The Last Moment of a Loyal Life: Hara-kiri and Honor Ideology in Meiji Japan

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April 23, 2010

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Abstract

On September 13, 1912 Nogi Maresuke, a prominent Japanese general, put on a Western-style military uniform and posed to have his picture taken. Several hours later, he removed the uniform and put on traditional Japanese clothes. He drew a sword and cut his stomach open from left to right, removed the sword and cut himself from the bottom up, and then impaled himself. Nogi had committed "junshi", the traditional Japanese practice of following one's master into death. For Nogi, that master was Emperor Mutsuhito, whose funeral on that very day signaled an end to the Meiji era, and an end to traditional Japan.

I will evaluate how the westernization of Japan and the move away from traditional honor ideology in the Meiji period can be seen through the lens of ritual suicide. The exploration will begin with a study of traditional Japanese honor ideology, and the roots of ritual suicide ("Hara-Kiri", or "Seppuku") within this ideology. From there, the focus will shift to the Satsuma Rebellion, in which samurai fought to reclaim the rights that they had lost to modernization, and which ended with myriad instances of ritual suicide. The Satsuma period will be shown as a midway point in the transformations to Japanese society in the Meiji Period. General Nogi's suicide in the final moments of the Meiji Period, and the reactions from all corners of Japanese culture, will illustrate the last point in the Meiji-era trajectory towards modernization, and away from honor ideology.
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Introduction

Ritual suicide in Japan is a topic that has been the subject of much speculation, and the victim of much sensationalism. Popular culture is filled with images of valiant Japanese warriors killing themselves in the heat of battle, or of disciplined samurai meticulously disemboweling themselves to salvage their honor after committing a grave offense. Ritual suicide in Japan is seen as both horrifying and awe-inspiring, but it is rarely viewed critically and academically.

I will evaluate how the westernization of Japan and the corresponding move away from traditional honor ideology as a driving cultural force - and towards honor ideology as a fetishized remnant of traditional Japan - can be seen through the lens of ritual suicide during the Meiji period. The exploration will begin with a study of the events of the Meiji period and their effect on traditional Japanese honor ideology - and the roots of ritual suicide ("Hara-Kiri", or "Seppuku") within this ideology.

The Meiji period, which began in 1868, was a seminal moment in Japanese history. It can not be classified as the first moment that Japan opened up to the West, as Westerners had been visiting and living in Japan for hundreds of years prior to 1868. Furthermore, the Japanese were keenly aware of Western ideology and had taken sides on the matter far prior to the dawn of the Meiji period.

However, the Meiji period did mark a radical change in the organization of Japanese society, from a traditionally culturally insular society to a more modernized and more Westernized society. The samurai class, which had enjoyed great privilege in the preceding Tokugawa period, watched as their privileges and
social status were stripped rapidly and nearly fully. Japan engaged in wars with China, using Western methods of battle. During the Korean Crisis of the 1870s, diplomacy emerged between Japan and Korea as means to address national conflict, rather than immediate military confrontation.

As such, while the Meiji period absolutely cannot be simplified as the first contact that Japan had with the West, it was the first period where such change had a dramatic and direct impact on Japanese government and daily social practice, and as such will be seen as a primary reason for the decline of honor ideology.

The concept of Japanese honor ideology itself was not discussed, or followed by name, during the Meiji period, but rather is a historical construct. Honor ideology is examined most clearly by Eiko Ikegami's work *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan*, and her understanding of honor ideology will provide the foundation for my argument. In her book, Ikegami delineates the causes and the effects of the Japanese cultural emphasis on honor. With such an approach, Ikegami is able to shed light on events in which the Japanese focus on honor played a central role, despite never being referenced by the name "honor ideology" during the time period.

Ikegami's work focuses on honor ideology in a broad sense, both with regard to focus and time. Ikegami studies social theory, war, state formation, and Confucianism. She covers a vast swath of time, from the origins of honor ideology in the early 11th century, up until the remaining influences of honor ideology in modern Japanese society.
At the crux of Ikegami's work, and my argument in this thesis, is an assessment of how honor played a prominent role in Japanese culture, to the extent that it became an ideology itself. Ikegami argues that the importance of honor, and the rise of honor ideology, began with the samurai class.

As the samurai were, "from the late twelfth century well into the late nineteenth... the most important and powerful political actors in Japanese society", the effects of their focus on honor ideology had broad effects on Japanese culture as a whole.¹ Despite the fact that large parts of the Tokugawa period were peaceful, and despite the fact that the majority of citizens were not samurai, the power and influence of the samurai insured that their conception of honor would become an ideology that was revered and practiced by the masses.

Ikegami argues that honor ideology itself stems from the "intrinsic duality of honor", with conceptions both of honor as it is perceived internally and well as externally.² In other words, honor was applied and seen through both individual actions and beliefs, and also through the behavior of Japan as a collective. Ikegami states that "One's honor is the image of oneself in the social mirror, and that image affects one's self esteem and one's behavior."³ This process of identification linked both the internal and external conceptions of honor to create an overarching honor ideology.

² Ikegami, 23.
³ Ibid.
It is important to note that honor ideology is a historical term, and was not something which the Japanese discussed or upheld specifically. The closest term in Japanese would be *meiyo*, or the formal term for “honor”, although honor ideology scholar Eiko Ikegami breaks down the concepts of honor ideology into several Japanese words: “haji (shame), meboku (face), chijoku (dishonor), iji (pride), and sekentei (one's appearance in the world).”

To explore the roots of honor ideology, Ikegami further defines honor ideology through Ruth Benedict’s definition of Japan as a “culture of shame”. Ikegami sees great value in such an assessment, arguing that even to this day, “Japanese social scientists now largely agree that a keen sensitivity to shame and a corresponding concern for a good reputation and honor are still important factors in the daily life of the Japanese people.”

Thus, honor ideology, as seen by Ikegami, can be broken down into several pieces. First, it was derived from samurai culture – though not necessarily samurai practice – and passed down through lower ranks of society due to the influence of the samurai class before the Meiji period. Second, honor ideology was both individual and collective. Finally, honor ideology can be seen as a “culture of shame”, where important decisions were made based on the desire to avoid being shamed as a first consideration.

It is also important to note that honor ideology was not a stagnant cultural belief, nor was it pervasive throughout all corners of Japanese society. Honor

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4 Ikegami, 17.  
5 Ibid.  
6 Ikegami, 18.
ideology was a dynamic and fluid element of Japanese culture that cannot be encapsulated within a person, event, or description. However, I will examine honor ideology in two major periods of time. First, within the origins of 'true', practically applied honor ideology in Tokugawa Japan. During this period of time, honor ideology was put into daily practice, both in battle and in daily life. Second, within the transition period to the Meiji period, in the 'idealized' honor ideology through colorful prints and the samurai codes of Taira Shigesuke and Yamamoto Tsunetomo. During this period, the late Tokugawa, Japan was at peace. As such, honor ideology was an idealization of the past rather than an institution of daily life.

While Ikegami's work is the most effective and comprehensive scholarly writing on the subject of honor ideology, it does not focus specifically on the question of ritual suicide in the Meiji period. I will draw heavily on both the background of the Meiji period shift towards Westernization and the essence of Japanese honor ideology to examine ritual suicide as a lens through which to view dramatic cultural change.

To do so, the focus will shift to the Satsuma Rebellion. In the Satsuma Rebellion, fought to reclaim the rights that they had lost to modernization. Formerly one of the top social classes, the samurai enjoyed a rich pension, could wear their swords in public, and indeed were the ruling force behind the Tokugawa government. After the Meiji period reforms, the samurai found themselves removed from the top of the class system, deprived of government salaries, and stripped of their sword-bearing privileges. In 1877, samurai Saigo Takamori led the rebellion of
angry samurai against the government. The rebellion was not successful, and ended with myriad instances of ritual suicide, including that of Saigo Takamori.

