

## The Virtue of Bushido in Japanese World War II Films

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**Abstract.** The Japanese Bushido system conveys the doctrine of “bravery”, while it also eulogizes “the virtue of bushido”. Both of them seem like the two wings of the Bushido system, flying in the sky of Japanese World War II films. The virtue of bushido reflected in these films is mainly distributed in the wartime and during the time when Japan was under the occupation of the American army. It refers that this virtue is not only a wonderful morality of obeying commands but also a lofty and instinctive love; it means to accept passively as well as naturally, to introspect initiatively as well as inquisitively. Thus “the virtue of bushido” in Japanese World War II films can be generalized into such Bushido spiritual factors as loyalty, generosity, argumentation, reputation and other non-forcible factors..

### 1. Implication and Forbearance: The Development of the Virtue of Bushido in the Second World War

The virtue of bushido in Japanese World War II films is the incarnation of Japanese bushido system. It is deeply rooted in Japanese bushido culture and lays the foundation for almost all of the later Japanese World War II films. Why the anti-war elements like military violence, arduous march and so on are regarded quite natural in the view of Japanese? What Americans could not understand is just the “reflection of virtue” in Japanese bushido system. The early Japanese World War II films *Five Scouts*(1938) seemed to be swarmed with these “anti-war” scenes: Idle soldiers looked for the same grass he had seen in hometown; bored ones massage the shoulder for each other in a queue; even some hobbled back pulling the ducks as the sought food with strings. Just the same, the film *Chocolate to heitai* (1938) also displayed soldiers’ fear of war in some objective scenes many times, reproducing the scenes of sloppy march and tenacious battle in a reportorial style. In the eyes of non-Japanese, both of the two films conveyed the implication of anti-war, however in fact, it’ s just a representation of Japanese spiritual power, which was to conquer the difficulties of boredom, vapidity and homesickness so that they can fulfill their duty, pledge loyalty to their country and repay an obligation to the Mikado.

At the beginning of World War II, some Japanese directors were assigned to the battlefield to shoot the films for propagandizing the war. However, these directors had neither the experience of shooting war films nor the mood to collude with the Army Headquarters, that was the reason for the exploratory style and scenes we saw in the early World War II films. The war of aggression against China also seemed not to be perfectly justifiable in domestic Japan, although there was a so called “Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” polity as fig leaf, to persuade national into war was not such an easy thing. How to propagandize war effectively? There was no doubt that films were the best means. Even under a great deal of pressure, not all of these directors acted like *Hisatora Kumagai* to acknowledge the superiority of the propaganda implemented by the Military Headquarter. Thus there appeared the World War II films resembling *Tomotaka Tasaka’s* “veiled style” films and *Kozaburo Yoshimura’s* “negative style” films. These films not only showed the reality to cope with the requirement of military but also revealed the reflection of cinematographic art. The existing meaning and exploratory meaning of the film *Five Scouts* were far more than the meaning of this film itself. The fighting scenes began the films and sat a distinctive example among all of the World War 2 films, seeing through the desolated battlefield with an erected saber as the foreground. It was

rather said to be a reflection of speculation for humanity than regarded as a way to show the forceful imperial majesty. The film ran over with the intense aura of moralism and the virtue of bushido had been deeply rooted in the ideographical organism since the start of the film. One year later, *Tomotaka Tasaka* shot the film *Mud and Soldiers* (1939) in the forms *Five Scouts*. This one also did not smear Chinese resistant power but fixed the orient theme on tenacious march, attracting audience's attention on one and another transition of battlefield like the films of the spectacle. To achieve this goal, it even omitted the concrete plot, emphasizing on the tough moral character and commendable sacrificial spirit. There was no doubt that the confirmation of spiritual power and fine quality was the embodiment of the virtue of bushido and it could "be regarded as the peculiar ascetic view of Japanese fascism"[1]. Perhaps under the influence of *Kajirô Yamamoto's* film, *Battle of Pearl Harbor and the Malay Coast*(1942), *Tomotaka Tasaka* made another film *Kaigun*(1943). It was a big-budget production to show the naval aviator's attendance of the Pearl Harbor Attack. Nevertheless, the logic of this film was quite confused and in disorder, with no style to say at all. Through the secretive mood we could get a glimpse of the director's disapproval of war, but the equivocal images really annoyed people. After the war he never shot any other war films, which was perhaps related with his lifelong struggle against the sequelae of nuclear radiation, while it also maybe lies in his wish to escape from all the things about war.

