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The Tokugawa Samurai: Values & Lifestyle Transition

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Abstract

The Tokugawa period of Japan was a time of great prosperity but also great strife among the social classes. Of the most affected peoples of the Japanese feudal system was the samurai, who had so long been at the center of military and even political power. For hundreds of years, these highly revered peoples had lived a consistent life based off of virtues passed on through a code, and have also lived comfortable lives due to special powers that were reserved for them.

However, with a lack of warfare and increasing Western influence on the political, social, and military system of Japan during the end of the Tokugawa Period, the samurai struggled to maintain significant power in their society as did they did in earlier eras. This slow decline in power that they faced, and a lessening focus on weaponry for fighting, indicated the transition that the samurai made from an elite warrior to a non-militaristic member of society. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Japan, Japanese history, Tokugawa, Samurai, Japanese military, feudalism, Shogunate, Battle of Sekigahara, Yamamoto

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Introduction

The Tokugawa period of Japan was a time of great prosperity but also great strife among the social classes. Of the most affected peoples of the Japanese feudal system was the samurai, who had so long been at the center of military and even political power. For hundreds of years, these highly revered peoples had lived a consistent life based off of virtues passed on through a code, and have also lived comfortable lives due to special powers that were reserved for them.

However, with a lack of warfare and increasing Western influence on the political, social, and military system of Japan during the end of the Tokugawa Period, the samurai struggled to maintain significant power in their society as did they did in earlier eras. This slow decline in power that they faced, and a lessening focus on weaponry for fighting, indicated the transition that the samurai made from an elite warrior to a non-militaristic member of society.

The Samurai could not last in a society that was becoming more modern and alike to the aspects of Western civilizations. An extended period of peace led to Japan's growth economically, but created a difficult situation for the samurai, who had long depended on warfare to bring honor and glory upon themselves and their families. The Samurai slowly lost power as pieces of Japan changed-the feudal system was broken up, the power of the shogun was

placed to another source, and the economy was less focused on the agriculture that so long supplied the Samurai with money.

By which morals and standards did the samurai live by during the Tokugawa Period, and how is this reflected in the artifacts? What reflects the shift in their roles in society after transitioning into the Meiji Period?

In researching this topic, several artifacts of interest were found in Special Collections in Musselman Library of Gettysburg College. Due to the large collection of Asian art in the Gettysburg College collection, finding items related to the Samurai was not at all difficult. The Asian Art Collection of Gettysburg College contains many different artifacts from Asian countries-including China, Japan, Korea, and India. These objects can range from figurines and pictures, to knives and other weaponry.

The objects I found, all related to the Samurai, can show us different aspects of their culture and beliefs, giving a valuable look into their lives. Although these objects may seem small, the objects and even their decorations speak volumes about these revered warriors.

What I Found

The first object (D70) is a Japanese Kodzuka handle of the Tokugawa period. A small piece that measures only 9.7 cm x 1.5 cm, the iron handle was an important piece of a small kogatana knife. The decoration upon it is a gold crescent moon partially covered by tidal waves. Three Japanese characters are etched into the back and mean “the nature of wild waves”, relating to the picture exactly. As described by Special Collections, the “balanced yet asymmetrical

layout signifies the philosophy of the samurai class: the dynamic between ‘configuration/ principle’ and the ‘material energy/ vital force’”. (“Description”) It was attributed to the last great swordsmith, Kano Natsuo, or one of his pupils.



The second object (D69) is a Japanese Kogai scabbard of the Tokugawa period. The scabbard is a small, but important object that holds a myriad of uses. An object of only 21 cm x 1.2 cm, it could be used for anything from a scratcher and ear cleaner, to the carrier of the head

of an enemy during battle. The design on this object is simple but meaningful, with a flying crane decorated near the top of the scabbard. The flying crane symbolizes a long life. This object, too, was attributed to Kano Natsuo or one of his pupils. The work of the Otsuki School, which was run by Natsuo himself, is distinctive in its “austerity and reserved elegance”.

