

art

summer 2005

connections

a teacher resource guide

Taiko - the festival drumming of Japan

This teacher resource guide provides information and ideas for classroom instruction and the study of Japanese culture and history through the exploration of *taiko*, a traditional form of Japanese drumming.

THEME: The performing art of *taiko* is relatively new, with the first public performance taking place in 1951. It was the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, however, that placed taiko onto the international stage. Since then, this art form, uniquely Japanese and steeped with traditional and contemporary influences, has captured the world's attention. It is thought that there are over 5,000 taiko performing ensembles in Japan, and over 150 in the United States. While taiko as a performing art is young, the drum itself has been in Japan for thousands of years, used first as an instrument for ceremony in the *Buddhist* tradition. By studying the history of taiko, insight can be gained into the history of Japan.

BACKGROUND: In Japanese, the word taiko literally means "fat drum," but can also refer to the ensembles who use taiko in performance. There are many different sizes and shapes of taiko, from the very large *o-daiko* to the smaller *shime-daiko*, but the word taiko references all of them (when the word taiko is used in a compound word situation, the "t" changes to a "d").

The taiko, or drum, found its way to Japan sometime in the seventh century by way of China and the Buddhist monks who were traveling to Japan. The taiko was used in ceremony, and was said to sound like the voice of Buddha. Up until 900AD, Japan was heavily influenced by the cultures of China, Korea, and India, but during the 10th century, these cultural influences ended. Since then, the taiko has been developed by Japanese craftspeople and is considered a uniquely Japanese instrument.

Taiko as a performing ensemble dates back to just after World War II when Japan's borders re-opened to the West. The taiko performing ensemble, called *kumi-daiko*, has many group members who perform on stage at the same time, utilizing many different kinds of taiko, and often incorporating movement and athleticism into their performances. This kind of performance was made popular worldwide by a group called *Kodo* from the island of Sado in Niigata Prefecture, Japan.

Taiko has had a place in Japanese culture over time and in a wide variety of settings. Specific kinds of taiko are associated with different kinds of events. One of the first uses of taiko was on the battlefield. The sounds of very large taiko were used to scare or intimidate the enemy, or to issue commands and movements on the battlefield. The drum was used to drive evil spirits from a village, and at harvest time was played to give thanks for a bountiful crop. Specific kinds of taiko are used in conjunction with traditional Japanese performing arts, including *Noh* and *Kabuki* theater; others for religious ceremony; and still others for community festivals. But whether being used for ceremonial or performance purposes, the sound of taiko is unmistakable.

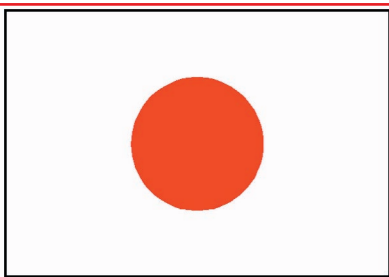


A Little Japanese History:

Japan is an island nation in east Asia. Over 3,500 islands make up all of Japan, but the four largest islands are *Hokkaido*, *Honshu*, *Shikoku* and *Kyushu*. More than 126 million people live in Japan, which is comprised of large, metropolitan cities like the capital, Tokyo, and small rural villages. Most of Japan’s population is located in the coastal cities.

Japan is known historically as the “Land of the Rising Sun” as symbolized by its flag, with a history dating back over 2,000 years. From the 12th to the late 19th century, feudal lords, or *shoguns*, held political control of Japan and forced all foreigners from Japan in the 17th century, suspecting they were spies for European armies. In 1854, **Matthew Perry** of the U.S. Navy, sailed to Japan, opening the country up to Western influences. The *shoguns* lost political control of Japan in the 1860s, and the Emperor of Japan once again came to power. The current emperor of Japan, Akihito, took the throne in 1989.

Japan’s history and influence in Asia and around the world has dramatically changed since World War II, when Japan, already recognized around the world as a military power, successfully attacked U.S. naval forces at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In 1945, the United States attacked Japan, dropping two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing the collapse of the Japanese empire and the surrender of Japan. In 1947, Japan, under the direction of the United States, adopted a new constitution, renounced war, granted basic human rights, and declared itself a democracy. Today, the United States has a good relationship with Japan and its’ government, which consists of a Prime Minister and legislative bodies (the Emperor is mostly a figurehead), and Japan has once again gained status as a good world partner with an emphasis of universal peace.



