

Shinto, Buddhism, and Japanese Culture Elements in The Movie Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pon Poko

Hiroaki Taniyama^{1,a,*}

¹*International Department of Beijing No. 2 Middle School, Beijing, 100010, China*

a. gushan5053@163.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper analyzes the Shinto, Buddhism, and Japanese cultural elements in the movie Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pon Poko (“Heisei-era Raccoon Dog War Ponpoko”), which is a movie produced by famous Studio Ghibli and released in 1994. The director of the movie chose the tanuki, which is a wild raccoon dog species, as the protagonist character to reflect the destruction of natural environments on the outskirts of Tokyo caused by human expansion. The director also included many Japanese Shinto, Buddhism, and cultural elements in this movie, making the movie both entertaining and reflecting. In this work, I will summarize the plot of the movie, explain the three endings in this movie, and conclude the director’s message.

Keywords: Studio Ghibli, Japanese culture, Shintoism, Buddhism

1. Introduction

Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pon Poko is an animation movie directed by Isao Takahata and produced by Studio Ghibli. It was released in 1994 and had a box office of 4.47 billion Yen. The Takahata director’s intention in producing this film is to convey the idea of environmental protection, and the director calls upon people to notice that city constructions are depriving natural habitats of wild animals.

According to Toshio Okada, a Japanese movie critic, director Isao Takahata thought that fantasy is beautiful indeed, but fantasy is hard to allow audiences to catch the deeper theme of the movie. Therefore, in order to better convey this serious central theme, this movie didn’t use many fantastical characters and didn’t depict nature as extremely beautiful just like other Ghibli movies. Instead, the movie chose a realistic style [1]. The movie chose the tanuki, which is a real-world animal, as a protagonist animal and includes many traditional myths about the tanuki, such as the magical ability to change their appearance, which is well known in Japan. This movie also contains many Shinto and Buddhism elements that vividly illustrate the Japanese culture and also lead to the three endings of tanukis in this movie, which shape the destiny of tanuki communities.

By analyzing the Shinto, Buddhism, and Japanese cultural elements in this movie, we can appreciate some Japanese ideologies in the movie, comprehensively capture the issues that the director of this movie worries about for Japan, and also have a better understanding of the message of this movie. So, we need to first know what happened in this movie.

Because of the economic development and the population expansion in Tokyo during the 1960s, downtown Tokyo became very difficult to live in. At the end of the 1960s, the Tokyo government initiated the Tama new town project and decided to expand the city westward into Tama rural areas.

At the end of the 1970s, the basic construction of Tama's new town was finished [2]. The construction caused many environmental issues, causing natural habitats to disappear. In the movie, tanuki, which lives in the Tama forest, decided to chase humans out of their homeland.

Tanukis decided on a five-year plan to study human society first, and then revive the “Bakegaku”, which is their ancestral camouflage magics, as a key method to repulse human beings. Tanukis practiced Bakegaku and changed into the feature of ghosts and deities to scare a human. Humans, however, didn't stop the construction because of those paranormal events.

Tanukis also sent messengers to Western Japan, asking elder tanukis there for help. When three elder tanukis reached Tokyo, they planned a huge “Ghost Parade Operation” in order to threaten humans and force humans to respect natural life. Using their strong Bakegaku ability, three elder tanukis created an array of traditional Japanese gods, deities, and ghost images and let them parade in the street. Other young tanukis also joined the operation and contributed their power. One elder tanuki even lost his life because of extreme tiredness. People in Tama city were impressed by this mystery. However, using this as a business chance, a boss of an amusement park deliberately announced that this parade is an advertisement for his park. People were deceived and no one recognized the parade was conducted by tanukis.

Tanukis entered a desperate mood. In the end, some of them carried out Buddhism ideas. They formed a treasure ship, escaped from Tokyo, and traveled to Elysium. Some of them used their physical power to fight against humans, while eventually losing their lives when they encountered armed policies. Some of them used Bakegaku to change themselves into humans and support their life in human society.

