

JAPAN'S



WAY OF THE WARRIOR

On the battlefield they inspired terror, harvesting heads and glory with their swords. Their leaders wore fierce masks and horned helmets. All lived by a code that valued death over defeat. They were the samurai, the elite warrior class who ruled Japan for nearly 700 years, leaving an indelible mark on a land still making peace with its violent heroes.

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IRA BLOCK

SAMURAI



MAKE WAY FOR THE SAMURAI. EYES DROP, AND CROWDS STEP ASIDE AS A WARRIOR STRIDES HAUGHTILY DOWN A CONGESTED LANE IN EDO, THE FUTURE TOKYO. THE TIME IS THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY, BUT IT COULD BE A HUNDRED YEARS EARLIER OR LATER: THE SCENE WOULD REMAIN THE SAME IN A JAPAN FROZEN IN FEUDAL WAYS. ON THE STREET THERE IS NO MISTAKING A SAMURAI.

Two swords, a long one and a short one, protrude from his waist. As a member of Japan's highest class, that of the warrior, only a samurai may carry both swords, lethal symbols of his authority.

He wears a kimono topped by flowing, skirt-like trousers and a short, loose jacket. His head is shaved on top, with the hair on the sides and back gathered up into a dandyish topknot. The samurai is in no hurry. The government doesn't require him to work, though he might take a job to supplement his yearly stipend of rice. He is asked only to stay in fighting form and to defend the regime in times of trouble. And should some commoner dare to disrespect him—fail to obey an order or bump into his sword—the samurai has the right (rarely invoked) to kill the ingrate on the spot.

Swagger came as a birthright to samurai. Their warrior class dominated Japanese history for nearly 700 years from 1185 to 1867, a reign as ruthless and violent—and as culturally rich—as almost anything experienced in ancient Rome or medieval Europe. Old Europe's knights, in fact, may be the samurai's closest historical kin. Like the knights, samurai (the word means "one who serves") formed a military elite, composed of clan leaders or warlords and the loyal soldiers who fought under them. Traditionally the emperor commanded the highest allegiance in Japan. But as the samurai rose to power, the emperor was relegated to a figurehead, eclipsed by a military dictator called shogun, or commander in chief, a designation that signaled the new rule of the samurai.

The samurai and the knight would have recognized each other in battle. They both wore armor, attacked on horseback, fought with swords and lances, besieged castles, and lived by a code of honor. But where the samurai and the knights differed was in their longevity. The Japanese warrior class enjoyed an amazing run of dominance that ended only when American warships sailed into Japan's harbors, exposing the



inability of the shogun to defend the country. Forces rallied around a new emperor and easily overthrew the shogun's army. The samurai's reign had ended.

THIS YEAR JAPAN IS CELEBRATING with festivals and exhibits the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the Edo period (1603 to 1867), which saw the samurai reach the pinnacle of authority and privilege. Now comes the worldwide release of *The Last Samurai*, a Hollywood blockbuster about the final post-Edo days of the Japanese warrior. So it's true: The samurai still lives. In fact, it's hard to escape him. To walk around any Japanese city or town is to collide regularly with the image of the haughty warrior. His face and his weapons appear on posters for action movies, on billboards warning against drunk driving, on museum banners and comic book covers, in shop windows arrayed with armor, helmets, and swords to announce Children's Day on May 5, a time for families to celebrate the health and vigor—the inner samurai—of their young, particularly boys.

The enduring appeal of the samurai stems from a simple fact: Here is one of the world's greatest action figures, mythologized most often as a lone swordsman who against impossible odds slays dozens of enemies in the name of duty and individual glory. The samurai is the cowboy, the knight, the gladiator, and the *Star Wars* Jedi rolled into one. Who hasn't seen a samurai swing a sword? Initiation may come from viewing *Seven Samurai* or *Throne of Blood*, classic warrior films made by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, or, on the other end of the gravitas scale, from watching on *Saturday Night Live* the crazed samurai skits of the late comic John Belushi, who wielded his sword like a food processor.

Does the samurai deserve this iconic, leading-man stature? Actually, history demands a rewrite. Instead of the one-dimensional justice-wielding sword slinger of popular culture, the real Japanese warrior was many things. Over the course of seven centuries the samurai underwent a significant transformation, evolving from a courtly duelist to a professional soldier carrying a gun, and finally to a pampered ward of the state.

Off the battlefield the samurai also confounds stereotypes. The same warrior who took trophy heads in combat was likely a worshipful Buddhist. The religion's emphasis on austere self-control appealed to a samurai intent on perfecting his fighting techniques. And as members of Japan's highest class, the samurai, particularly clan leaders and their top generals, indulged in such refined cultural pursuits as flower arranging, composing poetry, attending performances of Noh drama, and hosting tea ceremonies.

