

Genre Realistic Fiction

Essential Question

How can art help us connect with people around the world?

Just 17 Syllables!

*by Dennis Fertig
illustrated by Lisa Fields*



On a bright, sunny morning in Tokyo, Ms. Uchida led a class of Andrews International School students to Rikugien Garden. She was the school's Japanese culture teacher.

As the group walked, Ms. Uchida pointed out interesting Tokyo sights. One of her students, Danny Flores, barely paid attention. The noise of the busy Tokyo streets and a nearby expressway bothered him too much today. To shut out the sounds, Danny studied his cell phone screen. The plan worked so well that he hardly noticed when he entered Rikugien Garden with his class. It was the silence of the park that finally made him look around.

In the park, Danny felt the beautiful day. The green trees of summer were gradually becoming the red and gold, yellow and orange trees of autumn. Already, trees had scattered some leaves on the ground. Occasionally, a leaf drifted slowly down to join its fallen brothers and sisters.

Danny gently sniffed the autumn air. For a moment, it almost smelled like the hockey rink, warm pumpkin bread, corn mazes, and all the other things his family left in Ohio. Tears welled up in Danny's eyes, and he quickly became even more interested in his cell phone. He certainly didn't want his classmates to notice his melancholy.



Some of his Andrews International School classmates were from the United States, while more came from Britain, Australia, Ireland, and other English-speaking countries. There were also some Japanese students. The language used in the school was English, although non-Japanese students also studied Japanese.

The parents of most of the students worked in Tokyo. Danny's mother worked for a Tokyo insurance company, and his father reported on Asian news for an American newspaper.

This was Danny's first school year in Japan, and so far, it was both good and bad. He liked his teachers, classmates, and Japan—some of the time. But much of the time, he just wanted to go back to Ohio.

The class now walked into a pleasant, shady clearing near a large, beautiful pond in the center of the park. Danny noticed how the water glittered in some spots while it reflected sunlight and the colors of fall maple trees in others.

In the clearing, the students sat on two rows of backless benches. Danny sat down in the back row and immediately checked his cell phone for the weather forecast at home in Ohio.

Ms. Uchida stood next to another bench that faced the students. An older man with a briefcase stood nearby. Danny only noticed him when Ms. Uchida addressed the students. "We are in a park that was built more than three hundred years ago on the orders of a powerful shogun who ruled all of Japan," she said.



Danny's head popped up from his phone when Ms. Uchida said "shogun." He remembered his older cousins had a computer game that featured a fierce, powerful shogun who was feared by all. Would a real shogun actually have built a garden like this? It was easier for Danny to imagine furious battles being fought.

