

In Mortality...

Chiba Tetsuya on Joe and the Death of Heroism

Darren Jon Ashmore, Ph.D.



'Joe absolutely had to die, in order that we might learn something from him. [...] Immortal heroes become less than human because we cannot empathize with them. True heroes share all our traits; from the strength of our spirit to the fragility of our flesh'¹

- Chiba Tetsuya

¹ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.
Editor's Note: In view of the piece's nature as a memorial, we have left the author's original formatting intact wherever possible rather than our usual practice of making it conform to our Style Book.

**Dedicated to the life and work of
Master Chiba Tetsuya, whose characters have enthralled *manga*
fans for over forty years.**



千葉 徹彌²

² Photo by the author, October 6th 2012.

IN MORTALITY...:
CHIBA TETSUYA ON JOE AND THE DEATH OF
HEROISM

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By Bread Alone...

It is never a good sign when the guest of honor at an event seems to burst into tears the moment one so much as opens one's mouth...

In this case, I had just taken to my feet to speak on the beauty and power of the various characters of Chiba Tetsuya,³ when the gentleman in question quietly began sobbing to himself, supported by both Katō Kazuhiko (Monkey Punch)⁴ and his own son.

Though puzzling, the moment soon passed and I was able to share my own impressions of Master Chiba's very human character illustrations with several hundred fans – both old and young – who had gathered to pay their respects to the man.

It was only after the address itself, as we all sat quietly discussing the day that the old man apologized for his 'unseemly outburst' and explained that he was often taken that way by the sight of 'canned bread'.⁵

I had been nibbling on a biscuit of hard-tack before the address, but could not have begun to imagine the truth behind that kind old man's tears as he unpacked his story for me, and shared sixty seven years of hunger, fear, pain, remorse and love.

³ At the opening of an exhibition at Otemae University which was dedicated to the life's work of Master Chiba.

⁴ Master Kato was serving, at the time as professor of manga history at Otemae University.

⁵ 乾パン [kan-pan] is a form of hard-tack, or dried bread which has been used for centuries as a staple of military rations and survival food.

“Many of my younger fans don’t know that, as a child I lived in occupied China and, when the war was over, our family had to make our way to the coast and wait for ship home to Japan. [...] As you can imagine, there was a great deal of hatred for the Japanese who were leaving, and in those weeks I saw many terrible things done to my friends and family. At the time, I was too young to take in, and did not understand the violence, the selling of children for food, the hatred and the fear. I did understand the hunger however. [...] It took us a long while to get a ship, and by the time we did get one I can recall not having eaten, seemingly for days. You might think it selfish, considering what had just happened, but getting aboard ship and being fed soup and canned bread became the defining moment in that part of my life; more than leaving the war-zone and more than arriving in Japan. [...] Those little biscuits have become both my memorial to all the horrors of those times, and one of the ways I appease the spirits of that age. It is the same with my characters. Each one of them tries to answer some of the questions I still have from that time of turmoil, and none better than Yabuki Joe, who himself is like those little bits of bread; tough as Hell itself, plain as can be imagined, and good for soul if one understands them.”⁶

One Quiet Man and the Heroism of Yabuki Joe

“Of all the characters to which I have given life, I love Yabuki Joe the most. Not because he is stronger, better or more heroic than the others, but because both [Takamori] Asaki⁷ and I think of him as the outsider God, or the auspicious stranger who arrives in a community and, in changing himself, changes it for the better then departs. He is Human and divine, and he is all I hoped I could be in this life, but still am not.”⁸

