The Samurai Next Door: Chinese Examinations of the Japanese Martial Spirit

Un Samourai à ma porte: l'esprit martial du Japon vu par les Chinois
隔壁的武士: 中國對日本尚武精神之檢視

Oleg Benesch
The Samurai Next Door: Chinese Examinations of the Japanese Martial Spirit

Oleg Benesch

Introduction

Japan is a martial country, while China emphasizes civil virtues. This characterization has colored views of the two societies for centuries, reinforced by apparent differences in their traditional forms of premodern government, with Japan ruled by warriors while China maintained a scholarly examination system. Japan’s successful repulsion of the Mongol fleets in the thirteenth century, as well as Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s (1536/1537-1598) devastating invasion of Korea at the end of the sixteenth century, further reinforced this perception. The view of a martial and warlike Japan was carried into the modern age, where it fed into the emerging discourse on *bushidō*, or “the way of the samurai/warrior,” which began to be popularized around the time of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Rather than a continuation of an ancient tradition or a manifestation of a “national character,” however, *bushidō* is largely a modern invention, interpretations of which have tended to reflect the conditions under which they were formulated. In this way, the samurai spirit has at times been credited for Japan’s economic success and technological progress, but also associated with militaristic imperialism. During the long conflict with China between 1931 and 1945, *bushidō* was a core tenet of militaristic “spiritual education” in Japan and came to symbolize Japanese aggression abroad.

In China, *bushidō*, or “wushidao” as the word is read in pinyin, has played an important role in shaping views of Japan from the late nineteenth century

---

1. The author owes a debt of gratitude to Nathan Hopson, Jon Howlett, Ran Zwigenberg, and the anonymous reviewers for EOEO for their insightful comments on various drafts of this article.

2. 武士道
onward, as the period of bushidō’s greatest growth and popularization coincided with an unprecedented influx of Chinese students, reformers, and exiles to Japan. Chinese intellectuals credited bushidō with driving the 1868 Meiji Restoration and subsequent reforms, while students at Japanese civilian and military schools were exposed to the increasingly pervasive bushidō ideology promoted by the imperial government. This was not the only bushidō, however, and Japanese discourse on the subject has always been highly diverse. Similarly, Chinese writers on bushidō soon moved beyond Japanese models to redefine the ethic to their own ends, which often related more closely to reforming China and managing Japanese activities than they did to objective scholarship. Writing in 1927, the prominent Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party) leader Dai Jitao (1891-1949) argued the necessity for Chinese to study Japan, invoking the legendary strategist Sun Wu (Sun Zi): “If you know yourself and you know your enemy, all of your battles will be victories.” For their part, Dai wrote, the Japanese studied China in great depth, publishing countless books and articles on the subject. According to Dai, the notion that there was no value in studying Japan because it only borrowed ideas from other countries was most misguided, and knowledge of Japan was essential for China’s future. For Dai, bushidō was one of the most important explanatory tools for understanding the dynamics of Japanese culture and society, reflecting its high profile among both Japanese and foreigners as the “animating spirit” and even “soul” of Japan. During and after the Second Sino-Japanese War that ended in 1945, perceptions of bushidō in China were overwhelmingly negative, to the extent that the subject was discussed at all. Interest in bushidō began to grow again in the 1980s, reflecting not only the greater openness of Chinese scholarship in the Reform Era, but also mirroring a resurgence in bushidō discourses in Japan and the West at the time.

Bushidō continues to fill this role in China today, and recent diplomatic tensions have contributed to a tremendous increase in Chinese studies of bushidō over the last two decades. Separate international conferences in Beijing and Taiwan in 2009 brought together over one hundred scholars from throughout the region and beyond to exchange views on bushidō. Hundreds of books and articles on the subject have appeared during this time, many of which posit bushidō as a possible explanation for a supposedly “innate”

5. “Chū Nichi Kan ni okeru bushidō no kenkyū,” held at the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies (Beijing Riben xue yanjiu zhonxin) on Feb. 15, 2009; “DongYa shiye zhong de Riben wushidao yu wenhua,” held at National Taiwan University on March 7, 2009.
or “traditional” Japanese militarism. According to this view, which has considerable implications for reconciliation and inter-cultural relations, even if Japanese thinkers appropriated Chinese thought when formulating *bushidō*, they either misunderstood or intentionally distorted it to create an ideology of militarism. Another body of work tends to focus on the positive influence of *bushidō* on Japan’s development, while simultaneously stressing the supposed Chinese heritage of the ethic. Positive assessments of *bushidō* focus on the Chinese religious and philosophical influences that supposedly drove Japan’s successful modernization, while simultaneously downplaying the relationship between *bushidō* and militarism. Chinese publications on *bushidō* over the last thirty years accept *bushidō* as an ancient tradition, rather than acknowledging its modern character, and typically follow theoretical models established by Dai Jitao and others in the early twentieth century.

While the overtly martial overtones of Dai’s exhortation to study Japan may seem less immediately relevant, his selection of the maxim quoted above is most fitting. There is a tendency in Chinese *bushidō* discourse, especially among popular works, to only consciously consider half of the maxim—“know your enemy”—when, in fact, the content of specific *bushidō* theories often reveals a great deal more about contemporary China, or perhaps Sino-Japanese relations, than it does about Japanese culture, society, or history. This is not unique to China, and in both Japan and the West, the vast majority of works on *bushidō* have traditionally been more reflective of the social, political, and economic conditions under which they were written, rather than objective studies of the samurai or their ethics. At the same time, as Japan’s most important foreign “other,” China played a crucial role in the formative period of *bushidō* in modern Japan, and continues to influence its development in Japan today.

In this context, *bushidō* has served as a barometer of nationalism and the development of national identities in Japan and China, as its origins were hotly debated in both countries. While Japanese promoters of *bushidō* often sought to minimize the perceived significance of Chinese thought in Japan, Chinese thinkers have frequently portrayed *bushidō* as being based primarily on “Chinese” Buddhist and Confucian ideals. Individuals who domestically criticized or dismissed these traditional thought systems as irrelevant to modern China often continued to claim them defensively as part of a broader Chinese heritage that had supposedly been appropriated by Japan. These responses, which were also conditioned by shifts in Sino-Japanese relations, can help trace the ebb and flow of cultural nationalism and notions of Chinese identity over the past century.
The development of *bushidō*

The formulation and development of *bushidō* in modern Japan was very much a product of the unique dynamics of the Meiji period (1868-1912), which saw dramatic changes in government, society, and popular culture. A large-scale drive towards Westernization in the 1870s was followed by a backlash in the form of a Confucian revival in education, culminating in the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. Although the Confucian ideals promoted at this time were heavily influenced by those that dominated the preceding Edo period (1603-1868), the association of Confucianism with China meant that their popularity waned as views of the neighboring Qing dynasty (1644-1912) deteriorated. As Matsuzawa Hiroaki argues, Japanese experiences of China from the 1860s on into the early twentieth century were heavily colored by Western points of view, as many travellers to the continent sailed on Western ships, stayed in the foreign legations in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and obtained knowledge of Chinese political events from European newspapers. In the climate of burgeoning Japanese nationalism that marked the last decade of the nineteenth century, these factors contributed to a lowering of contemporary China’s status, which was dealt further blows by Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War and intervention in the Boxer War (1900-01).

These currents led to an increased desire for new, “national” ideologies that were more clearly based on Japan’s own history and traditions, albeit with at least one eye on foreign models. *Bushidō* was perhaps the most prominent and influential product of this process, and certainly the one with the greatest staying power. Although samurai did concern themselves with ethical thought before this time, it was highly diverse and varied greatly by time period, region, and individual, and it was only after the Sino-Japanese War that a martial ethic with a national scope came to be developed. The term “*bushidō*” was no more than an obscure literary relic and very rarely used before 1895, and in this study refers exclusively to the modern ideology. Rather than a continuation of an ancient tradition, *bushidō* evolved as a response to modernizing trends and was subsequently promoted by both government and private thinkers in order to promote patriotism and national unity.

With regard to the samurai class with which *bushidō* is typically associated, their condition had been recognized as a major problem for several decades before the Meiji period, and reforming the samurai was one of the new government’s most pressing and divisive issues. The unsustainability of the

---

7. For an overview of the etymology of *bushidō*, see Benesch (2011): 5-14.
The Samurai Next Door

Samurai in their traditional state was already clear to many in Japan before 1868, and suggestions included putting them to work in farming or other industries. The overpowering military strength of the foreign powers further demonstrated that the samurai were not fit for purposes of national defense, and one of the first tasks of the Meiji government was to create a new conscripted army on the European model. A series of reforms in the 1870s stripped the samurai of their traditional privileges such as the wearing of swords and, perhaps more importantly, eliminated their stipends. Many samurai were angered by the drastic changes to their livelihood and identity, and this discontent combined with other, more widespread grievances, boiling over in a number of uprisings in the 1870s. The largest of these, the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, was centered on a large group of disaffected samurai gathered around the Restoration hero Saigō Takamori (1828-1877) and could only be put down by the government at great cost and with considerable loss of life.

