Two Spirits: The Dichotomy of Saigō Takamori and Its Portrayal in *The Last Samurai*

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Abstract

*The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick, is easy to pass off as an American movie under the guise of a Japanese motif, but there is something deeper beneath the surface. The movie opened to Western criticism of the portrayal of samurai and Japan and mediocre public reception, but was juxtaposed by the overall positive and appreciative reception by Japanese viewers. While there are historical inaccuracies abound, these romanticized aspects that are commonly mistaken for Hollywood’s blatant disregard for factual events could in fact be indicative of a phenomenon deeply imbedded in Japanese culture. By analyzing the 21st century American movie itself, other popularized iterations of historical figures in Japanese media such as Sakamoto Ryōma, firsthand accounts of the modernization of Japan, and analyzing the Japanese reception of the movie compared to Western reception, this capstone aims to prove that portrayal of Japan and the rebel leader Saigō Takamori is a direct result of Japan’s own sense of tradition, heritage, and culture. Ultimately, this capstone will demonstrate that the glorification and misrepresentation of Japanese rebel Saigō Takamori is less a manufacturing of American design, and rather the mythologizing of a historical Japanese figure through a Japanese public memory that traditionally exemplifies certain characteristics of prominent national characters throughout its extensive history.
Introduction

“It was a dilemma for me at first, until I realized that for Katsumoto [Takamori], it wasn't a question of life or death that was important, but a question of honor.”¹ This quote, from the Japanese actor who portrayed Hollywood’s version of Japanese rebel Saigō Takamori, perfectly sums up the quintessential aspects of why the Japanese revere the historical figure. The Hollywood film tells a romanticized and rather misinterpreted—albeit with good intention—iteration of the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, with the Japanese folk hero Saigō Takamori. The film is resplendent with traditional and iconic samurai armor, katanas, and grand gestures of honor, glory, and patriotism. These elements within the film seem overstated and exaggerated, but in truth they are the embodiment of everything the Japanese love about Saigō. While many in the West who saw The Last Samurai—both critic and humble viewer alike—met the movie with mixed feelings, there was a surprisingly positive reception by the Japanese viewer base. To some it is puzzling as to why the Japanese could be so warm towards a movie that not only contained a white American actor as its headlining star, but also a movie that was, to the West, “clearly enamored [with] the culture it examines while resolutely remaining an outsider’s romanticization of it...”²

In fact, The Last Samurai remains one of the few Hollywood depictions of the Japanese in a positive role. With a long history of Orientalization, casting white actors as Japanese

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characters, and a slew of misrepresentations and racist depictions, the spirit of what it means to be Japanese has been altogether avoided in Western media. While it is rather easy to identify *The Last Samurai* as another Americanization of Japanese culture, especially with the movie’s seeming focal point on the American movie star Tom Cruise, there are instances of reverence to Japanese heritage that—whether intentional or otherwise—resonate with some of the deep characteristics that compose Japanese culture. The ideals of honor, selflessness, and loyalty are exemplified in the art of *bushido* and in older samurai films by Japanese directors such as Akira Kurosawa. These ideals are critical to the Japanese identity, and without understanding them it is hard to make sense of how the Japanese public memory could ever influence Japanese culture and historical representation.

By understanding these ideals that makeup the foundation of Japanese ethics, it is easier to understand the praise given to the film *The Last Samurai*, as this was one of the first films from American filmmakers that did not misrepresent Asian and Japanese characters in a racist and stereotypical manner. In all actuality the presentation of historical events in the movie coupled with the spirit of the film demonstrate the Japanese public memory and give an understanding of their own cultural interpretation of national historical events.

While the stunning scenes of explosions and toppling horses, swordsmen swinging their katana wildly and preparing for certain death are certainly appealing and compelling, there is a deeper story in the film that is not only missed, but it is almost surely

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3 *Seven Samurai*, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 3 hr. 27 min., Toho Production Company 1957-2010, DVD.
unintended by the filmmakers. So while the American moviegoer might have met the movie with average expectations, wowed by the action sequences and the interesting window into historical Japan, it is met doubly by Japanese fans due to their connection to the legacy and the appreciation that was put into the film by Zwick and company.

It is important to understand that the glorification and mythologizing hero worship that is prevalent in Japanese culture towards Saigō Takamori is not a cultural phenomenon, but has been done throughout Japan’s history—from gunpowder in the 17th century to other historical figures such as Sakamoto Ryōma. These historical phenomena—not cultural—encapsulate the ethics of modern Japan and the handling of the events gives insight into the Japanese public memory and how they revere the Japanese characteristics and the heroes that embody them. Among these are Sakamoto Ryōma and the entire mythologizing of the Japanese imperial Yamato family. Transforming these historical figures from important Japanese politicians into Japanese myth it is a sign of cultural importance that in turn shapes how the Japanese approach their own history. In fact, Saigō Takamori’s legacy is most important because it was in the face of cultural change, a desperate attempt to preserve a traditional Japan against the Western influence and Japanese adaptation to outside powers.

This attempt, and the ethics that it attempted to preserve and also displayed, is what makes The Last Samurai a movie that is warmly received by many in Japan. Despite the smudging of historical facts and the legacy of Japan’s fiercest warriors dressed up by

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Hollywood, it comes as no surprise that directed Edward Zwick and the people who made this film were catering to the admiration of the Japanese rather than the falsely perceived Western audiences. In addition, the film served as a catalyst for progress in the way of Hollywood’s portrayal of the Japanese through its determination to star and hire a predominantly Japanese cast and crew.

So while American viewers may believe that the movie is yet another attempt at cashing in on exotic appeal, the more baffling truth is that it so rightly captures the heart of Japanese public memory and the essence of who Saigō Takamori was to the Japanese people after his rebellion, regardless of what evidence supported the latter.

