

Japanese Feudalism in

# The Middle Ages

Life as an...

Emperor, Shogun, Daimyo,  
Samurai, OR Peasant



**Mr. Educator's Social Studies**

Specializing in American & World History for late  
Elementary, Middle, & High School



## Instructions

- 1.) In this activity, students will be introduced to the FIVE components of Japanese Feudalism: emperor, shogun, daimyo, samurai (and ronin), and peasants.
  
- 2.) Introduce the activity by giving each student either an emperor, shogun, daimyo, samurai, or peasant “first hand” account paper. Have each student read through their selection, underlining or highlighting difficult words, pieces of information that tell more about the feudal system, or other information that they feel is important to their role.
  
- 3.) Once finished with their selection, have students work independently on completing the “Japanese Feudalism in the Middle Ages” handout. In section 1, students will provide definitions to FOUR key words in the feudal system. In section 2, students will complete a class pyramid, detailing more about the top four groups while just filling out the bottom 4 (one has been done for them).
  
- 4.) Once sufficient time is allotted, have students “break” and class can now take one of two options.
  - a.) Option 1: Review with students the answers to the first two sections.
  
  - b.) Option 2: Divide students into groups of FIVE. Skip to Step 5 to read how to best break into groups. Before skit creation, have groups discuss their answers to Sections 1 and 2.
  
- 5.) Once Sections 1 and 2 have been reviewed, move onto Section 3 of the worksheet. Have all the “Emperors” raise their hand, number off the students until all the Emperors have a number. Have them write their number in the top right corner of their worksheet. Then, do the same with Daimyos, Shoguns, Samurai, and Peasants. You should end up with a group of “1’s” where you have five people, one from each of the groups, the same for the “2’s” and “3’s” and so on. You may end up with groups of three or four people. This is OK. Each text makes it very clear what the other groups do in feudalism, so missing a “part” should not affect it too much.
  
- 6.) Give students 15-20 minutes to create a basic skit or play to show what feudalism is. Have each group member “summarize” their skit in Section 3 of their worksheet.
  
- 7.) Have groups present! Have fun!

Life as the...

# EMPEROR in Feudal Japan!

“

Life is great at the top! I rule over all of Japan in the feudal system. But, don't tell the shogun I said that! In reality, he is the real one in power. Due to his military strength and powerful allies, the shogun is the one who calls the shots. I get to appoint the shogun, but if this military man found out that I am just a “puppet leader” then he might as well take over all of Japan! It's only thanks to the belief that I am connected to the Shinto deities that I am able to keep my power.

Maintaining order in my empire is difficult. This is why I appoint a strong military leader to look after my empire. I could rule over the people directly, but I need someone who the people truly fear. This is why I choose a **shogun**. The shogun will be the “face” of the **bakufu**. Bakufu is the Japanese word that means “military government.” Usually I choose who I want to be shogun, but sometimes a rising military leader will intimidate me, so I just choose him to avoid any problems!

Here in Japan, everyone has a ‘you do this for me, and I'll do this for you’ type attitude. I do a favor for someone and they do a favor for me! For example, since I appoint a shogun to rule over my empire, the shogun rewards me by keeping my empire safe! However, the shogun is just one man. He needs help too! So, he appoints people to help him out - these people are called **daimyo**.

These **daimyo** are powerful warlords, and the shogun will break up my empire into smaller sections and give each daimyo a large section of land to live on and look after. In exchange for this land to live on, the daimyo must provide protection for my empire in the event of an invasion. Oh, and they must pay a yearly tax too. I don't want money though, I want to be paid in rice!

I know, I know. You probably think the daimyo need help too, right? After all, how can the daimyo keep my land safe by themselves? You are right - they need help. In fact, they need a lot of help!

Well, the daimyo have to hire many armies to keep the land safe, and he has **samurai** lead these armies. If the daimyo cannot keep their land safe, then my shogun will make sure they are “taken care of” (if you know what I

mean). Not only are the samurai extremely well-trained military men, but they are very honorable as well. They follow a specific code called the **bushido**. The bushido stresses loyalty to the daimyo, a mastery of the martial arts, and an overcoming of the fear of death. These samurai are so dedicated that if they break the code or bring shame to themselves or their family, then they will perform **seppuku**. This is our word for “ritual suicide.” The samurai will plunge a sword into their abdomen in front of a group. Oh, and the daimyo can have women samurai too! The only rule for women is that they must serve under a male leader.

