

Samurai

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For other uses, please see [Samurai \(disambiguation\)](#)



Japanese samurai in armour, 1860 photograph.

Samurai (侍 or sometimes 士) is a common term for a warrior in [pre-industrial Japan](#).

Most samurai were bound by a strict code of honor (武士道 *bushido*) and were expected to set an example for those below them. A disgraced samurai could regain honor and respect by committing suicide by a gruesome and painful means: stabbing himself in the stomach with his own sword, an act called [seppuku](#) (切腹). When time was available, samurai would have a friend or student, called a *kaishaku* (介錯, executioner), decapitate them after the initial cut across the abdomen. Even in death, samurai were beholden to honor.

In practice, there were disloyal samurai. Japanese history is filled with examples of samurai that were treacherous (e.g., [Akechi Mitsuhide](#)), cowardly, brave, or overly loyal (e.g., [Kusunoki Masashige](#)). Samurai were usually loyal to their immediate superiors, who in turn allied themselves with higher lords. These alliances to higher lords often shifted, however.

For example, the feudal lords allied under [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) (豊臣秀吉) enjoyed the loyalty of their men; however, the feudal lords themselves might shift their backing to Tokugawa. This did not mean that the lower-ranked samurai were disloyal, though. It was that their allegiance was to their immediate superior.

Etymology



The character for *Samurai*.

The term *Samurai* originally meant "those who serve in close attendance to nobility", and was written in the [Chinese character](#) (or *kanji*) that had the same meaning. In Japanese, it was originally pronounced in the pre-[Heian period](#) as *saburau* and later to *saburai*. In Japanese literature, there is an early reference to samurai in the [Kokinshu](#) (古今集, early 10th century):

Attendant to your nobility
Ask for your master's umbrella
The dews 'neath the trees of Miyagino
Are thicker than rain
(poem 1091)

The word **bushi** (武士, lit. "warrior or armsman") first appears in an early history of Japan called [Shoku Nihongi](#) (続日本記, 797 A.D.). In a portion of the book covering the year 723 A.D., Shoku Nihongi states: "Literary men and Warriors are they whom the nation values". The term *bushi* is of [Chinese](#) origin and adds to the indigenous Japanese words for *warrior*: *Tsuwamono* and *Mononofu*. The terms *bushi* and *samurai* became synonymous near the end of the [12th century](#), according to [William Scott Wilson](#) in his book *Ideals of the Samurai-- Writings of Japanese Warriors*. Wilson's book thoroughly explores the origins of the word *warrior* in Japanese history as well as the [Kanji](#) (Chinese symbols) used to represent the word. Wilson states that *Bushi* actually translates as "a man who has the ability to keep the peace, either by literary or military means, but predominantly by the latter".

It was not until the early modern period, namely the [Azuchi-Momoyama period](#) and early [Edo period](#) of the late [16th](#) and early [17th](#) centuries that the word *saburai* became replaced with *samurai*. However, the meaning had changed long before.



 A Samurai katana in koshiraie.

During the era of the rule of the samurai, the earlier term *yumitori* (弓取, "bowman") was also used as an honorary title of an accomplished warrior even when swordsmanship had become more important. Japanese archery ([kyujutsu](#)), is still strongly associated with the war god [Hachiman](#).

A samurai with no attachment to a clan or [daimyo](#) (大名) was called a *ronin*. In Japanese, the word *ronin* means "wave man", a person destined to wander aimlessly forever, like the waves in the sea. The word came to mean a samurai who was no longer in the service of a lord because his lord had died, being banished, or simply choosing to become a ronin.

While by some it was considered undesirable to be a ronin, as it meant being without a stipend from a lord, it was also considered necessary to the life experience of any true samurai. There was once the expression, "Seven times down, eight times up," which signified that a samurai would be dispatched on a year-long wandering mission seven times over his career, each time returning to the service of his lord.

Also, it is worth considering that the undesirability of ronin status was mainly a discrimination imposed by other samurai. As thoroughly bound (though unusually literate) men, most samurai resented the personal freedom enjoyed by wandering ronin. There are many tales of the just ronin, defending poor villagers against haughty, arrogant samurai who would kill anyone unlucky enough to offend.

On the other hand, there are also stories of the lordless, undisciplined, unemployed, and bitter ex-samurai, left over prior to the 1868 [Meiji Restoration](#). These de facto ronin were little more than urban troublemakers, who were in desperate need of a new cause.

This threat of obsolescence led to the subsequent coining of the phrase, "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians!" This of course harkened to the influx of foreign trade, religion, and technology (in this case, Western) which has so often been absorbed and rejected in alternating waves throughout Japanese history. As the master swordsman Miyamoto Musashi observed, there is a rhythm to all things. To survive one must see, appreciate, and move with this rhythm.

The pay of Samurai was measured in *koku* of rice (180 liters; enough to feed a man for one year). Samurai in the service of the [han](#) are called **hanshi**.

The following terms are related to samurai or the samurai tradition:

- *Uruwashii*
a cultured warrior symbolized by the kanji for "bun" (literary study) and "bu" (military study or arts)
- *Buke* (武家)
A martial house or a member of such a house
- *Mononofu* (もののふ)
An ancient term meaning a warrior.
- *Musha* (武者)
A shortened form of *Bugeisha* (武芸者), lit. martial art man.
- *Shi* (士)
A word roughly meaning "gentleman," it is sometimes used for samurai, in particular in words such as *bushi* (武士, meaning warrior or samurai).
- *Tsuwamono* (兵)
An old term for a soldier popularized by [Matsuo Basho](#) in his famous [haiku](#). Literally meaning a strong person.

natsukusa ya
tsuwamono domo ga
yume no ato

Summer grasses,
All that remains
Of soldiers' dreams

Matsuo Basho

(trans. Lucien Stryk)