2. About Tanuki

The director chose tanukis not only because of their vulnerability so that they can represent the animals that were influenced by city constructions but also because of the public's familiarity with this animal. Current Japanese people have an affection for tanuki because of its quiet appearance, so audiences can easily accept this movie. While in the past, there were many scary myths about this species, which also provides a creative space for this movie.

Tanuki, also known as the Japanese raccoon dog, is a species of canid and was very common in rural areas in Japan. It looks like a dog covered with brown and black fur. It is omnivorous and has a nocturnal living habit. While, currently, tanuki is a species in danger. The population of tanuki decreased sharply since 1920. The major reason is massive human hunting in the 1920s' because tanuki fur is very valuable. Therefore, many Japanese countries set the tanuki as a natural monument and started to protect the tanuki.

Tanuki also has a mysterious image in Japan. Japanese people thought tanukis have the ability to change their appearance and make strange sounds, and people always relate some paranormal events to tanukis because of their nocturnal habits. The *Nihon Shoki*, written in the Nara period, recorded that tanukis changed their appearance into humans and sang songs. Some *Ukiyoe* from the Edo period depicted tanukis tapping on their stomach to make strange sounds.

In addition, people in the Edo period were afraid of tanukis that tanukis were going to revenge because they hunted lots of tanukis for their furs and meats [3]. In another *Ukiyoe* depicted sarcastically that male tanukis expanding their testis as weapons to attack humans.

Not only against humans but tanukis also used their magical power to protect their family against other tanuki powers. According to the legend *Awa Tanuki Gassen*, two tanuki groups launched a great war in the current Tokushima area. The *Kinchyo* shrine was built in order to commemorate the *Kinchyo Tanuki*, a chief tanuki who lost his life during this war [4].

3. Gods, Deities, and Ghosts

Isao Takahata, the director, wanted to make this movie an “anti-fantasy” movie. According to Toshio Okada, Isao thought if artists depict nature as extremely beautiful, people will dislike and don’t protect real nature because they will be disappointed that the real nature is not as beautiful as the fantasy in the movie. In order to really underscore the importance of the environmental protection theme, he decided to add serious gods, deities, and ghosts that people may be familiar with and were recorded in the real world, instead of creating new imaginary characters.

In my opinion, those gods, deities, and ghosts not only helped the director to emphasize the central theme of environmental protection, but also reveal some other social characteristics of Japan. This part will list some Shinto and Buddhism gods and traditional Japanese ghosts in the movie scene and analyze which characteristics of Japanese culture it reflects.

3.1. Shinto Gods and Deities in The Movie

There are many Shinto gods and deity elements in the scene of the movie.

When engineers and managers of the new town project and managers came to the local shrine to pray for the success of the construction, some young tanukis changed into stone Shinto sculptures to create a nervous atmosphere and an elder chief tanuki changed into a white fox, running on the roof of the shrine. Engineers and managers who saw the white fox panicked and keeled toward it.

The white fox is the oracle, the physical representation, of the deity of rice in Japanese Shinto. According to Shinto, the deity of rice controls the growth and harvest of five main grains in Japan. In many Inari shrines, including the main shrine Fushimi Inari-Taisha, the deity of rice is consecrated as the main god. Therefore, the white fox, as the oracle of the rice god, symbolizes the deity of rice and receives high respect from the Japanese people. Engineers and managers kneeled in front of the fox, which is the authority of the deity. While, what is the reason that those engineers and managers all believe in this authority, without doubting that this fox might be fake?

