

Introduction

*Bushido*¹ and the warrior culture of Japan are viewed with fascination not only by modern Japanese but by non-Japanese as well. The most visible vestige of Japanese warrior culture is the overwhelming international popularity of the martial arts (*budo*), which are undoubtedly Japan's most successful cultural export. People around the world practise these arts not only for self-defence or as a sport, but also as a pursuit for spiritual development and enlightenment. Another motivation, although by no means a driving force now, was in the days of Japan's bubble economy there were widespread opinions that Japan's economic and business success was based around management practices stemming from 'samurai strategy'. This prompted numbers of business people to take up martial arts training, and to study translations of famous warrior books such as Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*, Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, Nitobe's *Bushido*, and so on.

More recently, there have been a number of popular movies about the bushi, notably *The Last Samurai* starring Tom Cruise and Watanabe Ken. This has sparked a major resurgence of interest in *bushi* ethics. In many ways the reverence of *bushido* is glorified nonsense. Some scholars have described *bushi* as having been no more than 'valorous butchers'. Nevertheless, people around the world are searching for ethical anchors in this day and age where honour, integrity, bravery, sincerity, and self-sacrifice for the greater good is well and truly hidden by the tidal-wave of political scandal, corruption, crime, and greed. Reinterpretations of *bushido* are being looked at as one of those possible anchors. In this brief article I will attempt to outline the history and basic components of the seemingly timeless and possibly borderless culture of Japan's *bushi* warriors.

Honour, Violence and Death

Japan's first identifiable professional warrior class emerged in the late 9th and 10th centuries as a result of the inability of the court government in Kyoto to maintain law and order in the provinces. Men from powerful local families entrusted with governmental titles formed bands and took up arms to defend their own estates, and to help quell other local disputes with the impending threat of violence. Provincial bands of *bushi* eventually formed feudal ties bound by a strong sense of identity as warriors. They maintained intense bonds of loyalty born of their shared experience in combat, as well as the promise of financial reward for services rendered. By the time the warriors had set up their own government in Kamakura (1185-1333) they had already developed their own unique culture based on a ferocious appetite for fame,

glory, and honour. Although this was not the case in this early stage, warrior culture was referred to by an array of terms such as *bando musha no narai* (customs of the Eastern warriors), *yumiya no michi* (the way of the bow and arrow), *kyuba no michi* (the way of the bow and horse), and so on. Actually, the term *bushido* was not coined until the late 16th century, and only became the prevalent term referring to *bushi* ethics from the early 20th century.

Nomenclature aside, the driving force behind *bushi* culture has always been the concept of honour, and it was utilised in a number of ways. Firstly, honour formed the basis of a unique cultural style for the *bushi*'s collective identity. Without implying that nobles and peasants lacked a sense of honour, there are few examples of any who strove to maintain their honour at the cost of their own lives. This made *bushi* honour distinctive. *bushi* created unique rules for interaction utilising honorific expression, and these rules directed the relationships between *bushi* individuals of all rank. It was the adhesive for *bushi* politics and social life. They also developed an unquenchable desire to enhance the name of their family or *ie*, and were fiercely competitive in ensuring that their name or *na* would last into posterity. In this sense, the quest to seek honour and avoid shame became inextricably linked to combat prowess and unremitting valour, and an eventual monopoly on the ability to use violence.

Naturally, as expressions of honour were demonstrated through martial prowess and violence, the question of 'death' has always been central to the *bushi*'s existence. As is the case with the western knights, the job of killing was certainly not condoned as a moral act in itself, although it was justified or vindicated in a number of ways. However, yearning for posthumous recognition, and an obsession for personal glory was all the motivation and justification needed to kill and die for. This provided the emotional drive to fight bravely for one's lord (along with the promise of financial reward), and to any *bushi* who was seen by his peers to act in a cowardly manner. The stigma of spinelessness would be too much shame to bear, for him and his descendents.

The Good Old Days?

