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Onna-Bugeisha “Warrior Women”

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, women in Japan have been cast as geishas, however, the history of onna-bugeisha or “warrior women” poses a contrasting shadow. These warrior women took up training focused on using the naginata, a sort of spear with a curved blade on the end and the kaiken, a sort of dagger. They trained to protect their homes and villages; in addition, some would even carry their training into battle. In the twelfth century, Hangaku Gozen and Tomoe Gozen, while Nakano Takeko in the nineteenth century were considered to be among the best of the onna-bugeisha. These women led their own armies into battle, some made up of only women and some of only men. Very little is written about these women as Japanese warriors. Tomoe is only briefly mentioned in the Heike Monogatari, a series of stories detailing the Genpei wars (1182-1185). The down play of their importance is evident in the lack of resources recording their lives. This is possibly because their warrior-like-actions threatened the natural masculinity of the samurai. Once the samurai become a rising class structure, the onna-bugeisha began to fall away in importance, second to their husbands. As they moved behind the scenes, their training emerged to represent a method of moral discipline rather than preparing for combat. Their natural warrior way of life faded from their daily lives and the Japanese history.

FINDINGS

Samurai women had three options when the safety of the castle became compromised. They could hide with the children and older women inside the castle, follow their husbands in death by suicide—like nineteen year old Tomohime in 1536 who drowned herself in the moat using a bronze bell from the castle—or defend the castle from within like the Aizu women who attempted to limit the damage of cannons. Whenever a cannonball landed they covered the spot with wet mats and rice sacks before it could explode. Or they charged into battle like Tomoe Gozen in 1184 in the last battle of Awazu during the Genpei Wars, Hangaku Gozen during the siege of Torisaka Castle in 1201, Tsuruhime of Omishima in 1541, and Nakano Takeko who served as one of the women warriors of Aizu in 1868.

PAINTINGS



Wood block print of Tomoe Gozen, artist unknown.



Painting of Tsuruhime of Omishima fighting off invaders by Giuseppe Rava.



Painting of Nakano Takeko fighting off Emperor Meiji's soldiers at Aizu in 1868 by Giuseppe Rava.

PAINTINGS

Italian artist Giuseppe Rava took an interest in all things military at a young age. He is self-taught and has established himself as a leading military history artist. He has completed numerous paintings for books on military history published by Osprey Publishing.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of the samurai has changed since the time of constant warring. No longer are they riding into battle and defending their master's castles until death. Today the samurai class mixes with formerly despised positions such as those in trade and industry, among merchants, farmers or domestic servants. Women eagerly seek out careers in the positions of teachers, interpreters, trained nurses and whatever jobs a woman may honorably occupy. It is very clearly seen that gender was shaped by culture, in regards with what a person was to do with their life and within the family unit. I plan to continue with this research project and further analyzing the varying roles women played in Japanese society within the different classes.

METHODOLOGY

The research began with a search for sources, note taking, and a conference presentation. Most of the sources are journal articles giving the base for this research concerning the Samurai and their lives. Other sources include Japanese Girls and Women, a book by Alice Mabel Bacon, published in 1891 and Samurai Women 1184-1877 a book by Stephen Turnbull, published in 2010.

REFERENCES

- Bacon, Alice Mabel. *Japanese Girls and Women*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Turnbull, Stephen. *Samurai Women 1187-1868*. Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2010.
- Wright, Diane E. “Female Combatants and Japan’s Meiji Restoration: the Aizu.” *War in History* 8 (2001).

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