

Japanese Swords as Symbols of Historical Amnesia: Touken Ranbu and the Sword Boom in Popular Media

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Abstract: *This essay analyses the Japanese sword boom in popular media in the 21st century, situating Touken Ranbu, an online video game franchise, within its wider political and historical context. In the first two decades of the 21st century, government, commercial, and semi-public institutions, such as museums, extensively deployed positive depictions of Japanese swords in popular media, including anime, manga, TV, and films in public relations campaigns. As a historical ideological icon, swords have been used to signify class in the Edo period (1603-1868) and to justify the Japanese Empire's expansion into Asia during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945). By emphasizing the object's symbolism and aestheticism, the sword boom of the 21st century is following a similar trajectory. Popular representations of swords in media culture selectively feature historical episodes that are deemed politically uncontroversial and beneficial for promoting a sense of national pride. This practice systematically ignores the shadow of modern Japanese history in which swords played a central role, such as the controversial wartime "contest to kill one hundred people using a sword" (hyakunin giri kyoso) in China in 1937. The recent notable rise of this idealized symbolism exemplifies the mechanism through which historical revisionism—serving neo-nationalist/right-wing interests—infiltrates Japanese society through popular culture. The sword has been mobilized in contemporary Japanese media as a symbolic cultural commodity to influence consumers' knowledge and consciousness and to condition their views of modern Japanese history.*

Keywords: *popular culture, media, historical*

revisionism, nationalism, symbolism of Japanese swords, Touken Ranbu

Introduction

In the 2010s, Japan's media culture witnessed a phenomenon that could be termed a Japanese sword boom, evident in forms from manga and anime to video games and films. The transmedia popularity of sword iconography has influenced public relations strategies of companies and governments and encouraged collaborations among public and private sectors. Arguably, the most notable example of this phenomenon is a video game called *Touken Ranbu* and its transmedia franchise. Taken together, these trends represent a fascination with the trope of the sword: some representations are historically grounded while others are radically decontextualized; some media and messages lean towards nationalistic nostalgia while others invest decidedly new meaning and affect to this cultural icon. The significance and implications of this 21st century sword boom deserve a critical reading that addresses the troubling mobilization of the physical and symbolic sword in interpretations of Japanese history. This essay locates the boom within the broader historical context of modern Japanese history, distinguishing the phenomenon from the discourses that glorify the "Cool Japan Policy" and contemporary Japanese media content.

This essay is positioned within academic debates addressing propagandistic representations of war and history. The sword

boom is a prime example of popular media's contribution to the shaping of public historical knowledge and, importantly, (mis)understanding, which historians of modern Japan, such as Carol Gluck and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, have addressed (Gluck 2007; Morris 2005). As a specific example, Sabine Frühstück argues that Japan's Self-Defense Force has been deploying images of children, particularly innocent pre-teen girls and sexualized young women, that resignify and fetishize machines of war in its public relations campaigns from the 1990s to the 21st century (2017: 165-210). Covering much the same time frame, this essay shares an academic commitment to the critique of war glorification, focusing on the popular aesthetics of Japanese swords in transmedia content.

Below, I argue that the current sword boom is a symptom of a post-WWII Japanese society that institutionally ignores the practical and actual use of Japanese swords as weapons and instead treats them as aesthetic objects that symbolize certain ethno-nationalist values. Japanese people have been enjoying the beauty of the structural aspects of Japanese swords since premodern times: textures on the steel made by folding techniques during forging; patterns of martensite created during the cooling process; and temper patterns on the blade. However, the Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law after WWII established a rule for possession of Japanese swords, officially defining them as valuable historical and/or artistic objects (Watanabe and Sumi 2014: 3-4, 92-94). This aestheticization of Japanese swords underpins the collaboration of various actors in the sword boom of the 2010s. No single player orchestrated the Japanese sword and samurai boom as a form of propaganda, but the symbolic malleability of sword images certainly enabled the collaboration. Below I examine *Touken Ranbu*, a smash hit video game franchise, as a contemporary case study to show how the lethal aspect of swords have been underplayed and their aesthetic and

symbolic aspects emphasized instead. Such abstraction has enabled the Japanese sword to function as a focal point for historical revisionism, facilitating the creation of a narrative in which palatable versions of modern Japanese history, largely associated with aestheticism, are selectively remembered in the popular media culture of Japan in the 2010s.

Symbolizing the Sword in Japanese History

Japanese swords derive from curved single-edge blades produced in the Heian period (794-1185). The emerging samurai class brought long *tachi* swords, a type of Japanese sword common during the feudal era, into battle for the purpose of mounted combat (Miyazaki 2018: 6). In fact, swords were not necessarily the primary weapon for warriors from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) to the Sengoku period (1467-1590), the most turbulent time in Japanese history, as stone slings, arrows, spears, and *naginata* (a pole weapon with a single-edge blade) were more effective and safer weapons on the battlefield (Kaku 2016: 72-75). Additionally, the use of swords was not limited to the samurai class at that time. Even peasants possessed and carried swords and were pressed into service as soldiers. In short, swords were not always a symbol of the samurai class, who are said to have mastered *kyūba no michi* ("the way of the bow and the horse").

The symbolic meanings of Japanese swords changed during the largely peaceful Edo period (1603-1868). It was in the 17th century, during the Tokugawa Shogunate, that Japanese society embedded the symbolic value of swords into its social order with a set of laws that regulated the possession and carrying of swords according to the occasion and the owner's class (Owaki 2018: 72-117; Sakai 2011: 299-302). Since long *tachi* swords were no longer necessary in times of peace, the samurai began to carry a pair of *uchigatana* and *wakizashi*

swords: *uchigatana* were the primary weapons, a little bit shorter than *tachi*, and *wakizashi* were much shorter secondary swords used in case of the loss of the *uchigatana*. Although non-samurai classes were allowed to possess and carry *wakizashi* according to their roles in and contribution to government, the pair of *uchigatana* and *wakizashi* swords became symbols of, and were permitted only to, the samurai class. In the civil conflicts between Imperial and Shogunate forces that occurred during the Boshin War in 1868, Japanese swords and skilled samurai were no longer effective against more modern infantry. The time of swords ended with the Tokugawa order; therefore, many popular references to samurai and Japanese swords depict times before the Meiji era (1868-1912), which followed the Edo period.

