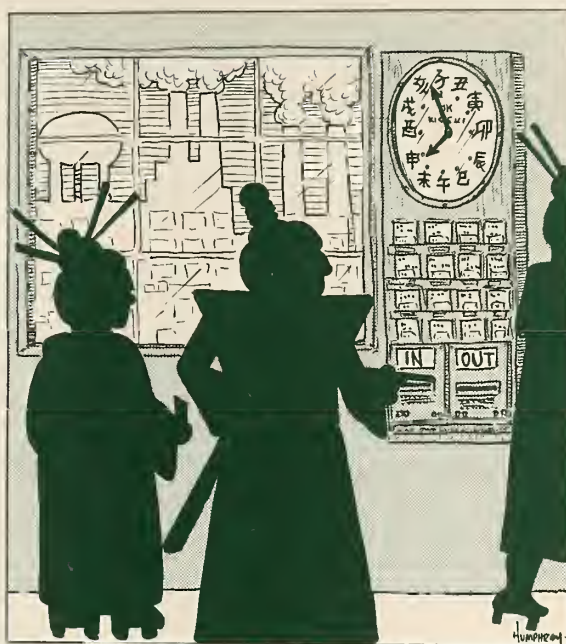


Teacher's Corner: Choosing Texts for Studying Japan

Japan is the land of samurai, haiku poetry, flower arrangements, tea ceremonies, and miraculously prosperous companies such as Sony and Mitsubishi. Wrong. All too often, students know only about these seemingly exotic qualities and their studies in global history or world civilization courses simply reinforce them. Sometimes, even anthropologically organized texts echo these simplistic images when chapters focus on topics such as cultural values, family organization, economics, government, communication, and the arts. Unless Japan is one of the separate case studies in such a text, Japanese customs, values, arts, and institutions are presented as isolated examples of cultural variation rather than as integral elements of a total Japanese cultural system. The danger is that instead of giving students the tools and knowledge for understanding cultural differences, these images simply underscore the vision that the Japanese are different, strange, and undecipherable. Rarely do the textbooks consider the similarities between Japan and the U.S. What then should a text have in it to correct such skewed visions of Japan?

This Teacher's Corner, the second in a series of guides to textbook selection, suggests basic general points anthropologists would encourage you to consider as you evaluate textbooks that include Japan. (For the first guide to Global History/World Civilization texts, see Anthro Notes, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 1990, pp. 7-8). In this second guide we draw examples from widely used texts that include Japan such as:

- 1) *Global Insights* by James N. Hantual et al. (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co., 1988);
- 2) *A Global History* by Leften S. Stavrianos et al. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1979);
- 3) *World Cultures* by Claren L. Ver Steeg. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1977); and
- 4) *World Geography Today* by R. J. Sager, D. M. Helgren and S. Israel (Austin: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989).



General Considerations

At a minimum, a cultural history or world civilization text should discuss environment, cultural values, history, and language. Ideally the text should analyze how these elements interact and how they affect politics, work, family life, the role of women, and the business world. It is important to "hear" Japanese speak from primary or secondary sources, either in narratives of their experiences and perspectives or in profiles of individual Japanese. *Global Insights* provides both the minimum and the ideal. In contrast, *World Cultures* does not have a separate section on Japan to show integration; hence the reader has a disjointed or skewed perspective and comes to know only about department stores, flower arrangements, the art of gardens, Haiku poetry, marriage partners, music, and social values.

Some texts, such as *A Global History*, focus primarily on China and consider Japan only in relationship to the history of China or the U.S. Granted it is impossible to cover every area of the world so that any teacher has to select the key countries for the course. *World Geography Today* is not a history or world cultures text but exemplifies a format in which many secondary students are introduced to other cultures and regions. Although this book

does have a separate chapter on Japan and Korea, as a geography text it focuses on the physical environment and its effect on agricultural and industrial production and settlement pattern. History and "way of life" are covered but these are not related to predominant cultural values, religions, ideologies, or language.

1. Environment

It is essential that any textbook point out the size; the mountains, including 190 volcanoes; the chain of islands; the frequency of earthquakes; the monsoons; and the absence of raw materials. Past and present cultural responses to crowding, dependence on foreign raw materials (especially oil and lumber) and frequent and unpredictable natural disasters should also be discussed.

2. Cultural Values

Does the text describe Shintoism and Buddhism, the two predominant religions in Japan, and explain that people often practice both? Shinto rituals honor ancestors and the forces of nature leading to reverence for the natural world, love of simplicity, and concern for cleanliness and good manners. Buddhism influenced the arts, and most Japanese today use Buddhist rituals in funerals and memorial rites for the dead. Both religions are used to affirm family ties and provide a sense of continuity with the past (p. 288, *Cultural Insights*).

What often confuses Americans and leads to cultural misunderstanding is a Japanese value system that emphasizes conformity rather than individualism, social obligations, saving face rather than resolution through open confrontation, ranking, the use of etiquette to reduce social tension, and greeting behavior including bowing. These values do not exist in a vacuum but evolved from historical forces and are best understood in the context of a highly crowded, compact country where 70% of the land is mountainous, only 7% is arable, and the archipelago offers no room for expansion.

