

NEW

JAPANESE MYTHS & MONSTERS

DISCOVER THE CURIOUS CRITTERS
AND VENGEFUL SPIRITS OF JAPAN

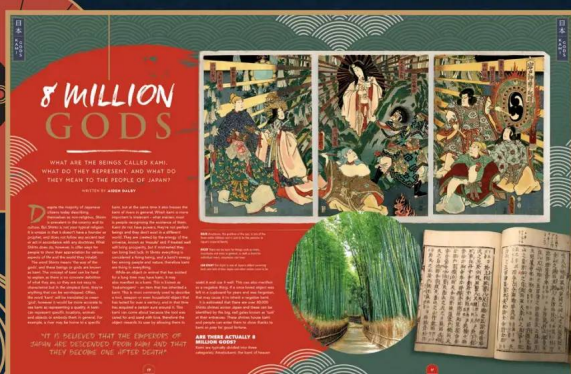
Digital
Edition

FUTURE
FIRST EDITION

LstTpcEysO6QCb+ILkigO=

JAPANESE MYTHS & MONSTERS

DISCOVER THE CURIOUS CRITTERS
AND VENGEFUL SPIRITS OF JAPAN



COUNTLESS KAMI

Delve into the Shinto pantheon of
endless mystical deities



STRANGE CREATURES

Demons? Mythical beasts? What are the
mysterious yōkai of folklore?



GHASTLY GHOULS

Learn about the ghostly supernatural
entities that haunt the nation



21ST CENTURY SAGAS

Explore the modern Japanese legends that
have taken the world by storm

THE MYTHS & MONSTERS OF THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

VENTURE BEYOND THE OUTER LAYERS OF MODERN JAPAN
INTO A TIMELESS WORLD OF ANCIENT BELIEFS, FASCINATING
FOLKLORE AND WEIRD AND WONDERFUL CREATURES

WRITTEN BY PHILIP S KAY

With its futuristic capital city and state-of-the-art technology, at first glance Japan may seem like a country ahead of time. However, behind its modern mask and pristine visage hides a more ancient and mystical land - a curious place created by a fusion of history and legends. This world of myth and folklore is the abode of a bewildering assortment of unique deities, strange creatures and other supernatural entities. As those brave souls who dare to enter will find out, there can be a fine line between gods and monsters in Japan.

AN ANCIENT LAND

The archaeological and cultural record of Japan dates back thousands of years, but unlike other civilisations of similar antiquity that we can track through the millennia, the myriad islands that make up the Japanese archipelago have remained comparatively

free of foreign interference. Apart from a brief period following the end of World War II (1945-52), Japan has never been occupied by another power, and although influenced to some degree by the cultures it has come into contact with, many of the customs, beliefs and traditions of the present stretch all the way back to the civilisation's enigmatic origins.

Japanese mythology owes a great deal to the country's geography and geology. Situated on the Pacific Ring of Fire, three-quarters of the volcanic nation is made up of mountainous terrain, with its loftiest peaks reaching more than 3,000 metres (9,840 feet) into the sky. Its interior is covered in dense, peaceful forests that seem charged with spiritual energy, and a spectacular coastline conceals mysterious coves and caves that offer perfect sanctuaries for reclusive gods and goddesses.

Within such inspiring environments, isolated communities forged relationships with the

outstanding natural features of their local areas and developed stories imbued with the mystery and magic they attributed to them. Over time, oral storytelling traditions ensured that these were passed down over successive generations until they became inseparable from historical reality. Some would eventually form the foundations of the nation's mythical origin narrative, which was chronicled in two key 8th-century compilations. *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720) are beguiling literary records that combine history, legend and folklore. They detail the creation of Japan, recount the adventures of its Shinto deities and legitimise the divine lineage of the nation's imperial family.

