Kendo as a Feminist Sport: Martial Arts and the Japanese Women's Liberation Movement

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ABSTRACT

Kendo is a modern Japanese martial art derived from Tokugawa Era swordsmanship practices. From the 19th century to today, kendo evolved from an art form to a national sport, to a militaristic indoctrination practice until its present form. Its historical link to samurai culture and militarism and the invented notions of bushido that perpetuate this image invoke a romanticized masculine impression of kendo. However, kendo's modern inclusion of women beginning in the mid 20th century and increasing significantly during the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s contradicts this masculine milieu. The testimony of female kendoka and the rhetoric promoting martial arts for women demonstrates that, although women's kendo continues to be patronized today, female kendoka that began practicing during the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s view their participation as agentic feminism. Thus, despite the persistence of gender inequality in kendo today, the generation of female kendoka that perceive kendo as a feminist sport pass down their confrontational attitude to future generations through their instruction and mentorship.

Kendo is often described to Western audiences as "Japanese-style fencing" derived from samurai sword fighting and swordsmanship. It is also often described as "traditional" despite its relatively recent invention in the nineteenth century.[1] In modern practice, every aspect of kendo is highly ritualized and formalized. Many practitioners and teachers of kendo hold the understanding that kendo draws from notions of *bushido*, the "way of the warrior" that codified the virtues such as honor, loyalty, and respect as cornerstones of Tokugawa samurai culture and all of Japanese society today.[2] I began practicing kendo at the age of nine. This ritualization was intimidating and difficult to grasp at a young age. Yet, my mother, who began practicing at the age of six, felt that it was necessary to instill in me discipline and respect. For the same reason, kendo has been popular in Japanese physical education classes since the 20th century. However, these notions of bushido as a cornerstone of modern Japanese culture were themselves

[1] Sakaue Yasuhiro, "The Historical Creation of Kendo's Self-Image from 1895 to 1942: A Critical Analysis of an Invented Tradition," *Martial Arts Studies 6*, (2018): 11, doi.org/10.18573/mas.66.
[2] Alexander Bennett, *Kendo: Culture of the Sword* (University of California Press, 2015), xxxv.

an "invented tradition" of the nineteenth century alongside kendo.[3] They fuel ideas of Japanese essentialism that claim that the virtues codified in bushido explain the nature of modern Japanese society. These purported traditions from which kendo claims its origins are also notably masculine and perpetuate the idea that the "Japanese spirit" that bushido embodies is the result of the male samurai who codified it.[4]

However, there are many aspects of the modern practice of kendo that contradict this emphasis on tradition, particularly its inclusion of women. My mother began practicing kendo in Japan in 1974. At the time, the Japanese Women's Liberation movement was in full swing. Many young women, including my mother, witnessed an increase in women's participation in kendo and other martial arts, both in the context of physical education and on a higher level. Now 57, she continues to practice, compete, and teach kendo across the United States. I particularly remember a demonstration that she led at the Japanese Festival in St. Louis when she explained to an unfamiliar crowd that kendo is a "feminist sport" because men and women are able to practice and compete alongside and against one another. In a world where women's sports are often segregated and demeaned, she believes that a level playing field can be found in kendo. To her, there are few physiological differences that give any significant advantage to one sex. This view sharply contradicts kendo's traditional milieu that noticeably excludes women. It also overlooks the fact that even today, the institutions and culture surrounding kendo continue to limit women's roles and advancement. No woman has ever been awarded the highest possible rank, and administrative positions are often filled by men. This discrepancy inspired an inquiry into how the purported masculinity of kendo was challenged by the wave of feminism that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, as my mother began practicing kendo. Essentially, I explore why she and other female practitioners of that generation might view their participation in kendo as feminist agency. From the testimony of female *kendoka* and the rhetoric promoting the participation of women in martial arts in the 1960s and 1970s, women's increased participation in kendo was



Figure 1. Photo provided by Author.

