

OBJECTIVE

To use reading, discussion, and visual thinking strategies to explore the role played by swords in Japanese trade and cultural exchange during the Medieval era.

STANDARDS

Historical Analysis Concepts: Evidence, Cause and Consequence (see link)

History-Social Science Content Standard: WH7.5.1 Discuss the significance of Japan's proximity to China and Korea and the intellectual, linguistic, religious, and philosophical influences of those countries on Japan.

Common Core Reading and Writing Standard(s): RH 1) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources. RH 2) determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions. WHST 1b) Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.

MATERIALS

Museum Artifact:

Unknown craftsman. [Short sword](#) (*wakizashi*) and [Long sword](#) (*katana*) with blade mountings. Japan, Muromachi period (1333–1573), forged and tempered steel, sharkskin, black lacquer, gold on bronze. From the Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Supplemental Sources:

Text: "Trade in pre-modern Japan," Andrea Horbinski (UC Berkeley: 2017), adapted from Charlotte von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea* (2006).

Table: "Exports from Japan to China in 1453," adapted from Charlotte von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea* (2006).

Text and Images: Chaddha, Rima and Audrey Resutek. "Making a Masterpiece." *Secrets of the Samurai Sword*. NOVA. 2007. [URL: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/samurai/swor-nf.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/samurai/swor-nf.html)

Text: From "Samurai Martial Culture and Their Valued Sword." Japanese Sword Society of Hawaii. 2011.
URL: <http://jssh.org/samuraiculture.html>

Text and Images: Martin, Paul. "Japanese Sword Fittings Showcase the Beauty of Impermanence." *Japan Forward*. 23 Sept. 2017. URL: <https://japan-forward.com/japanese-swords-fittings-showcase-the-beauty-of-impermanence/>

"Japanese Sword: How to Know if a Tsuka Is good or bad." *Tozando*. 30 May, 2017. Accessed 26 March, 2018.
URL: <https://weblog.tozando.com/japanese-sword-how-to-know-if-a-tsuka-is-good-or-bad/>

PROCEDURE

Jigsaw Activity: What role did swords play in Medieval Japanese trade and cultural exchange?

Divide class into 4 “Expert Groups:”

1. **The History of Japanese Trade**
2. **The Making of Japanese Swords**
3. **The Cultural Significance of Japanese Swords**
4. **The Decoration of Japanese Swords**

Note: The groups can do their readings the night before as homework, so you can save time and start the class with the small Expert Group discussions, rather than taking class time to read.

Group 1: History of Japanese Trade and the Role of Swords

Part A: Reading and Discussion

Source: “Trade in pre-modern Japan,” Andrea Horbinski (UC Berkeley: 2017).

Context: We’ve seen in our studies that Japan acquired many important products and ideas from China and Korea. These products and ideas came to Japan primarily through trade. The following reading gives a general description of how that trade developed.

Directions: In your small group, read and annotate the provided source. Then discuss the prompt below.

Trade in Pre-modern Japan: An Overview

After it reorganized itself on the Chinese model, the Japanese state took part in tributary exchanges with China from the seventh to the ninth centuries CE: the tributary system and the exchange of embassies between states on the Korean peninsula were ways for the Japanese state to acquire luxury goods, for which they traded small handmade goods or small quantities of metal. The Chinese court saw the tribute system as an acknowledgement of China’s cultural superiority. The goods that foreign governments gave to the imperial court were expressions of submission to the Chinese emperor. The Japanese state, however, engaged in the tribute system because it was the easiest way to conduct trade and to acquire goods to which they would not otherwise have had access, not because they saw themselves as inferior or subordinate to China.

Not coincidentally, once merchants from the continent and the peninsula began making regular trips to Japan, the embassies to the Chinese court stopped, and while the Japanese state claimed the right to regulate and to conduct trade with foreign, principally Chinese merchants, powerful aristocrats increasingly began conducting foreign trade without court approval.

In this period, Japan imported raw materials for perfumes and medicines, as well as rare textiles and Chinese ceramics, particularly celadons and porcelain, both directly from China and via the Korean peninsula. Japan also

imported Chinese books, which were essential to Japanese culture, along with small amounts of furs, bamboo, and exotic animals. For exports, Japan--which was a notable metal producer before the 18th century--sent out gold, metals, sulfur, and pearls, as well as paper, construction wood, mother-of-pearl items such as high-quality lacquerware, and fans and swords.

