Roles of Samurai Women: Social Norms and Inner Conflicts During Japan’s Tokugawa Period, 1603-1868
By Patricia E. Anderson

The Samurai male during the Japanese Tokugawa Period spanning the better part of the 17th through 19th centuries (1603 – 1868), was at the top of the class structure. Under Tokugawa rule, the samurai were stripped of their warrior status and assigned to local bureaucratic positions, with literacy replacing swordsmanship for potential promotion.¹ This new role of bureaucrat over swordsman at the beginning of the period demanded many adjustments and resulted in a highly ordered, peaceful society. Though his social status remained high, his cultural relevance waned. In the new structure, he lived under the repressive strict chain of command within the clan. Samurai women in this period endured even greater repression and hierarchical subjugation.²

Attitudes of gender hierarchy and discrimination toward women in the samurai class during the Tokugawa Period created internal conflict for them. As samurai men moved toward civil servants focus moved toward the household. A man’s house brought either respect or shame to him and his clan and women were the catalyst for both. In that sense, women held great power. However, repression of women was the means by which the household obtained honor and respect. If women were not properly submissive the family name could be ruined and in severe cases the men in charge of the house ordered to commit seppuku, or suicide. Thus, a woman who served her husband well brought great honor to his home and ultimately rendered service to the entire clan.³ Women who had the courage to question authority suffered knowing the consequences of breaking from the expected mold would result in some form of punishment for themselves and for their families.

The concept of service to the clan took precedence during this period and individual rights were nonexistent. Women were

¹ Andrew Gordon, A Modern History of Japan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16-17, 38-39
² Yosuke Nirei, “Japan Through Film”, Class Lecture, IUSB, Fall 2013.
³ Ibid.
New Views on Gender 2014

considered mere “tools for the longevity of the house” to preserve the honor and lineage by bearing children for their husbands and by being good examples of virtue to members of the house and all other members of the clan. Although women in the peasant, merchant, and artisan classes worked beside the men on farms, running the shops, and working to make useful objects, typically samurai women did not engage in manual labor. The exception to this was within the lower class samurai such as in Seibei’s household shown in The Twilight Samurai.\(^4\) Within the higher classes they were housewives and the primary expectations of them were ones of morality. Additionally, femininity in all areas including their dress, hairstyles, the way in which they carried themselves, and their mannerisms was of utmost importance for women to model.\(^5\)

A historical analysis of the required domestic roles and attitudes of women in samurai society as viewed through the lens of three period films: Miyamoto Musashi , Samurai Rebellion, and Twilight Samurai. These films cover the early, mid, and later Tokugawa Period and respectively offer great insight into the conflicts faced by Tokugawa women in the samurai class. Examining the behavior of three women in these films, we observe classic examples of the ideal submissive samurai women who conversely exercised unexpected rebellion at key points in their lives.

In Samurai Rebellion\(^6\) Lady Ichi was introduced into the Sasahara house as the new wife for Yogoro. Her initial words to him and the members of the household expressed her humility and her willingness to be of service. Her voice had a pleasing pitch and soft quality. She appeared dressed in a lovely kimono, was beautifully coiffed, and displayed feminine mannerisms which exhibited all of the important external characteristics for a samurai woman to possess. One source for those expectations was a non-Confucian scholar, Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714). He wrote a behavioral code “The Great Learning for Women (Onna Daigaku).”\(^7\) A misogynistic writing detailing the many character flaws intrinsic to women, it very specifically spelled out how they should act in order to avoid bringing ruin to the house. “Such is the stupidity of her character that it is incumbent on her, in every detail, to distrust

\(^{4}\) The Twilight Samurai, directed by Yoji Yamada (2002; Japan: Shochiku Company, 2002), DVD.
\(^{5}\) Class Lecture.
\(^{6}\) Samurai Rebellion, directed by Masaki Kobayashi (1967; Japan: Janus Films, 1967), DVD.
herself and obey her husband.\textsuperscript{8} The desirable traits he listed ranged from self-denial, self-control, submissiveness, and avoidance of any emotional outburst at all costs to politeness, humility, propriety, and never expressing opposition to one's husband but always properly revering and worshipping him.\textsuperscript{9} Education was considered unnecessary for women during this period. It was only into the Meiji period (beginning in 1868) that education of women was an added element of being a good wife and mother. Even then the reason for their education was solely in order to better serve their husbands and the state.\textsuperscript{10}