Yet for all the attention and prominence given to the samurai, many

Beautiful and deadly, the sword of a high-ranking samurai with its dragon-entwined engraving symbolizes the authority and grandeur of the warrior class. Nearly 400 years old, this 16-inch wakisashi, or short sword, would fetch at least \$170,000 at auction today. Above all their possessions, samurai prized the long and short swords they wore at their waists, lavishing attention even on the sword guard (left).

IRA BLOCK (BOTH)

SWORD: JAPANESE SWORD MUSEUM, TOKYO; SWORD GUARD: HAYASHIBARA MUSEUM OF ART, OKAYAMA

CRESTS: AN ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAPANESE FAMILY CRESTS, GRAPHIC SHA PUBLISHING CO., 2001.

CREST CONSULTANT: YOSHIDA KAMON ART, LOS ANGELES

CREST (BELOW): MINAMOTO (GENJI)

Japanese adults are uncomfortable with the samurai mythology. The adulation of samurai heroes with their take-no-prisoners fighting spirit was used by 20th-century politicians and military officers to stoke the flames of militant nationalism, triggering Japan's involvement in World War II. With Japan's postwar embrace of pacifism, now even the word samurai may cause unease. "Samurai to many of us implies fighting, killing," Kunio Kadowaki, a photographer's assistant from Kyoto, told me after I confessed to some difficulty in getting people to discuss the samurai. "Some of us like to use another word for warrior, *bushi*, which has a higher, more chivalrous meaning."

To understand modern Japan is to confront the legacy of the samurai, review their vivid role in history, and to figure out just how far beneath the surface the fighting spirit still stirs.

HISTORY FIRST TAKES NOTICE of the samurai in the tenth century, placing them as guards at the imperial court in Kyoto and as members of private militias employed by provincial lords. Efforts by the court to mold a conscript army out of small landowners and peasants had failed. In response, nobles in the capital and wealthy landowners in the outer provinces created their own security forces, which included ambitious young members of the gentry, tutored in the arts of combat. "In essence," says historian Karl Friday, a leading samurai scholar from the University of Georgia, "the first samurai were mercenaries, privately trained and privately equipped."

Over time authority drained from the emperor's seat as powerful samurai clans formed in the countryside. Eventually the two strongest clans, the Taira and Minamoto, fought each other for control of Japan. The Minamoto troops prevailed in 1185, and their leader, Yoritomo, consolidated his power in a new capital in the fishing village of Kamakura in eastern Japan.

I had to look hard to find traces of Yoritomo, the first shogun. Earthquakes, fires, and warfare—not to mention urban development—have erased most architectural traces of medieval Japan. Also, the Japanese as a people are modest worshippers, not prone to erecting monuments to



MICHAEL YAMASHITA (ABOVE); IRA BLOCK. FAMILY CREST: INOUE

With samurai intensity a wiry contestant draws his bow during a kyudo, or archery, competition in Tokyo. A favored weapon of early samurai, the traditional Japanese bow takes shape in the hands and feet of Shibata Kanjuro, a 21st-generation bow-maker in Kyoto (right). Working with 30-year-old bamboo, he applies tension to give the seven-foot-long bow its classic contour.



their historical giants. When I visited Kamakura, now a well-heeled outer suburb of Tokyo, visitors packed the center of town. They had come not to commune with history's ghosts but to photograph cherry blossoms, which had exploded with a tropical profusion of pinks on a warm Sunday in early April. Couples and families drifted with their digital cameras under a tunnel of cherry trees, the brilliant foliage marking the route designed by Yoritomo as an offering to assure that his pregnant wife, Masako, would safely deliver his heir.

Samurai identified with the fragile, transitory beauty of the cherry blossoms. They wrote poems about cherry trees and held extravagant cherry-blossom viewing parties. I couldn't quite picture a hard-faced samurai mooning over nature, but my interpreter, Toko Nagase, explained the connection. "The cherry blossom doesn't cling to the tree until it withers," she said, "but falls in its prime, the same way the samurai imagined himself dying in battle."

WHEN CLAN WARS BROKE OUT in those early medieval days, combatants faced off more like well-mannered rivals than vicious enemies. The early samurai leaders idealized single combat, preferably fought on horseback with a bow and arrow. A warrior seeking a worthy opponent would gallop to the front lines and call out his pedigree and a list of his accomplishments, as recounted, for instance, in one medieval war epic: "Ho, I am Kajiwara Heizo Kagetoki, descended in the fifth generation from Gongoro Kagemasa of Kamakura, renowned warrior of the East Country and match for any thousand men. At the age of sixteen . . . receiving an arrow in my left eye through the helmet, I plucked it forth and with it shot down the marksman who sent it."

Once the breast-pounding was completed, mounted archers let their arrows fly. Then samurai armed with swords and lances charged in. Many times a battle ended abruptly with the death of a general. Even in prolonged fights or sieges, casualties were relatively low, usually fewer than a thousand. As Sir George Sansom, the great chronicler of medieval Japan, pointed out, "Plagues and famines were much more deadly than medieval weapons."

