

## East Asia Study Unit

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### Module Two: The Basics in Traditional East Asia

#### LESSON THREE: RETHINKING TIME, AGE, AND THE CALENDAR

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**GRADE:** 9-12

**TIME:** One to two class periods with discussion.

**GOALS:**

1. Get students to reflect on their own experiences and the ways in which they measure the passage of time.
2. Help students to realize that ways of keeping track of time are culturally bound and that different cultures may have very different ways of measuring time.
3. Introduce some of the ways that people perceived time and history in “traditional” East Asia.

**MATERIALS/PREP:**

1. Blank paper for students to write on.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Nothing seems more basic to the way we live our lives than our concept of time. Because everyone has a common understanding of time, we agree on when to come to school, how long each class should be, which days of the week are school days, etc. And the way we think about time influences the way we understand ourselves. For example, we might think of how old we were when we first learned to read, or to ride a bicycle, or went out on a first date. And we pay special attention to time markers like holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and more. These things are so natural that we probably never consider that the ways we think about time are not universal, but rather are unique to our culture. There are, of course, variations within American society due to difference in religion, ethnicity, family traditions, and more, but these differences seem relatively minor when compared to the quite different ways that people thought about time in historic East Asia. This lesson is designed to introduce some different ways of thinking about time that were used in the societies of China, Korea, and Japan prior to the nineteenth century.

**ACTIVITIES:**

1. Self-reflection
2. Discussion
3. Analysis
4. Introduce a new idea
5. Introduce new information
6. Analysis
7. Introduce new information

8. Calculate
  9. Analysis
  10. Introduce new information
  11. Analysis
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### **DAY ONE:**

1. Self-reflection: have the students take out blank pieces of paper. Ask them to create brief personal timelines, marking key events in their lives. You may wish to ask them to record a specific number of events and you may wish to give them some examples (such as “I was born,” “my family moved to \_\_\_\_\_,” “my team won the little league title,” “I got my driver’s license,” etc.) Do not limit their choices, though; they should reflect on their lives, pick out six or eight key events, and create a timeline that includes those events. However, you may wish to caution them that they will be sharing these timelines with their classmates, so events that they would find painful or embarrassing to share should be left off of these lists.

2. Discussion: first, have students swap papers with their neighbors in order to discover what kinds of things their classmates ranked as key events in their lives. They could do this in pairs or in small groups, but they need to think carefully about their neighbor’s choices. You might then guide discussion with the whole class, having a few students share their timelines aloud while you note their selections on the board. Are there some events (such as the date of their birth) that everyone seems to include in his/her list? What kinds of organizing principles do the lists have?

3. Analysis: Now that they have seen the variation, ask them what all (or most) of the timelines have in common. For example, most will surely include references to years, and everyone understands that a “year” is a solar year on the Western style calendar. Or they may refer to things in terms of the students’ ages (such as “I was 10 when I first went to summer camp”). Living in twenty-first century America, we all have some common understanding of what these references mean. But that does not mean that everyone around the world, or in all periods of history, would have understood what we mean when we say “something happened in August” or “I was 10 years old.” As we will see in a few moments, even something as seemingly natural as one’s age can be measured differently in different societies.

4. Introduce a new idea: that time, which seems to be natural and universal, is not. Let’s begin with the calendar. Our calendar, the one recognized by law in the United States, is basically a solar calendar, measuring one year as the length of time it takes the earth to travel around the sun. The calendar is derived from one used by the Romans over 2000 years ago. Some students may know, for example, that the months “July” and “August” were named for the Roman Emperors Julius Caesar and Augustus, respectively. Or they may realize that “October” resembles “octagon” (with the “octo” prefix signifying eight) and that December contains the “deca-” prefix meaning “ten.” Originally, October was the eighth month and December the tenth, but July and August were added in the summer, throwing the names of the later months off from their original meanings. Of course, the very word “month” is linked to the moon, for in ancient times people measured time by the cycles of the moon. However, because the sun determines the seasons, and the seasons are crucial for farmers, most settled societies had to have some form of solar calendar. In the Roman Empire, the calendar that emerged had months that did not actually correspond to the cycles of the moon. The point, of course, is that the calendar is neither

natural nor universal. People created and changed it. And in other societies, people created different calendars.

