Sanjuro, Jidaigeki's New Hero:
His Goals, His Ordeals and His Salvation

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Introduction

Focus and significance of the study

This research seeks to clarify how the character of Sanjuro, the hero of two of Akira Kurosawa's films *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962), differs from the rest of the heroes of Japanese period drama films. These films have been a major aspect of the Japanese film oeuvre. Moreover, traditionally, members of the samurai class have provided the heroes of period films[1]; several studies established certain conventions for how period films' narratives progress and how the hero contributes to the story development. However, not all the heroes can be defined based on this rule. Donald Richie and Stephen Prince are two of the celebrated film scholars who argue that the character of Sanjuro (portrayed by Toshirô Mifune) is different from the rest of samurai heroes. They identify him as an 'anti-samurai' who is 'alienated' from Japanese society. Therefore, Sanjuro demeans the social norms and does not fit into Japanese society (which is generally accepted among film scholars such as Richie, Silver and anthropologists like Robert Smith to be collective-orientated); he does not follow the codes of *bushido*, the samurai codes of ethics and manners.[2]

The above argument is intriguing, but it is debatable. Both Richie's and Prince's ideas are based on a dichotomy: the entirety of Japanese heroes versus Sanjuro. I do not agree entirely with this reading, for it suggests that Japanese heroes have similar characteristics. According to Sybil Anne Thornton (2008) the concept of 'hero' in Japanese period films, in contrast to the orthodox view amongst film scholars, consists of three sub-categories.[3] So, the first critical question arising from the existing literature is whether Sanjuro differs from one group of heroes, or all the three groups, as suggested by Thornton.

Furthermore, Richie and Prince have contextualised *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* as social films. The aforementioned reading is not problematic per se, but I found the social reading of the films unsatisfactory for understanding the entertaining aspect of these films.

Yoshimoto (2000) argues that the intellectual texts on Kurosawa's films have not yet exhausted most of the related topics to his films, and so there are undiscovered grounds on which to study them. In addition, Alain Silver has the same approach towards the scholarship on period films. In the acknowledgment of the revised version of his book, *The Samurai Film* (2005), he writes that: "[since 1977] interests and information about the samurai film available outside of Japan and to non-Japanese speakers has increased significantly: from almost nothing to a small amount." I will offer a new reading of the films which is based on the close scrutiny of personal and social characteristics of the hero and how they affect the progress of the two films' narratives.

The final point is that, at first glance, not all the materials gathered in this text are related or linked directly to different issues that the research tries to resolve. But the whole point of this paper is that it will establish a bridge via a variety of topics and arguments. This bridge is what is lost from the current scholarship. On a subjective level, I do hope that this text contributes to the evolution of Japanese film scholarship in general and Japanese period film studies in particular.

Methodology

This is historical research. In order to achieve my objectives, I will study the history of Japanese period films from its origins in the early days of cinema in Japan, up to the 1960s. As the result, this researcher will present the modes that the Japanese film industry used in making period films. In doing this, one hopes to contextualise the representation of heroism in Japanese period films before Kurosawa made his aforementioned dual films. Moreover, the mode of production in the Japanese film industry in the 1960s will be studied. The latter method will help both this researcher and readers understand why the Japanese studio system declined in the 1960s and how this incident influences the filmmaking tendencies of that era.

Focusing on germane texts enables the researcher to be mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of available academic writings on the subject. It should be remembered that not all literature used in this book is about Kurosawa's films. Some of them are about

Japanese culture, history and society. These materials provide the writer with the framework to discern what discussions are lacking in the current literature on Japanese films; the final product of this research will compensate for this lack.

As mentioned earlier, both films are period films. The interesting point is that as Standish (2005a, p.273) mentions, they also established a new sub-genre for the period films: "[in the 1960s, the *jidaigeki*] underwent a period of change as the format shifted to what became known as cruel- *jidaigeki* (*zankoku-jidaigeki*) presaged by the release of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* in 1961 and *Sanjuro* in 1962." This is probably the cardinal reason for suggesting Sanjuro as a new hero; he belongs to a new sub-genre, thus he should have characteristics that differ from the other heroes.

I also offer a close textual analysis of both films, based on how the hero's characteristics link to the narrative progression. Therefore, both films will be viewed repeatedly because one can focus more profoundly on the individual scenes that refer to the different aspects of Sanjuro's character and affect the films' narratives. The significance of choosing these films for a textual analysis is that both of them share the same hero. Although there appears to be no connection between the two films' narratives, I believe that having the same characters is not arbitrary; it provides the director with an opportunity to link the narratives of both films together (in terms of content). However, this does not mean the two films are not different; the research suggests that while both films are diverse in some aspects (e.g. different plots, different morals and so on), they share certain similarities as well (e.g. the constant evolution of the hero).

