

The Contemporary Japanese View of Life and Death as Seen through the Depictions of Reincarnation in Another World (Isekai Tensei) Anime

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ABSTRACT: The study discusses the Japanese view of life and death as seen in Isekai reincarnation anime. Isekai anime can be divided into two further categories, Isekai anime and Isekai reincarnation anime. Both genres are set in the world of swords and magic. However, the difference between them is how the protagonists are reincarnated into another world. The author conducted research how they were reincarnated into another world. It can be divided into five categories depending on the circumstances and means of reincarnation. Of these, the author focused on the means of reincarnation

after the deaths of the protagonists in this world. The concept of reincarnation in Isekai anime may appear similar to that of Buddhism (karma and saṃsāra). However, Buddhism has a negative view about reincarnation because Buddha tried to transcend reincarnation which was a traditional dominant thought in Indian society at that time. In Isekai reincarnation anime, the protagonists are reincarnated in another world in which they gain magical powers and talents and can realize the unfulfilled dreams of their previous lives. We can see that this depictions of reincarnation in positive.

KEYWORDS:

Isekai anime, reincarnation, Rokudo Rinne, samsara, Japanese anime, anime and religion, escapism

INTRODUCTION

Japanese anime has long been gaining popularity around the world. In recent years, the genre of “Isekai (in English, “another world” or “a different world”) anime” has emerged, and the term “Isekai” has already become commonplace among otaku, such as in the overseas otaku term “get isekaied.”¹ Also, in the academic field, we will find many articles discussing Isekai anime (or manga and Japanese young adult novels, referred to as “light novels”) written by foreign researchers, rather than Japanese-language articles.² This is a good indication that people outside Japan are paying more attention to the “Isekai” genre than the Japanese themselves.

However, even for Japanese people, they don’t know clearly what Isekai anime is. A closer look at “Isekai anime” reveals that by its content, it can be divided into two categories. One is stories set in the “world of swords and magic,” and classified as a genre of fantasy. The other is stories in which people from this world reincarnate (transfer) into the “world of swords and magic” and face various ordeals or enjoy life in another world. In this study, the author will refer to the latter anime as “Isekai Reincarnation Anime.”³ Further research of this genre reveals that it can be divided into three main categories according to how the protagonist reincarnates into another world.⁴

1. Summoned by someone in another world.
2. Reincarnation in a different world after death in this world.
3. Transference to the game world during or after playing a game.

According to Akiko Komura (2023), the most prominent manner of the protagonist’s reincarnation is by being summoned by a person/persons in another world. Reincarnation in another world after the protagonist’s death in this world is also often depicted.⁵ However, one question arises here.

¹ The word means “to be reborn or reincarnated in another world,” and an Internet search shows that it is already being used on many overseas sites and social networking.

² When we have searched the academic articles database about Isekai anime at the internet site of Google Scholar, JSTOR and so on, we could find some articles about the topic written by foreign researchers. For example, PRICE, P. S. A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga. In *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, 2021, Vol. 2, pp. 57–91. [online]. [cit. 16 March 2023]. Available at: <https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/jams/article/view/808/>, etc.

³ As far as the results of the Internet search and the descriptions on social networking are concerned, anime related to another world are currently described as a genre of “Isekai Anime” or “Isekai Fantasy.” Therefore, the classification of the genre depends on the subjectivity of the person who describes it. In this paper, in order to eliminate such confusion, the author uses the term “Isekai Anime” for those that are named “Isekai”, and “Isekai Tensei Anime (Different World Reincarnation Anime)” for anime in which the protagonists are reincarnated in a different world or are summoned to another world.

⁴ KOMURA, A. Japanese View of Life and Death Seen in Different World Reincarnation Anime. In *Contemporary Religious Perspectives: Spirituality at a Turning Point in History*. (Ed. Contemporary Study Group / K. Sanematsu). Tokyo : Sanseisha. 2023, p. 341–344.

⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

For the Japanese, the concepts of “Isekai” and “Reincarnation” are not ideas that originated in Japanese subcultures such as manga or anime, but are Japanese religious traditions. First, in Japanese culture, “another world/a different world (他界 Takai, in Japanese)” is a traditional religious concept. For example, in Shintoism, the traditional Japanese religion, another world is “Yomi-no-Kuni (Underworld).” In folk beliefs, there is a world called “常世 (Tokoyo)” or “Takai,” which appears in the folk legend, “(浦島太郎 Urashima Tarō),” and means the eternal world beyond the sea and mountains. There is also a belief in another world (他界信仰 Takai Shinkō) in which the spirits of ancestors stay and from where they return to their descendants during the Bon festival (around the middle of August).

In Buddhism, there is the concept of the endless cycle of transmigration in the six posthumous worlds (六道輪廻 Rokudō Rinne). This is a very common religious concept that is familiar to the Japanese, who are traditionally Buddhist.

Is it possible to say that depictions in which the protagonists are reincarnated in another world after their deaths are based on this traditional Buddhist view of life and death? Or, does Isekai reincarnation anime create a unique and new concept of reincarnation as a belief of modern Japanese people? Needless to say, the reincarnation depicted in anime is completely different from the Buddhist concept of the endless cycle of transmigration in the six posthumous worlds. In many cases, a simplified concept of reincarnation is co-opted from traditional religions simply to enrich the storyline. However, as will be explained later, there are some anime that actually depict the concept of reincarnation expressed in the above-mentioned traditions.

