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Inside Shogun Assassin: The Japanese Tradition of Violence and Vengeance

By Dan Furuya and Sandra Segal

A lone samurai sits meditating in a deserted temple. Suddenly he jumps up, and with one cut splits the Buddha in two. Blood spurts out, and the hidden ninja falls dead. In the darkness of the temple, the other images spring to life. Ninja attack relentlessly, but are swiftly cut down by the swordsman. Surrounded by dead and dying bodies, the swordsman calmly picks up his child and leaves the temple.

The Lone Wolf and child are well known to all aficionados of *chambara*, Japanese sword-play cinema. *The Sword of Vengeance* series, as it is called in America, combines the trance-like beauty of Japanese cinematography with graphic scenes of bloodletting. Much of the film's power comes from the brooding presence of Tomisaburo Wakayama, as the superb swordsman Itto Ogami, whose bulky, powerful figure and concentrated stare transmit a state of intense calm and charged awareness. Ogami is accompanied by his infant son, Daigoro, played by Masahiro Tomikawa, as the ever-present observer of the carnage that follows their journey. Daigoro's solemn, silent gaze becomes almost palpable in the films, suggesting the ruthlessness of total innocence. These two figures live and act in the half-mythological, half-historical world of cinematic samurai, a world ruled by the code of bushido, the way of the warrior, with its total acceptance of death.

At the philosophical center of these films is the idea of the master killer as a tragic hero whose perfection in the art of killing binds him to a life of isolation and alienation. This image has entered American consciousness in the

gunslinging anti-hero of spaghetti Westerns. However, the complex political, historical, and cultural background of the Japanese films is bewildering to the uneducated eye, and even though American audiences have been partially numbed by Sam Peckinpah films, the explicit violence is still shocking.

Making Itto Ogami understandable to the mainstream American audience was the task undertaken by David Weisman, producer, Robert Houston, director and writer of the English narration, and Lee Percy, the film editor of *Shogun Assassin*, the Americanized production of *The Sword of Vengeance*. To accomplish this, they made a variety of changes, some radical, some subtle.

As a Virgil was needed to guide Dante through the Inferno, so Weisman and Houston felt that it was vital to provide a narrator who could guide the audience through the Lone Wolf's hell. After much deliberation, they finally decided to use Daigoro as the guide, giving him an extensive voice-over narration to provide the necessary background information. Houston comments, "Some critics say that by having Daigoro narrate the story, we compromised the power of his silence. But he's a natural window on the world."

Daigoro's narration is buttressed by a very sophisticated job of dubbing the English dialogue. Instead of using exact translations of the Japanese, Houston and Weisman concentrated on creating dialogue which could take advantage of lip synchronization. "We used only portions of the dialogue to convey the essence of

the meaning. We lip-read the characters, and wrote the script to match the movement of the lips as closely as possible," Weisman says.

The remaining dialogue was then used to further develop the new plot line, which substantially simplifies the original. Houston says, "The raw material of the plot was revenge. It was an assassination plot to protect the secret of a blue dyeing technique. This is true to Japanese culture, but is not the stuff of American movie motivation." Weisman and Houston changed the plot to a simple power struggle between the Shogun and Itto Ogami (see sidebar).

Houston is most proud of the changes they made in the musical score. "We were happy to throw out the music they used," he says. "The Japanese work in a visual tradition, and their sound technology is not so good. The *Sword of Vengeance* sound track was unsophisticated, and it was gratifying to us to add a polished sound to go with the visuals. In the original, the music was overmodulated. It sounded like a car radio played too loud."

On a more subtle level, the pacing of the film was changed by recutting the original. Houston says, "We find the Japanese are patient, and are willing to move the film almost at the speed at which it runs through the camera. There are scenes which are calm, meditative, beautiful. American audiences aren't willing to meditate with the film. So we shortened up the spacing between shots."

Weisman and Houston insist that none of these changes radically alter the original film. "The movie is very much intact as Misumi

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(Kenji Misumi, the Japanese director) made the film," Houston says. "The action is almost untouched. In fact, the critics were shocked by Misumi's style, the sudden violence, the brutal shots of detached limbs and fingers." Weisman agrees. "We might have gone too far in keeping Misumi's action," he says. "Especially in part two (the film on which *Shogun Assassin* is based) Misumi was experimenting with a painting in blood."

