

# Fact and Fiction: Portrayals of the Meiji Restoration in Anime

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## Table of Contents

### Fact and Fiction: Portrayals of the Meiji Restoration in Anime

<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>Historical Background</i> .....	4
<i>Important People</i> .....	6
Sakamoto Ryoma.....	7
Katsu Kaishu.....	8
The Shinsengumi.....	9
Choshu Clan.....	11
Satsuma Clan.....	11
<i>Anime</i> .....	12
Peacemaker Kurogane.....	12
Rurouni Kenshin.....	13
<i>Significant Issues</i> .....	14
<i>Analysis</i> .....	16
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	22

### Appendices

<i>Appendix A: Works Cited</i> .....	23
<i>Appendix B: Glossary</i> .....	24
<i>Appendix C: Peacemaker Kurogane Episode Summaries</i> .....	25
<i>Appendix D: Rurouni Kenshin Episode Summaries</i> .....	29

## Fact and Fiction: Portrayals of the Meiji Restoration in Anime

### INTRODUCTION

Japanese anime is a pervasive part of that country's culture, and is a medium rather than a genre, often dealing in far more adult themes, ideas, and storylines than are typically associated with American animation. In this paper I will argue that anime both represents and reimagines the known historical narrative in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences. To do this, I will look at two shows, *Peacemaker Kurogane* and *Rurouni Kenshin*, both of which premiered in the late 1990s. This decade was a period of domestic and economic unrest for Japan, and themes relevant to the viewers of this era abound in these anime. First, though, it is important to provide some historical and political context in order to better understand the events, people, and thought processes of the Meiji Restoration. This will allow me to better explain and analyze their portrayal.

The late 1860s were a tumultuous time for Japan. This period of Japanese history, known as the Meiji Restoration, was a huge turning point for the country: it opened the nation to foreign trade, customs, and industry; it saw the end of a 260-year-old regime; and it had a lasting effect on the Japanese consciousness. The name 'Meiji Restoration' simply refers to a restructuring of government power, but that is perhaps an oversimplification of the military conflicts and political disputes that characterized the period (Reischauer, *Story* 95).

The events of the Meiji Restoration were unique in the progression of Japanese history, and those events and their perpetrators have left an indelible mark on Japanese

society. These people and events can be seen in media as varied as movies, dramas, novels, manga, and anime; however, as I must limit my scope, this paper will focus solely on anime and how Restoration-era people, events, and themes are portrayed.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Japanese nation has been ruled by an emperor or empress for most of Japan's recorded history. Following the internal chaos of the Warring States era in the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, a military coup seized power from the Imperial court. It eventually placed that power in the hands of the Tokugawa family. The Tokugawa would spawn a dynasty of shoguns<sup>1</sup>, military leaders who used martial tactics to bring stability and peace to Japanese society. This shogunate became a champion of the principle of sakoku, a policy of extreme isolationism strictly enforced in the two and a half centuries preceding the Meiji Restoration (Akamatsu 41-2). The shoguns believed that European customs and ideas, in particular Christianity, would threaten the fabric of Japanese society and endanger their own interests. The division of neighboring China into Western spheres of influence did nothing to assuage these fears (Totman 288).

Sakoku was enacted in the early 1600s and remained in place for nearly two and a half centuries, until the United States' show of force, led by Commodore Matthew Perry, convinced the Japanese government to open its borders to foreigners once again (Totman 289). When Perry entered Tokyo Bay in his steam-powered and ironclad 'black ships,' the

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<sup>1</sup> An exhaustive glossary of unfamiliar terms can be found in Appendix B.

Tokugawa regime was confronted with the obvious and massive superiority of the West's technological and industrial advances.

The decade and a half following Perry's arrival in 1853 up until the Meiji Restoration and the restructuring of the government was one of great discord, as the Japanese faced the immense difference between their own society and technology and that of the West (Reischauer, *Past* 109-110). To place this situation in context, I would point out that when Japan had closed its borders, America would not yet be an independent nation for another 150 years; the Industrial Revolutions that shook the US and Europe and caused enormous social upheaval had not yet taken place, and the philosophical and scientific masterminds of the Enlightenment had not yet been born. Japan's only link to Western civilization was a small colony of Dutch merchants whom the Tokugawa permitted to reside and trade in Nagasaki. Therefore the introduction of centuries' worth of ideas and technology caused a significant paradigm shift for the Japanese (Reischauer, *Story* 94). Although they considered the foreigners barbaric because they didn't understand Japanese social and cultural norms, the Westerners saw the Japanese, with their caste-based feudal society and their dependence on 'antiquated' weaponry such as swords, spears, and bows, as the backward ones (Totman 220).

The Japanese had a variety of responses to this cultural and industrial shock, but the two most vocal groups were those who felt the government should implement Western ideas and technological advances to improve Japan's standing on the world stage, and those who felt that Westerners threatened the homogeneity of Japanese society and that they and their

ideas should be summarily cast out of Japan (Hillsborough 6). These groups would clash continuously until the former emerged victorious, beginning the period in Japanese history known as the Meiji Era and putting Japan on the path to becoming a world power.

Before that could happen, however, Japan experienced a period of upheaval fraught with uprisings, assassinations, and discord. Clans who disapproved of the government's neutral stance toward the foreigners shelled Western ships and were attacked in retaliation; a shogunal regent was assassinated; paramilitary organizations sprang up in resistance to the rapid change (Reischauer, *Story* 100; Hillsborough 9, 21).

Through the unlikely alliance of two rival clans, the emperor's side eventually won out. They seized power from the shogun, returned ruling power to the imperial throne, and proceeded to modernize Japan through sweeping industrial, social, educational, and political reforms. These changes to Japan's infrastructure helped prepare the country for its role as a major player on the world stage (Reischauer, *Today* 80, 83-4).

### IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Both of the anime discussed later in this paper are retellings or reimaginings of the exploits of actual historical people and groups, and so it is important to be aware of those people and to understand their backgrounds and motivations. I've boiled the myriad viewpoints embraced by these historical actors down to four categories. There were those who supported the emperor and those who supported the shogunate, and within those two groups were people who supported embracing foreign ideas and those who rejected that

concept. Both the emperor and the shogunate took a neutral and politic stance on the foreign presence in the pre-Restoration period, walking a fine line between acceding to foreign infrastructural superiority and sympathizing with the Japanese people's discontent regarding the Western presence.

### **Sakamoto Ryoma<sup>2</sup>**

Sakamoto Ryoma was one of the foreigner-friendly imperialists. He was a ronin or masterless samurai (that is, he did not answer to a feudal lord) of the Tosa clan, from Shikoku. Although Sakamoto was of noble birth, he was not the firstborn son and thus he was able to pursue various activities that would have otherwise been closed to him, such as running a business (Jansen 78). He originally opposed the government's efforts to open the country to foreigners, going so far as to attempt to assassinate Katsu Kaishu, a famous diplomat who supported the shogunate. However, when his intended victim bravely challenged the would-be assassin's beliefs, Sakamoto saw the flaws in his previous ideas and decided to cast in his lot with Katsu instead (Jansen 162-3).

Sakamoto remained an imperialist, but came to see how Western contributions could help Japan. Under Katsu's tutelage, he was able to gain experience as a negotiator and diplomat. He is now known for being an avid supporter of opening Japan to foreign trade and

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<sup>2</sup> All Japanese names are presented in Japanese order, surname first. Also, in romanizing names and words I've taken the liberty of omitting all secondary lengthening vowels (i.e. Ryoma instead of Ryouma) as that lends to easier/more correct English pronunciation. (The only place where I didn't apply this is in the anime title *Rurouni Kenshin*, as that is the official romanization used by its distributors.)

technology and assisting in strengthening Japan's navy using Western technology. He acted as an official mediator on several occasions, most importantly brokering the alliance between the Satsuma and Choshu clans; this agreement would give the imperial forces the power they needed to topple the shogunate. Unfortunately, he was assassinated before he could see the full fruits of his labor (Akamatsu 318).

