



Shiba *Ryōaro*'s Construction of the Shinsengumi and Its Impact on Later Generations

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Abstract. This thesis compares the content of some of Shiba Ryōtarō's Shinsengumi novels with historical facts and sums up the influence of these two novels on later generations. Shiba Ryōtarō's Shinsengumi novels have had an impact on the dissemination of historical fragments and the creation of related works on the Shinsengumi in later generations, but the history of the Shinsengumi described by Shiba after selecting and discarding historical facts has significant discrepancies with historical facts, which misleads the construction of historical memory of the Shinsengumi in later generations and has been criticized by academia. The construction of the Shinsengumi is also one of Shiba's historical perspectives, which has research value. When creating historical works, a balance between historical facts and fiction should be considered according to the needs of the work, and readers' historical interests should be consciously aroused to pursue the truth of history.

Keywords: Bakumatsu · Shinsengumi · Shiba Ryōtarō

1 The Historical Background and Beginning and End of the Shinsengumi

In 1853, American naval commander Perry led a fleet to force open Japan's closed doors, which was known as the "Black Ship Turmoil". On January 15, 1863, the shogunate decided to go up to Kyoto on February 26. To ensure the safety of General Tokugawa Yoshinobu, Kiyokawa Hachiro proposed to recruit ronin to form a protective force for the general. In February 1863, more than 200 recruited ronin arrived in Kyoto. Kiyokawa Hachiro conspired with loyalist forces to deploy the recruited ronin as troops under the command of the emperor. However, the plan failed, and most of the ronin returned to Edo. Meanwhile, Kondo Isami and his faction who volunteered to support the Imperial loyalists against foreign aggression, under the premise of cooperation between the Imperial Court and the shogunate, stayed in Kyoto and continued to protect the General on his way to Kyoto. At this time, the ronin showed their pro-shogunate tendency. In March of the same year, the remaining ronin formed the Mibu Roshigumi, commissioned by Matsudaira Yoritaka, the Kyoto governor, to patrol the city and maintain order against anti-shogun loyalist ronin. On August 18, the pro-shogunate forces represented by the Public-Imperial Alliance launched a coup d'état in Kyoto, and the main force within

the court shifted to the Public-Imperial Alliance. In this coup, the Shinsengumi assisted the shogunate, received the support of Matsudaira Yoritaka, and was given the name "Shinsengumi" and incorporated into the Aizu domain.

Thus, the Shinsengumi was born.

According to Shimozawa Kan's "The History of the Shinsengumi", the history of the Shinsengumi can be divided into several stages based on changes in its internal structure. These stages include the Ronin Corps stage, the Assassination of Serizawa Kamo stage, the Ito Kashitaro Defection stage, and the Shinsengumi's march to Hokkaido under the leadership of Hijikata Toshizo after the Restoration of Imperial Rule until the Boshin War [1].

On January 3, 1868, Emperor Meiji issued a decree to restore Imperial Rule, and the political power was nominally transferred to the Emperor's hands. At this time, the shogunate's power was already declining, and Kondo Isami was wounded by the remnants of Ito Kashitaro at this time. The leadership of the Shinsengumi was temporarily transferred to Hijikata Toshizo. On January 27, 1868, the Battle of Fushimi-Toba broke out, and the Shinsengumi and the Satcho Alliance of Aizu domain defeated the old shogunate forces. The power of the old shogunate collapsed. Two months later, Kondo Isami surrendered to the new government army after leading the Shinsengumi to a disastrous defeat at the Battle of Katsunuma in Kai Province.

According to Shimozawa Kan's records, although there were still some members of the Shinsengumi fighting in the Boshin War, he believed that the organization had already disintegrated at this time, and the events after the Battle of Katsunuma were recorded as the experiences of Hijikata Toshizo and two others [2].