If the World War 2 films of *Tomotaka Tasaka* still concealed the fact of forceful invasion meticulously, then *Hisatora Kumagai* defended the justice of war with "cannot but to fight back" in a drastic image style, attempting to treat the invasion against Chinese as "Benevolence War". But he seemed to forget naturally or deliberately that "this war is an invasive war, while the major premise has been already wrong" [2]. *Hisatora Kumagai* was an idealist and he had shot the film *Abe ichizoku* (1938) to criticize Bushido system before the war, but he propagated the bushido spirit of "benevolence war" repeatedly in the film *Shanghai Rikusentai*(1939), which showed that he himself is one that had been brainwashed by militarism. *Shanghai Rikusentai* was one of the most important films in the history of Japanese World War 2 films and "the first film positively depicted the real scale of the war in China" [3]. It was directed in Shanghai, 1937, with the "peeping recording lens" which covered the edge as performance practices; with the relatively real war images and military deployment as performance content. It "posed" and reproduced the famous "Eight One Three Battle of Shanghai" from the perspective of Japan, propagating the "valiant fight" with a numerically smaller army and invincible "heroism" of Japanese Marine Corps. With the "virtue of bushido" idea, the film repeatedly propagandized the justice of "Benevolence War" and created the image of a squadron leader with scared face played by *Den Obinata*, in order to conceal the essence of the war. *Hisatora Kumagai* continued this idea to the film *Shidô monogatari*(1941) shot in 1941, casting into the imperial soldiers as "warriors" with the same spirits of martial optimism and "invincible" virtue of bushido. Although the shooting techniques were commendable and the war images were better than the real ones, the height of art could not match with the low-grade of theme, largely violating the historical facts. After the war, *Hisatora Kumagai* was classified as the "Grade B war criminals" by the Japanese Film Festival and forbidden to hold public post for a time in the Film Festival. We have no idea whether he had a clear cognition of the war films after the war, but he did not shoot World War 2 films any more after the end of the war.

In the end of 1940, *Kozaburo Yoshimura* shot the film *Kato hayabusa sento-tai* (1944) according to the biographic novel written by *Kan Kikuchi*, which is together with *Nishizumi senshacho-den* (1940) called "Two Stars of War Films". This film and the *Gonin no Sekkohei* shot by *Tomotaka Tasaka* in 1938 were regarded as the best war films at that time. The late thirtieth and early fortieth was the time when militarism expanded extremely and "the army and navy competed to make use of film propaganda" [4], creating a series of heroic figures. As a minor enterprise, Shochiku studio film company was always dedicated to make romance films, wishing not to become a accomplice of

war like East Treasure film company, which certainly will arouse the dissatisfaction of the army headquarter. Under the pressure of being criticized with lacking of “understanding of the situation”, Schochiku company invited *Kozaburo Yoshimura* who was famous for the film *Danryu*(1939) in the “vessel” style (won the fame for the unique and high quality female movies shot by Schochiku film studio) to direct the film *Nishizumi senshacho-den*. This film narrated a story about lieutenant *senshacho* who had come to China, been friendly welcomed by Chinese people and even received the aid from Chinese women and children, while it was also people like him that brought disaster to Chinese. The film showed many times the catastrophe that Chinese people were confronted with. “To regard Japanese army as enemy and shoot film from the later view, this has never been found in the former Japanese films” [5]. It is also seldom to be found again in the later Japanese films. Exactly this crafty film expressed its resistance of the pressure from the Military Headquarter, reflecting the “virtue of bushido” of the director in the view of humanity, which is the “benevolence” to show compassion, the “propriety” to cherish honor and the “love” to cross nationalities and national boundaries.

