

Inventing the Zen Buddhist Samurai: Eiji Yoshikawa's *Musashi* and Japanese Modernity

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IT IS DIFFICULT TO OVERSTATE THE POPULARITY OF YOSHIKAWA EIJI'S historical novel *Musashi* (1939). After its initial serialization in the *Asahi Shinbun*, a major Japanese newspaper, the novel underwent over fourteen reprints (for a total of over 120 million copies sold), was adapted to a film trilogy called *Samurai* featuring the Japanese star Mifune Toshirō and a manga series by the famous Takehiko Inoue, and became a hit abroad. Despite its enduring popularity this novel has garnered little scholarly attention outside of Japan, perhaps because of its lack of sophistication: its characters are one-dimensional and its plotline repetitive. Moreover, Yoshikawa developed this relatively bland picaresque in over three thousand pages of text, leading Sheldon Frank to title his *New York Times* review of the—abbreviated—English translation “Way of the Samurai, Way of the Tedious” (Frank). Though Frank's assessment of *Musashi*'s literary qualities is no doubt correct, the novel's popularity and the historical context in which it appeared do more than enough to make up for the fact that it reads rather poorly. *Musashi* provides a means of examining the modern construction of the samurai as a spiritual warrior, uniting Zen Buddhism and the martial arts in a manner unprecedented before the twentieth century. Reading Yoshikawa's novel, therefore, allows us to explore the roots of a popular culture icon whose presence in (graphic) novels, movies, videogames, and other media continues unabated today.

Discussions of *Musashi* and its relation to the politics of the Pacific War have tended to revolve around the question whether the novel and its author supported the war effort. *Musashi*, after all, was serialized during a time (1935–1939) when the Japanese state increasingly censored literature that did not directly contribute to the war effort. *Musashi*'s uninterrupted serialization and publication seems to indicate that state authorities approved of the novel and its author, something further attested by the use of the book as propaganda after hostilities with the United States began (Sakurai 75–76). Moreover, Yoshikawa's self-identification as a "fascist" writer and his membership of "The Society of the Fifth," a group that met with the military on a regular basis to discuss the proper form of literature, also indicates complicity with the regime (Rubin 251–52; Torrance 61). However, the significance of Yoshikawa's membership in this group should not be overstated; as both Jay Rubin and Richard Torrance point out, the "Society" was a loose conglomeration of idealists, not a hegemonic cabal controlling literary culture. As for *Musashi*, Saitō Tadao has read the immense amount of bloodshed in the novel, often part of the reason why the novel is seen as supporting the war, as a critique of Japanese imperialism in general and the war in China in particular. The whole issue of Yoshikawa's politics is further complicated by his postwar changes to *Musashi*: according to Sakurai Ryōju, Yoshikawa deleted scenes where the main character worships the emperor in order to adapt the book to the mentality of postwar Japan (72–94).

Although this article will not solve the question of Yoshikawa's personal politics, it will propose that *Musashi* participated in a network of significant cultural representations within which violence was glorified and estheticized, thus serving the purposes of a nation at war. This complicity can be understood as part of a global and continuing struggle against "modernity," by which is meant the social and cultural consequences of capitalism. In his study of interbellum and wartime Japanese thought, Harry Harootunian shows that to resist the changes capitalism brought to their country (including class struggle, rapid change, industrialization, and urbanization), intellectuals frantically looked for an essence of Japaneseness that could resist all encroaching, foreign cultural elements. These intellectuals, like many of their Western counterparts, located this essence in the past. Seeking to draw away from the economic-political realm, marked as it was by rapid change, they reified Japanese culture (and

emphatically art) as eternal. In this, their project was similar to fascism, which also tries to bypass the social and political base of liberalism by recourse to cultural objects and customs from another era.¹ The ultimate irony with this attempt to overcome modernity is that it was itself an expression of modernity: only in modernity would one feel the need to rescue the fleeting present by recourse to the past. To “overcome” modernity is thus to be always-already overcome by it (Harootunian xxix–xxxii).

Apart from the host of intellectuals analyzed in Harootunian’s book, more recent contributions have clarified the dynamic he describes in individual case studies, such as Yokomitsu Riichi’s reconstruction of communal bonds (Lippit 197–228), Kobayashi Hideo’s turn to esthetics (Dorsey, *Critical Aesthetics*), and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s and Yamada Yoshio’s attempt to save the Japanese language (Hurley). Moreover, focusing on literary form, Alan Tansman has suggested that interbellum Japanese authors created “fascist moments” in an attempt to escape modernity. These moments erase the confusion of modern existence by dissolving individual subjectivity into a greater whole. Tansman argues that this lyrical dissolution is ideologically effective precisely because it pretends to be unconcerned with politics.

