

# The Spiritual Quest in Keisuke Itagaki's Baki Series

## A Synthesis of Eastern Religious Figures, Aesthetics, and Martial Arts in a Japanese Anime

### Abstract

The Baki series, created by Keisuke Itagaki, is a globally popular anime and manga franchise that has captivated audiences with its striking visual aesthetic and depiction of martial arts. However, despite its widespread popularity, there is a notable lack of scholarly research on the series, particularly in relation to its spiritual and philosophical themes. This article addresses this gap by offering a contextualized analysis of Baki that explores the complex intersection of religion, aesthetics, and popular culture in Japanese society. Through an examination of the series' representation of Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, this study provides insights into broader cultural attitudes towards masculinity, violence, and martial arts in Japan and the global community. By shedding light on the spiritual themes present in the Baki series, it contributes to the global discourse on popular culture, martial arts, and spirituality, offering a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of Japanese culture and its influence on the wider world.

### Keywords

Mythology, Japanese Anime, Archetypes, Subversion, Masculinity, Martial Arts, Religion

### Biography

Rehuel Nikolai B. Soriano has dedicated his career to the study of world myths. He is a faculty member of the Central Luzon State University, Philippines, where he teaches mythology, literature, and rhetoric. He recently presented his research paper "An Odyssey to the World of Myths" at the *VII International Conference on Myth Criticism* held at Complutense University of Madrid in October 2022. Nikolai Soriano's main research interests include archetypes, literature and religion, and world mythologies.

## Introduction

As one of the most culturally rich countries in the world, Japan has long been a subject of interest for scholars and enthusiasts alike. From its deeply rooted religious traditions to its strikingly beautiful aesthetic principles, Japan has left an indelible mark on the world. One of the most intriguing aspects of Japanese culture is its unique relationship with martial arts, embodied in Keisuke Itagaki's Baki series, a popular anime and manga franchise. In this article, we delve into religion, aesthetics, and popular culture to explore the ways in which these seemingly disparate elements intersect and shape our understanding of Eastern tradition. A contextualized analysis of Baki provides, as we shall see, insights into the complex spiritual, historical, and psychological factors that have contributed to the development and popularity of this iconic franchise. Moreover, it can shed light on how the series reflects and shapes broader cultural attitudes towards masculinity, violence, and martial arts, offering a window into the complex and multifaceted nature of Japanese culture.

This study redresses the lack of scholarly research on the spiritual themes present in the Baki series, particularly in relation to Eastern religious and philosophical traditions. While the series is widely popular, little attention has been paid to its deeper cultural and philosophical implications, particularly in terms of its representation of spirituality and its impact on the global discourse on martial arts and popular culture. This study will fill this gap by examining the spiritual themes present in the Baki series and their relationship to Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, as well as their significance in the broader context of Japanese society and the global community. Specifically, this research explores the ways in which the Baki series reflects and influences contemporary discourses on spirituality and martial arts and the potential implications of this discourse for broader questions of cultural identity and the human quest for meaning and purpose.

## Contextualization

Keisuke Itagaki's Baki series is a manga and anime that has become a cultural phenomenon and gained a substantial fan-base globally.<sup>1</sup> The series is renowned for its graphic depiction of martial arts, which includes violent

1 The BAKI series is currently available on Netflix.

and intense fight scenes that feature characters with extraordinary physical strength and mental resilience. Beyond the martial arts, it explores a wide range of themes related to spirituality, culture, and society, making it an intriguing subject for scholarly research. For instance, the series delves into the nature of existence, the pursuit of enlightenment, and the role of religion and spirituality in shaping human behavior. Moreover, it touches on issues related to gender, identity, and cultural values, all of which contribute to the complexity of the series and its cultural significance.

