



The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan

YUKIO MISHIMA
on *HAGAKURE*

translated from the Japanese by
Kathryn Sparling

Charles E. Tuttle Company
Tokyo, Japan

Hagakure Is Alive Today

"The ultimate love I believe to be secret love. Once shared, love shrinks in stature. To pine away for love all one's years, to die of love without uttering the beloved's name, this is the true meaning of love." (Book Two)

Contemporary Youth Infatuated with the Cardin Look

During the twenty years immediately following the war, Japan began to transform herself into exactly the condition that *Hagakure* had foreseen. There were no longer any samurai in Japan, there was no war, the economy was reviving, all was overflowing with a mood of peace; youth was bored. *Hagakure*, to repeat, is basically a paradoxical book. When *Hagakure* says, "The flower is red," public opinion says, "The flower is white." When *Hagakure* says, "One must not follow this course,"



this course is exactly what the world at large is eagerly pursuing. Everything considered, behind that austere book *Hagakure* there lie social conditions and public opinions contrary to its contents. These conditions are the response that in any age the Japanese people have made to peacetime existence.

Here is one familiar example of this phenomenon. Certainly today is not the first time that men's fashions have flourished as though to outshine women's fashions. The sight of today's young men infatuated with the Cardin look is no novelty in Japanese history. In the Genroku Period (Jōchō abandoned his worldly life to live in seclusion during the thirteenth year of Genroku, 1700), not only in clothing but extending even to the design of the swords they carried, their sword guards, and the dagger attached to the scabbard, a fashion for ornateness and dazzling splendor captivated the hearts of men. One look at the showy appurtenances and splendid

pastimes depicted in the genre scrolls of Moronobu Hishikawa (*ukiyo-e* artist of the early Edo Period) is enough to imagine the luxury of that age, influenced by the sumptuous culture of the merchants and townsmen.

Today, if you go to a jazz coffeehouse and speak with teenagers or young people in their twenties, you will find that they talk of absolutely nothing but how to dress smartly and cut a stylish figure. I once had the following experience. Having walked into a modern jazz cafe, I had no sooner seated myself at a table than a youth at the next table began to cross-examine me: "Did you have those shoes made? Where did you have them made? And your cufflinks, where did you buy them? Where did you get the material for that suit? Who is your tailor?" He asked me one question after another in quick succession. Another youth, who was with the first, began giving him a hard time: "Hey, cut it out. You sound like a beggar, asking questions like that. Why don't you just observe quietly and then steal his ideas?" And the first youth returned, "Don't you think it's more honest to ask questions and learn from him openly?"

To learn, for them, meant to learn how to show themselves to their best advantage, to be initiated into the secrets of men's fashion. The following passage from *Hagakure* is clearly evidence of a similar attitude.

Times have changed in the last thirty years. When young samurai get together they talk of money, of profit and loss, how to run a household efficiently, how to judge the value of clothing, and they exchange stories about sex. If any other topic is mentioned, the atmosphere is spoiled and everyone present feels vaguely uncomfortable. What a distressing pass things have come to! (Book One)

The Feminization of the Male

Moreover, we are constantly being told of the feminization of Japanese males today—it is inevitably seen as the result of the influence of American democracy, "ladies first," and so forth—but this phenomenon, too, is not unknown in our past. When, breaking away from the rough-and-tumble masculinity of a nation at war, the Tokugawa *bakufu* had securely established its hegemony as a peaceful regime, the feminization of Japanese males immediately began. One can see evidence of this trend in *ukiyo* prints of the eighteenth-century master Harunobu Suzuki: The couples snuggling together as they sit on the edge of the veranda gazing at plum blossoms so resemble each other in their hair styles, the cut and pattern of their clothes, the very expression on their faces that no matter how you examine them, no matter from what angle, it is impossible to tell which is the man and which is the woman. During the age in which *Hagakure* was written, this trend had already begun. Look at this scathing passage, called "Female Pulse":

I heard this from an acquaintance of mine. Apparently a Doctor Kyōan once made the following statement: "In medicine we distinguish between men and women by attributing to them the principles of yin and yang, and medical treatment originally differed accordingly. The pulse is also different. Over the past fifty years, however, the pulse of men has gradually become the same as that of women. Since noticing this phenomenon, I have considered it proper to treat eye diseases of male patients with the method normally appropriate to the pulse of women patients. When I try applying to my male patients the cures appropriate to men, they produce no effect whatever. The world is indeed enter-

ing a degenerate stage; men are losing their virility and are becoming just like women. This is an unshakable truth I have learned from firsthand experience. I have decided to keep it a secret from the world at large." When with this story in mind I look around me at the men of today, I often think to myself, "Aha. There goes an example of a female pulse." Almost never do I see what I call a true man. . . . (Book One)