I will argue that the nature of the Satsuma Rebellion suicides, as widespread and precipitated by defeat, will be seen as indicative of honor ideology's final moment as a predominant force in military culture. While there are later examples of Japanese soldiers going on suicidal missions, most famously at Pearl Harbor, the suicides of the Satsuma Rebellion were unique in that they were a direct response to defeat in battle – and the defeat of traditional Japanese culture.

Furthermore, there has been little scholarly research on the connection between the Satsuma Rebellion and honor ideology. As such, I will explore the links between the Satsuma Rebellion – and its ritual suicides – and honor ideology. The Satsuma Rebellion will be seen as a 'mid-way point' between the honor-ideology based Tokugawa period and the waning influence of honor ideology after the Meiji period.

Finally, General Nogi's suicide in the final moments of the Meiji Period and the reactions from all corners of Japanese culture, will illustrate the last point in the Meiji-era trajectory towards modernization, and away from honor ideology. In many ways, General Nogi serves as the ultimate example of honor ideology during the Meiji period.

Not only did Nogi commit ritual suicide, but he did so in traditional form. He committed ritual suicide explicitly for the death of his master (the Emperor), and killed himself in the most traditional way possible, using the correct knife and style, and attiring himself in traditional Japanese garments. However, Nogi's death is
nuanced. One of the main reasons for his perceived dishonor was losing the
government’s flag during a moment in the Satsuma Rebellion – where he was
fighting against the samurai, and against the traditional concept of honor ideology. I
will attempt to make sense of such seeming contradictions within Nogi’s life.

While Nogi’s attributes have been fictionalized in such works as Natsume
Soseki’s *Kokoro*, and his life story is borne out through both biographical works such
as Doris Bargen’s *Suicidal Honor: General Nogi and the Writings of Mori Ogai and
Natsume Soseki*, no scholarly attempt has been made at contextualizing the life and
suicide of General Nogi within the broader context of honor ideology, as I will
attempt to do.
Section One: The Transformations of Meiji Japan: Sowing Change in Tradition

The Meiji Period Begins

The Meiji period, which began in 1868, was a seminal period in Japanese history, and created an unprecedented upheaval in the traditional Japanese social order. While there was no grand revolution or chaotic uprising, the dawn of the Meiji era meant a rapid and deep erasure of centuries of traditional Japanese culture.

It would not be accurate to say that the beginning of the Meiji period was the first exposure that Japan gained to the Western world. For hundreds of years during Tokugawa rule, Westerners both visited and lived in Japan, bringing with them fragments of Western culture to varying degrees. During the late Tokugawa period, a strong anti-foreigner movement had emerged, the "revere the Emperor, expel the barbarian" movement. Led by Aizawa Seishisai, the movement sought to rid Japan of Westerners, whom they considered "barbarians who should be expelled militarily", and who stood in contrast to Japan, which had finally surpassed China as the "center of world civilization."

However, the late Tokugawa period did bring the official opening of Japanese ports to the West. With the ports of Japan open to the West, modernization and Western culture began to seep into daily life and culture in Japan. This shift can be seen most clearly in the fall of the samurai class. Once powerful and respected, as

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8 Wakabayashi, 17.
the samurai class began to lose its grip so too did the honor ideology which it held close to its heart, paving the way for modernization to sweep throughout Japan. This modernization – both technological and social – would continue at a breakneck pace through the end of the Meiji period. Combined with its catalyst, the fall of the Samurai class, this modernization would cement the disappearance of honor ideology from mainstream Japanese culture.

Foundations of Revolution

During the Tokugawa period, which preceded the Meiji period and ended in 1868, Japan was mostly closed to foreign trade, with the exception of limited trade with the Dutch.9 Without serious foreign obligations, and largely without a strong foreign influence on daily culture, Japan was able to maintain a largely insular existence.

This was all to change in 1853. Commodore Matthew Perry, an American, arrived in Japan in the summer of 1853 with a squadron of Naval ships. Perry delivered a letter directly to the bakufu (the ruling institution) requesting diplomatic relations and trade between the United States and Japan.10 While no direct threats were made, the harsh message sent by the squadron of Navy ships and the direct tone of the letter gave Japan little choice but to enter negotiations with the United States.

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Japan did not give in entirely to the United States’ requests. Ordered “not to grant trade but to avoid precipitations hostilities”, the Japanese negotiators met with Perry to determine an agreement in February of 1854.\textsuperscript{11} It was determined that two ports would be opened as ports of call, a U.S. consul would be appointed to Japan, and the U.S. would get most-favored-nation status.\textsuperscript{12} Most tellingly, Perry’s own writings describing the initial treaty revealed that this was seen as a beginning of a campaign to 'Westernize' Japan, as he wrote of hope for “future negotiation of treaties” for “the advancement of Japan”.\textsuperscript{13}

The ‘advancement’ that Perry hoped for came swiftly and decisively. By 1858, the Harris Treaty was signed. The Harris Treaty was the true opening of the levy, and officially opened Japan to foreign trade.\textsuperscript{14} A primary motivation of Japan in signing the treaty was fear of being placed under the same foreign influence that China had fallen under in the wake of the Arrow war. However, the Harris treaty was sweeping enough in its terms and conditions as to place Japan under a similar level of subjectivity that China had surrendered to.\textsuperscript{15}

From 1858 to 1868, tensions began to mount within Japan. As foreigners began to rapidly increase their trade relations with Japan in the wake of the Harris treaty, an unprecedented clash of cultures occurred. Two key events highlight these

\textsuperscript{12} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 270.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 316.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
tensions: the 1862 murder of an Englishman by a Samurai, and the 1863 raid of foreign shipments in the Shimonoseki straits.\textsuperscript{16}

This tension exposed the fundamental weaknesses of the Tokugawa government. The lack of unity within the Tokugawa bakufu made it difficult for Japan to participate effectively in this new era of international politics.\textsuperscript{17} In 1866, an alliance against the Tokugawa bakufu was formed by Satsuma and Choshu, which was the final nail in the coffin of Tokugawa rule. The Satsuma-Choshu alliance was too strong to resist, and as it became apparent that a bloody civil war was inevitable, the Japanese court issued "The Restoration of Imperial Rule of the Old" on January 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 1868.\textsuperscript{18}

The Meiji period, forged by the instability and influence created by the foreign presence in Japan, was a schizophrenic mix of the old and the new. While it was a restoration of the Imperial rule, it must not be thought of as a return to traditional Japanese culture. As a practical consideration, Japan was ruled not by the Emperor, but by men of "modest rank but immodest self-assurance" who desired to make a power-play of Japan's new role on the global stage.\textsuperscript{19} Now that Japan was irreversibly engaged with the rest of the world, the new goal was not to return to Japan's previous insularity, but to make Japan a leading global power:

\textsuperscript{16} Mason and Caiger, 263.
\textsuperscript{17} Marius Jansen, \textit{The Making of Modern Japan} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 331.
\textsuperscript{18} Jansen, 312.
\textsuperscript{19} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 316.
The Fall of the Samurai

With Japan on a straight course towards Westernization, one clear victim emerged: the samurai. During the Tokugawa period, the samurai enjoyed a place at the top of the social hierarchy – technically being situated above peasants, artisans, and merchants. However, in practice, there were only two social classes – samurai and commoners. The samurai not only had power over other classes politically, but were able to live “off the work of others”, drawing large pensions from the Tokugawa government.

With the samurai at the top of the social hierarchy, so too was the honor ideology of the samurai. Honor ideology was the central element of the samurai identity. For the samurai, honor was what placed them above the other classes. While almost every element of samurai culture can be seen through the lens of honor ideology, two examples illustrate it most clearly.

