

A rise to legendary status of warriors: japan's history of samurais

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Japan: The Age of the Samurai

The Japanese warrior, most commonly known as the samurai, has been a significant symbol throughout Japan's history and culture. In the beginning although they were simply common men who just guarded the capital for the Emperor, while some were used as tax collectors and police for that time making sure everything was in justice. They began to emerge during the Heian Period (794-1185). During this paper I will talk about their status in Japan, rise, importance of samurai belief, how they raised to power and finally their weaponry and armor they use during their time.

According to the journal "Samurai Status, Class, and Bureaucracy: A Historiographical Essay" By Oxenboell, The Samurai ranked the highest of all class in Japan; they were very powerful in many ways. Samurai were "retainers" or "men of war". But they were changed over time and now referred to as a Chinese origin name samurai, which means "to serve" (Ratti & Westbrook, p. 83). In today's culture powerful would mean having a lot of money, or possessing a lot of influence. The samurai were powerful not because of possession, but because they had a great deal of honor, loyalty, and kindness. This was very important to the samurai because they believe in reincarnation and karma. Which means actions reflected during your life time; you will have a bad or good life when you are reborn. Unlike the first organized conscripts peasant army Emperor Mommu built called Gundan-sei that drafted one adult from every peasant families. The samurai's were a group of highly skilled warriors also known as the Japan's lighting dealer of death.

According to the video (Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire) although samurai were along for a long time they weren't formed into military power until early during the Heian period. From earliest time, Japan was ruled by an emperor. He was rich and powerful and lived in a big palace in Tokyo; he never made a public appearance and his government was badly organized. So when the conscript peasant army, Emperor Kammu sent to conquer the Emish people kept failing, due to the lack of discipline and motivation. The Emperor slowly turned his head and started relying on powerful local lords who are skilled in mounted combat and archery to conquer the Emish. After the Taika reforms in the 646 A. D, it began the rise of the samurai and it gradually leads Gundan-sei to their decline. Ultimately, Emperor Kammu disbanded his army. From this time, the emperor's power gradually declined.

During the Gempei war (1180-1185) Minamoto Yoritomo answered Go-Shirakawa's son call even after he died. Minamoto Yoritomo came and pushed the Tiara family to the farthest tip of the main island. After this achievement, in 1192 Yoritomo received the title Sei-i tai-shogun or "Great General Pacifying the Barbarians." commonly shortened simply to shogun. Yoritomo became Japan's first shogun. Holcombe (151-152)

According to a journal article called Howland, The culture of samurai was strongly Confucian in nature, grounded and being in check by the concept of bushido "The way of the Warrior" meaning honor, loyalty, truthfulness and freedom from fear, a warrior with bushido spirit would fight fearlessly for his daimyo, and prefers to die honorably rather than surrendering to the rival army.

Early Samurai's were archers shooting down enemies with their low bow. They use swords mainly for finishing off wounded enemies. Samurai's were dressed light weighted, to travel with speed and agility. After the Mongol invasion, it opened Samurai's vision and began using a huge variety of weapons, but most of them concentrated on naginata, spear, sword and bows. They all have different advantages in their own area and disadvantages. But after the influences of western powers later in the 19th century, Samurai's began their downfall due to the gun powder warfare.

Over time according to the book: " Museum of fine arts", (boston, 29-31) samurai weaponry changed and evolved over the centuries, being slowly improved or adapted to different needs, although most people nowadays would automatically think and assume samurais primary weapon as sword but in reality it was only one of three major weapons along with the bow and arrow and the yari. The samurai's primary weapon was, in fact, not the sword. The sword really did not even become a primary weapon of samurai culture until the mid to late 17th century when the civil warring period ended. But as a sword, the Japanese katana was unmatched in its design, sharpness and cutting power during its time. Furthermore, it is particularly good at cutting against armor but are not preferred by the samurais to do so because it requires big swings which could be used to the enemies advantage to take you down when your performing the swing or risk breaking the sword, Samurai soon developed a new technique to help them fight against armor and it was not to cut at the armor but to stab and thrust at the gaps and joints of it. Over all the katana was a very well-rounded design: excellent at cutting and slicing, yet good at thrusting.

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According to the book: (" Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis", 7-10)

Armor changes a lot of factor in warfare, you can't imagine how much it actually affects you due to the weight of the armor and the movement it allows you to move. Samurai didn't want use shields because they see it as a cowardly act; they rather to be more offensive with the use of two swords.

