Shame and the Samurai: Institutions, Trustworthiness, and Autonomy in the Elite Honor Culture
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Source: Social Research, Vol. 70, No. 4, Shame (winter 2003), pp. 1351-1378
Published by: New School
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971973
Accessed: 18-02-2016 03:51 UTC

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Although shame is a complex notion in any culture, it has strong negative connotations in modern Anglo-American usage. It also often implies experiencing a passive emotion in a private space. Imposing such an image onto other cultures’ usage of shame, however, may obscure the complexity and dynamics of the concept. Premodern Japanese samurai culture indicates that the notion of shame can be a powerful public concept even while rooted in the innermost depth of an individual’s dignity.

Although anyone can experience emotions related to shame and honor, social usages and the degree of social influence wielded by these concepts are considerably different if the ruling elite place them at the core of their collective identity. The Japanese concept of shame was closely connected to the rise and transformation of the samurai elite and their political institutions. Yet, a sense of shame was a criterion of honorific autonomy and trustworthiness of individual samurai as well as the inner source of their self-esteem. Interestingly, haji or shame can be described in Japanese by a kanji (Chinese character) that consists of an ideogram composed of two root characters representing “ear” and “mind.” As this way of writing implies, by serving as a bridge
between individual aspirations and social expectations, shame in
the samurai culture is a case study in the complexity of the inter-
actions between the self and society.

To be sure, shame (*haji*) in Japanese can also represent the pri-
ivate passive emotion related to concern for one’s social reputa-
tion. But within the context of the samurai’s elitist honor culture,
shame had much deeper and more complex layers of meaning.
In this paper, I would like to shed light on an unlikely combina-
tion of meanings—namely, the close relationship between shame
and moral autonomy. For several centuries, *haji* played a central
role in constructing the identity of the Japanese samurai, the
class that ruled the country from the medieval period until the
mid-nineteenth century. The samurai collectively defined them-
selves as those who know shame and would risk their lives to
defend their honor. In comparison, members of such other
classes as the court aristocracy and the commoners would not
think of dying for such a reason—or be perceived by others as so
doing. The concepts of shame and honor helped to construct
the collective identity of the samurai that differentiated this cat-
egory of warriors from the rest of Japanese society. The compa-
native study of shame cultures is not an easy task because shame
and honor can be expressed in collections of concepts that are
related to one another but applied differently to different gen-
der, age groups, status, and economic categories even within a
given cultural and linguistic area (see, for example, Herzfeld,
1980; Schneider, 1971; Abu-Lughod, 1986). The present paper is
an overview of the shame culture of the premodern Japanese
samurai as an elite male culture.

The samurai’s honorific sentiments were expressed by a con-
stellation of words that included *na* (name), *meiyo* (honor), *haji*
(shame), *chijyoku* (shame), *iji* (pride) and *mengoku* (face). Within
this cultural complex, having a sense of shame meant more than
a concern with the externals of honorific status; it also implied a
pride and dignity related to internal evaluation in light of the
group’s approved behavioral principles. The samurai culture
derived its vitality from the close connections between honor, dignity, and individuality that were often expressed in the lexicon of shame. The internal emotional dynamics of the samurai were attached to the sociopolitical roles of individual members of the class through the vocabulary of shame and honor. I have examined elsewhere the samurai’s role in the making of modern Japan by using their honor culture to gain entrée to their cultural and social history. I investigated the cultural reformulation of the samurai through the examination of numerous examples of honor-related violence in which the samurai’s sense of honor and shame was clearly at stake, including quarrels, fights, and vendettas that took place over the course of several centuries. The transformation of samurai culture was the long-term result of their changing relationship with the Japanese state (Ikegami, 1995). Samurai intellectuals, however, also contemplated the ethical implications of shame in philosophical discussions in which questions of shame and honor allowed them to explore issues of moral autonomy, integrity, and trust. I begin with the voice of a nineteenth-century samurai intellectual.

**Shame and Political Participation in the Samurai Culture**

“Shame (haji) is the most important word in a samurai’s vocabulary. Nothing is more shameful than not understanding shame.”2 A young samurai named Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859) made this observation in his notes for a prison lecture.3 Shame for Shōin represented not simply a state of emotion but the core value that defined moral principle. Shōin regarded the individual’s inner sense of moral principle as a better arbiter of shame than societal definitions of it. The knowledge of what constitutes shame and the proper ways to avoid it underlay his sense of dignity, autonomy, and political responsibility. Shōin’s notes continue:
On one occasion someone asked me: Which is more serious, crime (tsumi) or shame (haji)? I answered: Crime belongs to the body, but shame lies in the soul. . . . Now, people at the grass-roots level discuss national politics and criticize officeholders. This kind of behavior is a crime because it is not the job of ordinary people, and it is not their prescribed role in society. However, if you ask about their internal motivation and find that they are worried about the future of the nation, and have tried to ask questions about its legitimacy—their behavior is less culpable.4

The contrast that Shōin draws between shame and crime seems strange in terms of the contemporary notion of shame as a private experience. His formulation, however, cannot be understood without considering its contemporary political context as well as Shōin's own public “crime” as defined by the law of the shogunate—namely, his attempt to go abroad. To understand the seriousness of his crime, we have to look into the historical background.

