



## Colonialism and Western Hegemony: Representations of Imperialism in The Last Samurai

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**Abstract.** This study raises the issue of the existence of Western hegemony carried out by the United States, the purpose of this study was to look for forms of imperialism that exist in the film *The Last Samurai*. This study uses the theory of hegemony proposed by Antonio Gramsci and the concept of Soft Power conducted by the United States in an effort to spread Western ideology to Japan, the method used is a qualitative descriptive method, qualitative descriptive used in research with the aim to describe and understand the phenomenon of Western hegemony conducted by the United States. This study answers several problems contained in the film *The Last Samurai*. This study shows that there is a representation of imperialism in the film *The Last Samurai*. This can be seen when Nathan Algren, as a representation of America, comes to Japan to train new military troops. The results of this study show how the character of Nathan Algren, a former United States military, transformed from a person who presented Western culture and power to sympathy for traditional Japanese culture, especially a Samurai. The modernization through changes in the Japanese military system made the Samurai lose their power in social status. This research also provides readers with knowledge about imperialism and its depiction in films.

**Keywords:** Japanese Film, Imperialism, Hegemony

### 1. Introduction

Colonialism and Western imperialism have become important topics in the study of history and culture. In the 19th century and early 20th century, Western countries including the United States expanded their dominance through colonization and military expansion. Under the influence of this colonialism, colonized countries were forced to adopt Western values because they were considered more advanced, including their system of government. Japan was one of the countries affected by colonization. Since the Meiji Restoration at the end of the 19th century, Japan has sought to adapt to the globalization influence exerted by the West, including by maintaining its traditional system. In Japan, the samurai class held a high position in its social structure, they were a military class tasked with serving the ruler or daimyo (my lord) with loyalty and courage.

This issue can sometimes be seen in a film. Film is a complex social, psychological, and aesthetic phenomenon that is a document consisting of stories and images accompanied by words and music. Thus, film is a multidimensional and complex production. The last samurai (2003), directed by Edward Zwick, depicts the conflict between Western values brought by modernization and the Japanese traditions upheld by the samurai group. This film tells the story of Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), a former American soldier involved in training Japanese troops to face the samurai who are trying to maintain their traditions amid the pressures of modernity. The themes presence in the films, as well as their implication, both local and global, are examined in detail [9].

Samurai, among the most popular icons of Japanese history and culture, are often the subject of common myths or simplifications [10]. As time goes by, Nathan gradually begins to side with the samurai who reject the westernization imposed by the government at that time. This is because if westernization truly occurs, the samurai will lose their power in social status [8]. As is known, the samurai are the highest caste in social status compared to other castes. Therefore, the samurai reject westernization, leading to conflicts between the samurai and the Japanese military formed by the government during that era.

This research was conducted to find a depiction of imperialism in a film that depicts similar events in the past, This research aims to analyze how the film The Last Samurai represents colonialism and Western hegemony? Specifically, the questions in this research are:

1. How did the history of the United States' first arrival in Japan come about?
2. How does the film The Last Samurai influence perceptions of global power dynamics?

## 2. Literature Review

The film, The Last Samurai, directed by Edward Zwick, has previously been studied from various perspectives, one of which is from the perspective of bushido values. Previous research in the journal entitled Bushido Values in The Movie: Rurouni Kenshin: The Beginning (2021) and The Last Samurai (2003), this research discusses the presentation of bushido values in the films Ruroini Kenshin: The Beginning (2021) and The Last Samurai [2].

The study used descriptive qualitative to analyze the film. Data collection methods include watching and reading, identifying, classifying, and selecting. Analyzing data with research methods using display, explain, and interpret. In the results of the study , it was explained that the values of bushido presented in the film The Last Samurai (2003) include honor, loyalty, courage, discipline, honesty, and politeness [13].

In this study, the researchers used the same object as previous study but examined different problems. The Last Samurai (2003) directed by Edward Zwick by raising the issue of colonialism and Western hegemony experienced by Japan at the time. The thing that distinguishes this research from previous research is that this research focuses on the depiction of imperialism in the film The Last Samurai and compares it with events that occurred in the past [11].