As Weisman and Houston claim, the action of this blood-splashed painting—slashing swords, detached limbs, heads neatly sliced from the body or cleft from forehead to chin, fountains of warm blood covering the screen—remains in *Shogun Assassin* in all its gory exuberance, and is greeted by American audiences with shocked laughter and cheers. The viewers may also appreciate some of the aesthetic aspects of the film, the precise composition of shots, the balance of violent scenes with scenes of poised serenity. Yet the context in which both the violence and beauty have their meaning, the subtlety of certain actions which deepen our understanding of the characters, and the rich texture of interwoven plot lines, are all lost.

While much of Itto Ogami's story exists only in the realms of fantasy, its essential nature is closely tied to the historical and cultural traditions of Japan. The conflicts explored by the series have their roots in the political situation at the end of the sixteenth century. For 200 years, civil war had torn through Japan, as competing feudal lords strove to expand their territory and power. Finally, in 1598, Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated the principal contenders for power. Taking the title of Shogun, supreme military ruler of Japan, Ieyasu established his capital at Edo, now Tokyo. A fictionalized history of this period appears in James Clavell's *Shogun*.

The Tokugawa shoguns were extremely shrewd manipulators of power politics. A number of strategies, initiated first by Ieyasu, and refined under the third Tokugawa Shogun, Iemitsu, were used to consolidate the Shogunate's power and prevent any collision of feudal lords from becoming a threat. The Tokugawa Shoguns rearranged the hereditary *daimyos* (feudal holdings) so the lords who had been hostile during the war would be flanked by Ieyasu's allies; required the lords to live alternately in Edo and in their own domains while leaving their families in the capital to serve as potential hostages; and levied heavy taxes to prevent the lords from accumulating the wealth needed to overthrow the Shogun. In the suspicious eyes of the central government, any signs of dissidence or internal conflict provided an excuse to abolish an entire clan. These strategies were buttressed by a system of spies

The superior skill and high moral standards of Itto Ogami (left), the Lone Wolf of *Shogun Assassin*, give him an almost supernatural invincibility.

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and secret police, called *ninja* or *ometsuke*, recruited from the Yagyu family.

Originally a small, poor clan in the outskirts of Nara, the Yagyus had gained power by helping Ieyasu uncover traitors during the civil wars. After peace had been established, the Shogun appointed the Yagyus to be *shinan-yaku*, official fencing instructors. Traveling from clan to clan, ostensibly to give fencing instructions to the feudal lords, the Yagyus would actually report all they observed directly to the Shogun. By the time of the third Shogun, Iemitsu, the Yagyus' use of blackmail and intrigue had made them the most feared and powerful clan in the empire.

To further satisfy their greed for power, the Yagyus sought the coveted position of *kaishakunin*, official decapitator to the Shogun. As a direct representative of the government, the official decapitator verified the Shogun's death sentences by personally beheading feudal lords as they committed *hara kiri*. A position of honor, the office was reserved for the best swordsman in the land.

The *Sword of Vengeance* series begins with a duel between Gunbei Yagyu, one of the six sons of the Yagyu clan, and Itto Ogami, master of the *Suioryu Zambatto* (the Sea Gull school/Horse Slashing cut) to determine who will become the official decapitator. Being the

superior swordsman, Gunbei disarms Ogami. However, by leaping in front of the Shogun, Ogami cleverly interposes his body between the Shogun and Gunbei's sword. As pointing a naked sword at the Shogun was a serious breach of the samurai code, and could be interpreted as treason, the Shogun declares Ogami the winner.

The Yagyus immediately turn their hatred toward Ogami, who had interfered with their schemes and made them lose face in the eyes of the Shogun. To avenge themselves and appease their hurt pride, they plot Ogami's downfall.

When Ogami returns home, he finds his wife has been brutally murdered, and a memorial



Although living as a paid assassin, Ogami is not a heartless killer. His humanity is revealed in his stern love for his son and in his compassion toward Akane, the swordswoman who tries to kill him.

tablet with the Shogun's name has been planted in his family shrine, making it appear that he was praying for the Shogun's death. In this way, the Yagyuu frame Ogami; he is accused of treason, his title is taken away, and he is put under house arrest.

In a moment, Ogami's world has been destroyed. From being a model samurai, loyal to the Shogun and a follower of the uncompromising code of bushido, he has been branded a traitor and his house abolished. The loss of his honor and his line was the worst fate to befall a warrior. As a samurai, Ogami's only duty, his only honorable course of action, is to commit hara kiri to redeem himself. Yet if he loses his

life, he can never fulfill his desire to revenge himself against the Yagyuu and reestablish his house. This is the classic Japanese tragedy, the irreconcilable conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*, duty and personal desire. Torn between his thirst for vengeance and his duty to die, Ogami, the master swordsman, falls under the double-edged sword of his dilemma. Unable to make a decision, he leaves his fate in the hands of his infant son.

