The Tiger’s Foreboding Allure

By Gary DeCoker

Without a doubt, the teachers who participate in the Keizai Koho program and NCSS publishing efforts receive many benefits from both activities. But after reviewing the Tora no Maki lesson plans, I wonder whether other educators, too, can benefit from these teachers’ efforts. Although the goal of the Tora no Maki series, to bring Japan into the K-12 classroom, is admirable, the publications as they exist may in some cases do more harm than good.

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My criticism of the publications should take nothing away from the Keizai Koho program. I cannot quarrel with the idea of giving teachers a first-hand look at Japan and encouraging them to develop lessons. Participants in previous Keizai Koho and other teacher excursions to Japan surely could use the lessons in the Tora no Maki series to good advantage. But for the teacher who never has been to Japan, the lessons lack sufficient context. More troublesome, if teachers follow the lessons too rigidly, they may end up fostering rather shallow thinking and promoting stereotypes.

The lack of historical and cultural context on Japan results in simplistic stereotypes. This is one of the most interesting, perhaps also the most troublesome examples. More troubling, if teachers follow the lessons too rigidly, they may end up fostering rather shallow thinking and promoting stereotypes.

The discussions of women’s issues and nuclear issues in World War II. Teachers using these lessons might also have students read Paul Fussell’s Thank God for the Atomic Bomb for a clear viewpoint of the other side of this issue.

Although the AP article on land prices in Japan is from May, 1995, teachers should attempt to find out current prices. Some of the words in the Japanese Food Vocabulary contain nonstandard romanized vowels in lieu of the macron:

budou for budō (grapes); tofu for tofu (bean curd); tomorokoshi for tomorokoshi (corn); kyuuri for kyuri (cucumber); shouyu for shōyu (soy sauce), although the macron would be on the “u” in this case.
about Japan. Standards documents such as the NCSS “Curriculum Standards for Social Studies,” used as an organizing framework for Tora no Maki, provide generic statements and leave the specific content to the local schools. The NCSS document authors, for instance, present detailed descriptions of ten thematic strands, but purposefully avoid any specific historical and cultural content. According to the Foreword, “state and local decisions will augment and enhance the framework these national standards provide” (xvii).¹

Each of the lessons in Tora no Maki makes reference to one or more of the ten strands. Many of the elementary and middle school lessons refer to strand one, “Culture,” which includes the statement, “Explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns.”

An elementary school lesson, “Global Reflections” (I:31), suggests meeting this objective through student research. The lesson itself, however, presents a rather short bibliography of primarily tourist books on Japan and relies heavily on videos, guest speakers, and a children’s book, *A to Zen: A Book of Japanese Culture* by Ruth Wells.²

For a teacher and students unfamiliar with Japan the lesson lacks sufficient Japan content. Students may develop skills of “exploring and describing similarities and differences,” but they might not develop accurate understandings of Japan. The assessment section of the activity skirts the issue of content knowledge with this statement, “In critical thinking situations there are no right or wrong answers. Most of the assessment should be subjective.” An experienced teacher with a knowledge of Japan might pay more attention to the content. But students and teachers without Japan background could end up contrasting various aspects of U.S. and Japanese society, but ignoring the accuracy of their comparisons.

Without sufficient knowledge of Japan, a teacher can easily fall into the trap of transmitting mere stereotypes. A high school lesson, “Working Conditions and Work Ethic” (I:103), leads students to explore the relationship of working conditions and the work ethic in Japan and to make inferences about the work ethic in the U.S. The crux of the lesson is Japanese workers have a good work ethic because they are provided for by their companies. Employees at Mazda, the example given in the lesson, benefit from the company hospital, dormitory, supermarket, sports facility, loan programs, and company training opportunities. An essay on the Japanese work ethic in the appendix concludes, “Japanese workers not only work long and hard for the company, but also tend to do so with visible enthusiasm. . . . The Japanese, then, are among the world’s most diligent workers.”

Teachers using this lesson are encouraged to compare the Japanese work ethic with their own observations of the U.S. work ethic. The structure of the lesson, however, seems to lead the student to the conclusion that the U.S. work ethic suffers because U.S. companies do not take care of their workers. This stereotype, found repeatedly in U.S. media during Japan’s

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“bubble economy” of the 1980s, ignores the dramatically different approaches to company paternalism in the two countries. Most American workers would not want a company dormitory, hospital, nor supermarket. They probably would prefer to receive higher wages which they could spend wherever they choose on the open marketplace. Without the cultural context, the students can only conclude that the Japanese approach creates a superior work ethic. This stereotype from the 1980s continues a decade later even as the Japanese economy struggles, while the U.S. continues to have the highest worker productivity rate in the world.

The most successful lessons focus narrowly on one aspect of Japan and compare it to the U.S. Elementary lessons compare festivals (I:25), student interests (II: 35), and school slogans (II:77); middle school lessons compare constitutions (I:63), stock exchanges (II:21), and business practices (II:129); high school lessons compare policies for the elderly (I:127), and economic policy (II:151). The writers of these more successful lessons carefully avoid making broad generalizations that are not supported by the information they present. Teachers who have background knowledge on Japan could easily implement these lessons into their curriculum.

In conclusion, I think that the Tora no Maki series might better be shared only among the participants of the Keizai Koho and similar teacher-exchange programs. By distributing it to members, NCSS risks appearing to promote an unstructured, patchwork approach to meeting its thematic standards. Although the Tora no Maki activities do, in fact, illustrate the standards, they fail to provide a well-developed approach to teaching about Japan. U.S. teachers with an interest in teaching about Japan need more than just lesson plans. Perhaps NCSS could follow the models of organizations such as Project Wild and the Great Classroom

Putting “the Tigers” in their Classroom Context

By Linda S. Wojtan

First I would like to thank my colleagues for their thoughtful perspectives on Tora no Maki: Lessons for Teaching about Contemporary Japan, vol. I and II, and express my appreciation for the invitation to respond. Space considerations require that I comment only on a few key issues and leave many unaddressed.

Professor Rice states that a review of other supplementary materials confirms that Tora no Maki I and II does not “set new standards in content or creativity.” Having extensively used all the materials he cites, I must differ, and express not only my own viewpoints, but also those of many colleagues. Many in the field of precollege Japan studies have praised Tora no Maki I and II, specifically for presenting fresh material, especially in the lessons focusing on hansei, deregulation, kendama, the aging society, kaizen, and the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Further, although evaluation of creativity and approach are matters of opinion, all of the lessons should be credited for their ground-breaking attempt to link Japan-related content to the social studies standards of the National Council for the Social Studies.

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