

## Symbols of State Ideology: The Samurai in Modern Japan

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### Abstract

Between the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the end of the Pacific War in 1945, the Japanese state systematically created and propagated a nationalistic ideology in order to foster a coherent, unified identity among the newly nationalised population and mobilise support for its agenda. This ideology was represented by a series of discursive symbols, of which I examine the particular image of the samurai. Through the deliberate glorification and imbueing of this image with certain moral and behavioural values including the ideals of loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice, the state elite deployed the samurai symbol to promote its ideology. This symbol was widely disseminated via official indoctrination efforts, but as I will demonstrate, this did not necessarily translate into a profound impact on the popular mindset. Drawing on a range of sources, I investigate the construction, projection and significance of the samurai image in the particular context of pre-war and wartime Japan, and in so doing shed some light on the function of symbols as tools of ideology.

### Keywords

Samurai, ideology, nationalism, symbol, state

### Introduction

In 1913, scholar Nukariya Kaiten (忽滑谷快天) published a study on Zen Buddhism, ‘the religion of the samurai’, in which he wrote:

Bushidō, or the code of chivalry, should be observed not only by the soldier in the battlefield, but by every citizen in the struggle for existence. If a person be a person and not a beast, then he must be a Samurai – brave, generous, upright, faithful and manly, full of self-respect and self-confidence, at the same time full of the spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nukariya, *The Religion of the Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline on China and Japan*, p. 50.



In this telling excerpt, we see the samurai painted as the ideal national subject and the embodiment of a series of admirable qualities that Nukariya believed all Japanese should strive to emulate. Nor was he the only one. Between the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the end of the Pacific War in 1945, the Japanese state elite deliberately constructed and promoted a nationalistic ideology using a series of symbols including the Emperor and the cherry blossom. In this article, I will focus on one such image that encapsulated all the objectives of the Japanese state during this period – the samurai. The image of the historical warrior was uniquely suited to serve as a symbol due to the particular context in which state ideology was articulated, and the versatility of the samurai image within its ideological function.

Emerging as a nation at a time when Western imperialism was at its peak, Japan's leaders were faced with many choices on the path to becoming a 'great nation'. Searching for inspiration and example across the world and at home, it became clear that Japan would need to modernise, industrialise, militarise and colonise in order to survive in the international arena. To further this agenda, the state required a unified and cooperative population that would support its goals by being loyal, obedient, and willing to make many sacrifices for the good of the nation. It was to achieve these goals that the state elite created and propagated a nationalistic ideology and the various symbols with which to promote and empower it, such as the samurai.

In a variety of media including texts, pictorial sources – both photographs and illustrations - and film, words, images, ideas and values were both used to describe and used in connection to the samurai in official ideological rhetoric. A particular samurai image was constructed, utilised and manipulated in official documents, contemporary media and independently written nationalistic material, presenting the Japanese population with ideological discourse on many levels. Comparing the tone of Imperial Rescripts with state-authored school textbooks; identifying the parallels that can be made between the modern military and the state-created traditional samurai in photographs from this period; and demonstrating the degree to which mass media and nationalistic scholars supported and echoed the official discourse - these methods demonstrate how society was saturated with layers of nationalistic ideology and imagery. In approaching such primary sources, the way in which the state elite – namely the government, national institutions such as the military and education system, public figures, social organisations and the media - systematically constructed and projected an image of the samurai as a heroic warrior steeped in the tradition of *bushidō*, which espoused the values of loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice, becomes clear.

In order to demonstrate the significance of the samurai symbol, it is necessary to place the creation and promotion of the samurai symbol into the wider context of

modern Japan. During this period, nationalism was articulated as a state-led ideology, requiring the population to conform exclusively to 'official' ideas regarding national identity. Such ideas emphasised national uniqueness and strength, incorporating notions such as the 'family nation' and a mission in Asia into the overall official vision. Through promoting such ideas as part of its ideology, the Japanese state aimed to unify, indoctrinate and to mobilise the national population.

Within official ideological discourse of this period, the figure of the emperor was widely promoted as an image through which the state could command loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice from the imperial subjects. The populace was expected to love and serve the emperor and sacrifice their lives for him willingly. In effect, they were required to act like samurai, in many ways the ideal servile counterpart to the authority figure of the deified emperor.<sup>2</sup> The image of the samurai as it was constructed in modern Japan, was depicted to exemplify all the idealised qualities the state wanted to promote – absolute loyalty, obedience to authority and self-sacrifice for honour.

