

# Comparative Study of *Yojimbo*, *Seven Samurai* & *The Yakuza*, *Black Rain*



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## Background & Distinctive Features of *Yojimbo*

*Yojimbo* is a renowned Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa portraying the image of a masterless samurai (*Ronin*) named Sanjuro Kuwabatake. It is also known that it influenced Sergio Leone's Western *A Fistful of Dollars* starring Clint Eastwood.

What is unique about the character of the protagonist Sanjuro Kuwabatake (Toshiro Mifune) is that he is not a typical hero. He is rather portrayed as a vicious character with a sinister face. However, his plan to extort money jumping between two groups of gangs is remarkable. His ultimate goal is to destroy both factions, after gaining as much money as possible and maintaining peace in the town. His plan is to trigger a war between the two gangs so that they will destroy each other. In the process, he shows mercy to a farmer and his wife, who had been taken as a hostage, and rescues her from one of the gangs. His actions and his cynical comments are sometimes contradictory but he appears to have a warm heart. Not only Sanjuro's unique character but also the clear structuralism that underlies the plot distinguishes the film from others. This will be discussed in the following section.

## Oriental Symbol Versus Occidental Icon

In the film, there are two gangs, one called the Seibei family and the other called the Ushitora family. In the Seibei family, the shadow leader, Seibei's wife, usually takes control of the group. Seibei is more a merchant-type character than a swordsman. Seibei's subordinates are mainly a nameless band of outlaws, and the weapons they possess are basic swords. That's the reason why they needed Sanjuro as a mercenary to fight for the family. Unlike the Seibei family, there are more dangerous characters in the Ushitora family. For example, the biggest obstruction for Sanjuro is Yoichiro, one of Seibei's sons, a slick strategist always armed with a gun who was part of a plot to assassinate a government official. After he came back to the village after a long odyssey, the stalemate between the two gangs began to change.

In all samurai films, the sword is a symbol of the warrior spirit and it represents not only the status but also the pride of the user. The

possession of a sword symbolizes the code of honor. On the other hand, a gun is a symbol of modernization. Yoichiro's use of a revolver drastically turned the tide of the turf war towards the Ushitora family. The gun, of course, is a symbol of Western society and its use contradicts the samurai code of honor. The conflict between the two gangs is now a clash of Oriental power versus Occidental power. The results were quite predictable. Aided by the gun and Yoichiro's sharp tactics, the Ushitora family easily outmaneuver the Seibei family. This could be seen as a story of Western modernized power prevailing over Oriental traditional power. However, this is just a prelude to a comeback of the Japanese samurai spirit. After being heavily wounded by the Ushitora family, Sanjuro heals his wounds in a shed near the river, with the aid of villagers, dreaming of revenge. Hearing that the Ushitora family had beaten up a bar owner, who was his sidekick, the infuriated Sanjuro rushes back to the village and slaughters all of the gang members, including the gun-toting Yoichiro. This magnificent comeback demonstrates that the swordsman's spirit can trump Western power.

## Structural Analysis of *Yojimbo*

*Yojimbo* can be analyzed in four dimensions using the semiotic square of Algirdas Julien Greimas, the eminent French-Lithuanian linguist and semiotician. In *Chart 1*, Sanjuro (S1), the protagonist, is placed in the far left corner. In the opposite corner, S2, there is the Seibei family (S2). They are linked because they both use swords, the symbol of the samurai. In addition, Sanjuro is just a vagabond who happened to drift into the village and not a stereotypical hero who carries out virtuous actions. He shares this unique character somewhat with the Seibei family gang.

Sanjuro feels sympathy for the townspeople and farmers who reside there (~S2). He also finds collaborators such as the bar owner and the undertaker. With their help, Sanjuro manages to take out the Ushitora family. They share the common interest of keeping peace in the town. This ultimate goal makes them work together. By contrast, the Ushitora family (~S1) is placed in the diagonal position, ~S1. That's because the Ushitora family is a band of villains that use slick strategy and Western weapons, the reverse of Sanjuro, a rugged

samurai who will eventually clash with them. In conclusion, Sanjuro, expressing sympathy for townspeople and being a drifting masterless swordsman, was not a stereotypical hero of virtue but in the end destroys all the vicious characters and restores peace in the town.