Despite the honourable depictions of *bushi* in the popular medieval war tales, greed for land, power, and self-advancement was always prevalent in the larger picture. This climaxed in one of the most turbulent times in Japanese history, the *sengoku jidai* (Warring States period of the 15th and 16th centuries) where multitudes of rival *daimyo* warlords vied to conquer and eventually rule over a united Japan. This was a period where unquestioned loyalty to one's overlord was often conveniently overlooked in favour of personal profit, and alliances and promises were broken as often as they were made. It was a volatile period where the rise or demise of a great *daimyo*, his *ie* (house) and its members was only a treacherous backstab away. These precarious situations lead to a proliferation of 'house rules' (*kakun*), laws (*hatto*), and prescripts outlining model *bushi* behaviour. This is obviously a clear indication that model behaviour was far from the status quo, but it resulted in a large-scale effort to codify the 'way' of the warrior.

Bushi of this era lived life on the edge. The Sengoku period, (despite numerous demonstrations of less than loyal behaviour) was revered by future generations as 'the good old days' where *bushi* were real men, and those who dared won, or died in the process.

The Problem of Peace

When finally the treacherous Sengoku period was concluded and Japan was ushered into a new era of peace under the Tokugawa Bakufu (military government 1603-1867), the *bushi* were thrust into a unique situation. Here was a minority warrior class ruling the nation on the virtue of their martial prowess, but the 'threat' of peace afforded no opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness on the battlefield. How could they justify their existence at the top of the new *shi-no-ko-sho*² social strata when there were no more wars to speak of?

Here, a number of scholars came to the rescue by formulating and refining a code of ethics for warriors which is now referred to as *bushido*. The groundwork for a new system of political thought and *bushi* awareness emerged, and arguments were circulated among the upper echelons of government advocating the centrality of *bushi* in affairs of state, and offering justification for the existence of a military government even though peace prevailed.

For example, Yagyu Munenori (1571-1646) in his famous military treatise *Heiho Kadensho* clarified how a virtuous ruler has the ability to use military force solely for protecting the masses. Thus maintenance of a benevolent military government was vital for the wellbeing of the nation.

"At times because of one man's evil, ten thousand people suffer. So you kill that one man to let the tens of thousands live. Here, truly, the blade that deals death becomes the sword that saves lives."

In other words, the way of war was the way of peace. Such arguments were quickly accepted and helped solidify the resolve of the Bakufu, but later in the Tokugawa period it was the lower echelons of *bushi*, now fully transformed into non-combatant salaried civil servants, who were searching for meaning to their existence. Prominent scholars such as Yamaga Soko (1622-85) and Daidoji Yuzan (1639-1730) provided *bushi* with much appreciated 'moral' support and popular guidelines for action. For example, Yamaga Soko observed rhetorically *"the bushi eats food without growing it, uses utensils without manufacturing them, and profits without selling. What is the justification for this?"* His solution was that the function of *bushi* in society was to serve his lord loyally, and to act as an exemplary moral example worthy of emulation by the other classes. In other words, to live one's life in strict observance of correct moral behaviour and etiquette, always maintaining a high level of military preparedness through practising and perfecting the military arts, and proficiency in aesthetic arts and scholarly pursuits was deemed just as glorious as fighting bravely in battle for one's lord. It was a far safer and less exciting substitute for war, but it served to satisfy the needs of a growing number of restless *bushi*.

It is interesting to observe here that even though death in the literal sense was no longer a reality, the concept of 'death' was idealised to the effect that one was expected to fulfil one's duties with total selflessness. One of the most widely read (and possibly misinterpreted) books on *bushido* to appear in the Tokugawa period was Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure* (1716) which contains the infamous phrase *"the way of the warrior is found in death"*. Tsunetomo wrote the treatise in reaction to what he saw as the moral deterioration of *bushi* of the time who were turning into "spineless moneygrubbers" rapidly forgetting or neglecting their honourable *bushi*

heritage of unquestionable loyalty, and preparation to face death at a moments notice.

Still, there were celebrated episodes during the Tokugawa period which demonstrated just how loyal to the point of death a true *bushi* could be. The most obvious example is the revenge of the forty-seven *ronin* (master-less *bushi*). In 1701, a *daimyo* in attendance at the Shogun's castle in Edo drew his sword and assaulted one of the officials because his honour had been insulted. The *daimyo* was ordered to commit *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) for this serious breach of etiquette. The *daimyo's* now master-less retainers plotted and carried out a vendetta culminating in the successful assassination in the name of their master. This in turn led to the order of their own termination by ritual suicide. The propriety of their action attracted praise and criticism from all quarters, but it also drew attention to the special lord-vassal relationship of the *bushi*, and reaffirmed the ideal of vassals acting out of selfless loyalty to the point of forfeiting their own lives.