[3] Inoue Shun, "The Invention of Martial Arts: Kano Jigoro and Kodokan Judo," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan,* ed. Stephen Vlastos (University of California Press, 1998), 164.
[4] Carol Gluck, "The Invention of Edo," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan,* ed. Stephen Vlastos (University of California Press, 1998), 278.

a manifestation of the social change promoted by the Japanese Women's Liberation Movement. Although the masculine identity of kendo continues to limit female kendoka, feminist advancements of the 1960s and 1970s enabled more women to confront these socially ingrained and invented masculine traditions through their increased participation and expansion of opportunities for women in kendo.

The Origins And Invention Of Kendo As Masculine

Kendo is an invented and reinvented tradition. While forms of swordsmanship practice were present for centuries, like many other invented traditions of the 19th century, kendo underwent major transformations in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) that standardized and codified it as a hallmark of Japanese culture, heritage, and national identity. This self-image of kendo as a "national sport" sparked further reinvention to preserve and standardize the practice of kendo as a tradition.[5] These "traditions" which invoke images of medieval and early modern samurai culture have shaped and continue to shape modern kendo practice in a fashion that is deeply intertwined with national identity and masculinity. Eventually, kendo became synonymous with Japanese militarism upon Japan's entrance into World War II and, in 1945, upon Japan's defeat, was banned by occupation authorities. Kendo's link to samurai culture and warfare, and the invented traditions that perpetuate this image, invoke a romanticized masculine identity of an imagined past.[6] The images of masculinity present in all stages of kendo's development live on in the collective memory of modern kendo practitioners from the late 20th century to today, even as its militarism was deliberately washed away during the occupation and participation was opened to women.

The origins of kendo provide insight into the imagined past that modern practice seeks to emulate. Schools of martial arts that focused on swordsmanship developed as early as the Muromachi Era (1336-1573), but rather than practicing combat, it was framed more as an art form, even though samurai actually engaged in combat at the time. It mainly consisted of *kata*, or choreographed sets of movements and strikes.[7] With the onset of the peace of the Tokugawa Era (1601-1868), samurai were further disconnected from combat, but the practice of *kenjutsu,* a more codified form of swordsmanship practice, matured and became deeply intertwined with the samurai identity. It still consisted mainly of kata, but incorporated philosophy, spirituality, and a cultivation of the self as central to its doctrines.[8] Thus, the initial development of the practice of swordsmanship was quite detached from soldiery and focused mainly on the aesthetics and philosophy of the practice. The image of medieval and early modern samurai that is often invoked in modern kendo practice aestheticizes a kind of violence that never existed in kendo's origins.

[5] Sakaue, "Kendo's Self-Image," 21.
[6] Kate Sylvester, *Women and Martial Art in Japan* (Routledge, 2023), 56.
[7] Bennett, "Kendo," 44.
[8] Bennett, "Kendo," 57.

However, kenjutsu also holds a long history of reinvention even prior to the Meiji Era. In the late 17th century, kenjutsu was reinvented to resemble a sport through an emphasis on fencing in response to the perceived impracticality of the practice and a desire to reconnect with genuine warfare.[9] The bamboo *shinai* and protective armor that is similar to today's standardized kendo armor came into popular use at this time. The invention and reinvention of kenjutsu is full of contradictions, but all seek a stronger connection with an imagined past. For instance, although the "sportification" of kenjutsu sought to better simulate genuine warfare, it popularized the use of blunt swords and protective armor, which sparked debate over how best to emulate real mortal combat in training. Bamboo swords and protective equipment, in some schools' perspectives, diluted the sparring. Each perspective emphasizes the preservation of a martial past of pre-Tokugawa samurai engaging in genuine combat. The practice of kenjutsu was a method through which men, both of samurai and non-samurai status, could connect with violence and warfare in a society that was increasingly removed from it.

