

Samurai Images in Japanese Cinema

Final Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The samurai is an internationally renowned symbol of Japanese culture. Unlike the American culture, which only dates back to the early British settlers, this history of Japan stretches far back into ancient times when writing was more hieroglyphic than actual abstract characters. Though the samurai only represent a comparatively small period in the historical record of Japan, the legacy of the samurai is an important aspect of Japanese culture both in the past and present.

This entire semester I have been interested in learning about the samurai in order to fill my large knowledge gap concerning this important icon in Japanese history. I thought that, as a Japanese major and someone who is generally interested in Japanese culture, the samurai is a figure that I should understand so that I am able to appreciate Japanese culture more authentically. I became interested in the appearances of samurai in Japanese cinema after reviewing my film reflections and noticing a few occurrences where I noted that something in the film reminded me of samurai. I thought that this was an interesting connection to be made in films that were categorically not about samurai at all.

In order to better understand these connections, I decided to analyze the images of samurai in Japanese film overall, in both the samurai genre and films of other genre as well. First, I will look at the cinematic depiction of samurai in different stages of history; the latter eras especially. Second will be a comparison between the portrayal of samurai in the Edo period by films prior to the turn of the century and their portrayal in modern film. Lastly, I will return to my original interest and examine the essences of samurai images in films beyond the samurai genre.

As a long and influential figure in Japanese history, it is no stretch of the imagination that samurai images also permeate Japanese film. Images of samurai appear in film from the very obvious to the very subtle, but their presence is innate in all forms of Japanese film throughout the generations.

TIMELINE OF SAMURAI HISTORY

Samurai did not abruptly appear in Japanese society; they were cultivated along with the evolution of historical eras. Japanese cinema has captured the progress of samurai in different eras as well.

Early Samurai

The early form of the samurai appeared in the Heian period as a byproduct of the flourishing court culture. While court nobles and lords of the land were participating in court life, the early samurai were responsible for guarding and protecting the lord's property while he was away. The corrupt aristocratic life of the nobles led to an accumulation of power in local areas that conflicted with the government power. The samurai, which was becoming a distinct warrior class, was now vying for control of the land.

We did not watch any films that depicted the life of an early samurai in the Heian period. In fact, there are few cinematic depictions of samurai from the Heian era; an example would be Kurosawa's *Roshomon*. Most samurai films utilize the settings of the latter samurai in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries. These were the years in which the most widely recognized samurai image was cultivated; as such, this setting is the more popular choice for a variety of films. These centuries can be divided into a period of constant war and a period of peace that predates the beginning of the modern era.

Warring States Period

The Warring States period in Japanese history was a time when the samurai clans of Japan that controlled individual parcels of land fought for total control. This era is known for many great names—Ashikaga, Nobunaga, Toyotomi, Tokugawa—as well as its significance in the transition from medieval Japan to a pre-modern Japan. Due to the upheaval and intense samurai involvement, this is a popular period in Japanese history for the depiction of samurai in the cinematic realm. Popular films set in this era include Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress*, *Seven Samurai*, and *Ran*, as well as Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu*.

Edo Period

After the victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu and the implementation of the Tokugawa shogunate, the samurai became the ruling class in Japan. It was also a time of lasting peace with many government enactments that prevented war. As the ruling class, samurai were employed in many government positions, from clerk to accountant, et cetera. Samurai also were required to maintain a certain code of conduct, as mandated by the shogun, which is where a lot of samurai images arise in media. However, it is a common misconception to believe that all samurai were benefitting as members of the ruling class, when in fact most samurai were low-ranked and never had the opportunity to improve their standing. There were also the samurai that chose not to serve in a clan and became wandering samurai known as ronin.

This era most likely contains the highest number of samurai films. It is a popular era not only because it produces the majority of the stereotypical samurai images, but because the setting allows for a wide variety of storylines. Samurai films set in the Edo period can range from sappy romantic dramas to harrowing tales of honor and betrayal. Famous films that depict this era

include *The Hidden Blade*, *Sword of Desperation*, *Twilight Samurai*, *47 Ronin* and Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*. These films alone showcase the variety of stories told through cinema about the Edo period; the romance in *The Hidden Blade*, to the betrayal in *Sword of Desperation*, and the epic fights of Mifune Toshiro in Kurosawa's films.

Post-Samurai Era

Films in the late Edo period are sure to depict the growing westernization of Japan, which ultimately results in the relinquishment of the shogun to the emperor, effectively eliminating the samurai class. The years leading up to and the transition after this momentous occasion was rife with disagreement between samurai who desired to keep their ways and revolutionists who agreed with the modernization of Japan. Similar to the Warring States Period, this time is popular in film for depicting these struggles; examples include *When the Last Sword is Drawn* and the well-known *Ruroni Kenshin*.

PORTRAYAL OF SAMURAI

To examine the difference in the portrayal of samurai by moviemakers in the 1900s versus the 2000s, I decreased the variables by comparing films that depict the same era in the history of the samurai.

Prior to the 21st Century

Kurosawa Akira is the biggest name in samurai film prior to the turn of the century. He also created a number of samurai movies with varying stories that depict different eras in the history of the samurai. *Sanjuro*, which was released in 1962, follows the journey of a ronin in the Edo period as he assists a troupe of samurai rid their town of corruption by rescuing their lord. Throughout the film, the audience is able to see how the young samurai interact with other

common figures of the age—lords, ladies, other samurai—as well as view the circumstances of that era, such as the environment and the methods by which samurai had to operate.

