

The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum (*Zangiku Monogatari*)

By Naoyuki Haraoka

Introduction

I would like to introduce *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (*Zangiku Monogatari*), which was directed by Kenji Mizoguchi and released in 1939. Kenji Mizoguchi is one of the three outstanding directors that built the golden age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s, along with Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa. When considering the legacy of modern Japanese culture, Mizoguchi cannot be ignored. From the viewpoint of contributions to the world by Japanese civilization, it can be said that the greatest contributions are *anime* and movies, and pictures such as *ukiyo-e*, which represent visual culture. Kenji Mizoguchi is one such person who made great contributions, and his name is known throughout the world.

At cinemas in Paris and other cities around the world, many of his works are shown on special occasions and prove very popular. Among Mizoguchi's works, some produced in the 1950s such as *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1959) have won international awards, and are popular overseas. The work I am introducing here, *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*, was produced in 1939 and, apart from foreigners with a particular interest in Japanese film, it is not very widely known. However, since it has as its topic Kabuki, one of Japan's traditional arts, and because I believe that it is the work of Mizoguchi's that best expresses "the strength of the spirit of Japanese women", a theme he pursued throughout his life, I would like to introduce this work to readers.

The Story

The film is set at the end of the 19th century, in the middle of the Meiji Era (1868-1911). At the start of the film, the Kabuki Theater of the time the film was produced is shown, and one scene from *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, the masterpiece of the mid-18th century Kabuki playwright Tsuruya Nanboku, appears. This enables the audience to understand that the film treats the subject of Kabuki.

The Kabuki of that time, that is, of the end of the 19th century, was approaching its golden era, through the activities of those who were later called the three great actors: Ichikawa Danjuro the 9th, Onoe Kikugoro the 5th, and Ichikawa Sadanji the 1st.

Zangiku Monogatari tells the story of Onoe Kikugoro the 5th. Onoe's adopted son Kikunosuke, whose name is reflected in the title of the movie, has been brought up to become the successor of a great actor, and although he is young and still an immature actor, he receives

major roles to play in Kabuki. While fearing the authority of the top-class Kikugoro, even though his acting ability is still immature, he is brought up among disciples of Kikugoro and among other actor colleagues who give him only superficial praise and obsequiousness, and surrounded by entrepreneurs who are the patrons of the actors.

Kikunosuke himself, who in fact does not have confidence in his own acting, realizes that while no one openly gives him a critical opinion, when he is not there they disparage him behind his back, saying "He's such a bad actor we can't bear to watch!"

Only Otoku, the wet-nurse of Kikunosuke's younger brother (Kikugoro the 6th, a top actor who was active later, from the 1920s to the 1930s), honestly tells him what she thinks in regard to his poor acting skills, so that he can improve and become a truly great actor. For the first time in his life, Kikunosuke has met someone who tells him what she really thinks about his acting, and feels deeply moved. Then the two of them somehow develop a powerful love that makes them inseparable.

However, at this period in Japan there was still a feudal mindset and status discrimination, and a love affair between a master and a servant was socially unacceptable. Otoku is forcibly dismissed from service by the strong wishes of the adoptive father Kikugoro as well as the family and relatives, and the two are torn apart. Kikunosuke rebels against his adoptive father for behaving this way, leaves home and goes to Osaka, where he continues as an actor under the patronage of a different Kabuki actor.

In Osaka, without the support of Kikugoro, he experiences only scorn from audiences and fellow actors, who deride his poor

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Kikunosuke invites Otoku to eat a watermelon with him in the kitchen, although sharing a meal with a servant is considered socially inappropriate.



In spite of the imminent threat of her own death, Otoku stubbornly insists that her husband go back to work to greet his patrons.

performances. One year later, he again encounters Otoku, who, concerned about him, has followed him to Osaka, where they live together as a common-law couple. Otoku encourages him, saying that, compared to when he was in Tokyo and was spoiled, because of his sufferings in Osaka his skills as an actor have improved considerably. She goes so far as to sell her own kimono in order to buy a mirror stand for Kikunosoku, a very important item for an actor. (This was a large mirror used when actors put on their make-up.) Otoku pours her energy into helping Kikunosuke achieve great success as an actor, rather than focusing on her own happiness.