However, why this kind of film could be allowed and discharged by the Japanese government, be recognized and understood by the Japanese citizens? This was certainly not the result of internationalism tolerance. What we should pay attention to is: in the film *Nishizumi senshacho-den*, *senshacho* strived incessantly for one goal; in the film *Kanchô imada shisezu*, the Japanese spy protected national security with heart and soul; even in many of the postwar World War II films which seemed to be anti-war, the audience could see the arduous people who strived for survival, for their country and for the commons. In the logic of America, Japanese war film were full of “marching in the mud, miserable dreary fight and unpredicted torment, and so on” [6], most of which were the elements to lower morale and even to resist the war. On the contrary, in the Japanese logic, “So long as the characters in the screen always try their best to work hard and repay an obligation, whenever and wherever, that’s enough” [7]. As for the success and failure, compared with working hard and repaying an obligation, they were seemed to be not so much important. All these could be the propaganda tools as well as practice of “the virtue of bushido”, killing two birds with one stone and arousing no peaceful anti-war mood among the Japanese audience.

## **2. Argumentation and Introspection: the Anti-war Voice of the Virtue of Bushido under the Occupation of American Army**

From Japanese unconditional surrender to 1952, Japan was under the charge of American Supreme Command of Allies in the Pacific and the film creation was also confronted with new changes. Nevertheless, the films which aimed to reflect Japanese World War II had not been ended, but rather aroused a democracy climax of war accountability. During this time, the expression of “force” was treated as reaction, so that Japanese World War II movies at this time fixed more attention on the performance of “the virtue of bushido”, penetrating deeply into human’s soul and appeasing the agony of war. If the doctrine of “force” still conveyed too much brute courage in the sword-fighting films, then Japanese World War II films, during the time under the occupation of American army after the war, appealed much more to the doctrine of “the virtue of bushido” with anti-war themes. The keyword of the “virtue of bushido” during the Second World War was “argumentation”, while at this time, it was “honor”. The former one was the obligation along with loyalty and the later was the accountability due to the defeat. This kind of films combined the obvious accountability with the latent introspection, which was a countermeasure to the policy of American army as well as an idea of enlightenment influenced by democracy. The moment when the god-like Mikado discharged the god-hood and fell down the altar, the authority in the wartime collapsed at once and the undercurrent of accountability depressed by the military headquarter gushed out of the ground promptly.

The introduction of American democracy and the disappearance of the pressure from the military headquarter constituted the foundation of the voice questioning the anti-war accountability of the Japanese films about the Second World War. In the film *The Voice of War* (Kike wadatsumi no koe: Nippon senbotsu gakusei shukiv, 1950), *Till We meet again* (1950) and *Morning for the Osonoe Family* (1946), the director asked “who started the war?” Via the words of a soldier, questioned respectively “what did Japan fight for” via the words of *Tajima Saburo* and accused “who on earth became happy because of the war and for whom the war started”. Even *Yasujirô Ozu* who never left “family” before, questioned the damage that war brought to family in the film *Kaze no naka no mendori* (1948). The film depicted a mother with simple, natural and slow scenes to show her fight against poverty and misunderstanding with forbearance and dignity, resembling a full-winged hen protecting its hazardous family in the wartime. It recounted the desperation and bitterness of women to rival with the war started by male and it also eulogized the beautiful personality of Japanese women. *Women of the Night* (1948), directed by *Kenji Mizoguchi*, was a replica of *Kaze no naka no mendori*, reproducing the disaster that war brought to Japanese common people from the viewpoint of female. The Japanese dilapidated street, the young married woman waiting for her husband and the mother who traded body to treat and cure her son, similar environment, similar plot, similar characters and similar tribulation altogether questioned the harm brought to women from the war started by men, expressing the unyielding and tenacious characters of women to undergo everything to survive. *Kenji Mizoguchi* seldom showed favorable impression for war, but his disciple *Shindo Kaneto* welcomed to his era. In the film *Children of Hiroshima* (1952), he made the old man shout “war, bastard!” , *Akira Kurosawa* had his own answer to war although he turned a deaf ear to the defeat, that was to firmly believe “which way is correct, time will tell it” via the words of *Utsumi* who awakened gradually. No matter the question or the denouncement of war, even the firm belief in future. In a relatively mild manner, these actions retrospect the disaster that war had brought to Japanese, claimed the punishment of criminals and rebuilt all of the cities.

