

An Introduction to Japanese Culture

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Introduction

- Self-Introduction
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 - Apprentice to Maestro Guidobaldo Marco Odo Romeo d'Aquila (An Tir)
 - Practitioner of Japanese Martial arts
 - Studying Modern and Classical Japanese Language
 - Scholar of Seagirt
- Class Motivation
 - Many of the things which are “known” and spoken of in the west about Japanese culture represent the culture as it was in the Edo (Tokugawa) period (1604 - 1868).
 - This struck me as interesting once my research took me beyond the books most often touted as the sources for an understanding of Bushi culture. Because of how often the later period books are contradicted by earlier source material.

What this class is and what it isn't

- What this class isn't
 - Definitive
 - Comprehensive
- What this class is
 - A starting point
 - An attempt to showcase some of the ways Japanese culture can be represented in SCA Personae
 - A very narrow, rather shallow look at some of the features of pre-modern Japanese culture
 - A rather academic look at the interrelation of features of Japanese culture.

Caveats

- Each section of this class should really be a class (or series of classes) of its own. Very often I try to present a distillation of a much broader context into smaller ideas for the purpose of brevity.
- There are many specific features of Japanese culture which while “traditional” and thought to be relatively fundamental can only be traced to the Edo-period
 - Hagakure was written a century after the majority of Bushi fighting stopped, and represents a somewhat romantic view of what the Bushi believed
 - The Daishou as the marker of the Bushi didn't really exist until the 17th C
 - Kumihimo (with marudai, etc is really hard to document before 1650)
- In my particular discipline (and many others) there is a concept which gets in the way of most things: Kuden (verbal transmission)

The Relationship of Religion and Culture in Japan

This section of the class is going to cover Japan's relationship with religion and how it impacts the features of culture that we see both in modern and pre-modern Japan

We will cover such things as the following:

- Shintoism
- Buddhism
- The impact of Chinese philosophy
- Japan's Syncretic view on religion.

Shintoism

The native religion of Japan, Shinto, is an interesting blend of polytheism and animistic belief. One author posits that Shinto wasn't really organized into what we see today until the 19th Century, and that it effectively tried to jam several thousand cults together into a unified religion

The polytheistic side of the faith presents that the Japanese Archipelago was created by the Gods, and that the Tennou is the direct descendent of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami.

The Animistic side of the faith centres around “musubi” the animating energy, and maintenance of spiritual cleanliness.

Buddhism

Introduced to Japan several times.

- 6th Century - Resembles monastic Buddhism
- 8th Century - Esoteric Buddhism
- 12th - 14th Century - Pure land and Chan (Zen)

The various schools of Buddhism remained balanced with Shinto until the late 19th Century.

Chinese Philosophy

- The Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan in the 5th Century (according to the semi-mythological historical text the Nihon Shoki)
- The Japanese government strove to emulate the Chinese for several hundred years, and the Chinese classics, Tao te Ching, the Analects, and Sun Tzu's Art of war, among others, were considered the necessities of education until the 19th Century.
- There were Taoist, and Confusian Scholars in Japan throughout Japanese history, and these ideas were central to Aristocratic thinking for more than 1,000 years.

Specific Effects on Culture in Japan

- Shinto
 - Matsuri - Festivals
 - Food Etiquette
 - Cleanliness
- Buddhism
 - Poetry - Zen
 - Distaste for handling the dead
 - Goma Fire Ritual - Shingon
- Chinese Philosophy
 - Onmyoudou (a combination of Taoist Geomancy with Shinto Ritual and folk magic)
 - Japanese philosophy - influencing even the core of Japanese Culture
 - Writing Systems

The Concept of Wa (Harmony)

“*Wa* should be valued and quarrels avoided. When superiors are in harmony with each other and inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly and the right view of matters prevails.” - Prince Shotoku Taishi (604 CE)

Harmony with Kami

As previously discussed while Prince Shotoku was strongly influenced by Confusian and Buddhist ideas when he worked the above quote into Japan's First constitution. There is also a strong current of harmonious dealings with Kami, who often need to be appeased when a person has picked up spiritual pollution, whether moral or natural.