2 Shiba Ryotaro's Shaping of the Shinsengumi

2.1 Concretization of Character Image and Character Relationships

The three most well-known figures in the Shinsengumi are Kondo Isami, Hijikata Toshizo, and Okita Soji, with Kondo and Hijikata having actual photographs and some handwritten letters that have been passed down to later generations. However, there are only seven surviving letters written by Okita, and there is no actual photographic evidence of his appearance [3]. His character image mostly comes from evaluations by those who knew him or from deductions and supplements made by later researchers based on these historical fragments.

The image of Chikaraishi can be divided into two aspects, pure and rough, both of which are reflected in historical records and evaluations from people who knew him. Satō Toshinobu described Chikaraishi's appearance to his grandson, saying "He was tall and had a slight hunch, but he was a person who laughed a lot" and "During practice, the captain would become impatient and rough" while Nagakura Shinpachi noted in "Shinsengumi Shimatsuki" that "When Okita was absent, Chikaraishi would definitely take his place. However, this person taught in a rough manner despite his ability, and was also very short-tempered, so the disciples were more afraid of Chikaraishi than Okita." [4] On the other hand, Shiba Ryotaro's portrayal of Chikaraishi's image emphasized his purity while downplaying the "son of a demon" image. In his book, Shiba wrote similar phrases as "Since he was well raised, Chikaraishi speaks well. He has a beauty

that makes one want to call him a playboy.” “Because Chikaraishi was well-raised and eloquent, he also had a beautiful appearance that made people want to use him as a plaything.” “Chikaraishi nodded repeatedly with a first-class cheerful smile,” and “Chikaraishi nodded with his adorable chin.” “Chikaraishi tilted his favorite Oyamamairi straw hat childishly.” These are frequent descriptions of Chikaraishi’s smile [4]. In Shiba Ryotaro’s depiction, the captain is portrayed as a pure person with both childlike innocence and cruelty. Although there are scenes in the text that depict him as ruthless and cold-hearted, they are used to enhance his image as a genius swordsman rather than his character portrayal.

Toshizō turned his head and carefully looked at Chikaraishi, shocked to the point that he couldn’t close his mouth. How did this man kill someone without getting any blood on himself? “You...” said Toshizō, but Hijikata’s face twisted in anger. “Is this person the incarnation of a demon?”

Chikaraishi looked around and put away his sword. “I didn’t have time to count, and I was a little dazed tonight,” he said. “But you did kill quite a few,” Toshizō replied. As Chikaraishi walked through the red-light district, he counted the bodies as he went. This is the description [4].

In light of this vivid portrayal, Shiba Ryotaro dramatized and made concrete the relationships between the three members of the Shinsengumi (Kondo Isami, Hijikata Toshizo, and Okita Soji) that he was guiding. The purity embodied by Okita Soji in the novel does not serve only his character, but rather the heartrending, unadulterated brotherhood among these three comrades from the same hometown and dojo in the face of changing times and turbulent circumstances that is deeply moving and devoid of any selfish interests. When Kondo Isami asked Okita Soji about his will to come along to Kyoto, his answer was always:

When he was seriously ill in Osaka, Hijikata said to Kondō, “As long as I live, I’ll follow you, Kondō-san”. As the story progresses, both Hijikata and Kondō acquire more complex identities and their personalities and attitudes change. Meanwhile, Shiba Ryotaro portrays Okita Souji as emotionally pure like a child, and unchanged despite his changing status. In fact, Souji serves as a symbol of the unbreakable bond between the three main characters. After Souji falls ill and leaves the group, Kondō surrenders following his farewell to Hijikata, and the Shinsengumi gradually falls apart. In history, Kondō did not conflict with Hijikata out of fear of becoming a rebel; he still advocated for fighting to the end alongside other central members of the group. His surrender even allowed Hijikata to lead the other members north to buy time, and the downfall of the Shinsengumi was a natural result after the restoration of the imperial government. However, the way the novel portrays these events gives readers the impression that the Shinsengumi overcame countless crises together, but ultimately disintegrated due to the breakdown of their strong bond. This is a testament to Shiba Ryotaro’s ability to bring the characters’ relationships to life for readers.

