

Some Thoughts on the Emergence and 'Aesthetic Asceticism' of Ryūha-bugei

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This essay will investigate the enigmatic symbolic reverence attached to the sword (*katana*) in medieval and early-modern Japan, and the genesis of 'schools' dedicated to the study and refinement of its techniques.

To this day, many scholars still take it for granted that the *katana* was the primary or preferred weapon of the *bushi*. However, for most of *bushi* history the sword was but an auxiliary weapon. Because of its fragile nature, its practical use in the thick of battle was perceivably somewhat limited. Nevertheless, from the fifteenth century onwards, we see the gradual rise of specialist martial art schools (*ryūha-bugei*) in which the sword became the predominant weapon despite the introduction of more devastating arms, namely firearms in 1543. This trend seems to be at stark odds with the reality of the era, where warlords (*daimyō*) vied to crush each other to gain suzerainty over the country, and begs the question as to why schools dedicated to swordsmanship arose in the first place.

Obviously, training in systemised composite martial arts had important practical applications, and in this sense specialist martial art schools which evolved in the late medieval period (from around 1400–1600) provided an important route for the professional warrior. Even so, it is difficult to ignore the ostensibly 'devolutionary' mind-set from a practical perspective with regards to the fundamental weapon involved—the sword.

Thus, my intention by investigating this theme is to corroborate the following three postulations: 1) Given the period in which they arose, it is likely that they were created not just as a culmination of combat experience, but were strongly influenced by genteel art forms such as *nō* as a result of a *bushi* complex/infatuation with courtier culture, and recognition of the necessity to emulate this culture as new rulers of Japan. Here we see the genesis of composite martial schools which for the most part focussed on the use of the sword; 2) While maintaining practical battle application, *ryūha-bugei* were, in essence, pseudo-religious organisations that "aestheticized" individual combat into art forms; 3) Successive generations or students of the schools refined the training methodologies and surrounding philosophies. As such the ensuing extensions of the original *ryūha* provide a vivid example of the process of "invention" or "reinvention of tradition" to justify the existence and pre-eminence of a specific social group.

The Predominance of Swords – Fact or Fiction?

Ironically, it was the introduction of firearms in the sixteenth century that supposedly

raised the prominence of swords. The standard line of argument to elucidate this irony has been promoted by scholars such as Imamura Yoshio and Tominaga Kengo. They suggest that the introduction of firearms increased the rapidity in which warriors sought close-quarter engagements. In addition, given the increased number of combatants on Sengoku battlefields, room for movement was limited, and long weapons such as the *naginata* and *yari* were awkward to brandish compared to swords. Furthermore, musket balls could penetrate even the heaviest of armour, and warriors started to use lighter and less cumbersome suits, which left them more susceptible to shock weapons such as swords.¹

However, some scholars have started to refute the idea that the introduction of firearms served to significantly change the face of warfare in sixteenth century Japan immediately after their arrival – generally thought to be in the 1543 via Tanegashima. For example, Udagawa Takehisa states, “For a great number of guns to be utilised effectively requires many instructors (*hōjutsu-shi*) to teach usage, mastery of by officers and men, the formation of mobile gunnery units, as well as gunsmiths to make the weapons. These were requirements that could not be met immediately after introduction.”² He asserts that firearms became more significant in battle as their use was increased by *daimyō* armies in the Tenshō period (1573–1591) – towards the end of the Sengoku period. By this stage, specialist schools of swordsmanship were already well established.

Ironically still, there is evidence that actually negates the sword as being the primary choice of weapon in close-quarter engagements. Suzuki Masaya’s research reveals that of the 584 battle wounds recorded in documents extending from 1563–1600, 263 were inflicted by guns (which corroborates Udagawa’s claims); 126 by arrows; 99 spear wounds; and only 40 warriors suffered from sword lacerations. The remainder were 30 injuries from rocks, and 26 warriors who were felled by a combination of weapons.³ I do believe that caution is in order in regards to the analysis of these documents. I have yet to be convinced as to how a stab wound from a spear and a sword can possibly be differentiated. Nevertheless, Suzuki contends that, although swords were used to a certain extent in battle, more often they were merely utilised to cut off the heads of fallen foe (*kubi-tori*). These were then taken back for inspection as ‘invoices for payment’ for the warrior’s personal contribution to victory.

Particularly after the Nanbokuchō period, the *katana* became an integral part of standard *bushi* garb, but does that mean that it was the preferred weapon on the battlefield? Scholars often point to the introduction of firearms as changing the face of battle in the Sengoku period. However, Suzuki asserts that firearms merely replaced the bow as the established weapon, and when warriors engaged in close-quarters combat, spears were favoured over swords.

Suzuki’s assumptions are based in part on the work of *katana* expert Naruse Sekanji (1888–1948). Of particular interest are Naruse’s observations that the famed Japanese *katana* was “greatly flawed” as a weapon. Of 1681 blades that he repaired personally, 30% had been damaged in duels, and the remaining 70% were damaged through everyday use such as inadequate cleaning and care, or reckless *tameshi-giri* (cutting practice).⁴

Katana have a tendency to rust in the humid Japanese climate, but of more concern to the combatant though, records show the common occurrence of *tsuka* (hilt) snapping with use, or the silk threads of the hilt unwinding. Furthermore, the bamboo pegs (*mekugi*) that secured the *tsuka* to the blade were also apt to crack or come loose, thereby rendering the sword unusable.⁵ The sword guard (*tsuba*) also had a tendency to work loose, and the blade is easily bent when cutting with incorrect *hasuji* (blade trajectory). The *katana* was known to snap easily when struck on the flat of the blade by such weapons as *yari* or the staff.

