



Clay Wyatt

Class: Sophomore
Major: Professional Writing

Clay Wyatt was born in 1982 in Benton, Ky., and wormed his way through school until graduation in 2000. After high school, he took a three-and-a-half year break before continuing his education at MSU. Wyatt has since become involved with various on-campus organizations and currently works as a mentor with the Services for Students with Learning Disabilities.

ABSTRACT

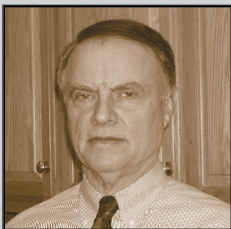
Sixty Years of Japanese Pacifism: The Transformers' Binaltech

The Japanese, since the conclusion of World War II, have funneled their warrior heritage into their modern consumer culture. This culture includes toys, such as the Transformers, and this link between products for sale and the desires of feudal conquering can be supported by the appearances of the figures, their functions, and the economics of selling merchandise.

FACULTY MENTORS



Jean Lorrach is a professor of English at Murray State University. She lives with one dog, Kadi Farris ambrov Keon, and therapy cat Earl Gray Dudley. Dr. Lorrach started publishing nonfiction professionally in graduate school but turned to professional fiction in the 1980s. She has created a series of her own, *Savage Empire*, a series with Jacqueline Lichtenberg, *Sime~Gen*, and a series of children's books about the Loch Ness Monster with Lois Wickstrom. She created the department's course in Fantasy, Myth and Legend, and regularly teaches the History of the English language.



Terry Strieter is a professor of history. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1977 and has been teaching at Murray State since that date. While teaching a wide variety of history courses, his specialization is France. Strieter's research is in French and European social history; besides a book on 19th-century European art (published in 1999), he has published over 20 articles and given over 40 papers at professional conferences. In 2001 and again in 2004, he was elected by the Murray State University faculty as the Faculty Regent to the Board of Regents.



Pat Wilson-McCutchen is a lecturer in the sociology program in the Department of Government, Law and International Affairs. She has taught the introductory sociology and social problems classes at Murray State since 1999. She is a Murray State alumna and has worked as a psychiatric therapist for a number of years. She has a special interest in the motivational forces that underlie human behavior.

Sixty Years of Japanese Pacifism: The Transformers' Binaltech

Binal adj. *double, twofold*

Tech abr. *technical, technology*

Transform v. *to change in appearance,
condition, nature, or character*

— Torsten Abel

I'm a Transformers toy enthusiast. My interest in them has developed over the past few years into a full-fledged collection, rivaling anything on that blurry border between normal hobbies and obsessions. Of course, no personal interest would be complete without the requisite musings to go with it, so these extra traits have manifested themselves in my participation in the amorphous, mutant appendage of any hobby or interest—the internet fan site. During my time with fellow fans, I have come to absorb quite a bit of information about Transformers toys and have ultimately contributed to the endless spiels as well. One method that I have subsequently used to “introduce” people to my hobby has been to say, “these are 60 years of Japanese pacifism.” After putting this phrase through some high mileage, I have conceded that there may indeed be something deeper to it than my usual throwaway maxims, so I’ve set to the task of elaborating it.



Figure 1a

Suit of Armor and Helmet,
by Haruta Katsumitsu
and Juryo Misumasa.
Japan, 1700s, Edo period.
Iron, silver, lacquer, leather and
silk. Denver Art Museum, gift of
John and Celeste Fleming.

Modern Japanese toys have become a symbolic transference of the country’s warrior heritage because of the abandonment of militaristic ventures following World War II. Rather than attempting to dominate the world through military avenues, Japan has preferred (or been limited to) the route of commerce, while diverting its feudal legacy into its pop culture. In the case of the Transformers’ Binaltech line, these processes are one and the same



Figure 1b



Figure 1c

(Fig. 1a). As cars, they are the terrific examples of peaceful, placid and civil consumer designs (Fig. 1b), while being able to disguise perfectly the warrior within (Fig. 1c). Following a more thorough analysis, they become an even more convincing subject than what merely meets the eye.

