Perseverance

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Japanese Cinema

Final Paper

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Introduction

‘Gaman’ is a Japanese word that originated in Zen Buddhism, it means to “endure the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity (1)”. It is a word that generally translates out to mean “perseverance”, “patience”, and “tolerance”. It is one word that encompasses the idea of bearing with something unbearable, and it is a concept that is a great part of Japanese society.

In America, there is a similar idea of “grin and bear it”. This has a similar connotation to “gaman” and is about thriving despite adversity. Through time and movie making history, movies have reflected the societies that they were made in and they have also contributed towards affecting the people and the place that they came from.

Many movies that we watched throughout this class had elements of these concepts in them, but three of them really struck me as indicative of the Japanese people’s hope and belief in their futures despite the hard times or adversity that they were facing in real life. The movies that I chose were Red Beard by Akira Kurosawa, Hidden Fortress by Akira Kurosawa, and Always by Takahashi Yamazaki. Each movie portrays difficult times that the characters have to overcome, and by example inspire in those who watch the films a feeling of hope. Despite facing difficult circumstances, the characters in the stories continue on forwards and don’t let themselves become defeated by the tough times that they are going through; they still find something to look forward to.

I intend to analyze in this paper how each movie and the main characters represent the ideals and aspects of society, how the impact of each of the movies and the characters portrayed within them would or could affect people in general and what about each of them would have been inspiring to the people watching. The overall concept of being hopeful, persevering, and believing in a better future.

Red Beard Movie

The movie Red Beard was filmed by Akira Kurosawa and came out in 1965. In the movie Red Beard, an actual period in Japanese history, Edo in the 19th century, is portrayed. It was a difficult time where many people were stuck in poverty, where health care and medicine were a luxury, and if you were to fall ill chances were high that you would die. Government funded health care is minimal, and those that work to help others, though greatly appreciated by those they aid, are minimally rewarded as far as money or status.

This film shows that even in difficult times people will still help one another and fight for a good future. The physicians were well enough educated and despite the fact that many people are poor and ill and starving, they still fight to help each other and heal as many as they can. Even when the government stops funding the outpatient clinic area, they still continue to help others and treat them with out funding. The characters, from the doctors to the patients, all persevere in order to make a better future. The idea that people should help others that are in need is a strong social concept that is a part of Japanese life, and of course it is in movies depicting Japanese society.

The characters in the story all persevere. Dr. Niide in this story is a perfect representation of this trait. Dr. Niide is always calm and focuses on helping those in need. When the funding for the out patients is cut, he continues to help them. When he sees that otoyo is ill and in need of help, he doesn’t stop until he has her at the clinic getting care. When otoyo’s behavior frustrates Yasumoto, Niide patiently preservers and gets hers to start slowly trusting them. Dr. Niide never gives up on his clinic and always continues helping others despite every adversity thrown at him.

Yasumoto is young and smart and he is brash because of it. Even though he has gotten the best training, he doesn’t have a desire to help others; all he wants is power and a good position. His attitude is, why should he bother helping the poor, they are beyond help. However, his thinking slowly changes until he begins to believe in others and becomes hopeful for the future and wishes to help others. By the end of the movie, he decides to stay working at the clinic, he even goes so far as to turn down the lofty position of working for the shogunate in favor of staying.

Another character in this story that displays these admirable qualities is Sahachi. As a patient of the clinic, it is obvious to all that he is ill and that her is poor. Despite being ill he continues to work in the yard, fixing cart wheels, in order to make a little bit of money that he can give to the clinic in order to help others. Even when his beloved wife left him and disappeared, only to reappear years later with the child of another man, he still was good and kind to others. When she died, he continued on in her name and was a beloved member of the neighborhood and believed in a better future.

People are impressionable, and can learn by example, so when they watch a movie about helping others it has an effect. That is why, when watching a movie like Red Beard, viewers would also be inspired to be like the people they saw in the movies. Seeing people doing good things, helping others in need, being patient and kind, it makes you want to do it too. You want to behave in an admirable way that others would be impressed by, just like in the movie. It also serves as an example of how poor the conditions of Japan were back then, and shows that things will get better, because they have improved since the time portrayed in the film. It makes it so the Japanese people watching this film can believe that, if they bear with it, if they persevere, that things will get better and it lets them have hope and a belief in a better future.

