

# The Shape of Our Fate

Thoughts on Kurosawa's masterpiece *The Seven Samurai* and its offspring, *The Magnificent Seven*

Sean Arthur Joyce

*You can't change your fate, only the shape of it.*  
—from *The Seven Samurai*

This statement, made by the lead samurai Kanbê Shimada, seems to be a bedrock philosophical position of Kurosawa throughout *The Seven Samurai*. This despite the fact that these seven elite warriors, of all people, would seem—like the seven gunslingers of John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven*—most able to take control of their fates. It's the age-old debate: are we creatures of free will, able to chart our own course through life? Or is there a path laid down from which our individual choices amount to little more than detours?

Unusually for an American Western, Sturges follows closely in Kurosawa's philosophical footsteps. In both films, the leaders of the seven warriors acknowledge that—to paraphrase, “in the end, we lose.” Even with a substantially greater than average level of personal power, there are forces far beyond our control that impact or steer our fate. Ultimately, the farmers at the end of the great battle will go on being farmers. The warriors will go on being rootless wanderers, weapons-for-hire with a high likelihood of dying alone and without family. “He who takes the sword shall die by the sword.”<sup>1</sup> In his final comments, Shimada acknowledges the irony. Watching the villagers joyfully singing their planting songs as they put in a new crop of barley, he mutters, “The farmers have won. We have lost.”

But *The Seven Samurai* is far from an exercise in simple fatalism. Kurosawa uses an extensive lead-up to the final battle to make it clear that the farmers are not helpless if only they will take a hand in their own defensive preparations. This point is subsumed somewhat in *The Magnificent Seven*, which can't help being influenced by the American ethos of rugged individualism. Yet even here, a small core group of Mexican farmers learns to transcend their sense of powerlessness, realizing that they *can* have some impact on the shape of their fate.

Although ostensibly these films are about ‘heroes’, both directors challenge the archetype. In *The Magnificent Seven* this happens in the scene where Mexican-Irish gunslinger Bernardo, played by Charles Bronson, chides the Mexican boys who have become his followers. He reminds them that the real heroes are their fathers, who work day in and day out to provide

for them and their mothers through sheer hard labour. “It takes no courage to pack a gun,” he insists. There is an echo of this in *The Seven Samurai* when Shimada reproves the young samurai-in-waiting Katsushirô. “You’re overestimating me. Listen, I’m not a man with any special skill, but I’ve had plenty of experience in battles; losing battles, all of them.”

Overall, Kurosawa’s film is more emotionally nuanced, but in neither film are there completely black-and-white characters. Sturges arguably makes somewhat more of the bandits’ plight. Through their leader Calvera—finely rendered by Eli Wallach—we discover that they haven’t eaten for three days. That makes them just about as desperate as the Mexican villagers. As to the ruthlessness of the bandits, Kurosawa works more by implication than exposition. Unlike Sturges’ bandits, they never have to ride into the village to make their threats and demands. Kurosawa’s bandits are well known—their reputation precedes them like the gradually swelling thunder of hoofbeats in the opening scene. (Like Hitchcock, Kurosawa used both soundscape and suggestion to build tension and anticipation.)

We also see the fear and terror of the farmers in Kurosawa’s village to an extent we never really see in Sturges’ Mexican villagers. For a culture that is traditionally quite emotionally reserved, it’s astonishing to see such profound emotion expressed by Japanese characters. Their prolonged suffering at the hands of repeated raids by the bandits is painfully apparent as they weep and grieve openly in the public square. It may be that once again the contrast between cultures is apparent here—in the American ethos, ‘men are men’ and ‘tough guys are tough’ even if they are persecuted farmers. But Kurosawa makes it graphically obvious that his villagers’ lives hang on the thinnest of threads.

What this points toward is a fundamental awareness that all fates are connected, especially in a tightly knit village community. Kurosawa communicates this visually in a stunning way. In his crowd scenes the villagers move as one body, with a unison worthy of well-choreographed dancers. They move like a flock of birds or a herd of animals; the group emotion is felt and expressed by all. Even in the chaos of the battle scenes, the villagers attack the bandits in coordinated swarms like furious hornets. It’s as Shimada says, “This is the nature of war. By protecting others, you save yourselves.” To survive, all must work together, whether in war or peace: Kurosawa is using war as a metaphor for existence.

It’s an unpopular message now in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the ethos of the consumer—the fiction of the rugged individualist—has taken over. While this serves vested

commercial interests well enough, it has a corrosive effect on society. It's a symptom of a collapsing empire. "A house divided against itself cannot stand."<sup>2</sup> Historian Michael Grant, in *The Fall of the Roman Empire—A Reappraisal*, pinpoints a single principle—disunity—as the cause of that great civilization's downfall. He analyzes how this disunity spread out across all sectors of Roman society. "Heaven forbid that we ourselves should have a monolithic society without any internal disunities at all, or any differences of character or opinion. But there can arrive a time when such differences become so irreconcilably violent that the entire structure of society is imperiled."<sup>3</sup>

The myth of the rugged American individual may have served that society well during its westward expansion. But taken to an extreme—as it has been—it has become little more than social engineering for the purpose of selling products. It has been well documented by other writers of film history that the American Western reflected a similar trajectory, from the early 'horse operas' to the exaltation of the Western hero personified by John Wayne through to the anti-heroes of Clint Eastwood's films. Filmmakers realized—as 19<sup>th</sup> century lawmakers must have—that at a certain point what is needed more than individualistic heroes is a stable society of law-abiding citizens. The lone hero must be de-mythologized, and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) fires an early warning shot in this direction. The ricochet carries all the way through to Eastwood's own *Unforgiven* (1992) and beyond.