By the late 1880s, the image of the former samurai class had become quite negative in broader society, as the former commoner classes continued to resent their erstwhile superiors. Although some ex-samurai were quite successful and powerful, many others had trouble adjusting to the new order and fell on hard times. The phrase “samurai business practice” (bushi no shōhō) was a popular descriptor for failed entrepreneurship, and newspaper editorials criticized destitute former samurai or asked for sympathy on their behalf. The rebellions of the 1870s were widely viewed as samurai revolts against the state, and the notion that the samurai were more trouble than they were worth was widespread. This was an unlikely climate for the birth of a national ethic based on the obsolete warrior class.

In this light, the first discussions of samurai ethics occurred around 1890 among a diverse group of intellectuals who were bound by a common interest in Western thought and history. In the context of bushidō, the most influential ideal was the English gentleman, who filled the pages of the translated Victorian moralistic tomes that were so popular in the early and mid-Meiji periods. In the late nineteenth century, the British Empire served as a model for many aspiring societies, and the idea that virtues of gentlemanship and chivalry were the secret behind the empire’s strength and prosperity were widespread. This trope was promoted in no small way by the English themselves, often in combination with Social Darwinist theories and notions of racial superiority. Victorian gentlemanship was seen as the direct heritage of medieval knighthood, which lent it a connection with supposedly ancient traditions that served as an anchor in a rapidly changing world. English knighthood and gentlemanship became points of interest in many other countries, including Germany, the United
States, and Japan, where the latter term was rendered “jentorunanshippu,” and is still widely understood today.

A number of Japanese thinkers in the early 1890s sought to introduce a similar ethic to idealized gentlemanship into Japan, and saw the former samurai class as a vehicle by which this could be accomplished. If medieval knights could serve as the basis for English gentlemanship, Japan’s equivalent “feudal knighthood,” the samurai, or bushi, could serve for a native gentlemanship, or bushidō. The most significant early formulation of these ideals was in articles published by the journalist and politician Ozaki Yukio (1858-1954) during and after a journey to England. According to Ozaki, “The nature of that which is called gentlemanship in English is truly like this. In English, gentlemanly and ungentlemanly are two words, and verily they decide the failure and success of a man. In our country, being labeled with the word bushi should also have the same force. Does not the old proverb state that ‘as the flower is the cherry blossom, the man is a bushi’?”8 Ozaki’s ideas were subsequently echoed by a number of other thinkers in the early 1890s, and bushidō discourse grew slowly before success in the Sino-Japanese War gave the concept a great boost.9

Throughout the world, Japan’s victory over China in 1895 was widely seen as a demonstration of the more successful implementation of Western reforms and technology by Japan relative to China. Images from the war portrayed Japan’s military in Western ways, as opposed to garish and colorful “oriental” Chinese troops, and superior use of modern military drill and structures was widely credited with deciding the war in Japan’s favor.10 The discussions of bushidō that emerged around the time of the war were not ostensibly militaristic, but instead focused on virtues such as nationalism, diligence, and duty, which were seen as having given Japan the ability to adapt modern military methods. After the war, however, Japan’s success led to a new type of bushidō discourse as national confidence and anti-foreign sentiment grew following a heavy-handed Triple Intervention by France, Germany, and Russia that greatly reduced Japan’s war gains. In an 1896 article on “Our Recent Chauvinism,” the American-educated Christian Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933) defended the new currents: “No wonder that reaction has lately been started against undue respect for European civilization…. Unhappy the nation, which succumbs without a groan,—with neither power nor will to assert its claims…. We cannot deny that we are a sensitive people. We have been so trained. Sensitiveness is a trait of samuraism, of bushidō…. A sensitive nation can never bear to have itself

---
placed in an inferior position.” Nationalistic groups, many of which were tied to the rapidly proliferating martial arts organizations, picked up *bushidō* and reinterpreted it in increasingly chauvinistic ways. The Christian leader Uemura Masahisa (1858-1925) criticized these shifts in mainstream *bushidō* discourse, lamenting that the concept had been hijacked by insipid false patriots. Over the course of the next twenty years, *bushidō* became a household word, finding broad acceptance both in Japan and abroad, the latter especially through the book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, written by Nitobe Inazō in English in 1899 and published the following year. *Bushidō* became a common theme in literature, politics, and sports, as well as both civilian and military education, being reinterpreted to suit various goals over the course of the last century. As there is no accepted definition of the tenets of *bushidō*, individual thinkers have been largely free to promote their own interpretations, using carefully selected examples from history to support their contentions. Where one *bushidō* interpretation may rely on certain eighteenth-century texts to stress the virtue of loyalty, another may call upon medieval history to demonstrate the lack of loyalty among Japanese warriors.

The development of *bushidō* was strongly influenced by a nationalistic desire for a uniquely Japanese ethic free from foreign influences, and the pre-1894 theories were later ignored due to their perceived overemphasis on European models. In a 1901 essay on *bushidō*, for example, Tokyo Imperial University philosophy professor Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944) claimed that *bushidō* was far superior to European chivalry, dismissing the latter as mere “woman-worship.” Chinese influence on Japan’s intellectual traditions was more difficult to ignore, as many of the most fundamental concepts in religious and philosophical thought had their origins in Confucian and Buddhist ideals, and the widespread view of China as superior to Japan arguably lasted until the Sino-Japanese War. One of the most important tasks for *bushidō* theorists in the early twentieth century was to downplay the supposed Chinese influence on the ideology as much as possible in order to make it comprehensively Japanese. Significantly, the early formulators of *bushidō* in the 1890s had already moved away from China and towards the West for inspiration. After spending two months in Shanghai in 1884 to report on a conflict between China and France, Ozaki Yukio claimed to have been convinced of China’s inferiority, as well as the need for Japan to intervene on the continent. Inoue Tetsujirō, far and

---

away the most influential promoter of *bushidō* in the period before 1945, built
his *bushidō* theories around selected writings of the strategist Yamaga Sokō
(1622-1685), who disparaged contemporary China and relocated the moral
center of the world to Japan. Yamaga also promoted ideals of imperial loyalty,
and nationalistic factors weighed more on Inoue’s decision to focus on Yamaga
than did his actual writings on samurai ethics.\(^{15}\)

In addition to using the writings of anti-Chinese Confucians, Inoue
defined the character of Confucianism within *bushidō* by displacing
the traditional orthodoxy of the Song-era neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130-1200)
with the work of the Ming neo-Confucian Wang Yangming (1472-1529). The
teachings of Zhu Xi were at the core of the official Tokugawa academy, as
well as the majority of domain schools, during the Edo period, where they
were intended to provide the ostensibly martial samurai with the education
of virtuous Confucian scholar-gentlemen. Although Tokugawa intellectual
life was highly diverse, the privileged position of Zhu Xi’s teachings meant
that they were closely associated with the *ancien régime* in the Meiji period.
In contrast, Wang Yangming, whose ideas were often posited as the primary
neo-Confucian heterodoxy to Zhu Xi, came to be seen as the driving force
behind anti-Tokugawa movements. In the Meiji period, the teachings of
Wang Yangming became more popular than ever before, with a wide variety
of individuals who had resisted the Tokugawa posthumously recast as his
students. This characterization was rarely supported by any evidence, as even
activists, rebels, and adventurers with little interest in any sort of Confucian
thought were portrayed as studious followers of Wang Yangming.\(^{16}\)

As Nitobe Inazô wrote in *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*,

Bushido made light of knowledge as such. It was not pursued as an end in itself, but
as a means to the attainment of wisdom. Hence, he who stopped short of this end
was regarded no higher than a convenient machine, which could turn out poems and
maxims at bidding. Thus, knowledge was conceived as identical with its practical
application in life; and this Socratic doctrine found its greatest exponent in the
Chinese philosopher, Wan Yang Ming [sic], who never wearies of repeating, “To
know and to act are one and the same.”\(^{17}\)

As Nitobe indicated, most references to Wang Yangming in this context
focused on two core concepts: the idea that humans have innate knowledge of

\(^{15}\) Tucker (2002).
\(^{16}\) Benesch (2009).
\(^{17}\) Nitobe (1904): 16.
the good, and that knowledge and action were inseparable. The combination of these elements was especially attractive for aspiring revolutionaries (and their later biographers) as it vindicated their actions against authority by appealing to the higher authority of the innately-known good. Discussions of Wang’s thought in this context did not often go beyond stating these basic tenets and claiming their supposed influence on certain historical figures, as the paucity of supporting documentary evidence also hindered the development of more extensive arguments.

Inoue Tetsujirō also focused on Wang Yangming, crediting his thought with having strengthened bushidō and aided in its codification, and the first volume of Inoue’s major study of Japanese Confucian thought was dedicated to Wang’s teachings. According to Inoue, the prominent Westernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) was mistaken in blaming the recent defeat of the Qing on Confucianism, arguing instead that it was precisely the disappearance of Confucianism in China that led to this disaster. This reflected the widespread notion that Wang’s heritage had been neglected in China, while contributing to Japan’s success, an idea that would also gain broad currency in China in the early twentieth century. As Takeda Kiyoko argues, Sun Yat-sen (Sun Wen; 1866-1925) was inspired by the understanding of the Meiji Restoration as caused by “men of action” driven by their martial bushidō spirit, which was built on Wang’s unity of knowledge and action. Ultimately, chauvinistic views typically won out in discussions of the Confucian influence on bushidō, however, as they often would in later Chinese discourse on the subject, albeit with very different conclusions. As Nitobe Inazō wrote, “As to strictly ethical doctrines, the teachings of Confucius were the most prolific source of Bushido. His enunciation of the five moral relations… was but a confirmation of what the race instinct had recognized before his writings were introduced from China,” alleging that Japan had very little intellectual debt to China in this regard.

