

DID "FEMALE SAMURAI "ACTUALLY EXIST IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN?

S. Alexander Takeuchi, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology
University of North Alabama

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I believe that most do agree on factual issues that are already well documented. For instance, based on very well documented historical facts, we all seem to agree on the followings:

1. Did women (i.e., legitimate wives and daughters of "samurai") also belong to the privileged social category/cast as their male counter parts?

Yes. By default, any legitimate wives through official marriage or daughters by birth or through formal adoption automatically become members of the privileged social category/cast just like their male counter parts.

2. Were there any female members of the privileged social category of *buke* (aka "samurai class" as it is casually and loosely defined in the Western world) in the Japanese history who also practiced and possessed established martial arts skills?

Yes, there were, in fact, many. Those female martial artists were called "onna bugei-sha."

3. Were there any "female warriors" in the Japanese history who were also members of the privileged social category of *buke* and who fought the war as did male warriors?

Yes, there were several. As most already know, *Tomoe-gozen*, the wife of late *Kiso Yoshinaka*, was a prime example of such women.

4. Did any of those *female warriors who were also members of "buke"* actually serve their male samurai lords in *official* and *formal* military capacities as did male "samurai" (with *formal* military ranks and positions within the *official* military system of Bakufu or Han governments such as in "kachi-kumi," "osakite-kumi," "shoin-ban," etc.)?

Very few, if any ever existed... (At least in the Japanese history after "the battle of Sekigahara," I have not personally come across any documented existing academic evidence of such cases throughout my study of old Japanese social structure... Then again, I am not a Japanese historian...)

Despite the agreement on these factual issues, however, the "debate" on "female samurai" still seems to continue (rather unnecessarily)... I think that the major cause of this "unnecessary debate" is the lack of consensus amongst non-Japanese speaking enthusiasts of "samurai culture/history" on the "precise" definitions of Japanese terms such as "samurai," "bushi," and "buke"...

To clarify the confusion and to settle this unwarranted “debate” over “female samurai” once and for all, allow me to provide more accurate definitions of those terms as they are understood amongst scholars in Japan. As you will see, those academic definitions (that are also shared within the general Japanese culture) may seem somewhat different from the standard “Japanese-English dictionary definitions” of the same terms. However, after reading my explanations, I hope people will also realized why unwarranted “debate” on “female samurai” still continues when the factual issues have already been understood and shared by most and how further confusions can be avoided...

I. “Samurai” - a gender specific term to denote “individual social position” within a privileged social category.

The term “samurai” in the context of Japanese language is used primarily to refer to the “social position” - thus “social status” in a sociological term - that *individuals* occupied within a privileged social category called “buke” in the traditional Japanese society. As such, the Japanese term “samurai” does **not** refer to the said social class/category/cast itself within the traditional Japanese social structure. Again, it refers to the “individuals’ position (=social status) within the cast system primarily based on ascription.

Another source of confusion comes from the fact that many outside of Japan do not realize that the term “samurai” as it is implicitly shared within the Japanese culture is originally a **gender specific** term, which is only used in association with the **male** members of the privileged social category called “buke.” (Note. I believe when the Japanese term “samurai” was originally imported to the English speaking world, somehow in the process, the term’s “gender specific” assumption was lost... However, to regard the term “samurai” as though “gender neutral” is **not** academically correct...)

In this sense, the Japanese term “samurai” as it is understood in Japan is similar to “father,” “brother,” or “husband” that also denote “individuals’ social positions” and carry “gender specific” assumption implying only males... Therefore, logically speaking, “female samurai” cannot exist as “female father/brother/husband” cannot logically exist...

Of course, this “logical impossibility/absence” of “female samurai” has nothing to do with the empirical fact that “female warriors/martial artists who were also members of “buke” category/cast clearly existed. In other words, the term “female samurai” is simply an incorrect/wrong terminology from a logical stand point.

Likewise, to use the term “samurai” to refer to the entire social category/cast (as it is commonly done in the English speaking world), is **not** academically correct. When using the term “samurai” to somehow refer to the entire social category/cast, it must be combined with other terms such as “kaikyu” (=rank, class) or “kaiso” (=social strata). Also, “samurai kaikyu/kaiso” is used as a “non gender specific” term to refer to the entire social category of privileged individuals including both the male and female constituents.

II. "Bushi" - another gender specific term to primarily denote "individual social position" within the privileged social category.

Similar to the term "samurai," "bushi" in Japanese also denotes primarily the *individual social positions* that *male* members of the privileged social category of *buke* occupied within the traditional social structure of Japan. As such, the term "female bushi" is also logically incorrect/impossible at least within the Japanese language system...

As in the case of the term "samurai," however, when used in conjunction with other terms such as "kaikyu" or "kaiso," they refer to the entire social category of privileged individuals including both the male and female constituents.

III. "Buke" - the correct "non gender specific" single term to refer to the entire social category/cast.

Perhaps the term "buke" is the most appropriate single term to refer to the entire social category/cast of privileged individuals (loosely called "samurai class" in the English speaking world). Unlike "samurai" or "bushi" the term "buke" does *not* refer to the "individual social position/status," but it only refers to the entire category/cast including both the male and female constituents of the said category/cast. Therefore, the term "buke" is *not* "gender specific."

IV. "Female samurai" and "female bushi" - widely spread illogical terms causing unnecessary confusions in the English speaking world.

Once again, at least in the Japanese language, "female samurai" and "female bushi" are logically impossible as they combine "female" with "gender specific" terms (i.e., "samurai" and "bushi") that assume only the male constituents of the said social category/cast occupying the social position. At least to Japanese, the words such as "female samurai" or "female bushi" actually sound as inappropriate and awkward as "female father" or "female husband" to English speaking people. Proper and commonly used Japanese terms to refer to the female constituents of the said privileged social category/cast "buke" are:

Samurai no musume/tsuma (= "daughter/wife of a samurai") - because any legitimate daughter (by birth or via adoption) or wife (through formal marriage) of a "samurai" automatically becomes a member of the privileged "buke" category.

Buke no onna (= "a woman of the 'buke' category").

V. Logically and academically accurate English terms.

To avoid confusions and unnecessary "debate" due to the lack of consensus on academically accurate English terminology, I strongly propose that we discontinue using illogical terms such as "female samurai," "woman samurai" and "female bushi" ... At the same time, I strongly propose that we start using more appropriate and logically/academically correct terms such as:

1. *Woman of buke* or *buke woman* (i.e., English translation of “buke no onna”) to refer to a “female member of the privileged social category/cast commonly and loosely referred to as “samurai class” in English. [Note that “woman of buke” may or may not have possessed any martial skills.]
2. *Female bugei-sha* (i.e., English translation of “onna bugei-sha”) to refer to “a female member of “buke” category who also possessed martial skills and exercised her martial skills as did male members of “buke.”
3. *Female warrior* to refer to “a female member of “buke” category who also possessed martial skills and exercised her martial skills to fight the war as did male “samurai” of medieval Japan.

As you can see in definitions of these terms, the later (more specific) categories presuppose less restricted (or more general) previous category (/categories). That is, “*woman of buke* or *buke woman*” is the most general category; “*female bugei-sha*” is a sub-category of *woman of buke* or *buke woman* with a more strict qualification; then “*female warrior*” is a sub-category of *female bugei-sha* (thus also a sub-category of *woman of buke* or *buke woman*) with the most strict qualifications.

Further, as it is also clear from the definitions of above terms, all of those three type of women had in fact existed in the history of Japan. Therefore, by using these academically more accurate terms with precise definitions, we can effectively avoid miscommunication and unnecessary confusions.

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