

International ResearchScape Journal

Volume 1

Article 2

February 2014

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Recommended Citation

Coldren, David A. (2014) "Literature of Bushidō: Loyalty, Honorable Death, and the Evolution of the Samurai Ideal," *International ResearchScape Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/irj/vol1/iss1/2>

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Literature of *Bushidō*: Loyalty, Honorable Death, and the Evolution of the Samurai Ideal

David Adam Coldren

ABSTRACT

This essay will address the evolution of the samurai warrior code (*bushido*), concentrating on its depiction in several prominent works of Japanese literature from 1185 to 1989. This essay will argue that rather than a concrete set of principles, *bushido* was actually a malleable set of romanticized qualities supposedly possessed by the samurai that were repeatedly adapted to a changing Japanese society in order to maintain a national identity predicated on the warrior class. Beginning with the introduction of the samurai through the *Tale of the Heike*, this essay will then proceed to discuss the blatant romanticization of the samurai until the early 1900's as illustrated in such prominent works and mediums as the house codes of various feudal lords, Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, and Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido*. The militarism of the Pre-World War II period will then be analyzed along with Eiji Yoshikawa's *Musashi* while the culture of death affiliated with the Second World War will be examined as the high-water mark for romanticized *bushido* as a means of national identity. This essay will then conclude with an analysis of Mishima Yukio's *Patriotism*, the definitive end to the Japanese people's overt identification with samurai and their idealized code by 1989.

Over its long history, Japan has undergone numerous dramatic changes. One of the most important of these changes is the shift in political power that accompanied the rise of the warrior class in the late thirteenth century which initiated a series of radical shifts in politics, economic structure, and domestic and foreign policy. However, the one constant that remained through all of this turmoil was the notion of the idealized warrior. But this definition of a samurai ideal was in a constant state of flux and as such became the primary means to connect the past to the present as Japan began to struggle with the notion of a codified national identity. This evolution of the warrior ideal and the later attempts to adapt those ideals onto changing society are clearly documented in the literature of Japan's numerous periods, from 1185 to 1989. Through an analysis of this various literature, it becomes obvious that the Japanese people have continually

romanticized the code of the samurai, especially the aspects of loyalty and honorable death, which gradually became inescapably intertwined. Furthermore, these ideals were constantly adapted to Japan's ever-changing society in order to maintain the historical narrative necessary for a Japanese national identity, which was predicated on this code.

The origin of the samurai mythos and the starting point for the historical narrative of Japan as a military nation is arguably found in the most famous of Japan's war tales, *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike Monogatari*). This text details the events of the Gempei War, a conflict that definitively ended the aristocratic rule that characterized the Heian period and ushered in the military rule of the Kamakura period (Butler 93). The Heian period had been in existence since 794, but in the 1160s, the leader of the militaristic Taira clan gained control of the imperial court. This was short lived, however, as the Taira were soon challenged by the rival Minamoto clan. Following the Minamoto defeat of the Taira, the political clout that Yoritomo, the leader of the victorious clan, had spent years consolidating manifested itself in the form of the Kamakura bakufu, a form of military or "tent" government. Although the emperor still nominally retained authority over the government and was the only one capable of granting legitimacy to Yoritomo's administration, the actual power rested with the warriors who served as the catalyst for this great change (Hane 9). It is through the relation of these events that *The Tale of the Heike* effectively chronicles the rise of the warrior class, presenting a clear starting point for the warrior lineage that Japan will consistently attempt to claim.

While the causes and intricacies of the war are not essential to the investigation of the evolution of Japan's warrior culture, as literary scholar Kenneth Dean Butler argues, great importance lies

in the fact that “it is possible to isolate in the...*Heike Monogatari* text all of the important qualities which later came to be accepted as the ideal and necessary attributes of a warrior” (93). The most central of these qualities pertains to death, particularly a willingness to die for one’s lord and the determination to attain an honorable death. These two themes constitute the core of the Japanese samurai ideal for the time, and as such, have been constantly recycled for use in different contexts following their inception. However, even the original portrayal of samurai values provided in *The Tale of the Heike* did not escape the overt romanticization that is often seen in later periods. The various versions of *The Tale of the Heike* now in existence are too numerous to attempt a comprehensive analysis of their romanticization of the samurai, but Butler identifies four important variations of the text that he deems to be the most appropriate means for understanding the evolution of the romantic characteristics of the warrior: the *Heike monogatari*, *the third battle of a battle-record in four parts (Shibu kassenjō daisamban tōjō Heike monogatari)*, the *Yashiro Heike monogatari*, the *Kamakura Heike monogatari*, and the *Kakuichi Heike monogatari*.

The *Shibu kassenjō* text, written closest to the actual events of the Gempei War, is valuable because it is believed to be the most original form of the *Heike monogatari*. In this version, emphasis is given to the descriptions of large-scale battles and the movements of entire armies, with little time devoted to the accounts of individual warriors provided in later variations (Butler 96-97, 101). In fact, only the most important warriors receive any mention at all. It is during these brief descriptions of the actions of such prominent warriors that the origin of the romanticized warrior ideal may be found. However, as Herbert S. Joseph argues, the “actual portrait of the samurai as presented...is somewhat at variance with the idealized portrait” that is

presented as factual in later works (97). A prime example is the depiction of the death of Saitō Bettō Sanemori, a Taira warrior. In later versions of the text, Sanemori is depicted as choosing to stay behind to protect the rear of a retreating Heike force, fully aware that it would cost him his life. In the *Shibu kassenjō*, he is simply retreating with the remainder of the army and it is “only because he is old that he is overtaken by a younger Genji, who dispatches him” (Butler 101). This story is not an isolated incident because “at no point in the *Shibu kassenjō* account...is there any developed presentation of individual warriors acting in a way” consistent with the portrayals provided by later versions of the text (Butler 101-102).