They did have practical application in narrow spaces or indoors where longer weapons could not be wielded freely, and were the weapon of choice in assassinations.⁶ Especially in the Tokugawa period, the sword was most certainly the predominant weapon employed by *bushi* in political murders, fights, and exacting honour through revenge (*kataki-uchi*). This was because the *bushi* always carried a *katana* at his side as a symbol of his status, and nobody wore armour anymore. The *katana* is perfect for cutting through silk and flesh, but its practical use in the chaotic melees of medieval battlefields is questionable. In this sense, although by no means an ineffectual weapon, it is a fair assumption that its practical worth was less than the sturdy and versatile *yari* in the thick of battle.

What then, elevated the sword to occupy the position of emblematic favouritism it irrefutably received from warriors? Since the end of the Heian period, over three million swords were produced, and over half of these were made after the Sengoku period.⁷ Suzuki poses the question how could so many swords have survived compared to other weapons such as guns—which are far fewer in number, and most of the surviving specimens were actually manufactured in the Tokugawa period? He postulates that more swords have survived as they were not used as prolifically in battle as many people think. “While the *katana* did serve as a weapon, it also retained an important and peculiar quality beyond a simple, benign implement of war.”⁸ In other words, the *katana* was not only a sidearm (like a revolver to an officer in a modern army), but was revered as a ritualistic object with religious qualities. It has figured prominently in Japan's national mythology, used as the symbol of ascendance in the imperial family, and treasured as important family heirlooms even before it came to be considered the most important icon of *bushi* status.

Apart from the traditional mythological and ritualistic functions attached to the sword, there was also a very practical, albeit non-combative, reason for its reverence. There are countless instances of warriors naming their swords, and even *yari* to a certain extent, but guns and other weapons rarely received such honourable treatment. The term *meitō* (名刀) refers a sword of special importance. A *meitō* would have a name and be appraised as such through having been made by a renowned smith, or because it was judged to have an awe-inspiring ‘cutting quality’, or maybe it belonged to an historical figure.

To possess a *meitō* afforded the owner status and prestige. It was a symbol of his importance, wealth and valour in battle. In fact, from the Sengoku period, *bushi* warlords appeared to have been infatuated with *meitō*, and very much desired to acquire them, not to include them in their personal arsenals for use in battle, but much in the same way that

modern collectors seek priceless works of art.

Apart from narcissistic satisfaction gleaned from owning a *meitō*, swords of worth also became a widespread form of currency in warrior society from the Sengoku period. Warriors fought for prizes. Ideally, they would receive parcels of land from their lord upon performing gallant feats in battle. However, it was often the case that instead of land they would be repaid in lieu with money, antique tea utensils, or with swords.⁹ Of course, only a very small number of the literally millions of swords produced had the status of *meitō*. Still, even if it was not a designated *meitō*, the more valuable the sword the more prestige it afforded the recipient, and as early as Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436–1490), the eighth shogun of the Muromachi period, records were being kept for appraising the value of swords.¹⁰ Thus, we can infer that from this period the sword was a symbolic indication of the owner's wealth, authority and valour, and also served as an important form of exchange determined by aesthetic attributes – or at least not only combat functionality.¹¹

Aspirations for 'Bun' to Aestheticization of 'Bu'

If this was the case, then an important question needs to be asked. What was the impetus for the development of specialist martial schools from as early as the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that, although including an array of weapons in the curriculum, often tended to focus on swordsmanship? Judging by the recent scholarly discourse that questions the standard interpretation of the method of warfare waged in the late medieval period, it seems unreasonable to assume that swords—as statistics of battle wounds supposedly show us—were primary battle weapons. Moreover, if we follow Suzuki's hypothesis, swords were used mainly for desecrating warriors already dead. What then caused an infatuation with swordsmanship by founders and students of the earliest *ryūha-bugei*? The question is simple enough, but surprisingly few scholars have attempted to answer it.

Karl Friday is one of the few who has considered this important issue with much circumspection, and his answer was equally simple. "*Ryūha-bugei* itself constituted a new phenomenon—a derivative, not a linear improvement, of earlier, more prosaic military training."¹² The fact that swordsmanship became the focus suggests the plausibility that *ryūha-bugei* evolved not just for the sake of military training, but were profoundly influenced by the formulation and systematisation of other art forms (*gei*) around the same time or earlier. The Muromachi period was epochal in terms of *bushi* aesthetic development, and hence martial art evolution.

As Ashikaga Takauji's hold over the capital was insecure, he felt obliged to actually reside there rather than in the eastern provinces. Consequently, there was a massive influx of *bushi* from the provinces into Kyoto. With this migration, *bushi* rapidly came to control political and cultural life in the capital. As they replaced courtiers in positions of authority, they saw the necessity to learn and behave in an 'appropriate' manner for rulers, and break away from the rustic mannerisms that had earned them the scorn of more refined individuals. In other words, to use Talcott Parson's term, it was an act of "adaptive

upgrading” to ensure survival.¹³

Bushi concern for ‘propriety’ is evident through two main trends that appeared in the Muromachi period; the proliferation of house codes; and the circulation of texts outlining distinctive *bushi* ceremonies, rules and customs (*buke kojitsu*) – which has its origins in the ceremonies and customs of the ancient imperial court (*yūsoku kojitsu*). From the Kamakura period, warriors started to develop their own forms of *kojitsu* and with the onset of the Muromachi period, the study of cultural and ceremonial standards set by the court nobles took on more urgency among the warrior class as they sought to assert their ‘cultural equality’ and ‘political superiority’ to the nobles.¹⁴ The content included learning court ceremonies, various religious rituals, appropriate clothing, etiquette for everyday interaction, and treatment and use of arms and armour, especially with regards to archery. The two main ‘styles’ or specialists that directed *kojitsu* norms to the *bushi* were the Ogasawara and the Ise families.¹⁵

House codes of the period exhibit a newfound concern for balancing martial aptitude with the refinement in the genteel arts and civility; namely an equilibrium between *bu* (武) and *bun* (文). It was deemed no longer appropriate for warriors to be seen as brawny, bucolic bumpkins with no sense of decorum or edification. They needed to be worthy rulers able to assert dominance by virtue of intellect, and violence as a last resort. The *bushi* had long felt culturally inferior to the nobles, and sought to solidify a mantle of equality, if not elitist sentiments over their traditional cultural superiors.

