

“IN THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI”

DIFFERENCE AND CONNECTION IN *SAMURAI CHAMPLOO*

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When Shinichiro Watanabe conceived of *Samurai Champloo*, his primary objective was to entertain. As he explained in a 2006 interview: “When I make a new anime, it’s no fun for me if I make something that I’m not interested in, so in the case of *Samurai Champloo* I took two things that I’m very interested in – hip-hop and old samurai shows, especially the sword fighting shows – and I combined them together.”² The first episode opens with a disclaimer: “This work of fiction is not an accurate historical portrayal. Like we care. Now shut up and enjoy the show.” From that moment viewers are plunged into an innovative, mind-boggling display of shameless anachronism, highlighting the amalgamation of modern-day hip-hop and Edo Period (1600-1868) samurai culture. Contingent upon our detachment from any conventional understanding of Japanese history, we can observe with fascination a world where samurai wear glasses, breakdancing is a form of kendo, and swordfights are set to hardcore and beat-heavy hip-hop music – all the while marveling at how supposed incompatibility gives way to harmony.

The thematic construction of *Champloo* casts it beyond mere entertainment, creating a web of conceptual possibilities that are worth exploring regardless of whether or not they were deliberate. By inserting a phenomenon of western popular culture into the setting of historical Japan and depicting their parallelism through the essentially Japanese medium of anime, *Champloo* activates the portrayal of cultural identity to provide an original perspective on the issue of globalization: as the characters of the show ultimately learn, an emphasis upon individuality and difference is compatible with a connection and even an alliance with others.

Globalization is often perceived to be a promotion of assimilation between cultures, wherein their connection makes it difficult for them to sustain their uniqueness. According to James Watson, “In popular usage, *Globalization* is linked to the idea that advanced capitalism, aided by digital and electronic technologies, will eventually destroy local traditions and create a homogenized, world culture.”³ A fear that accompanies development and increased connectivity is that cultures will undergo a sort of Darwinistic battle, obliterating all but the strongest and the most pervasive. Culture itself is a hazy concept, for as Watson notes, it “is no longer perceived as a preprogrammed mental library” but rather as “a set of ideas, attributes, and expectations that is constantly changing as people react to changing circumstances.”⁴

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2 Watanabe, interview with Pedro Mendes, trans. Ian Condry, (CBC, Detroit, 2006). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of Watanabe are from this interview.

3 Watson, “Globalization in Asia: Anthropological Perspectives” in *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*, ed. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Deiree Baolian Qin-Hilliard (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 143.

4 *Ibid.*, 145.

Culture is never stationary: the question is, what matters to those who control it? Contrary to popular theories of globalization, Watson asserts that local culture – “the experience of everyday life in specific, identifiable localities” – remains important to most people.⁵ In particular, as Robert Bellah recognizes, the discourse about the Japanese – *nihonjinron* – is infused with an overriding theme of Japanese uniqueness: “it would seem that in dealing with the different, understanding one’s own uniqueness becomes more important.”⁶ Like many other societies, the Japanese search for ways to incorporate the new and growing framework of global ideas and concepts into an established cultural framework of philosophies and traditions, combating the notion that globalization will lead to a decimation of unique local cultures.

Exemplifying this concept, *Champoo* manages to harmonize cultural connection, invigorating certain elements of traditional Japanese culture by interpreting them through modern-day hip-hop. The word *champoo* is an anglicization of the traditional Okinawan word *champuru*, which is translated most simply as “blend,” though Ian Condry specifies it as a reference to stew: “a mixing of everything to see what comes out.”⁷ In a sense, the idea of *champuru* parallels the hip-hop concept of a remix, which Watanabe cites as a conscious creative technique for the show: “As people do in hip-hop, taking old jazz and soul records, sampling them, and making something new, I did the same thing with *Samurai Champloo*... I took images and ideas from old samurai films... and remixed them... to make something very new that was appropriate for today’s age.” The medium of anime provides the flexibility required for such innovation, for as Susan Napier suggests, “the world of anime itself occupies its own space that is not necessarily coincident with that of Japan.”⁸ However, what distinguishes the world of *Samurai Champloo* from the dream-like, fantastical worlds of other anime is that its alternate, anachronistic reality still manifests itself as an essentially Japanese period drama. The worlds of hip-hop and samurai do not override one another – they *blend*.