Kurosawa coordinates his group scenes like an artist wielding paintbrush and watercolours, or a skilled calligrapher writing *sousho*<sup>4</sup> on rice paper. The fluid movement of his villagers is reminiscent of the opening scene of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*—the gorgeous reeds rippling in a clear stream. The use of the cinematic lens to create a painterly sense of *mood* or tone is something both Tarkovsky and Kurosawa understand thoroughly. There are passages in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* that approach this depth of tonality, a legacy that goes all the way back to the expressionism of early silent films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Metropolis*. In American cinema, the masterly use of film to evoke mood is probably best expressed during the classic period of *film noir*, when wartime restrictions on lighting created an unexpected artistic bonanza. Although American commercial filmmaking tends to favour plot elements over mood, thankfully we have living masters like Terrence Malick and Jim Jarmusch.

Tarkovsky, by making the stream image so powerfully beautiful, makes the separation of the *Solaris* astronauts from Earth particularly poignant. When we find out that they never leave

the planet Solaris, we fully appreciate how much they are giving up. In *The Seven Samurai*, the synchronous emotionality of the villagers makes us see them almost as animals, with no sense of separation from the Earth. As farmers they understand how closely their fates are linked—not only to each other, but to the soil beneath their feet.

By contrast, the American westward expansion required an ethos not of co-existence but of conquering both the Earth and native people. The repeated use of Monument Valley in Arizona and Utah as backdrop for classic American Westerns emphasizes the forbidding aspect of landscape. Like the Indians encountered by settlers, it becomes another potentially deadly enemy. The heroic aspect of the individual is brought to the foreground. By contrast, the samurai use the landscape surrounding the village as an ally in the villagers' defence. It's fitting and poetic that this strategy forces the bandits to cross flooded barley fields to get into the village.

In both films, by getting the farmers to fight back, the warriors are helping them alter the shape of their fates. Ultimately these humble villagers are given an opportunity that is somewhat more rare for the warriors, who—according to Shimada—go on fighting losing battles. Kurosawa devotes his final scene to a loving portrayal of the villagers planting their new crop, moving to the rhythm of a work chant led with gusto by a cheerful villager. The villagers' spirits have been transformed by their experience. Yet they remain farmers—their basic fate is unchanged. Only now they have hope and a renewed sense of pride. Whatever comes, the villagers can hold their heads high—they didn't just hire expert warriors to save them, they worked for their salvation.

“You can't change your fate, only the shape of it.” Is this the message of an older, wiser culture to a younger, less experienced one? The *Tao te Ching* puts it plainly: “The universe is sacred. You cannot improve it.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the ethos of taking the reins and bending the universe to our will—a common theme in American Westerns—the Tao would have us learn our place within it. The image of water is repeatedly invoked in the Tao to illustrate the mysterious life force. Wisdom comes from following the will of water, not “pushing the river.”<sup>6</sup> Kurosawa's masterful crowd scenes—like Tarkovsky's streambed reeds—reflect this ebb and flow. In both *The Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* the villagers are swept up in a wave of fear they must learn to master. Though they seek to do so by external means—hiring expert warriors—by the film's end they realize the strength they needed was within. “Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools.”<sup>7</sup>

The joy on the villagers' faces at the end of Kurosawa's film shows that they have grasped the lesson: though they will never be as physically powerful as the samurai, they have more power to influence the shape of their fate than they had ever imagined. In *The Magnificent Seven*, the young protégé Chico is the only one of the surviving gunslingers who gets a chance at a new life when he decides to stay in the village and marry Petra. Like the villagers, he has learned that there is always an element of choice in our fate. As the Tao suggests, we may not be able to change the universe, but we can use our free will to move more freely within its currents. The result of this spiritual realization is contentment and even joy.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Matthew 26:52
2. Mark 3:24
3. Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire—A Reappraisal*, Annenberg School of Communications, Radnor, PA USA, 1976, p. 20.
4. Susho is one of three basic styles of Japanese calligraphy: *kaisho*, or 'correct writing'; *gyousho*, or 'travelling writing' for note-taking; and *sousho*, or 'grass writing', used for artistic effect.
5. Lao Tsu, *Tao te Ching* 29, Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, translators; Vintage Books edition, March 1997.
6. Lao Tsu, *Tao te Ching* 32, *ibid.* "Tao in the world is like a river flowing home to the sea."
7. Lao Tsu, *Tao te Ching* 31, *ibid.*