**Background and Historiography**

Known as the Meiji Restoration Period, Japan was in the midst of a watershed moment starting in 1868 in the face of modernization of the nation. It was during this time that the Tokugawa shogunate—a feudal militant dictatorship—was toppled and replaced with a new government which was faced with the troubling dilemma of whether or not to open its ports to the West. With America pressuring Japan with gunboat diplomacy, the new leaders were under a significant amount of pressure and those who had instated the new government were in conflict of how to handle Japan’s future. As Charles Yates describes it:
However, until at least the later 1870’s, most of these men were not so much moving toward Meiji Japan as they were trying to find a satisfying way of moving away from Tokugawa Japan. That is, they knew what they had was no longer functional, but they did not have more than the vaguest of ideas of what should replace it...⁶

With America taking full advantage of cultural misunderstandings and the false perception of inequality between the two nations, Japan’s budding new government was already on the ropes from a global standpoint⁷. While the new government sent ambassadors overseas during the 1860’s and 1870’s, the struggle to maintain a wholly Japanese identity was becoming a losing battle.

It is in this politically volatile climate, with the old Japan gone and the new Japan uncertain, that Saigō fell into an opportunity to leave his mark on Japan’s history. A proud member of the soon-to-be disenfranchised samurai, Saigō set out to protect the privileged warrior class’ interests and in doing so embodied the ethics that were believed to be mastered and upheld by Saigō and his peers. Where The Last Samurai succeeds is in capturing dichotomy of Saigō, simultaneously a rebel fighting to preserve his own sociopolitical interests and a patriot defending Japanese heritage and preserving the traditions of the common people.

The convoluted nature of Japanese interpretation of Saigō Takamori is well documented and analyzed by historians even to this day. Charles L. Yates delves into the mystery of Saigō’s historical and mythical identities in his book Saigō Takamori: The Man behind the Myth. His

book attempts to understand where the historical facts of Saigō’s identity become blurred by the Japanese reverent perception of him as a national figure.

Mark Ravina also aims to peel back the layers of myth surrounding Saigō, and describes that almost immediately after his death the mythologizing of his identity begins. His article “The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori: Samurai, Seppuku, and the Politics of Legend” underlines the importance of Saigō’s legacy and its impact on modern Japanese ethics and culture. In fact, much of Saigō’s life has been extensively documented, as has the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877.

Despite this wealth of documentation and analysis, there is controversy that surrounds Saigō to this day due to the dichotomous nature of Saigō’s identity. At once both a historic figure and a mythological being, the historical evidence that can be found is of little importance to the Japanese perception of one of their national legends. Ravina explores this in his work and points out that “…Saigō legends, over decades, were rewritten in accordance with changing political positions and visions of Japanese history." This strange conduct with Saigō’s historical legacy has compelled many historians to focus on the truths of his existence.

While this focus is critical to understanding how Saigō fits into Japan’s history, there has been very little done on the cause and effect of this glorification and romance of his legacy. Ivan Morris has explored the Japanese cultural phenomenon of glorifying what he refers to as “the nobility of failure." And there has been limited studying of Japanese public memory, but

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almost none of the historiography done on Saigō Takamori or his legacy has been conducted in the last twenty years.

In considering *The Last Samurai* as an academic area of study, there has been little done to analyze the film or its reception by the Japanese public. One article has been done by Mina Shin that explores the underlying negative implications of the film; including the White dominance over foreign culture, Orientalization, and the Westernization of Japanese culture and history. Overall, however, there has been little done on the film or its connection to Japanese heritage and public memory.

*The Last Samurai* is not an isolated interpretation of Japanese heritage and culture, but other films such as *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Seven Samurai* that, while made for entertainment purposes rather than historical documentation, portrays the spirit and ethics of the Japanese and their history in a positive and appreciative light. These movies demonstrate that while not entirely historically accurate, the essence of the depiction is what is important to Japanese public memory, which in turn conditions the nation’s historical discourse.

**Setting the Stage**

Unsurprisingly, *The Last Samurai* is not entirely faithful to Japan’s reception of the West during the 19th century. While relations with the West had carried on for almost thirty years, the tension within Japan had also grown. Starting with the dwindling Tokugawa bakufu, the relationship between the United States and Japan had been handled with Japan on its back
foot. While Japan had already once closed its borders in the 17th century during a period of the Edo bakufu known as Saikoku (literally meaning ‘closing the country’)\(^\text{10}\), America was adamant in forcing open Japan’s ports for trade with aggressive gunboat diplomacy. This was not only to ensure the trade, but some Americans wholeheartedly believed that this diplomatic strategy was the only way to handle negotiations with the East. This is explicitly stated by an American who ventured to Japan during the mid-19th century:

> The many fruitless attempts made to open the ports of Japan, by various nations, unaccompanied by that display of physical force necessary to command due respect for their request; and the immediate success of Commodore Perry at the head of his formidable fleet, point significantly toward the kind of diplomacy best calculated to prove prosperous in that country, as in other parts of Asia\(^\text{11}\).

With little room to maneuver diplomatically, the Tokugawa regime stumbled through trade relations and one-sided contracts that started in 1853 until Japan finally began to assert itself well into the 1870’s. While the Tokugawa bakufu’s hand was essentially forced into these trade agreements with the militarily stunning America, it would put the interim government during the early years of the Meiji Restoration in a foreign relations crisis. With many of Japan’s neighbors, China and Siam included, subjected to colonization and forced into Western trade agreements, Japan was determined to keep its autonomy intact. This determination succeeded


\(^{11}\) *An Oriental Traveler, Japan and the Japanese* (1860), 55.
in some ways, as Japan remains one of the only Eastern countries that was able to modernize itself without the need for Western colonization\(^\text{12}\).

Despite staving off any possibility of Western colonization, this period right before the Meiji Restoration is critical to understanding the gravitational pull Saigō’s ethics had on the people and the longevity his legacy has. In early 1858 to mid-1859 many American-Japanese treaties were restructured, giving Americans even more power in Japan’s ports. One of these critical clauses gave Americans free exercise of religion and, even more importantly, made Americans exempt from Japanese law and judgment.\(^\text{13}\) The Japanese identity and national power was in a state of contest, an unabashedly aggressive America forcing concessions for themselves and draining any power the bakufu might have held over them.

