

Taryū-Jiai

The term taryū-jiai is used to describe shiai (duels) between kenshi (swordsmen) of different ryūha (schools). Nowadays taryū-jiai is one of the most misunderstood terms in relation to koryū-bujutsu (old Japanese warrior arts). In the modern day koryū environment, taryū-jiai is often referred to as something malicious and disrespectful, an activity put on the same level as dōjō-yaburi.



Taryū-jiai geiko during the late Edo-period, done in front of clan officials observing the fighting skills of the fencers

I. Dōjō-Yaburi

Dōjō-yaburi is historically something very different from normal taryū-jiai which was fought and sought after by the majority of kenshi of all ryūha, during Japan's various feudal periods. The term dōjō-yaburi describes the violent destruction of another school's dōjō (training hall) during a vendetta between two ryūha in the Edo period (1603-1868). This was done by defeating or killing a dōjō's high ranking students and shihan (masters) and taking or breaking the kanban (board with the ryūha's name on it), the heart of every dōjō. It is important to note that there are not many recorded cases of dōjō-yaburi and it was very rarely done, as it could have severe consequences for both schools involved. Often the local clan administration interfered before a dōjō-yaburi could occur, in order to prevent bloody vendettas and a small semi-war between two schools.

A common solution to prevent dōjō-yaburi was that both schools chose one swordsman and had them fight a duel in front of a clan official acting as a kenbunyaku (referee). The word of a kenbunyaku was considered the law. If one of the participants would have dared to speak against it, it could easily have been punished with seppuku (ritual suicide by cutting open the belly). A shiai like this was commonly fought to the death with shinken (sharp swords), although a couple of cases where both participants fought with bokutō (wooden swords) or shinai (bamboo swords) to settle a feud are recorded as well. Shiai (duels) fought with bokutō or shinai don't necessarily

end with the death of one of the participants. A participant dying during official duels overseen by a kenbunyaku which weren't fought with shinken was a rare occurrence.

Sometimes the term ryūha-yaburi was used, which refers to the complete annihilation of another ryūha. When hearing the term ryūha-yaburi many would assume that it would automatically mean that all members of a rivalling school would have been killed or assassinated and all their dōjō destroyed. However, something like that never really happened except in novels or modern-day TV-dramas. Historically, ryūha-yaburi was more of a takeover of another school and its student base. After a school got totally defeated and thereby proven insufficient, most students would eventually leave the school, either enrolling as a student under the winning ryūha's teacher, searching for another school, or founding their own ryūha. This left the defeated school to be forgotten in history as nobody wanted to be associated with it anymore.

II. Taryū-Jiai

During the Edo period, in contrary to dōjō-yaburi or ryūha-yaburi, normal taryū-jiai was something very common to happen. A kenshi who was high ranking enough, would eventually get permission from his teacher to go on a musha-shugyō (warrior pilgrimage), a journey through the country to improve his technique by fighting duels with several high ranking kenshi of other ryūha. The permission for fighting taryū-jiai was normally given automatically to each student who received the menkyo-kaiden (license of full mastery) of a ryūha. But often it was given even to lower ranked shihan (masters) of the art when they were deemed worthy representatives of the school by their sōke. The type of taryū-jiai a kenshi fought during an Edo period musha-shugyō could differ in nature. Mostly they were fought with shinai, sometimes with bokutō, but rarely with shinken. The focus was mainly on developing their own technique and spirit by fighting against exponents of other ryūha.



Fukurō-shinai daishō (sword pair) which was developed by Kamiizumi Nobutsuna, founder of the Shinkage-ryū Hyōhō, for fighting and practicing taryū-jiai with full contact. In comparison to shiai being fought with a bokutō, the usage of fukurō-shinai reduced the risk of getting severely injured during training and was thus quickly adapted by many ryūha for their shiai training and the duels they fought.