All the images in *Sanjuro* are a composition of Kurosawa's portrayal of the Edo samurai. What the viewer can deduce from this is that Kurosawa is that he had a high respect for the reality of the samurai. This is evident in the sense of realism that the viewer receives when watching films like *Sanjuro*. For example, the storyline of *Sanjuro* directly informs the audience about the corrupt power of the government in the Edo period. This heavy dose of reality, which reflects the monopoly of the samurai class upon the government at this time in Japanese history, is easy for the audience to comprehend in Kurosawa films. Another element of the realism in *Sanjuro* is the inclusion of humor in real-life settings. The humor in *Sanjuro*, which is seen throughout the film in the actions of the main characters, all occurs very naturally. For example, the joke about one's age—a classic—is mentioned briefly during his introduction, for a small grin or giggle, not the slapstick humor that is not found in day-to-day life. This natural realism is key in the portrayal of samurai prior to the twenty-first century.

Samurai in Film Today

The Hidden Blade, which was released in 2004, is an example of a samurai film produced during this century with a setting in the Edo period. The samurai of this film presents a definite contrast to the ronin of *Sanjuro*, despite the fact that both films “exist” in the same era of Japanese history. *The Hidden Blade* follows the story of a clan samurai by the name of Katagiri as he faces challenges of life as a samurai, which culminates into an order to fight an old friend to the death. This film also gives the reader an understanding of the historical context, especially in the clash between eastern and western methods of warfare, and the interactions between samurai and other peoples.

While *The Hidden Blade* can include similar elements as *Sanjuro*, such as the depiction of corruption in the ruling samurai class, the feeling of natural realism was not obvious in this film. Instead, *The Hidden Blade* has more of a “historical fiction novel” angle to the storyline rather than the “episode in history” approach of films like *Sanjuro*. The use of voiceover by the main character as well as the series of scenes that perfectly lead up to the romantic sub-plot all detract from the realism of a historical era film. While emotion was obviously still a factor to the human samurai of the Edo period, the exaggerated portrayal of such in this film was a stylistic choice that allows for the storyline to be accepted by a wider variety of audience members, which was perhaps the reasoning behind this choice.

SAMURAI IMAGES IN OTHER FILMS

As presented, the samurai is a figure that appears within historical context in many Japanese films, but the images of the samurai are also seen in more subtle ways in films that are not strictly about the samurai themselves. In these films, the samurai essences are imbedded as a part of culture and society.

Kurosawa Akira's Dreams

An essence of samurai culture in Kurosawa Akira's film *Dreams* is seen in the use of the tanto knife. In samurai culture, this type of knife is used to perform hara-kiri upon oneself. While the young boy with the blade was definitely not a samurai and this short scene was not a samurai film, the use of the tanto knife signifies a connection to the culture of the samurai. The fact that Kurosawa dreamt this scenario is an indication of how the details of samurai life have influenced other matters, even a dream based upon a short children's fable.

Shimotsuma Monogatari, aka Kamikaze Girls

This film was as far from a samurai film as one could possibly imagine, yet it is still

possible to see an essence of the samurai. In the final scene where Ichigo is in conflict with the gang, one of the weapons in hand is a sword. When writing my reflection, this caught my attention because I do not believe that it is common for gangs of other cultures to acquire and use a sword as their weapon of choice. Being accustomed toward swords is a unique consequence of the history of Japanese swords and the samurai; the same cannot be said of European swords in the modern culture.

Summer Wars Anime

Essences of the samurai appeared in *Summer Wars* due to the background of Natsuki's family. In the film, which is set in modern-day Japan, the estate where a majority of the story takes place shares a similar appearance with a samurai manors in old times. Natsuki's family is even said to be descendants of the Sanada samurai clan, who played a significant role during the Warring States period as opposition to the Tokugawa clan. Further image of the samurai is seen in the grandmother's wielding of the naginata. Many Japanese martial arts that are still practiced today are distilled versions of life-or-death skills honed in battle during the samurai eras. The naginata was actually a weapon used by foot soldiers before it was altered to suit the women of the samurai class for self-defense. This modern use of a samurai weapon is yet another essence of the samurai culture.

CONCLUSION

The samurai is an important icon of the Japanese culture that has made many appearances in Japanese cinema throughout the generations. These appearances range from a direct depiction of samurai culture in samurai-themed films, to the more subtle essences of the samurai through

its legacy in the Japanese culture. Due to its importance in the history of Japan, samurai culture is a major reoccurring image that heavily contributes to the cultural identity of Japanese film.

In the depiction of samurai in Japanese cinema, it is apparent that Japanese film is biased toward the latter era of the samurai. Most of the samurai images and stereotypes come from this era, so it is simply a matter of deduction to perceive that many of these misconceptions arise because of this limited representation of samurai history. The portrayal of samurai is an element of Japanese cinema that has definitely seen an evolution between the generations. Prior to the turn of the century, samurai films illustrated a more realistic storyline, while samurai films of the 2000's contain additional thematic elements. This leads to the conclusion that the portrayal of the samurai has become more romanticized in modern film. Essences of the samurai can be seen in films beyond the samurai genre because samurai culture has permeated the culture of modern day Japan. Due to the fact that samurai images are already an unalienable part of Japanese culture, their presence in today's Japanese film is no surprise. This is also the reason that the samurai essences in Japanese cinema are relatively unchanging in their context even over decades of time.

It is apparent that the legacy of the samurai culture lives on in Japan through the many avenues by which samurai appear in Japanese cinema as a reflection of their importance to the Japanese culture and the identity of Japan. For this reason, I expect samurai images to continue their appearances in Japanese film, both in overt historical depictions of samurai culture in another time and through the refined images of the samurai that have already permeated the culture of Japan. It will also be interesting to observe how the samurai will be portrayed within Japanese film in another couple decades and discover if the samurai will become even more romanticized or return to more realistic roots.

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