With the vassalage system, which revolved around “long-term relationships of exchange and obligation”, honor can be seen as the glue which allowed such strict and obligation-heavy structures to exist. Another prominent example of honor ideology in Japan, and the central focus of my argument, is the concept of ‘honorable death’. Death was seen as an “important occasion for making a point of honor: a man’s control, dignity, and concern for posthumous reputation all fused together” in

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20 Mason and Caiger, 220.
21 Ibid.
22 Ikegami, 16.
23 Ikegami, 25.
24 Ikegami, 28.
the moment of death.\textsuperscript{25} Here, honor is seen as the most important force in the life of a samurai - more important than life itself. As the samurai were at the top of the social classes in Japan, devotion to honor ideology was seen as the supreme goal of mainstream Japanese culture in the Tokugawa period.

However, the dawn of the Meiji period brought a broad and measurable decline in the influence of the samurai. First, the samurai were not simply made a lower class, they were officially abolished as a class entire. The pensions that samurai had long enjoyed were cut drastically, and replaced by stipends to be used as seed money for business - a practice unthinkable for the samurai before 1868. Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, in 1876 the samurai were forbidden from wearing their swords.\textsuperscript{26} Without their pensions or swords (a crucial part of their identity) the samurai struggled with a remarkably rapid fall from grace.

No event highlights the decline in samurai influence during the Meiji period more vividly than the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877. Due to the extent of the war, it might be more accurately referred to as a civil war – the rebellion involved more than seven months of brutal fighting between samurai and government forces in the southern part of Kyushu.\textsuperscript{27} The rebellion was led by Saigo Takamori, a samurai who had formerly held a position on the powerful Council of State. Motivated by the abolition of the samurai class and disgusted by the Westernization of the Imperial

\textsuperscript{25} Eiko Ikegami, 103.
\textsuperscript{27} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 393.
government, Takamori's resignation from government set into motion an unstoppable momentum towards war.²⁸

Thousands of troops were sent by the Imperial government to crush the rebellion, and while the samurai fought a long and hard battle, the Imperial forces were simply too powerful for the samurai to put down.²⁹ Importantly, the condescending treatment of the samurai towards the commoners prevented the samurai from using the peasants as allies. This hubris can be seen as one of the reasons for the failure of the Satsuma Rebellion, and more broadly as an explanation for why the commoners of Japan did not more actively support the samurai during their decline.³⁰

The defeat of the Satsuma Rebellion was final: the decisive and relatively swift victory by the Imperial forces made it "clear that no further samurai revolts would have a chance of succeeding."³¹ And while Saigo Takamori was eventually pardoned by the emperor, the Satsuma Rebellion marked the final end of samurai rule in Japan.

It must be noted that not all samurai were against the modernization of Japan. Yet while some "enthusiastic and progressive samurai eagerly replaced their top knots with top hats", the majority of samurai in the Meiji period were largely dissatisfied with their new role in society.³²

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²⁸ Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 393.
²⁹ Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 399.
³⁰ Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 401.
³¹ Jansen, 370.
Well before the end of the Meiji period, the samurai as a powerful class with practical influence on mainstream Japanese culture had become largely a relic of the past. S.R. Turnbull's comprehensive history, *The Samurai*, ends with Saigo Takamori committing ritual suicide, with the help of his retainer, in the waning moments of the Satsuma Rebellion.\(^{33}\)

**Japan's Course Towards Modernization**

With their adherence to traditional Japanese culture, the prominent place of the samurai in Japanese government – and their high regard in the eyes of commoners – had been an obstacle for Westernization of Japanese culture before the Meiji period began. As such, despite the Western culture and influence that existed in Japan prior to the Meiji period, Japan was able to largely resist Westernization. With the samurai removed from both their official status and, as a result, largely from mainstream culture, the stage was cleared for the swift and comprehensive Westernization of Japan.

The rise of trade brought a reorganization of the Japanese economy. Cities which benefitted from increased trade and embraced modern industrial methods of production experienced fast growth. One of these cities was Osaka, which grew the most rapidly of all Japanese cities towards the end of the nineteenth century. Cities which were left behind in the modernization of the Japanese economy, such as Nagasaki, were left with much slower growth.\(^{34}\) However, it must be noted that

\(^{33}\) Turnbull, *The Samurai*, 290.
\(^{34}\) Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 539.
Japan did not experience a mass exodus from rural areas to cities; Japan possessed an "adequate urban base for launching modern economic growth."\textsuperscript{35} The move towards an industrialized economy did, however, create a dramatic shift in cultural values, the extent of which I will argue was essential in reducing the role of honor ideology in Japanese culture.

Now a participant on the international stage, Japan found itself entangled in the messy arena of global politics. One issue of constant infighting within Meiji politics was the question of whether or not to invade Korea.\textsuperscript{36} Wars were fought; determined not to lose territory to Russia, Japan instigated the Russo-Japanese war, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The war was fought by modern, 'Western' means, as the fighting involved naval battles and ground combat with modern artillery.\textsuperscript{37} With the emphasis on modern fighting tactics, neither the samurai warrior nor honor ideology had any place in modern warfare. This is a crucial point, as excellence in warfare was an essential merit of the samurai. Without utility in war, the samurai became pragmatically useless to Japan.

Despite the emergence of modern and mechanized warfare and the removal of samurai from positions of power, there a notable cultural movement towards antiquity. The fukko (restore antiquity) movement revolved around the theme of bringing back the best aspects of the past to restore harmony to Japanese culture. The fukko movement revolved around the native deities of old, as well as looking to the Meiji government not as a modernized government, but rather as a return to

\textsuperscript{35} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 539.
\textsuperscript{36} Jansen, 424.
\textsuperscript{37} Jansen, 440.
civilized Imperial rule after centuries of warrior rule by the samurai of the
Tokugawa bakufu. However, this movement was not large enough to sustain
momentum.\textsuperscript{38}

The focus on a new type of civilization led to changes in culture and
education. Western-trained Intellectuals assumed a prominent place in society and
were paid large salaries, and English lessons were in high demand.\textsuperscript{39} The teaching of
Nakamura Masanao, who was educated as a traditional Confucian scholar and later
studied in England, became a prominent figure in Japan’s move towards Western
‘enlightenment’. Nakamura founded the Meiji Sixth Year-Society, a group of Japanese
elite who met to discuss how to “advance modernization in Japan.”\textsuperscript{40}

Nakamura was not alone, as indeed Japan made such quick study of foreign
institutions and customs that it appeared as if Japan had simply given up its own
culture. However, Japan’s study of foreign culture was more of a strategic decision.
Japan saw that its way to assert power over the West and establish itself as a global
power was to first learn the rules of the game.\textsuperscript{41} Regardless of the motivation for
adapting the education and customs of the West, it was certainly a decisive
adaptation, and while there was still nationalism in the sense that Japan was seen as
superior to other nations, traditional Japanese culture was not seen as the means to
such superiority.

\textsuperscript{38} Jansen, 458.
\textsuperscript{39} Jansen, 460.
\textsuperscript{40} Jansen, 461.
\textsuperscript{41} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 466.
Despite some calls for a return to antiquity, modernization could not be stopped. What effect his modernization would have upon Japanese society was hotly debated. However, it is clear that much more was at stake than a simple cultural shift. The writings Kuga Katsunan during the late Meiji period encapsulate what the stakes were: the unity of the nation itself. The Japanese viewed traditional culture as necessary to maintaining the balance of the nation, and with the loss of the "unshakable moral authority" that was provided by tradition, it was the fate of Japan that hung precariously from the precipice of modernization.
Section Two: Honor Ideology as an Essential Element of Japanese Culture

The Ways of the Samurai: The Origins of Honor Ideology

The origins of honor ideology in Japan are inextricably linked with the samurai, and while it is possible to find elements of honor ideology at points in earlier Japanese history, I will consider honor ideology it relates to ritual suicide in Japan, which began around the twelfth century. Two sources will be considered: the suicide of Minamoto Yorimasa in the Gempei war of 1180 and documentation of warrior recognition in the fourteenth century.

The origins of honor ideology with direct correlation to ritual suicide can be seen in Japan as early as the twelfth century. The exact date of the first honor-related suicide is unknown. However, the first well documented instance is attributed to the Gempei war, with the suicide of Minamoto Yorimasa. While it is unclear whether or not the suicide is factual, the story of Yorimasa's suicide is a rich illustration of how honor ideology was constructed.

