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From the Art of Victory to the Art of Keeping Peace: The *Dao De Jing* and Early 17th Century Tokugawa Bakufu Military Strategy

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Abstract. Using the material of a crucial Tokugawa era normative document, the *Laws for the Military Houses* (*Buke Shohatto*) in its first edition (1615) and the *Hereditary Book on the Art of War* (*Heihō Kadensho*, 1632), composed by Yagyū Munenori (1565–1646), a prominent statesman and fencing teacher of the first three Tokugawa shoguns, this article considers the influence of the *Dao De Jing* on the military-political doctrine of Tokugawa *bakufu* of the first half of the 17th century. The analysis of these sources gives us reason to believe that the concept of government in accordance with the Dao, stated in the *Dao De Jing*, which permitted the use of armed force only as an extreme measure of defense, was widely discussed by the Japanese elite in the first half of the 17th century and played a significant role in determining the administrative and military policies aimed at securing peace in the country. This strategy eventually resulted in a series of measures aimed at preserving the dominance of the military-feudal class, strengthening the *bakufu* control over the *han*, quantitative and qualitative reduction of armed forces, the reduction of military education of the samurai to classes at private martial arts schools, which did not prepare the troops for large-scale action. Eventually, this significantly contributed to Japan having two and a half centuries of peace despite the formal dominance of the military.

Keywords: Taoism, *Dao De Jing*, Tokugawa Bakufu, *Buke Shohatto, Heihō Kadensho*, *heihō*, samurai.

During the wars of the 15th and 16th centuries, during the endless civil strife and struggle against popular uprisings, Japan witnessed the final establishment of the dominance of the samurai military class. It became numerous, covering almost a tenth of the entire population (counting family members), and, within it, a complex hierarchical structure of suzerain-vassal relations formed.

After fierce struggle between the most powerful military houses, in the early 17th century, the Tokugawa clan came to power in Japan, with its leader, Ieyasu (1543–1616), defeating his enemies in the war of 1600 and becoming shogun in 1603. In 1614–1615, he crushed the anti-Tokugawa opposition, which had formed around Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615), and finally established firm peace in the country.

The final unification of the country under the rule of the Tokugawa shoguns faced them with the necessity to determine the strategy of developing the state during the new, peaceful period. The most important tasks of the Tokugawa shoguns were firmly securing supreme power in their hands, keeping, despite the end of wars and the nation moving to peaceful life, the historically established dominance of the military class as the basis of the *bakuhan* ("Bakufu – domains") system, suppressing and preventing any attempts of rebellions within the country, which posed the greatest danger to the Tokugawa regime, given the absence of real external threats. To address these tasks, the new rulers had to, first of all, establish a firm hierarchy of feudal dominance, to determine the status and the social role of the samurai class, to guide its development in the desired direction, so that, under the new historical circumstances, it could transform from a constant threat to peace and order, from soldiery obsessed with ideas of personal glory, used to maneuvering, betraying, and defecting to the victorious side, into a firm basis of the regime, an obedient instrument of its power. A whole complex of measures was used to address these tasks. The ideological basis of the regime played a significant role among these.

For a long time, Confucianism, primarily, the Zhu Xi school of Neo-Confucianism was pointed out as the source of the Tokugawa Bakufu ideology (see, for example: [Nagata 1991, p. 59]). However, in

recent decades, historians point out that this statement is an unjustified simplification and that, for the ideology of the Bakufu, the rich military and political experience accumulated by Japanese feudal lords during the previous centuries, as well as the theories of military art, or *gungaku* (literally "military science") [Maeda 1996, pp. 1–3] played no lesser role. In particular, an American scholar John Rodgers' thesis "The Development of the Military Profession in Tokugawa Japan" [Rogers 1998] persuasively showed that the basis of the Tokugawa *bakufu* ideology was laid, under the first three shoguns, not by Confucian scholars, but by high-ranking *bakufu* officials and the *gungaku* specialists serving it, who drew their ideas not only from Confucian texts, but also from a much wider range of Chinese thought, including China's seven military classics and Daoist texts, in particular, the *Dao De Jing* [Rogers 1998, pp. 64–116].

Rogers demonstrates the influence of the *Dao De Jing* on the *bakufu* ideology by using the example of the *Hereditary Book on the Art of War* (兵法家伝書, *Heihō Kadensho*, 1632)[1] by a famous fencing teacher Yagyū Munenori (1565–1646) [Rogers 1998, pp. 85–86]. The researcher shows how, proceeding from a quote from the *Dao De Jing*, Munenori elaborates a concept of, on the one hand, maximum limitation of the use of armed violence, and, on the other, of preserving the military regime in peaceful times.