The significance of the Baki series is manifold. First, the placement of the series in its wider cultural and historical framework provides an understanding of the societal, political, and economic elements that may have impacted the growth and prominence of the franchise. Secondly, the series mirrors and influences broader cultural outlooks on masculinity, aggression, and martial arts. Lastly, ongoing discussions can draw on the series in exploring the impact of popular media in shaping our perceptions of the world and in reflecting on the fantasies, spiritualities, and social history of a changing Japan,<sup>2</sup> viewing it as a form of literature that blurs the line between high and mass cultures.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the Baki series lies Keisuke Itagaki's personal background, shaped by his experience as an amateur boxer and a practitioner of Shorinji Kempo, a Japanese martial art that places emphasis on both spiritual cultivation and physical training. While Itagaki's passion for martial arts and his support for Japanese nationalism and imperialism undoubtedly inform the series' martial prowess and nationalist themes, the Baki series should not be reduced to a mere account of Itagaki's personal views and experiences. Rather, it reflects and refracts the broader social, cultural, and historical context of Japan, particularly the country's history of trauma and defeat in World War II and its surrender to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The Baki series, which consists of five instalments, reflects hyper-Japanese machismo, likely due to Itagaki's fascination with martial arts. It draws inspiration from Japan's collective psyche during the Sengoku Jidai (1467–1615), a period of warring states that began with Nobunaga Oda's rise to power. The manga, *Grappler Baki*, was first serialized in *Weekly Shonen Champion*, a manga magazine published by Akita Shoten, from 1991 to 1999,

2 Drummond–Mathews 2010.

3 Treat 2020.

4 See Macwilliams 2014 on his view of manga and anime as open windows onto the Japanese id.

with a total of 42 Tankobon volumes. The second instalment, *New Grappler Baki: In Search of Our Strongest Hero*, has 31 volumes and was serialized in the same magazine. *Baki Hanma*, also known as *Baki: Son of Ogre*, was serialized from 2005 to 2012, with a total of 37 volumes. *Baki Dou* has 22 volumes and was serialized from 2014 to 2018. The latest instalment, also titled *Baki Dou* but written in Katakana, has an original video animation adaptation released in 1994 and is currently available on Netflix.

This article is based on the anime adaptations of the series. These are GRAPPLER BAKI: THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER; BAKI THE GRAPPLER: MAXIMUM TOURNAMENT; HANMA BAKI; BAKI 2018; BAKI 2020; and BAKI: SAIKYOU SHIKEISHUU-HEN SPECIAL ANIME. The setting is a world where underground fighting tournaments are prevalent. The protagonist of the series, Baki Hanma, is a martial artist who seeks to defeat his father, Yujiro Hanma, the strongest creature in the world. Furthermore, Baki faces off against several formidable opponents with their own unique styles and philosophies, including characters that resemble real-world martial artists, athletes, and historical figures. For its narrative, Baki delves beyond his physical battles as he deals with the psychological and philosophical aspects of combat, exploring the nature of strength, the pursuit of perfection, and the resolve to tap one's potential. It spans multiple story arcs, each providing new challenges and adversaries for Baki to overcome.

## Procedure

No artist works in isolation; artists always operate within the confines of their communities, with their own sets of precepts and biases.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when an artist creates a work, it becomes a mirror of their society's values, aspirations, and dreams. In this regard, it can be presumed that there are underlying sociocultural elements hidden in the narrative of Baki. A close reading of the text is implemented to extract these elements, seeking objective accuracy in interpretation. These extracted elements are then subjected to Myth Criticism, which asserts that works of art, literature, or media texts are fundamentally based on powerful social stories known as "myths".<sup>6</sup> Comparison with these myths establishes recurring parallels that are reflective of the most dominant mythological archetypes.

5 Escarpit 1971.

6 Kershaw 2007.

## Spiritual, Aesthetical, and Martial Elements

Japanese religious history spans thousands of years. It includes a diverse array of indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as significant influences from China and Korea, and later from the West. One of the earliest forms of religion in Japan was animism, which is the belief that everything in nature, including rocks, trees, and animals, has a spirit or soul. This belief system evolved into Shinto, which is the indigenous religion of Japan. Shinto emphasizes the importance of purity, nature, and ancestor worship and has had a profound impact on Japanese culture and identity. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century CE and quickly became one of the dominant religions in the country. It was brought over from China and Korea and was initially practiced only by the elite classes. However, it eventually spread to the general population and has since become deeply integrated into Japanese culture. Another major religion in Japan is Confucianism, which was also introduced from China. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of ethics, morality, and social order and has had a significant impact on Japanese society and government. During the Meiji period in the late nineteenth century, Japan underwent modernization and Westernization. This led to the introduction of Christianity, which has since become a minority religion in Japan. Today, Japan is a highly secular society, with many people practicing a blend of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and traditions. However, religion, which has had a profound impact on the country's history and development, continues to play an important role in Japanese culture and identity.