In this study, the author will analyze the concept of reincarnation in anime about reincarnation, focusing on how people are reincarnated in another world and how they live in the reincarnated world. Then, by comparing the concept of Isekai reincarnation anime with the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, this study will investigate whether Isekai reincarnation anime represents a unique religious view of reincarnation by contemporary Japanese people.

ABOUT PRIOR RESEARCH

As mentioned above, there have been a variety of studies about Isekai anime published abroad. However, the author is not aware of any articles which discuss the relationship between anime and the Japanese view of religion, and this might be a topic of future research. If the research area is extended beyond the genre of Isekai anime to all genres in Japanese anime, several articles can be found. In particular, many of them are written about specific anime. For example, an academic article takes up religiosity in the film *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki.⁶ However, it cannot be said that the articles that focus on a specific anime reveal the relationship between Japanese religious views or concepts, and anime. This is because, by focusing on a specific anime, they are merely describing the religious views of the anime’s director or author. In recent years, there have been quite a few

6 MASAKI, A. *Spiritual World of Sen and Chihiro*. Tokyo : Shunju-sha, 2009.

articles that discuss anime and religion in relative terms.⁷ However, the discussion of Isekai anime, which will be discussed in more detail below, will be studied and many articles will be published in the future due to the fact that Isekai anime has rapidly become popular since the 2010s, and various depictions of Isekai anime are still being produced today. Therefore, this paper can be said to be a pioneer in terms of discussing the Japanese view of religion as seen in Isekai anime.

There are a few studies on the means of reincarnation in Isekai anime. For example, Paul S. Price (2020) also investigates the means of reincarnation in another world. Similarly, Akiko Komura (2023) also analyses Isekai reincarnation anime that aired on TV from the 1990s through the spring season (April to June) of 2022.

Furthermore, a few master's theses have mentioned escapism from the reality of Japanese society based on the idea of the connection between Japanese social issues and Isekai genre, in particular, Japan's suicide rate with Isekai reincarnation anime. For example, Curtis Lu (2020) mentions that Japan's current suicide rate has been decreasing but "the number of those under 20 who took their lives rose," also mentions that "the target demographic of most Japanese anime, manga, and light novels is aimed at young adults."⁸ It is not entirely accurate. Because we can say that middle-aged and older Japanese enjoy watching anime or reading manga and light novels rather than young adults.⁹

The causal relationship between Japan's suicide rate and Isekai reincarnation anime has not been clearly proven. If we mention Isekai reincarnation anime connected with escapism from the real Japanese society, it is necessary to first understand the Japanese idea of life and death.

PURPOSE AND FLOW OF THIS STUDY

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study is to examine whether or not the depiction of the protagonists' reincarnation into another world after their death in this world is based on the traditional Japanese view of life and death, such as the belief in another world and reincarnation. For this purpose, this paper will first examine what the characteristics of "Isekai reincarnation anime" are. Then the author will examine how the protagonists in Isekai anime are reincarnated into another world, have adventures in that world, and live their daily lives.

In writing this paper, based on Akiko Komura (2023), the author will also analyze and discuss Isekai reincarnation anime which aired on Japanese TV from the 1980s

⁷ PARK, K. Anime and Religion: Landscape, Identity and Spirituality. In *Contemporary Religions 2008*. (Ed. International Institute for Religion Studies). Tokyo : Akiyama-Shoten, 2009, pp. 143–167, and KOMURA, A. Anime and Religion: Thinking about Japanese Spirituality. In *The Journal of Applied Sociology*, 2022, Vol. 64, pp.137–146, etc.

⁸ LU, C. *The Darker Sides of the Isekai Genre: An Examination of the Power of Anime and Manga*. USF Scholarship: a digital repository of The University of San Francisco. 2020. [online]. [cit. 20. August 2023]. Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2190&context=capstone>, p. 28.

⁹ e.g., IIDA, I. Young people are shifting away from light novels before adults know it ...! (大人が知らない間に「若者のライトノベル離れ」が起きていた...!), *Gendai Business* (現代ビジネス), Distributed on November 21, 2020. [cit. 20 August 2023]. Available at: <https://gendai.media/articles/-/77046?imp=0>, etc.

to the winter season of January to March 2023.¹⁰ The author will also discuss Isekai reincarnation anime from a new perspective, that of comparison with reincarnation in Buddhism.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ISEKAI REINCARNATION ANIME

First of all, the author mentions the characteristics of Isekai reincarnation anime. We can say that Isekai anime are stories of a world of swords and magic. In fact, if we watch some of those anime works that are categorized as belonging to the Isekai anime genre, we will find that the majority of the stories are set in a world of swords and magic. Also, many stories can be seen in which the protagonists are depicted as brave warriors or wise persons in another world, who fight their enemies such as dragons, devilish beings, and so on by using swords and magic.

In recent years, however, a close examination of the stories of Isekai anime that have been aired on TV in Japan and other media such as the Internet reveals that the means of transferring or being reincarnated into another world and the way of being or lifestyle there are to some extent regulated.¹¹ Therefore, we can further divide Isekai anime by the way they are depicted, and that is, the characteristic of Isekai reincarnation anime.

