

# Bringing Japanese Pop Culture Travelers into Your Classroom PERILS, PITFALLS, AND PAYOFFS

By Paul E. Dunscomb



Tatsuya Nakadai as the unemployed samurai, Hanshiro Tsuguma, in *Harakiri*, a film by Masaki Kobayashi. ©1962 Shochiku Co. Ltd. ©2005 The Criterion Collection.

**Editor's Note: Readers can find short synopses of all films discussed in this article on page 52.**

No discussion of Japanese travelers is complete without mentioning the most widely traveled and influential figures to have ever left the country. They've been everywhere, representing their nation and their culture, and wherever they've gone they have left an indelible impression. They are the icons of Japanese popular culture—everything from Hello Kitty to Pokemon. But perhaps the most widely traveled figures in Japanese popular culture have come from the movies. Among the most familiar are samurai and rubber-suited monsters called *kaijū*. Inviting these travelers into your class will offer excellent opportunities to teach about Japan, but you need to be careful when they come to visit to make sure they contribute more to your class than just a vacation from listening to lectures.

I am a firm believer in both the utility and propriety of using pop culture products in the classroom. Yet, even for me, using such materials in class has its problematic aspects. I note with distress that whatever accomplishments I may have achieved as a scholar and teacher, my students at the University of Alaska Anchorage basically know me now exclusively as “The Godzilla Guy.” This is especially ironic as I come by my Godzilla obsession secondhand through my mentor Bill Tsutsui, who has not one, but two books on the big guy to his credit.<sup>1</sup> Personally, my own Japanese pop culture obsession

runs towards the *anime* series *Cowboy Bebop*.<sup>2</sup> However, I note with some alarm that while I don't actively seek it out, somehow, very little Hello Kitty related material gets by me.<sup>3</sup>

I have always made it a point to invite Japanese film figures into my classes. While I would love to make more use of anime series like *Cowboy Bebop* or translated *manga* (Japanese graphic novels), these often tend to be too unwieldy to fit into my overall course narrative. Hello Kitty is the ideal exemplar of the fungible nature of popular culture products. Americans rarely suspect that Kitti-chan's face adorns a far more varied group of products in Japan than are available in the United States, including kitchen appliances and radios, as well as vibrators and condoms.<sup>4</sup> But how to fold this insight into a lecture on modern Japanese history presents a challenge. Movies spawn no such problems, at least for me; they break up the monotony of lectures and provide high points during the semester for the students, while fitting basic course objectives.

Among the first courses I developed when I came to UAA was one on the evolution of the samurai, and movies were an integral part of the course material from the beginning. Over the semester, I show two films and have the students do a review essay on both, but I use them for quite different effects. At the beginning of the semester,



Beginning of the final duel between Sanjurō and Hanbei in *Sanjurō*. Copyright © 1962 Toho Co. Ltd.

I show one film to give the students a chance to examine the basic archetype of the samurai. Previously, I used Kurosawa Akira's *Yojimbo* for this purpose.<sup>5</sup> The film, starring Mifune Toshirō, lends itself to an analysis of the various elements that make up the mythical samurai of popular imagination, especially since it's been remade into an American western twice,<sup>6</sup> and students can readily compare the western gunfighter archetype with the samurai. However, when I teach the course now, I use its sequel, *Sanjurō*.<sup>7</sup>

I made the switch because I think the second film works slightly better at addressing the themes I want the students to focus on: What makes a samurai a samurai? Is he defined merely by the sword he carries, or by a collection of expected behaviors (among them, notions of honor and duty)? In particular, I want the students to think about how *Sanjurō* is different from all of the other samurai depicted in the film. What makes his actions admirable and heroic, especially compared to his rival Hanbei (Nakadai Tatsuya)? Because samurai are heroic archetypes, we give them license to behave in particular ways. Most especially, we allow them to kill without censure. However, the final duel between Sanjurō and Hanbei (a classic "gunfight" with a short, spectacularly gory climax) doesn't let samurai off the hook. Ultimately, for all that we valorize them, samurai are purveyors of violence and I want the students to realize the implications of this.<sup>8</sup>

Once students are aware of the samurai archetype, I use the rest of the semester to examine how the samurai came to be. In particular, I am at pains to make students understand that there was not, nor had there ever been, nor is there today, a transcendent, unchanging thing known as *bushidō*; that Japan's samurai class, and the supposed ideals under which they operated, were invented and reinvented numerous times to serve the ends of the samurai masters. To help drive this point home, I show Kobayashi Masaki's *Harakiri*.<sup>9</sup> This is not your typical samurai movie in a number of respects. Its challenging, non-linear narrative keeps students guessing. The bulk of the violence is saved for the end and is built up with almost excruciating inevitability. The film does an excellent job of problematizing ideas of loyalty and honor. Set in the peaceful Tokugawa period, it shows what happens when the samurai are no longer useful to their masters as fighting men, and how new ways must be found to use and control them.