As part of the systematic promotion of these qualities, certain words and particular imagery were used in influential texts during this period to create an idealised image of the samurai that consisted of several key elements - that of the warrior, the hero, and the *bushidō* tradition. Among the most widely disseminated and influential texts from the period were *Kokutai no hongī* (國體の本義), a nationalistic text produced by the Department of Education in 1937 and made compulsory reading for all school students and teachers, and the early 18<sup>th</sup> century work *Hagakure* (葉隠れ), by samurai-turned-monk Yamamoto Tsunetomo (山本常朝), which became a favourite among ultra-nationalists in the 1930s for its 'testament to samurai spirit' and something of a disciplinary manual for members of the military. Texts such as these abounded with descriptions and imagery that constructed the samurai as military heroes, glorifying martial skill and war and attributing the alleged samurai prowess and virtue to the *bushidō* concept. *Kokutai no hongī* described *bushidō* as an ancient, unique spirit, 'peculiar' to Japan, and 'an outstanding characteristic of national morality'.<sup>3</sup> Eminent scholars such as Suzuki Daisetz expressed the idea that the samurai tradition had permeated the masses, stating that 'even when they are not particularly trained in the way of the warrior [they] have imbibed his spirit and are ready to sacrifice their lives for any cause they think worthy', while in *The Ideals of the East*, published in 1903, prominent art scholar Okakura Kakuzō (岡倉珣造) wrote of the 'spirit' of invincibility and freedom that had made Japan a nation of martial prowess and preserved it from invasion throughout

<sup>2</sup> The word 'samurai' (侍) derives from 'saburau', meaning 'to serve' for the nobility. Thus, a samurai was, essentially, a servant to his lord. Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> 「我が国民道徳の上に顯著なる特色を示すもの」Japanese Department of Education, trans. John Owen Gauntlett, *Kokutai no hongī: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*, pp. 144-145.



history, arguing that ‘this same heroic spirit’ remained in the modern era.<sup>4</sup> This very concept led the state to promote the martial art of *jūjutsu* (柔術) as a national sport in the 1930s in an effort to emphasise Japan’s uniqueness and the idea of an existing martial tradition; a tradition that was deliberately incorporated into state ideology and linked to the samurai and the *bushidō* concept<sup>5</sup>. In this way, the range of ideological texts, both contemporary and historical, formed a multi-layered ideological discourse, which emanated both from the state elite and from separate influential sources.

Thus, through diverse methods and media, the state imbued the samurai with the aforementioned qualities of loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice, linking them to the concept of *bushidō* in ideological discourse. By projecting such an idealised image as a model for emulation, the state elite aimed to encourage nationwide observance of these values, essentially transposing the particular behavioural ideals it ascribed to the samurai class into ‘national’ values relevant to the entire population.

State ideology equated the willingness of a samurai to sacrifice his life for his lord with the willingness of an imperial subject to sacrifice his life for his emperor and nation. Prominent Confucian scholar Inoue Tetsujirō (井上哲次郎), when writing the first official commentary on the 1890 *Imperial Rescript on Education* (*kyōiku chokugo* 教育勅語), exhorted the people to ‘have a sense of public duty by which he values his life lightly as dust, advances spiritedly, and is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation.’<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *bushidō* is described in *Kokutai no hongii* as ‘the way of loyalty, counting life and death as one’, with this same loyalty instructed to the population to mean ‘offering [their] lives for the sake of the Emperor’.<sup>7</sup> Such illustrations of the *bushidō* ideal of honourable self-sacrifice being linked with imperial duty demonstrate the way in which the samurai image served to idealise and promote certain state-serving values. An analysis of a range of key ideological texts such as these demonstrates how the state deliberately constructed an image of the samurai as a heroic warrior who was absolutely loyal to his nation, obeyed authority without question, and perceived self-sacrifice to be the epitome of honour.

In order to promote its ideology effectively, the state relied on multiple channels of influence and methods of indoctrination. The state ideology and its symbols attained dominance in public discourse to a significant extent through censorship and the cooperation of national organisations, the media and public intellectuals. Access to public discourse is crucial to the success of an ideology, and in this respect the state is in

4 Okakura, *Ideals of the East*, in *Collected English Writings 1*, edited by Sunao Nakamura, p. 22; Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, p. 85.

5 Inoue, ‘The Invention of the Martial Arts’, p. 172.

6 Inoue Tetsujirō, *Chokugo engi* (勅語演義), cited in De Bary, W. T., et al. (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition Vol. 2: 1600-2000*, pp. 780-782.

7 「生死一如の中に、よく忠の道を全うするのが我が武士道である…(忠は)天皇の御ために身命を捧げること…」 Japanese Dept. Ed. trans. Gauntlett, J. O., *Kokutai no hongii*, p. 80, 145.

a uniquely advantageous position, being able to exercise control over mass media and national institutions and organisations – direct channels of communication between the government and the people. It is through such channels that an ideology is repeated and reproduced to influence popular attitudes and beliefs.

Nationalistic social organisations, formed during this period in Japan to mobilise different sectors of the population, ensured that the entire population was speaking the same ‘ideological language’ and inferring similar meanings from the state’s rhetoric. In order to be effective, ideological symbols such as the samurai needed to be ‘seen’ and their nationalistic message understood across society. This message was further reinforced by the state imposing strict censorship over the mass media. In addition to censoring material at odds with its ideology, the government also made conscious efforts to increase nationalistic and patriotic content in the media – newspapers, magazines and radio programs. Particularly following Japan’s entry into the Pacific War, reportage on military conflict was heavily scripted to reflect the state’s nationalistic ideology and to make war ‘accessible and palatable to a general audience’ by turning the experience into a *bidan* (美談), ‘beautiful stories’ of historical heroism and adventure.<sup>8</sup> Such a depiction of war and sacrifice was a vital part of ideological indoctrination and in this way media cooperation and censorship assisted the glorification of state militaristic policies in public discourse.