At the time that Shōin was composing his lectures, Japan had been ruled by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868) for more than two centuries. The seemingly perpetual peace that followed the establishment of Tokugawa rule was undergirded by a strict isolationist policy that sealed off the shores of Japan. No Westerners except for a small group of Dutch traders on the island of Nagasaki were allowed to stay in Japan. The shogunate also strictly prohibited Japanese citizens from traveling abroad. The news of the Opium War between Great Britain and China (1840-1842) and of the humiliating concessions in the treaty that China had to accept after the war, however, alerted the Japanese elite to the political realities of the world outside their country. The opinions of some intellectuals outside the shogun's inner circle began to circulate among the literati, while less formal networking quietly began among a concerned group of political activists. Meanwhile, Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of the American
navy, created a sense of national crisis. It stirred the minds of the samurai, whose class identity was originally and still officially based on military prowess.

The entry of Commodore Matthew Perry and his four “black ships” into the Bay of Edo in 1853 to demand the opening of Japan to the West shocked the Japanese. The advanced technology that powered the American vessels was a forceful demonstration in front of the shogun’s own castle that the Tokugawa rulers could no longer guarantee the peace of the country—which had been the source of the legitimacy of the samurai regime. The spell of the pax Tokugawa was finally broken by the apparent military superiority of the American navy. In 1854, Shōin and another man secretly hired a small boat and attempted to board Perry’s ship on the occasion of the Commodore’s second visit to Japan. The two men’s petition to Perry, which was recently discovered in the Yale library, reflected Shōin’s sincere desire for foreign travel coupled with full awareness that his action was a grave offence under the law of the shogunate. It seems likely that Shōin wanted to learn the secrets of the West’s military and technological strength. Perry turned down Shōin’s petition in order to avoid diplomatic complications with the shogun. Following Perry’s refusal, Shōin delivered himself to the shogunate’s authority acknowledging his act. He committed a crime according to the letter of the law, but he was not ashamed of his action. After being jailed in Edo, he was sent back to his home province, Chōshu; he was imprisoned at the Noyama jail.

Being accused of a crime was usually considered shameful for the other members of the defendant’s family. When Shōin wrote about crime and shame in prison, however, he was not simply defending his past action; he was trying to create a new moral basis for political participation by using the honorific idiom of shame within samurai culture. For ordinary samurai in the outlying provinces, organizing as a group to participate was defined as a crime by the Tokugawa regime. The shogunate had strictly prohibited the formation of horizontal alliances of any kind. Further-
more, the Tokugawa rulers were skilled in preventing the formation of private alliances that went beyond territorial and status categories. The first Tokugawa shoguns had strategically decentralized Japan, dividing the country into approximately 260 domains ruled by semi-independent daimyo (feudal lords). The vassal samurai, whose income was largely derived from hereditary stipends, acted as administrators of these domains, collected taxes from the daimyo’s subjects, and adjudicated disputes. The primary loyalties of the vassal samurai were therefore directed toward their immediate masters, the regional daimyo. The vassal samurai were also organized into a pyramidal structure of stratified hierarchies. National political matters were dealt with only by the shogun’s inner circle of advisers, while the politics of the daimyo domain were managed by the senior samurai in each domain. Lower-level samurai, whose stipends were barely adequate to support their families, were not supposed to discuss national issues. The structure of the samurai hierarchies is the immediate context of Shōin’s argument: that samurai should act according to their own moral principles rather than automatic obedience to the laws of the shogunate and their immediate master.

Although the life of the average Tokugawa samurai was that of a loyal and sober bureaucrat during the long period of external peace, the threat posed by Perry’s ships caused a number of thoughtful samurai to look beyond the borders of their own province. Shōin took advantage of this shift in mood and tried to encourage individual samurai to participate in politics by appealing to their centuries-old concept of shame.

If you cannot practice the way and are only occupying an honored status and wasting a hereditary income, how can you show your face [menboku]? If the number of such shameful people increases, the moral principles of society are lost, then in effect they are larcenous. In general, although a crime may be known to outsiders, it is a matter that affects only the individual. But if a samurai harbors shame [of such kinds] in his mind, this will eventually harm both lord and people.5
In other words, Shōin was arguing that a person who is aware of a crisis of national security and does nothing about it has behaved more shamefully than one who breaks the law. In his writing, shame is defined not as the consequence of evaluation by an external authority, but the result of internal conversations with one’s imagined other. Shōin had frequent conversations with his inner self. Avoidance of shame (that is, knowing shame or having a sense of shame) was not defined as evading condemnation by an external other, but rather as truthful adherence to this internal other. The point of Shōin’s redefinition of shame was to make the individual the ultimate source of moral judgment. It is the moral integrity of the person rather than society that defines shame. By underscoring the moral autonomy of the individual samurai with reference to the older notion of shame, Shōin was able to encourage political actors to break the statutory boundaries that prohibited the formation of political alliances. Paradoxically, Shōin was able to establish an indigenous version of political individuality and civic participation by using a concept (haji) often associated with concern for one’s reputation in the outside world.

