero of the kabuki play, was used to intensify all important scenes. In fact, particular actors became famous for the *serifu* that they had delivered; some kabuki plays were created just to display the famous *serifu* of the actors. In the kabuki, when an actor delivered the *serifu* well, he was cheered on and encouraged by the audience with shouts of "Matte' mashita!" (That's what we've been waiting for!) This important dramatic element of the kabuki was naturally adopted into the chambara genre; however, as the chambara movie evolved and lost many of its kabuki influences, the *serifu* was lost too. Few actors today can deliver the *serifu* as did their illustrious chambara predecessors.

Fans of the early chambara films consider this a great loss. Though the *serifu* may sometimes sound as corny as the dialogue in the Flash Gordon classics, they have a timeless

character which will never cease to be entertaining.

Words of Power

The effect of the *serifu* often depends on one's understanding of certain key words which the hero uses to epitomize his power. This is the case in the final scene of *Mystery of the Foreign Drum* (1960) when Saotome Mondonosuke, the hero, prepares to dispatch the villains.

"Ah ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" Saotome laughs in derision at the villains.

Bad Guys: "Who are you?"

Saotome: "You hopeless characters! Don't you recognize the famous crescent scar on my forehead? I am Japan's bored samurai, a direct Hatamoto nobleman. I am Saotome Mondonosuke! I will oblige you by showing you my famous *Moroha Ryu Seigan Kuzushi* sword style. (Saotome draws his sword and looks it over.) Do you see these cheeky bums? My precious *Heianjo Sagami no Kami* (sword), it's been a long time since you last tasted blood. . ."

Cheeky bums begin falling everywhere.

The character of the "bored samurai," played by Ichikawa Utaemon, was central to one of the most popular and long-enduring series in chambara screen history, appearing in over 30 films from 1931 to 1963. Saotome's *serifu* would be eagerly awaited by his fans, as it signalled the moment the fighting fireworks would really begin.

The words which have the greatest impact, both on the film villains and on the theater audience, are those which suddenly and painfully reveal to the villains that they are not confronting a nameless ronin, but a master swordsman who has them at his mercy.

One of the key words which Saotome uses to describe himself is *hatamoto*. The word *hatamoto* literally means "at the foot of the banner." After Tokugawa Ieyasu won the decisive battle to rule all of Japan, the warriors who were fighting right at his side became the most powerful families in Japan, directly under the ruling Tokugawa shoguns. When Saotome declares himself a *hatamoto* family member, the villains know they are confronting a man who is not only a great warrior, but also a member of a powerful and distinguished family.

Perhaps an even greater source of terror to the desperate villains is the name of Saotome's sword and sword style. Saotome calls his sword *Heianjo Sagami no Kami*. This is actually the name of a swordsmith who is renowned for



When the Tattooed Judge (Kataoka Chiezo) first confronts the villains, he appears as the dignified Magistrate of Edo and noble Lord of Echizen (left). But when he unmasks the "wild cherry blossoms" tattoo (above), he reveals his double identity as commoner and samurai.

The Serifu



making swords of superior cutting ability. The name of his sword style, Moroha Ryu Seigan Kuzushi, indicates that Saotome uses two swords in an “eye slashing” style. The threat implicit in the style’s name is intensified by the image of Saotome’s own scar, the famous crescent between his eyes. The villains can only wait to be cut down by two fiendishly sharp blades wielded by a master; the serifu tells them there is no escape.

Tattoo of Justice

When Clark Kent strips off his bland business suit to reveal Superman’s now classic leotard and cape, he instantly becomes an unambiguous image of truth, justice, and the American way. A similar transformation in *Gozonji Irezumi Hangan, The Well-Known Tattooed Judge* (1961) starring Kataoka Chiezo, has much greater subtlety. In the final scene, Kin-san reveals that he is actually not just a common gambler, but the famous magistrate and samurai, Toyama Kinshiro, Lord of Echizen Province, who has come to pass judgment on the evildoers who have willingly perpetrated nefarious deeds throughout the entire movie.