One big problem with being a **samurai** is if your daimyo dies. Since each daimyo gets to choose and organize their own army, it is very possible (and likely) that you can be a samurai one day and a **ronin** the next. A ronin is a samurai without a daimyo! A ronin will roam around (or wander) until he finds a daimyo to work under. I've seen many good samurai lose everything when their daimyo dies. It truly is a sad story. Because of this, ronin are not as high on the social pyramid as full-fledged samurai.

In Japan, my **peasants** are at the bottom of our society. In exchange for receiving land to live on from their daimyo, they work the land, produce crops for the empire, and pay taxes to keep my empire running! Oh, and if a war breaks out then they might be called on to fight for the samurai. However, all peasants are not equal! For example, farmers are very high-ranking peasants. Since my land is very mountainous and contains little good farmland, we have to value the men who grow food for my empire! Also, a farmer who owns land has a higher status than one who doesn't. Craftsmen and artisans are beneath the farmers and they work with wood and metal - the ones who make the swords for the samurai are the most respected! Merchants sit at the bottom of our society. Since they make all of their money off of other people's work, they don't really add a whole lot to our society.

Well, there you have it! You should have a good idea of how my empire works. Remember, if you see the shogun, whatever you do, **do not tell him that he holds the real power** in Japanese feudalism. ”

Life as a...

# Shogun in Feudal Japan!

“

You know what really stinks? The **emperor** “rules” over all of Japan but I’m the one who is really in charge! But, don’t tell the emperor that I said that. I don’t want to risk losing his approval, but if it came down to it I bet I could throw him out of power. Even though he may be just a “puppet leader,” he has divine connections to our Shinto ancestors and I must respect him. Too, the emperor is the guy who appoints me to be the **shogun**.

Maintaining order in the empire, and leading this **bakufu** government, is difficult. Bakufu is the Japanese word that means “military government.” The emperor just sits back and relaxes while I stress over how to keep this land safe! But, since I am a strong military man I feel well-prepared to do the job.

The best thing about being a **shogun** is that I control something that everyone wants: land. Everyone wants and needs land! So, I use this land to make sure the empire stays safe. I will give out this land to a handful of powerful warlords in exchange for their military service. In Japan, we call these powerful warlords **daimyo**.

Essentially, I give them large plots of land in exchange for organizing armies to protect the empire in the event of an invasion. Too, they must pay me annually in taxes so that I don’t lose favor with the emperor. Oh, and we don’t want money for taxes - we want rice!

These daimyo are powerful men but they can’t do it all themselves! The daimyo have to hire many armies to keep the land safe. Oh, and don’t worry. If the daimyo cannot keep the land safe, then I will see to it that they are “taken care of” (if you know what I mean). Therefore, the daimyo must choose very, very well-trained men (and some women) known as **samurai** to lead their armies. In exchange for leading the armies, the samurai are given large estates to live on and call their own!

Not only are the samurai extremely well-trained in the martial arts, but they are very honorable as well. They follow a specific code called the **bushido**. The bushido stresses loyalty to the daimyo, a mastery of the martial arts, and an overcoming of the fear of death. These samurai are so dedicated that if they break the code, or bring shame to themselves or their family, then they will

perform **seppuku**. This is our word for “ritual suicide.” The samurai will plunge a sword into their abdomen in front of a group. Did I mention that women could be samurai too? The only rule for women is that they must serve under a male leader.

Occasionally one of my daimyo is killed in battle. This is a sad time but I must move on. My duty is to keep the empire safe! However, the people I really feel sorry for are the **samurai**. When I lose a daimyo, the samurai he chose basically lose everything. It is very possible (and likely) that you can be a samurai one day and a **ronin** the next. A ronin is a samurai without a daimyo! A ronin will roam around (or wander) until he finds a daimyo to work under. I’ve seen many good samurai lose everything when their daimyo die. It truly is a sad story. Because of this, ronin are not as high on the social pyramid as full-fledged samurai.

In Japan, the **peasants** are at the bottom of our society. In exchange for receiving land to live on and safety within the empire, they work the emperor’s land, grow crops, and pay taxes to keep the empire running! Oh, and if a war breaks out then they might be called on to fight for the samurai.

However, all peasants are not equal! For example, farmers are very high-ranking peasants. Since the emperor’s land is very mountainous and contains little good farmland, we place high value on the men who grow food for his empire! Also, a farmer who owns his land has a higher status than those who don’t. Craftsmen and artisans are beneath the farmers and they work with wood and metal - the ones who make the swords for the samurai are the most respected! Merchants sit at the bottom of our society. Since they make all of their money off of other people’s work, they don’t really add a whole lot to our society.