### **Katsu Kaishu**

Katsu Kaishu was Sakamoto's mentor and another proponent of Western ideas, although he was loyal to the shogunate. Katsu was one of a select group of Japanese who traveled to the United States as part of the first formal embassy (Jansen 158). His experiences in America showed him how far Japan had to go to reach the technological level of the West. Katsu spent the period immediately before the Restoration travelling throughout Japan, settling diplomatic disputes and negotiating treaties.

As Tokugawa's Naval Commissioner, he was devoted to attaining naval superiority, and therefore often stressed the importance of a strong navy to the government (Jansen 175). He succeeded in having a naval academy founded in Hyogo, the administration of which he later turned over to Sakamoto. He also brought several Western-inspired reforms to the Japanese navy (Jansen 167, 170). Like his protégé Sakamoto, Katsu led several crucial negotiations that helped settle the new Meiji government in place as painlessly as possible, despite originally having held a position in the Shogunate government. He chose to further peace at the cost of his political stance.

## The Shinsengumi

One of the most well-known groups that opposed the Emperor and the foreign presence was the Shinsengumi, whose name means ‘Newly Selected Corps’. The Shinsengumi was formed by Kondo Isami, a ronin and master of a school of swordsmanship, who was displeased with the state of affairs in Kyoto. He and several fellow ronin set up shop in Kyoto, forming a paramilitary society with strict rules and clear ideals (Hillsborough 18). The Corps defended the shogun’s honor in imperial Kyoto even before it were given permission from the shogunate in Tokyo to act as its representative. It enforced its lofty standards with cold steel; any breach of the Corps’ extensive code, which included both rules of battle as well as social interaction, was a capital offense for members, and any person who resisted their policies would be summarily cut down. Despite resenting foreign involvement in Japan, it had no qualms about utilizing foreign military technology if it would help the Corps win a fight or at least retain a level playing field with its opponents.

The officers of the Shinsengumi who served with and beneath Kondo made their own marks on history, and several of them are key characters in the anime I plan to analyze.

Kondo Isami was the commander of the Shinsengumi. He shaped the group’s policies and actions for several years and encouraged their brutal methodology (25). He was eventually framed for the assassination of Sakamoto Ryoma and executed by the imperialists (161, 164).

Hijikata Toshizo was a founder and vice-commander of the Shinsengumi (188). Although he had a generally gentle personality, he was a skilled swordsman who became coldly brutal in battle (28). Hijikata was one of the last surviving members of the Corps, and died in one of the last battles against imperial forces (174).

Yamanami Keisuke was another founding member of the Corps (29). Although faithful to the cause in the beginning, he later left the Shinsengumi (the reason why remains a source of great speculation) and committed ritual suicide (198).

Serizawa Kamo was the last founding member of the Shinsengumi. However, he allowed the power of his position, which placed him effectively out of the reach of Kyoto's law, to go to his head. Serizawa's actions became more and more reckless until Kondo's sponsors ordered his assassination after he killed several civilians in a drunken rage. Although the Corps officially reported that his murderers' identities were unknown, Kondo and a few other Shinsengumi vice commanders are believed to have done the deed (56, 58).

Okita, Nagakura, Harada, Todo, and Saito were captains in the Corps, each with their own unique legacy. Of all the members mentioned here, only two would survive the Restoration. Nagakura Shinpachi would later provide the only first-person account to come out of the Shinsengumi (184). Saito Hajime took a position as a policeman in the new government, working to keep order in the new Meiji era. Both men died in their seventies (184-5).

The Shinsengumi clashed several times with imperialist forces in Kyoto; some encounters were simply by chance, whereas some were carefully planned raids on opposing

groups. One such event was the raid at the Ikedaya, an inn where many key leaders of the Shinsengumi's opposition had met to plan an attack. The Corps descended on the inn and slaughtered most of the conspirators within (77-9).

The Shinsengumi occupies a unique place in history because although most modern Japanese disagree with its methods and the ideals it fought for, its members' tragic story and noble bearing have awarded them something of a cultural hero status. Their story has been excessively romanticized in pop culture in television, literature, and other media.

### **Choshu Clan**

The Choshu clan was a clan based in the modern Chugoku district near Hiroshima (187). They were adamantly imperialist, one of the leading clans that took that position, and they conspired numerous times against the Tokugawa Shogunate in Tokyo as well as the Shinsengumi in Kyoto. They strongly endorsed the sonno-joi (revere the emperor, expel the [Western] barbarians) mentality (Totman 293). Many of the leaders killed in the Shinsengumi's raid at Ikedaya were Choshu or Choshu-affiliated.

### **Satsuma Clan**

The Satsuma clan made its home on Kyushu, and was another of the several clans that opposed the continuation of Tokugawa rule. They were more moderate in this view than the Choshu, and they also disagreed with the Choshu on the role of Western technology in Japan's international advancement. Their military leader for some time was Saigo Takamori,

who was a key figure in smoothing the path for the alliance Sakamoto worked to make with the Choshu clan (Akamatsu 185). This agreement, known as the Sat-Cho Alliance, was crucial in finally breaking the shogunate's power (Reischauer, *Story* 100).

## ANIME

The anime I will be discussing are *Peacemaker Kurogane* and *Rurouni Kenshin*. The former is set in the chaotic period immediately preceding the Restoration, and looks at the infamous Shinsengumi of Kyoto. The latter takes place ten years after the Restoration itself, and focuses partly on the dichotomy between the new and modern Meiji-Era state and the traditions the Japanese people still clung to, for better or worse. A short explanation of the plots of these stories is necessary before I can proceed with my analysis<sup>3</sup>.

### *Peacemaker Kurogane*

The anime *Peacemaker Kurogane* is 24 episodes long, was based on the manga of the same name by Chrono Nanae which was published from 1999-2001. It follows the coming of age story of a fifteen-year-old historical figure named Ichimura Tetsunosuke after he joins the Shinsengumi and ends with the infamous raid at Ikedaya.

The story starts in 1864 in Kyoto. Tetsunosuke (Tetsu) wants to get revenge on the Choshu clansman who killed his parents two years earlier. His brother Tatsunosuke is joining the Shinsengumi as a bookkeeper, and Tetsu follows him to the Corps' headquarters;

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<sup>3</sup>Full episode-by-episode summaries of both shows can be found in Appendices C and D.

his brash personality and resolve impress Kondo and Hijikata so much that the latter takes the boy on as a page. Tetsu finds his page duties tiresome, but has no stomach for the brutal reality of becoming a full member – he goes into shock the first time he sees a patrol slaughter a group of would-be assassins. Despite his issues, he is ‘adopted’ by the other Corps members; Okita, Nagakura, Harada, and Todo all find his short stature, fierce determination, and big dreams endearing and enjoy assisting him in training. Tetsu possesses a natural talent for fighting but freezes at the idea of slaying an opponent; he is appalled the first time he reads the Shinsengumi’s brutal code.

Tetsu discovers that the Corps’ spies have been gathering information at a store called Masuya, whose owner is suspected of having imperialist loyalties. As the story progresses we find out that the Choshu ronin who killed Tetsu’s parents is in hiding at Masuya, and Tetsu must overcome his fears in order to face him. The night of the raid at Ikedaya, Tetsu swallows his fears and is able to best the murderer in battle; however, he stops short of killing him. (Okita later slays the man in a different fight.) Tetsu swears that he will remain a page so that he can always fight but never be forced by the Corps’ code to kill an enemy, choosing instead to be a peacemaker (Peacemaker Kurogane, 1-24).