Kin-san: “It’s just me, Kin-san. My name is not really important. But, instead of a name as an introduction, let me show you the famous Toyama cherry blossoms! (Kin-san bares his chest and back, showing a full-body tattoo of “wild



In *Mystery of the Foreign Drum*, Ichikawa Utaemon (top) terrifies the villains by revealing his crescent scar and Eye-Slashing sword style. Above, Tamba Tetsuro plays “Lefty” (Tange) Sazen with his right hand! Apparently, Tamba found the left-handed swordplay required for the role of Sazen too taxing.

cherry blossoms' blown about in the wind.) Don't be surprised at what you see. Only bad guys shudder at the sight of this tattoo because this tattoo, as you know, stands for justice! Say, you guys! Even the moon must wane, let's see which one of you can scatter the sweet-smelling cherry blossoms on my back."

The evil-doers fall as swiftly—if not as sweetly—as the aforementioned cherry blossoms in a violent gale.

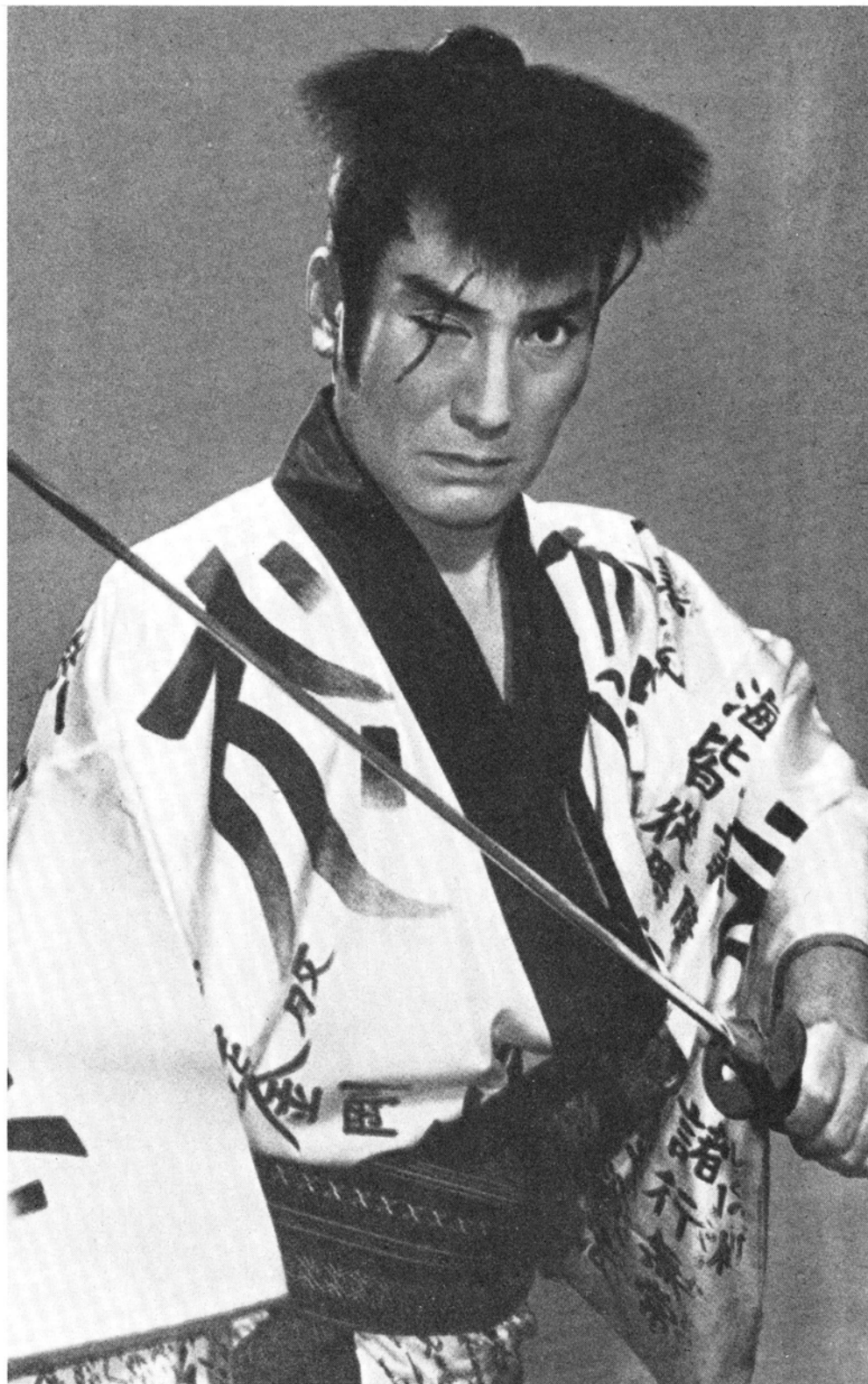
The impact of this scene obviously depends on the significance of the tattoo. The audience, of course, would know that Toyama Kinshiro is an historical figure, a judge famed for solving baffling crimes in the capital city of Edo. During this period, the magistrate acted as a combination police officer, detective, prosecutor, judge, and executioner, with a ward exclusively under his supervision. This situation of near absolute power naturally led to an equal amount of corruption. Magistrates became notorious for taking bribes from criminal and gangster elements, with complete disregard for any idea of justice. The historical Toyama stood out as a magistrate who sincerely and honestly tried to uphold the law and bring justice to the common people. As such, he became a legend, and a hero for the masses.