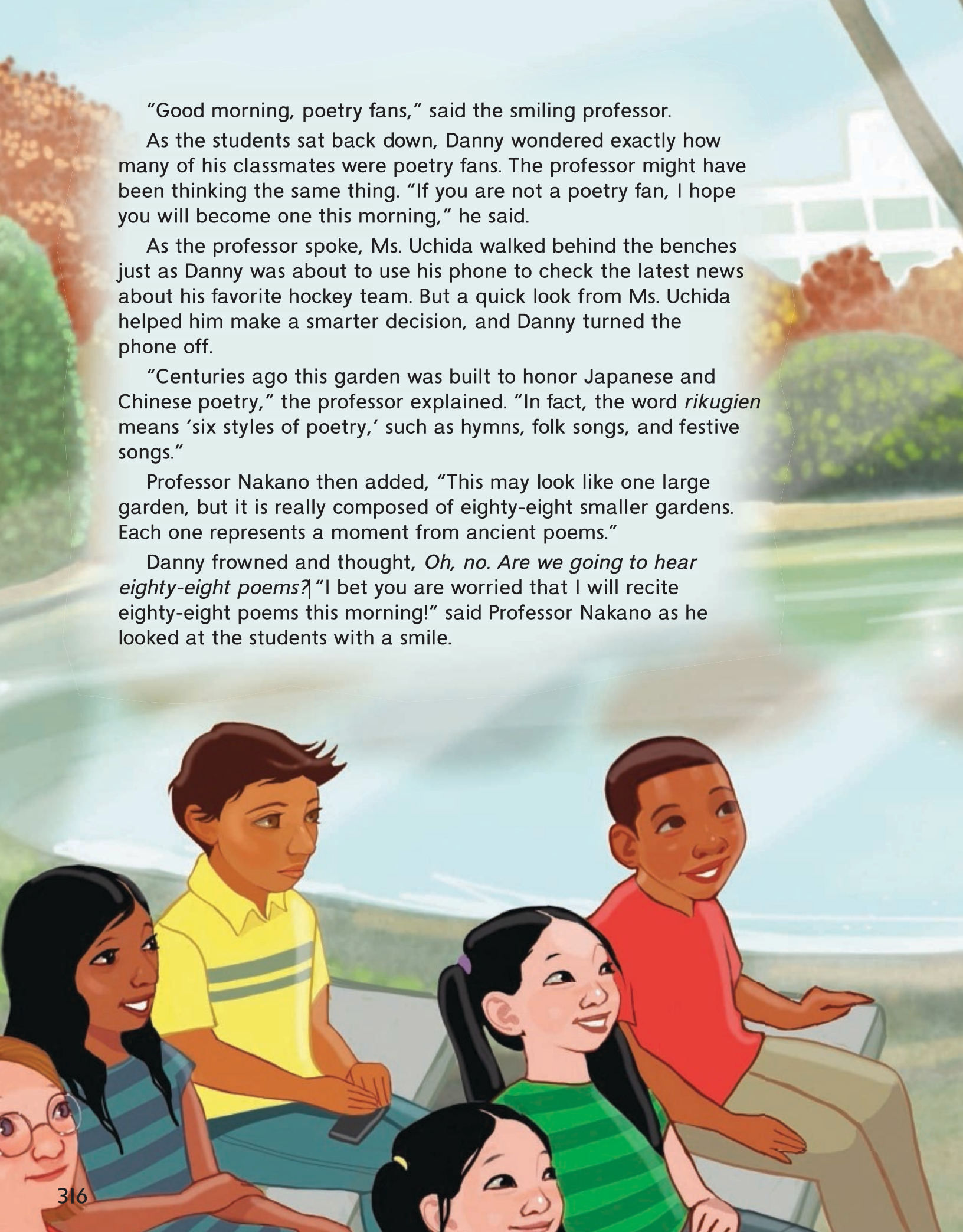
As Danny fantasized about what might have happened hundreds of years ago, he dropped his cell phone. When he realized that Ms. Uchida was staring directly at him, Danny hoped she hadn't spotted his phone.

Ms. Uchida then turned to the whole group and explained that the shogun's garden was dedicated to poetry. *Poetry!* thought Danny. *A fierce shogun built a gigantic park about poetry?!*

Ms. Uchida turned to the older man, and they bowed toward one another. Then Ms. Uchida said, "Students, this is Professor Nakano, an expert on Japanese literature. He will speak to us on this lovely morning about Japanese poetry and this amazing place, Rikugien Gardens."

The students, including Danny, stood up and bowed to the professor. Professor Nakano bowed toward the students and set his briefcase down on the bench. As he did, Danny looked around again at the park and admitted to himself that it was an amazing place. However, the idea of learning about poetry made him question whether or not his cell phone still had a strong charge. He hoped it would last through the entire visit to the park.





“Good morning, poetry fans,” said the smiling professor.

As the students sat back down, Danny wondered exactly how many of his classmates were poetry fans. The professor might have been thinking the same thing. “If you are not a poetry fan, I hope you will become one this morning,” he said.

As the professor spoke, Ms. Uchida walked behind the benches just as Danny was about to use his phone to check the latest news about his favorite hockey team. But a quick look from Ms. Uchida helped him make a smarter decision, and Danny turned the phone off.

“Centuries ago this garden was built to honor Japanese and Chinese poetry,” the professor explained. “In fact, the word *rikugien* means ‘six styles of poetry,’ such as hymns, folk songs, and festive songs.”

Professor Nakano then added, “This may look like one large garden, but it is really composed of eighty-eight smaller gardens. Each one represents a moment from ancient poems.”

Danny frowned and thought, *Oh, no. Are we going to hear eighty-eight poems?* “I bet you are worried that I will recite eighty-eight poems this morning!” said Professor Nakano as he looked at the students with a smile.

The professor then talked about poetry in Japan. He explained that arts in many forms have always been important to Japanese people. Those forms include how food is prepared and how flowers are arranged, as well as paintings, dance, and theater. "Yet the most important art for Japanese people might be poetry," he said.