First, Isekai reincarnation anime are stories about how a person is transferred or reincarnated into another world. Because these stories are set in a different world, they have often been simply categorized as fantasy anime. However, in some Isekai anime, the story begins when the protagonists are transferred or reincarnated into another world, rather than being born and living there. Moreover, the means of transmigration (reincarnation) is not simply being summoned by someone in another world, but also being reincarnated into another world by a god or a god-like being upon the protagonist's death in this world. In addition, since some anime works are set up in such a way that a summoned individual cannot go back to this world, depending on one's point of view, a transfer to another world through a summons may also mean the death of the protagonists in this world. In other words, from the point of view of those who remain in this world, the protagonists will cease to exist, which indirectly means their death. In any case, works in which the protagonists are transferred or reincarnated into another world from which they can never return are defined as "Isekai reincarnation anime" for the sake of convenience in this paper.

In addition, the protagonists are reincarnated into another world with retaining their identities and memories of this world. Also, they can bring with them personal

¹⁰ There are two reasons why the author chose to study televised Japanese anime in this research. One is the unification of the subject matter of the study. Needless to say, the Internet did not exist in the 1980's. The second reason is the difference in medium to watch Japanese anime. Currently, Japanese young people are watching Japanese anime on the Internet, because they do not have a TV set. However, when they watch anime on the Internet, they tend to prefer watching free sites such as TVer provided by Japanese TV stations rather than the paid sites such as Amazon Prime or Netflix. And most of the free sites are aired on TV.

¹¹ KOMURA, A. Japanese View of Life and Death Seen in Different World Reincarnation Anime. In *Contemporary Religious Perspectives: Spirituality at a Turning Point in History*, pp. 349–354.

belongings which they had in the previous world, such as a smartphone. In general idea of reincarnation, the dead person cannot retain their identities and memories of this world. Also, the dead person cannot bring his/her belongings which he/she used in our previous lives to another world.

THE FIRST STAGE OF THE HISTORY OF ISEKAI REINCARNATION ANIME BEFORE 2010

Before talking about the author's survey of Isekai reincarnation anime from 1980 to March 2023, the author would like to mention the first stage of the history of Isekai reincarnation anime. Because there hadn't been the word, "Isekai" before 2010. The term "Isekai" first appeared on the Internet website "Let's Become a Novelist (小説家になろう Shōsetsuka ni Narō)" around 2010.¹² However, if this term "Isekai" hadn't been appeared before 2010, we can see that there were some Isekai reincarnation anime aired on TV before this year.

According to Internet searches and social media postings, the first Isekai reincarnation anime appeared on TV is "Aura Battler Dunbine (聖戦士ダンバイン Seisenshi Danbain)" which aired in 1983. The protagonist of this anime work is transferred to another world together with his motorcycle on which he is riding just before transfer. Also, in "Shurato (天空戦記シュラト Tenkū Senki Shurato)" which was aired on TV from 1989 to 1990, the protagonist and his friend are transported by the god of harmony, Vishnu, into another world where other deities exist. This anime shows the world where Esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism are mixed.

Furthermore, the anime work "Escaflowne in the Sky (天空のエスカフローネ Tenkū no Esukafurōne)", which was produced after the Bubble economy collapsed (since around 1991) and aired in 1996, depicted the protagonist going to a different world and returning to this world.

Before 2010, in Isekai reincarnation anime works including the above-mentioned anime works, the protagonists are transferred into another world by summons by someone or a god/goddess in another world. And some protagonists can be back to this world. Therefore, we can say that the depictions of transition by summons and going back to this world are the characteristics of the first stage of Isekai reincarnation anime.

CASE STUDIES: ISEKAI REINCARNATION ANIME PRODUCTIONS UP TO MARCH 2023

As mentioned earlier, this paper expands the anime survey in Akiko Komura (2023) to include an analysis of anime works aired on Japanese TV between the 1980s and the winter season of March 2023. The author would like to begin this chapter by reviewing the yearly number of Isekai anime works aired during the above-mentioned period, and reconfirming how reincarnations in another world occur in the anime works.

Below, the table shows the number of Isekai reincarnation anime works aired on Japanese TV from the 1980s to the winter season of 2023. The total number of Isekai

12 Ibid., p. 340.

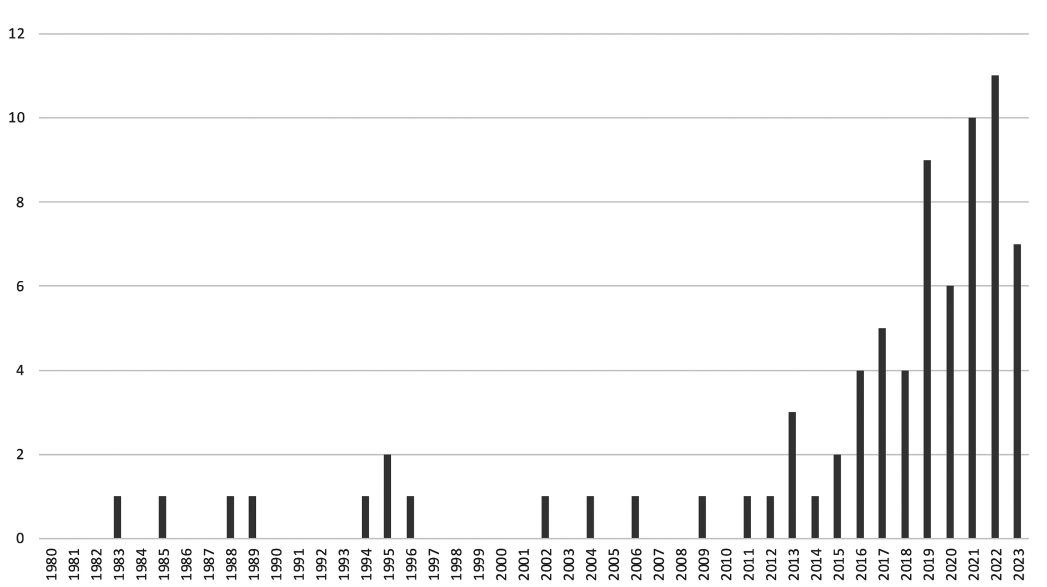


Figure 1: Number of Isekai reincarnation anime aired on TV from 1980 to March 2023
(Source: Akiko Komura)