The 1868 Meiji Restoration further disconnected samurai from combat with the dissolution of the samurai as a status group and the adoption of Western-style military forms. Like many aspects of Japanese culture at the time, kendo was intentionally standardized and affixed to the new Japanese national identity. Although the carrying of swords was banned, kenjutsu was repurposed rather than dissolved. In particular, the Meiji government promoted it as a method of physical training for police.[10] The invention of modern kendo can be credited to the establishment of the Dai-Nippon Butokukai, an organization that sought to standardize swordsmanship practices throughout Japan in 1895.[11] This organization was also responsible for the name change from kenjutsu to kendo. Altering the suffix from *-jutsu*, denoting skills and techniques, to *-do,* meaning "the way of," was meant to indicate a deeper philosophical and self-cultivating purpose in the practice of swordsmanship.[12] According to the Dai-Nippon Butokukai, kendo was necessary for the development of one's "samurai personality." In 1926, Hiromichi Nishikubo, Vice President of the Butokukai, claimed, "When one trains in kendo, handed down from our ancestors, one naturally fosters one's bushido spirit and its dignity, and it is natural that one realizes our country's national virtues, such as ancestor worship, loyalty and patriotism, the spirit of martyrdom and sacrifice, and the like."[13] The "bushido spirit" which Hiromichi mentions is an invented tradition of the Meiji Era that seeks to emulate European notions of chivalry to demonstrate the superiority of Japanese masculinity to the West.[14] The Dai-Nippon Butokukai invented kendo through standardization across the nation while claiming ancient descent and an association with "national virtues" that were largely invented by the Meiji

[9] Bennett, "Kendo," 73.
[10] Bennett, "Kendo," 102.
[11] Sakaue, "Kendo's Self-Image," 12.
[12] Sakaue, "Kendo's Self-Image," 15.
[13] Sakaue, "Kendo's Self-Image," 16.
[14] Sylvester, "Women and Martial Arts," 65.

government. These bushido virtues included martial and masculine bravery in the face of mortality. Despite its historical disconnect with mortal combat, masculinity had become deeply ingrained in the practice of kendo and was now institutionally codified as such.

As Western culture was increasingly incorporated in everyday life during the Taisho Era (1912-1926), kendo gained prevalence in youth physical education. It was a useful tool to instill a sense of Japaneseness in a society where youth were raised surrounded by Western culture. Kendo's association with bushido virtues of bravery and loyalty was also useful in a time of increased militarization of the early Showa Era (1926-1989). The Ministry of Education increasingly promoted the incorporation of kendo into the physical education programs of primary schools.[15] Kendo's popularity among older students for extracurricular sports purposes, according to militarists and ultranationalists, led to a deterioration of kendo's philosophical purposes and was the manifestation of the perceived Western corruption of Japanese martial arts.[16] Military and government officials made efforts not only to reemphasize a cultivation of the "Japanese spirit" and patriotism, but also to make kendo more practical for combat. For instance, matches were no longer *sanbon-shobu*, best of three points, but *ippon-shobu*, best of one point, to reflect real combat in physical education settings.[17] While kendo was compulsory for boys in year 5 and above, girls were given the option of participating in *naginata*, another martial art traditionally practiced by women using a polearm weapon.[18] By 1941, all aspects of society, including education, were dedicated to the war effort, and kendo education became completely militarized. Students were essentially trained to fight to the death. The virtues of bushido were construed as solely martial virtues of the nation. With the banning of kendo during the American occupation, its post-occupation revival attempted to sterilize the militaristic values out of kendo, but kendo's role in physical education persisted after the end of the occupation and continues in modern kendo practice today.

With the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers' ban on kendo, the sport of *shinai-kyogi* was created to more closely resemble the sport of Western fencing. All allusions to the Japanese spirit and militaristic rhetoric were absent in official descriptions and documentations to appeal to occupation authorities. Notably, the sport was explicitly promoted for both men and women.[19] This may have been a concession to occupation authorities' push for women's rights, or perhaps the absence of militarism made shinai-kyogi appear to be more suitable for women than militaristic kendo.[20] In either case, for the first time, women were now openly encouraged to participate in Japanese fencing as a sport rather than a martial art.

