

LEARNING BUSHIDŌ FROM ABROAD: JAPANESE REACTIONS TO *THE LAST SAMURAI*

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"There's some cool sword-fighting. But still, it's junk."

– Stephen Hunter, *Washington Post*

"I was crying a lot throughout the movie. That was not a surface feeling, but rather a deep-seated feeling that came from me as a Japanese."

– skaskaclub88, *Yahoo!Japan* reviewer

ABSTRACT

*Hollywood, struck by a case of Japan "fever" in the early 21st century, churned out a crop of Japan-oriented films such as *Lost in Translation* [Coppola 2003], *Kill Bill Vol. 2* [Tarantino 2004], *Memoirs of a Geisha* [Marshall 2005] and *Letters from Iwo Jima* [Eastwood 2006]. But among all these, *The Last Samurai* [Zwick 2003] received the most positive Japanese audience reaction. This film, about an ex-Civil War American soldier who takes up arms to fight with the last of the samurai, played to mixed reviews in the U.S. but enjoyed a wildly popular reception in Japan. Judging from Japanese online discussion posts and media articles, many Japanese audiences read the film differently from the American critics. Why and what do these reviews tell us about Japan in the beginning of the 21st century? By being a foreign film, *The Last Samurai* allowed Japanese audiences to celebrate the nationalist messages taboo in a domestically produced film.*

Keywords: *The Last Samurai*, American Japan influence in motion pictures, mass media Japan audiences, bushido postwar reinterpretations, mass media culture in Japan 21st century

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CRITICAL REACTION TO *THE LAST SAMURAI*

This paper will make use of print reviews along with extensive use of online discussion board postings to gauge the Japanese audience reactions to *The Last Samurai*. These reactions, posted on the *Yahoo!Japan* discussion board for movie reviews, were saved by the author back in 2004 on the hunch that they would be useful as future primary source materials. These posts will be used to bolster the argument that Japanese audiences accepted the film differently than American audiences. In the past, only respected reviewers and critics would be taken seriously as sources, but a growing body of scholars believes that online fan-generated sources such as blogs and bulletin boards are also indicative of the ranges of popular opinion. Examples can be seen in Kathleen Boler's study of discussion forums for *The Daily Show* (Boler 2008), or in *Into the Blogosphere*, an online collection of articles dealing with the use of blogs (Gurak et al. 2004).

On the surface, *The Last Samurai* seemed an unlikely candidate to win over Japanese audiences. The director, Edwin Zwick took liberties with historical facts, even by Hollywood standards. This film was remotely based on the real life of Saigō Takamori who had led a samurai rebellion against the nascent Meiji government in 1877. Nathan Algren, played by Tom Cruise, was a former U.S. soldier sent to Japan to train a modern army. Algren is captured by samurai rebels and brought to a remote samurai village where he finds out that Katsumoto, the rebel samurai leader played by Watanabe Ken, is leading a rebellion against corrupt Japanese officials. Through his captivity, Algren gains a deep appreciation of the samurai lifestyle and decides to join Katsumoto to fight a valiant but doomed battle against the modern Japanese army. To even a casual student of Japanese history, this movie employed fictional characters, events and fictional wars that would seem to make this movie implausible.

American critical reaction to *The Last Samurai* was mixed. Some reviewers saw a flawed movie with good intentions; for example, Richard Schickel of *Time* praised the movie's romanticised theme of samurai fighting to protect their pre-modern values. Other critics saw the movie as a part of a "white male saves a non-white world" genre, as seen in *Dances with Wolves* [Costner 1990], in which Kevin Costner stars as a white American soldier who takes up residence with Native Americans and defends them from the American army. Stephen Hunter, in a scathing review in the *Washington Post*, pointed out that *The Last Samurai* was just *Dances with Wolves* set in late 19th century Japan with samurai playing the role of Native Americans (Hunter 2003). For many American critics, the movie's analogy of the samurai with the Native Americans seemed too

forced and sentimental. If American critics like Hunter did not like this flawed analogy, then how would Japanese audiences and critics react to this film?