Post Bushi *Bushido* and Beyond

Although the *bushi* class was abolished during the Meiji period (1868-1912), it did not mean the end of *bushido* as a gripping emotive force. *Bushi* traditions were briefly suspended in the early Meiji surge of modernization only to be revived from the mid 1880's, as the cultural pendulum began to swing in a more blatantly nationalist direction where western technology was complimented by 'Japanese spirit' (*wakon-yosai*). Prominent scholars such as Inoue Tetsujiro sought to bind *bushido* to the service of the state by associating it with patriotism and devotion to the emperor. The passionate Christian Uchimura Kanzo reinterpreted *bushido* with loyalty to Jesus Christ. However, the most influential *bushido* commentator of all time is undoubtedly Nitobe Inazo. In 1900, he published *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* in English where he portrayed a clean interpretation of *bushido* to the Western world minus extreme militaristic, anti-modern, and anti-Christian aspects. He stressed such virtues as, honesty, justice, polite courtesy, courage, compassion, sincerity, honour, duty and loyalty, and self-control. He argued that *bushido* had spread from the *bushi* class to all echelons of Japanese society, and was discernible in the physical endurance, fortitude, and bravery of the Japanese people. (Despite numerous historical inaccuracies this book is still a best seller today.)

However, a more martial interpretation of *bushido* came into vogue again in the militarist 1930's, and many Japanese soldiers read copies of the aforementioned *Hagakure*, or *Bushido* on the way to the front. In the after math of WWII, *bushido* again fell into disfavour. Foreign critics and Japanese critics alike blamed *Bushido* as representing all that was most loathsome in Japanese wartime behaviour. Many Japanese renounced *bushido* as part of the misguided militaristic ideology resulting in Japan's defeat and shame, and as unsuited to their new post-war democratic society.

Nevertheless, the ever-increasing popularity of samurai films and books suggests that however old-fashioned or illogical the *bushido* tradition seems at the conscious level, it still wields considerable appeal, and may just contain simple tenets of 'forgotten' wisdom to alleviate the ethical woes of today.

***Bushido* a la "The Last Samurai"**



Gi (Honesty and Justice) Be acutely honest throughout your dealings with all people. Believe in justice, not from other people, but from yourself. To the true Samurai, there are no shades of gray in the question of honesty and justice. There is only right and wrong.



Rei (Polite Courtesy) Samurai have no reason to be cruel. They do not need to prove their strength. A Samurai is courteous even to his enemies. Without this outward show of respect, we are nothing more than animals. A Samurai is not only respected for his strength in battle, but also by his dealings with other men. The true inner strength of a Samurai becomes apparent during difficult times.



Yu (Heroic Courage) Rise up above the masses of people that are afraid to act. Hiding like a turtle in a shell is not living at all. A Samurai must have heroic courage. It is absolutely risky. It is dangerous. It is living life completely, fully, wonderfully. Heroic courage is not blind. It is intelligent and strong. Replace fear with respect and caution.



Meiyo (Honour) A true Samurai has only one judge of his honour, and that is himself. Decisions you make and how these decisions are carried out are a reflection of who you truly are. You cannot hide from yourself.



Jin (Compassion) Through intense training the Samurai becomes quick and strong. He is not as other men. He develops a power that must be used for the good of all. He has compassion. He helps his fellow man at every opportunity. If an opportunity does not arise, he goes out of his way to find one.



Makoto (Complete Sincerity) When a Samurai has said he will perform an action, it is as good as done. Nothing will stop him from completing what he has said he will do. He does not have to give his word. He does not have to promise. The action of speaking alone has set the act of doing in motion. Speaking and doing are the same action.



Chu (Duty and Loyalty) For the Samurai, having done some thing, or said some thing, he knows he owns that thing. He is responsible for it and all the consequences that follow. A Samurai is immensely loyal to those in his care. To those he is responsible for, he remains fiercely true.

1 *Bushido* - Literally 'the Way of the warrior'. '*bushi*' is the common Japanese word denoting warrior, although 'samurai' is more well-known in the West. Nowadays both terms are used interchangeably, however, in this article I refer to the Japanese warriors mainly using the word '*bushi*'.

2 The social strata enforced by the warrior government placing *bushi* at the top of the pyramid followed by farmers, artisans, and merchants respectively.

