The Samurai in Japan and the World, c. 1900
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- Excerpts from *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*

<u>**Introduction**</u>

See also "The Place of the Samurai in 20th Century Japan."

This unit addresses the role of the samurai in 20th century Japan by examining excerpts from Nitobe Inazô's 1899 book *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*, which asserts that "the way of the samurai warrior" was "the soul of Japan" and the Japanese people. The reading also allows students to explore an important yet underexamined part of Japan's reaction to Western imperialism: namely, how the championing of what was described as "native culture" as a modern source of strength was a way to negotiate (if not resist) the process of Westernization.

<u>**Audience and Uses**</u>

The unit could be useful in a wide variety of courses, including but not limited to:
- Nationalism and Patriotism
- Military history
- World history
- East Asian History
- Representation and image
- Gender studies (masculinity)
- Gender and Nationalism
- Modern Asia/Japan
- Japanese history

This unit can be taught alone, as a single class exercise, or together with the accompanying unit "The Samurai in Postwar Japan: Yukio Mishima's 'Patriotism.'" Taken together, the two units provide an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the place of the samurai in twentieth-century Japan and the world. The two units could be used in successive class sessions to make up a week-long study, or if time permits, spread over four class sessions for a two-week long study.

Student Reading

Excerpts from:
Bushidô: The Soul of Japan, by Nitobe Inazô. The book was written while Nitobe was living in the U.S. and first published in English in 1899. It was then released in Japanese in 1908. (For more on the text and Nitobe, see the Background Information section below.) The entire text is provided by the Internet Sacred Text Archive at: http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/bsd/

- For use as an in-class exercise, read and discuss with students the excerpts featured in this handout: Excerpts from *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*
- For use as the basis of one day of classroom discussion, have students read before class the following chapters:
  Chapter 1: "Bushidô as an Ethical System"
       http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/bsd/bsd06.htm
  Chapter 16 ("Is Bushidô Still Alive?"):
       http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/bsd/bsd21.htm
  Chapter 17: "The Future of Bushidô"
       http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/bsd/bsd22.htm

Discussion Questions

In *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*, Nitobe explains what *bushidô* is, where it came from, and how it was a source of strength and pride for Japanese people and for Japan as a nation. Use the questions below to help students understand why Nitobe insists that *bushidô* is the soul of Japan.

Nitobe and the World
- In a text that is supposed to explain things about Japan, why do you think Nitobe spends so much time quoting words, texts, and individuals from around the world?
- For example, why do you think Nitobe compares *bushidô* to chivalry?
- Through explaining the figure of the samurai and the ethic of *bushidô* in this way, was Nitobe trying to suggest that Japan was the same as, different from, or equal to the West? (Note: In a sense, Nitobe is trying to suggest that Japan was all three — same, different, and equal. Students should be encouraged to think about how and why Nitobe was ambivalent about Westernization, in particular, how Nitobe is attempting to suggest that Japan was equal to the West yet, at the same time, did not owe entirely its place in the world to its adoption of Western ways.)

The Origins and Transmission of Bushidô

- According to Nitobe, where did *bushidô* originate and how did it remain alive through the ages and into the twentieth century?
  (Note: In the passage on pp. 4-6, note how, on the one hand, Nitobe only vaguely describes how *bushidô* was transmitted to the people of modern Japan, making one wonder how indeed *bushidô* could be called the soul of all Japan; on the other hand, note how Nitobe suggests definitively that *bushidô* is a racial, if not genetic, component of the modern Japanese person. Here, Nitobe is attempting to make *bushidô* into a point of racial pride in a world dominated by the white races of Europe and America.)
- To what extent would we say chivalry is part of the West? Is it a racial component of every modern Westerner?

Bushidô and Japan's Image in the World

- Why did Nitobe choose the samurai and *bushidô* to represent Japan to the outside world?
- In a world dominated by Western powers, why do you think Nitobe suggested that Japan's source of strength was Japanese and not Western?
- Does Nitobe's championing of *bushidô* resist Westernization and non-Western ambivalence toward the West?
- Do you think Nitobe's reaction was typical of non-Western peoples threatened by Western imperialism?
- Can you think of other 20th century non-Western thinkers or leaders (Mahatma Gandhi in India or Leopold Senghor in Senegal) who looked to what they called indigenous culture as a source of strength and guidance in the modern world?

Was Bushidô the soul of Japan?