### ***Rurouni Kenshin***

*Rurouni Kenshin* follows the fictional Himura Kenshin, a former imperialist assassin, ten years after the new government has stabilized. The anime is 95 episodes long and is based on the manga written by Watsuki Nobuhiro and published from 1994-1999. After the

Restoration, Kenshin swore to never kill a man again and now spends his time traveling the nation as a 'rurouni' or wanderer. He still fights to defend the newly-instated peace, but uses a reverse-bladed sword<sup>4</sup> that makes it nigh on impossible for him to kill any opponent.

Kenshin becomes a lodger at the Kasshin dojo, a swordsmanship school led by a young woman named Kaoru who believes that swords should be used to protect others. He is joined there by Myojin Yahiko, the son of a former samurai, and Sagara Sanosuke, a former shogunate fighter, both of whom end up embracing Kenshin's ideal: that since the pre-Meiji fighting is over, there should no longer be any grudge or conflict between the winning and losing sides. The peace is threatened, however, when vengeful former ronin Shishio Makoto enacts an elaborate plot that will throw the country back into the chaos of the pre-Restoration period. To defeat him, characters with as varied backgrounds as spies, former Shinsengumi captain Saito Hajime, and Kenshin himself must become allies. Their close victory over Shishio keeps the country safe until the next threat can appear (Rurouni Kenshin, 1-95).

### SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

The overarching conflict of the Meiji Restoration is that of traditionalism versus modernization, a theme that colored many of the actions taken on both sides of the conflict. Traditionalism can be linked to jingoism, conservatism, and a love for the familiar, while modernization is tied to ideas of industrialization, foreign involvement, and radical change.

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<sup>4</sup> Kenshin's sword is explained more fully in the glossary.

This conflict has been present in Japanese culture for millennia, beginning with the influx of Chinese ideas and culture as far back as the 700s C.E. and continuing to the present day; however, it figures very prominently in the Meiji Restoration.

Despite all this, it is interesting to note that the two groups most noted for opposing each other during the debates and battles leading up to the restoration of imperial power, the Shinsengumi and Choshu clan, both embraced exclusionism; they only adopted Western weapons such as cannon and rifles as a necessity in gaining the upper hand in battle rather than out of any admiration for the superiority of foreign technology.

The Meiji Restoration continues to be a popular theme in Japanese anime and other media today for a number of reasons, but in part because of the effect the paradigm shift of the period had on Japan's cultural consciousness. The conflict can still be seen today in the juxtaposition of Japanese traditional and modern society, as well as in Japan's complicated political and cultural relationship with the West. The abrupt dismantling of Japan's insular society that began with Commodore Perry's arrival was a change unlike anything Japanese history had ever seen, and it dealt the Japanese a blow that left them reeling. Because the historical Restoration holds a wealth of stories dealing with the idea of the traditional vs. modern, many Japanese authors and artists regularly draw on this period when they want to present this theme to their audiences. An understanding of this period will inform the discussion of the anime I've chosen to analyze.

## ANALYSIS

At the beginning of this paper, I stated that anime both represents and reimagines the known historical narrative in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences. Now that I've given sufficient background into both the era and the shows about it, I can return to this argument. To do so, I will look at the three component parts of that statement: first: how does anime represent history? How are the facts presented? Next, how does anime reimagine history? What liberties or creative license has the work taken with the historical narrative? Finally I'll look into the relationship between the stories as presented and the audiences who enjoyed them – what is it about the Meiji Restoration that continues to enthrall viewers, and, looking specifically at the way *Peacemaker* and *Kenshin* represent it, why does it continue to do so?

First, let's consider *Peacemaker Kurogane*. In what way does it hold on to the true and basic historical narratives, and in what way does it modify the story for its own ends? Although it displays its members' violent tendencies harshly, realistically, and without any idealistic cant, this series mostly paints the Shinsengumi members as the heroes. Despite this, however, Tetsu's status as a blank slate (knowing very little about the political stances of either side) made it possible for him to learn about and consider both sides of one of the era's critical arguments – that is, opening the country versus expelling the foreigners. The show doesn't really address the other conflict of emperor versus shogun. Although his parents were killed by the Choshu, it was not because they were Shinsengumi sympathizers; rather,

his father was active in helping the government work to welcome foreign technology and ideas.

Later in the series, Tetsu has several run-ins with Sakamoto Ryoma, who (much to Tetsu's brother's chagrin) fills Tetsu's mind with ideas of going across the sea, as Sakamoto's mentor Katsu Kaishu had done, to see the Western nations. Tetsu displays a hatred of the Choshu but no real dedication to the Shinsengumi's ideals. Instead, he is more than a bit put off by their violent ways and sees them as comrades rather than commanders. He fights with and assists the Shinsengumi not out of love for their ideals but out of respect and affection for the friends he has made in the Corps.

This anime's portrayal of the Shinsengumi was certainly very close to what we know of the historical group. The officers were portrayed mostly as history painted them: Kondo was grandfatherly but stern, and viciously skilled in battle; Hijikata was gruff and equal parts noble bearing and cold-blooded killer. Okita, just as in real life, was seen to suffer from some sort of pulmonary disease (history's Okita died of tuberculosis), and Harada displays the scar from his attempted seppuku (Japanese ritual suicide) to Tetsu upon his introduction.

There were several liberties taken, however, mostly for the sake of forwarding the plot and creating a more intriguing narrative. For example, one of the Shinsengumi's enemies uses magic and illusions to trick the Corps' members during battle, to control corpses like puppets, and to tell the future. To combat this, the Corps obviously had to have its own resident psychic; this duty fell to Third Squad Captain Saito Hajime, who is able to

see ghosts and auras and is knowledgeable about the occult, abilities I greatly doubt he possessed in real life.

Many historical anime rely on an original character to interact with the historical figures portrayed in the anime. This allows the storyteller to display opinions, actions, and ideas that might be out of line with those of the real people. *Peacemaker Kurogane*, however, neatly sidestepped the problem of inserting a fictional character while still retaining the aforementioned storyteller's ability. The historical Ichimura Tetsunosuke and his brother Tatsunosuke did in fact join the Shinsengumi prior to the Ikedaya raid as a page and an accountant, respectively, although little is known about the pair. Tetsunosuke rode out the end of the conflict between the Shinsengumi and imperial forces as Hijikata's page – it was to Tetsunosuke that Hijikata left his last mementos before riding to his final battle (Hillsborough 173).

Now let's consider *Rurouni Kenshin*. *Kenshin* also presents history at times factually and at times with creative license. I found the characters of this anime very interesting. Each of them seems to be a personification or type of a certain post-Meiji mindset or group. There is the realistic pacifist in Kenshin, the idealistic pacifist in Kaoru, the struggling former soldier in Sanosuke, the disenfranchised samurai in Yahiko, the principled keeper of order/former foe of the government in Saito, the vengeful and scorned anti-Meiji troublemaker in Shishio. These were archetypal of post-Restoration struggles or conflicts, and, by applying one to each character, the author was able to discuss many varied

viewpoints about the general worth of the Restoration and the Meiji government without losing the interest of his audience.

One point I found interesting was the cautious camaraderie between Kenshin and Saito. Despite having held opposing views about who was right during the pre-Restoration period, they are both able to work together to help the people who are currently around them. Saito mentions that even though he fought against the Meiji rule initially, since they have won and he has no chance of shaking their hold, he must prioritize making the country a safe place over his own personal grudges. Because of the way the characters are presented, it is hard to say that any one political group in *Rurouni Kenshin* are the bad guys – rather, the lines are moral: the villains are those who are still trying to disturb the established peace, and the heroes are those who protect it, whether they are former Choshu, former Shinsengumi, or former assassin. This gives the show a very optimistic and idealistic flavor. Kenshin himself understands the brutality of war and the reality of murdering others; he states that swords are tools for killing people, not for protecting them as Kaoru believes. However, the plot of the entire anime forces viewers toward Kaoru's more rose-colored opinion: throughout the series Kenshin's sword and the fighting skills of others are used as tools to protect, and rarely if ever as murder weapons. *Rurouni Kenshin* has a particularly innocent view of battle.

