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'The Last Samurai' depicts the roots of the modern martial arts

The Last Samurai accurately recreates this period when Meiji regime replaced the Tokugawa regime in Japan during the later half of the 19th century. (The Tokugawa regime's rise is well told in James Clavell's, Shogun.) This was the period when Japan was trying to establish itself as player in the world community. This movie really focuses on the struggle to integrate western technology and philosophy with Japanese traditions. Among the strongest of them was the code of bushido (the way of the warrior). The Samurai as a class were on the verge of becoming extinct. The struggle to maintain the virtues found in bushido while adopting the ways of the west is at the core of movie.

These virtues are jita kyohei, respect for one's opponent, mushin, no mindedness in battle, kaizen, to seek perfection, seiroyoku zenyo, to make the best use of energy, gumbari, to fight with gusto and honor. Rank and respect for one's sensei (teacher) is also deeply rooted in the code of bushido.

Judo was founded to help preserve these virtues. Being a judoka (judo player) and sensei of a large judo dojo (school) I liked the fact that this story takes place right around the time that judo was developed. Dr. Jigoro Kano, invented modern judo in 1882 as a refinement of jujitsu in an effort to preserve the best aspects of the Samurai (warriors).

The Last Samurai captures the spirit of bushido with great accuracy in terms of the weapons particularly the tachi (long sword), armor, hand-to-hand fighting techniques. There are no somersaults in mid air, flying people, and other Hollywood acrobatics in this movie. Instead we see glimpse into the past with realistic battles as if we were there observing. The story is fairly tight and Tom Cruise is convincing in his role of an American combat officer and advisor who transitions into a Samurai.



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