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The Jedi of Japan

David Linden

The West's image today of the Japanese samurai derives in large part from the works of Japanese film directors whose careers flourished in the period after the Second World War. Foremost amongst these directors was Akira Kurosawa and it is from his films that Western audiences grew to appreciate Japanese warriors and the main heroes and villains in the *Star Wars* franchise were eventually born. George Lucas and the first six films of the *Star Wars* franchise draw heavily from Kurosawa's films, the role of the samurai in Japanese culture, and *Bushido*—their code.

In his book, *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa*, David Desser explains how Kurosawa himself was heavily influenced by Western culture and motifs and this is reflected in his own samurai films which “embod[y] the tensions between Japanese culture and the new American ways of the occupation” (Desser. 4). As his directorial style matured during the late forties, Kurosawa closely examined Western films and themes such as those of John Ford, and sought to apply the same themes, techniques and character development to Japanese films and traditions. His focus on individuals and the need to distinguish themselves from the collective was mostly based on western cinema. While he was influenced by several western directors (for example, Eisenstein), he was most moved by John Ford's westerns, especially *3 Bad Men* and *Stagecoach*. In his essay, “Under the Influence of Akira Kurosawa: The Visual Style of George Lucas,” Michael Kaminski explains that “Ford [...] is evident in Kurosawa's work, becoming especially heightened once Kurosawa began making period films involving dust-swept villages and bandits on horseback [...] A prime reason for critics to deem Kurosawa's films ‘westernized’ is their similarities to the cinema of Ford and Hollywood's golden era.” Kurosawa also borrowed extensively from western literature—Dostoyevsky, Gorky, and Shakespeare—for his plots. His *Throne of Blood* (1957) transplants Macbeth's tale about an ambitious soldier seeking to be a feudal lord to medieval Japan with its Spider's Web castle. His *The Bad Sleep Well* (1963) updates *Hamlet* to post-War Japan and involves kickbacks and captains of industry seeking government contacts, while *Ran* (1985) tracks *King Lear's* plot with three sons

(not daughters) fighting for dominance over the other at the expense of their father. While there are significant modifications and twists to Shakespeare's plots, Kurosawa relies heavily on the Bard's exposé of character to produce masterful dramas and tragedy in a Japanese setting.

Twenty years later, George Lucas became fascinated with the samurai and the films of Kurosawa depicting them. Just as Kurosawa had been heavily influenced by western films and theatre, Lucas proceeded to borrow many of Kurosawa's themes and incorporate them, as well as the principles of Bushido, into an epic space opera that would become known as *Star Wars*, the most profitable movie franchise ever. In his book *Skywalking*, Dale Pollock explains how "Lucas admired the formal Japanese sense of composition and texture and eventually incorporated it in his own films" (Pollock. 46). Similarly, Kaminski explains how Lucas admitted that the films of Kurosawa "basically changed my life...in terms of understanding how cinema works and how to tell a very exciting story and still have it be very funny and very human" (Kaminski. 88). In particular, two of Kurosawa's films, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) and *Seven Samurai* (1954), deeply inspired Lucas; they represent arguably the height of a movie genre known as *jidaigeki*, the source of the name *Jedi*. The kendo lightsaber fighting, the robes of the Jedi, the shogun helmet of Darth Vader, the conflict between good and evil, and the comical relief of R2-D2 and C-3PO can all be traced back to the influence of the samurai and the films of Kurosawa. In her essay "Star Wars, Remixed," Amy Sturgis describes the saga as "a masterpiece of synthesis, a triumph of American ingenuity and resourcefulness, demonstrating how the old may be made new again" (Sturgis).

The first time that the audience sees the lightsaber in *A New Hope* (1977), there is an awe of mystery and shock. No one had seen anything like it before. There is not even music in the background to accompany the moment; only the humming of the blade. *Star Wars* would not be *Star Wars* and Jedi would not be Jedi without the iconic lightsabers; similarly, samurai films would not be such without the iconic samurai sword. In his book, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan: A Classic Essay on Samurai Ethics*, Inazo Nitobe explains how "Bushido made the sword its emblem of power and prowess" (Nitobe. 117), even though by the 1550's the utilization of the sword in Japan for fighting purposes had begun to diminish and the role of guns had come more to the forefront (Peabody Museum).

