



Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan*

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Most readers of this journal know that *bushidō*, whatever its claims to the contrary, is a twentieth-century creation. But if, like me, you are only knowledgeable about some of the major twists in its development, this book is the perfect fix for that lacuna. Benesch gives a thorough and balanced account of *bushidō*'s ideological development from the medieval period up to the present. In our contemporary historiographical context, we recognize the scent of historical reconstruction when we come across it. And in *bushidō* that scent is unmistakable.

Benesch follows that scent, tracking it to its sources. He traces the subterranean roots of *bushidō* to a time long before it became so visible in its modern form. Of course, going back to the roots of the tradition is exactly what the ideologues of the modern period purported to do, but Benesch digs up what was really there before

it became so politicized. The reconstruction of the past seldom happens all at once, but is more often a complex event that surreptitiously starts in the margins of our collective consciousness, sneaking up on us until we cannot help but deal with it. By then, however, it is often too late to modify or mollify easily because some political group has already taken control of its articulation and put it to use in furthering its own agenda. If you want a balanced, sophisticated critique of how *bushidō* came to achieve such a powerful ideological presence in Japan, this book is again an excellent place to begin.

We can also think of another way in which a reconstruction of the past influences societal developments, namely when a key idea gains enough legitimacy that, even when criticized, it is seldom rejected so fully that it is completely eradicated. Instead, it steps out of the spotlight for a while, waiting in the wings ready to come back on stage at a key moment, and then often in the guise of a new character or a least an old one with a costume change. Benesch appreciates this dynamic within the ideological history of *bushidō*, calling it “resilience.” Once it establishes its presence in the Meiji period, *bushidō* sometimes recedes in its influence, but at other times returns in full force playing a key role in history.

I especially appreciate Benesch’s avoiding the temptation to offer an essentialist, unequivocal characterization of *bushidō* as if it were a single idea interpreted from different perspectives through history. It is not that we change our view of it, but instead that *bushidō* itself transmutes into something different. Like a shape-shifting fox, *bushidō* assumes a variety of forms through its history, forms well documented by Benesch. He investigates the historical variations we might have expected: an array of pre-Tokugawa, Tokugawa, *bakumatsu*, Meiji, post-Meiji, wartime, and post-war appearances. Less predictably, though, he also takes us on a fascinating tour of a menagerie of Chinese-influenced species and anti-Chinese species, of Christian (including even Quaker!) variants and Buddhist anti-Christian variants, and of universalist permutations that actively sought western parallels alongside nativist constructions that used *bushidō* in support of its claim for Japanese uniqueness. I have nothing but admiration for Benesch’s skill in unearthing so many forms of *bushidō* through history.

Now, as befits this journal, my review turns to making a few observations and comments of special relevance to philosophers. First, as a general principle, I suspect that the most resilient symbols and philosophical motifs are those, like *bushidō*, that elude a fixed definition and are pliable enough to assume new forms in new circumstances. When I teach American students about the context of twentieth-century Japanese philosophical discussions of such ideas as *kokutai* and the East Asian Co-prosperity sphere, I have used an analogy from their own culture, namely, the idea of “family values” as it is played out in American politics. At least from the time

of Ronald Reagan, I cannot think of a single US politician who has taken a position *against* family values. Yet, I would be hard pressed to come up with the names of any two politicians who define family values in the same way. Are family values limited to two-parent families? Must the parents be a heterosexual couple? Do family values allow for medical interventions to limit family size or to avoid congenitally challenged offspring? And so forth. Although ordinary US citizens and politicians alike may answer such questions differently, they nonetheless all claim to be upholding “family values.”

After reading Benesch, I wonder if at some point *bushidō* in modern Japan attained a similar status. Arguments about *bushidō* often seem more about how to define it than whether to advocate or reject it. That is, discussions often seem to shape the ideal to one’s agenda rather than question its fundamental value. In his essay for *Rude Awakenings* concerning the Kyoto School relation to the political ideology of its time, Ueda Shizuteru called this phenomenon “a tug-of-war” over what politically charged words mean. In the history of philosophy, such tugs-of-war are more common than some purist philosophers might expect. As interpreters of Japanese philosophy, we should attune ourselves to the possibility that some philosophical discourse is not about justifying or refuting an idea, but instead an attempt to shape or re-shape what is accepted at the time as an unassailable ideal. In our contemporary political situation in both Europe and the United States, for example, the intellectual battle is not over whether patriotism is good or bad, but rather over what constitutes “true” patriotism.

