Samurai and the Bushido

The reading below describes the samurai’s Bushido, or code of conduct.

Above all, the Way of the Samurai should be in being aware that you do not know what is going to happen next, and in querying (questioning) every item day and night. Victory and defeat are matters of the temporary force of circumstances. The way of avoiding shame is different. It is simply in death. Even if it seems certain that you will lose, retaliate. Neither wisdom nor technique has a place in this. A real man does not think of victory or defeat. He plunges recklessly towards an irrational death. By doing this, you will awaken from your dreams.

—Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai

Buddhism’s teachings about reincarnation and life after death helped the samurai be brave in the face of danger. Followers of Zen Buddhism, an important Buddhist sect, learned to control their bodies through martial arts or sports that involved combat and self-defense. This appealed to the samurai, who trained to fight without fear.

Shintoism taught the samurai loyalty and love of country. One major characteristic of Shintoism was ancestor-worship. In particular, the emperor was honored as a god. This belief was part of the samurais’ loyalty to the emperor and their daimyo, or feudal warlords. Shintoism also taught an extreme devotion and reverence for the land of Japan. Samurais felt an intense sense of duty to Japan and its rulers.

Confucianism stressed loyalty, devotion, purity, and selflessness. These ideas were also admired by the samurai. However, the samurai did not admire purely intellectual pursuits, such as scholarship or writing poetry, which were valued by Confucianists.

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions. Use the information in the passages and your textbook.

1. Summarizing  Rewrite the passage from The Book of the Samurai in your own words.

2. Identify and Analyze  Why do you think the samurai rejected intellectual pursuits that were valued by Confucianists?
Biography Activity 5b

Minamoto Yoritomo

The Bakufu

When Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199) was fourteen, he was sent away to live with a guardian because his father tried to overthrow the Taira family that ruled Japan.

Yoritomo was not safe in exile, however. In 1180, the Taira family issued an order to have Yoritomo captured and killed. Yoritomo then gathered a group of samurai warriors and sent them to defeat and kill Taira Kanetaka.

Yoritomo was finally safe, but he was not satisfied. He became the overlord of Japan, and he developed a military dictatorship to ensure his power. He created the bakufu, which means “tent government.” Yoritomo ruled because of his huge army, and the army lived in tents. Yoritomo named governors and stewards all across Japan to run local affairs.

The First Shogun

In 1192, Emperor Go-Tobo gave Yoritomo the title of “shogun,” which means “barbarian conquering supreme general.” Go-Tobo was responsible for decisions that related to Japan’s religion, but Yoritomo was in charge of everything else. It was Yoritomo’s way of overthrowing the emperor without actually having to defeat him in battle.

Yoritomo died in 1199, and his wife—a member of the Hojo clan—seized power. She installed her son in Yoritomo’s place, but he was eventually assassinated. From that point on, the Hojo clan ruled the bakufu. Members of the Minamoto family served as shogun, but they had much less influence.

Directions: On another sheet of paper, answer the questions below.

1. What did Yoritomo do when he found out that the Taira had ordered him killed?

2. What does “bakufu” mean?

3. When was Yoritomo named shogun?

4. Writing What might be the advantages and disadvantages of the military style of government used by Yoritomo?