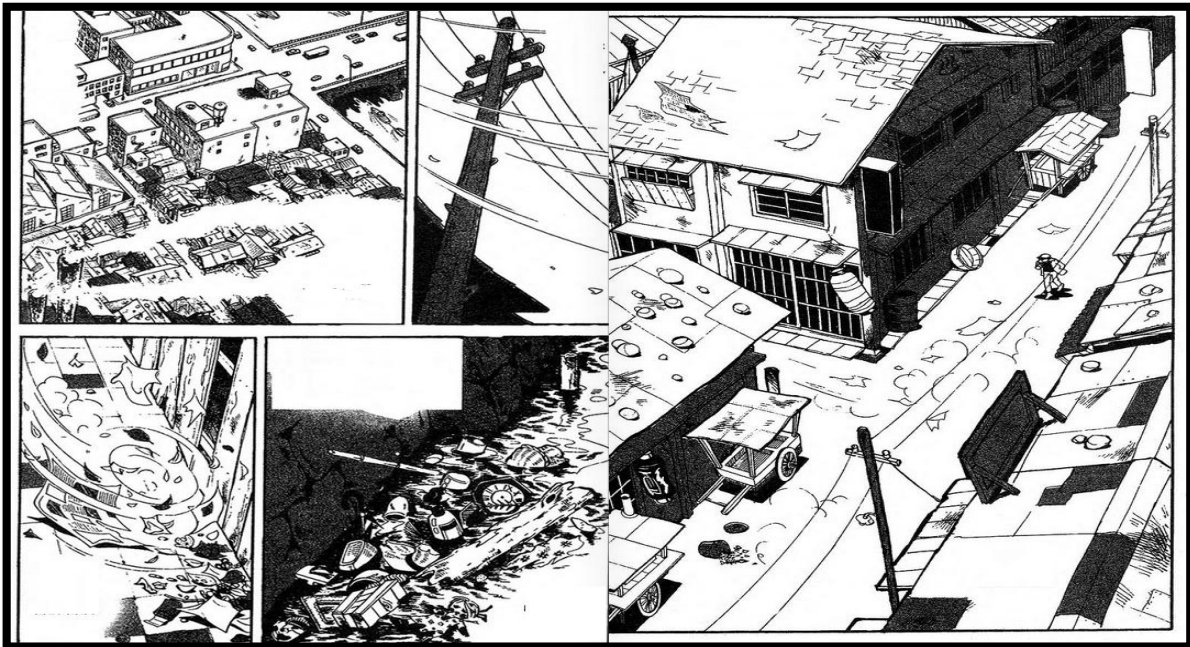
The Story of Yabuki Joe is common enough in many ways, and certainly redolent of the heroic tradition to which Mr. Chiba’s work (both visual and written) has always appealed.

⁶ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

⁷ Takamori Asaki is the real name of 「明日のジョー」 [Tomorrow’s Joe] author Takamori Asao (AKA Kawajiri Ikki, or Masaki Ato). The series of manga, TV series and films is sometimes known outside Japan as “Rocky Joe”.

⁸ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

Joe is an orphaned youth, who flees the depression and confinement of the institution which has been his only home in years, in an attempt to make something of himself in the wide World. The opening to the *Manga* reveals the stark, ugly beauty of the story of Joe. Seemingly swept along on the winds of Fate, this young man who has nothing to his name but his own strength of purpose trudges along dirty, forgotten and boarded up streets seeking for the way out of the maze that has become his own life.



“I recall Asaki and I discussing how we could open the series on the right tone. This was to be a tale about ordinary youth in an extraordinary time of both wealth and poverty. We wanted an ordinary boy, but wanted him cut from classical cloth. [Asaki] had recently become interested in [Joseph Campbell’s] ‘Monomyth’ and loved applying it to Joe’s life.”⁹

This appreciation of the Hero’s Journey can easily be seen in the development of the *manga*, as Joe slowly begins to gain wisdom and skill as he travels through all the ‘stations of life’ that a poor boy in modern Japan must face. From joining a street gang, to going to jail and taking up the boxing gloves – symbolic of his self-reliance – Joe is slowly and carefully

⁹ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

polished as a heroic figure for an audience which understood all too well what it was like to be at the very bottom of an increasingly wealthy society. Indeed, it is in prison that Joe meets up with the figures that acts as his developmental pivot.



First, there is Danpei, the grizzled old boxer whose life led him to jail after making a series of misguided decisions in his own career. His repentance, and his continued - if sometimes well hidden - respect for the life he himself has lost is what kindles the passion for success that Joe has brought with him from the orphanage and from the streets.

