

# A Long History

## Japanese Women Warriors

Long before the term "samurai" came into usage, Japanese fighters were skilled with the sword and spear. These warriors included some women, such as the legendary Empress Jingu (c. 169-269 A.D.). According to the stories, Jingu was married to the fourteenth emperor of Japan, Chuai, who reigned between 192 and 200. After his death, she ruled as a regent for her young son. To pass the time, she invaded and conquered Korea (without shedding a drop of blood, according to the legend).

### "Female Samurai"

Linguistic purists point out that the term "samurai" is a masculine word; thus, there are no "female samurai." Nonetheless, for thousands of years, certain upper class Japanese women have learned martial skills and participated in fighting.

Between the 12th and 19th centuries, many women of the samurai class learned how to handle the sword and the naginata (a blade on a long staff) primarily to defend themselves and their homes. In the event that their castle was overrun by enemy warriors, the women were expected to fight to the end and die with honor, weapons in hand.

Some young women were such skilled fighters that they rode out to war beside the men, rather than sitting at home and waiting for war to come to them. Some depictions of samurai women are enigmatic, such as Kiyonaga Torii drawing from 1785-1789.

Some female warriors wore a long veil and have covered their lacquered armor with civilian clothing. Their footwear is anything but practical for warfare. Nonetheless, they would wear the two swords of a samurai (as well as the aforementioned armor).

During the Genpei War (1180-1185), a beautiful young woman named Tomoe Gozen fought alongside her daimyo (and possibly her husband), Minamoto no Yoshinaka, against the forces of his cousin Minamoto no Yoritomo.

Tomoe Gozen (*gozen* is a title meaning "lady") was famous as a swordswoman, a skilled rider, and a superb archer. She was Minamoto's first captain, and took at least one enemy head during the Battle of Awazu in 1184.

### The Genpei War and the Story of Tomoe Gozen

The late-Heian era Genpei War was a civil conflict between two samurai clans, the Minamoto and the Taira. Both families sought to control the shogunate. In the end, the Minamoto clan prevailed and established the Kamakura shogunate in 1192.

The Minamoto did not just fight the Taira, though. As mentioned above, different Minamoto lords also fought one another. Unfortunately for Tomoe Gozen, Minamoto no Yoshinaka died at the Battle of Awazu. His cousin, Minamoto Yoritomo, became shogun.

Reports vary as to Tomoe Gozen's fate. Some say that she stayed in the fight and died. Others say that she rode away carrying an enemy's head, and disappeared. Still others claim that she married Wada

Yoshimori, and then became a nun after his death.

The story of Tomoe Gozen has inspired artists and writers for centuries. Fortunately for us, she also inspired a number of Japan's great woodcut print artists. Because no contemporary images of her exist, artists have free rein to interpret her features. The sole surviving description of her, from the *Tale of the Heike*, states that she was beautiful, "with white skin, long hair, and charming features."

## **The Genpei War and the Story of Hangaku Gozen**

Another famous female fighter of the Genpei War was Hangaku Gozen, also known as Itagaki. She was allied with the Taira clan, which lost the war.

Later, Hangaku Gozen and her nephew, Jo Sukemori, joined in the Kennin Uprising of 1201, which tried to overthrow the new Kamakura Shogunate. She created an army and led this force of 3,000 soldiers in defense of Fort Torisakayama against an attacking army of Kamakura loyalists numbering 10,000 or more.

Hangaku's army surrendered after she was wounded by an arrow; she was captured and taken to the shogun as a prisoner. Although the shogun could have ordered her to commit seppuku, one of Minamoto's soldiers fell in love with the captive, and he was given permission to marry her instead. Hangaku and her husband, Asari Yohito, had at least one daughter.

The Genpei War of the late 12th century seemed to inspire many female warriors to join in the fight. More recently, the Boshin War (1868-69) also witnessed the fighting spirit of Japan's samurai-class women.

## **The Boshin War**

The Boshin War was another civil war, pitting the ruling Tokugawa shogunate against those who wanted to return real political power to the emperor. The young Meiji Emperor had the support of the powerful Choshu and Satsuma clans, who had far fewer troops than the shogun, but more modern weaponry.

After heavy fighting on land and at sea, the shogun abdicated and the shogunate military minister surrendered Edo (Tokyo) in May of 1868. Nevertheless, shogunate forces in the north of the country held out for many months more. One of the most important battles, which featured several female warriors, was the Battle of Aizu (October and November 1868).

After a month-long siege, the Aizu region surrendered. Its samurai were sent to prisoner of war camps, and the domain was divided up and redistributed to imperial loyalists.

## **Yamakawa Futaba, 1844-1909**

As the daughter and the wife of shogunate officials in Aizu, Yamakawa Futaba was trained to fight. She participated in the defense of Tsuruga Castle against the Emperor's forces. When the castle's defenses were breached, many of the defenders committed seppuku. Yamakawa Futaba survived, and went on to lead the drive for improved education for women and girls in Japan.

### **Yamamoto Yaeko, 1845-1942**

Another of the Aizu region's female defenders was Yamamoto Yaeko (1845-1932). Her father was a gunnery instructor for the daimyo of the Aizu domain, and young Yaeko was a highly skilled shooter.

After the defeat of the shogunate forces in 1869, Yamamoto Yaeko moved to Kyoto to look after her brother, Yamamoto Kakuma. He was taken prisoner by the Satsuma clan in the closing days of the Boshin War, and presumably received harsh treatment at their hands.

