

## 8 *Tōken Ranbu and samurai swords as tourist attractions*

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Japanese swords (*nihontō*) are generally regarded as weapons for samurai warriors, but they have various symbolic and aesthetic values in Japanese culture. In *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*) and *Nihonshoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*) in the eighth century, it was said that a sword was one of the Three Sacred Treasures of Japanese imperial regalia that Ninigi, a grandson of Amaterasu the Sun Goddess, brought to the ground from Takamagahara heavens. Based on this myth, swords became objects of worship in Shinto. Additionally, in Japanese Buddhist and Shinto belief, a sword protects its owner from demons, so it is regarded as a talisman (Sugawa-Shimada 2020a: 59). In the Heian period (794–1185), a sword was a treasure bestowed by the emperor, and it was gifted to noblemen for their great achievement in the court (Kawashima 2020: n.p.). Following this tradition, after the Kamakura period feudal lords (*daimyō*) also gave *nihontō* to samurai for meritorious service.

From the Kamakura period (1185–1333) to the Warring States period (late sixteenth century), swords were not used in battle as often as other weapons, such as spears, bows, and arrows (Watabe 2021: 2; Kawashima 2020: n.p.). However, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), when class distinctions were solidified, only the samurai class was allowed to carry a pair of long and short *nihontō*. Swords symbolized samurai status, and this image has been reproduced in popular culture. After the *Haitōrei* (law prohibiting the carrying of swords) of 1876, intellectuals such as Nitobe Inazō (author of *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan*) in the Meiji period (1868–1912) used swords' symbolic value to construct a national identity associated with *bushidō* (way of the samurai). In the 1930s, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the symbolic value of *nihontō* was enhanced again. Japanese soldiers wore *nihontō* to symbolize loyalty and masculinity in reference to samurai (Watabe 2021: 3). After the Second World War, the 1958 Act for Controlling the Possession of Firearms or Swords and Other Such Weapons was enacted. Swords were defined as

artefacts and their images as weapons sanitized. In recent times, therefore, *nihontō* in Japanese culture have been seen as works of art, but historically they have also been weapons of war and ritual tools in Shinto and Japanese Buddhism. Overall, swords frequently invoke a national sensitivity (Watabe 2021).

Young people used to pay little attention to *nihontō* as works of art. But they suddenly gained popularity, especially among young women, due to the online game *Tōken Ranbu-ONLINE-* (2015–present) and its transmedia franchise. *Tōken Ranbu* (literally ‘boisterous dance of swords’) is a DMM and Nitroplus action game played on web browsers and apps. It features handsome young men called *Tōken danshi* (sword male warriors), who are the ‘artifact spirits’ (*tsukumogami*) of Japanese swords modelled on actual swords of historically famous figures from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Gamers play the role of a *saniwa* (shaman-like person) who has magical power to ensoul swords. The game has no specific storyline but the ‘world’ (*sekaikan*) is set in 2205 when historical revisionists attempt to change Japanese history by sending their demon-like army to the past. To prevent their plot, the government orders a *saniwa* to maintain ‘history’ by sending *Tōken danshi* to the past.

*Tōken Ranbu-ONLINE-* was adapted into musicals (2015–present), plays (2016–present), a live action film (2019), two TV anime series (*Tōken Ranbu: Hanamaru*, 2016 and 2018; *Katsugeki! Tōken Ranbu*, 2017), and Internet radio programmes. Collaborations with tourist sites vary from *Tōken saryou* (2016–2019), a café in Akihabara with real *nihontō* displayed in glass showcases, to sword exhibitions in museums. The musicals and play series are some of the most popular works among young women and have induced theatre tourism as a form of contents tourism (Sugawa-Shimada 2020b: 135; Chapter 14). A special live concert from the musical *Tōken Ranbu* was held at Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima in 2016 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of it becoming a World Heritage Site. In Shinto, *kagura* (traditional Shinto dance) and *gagaku* music are routinely performed as a sacred ritual for *kami* (Shinto gods). Thus, dance and songs by *Tōken danshi* (personified swords) at a world heritage Shinto shrine had the potential to stimulate a sense of spirituality and national sensitivity, although most female fans who attended the concert in Itsukushima Shrine concentrated on the characters/actors and seemed to pay no attention to the symbolic and negative meanings that *nihontō* can have (Sugawa-Shimada 2020a: 62).

During the *nihontō* boom induced by *Tōken Ranbu*, a number of museums all over Japan put on displays of swords related to the game, and female fans sometimes called *Tōken joshi* in the media flooded to them (The Mainichi 2020). The five-minute TV series *Tōken Ranbu, okkii*

*Konnosuke no Tōken sanpo* (*Tōken Ranbu*, big Konnosuke's sword walking tour, broadcast 2017–2019 on Tokyo MX TV) introduced swords on display in museums and shrines in Japan, which also facilitated female fans' contents tourism (Figure 8.1).