This did not go uncontested, however, and even before Saigō became the rebel leader he is remembered for, there are terror attacks by samurai and Japanese citizens alike. Tensions were high even before the early days of the new Meiji government, and while Saigō and the other politicians who had brought about this new government struggled to assert its authority over the nation, Japanese took it into their own hands to dispense their self-righteous justice upon foreign traders. With the Tokugawa bakufu’s influence dwindling, many Japanese acted out against the Europeans and Americans. Terror attacks as early as 1861, seven years before the Meiji Restoration, foreign diplomats and their parties came under threat from the samurai\(^\text{14}\). In the spring of 1868 samurai would attack and kill 11 French sailors, demonstrating

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\(^{13}\) Auslin, *Negotiating with Imperialism*, 44.

\(^{14}\) Auslin, *Negotiating with Imperialism*, 71-75.
the severe discontent the Japanese suffered during the perforation period of the European and American traders. More importantly, this attack led to two devastating issues within Japan. The French minister demanded that the samurai involved be sentenced to death, but in a fashion that would rob them of the honorable death that the samurai class was entitled to by tradition\textsuperscript{15}. Secondly, it exposed and challenged the fledgling power that the Meiji government had managed to establish this early on in its existence. While the Meiji government handled the situation commendably—chiefly in securing the right to seppuku for the attackers—the simple fact that European powers were allowed to infer their own sense of justice at all demonstrates the lack of autonomy that Japan had going into the 1870’s.

Ironically, the Meiji government would find its empowerment in leaning into the West’s presence. During the 1870’s one of Japan’s most promising politicians, Iwakura Tomomi, conducted an ambassadorial mission to visit the United States and Europe in an attempt to understand their new trade partners better. During his time abroad, he noted the military strength of America and began to realize the promise and importance of global commerce\textsuperscript{16}.

The more centralized and empowered the government grew, and the more it decided to appeal to the West’s influence, the more the samurai’s own influence began to diminish. It was, in fact, this strengthening of centralized government that would put Saigō back into political power after aiding the dissolution of the Tokugawa bakufu and lead to the very conflict that would cause the samurai uprising.

\textsuperscript{15} Auslin, \textit{Negotiating with Imperialism}, 150.
\textsuperscript{16} Kume Kunitake, \textit{The Iwakura Embassy} (Japan: The Japan Documents, 2002), 52.
With Saigō’s home province of Satsuma prospering industrially due to trade, the new Meiji government grew concerned that the province would find itself better off independent from a barely established regime. By inviting Saigō into the government in order to rein in Satsuma, it put him in a position of military command and in the middle of a dilemma. On the one hand, he was expected by his fellow samurai to preserve their interests and their sociopolitical station. On the other hand, the imperial Meiji government had been challenged by Korea and was debating war in order to protect its own integrity. This war would require a national army, in the vision of Von Bismarck’s Prussian army, which would disempower the samurai class that had put its faith in Saigō.\(^{17}\)

Saigō’s next move was indicative of his true nature, and demonstrated the “nobility in failure” that Ivan Morris has described. As Ravina describes it in his book, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori*:

Saigō’s sudden determination to go to Korea has puzzled generations of historians, and the political crisis sparked by his mission is one of the most intensely debated topics in Japanese history. For many years the influential explanation was that Saigō expected to provoke a violent clash in Korea and, through his death, provide a rallying point for disaffected samurai. Saigō could thus atone for supporting the abolition of saurai privilege, and thousands of samurai could prove their worth by conquering Korea and then, perhaps, seizing control in Tokyo.\(^{18}\)

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This diplomatic mission, however, never took off the ground. The result was Saigō resigning from his position in government and retiring to his home province. While the *The Last Samurai* depicts Saigō’s character as an eager leader of a desperate rebellion, the truth is that Saigō was not even the main proponent of the rebellion that he found himself leading to its bloody end. In truth, his home province of Satsuma had decided that it could be an independent polity, separate from the imperial government. The samurai of Satsuma eventually mounted a bold offensive against one of the imperial forts in the region, storming the fort with a conscious decision to only use traditional samurai weaponry. He remained publicly impartial until a confession of an imperial attempt on Saigō’s life that resulted in students under his tutelage rebelling and killing imperial policemen, convinced him that his years-long dilemma between the samurai class and a centralized government was no longer his moral prison. He had found a noble cause to dedicate the final chapter of his life to. What would follow would be a bloody rebellion that was doomed to fail from the start.

**Saigō’s Death and Legacy**

Saigō’s rebellion was plagued with small victories and bitter defeats, ending in a year-long retreat through the mountains of his home province. One aspect of *The Last Samurai* that the filmmakers get half right is Saigō’s belief that he was indeed a loyal subject of the emperor, attempting to protect him against his own advisors that would seek to influence him. This

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allowed Saigō to maintain his loyalties to both his fellow samurai and the imperial government that he had helped to create, keeping his conscious clear and his duty purposeful. These ethics that Saigō exemplified would not be lost on his enemies nor his supporters, as both sides would come to honor his legacy and mourn his passing.

While *The Last Samurai* dresses up his final moments in a bloody charge befit for the Hollywood silver screen, the reality of his peril was none too spectacular. His death has been contested by scholars, and many Japanese maintain the fact that he committed *seppuku*—the ritual suicide maintained by the samurai class in order to keep their honor intact—while Western scholars have proven that while it would be romantic to believe he was able to die a samurai’s death, the evidence points elsewhere.