Another philosophical issue I would like to raise is that of hybridity. As an historian Benesch seldom directly addresses the issue of how to locate *bushidō* within the cluster of Japanese philosophical traditions: Buddhist, Confucian, and Shintō. As a philosopher I would like to raise the following question: when a value, phrase, or idea historically connected with Confucianism becomes part of an account of *bushidō*, is it still “Confucian?” Or, once it has been assimilated into *bushidō*, has it become a *bushidō* phenomenon and no longer a Confucian one? For example, I maintain the Confucian values and the Buddhist values in the Shōtoku *Constitution* remain true to their origins. The *Constitution* allows Confucian values to remain Confucian, the Buddhist Buddhist. It does so by allocating them to distinctive domains, namely, Confucianism for social relations and political roles, Buddhism for psychological introspection and personal transformation. Does *bushidō* assimilate aspects of Confucianism (and Buddhism or Shintō) through such an algorithm of allocation or does it cross-breed them to create a new species of ideology? I believe *bushidō* has evolved into a true hybrid. First, I should explain what I mean by a hybrid because the term is often used by scholars in a loose fashion, mak-

ing it almost a synonym for “syncretism.” But both allocation and hybridization are syncretistic. Of philosophical importance is how they differ.

A hybrid is a cross-breeding of two species that creates *a new*, third species. Allocation leaves the two parents intact within its syncretizing and they can later be separated out if circumstances call for it. You can take the “Confucian” values out of the Shōtoku *Constitution* and still recognize them as Confucianism. By contrast, in a true hybrid you cannot go back in that way because the parents are absorbed into the DNA of the new species and can no longer be extracted. A mule is a cross-breeding of horse and donkey, but you cannot use a mule to be a parent of a horse or donkey. Or, according to the analysis of most genetic botanists, a loganberry is a hybrid of a raspberry and blackberry. In turn a boysenberry is a hybrid of a loganberry and a raspberry. Yet, you cannot cross-pollinate a raspberry and blackberry to create a boysenberry. So the practical issue behind my question about *bushidō* is whether the “Confucian values” within it can ever be extracted again into a Japanese Confucianism. I think not.

If I am right, that would help explain why we can identify the presence of “Confucian” values in Japanese society, but very little Confucianism *per se*, even as a philosophical tradition. There is certainly scholarship *about* Confucianism in modern Japan, but we do not find very much Confucian philosophizing (comparable to Soga Ryōjin’s philosophizing in a Shin Buddhist tradition, Nishitani Keiji’s in a Zen Buddhist one, or Ueda Kenji’s in a Shintō one, for example). If Confucianism and its values are like the blackberry, the boysenberry of *bushidō* has gradually taken over the garden and pushed it out. In the genealogy of *bushidō*, we find values of Confucianism’s parentage, but once the new species was established, Confucian values became *bushidō* values and truly Confucian no longer.

For example, although loyalty is certainly a major Confucian value (albeit admittedly not one of the cardinal five), Confucian loyalty evolved into a new species within Japan. The loyalty taught in, say, the National Morality system of the Japanese education system from the Taishō period up to the end of the War is not, I would argue, the loyalty of Confucianism. Once loyalty was *bushidō*-ized, it could no longer be extracted as Confucian. Starting from around the Akō Incident of the forty-seven *rōnin* up to 1945, the *bushidō* form of loyalty gradually flourished so much that it pushed out the Confucian sense.

In conclusion, I’d say Benesch’s book is not only a classical work in Japanese history, but also one I would heartily recommend to anyone interested in the history of Japanese philosophy. It may not itself be philosophical, but it gives the detailed information about the historical development of an idea and an ideology that should provoke any philosopher interested in Japan. In

general I would argue that scholars of Japanese philosophy can benefit from reading intellectual histories of Japan, at least ones of this caliber.

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