Both the Yashiro and Kamakura texts show significant developments to the narrative of *Heike monogatari* that may be elucidated through comparisons of the respective accounts of Sanemori’s death. In the Yashiro text, which is the earlier of the two, Sanemori is depicted as having been separated from the remainder of the retreating Heike and is thus forced to fight for his life. While certainly not the samurai ideal, the important development is that Sanemori actually puts up a struggle, which is markedly more heroic than a death while fleeing. The most significant development in the romanticization of Sanemori takes place in the Kamakura text, written sometime after 1300. In this presentation of events, Sanemori is given the ideal qualities of a warrior, “staying behind by choice” because he knows his lord must live to fight another day (Butler 102). In this regard, not only has he been exonerated from a cowardly death, but he has also become a paragon of loyalty through his selfless sacrifice, thus embodying the two essential qualities of a Japanese warrior and setting the standard for all samurai to follow. Also important are the additions of numerous other stories of individual warriors who were not present in either of the two previously mentioned versions, only having been added some one hundred years after

the Gempei War actually took place. These other individuals are essentially doppelgangers of Sanemori. They all embody the ideal warrior characteristics that cannot be found in either of the earlier versions of the *Heike monogatari*, and by sheer volume of instances attempt to make this heroic portrayal more accurate.

The final and most important version of the text is the Kakuichi *Heike Monogatari*, written in 1371. This version of events is a “combination of the best elements of both the Yashiro and the Kamakura” *Heike monogatari* (Butler 97). It continues the trend initiated in the Kamakura version, with more elaboration. For example, in the Kakuichi version, while searching for a worthy adversary, Sanemori is described by Tezuka no Tarō Mitsumori as ‘the valiant man who stays behind long after all his comrades have fled’ (*The Tale of the Heike* 234). This seemingly simple appraisal implies that even the enemy respected Sanemori’s virtuous behavior, a claim which, while nearly impossible to substantiate, further augments the ideal nature of Sanemori’s actions. This account of the story provides evidence for the reason behind this alteration: bardic tradition. Kenneth Butler argues that the incredibly detailed battle scenes and vivid individual characterization provided in the Kakuichi version of the *Heike monogatari* was achieved through use of “formulas and a formulaic method of elaborating themes” originating in oral battle tales constructed by a bardic class of the Heian period (104).

The Kakuichi text became the most popular and commonly accepted version of the *Heike monogatari*, which served to define the existence of a warrior code as described in the text, despite no historical evidence for such a claim. To this end, perhaps the most effective means of disseminating this idea was the medium of heroes. In this sense, a hero is an individual that so

fully embodies the principles of this romanticized warrior code that he becomes larger-than-life. However, potential heroes must also succumb to an honorable death, for that is what truly solidifies the belief that the principles in which they believed were more valuable than life itself, a crucial and reoccurring aspect of the samurai mythos. The *Heike monogatari* is full of such individuals. The Noto governor Noritsune (Taira) was a peerless warrior who slew numerous foes in the great naval battle that ended the Gempei War before he realized that he needed to find someone of equal status with which to do battle. He thus begins to jump from Minamoto ship to Minamoto ship searching for the commanding general of the Minamoto fleet. After realizing that he could not catch the nimble general, Noritsune “resign[ed] himself to death” and after firmly grasping two opponents, “sprang into the waves” (Butler 380).

Introduced in the *Heike monogatari* is Minamoto no Yoshitsune, described by Ivan Morris as “the ideal Japanese hero whose person and career, especially as developed in the legend, embody almost every characteristic that appeals to the national sensibility” (105). However, while the *Heike monogatari* describes his many successes as a military leader, it fails to discuss his death and the preceding events, which is found in a text written around the same time as the Kakuichi *Heike monogatari*, the *Chronicle of Yoshitsune (Gikeiki)*. Largely fictionalized, the *Gikeiki* is a depiction of Yoshitsune’s life, but more importantly, describes the circumstances of his death. After the establishment of his bakufu, Yoritomo decided that Yoshitsune had become a threat to his newfound hegemony. Accordingly, he attempted to have his half-brother killed. After several years of prolonging the inevitable, Yoshitsune is finally cornered in his stronghold and decides that he “shall kill [him]self rather than trade arrows with an eastern retainer,” signifying that it would have been more honorable to take his own life than to be killed by a low ranking

soldier (*Yoshitsune* 285). Not only does Yoshitsune provide a precedent for committing suicide in opposition to capture, he also immortalizes the method, now commonly known as *seppuku*, although he was not the first individual to perform it: Yoshitsune took a dagger and “stabbed himself below the left nipple...then stretched the incision in three directions [and] pulled out his intestines” (*Yoshitsune* 290). Due to his fame and popularity, Yoshitsune establishes the standard against which all later samurai are held: honorable suicide over capture, preferably by *seppuku*.