First, however, a brief synopsis of Japanese history tells that, during the earlier periods going all the way back to the Mongol invaders in the 13th century, a military hierarchy called the Shogunate was in power. The system can best be translated to Western analogies by making a connection to the feudal era of Europe. Peasants served under vassals of higher lords, and so on (Bulliet et al., 2001, p. 364). In this system, the samurai held resounding importance as the lowest-ranking members of the military caste and as governors of peasants. The significance of the social niche of the samurai cannot be fully elaborated here, but, in brevity, the role of the powerful warrior was absolutely respected by the majority of the

population. According to Noel Perrin (1979, p. 50), author of *Giving Up the Gun*, “This was called *myoji-taito*, the privilege of surname and sword.”

The Shogunate system, however, was completely eliminated by internal means due to the United States Navy’s showing up in 1853, demanding trade. The Japanese had sealed themselves off from most foreigners in the previous 200 years, and by doing so had fallen behind in the ability to make gunpowder weaponry (Perrin, 1979, p. 77). This did not take them long to remedy; during the Meiji restoration, Japan successfully and selectively modernized and westernized itself within 30 years (Bulliet et al., 2001, pp. 691-694). This leap of technological and cultural ability led to the defeat of the Chinese in 1895 and the Russians in 1905. The military advance was only quelled at the end of World War II (Bulliet et al., 2001, p. 847).

In the some 60 years since World War II, Japan has been once again a peaceful nation. But to where did all of the centuries’ worth of combative and industrious energy disappear? The answer, quite baldly put, is that it didn’t go anywhere, but was instead transformed into the execution of a rapid economic recovery. As Stephen Cohen (1991, p.71), author of *Cowboys and Samurai*, states:

Consensus, capitalism and the special circumstances of Japan’s economic history collectively produced a system in which the samurai of the Tokugawa era seem to have been transformed into a new breed of managers and bureaucrats who guide modern Japanese corporations and government agencies. Large corporations can be seen as contemporary versions of the regional lords to whom so much loyalty was extended.

This literal displacement of feudal warriors does not even get into the figurative representations in Japanese popular culture, such as seen in manga and anime. Shows like the Gundam series, GaoGaiGar and Go Lion (known as Voltron in the west) all revolve around giant, robotic warriors with varying degrees of violence and intensity (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>). And a symbiotic element to any animated fiction, or subculture thereof, is toys.

What were to become the Transformers were made first by a Japanese company called Takara. Most of the toys from the original 1984 line debuted a bit earlier, usually in either Takara’s Diaclone or Microman (Micronauts) lines (Alvarez, 2001, p. 5). The Diaclones were fairly realistic, scaled-down real-model vehicles that could

turn into humanoid robots. The Microman sub-line “Microchange” featured a similar idea, but used smaller items for the alternate modes (tape decks, cameras, guns, etc).

The Transformers, as they are now known, were created when the American company Hasbro contacted Takara with intention of using some of their toys for a new line. Most of those pre-existing toys were cobbled together under the name Transformers and then heavily advertised. According to Torsten Abel, the result was the creation of a highly successful brand of the 1980s (<http://www.binalternators.de/>).

The original fiction for the Transformers was composed and compiled by Marvel Comics, and the animated series was written in the U.S. while drawn in Japan and later Korea (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>); however, most of the lengthiest character development and mythos development took place in the considerably longer run of the UK comic. The cover dates for the UK version span Sept. 20 1984 – Jan. 18, 1992, amassing over 300 issues. The U.S. comic finished with 80 issues (<http://www.tfarchive.com/>). Thus what was initiated in Japan by toys had become in only a few short years a truly multicultural phenomenon.

Naturally, public interest in the toys within the U.S. waned because of sheer oversaturation, competition with other toy lines (GI Joe, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, etc.), and the advent of Nintendo. (The Japanese series continued along a slightly different path, but ended up withering by the early 1990s as well). Though the toy line nearly faded into yesteryear, it experienced a resurgence during the late nineties with the Canadian-written and Canadian-animated “Beast Wars” show, which lasted three seasons (or five if the follow-up Beast Machines is counted). Though never quite topping the popularity of the original series, the Hasbro-initiated and -designed Beast Wars line can easily be understood as successful even years later as it is the only Transformers toy line apart from the original to have figures re-released as commemorative reissues.