Chivalrous behavior on the battlefield gradually disappeared as samurai armies grew in size and foot soldiers began to outnumber mounted warriors. But some facets of early samurai warfare endured and became classic, if rather gory, traits of the ideal warrior. To avoid the dishonor of capture, defeated samurai began practicing *seppuku*—suicide by disembowelment. It was such a painful ordeal, slicing open one's abdomen and dying slowly, that the samurai modified the ritual and allowed an attendant to behead the warrior as soon as he stabbed himself.

Samurai also sought glory by headhunting. When a battle ended, the

Deerskin chaps complete the medieval hunting outfit worn by participants in a yabusame, or mounted archery, event in Nikko. In this sport, adapted from a samurai training exercise, horsemen moving at full gallop fire arrows at small wooden targets. Samurai cavalry used their iron stirrups to smash foot soldiers in the face—a use spared a lacquered pair (below) made after the samurai wars ended.





MICHAEL YAMASHITA (ABOVE); IRA BLOCK, HAYASHIBARA MUSEUM OF ART. FAMILY CREST: ODA

warrior, true to his mercenary origins, would ceremoniously present trophy heads to a general, who would variously reward him with promotions in rank, gold or silver, or land from the defeated clan. Generals displayed the heads of defeated rivals in public squares.

The lopping off of heads still brings gasps and cheers in the fashionable Ginza neighborhood of Tokyo. One afternoon inside the baroque Kabukiza Theater, an audience watched the samurai hero Gongoro, his face streaked with red paint, pull out a sword the size of a tree limb and with one swing—and a generous dose of stagecraft—slice off the heads of a half dozen enemies, thus restoring the rightful ruler to power.

Such samurai heroics have propelled kabuki plays ever since this theater form with its melodramatic, opera-style poses and emotions emerged in the 17th century as entertainment for the common classes. Today these dramas provide the public with an undimmed view into the soul of the idealized samurai. The plays deal with revenge, honor, conflicts of loyalty, and sacrifice, key elements of a code of ethics known as *Bushido*, or way of the warrior. Kabuki samurai who live up to the code present modern audiences with a warrior the public can live comfortably with—a reluctant hero rather than a soldier of fortune.

How does one get inside the skin, the soul, of a samurai? I posed this question to Danjuro Ichikawa, the actor who played Gongoro in Tokyo. “I push the nuance of knight, rather than soldier,” Ichikawa told me at his home, his voice and eyes as intense in private as on stage. “My performances should bring out the feeling that the warrior has a different sense of life and death than we do, that he will choose death if his honor is questioned. My mission is to show the audience that such a way of life once existed.”

The three major periods of the samurai epoch reflect the rise and fall of specific shogun regimes. Each established its own capital: first Kamakura, then the Muromachi district of Kyoto, and finally Edo (Tokyo).

NGM ART



THE REAL-LIFE IMAGE of the honorable warrior probably did not survive much beyond the Mongol Wars, a brutal wake-up call to the samurai about the nature of battle. Twice in the late 13th century, large Mongol forces under the command of Kublai Khan, grandson of the Asian conqueror Genghis Khan, attacked Japan from the sea. The samurai fought back on beaches and from boats. Both times ferocious storms came to their rescue, with high winds and seas crippling the Mongol fleets. The samurai called the second typhoon the *kamikaze*, or divine wind, a name adopted by Japanese suicide pilots during World War II.

The savage hand-to-hand combat the samurai found themselves locked into with Kublai Khan's troops ended reliance on the bow and arrow as the best way to kill and elevated the sword as the preferred weapon. The rise of the sword coincided, in turn, with the downfall of the Kamakura shogunate and the rise of a new regime under the Ashikaga clan. Increasingly wars were fought not only on open plains suitable to cavalry charges but also in mountainous terrain, the domain of upstart warlords, where samurai were forced to fight on foot. It was now slash or be slashed.

Michihiro Tanobe, chief curator at the Japanese Sword Museum in Tokyo, was reluctant to let me touch, much less lift, a 600-year-old samurai sword valued at ten million yen, or about \$85,000. Instead, he gingerly placed the gleaming razor-sharp steel sword, more than two feet long, in my lap. This was a *katana*, the



ONLY SAMURAI, THE HIGHEST CLASS, COULD CARRY TWO SWORDS.



FARMERS GAVE AS MUCH AS 60 PERCENT OF THEIR RICE CROP TO SAMURAI.



ARTISANS SUPPLIED CLOTH (ABOVE), SWORDS, ARMOR, AND SAKE.



CONSIDERED PARASITES BY SAMURAI, MERCHANTS OCCUPIED THE LOWEST RUNG.