Rogers attributes the establishment of this concept to Yagyū Munenori himself [Rogers 1998], thus completely ignoring the fact that the same quote from the *Dao De Jing* can be found in the first edition of the *Laws for the Military Houses* (武家諸法度, *Buke Shohatto*).

The *Laws for the Military Houses*[2] was a cornerstone normative document of Tokugawa Bakufu. Its first edition was announced on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month of the first year of Genna (1615), when Ieyasu, after the defeat of Toyotomi Hideyori and the fall of the Osaka castle, gathered the daimyo lords in his Fushimi castle. The day

[1] This book was translated into Russian by the author, see: [Gorbylev 2010].

[2] For Russian translation, see: [Knyazheskii kodeks… 1960].

the *Laws* were announced, first, the shogun's advisor Honda Masazumi (本多正純, 1566–1637) spoke to the daimyo about the reasons for their introduction, and then another prominent advisor of the shogun, Zen monk Konchi-in Sūden (金地院崇伝; Ishin Sūden 以心崇伝, 1659–1633), recited the text of the *Buke Shohatto*. After that, the announcement of such an important document was celebrated by a splendid nine-part Noh performance [Ono 1968, p. 3].

Being similar in its composition to *Goseibai Shikimoku* (*Jōei Shikimoku*, 1232) and *Kemmu Shikimoku* (1336), the *Laws* included 13 articles. It is believed that it was based on a three-point oath that Tokugawa Ieyasu made the daimyo, who gathered in Kyoto on the occasion of the intronization of Emperor Go-Mizunoo, sign in 1611 [Prasol 2017, p. 395]. To the existing three, ten more articles were added, developed by monk Ishin Sūden, who is believed to be the author of the *Buke Shohatto*.

Article 1 of the *Laws for the Military Houses*, which is of interest for us and which contains a hidden quotation from the *Dao De Jing*, says:

一、文武弓馬の道、専ら相嗜むべきこと。

文を左とし武を右とす古よりの法なり。兼ね備えざるべからず。弓馬はこれ武家の要枢なり。兵を号し、凶器となすは已むを得ずしてこれを用う、治めて乱を忘れず、何ぞ修練を励まざる事あらん [Ono 1968, p. 3].

1. – Literature (文, *bun*), *arms* (武, *bu*), *archery and horsemanship* (弓馬の道) *are, systematically, to be the favourite pursuits.*

Literature (*bun*) *first, and arms next to it, was the rule of the ancients. They must both be cultivated concurrently. Archery and horsemanship are the more essential for the Military Houses. Weapons of warfare* (兵) *are ill-omened words to utter* (凶器, *Japanese – kyōki, Chinese – xiongqi); the use of them, however, is an unavoidable necessity. In times of peace and good order* (治) *we must*

not forget that disturbances (乱) *may arise. Dare we omit to practise our warlike exercises and drill?*[3]

The character 兵 (Japanese – *hei*, Chinese – *bing*) is translated here as "weapons of warfare", while other translations, like "soldier", "troops", "warfare", seem equally viable. Our choice here is defined by the fact that most translators of the *Dao De Jing* use the word "weapons" for the character 兵. It should, however, be noted, that, in this case, it is not to be understood in the narrow meaning and should be treated as a synonym for "warrior", "army", or "warfare".

The phrase 兵を号し、凶器となすは已むを得ずしてこれを用う, which is translated by Hall as "weapons of warfare are ill-omened words to utter; the use of them, however, is an unavoidable necessity," is a quotation from Chapter 31 of the *Dao De Jing*, which, in the Chinese variant, looks like this: 聖王號兵爲凶器、不得巳而用之.

