

Wonders of
World Cultures

Exploring Asia and Oceania

Interdisciplinary Readings and Activities

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written and illustrated by

Toni Rhodes

J WESTON
WALCH
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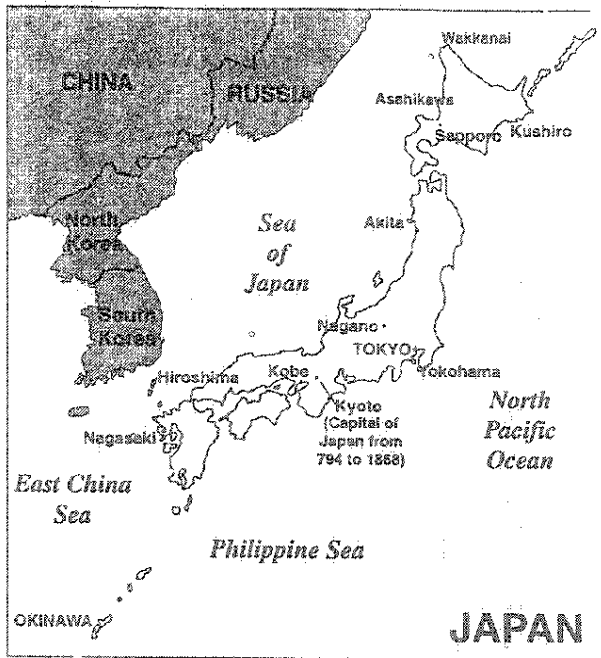
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Samurai Means “One Who Serves”

In tenth-century Japan brave warriors, skilled in the use of bow, spear, and sword, served as protectors for nobles and their families who lived in rural outlying areas far from the capital, Kyoto. These warriors also helped the noble masters take over lands from other families.

The warriors and their masters in the rural provinces became known as *samurai*—a new class of people in Japanese society. They got stronger and stronger, and sometimes they rebelled against the emperor and his government in Kyoto. One group, known as the Taira, rebelled against Kyoto in the tenth century.

Because the emperor and the city nobles were not fighters, they started using some of the samurai warriors as police and guards in the capital. One of these samurai groups, the Minamoto, helped defeat the Taira rebellion.

Later, in 1156, the two samurai groups fought each other again. The Taira gained control and began to take power from the central government. There was still an emperor and his court, but they had no power. The idea of serving a master was so strong in the samurai leaders, however, that they still thought of themselves as servants of the emperor even though the samurai held the power. Between 1180 and 1185, the two main samurai groups fought an epic struggle called the Gempei War. This war is the source for many of the stories and people in Japanese legends and theater. It started with the rebellion of an aged Minamoto veteran and ended with complete defeat of the Taira forces.

One folktale says that the ghosts of defeated Taira warriors linger on the seashore where the last fatal battle took place. Crabs in the area have markings that look like samurai war helmets. These are the souls of dead Taira warriors, according to the tale.

The samurai winners of the war ruled Japan from 1185 to 1868. Samurai rule emphasized the warrior might and strict discipline. They were always ready to kill or be killed. Through their bravery and fierce fighting they successfully defeated two Mongol invasions in the late 1200's.

The samurai class also started enjoying some of the cultural pursuits of the emperor and his court. In the 1300's, many well-known features of classic Japanese culture evolved from older traditions, including the Noh theater, the tea ceremony, gardening, and the art of making swords.

To understand the arts of Japan, it is helpful to learn about the religions of Japan.

Religions of Japan

Shinto is a religion that started in Japan. It centers on worship of nature. The people had a deep respect for mountains, streams, trees, and the soil. They also worshiped the sun in the form of a sun goddess, and they believed that the first emperor was



an ancestor of the sun goddess. They also believed in many lesser but still important gods.

Another religion of the Japanese people is Buddhism, which originally came from India and reached Japan in the sixth century *A.D.*

Zen Buddhism is a type of Buddhism that came to be widely accepted in Japan in the 1100's. Zen Buddhism helped the samurai because it stressed action and instinct rather than thought, feeling, and questioning. Also, Zen taught that there is no difference between life and death. Neither is worthy of consideration.

Through meditation, a samurai could achieve the Zen spirit and the willpower to force all thought and questioning from his mind so he could fight and die without hesitation in the service of his master and country. Death to him must be "lighter than a feather."

