

The Fate of the Samurai in the Conflict of the Ages from "Rurouni Kenshin"

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Abstract: This study investigates different samurais' choices and their fates in the anime series "Rurouni Kenshin." In this study, by analyzing different samurai figures in the anime as they go through the changes from the Edo to the Meiji era, the samurai show different ways of reflecting on their own perceptions and traditional bushido: Himura Kenshin reflects on the situation brought to the people by the times and his own samurai identity, and finally chooses to pursue benevolence and not to kill anymore; Saito Hajime keeps the traditional spirit of bushido but blends it with the new era; Shishio Makoto rejects most of the traditional concepts of bushido and is willing to change from being a samurai to being an emperor through his ability and ambition. Most of the previous studies of Bushido focused on the characteristics, the history and trajectory of the formation of Bushido spirit. When studying Bushido in animation, previous studies tended to look for the embodiment of Bushido culture in animation, but fewer focused on the changes of Bushido culture in animation. This study provides a new perspective on examining the impact of changing time using Japanese anime.

Keywords: Rurouni Kenshin, Bushido, Animation, Meiji Restoration, Change of Age.

1. Introduction

As the ruler of the Shogunate era, the samurai reached the pinnacle of their status. Bushido also matured and became a representative of the traditional Japanese ethical consciousness [1]. However, with the gradual Europeanization of Japanese values around the time of the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese people also reflected on the traditional Bushido. As a medium of cultural communication, manga and anime works coalesce the authors' reflections on history and make. The author of "Rurouni Kenshin" - Watsuki Nobuhiro shows the inner conflict of the samurai's lives after the demise of the samurai class in Japan under the turmoil of the times. Previous scholars have favored the formation and characteristics of Bushido, but less research has been done on the changes of Bushido shown in animation[2]. This study intends to analyze the dilemmas faced by the different samurai figures in Rurouni Kenshin and the choices they made in the animation.

2. The Conflict of the Times in "Rurouni Kenshin"

The story of "Rurouni Kenshin" takes place at the end of the Edo period and the beginning of the Meiji period. After the arrival of the American black ships in 1853, the Shogunate, which had ruled Japan for more than two centuries in Edo, saw its downfall. The arrival of the Americans caused social unrest. The subsequent dispute over the country's opening and the resolution of civil unrest in the 1950s gradually divided the 1960s into the Shinsengumi, such as Hijikata Toshizō and Okita Sōji, who supported the Shogunate, and the Choshu clan, supported by the Satsuma clan, who opposed the Shogunate.

Rurouni Kenshin Tsuiokuken depicts the chaotic Edo period when human life was precarious. The OVA begins with heavy music, and then the seemingly serene night sky erupts into a bloodbath: over ten people are slain horrifically in just

five minutes, corpses are strewn all over the place in the background, and darkness and brutality are represented in the most incisive way. "In this era of increasing turmoil, even with great skill, you can't suppress the torrent," says the anime's protagonist Himura Kenshin's master, Hikosei jurō.

The TV version "Rurouni Kenshin: Meiji Kenkaku Romantan" is a sequel to "Rurouni Kenshin Tsuiokuken". After the Meiji Restoration, the samurai class ceased to exist, the samurai became part of the shizoku, and Japan began to modernize. The privileges of the samurai disappeared: they were no longer legally allowed to wear swords, they no longer had exclusive surnames, and they no longer had the privilege of being a soldier. The status of the samurai and the symbol of honor were taken away by the new government[3]. The tone of the TV version of the anime is more light-hearted, the lines of the characters are softer and cuter, and the hilarious routines replaced dramatic tragedies, all of which point to the peace of the world during the Meiji period. Civilian characters appear more frequently in the anime's TV version and their happiness level is substantially higher. For example, in the 39th episode of the anime's TV adaptation, "The Man Who Made the Conversed Blade - Arai Akakko's Last Work!" During the end of the Edo era, the legendary sword forger Araku Arai said, "The sword I forge will create a new era, but the blade forged under such a belief has taken the lives of many people. Creating a new era by virtue of killing people is something I do not approve of." So, Asuka Arai, Akira Arai's son, had already abandoned his status as a swordsmith in the hard-won tranquility of the Meiji era to live a peaceful and happy life with his wife and children. However, the Meiji period was not entirely tranquil. It is difficult for anyone to maintain social stability and avoid killing when facing vicious thugs who break the peace to protect their friends and relatives and safeguard their happiness.

3. The Fate and Choice of Samurai in "Rurouni Kenshin"

Faced with the turmoil of the times and drastic changes in the identity and status of the samurai, the many samurai characters in "Rurouni Kenshin" reassessed the meaning of the old Edo Bushido spirit, took choices, and changed their fates.

3.1. Himura Kenshin—Reflections on life under tragedy

During the late Edo period, Kenshin, formerly known as Shinta, witnessed the rampage of bandits and the tragic deaths of the women accompanying him. The seed of hatred for instability was sowed in his heart at the time. After being saved by Hikosei jurō, he changed his name to Kenshin and followed Hikosei jurō into the mountains to learn the technique of the Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu. Kenshin was eager to leave the mountain at fifteen and use his study of the Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu to protect the people and save them from the fire as his sword abilities increased and the country's turmoil intensified. Even though his master Hikosei jurō warned him repeatedly: the sword was a weapon for killing, swordplay was the art of killing, and if he wanted to help himself and others survive the desolate times, he had to kill the villains, Kenshin insisted on using his unparalleled power to protect the people from the suffering. At this time, Kenshin thought that: even if one kills, one must still carry out justice and protect others with one's own hands. So Kenshin entered the Choshu domain as an executioner, joined the "Tenchu" operation, and set out to support the Meiji Restoration's policies. On this route, he assassinated innumerable Shogunate officials, always believing that he was doing it for justice until Kenshin met the woman who changed his life—Yukishiro Tomoe.