Even after the Tokugawa order, Japanese swords maintained their symbolic value in society. Intellectuals in the Meiji period used sword symbolism in establishing a national identity grounded in an idealization of the samurai; for example, Nitobe Inazo wrote a book called *Bushido*, which elevated Japan's reputation in international society, introducing a fanciful version of the identity and ethics of the samurai class to a wider audience (Mason 2011: 71-77; Sakai 2011: 299-302). The image of an ideal samurai, commonly envisioned with their set of swords, was also used to describe the virtue of soldiers who served the Japanese Empire (Sakai 2011: 304-308). When the Meiji government formed a modern military force, the army provided western sabers rather than Japanese swords to its soldiers; however, the achievements of the squad equipped with Japanese swords during the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877 led to some skilled soldiers bringing Japanese swords with western mountings to later battlefields (Watanabe and Sumi 20014: 90). In the 1930s, when ultra-nationalism heightened, the Japanese army used Japanese swords with Japanese (rather than western) mountings (Sakai 2011: 304-306; Watanabe

and Sumi 2014: 90-91). In order to meet increasing demand, a workshop was built to produce Japanese swords for military use within the Imperial Shrine of Yasukuni, which was built in 1869 to commemorate those who died in service to the Meiji government (Kishida 1998: 33-34; Watanabe and Sumi 2014: 91). In this way, the link among Japanese, samurai spirit, and swords was fostered.

Thus, Japanese swords emerged as prominent symbols of a Japanese superiority in the years of war and colonial expansion. During the invasions of the Korean peninsula, mainland China via Manchuria, South East Asia, and the Pacific Islands in the first half of the twentieth century, Imperial Japan mobilized propaganda to enforce its ideology and consolidate its totalitarian regime. *Bushidō* ("the way of the samurai") and the cherry blossom symbol, which Nitobe associated with *bushido* in his book of the same name, were praised as virtues indigenous to and distinctive of Japan. The Imperial Shrine of Yasukuni was thought to be a holy place, where the souls of Japanese soldiers who died in battle were brought and would appear in the form of cherry blossoms to the eyes of the living (Dower 2012: 65-80; Onuki 2003: 169-201). The emblematic power of Japanese swords was used to enhance imperialist nationalism, and the material beauty of swords played a key role in guaranteeing the teleological construction of the history of Japan. For example, Harada Michihiro, a sword enthusiast who wrote several books on the subject in the pre-WWII era, attributed the dual nature of Japanese swords as a weapon and an aesthetic object to the Japanese traditions of beauty and aestheticism (Harada 1935: 3-17; Harada 1940: 3-7). He argued that "the civilization and culture of the God Age (*jindai*) and the fundamental character of our national polity (*kokutai*) are rooted in the many divine swords that the Gods possessed" (Harada 1940: 3). He connected the myth to the present, supported

the ideology that the emperor of the unbroken imperial line (*bansei ikkei*) should rule the country, and that all Japanese people were his subjects. In this way, the symbolism of the beauty and strength of Japanese swords was proactively used to advocate the ultranationalist regime.

The Japanese sword, which functioned to indicate social class in the Edo period, was transformed into an icon signifying the state's legitimacy during Japan's modernization. Again, after WWII, Japanese swords were redefined as works of art, but their symbolic value did not quickly disappear. This chameleon aspect of the sword as a marker of status, legitimacy, and national identity has had lasting impact on post-war Japanese society.

Propagandizing the Sword during WWII and Its Continuation after the War

The iconic narrative of the “contest to kill a hundred people using a sword” (*hyakunin giri kyōsō*) plays a particularly salient and long-lasting role in the propagandistic use of Japanese swords in the media. The sword carried a particular ethno-nationalist message. In 1937, the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun* and its sister paper, the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun*, reported on a contest between two officers of the Japanese Army over who could be the first to kill 100 Chinese people with their swords en route to Nanking during the Japanese invasion of China (Honda, Hoshi, and Watanabe 2009:10-17). The newspapers described the two officers’ atrocities in a disturbingly positive and cheerful manner. It was reported that both officers surpassed the goal during battle, and the race was closed with a score of 106 vs. 105 (Figure 1). Newspapers reported that the two officers intended to engage in another bet, this time with the goal of killing 150. The story, however, favoured both the young officers’ ambitions in such a way as to highlight specifically the use of Japanese swords, and,

due to the journalist’s desire to scoop a patriotic episode from the war, the incident was not accurately represented. The two officers, both second lieutenants, were responsible for commanding their artillery units, it is therefore unlikely that they could have engaged in sufficient hand-to-hand combat to kill more than 100 soldiers each. This does not mean that the officers did not slaughter Chinese while advancing toward Nanjing given the many reported cases of war crimes committed by the Japanese Army. However, the story of these two officers illustrates the propagandistic use of swords in preference to more modern weapons. If they had used machine guns, for example, their actions would simply have been reported and would not necessarily have been construed as heroic.



Figure 1. *The Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun* covering an alleged contest between two officers of the Japanese Army (December 13, 1937).

Praise of the beauty and strength of Japanese swords in connection with imperialism ended with Japan's defeat. For seven years, between the end of the war in 1945 and the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, Japan was under the control of the General Headquarters, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP). Ownership and production of Japanese swords was subject to the disarmament efforts of the GHQ/SCAP. Sword enthusiasts scrambled to set up new laws to control the possession of Japanese swords, defining Japanese swords primarily as traditional fine-art items rather than weapons (Watanabe and Sumi 2014: 3-4, 92-94). Owners of Japanese swords needed to register them to possess them legally. Only swords made using traditional methods by a certified swordsmith were approved (*ibid*). This registration system coincided with the end of the weaponized utility of Japanese swords. Instead, Japanese swords came to be regarded primarily as aesthetic and symbolic objects, which continues today. This does not mean that the aestheticism of Japanese swords originated in post-WWII Japan. Rather such aestheticism survived in post-WWII Japanese society when celebrating the material strength of Japanese swords became controversial due to the radical change of Japan's status in the international community in the wake of Japan's defeat in the war and the American occupation.