This pollution impacts a person's connectedness with all life around them and is a less than ideal state of affairs. Which is why so many Shinto rituals centre around the cleansing of oneself of the pollution, so that one can rejoin harmonious relations with everything around themselves

Hierarchies

One aspect of the influence of Shinto and Confucian thought on the elements of Japanese culture is found in the hierarchies that make up Japanese society.

The Tennou is descended from one of the Chief Kami, and therefore is the top of the hierarchy. Even the Shogun who took the power of the Tennou away needed him to “appoint” them to the position.

In the following slides I will be breaking the hierarchies into two rough groupings. The Imperial court hierarchy, then the hierarchies of the bushi. These two groups while interrelated were at odds throughout the pre-modern period.

The Imperial Court

The imperial court rank system is fairly complicated made up of thirteen total ranks.

The first four ranks are reserved for the Imperial Princes

The next three ranks have two levels each a junior and a senior rank

The following 6 ranks have four levels each an upper and lower junior and senior rank.

This rank structure was quite strict. In the imperial palace there were doorways and paths through the grounds which were restricted by rank. In addition, the jobs you were permitted to do were also restricted by rank. Everyone who was important had a court rank, even the Bushi.

Bushi Hierarchies

At the top of the Bushi hierarchy is the Shogun who has regents and governing councils directly beneath him.

Further down there are regional lords called Shugyo (There is a hierarchy regarding these Shugyo as well). Shugyo would later be called Daimyo.

Closer to the average bushi would be the Jito, or clan heads.

Below them would be the family(Ie) head, who would report to the Jito.

Below all of these would be the Ashigaru - Common Foot Soldiers who had the potential for social mobility.

Hierarchies and Wa as expressed in Language

- Modern Japanese
 - Three commonly used levels of formality. Casual, Formal, Honorific
 - The subject of the sentence (if talking about yourself) is often understood
 - Name + honorific is used instead of personal pronouns
 - There are honorific verbs which you never use when talking about yourself.

Hierarchies and Wa as expressed in Language

Classical Japanese is a different animal entirely. Unlike Modern Japanese, Classical Japanese has a much more flexible in the way that it constructs honorific language. Jesuit Missionary Joao Rodrigues wrote about the formal letter writing of the Bushi in the 16th Century. Which shows the many levels of formality and honorifics used in Late period Classical Japanese. It can be instructive to look at the correspondence of Toyotomi Hideyoshi to understand the vast number of levels of honorific speech/writing in his time period.

Here are a few highlights which span from the Heian Period through the Edo Period. (Classical Japanese: A Grammar by Haruo Shirane is where much of this section comes from)

- Honorific/Humble prefixes and suffixes
- Honorific/Humble supplementary verbs
- Honorific/Humble verbs
- Honorific/Humble auxiliary verbs.

Bushido

The concept of Bushido as we know it is a post period romanticisation of the bushi way of life. Here are some quotes from notable period sources regarding bushi ways of thinking:

“The warrior doesn't care if he's called a beast or a dog; the main thing is winning.” Asakura Norikage (Soteki) (1474-1552)

“Offering prayers is for your own sake. Simply keep your mind straight and plain, honest and law-abiding. Be respectful for those who are above you, and be compassionate to those who are below you. Accept things as they are: what you have as what you have, what you don't as what you don't. Doing so seems to accord with the Buddha and Shinto deities. Even if you don't pray, by keeping this in mind you will enjoy various deities' protection. Even if you pray, though, if your mind is crooked, you'll be abandoned by Heaven's Way. So be careful.” Hôjô Sôun (1432 - 1519)

Bushido continued

It is important to note that some of the ideas found in the Edo period construct of Bushido come from the House codes of conduct found in the clans of Daimyo. This brings to mind the fact that codes of conduct aren't written to encourage behaviour that people already do naturally.