Knowing shame (haji o shiru, or shūchi) thus represented moral consciousness in the mirror of an internalized other as well as the voice of the imagined community of honor. In this sense, the culture of honor among the samurai always connected the aspiration of individuals with the judgment of the larger community. Yet this notion of honor was more than the subjection of a person’s inner self to external expectations. The samurai’s imagined community of honor, which originated historically as a class of medieval mounted warriors, itself always respected decisive action and the autonomy of individuals; it put little value on passivity (Ikegami, 1995). For this reason, a sense of shame was also rarely understood as a passive emotion related to conformity to social expectations. The deeply institutionalized samurai honor culture made it easy for Shōin to reformulate the notion of shame as a cultural resource for encouraging participation in politics.
Yoshida Shōin was released on one occasion but was later imprisoned again because of the shogunate's increasingly repressive measures against political opposition. He was sent to Edo and executed at the age of 29. Despite his early death, Shōin left a clear stamp on Japanese history as an educator and political theorist because his small private school trained a number of young samurai who later became revolutionary activists. Shōin's former students carried out the project of radical political change that brought about the Meiji restoration in 1868. The mentality and idioms of shame and the samurai honor culture supplied the resources for what I have elsewhere called "honorific individualism" (Ikegami, 1995) in premodern Japan. The presence of honorific individualism in the Japanese elite was a critical cultural resource for radical social change, since the Meiji restoration was carried out by alliances among the samurai who dared to challenge the shogun's authority.

Shame in the Context of Institutions and Personal Strategies

Shōin's logic of shame as a stimulus for social change indicates that shame in the samurai culture was a link between social institutions and personal strategies. Individual samurai had to consider the various political and other institutional structures that routinely defined and labeled shame in their lives in order to make a point of honor. But an individual actor was not simply a passive consumer of the accepted codes of shame and honor. In fact, a samurai was also required to make strategic decisions so as not to incur shame when his samuraihood was tested. The ability to decide for oneself to defend one's honor was a paradoxical component of the samurai's code of shame. In the medieval period, battlefields were the approved ground for testing a samurai's honor because fighting required swift independent action. Unlike a modern army, in which the individual combatant is trained to obey orders from superiors in the chain of command,
the medieval samurai placed a premium on individual bravery and strategic actions. Even in peacetime, however, the samurai were constantly aware of the need to defend their honor by strategic displays of courage and initiative. But even during the Tokugawa period, there were many occasions in service to one’s lord or in social life that an individual samurai had to show that he could defend his honor through proud and decisive actions.

In these circumstances, the samurai could make strategic use of the notion of shame by refocusing and redefining it through their own words and deeds. One might say that individual reformulations of shame resemble the role of the captain of an ocean liner. The captain needs the cooperation of the crew and must take weather conditions and ocean currents into account; at the same time, he or she exercises considerable power in changing the ship’s course and direction. Since the samurai were forced to live in a situation of continuous tension resulting from the need to avoid shame combined with the desire to demonstrate their honor, it was inevitable that some thoughtful samurai began to contemplate the various meanings of shame and honor. By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion of shame had acquired a rich complex of meanings. Shōin wisely drew on a part of the established idiom of shame to underscore the moral autonomy of the samurai because shame was a persuasive device to mobilize the samurai of his period for political action. In other words, Shōin had to sharpen the existing definition of shame. What he focused on was a complex concept that included pride, autonomy, and the courage to act. The elitist honor culture of the samurai was predicated on the belief that the criteria defining honorific identity belonged to each individual samurai, not to society as a whole. The strategic redefinition of shame in the direction of moral autonomy was possible among the nineteenth-century samurai because their notion of shame was inseparately connected to and situated in the context of an elitist honor culture. This close connection was necessary in order to reformulate the sense of shame (haji o shiru)
within the mind as a luminous indication of an individual’s moral
nobility.

As Shōin’s example indicates, the cultural legacy of the Toku-
gawa samurai was multilayered, the result of preceding develop-
ments during the medieval period. Since the medieval samurai
were self-equipped mounted warriors with their own landed prop-
erties, violence, power, and autonomy became inextricably con-
nected in the warriors’ sense of honor. To keep one’s good name
meant to avoid incurring shame in peacetime as well as on
the battlefield. A reputation for cowardice was the most shameful
stain on a warrior’s name. Accepting shame without fighting back
would decrease a samurai’s independence and his power of self-
determination. As a result, the samurai were hypersensitive with
regard to their honorific reputation. Any challenges to their
honor would be answered decisively, in physical terms.

It must be also noted that the samurai honor culture was related
to the samurai’s relations to other social classes, because honor
was the core of the samurai’s collective identity. Unlike in Europe,
where the aristocracy and the warrior class overlapped, the aris-
tocracy of the Japanese imperial court looked down on soldiers.
This disdain led to the emergence of a class of military specialists
in the late ancient world, namely the samurai. The samurai
defined themselves as men who would risk their lives to defend
their good name. The elegant courtiers of Kyoto would not spill
their blood for such a vague abstraction. Furthermore, in the men-
tality of the late ancient world, death and blood were considered
sources of dangerous pollution. As military specialists, the samurai
ran the risk of contamination. Thus, one may regard the honorific
culture of the samurai as an attempt to ennoble the military life.
The notion of honor also implied that the killing that took place
on the battlefield was an honorable action rather than defilement.
The samurai’s celebration of honor can be seen as a mechanism to
enhance their status at the expense of other classes.

To be sure, even during the medieval period the samurai did
not simply equate honor with a reputation for military might
external to the self; honorific actions were perceived to reflect their dignity. This aspect of the honor culture came to the fore as the samurai became the ruling class of Japan, overcoming the influence of the court aristocracy. In this context, the samurai began to demonstrate that they were willing to die for the sake of honor. The introduction of seppuku or self-willed death was a ritualistic embodiment of this sentiment. The samurai committed suicide by seppuku on the battlefield when they perceived that they were losing the battle. Rather than incurring the shame of being taken as captives by the enemy, the samurai could testify to their autonomy through their complete control of the body in the final moments of life. They had a highly developed sense of honor and glory, combined with self-esteem, dignity, and moral autonomy demonstrated through violence. Although this custom of self-willed death may appear to be little more than an exotic ritual from a non-Western culture, we should not overlook the aspiration for dignity and autonomy behind it.