Toyama's tattoo epitomizes his unusual integrity in a highly visual and dramatic way. The tattoo was originally used to mark imprisoned criminals to help identify them. Later, the tattoo became the mark of the yakuza, or gambler. As only the lowest elements of society wore tattoos, any person of samurai birth who tattooed himself would suffer a lifetime of disgrace.

Toyama accepts the humiliating implications of the tattoo in order to go out among the common people and investigate crimes at first hand. The tattoo authenticated his disguise; no samurai could conceivably wear one.

However, because of Toyama's lofty motivation, the disgraceful tattoo becomes a badge of honor. When Toyama reveals his tattoo, shaming himself as a samurai, he also shows the absolute rectitude of his justice; the criminals see his judgments are based on personal knowledge of their crimes. Thus, the tattooed judge becomes a symbol for justice prevailing over personal honor; an unprecedented example of a high-born samurai sacrificing his name for the sake of the common people.

There is a further irony inherent in the scene at which Toyama reveals himself. When in disguise, Toyama speaks as a common gambler. However, when he bares his torso to show the mark of the criminal, he paradoxically begins speaking in the language of a powerful samurai. This change in diction is indicated by the poetry in his challenge to the villains: "Even the moon must wane, let's see which one of you can scatter the sweet-smelling cherry blossoms on my back." The images of the waning moon and the fragile cherry blossoms are familiar ones in Japanese poetry, suggesting the transience of life, particularly the life of a warrior. In



As the one-eyed, one-armed Tange Sazen, star Otomo Ryutaro reveals the complex nature of this outcast swordsman in a punning serifu.

this case, however, we know it will not be the tattooed judge whose blood will color the metaphoric cherry blossoms.

Wordplay Before Swordplay

The serifu of Saotome and the tattooed judge revealed their true identity; an image of power and skill suddenly emerging from their concealing camouflage. However, Tange Sazen's serifu reveals a more complex transformation, one

which is internal and spiritual. The dramatic revelation in the film *Tange Sazen* (1958), starring Otomo Ryutaro in the title role, turns on the use of a single word which was coined specifically for its double meaning in the context of the film.

Bad Guys: "Sazen. You double crosser! You betrayed us!

Sazen: "You fools. Who betrayed

The Serifu



whom? I told you I would kill Gensaburo for the money you paid me. But I will not have anything to do with your schemes. You fools. (A bad guy falls under Sazen's sword.) Let this wet swallow (*nure tsubame*) taste your blood. . . !"

