

Walk Like a Samurai

Using Japanese Performing and Martial Arts to Teach Historical Inquiry

By Tim Cooper

The Need for Historical Inquiry

In his Winter 2010 *EAA* article, “Can Samurai Teach Critical Thinking? Primary Sources in the Classroom,” Ethan Segal offers several constructive methods to help students discern truth from fiction regarding the historical samurai. Woodblock prints of Saigō Takamori garbed in Western military uniform; images from the *Mongol Invasion Scrolls* depicting the disorderly chaos of samurai warfare; and the historical fiction of *The Tale of the Heike*, which for centuries passed as historical fact, all offer instructors opportunities to help students think critically and dispel many of the romantic visions of the samurai we have all likely held at one time or another.¹ I wish to offer a different approach to teaching about the samurai in this article—one that allows students to make intellectual connections and advance original theses about the past based, in part, on their experiences in a traditional martial and performance arts workshop that takes them outside the classroom and beyond the typical historical archive. This method of historical inquiry is every bit as important and necessary as the rigorous skepticism offered by Segal, and students need to develop both sets of skills as they learn to practice history.

The Historical Problem

As the *taihei* (“Great Peace”; the balance of power between the Tokugawa shoguns and the 250-odd domain lords who attended them annually in Edo) settled across Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868), ending more than a century of civil warfare, the military skills of the warrior class became increasingly irrelevant to the urban—and urbane—realities of their lives in castle towns throughout the realm. Nevertheless, their long martial legacy remained central to the samurai class’s claims to political authority, and thus could not be abandoned entirely. Scholars have written about the institutions that served to “tame” the samurai and transform them into



One Hundred Noh Plays: Prince Atsumori. Woodblock print by Tsukioka Kogyo. Source: Ukiyo-e Search website at <http://tinyurl.com/jq4gjqvq>.

bureaucratic officers of the state while preserving the myth of their warrior identity as a useful instrument of social control.² Still, some question remains about the ways in which individual samurai lived their identities as members of a warrior class during an era of protracted peace. Where, for example, did early modern samurai find the lexicon necessary to transform disparate battlefield fighting techniques into schools of *jutsu* (martial arts) and *dō* (ways) codified around central principles of practice?³ These questions about samurai identity were born of my own experiences practicing Noh theater and martial arts in Japan for nearly a decade. Today, I use them to suggest to students that historical questions and clues can be found in rather unexpected places, and that historians need to draw on their creative imagination—tempered, of course, by factual evidence—when they form

mental images of the past. In short, I hope to teach students that the practice of history can be much more than the tedious scrutiny of dusty archives, and that historical insight and inspiration can come from almost anywhere. To that end, I have developed the “Walk Like a Samurai” movement workshop as part of a lesson plan that asks students to consider what their bodies can teach them about history.

The Workshop

The Walk Like a Samurai workshop introduces students to the basic *kamae* (postures), *suriashi* (walking), and *kata* (movement) of Noh and *kenjutsu*. Foot positioning is the foundation of both Noh and *kenjutsu kamae*. Feet are splayed about thirty degrees, nearly touching at the heels, which remain on center. This foot posture is known as *ha-no-ji* for its resemblance to the *katakana* character “ha” (ハ). Arms are also held similarly in Noh and *kenjutsu*. However, whereas elbows are flared out away from the torso in Noh, the *kenjutsu kamae* pulls them into the body. Also, as with gripping the Noh *ōgi* (fan), when holding the *bokken* or *bokutō* (wooden practice swords) used in the workshop, fingers are curled around the sword hilt, beginning with the little finger and ending with the index finger, each digit receiving slightly less strength than the previous. While maintaining this *kamae*, students advance and withdraw several steps at a time, sliding their feet flat across the floor as in the Noh. Unlike the Noh, however, which releases tension in the feet at the end of each step, the *kenjutsu suriashi* does not raise the toes at the completion of each stride. Instead, students should press and draw their feet along the floor, forward and backward, as if walking through fine sand.

Throughout the workshop, I correct posture and movement, and ask students to consider similarities in the practice of the performing and martial arts. *Kamae*, *suriashi*, and *kata* form the basis of more advanced techniques, but are sufficient for introducing students to some of



Illustration of Japanese Kendō sword martial arts fighters' sport silhouettes. Source: Shutterstock at <http://tinyurl.com/jmoygn4>



Special Segment on Japanese Noh Theater



"Kozume." From Yagyū Muneyoshi, *Shinkage-ryū heihō mokuroku*, circa 1707. Image courtesy of author.

the physical connections between traditional Japanese martial and performing arts. Students wishing to study these elements further may examine the 1982 *Dance in the Noh Theater*, an excellent illustrated series with companion videos by Monica Bethe and Karen Brazelle. Also, there are innumerable illustrated texts on martial arts techniques, but students may find Watanabe Tadahige's *Shinkage-Ryu Sword Techniques* series particularly helpful. Finally, YouTube and other websites provide ample online content that can help students visualize the elements covered in

the workshop. I have provided links to two such videos in the suggested resources section.

