

# The Swords of Japan: A Window of Modernization

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The year 1868 marked nationwide turmoil and unrest in Japan as civil war gripped the country by its core and forced it to change its ancient ways. With the young Emperor Meiji in place, a radical change of Japanese culture ensued as the country moved wholesale into Western learning in the cultural, social and economic arenas. With the feudal system and samurai class virtually dismantled, Japan moved away from many of its old traditions and brought in everything that was new and modern. During this time, the military was not unaffected. The Imperial Army and Navy adopted Western military advisors and technology completely redefining the image of the Japanese warrior. While the Japanese warrior used to be defined by a high level of swordsmanship, spirituality, and discipline, ever since the introduction of the firearm in the 15<sup>th</sup> century warriors slowly became defined by how well they could march and shoot a rifle.<sup>1</sup>

The samurai class, which had not given up their power and status quietly, was largely dismissed by the government so that newer systems of politics and economics could have the chance to gain some momentum. But those who have studied World War II Japan or even seen movies depicting that time period may have noticed that WWII-era Japanese soldiers believed they were acting like samurai in certain rituals and even carried government-issue

1 Thomas Cleary, *Soul of the Samurai: Modern Translations of Three Classic Works of Zen & Bushido* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 5.

samurai swords. It is curious how this came to be since only decades earlier the Meiji government had made it illegal to carry samurai swords under the *Haitorei* edit (1876) in an attempt to modernize. This modernization which persisted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was very intrusive to Japanese society ultimately led to a rise of the Japanese nationalist fervor in the mid-1890's.<sup>2</sup> This rise in nationalism saw a return to and gross distortion of Japanese traditional values through concepts like “bushido,” commonly known as “the way of the warrior.”<sup>3</sup> Many scholars argue that the radical break away from Japanese culture, and subsequent interest in feudal Japan and the Samurai, was a response to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of their society. I will test this by examining the change in the primary weapon of the traditional Japanese warrior, the sword, from the Edo period to World War II and what this change can tell us about the development of the Japanese warrior and the nation he fought for during the late Meiji period through the Imperial era. This will show that swords give us a window with incredible insight to the changes Japan was undergoing in this period.

## Feudal Era Samurai

From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japan was fundamentally a feudal society. Just as in medieval Europe, there were the merchants, the artisans and a large class of serfs and peasants, all of whom were essentially servants to the small upper class of warriors known as the samurai. This upper class aristocracy, just like the knights of early feudal Europe, largely consisted of mounted, armored warriors. The word “samurai” itself came from the Chinese verb 侍 literally meaning “those who serve” because Samurai were warrior-servants of a feudal lord or *daimyo*.<sup>4</sup> From the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, warfare became endemic throughout Japan as loyalty to the emperor dwindled and power changed from one military family to another. Consequently, much as in the case of feudal Europe, such extensive periods of warfare brought great admiration for military virtues of honor, bravery, discipline and acceptance of death. As Harvard professor of East-Asian studies Edwin Reischauer states, “Lacking any religious injunctions against suicide, in defeat they commonly

2 Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 81, 85.

3 Karl F. Friday, “Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian’s Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 3 (May 1, 1994): 340.

4 Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, 52-53.

took their own lives rather than accept humiliation... by means of cutting one's own abdomen... to demonstrate will-power and maintain honor." This gruesome and extremely painful act was called *harakiri*, literally "belly-slitting" but better known as *seppuku* and has survived to modern times as an honorable way to escape an intolerable situation.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to warfare, Japanese warriors prided themselves on their skill in the arts of poetry and calligraphy.<sup>6</sup> It even became provincial law that samurai devote time to literature as it became more relevant in dealing with political matters in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century as peace began under the administration of a Tokugawa Shogunate in 1600, "The study of literature and the practice of the military arts, including archery and horsemanship, must be cultivated diligently."<sup>7</sup> This peace, which lasted nearly 250 years, created problems for the ruling warrior class who sought to be relevant in a time without war. One 17<sup>th</sup> century samurai who heavily pondered this issue was Yamaga Soko (1622-1685). Yamaga attempted to define the warrior from an ethical standpoint saying that the warrior was not only an example of Confucian purity to the lesser classes of society, but also an enforcer of it. In this setting, the samurai would become some sort of Warrior-Sage, and realizing their dilemma, samurai soon began to act in such a role more and more. But in a society without war the Japanese warrior's role became more idealized than realized.<sup>8</sup>