The postwar Japanese surrender and adherence were contradictory as well as coalesce with each other. “Surrender” certainly referred to its entire acceptance of the occupation of America. From 1945 to 1952, the Japanese Second World War films during this time, there was no one in the same way to depict war as the *Shanghai Rikusentai*. The only one film depicted the war positively was *The Voice of the War*. It was suffused with illusion and reverie, like an interrogation for the responsibility of war or confused dream murmur about the unknown future. “Fusion” means that Japan tried to accept the democracy brought by America. In the movie sphere, *Akira Kurosawa* and *Keisuke Kinoshita* played the role of daring vanguard and led a series of creation of anti-war films. The amount of World War II films at this time was not too much, altogether about a dozen. But the quality could not be ignored, for these films stood for the strongest interrogation towards the meaning and cause of war in the history of Japanese World War films.

The second year after the war, *Keisuke Kinoshita* and *Akira Kurosawa* shot the films *Morning for the Osonoe Family* and *No Regrets of Our Youth* with democratic ideas, in order to introspect the war and open up new directions for the creation of Japanese postwar films. *No Regrets of Our Youth* appeared before the style of *Akira Kurosawa* was formed and it could be regarded as an eulogy for the awakening of the heroine’s self awareness. Although the film set the war in the background, “the depression of freedom by the fascism, the white terror in the dark ages and the ignorance in the common people still seem to be extremely gloomy and heavy[9]. *Morning for the Osonoe Family* related a story happened in Osonoe family in the morning of Christmas. It was an anti-war film directed by *Keisuke Kinoshita* to reflect the big society from the small perspective of the destiny of the Osonoe family. *Akira Kurosawa* played a role of an active participant in the film *No Regrets of Our Youth* and seldom expressed his likes and dislikes of personal feelings and the attitude towards war via the characters in the film. He believed “in the back of dazzling and colorful freedom, there are torturous sacrifice and responsibility to undertake”. Differed from him, in the *Morning for the Osonoe Family*, *Keisuke Kinoshita* was more like a bystander, watching the decline of Osonoe family

coldly. Resembling the play *Thunderstorm*, all kinds of contradictions were interwoven in this film, predicting the oncoming of social thunderstorm by means of indicating the ideological changes of Osone family. If the former film was to hold on to belief, then the later one was the salvation of souls. Both of the two films blended western style of image, allegoric stories, eastern connotation and Japanese forbearance together. One took real actions to show “the past people who were regarded as betrayer and spy are just those pioneer soldiers who want to save Japanese from the agony of war” [10], the other presented the vivid fact and bloody experience to express “the wish of peace, the love for life and the condemnation of war” [11]. One thing should be noticed was that, even if the starting point of the two films was the same question “who is the starter of the war?”, but the footholds were different: in the film *No Regrets of Our Youth*, *Utsumi* devoted herself to the cultural construction in the rural areas, proceeding to the extension of militarism, in other words, it was the belief that the reason why people accepted the military war blindly was the fact that most Japanese didn’t receive education. However, this excuse was too much far-fetched; and in the *Morning for the Osone Family*, *Yoko* said affirmatively that “the responsibility dues to the army who starts the war”. In fact, the responsibility was not merely attributed to the uneducated common people or the obedient army. It actually manifested the avoidance of responsibility of the whole Japanese nationality and it also the result of the “shame culture” thought in Japanese character. Just as Jijun Guo said in the article *victim and accomplice—the common people in the Second World War*[12] published in *Wenhui Reading Weekly*, “the Japanese common people in war are victims as well as accomplices”, in the film *Seisaku no tsuma*(1965) directed by *Yasuzo Masumura* and *War and Youth*(1991) by *Tadashi Imai*, we could see how did the Japanese “reciprocate their hostility”. Because one’s own family was enlisted, he was wild about to “force” other families to join the army, which showed the wickedness of humanity. The people actually became an accomplice of war and the fact went against the cultural idea that “the virtue of bushido” advocated.