- Do you think that *bushidô* really was/is the soul of Japan?
- If so, how did it become the soul of Japan? (Keep in mind that most of the Japanese population, whether in 1899 or before, were not descended from samurai families and were unfamiliar with samurai ideals.)
- If not, do you think that Nitobe wanted *bushidô* to become the soul of Japan?
- Why would praising things like the samurai and the samurai ethos be advantageous to Japan's international reputation?
- Why would praising things like loyalty, honor, and sacrifice also be consistent with the goals of the Meiji government's efforts to mobilize the population for war and nation building?

Background Information for the Instructor

The Emergence and Disappearance of the Samurai (1185-1876)

The samurai were a warrior elite who ruled Japan from 1185 until 1868. During that time, three successive samurai governments (known as a shogunate) were formed, headed by a military ruler known as a *shogun* and staffed by samurai vassals. Though ostensibly able to achieve

centralized rule, the leaders of the first two shogunates, in fact, shared power with samurai vassals at the provincial and local level. Therefore, the stability of the shogunate depended upon the degree of loyalty between the shogun and his vassals. However, it should be emphasized that what would later become the samurai ethic and the actual behavior of the samurai were often very different — in reality, the samurai vassals of this time were not particularly honor-bound or loyal. Between 1185 and 1600, the life of the samurai was full of violence, military battles, and daring deeds. The samurai vassal was individualistic and opportunistic, trying to win battles and forge alliances to get himself a better life and to garner control over larger amounts of territory.

Beginning around 1600 (when the third shogunate — the Tokugawa shogunate — was formed), Japan entered an era of peace and the life of the samurai drastically changed. In its effort to consolidate power, the Tokugawa shogunate began to exercise a monopoly over violence; for the samurai vassal, this move toward pacification meant that he could wear swords but not use them. More generally, the Tokugawa government tightly regulated the ability of all samurai to engage in vendettas, conflicts, ritual suicide, and other acts of violence. This "taming of the samurai" (as one scholar calls it) was meant to insure domestic peace and the longevity of the Tokugawa shogunate. As a result, the samurai of the Tokugawa era functioned increasingly as paper-pushing bureaucrats, far from the image of the swashbuckling warrior associated with the pre-Tokugawa samurai. This trend toward pacification continued until the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868. After the overthrow of the shogunate, the special status designation of samurai existed for eight more years, when it was abolished by the new Meiji government in 1876.

Japan and Western Imperialism

Part of the answer to the question "How did the samurai become a icon of 20th century Japan?" lies in the history of Japan's late 19th and early 20th century encounter with Western imperialism. Japan, not unlike the vast majority of countries in Asia and Africa at the time, faced the threat of military aggression or hostile takeover by Western countries (England, the U.S., Germany, Russia, etc.) eager to garner international prestige through extending their overseas empires and to receive economic advantage through opening markets and extracting raw materials from non-Western lands. World history textbooks often emphasize that Japan's response to this mid-19th century threat of Western imperialism was Westernization. In other words, leaders of government and society transformed Japan along Western lines, whether through the adoption of Western-style constitutional government, the importation of industrial technology, or the encouragement of meat-eating (a practice little known in Japan until the mid-19th century arrival of Westerners). The ultimate goal was the complete metamorphosis of Japan into a Western-style nation; in the process, political and social leaders hoped to convince the world of Japan's attainment of "civilization" and achievement of parity with Western powers. Today, teachers and students of world history tend to accept the idea that the Japanese people, from government officials to the everyday citizen, "turned Western" without looking back and contentedly imported and implemented Western ways. Yet this understanding of Japan's reaction to the Western threat, while not entirely inaccurate, needs further examination. To begin with, Japan's self-conscious modernization was a form of "anti-Western Westernization," as one scholar puts it. Japanese embraced things Western out of fear and hate of the West as much as attraction and esteem. Moreover, Japan's adoption of things Western during the Meiji era (1868-1912) was by

no means uncritical and their evaluation of Western ideals and customs was never entirely admiring. Finally, an important yet underexamined part of Japan's reaction to Western imperialism is the championing of what was described as "native culture" as a modern source of strength and, furthermore, as a way to negotiate (if not resist) the process of Westernization within a non-Western society.

