

Can Samurai Teach Critical Thinking?

PRIMARY SOURCES IN THE CLASSROOM

BY ETHAN SEGAL

Many Americans are fascinated by the samurai. Although there are no samurai today—the official status was abolished by the Japanese government in the 1870s—they remain alive and well in the popular imagination. Samurai-themed manga such as *Lone Wolf and Cub*, *Blade of the Immortal*, and *Vagabond* are wildly popular, as are animated television series such as *Samurai Champloo* and *Samurai Jack*. Japan's legendary warriors star in many computer and video games and are regulars on the silver screen, inspiring classic movies such as *The Magnificent Seven* and *Star Wars* as well as more recent films including *Kill Bill* and *The Last Samurai*.

Teenagers and university students are important consumers of these products, whether at the movie theater or in the lecture hall. High school students' curiosity about samurai and ninja accounts, in part, for the popularity of Japanese graphic novels and anime fan clubs. At the college level, interest in warriors leads students to take courses on traditional East Asia, and samurai are popular research paper topics. When I asked my students to write paragraphs on where their prior knowledge of samurai had come from, most cited movies and television, with fifteen percent specifically mentioning Edward Zwick's film *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise. By their own admission, students' fascination with samurai is fueled by what they see in the entertainment industry.

For those of us who teach early Japanese, Asian, or world history, this information does not come as a surprise. However, it does pose a dilemma. Whether at the high school or the college level, it is tempting to play up the appeal of the samurai to attract students to our classes. I know colleagues who make posters featuring samurai to promote certain courses, but most of us do not offer what such posters seem to promise: an admiring look at the stoic, sword-wielding, honor-bound Japanese warrior. Instead, our lessons deconstruct the mythic image of Japanese warriors that students bring to the classroom. Herein lies the dilemma. Are we being dishonest? If we draw students to class by referencing the romantic appeal of fictionalized samurai (*a la* Tom Cruise), is it fair then to teach only about real samurai like Saigō Takamori?

I contend it *is* fair, but our goals as instructors, regardless of discipline or level, are not merely to correct the false impressions disseminated by Hollywood. Rather we strive to teach skills such as how to evaluate sources, think critically, and construct persuasive papers. One way to accomplish these goals effectively is by using students' interest in



Seinan sensō nishiki-e of Saigō Takamori on a white horse with Shinsei Kotoku banner, gazo film no. 4649. With permission of the Japanese National Diet Library.

the “cool” aspects of samurai to get them to think critically about the past. Although this might seem obvious, there are surprisingly few resources available to aid teachers in designing such lessons on the samurai. For example, this journal has recently featured two articles on the samurai.¹ Both are very informative and worth reading, for they provide valuable background information as a “reality check” against pop culture depictions of samurai. However, they do not offer concrete suggestions on how to use the material in the classroom. Fortunately, there are many good ways to use the cool things about samurai to get students to re-examine their misconceptions. This article suggests some ways that teachers might use material related to the samurai to help promote critical thinking in the classroom. Readers interested in utilizing materials mentioned in this essay should refer to the “teaching resources” section at the conclusion.

Reality Is Better than Fiction: Saigidō Takamori vs. Tom Cruise

Many students have seen the 2003 Hollywood film *The Last Samurai* starring Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe. The film draws loosely upon historical

events—there was a revolt—the Satsuma Rebellion, in 1877 that was fought by samurai opposed to the policies of the Meiji government. It was led by Saigō Takamori, the real figure who was the inspiration for Watanabe's character, Katsumoto. Katsumoto stands out as a powerful man of conviction who resisted Westernization and commanded tremendous respect. Students can discover for themselves by examining primary sources that the real Saigō Takamori did not oppose all things Western and was even more revered than his fictional movie counterpart.

Japanese woodblock prints are one way to encourage critical thinking and to help students question the film. These colorful prints functioned like newspapers, and in the late 1870s Saigō and the Satsuma Rebellion were popular topics. Today you can find many of them online. Upon examination, students find that most prints depict Saigō wearing a Western-style military uniform and that some of his followers have guns. The statue commemorating Saigō in his hometown of Kagoshima also shows him in uniform. This is quite different from the film character Katsumoto, who only wore kimono and refused to use Western weapons. In fact, the real Saigō did not oppose Japan's modernization. He met with British representatives to help secure guns for his Satsuma troops in the final days of the Tokugawa shogunate. Later, as a member of the new Meiji government, he

helped modernize its army. In 1877, Saigō and his rebel followers initially set out with Western weapons. In the end, only their lack of munitions forced them to use traditional weapons.²