The Literature Review

Section I. The Literature

The literature related to the research topic can be divided to three groups. The first group consists of texts that study Akira Kurosawa's works; the significant ones are Stephen Prince's *The Warrior Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (1991), Donald Richie's *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1996) and Mitsushiro Yoshimoto's *Kurosawa: film studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000). The most notable point is that these books do not study Kurosawa's films based on one single theory. Indeed, they try to read each film individually, not in relation to Kurosawa's other cinematic texts. Moreover, although all

three writers have the same approach (they are empiricists), their arguments do not overlap. Likewise, they are not able to reflect on every aspect of Kurosawa's scholarship. Yoshimoto (2000, p.61) clarifies this point by writing: "the sheer diversity of his [Kurosawa] films, which were made over the span of fifty years, can not be discussed as a manifestation of a single project without extreme reductionism"; therefore, there are still unstudied grounds on Kurosawa's scholarship.

The second group of books involves arguments that are not about *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*; they are about the history of Japanese period films and their heroes' roles in the films' narratives. Thornton's *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis* (2008) epitomises this kind of written text. Her book contains rich and valuable information that provides the basic lexicon of this research. Moreover, Ian Buruma's *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture* (1984) alongside Isolde Standish's *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (2000), and *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (2005) provide information and debates regarding the connection between the hero and the period film's narrative. By this I refer to the fact that in Japanese period films, there are certain heroes, and each type of hero has his own narrative.

The final group of books is not even concerned with film study; in fact, they are anthropological and sociological works about Japanese culture and society. A crucial section of this research is about the dichotomy of the individual versus the group in Japanese mentality. Joy Hendry's *Understanding Japanese Society* (1987) and Robert Smith's *Japanese Society: Traditions, Self and the social Order* (1983) are two key books that will contribute to the research's discussions. The books used for the research will be reviewed mainly based on their core theme - the relationship between individual and group in Japanese society - which relates significantly to the research purpose.

Finally, Aaron Beck's *Cognitive Theory of Personality Disorders* (1990) has been used for this research. This must not mislead readers, for my arguments are not concerned with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy; however, there are aspects of Sanjuro's character that can be explained in more depth in respect to notions borrowed from Beck, who is the father of cognitive therapy.

Section II. The traditional hero's status in debate: 'Individual versus Group'

The majority of film scholars at the moment are in favour of the thought that Japanese society champions the group against the individual. This doctrine is evident in writings of Prince, Buruma, Silver and Standish; they read a Japanese film's narrative as a text which enables the director to portray the collectivist nature of Japanese people. Standish (2000a, p.144) believes that 'the group' is a matrix in which many aspects of the Japanese psyche, such as morality, are conceived: "it should be born in mind that *dotoku*, translated into English as 'morality', is defined in modern Japanese, not in terms of metaphysical commandments, but […] on the utilitarian principle of the social interaction of the individual within the group." Thus it can be said that in Standish's perspective, the very existence of morality, one of the most significant components of human mentality, manifests itself from within the group. Thus, ignoring the concept of the group in Japanese society equates to ignoring morality. Although Standish does not define the details of this morality, she accepts it as the function of the group.

Tadao Sato has similar approach to Japanese mentality. He defines *iji* (pride) in Standish (2000a, p.159) as, "an individual's need for public acknowledgment of the righteousness of one's life and actions." The key point of Sato's definition is 'public acknowledgment'. For Thornton, the need for 'public acknowledgment' among the heroes of period films is because of a new version of identity, which was established during the Tokugawa period. She (2008, p.20) writes: "in Tokugawa Japan, social identity - for a man especially - was established at birth and could be changed only by adoption and only within limits set by law. Social identity prescribed one's clothes, names, and occupation. Anyone capable of doing such a thing [changing one's identity] was a man more to be feared than admired."

Due to the aforementioned notion, scholars such as Sato and Prince argue that personal freedom is restricted in Japanese society; Prince (1991, p.27) says that some scholars "[…] go so far as to suggest that because Japanese social institutions seem so hierarchical and group-orientated, the social space of the family as foundation and the emperor and state as 'capstone', conformity to social dictates is an ever-present tendency, even a threat to democratic life." Thornton's idea (2008, p.23) helps the reader to understand the effect of this power distance on the hero's position: "there is always this

feeling that even if the hero can demonstrate intellectual equality, he can never demonstrate moral capacity equal to that of his social superior." Takeo Yazaki's arguments can contribute to this point. He says in Prince (1991) that it is due to this national characteristic that in the Edo period, the time setting for many period films, Japanese subjects were so oppressed by the group that there was no rebellious spirit among them.

