Japanese History and Literature

Produced by Columbia University’s Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum of Schools and Colleges

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Designed as a resource for teachers of world history and literature courses, this group of materials can be used as part of faculty development institutes, in-service workshops, or as a resource for individual instructors. Three video tapes survey premodern Japanese history with special reference to selected works of literature: (1) Classical Japan and “The Tale of Genji” (45 minutes), (2) Medieval Japan and Buddhism in Literature (45 minutes), (3) Tokugawa Japan and Puppet Theater, Novels, and the Haiku of Bashō (70 minutes).

A printed guide includes a script of the narration, plus materials to be xeroxed for video viewers—study questions and excerpts from literature being discussed. An appendix provides an instructor’s overview, map exercises, bibliography, and recommended resources.

The project team has addressed an extremely difficult problem—how, with a limited budget, to use a visual, action-oriented medium to create enthusiasm for the study of texts. The video programs primarily consist of what the TV generation calls “talking heads,” but the speakers are impressive authorities: Donald Keene, Paul Varley, Carol Gluck, Haruo Sirane, and Henry Smith. The narrator is Robert Oxnam, President Emeritus of the Asia Society. Even luminaries can be deadly on camera, and taped lectures hardly engage the potential of the video medium. The best that can be hoped for is that the lecturers will communicate their personal enthusiasm for the topics. These “heads” deliver. Experiencing Sirane’s explication of a Bashō haiku is a

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genuine delight. There are a few
stiff moments, but the speakers
provide us with credible expres-
sions of their excitement and
pleasure as they dispense solid
background information teachers
can use.

These videos are genuine
resources, not plug-and-play
classroom modules. The informa-
tion, while basic, is a bit con-
centrated for the target audience
of teachers largely unfamiliar
with things Japanese. The printed
script will be particularly valu-
able for such individuals. As rec-
commended by the project editors,
those segments useful for high
school or college student view-
ing, such as direct comments
about literary selections, need
to be carefully extracted by
the classroom teacher who
has already absorbed the video
lectures. Attempts to compare
Japan’s historical and literary
achievements with those of
other cultures are left largely to
the viewer.

The video production has
some problems. The decision to
illustrate several battle scenes by
moving the camera around a
two-dimensional painting sug-
gests a low budget. The repeated
use of a percussion ensemble for
the soundtrack becomes irritat-
ing. Video strobing during
sequences panning calligraphy
looks technically unprofessional.
Employing slides, several poorly
reproduced, to depict Japanese
historical sites is disappointing.
Video clips of nature scenes,
often illustratively weak, are
so generic they could well
have been taken in rural New
England.

Aspects of the printed study
guide need improvement also.
The hand-drawn maps teachers
are invited to duplicate are aes-
thetically out of touch with the
fact that increasingly, secondary
school teachers and their stud-
ents have sharp, computer-gen-
nerated materials available to
them. The “homemade look” no
longer wins points. The one pro-
fessional looking map, bor-
rrowed, but poorly reproduced,
from Japan Today, has serious
pedagogical design flaws for
those unfamiliar with Japan’s
geography. Injecting hand-writ-
ten Japanese characters into
printed English text in this day
of multi-lingual word processing
looks crude. Missing among the
list of resources and much more
useful in explaining premodern
Japan than The Pacific Century
Video Series, is the old, but still
serviceable, fourteen-part series,
Japan: The Living Tradition by
the University of Mid-America.

In summary, the content of this
video series is strong, and the
experts are engaging; however,
the general production quality is
not up to the usual Annenberg/
CPB Collection standard.

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