Then there was the character that would inspire both Chiba and Takamori to begin seeing their own creation in a more native, heroic vein.

This was the figure of Rikiishi , the boxer whose life and death anoints Joe’s own story with a sacrificial quality and confirms him as a Mortal Hero for the ages.



Rikiishi not only stands as one of the Mentor figures which are central to the development of the Heroic myth, but also serves as direct role-model in that Joe’s skill and technique are intimately influenced by the more experienced fighter.

Yet, in addition to giving the young Joe the drive and techniques which he will need to take the most important step in his journey, Rikiishi also served, almost accidentally to demonstrate the power of a character to transcend mortality, heroism or even reality, as his death in the *manga* triggered a transformation in creators, fans and characters alike.

“[We] always envisaged that Rikiishi would have to die in order that the narrative could progress. I felt it should be like the passing of a torch to the next generation: as if Rikiishi had passed on his skill and after his death he had laid a burden upon young Joe, who would take those lessons and finally achieve victory for them both.

It was only afterwards that [we] saw how potent, and how ancient this blood sacrifice could be, when so many people turned up for Rikiishi's funeral."¹⁰

Funeral for a Friend

It cannot be underestimated how much of an impact this death had on the title's readership at the time it was published. Japanese comic fans were certainly used to their own favourite characters often having life-spans as short, if not shorter than the average George Martin creation, and there was certainly nothing in the story which, as Mr. Chiba hints at above might have made the passing more than a symbolic 'passing of the torch'.

Yet, as important as the story of Rikiishi's 'starvation training' - his reduction in weight class just to be able to fight Joe – was, on the 24th of March 1970 as Chiba Tetsuya was getting ready to go the funeral of his own character he still seems to have been unable to grasp the gravitas of the story he had helped develop. As the sun was just creeping over the horizon on that cold morning, the creators and members of staff at the Kodansha headquarters watched, in silent awe and dozens, then hundreds, then seemingly thousands of obviously distraught people, of all ages and types began assembling in the shadow of the building. Each one of these souls, re-enforced by those around them, compounding their own emotions in a sea of very real, if hard to quantify grief. It would be impossible to make a blanket statement about these folks, and all their various, subjective approaches to the passing of Rikiishi, but in speaking to a number of these attendees, whose memories of the event seem as vivid now as they did in 1970, it was clear that there was some profound belief at work in their desire to celebrate this most unusual of events.

A very typical voice was that of Mrs - then Miss - Nakajima Emiko, who had travelled down to Tokyo from her home in Sapporo, and slept a few hours in Shinjuku station before joining the growing crowd at Kodansha.

“I don't want to say I was drawn by some mystical force. That would trivialize the emotions that we felt. We all realized that something had changed for all of us, and

¹⁰ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

that we were witnessing not just the death of a beloved character, but the birth of a legend. I think that's why we all helped pay for the cost of the funeral itself.”¹¹



Readers today will, no-doubt find the very idea of a formal funeral ceremony for a 'comic character' ludicrous. After all, when the 'unthinkable' happened three years later in the US - and Gwyn Stacy died in *The Amazing Spiderman* #122, thus ending the Silver Age - there was no formal, organized show of grief, though the event was certainly no less profound for fans of the series. However, a full ceremony *was* paid for, partly by public subscription, partly with the support of Kodansha and partly through the generosity of the creators, with the event being filmed and televised around Japan by NHK.

Though the priests who performed the rite at Kodansha were told that they would be officiating at the memorial for a fictitious character, according to Mr. Chiba they dismissed the concerns and referred the worried artist to the fact that so much grief was being spent, which was real enough and beautiful in its own way.