In his ESPN.com article “SC Featured: The sport that sparked lightsaber lore,” Greg Garber describes how the “sport of kendo focuses on mastering the fine balance between body and soul. It is a nuanced discipline, a series of patterns: strikes and thrusts, attacks and counter-attacks” (Garber), which is exactly what is portrayed in the climatic lightsaber duels of the *Star Wars* films. In ESPN’s documentary *Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel*, it is explained how “[a]fter the civil war era there was no need for samurai to kill each other, but the warriors were worried without combat, they would lose their technique” (ESPN). This would lead to the rise of the sport of kendo. It is easy to notice the relationship between lightsaber and kendo fighting in the early *Star Wars* films, where the Jedi, like Kendo fighters, almost always keep two hands on their swords or staffs. The climactic fight at the end of each film drives the plot through action, and brings the best of the good against the dark side. For example, the battle between Anakin and Count Dooku in *Attack of the Clones* (2002) epitomizes the kendo style when “Dooku goes straight [high] into a kendo pose and we just turned Anakin” (ESPN). Lucas “wanted the lightsaber duels in *Star Wars* to have th[e] same romantic feeling, with his heroes saving the galaxy instead of the town” (Smithsonian Star Wars Museum) portrayed in the old-school western movies.

Lucas took his inspiration for the several meticulously choreographed sword duel scenes not only from kendo, but also from examples depicted in Kurosawa films. “From the beginning, George Lucas wanted there to be sword duels in his ‘galaxy far, far away.’ He also wanted his film to have the pageantry and choreography he saw in samurai films of the 1950s and 1960s” (Smithsonian *Star Wars* Museum). In his book *Star Wars*, Will Brooker details how Lucas’ source is so noticeable that the first lightsaber duel in *A New Hope* is almost identical to a fight in Kurosawa’s *Hidden Fortress*. “The duel between Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi, Kaminski demonstrates, follows the exact pattern of Toshiro’s Mifune’s staff fight [...]climaxing, in both cases, with the warriors’ weapons clashing in diagonals across the frame” (Brooker. 53-56). Similarly, Darth Vader’s appearance is intentionally meant to resemble that of a samurai. Lucas wants Vader to look like a “dark lord riding on the wind with black flowing robes, a large helmet like that of the Japanese Samurai, and a silk mask covering his face” (Smithsonian Star Wars Museum).

Lucas' *A New Hope* closely follows the plot line of *Hidden Fortress* which is essentially about two bickering peasants (similar to R2-D2 and C-3PO) who help an outlaw princess (Leia) and a samurai (Luke) who escapes the clutches of enemy imperial forces. This structure allows both Lucas and Kurosawa the freedom to develop characters through the action of the film and the manner in which the characters overcome obstacles. The Kurosawa film even has the main villain unexpectedly turn against his forces in order to save the heroes from execution, which closely resembles how Darth Vader turns against the Emperor in order to save his son. In many ways the *Phantom Menace* has the same main plotline as *A New Hope* and *Hidden Fortress*. Similar to Princess Yuki, the young Princess Amidala is running from enemies who have invaded her kingdom assisted by her handmaidens and entourage and a warrior who protects her like Makabe. Moreover, like *Star Wars*, "*Seven Samurai* is situated [...] in the era of constant civil war so that the need for 'situational' ethics arises" (Desser. 79). The very first line in the opening title cards of *A New Hope* reads, "[it] is a period of civil war" (*A New Hope*). The title cards themselves as an opening sequence are another homage Lucas paid to Kurosawa, as the beginning of *Seven Samurai* also includes a lengthy card sequence which introduces the audience to the movie.