In my opinion, after the Taika Reform, Shinto not only helped the Yamato clan to consolidate its power but also gradually became the national belief of Japan. The number of people in a country that believe in a particular religion or idea can reflect the popularity of this religion or idea in this country, and a majority of people in Japan, despite their age, living area, and social status, believe in Shinto. Students pray for the god of study for their academic success; parents pray for deities for their children’s health; drivers pray for deities for their traffic safety. Most Japanese people have a Shinto value that their ancestors’ spirits, including gods and deities, are supervising and protecting them. Therefore, people need to show their respect to those spirits. If people humiliate those spirits, they may show their bad face toward people by withdrawing their hands to help people, known as the wrath of heaven. In the movie, Engineers and managers may feel guilty about destroying farmlands and afraid that they will receive the wrath of heaven, so they kneeled to the “oracle of the god of rice”.

3.2. Buddhist God in The Movie

Buddhism elements, as an important part of Japanese religion, also appeared in this movie.

There is a scene of Raigo, the welcoming approach, in this movie. When an elder tanuki from the western part of Japan lost his life during the Ghost Parade Operation because of extreme tiredness, Amida Buddha rides on a cloud to pick up the soul of this elder tanuki.

Amida Buddha is the main Buddha, the “awakened one”, of Pure Land Buddhism. When someone lost his life, Amida Buddha may have a welcoming approach and bring the person’s soul to the clean land. The Raigo became popular in Japan in the Heian period, when Buddhism was imported into Japan from China.

In my opinion, the Buddhism god in this movie represents the official religion in Japan. In reality, during the Heian period, Japanese rulers introduced Buddhism from China in order to stabilize the nation and enhance the power of aristocrats. The construction of joss can unify the nation's power and Buddhism doctrine can also unify the nation's ideology. In the movie, representing the official religion in Japan, the Buddhist god also showed majesty during the Raigo. The world is chaotic, and many traditional Japanese monsters and ghosts are paraded on the street at the night during the Ghost Parade Operation. However, when a person died, everything became quiet, and the Buddhism god welcomes the spirit of the dead person.

3.3. Traditional Japanese Ghosts in The Movie

Tanukis concentrated their magical force together to create many illusions and formed many traditional Japanese ghosts in order to threaten humans.

Ghosts, or “Obake” in Japanese, are a supernatural-figures that are something beyond human understanding. Some of the earliest Japanese ghosts were recorded in Kokiji as explanations for paranormal events. During the medieval period, the Japanese ghost culture became popular as a form of oral story. People, especially worriers, gathered at the night to share many scary stories, Kaidan in Japanese, in order to test their courage. In the Edo period, many books and scrolls about famous Obakes were published with detailed pictures [5].

Noppera-bō is a traditional Japanese ghost who has a human body but no face. People who were attacked by the Noppera-bō often find many furs on their clothes, indicating that Noppera-bō was formed by an animal. Chōchin-obake is the ghost of floating and speaking lanterns.

Those ghosts also contribute to the “anti-fantasy” purpose of this movie. According to Toshio Okada, the director of the movie, Isao Takahata, said that true fantasy is a kind of opium for audiences. Audiences infinitely put their emotion into the positive fantasy of the story instead of considering the reality means that they are infinitely requiring opium. Allowing traditional ghosts to parade in the street and meet people face to face, Isao Takahata creates a horror atmosphere in the movie and constantly notices audiences to pay attention to negative emotions, which are realistic, instead of paying attention to the fantasy.

In my opinion, the Japanese ghosts in the movie represent the Japanese secular culture. Japanese people are very familiar with those images of traditional ghosts thanks to the Kaidan and many illustrated books about ghosts. There must be a ghost house in a Japanese amusement park. Using those ghost figures, the director reflected the anger and fury of tanukis about human constructions.

4. Three Endings

Tanukis eventually failed to repulse humans and must find a way to survive under the circumstance of scarce natural habitats. Different tanukis choose their way to live according to their characteristics. In the end, the movie depicts three endings of tanukis. The three endings are also a metaphor for how different people in Japan addressed the problem when they were facing difficulties.

