

The Last Sham-urai

A Vietnamese boy's take on The Last Samurai and an argument for switching dance partners

Let's get a few things out of the way: this is not going to be an article about historical inaccuracies, nor will it be an apologist essay urging Asians to lighten up and appreciate the film for its "art" and "drama," both of which have been done before. My approach to critiquing *The Last Samurai* will be to look at it as a contemporary big budget film that can't be removed from its present day racial/gendered/political context. Specifically, how does *The Last Samurai* portray the same racial stereotypes that have plagued Asians in the U.S. since the days of silent film?

I won't apologize for giving up plot spoilers. Because honestly, my people, if you don't already know what's gonna happen when white folks make a movie about Asians, then you need to get out more often.

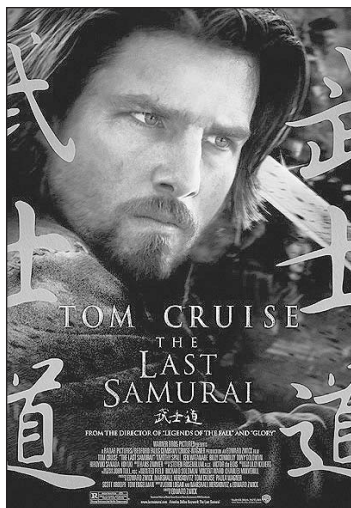
Did I support the film by paying for a ticket? Nope. Let's just say that I, um, found some creative ways to view the film in the theatres for the purpose of this essay.

Basically, the film revolves around a character named Nathan Algren, an alcoholic white American army captain who feels guilty about his role in slaughtering Native Americans. Algren is hired by the Japanese to train its army in contemporary warfare, to suppress a rebellion of Samurai. These rebels (the Samurai) believe that Japan is modernizing too quickly, and that the Emperor is being manipulated for the material benefit of corrupt and self-interested men.

During a battle, Algren is captured by the Samurai leader, Katsumoto, and brings Algren as a prisoner back to their village in order to learn more about his enemy. Algren is nursed back to health by Taka, the wife of a man he just killed in battle. Algren, in a surprisingly short amount of time, learns to wield a katana and do some hand-to-hand martial arts (well enough to kill many Japanese men), speak some Japanese (enough to passive-aggressively flirt with Taka), play with the kids of the man he killed, fall in love with the woman he made a widow, and earn the respect of the Samurai who initially hated his white ass.



Ken Watanabe and Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*.



During the film's dramatic climax, Katsumoto and Cruise lead the Samurai rebellion in a doomed charge, katanas and bows versus rifles and cannons. Everyone in the Samurai rebellion is gunned down by Howitzer cannons and shiny new rapid-firing machine guns, except for Cruise, who miraculously lives on to teach every one the values of martyrdom, and to live out the rest of his days in love with Taka.

So who is supposed to be the "Last Samurai" anyway, Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) or Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe)? This has been a central part of discussions involving this film, and boy, is it ever a stupid discussion. Because it doesn't matter who the titular last Samurai is supposed to be or even intended to be, the star of the film is Tom Cruise, and if you need more proof of that, just look at any poster or publicity material for the film. At the heart of the movie is the same formula that nearly every

Hollywood film has replicated involving people of color: Troubled White Man™ meets people of color, learns about the value of struggle, life, and honor, and becomes one with the oppressed. We've seen this in many flicks, from the "noble savages" of *Dances With Wolves*, to the doomed Black martyrs of *Glory* (directed by the same director as *The Last Samurai*, Edward Zwick). But *The Last Samurai* adds an Orientalist twist: Cruise appropriates the culture of Japanese men to augment his humanity, then all of the Japanese men conveniently die a noble death so the white man can miraculously survive as the spiritual successor/superior of the Japanese men and get the Geisha. It's an old formula that reinforces the same type of bourgeois white liberal appropriation of Asian people and cultures that exist in contemporary society: Put some sandals and a backpack on Cruise, give him a laptop in place of the katana and you've got a Columbia student hiking across Third World Country Du Jour™ looking for his lost soul.

