

**PATHS PRESENT AND FUTURE:  
YOJIMBO AND THE TRAIL OF THE ZEN DETECTIVE**

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Akira Kurosawa's 1961 film *Yojimbo* is a classic work of Japanese cinema, a highly influential period piece that aesthetically and commercially revitalized the *chambara*, or *samurai* swordsman genre. As Kurosawa's biggest hit and one of the lasting successes at the Japanese box office, *Yojimbo* still resounds with audiences around the world because of its highly entertaining, artfully realized tale of evil shrewdly pitted against evil by a wily *ronin* wandering the countryside.

This *ronin*, or masterless *samurai*, is the central figure in the film's visual and philosophical cosmologies. For some, his crowd-pleasing antics leading to the film's status as an overwhelming commercial triumph detract from critical considerations of its aesthetic and thematic value. However, close examination of *Yojimbo* reveals a subtle synthesis that renders the *ronin* a unique cinematic creation. Enlisting a key practice from an ancient style of Zen with a narrative loosely adapted from the novel *Red Harvest* by Dashiell Hammett, Kurosawa seamlessly melds Eastern religion with Western action, creating a cultural amalgam: the Zen detective, who solves mysteries in the moment.<sup>1</sup>

As the spiritual foundation for such a character, Kurosawa revives *shikin Zen*, or spontaneous, improvisational Zen. This style of Zen derives from the Chinese masters who adapted Zen to their Japanese audiences, predominantly members of the *samurai* class of ruling warriors during the late thirteenth century. As Zen scholar Trevor Leggett writes in his book *Samurai Zen*:

The warrior pupils of the early period of Kamakura Zen had no bent for scholarship and could not be taught by means of the classical *kōans* from the Chinese records of the patriarchs. The Zen teachers of this time trained them by making up *kōans* on the spot, in what came to be called *shikin Zen* or on-the-instant Zen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929).

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Leggett, *Samurai Zen* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 21.

These *kōans* drew heavily on familiar aspects of everyday existence, such as "water buckets, pieces of paper, iron fans and even loin cloths" and were tailored to harness the potential of each individual pupil.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally presented in an interview format between teacher and student, the *kōan* is the entryway into Zen instruction. An example of a *shikin Zen kōan* is "Wielding the Spear With Hands Empty," in which a spear master is told that until he experiences "the state of wielding the spear with hands empty" he will fail to "penetrate to the ultimate secret of the art."<sup>4</sup> With the words, "No spear in the hands, no hands on the spear," the teacher proffers an individualized lesson that the spear master fails to grasp.

Under ideal conditions, however, such a *kōan* positions the pupil on the path towards transcendence. By answering, the pupil passes through a moment and if he succeeds in giving a correct response, arrives in the now, in a state of unity with the immediate. If he fails, he arrives back in the past or far in the future. For the warrior pupil such as the spear master, often this path seeks a totality of being in which the mind and the body balance to liberate the warrior from a fear of death.

This spiritual background is vital to the protagonist of *Yojimbo* as he confronts an elaborate web of alliances and feuds suffocating a village with violence and vengeance. Kurosawa distills this scenario directly from *Red Harvest*, transposing the troubles of an early 1920s American mining town packed with hired muscle and riddled by corruption to 1860s Japan in the wake of the dissolution of the Tokugawa shogunate.<sup>5</sup> Kurosawa moves from "Poisonville," as it is known to the locals in *Red Harvest*, to a nameless, poisoned village, both grim sites of dusty death.

Within this basic narrative structure, Kurosawa also borrows a distinctive plot device from *Red Harvest*. Both the nameless protagonist of the novel, an operative of the Continental Detective Agency, and Kurosawa's *samurai* succeed in their tasks of eliminating evil from their respective locales by masterfully playing both sides against the middle. As each character engineers and manipulates events to goad the opposing sides into a decisive showdown, they gradually extract themselves from the fray. Their timely exits allow them to return and dispatch any survivors.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> Other than a brief mention in Stuart Galbraith's *The Emperor and the Wolf* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2002), to my knowledge there has been no scholarly examination of the connection between *Yojimbo* and *Red Harvest*.

In the case of Kurosawa's wily *ronin*, this device draws heavily on the ability of *shikin Zen* to liberate the warrior pupil from a fear of death. Once this type of transcendence is achieved, the warrior engages death in everything he does, defeating it through a constant awareness of its presence. As such, others must die for this defeat to occur, as the warrior harnesses through physical violence the "freedom of action and creativity" associated with his transcendence.<sup>6</sup> As this state is vital to the actions of his protagonist, Kurosawa meticulously establishes the Zen fabric of the film in his opening sequence. This accentuates the later threads of *shikin Zen* that appear at key intervals.

The movie opens with a wide-angle shot of a mountain range. A figure strides in from the right, stops, fidgets, scratches his head, then thrusts his hand back into his robe. The camera moves left, following the figure as it draws in closer to his back. This back is towards the audience, suggesting distance and inapproachability, but the camera now in close-up implies an intimacy with that distance, a familiarity within that space. The fact that only a back is shown encourages a consideration of anonymity: Is it a burden to be borne or a freedom from entanglements that becomes burdensome?



**To pass the second installment of the film's living *shikin Zen*, the *ronin* sees himself along the path.**

Next, a languorous long shot that cannot fully match the speed of the *ronin* in motion furthers this sense of anonymity. Even as the camera gradually glides accordingly from left to right, it reveals only small swaths of the *ronin's* profile. His features persistently eschew scrutiny, implying that the audience will be forever on his tail, trailing just behind, never quite catching up. Foreshadowing the Zen detective's own living unpredictability, we will never know what he is thinking, or how he will act.