Japan is often called the *Land of the Rising Sun* due to its geographic location in the far east. The Japanese flag, above, illustrates this phrase, with the red circle in the center of a white field, symbolizing the sun.

A Little Japanese Culture:

Japanese is the official language of Japan, and written Japanese, or *kanji*, is closely related to written Chinese, utilizing signs or symbols similar to pictures to depict the meaning of words. The Japanese also use two phonetic alphabets, *hiragana* and *katakana*, which incorporate the characters, and a third alphabet, called *romaji*, which uses Roman letters.

Festivals are an important part of Japanese culture, and mark all aspects of Japanese life, from celebrating children to remembering ancestors. There are hundreds of festivals all over Japan every year, and often taiko are played at the festivals, or *matsuri*, with the drum and drummers atop a float or tall structure usually located in the center of the festival events. *O-Bon Matsuri* celebrates the lives of family ancestors who have passed. Families return to their family homes and build bonfires, light candles, and float lanterns on rivers to help the souls of the dead find their way home. Towers are built and drummers play taiko all night in celebration while villagers dance a traditional *o-bon* dance. *O-bon* is Buddhist in origin and takes place in Japanese communities throughout Japan in August of each year.

Kanji are symbols of words borrowed from the Chinese written language, and often look similar to the words they represent. Here are the *kanji* for tree (top), woods (middle), and forest (bottom). Notice how the *kanji* for tree looks like a tree, and as you add more trees, you create the woods, and finally, the forest.



Kodomo-no-hi is Japanese for “the day that belongs to the children” and is a festival celebrated on May 5. On this day, many families fly giant carp kites, called *koinobori*, from poles around their homes. A family will fly as many kites as they have family members, with the largest kite representing the father; the next largest representing the mother; and, the smallest kites representing the children. The carp, or *koi*, has special significance in Japan, and represents determination and strength, a wish the Japanese have for their children as they grow older.

The visual, folk, and performing arts of Japan are steeped in Japanese history, and are often passed on from one generation to the next from master to mentor. The art of *origami* (Japanese paper folding) was introduced to Japan by the Chinese around the 1st century AD by Buddhist Monks. It was commonly taught by a mother to her daughter, in the oral tradition, until 1797 when the book *Senbazuru Orikata* (*How to Fold One Thousand Cranes*) was published. *Senbazuru*, or one thousand cranes, are still often made today. It is believed that when you fold one thousand cranes, connect them, and hang them with a thread, wishes will be granted.



O-daiko

The Taiko:

Taiko come in all different shapes and sizes. One of the oldest and most respected builders of taiko in Japan is a company called Asano Taiko. The Asano family has been building taiko for nearly 400 years, and like many other artistic and cultural traditions, the art of building taiko has been carefully passed down from generation to generation.

O-daiko. The *o-daiko* is the largest drum in the taiko ensemble, and is often used as a solo instrument. Traditionally, the *o-daiko* is carved from one solid piece of wood and can take the builder as many as three years to complete. The size and the sound of the *o-daiko* is equally impressive. The largest *o-daiko* can be found in Aikita Prefecture, Japan (it is in the Guinness Book of World Records). The skins of this drum are tacked on, and a very large *o-daiko* requires the full hide from a holstein bull.

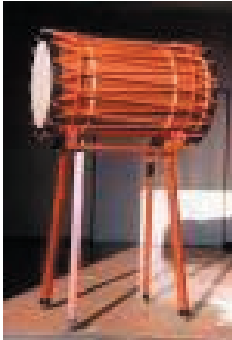
Nagado-daiko. The *nagado-daiko* is commonly found at festivals, and in temples and shrines (where they are often called *miya-daiko*). The skins of these drums are tacked on to the shell, which is a solid piece of wood. There are many ways to play this drum and it is by far the most popular taiko used today.



