

# The Amazing Code of Japan's Samurai

## Ancient Warlike Standards Persist in Modern Day



### Old Warriors Heroes of Masses

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Tokio.

THE SAMURAI, the two-sworded warrior of feudal Japan, still lives in the hearts of the people of this country. Like his American counterpart, the two-gun man of the west, he has long since passed out of existence as a living being, but he is very much alive on the screen and stage and in the literature of the land of cherry blossoms.

Stand in front of any small motion picture theater in Japan—there are thousands scattered throughout the country—and you cannot fail to note that one of the two featured pictures is a samurai film. The other is usually an American or a Japanese film based on modern life. The smaller the movie house the greater is the pull of the samurai film, indicating the drawing power of the two-sworded men among the laborers, shopkeepers, and poorer classes.

The surprising thing about the popularity of samurai films among the masses is that in olden times warriors were as often as not the enemies of the common people, especially of the merchant class. The samurai were at the top of the social scale, then came the farmers, and last of all the merchants—the scum of the earth, and they were frequently so treated by the warrior class. Young bucks among the samurai thought nothing of hiding in lonely alleys and lopping the head off the first layman who passed by just for the sake of testing his sword. Shopkeepers sometimes lived in terror of the samurai.

Scene from a film immortalizing the ancient samurai—two-sworded warriors of old Japan. Samurai pictures and plays are certain hits today.

But those days have long since passed. Today it is a well known practice on the legitimate stage, whenever things begin to grow dull, for a producer to put on "The Forty-seven Ronins or Faithful Samurai," the most popular and famous samurai show of all time. There is almost always an immediate sell-out.

"The Forty-seven Ronins" is based on an actual occurrence 250 years ago. To avenge their master, who was forced to commit harakiri by a cruel nobleman named Kira, the forty-seven faithful clansmen of Asano, lord of Ako, vow vengeance. For almost three years they undergo untold hardships.

When their leader, Oishi, discovers that Kira has put spies on his trail he plunges into drunkenness and debauchery and even discards his wife and children, taking a harlot to live with him, to delude the enemy into false security.

Then, during a violent snowstorm, the forty-seven warriors storm Kira's mansion and after a fierce battle they succeed in slaying their enemy. They then march to the temple of Sengakuji, where they lay the head of Kira on their lord's grave. Finally, their task having been accomplished, they commit harakiri and are buried in the same temple grounds as their lord. According to the play, the warriors commit harakiri of their own volition, but according to records they were tried and condemned to take their own lives.

This undoubtedly was the greatest mass suicide in history. It also was, according to Japanese tenets, the finest exemplification of the samurai code of honor.



Japanese children celebrate the founding of the empire by dressing in the regalia of the ancient samurai.

Two and a half centuries have passed since then, but thousands still visit Sengakuji temple in Tokio each month to offer prayers to the souls of the loyal warriors.

Besides on the stage and screen, serials and novels in the newspapers and magazines based on the adventures of samurai are extremely popular.

When Japan made the historic decision to open its doors to the west in 1854 after having remained completely cut off from the rest of the world for two centuries as though it were another planet, it decided to transform itself into a nation on a level with European and American powers.

Beginning with the imperial family, which adopted western court costumes and customs, the whole nation took up western ways and culture. Today in outward appearance the business sections of such large cities as Tokio and Osaka are equal to those of the most advanced countries in the world.

Education also has been along western lines. In classrooms children do not squat on the floor, but sit on chairs and wear westernized clothing. They are educated along modern scientific lines.

So today the Japanese people, particularly those living in the cities, are, outwardly, in the clothes they wear, the buildings they work in, and the food they eat, more western than eastern. The same may be said of their minds. It is their hearts that remain least changed.

This perhaps is one reason why there is such a conflict in Japanese life. The minds of the people are turned to the west, but their hearts are in the east. Brought up to respect and emulate the samurai of old and at the same time to adopt the

practical but foolhardy. But few Japanese officers have ever been taken captive and lived long to tell the story.

There are numerous instances of similar inconsistencies and conflicts. How Japan will work them out is one of the great problems of the future.

In many respects the samurai of feudal Japan bore a striking similarity to the armored knights of England. It was the essence of old Japan that all gentlemen must be samurai and all samurai must be gentlemen. With them, as was the case with the nobility and gentry of England, unquestioned obedience and loyalty were yielded to their superiors—loyalty even unto death.

In several important respects, however, the samurai differed from European knights. They practiced harakiri as part of

whom he owes a deep sense of gratitude, whether or not he likes the girl.

