

Samurai History

Origin of Samurai



 *Samurai walking followed by a servant*, by Hanabusa Itcho (1652 - 1724)

Before the [Heian period](#), the army in Japan was modeled after the Chinese army and under the direct command of the emperor. Except for slaves, every able-bodied man had the duty of enlisting for the army. These men had to supply themselves, and many gave up returning and settled down on their way home. This was treated as a part of taxation and it could be substituted with other forms of tax such as bolts of cloth. These men were called *Sakimori* (防人, lit. "defenders"), but they are not related to samurai.

In the early Heian, the late [8th](#) and early [9th centuries](#), [Emperor Kammu](#) sought to consolidate and expand his rule in northern [Honshu](#). The armies he sent to conquer the rebellious [Emishi](#) lacked motivation and discipline and were unable to prevail. He then introduced the title of *Seiitaishogun* (征夷大將軍) or [shogun](#) and began to rely on the powerful regional clans to conquer the Emishi. Skilled in mounted combat and [archery](#), these clan warriors became the emperor's preferred tool for putting down rebellions. Even though they may have been educated, the Imperial court officials considered 7th to 9th century warriors to be crude and barbaric.

During the Heian period, the emperor's army was disbanded and the emperor's power gradually declined. While the emperor was still the ruler, powerful clans around Kyoto assumed positions of ministers and their relatives bought their positions of magistrates to collect taxes. To repay their debts and amass wealth, they often imposed heavy taxes and many farmers were forced to leave their lands. Regional clans grew powerful by offering lower taxes to their subjects as well as freedom from conscription. These clans armed themselves to repel other clans and magistrates from collecting taxes. They would eventually form themselves into armed parties and became samurai.

The samurai came from guards of the imperial palace and private guards clans employed. They also acted as a police force in and around [Kyoto](#). These forerunners of what we now know as samurai had ruler-sponsored equipment and were required to hone their martial skills. They were *saburai*, servants, yet their advantage of being the sole armed party increasingly became apparent. By promising protection and gaining political clout through political marriages they amassed power, eventually surpassing the ruling aristocrats.

Some clans originally were farmers that had been driven to arms to protect themselves from the imperially appointed magistrates sent to govern their lands and collect taxes. These clans

formed alliances to protect themselves against more powerful clans. By the mid-Heian, they had adopted Japanese-style armor and weapons and laid the foundation of [bushido](#), their famous ethical code.

After the 11th century, Samurai were expected to be cultured and literate. Samurai lived up to the ancient saying "Bun Bu Ryo Do" (lit. literary arts, military arts, both ways) or "The pen and the sword in accord". An early term for warrior "Uruwashii" was a combination of the kanji for literary study ("bun") and military arts ("bu") and is mentioned in the [Heike Monogatari](#) (late 12th century). The Heike Monogatari makes references to the educated poet-swordsman ideal in mention of Taira no Tadanori's death:

"Friends and foes alike wet their sleeves with tears and said, "What a pity! Tadanori was a great general, pre-eminent in the arts of both sword and poetry."

According to William Scott Wilson in his book *Ideals of the Samurai*: "The warriors in the Heike Monogatari served as models for the educated warriors of later generations, and the ideals depicted by them were not assumed to be beyond reach. Rather, these ideals were vigorously pursued in the upper echelons of warrior society and recommended as the proper form of the Japanese man of arms. With the Heike Monogatari, the image of the Japanese warrior in literature came to its full maturity." Wilson then translates the writings of several warriors who mention the Heike Monogatari as an example for their men to follow.

Kamakura Bakufu and the Rise of Samurai

Originally these warriors were merely mercenaries in the employ of the emperor and noble clans (kuge). But slowly they gathered enough power to usurp the aristocracy and establish the first samurai-dominated government.

As regional clans gathered manpower and resources and struck alliances with each other, they formed a hierarchy centered around a *toryo*, or chief. This chief was typically a distant relative of the emperor and a lesser member of one of three noble families (the [Fujiwara](#), [Minamoto](#), or the [Taira](#)). Though originally sent to provincial areas for a fixed four year term as a magistrate, the *toryo* declined to return to the capital when their terms ended. Their sons inherited their positions and continued to lead the clans in putting down rebellions throughout Japan during the middle and later Heian.

