

## From Muromachi Nô to Mizoguchi Film: Permutations of the Sanshō Dayū Legend

**Date:** Monday, 29 October 2012

**Time:** 14:00-16:00

**Venue:** AS4/03-28

**Speaker:** Susan Matisoff

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### Abstract

The highly esteemed director Mizoguchi Kenji was at the peak of his powers when he directed his 1954 film *Sanshō Dayū*. Despite a brief period immediately after the war in which his work was sometimes scorned by Japanese audiences as outdated and old fashioned, he had regained popularity and standing after his films came to the attention of western critics. *Sanshō Dayū* was the third of his works to win the prestigious Silver Lion award at the Venice film festival, after *The Life of Oharu* (1952) and *Ugetsu* (1953). Set at a vague point in time, in the late Heian or early Kamakura period, this work is ultimately based on oral legends of considerable antiquity. The film centers on the experiences of a pair of siblings captured by slave traders. Mizoguchi's *Sanshō Dayū* can also be viewed as a meditation on personal, and governmental, morality. Like nearly all of his output, this film is in black and white with, as one of his critics has noted, infinite shades of gray. Nearly half a decade after its release, *Sanshō Dayū* still has the power to move audiences.

This talk takes Mizoguchi's film as its starting and ending point, but along the way will focus on the literary and theatrical sources drawn on in its creation by the director and the co-authors of the screenplay. The film's most immediate source is Mori Ogai's *Sanshō Dayū*, a short story published in 1915. Ogai himself clearly was drawing from earlier sources, possibly both oral and written.

The earliest narratives to be discussed in this talk are a handful of nô texts from the Muromachi period that touch upon the problem of human trafficking, most notably a play entitled *Basōten*. We then turn to the *sekkyō-bushi* version of *Sanshō Dayū*. This long printed text dates from 1639 and reflects a type of performance that was enormously popular in its day. Several additional, slightly later *sekkyō-bushi* variant texts survive, and by the second decade of the eighteenth century, the legend was also becoming familiar in jōruri and kabuki versions. These added new characters, plot twists and stylistic elements. I will also briefly discuss what is known about oral transmissions of some elements of this legend along the Japan seacoast up to Sado and to Aomori prefecture.

Depending on its mode and era of presentation, and the preoccupations of its authors, the *Sanshō Dayū* legend remains recognizably the same and yet intriguingly variable.

### About Speaker

Susan Matisoff is Professor of Japanese, Emerita, in the East Asian Languages and Cultures Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Earlier in her career she taught at Stanford for close to thirty years. Her primary research focus has been the theatrical and narrative texts of the Muromachi through early Tokugawa periods. She is the author of *The Legend of Semimaru, Blind Musician of Japan* (1978) as well as numerous articles and translations. Her most recent publication is "Oguri: An Early Edo Tale of Suffering, Resurrection, Revenge and Deification." *Monumenta Nipponica*, Volume 66, No. 1, 2011