The "contest to kill one hundred people using a sword" narrative of the Imperial Japanese Army was banished to the deepest layers of the collective memory of the Japanese people by the discursive emphasis on the aestheticism and symbolism of Japanese swords in post-WWII society, thus erasing the violence and imperialism attached to their prior representation. However, the event sometimes surfaced in public discourse and resurrected the old wounds of Japanese society. In 1971, journalist Honda Katsuichi, a then in-house journalist of *Asahi Shimbun*, ran a series on the Imperial Japanese Army's war crimes named

"Journey to China (*Chūgoku no tabi*)," excavating the brutal contest that was forgotten by the general public (Honda, Hoshi, and Watanabe 2009: 5). His article triggered a controversy about its veracity. Yamamoto Shichihei, a novelist, claimed that the contest to kill a hundred people using a sword was merely a legend, since Japanese swords were not durable enough to kill 100 people. In 1973, Suzuki Akira, a journalist, received an award for his serial publication titled "The Illusion of the Nanjing Massacre" (*Nankin Daigyakusatsu no Maboroshi*) (Association to Support Killing-100-with-Sword Lawsuit ("Association") 2007: 42-45). As these critics highlighted, it would have been practically impossible for each of the two officers to kill more than 100 enemy soldiers with a single sword under the conditions of modern warfare. However, as the title of the series, "The Illusion of the Nanking Massacre" suggests, these arguments sought to deny not merely the improbable tale of the single sword but the entire allegation of misconduct by the Imperial Japanese Army, that is, the Nanjing Massacre.

Honda's rediscovery of Japanese wartime atrocities is not merely a musty episode of history. In the 21st century, with the popularization of swords again featured in media culture, heated discussions have re-emerged about the veracity of the "contest." In fact, in 2003, the daughters of the two officers prosecuted Honda and some newspapers in which he published, for defamation concerning the incident. The plaintiffs also proffered the "Japanese-swords-not-so-durable" defense to discredit the ostensibly fictionalized reports that had led people to believe otherwise (Association 2007: 49-50, 116, 172-173). They invoked scientific grounds and other types of evidence, to insist that the officers had not actually killed as many people as was claimed in the final tally and that the episode had been fabricated by the war correspondents. The litigants' claim was predicated on the ideologically influenced image of Imperial

Japanese Army soldiers, bound by a strict honour code, bravely wielding a sword in battle. However, as discussed in the court proceedings, post-war research and accounts by officers revealed that Japanese officers committed war crimes by killing surrendered Chinese soldiers and civilians with Japanese swords (Honda, Hoshi, and Watanabe 2009: 142-167; Association 2007: 109-130, 135-195). The court concluded that although there had not been hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield, it was difficult to rule that the claim to having killed one hundred with a single sword had been entirely fictional (*ibid*). Ultimately, the court dismissed the claim of the plaintiffs that the challenge was a total fabrication.

The debate over the truthfulness of the contest to kill one hundred people with a single sword has not waned, which is attested to by the debates on historical revisionism in recent decades. The term “historical revisionists” was first widely used in Japanese society in the 1990s when deniers of the Nanjing Massacre and forced sexual slavery during WWII rose to prominence (Kurahashi 2018: 20-32; Nakano 2016). By insisting that the Chinese had photoshopped the visual records to doctor the evidence of the Nanjing Massacre and asserting that “comfort women” were voluntary prostitutes, the deniers tried to delete or rewrite a dark period in Japanese colonial history. The term historical revisionism is typically used to criticize neo-nationalist/right-wing activists who support the non-apologetic diplomatic attitudes of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as evidenced in Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 2001. In 2014, *the Sankei Shimbun*, an ultra-right paper, defined its revisionist activities as a “war over history” (*rekishi sen*) and enhanced its campaign by insisting that China, Korea, and *the Asahi Shimbun* were fabricating the war crimes of Imperial Japan to degrade Japan’s reputation in the international community (The Sankei Shimbun 2014;

Yamaguchi 2020). This form of revisionism became even more pronounced in the second and later Abe administrations (2012-2020) through the appointment of neo-nationalist/right-wing politicians to responsible posts, including Inada Tomomi, who was the attorney of the plaintiffs in the aforementioned lawsuit (Nogawa 2016: 18-19).

The recent sword boom illuminates the stakes of this court case and efforts at historical revisionism; it has further contributed to erasing the practical use of the sword as a weapon, focusing rather on its consumption as an image. The wholesome and, at the surface-level, non-ideological nature of sword imagery enabled governmental and public actors to participate in its aesthetic universe, which was not free from patriotic and nationalistic dogma. Such sentiments gradually permeated Japanese popular culture as well. A similar mechanism can be observed in the plaintiffs’ claim. In defense of their fathers’ honour, the daughters of the two lieutenants adopted the strategy of separating the symbolic and aesthetic values of Japanese swords from their material utility, which could not be openly praised in post-WWII Japan. It is possible that, in the plaintiffs’ defense of their fathers’ behavior, they simultaneously defended, and even reinforced, a symbolic universe that linked Japanese swords to honour and integrity. The inherent quality of Japanese swords (unbendable, adamant, sharp and strong) was asserted and their definition as aesthetic objects, not only in the lawsuit, but also in popular culture at large, established, thereby prohibiting the denigration of their beauty. This is a possible explanation for why no contemporary popular media content related to swords has referred to “the contest to kill one hundred people using a sword” or to any other violent historical episodes involving Japanese swords during the Asian Pacific War. The shadow of the Japanese imperial invasion has been institutionally forgotten in the aesthetic universe of Japanese swords.

Sanitizing the Sword Image in Popular Media at the Turn of the Century

In 20th-century post-WWII Japan, society-wide interest in Japanese swords caused by the “the contest to kill 100 people” controversy was exceptional. Of course, the general public consumed many *jidai-geki* (samurai drama) films and manga, in which Japanese swords inevitably appeared. The sword, however, was generally viewed as an anachronistic icon of a nation that was quickly transforming to a consumer society during its rapid economic growth from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Then, at the turn of the century, manga, anime, and film fueled a short period of greatly decontextualized iconic, pop depictions of swords. Still, on the whole, Japanese swords themselves were certainly not a widely popular, but rather fetishized by a small group of sword enthusiasts or used as nostalgic symbology by ultra-patriots.

