

**The New York Times**

Ideas &amp; Trends

Week in Review Desk; SECT4

**Japan's Samurai Past Thunders Into the Present**

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819 words

7 December 2003

The New York Times

Late Edition - Final

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English

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TOKYO -- THE climax of the new film "The Last Samurai" is no ordinary fight scene: It is a coda to Japan's medieval past and a nod to its enduring fighting spirit.

After a dramatic battle, the leader of a group of rebel holdouts commits ritual suicide rather than surrender in shame to the well-armed and newly Westernized Japanese Army. The victors, awed by the rebels' bravery, bow in reverence. Though they now wear Prussian-style uniforms, they remain true to the samurais' unspoken code of Bushido.

The film takes place in the late 1870's, when Japan was abandoning its feudal society and industrializing, yet the same tug of war between preserving tradition and opening Japan to the world persists today. Even as Japan is about to commit troops in Iraq, sending its military abroad for the first time since World War II, the tension between old ways and modern life is evident.

The movie, though fictional, reminds us that while the samurai are gone, many of their values are still part of the fabric of Japanese society. Though outsiders -- and many Japanese -- exaggerate the resonance of this mix of allegiance, self-control and shame, the social structure that nurtures these values has resisted everything from the American occupation to encroaching globalization.

"Hierarchy is still part of everyday life in Japan," said Sheldon M. Garon, a professor of history at Princeton University and author of "Molding Japanese Minds" (Princeton University Press, 1997). "It's in every relationship, whether it's a company, college or otherwise. The basic organizational structure is remarkably resilient."

American society may celebrate initiative and reward upstarts, but most Japanese still define themselves by their affiliations and their ranking in these groups. The samurai did not invent the system; they were just ardent followers of it. But their fervor has become lore in Japan, where "salarymen" are compared to warriors, baseball teams are like armies and students cramming for exams wear headbands like kamikaze pilots.

The flip side is the shame in letting down one's boss, coach or teacher. "The Japanese ethical code consists of three main pillars: obligation, shame and the environment that surrounds people," said Shinichi Yanaka, a professor at Japan Women's University and a specialist in Bushido, the samurai's code. "To do something bad in Japan does not only mean breaking the rules but also doing something that society does not permit."

This system of social checks and balances was heavily refined during the shoguns' rule from 1600 to 1868. The circles people moved in and the roles they performed were far more rigidly defined than today, and the penalties for failure were often crueler, including banishment and death by sword.

The arrival of the Americans and the industrialization they ushered in threatened the system and the ruling class that long benefited from it. Within two decades -- the time frame for "The Last Samurai" -- Japan's industrialists and their Western backers all but replaced that status quo.

But the samurai spirit and the precepts of Bushido made a comeback in the 1930's as Japan's military prepared the nation for war. The kamikaze pilots, who defended the honor of Japan and the emperor by turning their airplanes into missiles, were the most fanatical expression of this thinking.

The sentimental attachment to the samurai code runs deep. Japanese form hundreds of relationships based on deep and often subtle obligations to one's company, school or sports teams. And with those obligations comes the shame in not meeting them.

After World War II, workers began to see themselves as toiling not for money but for the honor of serving their corporate masters, and helped turn Japan into an economic giant. During the economy's 10-year slide, though, thousands of businessmen have killed themselves for letting down co-workers, companies and families.

"After the war, people thought their companies were their family and decided to be loyal to the company," said Eiichi Motono, a professor at Waseda University who studies Japan's industrial development. "People who did not work for

companies were considered heretics, and those who failed to keep up with their business were looked down on. That is why people commit suicide in today's stagnant economy."

Increasingly, Japanese are questioning their romance with the samurai past, even as many others cling to the old ways and lament the decline in the lifetime employment system and other cornerstones of postwar Japan.

One thing is certain, though: No matter how strong the pressure for cultural change, the intertwining code of obligation and shame that has grown over centuries will not unravel easily.

Photo: The new film "The Last Samurai" is an act of homage to the enduring samurai code of allegiance, self-control and shame. (Photo by Warner Brothers)

Document NYTF000020031207dzc700067