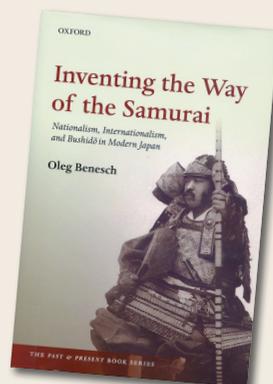


BOOK REVIEW

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

Oleg Benesch

Oxford University Press, 2014
294 pages.



There is an old saying that “necessity is the mother of invention,” an expression that regards the notion of invention in a much more positive way than the manner in which it is commonly encountered in academic circles. This latter view, which is largely negative and sometimes even contemptuous, derives from the concept of the “invention of tradition,” the phrase famously created by Hobsbawm and Ranger. Over the years the notion of the invention of tradition has proved to be a useful peg on which to hang one’s book, or at the very least one’s hat. I used it myself quite recently for an article entitled “The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?,” and now we have it applied to a much more serious Japanese historical subject: the well-known yet much misunderstood notion of *bushidō*.¹

Whereas I added a query to the end of my title, Benesch has no qualms about ending his title with a full stop, because his argument is clear and set out with style. Benesch’s scholarship is both rigorous and considerable, and so is his razor-like approach to the subject. He wastes little time telling us what we already know. Chapter 1 is entitled “Before *Bushidō*: Considering Samurai Thought and Identity,” and begins with the words, “The development of *bushidō* was an essentially modern phenomenon, with core symbols borrowed from the historical samurai” (p. 15). Modern reinterpretations of Edo period texts added to the phenomenon. *Hagakure*, with its famous phrase “the way of the samurai is to be found in death,” was little known outside the Nabeshima domain until the twentieth century, and Benesch adds that these core symbols could even cause problems for *bushidō*’s Meiji inventors who possessed a “significant nostalgia” for the past.

The pages which follow complete his dismissal of the popular notion of a medieval warrior code, and it is then that Benesch really hits his stride with a comprehensive and detailed study of *bushidō* as it really was. He demonstrates very clearly and precisely where—within the intellectual currents of late nineteenth-century Japan—the origins of *bushidō* are to be found. One major source, he believes, is Western culture, whereby *bushidō* was created as a Japanese counterpart to the Victorian ideal of the “gentleman,” a concept that drew its own nostalgic support from romantic notions of knightly chivalry. Two idealised and long-dead military myths therefore came together to give Japan something that it needed at the

¹ Turnbull 2014.

time. “Civilization” and “honor” added to the positive nature of Japan’s modernization. Necessity was indeed the mother of *bushidō*’s invention.

None of the above is very surprising to scholars of the subject. Nitobe Inazō, for example, has been thoroughly worked over for more than a century. Benesch’s great contribution is to move beyond that stage (which he covers exceptionally well) to show what use was then made of the notion of *bushidō* once it had entered Japan’s bloodstream. We are therefore taken beyond the appropriation of Western nostalgic ideals towards the imperialist embrace of *bushidō* as a touchstone of loyalty to the state. This happened in the years between the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars. *Bushidō* entered the education system and became increasingly involved in a military and nationalistic discourse. World War II then takes its toll; yet, within a few years, *bushidō* returns, reconceptualized and as rehabilitated as any war criminal who has served his time. The Japanese economic miracle spurred on the ideals of a *bushidō*-like loyalty to one’s company, with the samurai realized once again as the epitome of that virtue.

Benesch concludes by bringing *bushidō* up to date, and here his references and anecdotes make one want to know more. *Bushidō*’s role in the martial arts and martial sports is well known, but I was surprised to read how casually the term is still employed today as a marketing tool for the military to domestic and international audiences. In support of the Japanese humanitarian support for the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq in 2006, a Diet member referred to Japanese troops being esteemed as “samurai of Japan, the nation of *bushidō*” (p. 234). Not surprisingly, Benesch notes a certain disquiet among Chinese politicians when such expressions are used, and with discussions currently taking place about Japan taking an increased military role in world affairs, I have no doubt that *bushidō* will be cited somewhere in the discourse.

Inventing the Way of the Samurai is an excellent book. Other issues could have been developed and used here, such as the way that *bushidō* may have crossed transnational boundaries as it went beyond nation building. Yet Benesch is obviously so well immersed in his subject that another book should be eagerly anticipated. *Bushidō* as a concept is as firmly entrenched as it has ever been. I remember groaning inwardly a few years ago during a speech of welcome to new students when the principal urged everyone that if they only read one book it should be Nitobe’s *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan*. I think *Inventing the Way of the Samurai* should also be on their reading lists.

REFERENCE

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Stephen Turnbull. “The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Japan* 9:1 2014, pp. 9–26.

Reviewed by Stephen Turnbull