There are a number of well-known house codes from the period such as Shiba Yoshimasa’s (1350–1410) *Chikubasho* and Imagawa Ryōshun’s (Sadayo) (1325–1420) *Imagawa Ryōshin seishi* which were studied enthusiastically by warriors in the Tokugawa period. House codes also characteristically offered detailed advice on proper social deportment. Kondō Hitoshi states “*Kakun* outlined many facets of everyday life. Namely, where to sit at a banquet, how to exchange sake cups, cleaning, travel etiquette”, and so on.¹⁶ The *buke kojitsu* texts were more detailed in this regard. The *kakun* were more personal in nature. Primarily written by the patriarch of the *ie* to ensure that his sons or retainers did not induce shame in the warrior community of honour, they accentuate the right “mind” rather than just “form”.

Ashikaka Takauji also supposedly wrote a set of house rules (*Takauji-kyō goisho*) to outline expectations of his *bushi*, and the thirteenth article clearly shows the importance placed on *bunbu-ryōdō*.¹⁷ “*Bu* and *bun* are like two wheels of a cart. If one wheel is missing, the cart will not move...”¹⁸ This emphasis, it should be pointed out was primarily aimed at the upper echelons of *bushi* society. In his *kakun* of 1412, Imagawa Ryōshun declares “It is natural that *bushi* learn the ways of war and apply themselves to the acquisition of the basic fighting skills needed for their occupation. However, it is clearly stated in ancient military texts such as the *Shishi gokyō* (The Four Books and Five Classics) that without applying oneself to study, it is impossible to be a worthy ruler...”¹⁹

Another *tour de force* in *kakun*, Shiba Yoshimasa’s *Chikubasho* (1383) also admonishes

the ruling class of the need for propriety, self-cultivation, and attention to detail. "...Have a mind to improve one step at a time, and take care in speech so as not to be thought of a fool by others..."²⁰ Furthermore, "Be aware that men of insincere disposition will be unable maintain control. All things should be done with singleness of mind...Warriors must be of calm disposition, and have the ability to understand the measure of other people's minds. This is the key to success in military matters."²¹ More specifically in regards to the genteel arts, "If a man has attained ability in the arts, it is possible to ascertain the depth of his mind, and the demeanour of his ie can be ascertained. In this world, honour and reputation are valued above all else. Thus, a man is able to accrue standing in society by virtue of competence in the arts and so should try to excel in them too, regardless of whether he has ability or not...It goes without saying that a man should be dexterous in military pursuits such as *mato*, *kasagake*, and *inuōmono*."²²

This passage is of particular significance. Here, Yoshimasa is stating the importance of the warrior being *au fait* with genteel arts such as linked verse and musical instruments, as well as the military arts. Interestingly, he refers to "military pursuits" that all utilise the bow and horse. This supports the idea that swordsmanship was at this time still not considered the primary skill for *bushi*. But, it is from this period that we begin to actually see the rise of swordsmanship as an "art". This in itself coincides with the patronisation by *bushi* of other so-called *geidō*, and I suspect that it was the influence of genteel arts that gave swordsmanship the boost it needed to 'grab the hearts' of *bushi*. It was practical (to a degree), and easily suited to refinement of movement, and systemisation of technique and philosophy in the same vein as performing arts such as *nō*. A master of the sword, as an "art", stood to gain high social standing and patronage like teachers of other arts, honour, employment and wealth—therein laying the attraction and impetus to develop such systems. In other words, practical combat application was far from the sole stimulus resulting in the eventual ascendance of schools of swordsmanship over any other combat systems in the late medieval period.

The word '*geidō*' (芸道) first appeared in the renowned *nō* master Zeami's (1363–1443) *Kyōraika* (1433).²³ He considered *nō* and the arts to be "ways" (*michi*=道) of attaining human perfection. *Michi* was used as a suffix for other occupations from the Heian period and earlier, but it indicated the pursuit of a specialist occupation, and did not necessarily contain the spiritual connotations contained in the later term *geidō*. In regards to the gradual formation of a distinct *geidō* mentality in medieval Japan, Hayashiya Tatsusaburō gives the example of the transition of calligraphy. Initially the student must master the basic forms, a stage known as *shin* (真=essence). Upon learning the techniques to the extent that they become second nature or an embodiment of the student, they then adapt the style and infuse individuality (*gyō* 行=running style). Following further intensive practice the student creates a distinctive cursive style which in the final stage is referred to as "grass-writing" (*sō*=草). This cursive style abbreviates and links the characters resulting in a curvilinear and artistic form of writing.

The point being that, first the practitioner learns the art by abiding by set precepts and rules. Hayashiya asserts that the *gyō* stage of any given art form is essentially the beginning of the “way”. Art forms do not just stop at following the prescribed conventions (*bō*). The adept is encouraged to progress and apply these forms and techniques to all aspects of his life in the quest for perfection.²⁴ In this way, an array of *geidō*—calligraphy, painting, pottery, *nō*, dance, poetry, tea and so on—were permeated with deeply spiritual underpinnings, and those who reached a level of mastery would receive accolades in the high society that patronized them. To enhance and maintain their prestige, they sought to codify their knowledge into schools (*ryū*) in order to pass it on to select students, thereby creating a form of ‘traditionalism’ which afforded them kudos and authority.

Seeking the same kudos, skilled martial art practitioners it seems, followed a similar pattern and ‘aestheticized’ (芸化=*geika*) their martial skills. Broadly speaking, apart from practical combat applications, infatuation with artistic qualities in the techniques, spiritual/religious revelations and financial motivations were clearly important factors in the genesis of *ryūha-bugei*. Furthermore, with its long history and connections to religious ritual and the beauty of its exterior form, the sword was the obvious weapon to be elevated to a realm which superseded concerns only with battle. Nevertheless, it was a stringent concern with questions of life and death gleaned from actual battle experience that set this *geidō* apart from all the other arts.