Yukishiro Tomoe was already betrothed to Shiyo Shigekura Jubei when she first met Kenshin. However, after learning that Kenshin had killed her fiancé, she became embroiled in a plot to kill Kenshin. So she started approaching Kenshin and seeming to be compassionate, usually by his side. Her gentle kindness and understanding infected Kenshin while they pretended to be husband and wife, and Kenshin's inner purity and youthfulness also transformed Tomoe's perspective. They eventually fell in love, but it was a tragic love. Although Tomoe fell in love with Kenshin, she still followed the revenge plan. In the end, She lured Kenshin to the mountain to fight with multiple people but blocked the fatal strike for Kenshin.

Kenshin's inner justice began to waver with the death of Yukishiro Tomoe: the sword skill he had developed to protect others eventually killed the person he was protecting. When the Meiji era arrived, he decided to stop killing, carrying only a converse-blade sword for protection. Although it was his mission to create a time of peace, the threat to his happiness was always with Kenshin. While defending his own and his friends' happiness, he continued to change his outlook on life, eventually abandoning the traditional bushido qualities of loyalty, righteousness, and courage but retaining "benevolence."^[4]

3.2. Saitō Hajime—The constant concept of "Aku Soku Zan"

Saitō Hajime served the Shogunate as the leader of the Shinsengumi group at the end of the Edo period, fighting

against anti-Shogunate forces. Hajime was imbued with the traditional samurai "loyalty, righteousness, courage, courtesy, benevolence, and sincerity" everywhere, more in line with the traditional image of a samurai before the Meiji Restoration than Kenshin, who wielded his sword with the ambition to protect the people. He was willing to give his life for the Shogunate's allegiance, fought valiantly to kill the enemy, and played an important role in strengthening the Shogunate's power in Kyoto and repelling the Choshu domain forces at the Kinmon incident. At the same time, he practiced "Aku Soku Zan," or Slay Evil Immediately, in his heart. Hajime was not rude in his speech or behavior, but rather calm and polite all the time.

After losing his samurai privileges after the Meiji Restoration, he became a police officer, changed his name to Fujita Gorō, and began to serve the new Meiji government. He had not forgotten the teachings of Bushido and continued to practice it at this time. When confronted with Akamatsu Arundo's provocation, Hajime remained polite and gracious in his response. Hajime's pride as a samurai is also reflected in his choice of a Japanese sword over a Western sword for his saber after becoming a police officer. However, unlike his previous identity as the Shinsengumi leader, who insisted on an open and honest fight, Hajime used "despicable means" after the Meiji Restoration, which included harming the enemy's family.

Unlike Kenshin, Hajime believed that Kenshin's adherence to the no-kill philosophy after the Meiji Restoration was a form of hypocrisy, as it made him weaker and more difficult to treat his enemies. He believed, like Hikosei jurō, that if he needed to protect others, he had to wield a sword and kill. His strong desire to kill infected Kenshin, almost making the post-Meiji Restoration Kenshin as desperate to kill as the executioner Kenshin. Nonetheless, when his superiors prevented him from dueling Kenshin, he set aside his pride and obeyed his command. In addition, unlike the ronin Kenshin, Hajime possessed both martial and obedience qualities, and the police officer's saber satisfied the samurai's honor complex. The traditional bushido represented by Hajime was the ideal choice for the police in the early Meiji period, which was not yet fully stabilized^[3]. Hajime believed that regardless of the era, he would carry out the Shinsengumi's mission and the dogma of "killing all the evils that harm the country."

3.3. Shishio Makoto—The Demon that Aims to Destroy

Shishio Makoto, the successor of the executioner Battousai, carried out numerous assassination missions during the Meiji Restoration. Despite his significant contributions to the Meiji Restoration, his ambition and dangerous nature led the Restoration forces to secretly execute Shishio Makoto and even pour oil on his corpse and light it on fire during the Eugene War to secure the Restoration government's power. Despite this, Shishio Makoto escaped and devised a grand plan to destabilize the Meiji Restoration government. Although Shishio Makoto has an extreme traditional bushido side of "courage," he is very different from traditional bushido in that he has no sense of "loyalty": after his loyalty to the Meiji government was betrayed, he was bent on revenge, after which he had no lord and acted as his leader. Shishio's true dogma was "the strong live, the weak die," and he was extremely indifferent to life (and the Bushido connection), believing that the death of the weak was unavoidable and

merciless. He took the deaths of his subordinates for granted while carrying out his plan to overthrow the government, believing that he, as the physically and mentally strong man, would ultimately triumph. However, this thought eventually backfired on him, causing his body to spontaneously combust and kill him. But his spirit was unaffected by his defeat, and he believed that the times lent Kenshin their power out of fear of him. So his dominance did not end there, and in Hell, he plotted to depose the ruler of Hell and seek power and usurp the throne.

4. Conclusion

The transition from the end of the Edo to the Meiji period, like the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance in Europe, emphasizes humanism and rationality, valuing individual secular life over rigid rules and regulations. The samurai's conflicts, thoughts, and final decisions are

meticulously presented artistically in the manga anime "Rurouni Kenshin." The study of "Rurouni Kenshin" can provide a modern perspective on the transition and change of the samurai spirit from ancient to modern times, as well as a new perspective on studying the impact of modern reforms on specific groups of people.

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