**Chinese in Japan during the bushidō boom**

Along with the growth of bushidō discourse, the decade following the Sino-Japanese War also saw a tremendous influx of Chinese students, activists, and reformers. The necessity for reform in China was driven home by the defeat

---

18. Inoue (1900).
to Japan, and thousands of students were sent to study abroad. China’s recent adversary was the most popular destination, given Japan’s own seemingly successful experience of modernization and the short geographical distance. Perhaps most importantly, the similarity of the written languages made it far easier for Chinese to read Japanese texts than Western ones, including the many annotated translations of the latter. The scale of this transfer of knowledge through the medium of the Japanese language can be seen in the many terms in modern Chinese that were originally Japanese translations of Western concepts, including “civilization,” “economics,” “philosophy,” and many more. At the same time, there was great interest in the “Asian” backgrounds of Japan’s progress, as these were believed to be most immediately relevant to the Chinese situation, and *bushidō* was one of the most widely-cited concepts in this context.

For their part, many groups and individuals in Japan were keen to provide support to the arriving Chinese, who were seen as strugglers against an unjust and despotic order similar to that which Japan had overcome in the 1860s. More pragmatically, the elite students and political exiles were accurately viewed as potential leaders of a future reformed China, and it seemed prudent to secure their goodwill and influence at this early stage. The influential nationalistic Dark Ocean Society (Gen’yōsha) around Toyama Mitsuru (1855-1944), for example, sought close links with anti-Qing figures such as Sun Yat-sen and Liang Qichao (1873-1929) during their time in Japan. The Gen’yōsha were heavily engaged in the coal trade with China, but difficulties negotiating with the Qing government led them to give support to exiled reformers and revolutionaries. The ultranationalistic *bushidō* theorist Suzuki Chikara (Tengan; 1867-1926) was a prominent member of the Gen’yōsha and a founder of the more extreme expansionist Amur River Society (Kokuryūkai), and photographs of Suzuki with Sun during the latter’s visits to Nagasaki attest to their personal relationship.

*Bushidō* was a popular theme among the nationalistic groups that sought out Chinese exiles, exposing the latter to the concept before it had reached mainstream discourse in much of Japan. Through this dynamic, the first writings on *bushidō* by Chinese authors appeared soon after the Sino-Japanese War, initiating a parallel *bushidō* discourse in the Sinophone literature that has carried on to the present day. One of the first significant texts on *bushidō* was written by Liang Qichao, who fled to Japan in 1898 after the failure of the 100 Days Reform and spent the next fourteen years in exile with Japan as his primary base. The year following his arrival, Liang published the brief

article “What of the Spirit of China?” (“Zhongguohun an zaihu”), in which he extolled the virtues of bushidō and its influence on the Japanese national spirit: “Among things the Japanese often speak of, there is the so-called Japanese spirit, and there is so-called bushidō. And what is this Japanese spirit? It is bushidō. This is the reason Japan was able to found and restore the country.”  

In China, Liang lamented, it was not possible to find such a national spirit or to encourage martial virtues among the people, many of whom viewed soldiers as no different from slaves. There was no patriotism or trust between the government and people, and Liang desired something akin to bushidō for China. The soldiers of China did not have any spirit, he criticized, and “Soldiers without spirit are the same as not having soldiers at all. Today, the most essential thing is to manufacture a Chinese spirit. What is this Chinese spirit? It is the soldier spirit. If one has soldiers with spirit, the country has spirit. The things known as patriotism and self-respect result in the soldier spirit.”

Liang acknowledged elsewhere that the demand for absolute loyalty inherent in bushidō could make it “damaging to the social order,” but firmly believed that China needed to create a patriotic and martial spirit similar to bushidō in order to reform the country, as the courage and selflessness it inspired made it a valuable ethic.

Liang made several trips abroad to destinations including North America and Australia over the next few years, always returning to Japan where bushidō discourse was becoming increasingly prominent. He addressed the subject in a number of articles, such as his 1903 “On Militarism” (“Lun xiangwu”), and was increasingly involved in Japanese debates. Here, perhaps the greatest influence on Liang’s ideas was Inoue Tetsujirō, who used his position as a prominent academic to ensure that his nationalistic and imperialistic bushidō swiftly became the orthodox interpretation in Japan. Liang and Inoue had a close relationship, and Liang’s writings on bushidō clearly reflect Inoue’s arguments. While Chinese ideas typically received only limited and qualified credit in the works of most Japanese bushidō theorists in the twentieth century, Japanese acknowledgement of Wang Yangming’s supposed influence, in particular, inspired Liang and many other Chinese in Japan at the time.

Liang, whose thoughts on bushidō had been gradually developing over the past five years, seized on the idea that Chinese teachings were at the heart of bushidō, and in 1904 published his most significant work on the subject, *China’s Bushidō (Zhongguo zhi wushidao)*. Liang opened this book by reflecting on the shame that he and other Chinese felt when Westerners and Japanese remarked that China had no martial history, and that the “Chinese race was not a martial race.”

Throughout Liang’s writings on bushidō, he fought against the perceived “bookish weakness” of Chinese society relative to Japan and the West. In *China’s Bushidō*, Liang continued this trend, but now argued that this was a more recent phenomenon, and that China had once possessed a proud martial tradition that it should call upon to strengthen the nation in this time of crisis. To this end, Liang cited examples from Chinese history to demonstrate the nation’s own wushidao, beginning with the military character of the unification processes in China that brought the country together from “10,000 states” to a single one. According to Liang, China’s martial tradition grew strong during the Spring and Autumn period and continued through the Warring States period until the end of the Han dynasty, covering a span of roughly a millennium from the eighth century B.C.E. onward. This ancient martial spirit enabled the Chinese to resist foreign barbarians for many centuries, Liang reasoned, and three thousand years earlier, the Chinese had been the “most martial of races.” Unfortunately, Liang wrote, this wushidao spirit disappeared with the Han, and China’s martial heritage was forgotten.

Having witnessed the rapid development and dissemination of bushidō in Japan, Liang intended *China’s Bushidō* to have a similar effect in China. Referring to it as a textbook that should be used throughout the country to “promote the martial spirit” and to “stimulate children’s brains,” Liang based the text around textual and anecdotal examples from Chinese history designed to awaken his readers to their martial roots. Significantly, Liang made almost no mention of Japan in this text after the first few lines of the foreword, and Japanese bushidō ostensibly served only as an inspiration rather than a concrete ethic to be imported. In his preface to *China’s Bushidō*, Liang’s friend, the later politician Yang Du (1875-1931), recounted that he was puzzled by the title of the work. According to Yang, when he questioned Liang about

the use of the term *bushidō*, which referred to the unique Japanese ethic, Liang responded that while this was true, *bushidō* was at its heart no different from the Western way of “Humanity” or ancient Chinese ideals. Yang took this line of reasoning further, speculating that since *bushidō* consisted primarily of a fusion of Confucianism and Buddhism, it could be said to be a uniquely Chinese concept.35

The difference in Liang and Yang’s approaches to *bushidō* reflected in this exchange was largely predicated on the situation in which they first encountered the subject. Liang had arrived in Japan at a time when *bushidō* was still very much in flux, and witnessed its development and establishment as an important national ideology. The relatively recent vintage of *bushidō* and the “Japanese spirit” was apparent to Liang, leading him to propose the “manufacture” of a similar spirit in China, even using the same terminology. In contrast, by the time Yang arrived in Japan in 1902, *bushidō* had a considerably higher profile and was being promoted by prominent figures such as Inoue Tetsujirō. In this context, a significant shift in the character of *bushidō* discourse occurred when Inoue introduced Edo-period texts by Yamaga Sokō, Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859), and others to reinforce his arguments, culminating in the 1905 publication of an anthology of historical documents purportedly related to *bushidō*.36 Before this, *bushidō* was typically supported by vague appeals to the Japanese spirit or virtues, but Inoue’s contribution seemed to lend the concept considerable historical legitimacy. Liang’s *wushidao* followed a similar trajectory, and *China’s Bushidō* consisted primarily of historical accounts and sayings that demonstrated China’s ancient martial tradition. While Liang was conscious of the modernity of both *bushidō* and *wushidao*, he was equally aware of the advantages of portraying the latter as rooted in ancient tradition if it was to become widely accepted.

