



Bushido: The Soul of Japan

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Chivalry is a flower no less indigenous to the soil of Japan than its emblem, the cherry blossom; nor is it a dried-up specimen of an antique virtue preserved in the herbarium of our history. It is still a living object of power and beauty among us; and if it assumes no tangible shape or form, it not the less scents the moral atmosphere, and makes us aware that we are still under its potent spell. The conditions of society which brought it forth and nourished it have long disappeared; but as those far-off stars which once were and are not, still continue to shed their rays upon us, so the light of chivalry, which was a child of feudalism, still illuminates our moral path, surviving its mother institution. It is a pleasure to me to reflect upon this subject in the language of Burke, who uttered the well-known touching eulogy over the neglected bier of its European prototype.

Bushido: The Soul of Japan Details

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From Reader Review Bushido: The Soul of Japan for online ebook

Diz says

There are several reasons why I didn't really like this book. First, it feels very dated. Nitobe often compares samurai to the knights of chivalry in a favorable light, which may have appealed to westerners when this was published, but really doesn't appeal to the modern reader which has a less romantic understanding of medieval life. When I read these comparisons, it brought up mostly negative images even though it was clear that the author meant it to be a positive image.

Second, Nitobe's sources are a bit suspect. When citing Japanese sources, he often cites literary, legendary, or semi-historical examples. He never once cites any documentary evidence or any testimony from any living samurais. The feudal system was abolished only around 30 years before the publication of this book, so numerous living sources were available at that time. The legendary sources that he cites are exceptional, not typical, which is why they have come down to us as legend. Creating a theory on how the typical samurai lived by citing exceptional sources is not convincing.

Third, Nitobe's expertise is not in Japanese cultural studies, but in western literature and philosophy. This can be seen in his reliance on western sources to help explain his concept of samurai ethics. Since more than half of his references are western, it underscores the weakness of his Japanese sources.

If you want to learn about pre-modern Japanese society and culture, or about the samurai themselves, there are other better researched sources. I would advise you to give this one a pass.

Andrea says

beautiful, excellent review, explanation and relation with modern Japan

CapsGuy says

What an interesting little book! As many of my Goodreads friends know, I have a keen interest in Japan, although I've never really read into its' history or the philosophical foundations on which it developed, at least to be what it was prior to significant Western influence.

The author makes a great point that now (over 100 years since he wrote this) that Bushido as a way of life passed through generations is long gone, what with Japan as we all see it today being what it is, but the soul of it still thrives in the people and culture. Of course nowhere near as prominently as it once did, but it is still there.

I do not mean in only the martial arts and other cultural activities, but in the fostering and development of Japanese people today. Although, as we are seeing on a global scale, this is lessening as we are all (with some exceptions, but as a general rule) converging towards similarity across the globe. This is evident especially when you compare generations in the Japanese, many of the elderly still have that fire and passion

in them, where now the youth are focused on more trivial matters and pursuits with little to no interest in their own nation's heritage. Of course Japan is rich in abundance with many unique festivities and whatnot, but a lot of people do these solely because it's always been done, and even though many have religious connotations, Japan is now one of the least religious nations in the world.

Of course Bushido doesn't depend on religion, but the fact it did spawn from it cannot be ignored.

I'd still say this book is of value even reading now and a lot of the psyche and practice comparisons throughout the book between the West and Japanese are relevant to this day. There is a significant amount of referencing to scholarly works and philosophical texts, both Eastern and Western throughout the book so readers from Shakespeare to Confucius may be interested in this man's explanations of such an important part of Japan's life.

Jackson Burnett says

When men's fowls and dogs are lost, they know to seek for them again, but they lose their mind and do not know to seek for it.

If the author of this book on the way of the Samurai had stopped two-thirds of the way through, I would be writing a five star review. The last third dealt with women and the future of the Japanese warrior. The former was painful; the latter verged on cultural chauvinism. Bushido: The Soul of Japan. A Classic Essay on Samurai Ethics merits about a 3.4 star rating.

Author Inazo Nitobe wrote this book in 1899 in his ongoing effort to explain traditions of his homeland to American readers. A Quaker, Nitobe draws heavily on the sayings of Confucius and the writings of Mencius to provide a holistic understanding of the worldview of the warrior society that dominated Japan from around 1100 to 1868 CE. I like this type of book and really think the author did a fine job with the exceptions noted above.

????? says

It was a very interesting book, I really enjoyed exploring the samurai ways of living, I highly recommend it .