Background to the Reading

Within the context of Japan's Westernization, it is important to examine the efforts of Japanese thinkers to explain Japan's seemingly successful modernization as a product of so-called indigenous ideals and practices. After three decades of headlong modernization undertaken to fend off the threat of Western takeover, government and social leaders circa 1900 felt more certain of Japan's place in the world, more confident in their relationship with Western powers, and more reluctant to see Japan's modernization as entirely the product of its adoption of Western ideals, practices, and technology.

Nitobe Inazô (see "About the Author" below) symbolized the efforts of Japan's leaders to mine their own past for examples of what they saw as native yet modern sources of strength. At the end of the 19th century, Nitobe looked for alternate ways to explain Japan's emerging world power and, in his 1899 book *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*, proclaimed that Japanese morality, an ethical system native to Japan and untouched by Western influence, was the unheralded font of Japanese national and international strength. Nitobe identified the source of that morality as *bushidô* (or the way of the samurai warrior) and forever linked Japan's samurai past to its 20th century present. Therefore, it is arguable that the samurai became synonymous with Japan (and the samurai ethos with Japanese national character) because certain influential Japanese individuals promoted such a view. It was never the case that *bushidô* was the soul of the Japanese population, but it was the case that, for a variety of reasons, certain influential Japanese thinkers at the turn of the 20th century wanted *bushidô* and a variety of other hiterhto esoteric aesthetics to be seen, both internationally and domestically, as the traditional soul of Japan.

About the Author

Nitobe Inazô (1862-1933), the author of *Bushidô: The Soul of Japan*, was an educated Japanese elite who, by profession, was a pioneer in the education of elite men and women as the principal of First Higher School and the founder of Japan Women's College. In addition to these occupational pursuits, Nitobe also saw himself as Japan's unofficial cultural ambassador to the Western world. Nitobe had lived abroad for 18 years, was educated in both the United States and Germany, was a Christian who married an American Quaker, and was fluent in English. It is important to remember that Nitobe wrote *Bushidô* in English and that he authored the book for the express purpose of explaining Japan to a Western world increasingly interested in this new player on the world stage. A translation of the book into Japanese did not appear until after the Russo Japanese War (1904-5); the translation published in 1908 appears to have been the either the cause for or part of a wider boom in publications on the topic of *bushidô*. (For more on the bibliographic history of native Japanese interest in Bushido see: http://www.columbia.edu/~hds2/chushinguranew/Bushido/Biblio.htm#japanese.) Therefore, Nitobe's book *Bushidô* is an important part of the story of how influential Japanese individuals

tried to explain (to themselves and to the world) how a non-Western country like Japan rose to power in a globe once dominated exclusively by Western powers.

Additional Classroom Exercise

If you have the inclination and time, it is worthwhile to discuss with students the debates over the ritual suicide of General Nogi Marusuke (see below) upon the death of the Meiji emperor in 1912. (This practice of ritual suicide was common among samurai in the years before the founding of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1600 but highly uncommon from that point forward.) Examining these early 20th century debates will help students to see how "the way of the warrior" (or at least this particular manifestation of it) was by no means fully sanctioned or lauded by Japan's political and social leaders. Students will further see how Nogi's act highlighted the undeniable ambivalence of Japan's leadership toward the place of its samurai past in its 20th century present.

Nogi was a hero of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) who, along with his wife, committed suicide (Nogi by slashing his stomach and tearing his intestines from his body, his wife by stabbing herself in the heart) in order to follow his "lord" (the Meiji emperor) in death. Carol Gluck, in her book *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985) (See pp. 221-225), explores the varied reactions among Japan's leaders to this spectacular manifestation of the premodern "samurai ethos" in a Japan that considered itself fully modern. Some leading Japanese were embarrassed by Nogi's act, while others sympathized with it. In addition, as Gluck makes manifest, the meaning of Nogi's act was unclear to most of the population, who remained unfamiliar with the ways of the samurai and knew nothing of this thing called *bushidô*.

Additional Online Resources

Chûshingura and the Samurai Tradition (syllabus)
http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/samurai-tradition.html

Samurai, Cowboy, Shaolin Monk: National Myth and Transnational Forms in Literature and Film (syllabus)
http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/cowboy-samurai.html

The Samurai Tradition in Japanese Literature and Film (syllabus)
http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/samurai-japanese-lit.html

Law and Society: The Story of the 47 Samurai (teaching unit) (forthcoming on the ExEAS website)

"What is Bushidô?" Website
http://www.columbia.edu/~hds2/chushinguranew/Bushido/Intro.htm