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Bushidó or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition



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It would be difficult to find any facet of Japan's cultural heritage that exercises as powerful a hold on the world's popular imagination as the *samurai*. [EN1] For the most part, the image of the *samurai* and the tradition he represents is positive. Japanese warriors are the heroes of movies, TV shows, and novels, and the role models for hundreds of thousands of martial arts students around the globe. But for many among the generation that fought Japan in the Pacific War, for much of the political left in Japan, and especially for many of the peoples and governments that were occupied by Japan in the course of the war, the legacy of the *samurai* also has its sinister side.

The *samurai* tradition is often cited as the source of both the mind-set that launched Japan's war against China, Southeast Asia and the United States and of the norms and values of the soldiers and officers who fought it. Both are said to have been conditioned by and derived from an ancient code of warrior behavior called *bushidó* – literally, the "Way of the Warrior." In the words of military historian Arthur Swinson:

When Japan went to war [attacked Pearl Harbor] in 1941, the *samurai* caste and the feudal order in which it flourished had been abolished for seventy four years. But *bushido*, the code of the *samurai* was still preserved intact by the warrior families, and was taught to the officer corps of the imperial Japanese Army. The fact that the code was not incorporated into Army Regulations did not invalidate it, for it existed on a superior plane – an ideal, a faith, a creed, and a key to the ultimate things of life and death. [EN2]

It was this same perspective that led Lord Russell of Liverpool to title his 1958 litany of Japanese wartime atrocities *The Knights of Bushido*. [EN3]

Of course the connection of the Imperial Army to *bushidó* and the *samurai* tradition was not just a Western invention; it was, in fact, an important part of the modern state's early propaganda and remained a favorite theme of Japanese militarists and right-wing essayists right up to Japan's defeat in 1945. A set of instructions issued by the Ministry of War to the new Japanese conscript army in December of 1871, for example, listed seven qualities of character appropriate to soldiers: loyalty, decorum, faith, obedience, courage, frugality, and honor. "This spirit," it enjoined, made up the substance of the *bushidó* of old." [EN4]

The foregoing, then, raises an intriguing question: just how well does Japan's premodern military tradition explain the comportment of her troops during the Pacific War? The following essay questions the accuracy of tracing the norms and values of the modern Imperial Army to the legacy of the *samurai*. In examining this issue, I will first discuss the term and concept of *bushidó* itself, and then look at some of the wartime behavior of the Imperial Army, comparing it to the battlefield conduct of the *samurai*.



Bushidó in Medieval & Early Modern Japan

Hanging the label of "*bushidó*" on either the ideology of the Imperial Army or the warrior ethic of medieval Japan involves some fairly overt historian's sleight-of-hand. In the first place, the term was not used to designate a code of warrior behavior until the early modern era and was only rarely used in this context prior to the late nineteenth century. (In fact, the word was so unusual that Nitobe Inazo, whose 1899 tract, *Bushidó: the Soul of Japan*, probably did more than any other single book to popularize the idea of *bushidó* in both Japan and the West, was able to believe that he had invented it himself!) [EN5] The concept of a code of conduct for the samurai was a product of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Japan was at peace, not the medieval "Age of the Country at War." The samurai of this later period were bureaucrats and administrators, not fighting men; the motivation held in common by all those who wrote on the "way of the warrior" was a search for the proper role of a warrior class in a world without war. The ideas that developed out of this search owed very little to the behavioral norms of the warriors of earlier times.

One of the basic tenets that modern writers associate with *bushidó* is that a true samurai was not only willing to risk his life when called upon to do so, but actually looked forward to the opportunity to sacrifice himself in the line of duty. As Swinson puts it, "the essence of *bushido* was that the young warrior *should aim at dying*.... In any event, death for the *samurai* was not something to be avoided; it was 'a consummation devoutly to be wished'; it was the realization of a great and wonderful ideal." [EN6] This is the fundamental sentiment to be found in Yamamoto Tsunemoto's famous *Hagakure* (compiled sometime in the early eighteenth century), and was the inspiration for Mishima Yukio's eloquent post-war commentary on the text. [EN7] The *Hagakure* was immensely popular among the officers of the Imperial Army and its often-quoted opening line, "I have found that the way of the warrior is to die," was unquestionably used to inspire kamikaze pilots and the like.