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2.2 The Portrayal of Heroism and the Neglect of Historical Facts

While Shiba Ryotaro depicts Hijikata Toshizō as a hero, he contrasts him with Kondō Isami, who is portrayed as a “mediocrity.” The neglect of historical facts mainly revolves around Kondō Isami.

First, in Shiba Ryotaro's novel, Hijikata Toshizō and others achieve a class leap through a series of efforts and go from being wealthy farmers to becoming samurai. In the novel, there is a confession by Hijikata Toshizō: “No, I'm praising you. But Souji, even if you weren't born into a ronin family, but rather into the family of a high-ranking official of a big han, and received a proper education and became an excellent person according to expectations, you would be appreciated by your lord and stand out from your peers. Humans, depending on their birth, will have a different halo above their heads” [4]. This shows that Hijikata is dissatisfied with his own background and believes that with better circumstances, he could have achieved more. This is also related to the ideas that Shiba Ryotaro wants to convey in the novel.

In the novel, Kondō Isami is portrayed as a “mediocre” figure who is driven by a desire for fame and fortune, lacks political savvy and foresight, and is a “puppet director” who relies entirely on Hijikata Toshizō. On the other hand, Hijikata Toshizō is portrayed as an “idealistic hero” who is unconventional, has vision, and is willing to sacrifice anything to achieve his ideals.

First, let's analyze several turning points in the development of the Shinsengumi. During the period when the Ronin Alliance went up to Kyoto, the decision of Kondō Isami's faction to stay in Kyoto was attributed to Hijikata Toshizō in the novel. In the novels *Shinsengumi keppuuroku*, Kondō Isami asked Hijikata Toshizō, “What should we do, Sō?” to which Hijikata Toshizō proposed a strategy: “Let's create a new political party” [4]. However, in historical records, the decision for the Shinsengumi to stay in Kyoto was based on Kondō Isami's political philosophy. According to “The Shinsengumi in History,” “Kondō Isami and his followers argued that they should remain in Kyoto and establish a grand policy of anti-foreignism and loyalty to the Emperor under the conditions of the unification of the imperial court and the shogunate. Kondō Isami's self-determined objective was to be first and foremost an ‘all-out loyalist,’ and with that as the basis, to be the ‘vanguard against foreign enemies.’”

During a series of political crises (including the Conquest of Chōshū, the shogun's return to Kyoto, and opposition to the shogun's return to the east), Kondō Isami can be seen working tirelessly to maintain the unity between the imperial court and the

shogunate. This demonstrates his leadership within the Shinsengumi as the primary planner of their political strategy [5].

The second important turning point was the assassination of Serizawa Kamo. In the novel, it is once again Hijikata Toshizō who decides to carry out the assassination. In *Shinsengumi keppuuroku*, Kondō Isami asks Hijikata Toshizō, “What did he mean by ‘outside forces’?” to which Hijikata Toshizō replies, “He wants us to kill Serizawa Kamo” [4]. However, historically, Kondō Isami relied on Serizawa Kamo’s power and connections to establish the Shinsengumi in Kyoto. However, they had major differences in their stance on loyalty to the Emperor and the shogunate. With tacit approval from the Aizu domain, and taking into consideration Kondō Isami’s stance and the internal power struggles of the Shinsengumi, they decided to assassinate Serizawa Kamo [6]. After this assassination, the Shinsengumi was placed fully under Kondō Isami’s control, and the internal power structure of the organization was purified. In other words, the decision to assassinate Serizawa Kamo was a political purging action made with Kondō Isami’s political considerations in mind.

