

# Ordinary Is True

## Analysis on Yoji Yamada's Historical Trilogy

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**Abstract**—The “Samurai Trilogy” directed by Yoji Yamada represents a type of different samurai film overturning traditional samurai film rules and reflecting new values in a new era. This paper intends to analyze unique features of “Samurai Trilogy” from three aspects: character image, plot handling and value orientation.

**Keywords**—samurai film; subaltan consciousness

### I. INTRODUCTION

Yoji Yamada is a famous Japanese “subaltan director” and his works are full of deep grassroot feelings. At the beginning of the 21st century, Yoji Yamada shoots the “Historical Trilogy”—*The Twilight Samurai*, *The Hidden Blade* and *Love and Honor*, obtaining praise from critics and audience. Just like Yoji Yamada’s other films, “subaltan consciousness” and “grassroot feeling” run through these three films, endowing his samurai film with new characters, styles and features different from traditional samurai film. The three films draw their materials from works of Fujisawa Shuhei, a Japanese time novelist. Most of his novels take partings and reunions of common people and subordinate warriors as their theme. He takes the imaginary Hirasaka clan as the stage and depicts a series of warrior images with distinctive personalities. It can be said that it is exactly the common attention to subaltan feelings and grassroot life that rearrangement of novels and creation of a brand-new type of samurai film are achieved.

Japanese samurai film has a long history and it is a big category of Japanese film. After Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* gets the Golden Lion on Venice Film Festival in 1951, Japanese samurai film wins attention from international film circle and embraces a glorious phase. A batch of excellent films appear, like *Seven Samurai*, *Seppuku*, *Sanjuro*, *Sword of Doom* and so on. Traditional Japanese samurai film concentrates on praising heroic figures. The film advocates

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Samurai spirit and shapes samurai’s loyal, steadfast and chivalrous positive image. However, the Age of Great Depression changes people’s value orientation. In that age, people long for spiritual salvation and psychological comfort more and they are no longer appealed by “militaristic”(courage), “royalism”(loyalty), “revenge”(justice) and other elements of Samurai spirit repeatedly depicted in traditional samurai films. Instead, values of “plainness” and “peacefulness” enjoy popular support. Under this background, it is no accidental phenomenon that Fujisawa Shuhei’s novels neglected by people for a long time are rediscovered and their screen versions are produced repeatedly.

Through shaping images of bottom warriors and women, routinized plot handling and warriors’ final choice, Yoji Yamada displays his understanding and interpretation of the new spirit of the times in “Historical Trilogy”.

### II. ANTI-TRADITIONAL FIGURES

#### A. Neotype Samurai Image

Hiroguchi Kiyohama in *The Twilight Samurai* displays the warrior image indifferent to utilitarian and undeserved reputation, totally contrary to warriors longing for achievements in traditional samurai films. In his opinion, the most important thing in life is to take good care of his family. He turns down his good friend’s proposal to go to Edo to develop his career and is willing to abide by an obscure post. He is modest. Even though he wins the fight, he doesn’t wish to make it widely known. He just wants a peaceful and undisturbed life. Muneaki Katagiri, the leading character in *The Hidden Blade*, also retreats into the shadows and chooses to leave his native place and find another way of living with his beloved girl after obtaining victory. In *Love and Honor*, Mimura Shinnosuke also takes a harmonious family life as his ultimate pursuit of life. It is obvious that these warriors value is totally different from that of warriors in traditional samurai films. It becomes their common life pursuit to return to the most ordinary life and taste life in daily life full of daily necessities.

In trilogy, Yoji Yamada emphasizes on warriors’ “valuing feelings” as ordinary people. This kind of “affection” is valuing feelings of family and lover rather than otherworldly bushido. In order to decently bury his wife with an early death,

Hiroguchi Kiyohama sells out his katana, a symbol of warrior identity. In order to take revenge for his good friend's wife, Katagiri assassinates heartless and disloyal Karo. For the sake of his wife's reputation, Mimura challenges his opponent stronger than him resolutely regardless of his own safety. This kind of life choice demonstrates the life attitude of "valuing feelings". Affection is more important than the warrior identity, loyalty to Karo and even personal safety. Away from the identity of warrior in trilogy, firstly they are terrestrial human with feelings in front of the audience rather than categorized and patterned traditional images of warrior.