Although I found that the pseudo-magical level of skill involved in essentially every battle or swordfight was less than realistic, Kenshin as a historical anime has several links to real historical groups or characters. For example, the aforementioned Saito Hajime was

actually a captain in the Shinsengumi who later became a policeman. A story arc near the end of the anime concerns Katsu Kaishu and addresses his political allegiances pre- and post-Restoration. Satsuma clan military leader Saigo Takamori is mentioned more than once. Sanosuke's former squad, the Sekihotai, was a militia used as cannon fodder by the Choshu. And outside of the actual historical people represented, the author used other figures as bases for some of his characters. For example, the Shinsengumi's so-called "Demon Commander" Hijikata was the inspiration for the show's cool but brutal Shinomori Aoshi, head of a spy organization based in Kyoto (Hillsborough 28).

With all this in mind, we can come to my final question: what is it about these anime that continues to resonate with Japanese audiences? *Peacemaker* is the story of a boy casting aside societal expectations to figure out what he believes for himself. *Kenshin* tells a tale of a man trying to fight for what he believes in in a society where his method of fighting has been rendered obsolete. These stories could be easily placed in a variety of contexts, from modern to fantastical to science-fictional; why, then, did the authors choose this specific time period to represent them?

Firstly, as I've mentioned, the Meiji Restoration and the time immediately before and after it continue to be interesting to the Japanese for several reasons; the era turned on a paradigm shift that was unique to Japan's situation and filled with intriguing historical figures. Secondly, and more importantly, the atmosphere of Japan in the late 1990s when these stories were originally written may have had significant influence on the writers' choices. Let's consider one final tidbit of Japanese history. After World War II, Japan's

economy took off, and steadily grew stronger and stronger in what has been referred to as the post-war “economic miracle” (Reischauer, *Today* 114). The 1980s were the peak of this growth, where the economy was likened to an ever-ballooning bubble, and during which the average Japanese enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

It couldn't last forever, however, and the 1990s have been referred to by the Japanese as the ‘Lost Decade’ or ‘Lost Generation’ (Totman 546). This decade followed the dramatic downturn of the Japanese economy (the ‘popping’ of the ‘80s ‘bubble’) and was characterized by a general social lethargy and economic depression that actually continued well into the 2000s (546). Companies which had promised lifelong employment to their employees often could no longer promise employment, period. The Japanese saw the rise of social trends among young people whom they designated as NEETs (not in education, employment, or training), hikikomori (shut-ins), or freeters (a portmanteau word signifying a person who works many part time jobs). The way of life that the Japanese had followed devotedly for over three decades no longer promised success.

The themes I connected with each anime earlier (finding one's niche in *Peacemaker* and dealing with an abrupt change in lifestyle and values in *Kenshin*) are both ideas that would have resonated with the demoralized Japanese and served to provide an uplifting take on an otherwise disheartening situation. The combination of the culturally intriguing Meiji Restoration with the immediately relevant social message made for an instant hit with the Japanese anime-viewing populace. The shows dealt with issues and crises similar to those their viewers were experiencing, but, by using a historical setting, provided enough distance

from the situation at hand that watching it could be an escape from reality rather than a grim reminder of what life looked like outside of their living rooms.

## CONCLUSION

Historical anime is an intriguing way to engage with the stories of a nation's past. First of all, as with any historical fiction, simply knowing the setting allows the viewer to access a wealth of cultural context before they've even begun watching. It also can, in some cases, provide a message: 'we've been in this bad place before, and things eventually got better'. Stories about the Meiji Restoration were uniquely relevant to those Japanese who'd lost their way in post-bubble Japan. At the same time, these anime continue to be popular now because they contain timeless stories couched in familiar time periods.

These stories can never be one hundred percent factual, however; there is no historical tome so expansive that it covers every single thing that happened in a given era. As such, authors must insert their own characters, storylines, ideas, and values into a story to give it life. This can add a new and different spin to a period with which viewers are well acquainted. It also allows the author to moralize; through the use of original or little-known characters the creator of a story can play with and display the various opinions people hold about that era.

Anime continues to be an exceptionally accessible medium for discussing historical issues and ideas. At the same time, it can be used as a platform for the views of its creator or to disseminate ideas that might otherwise be difficult for viewers to grasp. The historical context combined with the authors' creative license and idealistic themes make *Peacemaker*

*Kurogane* and *Rurouni Kenshin* truly interesting and engaging retellings of well-known narratives.

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## Appendix B: Glossary

**Clan:** An aristocratic family and its vassals in the feudal-based pre-Meiji system.

**Reverse-blade sword:** Japanese swords have slightly curved blades and therefore only one cutting edge. In *Rurouni Kenshin*, Kenshin's sword is sharpened on the inside of the curve rather than the outside, making it impossible to cut or kill an enemy using the blade.

**Ronin:** a man of the samurai class who did not answer to a feudal lord. Similar to the knights errant of the European feudal era.

**Sakoku:** closed-country exclusionary policy. Under sakoku Japan had severely limited contact with foreign nations.

**Samurai:** a member of the hereditary warrior caste in pre-Meiji Japan; generally skilled with a deadly weapon. Samurai were disenfranchised following the Restoration when the caste system was abolished.

**Sat-Cho Alliance:** A political and military agreement between the Satsuma and Choshu clans that enabled the two groups to overcome the shogun's forces and win victory for the emperor.

**Seppuku:** A form of ritual suicide that involves disemboweling oneself with a sword. It was seen by samurai as a way to regain honor lost through shameful actions or misdeeds.

**Shogunate:** 'shogun' is a Japanese military rank literally meaning 'foreigner-expelling generalissimo'; this military role took on a political cant after the Warring States period (15<sup>th</sup> century-17<sup>th</sup> century), the events of which led to the first of the Tokugawa dynasty assuming control of Japan

**Sonno-joi:** Literally "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians". Describes an exclusionist political stance held by many during the pre-Restoration period. The barbarians in this case are the Westerners.

## Appendix C: Peacemaker Kurogane episode summaries

- Ep. 1: Ichimura Tetsunosuke wants to join the Shinsengumi to get revenge on the Choshu clansman that killed his father. An androgynous youth helps him an audience with Kondo; the youth turns out to be Okita Soji, with whom he fights fiercely but unskillfully. Tetsu is defeated but Kondo likes his spirit so agrees to admit him. Hijikata disapproves, saying Tetsu is too young and innocent. Tetsu's will is tested later that night when he witnesses Hijikata brutally killing a group of Choshu assassins who were targeting him. Despite the shock and horror he feels at the gruesome truth ("The only thing you learn in the Shinsengumi is how to become a demon" – Hijikata) Tetsu resolves to prove himself in the Corps.
- Ep. 2: Tetsu's determination to join finally sways Hijikata and he is signed on. He is displeased, however, because he is made to be Hijikata's page rather than a soldier. He meets Nagakura and Harada. Tetsu's brother (an accountant for the Corps) continually rescues his hotheaded brother from several situations where he might have gotten in trouble for refusing to keep his mouth shut. Later, Tetsu witnesses an exchange between Hijikata and one of the Shinsengumi's spies, and decides he wants to become a spy rather than staying a page.
- Ep. 3: While attempting to be a spy Tetsu endangers the work of the real spy Yamazaki. While Yamazaki berates him some ronin corner and harass a young girl. Eager to prove his worth, Tetsu interferes and beats up some of them. Sanosuke, Soji, and Shinpachi interfere, pretending to be passing ronin, and Tetsu and Soji escape with the girl. When a final ronin attacks Soji, Soji kills him in cold blood because the ronin has heard Tetsu saying Soji's name and could trace the fight back to the Shinsengumi, further endangering the covert mission. Later Soji shows the stunned Tetsu the Corps' code, for which the price of any violation is seppuku. Soji had tried to keep Tetsu off the path of fighting by making him a page, but, if Tetsu wants to fight, he must be prepared to kill whoever he must in every battle. A villain, an enemy of the Shogunate, is introduced.
- Ep. 4: Tetsu does chores and meets Hajime Saito. Hijikata learns that the villain from the previous episode, Yoshida, has been setting fires around Kyoto. Tetsu is still displeased with not being able to fight. Saito apparently has some psychic gifts, and can see that Tetsu is haunted by something. He goes to investigate the fires and discovers who died in them. Later, while Tetsu is on guard duty, he follows Saito out and watches him defeat several would-be assailants. However, they are controlled by some sort of magic and rise again despite being wounded.
- Ep. 5: Tetsu meets Yamanami. Tetsu thinks Yamanami is far nicer than Hijikata, which amuses the other officers. Later, tired of chores, he runs errands and discusses his inner conflict with the girl he rescued a few episodes previous: how can he hope to revenge himself on the man who killed his parents if he cannot bring himself to kill the way the other Shinsengumi do? Some of the Corps' spies are seen collecting info on the Choshu.

