

## The Place of the Samurai in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan: Two Teaching Units

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Why is the figure of the samurai and something known as “the samurai spirit” intimately associated with Japanese national character? In the modern world, the purported ideals of the samurai — loyalty, honor, self-sacrifice, and even death — have become the defining ideals of Japanese identity. Somehow, it came to be for many in both the West and Japan that all Japanese were descendants of the samurai and practitioners par excellence of the samurai spirit. Such a characterization seems particularly strange given the following historical facts:

- The samurai as a group never occupied more than 10% of the entire population in the years leading up to Japan’s modern revolution, the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Therefore, it was never the case that all Japanese were samurai or were even familiar with what it meant to be a samurai.
- The samurai ceased to exist in Japan in 1876, when the government abolished the special status group known as the samurai, took away their swords (and, even worse, their financial stipends that they had been receiving from the government), and forced these now ex-samurai to fend for themselves in the new world of Meiji-era (1868-1912) Japan.

Given these facts that point to the limited influence and historical disappearance of the samurai by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, how can we understand historically how the samurai has become an icon of Japan during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? For whom is Japanese identity associated with the samurai? When are such associations made? Why and how did some Japanese help to construct this image?

“The Samurai in Japan and the World, c. 1900,” the first unit presented here, addresses the role of the samurai in 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan by examining excerpts from Nitobe Inazō’s 1899 book *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan*.

The second unit, *The Samurai in Postwar Japan*: Yukio Mishima’s “Patriotism,” addresses the role of the samurai as an icon by examining Yukio Mishima’s short story “Patriotism,” published in 1961.

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.

See also:

- *Chūshingura* and the Samurai Tradition (syllabus) Available at <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/samurai-tradition.html>
- Samurai, Cowboy, Shaolin Monk: National Myth and Transnational Forms in Literature and Film (syllabus) Available at <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/cowboy-samurai.html>

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