#### *B. Female Image Symbolizing Secular Happiness*

The trilogy boasts "detailing the affection", therefore female image plays an important role. No matter it is brave and responsible Tomie (*The Twilight Samurai*), smart and tough Xihui (*The Hidden Blade*) or virtuous and tolerant Kase (*Love and Honor*), all of them boast an extremely colored and dazzling female image. These female images demonstrate the fiction writer's understanding of and special attention to the concept of "happy life". All heroes in the three works end in happiness of life with accompany of their ideal female. Females in films are so perfect that they are even untruthful. However, this kind of "perfection" creation is the externalization of leading characters' secular and amiable life ideal. Compared with traditional samurai film in which warriors usually take "martyrdom" as the highest pursuit of life, these warriors at the bottom of society totally change their view of life and happiness.

"Routinization" is also reflected in manifestation mode of emotion. Each kind of love stretches implicitly and silently in every detail of daily life. Tomie helps Hiroguchi Kiyohama who is about to set foot on the journey of a decisive battle and has no idea about whether he can survive the battle comb his hair. Sincere feelings between them flow slowly in each quiet movement, giving audience an intense feeling. Katagiri's wooing and Xihui's response also bear moulage of former days, sincere, simple, natural and moving. Only by the smell of a course, Mimura realizes that his wife comes back to him. All these details in ordinary life, like combing hair, washing clothes and cooking, reflect female's sincere feelings towards male. Warm family and emotional happiness become the Utopia for warriors to escape from cruel reality and the final destiny of their happy life.

Shaping of female's perfect image also represents the creator's orientation in affirmation of secular happiness.

### III. ROUTINIZED PLOT HANDLING

#### *A. "Legend Kungfu" Is Reduced to "True Life" in Conflict Philosophy*

In traditional samurai film, warriors' Kungfu is usually deified and becomes a kind of "legend" away from reality. However, in trilogy, each warrior's victory is not only a mysterious "unique esoterica", but also described as victory of attitude and mind. Based on psychology, it is more credible and real.

Hiroguchi Kiyohama wins in two duels. Besides great talent, the film emphasizes more on his "benevolence" reflected in his use of non-aggressive "wooden sword" without lethality in fear of hurting his opponent's life in the first duel. It is exactly his mercy that broadcasts his reputation of super martial arts, thus the second duel changing his life appears. Driven by risk in the second duel, cautious Hiroguchi Kiyohama calls up all his courage and expresses his love to his long loved Tomie. In the duel, his mercy serves as a foil to the opponent's cruelty. In the end, the opponent dies in his cruelty to kill Hiroguchi Kiyohama who survives by a narrow margin. It can be said that "benevolence" is the key for Hiroguchi Kiyohama to win the duel.

Katagiri's conflict philosophy centers in "retreat for the sake of advancing", which is hidden in the military accomplishment of "Hidden Blade". His teacher teaches him that timely retreat can obtain the chance of victory in exchange in duel and "It is the body retreating rather than heart".

Mimura's victory lies in "Placed resurrection", namely depending on "doomed death" mindset to achieve victory in an absolutely weak situation. In the film, "If you are determined to die, the opponent will long for survival", "Victory comes out of the determination to perish together" and "Life is ignited in the moment of deciding to go away" are all reflections of this conflict philosophy.

#### *B. Routinized Details*

The film tries hard to demonstrate warriors' daily life and spends a great length on details of daily life. Hiroguchi Kiyohama's poverty and warmth, Muneaki's loving care for Xihui in dribs and drabs, and sympathetic friendly sentiments between Mimura and his wife are shown through vegetables, meals, delicate expressions and tranquil dialogues, as if revealing ordinary people's secular real life to the audience through a transparent wall.

The film often displays trivial things in ordinary life with extraordinary patience. After finishing eating porridge each time, Hiroguchi Kiyohama always scoops up a gourd ladle of water to wash away residues inside the bowl (Hardworking and thrifty is formed in an extremely poverty-stricken life). Mimura's wife picks up fallen rice on her husband's jacket in an experienced way and puts it into her own mouth (the image of a tough wife with meticulous housekeeping). All these daily details display ordinary people's solid and tough life. Without shouting and screaming or stealing the spotlight, these scenes are meticulous and moving, like still water running deep.