- Ep. 6: While Hijikata is out of town the rest of the Shinsengumi holds a series of contests for fun. Tetsu is depressed most of the day because of the issues from the previous episode and challenges Okita to spar. He asks Okita why he joined the Corps, but although Okita refuses to tell, he promises that he will spar with Tetsu again in the future. Tetsu is encouraged and emerges from his slump to compete in the final event.
- Ep 7: Tetsu gets in an argument with a boy called Suzu in a sword shop and his brother has to diffuse the situation. Suzu is later seen to be the page of the villain Yoshida. Later, Tetsu becomes embarrassed because he still doesn't have a sword, and pleads with Hijikata that he receive one. Okita talks to Hijikata about his unwillingness to arm Tetsu, since he gave Okita a sword when he was only nine. He realizes that Hijikata regrets arming Okita so young and doesn't want to make the same mistake again. Yamazaki is discovered spying by Choshu's ninjas and must escape.
- Ep. 8: Tetsu goes to a festival and meets Saya and a friend of hers, Hana. The viewer discovers that Saya is training to be a geisha (but Tetsu is oblivious). Tetsu wins a small sword in a game and is excited about it. Later Hana is set upon by some unsavory types and Harada and Nagakura, who were passing by, defeat them hand-to-hand, saying that weapons are worth nothing if their bearer isn't worthy. Tetsu is moved and decides to wait a little longer for his own sword.
- Ep. 9 Tetsu and Tatsu go to the harbor on an errand for Hijikata. Tetsu meets up with Suzu again and they become friends, but Tetsu still hasn't learned his name or who he is. Later Tetsu hears a man singing the Star-Spangled Banner (with a million wrong words) and sees that the man resembles his father. After following him, Tetsu learns that the man is helping to train the Japanese navy and thinks the exclusionists are totally reactionary. Tetsu is intrigued by the idea of going out 'into the world', but Tatsu is irritated by his rhetoric and drags Tetsu away. They pick up Hijikata's package and head home.
- Ep. 10: Yamanami and Hijikata argue because Yamanami wants to be demoted. Yamanami leaves, and flashes back to their assassination of Serizawa Kamo. Tetsu and Tatsu return from their journey, and it turns out the package is cough medicine, which Hijikata prepares for Soji. The soothsayer from Ep. 4 summons a demon to attack the Corps' officers that preys on weakness. Yamanami asks Hijikata to kill him should he ever become that weak.
- Ep. 11: The man they met in Ep9 sneaks into the headquarters to talk to Tatsu, but is found out by Okita. Turns out he is Sakamoto Ryoma, who wants to recruit Tetsu and Tatsu to his cause. He is chased out of the headquarters before Tetsu knows he was there. The spy Yamazaki is found out by Yoshida and his ninjas, and returns home in shame. The owner of the Matsuya shop sends a young girl named Hotaru to spy on the Corps against her will, but she is unable to find anything of note her first night.
- Ep. 12: Saito offers to spar with Tetsu, but is overcome by a vision for a second and accidentally fights Tetsu seriously. Tetsu is still sore the next day, when Yamanami offers to take him out for the evening to relax. He takes him to Shimabara, however, to a geisha house.

It just so happens to be the one where Hana and Saya are maiko, and Tetsu discovers their secret (and doesn't judge them). Tatsu is appalled that Yamanami would take his brother to such a place and rushes from HQ to go preserve his brother's virtue.

- Ep. 13: Tetsu and Saya are reconciled; they go play cards and other games while the others drink. Suzu is sent to the same house because the female ninja who work for his master are employed there. He happens on Tetsu and Saya, and is pressed into playing with them. Some hooligans attack Yamanami and his group, but are defeated. Tatsu discovers them and is relieved to find his brother's innocence intact. Suddenly Suzu's master shows up at Tetsu's room, telling Suzu to get away from Tetsu as he is dangerous.
- Ep. 14: Tetsu is depressed and Tatsu is angry all day because both recognized Suzu's master as the man who killed their parents. Yamazaki attempts to kill himself to repent for his failure, but the Corps' maid Ayu, who it is revealed is both his sister and also a spy, stops him. Later Tetsu catches Ayu as she's about to leave on a mission and she cheers him up again.
- Ep. 15: Soji tricks Tetsu into running off with Hijikata's personal haiku book (his poetry is terrible). Hijinks ensue. Later we see Ayu spying on Yoshida's base. Yoshida tells Suzu that Tetsu is not a worthy friend because of his allegiance to the Shinsengumi; he orders Suzu to kill Tetsu to prove his loyalty.
- Ep 16: The lord with the soothsayer hires a man who looks just like Soji to infiltrate the Corps. Tatsu runs into Sakamoto again and is confused for one of his comrades. The impersonator kills several of the Mimawarigumi, another Kyoto paramilitary organization, in order to frame Okita.
- Ep 17: Tetsu has a nightmare. Yoshida plans to burn the palace and kidnap the emperor. The Mimawarigumi confronts the Corps about the lookalike; Hijikata swears to find the culprit and bring him to justice. He is later attacked by the impostor, who has infiltrated HQ, but the stranger escapes. Later Hijikata, Saito, and Soji go to the lord's mansion to track him down, and are trapped in an illusion. They are freed and the lord dies burning his mansion down, possibly with the impostor inside.
- Ep 18: Tetsu trains and is getting better at swordfighting. Ayu's help is sorely missed at the Corps HQ. She, in the meantime, is busy spying on the many Choshu ronin Masuya has brought into the city. She sleeps with one as part of her cover but it turns out the whole group has been suspicious of her from the start. She is captured and Masuya tells his men to dispose of her however they like. A by-passer alerts the Corps that there's a woman in trouble.
- Ep. 19: The Corps find Ayu's body but it is too late. They mourn her loss in their own ways. Hijikata feels responsible and swears vengeance. Yamazaki and Tetsu reconcile finally.
- Ep. 20: the Shinsengumi raid Masuya's store and take several prisoners. Yamazaki captures Masuya himself. Tetsu runs to the scene, where he notices Suzu. Suzu leads him away, intending to slay him as per his master's orders, but finds he is unable. Yoshida appears and casts Suzu aside in order to kill Tetsu himself. Tetsu flees into a run-down house, but Yoshida sets a fire around the perimeter and follows him inside. Suzu attempts to stop his master but

Yoshida readies himself to strike nonetheless. Tatsu, fearing for his brother's safety, finds him trapped in the burning building.

