

The Samurai:
The Japanese Warrior in Film

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In America we have a few samurai films, usually bloodbath mater or the reluctant but deadly warrior. In Japan however, the samurai's homeland, have a much longer history in film and have been portrayed very differently from the Western image. There are undertones, cultural customs, and societal rules that seem all but lost in American films, even in most modern day films. But as the film industry in Japan evolved and developed, the manner in which samurai were portray also changed, moving from the dramatic theater style to an equally artistic new form combining both emotion and heavily structured plot. As the image of samurai shifted, how accurately did the Japanese portray their own historical warrior?

Historical Japan, from 1185 to 1868, was governed by Japanese warriors, the samurai ("The age of," 2009). Part of system similar to the European feudal system, the vassal-like samurai worked for higher-ranking regional nobles, the *daimyo*, in exchange for land and security all while administering the daimyo's domain (Ikegami 2003). Within the samurai class however, there was still "stratified hierarchies" (para. 10) in which lower-ranking samurai "were not supposed to discuss national issues".

To illustrate my point, I am going to examine four Samurai movies, two from the artistic period – *Ugetsu* (1953) and *The Samurai Rebellion* (1967) - and two more modern films directed by Yoji Yamada, *The Twilight Samurai* (2002), and *The Hidden Blade* (2004), to show how the film industry in Japan has evolved. Before I can comment on the accuracy of these films however, what was the samurai's value system really like? Nitobe Inazo was the first – a highly internationalized Japanese individual – to introduce the world to the concept of specifically called "Bushido" in 1900 (Hurst III, 1990, para. 2). This is what most of us in the USA know as the "Way of the Warrior," or "Way of the Samurai" (Bushido in History section, para. 5). However, as Hurst goes on to state, Nitobe "was the least qualified Japanese of his age to have

been informing anyone of Japan's history and culture” (Nitobe Inazo and Bushido section, para. 1) because of his overly Western education and isolation “spatially, culturally, religiously, and even linguistically” (para. 2) from the rest of Japan during the Meiji era during which his book was published. This is not to say Nitobe’s collection of principles were not found in Japanese samurai, but instead there is “no universal ‘code’ of behavior for the samurai class” (Bushido in History section, para. 4).

Beginning with the modern films, *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade*, portray low-ranking samurai, one a widower and the other single, both heads of their respective houses, during the critical change of the Meiji Era, the ending of the age of samurai. Seibei, from *The Twilight Samurai*, is shown as a caring father, wanting his two girls to learn Confucius teachings, but neglects his own image until his childhood friend comes to help. While officials looked poorly on him for his neglected appearance, they chose him to fight Yogo, a ‘disowned’ samurai who refused the order to commit ritual suicide, or *seppuku*. Seibei is an interesting mix of samurai and farmer due to his lower status and personal convictions. He exhibits samurai traits in his concern with protecting Tomoe’s honor from her ex-husband, and upholding his duty by obeying the Clan’s orders. Yet, in contrast, he focused less on how he appeared and felt little conscious shame for his appearance until berated by his superiors. In the film there is little discussion of what schools of *thought* any of the samurai specifically followed, although it is alluded through his children that Seibei learned the Confucius teachings, and through the plot that the Clan had “house laws” (Hurst III, 1990, *The Value of Loyalty*, para. 6) ruling that duels were prohibited, which was common at that time in the Meiji period.

The Hidden Blade, though set in the same time period, vividly depicts the changing undercurrents of the samurai life while learning about Western War from a self-important

teacher from Tokyo. The main character, Katagiri, a low-ranking clan samurai is engrossed in his studies, rescues and discovers his affections towards his maid, Kie, when he is ordered to prove his innocence from Hazama's political intrigue by slaying his friend.

As shown in *The Hidden Blade* through the duel between Katagiri and the Official that used Hazama's wife without fulfilling his promise, samurai were trained and taught in different "schools of thought" (Hurst III, 1990, Bushido in History section, para. 3) and fighting techniques. Even within these schools however there is a wide variation of personal practice, as is the human condition in application. *The Hidden Blade* illustrates well, that even though Katagiri and Hazama are from the same school, they still have very different morals, as Hazama is willing to hide behind hostages and Katagiri dutifully follows his lord's orders to apprehend Hazama.

From these depictions it appears that Director Yamada did his research and at the same time incorporated a very human element into it by taking into account individual personalities of these lower class samurai that he brought to life.

The Samurai Rebellion, made before Yoji Yamada's films, deals with a similar decision between obeying or rebelling against the daimyo. In the beginning, the family was loyal and dutiful to the lord, but after being ordered cruelly to return Yogoro's wife Ichi, formerly the daimyo's concubine, Isaburo and his son Yogoro defy the orders of their lord in order to restore Ichi's honor and place in their home. This takes the form of civil disobedience by not showing up to court and eventually a threatening letter stating that they will take up the issue with Edo, calling their Lord a wife-snatcher, which was a punishable offense regardless of a Daimyo's orders.