Having practiced and thought about their commonalities (students often mention similar use of the feet, arms, and torso), I ask them to consider how and why movement with the sword might have come to resemble that with the fan in Noh. A brief discussion of their experiences at the end of the workshop helps students begin to formulate their responses to the writing assignment that caps off the learning objectives of the Walk Like a Samurai workshop.

Assessment: Writing Assignment

The writing assignment asks students to respond to two questions in a brief essay. To begin, I ask students to describe the similarities and/or differences between modern Noh and kenjutsu kamae, suriashi, and kata as we practiced them in the movement workshop. Then, I ask students to use three pieces of historical evidence in conjunction with the physical clues they discovered in the workshop to think about how practice of the performing arts might have influenced the transformation of the martial arts. How might the practice of these performing and martial arts have tamed the samurai in the Tokugawa period?

First, I provide students with some historical background on the development of Noh theater, explaining that Noh actors originally competed for the patronage of the shogun and high-ranking samurai lords; but during the Edo period, the art was placed in service to the shogunate as a form of Confucian rites used for official state ceremonies. This shift caused novel aesthetic appeal to give way to orthodox performance as the actor's primary goal, and plays were organized into five broad categories (god, warrior, female, miscellaneous, and demon) that made up an official performance playbill. Standardization and codification of patterned dances and repertoires allowed a new brand of performer to take the stage. Elite samurai, including such luminaries as Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, came to practice the Noh as a kind of



Still photo from *Funabenkei* Noh production. Source: *On the Art of the Noh Drama* website at <http://tinyurl.com/jdnIntd>.

social grace, performing *shimai* (dance) and *utai* (chant) for their guests at banquets and celebrations of their victories on the battlefield.

Students also examine premodern and modern images of Noh and kenjutsu kamae, including Zeami's illustrations of the warrior, female, and aged performance types found in his treatise *Nikyoku santai ningyozu* (*Figures of the Three Role Types and Two Performance Modes*).⁴ Zeami considered the female mode the pinnacle of his art, and scholars have argued that all Noh kamae gradually approached the elegant posture of the female form—with its elevated center of gravity and graceful posture—over time. Illustrations of kamae used in the *yagyū shinkage-ryū* of kenjutsu also demonstrate a gradual elevation of the hips and a higher center of gravity over time.⁵

Finally, I ask students to compare a list of Noh performances given by Komparu Ujikatsu (1575–1610) and Yagyū Munenori (1571–1646). In addition to being the head of the Komparu school of Noh, Ujikatsu was an avid practitioner of both sword and spear arts and is said to have taught the headmaster of the Kita Noh troupe the use of the halberd for the popular demon category play *Funabenkei*. In fact, Ujikatsu spent so much time training in the martial arts that the quality of his Noh performances is said to have suffered.⁶ Munenori, on the other hand, was headmaster of the Yagyū shinkage school of swordsmanship, official kenjutsu instructor to the Tokugawa house, and personal adviser to the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651). Munenori performed dozens of Noh plays over the course of his life, at times sharing the stage with the shogun and other elite samurai. The list of performances I provide for students demonstrates an interesting proclivity for both the warrior and the artist. Whereas Munenori performed plays overwhelmingly from the female category (and only one warrior play), Ujikatsu performed almost sixty plays from the miscellaneous and demon categories (many of which feature appearances by powerful, martial, or demon roles) and *none* in the more graceful female mode.⁷ The data encourages students to ask what the warrior and the artist might have seen in the other's art and how the practice of one might have informed the historical transformation of the other. With respect to the practice of kenjutsu specifically, I ask how the practice of Noh and other traditional art forms by the samurai might have affected the transformation of battlefield weapons techniques into martial arts suitable for practice in the pacified setting of the early modern dōjō.

This is a tall order for students to process, and I do not expect them to arrive at the “correct” answer—if there is one. Rather, the purpose of the workshop and the writing exercise is to take students out of their comfort zones, demonstrate that historical evidence can come from unex-

pected places, and suggest that creative thinking is critical to successful historical reasoning. All along, I make it clear that this workshop and this methodology come from my own experiences, observations, questions, and analyses. I underscore the fact that my conclusions remain a work in progress and try to make the case that demonstrating the process of historical inquiry in their writing is more important than providing tidy conclusions that simply reiterate predigested material. These lessons are as important as the ones outlined by Segal in his article on critical thinking, and students' papers suggest that many appreciate the bigger pedagogical goal, even if their observations differ from my own. Again, having students parrot my conclusions was never the goal, so in this sense, I consider the Walk Like a Samurai movement workshop a success.