By examining the writings of many prominent individuals in the intellectual and political fields during this period, we see the samurai image glorified and an abundance of views in support of state ideology, beyond the necessities of conformity. The use of nationalistic discourse by public intellectuals and their engagement with official ideology gave the state additional credibility, thereby assisting it to gain a further foothold in popular mentality. In terms of attaining dominance in public discourse then, these writings demonstrate that state ideology was successful. The ‘public language of ideology’, in Carol Gluck’s words, ‘while in unevenly active use among different members of the population, in the passive sense at least was widely and mutually understood.’<sup>9</sup>

The samurai symbol was also deployed in different ways to target various sectors of the population, namely children, soldiers and women, through the formal institutions of the school and military systems. The state’s indoctrination efforts and influence – evident in textbooks and training manuals, curriculum content, teaching methods, training and regulations - allowed its nationalistic discourse to permeate the daily lives of the Japanese people, turning them into imperial subjects, each with

8 Moore, ‘The Peril of Self-Discipline’, p. 161.

9 Gluck, *Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, p. 247.



a national duty to fulfil. The samurai symbol was used to transform men into modern samurai, exhort children to aspire to become samurai, and encourage women to follow samurai virtues and fulfil their roles as wives and mothers of the nation's samurai. Not only was it a powerful image, the samurai also possessed a remarkable degree of functional flexibility. This versatility suggests the particular suitability of the samurai as a tool of nationalist ideology.

If we are to believe the nationalistic ideal then, the Japanese population was transformed into a nation of samurai – absolutely loyal and unquestioningly obedient to the state and emperor, and willing to sacrifice their lives for honour. But how close to the reality was the image of the nationalistic subject that the state promoted? To what degree were official efforts to inculcate the population with ‘the samurai spirit’ successful, if at all? The rest of this article addresses this question. Through an examination of personal diaries and oral histories of Japanese people who lived during the pre-war and Pacific War years, I compare what the population was meant to think and believe according to official ideology, with what these individuals actually thought. Was the samurai symbol effective? My findings suggest that we should not overestimate the impact of state ideology, for despite the pervasiveness of ideological discourse, in many cases the samurai symbol failed to impact significantly on the hearts and minds of the people.

### First-Person Accounts – Were All Men Samurai?

Legislative pressures to conform, combined with institutional indoctrination and state influence over the media, meant that individuals almost inevitably came in contact with state ideology, even if they did not agree with its content. Barak Kushner claims that official ideology and indoctrination efforts were effective, turning the Japanese people into ‘active participants and not mere followers’ of the state cause.<sup>10</sup> However, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, in her study of the wartime diaries of Japanese university students who were conscripted as *tokkōtai* (特攻隊) pilots, conveys a different view. She sympathises with these youthful members of the intellectual elite, stating that they had ‘no choice’ but to participate in the war effort and therefore ‘reproduced the imperial ideology in action while refusing or failing to embrace it in thought.’<sup>11</sup> I have used first-person accounts to find examples or lack thereof, of individuals using ideological rhetoric and believing in the state-created samurai image.

In approaching such sources, we need to be aware of their limitations and

<sup>10</sup> Kushner, *The Thought War: Japanese Imperial Propaganda*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Tokkōtai* means ‘special attack force’ and refers to the soldiers who engaged in suicide attacks later in the Pacific War. They are often called *kamikaze* (‘divine wind’) pilots, a term that gained popularity in wartime Japan, linking them with the apparently god-sent winds that forced the Mongol invaders to turn back from Japan’s shores in the 13th century. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, p. 11.

shortcomings in terms of reliability and usefulness. Edited compilations of post-war recollections, such as the oral histories collected by Haruko and Theodore Cook, must be treated with a degree of scepticism simply due to the nature of the work.<sup>12</sup> The testimonies all come from individuals who survived the war and had ample time to reflect on their experiences in the post-war context. Inevitably, their memories have been influenced by the dominant narrative that absolved the general population of responsibility by laying the blame largely on selected members of the wartime elite.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, diaries are perhaps more reliable, since they are contemporaneous accounts of the experiences and opinions of individuals.<sup>14</sup> However, those that have been published have also been intentionally selected to convey a certain image of Japanese civilians or soldiers in the post-war context. These include the intellectual martyrs, as soldiers are depicted in such volumes as *Kike wadatsumi no koe* (きけわだつみのこえ), published by the Japanese Memorial Society for Students Killed in War as early as 1949, as well as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's more recent study, or the 'ordinary' (and thus innocent) individuals in Samuel Hideo Yamashita's edited volume. Such publications are not necessarily entirely accurate representations of the majority. While we must keep these issues in mind when utilising such material, these sources are useful indications of the extent to which certain members of the population absorbed and reproduced the nationalistic ideology and the messages that were conveyed through various symbols. I have attempted to form a balanced picture by drawing on a variety of accounts from soldiers, children and women, which facilitates a comparison between the samurai image in ideology and in practice.