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[15] Bennett, "Kendo," 130.
[16] Bennett, "Kendo," 132.
[17] Bennett, "Kendo," 161.
[18] Bennett, "Kendo," 144.
[19] Bennett, "Kendo," 169.
[20] Sylvester, "Women and Martial Arts," 4.

Feminism And The Female Body

The absence of women in the development of kenjutsu reflects the gender dynamics of Tokugawa samurai households in which women's actions were highly restricted, while women of other classes were mostly free to work both productively and domestically alongside men.[21] In the Meiji Era, as kendo simultaneously became codified as an embodiment of national martial virtues, so too did the role of women under the Meiji doctrine of *ryōsai kenbo*, or "good wife, wise mother." Although this promoted education for girls, women were institutionally prescribed and confined to child-rearing and domestic labor as a service to the modernizing nation. Women were not legally recognized persons under the 1898 Meiji Civil Code, and this political and social subordination quickly became deeply ingrained in Japanese institutions and culture for the following century. To combat these lasting effects, throughout the twentieth century, diverse versions of feminism emerged with different perspectives and actions on the liberation of women's minds and bodies. These culminated in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which sparked broader social change through organized collective action. For the purposes of exploring feminist influence on kendo, this research will focus mainly on the liberation of women's bodies, including labor rights, child rearing, reproductive rights, and public participation in sports and martial arts.



Figure 2. A shinai-kyogi match in 1953. Bennett, "Kendo," 169.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, feminists challenged Meiji doctrine intellectually, largely through publications and lectures. In 1911, Hiratsuka Raicho, a highly educated and upper-class early feminist, founded the *Bluestocking* literary journal, in which she established herself and her contemporaries as "New Women" who sought freedom of individual expression in poetic form.[22] *Bluestocking* spoke on a number of gender issues, and particularly examined the role of women as mothers and the question of choice in taking on that role through the discussion of birth control and abortion. Yet, as another early feminist Yamakawa Kikue alludes in a 1912 lecture on women's rights, feminist rhetoric is not enough to dismantle socially ingrained subordination:

[21] Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, & Arthur E. Tiedemann, *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Abridged: Part 2: 1868 to 2000* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 474.
[22] Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45-46.

> There are many men who appear to be allies of women and speak on women's issues and argue for equal rights and equal status for women. But you must not be taken in facilely. Many of them, when they leave their homes, become allies and friends of women, but take a look at their households to see how they behave at home. They turn into tyrannical princes and treat their wives and daughters as slaves.[23]

The New Women, although they attempted to enact political change, such as the struggle for women's suffrage, were largely unsuccessful outside of the library of feminist literature they produced.[24] However, their rhetoric was quite influential in sparking a broader public questioning of Meiji-prescribed gender roles, especially with the dawn of the Taisho Era, and their legacy lived on in the memory of future feminists.[25]

Another contrasting version of feminism of the early 20th century is often not thought of as feminism at all and is often absent from surveys of modern Japanese feminism. Often compared to her American flapper girl contemporaries, the 1920s Modern Girl phenomenon demonstrates feminist agency through bodily action rather than intellectual feminist rhetoric. The Modern Girl, although perhaps exaggerated by media and fiction, was characterized by her transgressions across gender, class, and cultural lines. She smoked, drank, was sexually and physically aggressive, fraternized with men, and consumed Western culture, all in a public setting.[26] However, unlike her New Woman counterpart, her actions were not collective nor highly intellectual. Rather than discuss the life they envisioned for a modern woman, they simply lived it. Among journalists and feminist critics, opinions on the Modern Girl were scattered.[27] Some viewed the Modern Girl as the next generation of Japanese women, while others viewed her as the embodiment of the deterioration of traditional Japanese society. Nonetheless, the modern girl phenomenon of the 1920s provides an intriguing parallel for the second wave of feminism four decades later. The militant action and bodily autonomy that she pioneered would later be intellectually explored and physically embodied in the Women's Liberation Movement, especially through increased participation in martial arts.