Even museums whose exhibitions did not collaborate with *Tōken Ranbu* have seen an increase in visitors: for instance, the Hijikata Toshizō Museum in Hino city, Tokyo, which displays Izumi no kami Kanesada, the long sword of Hijikata Toshizō; and the Satō Hikogorō Shinsengumi Museum in Hino, which displays Hijikata's photo, swords, and letters (Chapter 10). A female fan who I talked to at the Hijikata Toshizō Museum in 2019 told me that she was 'so happy to meet' (*aete, mecha ureши*) Izumi no kami Kanesada (a character of *Tōken Ranbu*). She came all the way from the Kansai area to see 'him'.

In other notable cases of *Tōken Ranbu*-related contents tourism, fans have contributed to the rediscovery or restoration of *nihontō* as Japanese art or to the broader disaster recovery effort after the Kumamoto Earthquake of 2016 and the 2020 Kyushu floods.

In actual history, Shokudaigiri Mitsutada, a sword of Date Masamune (a famous *daimyō* in the Warring States period), was handed down to the



Figure 8.1 *Tōken Ranbu* fans looking at other fans' *ema* (votive wooden tablets), Kaji Shrine, Kyoto. Author's photo.

Mito Tokugawa Family, but it was thought to have been destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. Although its whereabouts were unknown to sword fans, after Mitsutada appeared as a *Tōken danshi* in the game, the Tokugawa Museum in Mito city announced that it was stored at the museum, but was too heavily damaged by fire to be displayed as an artwork. However, following fans' requests, the Tokugawa Museum has held special exhibits since 2015 and become one of the most popular destinations for fans ever since (Mikame 2018). There is a similar story about Hotarumaru, a *Tōken danshi* modelled on the large sword Hotarumaru Kunitoshi, which was lost during the Second World War. Swordsmith Fukutome Fusayuki started a crowdfunding project called Hotarumaru Legend Recovery Project in 2015.<sup>2</sup> It exceeded its target and raised around 45 million yen, which was probably supported heavily by fans (Kumamoto Kenmin TV 2017). A newly forged Hotarumaru was dedicated to Aso Shrine in 2017.

The Hotarumaru Legend Recovery Project also contributed to the recovery of Aso Shrine, which was almost destroyed in the Kumamoto Earthquake of 2016. *Tōken joshi* also contributed to disaster recovery efforts at Aoi Aso Shrine in Hitoyoshi city, Kumamoto. The 77 swords dedicated to this shrine were submerged in the 2020 Kyushu floods. Although these swords were not directly related to *Tōken Ranbu* characters, 'many female fans of *Tōken Ranbu* ... supported the crowdfunding to rescue 77 swords dedicated to Aoi Aso Shrine' (Hitoyoshi Shinbun 2020). Fans donated to this project because they are not only fans of the game. As sword fans they wanted to help any sword damaged by natural disaster.

In summary, Japanese swords (*nihontō*) have symbolic and aesthetic value in Japanese culture. The transmedia franchise *Tōken Ranbu* deftly sanitizes their negative images related to wars and has popularized them using handsome young male characters modelled on the actual swords of historically famous figures. Paying little attention to such war-related connotations that *nihontō* can convey, fans, many of whom are female (*Tōken joshi*), enthusiastically visit shrines, museums, birth and death places of historical figures who were the models for their favourite sword characters, and other related sites nationwide. However, the nationalistic samurai spirits connected to swords unexpectedly appeared when Chinese and Korean fans of *Tōken Ranbu* harshly condemned a 2017 stamp rally called 'Cherry blossom tour in Edo castle district' in Tokyo done in collaboration with *Tōken Ranbu* that had Yasukuni Shrine as one of the stops (Together 2017; Chapter 15). Yasukuni Shrine is often criticized because it enshrines war criminals. Japanese swords are double-edged indeed.

## Notes

- 1 The director of *Tōken Ranbu* intentionally avoided using swords from the twentieth century as game characters because they are strongly connected to killing in wars (Watabe 2021: 15).
- 2 The legend of Hotarumaru: The large sword of Aso Korezumi was damaged during battle against Ashikaga Takuaji in 1336. It is said that the blade of Aso's sword was restored after he dreamed that countless fireflies were perched on it. Based on this legend, this sword was called Hotarumaru (the fireflies) and was later dedicated to Aso Shrine (Kumamoto Kenmin TV 2017).

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