Diaries and accounts of wartime experiences show that many people did actively engage with state ideology and the glorified image of the samurai it promoted. Aaron Moore has argued that diaries can be tools for 'self-mobilisation' in wartime, as individuals reproduce the ideological discourse already pervasive in society to describe their personal experiences, thus subconsciously engaging with state ideology.<sup>15</sup> For example, Kōzu Naoji, a manned-torpedo (*kaiten* 回天) pilot, described the send-off ceremony for military as 'like the departure for battle of a great general and his samurai warriors.'<sup>16</sup> Another pilot described his joy at being able to take part in the 'heroic battle'

12 Haruko and Theodore Cook published *Japan at War: An Oral History* in 1992. Their interviews with survivors from the war era did not take place until the 1980s, four decades after the experiences that were recounted.

13 For example, John Dower sums up the memory of war constructed in Japan from the Occupation era as being that of the nation being 'led into "aggressive militarism" by a small cabal of irresponsible militaristic leaders'. He notes that 'the most ubiquitous passive verb after the surrender was surely *damasareta*, "to have been deceived", which fed the idea that the population itself was a victim of the war and its perpetrators. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 480, 490.

14 Samuel Hynes argues that diaries have an immediacy and particularity that war memoirs lack due to the lapse in time before the latter are published and the reflection period this provides. Content in personal diaries is not (usually) 'filtered and mediated' by time or by concerns of audience. Hynes, 'Personal Narratives and Commemoration', in Winter, J. and Sivan, E. (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 208-209. However, as stated previously, children and soldiers in wartime Japan were subject to diary checks by the relevant authorities and letters from soldiers to the home front also passed through official censors. We therefore need to be aware of potential self-censorship when utilising such sources.

15 Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

16 *Kaiten* (回天), which literally means 'turning the heavens', was the name given to glorify the manned torpedoes used in the Pacific War to attack enemy vessels underwater. Cook (eds.), *Japan at War: An Oral History*, pp. 318-319.



of Pearl Harbour as a ‘warrior’ (*bujin* 武人).<sup>17</sup> Some individuals evidently did absorb the message of state ideology, identifying soldier with samurai and glorifying the nation’s military. In the wartime diary of Lieutenant Sugihara Kinryū, detailed observations of the weather, air raid frequency, casualty rates and the like, are interspersed with bursts of patriotic expression. For example, he wrote a poem describing the army as ‘warriors’ who defend the island of Iwo Jima ‘upon [their] honour’ as ‘the shield of our Emperor’s domain’.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis on responsibility to the emperor and personal honour is a reflection of the idealised samurai image functioning in state ideology. Another diary entry reads ‘What is death! We will fight bravely in the face of certain death’.<sup>19</sup> Such words, which would not be out of place in *Hagakure*, indicate Sugihara’s belief in the idea of glorious self-sacrifice for the nation, which the state elite promoted as a key value of the idealised samurai.

Official ideology established a link between the image of a samurai dying honourably on the battlefield and masculine identity. Turning to first-person accounts, this same idea is implied in the words of one student soldier, who, mourning his comrades’ deaths, nevertheless described them as ‘proper’ and ‘quite satisfactory for them as males’.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, another *tokkōtai* pilot wrote ‘I am a man...destined to die fighting for the country’ and described his fellow pilots as looking like ‘the forty-seven loyal retainers’ (義士の討入), a reference to the famous tale of samurai loyalty and honourable self-sacrifice that was so popular during this period.<sup>21</sup> Such examples indicate some soldiers believed that falling in battle like heroic samurai was a noble death that men should aspire to and feel proud of.

Despite such examples of individuals using and seemingly believing in state ideology, the official ideal that ‘all men are samurai’ did not translate very effectively into reality. In a study of soldiers’ diaries written during the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-5, Stewart Lone argues that the average soldier was more concerned with food than patriotism, filling their diaries with ‘mundane complaints’.<sup>22</sup> Accounts such as that of the poetic patriot Sugihara, were by far rare exceptions rather than the general rule. In his study, Lone attributes this to the fact that the nationalist ideology was not yet fully developed, implying that in later years the idea of reverence for the nation and the emperor would hold more sway over the minds of the soldiers.<sup>23</sup> However,

17 Arai Yasujirō, cited in Moore, *op. cit.*, p.204.

18 Sugihara, trans. Lofgren, S. J., ‘Diary of First Lieutenant Sugihara Kinryū’, p.130.

19 Sugihara, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

20 「男子として死処を得たるは、本懐だろう。」Diary entry dated October 15, 1944. Takushima (宅島徳光), edited by Takushima, *Ikō Kuchinashi no Hana: Kaigun hikō yobi chūi* (遺稿くちなしの花:海軍飛行予備中尉).

21 「私は...国を負うて信でゆく男です。」Letters to mother, 1945. Hayashi (林市造) edited by Kaga, *Hi nari Tate nari: Nikki, Haha eno tegami, Hayashi Ichizō Ikōshū* (日なり橋なり:日記、母への手紙、林市造遺稿集), p. 58, 68.