In contrast, the reaction to the film within Japan was mostly positive. There, *The Last Samurai* opened on 6 December 2003 and was met with high box-office returns and favourable reviews. For example, the film grossed USD111,127,263 in the American market (24.3% of its total revenue), and was ranked 20th in the U.S. box-office movies list. In Japan, the movie grossed USD119,268,595, which surpassed the U.S. figures. This movie was the second most popular movie in Japan in 2003, based on box office sales.¹ Critics of the film magazine *Kinema Junpō* listed *The Last Samurai* as the fifth best foreign film of 2003, while their readers voted it the second best foreign film of the year, beating out blockbusters such as *Chicago* [Marshall 2002] and *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* [Jackson 2002] (*Kinema Junpō* 2004).

While *The Last Samurai* elicited a variety of critical and popular responses from admiration to simple indifference, one of the most common reactions of both critics and popular reviewers was one of tears. For example, Ochi Michiō, writing in the film magazine *Kinema Junpō*, seemed profoundly moved: "What's surprising about this movie is how even one week after watching a preview screening, scenes from the movie keep playing in my mind and continue to be alive. Moreover, my tears start to pour out when I think of them" (Ochi 2003: 35). In addition, many Japanese-language members posted similar reactions on the *Yahoo!Japan* discussion board. A user, *Joker6818* noted that he could not stop crying during the last hour of the movie. Another reviewer, *nf7to0268* noted that the audience could not move after the film was over because they were too emotionally drained from crying.

The Last Samurai elicited strong emotions from Japanese audience despite its historical errors and latent ideology of American supremacy because this film spoke to Japanese undergoing economic and social change. The following pages will show how Japanese reinterpreted *The Last Samurai* into a nationalist ode to Japanese values.

¹ All office figures were gathered from www.boxofficemojo.com

THE LAST SAMURAI AS AN ALLEGORY ABOUT AMERICAN INFLUENCE

The Last Samurai tapped into the growing anti-American sentiment exacerbated by what many Japanese considered to be American bullying. Japanese audiences identified this as an "American" film and therefore feelings about the U.S. came to the surface in their reviews. But it would be a mistake to see this film as simply a product of "Hollywood" as *The Last Samurai* was a multi-national collaboration, shot at various locations throughout the world, and featured a multinational cast: American actors like Tom Cruise and Londoner Timothy Spall alongside Japanese celebrities such as martial arts superstar Sanada Hiroyuki.

Despite the multinational nature of this film production, Japanese audiences identified the themes of *The Last Samurai* with the United States. This anti-Americanism in Japan revealed the Japanese audience's ambivalent relationship with the U.S., which was comprised of a mixture of fear and longing. As Yoshimi Shunya points out, after the war, the U.S. was considered an overwhelming figure of authority, especially with the large number of bases and soldiers on Japanese soil. But with the passage of time and decrease in the numbers of American troops, "America-the-occupier" ceased to be part of most people's everyday experience, and so the image of America became sanitised through television. Consequently, the Japanese view of America became less direct, and more mediated and confined to images (Shunya 2003: 443–444).

Watanabe Yasushi, in his article on anti-Americanism in Japan, noted that by the mid 1990s to early 2000s, the U.S. was perceived to be a bully that expanded its power through money, mass media and military power (2008: 7–10). The American invasion of Iraq and subsequent demand that the Japanese government send military forces as a show of support angered many Japanese, who found this dispatch of Japanese Self Defense forces to be a direct violation of their constitution's Article 9, which renounced military force as an instrument of foreign policy. It is in this context of a perceived American bullying over Iraq, that Japanese audiences flocked to the *Last Samurai* to enjoy what they considered its anti-American message. As one post, under the name *saka_kun_jr* suggested, this was a Hollywood movie aimed at Americans, and so Japan in this movie represented Iraq or other developing nations. According to this post, the film cautioned against America intervening in other nations' affairs. Other viewers also interpreted the movie as a denunciation of the invasion of Iraq. For example, a reviewer in the *Asahi Shimbun* also noted the parallels between the samurai rebels and Iraq insurgents, seeing the rebel leader Katsumoto as someone who

threw away the lives of his men in a reckless suicide attacks while fighting fellow Japanese (Wakamiya 17). Thus, *The Last Samurai* could be read as a criticism of U.S. policy in Iraq. In his mind, both film samurai and Iraq insurgents were using the same tactics and fighting for the same anti-Western causes.