But, however central the willingness to die might have been to twentieth century notions of *bushidó*, it takes a considerable leap of faith to connect this sort of philosophy with the actual behavior of the medieval samurai. It is not terribly difficult to find examples of warriors who, in desperate situations, chose to turn and die heroically rather than be killed in the act of running away. By the same token, it is not terribly difficult to find examples of this sort in the military traditions of virtually any people at any time anywhere in the world. On the other hand, as one reads the military historical record of early and medieval Japan, one is struck far more often by the efforts of samurai to use deception and subterfuge to catch an opponent off guard or helpless, than by the sort of zealous self-sacrifice that Tsunemoto called for.

A second popular theme among modern commentators on *bushidó* concerns the absolute fealty that warriors

were supposed to have displayed toward their lords. The loyalty of a samurai is said to have been unconditional and utterly selfless. It *is* true that exhortations to loyalty were a major theme in shogunal regulations, the house laws of the great medieval feudal barons, and seventeenth and eighteenth century treatises on *bushidó*, as well. But there are at least two problems involved in interpreting from this that loyalty was a fundamental part of the medieval warrior character.

To begin with, the unrestricted loyalty that subjects owe their rulers is a basic tenet of Confucianism and derives little or nothing from any military tradition per se. Japanese government appeals for loyalty from subjects began long before the birth of the samurai class – as, for example, in the "Seventeen Article Constitution" of Shóttoku Taishi, promulgated in 603. The concept predates even the existence of a Japanese nation by hundreds of years, and traces back to the Chinese Confucian philosophers of the sixth to third centuries B.C. Japanese warlords who called upon the samurai who served them to render unflinching loyalty were not so much defining proper *samurai* behavior as they were exhorting their subjects on a traditional and general theme of government.

Furthermore, there is a logical fallacy involved in trying to deduce norms of actual behavior from formal legal and moral codes. It is no more accurate to infer from the writings of lawmakers and moral philosophers that medieval samurai were shining examples of fealty than it is to draw conclusions about the sexual behavior of twentieth century Georgians from the state laws on sodomy. The truth is that selfless displays of loyalty by warriors are conspicuous in the Japanese historical record mainly by their absence. From the beginnings of the samurai class and the lord/vassal bond in the eighth century to at least the onset of the early modern age in the seventeenth, the ties between master and retainer were contractual, based on mutual interest and advantage, and were heavily conditioned by the demands of self-interest. Medieval warriors remained loyal to their lords only so long as it benefited them to do so; they could and did readily switch allegiances when the situation warranted it. In fact there are very few important battles in Japanese history in which the defection – often in the middle of the fighting – of one or more of the major players was not a factor.



Bushidó and the Modern State

Much of the code of conduct for samurai prescribed by early modern and modern writers, then, was at odds with the apparent behavioral norms of the actual warrior tradition. Beyond that, much of the "*bushidó*" preached by the government and the militarists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was at best only superficially derived from the "Way of the Warrior" espoused in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Modern *bushidó* is closely bound up with the notion of a Japanese "national essence," and with those of the *kokutai*, or Japanese national structure, and the cult of the emperor. It was a propaganda tool, consciously shaped and manipulated as part of the effort to forge a unified, modern nation out of a fundamentally feudal society, and to build a modern national military made up of conscripts from all tiers of society. *Bushidó* was believed to represent much more than just the ethic of the feudal warrior class. The Imperial Rescript to the Military of 1882 proclaimed that it "should be viewed as the reflection of the whole of the subjects of Japan." [EN8] That is to say, warrior values were held to be the essence of Japanese-ness itself, unifying traits of character common to all classes. The abolition of the *samurai* class thus marked not the end of *bushidó*, but the point of its spread to the whole of the Japanese population. [EN9]