In addition, the Japanese hold a deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of their crafts and martial art forms.<sup>7</sup> This belief stems from several factors, including their cultural heritage, philosophy, and history. One reason why the Japanese view their crafts as superior is their adherence to the concept of *kaizen*,<sup>8</sup> which refers to the continuous improvement of their crafts. The Japanese believe in perfecting their craft through constant practice and refinement, resulting in a higher level of skill and quality. Furthermore, the Japanese also place a high value on aesthetics, which they see as an integral aspect of their craft. They believe in finding beauty in imperfections,

7 See Johnson 2012 for an exploration of *Nihonjinron*, an ideology that celebrates the perceived defining characteristics of Japanese culture, as envisioned by its advocates.

8 See MacPherson/Lockhart/Kavan/Iaquinto 2015 for a thorough discussion of *Kaizen*.

emphasizing minimalism and simplicity, and creating a harmonious balance between form and function. This attention to detail and focus on aesthetics has resulted in some of the most beautiful and intricate crafts in the world. The Japanese also take great pride in their culture and history, which has contributed to their belief in the superiority of their craft. The samurai tradition and its associated crafts, such as sword-making and martial arts, have played a particularly significant role in shaping this view. These crafts are seen as symbols of Japanese cultural identity and are deeply intertwined with the country's history and values. Finally, the Japanese hold a belief in the divine or spiritual aspects of their craft. For example, the specific type of steel called *tamahagane*, which is used to forge katanas, is considered a sacred material, imbued with spiritual energy.<sup>9</sup> This belief in the divine nature of their craft adds another layer of significance and reverence to the Japanese view of their craft.

The *Baki* series is heavily influenced by Japanese aesthetics. One of the key aesthetic principles in Japanese culture is the concept of *wabi-sabi*, which emphasizes the beauty of imperfection, transience, and the natural cycle of growth and decay. This principle can be seen throughout the series, from the physical appearance of the characters to the fighting styles they employ. For example, the characters in the *Baki* series often bear scars, wrinkles, and other imperfections that are seen as marks of their experiences and battles. The characters are also depicted in a highly stylized manner, with exaggerated features and proportions that emphasize their strength and power. In terms of fighting styles, the characters in the series often employ minimal and efficient movements. Also, the series often depicts a strong sense of honor and respect among its characters, particularly in the context of one-on-one fights. This reflects the Japanese valuing of honor and respect, as well as the importance placed on personal growth and development through challenging experiences. The martial art *Iaido*, which employs minimal movements to produce lethal outcomes, exemplifies this philosophy perfectly.

However, these views are not held by the entire Japanese population and they do not necessarily represent their attitudes toward other cultures. While some media may portray foreign martial artists in a negative light, Japan has a long history of cultural exchange and appreciation for other cultures. Overall, however, Japan continues to hold its culture in high esteem

9 See Ilundáin-Agurruza 2014 for a thorough discussion of the spiritual aspect of katana.

and values its unique contributions to the worlds of art, philosophy, and religion. Through the centuries, this appreciation for art and religion has led to a society that is both unique and intricate and that inspires and fascinates people around the globe.

## The Mythical Oni

The *Baki* series not only is influenced by Japanese culture and aesthetics but also incorporates elements of various Eastern religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. One of its notable aspects is the depiction of characters that embody spiritual entities found in these religions. These characters are often portrayed as possessing extraordinary abilities, physical prowess, and a profound understanding of the underlying principles of their respective traditions. They are also depicted as being deeply spiritual and often use their understanding of their respective religious principles to guide their actions and interactions with others. In this discussion, we will explore some of the *Baki* characters that embody spiritual entities from Eastern religions and the impact of their spiritual beliefs on their characterizations and actions in the series.