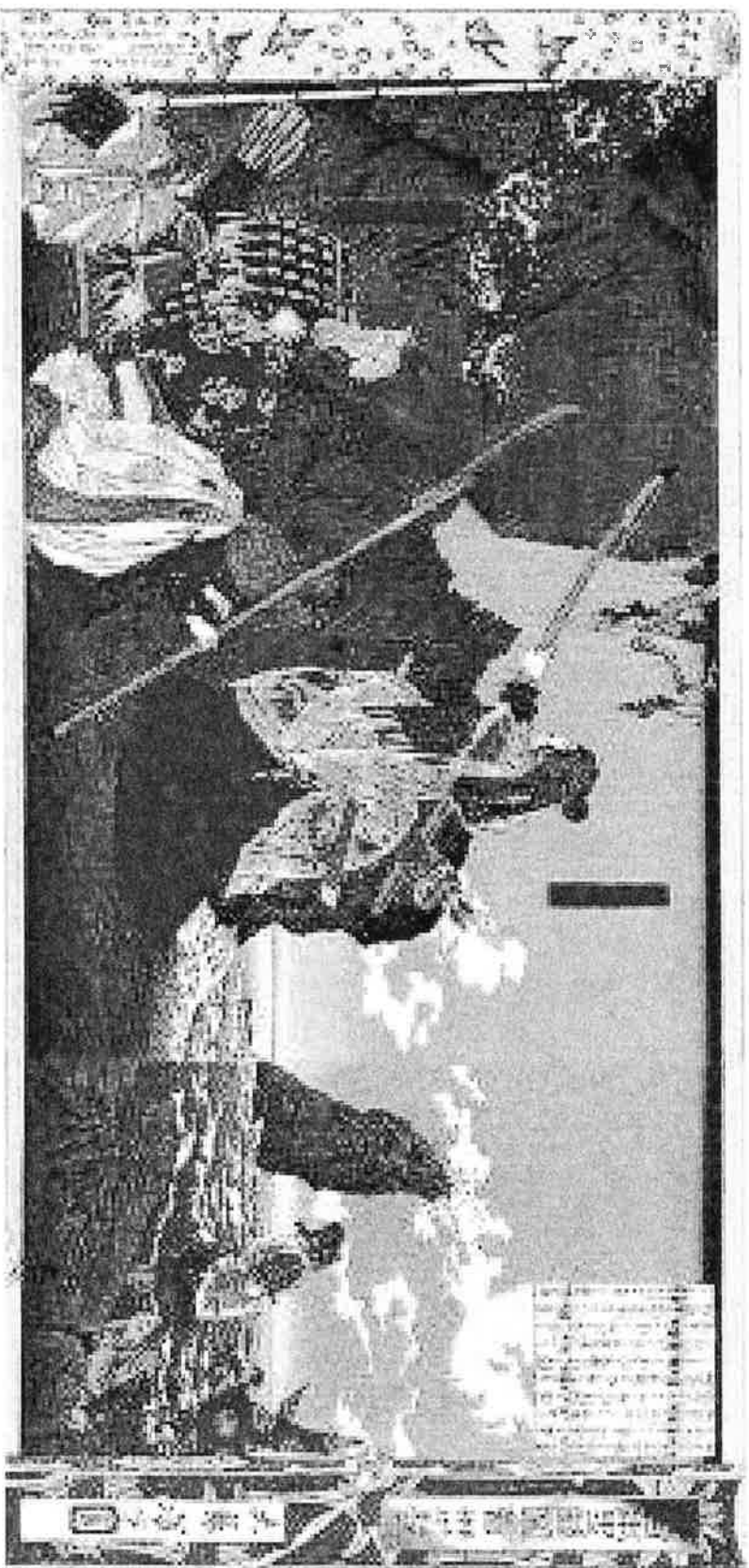
### **Nakano Takeko, 1847-1868**

A third Aizu defender was Nakano Takeko (1847-1868), the daughter of another Aizu official. She was trained in the martial arts, and worked as an instructor during her late teens.

During the Battle of Aizu, Nakano Takeko led a corps of female warriors against the Emperor's forces. She fought with a naginata, the traditional weapon of preference for Japanese women warriors.

Takeko was leading a charge against the imperial troops when she took a bullet to her chest. Knowing that she would die, the 21-year-old warrior ordered her sister Yuko to cut off her head and save it from the enemy. Yuko did as she asked, and Nakano Takeko's head was buried under a tree at Hokaiji Temple.

The Meiji Restoration that resulted from the Emperor's triumph in the Boshin War marked the end of an era for the samurai. To the very end, though, samurai women like Nakano Takeko fought, won and died as bravely and as well their male counterparts.



**The Empress Jingū (c. 169 - 269 A.D.) leads an invasion of Korea.**



Tomoe Gozen, c. 1157–1247, a Genpei War-era samurai, leaning on her naginata



Hangaku Gozen, another Genpei War-era female samurai, who was allied with the Taira Clan, c. 1200.





**Nakano Takeko (1847-1868),  
leader of a female warrior corps  
during the Boshin War**



**Yamakawa Futaba (1844-1909), who fought to defend Tsuruga Castle in the Boshin War (1868-69).**





**Yamamoto Yaeko (1845-1942),  
who fought as a gunner during the  
defense of Aizu in the Boshin War**