

Nihonjijou: Japanese Culture Class for Foreign Students

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This paper introduces aspects of curriculum content and philosophy of a *Nihonjijou* (Japanese culture) class designed for university-level foreign students, most of whom are simultaneously studying Japanese. The goal of the class is to stimulate appreciation of both past and present Japan by examining various topics integratively through discussion of open-ended questions. Students are asked to bring ideas to class--to share what they already know about Japan and make comparisons with their own cultures. Various teaching methods and materials are introduced as well as contents of the various units.

この論文は、大学の留学生のために設定されている日本事情という授業のカリキュラム内容や教授法について紹介しています。日本へ来る留学生のほとんどは日本語を勉強しながら、日本事情も同時に勉強している。このクラスの目標は総合的に色々な課題を決まった答えのない質問を討論した上で、日本の過去と現代社会の理解と知的刺激を促すものです。学生に対しては、日本に対する経験・知識をクラスに持って来させ、自分の国の文化と比較し、クラスの参加者の皆と話させるようにします。このクラスの教え方、教材、やそれぞれの課題の内容を紹介しています。

Philosophy towards teaching *Nihonjijou*

Nihonjijou is often taught in Japanese, by the same Japanese teachers who teach Japanese language.

Sometimes, as in my case, foreign teachers are asked to

teach the class, often with the assumption that it will be taught in English. As I can speak Japanese relatively well and since the class is often composed of some students who do not understand English and others who do not understand Japanese, I find myself often using both languages and allowing students to use either language for classroom discussion. Usually, however, I ask students to write their final papers in English. I also usually try to invite a few Japanese students to audit the class as their presence and input makes the discussions all the more interesting.

On the first day of class I give students a list of suggested topics and ask them to consider what aspect of Japan and Japanese culture most interests them by having them select from the list and suggest their own topics as well. During the course they will be asked to give an oral presentation on the topic of their choice, and then later to develop that into a written paper for evaluation. I utilize the input of students' preferences in order to start them on the process of considering their oral report topics as well as to compile my curriculum, which I finalize after the first class. As I generally teach this course for one semester over fifteen, ninety-minute classes, it is not possible to cover the full range of possible topics.

I am constantly trying to learn more about Japan. Being a foreigner myself, I do not attempt to present

myself as the expert on Japan, but rather as a fellow sojourner, searching for the ever-elusive truth about Japan. Most importantly, I want my students not just to consider statistical data about Japan, but also to think about the underlying causes of various situations by examining the relevant historical and social factors. I present them with discussion questions, which have no one 'correct' answer.

Unit topics are tied to other topics integratively. For example, I may start out with a unit on religion and philosophy. Later when we do the unit on cinematography and animation, many of the themes of Japanese folk beliefs as well as Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism that are revealed in the movies are brought to life. For example, Miyazaki Hayao's animated *Ponkoko* and *Mononoke Hime* have many religious and folk images, which depict a Japanese consciousness and spirituality. Movies, such as *Naruyama Bushiko* with its mystical and animistic portrayals, can also serve as good material for making connections with the essence of Japanese spirituality. Also the novels of Kobo Abe (Abe, 1964) depicted in classic art films such as *Suna Onna* and *Tannin no Kao* provide excellent material for discussion of Japanese folk beliefs, post-war society, and psychology. Here literature, cinematography, folk beliefs, psychology, sociology and religion among other themes can be discussed in an integrative manner.

Concepts

One of the main concepts that I introduce towards the beginning is the idea of ethnocentrism, where students are asked to draw a world map in three minutes. Most students place their home country smack in the middle of their page, and often draw it oversized. After showing Japanese, American, and British versions of commercial maps (each with those countries centered), I also show a 'Down-Under' map which is printed as if a conventional map were turned upside down, with the southern hemisphere on top. I show this in order to demonstrate that making a map is all just a question of perception (ethnocentrism) and even an upside down map is still geographically correct. Other important concepts that we discuss from the start are stereotyping and oversimplification. These types of perceptions are natural for humans to possess to a certain extent; however, it is important for students to be aware of the way they frame themselves when they try to evaluate another culture. They must also learn to be reflexive in their own self-evaluation.

Methods and use of classroom aids

I try to vary the sorts of classroom methods that I use to teach the class. Lectures, discussions, guest speakers, small group discussions, and individual oral presentations by students are some of the methods that I employ. A number of classroom aids such as video

movies and animation, audio recordings, videos taped from television, printed material from newspapers, Japanese special reports appearing in *Time* magazine, books, and material from the Internet are used. Often I bring *realia* to class--samples of real things. When possible, I try to invite a guest speaker to come to speak about various topics.