Hidden Fortress

 The movie Hidden Fortress was filmed by Akira Kurosawa and came out in 1958. In the film, the 16th century Feudal Period is portrayed. It was a time where, right and left people were dying and going to war; no one was safe. If you were the family of a defeated feudal lord, then even more so were you marked for death. One difficulty after another, the characters of the story have to face the problems head on while still being careful. Even though the story is about the princess and her story, it is told from the perspective of two peasants. By doing this, it gives the film the feeling of something noble to aspire to.

 This movie was filmed not long after the end of world war two, for the people of Japan to see a movie about a warring era of their history that might seem bleak, there would be many similarities that viewers could draw between their own recent history and their past represented by the film. For viewers who were probably still feeling the after effects of the war, seeing a situation where a Japanese woman, traditionally thought of as weak, being strong and continuing on and fighting for her family and her people would be heartening and inspiring. Princess Yuki could even have been seen as a representation of Japan weakened after the war, which would have added to the feeling of persevering in tough times.

 Princess Yuki, despite being a princess, was raised mostly like a boy and because of it was more reserved about her emotions. This is another parallel between Princess Yuki and the Japanese society, further showing the loop of society influencing movies and movies influencing society. During her struggles she is willing to be humiliated by pretending to be a mute because it is for the sake of regaining her freedom and in the hope of a better future. When she reclaims her position as a Princess and is finally able to start rebuilding again, viewers would feel inspired by her victory. It helps people believe in a better future.

 The story is told from the perspective of two peasants named Tahei and Matashichi that, at the beginning and through out the film are selfish and greedy, change their attitudes and behaviors after experiencing the trials and dangers they are confronted with in the movie. In the end, they come out as better people because of it. Even though they are poor, they learn to help each other instead of fighting over money; in the end of the film the are paid for their help in gold and, rather than bickering and belittling each other like at the start of the film, they offer the money to one another.

 An article that I read described that “the film industry was a microcosm of Japanese cultural life” (2), which follows along with my idea that movies were and are used to influence and conversely represent Japanese life and society. By showing a character in a movie that is relatable, viewers are able to feel as though they are a part of the movie and in turn influence them in their every day life. When encountering a trying situation where one might feel helpless, they can then turn their thoughts to how, despite all the was against her, Princess Yuki did not give up and kept on fighting in order to reestablish her family and help her people. This could give people a feeling of hope for a better future no matter how dire things may be and and help them preserve through their tough times.

The story of this film shows that even if your family and home are destroyed, you can still move on and start again. To not give up, and continue having hope and believing in the future. Even when it seems like everything and everyone are against you, you can still persevere and stay strong and believe that there is more for you in the future than simply accepting fate and dying. Everyone from a lowly peasant to a princess will be rewarded for their efforts, like Princess Yuki reclaiming her title and Tahei and Matashichi receiving gold for helping her, as long as they preserve- continuing on until the end goal is achieved.

Always

 The movie Always was filmed by Takahashi Yamazaki and came out in 2005. The time that the movie takes place is the post WWII era during the time that the Tokyo Tower was being built. During and after World War II, there were strict restrictions placed on movies and what contents could be portrayed in them. Scripts had to be approved before the movies were put into production. There were “prohibited subjects” (3) and “subjects to be favored” (3) in movies being made. Despite all the difficulty involved, directors like Akira Kurosawa were still able to create amazing movies that affected people across Japan and the World. This is an example of how, just like this movie, people continued and persevered through difficult times and how they still worked toward a better future. The Japanese peoples’ hopes and ideals are reflected in their films which in turn reflect back on their society.

This movie shows that even when people are poor and don’t have much to give, they still manage to share what little they have with the people that matter to them. It also showed that simply having money doesn’t solve anything if it can’t help those that you care about. Despite difficulty people are still willing to look out for one another. Japanese movies are a representation of the sentiments of their society and this film displays the hope for a better future that people after the war fostered. Especially during tough times is when people need to believe in a better future and hope for the best.

Even though times were hard for many people and they were still feeling the after effects of the war, the people in the movie focused on what they had left and did what they could to stay positive. It was time where things were gradually improving and people beginning to feel hopeful about their futures. Education in Japan was also improving at the time, making public school the best it had ever been. New modern conveniences were coming out, the washing machine, the refrigerator, the television and they were making life easier for people all over. Little conveniences that make your life easier worked towards helping give people the will to persevere and continue on.