But, had they not been cremated, Yamamoto Tsunemoto, Daidóji Yúzan, Yamaga Sokó, and other early modern figures who wrote about the idea of a code of conduct for samurai would probably have rolled over in their graves when they heard this. One of the few things that all of these men had in common was their interest in defining – and defending – the essence of what set the samurai *apart* from all other classes. They were describing – or prescribing – a code of conduct for an elite; and they were arguing that it was adherence to this code of conduct and the values on which it was based that separated this elite class of warriors from the rabble of townsmen and peasants behind them. The idea that *bushidó* values were simply Japanese values would have appalled them.

Furthermore, the abstract, transcendent loyalty to the emperor and the *kokutai* demanded of Japanese subjects by modern *bushidó* was a far cry from the particularized, feudal loyalty valued by Tsunemoto and his contemporaries. The former was intangible, institutional, and more akin to nineteenth century German patriotism than to the lord/vassal bond of pre-modern Japan. The latter was direct and personal: for Tsunemoto the relationship between a *samurai* and his lord was grounded in a kind of platonic homosexual love; for Yúzan, it derived from an extension of filial piety. In short, twentieth century and early modern commentators on *bushidó* may have been using many of the same words, but they were *not* speaking the same language.

Another problem involved in attempting to find the source of Imperial Army behavior during the Pacific War in *samurai* codes of conduct is that modern "*bushidó*" is not much of a guideline to behavior at all. Which is to say that the ideals for modern soldiers specifically identified as deriving from the samurai tradition are vague and innocuous. The Ministry of War's 1871 instructions to the troops listed seven character traits that soldiers should strive for: loyalty, decorum, faith, obedience, courage, frugality, and honor. [EN10] Similarly, the Imperial Rescript to the Military, promulgated on Jan. 4, 1882 listed five such traits: loyalty, decorum, courage, faith, and frugality. [EN11] (Apparently the government had lost interest in keeping its troops obedient and honorable during the intervening eleven years.) At any rate these are all very general concepts – and very nebulous ones. There is nothing especially *samurai*-esque about them; they could apply to almost any military anywhere at any time.

Of course, some might object that *bushidó* ideals were ingrained in the Japanese, and that they needed no elaboration in order to function as a determinant of army behavior. Swinson, for example, argued that, "According to their historians, the Japanese derive a large measure of dash and bravery from their Malayan ancestors, and the qualities of discipline and loyalty from the Mongolians. Undoubtedly these qualities (whether denied or not) are latent in the vast majority of the people, and can be developed through training to a remarkable degree." [EN12] But the truth of the matter is that *bushidó*, and the notion of what constituted proper samurai behavior, was a vague and imprecisely defined concept in pre-modern and early modern times as well.

G. Cameron Hurst, III has observed that the range of early modern opinion concerning just what constituted the "real" "way of the warrior" is well-illustrated in the various contemporaneous reactions to the famous incident of the "Forty-seven *rōnin* of Ako." [EN13] To recap the story briefly: In 1701, Lord Asano, the lord of Ako domain, was serving in the Shogun's castle in Edo. He seems to have somehow run afoul of his assigned supervisor, Lord Kira, who managed to humiliate him publicly on several occasions. Asano, who apparently operated more on youthful righteous indignation than pragmatism, at length ambushed Kira in the halls of the castle and cut him – although not fatally – with his short sword. Shogunal law on this matter was both clear and strict: drawing a weapon within the confines of the Shogun's castle was a capital offense, whatever the reason. Accordingly Asano was ordered to commit suicide and his domain was confiscated.

In the aftermath of this decision by the shogunate, the principal retainers of the (now-defunct) Asano domain met to plot revenge. In order to allay the suspicions of Kira and the shogunate, who would naturally have been expecting a vendetta, they agreed to split up and lay low for some time, reassembling nearly two years later, after Kira had had time to relax his guard. On the 14th night of the twelfth [lunar] month of 1702, 47 of the now masterless former Asano samurai (i.e., *rōnin*) attacked and killed Kira in his home in Edo. They then surrendered themselves to shogunal authorities, who, after much debate, ordered them all to commit suicide.

