Bushidō and the Gendered Body/Bodies of the Japanese Nation

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Examining writings of Nitobe Inazō and Mishima Yukio, I show how their conceptualizations of Bushidō shape the image of both the body politic (the Japanese nation-state) and the ideals of physical bodies (modern Japanese “samurai”/citizens) as Nitobe and Mishima responded to their changing historical, political, social, and cultural environments. Nitobe initially claims that samurai ethics are the manly inheritance embodied deep within all modern Japanese citizens. Later he casts Japan variously as the virile protector of emasculated nations and the “feminine” partner of the U.S. at the same time as he locates the apotheosis of civilization in a “feminine” samurai. Mishima’s formulation of Bushidō postulates a manly art of beauty, which rationalizes a meticulous attention to a man’s outward appearance that functions as the evidence of a masculine inner commitment to death – the ultimate samurai virtue. Since Nitobe and Mishima’s incarnations of Bushidō are manifestations of painstaking negotiations of unstable domestic and international power politics, they represent necessarily fluid and complex intersections of gender and nation that defy received notions of Bushidō as a wholly masculine trope.