Following the suicide of Yoshitsune, Yoritomo’s complete consolidation of political power allowed for the beginning of a social transition. The Hōjō family seized power during the middle of the era and instituted various reforms that initiated a shift in the social structure of Japan. By the time the Ashikaga family took control of the bakufu in 1336 (the advent of the Muromachi period), the social landscape had been infused strongly with feudalistic values. However, the Ashikaga had been unable to obtain the level of control that Yoritomo had possessed and the country spiraled into civil war (*Sengoku Jidai*), with regional warlords (*daimyō*) vying for control (Hane 10). It was during this time that the warrior code was reinvented and applied to this new social context, with the preferred literary medium being the house codes of various *daimyō*. Unlike the previous interpretation of the ideal warrior, as seen in the *Heike monogatari*, house laws offered the notion of an ideal warrior as a subservient one, a necessary means of control in an era in which “the obligations of the lord-vassal relationships were regarded as relative ones...based on prevailing social and political circumstances” (Shizuo and Collcutt 107).

Due to the nature of the civil warfare taking place, with *daimyō* facing off against one another, armies were primarily recruited based on the belief in the strength and capability of the

individual *daimyō*, making the retention of warriors of utmost importance. To this end, many of the house laws propagated the essence of loyalty as the most important aspect of samurai behavior. The Asakura house law stated that the lord must “reward his loyal subjects and soldiers and eliminate those who are disloyal and treacherous,” an obvious method of control created by providing incentives to be loyal (Lu 178). Furthering this notion was Takeda Shingen, who declared that “exchanging oaths privately by relatives and retainers is tantamount to treason” and only on the battlefield is it acceptable (Lu 181). A final example comes from the Chōsokabe house law, in which the lord declared that “proper reward should be given neighbors or friends who report anyone...[that] is planning to desert. Those who have knowledge of such intent and fail to report it will receive the same punishment as the offender,” continuing to state that “if a man’s retainer deserts, the master will be penalized threefold” (Lu 182-183). The aforementioned house laws were clearly designed to inspire a fierce loyalty in a *daimyō*’s subjects, especially the samurai, through an enactment of a strict system of reward and punishment. This interpretation of the ideal samurai retained numerous aspects of the code as defined by the *Heike monogatari*, but reinterpreted the notion of loyalty to conform to the current socio-political situation.

Following the decisive victory over his lingering adversaries at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the *daimyō* Tokugawa Ieyasu took control of the government, establishing the Tokugawa bakufu and effectively ending the *Sengoku Jidai* and signifying the start of the Edo period. While initially similar to Yoritomo’s rise to power several hundred years earlier, Tokugawa and his immediate heirs instituted a number of reforms that shifted the priorities of the samurai towards management and away from the combat of the previous era. The transition from warrior to

bureaucrat was ushered in by Tokugawa Ieyasu's desire to "establish absolute control over the society," necessitating more managerial positions to enforce the extensive legal system created in conjunction with the bakufu (Hane 2-26). However, Tokugawa Ieyasu, although a samurai himself, was also a product of the preceding era, meaning that he understood the very real possibility of defection, a definite threat to his newly established government and much like Yoritomo, decided to neutralize this potential threat immediately. Legislation such as the "Laws of Military Households" (*buke shohatto*) placed severe restrictions upon the samurai, limiting movement between domains, the building of fortifications, and gatherings of large numbers of warriors, effectively preventing any massive military reaction to the bakufu (Lu 206-208). The amendments to the *buke shohatto* added shortly thereafter also destroyed the economic strength of the *daimyō* through the institution of the alternate attendance policy, which forced *daimyō* to spend large portions of annual income to fund the procession needed for the inevitable trip to the capital to "serve in turns at Edo" (Lu 208).

Furthermore, while limiting the military capabilities of the samurai class, these laws championed the virtue of loyalty that dominated the landscape of the *Sengoku Jidai*, albeit in a very different manner. Written into the *buke shohatto* are numerous references to loyalty, not to a lord, but rather to ideals, signifying the transformation of the concept from an emotional bond formed through trust and willingness to die on the battlefield to an "unconditional and often highly impersonal" association akin to a business contract (Hurst III 509). In conjunction with this semantic shift, the peaceful nature of the Edo period and the strict controls on the samurai disestablished the necessity of martial prowess, creating a fertile environment for the samurai transition to more intellectual pursuits and administration. Thus, the legislation enacted by the

Tokugawa bakufu provided ample motivation for the samurai transition from warrior to bureaucrat.

However, not all samurai were willing to conform to the Tokugawa reinterpretation of *bushidō*, least of all Yamamoto Tsunetomo, the author of a treatise on the warrior code entitled *Hagakure*. Written between 1710 and 1716, the *Hagakure* essentially questioned the “role of the warrior in an age of peace” (Hurst III 521). Yamamoto’s assessment of this overarching question contains numerous critiques of the shift in samurai values during the Edo period, many of which imply his own romanticization of certain heroic qualities. One key value that is extensively examined is that of loyalty, specifically the seemingly arbitrary manner in which it was professed within the Tokugawa system, drawing attention to the inherent hypocrisy of the bureaucratic samurai. In conjunction with this point, Yamamoto appeals to the idealized notion of honorable death seen in the *Heike monogatari*, creating a literary synthesis of the two ideals that served to establish a connection between his own values and those of Japan’s great heroes of the past.

