

Things Japanese; being notes on various subjects connected with Japan for the use of travellers and others, by Basil Hall Chamberlain

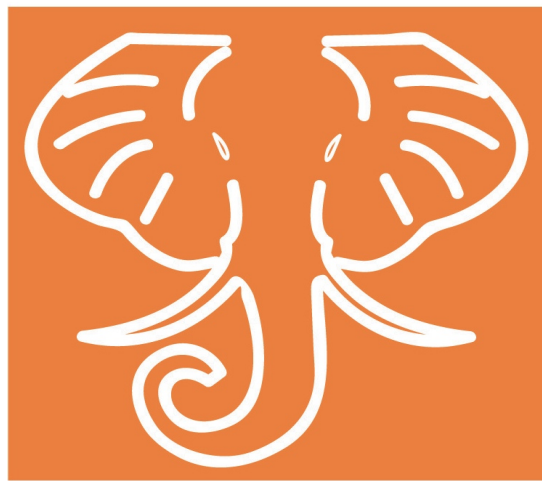
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THINGS JAPANESE

BEING

NOTES ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS CONNECTED WITH JAPAN

FOR THE USE OF TRAVELLERS AND OTHERS

BY

BASIL HALL CHAMBERLAIN

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF JAPANESE AND PHILOLOGY IN THE IMPERIAL
UNIVERSITY OF TŌKYŌ

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mat from those to whom an audience was granted. Photography, when first introduced, was also considered dangerous, because likely to absorb some portion of the life or spirit of the person photographed.

The above are samples merely, culled at haphazard. Of other superstitions concerning names; concerning clothes, concerning the weather, concerning sneezing, concerning words to be avoided, etc., etc., etc., the tale is endless. A very fat volume could be filled, were a complete account of all Japanese superstitions, past and present, urban and rustic, to be brought together; for each province would contribute its quota. At the same time all, or almost all, are now confined to the lower classes; or if they find any credence in the upper class, it is chiefly among the women-folk. The generation now at school is—both for good and for evil—distinctly Voltairian.

Swords. The Japanese sword of ancient days (the *tsurugi*) was a straight, double-edged, heavy weapon some three feet long, intended to be brandished with both hands. That of mediæval and modern times (the *katana*) is lighter, shorter, has but a single edge, and is slightly curved towards the point. There is also the *wakizashi*, or dirk of about nine and a half inches, with which *harakiri* was committed. The four most famous Japanese sword-smiths are Munechika (10th century), Masamune and Yoshimitsu (latter part of the 13th century), and Muramasa (latter part of the 14th century). But Muramasa's blades had the reputation of being unlucky. Towards the close of the fifteenth century arose schools of artists in metal, who made it their business to adorn the hilt, the guard, the sheath, and other appurtenances in a manner which is still the delight of collectors. But to the Japanese connoisseur the great treasure is always the blade itself, which has been called "the living soul of the Samurai."

Japanese swords excel even the vaunted products of Damascus and Toledo. To cut through a pile of copper coins without

nicking the blade is, or was, a common feat. History, tradition, and romance alike re-echo with the exploits of this wonderful weapon. The magic sword, and the sword handed down as an heirloom, figure as plentifully in the pages of Japanese novel-writers as magic rings and strawberry-marks used once upon a time to do in the West. The custom which obtained among the Samurai of wearing two swords, is believed to date from the beginning of the fourteenth century. It was abolished by an edict issued on the 28th March, 1876, and taking effect from the 1st January, 1877. The edict was obeyed by this strangely docile people without a blow being struck, and the curio-shops displayed heaps of swords which, a few months before, the owners would less willingly have parted with than with life itself. Shortly afterwards, a second edict appeared, rescinding the first and leaving *any one* at liberty to wear what swords he pleased. But as the privilege of a class distinction was thus obliterated, none cared to take advantage of the permission, and the two-sworded Japanese gentleman is now extinct.

Excellent specimens of swords and scabbards may be seen at Tōkyō in the *Yūshū-kwan*, or Museum of Arms, situated in the grounds of the Shōkonsha temple.

Japanese swords are made of soft, elastic, magnetic iron combined with hard steel. "The tempering of the edge," says Rein, "is carefully done in the charcoal furnace, the softer backs and the sides being surrounded up to a certain point with fire-clay, so that only the edge remains outside. The cooling takes place in cold water. It is in this way that the steeled edge may be distinguished clearly from the back, by its colour and lustre. The backs of knives, axes, and other weapons are united to the steel edge either by welding on one side, or by fitting the edge into a fluted groove of the back blade, and welding on both sides."

The most extraordinary circumstance connected with swords in this country is that ladders are made of them set edge up,

which men climb, with the idea originally of propitiating the gods and gaining merit, though now the ordeal would seem to have sunk to the level of a mere acrobatic performance. On the occasion when the present writer witnessed one of these performances in the grounds of the temple of Asakusa at Tōkyō, he inspected the swords, could not detect any trace of deception, and is therefore unable to offer an explanation of the fact that several persons walked up this dreadful ladder barefoot without any untoward consequences.

Books recommended. Rein's *Industries of Japan*, p. 430.—McClatchie's *The Sword of Japan*, in Vol. II. of the "Asiatic Transactions."—B. S. Lyman's *Japanese Swords*, in the "Proceedings of the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia" for 1892, and papers by E. Gilbertson in the "Transactions of the Japan Society."—For prehistoric swords, *The Dolmens and Burial Mounds in Japan*, by Wm. Gowland, published by the Society of Antiquaries (London).—Lowell's *Occult Japan* for the sword-walking.

Taste. Japanese taste in painting, in house decoration, in all matters depending on line and form, may be summed up in one word—sobriety. The bluster which mistakes bigness for greatness, the vulgarity which smothers beauty under ostentation and extravagance, have no place in the Japanese way of thinking. The alcove of a Tōkyō or Kyōto drawing-room holds one picture and one flower-vase, which are changed from time to time. To be sure, picture and vase are alike exquisite. The possessions of the master of the house are not sown broadcast, as much as to say, "Look what a lot of expensive articles I've got, and just think how jolly rich I must be!" He does not stick up plates on walls:—plates are meant to hold food. He would not, whatever might be his means, waste £1000, or £100, or even £20, on the flowers for a single party:—flowers are simple things, perishable things; it is incongruous to lavish on them sums that would procure precious stones for heirlooms. And how this moderation makes for happiness! The rich not being blatant, the poor are not abject; in fact, though poverty exists, pauperism does not. A genuine spirit of equality pervades society.