East Asia Study Unit

Module Three: Ancient, Medieval, & Early Modern Japan

LESSON TWO: WHO WERE THE SAMURAI?

LEARNING TO READ PRIMARY SOURCES, PART TWO

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GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

TIME REQUIRED: One to 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 challenge students' preconceptions about Japanese warriors and premodern society.
4. To teach students about the evolving role of warriors in Japanese society.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Large card that you can show or post in the front of the room. At the start of class, it should be turned toward the blackboard so that the students cannot read it yet. On it should be three questions:
   When was it created?
   Who created it?
   Why (for what purpose) was it created?
2. Photocopies of Handout A and Worksheet A to distribute to students.

INTRODUCTION:

This lesson is designed to accomplish two large goals. First, it introduces some of the skills that historians use in their efforts to learn about the past – namely, the careful consideration of source materials. Learning to think carefully about the sources of information that students encounter is a valuable skill that helps them think critically about not only history but also about what politicians, television commercials, and the media tell them.

Second, the lesson offers a brief history of the rise of the samurai from their origins (covered only briefly) to their assumption of power in the late twelfth century (covered in more detail). If you ask your students to think of something Japanese, there is a good chance that "samurai" will be one of the first answers that they give. Young people today seem taken with the idea of the samurai. They see samurai in movies and play the parts of samurai in video and computer games. Although there have not been any actual samurai for over one hundred years, many of our students feel that they know what the

samurai were all about. This lesson is going to prove them wrong by forcing students to engage with primary sources in translation.

ACTIVITIES:

1. One
2. Two
3. Three
4. Four
5. Five
6. Six
7. Seven
8. Eight
9. Nine
10. Ten
11. Eleven
12. Twelve
13. Thirteen
14. Fourteen

DAY ONE:

1. Ask your students what samurai are and what they are like. Some answers you might receive include warriors, brave, loyal, ready to die for their lords, swordsmen, and/or men of honor.

2. Next, ask how many of them have ever met a samurai. Since none of your students will have ever met a samurai (there are no samurai today), how do they know so much about them? Answers will likely include movies, video or computer games, manga or books, etc. Do the students think that the people who made the computer games and movies ever met any real samurai? If not, then from where did they get *their* information?

3. Now tell them that we are talking today about how to judge whether or not information comes from a reliable source. Sometimes it is hard to know if the information we receive is accurate or not. But to help distinguish more reliable from less reliable, there are certain questions we can ask about any source of information: First, when was it written or created? Second, who created or wrote it? Third, for what purpose was it created or recorded? As you read these questions, turn over the large card that you prepared ahead of time with the questions on it.

4. If we can determine the answers to these questions, then we can learn a lot about the reliability of sources. For example, if someone wrote something down just as it happened, we tend to think of it as more accurate than an account written down decades later. And if someone who was actually there creates the document, then it is generally more reliable than something created by someone who wasn't there. So we would probably place more credibility on the diary of someone who lived through World War II than on a story someone wrote about the war many years later.

5. Historians have names for these different types of information. Accounts written by people of the time who were actually there are known as primary sources. Accounts written later or by people who were not actually there are known as secondary sources.

6. Give them worksheet A so that they can, in small groups, determine which are primary and which are secondary sources. Discuss the answers as a class. Be sure to elicit the reasons why students believe certain sources to be primary or secondary, for in some cases, they can legitimately claim that an item fits into either category. For example, an American history textbook is a secondary source since the people who wrote it did not live through most of the events they are describing. But, it could be considered a primary source if you were doing research about what American schoolchildren studied in the early twenty-first century. The point, of course, is not that we find only one category for every source, but that we think carefully about how reliable a given source is and why we can or cannot trust it.

7. Now let's return to the samurai whom we think we know so well. What are the sources of information about samurai that you have been exposed to prior to this class, primary or secondary? (all secondary) Well then, if we really want to know what the samurai were like, we should turn to some primary sources, read first-hand accounts of what the samurai of medieval Japan had to say about themselves, and then see how well our list of samurai characteristics holds up.

8. The term samurai is used to describe members of the warrior class in Japan. The origins of the samurai are lost in unrecorded history, but by the tenth century there were hereditary warrior families that held posts in the Japanese provinces. Some descended from the imperial family, other from regional power holders, and still others had simply been local landholders. However, it was not until the second half of the twelfth century that samurai held any power at the national level – something they would then hold on to for approximately 700 years in Japan, until the late nineteenth century. The origins of samurai government can be found in a civil war that lasted from 1180 to 1185. During those years, the two leading samurai coalitions of the day, known as the Genji and the Heike, battled the length of Japan on both sea and land. The winners, the Genji, led by Minamoto Yoritomo, formed the first warrior government.

