

MEDIA RESOURCES

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Fantasies of Valor: Legends of the Samurai in Japan and the United States

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I want to talk today broadly about Hollywood, its images of samurai and the Japanese, and how those images contrast with Japanese images of the samurai. But more narrowly, I want to talk about one particular film: the 2003 Warner Brothers film *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise. The reception of this film was so different in Japan and the United States that it seems as though the two audiences were watching two different movies. I think exploring those differences can provide substantial insight into cross-cultural perceptions

The Last Samurai, a big-budget Hollywood movie set in 1870s Japan, premiered in the United States on December 5, 2003, to a mixed reception. Audience response was tepid, and the \$111-million domestic box office receipts did not cover the estimated \$170-million cost, including a \$140-million production budget and \$30-million marketing budget.

The Last Samurai was the sort of lavish production designed for the Academy Awards, and it received nominations for art direction (Lilly Kilvert and Gretchen Rau), costumes (Ngila Dickson), and sound (Andy Nelson, Anna Behlmer, and Jeff Wexler). Ken Watanabe was nominated as Best Supporting Actor for both the Golden Globe and the Oscar Awards and

the film sparked his international success. Overall, however, the movie was something of a disappointment. It did not win any major awards, and the star (Tom Cruise), the director (Edward Zwick), and screenwriter (John Logan), did not even receive nominations for their efforts. U.S. film critics found the film to be entertaining, but were annoyed by what they perceived as incongruities, contradictions, anachronisms, and clichés. The movie was widely dismissed as a remake of *Dances with Wolves*, set incongruously in Japan.¹

The Japanese response was fundamentally different. This film was financially successful in Japan, making more money (\$119 million) than any other U.S. or foreign film that year, including the blockbuster *Lord of the Rings: The Last Samurai*, in fact, made more money in Japan than in the United States and also did well in Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, and South Korea, eventually grossing over \$320 million overseas. International earnings have accounted for nearly 75 percent of the film's revenue, the highest percentage for any major U.S. film made before 2008.² The film received good reviews both in the Japanese mass media and in more specialized film journals. This reception was surprising given the concern American critics had over inaccurate representations of Japanese history.

This essay explores these apparent contradictions. Why did U.S. critics seem more concerned with accurate portrayal of Japanese culture than Japanese critics? Pressing further, why was a film that U.S. critics found ridiculous and possibly insulting to Japanese culture so successful in Japan? Why did Japanese audiences overlook or even enjoy incongruities that vexed U.S. viewers? And what did Japanese reviewers see that U.S. reviewers overlooked or repressed? These different evaluations reflect the different genres into which American and Japanese audiences place the film and, more broadly, the different political contexts in which the film was viewed. I would like to suggest, simply, that what U.S. critics said about *The Last Samurai* was putatively about Japan, but more about U.S. history and race relations, whereas the comments of Japanese critics reflect Japan's own film-making tradition, but also critics' understanding of contemporary U.S.-Japanese political relations.

Plot Summary

Let me begin with a brief overview of the plot—or rather the official trailer—which gives almost the entire plot in about two minutes and is available at http://trailers.apple.com/trailers/wb/the_last_samurai/trailer/ and http://lastsamurai.warnerbros.com/html_index.php. To recap, Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) is a U.S. Army captain and Civil War veteran haunted by memories of his role in a massacre of Native Americans. That back story is based loosely on two attacks on the Cheyenne, one in 1864 and one in 1868 by General George Armstrong Custer. Algren, although regularly drunk, is hired by his former commander, Colonel Bagley (Tony Goldwyn) to work for the Meiji government training its new conscript army. Once in Japan, Algren trains and leads an army of Japanese commoners into battle against the samurai rebel Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe). Unprepared and terrified of the samurai, who rise like specters out of the fog, the conscripts are scattered and routed in their first battle. Algren, abandoned by his troops, fights valiantly despite grave injuries, and kills Hirotarō, Katsumoto's second in command. Katsumoto, intrigued by this strange foreign fighter, takes him back to the samurai mountain stronghold. Algren is nursed back to health by Hirotarō's widow, Taka (Koyuki), and even recovers from his alcoholism. He learns Japanese from Taka, watches her son practice kendo with the master swordsman Ujio (Sanada Hiroyuki), and discusses philosophy with Katsumoto. Gradually he forms a deep connection with Katsumoto, even fighting alongside Katsumoto when ninja assassins attack the village, disrupting a folk theater performance. With the coming of spring and the melting of the mountain snows, Algren returns to Tokyo, but declines to resume working for the Meiji government, now completely in the hands of the villainous Omura (Harada Masato), who is using government contracts to build a *zaibatsu* empire.