This article draws on Harootunian and Tansman’s work to understand *Musashi*. It also brings these scholars into dialogue with a growing literature on the role of Zen Buddhism in the Japanese war effort (Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism”; Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience”; Victoria, *Zen at War*; Snodgrass). This combination of perspectives suggests that in the 1930s, Zen Buddhism was seen as a resistance against modernity. Major apologists for the religion, such as Daisetz Suzuki, proposed that Zen Buddhism was the source of Japanese uniqueness and strength. In *Musashi*, Yoshikawa goes along with this by casting Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645 CE), a historical figure considered Japan’s most famous samurai, as a Zen Buddhist. Uniting the martial and spiritual, Yoshikawa’s Musashi represented a Japanese warrior spirit untainted by the corruptions of modernity. At the same time, Musashi’s behavior modeled that of the perfect twentieth-century Japanese soldier, and thus supported military expansionism. A formal analysis of “fascist moments” in Yoshikawa’s novel further demonstrates its attempt to overcome modernity. Drawing on contemporary discourse on Zen,

these moments erase the moral problems of violence by estheticizing it, thereby facilitating killing in service of the state.

Overcoming Modernity: The Way of the Samurai

Similar to heraldic mythology in the West, Yoshikawa understood samurai to be cultured and above all spiritual warriors, with Musashi as the ultimate embodiment of this ideal. In imagining Musashi's life story, for which there exist almost no historical sources, Yoshikawa provided a shining example to many young men who were already or about to be a different kind of warrior in a battle that contemporary discourse portrayed in equally spiritual terms borrowed heavily from Zen Buddhism.² A close reading of certain passages from the novel brings out Yoshikawa's position toward his own time: they contain a critique of modernity and advocate a return to a samurai culture, "the Way of the Samurai."

From its opening scene, *Musashi* critiques modernity. The reader first meets Musashi, who is then still known by his given name, Takezō, at the battle of Sekigahara. This battle marked the beginning of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868 CE), an era that would see Japan's nearly complete isolation from the Western world (during the Tokugawa, only the Dutch were granted limited trading privileges). According to Yoshimoto Mitsuhiko, at the beginning of the twentieth century this long period of peace was both commodified and idealized (216). Yoshimoto adds that twentieth-century Japanese did not think of the Tokugawa as "premodern" but more as an in-between stage, an agreeable modernity that was not Westernized yet. By opening his novel on the scene that inaugurated the Tokugawa, Yoshikawa therefore already suggests his critical attitude toward the influence of foreign elements in his own time. Moreover, he amplifies the anti-Western symbolism of Sekigahara by noting that on this battlefield Musashi/Takezō lies wounded by a western import: bullets.

Yoshikawa returns to this critique of Western influences when the reader is introduced to Sasaki Kojirō, who will become Musashi's most formidable opponent (*Musashi* 259–69). The scene is the following: Kojirō is traveling and his ship is filled with merchants who praise the profits to be made in foreign trade and mock the stupidity of the samurai who let them do as they please so long as they make a

show of obeisance. Moreover, in these uncertain times (the Tokugawa Shogun who was victorious at Sekigahara is still establishing his power, and rebellion is brewing everywhere), merchants have become richer than samurai, a wealth demonstrated in a foreign gambling game the merchants proceed to play out of boredom:

A curtain was hung, mistresses and underlings brought sake, and the men began playing *unsummo*, a game recently introduced by Portuguese traders, for unbelievable stakes. The gold on the table could have saved whole villages from famine, but the players tossed it about like gravel. (260)

Like the opening of the novel, this passage criticizes Japanese modernity as a product of corrupting Western influences. This time, the criticism does not focus on guns, but on another Western import: capitalism. Discussing the effects of the economic crisis that followed the 1929 Wall Street crash, Andrew Gordon points out that in Japan the worldwide depression was worsened by the currency speculation of the country's banks. The consequences (such as poverty and famine) hit farmers the hardest (Gordon 182–83). Returning to the passage from *Musashi* above, it is easy to read the merchants playing the foreign gambling game as Japan's bankers. Their game is interrupted though, when Kojirō's pet monkey steals some of the playing cards. Answering to the captain's complaints about this, Kojirō points out that the animal "was just imitating what they themselves [the merchants] were doing" (269).³

Kojirō's mockery of the merchants marks his second provocation on the ship. His first was defeating Gion Tōji, a disciple of the famous Yoshioka School of swordsmanship, thereby confirming rumors that the school's teaching has degenerated. Focalizing⁴ on Tōji, the narrator tells us the reason for this degeneracy: the Yoshioka master has lived beyond his means, spending all his money on women and alcohol. Because of the debt the Yoshioka School has accumulated, this once-exclusive institution now contemplates offering instructions to anyone willing to pay. Kojirō's humiliation of Tōji, an act performed by cutting off the latter's topknot, parallels the former's humiliation of the merchants: in both cases, both Kojirō and the narrator criticize the erasure of the traditional class distinction samurai-commoner and the moral laxity of both classes.