Iterations of his noble and honorable death begin cropping up little more than a month after his death, including news tabloids and woodblock paintings commemorating his defeat. These eager depictions of the “last samurai” at his end are the very reason that his death is so contested and his legacy so embedded into Japanese identity to this day. To further iterate this point, Yates describes Saigō’s lasting legacy and its impact on the modern Japanese, “…the real importance of Saigō Takamori is less the role he played in the Meiji state and the birth of modern Japan than it is the role he continues to play in the imaginations of the Japanese today…”

The stage set for Saigō on the verge of his rebellion was a complex and bizarre combination of mishap and misunderstanding. Saigō was on the precipice of a conundrum; at

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once being torn between his social class that held respect for him and the emperor to whom he swore his loyalty and honor. These political and social obligations are paramount in Japanese culture, and Saigō’s ability to stay true to both sides in the midst of the rebellion demonstrate one critical reason why the Japanese revere him, despite being an unsuccessful rebel.

Tasuku Harada conducted research into Japanese ethics and the pillars of their culture, noting:

“In most cases giri [justice, what is right] conflicts with ninjo (human emotions, natural feelings). What moves the Japanese most in novels or in theatrical plays are those scenes in which the conflict between giri and ninjo are represented...A man who does not acknowledge these principles is despised as a man devoid of the sense of giri.”

Saigō’s death was significant because it demonstrated one last potent display of honor for the samurai warrior class, while also reigniting a sense of pride and patriotism that had been lost in the Japanese people in the midst of a foreign assault on Japanese national agency.

The significance of Saigō’s death was such that it was near impossible for the Japanese to truthfully represent his demise. Within a month there were numerous romanticized depictions of Saigō’s death. These depictions include dramatic portrayals of the final battle, in which Saigō’s bodyguards hold off the imperial forces while he commits seppuku, and others where he ascends to the heavens to look down on his subjects. These representations

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perforate Japanese history, and can be found in both Japanese and English history books. Even Ivan Morris’ *The Nobility of Failure* depicts Saigō’s death in a fabricated, romanticized fashion:

> There was a bright moon on the night of the twenty-third. Saigō’s companions took advantage of its light to make music on the Satsuma lute, perform the *kenbu* (an ancient sword dance), and compose some final poetry...Finally Saigō exchanged farewell cups of *sake* with his chief officers and other followers...[Saigō] then bowed in the direction of the Imperial Palace and cut open his stomach.

Today historians have uncovered enough evidence to dispel any doubt that Saigō’s death was neither artfully executed nor ceremoniously spectacular. While he supposedly performed *seppuku* himself, both the accounts of an American sailor, John Hubbard, and the autopsy performed by the Japanese after the battle demonstrate that the wounds sustained and the state of Saigō’s body would make it impossible for him to have met his end in such a romantic fashion. In truth, of Saigō’s last moment were almost certainly so much more tragic and morbid that it would have betrayed his legacy if he were to be remembered in that way.

> It is for these reasons that the damning evidence against Saigō’s glorious demise is willfully ignored, or ignorantly recounted in textbooks and academia. The autopsy report reveals that Saigō was plagued with health issues including heart problems and an infection in his scrotum which, at its late stage, would have nearly crippled him. Hubbard’s account also

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leaves out any notation of stomach wounds or damage from swords anywhere on Saigō’s body aside from his decapitation. These wounds would have been obvious and indicative of any attempt at seppuku.

By fabricating Saigo’s death, however, the Japanese are able to portray him as the idealistic Japanese hero that embodied everything that was wholly Japanese. Ravina speculates as to why the details of Saigō’s death were so paramount to the Japanese:

These tales of suicide, like stories of Saigō’s ascent to Mars, were attempts to represent the enormous implications of Saigō’s death. If, for example, Saigō was the last true samurai, then he needed a spectacular and iconic death. What is fascinating about Saigō’s seppuku is how it has morphed into something else: a standard account of Saigō’s demise, reproduced in reference works and textbooks. This transformation and neglect for the truth of Saigō’s last moments and persona take root immediately. Not only is his own image changed, but the way the Japanese people see themselves is quickly changed as well. This can be seen in different wood carvings, where prior to Saigō’s death he can be seen portrayed in his imperial uniform that had become the standard for military men, and eleven years after his death the traditional samurai armor reappears in scenes that

Figure 1. Nagashima Mōsai Saigō nehan zō. 1877. Print. Kagoshima City Museum of Art. Kagoshima.

depict the implementation of the new Meiji constitution in 1888. The cultural retrograde on display demonstrates the power of Saigō’s legacy, a national hero who—while a rebel against the emperor—helped the Japanese to resolve the primary issue that was plaguing the nation: retaining a Japanese identity and agency in the wake of building a relationship with the West31.

This lasting impression of Saigō would eventually be used as the preliminary architecture for the imperial Japan of the early-to-mid 20th century. Saigō’s support of invading Korea to demonstrate a militarily strong, nationally united Japan in the formative years of the Meiji Restoration were eventually used by the extreme nationalists to advocate aggressive expansion into Korea and China during the early 20th century. This interpretation of Saigō would lead to further convolution of his character, as some of the nationalist political groups of Japan would lend their own details to justify their reverence of Saigō, such as the emperor’s approval of Saigō and his motivations for invading Korea despite no evidence to support it32.

After World War II and the end of imperial Japan Saigō’s legacy would be reinterpreted to be a symbol of Japanese ethics and heroism, a patriot who made difficult choices in order to stay true to the people and his emperor, preserving both giri and nanjo. This version of Saigō is

![Figure 2. Kenpō happu Ueno buri.](image)


the equivalent of the United States’ reverence of rebel general and first president George Washington. It is this iteration of Saigō that remains within the hearts and minds of the Japanese today, and it is the legacy of a hero that Zwick and the crew of *The Last Samurai* attempt to capture in the 2003 movie.