- Ep. 21: Tetsu has been saved but is in a state of shock, lashing out at anyone who tries to help him. He still hasn't moved past his parents' murder psychologically. The Choshu plan to meet at the Ikedaya inn. The Corps plan to find and attack the meeting but have split up to do so. Yamanami is not with them; he continues to relive Serizawa's assassination and has no stomach for blood. Yamazaki confronts Tatsu and Tetsu and gives Tetsu his swords and uniform, which are finally finished.
- Ep. 22: Tetsu is confronted by Yamanami. Fighting begins in earnest at Ikedaya; most of the Choshu are slain quickly. Yamazaki sets off a flare above the building to draw the rest of the Corps there, including Tetsu. When Tetsu arrives he finds himself facing off against Yoshida. The others fear for him, but it seems Tetsu has made peace with himself and wants to kill not Yoshida, but the cowardliness in his own heart.
- Ep. 23: Suzu pleads for backup but is ignored. Tetsu holds his own against Yoshida, nearly killing him by wounding his leg and taking off his arm. At the last second Yoshida tries to kill Tetsu holding a broken blade in his mouth but Okita beheads him. Another clan shows up to try to claim the raid's victory as their own but is driven away by Kondo and Hijikata. Soji is overcome with coughing and Hijikata has to medicate him. Suzu sees Tetsu sheathing his swords above his master Yoshida's body and breaks down.
- Ep. 24: Tetsu has a dream of his father and Sakamoto, encouraging him to be a peacemaker. Soji denies being sick; the rest of the officers go to a festival. Tetsu sees Saya, and promises her that even if he draws his sword he won't ever kill anyone. He returns to the HQ to watch the fireworks from the roof. Suzu huddles in a corner clutching Yoshida's severed head and talking to it as everyone else celebrates.

## Appendix D: Rurouni Kenshin episode summaries

- Ep. 1: After the Meiji Restoration was achieved, the legendary assassin Battosai disappeared. Kenshin appears in a small town and is mistaken for Battosai by Kaoru. There have been several murders in the town and the murderer is claiming to use her family's style. Kenshin rescues her and moves into the Kasshin school's dojo. After Kaoru loses her last students because of the Battosai scandal, Kenshin defeats the murderer (who held a grudge against Kaoru's father) and regains her honor, but is revealed as the real historical Battosai.
  - Key Idea: Kaoru: "A sword is a tool to save people with."
- Ep. 2: Yahiko Myojin, the disenfranchised son of a samurai, has been pushed into pickpocketing for the yakuza since his samurai status no longer carries any weight. Kaoru wants to free him from his debt and challenges the yakuza first to dice then to combat. She is losing but Kenshin appears to save them. Yahiko becomes Kaoru's student.
- Ep. 3: Kaoru worries about why Kenshin is wandering and if he's wanted. Her fears are confirmed when the police show up looking for him. The police are brutal bullies and threaten to kill several townspeople to prove a point. Kenshin calls them out and easily defeats them despite their boasts. Yamagata Aritomo (leader of the Imperial Army) shows up and orders the police punished; he has been looking for Kenshin and wants him to join the army as an officer. Kenshin refuses.
- Ep. 4: Sagara Sanosuke, a fighter for hire, is employed to kill Kenshin by the murderer from the first episode. Sanosuke hates Imperialists like Kenshin and looks forward to the fight, but before they can get into it some children wander past and both men lose their fighting spirit. The threat remains, however.
  - Kenshin fought for Choshu clan.
- Ep. 5: It is revealed that Sanosuke used to be in the Sekihotai, a radical militia during the pre-Restoration period. It was scapegoated after the restoration and blamed for promises the Meiji government had made and was unable to keep. Their captain, Sagara Sozo, was Sanosuke's role model and he took his last name from him. Sanosuke resents the government because of this and wants to fight Kenshin because of it. Kenshin, however, defeats the murderer and Sanosuke, and convinces Sanosuke that not all Imperialists are evil. Sanosuke joins their group.
  - Kenshin: The revolution isn't over until all the weak people have protection.
- Ep. 6: When Kenshin and Sano are hired for a bodyguard job they encounter a fearsome assassin who kills for fun. Kenshin decides to defeat him, but to do so he must tap into the Battosai part of him that he's blocked off for a decade. When Kaoru hears this she goes to confront him and makes him promise not to get lost in his head and to come back after the fight, but she is kidnapped by the assassin as she goes to leave.

- Ep. 7: Kenshin is a changed man when he comes to fight the assassin, having almost completely reverted to his former Battosai persona. The villain puts a spell on Kaoru that will kill her if Kenshin doesn't kill him. He nearly does, but Kaoru is able to break free of the hypnosis and stays Kenshin's hand.
- Ep 8: Kenshin and company agree to protect a woman. Megumi, who is on the run from a gang. They fight two ninjas from the notorious Oniwaban group, and Yahiko is poisoned. The woman, however, is a doctor, and springs into action to help him. Sano discovers opium among her belongings.
- Ep 9: Yahiko is healed. The Oniwaban blackmail Megumi into returning, because she is their only remaining member who can manufacture opium. She resists but is taken, and Kenshin and co. resolve to get her back.
- Ep 10: The mission to rescue Megumi begins. Kenshin fights and defeats another Oniwaban and then goes to face their leader, Shinomori Aoshi, who gains the upper hand over Kenshin.
- Ep 11: Kenshin defeats Aoshi and is faced by the mob boss, who is not a fighter but has a Gatling gun. Aoshi is wounded and the four defeated Oniwaban members die protecting him. Kenshin stops the gun and they are able to save Megumi, who was about to kill herself. Kenshin convinces her that she should live like him and repent for her sins rather than selfishly dying and escaping punishment.
- Ep 12: Yahiko trains and is able to defeat some thieves who held a pre-revolution grudge and were trying to rob a nearby lord, in the meantime saving a young girl they'd pressed into service.
- Ep. 13: Kaoru helps a low-ranking sumo wrestler regain his teacher's respect.
- Ep. 14: The group defends Megumi's honor as a doctor when some pretenders label her as a quack.
- Ep. 15: A gang of vigilantes is killing government officials they deem corrupt. They threaten a friend of Sanosuke's, a professor, that they will kill his students if he doesn't join them (like Kenshin, the professor used to be an assassin himself during the revolution). Kenshin and Sano foil their latest assassination attempt and rescue the professor, but the rest of the squad escapes.
- Ep. 16: Sano, Kenshin, and the professor are able to trap the assassination group, whom they turn over to the authorities. The killers come to realize that they were just hiding bog-standard murder under the guise of divine retribution.
- Ep. 17: The group helps out a girl who works at a carnival whose former boss is trying to ruin her business.
- Ep. 18: The murderer from the first episode reappears, still trying to get rid of Kenshin. Yahiko is tired of fighting with a practice sword and wants to try a real sword; the murderer tricks him into stealing Kenshin's reverse-blade sword and then kidnaps him. Kenshin goes to save him, weaponless, but Yahiko is able to escape and return the sword to him.