In a particularly relevant passage, Yamamoto condemns much of the contemporary Tokugawa attitude regarding the samurai’s growing aptitude for the arts and academia, claiming that “outside learning for retainers...is worthless” and that a samurai should be concerned with “nothing other than doing his own job” (158). While harsh, this condemnation was not motivated by a hatred of learning, but by his own perceived inadequacies in an era of peace, a notion corroborated by the *bushidō* scholar G. Cameron Hurst III, who stated that “there were simply no longer any arenas where would-be zealots like Tsunetomo...could demonstrate either his military prowess, his loyalty, or his courage” (521). In essence, Yamamoto, a subscriber to

the *Sengoku Jidai* mindset, was unable to adapt to the changing political climate of the Edo period. Accordingly, many of the passages in the *Hagakure* heavily romanticize the duties of the samurai, as if Yamamoto was deliberately attempting to make them as appealing as possible in a vain attempt to return the Tokugawa society to a more militant past in which he would cease to be an anachronism.

A fine example of such a romanticized concept is Yamamoto's attempt to juxtapose the *Sengoku Jidai's* idealized conceptualization of loyalty upon the Edo period, disregarding the fact that such loyalty was designed for use on the battlefield, a far cry from the Japanese society of the eighteenth century. Even though the legal system of the Edo period severely punished traitors and discouraged disloyalty to the point of death, Yamamoto heavy-handedly asserts that only when "a warrior makes loyalty and filial piety one load...and carries these twenty-four hours a day until his shoulders wear out, he will be a samurai" (83). The actual purpose of this statement is not to profess the absolute necessity of abject loyalty, which existed by law, but rather an attempt to return a sense of purpose to the samurai seemingly lost in the peaceful "decline of the warrior class" (Hurst III 521). Although indirect, Yamamoto also effectively implies that the bureaucratic samurai is an oxymoron. The notion of loyalty inherent for the samurai, termed by Lafacadio Hearn as a "dutiful obedience [that] is essentially religious," was replaced by an enforced servitude, with the impersonal nature of the relationship between lord and vassal and the strict enforcement of a nationwide legal code undermining genuine loyalty (196). Yamamoto also continues to state that the essence of being a samurai is in "seriously devoting one's body and soul to his master," thus utilizing loyalty as a focal point around which samurai can rebuild the identity lost with the decline of martial necessity (Hearn 52).

The zeal to serve one's lord is expressed in the *Hagakure* to the point that "merit lies more in dying for one's master than in striking down the enemy" (Hearn 42). This sentiment serves two purposes, with the more obvious being the creation of a life and death dynamic, similar to the *Sengoku Jidai* for which Yamamoto yearned. The necessitation of death as a direct consequence of loyalty imparts a significance to the practice that was inherently lacking in the Tokugawa's impersonal and contract-like conceptualization of loyalty. The second purpose is the establishment of a connection with the heroic legacy of Japan. The use of death as the ultimate expression of loyalty provides a blending of the *Heike monogatari*'s concept of honorable death with the *Sengoku Jidai*'s emphasis on loyalty, which allowed the samurai to have "the purity of his intentions...revealed in action," an essential quality for the ideal Japanese warrior (Morris 23). Accordingly, the core of the *Hagakure*'s portrait of *bushidō* is expressed rather simply in the poignant statement that "the way of the samurai is found in death" (Yamamoto 3). This assertion is based on the notion that "we all want to live," implying that the transcendence of this desire marks the aforementioned heroic purity of motive, a sentiment echoed in the belief that "death is the only sincerity" (Yamamoto 3, 131). Thus, the warrior code outlined by Yamamoto Tsunetomo in the *Hagakure* centralizes the combination of loyalty and honorable death as the most idealized qualities of the Japanese warrior, altering these qualities enough to act as a direct antithesis of Tokugawa values.

This continuation of national narrative proved incredibly important in the years following the collapse of the Tokugawa bakufu initiated by the intervention of the West. The Tokugawa regime enacted an isolationist policy upon seizing power, but the gunboat diplomacy exercised by Commodore Perry nearly two-hundred fifty years later forced Japan to confront the West

(Hane 70-72). The leaders of the government could not determine the most appropriate way to do so, and following the ratification of accords such as the Harris Treaty, which officially opened Japanese ports to American merchants and initiated trade between the two countries (Lu 289-292), the nation split into two factions: those who supported the government's decision to open trade with the West and those who desired to 'revere the emperor and repel the barbarians' (*sonnō jōi*) (Hane 72). This political schism set the stage for the Meiji Restoration, which ended the Tokugawa bakufu by militarily restoring the emperor to power. The beginning of the Meiji period, named for the restored emperor, marked a dramatic departure from the Japan of previous eras in which Japan not only opened itself to trade with foreigners, it actively emulated them in an attempt to become "modernized" (Hane 87, 92).

As this westernization coalesced into the modern Meiji state, complete with western technology, the national identity of the country came into question. Prior to the fall of the Tokugawa bakufu, Japan's isolationist policy allowed for a relatively cohesive sense of identity based fundamentally on the warrior class, which had ruled the nation since the formation of the Kamakura bakufu under Yoritomo. Following Japan's forced confrontation with the West, this identity no longer seemed valid, as western military technology appeared to make the samurai obsolete.

Accordingly, the West became "the norm against which Japan tried to define itself," evidenced by its rabid integration of western systems and ideologies (Klien 55). As proven by the imposition of the so called "unequal treaties," granting foreigners certain provisions in Japan not granted to Japanese citizens (Hane 92), this mimicry failed to achieve genuine parity with the West, signifying that the "West represent[ed] an advanced stage of development, and Japan [stood] for backwardness" (Klien 57).

