

EXCERPTS FROM THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI (SHĪDO)
By Yamaga Sokō

Introduction

Yamaga Sokō (1622-1685) was a Confucian philosopher and expert in military techniques and strategy. He was particularly concerned with the fate of Japan's warrior elite in an era of extended peace: after the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637-1638, Tokugawa Japan would enjoy more than two centuries without any large-scale wars or uprisings. In his mid-sixteenth-century work *The Way of the Samurai (Shidō)*, Sokō outlined a role for samurai in Japanese society that combined moral cultivation and civil responsibility with military preparedness.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

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... For generation after generation, men have taken their livelihood from tilling the soil, or devised and manufactured tools, or produced profit from mutual trade, so that peoples' needs were satisfied. Thus the occupations of farmer, artisan, and merchant necessarily grew up as complementary to one another. But the samurai eats food without growing it, uses utensils without manufacturing them, and profits without buying or selling. What is the justification for this? When I reflect today on my pursuit in life, [I realize that] I was born into a family whose ancestors for generations have been warriors and whose pursuit is service at court. The samurai is one who does not cultivate, does not manufacture, and does not engage in trade, but it cannot be that he has no function at all as a samurai. He who satisfies his needs without performing any function at all would more properly be called an idler. Therefore one must devote all one's mind to the detailed examination of one's calling.

...

... The business of the samurai is to reflect on his own station in life, to give loyal service to his master if he has one, to strengthen his fidelity in associations with friends, and, with due consideration of his own position, to devote himself to duty above all. However, in his own life, he will unavoidably become involved in obligations between father and child, older and younger brother, and husband and wife. Although these are also the fundamental moral obligations of everyone in the land, the farmers, artisans, and merchants have no leisure from

their occupations, and so they cannot constantly act in accordance with them and fully exemplify the Way. Because the samurai has dispensed with the business of the farmer, artisan, and merchant and confined himself to practicing this Way, if there is someone in the three classes of the common people who violates these moral principles, the samurai should punish him summarily and thus uphold the proper moral principles in the land. It would not do for the samurai to know martial and civil virtues without manifesting them. Since this is the case, outwardly he stands in physical readiness for any call to service, and inwardly he strives to fulfill the Way of the lord and subject, friend and friend, parent and child, older and younger brother, and husband and wife. Within his heart he keeps to the ways of peace, but without, he keeps his weapons ready for use. The three classes of the common people make him their teacher and respect him. By following his teachings, they are able to understand what is fundamental and what is secondary. ...

[*Yamaga Sokō bunshū*, pp. 45-48; RT, WTdB]

Questions:

1. What does Yamaga Sokō consider the most important duties of the warrior?
2. Why does Sokō feel that the samurai are uniquely prepared to assume moral authority in society?
3. What kind of education do you think Sokō would have recommended for samurai?
4. How do you think you would have responded to Sokō's arguments as a Tokugawa period farmer, artisan, or merchant?
5. How do you think Sokō's vision of samurai values and behavior differs from images of the samurai common in popular culture today?