Not all of the movies at this time were finding excuses and reasons for war. In 1950, *Tadashi Imai* and *Hideo Sekigawa* shot the films *Till We Meet Again* and *The Voice of the War* respectively. Both of the two were excellent anti-war movies and the depth of introspection had achieved remarkably progress. Influenced by the western thoughts, especially the French humanism, these two films were distinctive with obvious consciousness of freedom and democracy. *Till We Meet Again* was adopted from the book *Pierre et Luce* written by the famous French writer *Romain Rolland*. The director referred to the shooting method of *Waterloo Bridge*, telling the love tragedy of youths under the torment of war with tight and intense images. *The Voice of the War* also known as *Listen, the Appeal of Ghosts* was adopted from the popular Japanese postwar book *Listen, the Appeal of Ghosts—The Scripts of Japanese Students killed in Wars*, judging the destined tragedy of intellectuals from the perspective of the life and death in wartime. The consideration of the two films was not constricted in merely asking “who is the starter of the war” and “who should shoulder the responsibility of the war”. They emphasized more to uncover the cruelty of war and rethink profoundly about “for what the war starts”, in order to appeal for peace and object to war. This kind of thinking in the films was humanistic. *Till We Meet Again* talked about “no reunion day any more” and the love between the hero and the heroine was much more tragic than that of *Pierre and Luce*. The “kiss across the glass” could be regarded as a stroke of genius, reminding people of the book *Heart Sutra* of *Eileen Zhang*. The entire happiness and helplessness, heart-touching and heart-broken tore people into pieces and made them sob in silence. It formed an echo with the destiny of characters later on, judging the value of love and freedom in the shadow of death. *The Voice of the War* was “the voice of death”. The *private Oki* was a French teacher in the University of Tokyo. In the class, he was a knowledgeable professor and an expert in teaching the theoretical research on *Montaigne’s* philosophy, while in the field, he could only be a soldier succumbed to the despotic power of his selfish and ignorant commander. When “the intellectual meets with soldier”, the story was quite simple and natural, provoking people deeply. Both of the two films were affected by French

humanism. In the film *The Voice of the War*, the Liberalism of *Montaigne* taught by teacher Oki in the class was interwoven with the sloppy marching in Myanmar, forming a remarkable contrast. The film *Till We Meet again* even removed the French story into the Japanese background and depicted few images of intellectuals who stood outside of militarism, which were quite rare and commendable. So that these two films could be regarded as the harbinger of the moral and humanistic introspection of Japanese World War II films in the New Wave Period.

Japanese movie expert *Akira Iwasaki* has ever illustrated that half of the Japanese movies are about the Second World War, which has permeated into the collective unconsciousness of Japanese nationality and filled in the images of Japanese movies. No matter the doctrine of force or the virtue of bushido is closely related with Japanese social surroundings at that time, which cannot come out with no causes, nor disappear naturally. It is the manifestation of Japanese World War II films, the image epitome of Japanese society and more over, the concentrated reflection of the virtue of bushido. It will go further and further, spreading into the depth of image in Japanese films.

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