Two characteristics of *China’s Bushidō* are especially significant in the context of later *bushidō* thought in China. The first of these was conditioned by Liang’s strong interest in the Social Darwinist theories popular throughout much of the world at the time.37 Liang saw an ideology such as *bushidō* primarily as part of the nationalistic spirit created by the Meiji government, and therefore as a tool that could be adopted for use in the great evolutionary struggle between people and nations. The strengthening of nationalism was one of the most significant issues for Chinese reformers throughout much of the modern period, as can be seen in Sun Yat-sen’s making it the first of his

For his part, Liang saw nationalism as “the most promising doctrine of the times,” and it became the focal point of his historical writings. The second significant characteristic is presented more clearly in Yang Du’s preface, and concerns the notion that bushidō was based largely on Chinese ideas. Here, Yang listed Buddhism and Confucianism, referring to the close connection between the Japanese warrior ethic and the thought of Wang Yangming. Just as many Japanese theorists sought to de-Sinify bushidō by appealing to heterodox teachings, Yang was an early example of Chinese attempts to portray bushidō as essentially derivative. The Chinese teachings that seemed to be at the heart of bushidō could serve as a bridge for introducing a similar martial ethic into China, or could be seized upon to criticize the ideology as a corruption of ancient virtues.

**Bushidō in the early Republican era 1912-1928**

Liang Qichao was already a relatively mature scholar when he arrived in Japan to witness the rapid growth of bushidō, and his elite connections meant that he engaged with the latest intellectual discourse on the subject. For Yang Du and other, younger Chinese who came to study in Japan in the first decade of the twentieth century, exposure to bushidō was similar to that experienced by Japanese students and cadets; i.e. bushidō was presented as an ancient and unique Japanese spirit that was behind Japan’s recent strength and success. This notion was enhanced by Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, when people across the world took notice of Japan as the first non-Western nation to defeat one of the great powers in a modern war. In contrast to the Sino-Japanese War, this latter achievement was primarily credited to a difference in spirit between the two sides, and bushidō rode a global wave of popularity. The Russo-Japanese War also marked the high point of bushidō discourse in Japan before the 1930s, with interest in the subject declining considerably during and after the First World War, as popular disillusionment with the military and government combined with broader social currents towards democracy and internationalism to drive discourse away from ostensibly traditional ideals. In spite of this, the slow pace of curriculum reform meant that this was also the time when bushidō became firmly established in

38. Sun Yat-sen (1943).
41. See, for example: Holmes and Ion (1980).
both the military and civilian education systems, and the many Chinese who came to Japan to study during this period were thoroughly exposed to *bushidō*.

Like their Japanese peers, this younger generation did not question the historical legitimacy of *bushidō*. Although aspects of *bushidō* were seen as useful for the Chinese situation, the notion that the ideology was a Meiji-era construct was not widely pursued, meaning that Liang’s attempt to “manufacture” a Chinese equivalent remained an unusual departure. Furthermore, as Japan became increasingly involved on the continent, *bushidō* became especially popular as a tool for understanding Japan’s intentions, as well as reforming China. An area in which *bushidō* had a strong and lasting impact in China was in military education, as many leading officers had undergone training in the *bushidō*-infused environment of Japan’s military academies. One of these was the military educator Jiang Baili (1882-1938), who arrived in Japan in 1900 and graduated at the top of his class at the Japanese Imperial Military Academy in 1904. Influenced by the burgeoning *bushidō* discourse around him, Jiang wrote in 1903 that Japan’s success was due to its ability to combine the *bushidō* tradition with modern science, channelling the strength of both East and West. According to Jiang, Japan could serve as a model for China in this regard, echoing Liang and others that the cultivation of nationalism in China was a most urgent task.42

Like his contemporaries, Jiang’s *bushidō* theories also focused on the Chinese heritage of the ethic, although Jiang was more interested in the influence of Buddhist thought than Confucian ideals. Jiang pointed out that Japanese often claimed that foreigners could not understand *bushidō* or the Japanese spirit, but reasoned that the Japanese could not understand it either. This, according to Jiang, was because it came from Zen (Chan) Buddhism.43 This view reflects the great efforts Japanese promoters of Zen made to tie their religion to the increasingly popular *bushidō*, often portraying Zen as “the religion of the samurai.”44 Although there was no exceptional historical connection between the two, the Zen schools, which had been persecuted along with other Buddhist sects in the Shinto-dominated environment of the early Meiji period, sought patriotic legitimacy and popular acceptance by claiming historical ties to the samurai, military, and the unquestionably Japanese ethic of *bushidō*.45 This method proved effective, and after Confucianism, Buddhism

---

43. Wu and Xiaong (1989): 224-225
44. Nukariya (1913).
became the most significant hook for Chinese students of bushidō to identify apparent traces of Chinese influence.

Japanese and Western interest in bushidō declined after 1914, as Japan moved to embrace new types of modernity and the West was absorbed in its own conflicts. Chinese writings increased during and after the First World War, when Japan became firmly established as the major foreign source of political and military interference, but also as the greatest hope for potential aid for China’s various competing factions. In spite of growing animosity between the two countries deriving from Japan’s imperialistic activities, Japan’s undoubted strength meant that it would continue to serve as a model for many in China. In this context, while citing bushidō as a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, Chinese reformers argued for changes similar to those they observed in Japan. For example, having returned to China after further study in Germany, Jiang Baili became president of the Baoding Military Academy in 1912, where he required cadets to memorize passages of Liang Qichao’s China’s Bushidō.46

The importance of Japan was also emphasized beyond the military, as in a 1916 commentary by the editors of the Tsinghua University Journal, describing Japan as proving the necessity for modern educational institutions, as the teaching of bushidō in schools was key to strengthening the Japanese nation.47 Similarly, the educator Tang Yikang (dates unknown) wrote in 1924 that Japan’s wealth and power came from the fact that they were used to military things and emphasized the “bushidō lifestyle.” Realizing that this would not be enough to increase national wealth after the Restoration, Tang wrote, Japan also turned to practical knowledge, which combined with bushidō to make Japan strong.48 The same year, the Qing loyalist scholar Gu Hongming (1857-1928) toured Japan on an English-language lecture series that continued on into 1925. Speaking on the subject of “Japan and the Reconstruction of Chinese Civilization,” Gu drew parallels between English chivalry and Japanese bushidō. Just as the English knightly code had been derived from French models, Gu argued, the samurai ethic was based entirely on Chinese ideals. However, China had undergone drastic change and foreign invasions since the height of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and the purest elements of its civilization had been lost. According to Gu, these ideals had been transferred to Japan, where they had been preserved into the present. In other words, the modern Japanese were the “true Chinese” and their bushidō spirit manifested

47. Anonymous (1916): 161
the best of ancient China. While lauding the Japanese for their national spirit and modern progress, Gu portrayed them primarily as the curators of superior Chinese virtues.

1927 saw the publication of Wang Chaoyou’s (dates unknown) My View of Japan (Wo zhi Riben guan), which was perhaps the most positive assessment of bushidō by any Chinese writer before 1945. Wang had first moved to Japan in 1905 as an exchange student, and little is known about his personal life other than that, following his return to China, he took up a position in the Beiyang government based in Beijing. Echoing other writers, Wang admonished his countrymen for not devoting sufficient energy into the study of Japan, and My View of Japan was intended to promote this type of research. According to Wang, the lack of understanding of their many commonalities was the cause of friction between the two countries, and overcoming them would lead to mutual prosperity. Wang portrayed Japan as a model society, due primarily to its superior “national character,” which was defined by bushidō. For Wang, bushidō was a wholly positive ethic that incorporated important Confucian ideals, especially loyalty and filial piety, combining these with courage and refinement: “courageous people are cruel, and graceful people are without courage. This is normal. The Japanese people have courage, but are not cruel. They have grace, as well as courage. This is due to the quality of their national character.” Wang further highlighted Japan’s ability to adopt the best from other cultures, arguing that poor people in Japan committed fewer crimes than those in other countries due to the fact that they were made virtuous by many years of Buddhist and Confucian education. The common inference here was that Chinese ethical systems were the basis for Japan’s most admirable aspects, and that China therefore already had the tools for self-improvement if it so desired. Although Wang’s text was unusual in its wholly positive assessment of Japan and bushidō, it enjoyed wide circulation immediately after its initial publication, indicating a certain receptiveness for his views at the time.