Showing these movies in class doesn't mean I get to sit in the back of the room and watch. While there are review essays required of both films, taking time to talk about them in class and referring back to them as needed allows us to specifically address themes and issues that come up during the class. Films are an integral part of the course and can provide fodder for exam questions. The real key to using popular culture products is to understand what sort of load they can carry as course materials. It is inappropriate to throw anything out there in hopes of amusing your students. One must use critical judgment to choose films that fit in with the basic aims of the course and one's desires as an instructor. Simply put, know what you want your students to get out of these aids and be sure the lessons are there before you show the film.

I use the same approach when showing films in my East Asian Civilization course, but for this class, the lessons I'm hoping the students draw from the experience are quite different. Although it's hard to call it a samurai movie, I've had good results using Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the experience, I want the students to subject a document to analysis and learn that one cannot understand how human beings behave without taking into account their motivations and the outside forces that work on them. Specifically, I have students write a brief essay examining the character of the Thief (Nakadai Tatsuya, again, who also stars in *Harakiri*) and the arc that his character goes through from beginning to end.

Although the students know they are analyzing a fictional story, they learn skills that can be used equally well in doing good history. One must develop an ability to analyze a variety of historical documents, which may take unusual forms, including works of fiction or art. Examining the motivations of a fictional character helps students understand that real historical figures have personality traits that condition their responses to given situations, while at the same time, larger forces narrow an individual's options when dealing with events. It's hard to find two more important qualities in a good historian than a capacity for critical analysis and empathy for the subject. *Kagemusha* serves admirably on both counts.

It is equally important for students to get some idea of the fact that both filmmakers and historians deliberately assemble their nar-

natives to achieve an effect: either a dramatic resolution or a compelling argument. The events of a movie do not simply occur on the screen; the filmmaker has put a lot of thought and hard work into making it unfold in a particular way. Similarly, when historians put together a narrative of events, they chose to emphasize certain sources, facts, or interpretations—and not others—in support of the overall argument they wish to make. How historians interpret and assemble their materials will determine the form their narrative will take. Of course it is necessary to teach students that while filmmakers are free to alter their screenplays as they choose, historians are required to create a narrative the facts can support.

You must then be prepared to assist your students in analyzing the content of pop culture products used in class. There really is no point to it otherwise. Students must be encouraged to articulate their analyses of such documents through written assignments or classroom discussion, and preferably both. The greatest reward of using popular culture in the classroom is that students respond with an energy not inspired by other materials. The greatest danger and challenge is that pop culture products come loaded with presumptions that are hard to strip away.

Nothing demonstrates the added excitement of having a Japanese pop culture icon visit your class than the way my students react when Godzilla drops by my modern Japan course. I've done this long enough now that the cat is pretty much out of the bag, but it was always fun handing out the syllabus at the beginning of the semester and hearing the reaction of the students when they saw that they were going to spend a week watching the original Tōhō Studios version of *Godzilla* later on in the semester. This was once a rare privilege, since the movie was hard to come by, but the original has finally come out on DVD and is now readily available.<sup>11</sup>

My motivations for showing *Godzilla* in my modern Japan class are somewhat different from the other films mentioned. *Godzilla* works in one sense because it manages to utterly confound the student's expectations. They anticipate seeing a cheesy, possibly even campy monster flick (which the *Godzilla* franchise did eventually become), but what they get is a serious film with a strong anti-nuclear (and distinctly anti-American) message, which demonstrates in a visceral way that while Japan had managed to quickly recover from the physical effects of war and defeat, the psychic ones lingered. Analysis of this unusual historical document sheds light on aspects of modern Japanese history that otherwise simply won't come out in lectures or classroom discussion. Even better, guiding the students through a deep reading of what they are predisposed to think of as fluffy and frivolous opens up the possibility that other things around them might yield similar treasures.