Another theme borrowed by Lucas from Kurosawa's films is the conflict between the light and the dark. While the theme of good versus bad has always been around, it is the nature and relationship between the two which Kurosawa and Lucas explore. "By bringing the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy to the surface, and by choosing the one over the other, the ronin-hero recreates the crisis for the audience and resolves it ritualistically. The climax of virtually every Samurai film (as in the Western) is a violent one. The choice the *ronin* has made leads inevitably to violence and usually his own death" (Desser. 36). *Giri* refers to the duty or obligation to serve while *ninjo* is the human emotion such as love or hatred, which arises and is in conflict with the *giri* social obligation. While samurai might refer to the action of serving, the struggle between *giri* and *ninjo* resolves the extent to which one serves. "To the Japanese of a very confusing modern world, the period film in general offers a clear picture of good and evil, right and wrong" (Desser. 35). This is a consistent theme within the samurai and the samurai films of Kurosawa. "When confronted by the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy, the hero of the Nostalgic Drama chooses the one or the other, knowing full well the price to be paid. When he chooses *giri* he

duplicates the socialization process whereby the Japanese are asked to suppress a part of themselves. If and when he chooses *ninjo* he breaks out of the powerful codes which rule Japanese life” (Desser. 36).

Lucas not only borrowed from Kurosawa’s films, but also from the Bushido for samurai. “*Bu-shi-do* means literally Military-Knight-Ways—the ways which fighting nobles should observe in their daily life as well as in their vocation [...] It is not a written code; at best it consists of a few maxims handed down from mouth to mouth or coming from the pen of some well-known warrior or savant” (Nitobe. 34-35). Numerous scenes, themes and character reactions in the *Star Wars* series follow the principles in the code. For example, the training and maturing of a samurai is illustrated by Luke’s and Anakin’s journeys. “Samurai’s sons were let down to steep valleys of hardship, and spurred to Sisyphus-like tasks [...] for inuring them to endurance” (Nitobe. 52). At the beginning of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Luke undergoes an adventure similar to a young samurai when he is stranded alone in the cold on the planet of Hoth. The harsh surroundings and his efforts to survive them provide momentum to further his journey from a young apprentice Jedi to one with a greater control of the Force. Similarly, young Anakin Skywalker embarks on his own pilgrimage in *The Phantom Menace*, when he joins Qui-Gon Jinn to learn the ways of the Force and become a Jedi. It is a sacrifice, as in doing so, he leaves behind his old life and his mother.

“It was considered unmanly for a samurai to betray his emotions on his face. ‘He shows no sign of joy or anger,’ was a phrase used, in describing great character. The most natural affections were kept under control” (Nitobe.100). Throughout the *Star Wars* series, padawans are instructed to trust their instincts such as when Obi-Wan instructs Luke to turn off his monitor to shoot the Death Star, while, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Darth Vader tells young Skywalker, “[y]ou have controlled your fear. Now release your anger; only your hatred can destroy me.” In contrast, Master Yoda instructs, “[f]ear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering” (*Phantom Menace*). These episodes illustrate how throughout the *Star Wars* movies, there is a consistent struggle by the main characters to find their path towards the light or the dark. The saga follows the path to the dark side for Anakin Skywalker and the path to light for his son, Luke. Anakin is conflicted from the beginning due to the absence of his mother and his scandalous affections for Padme. Consistently through the prequel trilogy he

seeks adventure and excitement, and steps beyond the codes for a padawan due to an overconfidence in his abilities. In contrast, Yoda instructs Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back* “[a]dventure. Excitement. A Jedi craves not these things” (*The Empire Strikes Back*). Anakin’s overconfidence causes him to disobey simple orders such as Mace Windu’s specific instructions to wait at the Jedi Temple while he arrests Palpatine. Similarly, his efforts to discover ways to circumvent death in order to save Padme ultimately lead Anakin to his betrayal of the Jedi council and to a new master under Darth Sidious’ mentorship. In *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), while Anakin is promoted to the Jedi Council, at the request of Chancellor Palpatine, he is not given the rank of Jedi Master—the first such circumstance. This lack of recognition promotes Anakin’s mistrust of the Council and furthers his frustration with their policies and methods for peace. Dessler describes that in Judo, to be a “judo master is to be free of ego, vanity, and the need for glory. The true way of Judo is non-violent” (Dessler. 63). However, Anakin has an ego, pride, and a weak spot for glory.

