

## **Multi-dimensional Viewing from a Longitudinal Perspective: Review of a Study on Japanese Samurai Films by Liya Luo**

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**Abstract:** Samurai films, as the most distinctive film genre of Japan, hold a paramount position not only in the history of Japanese cinema, but also in the global cinematic landscape. Therefore, they deserve significant attention and thorough research. However, until now, most domestic academic studies on Japanese samurai films have been fragmented and lacking systematic analysis. Luo Liya's "A Study of Japanese Samurai Films" is the first scholarly monograph published in China that systematically examines these films. It comprehensively employs critical methodologies such as social and historical criticism, structuralism-semiotic criticism, and cultural criticism. This paper provides a panoramic exploration and an extensive discussion on various aspects of samurai films including their developmental trajectory, stage characteristics, directorial lineage, genre construction, aesthetic style, cultural connotations, and dramatic origins. With its broad research perspective combined with historical theories integration, this work stands as an academic masterpiece that exhibits both documentary rigor and scholarly rationality.

**Keywords:** "A Study of Japanese Samurai Films"; Japanese Films; Multi-dimensional Perspectives; Vertical and Horizontal Viewing

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, with the increasingly frequent exchange of film art and culture between China and Japan, there has been a growing interest within domestic film circles in studying Japanese films [1]: Firstly, a number of monographs by foreign scholars have been translated and published, such as "Masters of Japanese Film" [2] "History of Japanese Film"(First, Middle and second volumes) [3] by senior Japanese film scholar Tadao Sato, "Japanese Film under Asian Background" [4]

"110 Years of Japanese Film" [5] by Inuhiko Shibata, "The Japanese Film: Art and Industry" [6] by American scholar Joseph Anderson, and Peter Hai's "Screen of the Empire: Fifteen Years of War and Japanese Film" [7] etc., which provided abundant historical materials for Japanese film studies by domestic scholars, and expanded the vision of Japanese film studies. Secondly, a number of research monographs by local scholars have been published, such as Wu Yongmei's "Japanese Films" [8], Shu Ming's "An Overview of Japanese Films" [9], Liu Wenbing's "Japanese Films in China" [10], Huang Xianwen's "An Introduction to East Asian Films" [11] etc., which reflect the development and expansion of Japanese film studies by domestic scholars. Generally speaking, these works mainly focus on the history of Japanese film and the history of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, the reviews of famous Japanese directors, and the interpretation of Japanese classic films, while the study of Japanese film genres is lacking. Among all genres of Japanese films, samurai films stand out as a unique and quintessential representation of Japan's national identity. Not only do they account for half of the entire Japanese film industry, but they also possess immense popularity among the Japanese people and have a profound influence worldwide. Samurai films reflect many aesthetic elements that define Japanese films, making them an essential genre to explore in any systematic research on this topic. However, current domestic academic studies on Japanese samurai films remain fragmented and lack comprehensive analysis. Although foreign scholars have published monographs such as Alain Silver's "The Samurai Film" [12] and David Desser's "The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa" [13], which provide in-depth analyses of Golden Age samurai films by directors like Akira Kurosawa, Kihachi Okamoto, and Masahiro Shinoda from various perspectives including genre, culture, and aesthetics. There is still ample room for further

expansion and deepening in the study of Japanese samurai films.

Luo Liya's "A Study of Japanese Samurai Films" (China Social Sciences Press, 2022 edition) just makes up for some of the shortcomings in the study of Japanese samurai films at home and abroad. The book is not confined to the study of the interrupted history of samurai films. Based on the collection and analysis of a large amount of valuable video materials, the book combines theoretical construction and textual reading, and utilizes a variety of critical methods, such as socio-historical criticism, structuralist-semiotics criticism, and cultural criticism, to analyze the development history of samurai films in terms of their developmental history, stage characteristics, director genealogy, genre construction, aesthetic style, cultural connotations, and theatrical origins, etc., with a broad vision and detailed arguments.

As the first academic monograph to examine Japanese samurai films in China, it holds pioneering value and significance within the realm of Japanese samurai film research, establishing a strong foundation for subsequent studies in this field. Simultaneously, it enhances and deepens the exploration of Japanese film history within domestic academia, while also offering valuable insights for the future development of Chinese genre films, particularly Chinese martial arts films.