Attitudes of the Samurai class such as the idea as a Warrior-Sage or example to the rest of society accelerated the rise of some extremism among many samurai masters. While many samurai of this time period accepted their fate of domestication, others reveled in protest in attempt to retain their unique status as samurai.<sup>9</sup> Today, the most famous of any of these attitudes is that of Tsunetomo Yamamoto, who in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century served as a samurai lord in the court of the third *daimyo* of the Saga Prefecture, Nabeshima Mitsushige. After his master's death Tsunetomo went to live a life of seclusion as a Buddhist priest and proceeded to dictate the meaning of his service to scribe Tashiro Tsuramoto. After seven years' worth of conversations, Tsuramoto arranged

5 Ibid., 56-58.

6 Shiba Yohsimasa, "The Chikubasho" in *Ideals of the Samurai*, trans. Wilson (Burbank, CA: Ohara Publications, 1982), 27.

7 "Rule for the Military Houses" (*Buke Sho-Hatto*) in *Ideals of the Samurai*, trans. Wilson (Burbank, CA: Ohara Publications, 1982), 29.

8 Wilson, introduction to *Ideals of the Samurai*, 29.

9 Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 279.

these utterances into a book named *Hagakure*, literally meaning “hidden by the leaves.”<sup>10</sup> In more recent times the title is usually followed by “The Book of the Samurai” and is often considered to be a very valuable source for peering into the thought process of the Samurai class. As the book’s translator William Scott Wilson tells us,

[Tsunetomo] was the absolute samurai... His extremism and singularity were not held in check by any anticipation of judgment from the outside... His mentors and perhaps geographical position gave encouragement to his own radicalness, and the single idea that focused his thought was not prone to compromise or dissuasion.<sup>11</sup>

But while much Western scholarship classifies this book as an extremist version of the samurai ethic that does not accurately represent the majority of historical samurai, other scholars believe *Hagakure* to be “a work that reflects the ‘ethnomentality’ of the Tokugawa samurai in all its diversity.”<sup>12</sup>

The radical attitudes of Tsunetomo were shared by many and had been among the warrior class for centuries. All of these factors Wilson highlights contribute to Tsunetomo’s focus on the importance of one’s master and the willingness of the samurai to die, front-lining this philosophy with his opening line “The Way of the Samurai is found in death.”<sup>13</sup> The recklessness which Tsunetomo conveys throughout these conversations is somewhat rejected among various scholars who state that while it is not hard to find examples of samurai who in some situations, chose to turn and die in a frontal charge rather than be killed while running away, the historical military record of medieval Japan shows more often the efforts of samurai to use deception and subterfuge to catch his enemies off guard or helpless, than the sort of zealous self-sacrifice that Tsunemoto spoke of.<sup>14</sup> Whether this be the case or not, there is no doubt that there is an honorific acceptance of death within the samurai unlike that of any other warrior giving rise to the Japanese cult of honor. If

10 William Scott Wilson, introduction to *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, by Tsunetomo Yamamoto, trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International Ltd., 1979), 9.

11 Wilson, introduction to *Hagakure*, 16.

12 Ikegama, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 279.

13 Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International Ltd., 1979), 17.

14 Friday, “Bushidō or Bull,” 341.

one reviews other literature of the period, “it is evident that the number of references to honor, usually expressed with the word *na* or ‘name,’ suddenly increases with the emergence of the samurai.”<sup>15</sup> Another book translated by Wilson, *The Ideals of the Samurai: Writings of Japanese Warriors*, presents writings of samurai masters dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and many of these men, like Tsunemoto, praise death on the battlefield. These values and other ideals practiced and praised by the samurai soon became coined as *bushido*, literally meaning “Way of the Warrior.”<sup>16</sup>

## Soul of the Samurai

Throughout their illustrious history, the warriors of Japan have carried many different weapons in battle but the iron tools and weapons brought over from mainland Asia during the Yayoi period (300 BC–300 AD) soon began to produce skillful iron working by native Japanese craftsmen. These ironsmiths worked for centuries in order to perfect the art of their craft—determining which techniques, materials and forging methods would produce swords that would cut well and would not bend or break. Changes in battle methods would inevitably effect the nature of the weapon as the sword went from the long and straight *chokut* in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the long and curved *tachi* in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, until eventually the Japanese sword as we know it today, the *katana*, with a shorter curved blade, was perfected sometime around the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup>

