

Honors Literature – World History

TASK: Read the following text carefully, making all appropriate notations. Identify SOAPStone, DIDLS, PERSIAN, and other information as evidence of your research and analysis of the piece of literature. Answer the related questions on notebook paper or on this document. You may use this information for any written essay on the piece. See the text at the very bottom of these notes.

TASK: Comprehension Questions

- 1. From these passages, can you identify Chinese precedents in terms of place names and historical personages, allusions to Chinese literary works, and attitudes toward gender or social organization that can be traced to Chinese models? Show your evidence, and demonstrate.**

- 2. Can you detect passages that convey Buddhist ideas about the nature of the world and human existence? Show your evidence, and demonstrate.**

- 3. Are additional Indian influences suggested? Show your evidence, and demonstrate.**

- 4. Are there ideas that are distinctively Japanese or Vietnamese, or are the authors totally caught up in Chinese precedents? Show your evidence, and demonstrate.**

Literature as a Mirror of the Exchanges Between Civilized Centers

The following passages from Lady Murasaki's classic Japanese account of court life, *The Tale of Genji* (Vintage Press, 1985 edition), and from perhaps the most popular and beloved work of Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* (Vintage Press, 1973 edition), are superb examples of the important and far-reaching exchanges between the civilizations of south and east Asia. Not surprisingly, Chinese influences, including many allusions to Chinese writings and historical events, are paramount, but Buddhist (hence originally Indian) themes are pervasive in both works. There is also evidence in one of these passages of significant exchanges between the satellite civilizations of China.

[Kieu] dreamed a girl appeared hard by her side and murmured: "Kieu! Your Karma's still undone. How can you shirk your debt of grief to fate? You yet have to play out your woman's role."

The moderator was a man of considerable learning. There was much of interest in his exchanges with the Korean. There were also exchanges of Chinese poetry, and in one of his poems the Korean succeeded most skillfully in conveying his joy at having been able to observe such a countenance on this the eve of his return to his own land. . . . Summoning an astrologer of the Indian school, the emperor was pleased to learn that the Indian view coincided with the Japanese and the Korean; and so he concluded that the boy should become a commoner with the name of Minamoto or Genji.

Looking at the keepsakes Myobu had brought back, [Genji] thought what a comfort it would be if some wizard were to bring him, like that Chinese emperor, a comb from the world where his lost love was dwelling. . . . There are limits to the powers of the most gifted artist. The Chinese lady in the paintings did not have the luster of

life. Yang Kuei-fei was said to have resembled the lotus of the Sublime Pond, the willows of the Timeless Hall. No doubt she was very beautiful in her Chinese finery.

"You are well-famed as a lute-player," he said. "Like Chung Tru-chi I've longed to hear you play." . . . Now [Kieu] began to play. A battle scene—oh how they clashed and clanged, Han and Chu swords! The Ssu-ma tune, A Phoenix Seeks His Mate—it sounded like an outburst of pure grief. Then Hsi K'ang's masterpiece, Kuang-ling, was heard: it rushed on like a stream or flew like clouds. Next came what Chao-chin played—she mourned her Prince and all her kinsfolk she must leave behind as she crossed the Great Wall to wed a Hun.

The [abbot] talked of this ephemeral world and of the world to come. His own burden of sin was heavy, thought Genji, that he had been lured into an illicit and profitless affair. He would regret it all his life and suffer even more terribly in the life to come. What a joy to withdraw to such a place [a mountain monastery] as this!

When one must weigh and choose between one's love and filial duty, which will turn the scale? Kieu brushed aside her solemn vows to [the young student] Kim—she'd pay a daughter's debt before all else. Resolved on what to do, she spoke her mind: "Hands off my father, please! I'll sell myself and ransom him."

QUESTIONS From these passages, can you identify Chinese precedents in terms of place names and historical personages, allusions to Chinese literary works, and attitudes toward gender or social organization that can be traced to Chinese models? Can you detect passages that convey Buddhist ideas about the nature of the world and human existence? Are additional Indian influences suggested? Are there ideas that are distinctively Japanese or Vietnamese, or are the authors totally caught up in Chinese precedents?