(“Description”)



I came into Special Collections expecting only these two objects to use in my paper. However, in the same collection as the Japanese Kodzuka handle and the Japanese Kogai scabbard, there was an unidentified artifact among them. This object, which I later identified as a

ko-gatana knife, was a welcome surprise in this collection. Prior to finding this, I believed I would only have a ko-gatana handle to work with, and was pleased to have the full ko-gatana knife at my disposal. The ko-gatana knife was easily identifiable as so due to the similarity in handles between it and the kodzuka handle. The handle of it measures about 9.7 cm x 1.5 cm long, and is adorned with an carving of two horses. These two horses are running, one on the land and another through water. The one running on land is completely gold in color, while the horse running through water has only its mane and tail as gold. The blade of the knife is slightly longer, measuring approximately 10 cm x and 1 cm in width. On the actual blade there is a carving of two Japanese characters, which have not been translated by Special Collections. What makes this object unique is that it is part of Special Collections, but not registered, indicating that it is most likely a newer object.



The fourth object is a bit different from the other three in that it was not weapon related. This object, attributed to the Meiji period rather than the Tokugawa, is a lacquered four-case roiro inro (253). It looks like a small container, with different sections to hold small goods. This object first functioned as a seal and seal paste carrier in China, and then a medicine carrier in the early Tokugawa period. By the late Tokugawa period, it became a status symbol by the samurai and wealthy merchants of Japan because of its beautiful designs. This wearable art piece features vines of morning glory with leaves and buds growing out of it. It is accented with mother of pearl and very extensively decorated for something only measuring 7.5 cm x 5 cm.



Tokugawa Period

The period between 1603 and 1868 was known as the Tokugawa Period and was one of great growth for Japan. Brought about by Tokugawa Ieyasu after his victory in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, this period experienced a peaceful, politically and economically stable time where Japanese culture continued to flourish. ("Tokugawa Ieyasu") This was due in part to their ability to push Western influence away, at least for some time.

A strictly feudalistic time in Japanese history, society was divided into four social classes-the warrior, the artisan, the farmer, and the merchant. And, as with most feudalistic societies, mobility between the classes was nonexistent. These warriors, known as the Samurai, were especially dependent on this lack of mobility to keep power and income. The peasant, which made up most of the population, was forced into doing agricultural work to make a living, which ensured the samurai that owned the land would have a constant supply of money. ("The Age of the Samurai: 1185-1868")

Edo (present-day Tokyo) became the main center of Japan for the military, and ultimately a large economic center as well. With a population of one million people during the Tokugawa Period, Edo was a catalyst for not only military growth but also economic growth. With the large samurai population and focus in Edo, many people went to Edo to supply this population of warriors. Merchants supplying the samurai with numerous goods become wealthier than the samurai themselves, which led the warrior population becoming aggravated with their lack of financial gain. They were highly esteemed and worked tirelessly for their people, but this wasn't being reflected monetarily. Even the great samurais of Japan longed for some political and

economic reform to change the old ways that no longer provided for them. ("The Age of the Samurai: 1185-1868")

However, this would also be the last time that Japan would be able to enjoy their traditional ways of life. With the rapid modernization of other countries, the isolated Japan, despite being away from other countries and ethnocentric, would soon succumb to these new ways of life.

Who Were the Samurai?

During the Tokugawa Period, the period of peace was upheld by the shogunate, a military group that acted as both a symbolic head and an actual power. Despite this, the shogunate was thought of very differently by different peoples. The samurai and other higher members of society respected and followed the shogunate very closely, for they benefitted from doing so. The farmers, however, were not so happy with the shogunate because they were forced into the slave-like labor of providing the higher ranks with fertile, successful land to make money off of. (Sasaki 39)

Of the shogunate was a powerful military caste called the Samurai, the highest of warriors in the Japanese military. These warriors lived to protect their people, and during the Tokugawa Period, they did so mostly through non-militaristic means. In fact, the Samurai were not only taught to be fierce and powerful fighters, but also to have lessons non-military matters such as manners and respect.

The Samurai had many influences in how they were supposed to act in their high status position. The shogunate was the main power behind the Samurai, from which they served, and

influenced how they acted and fought. They were taught by the ways of Confucius, to follow his ideals, as well as those of Buddhism. However, the main code they lived by was one that had been around for hundreds of years. From the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism came about the Samurai's code for living called the Bushido. (Yamamoto)

The Bushido, Idealized

The Bushido was a code for the Samurai to live by. It taught the Samurai to be fearless in battle and kind to family and elders. There were seven main virtues that the Samurai were expected to maintain: justice, courage, benevolence, respect, honesty, honor, and loyalty.