Watanabe’s decision to blend the seemingly incongruous elements of samurai and hip-hop was not entirely arbitrary. “One of the things that makes samurai and hip-hop very similar,” he says, “is that in the old days samurai felt very strongly about representing themselves... with their one sword, and rappers today are also the ones who take one microphone and represent who they are.” The show’s cultural combination flows in two directions: it sends hip-hop (and various other modern concepts) back in time, but it also invites viewers to contemplate the applicability of historical situations to modern culture. In a globalizing world, the necessity to establish and distinguish identities – to “represent” – has become increasingly important. Since the late 19th century, when the process of modernization began in Japan, the idea of synthesis – blending – has permeated the Japanese struggle to maintain cultural identity while accepting Western influence. Robert Scalapino observes that the forces of “Westernism” and “Japonism” “represented a continuation of the historic elements *yin* and *yang*... symbolizing black and white, male and female, the union of opposites that was the essence of creativity and life.”⁹ Yet, while the overarching process of modernization mirrors (and includes) Watanabe’s blending of samurai culture and hip-hop, the thematic construction of *Champoo* suggests that these elements are not necessarily opposites. *Champoo* potentially defines Japanese identity through the capacity for identification: the influence of Western culture does not have to overwhelm Japanese culture because Japanese culture – even in its premodern

5 Ibid., 146.

6 Bellah, *Imagining Japan: The Japanese Tradition and Its Modern Interpretation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 55-56.

7 Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 85.

8 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 24.

9 Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization – The Japanese Case” in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 97.

state – is compatible with certain Western cultural constructions. For this reason, the Japanese people can remain true to many traditional values and practices while enacting them within the framework of a global, modern society.

Condry addresses the complexities of the “shape-shifting amalgam” of Japanese culture and hip-hop in his fascinating book, *Hip-Hop in Japan*.¹⁰ Central to his argument is the assertion that Japanese culture cannot be objectively defined; in order to witness the reality of hip-hop in Japan, we must observe it as it is individually performed in *genba*, or nightclubs – the “actual sites.”¹¹ Within these *genba*, we can witness how people construct their cultural identities in unique ways. Some choose to blend aspects of traditional culture with global modern culture; however, as Condry notes, many modern hip-hoppers merely don a “traditional” samurai image as a sort of costume.¹² In reality, the actual meaning of the samurai “has always been very much contested” – and for this reason, “battling samurai can be seen as evoking a contest over the meaning of Japaneseness, more than a particular national character.”¹³

Champloo explores two potential implications of this understanding. First of all, it depicts the conflicts of Edo Period samurai in action, allowing historical Japan to become yet another *genba* where the active construction of identity may be observed. Also, because it takes place in a time of discontent among the samurai, *Champloo* corroborates Condry’s argument that the concept of “battling samurai” is indicative of the internal conflicts experienced by the samurai class, which can be used to “explain a widening diversity within Japan’s scene amid a deepening global connectedness.”¹⁴ In a way, then, the situation of the samurai is applicable to the modern dilemma of globalization. Through the blending of samurai and hip-hop in *Champloo*, Watanabe materializes the connection between the historical and modern search for identity. This connection, while it is based upon a shared experience of conflict and difference across eras of history, actually serves to emphasize the similarity between these eras.

It is important to recognize that Japanese society has often been noted for its collectivist tendencies.¹⁵ Bellah describes Japan as a “non-axial” society, one that has managed to preserve an “archaic heritage” wherein “self and society were seen as embedded in the natural cosmos.”¹⁶ In the Tokugawa era, there was a significant “resurgence of Shinto,” which Bellah claims was promoted by Kokugaku thinkers to emphasize “collective solidarity under the aegis of the Shinto gods.”¹⁷ Furthermore, according to Scalapino, “Japanese political theory traditionally considered the family to be the atom in human society, the elemental unit that could not be split. The individual was thus a part, never a whole.”¹⁸ Japan’s social organization, then, is often considered to be incompatible with individualism. In her book, *The Taming of the Samurai*, Eiko Ikegami takes issue with this assumption. She explains how the samurai culture of honor “mediates between individual aspirations and the judgment of society,” consistently involving a conscious decision on the part of the samurai to engage in service in order to achieve higher social

10 Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 5.