Both Zen and Shinto stress a natural, simple way of looking at the world, which appealed to the samurai. He had to be able to throw off the many distractions around him and focus on the single purpose of his life—being a warrior who was ready to die.

The Tea Ceremony

Zen monks brought this art form from China to Japan. It provided a way for samurai warriors to relax, if only temporarily.

Leaving his sword outside, the samurai entered the tea hut through a low sliding door. Then the rituals of the tea ceremony would begin.

The samurai first knelt and bowed deeply to the floor. The only decorations in the tea house were a scroll of calligraphy (fine handwriting) and a carefully arranged vase of flowers, which the samurai and other guests at the tea ceremony quietly contemplated. Mats of rice-straw covered the floor. A heavy iron kettle stood on a wooden support over a bed of hot coals. Tea utensils, bowls and bamboo tea whisks, were set out on a table. With other guests, the samurai sat motionless and watched silently as the tea

preparer boiled the water and prepared the tea. The motions of the tea server followed a slow and graceful ritual. The Samurai drank the tea in three sips, the last sip being a loud "slurp." He and other guests often admired the beautiful tea utensils, and sometimes composed poetry or played the lute. In this sanctuary of tranquility, beauty, and ritual, samurai could put aside the cares of the warrior's world.



A Samurai in Full Armor

At 10 years of age a boy of the samurai class started his training. He learned fencing, archery, wrestling, horseback riding, spear throwing, and how to plan a battle. He also learned how to commit suicide, if necessary. At 15 the young samurai became an adult and could wear his hair pulled back into a ponytail in the warrior style. He could also officially carry a sword, his most prized possession.

The Art of Making Swords

Japanese craftsmen achieved a high level of skill in making objects of war, including bows and arrows and matchlock guns, after they came into contact with the Portuguese in the mid 1500's.

The armor that samurai warriors wore was made of hundreds of lacquered steel or leather scales laced together with silk braids of different colors.

The object where craftsmanship reached its highest level, however, was the sword, considered the "soul



of the samurai." It represented the warrior's self-discipline, devotion to a master, and fighting skill. A samurai cleaned his sword every day, wiping the blade forty times, then reapplying oil.

Before a sword maker started to make a sword, he performed rituals. To purify his body he washed in cold water and prayed for guidance. The swordsmith tried to be clean in mind and body so no evil thoughts would enter the blade as he worked on it and later cause it to commit evil acts.

The warrior needed a sword that was strong but flexible so it would not break in battle. First, the sword maker heated pieces of iron in a charcoal fire until they were cherry red. Then, he hammered the hot iron into a thin sheet, folded it in half, reheated it, and hammered it out again. This process would be repeated up to 18 times. When the gently curved blade was finished, it was polished to a high sheen.

The sword guard (a piece between the handle and the blade) was highly decorated with landscape scenes or events from history. The sword handle was covered with the skin of the giant ray (fish), which is like ivory, and wrapped diagonally with silk braid to provide a good grip.

A finished sword had to be handled in a certain way. As it was pulled out of the cover, it was turned with the cutting edge upward, and the blade could never be touched with the hand or fingers.

Noh Theater

This form of drama grew out of early Buddhist dances. In the 1300's it became the main form of entertainment of samurai society. The Noh plays were taken from samurai stories of war and from classic Japanese tales.

All of the actors were men, who presented the story through song, dance, and wordless gestures. Every movement had symbolic meaning. Originally these plays were performed outside in very bare settings. Sometimes wealthy samurai hired actors to perform at their homes.

The actors wore elaborate and colorful silk robes and masks, which could represent a male or a female of any age. Originally there were three types of masks: gods or demons, old men, and women. To show expressions, the masks were tilted in different ways, to catch light or cast shadows.



Noh Theater

Before the actor went onstage, he would put on the mask and look through the eyeholes at his image in a mirror. In this way he tried to become the character he was playing.

Landscape Gardening

The samurai nobles and warriors certainly were not the first people in Japan to create beautiful gardens. After the Japanese made contact with China, in the early 600's, they tried to make gardens like those they had seen in China. One of the features of these gardens was an artificial island and rock formation in the middle of a pond. This was meant to re-create a scene from a Chinese fable in which a mountain rises up from the sea. People of the upper classes, who were the only ones who could afford to have gardens, would float ones around the pond in little boats and write poetry.

Later, in the 800's and 900's, the emperor and his court spent a lot of their time in cultural and artistic pursuits. They built splendid houses and gardens, wrote romantic poetry, played music, and created and

