

THE SAMURAI HERO

The image of the ideal samurai hero does not come from actual historical personages or from historical events - both tend to be far too complicated, too ambiguous, to sustain any idealization for too long.

Take, for example, the juxtaposition of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189), accompanied by his faithful follower Musashibo Benkei (? - 1189??), and the historical figure against whom they are most tellingly contrasted, Yoshitsune's half-brother Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199). We know that Yoshitsune led the Minamoto forces to victory in the battles of Ichinotani, Yashima and Dannoura, but we know very little else about him, other than that he incurred Yoritomo's enmity, was chased by him and finally killed at the age of thirty. Of Benkei we know hardly anything at all. His name appears a couple of times in historical records, but everything else we "know" about him is sheer fabrication.

Nevertheless it is these two figures of samurai fantasy which captured the popular imagination, and were created over successive generations in Noh plays, kabuki plays, stories and, ultimately, movies. The life of Minamoto no Yoritomo, by contrast, is far better known, and his achievements far more lasting, but he was never the object of popular fantasy.

Similar points can be made about the relationship between two figures of Japan's period of unification - the swordsman Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) on the one hand and the great unifier Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) on the other. Virtually all we know of Miyamoto Musashi is contained in a brief passage of his famous treatise on swordsmanship, The Book of Five Rings. We also know that he was a fine artist.

But Hideyoshi can claim to be the unifier of Japan and the architect of 250 years of unparalleled peace. There is no doubt, therefore, whose influence and legacy was the more significant for Japan's later development, but nevertheless it is the swordsman despite the lack of documentation about him - who is considered the real samurai hero.

Abstracting from these observations, it is clear that anybody claiming to be a samurai hero needed to conform to a series of preconditions:

- a) that little reliable information be known about him
- b) that he be either a loser, or a non-competitor, in struggles for power, rather than a winner
- c) that he take little or no responsibility for administration, thereby evading the need to take unpopular decisions
- d) that he should not be associated with anything but a frugal lifestyle
- e) that he should possess a pronounced streak of misogyny, remain unmarried, and preferably celibate, although not beyond romantic attachments to his comrades