In a famous scene, Ogami sets his son between a brightly colored play ball given to him by his mother, and Ogami's own razor-sharp sword. If Daigoro crawls toward the ball, it signifies he wants to be with his mother, and

Ogami will kill his son and himself. If Daigoro crawls toward the sword, it signifies that he chooses vengeance. The baby reaches for the sword, and Ogami prepares to walk the path of fire and water, the road of hell.

Ogami becomes a paid assassin—an odd assassin, walking through Japan with a baby-cart (*ubaguruma*). By charging 500 pieces of gold for his services, he is assured that only feudal lords can afford him, and the Yagyuu will doubtless be behind any intrigue that threatens a feudal lord. Each assignment is another chance for Ogami to further his vendetta against the Yagyuu.

The storyline for *Shogun Assassin* is based

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on the Yagyuu's intrigues to destroy a clan and take over its monopoly on a special blue dyeing process. This dyeing process, called *aizome*, was famous throughout Japan, and control of the monopoly guaranteed large incomes. Although the Tokugawa Shogunate wanted to seize control of the monopoly, it had no legitimate excuse and so relied on a Yagyuu-created disturbance.

The Yagyuus' first furtive steps were simple: they convinced the head master of the dyeing process that rival factions in his clan were plotting his death. When the head master took

Ogami's adherence to the code of bushido and complete acceptance of death give him the calm awareness he needs to triumph even in the most desperate circumstances.

flight, he was captured by a hostile neighboring clan. This clan hired three brothers, Ben, Ten, and Rai, professional killers armed with a hooked claw, mailed fist, and studded club, to escort the head master to the Shogun. If the dyer succeeded in reporting on the conspiracy within his clan, the Shogun would have sufficient provocation to abolish the clan completely and take over the dyeing monopoly. If the head master is not stopped, the clan faces dissolution and death. As a last resort, the clan hires Ogami to kill the head master before he reaches the Shogun.

Meanwhile, Ogami is being ruthlessly hunted by the Yagyuus. His attackers, who pursue him tenaciously, include the six sons of Munenori Yagyuu, head of the Yagyuu clan; the Kurokawa

ninja; and even Munenori's only daughter, Akane.

Akane's relationship with Ogami becomes an important subplot for the film. Determined to prove she is as coldblooded and expert a killer as her brothers, Akane continues her single-minded pursuit of Ogami regardless of his superior swordsmanship. Then Ogami saves her life as they flee a burning ship. Akane realizes that Ogami is not the heartless killer that she holds as her ideal, and becomes aware of her own humanity for the first time.

Just as Ogami's superior skill and high moral standards (the one implying the other in the *chambara* world) defeat Akane psychologically, so these samurai traits defeat all of the Yagyuu's schemes to destroy him. In one scene, the



Shogun Assassin: Synopsis of the American Version

Yagyuus try to destroy Ogami's spirit by kidnapping Daigoro, and using him as bait to entrap the swordsman. Akane suspends Daigoro over a well by a rope, and threatens to kill him unless Ogami gives up his sword. The Lone Wolf does not weaken. "My son and I have both embraced our fate," he says impassively. At that moment, Daigoro kicks off his sandal. Pausing only to count the few seconds it takes for the sandal to hit the water, Ogami goes into action. In a blur of motion, he cuts down two ninja; stops the uncoiling rope with his foot; and slashes open Kurokawa's head. Akane stands paralyzed with shock. Ogami slowly pulls the rope up, and we see that Daigoro's head is still dry, though his clothes are sodden. In that brief instant, Ogami had precisely calculated the



Lone Wolf loyally served the Shogun as official decapitator at a time when the Shogun was old and deranged with paranoia. (The figure shown as the Shogun in the movie is actually Munenori Yagyu, head of the Yagyu clan.) One night, the Shogun decided to test the loyalty of Lone Wolf, and dispatched ninja to murder his wife.

Grief-stricken, Lone Wolf defies the Shogun. He accepts a duel with the Shogun's son, Lord Kurando (actually one of Munenori's sons) as a means to win his freedom. After beheading the lord, Lone Wolf abandons samurai life and sets out with his baby son to walk the road of vengeance.