Omura now suspects that Algren has allied with the enemy and sends assassins to kill him, but Algren, although unarmed, uses his newly acquired samurai skills to defeat four *rōnin* assailants. Meanwhile, Omura imprisons Katsumoto, who has come to Tokyo for an audience with the emperor. Algren helps

lead a raid that frees Katsumoto, although Katsumoto's son Nobutada (Koyamada Shin) is killed in the attack. Katsumoto and Algren now plan their last stand against the government army, which has become a highly disciplined force armed with 200-round-per-minute Gatling guns. Algren recounts to Katsumoto the legend of the battle of Thermopylae, where 300 Greek warriors held off a Persian army of one million. Katsumoto is intrigued by both the strategic acumen of the Greeks and their glorious deaths. When the Meiji army arrives, the rebels fight with traditional weapons against Mausers and Howitzers, but repel several attacks through superior strategy and courage. Algren manages by throwing his sword to kill Colonel Bagley, the commander who had ordered the massacre of Native Americans. In the final engagement, however, the remaining samurai charge and the imperial army brings out the Gatling guns and cuts down the approaching mounted warriors. Katsumoto is shot from his horse, and Algren comes to his side and helps him commit seppuku. Omura orders the Imperial army to continue firing, but instead, the chief officer, his eyes filling with tears, orders firing to cease, removes his cap, kneels, and bows, head to the ground, in deference to Katsumoto. His troops, in stunned silence, emulate his example.

With the samurai rebels defeated, Omura seems to have triumphed. But, Algren, although badly injured, survives and interrupts Omura's audience with the Meiji emperor to present the sovereign with Katsumoto's sword. The emperor, inspired by Katsumoto's loyalty, finds the courage to rebuke Omura and seizes his ill-gotten fortune. In the closing scene we see Algren returning to the samurai village to live happily with Taka and her sons. So Tom Cruise finds happiness in rural Japan and carries on the tradition of the samurai

The film is loosely historical, and several characters can be linked to historical figures. Katsumoto is unquestionably Saigō Takamori, and the wicked Omura is a dark caricature of Ōkubo Toshimichi. Algren is largely fictional, and Americans were relatively unimportant as military advisers in Japan during the 1870s. Algren does resemble a combination of several foreign advisors, such as the French officer Jules Brunet, who fought

with shogunal forces in Hakodate, and William Willis, a British surgeon who remained in Kagoshima during the Satsuma Rebellion. In the end, however, *Algren* is primarily two things. First, he is Tom Cruise. Whether he is portraying a bartender, a fighter pilot, a sports agent, or a Civil War veteran, Tom Cruise basically plays the same character: an underachiever, directionless and distracted by past demons, who triumphs and shows his true abilities and moral fiber after encountering a transformative experience. Second, Nathan *Algren* is a fictional contrivance to make nineteenth-century Japanese history less foreign to American viewers.

There are, as we shall see, some real problems with this film, but it is extremely well crafted. The film is the work of several accomplished Hollywood veterans. Edward Zwick (director/producer/screenwriter) and Marshall Herskovitz (producer/screenwriter) together developed several major TV series (*thirtysomething*, *Once and Again*, *My So-called Life*), and in so doing, won a series of Emmy Awards. Zwick directed the Civil War drama *Glory*, which won three Academy Awards. Herskovitz produced *Traffic*, which won two Golden Globe Awards and four Academy Awards. The screenwriter John Logan was nominated for an Academy Award for *Gladiator*. John Toll (director of photography) won two Academy Awards for Best Cinematography for *Legends of the Fall* (1994) and *Braveheart* (1995). As a result, even when the film is conceptually incoherent, it is visually elegant and polished: Hollywood clichés done well can be pretty effective. That did not, however, ensure a warm reception in the United States.