## **2. The Multidimensional Perspective of Samurai Films Research**

As Japanese samurai films are a unique existence in the history of Japanese films, their development history is almost synchronized with the development history of Japanese films as a whole, with rich types and mixed styles, both vast and difficult to classify and comment, and it is the most national characteristics of Japan's film genre, it is necessary to understand why they are so unique. It is necessary to analyze it in combination with Japanese cultural tradition and aesthetic tradition.

Therefore, it is very necessary to study Japanese samurai films from a multi-dimensional perspective relying on rich theoretical resources. In studying Japanese samurai films, the author makes comprehensive use of the knowledge and theories of cinematography, literature, and aesthetics, and tries to combine the unique attributes of Japanese samurai films with a multidimensional perspective. These

perspectives include the development history of samurai films, its stage characteristics, directorial genealogy, genre construction, aesthetic styles, cultural connotations, and theatrical origins, etc., which not only includes the construction of history, but also the mining of the genre characteristics and national cultural attributes of Japanese samurai films. In addition, it also gives multiple micro-examination from each major perspective, which has a broad vision and rich levels.

For example, in Chapter 1, in the process of sorting out and analyzing the history of the development of Japanese samurai films and its stage characteristics, on the one hand, it is analyzed from the three aspects of thematic settings, formal styles, and production strategies, and on the other hand, it is supplemented with the socio-political and cultural contexts, and the samurai film production system and other dimensions of the perspective. In Chapter 3, when studying the types of Japanese samurai films, it specifically analyzes the construction of subject matter types, plot mode construction and character image construction. On the one hand, combined with the history of the development and evolution of Japanese samurai films, the subject matter types of Japanese samurai films are divided into traditional samurai themes, Ronin themes, Grand Theft gangland themes, historical themes and ninja themes. As well as the catchall theme and popular samurai films developed within the samurai theme and ronin theme since the new century, and take into account the recently released fantasy samurai films, super genre samurai films, swordswoman samurai films and other types of mixed and different styles of samurai film subtypes. On the other hand, fully combined with the characteristics of Japanese samurai films, the plot construction mode and character image series of samurai films are further subdivided into five plot modes of "revenge, sacrifice, struggle, pursuit of the way and conversion" and four character images of "samurai, Ronin (and chivalrous thieves, gangland), women and farmers", and are analyzed in combination with specific image texts. In Chapter 4, when studying the unique formal system of Japanese samurai films, we analyze the ways and characteristics of its formal construction from two levels: the construction of narrative space and the construction of symbolic representations. On the one hand, drawing on the four

dimensions of film narrative space from the perspective of cultural paradigm, the narrative space of Japanese samurai films is divided into four dimensions: natural space, historical space, spiritual space, and virtual space. On the other hand, the rich symbol system contained in Japanese samurai films is summarized into three categories: violent symbol, star symbol and cultural symbol. In Chapter 5, when exploring and interpreting the national cultural connotation of Japanese samurai films, it not only analyzes in detail the “spiritual core” of samurai films -- “Bushido culture” on the basis of tracing its origin and combining its characteristics and image presentation, but also gives a considerable degree of observation and analysis of the “cultural variations” -- “subcommon culture” infiltrating into it. It not only points out the communication and fusion of Bushido culture and subaltern culture to a certain extent, but also analyzes and summarizes the development of Japanese samurai films under the influence of subaltern culture.

In short, this book centers on the genre characteristics and national cultural attributes of Japanese samurai films and radiates to multiple dimensions and levels related to them, with long and detailed research tentacles, and a combination of points and surfaces, historical and theoretical, which demonstrates good logical thinking and scholarly ability.

### **3. The Longitudinal and Horizontal View of Samurai Films Research**

Since the study of Japanese samurai films in China is still in its infancy, the existing research results mainly focus on the cultural and aesthetic analysis of individual directors (mainly Akira Kurosawa) and their representative samurai films, with a very limited number of directors and films involved, and less comparative research on Japanese samurai films and Chinese martial arts films. Although foreign studies of Japanese samurai films are more comprehensive and in-depth, involving a wider range of directors and more diversified research angles, they are mainly focused on the golden age of Japanese samurai films, i.e., the 1950s and 1960s, while the studies of Japanese samurai films of other eras, such as the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and those of the new century, are mainly generalizations and overviews. The development of Japanese samurai films before the 1950s and 1960s has not yet been studied. Therefore, a

comprehensive, systematic and in-depth study of Japanese samurai films from both the vertical and horizontal perspectives is necessary. This book is keenly aware of this problem, and while vertically organizing the development of Japanese samurai films since the silent era, it also adopts a multidimensional perspective and a comparative research method to examine Japanese samurai films horizontally, thus forming a three-dimensional spatial and temporal perspective that is intertwined with the past and the present, and thus making its exposition more in-depth and persuasive.