The most sophisticated treatment of bushidō by a Chinese writer in the early twentieth century can be found in the works of Dai Jitao, a member of the Guomindang Central Executive Committee and the republican government’s Information Minister. Born in Sichuan, Dai had traveled to Japan to study at the age of 15 in 1905, returning to China in 1909 after obtaining a degree from Nihon University. Also due to his excellent command of Japanese, Dai became

Sun Yat-sen’s translator and secretary, giving him great influence even after Sun’s death. Dai moved frequently between China and Japan, negotiating for support for the Guomindang, and his views on Japan were highly influential in his homeland. Dai’s first significant text in this context, a 1919 essay titled “My View of Japan” (“Wo de Riben guan”), criticized Japan’s aggressive policy towards China, while warning his countrymen that irrational hatred of the Japanese and rejection of Japan’s successful policies were grave mistakes. Also due to his considerable experience in the country and his many personal connections, Dai’s writings differentiated between the many Japanese who had supported him and his compatriots in their struggles to reform China, and the expansionist imperialists who sought to partition and exploit China to Japan’s own ends.\(^5^3\)

In his evaluation of Japan, Dai singled out Shinto as a malicious and puzzling element in Japan’s development. Contrasting it with the Confucian rationalism that supposedly guided China, Dai criticized Shinto as an ancient superstition that was becoming increasingly prominent, with the notion of Japan as a divine nation being especially dangerous. One of Dai’s other main criticisms of Japan was the supposedly violent nature of the traditional “feudal” class structure before the Meiji period. According to Dai, the samurai brutally exploited the class structure to abuse and even kill those below them in the social order, which was entirely opposed to the character of “peace-loving Chinese” society. This situation changed, Dai wrote, after Confucianism became influential from the seventeenth century, bringing ideas of benevolence and humanity that pacified the cruel samurai and set Japan upon the course to becoming a modern and civilized society. Dai also appreciated aspects of the samurai, however, arguing that Japan continued to benefit from their spirit of self-sacrifice, selfless loyalty, and—after the introduction of Confucian ideas—compassion. In contrast, Dai saw the problems of modern Japan as closely related to the loss of samurai virtues as the avaricious former merchant classes became more powerful and large corporations began to steer government policy.\(^5^4\)

Dai’s concern with negative aspects of Japanese militarism in this essay reflected the powerful anti-Japanese sentiments in China, but he also believed that Japan was changing in the spirit of democratization that defined the Taishō period (1912-1926), and that relations between the two countries could be beneficial in the long term.

In 1927, Dai made a somewhat disappointing trip to Japan to attempt to secure support for the Guomindang. Japan’s involvement in China was

54. Lu (2004): 87-9
becoming considerably more intrusive, but Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi; 1887-1975) and other right-wing members of the GMD believed that Soviet Russian influence was the greater threat. As a result, Dai was instructed to solicit Japanese aid, and to persuade the Japanese business community that the GMD’s priority was to protect business interests.55 Following this journey, and the anti-Communist purges in Shanghai, Dai revisited his 1919 essay, expanding it into a full-length book titled *On Japan* (*Riben lun*), in which the samurai and *bushidō* were central themes. Here, Dai credited the samurai as being entirely responsible for the Meiji Restoration which enabled Japan’s modernization, while the commoner classes that made up the vast majority of the population stood idly by.56 As Hatakeyama Kaori argues, Dai portrayed the Restoration as a revolution initiated by the elite samurai, rather than an uprising of the farmers or lower classes, reflecting his anti-communist views.57 Accordingly, Dai was responding to the growing Communist challenge by providing an apparent example of a positive bourgeois revolution that supposedly demonstrated that an elite movement such as the increasingly conservative core of the Guomindang was ideally suited to the challenges of reforming the country for the good of all members of society.

Dai brought together several themes from his earlier work, arguing that the Japanese devoted great resources to studying China, enabling them to gain great influence. In contrast, the Chinese knew very little about Japan, thereby leaving them most vulnerable to this potential enemy.58 Japanese study of China had a long history, Dai pointed out, and the adoption of Chinese thought in the Tokugawa period had combined to create a unique and powerful spirit that contained the best of both societies. According to Dai, the samurai class had been heavily influenced by Confucian ideals of compassion during the Edo period, and their *bushidō* was essentially a “life of blood and tears,” selflessly spilling their blood for their lords while crying tears of compassion for the farmers below them.”59 Dai emphasized the influence of the eighteenth-century Confucian Yamaga Sokō, who was widely viewed as the “Sage of *Bushidō*” in early twentieth-century Japan.60 In discussing Yamaga, Dai’s writings reflected the mainstream *bushidō* interpretations taught in schools and the military, which were often the result of attempts to de-Sinify Confucian ideals and give

56. Dai (2011): 46
60. Dai (2011): 8-9, 12, 31-32, 86.
them legitimacy as native Japanese thought. Like other Chinese thinkers, Dai Jitao sought the Confucian (Chinese) roots of *bushidō*, as these might make possible the creation of a similar ideology in China. In this context, the notion that the essence of *bushidō* was to be found in Japanese appropriation of the thought of Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi was highly influential.\(^\text{61}\)

Dai repeated earlier warnings of the dangers of Japanese militarism, which had ancient roots predating China’s “civilizing” influence.\(^\text{62}\) According to Dai, Japanese martiality and militarism were not present in Chinese or Indian thought, but were purely founded in Japan’s socio-religious superstitions centered on the notion of divine authority.\(^\text{63}\) At the same time, Dai described the influence of *bushidō* more positively than in his 1919 article, portraying it as the force that gave Japanese thought a vitality that was lacking in China. Dai did not question the historical legitimacy of *bushidō*, but argued that it had evolved considerably from its origins as a theory of a social order. In the Tokugawa period, *bushidō* was first used to describe an ethical theory and then became a religious concept based on Shinto. In the Meiji period, *bushidō* absorbed European ideals and became the foundation of Japan’s political ethics, Dai wrote, and it was this process that should be thoroughly researched by Chinese scholars.\(^\text{64}\)

The foreword to Dai’s *Riben lun* was penned by the rightwing Guomindang leader Hu Hanmin (1879-1936), indicating the importance of this text. Hu described *Riben lun* as the “crystallization of Dai’s thought” and echoed his calls for further study of Japan, which he claimed was culturally and geographically much closer to China and hosted ten times as many Chinese students as Europe.\(^\text{65}\) Hu also warned of the influence of Moscow and the Chinese Communist Party, reflecting the pragmatic domestic political reasons that drove men aligned with the Guomindang to promote Japan and *bushidō*.\(^\text{66}\) This positive assessment of Japan was becoming increasingly problematic as Japan’s activities in China became more directly interventionist, however, and writers on *bushidō* walked a precarious ideological tightrope.

---

**Bushidō during the Fifteen Year War**

As relations between Japan and China worsened, especially after the Manchurian Incident of 1931, attitudes towards Japan and *bushidō* understandably became increasingly negative, although there remained a significant diversity among interpretations. Internal conflicts, most significantly between the Guomindang and Communist factions, meant that Japanese support was often highly desired and that Japan was not universally dismissed. Similarly, the very military and economic strength that underpinned Japanese imperialism on the continent meant that Japan could continue to serve as a model for emulation in some regards. These continuities were especially apparent in military fields, where Japanese technology and drill were highly esteemed, also because many Chinese officers were graduates of Japanese institutions or had received instruction from Japanese advisors. At the Baoding Military Academy, the Japanese influence was embodied by Jiang Baili’s promotion of *bushidō* and Japanese methods. Jiang’s many attempts to reform the inefficient structure of Baoding ended in his own attempted suicide, bringing him great respect among those dissatisfied with the new order. After this failure and the disillusionment of the 21 demands, Jiang dismissed *bushidō* as a possible instrument for use in China.67 Jiang’s high opinion of *bushidō* declined further as Japanese interventions in China increased, and by the 1930s he had become very critical. In his 1937 *The Japanese—One Foreigner’s Research* (*Ribenren—yi ge waiguoren de yanjiu*), Jiang warned of Japanese duplicity rooted in their martial traditions, for even as Japan protested about their national crisis, they prosecuted an offensive war in China.68

Yan Xishan (1883-1960) was another graduate of the Japanese Imperial Military Academy who returned to China after graduating in 1909, having experienced the peak of the late Meiji *bushidō* boom. Like his classmates, Yan was convinced of the significance of *bushidō* to Japan’s modern success, and especially its effect in mobilizing that nation to support the military in its war with Russia. Yan brought these ideas with him to China, where he authored a pamphlet arguing that revering the military and adopting a *wushidaodao* ethic were the only sources of hope if China were to compete with Japan.69 In the turmoil following the 1911 revolution, Yan moved to Shanxi province, which he controlled as his largely autonomous fief for over three decades until the Communist takeover in 1949. Throughout this tumultuous period, Yan

---

survived rival warlords and regimes through no small amount of diplomatic skill, including a constantly shifting relationship with Japan. Partly out of pragmatism, but also out of a continuing admiration for Japanese militarism from his time there, Yan continued to discuss bushidō in a positive manner even as the conflict between the two countries intensified in the 1930s.

Yan was particularly interested in the influence of bushidō on the Meiji Restoration, considering this event to be the most important turning point in Japan’s modern history, and he desired a similar “spiritual” and social revolution in China. Even in 1938, only one year after the full-scale invasion of China by Japan began, Yan stated that “only 70 years ago, Japan was still but a small and weak country that was periodically subject to invasion, and the Meiji emperor knew that a restoration was necessary. His Restoration especially emphasized the military and proclaimed the bushidō spirit.”

According to Yan, the “thousands of years of traditional bushidō spirit education are demonstrated by the fact that Japanese soldiers do not become prisoners of war,” a trope that was first popularly associated with bushidō during his stay in Japan in 1904. As an essentially independent ruler of Shanxi, Yan had the power to implement reforms, even if he often failed to follow words with actions, and Japan retained its value as one of several potential models even during wartime, while the practical necessity of negotiating with the Japanese further reinforced his interest in their military culture. Yan benefitted most directly from his pro-Japanese views and cultural knowledge after 1945, when he was able to convince 15,000 Japanese troops to fight for him in Shanxi even after “their” war had ended, and this assistance was vital in Yan’s ability to hold out until 1949.

