

Japanese Folktales

Purpose:

This lesson is designed to enable students to appreciate cultural diversity by introducing them to Japanese folktales.

Target Grade Level: K-8

Essential Questions:

- What do folktales tell about a country's culture?
- How do folktales in Japan compare to those in the United States?

Concepts:

- Cultural similarities and differences
- *On*--a debt of honor in Japan
- Favor, a kind act

Key Ideas:

- Japanese folktales reveal information about Japanese history, life, and customs.
- Japanese and American traditional folktales have many similar characters (animals and royalty), plots (magical occurrences and transformations), and themes (kindness rewarded and evil punished).
- In Japan, folktales are often told through a series of large pictures depicting the important scenes of the story. This is called a *Kamishibai* or paper play.
- In American culture, a favor or kind act is returned with a "thank you." In Japanese culture, a favor is viewed as *on*, a debt of honor. The person receiving the favor is obligated to return the favor, often with elaborate gifts.

Materials:

1. "The Crane that Returned the Favor" (Handout A)
2. Posterboard (11" x 14") - 14 pieces and paint, crayons, markers, glue, wallpaper samples, fabric, etc. for paper play activity.
3. A collection of American folktale books.

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4. A collection of Japanese folktale books. The following books have been translated into English and are available through Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont, your local library, or The Institute for Japanese Studies, japan@osu.edu, 614-292-3345:

Japanese Children's Favorite Stories

Japanese Children's Stories

Kintaro's Adventures and Other Japanese Children's Stories

Old Tales of Japan

Urashima Taro and Other Japanese Children's Stories

Procedures:

Day One

1. Introduce the lesson by asking the students if they think Japanese and American folktales are similar or different. Have them discuss their reasons why.
2. Give students copies of "The Crane that Returned the Favor" (Handout A). Read the story.
3. Discuss the folktale. How did the old man help the crane? How did the crane return the favor? Introduce the concept of *on*, a debt of honor. Ask the students if the crane had to repay a debt of honor? Have the students ever experienced a favor, a kind act? Give examples. How did they return the favor? Why did the crane assume human form and then return to its original form? What lessons can be learned from this folktale?
4. Introduce students to the word *kamishibai* (paper play). Explain that in Japan folktales are often told through a series of large pictures depicting the important scenes of the story.

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5. Divide the class into 14 groups. Ask each group to illustrate its part of the story on the posterboard. Write the portion of the story being illustrated on the back of the posterboard.
6. Each group holds up its illustration and reads its part of the story of "The Crane that Returned the Favor."
7. Close the lesson by having the students discuss the main idea they learned from the folktale.

Day Two

1. Introduce the lesson by summarizing the Japanese folktale studies the day before and asking students if they think American folktales will be similar or different.
2. Read to the students or have them read an American folktale of the teacher's choosing.
3. Discuss this folktale using the similar questions as in step 3 but make the questions appropriate for the folktale read.
4. Divide the class into an appropriate number of groups based on the folktale read. Ask each group to illustrate its part of the story on the posterboard. Write the portion of the story being illustrated on the back of the posterboard.
5. Each group holds up its illustration and read its part of the American folktale.
6. Close the lesson by discussing with the class how the Japanese folktale compared with the American one.

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Enrichment Activity:

1. Have the students present their *kamishibai* to other classes.
2. To stimulate interest in reading folktales, make an attractive display of both Japanese and American folktales. Place the books near the bulletin board. On the bulletin board, write motivating questions such as "Who saved a turtle and was rewarded with a visit to the Sea Princess?" As the students read folktales, they can make up their own questions and create answers to the ones already on the bulletin board. Answers to the questions should be illustrated. Once the bulletin board is completed, it provides a review of the folktales read and stimulates students interest in reading additional stories.
3. Teachers can stimulate interest in reading in the following ways:
 - a. Read a folktale to the class and lead a discussion of the story;
 - b. Ask two students to work together to read a specific tale and prepare a written or oral summary to present to the class;
 - c. Have a small group of students read a folktale together, then ask them to write and prepare a dramatization of the folktale to share with the class and/or other classes in the school. A variation of this could be a puppet play, a traditional art form in Japan (*bunraku*). Puppet plays in Japan take a different form from those in the United States. Have the student note the difference.

Evaluation:

After the lesson is completed, have the students complete a Venn diagram or explain in some other way how the American and Japanese folktales were similar and different.

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Relationship to State Social Studies Standards:

Kindergarten, People in Societies, Grade-level Indicator 2

I identify different cultures through the study of holidays, customs, and traditions utilizing language, stories, folktales, music, and the arts.

Grade 1, People in Societies, Grade-level Indicator 2

I identify cultural practices of a culture on each continent through the study of the folktales, music, and art created by people living in that culture.

Grade 2, People in Societies, Grade-level Indicator 2

Describe ways in which language, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence the behavior of people living in a particular culture.

Grade 3, People in Societies, Grade-level Indicator 2

Compare the cultural practices and products of the local community with those of other communities in Ohio, the United States, and countries of the world.

Grades 6-8, People in Societies, Benchmark A

Compare cultural practices, products, and perspectives of past civilizations in order to understand commonality and diversity of cultures.

This lesson was developed by Julia Morris, teacher, Westerville City Schools, and revised by Dr. Betty Barclay Franks, teacher, Maple Heights City Schools, Ohio. It was revised further for this publication by Dr. Kent J. Minor, Director, Ohio Japan Project.

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Handout A

THE CRANE THAT RETURNED THE FAVOR

This folktale was taken from a "kamishibai" made and sent to Julia Morris by Sachiko Miyata, Oita City, Kyushu Island, Japan.