The making of a traditional Japanese sword is an extremely involved procedure that can take several months from start to finish. The process begins with the smelting of a type of iron ore known as *satetsu* found in the form of very fine sand. The *satetsu* is placed in large charcoal-fueled clay furnace called a *tartara* until it melts and hardens into a large steel block at the base of the furnace. This block is then removed, broken into fist-sized pieces and examined for carbon content. The steel that has a carbon content ranging from about 0.6 to 1.5 percent is called *tamahagane* and is deemed suitable for sword making. The rest must undergo additional smelting to adjust the carbon content.<sup>18</sup>

Swordsmiths then hand select the pieces of *tamahagane* they wish to use

15 Sakurai Shotaro, *Meiyo to chijoku* (Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 1971), 4, quoted in Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 49.

16 Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (New York, NY: Kodansha USA, 1899), 10.

17 Kokan Nagayama, *The Connoisseurs Book of Japanese Swords* (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International, 1998), 2.

18 Leon Kapp, Hiroko Kapp, Yoshindo Yoshihara, and Tom Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths: From 1868 to the Present* (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International Ltd., 2002), 9.

and stack them in a compact square on a steel plate welded onto the end of a long steel handle. This is then inserted into the forge until it is heated to a specific temperature at which point it is withdrawn, folded, hammered, and reheated some twelve or thirteen times depending on the swordsmith. This process is what gives a Japanese sword its strength and durability with its softer center and hard outer edge with some several thousand layers of steel made visible by the wave-like pattern on the blade known as the *jihada*.<sup>19</sup> If a sword is not made in this fashion or using the Japanese steel *tamahagane*, it cannot be considered a “traditional” Japanese blade.<sup>20</sup>

The sword, moreover, has symbolic significance to early modern Japanese as many called it the “soul of the samurai” and believed that it contained certain spiritual qualities due to its appearance in myths and religious texts. Some of Japan’s oldest histories contain hints that the sword was regarded as an object of worship in addition to an effective weapon. This most likely originated from the Japanese myth of the three sacred Imperial regalia in which the gods directly handed three objects, one of which was a sword, to the brother of the sun goddess from whom the imperial family claimed direct descentance.<sup>21</sup> This myth is significant because the sword was lost during the Battle of Dannoura in 1185 between Imperial and Shogun forces when eight-year-old Emperor Antoku jumps into the ocean with it. Thus, the loss of the sword, which represented imperial power, symbolically tethers the lost sword to the new martial entity of the shoguns.<sup>22</sup> Dutch scholar Vyjayanthi R. Selinger argues that this tethering is specifically symbolic to the first shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo because in the battle in which the sword is lost and his forces conquer the Emperor’s, he brings stability to the region and becomes the new symbol of power, and is thus the new sword. “Yoritomo, who restores peace to the realm, is represented as the metaphoric double of the imperial sword... [and] Yoritomo assures the continuity of imperial power by becoming its proxy.”<sup>23</sup> This means that the leaders of Japan whether emperor or shogun, were symbolized by a sword making the weapon something of a sacred object

19 Kapp, Kapp, Yoshihara, and Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths*, 9-10, 49.

20 Ibid., 43.

21 Nagayama, *The Connoisseurs Book of Japanese Swords*, 2. Gregory Irvine, *Japanese Sword: Soul Of The Samurai* (Trumbell, CT: Weatherhill Press, 2000), 8.

22 Vyjayanthi R. Selinger, *Authorizing the Shogunate: Ritual and Material Symbolism in the Literary Construction of Warrior Order* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013), 107.

23 Ibid., 107-108.

throughout the country.