Nagado-daiko

O-kedo. *Okedo* means barrel-shaped and is believed to be the oldest style of taiko in Japanese culture. The body of the drum is made from staves, or planks, rather than a solid piece of wood, and because the skins of this drum are roped rather than tacked, they are easier to carry. The *okedo* was probably brought into northern Japan from Korea, carried on horseback. These taiko are also often seen at festivals, especially in villages that have a farming or hunting culture, and because they are light, can be carried and played while dancing.

Shime-daiko. The *shime-daiko* is similar to the *o-kedo* in that the skins are attached by rope rather than tacks, but are much smaller with a high, sharp sound. In taiko groups, the *shime-daiko* is often used to keep the basic rhythm and establish time, but they can also be used as a solo instrument. The word *shime* comes from the Japanese verb *shimeru*, which means to bind or tighten up. It has a one piece body carved out of hardwood, and the shell is often beautifully lacquered and decorated.



O-kedo

While there are many other types and variations of taiko, these four instruments are the ones that are most popular and seen most often during taiko performances.

Taiko in Japanese Theater:

Taiko has been a part of Japanese theater for centuries. It is most associated with *Noh* and *Kabuki* theater, and is still used in performances today.



Shime-daiko

Japanese *Noh* theater was created in Kyoto sometime within the 14th or 15th century. Its purpose was to entertain the Japanese aristocrats and *Noh* remained the aristocracy's chief form of entertainment for over 400 years. *Noh* theater is part dance and part song, and the *shime-daiko* is one of the instruments used in the musical ensemble. In its original form, all of the actors in a *Noh* drama were men. They wore masks, sang, danced, and used rhyming words. The movements in *Noh* are very slow and the stories are based on Shinto dances and Buddhist teachings. The action on stage is in the form of flashbacks and the themes are usually powerful and serious. *Noh* costumes are colorful and elaborately embroidered. The replication of natural sounds, prevalent in the soundtrack of *Noh* dramas, have had a strong influence on taiko compositions.

The origins of Japanese *Kabuki* theater go back to the early 17th century in Kyoto when a female temple dancer, Izumo no Okuni, produced these plays on temporary stages outside Kyoto around 1603. While it was a woman who created the *kabuki* style, women were not allowed to perform on stage, and all parts were played by men. *Kabuki* literally means song and dance, and the late 18th century is regarded as the golden age of *Kabuki*. At that time, the theaters were full of romance and intrigue. The audience was entertained by popular actors in lavish costumes, performing the newest forms of music and dance and innovative theater tricks. While *Noh* theater was reserved for Japanese aristocracy, *Kabuki* was theater for the common man. Taiko provides the soundtrack of *Kabuki*, evoking the sounds of weather or establishing a particular mood. And while the sounds of taiko are prevalent throughout the performances, the instruments are never seen on stage.

classroom connections:

These activities are just a few recommended classroom lessons that incorporate Japanese history and culture. While they are categorized into specific subjects, many cross disciplines, and all link to specific benchmarks of the State of Ohio Standards for Education. All activities are easily adapted to various grade levels.

Mathematics:

Proportion and Ratio - select a work of Japanese art, the map of Japan, or some other visual representation of Japan and enlarge the work to a specific degree.

Research Japan's monetary system and determine the worth, in dollars and cents, of each denomination. Ask students to take a specific amount of U.S. money and find its equal worth in Japanese currency using a current exchange rate, easily found on the internet.

Research the *abacus*. Make an *abacus* and use it to solve basic math problems.

Learn to count in Japanese and practice writing Japanese numbers in *kanji*.

Science:

Using the internet, compare the weather in Columbus, OH to specific cities in Japan - be sure to select cities throughout Japan, providing a diverse view of the country. Ask students to work on one city and one measurement of weather (i.e. - high temperature, wind speed, precipitation). Collect the data over a specific period of time, then ask the students to make a brief report, describing the location of their city, including latitude, longitude, and elevation in relationship to Columbus, and the presence of any geographical features that may contribute to the weather. They could also include a graph or table comparing and contrasting the collected data.

Research natural events like tsunami, earthquakes, and volcanoes, using the library and the internet. Students could make a contour map of a volcano and study Mt. Fuji. The earthquake in Kobe, Japan, was dramatic and students could research what happened as well as the reconstruction efforts of this port city. Ask students to present a brief report detailing the information they have discovered, OR create a poster, model, or some other representation of their subject.