While feminist action persisted through the war and the occupation, the next major wave of Japanese feminism would come in the 1960s and 1970s. The Japanese Women's Liberation Movement was largely born out of dissatisfaction with the political agenda of the New Left in post-occupation Japan. Although many women were active protestors in the *Anpo* anti-treaty protest of 1960 and the student protests later in the decade, they held a marginal role within New Left

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[23] Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition,* 486.
[24] Mackie, *Feminism,* 64.
[25] Ikeda Keiko, "From Ryōsai-kembo to Nadeshiko: Women and Sports in Japan," in *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. J. Hargreaves and E. Anderson (Routledge, 2014), 99.
[26] Miriam Silverberg, "The Modern Girl as Militant," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945,* ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (University of California Press, 1991), 249.
[27] Silverberg, "The Modern Girl, 240.

organizations, which were largely ignorant of gender issues.[28] The subsequent women's activists, organizations, publications, and demonstrations that arose not only sought greater political and social freedom, but also the liberation of women's bodies. This included sexual liberation, reproductive freedom, and overall freedom from societal expectations of female physical behavior.

Like the New Women before them, the Women's Liberation Movement turned to publications and organizations to discuss and debate feminist ideas. Organizations like the Asian Women's Conference and Agora discussed and debated the forms of oppression that continued to plague Japanese women despite gaining suffrage in 1945. Agora specifically focused on the conflicts surrounding working mothers and the limited ability for housewives to take an active role in society.[29] Several feminist journals also emerged for intellectual and theoretical feminist discussion, and some feminist organizations engaged in small-scale political demonstrations. Tanaka Mitsu, a member of the Fighting Women organization, discusses the liberation of women's bodies in her publications, not only in the context of sexual liberation but also in terms of casual behavior. She reflects on her own trained body language as a result of sexist oppression:

> I had just been involved with the women's liberation movement for only a short time and would generally sit on the floor with my legs crossed. However, when an attractive man walked into the room, I found myself sitting 'properly' with my legs tucked under me. I'm not exactly saying that crossed legs equals 'revolutionary', and sitting properly equals reactionary … but behind my changing from sitting comfortable to sitting properly was (another) self who wanted to be seen as 'feminine' by men.[30]

The Women's Liberation Movement's reflections on the liberation of the body laid the intellectual framework for the physical liberation of women as caregivers, workers, and active individuals. While activists often garnered ridicule from mass media, the mass visibility of the Women's Liberation movement was influential in sparking genuine political and social change in the late 1970s, which contributed significantly to women's increased participation in kendo.[31]

Women In Martial Arts And Gender Transgressions

Women's participation in martial arts throughout the 20th century mirrors the evolution of feminism. The extent to which women saw their participation in kendo as feminist agency depends on the extent to which they viewed their actions as a gender transgression. Early female kendoka of the pre-occupation era viewed themselves as tomboys, a colloquial term to describe women whose personality is explicitly masculine, and sometimes forsake their femininity to embrace this label. They viewed themselves similarly to the Modern Girl, although their gender transgressions were far less scrutinized in popular media, likely because they were so few in number. They did not view their gender

[28] Mackie, *Feminism,* 147.
[29] Mackie, *Feminism,* 151.
[30] Mackie, *Feminism,* 157.
[31] Mackie, *Feminism,* 156.

transgressions as an explicitly feminist gender transgression in the same way that the Modern Girl is not traditionally viewed as feminist. As a result, they were less likely to view kendo as a feminist sport and more likely to view it simply as a sport. However, the context of the Women's Liberation Movement gave women's participation a deeper meaning, and a significant increase in the participation of women is evident in the establishment of various female student kendo tournaments, local martial arts classes for women and girls, and the All-Japan Women's Kendo Competition in 1962.[32]