Well, there you have it! You should have a good idea of how the empire works. Remember, if you see the emperor, whatever you do, **do not tell him that I called him a “puppet ruler.”** He will be very upset. But you know what? Who cares! I am the one with the real power in Japan!

”

Life as a...

# Daimyo in Feudal Japan!

“

You know what really stinks? The **emperor** “rules” over all of Japan but everyone knows that he is just a “puppet leader.” It is the **shogun** that holds all the power. He is the military leader that everyone is truly afraid of. But, don’t tell the emperor that I said that. I don’t want to risk upsetting him. Even though he may be just a “puppet leader,” he has divine connections to our Shinto ancestors and I must respect him. Too, the emperor is the guy who appoints the shogun, who then chooses me and all the other **daimyos**.

Maintaining order in the empire, and being part of this **bakufu** government, is difficult. Bakufu is just the Japanese word that means “military government.” I truly do feel for the shogun. He has to watch over all of this land and it is up to use daimyos to keep it safe. The emperor just sits back and relaxes while the shogun stresses over how to keep “his” land safe!

One day I hope to be the **shogun**. After all, the shogun is often one of the most powerful daimyos. So, if I perform well in this role then maybe I can be a shogun someday! The shogun controls something that everyone wants: land. Everyone wants and needs land! The shogun gives us daimyos land to “care for.” It’s a two-way street: the shogun gives us a huge lot of land to live on and even builds us an extravagant castle (high up in the mountains to protect from invaders), and in return we keep the land safe and collect taxes from the people who live on this land! But, the silly emperor doesn’t want money - we have to collect taxes in the form of rice!

Us **daimyos** are powerful warlords, but we cannot keep this land safe by ourselves. We have to hire many armies to keep the land safe. I feel a lot of pressure doing this - I have to make sure the men I choose to guard the land are good, because the shogun will likely have me killed if I fail in protecting the empire. I want only the best, most well-trained men to lead my armies. These men are known as **samurai**. In exchange for leading the armies, I give the samurai large estates to live on and call their own!

Not only are the samurai extremely well-trained military men, but they are very honorable as well. They follow a specific code called the “**bushido**.” The bushido stresses loyalty to the daimyo, a mastery of the martial arts, and an overcoming of the fear of death. These samurai are so

dedicated that if they break the code, or bring shame to themselves or their family, then they will perform **seppuku**. This is our word for “ritual suicide” - the samurai will plunge their sword into their abdomen in front of a large group. Did I mention that I can hire women samurai too? The only rule for women is that they must serve under a male leader.

Being a samurai is a highly respected position. However, if I were to die in battle then the samurai would lose everything. See, the shogun would choose a new daimyo and that daimyo would likely want to bring in his own samurai. Therefore, that samurai would no longer have that plot of land that I gave him. It is very possible (and likely) that you can be a samurai one day and a **ronin** the next. A ronin is a samurai without a daimyo! A ronin will roam around (or wander) until he finds a new daimyo to work under. Sometimes they never find one! I’ve seen many good samurai lose everything when their daimyo dies. It truly is a sad story. Because of this, ronin are not as high on the social pyramid as full-fledged samurai.

In Japan, the **peasants** are at the bottom of our society. They essentially work the emperor’s land and pay taxes to keep the empire running! Oh, and if a war breaks out then they might be called on to fight for the samurai.

However, all peasants are not equal! For example, farmers are very high-ranking peasants. Since the emperor’s land is very mountainous and contains little good farmland, we have to value the men who grow food for his empire! Also, a farmer who owns his own land has a higher status than one who doesn’t. Craftsmen and artisans are beneath the farmers and they work with wood and metal - the ones who make the swords for the samurai are the most respected! Merchants sit at the bottom of our society. Since they make all of their money off of other people’s work, they don’t really add a whole lot to our society.

Well, there you have it! You should have a good idea of how the empire works. Remember, if you see the emperor, whatever you do, **do not tell him that I called him a “puppet ruler.”** He will be very upset. ”  
It is the shogun who is truly in charge.

Life as a...