THE WAY OF THE GODS

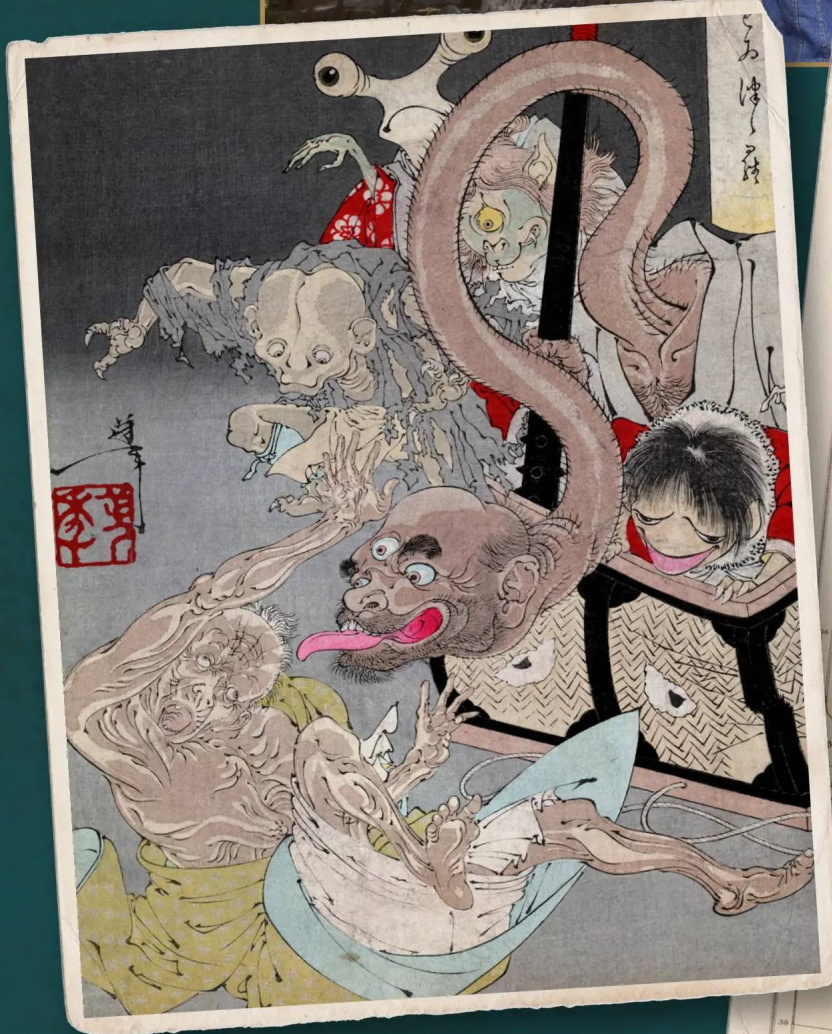
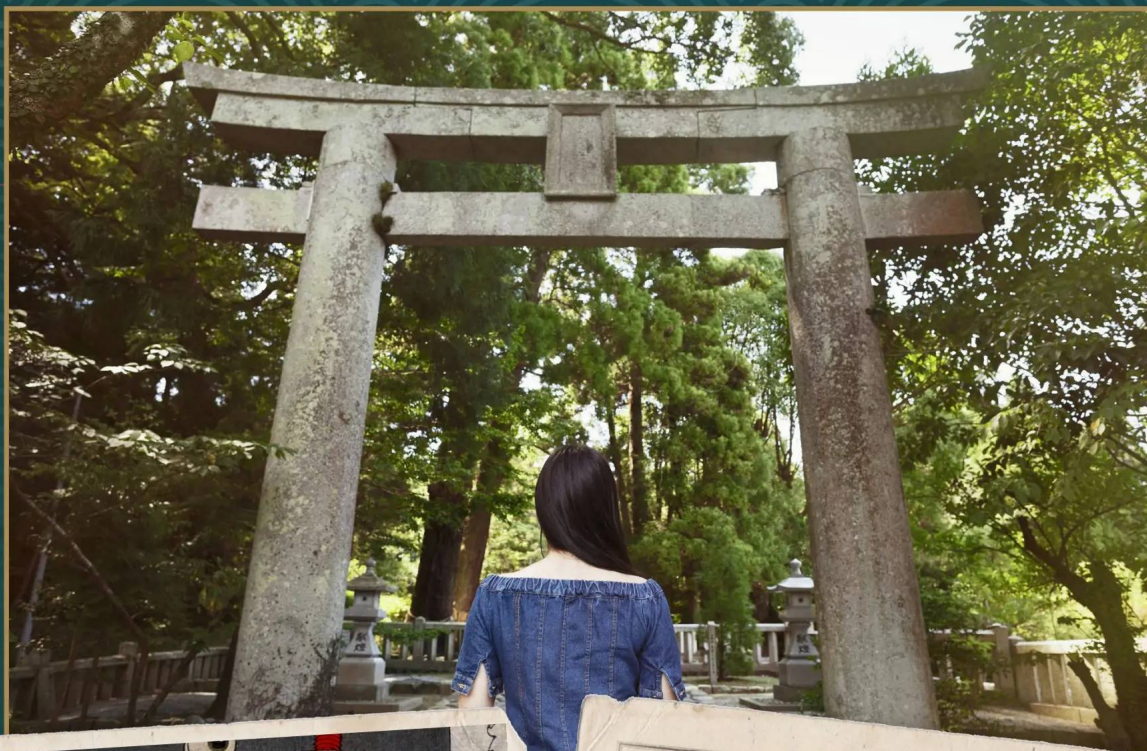
Shinto, meaning 'the way of the gods' or 'the way of the spirits', is Japan's indigenous belief system. Worship is intrinsically linked to the country's natural environment because followers believe that remarkable phenomena - such as ancient trees, giant boulders and fiery volcanoes - are inhabited by deities or spiritual beings called kami. Although these