Yuichiro Hanma is the father of Yujiro Hanma. The first chapter of *Baki Gaiden: Kenjin*, depicts Yuichiro as a muscular man with large shoulders and a stocky body (fig. 1). He has a cauliflower ear – a deformity of the ear that can be caused by injuries that happen during a boxing or wrestling match. He is depicted as a calm person but ruthless when provoked and as a compassionate fighter but proud of his extra-human strength and fighting skill. In the fic-



Fig. 1: Film still, BAKI HANMA, S2 Ep 27 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:17:30.



Fig. 2: Katsushika Hokusai, Kobo Dashi (priest) practicing the Tantra, with an Oni before him, and wolf behind, ink and color on paper, 152.5x251.4 cm, Japan © Freer Gallery of Art Collection, public domain.

tional battle of Okinawa, Yuichiro defeated the 2,000–strong American forces, killing them in the most brutal way without using any weapons. Historically, in the the battle of Okinawa in World War II, the United States defeated the Japanese Imperial Army. The battle was dubbed *Tetsu no Bofu*, or “violent wind of steel”, a reference to the ferocity of the event and the intensity of the soldiers on both sides. Tragically more than 15,000 Okinawan civilians were killed in this invasion,<sup>10</sup> a number that exceeds the dead of Hiroshima. Yuichiro may be a refraction of this historical fact. He becomes a symbol of the collective dream of the Japanese psyche.<sup>11</sup> Since war is deeply embedded in their culture, losing to a supposedly inferior foreign power is very humiliating. Much as also happens to other Hanmas, Yuichiro’s back muscles become an abomination, morphing into a demon–like image that resembles that of an *Oni* (fig. 2).

The *Oni* is a fascinating creature in Buddhism, depicted as a brutish and muscular spirit with a menacing appearance. Its image has evolved over time, starting with its traditional depiction as a man–eating monster in ancient Buddhist texts. The *Oni* is often associated with death and destruction,

10 Feifer 2001.

11 See Brown 2012 on Manga’s ambiguity and escapism.



Fig. 3: Film still, BAKI HANMA, S2 Ep 25 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:06:56.

serving as a symbol of the darker aspects of human existence. The *Oni*'s origins can be traced back to a female deity named *Yomotsu-Shikome*, who was shamed by her husband.<sup>12</sup> This origin story reveals the *Oni*'s complexity, which includes female qualities in some versions. Interestingly, some traditions, such as Shintoism, view the *Oni* as a bringer of prosperity rather than destruction. This multidimensionality of the *Oni* makes it a symbol of both oppositions. Despite being a mythical creature, the *Oni* has managed to transcend time and space, relocating from its traditional dwelling in the spiritual realm to the world of media. This shift has allowed the *Oni* to remain a popular cultural icon in modern times, where it continues to fascinate through its ominous appearance and multifaceted nature.

Yujiro Hanma, one of the main characters in the *Baki* series, can be connected with the Buddhist demon *Oni* due to his physical attributes and his aggressive behavior (fig. 3). The *Oni* is depicted as a powerful, muscular creature that is often associated with violence and destruction, and similarly, Yujiro is known for his immense physical strength and combat prowess, as well as his brutal fighting style. Furthermore, the *Oni* is often associated

12 Reider 2010.

with negative emotions such as anger and hatred, which are also evident in Yujiro's character. He is shown to be ruthless and enjoys causing pain to others, often using excessive force in his fights. This violent and aggressive behavior is a common trait of the *Oni* in Buddhist mythology. In addition, the *Oni* is sometimes depicted as a symbol of opposition and challenge, which can also be seen in Yujiro's relationship with his son Baki. Yujiro sees Baki as a worthy opponent and often challenges him to fight in order to test his abilities and strength. This dynamic reflects the traditional role of the *Oni* in Buddhist mythology as a force that tests and challenges individuals. Yujiro's actions and personality are also reminiscent of the *Oni's* nature. The *Oni* is often viewed as a symbol of malevolence and benevolence. Yujiro is similarly depicted as a complex character, possessing both villainous and heroic qualities. His immense strength and fighting prowess make him a formidable opponent, and he often engages in brutal and violent battles. However, he also has a sense of honor and respect for his opponents, which are positive traits associated with the *Oni* in certain Buddhist traditions.