Because of their rising military and economic power, the clans ultimately became a new force in the politics of the court. Their involvement in the [Hogen Rebellion](#) in the late Heian only consolidated their power and finally pit the rival Minamoto and the Taira against each other in the [Heiji Rebellion](#) of 1160. Emerging victorious, [Taira no Kiyomori](#) became an imperial advisor, the first warrior to attain such a position, and eventually seized control of the central government to establish the first samurai-dominated government and relegate the emperor to a mere figurehead. However, Taira clan was still very much aristocratic than later Minamoto. Instead of expanding or strengthening its military might, Taira clan had its women marry emperors and attempted to control through the emperor.

The Taira and the Minamoto once again clashed in 1180 beginning the [Gempei War](#) which ended in 1185. The victorious Minamoto no Yoritomo established the superiority of the samurai over aristocrats. In 1190 he visited Kyoto and in 1192 became Sei-i Taishogun, establishing the Kamakura Shogunate. Instead of basing its rule in Kyoto, he set up the

Shogunate in the Kamakura, near his base of power. "Bakufu" means tent government, taken from the encampments the soldiers would live in, in accordance with the Bakufu's status as a military government.

Over time, powerful samurai clans became warrior nobility ([buke](#)) who were only nominally under court aristocracy. When samurai began to adopt aristocratic customs like calligraphy, poetry and music, some court aristocrats also began to adopt samurai skills. In spite of various machinations and brief periods of rule by various emperors, the real power was in the hands of the shogun and samurai.

Ashikaga Shogunate and the Feudal Period

Various samurai clans struggled for power over [Kamakura](#) and [Ashikaga Shogunates](#).

[Zen Buddhism](#) spread among samurai in the [13th century](#) and it helped to shape their standards of conduct, particularly overcoming fear of death and killing. Zen Buddhism in Japan took Sakyamuni as the principal image and taught to be a living [Buddha](#) with enlightenment by Zen meditation training. While major schools of Buddhism among the populace took [Amitabha Tathagata](#), a buddha is said to be capable of taking believers to paradise after death.

In the 13th century, [Yuan](#), a Chinese state of the [Mongol Empire](#), invaded Japan twice. Samurai not used to fighting in groups barely survived the first brief battle. However, they were prepared for the second invasion by building a defensive stone wall on the Mongols' landing shore, and adopting a night attack tactic. Overall, the Samurai way of warfare was incapable of inflicting significant damage upon the Mongol army, which favored tactics of large encirclement, [blitzkrieg](#), and employed advanced weaponry (the Samurai were shocked by the Chinese [grenades](#)). In the end, it was the second [typhoon](#) that destroyed the Mongol armada, and prevented the Yuan Dynasty from annexation of Japan. Japanese deemed the typhoon "the divine wind" or "kamikaze" in Japanese. Two major military elements were acquired from Mongol invasions: 1) the importance of infantry and 2) the weakness of Japanese [longbows](#) and of the conventional Samurai [cavalry](#) against the invaders. As the result of this, Samurai gradually replaced the way of bow with the way of "blades". At the beginning of [14th century](#), [swords](#) and [spears](#) became the mainstream among Japanese samurai warlords. An innovation on Japanese sword was produced by a blacksmith called [Masamune](#) in the 14th century; the two-layer structure of soft and hard iron was adopted and the style spread rapidly with its amazing cutting power and endurance in continuous use. Since then, Japanese swords had been recognized as one of the most potent hand weapons during the pre-industrial era of [East Asia](#). It was one of the top exported items, a few even making their way as far as [India](#).

The issues of inheritance caused family infighting, because primogeniture became common, while division of succession was designated by law before the 14th century. To avoid infighting, continuous invasion against neighboring samurai's territories was rather favored and bickering among samurai was constant problems to [Kamakura](#) and [Ashikaga Shogunate](#).

The [Sengoku jidai](#) ("warring-states period") was marked by the loosening of samurai culture, in a sense. Those born into other social strata could sometimes make names for themselves as warriors and thus become de facto samurai. In this turbulent period, [bushido](#) ethics became important factors to control and maintain public orders.