In terms of the “vertical” dimension, it is mainly reflected in the development process and stage characteristics of samurai films as the main line, combined with the social political and cultural context of different historical stages of Japan, as well as the production system of samurai films, image text characteristics and other multiple dimensions, according to the linear development of time. Japanese

samurai films are divided into the silent film era (1908-1934), the early sound era (1932-1949) when they were bound by politics, the 1950s (1950-1959) when they were revived and prosperous, the 1960s (1960-1969) when they were both prosperous and classicized, and the 1970s (1970-1979) when they were alienated, the sharp decline of the 1980s and 1990s (1980-1997), and the transformation and revival of the new era (1998-present), and the stage characteristics of samurai films in each period are summarized as “the silent film era: the theme of cinematic exploration and nihilism resistance” and “the early sound era: Historical and political illumination and humanistic concern”, “1950s: gentle lyric and idealistic ode”, “1960s: Reflection, criticism and rationalist light”, “1970s: bloody and violent Cult style and lust”, “1980s and 1990s: expansion of epic films and diversification of martial arts styles”, “21st Century: The pluralistic exploration of genre style and the triumph of the plebeian spirit”(corresponding to the stages of the samurai films mentioned above). It is this longitudinal observation, relying on precious video materials and a large amount of literature, that makes The research on samurai films break through the previous studies (such as David Desser’s “The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa”, Alain Silver’s “The Samurai Film”, etc.) only focusing on the research of samurai films from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, and

outlines a complete outline of the development trend of Japanese samurai films, thus reflecting a broad research horizon. In addition, the book's study of the early samurai films, i.e., samurai films of the 1920s to the 1940s, is a good clarification of the sources and relationships in the course of samurai films in Japan, and is of unique scholarly value.

In terms of the dimension of "horizontal", in addition to the multi-dimensional perspective of samurai film studies, it is also particularly evident in the two chapters on samurai film authorship and samurai film's national cultural connotations. Specifically: First, the representative directors of Japanese samurai films and their authorship are analyzed and interpreted by analogy on the basis of their time line development. On the one hand, directors with similar styles in different eras or with certain similarities in the same era are consciously juxtaposed together with their creative eras, genre tendencies, stylistic characteristics and status in the film industry, in order to clarify their spiritual inheritance relationship and better analyze their stylistic features, as in the case of Akira Kurosawa and Hideo Gosha, Eiichi Kudo and Takashi Miike, Kenji Misumi and Kinji Fukasaku, Hiroshi Inagaki and Tomu Uchida, Tadashi Imai and Masaki Kobayashi, Sadao Yamanaka, Mansaku Itami and Yoji Yamada. On the other hand, the author makes full use of the method of careful reading of the text to give an in-depth interpretation of samurai films, reflecting the unity of aesthetic and academic rationality. Second, based on the similarity of genre elements and the difference of cultural spirit between Chinese martial arts films and Japanese samurai films, the book compares Japanese Bushido culture and Chinese chivalry culture horizontally in terms of cultural origins, cultural characteristics and image representations, so as to deepen the interpretation of Japanese samurai films. The book not only points out that Bushido culture is influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Japanese Shinto and aims to consolidate the rule of martial arts, with "loyalty" as the core, but Chinese chivalry culture is influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Mo, with "righteousness" as the core, and that the two countries are different in their cultural traditions and narrative experiences, thus the samurai films and martial arts films are more different than the same. It is also

mentioned in particular that samurai films, while demonstrating their distinctive nationalities, have also subtly realized the beautification of part of the Japanese national spirit through the condensation, sublimation, and expansion of Bushido culture, as well as that besides the Bushido culture, the Japanese common people's culture has also had a significant influence on the development of the samurai films, thus reflecting the author's unique academic insights.

#### **4. The Subtlety and Depth of Samurai Films Research**

From the notes and references of the book *A Study of Japanese Samurai Films*, it can be seen that there are many literatures involved in the book, most of which are first-hand sources, including some original English sources. According to the authors, these documents come from different countries such as China, Japan, the United States, Britain, France, Korea, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. From the perspective of disciplines and categories, the literature collected includes film theory, literary theory, film history (including Japanese film history, Chinese film history, American film history, etc.), culturology (including Chinese culture and Japanese culture), aesthetics (especially Japanese aesthetics), Japanese drama, Japanese literature, history, sociology, communication studies and many other macro fields, reflecting the extensive theoretical resources of the book. From the 331 films listed in the appendix "List of Japanese Samurai Films", it can be seen that the author has collected nearly comprehensive film text materials, which lays a solid foundation for the detailed and in-depth study of Japanese samurai films. In the book, the author comprehensively uses the methods of close reading of texts, comparative analysis, social and historical criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, structural-semiotic criticism, cultural criticism, etc., and shows her unique academic vision and skill in the material combing, text in-depth reading and theory construction.

