

## Samurai and Falconer



Takahiro Yamana  
Chief Priest of the Ohkunitama Shinto Shrine

The art of falconry was introduced to Japan from the kingdom of Baekje of Korea at around the first half of the 5th century, during the reign of the 16th emperor Nintoku (current Emperor Akihito is the 125th emperor of Japan.) Since then up until around the 14th century, falconry was occupied by members of the Imperial Family and aristocrats.

The “Takagyou” texts depicting advanced falconry techniques were brought over from China (Tang dynasty,) but in the beginning of the 9th century, the 52nd emperor Saga created his own set of texts named “Shinshuu Takakyo” that took into consideration Japan’s natural environment.

The concept of animism has been practiced in Japan since ancient times, with people recognizing that spirits existed within nature and animals and believing in the reincarnation of life. For example, they believed that the souls of the dead ascended to heaven (Takama-ga-hara,) carried by swans and cranes. Falconry was practiced to summon the souls of familiar faces and pray for them to bring happiness to this world.

During New Year events, aristocrats enjoyed performing rituals involving flying their falcons and binding birds of prey with branches of autumn leaves and plums while taking a walk.

These rituals were based on the belief that the spirits descended down to earth from the heavens during the New Year to provide peace and prosperity.

Around the 14th century, the political force of Japan had shifted to the hands of the samurai class, but falconry continued to thrive among shoguns and powerful warlords. Since the 8th century, Japanese have believed in both Shintoism and Buddhism. As “do not kill” is the first precept of Buddhism, falconry was forbidden to engage in. However, a compromise was made at Suwa Shrine (Nagano Prefecture,) a location known for its hunting rituals.

It was believed that the fish and birds that were killed would be able to rest in peace by being eaten by people. The reasoning behind this was that as long as those people kept a compassionate heart and made efforts to live their ideal lives, the fish and bird would eventually be saved.

These kinds of beliefs continued to spread until the mid-19th century. The falcons used for falconry were revered for giving the lives of animals inhabiting the mountains to people, and were not seen as committing the sin of killing.

In the 16th century, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi unified Japan, but these two men also developed falconry on a grand scale by securing skilled falcons and performing rituals that consisted of offering captured game to the Emperor.

Tokugawa Ieyasu established the Edo Bafuku (also known as the Tokugawa Shogunate) during the early 17th century, and as a fan of falcons by birth, he completely monopolized all of the falcons within the country. On top of that, in order to keep falcon nests safe, he protected the forests and claimed the areas surrounding Edo where migratory birds flocked as areas where falconry was practiced.

Ieyasu was deified after his death, and a portrait of a falcon hangs at his mausoleum in Nikko Toshogu Shrine.

However, with the end of the Edo Bafuku (1867,) it brought an end to the practice of traditional falconry.