By Mohammed Abbasi

There is an old tale that is told in Japan called In the Land of the Rising Sun. "Go! And may prosperity attend thy dynasty, and may it, like heaven and Earth, endure for ever." With this command, the sun god Amaterasu sent her grandson Ninigi to rule over Japan. Ninigi descended from the heavens, but he only stayed on the island, and left it up to his grandson Jimmu to fulfill Amaterasu's wish. Jimmu journeyed to the main island of Honshu, where he became the firs emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun.

This tale of Japan's beginning is related in the Nihon Shoki, or Chronicles of Japan. Ever since the 700s when the story was set down, Japan's many clans have placed themselves under the reign of an imperial family, who claimed to trace its origins back to Jimmu. This dynasty founded a long lasting capital in Nara, which drew its inspiration from China. Earlier, the Japanese court had used a Chinese model for a series of political reforms known as the Taika, which was aimed at strengthening the central government.

Japan did indeed benefit from Chinese thought and technology in the areas of medicine, art, mathematics agriculture, which was brought by Korean and Chinese immigrants. From Korean traders, the Japanese also got a new religion, Buddhism, which went from India to China and then to Korea. According to Nihon-Shoki, a sixth-century Korean ruler had sent the Japanese court a Buddhist image and scriptures and a personal message: "This doctrine is amongst all doctrines the most excellent."

The Japanese did not adopt the Chinese way of life trustingly-in the Japanese court, for example, there would be no periodic changes of dynasty because of a loss of heavenly mandate, as there were in China. Each Japanese Emperor was chosen from the original imperial family, who were considered the divine descendants of the sun goddess. But Japanese emperors, especially after the Nara period, were usually political figureheads. A member of another powerful family controlled important matters of state. During the Heian period, which, which began in 794 and was marked by the move of the capital to Kyoto, that powerful family was the Fujiwara, who acted as supervisors to the emperors.

Outside Kyoto, in the country side, people fought to protect their lands from invaders. The warrior class-including the aristocratic fighters called samurai-grew stronger as the Heian period wore on. Japan's urban aristocracy lost control of the at the end of the 12th century, when two powerful military clans, the Taira and the Minamoto leader Yoritomo established a military government known as the Kamakura bakufu and in 1192 became shogun of Japan.
The samurai of Japan were an impressive sight in lacquered iron armor, armed with sword, dagger, bow. They pledged loyalty to their daimyo, or local lords, and to the shogun and willingly fought for honor, glory, and valuables. But the peaceful first decades of the bakufu offered little opportunity for battle and advancement. That changed in 1274 when Khublai Khan launched an invasion of Japan. Samurai rose to

the challenge, racing to Hakata Bay, off Kyushu, to meet Mongol ships. With the help of typhoon winds, the Japanese forced back the invaders.

A shortage of land to reward its vassals for such service threatened the bakufu's stability. And in the 1330's, Emperor Go-Daigo's forces took over. But Go-Daigo was later forced to flee Kyoto when he was by warlord Ashikaga Takauji at Minato River. While Go-Daigo set up a court in the south, Takauji placed a second emperor on Kyoto's throne. Civil War raged until 1392, when the southern emperor agreed to step down. In 1467 a battle over shogunal succession led to a century of warfare-a situation that proved beneficial to the economy. Merchants thrived as the daimyo's need for weapons, armor, and the basic necessities rose, and guilds and other organizations formed to safely transport goods.

The samurai were Japan's warrior class for seven centuries. Their name was derived from the Japanese for service, saburau. The samurai emerged as military aristocrats and then as military rulers. involvement in government began in 1156, and from 1160 to 1185 the warrior Taira no Kiyomori dominated affairs at court. In the Gempei War (1180-85) the Taira family was displaced by the Minamoto clan. Yoritomo established the first of the military governments, or Shogunates that dominated political life from 1185 until 1868.

Medieval samurai were generally illiterate, rural landowners who farmed between battles. Some developed the necessary skills for bureaucratic service, but most did not. During the Shogunate of the Tokugawa family (1600-1868) the samurai as a class were transformed into military bureaucrats (civil servants/administrators) and were required to master administrative skills as well as military arts. As hereditary warriors they were governed by a code of ethics--bushido, meaning "the way of the "--that defined service and conduct appropriate to their status as elite members of Japanese society.

During the autumn of 1274, Takezaki Suenaga rode hard for Hakata bay on the northwest coast of the island of Kyushu. A large armada of invaders from China and Korea was headed for the coast, and they wanted the Japanese to bow to Khublai. Since 1268 the emperor of Northern China had been attempting, through a series of many threats, to make the same kind of lord-vassal authority as he did in Korea and other neighboring nations. After six years of urging and threatening the Japanese, Khan wanted to attack Japan. By November of 1274, word had reached Suenaga's province in Southern Kyushu that two small Japanese islands to the north west of Kyushu, Tsushima and Iki, had fallen to a Mongol-Chinese invasion force. The Japanese were badly outnumbered. According to them, 1,500 strong enemies in 800 vessels were going against the few hundred defenders of Iki and Tsushima.