Ali Reda says

A book written by a Westernized Japanese scholar, to answer Westerners' questions about the Japanese mentality and Bushido. So the book doesn't feel Japanese at all, you will find historical comparisons between the Chivalry of Europe and the Bushido of Japan. You will find many examples from the European and American cultures describing Bushido. Even when we encounter something against values of the western culture, like ritual suicide, we find him citing examples for it from the Western Culture. May be this method

was what me dislike the book. The following is some parts that caught my attention:

What Japan was she owed to the samurai. They were not only the flower of the nation, but its root as well.

We cannot share the admiration of the Europeans for their roses, which lack the simplicity of our flower. Then, too, the thorns that are hidden beneath the sweetness of the rose, the tenacity with which she clings to life, as though loth or afraid to die rather than drop untimely, preferring to rot on her stem; her showy colours and heavy odours--all these are traits so unlike our flower, which carries no dagger or poison under its beauty, which is ever ready to depart life at the call of nature, whose colours are never gorgeous, and whose light fragrance never palls. Beauty of colour and of form is limited in its showing; it is a fixed quality of existence, whereas fragrance is volatile, ethereal as the breathing of life. So in all religious ceremonies frankincense and myrrh play a prominent part. There is something spirituelle in redolence.

The swordsmith was not a mere artisan but an inspired artist and his workshop a sanctuary. Daily he commenced his craft with prayer and purification, or, as the phrase was, "he committed his soul and spirit into the forging and tempering of the steel." Every swing of the sledge, every plunge into water, every friction on the grindstone, was a religious act of no slight import. Was it the spirit of the master or of his tutelary god that cast a formidable spell over our sword? Perfect as a work of art, setting at defiance its Toledo and Damascus rivals, there was more than art could impart. Its cold blade, collecting on its surface the moment it is drawn the vapour of the atmosphere; its immaculate texture, flashing light of bluish hue; its matchless edge, upon which histories and possibilities hang; the curve of its back, uniting exquisite grace with utmost strength;--all these thrill us with mixed feelings of power and beauty, of awe and terror.

Emi Bevacqua says

It's not often I read non-fiction, and this was undeniably dry; but I'm glad I stuck with it. Being half-Japanese and having studied Japanese language and literature, having lived in Japan and with Japanese people, I've accumulated a slew of images and memories of quirks, anomalies, mannerisms and truisms that are all uniquely Japanese. A Japanese movie or TV show generally brings one or two of those to mind, but reading this Bushido book really gets to the heart of the Japanese matter. I'm surprised how relatable it remains today, 40 years after it was first published.

Not only is it interesting to study the roots of Japanese ethics, feudalism and notions of valor; but this book really made me think about some American things outside my normal sphere of reference - for example life for US military families, how moral relationships like the governing and the governed differ in various countries (or political parties), and also differing cultural views of self-control, respect for enemies, disdain for the intellectual, etc.

Based on names I came across in this book, I have a list of biographies I want to look for now: Sakuma, Saigo, Okubo, Kido, Ito, Okuma, Itagaki.

Edward Morton says

I can only admire and be fascinated by how a Japanese author is capable of describing his culture (or better, an element of his culture) by means of the classic European standards.

He translates the ever-lasting Samurai way of living through the point of view of a scholar of the XIXth century: it is amazing to see how Marx, Hegel, Montesquieu or even Bacon ideas pop up and are used to make understandable the perspective of the Bushi, even more, to show that they are not that different to us. But the author does not stop there, he shows a deep knowledge of the European culture by confronting Christian, Classical Greek and Roman or Medieval Islamic to Confucianism and Mencius ideas. He provides a common system of reference to describe something as esoteric and variable as the Bushido. Honestly, I have really enjoyed this essay.

Even more, because at the same time he presents without realizing, the society and main references of the European society at his time. The British imperialism, the late French revolution system and the German social nationalism are taken as the correct values, or better, the expected ones for a society to succeed. In this sense, a beautiful mix can be found: the pride and respect of his Japanese feudal origins confronted to the society he wishes his country should become. And I think (under the few knowledge I have of the history of Japan) that these two forces seem to have originated the modern Japanese way that culminated in the world war II. So, it is an cultivating journey also through the way society was back then. Interesting enough, I'm surprised on how the patriarchy and machismo are different from the European perspective. The role of women in Japanese society seems more active (at least as presented by the author), although always reduced to the back side. It is just an impression though, I don't have enough background to judge this.

Finally, I'm really surprised of the deep cultural knowledge the author has. He is able to compare the Japanese literature and poetry to German romanticism, he likes to have Shakespeare as a reference as much as he can and the classic mythological heroes are used for us to understand the feelings and emotions of the Samurai. Even don Quijote appears as a common frame to expose how absurd some situations could be. An enriching experience indeed.