The shogunate's decision notwithstanding, public sentiment at the time and since came down heavily on the side of the forty-seven *rōnin*. The story was almost immediately fictionalized into a stage drama and has subsequently served as the plot of half a dozen or more movies. For many at the time, and for the militarists of the modern era, the forty-seven Asano retainers were the embodiment of samurai virtue. But evaluations of the incident varied widely among the early eighteenth century "authorities" on proper *samurai* behavior.

Ogyū Sorai, Dazai Shundai, and several others censured the Asano *rōnin* for placing their personal feelings above their higher duty to uphold the shogunal law and protect the public order. On the other hand, Hayashi Nobukatsu, Miyake Kanran, and others praised them for the purity of their motives and the selfless nobility of their actions. Perhaps the most significant condemnation of the *rōnin* – in the context of the point at issue here – came from Yamamoto Tsunemoto, the author of *Hagakure*. To Tsunemoto, the actions of the Asano retainers – specifically, the fact that they waited to carry out their vendetta rather than rushing to attack Kira immediately, without thought of actual results – were too calculating and rational. He wrote that, "citified men [like the Asano *rōnin*] are clever and know angles to show off themselves for praise..." but this was not at all the way a true warrior ought to comport himself. [EN14] In other words, the very text that the officers of the Imperial Army took as the paramount statement on warrior values denounced the very actions that are most often taken as the peerless example of samurai behavior!



Bushidó and Japanese Wartime Behavior

The foregoing has argued three main points: that "*bushidó*" is a very ambiguous term and one that covers a very wide range of thinking; that neither modern nor early modern ideas about the "way of the warrior" had much to do with authentic samurai behavior during the age when they were actually fighting; and that modern ideas about *bushidó* and the samurai tradition were out of sync even with those of the early modern bureaucrats who first tried to enunciate a code of conduct for the *samurai* – long after the *samurai* had ceased to be warriors.

The overall point to be taken is that the connection between Japan's modern and pre-modern military traditions is thin – it is certainly nowhere near as strong as government propagandists, militarists, Imperial Army officers, and some post-war historians have wished to believe. All of which is to say that politicians and others who condemn the *samurai* tradition, who blame the legacy of Japan's warrior past for the atrocities and other wartime misbehavior committed by the Imperial Army, are distorting history. To make this point just a bit clearer, I will conclude this article with a look at two specific patterns of Japanese wartime troop behavior: atrocities against civilian populations, and mistreatment of prisoners of war. Both of these behaviors seem particularly foreign and are particularly shocking to modern western audiences; and both have often been attributed to *bushidó* and the *samurai* legacy.

On December 12, 1937 the Central China Expeditionary force of the Imperial Japanese Army captured the city of Nanking and went on a rampage against the city's civilian population. In the words of Lord Russell of Liverpool,

They looted, they burned, they raped and they murdered. Soldiers marched through the streets indiscriminately killing Chinese of both sexes, adults and children alike, without receiving any provocation and without rhyme or reason. They went on killing until the gutters ran with blood and the streets were littered with the bodies of their victims.... At the lowest computation twelve thousand men, women and children were shot or done to death during the first three days of the Japanese occupation. [EN15]

The Rape of Nanking may be the worst and the most famous example of Japanese army abuses of civilians in occupied territories, but it was certainly not the only one. The question to be asked, however, is how acceptable this sort of behavior was, in terms of the Japanese military tradition.