The status of the sword in postwar Japanese society is clearly illustrated by the *seppuku* case of Mishima Yukio, a post-WWII nationalist author who criticized Japanese people’s spiritual decadence in a quickly growing consumerist society. On 5 November 1970, Mishima broke into the Ichigaya base of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces with his private militia and attempted a coup. When it became clear that his plan was a failure because his agitation did not inspire the SDF personnel to join him, Mishima committed ceremonial suicide, using a Seki no Magoroku sword with a military-style mount (Funasaka 1973). After stabbing himself in the gut with his dagger he had one of his militiamen slice off his head with the Magoroku sword. Although Mishima’s action shocked the literary world and is still being interpreted as either ironical or comedic, the general public was unsympathetic to the violence, militarism, and jingoism redolent of a musty and shameful past that his behavior evoked.

Popular media cultures in the 1990s contributed to a softening of the violent image of swords both in Japan and on the global market. In the case of Japanese manga and anime, Watsuki Nobuhiro’s *Rurouni Kenshin* (1994-99), a *jidai-geki* manga series, signals the popularization of Japanese swords iconography in the last decade of the 20th century. Spanning the Bakumatsu period (the end of the Tokugawa order, 1853-1868) to the early Meiji period (1868-1912), *Rurouni Kenshin* was a smash hit and ended the belief in the industry that old-fashioned *jidai-geki* did not attract boys, the target readers of the weekly magazine company that published the manga. *Rurouni Kenshin* is different from earlier *jidai-geki* manga in that it employs good-looking male characters common in *shōjo* (girls) manga; this emphasis on characters’ appearance became the basis for the sword boom of the 21st century.

While *Rurouni Kenshin* marked the softening of the image of swords in Japan, Hollywood films played a bigger role in popularizing the image of Japanese swords in the global market. Edward Zwick’s *The Last Samurai* (2003) was a positive depiction of the virtue and loyalty of a declining samurai. While *The Last Samurai* sheds light on an old-fashioned nostalgic masculinity, Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* series (2003 and 2004) utilized Japanese swords as fashionable contemporary icons, together with other Asian elements. *Kill Bill* detached Japanese swords from Japanese national history and used them as an ahistorical sign of contemporary Asian “coolness.”

What is common among these cases, to varying degrees, is the isolation of the image of swords from the original Japanese historical context. This may be more obvious in the *Kill Bill* series set in contemporary America, in which Japanese swords are simply trendy icons, but it is also applicable to *The Last Samurai*, which projects an idealized image of samurai and *bushido* on Japanese history. Even *Rurouni*

Kenshin, which shows the influence of American superhero comics, is not a true-to-historical-fact expression but a distorted representation to attract and entertain readers. Popular culture, both in Japan and in the wider context, during the 1990s to the 2000s, found the Japanese sword a “cool” icon and prop useful in action and combat scenes, which are a key entertainment feature in visual media. The rise of samurai manga and anime in Japan, and the popularization of sword imagery on the global market at around the turn of the 21st century, signified the reshaping of the symbolism associated with Japanese swords; they created the image of Japanese swords as a harmless and wholesome “cool” icon, globally distributed in popular media and society.

Commercializing the Sword in the 21st Century

The circulation of such revisionist, sanitized images of Japanese swords paved the way for their liberal use as an advertising tool in the early 21st century. Communication strategists began to recognize the appeal of Japanese swords, especially among the younger generation, and began featuring the images intensively. Employed not only by commercial companies and sports teams to establish a positive image about their products and teams, the Japanese sword iconography also functions as a foundation for collaborations among companies, national and local governments, and the public.

Harking back to samurai is a common mode of drawing on associations of masculine strength and integrity without addressing bloodshed. For instance, when Coca-Cola Japan launched Coca-Cola Zero on the Japanese market in 2007, it used an image of a young Japanese businessman in a dark suit, holding a Japanese sword in his hands (Figure 2). The bottle of Coca-Cola Zero on his head is emblematic of the formal hairstyle of samurai in the Edo

period. Therefore, this man is not just carrying a Japanese sword; the advertisement projects the image of a samurai on him. Since the dark suit suggests that the man is a businessman, perhaps working for a large corporation, the image implies that he will be as loyal to his company as a samurai. The ad includes the slogan: “Don’t hesitate, Japanese men!” According to the company, the choice to display the image of the samurai, which symbolizes “a man who has a firm will, decisiveness, and dignity,” was made to appeal to men, the target consumers of the product, distinguishing it from Diet Coke which was aimed at female customers (Coca Cola Japan, 2007). In sports media, Japan’s national baseball and soccer men’s teams have also launched publicity campaigns using samurai imagery: the men’s national baseball team was named “Samurai Japan” during the first World Baseball Classic in 2009 while the men’s national soccer team was called “Samurai Blue,” fusing samurai iconography and the team colour. Overall, these advertisements stress the strength and masculinity of samurai, while suppressing the aspects of violence and cruelty. Without sanitizing the violence of Japanese sword imagery these depictions in mass media would not have been feasible.



Figure 2. Coca-Cola Zero advertisement for the Japanese market. (Coca-Cola Japan)