# SAMURAI in Feudal Japan!

“

Everyone knows that the **emperor** who is supposed to “rule” over all of Japan is just a “puppet leader.” It is the **shogun** that holds all the power. He is the military leader that everyone is truly afraid of. But, don’t tell the emperor that I said that. I don’t want to risk upsetting him. I could see something bad happening and I could become a **ronin** in no time. Even though he may be just a “puppet leader,” he has divine connections to our Shinto ancestors and I must respect him. Too, the emperor is the guy who appoints the shogun, the shogun then chooses the daimyo, and it is the daimyo who then hires me!

Maintaining order in the empire, and being part of this **bakufu** government, is difficult. Bakufu is just the Japanese word that means “military government.” I truly do feel for the shogun. He has to watch over all of this land, however it is the samurai class who really sacrifice everything to keep the empire safe. The emperor just sits back and relaxes while the shogun stresses over how to keep “his” land safe, but it is the samurai who sticks his (or her) neck out there in battle to lead the armies!

One day I hope to be the **shogun** but that will likely never happen. After all, the shogun is often one of the most powerful daimyos. The shogun never comes from the samurai class. But, if I could be shogun it would be great! I would control something that everyone wants: land. Everyone wants and needs land! The shogun gives land to the daimyos to “care for.” It’s a two-way street: the shogun gives a daimyo a huge lot of land to live on and even builds him an extravagant castle (high up in the mountains to protect from invaders), and in return the daimyo keeps the land safe and collect taxes from the people who live on this land! But, the silly emperor doesn’t want money - the daimyo have to collect taxes in the form of rice! At least the samurai don’t have to worry about collecting taxes.

The **daimyos** are powerful warlords, but they cannot keep the land safe by themselves. They have to hire many armies to keep the land safe. Do you want to guess what will happen to a daimyo that fails to keep his plot of land safe? You guessed it - the shogun will likely kill him! Therefore, the daimyo only wants the best, most well-trained men to lead my armies. This is where the **samurai** come into the picture. In exchange for leading the armies, we are given large estates to live on and call our own!

Not only are we extremely well-trained military men, but we are very honorable and respected too. We follow a

specific code called the “**bushido.**” The bushido stresses loyalty to our daimyo, a mastery of the martial arts, and an overcoming of the fear of death. We samurai are so dedicated that if they break the code, or bring shame to ourselves or our family, then we will perform **seppuku**. This is our word for “ritual suicide” - we will plunge our sword into our abdomen in front of a large group in order to end our lives. The shame of breaking the code is just too great to bear. Did I mention that there are women samurai too? The only rule for women is that they must serve under a male leader.

Being a samurai is a highly respected position. However, if my daimyo were to die in battle then I would lose everything. See, the shogun would choose a new daimyo and that daimyo would likely want to bring in his own samurai. I would not be allowed to stay on my plot of land unless the new daimyo hired me. It is very possible that you can be a samurai one day and a **ronin** the next. A ronin is a samurai without a daimyo! A ronin will roam around (or wander) until he finds a new daimyo to work under. Sometimes they never find one! I’ve seen many of my samurai friends lose everything when their daimyo dies. It truly is a sad story. Because of this, ronin are not as high on the social pyramid as full-fledged samurai.

In Japan, the **peasants** are at the bottom of our society. They essentially work the emperors land and pay taxes to keep the empire running! Oh, and if a war breaks out then they might be called on to fight for the samurai.

However, all peasants are not equal! For example, farmers are very high-ranking peasants. Since the emperor’s land is very mountainous and contains little good farmland, we have to value the men who grow food for his empire! Also, a farmer who owns his own land has a higher status than one who doesn’t. Craftsmen and artisans are beneath the farmers and they work with wood and metal - the ones who make the swords for the samurai are the most respected! Merchants sit at the bottom of our society. Since they make all of their money off of other people’s work, they don’t really add a whole lot to our society.

Well, there you have it! You should have a good idea of how the empire works. Remember, if you see the emperor, whatever you do, **do not tell him that I called him a “puppet ruler.”** He will be very upset. ”  
It is the shogun who is truly in charge.

Life as a...

# Peasant in Feudal Japan!

“ Everyone knows that the **emperor** who is supposed to “rule” over all of Japan is just a “puppet leader.” It is the **shogun** that holds all the power. He is the military leader that everyone is truly afraid of. But, don’t tell the emperor that I said that. I don’t want to risk upsetting him. Even though he may be just a “puppet leader,” he has divine connections to our Shinto ancestors and I must respect him. After all, I work on the emperors land and owe everything I have to the emperor, so I must be watchful what I say about the man.