Angry over his son's death, the Shogun ignores his promise of freedom to Lone Wolf, and instead sends a large army led by another son, Lord Bizen, to kidnap Daigoro as payment for his father's defiance. Lone Wolf kills Lord Bizen, and the Shogun curses him forever, sending hordes of ninja to hunt him wherever he may go.

Lone Wolf makes his living as a paid assassin. He is retained by a local clan whose members explain to him that they have been taxed mercilessly and terrorized by ninja spies, led by the Shogun's brother, Lord Kiru. (The figure shown as Lord Kiru is actually the head master of the special dyeing process.) The Shogun is said to be sending the three Masters of Death to escort his brother home. The clanspeople fear the Masters of Death will kill many people if they arrive in their town, and wish to have Lord Kiru killed before they arrive.

Meanwhile, the Shogun's special forces (actually the Kurokawa ninja) and the supreme ninja, the Dragon Lady (actually Akane Yagyu, sole daughter of Munenori), are stalking Lone Wolf.

A supreme fighter, Lone Wolf accomplishes his mission, meeting his adversaries with full force. Tired but triumphant, he bundles up his baby son, and together they travel through the countryside in search of further retribution and freedom.

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Even Ben, Ten, and Rai, professional killers armed with a hooked claw, mailed fist, and studded club, are powerless to defeat the Lone Wolf.

amount of time Daigoro had before he would hit the water and drown.

Ogami's statement that he and his son have prepared themselves for death is the ultimate expression of the bushido code. The *Hagakure*, a seventeenth century classic on bushido, opens with the statement, "The way of the warrior means death." The modern day translator of the *Hagakure*, Yukio Mishima, was so affected by this philosophy that he chose to die as a warrior and committed hara kiri.

While Ogami supposedly abandoned all ethics and conventions in his fall from the top rank of the samurai to that of an outcast and paid assassin, he paradoxically adopts the even stricter code of samurai battlefield ethics. This is one of the ironies which pervades the *Sword of Vengeance* series. Ogami's adherence to this code is shown in subtle ways. For example, he arranges his meetings with a secret code developed by Dokan Ota, the military strategist who built Edo castle for Ieyasu Tokugawa. Those who desire Ogami's services hang a votive offering from the eaves of a temple. The illustrated hanging depicts two messengers of hell, symbolizing the Lone Wolf and child on

their terrible journey. When he sees this sign at the temple gates, Ogami arranges pebbles into two concentric circles. This represents a *honjin*, the central tower within a castle, or headquarters. Ogami would then wait within the temple for the secret meeting.

Ogami's sword style complements his battle ethics. The Yagyus used a formal, sophisticated style. Ogami mastered a sword style which was known for its simplicity and deadly practicality in battle. His Sea Gull style used water as an ally in fighting. When an opponent attacked, Ogami would draw his sword through the water, distorting the actual position of the blade. This maneuver allowed him to take his opponent by surprise.

The tension between Ogami's strict observance of battlefield ethics and his life as a pariah is one of the many aspects of the *Sword of Vengeance* series which does not translate well in the American version. However, the moderate success of *Shogun Assassin* at the box office indicates that the Americanization of Itto Ogami will continue. Weisman and Houston's second offering will be a remake of part four of the series, "Heart of the Parent, Heart of the Child." In this film, the daughter of a street performer is raped by the fencing instructor of a feudal lord. An expert swordswoman, the daughter devises a scheme to take revenge for her shame. She boldly has a tattoo emblazoned

over her entire body; a mountain hag on her back, and an imp on her breast, reaching for her nipple. When attacked, she strips off the top of her kimono, and uses her attacker's momentary shock to dispatch him. To realize her revenge, she kills so many members of the fencing instructor's clan that Ogami is finally called in to stop her. Houston says, "The changes we'll make won't be significant. We're just recasting the conflict into a more understandable political set." Unfortunately, one of the changes will be to recast the woman as the Shogun's daughter, an alteration which substantially affects the meaning of the original.

Houston and Weisman may also produce a third movie, based on part one of the series. "This one is like a Hell's Angels movie," says Houston. "A spa has been taken over by 40 ronin, and Ogami walks in, finally reveals himself, and there's a massive confrontation. It's really a biker movie."

The final Americanization of Ogami and Daigoro will take place when Houston and Weisman obtain the backing to remake the films with American actors. "We've talked to executive producers about doing an American film based on this story," Houston says. "I'd love to work with a father and infant daughter, something like Ryan and Tatum O'Neal in *Paper Moon*. I guess you could call it *Paper Moon Meets Itto Ogami*."