In the first place, the vast majority of the fighting in medieval times was civil warfare; the prizes contested were, for the most part, the control of agricultural lands and the peasants who cultivated them. Massacring or otherwise mistreating the occupants of newly captured territories was therefore counter-productive -- fewer peasants meant more fields taken out of cultivation and also fewer men that could be conscripted into a feudal lord's army. It is true that medieval samurai made little or no formal distinction between combatants and noncombatants and for this reason showed few scruples against killing what modern readers would call civilians when it suited a specific military objective, but wanton incidental killings or destruction of property were exceedingly rare. When winning generals felt the need to be vindictive and cruel after a campaign, they directed it toward enemy commanders, not ordinary troops or peasants. The Japanese never developed a tradition of pillaging conquered territories as did Ghengis Khan.

In the second place, Nanking-type incidents ran counter to the formal tenets of the modern version of *bushidó* as well. The *Senjin kun*, or Code of Battlefield Conduct, issued in January of 1941 repeatedly forbids this sort of behavior: Section 3, Part 1 states, "Do not despise your enemy or the inhabitants," while Part 6 directs troops to, "Take care to protect the property of the enemy. Requisition, confiscation, destruction of enemy resources, etc. are all governed by regulations. Always follow the orders of your commanding officers." [EN16] Section I, Part 2 reads:

The army, under the leadership of the Emperor, bodily manifests the true military spirit (*shinbu*), and through this reveals the august virtue of the empire. It is charged with aiding Imperial destiny. The true military spirit is to receive the noble will of the Emperor, to be strong in righteousness and benevolent in strength, and thereby establish world peace. Strength must be austere; benevolence requires breadth. If there be enemies that resist the imperial army, resolutely brandish martial dignity and vanquish them. But even if one's power forces the enemy to submit, the true martial spirit is incomplete if one is lacking in the virtue that causes one not to strike down those who submit and to treat tenderly those who obey. Strength is not haughty; benevolence is not an ornament; they are ennobled by spontaneously erupting. It is the providence of the imperial army to temper justice with mercy, to revere the broad majesty of the Emperor. [EN17]

The Rape of Nanking and similar incidents, then, were clearly not condoned by either pre-modern or modern Japanese warrior philosophy. To explain why such things happened, one must look outside the *samurai* legacy.

A similar conclusion can be reached with regard to Japanese maltreatment of prisoners of war. These abuses are well-documented -- Russell devoted more than four chapters of *The Knights of Bushidó* to them. But while the *samurai* tradition did not actually forbid this sort of treatment of prisoners, it does not explain it,

either.

The custom of taking and holding large numbers of prisoners for extended periods of time never developed in Japan. Defeated troops were either disarmed and sent back to their fields or, more commonly, invited to join the forces of the victor. In point of fact, western armies followed similar practices – except in the case of officers – until the late nineteenth century. The place where Japanese and European customs regarding prisoners diverged is on the issue of captured officers. European knights developed the peculiar practice of ransoming captured enemy nobles, which led to the development of the concept of the honorable (and protected) status of prisoners of war. The medieval samurai never developed this habit. Defeated or captured enemy commanders might be well-treated and enlisted in the army of the victor, or they might be killed, or even tortured for information. The famous – and much overblown – instances in which samurai chose to kill themselves rather than be captured come from a desire to avoid the last of these three alternatives.

In early 1942, the Japanese Foreign Minister, Tógó Shigenori, formally announced Japan's intentions to abide by the standards set by the Geneva Prisoner of War Conference of 1929, even though Japan had never formally ratified the treaty. [EN18] Clearly then, Japanese philosophy – traditional or otherwise – on the rights of prisoners of war does little to explain the subsequent abuses of captured allied troops. A better source for this kind of behavior can be found in the more immediate circumstances of the war.

For most of the conflict, Japanese troops lived on minimal rations and under conditions that were Spartan, even by the wartime standards. By the late years of the fighting, large numbers of soldiers were on the verge of starvation. Under such conditions, it is hardly surprising that guards, commandants and supply officers would have grown to resent the food and supplies spent on caring for enemy prisoners or that they would have taken out this resentment on the prisoners themselves. This sort of resentment was compounded by a general contempt for soldiers who surrendered, a contempt engendered by their military training and indoctrination. Japanese troops were taught that surrender was simply not an option for any but the basest of cowards. The *Senjin kun* intoned that, "One who knows shame is strong... Do not endure the shame of being made prisoner while alive; die and do not leave behind the sullied name of one who foundered and fell." [EN19] To their Japanese guards, then, allied prisoners appeared as nothing less than cowards and moral failures who were consuming food and other supplies that could otherwise be used by fighting troops; hardly an attitude conducive to kind and considerate treatment.

