

Yamaoka Tesshū: A Swordsman for Peace*

— His deeds and the education of the *samurai* —

Lecture delivered at the Ashmolean, Oxford [18 September, 2004]

by Eiji Takemura

Introduction

Historians perceive the Meiji Restoration of 1868 as an event that embraced elements of revolution, while the transfer of power that occurred during the event was a relatively amicable one. However, the process did involve complications. December 1867 saw the so-called *Taisei Hōkan*, the return of the reins of government from the Shogunate to the Emperor. But in January 1868, a war was waged by the allied forces of Satsuma and Chōshū that acquired “authorisation” as an “Imperial force” and envisaged the complete defeat of the Shogunate. These allied forces headed east to attack Edo, the political capital where successive Shoguns had resided for more than two and a half centuries. Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the 15th and last Shogun, decided on a ceasefire and laid down weapons, but the retainers of the Shogunate split into a pro-war party and an allegiance party, and this complex dispute resulted in a chaotic situation. Furthermore, there was no way of conveying the Shogun’s wish for a peaceful settlement to the Imperial force. Even for Katsu Kaishū, who held the central post of army director-general in the Shogunate, the situation was out of control. It was under these circumstances that Yamaoka Tesshū (1836–88), a retainer of the Shogunate, was recommended as a messenger/negotiator to convey the Shogun’s peaceful intentions.

Yamaoka was born in Ōkawabata, a principal base of Edo, as the fourth son of Ono Takatomi, a retainer of the Shogunate and Magistrate of the Shogunate Granary. He started to learn swordsmanship at the age of nine from Kusumi, a master of the Shinkage School, and continued to study under Inoue of the Hokushin Ittō School at Hida-Takayama, where his father was appointed Chief Governor. He also learned and became qualified in the art of calligraphy under the instruction of Iwasa Ittei at Takayama, eventually assuming the pen name Ichirakusai. He started to practice in earnest as a disciple of *zen* at around the age of twenty.

Having returned to Edo when he was sixteen, Yamaoka became a deputy-master of the Shogunate Sword Institute (*Kōbusho*) at the age of nineteen in 1855 (Ansei 2). He also received

training in the spear from Yamaoka Seizan. When Seizan died at a young age, Yamaoka married one of Seizan's sisters and took over Seizan's family name (Yamaoka). He became an instructor at the Shogunate Sword Institute at twenty-one.

Yamaoka became Deputy Statesman of the Shogunate in late 1867, just before the outbreak of the War of Toba-Fushimi, the initial stage of the Boshin War in 1868. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, he held a succession of important posts including the prefectural governorships of Shizuoka domain, Ibaraki and Imari prefectures, and became an Imperial retainer in 1872 (Meiji 5). For the next ten years, he served the Emperor Meiji. In 1882, he became a lifetime Imperial retainer of the Emperor's mission, and worked for the Imperial Household Agency as a close confidant of the Emperor Meiji until he died at the age of fifty-three.

Yamaoka's Mission during the Boshin War of 1868

In March 1868, Yamaoka assumed an important role as a messenger/negotiator at a time when the vanguard of the Imperial force was at 10 kilometres south from Edo and its General Commander, Saigō Takamori, had arrived at Sunpu in Suruga (Shizuoka). A sequence of Yamaoka's actions and negotiations with Saigō can be traced from a document titled *Ryōyū Kaishinroku* ("Saigo and Yamaoka: A Meeting of the Twain") that belongs to Zenshōan Temple in Yanaka, Tōkyō. Let us examine Yamaoka's actions in this difficult situation.

Yamaoka met Katsu Kaishū, Director-General of the Shogunate Army on 5 March, 1868, and informed him of his mission. He then had an audience with Shogun Yoshinobu and departed for Suruga, where Saigō was staying, carrying a letter for Saigō from Katsu, accompanied only by one man. Heading west for Suruga, he immediately found that the vanguard of the Imperial infantry had almost reached the mouth of Tama River, just 10 kilometres south of Edo. By the time he reached Odawara through Yokohama, he heard that war had broken out in Edo. This was not actually a battle in Edo, but a demonstration of force by Kondō Isami in the Kōshū-Katsunuma area, approximately 100 kilometres west of Edo. Nonetheless, Yamaoka's journey was accompanied by the utmost danger, for he had to pass through the middle of the opposing artillery.