reincarnation anime aired on Japanese TV during this period is 76 anime works. The table also shows that since around 2011, the number of Isekai reincarnation anime aired on TV has increased dramatically. The number of anime aired in 2020 dropped for a period of time, but this was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered the production of anime in such areas as voice recording. The year 2023 counts

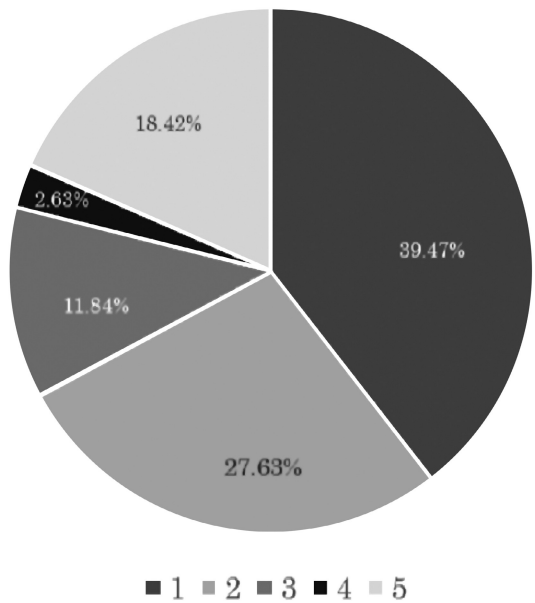


Figure 2: Circumstances and means of transition or reincarnation in another world in Isekai reincarnation anime aired from 1980 to March 2023 (Source: Akiko Komura)

anime aired from January to March during the winter season. By the author's own confirmation alone, seven anime works were aired during the same period. Therefore, the eventual number for 2023 broadcasts after the spring season (April to June) might be much higher than the previous year.

Figure 2 shows the results of classifying the means of transmigration and reincarnation into another world in Isekai anime aired during the same period as figure 1.

- 1: The protagonist is summoned by someone in another world.
- 2: The protagonist dies in this world and is reincarnated in another world to start over.
- 3: The protagonist is transferred into another world during or after playing a game.
- 4: Great historical figures are summoned to another world or reincarnated for some reason.
- 5: Other

Based on the analysis of 76 anime works, about 40% of protagonists are summoned by someone in another world, whereas about 28% are reincarnated by a god or god-like being after death in this world. The most important means of reincarnation in another world for the aim of this paper is No. 2: "The protagonist dies in this world and is reincarnated in another world to start over." The first anime work that depicts reincarnation after the death of the protagonist is, as far as the author knows, "KonoSuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World! (この素晴らしい世界に祝福を! Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!)" which aired from 2016.

Figure 3 shows how the protagonists in 21 works of Isekai reincarnation anime are depicted their life before and after reincarnation and their deaths. Based on this figure, the author would like to discuss how the 21 anime works depict the way of life and death in Isekai reincarnation anime.

LIFE BEFORE REINCARNATION

First, we will discuss in detail how the 21 anime works depict the way of life before reincarnation. There are several patterns in the depiction of the protagonists before their reincarnation. For example, protagonists are depicted as NEET or hikikomori (a shut-in) e.g., "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation (無職転生～異世界いっただら本気出す～ Mushoku Tensei: Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu)" and "KonoSuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!", those depicted as ordinary people spending peaceful daily lives, e.g., "That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime (転生したらスライムだった件 Tensei Shitara Suraimu Datta Ken)", those depicted as hard working persons in this world, e.g., "By the Grace of the Gods (神達に拾われた男 Kami-tachi ni Hirowareta Otoko)" and "Wise Man's Grandchild (賢者の孫 Kenja no Mago)", and those depicted as superior-talented persons beings in present world, e.g., "The Saga of Tanya the Evil (幼女戦記 Yōjo Senki)", "Knight's & Magic (ナイツ&マジック Naitsu ando Majikku)," and "The World's Finest Assassin Gets Reincarnated in Another World as an Aristocrat

Figure 3: 21 works of Isekai reincarnation anime which the protagonist dies in this world and is reincarnated in another world to start over (Source: Akiko Komura)