Although at first all classes of people carried weapons of different sorts, the times of great social upheaval before the unification of Japan in 1600, most notably the Warring States period from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, caused a rise of the warrior class. The sword gradually became exclusive to a small percentage of the population and eventually, the samurai as a class were formed when general to the shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi, confiscated all arms of the peasantry in 1590 drawing sharp lines between social classes.<sup>24</sup>

Japanese scholar Francis Brinkley who lived in Japan for some 40 years during the Meiji Era expertly highlights the importance of the sword to the Japanese people during the time in his account *Japan: Its History literature and Arts*:

The sword has exercised a potent influence on the life of the Japanese nation. The distinction of wearing it, the rights conferred, the deeds wrought with it, the fame attaching to special skill in its use, the superstitions connected with it, the incredible value set upon a fine blade, the honors bestowed on an expert swordsmith... all these things conspired to give to the katana an importance beyond the limits of ordinary conception.<sup>25</sup>

All of these notions and more make the sword a vitally important artifact when studying feudal, Tokugawa, and early modern era Japan.

## The Meiji Era and its Swords

In summer of 1853, large black ships sailed through the isolationist waters of Japan and into Yokohama harbor. Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States had come with his black fleet to force Japan to open its doors to international trade. The sudden and massive influx of foreign trade effectively destroyed domestic markets and the monetary system. The one person that could do something, the *shogun*, was powerless against the superior forces and firepower displayed by the United States despite his best efforts at gaining national support. Eventually, his lack of action and breeches in protocol while consulting the *daimyo* for support led to a flood of criticism. Popular sentiment for the opening of the country was vastly negative and many felt that in order

24 Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, 65.

25 Francis Brinkley, *Japan: Its History Arts and Literature*, Vol. II (Tokyo, Japan: J.B. Millet Co., 1901), 142.

to meet the foreign powers, the nation would have to come together around a greater symbol of national unity, the emperor. Unable to resist the weapons and manpower of the ominous foreign presence and the increasing disintegration of the authority and loyalty to the *shogunate*, eventually led factions of Japanese leadership to seize control of the imperial court and declare the resumption of direct imperial rule under Emperor Meiji on January 3, 1868.<sup>26</sup> The change brought about by the Meiji era effectively restored the power in the country from the *shogun* and the Samurai class to the emperor and the central government, from which the *shogun* had taken much of its power during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> After only a little more than a decade of exposure to western culture and ways of industry and capitalism, the Japanese way of life had been knocked to its foundations.

Although replacing the old feudal domains with new prefectures was relatively easy because of the symbolic role of the *daimyo* now governors—wiping out the old class divisions of the deep-seated feudal system would prove to be much more difficult. While many of the peasants were happy to see a change in this system, the Samurai were very reluctant to give up their special privileges and hereditary titles. The following years did not bode well for the samurai either as their role in society was steadily dismantled. In 1873, nationwide military conscription was put into place rendering the old class basis for military service completely obsolete.<sup>28</sup> The final abolishment of the Samurai class began in 1876 by means of the *Haitorei* edict which forbid the samurai from carrying their swords, the weapons which symbolized their authority.<sup>29</sup> Opposition to this new law and additional strife between different factions of the government caused by a lingering antipathy for the new Meiji government instigated numerous samurai uprisings eventually culminating in the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. This rebellion, which was largely composed of samurai bitter about their new place in society, was led by commander of the Imperial Guard and samurai lord Saigo Takamori. Some 42,000 men flocked to Saigo's cause, but the effort was in vain as the imperial army possessed greater numbers and more advanced weaponry eventually subduing samurai rebellions for good.<sup>30</sup>

The influx of Western style and ideals that was forcibly embedded into

26 Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, 79-80.

27 Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 48.

28 Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, 81.

29 Irvine, *Japanese Sword*, 108.

30 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 40.

Japanese society soon became immediately noticeable in the Japanese Imperial Army through modern uniforms, tactics, firearms, and battlefield conduct. Much less noticed are the swords which commissioned and non-commissioned officers carried on the battlefield and what they symbolize. Although today, swords are worn to show tradition and only for ceremonial purposes, officers and non-commissioned officers have always worn swords as a status symbol. In pre-Meiji Japan, as I have discussed, only samurai had the right and privilege to wear swords. After the restoration, the wearing of swords was restricted to police and military only, many of whom were ex-samurai. But gradually, the beginnings of Japan's modern military institution began to show as new government officials began to answer the question of who was qualified to serve in the army. Eventually, a nation-wide conscript policy was formed and required a certain amount of troops from each domain based on rice production. Although some units were made up of only samurai, all were equipped with modern infantry weapons as well as artillery.<sup>31</sup>

At this point, men who had not been born of the samurai class soon began to earn the right within this modern military to carry a sword. Just as the European style made a lasting affect on the design of dress uniforms, it had an effect on the military officer's sword. The army's military advisors who, at the time, were French and German would have heavily influenced the first swords that were issued in the imperial army.<sup>32</sup>

As one can see from Figure 2, this sword and scabbard which were produced from c. 1871 to 1877 with a few varying designs, are completely western in appearance and bear no resemblance to the sword in Figure 1 which is the widely recognized katana carried by the samurai for centuries.