### Background of *Seven Samurai* & Its Structural Analysis

Kurosawa's masterpiece *Seven Samurai* is a distinguished movie with an international reputation. It also had a strong impact on the "Western" movie genre. The story starts with a village of poor farmers being regularly pillaged by a group of bandits and their precious crops taken as tribute. In order to protect themselves, the farmers asked one masterless vagabond Kanbei (Takashi Shimura) to be their bodyguard in exchange for food. Kanbei first declines their plea but changes his mind after seeing their desperate situation and decides to stand up for them. First, Kanbei decides to recruit more samurai – seven in all – in order to compete equally with the bandits. After succeeding in gathering seven warriors, they and the farmers bravely fight a fierce battle against the bandits and succeed in wiping them out. At the end of the battle, Kanbei tells one of the youngest samurai that they had lost the battle, looking sadly at the graves of four of the samurai. The following diagram demonstrates the character structure of the movie.

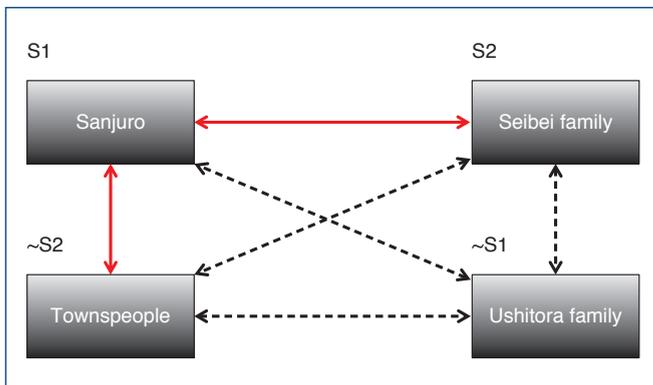
*Chart 2* places the characters into four dimensions. In the top left, we find the seven samurai (S1) led by Kanbei. In the top right corner are the farmers (S2). They share the common interest of protecting the village and maintaining peace. Free food and drink are supplied to the mercenaries in exchange for risking their lives. Townspeople (~S2) rarely show up in the plot, but they are basically monks, and drifters who show up at the beginning of the story playing a minor role. Bandits (~S1), put in the bottom right corner of ~S1, are the arch-enemy eventually to be annihilated by the seven samurai and the farmers. The biggest difference between the alliance of S1 and

S2, and ~S1 is moral. Our seven samurai dedicate their lives to this war, not to mention the lives of the farmers as well, compared to the bandits who underestimate the might of their opponents. This difference in morality is one important factor in determining the outcome of the combat.