In the end, before Kondō Isami surrendered, there is a scene in which he bids farewell to Hijikata Toshizō and says, “Toshizō, please let me be free. You created the Shinsengumi organization, and you also created me as the leader of the Shinsengumi. Looking back now, I realize that the ‘Kondō Isami’ I was in Kyoto was probably not really me. Please just let me go and set me free” [4]. In earlier chapters of the novel, Kondō Isami had also realized the difference between himself and Hijikata Toshizō, and had asked, “Toshizō, why don’t you become the leader?” [4]. Throughout the novel, every important turning point can be seen as a decision made by Hijikata Toshizō, while Kondō Isami carries out those decisions.

However, in history, Kondō Isami was responsible for coordinating the Shinsengumi’s power, planning its political strategies, while Hijikata Toshizō was responsible for establishing rules and regulations within the organization, and providing strict governance. Hijikata’s management, leadership abilities, and contributions to the Shinsengumi are undeniable, but all of his actions were carried out under Kondō Isami’s political guidelines. Even after Kondō Isami’s execution, Hijikata continued to operate based on the policies set by Kondō Isami. It cannot be denied that Hijikata’s support was instrumental in Kondō Isami’s leadership and the development of the Shinsengumi. However, Kondō Isami was not a puppet leader who could be easily manipulated. Both Hijikata Toshizō and Kondō Isami, as well as the entire Shinsengumi, had their choices and visions limited by their class, which led them to choose the path of supporting the shogunate, and ultimately led to their downfall.

2.3 Inaccurate Description

There is an inaccurate description regarding the katana owned by Hijikata Toshizō in the novels “*Shinsengumi keppuuroku*”. In the novels, it is mentioned that his katana is a family heirloom passed down through generations. However, in reality, there is no evidence to suggest that Hijikata owned a family heirloom katana.

Regarding Okita Sōji’s katana: In the novels “*Shinsengumi keppuuroku*”, author Nobuhiro Watsuki added a storyline where Okita Sōji is depicted as owning a katana with a chrysanthemum pattern. While this depiction has become widely accepted and

influential in subsequent works, there is no historical evidence to support it. In fact, the katana known as “Chrysanthemum Mon” was a Shinto shrine sword used for ceremonial purposes. The Kiku-ichimonji Sukezane sword, which has a history of several hundred years and is now designated as a national treasure, is not suitable for practical use in combat. It is highly unlikely that it would have ended up in the hands of a sword dealer, and it is also highly unlikely that it was Okita Souji's sword [6].

In fact, the description of the repair of the swords of Shinsengumi members after the Ikedaya Incident by the sword sharpener Genryuusai Tsumegorou is based on historical records. The list of repairs in the book “Ikedaya Jiken no Shinsengumi Taishi Sen-to Retsuden” (“Sword Chronicles of Shinsengumi Members in the Ikedaya Incident”) includes a note that reads “Okita Souji, Kaga Kanazawa no Choubei Toudaifujiwara Kiyomitsu, original length over 2 shaku 4 sun, tip (kissaki) broken”. However, there are doubts about the authenticity of this record, as it may have been influenced by later sources such as the “Letter from Kondo Isami” [6]. Furthermore, there are also other claims about the length and design of Okita's sword, but their sources are unknown. Therefore, the specific details of Okita Souji's sword remain unclear despite its significant impact on popular culture.

3 His Influence to Future Generations

The appearance of Shiba Ryotaro's novel about the Shinsengumi in the 1960s further fueled this trend, and there have been numerous performances and works related to the Shinsengumi since then. Due to Shiba Ryotaro's portrayal of other members of the Shinsengumi in his novel, besides Kondo Isami and Okita Souji, other members of the group have entered the public eye with a more distinct image. “Shinsengumi Chronicles” and “Burn, My Sword” are certainly among the important reasons for this trend [7].

However, as mentioned earlier, Shiba Ryotaro dramatized the characters of the Shinsengumi in his novel, giving them personalities that differed from historical facts, which blurred the line between reality and fiction. For later works related to the Shinsengumi, Shiba Ryotaro's construction of the Shinsengumi has influenced the character design and portrayal of personality traits in later works, as well as the narrative techniques used to show character traits.