Within the last few years, the creation of a sub-line called Binaltech (or Alternators outside Japan), based on real vehicles and complex transformation sequences, has made many collectors happy. Binaltech toys are something of a “back to the roots of Diaclone” line within the Transformer series. They feature die-cast metal parts, licensed car designs from major manufacturers, rubber tires and overly detailed interiors, and are once again designed in Japan (<http://www.binalternators.de/>). They have also prodded

me to wonder who, or what, the modern Japanese warrior is. My examination of the Binaltech line specifically indicates that the “neo-samurai” can be inferred in a variety of ways, some subtle, some not so subtle.



Figure 2

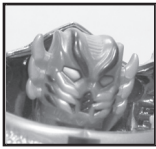


Figure 3



Figure 4

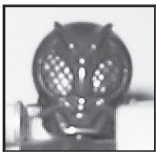


Figure 5

The neo-samurai appears first on the cosmetic level. Certain elements of appearance alone are quite intimidating. Several of them do possess some aesthetic references to old-time samurai armor. The head of Tracks strongly resembles the helmet of some by-gone warrior, complete with ornamental horns (Fig. 2). That’s not to say arbitrarily that since they’re toy robots they automatically must feature warrior designs. During the era of the Beast Wars series, which was designed in the U.S. by Hasbro, most of the figures’ heads resembled the animals used for their alternate forms, which is completely contrary to the first Japanese designs. Rampage looks like a crustacean (Fig. 3), Inferno looks like an ant (Fig. 4), Waspinator looks like a fly (Fig. 5), etc., so the head designs of the earlier (and later) figures that match more closely to helmets and faceplates should not be taken for granted (naturally, there are exceptions to both trends, but they are just that – exceptions). The motifs may

be subtle homages to the Diaclone-era figures on the part of the designers, but the schemes used for some Binaltech heads are very distinctly drawn from Japanese samurai.

Other figures require more keen observation, but similarities to the imposing visages of warriors can still be found. Most of the models released so far feature some method of transformation that results in vehicle doors or rear wheels being splayed outward to enhance shoulder width (Fig. 6). It is not enough simply to turn a car into a humanoid robot; the robot also has to have a warrior’s intimidating build.

The second appearance of the neo-samurai is in the fiction associated with the toys. The Binaltech line’s story is an extension of that of the original Transformers, which has always been about conflict and strife between factions. The original series from the 1980s was written in the U.S., but the seed for a fiction of warriors was

planted by the pre-Transformers toys themselves: they all originally came with *weapons*. Shoulder missiles, swords, handguns, rifles and a variety of other weaponry were created before the toys ever had a backing fiction. In a less subtle example, the toy that was to become the original antagonistic faction’s leader (named Megatron for the Transformers) transformed into a Walther P-38 pistol. Even though most of the pre-Transformer toys were more subtle about it, they, and almost every Transformer since, still came equipped with a warrior’s arsenal. The supporting fiction (comics, cartoons, etc.) that was launched with the original line, and all the subsequent lines, has built upon this concept. The weapons that come with the toys have never been ornamental in the shows, and the warrior props of the foreground have universally had the backdrop of some greater factional conflict or war.

Though the original series was written in the U.S., the theme of giant robots annihilating each other is found in native Japanese anime that predate Transformers (see the previous examples of Gundam, etc.). The fundamental difference between Transformers and all the other series, however, comes from the American input of Marvel-anthropomorphism. In the majority of the other Japanese robot fictions, the robots themselves do not have personalities. Rather, as in the Gundam or Voltron series, they are all driven by human pilots. Even the pre-Transformer line Diaclone was based on this principle, too, since the toys came with small human drivers that could be attached by magnets. As it did not follow this trend, the Transformers’ fiction offered something new to the Japanese audience while still maintaining the familiar theme of warriors’ conflict.

