Samurai in popular culture

Actor Kotaro Satomi on the set of *Mito Komon*

**Jidaigeki** (lit. historical drama) had been a staple on Japanese movies and TV from the beginning. It usually features a samurai with a kenjutsu who stood up against evil samurai and merchants. *Mito Komon* (水戸黄門), a fictitious stories of Tokugawa Mitsukuni's travel, is a popular TV drama where Mitsukuni travels disguised as a retired rich merchant with two unarmed samurai also disguised as his companions. He finds trouble wherever he goes, and after gathering evidences, he has his samurai knock around unrepentantly evil samurai and merchants. He then reveals his identity which, if he wished to, can destroy the entire clan and evils has no option but surrender and hope that his punishments would not extend to their families.

The samurai-themed works of film director Akira Kurosawa are among the most praised of the genre, influencing many filmmakers across the world with his techniques and storytelling. Notable works of his include *The Seven Samurai*, in which a besieged farming village hires a collection of wandering samurai to defend them from bandits; *Yojimbo*, where a former samurai involves himself in a town's gang war by working for both sides; and *The Hidden Fortress*, in which two foolish peasants find themselves helping a legendary general escort a princess to safety. The latter was one of the primary inspirations for George Lucas's *Star Wars*, which also borrows a number of aspects from the samurai, such as in the *Jedi Knights* of the series.

Samurai films and westerns share a number of similarities, and the two have influenced each other over the years. Kurosawa was inspired by the works of director John Ford, and in turn Kurosawa's works have been remade into westerns, such as *The Seven Samurai* into *The Magnificent Seven* and *Yojimbo* into *A Fistful of Dollars*.

Another fictitious television series, *Abarembo Shogun*, featured Yoshimune, the eighth Tokugawa shogun. Samurai at all levels from the shogun down to the lowest rank, as well as ronin, featured prominently in this show.

*Shōgun* is the first novel in James Clavell's Asian Saga. It is set in feudal Japan somewhere around the year 1600 and gives a highly fictionalized account of the rise of Tokugawa Ieyasu to the Shogunate, seen through the eyes of an English sailor whose fictional heroics are loosely based on William Adams' exploits.
A Hollywood movie, *The Last Samurai*, containing a mixture of fact and fiction, was released in 2003 to generally good reviews in North America. The film's plot is loosely based on the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion led by Saigo Takamori, and also on the story of Jules Brunet, a French army captain who fought alongside Enomoto Takeaki in the Boshin War. The life style and the war tactics shown in the movie *The Last Samurai* are those of out-country samurai of the Sengoku jidai, precisely of the era before 1543; not those in the 19th century. An actual battle of that period was only a little different from that of American or European army, the only difference being a katana to be waved for soldiers to charge instead of a saber.

The movie *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* takes as its central character a black assassin in contemporary America, who takes inspiration from the Hagakure. The soundtrack album positions hip hop against readings of the *Hagakure* by Forest Whitaker.

*Kill Bill* by Quentin Tarantino can be described as a glorification of the samurai sword, katana.

The samurai have also appeared frequently in Japanese comics (manga) and animation (anime). Most common are historical works where the protagonist is either a samurai or former samurai (or another rank/position) who possesses considerable martial skill. Two of the most famous examples are *Lone Wolf and Cub*, where the former proxy executioner for the Shogun and his toddler son become hired killers after being betrayed by other samurai and nobles; and *Rurouni Kenshin*, where a former assassin, after helping end the Bakumatsu era and bringing about the Meiji era, finds himself protecting newfound friends and fighting off old enemies while upholding his oath to never kill again through the use of a reversed-bladed sword. Samurai-like characters are not just restricted to historical settings, a number of works set in the modern age and even the future include characters who live, train, and fight like samurai. Notable examples include Goemon Ishikawa XIII from the *Lupin III* series of comics, television series, and movies; and Motoko Aoyama from the romantic comedy *Love Hina*. Small relevance to samurai can even be seen in the show *Beyblade*, which is set in the present. One character, Jin of the Gale, seems to be a mix of samurai and ninja.

*Usagi Yojimbo*, the longest running American samurai comic book to date.
American comic books have adopted the character type for stories of their own. For instance, the Marvel Universe superhero Wolverine during the 1980s attempted to use the ideals and concept of the samurai as a means to control his violent urges in a constructive manner. The character has also been a feature in popular series itself such as Ronin by Frank Miller and Usagi Yojimbo by Stan Sakai.

Samurai are also heroes and enemies in many games where they would either be greatest friends or worst nightmares. These samurai would use mostly katana and are devastating foot soldiers. An example is Age of Empires series. It also seems that many new games springing about have something to do with Samurai, in part or in whole related to the topic. The main reason for this is the import of games from Japan, influenced by the styles of Japanese Anime and manga. Some popular titles include Dynasty Warriors, Seven Samurai, and there is even a lead character portraying a samurai in the Sci-Fi thriller game, Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Jin Uzuki, Shion Uzuki's brother, is a Samurai wannabe who fights only with a sword, trying to force his Kimono styles onto his sister.

The concept of a samurai, as opposed to that of a knight, has lead to a major gap in how a warrior or a hero is characterised in Japan and the rest of the world. A samurai does not have to be tall and heavily muscled to be strong. He can be barely five feet tall, seemingly weak and even handicapped. He can even be "she". Equating size with power and strength does not readily appeal to the Japanese aesthetic. Perfect examples of this can be found in the Blind Swordsman Zatoichi movie series or Lady Toda Mariko from James Clavell's Shogun. Ancient Japanese heroes are often flawed individuals, who gain strength from what other cultures would only see as a form of weakness.