

Women were *also* warriors - Reflections on David L. Davis's 'The evolution of Bushidō to the Year 1500' (1978)

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David L. Davis's 1978 article alerted scholars to the fact that the word '*bushidō*' ('way of the warrior') was not of ancient origin but rather was a comparatively recent invention that gained its currency and meaning in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867). Despite Davis's important point, the term is still casually applied to describe the value system of the Japanese warrior classes across many eras of Japanese history. This problem is particularly apparent in popularist texts and media. Davis posits that the term *bushidō* only gained its present currency and meaning in the 17th century and that the Confucian scholar, Yamaga Sokō (1622-1685) contributed to the creation of the ideology and popularisation of the term. Davis explains that while 17th century Confucian scholars were often of warrior class, they held unrealistic views about military values because, unlike the warrior classes in earlier tumultuous periods, they were not personally engaged in warfare. Utilising various Japanese sources, Davis provides an interesting and stimulating perspective on the evolution of term between the 10th century to the 16th century to examine the early development of *bushidō*.

The field of *bushidō* studies has developed to the point where scholars now agree that the code of conduct for samurai was only called *bushidō* from the Meiji period (1868-1912) and that the discourse was developed as a gendering ideological tool to unite a diversified nation through rapid modernisation. In that process, *bushidō* affirmed patriarchy as an age-old tradition, a tradition that continues to be symbolic of cultural identity in Japan. [1] Contemporary literature also explores differences in warrior class customs between regions, eras, and even within the stratum itself to suggest that *bushidō* has been subjected to retroactive romanticisation in literature throughout the ages and is representative of an ideal rather than lived reality.

Davis's article, like most scholarship on the topic, leaves women conspicuously absent, or when they do appear, they are given limited, prescriptive roles or are presented as exoticised exceptions. These features of the discourse further highlight the ways *bushidō* is an enduring ideology that is instrumental in reproducing sexism within the global realms of academia and the martial arts. A striking example of how the field has developed within the male-centred sphere, is in Davis's use of the *Heike Monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*) to illustrate the evolution of the *bushidō* logic but omitted discussion of Tomoe Gozen, the most well-known female warrior in Japanese history. Contemporary writings in English include Tomoe Gozen in their texts but even then, primarily as an exoticised and sexualised exception and describe her as ruthlessness in her skill with the sword. Although current literature scrutinises the origins and monoculturalism often attributed to *bushidō*, publications continue to be prodigiously male-penned and male-centred and tend to ignore and undermine women's legacies.

A number of scholars recognise that women's contributions to warrior culture remain a great untold story but resist further delving into women's histories with the excuse that they are not gender specialists. Acknowledging women's vast contributions and feats in warrior history would not require esoteric intellectual consideration but rather simply, a scholarly interest.

Hitomi Tonomura insightfully explains that “without understanding men’s actions and concerns from a gendered perspective, we cannot fully comprehend Japan’s medieval society”. [2] Applying normal academic rigour through the inclusion of women’s history would not only challenge the dominant male-centred discourse but would also unravel an ideological construct that since the Meiji era has contributed to the systematic discrimination against women in Japan.

It is critical to acknowledge that although women in Tokugawa Japan were not recognised with equivalent official titles and status given male samurai, throughout history women were *also* warriors, military strategists, clan leaders, and powerful rulers in Japan. Women’s contributions have been largely overlooked or undermined in scholarly and popularist texts. [1] Tonomura’s work is prolific and insightfully problematises the institutionalised contemporary writings of the past and in her work reveals how women’s martial contributions were legitimate and powerful. [2] Sachiko Kawai’s recent publication also questions the traditional view of medieval Japan as an era that was dominated by warrior-led governments and retiring male monarchs. [3] These female-centred publications are an example of a shift that is taking place in the field of *bushidō* studies through their exploration and acknowledgement of women’s significance and presence in warrior history.

While Davis’s article does not include women, it remains a significant contribution to knowledge for its reconsideration of the origins of the term *bushidō* and its problematic usage that presented warrior culture as an unchanging ancient tradition.

[1] Sylvester, K. (2022). *Women and martial art in Japan*. Routledge.

[2] Tonomura, H. (2017). Family, women, and gender in medieval society. In K. Friday (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of premodern Japanese history* (pp. 275–295). Routledge.

[3] Kawaii, S. (2021) *Uncertain Powers: Sen’yōmon-in and landownership by royal women in early medieval Japan*. Harvard University Press.

In his academic career, David L. Davis published on Medieval Japan and focussed on warrior culture and mass revolts (*ikkō-ikki*) supported by the Buddhist sect Jōdo Shunshū. Another of his related publications is ‘Ikki in Late Medieval Japan’ in *Medieval Japan: Essays in Institutional History*, eds John Hall and Jeffrey Mass (Stanford University Press, 1988).

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