In recent decades, the enthusiasm for Japanese sword and samurai imagery expanded from hardcore male enthusiasts to the wider public, including female fans in the video game world, prompting a variety of commercial, public, and cultural sector collaborations. One such example is *Sengoku Basara* by Capcom in 2005. This is the first title of a video game series set in the Sengoku period (1467-1600). *Sengoku Basara* and the other titles of the series were a modest hit compared to *Touken Ranbu*'s popularity, but they did foster a renewed interest in the samurai warlords of the era among female game users. These female users, whose interests were not limited to the game series but more broadly to Japanese history, were called *reki-jo* (history women). According to Sugawa-Shimada (2015), the *reki-jo* phenomenon was brought to light in the mid-2000s when media began to recognize the popularity of the Sengoku and Bakumatsu periods among young women. The *reki-jo* community likely fed into the Japanese sword boom of the 2010s given their interest in historical periods that feature swords. In fact, Sugawa-Shimada contends that the depiction of male historical figures as attractive men in popular media such as TV dramas and video games caused the number of female heritage tourists to increase (2015: 21-22), reaching a peak between 2008 and 2012. For example, *reki-jo* visited local historical museums and historical sites related to the Sengoku warlord depicted in *Sengoku Basara*. Their history-related tourism is a version of the anime-themed tourism *seichi-junrei* (pilgrimage) (Okamoto 2018), both of which can be categorized as "contents tourism" (Alexander 2017), and received interest from companies and local government agencies trying to revitalize the areas. Due to the response triggered by *Sengoku Basara*, Capcom

proactively promoted the popular game series to improve its public image by permitting the use of the characters to local governments. The company's website (Figure 3 and 4) advertised the use of its video game characters as a promotional tool for "economic and cultural development, the improvement of public safety, and bringing attention to local elections" (Capcom 2016), thereby foregrounding the localities' ostensible contribution to the public good.



Figure 3. Sengoku Basara character used in a poster to encourage young people to vote. (Capcom)



Figure 4. Map showing the collaborations between *Sengoku Basara* and local governments. (Capcom)

Another collaboration between the public and private sectors that prominently featured swords in popular media was the Bizen Osafune Japanese Sword Museum in Okayama, which planned special exhibitions featuring various anime and video games. These included Capcom’s *Sengoku Basara* in 2011, Gainax’s *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in 2012, *Samurai Warriors (Sengoku Musou)* in 2014, a video game series by Koei Tecmo Games that started in 2004, and, in 2015, *Shinken!!*, a sword-themed browser video game by DMM that spanned from 2015 to 2017 (Bizen Osafune Japanese Sword Museum, Tokubetsu). The Sword Museum’s most successful partnership was its collaboration with *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a popular anime series that hit peak popularity in the 1990s and is still competitive in today’s market. When the small museum, situated in a rural area, opened its “Evangelion and Japanese Swords” exhibition (Figure 4), showcasing swords modelled after the characters of the popular anime in 2012, the display was an instant hit due to the popularity of the anime. That the exhibit has travelled throughout Japan—and is still

occasionally open in local museums with minor updates when the anime series releases new movies, attests to the collaborative potential of Japanese swords.



Figure 5. Poster of the Evangelion and Sword Exhibit. (The Ueno Royal Museum)

These examples showcasing the collaboration of commercial media companies, public organizations such as museums, and local government using Japanese sword images preceded the “Cool Japan Policy” of the Japanese government. The “Cool Japan Policy” did not seem to recognize the malleable potential of sword images in the beginning. The Intellectual Property Strategy Office mapped “Cool Japan” contents in two axes of spiritual/material and popular/highbrow (Figure 6). Its documentation, however, did not refer broadly to Japanese swords in the same way that it discussed other cultural commodities such as *sake*, Japanese foods, *kimono*, traditional crafts, robots, convenience stores, and even bidet toilets (Intellectual Property Strategy Office 2018). This is probably because traditional Japanese swords cannot be made in modern production facilities and as mass production is antithetical to the rarified nature of contemporary sword making. Each swordsmith is conventionally allowed to make

up to 24 pieces per year through traditional methods; thus, the supply of Japanese swords on the market is quite limited, driving prices higher than those of other commodities. Compared to other mass-producible items, such as manga, anime, video games, and confectionary foods mentioned in the Intellectual Property Strategy Office's "Cool Japan" schema (Figure 6), Japanese swords received less attention because of their limited economic impact. Neither the Japanese government nor business were able to fully grasp the potential of the symbolic value of the Japanese sword image. That is to say, what is at the core of the sword-samurai boom and public-private collaboration is the malleability of the imagery of swords as an emblematic commodity.

mobilization by the Japanese government and associated political forces in the 2010s. Once the Japanese government recognized the value of sword iconography, it welcomed the increase in the representation of swords across a variety of forms of popular culture because it contributed to state interests such as promotion of industries, economic growth, and fulfilment of national pride. This resonates with earlier multimedia efforts at bolstering national sentiment. In tracing the history of "media mix," the Japanese term for transmedia storytelling, Ōtsuka Eiji (2018) points out that, during the age of Japanese Empire, officials actively developed media content along these lines. He contends that Japan's colonial regime utilized transmedia storytelling to mobilize ordinary people for the voluntary reproduction of the Imperial discourse during WWII. One of Ōtsuka's compelling examples is the *Yokusan Ikka* (Imperial-Rule-Assisting Family) series, a mixed-media franchise that began in 1940, which he emphasizes increased the trend of manga artists emphasizing service to Imperial rule. The *Yokusan Ikka* manga series illustrated daily life of the Yamatos, a model family by the militaristic criteria of their time. Contrary to the post-WWII approach of the manga industry, several versions of *Yokusan Ikka* were drawn by multiple artists and published by various magazines. The *Yokusan Ikka* franchise expanded to radio, records, and novels, and even encouraged amateur readers to participate in its universe by sending letters and submitting their secondary works based on the franchise.

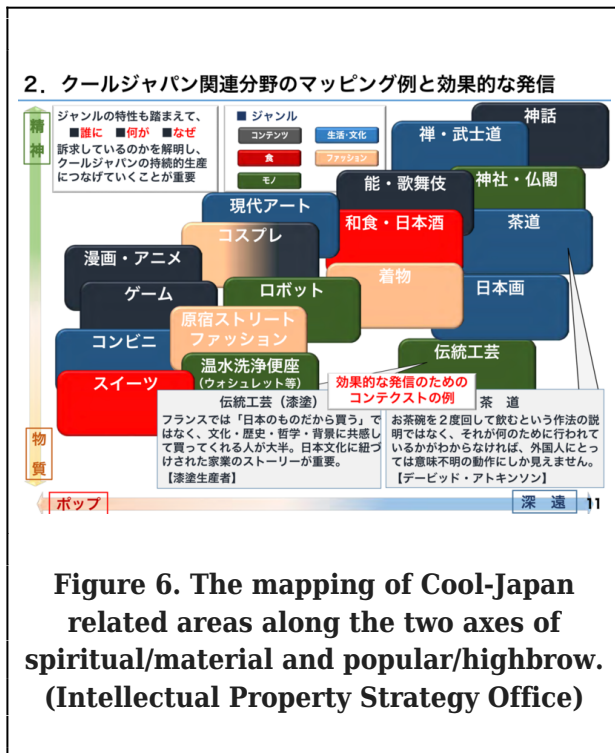


Figure 6. The mapping of Cool-Japan related areas along the two axes of spiritual/material and popular/highbrow. (Intellectual Property Strategy Office)