9. The war itself and the soldiers who fought in it were remembered in a famous war tale called *The Tale of the Heike* that started to emerge shortly after the fighting ended. Let's read an account of what one of those samurai was like (distribute handout A). What is Jomyo like? Does anything surprise you? What is his weapon of choice? (The bow and arrow, not the sword). In fact, samurai in ancient and medieval times thought of themselves primarily as "men of the bow and arrow." Although they used swords, it was only much later that swords came to be thought of as the soul of the samurai. In this case, *The Tale of the Heike* probably provides a more accurate account than do modern movies or computer games.

10. But, as historians, we should never trust any source without first considering the three questions we posted at the front of the room. Please make a chart. Across the top, list the three questions; along the side, list one of the modern sources of information about the samurai and then list The Tale of the Heike. Your paper should look something like this:

	When written?	Who wrote it?	Why written?

Tom Cruise's

The Tale of the Heike

Answer the questions for your top row as best you can on your own. For example, the Tom Cruise film was probably written in the early twenty-first century by Hollywood figures who wanted to make a film that would entertain modern American audiences and earn the producers a lot of money. For the bottom row, you will need to tell your students that *The Tale of the Heike* was written down in the 1370s by a Buddhist chanter to entertain audiences and convey Buddhist messages (the students will have no way of knowing this without the teacher telling them). Because it the tale was written down much closer in time to the events it describes, it is surely more reliable than the Tom Cruise movie. But still, we must be careful in how much trust we place in *The Tale of the Heike*. After all, the tale was recorded around 200 years after the actual events (the civil war of 1180-85), and because it was created to illustrate a religious message, the tale probably emphasizes certain events that are in keeping with its message (Note: although you will not be able to discuss this with your students unless you read more of the tale, it does indeed have religious messages, the most significant being the Buddhist notion of the impermanence of all things).

11. With this cautionary statement in mind, what else can our excerpt from *The Tale of the Heike*teach us about medieval Japanese warfare? Working together with a partner, can you find anything else in the quoted passage that seems unusual about the way the Japanese fought? Answers should include two interesting points: that they announced their names and lineage before going into battle and that they wore fancy costumes that drew attention to themselves (as opposed to camouflage)). These are, indeed, distinctive characteristics (and you might find parallel's with Homer's literary accounts of ancient Greek warfare). But, given what we know about the tale, does it accurately reflect twelfth-century warfare?

12. The truth is that we do not know. We have no independent records from the twelfth century that indicate what warriors wore or spoke on the battlefield. In other words, we have no way to verify the information in *The Tale of the Heike*. But we do know that in the fourteenth century, when the tale was written down, warriors did in fact wear bright colors and outlandish costumes to battle in order to be recognized and earn rewards and fame. This may have been true of the twelfth century as well. As for the calling out of names, though, that seems much less likely. Battlefields are noisy places, full of men, horses, equipment, etc. It would not have been quiet enough for individual warriors to call out their names and lineages and be heard. So why are these things included in the tale?

13. Here is where we must consider what we are reading. Remember, the tale was recorded almost 200 years later, so no one was around who had witnessed the events. Even if names were called out, no one would have been on the battlefield to take notes and record what the warriors said. So we have every reason to be suspicious. If we think further, we can also realize that later storytellers had every reason

(and opportunity) to invent the name announcing. After all, the tale was supposed to be chanted aloud by a professional storyteller. The storyteller probably did have a quiet, attentive audience who would listen to the (fictional) boasts of the tale's heroes – indeed, having the great champions on each side announce how mighty they were surely added to the excitement for listeners. So those were probably flourishes added by the storytellers rather than actual battlefield practices. The point is that the tale is not merely a record of the facts; we have to read it carefully if we want to use it to learn about the past.

14. Of course, this is not merely a lesson for us to take away about studying ancient cultures. The same is true of the things we see and hear in our world today. When the government issues a news statement, we have to always remember that government officials want to emphasize certain things (and downplay others). The same is true for people trying to sell us things. The skills that we use as historians thinking about the documents of the past are very similar to the skills that we use as modern people living in an information age – we have to think about the who, when, and why of the things we read in order to decide how much to trust them.