

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 textures 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 hand-clapping. 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.

ESSAYS

Asian Culture in the Classroom

APPENDIX I
SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS

ACTIVITIES

1. Write responses to the following films: *To Live, Shall We Dance* and *Sop'yonje*.
2. Participate in a field trip to the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena. A docent tour introduces you to the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean art collections, Chinese architecture and a Chinese garden.
3. Tour a traditional Japanese house, Zen Buddhist garden and an extensive Bonsai collection at the Huntington Library and Gardens in San Marino, California.
4. Read a booklet from the *Korean Heritage Series*. Individuals will share information in brief presentations to the class. This assignment is an excellent introduction to the study of Korea.
5. Participate in an exercise on the 1994 nuclear crisis in Korea. Prior to studying this event most young people think that the issues between North and South Korea were resolved at the end of the Korean War. They discover how Jimmy Carter reached an interim agreement with Kim Il Sung, but they also learn that many issues remain unresolved and the Korean situation remains precarious.

APPENDIX II
SUGGESTIONS FOR THE APPLICATION OF
HOWARD GARDNER'S
MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY

Verbal/Linguistic

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT:

Complete research on a famous individual from China, Japan, or Korea (suggestions: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, a samurai warrior, Sen no Rikyū, Hokusai, Hiroshige, Kim Il Sung, or Kim Dae Jung). Present report in the first person.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP PROJECT:

Watch the following films about China: *Farewell My Concubine*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *The Story of Qiu Ju*. Write a report evaluating all three films. You could do a Siskel/Ebert style review for the class.

Logical/Math

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT:

Research the abacus and learn how to use it. This will be followed by a class demonstration.

Musical

INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS:

- Do research on a musical instrument of China, Japan or Korea. Give a demonstration of the musical instrument or provide a tape appropriate to the project.
- Take lessons on the Japanese Taiko drums at a community center.
- Demonstrate karaoke.
- Research Chinese opera. Provide music with the presentation.

Visual/Spatial

INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS:

- Research Chinese landscape paintings. Complete a painting according to the principles employed by traditional artists.
- Study Chinese porcelain. If you are taking a class in ceramics, develop a project that demonstrates knowledge of this art.
- Create a three-dimensional map of China, Japan, or Korea.

Bodily/Kinesthetic

INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS:

Study Bonsai. View the Bonsai plants at the Huntington Gardens and consult an expert. Purchase a Bonsai and care for it from September until December. Bring the Bonsai to class and share knowledge.

- Participate in Ikebana lessons at a local community center.
- Take two or more lessons in Tae Kwon Do.
- Take lessons in traditional Chinese or Korean dance. Give a demonstration to the class.
- Practice *hangul*. Be able to write some key words and phrases.
- Research the Kabuki theater. Present a scene from a Kabuki drama.

Interpersonal

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP PROJECT:

Simulate a news broadcast such as the Jim Lehrer News Hour. The news should relate to China, Japan, and/or Korea. Or include actual interviews from a news program and make your own commentary.

Intrapersonal/Introspective

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT:

Take two or more lessons in Tai Chi at a community center.



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- Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997.
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Morton, W. Scott. *China: Its History and Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995.

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Nahm, Andrew C. *A Panorama of 5000 Years: Korean History*. Elizabeth, N.J.: Hollym International Corp., 1987.

Oberdorfer, Don. *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997.

Okakura, Kakuzō. *The Book of Tea*. New York: Kodansha International, 1989.

Reischauer, Edwin O. *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. (This is a particularly effective text; it combines essential historical background together with an understanding of Japanese society, government, business, and Japan's position in the world today. This text, together with selections from *Tora no Maki I, II, and III*, makes our study of Japan very up-to-date.

Tai Chi Chuan for Life: The First Video Course on the Sun Style. Los Angeles: Walking Mountain Productions (phone: 310-478-0018).

The Way of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: Gentle Exercise for Health and Inner Peace with Lana Spraker. Los Angeles: T'ai Productions (phone: 310-479-3646).

Tora no Maki I (1996), *Tora no Maki II* (1997), and *Tora no Maki III* (1998) are published by the National Council for the Social Studies and ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Washington, D.C. and Bloomington, Indiana, 1997. (These booklets are recently published lesson plans designed by teachers who are recipients of Keizai Koho Center Fellowships. Complete lesson plans are available within each *Tora no Maki* on Japanese society, culture, government, business, and technology. The most recent edition includes lessons on technology, consumerism, and an interesting comparison between department stores in the United States and Japan.)

Wardell, Steven. *Rising Sons and Daughters: Life Among Japan's New Young*. Cambridge: Plympton Press International, 1995. (Students enjoy this entertaining and informative account of a high school student's experience in the Youth for Understanding Program.)

WEBSITES

FENG SHUI

<http://www.168fengshui.com/Articles/whatis.htm>

KARAOKE

http://www.arts.unimelb.edu.au/fcf/ucr/student/1996/c.yu/kara_his.htm

MOON FESTIVAL

<http://www.insidechina.com/china/culture/festival/moonfest.htm>

P'ANSORI

<http://www.korea.insights.co.kr/music>

TAE KWON DO

<http://www.pro-tkd.com/taekwon.htm>

TAI CHI

<http://www.wccusd.k12.ca.us/portola/china/tc.htm>

Editor's note:

Ms. Conner reports that most video stores have the films she recommends, especially in states with a high Asian population. She rented all but *Sop'yonje* at Blockbuster. Both *To Live* and *Shall We Dance?* are available from Facets Video (1-800-331-6197). If you want to use *Sop'yonje* in your classroom, she suggests that you send a blank tape requesting the film with English subtitles to the Korean Cultural Service, The Embassy of the Republic of Korea, 2370 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest, Washington, DC 20008. The Korean Cultural Service will mail the tape to you. Also, the Asia Educational Media Service offers information about where to find audio-visual media resources for teaching and learning about Asia. Contact Rebecca Payne at 217-265-0642 or e-mail: rpayne@uiuc.edu.

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