Study the science of sound through the construction of Japanese instruments. Ask students to research a traditional instrument (shakuhachi, taiko, etc.) including its origins and design. They could also compare their instrument to one used in Western culture. Once the research, using technology, the library, and their school's music educator, is complete, the students should work in groups to construct one of the instruments. Ideas should be generated about design and materials. In the end, the instrument should be able to be played, and sound reasonably like the traditional Japanese instrument.

Language Arts:

Ask the students to read, or read aloud to them, the book *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. With the assistance of the art department, the students can create paper cranes of their own. Discussion can center around contemporary Japanese history and students should be able to make connections between the story of Sadako and their own lives. The students could be asked to creatively write their own story.

Introduce and research *haiku* poetry. Read some *haiku* by the great masters of this traditional Japanese art form. Ask students to construct a *haiku* of their own, fulfilling all of the requirements of a traditional *haiku* poem.

Use the book *Talking Walls* by Margy Burns Knight, and look at the story of *The Dog Wall*. This story is about a mural, located in Shibuya Station in Tokyo, that is a memorial to a faithful Akita dog, Hachiko, who waited for his master every day at the train station for ten years, even after the master had passed away. You can combine this with reading the stories *Hachiko Waits* by Leslea Newman and *Hachiko: The True Story of a Loyal Dog* by Pamela S. Turner and Yan Nascimbene. Consider partnering with your school's art educator to create a mural for the school - either reproducing the original, or create a mural of their own design.

Using the internet and the library, research Japanese *kanji*. Ask the students to learn how to write their own names using *kanji*.

Kamishibai is a traditional Japanese method for telling folk and fairy tales. Ask the students to research *kamishibai* stories, and read some traditional Japa-

nese folk tales. Ask students to create their own *kamishibai* story cards, and tell their stories to the class.

Social Studies:

Ask students to select a topic of interest about ancient or modern day Japanese culture. Topics could include: Family Life, School, Festivals, Architecture, the Economy, or the Government of Japan. Students should research their topic, utilizing the library, the internet, community members, or other available resources. The students should be able to make a brief presentation about their subject, creating visual aids to highlight their topic (a poster or a power point presentation), or do something interactive with their classroom (origami, using chopsticks).

Ask students to research the O-bon Festival, held in August each year in Japan. Students can also study Mexico's Day of the Dead Celebration. Ask students to compare and contrast these two cultural festivals, and investigate how two festivals, so similar, may have ended up in two countries so far apart. Engage in discussion of family life and the way we celebrate our ancestors in the United States.

Visual Arts:

Research the Japanese tea ceremony and the different utensils used in performing this tradition. Using clay, students can create their own tea ceremony utensils, using glazes to create traditional or contemporary designs.

The *koi*, or carp, is an important image in Japanese culture. Ask students to research and find images of the *koi* in Japanese art. Research the children's day festival, *kodomo-no-hi*, and create family carp kites, *koi-nobori*. Display the kites in the school's hallway.

Bunraku is a Japanese performing art that utilizes puppets as actors. Ask students to research *Bunraku* and then create their own *Bunraku*-style puppets. Consider partnering with the language arts teacher to have students write their own puppet plays in the Japanese *Bunraku* style.

Special thanks to the teachers of Davis Middle School of the Dublin City Schools, who, through their participation in the Eitetsu Hayashi international artist residency project, developed and utilized many of these activities in their classrooms.

art connections

Taiko-the festival drumming of Japan

VOCABULARY:

Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion and philosophy based on the teachings of the Buddha, who lived between approximately 563 and 483 BCE. Originating in India, Buddhism gradually spread throughout Asia to Central Asia, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, as well as the East Asian countries of China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan.

hiragana

One of two Japanese writing systems based on syllables and developed around the 9th century. Hiragana consists of 46 cursive-looking signs which were originally kanji, but simplified over time. Hiragana is the first of all writing systems taught to Japanese children.