Expense Account Aristocrats

The same thing can fairly be said of the rise of the expense account aristocrat, for which the modern tax system is at least partly responsible. In Jōchō's day the expense account samurai who had difficulty telling the difference between his own money and that of his lord had already become conspicuous. Within what was not a company but a daimyo domain, the young samurai, forgetting his objective of participating in the ideal of a cooperative community, had come to wish only for his own preservation. The idealistic gleam in the eyes of youth faded to a mere glimmer, and their attention was completely absorbed with trivialities. Young samurai with "the furtive glance of pickpockets," who thought only of their own personal interest, had become increasingly numerous.

Looking at young samurai in service these days, it seems to me they set their sights pitifully low. They have the furtive glance of pickpockets. Most of them are out for their own interests, or to display their cleverness, and even those who seem calm of heart are simply putting up a good front. That attitude will never do. Unless a samurai sets his sights on no less than offering up his life for his ruler, dying swiftly and becoming a spirit, unless he

is constantly anxious about the welfare of his daimyo and reports to him immediately whenever he has disposed of a problem, his concern being always to strengthen the foundations of the realm, he cannot be called a true samurai in the service of his lord. (Book One)

Lionized Baseball Players and Television Stars

While Jōchō condemns at great length people who distinguish themselves in a certain skill or art, he relates how his age is becoming imbued with a new tendency to idolize people who excel at such arts as the greatest stars of the day.

Today, baseball players and television stars are lionized. Those who specialize in skills that will fascinate an audience



tend to abandon their existence as total human personalities and be reduced to a kind of skilled puppet. This tendency reflects the ideals of our time. On this point there is no difference between performers and technicians.

The present is the age of technocracy (under the leadership of technicians); differently expressed, it is the age of performing artists. One who excels at an art can win by means of that art the enthusiastic applause of society. At the same time, such people are lowering their life goals, aiming only at appearing as dazzling and as important as possible. They forget the ideals for a total human being; to degenerate into a single cog, a single function, becomes their greatest ambition. In the light of this phenomenon, Jōchō's disdain for technicians and artists refreshes the soul:

That an art or skill will help one earn a living is true only of samurai from other domains. For samurai of this ruling house, a skill or art leads to debasement of status. Anyone who is especially skilled in a particular art is a technician, not a samurai. (Book One)

The Compromise Climate of Today, When One May Neither Live Beautifully Nor Die Horribly

"If your name means nothing to the world whether you live or die, it is better to live." (Book One) This way of thinking did exist in the time of *Hagakure*, of course. The human instinct for survival, faced with a decision between life and death, normally forces us to choose life. But we must recognize, that when a human being tries to live beautifully and die beauti-

fully, strong attachment to life undermines that beauty. It is difficult to live and to die beautifully, but it is equally difficult both to live and to die in a thoroughly horrible way. This is the lot of mankind.

The compromise climate of the times arises from the fact that those who try to live beautifully and die beautifully are actually choosing an unsightly death, whereas those who wish to live horribly and die horribly are choosing a beautiful way of life. *Hagakure* pronounces a delightful verdict on this question of life and death. Here again is the most famous line in *Hagakure*: "I found that the Way of the Samurai is death." Jōchō goes on to say, "In a life or death crisis, simply settle it by deciding on immediate death. There is nothing complicated about it. Just brace yourself and proceed." (Book One)

The Ideal Love Is Undeclared

Hagakure also discusses romantic love—in fact, as Bunsō Hashikawa has pointed out, it is probably the only work in classical Japanese literature to develop a logical theory of romantic love.¹ The ideal presented in *Hagakure* may be summed up in one expression, "secret love," and *Hagakure* maintains flatly that once love has been confessed, it shrinks in stature; true love attains its highest and noblest form when one carries its secret to the grave.