The text should also discuss the Japanese work ethic and the intense studying in high school, often referred to as "examination hell." Why such pressure? In part, a high score on the examination at the end of high school not only determines where a person goes to college but where that person will work for the rest of his life. Different businesses have strong ties to particular universities--the source of their work force. Loyalty to and ties between institutions play a greater role than in the U.S. where such practices might be seen as unfairness or favoritism. As a result, college is often a far more relaxed time than high school.

Finally, the text should include Japanese attitudes toward nature. How are they different from those of the West, and why? Differences in cultural values are reflected in studies carried out by American and Japanese anthropologists, respectively. Americans who studied the Ituri Forest pygmies and Kalahari bushmen emphasized how few possessions people had, and how they shared both possessions and food freely among themselves. Japanese anthropologists, on the other hand, were struck by the hunter-gatherers' freedom of movement in a relatively unbounded space.

3. History

Does the text explain the major trends in historical change, noting the periods of isolationism and the minimal role of immigration or conquest during the last 2000 years? Although not anthropological per se, it seems important to analyze the Japanese drift to war during World War II. Is a Japanese perspective offered or only a U.S.? Are traditional Japanese values discussed such as physical courage and strict adherence to authority in order to show their role in leading Japan into the War. How did MacArthur's postwar changes alter the country?

Are the differences between urban and rural life shown? Is the relationship between the citizen and the government explored? Business and government traditionally and even today have had strong ties to each other, and local and national governments engage in many

practices Americans would find oppressive or unconstitutional.

If teachers are exploring comparative economic and political structures, they need to be aware of the problems when using such words as feudalism and imperialism. As Umesao Tadao states, "When we use the term 'feudal system' in Japanese, we express it using the Chinese characters for feudalism. However, in Marxian terminology, the entire pre-modern age is referred to as 'feudalistic'. In present-day China, therefore, 'feudalistic' is applied to both Chinese and world history to mean 'pre-modern'. But the substance of the feudal system in Chinese and Japanese history is completely different.

Similarly, Europeans who came to Japan during the Meiji period first described the Tokugawa Shogunate as a feudal system. They based this on their own interpretation of its similarities with the feudal period in Europe." (SES 25:8). Major differences existed, however.

Since many Americans are distressed with the current economic competition with Japan, it is important that a text explain how Japanese corporations are different. Firms were not created historically in the same way as were Western companies. Western history and theory often do not apply. "Seen alone, Japanese enterprises are smaller than their Western counterparts, and on the whole, they are more specialized in form and function; seen as parts of a wider association of related firms, Japanese companies are often formidable building blocks of macro-organizational diversity and integration." (SES 26:123)

The Japanese economic development should not be characterized as a "miracle." As Harumi Befu from Stanford University notes, "Westerners have regarded their own economic development as being normal.... Deviations from the Western patterns are just that: deviations from the norm and from the normative. True to the nineteenth century unilinear evolutionism, the West still claims achievement of the pinnacle of economic success, which non-Western nationals are supposedly following and trying to achieve..... Enter Japan, which

performs better than the teacher that the West is supposed to be.... The Westerner's reaction is that this cannot be, and is therefore a miracle.... Also, to call the Japanese case a 'miracle' simply reinforces the notion... that Japan is unique. It does not help us understand Japan as a normal, natural phenomenon..." (SES 26:202).

4. Language

Contrasts between English and Japanese can provide other insights into cultural differences. How do languages differ visually and in the direction in which they are read? Even though the Japanese once borrowed the Chinese system of writing, the Japanese language now has little in common with Chinese. Japanese uses picture words called kanji and symbols expressing different sounds called kanaa. Japanese incorporates a complex ranking system so that a speaker must consider whether the person addressed is a male or female, is older or younger, or has a higher status. The rank of the speaker will affect the endings of words as well as the actual vocabulary. For example, more than a dozen pronouns can be translated as "I". Women are ranked generally lower than men in the language.

Students should also appreciate why translation is difficult. For example, "hai" is usually translated as "yes." It means, however, yes I understand you, not yes I agree with you or yes I will do that. For Americans, conducting business discussions with Japanese and attempting to reach agreements, those distinctions are critical. Hurt feelings, a sense of betrayal, labels of "tricky, devious," and lack of trust all can grow simply from misunderstanding the meaning of the word yes.

Conclusion

What is important, then, in a textbook is that students see the interaction among environment, history, cultural values, and language. If these areas are covered in some detail, students then will have the background to explore in a more in-depth way how those four qualities affect politics, work, family life, the role of women, and the business world. They will then see why and how Japanese culture has certain

characteristics that affect many areas of Japanese life. Ideally, students who have an initial appreciation of Japanese differences and similarities within an integrated cultural system will be able to ask questions leading to a better understanding of Japan --whether they are reading newspaper articles on Japan, working in a Japanese-owned company, negotiating with Japanese officials, seeing Japanese portrayed in movies, or simply working with and entertaining Japanese colleagues and friends.

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