Regarding character design, for example, in works such as NHK's TV drama “Shinsengumi!” and the manga “Shinsengumi Ibun PEACE MAKER” by Nae Naoe and the game “Beyond the stream of time 6” released by Koei Tecmo, Okita Souji is portrayed as a pure and childlike young man who is also a cold-hearted genius swordsman, suffering from a fatal disease and dying tragically in the end. Okita Souji is portrayed as a “pure” and “transparent” youth, as well as a short-lived genius swordsman. This character leaves a deep impression on people. This also makes Okita Souji another popular character among fans, in addition to Kondo Isami [8]. These two traits, and even the fictional Kikuichi-monji sword he uses, have become the “standard image” of Okita Souji that continues to appear in later Shinsengumi works.

Regarding narrative techniques, in the trilogy by Komizo Kazuma, Hijikata Toshizo is portrayed as cold and ruthless. However, in the novels *Shinsengumi keppuuroku*, writer Shiba Ryotaro only briefly mentions Hijikata's harsh interrogation of the Ikedaya

Incident suspects, and omits the execution of financial accountant Kawakatsu Kojiro, who lost 50 gold coins. Instead, a fictional character named Akizuki is added to showcase Hijikata's humanity. This transforms Hijikata from a "cold and stern enforcer" into someone who "plays the role of a cold and ruthless person, but at heart is still full of humanity" [7]. This narrative technique has also been used to interpret Hijikata in later works, such as the manga series "Shinsengumi Ibun PEACE MAKER" in which his originally emotionless character is portrayed as comically losing his temper when his poor haiku attempts are ridiculed by other members of the group. Similarly, in the NHK Taiga drama, it is shown that Kondo Isami was slapped by a woman due to his complicated relationships with women, adding a comedic scene to the opening episode. These examples illustrate how Shimabara Shirou's narrative techniques have influenced subsequent interpretations of the Shinsengumi.

Shiba Ryotaro combined the image of the Shinsengumi with his own character designs, creating a "beautifying" tendency towards the Shinsengumi [7]. This has had an impact on the fans and creators who have been continuously drawn to the Shinsengumi from the Showa to the present era.

4 Conclusion

The mixing of fiction and reality has always been an issue with regards to the Shinsengumi. Although Komoro Tetsu's trilogy is an important historical source, it contains many unverifiable anecdotes and subjective interpretations and viewpoints from those interviewed. Similarly, the account of Shinsengumi member Okita Souji in Shinsengumi Shimatsuki also suffers from these same issues. Moreover, on top of the already mixed-up history of the Shinsengumi, Shimabara Shirou's Shinsengumi keppuuroku and Shinsengumi Battle Stories have fictionalized and exaggerated this period even further, becoming well-known works on the Shinsengumi. Even though Shiba Ryotaro acknowledged in his article "On Novels and History" published in Kochi News that his historical novels are not actual history, the widespread dissemination of these two works ended up affecting the memory and spread of the historical understanding of the Shinsengumi in later generations. Furthermore, subsequent works have also been influenced by Shiba Ryotaro's works, leading to a homogenization of characters.

However, fortunately, more and more people have come to realize that Shiba Ryotaro's novels are not true history, and different interpretations have started to emerge. Especially with regards to Hijikata Toshizo, there are now more creators who depict him not just as a tragically gifted swordsman, but also as a young man with unpredictable actions and rebellious tendencies.

Based on this study, although Shiba Ryotaro's Shinsengumi novels have contributed to the dissemination of historical fragments and greatly influenced the construction of historical memory in later generations, the differences between novel content and historical facts indicate that literary works cannot be regarded as historical truth. Secondly, the character development and narrative style in the Shinsengumi novels can reflect Shiba Ryotaro's thoughts on history and his approach to historical understanding. Studying his writing techniques is essential in researching Shiba Ryotaro's historical perspective. Lastly, through the exploration of fact and fiction, creators should balance history and

fiction in their creations based on their creative purposes and consciously guide readers to have an interest in history and to pursue historical facts.

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