

East Asia Study Unit

Module Three: Ancient, Medieval, & Early Modern Japan

LESSON ONE: THE WORLD OF THE SHINING PRINCE-LEARNING TO READ PRIMARY SOURCES, PART ONE

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GRADE: 9-12

TIME: Two class periods with discussion.

GOALS:

1. To help students to think critically about the sources of information they see or hear.
2. To teach students to distinguish between primary and secondary sources.
3. To have students read and engage with a chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, an important work of premodern Japanese literature.
4. To have students begin to understand the culture and society of the early eleventh-century Heian court.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Copies of the fourth chapter of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*. The fourth chapter will, depending upon the translation, be entitled "Yugao" or "Evening Faces." There are four translations of the tale that are well regarded: those by Waley, Seidensticker, McCullough, and Tyler. Any of these will suffice. Students will need to have read the chapter before the second class, so it may make the most sense to have the first class meeting before a weekend and the second class after the weekend so that the students have time to read.

ACTIVITIES:

1. Teaser
2. Primary Sources
3. Background
4. Life in the Capital
5. Women and Marriage Politics
6. Clues
7. The Tale of Genji
8. Evening Faces
9. Pre-reading Questions
10. THE NEXT CLASS
11. Activity One - Clarifying the Story
12. Activity Two - Acting Out the Story
13. Activity Three - The Tale of Genji as a Primary Source

DAY ONE:

1. Teaser: Begin with a question written on the blackboard as the students come into class: What is the best way for us to learn about the past? Give the students a few minutes to think about this, perhaps even talk with their neighbors, and then start discussion of the question. Unrealistic suggestions are fine – for example, someone might suggest that we use a time machine to go back and experience for ourselves what the past was like. An excellent idea, though unfortunately no time machines have as yet been made available to historians or school teachers and their classes.

2. Primary Sources: until we get access to a time machine, perhaps the best way to try to understand the past is to study the writings that people of the time left behind. In other words, if we want to learn about the American Revolution, we would do well to read the writings of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and others who actually took part in the events. These kinds of materials that survive from the time we are studying are known as “primary sources.” In this lesson, we are going to use a primary source to learn about the culture and society of a fascinating time and place: the world of the imperial court of Heian Japan.

3. Background: The Japanese have a very long history, going back over 1500 years, so historians tend to break up that long stretch of time into “periods.” The Heian period derives its name from the capital city, Heian, which is the city we know today as modern Kyoto. The Heian period, when the seat of government was in the city of Heian, lasted from 794 to 1185. At the beginning of the period, Japan was ruled by an emperor and his ministers, who were members of the nobility. But over time, one of those noble ministerial families, the Fujiwara, came to hold real power. They did this by marrying Fujiwara daughters to the emperors and having the children of those marriages become emperor (see lineage chart below). How did this work? If a Fujiwara minister married his daughter to the emperor, and the new couple produced a child, then that child would be heir to the throne. But why would this make the Fujiwara grandfather powerful?

4. Life in the Capital: Most of the rich and powerful people lived at one time or another in the capital city of Heian. It was the only city of any size at the time, and it was from there that the emperor and his minister ruled the country. The countryside was divided into the provinces, and the imperial court appointed officials to administer the provinces. Buddhist temples were also important institutions in the Heian period, exerting influence over political affairs and controlling many landed estates that gave them economic power. Major temple leaders were often chosen from among relatives of the emperor or the noble families. Elite women also had some political influence. Although they did not officially serve as emperor or ministers of state, they could own property, pass it on to their own heirs, etc. Women were educated as well; the author of *The Tale of Genji* was a woman known as Murasaki Shikibu.

5. Women and Marriage Politics: At the beginning of the Heian period, the imperial family actually ruled, but over time, one of the noble ministerial families, the Fujiwara, came to wield real power. Curiously, though, the Fujiwara never attempted to replace the emperor. Instead, they made sure that imperial princes married Fujiwara girls, and thereby kept a solid hold on the imperial house for more than a century. But why was it so advantageous for the Fujiwara to marry their daughters into the imperial family?

6. Clues: Let's consider some basic facts about life among the nobility in the Heian period and see if we can figure out how this system enabled the Fujiwara to assert power over the emperors.