As the last member of the Minamoto clan left in court after the Taira clan had gained power of Japan, he organized a plot to attack the Taira clan, with the goal of allowing the Minamoto clan to regain control of the country.

During one of the first battles of the Gempei war, Minamoto was injured and cornered by advancing Taira samurai. At the age of seventy-four, Minamoto chose not to be captured, or to allow his head to be taken by the oncoming Taira samurai –

which would be a serious dishonor. Instead, he instructed his son to hold off the coming onslaught, and calmly composed the following poem:

Like a fossil tree from which we gather no flowers
Sad has been my life, fated no fruit to produce.43

Then, Yorimasa thrust his sword into his belly and committed suicide. His eldest son followed him into death. Yorimasa’s suicide can be seen as marking the beginning of ritual suicide as a cultural institution, and his final poem provides a stunning connection between the act of suicide as something more than an act of grief or despair. Rather, Yorimasa’s poem reflects upon suicide as a carefully calculated response to failure and dishonor. Despite his attempt to restore honor to his clan, and despite his attempt to fight valiantly in battle, Yorimasa clearly realized that he has lost, and had “no fruit to produce”. It is for this reason that he committed suicide by sword, and thus began the practice of ritual suicide as a Japanese cultural institution.44

It is important to note what while this story is considered accurate by prominent samurai scholar S.R. Turnbull, it is very difficult to prove the actual events of medieval Japanese history. As such, I consider it not as a moment in history but as a moment in Japanese ideology: the poem’s central theme of honor ideology is an illustration of the power of the ideology itself.

As such, while Yorimasa’s suicide can be seen as the beginning of honor ideology through the lens of ritual suicide, it is important to consider that honor

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44 Turnbull, The Samurai, 47.
ideology extended further into Japanese culture than simply a response to dishonor in death. Indeed, the existence of ritual suicide itself suggests a cultural tradition of honor, which can be seen in the testament of Lord Shibuya Shigekado in 1367. Such testaments are important because they allow a direct glimpse of Japanese life without the interfering bias of an artist of observer.

Shibuya Shigekado, a Lord of Iriki, laid out a testament to assign privilege and reward for those who were loyal and honorable according to the honor ideology based customs of the time. His testament contained the following:

For a distinguished loyal service, twice the usual grant will be assigned. As regards to one who dies in battle, if he leaves a son, a fief will be assigned to him in addition to his original holding, when it is practicable to do so... If the aforesaid articles were, even in the time of his children, violated [by any of them], he should not be [considered as] Shigekado's descendant.45

This testament demonstrates the power of Japanese honor ideology in two ways. First, it demonstrates the high premium that Japanese culture placed on the ideal of 'loyalty' and dedication in battle. Death in battle – which often took place as ritual suicide - was seen as something honorable, and indeed something to be rewarded, rather than as a sign of failure. Similarly, loyalty is the only other virtue mentioned in the testament, taking its place alongside valor in battle as a key component of honor ideology. The real warrior culture of fourteenth century Japan is on clear display in this testament. As a historical document, this goes a step beyond Yorimasa’s poem and provides evidence of the actual practice and existence of honor ideology.

Second, the testament demonstrates the deep and pervasive roots through which honor ideology spreads through the tree of Japanese family heritage. Honor was not viewed as an individual trait, but rather as part of a broader cultural tradition, and then broken down into smaller units which comprised an 'honorable society', the smallest of which was the family.

An individual could not be honorable if their family was dishonorable, as directly referenced in the testament by the statement "If the aforesaid articles were, even in the time of his children, violated [by any of them], he should not be [considered as] Shigekado's descendant." This interweaving between family and honor is essential to an understanding of Japanese honor ideology as a broad cultural belief rather than an individual code of conduct.

The Fantasy of Honor: Honor Ideology in the Eighteenth Century

The Japanese conception of honor ideology did not shift dramatically during the Tokugawa period. While the Tokugawa period itself was dynamic and involved periods of both war and peace, honor ideology itself played a consistent role by virtue of the samurai class staying in consistent power.

By the end of the Tokugawa period, honor ideology still survived as a crucial and revered element of Japanese society, although a trend began to emerge towards glorification of past honor rather than a celebration of current instances of honor ideology. The print "Tsutsui no Jomyo and Ichirai Hoshi on Uji Bridge" is an excellent

46 Shigekado, 269.
of this bridging between the years of honor ideology as a fundamental and practical element of warfare culture and honor ideology as an idealized cultural value.

The vivid and colorful print depicts the Battle of Uji Bridge, which was the first major battle of the Genpei war. The central figure, Tsutsui no Jomyo, was one of the more prominent samurai engaged in the war, and was revered for his prowess in battle.47

In the print, Tsutsui is depicted flying acrobatically and gracefully over his opponent. His sword is drawn, and about to deliver the death blow to his opponent, Ichirai Hoshi, a samurai of the Tairo clan. His face is calm and composed; there is no trace of battle stress on his face, and he shows complete concentration.

Further, he has one hand on his sword and the other on his enemy’s head, presumably to remove his enemy’s head and keep it – a direct statement of dishonor for his enemy.48

The depiction of Tsutsui’s opponent is also important. Contrasted with Tsutsui’s natural complexion and controlled expressions, his opponent has a grey complexion and his face is contorted in an expression of fear and agony. The viewer can see Tsutsui’s honor in the calm and collected expression in the face of action and danger.

The print is bold and exciting. Despite depicting an event which occurred 600 years before the print was made, the viewer gets a strong sense of action and danger.


excitement. The background is simple, and the focus is entirely on the graceful and powerful scene of two men engaged in traditional samurai warfare. As such, the print demonstrates the popular interest in samurai warfare, even during the peaceful later Tokugawa period. It is this popular interest in warfare that provides the basis for considering the samurai codes of Taira Shigesuke and Yamamoto Tsunetomo.

The samurai codes of Taira Shigesuke and Yamamoto Tsunetomo give great insight into the idealization of honor ideology. In the late Tokugawa period, the constant warfare of earlier Japan had vanished to a great extent. However, with easier distribution of literature came a flood of material idealizing honor ideology. Two of the most prominent Tokugawa codes were written by Taira Shigesuke and Yamamoto Tsunetomo in the early eighteenth century.

The honor ideology portrayed in Bushido Shoshinsu cannot be read as a practical guide. Taira Shigesuke was never involved in battle, and in fact was a scholar. The guide is very clear in its intentions of focusing on the past and only in readying young warriors for a potential battle, as opposed to any real threat. This can be seen in the chapter on guardianship, which begins its narration describing an incident “During the era of the Warring States...”, and similarly referencing the past in almost all chapters of the text. With no wars occurring at the time, honor


\[51\] Shigesuke, 58.
ideology was used as a way of paying homage to the past and keeping cultural traditions alive.

The honor ideology described in *Bushido Shoshinsu* is very precisely laid out.

As with previous examples, I will focus on the aspects of *Bushido Shoshinsu* that focus on suicide and death.

Perhaps the most striking statement in *Bushido Shoshinsu* comes in the very first sentence:

One who is supposed to be a warrior considers it his foremost concern to keep death in mind at all times, every day and every night, from the morning of New Year's Day through the even of New Year's Eve.\(^{52}\)

Shigesuke is very clear on his point – death is the end goal of life, especially in the "precarious" life of a warrior, and so a focus on dying an honorable death should be a key for the life of any warrior. In battle, this meant either death at the hands of the enemy or ritual suicide. Life may be transient, especially for a warrior, but honor in death lasts forever.

Shigesuke clearly addresses what a warrior can do to create an honorable death, especially after the death of one's master. Interestingly, Shigesuke does not simply prescribe that all warriors commit ritual suicide upon the death of their master. Rather, Shigesuke argues that a warrior (or 'knight') should do the following in the event of his master's death, in the event of a vengeful spirit haunting the house:

Seize the villain, the devil of the house, and do away with

\(^{52}\) Shigesuke, 3.
him as you will – run him through, or strike off his head – and then when that is done satisfactorily you immediately disembowel yourself, committing suicide.”