## The Monster Mara

In Buddhism, Mara is often depicted as a demonic figure with fearsome physical attributes (fig. 4), representing the temptations and illusions that hinder spiritual progress.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Yujiro Hanma is portrayed as a physically imposing and intimidating figure, with bulging muscles, sharp facial features, and a menacing gaze (fig. 5). Like Mara, Yujiro embodies a sense of danger and malevolence, capable of unleashing incredible destructive power upon his enemies. His physical prowess is unmatched, and he is often depicted as being in complete control of his body, effortlessly overpowering opponents with his strength and speed.

However, while Mara represents a force of temptation and illusion, Yujiro has a more complex and nuanced character. He is not simply a mindless monster but rather a highly intelligent and strategic fighter who understands the value of psychological warfare and manipulation. Certainly, Yujiro and Mara share a common trait – both are physically and mentally formidable opponents, capable of using their appearance and demeanor to intimidate and overpower their enemies. However, while Mara represents a purely negative force, Yujiro's character is more ambiguous, with shades of both darkness and light.

13 See Nichols 2010.



Fig. 4: Thangka of Mahakala, Tibet, 19th century, Wikimedia Commons, ©Hiart, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.



Fig. 5: Film still, BAKI THE GREAT RAITAI TOURNAMENT Saga, Ep 1 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:03:33.

## The Demon Kensei

Another manifestation of the *Oni* can be seen in the recharacterization of one of Japan's national heroes. Miyamoto Musashi is known for his expertise in martial arts and his contributions to the development of Japanese swordsmanship. Musashi's life and legacy have been the subject of numerous books, films, and other works of art, and his philosophy and approach to combat continue to influence martial artists and enthusiasts to this day. Musashi was born in 1584, and as a young man he travelled to Japan, engaging in numerous duels and battles to prove his skill as a swordsman.<sup>14</sup> In his late twenties, he retired from active combat and began to devote himself to the study and teaching of martial arts. Over the course of his life, Musashi authored several works on strategy, including *The Book of Five Rings*, which is still widely read and studied today. Musashi's approach to martial arts emphasized simplicity and practicality over flashy techniques or showy displays of skill. He believed that the key to victory in combat was to maintain a clear mind and to be adaptable and flexible in one's approach. Musashi also emphasized the importance of continuous self-improvement and self-discipline, both in martial arts and in life more broadly. Despite his reputation as a skilled and deadly warrior, Musashi also had a reputation as a philosophical and spiritual thinker. He spent much of his later years as a hermit, living in a cave and contemplating the nature of existence and the human condition.

The Confucian elements in *The Book of Five Rings* may have been unconsciously influenced by Musashi's upbringing and the impact of Confucian ethics on his background and outlook on life. It is likely that other warriors of the time also drew on this tradition, even if it was not explicitly mentioned.<sup>15</sup> However, a note in the introduction to the book presents a problem, as it suggests that Musashi himself drew specifically on Confucian ethics. Some scholars believe that the introduction was written by one of Musashi's students, possibly his adopted son Iori.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, it is still plausible that Musashi incorporated Confucian ethics into his philosophy and that a follower provided this information in the introduction. Confucianism emphasized the importance of loyalty, filial piety, and self-discipline, which were also values that Musashi upheld in his teachings.

14 Ciecieląg 2014.

15 Ciecieląg 2014, 1–2.

16 Ciecieląg 2014, 3–4.

In the Baki franchise, Musashi is depicted in a very different light. Rather than as a spiritual philosopher or a master swordsman, he is portrayed as a bloodthirsty and sadistic warrior, willing to use any means necessary to defeat his opponents. He is narcissistic, with an alarming face and strange eyes. He uses his martial knowledge to abuse his opponents, going on a killing rampage and slicing them up with his sharp sword. The depiction of his victims' enlightenment and revitalization after being cut justifies and beautifies the act of cutting, making the violent nature of the series all the more disturbing. The total opposite of his actual characterization as a Kensei, a ronin-saint, Musashi is instead characterized as an *Oni* and bloodthirsty swordsman, indicative of the imperialist propaganda embedded in the series. Musashi's quest for enlightenment is reflected in his fighting style, which he views as a means to transcend the limitations of the physical world and achieve a higher level of consciousness. While the historical Musashi believed in the principles of *heijoshin*, a state of calmness and serenity in the face of danger, the Musashi in Baki is constantly seeking out strong opponents to satisfy his desire for battle. He is also portrayed as arrogant and narcissistic, often belittling his opponents and dismissing their abilities.