- Ep. 19: On vacation, the group meets a spoiled young rich boy. He has hired a ruffian and his gang to be his swordsmanship teacher, but the leader is actually a separatist fighter and has been selling the boy's belongings to pay for weapons. When Kenshin confronts the man about this, the boy is thrown into harm's way.
  - The gang feels emasculated by the restructuring of society where fighters have no place.
- Ep. 20: The boy is saved and starts taking lessons from Kaoru instead. He still reveres his teacher, though, and when the government moves in to eliminate the separatist threat, the boy rushes headlong into the middle of it.
- Ep. 21: The boy is injured by the gang's leader. Kenshin challenges the man and defeats him, and the government seizes all the separatists. The boy travels to Germany to recover at a relative's house.
- Ep. 22: A train has been built connecting Tokyo and Yokohama. Kaoru buys everyone tickets to try out the mysterious new technology, but Sanosuke is frightened by the locomotive. Meanwhile, Kenshin and Yahiko foil an attempt to hijack the train.
- Ep. 23: Sanosuke encounters one of his old comrades from the Sekihotai. He has spent the ten years since the restoration plotting to overthrow the government that scapegoated the militia. Meanwhile, some burglars have been using the Sekihotai's name to gain notoriety. Sanosuke and his friend defeat the group, who were led by the man who had originally discredited the Sekihotai. Sanosuke agrees to abandon his present friends and help his past comrade achieve his revenge.
- Ep. 24: The pair's attempt to blow up the Internal Affairs building is foiled by Kenshin, who once again convinces the bad guys to try to change the government in some other way. Sano returns to the group, and his friend starts a newspaper denouncing the government.
- Ep. 25: Kenshin and co. take a job on a ship defending it from pirates. Things become tricky when the pirates' leader, a woman named Shura, takes a wounded Kenshin prisoner.
- Ep. 26: Sanosuke, Kaoru, and Yahiko try to save Kenshin. Meanwhile, Kenshin has befriended the pirates' captain and helps her escape a mutiny by her crew.
- Ep. 27: Kenshin helps rescue the captain from the mutiny and the pirates' island goes up in flames. The others head back to Tokyo and Shura decides to start a new lifestyle.
- Ep. 28: In a flashback, we see the slaughter at the Ikedaya from Kenshin's eyes, as he cuts down escaping Shinsengumi. He fights Hajime Saito. Back in the present day, Saito is working as a policeman but moonlighting as an assassin. He is hired to kill Kenshin. He comes to the dojo when Kenshin isn't there and wounds Sano badly. Kenshin can tell from the attack who the perpetrator was, and prepares to fight his old rival.
- Ep. 29: Kenshin is called out to fight a bogus assassin while Saito goes to the Kamiya dojo. He waits there until Kenshin returns, and then challenges him. Kenshin is unnerved by the idea that Saito could have killed any of his comrades while he was gone, and Saito gains the upper hand in their battle.

- Ep. 30: The battle becomes vicious and everyone watches in horror as Kenshin reverts into his Battosai persona. The two go all out at each other and are about to strike their final blows when they are interrupted by the police. It turns out Saito was an undercover agent and was only supposed to be testing Kenshin's strength. The assassin who succeeded Kenshin after he quit, Shishio Makoto, despite being thought assassinated by the government many years previously, has reappeared and is building an army of malefactors in Kyoto. The government wants Kenshin to dispatch him, but all Kenshin's friends refuse, as this would mean breaking his vow to never kill.
- Ep. 31: The high-ranking government official (Okubo) who asked Kenshin to go to Kyoto is assassinated by one of Shishio's men. Kenshin thinks for a long time and decides he must go to Kyoto. He bids farewell to a tearful Kaoru and heads out.
- Ep. 32: Everyone is reeling from Kenshin's absence, but Sanosuke, Yahiko, and Kaoru go after him. Saito is also on his way to Kyoto.
- Ep. 33: Aoshi (leader of the Oniwaban group) is courted by both Shishio's and the government's sides. He starts towards Kyoto as well, although his loyalties are unclear. Kenshin is walking to Kyoto, having refused the government's offer of berth on a ship. While resting in the woods he meets a girl who has just beaten up and robbed a group of men.
- Ep. 34: The girl Kenshin encountered, Misao, was raised by Aoshi and is searching for the Oniwaban. Kenshin can't bring himself to tell her that they are all dead except for Aoshi. She suspects that he knows something and continues to dog his trail.
- Ep. 35: Kenshin and Misao discover a village that has been seized by Shishio and abandoned by the government. Its citizens live in fear of Shishio's men, and are killed for the slightest offense. Kenshin is angrier than ever, and he and Saito, who has just appeared on the scene, head to Shishio's mansion to face him, leaving Misao behind on the road.
- Ep. 36: Misao and one of the village boys try to sneak into the mansion. Meanwhile, Saito and Kenshin meet Shishio, who wants to throw Japan back into chaos and seize power. One of his followers battles Kenshin, but Kenshin defeats him and challenges Shishio.
- Ep. 37: Shishio escapes, leaving his lieutenant to fight Kenshin. Both of their swords are broken on the first blow, and they both leave unscathed. Kenshin is faced with the decision of getting a new sword – whether it should be another peaceful reverse-blade sword or a killer's blade. Shishio tells his lieutenant to call all the Juppongatana (Ten Swords), his special attack force, to Kyoto.
- Ep. 38: Sanosuke is lost on his way to Kyoto and trains with a fallen monk he meets on the way. The man later turns out to be one of Shishio's Juppongatana. Kaoru and Yahiko are also training, while traveling by ship to Kyoto. Kenshin continues to worry about the friends he left behind and what will happen when he gets to Kyoto.
- Ep. 39: Kenshin visits the swordsmith who forged his reverse-blade sword, but he has died and his son has given up sword making. Kenshin must fight one of Shishio's men with a broken sword to gain ownership of the last sword the man's father had made.

- Ep. 40: Kenshin defeats the Juppongatana and wins the sword, which turns out to be the higher-quality twin of his previous reverse blade sword. He leaves the Oniwaban's headquarters where he was staying with Misao just as Misao runs into Kaoru and Yahiko in the street.
- Ep. 41: Kenshin approaches his old master and asks him to teach him the last technique of his Hiten Mitsurugi style. He is joined there by Kaoru, Yahiko, and Misao, whose testimony helps to convince his master to teach him. Kenshin goes off to train, and Kaoru and Yahiko are forced to reveal the harsh story of Kenshin vs. the Oniwaban to Misao.
- Ep. 42: Kenshin continues to train. Meanwhile, Aoshi has allied himself with Shishio, and Misao's grandfather, the current leader of the Oniwaban, has challenged him to try and stop him. Misao reveres both of them and rushes to stop them but is rebuffed by Aoshi, who has nearly slain the old man. He is rushed home to be treated and Misao declares herself leader of the Oniwaban, and resolves to take down Aoshi and protect Kyoto from Shishio.
- Ep. 43: Kenshin learns the final move, nearly killing his master in the process. Saito and Sano arrive in Kyoto.
- Ep. 44: Saito and Sano discover that Shishio intends to burn down Kyoto. Meanwhile, all the Juppongatana (save the one Kenshin defeated, who's in jail) have gathered at Shishio's mansion. Kenshin's master recovers and sends Kenshin off to fight.
- Ep. 45: Kenshin, Sano, and Saito rush to intercept Shishio, who plans to use the cover of the fires in Kyoto to sail to Tokyo and fire on the harbor, invoking peoples' memories of the black ships and throwing the government into chaos. In Kyoto, the fires are not starting, though, because the Oniwaban has mobilized to stop all the arsonists.
- Ep. 46: The fires are stopped before they have a chance to begin in Kyoto, and Kenshin, Saito, and Sano manage to sink Shishio's ship, thwarting his plan to sail to Tokyo. They decide to fight a final duel elsewhere and flee the sinking vessel. The next morning Kenshin steels his resolve and the three go off to fight.
- Ep. 47: The three start their one-on-one duels with the Juppongatana. Sano fights first against the same fallen monk who trained him on his way to Kyoto. He appears to have won against the monk, but it is unclear.
- Ep. 48: Sano finally beats the monk, who it turns out had been fighting to avenge the deaths of some children murdered at his temple after the Meiji government banned Buddhism. Sano stays to recover and Kenshin and Saito move on. Meanwhile, the Oniwaban's headquarters is surrounded by Shishio's men, including some of the Juppongatana.
- Ep. 49: Saito defeats the next Juppongatana. Sano and Kenshin race on to the next battle. Misao, Kaoru, Yahiko, and the Oniwaban spring into action in Kyoto. Kenshin encounters Aoshi.
- Ep. 50: Kenshin battles Aoshi. The battle is close but Aoshi loses the upper hand because he is so desperate to throw his life away.