However, the head of the theater troupe who had included him on the stage in Osaka dies suddenly, and as a result Kikunosuke is unable to appear on the stage in Osaka any more either. So he drops in rank to a wandering actor. He and Otoku travel around and experience an even poorer time than when they were in Osaka. They continue this kind of life for four years. Kikunosuke's spirit gradually becomes battered. Although they have only very limited earnings, he begs from Otoku the money to go and have fun at a bar. Meanwhile, Otoku is trying hard to save even a little of their meagre earnings. In the end, Kikunosuke hits her. Even so, Otoku never leaves him, and continues to take care of him uncomplainingly.

"Hanging around with a useless actor like me isn't what you thought you'd get, right? How about getting out of it right now?" But even when he speaks to her so sarcastically, she always hopes for the great success of Kikunosuke as an actor, and tries her best to support him.

Otoku, concerned that if they go on like this Kikunosuke will never make it as an actor, and hearing that Nakamura Fukusuke, an old friend of Kikunosuke's from his young days in Tokyo and now a very popular star actor (who later became the famous Nakamura Utaezaemon the 5th), is on tour, goes to meet him without saying anything to Kikunosuke and begs Fukusuke to provide his help so that Kikunosuke can return to the Tokyo Kabuki world. She adds that, because of his many years of suffering, Kikunosuke's performance ability has greatly improved.

Kikunosuke, as a trial, stands in for Fukusuke in a Kabuki performance in Osaka, where he truly captures the hearts of the audience, and it is realized that, for an actor with this ability, it would now be possible to return to the Tokyo stage. Kikunosuke, feeling delighted, is proud that now at last he and Otoku can return in glory to Tokyo as a devoted couple. However, the condition of his return to the Tokyo stage is that he and Otoku must be parted, since Japanese society of the time did not allow relationships between two people of such different status. Otoku, knowing this from the start, nevertheless is willing for them to part if it will lead to the success of Kikunosuke as an actor, and thus had begged Fukusuke to arrange Kikunosuke's return to the Tokyo stage.

Moreover, at this time Otoku, probably because of all her accumulated years of suffering, has contracted tuberculosis, at the time considered a "disease of death".

Kikunosuke cannot forget Otoku. Realizing that his successful polishing as an actor to his current level of ability is all because of Otoku, even after his return to Tokyo he cannot stop longing for her.

Around this time, Kikugoro and his troupe perform in Osaka, with Kikunosuke also participating. Meanwhile, in Osaka, at the house where she and Kikunosuke first lived, Otoku is on her deathbed. Having heard that Kikunosuke has travelled to Osaka, the head of the household seeks him out and asks him to go to see Otoku, if only briefly. Hearing this, Kikunosuke's adoptive father Kikugoro says, "It is

because of Otoku that you have at last become a fully fledged actor. Please go and meet your treasured wife. And please tell her that I said thank you."

Otoku is surprised to see Kikunosuke again after so long. She feels thrilled to learn the highly unexpected news that Kikugoro has finally accepted the relationship between the two, and to hear his message of gratitude for making Kikunosuke into a proper actor.

However, cruelly, death is approaching.

Highlights

The feudal customs whereby a love affair between a servant and her master is forbidden seem unreasonable and hard for us to understand today. It might be said of Otoku by Kikunosuke's adoptive mother that she is seducing Kikunosuke in order to sneak into a famous Kabuki family. However, Otoku truly wishes for the success of Kikunosuke as an actor, in a pure way, and has no intention at all of aiming for position and property, or seeking her own benefit.

Then, since it is hard to bear such a misunderstanding, in the end, ill as she is, in order to have Kikunosuke return to Tokyo, she simply withdraws from the picture, with no benefit at all for herself. At the end of the film, on her deathbed, even when she is reunited with Kikunosuke, until she hears the words telling of his reconciliation with Kikugoro, she hides her true feelings until the end, loyally obeying the condition for his return to Tokyo, saying "You should not have come here. Return home quickly!"

Otoku's mettle and pride — along the lines of "I am different from the kind of person who thinks only of their own benefit; I am a human being with a higher level of dignity" — are what enable her to be a strong person who does not cave in to the unreasonable world in which she finds herself.

Although only a wet nurse, at the time a low-status position, and also a woman in a society where male superiority over female still reigns, out of all the characters in the film the woman called Otoku has the most dignity and the strongest spirit. She fully expresses the spirit of *Bushido*.

Non-Japanese readers may have the preconception that this type of old-style Japanese woman is weak. But I am convinced that seeing this Mizoguchi film will enable them to realize the actual strength of Japanese women from ancient times.

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