John says

I wish all philosophy books were more like this! Engaging and beautifully written, BUSHIDO is an insider's look into the foundational beliefs and customs of one of the most mysterious (to Westerners) cultures on the planet. After reading this, you'll definitely have a much better understanding and appreciation of many aspects of Japanese culture that initially come across as being either senseless or totally barbaric. Nitobe does a fantastic job of finding unexpected parallels between both Eastern and Western trains of thought, and he offers many examples as to how they aren't nearly as dissimilar as one might think. Nitobe's knowledge of western philosophy is incredible, and his tone throughout the entire book is respectful of Western culture and not nearly as biased in favor of Eastern philosophy as I would have thought. Sure, being Japanese, he obviously has a sentimental attachment to the precepts of Bushido as part of his national heritage, but he's also quick to point out its weaknesses and abuses (which were rampant). However, Nitobe argues that the code of Bushido, when applied the way it was originally intended, is actually very similar to more "enlightened" religions like Christianity. He certainly makes a very appealing case for it--aside from the stuff about seppuku (ritualistic suicide).

Steven Walle says

I recommend this book to all who want to understand the character of the Japanese people. The author was

the best known author in the west in his time. He melds the philosophies of the east with the philosophies of the west going back to the Romans and the Greeks.

Enjoy and Be Blessed.

Diamond

Vivian says

Nitobe specifically wrote this book in 1900 to comparatively explain bushido to an occidental audience. He wrote it in English, later translated into Japanese, and he breaks down the tenets of bushido or the ways of the warrior, bushi (warrior) and do (way) and placed them within the historical context of chivalry and knighthood. Using analogies that western European readers would be familiar with from ancient Greek philosophers to Nietzsche.

Born before the Meiji Restoration (1868), he brings a syncretic perspective of feudal Japan and modern Japan. The transition, the changes in society greatly affected outward manifestation of bushido ideals, but he alludes to a deeper collective unconscious, the soul of Japan. He wrote this for his father, for a time that had past, and there is an underlining thread of how these tenets when perverted are problematic. Very quietly, there are hints that as a Christian Nitobe saw the rising imperial cultism and the intolerance that was manifesting as troubling. Read as a time coded document it is very interesting. Its value as a depository of Japanese culture, less so.

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The irresistible tide of triumphant democracy, which can tolerate no form or shape of trust—and Bushido was a trust organized by those who monopolized reserve capital of intellect and culture, fixing the grades and value of moral qualities—is alone powerful enough to engulf the remnant of Bushido. The present societal forces are antagonistic to petty class spirit, and Chivalry is, as Freeman severely criticizes, a class spirit. Modern society, if it pretends to any unity, cannot admit "purely personal obligations devised in the interests of an exclusive class."

John Eliade says

This book is a bit dated. For example:

Niggardliness of gold and of life excited as much disapprobation as their lavish use was panegyricized. - pg. 72

Just the use of the term "niggardliness" (which means quite simply, "greed" without overt albeit underlying racist connotations) shows that this is an old book. For reference, since the Shambhala cover and the relatively unknown nature of the book (but not its concept) could imply otherwise, "Bushido" was published at the turn of the 20th Century, and some historical context is in order.

American Commodore Perry opened up Japan to Western Trade in 1854 when he sailed a few gunboats into Tokyo harbor and "convinced" the Japanese to trade with the United States. The changes that took place in Japan soon afterward are carefully noted and documented by Inazo Nitobe - a Christianized, Western-educated, loyal Japanese - who watches the end of Japanese feudalism and the beginnings of Japanese modernization over the Meiji Restoration when Japan was centralized, reformed, and began its development.

Around the time "Bushido" was written, Japan had just defeated Qing China in a massive war (the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, referenced in the book as Japan's "newly acquired territories of Korea and Formosa, without a hint of irony) and would soon defeat Russia in the humiliating Russo-Japanese War ending in 1905. (And in my edition, William E. Griffis is writing his Introduction while this war is taking place, adding new urgency to this book's understanding.)

Japan's rise from feudal, backward, poverty-stricken monarchy on the fringe of Asia to a modern military machine capable of subduing one of the world's foremost civilizations was watched carefully and troubling to Western nations. With the defeat of Russia, the psychology of westernization was thrown into virtual chaos. If the Japanese are a "Yellow race" and any race "below white" was supposed to be naturally inferior, then how did the Japanese manage to pull off such a feat? Was it because the Japanese industrialized and Russia... didn't? Do degrees of industrialization count? ... Were Western theories of racial superiority... wrong?