Luke also faces a conflict of choice. He recognizes the evil of the Empire and yet he is conflicted by the horrific fact that the incarnation of evil, Darth Vader, is his father. He searches for a way to somehow save his father from the Emperor’s control. Luke’s conflict is evident in his costume in the opening scene of *The Return of the Jedi* (1983), where he confronts Jabba the Hutt while wearing black robes. By donning a black robe, Luke expresses his inner-conflict between choosing the dark or the light. This is an example of how throughout the *Star Wars* movies, costumes often reflect the character’s inner conflicts and motives. Luke’s conflict is also seen during his final lightsaber fight with his father where the Emperor explicitly urges him to join the Dark Side and even replace his father. “Luke’s hope, fear, and anger, poured out in the duel with his father” (ESPN).

Yoda’s admonitions about anger and hate all reflect Bushido’s emphasis on calmness and lack of emotion in the face of adversity. “The spiritual aspect of valour is evidenced by composure—calm presence of mind [...] A truly brave man is ever serene [...] In the heat of battle he remains cool; in the midst of catastrophes he keeps level his mind” (Nitobe. 52). Throughout the many battles of the *Star Wars* series, the Jedi adopt the Bushido code and remain uniformly composed in the face of danger. For example, in *The Phantom Menace*, when the shield blocks the lightsaber battle between Qui-Gon Jinn and Darth Maul, the Jedi decides to kneel and meditate, and Darth Maul responds by

sheathing his own lightsaber. As the shield yields, the two return to their battle; however, the minute of meditation allows Qui-Gon to clear his mind and remain calm despite the danger. In contrast, Obi-Wan, then still an apprentice, does not meditate and remains agitated.

Lucas also examines the quality of mercy, which is so integral to a samurai's temperament. "*Bushi no nasake*'—the tenderness of a warrior—had a sound which appealed [to...] the mercy of a samurai [...and which] recognized due regard to justice [but...] was backed with power to save or kill" (Nitobe. 59-60). *In Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin is twice confronted with the question of mercy. In the beginning, he opts to behead Count Dooku at Chancellor Palpatine's orders even though he believes he should instead bring him before the Jedi Council. However, later in the film, when Mace Windu tries to kill Palpatine, Anakin believes that this action is wrong and Palpatine deserves to stand trial, even when Mace Windu reminds him that Palpatine is too dangerous as he controls both the Senate and the Courts. Anakin's decision reflects his own inner conflict regarding who to trust. He provides mercy to those who he trusts (Palpatine) and believes wish to do good, and denies mercy to those (Count Dooku) who wish to cause harm.

Today, whether through film or video games, many Americans view the samurai warrior more as a 'bad-ass' warrior who can kill anyone with his sword and less as an orator who serves and tries to do good. However, this image reflects folklore rather than fact. "Did Bushido justify the promiscuous use of the weapon? The answer is unequivocally, no! [...] A self-possessed man knows the right time to use it, and such times comes but rarely" (Nitobe.119). In fact, the samurai and the Jedi are so much more than skilled swordsmen. They are also leaders and wise. As explained at Yale's Peabody Museum, "[t]he word *samurai* conjures images of valor and violence: the man of uncompromising honor and loyalty, perfectly trained in the martial arts, and calmly indifferent in the face of death. But the real history of the samurai is more complex—full of drama, transformation, and paradox...[t]he term *samurai* means 'one who serves" (Peabody). There were times in Japanese history, primarily under the Tokugawa regime, where there was little need for the traditional warrior aspect of the samurai. Therefore, the samurai's role transitioned beyond that of a warrior. "Under the developing bureaucracy of the Tokugawa regime [...] the reading, writing, and leadership skills of the Samurai could be put to use in administrative and governmental functions [...] at the

head of a formalized organization. They became [...] literally the only candidates for bureaucratic positions [...] Bushido, under the Tokugawa, ‘...was as much a code of the bureaucrat as of the soldier’” (Desser. 22). Similarly, Jedi use their Jedi Code to help navigate their lives; they are primarily protectors of the galaxy and turn to physical violence only when necessary. “For over a thousand generations, the Jedi knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic, before the dark times, before the Empire” (*A New Hope*). As Master Yoda instructs in *The Empire Strikes Back*, “A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack” (*The Empire Strikes Back*). For example, in *Attack of the Clones*, prior to their lightsaber engagement, Yoda and Count Dooku engage in an intellectual battle about their knowledge of the Force. “Combat was not solely a matter of brute force; it was, as well, an intellectual engagement” (Nitobe. 53). Similarly, the Jedi use their persuasive wits and guile before turning to violence; they are masterful orators gifted in talking their way out of sticky situations.