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<sup>6</sup> Leggett, *Samurai Zen*, p. 15.

Kurosawa's mysterious treatment of the main character immediately arouses the audience's curiosity and attention, and intensifies the presence of the *ronin* on the screen. This supports the strength and stature suggested by earlier shots of his back, and emphasizes the swiftness of the *ronin's* stride. This emphasis distills the samurai's physical form to pure movement.

Kurosawa maintains this movement with a pan down from the *ronin's* profile to a tracking shot detailing the *ronin's* sandals in the dust. Anchoring the *ronin's* feet in the bottom of the frame, Kurosawa firmly plants him on multiple paths. With a simple pedestrian image, Kurosawa vividly illustrates the wanderlust of the *ronin* intersecting with the warrior pupil's pursuit of transcendence. Kurosawa delineates this further with a directional variation between the camera's movement to the left during the profile sequence, and its subsequent shift towards the right to capture the *ronin's* sandals in the dust.

This intersection converges at a crossroads, where Kurosawa finally reveals the full figure of the *ronin* in a wide-angle shot that places him at the center of the film's universe, balanced, attuned, and whole. His many paths have been reduced to one; his disunity of mind and body has been resolved. When the *ronin* picks up a stick lying by the road, throws it in the air, and departs in the direction it lands, this simple act captures the atmosphere of the Zen detective.



As the *ronin* follows the path, it becomes evident that he alone is poised to rid it of its poisons. The path leads him to a village wracked with crime and corruption, and a wide-angle shot places the *ronin* in perspective with the evil entrenched in the village. This wickedness looms as large as the ominous background of the village architecture, but is most volatile in the village streets. The very first village dweller the *ronin* encounters is a dog carrying a human hand in its mouth. This initiates Kurosawa's living *shikin Zen*, a visual trial for both samurai and audience.

The *shikin Zen* in question is almost an irreverent variation on that most clichéd of *kōans*, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Kurosawa's answer, whether a paradox of horror and tenderness, a perverse meditation on loyalty, or merely extremely sharp black humor, dramatizes the depravity and desiccation seizing the city. As he adapts the *kōan* to fit the demands of cinema, Kurosawa intertwines entertainment and enlightenment, replacing the interview with the image to test the Zen aptitude of his characters and his viewers. The *ronin's* response to the visual riddle posed by the image of the dog demonstrates precisely how "*shikin Zen* alludes to answers that, when attained, give freedom from the fear of death and from entangling concerns about what is happening and what is going to happen, which leads to freedom of action and creativity."<sup>7</sup>

For the audience, this also ensures freedom from the fear of boredom. The *ronin's* wry look as the dog scurries past earns him passage through this initial installment of cinematic *shikin Zen*, setting the tone for the chain of events that immediately follows. Slicing off an arm with ease, the *ronin* finds his answer to the living *shikin Zen* of the dog in a show of strength that causes his worth as a *yojimbo*, or bodyguard, to skyrocket. As he enters into the conflict between Seibeï and Ushitora, the two crime bosses vying for the village, the *ronin* advances to the second example of *shikin Zen* in the film.

Joining the ranks of Seibeï for a princely sum, the *ronin* overhears his new boss scheming to dispose of him once he has helped dispatch his rival Ushitora. In response, the *ronin* immediately assumes a self-effacing air, downplaying his skills and identity. When questioned for his name, the *ronin* peers through an open door towards blooming mulberry bushes swaying in the breeze, and replies "Kuwabatake Sanjuro," or "Mulberry Field, Age 30." His irreverence disarms just as much as his sword, displaying the range of "freedom of action and creativity" he wields.

The *ronin's* response to this rendition of the hackneyed *kōan*, "Wherever you go, there you are," aligns his external environment with his internal identity, preserving his anonymity while heightening his status as a variable, unpredictable presence. Transparently comical or vengefully lethal, he embodies intangibles that could tip the scales between the feuding gangs. Only the *ronin* himself knows who he is and what he is capable of.

His potential is enough to precipitate Seibeï's attack on Ushitora in a midday showdown between the rival gangs. However, as both gangs

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

assemble along the village's main road, the *ronin* dramatically rejects Seibei's contract in a public gesture of severance. Scrambling up the village's bell tower, the *ronin* gleefully awaits the end of evil in the village as both gangs begin to brawl. Visually, his vantage point emphasizes his own transcendence, illustrating the effects of his "freedom of action and creativity" when harnessed in the pursuit of good.

However, the surprise arrival of a government official interrupts this decisive battle, triggering assassination, an aborted truce, multiple kidnappings, the dreaded double-cross, hostage swapping, murder, and torture. Throughout these grisly episodes, the *ronin* once again relies on his freedom of action and creativity to eradicate the evil he faces. His presentation of strength, his presence as a warrior, and his honed spontaneity merge in the final illustration of *shikin Zen* in the film.

Imprisoned and tortured by Ushitora for aiding a peasant family's escape from the village, the *ronin* himself escapes, and convalesces in a small temple in the village cemetery. Gradually regaining his physical strength, he restores his Zen balance through the practice of knife throwing. Releasing leaves into the gentle breeze blowing through the temple, the *ronin* submits his skills to randomness, which he conquers with each successful strike. This beautiful juxtaposition of precision and unpredictability, attention and detachment, and spontaneity and strategy, punctuates the Zen detective's readiness to face Ushitora and his gang in a final confrontation. As he triumphs over the last vestiges of evil in the village, the Zen detective, bodyguard of randomness, spontaneity, and death, exits the village exactly as he came, penniless, with the wind at his back and a smile on his face.