

SAMURAI WARRIORS (EDO PERIOD)

My trips to Japan in recent years, as part of the cultural exchange sponsored by the Center for International Exchange in Tokyo, have increased my interest in samurai and the influence the samurai period had on Japan. The samurai warriors supported different feudal lords (daimyos) throughout Japan and for centuries bitter fighting occurred between different fiefdoms. The Edo Period in Japan ranged from 1603 to 1868 when the Tokugawa Shogunate period ended and the Emperor was restored to power. The Tokugawa Shogunate, however, unified Japan after victory in the famous Battle of Sekigahara on October 21, 1600, and for over 250 years Japan was a relatively peaceful country. Fighting ended and the arts flourished.

In the book entitled *Giving up the Gun: Japan's reversion to the sword, 1543-1879*, Noel Perrin discusses how the Japanese samurai warriors thought swords were nobler than guns, as warriors were forced to fight at close range. In 1638, samurai completely gave up guns after they expelled the Christian Portuguese, who had introduced guns, and samurai further mastered the use of the sword. This turned out to be a disadvantage for the samurai when Commodore Perry came to Japan in 1853-54, as the ruling Shogunate had few guns to resist Perry's strong demands backed up with superior guns. Japanese were now disillusioned with the Shogunate, and led by revolutionaries, finally overthrew the Shogunate, and returned the Emperor to power.

Samurai typically carried two swords: one, the katana, for the standard fighting and another, the wakizashi, for fighting in close quarters. The katana was worn only by samurai, but the wakizashi could be used by the chonin (merchant) class for protection. It also was used for seppuku (harakiri). There also are several other types of swords that differ in size, shape, application, and manufacture. While visiting Japan visitors can typically see swords and samurai armor when they visit castles or museums. The helmets of samurai warriors were often quite elaborately crafted and can be heavy. Some samurai helmets were crafted with the wings or images of dragonflies, as these flying insects never go backwards, which signifies one of the tenets of samurai code of not retreating.



Samurai helmet in shape of a dragonfly



M. Perry with helmet from samurai actor at party

When the Emperor Meiji was restored to power in 1868 all samurai were required to give up their swords. As a concession to this regulation, the samurai were allowed to keep their hand guards, which were attached to the swords to protect their hands in combat. The Japanese term for hand guard is "tsuba." Typically, they were attached to the intermediate length and long

length (katana) swords. They generally were not affixed to the shortest knife style of blade (wakizashi). Members of Kendo or Iaido Clubs collect these guards in the USA. There also are many collectors in Japan, who appreciate samurai arts and crafts. There are numerous types of tsuba, but there also are many replicas, so collectors need to be careful with purchases.

The relative value of the tsubas depends on age. Modern sword items (World War II and after) are referred to as "Shingunto" and are not generally worth as much as ancestral blades. Ancestral tsubas, swords, and accessories can be very valuable from a monetary standpoint as well as from a personal one. Many Japanese are very interested in obtaining war trophies and buying them back if they were previously owned by their family.

When I was in Japan in 2013, I visited many good friends of mine in Nahari, Kochi Prefecture, where I had visited in 2011. Mr. Hamada (Norihiro) and Mrs. Hamada (Junko) were extremely hospitable and arranged a nice reception for me. Although neither of them spoke much English, we communicated well with help from their daughter, Shoko. When I left the reception they gave me several gifts of old lacquer ware. They also gave me two tsubas, which I greatly prize as part of my small collection of Japanese historical articles.



Two sword guards (tsuba) from the Hamadas



Tsuba from Hamadas showing detailed design



Tsuba designed by Mitsumasa Yonemitsu



Tsuba designed by Musashi Miyamoto

Tsubas are made by casting various metals and then plating them with lacquer and gold powder. Musashi Miyamoto and Mitsumasa Yonemitsu designed and made some tsubas that are prized by many collectors. Musashi is famous for the Namako-designed tsuba. Namako is the Japanese name for the sea cucumber, which is commonly eaten in Japan. My friends the Hamadas in Nahari have a wall (kabe) with namako design on their warehouse.

In Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture, Japan, I visited the Matsue Castle and also the Samurai House near the castle where samurai lived and trained. Several exhibits in the castle displayed samurai armor and outside the castle samurai and ninja actors posed for photographs. Ninjas were the covert agents in feudal Japan that specialized in sabotage, infiltration, assassination, and other unorthodox methods of warfare. They essentially disappeared in the Tokugawa Era when samurai developed rules of conduct and a long period of peace prevailed. In the 1700s, a samurai, Yamamoto Tsunetomo, wrote many texts in a collection called *Hagakure*, which illuminated the concept of bushido, or the way of the samurai warrior.



Ninja actor with M. Perry in front of Matsue Castle



Display of samurai training in Matsue City, Japan



Famous Edo Period screen painting of the Battle of Sekigahara

Although the samurai era ended with the westernization of Japan and the return of the Emperor during the Meiji Restoration, the interest in samurai warriors continues today in Japan and many areas of the world. The samurai followed a code of tenets (bushido) that has been respectfully studied by military strategists for years and most likely for many years in the future.

On my cultural exchange in 2013, I heard several lectures and discussed Japanese history with many persons with our group. Paul Maruyama, author of *Escape from Manchuria*, was in our tour group, and although his book deals with World War II, he is interested and knowledgeable of samurai history. Mr. Maruyama posed with a samurai warrior actor, who had two arrows stuck in his armor. When we inquired on how heavy the armor was, the actor confessed that he had made the armor himself with plastic bottles and painted them red.



Samurai armor from display in Matsue Castle



Paul Maruyama with samurai actor at Matsue Castle

When samurai swords were given up during the Meiji Restoration, many sword makers were out of work. To this day there are few persons who make samurai swords with the old hand techniques. In 2009, when I visited Miyagi prefecture north of Tokyo, I had the pleasure to meet a well-known master of sword making, Saburo Hokke, and to see his swords. The steel used to make swords is heated, pounded repeatedly until thin, and then folded and pounded more. This process is repeated over and over until the desired piece of steel is obtained. What I learned in this process is that the curve on the end of the sword is not formed by the swordsmith during the pounding, but is obtained when the sword is heated. The trick is that they coat the cutting edge with clay, which creates a differential during the heating and cooling process. The swordsmith we visited in 2009 was so well known in Japan that he is considered a National Human Treasure. In 1998, when a meteorite was

discovered in Africa, part of the heavy mineral was sent to this man, who formed a sword with the mineral. National Geographic magazine did a special story of the process.



Master swordsmith, Saburo Hokke, with raw materials above and finished products below



Although the Samurai Period in Japan is often glamorized in movies and text, the period was a very tragic and bloody period of Japanese history. I met Tokugawa Tsunenari, the 18th head of the Tokugawa family, in San Francisco in 2010 at a Japanese American Summit. I had just finished reading his book entitled *The Edo Inheritance* and I was very impressed with the man and his book. It emphasizes many of the positive aspects of the Edo Period, especially education of the youth and the respect for the environment. In his book he stated “Japan is the only industrial nation in the world that has a civilization with a tradition of choosing to coexist with nature.” This should be a major objective for any country and it is too bad that we cannot just pick and choose from the best that each culture and time period has to offer.