

Samurai Analysis

Personal Perspective on Samurai Matters

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#1. Understanding of Early Samurai

An understanding of the early Japanese samurai first requires an understanding in many different aspects of Japanese culture. Knowledge of the basics, such as geography and climate, to the many areas society, such as arts and religion, are all connected to different aspects of Japanese culture that contributed to the image and ideology of the samurai.

First, an understanding of the geography of Japan, its terrain, and the Japanese climate sets a foundation for further understanding the samurai. Having an idea of the shape of Japan and the main areas, such as Kanto versus Kansai, and the major cities within those areas, such as Edo, Kamakura, Kyoto, and Nara, creates a mental map to reference when referring to eras in the history of the samurai. For example, knowing that Edo is current-day Tokyo helps in the understanding of the samurai in the film *Chonmage Pudding* and which era he has “time-slipped” from. Understanding Japanese geography also helps in the understanding of distance, and the significance of the separation between, for example, present-day Kyushu and Tokyo. This is highlighted somewhat in the story of *Fujiwara no Sanekata* in Sato's *Legends of the Samurai*, where his appointment to Mutsu (in present-day Tohoku) was shocking because of its distance from the capitol in Kyoto (p 37). It is also important to understand Japanese geography to understand the climate and terrain of Japan.

An understanding of the humid, four-season climate and island-mountain terrain helps in the understanding of samurai foods and certain historical events. Knowledge of the Japanese climate and rice cultivation makes it apparent that rice is the staple of Japan, and has been since the origin of Japan itself (ppt I). Additionally, rice was a major portion of the samurai diet, which also included sake, various vegetables, and few meats, such as chicken or fish (ppt I). This is also seen in the sake consumption and meals of the samurai in *Yojimbo*. The mountainous

terrain that rice is grown on is also the cause of the flexibility of samurai armor—the need for maneuverability. The island nature of Japan also made it susceptible to invasion, such as the Mongolian attempts in the Kamakura Era (ppt I). But the added knowledge that the climate of Japan includes a typhoon season makes the understanding that the Mongolians were driven off due to typhoons understandable. As a major event in samurai history, an understanding the geography and climate is essential to understanding the event. The seasonal climate of Japan is also a major influence in the ideology found in Japanese people, including the samurai, the idea of *aware*. *Aware*, meaning the bittersweet feeling associated with transience, is often affiliated with nature and the coming-and-going of seasonal events, such as falling sakura blossoms (ppt III). The idea of *aware* is necessary for understanding samurai because it ties into other aspects of samurai culture such as poetry and an appreciation for the arts.

Art is heavily connected to the understanding the samurai. Even in the imminence of battle, poems could be exchanged and even diffuse fighting, as it did in the story of a *renga* exchange between Yoshie and Sadato in *Legends of the Samurai* (p 99). Without understanding the importance of poetry in Japanese culture, understanding how samurai would appreciate this in battle is lost without understanding ideologies such as *aware*. Physical art pieces, such as picture scrolls, are also significant because they give a depiction of the samurai image and customs of the time (ppt IV). For example, a picture scroll depicting warriors on journey shows the difference between high-ranked samurai, who wear makeup and ride on horses with lavishly colored armor, and lower-ranking samurai, who walked alongside with *naginata* rather than bow and arrows. Other art forms that also carried along essential historical information of the samurai include stories written in *hiragana*, as most history was recorded by women, and songs of battles accompanied by Japanese instruments (ppt V). Religion is another method of recorded history.

Just as art is a reflection of society in many different eras, religion also reflects society. Understanding religion greatly impacts the understanding of many aspects of samurai life. Shinto and Buddhism co-exist in Japanese culture to the extent that some Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples share the same grounds (ppt III). Samurai were influenced by these religions, which is exemplified by the temples and family graveyards of samurai clans (Buddhism) and the protection of the family by enshrined deities (Shinto). An example of this would be the Minamoto clan's deity, the dove, as described in *Legends of the Samurai* (p 102). In an examination of the samurai *buke*-style architecture, there is a temple/shrine on the property (ppt V). Religion influenced the entire society of Japan, which is why understanding the religions of Japan is necessary to understand not only the samurai, but society itself, which is perhaps most essential for understanding the early samurai, because it is society that created the conditions for samurai to emerge.

The high-class society in Japan, known as court culture, flourished in the Heian period (ppt III). Many nobles socialized in the Kyoto, leaving their lands, and due to privatized property, families of local estates gained power while the nobles were away (ppt IV). Armed with bows, arrows, and swords, clans such as the Taira and Minamoto arose. The Taira and Minamoto clans originated from the extensive number of offspring from Emperor Saga; Minamoto were of direct blood descent while Taira were more indirect and slightly lower class (ppt IV). The clash between the Taira and Minamoto clans resulted in the destruction of Taira and the institution of Minamoto as the first shogunate—samurai rule—of Japan and the Kamakura period (ppt V). Understanding the development of the samurai and the resulting shogunate of the Minamoto clan is important to understand later samurai culture as well, because all shogun claim descent under Minamoto or Taira lineage.

While many more aspects of Japanese culture are also necessary to fully understand the early samurai, such as the tea ceremony, the few examined here evidence how important it is to have knowledge of the Japanese culture in order to understand the samurai because each essence of Japanese culture impacted the development, image, and ideology of the samurai. The vast amount of cultural knowledge necessary to understand the samurai is further evidence that the samurai is a true symbol of Japanese culture.

#2. New Knowledge and Interests

I entered this class with little to no knowledge of samurai; basically just the involvement of a sword and amazing martial arts abilities. Now I have much more knowledge on the reality of samurai in Japanese history; what is true and false. Not only have my preconceptions been rectified, but I now have a better understanding of just how integrated samurai were in every aspect of Japanese culture. I thought that this course would include a lot of history and battles and armor, but the cultural aspects of court life, art, religion, et cetera were eye opening; I never thought samurai would be connected to so many aspects of Japanese culture. For example, while many of the *Begin Japanology* videos spoke of modern-day Japanese culture, the historical background was very informative, especially the episode on the tea ceremony which depicted the golden tea room of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. That connected the tea ceremony to Hideyoshi's tactic of showing power through a lavish tea room. Even though I saw the exact same episode in FYS, this information never meant anything special, while now this knowledge has much more value and understanding. Understanding of historical background is essential for full appreciation of historical landmarks and culture. I experienced this first-hand during a trip to Washington DC—knowing the history made the trip more worthwhile—and knowing this information on the samurai and Japanese history will make future tourism in Japan more insightful and meaningful.