"BEHIND ITS MODERN MASK HIDES A
MORE ANCIENT AND MYSTICAL LAND"

RIGHT Torii gates found at Shinto shrines mark the boundary between the normal world and the sacred, spiritual realm of the kami

BELOW Japan's strange world of mythology and folklore contains a fascinating and often frightening collection of spirits, apparitions and monstrous creatures

BELOW RIGHT The Japanese archipelago is made up of thousands of islands, including the large landmasses of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, which constitute the mainland



entities exist throughout the country, it is the most southerly of Japan's main islands (Kyushu) that has the strongest connection to the creation mythology of the ancient texts. People who travel there today can still visit the sacred cave from which Shinto's most venerated kami - the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami - emerged to bring light to the world, as well as the coastal shrine of the god Ugayafukiaezu no Mikoto, who fathered the country's first emperor.

The enormous number of kami that make up the Shinto spiritual universe have a wide range of characteristics. This vast diversity is conducive to accepting and incorporating the deities, philosophies and traditions of other

cultures and religions into Japan's mythological world. Buddhism and Confucianism had already entered the country via China and Korea before *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* were completed, and they influenced both the texts and society at large. Elements of Daoism also made their mark on Japan, becoming apparent in astrological divination techniques and the duties of magic practitioners who could offer protection from harmful forces.

CONTINUED EVOLUTION

As the centuries passed, Japan's mythical realm of gods, goddesses and spirits continued to evolve and expand to include various other entities. The popularity of folk stories, now referred to as mukashi-banashi (tales of long ago), led to it becoming colonised with increasingly strange beings and lore. Sometimes likened to Western fairy tales, the encounters described in many of these are unsettling and involve supernatural apparitions with malevolent intentions or monstrous animal-humanoid

hybrids with terrifying appearances. Different regions had their own mukashi-banashi, and while some have survived to the present day, others were lost or forgotten over time.

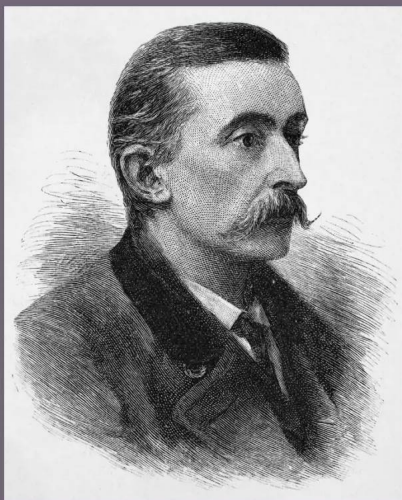
Japanese scholar Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) was instrumental in preserving many of the tales for future generations to enjoy. His interest in folk traditions led him to study them, and he wrote several books about the old stories. His most well-known work is *Tono Monogatari* (The Legends of Tono), a collection based on the local legends and superstitious beliefs of the inhabitants of a rural town in Honshu's Iwate Prefecture. In *Tono Monogatari* you can learn about the bizarre, river-based Kappa and the mischievous Zashiki-warashi, a spirit that ensures prosperity for the family home.