The examples above illustrate the form that Yoshikawa's critique of modernity takes: foreign imports, changing economic conditions and moral degeneracy combine to weaken class distinctions (in both incidents on Kojirō's ship, greed leads to degeneracy). As a cure for this disease, the book advocates a return to the "Way of the Samurai," a path largely forgotten in Musashi's world where "almost anyone who could wield a sword or shoot an arrow from a bow was regarded as a samurai, regardless of the attention—or lack of it—given to the deeper meaning of the Way" (594–95).

For Yoshikawa's Musashi then, the stable foundation to escape the degenerative effects of foreign influences and greed—modernity—is to revive the "Way of the Samurai." This "Way" has a "deeper meaning" than mere martial arts. It is profoundly philosophical:

The techniques of a swordsman were not his [Musashi's] goal; he sought an all-embracing Way of the Sword. The sword was to be far more than a simple weapon; it had to be an answer to life's questions [. . .] For the first time, he asked whether it was possible for an insignificant human being to become one with the universe. (595)

If this implies a spiritual development that remains personal, Musashi later discovers that it is also a way to guide others: "The Way of the Sword should not be used merely for his own perfection. It should be a source of strength for governing people and leading them to peace and happiness" (657). The novel repeats this point again and again: what Musashi studies is not just martial arts, but something much more profound, a fundamental knowledge that matters for any domain of human endeavor, from philosophy to politics to personal happiness to artistic insight and mystical realization. Another good example of this comes at a key moment in the book, namely when Musashi finally develops his unique style of swordsmanship, which consists in fighting two-handedly, a long sword in one hand and a short sword in another. He comes upon the idea while watching a drummer absorbed in his art:

Two drumsticks, one sound. The drummer was conscious of left and right, right and left, but at the same time unconscious of them. Here, before his eyes, was the Buddhist sphere of free interpenetration. Musashi felt enlightened, fulfilled. (793)

Here, Buddhist metaphors (“enlightened”; “sphere of interpenetration”) are used to describe Musashi’s thinking as he develops the fundamentals of his style as a swordsman. By describing the “Way of the Samurai” in this manner, Yoshikawa displays his familiarity with at least some of the contemporary discourse on Zen, to which I now turn. Just like some of his contemporaries, Yoshikawa did not really see Zen as separate from the martial arts. If the Way of the Samurai is this novelist’s escape from modernity, that “Way” is framed in Zen Buddhist language.

Zen and the Art of War

Musashi discovers the “Way of the Warrior” guided by a Zen monk, Takuan Sōhō. Takuan oversees the most important transformation in the book: that of Takezō, a man without discipline or purpose, into the samurai Musashi. The transformation happens as follows: in the beginning of the novel, Takuan first hangs the wild and murderous Takezō upside-down from a tree for days on end, claiming that he is teaching him a lesson. After Takezō begs for his life, Takuan deems him ready for further education and locks the young man in an attic room, forcing him to study Chinese and Japanese classics for three years. Takezō emerges from the room a changed man, a rebirth Takuan marks by giving his pupil a new name: Musashi. From then on Musashi, now a blend of cultural sophistication, spiritual vision and martial skill, will go on to defeat opponent after opponent, a quest that takes up the remainder of the novel.

As Musashi’s teacher, Takuan is therefore an important side-character in the novel. Yoshikawa based this character on the historical Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645 CE), an influential Zen abbot famous for writing two studies on swordsmanship. This fact, and the apparent popularity of this figure in the 1930s (Haskel 31–32), probably inspired the author to go beyond historical fact and cast Takuan as Musashi’s first teacher.⁵ But Takuan’s presence also points to how Yoshikawa approaches Zen, a manner very much in keeping with discourse on this school in the 1930s.