### Clash of Western Power & Eastern Power

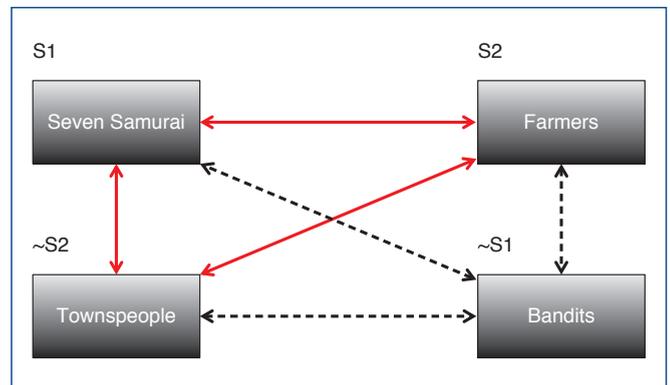
Another significant distinction between the farmer/samurai alliance and the bandits is the weapons they possess. The bandits use guns, whereas the alliance uses swords and bamboo spears. This can be understood as a battle of Western power versus Eastern power, because guns are a symbol of the Occident and sword and spear of the Orient. The clash of two different cultural groups starts out in favor of the West but as the combat continues the tide turns to the East. This comes from the strong bond between samurai and farmers, but the role of war tactician Kanbei should not be overlooked. Not only his leadership but also his strategy of fighting a guerrilla war is brilliant. The alliance takes out the villains one by one and gradually corners them. With impatience and fatigue, the bandits become reckless and end up losing to the alliance despite the fact that they outnumber them by 40 to seven (not including the farmers). Also, the bandits have horses and guns, and more sophisticated weaponry to take advantage of their apparently more primitive opponent, but in the end that does not affect the outcome of the combat. This implies that excellent tactics and the strong moral bond of samurai and farmers were sufficient to eventually trump a ferocious enemy equipped with Western weapons. Understanding the contrasts between the four groupings by using a structural analysis helps the viewer to understand the plot more easily. As the plot proceeds, the first four structures divide into two bigger groups and at last into only one: the farmers. Kanbei's last words, lamenting that they were defeated again, demonstrates the nihilism of war.

CHART 1  
**Structural analysis of *Yojimbo***



Note: Red is good relationship and black is hostile relationship.  
Source: Compiled by the author

CHART 2  
**Structural analysis of *Seven Samurai***



Note: Red is good relationship and black is hostile relationship.  
Source: Compiled by the author

## Background of *The Yakuza*

*The Yakuza*, directed by Sydney Pollack in 1974, is a Japanese-American gangster movie starring well-known Japanese actor Ken Takakura as Ken Tanaka playing the role of a former member of a yakuza gang. What may confuse the audience are the complicated human relationships in the story. Basically, however, this is a story of collaboration between a former police detective from America, Harry Kilmer (Robert Mitchum), and a former yakuza in Japan. What makes it intriguing is Harry's deep understanding of obligation. For instance, in the conversation between Harry and Ken's brother, they discuss how important it is to abide by the code of honor and obligation. In the Japanese world of the yakuza, the sword is the sole weapon to either protect or to destroy.

This is similar to the samurai code of honor, where the sword is used as a primary weapon for both attack and self-defense but also to commit ritual suicide in the case of a losing battle. In the film, the sword is a metaphor standing for the samurai spirit and the pride of a warrior, in this case the pride of being a yakuza. Therefore, Ken only uses his sword in the main combat scene, yet Harry as a *gaijin* (foreigner) is allowed to use a gun. As the plot proceeds, Harry gradually assimilates himself to the yakuza tradition and begins to understand the meaning of "obligation" (*giri* in Japanese). Japanese culture and its unique way of thinking are also interpreted by Dusty (Richard Jordan), Harry's American gangster sidekick. Dusty acts as Harry's bodyguard, with only a limited knowledge of Japanese society. His confusion and his view of the country represent the stereotyped image of a foreigner arriving for the first time in a mysterious society. One example is the scene with Dusty in the baths with Harry. He mentions that Americans kill everyone they see when they become reckless but Japanese kill themselves. According to Dusty, everything seems the reverse. This observation is significantly important because Harry, who had already lived in Japan for many years and is deeply embedded in the culture and tradition, has overlooked the intricacy of the cultural code. Moreover, Dusty expresses the differences between two cultures with excitement as if he were a small child who encounters something beyond comprehension. This view conveys to the audience another viewpoint, which is different from Ken's or Harry's, who are already experts on Japan. Dusty's curiosity as a true outsider, however, is a dangerous attitude for a bodyguard. He eventually gets himself killed during the battle against the gangs. These complicated views of Japanese society from both an outsider's and insider's perspectives will be simplified with a diagram below.