4.1. Buddhism Ending

An elder tanuki from western Japan, who is 999 years old and witnessed the war of GenPei, saw that Tokyo is dark and chaotic and decided to escape. He used his magical power to form a large Takarabune, the treasure ship, and called some ignorant young tanukis who did not learn the ability to change their appearance together to sail toward the Pure Land.

This is a typical Buddhism idea. The world is chaotic because people have many desires. People must endure their desire and think deeply about themselves to reach the Pure Land. There is irony in this movie scene. The narration of this scene said “this is a trip toward death, a trip of tragedy”,

marking a huge contrast between the tanukis on the Takarabune, who were surrounded by shining treasures. In fact, the “death” here doesn't mean physical death but means the death of hope. Escaping from the contaminated world is indeed an excellent idea and can help people to gain pleasure, but those tanukis who chose to embark took the escaping attitude about their homeland protection. Facing severe competition against humans, tanukis need hope, which is the most crucial value for them, to protect their homeland. Those Buddhism tanukis' departures left absolute damage on the tanuki community. When seeing those Buddhism tanukis singing and dancing on the going ship, tanukis who left on the hill felt hopeless.

In my opinion, Buddhism is too detached from reality for tanukis. Tanukis who choose Buddhism ending not only deceive themselves about a happy, perfect world but also mark the complete failure of their strive for their homeland.

4.2. Bushido Ending

Some aggressive tanukis, on the other hand, choose to fight against a human with violence to the end. Gonta is a tanuki who symbolizes power in the community. He was the chief tanuki of Takada Forest and he got extremely furious when his territory was completely occupied by humans and filled with concrete. He proposed to stop the human study plan and thought tanukis need to declare war against humans immediately. Although his war plan was objected to by other elders, he called upon his followers to fight against humans. Gonta's team used Bakegaku to form many illusions on a rainy night, distracting human drivers, and causing many traffic accidents at the construction site. Finally, there were three people killed in those accidents. Gonta's team's morale was greatly improved and he decided to kill as many humans as possible in order to chase humans out. He even tried to conduct a coup d'état to convince other elders.

When the Ghost Parade Operation failed, Gonta thought it is too late to use peaceful methods to solve the problem of human invasion. Therefore, Gonta led his followers to use the Bushido Gyokusayi spirit, using their life to fight and repulse humans till the end. Their aggressive actions caused some humans to be injured, causing the dispatch of armed polices. Finally, Gonta's team struck the array of police from the sky, and they were eventually killed by the police's gun.

In the movie, Gonta's plan is depicted as a tragedy and finally failed because Gonta's underestimated the strength of human powder. Although his idea is heroic, and selfless, and indeed caused impacts on human construction, it produced unnecessary sacrifices. If Gonta had listened to elder tanukis' ideas and consulted with them, he would have not lost his life.

In my opinion, Bushido is not all about courage. It is very unreasonable to radically pay attention to a particular part of Bushido only and practice it. Courage is important, but foolhardiness is always dangerous for all people. Miyamoto Musashi's Five Principles point out that as a warrior, he must set up a reasonable goal, consider the power of the opponent, and carefully lay out the plan in order to succeed in a battle. If the warrior only has bravery and without much consideration, he may bury himself because of some critical mistakes. Similarly, a business leader, if only has the courage and always does the risky investment, may have a greater possibility to fail and affect the whole business team.

In addition, I think this ending is also a metaphor for the tragedy of Kamikaze pilots in the Pacific War. Despite the incorrect reason and ideology which Imperial Japan launched the war when facing an absolute disadvantage against the United States, many Japanese soldiers choose to commit suicide attacks instead of surrender, because they thought protecting their empire and emperor is the absolutely correct action. This ideology may correspond to the idea of Bushido that warriors must do the correct decisions and devote their life to their masters. The Kamikaze action is still controversial even in Japan. The opinion of the Takahata director toward Kamikaze, as represented in the movie, can be understood as critical, because in the end those aggressive tanukis failed and said “in the end,

we cannot defeat humans” with a dying body. This is also one of the only two scenes that depict tanukis’ dead bodies (another scene is about a tanuki who died in a traffic accident). From my perspective, Bushido is only the façade for the suicide attack. Behind this were the distorted value of life at that time and the gambol of a nation. I think young people, as the future pillar of the nation and human society, should not be used as a consumable of a national machine.