**A Legacy Preserved**

*The Last Samurai* is a true embodiment of Saigō’s legacy, despite the inaccuracies in depicting the events of the Satsuma Rebellion. In fact, these inaccuracies are more faithful to representing the mythical figure of Saigō Takamori, and when coupled with the understanding of Japanese public memory and how they revere him now, can be used to understand a convoluted historical figure whose compromising situation fortunately led to an immortalizing death that would be used to dictate Japanese identity. Saigō’s legacy evolving in this way is nothing new, as it is less a Japanese phenomenon and more so a historical occurrence that has happened throughout the world in times of great social and cultural upheaval. As Morris points out:

There are times in the history of many countries when growing internal discord and fear of from the outside create a special need for some unifying symbol in the form of a national hero who will give the people a sense of pride and cohesion...This process is similar in every part of the world and in every period...Mohammed in seventh-century
Arabia, to El Cid in eleventh-century Spain, to Jeanne d’Arc in fifteenth-century France... 33

But Saigō’s legacy is even more monumental than simply being a national hero of the 19th century and feudal Japan. His has the ability to evolve, to fit any facet of Japanese culture and identity that suits the Japanese people, subjective to Japanese public memory. Pierre Nora, a French historian who has spent much of his time understanding French identity and the idea of French public memory, describes a French folk hero peasant-soldier known as Chauvin whose identity similarly evolved parallel to the French people’s mode of thinking. Pierre says this of Chauvin’s phenomenal transformation from French joke to symbol of patriotism and French pride: “Two things deeply buried in the French collective memory...namely, what Chauvin recounts and what he embodies...Classical yet progressive and resolutely modern34.”

Much like the French Chauvin, Saigō embodies both a progressive transition for Japan while also embodying classical ethics that give the Japanese a sense of identity and pride. It is insignificant to the Japanese people that aspects of his legacy are historically fluid, able to change to fit a mode of national and cultural thinking that caters to the times. This is why evidence that lends itself to solidifying his last moments in truth are relatively unimportant in remember who Saigō was.

Public memory is malleable and can be influenced to significant effect, as has been accomplished in Japan before. For almost one hundred years starting in 1543 Japan had been

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introduced to powder firearms, but after roughly one century after the introduction, mastery, and domestic production of these firearms the Japanese turned away from gunpowder weaponry in such a fashion that by the time Perry arrived in 1854 the Japanese did not even recognize the technology. This accomplishment is unheard of in almost any other civilization’s history, an entire culture’s ability to essentially turn back the hands of time and form the public memory in a way that renders prior historical events and evidence practically nonexistent. As Noel Perrin explains in his book *Giving Up the Gun*:

...in Japan swords had a symbolic value far greater than they had in Europe. It would therefore have been a greater loss to let them be replaced entirely by guns...the sword was not merely a fighting weapon in Japan, it was the visible form of one’s honor—‘the soul of the samurai,’ in the Japanese phrase...in Japan it was the only embodiment of honor\(^{35}\).

This erasure of technological knowledge was not by accident, rather it was a conscious decision made by the Japanese who had come to the conclusion that gun powder weaponry compromised Japanese tradition and ethos. Saigō’s legacy is much the same way, the parts that are important to the Japanese are retained and retold, remembered for their contribution to Japan’s identity. The other details fall by the wayside, they serve no purpose in building the Japanese identity, there is no history or meaningful message in those details for the Japanese people.

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\(^{35}\) Perrin, Noel. *Giving up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879*, (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1979), 36.
It is important to understand that the identity of the Japanese people time and time again is exemplified as the first and foremost aspect of Japanese culture. Saigō’s status as a national hero is nothing new to the Japanese. There is a pattern of national heroes such as Saigō, the 47 Ronin, and Sakamoto Ryōma, whom have outgrown their historical role and ascended to a larger, more idealistic framework of the Japanese narrative and identity. It applies, also, to darker parts of Japanese history that do not reflect the true ethos of the Japanese, such as the early-to-mid-20th century period of ultra-nationalism and wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese. There is an evident conscious effort to shift and shape history in order to fit the Japanese framework, a public memory that is proud of its heritage and culture.

**An American Depiction**

This national habit of transforming the historic into myth, the remembrance of the ideal instead of the accurate, is a critical foundation upon which the seemingly baffling positive Japanese reception of *The Last Samurai* is built. Although Saigō Takamori did not don the traditional and iconic samurai armor in battle as he is depicted in Figure 3, instead wearing his

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36 Tagsold, "Popular Realms of Memory in Japan: The Case of Sakamoto Ryōma," 44.
imperial officer’s uniform as in Figure 4, it is a small detail within the movie that gives homage to the memory of the samurai and their legacy. It would be easy, as an American, to ridicule these aspects of the movie as Hollywood’s own touches, but in truth it is a more accurate representation of Saigō in the minds of the Japanese and what he means to them than if Zwick had portrayed him as his true historical self.

Despite some of these nuances, Zwick made it very clear during the production period of the movie that it was of the utmost importance to him to maintain a sense of authenticity and honesty with this film, “There is really only one language among artists [and] that is the truth.” This aim of cultural authenticity—portraying the Japanese in a manner that resonates with their public memory—is demonstrated in one simple yet powerful decision on Zwick’s part. In order to preserve the spirit of the film and ensure that the significance of the Japanese legend were told with the Japanese in mind, Zwick was adamant about taking on a predominantly

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Asian cast\textsuperscript{38}. Even within these more specific and restrictive requirements that Zwick had for casting, the majority of the cast was Japanese, mostly skirting the issue of cross-ethnic casting—using a Chinese actor or actress to play a Japanese character for instance. While there are practical constraints of avoiding a cross-ethnic casting altogether, Zwick simultaneously combated cross-ethnic casting and the false interpretation of the culture he was representing in his film. These two elements of American-foreign film are amok in the industry today. Without exploring the extensive and nuanced world of racial-cultural politics in film, there is a question at the heart of it that pertains to the perceived inauthenticity of Zwick’s work: if there were a predominantly Japanese film crew and cast, would they willingly endorse and create a work of inauthentic representation of their people and culture? Jun Okada’s chapter in \textit{Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange}, titled “Cultural Odor in the Global Order”, explores this conundrum:

The misrepresentation of Japan is not merely evident in Hollywood. Rather, since the peak of the “economic miracle” in the 1980s, Japan’s own producers of culture have had a stake in its representation via a practice known as “cultural odorlessness…which render cultural and ethnic neutrality in Japanese products for overseas consumption.”\textsuperscript{39}

This practice of cultural odorlessness also affects our interpretation of Zwick’s decision to cast American actor Tom Cruise in the costarring role of Nathan Algren, a fictional American soldier who aids the film’s incarnation of Saigō Takamori. For many, this was the keystone to the film’s

\textsuperscript{38} Otto, Jeff. "An Interview with the Director and Cast of The Last Samurai - IGN."

inauthenticity and misrepresentation of historical events and the supposed focus on Japanese culture. Mina Shin describes Tom Cruise’s role as the embodiment of a “…white fantasy of becoming a samurai warrior [which is] one symptom representing the complicated American desire for Japan that has been shaped by the shifting Japanese-American relations of the past 150 years.” This main point of contention is shared by several movie reviews, including Variety’s online review by Todd McCarthy, who notes that the focus on Cruise’s character ultimately detracts from the heart of the film.

Cruise’s performance, however, serves a twofold purpose that ultimately helps the movie succeed. For one, he is a notable American actor that, when placed in the spotlight, is sure to elicit higher grossing sales and more attention in the media. At the time of production in 2003, there had been virtually no positive historical drama pieces featuring the Japanese in a positive light. Although far from the ideal rendition for many critics, it gave the film the attention it needed, giving American and Japanese demographics a push in the right direction in regards to Japanese—and Asian overall—portrayal in Hollywood films. Secondly, as Jayson Chun makes note of, the pairing of Cruise with a Japanese-centric film “revealed the Japanese audience’s ambivalent relationship with the U.S., which was comprised of a mixture of fear and longing.” In addition, Chun argues that the American-Japanese relationship, over time, has been sanitized through television and marketing. In this way, Cruise’s capacity and the film

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itself serves the purpose of reiterating that America had been an oppressive and incessant force that the Japanese struggled to reconcile with for a significant portion of the last two centuries. This sort of criticism came in another interpretation of Cruise’s character, much in the same vein of Kevin Costner’s character in *Dances with Wolves*, as symbolizing the white hero conquering and mastering another culture. However, this interpretation is entirely subjective and can more readily be interpreted as an acknowledgement of Japanese culture being juxtaposed to the budding imperial culture of the United States. As Stuart Price describes: “…This could be read as a trenchant critique of US military policy during the phase of its ‘internal’ imperialism, but it is contextualized by Algren’s personal sense of morality, and his eventual allegiance to a purer form of patriarchal authority, the village run by the samurai.”

In addition, the interplay between Ken Watanabe’s incarnation of Saigō Takamori and Cruise’s Nathan Algren help to highlight the cultural differences. The relationship they have throughout the movie personifies the convoluted and bittersweet relationship that Japan struggled with in its relationship with the United States. As Saigō’s rebellion highlighted at the time, it was a watershed moment where Japan began to acknowledge that its past was truly history and it prepared itself for a transformation in a modern era. Many critics are quick to dismiss the symbolic exchange of ideas between Watanabe and Cruise’s characters, rather remaining fixated on the battle scenes.

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Chun affirms that the film, a product produced by foreigners, is a truly nationalist piece at heart that is able to avoid bias and self-righteousness due to its political detachment from the culture it depicts\textsuperscript{46}. However, there are inherent sub-issues that bound to arise when the film is interpreted. Shin claims “in this narrative, violence used against samurai is presented as an essential and necessary part of the process through which Japanese society was established as a modern nation\textsuperscript{47}.” In reality, this statement is truer than she realizes. The Satsuma Rebellion and the significance of Saigō’s death were a necessity for Japan to transition from a feudal state to a modern government. If the Satsuma Rebellion had been successful, or the samurai class had not been given this last stunning blow, the ruling class of Japan for nearly seven centuries would be held in limbo. Japan’s government and social spheres were held hostage to the possibility that the samurai class could ever reemerge. This is something that the film achieves in its final battle—a symbolic defeat representing the last death throes of the samurai class—even if it is historically inaccurate in its details.

While many critics, the majority of them American, would be quick to ridicule \textit{The Last Samurai} for its historical inaccuracies, its starring of an American white actor, and the insertion of a fiction character that goes along with the Japanese way of life, there is a method to the madness. From a realist’s perspective, Tom Cruise brings in more money and more viewers which allows for a more widely accepted and widely seen film. From a historian’s perspective, the film lacks true historical facts and details, but the heart of the story and the representation of the Japanese people and the socio-political struggles within the Japanese people is more

\textsuperscript{47} Shin, “Making a Samurai Western,” 1069.
acutely captured than the film is given credit for. Zwick and company’s movie set an unprecedented step forward for representing non-Caucasian actors and actresses in an American film. This sign of effort to give authenticity to the heart of the film, while perhaps not in the style of armor or the correct details of events, was helped to capture what the Japanese people and their culture stood for and what it stood against at the time.

**Conclusion**

The glorification and misrepresentation of Japanese rebel Saigō Takamori in *The Last Samurai* is less a ploy thought up by Hollywood in order to cash in on Japanese culture, and rather the most modern iteration of the mythologizing of a historical figure that elicits cultural pride, ethics, and sense of identity. This evocation is made possible through a Japanese public memory and a nationalistic pride in a shared history.

While it seems convenient to write off Edward Zwick’s *The Last Samurai* as a Hollywood depiction that hopes to wow audiences with Tom Cruise’s presence, compelling morality and pondering of ideals such as sacrifice, duty and honor, there is more beneath the surface whether it was intentional or not. Many American critics believe that the film to be a poor rendition of Japanese culture and traditions, without touching upon the finer historical inaccuracies. In all actuality, however, the underlying themes and the personification of Ken Watanabe’s character, Katsumoto (the film’s iteration of Saigō Takamori), that honestly and
faithfully capture the elements of the Satsuma Rebellion that make Saigō an important cultural and historical figure.