The art of romantic love as practiced in America involves declaring oneself, pressing one's suit, and making the catch. The energy generated by love is never allowed to build up

within but is constantly radiated outward. But paradoxically, the voltage of love is dissipated the instant it is transmitted. Contemporary youth are richly blessed with opportunities for romantic and sexual adventure that former generations would never have dreamed of. But at the same time, what lurks in the hearts of modern youth is the demise of what we know as romantic love. When romantic love generated in the heart proceeds along a straight path and repeats over and over again the process of achieving its goal and in that instant ceasing to exist, then the inability to love and the death of passions (a phenomenon peculiar to the modern age) is within sight. It is fair to say that this is the main reason that young people today are tormented by contradictions concerning the problem of romantic love.

Until the war, youth were able to distinguish neatly between romantic love and sexual desire, and they lived quite reasonably with both. When they entered the university, their upperclassmen took them to the brothels and taught them how to satisfy their desire, but they dared not lay a hand on the women they truly loved.

Thus love in prewar Japan, while it was based on a sacrifice in the form of prostitution, on the other hand preserved the old "puritanical" [in English] tradition. Once we accept the existence of romantic love, we must also accept the fact that men must have in a separate place the sacrificial object with which to satisfy their carnal desires. Without such an outlet, true love cannot exist. Such is the tragic physiology of the human male.

Romantic love as seen by Jōchō is not strategy designed for the preservation of this half-modernized, role-differentiated, pragmatic, and flexible arrangement. It is always rein-

forced by death. One must die for love, and death heightens love's tension and purity. This is the ideal love for *Hagakure*.

Hagakure: Potent Medicine To Soothe the Suffering Soul

As can be surmised from what I have already said, *Hagakure* is an attempt to cure the peaceful character of modern society by the potent medicine of death. This medicine, during the hundred years of war preceding the Tokugawa Period, had been all too liberally resorted to in the daily lives of the people, but with the coming of peace, it was feared as the most drastic medicine and avoided. Jōchō Yamamoto's discovery is that this most drastic medicine contains an effective treatment for soothing the suffering spirit of man. The author, in his abundant understanding of human life, knows that man does not live by his life alone. He knows just how paradoxical is human freedom. And he knows that the instant man is given freedom he grows weary of it, and the instant he is given life he becomes unable to bear it.

Ours is an age in which everything is based on the premise that it is best to live as long as possible. The average life span has become the longest in history, and a monotonous plan for humanity unrolls before us. The youth's enthusiasm for "my-home-ism" lasts as long as he is struggling to find his own little nest. As soon as he has found it, the future holds nothing for him. All there is is the retirement money clicked up in rows on the abacus, and the peaceful, boring life of impotent old age. This image is constantly in the shadow of the welfare state, threatening the hearts of mankind. In the Scandinavian

countries, the need to work has by now disappeared, and there is no more worry over support in old age; in their boredom and disillusionment at being ordered by society simply to "rest," an extraordinary number of old people commit suicide. And in England, which after the war reached the ideal standard of a welfare nation, the desire to work has been lost, and what follows is the crippling and decline of industry.

Suppressed, the Death Impulse Must Eventually Explode

In discussing the direction modern society should take, some people propose the ideal of socialism and others the ideal of the welfare state, but these two are actually one and the same. At the extremity of freedom is the fatigue and boredom of a welfare state; needless to say, at the extremity of a socialist state there is suppression of freedom. With one part of his heart man supports grand social "visions" [in English], but then while he proceeds one step at a time, as soon as the ideal seems attainable he becomes bored with it. Each and every one of us hides within his subconscious mind deep, blind impulses. These are the dynamic expression of the contradictions filling one's life from moment to moment, a manifestation that has essentially nothing to do with social ideals for the future. In youth these are manifested in their boldest, sharpest form. Moreover, such blind impulses appear in dramatic opposition, even in confrontation with one another. Youth possesses the impulse to resist and the impulse to surrender, in equal measure. One might redefine these as the impulse to be free and the impulse to die. The manifestation of these impulses, no

matter how political the form it assumes, is like an electric current that results from a difference in electrical charge—in other words, from the fundamental contradictions of human existence.

During the war, the death impulse was 100 percent liberated, but the impulse for resistance and freedom, for life, was completely suppressed. In the postwar age, this condition is exactly reversed, and whereas the impulse for resistance and freedom and life is 100 percent fulfilled, the impulse for surrender and death is never fulfilled at all. About ten years ago in a conversation with a certain conservative politician, I said that perhaps the postwar Japanese government, in bringing about economic prosperity, had at least managed to fulfill the drive of modern youth for life, but I did not have the chance to talk about the drive for death. On another occasion, however, I have explained that we are constantly exposed to the danger that the death drive suppressed within modern youth will someday explode.