Another person who helped to conserve the traditional stories of Japan's past - and was responsible for introducing them to the West - was the writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904). Hearn, who entered the country in 1890, was charmed by the evocative world of 'old Japan'

LAFCADIO HEARN

MEET THE MAN WHO INTRODUCED MYTHICAL JAPAN TO THE WEST

Lafcadio Hearn was a journalist who settled in Japan when the culture of the insular, isolated island nation was largely unknown to the West. During the 14 years he lived, studied and worked there, he wrote a series of informative essays and books about traditional aspects of the country. Hearn's early life had included many hardships, but he found his place among the old stories and customs of Japan. He met his wife, Koizumi Setsuko, in Matsue and later took her surname as his own. They had four children together.



Lafcadio Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890. He went on to become a Japanese citizen and adopted the Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo



at a time when the country was racing towards industrialisation. His book, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, was influenced by older eerie accounts that he came across. The anthology of ghost stories, which includes one about a corpse-eating ghoul, offers a chilling insight into the disturbing side of Japanese folklore.

STEP OVER THE THRESHOLD

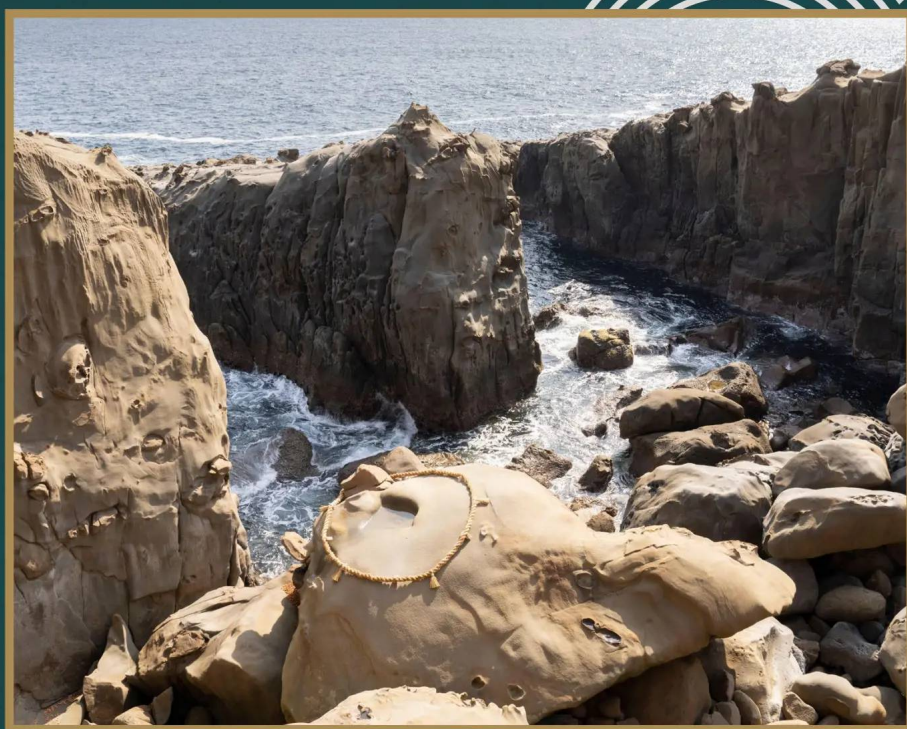
Since its beginnings, Japan's world of myth and folklore has constantly evolved - from the ancient spirit-deities of Shinto to the haunting Yurei of traditional stories. Even today, there are new additions to the already innumerable gods, goddesses, legendary figures and oddities that inhabit it. You are certain to meet many of them over the following pages, so as you step over the threshold to begin your journey into Japan's realm of mythology and monsters, be careful where you tread, lest you run into an old Yamamba mountain witch or a vengeful samurai ghost.

"AS THE CENTURIES PASSED, JAPAN'S MYTHICAL REALM OF GODS, GODDESSES AND SPIRITS CONTINUED TO EVOLVE AND EXPAND TO INCLUDE OTHER ENTITIES"

RIGHT A woodblock print depicting the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami. Her legendary story forms a key element of Japanese creation mythology

LEFT The Seven Gods of Fortune in their treasure ship. The majority of this benevolent group had their origins in the belief systems of other cultures

BELOW Some Shinto shrines, such as Udo Jingu in Miyazaki, are set in dramatic locations and are important for their mythological significance and unusual natural features



SHAPED BY THE SAMURAI

JAPAN'S SAMURAI WARRIORS BECAME LEGENDARY FIGURES IN THEIR OWN RIGHT AND HAVE INFLUENCED FICTIONAL NARRATIVES AND MYTHOLOGIES UP TO THE PRESENT DAY