### Structural Analysis of *The Yakuza*

This film demonstrates the complex culture of a Japanese underground syndicate, while also projecting the virtue and code of honor of Japanese samurai. There are many similarities between yakuza and samurai. This intrinsic and intangible cultural code is viewed from the perspectives of two outsiders and one insider. The

following diagram in *Chart 3* will simplify the roles of the characters and help the viewer understand the plot more readily.

Harry (S1) is the protagonist and the key person to convey his view of Japanese yakuza culture to the audience. Even though Harry is savvy on Japan, having lived there extensively in the past, his trustworthy deputy Dusty (S2) will supplement the understanding of this complicated cultural code from an outsider's viewpoint. Dusty could be regarded as a mere *gaijin*, but Harry is different owing to his relationship with Eiko Tanaka, a sister of Ken and a bar owner. The relationship between Harry and Ken (~S2) is more complicated because, even though they both speak each other's language, Ken is a former yakuza and still considered an insider. In the battle scene with the Tono gang, Harry is allowed to use a rifle but Ken only uses a sword, thereby abiding by the yakuza cultural code. As an insider, Ken is only allowed to use a sword. The Tono gang (~S1) and Harry are enemies and don't have anything in common, so they are positioned in the bottom right diagonally.

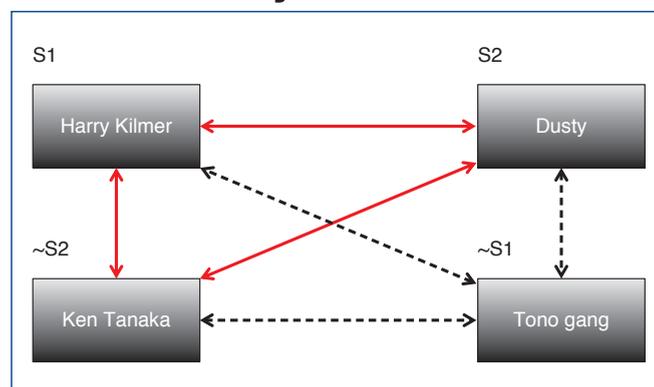
Dusty and the Tono gang are both mafia, so their background is the same. The Tono gang and Ken are both yakuza, the latter a former gang member; they have the same background and so are considered intertwined.

### Interpretation of *The Yakuza*

As is demonstrated in *Chart 3*, the main characters are correlated with each other and help viewers interpret the complex cultural code of Japanese yakuza society. A combination of Western weapons used by Harry and the Japanese combat style demonstrated by a master of the sword, Ken, will at last wipe out the Tono gang. This implies that the integration of West and East will double their power and enable them to overcome difficulties. Moreover, the fact that a certain level of language ability, in this case conversation levels of English and Japanese, enables both men to build a mutual understanding should not be overlooked. After the fierce combat against the Tono gang, Ken deliberately cuts off a finger with his knife as a token. This

CHART 3

### Structural analysis of *The Yakuza*



Note: Red is good relationship and black is hostile relationship.  
Source: Compiled by the author

is because he inadvertently killed his nephew. Harry also chops off one of his fingers, as a token to express his friendship with Ken. Carrying out the same obligation as a Japanese in the end is a pledge to eternal friendship and a sign of Harry's integration into the society.

### Background of *Black Rain*

*Black Rain* is an action movie directed by Ridley Scott in 1989. It is also known in Japan because Ken Takakura and Yusaku Matsuda, both famous Japanese movie stars, were cast in the parts of policeman and underground syndicate leader. This film is also significantly similar to the plot of *The Yakuza*. The protagonist Nick Conklin (Michael Douglas), a police officer in New York, and his deputy Charlie Vincent (Andy Garcia), happened to be in a restaurant and witness a shooting among Japanese yakuza. The perpetrator Koji Sato (Matsuda) is later apprehended and sent back to Osaka, accompanied by Nick and Charlie. Arriving at the airport, Sato's gang members disguised as Osaka police officers trick Nick, taking back their boss Sato. Later Nick and Charlie meet the real police from Osaka and discover they have been tricked. This is the start of the collaboration between the two American detectives and a determined and disciplined police officer, Masahiro Matsumoto (Ken).

