

The Longest Love of the Last Shogun: Isshiki Suga

By Yuri Isshiki



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Introduction

When I was a child, my late father used to say, “Osuga-san and Tokugawa Yoshinobu loved each other.” Then I might have said, “So what?” because I was not interested in history.

Yoshinobu was the last shogun of the Edo Era, which started in 1603 with Tokugawa Ieyasu and lasted for 265 years. During that time, Japan closed the country to other countries and created its own culture, such as Kabuki and *ukiyo-e* paintings. There were no big battles, and it was quite peaceful overall. The samurai Tokugawa family had handed over their political power to their families over the generations and governed Japan. Yoshinobu was the 15th and last shogun. After he returned his political power to the Imperial Court, Japan drastically changed through the Meiji Restoration. Emperor Meiji adopted, and adapted, Western culture and organised the dawning new era of Japan.

TV Dramas & Books About Yoshinobu & Suga

Isshiki Suga was appointed to serve Yoshinobu when she was a teenager and worked for him until his death. Because she didn't have any children, she adopted my late father when he was a child. Genetically, she was my father's great-aunt. As I grew older, I started to become interested in history and realised that the relationship between Suga and Yoshinobu was remarkable.

Many years ago, there was a TV drama about Yoshinobu's life and Suga was featured. Before watching the program, I was looking forward to it, but it was disappointing. The story was quite different from the facts and manipulated history a lot. Suga was divided into two

Photo: Tokugawa Yoshinobu Exhibition Executive Committee



Tokugawa Yoshinobu

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Isshiki Suga, taken by Yoshinobu

characters, one a girl from a farmer family, and the other the elderly chief of female servants at Edo Castle, the current Imperial Palace. In the drama, Yoshinobu and the girl loved each other, but the girl struggled with the difference in their social classes. The program was broadcast once a week and after only a few weeks, the girl suddenly disappeared. Then she came back after several months in the drama as a high-class prostitute, maybe. I'm not sure. I don't remember the rest of the drama. I seemed to have lost interest in it.

According to my father, a few historical novelists included Suga in their stories about Yoshinobu, but most of them were made-up stories that differed from the facts. Only the late novelist Sohachi Yamaoka seems to have depicted Suga based mostly on the truth. Although I don't remember if my father mentioned the book *Tokugawa Yoshinobu and His Family* written by Kageki Shimoda, that is the only relevant book I've read. I presume this is perhaps close to reality, at least about Suga. Shimoda set up the story as “the last shogun's life as seen through the eyes of the chief female servant”. In it, Suga was close to Yoshinobu, and he talked to her about many things, including important matters. It reminded me of *The Remains of the Day* written by Nobel-prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro.

Shimoda also wrote, “Yoshinobu gave Napoleon's hat to Suga.” When I read that part, I thought, if it were true, my father would have inherited it. Have I seen it? Unfortunately, no. It was a made-up episode. What a shame! However, later I found it was true that Napoleon gave Yoshinobu a hat.

Yoshinobu and Suga's close relationship was acknowledged by the Tokugawa family and the people around them. In the book *Tokugawa Yoshinobu-ke no Kodomobeya (Tokugawa Yoshinobu Family's Children's Room)* by Yoshinobu's granddaughter Kisako Sakakibara, the author wrote, “Suga was unique and there may be no one like her who worked so hard and was so devoted to Tokugawa Yoshinobu and his family. Elderly people will soon be leaving from this world, but they will leave something in people's hearts. Her grave is next to my grandfather's, to make it possible for her to continue to serve him.”

Early Stage of Suga's Life

My father and late cousin both left records about Suga. By referring to them and some other documents, I'd like to outline her extraordinary life.

Suga was born in 1838 in Akasaka, Tokyo, as the daughter of Isshiki Sadanosuke-sadazumi and Masu. When she was a child, she was called michi (Michi) and afterwards her name was changed to さで (Sade), 花浦 (Hanaura), 須賀 (Suga) and 寿賀 (Suga in different Chinese characters) along with being promoted. My father called her Osuga-san to show respect. Because her mother passed away early, her father

Photo: Masamoto Isshiki



Isshiki Suga and my father (the youngest) in the center of the first row

remarried. Then Suga was adopted by her aunt, Isshiki Sugiura, who was working for the Hitotsubashi family, which included Yoshinobu. (In order to protect the Tokugawa family's blood, three branch families of Tokugawa were established, called the *Gosangyo* (three lords): they were Tayasu, Hitotsubashi, and Shimizu.) Sugiura taught Suga the manners required to become a well-mannered lady, while Suga's grandfather taught her how to use a small knife and a bow and arrow from when she was about six years old. Apparently, Suga was boyish.