A NATIONALIST MOVIE MADE BY FOREIGNERS

The positive reception to *The Last Samurai* was also a product of the rise in Japanese popular nationalism. In the decade prior to the film's release, voices in the popular media began to question the notion of Japan's Pacific War (as WWII is commonly called) as a war of aggression. For example, the comics of Kobayashi Yoshinori, who publicly defended the war as a just war, became popular among some Japanese readers (Sakamoto 2008). This nationalistic movement had also grown within Japanese academia. Conservative historians, led by historian Kanji Nishiō of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, promoted a new history textbook that critics accused of whitewashing Japan's wartime atrocities but supporters said was needed to make young Japanese proud of their nation (Masalski 2003). Even though the vast majority of Japanese schools did not adopt textbook, South Korean and Chinese governments lodged strong protests and citizens took to the streets in an anti-Japanese frenzy. To many Japanese, it seemed that Japan would always be the villain of Asia. Therefore, many audience members watched the *Last Samurai* as a foreign movie that reminded them that not all people outside Japan saw their past in a negative light.

Many Japanese feel certain ambivalence to being identified as a nationalist out of fear of being associated with organised crime and gangsters. Viewers of the *Last Samurai*, however, could express these nationalistic sentiments because this was a foreign-made movie identified as an American production. As Motoko Rich (2004) points out in a *New York Times* article,

Counterintuitively, Mr. Zwick's lack of native familiarity with Japanese culture might have helped the film's reception in that country. "What if a Japanese contemporary director had made it?" wrote Midori Nakano in *The Sunday Mainichi*, a weekly magazine. "Right away, people would start

to question the director's political intention and ideological stance" (11 par).

For many Japanese, right-wing nationalism is associated with *uyoku*, ultra-nationalists (with underworld connections) who ride about in large sound trucks blaring loud patriotic music in an attempt to intimidate people. Yet, this movie could express nationalist sentiments that reconfirmed for some Japanese a sense of their national pride. For example, on the *Yahoo!movies* bulletin board, a reviewer named *kouyudamashi*, described his renewed pride in being Japanese: "Yes, I can say I feel more proud of being Japanese than ever [...]. There are still the strong feelings such as honour, pride and a lot of respect in my head." So for some Japanese, *The Last Samurai* made them proud to be Japanese again.

But why had some Japanese eagerly taken to this portrayal of their values in an overseas Hollywood movie? One could argue that a long process of over-internationalisation had increasingly blurred the boundaries of Japanese identity. The Japanese people, like most of Asia, had always grappled with dealing with outside influences, especially in the 20th century. But alongside this growing internationalisation was a crosscurrent of nationalism, against which some Japanese asked questions such as who they were, or how they could return to their national roots. *The Last Samurai* can only be understood within the context of 21st century globalisation. For many Japanese, this movie reaffirmed that they had lost their core beliefs in the face of what they perceived as relentless Americanisation. For example, a 22 year old *Yahoo!Japan* bulletin board poster named *jami_nyon* wrote she felt ashamed that it took a foreign movie to reconfirm how one should not forget the good parts of Japan.

Also, one could say that to have a megastar like Tom Cruise speak Japanese and profess his love of Japan and finding peace through Japanese values was affirming to the viewer's national esteem. *The Last Samurai* would thus imply that Western influences were corrupting, while the old Japanese values, as learned by Tom Cruise's character, were pure. And symbolically, in the hearts of Japanese viewers, Tom Cruise became Japanese through his emotionally compelling performance. As Tamba Kiyoko, a 54-year-old housewife noted in the print magazine *Kinema Junpō*, "Set against the eloquence of Watanabe Ken, is Cruise's silence. [...] His Japanism (*jyapanizumu*)—Japanese-style expression, and being completely at ease in Japanese clothes and armor—tickles the hearts of Japanese" (Tamba). Whether or not lack of speaking is a Japanese method of acting is beside the point. The key point is that Cruise was domesticated into a Japanese actor in the eyes of this viewer. And with Japanese actors

sharing the screen with Cruise, *The Last Samurai* contained a message that Japanese still had a place in this globalised world culture and not only could they compete with the world's best, but also the world's best could become part of Japan. Indeed, the movie's Japanese advertising campaign reinforced this message. While the American posters featured a Tom Cruise in samurai battle armour, the Japanese posters featured an armoured Tom Cruise standing next to the Japanese actors Watanabe Ken, Hiroyuki Sanada and Koyuki.