11 Ibid., 2.

12 Ibid., 28.

13 Ibid., 52.

14 Ibid., 49.

15 Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

16 Bellah, *Imagining Japan*, 6-7.

17 Ibid., 27-28.

18 Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization,” 96.

standing and/or enhance personal self-esteem – a process which she terms “honorific individualism.”¹⁹ While this system was designed to promote order and collectivism, its ultimate effect was empowerment. Particularly during the Tokugawa era, when “the shogunate placed the values of law and order above those that had governed the medieval lives of the samurai,” the samurai retained a “sense of individuality” which had “the potential to generate change by risking the violation of conformist norms.”²⁰

Champloo, which takes place during the Tokugawa shogunate, displays this potential through the individuality of its main characters. The character Jin, a vagrant *ronin* (masterless samurai) would appear at first glance to represent the stereotypical value system of classical Japan – he has been raised to follow *bushido*, and though he anachronistically wears glasses to suit the anime standard of a stoic “glasses type,” his taciturn, reserved demeanor suggests his strict adherence to samurai discipline. Similarly, his calculated and unassailable deftness with the sword reveals that he has been classically-trained in the martial arts. However, from the very beginning we witness the disillusionment he feels as a result of his social displacement. Addressing a group of Yagyu swordsmen who are about to cut down a peasant who has failed to pay his debt, Jin says bitterly: “To serve your lord and do his bidding... is that honor?”²¹ “Of course it is,” the men reply. Stone-faced, Jin retorts: “Even when that lord is a piece of shit nobody?” In a society where “peace” has left many samurai unemployed, Jin inevitably questions the value of unconditional service. What happens when a samurai can choose his own battles?

The character Mugen, who appears in many ways to be the *yin* to Jin’s *yang*, has been choosing his own battles since birth. Raised among criminals and thugs on the Ryukyu Islands (known today as Okinawa), Mugen is brash, tactless, and proudly uncivilized; his style of fighting is a chaotic and improvisational blend of all the moves he has encountered over the years, which in action closely resembles the modern phenomenon of breakdancing.²² In fact, Mugen’s characterization is the most visibly parallel to the hip-hop ideal – though, according to Watanabe, “It’s not so much that Mugen represents hip-hop, but that he is representing *himself*,” just as many rappers do today.²³ Mugen has developed a rather incorrigible distaste for authority, and consistently defies orders just for the hell of it – as Kazuya Nakai, Mugen’s Japanese *seiyuu* (voice actor), explains, “he’s always on edge and doesn’t follow any set of rules.”²⁴ His ultimate goal in life is to become stronger, and he makes a point to start fights with anyone “interesting” just to affirm his legitimacy and “represent” himself in a world that has dealt him a bad hand. Despite his talent and unmistakable enthusiasm, Mugen’s constant self-promotion correlates with a sort of emotional isolationism – he is performing at a *genba* where no one listening. But what can a rough-and-tumble warrior stand for if not raw power?

Despite their clear individuality, Mugen and Jin both struggle intensely due to the fact that they are essentially wanderers. As a *ronin*, Jin feels lost without someone to serve, and Mugen sees no need to serve anyone but himself. The circumstances of these two men left them without families or masters, and similarly disconnected from any prescribed duty, such that their duty inevitably transferred to the preservation and advancement of the self. Due to the pride that accompanies their individualism, they are thrown into a raucous duel from the moment they first meet, and throughout the show they are determined

19 Ikegami, 23, 11. In the epilogue to her book, Ikegami emphasizes the fact that the samurai’s honorific individualism could inspire both conformist and nonconformist tendencies: “the ultimate decision about whether or not to conform would be his own and no other’s” (370).

20 Ibid., 238, 11.

21 Note that all quotations from the show are translations of the original Japanese taken from the official DVD subtitles.

22 Dave Land, ed., *Roman Album: Samurai Champloo* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2007), 4.

23 It is interesting to consider that Mugen’s name in Japanese means “infinite,” which indicates his timelessness, though it may also refer in part to his ability to constantly postpone his own death.

24 Land, *Roman Album*, 72.

to kill one another. Their duel is put on hold, however, when a young girl, Fuu, promises to save them from execution on the condition that they assist her in finding “the samurai who smells of sunflowers.” As a result, the three form a sort of hodge-podge family – wanderers are given a clear purpose, and the stage is set for a complex process of identity development.

The journey of these three travelers places them in predicaments that ask many of the same social questions faced by modern audiences, and their responses to these questions display their increasing awareness of the world’s injustices. One of their first conflicts revolves around a quarrel between Yakuza gangs in episodes 3 and 4 (“Hellhounds for Hire”).²⁵ Condry points out the continuing effect of the Yakuza way of life on Japan’s youth, and cites the role that hip-hop has played in releasing them from a path of crime and destruction, providing “alternative paths to status and pleasure for its adopters.”²⁶

Through hip-hop, Yakuza members can potentially break from their virtual enslavement and discover their power as individuals. Mugen, with his bold tendency to rely only on his own abilities, is quick to recognize the oppression of Yakuza bureaucracy. Realizing that the head of the Nagatomi gang is using him merely as a symbol of power, he questions the Yakuza’s motivation: “So this ‘power’ you keep talking about is the power to control other people?” With a tone of utter disgust, he scoffs, “I ain’t interested in that crap. I don’t wanna rule or BE ruled, either one.” Soon after, he encounters Ishimatsu, a member of the gang who has remained in its employ against his better judgment. “It’s not enough to live by your skills,” Ishimatsu says, regretfully. “Sometimes you have to agree to something even when you think it’s wrong.” Mugen scoffs again. “Don’t spend your life making excuses to yourself,” he says. “YOU’RE the one who decides how to live your life.” This philosophy, which permeates the show’s thematic organization, is the central thread that weaves together the samurai culture of the Edo Period and the liberating hip-hop culture of today.

Over the course of the show, the three main characters encounter another kind of oppression that showcases the infamous isolationist policy of pre-modern Japan. In episode 6 (“Stranger Searching”)²⁷ they find themselves harboring a man who calls himself Jouji, a foreigner from Holland who is constantly met with expulsion orders from the government. He is allowed to stay only when it is revealed that he is Izaak Titsingh, the Chief Merchant of the Dutch East India Company’s Japan branch. This development exemplifies one of the most intriguing trends in *Champloo*, that although it is notoriously anachronistic, it essentially remains true to the progression of history – pre-modern Japan, despite its isolationism, did accept some influence from the Dutch.²⁸ But what truly sets this foreigner’s story apart is his intense admiration for Japanese culture. This admiration is driven by the fact that he is homosexual – while his homeland shunned him, he found solace in Saikaku Ihara’s *bushido* discourse, “The Great Mirror of Male Love.” In keeping with the show’s overarching tendency to display the relevance of issues in historical Japan to those faced by modern society, Watanabe playfully alludes to the fact that notions of sexual deviance only arrived in Japan with the influx of Western influence in the Meiji Era (1868-1912).²⁹

In a later recap episode, he outlines this pattern more explicitly through a voiceover: “There has been a recent uproar over rampant sexuality in the country’s youth. However, the Japanese people originally had a rather open-minded view towards sexuality, and it was especially liberal during the Edo Period... On the contrary, then, one could say that they have merely returned to the values of the Edo Period.”

25 The in-text titles of episodes represent the alliterative English renaming. The Japanese title of episodes 3 and 4 is “Tacit Understanding.”

26 Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 64.

27 Japanese title: “The Red-Haired Foreigner.”

28 Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization,” 94.

29 Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theater, Gender, and Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 27-28.

Thus, in the midst of a portrayal of Japan's diplomatic inflexibility, Watanabe still manages to highlight the internal open-mindedness of Japanese culture. Moreover, while Japan's isolationist policy places an emphasis on cultural difference, Jouji's example exhibits the possibility that someone can connect to a culture distinctly different from the one in which he was raised.

Over the course of the show, it is revealed that the sunflower samurai Fuu seeks is her father, Seizo Kasumi, who played an instrumental role in the Shimabara Rebellion, an uprising of Japanese peasants, most of them Christians, in 1637–1638 during the Edo period. This rebellion, while it was quashed by the Shogunate, represented the effect of many peasants' connection to an early influence of Western society upon Japan – the spread of Christianity. As Bellah notes, “Christians played a role out of all proportion to their numbers in the cause of social reform in the period before World War II.”³⁰ When Christian peasants rose up against their daimyo, they displayed how the willingness to choose one's own battles can derive from devotion to a particular cause. Incidentally, the events in the final three episodes inspire each of the main characters to display their devotion to one another, and in doing so, come to terms with their respective pasts. When Fuu is captured by three men who seek vengeance for the crimes Mugen committed against them as a pirate, Jin orders Mugen to go take care of her – and Mugen's typically rebellious character is momentarily trumped by a sense of obligation to his companions.³¹ Jin is then left to confront Kagetoki Kariya, the samurai administrator sent to execute Fuu's father – and the same man who persuaded Jin's former master, Enshirou Mariya, to kill Jin and turn the dojo into a band of assassins. We learn that Jin killed his master out of self-defense, and it was this incident that left him alone and frustrated with the apparent decline of samurai culture. “The age of the samurai will probably come to an end soon,” Kariya explains to Jin. “I hate to say it, but it looks like I was born into the wrong era. I was, as were you.”

What Kariya does not realize is that Jin has discovered a code of honor for the individualized samurai: he can choose, of his own volition, to fight for something he believes in. “For my whole life, I've fought only for myself,” Jin says. “My study of the sword was for no one but myself. But now...” Employing a sacrificial sword technique his former master taught him, Jin puts his life on the line to protect Fuu and promote justice in place of a political system that he views as exploitative and morally bankrupt. This technique, it seems, is the only one that could possibly defeat Kariya – a technique that values loyalty and individually-defined honor over mere self-preservation. In a way, Jin's rebellion against government regulation illustrates the “Confucian redirection of samurai standards of morality” which Ikegami describes as emphasizing “the inner moral quality of a person as the basis for measuring honor.”³²

Overall, the development of the *Champloo*'s main characters is materialized in a search for identity. Is it enough to wander aimlessly? To fight just to get stronger? When they are placed into circumstances that challenge their previously self-centered concepts of individualism, Both Mugen and Jin learn that their identity can be defined by the causes for which they choose to fight. At the heart of their cause is the connection that allows the tension between characters with very clear differences to develop into a spirit of unity and, eventually, friendship. At the end of the final episode, Jin and Mugen, battered and war-torn, discuss the life-altering effect of their unusual journey. “Up until now, whenever I met somebody who was tougher than me, I couldn't rest until I'd killed the guy,” Mugen says, alluding to the vendetta he and

30 Bellah, *Imagining Japan*, 42.

31 Interestingly enough, this obligation is, in fact, not an obligation at all – prior to this incident, Fuu released Jin and Mugen from her “service” and leaves them secretly due to the fact that it would have been too painful for her to say goodbye. Mugen comes to her aid regardless. His devotion to her thus becomes a more legitimate component of his individualism – and his obedience to Jin's command exemplifies the developing relationship between two characters who were previously in animosity.

32 Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 299.

Jin held against one another throughout the entire show. “But now... I don’t feel like killin’ you at all.” Insofar as Mugen more explicitly represents hip-hop and Jin represents the more traditional samurai, one might say that this declaration indicates the potential harmony between the two. In response, Jin smiles – something he rarely does. “I, too, feel as if I’ve finally found what I’ve been searching for all this time,” he says. “I have been alone my entire life... you are the first friends I have ever made.” These characters, who were previously aimless and almost reckless in their individualism, find true fulfillment in their connection to one another.

Condry’s brief discussion of *Champoo* in *Hip-Hop Japan* describes the show as an exploration of the heterogeneity of Japanese culture that “ultimately questioned the oneness of the Japanese people.”³³ The show consistently depicts the discrimination faced by foreigners, Christians, and other social outcasts; a memorable episode depicts an Ainu bowman who faces a death sentence from the same police force that contributed to the destruction of his hometown. Condry points to this emphasis upon difference as evidence that the prevalence of hip-hop culture in Japan is not paradoxical, because “Japaneseness is not something encoded in one’s genes.”³⁴ Concurrent with the theme of cultural difference is the theme of respect: the emphasis upon freedom and self-determination that characterizes the hip-hop spirit of the show makes the main characters – and the audience – sympathetic toward the oppressed figures. Mugen and Fuu, for example, each form a bond with the Ainu bowman, and eventually show a deep admiration for his persistence in the face of discrimination.

This emphasis on respect is indicative of the sort of battle that modern-day samurai choose to fight, particularly as hip-hop artists attempt to provide a liberating perspective on the issue of race. As Joe Wood explains, “The Japanese have long perceived themselves, and been perceived by others, as one homogenous group, racially, ethnically and culturally identical.”³⁵ However, he also argues that this perception has changed as the Japanese become increasingly aware of heterogeneity within their own society – the presence of “others” makes them respectful of differences.³⁶ According to Napier, “in contrast to the melting-pot vision of American cultural hegemony, Japanese society remains deeply aware of plurality and otherness.”³⁷

An understanding of culture that allows “otherness” to persist rather than promoting assimilation suggests that difference may be complemented with a sort of unity that *defends* that difference, even on a global level. Condry argues that “a transnational politics of race requires thinking not only of the multiple origin points of heritage but a re-imagining of the links that can lead to a more promising future.”³⁸ As individuals actively perform their cultural identities in a distinctive way, they can promote a deeper respect for difference through the power of ideological connection.

Accordingly, the draw of hip-hop culture is its capacity to *communicate* – represent – identity in a way that allows others to connect to it. While the traditional samurai weapon was the sword, the weapon of modern-day samurai is language. In episode 18 (“War of the Words”),³⁹ which is perhaps the most rampantly anachronistic of all the episodes, Jin is initially disgusted with the disrespectful behaviour of the Niwa brothers, who neglected to assume their prescribed role as masters of Gojuu Hall, choosing instead to immerse themselves in the exhilarating (while not-quite-yet-invented) art of graffiti. “As brothers, should you not be helping one another and mastering the path that your father handed down to

33 Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 85.

34 Ibid., 85.

35 Wood, “The Yellow Negro,” in *Transition* 73 (1997), 42.

36 Ibid., 60.

37 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 192.

38 Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 45.

39 Japanese title: “Master of Pen and Sword.”

you?” Jin asks. Their response? “Nobody takes over as heads of families or follows in their father’s footsteps anymore.”

The Niwa brothers’ attitude reflects the same sense of displacement that Jin himself feels in a “peaceful” era when the traditional samurai culture seems to be in decline. Jin eventually sees how the Niwa brothers’ graffiti, while unconventional, is a mode of self-representation that runs parallel to the art of the sword. In fact, as Jin himself notes, when they tag Hiroshima castle they are “getting revenge in their own way” – revenge against the lord who was responsible for the death of their father. Interestingly enough, the Niwa brothers’ situation – and to an extent, the situation of Jin himself – bears a striking resemblance to that of a modern example that Ikegami cites in her book: a middle-aged man, irritated by the outcome of a series of political scandals, vandalized the street facade of the public prosecutor’s office in Tokyo before issuing an explanatory statement to bystanders.⁴⁰ In an interview, the protester claimed to take inspiration from the historical example of Ōishi Kuranosuke Yoshio, the leader the Forty-seven Samurai who took revenge on a government official for shaming their lord: “Ōishi’s action was not simply taking revenge for his master. By his action he protested the unjust decisions of the public authority; that was why the people of that period were so excited about his act of revenge.”⁴¹ Like this protestor, many individualized warriors can find a true source of empowerment in the ability to communicate the causes that define their identities.

In this same episode, it is revealed that Mugen is unable to read – and he is subsequently abducted by a *sensei* (teacher) named Bundai, who resolves to teach him how. “You can keep trying to solve all your problems by force the way you’re doing now,” Bundai shouts fanatically, “but that won’t stop the world from turning. You can’t build a castle if all you’ve got is carpenters.” Language, Bundai explains, is the force that allows people to truly leave their mark on the world. The power gained from battling with a sword, while it can be liberating, does not always have an enduring effect in overall society – in fact, it typically contributes to one’s alienation. Because communication can potentially foster a deeper ideological connection with others, it is the building block for a legacy on a wider scale: it lets the world know that you stand for something.