The course of Ichi's life was ordered by male superiors which was typical in this time period. As a young woman and engaged to a man she wanted to marry, the lord of the clan decided he wanted her for a concubine. Her acquiescence, in spite of her desires, confirmed her submissive acceptance of her lot as a female. When he later expelled her and ordered her to marry Yogoro, a man she had never met, she once again acquiesced and this time left behind the son she had given birth to for the lord. As a new wife she completely devoted herself to serve the family with humility, kindness, and gentleness. Though her mother-in-law was an unbearably difficult woman, Ichi served her in the same obedient manner that she served the other more agreeable family members by following protocol of respecting the hierarchy within the house.

Two key points of conflict arose in her life. She had given birth to the lord's son and had been ordered to recover at a spa. Upon returning, she discovered the lord had replaced her with a new concubine. This was not an uncommon occurrence. Ichi reacted by attacking the concubine, tearing at her hair, chasing the lord and slapping him repeatedly. Such a strong reaction is not out of character for someone in another society or time period but for a samurai female in that time frame that was outrageous behavior.

Women were never to engage in emotional outbursts of any kind or exhibit signs of negative emotions. Physically striking a male was even more preposterous; especially one who is in top position of the clan. Why would Ichi act in this way? Later in the film she explained herself to Yogoro. In her abhorrence of the position of having no say over becoming his concubine and all that implied

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
New Views on Gender 2014

about the inequity of gender roles in society, she had vowed to herself that she would give the lord a son in the hope that he would never cause another young girl to experience what she had. Upon seeing that the new concubine was proud of her position, accepting status-quo, something snapped within Ichi. Her strong opinion about the oppressed role of women was enough to prompt completely unacceptable female samurai behavior.

The lord's heir died and he ordered Ichi's return to the castle since her son would become heir. She initially refused. Samurai women were submissive but they also possessed impressive inner strength in order to behave in the tightly restricted manner expected. Repeatedly, we see these characteristics in Ichi. For example, she denounced the son she had birthed for the lord vowing to Yogoro from that moment on only their daughter existed for her and again when she first went meekly to the castle giving up her chance at a life with her love. That same inner strength appeared in her defiance of the orders to leave Yogoro and return to the castle.

Ichi's conflict in that crisis epitomized samurai women's lack of meaningful choices in how to live their lives. Social norms offered no luxury of choosing their own way, deciding from their own personal beliefs; but rather, they were to obey orders from outside themselves. With great inner fortitude they molded their beliefs to those of the community. They did so for the good of the house and the well-being of the entire clan and in turn promoting the continuation of a well-ordered society. The societal order required submitting to the lord's demand, regardless of how cruel, unjust, or selfish it appeared. Ichi was in torment knowing she had no true options. To disobey meant required suicide for her husband and his father as well as complete ruin of the family name. To return to the castle was the end of her life in all the good and meaningful ways she had come to experience with this family.

In the film Miyamoto Musashi Otsu was the virtuous woman engaged to Musashi's friend. She lived dutifully within the village, waiting faithfully for his return from war. She understood her role as one of service to her elders and to men always acting with proper, respectful behavior. However, when Musashi was hung for a crime he did not commit, Otsu acted outside the social norms of adhering to the edict decreed by the village elders. Instead, she begged the priest to save him. Upon his refusal, she brazenly

11 Class Lecture.
12 Miyamoto Musashi, directed by Hiroshi Inagaki (1954; Japan: Toho Company, 1954), DVD.
found a way to loosen the rope and lower Musashi to the ground.

This defiance against authority spoke of Otsu’s conflicting beliefs. The village decreed that Musashi should die for his crime. Her humanity, combined with her feelings toward Musashi, prompted her to act totally out of character for a typical samurai woman. At one point she and Musashi fled the village and hid in the mountains. This was another dramatic act against the expected behavior of a modest woman since they were neither married nor engaged. When he was sentenced to study in order to transform himself into an educated, respectable samurai, she melded back into the expected role of servitude within the clan. Finally, when he decided to leave and prove his worthiness of samurai status she again boldly stretched beyond the demure role of propriety and requested that he take her with him. Though she was not technically a samurai woman until marriage to a samurai male, she lived in a community where the same strict rules extended to her.

