

Training and Education of *Ashigaru* (Foot Soldiers)

Although *ashigaru* (foot soldiers) was the lowest-ranking samurai, there were some remarkably talented people among them. They were regularly trained and rigorously educated.

Martial Arts

Edo-period (1603–1867) martial arts included sword training (*kenjutsu*), spear training (*sojutsu*), archery (*kyujutsu*), firearm training (*hojutsu*), and numerous other disciplines. As foot soldiers, *ashigaru* were supposed to train and prepare to serve in each of these capacities. However, the Edo period was a time of relative peace, so for most *ashigaru* there was no need to use these skills on the battlefield. Military training thus became a type of “warrior etiquette” for honing the body and mind. This included the daily responsibility of inspecting and caring for one’s armor, since in principle, *ashigaru* were expected to be always battle-ready.

A school called the Kebukan was also established in the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa Prefecture, centered on Kanazawa) for samurai to hone their abilities in the martial arts. While initially this school admitted only the children of higher-ranking samurai families, in later years *ashigaru* children were also permitted to attend.

Displayed in the Shimizu Family House are martial arts’ texts thought to have been used by Edo period *ashigaru* as study material.

Education

In the course of their civil duties, *ashigaru* were often required to sort and handle important documents, as well as perform various financial calculations as part of the economic management of the domain. Therefore, although they were the lowest-ranking samurai, they had to be as educated as samurai of much higher status. This can be seen in the memoir of a samurai from the early eighteenth century, who wrote, “samurai in an era of war might get away with being illiterate, but in a peaceful world this excuse is not acceptable.”

Accordingly, although *ashigaru* were busy with civil duties and their own side jobs, they had to set aside time for education. Dedicating themselves to the study of literature, history, and the poetic

forms of haiku (a poem of seventeen syllables), *kanshi* (a Chinese poetic style), and *waka* (an ancient style of thirty-one syllables), some became quite learned. The sophisticated designs of their gardens and documents they left behind give eloquent testimony to this fact. As in the case of Otsuki Tomomoto (1703–1748), who found great opportunities for advancement through his proposal for repairing the domain's finances in the eighteenth century, this focus on education gave *ashigaru* opportunities to rise above their rank.