The Genesis of *Ryūha Bugei*

It is generally thought that distinct schools (*ryū*) of martial systems appeared around the fourteenth century. The battlefields of medieval Japan were not just settings for murderous intent; it was far more complicated than that. “It was a world both religious and artistic in nature, where men demonstrated their physical and spiritual prowess bolstered by ingenuity and strategy, and ultimately decided by the will of heaven.”²⁵ Superstition, divination and religious beliefs played just as much an important role in the way battle was waged as the martial skills of the individual warriors and the military tactics of the commander. For example, the *gunbai* (battle fan)—now associated with the judging of professional sumo matches—was inscribed with codes used to interpret natural phenomena. Strategy and tactics for each battle were determined by the interpretations put forth by *gunbai-shi*. Another major factor in a commander’s decisions revolved around the study of time-tested classic Chinese books on strategy such as *Sun Tzu*, *T’ai Kung*, *Ssu-ma*, *Wu-tzu*, *Wei Liao-tsu*, and *Huang Shih-kung*.²⁶

In regards to actual techniques utilised in combat, finding traces of established combat systems before the fifteenth century is challenging. Sources explaining martial technique in detail before the fifteenth century are scant and open to conjecture. However, by scrutinising the old war tales, we do see some examples of what appear to be distinctive styles of swordsmanship with named or renowned techniques.

Even though the *Heike monogatari* depicts the exploits of the Taira warriors in the Gempei Disturbance of the twelfth century, it is thought to have been written sometime in the early thirteenth century. As such, it predates the earliest known schools such as the Kage-ryū or the Nen-ryū, and some episodes indicate the existence of distinctive combat styles. One example concerns the warrior-monk, Jōmyō Meishū. In the section titled “Battle on the Bridge”, this fearsome warrior killed twelve men and wounded eleven others with twenty-four arrows; then used his spear which snapped after engaging his sixth enemy. Then, he uses his sword as a last resort.

Hard-pressed by the enemy host, he slashed in every direction, using the zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragonfly reverse, and waterwheel manoeuvres. After cutting down eight men on the spot, he struck the helmet top of a ninth so hard that the blade snapped at the hilt rivet, slipped loose, and splashed into the river. Then he fought on desperately with a dirk as his sole resource.²⁷

The kind of combat training warriors engaged in varied from period to period. When mounted archery was considered the highest form of combat, warriors would hone their skills through activities such as *yabusame*, *inuōmono* and *kasagake*.²⁸ Obviously, for combat efficiency he needed to be familiar with a variety of different weapons. He did not necessarily need to be a master in all of them, but at least have a degree of expertise in diverse combat methods. When his arrows ran out he would need to use his sword; when his sword broke or he would need to use his dirk, or resort to barehanded grappling. Moreover, dealing with different adversaries with assorted weapons required that he at least had a rudimentary understanding of how they worked.

We can surmise from the *Heike monogatari* passage that martial combat systems which included an array of weaponry can be traced back to the twelfth century, but at this time were quite basic. During the Sengoku period (1467–1578) in particular, we see the evolution of more sophisticated and all-encompassing systems referred to by scholars today as *sōgō-bujutsu* (composite martial systems). The curricula included not only weapons training, but divination, strategy, theory and even engineering, but it was the sword that increasingly took the central role.

We first start to see the emergence of comprehensive systems that incorporated such criteria from approximately the fourteenth century. Initially, there were three main traditions that subsequently provided the core teachings for many hundreds of offshoot schools in the future. They are cited by many scholars as being the Shintō-ryū, Shinkage-ryū, and the Ittō-ryū streams.²⁹ Although the Ittō-ryū stream became one of the preeminent schools of swordsmanship in Tokugawa period through its patronisation by the shogun, it can be traced back further to the Chūjō-ryū, which had its roots in the Nen-ryū. Thus, it is the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū, Nen-ryū, and the Kage-ryū that were central to the genesis of *ryūha-bugei*.

Table outlining Japan's first combat ryūha-bugei

Name	Notes
Katori Shintō-ryū Kashima Shin-ryū (香取神道流 / 鹿島神流)	Iizasa Yamashiro-no-kami Ienao (飯笹山城守家直)(1387–1488?). Foremost offshoots from this school include the Bokuden-ryū (Shintō-ryū); and the Arima-ryū.
Nen-ryū (念流)	Formed by the monk Jion (慈音)(1351–?).
Chūjō-ryū (中条流)	The Chūjō stream traces its origins back to the monk Jion. Related schools include Toda-ryū and the well-known Ittō-ryū.
Kage-ryū (陰流)	Formed by Aisu Ikōsai (1452–1538), the Kage-ryū stream became increasingly influential in the Tokugawa period with the shogunate's patronisation of the Yagyū Shinkage-ryū.
7 Schools of Kantō (関東七流)	This classification of schools was considered by scholars from the Tokugawa period to represent the main streams or branches that evolved in the eastern provinces. 1. Kashima (鹿島) 2. Katori (香取) 3. Honshin-ryū (本心流) 4. Bokuden-ryū (卜伝流) 5. Shintō-ryū (神刀流) 6. Yamato-ryū (日本流) 7. Ryōi-ryū (良移流)
8 Schools of Kyōto (京八流)	These schools are more problematic in that their actual existence is difficult to verify. They are traditionally associated with Kyoto and the Kuramadera temple, and were offshoots of martial arts originally taught to eight monks by Kiichi Hōgan. 1. Kiichi-ryū (鬼一流) 2. Yoshitsune-ryū (義経流) 3. Masakado-ryū (正門流) 4. Kurama-ryū (鞍馬流) 5. Suwa-ryū (諏訪流) 6. Kyō-ryū (京流) 7. Yoshioka-ryū (吉岡流) 8. Hōgan-ryū (法眼流)