“I had thought everyone was mad, and I was even rude to some people as I felt I had better things to do than waste time at something like this. Then, however I started to see things in the crowd. There was real emotion, real pain and the sort of loss that I knew very well. When I walked into the room we had set aside, I saw the dark suits, heard the sobbing and finally began to appreciate the calls to my home and the cries of 'why did you have to kill Rikiishi'? How could I fault people who were responding with such feeling, even if it was to a *manga* character? I had finally realized that I had lost something important. I had made him for a purpose and even after the purpose had been fulfilled, there was the loss to consider. [...] After all, are not our own [Gods] fashioned in such a way? The Japanese Kami, I mean. We breathe life into them with craft and faith. I felt I should take a trip to Awashima.”¹²

¹¹ Nakajima Emiko, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

¹² Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

In Wood, Will and Wonder

What Mr. Chiba was referring to is the belief that, in Japan - the land of eight million *kami* - spirits can be brought into being through enough acts of creation and/or respect. Even the simple process of making a paper airplane might both fashion a specific *kami* which is bound to that object and appeal to the overall guardian of such items. Perhaps this is so because of the very nature of the Japanese native belief system, in which both ancestral and elemental forces are personified in the *kami* of the land, and given shape simply through the willingness of people to recognize the importance of such things within their lives.

This can be seen very clearly in the nature of the doll, and puppet in the Japanese psyche. Being both fashioned, and in a human form, the nature of the doll is, in Japanese tradition a powerful expression of both the divine and the mundane, possessing a dual existence as both animate and inanimate.



Indeed, a doll, or especially a puppet being manipulated on stage is both dead and alive at the same instance, standing across the borders of *Meido* (realm of the waiting dead) and *Ningendo* (realm of the living) and bearing significations of both Worlds within it.

In a ritual context, this allows the puppet to be both physical and spiritual in the same instant, creating a vessel through which the living may influence the spirit world and be influenced in return. This notion has been a powerful one for centuries, and can be most readily seen in the 8th Century documents which re-enforce the position that puppets were well understood, as part of a signification of both self and other: the *Usa Hachiman-gu Hojō-e Engi* [The Usa Hachiman Rite for the Pacification of Souls].

Recorded by the priests of the modern Oita Prefecture Usa Hachiman Shrine complex, the text describes the creation of a, still practiced *hojō-e* ritual and the part that dolls/puppets played in its formation.

Essentially, it suggests that sometime during the Yorō age (717-724) of Empress Geshō (rd. 715-724), the Hayato clan of Kyushu rebelled, fortifying seven large fortresses in their home province, before being besieged by an Imperial army. According to the rite, only when warrior priests from the influential Usa Hachiman Shrine were persuaded to join the battle with an array of puppets did the sieges end; the defending soldiery being enticed from their bastions to watch the Hachiman performance before being taken prisoner and executed. In the years following the battle, the Hachiman shrine incorporated several presentations from the battle, including the dance of the puppets into a new *hojō-e* and, when perfected in 745, the Hachiman priests were able to negotiate with Emperor Shōmu the granting of an imperial charter to practice the rite, on behalf of the state, to quell a plague that was felt to stem from the souls of the dead Hayato warriors.¹³

It seems unreasonable to suggest that the sieges of the Hayato campaign themselves did not actually take place, for though no first-hand accounts of the engagements exist, it is known that the Hayato were one of the clans which fought during the division of northern Kyushu into the realms of Buzen and Bungo in the eighth century.¹⁴ Moreover, it is a commonly accepted local legend on Kyushu that the shamans and warrior-priests of this age often accompanied soldiers into battle to work their magic in war, with several more continental sources supporting the Japanese use of such ritual specialists.¹⁵ However, whether or not the Hayato were actually distracted by Usa Hachiman-gu puppeteering cannot be directly proved and, in truth it does seem rather unlikely. However, this is not the important issue. The fact that the later narrative about the battle, the power of Hachiman and the souls of

¹³ Law, Jane. M. "Violence, Ritual Re-enactment, and Ideology: The Hojo-e of the Usa Hachiman Shrine in Japan". In, *History of Religions* 3, no. 4. (New York: Columbia University Press. 1994). PP 325-357.

¹⁴ Toyoda, Hiromi. *Oita Ken no Rekishi* (大分県の歴史) [The History of Oita Prefecture]. (Tokyo: Yamagawa Shuppansha. 1997). PP 18-20.