After this came an era of free trade in the 12th to 14th centuries, when the imperial court lost what control it had over trade and when Japanese people went out to begin trading in their own right in large numbers for the first time. Some of them became the first Japanese pirates, who seem to have preyed particularly on the coasts of the Korean peninsula. In this era, Japan also began importing large quantities of Chinese metal currency as a commodity rather than as a medium of exchange; although people did sometimes use Chinese money to settle payments, rice and cloth remained the primary forms of currency. After the 13th century, tea also became an increasingly common import, and by the mid-13th century, Japanese agents had entirely taken over the China trade, even as the Kamakura *bakufu* (Japanese military government) was unable to exert control over trade throughout the archipelago. The late 14th to 16th centuries saw the growth of the economy and trade within Japan, as well as the emergence of what was in fact a free market in the forms of merchant cooperatives, periodic markets, and wholesalers.

Discussion: In your small group, decide on the three most important developments in Japanese trade during this period. Be prepared to share these notes with your classmates later.

1.

2.

3.

Go on to Part B.

Group 1, Part B: DATA ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

Exports from Japan to China in 1453

Source: “Exports from Japan to China in 1453,” adapted from Charlotte von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea* (2006).

Context: Information organized into charts and tables provides easy access to evidence. This chart helps us understand the value of selected Japanese trade goods (including swords) to the Chinese mainland.

Directions: Determine the value of the listed trade goods (you may use a calculator).

Exports from Japan to China in 1453

Products	Quantity	Value per Unit in China, calculated in coins*	Total Value
Sapanwood (lbs.)	106,000	70	
Sulfur (lbs.)	364,400	50	
Copper Ore (lbs.)	152,000	60	
Long Swords	417	6,000	
Short Swords	9,483	6,000	
Fans	250	figure unknown	
Gilt Bronze Pitchers	figure unknown	4,000	
Gold Lacquerware	643	600	

*While the value of trade goods are given in “coins,” actual trade between Japan and the mainland was usually in the form of goods exchanged for other goods and not cash transactions.

Discussion: What does this table reveal about the value of Japanese swords at this time?

Group 2: The Making of Japanese Swords

Directions: In your small group, read through the printout of "[Making a Masterpiece](#)" (or read as an interactive resource on computer). Afterwards, discuss and jot down notes for the following question. Be ready to share your insights with your classmates later.

Source: Chaddha, Rima and Audrey Resutek. "Making a Masterpiece." *Secrets of the Samurai Sword*. NOVA. 2007. URL: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/samurai/swor-nf.html>

Discussion: What were the three most important reasons why Japanese sword-making was so rigorous and time-consuming? Be prepared to share your insights with your classmates later.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Group 3: The Cultural Significance of Samurai Swords

Directions: In your small group, read and annotate the following essay and then discuss the prompt below.

Source : From "Samurai Martial Culture and Their Valued Sword" Japanese Sword Society of Hawaii. 2011. URL: <http://jssh.org/samuraiculture.html>

One of the most important cultural and even spiritual aspects of the samurai was the sword. They treasured it even more than their own lives. If one were to mistakenly do the wrong thing with another's sword or even their own, a duel would take place with no verbal challenge made. John Saris in 1605, as quoted by Draeger and Smith, reports of the Tokugawa period: "That whosoever draws a weapon in anger, although he does no harm therewith, hee is presently cut in peeces: and doing but small hurt, not only themselves are so executed, but their whole generation. (sic)" This quote means that if a samurai were to unsheathe their sword in public, another swordsman would take that as a challenge and a duel will commence.

There is a lot of etiquette of the Japanese sword. How to wear it, how to place it upon your wall for decoration, and, the one I will be exploring more here, how to use it in front of other swordsmen. A serious breath of sword etiquette was the striking of one's scabbard, called *saya-ate*. Basically, this is the knocking of one's scabbard against another person or some object as one moves about in the streets. Here, especially if the scabbard of one's sword hits another's, the one that has been hit takes it personally and feels that the other has no respect for him and his sword.

The warrior considered his sword as a physical part of his soul. Any insult done by someone to his sword, such as touching it without permission, was considered a personal insult to the owner. Any transgression whatsoever of the

rules of etiquette towards the long sword will more likely be interpreted as an insult to the owner's personal honor. Once again, if this happened, it would result in a clash with personal honor at stake.