To understand interbellum discourse on Zen, some of the historical circumstances that shaped the socio-political role of this Buddhist school in premodern Japan need to be described. These circumstances

were very different from those in China, the country of Zen's birth, where, barring times of unrest and rebellion, political authority was relatively centralized. As many scholars have shown, Buddhism flowered in China because it managed to cater to this centralized authority, for example by providing legitimacy to the reigns of successive emperors (Zürcher; Orzech; McRae; Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*; Welter, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*; Schlütter; Cole). Once Zen spread to Japan, the school also made connections with those in power. But, unlike the Chinese case, the authority of Japanese rulers was increasingly local and decentralized. During the Kamakura (1185–1333 CE) period, the imperial court already faced significant limitations on its power. Though initially power was recentralized in the hands of the Kamakura Shogunate, during the following Muromachi (1338–1573 CE) period, local warlords increasingly gained power. As a result, the Zen temples that had chosen to associate with these lords became more prestigious than the temples that had remained close to the imperial court. But this increased influence came at a price. As the civil war that would end the Muromachi gained intensity, temples were called upon to support their patrons' war efforts directly by fielding armies and providing generals (Collcutt 125–29; Jorgensen 135–36; Haskel 60–76). But Zen was not just of strategic importance to Japanese warlords: the school's highly developed psychology fascinated samurai, as did its access to the refinements of Chinese high culture, a domain previously reserved for the imperial court (Haskel 26–7; King 159–78). Therefore, when Takuan composed his treatises on swordsmanship, he could draw on a long-standing connection between Zen and the martial arts. In casting Takuan as Musashi's spiritual guide, Yoshikawa draws on this history of Zen's involvement with samurai warlords.

In view of this history, it should not come as a surprise that many Zen leaders also actively supported Japanese wars of conquest in the twentieth century, for example by justifying such wars as tools for spreading Buddhism or by holding ceremonies in order to ensure victory in battle (Victoria, *Zen at War* 57–65). The cooperation was not one-sided: already in 1907 the Japanese military sought to “spiritually educate” their soldiers by implementing a code they called the *bushidō*, “the Way of the Samurai” (Victoria, *Zen War Stories* 19–20). Although this code, as Oleg Benesch has shown most recently, is a modern creation, its promoters claimed to have derived it from

traditional Japanese books on the samurai art such as the *Hagakure*, another treatise on swordsmanship written by a Zen monk (Benesch 8; Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" 6; Victoria, *Zen War Stories* 107). Again and again, the *bushidō* stresses two key elements: ultimate loyalty to one's duty (symbolized in the 1930s by the Japanese emperor) and suspension of one's fear of death. Enthusiastically promoted both by militarists and renowned Zen Buddhists, the *bushidō*, as encoded in the military's *Field Service Code* (*Senjūkun*), defined the Japanese warrior ideal by the beginning of World War Two. In *Musashi*, the "Way of the Warrior" is a version of *bushidō* that stresses the Zen dimensions of the code, and erases its modern origins.

In their search for a spiritual foundation for Japanese soldiers, Zen must have seemed particularly appealing to the Japanese military men at the dawn of the twentieth century. Not only did the school have a long history of associating with soldiers, but when read in a certain way it seemed to dismiss any questioning of orders. Takuan himself wrote the following in a manual addressed to the shogun's sword master, Yagyū Munenori:

The expression "A response instantaneous as a spark struck from flint" describes the swiftness of a flash of lightning. For example, when someone calls, "Mataemon!" [the early given name of Munenori] and you instantly answer "Yes!" that's what's meant by immovable wisdom. In contrast, if someone calls "Mataemon!" and you start to think, "What does he want?" and so forth, the mind that then wonders "What does he want?" and so forth is the ignorance of attachment as the ground of delusion. (Haskel 38)

Takuan's description of immovable wisdom here is remarkably similar to Louis Althusser's analysis of modern subjectivity, where an unquestioning reply to a call from the authorities defines the interpellated individual as a subject and as a being subjected to the state (Althusser 174). This call was also interpreted as such in interbellum Japan. As Haskel indicates, in 1937 Ishihara Shummyō, a Zen priest, approvingly referred to the citation from Takuan above, commenting that

if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated. On the contrary, one should be in a realm where something

called “oneself” does not intrude even slightly. Such a realm is no different from that derived from the practice of Zen. (Haskel 32; Victoria, *Zen at War* 103)

In Ishihara’s interpretation, which was far from eccentric, Zen becomes the perfect fascist ideology. An unquestioning obedience to the state goes hand in hand with the dismissal of the importance of one’s own life.