A kenshi would visit several dōjō on his musha-shugyō to fight against the students and masters there. But this wasn't, as nowadays very often depicted, something rude or disrespectful. It was quite the opposite. The kenshi would introduce himself politely when entering the dōjō, state his affiliated school and rank and then the sōke of the challenged ryūha or the kanchō (head of the dōjō) would decide if the challenge would be accepted or not. If the challenge was accepted, the shugyōsha (wandering swordsman on a musha-shugyō) was introduced to a few students and masters of the dōjō who would face him in shiai. Those duels would be mostly fought with yotsuwari-shinai, a type of shinai where the bamboo is split in four equally strong pieces. Sometimes fukurō-shinai, a shinai in a leather cover, with bamboo split in many thin pieces, was also used. Those shiai (duels) could be fought with or without bōgu (protective armour). The decision if bōgu, shinai or bokutō were used in the shiai, was up to the challenged ryūha. Sometimes only parts of the bōgu were used and for example the men (head and face protector) could be left off to make the shiai more dangerous for both swordsmen.

During the shiai, the shugyōsha would normally fight all of the kenshi, the sōke or kanchō of the other ryūha's dōjō chose for him. It didn't matter if the shugyōsha lost one or more times, as most sōke or kanchō saw a challenger from another ryūha as a welcome training method for their students. Also, they could demonstrate their strength and spread their ryūha's and dōjō's names throughout the country with these challenges.



Yotsuwari-shinai daishō (sword pair) which was developed by Nakanishi Chūbei, of the Ittō-ryū Hyōhō. The yotsuwari-shinai is a mixture between fukurō-shinai and bokutō. It is not as hard as a bokutō, but still harder and stiffer than a fukurō shinai as the core is split to four pieces instead of over ten pieces and not covered by leather. The Hokushin Ittō-ryū traditionally uses this type of shinai for its duelling practice as well as for taryū-jiai. Gendai-kendō (modern day kendō) adopted the usage of this type of shinai as well.

However, it was often very difficult for a shugyōsha to get accepted by a very famous ryūha's dōjō, as they had many challengers appearing at their gates every day. Accepting all of them was impossible, as then there wouldn't be time to teach their own students and hold regular keiko (training). So, sometimes it happened that a shugyōsha had to wait and apply frequently over several days until he was accepted. Shugyōsha who were highly ranked in a famous ryūha, normally got priority in being accepted for a taryū-jiai, compared to exponents from lesser known ryūha.

For example, during the Edo period ten to fifty kenshi would apply for taryū-jiai on an almost daily basis at the Chiba-Dōjō of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū. While many challengers were accepted, it was impossible to accept all of them, as this would have interrupted the strict training regimen of the

dōjō too often. The higher the applying shugyōsha was ranked in a famous ryūha and depending if he already had a strong fighting reputation, the higher was his chance to be accepted.

At that time, many masquerading kenshi claiming heavenly transmission or receiving secret techniques and teachings from deities or tengu (mountain goblins), could be found all over Japan. The ryūha whose kenshi claimed they learned in such a dubious manner were more of a countryside phenomena. In a metropolis like Edo or Ōsaka, where the strongest kenshi of the country gathered for taryū-jiai in the so called machi-dōjō (city dōjō), those questionable ryūha couldn't survive.

It was a very hard business to run a dōjō in Edo. With challengers from other ryūha applying at their own doorstep every day, if a ryūha lost or refused too many duels, it was seen as weak and useless and risked students leaving the school. Like this, the dōjō would break down financially and was mostly forced to close its doors.

Because of this, many ryūha only managed to open up dōjō in the suburbs of Edo and Ōsaka. But that already was a very impressive thing to do. During the Bakumatsu period (1853-1868), all the shugyōsha who got refused entry or lost at the Edo San-Dai-Dōjō (the three biggest and strongest dōjō in Edo- the Chiba-Dōjō (Hokushin Ittō-ryū), the Renpeikan (Shintō Munen-ryū) and the Shigakukan (Kyōshin Meichi-ryū)), went to other dōjō of less strong ryūha in and around Edo to fight the kenshi there instead.



A traditional bogu as it was used for taryū-jiai and shiai-geiko by the vast majority of all ryūha existing during the late Edo period. In modern day sport-kendō, which adopted the usage of this kind of bogu from various koryū-bujutsu schools, the usage is different. While modern kendō uses certain areas of the bogu as targets to score a point, in koryū the bogu is merely used to prevent internal bleedings and fatal injuries during shiai and targets are not restricted to protected areas.