Danny could not believe that was true. Then the professor said, "And the most popular form of poetry in Japan is haiku."

Danny had learned a bit about haiku back in Ohio and was not thrilled by the experience. He definitely was not a haiku fan, even if other American kids liked them.

Yet he knew feelings about haiku were different in Japan. During the short time he had been here, he realized that Japanese newspapers and magazines published new haiku poetry all the time. Danny had even watched some of his Japanese classmates talk about the newest haiku and read them aloud to each other.

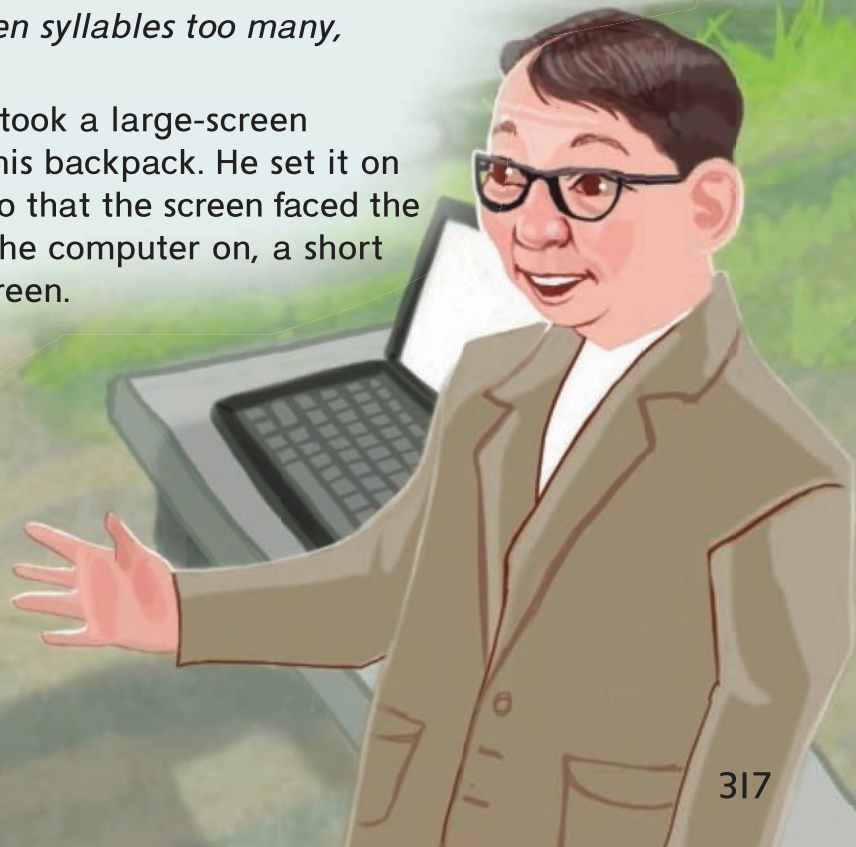
The professor offered more haiku facts. "Today there are as many as ten million Japanese people who regularly write haiku, and many of those poets regularly send haiku to newspapers and magazines, hoping their poetry will be published."


Wow! thought Danny.

"Many of you know that a haiku is poetry that has just three lines," said Professor Nakano. "The first and last lines each have five syllables, while the middle line has seven syllables. This means that a haiku has just seventeen syllables in total."

That might be seventeen syllables too many, Danny thought.

Now Professor Nakano took a large-screen notebook computer from his backpack. He set it on the bench and opened it so that the screen faced the students. After he turned the computer on, a short poem appeared on the screen.





“This is a haiku written by a great Japanese poet,” said the professor. “The words should be easy for you to see, but I will read it to you.”

*‘Tis the first snow—
Just enough to bend
The gladiolus leaves!*

Danny both read and listened carefully, but still didn’t quite understand the poem. Then he got it, or, at least, he thought he did. The snowfall was just heavy enough to bend a flower.

The professor said, “I will read the first line once more, and as I do, please count the syllables.”

As the professor slowly read the short line, Danny counted, one finger for each syllable. It was just four syllables, not five.

“Why just four syllables?” asked Professor Nakano.

Mieko, a Japanese student, raised her hand and asked, “Is it because the haiku you read was first written in Japanese, and you read an English translation of it?”