After ceaseless efforts, Yamaoka finally arrived at Sunpu on March 9 and requested a meeting with Saigō. Saigō agreed immediately to see Yamaoka and the negotiations commenced. Yamaoka informed Saigō that the Shogun pledged total allegiance and he pleaded with him to avert a disastrous battle. Saigō for his part recognized the need to avoid unnecessary battle, but could not immediately accept Yoshinobu's pledge of obedience conveyed through this sudden visitor from the Shogunate. After a lengthy argument, Yamaoka pleaded, 'I wish to comment with the utmost respect on behalf of my lord Yoshinobu that if you do not accept the

Shogun's peaceful intentions, death is my only option.' He continued, 'in that case, all 80,000 warriors of Tokugawa will fight to the end without fear of death. The entire nation will be plunged into war.' After a prolonged discussion, Saigō finally accepted Yoshinobu's pledge of obedience, and a peace plan was proposed in the form of the Proposal of Five Articles (*Gokajō no Mōshisagesho*).

The terms of this proposal were as follows:

- Relinquishment of Edo Castle
- Transfer of the Shogunate warriors from the castle to Mukōjima
- Handover of all arms and weapons
- Handover of all warships
- Transfer of Tokugawa Yoshinobu to Bizen in Okayama

In response, Yamaoka stated that the last article was unacceptable under any circumstances and, after a further heated discussion with Saigō, this fifth article was deleted and a peace agreement was reached. A fatal clash between the army of Shogun and the Imperial force was successfully avoided by this confidential meeting. This led to another successful meeting between Saigō and Katsu, which resulted in the peaceful transfer of power from the Tokugawa Shogunate to the Emperor.

It should be noted that Yamaoka travelled on foot for more than 200 kilometres through the middle of an opposing military force ready for battle, and successfully met Saigō to negotiate directly with him and conveyed Yoshinobu's peaceful intentions. Furthermore, he rejected the condition proposed by Saigō as one of the terms of peace that Yoshinobu be transferred to Okayama. How should we perceive Yamaoka's achievements?

As the war raged in January 1868, Yamaoka had to decide whether to join the pro-war party within the Shogunate to continue the struggle to maintain the Tokugawa rule, which would certainly have involved massive losses among the Tokugawa warriors and citizens of Edo, or to avoid combat for the sake of national stability and security of the people. Opting for the latter would surely have ended the Tokugawa rule.

Yamaoka duly assumed his mission to convey the Shogun's allegiance, which clearly shows his strong wish for peace. This is apparent also in his negotiations with Kakuōin, a high priest and a leader of the *Shōgitai*, who intended to continue total resistance even after the bloodless surrender of Edo Castle. Kakuōin, who had already gathered a mixed *Shōgitai* army that included masterless *samurai* in Ueno, insisted to fight on. He denounced Yamaoka for being disloyal to the Shogunate. Yamaoka responded by arguing that a catastrophic war against the

Imperial Army would be the utmost disloyalty, for the Shogunate was the guardian of the Emperor and his people. For the Shogun's retainers, or Tokugawa *samurai*, it was to the Emperor (and the people) that they owed the highest loyalty, so the ceasefire did not contradict their loyalty to the Tokugawa Shogunate. In contrast, war against the Imperial force and possible loss of life among the people was an utmost offence, equivalent to, in Yamaoka's words, "learning Hinayana Buddhism without understanding Mahayana Buddhism." (Obviously, Kakuōin was a Buddhist.) Although the influence of the ideology of the *kokutai* (national polity) on Yamaoka also needs to be borne in mind, it is apparent that Yamaoka made a judgment from a broader perspective in opposition to jingoism based on unconditional or irrational loyalty to and respect for the Shogunate.¹

Turning to Yamaoka's emphatic rejection of the last article of the Proposal of Five Articles (*Gokajō no Mōshisagesho*) requiring Yoshinobu's transfer to Okayama, this may be considered a mark of his absolute loyalty to his lord. Saigō insisted on the unconditional acceptance of all five articles that were, in his words, an "Imperial order." Yamaoka responded that the fifth article was by completely unacceptable. Let us now take a detailed look at the dialogue between the two, compiled in the document, "Saigō and Yamaoka: A Meeting of the Twain."