Hearing that these barbaric enemies were now for Kyushu's Hakata Bay, Suenaga and other warriors prepared for battle. They blackened their teeth, applied powder and perfume, and carefully tucked their hair into a top knot. Japanese warriors who lost at battle were normally beheaded, and careful grooming ensured that even in death their dignity was intact! The fighters then gathered their weapons-a bow, a dagger, and one or two swords. They also included deerskin, typically used to sit on or to hold one's place at archery practice. In war, the skin served as a seat for a warrior about to be executed.

A warrior's first loyalty was to his overlord; it was his duty to die for that lord if necessary-even if it's suicide to avoid being captured. In exchange for loyal service to the land owners who hired the men for their private armies, the warriors received grants of land or the right to be stewards of small estates. Their way of life-bushido-required a lot of physical hardship, absolute devotion to duty, and bravery in all things. The code represented the ideal samurai, but not all of them were like that. Treachery and cowardice existed among some of the ranks of samurai.

At Hakata Bay, Suenega joined forces with many of his allies who were pushing hard against Khublai and

the invaders. One by one the samurai rode forward to seek out individual enemy warriors of comparable rank for man-to-man combat. Traditionally, a warrior found his match by loudly announcing his family lineage and his official documents or credentials and pairs off an opponent. It was hard for them to slash the enemy on horse, so they would usually get off, pull out the short dagger from their waist, kill the enemy, and finally slash off his head. At the end of a war, the heads would be counted and taken to the overlord as trophies and proof of the samurai's kill.

Unfortunately, the samurai found out that the Mongols did not fight the way they expected. The enemy used fighting tactics that were perfected over the past half century of the Mongols vast conquests throughout Asia. Highly disciplined groups of archers and spearmen executed precise maneuvers to commands that were given by drums. The first samurai who went out on to the battle field to challenge one of the to a one-on-one combat soon found himself dodging streams of poison-tipped arrows. Then he was surrounded and massacred. The samurai had never seen such superior firepower. The short, yet powerful Mongol bows were effective at up to 240 yards, twice the range of the Japanese longbows. And for the first time the Japanese faced gunpowder in the form of catapult-launched projectiles that exploded with a deafening bang, frightening the samurai's horses and burning both the beasts an their riders. Fighting against these unfamiliar tactics, Suenaga and his men fought with all the unmatched courage of the proud Samurai. They gripped their long, sharp swords in both hands, and started to slash the enemies who were about to 'engulf' them. Eventually, (and luckily), a fierce storm began to stir as it grew dark, and the Mongols had to retreat because their boats would have broken over the rocks. Nearly a third of the Mongol fleet was lost, and according to a surviving record, an estimated 13,500 soldiers and drowned.

For the samurai, the Mongol invasions brought about important and lasting changes. First, the warriors had learned about fighting in formation, a practice that eventually spread across Japan. Second, the samurai's dissatisfaction with the bakufu had reached a point of no return. After holding off the Mongols in battle, the warriors did not receive the rewards they deserved, because the military capital of Honshu, or the rulers in Kamakura had gained no other land or other booty to distribute. So the warriors' discontent became contagious, and by the early 14th century, the Kamakura bakufu was a power in decline, and alliances were forming among its enemies in the ranks of provincial warlords and members of Kyoto nobility, as well as the faction-ridden imperial and ex-imperial households.
In 1338, Ashikaga Takauji was made shogun, creating the Ashikaga Shogunate. The Ashikaga reached the height of their power under the third shogun, Yoshimitsu (who ruled from 1368-1394). He controlled the military goals of the Shogunate and ended (1392) the division within the imperial house.

The Shogunate rested on an alliance with local military leaders (shugo), who gradually became powerful regional rulers. The great shugo, however, became more and more involved in the politics of the Shogunate, and by the mid-15th century many had lost control of their provincial bases. Their weakness became clear in the Onin War of 1467-1477. Beginning as a dispute over the Shogunal succession, it turned into a general civil war in which the great shugo exhausted themselves fighting in and around Kyoto, while the provinces fell into the hands of other shugo and eventually under the control of new lords called daimyo. The war effectively destroyed Ashikaga authority. The shogun Yoshimasa (ruled 1440-1473) simply turned his back on the troubles; he retired (1473) to his estate on the outskirts of Kyoto, where he built the Silver Pavilion (Ginkaku) and became the patron of a remarkable artistic flowering.

The Onin War marked the beginning of a century of warfare called the "Epoch of the Warring Country." In the provinces new feudal lords, the Daimyo, arose. Independent of imperial or Shogunal authority, their power was based on military strength. They defined their domains as the area that could be defended from military rivals and land holdings were guaranteed in return for military service. The daimyo concentrated their vassals in castle towns and left the villagers to administer themselves and pay taxes. The castle

towns became market and handicraft industrial centers, and a new style of urban life began to develop. This was the Japan found by the Europeans who began to visit the country after 1543. The Portuguese began trade in 1545, and in 1549 the Jesuit missionary Saint Francis Xavier introduced Roman Catholicism. Christianity conflicted with feudal loyalties, however, and was completely banned after 1639. At that point all Europeans, except the Dutch, were also excluded from Japan.

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