Morality is defined in two different ways in Japanese culture. Not only is it “one's power to decide upon a course of conduct in accordance with reason, without wavering; to die when to die is right, to strike when to strike is right.”(Nitobe 23), but also involves the physical composition of the body. It refers to the bones of the body that give firmness and stature, which hold the person up. (Nitobe 23) So, morality in both a physical and mental sense support and determine the actions of the person.

Courage as described in the Bushido is related to justice in that it is strongly connected with morals. In order for courage to be related to the Bushido code, the reasons behind enacting on this courage must be righteous. It is necessary to be courageous only when the time calls for it and not rash, for such rashness is viewed negatively “It is true courage to live when it is right to live, and to die when it is only right to die.” (Nitobe 30)

Benevolence, although seemingly unfit of a strong warrior, is something that can be a display of power. “Benevolence to the weak, the down-trodden or the vanquished, was ever

extolled as peculiarity becoming to a samurai".(Nitobe 43) .This virtue refers to "love, magnanimity, affection for others, sympathy and pity"(Nitobe 36), and is stressed by Confucius as "the highest retirement of a ruler of men". (Nitobe 38) As Confucius and Confucianism are the highest powers of which a samurai adheres to, such a virtue would be taken with much seriousness and be at the forefront.

With many powerful leaders, they may believe more highly of themselves and of people from their social class than others. However, with the strictly enforced Japanese system of respect, the Samurai were often very good at being respectful and polite to everyone. Respect, according to the Bushido, leads to a more harmonious body and therefore a stronger one. "Politeness is a poor virtue, if it is actuated only by a fear of offending good taste, whereas it should be the outward manifestation of a sympathetic regard for the feelings of others."(Nitobe 50) This politeness must be genuine and enacted for the right reasons, otherwise is cannot be considered a virtue. Politeness comes to the benefit of the samurai in that it "brings all the parts and faculties of his body into perfect order and into such harmony with itself and its environments to express the mastery of spirit over the flesh." (Nitobe 54)

The Samurai were regarded as a group of generally honest peoples who would give their word on anything. They did not believe in written contracts, for their word was just as good as any contract. In fact, sincerity was so important to the samurai and their code of living that they could be killed for lying, as for breaking any other of the samurai virtues. (Nitobe 61)

The Samurai's honor was perhaps the most important concept of the Bushido. The Samurai lived to keep their honor and if such honor was lost, they would perform acts such as ritual death. One form of ritual death called seppuku involved the disembowelment of a samurai, who wished to die with their honor. This would be done in cases such as being captured by an

enemy and not wanting to die by their hands, a form of capital punishment for serious offenses, or done by the samurai because they felt they had lost their honor. (Nitobe 72)

Loyalty is the basis of how the Samurai began and grew to great power. By being loyal to the shogun, these warriors work for their entire lives by the commands of their masters, and also to help and protect other people. Loyalty within families is also stressed, for the family unit is an important aspect of Japanese culture. (Nitobe 82)

The Bushido Virtues Reflected in Artifacts

The artifacts from Special Collections have several designs that are there not just for decoration, but also have meaning. These meanings can very much be related back to the Bushido code and the idealized virtues that the warriors were to follow.

The Japanese Kodzuka handle features a gold crescent moon, half covered by tidal waves. The main feature of the piece is the waves itself, for waves have great meaning in Japanese art, as shown in works such as *The Great Wave Of Kanagawa*. Waves are a symbol of power and resilience. (“Japanese Art & Design Themes”) The samurai was expected to be a strong and unwavering fighter, with courage in battle.

Resilience, the ability to stand up and continued even if things are tough, is an important aspect of having courage. Resilience itself shows great courage; even if a samurai was on the losing end or feeling discouraged, continuing through to the end, when not a rash act, is looked at positively.

As waves in the sea, courage for the samurai should be a constant attribute. And even when things are bad and there's a dark, stormy time, the samurai must learn to be like the waves

in this time and be strong and unwavering. The samurai should stand tall and fight to the end in order to maintain honor and dignity, as described in the Bushido.

The Kogai scabbard design is a unique design in relation to the samurai. The flying crane, which symbolizes a long life, is a common motif among Japanese designs. (“Asian Symbolism and the Crane”) A samurai was expected to live a long life in life and beyond death by following the virtues. If a samurai were to fail to follow any of the virtues in life, he would be expected to kill himself in the ritual suicide act of seppuku. Without honor, a samurai couldn’t expect to live in the mortal world, nor die and move on to happiness in the afterlife unless committing an act such as the ritual suicide, and that was not always an option.