	Original Title	English Title	Year (Aired on TV)	Life before Reincarnation	Cause of the Protagonist's Death	Life in Another World (after Reincarnation)
1	この素晴らしい世界に祝福を!	KonoSuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!	2016	A hikikomori teenage boy	He died of shock. Because he thought he saved a high school girl who was about to be run over by a truck. But this accident was his misunderstanding.	He became an adventurer with unusually good fortune.
2	幼女戦記	The Saga of Tanya the Evil	2017	A competent elite businessman	While waiting for the train, a man pushed a protagonist off from the platform and he was run over by train.	Always fighting in battles
3	ナイツ&マジック	Knight's & Magic	2017	A robot geek and talented computer programmer	By a car accident	He produces a robot with using his knowledge and talent which he had acquired in his previous life.
4	異世界はスマートフォンとともに。	In Another World with My Smartphone	2017	A 15-year-old boy	The protagonist died due to a slight mistake by God.	Adventurer with omnipotent abilities
5	転生したらスライムだった件	That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime	2018	A company employee who was living a peaceful life.	The protagonist was killed by a random attacker while protecting his junior colleague.	He became a slime with various talents.
6	本好きの下剋上 司書になるためには手段を選んでいられません	Ascendance of a Bookworm: I'll do anything to become a librarian	2019	A female university student who got a job at a library	She was buried under many books and was dead.	She prayed to a god that she wants to be reborn and read many books. When she woke up, she was reborn in another world as a sick girl. However, the world in which she was reborn was a world where few people could read and write, and books were very expensive.

7	賢者の孫	Wise Man's Grandchild	2019	A company employee	He died in a car accident when he was crossing a red-lighted crosswalk without paying attention.	He was born in the family of a wise man. He was able to acquire high-level magic and sword skills.
8	私、能力は平均値でって言ったよね!	Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!	2019	An excellent high school girl	She was hit to protect an elementary school child who was about to be run over by a truck.	She wanted to make friends and have a normal life, so she requested a god that her abilities be average for the world. However, what God gave her was not an average ability as she thought of it, but a destructive ability.
9	乙女ゲームの破滅フラグしかない悪役令嬢に転生してしまった...	My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!	2020	A 17-year-old high school girl who was a video game otaku	She was late for school because she was playing games late at night and died in a car accident on her way to school.	She knows tragedy will happen to her in future, and she makes a lot of efforts to avoid it.
10	神達に拾われた男	By the Grace of the Gods	2020	A single company employee in his around 40 was always busy with his work.	He fell out of bed and hit his head on the floor.	Enjoying a slow living
11	無職転生〜異世界行ったら本気だす〜	Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation	2021	A 34-year-old hikikomori	While wandering streets, he was hit by a truck to save some high school students who were about to be run over it.	Studying magic spells and training himself not to make any mistakes in life again.
12	スライム倒して300年、知らないうちにレベルMAXになってました	I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed out My Level	2021	An ordinary 27-year-old office worker	She died from overwork (Karōshi).	Enjoying a slow living
13	世界最高の暗殺者、異世界貴族に転生する	The World's Finest Assassin Gets Reincarnated in Another World as an Aristocrat	2021	An older assassin	On his way back to Japan after completing his last assassination, he was assassinated by the organization he belonged to in order to make it look like a plane crash to keep the organizations' secrets.	He receives a request from a goddess he met after his death to kill a hero in another world. He became an assassin with omnipotent skills.

14	リアデイルの大 地にて	In the Land of Leadale	2022	A young girl whose body has been rendered incapable of living without life- support equipment.	Due to a power outage at the hospital, the life support system was shut down, and she was dead.	She became her avatar in the game of Leadale.
15	悪役令嬢なのであ りスボスを飼って みました	I'm the Villainess, So I'm Taming the Final Boss	2022	Not mentioned clearly	Not mentioned clearly, however the protagonist remembered playing the game about another world in the previous life.	She knows she will suffer tragedy in the future, and she makes a lot of efforts to avoid it.
16	転生したら剣で した	Reincarnated as a Sword	2022	Not mentioned clearly	By a car accident	Became a magical sword
17	陰の実力者になり たくて	The Eminence in Shadow	2022	A high school boy who wanted to be a powerful figure in the shadow of a leader or an organization.	He was hit by a truck on his way home from training to be a powerful figure in shadow.	Became a talented figure in the shadow of a group.
18	黒の召喚士	Black Summoner	2022	Not mentioned clearly	Not mentioned clearly	In exchange for all the memories of his previous life, he gained rare and powerful skills of magic and was reborn as a summoner.
19	異世界のんびり 農家	Farming Life in Another World	2023	A man who was fighting against an illness.	He died of an illness.	Became a farmer
20	最強陰陽師の異 世界転生記	The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World	2023	The most talented Yin- Yang master	He was betrayed by the Imperial Court of Japan and was dead.	Son of a count with talent of Yin - Yang magic, but his family members think that he is a failure due to unable to use magic.
21	転生王女と天才 令嬢の魔法革命	The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady	2023	Not mentioned clearly	Not mentioned clearly	Princess who has memories of her previous life.

(世界最高の暗殺者、異世界貴族に転生するSekai Saikō no Ansatsusha, Isekai Kizoku ni Tensei Suru),” etc. Of these 21 works, it can be said that most of them depict the actual social situations of modern Japanese people.

CAUSES OF THE PROTAGONISTS' DEATH

There are some regular patterns in the depiction of the death of the protagonist. Of the 21 anime works, 8 depict deaths due to car accidents. These are depictions in which the protagonist not only encounters a traffic accident himself/herself, but also sacrifices his/her own life in order to save others. Some of them depict helping elementary or high school students, e.g., “Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,” “Didn’t I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! (私、能力は平均値でって言ったよね! Watashi, Nōryoku wa Heikinchi dette Ittayone!),” etc. There are also a few anime works depicting the protagonist’s death from illness, e.g., “Farming Life in Another World (異世界のんびり農家 Isekai Nonbiri Nōka),” and from political battles, e.g., “The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World (最強陰陽師の異世界転生記 Saikyō Onmyō-ji no Isekai Tensei-ki).” Furthermore, there is a depiction of protagonist’s death by a god’s mistake, e.g., “In Another World with My Smartphone (異世界はスマートフォンとともに。 Isekai ha Sumātofon to Tomoni).”