I believe that the battle over the renewal of the American Security Treaty is one instance of extreme difference in electrical charge. The Security Treaty struggle was politically complex, and the young people who participated in it were simply seeking a cause for which they would be willing to lay down their lives. They were not necessarily governed by ideology, and their conduct was not founded on their own reading of the text of the Security Treaty. They were trying to satisfy both their inner drives, the drives for resistance and death.

The frustration that followed the failure of the anti-Security Treaty demonstrations was even worse, however. Those who had participated were made to realize that the political movement to which they had devoted themselves was a sort of fiction, that death does not transcend reality, that political achievements

provide no satisfaction, that the energy of all their actions had been in vain. Once again the youth in modern Japan received the crushing sentence, "The cause for which you died was not worthwhile."

As Toynbee says, the reason Christianity gathered so many avid converts so suddenly is because these people had fervently wished for a goal worth dying for. In the age of the Pax Romana, the lands under Roman domination, including all of Europe and extending even to Asia, enjoyed interminable peace. However, the only people who were able to avoid the boredom and fatigue that seep into an age of peace were the frontier guards. The frontier guards had found a goal worth dying for.

Times Have Changed

Hagakure is based on the principles of the samurai. The occupation of the samurai is death. No matter how peaceful the age, death is the samurai's supreme motivation, and if a samurai should fear or shun death, in that instant he would cease to be a samurai. It is for this reason that Jōchō Yamamoto puts such emphasis on death as his fundamental motivation to action. However, in present-day Japan under a constitution that outlaws war, people who consider death to be their occupational objective—and this includes the National Defense Force—cannot exist, on principle. The premise of the democratic age is that it is best to live as long as possible.

Thus in evaluating the impact of *Hagakure*, it becomes an important question whether or not the readers are samurai. If

one is able to read *Hagakure* transcending the fundamental difference in premise between Jōchō's era and our own, one will find there an astonishing understanding of human nature, a wisdom applicable to human relations even in the present day. One reads lightly and quickly through its pages (stimulating, vigorous, passionate, but extremely sharp and penetrating, paradoxical pages), letting one's body be refreshed as by a spring rain. But in the end one is forced to confront again the fundamental difference in premise.

The reader, temporarily surmounting this difference in premise, comes to resonate with the text; then at the conclusion he must give way once more before the unresolvable difference. That is what is interesting about *Hagakure*.

The Significance of *Hagakure* for the Present Day

But what exactly is this difference? Here we transcend occupation, class discrimination, and the conditions ascribed to any individual in a specific era, and we are brought back to the basic problem of life and death, a problem we too must face in this day and age. In modern society the meaning of death is constantly being forgotten. No, it is not forgotten; rather, the subject is avoided. Rainer Maria Rilke (poet, born in Prague, 1875-1926), has said that the death of man has become smaller. The death of a man is now nothing more than an individual dying grandly in a hard hospital bed, an item to be disposed of as quickly as possible. And all around us is the ceaseless "traffic war," which is reputed to have claimed more victims than the Sino-Japanese War, and the fragility of human life is now as it has ever been. We simply do not like to speak

about death. We do not like to extract from death its beneficial elements and try to put them to work for us. We always try to direct our gaze toward the bright landmark, the forward-facing landmark, the landmark of life. And we try our best not to refer to the power by which death gradually eats away our lives. This outlook indicates a process by which our rational humanism, while constantly performing the function of turning the eyes of modern man toward the brightness of freedom and progress, wipes the problem of death from the level of consciousness, pushing it deeper and deeper into the subconscious, turning the death impulse by this repression to an ever more dangerous, explosive, ever more concentrated, inner-directed impulse. We are ignoring the fact that bringing death to the level of consciousness is an important element of mental health.

But death alone exists unchanged and regulates our lives now as in the era of *Hagakure*. In this sense, the death that Jōchō is talking about is nothing extraordinary. *Hagakure* insists that to ponder death daily is to concentrate daily on life. When we do our work thinking that we may die today, we cannot help feeling that our job suddenly becomes radiant with life and meaning.

It seems to me that *Hagakure* offers us a chance to reevaluate our views of life and death, after twenty years of peace since the Second World War.

NOTES

1. Bunsō Hashikawa (1922-). Critic at large and scholar of modern Japanese intellectual history.