The exact origin of most of these early traditions is somewhat unclear and shrouded in mythical claims often alluding to divine inspiration. For example, in the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū—considered the oldest school of swordsmanship in Japan—legend has it that at the age of 60, the founder Iizasa Chōisai Ienao (1387–1488) endured a harsh thousand-day training regime (*sanrō-kaigan*) at the Katori shrine.³⁰ One night the shrine deity, Futsunushi-no-Kami, appeared to him in as a small boy standing on top of a plum tree and passed on the secrets of strategy and the martial arts in a special scroll stating, “Thou shalt be the master of all swordsmanship under the sun”.³¹ It was on the basis of these divine teachings that he formed his own *ryū*. Descriptions of the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū, Nen-ryū, and Kage-ryū and the respective founders are found in Hinatsu Shigetaka's

1716 treatise *Honchō bugei shōden*. This is arguably the most important work recording the history of classical martial schools of swordsmanship, archery and other martial arts. Many subsequent works dealing with the same topic such as the *Gekken sōdan* (1790), *Bujutsu keifu-ryaku* (1790), and *Bujutsu ryūso-roku* (1843) rely heavily on the information recorded by Hinatsu.³²

Unfortunately there is little that can be confirmed as totally factual with regards to the earliest of the *ryūha-bugei*. We can only piece together titbits of information and avoid the temptation of believing all of what has been written by later generations of direct students, who understandably had a tendency to emboss the history of their schools and its lineage. Given the secretive and pseudo-religious nature of these schools from the outset, disciples often assert the divine beginnings of their *ryū*. Much tradition has been “invented” to enhance the reputation and perceived potency of the school’s teachings (both technical and spiritual) and hence the reputation of its students. However, compared to the seen in the increasingly elaborate streams of schools and techniques seen in the throughout the Tokugawa period, the techniques at the source were simplistic and pragmatic.

Successive Generations of Disciples and Masters

By the mid sixteenth century, *daimyō* began to seek the tutelage of ‘professional’ *bugei* instructors (*heihō shihan*) to train them and their men in military affairs. Individual warriors also sought skilled teachers to take them to new levels in their martial prowess and hence employability. This was a time when *bushi* would roam the countryside in search of duelling opponents to test their skills and hopefully make a name. This practice was referred to as *musha-shugyō*, a term I will come back to shortly.

Of the three main streams of schools mentioned above, it was the second and third generations of disciples that were in a position to take advantage of the growing boom in *bugei*, and the opportunities that came with notoriety. After soaking up the ‘enlightened’ knowledge of the founders and receiving certification to prove it, they improved the techniques through further combat experience either in battle or in duels, and created sophisticated philosophical frameworks to supplement the technical curriculum. There were many renowned swordsmen involved in this evolutionary process, and a plethora of schools that sprang from the initial three main source systems. I will restrict my commentary to the most notorious in light of the dominance of their successors in the Tokugawa period.

Firstly, from the Kage-ryū, Kamiizumi Ise-no-kami (1508–?) soon gained legendary status throughout Japan. He is thought to have studied under Aisu Ikōsai, however, some historians also suspect that he studied under the auspices of Matsumoto Bizen-no-kami Naokatsu of the Kashima Shin-ryū.³³ Due to the paucity of documents, and the unreliability of the ones that do exist, it is difficult to confirm either way. However, according to the *Honchō bugei shōden*,

Kamiizumi Ise-no-kami was from Kōzuke and served Nagano Shinano-no-kami.

Kamiizumi resided in the Minowa castle and was unequalled in martial skill. He had studied the sword and spear of the Aisu Kage-no-ryū style and reached the highest level of mastery. He then added his own revisions to this style and founded what he called the Shinkage-ryū.³⁴

Kamiizumi had a dozen or so disciples, most of whom made names for themselves as skilled warriors and were sought after as instructors. Of them, Hikita Bungorō, Marume Kurandonosuke Nagayoshi, and Yagyū Tajima-no-kami Muneyoshi (Sekishūsai) and their followers were particularly influential.

In the case of Marume Kurandonosuke Nagayoshi, upon a chance meeting with Kamiizumi he was able to engage the famous warrior in a duel. Although soundly defeated, his life was spared by the master swordsman because of Kamiizumi's insistence on using a revolutionary bamboo sword (*fukuro-shinai*) instead of a potentially lethal wooden *bokutō* or live blade, which was the norm.³⁵ Despite being, or probably because he was a seasoned warrior, Kamiizumi seems to have been somewhat a pacifist, and preferred not to take the life of his challengers if at all possible. The fortunate Marume immediately became Kamiizumi's disciple and "he studied and mastered swordsmanship and the art of the spear".³⁶ Upon learning Kamiizumi's secrets, he formed his own branch school which he later called the Taisha-ryū.

Later, he moved to the western provinces. Marume had many disciples, among whom Okuyama Saemon Taifu was outstanding. Later, he changed the name of his style to Shinnuki-ryū, offshoots of which are still practiced even today.³⁷

Another student of Kamiizumi, Yagyū Tajima-no-kami Muneyoshi (Sekishūsai) (1527–1606) was battle-hardened and commanded significant influence in his later years. Kamiizumi was not his only teacher, having studied the Shintō-ryū with Tsukahara Bokuden as well as Itō Ittōsai's Ittō-ryū. His martial skill was evident from a young age.

