



# **A Source Discussion of Blind People in Early Modern Japan**

**Lesson Plan:** A Source Discussion of Blind People in Early Modern Japan

**Created by:** Wayne Tan, Hope College

**Creation date:** December, 2023

**Keywords:** Europe, Travels, Early Modern Japan, Blind People, Disability

---

## **A Source Discussion of Blind People in Early Modern Japan**

### **Target Audience:**

High school grades 9-12, Undergraduate students

### **Duration:**

1 class session (50-60 mins)

### **Learning Objectives:**

1. **To learn to use a primary source** (in English) on Japan
2. **To discuss how to identify comments on disability** in a primary source
3. **To discuss how disability can inform historical views** of the person(s) observing and the person(s) being observed
4. **To learn to spot cultural biases**

5. To discuss techniques of cross-cultural comparison (e.g. how to use historical contexts to discuss cultural differences)

### **Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:**

- Disability Studies courses
- Early modern European and/or European Studies courses
- Japanese studies courses, East Asian Studies courses
- Book history courses
- World history courses

### **Required Materials:**

#### **Primary source:**

- Kaempfer, Engelbert. *The History of Japan Together with a Description of Siam, 1690-92*, vol. 2, book 3, pp. 51-56. English translation: J. G. Scheuchzer. Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906.

**Note:** This sourcebook can be accessed free of charge via the [HathiTrust Digital Library](#) or [Google Books](#). There are also more recent editions in publication.

### **Other Potential Materials:**

#### **Secondary sources:**

The follow can provide additional background information on Tokugawa Japan, disability/blindness, Europeans and Dutch.

Bodart-Bailey, Beatrice M. *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*. University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

Clulow, Adam. *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*. Columbia University Press, 2014)

Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the*

Present. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Oyler, Elizabeth. *Swords, Oaths, and Prophetic Visions: Authoring Warrior Rule in Medieval Japan*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. [a source on the historical events behind *The Tale of the Heike*]

Oyler, Elizabeth. *Swords, Oaths, and Prophetic Visions: Authoring Warrior Rule in Medieval Japan*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. [a source on the historical events behind *The Tale of the Heike*, a primary source that may also be useful accompaniment. See *The Tale of the Heike*, either translated by Royall Tyler (2012) or Helen Craig McCullough (1990)]

Tan, Wei Yu Wayne. *Blind in Early Modern Japan: Disability, Medicine, and Identity*. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

### **Activity/Procedure:**

- Find Kaempfer's descriptions of blind people in the primary source (vol. 2, book 3, pp. 51-56).
- Take note of the descriptions of the professions of blind people, their religion, their location (where they live), their social organization (e.g. their social titles), and any other details.
- Think about Kaempfer's background (e.g. his purpose in Japan as a scientist/botanist/traveler, etc.), and his position in Japanese society.
- Choose a passage to analyze.
- Examine other sections in the book (in book 3), e.g. regarding Kaempfer's observations of other social groups in Japan.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- –What does Kaempfer say about blind people's professions?
- What does Kaempfer find fascinating about the blind people he observes? Name/discuss 3 points.
- What do you think are Kaempfer's ideas of disability?

- How do you think the passage/s you analyze tell us more about Tokugawa (early modern Japanese) society and/or about disability in Japanese society?
- What are some similarities that you find between the blind people and the other social groups Kaempfer observes?
- What might be some differences about the ideas of disability between Japan back then and Japan (or a different society) today?

### **Relevant Vocabulary:**

- Feki blind (a reference to *Heike* music, a musical genre)
- Miaco (Kyoto)
- *Heike (The Tale of Heike)* was performed musically by blind male musicians from the medieval period. Although its popularity declined in the early modern period, it retained symbolic meaning as the representative genre of blind male musicians.

### **Evaluation:**

- Students could spend 10 minutes discussing the questions in their groups, before gathering to talk about their discussion points.
- This could also be a written assignment (a short analysis paper of around 300-400 words) with one of the discussion questions as a prompt.
- Students could learn to cite phrases and comment on them.

### **Background:**

There are not a lot of primary or secondary sources on disability history (the history of disability) in Japan in general. During his stay in Japan, Kaempfer was affiliated with the Dutch East India Company, which was the only European presence allowed in Japan under the Japanese shogunate's strict foreign diplomatic policies. This English translation of Kaempfer's travel account is one of the most valuable sources on observations of disability in Japan. Written by an outsider to Japanese

society, this account perhaps simulates what a 17th-century traveler to Japan might have encountered there—the people in everyday life, the customs and laws, the travel routes around the country, etc. We (teachers/students) might be able to find sources for comparison, e.g. a comparison between Kaempfer's work and another English-language original source from 19th-century England that could be helpful for drawing out similarities and differences about how people wrote about blind people. It might also be useful to ask students first what some assumptions about disability are (or what assumptions they know of), and how the assumptions may influence the reading of primary sources on disability.

### **Further Resources:**

Movie/film reference: [Inu-oh](#) (a contemporary Japanese animated film adapted from *The Tale of the Heike*, featuring a blind male musician named Tomona)

---

### **Credits/Acknowledgements:**

- HathiTrust Digital Library
- Google Books
- All primary and secondary source authors and attributions