Which may seem stretching duty to absurd lengths, but this is nothing compared to what "girl" was when Japanese knighthood was in flower. At the risk of shocking some readers I will relate an incident cited by the late Dr. Inazo Nitobe, an authority on "bushido," as an example of what "girl" was in the good old days.

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The story is of one of the greatest characters of Japanese history, Michizane, who, falling a victim to jealousy and calumny, is exiled. Not content with this, his unrelenting enemies are bent upon the extinction of his entire family.

Michizane's son and heir, still very young, has been secreted in a village school kept by a former vassal of Michizane, Genzo by name. Orders are forthwith dispatched to the schoolmaster to deliver the head of the boy.

Genzo's first thought is to find a suitable substitute. None among the children born of the soil bears the least resemblance to his protégé, but there is a new scholar, a comely boy of the same age as his master's son.

Here, then, is the scapegoat! The teacher visits the home of the parents of the new scholar and makes the suggestion. The rest of the narrative may be briefly told. On the day appointed the officer commissioned to identify and receive the head of the youth arrives.

Will he be deceived by the false head? The officer takes up the gruesome object before him, goes calmly over each feature and in a deliberate, business-



The modern Japanese girl lives a more respected life than did her predecessor of feudal days.

samurai. Consequently swords were and still are held in the highest esteem by the Japanese. In feudal times only samurai were permitted to wear swords. The custom was to wear two swords, a long one to be used in actual combat and a shorter sword to be employed in committing harakiri. When a samurai called on a friend it was etiquette for both to remove their weapons as a sign of good will.

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Japanese swords excel even the vaunted products of Toledo. To cut through a pile of copper coins without nicking the blade was a common feat. The Japanese prize their swords in the same way that world famous violinists prize their fiddles.

There were Stradivaris and Guarneris among Japanese swordsmiths. The four most famous are Munechika (tenth century), Masamune and Yoshimitsu (thirteenth century), and Muramasa (fourteenth century). A sword by any of these geniuses costs thousands and even tens of thousands of dollars today. History, tradition, and romance alike reecho with the exploits of the wonderful weapons forged by these masters.

Many a temple and almost every family descended from a samurai hoards a sword as an object of adoration. Any insult to it is tantamount to a personal affront. Woe to him who carelessly steps over a weapon lying on the floor.

Japanese audiences seeing Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" are horrified to see Cho-Cho-san kiss the dagger just before taking her life. The sword of the samurai should, in committing harakiri, be lifted reverently to the forehead, care being taken that the steel may not even be clouded by the human breath. To kiss the sword is regarded by the Japanese as an insult.

A Japanese swordsmith is not a mere artisan but an inspired artist and his workshop a sanctuary. Daily he commences his work with prayer and purification, or, as the phrase is, "he

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Modern thespians re-enact a harakiri—honorable suicide of the old days in Japan.

like tone, pronounces it genuine. That evening in a lonely home the mother of the child awaits, but she knows her son will not return. Her husband had for a long time been the recipient of Michizane's bounties, but since Michizane's banishment circumstances have forced him to follow the service of the enemy. As one acquainted with the exile's family, it was he who had been entrusted with the task of identifying the boy's head, which in this case was that of his own son.

That is the length to which people went to practice "girl" in the olden days in Japan. The sword was the emblem of power and prowess of the

their code of honor and they showed no gallantry toward the fair sex. "God and the ladies," was the motto of the European knight, but neither God nor the ladies inspired much enthusiasm in the samurai's breast.

"Bushido," which may literally be translated into "the way of the samurai," is the moral code of the Japanese warrior. It is not a written code. Strange as it may seem, religions have played an extremely important part in forming it.

Buddhism furnished "bushido" with a sense of calm trust in fate, a quiet submission to the inevitable.

Shintoism, the national faith of Japan, inculcated loyalty, reverence for ancestral memory, and filial piety into "bushido."

From Confucianism "bushido" adopted the five moral relations between master and servant (the governing and the governed), father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, and between friend and friend.

The samurai's unwritten code laid tremendous emphasis on "girl" or duty, although the Japanese word has a far, far deeper significance than the English word duty. It was the "girl" of the forty-seven faithful samurai to avenge their master even at the cost of their lives. It is the "girl" of Japanese to look after unfortunate relatives. It is the "girl" of a young man even today to marry the daughter of some one to



Gen. Maresuke Nogai, hero of the Russo-Japanese war, who followed his emperor in death by means of harakiri as a token of loyalty.



Swordmakers busy at the revived art. In the days of the samurai it was a calling almost as sacred as the priesthood.



Scene from "The Forty-seven Ronins," most popular play on the samurai theme. Here the faithful soldiers are about to storm the mansion of their dead master's enemy.