### IV. VALUE ORIENTATION SUBVERTING THE TRADITION

#### *A. The End of Warrior*

Yoji Yamada thinks that there are two destinies for warriors: Adhering to past practices and seeking change. Neither one can change the capsized destiny.

In the times when warriors gradually disappear, the movie's three leading characters have different choices: Hiroguchi Kiyohama chooses to be buried alive with the dead for the era of warrior. Although he says that if not being a

warrior, he will choose to be a pheasant, the never extinctive passion inside his bone drives him to choose the blood battlefield and use his own life to explain virtuous, courageous and loyal Bushido spirit with an acknowledgment that this path shouldn't be taken in the transitional period of old and new times. Hiroguchi Kiyohama is contradictory. On the one hand, he is indifferent to fame and wealth and willing to devote himself to daily life. On the other hand, he holds traditional warriors' conception of loyalty. In his final choice of life, Muneaki Katagiri shows a new mindset. He kills heartless and disloyal Karo. After realizing the real "righteous cause" inside his heart, knowing that this era no longer belongs to warriors' traditional katana, he resolutely and determinedly leaves his familiar environment, changes his identity and starts a new life rather than being a warrior with his beloved girl. Mimura returns to the daily life of family. Victory in the duel fails to driven him to perfect his martial arts, instead he realizes that the most important thing in his life is warmth from relatives. No matter it is being buried alive with the dead, reclusion or returning to daily life, they all inevitably declare the passing of an era. The warrior's times comes to an end and an era belonging to daily life and ordinary people arrives.

The trilogy's historical background is set in late Edo period when old cold arms will be replaced by new hot arms. If Muneaki chooses not to be buried alive with the dead just like Hiroguchi Kiyohama, the choice facing him is to grab new types of arms and become a new type of killer machine — solider, which is total betrayal of the warrior world and he is not willing to face it.

If Hiroguchi Kiyohama's living world can be described as peaceful and stable, Muneaki's living circumstances highlight the extremely dangerous state of late warrior age. After Muneaki's father lays open the bowel and commits suicide because of unredressed injustice, Muneaki has to obey the seignior's order to kill his good friend. At the end, Muneaki uses a hidden weapon to kill Karo rather than aboveboard means, declaring collapse of warrior's morality in that era and re-recognition and re-evaluation of traditional values. Mimura's fate is more unendurable. As a lower samurai, he is used to test the drug for the seignior and becomes blind in both eyes. His cruel fate definitely is bloody and teary complaint of rigid stratification society.

Unlike traditional samurai film promoting samurai spirit, the trilogy reveals the last samurai's helpless and choice in change of times from a realistic perspective.

### *B. The Victory of Common People*

"Historical trilogy" depicts the ordinary life state of ordinary people. Warrior's value is no longer represented as victory in the battlefield. Instead, it is represented as daily life filled with affection and faith, which is the victory of common people living at the bottom of society.

Just as shown in the film, Hiroguchi Kiyohama's charm is more represented as those ordinary human feelings and humanity, like his care and love for his mother and daughter, safeguarding self dignity and the failure of poverty to deprive their heart of mental wealth. Even facing an extremely poverty-stricken family life, he insists to let his daughter go to

school rather than bring home the bacon in order to make her think and judge by herself and live a better life. Facing his uncle's tough attitude, he still refuses to give up his life ideal in straitened circumstances. He refuses to yield to a compromised marriage. Muneaki puts ordinary people's "human feelings" above bushido's "loyalty" and is willing to take risks for his lover and friends. Mimura's personal dignity bursts out strong radiance in the will to die to defend his wife's dignity.

In traditional samurai film, the identity of samurai limits the role's action and the warrior has to use courageous and resolute and loyal actions in decisive battle to demonstrate the warrior's "superman" character. In Yamada's film, warrior becomes an ordinary person living on real soil and in real air with the breath of ordinary people. We firstly see "human", then "warrior".

## V. CONCLUSION

Yoji Yamada's film works originating from Fujisawa Shuhei's "bottom series of samurai novels" contain a real bottom taste and the breath of common people, which is a kind of coincidence in temperament and a subtle and accurate reflection of spirit of the times.

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