Nebraska Wesleyan University

HIST 4850 Twilight of the Samurai: Early Modern Japan

Catalog

2025-2026

Course Description

The word samurai derives from the verb saburau, meaning "to serve." Whom did Japan's samurai warriors serve, and what made their "services" necessary in the first place? How did samurai become the dominant political figures during Japan's Middle Ages? After the Tokugawa shogunate succeeded in pacifying Japan in the early seventeenth century, how did a social group whose elite status derived from their role as warriors adapt-or fail to adapt-to a long period of peace? These are some of the questions we will seek to answer through our discussion of primary sources and secondary scholarship on Japan's samurai warriors. We will focus on the early modern period, but the seminar provides an overview of the historical development of the samurai dating back to their origins in the tenth century. Once we arrive in the Tokugawa period, we will also take a broader look at a changing Japanese social structure in which commoners-and merchants in particular-began to overtake the samurai. At the end of the semester, we will consider the ideological development of bushid, or the "Way of the Warrior," as an invented tradition that played an important role during Japan's transformation into a modern nation-state. This also counts as an elective for the Modern Language Studies major. HIST 4850 Twilight of the Samurai: Early Modern Japan meets with HIST 3850. The requirements of the courses are the same EXCEPT that a research paper is required for students in 4850.

Archway Curriculum: Essential Connections: Writing Instructive
Archway Curriculum: Integrative Core: Identity Thread

Course Hours

4 hours

Departments

1. History