

An Analysis of Japanese Samurai Spirit

JAPN 212

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May 4, 2014

Introduction

The most general idea of a samurai is someone who has mastered the art of the sword, someone who is loyal to their master or lord, someone who is undefeatable, someone who follows a strict code of honor and morals. As we have discussed and learned through this class, these are all stereotypes, largely over-romanticized images of a greatly glorified past. Even I believed in the media's representation of the idea of an invincible sword master capable of defeating any adversary thanks to their great skill, cunning, and speed. But these ideas are just exaggerations. This class greatly helped me to better understand the origin, history, and eventual defeat of the samurai class in feudal Japan and for the purpose of this paper I would like to further analyze the true makings of Japanese "Samurai Spirit". In this analysis I will be focusing on the evolution of the samurai from their earliest appearances in the Heian Period to their downfall in the late Edo Period with the majority of my focus being on the latter period, when the idea of "samurai spirit" was highly developed due to it being a period of peace and growth for Japan. Through the texts of Fujisawa and Miyamoto and examples from the historical, drama film *The Twilight Samurai*, I will explain the development, conduct, and lasting effects of the samurai spirit.

In order to understand the evolution of the samurai spirit, I would like to give a brief history of the origins of the samurai. Samurai were originally hired by those of nobility, such as high-ranking aristocrats or even the Emperor himself. The original kanji character for samurai meant "one who serves", a quite literal translation of what their lifestyle entailed. These so-called noble warriors started out as simple bodyguards and servants for the higher ups. In the 8th century the term "bushi", or warrior, was introduced

as their position had become more important. The birth of the samurai class had begun. Early samurai surprisingly originated from noble or imperial families, further strengthening their status in Heian society. As family members began to stray from nobility, usually by marrying into common families, the status of the samurai was once again lowered. In the late Heian Period, they became part of their own class, which unfortunately further reduced their social status. Instead of remaining warriors from noble descent, the samurai had once again become low-class warriors who served and protected those of nobility. It wasn't all bad news though. Various clans during this time began to rise up, giving more power to the warrior class samurai.

After centuries of rising to power then losing it and rising up again and so on, the 12th century saw the growth of the samurai class to such a point that they were able to begin to create their own system of government. It was also during this time that their weapon of choice shifted from the bow and arrows to the sword, but not the katana sword that is so well known today, that is developed much later. Early period samurai were originally skilled with a bow and arrows having developed the art of "kyudo", or the use of a bow and arrows on horseback; something they were greatly respected for. Now, it was also during this time that the first shogun rose to office by seizing power from the weakened government. The aristocrats and nobles were beginning to lose their power as well, giving rise to the samurai class once again. Their swords became a symbol of status that would flourish during the upcoming war periods and well into their decline in the Tokugawa, or Edo, period. As the Tokugawa period became a time of peace for Japan, the samurai class began to slowly decline one last time as they had no real purpose in a peaceful society. It was then that their code of morals and ethics was created as they

found themselves sitting around having had no one left to serve or conquer. A change of pace soon followed thanks to their self-proclaimed high-ranking status in the class system. Samurai were able to become bureaucrats, policemen, and other high-ranking positions in Edo society. They practiced such things as poetry, calligraphy, and kendo due to the eradication of the need for warrior skills. Yet these laidback lifestyles would not last forever as Japan was forced to open its gates in 1853. Westernization and modernization overcame the unnecessary and outdated social class of the samurai and by 1867 they had completely died out.

My analysis begins with the film *The Twilight Samurai*. This film takes place in the late 19th century before Japan's modernization, giving some key examples of what daily samurai life had become at that time. The main character, Seibei Iguchi, works as a low-ranking bureaucrat and stock counter for his clan. Like other samurai at that time, Seibei had to take on various jobs in order to pay for food and other necessities. After recently losing his wife, he had to earn money any way possible to be able to feed his grandmother, suffering from dementia, and daughters. Though not apparent in Seibei's character, samurai in the film reflect this idea of high self-importance; this need to maintain a higher standing and to be treated with great respect, especially by those lower in the class system. Seibei's character is much more humbled and down to earth, something that clashes with the typical presentation of vanity seen in Edo period samurai.

Another aspect of samurai spirit was the importance of maintaining cleanliness and looking presentable as a means of reflecting their high status. One particular scene in the film demonstrates this: a highly regarded chamberlain is inspecting the clans' grounds when he is drawn to the stock room by a foul smell only to find that it is emanating from

Seibei. The chamberlain requests that Seibei bathe himself immediately in order to keep up his appearance and status as a samurai. The man escorting the chamberlain is extremely embarrassed and expresses his concern about how a samurai should be presented properly no matter the circumstance. This idea of being presentable and cleanly was not a concept only found in the Edo period. High-ranking samurai from earlier centuries also practiced hygiene and would even adorn themselves with makeup and perfume in order to look beautiful in battle and in death. The idea of cleanliness simply became more important as samurai further developed their code of ethics in Tokugawa society, which can be seen in the works of many bushido authors from the time.

My next analysis is of the Fujisawa chapters from *The Bamboo Sword and Other Samurai Tales*. In the final scenes of *The Twilight Samurai*, Seibei is forced to fight against childhood friend Tomoe's ex-husband in order to win her freedom from him. Based on the chapter "The Bamboo Sword", Seibei must use a special sword technique against Tomoe's ex. The Fujisawa chapter is reflective of sword skill and mastery of the mind, which samurai needed in order to master "bushido", or the way of the warrior. In "The Bamboo Sword" we are introduced to Tanjuro who is asked to take care of an unruly samurai if he is to be given a job working for the chamberlain (Fujisawa, 33). Though the residence is dark and unfamiliar, Tanjuro keeps a level head. When attacked by surprise he is able to quickly take advantage of the situation and eventually comes out victorious. This is reflective of the importance of mastery of the mind. Through meditation mastery of the body and mind could be achieved, which is critical in situations where one is on unfamiliar ground and must maintain themselves one step ahead of their enemies in order to survive.

