

Samurai Culture

As *de facto* aristocrats for centuries, samurai developed their own cultures that changed the way Japanese acted.

Education

A samurai was expected to read and write, as well as to know some mathematics. [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#), a great samurai yet a peasant at the start, could only read and write in [hiragana](#) and this was his biggest drawback. Some hint that this was what prevented him from becoming a [shogun](#). Samurai were expected, though not required, to have interests in other arts such as [dancing](#), [Go](#), [literature](#), [poetry](#), and [tea](#). [Ota Dokan](#) who first ruled [Edo](#) wrote how he was shamed to realize that even a commoner had more knowledge of poetry than him and this made him study harder.



 A [shūdō](#)-type relationship between a **samurai** and a [kabuki](#) actor; Painted hand-scroll ([kakemono-e](#)); [Miyagawa Isshō](#), ca. 1750; Private collection.

[Shūdō](#) (衆道), the tradition of love bonds between a seasoned and a novice samurai, which functioned much along the same lines as educational [Greek pederasty](#), was an honored and important practice in samurai society. It was one of the main ways in which the ethos and the skills of the samurai tradition were passed down from one generation to another. Another name for it was *bidō*, (the beautiful way). The devotion that the two samurai would have for each other would be almost as great as that they had for their daimyo. Indeed, according to contemporary accounts, that became a philosophical problem at times. [Hagakure](#) and other samurai manuals gave specific instructions in the way that this tradition was to be carried out and respected. After the Meiji Restoration and the introduction of a more western lifestyle the tradition fell out of favor and died out.

Lifestyles

Samurai culture ranged from a spartan Zen Buddhism influenced culture to an extravaganza Kano-style culture. Most samurai lived simply not due to preference, but necessity. As commerce developed in Edo period, samurai who were supplied with rice as income were

faced with inflating prices of common goods. Some samurai did crafts and others farmed to make ends meet. These poor samurai still found money and time to teach their children to value education. By the middle of Edo period, samurai had to be ordered to practice their martial art skills. There were stories of samurai being threatened and forced to run away against well muscled workers, some were even beaten in a fight. As samurai were specialists in fighting, these troubles were never reported out of shame but were still documented.

Samurai Names

A samurai usually was named by combining one [kanji](#) from his father or grandfather and one new kanji. Many samurai had intentionally phonetically same names as a great ancestors to honor their greatness and hope this samurai would be as good. This name was applied after [genpuku](#). He also had a childhood name. Most samurai had a second name and also used his title as a part of his name. [Oda Nobunaga](#) would be officially called "Oda Kouzukenosuke Owarinokami Nobunaga" (織田上総介尾張守信長) and he would be referred as "Oda Kouzukenosuke" or "Oda Owarinokami".

Marriage

A [marriage](#) of samurai was done by having a marriage arranged by someone with same or higher rank than those marrying. While for those samurai in upper ranks were a necessity as most had few opportunities to meet a female, this was still done as a formality for lower ranked samurai. Most samurai married women from a samurai family but for a lower ranked samurai, marriages with commoners were permitted. In these marriages, a [dowry](#) was brought by women and this was used to start their new lives.

A samurai can have a [mistress](#) but she was strictly checked by higher ranked samurai on her background. In many cases, it was treated like a marriage and a kidnapping, common in many fictions, would have been a shame if not a crime. When she was a commoner, a messenger would be sent, with a betrothal money or a note for exemption of tax, and ask for her acceptance to her parents. Many parents gladly accepted, and if she gave a birth to a son, he could be a samurai.

A samurai can [divorce](#) his wife for a variety of reasons with an approval from a superior. A divorce was, while not nonexistent, a rare occasion. An important reason would be if she could not produce a son but an [adoption](#) could be arranged. A samurai can divorce for a personal reason, even that he simply did not like his wife, but this was generally avoided as this would embarrass the samurai who arranged this marriage. Women could also arrange a divorce, although it would generally take the form of samurai divorcing her. In a divorce, samurai had to return the betrothal money and this often prevented a divorce. Some rich merchants had their daughters marry samurai to erase a samurai's debt and advance their positions.

A samurai's wife would be dishonored and allowed to commit suicide if she were cast off.

Succession

The eldest son of the previous leader became the next leader of the clan. If the eldest son had passed away before the succession, the eldest son of the eldest son became the next leader of the clan. If the eldest son did not have children, the second son became the next leader. These rules were sometimes bent with the wish of the former leader. When the next leader was too young or inexperienced, brothers and retainers of a previous leader acted as leader until the clan could be handed over. Dividing a domain had been popular in Kamakura and Ashikaga period but declined later as it often made the clan weaker.

Many samurai changed their name not because they did not like it, but because they were adopted into other clans. This was done for many reasons. The first and foremost reason is that many clans wanted a successor with high abilities and skills even if it meant throwing out sons of the previous leader. If that successor happened to be from a higher clan, so much better. While this had to be approved by shogunate or daimyo in Edo period, there were many instances. When the previous leader died without a son but with a daughter, it was common to adopt samurai from other clans into a clan and have him marry the daughter.

Samurai had a lot of children and faced with disease and wars, this often caused succession problems. These sometime led to a decline or even a disintegration and eventual destruction of the entire clan. Several steps were taken to avoid this problem. The adoption was one step and other was called *Koukaku* lit. decline in rank, where a son was given a new clan name and became a retainer and a vassal of their elder brother. Some samurai even became a merchants