The View from the United States

American critics, as noted above, were largely unimpressed with the film. Most praised its beauty and style, but found its portrayal of Japanese culture stilted and awkward. Ty Burr's review in the *Boston Globe* was representative. He praised the action scenes, describing one as "a thundering, brilliantly edited sequence of mayhem that suggests Quentin Tarantino without the show-off arrogance." But he found the dialogue facile if not silly: "[we] cut to a cherry-tree garden in which Katsumoto natters on about 'the perfect blossom,'—and the

movie slams to a halt while the film-makers write off their weekend meditation retreats.”³

Elvis Mitchell in *The New York Times*, had a similar evaluation. He wrote that the “majestic brutality of the battle sequences” evoked the concepts of sacrifice and honor “verve and simplicity.” But he disparaged the dialogue, comparing the discussions of ideas between Algren and Katsumoto to “statements being read into the *Congressional Record* by Nathaniel Hawthorne,” with Algren “picking up a lesson in Eastern deportment and philosophy a step away from the ‘wax-on, wax-off’ curriculum of *The Karate Kid*.”⁴

Many critics found the depiction of Japanese culture not just simplistic, but naïve. Stephen Hunter in *The Washington Post* was brutal in his denunciation of the director’s romanticism. “To Zwick, the way of the samurai is akin to the way of purity: It stands for nobility, service, self-sacrifice, denial of ego, tradition. It did, of course, but only for a small member of the elite who enjoyed its fruits; for the general population, it was simply feudalism, in which a small band of hereditary aristocrats controlled society by force and looted its profits to sustain themselves in castles and enjoy blood sports.”⁵ Bob Mondello on National Public Radio observed that the film sees the samurai as “a noble tribal culture being crushed rather than a brutal reactionary one being placed under the rule of law.”⁶

These criticisms have some merit and there is no question that Zwick indulges in a romantic and anachronistic depiction of the samurai. But many criticisms of the movie were as distorted as Zwick’s idealization. For example, the “looted profits” of “feudalism” is a strange term given the relatively modest lives of most nineteenth-century samurai. Many samurai families worked quietly at by-employments, such as umbrella making or weaving, to supplement their meager hereditary earnings. Although samurai were nominally an “aristocracy,” most could not have donned battle armor in the 1870s because their ancestors had pawned it generations ago to meet living expenses. What Hunter means by “blood sports” is baffling. Most samurai trained with wooden or bamboo swords and rarely used a real blade. Early modern executions were grizzly affairs,

but much of the work was done by *eta*, a Japanese stigmatized caste, rather than by samurai. In short, U.S. critics were not really concerned with historical accuracy, but instead were swapping positive clichés for negative clichés.

Why the Concern for Historical Accuracy?

Concern with historical accuracy is itself unusual in mainstream movie reviews. For example, the 1995 film *Braveheart*, a commercial and critical success, had many of the flaws of *The Last Samurai*: it was replete with historical inaccuracies, ignored economic exploitation, and glorified aristocratic violence. In order to turn a thirteenth-century succession dispute between English and Scottish nobles into a question of “freedom,” the film portrayed William Wallace as a commoner rather than a petty noble and entirely obfuscated how commoner rents supported both the English and Scottish aristocracies. Strangely, U.S. critics did not fault the film for its failure to expose the inequities of “feudalism.”

Nor were U.S. critics especially picky about historical accuracy when they reviewed *Gladiator* (2000), written by John Logan, who also worked on *The Last Samurai*. That film celebrated a “dream that was Rome” but was unclear as to exactly what that dream might be. It is obvious that Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) represents some betrayal of Roman principles, but in the film his greatest failing in his personal depravity: Commodus is willing to kill his nephew so he can have sex with his sister. The hero Maximus (Russell Crowe), as Commodus’s foil, represents courage, valor, and integrity, but ultimately the politics of this film make no more sense than those of *The Last Samurai*. Apparently wars of aggression and slave raiding along the Danube are acceptable if conducted in the name of a good emperor, but not if the emperor likes kinky sex. Here again, critics did not feel obliged to rebut these romanticizations and did not feel compelled to give their readers a corrective lesson on late Roman political economy. Only in the case of *the Last Samurai* did critics feel obligated to debunk myths of the samurai, often in strangely reductionist terms.