Although the film is set in the 19th century, Algren represents the contemporary ideal man that whites love, and any person of color with half a brain in their head has learned to spot a mile away and suspect: The white liberal appropriator. He is initially beaten by the Japanese (which helps him alleviate some of that white guilt and also positions him as a victim)

but eventually learns enough to beat the Japanese or equal them at their own game (good thing white egocentrism and privilege isn't threatened). Algren hates the ways of the White Man™ enough to sympathize with the Japanese and the Native Americans, but the film takes care to validate its white character by showing that Japanese culture is ignorant when it comes to contemporary liberalism: When Katsumoto says he admires General Custer, Algren lectures him, telling him that Custer was a murderer of Native Americans; Algren helps Katsumoto's sister, Taka (played by Koyuki) carry something in the house, and when she protests by saying "Japanese men don't help women with this," Algren responds by saying, "I'm not Japanese." Of course, he says it in Japanese, while wearing Taka's dead husband's kimono.

You'll excuse me if I must say that a white man lecturing others about their racial ignorance and sexism is like hiring a crack fiend to deliver an inspirational anti-drug speech to your local high school. And I'm not talking about a reformed crack fiend, I mean a crack fiend.

But the film does exactly this, because the white people who made this film evidently believe that the White Man™ can transcend all boundaries as long as his motives are "pure." An underlying current of this belief is that the White Man™ is the man of the future and that Asian men are obsolete. We're taught that there is nothing inherent-

ly special about Asian men that white men can't learn, co-opt, and appropriate — and white men will be better at whatever it is (in this case, *bushido*, and lovin' up Asian women) because they are also inherently superior.

That's why it's in the Asian man's karma to die and the white man's karma to live and learn, like some white liberal's wet dream version of Darwin's Natural Selection crossed with Courtney Love Buddhism. It doesn't matter if you think white men are superior to Asians for conservative stereotypes (i.e. they have more power, created the best civilization, etc.) or liberal stereotypes (i.e. they're less sexist and less conservative), white supremacy is white supremacy. *The Last Samurai* seeks to lull us with a less overt racism, a racism that is masked by white liberalism and its superficial PC-ness.

Speaking of white (and whitewashed) liberalism's many dogmas, it's surprising that there has been little criticism of the film's sexism. Other films, especially films made by men of color (i.e. *Better Luck Tomorrow*) that have featured only one female character, have been criticized for portraying monolithic depictions of Asian women. The same accusations have not been leveled at *The Last Samurai*, though the only Asian female character in the film is Taka, a widow and mother of two sons, her husband killed when Cruise stabs him with his long, long flagpole.

Wow.

Anyway, her character plays completely into the white man's racial/sexual fantasy of Asian women: Silent, dutiful, tragic, beautiful, and completely in love with a white man even if it makes no damn sense. Taka, in fact, undresses Cruise and dresses him in her dead husband's armor, all the while touching him suggestively as they exchange silent, longing stares — a scene that Oprah, by the way, described as "so sexy" amid cheers from the female audience when Cruise appeared on her show to promote the film.

As my friend Tim mocked, "if I kill her husband and stare at her longingly, she'll be mine." I'm guessing

this aspect of the movie probably bothered many of you Asian women, since many of you know what it's like to be in social situations where some creepy white dude stares at you like they're having a flashback to 'Nam. But it is also particularly disturbing that usual critics of racism and sexism seem not to mind when it's white liberal men that are guilty of the 'isms.

Okay, at this point, some of you may be assuming that I hate this film because I am one of those patriarchal possessive Asian men who can't stand to see "his women" being with white dudes. I can't be held responsible for such simple-minded, racist, and obfuscating reactions to my analysis.

What I can try to do is make a case that my critiques of the Yoko John relationship in this film are not about Asian men "owning" Asian women, but rather the different ways in which white racism specifically targets and affects Asians depending on their gender. The exotification of Asian women in this film and in other pop culture blockbusters like *Miss Saigon* may be obvious to us by now (hopefully). What may not be so obvious is the other side of Asian women's exotification: The very specific and gendered way in which white men, consciously or otherwise, want to get rid of Asian men. Because the oppressive possessiveness of women displayed by white men in this film (and in American society) directly oppresses Asian men as well.