In *Musashi*, Yoshikawa writes the *bushidō* back into the Tokugawa period. In the process, he erases the modern roots of the code and represents it as an eternal essence of which Miyamoto Musashi is the perfect representation. Musashi then becomes the supreme standard of the virtues Japanese soldiers were told they should strive for, not for themselves, but for the nation as a whole. At multiple points in the narrative, characters assert the importance of samurai who sacrificed their lives for the nation, claiming that revitalizing the eternal Way of the Samurai “could become the foundation of the nation’s strength and prosperity” (595). This disregard for self-preservation reaches its climax at the end of the book, where Takuan’s Zen education renders its ultimate fruits. In a small boat on the way to his final duel with Sasaki Kojirō, a duel that will take place on a small island, Musashi feels a complete indifference toward death:

[Musashi] was thinking of nothing at all. He was, if anything, a little bored. He looked over the side of the boat at the swirling blue water. It was deep here, infinitely deep, and alive with what seemed to be eternal life. But water had no fixed, determined form. Was it not because man had a fixed, determined form that he cannot possess eternal life? Does not true life begin only when tangible form has been lost? To Musashi’s eyes, life and death seemed like so much froth. (964)

Here, Musashi’s complete indifference toward death conforms to the Zen-inspired *bushidō* perfectly. In view of the immense success of Yoshikawa’s novel, not few of those crammed in boats bound for similar life-or-death struggles on distant islands will have wished themselves equal to Musashi’s valor. Historical records show that many succeeded in emulating his disregard for death, the Japanese rate of soldiers surrendering being significantly lower than those of the other Axis powers (Victoria, *Zen War Stories* 106).⁶

Fascist Aesthetics

Apart from using Zen discourse to frame Musashi's "Way of the Samurai," Yoshikawa also uses a Zen-derived aesthetics to create "fascist moments" which provide another way to escape the fragmentation that marks modernity. At the same time, these moments obliterate the moral consequences of violence, a move that, like the *bushidō* code that Musashi follows, affected the mentality of at least some Japanese soldiers. Though it might be true that the bloodshed in *Musashi* can be read as a critique of Japanese imperialism, as Saitō Tadao has argued, the manner in which Yoshikawa describes lethal violence does not suggest such an interpretation (Saitō).

At least since Okakura Kakuzō's *The Ideals of the East* (1903), Zen Buddhism has been associated with Japanese art, an association that, like the *bushidō*, is mainly a modern invention. "Art" here needs to be understood broadly: tea ceremony, archery, and rock gardens were all incorporated in an essentializing discourse on Japanese aesthetics.⁷ No wonder then, that swordsmanship was also deemed a Zen art. Daisetz Suzuki, perhaps the most famous writer on Zen in the twentieth century, took this association in a jarring direction. Writing in 1938, as the war on the Chinese mainland was in full swing, he asserted that true Zen warriors do not kill: "For it is really not he [the swordsman] but the sword itself that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim" (Suzuki 145). Because the sword "automatically" kills its enemies, the swordsman becomes "an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality" (Suzuki 145).⁸ Yoshikawa relies on this theory of aesthetic violence to depict confrontations between Musashi and his foes. As "fascist moments," these scenes suggest the dissolution of individuality into beauty and death.

In a rich study inspired by Walter Benjamin's analysis of fascism as the "estheticization of politics," Alan Tansman has argued that interbellum Japanese novels provide "fascist moments." He defines these moments as offering

images of self-obliteration evoked through the beauty of violence, often in the name of an idealized Japan. These images are anchored in ancient myth and transcend the strictures of time: they are moments in which the individual is depicted as merging with, or

is called on to merge imaginatively with, a greater whole. (Tansman 18)

Tansman here distinguishes three key characteristics of fascist moments. First, they are representations of death, channeled through beauty. Second, they present themselves as eternal, as unchanging essences, often of Japaneseness. Finally, the death they represent is meaningful as a fusion with a “greater whole,” which in Tansman’s book often means the Japanese state.

Many of the encounters between Musashi and his enemies can be described as fascist moments. Such encounters are consistently framed in the Zen language of aesthetics. The ending of the novel is a good example. As described above, Musashi looks upon his possible death in the final duel against Kojirō with a *bushidō*-like indifference. After describing Musashi’s attitude, the narrator goes to describe the scene in more explicitly Zen-inspired terms:

Here, hopes, prayers, and the gods were of no assistance, nor was chance. There was only a vacuum, impersonal and perfectly impartial. Is this vacuum, so difficult of achievement by one who has life, the perfect expression of the mind that has risen above thought and transcended ideas? (968)

The impersonal mind just described is the so-called “no-thought” or “no-mind.” In an essay on “Zen and Swordsmanship” published in the 1938 collection *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki calls this “no-mind” “one of the most important ideas in Zen” (Suzuki 111, n17). No doubt he is right. Yet his discussion of this idea takes place within parameters set by Takuan’s treatises on swordsmanship, a distinctly martial interpretation also present in *Musashi*. The similarity between Yoshikawa and Suzuki’s interpretation of “no-mind” thus demonstrates how *Musashi* reproduces 1930s discourse on Zen.

