Bushidō
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The “invention of tradition” is generally considered a modern venture, but in the case of Bushidō—“the Way of the Warrior”—the initial fabrication occurred centuries earlier, in the Edo period (1600–1868). During the first half of the Pax Tokugawa, when warring among warriors was explicitly forbidden, a handful of samurai scholars set brush and ink to paper, musing openly about their raison d’être and social value. The texts they produced were expressions of an existential crisis among the more contemplative members of Japan’s warrior elite. While those treatises constitute a canon for modern articulations of Bushidō (and have been applied to everything from business and martial arts to modern battle strategy and nation building), they are also a discrete reflection of their own times, distinct from both what preceded them and what came afterward.
Indeed, the inventors of the Bushidō “tradition” were quite deliberately critiquing their times and their contemporaries through their formulations of ideal samurai conduct. Yet they did so without over-reliance on nostalgic references to exemplary heroes of a bygone golden age. Rather, the ideal they envisioned was an unprecedented combination of the martial and intellectual, the rugged and the refined, the quick-to-act and the thoughtfully deliberative, that was more in keeping with the new roles peacetime required of warriors. This ideal was embodied in a novel combination of Chinese ideographs that Chinese and Koreans would have read as oxymoronic: bu (Ch: wu) for martial, and shi (Ch: shì) for gentleman or scholar. Bushidō was, therefore, “the way of the gentleman warrior.”
There are few fundamental incongruities between the core Bushidō treatises, but different authors did emphasize specific virtues: Yamaga Sokō (1622–1685) propounded on the samurai’s responsibility to exhibit moral conduct to commoners; Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659–1720) advocated mental preparation for meeting death without hesitation; the prolific Neo-Confucian Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714) instructed his readers in the proper observance of ritual hierarchy and the importance of study. However, for these men, arguably the most basic of all warrior virtues was selflessness, an attribute their medieval forebears neither exalted nor displayed with any consistence.
In earlier times, when warfare was endemic, samurai expected to be well rewarded for their services. Victorious warriors could anticipate a portion of the spoils from vanquished estates; when they did not receive those in the desired quantities, they either deserted or revolted. Abstract concepts such as unquestioning loyalty to one’s lord or service to the nation had little effect on their personal manners or battlefield conduct. The soldiers who fought off the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 were so aggrieved by the lack of compensation that they openly defied the Hōjō regency in Kamakura, permanently undermining its viability. The much-touted samurai virtue of personal honor was manifested mostly in violent efforts at self-redress (jiriki...
kyūsai)—that is, responding to any perceived insult with lethal vengeance. Jiriki kyūsai was so pervasive that most medieval legal documents—from the Jōei Code (1232) to the house laws of individual warlords—explicitly and repeatedly forbade any efforts by warriors to settle disputes among themselves without adjudication.

If the 16th century was the samurai’s heyday—with bloodletting aplenty—it was certainly not because of widespread observance of an intangible code among men of arms. If anything, that era’s phenomenon of gekokujō (“those below topple those above”) was a negative example against which the later codifiers of bushidō held up the virtue of loyalty to one’s lord. Most samurai of the Warring States period (ca. 1467–1590) would have regarded the “way of the gentleman warrior” to be foolhardy, even suicidal; conversely, the warrior-philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries scorned the self-aggrandizing, opportunistic treachery of that discredited, chaotic epoch.

Only in the relative calm imposed by the Tokugawa shōguns did introspective warriors feel moved to pontificate about what made their calling so distinctively noble and socially beneficial. Those who did so were informed by philosophical strains from Zen Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, which they melded with the martial proficiency valorized in the earlier, nebulous phrase yumiya no narai (“learning the bow and arrow”) to fashion a more comprehensive ethos. The earliest of the canonical texts—Book of the Five Rings (Gorin no sho) by Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645)—might be considered a transitional piece, in that it teaches military strategy and combat techniques, yet anticipates the philosophical tendencies of later treatises with closing remarks on the Void, “that which cannot be seen.”

Subsequent texts were somewhat less esoteric, going into considerable detail about proper samurai comportment and attitude, and reflecting the intense interest in Neo-Confucianism in the early Edo period, but devoting relatively little attention to specific martial arts techniques. “The samurai code requires that samurai rise at dawn,” Yamaga Sokō instructed, “wash their face and hands, groom themselves, dress properly, and prepare their weapons.” “It is bad taste to yawn in front of people,” Yamamoto Tsunetomo admonished. Daidōji Yūzan’s (1639–1730) Primer on the Martial Way (Budō shoshinshū) included chapters on frugality, courtesy, laziness, modesty, and cultural refinement, in addition to horsemanship and vassalage. In The Great Learning for Women (Onna daigaku, 1672), a didactic text for women of the warrior caste, Kaibara Ekken wrote that “A woman must always be on the alert and keep a strict watch over her own conduct” to avoid the “five infirmities”

to which her gender was prone: “indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness.” Bushidō should thus be embodied in every mannerism and social interaction, rather than just in combat.

In his Way of the Samurai (Shidō), Yamaga admitted that “the samurai eats food without growing it, uses utensils without manufacturing them, and profits without buying or selling. What is the justification for this?” The samurai’s role, he answered himself, was to “uphold the proper moral principles in the land. … The three classes of the common people make him their teacher and respect him. By following his teachings, they are able to understand what is fundamental and what is secondary.” In an age in which their martial skills were rarely required, samurai were to be the living exemplars of Confucian virtues such as filial piety, trustworthiness, selflessness, and wisdom.

Yamamoto’s Hagakure (1716) proposed an elegantly simple, straightforward definition of bushidō: “The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. It is not particularly difficult. Be determined and advance. … If by setting one’s heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way.” Daidōji likewise contended that “The
foremost concern of a warrior, no matter what his rank, is how he will behave at the moment of his death.” For these thinkers, controlling the circumstances of one’s death was the reward for a lifetime of physical and mental training. This fixation on “dying pretty” intensified in the wake of the infamous Akō vendetta of 1703, in which the retainers of Asano Naganori plotted and carried out the assassination of his tormenter, Kira Yoshinaka, and were sentenced to ritual suicide (seppuku) after extensive debate among government magistrates. The Akō vendetta laid bare the inconsonance between the unwritten warrior code’s emphasis on loyalty to one’s lord unto death and beyond, and the rule of law designed to preclude a return to the chaotic violence of the Warring States era. The government’s efforts to criminalize the “47 loyal retainers” were countered by a widespread popular reverence for their heroics. The codifiers of bushidō were, indeed, disgusted with what they considered to be the wretched state of warrior virtues in their own times (“Today,” Yamamoto lamented, “there are no models of good retainers.”). Nevertheless, their influence on the “men of purpose” (shishi) who challenged the Tokugawa regime in the mid-19th century was profound. Their words echo in the writings of Yoshida Shōin (1830–1859), mentor to several architects of the Meiji Restoration: “From the beginning of the year to the end, day and night, morning and evening, in action and repose, in speech and in silence, the warrior must keep death constantly before him and always have in mind that the one death [that he has to give] should not be suffered in vain.” The very fact that Yoshida felt compelled to restate this is proof enough that bushidō has always been an evolving set of ideal principles and behaviors that responds to particular historical circumstances, rather than a timeless, universally observed “Japanese tradition.” In the Edo period, these principles and behaviors were expected only of hereditary warriors; in modern times they were reimagined as a defining element of Japanese nationhood, which all people (kokumin) were required to exemplify.

See also: Civil Wars, Sengoku Era;
See also Mongol Invasions of Japan;
See also Tokugawa Bakufu Political System;
See also Yoshida Shōin.

Further Reading

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