Warrior Puppets: The Samurai of the Tokugawa Shogunate

By Matt Williams

The samurai have been long remembered as great warriors and the epitome of Japanese culture. The samurai class, consisting of no more than 7 to 10 percent of the population during the Tokugawa Shogunate[1] , were mere puppets of their overlords, the daimyo and the shogun.  The warrior class of the samurai was known officially as the buke, but was often referred to as the *bushi* (men of war).[2] Samurai, being the only official military retainers for the government, were the only ones who could carry the daisho, the long and short swords, with the highest ranking samurai being allowed to ride horses.[3] Samurai, no matter what their status, were but servants to their daimyo.[4]   Being a samurai meant that you were the lord of your land, that which was given to you by your daimyo. With this power came a certain amount of prestige, and social stratification. Law stated that any disrespect against a samurai from a peasant was justifiable cause for the peasant to be killed on the spot. Some regions had laws so lax that a samurai could kill a peasant for any reason at all, often leading to "practice murder." [5]  As lord of their land the samurai owed duties to their lords, the daimyo. Samurai took this loyalty to the extreme. Samurai swore loyalty to their lord in a loyalty ceremony dealing with a "contract" being written with the samurai's own blood and the document burned, the ashes of which were dissolved in water and then drank. This oath transcended generations, with the entire bloodline of the samurai being loyal to the bloodline of the daimyo.[6]   The loyalty between samurai and daimyo was so great that, according to the long surviving anecdote, of 47 ronin (masterless samurai) avenged the murder of their lord and then, to join with their fallen lord, all committed seppuku (ritualistic honorable suicide).[7] …  The undying loyal of the samurai to his lord did not cease at simple suicide. On the battlefield, if the tide of the fight turned against the samurai and his lord, the samurai would help his lord escape by donning the lord's armor and fleeing in a different direction, distracting the enemy army and becoming a casualty to free his master.[9]  This loyalty did not come without a price. All members of a clan were responsible for the actions of their lord.[10] Should a master be insulted or even killed, a retainer would take it upon himself to avenge his lord to any end.[11] For such loyalty, the lord was expected to take care of his retainers to insure that they did not become dissatisfied to the point of taking leave of their lord and becoming *ronin*.  Samurai were mere puppets of their lords, not allowed freedom of thought in matters and constantly expected to do what they were ordered to do.[12] Samurai would follow any order given by his lord immediately and without thought or hesitation, as per the code of *Bushido*.[13] Uesugi Kenshin, Lord of Echigo in the sixteenth century, explained the samurai's fatalistic approach to combat:

*Fate is in Heaven, the armor is on the breast, success is with the legs. Go to the battlefield firmly confident of victory, and you will come home with no wounds whatever. Engage in combat fully determined to die and you will be alive; wish to survive in the battle and you will surely meet death. When you leave the house determined not to see it again you will come home safely; when you have any thought of returning you will not return. You may not be in the wrong to think that the world is always subject to change, but the warrior must not entertain this way of thinking, for his fate is always determined.[14]*

Surrender was not an option for a samurai, fighting to the death or suicide were the only options.[15] The lords of the samurai knew this quite well and used it to every advantage possible. Such loyalty led to numerous lives being wasted in battles through ineffective tactics that the samurai blindly followed.  If a samurai, in the middle of a battle, found himself in a horribly losing situation and being of no use to the fight, the samurai would find a secluded place and commit *seppuku*. Seppuku, honorable and ritualistic suicide, involves the samurai taking his own life by means of opening his abdomen. Some means of seppuku involve a "second" to decapitate the samurai after his initial cut to curtail any unnecessary suffering. This practice was so common that, even on a battlefield, if a samurai committed seppuku, enemy soldiers within the area would cease their attack and one would take the job of "second" for the samurai.[16]   Death was such a part of the life of the samurai that even foreign observers like Francesco Carletti in the sixteenth century would state that, "there is no nation in the world which fears death less".[17] Yamamoto Tsunetomo, who lived during the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, wrote in his book Hagakure that, "The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to death, there is only the quick choice of death."[18]  The idea of death being common and natural extended as far as the education of children. Children of samurai would be sent on arduous errands involving going through cemeteries or witnessing executions to purge them of fear of death.[19] Yamamoto Tsunetomo further explained in his writings that:

*There is a way of bringing up the child of a samurai. From the time of infancy one should encourage bravery and avoid trivially frightening or teasing the child. If a person is affected by cowardice as a child, it remains a lifetime scar. It is a mistake for parents to thoughtlessly make their children dread lightening, or to have them not go into dark places, or to tell them frightening things in order to stop them from crying. Furthermore, a child will become timid if he is scolded severely.[20]*

Even as a child the samurai was molded into what their lord wanted them to be. Education was formulated such that a child would not grow up as an overlord who had too grand of an idea of his power and too little of a grasp on the idea of servitude.[21]   Children had first received their samurai clothing and swords by age 5. Children were split into instructional groups and would follow around a leader who would teach them. By age ten the children would memorize the instructional texts from the instructors. Between ages ten and fourteen the children were taught, and expected to perform, official etiquette. At age thirteen instruction in the military arts began; archery, swordsmanship, and spear fighting. At age sixteen the groups were dissolved and individual instruction began. Instruction lasted until age twenty-two.[22]  Lower class samurai were instructed in different schools, with curriculum limited by Bakufu law. (Secrets 107) The same concepts of servitude to their lord and basic military retainership were, of course, the mainstay of the education….   Samurai serving the Bakufu were able to maintain a steady real income during the Tokugawa through the help of Bakufu aide programs. Samurai serving their daimyo lords were worse off as their daimyo would often "borrow" from the stipends of their samurai.[26] Low-level samurai could not subsist on Bakufu stipend and had to rely on secondary employment.[27] By end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, samurai were working in low-level positions within the daimyo's castle.[28]   Samurai wages held steady or deteriorated while the rest of the standard of living increased. (Hanley 18)  During the Tokugawa Shogunate, commoners in urban areas and rural landowners had equal to greater wealth in comparison to the samurai.[29]   Such financial superiority increased the peacetime animosity between samurai and the peasants.[30]...  The only way for a samurai to break from this puppet-like "string pulling" was to break the bond between samurai and master, thusly becoming ronin (masterless).[33] ….   A samurai could request ronin status so that he could go on a quest and not have to worry about his actions staining the reputation of his clan.[36] Since being a ronin means that there is no longer any connection between the samurai and his clan then any actions that the samurai, now ronin, would take would be of his own accord and responsibility.   Ronin, being separated from their clan with no means of support, would often make a living by teaching bujutsu (martial arts), hiring themselves out as yojimbo (bodyguards), or by joining with raiders and surviving on pillaging.[37]   Ronin, still being samurai by law and pedigree, still despised the lower class peasantry, and still held the ideals of being "better." The animosity also turned toward the other samurai, especially in a case of unpleasant transition from samurai to ronin.[38] Ronin were considered "freaks" by regular samurai simply for existing, since it was against all samurai concepts of servitude.[39] A samurai could slay a ronin with no fear of reprisal from a clan.[40]   Tokugawa shoguns all feared ronin and the uprisings they could cause….   As a warrior, the samurai is hard to equal. As a servant, the samurai shows greater loyalty than any other vassal. The samurai during the Tokugawa Shogunate were dynamic and bold in their own rights, with many samurai causing many great changes in the course of history, but there are few in number. As a class of people, the samurai were mere pawns of the daimyo and the shogun.