Picture # 1 - Long, long ago in a certain place there lived an old man and an old woman. By taking firewood to town every day and selling it, they were barely able to make a living.

One day as he was coming home from town the old man noticed something fluttering in the snow. "What could that be?" he said to himself.

Coming closer he found a crane struggling to free itself from a trap. "Oh, poor bird! I'll let you loose. Here...". The old man loosened the trap that was holding the crane's leg.

Picture #2 - Spreading its broad wings the crane soared up toward the sky. "Kau! Kau! Kau!" 1 she cried. After briefly circling overhead, the crane flew off toward the mountains.

"Never get caught again," muttered the old man.

Picture #3 - That night there was a "ton-ton, ton-ton" 2 sound. Someone was knocking on the front door. The old woman wondered who it could be at this time of night. When she opened the door, there stood the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. The girl spoke up. "I am lost. Could you please put me up for the night?"

"What a shame. Yes, come right in," replied the old woman.

Picture #4 - The next morning the old man and woman woke up to find the

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house cleaned and breakfast already prepared. "What a bright girl she is!" Both of them took a liking to her. Thereupon the girl said, "I will work hard, so please let me stay here with you."

"What! You mean to say you will become our daughter! By all means!" They were overjoyed, and consented.

The girl was good-natured and worked very hard. She cleaned and did the wash and helped with many other chores. The old man was so happy he said to her, "Is there anything you wish to have?"

"I would like to weave," she replied. "Would you buy me some yarn?"

Picture #5 - The old man bought some yarn for his daughter. "I have a request," she said. "Please don't look in while I am weaving."

"All right. You can trust us."

The girl went into the shed and began weaving. "*Kata-kata baton, kata-kata battan*" 3 went the loom,.

"She's a good weaver, eh?" "Really, I say she can do anything!" Sitting beside the hearth the old couple listened spellbound to the sound to their daughter's weaving.

Picture #6 - From then on the girl wove continually without eating. At last on the night of the third day she came out of the shed.

"Here. See what I made," she said as she spread the finished cloth in front of them.

"What a beautiful cloth!" exclaimed the old woman, her eyes wide open. The old man sighed many times and shook his head in wonderment.

"Please take it to town and sell it," requested the girl.

Picture #7 - The old man took the cloth to town and cried out, "Is there

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anybody who would like to buy this cloth?" At once people began gathering around him and remarked, "This is extraordinary. We have never seen such beautiful cloth! It's almost as if the cranes are alive." They continued to admire the cloth, but nobody dared asked the price. Certainly it would be too expensive.

Picture #8 - Just then a Lord happened to pass by. The old man timidly approached him and said, "Sir, please buy this cloth. It is very rare.

"What, a rare piece of cloth you say?" The Lord dismounted from his horse and took the cloth in his hands. It glittered brightly and looked as if it would fly away any moment. "Well, it really is an amazing piece of cloth. I'll take it," said the Lord as he handed over a bag full of *koban*.⁵ "Where did you get this?"

The old man swelled with pride as he answered, "My daughter wove it."

"Ah, good. I want another one woven. I'll pay you a handsome price for it.

"Yes, sir. Yes, indeed."

Picture #9 - With some of the gold coins the old man bought more rolls of silk yarn and hastily returned home.

"Look at all this money!" he exclaimed, waving the money bag back and forth.

"How lucky we are," cried the old woman with joy. At that she immediately began preparing a feast.

Handing the bundles of yarn to their daughter the old man said, "Here you are. We're counting on you."

Picture #10 - The following day the girl again went into the shed. "*Kata-kata battan. Kata-kata battan.*" The rhythmical sound of the loom could be heard coming from the shed.

"What a good weaver she is!" the old woman said with delight.

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"We'll make a decent living because of her," joined in the old man.

Picture #11 - The girl continued weaving without eating or sleeping. On the morning of the third day, the old woman began to worry about her daughter. Furthermore, she became curious as to how the girl wove.

"It wouldn't hurt to just peek, would it?" she asked.

"Don't do it! The girl asked us not to look in, didn't she?" The old man hurriedly tried to put a stop to his wife's suggestion. But the old woman couldn't hold herself any longer and peered into the shed through a crack in the window.

Picture #12 - "Oh! she gasped unthinkingly. There sat a crane, weaving on a loom. With her beak she was plucking her own feathers and weaving them into the cloth. The crane had become very thin, and as she wove, her tiny feathers went flying.

The old woman tried calling the old man, but no words came. All she could be was motion to him. Wondering what the matter was, he came up beside her.

"Oh, a crane!" He swallowed hard.

Picture #13 - The girl came out of the shed carrying the newly-woven cloth. It seemed even more beautiful than the first one. Addressing the old man and woman, she said, "I am much obliged to you for your help. I am the crane you helped on that wintry day. Unfortunately, though, now that my real nature has been seen, I cannot remain in the form of a person. I truly hope the best for you." Even as she spoke and the girl changed into a crane. Without pausing she went outside and took off into the sky.

Picture #14 - "W...wait!" cried the old man and woman as they hurried after her.

"*Kau! Kau! Kau!*" called out the crane as she circle above the two. She soared ever higher and soon disappeared into the clouds.

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Notes:

1. "Kau, kau" is the Japanese rendition of a crane's call.
2. "*Ton-ton*" can be equated with "tap-tap", the sound of knocking on a door.
3. "*Kata-kata-battan*" can be equated with "clickety-clackety".
4. "Lord" refers to a feudal lord--a "prince" in Western stories.
5. A "*koban*" was a gold coin in old Japan.