

ZATOICHI

ZATOICHI MEETS THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN

Chinese, along with Tibetan, Myanmar, and the many tribal languages of South and Southeast Asia, belongs to the family of Sino-Tibetan languages. Besides a core vocabulary and similar sounds, these languages share several features that distinguish them from Western languages: they are monosyllabic, have little inflection, and are tonal. In order to differentiate between words with similar sounds, tone languages assign to words a distinctive relative pitch (high or low) and a distinctive pitch contour (level, rising, or falling).

Spoken Chinese comprises many regional variants, generally referred to as dialects. There are seven major dialect groups, and all consist of a large number of subdialects. The Mandarin dialect (which is spoken by Wang Kang and the family he encounters) is most common.

During the translation of this film, it was often hard to determine which languages were being spoken! This was particularly the case with Shaolong, who spoke both Japanese and Mandarin Chinese.

“I feel like I've been tricked by a fox.”

In Japanese folklore, foxes (kitsune) are masters of transformation. Growing in power as they age, a fox grows a tail and the ability to shapeshift and possess people after a century. The most powerful of these foxes are those who reach the age of 1,000, called the nine-tailed fox (kumiho) because of their additional tails. When a fox gains its ninth tail, its fur becomes silver, white, or gold, and it gains the power of infinite vision.

Using their transformation ability, foxes are renowned tricksters. In many Japanese folk tales, a fox will appear in the form of a beautiful woman, seducing and tricking unworthy men. Alternately, they will also reward or protect deserving people. Obviously, Zatoichi believes that he is in the former group of men!

“I'm going to buy a manju.”

Manju are wheat buns filled with something and then steamed. The inner filling is usually fork-roasted pork or red bean paste. Manju come in several sizes, ranging from ones as big as a clenched fist to as small as ones barely an inch and a half across.

The blind gambler who befriends Zatoichi in Furukawa, Henoichi, has quite an unusual name. At the time in which the film is set, the names of many people were based on their occupations. For example, “Zatoichi” is “Zato-Ichi,” or “Ichi the Zato” (“zato” is another word for masseur). Henoichi's name, however, translates into “Ichi of the Fart.” Although there is no indication that Henoichi experiences any “problems” that would earn him that name, it sheds a new light on Zatoichi's gastric breakdown near his blind friend!

“Shut up... you mud turtle.”

Henoichi, becoming annoyed by the senseless chatter surrounding him, snaps this line at the gambler Kame. The turtle (“kame” in Japanese) is the symbol for longevity. Turtles, which are

said to live for 10,000 years, are often paired with the crane (said to live 1,000 years). With such a long life, you would think that a turtle would become wise, but this is anything but the case for the sycophantic Kame!

“But really, he was just like a Tengu... He flew, and walked over our heads.”

Tengu are mountain and forest goblins with both Shinto and Buddhist attributes. Their supernatural abilities include shape-shifting into human or animal forms, the power to move instantly from place to place without using wings, and the ability to appear uninvited in the dreams of the living.

The patron of martial arts, the bird-like Tengu is a skilled warrior and maker of mischief. He is especially prone to act upon arrogant Buddhist priests and those who misuse knowledge and authority to gain fame or position. It is ironic that Kame refers to Wang Kang as a tengu, considering what the gambler does not know about the situation behind the roadside murders.

Once assumed to be solely creatures of evil, stories arose of some tengu acting as agents of good. There are many tales of tengu overcoming evil. Today, ceremonial festivals are held in their honor, and their tales continue to be told.

“They say, ‘Where there is life, there is rope.’”

Translating puns is guaranteed to generate migranes for even the best translators. The original play on words is a confusion between “mono” (thing) and “imo” (potato)!

“That's what Ojizo-sama said to me.”

This is a reference to Jizo Bodhisattva (meaning "one who seeks enlightenment"), one of the most beloved of all Japanese divinities. Jizo Bodhisattva is the patron protector of infants, mothers, travelers, and firemen. He is usually portrayed as a child-monk, often carrying a pilgrim's staff with six rings that jingle to warn animals of his approach. Jizo also carries the bright jewel of Dharma truth, whose light banishes fear.

As the patron saint of infants, Jizo takes particularly keen interest in children who die prematurely. When they are sent to the underworld to build stone towers (as punishment for the grief caused to their parents by their early death) and beaten by a demon, Jizo comes to rescue them. Even today, there are often heaps of stones around Jizo statues, as many believe that a stone presented to Jizo will shorten the time that their child suffers in the underworld.

Although originating in India, Jizo is more widely revered in Japan, China and Korea. He entered Japan around the sixth or seventh century. Jizo has achieved enlightenment but postpones Buddhahood, and therefore the rest of Nirvana, until all can be saved.

An accomplished filmmaker with over two dozen titles to his credit, “Zatoichi Meets the One-Armed Swordsman” is director Kimiyoshi Yatsuda's fifth foray into the story of Zatoichi. He directed six films in the Zatoichi series, ending in 1973 with “Zatoichi's Conspiracy” (also released by AnimEigo).

Jimmy Wang is one of the most prolific actors in the history of Hong Kong cinema (mostly under his Chinese name, Wang Yu). Born in 1943, he became involved with Chinese filmmaking powerhouse Shaw Studios at the age of twenty. His athletic abilities and muscular physique easily earned him a role in early productions, and his big break came in "Temple of the Red Lotus." Dedicating his spare time to the improvement of his martial arts and swordplay skills, he became an international box office superstar in 1967 with the release of "The One-Armed Swordsman." This movie broke box-office records everywhere and was the first movie that broke the 1 million HK\$ barrier. In real life, Jimmy Wang is a two-armed swordsman.

In Memoriam

Katsu Shintaro died of cancer on June 21st, 1997 at the age of 65. The famous, multi-talented actor-director-producer, affectionately called "Katsu-shin" by most Japanese, began his career in the 1940's, and was perhaps best known for his portrayal of the blind swordman, Zatoichi, in a long-running film series which was among the most successful in the history of Japanese cinema. As a producer, he fathered the hit movie series "Lone Wolf and Cub," which starred Katsu's brother, Wakayama Tomisaburo, which is now being released in the US by Samurai Cinema.

Known for his love of alcohol and cigarettes, in the last years of his life Katsu-shin spent increasing amounts of time in the hospital, only to be seen lighting up cigars at press conferences held to announce his recovery.

Two days after his death, five thousand people attended his memorial service at a Tokyo temple.

For further reference, we suggest the following sources:

- 1) "Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan" Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Ooishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) "Japan - A Historical Survey" Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) "A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867" George Sansom. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963