Yamaoka: I can never accept leaving my lord Yoshinobu alone in your charge at Okayama, nor will the vassals under allegiance to Tokugawa allow it on any account. A battle would rage and tens of thousands of people would die in vain. This is not the action of a truly great person, the Emperor. If you, Master Saigō, initiate such a war, you will be a murderer. I will never consent to this article.

Master Saigō: It is an Imperial order.

Yamaoka: Even if it is an Imperial order, I can never accept it.

Master Saigō (emphatically): It is an Imperial order.

Yamaoka: Then I ask you to consider for a while, supposing you were in my place. If your lord Shimazu (Hisamitsu) were stigmatized as an enemy of the court and subjugated by the Imperial force, notwithstanding your lord's expression of obedience, and if you were in my place trying to do your best for your lord, could you really leave your lord in the enemy's hands and just stand by and observe the situation idly? I, Tetsutarō (Tesshū), could never permit that.

Saigo was silent for a while and then said Yamaoka was right and gave his word of honour: 'I,

Kichinosuke Saigō, will reconsider the treatment of Shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu, so please do not concern yourself, Master Yamaoka.’

Saigō repeatedly demanded the exile of Yoshinobu to a remote part of the country, stating that it was ‘an Imperial order,’ which Yamaoka tenaciously rejected. After a heated debate, Saigō, having eliminated the last article, handed over the proposal of four articles to Yamaoka. The meeting of the two successfully avoided a battle in the city of Edo that would surely have led to much bloodshed, and paved the way for a relatively amicable transfer of power, while saving the life of the Shogun.

Factors Underlying the Thought and Actions of Yamaoka

These were surely acts that served national or “universalistic” interests rather than being preoccupied with particular allegiance to a lord. The ethic of nonconformity was involved, which was realised through courage, determination, and nerve. How had these thoughts and values become personified in Yamaoka? What made him an able entity to transform these thoughts into action? To answer these questions, we need to turn to the education of the *samurai*, especially Yamaoka’s education in his youth.

Confucianism had begun to be widely taught at *samurai* schools (*hangaku*), which rapidly increased in number from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.² Yamaoka, the son of a Shogun retainer, had the opportunity to study Sorai School of Confucianism. The Neo-Confucianism of Sung China regarded man’s moral nature and the social order as linked aspects of the natural order, and that “natural” social order duly affected the nature of lord-vassal relations also. This concept was challenged by such Tokugawa thinkers as Itō Jinsai (1627-1705) and Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), the founder of the Sorai School. By establishing a dichotomy between morality (*sakui*) and nature (*shizen*), they created, as Maruyama Masao put it, ‘an ontological freedom for man within nature.’ The crucial rejection of the notion that heaven and human beings are linked in an all-encompassing natural order was the most distinctive characteristic of their thought, especially that of Sorai.³ In this intellectual context, the valuation of “self-hood” or autonomy in judgment increased, which also had a significant impact on the lord-vassal relations of the Tokugawa *samurai*. With the valuation of “autonomy” in judgment, the classical conception of selfless devotion to one’s lord, which might have facilitated blind submission and particular allegiance, was ideologically realigned and superseded by a loyalty of an universalistic nature.

Sorai preached in his *Bendō*, *Taiheisaku* and *Rongochō* the concept of *anmin* (to provide people with security and the economic foundation) as a lord’s duty, or his “divine command”.