According to the section (Japanese Armor, 7-10) in " Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis" it is said that the Japanese designed their swords to defeat heavily armor warriors. During battles a lot of samurais carry two swords along themselves one long and one short; Long for slashing and short for stabbing with this it enabled highly skilled samurais to easily perform armor piercing moves with quick, swift movements and accuracy towards unprotected areas. So therefore most standard Japanese armor was primarily designed more as a defense against arrows and spears, only the higher ranking samurai like Daimyo had better Japanese armor that was constructed with small overlapping metal scales and rings or plates tied together with silk cords in order to specifically resist the slicing cut of the katana. It allowed good freedom of movement while offering excellent protection. But if it got wet, the silk cords will soak up water and it became terribly heavy to move. Though the earliest styles of samurai armor were designed with large square plates more as a defense against arrows, the later forms were intended primarily to be used by and against similarly equipped swordsmen and to lessen the tremendous cutting capacity of their swords. It was durable, effective, and provided for easy simple movement.

During the two assigned materials for this subject. Unique issue that was addressed in the " A History of East Asia" by Charles Holcombe is that are

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not repeated in other materials are the important Chinese development influence that took place in this time. During this time Holcombe said that it's arguably more deeply Confucian in its ethical values than the old Heian aristocracy had been. For an example he used the war tales that emphasized the warrior relations with their lords in terms of the Confucian ideal of loyalty. They also talked about how the Japan adopted the military conscription like the Chinese to mobilize huge army's, but it soon proven to be a heavy burden and was abandoned (Holcombe, 148)

Unique issue discussed in the video "Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire" was the trade fleet that Ieyasu created so he could have better trading terms with the west and without any western religion coming in trying to convert his people into believing a god greater than him.

I thought the video Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire was a really important source, because it contained a lot of valuable information's in a more entertaining way than getting them from reading. The video told us from a view that lets us understand what a samurai had to go through that time to become great like the process of a samurai growing up. During the time son gets sent to another clan leader to promise that their treaty will be guarantee, growing up in other places away from their own parents and how they get freed. The video provided basically all the information's i needed to write this research paper. The video first talked about clans sending sons to other clans as a symbol of promise that they will do as they promised on the treaty. They also talked about samurai's being the highest class in Japan. From there they talked about samurai's belief, rituals they perform when

questioned about their honor and lastly their fine armor and weaponry they used during the time.

I think the "A History of East Asia" by Charles Holcombe offer the most recent and significant research on my topic. The biggest reason is because it was published in 2011 using a lot of more recent source and evidence that were found to back up its point and that the book covered all the information's that I needed. From the rise of the samurai to all the major wars in samurai history, it also talked about what each Shogun did while in position to keep samurai clans loyal to them, how the Shogun's every decision affected the people during that time and how others like religion viewed them.

The source that I find provided most helpful approach is the movie "The Last Samurai" it helped me understand and visualize the amount of pride a samurai contained; especially during this particular part a samurai refused to cut their long hair even when there was five guns aiming at him he showed a huge amount of anger. It was like he was about to take them down with him, if it wasn't because of his friends interference they would have all died, he screamed loudly when he lost his hair. The movie also showed me how much of a disciplined group of people they are in another form rather than in text. They train from the moment they open their eyes to the minute they go to sleep all out of pure discipline without someone ordering them to, They do it even before ask.

The feudal system in Japan was very similar to the ones in European countries; it was the feudal system that gave birth to the samurai class but

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collapse in the nineteenth century because the need for warriors disappears. The collapse occurred mostly because of the introduction of guns but it was also largely because of the changes and moderation that were coming from the next generation class of the Samurai. Japan was being modernized in a fast pace to catch up to the western countries. Therefore, soon the warrior class converted themselves and went into civil service or business jobs. But the Samurai values that were so special to the samurai were still respect by the Japanese. The Bushido, the warrior code, became an expression of national morality (Harootunian, 255-266).

Samurai was only 10% of the populations in Japan and needs a life time of strict trainings in order to become one; while on the other side peasants can be trained into use with guns in matter of months. (Sonoda)

Lastly in conclusion, traditionally there was only four classes in Japan Samurai, farmers, craftsmen and merchants with Samurai placed up top. Samurai has been a symbol for Japan for centuries, everything great comes with a positive and negative side researcher's believe that although samurai was remarkable in many areas like installing a correct moral belief and excellent skills they left behind but a man should not be granted so much power without anything in check. They think samurai was really ruthless especially when they were granted so much power that they could just cut down any commoner when they feel like being disrespected.