

Samurai - the Training and Leisure time

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Introduction

Japanese clans had different ideals of the Samurai warriors training and leisure pursuits. We will explore the common military, academic and leisure activities of feudal Japan.

Childhood

Children of samurai households began their training early. If a child was born with left handed traits his left arm would be tied down and objects would be placed within reach of his right hand, every effort would be tried to train the child to be right handed.

Samurai children often attended a school that was sponsored by the clan. Between the ages of 5 and 6 children would start learning to be sociable and cooperative with other children, respectful to superiors and conduct themselves with dignity. At the age of 6 or 7 they would start learning to read Chinese texts and to do basic mathematics. Calligraphy, both Chinese and Japanese, was considered highly important.

Sometime between the age of 9 and 10, the child would start learning the basics of the martial arts. Many children went through 10 to 12 hours of academic, military and etiquette training as well as learning some poetry or music everyday. Education consisted of individual or small group instruction and lectures. Practice and examinations were also conducted. In some domains school was compulsory for all samurai children.

Between the ages of 13 and 16, samurai children underwent their coming of age ceremony. This event marked the transition between child and adult. At this time they were ready to fight in battle and assume duties within the clan's household. They would be given their first suit of armor. Many Daimyo's children fought in their first battle by the time they were 16 years old.

Martial Training

All samurai were expected to attend some training as retainers to daimyo; individual training was to the extent and in a style with regard to the samurai's station in the clan's structure. Military training did not follow any common structure from one clan to another and was often based on the tactics used by the clan in warfare and their geographical location.

The primary martial training could include the following:

- Archery – use of bow and arrow on foot or mounted
- Horsemanship – the ability to ride and fight from horseback
- Swimming – swimming in armor, combat in water
- Fencing – the use of the long sword or katana
- Short sword – the use of the short sword or wakizashi
- Pole arm – the use of the naginata
- Staff – the use of the staff

- Spearmen ship – the use of the spear or lance from foot and horseback
- Wrestling – the use of the body as a weapon in armor and out of armor
- Firearms – the use of the matchlock
- Dagger throwing – the throwing of tanto and smaller darts and stars
- Reconnaissance – the observation and concealment used to gather information
- Rope and knots – use of ropes and different knots to subdue and hold captives
- War fans – defensive and offensive fighting with the metal fan

As samurai advanced in rank additional training would be conducted in strategies, troop movement, castle construction and the use of signals in battle.

Academic Training

Further academic training was often conducted to provide the skills needed by samurai as defined in their roles within the job assigned within the clan system.

Reading and calligraphy were important to those samurai who wrote correspondence or acted as a regional overseer for the daimyo. Those that were involved in diplomatic affairs often received more training on etiquette, function planning as well as calligraphy. More advanced mathematics helped those responsible for the control of accounts such as food purchases, taxes, weapons storage, firewood and construction activities. Some samurai continued to receive specialized training into their 30's.

Leisure activities

Activities that comprised the samurais leisure time were often segregated by rank. Games and gambling were often thought of as low ranking activities, while music, poetry and theater were often considered high ranking social activities.

Sporting and martial activities were combined to form games and outdoor activities. Equestrian games consisted of the following:

- Horse racing, fully armored Samurai race a hazardous course. Though this is considered fun, it is in reality training for war.
- Inu Omono, wild dog hunts. Usually in an enclosed ring wild dogs would be released and a group of samurai with bows would enter on horseback. The winner was the Samurai with the most kills. In some instances Buddhist would require that the dogs not be killed, so blunt arrows would be used.
- Shinki-sodatsusen, a variation of capture the flag on horseback.
- Yabusame, horseback archery over a straight course with three wooden targets.

Sumo, a popular sport since ancient time, it was closely associated with Shinto religion. In 1578 Oda Nobunaga gathered about 1500 men through out Japan and held a one day spectacular tournament.

Kemari, a ball game played outside with 6 to 7 inch ball. Similar to soccer or haki-sack the object is to keep the ball from touching the ground by using your feet. This was played by all ranks of samurai and the imperial court.

Hanetsuki was a game similar to badminton that used paddles and shuttlecock. This game was often considered a children's game but adults often played it around the New Year and was a favorite of the imperial court.

None warfare related leisure activities included drinking and gambling as well as board games and cards.

Drinking was a popular past time for low and high ranking samurai. For many clans it was considered disgraceful for a Samurai to be seen in public drunk. Many drinking houses had private rooms for samurai to drink and to spend the night so as not to be seen on the streets in drunken state.