I was able to develop and execute the Walk Like a Samurai movement workshop because of my own expertise in Japanese history, martial arts, and Noh theater. Without an understanding of these elements (as well as access to bokken and Noh practice fans), it would admittedly be difficult to conduct this particular workshop. But the fundamentals of this pedagogical approach can be applied to any type of nontraditional learning, and the lesson of creative historical inquiry coming from unexpected places is one that all students can and should learn.

Conclusion

Practicing these arts reveals their historical connection in a manner not possible by reading or lecture alone. The Walk Like a Samurai movement workshop asks students to consider what their bodies can teach them about history, and encourages them to make new and unexpected connections in order to inquire about the past. By walking students through a limited series of Noh and kenjutsu kata, the movement workshop allows students to understand the commonalities through their bodies so that they might better grasp the junction of Noh and martial arts in the historical taming of the samurai. Although there is room for improvement, my experience with the Walk Like a Samurai movement workshop has convinced me that using nontraditional historiographical sources, such as Noh performance and martial arts kata, can be an effective means of teaching historical reasoning to undergraduate students. ■

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Noh-related Resources

- Bethe, Monica, and Karen Brazell. *Dance in the Noh Theater*, Vol. 1, *Dance Analysis*. Cornell University East Asia Papers; no. 29. Ithaca, NY: China-Japan Program, Cornell University, 1982.
- . *Dance in the Noh Theater*, Vol. 3, *Dance Patterns*. Cornell University East Asia Papers, no. 29. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1982.
- . *Dance in Noh Theater I: Fundamentals of Noh Dance*.

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University China Japan Project, 1979.

Komparu, Kunio. *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*. New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983.

“Nohgaku kitaryū Shiotsu Keisuke shimai keiko [Dance Practice of Shiotsu Keisuke, Kita School Noh Instructor].” YouTube video, 3:20. Posted by “keisukeshiotsu1027.” February 5, 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/h5ykal3>.

Martial Arts-related Resources

Draeger, Donn F. *Classical Bujutsu: The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan*. New York: Weatherhill, 1996.

—. *Modern Bujutsu and Budo: The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan*. New York: Weatherhill, 1996.

Sato, Hiroaki. *The Sword and The Mind*. Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1985.

Watanabe Tadashige. *Shinkage-Ryu Sword Techniques*, Vol. 1. New York: Japan Publications, 1993.

“Yagyū Shinkage-ryū Heiho—37th Nippon Kobudo Embutakai at the Nippon Budokan.” YouTube video, 9:35. Posted by “GuillaumeErard.com - Aikido and Life in Japan.” February 10, 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/zpujwc5>.

NOTES

1. Ethan Segal, “Can Samurai Teach Critical Thinking? Primary Sources in the Classroom,” *Education About Asia* 15, no. 3 (2010): 5–8.
2. Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
3. Donn F. Draeger, *Classical Budo: The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan* (New York: Weatherhill, 1996).
4. Zeami Motokiyo, “Nikoku Santai Ningyozu, [Figures of the Three Role Types and Two Performance Modes]” in *Zeami Zenchiku*, ed. Omote Akira and Katō Shūichi, *Nihon Shiso Taikei* 24 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1974), 122–132.
5. Omote Akira, “Noh to Budō [Noh and Martial Arts],” in *Nihon no Budō: Budō to Geidō Soyō* (Noh, Sho, Hana, Cha) [*Japanese Martial Arts: Martial and Performing Arts Training*], (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 17–63. More recently, Shelly Fenno Quinn has produced a sophisticated study of Zeami's fusion of popular dance and song with Yamato sarugaku (Noh) through the study of the *Nikyoku santai ningyozu*. Quinn, Shelly Fenno. *Developing Zeami: The Noh Actor's Attunement in Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.
6. Kanze Motonobu, Tanaka Makoto, and Yozaemon Niga, *Kōhon Yoza yakusha mokuroku* [*Annotated Records of Noh Performers from the Four Classical Schools*], *Nohgaku shiryō* 6 (Tokyo: Wanya Shoten, 1975), 39.
7. Omote Akira, “Noh to Budō,” 45–53.

TIM COOPER is an Assistant Professor of History at Siena College, where he teaches Japanese, East Asian, and World History. Before receiving his doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, he practiced Noh and Aikido in Japan for ten years. His current manuscript, *Enemy of the State: The Crimes and Punishment of a Profligate Lord in Tokugawa Japan*, examines the radical social and economic reforms of the eighteenth-century daimyo Tokugawa Muneharu.