Japanese war tactics and technologies improved rapidly in [15th](#) and [16th century](#). Use of large numbers of infantry troops called [Ashigaru](#) ("light-foot", due to their light armour), which was formed by the humble warriors or populace, with *Nagayari* (長槍) or long [lance](#) was introduced and combined with cavalry in maneuvers. The numbers of people mobilized in warfare were generally in the thousands to the over hundred-thousands.

[Harquebus](#) or a [matchlock](#) gun was introduced by [Lusitanians/Portuguese](#) on a Chinese [pirate ship](#) in [1543](#). Japanese succeeded nationalization of it within a decade. Groups of mercenaries with harquebus and mass produced [rifles](#) played a critical role. By the end of feudal periods, several hundred thousand rifles existed in Japan and massive armies over 100,000 clashed in the battles. The largest and most powerful army in Europe, the [Spanish](#) armies, had only several thousand rifles and could only assemble an army of 30,000. [Ninja](#) also played critical roles while engaged in intelligence activity.

The social mobility of human resources was flexible, as the ancient regime collapsed and emerging samurai needed to maintain large military and administrative organizations in their areas of influence. Most of the samurai families that survived to the 19th century originated in this era. They declared themselves to be the blood of one of the four ancient noble clans, [Minamoto](#), [Taira](#), [Fujiwara](#) and [Tachibana](#). In most cases, however, it is hard to prove who their ancestors were.

Oda, Toyotomi and Tokugawa

[Oda Nobunaga](#) was the well-known lord of the [Nagoya](#) area (once called [Owari Province](#)) and an exceptional example of samurai of the [Sengoku Period](#). He came within few years of, and laid down the path for his successors to achieve, the reunification of Japan under a new Bakufu (Shogunate).

He made innovations on organizations and war tactics, heavily used harquebus, developed commerce and industry and treasured innovations ; the consecutive victories enabled him to realize the termination of the Ashikaga Bakufu and disarmament of the military powers of the Buddhist monks, which had inflamed futile struggles among the populace for centuries. Attacking from a "sanctuary" of Buddhist temples, they were constant headaches to any warlords and even the emperor who tried to control their actions. He died in [1582](#) when one of his Generals, Akechi Mitsuhide, fell down upon him with his army.

Importantly, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (see below) and [Tokugawa Ieyasu](#), who made Tokugawa Shogunate, were [Nobunaga's](#) loyal followers. Hideyoshi was brought up from a nameless peasant to one of top generals under Nobunaga and Ieyasu had shared childhood with Nobunaga. Hideyoshi defeated Mitsuhide within a month and was regarded as the rightful successor of Nobunaga by avenging the treachery of Mitsuhide.

These two were gifted with Nobunaga's previous achievements to build the unified Japan. So there was a saying: "The reunification is a rice cake; Oda made it. Hashiba shaped it. At last, only Ieyasu tastes it." (Hashiba is the family name that Toyotomi Hideyoshi used while he was a follower of Nobunaga.)

[Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#), who became a grand minister in [1586](#), himself the son of a poor peasant family, created a law that the samurai caste became codified as permanent and heritable, and

that non-samurai were forbidden to carry weapons ending the social mobility of Japan up until that point and the dissolution of the Edo Shogunate by the Meiji revolutionaries.

It is important to note that distinction between samurai and non-samurai was so obscure that during the 16th century, most male adults in any social class (even small farmers) belonged to at least one military organization of their own and served in wars before and during Hideyoshi's rule. It can be said that an "all against all" situation continued for a century.

The authorized samurai families after the 17th century were the winners that chose to follow [Nobunaga](#), Hideyoshi and [Ieyasu](#). Large battles occurred during the times of change between regimes, and a number of defeated samurai were destroyed, went Ronin (Wave-Men; or masterless Samurai) or were absorbed into the general populace.

Tokugawa Shogunate

During the [Tokugawa era](#), samurai increasingly became courtiers, bureaucrats, and administrators rather than warriors. With no warfare after the early 17th century, over time, samurai during the [Tokugawa era](#) (also called the [Edo period](#)) gradually lost their military function. By the end of the Tokugawa era, samurai were aristocratic bureaucrats for the daimyo, with their *daisho*, the paired long and short swords of the samurai (cf. '[katana](#)' and [wakizashi](#)) becoming more of a symbolic emblem of power rather than a weapon used in daily life. They still had the legal right to cut down any [commoner](#) who did not show proper respect; in what extent this right was used, however, is unknown. When the central government forced daimyos to cut the size of their armies, unemployed [ronin](#) actually became a social problem.