After the Battle of Sekigahara in Keichō 5 [1600], Tokugawa Ieyasu commissioned Muneyoshi to teach swordsmanship. Ieyasu awarded Muneyoshi with the highest acclaim and his name was known in the capital as well as throughout the provinces.³⁸

From the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū line, warriors such as Matsumoto Bizen-no-kami, Tsukahara Bokuden and Matsuoka Hyōgonosuke were preeminent in their age. Conveniently, the *Honchō bugei shōden* details the prowess of these swordsmen in the same section:

Tsukahara Bokuden, an expert swordsman, was a great fighter. Although the particular secret of Bokuden's swordsmanship is said to be *hitotsu no tachi*, this technique was

actually created by Matsumoto Bizen-no-kami...Bokuden himself fought in battle with the spear nine times and claimed twenty-one heads. Among those, seven were classed as *yarishita*, *kuzuregiwa*, and *banaka*. He earned the title of ‘valiant warrior’.³⁹

Bokuden, as with so many of the legendary warriors of his day, sought divine guidance from the Katori shrine deities. There, he dedicated himself to a “thousand-days” of rigorous physical and mental training, and receiving the divine guidance was enlightened to the secrets of “*hitotsu no tachi*” (solitary sword).⁴⁰ Whether he learned it from Matsumoto Bizen-no-kami, or from his *shugyō* at the Katori shrine is difficult to know, however, “Bokuden used and refined his *hitotsu no tachi* until he was satisfied, and he taught the secret to *daimyō* throughout the land. He even taught it to Ashikaga Yoshiharu, Ashikaga Yoshiteru, and Ashikaga Yoshiaki – three successive generations of shoguns.”⁴¹

This secret technique was to form the basis of his new school which he named Shintō-ryū (新当流), using different characters to the Shintō-ryū (神道流) developed by Iizasa Chōisai. To avoid confusion, his school is also often referred to as Bokuden-ryū. In regards to the celebrated “*hitotsu no tachi*”, the *Honchō bugei shōden* records the following explanation.

Hitotsu no tachi can be divided into the three levels of *hitotsu no kurai*, *hitotsu no tachi*, and *hitotsu dachi*. The first uses the timing of heaven. The second uses the vantage of the earth and is the move that unites heaven and earth. The third secret technique teaches harmony of man and innovation.⁴²

Eventually dying at the age of 83, Tsukahara Bokuden had amassed a quite a following of celebrated adherents ranking as high as *daimyō*. It is no exaggeration to say that he was the most important swordsman of his era, and greatly contributed to the proliferation of Iizasa Chōisai’s teachings and the status of swordsmanship as a profession.

Finally, from the Nen-ryū line, Itō Ittōsai also stands out as being a giant of his age. Little is known about this warrior, except that his legacy culminated in one of the most influential schools of swordsmanship in Japanese history. Apparently learning his trade from Kanemaki Jisai (Chūjō-ryū and Kanemaki-ryū), Ittōsai was a veteran of thirty-three life-or-death duels, making him a sought-after opponent and teacher. He named his school the Ittō-ryū (一刀流), not as an expression of using ‘one sword’, but from the Daoist philosophy that all things arise from ‘One’ and then return to where they came from.

Of course, there are dozens more warriors of this era that could be mentioned for their contributions to the systemization of *ryūha-bugei*. Particularly in the late Muromachi period, there are some common trends that can be described for the plethora of schools that started to evolve.

Ryūha-bugei did not just appear as random entities. Nakabayashi Shinji stipulates three criteria which had to be met for the successful formation and continuation of a *ryūha*.⁴³ Firstly, not just any warrior could suddenly make his own school on a whim. The warrior

in question had to have extensive combat experience and have a reputation for brilliance that exceeded his peers. In order to gather students, a high degree of charisma and technical brilliance was a prerequisite.

Secondly, the techniques developed by the *ryūso* (founder) had to be effective and proven in battle. They also had to be learnable. A rational and sophisticated set of techniques that could be emulated by anybody who entered the master's tutelage, regardless of physique, needed to be developed in order to be diffused effectively.

Thirdly, the *ryūso* needed to develop a rational and methodological system for imparting his knowledge to disciples. This was not only so that they could master the techniques, but also to ensure the continuation of the teachings long after the founder had passed away. The teaching methodology would usually revolve around man-to-man teaching of techniques by the master to his disciple(s) utilising predetermined patterns of movements (型=*kata*); oral teachings (口伝=*kuden*); and later on in the Tokugawa period written teachings (伝書=*densho*) in the form of scrolls. These were often purposefully vague or elusive to ensure *ryūha* 'trade-secrets' were not divulged to outsiders.

***Ryūha* Training Methodology – 'Aesthetic Asceticism'**

In battle, the fear of death or injury greatly weakens combative efficiency. When fear sets in, the warrior becomes disoriented, ineffective and a liability to his lord. Contrary to this, a warrior who does not fear death is a formidable foe indeed. Through actual experience in mortal combat, the founders of *ryūha* incorporated such fundamental psychological considerations into their curricula. Typically, the highest level of teachings in a *ryūha* (*okuden* or *hiden*), were esoteric, spiritual and pragmatic at the same time. Still, as we shall see in the next chapter, the content of *ryūha* teachings became progressively more esoteric and mystical in nature during the peaceful Tokugawa period. Ideally, teachings in a school held the key to the 'holy grail' of combat, a superlative combination of body and mind which made the warrior invincible in battle (technically and spiritually) through a supposed transcendence of concerns for life and death. Understandably, these teachings were jealously guarded by the students of the *ryūha*.

Synergy of body and mind were taught through *kata*, predetermined techniques usually performed in pairs. Military training in China and Korea also utilised *kata* training, but were mainly done individually. Through practising *kata* in pairs, the Japanese warrior was able to learn the significance of timing and distance (*ma-ai*), breathing (*kokyū*), attacking opportunities, posture, and *ki*.⁴⁴

I define *kata* as 'death rituals' that provide the blueprints for technical and spiritual growth. I stress the term 'death ritual' as regardless of the *ryūha*, in almost all *kata* inevitably one side is, in theory, killed. Furthermore, in *kata* the 'death role' is usually enacted by the senior adept or the instructor. This is typically explained as the senior has a role to teach the junior adept the correct instant to attack, and what constitutes valid openings in an enemy. The junior adept is focusing on unison of mind and technique. Whereas the senior, who is

presumably already technically and mentally mature, is another step up the spiritual ladder, and through participating in this ritual is constantly facing not the possibility, but the reality of his mortality.