You can tell the classical warrior took much care and pride in his sword by the way he would clean it. One of the reasons a warrior doesn't want anyone to touch their sword is that when a person touches the naked blade with their hands, the oil on their hand or fingers will make the blade rust if not taken care of promptly. With such care, it's expected that the warrior gave such consideration in cleaning the blade. The owner would remove all traces of oil on the blade by first wiping it with *washi*, a soft handmade fibrous paper that could not scratch the high finish of the metal. After that, he would dust the blade with *uchiko*, a fine powder that absorbed all minute traces of oil and served as the mildest of abrasives to give luster to the blade. After that, he would wipe the blade again with a *washi* to remove any traces of the powder left.

The classical warrior regarded their customs of etiquette of the sword as very serious, to be respected and obeyed to the letter. As noted above, if a samurai failed to comply with the set of rules placed onto the sword, they would end up in a fight that may cost them their lives. A protocol that they must learn never to breach.

With the use of the sword as the main weapon in Japan, the Japanese have developed many styles of swordsmanship in how to properly fight with them. It wasn't until the fifteenth century, during the Sengoku era, that we have reliable evidence to prove that the *bushi* (the martial arts class) practiced swordsmanship, and that they included the body of rigorous ethics. Various terms can be used to describe these two major forms of swordsmanship, but it is convenient to categorize them as being either *kenjutsu* or *iai-jutsu*. However, the art of swordsmanship wasn't only learning to kill people with the sword, but it also was a sort of spiritual training. Draeger and Warner describe it perfectly:

It is true that classical combative swordsmanship in Japan was originally taught to protect the individual warrior so that he could better defend a specific social nexus. Martial strength is obviously implied by a man armed with a sword, but the use of the sword for wanton destruction has always been genuinely discouraged.

The sword is to be used only in the spirit of *gokoku taihei*: to 'defend the great peace.'the great peace.'

Discussion: As a group, decide the three most important ways in which a samurai treated his sword as if it were his soul:

1.

2.

3.

Group 4: The Decoration of Japanese Swords

Directions: In your small group, read and annotate the following sources (either as a printouts or online) and then discuss the prompt below.

Vocab Notes:

tsuba: the sword guard that keeps the owner's hand from slipping onto the blade

tsuka: the sword's handle

menuki: the handle ornament

fuchigane: metal decorative piece between the tsuka wrapping and the tsuba

Sources:

Martin, Paul. "Japanese Sword Fittings Showcase the Beauty of Impermanence." *Japan Forward*. 23 Sept., 2017. Accessed 26 March, 2018.

URL: <https://japan-forward.com/japanese-swords-fittings-showcase-the-beauty-of-impermanence/>

"Japanese Sword: How to Know if a Tsuka Is good or bad." *Tozando*. 30 May, 2017. Accessed 26 March, 2018.

URL: <https://weblog.tozando.com/japanese-sword-how-to-know-if-a-tsuka-is-good-or-bad/>

Discussion: How did the decoration of Japanese swords help to convey important messages and add to their value? Jot down notes/examples and be ready to share these with your classmates later.

Note to Teacher: After "Expert Groups" have finished their discussions, reorganize the class into "Jigsaw Groups," with every group containing at least one member from each "Expert Group."

Each Jigsaw Group will do the following activities:

ARTIFACT ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

Inquiry Question: *What might have been the appeal of Japanese swords for consumers in China and other countries? (Why might people want to buy these swords?)*

Source: Unknown craftsman, Short sword (*wakizashi*) and Long sword (*katana*) with blade mountings, Japan, Muromachi period (1333–1573).

Materials: Forged and tempered steel, sharkskin, black lacquer, gold on bronze.

Context: We are examining images of two Japanese *samurai* swords, sheathed and unsheathed. We are considering them not as weapons of war but as trade goods and works of art.

Inquiry Question: *What might have been the appeal of Japanese swords for consumers in China and other countries?*

Artifact:

Creator:

Possible Users:

Place and Time:

Observe the swords carefully. What do you see? Can you make any connections to what you learned in your Expert Groups? List or sketch specific details.

Considering our research in our Expert Groups, why would Japanese swords be seen as valuable goods for trade? (Include at least one insight from each expert in your Jigsaw Group).

Using Artifacts to Understand the Past - Japanese Swords



Unsheathed Sword: Unknown craftsman, Short sword (*wakizashi*) and Long sword (*katana*) with blade mountings, Japan, Muromachi period (1333–1573).



Sheathed Sword: Unknown craftsman, Short sword (*wakizashi*) and Long sword (*katana*) with blade mountings, Japan, Muromachi period (1333–1573), forged and tempered steel, sharkskin, black lacquer, gold on bronze. From the Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Click on website image for close-Up view:

[http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:7760](http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:7760)

Directions: In your Jigsaw Groups, share the information you learned in your Expert Groups to answer the following questions together. Wherever possible, share tables, images, or examples to help support your answers.

