

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 5: The Samurai: Warrior to Kamikaze to Baseball Player

Viewing:

Seven Samurai, 1954, Kurosawa (excerpts),

Musashi Miyamoto (Samurai I), *Duel at Ichijoji Temple (Samurai II)*, *Duel at Ganryu Island (Samurai III)*, 1954-1955, Inagaki (excerpts)

The World at War: Japan 1941-1945 (the part on the kamikaze)

Young Baseball Heroes, 1987, The Faces of Japan.

From Swords to Factories, 1987, The Faces of Japan. WS

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college, 2-4 classes or extended unit of 2 weeks.

The central idea:

Tradition and change. The Japanese samurai is the archetypal warrior-hero, the creation of history, legend, and myth. His story is the story of Japan from the early feudal period to the present as the spirit of the samurai's code of discipline, loyalty, and honor evolved from the warrior of the sword, to the warrior with a gun, to the warrior with a baseball bat or a briefcase.

Teaching:

The American Occupation 1945-1952 banned the samurai film as an instrument of prewar and wartime feudal culture and militarism. Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* in 1954 revived the public's interest in the samurai film and tradition and led a new wave of this type of film which continues even today in television dramas. However, while the prewar images of the samurai had helped forge the public's attitudes and values in support of Japan's imperial and military ambitions, the postwar images reflected disillusionment with war.

In *Seven Samurai* Kurosawa reaches back into the 16th century, a time of civil wars and the suffering of the people, to present a view of noble ronin, former samurai now masterless, who are tired of war but still willing, merely for rice, to help farmers defend their farms and families against marauding bandits. These ronin, as the title suggests, are true samurai, compassionate as well as courageous. Their leader, Kambei, early in the film, cuts off his samurai's top knot and shaves his head in imitation of a buddhist monk in order to save a child from a madman. He is, in essence, a self-less, enlightened priest-warrior ready to use his martial skills in the name of humanitarian justice. The next 30 minutes involve the search for other ronin-samurai who will join Kambei and take up the farmer's cause. It is a study in the psychology of the ideal samurai as each man joins for a different reason.

The teacher's dilemma is that *Seven Samurai*, considered by some critics to be one of the best films ever made, is three hours long. Although I have used the entire film as the centerpiece for a three week interdisciplinary study of feudal Japan and the samurai

In This Section:

I: Literature & Humanities

- > 1. The Moon Princess
- > 2. The Tale of Genji
- > 3. Kesa and Morito
- > 4. Rashomon
- > 5. King Lear/Ran
- > 6. The Martyr
- > 7. The Holy Man of Mt. Koya
- > 8. Sorekara
- > 9. The Izu Dancer
- > 10. Snow Country
- > 11. The Makioka Sisters
- > 12. Twenty-Four Eyes
- > 13. The Harp of Burma
- > 14. The Sound of the Waves
- > 15. Enjo
- > 16. Patriotism
- > 17. Muddy River
- > 18. The Family Game
- > 19. Madame Butterfly
- > 20. Baseball

II: Asian, World & U.S. History

- > 1. Geography
- > 2. Imperial Japan
- > 3. Pearl Harbor
- > 4. Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- > 5. The Samurai
- > 6. Women of Japan

tradition, I am suggesting it here as the source for selected images and scenes.

Based on the 1935 novel *Musashi* by Yoshikawa, *Samurai I, II, and III*, Inagaki's film trilogy on the life of the greatest swordsman in Japanese history, is a romanticized view of the samurai during the early Tokugawa period. Musashi was a transitional figure at the beginning of this period which brought two and a half centuries of peace to Japan. A restless and wild young man of sixteen he fought in the great battle of Sekigahara (1600) from which Ieyasu Tokugawa emerged as Shogun over a unified Japan. The new government imposed a strong bureaucratic rule with samurai in the key positions. Although Musashi was on the losing side, surviving the hunting down and massacre of the vanquished army, he emerged in the new period of peace as a wandering *ronin* (masterless samurai), living the Way of the Sword and searching for mastery of the self and sword. With the civil wars over, schools and masters of swordsmanship represented the samurai class' way of maintaining their skills with the sword and of elevating the Way of the Sword to a moral and spiritual philosophy. Each school had its champion and sought to challenge others. Musashi belonged to no school and wandered the countryside dueling with these champions. Before he was twenty-nine, he had fought and won more than sixty contests.

