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Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

The legacy of the samurai

**Samurai history**

The samurai (the word means ‘one who serves’) were the elite warrior class of Japan for nearly seven hundred years. In the tenth century, the imperial court in Kyoto tried and failed to organise a conscript army. If the court had succeeded in this, the wealthy landowners might not have decided to employ private soldiers and the samurai might never have existed. The original samurai were chivalrous warriors who went into battle on horseback, challenging opponents to ritualised combat. Their customs would have seemed familiar to the medieval European knights if they had ever met each other. Later, as the armies became larger and the fighting more savage, most samurai trained for hand-to-hand combat. However, during a long period of peace in Japan things didn’t go well for the samurai and eventually, in the 1860s, they lost their position of power in Japanese society.

**Samurai identity**

The sword of a samurai symbolises the authority and luxury of the warrior class. It was both a weapon and an art object. This double identity mirrored the samurai themselves. As well as being warriors, they used to socialise with painters, playwrights and intellectuals. Samurai generals practised calligraphy, did flower arranging and went to the theatre. But of all their cultural activities, the tea ceremony was the most important. The ceremony of making and drinking tea was another ritual, almost a meditation. It was carried out in a small room where swords were forbidden, even to samurai, and it must have been very inviting to battle-weary warriors.

**Bushido**

Bushido is the warrior’s code. It was first written down as a kind of self-help manual during the long period of peace when samurai fighting skills went into decline. The martial arts tradition continues in Japan to this day. Millions of Japanese children still practise the classic warrior skills of sword fighting (kendo), archery (kyudo) and hand-to-hand, unarmed combat (jujitsu) at school. But Bushido is also a code of ethics: honour, loyalty and sacrifice. As Terukuni Uki, a martial arts teacher, explains, ‘Here we teach the spirit of winning, but it’s not so much defeating an opponent as overcoming one’s own self. These days it seems everyone is looking for someone to blame rather than focusing on himself. Our message here is that if you try hard, at kendo or anything else, you will enjoy life.’

**Samurai today**

The continuing appeal of the samurai is due to a simple fact: he is one of the world’s greatest action figures. He’s the lone swordsman who kills dozens of enemies in the name of duty and individual glory. The samurai warrior is the cowboy, the knight, the gladiator, and the *Star Wars* Jedi all rolled into one. The samurai have inspired hundreds of films, video games, comic books and TV dramas. In Japan, each spring, men put on samurai armour and re-enact famous samurai battles. These ‘weekend samurai’ look fierce and realistic, but, with their plastic goggles and blunt swords, they wouldn’t have been a threat to the real thing. One of the ‘samurai’ is asked if he would like to go back in time. ‘Hmm,’ he replies, ‘I romanticise those times, but I also fear them. It was live or die.’

archery (n) /ˈɑːʃəri/ the sport or fighting skill using bows and arrows

calligraphy (n) /kəˈlɪɡrəfi/ the skill or art of decorative writing

chivalrous (adj) /ˈʃɪvəlrəs/ courteous and considerate

conscript (n) /kənˈskrɪpt/ a soldier who is called up to fight by the authorities

knight (n) /naɪt/ a soldier of a high status background

ritualised (adj) /ˈrɪtʃuəlaɪzd/ a way of doing something that follows a formal ritual or pattern

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