22 Lone, *Japan’s First Modern War: Army and Society in the Conflict with China, 1894-95*, pp. 70-71.

23 Lone, *Ibid.*, p. 80.



diaries from during the Pacific War, when both the state ideology and its methods of indoctrination were undeniably institutionalised, offer a similar picture. Many accounts indicate opposition to the state, and even in cases where individuals did express patriotic sentiments, some rejected or digressed from official ideology.

It is in connection to the idea of self-sacrifice for the nation that the conflict between individuals' notions of patriotism and state ideology often emerges. Despite official promotion of the glorified image of a samurai willing, above all, to give up his life for his lord, more often than not, people prioritised their family and friends over the Emperor. For example, Kōzu Naoji saw himself 'dying to defend [his] parents, [his] brothers and sisters', not the Emperor, the government or the nation.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, naval pilot Sahai Saburō defined 'the nation' as 'the land of my parents, younger brothers, and sister', with no mention of the Emperor for whom he was meant to willingly sacrifice his life.<sup>25</sup> Student soldier Nagatanigawa Shin wrote in his diary that he accepted the suffering and imminent deaths of himself and his fellow soldiers, as long as they contributed, 'however little', to 'the happiness of the people [he] love[s]', whom he specified were his parents and siblings.<sup>26</sup> As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney argues, 'soldiers need to convert an abstract idea... into something personally meaningful' in order to engage with an ideology.<sup>27</sup> Despite official efforts to inculcate in the population a 'personally meaningful' connection and sense of responsibility to the Emperor, in the way a loyal samurai might serve his lord, many did not identify with it.

Diaries tell us that some individuals also saw through the glorified samurai image they were being taught to believe in, and were opposed to state ideology. Student soldier Hayashi Tadao wrote in May 1944 that his cooperation with the national war effort was not due to patriotism but 'a wish not to make waves'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, 75-year-old Kyoto resident Tamura Tsunejirō wrote that 'complaints and unhappiness are forbidden, so one has to be discreet'.<sup>29</sup> Such statements indicate the pressure that existed to conform to official policy and the inherent risks of expressing opposition, which made many people, like Hayashi, cooperate without believing the ideology. University student and *tokkōtai* pilot Sasaki Hachirō criticised the coverage of war in the media, which praised mothers for raising their sons as splendid soldiers. Sasaki described the media glorification of mothers (*'haha no chikara'* 母の力) as a 'transparent trick' to encourage

24 Cook (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 319.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

26 「俺達の苦しみと死とが、俺達の父や母や弟妹たち、愛する人たちの幸福のために、たとへ僅かでも役立つものならば...」Diary entry dated November 29, 1944. Nagatanigawa Shin (長谷川信) in *Nihon senbetsu gakusei shuki henshu iinkai, Kike Wadatsumi no Ko: Nihon senbetsu gakusei no shuki* (きけわだつみのこえ: 日本戦没学生の手記), p. 175.

27 Ohnuki-Tierney, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

28 「おれを支配するのは *Patriotismus* (祖国愛)...でもなく、無事無難であれ」Diary entry dated May 1, 1944. Hayashi (林尹夫), edited by Hayashi, *Waga Inochi Getsumei ni Moyu: Ichi Senbetsugakuto no Shuki* (わがいのち月明に燃ゆ: 一戦没学徒の手記), p. 131.

29 「愚痴と不満は禁じられているので、憤しまねばならん」Diary entry dated July 19, 1944. Tamura (田村恒次郎), edited by Oka, Shinsan: *Senchū sengo, kyō no ichi shomin no nikki* (辛酸: 戦中戦後、京の一庶民の日記), p. 7; trans. Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies*, p. 85.



people to support war and force loyalty upon them.<sup>30</sup> In seeing through the idealised portrayal of women as mothers of warriors, he indicated his refusal to identify with the glorified warrior the state projected to inspire soldiers such as himself. Sasaki was able to see that the idealised samurai was only an image, not a reality. Another student soldier, Hayashi Ichizō, wrote that he ‘cannot say that the wish to die for the emperor is genuine’ but rather that ‘it is decided for [him] that [he] die for the emperor.’<sup>31</sup> Instead of welcoming the chance to sacrifice his life for the nation and the emperor, Hayashi felt ‘despair’ (*zetsubō* 絶望) and ‘tried [his] best to escape’ from his fate as a *tokkōtai* pilot.<sup>32</sup> A picture emerges that clearly conflicts with the ideological symbol of the samurai, who was meant to sacrifice himself willingly for the emperor to whom he was unconditionally loyal. Particularly during wartime, the carefully constructed idealised samurai image was clearly not as effective as one might assume based on the state’s wide-ranging indoctrination efforts and the ubiquity of ideological discourse.

