

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



Thursday, 21 May 2015, 18.30 h

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Samurai, Castles, and the Search for the Soul of Japan

As two of the most romanticized symbols of traditional Japan, samurai and castles feature prominently in popular culture and tourist promotions, and serve as important markers of both regional and national identities. In spite of their ancient roots, popular images of both samurai and castles were largely formed during and after the late nineteenth century. Bringing together themes from my recent book, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai*, and my current research project on Japanese castles, this talk explores the modern origins of some of Japan's most famous traditions, and how these were shaped by domestic and international agendas.

After 1868, samurai and castles faced the new Meiji order as relics of the discredited old regime. Viewed as backward and “feudal” in an age of “civilization and enlightenment,” samurai and castles suffered similar fates in the 1870s and 1880s as victims of popular apathy and even resentment. The eventual rehabilitation of the popular image of the samurai was a long and complicated process. Influenced by Western, especially Victorian, ideals of gentlemanship and medieval chivalry, a number of Japanese thinkers proposed similar moral guidelines for the new Japan. The “way of the samurai,” or *bushidō*, that emerged from this discourse rapidly gained in popularity after victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, and was soon widely portrayed as an ancient ethic and even the very “soul of Japan.”

This talk will explore the development of *bushidō* in modern Japan, comparing the ideological “revival” of the samurai spirit with the growing appreciation for castles, as efforts increased to “save” both of these “national symbols” in an era of growing national strength and confidence. The talk will further consider parallels in their subsequent histories up to the present day.

Oleg Benesch is Anniversary Research Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of York. His book, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido in Modern Japan* was published by Oxford University Press in 2014. He is currently engaged in several projects on Japanese and Chinese intellectual, social, and cultural history. For contact details and further information, please see his website, olegbenesch.com.

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is a forum open to scholars working on Japan in any field of the humanities. It is organized by Miki Aoyama-Olschina and Torsten Weber. All are welcome to attend, but prior registration (weber@dijtokyo.org) is greatly appreciated.

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