¹⁵ Nakano, Hatayoshi. *Hachiman shinko-shi no Kenkyū* (八幡信仰史の研究) [Research into the History of the Hachiman Faith]. (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunsha. 1976. PP 92-94.

dead Hayato, includes important references to ritual puppeteering demonstrates that puppets were already being considered as objects of religious power by influential social negotiators in 8th Century Japan.

Thus, because of the way in which the native faith has always been based around possession rituals, puppets have likewise been thought to have the ability to house, or express, all the physical, emotional and intellectual characteristics of the spirits which are associated with them.¹⁶

In this sense the puppet becomes a direct interface not only for humanity to negotiate access to the realm of the spirits, but also a way for that realm to access the mundane world and, through that, the already complex significations of man and spirit are given an



Kada Awashima Shrine, 2013.

intriguing alternate frame, in which the relationship between puppet and manipulator becomes representative of the relationship between mankind and the gods both of whom work together to give vitality to these otherwise lifeless puppets.

This is why we find many such stories in Japanese history and why Mr. Chiba makes his cryptic reference to a place called 'Awashima', as the Kada Awashima shrine in Wakayama prefecture, is perhaps the best example of the sacred nature of the creative process.

¹⁶ Umazume Masaru: Former Director, Awaji Ningyō Jōruri Theatre. Interview with Darren-Jon Ashmore, July 15 2001.

Famous for being the centre of doll worship since the classical period,¹⁷ the Kada Awashima Shrine has in its possession over twenty thousand dolls and puppets, many of which have been presented to the shrine in gratitude for the intervention of the patron *kami* in illness, childbirth and other related matters.

However, according to Terada Emiko, the shrine houses at least one thousand seemingly possessed dolls, which have been taken from families who perceive frightening spiritual energies within them. These dolls, are assessed by the priests of the shrine and categorized based on the spirits which are contained within. Most are housed in the shrine itself, as they are seen to be either a doll possessed of a *kami* which has manifested itself 'naturally' or the spirit of a deceased person close to the family who owned the doll.¹⁸

"We try to convince people to take these dolls home, as we feel that there is nothing in them to be feared. Indeed, many families will already have '*kamidana*' in their homes, which are houses for spirits, and these dolls are just another form of that. Most people cannot see that there is a difference between a ghost and an evil spirit, and so they leave the puppets here, and we make sure they are cared for. Not only dolls and puppets however. You will also find paintings here, sketches and prints. After all, what makes a dolls sacred is the human form, and the same things that sometimes bring dolls to life affect other forms of human representation."¹⁹

This ties into the very nature of the creation of *kami*, as discussed earlier.

¹⁷ Devotion to the Awashima *kami* based on beliefs about the *kami*'s efficacy in curing female ailments, helping to conceive children, and ensuring safe childbirth. Kada Jinja, the head shrine among the Awashima shrines throughout the country, is in Wakayama Prefecture's Kaisōgun county, and is a one of the *shikinaisha*, or shrines recorded in the classic Shinto text *Engishiki*. Kada Shrine is also called Awashima Myōjin, and popularly referred to as the Ebisu *kami*. According to legend, the *kami* of Awashima, who was the divine consort of Sumiyoshi Myōjin, became afflicted with a female ailment (*fujinbyō*) and exiled to Awashima. Because of her own suffering, she vowed to heal the illnesses of women. Today, this legend connecting the two *kami* of Sumiyoshi and Awashima is attributed to the fact that Awashima was a "shrine land" (*shinryō*) of Sumiyoshi Shrine. During the Edo Period, devotees of Awashima, known as "Awashima *ganjin*," traveled the country carrying small portable shrines (*zushi*) containing anthropomorphized dolls of Awashima Myōjin bound in pieces of cloth. These devotees performed in front of people's homes in exchange for alms or offered their services as "representative pilgrims" (*daisan*), leading to the country-wide propagation of this devotion to Awashima. There is a custom at the shrine whereby people make offerings of *hina ningyō* (dolls used in the annual Hina Matsuri or Doll Festival), combs, or hair ornaments (*kanzashi*), and the shrine provides paper Awashima *bina* dolls to visitors. This text is by Satō Masato and is taken directly from the Encyclopedia of Shinto website - <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=779>

¹⁸ Terada Emiko, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

¹⁹ Terada Emiko, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

The idea of an image taking on an authority of its own may seem extreme, but the process involved is no different for that bound up to the creation of any sacred object. The act of forming thought, creating image and having that image venerated is all that is necessary, as if the power of dozens, hundreds or thousands of people focusing on that single thought coalesces a singular identity from the collective.