WRITTEN BY PHILIP S KAY

Picture the scene: a cold, misty morning; a dark, silent forest; the sun slowly creeping up over a hidden horizon - its first rays struggling to pierce the isolated pockets of frozen vapour that have gathered between the canes of ancient bamboo overnight. From somewhere far away, you hear a low rumbling that gets louder and louder. As it approaches your position, you make out the sound of a hundred galloping hooves, and before you can react, they are upon you - a fearsome group of horse-mounted warriors clad in full battle armour bursts out from behind the treeline, their terrifying masks giving them the appearance of hideous creatures from some other world. They are samurai, and they know how to make an impression.

The scene described here is similar to a dramatic set piece that features in Edward Zwick's 2003 film, *The Last Samurai*, one of many creative endeavours that have been influenced by the mystique of Japan's elite warriors of old. Such a sight must have been chilling to behold in reality. The mythos that surrounds the samurai has grown since they graced the world, contributing to a legacy

that now spans centuries. Accounts of their formidable exploits and unrivalled discipline have bestowed a legendary status upon them that has cut a long swathe through Japanese history and society. It has impacted folklore, traditional arts and modern media. Their reach has also transcended cultural boundaries, inspiring books, TV shows and movies, including the world's most iconic sci-fi saga.

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

What is it about the samurai that has created such long-lasting appeal to so many people? To identify the factors that separate them from the legions of other militaristic personages strewn across the battlefield of history, you need to look at their origins and lifestyle.

The rise of the samurai can be traced back to their beginnings as soldiers and protectors who served Japan's provincial landowners in the Heian period (794-1185). They developed into a specialised aristocratic military caste with a sophisticated ethical system and moral code that later became known as 'bushido', or 'the way of the warrior'. It is bushido that defined the behaviour of the samurai, and its practice that elevated them beyond the limits

of what seems possible for most humans - into a realm reserved for heroes with extraordinary powers and capabilities.

Bushido encompassed a wide range of virtues that samurai tried to live in accordance with. Many of these admirable qualities would go on to permeate society and still constitute the core characteristics of modern Japanese culture and thought. Bushido's precepts of duty-bound honour and martial spirit encouraged fierce loyalty to a person's feudal lord and total dedication to a cause; it fostered a strong perfectionist disposition and required those who followed its path to cultivate incredible courage, composure and self-control. The tenacious and stoic samurai warriors were famed for their ability to take decisive action at the right time, regardless of the harm it might cause to themselves.

FROM HISTORY TO LEGEND

Despite their superhuman attributes and reputation, the samurai were real people. Many of them were important figures who

"IT IS BUSHIDO THAT DEFINED THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE SAMURAI"

The elegant swords of Japanese warriors were deadly weapons of exquisite craftsmanship. They were also believed to possess spiritual qualities

This woodcut by Utagawa Toyokuni shows that samurai warriors became mythical figures who not only battled human opponents but also demons and other supernatural entities

played pivotal roles in shaping Japan's history, and as such, there are a multitude of stories that tell of their feats and adventures. Although these tales are often rooted in actual events, some were embellished and others took on fantastical elements, helping their protagonists transition to the world of myth and folklore.

One notorious personality is Taira no Masakado, a rebellious 10th-century samurai with royal blood who, in an audacious move, declared himself the new emperor. His brave but risky offensive faced resistance, and he was eventually hunted down and killed. His severed head was taken to Kyoto and put on display - a gruesome warning to all those who might oppose the powers that be. Sometime later, reports of strange goings-on emerged: the disembodied head had opened its eyes; it had wailed in the night as it searched for its missing torso. Finally, it had flown away. This supernatural yarn continued to gain momentum over the years until Taira no Masakado became known as one of Japan's

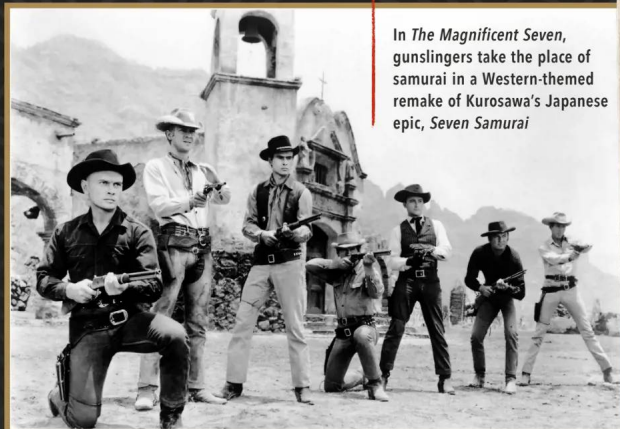
most prominent onryo (vengeful spirits). Even now, people make sure to avoid disrespecting his grave for fear of inciting his wrath.