Shortly after Musashi’s mystical meditation just quoted, the final duel begins:

The wooden sword rose straight in the air. With one great kick, Musashi leapt high, and folding his legs, reduced his six-foot frame to four feet or less. “Y-a-a-ah!” Ganryū’s [the martial nickname of Kojirō] sword screamed through the space above him. The stroke missed, but the tip of the Drying Pole [Kojirō’s sword]

cut through Musashi's headband, which went flying through the air. Ganryū mistook it for his opponent's head, and a smile flitted briefly across his face. The next instant his skull broke like gravel under the blow of Musashi's sword. (969)

In this fascist moment, violence is made subservient to esthetics. Like an abstract painting, the description of the scene consists of a variety of lines whose mutual play is its real interest. The vertical rise of Musashi's sword announces Musashi's leap, which is paired with the horizontal fold of the legs. Ganryū's sword provides a new movement from low to high. Then, Musashi's headband whirls through the sky, the shape of which shades into Ganryū's smile. The final downward motion concludes the scene with an explosion of red color. The ethical messiness of killing disappears in a work of literary art that is only interested in its own esthetics.

Another example of how the estheticizing language of fascist moments combines with Zen discourse comes earlier in the novel, when Musashi faces Yoshioka Denshichirō. Responding to a clumsy attack by the latter, Musashi dodges and draws his sword:

It looked as though they were too close together for both of them to emerge unscathed, but after a moment of dancing reflected light from the swords, they backed off. Several tense minutes passed. The two combatants were silent and motionless, swords stationary in the air, point aimed at point but separated by a distance of about nine feet. The snow piled on Denshichirō's brow dropped to his eyelashes. To shake it off, he contorted his face until his forehead muscles looked like countless moving bumps. His bulging eyeballs glowed like windows of a smelting furnace, and the exhalations of his deep, steady breathing were as hot and gusty as those from a bellows.[. . .]Musashi held his sword at eye level too, with his elbows relaxed, flexible and capable of movement in any direction. Denshichirō's arms, held in an unaccustomed stance, were tight and rigid, and his sword unsteady. Musashi's was absolutely still; snow began to pile up on its thin upper edge. (455)

Here, the esthetics are significantly different from those that determined the confrontation with Kojirō. The interplay of lines is still there in the contrasting position of the blades, but here it is accented by a delicate motif: the snow falling slowly, piling up on the warriors' bodies and their weapons. The cold whiteness of the snow also contrasts with the

redness of Denshichirō, whose eyes blaze like “windows of a smelting furnace.” The duel ends with Musashi taking two lives:

Dead silence. Snow accumulated on Musashi’s hair, on Denshichirō’s shoulders. Musashi no longer saw a great boulder [Denshichirō] before him. He himself no longer existed as a separate person. The will to win had been forgotten. He saw the whiteness of the snow falling between himself and the other man, and the spirit of the snow was as light as his own. The space now seemed an extension of his own body. He had become the universe, or the universe had become him. He was there, yet not there. Denshichirō’s feet inched forward. At the tip of his sword, his will-power quivered toward the start of a movement. Two lives expired with the strokes of a single sword. First, Musashi attacked to his rear, and Ōtaguro Hyōsuke [an ally of Denshichirō]’s head, or a piece of it, sailed past Musashi like a great crimson cherry, as the body staggered lifelessly toward Denshichirō. The second horrendous scream—Denshichirō’s cry of attack—was cut short midway, the broken-off sound thinning out into the space around them. Musashi leapt so high that he appeared to have sprung from the level of his opponent’s chest. Denshichirō’s big frame reeled backward and dropped in a spray of white snow. (456)

If the death of Kojirō was an abstract painting, this scene is expressionist. Snow provides the white background color for the red blood. In this space, shapes extend beyond themselves, as Denshichirō becomes a boulder and Musashi expands until he fills the universe. The mystical language abruptly cuts into an orgasmic celebration of violence. Apparently the consequences of being one with the universe include the gruesome death of others sharing that universe. This combination of killing and Zen spirituality expresses the ultimate consequences of the Way of the Samurai: if to Musashi “life and death seemed like so much froth,” (Ibid.) then the only thing that still matters is not whether you take lives, but how you take them. An ethical decision (is killing right?) changes into an esthetic one (are we killing properly?).

