

Lesson Title: Samurai: Myth and Fact A lesson based on medieval Japanese History, Literature, and Philosophy

Grade Level(s) and Subject: High school and college

Goals and Objectives: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Offer a brief account on the role of the samurai in Japanese history.
2. Compare and contrast the portrayal of the samurai in Ethan Segal's brief introduction to Medieval Japanese History and the Tale of the Heike.
3. Enumerate and examine the values attributed to the samurai in the required reading assignments identifying important Buddhist and Confucian themes found in samurai history and literature
4. Demonstrate understanding of the contemporary perspectives on Bushido and how this affects the way we reimagine the samurai and their contributions to broader Japanese culture and values.

Time required/class periods needed: 1-2 depending on length of class

Primary source bibliography:

Medieval Japan: An Introductory Essay by Ethan Segal, Michigan State University

<http://www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/curriculum/imaging-japanese-history/medieval/pdfs/essay.pdf>

Excerpts from the Tale of the Heike

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1000ce_heike.htm

Excerpts from the Hagakure by Yamamoto Tsunetomo written in the early 18th century by which time samurai were no longer warriors but bureaucrats. This code is kind of retrofitted.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/samurai/way-nf.html>

or

<http://ocw.mit.edu/courses/history/21h-522-japan-in-the-age-of-the-samurai-history-and-film-fall-2006/lecture-notes/lec07.pdf>

Other resources used:

Bushido: Mode or Ethic by Roger T. Ames in Japanese Aesthetics and Culture, A Reader, edited by Nancy G. Hume, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1995.

Bushidó or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition by Karl F. Friday http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_friday_0301.htm

Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidó Ideal by G. Cameron Hurst
http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_hurst_0501.htm

Required materials/supplies: Printouts of articles or access to computers

Vocabulary: Bushido – The way of the warrior; samurai – Japanese warrior class; Confucius – Chinese philosopher whose analects form the basis of Confucianism; Buddhism – religion that originated in India and made its way east through China to Japan

Procedure:

- Students will be assigned required readings to be completed ahead of time. The instructor will begin with an overview of medieval Japanese history highlighting the rise and fall of the Samurai. (The amount of time needed for this will vary based on the course and how much Japanese history has already been covered).
- The class will offer reactions to the excerpts from the Tale of the Heike comparing its portrayal of the samurai and their values to that offered by Segal's history.
- Discuss passages from the Hagakure. Elicit interpretations of the Buddhist and Confucian themes found here as well as in the excerpts from the Tale of the Heike. Discuss the values associated with the different works and traditions and especially draw attention to the dates the samurai flourished and the date the Hagakure was written.
- Introduce the concept of bushido and the notion of a samurai code as conceived by Nitobe Inazo.
- Divide class into groups with each group responsible for introducing different scholarly response/perspective to Bushido to the rest of the class followed by a discussion of the different perspectives.
- Conclude with a discussion of how the notion of bushido influences the way we think about the samurai, Japanese culture, and/or Japanese ethics today and what conclusions we can draw about these topics in light of our readings and discussions.

Assessment/evaluation:

Student understanding and comprehension can be evaluated in the form of a reflective essay. Sample questions below:

- a. What is Bushido? Where and when did this notion originate? Explain the controversy surrounding the notion of Bushido as discussed by modern historians and scholars of Japan. What conclusions about samurai ethics might be drawn in light of this controversy and what we know about medieval Japanese history? Explain your answers.
- b. Offer an overview of some of the key themes in Buddhism and Confucianism. How are these themes illustrated in the excerpts from Japanese literature such as the Tale of the Heike and the Hagakure? What conclusions might we draw about Japanese values in light of these texts? Explain your answers.

Additional activities might ask students to connect samurai history, values, and literature to other components of Japanese culture including artistic images of the samurai, performance arts such as Noh theatre, or tea ceremony rituals. This could serve as the basis of additional class sessions or individual research projects depending on the class and scope of material covered.