Consider that we never get a glimpse into the love lives of the Japanese Samurai in the film. In my correspondence with a fellow Asian American community organizer, one of the things she wondered as she was watching the film was, "where are all the women who are involved with the Japanese guys?" You might argue that asking a question like that is inherently heterosexist, as Japanese men may have built relationships with each other, like in the Japanese film *Gohatto* (Taboo). Good point, but neither the story nor the characters suggest any homosexuality among the men in *The Last Samurai*.

You may also argue that the Samurai follow a strict code which places their duty above all else, including loving relationships, but then how do you explain the existence of Katsumoto's son Nobutada (played by Shin Koyomada)? What

happened to Katsumoto's wife/Nobutada's mother? What is her name? Where is she? Are we supposed to believe that Asian men produce children asexually? If y'all other Asian men can do that, please tell me, because I must have missed that line when they were handing out that special ability.

Anyway, the invisibility of the Asian man relative to the Asian woman in Western society is not unique to *The Last Samurai*. Look at Asian films like *In the Mood for Love* (Hong Kong) and *Shiri* (South Korea), just to take two examples, and look at how they've been marketed in Asia versus the U.S. Both *In the Mood For Love* and *Shiri* are films that involve an Asian male and Asian female relationship, but look at the American DVD editions and promo material for both of those films.

Tony Leung won the Best Actor award at Cannes for *In the Mood For Love*, yet it's just Maggie Chung, by herself, pictured on the DVD. *Shiri* was about much more than a relationship, but it's Yun-jin Kim, by herself, in a slinky dress that we see in Western promos for the film — and when did she wear that dress in the movie anyway? You may blame Asian patriarchy for this, but if you look at the way the films were marketed in Asia, the marketing materials are more inclusive of the men and women and better reflect the content of the films.

It is the Western promoters who have chosen to market the films with the sexualized image of the Asian woman and render the Asian man invisible. In terms of marketing, this insinuates that the white male audience is the one being sought. White men's racist and sexist longings can go unthreatened if there is no Asian male love interest around. Even films made by Asians that fit into this mold (for example, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *The Joy Luck Club*, etc) tend to enjoy mainstream acceptance and success.

So it is no coincidence that the only Asian female character in *The Last Samurai* is the one that ends up being Algren's love interest. What about the other strong women in the village? Why aren't there any female warrior characters? You might argue that it wouldn't be realistic to have a Japanese female samurai — but would it be any less realistic than having a former alcoholic white

American military captain feel guilty about his slaughter of Native Americans, then going to Japan and eventually helping to lead a rebellious order of Samurai into certain death? Actually, it would probably be MORE realistic to have Asian female warrior characters, as there are Asian female warrior characters in Japanese history and mythology, Tomoe Gozen and Hojo Masako being two examples.

What all this adds up to is a familiar formula of white hetero-racism and sexism: The only Asian woman who is given any legitimacy or attention is the one who falls in love with the white man. And the Asian men are fated to be obsolete and dead, so they are no threat to white male patriarchy.

Alarmingly, it seems like all the main Japanese characters in the film have caught what I like to call the 8-Mile Syndrome, although you could also call it the Blue Crush Syndrome, the Karate Kid syndrome, the Bagger Vance syndrome: All of the characters of color seem unrealistically concerned about what the white character is doing at all times. White people like to create and portray characters of color that teach them something about the value of life while remaining completely unthreatening. The person of color is always background, only coming to the foreground when she or he has something to say to the white person, and if we start relating to the person of color more than the white person, the person of color dies.

This is all due to the fact that ultimately, whites are most comfortable with people of color being in a role of servitude, even if this racism is masked by contemporary liberalism. Kata's husband is killed by Algren, stinks up her house, leaves her sons fatherless, yet she ends up falling in love with him. Ah, the things we'll forgive for love, if a white man is involved.