Examining accounts written by women and children, the same varied picture emerges. There are examples of individuals who proffered the ideological discourse, such as Araki Shigeko, wife of a *tokkōtai* pilot, who described herself as ‘the wife of a samurai’ in reference to her soldier husband.<sup>33</sup> One teenage girl proudly declared that Japanese women, in the event of an enemy invasion, ‘intend to follow valiantly in the footsteps’ of soldiers and ‘kill at least one person before [they] die.’<sup>34</sup> However, it is again the case that not all women revelled in their roles as wives and mothers of samurai or were willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation, as was their duty as subjects. One woman described the procession of conscripts as ‘a funeral of living people...youths wearing their red sashes are being sent off with a heavy heart’, an image far removed from the glorious samurai the state portrayed soldiers to be.<sup>35</sup> Following Japan’s defeat at Saipan, she wrote that the news made her ‘angry’ and that the government should have the ‘courage...to give up the fight’, again expressing the opposite to the official ideal.<sup>36</sup>

Diary checks and constant moral supervision by teachers meant that schoolchildren were more likely to be inculcated successfully and prevented from expressing opposition to the state than any other group in the population. In the diary

30 「その手口は見えずにいる...人を戦に導いて行くな。忠を強いるのだ。」Diary entry dated April 7, 1942. Sasaki (佐々木八郎) edited by Fujishiro, *Seishun no Isha: Seimei ni Kaete, Kono Nikki, Ai* (青春の遺書: 生命に代えて、この日記、愛), p. 311.

31 「大君の辺に死ぬ願いは正直の所まだ私の心からのものとはいいたい。だが大君の辺に死ぬことは私にさだめられたことである。」Diary entry dated February 23, 1945. Hayashi Ichizō, *Hi nari Tate nari*, p. 29.

32 「逃げにげた私の生命」Diary entry dated March 21, 1945. Hayashi Ichizō, *Hi nari Tate nari*, p. 42.

33 Cook (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 325.

34 Diary entry dated April 2, 1945. Maeda Shōko in Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

35 「生きた人のお葬式...心のいたむ思いで、赤だすきをかけた、わごうどを、見送っています」Diary entry dated June 19, 1943. Takahashi Aiko (高橋愛子), 'Kaisen kara no nikki' (開戦からの日記), in Agawa H. et al. (eds.), 'Shimin no nikki' (市民の日記), *Shōwa sensō bungaku zenshū* (昭和戦争文学全集), vol. 14, p. 332.

36 「いさぎよく、戦いをあきらむべきだと、奮然とした気持ちにさえなっていました」Diary entry dated July 18, 1944. Takahashi Aiko, 'Kaisen kara no nikki', p. 338.

of soldier Takushima Norimitsu, we find a description of how a group of children bowed to him respectfully, indicating the glorification and reverential treatment of the military during the wartime era.<sup>37</sup> Willard Price's observation in 1938 that in Japanese society the army 'wears the mantle of divinity' rings true when we consider this image of a soldier being regarded as elite.<sup>38</sup> In the diaries of children themselves, one girl wrote of her happiness at being 'promoted' to the rank of corporal in the task of collecting firewood, while another child was assigned to the 'special attack force' to prepare sardines for a school meal.<sup>39</sup> These indicate how respect and adulation for the military were inculcated into children through constant exposure to the discourse of state ideology, with teachers even incorporating militaristic terms and ideas into ordinary school activities. The effect is visible in the diary of schoolboy Manabe Ichirō, who wrote that he wished 'to become strong in the way that Japan was victorious at Saipan', reflecting the state's idealisation of military prowess in his aspiration to be like a warrior.<sup>40</sup>

In the accounts of soldiers, we can often identify the discrepancy they felt between a state ideology that glorified the idea of fighting for the nation through the projection of the samurai image, and the brutal reality of military conflict. In many cases, it was the firsthand experience of war that extinguished the nationalistic fervour that had been hitherto carefully inculcated. For example, one former soldier recalled that he 'swaggered a lot' when he passed the military physical examination in 1934 – being a soldier was something special and exciting, 'all [we] talked about', and his call-up was 'a time for celebration'.<sup>41</sup> Of his experiences on the battlefield, however, he stated ironically 'there's not one soldier who ever died saying "Tennō Heika banzai!" (Long live the Emperor!)'.<sup>42</sup> For student soldier Kawashima Tadashi, disillusionment with war came from witnessing an assault by fellow soldiers on a Chinese civilian, which led him to declare that his own children would never be soldiers.<sup>43</sup> Another student soldier, Fukunaka Gorō, also described the brutal, 'de-humanising' nature of life in the military, writing that whilst he put on a brave face for his mother, he felt 'as wretched as the dead' due to harsh treatment from his senior officers.<sup>44</sup> Through these words we can see that the idealised samurai image that was promoted to glorify war was far removed from the reality of military life.

Direct experience of war also made people question the power of the 'samurai

37 Diary entry dated June 11, 1944. Takushima, *Kuchinashi no hana*, p. 48, trans. Ohnuki-Tierney, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

38 Price, *Children of the Rising Sun*, p. 53.

39 Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 264, 278-279.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 236. The diary entry is from July 16, 1944, shortly after Saipan was lost to US forces. Manabe evidently did not know of the defeat yet.

41 Cook (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

43 「俺の子供はもう軍人にはしない。軍人だけには...平和だ、平和の世界が一番だ。」Translates as 'I will not let my children be soldiers. Anything but a soldier...peace, a peaceful world is the best thing.' Diary entry dated January 31, 1943. Kawashima Tadashi (川島正), in *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe*, p. 14.

