

“Samurai Spirit”

Hatty Gardner
JAPN 212 Samurai Spirit
Chikaomi Takahashi, Ph.D.
5 May 2014

“INTRODUCTION”

The concepts, stereotypes, and presumed ideologies of samurai are an integral part of Japanese culture. Most people only know samurai by their modern stereotypes, which, while based in some truth, are often wildly sensational and fictional. Even though the fiction is often far from fact, these uniquely Japanese warriors have become an iconic symbol of Japan. The spirit of the samurai is often used to define Japanese culture, but what is samurai spirit, really? Like many others, I did not previously understand the truth hidden beneath the stereotypes but was still fascinated by this unique aspect of Japanese culture. I had seen many anime that included samurai, and now I realize many of the features of these samurai images I saw were untrue or greatly exaggerated for dramatic effect. In my essay I will investigate what samurai spirit really is, as well as what duty and honor meant to samurai, what the sword meant to samurai, what life was like for middle-lower class samurai and the dilemma's these samurai faced, what makes Japanese samurai unique, and what the differences between stereotyped samurai images and the actual lifestyle and moral values of samurai actually are.

Duty and honor are stereotypically portrayed as being enormously important to samurai, and for real life samurai duty and honor were actually extremely important as well. But what did duty and honor mean to actual samurai and how were they expected to fulfill their duties and live up to their honor? Duty and honor were very much a part of life for samurai. The importance of duty and honor was present throughout the history of samurai, samurai even means “one who serves,” so it was always important to instill a cultural sense of loyalty amongst these warriors. Early samurai dutifully took up arms and went in to battle, and to preserve their honor they always took care that they were ready to meet death with beauty, putting on perfume and wearing rouge and ensuring their armor was in good order. Even after peace was achieved with the beginning of the Edo period, duty and honor remained an essential part of samurai culture, perhaps even more so with samurai life becoming much more rigid and revolving around government activities and rituals rather than war. For example, in “Shinza, the Samurai” the setting is just a couple decades after the beginning of the Edo period, and guards for battle standards and other warrior duties are in little demand, making the jobs they do dull. However, Shinza still performs his duties day after day without complaint and keeps his skills sharp (Fujisawa, p.130). Though many samurai of the Edo period did not actually have excellent fighting skills, honing and keeping the mind and skills sharp was very important to maintaining honor. “The Book of Water” advises that the martial artist keeps the mind “unmoved” and prevent it from becoming “sidetracked” (Miyamoto, p. 30). “The Book of Fire” goes further and demands that in battle the mind is not to be bothered with insignificant or small matters; all attention should be focused on winning and overwhelming the opponent to maintain your honor (Miyamoto, p. 62). This is not just applicable to the way of martial arts but also to the samurai

philosophy in general. To perform duties of any kind honorably, especially in the Edo period, samurai were expected to keep their minds clear of anything but their duty. “The Book of Earth” maintains that should you choose to study the martial arts, “you should practice without end” (Miyamoto, p. 9). In “Runaway Stallion” Jubei is ridiculed for letting himself deteriorate into a drunk for five years and scorned as a swordsman because he stopped practicing. His old teacher even calls him a “waste” and his deteriorated skills cause him dishonor among the samurai community (Fujisawa, pp. 220-221).

To fulfill their duties, samurai were expected to remain sharp and ready to follow any command given by their clans and superiors, even if they didn't want to. For example, in *Twilight Samurai* Seibei Iguchi is a simple samurai, but when his clan learns of his skill with the sword they order him to kill a traitor to the clan. Though he has not fought in years and has no desire to kill or be killed, he accepts his duty and goes to kill the man. He could not refuse the demands of his clan, he would otherwise have been dishonored and either exiled or killed. So strict adherence to authority was a part of what duty and honor meant to samurai as well. This is not to say that Samurai performed their duties to their superiors without reward or expectation of reward. Seibei's clan offers to make his life easier, as he is very poor, should he kill the man and in “All for a Melon” Hankuro and Jinnai are two lowly samurai who successfully perform a dangerous guard duty for a faction of the clan they serve; their actions and skill help shape the fate of their clan. They expect to be reasonably rewarded for these duties they performed with promotions and raises, but instead are dismayed to discover that they only receive a melon a piece in payment (Fujisawa, pp. 97-98). Receiving payment for duties performed was the norm for samurai, carried all the way from samurai being paid for their service in battles in the earlier

periods through to being paid for government duties, among anything else, in the peaceful Edo period.