But it's not just Taka who's fascinated with Algren: Katsumoto's son dies, his brother-in-law is killed by Algren, his sister is tormented because she is forced to look after Algren, Katsumoto's faithful right-hand man Ujio (played by Hiroyuki Sanada) is gunned down in the final charge, and Katsumoto barely notices any of this, he's too busy wondering if Algren is the white tiger he saw in a vision and musing about fate and war. During an assassination attempt, ninjas are sur-

rounding Katsumoto, Taka, Taka's kids, and Algren. When does Taka draw her tanto to stab a ninja? Not when her brother or her kids or when she herself is threatened, but when a ninja is about to kill Algren. Likewise, though his nephews and sister are being threatened by ninjas, Katsumoto doesn't rush to defend them, he waits to throw his sword (something a samurai would probably never do, FYI, since samurai believed that their katana was their soul) to save Algren.

You might refer to *bushido* and how Samurai accepted death as a part of life and duty, and how it could be interpreted to be against the principles of *bushido* to bear a grudge towards Algren. But if the Samurai are willing to break their traditions enough to train a *gaijin* in the art of swordplay and *mushin*, you'd think that they'd be willing to bend the rules a little bit and kill the man that was hired to train the army meant to suppress them.

If Taka can break tradition enough to hook up with a white boy during 19th century Japan and feed and look after the killer of her husband, you'd think she'd be tempted to err on the side of her own humanity and feelings for revenge and poison the food of the cracker who devastated her family.

Oh, lighten up (pun intended), it's just a movie! Well, I would add that it's just a highly successful movie, both financially and critically (four Oscar nominations and \$268 million worldwide as I write this essay) and one of the few Hollywood films that has any speaking roles for Asians at all. It is, in fact, a highly visible, marketed, big budget film that has hardly been criticized or even analyzed for its racism, by mainstream critics or otherwise. A film made during the U.S. war with Iraq, written and directed by white men, that shows Japanese men slaughtering each other while a Heroic White Man™ is imported to intervene. A film that glorifies war and bloodshed while (despite two exceptions) only showing the Japanese dying, and allows its White Male Hero™ to be the sole survivor of the final slaughter. Hmmm.

A lot of people, including many Asians, have accused me of being overly critical of the film. They say enjoy the film for the costumes, the acting, the cinematography, and the fight scenes, and don't get all hung up on the politics. Okay, I have to

admit that the costumes are great (except for Tom Cruise, who looks like a woodchuck strapped into Samurai armor) and some of the acting by the Asians is good, particularly by Ken Watanabe and Hiroyuki Sanada. I even liked some of the fight scenes, especially the one where Ujio knocks the crap out of Algren with his *bokken*.

But it's ridiculous to see this film and not recognize the superficial, easy white liberal pandering to Asian sensibilities, especially since it does so much to ultimately hamstring its Asian characters. And it's absurd to ask Asians not to be affected by the politics of this film. If an African American was looking at a painting by a white man depicting a slavery auction block, would you ask that African American to just admire the brush strokes and ignore the political implications?

Yet I hear Asians complain all the time about how white people get away with things against Asians that they wouldn't get away with against African Americans. I hear Asians complain all the time about how white people wouldn't dare do this or dare do that for fear of angering the black community. I think we need to remember that African Americans, as well as Native Americans, Latino/as, and other peoples of color, have historically banded together as communities in order to speak out against transgressions and misrepresentation against their people. And there have been times when we Asian people have done so as well, though this history and its current day struggles are downplayed and misrepresented.

Asian people, maybe it's time we live up to that legacy, maybe it's time we're a little less forgiving when it comes to the white man. Maybe we need to stop checking ourselves and allow ourselves to be pissed. Maybe we need to stop convincing ourselves, and one another, to give our money to the people who make movies like *The Last Samurai*. Because I, for damn sure, hope this is The Last Essay I Need to Write Concerning BS Movies Like This™. ●

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