Star Wars also builds upon the samurai code’s relationship between an apprentice (a padawan) and a master. It allows Lucas to develop a form of humanism within the characters, and his audience to gauge the reaction of the padawan in terms of his responses and tone. In the films, the master would often ask his apprentice to perform tasks or duties, but each apprentice might react differently to these commands. Obi-Wan Kenobi, for example, always obliged to the wishes of his master Qui-Gon Jinn, whereas Anakin often put up barriers before agreeing to perform the tasks asked of him. The primary skill that the master teaches his padawan is the knowledge of the Force: how to understand it and wield it. While the most tangible evidence of the Force is the Jedi’s ability to lift, pull, or push objects, and the Sith’s ability to shoot lightning from their hands, one of the most subliminal abilities of the Force is the ability to communicate from the afterlife. Obi-Wan, for example, sacrifices himself so that he can always be there with Luke and guide him through the power of the Force. “[T]he vilest form of death assumes sublimity and becomes a symbol of new life [...] Death involving a question of honour, was accepted in Bushido as a key to the solution of many complex problems” (Nitobe. 105-106). Obi-Wan even lectures Darth Vader, “[y]ou can’t win Darth; if you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine” (*A New Hope*). While Darth Vader might have destroyed Obi-Wan in the living form, Obi-Wan’s new power is immediately displayed as he instructs Luke to run away from the battle. “By sacrificing himself,

Ben Kenobi shows to Luke Skywalker that there is something beyond life. The idea of sacrifice is part of a samurai code” (ESPN). The samurai go to great lengths to prove their sacrifice and worthiness to their master, even if it means their death.

Another aspect of the samurai code incorporated in *Star Wars* is the relationship between the warrior and money. “Bushido [...] disdains money. For the hero of the Sword Film to sell his sword arm, as it were, becomes a kind of perversion of the code” (Desser. 44). The Jedi performed their deeds in order to protect the peace in the galaxy and not for coin. “Bushido [...] believed in a service which can be rendered only without money and without price. Spiritual service, be it of priest or teacher, was not to be repaid in gold or silver, not because it was valueless but because it was invaluable” (Nitobe. 98). In many ways, the relationship between a master and a padawan is a form of service. In *The Phantom Menace*, the only request Qui-Gon Jinn makes of Obi-Wan Kenobi before he dies is to promise to train Anakin. Qui-Gon wants Obi-Wan to repay him through education of another pupil and not through any form of monetary payment. Money is almost absent in the *Star Wars* films as it deemed—a need of the common person and not for either a samurai or Jedi. Lucas uses money to show the transformation of Han Solo from mercenary without virtue to hero. Originally offered coin in order to help fly Luke and Obi-Wan, he at first deserts the scene before the final battle. However, his character evolves when he ignores the reward and unexpectedly returns to help destroy the Death Star in *A New Hope*. His return is the mark of someone who, though outside the Jedi caste, behaves as a Jedi. Solo resembles similar characters in Kurosawa’s sword films, where there are non-Samurai heroes. “In this sense, they can be perceived as more ordinary people who possess a certain skill rather than a certain social rank. It is as if anyone can become a hero in this kind of sword drama” (Desser. 45).

Thanks to the works of Kurosawa and now Lucas, the principles of Bushido are not forgotten; rather, they have morphed into the Jedi code, which is today familiar to young and old. In many ways, Kurosawa’s films spoke to Lucas in the same way that the *Star Wars* franchise speaks to an average person. Kurosawa created a world that while many in Japan understood, many in the West did not; Lucas created his own entire galaxy system with customs and norms that are based on Bushido yet out of this world. It is up to the audience to immerse themselves in these customs and understand the relationships

between the moving pieces of the franchise. “Of *Star Wars* Kurosawa said, ‘I’m not a critic, I just like it’” (Galbraith IV. 263).

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