

East Asia Study Unit

Module Three: Ancient, Medieval, & Early Modern Japan

LESSON FOUR: THE 47 LOYAL RETAINERS

HONOR AND MURDER IN EARLY MODERN JAPAN

AUTHOR: Ethan Segal

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods with discussion.

GOALS:

1. For students to learn and understand the key events in a famous moment from Japanese history.
2. For students to think critically about the decisions reached in that case
3. For students to develop and support their own opinions on how the case should have been handled and to present those supported opinions in an oral presentation or a written assignment.

MATERIALS/PREP:

Familiarity with the material contained in this lesson and copies of the handouts. For additional background material, there are many different resources that you might draw upon. The story of the 47 loyal retainers is one of the most popular in the Japanese tradition, and has been retold as a kabuki play, a puppet theatre play, made into movies and t.v. series, and the major characters depicted in paintings. You might find versions of the tale under the names “The 47 ronin” or “Chushingura.” Ukiyo-e woodblock prints can be viewed on the internet. Donald Keene published an English translation of the puppet play, but I do not recommend it only because it is long and because the puppet play, in order to avoid censors of the time, changed the names and set the play in a different time period. One good account, though still too long to use with high school students, can be found in Sato Hiroaki’s book *Legends of the Samurai* (Overlook Press).

INTRODUCTION:

This lesson employs active learning techniques to get students engaged in critical thinking about honor and the law in early modern Japan. The lesson centers on a famous real incident – the murder of a Tokugawa bakufu official by some retainers seeking to avenge the death of their late lord. It asks students to pretend to be members of the shogun’s deliberative council who must advise the shogun on how to treat the retainers who carried out the murder. In the real case, the shogun ordered the retainers to commit ritual suicide, a very honorable way of death in eighteenth-century Japan. But the point of this lesson is not to get students to come to the same conclusion, but rather to have them consider deeply the different possibilities and their ramifications.

The lesson could be done in one of two different ways. You could use part of a first day to set up the scene, going over the material contained in the handouts, and then have the students write short papers as homework in which they advocate a course of action. The following day, the class might discuss the various alternatives that students argued for. Alternatively, if time will not allow this (or if you do not wish to assign homework for this lesson), you could have the students break into small groups and come to a consensus within each group on a course of action, then debate it as an entire class. Done this way, the entire lesson could be completed in one class period.

When debating the fate of the 47 retainers, students will be tempted to think in contemporary American terms and may bring preconceived ideas about capital punishment or suicide to the discussion. Although this is, to some degree, inevitable, you should guide them to consider the case in the terms of early eighteenth-century Japanese standards rather than their own. Being allowed to commit ritual suicide, for example, was viewed as a very honorable way to die in Tokugawa Japan. Students need to consider the different possibilities and select a position to advocate based on what they learn in the lesson rather than simply personal opinions. In other words, a student who merely writes “I think that the 47 retainers should be set free because capital punishment is wrong” may have a fine opinion but s/he has not engaged with the material in this lesson.

BACKGROUND (to read aloud to the students):

By the early seventeenth century, one daimyo (warlord) family, the Tokugawa, had established hegemonic rule in Japan. The Tokugawa had won some major battles, gained direct control of around one-fourth of the country, and taken steps to make sure that other daimyo could not easily form coalitions or rise up against them. As a result, after close to 150 years of fighting and civil war, peace came to Japan. The samurai, who earlier had made their fortunes on the battlefield, were slowly converted to government officials with little or no real military experience. It was during the peak of this time of peace and prosperity that a small group of samurai carried out a shocking murder that challenged the law for the sake of honor.

HANDOUT:

The handout can be copied front and back. You can decide whether or not you want to include the “factors to consider” section.