
Film Review

'The Last Samurai,' Or the Last Railroad?

by Kathy Wolfe

"*Ten wa hito no ue ni, hito wo tsukurazu*," wrote Fukuzawa Yukichi, leading intellectual of Japan's Meiji Era in the 1860s. The literal translation is, "Heaven did not make people above people," but his actual reference is to the opening lines of the 1776 Declaration of Independence of the United States: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all Men are created equal."

One of the great stories of history, a story blacked out today, is the creation of modern Japan in the era of the Emperor Meiji (r.1868-1912). This is not because Japan is a mystic, exceptional land, or even because it was the first non-European nation to achieve global industrial power. And it was certainly not because a few wealthy Japanese lords decided to "xerox" Western culture, and sell their nation to the highest Yankee bidder, as Warner Brothers' *The Last Samurai* would have you think.

It is the story of how a small band of young American and Japanese intellectuals, each independent of the other, on opposite sides of the globe, decided that the "Dignity of Man" must be set higher than the age-old privileges of aristocracy, which treat men as beasts. It is the story of the universal nature of man, no matter where, to seek a society based on the sovereignty of the individual human mind. It is the story of how they joined together, to meet the mighty British Empire and its opium gunboats on the eastern rim of Asia—and turned it back.

Yet the film's theme is that arms merchants ruined the United States in the 1870s, including the lives of Civil War heroes such as Captain Nathan Algren (played by Tom Cruise), who were sent to massacre the American Indians. Then these merchants moved into Asia, selling guns and war. But Algren, hired to train Japan's new army in Western weapons, is recruited by the samurai leader Katsumoto (Kensaku Watanabe), who demonstrates to Algren the human dignity and superiority of his code of honor.

World Reality

History's samurai are much to be admired, but the film tells a violent lie, by ignoring the world reality of that time. Both Japan and America faced Britain's giant Opium Empire, armed to the teeth, occupying all India and China. British gunboats were already shelling Japan's southwestern cities,

such as Kagoshima, by 1863. Had Japan not imported American help and technology, it would have been occupied and destroyed, like China.

Also ignored is Britain's frontal assault on America. London had financed the secession of the South and the 1865 assassination of Abraham Lincoln, an overt attempt to Balkanize and reoccupy the United States. Lincoln's ally Tsar Alexander of Russia, in the 1860s, sent his fleet to New York and San Francisco to forestall British invasion. Civil War cannons at the Golden Gate Bridge to this day attest to the British threat to California.

Ignored are the writings of Townsend Harris (first American envoy to Japan), President Ulysses S. Grant, and others, who wrote that Americans came to Japan *not* as did the European empires: to take no lands, but to form an alliance, to defend the national sovereignty and freedom of both nations. Japan was literally the last place on earth where the U.S. fleet might dock to buy fuel, food, and water, to stop British occupation of the Pacific.

The film is intensely anti-American; it airbrushes the British Empire out of history, and paints America as the world's villain. In so doing, it denies the existence of the minds of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Tom Paine, and the fact that they founded a republic based on the Dignity of the individual Man.

Yet read the original writings of America's founders, and of the founders of Japan's Meiji era such as Fukuzawa, Okubo Toshimichi, and Okuma Shigenobu, and it is clear, that they take independent joy in the same purpose: the education of each individual human mind, and the creation of sovereign nation-states based on the Dignity of Man.

Attack on Industrial Culture

The film is also horribly anti-Meiji, in a racist way. It denies that Fukuzawa, Okubo, Okuma et al. could have recognized the American "Idea of Man"—because it was something they were already seeking. In fact, these Meiji leaders had reached the same conclusions before Commodore Perry set foot in Yokohama in 1853. The Tokugawa Shoguns closed Japan to foreign relations from the early 1600s to 1853, but in the 1850s, Japan's young intellectuals risked their lives to travel secretly abroad, study foreign books, languages, and science—and as any true intellectual does, look at the world *as a whole*. They saw the "big picture": The British Empire by 1840 had crossed Eurasia, occupying most of it, destroying the principle of national sovereignty, enslaving populations.

The Meiji intellectuals also took a good, hard look at Japan's age-old "rule by the few," and saw that their nation must industrialize, or be crushed, and wrote so.

Yet *The Last Samurai*'s ultimate aim is to provoke a psychotic reaction against industry, in Japan today. It paints science, engineering, and anything to do with electricity, railroads, cities, and machines, as cultural imperialism, killing the soul of Japan.

The film's villain, Baron Omura, wants to kill off the

noble samurai, as General Custer slaughtered the noble Indians, to seize their land for his railroad. This is a direct attack on the Eurasian Land-Bridge-New Silk Road program, a plan to uplift billions of people "from Pusan to Paris" precisely by building large railroad projects, amplified by major water, power, and other industrial programs. The reader should ask: "Why?" And, while glorifying the peasants who are shown planting rice one seedling at a time, barefoot knee-deep in water, the film neglects to mention how many billions of human lives have been ruined by such medieval production methods, which necessarily leave only a tiny elite to rule over most of the population as if they were cattle.

In fact, Japan today is in a profound existential economic crisis, in which Tokyo elites are already pondering precisely these questions, and asking just what industry has meant, and should mean in the future, for Japan. The film's masterminds have found a crack in Japanese society, and seek to blast it wide open.

Take a snapshot of any street in midtown Tokyo, a rush of students with orange and green hair, nose rings, bare stomachs, two cell phones in each hand, their MP-3 players surgically sutured to their ears. Elites across Asia are looking with dread at this hideous "culture" of violence and video-games, which today's all-too-real American Empire has created. More and more they ask: "Is this the culture which we want to bring to billions of people in Eurasia, and call it 'modernization'?"

Top officials who have devoted their lives to Great Projects such as the New Silk Road, seriously ask whether it's not all wrong. "Contrast the decay of our youth, their selfish commercialism, their disregard for our nation's future, to the peaceful village of my youth," one says. "My family gathered for quiet dinners and calligraphy each night—and no one locked their doors."

"My sons have no idea what to do with their lives," one official confided to me. "I tell them: 'Your material goods mean nothing, your life means nothing, unless you serve your country.' They stare back at me blankly. Was the old life not better for the spiritual human being?"

This serious question raises the issue of how we must not only reorganize the entire world monetary system, and rebuild its physical economy, but must also create an entirely new artistic culture based on the Dignity of Man. Japanese society is ready to explode. If Japanese troops start to die soon in Iraq, it will, and the anti-Americanism won't be pretty.

Who are the Hollywood consultants monkeying in this tinderbox? Whoever they are, they have certainly spent big money, to try to ensure that Japan and America do not join together in building the Great Project of the New Silk Road today. Or engage again in serious discussion of what is the human mind, what is Classical culture, and what is its universality.

That should suggest to the reader, that precisely this is what thinking Japanese and Americans should boldly now, once more, go forth and do, together.