## The God of Fists

Doppo Orochi's fighting style in Baki, Shinshinkai Karate, is based on Kyokushin Karate and can be seen as a homage to Mas Oyama's influence on the martial arts world.<sup>17</sup> Orochi is a highly esteemed tenth dan grandmaster and serves as the director of the Shinshinkai Karate Dojo, a martial art style based on the real-life Kyokushin Karate. He is renowned for his various titles, such as the God Hand, Tiger Slayer, and Man Eater, and has held the championship title in the underground tournament organized by Mitsunari Tokugawa in the past. Doppo Orochi is recognized as the mentor of several accomplished fighters, including Baki Hanma, Katsumi Orochi, Kyosumi Kato, and Atasushi Suedo. Additionally, he is the devoted husband of Natsuki Orochi and lovingly adopted Katsumi Orochi as his own son. He stands at an average height and has a muscular build with two scars on his face, one on the right side and another on his left cheek, as a result of his brief encounter with Yujiro Hanma. In their rematch, Yujiro gouges out Doppo's right eye, leading him to wear an eye patch beneath his trademark sunglasses. He typ-

17 See Oyama 2005.

ically dons a light-colored green suit with a white dress shirt underneath, a black tie, and white shoes. However, in combat or training, he wears the traditional karate uniform, with a black belt and an off-white colored gi with the kanji *Shinshinkai* on the right side and *Director* on the back of his collar, signifying his role as the director of the *Shinshinkai-kan*. In the *Baki the Grappler: In Search of Our Strongest Hero* manga series, following his fight with American convict Dorian, Doppo sustains numerous small scars on his face. During their initial confrontation, Dorian employs a concealed steel wire within a lighter to slice off Doppo's hand, which is subsequently reattached. In his younger years, when participating in the underground tournament hosted by Mitsunari Tokugawa, Doppo is depicted wearing only his iconic shorts and belt, which were the same ones he wore when he fought and defeated a tiger, as told by Dorian in the "Tales of Doppo Orochi". He later wears them again during his second fight with Dorian.

As founder and high-level practitioner of Shinshinkai Karate, he exhibits a diverse set of skills in Budo-style karate techniques. His analytical and knowledgeable approach to fighting is demonstrated in his ability to quickly think of countermeasures and attacks against other fighting styles, such as Yujiro's *udonde*<sup>18</sup> technique, and his ability to break down and explain Kousho's *himokiri*<sup>19</sup> Karate technique to others. He practices the same techniques over a thousand times a day, every day, for over fifty years. He has shown great external strength, having fought and slain a tiger in his youth, and extreme pain tolerance and endurance, withstanding multiple barrage attacks from Yujiro, having his arm sliced off and face blown up by Dorian, and holding out against various head-on attacks by Amanai. Although he dies at the hands of Yujiro, he has shown a remarkable ability to recover quickly, even resuming demonstrations the very next day<sup>20</sup> by performing *tameshiwara*, or breaking techniques, to his class. Doppo's karate style

18 Udonde is a secret fighting move, taught exclusively to the Ryukyu royal family's eldest sons, involving appearing defenseless and then quickly advancing towards the opponent, relying on exceptional reflexes to counterattack upon the opponent's strike.

19 Himokiri Karate is a fictional martial art style that emphasizes attacking pressure points and vital areas of the body to inflict maximum damage on the opponent; its practitioners are known for their ruthless and merciless fighting techniques, including the use of any means necessary to win a fight. The style is primarily associated with the character Shinogi Kureha, who is a master of Himokiri Karate and one of the strongest fighters in the series.