This is certainly evident in the World of the Bunraku theatre in Osaka, at which not only are the puppets themselves respected as sacred objects, but the very characters of the plays themselves - both historical and fictitious - are regarded with the sort of reverence that one would normally reserve for Gods.²⁰

The characters may just be the creation of writers, but through the work of performers mediating those ideas to receptive consumers, a form of reality is negotiated, and something is created which, when combined across the perception of many people takes on an undeniable reality that, as Yoshii Sadatoshi suggests has no less a sense of purpose than does our own adherence to any source of philosophical comfort.

"It is not disrespectful to suggest that there is no fundamental difference between a God and a beloved character, not least because my own faith [*shinto*] is built upon such observances. We are, at the very root taking examples and stories from sources and applying the lessons to our own lives. If someone lives a good life because they find the actions and life of characters in fiction emboldening, I have no justification in judging them. Indeed, it was this very notion which led to the induction of Tezuka [Osamu] into the realm of the higher *kami*, and many of his characters accepted as spirits in their own right."²¹

The Shade of the Tree: Rikiishi and Joe reborn

The thousands of people who came out in the grey morning to give respect to the deceased Rikiishi might not have been thinking in these terms when they turned out in their droves to acknowledge the love they had for a character who had affected their appreciation of the story of Joe so much. However, their outpouring of grief, unaccountable as it might seem to

²⁰ Takemoto, Komon. (1982). *Bunraku no subete* (文楽のすべて) [All Bunraku]. Tokyo: Takeoka. (PP 31-32)

²¹ Yoshii Sadatoshi, Senior Priest, Nishi-no-Miya Ebisu Shrine. Interview with the author, 10th January 2007.

those of us who have been conditioned to look at 'comics' as social trivia cannot be denied. Indeed, whilst talking with Mr. Chiba about the gifts and phone-calls, visitors and letters which he and Takamori received in the run-up to the funeral the full significance of this thought settles onto your poor correspondent with the unerring accuracy of hindsight.

Rikiishi, and characters like him are representations of our own self: ciphers for our potential failings and reminders that we stand to lose things of real value to us should we stray from the right path. Death is essential to the hero's journey, just as Campbell suggests and this is something which we - or, at the very least publishers of marketable pop culture titles - seem to have forgotten in a World in which Batman continues drawing in readers well into his old age. Eternal heroes, for all their power and authority, lack the most important human qualities to which we all look when consuming such narratives.

Whether we accept it or not, we need our heroes to be plausible representatives for ourselves. Stronger, faster, better perhaps, but ultimately as vulnerable and uncertain as we are. We need to know that we too might be capable of great things, should the call to action come for us, and we are thrust into that great cycle of change, growth and revelation.

When death is suspended for characters to which we - and company bank balances - have become attached the heroic imperative itself loses some of its luster, and tells us, we are required to pile overt moral precepts onto these immortal, unchanging heroes in order to give them back some of the human relevance of which they have been stripped by the desire to give them to the ages. When death loses its meaning, because it rarely visits the camp of our heroes, then all the actions of those people so protected by this narrative shield lose their value, and reduce the actions of the heroes to the most trivial forms of fan service.

Even throwing hordes of bad guys at the hero, in a callous desire to showcase the threat involved is meaningless. These throw-away villains, whose own deaths mirror the indestructibility of the hero cheapen the narratives because they further trivialize the nature of the heroic ideal. After all, if the threats against which our own narrative double must struggle are of no account, then can the transformation which should take place at the

conclusion of such a tale reveal anything of value to us as seekers? Especially, as Mr. Chiba commented in stories that essentially have no end.

