

Editor's Note: The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign contributed the following review. AEMS provides information about where to find audio-visual media resources for teaching and learning about Asia and advice about which ones may best suit your needs. The program offers a Web site <http://www.aems.uiuc.edu> with a searchable database and full-text reviews as well as a call in/write-in service and twice-yearly newsletter, both free of charge. AEMS is supported by funding from The Freeman Foundation and The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership. Contact: Tel: (888) 828-2367 or 265-0640. Fax: (217) 265-0641. E-mail: aems@uiuc.edu.

Occupied Japan

An Experiment in Democracy

PRODUCED BY OREGON PUBLIC TELEVISION
Distributed by PBS VIDEO,
a department of the Public Broadcasting Service
800-344-3337
1996. VHS video. 60 minutes.

The American Occupation of Japan following World War II is surely one of the most fascinating chapters in human history. Where else can one go for a practicum in intercultural transformation that benefitted most, if not all, involved? Where else has democratic reform worked as well as in Japan from 1945–52? Yet, this story has often been told as one of American values overcoming Japanese culture, the imposition of democracy “from top down” by the U.S. military on the silent, suffering Japanese folk. This new video claims that it will challenge this America-centered perspective on the Occupation, “arguing for a distinctively Japanese evolution that occurred in tandem with American objectives.” The larger goal is to redress the unequal relationship between a superior America and a subservient Japan that many feel has characterized U.S.-Japan relations until recently.

These presentist concerns are evident throughout the video. One technique that is particularly effective is the use of interviews with Japanese from a variety of

walks of life who lived through the Occupation (prominent politicians, farmers, female entertainers) and with American officers and G.I.s who were “on the spot” during the reforms. Memories and commentaries supplied by these people are then juxtaposed with a good deal of footage from the period, ranging from the surrender on board the USS *Missouri* to recent protests against U.S. troops stationed in Japan.

In addition, analysis and commentary is provided by leading American scholars of Japan, John Dower and Chalmers Johnson. (But why no Japanese historians? Is it because we are supposed to privilege native voice while ceding the right to interpret Japanese history to Americans?) In the end, the video merely suggests that history is understood through the lens of the present, and that changes in the relative strengths of the U.S. and Japan are shaping how we understand the Occupation today.

Consequently, *Occupied Japan: An Experiment in Democracy* adopts what might be called a “discursive” approach to the con-

troversies surrounding military occupation. The objective, reinforced by the concluding remarks of the narrator, NPR’s Robert Siegel, is to suggest that the significance of the U.S. Occupation of Japan is still under construction, and the best we can do is be sensitive to the opinions different people have on the matter. Hence, while the video covers all the essentials of the Occupation period (a new constitution, civil rights for women, labor, land reform, censorship, war crimes trials, Hirohito, etc.), it is also concerned with giving voice and visage to a broad spectrum of people, across gender, class, ideological, and national lines.

Occupation officials like Faubion Bowers are included, and so are Eleanor Hadley and Beate Sirota Gordon, who is credited with ensuring civil rights for women in the postwar constitution. Prominent politicians like Gotoda Masaharu, Ryūtarō Hashimoto, and Ishihara Shintarō are interviewed, and so is a group of Japanese farmers who lived through the food shortages of the early Occupation. Such a personal approach to history is bound to appeal to college students and many teachers as well, and it can make the subject approachable and enjoyable.

Overall, I think this video is an excellent educational tool for advanced high school and undergraduate students. By foregrounding individuals and their relationships to historical events, it brings to life the difficult issues at play in the U.S. Occupation —

and their impact on contemporary U.S.-Japan relations.

I have reservations about how this video might be used in some classrooms, since the relationship between this new evaluation of the U.S. Occupation and a resurgent Japanese cultural nationalism is only hinted at in the video. (How many viewers will recall that Ishihara is the notorious nationalist who urged his fellow Japanese to just say “no” to the U.S.?) Some will surely celebrate this video as evidence of the endurance of indigenous Japanese culture over American arrogance. But to do so would simply be to ignore the powerful testimony by many Japanese who experienced the Occupation and who, like Gotoda Masaharu, remind us that those “American” cultural values of the Occupation are now very much at home in Japan today. ■

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