4.3. Shinto Ending

Finally, the main character of the movie, Shoukichi, presented the Shinto ending to audiences.

Shoukichi had a curiosity about human society when he was little. He was determined to study Bakegaku and wanted to contribute to the human study plan. He successfully managed the skill to change into a human appearance and acted as a “spy” to study humans. He joined Gonta’s action to cause traffic accidents but later cast doubt that whether tanukis should kill or chase all humans out. At the end of the movie, Shoukichi decided to use his Shinto ability to enter human society, find jobs, earn money, supporting his life. Some tanukis who were also able to pretend like a human entered human society too. They earned money from companies and provided food for their families and friends.

For a majority of audiences, the action of Shoukichi and other tanukis who were able to change their appearance is a kind of compromise to human society. They gave up to protect their homeland and betrayed their original determination.

While, in my opinion, this is the best ending for tanukis in Tokyo when they failed to stop the rapid human construction. For them, the best path is not always the straight path, and if tanukis change their perspective to look at a problem that is previously hard to solve, they may find a better alternative solution. Using the Shinto magical power, Shoukichi and other tanukis choose a flexible way to survive and thrive. Firstly, they didn’t escape from the reality and expect an afterlife world; secondly, they also didn’t lose their life, what’s more, those tanukis may contribute to environmental protection, calling more people to protect the green land, helping to preserve as many natural habitats as possible. In contrast, ideas from western Japanese elder tanukis may be too obsolete and ideas about overthrowing the human construction by violence may be too arbitrary.

The reason for classifying this ending as a Shinto ending is because the doctrine of Shinto focuses on the more practical affair, such as how to live and thrive. In the movie, tanukis who chose the Shinto ending also considered the practical thing instead of the detached and spiritual idea.

4.4. Conclusion About Three Endings

Each end has its own characteristic: the Buddhism ending can reveal the detached emotion of tanukis who feel desperate about the world and their situation; the Bushido ending reflects the bravery of tanukis who fight against humans for their homeland; the Shinto ending represents the wise of tanukis who find out an alternative solution to survive. While three endings in the movie are reluctant choices for tanukis, and in the end, it is the triumph of humans: engineers succeed to build houses and roads; companies expanded their businesses; salarymen found a cheaper place to live in Tokyo. By representing the tragic endings of tanukis, the director in fact reflected the greed of human society at that time. Even though there were some casualties caused by traffic accidents (conducted by tanukis), even though there were signs of heavenly wrath (pretended by tanukis), and even though ghosts and monsters paraded on streets (formed by tanukis), the construction didn’t stop because people were pushed by the tremendous interests of this new town project.

5. Conclusion

There will be no literature if there is no thought and sorrow. The director conveyed the message that human society must face real environmental problems and try its best to address a substantial amount of issues. Different from the imaginary style of most movies produced by Studio Ghibli, Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pon Poko choose the realistic style to reveal the social issues: Shinto deities, Buddhist gods, and traditional Japanese ghosts reflect the fury and helplessness of tanukis when their homeland was devastated by human construction and three endings not reveal that different characteristics of tanukis can directly influence their destiny, but also provide enlightenment for human society.

Tanukis at first didn't care about human construction and still fought against each other for territory and food. Therefore, they missed the best chance to change the situation and were forced to accept three endings. Currently, human society is also facing considerable issues, such as global warming, nuclear energy crises, and global pandemic. In the near future, if human society doesn't start to change the situation, our position will be just like tanukis in the compressed forest: we will be forced to accept our destiny, feeling many regrets.

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