The establishment of the stable Tokugawa state altered the political institutional context of samurai culture. Unlike the medieval period, when the samurai personally controlled their landed properties, the samurai of the Tokugawa period were forced to move to the larger cities and serve their masters in the emerging government bureaucracy. Although the pax Tokugawa turned the samurai's role as warriors into a purely nominal function, the state also defined the samurai as the ruling class. Therefore, the honorific dimension of samurai culture was never completely erased even under the Tokugawa shoguns. Sensitivity to feelings of shame, however, coupled with violent behavior, was out of place in peacetime. As a result, various measures were put in place to tame honorific violence among the samurai.

Shōin's case might be thought of as exceptional radicalism at a time of national crisis, but even mainstream Confucian ethical literature of the period appealed to the pride of the samurai as if they were still socially autonomous warriors. For example, one passage in Meikun Kakun (1715), an ethical guidebook written by
the Confucian scholar Muro Kyūsō (1658-1734), defined the samurai’s basic moral code as principled autonomy. Muro wrote:

The disciplined and rightful attitude of the samurai should include the following: not to speak falsehood; not to work for selfish gain; to keep the mind straightforward and honest; simplicity in external appearance; to maintain a disciplined and courteous bearing, neither flattering one’s superiors nor being arrogant toward one’s juniors; to keep promises unfailingly; and not to ignore another in hardship. . . .

Courteous deportment, sincerity and consideration for others, and consistency in behavior were important criteria of virtue for samurai gentlemen. This virtuous sociability was to be upheld by inner strength residing in the individual’s dignity. In describing this inner strength, interestingly, Kyūsō concluded his argument in (Meikun Kakun) by using the vocabulary of shame: “The samurai who knows shame (haji) should not do anything untoward even though he is being beheaded. . . .” In this and similar statements, the image of a trustworthy samurai combining inner integrity and outward sociability emerged in Kyūsō’s writing. Kyūsō’s moral treaties were liked and recommended by the shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1716-1745) himself, and were popular among the vassal samurai. The Confucian ideal of a morally upright gentleman fit well with the emerging vassal bureaucracy that was a necessary part of Tokugawa political administration. This ideal also coexisted with another model of samurai behavior that combined decisive action and moral self-sufficiency. Even the most dutiful samurai bureaucrats, the neo-Confucian intellectuals, and the shoguns themselves—those who identified as samurai—continued to be fascinated by the medieval legacy of full-blooded individualism and honor won through feats of arms. From this perspective, all the Tokugawa samurai shared cultural idioms of shame and honor even though political realities sharply limited their opportunities for honorific deeds in the epic tradition.
The individualistic strand in the samurai's code of honor fostered a sense of moral pride that sustained their devotion to their official duties. It was the reason the samurai of the nineteenth century had not yet abandoned the aggressive dimension of their honor culture. Following the pacification of Japan and the consolidation of power by the Tokugawa shoguns at the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the internal dimension of the samurai's concept of honor became much more important. This inner dimension was sometimes expressed by the use of the word *shūchi*—literally, knowing shame.

The Tokugawa system thus contained within itself a tension between the samurai ideal of bold individual action with a bureaucratic ethos that favored cooperation among large groups of disciplined individuals. An internalized definition of honor as disciplined devotion to duty, however, could not completely displace the passionate definition of honor dating from the medieval period, insofar as the samurai's traditional image as fighters had been the foundational support not only of their esprit de corps but also of their personal self-esteem. Moreover, the authorities and Confucian scholars were themselves immersed in the traditional samurai honor culture. The result was an unacknowledged conflict among the different interpretations of shame and honor.

I must emphasize that the military honor culture in Tokugawa Japan was not simply a craving for glory. In fact, it was impossible for a samurai to aspire to a glorious reputation in the medieval style under a regime that placed a premium on smooth and orderly functioning. Promotion to higher rungs in the ladder of the Tokugawa bureaucracy was also difficult because the shogunate's status system limited the range of possible promotions on the basis of hereditary house rankings (*kakaku*). Furthermore, as long as individual samurai tried to uphold the honor code's requirement of loyalty to one's master, the range of moral autonomy was perforce limited. Since a samurai's status as a gentleman under the Tokugawa system assumed respectable employment in the service of a daimyo or lesser lord, Kyūsō's formulations were also addressed to
these men. Consequently, to achieve full moral independence, the samurai had to struggle with questions of shame and honor regardless of their particular social positions. The samurai's latent fascination with the medieval legacy of temperamental individualism led to a more inward-oriented version, an emphasis on the virtue of perseverance that would shine through one's conduct even when dealing with social or political adversaries.

Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), who was a Confucian scholar of the early Tokugawa period, recorded an impressive samurai story in his autobiography (Arai, 1979). One day his father talked about his encounter with an old friend in the course of a journey. The friend was an old samurai who was living in poverty as a masterless samurai. The father stayed overnight at his friend's humble mountain hut, and the two men reminisced about the past. Around midnight, the old man pulled out a set of bamboo tubes, and opened one end to take out his swords. The blades glittered like ice, reflecting his careful attention to the maintenance of his weapons. "I do not regret losing any part of the equipment I possessed in the past, but while my strength lasts, I intend to keep my set of swords" (52). The polished blades symbolized the man's preparedness as a warrior as well as the condition of his soul. He would probably never be employed by another master. Nobody would see his swords; however, no one would ever shame him for failing to take proper care of them. The shining blades reflected the old samurai's unaltered pride and dignity. At least the father felt that way about the incident and told this story to Hakuseki as an example of an impressive inner state of being. At the time that Hakuseki was writing, being a samurai was a status category that could be activated in its strict sense only by entering a master-follower relationship with a lord. The old man's unemployment made him no longer a part of the samurai community. For him, however, being a samurai was more than a mere social category; it was a reflection of an internal quality. The shining blades symbolized his internal strength and his moral freedom from society's judgments.
The reader should note that this old samurai had virtual others inside his mind; that is, an image of an ideal samurai and the imagined community of honor that shared this ideal. More precisely, it was Hakuseki’s father who clearly felt a sense of fellowship with his old friend. The identification of true samuraihood emerges interactively in this story through the medium of the shared notion of a sense of shame as an internal attitude of an ideal samurai. Hakuseki himself had lost his position as an adviser to the shogun and was expelled from the shogun’s inner circle. It was said that he even had difficulty arranging a suitable marriage for his daughter after his fall from power. The deep sympathy he felt in retelling his father’s story about his old friend reflected his sense of proud isolation. But Hakuseki did not stand alone; he had internalized the warrior spirit of the ideal medieval samurai as an inner spiritual attitude. He was trying to comport himself so as not to feel shame before this idealized other. From one angle, the samurai’s sense of shame can be expressed as a concern for his reputation in the eyes of others; and the others who counted were fellow members of the community of honor that he chose to respect. The community of honor was not necessarily identical with the actual samurai community or the established order at any given moment. Individual samurai sometimes defined for themselves an imagined public opinion that they respected as a model of a true samurai. This practice was a part of the tradition of moral autonomy in the samurai culture.

Needless to say, not all samurai could live up to such an ideal of spiritual samuraihood. In reality, the objective criteria of honor were defined by the state to an ever-greater degree as the Tokugawa samurai had to serve as bureaucratic functionaries rather than military leaders. Furthermore, Tokugawa Japan was equipped by the early eighteenth century with one of the most extensive commercial networks and urban systems in the world. In this condition of long-term domestic tranquility, it was natural that most samurai were more interested in tasting the fruits of urban sophistication rather than striving for spiritual heroism. Yet the notion of haji remained influ-
ential in their daily lives. As vassal samurai, they were constantly aware that their actions might reflect discredit on their immediate master. It was not unusual for careless service or political misjudgment on the part of vassal samurai to damage the lord's reputation. A mistake of this type could result in the loss of one's hereditary position or even loss of life. Constant reminders of the serious consequences of social shame intensified the samurai's fascination with internalized concepts of shame and honor. Those individuals who attempted to reinterpret the meanings of shame found that rich cultural resources were available to meet their needs.

*Shame: Internal and External Dimensions in Comparative Perspective*

The history of elite cultures of honor had important implications in the making of the modern world not only in Japan but elsewhere. In Europe it was closely associated with the history of medieval chivalry and aristocratic cultures. In *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), Albert Hirschman discusses the critical transformation of Western civilization that saw the rise of modern capitalism in the West serve to tame and redirect the volatile search for glory associated with the medieval warrior culture of honor. In his analysis of this great transformation, Hirschman reminds us that striving for honor and glory was exalted by the medieval chivalric ethos even though it was at odds with the central teachings not only of St. Augustine but of a long line of religious writers, from St. Thomas Aquinas to Dante, who attacked the quest for worldly glory as vain and sinful. During the Renaissance, however, striving for honor achieved the status of a dominant ideology as the influence of the Church receded and the advocates of the aristocratic ideal were able to draw on newly recovered Greek and Roman classics that celebrated the pursuit of glory. This powerful intellectual current carried over into the seventeenth century. The concept of glory had an astounding sudden downfall, Hirschman argued, as writers from a
number of Western European countries cooperated in the demolition of the heroic tradition. Charles Taylor noted the same critical transformation: "the ethic of rational control, finding its sources in a sense of dignity and self-esteem, transposes inward something of the spirit of the honor ethic. No longer are we winning fame in public space; we act to maintain our sense of worth in our own eyes" (Taylor, 1989: 152). Political liberalism, Enlightenment humanism, the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the rise of science, and the Romantic celebration of private selfhood in literature and arts all contributed to the notion of the genuine self that can be separated from its social connections. This transformation made notions of shame and honor somewhat peripheral in the discourse of personal dignity and self-esteem. By the eighteenth century, "The ethic of glory is confronted here with a fully articulated alternative view, of social order, political stability, and the good life" (Taylor, 1989: 214).

In contrast, the samurai remained the exclusive ruling class of Japan until the late nineteenth century, which preserved elitist traditions of shame and honor much longer than in Europe. Even in the culture of honor that existed among the European aristocracy, however, the transition that Hirschman and Taylor described was not as clear-cut as they have suggested; elitist practices associated with the honor culture survived into a much later period because the social influence of the aristocracy continued to be strong even though the bourgeoisie were gaining ground. The practice of dueling reflected the prevailing cultural atmosphere. For example, J. C. D. Clark’s study of the English nobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries asserts that the aristocratic honor culture was vital, hegemonic, and still of immense importance (Clark, 1985). The example of the English model appears to suggest that the persistence of honorific elite cultures in Japan throughout the Tokugawa period may not be unique. But since Tokugawa Japan did not develop an alternative to the honor culture as elite disciplinary culture and the cultural expression of their hegemony, and because the samurai’s political dominance was much more complete than
that of its English counterpart during the time in question, the influence of the honor culture was much more pervasive in Japan. Such individual Tokugawa samurai as Yoshida Shōin reformulated the idioms of shame and honor to express sentiments and ideas that resemble the notions of civic participation and political individualism in Western thought.