In early 1900, Nitobe Inazō published *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, a revolutionary book that provided a reinterpretation of the warrior code utilizing Japan's military past as evidence of the civilization needed to achieve parity with the West (23). To illustrate this perceived parity, Nitobe offers a thorough comparison to European chivalry, as is illustrated in the text's opening lines:

Chivalry is a flower no less indigenous to the soil of Japan than its emblem, the cherry blossom; nor is it a dried-up specimen of an antique virtue preserved in the herbarium of our history. It is still a living object of power and beauty among us; and if it assumes no tangible shape or form, it not the less scents the moral atmosphere, and makes us aware that we are still under its potent spell (23).

Thus, Nitobe effectively illuminates the primary intention of his work, implying that the discussion of *bushidō* he undertakes is not a strictly historical phenomenon, providing the essential connection between the contemporary and the past and preserving the historical narrative of the Japanese warrior tradition. Furthermore, by asserting the existence of *bushidō* as a previously existent conceptual framework, Nitobe also implies that Japan was civilized far before western intervention, a notion that places Japan on equal terms with the West. To further entrench the idea of *bushidō* as a plausible national identity, the very title of the book markedly alters any previous conceptualization of *bushidō* by stating that *bushidō* is the "soul of Japan." This statement implies that *bushidō* had "[become] the 'soul' of all Japanese citizens," replacing the exclusivity of the warriors with an inclusivity that allowed *bushidō* to be applied to entire nation, implying that *bushidō* was, in fact, Japan's national identity (Hurst III 513).

Another attempt to prove civilization used by Nitobe is his inclusion of religion as a major factor in influencing the formation and perpetuation of *bushidō*. Just as Christianity was inseparable from European knighthood, Nitobe asserts that *bushidō* was also the product of religious

realization through an analysis of *seppuku*. He begins by repeatedly referencing the nobility of the act, citing numerous historical and literary figures glorified through suicide as examples, including “Cato, Brutus, Petronius, and a host of other ancient worthies” (Hurst III 93). Nitobe subsequently asserts that the true samurai would not hasten to his death, as *seppuku* is not a desirable end, but it was sometimes a necessary one that was to be faced with “a fortitude approaching a Christian martyr’s” (Hurst III 98). Thus, through this assertion of *seppuku*’s nobility combined with its undesirability and its inherent Christian bravery, Nitobe creates an allusion to Jesus Christ. In essence, Nitobe states that much akin to Jesus, the samurai act of cutting open one’s stomach is a self-imposed death necessitated by a faith to a higher value. Instead of faith in God, however, the samurai worshipped honor, to which end death was heavenly ordained, effectively making the suicidal samurai a martyr, ennobling him, and bringing the argument full circle (Hurst III 99).

Another crucial aspect of Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushido* was its use in the transformation of Saigō Takamori into the idealized samurai needed to connect contemporary Meiji Japan to the “heroic” Japan of the past embodied by figures such as Yoshitsune. Saigō was one of the men initially responsible for leading the Meiji Restoration and directing the fledgling Meiji government, but following a falling out with the other oligarchs, Saigō became the leader of an uprising in 1877 known as the Seinan War. The rebellion was quickly quashed by the government’s western military technology with its leader dead by the end of the same year (Hane 91, 121-125). With the triumph of western militarism over samurai combat, the age of the traditional samurai came to an end with the death of Saigō, who was touted as the “last true samurai” (Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori" 696). The necessity of using the historical warrior

narrative as a national identity left the Meiji government with the awkward problem that the “last samurai” died as an enemy of the state. The solution to this dilemma was provided by Nitobe’s *Bushido*’s ennoblement of ritual suicide, as it was posthumously asserted that Saigō cut his own stomach, granting Saigō the iconic death required by the last of the samurai. This was done regardless of the fact that the various accounts of Saigō’s body as seen on the day of his death report that “he had no abdominal or stab wounds,” making it rather obvious that he did not commit *seppuku* (Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori" 698). But by granting Saigō such a symbolic death, the government was able to “embed Saigō and the samurai into a new national narrative” founded on the “invention of modern *bushidō* and its emergence as a national ideology” (Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori" 701). Death by *seppuku* also connected Saigō to Yoshitsune, firmly establishing the continuity of the narrative. Saigō’s death thus became the means to an end for the government, as the Meiji oligarchs were able to institute Nitobe’s reinterpretation of *bushidō* as a national ideology, but only “a generation after samurai had lost their hereditary powers and privileges” (Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori" 702).

The collapse of the samurai class, Saigō’s reinterpretation as a nationalistic hero, and Nitobe’s self-appreciative *Bushido* established a foundation for the imperialistic expansion seen in the period directly following the end of the Meiji era in 1912. The event that cemented this re-imagined version of the warrior code was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 (Hane 195, 186). Japan’s victory in the war against Russia was a seminal victory against the West, with the East finally obtaining the notion of parity, which served to validate the application of Nitobe’s *Bushido* and the country’s samurai lineage as the core of national identity because under the

influence of this ideology, Japan had defeated the West and freed itself from the shackles of the “unequal treaties” (Humphreys 12). Within Asia, Japan’s triumph over China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 reinforced notions of Japanese superiority implied in Nitobe’s text. In regards to the spirit of Japan, Nitobe states that it “may share with the flowers of other lands, but in its essence it remains the original,” implying that Japan is the origin from which progress springs, a notion that would later be applied to the surrounding nations of Asia (124). Under this notion of racial superiority, intense nationalism springing from two victorious wars, and the extension of *bushidō* to all Japanese citizens, Japan once again “made the sword its emblem of power” (Nitobe 104).

