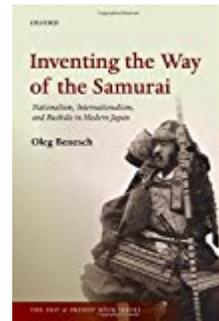


Oleg Benesch. *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido in Modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-870662-5.



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For well over a century, discourse on *bushidō* (“way of the warrior” or “way of the samurai”) has led many inside and outside of Japan to believe that an understanding of samurai ethics can reveal something fundamentally important about the nation and its people. Nevertheless, the myriad theories informing discussions of *bushidō* have received surprisingly little attention from historians. Oleg Benesch sets out to remedy this situation in his well-conceptualized and -executed historical monograph. As clearly indicated by the book’s title, Benesch views *bushidō* as an “invented tradition” intimately bound up with the articulation of modern Japanese nationalism and, perhaps more surprisingly, internationalism. Drawing on the articulation of that concept by Eric Hobsbawm and its later application to Japan by Stephen Vlastos, Benesch states his intent to explore *bushidō* from the standpoint of “how, by whom, and to what social and political effect ... certain practices and ideas [are] formulated, institutionalized, and propagated as *tradition*” (p. 7). In explaining just who did the inventing and how, the author presents the reader with numerous individuals and viewpoints (indeed, reflecting the topic’s popularity, there are too many to easily summarize here). While Christian educator Nitobe Inazō’s 1899 book *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* provided what has become the most fa-

mous exposition of *bushidō*, Benesch locates the origins of modern discourse on samurai ethics a decade earlier in “a confluence of intellectual and social trends around the overseas journeys of journalist and politician Ozaki Yukio,” who developed the concept as a “potential counterpart to English chivalry and the English ‘gentleman-ship’ that he idealized” (p. 5). For Benesch, these progressive, internationalist origins provided legitimacy and flexibility that resonated with postwar audiences, and thereby help explain how *bushidō* was able to survive having been “appropriated for ideological service by the militaristic state in the years before 1945” (p. 7).

The book’s first chapter considers Edo-era ruminations on samurai identity and their influence upon the *bushidō* articulated by anti-Tokugawa activists during the final years of the shogunate, with particular emphasis given to the long-standing practice of romanticizing past warriors and their actions. However, rather than perceiving here a thread of historical continuity connecting with mid-nineteenth-century meditations on samurai ethics, Benesch sees the links between *bakumatsu* ideas and earlier discourse as “problematic” (p. 11). For example, he argues for an important shift from an antiquarian focus on the declining martial skills and ethics of the warrior class per se to the broader proto-nationalistic, meta-

physical concerns animating the “nostalgic activism” of such figures as Yoshida Shōin and Yokoi Shōnan, and illustrates this sort of discursive change with a look at evolving discussions on balancing *bun* (“letteredness”) and *bu* (“martiality”) (pp. 28-36). Furthermore, looking ahead, he contends that the influence of Yoshida and others on modern *bushidō* theorists came only after a separate, wholly unrelated discussion of the topic had emerged in the late 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, the author asserts that the two decades following the Meiji Restoration were characterized by a popular disdain for the former samurai that left few people interested in idealizing the ethics of the old ruling class. The above perspective informs Benesch’s larger argument that “all modern *bushidō* theories are later constructs with no direct continuity from pre-Meiji history, while it is precisely the claims to such continuity that make *bushidō* an invented tradition” (p. 8). Chapter 2 focuses on the mid-Meiji origins of modern *bushidō* theorizing and especially on the aforementioned writings of Ozaki, which Benesch sees as reflecting an era when Japanese were taking a more measured look at Europe and America that avoided both blind adoration and xenophobic rejection, while concurrently displaying more interest and pride in their own culture. Meanwhile, attitudes toward Chinese civilization were not only less romanticized, but increasingly negative. It was within this context that Ozaki “instigated modern discourse” on the subject of *bushidō* and “foreshadowed many of the issues that Nitobe Inazō and other internationalist *bushidō* theorists would wrestle with a decade later” (p. 56).