44 「(軍隊生活は)全ての人から人間性を奪ってしまっています...母には元気で張り切っているとは書きましたが、僕の気持は死人同様のと惨なものです。」Letter to brother dated February 1, 1941. Fukunaka Gorō (福中五郎) in *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe*, pp. 42-43.



spirit' in bringing about victory, an idea that soldiers were taught to believe. Though familiar with the environment of self-censorship in the media, which was 'at one with the nation and the army', *Asahi shimbun* war correspondent Hata Shōryū saw the limits of official ideology in a war that inevitably depended on materials and technology. He reasoned that 'no matter how much you asserted *bushidō* [in the air force], if you didn't have the speed you couldn't escape or overtake your opponent'.<sup>45</sup> The actual experience of war made people question state ideology, wherein military prowess was linked to the samurai tradition of *bushidō*. Moore argues that the disjunction in perspective arose because the battlefield sometimes lay physically outside the realm of official censorship, where 'there was effectively no one to tell [the soldiers] what to think'.<sup>46</sup> However, the ideological machine of the state was far-reaching and its samurai symbol ubiquitous. The above examples of individuals dissenting from the samurai ideal call into question not the limits of state authority per se, but the power of ideological indoctrination to endure when faced with the harsh realities of war.

The population at home was also faced with hardships and restrictions on a daily basis as a result of the state's militaristic policies, a situation that demanded the most from the samurai ideal of self-sacrifice. People's experiences impacted on their willingness to emulate the state-created samurai image. For many individuals, patriotism was 'displaced by more immediate troubles' such as shortages of food sources and basic necessities and financial issues resulting from inflated prices and the loss of labour from men going to war.<sup>47</sup> Though noting in February 1942 that many people were happy about Japan's recent victory over Singapore, Takahashi Aiko wrote that she was 'dissatisfied and sad' because of the shortages and oppressions in daily life, which she described on another occasion as a 'heavy burden'.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, schoolboy Manabe Ichirō frequently complained about the poor quality of food that was 'dry and tasteless' and the perpetual lack of it, writing 'after I finished eating, I got hungry again', an indication that he was never truly sated.<sup>49</sup> Although the state promoted an image of a courageous samurai who willingly bore sacrifice and hardship, evidently many people failed to match the ideal in practice.

Likewise, Tamura Tsunejirō's diary entries, dating from July 1944 through to the end of the Pacific War, almost always include a reference to food shortages. He wrote ashamedly that 'hunger comes first' - not patriotism, concern for the Emperor, or any of the idealised samurai values we might expect from a member of the Japanese populace

45 Cook (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 208.

46 Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

47 Lone, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

48 「不満に思ったり、悲しく感じたり」, Diary entry dated February 18, 1942. 「大変な負担」, Diary entry dated March 27, 1943. Takahashi Aiko, 'Kaisen kara no nikki', p. 323, p. 330.

49 Diary entry dated July 15, 1944. Yamashita, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-237.

during this period.<sup>50</sup> Tamura's suffering led to increasing disillusionment with the state and its ideology. Whilst he originally believed 'the endurance by a million citizens of the hardships caused by the wartime food situation will mean victory',<sup>51</sup> the continued lack of food caused him to write sarcastically that suicide ('to tie a rope around your neck and die') would alleviate food shortage.<sup>52</sup> He wrote 'to save rice, let's resolve to repay the debt that we owe the country', subverting the state's glorification of heroic self-sacrifice and national duty.<sup>53</sup> Such sentiment also appears in other wartime diaries, with one man wondering if anyone had ever committed suicide due to the lack of food.<sup>54</sup> Tamura is an example of an ordinary citizen who was clearly influenced by the state's idealised samurai image, for he uses words such as 'incomparably loyal and brave' and 'brave warrior' in reference to the military.<sup>55</sup> However he found it increasingly difficult to support the ideal of courageous sacrifice, criticising 'the politicians with their bravado' who nevertheless can 'give us nothing to eat', another indication that his primary concern was finding enough to eat, not acting like a patriotic samurai.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, an examination of wartime diaries and oral histories shows that even though the Japanese people were barraged with nationalistic ideology from all sides, the impact on their hearts and minds was limited. Rather than a unified mass of patriotic subjects willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation and the Emperor, we find many examples of individuals who did *not* follow the example of the idealised samurai promoted by the state. The constant efforts on the part of the state to indoctrinate the population meant that the people understood the ideological discourse, even if they did not support or identify with it. As Aaron Moore points out, the dominance of state ideology in public discourse meant that both nationalist extremists and those who opposed the state's militarist policies often used the same rhetoric that was used to mobilise the Japanese people for 'noble war'.<sup>57</sup> However, despite official efforts to propagate the idea that 'all men are samurai', the Japanese people did not uniformly identify with this image. Rather, many continued to emphasise other, more personal sources of identity such as family over their role as national subject. We find many examples of individuals who were *not* absolutely loyal, unquestioningly obedient or willing to sacrifice their lives for honour. Many people did not believe the ideological rhetoric at all. The differing interpretations and level of engagement with the ideology and the samurai image that appears in wartime diaries, indicates the 'tenuous grasp' the state held on popular mentality, despite the 'impressive and thorough discursive fetters' provided by social, educational, military

50 「食いが先に立つ」 Diary entry dated July 29, 1944. Tamura, *Shinsan*, p. 11, trans. Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

51 「戦時食物難は一億国民平等に耐えてこそ勝利となる」 Diary entry dated July 15, 1944. Tamura Tsunejirō, *Shinsan*, p. 3, trans. Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

52 「ただ首をくくって死んで」 Tamura, *Shinsan*, p. 9.