If samurai are the iconic symbols of Japan, then swords are the iconic symbols of samurai. However, there are many misunderstandings about what the sword actually meant to samurai. In the earlier warring periods, before the introduction of guns, bows and arrows were actually the preferred weapon of samurai, and only upper class samurai could wield them, with the lower classes of samurai using mostly spears and naginatas. The samurai of these early periods did carry swords, but they were not prized and there were no formal sword technique schools. Swords were basically used as a last resort weapon when arrows ran out. Even in the Edo period, guns made swords difficult to effectively use in an open battlefield, and many samurai did not actually possess great skill with the sword. However, in the Edo period, the sword was seen as a status symbol. Only Samurai were allowed to carry them and a man's swords often had great history behind them and were carefully crafted to be beautiful as well as functional. In both *Twilight Samurai* and "The Bamboo Sword" the protagonists, Seibei and Oguro Tanjuro, respectively, both express dismay at being forced to sell their swords which had been passed down to them (Fujisawa, p. 31). However, even after selling their swords both Seibei and Oguro carry around bamboo swords in scabbards so that they maintain their status as samurai, though when men who they are asked to fight discover that they do not have real swords, they do not take Seibei or Oguro seriously (Fujisawa, pp. 37-38). Sword skills were sometimes also a way for samurai from different economic backgrounds to meet on even ground and for samurai of lower classes to distinguish themselves. In "All for a Melon" three samurai

from different economic backgrounds can all consider themselves friends because they all teach at the same dojo and respect each others skills (Fujisawa, p. 62).

In the Edo period the sword became so revered that many different schools of sword techniques rose into being, with many of these schools still existing today. However, “The Book of Wind” explains that many of these schools treat swordsmanship as a performance or a way of making a living or as a decoration, “or as a means of forcing flowers to bloom.” Miyamoto Musashi asks in this book how the martial arts can be considered the “true Way” if it as a saleable item. Martial arts, he contends, should be unfailing and pure and focus on an understanding of how to win, as opposed to specific footwork and positions. This Way takes practice (Miyamoto, p. 92). Practicing the sword was a way for samurai of all backgrounds to discipline their minds and bodies if they so chose.

Japanese samurai were a very uniquely Japanese class. In the earlier periods even, when they were simply warriors called away to battle when needed, they held ideals of beauty and of meeting death that were very unique from much of the rest of the world. Even samurai of the Edo period were very unique, with many of the current stereotypes actually coming from representations of life in the Edo period. Part of what make samurai so unique is the intertwining of Japanes cultural values and beliefs, such as Shintoism, Buddhism, and a belief in the beauty of transience. In “The Book of Emptiness” Miyamoto Musashi impresses the importance of Emptiness of the mind, “creating an absence of everything with form and the inability to have knowledge thereof” to make your mind clear and follow the true Way of martial arts. Miyamoto goes on to say, “In Emptiness exists Good but no Evil. Wisdom is Existence. Principle is Existence. The Way is Existence. The Mind is Emptiness” (Miyamoto, pp. 111-113). These

concepts are inherent throughout the samurai philosophy towards battle and living and can be very much linked to the ideals Buddhism and can be found even today in Japanese culture as what is considered the wise and enlightened path to follow.

Samurai were also unique, particularly in the Edo period, because of their social class and all the rules they had to adhere to. For example, in “Kozuru” Kanna Kichizaemon is reprimanded by his superior officer for quarreling all the time and loud enough for people in the street to hear all the time. His superior tells him that his behavior “reflects badly on samurai in general” (Fujisawa, p. 99). Samurai were held to a superior code than commoners, for example, the behavior of Sanjiro in the beginning of “Out of Luck” would not have been accepted at all by those of the samurai class. Sanjiro continually tries to run away from his responsibilities, similar behavior by a samurai might result in the samurai's death (Fujisawa, pp. 174-180). Another interesting thing about samurai and their social class is that there were actually a lot of samurai who were very poor, particularly in the Edo period when the class system forbid samurai from crossing over into any activities merchants, farmers, or artisans might do to make money. These samurai were forced to live off of meager earnings with almost no chance in the peaceful Edo period to increase their pay. Furthermore, they were never allowed to leave the samurai class, so they were stuck in poverty their entire lives. Many had to resort to piecework, such as making bug cages, as Seibei does in *Twilight Samurai* to sustain themselves and their families. Life for these samurai families was often grim, and in fact a huge number of samurai had to deal with this impoverished lifestyle. This reality is very different from the stereotype present now of grand skilled warriors who have the greatest amount of power and control in the country.

“CONCLUSION”

Samurai spirit is not just a simple thing. There are many aspects that combined to create it and the unique Japanese samurai culture. Though today there are many stereotypes that are false they do contain kernels of truth, such as the importance of duty and honor to the samurai class. However, the reality of samurai life is not as fantastical or strange as many samurai stereotypes and images make it seem. Ultimately, samurai were a warrior class made up of ordinary humans that changed with the times they were living in. Not every samurai had amazing abilities with the sword, in fact the sword wasn't always even important as a symbol of status. Life for samurai was not all blood and death and dying with honor or a bowl full of roses either. Many samurai were poor and during they Edo period they really had little hope of ever changing their economic situation. However, the spirit of the samurai, the values and ideals emphasized, is uniquely Japanese and intertwined with Japanese culture. It is no wonder then, that modern Japan has latched on to the samurai as their mascot, an idealized representative of why their country is unique.

Reference List

Fujisawa, S., & Frew, G. (2005). *The bamboo sword and other samurai tales*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Miyamoto, M., & Wilson, W. S. (2002). *The Book of Five Rings*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Y
o
j
i

Y
a
m
a
d
a

(
D
i
r
e
c
t
o
r
)
.

(
2
0
0
2
)
.

T
w
i
l
i
g
h