20 Doppo is revived by Kureha Shinogi, another fighter in the series, who happens to be a doctor with an extraordinary knowledge of human anatomy.

is characterized by brute force, speed, stamina, and technique, which is evident in his varying stances and defensive/offensive techniques. He has demonstrated his physical prowess by breaking and destroying concrete pipes, chopping a piece of steel wire in half, and breaking several ice blocks with his fist.

## **The Dragon Grappler**

Hanma Baki is a driven young man who seeks to defeat his father, Yujiro Hanma, the strongest man on earth. Baki's motivation stems from a tragic event in his past – the death of his mother, who was killed by Yujiro during a brutal brawl. Despite harboring a deep hatred for his father, Baki realizes that his mother's death was a necessary part of his own journey as a fighter. The story centers on the martial arts themselves, more than the individual martial artists, making it a unique entry in its genre. The series explores the theme of fighting for fighting's sake, as Baki strives to become the world's best fighter by taking on his father. This pursuit is deeply rooted in Japan's cultural context, where martial arts have a rich history rooted in the samurai tradition. Practicing martial arts is seen as a means of achieving physical and mental excellence and transcending the limits of the human body to achieve a higher level of consciousness. As Baki trains and fights to achieve his goal, he also grapples with the idea of destiny and the role of violence in shaping one's fate. Over time, Baki comes to accept and even appreciate his father's violent and deadly acts as part of his own path.

As a character, Baki exhibits a complex personality, which is shaped by his upbringing, his motivations, and his experiences. Through a close reading of the manga, it is possible to identify several key traits that define Baki's character and contribute to his development throughout the series. One of the most prominent aspects of Baki's personality is his intense desire to become the strongest fighter in the world. This desire is fueled by his rivalry with his father. Baki's pursuit of strength is not simply a matter of ego or pride but is driven by a deep need to prove himself and fulfil his destiny as a fighter. This is evident in his willingness to undergo extreme training regimens, such as spending a year in isolation or fighting in underground arenas against dangerous opponents. Another notable aspect of Baki's character is his determination and perseverance. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks throughout the series, Baki never gives up or loses sight of his goal. He is willing to endure intense physical pain, emotional turmoil, and



Fig. 6: The Demon Back. Film still, BAKI THE GREAT RAITAI TOURNAMENT SAGA, Ep 8 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:19:33.

even temporary defeat in order to become stronger and achieve his ultimate objective. This is exemplified in his battle with Pickle, a prehistoric man who is virtually invincible. Despite being severely injured, Baki continues to fight and eventually finds a way to defeat Pickle through sheer force of will. Baki's personality is also shaped by his upbringing, which was marked by physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father. This abuse is a key factor in Baki's motivation to become stronger, as well as in his complex relationship with Yujiro. Despite hating his father for the pain he inflicted on him and his mother, Baki also recognizes that his father's strength and ruthlessness are necessary traits for a fighter. This duality is reflected in Baki's own fighting style, which combines raw power with calculated strategy.

## The Demon Back

In the Baki series, the concept of the demon back plays a significant role in the characterization of several key characters (fig. 6). The demon back is a term used to describe the ridge of muscle and bone that runs down the back of a highly skilled fighter, giving the fighter an almost supernatural appearance. According to traditional Japanese beliefs, the back is the source of a person's power, and a well-developed demon back is a sign of exceptional physical ability.<sup>21</sup> This concept is reflected in the Baki series through the character of Yujiro Hanma, who is known to have the most prominent and well-developed demon back among all the characters. Yujiro's demon

21. See Reid 1991 for the concept of hara and the importance of the back in traditional training.

back is so powerful that it is capable of deflecting bullets and other threats, making him almost invincible in combat. The demon back also serves as a symbol of Yujiro's immense strength and fighting prowess. However, the demon back is not limited to Yujiro alone. Other characters in the series, such as Baki Hanma and his grandfather, have also been shown to possess well-developed demon backs, indicating their exceptional physical abilities and fighting skills. The demon back can be seen as a symbol of the character's inner strength and resilience. It represents their unwavering commitment to training and self-improvement and their willingness to endure intense physical and mental challenges in pursuit of their goals.