The “*bushidō* boom” that accompanied Japan’s victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) is taken up in chapters 3 and 4. Victory in the latter conflict in particular was believed to have demonstrated that “spirit” trumped materiel, “with *bushidō* and ‘human bullets’ responsible for Japan’s military success” (p. 76). This tremendous expansion in *bushidō* discourse, Benesch explains, continued until around 1914, during which time theories on samurai ethics increasingly incorporated paeans both to regional heroes and national character. Often ahistorical, such efforts to connect samurai ethics to nationalist and militarist endeavors met with criticism from some *bushidō* writers, such as Protestant minister Uemura Masahisa. Nonetheless, the author argues, these new portrayals of *bushidō* merged easily with theories of the “Japanese spirit” and the national polity (*kokutai*), thereby forging links that also help explain the concept’s resilience. It was during these years, too, that Tokyo Im-

perial University professor of philosophy Inoue Tetsujirō emerged as the dominant theorist binding *bushidō* discourse to Japanese identity and national morality. In so doing, Inoue laid the foundations for what Benesch calls the “government-sanctioned and emperor-focused ‘imperial *bushidō*’” that “broadly equated the samurai ethic with the Yamato spirit,” “portrayed [it] as a uniquely Japanese ethic with no equivalents in other cultures or nations,” and “most importantly, ... called for absolute loyalty to the sovereign and nation, and sought to instill a willingness to die for these causes” (p. 148).

Although chapter 5 discusses the decline in popular *bushidō* discourse during the years between 1914 and the late 1920s, the author emphasizes that this weakening came only after the concept had gained widespread acceptance in the education system, the military, and society in general. Indeed, it was this broad recognition, he argues, that facilitated the resurgence of the nationalist and militarist agenda of “imperial *bushidō*” in the 1930s, a topic that is the focus of chapter 6. Nevertheless, the growing intensity and official imprimatur given to this “imperial” variation should not, Benesch stresses, be allowed to obscure the continuing expression of dissenting views on what comprised the key ethics of *bushidō*. Picking up this thread in chapter 7, he underscores how this multiplicity of prewar perspectives facilitated the post-war resurgence of *bushidō* discourse by making it possible to cast aside the militarism and emperor-centered nationalism of “imperial *bushidō*” as a perversion of “real” or “true” *bushidō*, the origins of which could be—and indeed continue to be—sought elsewhere.

Benesch has written a sorely needed study of modern *bushidō* discourse that displays impressive mastery of a wide variety of theorists and theories. His comprehensive and insightful coverage will serve well as a reliable guide and a rich reference source, and as a point of departure for further investigation of the numerous individuals and texts introduced. But the merits of his study go beyond these accomplishments by incorporating a thoughtful application of the “invented tradition” paradigm to a subject that could easily lend itself to a reflexive and simplistic treatment. Considering the relationship between invented traditions and ideologies, he sees them as “distinct” yet capable of significant overlap and determines that in “its most common usage, ... as a traditional samurai ethic and/or defining trait of the Japanese ‘national character’, *bushidō* is best treated as an invented tradition, with the specific context and content of this usage determining its ideological character” (p. 8). Benesch addresses potential criticism that the ongoing construc-

tion and reconstruction of traditional ideas and practices “make it difficult to argue for their specific invention” with his aforementioned rejection of any “direct continuity” between modern discourse on samurai ethics and earlier antecedents and, consequently, the clearly delimited period for discussions of *bushidō* since the late nineteenth century. Whether one concurs with this theoretical proposition—it is unclear, for instance, if the rejection of “direct continuity” leaves the door open to “indirect continuity”—the author presents a well-thought-out argument based on thorough research of *bushidō* discourse.

Benesch’s treatment provokes questions as well. One wonders why Shōwa-era *bushidō* is treated with relative brevity compared with the carefully detailed account of Meiji discourses, despite being identified as a “key component” of the former period’s militarism, as having then “reached new levels of dissemination in popular culture,” and as “fulfilling many of the criteria used by Marxist scholars of functional ideology as a ‘systemic and manipulative political program’” (p. 13). The result is an occasional weakening of the author’s stated objective of using context to delineate the ideological character and utility of *bushidō* as “invented tradition.” For instance, despite the growing impact of decidedly non-status quo economic and political ideas in military and bureaucratic circles during the 1930s, the label “conservative elements” appears to apply to most anyone with access to state authority. Thus, the purge of generals of the Imperial Way faction in response to the 26 February Incident of 1936 is described as “a victory for rival conservatives, usually known as the ‘Control Faction’” and said to have effectively ended political pluralism as “the weakening political parties rubber-stamped proposals put forth by the governing bureaucrats and military leaders” (pp. 198, 200). However, officers of the so-called Control Faction were closely associated with efforts to implement a planned “control economy” (*tōsei keizai*) and thereby elicited fervent support from anti-capitalist forces such as, for example, proletarian politicians seeking access to power. Meanwhile, even after the attempted coup mainstream party politicians retained considerable ability to extract compromise from military and bureaucratic reformers, and in 1940-41 the stoutest, ultimately successful, resistance to the reformist drive to create a new political and economic structure came from conservative elements and other vested interests both in and out of government.[1] Thus, while discussion of *bushidō* certainly went into overdrive during these years and bolstered militarism and nationalism, it is still not entirely clear just whose interests and political program were be-