Although Prince is in favour of seeing Japanese society as group-orientated, he forms an academic debate in his book against the ideas of Yazaki. For doing so, Prince refers to the teachings of Robert Smith, the anthropologist, who writes in *Japanese Society* (1983, p.76): "it is frequently taken by foreign and Japanese observers alike that the ultimate goal of the individual is the complete suppression of the self or, more drastically, that the Japanese have no sense of the self at all. The conclusion does not follow." Prince suggests that Smith's idea, with regard to film study, refers to a tradition of presenting rebels in period films; a tradition which can clarify the concept of rebellion in Kurosawa's films. He (1991, pp.27-28) notes that, "Kurosawa's films, with their strong, rebellious protagonists and their visual style that celebrates excesses and transgressions, clearly belong to this latter tradition." The idea of rebellion is one of the ancient tools of many forms of narratives; it results in the emancipation of the hero from the group. Moreover, it does not only belong to Japanese films, but to many Western film traditions as well.

In addition to the above argument, it should be remembered that this matter of the heroes' individuality in the case of Japanese heroes is a matter of controversy. On one hand, a scholar such as Joan Mellen in *The Waves at Genji's Door* believes that the ethics of the Edo period, including the lack of individuality, were so ossified in the minds of people that even asking for one's freedom from a group was impossible. Moreover, she argues that these ethics continue to live even after the end of the Tokugawa government. Mellen (1976, p.7) explains this point: "the Meiji Restoration brought the political and ethical structure of feudal time intact into the industrialising modern Japan." Although Mellen, as a part of the first wave of feminism, has radical views, she is not alone in her beliefs; Ian Buruma (1984, p.220) manifests that, "modern Japan, as anyone who has ever watched a Japanese tourist group can tell, is still a group-orientated society"; this can be seen as a shallow form of reasoning. Buruma ignores the fact that as Hendry (1987) argues, not many Japanese can speak English or other foreign languages. So, when they

travel abroad, they are in need of a translator and being together make them less intimidated by the unknown culture or language.

H.D. Harootunian's arguments in Prince (1991, p.28) stand against the above ideas, for they explain what happens after the Meiji era: "by the Taisho era, Meiji ideals of public dedication and self-sacrificing services had to accommodate a new ethic of success that honoured the individual, that valorised the pursuit of the self alone in the private interest, a self no longer limited by concerns for family name or honouring one's native place." Prince agrees with this reading by suggesting that Kurosawa's heroes are usually 'alone' in their struggles. Kurosawa (1983a, p.146), in *Something like an autobiography,* defines the so-called 'alone hero': "I felt that without the establishment of the self as a positive value there could be no freedom and democracy." Thus, it can be reasoned that in making his films, Kurosawa is concerned with 'individual freedom' as moral for the narrative, and not as Prince suggested the loneliness of the hero.

Prince advocates a social reading for *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*; tired of being restricted by social norms, Sanjuro wants to be unshackled from society. However, this reading can be problematic; Sanjuro is already a masterless samurai who is freed from the hierarchy of the group. In both films he behaves according to his personal wishes and desires. In fact, Kurosawa portrays how the hero as an individual should strike a balance between helping one form of group (family in *Yojimbo*; a group of inexperienced samurai in *Sanjuro*) and his individuality.

The above idea of individuality is not an alien concept to the Japanese mentality. In reality, it is very domestic. Joy Hendry's book contains valuable information and scholarly opinions that illustrate this matter. She (1987, p.46) writes: "from early age, a Japanese child learns that not being part of a group makes him to look 'strange' or 'peculiar'". She (1987, p.48) clarifies this point by writing, "it should be emphasised that the development of the individual child is not neglected in all [the] collective activity [at schools]. In the home, the child is, of course, given much individualism." The term 'of course' makes Hendry's doctrine to appear over confident. Nevertheless, it can be understood from her notions that since childhood, Japanese subjects learn to distinguish between group and individual. Moreover, it should be mentioned that Prince and some others fails to realise that in Japan, the concept of 'individuality' differs from the rest of the world. Hendry's explanation (1987, p.49) can clarify Sanjuro's mentality which is oscillating between the two poles of individuality and individualism: