

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sanshiro Sugata / Part Two (1945)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

The present film was directed near the end of the War, when Japan was close to defeat, and when the Japanese were hungry for positive images of themselves and their nation. The present film plunges directly into the issue of national pride, stressing Japanese prowess, whereas the first *Sanshiro Sugata* (Part I) stressed the prowess of an individual, trying to prove himself in Japan's national martial arts masculinity test. A brilliant exponent of Japanese martial art takes a brief beating from an American sailor, part of the occupying army, and then reverses strategy on him, dumping him off a pier into the Pacific. This is a snapshot of the propagandistic points Kurosawa is making.

Auteur We are tracking Kurosawa's films through the earliest development, during a period which coincided with a calamitous downfall for the nation of Japan and for its equally humbled war-partner, Germany. We can only imagine what a difficult occasion this state of affairs brought to a creative genius like Kurosawa, who was just finding his own creative center in a respectful veneration of many of the cultural landmarks of his own nation. Such however was the dilemma he faced, and in two of his earliest films, as we have seen, the director resorted to the noble Japanese tradition of martial arts, in which to work through his anomalous historical feelings. In other of his earliest films, like *The Most Beautiful* or *No Regrets for our Youth*. In both of those films Kurosawa finds a pathway toward praising his national traditions without obeisance to the deadly trap of jingoism.

Film It was not congenial for Kurosawa to compose a film without human complexity, and the present film came close to that low point. In fact we see the director pushed by circumstances--the economic stringencies of the wartime Japanese film industry-- to rework the thinking of an earlier film, Part One of *Sanshiro Sugata*. This is the first known instance, in Japanese film making, of the multi part film enterprise, which was also to take root in the American Film industry. One might say that it is a strategy adapted to the multi sided development of an individual film.

Historical Background We have to imagine that for Kurosawa these early films were a test of his commitment to the action of cinema. From the larger retrospect, the eventual survey we reach for, in which we will see Kurosawa's work in retrospect, we will comprehend the finesse, humane subtlety, and visual precision of this innovator. However circumstances of the most compelling kind were forcing him to create against his natural grain. His nation, which was his own voice, was going down to crushing defeat. The last days of the war were to be heralded by the dropping of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The end game was playing out as Kurosawa's cameras rolled, in the creation of such prefabricated propaganda films as *The Most Beautiful* or *Sanshiro Sugata*.

PLOT.

The film opens onto the power and challenge of the martial arts, which lie everywhere in the development of Japanese culture. This cultural ambience makes for the energy of Kurosawa's early film of *Sanshiro Sugata Part I*, in which a driven young man aspires to the nobility of supremacy in jiu jitsu or judo. In the second part of this young man's quest, for martial arts greatness, the status of judo master, he undergoes a series of tests designed to discover his potential for judo mastery. One level of testing is brought to the fore when the Higaki brothers--Higaki was the brutal fighter whom Sanshiro beat up at the end of Part I--appear seeking revenge for their brother's defeat. This revenge motif will be supplemented with the upright and noble attitude of Sanshiro toward American boxing and its presence in Japan. To

Sanshiro boxing seems vulgar and disgusting, and to the end he refuses the efforts of the local boxing promoter, to get him into the ring with a boxer. The film's constant endeavor remains to denigrate boxing as the sport of a doomed and decadent culture.

The most provocative drama, of the second part of the sequel, comes with the struggle of Higaki's brothers, to inflict defeat on Sanshiro. This time the crucial battle takes place on the crest of a snow-capped mountain side, and generates eerie tension, as it brings the two enraged brothers closer and closer to the edge of the precipice. Sanshiro is thus enabled to assert superior power over the two avengers, and yet the superiority attained in this way is not durable --and this is the point at which Sanshiro begins to become interesting, as he became in the first part of the Sanshiro saga. In the present instance it turns out, Sanshiro needs to purge himself of demons before he can come back into his full strength. It turns out that the root of Sanshiro's desolation lies in the dojo where he has been living, and where the majority of residents openly voice their preference for karate over judo, indeed cruelly mock the latter. So deeply has this atmosphere cut into Sanjiro that he must cleanse himself. He takes a jug of sake onto the dojo floor one night and drinks himself silly until one of his dojo mates sharply reprimands him. As other voices join the reprimand, Sanjiro is overcome with shame at his behavior. His self-remaking begins. It gets a boost from a retake of Sanshiro's romance with Miss Sayo, from Part I. In the course of his spiritual maturing, Sanshiro grows in reputation and respect.

CHARACTERS

Sanshiro Sugata, the principal actor, and personality in the film. We know him, in a slightly different version, from the first version of Sanshiro, in which the same elements of patriotism applied, and a similar brand of idealistic self-investigation. In the present film he is particularly concerned to downplay karate, to lay his personal stress on judo, and to express his disgust of boxing, as a crude western activity. He is also of unusual sensitivity, which leads him into night of drinking and self-purge as an inner expression of his alienation of the dojo where he is living.

American sailor; William Lister: the latter a publicized boxer, the former a hardy representative of American fistcuffs, who gets tossed in the ocean by a deft Sanshiro, to open Part II of the film.

Gennosuke Higaki: the karate master Sanshiro beats up at the end of Part I.

The Higaki brothers, avengers of their brother, who was beaten up by Sanshiro Sugata.

Miss Sayo This first heartthrob of Sanjiro remains a fleeting fixture in both parts of *Sanjiro Sugata*.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sanshiro Sugata is evidence of how hard he as the protagonist is working to toughen and build up his own character. Whereas Sanjiro is a fine martial artist, he is equally adept as a spiritual athlete. He is after all, pursuing the arts of excellence wherever he can find it, in personal or martial virtue.

THEMES

Patriotism With the winding down of WW II in Japan, and the resulting crisis of morale and confidence in the nation, creative artists like Kurosawa were called on to buoy up the national confidence and effort. There is no reason, on the face of it, to doubt Kurosawa's patriotism-- The Most Beautiful he praises the genuine self-sacrifice of women volunteers for military research, while in *No Regrets for our Youth* he sensitively explores the interplays of militarism vs pacifism in the intellectual milieu of the Japanese University. Yet where Kurosawa speaks out for his nation as in *The Most Beautiful*, he carefully introduces mocking tones, defending himself against the charge of naivete. No be super patriot I, he seems to be suggesting.

Judo. Founded in the second half of the nineteenth century, judo had its roots in classical Japanese martial art training. To Sanjiro, Judo represents the dignity and cool of the classical Japanese, essentially for the way in which the judo master builds on the weakness, or positional unpreparedness, of the opponent, and having created such a positional advantage enables the practitioner to make an effortless throw or pin.

Romance In both Parts of the *Sanshiro* sequel, Sayo is the romantic interest for Sanjiro. Each time Sanjiro himself falls for Miss Sayo she is the daughter of a deadly opponent to Sanjiro. The film audience is sure to see, already in the early stage of Kurosawa's opus building, that this is not high romance cinematography, rather that Sanjiro himself is not a supple sensitive male. As in the end of Part I he appears to as a prefab out of Noh tradition, rather than as a flexible Kurosawa-relevant lover.

Self-examination In Part I of *Sanshiro* the main character finds himself assailed by an unease--disgust at the Americans and their new sport of boxing, the same hard to fill personal ambitions that we know in him from the beginning--and by a desire to recreate himself from within. It is this kind of inward tumult--a kind of conversion drive?--which leads Sanjiro to the pathway of high martial art proficiency, and to the leadership role which he comes to play in his martial arts community.

The ugly American The 1958 bestseller of the above title alerted the literate world, which was being made even smaller by the Cold War, to the indifference of American postwar power to the human values of the cultures their diplomatic representatives were bringing them into contact with. Out of this unfortunate mismatch, between humanity and administration, grew the widely discussed and analyzed culture figure of the ugly American, a figure ready, in the Japanese mind, as a ready opinion vehicle contour for anti-Americanism. Sanjiro is likely to have quaffed from this brew.

SCENES

Our attention falls on a certain young man, known to us from a just previous film. During the film this young man, Sanjiro, acquires enough savvy, concerning martial arts and American boxing so that by the end of the film he is able to compete successfully with either side of the cultural divide.

Sanjiro's learning process involves learning about the rivalry between karate and judo martial artists. Several scenes illustrate this conflict. Scene after scene illustrate Sanjiro's inner struggle to determine his own destiny and direction.

Sanjiro's dojo brothers regularly mock him for his preference for Judo over karate.

Left alone, Sanjiro broods continually over the best path for him to take in life. There is the morally right path and there are the corrupt and impure roles of the dojo.

In the end, happily, Sanjiro decides to break all of the rules. He leaves the dojo. He fights the tall American boxer, Lister, as well as the karate masters. He wins all his battles, and in the end finds himself able to sleep happily.