Centers of Progress, Part 34: Kyoto (The Novel)

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Lesson Overview

Featured article: "Centers of Progress, Pt. 34: Kyoto (The Novel)" by Chelsea Follett

Chelsea Follett writes, "Today, Kyoto remains the cultural heart of Japan. Its well-preserved Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and royal palaces attract tourists from around the world, and its Zen gardens have had a profound influence on the art of landscaping." Kyoto was also "the center of the novel's invention, a turning point in the history of the literary arts."

In this lesson, you will learn how Kyoto became Japan's capital and a flourishing center of poetry, prose, and the visual arts during the Heian period (794–1185 CE). The emperor's court developed a sophisticated, aristocratic culture that emphasized artistic expression, resulting in the composition of the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*, a treasure of world literature.

Warm-Up

Today's Kyoto

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Kyoto, an ancient city with a rich cultural heritage, is home to approximately 2,000 temples and shrines, the finest Japanese gardens, refined cuisine, exquisite handicrafts, and well-preserved historic neighborhoods. Its 17 individual UNESCO World Heritage sites, the most of any city in the world, make it a unique and fascinating destination.

Despite its ancient roots, Kyoto is also a modern metropolis and the center of Japan's second-most populated urban area after Tokyo. Its top tourist destination status, with over 30 million visitors annually, is a testament to its enduring appeal. Watch this guide video to get a glimpse of Kyoto's main attractions.

As you watch, answer these questions:

- How far is Kyoto from Tokyo?
- Which other ancient East Asian capital was the urban model for the city of Kyoto?
- What is the main historical reason why Kyoto became Japan's cultural capital?
- What is the specific reason why so much of Kyoto's traditional architecture was preserved in the 20th century?
- What is Kyo-Kaiseki?
- What do you notice about the Japanese approach to nature from the visuals of Kyoto's temples and gardens?
- Are you interested in visiting Kyoto? If yes, what about the city intrigues you? If not, why not?

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read the article and then answer the following questions:

- What is the environmental reason Japan's architectural heritage is so fragile?

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- How does the grid layout of Kyoto's streets reflect larger cultural and social patterns in East Asia during the Tang Dynasty?
- How was the artistic refinement of the Heian period (794–1185 CE) related to Japan's political situation at the time?
- Japan's history is marked by cycles of openness and insularity to the outside world. It was during these periods of closure that Japanese culture developed its most unique features, distinct from foreign influences.

Make inferences and use information from the article to respond to these questions:

- How was the growing isolationism of the later Heian period reflected in Japanese painting?
- What is the connection between the development of native Japanese scripts (Hiragana and Katakana) and the gradual shift toward cultural and political isolationism?
- The Fujiwara and other prosperous Japanese families patronized the arts during the Heian period. Centuries later, wealthy European families, notably the Medicis of Florence and Sforzas of Milan, also supported the creation of great artworks.

Using information from the article and your knowledge of history, write 2–3 sentences comparing the 2 types of patronage. What was the same? What was different?

- A persistent theme in Japanese poetry is the focus on the fleeting nature of life. How did imported Buddhist beliefs reinforce this cultural tendency?
- What is the significance of *The Tale of Genji* to world literature?

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Extension Activities/Homework

Write a Haiku

Nowadays, the most famous type of Japanese poetry in the West is the haiku, a poetic form that developed in the 1600s. However, we can trace the haiku's roots to early Japanese poetry, specifically *waka* poetry by Heian-era courtiers.

For this activity, try writing your own haiku. However, before you begin, you must know some of a haiku's crucial elements.

- **Syllable structure:** Haikus consist of 3 lines with a syllable pattern 5-7-5, totaling 17 syllables. Modern haiku, especially English ones, can have a more flexible format. However, composing within the traditional framework can be a fun challenge.
- **Kigo:** This is a seasonal word or phrase included to anchor the poem in nature, the passing of time, or a season. Try to include at least 1 reference to natural phenomena or a particular time of year.
- **Kireji:** A "cutting word" (*kireji*) is sometimes used to create a pause or provide emphasis, giving the haiku a subtle shift in tone or perspective.

A haiku is usually about a brief experience and the poet's accompanying feeling or reflection. Think of haiku as verbal snapshots of time. Because of their brevity, haiku are open to interpretation. For example, here's a famous haiku about Kyoto by master poet Matsuo Basho:

Even in Kyoto,

hearing the cuckoo's cry,

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I long for Kyoto.

Although we cannot be sure, many people believe that Basho was trying to convey nostalgia for a special place we know we must leave; we anticipate our future memories and the longing and desire to relive our time there.

Now you try. The experience you write about does not have to be profound. Also, do not get too hung up on counting syllables. Remember something you observed, describe it briefly, and then state your feelings. Here are several more haiku examples:

I write, and I listen
to the purring of the cat
by the window sill.

The rain is falling—
and I forgot my umbrella,
but I do have a hat.

The squirrel in my yard
keeps raiding the bird feeder—
it's not a bird, you know.

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Life Expectancy in Japan

Follett quotes a Japanese historian, "According to books on the history of epidemic disease and medical treatment, aristocratic women, on average, died at age 27 or 28, while men died at age 32 or 33. In addition to the infant mortality rate being extremely high, the rate of women dying at childbirth was also high. . . . Looking at the specific causes of death at the time, tuberculosis (possibly including pneumonia cases) accounted for 54 percent, beriberi for 20 percent, and diseases of the skin (including smallpox) for 10 percent."

Today, Japanese people enjoy one of the longest average life expectancies in the world: 81.6 years. What combination of factors do you think accounts for their longevity?

First, read the material on Our World in Data that explains the various reasons for the worldwide trend toward longer lifespans. Then, read these articles specific to Japan: Okinawa Blue Zone, Longevity Secrets, and 7 Reasons. A simple web search will provide you with even more information.

Finally, write a 250-word report on the causes of Japanese longevity in the 21st century. Include specific evidence to back up each of your claims. For example, if you say that Japanese life expectancy has increased along with per capita gross domestic product, you must include the data to support that assertion.

Be sure to address the following in your report:

- The current life expectancy of Japanese people

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- Healthy diets
- Good daily habits
- Medical advances
- Improved public health
- Economic development
- Education
- Reduction in child mortality

Finally, include a works cited section at the end of your report.

Analyze Traditional Japanese Architecture

One of the joys of visiting Kyoto is experiencing its exquisite architecture and landscaped gardens, which reflect the city's cultural heritage and historical significance.

Make a Google Slides presentation that describes each of the following types of Japanese structures, using 1 notable example of each kind in Kyoto.

Buddhist temple

Pagoda

Shinto shrine

Machiya (traditional townhouses)

Tea house

Dry gardens (sometimes called "Zen" gardens by Westerners)

Your presentation should note essential architectural features, materials, and room or garden layouts. Also, discuss how religious beliefs influence site selection and design and

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how architectural elements reflect cultural values. For example, what Shinto belief is reflected in placing ritual handwashing basins near shrine entrances?

A picture is worth a thousand words. Include high-quality images and possibly videos to illustrate your points.

To conclude, answer this question: Why is Kyoto's architecture a vital way to understand Japanese culture and history?

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