Also, a samurai is to be a selfless human being, and breaking the Bushido code would be a selfish act. In samurai families, not only is the samurai dishonored in failing to follow the Bushido, but the entire family is shamed. He risks the entire family’s chance of living a long peaceful life in the mortal world and afterlife. In many cases, the wife of a samurai will commit a ritual act of suicide if her husband has to do so, along with other members of the family, in order to achieve absolution.

The full ko-gatana knife with the horse design draws a unique look at samurai material culture. With its design focus on the horse, it calls about a different aspect of the samurai. “With the rise of the samurai, the horse became firmly established as an indispensable component of Japanese warfare as well as a lasting symbol of refinement and power.”(Bowers Museum) A samurai would have to be a refined person in order to follow the virtues, many of which relate to behavior and manners. All of the virtues are directed related to being a refined person, and it was a goal for the samurai to have perfected all areas of these personalities as to be a model samurai.

Refinement was also an extremely important characteristic of the samurai as the warrior had to shift away from being the fighter to being the political leader or other such non-military member of society. In all societies of the world today, a powerful, important figure must be refined in order to be respected; commanding respect means commanding power.

There are two characters etched upon the knife blade. The first character etched upon the blade means “justice” or “righteousness”, and the second character means “to go”. Justice and righteousness are both directly stated in the Bushido, and would remind and encourage the samurai to follow these virtues. The second character, although less directly related to the Bushido virtues in meaning, can perhaps be relating again to resilience and determination, which are key components of courage. (Sakai)

Another possible interpretation of the characters relates to Buddhism. Buddhism was an important religion by which the samurai followed, as well as Confucianism. The two characters can also be translated as “correct practices”. This in relation to Buddhism means to do right deeds or actions. The samurai were expected to always do what is right and just, which is also stated in the Bushido code. (Sakai)

The Bushido, Reality

As all rules of society, they are bound to be ignored or neglected by some. The Samurai code was no different, as not all Samurai followed the aspects of it. If all the Samurai were these perfect ideals, then punishment such as the seppuku would not have existed. The seppuku, a ritual death created for the samurai, or even other members of Japanese society, was a way to die

with honor. This would be done for such instances where the samurai did not uphold the virtues and was therefore shamed. A samurai in such shame would have to die, and for it to be honorable, seppuku would take place.

“Although seppuku was a form of suicide, it was often awarded to an offender as a form of honorable but necessary punishment.” (Seward 42) Seppuku was not offered to all dishonored samurais, and therefore this form of suicide was not considered a punishment so much as a saving grace. Being offered the right to commit seppuku was a positive thing for a samurai that has been shamed because it gives him the opportunity to save his soul and family from being damned and ostracized. (Seward)

A typical seppuku ritual for a samurai could take place either publicly or privately, and was not reserved just for the Samurai class, although it is commonly associated with them. A blade of some sort, usually a sword or knife, is used by the one performing the act to cut his stomach open. The intestines are then removed, disemboweling the person. The act was performed with assistance from a friend. After the stabbing and disembowelment was done by the samurai himself, the assistant in the seppuku would then behead the samurai by means of a quick blade through the neck.

The samurai was not the only one affected by the dishonor he brought upon himself. When a samurai has dishonored himself, he has also shamed his family equally. The friend, who was chosen to do the beheading in the act, was also at no benefit in this ritual. A friend chosen to kill his friend would not feel any honor or happiness in doing so. (Seward)

The wife of a samurai specifically was shamed, and would also perform ritual suicide if her husband does so. The wife's version of the suicide is called jigai, and was different in practice from the husband's counterpart.

In jigai, the woman would prepare by kneeling in a honorable position, tying something around her legs as to keep form even after she has done the deed. She would then take a knife and slit it across her jugular vein in her throat. Other female members of the family may also perform the act, leading to widespread death in the samurai's family. (Amdur)

What did Warriors do in a Peaceful Japan?