Researchers use the theory of hegemony as a reference in conducting research this time, hegemony is not a relationship of dominance by using power, but tends to the relationship of consent by using political and ideological leadership(Irwan, 2018). In addition theory is actually a criticism of the concept of reducing thought and considering the essence of a certain entity as the only absolute truth, especially reductionism and Essentialism inherent in the thoughts of Marxists and Non-Marxists [6]. The Last Samurai depicted a clash between the Samurai and modernization imposed by the Western powers through their military might.

Using the theory of hegemony, it can be analyzed how the film shows the process of Western hegemony penetrating into Japan through social changes, new values, and government systems implanted by Western powers.

### 3. Method

Researchers use the qualitative descriptive method to explore meaning, describe Qualitative descriptive to understand the problems used in the film *The Last Samurai*, describe Qualitative allows researchers to explore how colonialism and Western hegemony are represented in *The Last Samurai* through the narrative, characters and social dynamics that existed at that time.

The purpose of using descriptive method is to make a factual and accurate description of the facts between phenomena studied, according to Mulyana in [7] Qualitative research aims to maintain the form and content of human behavior and analyze its qualities, rather than being entities.

Researchers used an objective approach in this study, according to Hasanddin objective approach in [5], An objective approach is an approach that prioritizes the investigation of literary works based on the reality of the literary text itself.

Researchers will collect data from depictions of storylines in films to identify how imperialism and colonialism are portrayed. After obtaining the data, the researchers will compare it with Japanese historical literature the Meiji Restoration era and the representation of history in that movie, The researchers will analyze the narrative of the film and its accuracy in the history of Japan in the meiji era. Researchers will connect data from the film with relevant theories, as well as consider how in the film represents the problems of colonialism and Western hegemony in *The Last Samurai*.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Film is one of the products of Mass Communication whose influence able to reach all segments of society. Movies can represent a culture and function as a cultural process of a society presented in the form of moving images [4]. According to Goldin in, Representation is a configuration that can represent something else in some way. In *The Last Samurai*, clearly depicted Western imperialism and colonialism countries that are trying to maintain their traditional values. Colonialism is derived from the word colony, colony according to latin is a settlement. An effort made by ruling countries to control a region or territory in order to obtain resources is called colonialism. In addition to colonialism, the existence of imperialism is also seen in this film ini or in the original history. Imperialism according to Rauschenberger said that in general cultural imperialism refers to the spread and power of United States consumer products and culture throughout the world, with many countries claiming the erosion of their local cultural traditions and values. In addition to colonialism and Imperialism, the problem that can be seen is the existence of Western hegemony carried out by America. Hegemony in Gramsci's sense is a consensus in which submission is obtained through acceptance of the hegemony class by the hegemonic class(Siswati, 2018).

Gramsci proposed three levels of hegemony, hegemony integral, decadent hegemony and minimal hegemony. Gramsci in (Siswati, 2018), Hegemoni integral, Society shows a solid degree of moral and intellectual unity, which is evident from the organic relationship of government and the governed. The relationship is not tinged with contradictions and antagonism both socially and ethically. Hegemony Decadent is characterized by the potential

for disintegration or potential for conflict hidden beneath the surface, meaning that even though the existing system has achieved its needs and goals, the mentality of the masses is not really in harmony with the dominant thought and the subject of hegemony. Minimum hegemony, is hegemony that rests on the ideological unity between elit economic, political and intellectual elites, which goes hand in hand with the aversion to any mass interference in the life of the state.

This can be seen when Nathan is sent to train new Japanese military forces using modern methods. In History, Americans came first to Japan in the 19th century. In the 17th century Japan was being led by a shogun named Tokugawa, Tokugawa implemented the Sakoku system, namely the closure of the country from the outside world, this was because he wanted to protect Japan from European influence and Christianity to maintain political stability. However, in the 19th century Japan was urged by foreign countries to open their countries so that other countries could dock and trade in Japan. Matthew Perry who was a Commodore of the United States Navy first arrived in Japan in 1853, Perry brought a warrant from American President, Millard Fillmore, asking Japan to open its ports to trade, and if Japan refused then he would return with a larger fleet [15]. Nathan algren in *The last samurai* has a role as Western influence that comes to Japan, initially Nathan is a power from the West used to train new Japanese military forces, so it poses a threat to changing the way of life of the Japanese and all, including Samurai. But over time, Nathan sympathized with the Samurai who adhered to their morals and tried to protect their culture. This led to a tension between acceptance and resistance to the dominance of Western culture [14].