"This is the one thing, that upsets me about the current state of some of the popular literature market. Many characters are no longer believable, because they have no vulnerabilities. I can understand why someone writing today might think that characters [such as Batman] might seem immortal, and invulnerable, but death and frailties surround them, define them and make them human, even if they themselves persist long beyond the span of a normal life. I respect that, but for me, there has to be a true termination to both a story and a life. It was not an action of will to kill Joe and Rikiishi. It was merely that the narrative called for it, and in the classical sense, it was appropriate. [...] However, as you have discovered yourself, Joe has not died in the end. His story might have a terminus, and he might not have a grave like Rikiishi, but both of them, as well as Danpei and all the other characters have been given to the ages, and so long as even one young woman or man exists to turn those pages and be inspired, then Joe lives as the immortal 'auspicious stranger'. He entered my life as a creator, and helped me see through some of the horror I had witnessed as a child. Now, people from all over the World write to me and say much the same thing. [...] His arrival, out of the wilderness is like him being summoned from the great realm [Takama no Para], his journey through hardship, his mistakes, his triumphs all teach lessons to those who are willing to learn. Then, his death is merely his withdrawal from the stage, and his moving on to another person who needs him. A little melodramatic, perhaps, but I am a man of faith, who believes in the Kami. How can I not also believe that the faith shown in characters like Rikiishi and Joe has meaning?"²²

The Dreamer and the Dawn

"Copyright aside, I long ago gave up the idea that any of my characters belong exclusively to me. I have mapped out lives and given my point of view on their existence, but I am not able, or willing to dictate how anyone else takes possession of them in their own lives. There is not a single fan to whom I have spoken over the years who has not had something unique to say about their experience of the story, as well as something positive about the termination. They create value for themselves and that, will be as important and eternal to them as life itself. I have been pleased that my own views of heroism and spirituality have been so widely

²² Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

accepted and reinterpreted across the World, as it implies that I can, at least illustrate 'people', and not just characters"²³

Chiba Tetsuya's approach to the humanity of his creations might seem to represent a markedly different view of 'the human hero' to that which is represented in Western comics. Indeed, many fans of one version of the classical hero or another have ranged arguments over the years to justify why their particular avatar of heroism reflects the true way of representing the ideals to which they cling.

However, it could be argued that to do so largely misses the main point of such heroes and the role they have in developing intellectual and emotional responses in their (often, but not always young) readership. In this short paper we have generally concerned ourselves with examining what happens to some of the the processes involved with the negotiation of signification of a cultural property like a character which has been made the focus of personal growth and change, and the rights each consumer possesses to direct the meaning of the art in question.

In this regard, its main aim has been to demonstrate how much authority - as well as how potent that authority is - which consumers possess to radically reinforce the significations of others, when circumstances require it. Specifically, it has drawn upon Master Chiba's own notions of connecting his characters to the spiritual viewpoint of his readership, transforming 'people' such as Joe into altered-aspect versions of the very Kami who govern the land of Japan.

On the surface, this is certainly appealing, and one might find immediate analogues in the West, in the very messianic nature of characters such as Superman, Batman or (in a perverse way) Judge Dredd.

However, and as Master Chiba implies, perhaps there is something more human at work here than simply the transposition of morality tales, folklore or religion onto the popular culture of our time.

²³ Chiba Tetsuya, in conversation with the author, October 6th 2012, Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan.

Perhaps there is more to the heroes to which we cling so powerfully than simply a 're-skinning' of morality, and the way in which those who love these unconventional, often socially unacceptable heroes use them to reflect their own lives.

Perhaps it relates to the way in which, although classical heroes are seen as exemplars of human emotions and moral precepts they are remote figures, and increasingly impossible to connect with, as did our forebears.

As entertaining and uplifting as King Arthur, Theseus, Natty Bumpo, or Benkei might be in their heroic qualities, their World is no longer our own.

In an age of technological marvels - and horrors - we desire heroes that encompass not only the powers and frailties of yore, but also seek figures whose lives are close enough to our own that we might slip into them were 'the stars right'.

The World is a human thing.

Our heroes must be human heroes.

Even when they are not...