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Lessons of THE LAST SAMURAI

By Joan E. Ericson and Jim Matson

Samurai, among the most popular icons of Japanese history and culture, are often the subject of common myths or simplifications. Those of us who teach in the field of Japanese Studies confront these iconic images in the cultural baggage our students carry into the classroom, most recently from the lavish Tom Cruise vehicle *The Last Samurai*. Efforts to establish authenticity in this big-budget Hollywood production, with its elaborate sets and meticulously-filmed battle sequences on remote New Zealand locations, collide with an implausible tale of the American hero who goes “native” and survives to teach the Emperor about true Japanese values. But the film also immerses us in a sympathetic portrayal of cultural encounter and transformation, one that reflects many popular and appealing images of Japan.

For Japanese Studies, the problem of incorporating popular perceptions acquired through historical fiction is familiar territory. James Clavell's *Shogun* (1975) conveyed a great deal more detail about Japan in 1600 than can be absorbed in a single showing at the multiplex, and, to the surprise of many of their literary colleagues, historians weighing its merits in the teaching of early modern Japan generally found in its favor (Smith 1980). One of the strongest recommendations for *Shogun* was its opening a door for students to encounter more scholarly and critical accounts of early modern Japan. *The Last Samurai* offers similar opportunities to engage students, and to illustrate how popular perceptions provide points of departure for a more intelligent, critical appraisal of Japanese history and myths. These top ten lessons are not meant to offer a cinematic critique, but rather to identify areas where, as the film's director has admitted, “history sometimes took a backseat to drama” (Potier 2003:3), and to flag recent scholarship that aids in appraising mythic representations.

Still scene from the Fog Battle. ©2003 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.



1. IDENTITY POLITICS

Notably absent from the film was any reference to particular domains (*han*) that had served as the principal locus of samurai employment and identity under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), or to other affiliations to regions, towns, or lineages. The film skirts the issue of how samurai, led by coteries from the Chōshū and Satsuma *han*, had only recently (1868) restored the Emperor under the banner of *sonnō jōi* (revere the Emperor, expel the barbarian), and yet came to adopt what is often portrayed as modern (European) standards, including a state-authorized conception of a Japanese national identity. In a major recent study, Burns (2003:187–219) roots the early Meiji strategies for constructing a Japanese identity in the discourse of eighteenth-century nativists (*kokugaku*) who critiqued neo-Confucian Tokugawa orthodoxy. Burns traces how, through a complex sequence of intellectual lineages and appropriations from early modern debates, cultural affinities that celebrated things Japanese (often located in the language of ancient texts) came to be deployed to define Japan’s modern national culture; she explicitly sides with Prasenjit Duara in seeing “culturalism” (p. 224) as a sense of community that would significantly shape the construction of Japanese nationalism as something not simply reducible to a “modular appropriation” from the West.

2. ROMANTIC REBEL

The samurai rebellion led by Katsumoto (played by Ken Watanabe) is depicted as gloriously principled resistance to sordid commerce and rapacious modernity, aiming to restore the rights of samurai, especially following the humiliating ban (1876) on carrying swords and the mandatory cutting of the *chonmage* (top knot hair style). Katsumoto echoes the heroic figures fighting lost causes from Ivan Morris’s study, *The Nobility of Failure* (1975), emphasizing how sincerity (*makoto*) and purity of motive were preeminent Japanese values. Indeed the film’s director Ed Zwick reportedly modeled his story (Potiers 2003) on Morris’ account of Saigō Takamori, a founding oligarch of the Meiji restoration, who rebelled in 1877. However, the vast majority of samurai did not rebel, and it has long been noted (e.g., Smith 1961) how ready most samurai were to relinquish their privileges (and obligations). Saigō’s disillusionment with the clan-clique (*hanbatsu*) government was rooted in an earlier (1873) inter-elite policy dispute, specifically in the rejection of his call for an invasion of Korea (Yates 1995). His rebellion capped a series of samurai revolts (1874–77) that expressed ferocious opposition to specific government policies and, more generally, to the rapid restructuring and centralization of state authority, but they were not an attempt to return to status quo ante. In defeat, Saigō committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide), but he was posthumously rehabilitated and memorialized in a prominent statue in Tokyo’s Ueno Park. Although clad in kimono in the film



Statue of Saigō Takamori in Ueno Park, Tokyo.
Source: www.japan-guide.com/e/e3019.html

and in an even more informal summer *yukata* in his famous statue, Saigō always wore, even in rebellion, an Imperial Army uniform, and identified himself with the new institutional structures he had helped to create (Ravina 2004).