But the legendary, now mythical, Musashi was also an artist (calligrapher) and philosopher. The third film in Inagaki's trilogy ends with Musashi's famous duel with Sasaki Kojiro, in which he defeats his opponent with a wooden long sword and his short sword. The last image showing Musashi departing from the site shows him crying. This suggests that at last he has finally achieved inner peace and understanding and that he no longer needs to follow the Way of the Sword.

Later in life, in monkish seclusion, he spent his time painting and writing. An irony is that some of his writings were during the 1980's sold to American businessmen as a guide to understanding the psychology and strategy of Japanese businessmen (*A Book of Five Rings*, 1645, 1974, *Musashi*).

The Kamikaze. In the Pacific War these warriors were modern samurai. Young men volunteered or were chosen to become kamikaze, warriors of the divine wind, ready to die for Japan by crashing their planes into the American warships and bombers. A translated quotation from a designated kamikaze pilot who survived the war compares his mission to that of the samurais: "I felt that the Zero fighter was to me what the sword was to the Samurai. And I felt I must manipulate the plane just as if it were my own body. And I also believed that the cockpit was a sacred place which would be my death place." (from *The World at War Japan 1941-1945*). The present-day idealization of the kamikaze, visible in the Japanese war museums and in recent Japanese films, may be explained in Ivan Morris' *The Nobility of Failure* (1975): "There is another type of hero in the complex Japanese tradition...Faced with defeat, the hero will typically take his own life in order to avoid the indignity of capture [or surrender] vindicate his honor [or his nation's honor] and make a final assertion of his sincerity." Morris goes on to suggest the value of the study of the kamikaze in this tradition: "This predilection for heroes who were unable to achieve their concrete objectives can teach us much about Japanese values and sensibility - and indirectly about our own as well."

Young Baseball Heroes. Continuing in the spirit and tradition of samurai is the modern Japanese baseball player and the businessman. But this may be purely an American perception growing out of the war, the popularity here of the postwar Japanese samurai films, and the aggressive moves of Japanese business into the American economy during the 1980s. Although this analogy broaches cultural stereotyping, it is useful in teaching high school students to analyze and interpret cultural images and patterns for underlying characteristics and values.

The *Faces of Japan's Young Baseball Heroes*, available in 15- or 30-minute versions, is superb for having students compare and contrast their own school athletic experiences

with those of the Japanese. What is brought out is the Japanese emphasis on training, discipline, form, and total dedication to the team effort. The martial nature of this effort is reflected also in the style and emotion of the boy cheerleaders. Another *Faces* episode, one that can bring the unit and the divergent parts into a focus in modern Japan, is *From Swords to Factories*. While it may not be as interesting to students as *Young Baseball Heroes*, it does reveal the continuing if declining place of the art and heritage of sword making in Japanese culture.

The following are possible time patterns for using the unit:

Two Classes:

Seven Samurai: Day One

Opening (0-7:30 minutes)

The Samurai as Buddhist and Priest (15-30 minutes)

The Last Battle (last 10 minutes)

>> *Total 32:30 minutes*

Samurai II and III: Day Two

Opening & Samurai II (0-7 minutes)

Last Duel & Samurai III (last 8 minutes)

>> *Total 15 minutes*

Young Baseball Heroes

Entire 15-minute version

>> *Total 15 minutes*

Longer Units:

Seven Samurai

The psychology of the true samurai, the chosen seven and why (0-58:40 minutes)

The series of battles (the last 80 minutes)

Miyamoto Musashi (Samurai I)

The wild youth and taming (92 minutes)

Duel at Ichijoji (Samurai II)

Opening duel (7 minutes)

Duel at Ichijoji against many men (20 minutes)

Duel at Ganryu (Samurai III)

Final Duel (20 minutes)

The Kamikaze

Entire Video (50 minutes)

Faces of Japan

Young Baseball Heroes (27 minutes)

From Swords to Factories (27 minutes)

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