Discussions of shame often involve its external as well as its internal dimensions. The operational dynamics of shame cultures vary considerably; scholars identify the coexistence of internal and external aspects of shame and honor in ancient Greece, in Shakespeare, and in early modern bourgeois culture. Examples of the uses of shame in samurai culture show that its internal and external dimensions can never be cleanly separated but rather interact with each other. Samurai discourses on shame were rooted in a sense of personal pride and identity but were also linked to the collective identity of the honorific group. In fact, it is because of this duality that shame in Japan can effectively function as a powerful public concept. It served as a source of self-discipline among the elite as well as a cultural expression of the samurai’s collective identity.

If a sense of shame is closely related to the process of identity formation, we should also remind ourselves that identity as such—either personal or collective—cannot be understood as a preconstituted structure, but only as a process of constant flux and alteration through interactive processes. The definition of shame that emerges in this process of identity formation has also been in constant flux; it is related to social and cultural institutions as well as strategies of individuals. The samurai culture of shame and honor was interactively and closely connected to the samurai’s emergence as the ruling class of Japan in the course of competition with other social groups. The formation of an individual samurai’s identity, or samuraihood, was also not defined solely by his birth, but had to be earned in the critical eyes of other samurai through repeated demonstrations of strength and warrior spirit. The process of interacting with significant others plays an important role in the formation of personal and collec-
tive identities. These identities are fluid, as they are being constituted, and should be constantly guarded as well as manifested through successive interactions with others. The process of incorporating others into a given identity may operate through contacts with external-actual and/or internal-virtual others. Here again, however, the distinction between actual and virtual is often blurred. The story of the old samurai cited earlier concerns a man who lives in seclusion; thus his sense of shame is apparently derived from conversations with his internal virtual other. On the other hand, the conception of this internal virtual other is shaped by encounters with actual or virtual others external to the self.

If the descriptions of Hirschman and Taylor are correct in terms of the decline of the aristocratic honor culture in early modern Europe, they lead to the conclusion that the modern world is a posthonorific society. Although, as I stated earlier, it is necessary to acknowledge the strength of aristocratic honor cultures in the European past, it is also true that elitist honor cultures are so rare in the contemporary world that it is difficult for us to imagine the close and intricate connections between a person’s innermost self and his or her externalized self-awareness. In addition, the contemporary Western view of shame has become so privatized that it is difficult to appreciate the attachment of the samurai’s sense of individuality to an equally strong drive for sovereign power. We should not impose our modern notions of the self on the Tokugawa samurai or on members of other honor cultures.

Projections of modern concepts of the self often hamper analyses of shame in non-Western cultures. Ruth Benedict was one of the first social scientists to study the complex dynamics of shame in Japanese culture. But she was also tripped up by the need to distinguish others from ours (Geertz, 1988). Benedict’s iconographic description of Japanese society in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1989 [1946]) began in 1944 as a government-sponsored study of the “enemy” during World War II. She portrayed the Japanese as passive people burdened by a strong sense of obligation and shame. She then contrasted the “shame-based” culture
of Japan with the Western emphasis on conscience in a culture based on guilt. "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin." She drew a dichotomy between what she perceived to be the Western Judeo-Christian notion of internalized guilt and the Japanese shame culture in order to essentialize the national character of the Japanese—the most alien enemy the United States ever fought."

Shōin's prison contemplation and its exposition of the samurai's notion of shame make it clear that Benedict's classic dichotomy cannot be taken very far. Furthermore, her study was based on interviews with Japanese Americans during the war. In view of the suffering of Japanese Americans who were confined in internment camps, it is understandable that her research subjects were passive and cautious in their replies to her questions. A sociologist who talked with Benedict's informants reports; "I recall some of these informants telling me what it felt like to talk with Benedict over lunch, day after day. . . . They recalled the exhaustion and relief they felt as they were allowed to leave when the meal was ended" (Vogel foreword in Benedict, 1989).

A more serious weakness in Benedict's methodology was her imposition of a modern notion of shame onto Japanese culture. She unconsciously distinguished between the "true" inner self of a person and the external self as if they were separable entities. As we have seen, shame in the samurai honor culture actually exemplified an overlap and a relatively fluid interaction between the external and internal dimensions of the self. Bernard Williams expresses a similar view when he discusses the shame culture of ancient Greece; he said that "the scheme of Kantian oppositions" of duality, in which shame is always the negative pole, only confuses our understanding of the ethical life of the ancient Greeks (Williams, 1993: 75).