3. CODE OF THE WARRIOR

Bushidō, as this code is known, is depicted as driving “the last samurai” to train ceaselessly and to face death without flinching. However popular and enduring, this image of the samurai was largely the modern invention of Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), who was English-medium-educated in Japan and married to an American Quaker. His book, *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* (1905), written in English, in California, was widely heralded as an explanation for his country’s success in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. Far from invoking hallowed samurai ideals, Nitobe thought he was coining a new word with “bushidō” (Hurst 1990). Unbeknownst to Nitobe, the term had appeared much earlier in such works as an obscure early-eighteenth-century manifesto-cum-training manual *Hagakure* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (trans. Wilson 1979). Since the consolidation of power under the Tokugawa shogunate in the early seventeenth century, the vast majority of samurai, as retainers on stipends, had shifted to a status more akin to civil servants, living in castle towns, more often than not mired in debt to local merchants. The ideals of bushidō developed in a unified, pacified Japan as an expression of yearning for the “world we have lost.” Following Nitobe, many other Japanese literati would continue to invoke bushidō to explain Japanese triumphs on the battlefield or in business, or, like Mishima’s Yukio’s commentary on *Hagakure* (trans. Sparling 1977), to invoke it as emblematic of the Japanese spirit.

4. CULT OF THE SWORD

Noel Perrin’s (1979) account of samurai “giving up the gun” during the Tokugawa era has not been generally supported by Japanese historians (e.g., Totman 1980); what changed, in a unified and pacified country, was the need for constant innovation and wholesale deployment of firearms. The rejection of firearms by samurai in the film flies in the face of the widespread adoption of modern rifles and even cannons in virtually all military encounters since the early 1860s, including successive samurai rebellions of the 1870s. Swords would be used when they ran out of ammunition, but access to modern arms and armories was a major objective of most rebels. One notable exception was the *Shinpūren*, who, during a 1876 uprising in Kumamoto, used only swords and spears in keeping with their hatred of many widespread Western-inspired changes; their nighttime attack on the garrison slaughtered hundreds of soldiers who were caught by surprise, but they were thoroughly routed by modern weapons by the first light of day. Most samurai rebellions were fundamentally political in nature, fighting over which elite faction would exercise power and where (foreign incursions against Korea and Taiwan preoccupied the Imperial Council through much of the mid-1870s), not over whether to adopt a modern military, science, or technologies at breakneck speed.



Winter village scene. ©2003 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

5. ZEN COOL

The bucolic village setting as an open-air stage for samurai cultivation of their art—martial, meditative or decorative—with unmatched dedication and focus misleads, as most samurai had long since become urban habitués. A point that is largely lost in the movie is how well-educated samurai were expected to be in this era, more often writing reports than waging war. Moreover, practicing the arts, martial or otherwise, was a largely indoor endeavor, as was bathing (not under waterfalls) and meditation (no young boys sitting *zazen* in the snow). There are a number of places in the film that similarly misrepresent social conventions: samurai women in this period would have had much more elaborate hair-styles and language; they would typically reside with their husband's family; and samurai families would not eat communally from a common table, but each on their own separate trays—*ozen*—and women would usually eat separately, after the men (cf. Yamakawa 1992). By adopting contemporary conventions, the film suggests that samurai, at home in an unsullied serene environment, would interact like ordinary suburbanites with a clear sense of mission. There has long been an association in the West with the total concentration and commitment of samurai, honing skills as a warrior, even if only as a means to avoid military conflict, and zen (Suzuki 1959). But much less attention has been given to their shifting social milieu, and the relocation of samurai to cities during the Edo (Tokugawa shogunate) period. The cultivation of arts by samurai was typically an urban enterprise, a process that significantly contributed to the codification of cultural practices (tea and ikebana) that are considered emblematic of things Japanese.

6. VICTIMS OF MODERNIZATION

The embrace of the West, extending from institutional arrangements to sartorial standards, was indeed widespread and the costs of the process heavy. But these costs were borne largely by poor peasants shackled by a substantial land tax, rather than by samurai. Conscription—which allowed for widespread exemptions of privileged

groups—also weighed most heavily on the poor peasants who came to man the modern military ranks. The ethos of the samurai was consciously invoked in the soldier's code, emphasizing loyalty, obedience, frugality, honor, and respect for superiors, but this is best viewed simply as a method for autocratic authority to assert control. Even the program for compulsory education, with mandatory school fees and accompanying opportunity costs, bore more heavily on the rural poor. The reduction of samurai stipends and their eventual commutation into a lump-sum payment in government bonds (1871–76), calculated at different rates for different ranks, along with bonuses for those who fought for the Meiji Restoration, came as a blow to many poorer samurai. However, samurai (some six percent of the population) were already highly differentiated, so that while the poorer samurai were driven even further into destitution, others fared much better and, overall, samurai skills and residence—literate and urban—tended to prepare them to benefit from the opportunities of the new age.

