

Global Samurai

Annie Manion

The image of the samurai warrior has long been recognized as a representation of traditional Japan. However, while on the one hand samurai can be thought of as representing something uniquely Japanese, on the other hand, it can be argued that they have come to represent a set of behaviors and ideas that although rooted in a vague sense of 'Japaneseness' are now available for people of any nationality, ethnicity or cultural background to adopt. Samurai, rather than being an exotic, impenetrable other, are perhaps now something akin to knights in armor or cowboys, which vaguely embody a sense of their cultural origins, but have also come to represent universal ideals such as chivalry, independence or courage. A look at the recent representations of samurai in American and Japanese popular culture and the ways that the image of samurai has been traded back and forth between them reveals that the samurai have come to represent not so much Japan or Japanese culture itself as much as a boiled down essence of Japanese traditional culture as it is understood by outsiders, which can then be used as a cosmetic to perfume non-Japanese characters with a Japanese aesthetic.

In his book *Recentering Globalization*, Koichi Iwabuchi coins the term 'cultural odor' to refer to the detectable imprint of a particular culture that is left behind on a product or export. Cultural odor is rooted in the creator culture, and can potentially be a problem for exportation; if a product smells too much like the culture that created it, it will not be easily accessible to foreign cultures. In an article about the popularity of *Pokemon* in the USA, Iwabuchi describes the idea of 'cultural fragrance,' which as opposed to a cultural odor, is 'a socially and culturally acceptable smell that does not derive primarily from the inherent quality of a product; it has more to do with the image of the country of origin.' Among the

Japanese cultural images that have this acceptable fragrance, Iwabuchi lists samurai, who are seen as exotic, but positively so.

To be sure, samurai—along with many things Japanese—seem to be enjoying a certain popularity in the USA these days. According to a number of journalists and scholars, among them Anthony Fiola with his *Washington Post* article titled 'Japan's Empire of Cool,' claim that Japan-associated products such as anime, J-pops, fashion and food are more popular now than they have ever been, and even stand poised to overtake the popularity of American cultural goods worldwide. The popularity of these seemingly less traditional cultural forms has rejuvenated interest in more traditional cultural representations such as the samurai and there has been a rush of films and TV shows that depict various incarnations of samurai, both in the USA (*The Last Samurai*, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, *Samurai Jack*) and in Japan (*Vagabond*, *Shinsengumi*, *Samurai Champloo*).

The popular image of samurai is actually a rather complex one that draws from a number of influences and represents a variety of ideals. At the same time, it is an image that has its own inherent cultural qualities (cultural odor) and those projected onto it from outside (cultural fragrance). Much of the image derives from the samurai movies that reached foreign shores during the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema. In films such as *47 Ronin*, foreigners were introduced to the image of noble, loyal, self-sacrificing samurai, while films, such as *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and *Samurai—The Legend of Musashi* introduced the image of the cool, collected, courageous, formidable samurai. Both these ideals are evident in contemporary samurai, although it is perhaps the latter that is more internationally accessible and popular.

The idea of the samurai is inescapably orientalized. This is because samurai

cannot be divided from their Japanese origins; the word itself is a constant reminder of where samurai hail from. In a somewhat self-perpetuating feedback loop, anything samurai do or represent onscreen is understood as being Japanese, because samurai come from Japan, or so the logic seems to go. Samurai are portrayed as almost mystical, more in touch with their bodies and in control of their minds than regular people. For example, the samurai in *The Last Samurai* are often shown meditating or practicing martial arts. As Algren wanders through the village, he watches them and makes a note in his diary that everything appears inaccessibly spiritual to him. The Japanese tend to mystify the samurai as well, as we can see in the many reincarnations of the legendary Miyamoto Musashi, who seems to become even more supernaturally strong with each new depiction. The two main samurai in Watanabe Shinichiro's historically anachronistic anime *Samurai Champloo* defy gravity and human reason with their impossible strength and personalities. Samurai are characterized as having



The Seven Samurai (1954) directed by famous Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, featuring Toshiro Mifune. (Toho)

culturally distinctive forms of honor, bravery, emotional self-control and depth, and spirituality, as well as martial arts prowess and a snazzy sword.

But if the samurai image is still grounded in orientalized stereotypes of Japanese, how is it that the image has become something other cultures can adopt? As Iwabuchi suggests, the concept of cultural fragrance is related to how a country is seen from the outside rather than the inherent image it projects. In other words, samurai are popular because of the relatively positive evaluation Japan is enjoying as far as popular culture goes these days.

Samurai are cool because they are different and they have slowly become an idealization that other cultures long to be, like American cowboys or European knights. Such archetypes have been rolled around in the popular consciousness for so long that it is now possible for people who are not American to consider themselves cowboys without losing the sense that they are Russian or Japanese. It is still necessary for the country of origin, whether it be England (knights), America (cowboys) or Japan (samurai) to be regarded relatively highly by the people appropriating the image. England and America have long enjoyed cultural hegemony, but Japan is relatively new to the scene and it is interesting that they should be so highly regarded so soon after WWII and the more recent 'trade wars' with the US in the 90s. Perhaps, it is thanks to the economic hardship Japan has experienced that their cultural products have become more available to the outside world; with Japan no longer a menacing threat, consumption of their popular culture no longer constitutes a betrayal or a threat to local identities. This makes it possible for artists and filmmakers to appropriate the 'cool' aspects of samurai and imbue their local non-Japanese characters with them without losing their sense of local identity.

There are many examples of characters who are identified with samurai, but who are nonetheless not Japanese. Tom Cruise's Nathan Algren in the *The Last Samurai* is one of the more outstanding contemporary examples. By the end of the film, he has clearly taken on many of the samurai traits, such as zen-like mastery of the sword, and a budding understanding of spirituality. The film never comes out and says that he is a samurai, but the implications of the scene where the widow of the man he killed dresses him in the dead man's armor is unmistakable. The main characters in the French *Yamakasi: Les samourais des temps modernes* are all described as 'modern day samurai.' They are a street gang that perform acrobatics with their urban surroundings. Presumably it is their physical prowess and loyalty to each other that makes them samurai. Even Japanese pop culture has examples of non-Japanese samurai. At the end of one episode of *Cowboy Bebop*, Andy—an ethnically Caucasian character who speaks English even in the original Japanese dub—relinquishes the title of 'space cowboy' to Spike, and instead adopts the role of 'space samurai.' Andy is something of an idiot, and the joke is partly that he's got it wrong again (he was a bumbling space cowboy), but the ending does equate 'samurai' with 'cowboy' as an image that can be taken off and put on by almost anyone.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article, samurai are still strongly identified and associated with being Japanese. But as the examples from

popular culture suggest, it is an image that is becoming more flexible and available to people of all cultures. This is an indication of the acceptance that Japan has begun to receive internationally. However, it is interesting to note that most, if not all, of the non-Japanese who appropriate the samurai image are from the West. One would be hard pressed to find examples of Taiwanese, Chinese or Korean characters who identify themselves with samurai. This is partly because these Asian cultures have their own warrior figures who already embody many of the samurai traits, such as China's 'flying knights.' But it also has to do with cultural fragrance. Japan's image in Asian countries is complicated by lingering war and colonial issues that don't exist between Japan and Western nations. As technology improves and becomes more accessible and as Japan gains more soft power with its increasing number of cultural exports (mentioned by Douglas McGray in 'Japan's Gross National Cool'), it will be interesting to see how the image of the samurai develops and the degree to which it may or may not become an internationally available ideal. ■

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