THE LAST SAMURAI AND NATIONAL PRIDE THROUGH AN IMAGINED PAST

As a film about honour and identity in the face of wrenching social and economic change, *The Last Samurai* spoke to Japanese viewers who were experiencing uncertainties about their own economic system. The 21st century opened in Japan with the faltering of the economic system that had long churned out high-speed growth in post-war Japan. This system, based on pork barrel spending on infrastructure and those industries favoured by the government, helped to fund Japan's spectacular economic growth and most importantly, guarantee lifetime employment for elite college graduates. Thus, companies could run deficits, knowing that government money would prop them up during bad times. Although Japan's vaunted lifetime employment system only extended to about a third of the male workforce, this system remained the workforce ideal for workers and the gap in incomes between rich and poor seemed less than those in other industrialised countries.

However, rampant financial speculation and corruption led to the collapse of this system by the 1990s. Japan went into the "Lost Decade" in which the nation's economic growth stagnated and the government seemed unable to muster the will to enact substantial measures to reform the economy. New reforms intended to end the recession also led to growing economic inequality as the government stopped shoveling capital to money-losing companies and forced them to make painful restructuring cuts. A degree from a good college was no longer a guarantee of economic security, as the media told stories of college graduates who could only find part time jobs or temporary work with no job security. To Japan's younger generation, this seemed a cruel joke: They had honored their end of bargain by studying hard and doing well in school, but suddenly, with the rules now changed, they found that they could be fired at any time.

By the 21st century, Japan was still a wealthy country but faced an unknown future. Many equated this predicament with ruthless Americanisation—what they perceived to be a cutthroat economy accompanied by a growing wage gap. The media picked up on the theme of *kakusa shakai* (a society of disparity) as the gap between rich and poor and white-collar versus blue-collar increased. In this economic context, *The Last Samurai* offered viewers nostalgia for the past, which was seen as one of comfort and stability. Japanese viewers were attracted to this film's idealised version of the Samurai because in this time of economic change, Japanese looked to these warriors as the embodiment of so-called traditional values. In fact, the Japanese online reviewers surprisingly embraced this idealised image of the samurai because it touched in them stirrings of national pride. One review posted on *Yahoo!Japan's* bulletin board:

"Japanese should have a steadfast belief in being a little more proud to be Japanese. After seeing this movie, I felt that something stirred within me. I want to be a spiritually and physically strong man like the samurai. I will want to aim at that being strong in both the pen and the sword, living a simple but sturdy life, and to purify myself every day." (*real_gentleman_in_Tokyo*)

Like the post above, many Japanese viewers felt national pride through viewing the idealised Samurai heritage featured in *The Last Samurai*. The problem was that they were also parroting a modern 20th century interpretation of *Bushidō*, the supposed way of the samurai warrior. According to historian Karl Friday (2007), Japanese scarcely used the term "*Bushidō*" until the modern period, and there was little written discussion in pre-modern Japanese times as to what constituted the way of the warrior (2 par). In fact, the modern concept of *Bushidō* could be viewed as somewhat of an anachronism, popularised in 1898 by Nitobe Inazo in *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* and originally published in English to explain Japanese values to a Western audience. Inazo, a pacifist Quaker, did not write *Bushidō* to promote militarism. According to Minato Akiko (2003), Nitobe was proposing a set of values to guide the human heart (26 par).