“Outstanding! Yes! Often, translations from one language to another change the number of syllables,” explained the professor. “In a few minutes, you will write your own haiku, and please write in your own language.”

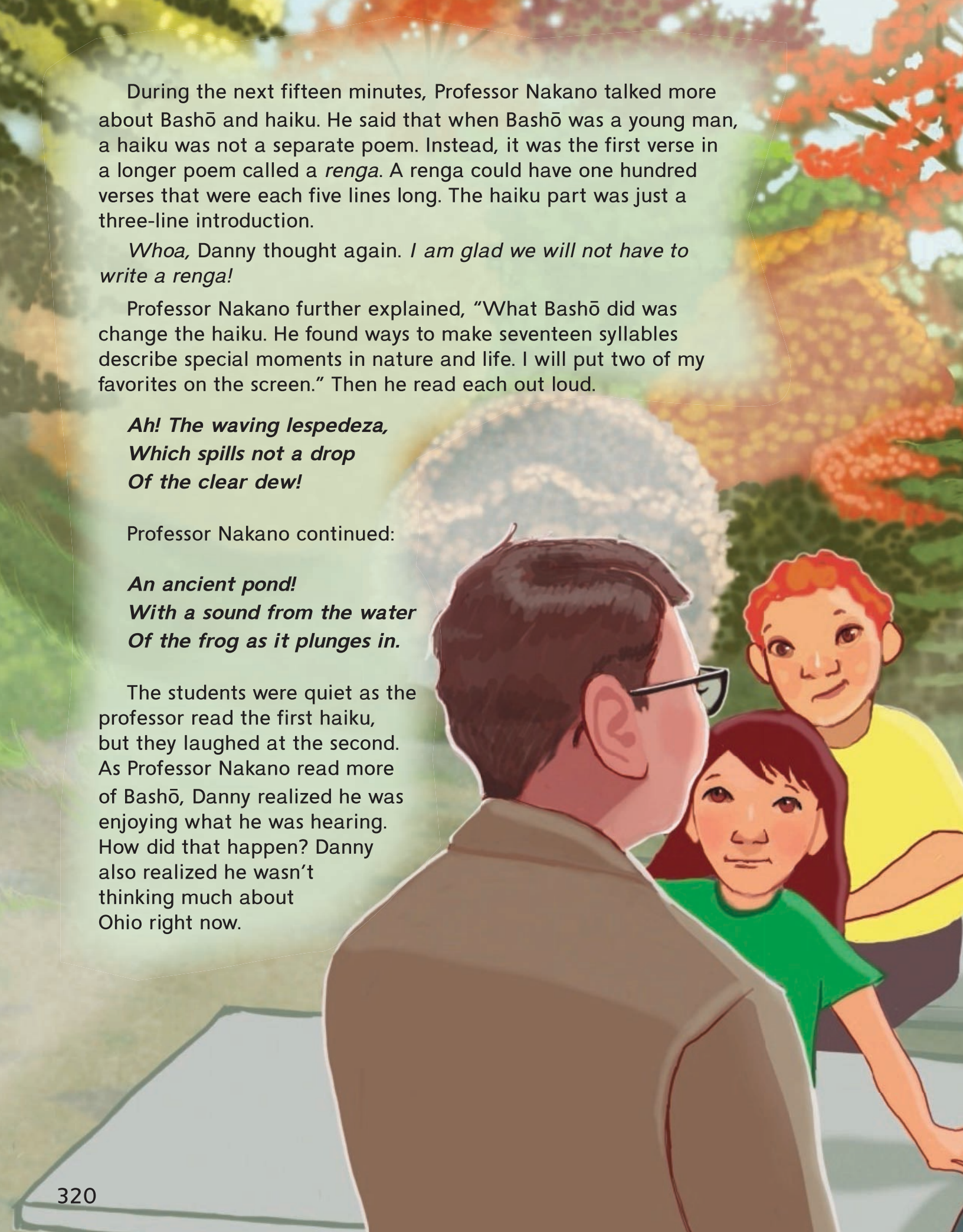
Danny wasn’t sure he could write a haiku in any language.

The professor continued, “The famous poet was named Bashō. The first thing many of you might want to know about him is that he was a poet, but he also came from a line of samurai warriors. Although it surprises many people who are not Japanese, it was not unusual for warriors to be poets, too.

Whoa! thought Danny. *Samurai warriors wrote haiku!* Danny knew that samurai were fierce soldiers in ancient Japan.