## The Bodhisattva Fist

*Bodhisattva* is a term used in Buddhism to refer to a person who has attained a high level of spiritual realization and has dedicated themselves to helping others achieve enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> The word *bodhisattva* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *bodhi*, meaning *enlightenment*, and *sattva*, meaning *being* or *existence*.<sup>23</sup> Together, they denote someone who is on the path to enlightenment and has committed themselves to aid others in their spiritual journeys.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of the bodhisattva is particularly important, as it emphasizes the altruistic ideal of seeking enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Bodhisattvas are spiritual leaders who embody compassion, wisdom, and the qualities of a true spiritual guide. They are viewed as having transcended the cycle of birth and death, and instead of seeking personal liberation they choose to remain in the world to help others achieve enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are often depicted in Buddhist art and literature as figures of great beauty, grace, and compassion. They may be shown wearing elegant robes and carrying a variety of symbolic objects, such as lotus flowers, jewels, and swords. The most famous bodhisattva is Avalokiteshvara, who is revered in both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism as the embodiment of compassion.

Doppo Orochi had a vivid dream in which he discovered the first form used by babies in the palms of their hands and realized it embodied the perfection of a punch. This vision, which resembled a Buddhist chant, sparked

22 See Chodron 2007.

23 See Leighton 2012.

Doppo's quest to uncover the origins of this ancient knowledge. Ultimately, he discovered the Bodhisattva Fist, a martial art founded on Buddhist principles of compassion and enlightenment. By mastering this art, Doppo achieved his goal of perfecting the punch and successfully delivered a fatal blow to Goki Shibukawa.

## Reflection, Refraction, and Subversion

Reflection, refraction, and subversion are important concepts in the Baki series, seen particularly in relation to its characters. Baki himself can be understood as a reflection of raging testosterone, with his intense drive to be the strongest and his constant pursuit of challenges and battles. His journey to become the strongest martial artist reflects the idea that physical strength and power are highly valued in many cultures, particularly those with a strong emphasis on martial arts. Similarly, all the martial artists who have taught Baki can be seen as forms of the old wise man archetype. In many cultures, martial arts are seen as a form of wisdom where the master-student relationship is highly respected. Baki's journey to learn from various martial arts masters is indicative of this idea, as well as of the philosophy of "learn all that is useful, disregard the useless". The Baki series also disrupts some traditional Asian characters, such as Genji in the novel *A Tale of Genji* and Jia Baoyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.<sup>24</sup> While these characters are often portrayed with feminine features, Baki subverts these ideas by portraying its characters in a hypermasculine manner. However, amidst the brute strength and fighting skills, there are still elements of femininity. For example, Baki is shown to be in touch with his emotions and often engages in introspection and self-reflection. He is also portrayed as having strong empathy and compassion with others, particularly those who are weaker or less fortunate than he is. This can be seen in his interactions with characters such as Kozue Matsumoto, whom he cares for deeply, even going as far as to risk his life to protect her. Furthermore, Baki's physical appearance also exhibits feminine features. His facial features are relatively soft and delicate, with large eyes and a small nose. His hair is also styled in a manner that can

24 "Male characters with feminine traits" is a common theme in Japanese and Chinese literature, such as Genji in *The Tale of Genji* and Jia Baoyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a part of the long tradition of androgynous beauty in both cultures.

be considered more effeminate than masculine, with long, flowing locks that often fall in his face during fights. The inclusion of feminine elements in Baki's character does not diminish his masculinity or physical strength in any way. Instead, it adds a layer of complexity and depth to his character, making him more relatable and well-rounded. Baki's incorporation of feminine traits serves as a reminder that strength and power can coexist with empathy and emotional intelligence. Finally, Yujiro, Baki's father, upends the benevolent father archetype. In many traditional stories, the father is a figure of authority and wisdom who guides his children along the right path. However, in the Baki series, Yujiro is portrayed as a brutal and violent figure who is more interested in his own power and status than in his son's well-being. This subversion reflects changing attitudes towards authority figures and the traditional family structure in contemporary society.

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