The debate between force and communication runs parallel to the reevaluation of political structure in post-war Japan, when conservative and nationalist military government failed in its attempt to achieve imperial ascendancy. Previously, the mobilization of the masses had involved an “enforced interiorization of a homogenous will” that contributed to “the formation of a national cultural identity” that international warfare could empower;⁴² after the war, however, circumstances pushed Japan toward an acceptance of democracy, or a government (ideally) characterized by less imposition and more individual autonomy.⁴³

Though this development itself was undoubtedly the result of Western influence, it enforced the belief that the only power to define identity rests within the individual – a belief which Ikegami also attributes to the warrior society of premodern Japan: “In the elitist honor culture of that period there flourished the strong belief that the ultimate responsibility for... creating an honorific identity belonged not to society as a whole but to each member of that society.”⁴⁴ And when individuals are free to communicate the foundations of their identities, they can connect constructively with their peers to gain respect through understanding rather than violent force.

40 Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 367.

41 Ibid., 367.

42 Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 29.

43 Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization,” 119.

44 Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 370.

The process of connection, then, applies to more than the overall “global connectedness” of the modern world – it can also describe the means by which people maintain their uniqueness as they define their identities in that world. Just as the characters of the show connect emotionally and people of different cultural backgrounds can connect ideologically through a promotion of respect, it has become increasingly popular for individuals in modern society to connect to the culture of the past. The Japanese concern with preserving cultural identity in the face of modernization coincides with extensive debate over what it means to be “Japanese,” and it has become increasingly evident that there is not one true definition.

However, the Japanese are aware that at a general level “Japanese-ness” can be sought within the cultural foundation that predated significant influence from the West.⁴⁵ Indeed, in the early stages of modernization, Japanese authorities sought to enforce sustained “Japanese-ness” through an emphasis on their unique historical tradition.⁴⁶ Nowadays, the Japanese are free to determine for themselves what makes them unique, but many continue to look back to their traditional heritage as a way of promoting the distinctiveness of their cultural definition. As Shunsuke Tsurumi suggests, “Edo culture has come to be esteemed by younger people in Japan.”⁴⁷ They see historical Japanese culture not as outdated and irrelevant to modern times, but rather as a wealth of material that they can draw upon and translate within the framework of contemporary society.

To be sure, Watanabe explicitly states that *Champoo* is not consciously designed to “protect Japan’s unique traditions and culture” – he deliberately infused the show with diversity in order to prevent it from seeming nationalistic.⁴⁸ However, because *Champoo* portrays the culture of Edo Japan in a manner that highlights its compatibility with modern society, it inevitably invites people to make use of Japan’s unique historical culture as they design their identities – a process which is more individualistic than nationalistic because it promotes personally-localized diversity in the midst of globalization. It is interesting to note that *Champoo* alludes in episode 5 (“Artistic Anarchy”)⁴⁹ to the fact that Van Gogh received inspiration in his painting from Japanese woodblock prints, and Tsurumi cites such realizations as promoting an awareness among 20th century Japanese artists of the “values of the Japanese culture preceding the Meiji period.”⁵⁰ In the midst of rapid Westernization, Japan had to rediscover its own culture. Today, as the Japanese people increasingly embrace aspects of traditional culture in their construction of modern identities, they contribute to the process by which Japanese society remains unique in a globalizing world.

Incidentally, it is this very uniqueness that has come to attract many Western people to the productions of Japanese society. Despite America’s reputation for encouraging cultural assimilation, the process of globalization has produced a sort of reverberation whereby Americans begin to see Japanese culture less as something to be altered and more as something to be admired. Roland Kelts explains in his book *Japanamerica* that Americans are experiencing a sense of “transcultural longing,” partly fueled by their acknowledgement that America is a “relatively young nation” with a cultural history that pales in

45 It must always be remembered that Japan was subject to a great number of influences long before it ever came into contact with the West. As Robert Bellah notes, “Although it is tempting to think of Japan as an ‘insular’ culture developing in its own way relatively independent of the rest of the world, this has never been true. Significant changes in mainland East Asia, usually China, and later in the world at large, have always had repercussions in Japan” *Imagining Japan*, 9.