There are several translations of the *Dao De Jing*, where this passage is borrowed from, into English. For example, R. Henricks translates it as:

> As for weapons – they are instruments of ill omen.
> And among things there are those that hate them.
> Therefore, the one who has the Way, with them does not dwell.
> When the gentleman is at home, he honors the left;
> When at war, he honors the right.
> Therefore, weapons are not the instruments of the gentleman –
> Weapons are instruments of ill omen.
> When you have no choice but to use them, it's best
> to remain tranquil and calm.[4]

Article 1 of the Laws for the Military Houses shows that weapons, as well as army and armed force, are an extreme measure to be used out of

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[3] Translation by John Carey Hall. https://web.archive.org/web/20071027103105/http://www.uni-erfurt.de/ostasiatische_geschichte/texte/japan/dokumente/17/tokugawa_legislation/index_files/buke_shohatto_1615.html

[4] From [Boisen 1996]. For the source of the translation, see [Henricks 1993].

necessity, when peaceful measures are obviously of no use. The primacy of peaceful measures over the military ones is expressed in the text of the article by, first, a double placing of "literature" (or "civilian sciences") before "arms", and, second, by the phrase in the first sentence of the commentary, which can be literally translated as: "to the left – "civilian sciences" (*bun*), to the right – warfare – this is the rule of the ancients." It is known that the left side was considered more important than the right one, and this is the reason the Minister of the Left was higher than the Minister of the Right. Therefore, *Buke Shohatto*, addressing the heads of the military houses (*buke*), dictates them to study "civilian sciences" first and warfare second.

Arguably, an educated reader who was well familiar with the text of the *Dao De Jing* could easily reconstruct the context from which this quote was borrowed and had to note Laozi's words that a ruler who has the Way, that is, Dao, as well as a gentleman, "does not dwell" with the weapons and that the use of weapons and military force is only permissible under extreme circumstances and must be done while remaining "tranquil and calm".

This educated reader also had to know that, in the *Dao De Jing*, the paragraph from which the author of the *Laws for the Military Houses* borrowed this quote follows one of the most well-known sayings of Laozi[5] about the destructive consequences of war (Chapter 30):

> Those who assist their rulers in the Way,
> Don't use weapons to commit violence in the world.
> Such deeds easily rebound.
> In places where armies are stationed, thorns and brambles will grow.

In other words, even though the Laws urge to make, among other things, "arms" one's "favorite pursuits", it requires the daimyo and the

[5] In this paper, we will not touch upon the discussion about the authorship, date, and authenticity of the *Dao De Jing* and, when speaking about Laozi, we will mean the author of the *Dao De Jing*, whom the tradition believes to be the above-mentioned thinker.

military houses (*buke*) in general to, generally, abandon "committing violence in the world" and to move on to ruling with civilian methods while keeping arms as the last resort. This requirement is all the more obvious given that the first article, considered here, is the only one in the *Laws* which has ideological contents, while other articles are devoted to specific practical issues of behavior and government of the domains.

The main requirement of the 1615 *Buke Shohatto* was further developed and justified in the 1632 *Hereditary Book on the Art of War*.

Heihō Kadensho is one of the most well-known works of the martial arts tradition. There are its translations into English [Sato 1985; Wilson 2003] and Russian [Yagyū 1998], including its translation by the author of this article [Gorbylev (trans.) 2010]. Usually, this text is seen as a fencing manual of the Shinkage-ryū school, which is explained by Yagyū Munenori being widely known as a fencing master who taught the first three Tokugawa shoguns. This, however, does not take into account other facts of Munenori's biography, who, for his service to the Tokugawa house, was given the rank of a daimyo.

Tokugawa Jikki, the official chronicle of the Tokugawa house, reports that Munenori entered the service of Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1594 as a fencing teacher. As a vassal of the Tokugawa house, he fought on their side in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 and the Osaka campaigns of 1614–1615. Since 1601, he was appointed the fencing teacher of Hidetada, and since 1623 – of Iemitsu. Under the third shogun, Munenori became a daimyo and between 1632 and 1636 was one of the four inspectors general (*sōmetsuke*), that is, he was a prominent statesman. *Tokugawa Jikki* characterizes him as a man who "knew not just of strategy, but was well versed in the state of the realm", who "realized new principles...which he applied to governing and thus was held in Iemitsu's highest trust" [Rogers 1998, p. 87].

Approximately at the same time when Munenori was appointed inspector general, he, according to *Tokugawa Jikki*, presented to

Iemitsu a certain treatise on strategy [Rogers 1998, p. 87]. It seems that this refers to *Heihō Kadenshō*, the opus magnum of Munenori.

It should also be noted that Yagyū Munenori constantly conversed with the political and cultural elites of Edo. It is to him that Zen monk Takuan addressed his famous work *Fudōchi Shinmyōroku* (不動智神妙録, *The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom*).

