“A New Thesis of Bushidō Philosophy”: Yasuoka Masahiro and Men of Character in Imperial Japan

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During the early twentieth century, belief that “busidō,” or the “Way of the Warrior,” constituted the core of the Japanese spirit intersected with discourses on personal cultivation and the need for political leadership by “men of character” (jinkakusha). One such example of this is visible in the “busidō philosophy” of the nationalist intellectual Yasuoka Masahiro (1898-1983). This paper examines Yasuoka’s efforts to impress upon naval officers their duties as officials assisting in stable governance and as warriors living and dying in the samurai spirit, to foster in boys a “bushi spirit” comprised of the loyalist virtues required of them as future soldiers and enfranchised subjects, and to convince women to provide wise mothering to adolescent boys and self-effacing spousal support to adult men active in the public sphere. Animating all these endeavors was Yasuoka’s belief that Japanese were laboring with personal characters and gender identities confused by the ill effects of modern materialism, leaving them vulnerable to dangerous political ideologies. In order to remedy their affliction, he offered an idealist revival of a disciplining “bushi spirit” to be realized by members of the minzoku (“ethnic people”) as they went about fulfilling their respective function within the emperor-centered kokutai (“national polity”).