Further, Sorai advocated that vassals were ‘to share this divine vocation in lord’s establishment’ and that the vassals should cooperate with the lord.⁴ In so doing, Sorai strongly advocated a vassal’s autonomy in remonstrating with his lord whenever he thought the lord was doing wrong. ‘Blind submission to a lord is completely different from the pursuit of duty (*hōkō*),’ argues Sorai in his *Taiheisaku*.⁵

Yamaoka was neither a Confucian nor a *samurai* chiefly of letters concerned mostly with administrative duties (*yakkata samurai*). However, he started to read Confucian texts earnestly at the age of ten under great scholars of the Sorai School, such as Akada and Tomita, in Takayama, where he spent his childhood as a son of the Chief Governor.⁶

According to Yamaoka’s biography edited by Murakami Yasumasa, a scholar named Akada often gave lectures on *Shunjū Sashiden*, a Chinese classic, in Takayama in the first half of 1849.⁷ The *Sashiden* states that ‘if the lord’s conduct is incorrect, the vassal should point it out and correct it; if the lord is not doing what he should, the vassal should teach the lord how to do it. Political stability and peace would be realised by this conduct.’⁸

Both the *Sashiden* and the Sorai School stress the divine vocation of the rulers as servants of the people, who should guarantee their security and well-being. They also advocated vassals’ autonomous judgment and their contribution through this autonomy to the pursuit of that divine vocation. Here we should stress the distinction between a mere submission to one’s lord and loyalty of an autonomous kind, and, more importantly, the value placed on autonomous judgment itself.

As we have seen, in the war of 1868 a sect of Shogun retainers (*bakushin*), particularly militarist *samurai*, waging a fatal battle in an hopeless attempt to maintain their rule. Others just stayed calm without finding any means or direction to act. Although Yamaoka was a *samurai* who excelled in swordsmanship, he did not follow the path chosen by his fellow swordsmen, many of whom were militarists preoccupied with their particular allegiance to the Shogunate. He placed the highest priority on the national or universalistic interest, and did not adhere to a particular allegiance to the Shogunate. In this, his thought and actions arguably reflected the teachings of the Sorai School and the *Sashiden*, especially their advocacy of autonomous judgment and universalism.

Heigaku, literally means ‘military study’, was an important element of the *samurai* education. This was the comprehensive study of military matters, including strategic, tactical, and individual combat skills, logistics and castle-building methods, and the art of organisational/managerial skills and leadership. However, *heigaku* underwent a gradual transformation as it was adapted to the prolonged peace during the Tokugawa period. Hōjō Ujinaga, the founder of this school, argues that ‘*heigaku* is not concerned only with defence but with the art of (national)

government; it teaches the “way” of the *samurai*, the great way of government and rulership. It must not be misunderstood, although the term “military” (*hei*) might suggest a narrower meaning.⁹ As is apparent from the massive *Kinsei Nihon Kyōikushi Shiryō* (‘Documents on the History of Education in Early Modern Japan’) compiled by the Ministry of Education, *heigaku* was taught at nearly all *samurai* schools from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.¹⁰

Among the most widespread was the Yamaga School of *heigaku* which broke away from Hōjō School, whose masters included the famous Yoshida Shōin (1830–59) of the Chōshū domain, who educated such preeminent figures in the Meiji Restoration as Takasugi Shinsaku, Kido Kōin, Itō Hirobumi, and Inoue Kaoru. The phrase ‘a lord should represent the people of the state, and should never act for selfish, private reasons’ appears in *Yamaga Gorū*.¹¹ Yamaga was a *heigaku* scholar with a profound knowledge of Confucianism. He discusses the *raison d’etat* of the *samurai* in *heigaku* texts in Confucian language.

Yamaoka started his service at the Shogunate Sword Institute at nineteen in 1854, when the Institute was founded. The head of the Institute was Kubota Sugane, a leading *heigaku* scholar of the time, who also gave lectures on Yamaga texts there from 1862 to 1864. Yamaoka cited the thought of the Yamaga School in his *Bushidō* (the code of the warrior) lecture in 1887 in which he asserted that Yamaga was “essential for the ebb and flow of the *bushidō*”.¹²

In his *Taiheisaku*, Ogyū Sorai criticized those who disdained learning (especially Confucian learning), condemning those who were interested only in battle stories and military strategies as “illiterate”.¹³ In the same paragraph, however, he argues that ‘those who are born to a family of bows and horses (a *samurai* family) should not discard the sword’.¹⁴ In *Taiheisaku* he broadly criticizes the *samurai* for becoming “effeminate aristocrats” or “townsmen-like.”¹⁵ This praise of swordsmanship is not generally found in original Chinese Confucian texts. It is worth noting here that, while military study underwent Confucianisation during the course of the Tokugawa peace, the texts of preeminent Tokugawa Confucians reveal the tempering of Confucianism with *heigaku* ideas and praise of swordsmanship.