Take particular notice to the different elements of the hilt, the scabbard, and the curvature of the blade in Figure 2. While Japanese swords had always had a *tsuba* for minor protection of the hands, it had never come close to the hand and knuckle guards of European swords which gradually became more elaborate as shields were phased out in European warfare.<sup>33</sup> Since these swords bear such close resemblance to western swords of the time, the only way that they may be identified is by Japanese arsenal markings. Although none of

31 Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 23.

32 Richard Fuller and Ron Gregory, *Military Swords of Japan 1868-1945* (New York, NY: Arms & Armour Press, 1993), 8.

33 For details on European warfare see: Ewart Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour: From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution* (Boydell Press, 2012).

these swords have actually been found due to the level of destruction in Japan during World War II, there are photos in which officers appear to be yielding the army officers pattern of c. 1871.<sup>34</sup> Although the actual production dates of this sword are unknown, it is speculated that production stopped sometime around 1877—the year of the Satsuma rebellion.

The significance of this rebellion cannot be overlooked as it shows both a major end to traditional Japanese culture and a beginning in the timeline of Japanese nationalism. The defeat of Saigo's forces marked an effective end to the samurai class in that there was no longer any dispute in the central government of how to “deal with the samurai.” Traditional samurai privileges and regional challenges to the central government were swept away and as a class, they ceased to exist. However, their ideals did not die with them. As military historian Edward J. Drea explains, “Conscripts’ battlefield performance deeply troubled the Meiji leaders, who saw that, man for man, the conscripts were



Figure 1



Figure 2

34 Fuller and Gregory, *Military Swords of Japan*, 15.

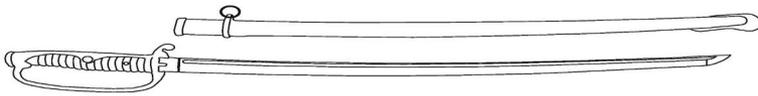


Figure 3

no match for Saigo's samurai." This led army leaders to conclude that while government troops may have better weapons and training, samurai fighters had superior morale and will to fight. The ferocity with which Saigo's samurai fought convinced senior army officers that these warriors possessed special intangible qualities that had to be inculcated into the ranks of the Imperial army. Authorities soon launched an intensive indoctrination program to instill the men of the Imperial army with the spiritual attributes samurai warriors held with such high regard.<sup>35</sup> This instilling of intangible qualities led to a reliance on the spiritual aspect of battle and over time, this came to mean a willingness to fight to the death regardless of the tactical situation. Once this concept gained acceptance, death in combat became the standard by which one measured their fighting spirit. It is in this instance we see the ideals of the samurai transferred to the common fighting man.

At around the same time as this spiritual indoctrination, we see the emergence of the sword in Figure 3.

This sword, known as the 'Kyu-gunto' or proto-military sword, contains elements from the western style sword in Figure 2 as well as the return of some traditional Japanese sword components. As seen side by side in Figure 4A and B, the Kyu-gunto has obvious resemblance to the completely western Imperial Japanese sword with the retaining of the handguard and wire-bound grip. In addition both have the slightly angled pommel which was popular in French and German swords of the time.