Being at the bottom of this **bakufu** government is difficult. Bakufu is just the Japanese word that means “military government.” While it is the shogun who watches over all of this land, and it is the samurai class who leads us into battle, it is on the back-breaking labor of us peasants that keeps the empire moving forward! We get no respect, no respect at all!

I would love to be **shogun** someday, but that will never happen. The shogun is typically one of the most powerful member of the daimyo class. The shogun never comes from the peasant class. But, if I could be shogun it would be great! I would control something that everyone wants: land. Everyone wants and needs land! The shogun breaks up all of the land of Japan and gives each daimyo a section to “care for.” It’s a two-way street: the shogun gives a daimyo a huge lot of land to live on and builds him an extravagant castle (high up in the mountains to protect from invaders), and in return the daimyo keeps the land safe and collect taxes from us peasants who live on the land! But, the silly emperor doesn’t want money - the

The **daimyos** are powerful warlords, but they cannot keep the land safe by themselves. They have to hire many armies to keep the land safe. Do you want to guess what will happen to a daimyo that fails to keep his plot of land safe? You guessed it - the shogun will likely kill him! Therefore, the daimyo only wants the best, most well-trained men to lead my armies. This is where the **samurai** come into the picture. In exchange for leading the armies, the samurai are given large estates to live on and call their own!

Not only are the samurai extremely well-trained military men, but they are very honorable and respected too. They follow a specific code called the “**bushido**.” The

bushido stresses loyalty to their daimyo, a mastery of the martial arts, and an overcoming of the fear of death. The samurai are so dedicated that if they break the code, or bring shame to themselves or their family, then they perform **seppuku**. This is our word for “ritual suicide” - a samurai will plunge a sword into their abdomen in front of a large group in order to end their lives. Did I mention that there are women samurai too? The only rule for women is that they must serve under a male leader.

Being a samurai is a highly respected position. However, if a daimyo were to die in battle then the samurai would lose everything. See, the shogun would choose a new daimyo and that daimyo would likely want to bring in his own samurai. It is very possible that you can be a samurai one day and a **ronin** the next. A ronin is a samurai without a daimyo! A ronin will roam around (or wander) until he finds a new daimyo to work under. Sometimes they never find one! It truly is a sad story. Because of this, ronin are not as high on the social pyramid as full-fledged samurai.

In Japan, the **peasants** are at the bottom of our society. This is where I come into the picture. We essentially work the emperors land and pay taxes to keep the empire running! Oh, and if a war breaks out then we might be called on to fight for the samurai.

However, we peasants are not equal! For example, farmers are very high-ranking peasants. Since the emperor’s land is very mountainous and contains little good farmland, the men who farm and grow food are seen as superior! Also, a farmer who owns his own land has a higher status than one who doesn’t. Craftsmen and artisans are beneath the farmers and they work with wood and metal - the ones who make the swords for the samurai are the most respected! The merchants sit at the bottom of our society. The emperor believes that since the merchants make their living off of other’s people work (they just buy something and resell it to make money) that their position isn’t very valuable.

Well, there you have it! You should have a good idea of how the empire works. Remember, if you see the emperor, whatever you do, **do not tell him that I called him a “puppet ruler.”** He will be very upset. ”  
It is the shogun who is truly in charge.

# Japanese Feudalism in the Middle Ages

1

## Vocabulary:

Shogun - \_\_\_\_\_

Bakufu - \_\_\_\_\_

Bushido - \_\_\_\_\_

Ronin - \_\_\_\_\_

## Act it Out!

3

After discussing with your group, give a brief summary of the skit you will be presenting to the class that shows how feudalism works!