Of course, technical revision is also a factor. By being on the receiving end of the *coup de grace* in the *kata*, the warrior is a step closer (or is reminded) of the importance of a spiritual transcendence of life and death. Interestingly however, some of the new *kata* created by *ryūha* in the Tokugawa period omitted the *coup de grace* signifying a trend of pacifism that infiltrated aspects of martial thought. Perhaps this can be interpreted in the following way. The technical ability to kill is accentuated by the moral choice not to take life, even though the opportunity is theoretically there. This kind of “martial morality” evolved in line with developing warrior ethics collectively referred to now as ‘*bushidō*’, in which benevolence was looked upon as a necessary virtue, especially for the maintenance of social stability. As the ruling class in Tokugawa society, redefinitions of the warrior’s *raison d’être* stressed the ideal of the *bushi*’s role to serve as moral paragons of righteousness and peace.

In his book simply titled *Kata*, Minamoto Ryōen describes the importance of *kata* to the warrior. “Through the physical act of polishing techniques, the adept deepens his spiritual resolve.”⁴⁵ By repeatedly practising each movement of the *kata*, the *bushi* becomes entranced and oblivious to the cold steel (or wooden *bokutō*) stopping a fraction away from a vital spot on his body. He learns to maintain a placid state of mind (*heijōshin*) while engaging in mock combat, and programs his body to move unconsciously in relation to a plethora of technique combinations and possibilities. The warrior thus trained his body and mind to seek openings and destroy his opponent in the most efficient way, with a mental state that exceeded concerns of self-preservation.

In this sense, the techniques of *bugei* far exceeded merely waving a weapon around, but required and aimed for the harmonious synergy of body and mind. Without fear of death or injury, the spirit, weapon and body had to function as one unified entity in order to overwhelm the enemy. Training to this purpose was far more than a physical pursuit, and could more accurately be described as a form of religious training, hence the term *shugyō* (修行= ascetic training) that is utilised in the worlds of both *bushi* and Buddhist monks.

Nishiyama Matsunosuke states that when the adept trains “religiously” to the extent that the techniques totally become a part of the warrior’s persona he will reach a sublime elevated state of total selflessness known by various terms such as *muga* or *mushin* (‘no-self’, ‘no-mind’).⁴⁶ When this level has been reached, the disciple is no longer a student *per se*, but is in fact an enlightened master of combat.

The process for learning the *kata* is different in each tradition. However, universal principles do apply, and one common explanation can be found in the concept of *shu-ha-ri* (守破離). This is used to explain the learning process in other Japanese arts, but is now a common ideal often referred to in modern martial arts (*budō*). The Ono-ha Ittō-ryū explains that firstly, in order to learn the techniques the teachings of the master must be strictly and obediently adhered (*shu*). When the student has absorbed all they can from the

master they must try and find their own interpretation of the techniques. They move away and break everything down to try and acquire a higher understanding of the teachings (*ha*). After testing and enhancing their basic knowledge, the warrior aims to acquire a profound understanding of the teachings, so profound in fact, that they essentially create their own path (*ri*).⁴⁷

There are many other similar terms essentially outlining the same process of learning the basic moves, improving on them, and then finally achieving a transcendent state in which the techniques become an expression of the warrior's very being, and his being is an expression of the techniques. This ultimate state of martial 'enlightenment' is supposedly the stage in which a new *ryūha* formed. It is a perfect unification of technique and mind, bolstered with a spiritual philosophy, and organized into a rational curriculum for teaching and learning, ensuring continuation from one generation to the next. Hence the word '*ryū*' (流), which means 'to flow' or 'stream'.

Conclusion

As Friday states, in many ways the founders of these schools "were military anachronisms, out of step with the changing face of warfare in their times. And in their pursuit of this quest through *musha shūgyō* and other ascetic regimens—their devotion to their arts over conventional military careers and service—they were self-indulgent and quixotic."⁴⁸ Although not all *ryūha* were devoted solely to the sword, it was the principal weapon studied by most. From the time of the founders, tradition was 'invented' surrounding the mysterious powers of the sword, the efficacy of the techniques developed in the particular *ryūha*, and the godlike skills and spiritual powers of those who headed/founded them. More than any other profession, it was the masters of the sword who came to represent the symbolic status of warrior culture. Ironically, infatuation with the sword became even more ardent with the onset of the peaceful Tokugawa period, and an exponential proliferation of pseudo-religious *ryūha* dedicated to kenjutsu led to intensification in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment through studying the techniques of swordsmanship.

To the *bushi*, training in the formalised martial arts which arose in the latter medieval period instilled in them a sense of superiority and confidence to survive, and hopefully prosper financially through demonstrating valorous feats in battle, or becoming a certified instructor in their own right. From a functional perspective, warriors trained to kill, and simultaneously acquired a profound sense of 'spiritual awareness' gleaned through the arousing experience of mortal combat. Of course, this introspective experience was by no means limited to Japan's *bushi*. Warriors from all cultures in any period are in some way altered by the intense lifestyle and severe anxiety inherent in such an occupation which entails constantly being faced with your own mortality. However, with the arrival of pax-Tokugawa—a period that spanned an almost unprecedented 250 years—traditional military arts ceased evolving into progressively more devastating modes of combat. Instead, Japan's martial anachronisms were consciously and continuously 'reinvented' to not only survive,

but thrive as highly esteemed vestiges of ‘traditional’ *bushi* culture and wholistic personal edification.

Thus, in conclusion, I assert that the systemisation of martial arts (especially swordsmanship) evolved through the need to establish a balance between *bun* and *bu*. In the highly volatile Muromachi period, it was a case of infusing *bun* into a world stricken by *bu*, and influenced by other *geidō*, *ryūha bugei* provided a perfect medium for this cultural transition. In the Tokugawa period the function of *bugei* was reversed. *Bugei* took on the role of infusing *bu* within *bun* as *bushi* struggled to come to grips with, and reinterpret their *raison d’être* in an era of relative passivity.

