

Some Notes on the History Behind *The Last Samurai*

By Dylan Kirk

Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade

While the period was correct and the depiction of the weapons was more or less correct, Hollywood has failed again to produce a truly accurate historical film in *The Last Samurai*. In this film, Tom Cruise's character, a drunkard American captain of the 7th Cavalry, is hired by the Japanese to train troops to fight against a rebel named Katsumoto. The time period the film is placed in is accurate, as around the time of 1877, the Satsuma Rebellion was roaring out of South Kyushu. Disenfranchised Samurai from all over Japan flocked to the banner of Saigo Takamori, a man recognized by international scholars and the Japanese alike as the real Last Samurai.

Like Katsumoto, Saigo Takamori was a member of the Samurai class and an oligarch of post-Meiji Restoration Japan from the Satsuma clan of Kyushu. He was, however, also the originator of the conscription program in Japan and knew well the potential of a modern military force. He put forth the idea that Japan should annex Korea (the policy of Sei Kan Ron) in order to prove its modernity and military might to the world. Less bellicose Satsuma clansmen rebuffed his plan and he was eventually forced to resort to arms, not in Korea but in Japan, in order to forward his political goals. Despite being a complete military failure, Takamori's rebellion was a veritable public relations coup and his suicide assured his legendary status in Japanese history.

What followed was the rapid descent of the Satsuma clan in favour of their co-conspirators during the Meiji Restoration, the Choshu. The Sei Kan Ron policy was shelved indefinitely and replaced by a gradual escalation in diplomacy with China through Korea. Perhaps the Choshu simply repaid the chastisement the Satsuma dealt them in 1864 while the Shogunate still held power. The descent of the Satsuma, however, was nowhere near as sudden as that of the Samurai. Their last, best hope was quashed by simple peasants and thus Japan evolved with nary a further whimper beyond its feudal past into modernity.

Very few Americans were hired by the Japanese military and those that were worked as English teachers. The army was trained by French and then German soldiers some years after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). The rationale behind this training was represented well enough in the movie; arms were a lucrative export and military trainers were often the best salesmen. Though the United States here has stepped into the historical role of Prussia, the consequences were/are essentially the same. Though such cinematic substitutions were annoying, they were at least to be expected; what was unbearable was watching Samurai extras draw their swords with their left thumbs extended like antennae from their scabbards - a definite swordplay no-no.

It is disappointing that Hollywood could not be satisfied with the simple story of a real Samurai and his dog - Takamori was quite renowned for his loyal dog, which also figures prominently in his statue in Ueno park in Tokyo. This was, after all, a Samurai who went from rags to riches, developed a modern army for Japan and then fought against it unto his death. No, this true history is altogether too well written; it has all the makings of a masterpiece. On the screen, the political intrigue of the Meiji oligarchy had to make way for plenty of scenes of blood and gore. The final verdict? In the end, *The Last Samurai* is a story that is not only a fiction, but far less interesting than historical fact.

Recommended further reading:

Stephen Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook*

E. Herbert Norman, *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State*

A.H. Mounsey, *Satsuma Rebellion: An Episode of Modern Japanese History*

Dylan Kirk is a Canadian Foreign Service Officer with a Master's Degree in Military and Strategic Studies from the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. His thesis, *After Battle Tighten your Helmet Strings: The Development of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1875-1905*, touches upon the Satsuma Rebellion as a contributing factor to Japanese military overconfidence prior to the Second World War.