Besides the highly mythologized female warriors of ancient Japan, typical women have been involved in martial arts since as early as the Tokugawa era, when women of samurai status practiced *naginata,* fencing with a halberd, as a form of self-defense and self-cultivation of womanly virtues.[33] It was a combination of firearms superseding the naginata as the superior battlefield weapon in the 15th century and the association with women of samurai status that branded the naginata as a feminine weapon thereafter.[34] Since then, it has been typical for young girls to be trained in naginata in physical education, although it has never been as culturally dominant or competitive as kendo. Because the femininity of naginata has long been culturally ingrained, women's participation in this martial art was not seen as a transgression across gender lines but a reinforcement of feminine virtues.

Several extraordinary women were documented to have begun practicing kendo prior to the occupation supposedly opening up kendo to women. These women pioneered women's kendo and provided a beacon for aspiring female students of kendo as it became popularized for women. However, they did not necessarily view their participation in kendo as feminist agency, but rather as masculine and tomboyish. Before occupation, participation was largely limited to the daughters of male kendoka. One example of this lived experience is Kobayashi Setsuko, the daughter of a highly acclaimed kendo instructor. She began practicing at the age of five in 1943 alongside her father's male students and her three sisters.[35] Despite having three sisters, Kobayashi described her upbringing as a "male environment" in an interview with a women's kendo magazine, reflecting the perception of kendo as masculine at the time.[36] At the age of 27, she halted her training to raise her children between 1965 and 1975.[37] Upon her return, she continued training and teaching kendo, particularly attracting female students who sought her advice, though not by her own promotion.[38] When asked to reflect on her experiences as a female kendoka, she makes little reference to any unique experiences as a result of her sex.[39]

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[32] Sylvester, *Women and Martial Arts,* 72.
[33] Sylvester, *Women and Martial Arts,* 57.
[34] Sylvester, *Women and Martial Arts,* 62.
[35] Kobayashi Setsuko, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo Interview: Kobayashi Setsuko," *Fine Ladies Kendo Worldwide*, 1 (Spring 2021): 13.
[36] Kobayashi, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 6.
[37] Sylvester, *Women and Martial Arts,* 77.
[38] Kobayashi, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 8.
[39] Kobayashi, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 7.

One exception to the pattern of daughters participating in pre-war kendo, Takano Hatsue became the first woman to pass the seventh-*dan* ranking (out of eight possible rankings) in 1966.[40] She began practicing in 1932 after discovering kendo at a girls' youth group where local adults taught the girls skills and sport activities.[41] As her contemporary Takizawa Kenji describes, "I don't know how Hatsue sensei came to take up kendo, but it is unlikely that girls would have taken up the sport in an organized way … I imagine that she was given a shinai, and was asked 'wanna try?' as this tomboy girl showed full curiosity."[42] As the daughter of a widowed father with three younger brothers, she was the only woman in her family, which her contemporaries believe contributed to her masculine identity.[43] Her extraordinary skill granted her a spot as the only woman in an elite kendo training academy at 17 years old.[44] She continued to train and compete until she passed the seventh-dan examination, during which she sustained a debilitating knee injury, but her achievement was lauded on national television.[45] While these women became role models to future generations of female kendoka, they did not seem to think of their actions as an advancement of women's liberation, but as a manifestation of their own masculine upbringing or "tomboy" nature.



Figure 3. Kobayashi Setsuko at age five in 1942 practicing militant kendo among junior high school boys. Kobayashi, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 7.

[40] Sylvester, *Women in Martial Arts,* 76.
[41] Robin Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend: Takano Hatsue," *Fine Ladies Kendo Worldwide,* Autumn 2021, 53.
[42] Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend," 54.
[43] Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend," 54.
[44] Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend," 54.
[45] Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend," 58.