The exciting, heroic and sometimes strange tales of the samurai made popular subject matter for military epics, such as the *Heike Monogatari*. Their deeds were reenacted in kabuki performances, and traditional woodblock print artists portrayed them battling evil folklore-borne demons and other amorphous entities in their works. Even the warriors' swords, infused with the magical properties of Shinto spirits, came to possess their own mythic narratives. Once mere mortals, the samurai had transformed into legends.

MODERN-DAY IMPACT

Perhaps the most pervasive of all samurai stories is the tragic tale of the 47 ronin. Ronin were wandering samurai who no longer served





In *The Magnificent Seven*, gunslingers take the place of samurai in a Western-themed remake of Kurosawa's Japanese epic, *Seven Samurai*



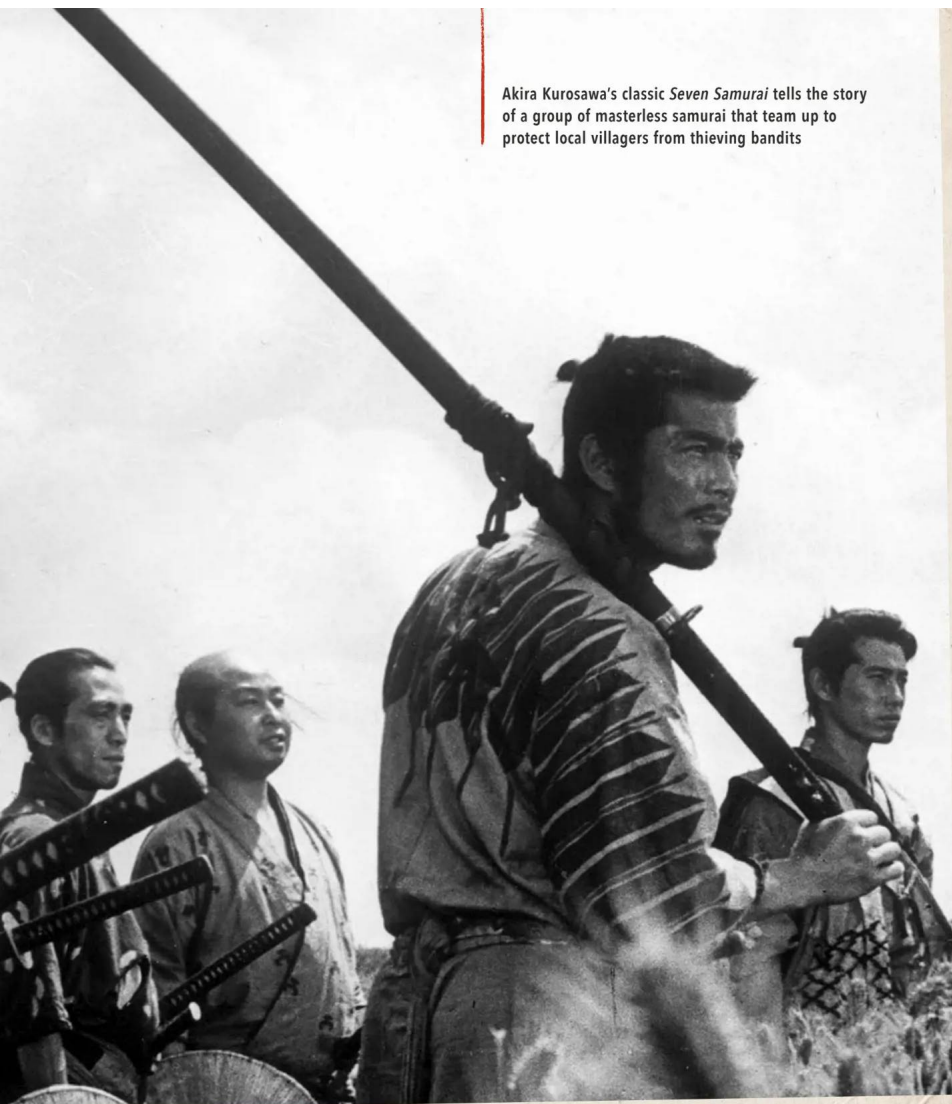
Samurai sometimes wore armour that was flexible yet still offered protection from enemies' arrows. Their intimidating masks and helmets had intricate designs