Also notice the scabbard tips in the swords of Figures 2 and 3 and enlarged here in Figure 5. This is a distinctly Western sword scabbard trait known

35 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 45-46.

as a ‘drag’ and is intended to protect the scabbard tip from additional wear. Although not pictured on the sword in Figure 4A, many Western swords

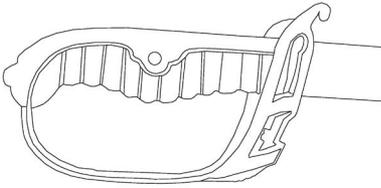


Figure 4A

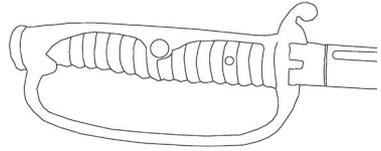


Figure 4B

of the time used clips welded to the handguard plate to hold the blade in its scabbard. Notice the small protruding piece sticking horizontally out from the handguard plate on Figure 4B. This is in fact one of the aforementioned clips to hold the Japanese-style blade into its Western-style scabbard. This portion of the sword I found most curious because it contains both the clip and a *habaki*—a metal collar slid around the base of the blade which was the traditional Japanese way to hold a sword in its scabbard as pictured in Figure 6.

Other traditional Japanese influences on the Kyu-gunto in the hilt are exhibited by the existence of a *mekugi-ana* (peg hole) and accompanying *mekugi* (bamboo peg) which were used to hold a Japanese blade within its mounts. While Western swords were generally made with the hilt as part of the sword, Japanese swords were always made and stored without mounts. This allowed any sword to be placed in virtually any mounts simply by removing the *mekugi* and sliding the blade out. These are represented by the small circle on the hilt in Figure 4B and on the *nakago* (unmounted handle) in Figure 6.

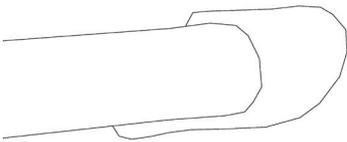


Figure 5

The remaining Japanese influence in the Kyu-gunto is exhibited solely in the blade. Although many of the early examples of this sword are speculated to have mass-produced blades, most of the surviving specimens have hand-forged or ancestral blades of the traditional

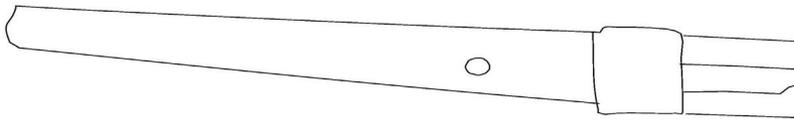


Figure 6

samurai. While a trained eye will be able to see the difference in the sori or curvature between a Japanese blade and a Western one, the most obvious component that gives away a blade as Japanese is the kissaki or point. See in Figure 7 the difference between A, an example of a Western blade, and B and C, both Japanese blades from above.

Although the blade in Figure 7B (traditional katana from Figure 1) and 7C (Kyu-gunto from Figure 3) are of different style—one with a visible *hamon* (temper pattern), and the other with a *bo-hi* (straight groove), the tips have a specific trapezoidal shape to them as well as the distinctive *yokote* which is the line perpendicular to the cutting edge of the blade and defines the point area by making a clear delineation between the point and the body of the sword.<sup>36</sup>

Although the actual date of the emergence of this sword is unknown, it is suspected that it came about sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and

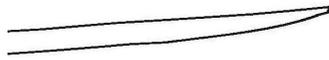


Figure 7A

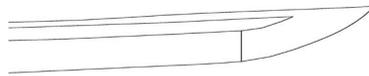


Figure 7C



Figure 7B

36 Kapp, Kapp, Yoshihara, and Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths*, 19.

almost definitely after the Satsuma rebellion of 1877.<sup>37</sup> Having discussed the importance of swords in historical Japanese culture, the emergence of this sword is highly significant because it is physical evidence of the indoctrination of samurai virtue into the general populace. And it is this spread of samurai ideals to the public that eventually caused everyone who was Japanese to come together as a nation believing all were part samurai in the years leading up to World War II. In other words, this sword represents the conception of nationalism in Japan.

## **“Bushido” and its Contribution to Nationalism**

Although the samurai had always had a distinct way of battle conduct, there wasn't even a concept that classified this conduct as such until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Just as a fish doesn't know that it is in water, samurai conduct on the battlefield was known only to samurai due to the constant state of internal war during Japan's long-standing isolation from other countries. Only when the 250 years of peace during the Edo period began under Tokugawa Ieyasu, and the role of samurai became more as a bureaucrat than a warrior did the concept of a code come about. Those who wrote on the “way of the warrior” were motivated by a search for the role of a warrior class in a world without war, which gave rise to the aforementioned warrior-sage.<sup>38</sup> Yamamoto Tsunemoto, Daidoji Yfizan, Yamaga Soko, and the other early modern samurai writers, wrote about the idea of a code of conduct exclusively for the samurai. What all of these men had in common was their strong desire to define and defend the essence of what set the samurai apart from all other classes. They were prescribing rather than describing a code of conduct for the elite and were arguing that it was this code and the values of it which separated this elite class of warriors from the throng of commoners and peasants beneath them.<sup>39</sup>