1467-77 Onin War
 1500
 1543 Guns introduced by Portuguese
 Battle of Sekigahara 1600
 1700
 1853 Matthew Perry's black ships arrive 1800
 1868 Imperial rule restored
 1900

MUROMACHI/ASHIKAGA

EDO/TOKUGAWA

Warlords fight for supremacy during Sengoku Jidai, the Age of the Country at War



1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu becomes shogun

Era of peace, rigid social hierarchy, and urban growth

1876 Samurai class ends

WHEN WARRIORS RULED JAPAN

From modest beginnings as militiamen and imperial court guards, the samurai seized power in 1185, installing themselves as a privileged ruling class, their authority based nakedly on force. Numbering about 6 percent of the population, samurai (the word means "one who serves") thrived in a feudal society in which they pledged loyalty to a warlord who needed soldiers to protect and expand his fiefdom. With the emperor reduced to a figurehead, the shogun held ultimate sway as a military dictator, though frequent clan wars undermined his power.

As the nature of warfare changed, so did the samurai. They began as chivalrous warriors on horseback, challenging opponents to ritualized archery battles. But as rivalries grew between clans, and armies became larger and fighting more savage, most samurai served as foot soldiers trained for hand-to-hand combat.

In their final guise during the 250-year-long peace of the Tokugawa shoguns, many samurai became idle aristocrats, installed at the top

of a rigid four-tiered class system (below left). Their military skills waned, merchants eclipsed them in wealth, and in the late 1860s forces loyal to the emperor, including disgruntled samurai, overthrew the once indomitable warrior class.





samurai's trademark battlefield sword. The samurai also wore a shorter blade, the *wakizashi*, more of an indoor weapon. Both types were on view in the exhibit, arrayed on pedestals like jeweled crowns. The identifying marks of a classic Japanese sword are its curve—like the arc of a new moon—and the often wavy border called the *hamon*, which divides the hard steel on the edge and the softer steel of the sword's body. Experts consider the katana the finest fighting blade ever made.

The ancient craft of Japanese swordmaking almost disappeared after World War II, when the Allies confiscated and destroyed an estimated five million swords and banned the manufacture of new ones. American soldiers feared the sword, or more accurately, its mystique, Tanobe explained, "because Japanese soldiers would make these *banzai* attacks"—desperate all-out charges—"holding their sword as if they believed in its magical powers." The Japanese managed to hide many of the top-quality blades, and in 1953 the prohibition against owning a sword was lifted. The craft revived, driven by rich collectors, and today artisans make swords a warlord would have been proud to carry into battle.

On a garden-lined street in a northeastern suburb of Tokyo, the muffled beat of a hammer pounding on steel alerts neighbors that



swordsmith Yoshindo Yoshihara is hard at work. A tenth-generation *katanakaji*, or maker of the long sword, Yoshihara labors inside a backyard shed, a dim, tool-lined space lit by the glowing heat of a forge. The day I visited, Yoshihara had reached the midpoint of turning raw steel into a polished sword, a process that takes from two to three weeks. A professorial-looking man with wire-rimmed glasses and goatee, Yoshihara knelt on a straw mat and began to work with a narrow baton-size bar of steel. Working the bellows of the forge with one hand, he used the other to thrust the bar into a bed of blazing coals. As soon as the bar turned yellow-hot, Yoshihara pulled it from the fire pit and with a metronome's steady beat began hammering and thinning the heated metal, drawing out the curve and width of a blade. He worked the steel as if it were modeling clay.

Taking a break, Yoshihara led me into a finishing room where several apprentices were polishing swords. Yoshihara handed me one which I gripped with both hands, its heft like that of a heavy baseball bat. As I began to compliment its shape and its wavy hamon, Yoshihara held up a hand. "Remember, a sword is a weapon first of all. If it is not sharp and can't cut, it is not beautiful."

Collectors will pay up to \$35,000 for a newly made samurai sword not only, Yoshihara believes, because it is an art object but also because it represents "a remnant of the samurai spirit, to protect family and home."

THE SWORD'S DOUBLE IDENTITY as weapon and art object mirrors the split consciousness of the long-ago samurai leaders, many of whom fancied themselves as both warrior and aesthete. At their castles, the *daimyo*, or great names, as the samurai land barons were known, held regular salon-like gatherings for painters, playwrights, and intellectuals. They attended—even took part in—private performances of Noh drama, a solemn and stylized theater form for the elite. Samurai generals practiced calligraphy, took up flower arranging, and

A miniature Mount Fuji rises in Suizenji Garden, a 17th-century warlord's re-creation of the scenery between his castle in Kumamoto and the capital in Edo. The shogun controlled the warlords by forcing them to travel often to Edo, where he kept their wives hostage. The Nakasendo, a mountain road, passed through Tsunmago (right), which preserves its Edo-period street front.



MICHAEL YAMASHITA (BOTH). FAMILY CREST: HONDA



played the lute. During the savage Onin War (1467-77), when much of Kyoto burned to the ground, officers entertained themselves between battles by composing poems and dressing up in flamboyant silk costumes.