Surely, no “effeminate” *samurai* would have possibly completed such a difficult mission as Yamaoka did during the war of 1868. What had made Yamaoka able to carry out this mission? Regarding this point, the following retrospective words of Katsu Kaishū illustrate the significance of *zen* and swordsman training:

‘What I really practiced hard was the sword, nothing else. I practiced swordsmanship every day and every night at a nearby shrine. At night, I sat on the stone at the front of the shrine, closed my eyes and meditated to cultivate fortitude. Then I stood up, wielded a wooden sword, and then sat down again to train my mind. Sword practice and meditation in turn, every night

for four years. Practicing alone at a shrine at night time was a frightening experience, especially at the beginning. But your nerves get stronger through training. It was the body-mind training of this sort that enabled me to face the difficult circumstances of the Meiji Restoration.¹⁶

As mentioned above, Katsu was the Director-General of the Shogunate Army and was in charge of negotiations with the Imperial force. He continues:

‘I was attacked by assassins on numerous occasions during those turbulent years, but I always handled those life-threatening situations successfully. Again, this was due to the fortitude I had cultivated through sword and *zen*.’¹⁷

Here Katsu discusses the grit and nerve nourished through sword and *zen* training, which were, in his view, essential in encountering difficulties. In fact, sword and *zen* training had continuously developed in *samurai* society in Japan. Unlike the Chinese bureaucrats of the Ch’ing dynasty in early modern China, who were selected almost solely through an intensive Confucian examination, and the Korean *Yangbang*, who were bureaucrats chiefly of letters, the qualities of the swordsman had never lost their value among the *samurai* in Tokugawa Japan even after two and a half centuries of continuous peace. During the course of this era, two types of *samurai* emerged: the *yakkata samurai*, who were chiefly concerned with administrative duties in the running of the government, and the *bankata samurai*, who were mainly in charge of military duties. However, unlike the ruling groups in early-modern China and Korea, the distinction between these two groups of the *samurai* was rather unclear. The *samurai* in charge of military duties were never allowed to be simply swordsmen; they received Confucian and other education for their intellectual development, as in Yamaoka’s case. On the other hand, the administrative *samurai* also practiced swordsmanship, bowmanship, horse-riding, and other physical skills related to military service, and attended the military study classes that were compulsory in most of the domains.

Obviously the *bankata samurai* who rose up during the war of 1868 were those with an “aggressive” nature, who were preoccupied solely with particular allegiance to the Shogunate, and in that respect they do not seem to have been well acquainted with the Sorai conception of universalistic loyalty. On the other hand, some *yakkata samurai* had kept their engagement with the sword to a minimum. In view of this, one can never assume that the Tokugawa education system necessarily or inevitably produced a “balanced” *samurai* both of sword and letters. Nevertheless, we may still assert that it functioned as a system that helped produce a

ruling group that was different in nature from those of other cultures.

As mentioned at the beginning, Yamaoka started his training in swordsmanship at the age of nine. Such distinguished swordsmen as Kusumi and Inouye were in charge of training the young Yamaoka. He immersed himself day and night in sword training in his twenties and thirties. The records show that at the age of twenty-four he went through 1,400 straight fights without a break during daylight hours, for one week.

Up against Asari Matashichirō Yoshiaki, a great swordsman, however, he was forced to realise that a body-mind training of a different level was required to overcome a swordsman of the highest quality. Since then, his body-mind training under the instruction of Tekisui, a *zen* monk/master, began to occupy a central place in his training. Sword practice in the daytime, meditation and breathing training at night. He lamented that, after two decades, he had finally attained enlightenment at the age of forty-four. He then encountered Asari again and overcame him. Yamaoka asserted at this age that improvement of the qualities of a swordsman required more than just a technical improvement but the cultivation of the mind.¹⁸ (Yamaoka's engagement in *zen* was discussed further in the lecture by Prof. Terayama which followed this lecture.)