Merely a cursory glance at the records of Japanese war atrocities shows that this manner of (not) thinking about the ethics of violence did not remain confined to fiction. In Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanjing*, an eyewitness remembers how Japanese officers instructed him in the proper way to decapitate prisoners:

“Heads should be cut off like this,” [Second Lieutenant Tanaka] said, unsheathing his army sword. He scooped water from a bucket with a dipper, then poured it over both sides of the blade. Swishing off the water, he raised his sword in a long arc. Standing behind the prisoner, Tanaka steadied himself, legs spread apart, and cut off the man’s head with a shout, “Yo!” The head flew more than a meter away. Blood spurted up in two fountains from the body and sprayed into the hole. The scene was so appalling that I felt I couldn’t breathe. (Chang 58)

In a remarkable review of Chang’s book for the Buddhist periodical *Tricycle*, Josh Baran has juxtaposed this quotation with what Suzuki wrote on the swordsman as an “artist,” calling the latter’s statements “grotesque” in face of the horrifying practices that were continually taking place on the Chinese mainland (Baran). Such an appraisal can also be extended to Yoshikawa who, writing at the same time as Suzuki, continued to evoke images of violence that dispense with moral questions.

Conclusion

Yoshikawa engages with Zen discourse on two levels. First, he casts Japan’s most famous samurai, Miyamoto Musashi, as a Zen Buddhist warrior who follows the twentieth-century *bushidō*. Second, Yoshikawa aestheticizes violence, creating “fascist moments” that erase moral questions, in line with Zen discourse on the warrior as a martial “artist.” Written at a time when Japanese soldiers were already involved in a brutal war on the Chinese subcontinent, this novel and others of its kind are not merely escapist or antiquarian.⁹ Using Zen Buddhist discourse, authors like Yoshikawa actively created and promoted a warrior ideal whose legacy lasts until this day.¹⁰ Contemporary films or graphic novels set in pre-Meiji Japan, whether they be authored in Japan, the United States, or anywhere else in the world, thus often portray samurai as Zen Buddhist warriors abiding by *bushidō*. Moreover, such products of popular culture tend to focus on the esthetics of samurai swordsmanship and neglect moral concerns: spilled blood becomes merely red paint from the brush of the Zen artist, who practices calligraphy the same way he does the martial arts.

By carefully analyzing the creation of the modern samurai, the configuration of our own time as a continuation of the struggle against modernity become clearer, as do the features of similar “spiritual warriors” and the dangerous attraction they hold on the modern mind. Though an analysis of such figures today lies beyond the scope of this article, the contemporary figures of the Islamic State jihadist and his counterpart, the Christian warrior, seem comparable to the Zen Buddhist samurai.¹¹ Both draw on religious ideas to construct a warrior ideal that seems immune to change, appears rooted in a traditional past, and praises self-destruction as the highest good. In the horrific suicide bombings that haunt the news one can discern the silhouette of the samurai warrior whose complete devotion to duty remains most memorably conserved in the grainy black-and-white films of kamikaze planes diving toward aircraft carriers.¹² Then as now, the spiritual warrior’s most self-fulfilling moment was his violent self-destruction.¹³

Notes

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1. For the purposes of this paper, fascism is understood along the lines of Harootunian and Tansman (op. cit.). The discussion also follows Marilyn Ivy in considering the application of the term “fascism” to the interbellum and wartime system in Japan as analytically useful. Ivy writes that “fascism is a notion that outstrips its historical reference, one that has a theoretical and reflective afterlife that can allow us to think about a range of problems that weren’t, aren’t, thinkable otherwise” (Ivy viii).
2. In a book that is devoted to reconstructing “Musashi’s life,” Tokitsu Kenji admits that, since so little evidence is extant, writing a biography of Musashi resembles imagining a vase based on “a small fragment of some piece of Greek pottery” (Tokitsu xviii).
3. Autobiographically, Yoshikawa’s resentment toward merchants might derive from his experiences with trade as a child, as documented in his memoir, *Fragments of a Past*. His father hailed from a samurai family but was forced to start a trading company in Yokohama. Though business was good, eventually a social misstep led to sudden abject poverty, forcing the young Yoshikawa to take on a series of random jobs, the most dangerous of which was refitting trade ships (Yoshikawa, *Fragments of a Past: A Memoir*). It is also necessary to note here that Shimauchi Keiji has argued that Yoshikawa portrays merchants positively in *Musashi*, an interpretation directly opposed to the one defended in the present article. Shimauchi cites Kobayashi Tarozaemon, a merchant that helps Musashi toward the end of the novel, as evidence of Yoshikawa’s favorable disposition toward merchants (Shimauchi 28–30). The matter is no doubt complicated enough that no single interpretation of

authorial attitude, a matter difficult enough to assess on its own, can be defended without qualifications. Nevertheless, Shimauchi's example focuses on an individual rather than Yoshikawa's representation of merchants as a social group, which is usually as a greedy and lecherous assembly of people. Kobayashi is exceptional because he aids Musashi despite his social class.

