

## Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

### Lesson 1: The Moon Princess

**Reading:** "The Bamboo Cutter and the Moon Child," 8th-9th c., anon

**Film:** *The Princess from the Moon* (1987 Ichikawa) or *Big Bird in Japan* (Stone).

**Suggested grades:** 6-12

**Themes:** Early Japanese folktales and cultural motifs of the moon, beauty, sadness, and the ephemeral nature of life.

#### The story:

The tale of Kaguyahime, the Shining Princess of the Moon, probably has its origins in early oral folklore. First recorded in the mid-9th century, the story was shaped by the developing Heian court culture and Buddhist beliefs about the ephemeral nature of youth, beauty, and life. Five young men, noblemen enchanted by the radiant beauty of the princess, neglect their duties and moral lives resorting to trickery and deceit to win her hand in marriage. The princess herself has been sent to live a period of time as a mortal on earth because of some unnamed offense in the Moon World. Her motives and feelings for assigning impossible tasks and tests for the suitors are hardly pure. Yet she is a sympathetic character, tragic in her temporary exile from the Moon World and her reluctance to return to it, leaving the loving parents she has found in this world. Although the tale is usually read to or by young children, it can be studied by older students as an example of early Japanese literature reflecting the aesthetic ideal of *mono no aware*, or the deep feeling for the beauty and sadness of impermanence.

#### Teaching:

The full-length film version may be difficult to find. However, the Sesame Street version should be readily available. Although one might hesitate to use a video starring Big Bird with older students, I have used excerpts effectively with high school students and even adults. The Moon Princess story is updated to today's Japan and the princess must help Big Bird and Barkley, who have been left behind on a tour, to get to Kyoto in time to catch their flight home. Kyoto is also the destination of the modern Moon Princess who must on that date return to the Moon World. If the students have read the story, they can enjoy the irony of Big Bird's failure to make the connection between his guide and the Moon Princess. Bonuses are: a delightful introduction to modern urban and rural traditional Japan, also visits to a shrine and a temple, and a classroom of elementary students putting on their own production of the ancient tale. If an edited version is to be shown, the opening to the meeting with the young woman and the ending from where the princess begins her return to the Moon World will present a memorable image sequence to reinforce the reading of the tale.

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