Course description and objectives

In this class we will survey the shifting ideals and diverse realities of samurai as they changed throughout history, exploring samurai from the perspectives of status, social and military activity, samurai politics, gender, values and identity. Samurai are the class of elite warriors in Japan who existed from the tenth century until the mid-1870's when their status was abolished. Over this time their roles, livelihoods and ideals changed in profound ways. A samurai of the year 1200 would not have recognized a samurai of 1700 as having the same dress, weapons and armor, sources of income, personal and professional values or daily lifestyle. Their ideas of honorable behavior would have been very different. The samurai era of political power began with the Kamakura era (1192-1333) when they shared rule over much of Japan with the Kyoto aristocracy and Buddhist temples. The next era was the Ashikaga era (1336-1573) during which time the authority of aristocrats and the old temples significantly declined. The samurai emerged dominant but usually at war amongst themselves. This is the most typically “samurai” era in modern imagination; including the Era of Warring States (1467-1590) and Unification Period (1568-1615) which are the setting for many modern samurai movies. The third and last of the samurai political regimes was the Tokugawa era (1600-1867), when (excepting the beginning and the end of the period) there was no war with foreigners or between samurai lords in Japan. During this time samurai retained military ideals but became bureaucrats and just-in-case warriors with plenty of time on their hands.

Each of the new eras had its own set of samurai ideals, but in each of the eras the ideals of the day had about as much relation to actual samurai behavior as the 65MPH speed limit signs on our California highways tell you how fast people are driving. There are many popular images of samurai that are mythic and based on exceptional cases or not based in any reality at all. These myths--pretending ideals are actual behavior--are both ancient and modern. One of the aims of this class is to distinguish between myth and reality, understand the relationship between ideals and behavior, and to help you learn how to evaluate information and historical sources for what they can tell you. Many of the readings and some of the lectures will focus on the experiences of individual samurai so you can see how they lived their lives, and understand samurai through experiences rather than prescriptions and ideals.

Requirements and Grading

Midterm 25%; Final exam 35%; Maps, timeline and small assignments 40%.

Late Assignment Policy: All assignments will be deducted 10 points per day late down to -50 points. An assignment turned in after class time is considered one day late. The next day is also considered one day late and each day ends at 5:00 PM. Cannot turn in on Saturday or Sunday but each of these days counts 10 points off. All late assignments must be turned in as paper copy to me directly or slid under my office door at HSSB 4228 M-F by 5:00 PM.

Required texts (two copies each of Conlan and Ikegami on 2 hr reserve in library)
Selected articles and documents posted on the Gauchospace class page.

Weekly Readings and Class Plan

Week 1 Beginnings to 1200
M April 1 Origins of Samurai (clip from “Shin Heike Monogatari”)
W April 3 Genpei Wars and Kamakura origins

Here is a 9 minute youtube video that presents the history of yabusame, mounted archery. It's interpretation is a bit precious, but it is still a good intro.  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di8c7FZJgUA&feature=related

Week 2
Kamakura 1192-1333
M April 8  Kamakura Government and society  MAP DUE (5%)
W April 10  Samurai Warfare: The Mongol Invasions

*Thomas Conlan, In Little Need of Divine Intervention. pp. 1-200, 254-275,
view the interactive maps at http://learn.bowdoin.edu/asian-studies/mongol-invasions/

Assignment for April 15 write two pages on this week’s reading: In first paragraph identify Conlan’s main argument (pp. 254-275) concerning the Mongol Invasions and note a couple points of his evidence and/or reasoning. Then pick two brief selections of the Takezaki scroll text (pp. 23-200) that help you understand samurai warfare better and explain what they help you understand and why.

Week 3
Kamakura end and Muromachi 1336-1567
M April 15 Class discussion of Takezaki Suenaga text  TWO PAGER DUE (10%)
W April 17 Muromachi period up to Onin war

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 78-134

Here is an 8 minute youtube video that presents a brief history and description of samurai armor.  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUWmaLnMIXE

Week 4
Warring States Era 1467-1590
M April 22 Daimyo realms and castle towns overview
W April 24 Hojo clan and domain

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 135-148

Week 5
Unification Period 1568-1615
M April 29 Unification: Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, Ieyasu
W May 1  Unification Discussion: Fukutomi Han’emon’s and Mistress An’s memoirs TWO PAGER DUE (10%)

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 151-194.

Assignment for May 1: Based on the two memoirs of Fukutomi Han’emon and Mistress An. What about Han’emon’s life surprised you the most? Why? What examples did you see of the importance of kinship ties to samurai, and how do they compare with loyalty to one’s lord? What are the jobs of women during a castle siege?
Week 6  Edo Period Government, 1600-1868
M May 6   MIDTERM EXAM  (25%)
W May 8   Edo Government

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 197-222

Week 7  Samurai in the Edo Period
M May 13  Arms and Letters in a Peacetime World: Asahi Monzaemon and Mori Yoshiki
W May 15  The Ako Incident  TWO PAGER DUE (10%)

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 223-298.
Assignment for May 15: Answer the following questions based on the Ikegami and Sato readings:
1. Identify some of the arguments among the 47 samurai over the choice to kill Kira Yoshinaka. In terms of their goals, why do they disagree? Then identify some of the arguments of outsiders judging their behavior and the punishment of the 47. Evaluate the comments on the good and bad of the retainers’ behavior in terms of the goals and ideals of the commentators. What tensions exist in the ideals for samurai?

Week 8  Samurai Romance and Families
M May 20  Youthful Loves
W May 22  Teshima Shō Murders Her Lover

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 299-328.

Week 9  Things Fall Apart
M May 27  HOLIDAY MEMORIAL DAY
W May 29  From Perry towards Tokugawa Collapse  TIMELINE DUE (5%)

*Ikegami, Taming, pp. 329-378.

Week 10  The End of the Samurai
M June 3  Meiji Restoration and Disestablishing the Samurai
W June 5  Post-Restoration Samurai Rebellions


FINAL EXAM: FRIDAY June 14  12:00-3:00 PM