a feudal lord. Their reasons for becoming masterless varied, but in the case of these warriors, it was the death of their lord. (He was ordered to kill himself in 1701.) Two years later, in defence of their master's honour, 47 of his loyal retainers avenged him. They assaulted the residence of the man they held responsible and assassinated him. After completing their task, the ronin turned themselves in and committed ritual suicide.

The incident captured people's hearts. It epitomises the best qualities of the noble warriors who would dutifully sacrifice themselves for what they believed in. The legendary story was retold in plays and later adapted for television and several films. Other movies told new, fictional tales that extolled the timeless virtues of the samurai. The most recognisable of these is Akira Kurosawa's 1954 cinematic masterpiece, *Seven Samurai*. The story of a brave band of ronin who come together to protect a village from plundering bandits was later reworked and released as the Western, *The Magnificent Seven*, highlighting the universal appeal of its themes.

The films of Kurosawa also played a significant role in the creation of *Star Wars*. George Lucas

Akira Kurosawa's classic *Seven Samurai* tells the story of a group of masterless samurai that team up to protect local villagers from thieving bandits



MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

GET TO KNOW JAPAN'S
MOST LEGENDARY
SWORDSMAN

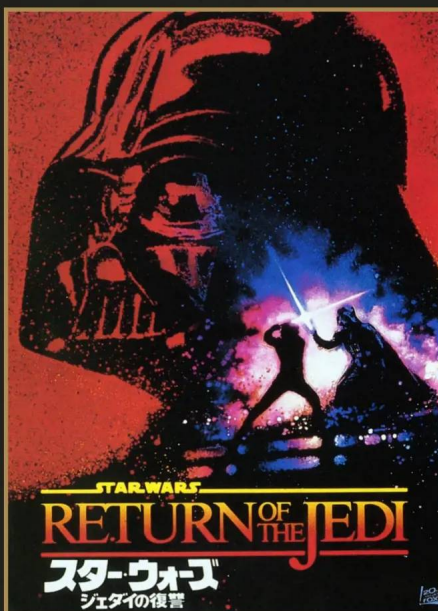
Samurai Miyamoto Musashi was born in 1584 and fought more than 60 duels during his lifetime. His tactical mastery and incredible martial skill ensured victory in all of them. Miyamoto developed his own two-sword fighting technique, but like many samurai, he also excelled in more peaceful pursuits. He was a talented artist and authored the famous strategy guide, *The Book of Five Rings*. As word of his real and imagined exploits spread, his legend grew until he became a warrior of such renown that he was venerated as a sword saint.



A 19th-century woodblock print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi depicting legendary warrior Miyamoto Musashi using his katana to vanquish a hideous, mythical tengu

- an admirer of Kurosawa's work - incorporated several plot points, motifs and designs into his epic sci-fi series that pay tribute to the Japanese director's pictures. In fact, he cites *The Hidden Fortress* as being a key influence for his first *Star Wars* film adventure (*A New Hope*), and with their strict codes of honour and selfless demeanour, parallels between Japan's exalted warriors and Lucas's Jedi Knights are easy to see. Even the intimidating helmets of Darth Vader and his army of Imperial stormtroopers seem to be space-age versions of those of the samurai.

Although they might not have the same monumental impact on popular culture as *Star Wars*, tales of samurai courage and daring continue to find their way into modern media. Novels, manga, television, cinema and video games all celebrate the warriors' enduring legacy. No longer confined to Japanese history, the samurai have become part of world mythology - timeless heroes who could do what most of us are unable to. Their indomitable spirit and staggering ability to simultaneously push and deny themselves beyond ordinary human limits is what has made them into figures of myth and legend.



This Japanese poster for *Return of the Jedi* shows the influence that the samurai had on the design of Darth Vader

"THE SAMURAI HAVE BECOME PART
OF WORLD MYTHOLOGY"