Otsu alternated between submission and rebellion which was typical of all three women in the films. This movement shows how difficult it must have been to completely move from the role of proper Samurai female to the life of rebellion. Where could one live and survive in that society if one went totally outside the boundaries of accepted behavior? The answer, of course, is nowhere. This was the conflict samurai women addressed when torn between acceptance of one’s lot and personal convictions of values that differed from the Tokugawa social norms. Tomoe, in The Twilight Samurai, was the epitome of feminine virtue in samurai society. At the same time, her actions alternated between adherence and disregard for the strict social structural guidelines for women’s behavior. On one hand, she submitted to the marriage her brother arranged and to the plan that she must remarry after her divorce. Still, she consistently defied the norms. For example, one day she took Seibei’s girls to a local festival of the peasants. Samurai were not permitted to frequent local peasant activities. Tomoe’s response to that rule was her observation that without the peasants the samurai could not exist. She took the girls and enjoyed the day immensely, indicating her complete disregard for normal samurai concerns of social status distinctions. Another indication of snubbing her nose at social status distinctions is presented by the fact that she considered marriage to Seibei when he was in the lowly rung of samurai earning a mere 50 koku per year when she just came out of a marriage to a 1200 Koku per year family.
New Views on Gender 2014

The high demands of propriety for women were spelled out, again by Kaibara Ekken in "The Greater Learning for Women." "[A] woman must form no friendship and no intimacy except when ordered to do so by her parents or middlemen. Even at the peril of her life must she harden her heart like rock or metal and observe the rules of propriety."\(^{13}\) Not only must women be supremely feminine on the exterior, but they must be completely hardened on the inside to all personal emotions, comparing the heart as being solid like stone or metal. Tomoe's casual attitude toward friendship with Seibei seemed unusual for that time period. In one scene as Tomoe saw Seibei leaving her house, before she could say hello she began to chase him as he was walking away. Her sister-in-law reproched her, saying it was inappropriate to talk with a samurai on the street. Especially as a divorced woman whose family was in the midst of a proposal discussion with another man. Tomoe was clearly unconcerned with such expectations, yet she obeyed her sister-in-law, showing her submission to the hierarchic of superiority within a household.

Tomoe's conflicted opinions developed early. While visiting Seibei's girls she told them of her childhood friendship with their father beginning when she was five years old. At age nine her mother informed her it was no longer appropriate to play with boys. Gender discrimination began at a young age and with indoctrination from the women themselves. Tomoe's says "it is no fun being a girl" to Seibei's daughters, which represents her conflicting value system. She was a woman devoted to family, living in accordance to their values, yet rebelling by the occasional internal questioning of those values, and at other times by her actions of defiance against them.

Tomoe went often to Seibei's home, doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning for him. She taught his daughters many skills. None of these things would have been normal accepted behavior. Her brother allowed it because he felt guilt himself over marrying her to a man who ultimately physically abused her. Through her acts of kindness, service, and her body language the viewer can sense that she would like to be attached to Seibei. However, she has no rights to verbally or physically express such desire. Tomoe's role was one of subservience to her elders and all men within the clan which included keeping her desires to herself.

New Views on Gender 2014

Otsu, Ichi, Tomoe ultimately rebelled against the societal norms. In addition to possessing the sweet, mild-mannered essence of femininity expected, they also exemplified the strength it required to be good samurai women. Faced with decisions to submit to oppression and stay within the confines of the behavior code, each drew upon strong inner resources to defy authority and forge their paths according to their personal convictions. In Otsu’s case, one knows her life will be filled temporarily with mere duty but feels the hope of a future potential reunion with Musashi. For Tomoe, the result was a life of meaning through marriage to Seibei though short lived as he died in battle a few years after the marriage. She was left with no income and low social status to raise the girls. The result for Ichi was the loss of her life and Yogoro’s and the ultimate ruin of the family name. These women made choices not out of desire for a happy ending, but out of an inner conviction of what gave life meaning and purpose, of desire for greater equitability between men and women, and for what was right and just which ultimately pushed the boundaries of gender restrictions within the Tokugawa society. Great change in women’s roles and rights did not occur until well into the 1900s. These three women exhibited attitudes of many women in Tokugawa society who experienced the internal and external struggles of repression. Through their actions they set the stage for the progress that was to come.

Bibliography


Nirei, Yosuke. “Japan Through Film”, Class Lectures, IUSB, Fall