In this way, the samurai does the greatest service to his lord, by eliminating the threat of ghosts and also by eliminating the chance that the ghost was able to transfer to the loyal samurai himself. However, this blend of honor ideology and ghost story is an illustration of how honor ideology moved away from being a battleground principle, and into an idealized vision of society.

In 1710, Yamamoto Tsunetomo authored *Hagakure*, commonly referred to as “The Book of the Samurai”. While still representative of the type of idealized honor ideology as *Bushido Shosinsu, Hagakure* presents a much less direct and step-by-step view of honor ideology. Rather, *Hagakure* is presented as a series of stories, each relating a key moral of the idealized samurai. The morals range from where one should sleep in a house to intimate relationships, but here I will consider most closely an example of ritual suicide and honorable death. In one striking example, a man named Takagi is beaten by his neighbors after an argument. He returns home, and his wife asks:

Haven’t you forgotten about the matter of death?’
‘Definitely not!’ he replied.
His wife then retorted, ’At any rate, a man dies only once. Of the various ways of dying – dying of diseases, being cut down in battle, seppuku, or being beheaded – to die ignominiously would be a shame.’

53 Shigesuke, 95.
His wife then proceeds to join him in dressing for battle, and they go the neighbors' house. The husband and wife kill the neighbors, thus avenging their loss of honor. Later, the husband is ordered to commit seppuku, to maintain his own honor.\footnote{Tsunetomo, 136.}

As with all stories in \textit{Hagakure}, this one is told with the express intention of crafting a powerful moral. The moral in this particular story is twofold. First, the way one dies is seen as integral to one's honor. Second, the conflicting nature of honor ideology - something that will be expanded upon later with General Nogi - is on vivid display. There is no way out for Takagi. He must avenge his honor, but he also must commit ritual suicide for the crime of murder.

Both \textit{Bushido Shoshinshu} and \textit{Hagakure} articulate the idea of honorable death as it related to honor ideology, and both do so in idealized ways. Rather than demonstrating examples of the present, both texts highlight episodes from the past which readers are encouraged to follow, embellished as ghost stories and as dramatic tales.

\textbf{The Foundation for Meiji Honor Ideology}

Before the Meiji period, honor ideology existed in two contexts. From the 12th century until the mid-Tokugawa period, honor ideology existed as a code of behavior that affected both warriors in battle and the everyday lives of Japanese people. This can be seen in ritual suicides during battle and in the documents governing the actions of the Japanese people.
Towards the end of the Tokugawa period, as Japan moved away from its violent warrior past honor ideology – and specifically honorably death – was seen as a vivid connection to a glorious past. However, there was far less utility for honorable death in a culture with less violence. This idealization of honor ideology is borne out in the artistic and literary depictions of honor ideology during the late Tokugawa.
Section Three: The Satusma Rebellion: Modernization Gains Momentum

The Satsuma Rebellion was a seminal moment in the trajectory towards modernization, and away from honor ideology, in Japan. The Satsuma Rebellion was launched as a last-ditch effort by the samurai to regain the status, privileges, and rights that they had enjoyed during the period of Tokugawa rule. Perhaps more importantly, the Satsuma Rebellion can be seen as the last formal clash of traditional Japanese warrior culture (based on honor ideology) versus the forces of modern Japanese government.

The Road to Rebellion

Most practically, however, the Satsuma Rebellion was a large-scale protest by the samurai to reclaim their status in society that was lost in the Meiji period. For hundreds of years prior to 1868, the samurai had enjoyed their place at the top of Japanese society, and a fall to the level of common citizens was not easy – and was not taken well by many members of the samurai elite.

At the end of Tokugawa, the Meiji government wasted no time in establishing itself as a powerful force opposed to the traditions on which the samurai had built their comfortable lives upon. Japanese samurai had been used to myriad privileges. They received pensions from the government, high status in government, and the
honor of being in one of the highest classes. At the outset of the Meiji period, all of these privileges were revoked.\textsuperscript{56}

Without a pension, or status as a top-class group, the samurai faced a crisis of identity. This crisis was a deep one, as their identity had been formed by hundreds of years of tradition and culture. Some of that identity was based on facts – such as the government pension. In this way, the samurai were upset at the loss of tangible privileges.

However, some of the identity was also based in myth – most specifically honor ideology – such as the image of an active warrior culture cultivated by works such as \textit{Hagakure}. As such, with the demise of tangible pieces of samurai identity such as class demarcation and pensions also came the perceived loss of something much greater – the created ‘warrior culture’ of honor ideology.

Not all samurai took this change in stride. The most powerful and obvious of these occurrences was the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, led by Saigo Takamori. The Rebellion was large-scale and shook Japan deeply for many months.\textsuperscript{57}

Crucial to understanding the roots of the Satsuma Rebellion is an understanding of Saigo Takamori, its leader. Takamori was a powerful figure in Japanese government even after the Meiji Restoration, and his position as a government insider gave him a uniquely close perspective on the inner workings of the governmental turn against the samurai.

\textsuperscript{56} Turnbull, \textit{The Samurai}, 277.
\textsuperscript{57} Hall, Jansen and Kana; eds., 400.
The Korean Crisis of 1873

In addition to the litany of reductions to samurai status, a crucial incident in Saigo Takamori’s path to rebellion was the Korean Crisis of 1873. In various incidents preceding the fall of 1873, Korea had consistently been disrespectful towards the honor of Japan. The Koreans had mistreated Japanese envoys, refused to accept official greetings from the Emperor, and forced Japanese merchants residing in Korea to live in poor conditions.\(^5^8\)

In October of 1873, the Council of State debated whether to take military action against Korea for such offenses, or whether Japan should take a more measured and diplomatic approach. This debate was about much more than a similar military decision. The nature of future Japanese foreign policy was at stake.

On one side were those who thought that Japan needed to exercise diplomacy in order to cement its status as a rising international power. On the other side were those who thought that Japan could not allow such continuous and brazen dishonor of Japan to go unpunished – in other words, that honor ideology should maintain a place in foreign policy. Firmly planted on this side was Saigo Takamori.\(^5^9\)

Saigo Takamori saw the Korean crisis as a chance to do two things. First, by pushing for military action he would be certain to avenge the Korean insults to Japan. Second, he (and his many samurai supporters) could combine “adventure


\(^{59}\) Mayo, 793.
with employment at a time when [samurai] stipends were in question and a
conscript [non-samurai] army was being recruited."\textsuperscript{60}

The resolution of the Korean Crisis was not favorable to Saigo Takamori. War
was not chosen, and on February 26, 1876 the Treaty of Amity and Friendship with
Korea was signed. The treaty was direct in stating that Korea was equal to Japan,
and established a desire for peace and friendship, as established through diplomacy:

\begin{quote}
Korea, being an independent sovereignty, and Japan
her compeer, in furtherance of their mutual desire
for lasting peace and friendship, do hereby settle and
conclude the forms and conditions of their intercourse
upon terms of equality and mutual regard.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

The unfavorable resolution of the Korea Crisis, combined with the Meiji
government's continued erosion of samurai status, led to Saigo Takamori's outrage –
and the Satsuma Rebellion. Saigo Takamori gave up his position in the Council of
State and his position as supreme commander of Japan's armed forced the moment
that the Council of State chose diplomacy over war.\textsuperscript{62}

The Revolution Takes Shape

Saigo Takamori was thus placed in an extremely volatile position. He was
used to having power, strongly on the side of the samurai, and now had no official
outlet through which to direct his anger in legislation or Council of State resolutions.