If Saigō did not oppose Westernization, students may ask, why did he rebel? Saigō had several issues with the government, but the most significant was Japan's relationship with Korea. Traditionally, East Asian states carried out diplomacy in the Chinese tribute-system framework. In that system, there was only one emperor—the Chinese emperor. All other rulers had lesser titles such as “king.” But following the 1868 Meiji Restoration, Japan's new government was centered on its emperor. When Meiji representatives traveled to Korea in the name of their emperor, the Koreans insulted them and refused to engage in diplomacy. Saigō felt this necessitated a military response; others, such as Okubo Toshimichi, argued that it was not time to go to war. Okubo prevailed, and Saigō quit the government. He retired to southern Kyushu and tried to remain out of politics, but when his students began rioting to protest government policies that eliminated samurai privileges, Saigō was drawn into leading the rebellion.

When students examine woodblock prints of the rebellion, they are sure to notice that Saigō is often shown with a distinctive flag bearing a four-character inscription: *shinsei kōtoku* (a new government, full of virtue). In fact, Saigō had no such flag, but the Japanese press added one to give his rebellion a cause. Saigō was widely heralded as an honorable man, and the flag confirmed what many in the general population believed anyway—that Saigō was fighting to replace evil Tokyo bureaucrats with more virtuous administrators. He was so revered that even when the Satsuma Rebellion was crushed, many refused to believe that Saigō died, claiming that he escaped to another country (or planet!). Some woodblock prints show Saigō returning to earth in a comet, surrounded by ordinary people listing various complaints for him to rectify. As these and other images make clear, the real Saigō was even more highly regarded than his fictional counterpart. Key to the success of the lesson, of course, is letting students examine the materials and come to these conclusions on their own.

Establishing the Myth: *Bushidō* and *Samurai Champloo*

Students have preconceived ideas about Japan, but many are misinformed. Studying samurai provides an excellent opportunity to show students the importance of questioning their sources of information. You might start a lesson by asking students individually or in small groups to answer two questions. First, what were samurai like? Second, how do you know? Their answers to the first question will likely include “brave, loyal, honorable, used swords,” etc., and their answers to the second might include movies or manga.

Alternatively, open class with a clip from the animated television program *Samurai Champloo*. The show centers on three main characters—Jin, Mugen, and Fu—who live in an alternate Tokugawa age. Jin is the only samurai, so I ask students to watch his story. In the first episode, he comes to the aid of a commoner about to be killed for not paying a bribe to the local magistrate. Though outnumbered, Jin is cool, collected, and lets his sword do the talking as he quickly dispatches the magistrate's tough bodyguards. He fights for justice and questions the honor of the samurai bodyguards because they work for a corrupt man. The cartoon confirms students' preconceived ideas of samurai. But were samurai really like that? Where do such ideas come from?

One source might be Inazo Nitobe's *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan*. This classic 1904 text presents one man's recollections of the samurai he knew from his youth and argues that Japanese society is pervaded by samurai values. The style of writing is dated, but students can read it quickly and seem to enjoy it. Even if you cannot assign the text, show your students the table of contents (available online). It reveals many characteristics that probably appeared on the students' lists of samurai qualities: honor, loyalty, courage, self-control, justice, and the sword as “the soul of the samurai.” The text also includes an eyewitness account of a samurai committing

ritual suicide, something that further appeals to our modern students' notion of the samurai as exotic.

Bushidō has been influential in shaping modern Western ideas about samurai. But is it a reliable source? Although the author had first-hand knowledge of the society he described, careful students will detect important clues that lead us to question the text. First, the author wrote almost thirty years after samurai status was abolished. Second, he wrote to defend his people from European criticisms that Japanese did not teach religious education. Caught up in the Meiji nation-building experience, he was more concerned with finding sources of contemporary Japanese culture. In short, Nitobe might have painted an overly favorable picture of the samurai and their adherence to the moral code known as bushidō.

Having come to doubt these twentieth-century images of the samurai, one can now introduce primary sources from medieval Japan (1180–1600), the age during which samurai came to power and actually fought on the battlefield. One such source is *The Tale of Heike*, the most famous medieval Japanese war tale. This epic work recounts stories of the Genpei War, fought between the Taira and Minamoto warrior clans from 1180 to 1185. The victorious Minamoto went on to create Japan's first warrior government, and the tale has often been held as a model of exemplary samurai behavior. Reading a few of the battle scenes from chapter nine will reveal to students that samurai rarely used swords in battle. Instead, their primary weapon was the bow and arrow. In addition, there are many examples of betrayal, such as the account of Kaneyasu (who murders the men who spared his life) or the final Battle of Dan-no-ura, which the Taira lose because most of their allies switch sides.

