

Chapter 21

The Rise of the Warrior Class in Japan

What was the role of the samurai in the military society of medieval Japan?

21.1 Introduction

During the Heian period, Japan experienced a golden age. That period was followed by civil war. In this chapter, you will learn about the rise of a powerful warrior class in Japan—the *samurai*.

Minamoto Yoritomo came to power in Japan in 1185. In 1192, he took the title of *shogun*, or commander-in-chief. Yoritomo did not take the place of the emperor. Instead, he set up a military government with its own capital in the city of Kamakura. While the imperial court remained in Heian-kyo, emperors played an increasingly less important role in the government of Japan.

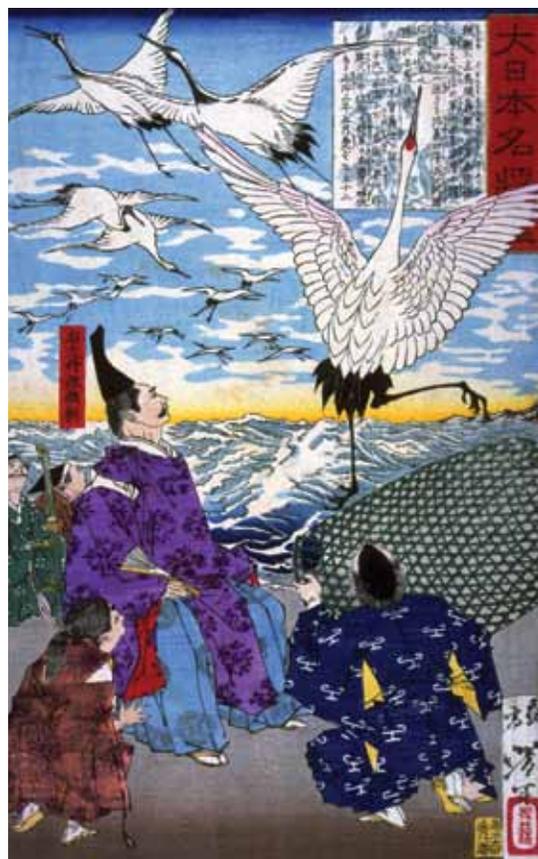
The start of the Kamakura government marked the beginning of a new era in Japanese history. Eventually, professional warriors—the samurai—became Japan’s ruling class. The era of the samurai lasted for 700 years, until the emperor was restored to power in 1868.

Over time, an elaborate culture and code of conduct grew up around the samurai. A samurai was expected to be honest, brave, and intensely loyal to his lord. In fact, the word *samurai* means “those who serve.” The samurai code was very strict. Samurai sometimes killed themselves with their own swords rather than “lose face,” or personal honor.

The samurai were more than fearless fighters. They were educated in art, writing, and literature. Many were devout Buddhists. Their religious faith helped them prepare for their duties and face death bravely.

In this chapter, you will meet Japan’s samurai. You will learn about their code of conduct and the role they played in the military society of medieval Japan.

Minamoto Yoritomo was Japan’s first shogun. Here he watches wild cranes on the beach near his castle.



shogun the head of the military government of Japan in the era of the samurai

samurai a member of a powerful warrior class in Japan

daimyo a local lord in Japan in the era of the samurai

21.2 The Rise of the Samurai

The military government established by Minamoto Yoritomo was led by a **shogun**, or commander-in-chief. Although emperors continued to rule in name, the real power shifted to the shoguns.

Samurai Under the Shoguns Shoguns, such as Yoritomo and his **successors**, rewarded warriors, or **samurai**, with appointments to office and land grants. In return, the samurai pledged to serve and protect the shogun.

The rise of the samurai brought a new emphasis on military values in Japanese culture. All samurai trained in the arts of war, especially archery. During this period, women, as well as men, could be samurai. Girls and boys alike were trained to harden their feelings and to use weapons. One samurai wrote,

Of what use is it to allow the mind to concentrate on the moon and flowers, compose poems, and learn how to play musical instruments? . . . Members of my household, including women, must learn to ride wild horses, and shoot powerful bows and arrows.