\textsuperscript{60} Mayo, 796.
\textsuperscript{61} "Treaty of Amity and Friendship with Korea" in Centre for East Asian Cultural
Studies. \textit{Meiji Japan Through Contemporary Sources}, Volumes 2. Tokyo: Hinode
Company, 1972, 122.
\textsuperscript{62} Hall, Jansen, Kanai, eds., 393.
Further complicating the matter were the large number of soldiers who followed Saigo Takamori as he left the government.63

Takamori then established shigakko, or private military academies, in Satsuma – funded by his large government pension that he received as a retired official.64 Finally, as Meiji forms eroded samurai privilege more and more – the last straw being the 1876 law that samurai could no longer carry swords – vast numbers of ex-samurai flocked to the shigakko. The stage for rebellion was set. All that was needed was a match.

The match came in two parts. The first was a spy sent by the Meiji government to infiltrate the shigakko, who was caught and confessed that he was sent to kill Saigo Takamori. The second was the raiding of a large government ship by members of the shigakko – which, although Saigo Takamori had not sanctioned it, set the rebels on an unavoidable path to war.65

Further insight on the causes of the war is provided by the confession of Oyama Tsunayoshi, an ex-Prefect of Kagoshima-ken, on his support to Saigo Takamori, written in July 1877:

On receiving the confessions of Nakahara and others from Saigo I believed in them, had them printed and issued within the Kagoshima-ken. At the time these men (Nakahara and others) were taken before the board of examiners, I sent police sergeant Kifugi to Kumamoto, where Saigo was at the time, to obtain proofs against them, but none were forthcoming... I heard that those men had been put to cruel torture while under examination by many members of the Private School. Judging from these circumstances, I now believe that those confessions were

63 Hall, Jansen, Kanai; eds., 393.
64 Ibid.
65 Hall, Jansen, Kanai; eds., 396.
extorted by means of threats, in order that they might obtain a pretext for breaking out into rebellion.\textsuperscript{66}

As Tsunayoshi's statement was also given as a confession, there is of course a chance that his testimony is also fabricated. However, the detail throughout his complete confession, which matches modern historical scholarship, suggests that his statement is accurate.

The fact that Saigo Takamori and the members of the shigakko incited war is important especially as an indicator of what the Satsuma Rebellion was conceived as. If analyzed within the context of this statement, one can see that the Satsuma Rebellion was conceived not as a response to a government assassination attempt, but as a calculated attempt to restore honor ideology to the Japanese government.

The war was costly for both sides, both in terms of finances and in terms of lives. The war cost the government 42 million Yen, which was equal to 80 percent of the annual budget at the time. 65,000 government soldiers were mobilized, and 6,000 died.\textsuperscript{67} While there is no direct accounting of the financial cost for Saigo Takamori's troops, 18,000 rebel troops were killed or wounded.\textsuperscript{68} There is no question that the Satsuma Rebellion was a full-scale civil war.

As the war came to a close, with the Meiji government winning decisively, many rebel soldiers chose to commit ritual suicide rather than be captured and imprisoned or dishonored. Indeed, Saigo Takamori himself chose voluntary death


\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{68} Jansen, 369.
over dishonor. Shot in the leg by a “European-trained conscript”, Saigo asked one of his retainers to help him end his own life. While there are varying accounts of Saigo Takamori’s final moments, most versions conclude that he chose to end his own life.

Links with Honor Ideology

It is important not to characterize Saigo Takamori as a wild rebel samurai who fought blindly for tradition. Saigo wore his Imperial Army uniform throughout the war, and indeed was one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the Meiji Restoration. However, despite his links with the Meiji government, Saigo Takamori emphasizes the deep-seated thread of honor ideology which existed throughout Meiji culture.

As seen through the example of Saigo Takamori, honor ideology was not one distinct part of traditional Japanese culture, one in which people fell on to one exact side or the other. Rather, honor ideology was so inextricably linked through different generations and different social classes that one could wear a government uniform while fighting the government. With honor ideology, the emphasis was on the practices and honor of one’s life, rather than one’s affiliations.

Despite the flexibility of honor ideology within different groups, the Satsuma Rebellion was, quite plainly, a massive defeat for honor ideology. Saigo Takamori and his men fought for a way of life which had passed, for a societal structure that was no longer practical, and were crushed by the stronger government forces.

69 Turnbull, The Samurai, 290.
70 Ibid.
Seeing the failure both of his revolution and of honor ideology, Saigo Takamori saw no choice but to commit suicide.

The Last Moment of a Loyal Life

Encapsulating the final moments of the Satsuma Rebellion is Toyohara Kunichika’s *The Last Moment of a Loyal Life*. In this triptych, the actor Nakamura Sojuro is depicted playing the role of Sawamoto Hikoemon, a traditional samurai disgraced by the failure of the Satsuma Rebellion. Sawamoto is shown in the throes of death, sword plunged into his body, and yet his face is peaceful and serene. This image can be closely read on several levels.

First, the image depicts the Satsuma Rebellion, a seminal moment in Japanese history through which the Samurai class and their traditional ways lost their grip on society, giving way to modernism in Japan. Second, the image depicts the traditional

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71 Direct Image Source For Purposes of Copyright: http://amica.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/AMICO~1~1~60561~3466:Nakamura-Sojuro-as-Sawamoto-Hikoemo?sort=INITIALSORT_CRN,OCR,AMICOID
method of hara-kiri suicide, and provides an accurate visual illustration of a process which is difficult for many outside of Japan to comprehend. Finally, both the style of illustration, and the style of the play from which the image is taken from, reflect the traditional Japanese culture which was clashing with modernity.

The central character in the image, Sawamoto Hikoemon, was a minor character in the Rebellion. He was not of any real import, and his name is not mentioned in historical texts. Sawamoto was a Samurai like any other, drawn to conflict over the degradation of traditional Japanese society in the face of modernization. Yet the decision of this average Samurai to commit Hara-Kiri as a result of the rebellion’s failure is a vivid illustration of the clash between traditional Japan and modern Japan. Sawamoto is depicted wearing traditional Japanese dress, and is disrobed from the waist up, which was the most traditional and strict form of hara-kiri. He is committing Sokotsu-shi, or expiatory suicide, to atone for his sin of disobeying the Meiji government. In accordance with the rules of Hara-Kiri, Sawamoto is emotionless, and does not show any pain while committing suicide. As such, The Last Moment of a Loyal Life is an excellent visual representation of traditional Hara-Kiri.

The style of this primary source is also worth noting. The triptych is drawn in classical Japanese style. Sawamoto is highly stylized, with exaggerated features. The

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74 Seward, 38.
75 Seward, 18.
background is composed in the style of classical Japanese aesthetics, with close appreciation of the natural world. Finally, the colors are rich and saturated, in stark contrast to Sakamoto's emotionless and pale face. The effect echoes a rich tradition of Japanese art, and does not display any signs of modernism. It is also important to note the triptych is based upon a traditional Japanese play, completed immediately after the Satsuma rebellion, in 1878. These traditional artistic elements echo the traditional content of the art, despite being produced in a time of modernization.

In the last moment of Sakamoto's life, we can see the last moments of honor ideology as a key focus of Japanese government and social practice.

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76 Keyes, xxiv.
77 Keyes, 182.
Section Four:
The Last Moment of a Loyal Life: Nogi's Suicide and the end of Honor Ideology

One Day in September: The Fall of Meiji and Nogi

It September 13, 1912. Nogi Maresuke, a prominent Japanese general, put on a Western-style military uniform and posed to have his picture taken. Several hours later, he removed the uniform and put on traditional Japanese clothes. He drew a sword and cut his stomach open from left to right, removed the sword and cut himself from the bottom up, and then impaled himself. Nogi had committed "junshi", the traditional Japanese practice of following one's master into death. For Nogi, that master was Emperor Mutsuhito, whose funeral on that very day signaled an end to the Meiji era, and an end to traditional Japan.

Yet Nogi's death, like his life, was rife with connections and contradictions. After all, this is the same General who led the government forces against the samurai in the Satsuma Rebellion. Nogi's loyalty can be seen as simply being to the emperor above all. This is borne out both in his life, by his service to the emperor over the samurai in the Satsuma Rebellion, and in his death, by his final act of following his master into death by traditionally executed ritual suicide. However, such a straightforward read does not do justices to the nuances of Honor Ideology.