Comprehension Questions

1. <i>Why did Japan trade with the mainland?</i>	
2. <i>Who conducted trade between Japan and the mainland?</i>	
3. <i>What goods were traded between Japan and China?</i>	
4. <i>Based on data in the chart, what were the most valuable trade goods for the Japanese?</i>	

Interpretive Questions

5. <i>What can the prices of Japanese swords tell us about the demand for swords?</i>	
6. <i>What values or ideals might have traveled with the swords that were traded?</i>	
7. <i>What might the value of Japanese exports mean for Japanese access to imports?</i>	

DATA ANALYSIS ACTIVITY (Key)

Exports from Japan to China in 1453

Source: “Exports from Japan to China in 1453,” adapted from Charlotte von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea* (2006).

Context: Information organized into charts and tables provides easy access to evidence. This chart helps us understand the value of selected Japanese trade goods (including swords) to the Chinese mainland.

Directions: After examining the tables, and determining the value of trade goods, respond to the questions.

Exports from Japan to China in 1453

Products	Quantity	Value per Unit in China, calculated in coins*	Total Value
Sapanwood (lbs.)	106,000	70	7,420,000
Sulfur (lbs.)	364,400	50	18,220,000
Copper Ore (lbs.)	152,000	60	9,120,000
Long Swords	417	6,000	2,502,000
Short Swords	9,483	6,000	56,898,000
Fans	250	figure unknown	
Gilt Bronze Pitchers	figure unknown	4,000	
Gold Lacquerware	643	600	385,800

*While the value of trade goods are given in “coins”, actual trade between Japan and the mainland was usually in the form of goods exchanged for other goods and not cash transactions

Analyzing an Artifact (key)

Inquiry Question: *What might have been the appeal of Japanese swords for consumers in China and other countries?*

Artifact: Short sword (wakizashi) and long swords (katana) forged and tempered steel, sheathed and unsheathed

Creator: unknown craftsman

Possible Users: samurai warriors, Japanese merchants, wealthy aristocrats

Place and Time: Japan. Muromachi period (1333-1573)

Observe the swords carefully. What do you see? Can you make any connections to what you learned in your Expert Groups? List or sketch specific details.

One sword shorter than the other	decorated handle—tsuka covering is well-wrapped
Blades curved	materials include gold and bronze = valuable
Single edged	sheaths shiny, black and white, dotted
Pointed, polished	blue cord tied around
Grooved along side	black cap on end

Considering our research into trade between Japan and mainland Asia, why would Japanese swords be seen as valuable goods for trade? (possible responses)

Japanese swords were high quality weapons. They would be very effective in combat, doing great damage to an enemy. The two lengths could be used in different fighting situations. The swords were beautiful examples of fine craftsmanship and might be considered artworks in themselves. The decorations on Japanese sword fittings often conveyed values and beliefs important to the samurai. All of these reasons made Japanese swords desirable products. Buyers were willing to pay high prices for them.

Directions: Use the information from both the text and data chart to answer the questions.

Comprehension Questions (key)

1. <i>Why did Japan trade with the mainland?</i>	...to obtain luxury goods and other items they otherwise wouldn't have had access
2. <i>Who conducted trade between Japan and the mainland?</i>	first the Japanese state, then powerful Japanese aristocrats later merchant cooperatives and wholesalers
3. <i>What goods were traded between Japan and China?</i>	(imports) raw materials for perfumes and medicines, textiles, ceramics, Chinese books, furs, bamboo, exotic animals (exports) gold, metals, sulfur, pearls, paper, construction wood, mother of pearl items such as lacquerware, also fans and swords
4. <i>Based on data in the chart, what were the most valuable trade goods for the Japanese?</i>	short swords

Interpretive Questions (potential answers)

5. <i>Who would likely buy and use these traded goods?</i>	soldiers, military suppliers, wealthy aristocrats
6. <i>What values or ideals might have traveled with the swords that were traded?</i>	respect for craftsmanship and artistry that went into making each sword; the way swords symbolize the owner's soul; the way the art displayed on the sword might convey philosophical beliefs (such the transitory nature of life)
7. <i>What might the value of Japanese exports mean for Japanese access to imports?</i>	The high value of Japanese swords as exports meant that Japan could import a great many Chinese products