Yan’s long-time rival and ally, Chiang Kai-shek, had a similar exposure to bushidō during military training in Japan in the last years of the Qing. Like Yan, Chiang was deeply impressed by the bushidō in Japanese military spiritual education, and later sought to instil a similar spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice in his own men at the Huangpu Military Academy. After the Manchurian Incident, Chiang expressed concern that Japan’s greatest and most destructive weapon in the invasion of China was not a physical weapon, but the mental spirit of their troops. This spirit, Chiang claimed, was the bushidō spirit comprised of imperial loyalty, patriotism, disregard of death, and a fondness

73. Huang (2004): 82.
for war. At the same time, Chiang saw bushidō as a possible source of strength for China. According to Chiang, the positive accomplishments of bushidō were attributable to Wang Yangming’s notion of the unity of thought and action, which had given form to bushidō. Before the Meiji period, Chiang argued, Japan had learned a great deal from China, and bushidō was part of this cultural borrowing. However, bushidō was only a part of the unique Chinese morality and warrior spirit, and the Japanese failed to grasp these in their entirety. Most significantly, Chiang felt, Japanese thinkers had failed to grasp the Confucian idea of benevolence, instead placing too much emphasis on martial courage. Ultimately, Chiang accused Japan of merely having stolen bushidō from China, made it their national spirit, and then turned around and used this same ethic to invade China. Chiang’s interpretation of bushidō as misappropriated Chinese thought was in line with his nationalistic promotion of Confucianism, manifested in his idealistic New Life Movement (Xin shenghuo yundong).

Attributing the positive aspects of Japan’s modernization to Chinese ideals while dismissing its militarism as an aberration was a popular device among Chinese bushidō theorists at the time. Criticism of bushidō was also widespread outside of military and political circles, especially in public discourse and among left-leaning intellectuals. The writer Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), for example, had witnessed the evolution of bushidō from his arrival in Japan as an exchange student in 1906, and became increasingly disillusioned as government repression at home and aggressive expansion abroad came to dominate the Japanese political agenda. Unlike Jiang Baili, Yan Xishan, or Chiang Kai-shek, Zhou arrived in Japan not in a military capacity—having failed the physical test required by the Navy—but as a nominal student of architecture who was in fact free to pursue his interests in Japanese history, language, and culture at Hōsei and Rikkyō universities. This meant that while Zhou was exposed to the popular bushidō discourse surging throughout Japan during his six-year stay, he was not systematically drilled in the officially-sanctioned interpretations taught in the military academies. Furthermore, Zhou’s career as a writer and scholar meant that he moved in more progressive circles in Japan than his peers with ties to nationalist organizations such as the Amur River Society.

Zhou became one of the most pro-Japanese thinkers of his generation, with his focus firmly on Japan’s arts, literature, and culture, which he compared

75. Shirai (ed.) (1975): 146-149.
76. For a discussion of Chiang’s Confucian thought, see: Wang (1994).
favourably with the situation in China in the decade after his return in 1911.
Even back in China, Zhou’s writings reflected many of the attitudes among
contemporary Japanese literary figures at the time, and this extended to
*bushidō*. Due to disillusionment with Japan’s military and government, as well
as the shock of General Nogi Maresuke’s (1849-1912) anachronistic suicide
by disembowelment following the death of the Meiji emperor, the majority of
Japanese intellectuals turned away from *bushidō* and began to look towards
more progressive ideals such as democracy and internationalism. This resulted
in a steep decline in popular interest in *bushidō*—although it remained strong in
the education system—and the ideology did not begin to recover until the late
1920s. ⁷⁸ Accordingly, Zhou did not engage extensively with *bushidō* during
this period, although a brief 1919 article on “Various Thoughts from Travels in
Japan” (“You Riben zagan”) introduced Japanese samurai and geisha, as well
as examining the influence of the *bushidō* spirit on Japan’s national character. ⁷⁹
Zhou’s understanding of *bushidō* focused on aesthetics and humanism, setting
it apart from the emperor-centered interpretations promoted in the civilian
and military education systems. In this way, in 1925 Zhou criticized the
widespread assumption that “loyalty to one’s lord (emperor)” was the essential
trait of Japan’s national character, instead arguing that this ideology was rooted
in a combination of Chinese and German thought and used by the Japanese
government. ⁸⁰ By this point, Zhou had become disillusioned by the actions of
Japanese on the continent, as well as political repression within Japan, resulting
in an attitude that he described as: “loving what is lovable, hating what
is hateful; being both pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese, for that may just be the
only workable approach.” ⁸¹

As *bushidō* discourse became louder and more directly relevant with the
rise of Japanese militarism in the 1930s, Zhou addressed the subject in greater
depth. Like a small number of Japanese critics at the time, Zhou considered the
*bushidō* being promoted by the military to be a corruption of a more noble and
ancient tradition. In his 1935 essay series “Riben guankui,” Zhou discussed the
famous eighteenth-century incident involving 47 masterless samurai of Akō
domain who were sentenced to commit suicide after avenging their lord and
were later celebrated in the story known as *A Treasury of Loyal Retainers*
(*Chūshingura*). Zhou further mentioned 20 Tosa samurai who committed
suicide in 1868 for attacking French sailors, in accordance with the law and

---

⁸¹ Lu (2004): 143.
old samurai practice. In contrast, Zhou condemned the fact that, following the assassination of prime minister Inukai Tsuyoshi by soldiers in 1932, none of his killers were punished harshly, nor did any of them take responsibility by committing suicide like the samurai of old. In 1936, as the situation deteriorated further, Zhou wrote on the humanity of traditional bushidō that was being lost. Referring to a samurai novel by Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965), Zhou focused on the solemn and dignified treatment of enemy corpses by the victors in a battle, which demonstrated the empathy inherent in traditional bushidō.

Neither Zhou nor other Chinese writers during the Fifteen Year War questioned the historical legitimacy of bushidō, although the notion that it had been altered and even corrupted in the modern period was widespread. At the same time, there was general agreement that this modern, militaristic bushidō ideology was extremely effective in driving Japan’s imperial expansion, and it was perceived as one of Japan’s greatest strengths. Criticism of bushidō increased greatly in China as the conflict intensified, with the points of argument largely consistent with earlier interpretations, especially the view that the positive elements of bushidō had essentially been taken from Chinese thought and religion. The wartime period perhaps best illustrates the influence that politics and conflict had on interpretations of bushidō, and the way in which this supposed core aspect of the Japanese “national character” was reinvented to suit contemporary expediencies.

**Bushidō in the Reform Era**

After 1945, interest in bushidō declined in Japan due to its association with prewar militarism and the emperor system. Japanese historians who had written on the subject during wartime purged their works of references to the emperor, instead focusing on examinations of premodern samurai in an attempt to find an earlier, uncorrupted, “true” bushidō. In China, which faced far greater internal and external challenges, Japan and bushidō became less immediately relevant. For leftists, bushidō was merely one part of the militaristic “fascist” ideology that Japan’s leaders had used to wreak destruction upon the peoples of East Asia, including their own citizens. For those on the right, continuing

---

accusations of being collaborators with the Japanese, combined with the
disillusionment resulting from Japan’s defeat, meant that Japan could no
longer publicly serve as a model in the same way as before. Significantly, the
vast majority of Chinese bushidō promoters during the war with Japan had
been affiliated with the Guomindang, with some, such as Yan Xishan, holding
its most powerful positions in the postwar period.

Geopolitical expediencies after the flight to Taiwan meant that the
Guomindang government had to reach an accommodation with Japan, as both
countries sought cover under the American security umbrella. Furthermore, a
large number of high-ranking military and civilian officials in the Republic of
China had spent time in Japan or worked closely with Japanese advisors, and
many of these personal relationships survived the conflict intact. Beginning
in 1949, Japanese officers were covertly invited to Taiwan to help train
ROC troops for the planned reconquest of China, an endeavour that was not
practically supported by the United States. Japanese troops had considerable
experience fighting Communists in China, and doing so on a shoestring with
basic materiel, which reflected the anticipated invasion of the mainland.85

Given the importance of spiritual training in Japanese military training, it
is likely that this was a significant component of the training of Taiwanese
troops, a suggestion that is supported by Major General Cao Shicheng’s later
recollection that the strengthening of the GMD’s “martial spirit” was the first
of three primary benefits of Japanese training.86 The Japanese military had
refined spiritual education to a high degree, and although aspects such as
imperial loyalty were no longer tenable, bushidō remained a useful ideological
tool in the postwar. The resilience of positive views of bushidō in Taiwan is
best illustrated by former ROC president Lee Teng-hui (1923-), whose 2003
sought to boost Japan’s morale during the ongoing economic malaise by
appealing to its warrior spirit.87

In the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s, bushidō and the emperor
system were seen as hollow ideologies of a disgraced and defunct order, and
American imperialism presented a far greater and more immediate threat.
Immediately following Japan’s surrender, Chinese thinkers on both the left
and right placed great hope in the reformation of Japan and the thorough
destruction of the emperor-centered ruling order. In this process, a clear

distinction was drawn between the Japanese people and their government, with the former seen as further victims of the latter. This view was strengthened by the tremendous growth of leftist movements in Japan after the war as formerly persecuted socialists were joined in their cause by many others disillusioned by the war and subsequent American occupation. The perceived leftist threat within Japan contributed heavily to the American “reverse course” after 1948, when policy began to shift from democratizing and demilitarizing Japan to rearming it for the battle against global communism. Chinese anger towards Japan in the 1950s was directed primarily at its role as a weapon of U.S. imperialism, rather than at the country itself, and there was a widespread feeling of solidarity with the Japanese people. As in Japanese academia, Chinese historiography was dominated by Marxist models, and class conflict replaced bushidō as the determining factor of Japan’s modern trajectory. Whereas Dai Jitao had posited the Meiji Restoration as a successful bourgeois revolution, Chinese scholars in the 1950s and early 1960s engaged with Soviet discourse on Japan, describing the Restoration as merely a slight change or an “incomplete bourgeois revolution” at best, with large elements of the “feudal” social structure remaining after 1868.