This intention however, did not last long as the dramatic change in the social structure along with the instilment of spiritual attributes in Imperial army regulars and the growing nationalist fervor, eventually led to the belief that the samurai martial ethic was shared by all Japanese. This idea was then widely popularized by author Inazo Nitobe in his 1904 publication *Bushido: The Souls of Japan*. This book which is still popular today among those who are interested in samurai culture, may be the most controversial piece of literature

37 Fuller and Gregory, *Military Swords of Japan*, 17.

38 Friday, “Bushido or Bull,” 340.

39 *Ibid.*, 343.

surrounding the ideals of Japanese honor. Nitobe, who claims that the spirit of Bushido replaced religion in Japanese schools in the education of morals, wasn't even educated in traditional Japanese ways having been a Christian most of his life.<sup>40</sup> Despite controversy over the book's accuracy of what really constituted the ideals of *bushido*, the book widely popularized the term both in Japan and internationally. There were many other watershed disseminations of the term *bushido* in Japan through various articles and journals which related to history, politics, and even baseball—the most prominent being the journal *Bushid zasshi* in 1898.<sup>41</sup> Publications such as these were largely due to the recent success in the Sino-Japanese war and show the degree to which traditional Japanese customs were being revived to serve nationalism during this time period.

## The Imperial Era and the Rise of Nationalism

Although the degree to which the Japanese people were nationalistic during the start of the Meiji period is often inflated, the foundation for the radical nationalism to come was already there. Ethnically homogeneous, linguistically united, socially standardized and undivided by religious resentments, the Japanese of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji period had few obstacles to the development of a strong national awareness.<sup>42</sup> In addition to this, the importance of loyalty to one's master and domain, which were central beliefs to the samurai, ended up playing a crucial role in the early years of Meiji as samurai loyalty switched from individual daimyo to emperor. As a society formerly run by a military class, it seems obvious to say that foreign wars would help to enhance the sense of patriotism and national unity in a newly proclaimed nation. In a span of less than 50 years the Japanese fought four major wars: the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, the Sino-Japanese war starting in 1937, and World War II from 1941-1945. The Sino and Russo-Japanese wars were especially vital to the development of a national pride as the first foreign wars that Japan fought as a country with a national army.<sup>43</sup>

This national army which was made up of conscripts from all over the

40 Nitobe, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, 6. For facts about Nitobe's life see the National Diet Library's official website at <http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/datas/311.html>.

41 Oleg Benesch, "Bushido : The Creation of a Martial Ethic in Late Meiji Japan." (Vancouver, British Columbia: University of British Columbia, 2011), 137.

42 Albert M. Craig, "Fukuzawa Yukichi: The Philosophical Foundations of Meiji Nationalism," in *Political Development in Modern Japan*, ed. Robert Ward, 100.

43 Nobutaka Ike, "War and Modernization," in *Political Development in Modern Japan*, ed. Robert Ward, 189.

country and from the poorest of families, soon became an institution not only for waging war but also for education. Japanese scholar Nobutaka Ike points out that “the problem of nation-building must necessarily involve the transformation of many individuals from ‘traditional’ man into ‘modern’ man.” The new conscript army did exactly this in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as many of the recruits came from remote mountain communities and had not attended any sort of schooling. The army provided not only the opportunity for these men to learn how to read and write, but also afforded them the opportunity to talk with recruits from other sections of the country thus broadening their political horizons. Doing this made recruits aware of the world outside of their native villages and soon gave them no desire to return. In addition to the army’s modernization and urbanization of these young men, the army instilled training in patriotism and nationalism. One such initiative was the 1882 Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors which gave basic guidelines for the moral training of all men in the army and navy stating “as the protection of the State and the maintenance of its power depend upon the strength of its arms, the growth or decline of this strength must effect the nation’s destiny for good or evil.”<sup>44</sup>