The point here is that nothing about this attitude can be directly traced to traditional Japanese military values. The shortage of supplies was obviously a result of the specific circumstances under which the Pacific War was fought. And, less obviously, so was the idea of capture as a disgrace worse than death. As noted above, defeat and capture did not necessarily mean disgrace in the medieval tradition (although it might entail an unpleasant death). There are numerous examples of feudal warriors who were captured at one time or another in their careers and passed through the experience with their reputations intact – the most illustrious was probably Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate and a prime architect of the early modern age.

The modern injunctions against surrender and capture were probably developed as a way for a country like Japan, which lacked the manpower resources of most of its potential enemies, to squeeze the most usage out of its troops. As American GIs learned repeatedly in their advance from island to island across the Pacific, a very small number of soldiers, already outmaneuvered and defeated by conventional standards, can keep a vastly superior force tied down for a very long time if they insist on fighting to the last man. Surrender, on the other hand, frees up enemy troops to be used elsewhere.

To sum up then, the military tradition of the medieval samurai has very little in common with the "*bushidō*" that was current in the early twentieth century, and does very little to explain the behavior of the Japanese Imperial Army. Far better clues to the attitudes of the Japanese high command, the officer corps, and the ordinary troops can be found in the specific circumstances of the war, the political atmosphere – both domestic and international – of the 1930s, and the process through which Japan emerged as a modern nation.

ENDNOTES

EN1. This article is based on a paper presented at the 3rd Annual Conference of the Georgia World History Association, Oct. 25, 1991, and re-presented (*in absentia*) at the 1992 National Conference of the World History Association, June, 1992.

EN2. Arthur Swinson, *Four Samurai: A Quartet of Japanese Army Commanders in the Second World War* (London: Huchinson, 1968), p. 15.

EN3. Lord Russell of Liverpool, *The Knights of Bushido: A Shocking History of Japanese War Atrocities* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958).

EN4. Reproduced in Hashimoto Minoru, *Bushidō kōwa* (Tokyo: Yūkōsha, 1942), pp. 288-89.

EN5. G. Cameron Hurst, III, "Death, Honor and Loyalty: the Bushido Ideal," *Philosophy East & West*, 40 (1990), pp. 512-13.

EN6. Swinson, *Four Samurai*, p. 18. Italics from the original.

EN7. Mishima Yukio, *Hagakure nyūmon*. In English see Kathryn Sparling, trans., *Yukio Mishima on Hagakure: the Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1978).

EN8. *Gunjin chokuyu yōgi* (Imperial Rescript to the Military), reproduced in Hashimoto, *Bushidō kōwa*, p. 276.

EN9. Hashimoto, *Bushidō kōwa*, pp. 283-87.

EN10. Reproduced in Hashimoto, *Bushidō kōwa*, pp. 288-89.

EN11. Reproduced in Hashimoto, *Bushidō kōwa*, pp. 288-89.

EN12. Swinson, *Four Samurai*, p. 21

EN13. Hurst, "Death," pp. 523-26. *Rōnin* are samurai without a lord.

EN14. Yamamoto Tsunemoto, *Hagakure*, trans. Takao Muko (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1980), p. 54.

EN15. Russell, *Knights*, pp. 42-43.

EN16. *Senjin kun*, in *Bushidō no zuishin*, ed. Bushidō gakkai (Tokyo: Teikoku shoseki kyokai, 1941), pp. 16-17.

EN17. *Senjin kun*, p. 10.

EN18. Russell, *Knights*, p. 54.

EN19. *Senjin kun*, Section 2, Part 8, p. 15.

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