kabuki

Kabuki is a traditional Japanese form of theater that originated during the Edo period in Japan. Kabuki plays are typically about historical events, moral conflicts in love relationships, and the like. Kabuki actors speak in a monotonous voice and are accompanied by traditional Japanese instruments. In the early years, both men and women acted in kabuki plays. Later, women were forbidden to act, a restriction that survives to the present day. Therefore, some male kabuki actors specialize in playing female roles.

kanji

Kanji are Chinese characters first introduced to Japan in the 5th century via Korea. Kanji are ideograms - each character has its own meaning and corresponds to a word. By combining characters, more words can be created. For example, the combination of "electricity" with "car" means "train". There are thousands of characters, of which 2,000 to 3,000 are required to understand newspapers. A set of 1,945 characters has been officially declared the "kanji for every day use".

katakana

One of two Japanese writing systems based on syllables and developed around the 9th century. Katakana consists of 46 angular-looking signs which were originally kanji, but simplified over time. Katakana is typically used to write names of places or people that cannot be written in kanji.

kodomo-no-hi

May 5 is Children's Day in Japan. This festival was originally called Tango no Sekku, or Boys' Day, and Girls' Day was celebrated on March 3. After World War II, May 5 was designated as the holiday to honor both boys and girls.

koi

The Japanese carp (fish). The carp is a symbol for strength and success and Japanese legend states that a carp that successfully swims up a waterfall turns into a dragon, and learns to fly in the sky.

koinobori

A carp kite or streamer displayed on Children's Day.

kumi-daiko

The Japanese word used to describe a taiko ensemble.

Noh

Noh is a very old form of traditional Japanese theater with its origins in the 14th century. The actors of Noh plays wear masks and speak and sing in a very monotonous way, accompanied by a chorus and traditional music instruments.

o-daiko

The largest drum in the taiko family, the o-daiko is constructed from one large log and the skins are attached to the body of the drum with tacks. The o-daiko is often used as a solo instrument, and some o-daiko are large enough that a person can stand inside the drum shell. Typically, the o-daiko sits on a stand with someone playing on each side of the drum.

o-kedo

A style of taiko in which the body of the drum is made from staves rather carved from one large log, similar to a barrel. The skins are attached to the body of the drum with rope rather than tacks.

matsuri

The Japanese word for festival.

Matthew Perry

Matthew Calbraith Perry (April 10, 1794 – March 4, 1858) was the Commodore of the U.S. Navy who forced the opening of Japan to the West with the Convention of Kanagawa in 1854, under the threat of military force.

nagado-daiko

A very popular style of taiko, the nagado-daiko is often used during ceremonies in temples or shrines and often played at festivals. The nagado-daiko is typically carved from a single log and the skins are stretched and tacked onto the body of the drum.

vocabulary, cont:

<i>obon matsuri</i>	Obon, a festival usually celebrated in August, is an annual Buddhist event for commemorating one's ancestors. Traditionally, lanterns are hung in front of houses to guide the ancestors' spirits, Obon dances (bon odori) are performed, graves are visited and food offerings are made at house altars and temples. At the end of Obon, floating lanterns are put into rivers, lakes and seas in order to guide the spirits back into their world. The customs followed vary greatly from region to region.
<i>origami</i>	The Japanese traditional art of paper folding.
<i>romaji</i>	Romaji is the writing of Japanese words with the roman alphabet - a,b,c,d,e.....
<i>senbazuro</i>	One thousand paper cranes that are attached with thin thread.
<i>Senbazuro Orikata</i>	The first book written about the practice of origami strictly for amusement and describing how to fold many items, including the paper crane.
<i>shime-daiko</i>	A smaller style of taiko that is often used to keep time in the taiko ensemble. Traditionally, the skins are held onto the drum with rope and stretched tighly so that the drum has a very high pitch (the skins can also be attached with bolts).
<i>shogun</i>	In Japanese history, a shogun was the practical ruler of Japan from 1192 to the Meiji Era, beginning in 1868. A shogun's administration is a shogunate, or bakufu in Japanese. The term shogun means "general."
<i>taiko</i>	The Japanese word for big drum; also used to describe an ensemble that plays the drums. When combined with another word, the "t" is changed to a "d".

bibliography and resources:

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