The story of Nogi's suicide as it pertains to Honor Ideology can be studied most clearly through a detailed examination of Nogi's suicide letter.

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79 Ibid.
Nogi's letter was written just hours before his suicide, and contains specific reference to his motivations as well as deeper contextual allusions to Honor Ideology. Despite its short length, Nogi's suicide letter is the best way to examine why he made his decision to follow his master into death.

Nogi's letter begins as follows:

I am now following the late Emperor into death, though I know I shall be guilty in no small degree in doing so. Through my carelessness I lost the Regimental flag entrusted to me during the Civil War in the 10th year of Meiji and ever since have been looking for an opportunity to put an end to my life on account of that disgrace.

Nogi wastes not a moment in plainly stating his intentions of suicide: to erase the dishonor of losing one battle in the Satsuma Rebellion. It is important to consider that Nogi did not lose the overall war, as the government forces put down Saigo Takamori's troops with definitive ease, but rather Nogi suffered a loss of an individual battle. This is powerful evidence of the extent to which honor was characterized – not as an end, but as a means. In this example, it did not matter what the outcome of the larger war was, but rather it was an individual incident of dishonor that characterized the entire conflict for Nogi, and a fundamental reason that he chose to follow his master into death.

Furthermore, this account demonstrates the connection that Nogi felt with his master, Emperor Mutsuhito. As covered in the Satsuma Rebellion section,

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81 Ibid.
loyalty to one's master was an essential part of samurai Honor Ideology – the same honor ideology which was fought for during the Rebellion, and which Nogi fought against. On the surface, this may seem like a contradiction. However, it makes sense when evaluated under what might be called an 'Honor Ideology hierarchy'. For Nogi, practicing samurai-influenced Honor Ideology meant first and foremost being loyal to your master before being loyal to your ideology. Through this frame of reference, it becomes clearer how Nogi both fought against and died for the samurai code of Honor Ideology.

Nogi goes on to say:

I could find [no proper occasion to put and end to my life]. On the contrary, I have hitherto been bathed in the light of the Emperor's great benevolence, which I scarce deserved. I am now advanced in age, and I have come to the belief that I should be of little use to the Emperor, when suddenly occurred his death, which was a great blow to me and prompted me to resolve to die.\(^{82}\)

Nogi's practical considerations of suicide are equally interesting. Indeed, the place of practicality within honor ideology is extremely important. As with the previously considered codes of Shibuya Shigekado, a true follower of honor ideology would take into account what their impact would be if they died, and oftentimes chose life over death – even after dishonor – because service to their master was the a greater and more honorable goal than personal honor.

With the example of Nogi, he had determined long before his actual suicide that he needed to die to preserve his honor. Yet as a General for the Japanese

government, his duty was not to himself. His own honor was irrelevant; Nogi was devoted absolutely to Emperor Mutsuhito. As such, it would not have been honorable for him Nogi place his own honor above that of his master, and of his country. As such, Nogi was forced to commit suicide because of honor ideology as it related to personal honor, and forced to delay his suicide because of honor ideology as it related to societal honor.

Honor in Art: *Kokoro* as a response to Nogi’s death

Equally important in a consideration of the state of honor ideology at the end of the Meiji Period was the popular reaction to Nogi’s suicide, which can be explored most closely in Natsume Soseki’s novel *Kokoro*. With *Kokoro*, Soseki crafts a tale with rich roots in honor ideology, and attempts to describe the popular reaction of the Japanese people to Nogi’s death.

*Kokoro* tells the story of Sensei, an elderly man who has isolated himself from the increasingly modernizing world of Meiji Japan. He lives in a well-maintained house with his wife, and spends most of his days reading or thinking. His only companion aside from his wife is the narrator of *Kokoro*, a young man of similarly intellectual leanings, who finds himself drawn to the mystique of Sensei. More specifically, he is intrigued by Sensei’s obsession with his old friend K, who had committed suicide many years earlier.

As the novel progresses, Sensei’s frustration with modernization grows more intense. No longer able to ‘survive’ in what Japan has become, Sensei commits
suicide once hearing of General Nogi’s suicide at the fall of the Meiji period, and for the ‘Spirit of Meiji’

*Kokoro* can be used as an interpretation of honor ideology for two reasons. First, *Kokoro* can be read in terms of character. While it is too simplistic to consider Sensei as a character of modern Japan, or K as a symbol of traditional Japan, the two characters do represent different sides of honor ideology despite both eventually committing suicide.

Second, *Kokoro* can be read in terms of plot and circumstance. *Kokoro* was written in 1914, two years after Nogi’s suicide, and as such can be seen as a direct reaction – albeit an intellectual one – to the fall of Meiji and General Nogi’s death, and as such as a reaction to honor ideology at the fall of Meiji.\(^3\)

Isamu Fukuichi’s article “Kokoro and the Spirit of Meiji” attempts to draw the parallel between the events of the late Meiji period and the novel *Kokoro*. However, Fukuichi does not fully extend his argument through to the larger implications of Nogi’s suicide. As such, I will focus on expanding upon the focus of Fukuichi’s article by fully contextualizing *Kokoro* with Nogi’s suicide.

Sensei’s character is a complex conglomeration of the old and the new. His view of the world as a child was one of trust; he was raised by honorable and traditional – and wealthy - parents who died at a young age. Afterwards, he went to University and left his inheritance to the care of his uncle. Instead of safeguard the

money honestly, Sensei’s uncle cheated him out of his inheritance, to which Sensei stated:

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\text{I must admit, I sometimes wish that I had never lost my old innocence, and that once more I could be the person that I was. Please remember that you met me after I had become soiled. If one respects one’s elders because they have lived longer and have become more soiled than oneself, then I certainly deserve your respect.}^{84}
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Here, Sensei’s sense of traditional honor is seen as clashing strongly with the ‘realities’ of modern Japan, or perhaps simply the dark side of human nature.

Sensei’s response to his Uncle’s cheating brings up an important question – where is the practicality of honor ideology? In traditional Japanese honor ideology, one is most certainly supposed to defer to their elders, and it would have been inappropriate for Sensei to ask his Uncle for a complete list of accounting details. With this instance, Soseki seems to be questioning the practicality of a system based on honor instead of accountability.

Most integral to an understanding of Sensei – and *Kokoro* – is an understanding of Sensei’s obsessive relationship with his friend, K. The character of K is seen by Fukuichi as a complex conglomeration of traditional and modern Japan, both “a symbol of traditional Japan” and “very much a modern character – independent and individualistic”.^{85}

While Fukuichi’s analysis is cogent, it misses out on a key point of Soseki’s portraits of K. Rather than an awkward conglomeration of the old and the new,  

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85 Fukuichi, 470.
Soseki paints K as a character who represents a moment in time – the Meiji period - and the deep conflict within K is directly reflective of the deep conflicts that occurred during the Meiji period.

Furthermore, K is deeply involved in his own spiritual life – desiring a "concentration of mind" - in shunning the conveniences of even traditional Japanese life, and Sensei becomes deeply involved in helping K to attain a level of humanity.\footnote{Soseki, 157.}

Despite this sense of dedication and concentration, K cannot be read as a character who was a symbol of honor ideology. Using the money that his foster parents sent him to study medicine, K arrives in Tokyo and begins to apply the money to further his pursuit of 'the way'.\footnote{Soseki, 158.} Eventually growing anxious of deceiving his parents, K later sends a letter of apology to his foster parents, and rejoins his original family.\footnote{Soseki, 161.} In this back-and-forth example of K's behavior, we can see how his views of honor ideology were strong but were not applied consistently.

