

Samurai Japan

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I teach a general introduction to Japanese Civilization and am always on the lookout for good educational videos. Since a video on the samurai would be a welcomed addition to our departmental collection, I was eager to acquire this one distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences under their Ancient Civilizations series. Whereas the video in question contains numerous interesting features, it is unfortunately flawed by misinformation and carelessness.

On the positive side, the video offers a wonderful collage of images culled from woodblock prints and picture scrolls depicting samurai engaged in the business of their calling—either galloping off to battle or preening in their armor. In addition, viewers are treated to careful footage of museum-piece armor, swords, and helmets. Interviews with Professors Andrew Gerstle and Ian Nish, and the narrative that they provide about the samurai's cult of honor and social position, are invaluable. Unfortunately, the segments featuring these Japanese scholars are far outweighed by those devoted to Ross Iannoccaro, president of the National Jujitsu Kumite Council. Mr. Iannoccaro provides much information about the samurai weaponry, and the footage of him engaging an unnamed colleague in demonstration battles will no doubt entertain students. One wished more care had been given, however, to insuring that Mr. Iannoccaro pronounced his terms correctly. "Yoroi," or samurai armor, for example, becomes "yarai" and is repeated to the point of annoyance.

Mr. Iannoccaro is not the only one guilty of mispronunciation, and one can tolerate a certain amount in a video narrated by the nonspecialist. But greater attention should have been given to insure that narrator Derek Hobson correctly pronounced such essential words as "samurai"—which becomes a queerly affected "sam-YOU-rai." This carelessness exceeds pronunciation. Dr. Gerstle's name is misspelled in the segment that introduces him as "Grestle," and more annoying is the gross misrepresentation of facts—which ranges from the petty to the egregious.

When the subject of Japanese architecture is introduced, for example, we are told that the Japanese favored paper-thin walls in their architectural designs so as to ward off the devastation that heavier constructions would have produced in the many

earthquakes that ravage the region. Where, one wonders, is footage of the many magnificent castles that are so often associated with the samurai? Rather, the video lingers over a garden in some undisclosed location. The building featured therein reveals the eclectic blend of Chinese and Japanese architectural styles typical of the Orientalist taste—with delicately curving roofs, moon-shaped windows, and filigreed balustrades. A bright vermilion bridge arches gently to the side of the pavilion and seems to captivate the eye of the camera—as we are brought back to this bridge time and again throughout the video. To complement this choice of representative architecture, the accompanying background music by Paul Farrer—featured throughout most of the video—is itself a blend of Chinese and Japanese instruments.

Starting in the mythical age, when we are told the Japanese islands were formed by the tears of a goddess, we race past the Kofun era—"when great tumuli were built along the coast"—stop briefly in the Heian (pronounced High Yan) and Civil War periods (where more focus is given the Western-imported cannons than anything else), and finally arrive at the Tokugawa era. While Chinese-inspired music tinkles in the background, we are informed that samurai women bore the brunt of the harshly rigid social system. "Footbinding, the deliberate breaking of bones leading to painful deformation of feet, was one of the indignities suffered by women [in Japan] right up to the turn of the century." As the camera pans over a woodblock image of a courtesan, her delicate toes peeking beneath her kimono, we are reminded that "small feet were believed to be more beautiful but binding masked a more sinister motive, one of actually constricting women's movements."

From this sinister behavior we are whisked, via our red bridge, to World War II where the cult of the samurai devolves into a brutal and cruel regime. Treated to actual footage of soldiers on the march and crashing kamikaze jets, we are provided a succinct summary of the war and the way Emperor Hirohito appealed to samurai instinct in his engagement in it. But rather than being shown footage of the Emperor when his name is invoked, we are shown another bespectacled, moustached man who looks much more sinister than the meek-visaged Hirohito.

According to the testimonial that accompanies it in the Films for the Humanities and Sciences catalog, the *School Library Journal* lauds *Samurai Japan* as "an extremely useful tool in world cultures and history classes." Indeed, with its rich panoply of swords and armor, the video might have been quite useful. But, with so many errors, I would not recommend showing it to a class unless one is prepared to distribute an errata sheet. ■

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