 Characters like Mutsuko, who was a young girl who had just graduated from high school, are easy to relate to for many people in the younger generations. Taking part in a hiring boom going on in Tokyo, she gets hired straight out of high school, and even though she ends up by mistake in an auto shop she still stays positive and continues on. Seeing someone get hired straight out of school is a powerful image for young people, who worry about the hiring market and not doing well at a new job. By seeing that, even though mistakes happen, she is able to improve and keep her job, it gives a hope to young viewers for their own future, making it feel like they will be alright. The feeling that, as long as you preserve and work towards a bright future, things will work out for the better.

The character Ryunosuke also is an example of being able to make the best of a bad situation. He has an abandoned boy named Kenta essentially dumped on him, to top it off he is a washed up writer living alone and running a candy shop. His passion is writing and, even though they aren’t popular, he continues on in the hope that someday he will be recognized for his writing. With the inadvertent help of the boy that was foisted off on to him, he is able to feel like he belongs, making a family and a life for himself. The boy who had no hope of finding a home is accepted by him and loves his writing, which gives Ryunosuke the recognition that he had craved. Both have their perseverance pay off and are able to find a more hopeful future in one another.

All of the characters in the story remained hopeful, believing in a better future, and due to their perseverance, were able to see their lives improve, even if only a little.

Conclusion

Each movie and the characters in them all have hope for the future in some form, each of them persevering in their own way and fighting towards the future that they believed in. Each movie was inspiring in its own unique way, influencing those who watched them and making it easier for the viewer to persevere and believe in a better future for themselves as well.

In Akira Kurowawa’s movie Red Beard, the doctors all believed in the work that they were doing; believing in a future where the people that they treated were healthy and well again. Dr. Niide relentlessly persevered and helped those around him, even when the little girl Otoyo did not want to be helped, he still helped her and made it so she could become a healthier person because of it. Yasumoto was able to put all of his expert medical training to use, helping others and learning in the process what it really means to take care of the sick and injured. This inspired in him the drive to make the future of his patients better, and he became as passionate about the clinic and helping others as Dr. Niide. Sahachi, even though he passed away in the end, was able to make the lives of others better and a little bit easier. His life being dedicated to a better and brighter future; he was able to pass on in peace.

In Akira Kurosawa’s Hidden fortress, the characters fought against great adversity and managed to achieve a brighter future due to their perseverance. Princess Yuki believed with all her heart in her people and used that belief to spurn her on towards reestablishing her family and succeeding. Tahei and Matashichi, both poor wretched peasants; they were dishonest and greedy and because of that they remained in their poor situation. By seeing the Princess’s determination to succeed and with a little coercion from Rokurota, they were able to see that being kind to one another would go a long way towards improving their lives. This movie helped to teach its viewers that greed would not get you anywhere; that belief in a better future and perseverance were needed in order to attain the bright future that they want.

In Takahashi Yamazaki’s Always, the characters are all a little down on their luck, but they learn that through helping one another out that they can achieve a better outlook on life. Mustuko went to Tokyo in the hope for a better future; even the one she got wasn’t the one that she had expected, she still ended up in a nice situation. Being able to persevere despite the mishaps she faced, she was able to make a place for herself and a brighter future due to her new experiences. Ryunosuke, even though he had wanted recognition from others and publishing companies, was satisfied by the recognition by one little boy. By persevering, he was able to get what he wanted, even though it was not in the form that he had expected it to be.

Overall, each of the movies inspired in me a hope and belief in a brighter future. They ended up teaching me that if one perseveres, if they continue with out giving up, that you can achieve what you were looking for in a way that you need. Continuing to “Gaman” is worth the trials that life will put you through, and all you need to do is not lose hope and your beliefs.

1. The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942-1946. (2010, March 5). Retrieved December 5, 2015, from <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2010/gaman/>
2. High, P. (2003). The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years' War, 1931–1945. *University of Wisconsin Press,* *32*(1), 32-32. Retrieved December 7, 2015.
3. Richie, D. (2005). The Occupation of Japan. In *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Revised ed., p. 107). New York, New York: Kodansha USA.