ing most effectively served. Indeed, as Benesch convincingly demonstrates, even during the 1930s “the diversity of *bushidō* discourses meant that there was an interpretation suitable for almost any purpose, often supported by carefully selected historical texts” (p. 212). If so, then the diversity he highlights effectively as an ideological strength would also seem, contrarily, to obfuscate the functioning of this concept as an effective ideological tool—invented or otherwise—for any one portion of the governing elite.

While Benesch’s thesis of diversity as a source of resilience is well taken, closer consideration of the intimately related subject of modern martial arts (*budō*) and the influence of organizations such as the Dai-Nippon Butokukai (Great Japan Martial Virtue Association) might have provided an even fuller explanation for the staying power of *bushidō* discourse by exploring its role in the daily lives of many Japanese. For instance, Denis Gainty’s research on the Butokukai suggests the importance of the literally physical, routine embrace of *bushidō*-related ideas by the numerous students of modern *budō*. [2] Likewise, Yamamoto Reiko’s study of the organization’s purge by American occupation authorities, while relying partly on the problematic distinction between true and false *bushidō*, effectively connects that concept and the practice of martial arts to the ubiquitous character cultivation activities of the early twentieth century, and developing this linkage further could have also bolstered the author’s explanation of *bushidō*’s appeal. [3] Relatedly, while Benesch effectively demonstrates the influence of British ideas of “gentlemanliness” on discussions of *bushidō*, surely part of the appeal of such ideals can be explained by the existence of a robust indigenous discourse on personal cultivation and on the obligation of cultivated gentleman to provide political leadership. [4] Finally, to close on an admittedly more speculative matter: upon finishing this study, it occurred to me that the book’s emphasis on the diversity of *bushidō* discourse to explain its ongoing appeal and resilience seems at once persuasive and problematic. For if it is the case that the concept is “suitable for almost any purpose” (p. 212) and functions as an “invented tradition that can be mobilized for almost any contingency” (p. 247), one wonders at what point diversity becomes a synonym for emptiness, thus making *bushidō* essentially a trope for articulating more substantive ideas or ideologies.

Whatever the worth of the preceding critique and speculation, Oleg Benesch has written an invaluable and pioneering history of modern meditations on the “way of the samurai” that will serve students of the topic well as

they further investigate *bushidō* discourse and its significance for understanding modern Japan. Indeed, anyone interested in *bushidō* inside or outside of Japan will benefit greatly from reading Benesch's book.

Notes

[1]. The classic statement of proletarian party support for the national mobilization agenda of army staff officers was provided in 1934 by Asō Hisashi, general secretary the Social Masses Party, and is available in Hata Ikuhiko, *Gun-fashizumu undō-shi* [A History of the Military Fascism Movement] (Tokyo: Hara shobō, 1980), 339. For a consideration of the political implications of the outlook championed by Asō and like-minded politicians, see Earl Kinmonth, "The Mouse that Roared: Saitō Takao, Conservative Critic of Japan's 'Holy War' in China," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 331-360. On continuing political pluralism and the status of party power, see Gordon M. Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan, 1931-1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); and Furukawa Takahisa, *Shōwa senchū-ki no gikai to gyōsei* [The Diet and Government During Wartime Shōwa]

(Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2005).

[2]. Denis Gainty, *Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Meiji Japan* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[3]. Yamamoto Reiko, *Beikoku tai Nichi senryō seisaku to budō kyōiku: Dai Nippon butokukai no kōbō* [American Occupation Policy Toward Japan and Martial Arts Education: The Rise and Fall of the Great Japan Martial Virtue Association] (Tokyo: Nihon tosho sentaa, 2003).

[4]. For instance, regarding the concept of the gentleman, see Donald Roden, "Thoughts on the Early Meiji Gentleman," in *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, ed. Barbara Malony and Kathleen Uno (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 61-98; and, on personal cultivation more generally, Janine Tasca Sawada, *Practical Pursuits: Religion, Politics, and Personal Cultivation in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). A close reading of similarities and differences between elite Japanese and British thinking on governance is provided by Matsuda Kōichirō, *Edo no chishiki kara Meiji no seiji e* [From Edo Knowledge to Meiji Politics] (Tokyo: Perikansha, 2008), 17-176.

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