Another such source is the *Mongol Invasion Picture Scroll* of Takezaki Suenaga, the record of a Japanese warrior who fought against the Mongols when they invaded in 1274 and 1281.³ It suggests that warriors disregarded orders and followed no established code. In Suenaga's account, he prevaricates in order to be the first into battle and is primarily concerned with getting rewards. The scroll's images reveal that soldiers on both sides used bows and arrows, pikes, and halberds, but rarely swords. These are readily understandable points that force students to reconsider what they thought they knew and weigh the reliability of different sources—in other words, think critically about knowledge and where it comes from.

The Nature of Medieval Warfare

Another effective way to use the *Heike* is by letting students replicate the errors of historians who took the tale to be a wholly accurate representation of late twelfth-century warfare. This assignment involves a small degree of risk, for unless set up in just the right way, students may feel that they have been misled into writing bad papers. Nonetheless, I feel the pedagogical value outweighs the potential risks.

To begin, have a general discussion with your students (perhaps in conjunction with lesson two above) about the questions that they should ask of any source. There are many good books that discuss these questions (see my teaching resources), but I find it easiest to keep things simple. I advise students to ask the following four questions of anything they read:

“Who wrote it?”

“When was it created?”

“Why was it created?”

“How has it come to us?”

These should become familiar enough to your students that they know the questions, have seen you apply them to a source, and know that you expect them to ask these questions. Yet despite your best efforts at teaching students to interrogate sources, most will not think to do it on their own.

Having emphasized this kind of questioning with your students, ask them to read select chapters of *The Tale of the Heike* and write papers on what the tale can teach us about late twelfth-century warfare. Students tend to notice the same exotic aspects of warfare that many early scholars did:

warriors called out their names and lineages to find worthy opponents, wore brightly-colored armor, and individual feats of bravery were the order of the day. Only the most careful students—those who ask the four questions and carefully consider the answers—will come to realize that the tale is rather unreliable as a source of information about twelfth-century warfare.

In order to give the students many opportunities to think critically about the text, I use the McCullough translation and include her introduction that tells students that the version they are reading was composed by the Buddhist chanter Kakuichi in 1371. I also assign some of the early and later passages (in addition to the battle scenes), including section 1.1, which conveys the Buddhist message of impermanence; section 1.6, a story clearly intended to show the evil nature of the Taira leader Kiyomori; and part of the Initiates' chapter, which illustrates the fleeting nature of riches and glory. You might choose other sections, but your selections should allow students to pose the questions that you taught them to ask of any source and come up with answers that question the tale's reliability. After all, (1) it was written almost 200 years after the events it describes, (2) it was supposed to convey Buddhist messages of impermanence rather than accurately describe the war, and (3) its completely negative portrayal of Kiyomori suggests that the writers wanted to appeal to the winning side. Many students will notice at least one of these points, and hopefully, some will reach the (correct) conclusion that the depiction of warfare in *The Tale of Heike* should be handled with extreme caution.

After students turn in their papers, I have them read Butler's article "The *Heike Monogatari* and the Japanese Warrior Ethic" and/or Friday's chapter "The Culture of War."⁴ These two pieces effectively dispel any illusions about the tale as an accurate depiction of the Genpei War. Butler uses textual analysis to demonstrate that notable parts of the tale's descriptions—the colorful armor, the acts of individual bravery, etc.—were details added in later versions, well after the lifetime of anyone who had lived through the events. Friday reaches similar conclusions arguing from a practical standpoint, noting that, for example, no one in the opposing army would have been able to hear a warrior calling out his lineage amidst all of the other battlefield noises. Reading these two pieces will shatter students' assumptions about what *The Tale of the Heike* can reveal about twelfth-century war.

As noted earlier, it is very important to carry out this exercise with caution, for you do not want students to feel that they were "set up" or that they read something of no real benefit. We can learn many important things from *The Tale of Heike*, though it teaches us more about fourteenth-century values than those of the twelfth. I have done this exercise twice now, and both times the students responded quite well, recognizing that they had not adequately considered the very questions that we agreed to ask of any source. Some even thanked me for the relatively lenient marks I gave their papers, suggesting that they believed that I should have been harsher in grading their work. The point, of course, is not to give bad grades but to help students realize an important lesson about the sources of information they use.