In the 1980s, when relations between the two countries again became more important, Japan was in the midst of a resurgence of bushidō theories in scholarship and popular culture, as “samurai” virtues were frequently portrayed as the cultural background for Japan’s economic miracle. This discourse was boosted by the appearance of the long-forgotten Nitobe Inazō’s portrait on the 5,000-yen note from 1984 to 2004, setting off a spate of republications of his work that has continued unabated into the twenty-first century. This discourse also became very influential in the West, as politicians and business people sought to learn from the Japanese corporate structure, and found Nitobe’s relatively pacificist and Westernized bushidō interpretation most accessible. In contrast, in China, the notion of Japan as a model mixed uncomfortably with unresolved issues from the first half of the century, and bushidō was also widely associated with militarism, making the subject far more controversial.

The growing academic freedoms in the reform era combined with increasingly assertive and nationalistic activities in Japan to drive rapid

---

92. Lou Guishu sees this as a sign of increasing militarism in Japan (Lou [2009]: 101).
growth in Chinese research on Japan from the mid-1980s. Prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 1985 provoked harsh reactions throughout East Asia, and controversies over issues such as the content of school history textbooks, wartime responsibility, and the status of so-called “comfort women” recruited by the Japanese military continue to complicate diplomatic relations. In 1987, Li Quanyue, Song Jihuo, and Fan Baochen warned of the devastating effect of “corrupt” bushidō over the past hundred years, insisting that for the sake of world peace, Chinese, Japanese, and people of other nations must Endeavour to prevent bushidō from again becoming a weapon of a revived Japanese militarism. After prime minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō’s visit to Yasukuni on July 29, 1996, Ji Yu placed this in a context of Japan’s postwar rearmament, warning of the militarism inherent in Japanese history and society following centuries of rule by a martial elite embodying the death-focused bushidō spirit.

Bushidō features in the majority of texts on Japanese history and culture published in China in the last three decades, and it plays an increasingly important role in reflecting and informing public opinion about Japan. As in the period before 1945, reform-era writers on bushidō generally walk a line between positive and negative assessments of the ethic, following a broad characteristic pattern. Positive evaluations of bushidō tend to focus on its supposed Chinese heritage, especially Zen Buddhism and Confucianism, and downplay or ignore its role in twentieth-century militarism. Wang Sansan, for example, argues that bushidō—founded in Confucianism and Buddhism—was the most important element in Japan’s successful modernization. According to Wang, China must recognize the tremendous power of Confucianism in Japan’s development, and utilize this same power in order to drive its own modernization process. Similarly, Su Jizheng’s analysis of Japan’s corporate culture attributes a key role to bushidō, which was most strongly influenced by Confucian thought. Su claims that Confucian ideals arrived in Japan from Korea in the late third century C.E., and that the Confucian ideal of loyalty was emphasized in Japan from this very early point onward. For Su, Japan’s success was built on a combination of traditional Chinese ideals and extreme bushidō loyalty to the corporation, and that China would have to carefully consider these elements and discard those which had proven ineffective.

Like Su, Zhang Mingguo, Tang Yongliang, and Yue Yongjie do not address militarism in their examinations of the influence of Confucian-inspired *bushidō* on Japan’s successful modernization and economic success. Zhang focuses on the high proportion of former samurai in Japanese universities in the Meiji period, while Tang and Yue look at the promotion of practical learning by Japanese Confucian scholars.98

When militarism is addressed in more positive assessments of *bushidō*, it is typically portrayed as a uniquely Japanese element, and often ascribed to the influence of Shinto or emperor-worship, while Chinese thought is presented as responsible for morally “positive” events such as the Meiji Restoration or Japanese economic success. Wu Si looks to the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960) for one solution to the dilemma, which is to posit *bushidō* as two parallel traditions. One, more positive tradition, runs from Yamaga Sokō through the Restoration heroes to the Meiji period, while a second, death-focused tradition runs from the Kamakura period through the Warring States period and into the militarism of early Showa.99 This theory is attractive to some promoters of *bushidō* in both Japan and China as it distinguishes a beneficial *bushidō* tradition firmly rooted in Confucian thought from a corrupted, militaristic form, thereby allowing the concept to be saved. Positive assessments of *bushidō* in China often repeat the trope of the Japanese as mere borrowers from other cultures, and lacking in originality beyond an innate love of the martial.

Some critics of *bushidō* also make use of this argument, describing Japanese as having taken Confucianism and other ideals from China, but reinterpreted them to their own ends. One common theme also found in texts that are not explicitly critical of *bushidō* is that the fundamental difference between Japanese and Chinese Confucianism was that the former focused on loyalty (*zhong*) while the latter stressed benevolence (*ren*).100 Wang Zhi, for example, argues that while Confucian ideals were already influential in Japan during the Tang dynasty, the emphasis was always on martial rather than civil virtues. This was especially the case with *bushidō*, which was forged on the battlefield but borrowed Confucian ideas for most of its content when it was codified. Wang argues that this “twisted despotic way” that valued war was completely different from Chinese Confucianism.101 Although the samurai weakened during the centuries of Tokugawa peace, Wang writes,

---

100. See, for example: Gu (2004): 82; Sha (1995): 46.
the militaristic nature of their ethical writings presented the possibilities for militarism when Japan met new challenges in the modern period.102 This view is perhaps most explicit in the work of Lou Guishu, one of the most prolific recent scholars of bushidō in China. According Lou, bushidō was most strongly influenced by Zen, Confucianism, and Shinto. While Zen lent the samurai courage and took their fear of death, and Confucianism furnished the philosophical, ethical, and political structure for peacefully ruling the country, Shinto and its attendant emperor-worship were responsible for the militarism of the ideology.103 Similarly, Xiang Jie picks up the popular theory that bushidō was little more than a “practical ethic” given structure by Confucian thought in the Edo period. In contrast, Xiang describes Shinto as a militaristic religion lacking the compassionate character of other faiths, arguing that bushidō was removed from its Confucian roots in the Meiji period and transformed into an ethic of “unconditional sacrifice for the emperor,” becoming the spiritual core of modern militarism.104 Gao Changfeng describes bushidō as having gone through three stages, the second of which involved the thorough adoption of Confucian thought to “perfect” the ethic in the Edo period. The third period from the end of the Edo period on, however, saw the development of an “anti-Confucian, anti-Mencian bushidō” that prescribed absolute loyalty to the emperor and was a “cruel and tyrannical way that worshipped ‘insanity (kuangqi).’” 105

Another approach found in critical assessments of bushidō is to gloss over any potential Chinese heritage, portraying bushidō as one with militarism and a wholly Japanese development. In this vein, scholars such as Huang Zhen and Cao Lü trace the origins of these ideals—as well as Japan’s “national aggressive and expansionist political and cultural identity”—to Japan’s geography as an island nation.106 Wang Fuchun attributes Japan’s aggression to the influence of Shinto and the combined elements of emperor-worship and the notion of a “divine nation,” while positing the ancient ethic of bushidō as inextricably tied to militaristic expansionism. In the modern period, Wang argues, “the evil expansionism of bushidō became the core of the morality of the modern Japanese nation,” promoting “extreme foolish loyalty to the emperor” that acted like a drug upon many Japanese.107 Sha Lin sees bushidō as a uniquely

103. Lou (2012).
Japanese spirit of aggression, pointing out that Yamaga Sokō appropriated Confucian concepts in a nationalistic manner. Sha argues that Confucianism had little influence on *bushidō* beyond supplying it with terminology, and focuses instead on the character of *bushidō* as a Japanese ethic of cruelty and aggression.\(^{108}\) The historical evidence supports this line of reasoning to a certain extent, as Yamaga’s works were selected by Inoue Tetsujirō and other modern promoters of *bushidō* due to Yamaga’s Japan- and emperor-centered ideas, rather than his views on samurai ethics.