5. Introduce new information: in China, which created the calendar that came to be adopted by the rest of the states around it, both the moon and the sun played important parts. Months followed the lunar cycle, so they were 29 or 30 days long (because it takes approximately 29.5 days for the moon to pass through its complete cycle of phases). But if you have twelve months of only 29 or 30 days each, then you have less than 365 days in a year. This meant that after a few years, the seasons would no longer correspond to the months – the sixth month would come slightly earlier each year in the solar year, and so soon it would become a spring month rather than a summer one, etc. (you may need to explain this as it may not be obvious to some students). So to compensate, the Chinese added an extra month on occasion, similar to our February 29<sup>th</sup> every four years. In the Chinese case, however, a leap year contained an extra month, not just an extra day.

6. Analysis: what would be the disadvantages of this type of calendar? (It might be awkward having to deal with extra months in some years, and there still could be some variation from the solar year) What would be the advantages? (One advantage was that everyone born in the same year is the same age all year long; another advantage was that the months follow the cycles of the moon, so you could know the time of month by looking at the moon. And remember, in a society before electricity, the moon was an important source of light at night, so people paid much more attention to it than most of us do today!)

7. Introduce new information: age was also thought of very differently. We think of our lives beginning from the moment of our birth, and our age reflects how many anniversaries we have enjoyed since that moment of birth. So, on the one-year anniversary of our birth, we turn “one.” However, in East Asia, people did not keep track of how many anniversaries had occurred since they were born. Instead, they kept track of the number of years in which they had been alive. So, when you are born, you are “one,” because you have been alive in one year. If you were born on the last day of the year (the equivalent of December 31<sup>st</sup>), then you are “one” on the day of your birth, and on the following day, you would turn “two,” since you would have been alive in two different years. You would turn a year older with the start of every new calendar year (rather than on the anniversary of the day you were born). This system of keeping track of age is just as logical and consistent as the system we use; it seems strange to us simply because it is unfamiliar.

8. Calculate: have the students figure out their ages using this system. How many would be considered a different age under the East Asian way of counting? How many would be the same?

9. Analysis: Why is it important to keep this in mind if you are reading diaries written by people from that time? (Because a Japanese person writing that she was 18 when something happened to her was probably 17 by our reckoning and possibly as young as 16).

10. Introduce new information: finally, let’s think about the really long view of history. Any system of numbered years needs a starting point. In modern Western society, most people follow a system based on the supposed birth year of Jesus, so that the year 2005 represents the number of years that have passed since Jesus was born (in theory, anyway, as some scholars believe the year to actually be inaccurate). But there are other ways of numbering years. For example, the Jewish calendar takes the supposed creation of the world over 5700 years ago as its starting point. In both of these examples, the calendar was based on something (such as Jesus or the creation of the world) that was thought to be

more important than any government or king. In premodern East Asia, however, ordering the calendar was thought of as a right and an obligation of the ruler, and so the numbering frequently started over in accordance with the ruler's commands. Chinese and Japanese emperors and their advisors created auspicious names such as "righteous prosperity" or "bright rule" for the periods they ruled. The names would be changed every few years when a momentous occasion took place (such as the birth or death of an emperor) or if bad luck plagued the realm (such as a severe drought or earthquakes). Every time the name changed, the year began back at number one again. To explain it using more familiar names, it would be as if when Bill Clinton took office in 1993, he changed the name of the year to Economic Prosperity 1, and so 1994 would be Economic Prosperity 2, etc. When George Bush assumed office in 2001, he might have changed the year name to Compassionate Conservatism 1, and then, after 9/11, he might have changed the name again to Defeat Terrorists 1, with 2002 becoming Defeat Terrorists 2, etc.

11. Analysis: What would be the advantages and disadvantages of this system? (Advantage would be if the people believed the changing of names to be a way to alleviate natural disasters; disadvantage is that it is really complicated to talk about events in the past, since you have to remember so many year names and how long each lasted).