To be fair, some critics hated both *Gladiator* and *The Last Samurai*. Hunter, for example, wrote “friends, Washingtonians,

countrymen, I come not to praise *Gladiator* but to bury it.” But Hunter faulted the film’s dramatic incoherence, not its historical inaccuracies. In fact, rather than decry Roman “blood sports,” Hunter lamented that the best combat scene came first, rather than last.⁷ Why then, in the case of *The Last Samurai*, did American reviewers feel the need to serve as history professors?

To a large degree, American criticism was prompted by the film’s similarity to the Kevin Costner film *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Mondello on NPR described *The Last Samurai* as “as a kind of *Dances With Wolves* on Mt. Fuji.”⁸ J. Hoberman in *The Village Voice* called it “*Dances With Wolves* . . . in Kimono.”⁹ Hunter was still more explicit. “Basically what Zwick has done is to take Kevin Costner’s *Dances With Wolves* and insert it into the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, with a samurai clan in the role of an Indian tribe. Hmmm, I don’t think so. Costner evoked all of Native American culture; the survival of a whole people was at peril. It was a culture war, not a class war. But the samurai, after all, were but a small part of Japan; they represented, by the nineteenth-century, obstructionist, regressive values. They really can’t, or shouldn’t, be sentimentalized.”¹⁰

“Going Native”

This strange double standard is, I think, the key to understanding the tepid, ambivalent U.S. reaction to *The Last Samurai*. According to Hunter, two-dimensional, romanticized Sioux are good, but two-dimensional, romanticized samurai—well, that’s a different story. This would be ludicrous if the sentiment behind it weren’t so powerful. But the “going native” story of *The Last Samurai* draws on some of the great conceits of America: nobles savages, the natural beauty of the American frontier as benevolent and healing, and a grand journey of individual salvation. Burr touched on this when he described the film as “the latest in that oddly neurotic genre in which an American hero validates himself by becoming an alien culture’s great white hope. That’s a romantic fantasy as old as James Fenimore Cooper and as recent as *Dances With Wolves*.”¹¹ Actually, a more comprehensive and updated description of the

genre would include *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and the 3D, CGI blockbuster *Avatar* (2009), described variously as “*Dances with Wolves* in Space,” and “*Dances with Smurfs*.”

The core plot elements of this “oddly neurotic genre” are simple. A traumatized or marginalized adult white man “goes native” by leaving the comforts of civilization for an encounter with a less technologically sophisticated, but more spiritually pure, people. Despite the initial confusion and the culture clash, the natives accept him, and the hero quickly masters all native ways, often displacing a native heir-apparent in the process. When white civilization comes to threaten the native culture, the hero now sides with the natives, saving them by combining a mastery of both white imperial knowledge and native insight. Redeemed through this action, he lives happily ever after, often with the natives themselves and a native princess bride, having opposed the excesses of Western civilization without sacrificing any of the benefits of adult white male colonial privilege.

It is easy enough to lampoon this sort of film. Burr, for example, summarized the genre as “self-help imperialism,” while Annalee Newitz labeled it “an old white guilt fantasy,” wondering “when will white people stop making movies like *Avatar*?”¹² But we also need to understand why it is so appealing and what goes wrong when this script is moved to nineteenth-century Japan. What happens when we think and really unpack the extended metaphor at the heart of the film? *Dances with Wolves* works in part because Costner perfected the “white guilt fantasy”: Colonel Dunbar is a Western hero who redeems himself by saving the Sioux from the U.S. Army and giving viewers an alternative history in which “How the West Was Won” does not mean the destruction of Native American civilization. But Nathan Algren redeems himself by leading the samurai into battle against the modern Japanese army, a low-technology suicidal charge against state-of-the-art Gatling guns. Upon a moment’s reflection this is quite chilling. Are the film-makers celebrating Japanese suicide attacks against Western culture? Are human-wave suicide attacks against high-technology gun emplacements an example of noble effort? Clearly, the film-makers did not intend these resonances with *kamikaze* attacks, but those are the logical implications of the

extended metaphor: Nathan Algren is a *kamikaze* Lawrence of Arabia. That extension of the metaphor also undermines the “noble savage” trope. If Sioux or Cheyenne are noble in this primitive purity, and so are samurai, why not samurai-inspired *kamikaze*?