Up to this point, Tange Sazen has appeared as a drinking, masterless ronin leading a totally dissolute life. Based on a popular novel by Shibata Ryotaro, the film shows how Sazen, a great swordsman, loses one arm and one eye at the hands of his jealous teacher. The mutilated man rejects society and its conventions, as symbolized by his sword: with his right hand gone, he wears his sword on the wrong side and draws the sword with his left hand. Having abandoned the samurai ethos, Sazen sinks lower and lower, finally agreeing to kill a man in order to earn a little drinking money.

At the crucial moment, however, Sazen cannot follow through with this base scheme. Repenting his corrupt life, Sazen decides to do away with the villains who hired him, instead of their intended victim.

Sazen's new resolution is revealed in a single word. When the villains call Sazen a "double crosser," they use the word *ura giri*, which literally means "one who stabs in the back." Sazen's reply, translated as "who betrayed whom" uses the neologism *omote kaetta*. This word is untranslatable, as it is a subtle pun which has meaning at two different levels. First, it plays off the villains' word "back" stabber, by using the word "front" to imply, "I don't stab you in your back but to your face, i.e., in front." The second meaning of *omote kaetta* is that of "changing face," i.e., turning over a new leaf or being reborn. Thus, when the villains accuse him of treachery, Sazen's words reveal that in attacking his employers he is paradoxically abandoning the treachery of being a paid assassin in order to become an honest swordsman fighting for the good.

Sazen's description of himself as a wet swallow, *nure tsubame*, intensifies this suggestion of transformation. The closest English equivalent would be a combination of "fighting cock" and "wet hen." The phrase, which evokes the image of a small, apparently weak creature who fights fiercely when aroused, enhances the audience's recognition of Sazen's personal metamorphosis.

A Killer's Crest

The samurai's crest (*kamon*) embodies the proud history of his family, usually a history of courage and combat. The most famous of these crests would be instantly recognizable to film villains and film audiences alike. In the series of films based on the character of Genji Kuro, played by Nakamura (Yorozuya) Kinnosuke (*Byakko Nito Ryu*, *The Two-Sword Style of the White Fox*, 1958; *Nure Kami Nito Ryu*, *The Two-Sword Style*, 1957; and *Hiken Ageha Cho*, *The Secret Sword Butterfly Style*, 1962), the serifu is a visual, as well as verbal, re-creation of one of the most notorious crests.

Bad Guys: "Oh no, it's Genji Kuro!"
Genji: "For whatever reason, the



Genji Kuro, played by Nakamura (Yorozuya) Kinnosuke, takes his "secret swordfighting butterfly stance" (top). A Japanese audience would instantly recognize its relationship to the crest of the powerful Genji family (above).

downtrodden, the sincere, the weak, whoever needs help, call my name. Then the white wings of the Fighting Genji Butterfly begin to rise. (Genji draws both swords and holds them over his head, the white sleeves of his kimono fluttering like the wings of a butterfly.) This is my parting gift. . . to send you to hell! My family is Genji, my name is Kuro.”

By day, Genji is a gambler and a flimflam man. At night, however, he becomes a noble swordsman dressed in white, whose true identity is known only by a clever magistrate and an innocent deaf-mute girl.

Before Genji begins his mass annihilations of evil-doers, an activity performed with consummate poise and style, he pauses to take a fighting butterfly stance and speak his serifu. While a butterfly does not seem particularly fear-provoking to a Western audience, the Japanese would instantly recognize the family crest of the powerful Minamoto (Genji) family of the twelfth century. The white butterfly of the crest, suggesting refined aristocracy, reminds the villains that Genji is a descendant of Emperor Seiwa Genji; the upraised wings refer to the Genji's style of swordplay. For the Japanese, this momentary image of delicate butterfly as impeccable swordsman is far more effective than a more obvious symbol of power could be.

Prelude to Revolution

The Lone Ranger as a revolutionary? This idea seems absurd to the American viewer, who remembers the famous masked man as upholding all the conventional values—including good grammar. However, the Japanese equivalent of the Lone Ranger, Kurama Tengu, brings with his black mask, silver revolver, and white steed the first warnings that Japan would soon enter a period of great revolutionary change.