Ryūha which had no fighting reputation and didn't bring out strong and famous kenshi during the Edo period were branded as kahō or dōjō-kenpō. The term kahō-kenpō (flowery swordsmanship) is used to describe schools which are considered weak, as they and their kenshi are frequently beaten or don't accept and engage in taryū-jiai. As a result, those schools were and are called dōjō-kenpō as well. Dōjō-kenpō describes a ryūha whose sōke and shihan are only theoretically engaged in swordsmanship (via kata-geiko) within the closed doors of their dōjō, lacking the constant proof of effectiveness of what they actually teach. Even when an older school proved to be effective during the Sengoku period (c.1467-c.1603) many younger ryūha evolved beyond them technically and became stronger during the Edo period (1603-1868). A school which rested on its past glory without consistently bringing out strong kenshi, to prove its effectiveness, was labelled as kahō or dōjō-kenpō as well. Just because a ryūha was once strong doesn't necessarily

mean that it stays that way through generations and over the centuries. After all, the koryū were the military education institutions of the bushi during Japan's various feudal periods and their effectiveness in successfully fighting against other traditions was the most important thing for each kenshi.

III. Taryū-jiai against the Sōke of a Ryūha or Kanchō of a Shibu-Dōjō

To challenge the sōke of a ryūha or the kanchō of a ryūha's shibu-dōjō (branch dōjō) directly was something very difficult and delicate to do. If a shugyōsha directly challenged a person in such a position, it was generally taken as rude and disrespectful and the challenge could easily end with the death of the challenger. As explained before, during the Edo period taryū-jiai was a very common thing to happen. But it was more seen as taryū-jiai geiko (taryū-jiai training) and not a direct attack on a ryūha or dōjō. However, when the head of a ryūha or dōjō was challenged himself, it was taken very seriously as the ryūha's and dōjō's reputation was on the line.

In such a case, it was customary that the shugyōsha had to face a couple of high ranking students first. Only if he managed to defeat all of them, he would then be allowed to fight against the person he originally challenged. Also, most dōjō had the policy to not let such a person out of the dōjō alive. So even when it was a shiai fought with shinai, going into kumiuchi (mixture of kenjutsu and jūjutsu techniques) and crushing the challengers throat or breaking his neck was quite common. Protecting the reputation of the school was and still is the most important thing for each ryūha.

Of course, it happened sometimes that the head of a ryūha or shibu-dōjō fought even when the shugyōsha didn't manage to defeat all of their chosen students. This was in most cases done in order to gain a new student. When a shugyōsha was defeated in such a taryū-jiai and was impressed by the technical level of his opponent, it happened quite often that the shugyōsha acknowledged the technical superiority of the ryūha he lost against and officially or temporarily enrolled in it as a student.

The only people who were accepted to fight the sōke of a ryūha or the kanchō of a school's shibu-dōjō directly during the Edo period were kenshi who had the same position and rank as well as a strong fighting reputation. In some cases, a high rank in a ryūha together with a strong fighting reputation was enough. In general, most kenshi only fought when they could gain something from the shiai. For a kenshi who still lacked a fighting reputation it was near impossible to get accepted for a taryū-jiai against the head of a ryūha or dōjō. It was likewise difficult for a highly ranked kenshi from a relatively unknown ryūha.

If the sōke or kanchō couldn't gain fame by defeating a famous kenshi, a highly ranked exponent of a famous school, or at least gain a student by winning against the challenger, it was generally seen as useless to fight personally as the higher ranked students normally were sufficient to protect the school's name.

IV. Taryū-Jiai Nowadays

After WWII and during the American occupation of Japan, many koryū went through a ground-breaking change. While up to the 1940s over 90% of existent koryū at the time were still fighting taryū-jiai, that changed drastically after the war. The Americans banned all forms of martial practice and drills in Japan after they won the war and occupied the country.