Mobilizing the Sword

The malleability of Japanese sword images, which made these public-private collaborations possible, was also a precondition for their

Today's Japanese sword craze functions as a transmedia symbol to attract people's attention and reinforces national identity among people, much in the same vein as *Yokusan Ikka* did during WWII. For example, responding to and taking advantage of the Japanese sword and samurai boom among the younger generation, in 2018, Diet members of the LDP formed a group called Watetsu (Japanese-iron) Caucus. *Watetsu* is a specially made steel for Japanese

swords. The Watetsu Caucus, consisting of conservative politicians, claims to preserve and promote *watetsu* steel and to support traditional sword culture that was deemed to be in a precarious situation (MEXT 2018). An entry posted on Facebook by Yamada Hiroshi, a member of the House of Councillors and the caucus (Figure 7), expresses the group’s feelings more bluntly. The banner shows Yamada, who actively denies the Nanjing Massacre and the “comfort women” issue on social networking services, standing in front of the wartime flag of the Imperial Army (*kyokujitsuki*, right) and the national “rising sun” (*hinomaru*, left) flag. In the text, Yamada decries the global spread of Japanese swords made in China and exalts the “spirituality” of *bushido* promoted by Nitobe. The aesthetic and symbolic value of Japanese swords has been captured as a vehicle for his ideology.



Figure 7. Facebook entry on the establishment of Watetsu Caucus by Yamada Hiroshi, a member of the House of Councillors. (Yamada Hiroshi)

The *Watetsu* caucus is not the only example illustrating the national governmental interest in Japanese swords as a “cool” icon that can be

exploited for public relations. The Japanese Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF) released a new emblem in 2016 (Figure 8), while it continues to use the established one (Figure 9). The change generated controversy. While some supported JGSDF's decision, others were strongly critical because the new emblem, which includes a Japanese sword, could be reminiscent of Japan’s traumatic invasions in Asia, when the Imperial Japanese Army was equipped with Japanese swords (Ando 2016). JGSDF claims that the blade and scabbard, however, represent strength and a love of peace, respectively, as the design places the scabbard in front of the blade, signifying that JGSDF, the last fortress of national defense, fights only in cases of national crisis (JGSDF, Enburemu). The critics found JGSDF's explanation of the design unacceptable, stating that there is no reason to use an image of Japanese swords to represent the defense-oriented policy of Japan in the 21st century. Given that JGSDF had been prone to using anime-style posters and manga with prominent placement of military weaponry and machinery to recruit young people, the adaptation of a Japanese sword for its emblem appears to be part and parcel of this targeted media strategy (Frühstück 2017:165-210; JGSDF, Chihon).



Figure 8. JGSDF emblem released in 2016. (JGSDF, “Enburemu”)



The JGSDF's ill-considered decision on its new emblem, however, should not be simply regarded as a sign of the revitalization of militarism or of the rebirth of militaristic imperialism. Besides the fact that many military forces resort to sword imagery, the JGSDF's decision should be understood in the context of trendy images of Japanese swords. Just as conservative LDP politicians formed the Watetsu Caucus only after the popular boom in sword imagery, the JGSDF sought to gain popularity through the appeal of military-themed anime and manga to the younger generations. Of course, it is undeniable that the decision makers also calculated the emblem's appeal to their neo-nationalist/right-wing supporters. However, right-wing sympathizers impressed by militaristic icons do not account for the majority of people. Thus, the decision would not have been possible without a newly "cool" and popular sword imagery separate from that of Imperial Japan's militarism. In that sense, the emblem conveys a dual message: it expresses the sanitized "coolness" of Japanese swords, while appealing to nationalists' fetishization of Japan's "honor."

The duality of the implications of the JGSDF's sword emblem exemplifies the specificity of the Japanese sword boom in the 2010s. References to Japanese swords in popular culture should

not be considered as propaganda controlled solely by the national or local governments, as no single actor planned the boom in the 2010s. Each player (the media industry, sword-related craft industry, local and national governments, public organizations such as museums of local history, etc.) voluntarily participated in the aesthetic space celebrating the beauty and historical significance of Japanese swords. For example, the wording on Capcom's website in its promotion of local initiatives was similar to the language and logic found in governmental documents for the "Cool Japan" strategy. Both recognized the synergy happening in the collaborations between governmental and commercial sectors and emphasized the economic and public benefits. Capcom insisted that the use of images from its video game *Sengoku Basara* contributed to "regional revitalization" (*chihō sōsei*) (Capcom 2016), a slogan used frequently during the second Abe administration (2012-2014).

These three examples illustrate how the Japanese government has been mobilizing the image of Japanese swords in the 2010s. In pointing out that the *Yokusan Ikka* was a wartime example of media mix, Ōtsuka warns that popular culture can facilitate the rallying of favour for a specific ideological regime (Ōtsuka 2018: 18-184). Ōtsuka's warning is worth listening to, as the current exploitation of Japanese sword imagery echoes the wartime *Yokusan Ikka* media mix he describes. The individuals concerned with the Watetsu Caucus, JGSDF's emblem, and Capcom's "regional revitalization" campaign were not necessarily dyed-in-the-wool conservatives or nationalists. However, the sanitized, wholesome sword imagery lowers resistance to participation in the reification of a deeply ambiguous symbol, thus potentially making participants more receptive to nationalistic discourse.