Played by Arashi Kanjuro in a series stemming from the 1920s, Kurama Tengu always delivers his serifu before riding off into the sunset. Certain vital—but veiled—references are embedded in his dialogue, references made clear by the underlying meaning of his name.

Reika (the heroine): Manabe-san!

Kurama Tengu: Yes, *Reika*-san, this is where we part, isn't it? My next assignment is waiting!

Reika: Well, you are the Black Mask, after all!

Kurama Tengu: *Reika*, don't let your dead brother's work go to waste. I pray that I can help rebuild a new country for you.

Reika: Thanks

Kurama Tengu: Well. (He mounts his horse, White Dragon.)

Little Kid: Uncle, why do you always wear the black mask?

Kurama Tengu: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. As long as there are bad people in this world, I will never remove this mask. You two, take care of yourselves. Bye!



(He rides off into the sunset on his faithful White Dragon.)

To understand the significance of this serifu, one must first understand the meaning of the name Kurama Tengu. The name refers to legendary events which took place in the twelfth century, a period of great conflict in Japan. Until that point, Japan had been ruled by an emperor and an imperial court. As the court became increasingly weak and corrupt, powerful clans of noblemen and samurai began vying for control of Japan. The Minamoto (Genji) family (from which Genji Kuro was descended) eventually won a bitter, bloody struggle which tore Japan apart but resulted in a feudal system that was to endure, in one form or another, for six centuries.

The most famous warrior of this period was Minamoto Yoshitsune. Considered potentially dangerous by a powerful court family, Yoshitsune had been torn from his family at an early age, and entrusted to priests to be taught Buddhist sutras instead of swordplay. However, Yoshitsune found his way to the deep northern mountains of Kurama where the goblins, *tengu*, taught him their secrets of swordsmanship and strategy. Under their tutelage, Yoshitsune grew to become the greatest general of his time.

The hero's name, Kurama Tengu, suggests that the situation in the twelfth century has parallels with the 1850s, the period in which the film takes place. Instead of a struggle to end Imperial power, the 1850s would usher in the Meiji Restoration, finally ending Japan's feudalism and restoring the Emperor to power.



"Hiyoo Silver, away..." The black mask, pistol, and white horse (above) were symbols of Kurama Tengu, the Japanese Lone Ranger. This role of master swordsman, fearless patriot, and fatherly man given to rescuing maltreated children, was coveted by many chambara stars.

Kurama Tengu's part in the coming battle is suggested by his lines, "I pray that I can help rebuild a new country for you." Like Yoshitsune's goblins, Kurama Tengu will aid in the destruction of one political system before the emergence of a new one.

This serifu provides a further hint of the coming storm. Since part of the Meiji Restoration was an acceptance of Western ways, Kurama Tengu's silver revolver, and perhaps the Lone Ranger-like image itself, indicate that the floodgates to Western culture are beginning to open.



Filmography: The Actors' Other Roles

It is easy to confuse actors with their most popular roles. To many viewers, for example, Shintaro Katsu *is* Zatoichi; Sonny Chiba *is* the Streetfighter. The device of serifu has helped to identify Ichikawa Utaemon (the Bored Samurai), Kataoka Chiezo (The Tattooed Judge), Otomo Ryutarō (Tange Sazen), Nakamura Kinnosuke (Genji Kuro), and Arashi Kanjuro (Kurama Tengu) closely with their famous characters. To avoid contributing to this confusion, we offer a brief filmography of the most accessible films (those made during the '60s) of each of these prolific actors.

Ichikawa Utaemon

Born in 1908 in Osaka as Asai Zenno-suke, he entered the kabuki at the age of five years under the professional name of Ichikawa Yuichi. In 1926, he entered the movie world with his debut in *Kurogami Jigoku (The Hell of Black Hair)* and changed his name to Ichikawa Utaemon. He privately produced many period movies until the war. After the war, he joined the Toei Production Co. and became one of their leading stars. His most famous role is of Saotome Mondonosuke as the *Hatamoto Taikutsu Otoko, The Bored Samurai* series. There were over 30 films made in this series alone. Because of his size and stature, he specialized in heroic roles as feudal lords or famous gambling bosses.