When the ban was lifted in the 1950s, a deeply pacifistic mindset had found its way into many koryū-bujutsu ryūha, as well as into gendai-budō. Many sōke and shihan of formerly strong gekiken (sparring) traditions who were known for their practice of taryū-jiai became afraid to be seen as warmongers for practicing their arts the old and authentic way. With post WWII modern kendō, iaidō, jūdō, jōdō and others openly declaring themselves to be nothing more than cultural sports not meant for a real combative application or military training, many koryū teacher followed along to blend in with the rest of a westernized and pacified Japanese society. Thus, many koryū isolated themselves from each other, refraining from fighting or challenging other schools in taryū-jiai. Many schools even let their shiai-geiko (sparring training) fall away and are now only focusing on kata-geiko (fixed form practice). To “not fight” or “being non-competitive” even became widely recognized as a characteristic of koryū-bujutsu. This explicitly reflects the degeneration that happened in various koryū-bujutsu ryūha over the last century.



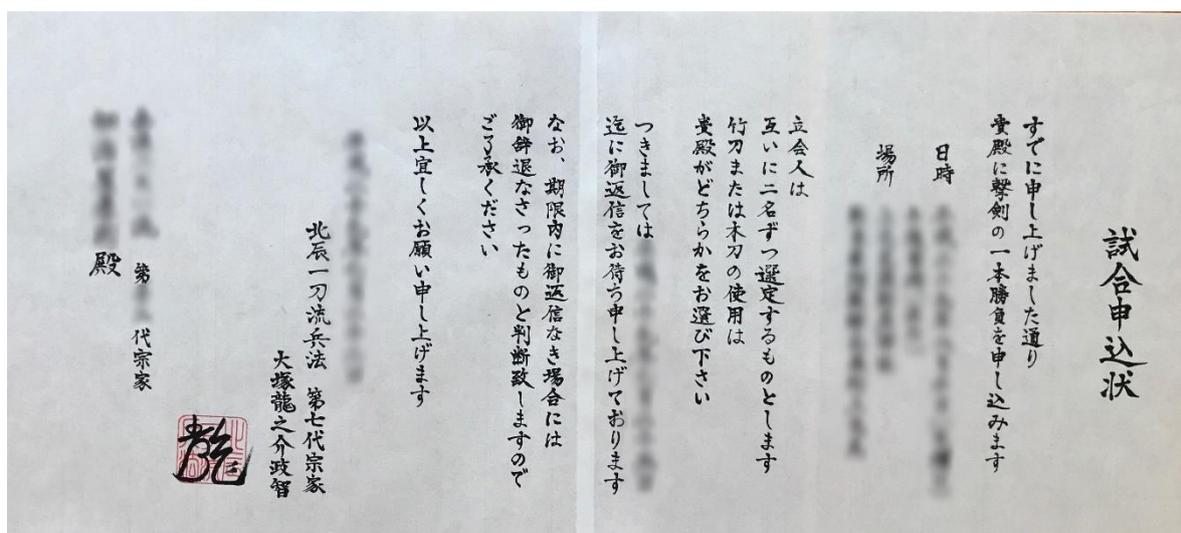
Gekiken-shiai geiko in bōgu practiced with yotsuwari-shinai. This kind of sparring training was practiced by over 90% of all extant ryūha during the late Edo period

Nowadays only a couple of authentic koryū which are still extant and taught practice exactly like in the Edo-period, and thus preserve their school's teachings and traditions. Many old lineages of once famous koryū and their ha (branches) still exist but became heavily influenced by the mindset of westernization and pacification after WWII. They can be compared to a hermit crab living in the shell of a dead clam. In terms of an unbroken line of transmission they may be the real thing. On the other hand, a ryūha which abandoned shiai-geiko (sparring training) or doesn't accept and engage in taryū-jiai anymore, despite its recorded fighting history, has lost its essence and became a rather different thing compared to authentic koryū-bujutsu. It becomes a neo-koryū, a school quite close to a gendai-ryūha (modern school) in an empty koryū shell, lacking authenticity.

Of the three authentic lineages still existing nowadays, only the main-line of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō (Chiba-Dōjō) currently led by the 7th sōke Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke still preserves its gekiken

curriculum and engages actively in taryū-jiai. It remains open to shugyōsha from other ryūha who want to test their skills. The two other remaining shihanke/side-lines of the school, the Ozawa-ha Hokushin Ittō-ryū (Tōbukan) and the Noda-ha Hokushin Ittō-ryū (Otaru-Genbukan) both became neo-koryū and nowadays neither preserve the traditional gekiken shiai-geiko of the school nor engage in taryū-jiai.