Japan rode the wave of nationalism created by its victories over China and Russia, until the end of the Taishō period in 1926, when Emperor Hirohito took the throne and ushered in the Shōwa period (Hane 255). Accompanying increased aggression in China, from 1935-1939 was the publication of a serialized novel (Yoshikawa ix). Entitled *Musashi*, it was author Yoshikawa Eiji’s dramatic rendition of samurai Miyamoto Musashi, a swordsman of considerable repute from the dawn of the Tokugawa era (Sato 254). This work, while fiction, effectively encapsulated the nationalistic sensationalism at the time, and through presentation of a fictional, yet idealized, samurai, presented a reinterpretation of Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushido* to be applied in the age of modern Japanese militarism.

Little is actually known of Miyamoto Musashi, as even the stories surrounding his “famous” duels are shrouded in mystery (Sato 254-256). It is for this very reason that Musashi became the choice avatar for Yoshikawa’s reinterpretation of *Bushido*, because unlike Nitobe, who was

forced to work somewhat within the confines of history, Yoshikawa's version of Musashi could not be historically invalidated. Thus, Yoshikawa's Musashi became the "real" Musashi in the same way that the Kakuichi *Heike Monogatari*'s version of the Gempei War came to be viewed as historical truth. To this end, the climax of *Musashi* depicts the titular character's struggle against his archrival, Sasaki Kojirō Ganryū, as a battle of ideology, in which Musashi emerges triumphant through a commitment to "the sword of the spirit" (Yoshikawa 970). This implies that the superiority of the spirit to which Musashi veraciously subscribed, *bushidō*, was the "only difference between them," further promoting the notion of moral superiority proposed by Nitobe years earlier (Yoshikawa 970). Through extrapolation, the "inferior" Chinese people's lack of faith in the *bushidō* spirit became the "difference between them" that justified the actions of the Sino-Japanese Wars.

Additionally, the heroic nature of Yoshikawa's fictional samurai is tailored specifically to invoke an association with the ideal warriors of the past. For all intents and purposes, Miyamoto Musashi, as depicted by Yoshikawa, was supposed to be the "perfect" samurai, and although he does not resign himself to glorious death like Yoshitsune or Saigō, he *does* illustrate the purity of motive essential to any ideal Japanese warrior. This is exceptionally exemplified through his final duel with Sasaki, the climactic showdown that the entire novel builds towards. After giving his word to attend the duel, Musashi binds himself to this agreement and remains committed, even when he notices the forty samurai in Sasaki's camp on the day of the duel, knowing full well that "in the event that Ganryū was beaten, they were ready to take revenge" (Yoshikawa 965). This single-mindedness, akin to the *Hagakure*'s precepts, guides Musashi to meet Sasaki's challenge, regardless of the high probability of his own death. Such intent encapsulates the

reoccurring themes of loyalty and death in that Musashi is loyal to the promise he makes with Sasaki to the point of willfully going towards what could very likely be his own demise. This purity of intent is not unlike the determination shown by Yoshitsune as he disemboweled himself or Saigō as he led a rebellion he had very little chance of actually winning, thus allowing for the inclusion of Musashi in this historical narrative.

Yoshikawa's *Musashi* also capitalized on the nationalism of the early Shōwa period by crafting Musashi as a metaphor for Japan's ascendance to global prominence. In the beginning of his novel, Miyamoto Musashi is known by the name Shimmen Takezō, and is a wild, somewhat barbaric individual. An illustrative example of this is when Musashi is attacked in a bathhouse, where he is described as "naked, his wet hair flying in every direction" while he "thrashed about like a whirling dervish, swinging with complete abandon and hitting anyone who came near" (Yoshikawa 46). This draws a comparison with pre-Meiji Japan, which suffered the "unfair treaties" as a result of being seen as backwards and primitive. Yoshikawa continues in his literary evolution of Musashi by recreating the Meiji Restoration and absorption of western knowledge when Takezō is taken in by the far more cultured monk Takuan and Lord Ikeda Terumasu (92-95). Once taken into their protection, Takezō is confined to a small room in which he is "virtually buried in...scholarly tomes" for three years (Yoshikawa 96). Upon his emergence, deemed "the day of [his] rebirth," Takezō is granted a new name, signifying his new identity, which is founded on a reinterpretation of his past life and warrior lineage in a similar, albeit more romantic, version of the events of the Meiji period (Yoshikawa 98). Finally, Musashi evolves to the point where his wooden sword becomes just as deadly as a real blade, prompting a master of spearmanship to advise Musashi that he has become so strong that "[his] strength is the

problem” and that he “must learn to control it” (Yoshikawa 161). This is the point at which Musashi’s evolution in the novel can be perceived to mirror the sentiment popular in Japan at the time: Japan’s dominance in Asia was secure and the parity with the West was achieved.

Japan began to advance towards war as this notion of parity with the West was reaffirmed by the ratification of the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany, and Italy in 1940. This agreement stated that “Germany and Italy recognize and respect the leadership of Japan in the establishment of a new order in Greater East Asia,” which finally reaffirmed the belief in equality with the West held by the Japanese people since the end of the Russo-Japanese War (Lu 424). Several years after the outbreak of war in Europe, Japan launched a surprise attack on the American naval base located in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, signaling the beginning of the Pacific War, which proved to be long and bloody (Drea 26). As is only appropriate, it was during Japan’s most international war, with the future of the nation at stake, that we see the pinnacle of *bushidō* development and application. This culmination was set in motion by events of the Meiji period, the nationalism sweeping the nation, and the romantic legacy of the warrior class.