- In this time, people were often married when they were quite young- as young as twelve or thirteen. Would they be able to run their own households at such a young age? (No, they probably would not be able to live on their own yet).
- Consequently, married couples rarely lived together in their own home. Instead, they usually maintained separate residences with the husband visiting the wife. In many cases, the wife would continue to live at her parents' house for some time even after she married.
- As a result, when children were born, they were frequently raised in their maternal grandfather's house. If such a child was an imperial prince, and became emperor, his maternal grandfather would have tremendous influence over him. Consequently, even though the emperors remained the official head of state, members of the Fujiwara family were often pulling the strings behind the scenes.

7. *The Tale of Genji*: An important source of information about this period comes from female writers who lived in the world of the Fujiwara and the imperial court. Among the many famous works they produced is the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*. It is the story of a fictional prince, the son of the emperor by one of his consorts. The young man is handsome and gifted at all he does, from composing poems to dancing to playing musical instruments, and women find him very attractive. Murasaki Shikibu, the author, was a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court and therefore observed firsthand the world that she describes in *The Tale of Genji*. Her novel became very popular at court and quickly became one of the most highly regarded works in Japanese literature. In particular, nobles for centuries afterward looked to *The Tale of Genji* as a model of beautiful poetry, fashion sense, and aesthetics.

8. Evening Faces: You will be reading the tale's fourth chapter, known as "Yugao" or "Evening Faces." Originally, Murasaki Shikibu did not provide chapter titles, but over time, readers came to refer to the different chapters by a memorable figure or event contained within. In this case, Yugao is both the name of a flower that appears in the chapter and the name given to the young woman who becomes Genji's love interest.

9. Pre-reading Questions: You are reading a story from a very different part of the world, written around 1000 years ago. So take the time to read carefully and enjoy the tale. While you are reading, you might consider the following questions:

- What originally brings Genji to Yugao's neighborhood? How do they meet?
- How does Genji court her? Why does he take her away?
- What happens at the empty mansion?
- Who are Koremitsu and Ukon? What roles do they play?

10. THE NEXT CLASS: There are different parts to the lesson for the day after the reading; please use your own judgement to decide which of the activities would work for your class (and the order that will work best for your students).

11. Activity One - Clarifying the Story: You might begin with a discussion of what happened in the chapter, for some students may struggle to follow the events. Briefly, Genji goes to visit his elderly wet nurse, who is ill. While there, he spies some young women peering over the fence of the next house. When he sends one of his attendants to pick some flowers from the fence, he is given a fan with a love poem on it. Genji has his confidant, Koremitsu, try to find out who lives in the house, but Koremitsu learns little. Nonetheless, Genji starts a relationship with its mistress, Yugao. She is clearly not of the same high rank that he is, and so Genji fears to reveal his identity, but he falls deeply in love with her. Normally they meet at night, but one morning he rashly decides that he doesn't want their time together to end and so he whisks her away to an empty mansion so that they can spend the day together. That night, however, a strange apparition visits them and Yugao dies--of fright or at the hand of the ghost, it is not clear. Genji eventually locates Koremitsu to help him and they have the girl's body taken to a Buddhist temple in the mountains.

12. Activity Two - Acting Out the Story: Another option is to have the students reconceptualize the story through role play or by casting it in more modern terms. For example, you could have some students act out a criminal investigation along the lines of a t.v. show such as *Law & Order*, wherein they play the roles of police and the various characters from the chapter. Or, you could ask the students to form small groups and cast *The Tale of Genji* as a movie. They would need to pick modern actors to play the parts of the major characters and create a movie poster promoting the film. They should be ready to justify why they chose certain actors for specific roles.

13. Activity Three - The Tale of Genji as a Primary Source: What can *The Tale of Genji* tell us about life in Heian Japan? After all, the tale is a work of fiction. This is a tricky problem that will require some thought from your students. Neither the characters nor the events actually happened. So can fiction serve as a source? The answer is "yes," though we must be careful in how we use fiction to understand historical reality. We do believe that Murasaki wrote the tale in a way that her readers could find plausible, and so much about daily life is likely reliable. For example, we might use the tale as a window into courtship ritual, religion and superstition, attitudes and practices surrounding death, or the importance of class and status in Heian elite society. Murasaki's protagonist was supposed to be an ideal lover, so we might learn something about ideas of romance from the way he is portrayed in the tale. Or, in the deference shown by servants and in Genji's surprise at hearing the neighbors when waking in Yugao's house, we might get a sense of how people of different status regarded each other. In a sense, it is in the background details that we might learn the most about life in Heian Japan.