Conclusion

As we have seen, Yamaoka Tesshū was taught by masters of Sorai School, in which typical Confucian ideas were tempered by the values of *heigaku* and the *samurai* code of behaviour. Yamaoka was also in touch with such an outstanding *heigaku* scholars as Kubota. The education that Yamaoka relished had this quality, and swordsmanship, *zen* and calligraphy he practiced throughout his life were essential elements of the man.

No substantial reference was made by Yamaoka to Confucian learning, apart from his very brief mention of it in his *Bushidō* lecture in 1887. He may not have dared to refer to it, for Sorai School, for instance, condemned Buddhism for being concerned only with “afterlife”, and for maintaining a stance entirely foreign to the practical running of society. [*Taiheisaku*] Such a perception of Buddhism may have been unacceptable to Yamaoka, who possessed a profound knowledge of *zen* Buddhism and later became a *zen* master.

Nevertheless, Yamaoka was a product of Tokugawa *samurai* society, where Confucianism of a kind was widely taught and appreciated. The ideas of lord-vassal relations and the sense of common good manifested in his actions during the war of 1868 are attributable especially to the ideas of rulership and the public developed in Sorai School of Confucianism.

However, Yamaoka's ability to pursue his difficult mission can be attributed to his prolonged practice of swordsmanship and *zen*, which underlay his personal qualities. In view of this, he was also a product of a society that never ceased to place high value on the unique qualities of

the *samurai* as the ultimate warrior.

Notes

* The present article is based on the text of a lecture delivered by the author at the Ashmolean, Oxford, on 18 September, 2004. The lecture was given as a part of a lecture/exhibition programme entitled *Zen and Japanese Culture*, which was held in Oxford from 15 September to 23 October, 2004.

-
- 1 The dialogue between Yamaoka and Kakuōin is documented in 'Record of the Debate with Kakuōin' (*Kakuōin to rongi no ki*) in the property of Zenshōan Temple, Tōkyō, and included in *Zenshōan Bassui* edited by Maruyama Bokuden (1918). It was reprinted in *Tesshū Koji no shinmenmoku* (1963).
 - 2 Among the 276 domains (*han*) that existed in 1867, 215 had at least one domainal institution for *samurai* education. See Ishikawa Matsutaro, *Hanko to terakoya* ('*Samurai* Schools and Popular Schools in Tokugawa Japan'), (Tōkyō: Kyōikusha, 1978).
 - 3 Maruyama Masao, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton University Press and University of Tōkyō Press, Princeton and Tōkyō, 1974).
 - 4 Ogyū Sorai, *Rongochō*, Vol. 1 (Heibonsha, 1994), p. 131.
 - 5 Ogyū Sorai, *Taiheisaku* (in *Nihon Shisō Taikei*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973), p. 481.
 - 6 Murakami Yasumasa, *Itou seiden Mutouryū kaiso Yamaoka Tetsutarō (Tesshū) sensei nenpu* (1999).
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 *Shunjū sashiden* (in *Shinshaku kanbun taikai*, vols. 30-33), p. 1,496.
 - 9 Hōjō Ujinaga, *Shikan yōhō* (1646).
 - 10 Ministry of Education, ed., *Nihon kyōikushi shiryō* (1890-92).
 - 11 Yamaga Sokō, *Shidan* Vol.1, Yamaga, *Yamaga Gorui* vol. 22 (Tosho Kankōkai, 1911), p. 462.
 - 12 Yamaoka Tesshū, *Bushidō* (a record of the lecture delivered at Yamaoka's residence in 1887, compiled by Abe Masahito). This was later edited by Katsube Mitake and published as *Bushidō: Bunbu ryōdō no shisō* (Daitō Shuppansha, 1997).
 - 13 Ogyū, *Taiheisaku*, op. cit., p.453.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 *Ibid.*
 - 16 Katsu Kaishū, *Hikawa seiwa* (Kadokawa Bunko, 1972), pp. 208-209.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p.211.
 - 18 Yamaoka, *Shintan renma no koto*, in Takano Kiyoshi (ed), *Yamaoka Tesshū: Ken-Zen-Wa* (Tokuma Shoten, 1971).