K becomes central to the book as he falls in love with a woman named Ojosan, the daughter of his (and Sensei's) landlord. As K begins to fall deeply in love with Ojosan, Sensei repeatedly tries to get in the way of K's love for Ojosan – fearing, according to Fukuichi, that Ojosan will choose K.\footnote{Fukuichi, 471.} It is perhaps the stuff of soap operas on the surface, but the interactions between K and Sensei – and the implications of the love triangle for Sensei – are rife with honor ideology.

K's refusal to open himself up to Ojosan was described by Sensei as follows:

\footnote{86 Soseki, 157.}
\footnote{87 Soseki, 158.}
\footnote{88 Soseki, 161.}
\footnote{89 Fukuichi, 471.}
...phrases such as “the age of awakening” and “the new life” had not yet come into fashion. But you must not think that K's inability to discard his old ways and begin life anew was due to his lack of modern concepts. You must understand that to K, his own past seemed too sacred a thing to be thrown away like an old suit of clothes. One might say that his past was his life, and to deny it would have meant that his life thus far had been without purpose.\(^90\)

Here, K can be seen as analogous to the last bastions of honor ideology. Despite being surrounded by the promise of what he could achieve if he modernized his ways of thought and behavior – in this case, 'true love' – K is too deeply involved in the tradition to which he was accustomed.

Yet K was not single-mindedly traditional, or able to put the thought of his life for Ojosan completely out of his mind. Rather, K's love for Ojosan was so great that he decides to commit suicide two days after hearing that Sensei had proposed engagement to her.

Despite the direct time correlation to K's suicide, K mentions nothing of Ojosan or her engagement in his suicide letter. Rather, he thanks Sensei for his "many kindesses in the past", asks him to take care of his final arrangements, and makes absolutely no mention of Ojosan in a "brief, businesslike letter".\(^91\) Even in death, K chooses not to reveal his emotions and maintain his traditionally stoic composure.

\(^90\) Soseki, 207.
\(^91\) Soseki, 219.
Fukuichi gives insight into this incident by stating that "unlike Sensei, who had different standards for men and women, K applied the same standard to both."\(^{92}\)

To take this further, and apply the lens of honor ideology to Fukuichi's argument: Rather than see things through the blurry lens of emotion, K was able to compartmentalize his emotions in traditional Japanese style, and see things in black and white: honor and dishonor.

The motivations of K's suicide once again demonstrate a hierarchy of honor ideology. While he could not live with opening himself to a modern understanding of love, he could not live with such a violent inner conflict. As such, the only option he saw was to take his own life.

K's suicide has a devastating impact on Sensei. Through much of the early parts of *Kokoro*, the narrator wonders about Sensei's deep and brooding nature. The answer is contained in the chapter on Sensei's testament in no uncertain terms:

> I did not cease to blame myself for K's death. From the beginning, I was afraid of the suffering my own sense of guilt would bring me. I had a vague hope that perhaps marriage would enable me to begin a new life. That this hope would be no more than a fleeting daydream, I realized soon enough. It was my wife who reminded me of harsh reality every time we were together.\(^{93}\)

Like Nogi's loss of the flag in battle, K's death brought an unrelenting force of anguish on Sensei. Instead of love bringing him comfort, his wife reminds Sensei of his failure with handling the love triangle with K and Ojosan, and of his betrayal of his friend. Sensei decides that he must die.

\(^{92}\) Fukuichi, 472.
\(^{93}\) Soseki, 225.
First, Sensei studies the General's reason for dying – and finds himself
"automatically counting the years that the general had lived, always with death at
the back of his mind."\textsuperscript{94} Realizing that Nogi had likely suffered more while living
with shame and dishonor than in his moment of death, Sensei has a revelation that
he must follow the General's junshi.

Fearing further that the narrator would not understand his reasons for
committing suicide, Sensei further explains his death:

| Perhaps you will not understand clearly why I am
| about to die, no more than I can fully understand
| why General Nogi killed himself. You and I belong to
different eras, and so we thinking differently. There
| is nothing to bridge the gap between us.\textsuperscript{95} |

Here, Sensei directly laments the gap in understanding between traditional honor
ideology and the modernizing world. The narrator was a close friend of Sensei's, one
that Sensei wrote a lengthy testament to, laying his soul bare, and yet Sensei was
afraid that the rapid changes that occurred during the Meiji period had erased a
connection between the two based on a shared cultural understanding of honor
ideology.

\textbf{The Final Curtain: The Fading of Honor Ideology}

As reported by the New York Times immediately after Nogi's death, his act of
junshi was "regarded as a splendid illustration of patriotism and devotion to duty"

\textsuperscript{94} Soseki, 234.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
by "all of the General's countrymen." And yet even in this demonstration of support, the fading influence of honor ideology can be seen: rather than simply being seen as the status quo, Nogi's death was glorified as a dramatic devotion to traditional honor ideology, not as an act that was widely understood as necessary.

Similarly, in *Kokoro*, Sensei's feeling that his death cannot be understood by the new generation of Japanese is evidence of the situation in which ritual suicide, and by extension honor ideology, found itself at the end of the Meiji period: something to be admired, but not emulated.

Additionally, both works highlight the concept of a hierarchy of honor ideology: like Nogi's decision to delay death for his own honor in order to serve his master, K's decision to die instead of living a life of conflicting principles is an illustration of the complex layers of honor ideology.

Honor ideology was not neatly replaced by a new form of ideology, nor was it erased completely. The Japanese warrior code lived on in the form of the suicide bombers of Pearl Harbor, and the reaction to Nogi's death showed that Japan still was engaged by honor ideology.

It would be simplistic to say that Japan quickly modernized and Westernized. However, the Western influences of the Meiji period took a toll on Japanese cultural identity. In the Taisho era, which occurred directly after the Meiji period, Japan went through a period of "cosmopolitanism, discontent, and reform" as the country

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struggled to find its identity between the traditional and the modern. However, Japan's place in the international stage was set - now a player in the world of global politics and trade, Japan could never return to its culturally insular past. As such, while Japan did not simply 'Westernize', Japan did modernize to the extent that a culture based upon honor ideology was no longer practical.

As more and more ideologies and modern complications arose - samurai rebellions for Nogi, 'true love' for K - the effectiveness of a code of honor began to wear thin, and lost its practicality. As Japan moved past the Meiji period, honor ideology had become so impractical in application that it began to fade from the public consciousness and establish itself as a fetishized remnant of traditional Japan.

97 Jansen, 543.
Conclusion

The Meiji period was a seminal moment in Japanese culture, not because it was the first time that Japan found itself open to the West, but because the cultural and political changes during the Meiji period allowed Western culture to gain a foothold in daily culture for the first time. This change has been seen in two key events involving ritual suicide: The Satsuma Rebellion and General Nogi’s Suicide at the end of the Meiji Period.

Prior to the Meiji period, honor ideology had been the driving force in Japanese culture. While not a specifically references social construct during the time period, Ikegami’s conception of honor ideology could be seen in myriad aspects of daily life, from testaments to art.

With the rapid Westernization that came forth during the Meiji period, honor ideology was suddenly forced to take a back seat to new conceptions of government and social order. These changes were reflected strongly in the act of ritual suicide, which can be seen as the greatest possible extension of ritual suicide.

In the Satsuma Rebellion, samurai fought to regain their status in society, and when they failed, turn to ritual suicide. The total failure of the rebellion, in which the samurai could not muster either government or popular support, proved to be the last moment in which honor ideology played an essential role in warfare – which had long been seen as the ultimate use of honor in such texts as Bushido and Hagakure.

In the suicide of General Nogi, we can see the final fading of honor ideology as a cultural cornerstone. Despite lamentations by the intellectual elite – notably
Nasume Soseki's *Kokoro* – and widespread popular praise of Nogi's suicide, Nogi's ritual suicide demonstrated a curious and gripping headline rather than a culturally acceptable and expected event. In fact, the widespread praise and discussion of Nogi's suicide is evidence in and of itself that honor ideology had faded as a cornerstone of Japanese culture, and had become fetishized as a relic of Japan's traditional past.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