“Bashō died in the year 1694, just a year before the building of this park began,” said the professor. “Since many of Bashō’s haiku are about nature, this park is a good place to talk about him.”





During the next fifteen minutes, Professor Nakano talked more about Bashō and haiku. He said that when Bashō was a young man, a haiku was not a separate poem. Instead, it was the first verse in a longer poem called a *renga*. A *renga* could have one hundred verses that were each five lines long. The haiku part was just a three-line introduction.

Whoa, Danny thought again. I am glad we will not have to write a renga!

Professor Nakano further explained, “What Bashō did was change the haiku. He found ways to make seventeen syllables describe special moments in nature and life. I will put two of my favorites on the screen.” Then he read each out loud.

***Ah! The waving lespedeza,
Which spills not a drop
Of the clear dew!***

Professor Nakano continued:

***An ancient pond!
With a sound from the water
Of the frog as it plunges in.***

The students were quiet as the professor read the first haiku, but they laughed at the second. As Professor Nakano read more of Bashō, Danny realized he was enjoying what he was hearing. How did that happen? Danny also realized he wasn’t thinking much about Ohio right now.

Suddenly, Professor Nakano was silent. As Danny wondered what was next, the professor fiddled with his computer until a phone number came up.

“Now, students, I assume that each of you has a cell phone with you. I hope you were not using them during our discussion,” chuckled Professor Nakano.

Danny took a quick look at Ms. Uchida, and she grinned back at him.

“On your phones, I want you to write one or two haiku and then text them to the phone number on my computer screen. I will see and read the haiku as you send them and then share some of them with all of you,” said the professor. “You can sit here and write, or you can wander around this area and find inspiration in nature, like Bashō.”

Danny nervously took out his phone. It still had a strong charge, but he was not sure that was a good thing. It meant he had to try to write a haiku. Could he do it?





Professor Nakano added one more thing. “If this is challenging for you, be as strong and determined as a samurai warrior. Make your pen mightier than the sword.”

So Danny, the samurai haiku writer, started to think. As he did, he noticed that none of his classmates were typing, and many of them look puzzled. Some wandered around nearby. Danny walked to a nearby bridge for a different view. He hoped it would give him some creative inspiration.

Looking at the natural beauty of the park, Danny could imagine a samurai sitting and writing a haiku. Away from the din of battle and the demands of medieval Japan, this must have been peaceful. However, before he could even finish his thought, Danny noticed the flurry of activity from the other students.

One student began to type, then another, and pretty soon, the area was filled with flying thumbs pecking away on cell phones. Every now and then, a student would stop typing for a moment to count syllables—or fingers. Soon, haiku compositions were being streamed from cell phones to the professor’s computer.

Danny pondered what his classmates could be writing about. The gardens? The lake? What could he write about? Noisy Tokyo streets? Ohio? Hockey?

Come on, Samurai Danny, think! Danny muttered to himself. As the other kids furiously typed and typed, inspiration finally came to Danny and he slowly started typing. As he paused once or twice to count syllables, Ms. Uchida saw some of what he was typing. When Danny thought he was finished, he reread his haiku. He thought it was good, so he texted it.



Professor Nakano was sitting on the front bench reading each haiku as it came in. Now and then he smiled or nodded his head. Not many students had written more than one poem, so the professor's reading process was fairly quick. Soon, all the students had stopped thinking, typing, and counting fingers.

The professor stood up and set his notebook on the bench so that students could view it again. "Your haiku poems are wonderful! I will read two or three that I find especially charming," he said. "Later, I will talk to each of you about your fine work."

In a few seconds, the first haiku appeared on the screen. As Danny and other students read it, they counted the syllables.

*Green leaves change colors
Brown, yellow, and red leaves tumble
Leaves leave sad trees bare*

Professor Nakano read the haiku aloud and then commented, "This haiku nicely honors the season of autumn."

Danny also thought it was excellent. He wondered if he, too, should have written about autumn.



In a minute, a second haiku was on the screen. All the students counted again.

*Five great friends back home
Six new friends in Tokyo
My heart reaches far*

After the professor read that haiku aloud, he said, "I know being away from home is challenging at first, but students from other countries do eventually find a warm home here. This haiku is very moving."