Evaluation

Students are evaluated partly on the basis of attendance and class participation. They are also evaluated on their oral report and the final written report emerging from it. The oral report serves two purposes: to enable students to share with other members of the class a niche that they especially know something about; and to assist me in checking their progress. I can give them suggestions where they may improve when writing up their ideas and completing their paper, which is expected to be thoughtful and well written. They are expected to use at least two outside references with at least one source not being an Internet web site. Some are encouraged to conduct interviews and collect raw data when appropriate. In grading, I take into consideration the wide range of academic abilities, experiences, and English proficiencies.

Contents of Units

I generally present uncommon, untraditional topics

which students are curious about, but don't have much knowledge of. Much of the material that I have assembled is based on my twenty years of experience living in Japan and ten years teaching the course. I try to include topics which they will enjoy and find useful in their everyday life in Japan. The contents of some of the more popular units will be included in this section.

Similarities between cultures: Why are distant cultures the same?

I introduce this unit early in the course as I feel that in this sort of class, which focuses on comparing cultures, there is often too much emphasis on *differences* between cultures and not enough thought of the *similarities* that two very distant cultures may share (See Kamada, 1997). I use an audiotape of a South African Zulu healer, named Mutwa, who spoke in 1985 at the International Transpersonal Association Meeting in Kyoto (Mutwa Vusumazulu, 1986). In Mutwa's introductory remarks, he expressed his awe and excitement in discovering similarities between Japan's ancient Shinto religion and his own ancient culture. Mutwa proclaimed his astonishment of how the Japanese traditional religion of Shinto seemed very similar to his ancient Zulu religion which is similarly called *Sin-du*. Not only that, but also *Shinto* and *Sin-du* both mean 'The Path of God.' Mutwa furthermore, in an emotion-laden voice, exclaimed how the mythological Shinto originator of the Japanese

people, a Goddess named Amaterasu, is very closely linked phonetically to a similar Goddess personage in his culture, named Matarasu-Ma. Finally the three symbols of Shinto (*kagami*, *tama*, and *katana*) look very similar to Zulu's Three Fishes of God. With this simple introduction as starting material for a unit on similarities, a discussion is opened.

Identity: How are foreigners viewed? How do foreigners view Japan?

This unit is also introduced early in the course. I feel that it is important to consider not only the question of how we form our identities as foreigners in Japan, but also how Japanese perceive foreigners. Often these perceptions depend on questions of ethnicity, race, religion and gender. This opens discussion of the students' first impressions of Japan and changes in those impressions over time.

Religion, Philosophy, Perspective

The unit on Japanese religions starts with folk beliefs and rituals and moves through discussion of Shintoism, Buddhism, the Chinese philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, Christianity, and finally 'new religions' including cults such as Aum Shinrikyou. Students are brought to reflect on reasons behind various prevalent conditions based on historical and social factors. Following are some of the discussion questions which

follow the introduction to religions:

1. Why do you think Christianity has not caught on very well in Japan today, especially in comparison with other Asian countries such as Korea and Philippines?
2. What do you think caused so many well-educated and average Japanese youths who joined the Aum Shinrikyou cult to defy reason and basic morality to commit murder and terrorism? What attracted them to Aum Shinrikyou?
3. In what ways (and why) has Japan combined institutional religions with folk beliefs?
4. How do your religious/spiritual beliefs differ or resemble those of people in Japan?

Youth culture and contemporary society

This topic is usually the most popular topic, as most students are *ipso facto* members of the current youth culture. I start out the unit by looking back at Japanese youth culture from the 1970's, which could be described as the *kawaiko buriko* (cutie) generation where Hello Kitty made its debut. The 1980's was the *now-i* generation where youths caused a ruckus by walking around and boarding trains for the first time with their walkman headphones blaring. The 1990's was the generation that looked to the millennium with

apprehension and 'nurtured' *Tamagotchi* (a virtual pet carried on one's body that cried out for food and affection at the most inopportune moments and 'died' if not properly tended to). The youths of today walk around yelling out '*Ima doko*' ('Where are you now?') into their hand-held telephones or clicking out email messages to friends and acquaintances with extreme energy all day long, while adults, ironically, criticize them for lacking the ability to communicate.