¹ See Imamura Yoshio, “Budōshi gaisetsu”, pp. 8-10 and Tominaga Kengo, *Kendō gohyakunen-shi*, pp. 47-53

² Udagawa Takehisa, *Shinsetsu teppō denrai*, pp. 10–11

³ Suzuki Masaya, *Teppō to Nihonjin: “teppō shinwa” ga kakushite kita koto*, pp. 163-83

⁴ Suzuki Masaya, *Katana to kubi-tori*, p. 96

⁵ In regards to this point, it is true that many swords also used metal *mekugi*. However this became less common by the Tokugawa period as metal tended to enlarge or distort the holes in the tang. Also, there is little agreement on why Japanese swords have removable *tsuka* in the first place. The most probable explanation I have heard is that it serves as a ‘shock-absorber’ much in the same way as the pommel at the bottom of the handle did in European swords.

⁶ Suzuki Masaya, *Katana to kubi-tori*, p. 114

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹¹ It is worth mentioning that this custom of rewarding a good deed with a sword in lieu of money or fiefdoms remained an extensive practice in the Tokugawa period. Nothing was valued more than a sword with the signature of the shogun engraved on the tang. Also, a fine sword could be presented by a subordinate to gain ear of a superior. In sum, swords were an extremely coveted form of currency in *bushi* circles.

¹² Karl Friday, “Off the warrior path”, in Alexander Bennett (ed.), *Budo Perspectives*, p. 225

¹³ Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, p. 27

¹⁴ Refer to Fuji Naomoto’s analysis in *Buke jidai no shakai to seishin*, pp. 123–126

¹⁵ Futaki Ken’ichi, *Chūsei buke girei no kenkyū*, p. 175

¹⁶ Kondō Hitoshi, *Buke-kakun no kenkyū*, p. 60

¹⁷ It is difficult to substantiate whether or not he was the actual author. It is highly probable that he wasn’t, but the articles still provide a good indication of the ideals of the time.

¹⁸ Kakei Yasuhiko, *Chūsei buke-kakun no kenkyū (Shiryō-ben)*, p. 32

- ¹⁹ Yoshida Yutaka, *Buke no kakun*, p. 83
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 48. For an explanation of *inuōmono* and *kasagaki*, please refer to footnote No. 28.
- ²³ Nishiyama Matsunosuke (*et. la.*), *Kinsei geidō-ron*, p. 585
- ²⁴ Hayashiya Tatesaburō, *Kodai chūsei geijutsu-ron*, p. 729
- ²⁵ Futaki Ken'ichi, *Kassen no butai-ura*, p. 94
- ²⁶ For English translations of these influential works, refer to Ralph D. Sawyer's *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.
- ²⁷ Helen Craig McCullough (trans.), *The Tale of the Heike*, p. 153 ("The Battle at the Bridge")
- ²⁸ *Yabusame* is still popular as a tourist attraction in Kyoto and Kamakura, and involves a mounted archer who shoots at three stationary targets or boards while riding a straight course at a full gallop. In the case of *kasagake*, mounted archers galloped down a similar course to that used in *yabusame* while shooting hollow *whistling kaburaya* arrows at targets. *Inuōmono* was a rather pitiless activity where a large circular area was roped off with a smaller circle inside the larger one. Warriors galloped around the outer ring and fired their arrows at moving targets – hapless dogs placed in the inner circle.
- ²⁹ Nakabayashi Shinji, *Budō no Susume*, p. 29
- ³⁰ The Kashima shrine is situated in modern day Ibaraki prefecture and the deity worshipped is Takemikazuchi no Mikoto, who is believed to have descended to the Japanese islands with Futsunushi no Kami, the resident deity of the Katori shrine (Chiba prefecture). They arrived ahead of Ninigi no Mikoto in order to orchestrate the transfer of Japanese islands to Amaterasu Ōmikami's descendants. Both deities are traditionally connected with military prowess, and for many centuries warriors paid homage at the shrines for protection and inspiration. Due to the rich warrior traditions associated with the shrines, modern martial artists still visit the shrines to this day.
- ³¹ R. Ōtake, Katori Shintō-ryū: *Warrior Tradition*, p. 11
- ³² The late John Rogers provided martial art scholars with an exemplary translation of Hinatsu's work which I quote from below.
- ³³ Watatani Kiyoshi, *Nihon kengō no 100-sen*, p. 32
- ³⁴ Hinatsu Shigetaka, *Honchō bugei shōden* (1716), translated by John M. Rogers, "Arts of War in Times of Peace: Swordsmanship in *Honchō bugei shōden* Chapter 6", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 46, No. 2. (Summer, 1991), p. 179
- ³⁵ Watatani Kiyoshi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 52
- ³⁶ Hinatsu Shigetaka, *Op. Cit.*, p. 184
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3
- ³⁹ Hinatsu Shigetaka, *Honchō Bugei Shōden* (1716), translated by John M. Rogers "Arts of War in Times of Peace: Swordsmanship in *Honchō Bugei Shōden*, Chapter 5", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 45, No. 4. (Winter, 1990) pp. 426–7
- ⁴⁰ Watatani Kiyoshi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 24
- ⁴¹ Hinatsu Shigetaka, *Op. Cit.* (Winter, 1990) pp. 426–7
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 426–7
- ⁴³ Nakabayashi Shinji, *Budō no susume*, p. 23
- ⁴⁴ Nakabayashi Shinji, "Nihon kobudō ni okerushintai-ron", *Risō* (Vol. 604, Sept. 1983), p. 108
- ⁴⁵ Minamoto Ryōen, *Kata*, p. 165
- ⁴⁶ Nishiyama Matsunosuke (*et. la.*), *Kinsei geidō-ron*, pp. 586-7
- ⁴⁷ Sasamori Junzō, *Ittō-ryū gokui*, p. 632
- ⁴⁸ Karl Friday, "Off the warrior path", in Alexander Bennett (ed.), *Budo Perspectives*, p. 226