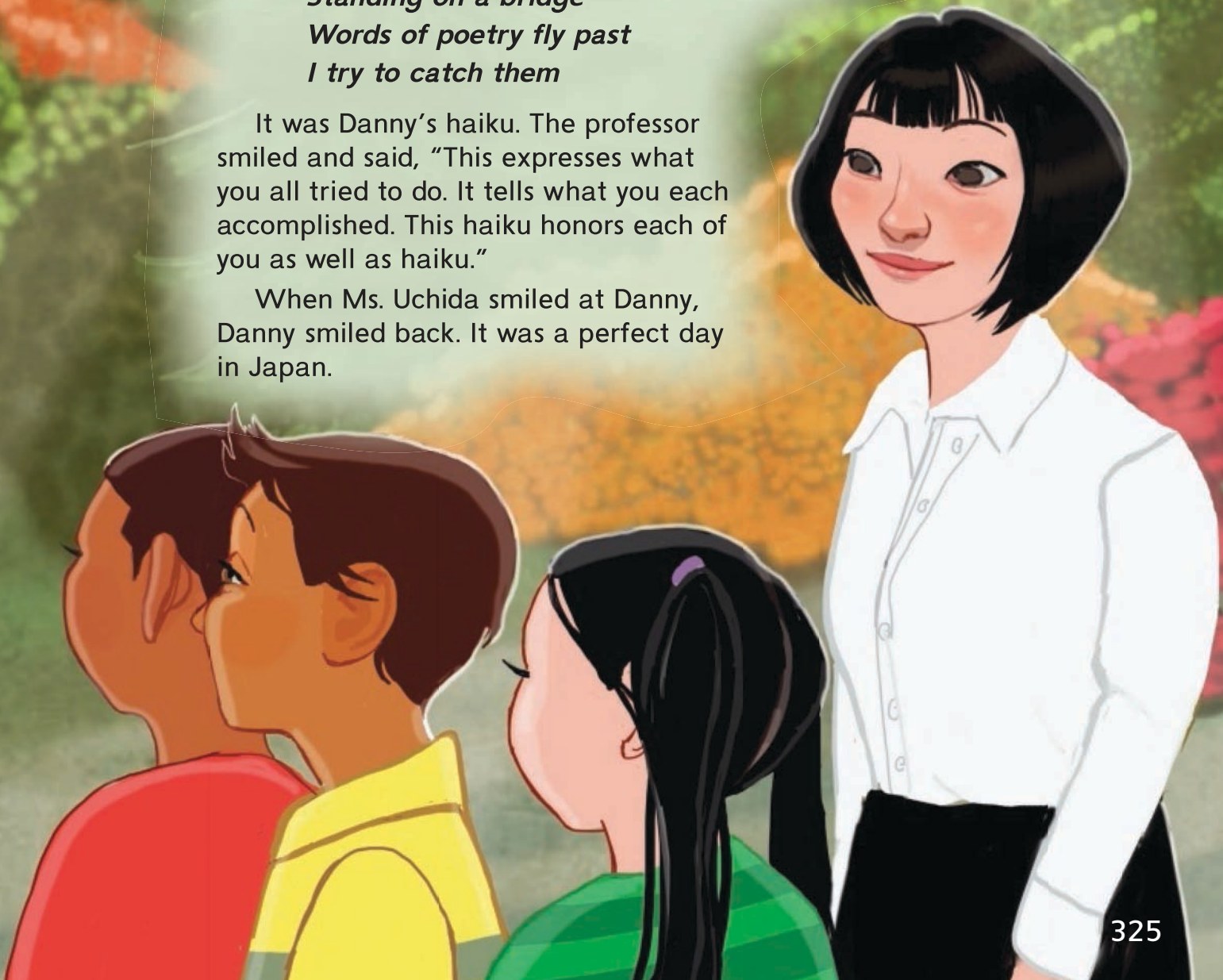
Danny liked that haiku, too. He hadn't tried to make many friends in Tokyo yet, but he felt this seventeen syllable poem might inspire him to become a samurai warrior at making new friends.

Soon, a third haiku was on the professor's computer screen. Other students counted syllables, but it wasn't necessary for Danny to count for this one.

*Standing on a bridge
Words of poetry fly past
I try to catch them*

It was Danny's haiku. The professor smiled and said, "This expresses what you all tried to do. It tells what you each accomplished. This haiku honors each of you as well as haiku."