As Sugiura was working in the Hitotsubashi family mansion, Suga started to live there when she was eight years old. Naturally, she learned and got used to the rules and manners in the ladies' chambers.

Later Stage of Suga's Life

Yoshinobu was seized and confined after returning his political power to the Imperial Court. Soon after Emperor Meiji acceded to the throne, Yoshinobu moved to Shizuoka with his family and Suga. At first, Suga was appointed as Yoshinobu's wife's servant there, but her workload increased and she looked after the children of Yoshinobu's concubines, mainly the girls.

Afterwards, Yoshinobu returned to Tokyo with his household. Many things happened in succession, such as Yoshinobu's receiving the title of Duke, his son's marriage, his grandson's birth, and Yoshinobu's passing away. After his death, Suga continued to serve his family and spent the rest of her life in the Tokugawa family's mansion.

According to the *Taisho Tokugyoroku Jyo* (*Taisho Era's records of virtuous conduct*) issued at Emperor Taisho's suggestion and endorsed by the then head of the Imperial Household Ministry, Suga was rewarded because of her lifelong hard work for the Tokugawa family. Below I quote some lines from this document.

"Suga started to serve the Tokugawa family when she was 15 years old. She is loyal to the Tokugawa family, skilfully handling internal matters, and has been training and managing many servants for 74 years. Although she is 88 years old, she is physically and mentally well. She is trustworthy and still performs her duties as chief of the female servants. She is thoughtful by nature and takes things calmly. Around 1890, a burglar intruded into the Tokugawa family home and threatened the ladies with a knife. However, Suga didn't act surprised, but instead calmly coped with the situation, and went to her room to collect her savings. The burglar was discouraged by her attitude, put away his

knife, and meekly left. There are several other similar episodes."

Great Earthquakes

Suga passed away in 1927 when she was 89 years old, at a time when the average life span was shorter than now, and witnessed the later period of the samurai era and the dawn of a new era. Furthermore, she survived two great earthquakes that hit Tokyo (at the time of the first one, Tokyo was called Edo). The first one, the Ansei Edo Great Earthquake, happened in 1855, and the second one, the Kanto Great Earthquake, in 1923.

The novelist Shimoda described how Suga coped with the first one in his book. She didn't panic, but instead tried to reassure her staff and efficiently instructed them what to do. According to my father, she was exactly that kind of person.

Fortunately, the Hitotsubashi family's mansion neither collapsed nor caught fire. At that time, Suga was not yet chief and so followed the chief's instructions along with the other staff. They spread a big mat in the garden and the male servants put out tatami mats. Suga instructed the staff to prepare rice balls, water, and sweets for everyone. She didn't panic and helped the other staff to collect daily necessities from the inner house.

Yoshinobu visited Shogun Tokugawa Iesada in Edo Castle soon after the Ansei Edo Great Earthquake to see how he was. When Yoshinobu came back, his wife ordered Suga to greet him. After greeting Yoshinobu, Suga silently made special green tea based on the open-air tea ceremony style and served it to him. Apparently, Yoshinobu drank and enjoyed the tea without saying anything. However, he stared into Suga's eyes and smiled at her. By around that time, their relationship had become like that. They could understand each other without any words.

Later, Suga talked to my father about the Ansei Edo Great Earthquake. She did not mention how scary it was, but described another episode. "One male servant, who was sleeping upstairs, was thrown onto the lawn in the garden; however, he kept on sleeping." Suga was laughing a lot. My father said, "It must be a lie, great-aunt." Then she said, "It is not a lie. That servant was tall, well-built, and scrappy. He woke up when we shook him awake."

Closing

After reading the records, I felt that Suga was cool when she calmly kicked out the burglar and experienced the two big earthquakes. If I were her, I would have been terrified and panicked. And I'm glad to know that she was not just Yoshinobu's servant and lover, but was also an independent woman with a decent job. Most importantly, she was respected by everyone.

If I could travel back in time, I'd love to meet Suga and have a chat about everything with her. My first question would be "When did you fall in love with Yoshinobu?"

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