LIFE AFTER REINCARNATION IN ANOTHER WORLD

Due to each storyline, it cannot be said that all anime works depict exactly the same way of life after reincarnation in another world. However, there is also a fixed flow or rule. First of all, reincarnated persons gain omnipotent magic power or special abilities in another world. In addition, they are able to make their best choices and good deeds in their lives easily so that they have vivid memories of their previous lives. In some Isekai reincarnation anime, male protagonists describe themselves by saying “My age is the same as the period in which I’ve never had a girlfriend.”¹³ It means that they were not able to realize their dreams in the previous life, especially dating a girlfriend, but they will come true in another world. Many female characters fall in love with male protagonists.

A few anime works depict that the protagonists enjoy living freely and with ease in another world, e.g., “I’ve Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed out My Level (スライム倒して300年、知らないうちにレベルMAXになってました Suraimu Taoshite 300nen, Shiranai Uchini Reberu Makkusu ni Nattemashita).” In this anime work, after reincarnation in another world, the protagonist practices a slow and leisurely life because she died from overwork in her previous life. In this depiction, we can say that the protagonist regrets the way she lived in the previous life and now lives a better life for herself in another world.

In general, Isekai (another world/a different world) is different from the real world, and the reincarnated person is depicted as a powerful or talented person whom everybody in another world admires. However, a closer look at those 21 anime works

13 e.g., “Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,” “That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime,” etc.

shows that no matter how talented protagonists are, they are repeatedly subjected to ordeals after their reincarnation in another world, then they finally achieve their dreams by overcoming ordeals. For example, “Ascendance of a Bookworm: I’ll do anything to become a librarian (本好きの下剋上～司書になるためには手段を選んでいられません～ Honzuki no Gekokuujō: Shisho ni Narutame niha Shudan wo Erande Iraremasen)” depicts the protagonist finding hope through maximum efforts to realize her dream.

ANALYSIS: THE DEATH OF A PROTAGONIST IN THIS WORLD

The death of a protagonist, as depicted in the above 21 works, is nothing more than the catalyst for the reincarnation into another world. Nevertheless, can it be regarded as a new modern Japanese idea of death?

First of all, not only human beings, but all living things must die. Therefore, every religion in the world teaches how to live one’s life in this world. This is the so-called “view of life and death.” If we analyze this view in Isekai reincarnation anime in detail, we might be able to see it as a brand-new view of life and death for contemporary Japanese people. In these 21 anime works, the depictions of life before reincarnation are very common depictions of the daily lives of people living in modern Japanese society. However, actual social problems, such as hikikomori (social withdrawal) due to bullying and death due to overworking or long working hours, are depicted in 21 anime works. We will take a closer look at the individual anime works.

First, “KonoSuba: God’s Blessing on This Wonderful World!” features a hikikomori teenage boy who died of shock. He thought that he died because he tried to save a high school girl who was about to be run over by a truck, but he misunderstood about this truck accident. In fact, the truck was a farm tractor which slowly approached the high school girl. He saw the truck accident in a vision. When he was dead, he met a goddess and she told him that the real reason for his death was not the accident itself but the shock which the vision of the accident gave him. After that, she asked him to choose to be reincarnated in another world or to go to heaven. He made a choice to be reincarnated in another world and he became an adventurer with an unusually good fortune.

Second, “Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation” features a 34-year-old Japanese man who becomes a shut-in after getting bullied at school and has never had a girlfriend. The death of his parents leads him to be kicked out of his home by his family. While wandering the streets, he saves some high school students who are about to be run over by a truck, but he dies. He is reborn as a new-born baby in a different world of swords and magic with vivid memories of his previous life, and he practices sword and magic himself as a daily routine, training to avoid repeating the mistakes of his previous life.

It is one of the characteristics of Isekai reincarnation anime that protagonists keep their previous identities with vivid memories of their previous lives even after they die and are reborn in the next life. By making use of the failures and experiences in the previous life, they can avoid failures in another world and turn into

successful people. This is especially true in the case of a story in which a female is reincarnated as a villainess in a game, e.g., “I’m the Villainess, So I’m Taming the Final Boss (悪役令嬢なのでラスボスを飼ってみました *Akuyaku Reijō Nanode Rasubosu wo Kattemimashita*),” “My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! (乙女ゲームの破滅フラグしかない悪役令嬢に転生してしまった... *Otome Gēmu no Hametsufuragu Shikanai Akuyaku Reijō ni Tensei Shiteshimatta...*)” and so on.

A further example related to the retention of memories of previous life is “That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime.” The protagonist of this anime work is a company employee who is living a peaceful life, but has never had a girlfriend. One day, he is stabbed to death by a random attacker while defending his colleague. In the process of dying, all the feelings and thoughts that come into his head, and the deeds he had left unfinished in this world are transformed into various talents, and he is finally reborn as a slime in the world of swords and magic.