There are many examples of Bushi turning on their lords, showing up at muster for payment then “getting lost” on the way to battle, etc. The house codes were set up to remind people that there are consequences for the actions that act against their lord.

Notable Quotes on being Bushi

“Always work at reading, writing, martial skills, archery, and horse riding. There is no need to detail this. Hold literary skills in your left hand, martial skills in your right. This is the law from ancient times. Never neglect it.” Hôjô Sôun (1432 - 1519)

“When a man in the beginning of his life is ignorant of everything, he has no scruples, finds no obstacles, no inhibitions. But after a while he starts to learn, and becomes timid, cautious, and begins to feel something choking in his mind, which prevents him from going ahead as he used to before he had any learning. Learning is needed, but the point is not to become its slave. You must be its master, so that you can use it when you want it.” Yagyu Munemori (1571-1646)

On Being Bushi Continued

“A man who has thoroughly mastered the art does not use the sword, and the opponent kills himself; when a man uses the sword, he makes it serve to give life to others. When killing is the order, it kills; when giving life is the order, it gives life. While killing there is no thought of killing, while giving life there is no thought of giving life; for in the killing or in the giving life, no Self is asserted. The man does not see 'this' or 'that'; he makes no discrimination and yet knows well what is what. He walks on water as if it were earth; he walks on the earth as if it were water. One who has attained this freedom cannot be interfered with by anybody on earth. He stands absolutely by himself.” Takuan (1573 - 1645)

On Being Bushi Continued - Selected House Codes

“It should be the primary concern of everyone to train himself unceasingly in military accomplishment. Those who tend to excel their fellows in this should be given additional income. Particular attention should be paid to musketry, archery, and horsemanship...” Chosokabe Motochika

“Conform to the limitations of your fief; in all things your actions should be [consistent with your standing].” Toyotomi Hideyoshi

“... Even if you own a sword or dagger worth 10,000 pieces, it can be overcome by 100 spears each worth 100 pieces. Therefore, use the 10,000 pieces to procure 100 spears, and arm 100 men with them. You can in this manner defend yourself in time of war.” Asakura Toshikage

Selected House Codes Continued

“Whenever you have a little bit of time for yourself, read a book. Always carry something with characters written on it with you and look at it when no one's looking. Unless you accustom yourself to them, asleep or awake, you'll forget them. The same is true of writing.” Hôjô Sôun (1432 - 1519)

“When you have to walk past the elders lined up in the corridor for the master's audience, you must bend at the hips and lower your hands. It's absolutely out of the question not to show deference or humility but to stomp past. All samurai must behave humbly, deferentially.” Hôjô Sôun (1432 - 1519)

Selected House Codes Continued

“In regard to those who abscond: offenders must be punished whatever their excuse and so also their relatives. Proper reward should be given neighbors or friends who report anyone whose behavior causes suspicion that he is planning to desert. Those who have knowledge of such intent and fail to report it will receive the same punishment as the offender. Furthermore, a man who reports late for lumbering or construction and leaves without getting permission from the magistrate will have his lands declared forfeited. If a man deserts directly to another province, punishment will also be imposed on his relatives. Similarly, if a man's retainer (hikan) deserts [from labor duty], the master will be penalized threefold.” Chosokabe Motochika

Sources for further information

- [Mimusubi.com](https://mimusubi.com)
- Bushi Archives podcast
- Youtube channels: The Shogunate, Linfamy
- Japanese Shintō: An Interpretation of a Priestly Perspective (Jstor)
- The Samurai Mind - Thomas Cleary
- The Samurai Sourcebook - Steven Turnbull
- The Kojiki and Nihon Shoki
- The writings of Murasaki Shikibu, and her contemporaries