Gambling, often discouraged by the Daimyo, was the soldier's pastime in barracks and on campaign. Betting was popular on dice games such as Han-Cho or odd and even.. Elaborate steps were done to ensure that the games was fair and that the "house" was not cheating. The "dealer" was often stripped down to underwear. The betters would declare odd or even and the the dealer would cast the dice. Players won or lost on the number that came up.

Board games such as go, cards, shogi and sogoroku were also classic activities.

- Go – classic strategy game played by two players. It is said that it only takes a few minutes to learn but a lifetime to master. Go was considered by some to be the ultimate strategy game.
- Cards – several different games using either Japanese or European cards. Basics of most card games were matching style games that required players to match colors, drawings or even poetry verses.
- Shogi – A Japanese variation of chess where pieces move in set patterns and can be advanced in rank for different moves.
- Sogoroku – The Japanese variation of backgammon. This version is played without the ability to block or the benefit of doubles.

Tobacco, after its introduction by the Europeans became popular for all ranks. The kiseru, Japanese pipe, only held enough tobacco for a few puffs but was immensely popular for samurai, the use of the pipe as a weapon eventually became a martial art.

Other Activities

The playing of music was considered a high ranking leisure activity with samurai often learning to play musical instruments. The shakuhachi, a vertical flute often played in Zen temples and the biwa, a heavy lute that is played with a pick were both popular for samurai. The Koto, a zither was considered a woman's instrument by the samurai but men in the court did play it.

The tea ceremony or Cha-no-yu, was often considered a form of leisure and meditative activity by high ranking individuals. Both Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi practiced the tea ceremony and collected fine tea sets from China and from Japanese artisans.

Ink paintings, many samurai believed that the character of a man could be shown by the brush strokes of paintings or calligraphy. Miyamoto Musashi, considered the best swordsman of all time, was and is considered one of Japans greatest painters.

Poetry was a form of entertainment when done in the linked verse style. Linked verse uses the 5-7-5 syllable and a 7-7 syllable structure repeated with a linked theme and done by multiple people to create a poem with up to 100 stanzas. Many daimyo often held link verse parties with other samurai and famous poets in attendance.

Noh Theater was associated with many daimyo and is comprised of mime and stylized dance with little props. Oda Nobunaga supposedly performed a Noh dance prior to his departure to engage Imagawa forces at Okehazame in 1560.

Clan Rules and Beliefs

As military training differed from one clan to another, so did the beliefs on what was important to the warrior. The following examples defined the importance of activities to different clan samurai.

From Imagawa Sadayo (1325 – 1420)

- Without knowledge of learning, one will ultimately have no military victories.
- It is forbidden to forget the great debt of kindness one owes to his master and ancestors and thereby make light of the virtues of loyalty and filial piety.
- It is forbidden to be given up to drinking and carousing and, in gambling and the like, to forget one's family duties.

From Asakura Toshikage (1428-1481)

- One should place spies in fiefs both near and far, even in times of peace, and should constantly inquire into their circumstances.
- It is prohibited to perform Noh within the castle grounds at night.

From Hojo Nagauji (1432-1519)

- When one has the least bit of spare time, he should always take out some piece of literature or something with characters on it that he has kept in his pocket, and read where no one will be looking. Characters are such that if one is not used to them both waking and sleeping, they will soon be forgotten.
- A person who has not studied poetry is the poorer for this lack, and thus one should study it. One should always be genteel in his speaking. A man shows his innermost self by a single word.
- In the intervals of one's work, one should learn horsemanship. After becoming well-founded in the basics, other techniques should follow with training.
- It is hardly necessary to record that both learning and the military arts are the way of the warrior, for it is an ancient law that one should have learning on the left and martial arts on the right.

From Kato Kiyomasa (1562-1611)

- One should not be negligent in the way of the retainer. One should rise at four in the morning, practice sword technique, eat one's meal, and train with the bow, the gun, and the horse. For a well developed retainer, he should become even more so.
- If you want diversions, he should make them such outdoor pastimes as falconing, deer hunting and wrestling.
- The practice of Noh dancing is strictly forbidden. When one unsheathes his sword, he is cutting a person down in the mind. Thus, as all things are born from being placed in one's heart, a samurai who practices dancing-which is outside the martial arts-should be ordered to commit seppuku.
- One should put forth effort in matters of learning. One should read books concerning military matters, and direct attention exclusively to the virtues of loyalty and filial piety. Reading Chinese poetry, linked verse, and waka is forbidden. One will surely become womanized if he gives his heart knowledge of such elegant, delicate refinements. Having been born into the house of a samurai, one's intention should be to grasp the long and short swords and to die. If a man does not investigate into matters of bushido daily, it will be difficult for him to die a brave and manly death. Thus it is essential to engrave this business of the warrior into one's mind well.

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