Shifting Loyalties By the 14th century, Japan's warrior society resembled the lord-vassal system of medieval Europe. The shogun now ruled with the help of warrior-lords called **daimyos** (DIE-mee-os). In turn, the daimyos were supported by large numbers of samurai. The daimyos expected to be rewarded for their obedience and loyalty with land, money, or administrative office. The samurai expected the same from the daimyos they served.

Over time, the position of the shogun weakened as daimyos became increasingly powerful. Daimyos began to view their lands as independent kingdoms. Samurai now allied themselves with their daimyo lords.

In the late 15th century, Japan fell into chaos. Daimyos warred with one another for land and power. Samurai fought fierce battles on behalf of their lords.

After a century of bloody warfare, a series of skilled generals defeated rival daimyos and reestablished a strong military government. In 1603, the last of these leaders, Tokugawa Ieyasu (TAW-koo-GAH-wah EE-yeh-YAH-soo), became shogun. Tokugawa established a new capital in Edo, present-day Tokyo.

For the next 250 years, Japan was at peace. Samurai served under shoguns and **administered** the government. It was during this time that the samurai ideal came to full flower. Let's look now at the samurai way of life.

21.3 The Samurai's Armor and Weapons

A samurai was first and foremost a warrior. Let's look at what a samurai wore in battle and the weapons he used.

Armor A samurai went into battle dressed in heavy armor. Under the armor, he wore a colorful robe called a *kimono* and baggy trousers. Shin guards made of leather or cloth protected his legs.

Samurai armor was unique. It was made of rows of small metal plates coated with lacquer and laced together with colorful silk cords. This type of armor was strong, yet flexible enough for the samurai to move freely.

Boxlike panels of armor covered the samurai's chest and back. Metal sleeves covered his arms. Broad shoulder guards and panels that hung over his hips provided additional protection. Some samurai wore thigh guards as well.

After dressing in his body armor, the samurai put on a ferocious-looking iron mask that was meant to frighten his opponents as well as to protect his face. Last came his helmet. Before putting on the helmet, he burned incense in it. In that way, his head would smell sweet if it were cut off in battle.

The clothing and armor of a samurai was extremely complex and took several stages to complete.





Samurai wore elaborate armor with many layers. The layers protected the samurai while allowing free movement.

Weapons Samurai fought with bows and arrows, spears, and swords. A samurai's wooden bow could be up to eight feet long. Such long bows required great strength to use. In battle, samurai on horseback rode toward each other, pulling arrows from the quivers on their backs and firing them at the enemy.

In hand-to-hand combat, some foot soldiers used spears to knock riders off their horses and to kill an enemy on foot with a powerful thrust.

The samurai's most prized weapon, however, was his sword. Japanese sword makers were excellent craftsmen. Samurai swords were the finest in the world. They were flexible enough not to break, but hard enough to be razor sharp. Samurai carried two types of swords. To fight, they used a long sword with a curved blade.

Wearing a sword was the privilege and right of the samurai. Swords were passed down through generations of warrior families and given as prizes to loyal warriors. Even after peace was established in the 17th century, samurai proudly wore their swords as a sign of their rank.

21.4 Military Training and Fighting

The way the first samurai warriors trained and fought was called "The Way of the Horse and the Bow." Later, the art of swordsmanship became more important than archery.

Military Training Learning the skills of a samurai required extensive training. Young samurai were apprenticed to archery masters who taught them mental and physical techniques. Samurai practiced until they could shoot accurately without thinking. They also learned to breathe properly and to shoot at their enemies while riding on the back of a galloping horse.

The art of fencing, or swordsmanship, was just as demanding. A samurai had to learn how to force an enemy to make the first move, how to stay out of range of an enemy sword, and how to fight in tight spaces or against more than one opponent. He practiced continually until he could fence well without thinking about it.