For example: In view of the importance of the concept of "samurai films" in the study of Japanese samurai films, the introduction part clarifies and deeply analyzes the consensus and disputes formed during this process by combing, summarizing and discriminating the understanding and definition of samurai films and similar concepts in domestic and foreign



film critics, especially in Western film critics. Based on the “samurai spirit”, the spiritual core of samurai films, the concept of “samurai films” is clearly defined, that is, “Samurai films refer to a film that are based on the history of Japan before the Meiji Restoration, aiming to express and explore the samurai spirit, as well as show the life, history and fate of samurai. The protagonists of the films are mainly samurai and ronin. And most of them contain sword-fighting scenes, and the history of the film is synchronized with the entire history of Japanese film development. “Through its comparative analysis with similar concepts such as Jidai-geki, Chanbara, and Yakuza film, the book further points out that “In terms of category size, samurai film should be a concept between Jidai-geki and Chanbara, i.e., greater than Chanbara and less than Jidai-geki. Although some samurai films have some commonality with Yakuza film in terms of themes, their category attribution is different; samurai film and Chanbara are consistent and belong to the category of Jidai-geki, while Yakuza film belongs to the category of Gendai=geki” [14]. This has laid a good academic foundation for the study of samurai films.

Based on the reputation of Akira Kurosawa and Hideo Gosha in the field of creation of Japanese samurai films, as well as the spiritual inheritance relationship between the Hideo Gosha and Kurosawa in the development and innovation of samurai film themes and genres, the second chapter intends to compare the “Emperor of Cinema” Akira Kurosawa with the “Nationalist” director Hideo Gosha. And select Kurosawa’s representative works such as “The Seven Samurai”, “Yojimbo”, “Kagemusha”, “Ran”, and Hideo Gosha’s representative works such as “Three Outlaw Samurai”, “Sword of the Beast”, “Goyokin” and “Tenchu!” to interpret one by one, and finally conclude that “the greatest charm of Kurosawa’s samurai films lies in the successful creation of a tragic epic style and the perfect integration of Eastern and Western cultures presented in the films”. “The greatest charm of Hideo Gosha samurai films lies in reflecting on Japan’s traditional Bushido culture with the reference of Western modern humanistic spirit” [15]. It embodies the author’s unique aesthetic insight.

In a word, in the specific analysis of the above chapters, the author makes a comprehensive use of the knowledge and theories of cinema,

literature and aesthetics, and conducts a deep study and detailed reading of the samurai film text. He boldly elaborates new ideas, does not echo the previous conclusions, and his views are reasonable and convincing, which also reflects the rich academic content of “A Study of Japanese Samurai Films”.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize, Luo Liya’s book “A Study of Japanese Samurai Films” highlights its unique characteristics in the study of Japanese samurai films from the multidimensional perspective of samurai film research, the vertical and horizontal perspective of samurai film research, and the subtlety and depth of samurai film research, which not only makes up for the shortcomings of domestic and foreign scholars in the study of Japanese samurai films, but also enriches the results of the study of Japanese films, especially the study of Japanese film genres. Moreover, through the in-depth study and detailed reading of samurai film texts, the book explores the methods and strategies of the narrative mechanism and cultural expression of samurai films in constructing the Japanese national imagination and shaping the image of the Japanese nation, thus responding to China’s current mainstream cinema’s in-depth consideration of how to actively construct the national image and effectively realize cultural dissemination under the era’s proposition of firm “cultural self-confidence”. It is a response to the contemporary mainstream films in China to consider how to construct a national image under the proposition of “cultural self-confidence” and realize cultural communication effectively, reflecting important theoretical value and practical significance. However, the work still needs to be further deepened in terms of further excavation, reflection, and dialectical view of the specific methods and strategies of samurai films in constructing the cultural memory and imagination of the Japanese nation, shaping the image of the Japanese nation, as well as the political and cultural significance of samurai films that is different from that the rest of the East Asian countries, which is one of the most important directions for the subsequent study of the samurai cinema in Japan.

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