Ironically, Nitobe, a pacifist, helped to re-popularise the idea of *Bushidō* as a moral foundation for Japanese, and this warrior code was propagated by the government through education, and by the mass media through movies and books as a national myth—to teach commoners the supposed militaristic values of the samurai. The idea of *Bushidō*, and its

reinterpretation (to fight to the death, which samurai did not do in the warrior days), became the basis for countless movies, and for the government's militaristic wartime propaganda justifying blind obedience to the emperor and suicides rather than surrender. After the war, Occupation authorities removed references to militarism in education, and even inserted Article 9 into the new Japanese constitution, which renounced war as an instrument of national policy. A growing number of Japanese, reacting to their experience of war, also helped to lead a pacifist movement that made publicly distasteful, any overt expression of the militaristic interpretation of *Bushidō* and ultra-nationalism. As we shall see in a subsequent section of this paper, the romanticisation of *Bushidō* continued on in samurai movies, and later in the 1960s onward, on television samurai period dramas (*jidaigeki*).

Of course, there were viewers who could not understand why so many people were proud to be Japanese after watching *The Last Samurai*. For example, one *Yahoo!Japan* poster, *ykr617* noted the WWII-era militaristic themes in this film:

"One cannot help but feel that the producers exploited the samurai spirit of Japan in order to affirm modern America's national policy. I want you to remember this. Until we lost World War II, about half of Japan truly believed that 'I will die for the sake of the emperor.' That is, for Japanese, a sad past that should make us feel ashamed" (*ykr617*).

This viewer understood the historical dangers of the movie's message, pointing out that slavish obedience to the emperor had led the Japanese government and people to a destructive war. She realised that the movie promoted militarism by romanticising blind obedience to the Emperor.

Yet, such opinions comprised the minority in Japanese audience reaction. For most viewers, the *Last Samurai* hit a nationalistic nerve, and it reawakened in many a pride in being Japanese. Many of the internet posters who liked this film were in their thirties, a part of the generation who grew up in a Japan noted for its prosperity and pacifism, in direct contrast to the economic, social and political struggles of their wartime and postwar recovery generation. As such, the viewers may have interpreted the movie as a self-critical condemnation of materialistic Japanese society that had forgotten its roots. For example, in a revealing quote, *erino1212* wrote:

"When I returned to my home, there were western curtains, a Western-style living room, and while on my western bed I felt that something was out of place. I want to find my inner essence and live that way. It was really good that I saw this movie" (*erino1212*).

Yet, this is strange, as Japan had started its Westernisation program back in the late 19th century. As such, this viewer was not part of a wrenching transition from Japanese-style to western-style homes nor was he part of the change from pre-modern lifestyles to a modern one. This reaction shows that films are about the time period in which they are produced and not about the time period in which they are set. The viewer was not thinking of the 19th century changes or wanting to go back to the samurai era when he wrote about feeling out of place while lying on a western style bed (which many Japanese, by the early 21st century, had slept in since childhood). This viewer was rather discussing the sense of unease he felt at the economic and social changes Japanese society faced at the beginning of the new millennium.

Therefore, *The Last Samurai* provided a message to Japanese viewers fearful of a social or economic breakdown. The imagined pre-modern Japan in this instance represented honour, loyalty, community, simplicity and bravery through an idealised representation of the samurai. Japanese audiences readily interpreted this flattering portrayal of Japan into one that offered them reassurance in an era of wrenching economic change. This Hollywood film offered what Edward Said (1978) would probably call "orientalist" representations of a romanticised and idealised samurai society, but one fundamentally different from Western "modernity" and doomed to die in the name of "progress." Ironically, this film's portrayal of samurai allowed Japanese to mourn what they felt they had lost in the lost decade of the 1990s. Japanese audiences took to this film's mythical Japanese past because they believed it portrayed what the Japanese had lost in the transition to a new economy which cast aside unwanted employees.

THE LAST SAMURAI AS AMERICAN JIDAIGEKI (PERIOD DRAMA)

Another reason for the Japanese reaction to this film was that these audiences watched *The Last Samurai* in the context of watching a *jidaigeki* ("period drama") or samurai genre drama with established conventions and motifs. According to Mark Schilling, these period dramas "are to Japan what the Western is to the United States: Repositories of national myths and cultural values" (1997: 135–138). Today, these dramas are seemed as old-fashioned, and may even hearken back to the nationalistic values of the wartime, which may turn off some audiences. Yet, by being a foreign-made film, Japanese could indulge themselves in the *jidaigeki* themes seen in *The Last Samurai*.