The Samurai were not busy fighting internal or external battles during this period of Japanese history, so to occupy their time, many also took up trades or became bureaucrats to remain in some type of power. However, they did their best to keep up their appearance as fighting men, and carried around swords despite never needing them. Just carrying a sword showed a special kind of power since in 1588 it was decreed that only the Samurai was allowed to carry swords. In fact, The Great Sword Hunt of 1587 removed all swords and other such weapons from peasants. (Norman 50)

The sword, in fact, was not just a weapon. It was not just a piece of iron with some decoration to make it physically appealing, but the sword, and other such weaponry, was connected to the soul of the Samurai. They were made and treated with care, and often portrayed important messages that reflected the lives that the Samurai lived. The waves crashing in the sea on the handle of a sword is not simply there to be decorative; it portrays the strength and endurance a warrior must have and encourages these attributes in the warrior.

Despite this lucrative time, the prosperity of the Samurai began to decline even before feudal Japan came into jeopardy. Since the stipends from landowners declined during the

Tokugawa period, and this was the Samurai's main source of income, the Samurai were living under lesser conditions than they were used to, and were frustrated by the unchanging situation.

With this lack of violence in Japan, the samurai found that their swords were being used less for fighting and more for decoration, because of the law that decreed them the special ability to carry a sword. This started the transition from a focus on weaponry to a focus on objects to further show their status-some of these remained "weapons" for decorative use and some of these completely branched off from the weapons to reflect a growing political/economic power rather than a military one.

Meiji Restoration: The End of an Era

By the mid-1800s, other countries were developing and expanding their economies due to rapid modernization. In other countries such as England and America, industrial revolutions were bringing about new technologies and creating boosted economies. Japan, which had been purposely cut off from Western influences was about to lose its ethnocentrism for the sake of modernizing.

In 1858, Commodore Matthew Perry sailed to the shores of Japan to convince them to open trade with the rest of the world, and after some conflict, succeeded. Japan signed a treaty in 1858 with countries to open trade, and thus began the process of Japan's modernization.

By 1868, the shogunate, which had controlled Japan for so long, was crushed by the Choshu and Satsuma clans. These clans created a new government in which an Emperor would be in power and feudalism would no longer exist. Feudalism was abolished in 1871, and the right

of the samurai to wear swords was taken away. The Samurai had lost the power they had enjoyed over the years and now were furious and felt lost. (Beasley)

The samurai were then permanently forced into different careers- many having nothing to do with the military. Many became high ranking officials or merchants and tried to maintain the high status they once enjoyed, although this became significantly harder as time went on. The samurai culture became less focused on weaponry and its use in battle and more focused on non-weapon related artifacts and weapon's decorative aspects. The reminiscence and romanticization of the samurai become popular in the following year since the active samurai no longer existed. Weapons once used in warfare were turned into pieces used to decorate homes.

The Four Case Rōiro Inro

The four case rōiro inro, created and used during the Meiji period, is a non-weapon item that was used by the transitioning samurai class and other high class people. The rōiro inro was originally used by Chinese seal makers to carry seals, and then was brought to Japan as a case for holding medicines. As the Tokugawa period continued, it slowly became an object of bodily decoration and a symbol of wealth. Many of the once-samurais of the Meiji period, as well as the other higher class people, wore these small container objects as a symbol of their status. This marked an important shift in the samurai material culture; no longer were they decorating themselves with knives, scabbards, and other such objects, but with decorative, non-weapon objects.

Conclusions

A respectable member of society, the samurai was a man who upheld the values of The Bushido, which were based off of the teachings of Confucius and Buddha. These warriors were expected to be grand members of society who set an example for others to follow. Even in their weaponry were these values, or versions of these values, displayed in the form of various motifs.

The samurai, although thought of as a flourishing, wealthy social class of the Tokugawa Period, was actually in stages of decline-even before the opening to Japan to the modern world. Despite some nostalgic sadness at the loss of the warrior aspect of the samurai, there was some comfort in the thought of moving away from this old structure. With this transitioning, there was a clear change in what the samurai's role in society was. No longer were they the warriors of the land, fighting to protect the people, but now they were just more or less average people, trying to make it in the new Japan as political heads, merchants, and other such professions.

Overall, the Meiji Restoration Period brought positive change to Japan, especially for the samurai. Although they enjoyed a lavish and respected life in past periods of Japan, the Tokugawa Period began a time where the samurai started to struggle financially and socially. The reformation of political and social structure led to more opportunity for these samurai to become successful members of society.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code. Kathleen McGurty

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