Katsumuto's character in this film ini is a Samurai leader who rejects Westernization, Samurai comes from the old Japanese 'samorau' which means to serve, then men becomes 'saburai' and then called 'samurai', which means servants who serve their masters. There is also the term 'bushi' which is similar to 'armed people' or 'military people'. 'samurai' and 'bushi' becomes a synonym in late 12 century [3]. The moral values possessed by a Samurai are known as Bushido, according to Rahma in *Bushido Japanese samurai code of conduct Jepang* that governs their way of life and prinsipmoral principles mereka [1]. In bahasa Japanese, "Bushido" literally means "the way of the warrior" and consists of 7 values such as integrity (Gi), courage (Yuu), compassion (Jin), respect (Rei), sincerity (Makoto), honor (Meiyo), and loyalty (Chugi). Through Katsumuto we can see the resistance efforts made by the Samurai to maintain the principles of honor, sacrifice and loyalty that are important principles by the Samurai [12]. The Japanese government at that time considered that Samurai alone were not enough to keep Japan from the threat of the outside world in Table 1.

Table 1.

Scene	Explanation
	<p>This scene represents Western imperial powers asserting influence over Japan, as the government turns to Western experts to modernize and avoid colonization. The Japanese government's reliance on foreign military help shows how Western imperialism has shaped Japan's military strategies and modernization.</p>
	<p>Katsumoto's death symbolizes the loss of Japan's traditional culture under the pressure of imperialism. The samurai way of life is rendered obsolete in the face of modern military power, a direct result of Western influence.</p>
	<p>The samurai rebellion is a direct form of resistance against the imperialist forces. The samurai's desire to preserve their way of life represents the tension between maintaining national identity and succumbing to the pressure of Westernization and imperialism. This visual conveys the cultural clash of modernization imposed by the West.</p>

Scene	Explanation
	<p>The Emperor and his officials are shown in a government meeting, with the Emperor dressed in a Western-style uniform. There's a visual contrast between the Emperor, who represents the shift towards modernity, and the traditional samurai warriors who resist such changes.</p>
	<p>The Imperial Army, modernized using Western technology and tactics, symbolizes the force of imperialism overtaking Japan's traditional culture and way of life. The samurai, in contrast, embody the old feudal system and resistance to foreign-imposed change. The clash between these two forces symbolizes the struggle between Western imperial influence and Japan's cultural preservation.</p>

In history, this conflict is called the rebellion or also known as the Seinan War, this rebellion ini took place in Japan from 1877 to 1878. This rebellion was led by a Samurai named Saigo Takamori, Takamori was disappointed because of the Westernization that the government wanted to do at that time, with Westernization Takamori felt that the Samurai class was marginalized and not respected anymore. At the end of the film, Nathan gives Katsumoto's sword to Emperor Meiji as a symbol of respect for samurai and traditional Japanese culture. Although the Japanese world has changed radically, the values of the samurai and the sacrifices they made can be remembered despite now seeing Japan from a different perspective.

### 5. Conclusion

Through the perspective Hegemony of Antonia Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the film shows how the Western powers, in this film The United States, seek to dominate and change traditional Japanese culture and values through military force and ideology. Represents imperialism in this film looks at the interaction between traditional Japanese culture with Western influences in the film The last samurai is portrayed by Nathan algren's character who is a former American soldier. Nathan is involved in a conflict between Japanese forces who

want to keep their traditions from Western powers who want to Westernize, although Nathan is a former American soldier, he also tried to maintain the traditions of the Samurai. Overall, this film not only describes the history of Japan, but also a reflection of the process of hegemony that occurred at that time. Where Western powers try to impose their ideology in a way that is full of conflict, but also provides space for resistance and cultural transformation is quite complex. In this film hegemony is not something that is absolute, but the existence of a process that is met by negotiation, resistance and adaptation of the colonized party.

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