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Ages 7–10

Behind The Perfect Sword

Young Michio is apprenticed to the master swordsmith. He watches and learns not only the skills to make a fine sword, but also lessons in humility, hard work, and compassion—elements of Bushido, the samurai code of honor. When he and Sensei create a sword that rivals all others, warriors from around Japan come to claim ownership of it. But only one can be worthy.

“To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage.” — Confucius

The Warrior Class

During the Tokugawa period, the warrior class, or samurai, formed only seven percent of Japan’s population. They were easily identified by the characteristic “topknot” hairstyle and the carrying of two swords. Law forbade other classes to dress as samurai or to carry swords, because distinction among the statuses of warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants was strictly enforced.

The Tokugawa Period

The Tokugawa Period from 1603 to 1867 was a peaceful time in Japan. The landholding class, or daimyo, was the most powerful class and ruled over the other classes in their territories. The samurai worked for the daimyo to defend their property and to collect taxes from the nearby farmers. Complete loyalty to one’s daimyo was demanded from samurai, even if that meant leaving one’s own family.

The Code of the Warrior Class

The Japanese word *bushido* refers to the ancient code of conduct for the samurai developed in the sixteenth century. Bushido combined the ethics of Confucius, an ancient Chinese philosopher, and Yamaga Takasuke, a Japanese military strategist during the Tokugawa period. A samurai was expected not only to excel in combat and defense, but also to serve as a role model for the lower classes by being “the perfect gentleman.” Below are the seven ethics of bushido.



- Gensei: Using good judgment
- Yuuki: Courage
- Jingi: Kindness
- Sonkei: Respect
- Seijitsu: Honesty
- Meiro: Honor
- Chuugi: Loyalty



Symbolism



Tigers represent courage and are also a symbol of samurai. A tiger represents Katsuo, the warrior, because tigers are ferocious, brave, and strong, but not necessarily wise. In Chinese philosophy, the tiger fights with brute power, unlike the dragon, which is skilled and fights with intelligence.



The fan, which represents Lord Toda, symbolizes flexibility, tenderness, and beauty. On the screen behind Lord Toda and on his clothing are cherry blossoms. Fallen cherry blossoms represent samurai and the short lives they lead.



Oak Tree

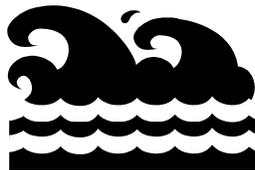
The oak tree symbolizes Kenshin, the ronin. The oak tree is strong, rigid, and deeply rooted. Many wooded weapons in Japanese martial arts are made with oak because of its density and strength. However, unlike bamboo, during a storm an oak tree can be uprooted and overturned because of its rigidity. That which makes it strong also makes it weak. It is unyielding and inflexible, much like the ronin himself.



Bamboo

Bamboo is symbolic of endurance and strength. The joints represent hardships, which build character and also give people the strength to withstand strong winds without breaking. It is very balanced. Takeshi's name comes from the Japanese word *take*, which can mean warrior or bamboo.

Water



Water is symbolic of purity. The bamboo fountain in the first scene represents the purity of the perfect sword and the sword's strength. This garden scene is based on a zen style garden, representing the calm and clarity Masa Sensei has as a person and a master. If you look closely at the screen behind Sensei and Michio, you can see that the trees behind Sensei are fully grown and high atop a mountain. The trees behind Michio are mere shrubs and lower, nearer the river. This represents their differences in skill and maturity.