In “By the Grace of the Gods,” we can see that the protagonist is working too hard and too much. In this world, the protagonist, a single company employee in his around 40, is always busy with his work and is constantly being scolded by his younger boss. One day, he falls out of bed and hits his head on the floor. As a result, he dies. After his death, he meets three gods. He learns of the cause of his death from the gods and complains to them because he is not convinced of the cause of his death. However, he is then reborn as an 8-year-old boy in another world by the gods, and unlike the way he lived in his previous life, he spends a leisurely and fulfilling life doing what he wants to do.

In “Didn’t I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!” the protagonist was unable to make friends because she was much too excellent compared to her classmates. She wanted to make friends and have a normal life. One day, she was hit by a car when she tried to protect an elementary school child who was about to be run over by the car. When she was dead, she requested a god that her ability be average in the next world. However, what the god gave her was not an average ability as she had expected, but a destructive ability.

Such desires can be thought of as the desires of people in contemporary Japanese society. Wishes that protagonists are unable to fulfil during their earthly life are heard by gods or near-gods. It is a characteristic of principal characters of Isekai reincarnation anime that they retain their identities of their previous lives even after being reincarnated into another world. As they face death, they regret their failures and wish to live a better life in the next world by attaining talents or experiences that will make them perfect persons.

What is of interest here is whether these descriptions of reincarnation into another world reflect the Japanese view of life and death which is rooted in Buddhism. This is because Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan, regards death as impurity and tends to avoid dealing with death. Therefore, as a general religious tradition in Japan, the concept of death is addressed mainly in Buddhism. Buddhism also has a concept of reincarnation called “*Rokudō Rinne*” (the endless cycle of reincarnation in the six worlds, so-called “*saṃsāra*”). Can it be said that reincarnation as depicted

in Isekai reincarnation reflects such religious concepts as *saṃsāra* in Buddhism? In order to answer this question, in the following sections, we will discuss the Rokudō Rinne, which is rooted in Japanese religious culture.

REINCARNATION IN BUDDHISM

Various Buddhist scholars have discussed the endless cycle of reincarnation in Buddhism. There are also various discussions among scholars from different viewpoints of various sects of Japanese Buddhism. However, this paper is concerned with the concept of reincarnation in Isekai reincarnation anime works, not with reincarnation in Buddhism, which has been the subject of much debate. Therefore, the author would like to introduce a commonly accepted Buddhist idea and discuss reincarnation in Isekai reincarnation anime based on this idea.

First, we will discuss reincarnation in Buddhism. Gautama Siddhartha, who became enlightened and became Buddha, attempted to transcend reincarnation, which was a traditional dominant thought in Indian society at that time. While human beings are alive, they always face suffering such as illness, aging, and death. Everything in this world changes. Nothing can maintain the same form forever. This is what is called the impermanence of all things. Such suffering and transience are faced over and over again in each reincarnation. Therefore, in order to escape *saṃsāra*, one must be liberated. Buddha founded Buddhism in order to save people from this endless cycle of *saṃsāra*, and taught liberation from *saṃsāra* and its means (so-called the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path). Buddhism views reincarnation negatively and does not promote which world one will go to in the next life. However, human beings are always harassed by their desires and their spirits are fragile. Man's words and deeds in this life affect the next life (so-called karma, 業 *Gō* in Japanese).¹⁴ This is further developed into the idea of "reincarnation of the six worlds," which is found in particular in Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, and so on.

The six worlds of reincarnation are heaven, the world of war/anger (Asura), the human world, the animal world, the hungry ghost (preta) world, and hell. It is our deeds in this life that determine the world in which we will be reborn in the next life. Even if one is able to be reborn in heaven, he or she is not still liberated from *saṃsāra*. Therefore, Buddhists must make efforts to be liberated in heaven as well. In *saṃsāra*, if one does not reach enlightenment in any of the worlds, he or she will be reborn in some other world. This is the basic concept of *saṃsāra*.

THE CONCEPT OF KARMA AND SAṂSĀRA BEING SHOWN IN ISEKAI REINCARNATION ANIME

In the 21 works of Isekai reincarnation anime, some seem to hold ideas similar to those of Buddhism. For example, some anime depict the sequence of what may

¹⁴ MINOWA, K. (ed). *Encyclopedia of Buddhism in Japan* (事典 日本の仏教). Tokyo : Yoshikawa-kōbunkan. 2014, p. 48, 507, 511. The influence which is brought about by karma is called "cause-and-effect (因果応報 *Inga-ōhō* in Japanese)."

be called “karma.” In the previous life, the protagonists died in a car accident in an attempt to save others. After reincarnation in another world, they spend a happy life or their dreams come true, because of their past self-sacrificing deeds. In some anime works, we can see that the protagonists met a god/goddess after their death and were told to be reincarnated in another world because of saving other lives. Also, if the protagonist had worked too hard for the company and died from over-work (*karōshi*), he/she was able to spend a leisurely life in another world. It shows that those who work hard in their lives receive a corresponding compensation after death. We can say that these stories are based on the idea of karma in Buddhism. As the author mentioned before, man’s words and deeds in this life affect the next life. The protagonists’ deeds such as saving other persons in the previous life bring them good fortunes in their next life. This is the basic idea of karma and we can see its depiction in some Isekai reincarnation anime works.¹⁵