A couple of other koryū which are still authentically practicing shiai-geiko and are open for taryū-jiai are: Tennen Rishin-ryū (Bujutsu-Hozonkai line), various Jikishinkage-ryū and Shinkage-ryū lines, and a few other ryūha. However, the vast majority of all ryūha with an authentic lineage extant today became neo-koryū which are only studying and teaching their art in theory.



Shiai-mōshikomijō (traditional duelling challenge) which was sent to the sōke of another koryū by Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke, the 7th sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō. The duel was won by “saya no uchi no kachi” (winning without having to draw the own sword), after the other ryūha’s sōke gave up and stated that “he won’t be able to win this duel”. The dates and places, as well as the names of the challenged sōke and his ryūha, are blurred out in order to protect his and his ryūha’s dignity.

V. Taryū-Jiai with the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō

1. **Taryū-jiai geiko:** The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō under the leadership of the 7th Sōke Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke accepts all kenshi (swordsmen) with a koryū or gendai-kendō/iaidō background, who have the wish to test their skills against our tradition in a gekiken taryū-jiai geiko session (duel training session) fought with shinai and bōgu against various of our higher and lower ranked kenshi. As this is not an official taryū-jiai in the presence of a kenbunyaku (referee) but considered taryū-jiai geiko (training for taryū-jiai) without official results, we don’t request the written and signed permission of the challenger’s ryūha or teacher. The requirements to join a taryū-jiai geiko are:

- *koryū or gendai-kendō/iaidō background*
- *polite application via e-mail which explains one’s own martial-arts background*
- *bōgu and shinai for a taryū-jiai geiko session can be provided by our ryūha*
- *no permission for taryū-jiai from the challengers ryūha or teacher required*

2. Official taryū-jiai: The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō is only accepting official taryū-jiai requests from practitioners with a legitimate koryū background. That means the school has to be mentioned in the “Bugei Ryūha Daijiten”. Also, the person applying has to be authorised to represent his ryūha by their school’s sōke or shihanke. Please also note that we don’t take a challenge for taryū-jiai as an offense or as something disrespectful as long as the challenger behaves in a respectful and polite way. The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō is open for official taryū-jiai and we are looking forward to every challenger who might approach us. The official taryū-jiai with our school are fought with either shinai (bamboo swords) or bokutō (wooden swords), either protected by a bōgu (traditional sparring armour) or without. The choice between shinai and bokutō, as well as if the bōgu is used or not is up to our ryūha’s current sōke to decide for each shiai. Of course, requests can be made regarding this matter. During official taryū-jiai, there will always be a kenbunyaku (referee) present. The requirements for an official taryū-jiai are:

- *koryū background*
- *written and signed permission for taryū-jiai by the own ryūha’s sōke or shihanke*
- *shiai-mōshikomijō (traditional duelling request) sent via post or e-mail*
- *bōgu, shinai and bokutō for official taryū-jiai can be provided by our ryūha*

3. Taryū-jiai with the current sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū: If you are the sōke or a high ranking shihan of a legitimate koryū, feel free to formally apply for a taryū-jiai with the 7th sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō, Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke directly. Over the years, Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke-sōke challenged and fought sōke, shihan and students of over twelve different ryūha without losing even a single duel up to this point. The requirements for a taryū-jiai with the 7th sōke are:

- *being the sōke, shihanke or highly ranked shihan of a legitimate koryū*
- *if you are a shihan, provide written permission for taryū-jiai from your sōke*
- *shiai-mōshikomijō (traditional duelling request) sent via post or e-mail*
- *bōgu, shinai and bokutō for this taryū-jiai can be provided by our ryūha*

For all requests concerning point 1, 2 or 3, please send an email to info@hokushinittoryu.com, in which you introduce yourself in Japanese or English, with your full name (as shown on your passport), explain your detailed koryū or gendai-iaidō/kendō background and provide the for each point requested things.



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