Nazo no Yurei Jima (Mystery of Ghost Island) 1960

Nazo No Ansatsutai (Mystery of the Assassination Squad) 1960

Asayake Tengu (Morning Devil) 1960

Tempo Rokkasen—Jigoku no Hanamichi (Six Great Men of the Tempo Period—Pathway to Hell) 1960

Nazo no Shichi-Iro Dono (Mystery of the Seven-Colored Room) 1961

Tekka Daimyo (Fighting Daimyo) 1961

Hatamoto Kenka Taka (Fighting Hawk of the Hatamoto) 1961

Kisaragi Muso Ken (The Invincible Sword) 1961

Inazuma Toge no Ketto (The Duel at Lightning Pass) 1962

Yoi-Dore Musoken (Drunken Sword) 1962

Nazo no Ryujin Toge (Mystery of the Dragon God Pass) 1963

Rojingai no Kaoyaku (Street of Wandering Men) 1963

Kumokiri Gokumoncho (Terrible Record of Kumokiri) 1963

Shinsengumi Chifuroku-Kondo Isamu (The Bloody Record of the Shinsengumi—The Story of Kondo Isamu) 1963

Shinobi Daimyo (Daimyo Spy) 1964

Kataoka Chiezo

Born in Gumma Prefecture in 1904 as Ueki Masayoshi, he entered the movie world from the stage in 1928 debuting in *Banka Jigoku (A Flowery Hell)*. He produced numerous films in his own production company until he joined with Toei Productions after the Occupation, becoming one of their most important actors. His famous roles were in *Chi-Yari Fuji (Bloody Spear on Mt. Fuji)*, *Daibosatsu Toge (The Pass at Daibosatsu)* and *Hana no Yoshiwara Hyaku-Nin Giri (Hero of the Red Light District)*.

Before the war, he specialized in roles of young, handsome samurai. After the war, because of his stature and size, he played mostly heroic roles such as Shimizu no Jirocho. His most popular roles were of the Tattooed Judge (*Toyama no Kinsan*) and as Tsukue Ryunosuke, the arch villain in *Daibosatsu Toge*.

Gozonji Irezumi Hangan (As You Well Know I am the Tattooed Judge) 1960

Shoretsu Shinsengumi—Bakumatsu no Doran (The Wild Shinsengumi—Revolt at the End of the Feudal Age) 1960

Hanshichi Torimonochō—Mitsu no Nazo (Detective Stories of Hanshichi—The Three Mysteries) 1960

Yoto Monogatari (Tales of Strange Swords) 1960

Hana no Yoshiwara Hyakunin Giri (Hero of the Red Light District) 1960

Ninkyo Nakasendo (The Gambler's Code on the Nakasendo) 1960

Edo no Asakaze (A Morning Breeze in Edo) 1960

Nippatsume Wa Jigoku-Iki Daze (You'll Be Going to Hell the Second Time Around!) 1960

Nanatsu no Kao no Otoko Daze (I'm a Man of Seven Faces!) 1960

Hayabusa Daimyo (The Speedy Daimyo) 1961

Ako Roshi (Story of Chushingura—Samurai of Ako) 1961

Boku Wa Jigoku no Tehinshi Da (I Am a Craftsman of Hell!) 1961

Amazon Mushuku Seiki no Daimaoh (The Wandering Amazon—The Devil of this Century) 1961

Amazon Mushuku—Shinzo Yaburi no Yaro Domo (The Wandering Amazon—The Guy Who Breaks Your Heart) 1961

Obozu Tengu (The Devil Priest) 1962

Sakura Hangan (The Cherry Blossom Judge) 1962

Taiheiyo no "G" Men (The G-Men of the Pacific) 1962

Uragiri Mono Wa Jigoku Daze (Traitors Go to Hell, You Know!) 1962