4. "Focalization" is the process where an external narrator represents the thoughts and feelings of one of the characters in a text. For example, in *Musashi*, the narrator is all-knowing and not bound within space and time: it freely comments on the actions of the characters, and is able to know things they do not. This all-knowing perspective is called external focalization. However, sometimes the narrator sees the world of the text through the eyes of one of the characters, in which case it is internally focalizing. Though Gérard Genette originally developed this narratological system, this article uses the adaptation of Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (Herman and Vervaeck 41–102).
5. Though Musashi and Takuan were contemporaries, no historical record exists of them ever meeting, let alone of the latter having been the former's teacher. However, several Tokugawa daimyo, among them the Shogun's swordmaster Yagyū Munenori (1571–1646 CE), claimed to have received instruction from Takuan, making Yoshikawa's invention not wholly far-fetched.
6. Commenting on Yoshikawa's usage of Zen, Donald Richie writes that "Musashi appears to know as much about Zen as the average Jersey city jogger" (Richie 281). Whether Richie is right or wrong depends on what one considers "Zen" to be here. If by "Zen" is meant a familiarity with canonized sutras, chants, and traditional meditation methods, then Musashi is surely a beginner. If one means a type of discourse used by Zen priests and laymen alike during the 1930s, then Musashi is an enlightened expert.
7. For a discussion of archery and rock gardens in particular, and how Western visitors to Japan played a key role in developing this discourse, see Shōji Yamada's *Shots in the Dark* (Yamada).
8. In a chapter devoted to Suzuki's interpretation of the samurai, Winston King shows that the Japanese scholar's position has little historical validity: "Suzuki's idealized version [of samurai as Zen warriors] was *not* that of the rank-and-file samurai who found Zen training practically useful in actual combat regardless of presumed spiritual benefits. Suzuki's is a later version" (King 183). What King maintains here in spite of his criticism of Suzuki, namely that a significant amount of historical samurai had undergone Zen training and used it in combat, has also been questioned, for example by Christopher Ives' in his stimulating review of King's book (Ives 237).
9. James Dorsey has shown that *Musashi* was far from unique in casting the Pacific War as a "quest for spiritual purity" (Dorsey, "Literary Tropes" 424). The novel he analyzes, a fictionalization of an army communiqué on the role of submariners during the Pearl Harbor attack, demonstrates that the character type of the spiritual warrior also appeared in depictions of contemporary Japanese soldiers at war.
10. See, for example, Maria Rankin-Brown and Morris Brown's exploration of the samurai figure's role in contemporary manga, where they assert that the "honorable codes" such figures obey are "key to establishing a positive national identity and, by extension in Japan, a personal identity" (Rankin-Brown and Brown 80). Though the history of nationalism demonstrates that such an identity is not necessarily "positive," Rankin-Brown and Brown's examination demonstrates, as the present article aims to do, the function the samurai figure fulfills in establishing and maintaining Japanese cultural identity in the face of modernity.
11. For a discussion of one such Christian group currently fighting the Islamic State in the Middle East, see Loveday Morris' article in the *Washington Post* (Morris). The group Morris examines is called Dwekh Nawsha, a term that means "self-sacrifice" in Aramaic. The

- meaning of this name already points to the similarity between the ideals of this group and those of the death-defying Zen samurai.
12. In her work on Japanese kamikaze diaries and the cherry blossom esthetic, Emiko Ohnuki Tierney has already suggested the similarity between kamikaze missions and today's suicide bombings (Ohnuki-Tierney).
 13. A striking illustration of the continued international influence of the samurai image articulated in *Musashi*, particularly on products of popular culture, is Edward Zwick's 2003 film *The Last Samurai*. A fictionalized portrayal of samurai resistance against Japan's modernization during the Meiji, the protagonists of *Samurai* affirm the need to adhere to *bushidō*, which is represented as an ancient code of conduct. The movie goes far beyond historical fact to ascertain that we see these samurai (and Tom Cruise's character, who provides the Western eye into this Eastern mystery) as the opposite of modernity: we learn that the samurai rebels reject even the use of firearms, so spiritually repelled are they by soulless machinery. Predictably, their end is a suicidal attack smothered by a machine gun, an attack that unasily recalls the plenitude of Japanese bayonet attacks during the Pacific War (Tom Cruise's character, of course, survives all of this) (Zwick).

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