

Teaching with Embracing Defeat

NOTES FROM A HUMANITIES TEACHER

By George W. Chase

I was a bit apprehensive on the first day of spring term, 2000. Eight seniors had signed up for a new humanities elective I was offering on postwar Japan. I knew what most of these students were thinking: spring term, senior year, already have college plans decided, new course, . . . *how much work am I going to have to do?* I knew what was worrying me: their reaction when I gave them the reading list on the first day of class. What would happen when I held up my 600-page, hardcover edition of John Dower's *Embracing Defeat*? The size of the book alone is intimidating; why, it just might occupy more of a senior's spring term backpack than he or she cared to devote to academic paraphernalia!

Nevertheless, I was sold on this book, and I knew that if I could just get my students to read the first assignment, they would be hooked as well. I had read Dower's book in summer 1999 when I participated in "Japan 1945–89: Recreating a Modern Nation," a wonderful institute offered by the Teaching East Asia Program in Boulder, Colorado. Professor Dower had been the keynote speaker. He began his talk by challenging us to test a theory that one of his colleagues had proposed: American news media only print articles that portray the Japanese people as "weird little people, sneaky little people, or *American* little people." On the first day of my new elective, I asked each student to bring in articles on Japan. The next day, I offered this theory to them, and we evaluated the postwar articles they had found. With one exception, we decided that the theory had validity. We knew it was time to examine these stereotypes and start reading Dower.

As I had hoped, Dower's compelling and captivating stories of individuals living in postwar Japan kept reading assignments lively. A few weeks into the course, several students came into class excitedly, holding the front page of the *New York Times* in my face. *Embracing Defeat* had won a Pulitzer Prize. One girl teased, "Your credibility has been affirmed, Mr. Chase." Students found the early chapters, "Shattered Lives," "Kyodatsu: Exhaustion and Despair," and "Cultures of Defeat," effective in dispelling the stereotypical myths promoted by American media. One student commented in her journal, "I found *Embracing Defeat* to be one of the most effective sources I have ever used in a class. It has the information of a textbook and the engaging stories of a novel." The book so beautifully addresses the questions that I wanted my students to explore: How does a country react to defeat? How does a nation reinvent itself for the second time in a century? How does a nation choose to remember its own history? How did individuals deal with the devastation of the war? Finally, what were their stories of success and failure as they attempted to "endure the unendurable"?

The problem, of course, with using this book is that it is too good and too long for an eight-week elective. We could not read the entire book, but we used chapters as springboards to get at

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the questions that drove the postwar Japan course. Since we used a humanities approach, I supplemented Dower's text with film, literature, and art. For instance, in conjunction with his early chapters, we watched Kurosawa's *Stray Dog* to discuss the black market, honor, and censorship. When we reached the chapters on Hirohito, we researched the remaking of the emperor since Meiji and read and analyzed Hirohito's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration.

Though using this book in its entirety is not a possibility for most high school classes, its thorough, insightful, and very readable prose makes it a valuable resource for anyone who plans to explore Japan's postwar years. ■



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Voices of the Occupation

TEACHING WITH HAIKU

By Edith Roberts

In teaching the literature component of Midwood High School's ninth-grade interdisciplinary course in the humanities, I devote approximately six weeks to the literature of Japan. I try to synchronize my material with that of the corresponding social studies teacher, so that the two of us teach the same time period of the same country at about the same time. Up until this past year, however, the period of the occupation of Japan saw a huge gap in the literature section of the course. I just trusted that the students would gain enough knowledge from the social studies material.

In the summer of 1999, I attended a two-week institute entitled "Japan 1945–1989: Recreating a Modern Nation" conducted by the Teaching East Asia program at the Social Science Education Consortium in Boulder, Colorado. It was there that I first encountered John Dower's fascinating book, *Embracing Defeat*, an examination of Japan's postwar years. Usually, I can take books on history or leave them. *Embracing Defeat* was a different story. I could not put it down. Not only was Professor Dower's command of his subject staggering, but