The *Hereditary Book on the Art of War* is divided into two parts. The first one consists of one scroll, authored by Shinkage-ryū founder Kamiizumi Hidetsuna. He gave this scroll to his best disciple, Yagyū Muneyoshi, who gave it to his son, Munenori. *Shinkage-ryū Heihō-no Sho,* according to Munenori, presents, in general, a *mokuroku*, a catalogue of techniques, which "is to be given to each disciple who has reached a certain level in studying our school's art of fencing as a sign of transferring the teaching to him" [Yagyū 1972, p. 342].

The original title of this scroll was *Shinkage-ryū Heihō-no Sho* (新陰流兵法の書, *The Book of Sword Fencing of the Shinkage-ryū School*). But Yagyū Munenori gave it a new title, *Shinrikyō* (進履橋, *The Shoe-Offering Bridge*). According to his own explanation, this name is a reference to an anecdote from the history of the Chinese Former Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE): "I named this scroll *The Shoe-Offering Bridge* in memory of Zhang Liang once offering a shoe to [Huang] Shigong, who taught Zhang Liang the Way of war (兵道, *heidō*), after which, due to Zhang Liang's plan, Emperor Gaozu pacified the country and the Han family ruled it for four centuries... Use this scroll as a bridge and, with its help, walk the Way of the art of strategy (*heihō-no michi*)" [Yagyū 1972 p. 306].

In other words, Munenori presents the family school of *heihō* as akin to that shoe, as if hinting that this book can also help to establish firm peace in the country.

The second part of the book includes two scrolls. The first is named *Setsunintō* (殺人刀, *The Killing Sword*), another one – *Katsuninken* (活人剣, *Life-Giving Sword*). These names are borrowed from Zen literature, probably, from the classical *kōan* collection *Biyan Lu*

(Chinese; Japanese – *Hekiganroku*, *The Blue Cliff Record*).[6] Their meaning is explained by Yagyū Munenori himself: "A Killing Sword is to bring tranquility and order into this chaotic world. But once tranquility and order are established, should not this killing sword turn into a life-giving sword? It is this meaning that I put into the titles of the two scrolls" [Yagyū 1972, p. 343]. Here, Munenori says that, once peace is established, it is necessary to abandon aggression and transform martial arts, military profession, military organization in general from tools of destroying the enemy into tools of maintaining peace.

At the tactical and technical level, this idea is realized by Yagyū Munenori as a concept of waging war "as a second", which is expressed in the formula "provoke the enemy to strike first, and you will win" [Yagyū 1972, p. 313]. Being physically, technically, and psychologically ready to parry any attack and to deliver a crushing counterstrike while not attacking first – this was the Shinkage-ryū ideal, which was taught by Yagyū Munenori to his disciples.

However, in the *Hereditary Book on the Art of War*, Munenori does not limit himself to issues of fencing and pays attention to governing the country as well. This means that the Book addressed, first and foremost, rulers, and not common samurai. This is confirmed by the society where the copies of the Book circulated, which included the leaders of the Japanese elite – the disciples of the Yagyū family fencing school. For example, copies of *Heihō Kadensho* were received by Tokugawa Iemitsu, Tokugawa Ietsuna, the future fourth shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty (ruled in 1651–1680), and several prominent daimyo, for example, Nabeshima Motoshige (1602–1654).

Addressing these representatives of the elite from the position of their teacher and a major authority in the field of "strategy", sword fencing, and martial arts in general, Munenori presents his own concept

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6 Composed in China in the 12th century. In the Muromachi era (1338–1573) it served as a standard textbook for monks from the system of monasteries of the "Five Mountains", Gozan (in particular, those from the Zen school of Rinzai).

of the role of *hei* (兵) – army, warfare, martial arts in general, which has as its starting point the same words of the *Dao De Jing* that were earlier used in the Laws for the Military Houses: "There is something said of old: "Weapons are instruments of ill omen; it is the Way of Nature (*tendō* 天道, *Heavenly Way*) to dislike them. To use them only when it is unavoidable is the Way of Nature."[7]

According to Munenori, using weapons brings death, which is fraught with the anger of the Heaven. It is a testimony to the abandonment of the Heavenly Way. Meanwhile, the absence of the necessity to use violence is, vice versa, an indicator of following the Heavenly Dao, the virtuousness of the ruler, the correctness of governing the country, and also the condition for the benevolence of the Heaven.