But the great pitfall of using pop culture icons is that the potential pool of materials is vast and students will either have been exposed to, or will actively seek a lot of it out on their own. This means that the movies you choose to show in class will almost always exist in dialogue with whatever else your students have seen. The result is that the lessons you hope to impart by showing something in class can be unexpectedly augmented or undercut by other popular offerings.

A happy example of this happened to me using a Chinese film. A couple of years ago, Zhang Yimou's movie *Hero* came out at the same time I was showing the *Emperor and the Assassin* in my East Asian Civ class.<sup>12</sup> While both films were theoretically about the same event, an attempt to assassinate the man who would found the



*Gojira*, a.k.a. *Godzilla*, visits Tokyo for the first time.  
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Qin Dynasty and become China's first emperor, their takes on this event, and their views of both the emperor and his would-be assassin couldn't have been more different. And since I couldn't possibly have kept my students from seeing *Hero*, we ended up with excellent classroom discussions.

But frequently, things go the other way, and the place where this is most problematic for me is in my samurai course. In particular, I had the misfortune, one semester, of concluding my samurai course on the same weekend that the Tom Cruise vehicle *The Last Samurai* opened in theaters. I knew I would have strong objections to the film (and still do), but once again it wasn't as if I could stop my students from going to see it.<sup>13</sup> I tried to take advantage of it and offered to let them write an extra credit response piece to the film. I was already somewhat concerned about what I'd get back because, fueled in part by their fondness for *Rorori no Kenshin* and other anime products,<sup>14</sup> my students had fought me tooth and nail all semester on the notion that bushidō is an invention. I hoped I'd made some progress on that, but the pieces my students wrote disabused me of this notion. All essentially admitted that the second the lights went down, their analytical powers left the building. They surrendered to suspension of disbelief (not the most useful quality in a would-be historian) and embraced the notion of bushidō as a timeless ideal. I felt that an entire semester's worth of work had been undone in two hours.

This simply goes to show that there's no way you can predict exactly how your students will react to any given film. And one does need to be careful about this when using Japanese (or any foreign) film in class. The inescapable fact about another country's popular culture is that it is made for domestic consumption and therefore will have assumptions about things embedded within it that may well not accord with the tastes of an American audience. This includes attitudes about acceptable levels of sex and violence (which can crop up even in anime movies aimed specifically at children). What's embedded can also affect more subtle aspects of a film. Students are likely to be challenged by the basic narrative structure of a film,

finding the pace at which the plot unfolds boring. They might disagree about what makes an appealing character (“Why do animated female characters have to have such funny, squeaky voices?”). They may also be surprised (especially in the case of Chinese, but also in Japanese or South Korean films) by what makes for a politically acceptable “take” on a particular topic.

This may be the best reason to have a pop culture icon from the movies visit your students in the first place. By confounding their expectations, one has an opportunity to prod students into thinking what those expectations are and how they have been riled so by this movie (or anime series, manga, or book). Exposing your students to popular culture from other countries provides teachable moments. Students’ guards are down. Expecting to be entertained, they will often be shocked and surprised to have learned something. The key for you as the teacher is to maximize the impact of these moments by making sure that you’ve prepared your ground beforehand, and are ready to follow with meaningful discussion and follow-up assignments. ■

## NOTES

1. William Tsutsui, *Godzilla on my Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave, 2004); William Tsutsui, Michiko Itō, eds., *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
2. *Cowboy Bebop*, directed by Watanabe Shinichirō, 1998, Bandai Visual. There is also *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie, Knockin' on Heaven's Doors*, directed by Watanabe Shinichiro, 2001, DVD, Sunrise/Bandai Visual, Columbia/Tristar.
3. Ken Belson, Brian Bremner, *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon* (Singapore: John Wiley and Sons, 2004).
4. Christine Yano, “Monstering the Japanese Cute: Pink Globalization and Its Critics Abroad,” Tsutsui and Ito, *In Godzilla's Footsteps*.
5. *Yojimbo*, directed by Kurosawa Akira, 1961, DVD, the Criterion Collection.
6. Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1963), and Walter Hill’s *Last Man Standing* (1996).
7. *Sanjurō*, directed by Kurosawa Akira, 1962, DVD, the Criterion Collection.
8. I set them up for this discussion with two readings: Mary Elizabeth Berry’s “Presidential Address—Samurai Trouble: Thoughts on War and Loyalty,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 64, #4 (November 2005), 831–847, and Ivan Morris’ *The Nobility of Failure; Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1976), chapters 2–3.
9. *Harakiri*, directed by Kobayashi Masaki, 1962, DVD, the Criterion Collection.
10. *Kagemusha*, Directed by Kurosawa Akira, 1980, DVD, the Criterion Collection.
11. *Gojira*, directed by Honda Ishirō, 1954, DVD, Tōhō/Sony.
12. *The Emperor and the Assassin*, 2000, Directed by Chen Kaige, DVD, Sony Picture Classics.
13. While I could rail against this movie for pages, I will confine myself to the observation that the filmmakers are obviously interested in appropriating Japanese things, but care not a wit about actual Japanese, which allows the Tom Cruise character to achieve spiritual enlightenment through the sacrifice of several thousand expendable Japanese lives.
14. *Rorori no Kenshin*, directed by Furuhashi Kazuhiro, 2000, DVD, Anime Works. I also have to contend now with *Samurai Champloo*, directed by Watanabe Shinichirō, 2004, DVD, Geneon Entertainment.