Of all the high-ranking samurai's cultural pursuits, none infatuated them as much as the tea ceremony. By the 13th century Zen Buddhist monks had introduced the rituals of tea drinking to the Ashikaga warlords, who practiced it on a lavish scale. Yoshimasa, the eighth Ashikaga shogun, promoted a simpler, more spiritual ceremony in the late 1400s. At his ornate villa outside Kyoto, Yoshimasa added a small tea room that held only a handful of people, the model for today's ceremonies. Powerful warlords began to follow his example by adopting the tea ceremony as a badge of refinement. The meditative act of making and drinking tea in a small space—one where sword wearing, even by samurai, was forbidden—must have captivated battle-weary warriors. Some samurai prized their tea utensils as much as their swords. The hard and soft edges of the samurai show up in a description of the general Kanamori Yoshishige: "He defended the castle of Kishiwada and personally took 208 heads. He was also a noted tea master."

Inside a serene first-floor room in an office building in downtown Osaka, where sunlight crept through rice-paper windows, I bowed to tea master Chikuyu Fukuda and asked him about the link between the warrior and the tea ceremony. Master Fukuda had just finished conducting a practice ceremony for a few students. I had joined them in drinking frothy green Chinese tea, made from a powder that Fukuda had prepared with a whisk and hot water. After sipping the tea from the same 500-year-old cup, we took several minutes to admire the carefully orchestrated grace notes of the room—the sprig of pear blossoms flowing from a vase, the smell of plum wood incense.

"The tea ceremony is a spiritual activity," Master Fukuda told me,

Shaved eyebrows,TM blackened teeth, and an oval face defined female beauty during the samurai era, a look found on masks used in Noh theater, the classical drama form once reserved for the elite. Samurai of all ranks played go, a board game about territorial conquest, doubtless as addictive as the cell-phone video games of young kabuki actors (above).

MICHAEL YAMASHITA (ABOVE); IRA BLOCK, HAYASHIBARA MUSEUM OF ART
CREST: TAIRA (HEIKE)



sitting on his heels in the formal way. He looked about 60, had a thin, handsome face, and wore the broad *hakama* trousers typical of the samurai. "The samurai came to a tea room to calm down and appreciate the moment," he said. I admitted that I couldn't picture a samurai squeezing his ego into such a delicate space and letting down his guard. The tea master smiled and suggested that I, like the warriors of old, should relax, look around the room again, and enjoy myself. So I did. The sense of well-being I experienced was perhaps the closest I came to appreciating how a medieval samurai might have felt during a rare recess from war.

NO AMOUNT OF CULTURAL REFINEMENT or religious observance could quell the deeper instincts of most samurai leaders for naked power. The unchecked ambitions of the warlords ran amok during the Ashikaga shoguns' reign—a period of frequent warfare from the early 1300s to the late 1500s—akin to the darkest days of medieval Europe. Any semblance of central rule had dissolved entirely by the mid-15th century as the most powerful clans (about 20 controlled most of Japan) fought for supremacy during a 100-year period called Sengoku Jidai, the Age of the Country at War.

The character of battles changed dramatically. Armies of tens of thousands of samurai marched across the land to lay siege to castles, their ranks swollen by the enlistment of farmers pressed into battle as foot soldiers. Many of these *ashigaru*, or light feet, carried firearms.

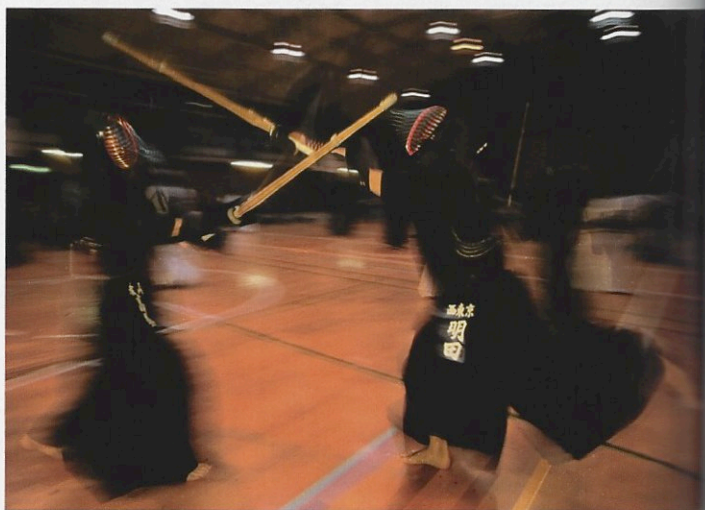
Muskets called harquebuses arrived in Japan in 1543, carried by Portuguese adventurers blown off course on a voyage to China. Japan quickly copied the technology, and within 30 years its armies led the world in the number of guns shouldered into combat. Battles became longer, bloodier, and more decisive. With each defeat of a warlord the countryside was flooded with his surviving unemployed warriors, the masterless samurai known as *ronin*, men of the waves.

Those combat-mad times—and the hundreds of films, video games, comic books, and TV dramas they still spawn—feed the imaginations of those Japanese children who grow up playing with plastic swords. Most outgrow the samurai fantasy, but a battleground exists for those who don't, those who crave the sensation well into adulthood of strapping on armor, unsheathing a sword, and playing war.