Post 9/11 Anxieties

In the wake of 9/11 this extended metaphor was still more unsettling, although only one U.S. critic chose to press the parallels. Tim Appelo, writing in *Seattle Weekly*, pondered,

Let’s see: Samurai were fundamentalist zealots furious about American military hegemony and their country’s modernizers, so they hid out in remote hill country, trained a terrorist army, and glorified suicidal war against their ruler and his Yankee infidel allies, all in order to uphold their allegedly ancient holy traditions. Gee, who does that sound like nowadays?¹³

This parallelism between samurai and the “War on Terror” was widely observed in Japan, but in the United States it was an unvoiced undercurrent.

Notably, critics were more willing to able to follow the extended metaphor in the case of *Avatar*. Ty Burr, for example, observed that “in terms of plot, then, this is *Dances with Wolves*. Seriously: It’s *the same movie*, re-imagined as a speculative-anthropological freak-out.” Having made that connection, he continued, “the movie’s cultural politics are childishly two-dimensional, at times insulting (especially if you know anyone in the armed forces). Squint at *Avatar* the wrong way and it starts to look like a training film for jihad—not, I’m guessing, what Cameron had in mind.”¹⁴ Perhaps the passage of time made the fuller implications of suicide-wave attacks more evident in 2009 than in 2003. But I suspect the real issue is that *Avatar* de-contextualizes the “noble savage” metaphor, denuding it of historical specificity by moving it to a distant planet in the future. *The Last Samurai*, by contrast, demands ahistorical, cross-cultural moral equivalencies. If Nathan Algren is in Japan atoning for Custer’s atrocities against the Cheyenne,

then does the Satsuma Rebellion equal the Battle of Little Big Horn? Were the *kamikaze* payback for Wounded Knee? Does Hiroshima equal one Pearl Harbor or two? Does 9/11 plus the Alamo compensate for the actions of the American empire in the Philippines or just the assassination of Salvadore Allende? These comparisons are absurd, but by conflating samurai and Sioux, the film invites them.

As a result, just beneath the surface, *The Last Samurai* is a maelstrom of anxieties. In addition to U.S. atonement for the destruction of Native American civilization, there are the sexual and political tensions of Orientalism, plus a dash of post-9/11 frenzy. If we follow the extended metaphor, we discover that Tom Cruise found spiritual peace by helping the jihadist, Lakota Sioux, kamikaze samurai when they drove the white man from Satsuma, or the Alamo, or Kabul, or Lower Manhattan in the name of Cherokee Islamo-bushido cultural purity. For most U.S. critics in 2003, this was one too many monsters. In that context, the U.S. critics sought largely to rebuke the samurai-as-Sioux metaphor, even if it meant inventing historical practices such as samurai “blood sports,” or endorsing the most facile conceits of *Dances with Wolves*. The goal was largely to preserve the fantasy of the “noble savage” by denying the moral purity of the samurai.

The View from Japan

Japanese audiences responded to the film in strikingly different ways. While some recognized the similarities to *Dances with Wolves*, the metaphors were much less powerful. Thus, when Japanese critics examined the “samurai-as-Cheyenne” metaphor, they did so with greater clarity than their U.S. counterparts. The parallels between samurai suicide attacks, the kamikaze, and twenty-first-century suicide bombings were also obvious to many Japanese critics, who addressed the issue with striking dispassion. Many viewers, however, saw the film in a different context entirely: as an American attempt at a *jidaigeki*, or Japanese-style historical drama. This made the film immensely appealing to many viewers. Whatever its flaws, the film was seen as an affirmation not of the “way of the samurai,” but of the genre of the samurai

movie. At the risk of a strained analogy, it was as though a major Chinese director (Zhang Yimou, perhaps) or a Bollywood star created a \$150-million film adaptation of *Gunsmoke*. The film would certainly be historically inaccurate, as was *Gunsmoke* itself, but the enterprise would be flattering nonetheless. How wonderful to learn that one's pop culture icons were adored around the world.