Historians have debated on the accuracies of Saigō’s life and final battle, especially American scholars, but all of these historical conflicts add to the mythical figure that is the present day Saigō Takamori. There are two versions of the last samurai that exist today, the historical and the mythical, and they exist for two very different reasons. The historical Saigō exists to explain the death of Japan’s most historically important and influential class. The mythical Saigō exists to explain the continuation of Japanese culture and tradition, ethics and morality, that still resonate within the Japanese today. While critics are quick to dismiss much of Zwick’s work as Hollywood magic and poor interpretations, the film captures this dichotomy at its heart. It is because of this portrayal of Saigō and the personification of duty, honor, and sacrifice that he portrays that the Japanese had such a warm, enthusiastic reception of a foreign depiction of one of the nation’s greatest heroes.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


A brief article published during the opening month of *The Last Samurai*. It is a publicity article in which Ken Watanabe is interviewed about the movie and about his experience acting in a major American film.

While most of the article was not important for research, the interview with Ken Watanabe yields some quotes that will lend insight into a Japanese actor’s internalizing of the movie and what it means to him and to many Japanese people.


The Iwakura Embassy collection chronicles the study of American and other foreign powers by Japanese ambassadors. While much of this information is of little consequence to understanding the Satsuma Rebellion, there are some very important parts of this source that help to understand the political climate of the time and the perception of Western powers by Japanese intellectuals.

A valuable primary source, some of the information provided proved useful for historical context and comparison, setting up the scene for the Satsuma Rebellion. This consists of the evaluation of American military strength, evaluation of cultural differences and the reflection of the Japanese dilemma, and the understanding of the archaic policies of the East versus importance of global commerce.


The author does a general detailing of events leading up to the Satsuma Rebellion, prefacing the events chronicled by the source’s subject, John Hubbard. The importance of the source comes from the primary source material in the form of Hubbard’s letters. He chronicles his experiences on the fringes of the rebellion as a third party. He details some of the local information about the rebellion leaders and the events surrounding them. Ultimately he describes seeing Saigō Takamori’s corpse, which is in direct conflict with other accounts or descriptions of Saigō’s demise and corpse.

This source was very valuable source to compare to other accounts of Saigō’s final days. Using this to juxtapose other accounts was helpful to understand the mythologizing of Saigō’s legacy.

This review is rather negative, and explores the Hollywood influence over the movie. While it has good things to say about some of the acting and representations, it demonstrates the negative reception that some critics in the West held on the movie’s release.

This was important to juxtapose with Japanese reception and the historical accuracy of the film.


This movie review demonstrates the Western reception of the movie The Last Samurai and its depiction of 19th century Japan. The author discusses the confusing roles and settings of the movie, and the conflicting ideals of both Watanabe’s and Cruise’s characters. The author also picks up on the romanticized version of the samurai and gives a pointed statement about how the movie works well for the action scenes, but most of the emotional and cultural developments fall short.

This review, coupled with others, was important in forming the framework that demonstrates the disconnect between Japanese public memory and history and the Western perception of historical accuracy and historical events.


This art shows the immediate idolization of Takamori after his death. This depiction shows him ascended to heaven and his subjects revering that ascent. It also depicts him in his historically accurate imperial uniform, which was useful in using to draw comparisons to the depiction of him and other samurai in Zwick’s movie, The Last Samurai.


This movie is a Japanese movie that tells the story of a band of samurai who band together to save a village. The movie itself serves only the purpose of demonstrating the glorification and mythologizing of the samurai class and the heroes envisioned in that class. This was a strong link to The Last Samurai, as they embodied many of the same ethics and morals and messages that Zwick’s movie attempts to get at.

This journal is an analysis of the movie *The Last Samurai* and how it has been Americanized by Hollywood. Shin picks the movie apart as being more about the dominant White than the cultural Japan aspects. There is some praise, but overall it seems the evaluation of the movie is negative.

While the content of the article was more in-depth than necessary for my research, it was important and there were good bits that will help understand the perception of the movie from a variety of angles.


A romanticized homage to the Satsuma Rebellion, this Hollywood movie is a prime example of the mythologizing of Saigō Takamori and the events of the rebellion. The material in the movie will be used for juxtaposition and for demonstration, but no historical information pertaining to the true events of the rebellion can be trusted from this source.

This was the basis for the thesis, as it helped to demonstrate the Japanese public memory through Japanese reception of the movie versus Western reception of the movie.


This source is a website that provides information on box office sales, both domestic and foreign, as well total grossing sales. These numbers helped me to understand how popular the film was, especially in Japan, and helped me to draw comparisons with other movies.

Secondary Sources


This book examine early Japanese exposure to Western powers and the political strife caused by these new challenges. While most of the book covers politics and trade agreements, along with Japan’s reactions and relationships with America and other foreign powers, there is a helpful section towards the end of the book that discusses the rising tension in Japan less than 10 years before the Satsuma Rebellion.

This was useful for historical backdrop, helping to set the stage for the political and cultural climate that would give Saigō a rise to fame.

This academic article explores a lot of the same material that my thesis explores. It looks at the Japanese peoples’ reaction to *The Last Samurai* and analyzes the Japanese people and the numbers to understand why it had such a warm reception compared to the American critics.


The journal is more interested in the relationship between Japanese culture and Christianity, but within this journal the author chronicles some of the critical pillars of Japanese ethics and ideals. This was helpful for a few citations, a great source to find and use these ideals described in the journal in order to demonstrate how the *The Last Samurai* embodied those ideals, and how Saigō Takamori plays into those ideals as well.