Gaming the Sword: Historical Amnesia and Revisionism in *Touken Ranbu*

The facilitation of government mobilization discussed above was predicated on the image of the Japanese sword proving entertaining in popular media. *Touken Ranbu* is an exemplary case of the amalgam of political propaganda and superficially non-political populist, smash-hit transmedia content in the 2010s. *Touken Ranbu*, which translates to “wild dance of curved and straight swords,” is an online browser-based video game that was released in 2015. It features handsome boys called *Touken Danshi*, each a personification of a type of historic Japanese sword. Much of the game’s attraction comes from its visuals and the voices of the *Touken Danshi* dubbed by male anime voice actors. Players form combat teams and send them into battle in scenes embellished with sound and animation. When *Touken Danshi* are injured in battle, they are shown wounded and half-naked, groaning in pain. Besides the subtle sexual appeal that plays a considerable part in the attraction of the game, players can also enjoy its relationship to and exploitation of Japanese history. In other words, rather than attempting to hew to the presentation of Japan’s historical past, *Touken Ranbu* displays a collection of arbitrarily chosen images of the past, in which players can indulge in “database consumption,” the postmodern mode of understanding and engaging with the world (Azuma 2009).

“Database consumption”—a mode that prioritizes playing with symbols in the cultural lexicon rather than trying to portray the world in realist narratives—in *Touken Ranbu* operates as follows: When players meet prescribed conditions, such as sending two different swords (via *Touken Danshi*(s)) that were owned by a single historical figure to a specific battlefield also associated with that figure, the *Touken Danshi* characters discuss the personage in a conversation, which pops up on screen. For example, if players send

Izuminokami Kanesada (Left in Figure 10) and Horikawa Kunihiro (Right in Figure 10) on a mission in Hakodate, the two *Touken Danshi* characters start to talk about Hijikata Toshizō (1835-69), a real historical figure who owned the two swords. As the vice-commander of *Shinsengumi*, the special police force organized by the Tokugawa, Hijikata continued to fight against the Meiji government even after the Boshin war (1868-69) and was killed in battle in Hakodate. The conversation between the two *Touken Danshi* is crafted with historical facts about Hijikata. The two swords have an interfraternal relation because they are a pair of *uchigatana* and *wakizashi*, a long and a short sword that samurai regularly carried together. Horikawa Kunihiro calls Izuminokami Kanesada “Kane-san”, as though he is speaking to his older brother. This is modelled after the common presentation of Hijikata Toshizō in popular media in which close members of *Shinsengumi* called him “Toshi-san” with some sense of combined respect and intimacy.



Figure 10. Conversation between Izuminokami Kanesada (left) and Horikawa Kunihiro (right) on Hijikata Toshizō in *Touken Ranbu*.

The historical and visual representations in *Touken Ranbu*, combining famous episodes in Japanese history and handsome male characters, have drawn large numbers of female game users. In fact, the game garnered instant success among female gamers

(Iwaguchi 2018). This led to a flood of related media mix content by the start of 2019: three anime series, one manga series, stage musicals, and a feature film. The appearance of the musical actors in 2018's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, an annual TV music show that has aired every New Year's Eve since 1951, proved the undeniable impact of *Touken Ranbu* on mainstream Japanese media culture. *Touken Ranbu* also elicited interest in Japanese swords themselves, primarily among Japanese women, or *tōken joshi* (sword girls), which refers to female enthusiasts of Japanese swords (Iwaguchi 2018). Prior to the boom in the 2010s, middle-aged and elderly men had been the primary fans of Japanese sword culture. *Touken Ranbu*, however, popularized the old-fashioned hobby and, in the wake of its release, boosted the number of visitors to museums displaying Japanese swords.

Touken Ranbu is the most recent iteration of the romanticization of Japanese swords, which contributes to collective amnesia regarding historical events. The choice of characters and episodes depicted in the game franchise is arbitrary: the game does not mention the violent use of swords in “the challenge to kill 100 people” or Mishima's suicide. The swords named Seki no Magoroku were used in both cases, but the game does not include a character with the same name. The lack of reference to Seki no Magoroku is notable, moreover, because it was a mass-produced sword brand that spanned from the Muromachi to the Edo periods and has been extremely popular in and central to Japanese sword history. For example, the Evangelion exhibit curated by the Bizen Osafune Sword Museum displayed a Magoroku Sword, one inspired by the anime series and forged by a contemporary sword smith (Morrissy, Figure 11). Thus, the exclusion of Seki no Magoroku from *Touken Ranbu* indicates intentionality, perhaps to divest the game world from uncomfortable historical truths.

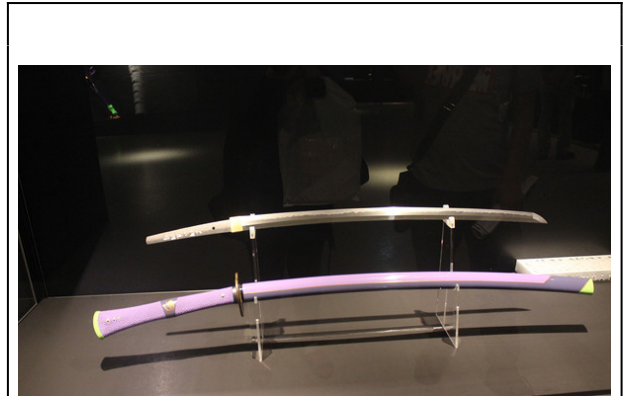


Figure 11. Magoroku sword displayed at the Evangelion and Japanese Sword exhibit. (Morrissy)

Shibamura Yuri, a scenario writer of the online game, is on record regarding the criteria for Japanese swords and historical events chosen for the game. Shibamura states that he created the game with utmost care because there were many actual owners of Japanese swords used in the game and descendants of historical figures, whom he “did not want to offend” (Mikame 2015). Although the phrase sounds prudent on face value, it signals that he may be concerned about the feelings of the neo-nationalist/right-wing. In fact, at a conference he referred to the fandom of *Touken Ranbu* as supporters of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” the exact phrase used to justify Imperial Japan's rule of Asian countries during the Asia-Pacific War (Miyajima 2015). Given that this phrase is generally avoided because of its clear and troubling past, we must consider that Shibamura decided not to include the controversial episodes in the game to avoid offending—or even to signal solidarity with—the neo-nationalist/right-wing. In other words, Shibamura prioritized those who love Japanese swords as an aesthetic symbol of the Japanese Empire's legitimacy over historical facts.