The Promise of Global Adoration

In Japan, the film's promoters made good use of that angle. They arranged a screening for none other than the Japanese Prime Minister, Koizumi Jun'ichirō, as well as a meeting and photo-op with Tom Cruise. After watching the film on December 27, Koizumi expressed his satisfaction with its depiction of the samurai and their fearless attitude toward death. In his meeting with Cruise the next day, he rattled off the names of his favorite Tom Cruise movies, and Cruise returned the compliment, praising the prime minister's intelligence and charisma and declaring "I've become a Koizumi fan." The two then sang Elvis songs together, Koizumi as Elvis impersonator and Tom Cruise as samurai: a festival of pop culture mutual appreciation. Although the *Asahi Shinbun* was somewhat cynical about the use of the prime minister's office to promote a movie, the event was given favorable coverage in all the major dailies.¹⁵

Many critics followed a similar approach, praising the film as a glorious revival of the Japanese *chambara* tradition (a samurai swashbuckler). The critic Ishigami Mitoshi, wrote explicitly "It's been so long since I've seen a truly great *jidaigeki*, or, to be more exact *chambara* movie." For Ishigami, Zwick's action scenes, such as the unarmed Algren killing four assassins with their own swords, were spectacular evocations of the genre. In fact, Ishigami was concerned that the film was too good. The huge production budget of *The Last Samurai* and the accordingly high production values made Japanese *jidaigeki* look shoddy by comparison. He lamented the decline of domestic *jidaigeki* as the "impoverishment of Japan's 'family tradition.'" Ishigami was fully aware of some of the cross-cultural mistakes, but did not think that they were major flaws, and was particularly delighted as to how Zwick showcased his

Japanese actors, including Nakamura Shichinosuke, who played the Meiji emperor.¹⁶

The veteran film director Horikawa Hiromichi, who worked as assistant director with Kurosawa on *The Seven Samurai*, also loved the film. Tom Cruise, he declared, looked great as a samurai, moving like a professional fencing teacher, steady through the hips even as he walked. For Horikawa this meant that, whatever Zwick's intentions, the film was not a Kurosawa homage. Kurosawa, he noted, avoided using fencing teachers in order to give his fight scenes more authenticity. But Horikawa found the stylized beauty of the Zwick-choreographed fight scenes a beautiful example of a more conventional samurai movie.¹⁷

For fans of *jidaigeki*, *The Last Samurai* even had inside jokes about the genre itself. For the part of "silent samurai," Zwick cast Fukumoto Seizō, a veteran of hundreds of samurai movies and television episodes. Fukumoto started as an actor in 1943, at age 15, and quickly settled into role of *kirareyaku*, the actor/stunt man who gets killed by the hero. "My job is to make the good guy shine," Fukumoto said in an interview. "The more spectacular my on-screen death, the better he looks." Fukumoto estimates (somewhat implausibly) that he has been killed 50,000 times, sometimes more than once in the same film or TV episode. As a *kirareyaku*, Fukumoto also never gets a speaking role, but his fans do not care. On the contrary, some watch samurai dramas just to watch Fukumoto briefly glower at the hero before being cut down in a choreographed duel. These fans lobbied Narahashi Yōko, the Japanese casting director, to put Fukumoto in the film, and she arranged for his audition in Los Angeles, where Zwick loved his stylized samurai moves.

Fukumoto's role as "silent samurai" is clearly a nod to his long career in *jidaigeki*. The script highlights Fukumoto's silence: he is assigned to guard Nathan Algren, but never speaks. Algren nicknames him Bob, and, referring to his *hakama*, quips, "I know why you never talk—you're angry because they make you wear a dress." On the surface this joke is about Algren's cultural arrogance, but for *jidaigeki* fans it is actually a sign of respect. For insiders, Tom Cruise is secretly acknowledging

Fukumoto's long career as a *kirareyaku*, a movie star who never talks. Fukumoto himself thought that he was reprising his role in countless *jidaigeki* and treated *The Last Samurai* as such. "I am truly grateful that I was able to make a Hollywood movie," he declared. "It is wonderful that young people are getting a sense of the samurai spirit, and that might spark a revival of the *jidaigeki* genre."¹⁸

For much of the Japanese audience, the two-dimensional moral purity of the samurai was a delight: an American confirmation of Japanese B-movie clichés. For those willing to simply revel in these conventions, the movie was utterly charming. Some Japanese critics, like their U.S. counterparts, sought to go beyond these clichés, but unlike the U.S. counterparts, their criticism was grounded in historical understanding and critical reflection. Matsunaga Tarō, for example, wondered about the term "no mind," used when Nathan Algren is taught the way of the warrior. He linked the phrase to the Japanese Buddhist term *mushin*, and connected the concept to the writings of the medieval Zen master Takuan and the modern Zen teacher Suzuki Shunryū, who founded the San Francisco Zen Center.¹⁹ In a similar vein Fukuda Kazuya traced the movie's understanding of bushido to Nitobe Inazo's famous book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900). Written specifically to explain Japan to Americans, it was widely read and was later translated into Japanese, where it proved equally influential. By discussing the Japanese figures who explained Japanese culture to America, these critics quietly challenged the film's Orientalism. Americans did not simply discover a passive and exotic Japan. Japanese cultural agents made careers of explaining Japan to Americans.

