

## ESSAYS

## Asian Culture in the Classroom

By Mary Connor

I teach a senior elective in Asian Studies at Westridge School, an independent school in Pasadena, California. My objective is to provide a solid foundation for appreciating the distinctive histories and cultures of China, Japan and Korea, their interrelationships and commonalities. To secure respect for Asian societies, opportunities are created for students to experience the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures within and outside of the classroom (see appendix 1). In order to be as creative as possible and to offer different options for students of varied abilities, I have adapted Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to group and individual projects (see appendix 2).

In this secondary-level Asian studies course, each lecture or reading assignment has a component element of personal engagement. Students are asked to respond sensually, physically, and emotionally to what they learn. After reading segments of Kakuzō Okakura's *The Book of Tea*, for example, they do the Zen Buddhist tea ceremony. They smell incense, feel the weave of tatami mats, endure the discomfort of kneeling during an entire class period, see a shaven monk pour hot liquid in

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### A page from Mary Connor's Asian Studies Class Scrapbook

Chinese New Year, February, 1999, Westridge School. Mary Connor (center, right) with Asian Culture Club Members and Lion Dancers



Chinese New Year Celebration. Sisters playing the Butterfly Harp and Zither



Chinese New Year Celebration with Dragon dancers and Tai chi Instructor



Students participating in Japanese tea ceremony.



Asian Studies Class at the Japanese Gardens, Huntington Library and Gardens, San Marino, California



Asian Studies Class field trip to the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California

slow motion into varying textured and subtly colored bowls, taste green tea, and meditate quietly for one hour, perhaps their most tranquil hour of the entire school year.

Students also throw the *I Ching*, reorder their rooms according to Feng Shui, eat moon cakes, kick and flail in Tae Kwon Do, center their bodies in Tai Chi, speak some Chinese, Japanese and Korean, and wield their brushes in bold strokes for calligraphy. Nothing is merely cerebral. All types of learners are engaged. Weekly journals invite students to reflect on the impact of Asia on their lives.

For the first nine weeks of the semester, students explore the history of China. As they study this ancient culture, they discover that at least 3,000 years ago peasants developed Feng Shui, the practice of arranging one's life in harmony with the forces of the universe. In the process, they encounter the *I Ching*, Chi, the five elements, Daoism, yin and yang, and ancestor worship.

Each student is given an opportunity to design a room, a house, or a garden according to the ancient principles of Feng Shui. They learn that this art is now widely practiced throughout the world and continues to influence architecture, interior design, and even real estate transactions. This year each student spent part of a weekend rearranging furniture, removing clutter, and drawing up a new floor plan to bring change into their lives and to enhance the positive forces of Chi.

When the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368) is studied, the class hears the folk legend that autumn moon cakes were used to overthrow the foreign Mongols of the Yuan dynasty. The plans for the revolution against Kublai Khan's descendants were hidden inside the moon

cakes at festival time. Students listen to a fairy tale associated with the festival and celebrate the occasion by eating moon cakes.

In studying Daoism, students search the Web for information about Tai Chi. They come to understand how the Chinese for thousands of years have ritualized certain movements that are associated with good health and peace of mind. The class views a Tai Chi video, practices the movements, and evaluates the experience. After reading about oracle bones and the evolution of Chinese characters, students quickly comprehend the complexity of the Chinese written language and the discipline involved as they try their hands at the art of calligraphy. A discussion follows as to how Confucian respect for learning and authority, together with the diligence necessary to master thousands of Chinese characters, contributes to academic excellence.

Leaving China, the class focuses on Japan for five weeks. Students are reminded of what they just learned as they examine the historical and cultural influences of China on Japan. As they read from Edwin O. Reischauer's *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, they discover the uniqueness and adaptability of Japanese culture together with the reasons why the Japanese and their neighbors in East Asia may have the most deeply ingrained work ethic in the world. Using up-to-date information about Japan from the *Tora no Maki* series (see bibliography), students learn about the Japanese family, educational excellence, technological innovation, and evolving business practices that result from global challenges and recent economic difficulties.

A Zen Buddhist monk transforms the classroom into a tea

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house. As students experience the ritual created by the sixteenth-century Zen priest, Sen no Rikyū, they witness the benefits of quiet meditation. In the process, they acquire a greater awareness of Japanese aesthetics and etiquette. To provide all students with opportunities to become familiar with Japanese art and architecture, photographs are scanned into the computer. Class sets are created with a color laser printer so that each student can follow a lecture that includes information on landscape painting, woodblock prints, Buddhist temples, and Shintō shrines.

On the Internet, students discover that in ancient times a party became more lively when someone started singing and others kept time with handclapping. It mattered little whether a person sang well. Out of this tradition the popular contemporary entertainment of karaoke was born. We then listen to a tape, and volunteers step up to perform.

During the final weeks of the semester the focus is Korea. A poignant twentieth-century novel, *The Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, by Sook Nyul Choi, reveals the heartbreaking plight of families at the end of World War II when the present unresolved situation arose. The class discovers Korean influences on Japanese culture. The country's history, art, and architecture are imparted through a video, *Discovering the Art of Korea*. Another video of a local celebration of Korean Independence

Day shows young Korean Americans dancing the fan and drum dances to the sounds of traditional music.

The class scans the Web for information about Tae Kwon Do and learns that this martial art is not only a superior form of self-defense, but a discipline of the mind. Following a demonstration of Tae Kwon Do by local young people, the class attempts its sharp, angular, and free-flowing circular movements. Students then read about *p'ansori* and watch the award-winning film, *Sop'yonje*. At the end of the semester the class reads a Korea Society's first-prize student essay on the topic of reunification. After examining this issue, each member of the class completes research on Korea and submits an essay for this national contest.

A final component of the Asian studies course comprises individual and group projects that provide opportunities for learners who do not have strong linguistic abilities. This year, for example, one student is demonstrating the Chinese zither; another is role playing various Chinese characters, such as a member of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution; a third is viewing a number of Gong Li films.

At the end of the semester, students have greater knowledge and respect for three ancient Asian cultures which are emerging into the complexity and flux of the postmodern world.