When Ms. Uchida smiled at Danny, Danny smiled back. It was a perfect day in Japan.



Essential Question

Why should we take time to appreciate nature?



On a withered branch . . .

Matsuo Bashō

On a withered branch
A crow is sitting
This autumn eve.

I come weary . . .

Matsuo Bashō

I come weary,
In search of an inn—
Ah! these wistaria flowers!

Even in the rain, come forth . . .

Yamazaki Sokan

Even in the rain, come forth,
O midnight moon!
But first put on your hat.

Thought I, the fallen flowers . . .

Arakida Moritake

Thought I, the fallen flowers
Are returning to their branch;
But lo! they were butterflies.



For all men . . .

Matsunaga Teitoku

For all men
'Tis the seed of siesta—
The autumn moon.

You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Did You Know?

In Japanese, the pattern of haiku lines is not based on syllables, but on the number of sound units. Sound units are shorter than English syllables. This means that some English poets do not worry as much about keeping the number of syllables exact.

Text Connections

1. What different roles does Danny's cell phone have in "Just 17 Syllables!"?
2. Why do English versions of Japanese haiku sometimes have an incorrect number of syllables, according to Professor Nakano?
3. Danny says he "learned a bit about haiku back in Ohio and was not thrilled by the experience." Why do you think his experience this time is different?
4. How does travel lead to surprises in both "I come weary . . ." and "My Chinese New Year"?
5. Connect Danny's feelings to a time when you felt out of place or homesick.
6. How might technology sometimes keep people from experiencing new things?



Write

Try writing your own haiku about something charming in nature. Remember to follow the pattern of 5 syllables each in lines 1 and 3, and 7 syllables in line 2.

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. Why do you think Danny hopes his cell phone has a strong charge when he hears they are going to learn about poetry? Quote from the text to support your inference.
2. How does Danny respond to the challenge of writing a haiku? Relate this to a theme of the story.

Writer's Craft

3. How does the point of view in "Just 17 Syllables!" influence how events are described?
4. Explain what a samurai was. Why do you think it helps Danny to think of himself as "the samurai haiku writer"?
5. How do the lines fit together and provide the structure in one of the haiku from this lesson?

Concept Development

6. As realistic fiction, how do both "Just 17 Syllables!" and "Heading Home" handle the theme of discovering a new culture?



Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Informational texts sometimes put words from other languages in **italics**.

The Last Shogun

On January 3, 1868, the last Japanese shogun, Tokugawa Keiki, realized that his power was at an end. A group of young samurai rose up and put a young emperor named Meiji into power. No longer would Japan be separate from the rest of the world. No longer would each new lord be the child of a previous, and no longer would there be a shogun.

Some might not have seen this change coming. After all, the Tokugawa shoguns had brought peace to a Japan that had been ripped apart by 150 years of chaos. For centuries, shoguns had been hereditary military rulers appointed by the emperor of Japan. However, independent *daimyo* warlords had risen up. Many people fought for power.

In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa shogun, gained control and brought peace. He made the city of Edo the center of government, and began the Edo period. Tokugawa Ieyasu gave the most power to *daimyo* who were related to him or had supported him. The Tokugawa shogun leadership was ironclad, but it also provided for Japan.

In many ways, Japan had flourished under the Tokugawa shoguns. Like the very first shogun, Yoritomo, the Tokugawa were patrons of the arts. During the Edo period, foreigners were thrown out of Japan. With foreign influences gone, the shoguns encouraged traditional kinds of poetry, calligraphy, and dance theatre. Because the *daimyo* had to regularly travel to the shogun's capital city, the *daimyo* spread an appreciation of traditional artistry across the land.

By the mid-1800s, younger leaders in Japan saw European countries gradually taking colonial control of many Asian nations. The Tokugawa shogun's government seemed outdated and weak. Many wanted Japan to become a modern country. Its new leaders rejected traditional Japanese feudal government.

1. How did the Tokugawa shoguns fulfill some of the purposes and functions of government?
2. During the Edo period, leaders inherited their positions from their parents. Explain how this differs from the leadership in a constitutional democracy.
3. Do you think the government should have the authority to choose certain art forms over others? Why or why not?

Tokugawa Keiki, the last Japanese shogun



Go Digital

Research other traditional Japanese art forms, such as calligraphy and Noh theatre. What themes seem to run across all these art types?