Sometimes in battle a samurai might lose or break his sword. Samurai learned to continue the fight by using other objects as weapons, such as metal fans or wooden staffs. They also learned how to fight without weapons by using **martial arts**. This type of fighting often involves using an opponent's strength against him.

martial arts styles of fighting or self-defense, such as modern-day judo and karate, that began mostly in Asia



Battle According to early texts, the samurai had a unique style of battle. First, messengers from opposing sides met to decide the time and place of combat. Then the two armies faced each other a few hundred yards apart. Samurai on both sides shouted out their names, ancestors, heroic deeds, and reason for fighting. Only then did the armies charge, with mounted samurai firing arrows as they urged their horses forward.

As the two armies clashed, samurai fought each other in hand-to-hand combat. Enemies fought a series of one-on-one duels. Each samurai found an opponent who matched him in rank. He would try to knock his opponent off his horse, wrestle him to the ground, and kill him.

21.5 Mental Training

A samurai's education in the art of war included mental training. Samurai had to learn self-control so that they could overcome emotions that might interfere with fighting, especially the fear of death. They also learned to be always alert and prepared to fight.

Training in Self-Control To learn how to endure pain and suffering, young samurai went for days without eating, marched barefoot in snow on long journeys, and held stiff postures for hours without complaining. To overcome the fear of death, they were told to think of themselves as already dead.

Samurai classes in swordsmanship, or fencing, taught samurai essential skills for battle.

Training in Preparedness A samurai could never relax. An attack could come when least expected, even while a samurai was playing music or dancing. For this reason, samurai had to develop a “sixth sense” about danger. This came from long and grueling training.

The experience of one young samurai illustrates this kind of training. The young man’s fencing master used to whack him with a wooden sword throughout the day whenever he least expected it. These painful blows eventually taught the young student to always stay alert.

Teachers also told stories about being prepared. One story was about a samurai who was peacefully writing when a swordsman tried to attack him. Using his sixth sense, the samurai felt the attack coming. He flicked ink into his attacker’s eyes and escaped. In another story, a samurai woman who was suddenly attacked thrust a piece of rolled-up paper into her attacker’s eyes and gave a war shout. Her attacker ran away.

Samurai learned to control their emotions and to always be prepared.





21.6 Training in Writing and Literature

By the more peaceful 17th century, samurai had to be students of culture, as well as fierce warriors. They were expected to be educated in both writing and literature.

Samurai practiced calligraphy, the art of beautiful writing. A calligrapher's main tools were a brush, a block of ink, and paper or silk. The calligrapher moistened the ink block and rubbed it on an ink stone until the ink reached the right consistency. Then he carefully drew each character with his brush.

Samurai also wrote poetry. One famous samurai poet was Matsuo Basho. He invented a new form of short poetry that was later called *haiku* (high-KOO). A haiku has three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, making 17 syllables in all. A haiku poet uses imagery to suggest an idea or create a mood. Basho added to the beauty of haiku by choosing simple words. Here is his most famous haiku:

<i>Furu ike ya</i>	<i>An ancient pond</i>
<i>Kawazu tobikumu</i>	<i>A frog jumps in</i>
<i>Mizu no oto</i>	<i>The splash of water</i>

Samurai were trained in the art of writing, or calligraphy.

Amida Buddhism a form of Buddhism founded on the belief that all people can reach paradise by relying on the mercy of the Amida Buddha



Many samurai worshipped the Amida Buddha, shown in this statue.

21.7 Training for the Tea Ceremony

Another aspect of culture that samurai studied was the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony fostered a spirit of harmony, reverence, and calm among these warriors. It also served as an important way to form political alliances.

Each step of the ceremony had to be performed in a certain way. A tea master invited guests into a small room. They entered through a doorway so low that they had to crawl.

The tearoom was very simple. The only decorations were a scroll painting or an artistic flower arrangement. The guests sat silently, watching the master make and serve the tea. They then engaged in **sophisticated** discussions as they admired the utensils and the beautiful way the tea master had combined them.

To make the tea, the master heated water in an iron urn over a charcoal fire. Then he scooped powdered green tea from a container called a tea caddy into a small bowl. He ladled hot water into the bowl with a wooden dipper and then whipped the water and tea with a bamboo whisk. Each guest in turn took the bowl, bowed to the others, took three sips, and cleaned the rim with a tissue. Then he passed the bowl back to the master to prepare tea for the next guest.