7. ENGLISH AS THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

The convenience of Katsumoto and his son speaking English eliminated the need for more extensive subtitles. While one suspects that English would have been exceedingly rare among such circles, the pace of change in education was swift. Literacy rates were already exceptionally high, roughly fifty percent for adult males, and nearly universal for samurai. The shogunate's Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books (*banshō shirabesho*) had long disseminated "Dutch-learning," principally in medicine, but by the 1850s many daimyo also promoted foreign-learning, especially of armaments, warships, and navigation. Even the Meiji Emperor, in 1873, took up the daily study of a European language; this was in German, and he disliked it so much he gave it up within the year (Keene 2002:239). Meiji educational experiments introduced four European languages (English, German, French, Russian) across the curriculum in a handful of institutions, which is how Nitobe (lesson #3) came to be

educated in English. When Tokyo University was founded with a modern curriculum and institutional divisions (Law, Letters, Science, and Medicine), the study of literature and history focused exclusively on Europe and America, not on Japan. In the early 1870s, William Elliot Griffis began to publish the first series of English textbooks that, as part of Western learning, were widely adopted. On a tour of Aomori (in Northeastern Japan) in July 1876, the Emperor reportedly listened to speeches in English at a local elementary school—the recitations included Hannibal’s address to his soldiers, a speech by Andrew Jackson to the US Senate, and Cicero’s attack on Cataline—and the Emperor gave each student ¥5 to buy *Webster’s Intermediate Dictionary* (Keene 2002:326). However, the Emperor complained about Japanese children memorizing English speeches while remaining unfamiliar with Japanese traditions. From 1878, he would back a major shift in educational policy, reemphasizing moral education and downgrading English, a trend that would accelerate in the 1880s.

8. AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN ADVISORS

Extensive use of foreign military advisors, and technical experts in other fields, commonly referred to as *yatoi* (“living machines”), was a significant part of the rush to modernity (Jones 1980, Pedlar 1990, and especially Rosenstone 1988). But the army modeled itself after the French military, rather than the American, and the navy opted for the British. Americans were much more influential in education (e.g., Notehelfer 1985), with David Murray of Rutgers serving as Japan’s Superintendent of Schools and Colleges from 1873 to 1879 and William Clark of the University of Massachusetts serving as the first president of Sapporo Agricultural College. Scores of Americans were hired to teach in schools and colleges. Other Western authors were also prominent among the relatively few early translations into Japanese. Scottish author Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help* for the rags-to-riches aspirants was one of the first popular volumes; in 1873, the first year to adopt the Western (solar) calendar, half of the lectures (24 a month) given to the Meiji Emperor were from Smiles’ book, largely biographical portraits of self-made men like Benjamin Franklin, chosen as emblematic of Western know-how and practical

knowledge (Keene 2002:223). However, the debates that would shape the reorientation of the Japanese state and cement a long-lasting cultural orthodoxy from the 1880s were wholly domestic, highly complex, and hard fought (Gluck 1985, Pyle 1969), without the guiding hand of any American interloper.

9. PUPPET OF THE OLIGARCHS

The depiction of the Meiji Emperor as a virtual prisoner of his own advisors failed to convey the dramatic transformation of his office and the active part played by its occupant. The adoption of completely new imperial rites, state rituals, public holidays, and ceremonies recast, quite literally, how the emperor was seen (Fujitani 1996). The Meiji Emperor ventured out of the palace to tour much of the country like no other Emperor in history; according to Keene (2002:162–3), he was probably the first emperor, ever, to have seen either the ocean or Mount Fuji. Although cautious in interacting with his advisors, who installed him as sovereign in the Restoration, by the mid-1870s he was an active participant in the determination of policy. His father, the Emperor Kōmei, had been profoundly xenophobic, but the Meiji Emperor often met with foreign dignitaries and visitors, and adopted the symbols and conventions of modern (European) monarchs, such as the rather out-dated European style uniform with Western-style sword that he wore from the early 1870s. However, his tours of the country and interaction with ordinary Japanese and foreign dignitaries alike were increasingly restricted from the 1880s, and his place in the Japanese imagination would be remade through the construction of the Emperor system, notably with the Meiji constitution (1889) that enshrined the autonomy of the military and adopted widespread censorship.

10. ABSENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Maneuverings of elites, between rapacious modernizers and uncompromised anachronists, fails to convey the most significant tensions in the political arena, notably in overlooking the Movement for Freedom and People’s Rights (*jiyū minken undō*), to say nothing about the social changes sweeping the country. The West was a model, not only for “official nationalism” (Anderson 1983:94–9)

Scene from the Emperor and his teacher sequence. ©2003 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.