Examination of the samurai culture of shame leads us to recognize that although there are words for shame everywhere in the world, the study of this affect is clearly one of the most difficult notions in comparative studies. It challenges our own funda-
mental conceptions of the self and society. As we have seen, the notion of shame is connected to both social expectations and the internal sense of the self. Bernard Williams holds that by the later fifth century B.C., the Greeks had made a distinction between a sense of shame induced by public opinion and shame resulting from violation of inner convictions. Williams presents a brilliant analysis of shame in Greek tragedies in his chapter entitled “Shame and Autonomy.” The source of the need to act in a certain way lies within the agent, “an internalized other whose view the agent can respect. Indeed, he can identify with this figure, and the respect to that extent self-respect; but at the same time the figure remains a genuine other, the embodiment of a real social expectation.” Concepts of the self, of responsibility, autonomy, and freedom were closely related to the notion of shame in ancient Greece. Furthermore, issues of moral self-sufficiency, trustworthiness, and power were also present in the operation of the Greek shame culture, just as they were in the honor culture of the samurai.

*Shame, Trust and Autonomy: The Social Impacts of Shame Discourse*

Bernard Williams’ analysis is interesting because it is a reminder that elitist honor cultures share several common themes, namely trust, autonomy, and power, in spite of the variations among them in the usage of shame. As we have seen with the samurai, their honor, in the earlier medieval form, was a manifestation of pride in their physical strength and skill in military strategy. The samurai could increase their power by developing a credible reputation, usually through defending their own honor against even the slightest challenges. As the samurai’s collective power increased during the early medieval period, they used the idioms of honor and shame within the dynamics of master-follower relationships (vassalage). The samurai’s master-follower relationship was essentially a form of hierarchi-
cal military alliance in which the follower (a vassal samurai) promised the master to provide his armed forces in wartime. In return the master protected his followers' rights over their landed properties. The master was also expected to recognize his vassals' abilities and reward them for their service on the battlefield. Since samurai vassalage was a long-term relationship built up over a period of time, it involved questions of trust and the unpredictability of human actions.

All human action occurs in time, but no one can predict how other people may act in the future. Our understanding of another is opaque at best. Examples of the uncertainty of human behavior may be found in long-term partnerships of any kind, from marriage to business contracts. The consistency of human intentions over time is desirable but not guaranteed. As we all know, neither law nor social institutions can fully guarantee the future course of human actions even though there are a number of cultural mechanisms that have arisen to decrease uncertainty regarding future actions. Sophisticated institutions to guarantee trust tend to develop in a situation in which the reliability of parties in a transaction is not known in a situation of high uncertainty. At this point, the logic of shame and honor has been used as a cultural device to increase the trustworthiness—or more realistically, the credibility—of individuals.

Judgments about trustworthiness were immensely important in the competitive world of the medieval samurai. If they had been unable to construct their own hierarchies and long-term exchange relationships with some degree of reliability, they would have found it difficult to compete collectively with the court aristocracy. The master-follower relationship was the foundation of the polities ruled by samurai. The samurai general who was able to mobilize the largest network of trust through vassalage became the ruler of the country. In the samurai honor culture, the logic of loyalty—those samurai who were loyal to one's master were considered honorable—was intended to increase the trustworthiness of the vassal samurai. Since the medieval samurai were economically independent, it was important for the master to keep
the loyalty of capable followers. At the same time, the most talented samurai warriors tended to be more independent in spirit, and therefore more difficult to keep within the master-follower system. The requirements of reliability and skill did not always match within samurai social relations. For this reason, loyalty to one’s master was often promoted as an honorable quality in his followers. Betrayal and cowardice were considered shameful in the ideological system underlying samurai vassalage. The trustworthiness of the parties, however, was a serious problem not only for the vassals. The vassal samurai also scrutinized the trustworthiness of their master, and his ability and his generosity in rewarding followers for superior service. In this context, a reputation for power was power. The stronger the master, the greater his followers’ opportunities to demonstrate skill in combat and earn corresponding rewards. In this way the master’s honor was considered an indication of credibility and achievement. On the other hand, a master who was dishonest or unable to appreciate his vassals’ loyal service could bring suffering on his samurai followers even though he was a strong and capable warrior. It followed that betrayal on the part of vassals could be legitimated if their master failed to recognize their true worth.

Nonetheless, it was understood that trustworthy men were characterized by moral autonomy and consistency. These qualities would be revealed through honorific behavior and a sense of shame (haji o shiru, shūchi). The man who knows shame can be trusted because a sense of shame is an inner safeguard against unpredictable behavior. Honorable persons—that is to say, those who “know haji”—are courteous and sociable with the inner strength that comes from moral self-sufficiency. Such a person could earn the trust of others by gaining a reputation for trustworthiness as a master, a vassal, or just a friend.

The samurai’s code of shame and honor resembled the gentlemanly honor culture of early modern Europe. Thomas Hobbes noted the implications of power and trust in the operation of honor among the seventeenth-century English aristocracy. As an
acute observer of early modern political culture, he realized the power of honorific glory-seeking among members of the political elite and its close connection with the use of violence: “We find three principal causes of quarrel. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory.” “To believe, to trust, to rely on another, is to Honour him: signe of opinion of his virtue and power. To distrust, or not believe, is to Dishonour” (Hobbes, 1952). In the middle of the bloody political turmoil ending in the consolidation of the English state under the later Stuarts, Hobbes described the impact of the medieval honor tradition that prevailed among English gentlemen. Although Hobbes ironically regarded heroic virtues as little more than adjuncts to self-preservation, he also recognized the power of the honor culture to maintain trustworthy behavior among members of the aristocracy.