In the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, the popularization of kendo for women became explicitly feminist. Although the Women's Liberation Movement was scrutinized in the mass media, women who began practicing kendo in the 1960s and 1970s were still influenced by the mass visibility of the movement at home and the coinciding Women's Liberation Movement in other capitalist democracies. This is reflected by media rhetoric surrounding girls' participation in martial arts in schools. In 1966, *The Japan Times* covered the physical education martial arts activities of a Tokyo girls' junior and senior high school, asserting that "learning the martial arts is not a monopoly of men any longer. Modern young women are taking it up to train themselves physically and also as a means of self-defense."[46] After detailing their training regimen of judo, *aikido*, naginata, and Western fencing, the *Times* mentions that although kendo is the newest martial art to be introduced, it garnered the most participants by far.[47] The nature of kendo as a militaristic indoctrination tool and its long ingrained masculine tradition was still alive in the collective memory of the 1960s. Thus, although martial arts were "opened to women" upon the beginning of occupation, these young women were still aware of their actions as gender transgressions. These transgressions were now performed as a collective in a female setting, such as an all-girls school, rather than as a tomboyish individual. In other words, they brought femininity to the practice of kendo. Within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement's rhetoric surrounding the liberation of female bodies, it is clear that these women viewed their participation in kendo as feminist agency.



Figure 4. Takano Hatsue, often described as "well-built and large in stature" at 160cm tall. Jakuen, "Revisiting a Legend," 53.

Interestingly, a 1973 *Japan Times* article on foreign women in Tokyo's participation in martial arts further demonstrates the influence of the multiple Women's Liberation Movements in other capitalist democracies at the time. The article reads as both a highlight and a promotional advertisement, featuring the testimony of mostly American women in Tokyo participating in a variety of martial arts classes, including naginata and kendo, of which kendo is practiced the most often. However, the

[46] "Accent on Martial Arts for Girls," *Japan Times*, November 16, 1966, 10.
[47] "Accent on Martial Arts," 10.

article claims that in the Edo Period, women would often engage in naginata combat with male kendo practitioners, prompting a Western spectator to ask the open-ended question: "Do you suppose they had women's lib in this country long before we did?"[48] Although the article makes this claim with novelty rather than a historical basis, the reactions of Westerners demonstrate a similar association with the Women's Liberation Movement as female Japanese students. The image of women with naginata sparring men with shinai invokes a sense of explicitly feminine power physically dueling masculinity. The liberation of women's bodies in this context prompts them to compare this action with the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement, which was highly visible in Western capitalist democratic nations.



Figure 5. Foreign women practicing naginata at a martial arts class in Tokyo, 1973. "Martial Arts Popular Among Foreign Women," Japan Times, October 21, 1973, 8.

[48] "Martial Arts Popular Among Foreign Women," *Japan Times,* October 21, 1973, 8.

This influence is made explicit in the testimony from female kendoka of later generations. Maeda Shinko, born in 1949, was not the daughter of a kendoka, but joined her high school kendo club of her own accord. In the first of a series of articles published in the *Kendo Nippon* magazine from 1991-1992, Maeda details how she became involved in kendo as the Women's Liberation Movement took hold in the 1960s. She cites the first All Japan Women's Kendo Championship in 1962 as the beginning of the history of women's kendo.[49] She recalls entering high school and joining the kendo club despite the fact that "kendo was very much a men's sport" with only four high schools in the prefecture hosting female members.[50] Maeda was able to participate in the National High School Kendo Championships, and claims, "These experiences were only possible because of this period," likely referring to the period in which women's kendo and Women's Liberation found their starts[51] After graduation, Maeda entered the academic world, researching kendo and gender dynamics inspired by her experiences of gender inequality as a female kendoka. Maeda has published a library of literature on kendo, including the *Women's Kendo Instruction Handbook,* in which she discusses the various challenges modern women face in kendo and provides guidance for navigating these challenges. In one section, the book focuses on marriage and motherhood as common disruptions in women's kendo journeys.[52] Throughout the book, she emphasizes the fact that women's kendo should harness femininity, both physically and behaviorally, rather than try to suppress it.[53] In an interview with a women's kendo magazine, she states, "Throughout Japan's long history, kendo originated as a male martial art and has been influenced by this historical background more strongly than in other sports. It is therefore a world that is difficult for women to enter, because men have a strong sense that they are supposed to be superior."[54] Although she acknowledges the historical precedent of masculinity in kendo, her persistence and success demonstrate a desire to challenge these precedents for herself and for women as a collective, which is characteristic of the feminism promoted by the Women's