One of the final scenes showed how some Japanese audiences interpreted this film as an American-made *jidaigeki*. After the climactic battle, Algren barges in on a meeting where the young emperor is about to sign a treaty forced upon him by the Americans and greedy advisors. Hoping to stop this treaty, Algren prostrates himself before the Emperor. When the corrupt officials question his loyalty, Algren responds in true samurai fashion by offering to take his own life should the emperor doubt his loyalty. The Emperor, touched by this devotion, then gives a speech in English: "I have dreamed of a unified Japan, of a country strong and independent and modern. And now we have railroads and cannon, western clothing. But, we cannot forget who we are or where we come from." Then, the newly inspired Emperor Meiji, remembering his duties to his ancestors, refuses to sign the arms treaty, dismisses the Americans, and confiscates the properties of his corrupt government advisor. In other words, the young Emperor begins to rule Japan the way he wants to (and should) rule.

Non-Japanese critics found this last scene to be out of place and altered the tone of *The Last Samurai*. Roger Ebert, for instance, viewed it as a Hollywood style ending that "caves in to Hollywood requirements, and we feel the air going out of the picture" (2003). Yet, while many American reviewers thought the ending as cheap and contrived, Yoel Sano of *Asia Times Online*, commented on how the Emperor's speech spoke to Japanese contemporary audiences facing economic change. When speaking of Japan's acceptance of modern phenomena such as railways, the Emperor reminds audiences that "...the Japanese cannot forget where they came from. This is certainly true of Japan in 2003, where much of the struggle between the would-be reformers and the old guard may in fact reflect a deeper battle for Japan's soul and identity, rather than being based solely on economic structures and deregulation" (Sano 2003).

For Japanese audiences, this powerful scene hit a nerve and spoke to the contemporary struggle to assert Japan's domestic identity. A *Yahoo* poster named *best_fragrance*, self-identified as a 25-year-old male from Tokyo summarised this sentiment in his post under the heading "It's for today's spineless Japanese":

"I think that one should not forget the words of the Meiji Emperor in the end of the movie. Those words are the true meaning of the film [...]. Today, Japan is rampant with people who really lack morals, and this kind of movie is a good medicine for them" (*best_fragrance*).

This viewer found the Emperor's words to be something that all Japanese needed to take to heart. Yet, this was a strange final scene because most Japanese who know even a smattering of their history would have known the Meiji Emperor was a figurehead ruler and so this scene was at odds with what they learned in history classes. So why did many Japanese viewers find this scene to be the emotional climax in the film?

Rather than assuming that *The Last Samurai* led to the surfacing of a latent respect towards the Emperor, one needs to situate the content of the scene within the tradition of Japanese long-running television *jidaigeki* samurai shows like *Mitō Kōmon* [1969–present], *Toyama no Kinsan* [1970–1996] or *Abarenbō Shōgun* [1978–2008]. These shows typically present a high official (former vice-shogun Tokugawa Mitsukuni in *Mitō Kōmon*) living in disguise among the common people. By the end of each hour-long weekly episode, the official uncovers wrongdoing by high officials and reveals their true identity. In a moment of emotional climax, he pronounces a singular judgment that simultaneously protects the weak citizens in Japan and punishes the corrupt officials. For example, in *Mitō Kōmon*, the climax of each episode was when at the critical moment, Mitō's retainer would reveal Mitō Kōmon's official seal, causing the villains to prostrate themselves to the ground and receive legal punishment (Schilling 1997: 135–138). The final scene with the Emperor pronouncing judgment on the evil villains bore much similarity with the these *jidaigeki* television dramas.