21.8 Training in Spiritual Strength

Most samurai were Buddhists. Two forms of Buddhism that became popular in Japan were Amida and Zen. Samurai were drawn to both kinds of Buddhism, but especially to Zen.

Amida Buddhism In the 12th century, a monk named Honen founded a popular form of Buddhism, **Amida Buddhism**. These Buddhists believed that all people could reach paradise. Honen taught that believers could do this by relying on the mercy of the Amida Buddha.

Amida had been an Indian prince. When he became a Buddha, it was said, he set up a western paradise called the Pure Land. Honen said that believers could enter the Pure Land by prayerfully repeating Amida's name over and over—up to 70,000 times a day. Then, when a believer died, Amida Buddha and a group of bodhisattvas would be waiting to escort the believer into the Pure Land.

Honen's disciple Shinran made this "Pure Land Buddhism" even more popular. He taught that believers could reach the western paradise by sincerely saying Amida's name only once.

Zen Buddhism The form of Buddhism called Zen appealed to many samurai because of its emphasis on effort and discipline. Zen stresses self-reliance and achieving enlightenment through meditation.



To reach enlightenment, Zen Buddhists meditate for hours. They must sit erect and cross-legged without moving.

According to the beliefs of **Zen Buddhism**, becoming enlightened requires giving up everyday, logical thinking. To jolt the mind into enlightenment, masters pose puzzling questions called *koans* (KOH-ahnz). Probably the most well-known koan is, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Zen masters created gardens to aid in meditation. These artfully arranged gardens were often simple and stark. They symbolized nature instead of imitating it. Rocks in sand, for example, might represent islands in the sea.

Zen Buddhism was a good match for the samurai way of life. Zen helped samurai learn discipline, focus their minds, and overcome their fear of death.

21.9 The Code of Bushido and Samurai Values

The samurai code developed over several centuries. By the 17th century, it took final form in **Bushido**, “The Way of the Warrior.”

The code of Bushido, like the code of chivalry in medieval Europe, governed a samurai’s life. It called on samurai to be honest, fair, and fearless in the face of death. Samurai were expected to value loyalty and personal honor even more than their lives.

Samurai who believed in Zen Buddhism might have sat in simple gardens like this one to help while meditating.

Zen Buddhism a form of Buddhism that stresses self-reliance and enlightenment through meditation

Bushido a samurai code that called on warriors to be honest, fair, and fearless



Samurai were fair, honest, and loyal to their lords, above all else. They would fight deadly duels to avenge an insult or their lord's death.

Loyalty and Personal Honor A samurai's **supreme** duty was to be so loyal to his lord that he would gladly die for him. If his lord was murdered, a samurai might avenge his death. A samurai poem says,

*Though a time come
when mountains crack
and seas go dry,
never to my lord
will I be found double-hearted!*

Samurai were also expected to guard their personal honor. The least insult on the street could lead to a duel. One samurai, for example, accidentally knocked his umbrella against another samurai's umbrella. This quickly turned into a quarrel and then a sword fight, resulting in the first samurai's death.

Ritual Suicide The price for failing to live up to the code of Bushido was *seppuku*, or ritual suicide. There were many reasons for *seppuku*, including preserving personal honor and avoiding capture in battle. Samurai might also perform *seppuku* to pay for a crime, a shameful deed, or an insult to a person of higher rank. Some samurai even killed themselves when their lord died or as a form of protest against an injustice.

21.10 Women in Samurai Society

The position of women in samurai society declined over time. In the 12th century, the women of the warrior class enjoyed honor and respect. By the 17th century, however, samurai women were treated as **inferior** to their husbands.

Samurai Women in the 12th Century In the 12th century, samurai women enjoyed considerable status. A samurai's wife helped manage the household and promote the family's interests. When her husband died, she could inherit his property and perform the duties of a vassal. Though women rarely fought, they were expected to be as loyal and brave as men.

Some women, like Tomoe Gozen (TOH-moh-eh GO-zen), did take part in battles alongside men. Fighting one-on-one, she killed several enemies in a battle. Then she fenced with the enemy leader, who tried to drag her from her horse. When he tore off her sleeve, she spun her horse around and killed him.