This rebellion isn't about taking up arms and killing even though that is what it ends up becoming but that their honor and Ichi's honor as vassals were being compromised for the daimyo's own illegal desires. While a samurai expected to obey their lord, in turn their lord must also obey the laws of Edo. Their honor sufficiently at stake, and the daimyo clearly in the wrong as the laws go, the prideful samurai 'rebelled' against his provocations and fought for Ichi, for their rightful claims, and for their life.

This film seems to first and foremost emphasize duty and pride. While majority of film the family is dutiful, this film seems to illustrate how easily a samurai family could fall into obscurity at their Daimyo's wishes, a reoccurring theme in Japanese media. In regards to portraying samurai accurately or not, the fight inside the Sasahara house seems exaggerated and a lot of the acting exaggerated in its postures but expressionless except for the eyes, the fundamental views of the samurai are hazy, if accurate. The style of portrayal is more focused on the artistic than complete accuracy.

Returning to the beginning, *Ugetsu* was released in 1953, half a century after Nitobe's "Bushido." Although this film was chronologically made before the other films, there is an interesting break in traditional Japanese samurai film tradition – nay – in Japanese media in general, not just from the patterns of majority of samurai films. The protagonists are not samurai, but peasants! To my knowledge, all of the other samurai films (and media) that I have seen were about samurai from the samurai point of view, but this one broke the mold. Yet they are not portrayed in a positive light. No better than bandits, they pillage, rape, and burn the peasant villages, and are not shown in a positive light. Ohama, Tobei's wife, was a rape victim of the samurai, and yet, Tobei wanted to and did eventually become a samurai by obtaining armor and a weapon. Now a foot soldier, he got promoted by bringing the enemy general's head to his new

lord, after witnessing the ritual beheading to avoid the shame of capture “since torture was expected in pre-modern Japan” (Hurst III, 1990, Shinigurui, Crazy for Death section, para. 3). What is most curious is that after his promotion he adopted the effect of a benevolent samurai and spouting one should learn tactics, techniques, and a whole list of things a peasant knows nothing about. Yet what is most interesting about this is that he had a preformed impression of what a samurai should be.

It is true that during the period this film was set, the Azuchi-Momoyama period, was a time of turmoil before the unification under the Tokugawa Shogun. It is difficult to say what these samurai in *Ugetsu* believed, but one thing is sure, they very much held the samurai’s unique sense of shame. As the enemy general demonstrated with his conscious choice to face death instead of capture.

Different directors had unique ways in how they wanted to portray the samurai and different styles of filming. The imagery of *The Samurai Rebellion* has high contrast between black and white, with intense fight ‘scenes’ but very little action in small bursts. The screenplay reminds me of a visual novel, the composition is never boring, and the characters have highly exaggerated and emotional postures. What set this style apart however are the few facial expressions but instead the samurai act with their eyes and deep, angry samurai voices. Coupled with the use of slow, dramatic zoom and the samurai gradually turning their heads, this visual style of Kobayashi, in which he said he was “...keenly attracted to the stylized beauty of [the] traditional forms,” (Richie 2005, p.165) is reminiscent to the old theater performances of kabuki and bunraku. His style has similarities as well to Mizoguchi, the director of *Ugetsu*, although the themes are quite different. Kobayashi was concerned about “resisting entrenched power” (p. 164). Mizoguchi on the other hand, with his “literary and painterly” (p. 131) background wanted

to give his work realism and yet maintained his painterly style of long continuous shots set far away from the action in the scene. The motion, poses, and gestures were like a dance, the beauty of shape. He “[portrayed] the extraordinary in a realistic way” (p. 130) and with *Ugetsu* the themes of social oppression, the devastating effects of war and greed are weaved expertly in with the rest of the film’s tapestry.

Yamada’s both films are up to date for their times using modern camera angles, with lots of close up shots, and switching shots to who’s talking. What is unique to his style however is the lack of overt background scenic shots, and the final fights in particular are shot from a distance and remotely follow the action back and forth. The use of environment, the plants and trees in *The Hidden Blade*, and the claustrophobia of indoor, close quarters dueling in *The Twilight Samurai*, would obscure the action and add tension. Similar to *The Samurai Rebellion*, the theme of *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade* deal with the honor of the samurai, but in comparison it is the samurai vs. the encroaching modern world where their honor prevents them from moving ahead when it is at odds with material goods and ideologies of the West.

This progression from old artistic style to modern techniques, from the old to the new is inversely seen in the themes of these films. *Ugetsu* and *The Samurai Rebellion* deal with social issues but Yamada’s Samurai films focus on the changing world the samurai lived in and the shaky structure their honor upheld in the new age. In this way Yamada’s movies most accurately portray the samurai’s moral codes while keeping the humanity and honesty in the film. *The Samurai Rebellion* purposefully exaggerated the samurai behavior, but in respect to honor and pride, as far my research has shown, the movie is not inaccurate. *Ugetsu* is unlike the others in its unique perspective, so it is difficult to determine the accuracy of the samurai portrayed. Overall,

the films did a good job not giving the inaccurate image of the soulless raging warrior, but showed the complexity of the morals that most samurai followed.

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