These ideas have direct parallels in the *Dao De Jing*. N. I. Chuev, who specifically studied the issue of Laozi's attitude to war, persuasively demonstrated that the author of the *Dao De Jing* was against war in principle because "any war demonstrates the absence of Dao in the country", but, if the war was inevitable, justified defensive war [Chuev 1999, p. 106]. Chapter 46 of the *Dao De Jing* says: "When the world has the Way, ambling horses are retired to fertilize fields. When the world lacks the Way, war horses are reared in the suburbs." In other words, the use of arms and armies is a sure sign of the lack of Dao.

Heihō Kadensho, therefore, presents an important step in the promotion of the idea that a ruler and a warrior should be deemed truly great not when they are able to defeat any foe, but when they are able to maintain peace in the country without resorting to the force of arms. In this, Munenori also follows the *Dao De Jing*, which says (Chapter 68):

> Therefore, the one who is good at being a warrior doesn't make
> a show of his might;
> One who is good in battle doesn't get angry;
> One who is good at defeating the enemy doesn't engage him.

[7] Translation by T. Cleary. https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/Munenori.html

The influence of the *Dao De Jing* can also be glimpsed in Munenori's borrowing of Laozi's ideas about chaos and order. Following the *Buke Shohatto*, Munenori stated: "Not to forget about disturbance (乱; Japanese – *ran*, Chinese – *luan*) when times are peaceful – this is an art of war (*heihō*). To see the dynamic of the state and discern when there is likely to be disruption, and to heal the disturbance before it happens – this is also an art of war."

Characteristically, Yagyū Munenori speaks not of war here (戦; Japanese – *sen*, Chinese – *zhan*), but about "disturbance". In *Dao De Jing*, the character 亂 (used eight times) has the meaning of the state of disorder, strife, war inside the country, while the character 戰 is used (six times) only in the meaning of the verb "to fight". Meanwhile, the character 亂 is juxtaposed by the character 治 (Japanese – *chi*; Chinese – *zhi*), which literally means "order" and, when referring to the state, its orderly and peaceful state. Apparently, with no serious external military threats, Yagyū Munenori, as well as other representatives of the Japanese elite of his times, was more worried by the problem of keeping peace within the country. Hence their receptiveness to the ideas of Laozi, who, during the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE) was also reflecting about ending internal strife and restoring order and peace in the Middle Kingdom. Simultaneously, Munenori extends the notion of strategy so that the leaders of the Tokugawa regime could believe themselves to be masters of this art should they be able to protect the country from disorder without resorting to arms.

Like Laozi, Munenori, even though he believed war to be evil, recognized the necessity of using armed force for defense and maintaining order. He did not urge the elimination of the military-feudal system and the samurai class (even though, later, there appeared scholars calling for the majority of the samurai to be returned to the land) and did not reject the right of the state to use violence. The state had to maintain sufficient power to be able to punish anyone who commits "evil" and to put an end to "disturbances" and "disorder". He wrote: "People may take advantage of events to do evil, but when that evil is done, it is attacked. That is why it is said that using weapons is also the Way of Nature. It may happen

that a multitude of people suffer because of the evil of one person. In such a case, by killing one man a multitude of people are given life. Would this not be a true example of the saying that 'the sword (*katana* 刀) that kills (殺人刀) is that sword that gives life (活人剣)?'"

One can say that Yagyū Munenori used his authority of a recognized expert in martial education and strategy to urge the leaders of his time, such as Tokugawa Hidetada and Tokugawa Iemitsu, as well as several influential daimyo (Date Masamune, Hosokawa Tadaoki, Hosokawa Tadatoshi, Nabeshima Katsushige, Nabeshima Motoshige, Mori Hidenari, and others) to focus not on building up their armed forces, but on securing due administration of the country in peaceful times.

Therefore, we can assume that the concept of governing the country in accordance with the Dao, which was stated in the *Dao De Jing* and which permitted the use of armed violence only as an extreme defensive measure, was widely discussed by the Japanese elite in the first half of the 17th century and played a significant role in determining the administrative and military policies aimed at maintaining peace in the country.

Eventually, this strategy resulted in a system of measures aimed at maintaining the dominance of the military feudal estate, increasing the control of *bakufu* over the domains, qualitative and quantitative reduction of the armed forces, the reduction of military education of the samurai to classes at private martial arts schools, the curricula of which did not prepare the troops for large-scale action, etc. It appears that this policy played a substantial role, giving Japan, despite the formal dominance of the military, two and a half centuries of generally peaceful life, even though it made the country extremely vulnerable to the external military threat in the 19th century.

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