Although very dated, Harada goes into great detail about the pillars of Japanese ethics and the aspects of their culture. This personification of their society through honor and tradition is mostly gone into detail through *Giri, Ninjo, Ho-on, Renketsu*, and *Choku*. These ideals of Japanese culture and ethics help to form my thesis and help to understand just what Takamori preserves and embodies today, and how *The Last Samurai* helps to capture those pillars.


This academic journal article describes the effects the implementation of the Japanese constitution in 1889 had on Japan. It describes the civil unrest and political tension leading up to the implementation of the constitution, and what came afterwards and what it signified for the country of Japan.

For the purpose of my thesis, this was helpful in helping to illustrate the build up to this point, and how without the Satsuma Rebellion and Takamori’s actions, the implementation of the constitution could have been very different.


This journal article describes the 17th century policy of Sakoku and the misinterpretations of the policy. The authors discuss the relationships Japan shared with European trade partners, Chinese trade partners, and also Korean trade partners.

Mostly this source provided helpful, but very limited background information for understanding the treaty climate and trading politics conducted during the 19th century.

Good look at Japan’s development during the mid-19th century, and the advent of the Satsuma Rebellion. Explains the economic impetus and uniqueness of Japan’s situation, and demonstrates that Japan was under a lot of political strain to succumb to foreign trade and influence.

This was a useful source for background information and understanding the catalysts for the rebellion, although no truly critical information was presented within that built my argument.


This book gives a broader telling of Saigō’s origins, following his life to his death at the end of the rebellion. This book only reiterates what many other sources have already stated—and in academic print no less. However, there is some great material in here in the form of paintings and woodblock carvings.

Although a non-academic source, the primary source material in here—woodblock carvings and paintings—are high quality and helped reiterate some more reliable sources’ information.


Although a dated source, Morris gives substantial detail and information about Saigō’s legacy and his impact on Japanese culture and history after his death. He inadvertently discusses just how the glorification and mythologizing of Saigō comes about, and how the Japanese public memory is formed through the early years following Saigō’s death. Given the age of the book, however, there are some inconsistencies and inaccuracies that have been proven and argued in newer works.

There were some good primary source leads in this book, and there was an abundance of information that while contained in an older book, was still valuable to my argument.


This work is directly associated with French history, but the ideas within can be directly applied to Japanese history, culture, and the legacy of Saigō Takamori. Discussing how cultural memory can become distanced and convoluted by the pursuit of history and the passing of time, things are not always portrayed or remembered as they truly were.

This was useful for helping to understand the fundamental reasons behind the mythologizing of Saigō’s identity, and the organic process of how Saigō’s mythical identity and how the pride Japanese take in that identity works.


Describing the choice to revert back to the sword from more advanced military technology, the author illustrates Japanese culture as being perceived as more barbaric and savage as it really was. Recounting that Americans knew very little about Japan and therefore underestimated them and thought them a lesser power, it is a clear demonstration of Japanese public memory and the predominance of their culture over historical facts.

There was little information of directly vital use, but in order to set a historical backdrop to compare to the depictions of Saigō it was useful to know the military technology and the cultural choices behind that technology. Perrin also gives some more examples of Japanese public memory that I used as important demonstrations in the paper.


Ravina’s journal article goes into great detail regarding Saigō’s death, and the details of the mythologizing of his identity. This article provides a wealth of primary sources, many of which come in the form of woodblock carvings and paintings that portray a mythologized version of Saigō, contradicting historical events. The article progresses with discussing how the mythologizing of Saigō Takamori was important to Japanese culture and the future of Japanese tradition, including the reigniting of Bushido in everyday life.

This will be a critical source for research, using it to not only gain primary sources, but it directly contributes to the idea of the Saigō dichotomy. Very important.


An in-depth study of Saigō Takamori’s life, from early days to the last days of the Satsuma Rebellion. The book takes a look at his political influence and the influence the end of the Tokugawa bakufu and the rise of the Meiji Restoration had on Saigō, and ultimately his decision to rebel. More importantly, it also illustrates his hesitation to rebel, and the other smaller rebellions that took place before Saigō was moved to rebel.

The later sections provided good historical context and imagery, especially of the earlier rebellions and the rebels’ honoring of traditional warfare and samurai culture.
Tagsgold, Christian. "Popular Realms of Memory in Japan: The Case of Sakamoto Ryo¯ma." Contemporary Japan-
2016. EBSCO.

Although this article focused on another prominent Japanese historical figure, the content
focuses on how the Japanese remember their historical figures from outside of the true
historical framework. While Saigō is mentioned briefly in here, the content delves into Japanese
public memory and legacy, and how historical figures are honored and portrayed in media
today. The article also explored Western perspectives and studies of the same content, and
how it varies compared to Japanese studies.

While Saigō is only briefly mentioned, the content of the article was useful as a meta-study to
help illustrate why Saigō’s image was mythologized and how portraying him as he was in the
movie The Last Samurai was actually closer to Japanese public memory and legacy than many
Westerners would like to believe.


The author’s work is twofold: he chronicles the political atmosphere and events that surround
Saigō’s legacy, helping to put Saigō’s character into an historical framework that helps to
understand just how important Saigō was. Secondly, Yates picks Saigō’s legacy apart,
attempting to understand the dichotomy between the historical figure and the mythical figure
that has been created by the Japanese.

This source was incredibly helpful in understanding the evolution of Saigō’s identity, and how
the Japanese perceive him, while also helping to learn more intimate and broad details about
Saigō’s existence.


While Yates’ journal article delved into the mystery of Saigō and tried to separate the historical
from the mythical, this is a broader look at both his identity and what made him special. It
examines, much like the article, the evolution of Saigō as a Japanese patriot and legend, and the
political events and circumstances that could have allowed him to be thrust to the forefront of
Japanese remembrance.

This, coupled with Yates’ journal article, helped to build a strong foundation on which to better
understand Saigō. There was some good material in here that helped to demonstrate why Saigō
stood out from other prominent figures of the time, and also attempts to understand why
Saigō’s legacy has such longevity.