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## Synopses of Films that Professor Dunscomb Addresses in his Article

**Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961)**—Masterless samurai Sanjurō (Toshirō Mifune) finds himself in a feud-torn Japanese village in legendary director Akira Kurosawa’s darkly comic film. After pretending to work for merchants on both sides of the feud, Sanjurō is imprisoned for treachery. He escapes in time to watch the two warring factions destroy each other, just as he had intended. *Yojimbo* served as the prototype for Clint Eastwood’s *A Fistful of Dollars*.

**Akira Kurosawa’s *Sanjurō* (1962)**—Akira Kurosawa’s sequel to *Yojimbo* is a dark comedy about a larger-than-life samurai. Adrift in an era of fading tradition and increasing lawlessness, surly Sanjurō (Toshirō Mifune) instructs a gang of scheming radicals in Samurai wisdom. An unlikely hero who loves an action-packed swordfight and is quick with the sarcasm, Sanjurō doesn’t always practice what he preaches, but he always remains true to himself.

**Masaki Kobayashi’s *Harakiri* (1962)**—Winner of the Cannes Special Jury Prize, Masaki Kobayashi’s drama centers on samurai Hanshiro Tsugumo (Tatsuya Nakadai). A new political climate finds the once-powerful samurai wandering the country begging estate owners to allow them to commit suicide on their property, when what they really want is a handout. Hanshiro arrives at a lavish manor and asks to commit harakiri on the grounds, but the vengeful warrior is harboring a secret.

**Akira Kurosawa’s *Kagemusha* (1980)**—Three warlord clans are battling for control of medieval Japan. When the leader of the Takeda clan, Lord Shingen (Tatsuya Nakadai), is mortally wounded, he orders that his death be kept secret from his enemies. The clan searches for a “shadow warrior,” an exact double, to take his place. Now, a thief (Nakadai in a double role) must fight for an empire in this stunning film from legendary Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa.

**Honda Ishirō’s, *Gojira (Godzilla)* (1954)**—A fifty-meter dinosaur springs to life in the wake of heavy nuclear weapons testing over the Pacific Ocean, and before long, the fire-breathing Gojira (aka Godzilla) makes a beeline for an unsuspecting Tokyo. This classic 1950s film is the original Japanese version of *Godzilla*.

**Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002)**—The Qin King has long been obsessed with conquering all of China and becoming her first Emperor—which makes him the target of three legendary assassins. To anyone who defeats the assassins, the King promises great power, mountains of gold and a private audience with the King himself. Jet Li heads the stellar cast of *Hero* as Nameless, the enigmatic county sheriff who earns his audience with the mighty King. Zhang Yimou directs.

**Chen Kaige’s *Emperor and the Assassin* (1999)**—Yin Zheng (Li Xuejian), King of Qin, embarks on a brutal campaign to unite all seven Chinese kingdoms in the third century B.C. Wanting to appear invincible, Yin sends his lover, Lady Zhao (Gong Li), to her homeland to hire a killer who will intentionally botch an assassination attempt on him. Once there, Lady Zhao tries to enlist Jing Ke (Zhang Fengyi), but complications arise in this lavishly produced historical epic from China.

**Furuhashi Kazuhiro’s *Rorori no Kenshin***—In this anime television series, Kenshin Himura—a former killer from Japan’s Meiji Era—seeks to find a place in the modern world. Along with other remnants of the past, Kenshin hides in secret, eager for a chance to use his deadly skills once again.

All movie descriptions (with slight modifications) are from <http://www.netflix.com>, except *Rorori no Kenshin*, which is from <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/>.