Such encouragement of nationalism only continued in the years leading up to war in a spiral of increasing state-controlled institutions. In 1890 the emperor issued the Imperial Rescript on Education calling for all Japanese to have a sense of public duty towards the nation and a spirit of collective patriotism. Not long after this did the state issue control over textbooks in response to pressure from opposing politicians.<sup>45</sup> Around the same time, with Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, the already in-place state religion of Shintoism began to expand rapidly. Production of shrines all over Japan soon attracted those mourning those lost in the Sino and Russo Japanese wars thus heightening the mood of patriotism.<sup>46</sup>

The succession of these events would steadily increase over the years until they finally found their peak during the second Sino-Japanese war when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. The Japanese attitude of dominance over other

44 Nobutaka Ike, “War and Modernization,” in *Political Development in Modern Japan*, ed. Robert Ward, 195-197.

45 “The Imperial Rescript on Education (1890),” in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume 2, 1600 to 2000*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck and Arthur Tiedemann (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 779-783.

46 Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck and Arthur Tiedemann *Japanese sources of tradition*, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 792.

Asian nations found its root in samurai culture, stemmed in China, and soon stretched across the entire south Pacific to the point that we see just before the start of World War II in 1941.

By the 1930's, nationalism was in full force in Japan as the Imperial army had largely taken over the education and schooling systems of the country through propaganda. The publication of cheap and widely distributed commercial handbooks was fully subsidized by the army. They explained different ways to venerate troops and that conscripts should be grateful the emperor wanted them for his army. With instances such as these, military virtues steadily seeped into popular culture.<sup>47</sup> Physical evidence of this came about in 1933-1934 with the emergence of the 'shin-gunto' or neo-military sword.

As seen in Figure 8, the shin-gunto was full a return to the Japanese style. One can see that at first glance, it is virtually indistinguishable from a traditional katana.

These swords lacked the title of being "traditional" for just about every reason though. Firstly, they were not forged using the lengthy traditional methods to meet the numbers of those that rated swords in the Imperial army. Although some smiths continued traditional sword making up through 1945, out of the approximately 7 million men in the imperial army and navy an estimated 2,150,000 men were eligible to carry swords.<sup>48</sup> As one can imagine this created a problem for the military of how to produce such a large number of swords forcing them to mass-produce them at an industrial level. Secondly, due to the volume of swords needed, they were not made using *tamahagane*. Instead

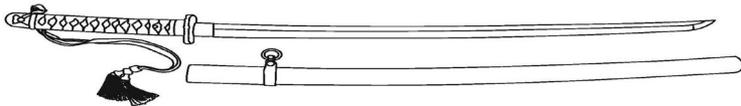


Figure 8

47 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 73.

48 Kapp, Kapp, Yoshihara, and Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths*, 42 and 61.

they were made either using a combination of *tamahagane* and foreign steel in the case of the *Murata-to* or using imported steel rails or old railroad tracks and given the name *Showa-to* which were made towards the beginning of World War II.<sup>49</sup> Although there are many reasons why these swords are not real samurai swords based on how they were made or what they were made of, they are significant because of the way they look and how they came about.

After the Second World War, the new Japanese government passed a law making the production of swords illegal. In addition American occupation forces went from door to door collecting all swords new and old from the people in order to hinder any possibility of insurrection.<sup>50</sup> The occupation forces knew they were confiscating more than just a weapon though, they knew it represented the fighting spirit of Japan and as long as the people had them stable reconstruction could not be started. In 1952, the government finally decided to allow the production of swords through the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. Master swordsmith Kurihara Hikosaburo then took it upon himself to travel all over Japan meeting with swordsmiths and asking them to continue their sword-making. Although Kurihara died only a short time later, he played a key role in the revival and continuation of traditional Japanese sword-making.<sup>51</sup>

Since the production of samurai swords is still very closely monitored and the imagery of them is scarce throughout the Japanese National Defense Force, it will be interesting to see what role swords play as Japan considers remilitarization with the impending Chinese threat.

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- 49 Kapp, Kapp, Yoshihara, and Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths*, 42 and 62.
- 50 Kapp, Kapp, Yoshihara, and Kishida, *Modern Japanese Swords and Swordsmiths*, 73 and 76.
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