Theoretical obligations between a samurai and his lord (usually a daimyo) increased from the Genpei era to the Edo era. They were strongly emphasized by the teachings of Confucius and Mencius (ca [550 B.C.](#)) which were required reading for the educated samurai class. During the Edo period, after the general end of hostilities, the code of Bushido was formalized. It is important to note that bushido was an ideal, but it is surprising how uniform the code remained over time from the 13th century to the 19th century. The ideals of Bushido transcended social class, time and geographic location of the warrior class.

[Bushido](#) was formalized by many samurai in this time of peace much like how [Chivalry](#) was formalized after [knight](#) as a warrior became obsolete in Europe. The conduct of samurai became a favorable model of a citizen in Edo with the emphasis on formalities. With time on their hands, samurai spent more time on the pursuit of other interests becoming scholars. Bushido still survives in present-day Japanese society, as do many other aspects of their way of life.

Samurai decline during the [Meiji Restoration](#)

By this time, the Way of Death and Desparateness had been eclipsed by a rude awakening in 1853, when Commodore Matthew Perry's massive steamships from the US Navy first imposed broader commerce, American Style, on the once-dominant national polity. Prior to that, only a few harbor towns under strict control from the Shogunate were able to participate in Western trade, and even then, it was based largely on the idea of playing the [Franciscans](#) and [Dominicans](#) off one another (in exchange for the crucial [arquebus](#) technology, which in turn was a major contributor to the downfall of the classical samurai).

The last hurrah of original samurai was in [1867](#) when samurai from [Choshu](#) and [Satsuma](#) provinces defeated the shogunate forces in favor of the rule of the emperor. The two provinces were the lands of the daimyo that submitted to Ieyasu after the [Battle of Sekigahara \(1600\)](#).

Other sources claim that the last samurai were in [1877](#), during the [Satsuma Rebellion](#) in the [Battle of Shiroyama](#).

The main players of the revolt came from lower class samurai in every province. Their ultimate political goal was the same: to maintain the independence of Japan against Western powers. But the two daimyo clashed first and these bloody conflicts lasted for years. At last, they realized that a large serious civil war must be avoided because that was just what the foreign powers waited for. So the last shogun [Tokugawa Yoshinobu](#) returned the governing to the emperor to avoid the war. Some resisted, believing this was a coup d'etat by Choshu and Satsuma and that the government was in their hands. Groups of Tohoku samurai organized an armed resistance but they were eventually defeated.

[Emperor Meiji](#) abolished the samurai's right to be the only armed force in favor of a more modern, western-style conscripted army. Samurai became *Shizoku* (士族) who retained some of their salaries, but the right to wear a katana in public was eventually abolished along with the right to cut down commoners who paid them disrespect. The samurai finally came to an end after hundreds of years of enjoyment of their status, their powers, and their ability to shape the government of Japan. However, the rule of the state by the military class was not yet over.

Post Meiji Restoration

In defining how a modern Japanese should be, members of the Meiji government decided to follow the footsteps of [United Kingdom](#) and [Germany](#). It would be based on the concept of "[noblesse oblige](#)" and samurai would not be a political force much like that of [Prussia](#).

With the [Meiji](#) reforms in the late [19th century](#), the samurai class was abolished, and a western-style national army was established. The Imperial Japanese Armies were conscripted, but many samurai volunteered to be soldiers and many advanced to be trained as an officer. In fact much of the Imperial Army officer class was of samurai origin. These volunteers were highly motivated, disciplined and well trained. As such the Imperial Army defeated a rebellion of samurai in the Satsuma Rebellion.

The Japanese Empire fought and won the Sino-Japanese War (1894) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904) and it could be reasoned that these volunteers and officers were behind these victories. Most soldiers of both Chinese and Russian armies could neither read nor write and after their officers were killed, these armies quickly disintegrated.

Many early exchange students were samurai, not because they were samurai, but many were literate and well-educated scholars. Some of these exchange students started private schools for higher educations. Some samurai took pens instead of guns and became reporters and writers to set up newspaper companies. Other samurai entered governmental services as they were literate and well educated.