

History
UNFOLDING

CLAN, EMPEROR, SHOGUN

JAPAN IN THE MIDDLE AGES



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

Medieval Japan

The labels “Medieval” or “Middle Ages” call to mind the knights, lords, ladies, and castles of the Europe of the age of chivalry, feudalism, and the Crusades. Efforts to apply these terms to other cultures usually distort their true nature and the real pattern of their histories.

Japan is one valid exception to this rule. From about the 11th century, Japan entered a feudal age that was to last until the great transformation and modernization of that society in the Meiji era of the late 1800s. One activity in this set quotes a historian who makes this point by describing Japanese feudalism and comparing it with feudalism in Europe:

Both had land-based economies, vestiges of a previously centralized state, and a concentration of advanced military technologies in the hands of a specialized fighting class. Lords required loyal services of vassals, who were rewarded with fiefs of their own. The fief holders exercised local military rule and public power related to the holding of land.

It is essentially this theme that ties together the illustrations and lessons in this set. The set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several key aspects of the theme, and on the broad sweep of Japan’s history from the rise of its imperial state through the era of the Tokugawa shogunate. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Island Nation

The natural features of Japan made it difficult to establish a unified central state. Despite Japan’s unbroken imperial tradition, decentralized authority prevailed more often than not before the modern era.

China’s Shadow

China influenced the political institutions and ideas of the Japanese elite from an early time. It also shaped Japan’s culture, art and much more. Yet at the same time, the Japanese were always able to adapt Chinese and other foreign imports to their own uses and cultural traditions.

From Emperor to Shogun

The family of the emperor of Japan was seen as descended from divinity. Yet for much of Japan’s history, the emperor was limited by the powerful localized clans and lords beyond the imperial capital. With the crises of the 12th century and beyond, a new figure—the shogun—worked to impose order on a fragmented Japanese society in a different way.

The Tokugawa Shogunate

The Tokugawa shoguns established a new, more militarized central control. Yet because of Japan’s feudal nature, this shogunate too was often subject to limits. The shoguns sought to freeze society in its tracks. But Japan under the Tokugawa shoguns was a dynamic order not easily kept in place by any central political authority.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Clan, Emperor, Shogun: Japan in the Middle Ages***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will appreciate the impact of geographical factors on Japan's unique history.
2. In particular, students will better understand how Japan's rugged terrain and island status affected its history.

Island Nation

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

This drawing shows a peasant in the Japanese countryside wearing winter clothing during a time of troubles in the 1400s CE. It suggests the simple technological level of Japanese farming then and earlier. In the third century BCE, settlers from Korea began to replace less technically advanced peoples in Japan. These newcomers mostly practiced wet rice farming methods. Japan's rainy summers are ideal for growing rice in paddies. But the work was intense and took a great deal of labor. It also often required the careful use of irrigation methods and close cooperation between all members of the village.

Illustration 2

Shinto is Japan's native religion based on reverence for natural forces and places of special spiritual power. A *torii* is a gateway of crossed pillars found near Shinto shrines. This *torii* is on Miyajima Island, just off the coast of Japan's main island, Honshu. Unlike China, Japan was rarely united under a single ruler or government. Its geography helps to explain why. As this photo suggests, Japan's small valleys and plains are ringed by rugged mountains in many places. Mountains run down the center of Honshu, dividing it into eastern and western sides. Smaller ranges extend off of this spine. This splits the nation into many separate regions which rarely could unite for long. Japan was primarily a land of villages, with all the families of a village organized into one or two clans. Clans were like large extended families, though not all clan members were related by blood. The clan heads were the most powerful figures in Japan until the first central government arose in the sixth century CE.

Illustration 3

In China, the constant threat of invasion by northern nomads often made political unity necessary. But Japan is a series of narrow islands off the coast of Asia. The sea protects Japan. Thus, many Japanese have seen even the sea's destructive power as a good thing. In the 13th century, after conquering China, the Mongols attacked Japan twice, in 1274 and 1281. Each time, storms destroyed their huge fleets and doomed their plans. This illustration shows Japanese opposing the second Mongol invasion. These typhoon-assisted victories led the Japanese to believe they had been protected by a *kamikaze*, which means "divine wind."

Lesson 1—Island Nation

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This drawing is of a peasant in the Japanese countryside wearing winter clothing. It is from the 1400s CE. From this illustration, what can you tell about the life and work of Japan's peasants at that time?
2. Long ago, rice became the main crop raised by Japan's farmers. Economists might say that this drawing only hints at how "labor intensive" traditional Japanese farming was, especially wet rice cultivation. Can you explain what economists mean by the term "labor intensive"?
3. What else do you know about wet rice cultivation and its several stages?
4. Despite the simple technological level of the peasant in this drawing, wet rice cultivation could not have been carried out easily without well-organized villages and a high degree of cooperation among all farmers in a village. From what you know about traditional rice farming, can you explain why?

Follow-up Activities

1. Find out about "Jomon" culture in Japan, which existed from around 10,000–300 BCE, and what sorts of farming if any the Jomon culture carried on. Also find out about the Yayoi peoples who came from Korea and began taking over in Japan in the third century BCE. Who were the Yayoi, and what kinds of agriculture did they practice? Write a brief essay describing what is known about each of these groups and their farming patterns and practices.
2. **Small-group activity:** Rice is very nutritious, but it takes a great deal of time and labor to produce. Learn more about all of these stages of wet rice production as they were traditionally carried out by farmers in Asia. These include growing and transplanting seedlings, preparing wet rice paddies, harvesting the crop, and threshing, hulling, and other tasks needed to make the rice usable as food. Make drawings of rice plants and of each of these stages in the process of growing rice.