“The Passing Shower” chapter gives examples of samurai honesty and loyalty. We are introduced to the character Kakichi, a knife sharpener by day and a thief by night. While waiting for a party to die down inside the next house he plans to rob, several different travelers make a stop at the shrine he is hiding inside. It isn’t, however, until a sickly woman and her daughter stop that he is compelled to help them (Fujisawa, 56). Kakichi’s stubbornness ultimately turns to selflessness as he is compelled to help someone far worse off than himself, reflective of the bushido conduct of loyalty.

The “All for a Melon” chapter is also reflective of loyalty as seen through the character Hankuro who helps a wounded woman and delivers an important message to the clans Councilor. Knowing the effect that the conspiracy could have on his clan, he and his friend agree to protect the Councilor (Fujisawa, 88). He does this without the expectation of a reward but with a sense of loyalty to his wife and clan.

The chapter “Shinza the Samurai” again deals with mastery of sword techniques. Shinza struggles greatly with inner turmoil; his mind being ruled more by rage instead of peace and observation. This combination of sword skill and inner turmoil can be dangerous as it can lead to rash and violent decisions. Yet Shinza shows great skill and precision when facing off against chamberlain Shinoi in defiance against his recent actions (Fujisawa, 161). It seems that not all samurai are bound to bushido conduct, dangerous as it may be.

The “Out of Luck” chapter more specifically reflects how true samurai should conduct themselves. The main character, though not a samurai himself, shows the importance of taking responsibility of one’s actions and learning to understand to respect others. Sanjiro, a no good playboy, is dragged off by the father of a girl he has slept with.

The father forces Sanjiro to do various laborious tasks, which eventually turn him into a better, more understanding person to the struggles of others (Fujisawa, 183). He learns the importance of hard work and through this becomes more respectful towards others, whether they be from a lower or high social standing.

My last analysis will be of the novel *The Book of Five Rings* by swordsman Miyamoto Musashi originally published circa 1645. To begin with, the “Earth” chapter describes the various “dou”, or ways, that samurai, farmers, and other classes should live by. More importantly the samurai is seen as the “two ways of culture and conflict,” (Miyamoto, 6). What this means is that it is important for samurai to be well studied in the ways of knowledge and literature, “culture”, as well as the way of martial arts, “conflict”. Studying scholarly subjects is stressed to be just as important as studying how to properly conduct oneself in a fight. This refinement of body and mind are crucial in understanding how to balance oneself and the world around them in order to become a successful warrior.

The “Water” chapter continues to explain the importance of refining the mind and later goes on to give specifics for refining the body through specific body movements. Musashi begins by explaining the importance of “keeping the mind in the exact center,” (Miyamoto, 30). This is important for warriors to be able to calmly assess any situation, keep the enemy guessing, and using that confusion to take advantage of any situation.

The “Fire” chapter goes on from the “Water” chapter’s analysis of various moves and techniques for warriors to use in battle. Though not techniques of the sword, as seen in the previous chapter, this chapter does teach how to find “the weakness of your opponent’s sword,” (Miyamoto, 62) in order to turn the battle to your favor. An

honorable and disciplined way of fighting is something that is very important to the samurai of the Edo Period and through mastery of the body and mind these warriors could bring themselves to victory in battle.

The “Wind” chapter focuses on the “deficiencies of other styles,” (Miyamoto, 92) and why these ways of teaching have strayed from the one true style that Musashi is trying to stress to his followers. He explains why and how the various other ways and methods of fighting cloud the mind and body of proper judgment, which naturally will fail to lead the warrior who practices those methods to victory. It is important for samurai to not be caught up in flashy styles or gaudy weapons for beauty alone cannot lead a warrior to victory.

The “Emptiness” chapter teaches one to be able to understand how their mind has grown and learned from the original emptiness that it once was. “Knowing the existent, you know the nonexistent,” (Miyamoto, 111). In understanding emptiness the warrior will understand just how important the achievements he made through discipline and refinement can be, not only in broadening the mind but also in understanding the world itself better.

Conclusion

My understanding of “samurai spirit” is that it became a strict way of life for men who, during a time of peace, felt the need to justify their existence in order to remind others of their social status and importance then and in centuries past. Their “spirit” is reflected through bushido, passed down legends, and the importance of the mastery of the sword. Adjusting to modernizing society left the need for warrior skills behind while these men had to find ways to adjust to normal life and work. In adjusting to normal life,

these warriors had newfound time in which they could dedicate themselves to refining their minds through meditation and bodies through disciplined practice. This gave birth to texts featuring various schools of thought and sword techniques and apart of those schools of thought were new disciplines such as honesty, loyalty, and dedication to their superiors and fellow samurai. Even after the samurai class had passed from their culture, their ways of discipline and thinking is something that still holds great importance in Japanese society today. The samurai code of morals and conduct is deeply rooted in today's culture as Japanese citizens put loyalty and other ethics above self-importance. Patience, perseverance, diligence, and many other forms of discipline can be found throughout Japan's history and in many different forms of art and conduct, not just the way of the warrior, though the samurai have quite a history to tell.

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