This feature of having the robots combat each other has been grandfathered down all the way to the Binaltech line (Fig. 7 on p. 56). The Corvettes are all equipped with dual shoulder missiles, wrist blasters and hand-held weapons. The Mustangs sport handguns and swords. The Honda S2000s feature long



Figure 6

barreled rifles and roofs that double as shields. Binaltechs not only look the part of warriors in terms of attire (so to speak), but they pack accordingly as well. Moreover, the pieces of the vehicles that are usually converted to weapons are the engines (six out of the eight molds released so far use this scheme), so the “warrior at heart” phrase isn’t quite so abstract, either.

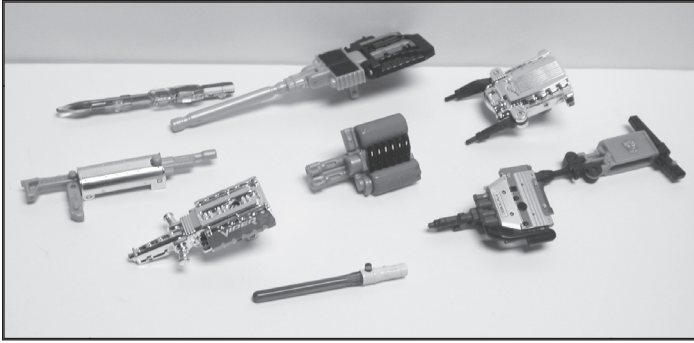


Figure 7

Third, the niche that the toys themselves occupy situates them in relationship to the neo-samurai. Historically in Japan (and almost every culture for that matter), weapons were also regarded as works of art, to be admired and treasured as items of rare quality when not being used in battle (Perrin, 1979, p. 50). This is a tradition that also lasted much longer in Japan than Europe or America (Perrin, 1979, pp. 53-54). While the toys themselves are not particularly lethal, they are still dual effigies of art and war.

It is perhaps not a subtle coincidence that Japan's toy culture remains such a blend of the two extremes. Japan was a very militaristic country in the period before the resolution of World War II, and obviously not so since then. With the abolition of the need to make weapons of war, lavishing artistic complexity on token warriors seems more practical. Murray State's Art Department Chair Dick Dougherty pointed out that, "The toy you showed me has some very sophisticated design and engineering skills involved in its making" (personal communication, Sept. 27, 2005).

That's not to say Japan has a monopoly on toys. Takara's partner, Hasbro, still markets the figures around the world. But there is an important distinction in the markets. Hasbro's versions of the toys are made completely out of plastic to keep the final retail price down, whereas Takara's versions use die cast metal parts for the exteriors and therefore cost more than double the price of the foreign counterparts. This reflects either a strong consumer base within Japan that is willing to pay extra for figures with higher quality parts, or designers with more grandiose ideas than their American counterparts.

Moreover, since the international versions are made of plastic, they are actually much safer to play with since there are no worries of damaging the value of the figure by chipping the paint. The fact that Takara uses higher quality (yet more easily marred) parts to

appeal to collectors suggests a sufficiently healthy market that is not solely composed of children, who are most assuredly not easy on their toys.

Finally, the toys can be interpreted as the modern samurai warrior from a purely financial point of view. Instead of conquering foreign peoples by the sword, they raid and plunder through their price tags (these figures some seven or eight inches tall cost around 50 U.S. dollars for those who choose to import, whereas the domestic Alternator versions retail at around \$20), diffusing capital into Japanese businesses. Granted, Takara lets Hasbro handle all international marketing and distribution, but the toys themselves all lead back to Japan.

If viewed through a realpolitik lens, this process seems quite obvious. Consumers trade money to buy the figures, and the situation changes in two ways: First, the buyers have fewer monetary resources at their disposal; second, tiny mock-samurai, blending artistry and technology, war and civility, invade foreign soil and slay the locals' wallets with crafty engineering and detail, paving the way for toy reinforcements.

Overall, Japan's toys are a good example of a cultural transference of military aggression to commercial aggression. In the case of the Transformers Binaltechs, the diffusion of a warrior heritage into a modern consumer culture is easy to illustrate. In many different ways, the toys can be effectively interpreted this way, as cosmetic appearance, associated fictions, or even pieces of modern pop sculpture.

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