Tokyo street scene. ©2003 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

but also for what came under the banner of people's rights and democracy. Local-level politics also became an arena for constructing new identities, loyalties, and affiliations at a time of significant economic transformation. Complex shifts in political fortunes of competing cliques coincided with far-reaching social changes on the ground; narratives of those who lived through this era demonstrate how fast-paced and fluid the dynamics were in these few decades (Ozaki 2001, Shibusawa 1994). The best of recent social history (Steele 2003, Walthall 1998; but consider also Gluck 1978, Bowen 1980, Wilson 1992) reminds us of the diversity of ways that commoners—not simply samurai—sought to make sense of the new institutional arrangements and cultural mores that accompanied the opening of Japan, and how they sought to change them. ■

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We might be justly proud of our deference to the rule of law, but China is a cultural resource that can be appropriated with profit to address the often disappointing quality of our personal relations—our often dysfunctional family lives—marred as they can be by selfishness, alienation, indulgence, and sometimes even violence.

Confucianism is certainly centered on self-cultivation, but such self-cultivation, as is the case with Daoism, must go beyond simple discipline to creative self-expression. Confucius says explicitly that in becoming authoritative as human beings, people cannot yield even to their teachers. That is, becoming a quality human being is a process of personal growth that originates with one's inchoate self and, through unrelenting attention to ritualized living in community, culminates in becoming a source of meaning for one's world. It is an entirely creative process of becoming one's own best thoughts. By enchanting the ordinary experience of the day, we are able to live inspired lives, and to become a source of spirituality for the world around us.

David Jones: *Finally, although there is so much more to discuss, would you share with EAA readers why China's early history, philosophy, and culture from 1000 BCE–300 CE is so relevant to twenty-first century Westerners as we make our ways into the future, especially to those of us who deliver Chinese history, politics, philosophy, and culture to students?*

Roger Ames: For me it is very simple. We have much to learn from China. One widely acknowledged European ethnocentrism has been universalism—the one true God, the one model of modernity that separates first world and third world, the ineluctability of modern science, the universality of conceptions such as human rights and democracy. This way of thinking about world order has been hugely productive, but also has its limitations. On a good day it is the rule of law; on a bad day it is cultural imperialism. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is a fair representative of this universalistic and rationalistic impulse that has led some scholars to dismiss his interest in China as at best condescending, and at worst, an example of this cultural imperialism. In short, as the story goes, his motivation in turning to the East was simply corroboration, and thus his celebration of China amounts to nothing but an appeal to another high culture as a means of demonstrating the truth of European universal indices. But those who would rehearse such a story should know Leibniz better.

In the Preface to the *Novissima Sinica* written over the period 1697–99, an astute and penetrating Leibniz offers a synoptic comparison between the contributions of European and Chinese culture that would satisfy the most optimistic interpreters of this antique Chinese culture and that is of enormous relevance today. Leibniz allows that in technologies, crafts, and artifacts, Europeans stand on equal ground with the Chinese, with each people having “knowledge which it could with profit communicate to the other.” With our modern marketplace full of Chinese goods, they have certainly learned from us. In theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and theology, however, Leibniz sees a clear European superiority. Indeed, Europeans “excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material.” Europeans own the theoretical sciences and surpass the Chinese in those intellectual tools of the mind that lead to demonstrable truth.

As a reluctant aside, Leibniz offers a second area in which Europe overshadows the China of his day—an area in which in our own historical moment we contemporary American's have transplanted too much from the European soil. For it is much to Europe's shame that they have a decided advantage in the military arts. Leibniz allows that this particular superiority is not out of ignorance on the part of the Chinese, but rather a matter of deliberate choice, and it is to their credit, for as a people they properly “despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men.”

In fact, the Chinese antipathy towards conflict and belligerence is not unrelated to what Leibniz perceives to be their greatest cultural achievement. On Leibniz's reading, the Chinese excel in the not unimportant pursuit of civil life where Chinese “civilization” has set a standard far superior to that found in Europe. China's ongoing achievements in practical philosophy—“the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and the use of mortals”—have enabled them to excel in the establishment and maintenance of social order at all of its different levels. Leibniz attributes this inspiring public virtue to the way in which *li*—the continuing process of personalizing ritualized roles and relationships in familial relationships—functions to produce the *ethos* in the human community.

We might be justly proud of our deference to the rule of law, but China is a cultural resource that can be appropriated with profit to address the often disappointing quality of our personal relations—our often dysfunctional family lives—marred as they can be by selfishness, alienation, indulgence, and sometimes even violence. After all, is there anything more important anytime anywhere in the human experience than the cultivation of interpersonal relations—the very ground of a flourishing community?

David Jones: *Thank you Roger for your time, but most of all I wish to express my gratitude for all that you have done for educating the world, which even includes the Chinese themselves as they move into their history in a Post-Maoist era, about why this civilization, the longest continuous one in the world, is relevant for our contemporary thinking, philosophizing, and living in the twenty-first century. You have given so many so much. Thank you, for not only your time, but for so much more. ■*

Editor's Note:

Readers interested in the book that David Jones mentions in this interview should see the following bibliographical reference: Ames, Roger and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.