A woman named Koman is another famous warrior. During a battle on a lake, she saved her clan's banner by swimming to shore under a shower of arrows with the banner clenched in her teeth.

In the 12th century, women, as well as men, were taught the military skills needed to become samurai.

Samurai Women in the 17th Century As the warrior culture developed, women's position weakened. By the 17th century, samurai men were the unquestioned lords of their households. According to one saying, when young, women should obey their fathers; when grown, their husbands; and when old, their sons.

Girls did not choose their own husbands. Instead, families arranged marriages for their daughters to increase their position and wealth. Wives were expected to bear sons, manage the home, and look after their husbands.

A popular book of the time told women how to behave. They were to get up early and go to bed late. During the day they must weave, sew, spin, and take care of their households. They must stick to simple food and clothes and stay away from plays, singing, and other entertainment.

Not all Japanese women were treated the same way. Peasant women had some respect and independence because they worked alongside their husbands. But in samurai families, women were completely under men's control.



restoration the return of a past state, situation, or ruler

21.11 Comparing Japan and Europe in the Middle Ages

The Japan of the samurai period was both like and unlike Europe during the Middle Ages. In both societies, ties of loyalty and obligation bound lords and vassals. Both had rulers who rose to power as military chiefs. But in Europe, a military leader like William the Conqueror ruled as king. In Japan, the shogun ruled in the name of the emperor.

The daimyos of Japan were like the landholding lords of medieval Europe. Both types of lords built castles and held estates that were worked by peasants.

Both the samurai of Japan and the knights of Europe were warriors who wore armor, rode horses, and owned land. Just as European knights had a code of chivalry, the samurai had the code of Bushido. The samurai code, however, was much more strict, since it demanded that a samurai kill himself to maintain his honor.

21.12 The Influence of Samurai Values and Traditions in Modern Times

Japan’s warrior society lasted until 1868, when political upheavals led to the **restoration** of the emperor to ruling power. Modern Japan still feels the influence of the long era of the samurai.

In the 1940s, the Japanese who fought in World War II stayed true to the warrior code. Many soldiers killed themselves rather than surrender. Suicide pilots crashed planes loaded with explosives into enemy battleships. These pilots were called *kamikazes* (“divine winds”) after the storms that helped destroy an invading Chinese fleet in the 13th century.

Samurai fought individual battles with other samurai of equal rank. Like the medieval European knights, the samurai also fought on horseback.





Today, instructors teach samurai fighting techniques to students wearing traditional padded armor. These students are practicing the ancient martial art of kendo.

Japanese and other peoples around the world study martial arts. Sports such as judo and fighting with bamboo swords reflect samurai discipline and skill.

Other elements of samurai culture persist today. People in Japan continue to write haiku and practice calligraphy. Zen gardens and the tea ceremony remain popular. And the samurai ideals of loyalty to family and respect for rank are still alive in modern Japan.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how a class of warriors, called samurai, rose to prominence in medieval Japan. They dominated Japan for nearly 700 years, serving shoguns and daimyos. Over time, an elaborate samurai culture developed.

Armor, Weapons, and Military, Mental, and Spiritual Training Samurai wore flexible armor, rode horses, and fought with bows, spears, and swords. They were trained as fearless fighters. The discipline of Zen Buddhism especially appealed to them.

Training in Writing, Literature, and the Tea Ceremony Samurai also studied literature, the arts, and the complex tea ceremony. They were expected to be able poets and to be skilled at calligraphy.

Bushido and Samurai Values Samurai were expected to live by a strict code called Bushido. This code prized honor, loyalty, and fearlessness.

Women Samurai Women enjoyed high status in early samurai society, and some women fought as warriors. Over time, however, the status of samurai women declined.

Japan and Europe in the Middle Ages Japan's samurai society resembled feudalism in medieval Europe. In both places, a lord-vassal system developed. Samurai and European knights both had a code of behavior, fought on horseback, and pledged loyalty to their lords.

The Samurai Influence Today Samurai values and traditions continue to influence Japan. For example, people practice samurai martial arts, write haiku, and create Zen gardens.