In the film, as in *The Yakuza*, there's a scene where Matsumoto is practicing kendo in a kendo hall. This demonstrates the Japanese warrior spirit, gained through training in the Japanese traditional martial art. The kendo arena's solemn atmosphere is a place to prepare warriors before physical confrontation. In kendo only bamboo swords are allowed, so that the competitors won't hurt each other. However, in the real battle scene, Matsumoto removes his armor and replaces his bamboo sword with a real sword. The sword is also a symbol of the Japanese spirit and the user is to abide by the code of honor.

In a parking lot, in front of him, Nick's deputy is beheaded with a sword. This act provokes and infuriates Nick, who pledges to take vengeance on Sato. In this dramatic scene, the murderer Sato uses a sword (not a gun) because he is a young and new leader of his own yakuza group. It could be interpreted as a declaration of war against Nick and Matsumoto. As a yakuza member, Sato also cuts off his finger in front of his former boss as a token of reconciliation. This act of chopping off a finger is an action conveying apology, to take responsibility for misconduct. These scenes represent an ideal Japanese yakuza culture which is linked to the traditional samurai culture of Japan. Observing the society of Japanese mafia from an outsider's perspective enables the viewer to decode this complex behavior.

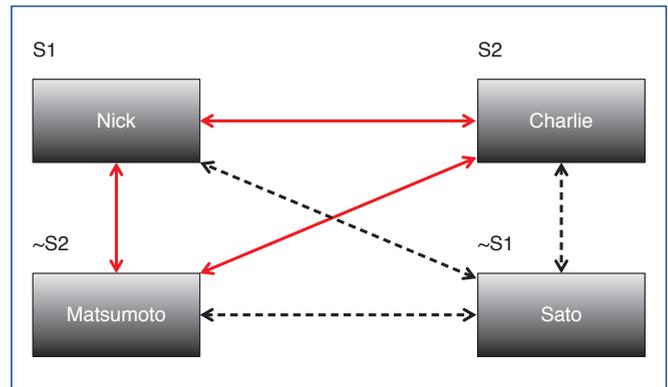
### Structural Analysis of *Black Rain*

The following diagram in *Chart 4* demonstrates the structure and relationships of the characters in the story.

Nick (S1), a police officer from New York, is the protagonist and the audience witnesses Japan from his viewpoint. Charlie (S2) is his

CHART 4

### Structural analysis of *Black Rain*



Note: Red is good relationship and black is hostile relationship.  
Source: Compiled by the author

deputy but is not as observant as Nick and is a bit of a lax character. His outsider carelessness causes his death. Matsumoto (~S2) is a Japanese policeman and collaborates with Nick to crush Sato's plot. From this perspective, they are partners and have common objectives. Moreover, Matsumoto speaks English and has no difficulty in conversing with Nick. This allows them to work together smoothly despite the fact they are not legally authorized to arrest Sato. Sato (~S1) and his men are arch-enemies of Nick and are bound to be apprehended. They are put in the furthest corner due to their distinct character and background. In the end, after Charlie's death, Nick and Matsumoto work together to crush Sato's plan and capture him.

### Conclusion

Looking at two Japanese samurai movies and two yakuza films directed by American directors, there are some similarities and distinctions. In all of the films, there is a clear distinction between the usage of guns (an icon of Western power) and the usage of swords (an icon of Japanese power). In some cases, Japanese power prevails over its counterpart and in the other cases a combination of the two leads to triumph. In the two yakuza films, an alien's point of view helps the audience understand the intricate cultural code of the yakuza, which is an example used to decode the complications of Japanese society. The samurai code is applied to yakuza in contemporary society and the sword is another iconic sign that represents Japanese society. However, in modern times, such icons have been replaced by Western-made items on a daily basis. Collaboration between West and East as represented in the four *Charts* suggests the significance of using both. JS

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