- Ep. 51: Kenshin defeats Aoshi, unfortunately displaying his ultimate move to Shishio. The group in Kyoto is having more trouble than they expected with the three Juppongatana there, and the remaining Juppongatana are lighting fires elsewhere and engaging the police force to keep them from reaching the Oniwaban to give them aid.
- Ep. 52: The Oniwaban manage to overcome the three Juppongatana they originally faced, and Shishio's men retreat. They are replaced, however, by two more Juppongatana.
- Ep. 53: Kenshin's master shows up and quickly defeats the remaining Juppongatana in Kyoto. Kenshin goes on to battle the strongest of the ten, Shishio's lieutenant.
- Ep. 54: Kenshin has difficulty against his opponent, who moves more quickly than even Kenshin himself. Kenshin is wounded but is able to unseat his opponent psychologically.
- Ep. 55: In a flashback to the young lieutenant's past, we find out that he was abused as a child and saved by Shishio, who helped him kill his abusers and taught him that only the strong can survive. The idea of Kenshin's swordsmanship that helps the weak unlocks the emotions he's been shutting off for years and he directs his anger and resentment at Kenshin for not saving him.
- Ep. 56: Kenshin is able to gain the upper hand now that the boy is frustrated, and defeats him. The boy decides to leave Shishio's employ and find his own truth, but first shares the weak point of Kenshin's final attack with Shishio. Saito wanders around inside the mansion, seeking his own ends, and Aoshi finally recovers from fighting Kenshin. Sano and Kenshin enter the final arena to face Shishio.
- Ep. 57: Kenshin and Shishio start their battle. Kenshin appears to be outmatched.
- Ep. 58: Kenshin is knocked out by a trick blow from Shishio. Saito appears from nowhere to attack, but is also cut down. Sano attacks Shishio but is brutally outmatched. Shishio celebrates his victory, but then Aoshi appears.
- Ep. 59: Aoshi buys time for Kenshin to recover, and Kenshin is able to push Shishio back. Shishio's henchmen begin to worry about the time. Because his sweat glands were destroyed when he was burned and left for dead, Shishio is unable to eliminate heat from his body efficiently and it can be hazardous for him to go at full strength for over 15 minutes.
- Ep. 60: Shishio makes one last stand, wounding Kenshin, but the effort is too much for him and his body combusts from the built-up heat. They attempt to escape the mansion but it is being torn down around them by one of Shishio's henchman who's gone mad due to Shishio's defeat.
- Ep. 61: The group escapes the mansion and is reunited with their friends. It is revealed that most of the surviving Juppongatana have been given deals under the table and are doing spy work for the government.
- Ep. 62: Kenshin and co say their farewells to their friends in Kyoto, who are returning to life as usual, and head back to Tokyo.
- Ep. 63: Kenshin meets an old man who encourages him not to push aside Kaoru's affections.

- Ep. 64: When the prince of a small Asian country is wounded near the Kamiya dojo, Yahiko (who looks just like him) must step in and impersonate him at a state event.
- Ep. 65: Sano is adopted by a dog so ornery that Kaoru makes him put up posters so they can find his real owner. Unfortunately the dog has stolen a key from some thieves who are searching for him high and low.
- Ep. 66: Kenshin gives Kaoru a ring, thinking it's her birthday. Kaoru has just learned of the Western engagement tradition and thinks Kenshin has proposed. When it turns out the ring belongs to another young man, they try a myriad of tricks to get the ring back and return it.
- Ep. 67: Kenshin and co return to Kyoto to help Misao and Aoshi defeat an assassin that's been killing politicians. The man turns out to be a Japanese Christian that uses the same sword style as Kenshin.
- Ep. 68: Sano discovers a hidden church and encounters its leader. Kenshin discovers that the killer wants to get revenge on the Japanese for their purge of Christianity during the Tokugawa era.
- Ep. 69: They follow the man to Shimabara and try to gather information on the group of Christians living there.
- Ep. 70: Kenshin is challenged by the swordsman and defeated, but is able to discover a weakness in his fighting style.
- Ep. 71: Kenshin is temporarily blinded by the man's attack and is recuperating. Meanwhile, Sano discovers that the leaders of the Christians are conspiring with the Dutch to mount a full-scale rebellion.
- Ep. 72: Some Dutch are planning to kill the leader of the Christians and instigate a holy war to topple Japan and recreate it as a Dutch colony. Sano and some others are trapped and in danger. Kenshin is also attacked.
- Ep. 73: The army has been warned that a rebellion is imminent and has mobilized to execute all the Christians. The Dutch ringleader is killed by an underling while Kenshin and co rush to warn the worshippers of the danger.
- Ep. 74: The area becomes a battlefield as the leader of the Christians instructs his followers to martyr themselves. Kenshin appears, still blind, and challenges him to stop the fighting.
- Ep. 75: Kenshin is able to defeat the leader, stopping the fighting and regaining his eyesight.
- Ep. 76: The case of the Christians is wrapped up by the local government and Kenshin and co get ready to head home.
- Ep. 77: On their way home, they encounter a man who's been using the Battosai name. Because he's only using it to help children and defend a small village, Kenshin doesn't want to bother him about it, but his true identity is revealed in the end.
- Ep. 78: Kenshin and co stop at a hot spring and, having lost their money, must work to repay their stay. A young artist staying there is smitten with Kaoru and tries to win her love to no avail.

- Ep. 79: Finally home, the group meets Katsu Kaishu and an apprentice of his, who is a brilliant scientist but lacks an ability in swordsmanship. Katsu kicks him out until he can learn how to use a sword. Kaoru takes him in. Meanwhile, something strange is going on with Katsu himself.
- Ep. 80: The apprentice continues to train at the Kamiya dojo. Meanwhile, a group of former shogunal vassals who resents some of Katsu's actions during the restoration (namely his advice that the shogun should surrender) is targeting him and his family.
- Ep. 81: The vassals kidnap Katsu's daughter. Katsu goes to face them, but Kenshin and his group get there first. However, when they spring into action, the young apprentice is stabbed.
- Ep. 82: The apprentice is okay because he had a book tucked into his shirt. The daughter is saved and it is revealed that another of Katsu's apprentices had mobilized the kidnappers with rumors of Katsu keeping stealing Tokugawa treasures.
- Ep. 83: The rich boy from eps. 19-22 returns to Japan, but is followed by a German paramilitary organization that is looking for a treasure connected to the boy's teacher.
- Ep. 84: The group follows hidden clues to discover the secret location of the treasure, a rumored miracle medicine. Meanwhile, the Germans have teamed up with a clan of ninja to try and find it first.
- Ep. 85: Nearly to the treasure, the group is misled by the ninja's leader and fall into a trap, leaving the treasure open to the Germans and ninja.
- Ep. 86: Kenshin and co escape but are attacked by ninja.
- Ep. 87: The Germans reach the treasure but face internal strife when they try to dispose of their ninja guide, as one of their number defends her. He is struck down, and Kenshin arrives in time to take his place.
- Ep. 88: Some sparks from the swordfighting light the chamber on fire, and although Kenshin defeats the Germans' leader, everyone must rush to escape, and the treasure is lost. The Germans' military group is disbanded, and the boy and his teacher return to Germany.
- Ep. 89: Aoshi and some of the Oniwaban come from Tokyo to collect Misao, who was visiting. The women spend a day out while Kenshin and Aoshi relax by themselves at the dojo.
- Ep. 90: A generations-old curse seems to be affecting the neighborhood, causing people to take drastic measures to leave. Meanwhile a shady-looking businessman has been buying up the properties of those who've left.
- Ep. 91: The 'curse' falls on the Kamiya dojo and Kaoru is poisoned. It is revealed that the businessman is a Chinese native trying to throw Tokyo into chaos.
- Ep. 92: Many government buildings are attacked while the businessman and his forces spring into action. Kenshin goes to find the cure for Kaoru, which is found only in the middle of the enemy's territory. From there it is a race against time to stop the enemies.
- Ep. 93: They discover that the enemy's forces plan to strike at an important government meeting the following day. They rush to find a way to stop them.
- Ep. 94: Kenshin and his companions are able to stop the threat and save the city.

- Ep. 95: End of the series. Everyone settles back into the grind of everyday life. Kenshin decides to forego his life as a wanderer and stay at the Kamiya dojo with Kaoru.