This book serves as one historic explanation for this difference. Inazo Nitobe (or Nitobe Inazo to Japanese) converted to Christianity but still confessed that his major moral upbringing and current influence was Bushido, the code of the samurai. He then goes on to explain in excruciating detail the mindset of the modern Japanese man at the beginning of the 20th Century using poignant examples from the Bible, Shakespeare, and Greco-Roman mythology that the average westerner today and in 1900 would be well aware of.

So the central questions of "Bushido" are where did Bushido come from? What is Bushido? And where is Bushido going?

He answers the first rather simply ("why, from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism, of course!"), but draws interesting questions that are never answered, for example:

Shinto theology has no place for the dogma of "original sin." On the contrary it believes in the innate goodness and Godlike purity of the human soul, adoring it as the adytum from which divine oracles are proclaimed. - pg. 9

The second question draws mostly from Western examples to show how the Samurai of Japan and the Knights of Europe are quite similar (albeit with a late 19th Century romanticized ideal of both Samurai and Knights), equating much of the Japanese mindset with the Europeans. Or as one disingenuous reviewer put it, "I imagine him expounding on this point while wearing a top hat in a London salon, charming the knickers of some gaggle of Oxbridge twats." While I disagree with the sentiment Joey Kurtzman expressed, there is some truth to this idea: Nitobe was dictating to a Western audience that he wanted to use contemporary (of the geographic kind) examples to show that he wasn't some alien from another planet. He did this rather successfully, even if some readers (including myself) a century later would prefer our study of oriental culture and philosophy mixed with oriental history and anecdotes. It's important to remember the CONTEXT with which Nitobe was trying to explain, most notably his audience.

Context, people. Context.

Has Western Civilization, in its march through our land, already wiped out every trace of its ancient discipline? It were a sad thing if a nation's soul could die so fast. That were a poor soul that could succumb so easily to extraneous influences. - pg. 127

But this here is the central question of the book, and is as important and interesting of a question in 2015 as it was in 1900. Nitobe makes a point that "Stoicism" is no longer a coherent system of thought, but has been entirely subsumed into a gamut of emotions that one can feel. No longer does one make a conscious decision to be "a stoic" one simply "can be" without drawing counter point logical answers. So Nitobe hypothesizes in 1900, that Bushido will die out in Japan as a framework, but survive in the background of the minds of Japanese just as Stoicism survives in the West centuries (millenia) after the death of Marcus Aurelius.

Scratch a Japanese of the most advanced ideas, and he will show a samurai. - pg. 142

I first picked this book up in my school. I live and work in Korea but my boss, raised in Japan originally told me, "This book is the key to understanding the Japanese mind." I'm writing this when I'm supposed to be in Japan, experiencing it (travel difficulties have me writing this from a Seoul suburb) but I have to say that from my limited experience with Japanese people, Nitobe is not far off.

I gave this book five stars because after reading it, you will understand *the essence* of what the Japanese think. The notion that being polite is more important than telling the truth, is totally averse to a western mindset and what has led a Canadian acquaintance of mine to label the Japanese as "a slimy, two-faced people" but in actuality, being in close contact with them, is just a way of trying to avoid offending... even if the imagined possible offense would come off as incredibly ridiculous to a boy raised in New England.

This book delivers the essence of what a Japanese thinks and the historic motivating factors that underlie Japanese culture. It is also well-written, and a pleasure to read (I read it on an extended subway journey). Each chapter leads into the other quite easily, which is quite impressive and not something I feel authors at the turn of the century (in their non-native tongue) were good at constructing. What solidifies the stars is that it makes the reader think as it implies hard HARD questions about culture, society, colonialism, and westernization.

Nitobe at one point discusses the division between the honorable samurai, and the shrewd merchant class of Japan. That it was considered beneath Japanese nobility to deal with finances and that even farmers (in your FACE Indian Varna system!) were above merchants who dealt in the marketplaces. The required separation between money and nobility was necessary to maintain a balance between the powerful and the rich.

But what happened in Nitobe's lifetime, that he mentions a bit, was how Commodore Perry transformed Japan simply by opening up Japan to capitalism and western trade. The prices of goods in Japan dropped dramatically and the price of her domestic goods rose as they were prepared for foreign export (the opening of Japan is usually used as a prime example of the good of free trade). What happened, though it should be noted that this is solely my opinion and not expressed at all by Nitobe, Griffis, or Shambhala publications (which is a strange company to be publishing this book since it's hardly Buddhist at all) is that all of a sudden, that lowly merchant class was able to grasp at what they wanted: power. The merchants were able to buy power, just as the merchant classes (that troublesome fourth estate) gained power in England, and other European states, who eventually went on to found the United States itself. The samurai dwindled, until going out in a blaze of glory in the Satsuma Rebellion. But while the Samurai were the last official card-carrying members of Bushido, just as the Knights were the last members of the Chivalric code, the merchants and gentlemen rising to power, rubbing elbows with Kings and Emperors, now became gentrified and were able to adopt the noblesse customs that had been forbidden them for so long. And so Bushido, albeit corrupted

just like corrupted ideas of Chivalry, survive in the Japanese mindset.