Figure 6. Maeda wearing white armor at the first All-Japan University Women's Kendo Championships in 1967, which she won. Maeda, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 7.

[49] Maeda, Shinko, *Women's Kendo Instruction Handbook*, trans. Kazuyo Matsuda (Bunkasha International Corporation, 2025), 29.
[50] Maeda, *Women's Kendo,* 29.
[51] Maeda, *Women's Kendo* 29.
[52] Maeda Shinko, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo Interview: Maeda Shinko," *Fine Ladies Kendo Worldwide*, 3 (Spring 2022): 6-7.
[53] Maeda, *Women's Kendo,* 32.
[54] Maeda, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 6.

Liberation Movement. She brings an unapologetically female perspective to kendo and kendo research, evident in her signature white uniform and armor. White is a common color for women's uniforms, and she expresses her individuality and femininity through her more unique white armor. Her explicit acknowledgement and reflection on women's experiences in kendo and her attempts to uplift other women through their challenges differs from the attitudes of the preceding generation and reflects a strong influence of the Women's Liberation Movement during which she began her kendo journey.

Persisting Traditions And Gender Inequality Today

There is much debate among kendo scholars regarding gender inequality in kendo today, the most glaring of which is the issue of eighth-dan. The ranking and promotion system in kendo is meant to be highly standardized, especially now as kendo is being propagated worldwide. Although the ranking system has historically gone to the tenth degree, it is now and forever only possible to achieve up to eighth-dan. However, despite many attempts, no woman has ever passed the examination for eighth-dan. Alexander Bennett, a scholar of Japanese history and male kendoka, argues that it is unlikely for a woman to achieve eighth-dan because the physical power of women decreases at a faster rate than men after the age of 40, when candidates become eligible to test.[55] Kate Sylvester, a scholar of gender and martial arts and a female kendoka, denounces this argument and claims that the lack of female eighth-dan is the result of culturally ingrained conservative gender norms, particularly in the beliefs held by the older male eighth-dan sensei who judge the examinations.[56]

Another significant issue in women's kendo today is the balancing of domestic life with kendo. Women are often expected to quit kendo after marriage and while raising children, which harkens back to the societal policing of women's bodies and the double bind of career and domestic labor.[57] Although this practice has declined in recent years, this issue reflects the persistence of prescribed domestic duties for women. Thus, it is difficult for women to continue practicing kendo as they age and become eligible for higher ranks. However, publications like *Fine Ladies Women's Kendo* and Maeda's *Women's Kendo Instruction Handbook* offer women advice on how to continue practicing through and past child-rearing and careers. These issues reflect the persistence of the invented masculine traditions ingrained in the history of kendo. However, women continue to recognize and attempt to combat these traditions through intellectual discussion and agentic action. The issue of women's eighth-dan will continue to be challenged until it is achieved. Women of my mother's generation instill the values of feminist agentic action in the next generation through their instruction and mentorship, and thus the legacy of the Japanese Women's Liberation movement will live on in a more integrated and equal kendo community.

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[55] Bennett, *Kendo,* xxxiv.
[56] Sylvester, *Women and Martial Arts,* 80-81.
[57] Maeda, "Pioneers of Women's Kendo," 6-7.

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