46 Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization,” 118.

47 Tsurumi, “Edo Period in Contemporary Popular Culture,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, 18:4 (1984), 755.

48 Land, *Roman Album*, 44.

49 Japanese title: “Falling on Deaf Ears.”

50 Tsurumi, “Edo Period in Contemporary Popular Culture,” 754.

comparison to the extensive history of Japan, and partly fueled by their increasing fascination with the Japanese artistic medium of anime.⁵¹

Champloo incorporates each of these factors. Aired on *Cartoon Network* in 2005, it allowed American viewers to form their own understanding of the value of Japanese culture while observing the interplay between historical Japan and the Western invention of hip-hop. It exposes America to the unique within the frame of the familiar. In this manner, *Champloo* capable of inspiring Western viewers with an appreciation for Japanese culture; the actual content of the show, as we have seen, promotes connection *despite*, cultural, or even temporal difference. However, as it is portrayed through the medium of anime, *Champloo* promotes another kind of appreciation – one that results from connection *because* of difference. As Napier argues, “one major (if not *the* major) attraction of anime is that it is ‘different.’”⁵² On the one hand, anime is the result of Japan’s unique cultural tendency to be “more pictocentric than the cultures of the West,”⁵³ and as Kelts notes, the medium is characterized by “the pronounced aesthetic influence of many of Japan’s classical traditions.”⁵⁴

Thus, some Americans may be attracted to the distinctiveness of the form itself. However, American viewers also appreciate anime because it is less predictable than many American cultural productions; it occupies a more “provocative” world and contains “far more complicated story lines.”⁵⁵ As a thematic exploration of globalization and the relationship between modern and historical Japanese culture, *Champloo* certainly supports Napier’s theory that anime texts are capable of “stimulating audiences to work through contemporary issues in ways that older art forms cannot.”⁵⁶ American viewers appreciate anime shows such as *Champloo* because they explore complex themes while offering a distinct visual experience. America’s increasing fascination with Japanese productions indicates how, as Kelts observes, “Japan has been perfecting the practice of spreading its culture around the world – something the Americans used to do more effectively than anyone else.”⁵⁷ One might say that Japanese culture now has a globalizing force of its own.

In the form of internationally appealing entertainment, then, *Champloo* promotes a connection between vastly different individuals, races, eras, and cultural traditions. This connection is founded upon our ability to promote respect for difference through communication, as well as our willingness to appreciate difference as valuable in and of itself. As we explore our differences, regardless of our position in space or time, we can acknowledge the tendency and the right of all people to “represent” themselves in true hip-hop fashion. *Champloo*’s scenario writer Dai Sato offers a compelling summary of the issue at hand: “I think there’s a theme running through Jin and Mugen, which is how to fight in a society that touts peace on earth, and that is a problem young people of today also carry, right?”⁵⁸ When Jin questions a Buddhist priest about how man’s natural state of freedom can coincide with the duties of a warrior, the priest replies: “To simply accept yourself as you are, and as you live, to let it be – in this is freedom.”

In a globalizing world where individuality and difference are constantly threatened, we are *all* warriors, charged with the responsibility to construct and defend our own unique identities. As Watanabe notes, “I think that today’s rappers are hearkening back to that time in the Edo Period several hundred

51 Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 211.

52 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 245.

53 Ibid., 7.

54 Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 27.

55 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 10.

56 Ibid., 4.

57 Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 211.

58 Sato, “Staff Interview,” *Samurai Champloo Volume 03*, DVD Insert, n.p.

years ago in which Japanese were more expressive of themselves.” *Champloo* invigorates the mirror of the past, inviting viewers to keep that past alive as they express their unique identities in an era of global connectedness. One of the show’s closing songs, “Fly” by Force of Nature, announces: “The journey finally begins to seek out and awaken the ‘me’ that I’m sure lived long ago.” By connecting both to the past and to one another, we can constantly rediscover the depth of meaning that makes our identities worth defending.

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