Now that is a book I look forward to: *Bushido Revisted*, the Samurai Code of Honor in Historic and Current Context

Bernie Gourley says

On the whole, people have ambivalent feelings about feudal times. On the one hand, these were horrible times to be alive for 99.5% of the population. Chances are that if you'd lived during that time you'd be toiling ceaselessly on the land with no hope of your lot in life ever improving. To add insult to injury, everything was determined on a hereditary basis, with merit having little to do with anything. Therefore, that person you would have to slather obsequiousness on was as likely to be a putz as not.

On the other hand, there is a kind of nostalgia about these times because we can't help but feel that there is a kind of virtue that has been lost. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, we think that society is ever advancing, but, in reality, we advance like a wave--losing as much on the backside as we gain on the front.

Inazo Nitobe's book give us an accounting of the virtue practiced by the *samurai*, the warrior class of feudal Japan. *Bushido* means the way of the warrior. Nitobe lived after the feudal era of Japan, in the late 19th and early 20th century. He was an educator, and the book has a feeling of erudition. Interestingly, the author was a Quaker and received education in the West, and, therefore, is able to contrast the Japanese worldview with that of Westerners.

The book is built around discussion of the seven precepts of *bushido*: justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, sincerity, honor, and loyalty. Each of these virtues has a chapter devoted to it (Ch. 3 through 9.) The book first introduces *bushido* as an ethical system, and then it explains the effect that Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism played in the development of this system.

Later chapters outline the education and training of a *samurai*, the importance of stoicism, the institution of suicide (*seppuku*), the symbolism of the sword in Japanese society, the role of women, the role of *bushido* as an ethical system in the present-day (his present), and its role in the future.

Our views of virtue have changed, but in some sense remain the same. The seven virtues are all still considered virtuous, but we don't regard them in the same way today. In some cases, we are better off with today's views, but it's not always so clear.

Consider the seventh precept, loyalty. We still value loyalty, but in today's society there is a Shakespearean addenda: "to thine own self be true." In other words, we no longer believe in loyalty that is blind as was valued in the days of old.

Sincerity, which is also referred to as veracity or honesty, is also seen differently today. As depicted in the Jim Carey movie, *Liar, Liar*, there is a widespread view that it is better to fib and make someone feel better than it is to tell the truth and hurt the other's feelings.

One of the most intriguing chapters is the one that deals with *seppuku*. This is a concept that has never been well-understood in the West, and it's a major point of cultural disconnect. While the Japanese have tended to see suicide as a means to restore honor that was lost in failure, in the West we tend to see it as a more

pathetic and cowardly affair. I've recently been reading Ian Fleming's *You Only Live Twice*, and this is one of many points of diverging attitudes between "Tiger" Tanaka and James Bond.

This book is definitely worth a read. It is thought-provoking, and is one of those books to be read slowly and conscientiously.

Paul E. Morph says

This is an enjoyable and enlightening read provided you don't go into it expecting it to be a detailed historical study of Bushido as we would expect to see today. Written at the turn of the century, Inazo Nitobe's book is very much a product of its time and tells the modern reader almost as much about the time in which it was written as it does of feudal Japan.

The author writes well but this is more of a misty-eyed, nostalgic pining for 'the good old days' than a scientific analysis. Nitobe illustrates his points with examples from Japanese mythology and epic historical poems which obviously were not meant to be taken literally. It's a bit like somebody trying to prove the existence of the Christian god using only the Bible as evidence; to accept the veracity of the 'evidence' you have to already have accepted the existence of what you're trying to prove. It's a bit self-defeating to anybody looking on from a neutral, unbiased viewpoint.

That's not to say this isn't worth reading, though. I enjoyed it a great deal, as romanticised and flawed as it is, more as a historical document than an actual history book. It's difficult not to get swept up by the author's enthusiasm and love of his subject.

Miss Laura says

I read this book as i have a general fascination with japan and its sense of morals and values. This book was immeasurably helpful when it comes to giving an insight into where their beliefs came from and the thinking behind it. This book contains many quotes from priests and scrolls which give a better understanding of the many ways in which the samurai code can be interpreted. This was great for understanding, so much so that even though its a small book, it took a long time to read because i was caught for long periods of time in a contemplative spell.