Conclusions

All of these sources offer valuable opportunities to help students reconsider their preconceptions and engage in critical thinking skills. There are many other interesting ways one might use these materials. Students reading the translated *Mongol Invasions Picture Scroll*, for example, might notice that Suenaga makes no mention of "defending Japan" even though his country is being invaded by a foreign power. The reason, of course, is that the thirteenth-century scroll predates modern notions of nationalism.

For a class that does not have time to read the scroll, Conlan has made it available in full color online. The images of battling Mongols and Japanese are sure to captivate students. Those viewing the images might be puzzled to discover that Suenaga's account does not refer to the typhoons that supposedly saved Japan. Did bad weather play a part in Japan's defense? If it

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did, why does Suenaga not acknowledge it? And if it did not, then what does that say about the state of Japan's defenses? Conlan offers one theory: that the Japanese samurai were able to match the Mongol forces on the battlefield.⁵ Your students might come up with their own explanations.

In the "teaching resources" section that follows, links are provided to additional online lesson plans appropriate for middle and high school students. Using materials like these not only helps make their study of Japan's past more interesting but also creates natural opportunities for teaching critical thinking. Fictional characters like the one portrayed by Tom Cruise might draw students to our courses, but their reading and questioning of primary sources will make a lasting impression. And that, I think, may be the best reason for teaching the samurai. ■

TEACHING RESOURCES

Lesson plans appropriate for high school students and additional background material can be found at Michigan State University's *Windows on Asia* website at http://asia.isp.msu.edu/wbwoa/study_units.htm and the University of Colorado's Program for Teaching East Asia Imaging Japanese History page at <http://www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/>.

For more on Saigō Takamori, including depictions of Saigō in nineteenth-century woodblock prints, see Ravina, Mark. 2004. *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

A photo of the Saigō statue in his hometown of Kagoshima is at <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/82982443/Taxi>.

Samurai Champloo. 2005. Directed by Shinichiro Watanabe, DVD. There are many versions available. Use with caution—the program includes explicit language and violence.

Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido: The Soul of the Samurai* is widely available in affordable paperback and also can be downloaded from Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12096>.

For more on Nitobe, see Hurst, G. Cameron III. "Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushido Ideal," *Philosophy East and West* 40:4 (October 1990), 511–527 (available on JSTOR).

Several translations of *The Tale of Heike* are available; I use Helen McCullough's *Genji and Heike: Selections*. 1994. Stanford University Press, but others include Sadler (1928), Kitagawa and Tsuchida (1977), and Watson and Shirane (2006). Detailed chapter descriptions of *The Tale of Heike* are on John Wallace's website at http://www.sonic.net/~tabine/heike081003/Heike_mainpage.html. Two battle scenes (full text) from chapter nine are available at <http://www.glopac.org/Jparc/Atsumori/Heiketxt.htm>.

Takezaki Suenaga's scrolls are available in annotated translation by Thomas Conlan, *In Little Need of Divine Intervention: Takezaki Suenaga's Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan* (Cornell East Asia Series, 2001). Conlan also has a fascinating website showing different versions of the scrolls at <http://www.bowdoin.edu/mongol-scrolls/>.

In Conlan's essay, "In Little Need of Divine Intervention," he argues that the Japanese fought off the Mongols without any help from *kamikaze* storms. It can be accessed at <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/articles/intervention.htm>.

Many books and websites discuss ways to evaluate primary sources critically. For college students, I recommend Patrick Rael's site at <http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/>.

Butler, Kenneth. "The *Heike Monogatari* and the Japanese Warrior Ethic," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 29 (1969): 93–108, explains the development of *The Tale of Heike*. Although some of Butler's theories on orality are now considered out of date, his discussion of how later versions of the tale incorporate greater detail is compelling (available on JSTOR).

Friday, Karl. 2004. "The Culture of War," *Samurai, Warfare, and the State in Early Medieval Japan*. Routledge.

NOTES

1. Karl Friday, "Once and Future Warriors: The Samurai in Japanese History," *Education About Asia* 10 (Winter 2005): 31–38; Joan E. Ericson and Jim Matson, "Lessons of the Last Samurai," *Education About Asia*, 9 (Fall 2004): 12–16.
2. Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Wiley, 2005), 3, 126, 167–68.
3. Thomas Conlan, *In Little Need of Divine Intervention: Takezaki Suenaga's Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan* (Cornell East Asia Series, 2001).
4. Kenneth Butler, "The *Heike Monogatari* and the Japanese Warrior Ethic," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 29 (1969): 93–108; Karl Friday, *Samurai, Warfare, and the State* (Routledge, 2003), 135–63.
5. Conlan, 254–75.

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