This unit can be taught by looking through any newspaper for discussion of various current social problems. In recent years topics of discussion for this unit have included *enjo kousai* ('compensated dating' of teen girls by older men), *gakkyu houkai* (collapse of the school classroom into chaos), *koutou kyouhi* (refusal to attend school), values, dreams, and messages found in youth music.

Cinematography and Animation

This unit has already been discussed above to some extent. One must be careful in comparing the most obvious western animator, Walt Disney, who has been dead for decades, with the vibrant, often young Japanese animation artists who are still very much alive. They represent an elite group of intelligent, creative and talented artists who produce Japanese works often with universal themes (See Bock, 1978).

As far as cinematography is concerned, I usually stick

to the more classic art type of films and try to show representative samples of many of the great directors, although not always their best-known works. While Kurosawa is most renowned for his samurai movies, I generally show his *Dodesukaden*, which is a thought-provoking social commentary on the poor underside of Japanese society set during the boom years of the 1960's.

Gender Roles

This is another unit that is very popular with students, especially girls. In recent years many new books have come out in English written by both Japanese and non-Japanese dealing with women's issues and roles in modern day Japan. Among others (Fujimura-Fanselow & Kamada, 1995), I have found Sumiko Iwao's (1993) book to be particularly helpful. One of the discussion questions I use for this unit is based on the following quotation taken from her book: "Since men do not see women as an immediate threat to themselves, they do not intervene in the affairs of women and do not know much about what women are doing, enabling them [women] to become quite independent. . . the practically minded Japanese woman has been able to take advantage of [this]. This indeed, is why the quiet revolution among women is moving forward so relentlessly . . . [women] are quietly enjoying a degree of freedom and fulfillment not available to men (*Ibid*, p.18)." Students are asked to consider how the American feminist movement, based

on principles, differs from the Japanese women's 'quiet revolution,' based on practicality.

Local (Tsugaru) Culture

Foreign students coming to the northern Aomori region where I reside, called the Tsugaru Area, are very enthusiastic to learn more about the local culture. I bring in realia to the class such as samples of Tsugaru lacquer-ware, Tsugaru stitchery (*kogin*), books (see 古岡, 1977) and so forth. When possible, I take them to a local Tsugaru kite festival, eat Tsugaru foods, listen to Tsugaru Shamisen music, participate in the Neputa and Nebuta parade festivals, and examine expressions of Tsugaru-ben (dialect). We spend considerable time discussing the literature of the 'Tsugaru-dream,' Dazai Osamu, a local boy born in a small Tsugaru village who later proved himself as a literary genius after moving to Tokyo as an adult. He later returned for a stint to complete a travel narrative called *Tsugaru* (Dazai, 1944; Westerhoven, 1985). His works are known to be as dark as his own life, which ended after his third suicide attempt at age 39. His fictional stories are often thought of as semi-autobiographical and he has been a sort of cult figure over the years for disaffected youths (See Dazai, 1991).

Common Sense and Health

Based on my own two decades of experiences with

hospitals, clinics and the school health staff in Japan, I have put together a unit that is seldom found in Japanese culture books. As my perspective is only one among many, I encourage students to compare Japan with their various home countries' health services. Some of the main themes that I cover in a comparative manner are as follows:

1. vagueness versus directness,
2. information versus knowledge,
3. wide public reach versus high technique,
4. *kampouyaku* (Chinese-based natural medicine) versus western medicine (over-medication),
5. low costs (at the expense of cleanliness and service) versus wide public reach,
6. emotional support (little counseling; poor bedside manner) versus physical skills (see Yamazaki, 1990),
7. privacy versus 'paper walls',
8. stress and mental illness versus leisure time (insufficient leisure; sleep deprivation),
9. prevention and education from kindergarten versus family or individual responsibility for health,
10. aggressive treatment versus the wait-and-see attitude.

Summary

As there is not time to cover all possible topics during only 15 class sessions, I try to select those topics which students are most interested in. While some of the most popular themes include youth culture, animation/cinematography, gender roles, local Tsugaru culture, and common sense/health, other topics have also been presented, such as: societal ills, psychology, arts, thinking/language/symbols, literature, history, politics, economics, social sciences, nature and the environment.

In conclusion, this *Nihonjijou* class offers foreign students studying in Japan an opportunity to examine various unusual features of Japan which they do not know much about, but which interest them. Students are given thought-provoking discussion questions to guide them to integratively understand the various aspects of Japan based on historical causes and social conditions. Students come to a deeper understanding of the ways Japan has developed by making comparisons with their own cultures and reflecting upon themselves.

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