Each spring in cities and towns across Japan, make-believe samurai clash in battle reenactments. The events involve hundreds of local citizens—from businessmen and rice farmers to high school students and teachers—who parade down streets in resplendent rented armor. Afterward, usually on an open field or in a park, the weekend warriors act out a highly choreographed, noncontact version of a famous battle, often to stormy music played over a loudspeaker.

To some history buffs, these civic extravaganzas have sissified the

Recalling a form of begging adopted by masterless samurai called ronin, members of the Komuso Society walk in Tokyo playing bamboo flutes with their faces hidden. Ronin collected alms this way during the peaceful Edo period, wandering the countryside as humble monks. Without war, many samurai turned to martial arts like kendo, sword fighting often practiced with bamboo staves (below).





MICHAEL YAMASHITA (BOTH). FAMILY CREST: MIYAKE

samurai, elevating spectacle over realism and, worse yet, taking away the fun of fighting. One Friday in mid-April on a wide bank of the Ara River, outside the town of Yorii, I met a band of maverick reenactors who were determined to add grit and bruises to the pageantry. Practicing for the next day's battle—the re-creation of the siege of Hachigata castle in 1590—they had strapped on glossy red or black armor that from a distance made them look like giant, hyperactive beetles. Even in dress rehearsal they were fighting. They jabbed each other with foam-tipped lances, weapons customized by the organizers so combatants could strike each other without too much damage.

Their ranks included a construction worker, a physician, a graduate student in history, a former movie stuntman, a warehouse employee, a novelist, and a salaryman—a Japanese office worker. “I love armor,” said salaryman Kimiya Kimura, preening in his hard, shiny shell. “Would you want to go back in time?” I asked. “Hmm, fifty-fifty,” he replied. “I romanticize those times, but I also fear them. It was live or die.”

On the day of the battle, the hard-core samurai skipped the town parade with its large contingent of nonfighting warriors and instead took their places in rival squads facing off across the river at the site of the original confrontation. They barely glanced at the curious spectators, made up of a scattering of post-parade townspeople and tourists who settled on rocks and ate rice balls and chocolate-covered bananas as war drums pounded and a cannon boomed. The combatants looked fierce and realistic—except for the plastic goggles, worn to prevent eye injuries. The action would go by the history book, with a few amendments. A one-month siege was being compressed to 40 minutes of combat, and instead of 50,000 soldiers, there were 100.



A blast on a conch shell launched the fighting. The Toyotomi soldiers crossed the river in two boats and attacked the Hojo forces. On the riverbank the two sides went at it with the gusto of playground pick-up teams. If a samurai was stabbed, he had to fall and count to ten before rising from the dead. Back and forth over the river went the indestructible samurai. At the 35-minute mark, the wrong side, the Hojo, was winning, necessitating a time-out for the battle coordinator to remind the fighters of historical accuracy. Finally, just as a heavy rain began to fall, the Toyotomi forces vanquished the Hojo. The audience fled for cover, missing the chance to see the antagonists high-five each other, having lived to see another reenactment.

That long-ago battle from 1590 belonged to one of the last large military campaigns conducted by the samurai. Over the next 13 years the strongest shogun ever, Tokugawa Ieyasu, would rise to power and force peace on all the warlords. Before Ieyasu, two other great samurai generals from the period—Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi—attempted to unify Japan. Assassination by a vengeful general stopped Nobunaga, and two failed invasions of the Korean peninsula weakened Hideyoshi.

Hideyoshi's death from natural causes in 1598 provoked the most



famous of all samurai battles. It pitted the Western Army, recruited by warlords loyal to Hideyoshi's heir, against the Eastern Army, led by Tokugawa Ieyasu, a 58-year-old general who had fought under both Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. The two huge samurai armies, each numbering about 80,000 men, met on October 21, 1600, near the village of Sekigahara in central Japan.

As every Japanese schoolchild knows, Ieyasu and the Eastern Army won in a rout. They used the ancient tactic of treachery. A Western Army general had secretly switched sides and attacked his former allies from the rear, delivering a fatal blow to their defenses. Today a plinth marks the spot where the victorious generals presented Ieyasu with thousands of enemy heads. Three years later Ieyasu took the title of shogun, the first of 15 for the Tokugawa dynasty, and by his death in 1616, he had eliminated all remaining rivals, bringing an end to civil war.

A SAMURAI WITHOUT WAR is like a bird without sky. Gone were the swashbuckling days of battlefield glory and mercenary rewards; violent talents were no longer needed. Ieyasu and his successors had installed such a dominating, autocratic central government that no warlord clan could mount a challenge to it. During the extraordinary 250-year-long reign of peace that resulted, many samurai became idle, state-subsidized aristocrats, the power without the glory.