A euphoric game world—favorable to the neo-nationalist/right-wing at the expense of accurate historical facts—is offered to game players who are not necessarily politically inclined toward the Right. As is the case with other social games on mobile and online platforms, the pleasure of playing *Touken Ranbu* is in consuming the database-like accumulation of characters and episodes. I am not suggesting that the ideological tendency behind the choice indicates that the players align with neo-nationalist/right-wing ideology. Rather, I argue that *Touken Ranbu* creates an amnesic and revisionist discursive space that structurally makes players forget the darker side of Japanese history.

A glaring irony emerges from the pseudo-Shintoistic setting of the game, which further reinforces the amnesia embedded in the game system. The player's role in the game is called *Saniwa*, which originates in Shintoism. Borrowing from animism, a *Saniwa* in the game is defined as a kind of shaman who has a magical power to transform memory and feelings embedded in material objects into human figures. The *Saniwa* works for the government, fighting against an enemy named the Historical Revisionists (*rekishi shūsei shugisha*), who are interfering with and trying to change the history of Japan. *Touken Danshi* is the collective name of the personified male characters of Japanese swords summoned by *Saniwa*. On behalf of *Saniwa* and the government, whose name is not mentioned in the game, they stand in the battlefield *against* the Historical Revisionists. The player, as a *Saniwa*, collects *Touken Danshi* to form combat teams to fight in major historical events in Japanese history against enemies sent by the Historical Revisionists. As discussed above, the term "historical revisionist" has predominantly been used in Japan since the 1990s to refer to the neo-nationalist/right-wing deniers of the Nanking Massacre and the sexual slavery of military comfort women during WWII, especially *within* the ruling LDP. However, the

original usage of the word is inverted in *Touken Ranbu*. The player is set to work *for* the government fighting *against* the Historical Revisionists. Shibamura's political view is, consciously or not, reflected in the game even if they are not explicitly foregrounded or recognized by most of the users. By shifting the criticism of the revisionist tendency of deniers onto the "Historical Revisionists," the monstrous enemy of the government in the game, *Touken Ranbu* dangerously launders the concept of historical revisionism.

This version of historical revisionism, which does not outright deny the shadows of Japanese history but allows consumers to immerse themselves in selected positive images of the past, is at the core of the Japanese sword boom in popular culture and the utilization of sword imagery in public and governmental discourse in the 21st century. The aesthetic space associated with Japanese swords necessarily elevates specific historical events over others, facilitating the crimes of the past to fade from the collective consciousness. Neither *Touken Ranbu* nor the "Cool Japan Policy" were the origin of the sword boom; rather, both are outcomes or expressions of the post-WWII aestheticization and transformation of Japanese swords into a popular "cool" symbol. Thus, the memory of historical episodes such as "the challenge to kill 100 people" is institutionally silenced for the benefit of idealized and sanitized symbolism.

Conclusion: Aestheticizing Politics

Although the increased use of sword imagery in the media does not directly signal the rebirth of militarism in Japan, sword imagery is visibly shaping political discourse in the current political climate. As the Heisei era gave way to the Reiwa era in May 2019, the LDP launched a new PR campaign targeting youth. The diverse material included a video featuring then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and a young BMX rider, a

fashion magazine article highlighting current trends, and other content utilizing youth-oriented images. A post depicting seven *rōnin*-like samurai (Figure 12) was displayed on the LDP's website and on the streets of Shibuya, a district in Tokyo well known as a shopping and entertainment hub for young adults. (Brasor 2019). The fashionable India ink painting of the seven samurai was drawn by Amano Yoshitaka, an illustrator famous for his character design for the *Final Fantasy* video game series. When a computer user's mouse hovered on the handsome samurai in the middle of the seven, the description "Abe Shinzō, the 21st and 25th President of the LDP" popped up. The LDP recognized the efficacy of mobilizing such images to attract the interest of younger generations and possibly that of the nation more broadly. This, however, is not limited to the LDP. The party names of two recently established political groups in Japan, the right-leaning Nippon Ishin no Kai (2015-) and left-leaning Reiwa Shinsengumi (2019-), each reference political-military groups of the Bakumatsu period to culturally authorize themselves. The LDP has so far been the most active in using images of sword and samurai, but these newly emerging political parties with very different political views signal that such images are becoming contested resources for politicians in contemporary Japan. The popular images of the historical past used by these contemporary political parties suggest that popular culture is always susceptible to being exploited by political power because of the fundamental malleability of images and signs.



Figure 12. An LDP PR Image modelled after Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* drawn by Amano Yoshitaka. (Liberal Democratic Party)

This essay underscores the varied and complex ramifications of contemporary depictions of the Japanese sword, and, as an extension to that, the samurai as cultural symbols in Japan, during the first two decades of the 21st century. The 2010s boom is noteworthy for its accumulated historical events related to Japanese swords incorporated as the centerpieces for media commodities such as games, movies, anime, and manga. The discursive associations related to these images were utilized and profited from by various economic, political, and cultural interests. Most users of such contents are motivated not by specific political interests but by non-political attractions such as fascinating and attractive characters, postmodern constellations of historical moments, and escapist thrill. However, some providers enter the aesthetic consumer universe with political motivations, which are stealthily integrated into the sword and samurai representations. Since the image of swords has been aestheticized and imbued with specific symbolism, popular representation of swords in media culture selectively feature historical episodes that are politically non-controversial, thus, tacitly supporting a sense of national pride associated

with the empire and the Asia-Pacific War. This practice systematically ignores the dark side of modern Japanese history in which swords played a central role. As a result, the impact of Japanese Imperialism on invaded and colonized nations is ever-increasingly lost in the consciousness of consumers. At the same time, various explicitly revisionist views of Japanese history permeate popular culture. The political messages embedded in the images infuse media and society, and an idealized aesthetic universe—which ignores historical realities—flourishes. The disclaimer commonly inserted within TV programs, movies, and anime - “This is a work of fiction and has nothing to do with real people, names, or groups”—self-actualizes. The aggregate of such discursive, euphoric media content has the potential to destroy people's touchpoints with reality while rewriting history in the process.

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