In short, Japanese critics took the film's interest in Japan seriously. For U.S. critics, this interest was something of an embarrassment: in Ty Burr's words, "why do our movies look to other cultures for what we feel we lack?"²⁰ For Matsunaga, this was not a rhetorical question but an occasion for cultural comparison. In English, he observed, "The Enlightenment" refers to a European intellectual movement celebrating the autonomous individual and instrumental reason. In Buddhism, by contrast, "enlightenment" refers to the spiritual peace that comes from

transcending the illusions of individual autonomy and instrumental reason. For that reason, both obvious and ironic, the European Enlightenment created a desire for Buddhist enlightenment. Buddhism helps fill the spiritual void created in Western thought since the Enlightenment declared that “God is dead.” Matsunaga’s account is reductionist—and he romps through the history of Buddhism, as well as Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Lacan in a mere four pages. But, unlike U.S. critics, Matsunaga at least explores the spiritual hunger behind Zwick’s romanticized view of bushido.²¹

What of the samurai as Sioux metaphor? For critics with a background in European or American studies, this is obvious, if bizarre. For example, Ikui Eikō, a professor of American Studies at Kyōritsu Women’s University, linked the film with *Dances with Wolves*, arguing that while *Wolves* was a liberal critique of the American system, *The Last Samurai* was a rightwing call for a revival of American greatness.²² Nakazawa Hideo, a professor of German Studies at Tokyo University, made similar comments, noting how in the film Algren’s alliance with Katsumoto against Omura constitutes atonement for atrocities against the Cheyenne.²³

Resonances of World War II and the U.S. Invasion of Iraq

Overall, however, critics were more interested in what the film seemed to be saying about Japan. By celebrating a samurai suicide wave attack, the film seemed to be commending twentieth-century Japanese militarism. Was the film granting absolution for World War II, they wondered? Ochi, for example, gave his essay the sub-title, “An expression of praise from the country hit by the *kakikaze*.” Born in the 1930s, Ochi grew up expecting to die in suicidal combat against the United States, so he was surprised by the film’s praise of bushido. Ochi was further confused by the film’s celebration of samurai suicide attacks in the context of the Iraq War. How was it that Zwick made a film celebrating samurai suicidal “death for honor,” while the United States was engaged in a “War on Terror” that explicitly denounced suicide bombings as cowardice rather than heroism? Ochi, who said that the film repeatedly brought tears

to his eyes, confessed that he was somewhat unnerved by the film's emotional power.²⁴

The essayist Fukuoka Kensei was still more explicit. In an essay entitled "Samurai and suicide-bomber terrorism," published in the mainstream *Mainichi Shinbun*, he faulted the film's nostalgia as dangerous. The film's yearning for a simpler past, full of warm communities of selfless people, is understandable. But this is a troubling nostalgia, since that emphasis on self-abnegation and loyalty to community was part of Japanese wartime propaganda, with its vision of Japan as one family led by the emperor. It took defeat in World War II for the Japanese to realize that the essence of a good society does not lie in self-denial of self-abnegation, but in the pursuit of individual desire, constrained by laws protecting the common good. To reject that view and embrace the suicidal defense of community was akin to defending suicide bombing. The Japanese people should lament the tragedy of suicide bombing, he wrote because it is a tragedy of their own past.²⁵

In broader public discourse, this anxiety about the film found voice as a conspiracy theory: the movie was part of a plan to promote Japanese participation in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the words of one blogger, Koizumi saw the movie in order to dispatch Japanese troops.²⁶ This rumor was so pervasive it was cited even by those who found it absurd. Fukuda, for example, began his essay on the movie with an explicit link to the Iraq War.²⁷

It was a weekend where the newspaper featured a photograph of a bearded Japan Self Defense force commander having a pleasant chat with an Iraqi commander in Samawa. I was trying to leave the Yurakuchō station for Kyōbashi. A long line had formed that morning in front of the movie theater. As I tried to pass by I thought, "That's right, *The Last Samurai* is still a hit, and some even think it was made as a U.S. Department of Defense plot to encourage the Japanese to rouse themselves. That's silly, but are there really so many Japanese who want to hear Tom Cruise talk to them about bushidō?"

