

Code of honor in the seven samurai essay

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Akira Kurosawa's film *The Seven Samurai* is as much a commentary on the themes of justice and selflessness as it is about samurai warfare. The primary conflict of the samurai against the raiders they are hired to drive away from the village is that of old-fashioned, underdog honor overcoming the ideals of both ruthless chaos (the raiders) and passive defeat (the villagers). Over the course of the film, all seven samurai find their own reasons for defending the village, overcoming their own pride, naivete and pity to band together as an opposing force and strike a blow for honor and dignity. In this film report, we will examine how the socio-economic factors of the high-medieval era of Japan are used and commented on in *The Seven Samurai*, and how they affect the characters themselves.

In the high-medieval era of Japan, substantial class and economic barriers existed that separated groups of people in many different ways. While the nobility rested peacefully in lives of plenty within the shogunate, many poorer Japanese were forced into modest lives of farming. Those who fell into neither of those categories tended to fall in with groups of raiders - raiding and pillaging was common, the use of force a common means to get food, property and women. The primary conflict in the film is of the villagers against the predatory raiders, who give them an ultimatum for their rice - they get what they ask for, or they burn down the village. Most villages of the time would react as this one has up to the events of the film - giving the raiders what they want in order to get them to leave. The samurai, while the main characters of the film, are merely the vehicle for the villager's defense; they are the damsel in distress that needs saving from these raids and attempts at extortion. This was a common occurrence in feudal Japan at the

time., even among samurai – the father of one of the young women in the village worries that even the samurai will attempt to take his daughter.

The biggest conflict in the first part of the film is whether or not they can get samurai to work for food instead of money (and even what food they have is not much). This is due to the noble stature of samurai, and their typical unwillingness to help those in need. However, the unconventional makeup of the group they get not only makes them more receptive to help, but creates the strange and unconventional strategy they require to win.

The primary weapon of the samurai is the sword, a source of pride and identity for them. If anything, the samurai's ability with his sword is indicative of their general toughness in the film – while Kyuzo is stern and tough, he is by far the most skilled swordsman of them all. On the other hand, Heihachi, while being the most personable of the samurai, is thoroughly mediocre in his handling of the katana. This ties the skill of a samurai directly to their swordsmanship, regardless of any other type of weapon.

The reliance of the samurai on swords is directly contrasted with the raider's use of firearms, a relatively recent development for Japan at the period of this film (the late 16th century). Kyuzo, the most talented swordsman, is actually taken down from a safe distance in the climax of the film by a musket. Despite the fact that many samurai often used these modern weapons to dishonorably win, this is dramatically ironic when considering Kyuzo's preferred method of combat – the duel. A duel is shown earlier in the film as an acceptable means of settling a dispute. The two characters (Kyuzo

and the man who has a grievance with him) square off, facing each other, and simultaneously decide the right moment to attack. This is thought to be the warrior's way of fighting – on equal ground, with equal weapons, both being fully aware of the situation. On an honorable battleground, Kyuzo is shown to win; it takes a musket in the back to down the skilled samurai.

All of the seven samurai are ronin – samurai without a master. Many ronin, since they have no persistent person to protect, must focus more on their ideals. While many masterless samurai would perform seppuku (ritual suicide), those who remained instead became ronin. They would roam the countryside, often putting their skills to work for whoever would pay them, becoming swords for hire. Many of the samurai in this film follow that principle, only wanting to follow the money, and being dismayed when they learn the villagers can only pay them in rice (and not much of it). However, the wise Kambei and the naïve, idealistic Katsushiro are able to put this need for money aside, acting first and foremost upon their ideas of honor. This includes protection of the innocent at any cost, and Kambei in particular feels a great sense of pride in being able to serve these villagers. The rest of the samurai seem to fall in with them, either through acquaintance (Shichiroki knowing Kambei) or genuine interest in the quest or its rewards (the others wishing to either fight for honor or rice).

Each of the seven samurai possess a unique skill that is integral to the formation of a comprehensive team that can defend the village. Kambei is the wise leader; Katsushiro the naïve youth; Heihachi the genial peacemaker among the group; Shichiroji, the reliable friend of Kambei; Gorobei, the

strategist; Kyuzo, the skilled swordsman, and Kikuchiyo, the reckless, unpredictable force of nature. Despite their incredibly diverse backgrounds and attitudes, they eventually manage to become comrades, or bohai, which was a common phenomenon among warriors of varying provinces and classes (Conlan, p. 124). This combination of traditional and nontraditional fighting skills and strategies makes for an incredibly complex and versatile fighting force. They can use their swordfighting skills in one on one battles, but they must come up with innovative ways of drawing in the raiders and making them vulnerable to their attacks, as evidenced by their dramatic strategy used in the climax of the film to separate the raiders one by one, using their lack of numbers against them.

While samurai are often thought to be of nobility, or closely tied to them, these samurai come from a variety of different backgrounds. Katsushiro comes from nobility, to be sure, but characters such as Heihachi are often humble wood-choppers. One particularly potent scene occurs when Kikuchiyo reveals that he comes from a farmer's family, revealing his motivation for accepting this mission with them. He relates to these common people, unlike many of the other samurai who are above them in social status, and helps bring them all together in empathy and cooperation.

This sense of creative thinking is evident in their ultimate strategy, which is to shrink the perimeter down to a reasonable size by burning the homes that are outside it. Next, they use the winding streets of the village to their advantage, having the villagers let in only one raider at a time through a wall of spears, where the samurai can then pick them off. It is an instance of honorable samurai using arguable dishonorable tactics for an honorable

cause. However, since they need to ensure victory due to the vulnerability of the villagers, they feel it is necessary to resort to these cruder, yet more inventive, methods of dispatching their prey.

In the end, with all of this strategy, it is Kikuchiyo's unpredictable energy that saves the day, rushing in to kill the leader of the bandits, with no regard for protocol or safety. While it costs him his life, he seeks to avenge the death of Kyuzo, who was killed by the same gun that murders Kikuchiyo. This demonstrates another attribute of samurai honor: brotherhood. In the absence of masters, they began to rely on each other for purpose and support, and they were united in a common goal; with the murder of his comrades, Kikuchiyo took it upon himself to make sure the man who did it was not left unpunished.

In conclusion, the samurai in *The Seven Samurai* retain their honor and express it through the defense of the innocents in this village. While they ultimately use dishonorable tactics to get the job done, it is done for the principles that they lay their lives down for. In fact, the real victory does not go to them: in the final scene, Kambei says that "The farmers have won. Not us." They were merely the instruments the villagers had at their disposal for securing their own freedom; while the samurai were the ones securing the victory, they trained the villagers to stand up for themselves, defend their people, their children, and their home. It was their initiative that led to their own salvation, and the samurai are fine with that; as ronin, they had a master one more time.

Works Cited

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