However, regarding *saṃsāra*, it may be difficult to depict the idea of the six worlds of reincarnation in anime works. As far as the author knows, only one Isekai reincarnation anime work, “The Saga of Tanya the Evil” attempts to depict the idea of *saṃsāra*. In this anime work the protagonist is a competent elite businessman. However, because he is a thorough rationalist, he ruthlessly punishes his colleagues who fail in their work. The protagonist’s rationalistic attitude leads to his death. One day, he is pushed off a station platform by a man, whom the protagonist has fired, and is run over by a train entering the platform. Being confronted with death, he hears voices of the gods’ pronouncing judgment on his past deeds and on his ungodly heart. Even though he argues with the gods, his outrageous attitude toward others results in his being reincarnated as a woman in another world where fierce battles and wars continue. In addition, if we consider the world in which the protagonist is reincarnated, it can be compared to the world of war (*Asura*) in the Buddhist view of reincarnation, where one is always in the midst of battle, whether one wants to be or not.

As the author mentioned before, the reception of the idea of reincarnation in Buddhism is fundamentally negative. However, many Isekai reincarnation anime show reincarnations as a positive thing. The portrayal of pre-reincarnation protagonists depicted in anime is often negative, such as NEETs or socially withdrawn individuals. For example, in the aforementioned “*Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*,” the main character is a 34-year-old man who has been a long-term recluse since being bullied by his classmates at school. Although there are different perspectives on how to view such people, according to the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, one’s words and actions in this life will have an effect on the next life. Even if a person in this world withdraws as a result of being bullied by others, this person is more likely to be regarded as lazy and be dropped into an even worse world. Even if we take into account some anime protagonists who die while saving someone in a car accident

15 e.g., “That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime,” “Didn’t I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!”, “By the Grace of the Gods,” etc.

as if this atones for their sins in this life, their thoughts or desires in the next life are depicted as a priority rather than their words and actions in their previous life. In other words, when the characters are reincarnated in another world, they are given the maximum ability by gods and reborn as the strongest in another world. Instead of the actions in the previous life determining the world in which they will be reborn in the next life, they are simply portrayed as having a better life in the next. Such a depiction is also different from the reincarnation of the ancient Indian idea which Buddha wanted to overcome, because what is depicted here is not a simple reception of the idea of karma or saṃsāra but a more positive utilization of reincarnation.

There may be many more Isekai reincarnation anime produced in the future, having stories beginning with protagonists' deaths. And if the Japanese people continue liking such stories, we can say that reincarnation depicted in Isekai anime is regarded as the modern idea of reincarnation based on the ideas of Buddhism.

CONCLUSION

Isekai reincarnation anime are stories where the protagonists are reincarnated into another world of swords and magic. While they originally belonged to the fantasy genre, the term Isekai reincarnation anime began to be used as an original genre around 2010 and has been on the Internet since then.

Isekai reincarnation anime has some unique characteristics. First, the protagonists are reincarnated in another world either by summons by someone in another world or by the protagonists' deaths in this world. By being reincarnated in another world, the protagonists can become heroes/heroines in another world and fulfil wishes that cannot be fulfilled in their previous lives. And they can live the lives of their dreams. In addition, they can bring with them personal belongings which they had in the previous world, such as a smartphone.

A careful examination of these depictions of Isekai reincarnation anime reveals a characteristic depiction of reincarnation into another world through the death of the protagonist. The reason why the protagonists' deaths are depicted, not simply summons by someone in another world, is that reincarnation itself, even if it is seen in the anime, reflects the worldview of reincarnation in Buddhism. In some Isekai reincarnation anime, the protagonists sacrifice their own lives to save others from a car accident in this world, or died from overwork. The efforts of these protagonists in this life are rewarded in positive in the next life. In other words, if they make efforts and accumulate virtues in this life, they will receive good rewards in the next life. This is what Buddhism calls karma, the worldview of cause and effect.

As we discussed in the forgoing passages, reincarnation is viewed as a negative obstacle to transcendence in the original Buddhist teachings. By contrast, reincarnation in Isekai anime is viewed as a positive means to overcome the difficulties of life. This positive view of reincarnation is interpreted in a few academic papers as an escape from the reality of Japanese society. However, even before the appearance of the Isekai genre around 2010, Japanese society had always been inflicted with problems. In particular, after the collapse of the Bubble economy around 1991, Japanese

society was faced with some critical social problems, such as a sharp rise in the unemployment rate, young homeless people, etc. Furthermore, even before 2010, there were a kind of people called Otaku in Japan, who enjoyed watching anime, reading manga and light novels, and playing the TV or PC game. In fact, there were also some Isekai reincarnation anime aired on TV, although the number was much smaller than it is today.

It might mean that in earlier times, before 2010, people still had enough strength to fight back problems of life. It might also mean that Isekai anime was not yet considered as an escape from society back then. In addition, one significant difference between before 2010 and after 2010 is the existence of the Internet, which must have had an enormous impact upon the nature of Isekai anime. To clarify all these points, however, further research will be needed.

To conclude, in any event, the most important aspect of Isekai reincarnation anime is the fact that the reincarnation depicted in Isekai anime is viewed in positive while the reincarnation in the original Buddhism is viewed in negative. And for this reason, we can say, Isekai reincarnation anime reflects well the view of life and death held by Japanese people, who developed the original Buddhism to their practical needs. In this sense, the reincarnation described in Isekai anime can be considered as a modern version of reincarnation grown out of the traditional concept in Buddhism.

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