The foundation for the fervent, nationalistic *bushidō* of the 1940s was established with the ratification of the Meiji Constitution. Within said Constitution, the emperor was directly linked to a “line of emperors unbroken for ages eternal” (Lu 340), which, according to religious scholar Shimazono Susumu, deifies the emperor as “a holy being” (“State Shinto and the Religious Structure of Modern Japan” 1089). A divine emperor provides to the Japanese *bushidō* identity a return to the one crucial facet it lost after the formation of the Kamakura bakufu: an appropriate lord to serve. Before the institution of the emperor as the object of fealty in the Meiji era, it was

necessary for one to observe loyalty in terms of the state, an abstract concept difficult to embrace. However, by personalizing the object of fealty, one returns to the personal relationship between lord and vassal so desired by Yamamoto Tsunetomo in the *Hagakure*. Also important is the religious aspect of the emperor's very being, as "the absence of a dominant religious institution made legitimation problematic for warriors who became de facto rulers" (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 351). By legally assigning the emperor a divine entity, the Meiji oligarchs created the appropriate environment to breed fanatic loyalty to the throne, a significant return to the ideal of the original samurai.

Another important aspect of State Shinto was indoctrination, which began in 1890 with the Imperial Rescript on Education, a document that asserted the divinity of the emperor in a decidedly nationalistic tone and became "widely recognized as a central principle of school education" (Shimazono, "State Shinto in the Lives of the People" 120). From a very young age, children were indoctrinated with the glory of the emperor and an acceptance of the state, instilling in them a loyalty that took shape when State Shinto crystallized nearly two decades after its inception (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356). As the historian Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney states, "it was also important to establish the emperor as the Father to all Japanese, thereby creating legitimate kinship ties between the emperor and his subjects," providing people with a greater motivation to die for the war effort (77).

The most vividly illustrated aspect of this interpretation of *bushidō* is death. In the name of the emperor, thousands upon thousands of Japanese men lost their lives, including those who decided to take their own in last-ditch attempts to destroy or damage enemy forces. Suicide units

like the infamous kamikaze squadrons were formed near the end of the war, when Japan was forced to confront the inevitability of defeat. In response to the waning effectiveness of conventional weapons, Japanese commanders began to resort to the utilization of the Japanese spirit (*yamato damashii*) as the “trump card that could counter the enemy’s material force” (Morris 285). Accordingly, *Yamato damashii* found its most appropriate manifestation in *bushidō*, which prompted numerous men to join these voluntarily formed corps devoted entirely to suicide attacks. These suicide corps, known as *tokkōtai* units, marked the first time that soldiers were actually ordered to crash into the enemy, a notion no doubt instituted due to the pervasive influence of religious nationalism (Ohnuki-Tierney 159). In accordance with the perceived divine nature of such suicide missions, obviously influenced by a combination of Nitobe’s ennoblement of death and the emperor’s own divinity, a cause worth dying for in the eyes of many, the units were given names that reflected this heavenly purpose, such as *Shimpū* (divine wind), *Asahi* (the rising sun), and *Yamazakura* (wild cherry blossom) (Morris 289).

Perhaps more influential than serving the divine emperor was the personal desire for deification as a Japanese warrior hero. This is reflected by the use of cherry blossom symbolism on planes, helmets, and unit names, as cherry blossoms had been viewed as a symbolic representation of the impermanence of life (Ohnuki-Tierney 39-40). Also representative of the kamikaze pilots’ desire for heroic deification is the consistent appeal to Kusunoki Masashige, a famous tragic hero of the Kamakura period who fought on behalf of the emperor and committed *seppuku* rather than risk capture following his inevitable defeat, a feat for which he was glorified by later generations. Kamikaze pilots routinely utilized Kusunoki’s family crest as a design on their airplanes, an attempt to emulate the hero’s courage and loyalty in death (Ohnuki-Tierney 165). This

emulation was also an appeal to the notion of welcoming death as the defining characteristic of the ideal samurai, evidenced by Minamoto no Yoshitsune's *seppuku*, the suicide attributed posthumously to Saigō Takamori, and even the brazen confrontation of death illustrated in Yoshikawa's *Musashi*. The government also realized the potential of capitalizing on this *bushidō* inspired desire and reinvigorated the Yasukuni Shrine, originally "erected to the spirits of all those who died in the service of the emperor" along with the initial promulgation of State Shinto in the Meiji period, thereby actually deifying Japan's fallen soldiers, providing a somewhat tangible reward for death in the name of the emperor (Harries and Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun* 19-20).

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki accelerated the Japanese surrender that ended World War II and with it the feasibility of utilizing *bushidō* as a means of national identity. The use of a warrior lineage as a means of national identity is predicated on the fact that one is able to exert significant military strength, but following the redrafting of Japan's constitution under General Douglas MacArthur, Japan no longer had a standing military (Lu 461). In conjunction, the emperor was forced to renounce his divinity, undercutting the religious foundation upon which the fanatical *bushidō* of the Shōwa period was crafted (Lu 466). With no other alternative, Japan acquiesced to the American occupation and discarded *bushidō*, that is until the works of author Mishima Yukio were published. In 1966, Mishima published the novel *Patriotism*, which became a medium through which it appeared that Mishima hoped to reignite the passion for *bushidō*. However, Mishima's interpretation of *bushidō* was not at all a warrior code, but a glorification of death for a man obsessed with the subject.