Fukuda here summarized the core of the rumor: the U.S. wanted help from Japan in the Persian Gulf, and thought that a celebration of bushido would flatter Japan into bending its constitution and dispatching combat forces.

Remarkably, these resonances with World War II and the invasion of Iraq were lost on Zwick himself. In an interview in *Kinema Junpō* he was asked, “For the past two years, America has been in a state of war. What do you think about making a war movie in such a society?” Zwick responded that his film was not intended to glorify violence, but to show its true cost. He then commented on the history of Western imperialism, including the British seizure of Hong Kong and American occupation of the Philippines. But even when directly asked, Zwick did not understand how Japanese viewers might see *The Last Samurai* as a call to arms, nor did he connect the film to contemporary events.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by trying to distill the two core anxieties summoned by *The Last Samurai*. In the United States, the film disturbed the conceit of what I’ll dub Hollywood liberal patriotism: the idea that American values are glorious even when American government policy is horrific. *Dances with Wolves* raised that conceit to perfection: Kevin Costner celebrates the clichés of the American West while disavowing the actual historical process by which the West became part of the United States. But *The Last Samurai* muddles that conceit, and in doing so unleashes a host of political and historical demons. On the Japanese side, the film was delightful as a genre film, but summoned anxieties not only about Japanese history itself, but also about the U.S. influence on Japan. In the last months of World War II, U.S. bombing raids killed at least 300,000 civilians in an unprecedented campaign of nuclear and conventional warfare. However, the U.S. Occupation established the basis of Japan’s unprecedented postwar peace and prosperity including the constitutional injunctions against the use of Japanese troops overseas. Since at least the 1950s, however, the United States has been pressing Japan to provide more extensive

support for its military operations. Most Japanese attitudes toward U.S. policy thus include aspects of respect, appreciation, loathing, and terror. *The Last Samurai* stirred those conflicting responses. For many, it was a thrill to have the United States praise the Japanese warrior spirit, but that same praise was unnerving, since it summoned memories of World War II and, in the context of the Iraq War, the specter of renewed militarism. Samurai and Sioux aside, for Japanese audiences, *The Last Samurai* was as much about the Japanese present as it was about the Japanese past.

Endnotes

¹The production materials and the official film website and jointly credit Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz, and John Logan with the screenplay, but credit Logan alone with the story.

²See <http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide> and <http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross>, both accessed August 10, 2010. The 74.5 percent mark for overseas box office was a record at the time. It has since been eclipsed by *Mamma Mia* (2008) at 76 percent, *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009) at 77.9 percent, and *2012* (2009) at 78.3 percent.

³Burr 2003.

⁴Mitchell 2003.

⁵Hunter 2003.

⁶Mondello 2003.

⁷Hunter 2000.

⁸Mondello 2003.

⁹Hoberman 2003.

¹⁰Hunter 2003.

¹¹Burr 2003.

¹²Burr 2003, Newitz 2009.

¹³Appelo 2003.

¹⁴Burr 2009.

¹⁵The events were covered in all the major dailies, but see, in particular *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2003 and *Asahi Shinbun* 2003.

¹⁶Mitoshi 2003.

¹⁷Horikawa 2003.

¹⁸Katayama 2004.

¹⁹Matsunaga 2004.

- ²⁰Burr 2003.
²¹Matsunaga 2004.
²²Ikui 2004.
²³Nakazawa 2004b, 2004a.
²⁴Ochi 2003.
²⁵Fukuoka 2004.
²⁶<http://pia-eigaseikatsu.jp/imp/4132/64422/>. Other examples of blogs and postings discussing this conspiracy include <http://www.asahi.com/column/wakamiya/TKY200404250098.html>; <http://www.asyura2.com/0401/bd33/msg/128.html>; and <http://mimizun.com/2chlog/history/academy2.2ch.net/history/oyster/1072/1072077335.html>.
²⁷Fukuda 2004

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