The Tokugawa regime enforced this lengthy peace through social engineering. The government, now based in Edo, anesthetized ambition by dividing the population into four hereditary classes—samurai, farmer, craftsman, and merchant—and froze them in place. Laws dictated the behavior of each class, defining where they could live, what they could wear, how they could earn money, and what weapons, if any, they could possess. Numbering about two million, some 6 percent of the population, the samurai class took the top rung.

In return for agreeing to defend the shogun government in rare times

A samurai look endures in Kyoto, where fire department trainees in warrior-like headgear practice their skills. During peacetime, samurai pitched in as fire-fighters and took jobs as police, their legendary bravery and discipline putting them in demand. Today becoming a samurai costs just a hundred dollars for rented gear and the courage to appear in public (right).



MICHAEL YAMASHITA (BOTH). FAMILY CREST: HOJO

of trouble, the samurai received an annual pension of rice, measured in units called *koku* and paid for by an onerous tax, as high as 60 percent, on a farmer's harvest. In the past many samurai had worked as farmers, putting on the armor and sword only when needed. Now most of them lived in castle towns, with nothing expected of them except to keep their blades sharp and to lead upright lives—to stay away from what were considered decadent low-class entertainments like kabuki plays, geisha dances, and anything else patronized by merchants.

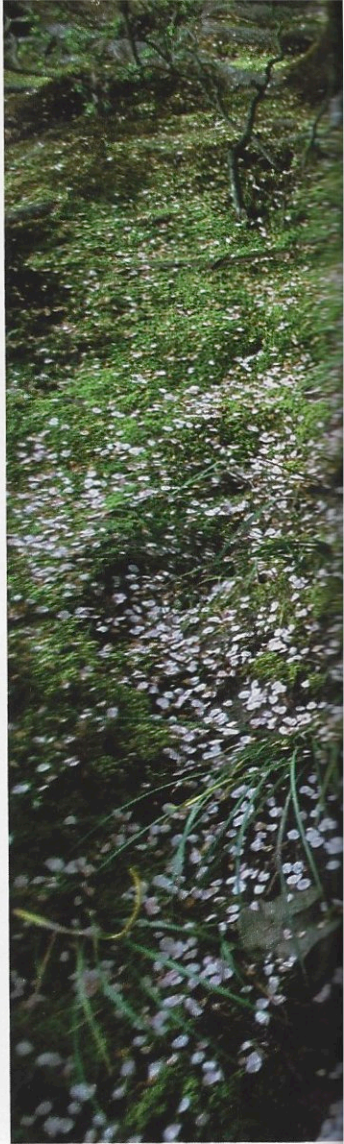
But while their blades may have stayed sharp, their fighting skills began to atrophy. Alarmed at the notion of soft samurai, certain teachers drew up codes of behavior to inspire idle sword wearers to retain physical and mental strength. These early self-help manuals gave instruction in sword handling, grooming, how to speak to superiors and inferiors, and how to retain the warrior's edge.

Bushido, the warrior's code, elevated the teaching of martial arts in Edo Japan, a tradition that permeates Japanese society to this day. Millions of Japanese schoolchildren still practice classic warrior skills of sword fighting (*kendo*), archery (*kyudo*), and hand-to-hand, unarmed combat (*jujitsu*) as part of their physical education curriculum. Adults, too, follow the warrior's way. At the Nippon Budokan, a martial arts center near Tokyo's Imperial Palace, I watched kendo students ferociously attack each other with bamboo staves. "Men!" an attacker would shout when a blow struck his opponent's face. "Tsuki!" rang out for a successful strike at the throat.

Breathing hard after practicing sword thrusts with a real blade, Terukuni Uki, the *sensei*, or teacher, sat down to remove his face mask and armor. When I asked him about the modern significance of kendo, Uki answered like a Bushido advocate from three centuries ago, complaining about how the Japanese youth were losing their toughness and their tradition. "Here we teach the spirit of winning, but it's not so much defeating an opponent as overcoming one's own self," Uki said. "These days it seems everyone is looking for someone to blame rather than focusing on himself. We're told to believe that unless you graduate from the best university and are somehow elite, you're a loser. Our message here is that if you try hard, at kendo or anything else, you will enjoy life."

A few of the students stood nearby, listening to the sensei's words. One spoke up: "With kendo you're never frightened, never panicked." He sounded as though he walked the congested streets in Tokyo with an invisible sword hanging from his belt.

ONE OPPONENT the Edo-period samurai were not trained to fight was poverty. A steady rise in the cost of living eroded the value of their rice stipend, which most samurai converted into cash, and slowly the despised merchant class began to eclipse the samurai in wealth and power. "Most daimyo families at the end were bankrupt or close to it," Tsunenari Tokugawa told me. The 18th head of the Tokugawa family, a retired shipping company executive, smiled ruefully as he discussed the dire straits of the samurai with me in his Tokyo office. "A big daimyo with 1.2 million *koku* of rice was once one of the richest men in Japan," Tokugawa said. "But suddenly by the 1800s his revenues from selling his rice couldn't even come close to the earnings of a single kimono store in Tokyo."