The novel centers on the discovery of a mutiny within the Imperial Japanese Army by a young lieutenant, Takeyama Shinji, who then decides to kill himself upon learning that “his closest colleagues had been with the mutineers from the beginning” (Mishima). The remainder of the story takes place entirely in the house that Takeyama shares with his wife and recounts the last hours of the lovers’ lives, culminating in their double suicide. At first glance, the novel seems to portray the same kind of righteous suicide that would be advocated by the *Hagakure*, but a deeper investigation into the life of Mishima proves otherwise. From his childhood, Mishima was constantly surrounded by death, especially in the image of his long-dying grandmother, who coddled Mishima as a child, forcing him to confront this death twenty-four hours a day, as he was also made to sleep in the same bed with her until his twelfth birthday, which served to create an early “eroticization of death” for him (Lifton, Katō, and Reich 241-243). It is this erotic image of death that Mishima strives to portray in *Patriotism*, with the entirety of the plot utilized as a means to set up the *seppuku* of the final two chapters, expressed in the sentiment “it would be difficult to imagine a more heroic sight” than the lieutenant a pale, deathly pallor and his entrails exposed on the floor (50). Clearly, the description provided does not glorify the act itself for its intention or purpose, instead focusing the means and the result. This artistic focus illustrates that *Patriotism* was not a genuine attempt to coerce the public back to a militaristic sense of identity, but an attempt to satisfy an elaborate and morbid fantasy.

The realization of the fantasy depicted in his novel came on November 25, 1970 when Mishima staged a coup and attempted to rally members of Japan’s Self-Defense Force to his cause. From a balcony overlooking a gathered crowd, Mishima gave an impassioned speech of his *bushidō*, but failed to win over a single soul. This was to be expected, as *bushidō* no longer had a place in

post-war Japanese society, as such a militaristic philosophy had brought Japan to ruin under the greater military power of the United States, failing in much the same way as the Tokugawa bakufu and the initial mimicry of the West pursued by the fledgling Meiji government. Granted, the samurai code was still alive, but “mainly in cultural mythology” and not in practice (Lifton, Katō, and Reich 238-239). Upon returning inside, Mishima committed *seppuku*, but based on his biography, the conclusion can be safely made that he did not aspire to the realm of heroes like Yoshitsune, desiring instead to embrace the object of his obsession. When news spread to the people of Japan, Mishima was viewed as a contemporary aberration and a ridiculous anachronism, signaling the definitive end of *bushidō* as a national identity for the Japanese people.

In conclusion, it is clear through the evaluation of select Japanese literature that the notion of a single and definitive code of *bushidō* has no historical basis and was a malleable set of ever-changing values adapted to variant societies as a means to preserve a Japanese national identity. It is clearly illustrated in the *Heike monogatari*, or rather the several existent variations, that such a code did not exist during the ascent of the warrior class. Instead there was an overt romanticization of warrior ideals projected through literary mediums that came to replace the actual history of the Gempei War, creating the basis from which various institutions and scholars elaborated *bushidō*. In addition, the *Heike monogatari* also entrenched the tradition of idealized samurai heroes, beginning with Minamoto no Yoshitsune and eventually ending with the kamikaze pilots of World War II. While the primary focus during the Kamakura period and in the *Heike monogatari* is honorable death, the realities of civil warfare necessitated a focal shift during the *Sengoku Jidai*, where the emphasis became loyalty. A synthesis of these two ideals

was established during the Edo period because of the bakufu's desire for hegemony and control, which shifted the semantics of the aforementioned values to effectively do so within the context of the Tokugawa legal system. Yamamoto Tsunetomo also proposed a reinterpretation of *bushidō* founded on a synthesis of loyalty and death in the *Hagakure* during this period, but his was seemingly written as an antithesis of Tokugawa ideology, glorifying willful death and promoting strong loyalty predicated on a deep personal relationship with one's lord.

Nitobe Inazō further expanded upon the ideas espoused in the *Hagakure* in his book *Bushido*, published in 1900 amid the restructuring of the Japanese state by the Meiji oligarchs. This interpretation of *bushidō* was only concerned with utilizing the "code of the samurai" as a means to assert parity with the West, and as such, is a blatant romanticization of already romanticized ideals, most notably death. During the expansion of the Taishō and Shōwa periods, Yoshikawa Eiji's fictional novel *Musashi* reinterpreted Nitobe's version of *bushidō* in a manner justifying imperialism and asserting Japanese superiority. World War II was the culmination of the ever expanding romanticization of the warrior code, achieved through a combination of religious nationalism created by the institution of State Shintoism, belief in equality with the West that legitimized *bushidō*, and an appeal to the idealized warrior heroes from Japanese history. The post-war period saw Japan discard *bushidō*, informed by the emperor's marked lack of divinity and the loss of military force. In this context, then the death-throes of *bushidō* are exemplified through Mishima Yukio and his work entitled *Patriotism*. Mishima's anachronistic call for the revival of *bushidō* was consciously spurned by the Japanese people, signifying the end of *bushidō* as a means of national identity for the Japanese. Mishima's *seppuku* effectively ended with the sword what began with the sword.

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