Steven Shapin’s *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (1994) provides an interesting perspective on questions of honor, trust, and power through its analysis of the connection between the rise of science and the gentlemanly culture of honor. Shapin found that the seventeenth-century code of honor among gentlemen valued truthfulness; a man of honor was one whose word could be trusted. “The practical ethical literature of the period from ca. 1550 to ca. 1700 therefore persistently argued that the gentleman ought to be a truth-teller and the consequences of his acquiring a reputation for mendacity were disastrous” (74). Gentlemen were perceived as truthful while the common people were sometimes described as unreliable and untrustworthy. Telling the truth was valued by an elite class in which “an honor culture molded truth to the contours of power” (65).

The samurai culture was not related to scientific research, and its concept of truth was different. Nonetheless, the samurai honor culture also emphasized trustworthiness associated with truthfulness of mindset and deed. A common saying that “a samurai will not go back on his word” (*bushi ni nigon nashi*) emerged within this cultural atmosphere. Keeping one’s word was an important norm for the samurai, as much as honesty in conduct.
Truthfulness was most eloquently discussed in the samurai literature in the context of the ethics of master-follower relationships, in terms of autonomy and moral principle. For Tokugawa men of honor, issues of loyalty were still the most difficult questions in moral philosophy. Unlike the pre-Tokugawa period, when many warlords were competing with one another for power, the long-lasting peace under the Tokugawa regime made the social relations of the samurai much less flexible. Once they lost their employment by the shogun or daimyo—that is, their master-follower relationship—it was not so easy to find other masters. The consequences of unemployment meant that loyalty to one’s immediate master was not only an ethical injunction but a practical necessity for the samurai. Yet, traditional samurai ethics also emphasized the spirit of assertive autonomy, a legacy of the medieval military samurai culture when the samurai were self-equipped mounted warriors and landed lords (Ikegami, 1995).

The simultaneous requirements of loyalty and moral autonomy were the *aporia* of the Tokugawa samurai. When the lord himself was not an ideal master, which was usually the case, the demands of loyalty became a particularly painful duty. Furthermore, when obedience to the master’s command or the law of the state contradicted an individual samurai’s inner moral sense, it posed real behavioral dilemmas. At this point, telling the truth intersected with the issue of honor and trustworthiness of the samurai as individuals. Shōin’s surrender to the authorities after the failure of his attempt to go abroad was an example of this young, high-minded, but not politically experienced samurai’s commitment to truthfulness. It is now clear that Shōin’s interpretation of shame in comparison to crime was his own way of solving his ethical dilemma by placing the moral autonomy of individual actors above loyalty to the established social order. The tradition of the samurai culture had already accumulated enough resources for establishing the ethics of political individualism that Shōin could formulate his logic of political participation within its terms.
Murō Kyūsō was also acutely aware of the necessity of truthfulness—being true to one’s moral principles and having the courage to express them—even if it was against the will of the lord. He maintained that vassal samurai should have the courage to remonstrate with their masters in matters of policies and ethics. For him, the ideal master is a generous open-minded lord who would say that “everyone must follow one’s principle even if it means that you vassals might betray me” (Murō, 1974). It was possible for individual samurai to be autonomous political actors under the Tokugawa system only if they were fortunate enough to have a generous and open-minded master. It was the limitation of the samurai’s moral autonomy under the shogunate system—the limit that Shōin had to risk his own life in order to break through.

After the Meiji restoration of 1868, Japan underwent a process of intensive Westernization in the course of constructing a modern nation-state. The philosophies of such Western thinkers as John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which emphasized personal liberty, individualism, and a sense of citizenship, quickly took root in Japanese intellectual discourse. The apparatus of Western statecraft, including a modern constitution, parliamentary system, political parties, a national bureaucracy, standing army, and public education, was introduced within the first three decades of the Meiji restoration. Throughout this process of radical transformation, the Japanese transferred their political loyalty to the larger framework of the nation-state while reinterpreting the value of moral autonomy in terms of Western political thought. The conventional view of the West’s impacts on various non-Western societies is that the Occident is the source of all apparent innovations. What was radically “new” about Meiji Japan, however, emerged out of a complex nexus of interactions between such previous indigenous achievements as Shōin’s intellectual struggles and ideas imported from the West. To be sure, I am not claiming that the Tokugawa political system and the native intellectual tradition could have brought Japan into the modern world unassisted; but I do maintain that the experience of politi-
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cal and intellectual struggles within a premodern context encouraged Japanese thinkers and literati to confront the challenges that they faced in the years following Perry's mission. The discourse about shame and honor among the samurai during the Tokugawa era in this sense anticipated and contributed to the intellectual as well as the political emergence of modern Japan.

Notes

1In this paper I focus on the usage of shame among the samurai. However, the samurai's shame culture should be understood in the larger cultural complex of honor and shame, which I analyzed at length in The Taming of the Samurai (1995). I would like to thank Betsy Frey for her research and editorial assistance for this paper.

2Komo yowa (319) in Teihon Yoshida shoin zenshu. My translation.

3Shōin was then imprisoned at the detention facility of the Chōshū domain, his home province. Obviously, the detention center was managed loosely so that Shōin was allowed to give moral lectures to fellow inmates. Shōin's life fascinated Japanese scholars. Tanaka Akira (2002) surveyed 110 monographs on Yoshida Shoin.

4Komo yowa (228).

5Komo yowa (229).

6It should be also noted that the samurai's use of shame was less connected with sexual honor. Mediterranean anthropologists often reported that female chastity is an important determinant of honor in this region. In contrast, although the samurai would lose face if his wife would commit adultery, it was not the most salient cause of honor related violent incidences.

References