At its core, *The Last Samurai* was an old period drama dressed up in Hollywood clothing. Motoko Rich (2004), of the *New York Times*, noted the incongruity of seeing these images, popularised by Japanese literature and film, return to the screen in "new American packaging" (9 par). Indeed, Zwick was recycling old Japanese themes of duty and loyalty, which had fallen out of favor in Japan during the peace and prosperity of the 1980s. He

had read stories of the samurai, such as Ivan Morris' *The Nobility of Failure* (1975) and had watched many old samurai dramas in preparation for this movie; however, ironically, it was the foreignness of the director which allowed Japanese audiences to react positively to the movie as Rich suggests:

Counterintuitively, Mr. Zwick's lack of native familiarity with Japanese culture might have helped the film's reception in that country. "What if a Japanese contemporary director had made it?" wrote Midori Nakano in *The Sunday Mainichi*, a weekly magazine. "Right away, people would start to question the director's political intention and ideological stance." (Rich 11 par).

Indeed, while many American reviewers saw the film as a Western similar to *Dances with Wolves*, Japanese saw this as a *jidaigeki* period piece (also known as "*chambara*" or sword fighting movies), more in the vein of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* [1954]. Todoroki Yukio of *Kinema Junpō* wrote, "This is a *jidaigeki* with the whiff of a western. This script could have come from Akira Kurosawa and this is an ode to a genre that has long since disappeared." (2004: 104). Zwick, however, had resurrected this genre in the guise of an American movie.

Likewise, the scene when the Meiji Emperor refuses to cooperate with the Americans reinforced for many viewers, the need for Japanese to reassert their national sovereignty. Arafuji Junko wrote of how the Meiji Emperor's willingness to stand up to the Americans contrasted with the weak Japanese politicians of today. He noted the parallels with Iraq, that when watching the young Meiji Emperor's refusal to buy weapons from the Americans, "You can't help compare him to today's Prime Minister who has dispatched the Self Defense Forces to please the Americans" (2004: 93). As such, many Japanese seemed to accept this idealised portrait of the emperor because it served as a critique of a perceived forced Americanisation of society. This movie provoked a moral judgment in the familiar genre of the *jidaigeki*, where the benevolent high official, in this case the Emperor, made society moral again.

WHO IS THE LAST SAMURAI?

Differing American and Japanese reactions to *The Last Samurai* can be explained through a consideration of context. Ebert asks the all-important question, "Which character is the 'last samurai': Katsumoto or Algren?" and contends that "A case can be made for either answer, which suggests the nature of their relationship" (18 par). Each case seems to fall across national lines, with American reviewers and audiences focusing on Algren and Japanese audiences focusing on Katsumoto.

On the one hand, American audiences, viewing *The Last Samurai* through the *Dances with Wolves* paradigm, focused on Tom Cruise as the last samurai. Much like how Costner's character carried on Native American traditions, audiences and critics saw Cruise carrying on the samurai tradition after the rest of the samurai rebels had been slain in battle. Many Japanese audiences, on the other hand, focused on Watanabe as the last samurai. A Japanese bulletin board posting under *vakara001* was perplexed that people outside Japan were so critical of this film.

"I looked at *Yahoo America*, and they said that the 'Last Samurai' was the white man Tom Cruise. But I wrote that it was strange for him to be the samurai. The 'Last Samurai' was Watanabe Ken right? I was shocked at the American opinion" (*vakara001*).

But what if the words "last samurai" meant plural, as in the whole army of samurai? If so, then with his death, comes the end of an era, and the end of samurai values. In a way, audiences were moved to tears during Katsumoto's death scene because they were watching the end of an idealised and imagined Japanese way of life. If Katsumoto and his fellow samurai were the last samurai, then their deaths represented the end of an era. The scene when the samurai make their final charge into modern weaponry was thus seen as one symbolising the close of the era where people cared about honor and loyalty. In this author's opinion, Japanese in the 21st century, far removed from the Meiji era, were also mourning the loss of their national identity and simpler way of life, as represented by the samurai. The death of the loyal, but now useless samurai, became an analogy for the loss of Japanese identity, the economic reforms and the end of the loyal salaryman worker. Algren, having received a sword from Katsumoto that read "I belong to the warrior in whom the old ways have joined the new," became a symbol of what the Japanese had to become if they were to survive in the

21st century—even more Americanised with a hint of Japaneseness to them. In the final scene, Algren, the sole survivor of the samurai, returns to the samurai village, but the samurai were gone. It would seem that, for many Japanese viewers, the film was so moving because it hit close to home; they too, like Algren, were the survivors who had seen a way of life vanish.

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