While their interpretations may differ considerably, most Chinese writers on *bushidō* in the reform era rely primarily on three texts for their theoretical framework: Ruth Benedict’s 1946 anthropological study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Dai Jitao’s *Riben lun*, and Nitobe Inazo’s *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. This corpus sets Chinese *bushidō* discourse apart from that in most other countries, especially Japan and the Anglophone world. While Nitobe’s work is the most popular book on the subject worldwide, outside of China, Dai’s writings are largely unknown and Benedict’s theories on Japan as a “shame culture” have lost much of their former influence. The popularity of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in China is significant given its origins as a wartime commission from the U.S. military to help understand their primary enemy at the time, and reflects the close association of *bushidō* with Japan’s twentieth-century activities in China. Zhang Ke, Gao Xiaoyan, and La Yanzhen approach *bushidō* as the primary source of modern Japanese militarism, and cite Benedict to argue that *bushidō* morality did not follow Confucian or Buddhist doctrine, but was rather a singular Japanese stream that was simultaneously the nation’s strength and weakness.\(^{109}\) While Benedict herself criticized *bushidō* as “a term popularized during this century to designate traditional Japanese ideals of conduct,” and a “publicist’s inspiration,” Chinese translations of her work tend to gloss over these indications that *bushidō* is essentially a modern invention.\(^{110}\) For example, a 2012 edition by Beijing’s Gold Wall Press loses much of this nuance of Benedict’s passage on *bushido*. Furthermore, the glossary defines *bushido* as having its origins in the Kamakura period before being bolstered by Confucian and Buddhist thought in the Tokugawa age to create an ethic of absolute loyalty to one’s lord.\(^{111}\) This explanation of *bushidō* is an addition not found in Benedict’s original text, and, in contradicting her

---

statement on *bushidō*, reflects the strength of popular views of the subject in China.

With regard to Nitobe, whose relatively pacifistic *bushidō* has been the most influential interpretation in Japan and the West, Lou Guishu and other Chinese scholars have accused him of beautifying *bushidō* and giving spiritual strength to the military. According to Lou, Nitobe defends militarism and focuses on loyalty and dedication while “deliberately” covering up *bushidō*’s path to “murder and war.”¹¹² Nitobe’s relationship with militarism has been subject to considerable debate in the scholarship, and his critics often point to his activities as a colonial official in Taiwan, as well as a controversial and ill-fated overseas tour on which Nitobe attempted to defend Japan’s activities in China to increasingly hostile audiences in 1932-33.¹¹³ Lou’s harsh criticism is much the exception in China, however, and Nitobe’s work is most often encountered as an authoritative explanation of the Japanese character and society.

Chinese publications on *bushidō* during the reform era have generally followed patterns established in the early twentieth century. The vast majority of texts treat *bushidō* as an ancient tradition, and acknowledgement of its modern character is rare. There is a broad consensus that Confucianism and Zen provided the ethical structure for *bushidō*, and there is a tendency to ascribe the positive characteristics of *bushidō* to these “Chinese” thought systems. Xi Jiabei, for example, credits this Zen-Confucian *bushidō* with Japan’s ability to resist opium addiction, arguing that China was less able to maintain these ideals.¹¹⁴ Luo Wei and Lei Huixiong compare traditions of policing in China and Japan, where the samurai supposedly followed a “unity of knowing and doing” *bushidō* that was influenced by Zen and Confucianism, especially the teachings of Wang Yangming. According to Luo and Lei, this ethic continued to influence police practice, and they hope to “absorb the advanced culture of police thinking to promote the Chinese police culture construction.”¹¹⁵ Texts that portray a typically Chinese-inspired *bushidō* in a positive light also tend to neglect modern militarism, or to ascribe this to the supposedly corrupting effect of indigenous Japanese religious thought. Similarly, Chinese writers focusing on negative aspects of *bushidō*, such as militarism, suicide, or cruelty, generally downplay or ignore the influence of Chinese thought on

---

¹¹². Lou (2010).
bushidō. Ultimately, national concerns and unresolved issues from the early twentieth century continue to influence bushidō theories in the reform period.

Conclusion

China has played an important role in bushidō discourse from its beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century, reflecting the broader trends in a Japan seeking a new, “national” identity between China and the West. A central theme of this early bushidō was the de-Sinification of Confucian and Buddhist ideas in line with the increasingly nationalistic agenda after the Sino-Japanese War. In contrast, Chinese studies of bushidō sought precisely these supposed Chinese roots, as bushidō was credited with Japan’s modernization and military success, which served as the most immediately relevant model for Chinese reformers. These contradictory aims meant that Chinese scholars began to form their own bushidō theories, stressing the Chinese elements of the ethic that could be “revived” most easily, while dismissing problematic characteristics of bushidō as Japanese corruptions. Even those ideals that were not necessarily considered desirable by modern Chinese scholars, including aspects of Confucianism and Buddhism, were still emphasized for nationalistic reasons as having had a formative influence on bushidō, and this defense of China’s intellectual heritage for its own sake attests to the growth of nationalistic concerns in modern China.

In spite of these significant continuities, just as the popularity and content of bushidō discourse in modern Japan has changed considerably in response to political, economic, and military conditions, views and uses of bushidō in China have evolved along with national and geopolitical developments. Admiration of Japan’s economic and military strength in the late Qing was joined by concern regarding these same factors after the issuing of the 21 Demands in 1915, and writings on bushidō echoed these shifts. As nationalistic and emperor-centered bushidō interpretations became dominant in Japan during the Fifteen-Year War, the belief that Shinto-based bushidō drove Japanese militarism became increasingly prevalent in China as an explanation of the reasons behind the Japanese invasion. These prewar and wartime currents have also driven the great resurgence of bushidō interest in China in the reform era, and the three most influential texts on the subject are all products of this earlier period. In recent decades, scholarship on bushidō has generally sought to understand Japanese actions in light of growing military strength and assertiveness in both countries, to understand elements of Japan’s economic success as a model for China, or to boost nationalism by elucidating the respective Chinese (positive)
and Japanese (negative) sources of *bushidō*. The intellectual history of *bushidō* in China over the course of the long twentieth century shows that, for many, studying the proverbial enemy is also a means of knowing and defining one’s self.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


LIANG Qichao (1904). Zhongguo zhi wushidao. Shanghai.


Glossary

Baoding Military Academy 保定軍校
Beiyang government 北洋政府
bushi no shōhō 武士の商法
Cao Lü 曹経
Cao Shicheng 曹士澂
Chiang Kaishen 蔣介石
Chūshingura 忠臣蔵
Dai Jitao 戴季陶
Edo period 江戸時代
Fan Baochen 範寶臣
Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉
Gao Changfeng 高長峰
Gao Xiaoyan 高小岩
Gen’yōsha 玄洋社
Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘
Hashimoto Ryūtarō 橋本龍太郎
Hatakeyama Kaori 畠山香織
Hu Hanmin 胡漢民
Huang Zhen 黃真
Huangpu 黃浦
Inoue Tetsujirō 井上が次郎
Inukai Tsuyoshi 犬養毅
Ji Yu 紀喻
Jiang Baili 蔣百里
Kokuryūkai 黒龍会
kuangqi 狂氣
La Yanzhen 喇延真
Lee Teng-hui 李登輝
Lei Huixiong 雷惠雄
Li Quanyue 李泉嶽
Liang Qichao 梁啓超
Lou Guishu 婁貴書
Lun xiangwu 論尚武
Luo Wei 羅維
Matsuzawa Hiroaki 松沢弘陽
Meiji period 明治時代
Meiji Restoration 明治維新
Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曽根康弘
The Samurai Next Door

Nitobe Inazô 新渡戸稲造
Nogi Maresuke 乃木希典
Ozaki Yukio 尾崎行雄
Qing Dynasty 清朝
ren 仁
Riben guankui 日本管窺
Riben lun 日本論
Ribenren—yi ge waiguoren de yanjiu 日本人-一個外國人的研究
Saigô Takamori 西郷隆盛
Satsuma Rebellion 西郷戦争
Sha Lin 沙林
Song Jihuo 宋繼和
Su Jizheng 蘇繼爭
Sun Wu 孫武
Sun Yat-sen 孫中山
Suzuki Chikara 鈴木力
Taishô period 大正時代
Takeda Kiyoko 武田清子
Tang Yikang 唐軼康
Tang Yongliang 唐永亮
Tanizaki Jun’ichirô 谷崎潤一郎
Tokugawa 徳川
Toyama Mitsuru 富山満
Uemura Masahisa 植村正久
Wang Chaoyou 王朝佑
Wang Fuchun 王富春
Wang Sansan 王三三
Wang Yangming 王陽明
Wang Zhi 王志
Watsuji Tetsurô 和辻哲郎
Wo de Riben guan 我的日本觀
Wo zhi Riben guan 我之日本觀
Wu Si 吳斯
Xi Jiabei 席佳蓓
Xiang Jie 向潔
Xin shenghuo yundong 新生活運動
Yamaga Sokô 山鹿素行
Yan Xishan 閻錫山
Yang Du 楊度
Yasukuni Shrine 靖國神社
Oleg Benesch

Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰
You Riben zagan 游日本雜感
Yue Yongjie 嶽永傑
Zhang Ke 張柯
Zhang Mingguo 張明國
zhong 忠
Zhongguohun an zaihu 中國魂安在乎
Zhongguo zhi wushidao 中國武士道
Zhou Zuoren 周作人
Zhu Xi 朱熹