MICHAEL YAMASHITA. FAMILY CREST: TOKUGAWA

To die like a cherry blossom, which falls at the peak of its beauty (above), held deep appeal for samurai. Warriors facing defeat would rather commit suicide than grow old with dishonor. As an 18th-century manual stated, “A samurai who is not prepared to die at any moment will inevitably die an unbecoming death.”

Many newly impoverished samurai took jobs as bureaucrats, martial arts teachers, policemen, and accountants. To bring in needed extra cash, they made items like umbrellas, birdcages, or furniture on the side. The shocking specter of a samurai grubbing for a living appeared in a recent prize-winning Japanese film, *The Twilight Samurai*. Its director, Yoji Yamada, said he was tired of film studio exaggerations of the samurai hero. “I wanted to show that samurai at the end suffered very much,” Yamada told me at his Ginza office. “Some couldn’t even eat. My main character had to sell his sword to pay for his wife’s funeral.”

The Tokugawa regime fell abruptly, a collapse as sudden and surprising—and nearly as bloodless—as the fall of the Soviet Union in our time. The trigger was the arrival in 1853, and again seven months later, of the black ships, a small fleet of United States warships led by Commodore Matthew Perry. The appearance of foreign ships pierced the bubble of isolation that had enclosed Japan since the 1630s. Confronted by the military strength of the arriving ships, the shogun dissolved Japan’s exclusion policy and began making trade pacts with other nations. This perceived act of weakness sparked revolts by several powerful clans of anti-foreigner—and anti-Tokugawa—samurai.

Acting in the long-dormant name of the emperor, the rebel warriors, backed by influential merchants and farmers dissatisfied with the stagnant shogun government, went head-to-head with the shogun's forces in the late 1860s and swept the Tokugawa regime from power. That the shogun's armies didn't put up much of a fight became clear to me when Yoshihiko Sasama, author and illustrator of comprehensive volumes on samurai armor, unrolled a scroll depicting one of the final battles. Uniformed, well-trained troops loyal to the emperor, armed with rifles from England and France, are shown repelling an almost comical attack on Kyoto by the Tokugawa samurai, many of them waving swords and muskets. "Can you believe it?" Sasama exclaimed. "Half the Tokugawa army is still wearing old-style armor!"

The new Meiji government, named for the young emperor and composed of many educated samurai, pulled Japan into the modern era. Surprisingly progressive, the Meiji rulers soon abolished the class system, broke up the feudal estates, confiscated castles, ended the payment of pensions, and forbade samurai to wear swords. Many of the samurai who helped propel the emperor to power felt betrayed, having believed that he would reinstate a conservative warrior-based rule. In a series of revolts in the 1870s, the Meiji government's well-armed forces overwhelmed the disgruntled samurai, some of whom committed seppuku rather than surrender. The samurai had made their last stand.

NOWADAYS THE SAMURAI SPIRIT still makes headlong charges through the Japanese psyche. The legendary bravery of the medieval warriors stiffens the backbone of public figures who long for a militarily strong Japan. Recently a general prefaced his remarks about meeting the challenge of a threat by North Korea by saying, "We are the descendants of samurai." And though the Japanese constitution prohibits the use of military force in international disputes, and public opinion strongly supports a pacifistic foreign policy, conservative politicians increasingly channel the samurai spirit as they argue for amendments that would allow Japan to fight foreign wars.

Nostalgia for the idealized samurai is undying, cropping up in places such as Tokyo's Sengakuji Temple. Visitors come daily to burn incense on the graves of the 47 Ronin—who in 1703 famously flouted the shogun's power by beheading the official responsible for their master's death. Later the ronin committed seppuku, becoming Japan's most beloved rebels.

And what salaryman locked into a conforming job doesn't dream of being called a samurai, the workplace jargon for the rare person who risks being fired for standing up and speaking his mind?

But for most Japanese, the samurai rests in peace, a violent figure embalmed in history, the tragic hero who emerges now mostly to star in crackling good plots for kabuki plays and action movies. The samurai's time came and went, like a fallen cherry blossom. There's no better epitaph than the opening lines of the *Heike monogatari*, a 13th-century samurai war tale:

"The proud ones do not last forever, but are like the dream of a spring night. Even the mighty will perish, just like dust before the wind." □

WEBSITE EXCLUSIVE

See photos of 19th-century samurai, and learn about women of the samurai class and Christian samurai in Did You Know? at nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0312.



The power of the samurai that emerged in the 12th century with the shogun Minamoto Yoritomo (above) carried Japan through its medieval period and into the modern era. By wearing sword and armor (right), Japanese reenactors connect with the most vivid chapter of their history, when warriors had their way.

MICHAEL YAMASHITA (RIGHT); IRA BLOCK, JINGOJI TEMPLE, KYOTO
FAMILY CREST: UESUGI

宇佐美駿河