53 「節米のために国恩に報ゆる覚悟をしよう。」 Diary entry dated July 26, 1944. Tamura, *Shinsan*, p. 9, trans. Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

54 「食うものがなくなったからとして自殺した奴はいないのかな。」 Diary entry dated March 12, 1944. Furukawa (古川緑波), 'Hishoku ki' (悲食記), in Agawa et al. (eds.), *Shimin no nikki* (市民の日記), p. 239.

55 「忠勇無双の皇軍」 「勇士」 Tamura, *Shinsan*, p. 13, 26.

56 「政治家のから威張運中は我々に食うに食無き事をして。」 Diary entry dated March 11, 1945. Tamura, *Shinsan*, p. 72, trans. Yamashita, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

57 Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 186.



and media institutions.<sup>58</sup> Increasing restrictions and hardships in daily life as a result of government policies and the brutal reality of war, made it more and more difficult for people to believe in a samurai image that glorified self-sacrifice and subordinated the individual to the needs of the nation and state by advocating unconditional loyalty and obedience. Expressions of dissatisfaction and scepticism indicate the limited ability of state ideology to mobilise the masses.

The gulf between the official ideal and the reality becomes even clearer when we consider the almost immediate erasure of the image of the nationalistic samurai following Japan's surrender. Suddenly, Japan transformed into a peace-loving nation, and martial valour and loyalty to the emperor were no longer idealised as national values. The people made a remarkably smooth transition from being descendants of samurai to advocates of peace. With startling rapidity, the samurai image evaporated from public discourse and from popular mentality. As Kushner puts it simply, 'most military as well as most civilians accepted defeat and went on with their lives'.<sup>59</sup> This transformation, more than anything, suggests that state ideology was not profoundly ingrained in the popular mindset. The end of military conflict thus brought with it the end of the samurai as an ideological symbol, since the nationalistic values and militaristic agenda it represented were no longer in play.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on discussion of the samurai as one of a multitude of symbols constructed and deployed by the Japanese state to promote its nationalistic ideology between the Meiji period and the end of the Pacific War. The combination of contextual factors and the functional flexibility of the image made the samurai an irresistible choice for the state, and it was an ideal nationalistic symbol to use because it fulfilled all the requirements of official ideology. In the samurai image, the state was able to combine the concepts of national uniqueness, military strength and moral virtue. Furthermore, the samurai image was malleable enough to be used to promote various nationalistic messages depending on the sector of the population that was being mobilised. The suitability of the samurai image was only compounded by the absence of the samurai as a visible social class in modern Japan. The pseudo-historical nature of the image made it more susceptible to manipulation, change and invention to suit the purposes of state ideology, since there were no 'real' samurai against which to compare. The state elite was thus able to reconstruct the samurai as the ideal national subject and the embodiment of state-serving values that could be attributed to the bushidō tradition - a tradition that

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Kushner, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

was deliberately transformed from an elite code to apply to the entire nation.

However, as I have demonstrated in this article, the very invented nature of the symbol placed limits on its effectiveness as a mobilising tool. In contrast to the image promoted by the state, Japan never became a nation of samurai. Nationalist ideology dominated public discourse due to the state's extensive efforts, both in terms of institutionalising ideological indoctrination and censorship, and the symbol of the idealised samurai did in fact permeate Japanese society at all levels. Nevertheless, the disjunction between the image promoted in official rhetoric and the real-life experiences of the population led many individuals to question and disbelieve the ideal of the nationalistic warrior.

Although the state attempted to create a unified population modelled on the samurai, the people themselves were far from uniform in their adherence to this vision. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), an idealised samurai image was created and propagated to inspire idle warriors to behave in a morally sound manner. It was not a true reflection of samurai behaviour. It is somewhat ironic that this was repeated in modern Japan, when the samurai was again a deliberate construction promoted by the elite to serve its own purposes – neither an accurate depiction of the population itself, nor of the samurai.

A discussion of the samurai image as a symbol of nationalistic state ideology in modern Japan successfully demonstrates both the importance and limitations of the role that symbols play in an ideology. The samurai belonged to a set of discursive tools that the state deployed to transform an ideology consisting of abstract concepts of 'Japaneseness' and the *kokutai* into relevant, concrete, and evocative images that could incite nationalistic fervour and full support for the official agenda. However, as the case of the samurai suggests, the effectiveness of such ideological symbols was limited. As the pressures and demands placed on the wartime population became increasingly onerous, the samurai image could eventually no longer support the state's aims of indoctrination. The idealised samurai was never more than an image built on foundations that lacked real popular resonance, and was therefore unable to be sustained against wartime pressures. The reality that the nationalistic samurai remained unrealisable and irrelevant for many, forces us to question how profound an impact an ideology constructed and disseminated by the state can really have on the masses.

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