\_\_\_\_\_  
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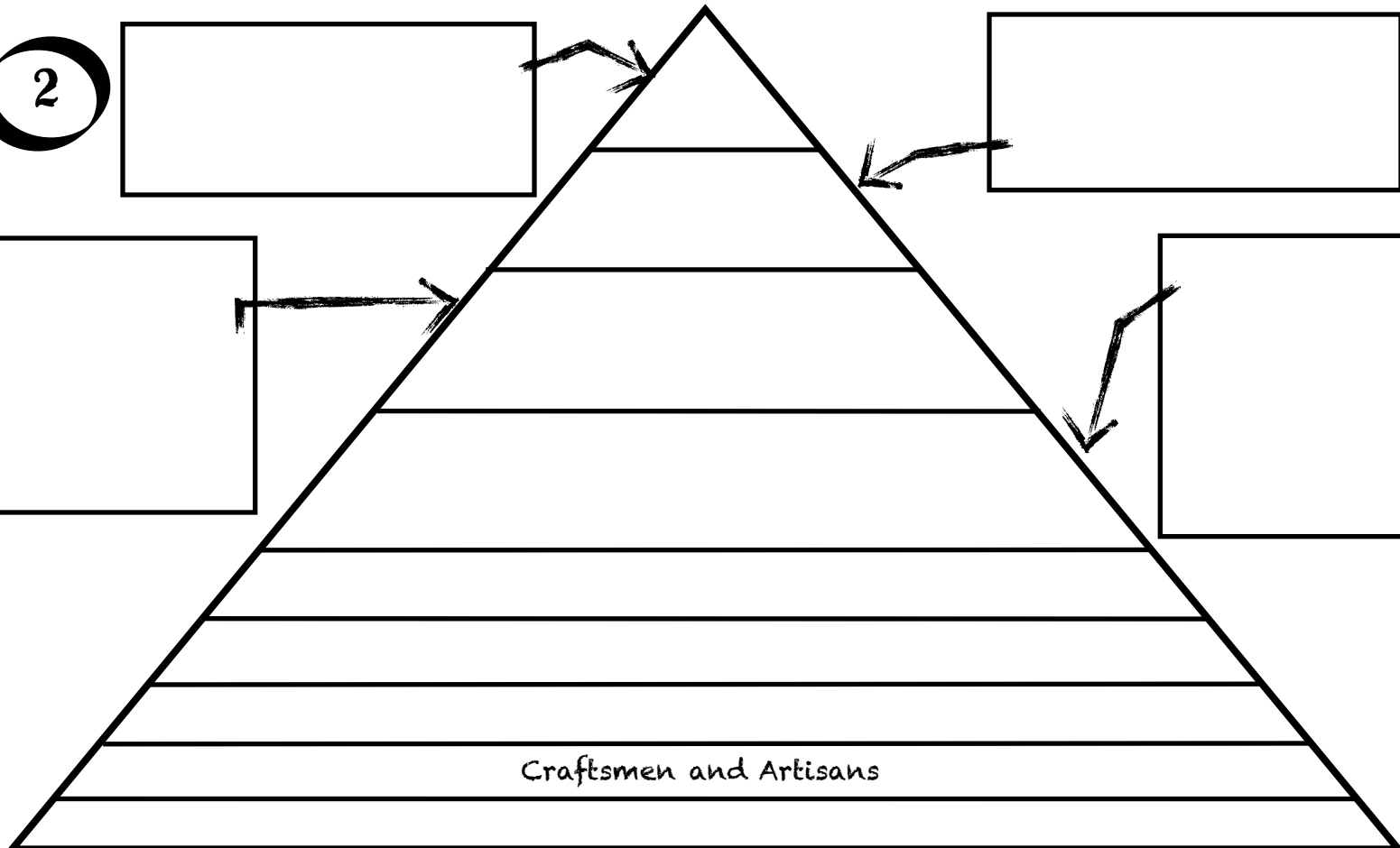
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Craftsmen and Artisans

Fill in the pyramid with the names of the social classes in the Japanese feudal system. For the first four, write additional details in the correct box. For the remaining five, just fill in the social class. The second from the bottom has been done for you!



# Japanese Feudalism in the Middle Ages

1

## Vocabulary:

Shogun - **the true leader of the military government, has the real power, the strongest daimyo**

Bakufu - **the name of the military government**

Bushido - **the code that samurai must follow; emphasizes loyalty to daimyo, honor; breaking code means seppuku**

Ronin- **a wandering samurai who has lost their daimyo**

## Act it Out!

3

After discussing with your group, give a brief summary of the skit you will be presenting to the class that shows how feudalism works!

2

**figure-head, puppet leader  
shogun was really in charge  
connected to shinto deities**

emperor

**strong military leader,  
strongest daimyo, divides up  
land to give to daimyo**

shogun

**receives land in  
charge of  
collecting rice  
taxes, chooses  
samurai to lead  
armies**

daimyo

**lead armies,  
experts in  
martial arts,  
follow bushido  
code, rely on  
daimyo for land**

samurai

ronin

farmers who owned land

farmers who did not own land

Craftsmen and Artisans

merchants

Fill in the pyramid with the names of the social classes in the Japanese feudal system. For the first four, write additional details in the correct box. For the remaining five, just fill in the social class. The second from the bottom has been done for you!