

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

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the fluidity of his prose style was magnificent. As a literature teacher, I was further intrigued by Dower's inclusion of poetry by ordinary Japanese expressing views on the American occupation.

The poetry offerings in *Embracing Defeat* now contribute to the core of a new unit on postwar Japanese literature in my humanities course. Last year, including occupation poems cited in *Embracing Defeat* made Japan's six years of occupation more human for my students. The students came to realize that the Japanese living through the occupation years (1945–52) were real people with individual and varied perspectives on their situations and their American occupiers. Now, when I show a videotape of Japanese people listening to Emperor Hirohito's surrender speech, my students also read a poem that begins, "The flag falls to the ground/ and from a radio box/ comes the voice of a god—/ hollow, trembling, sorrowful."¹ The students are able to imagine what that moment must have felt like, to hear those words issuing from the radio—the first time the Japanese people had ever heard the voice of their emperor—and to hear them in the sorrow of defeat.

In teaching the poems from *Embracing Defeat*, I have drawn upon an excellent lesson from SPICE (the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education) entitled "The History of the Occupation of Japan."² This lesson offers three questions to guide student analysis of several occupation-period poems:

How do you feel reading this poem?

What conflicts do you sense in the poem?

What does this poem reveal about the postwar era?³

These questions direct the students to personal, emotional responses as well as to more objective ones about occurrences during the occupation period.

Discussing a poem from *Embracing Defeat* that talks about how Japanese preparing against an Allied invasion "wielded bamboo spears against the big guns and giant ships" of the Americans,⁴ my students recognized the hopelessness of the last days of the war more vividly than if I had shown tables of statistics. In answering the three focus questions above, one student wrote that the poem helped her see the degree of determination among Japanese at home because it "indicates that, despite the giant guns and the ships of the Americans, there were Japanese people prepared to fight till the end with whatever weapons they had."

Students were especially struck by a poem that compared the grandparents who had to eat "a stale meal" and "keep their mouths shut" to the Japanese nation which "is feasting on freedom/ And in feasting as though it is trying to see/ How long it

can live no matter how it lives."⁵ In helping students empathize with sacrifices that Japanese people made in the immediate postwar years and recognize the ambivalence Japanese felt toward the new, U.S.-framed constitution, this poem ties directly to the global history component of our humanities course.

A related activity would be to have the students write poems about difficulties in their own lives. In my class, the students had already spent three weeks writing haiku prior to our study of the postwar period, but there is no reason why the poetry in *Embracing Defeat* could not serve as an introduction to writing haiku and other poetry.

I included the following haiku in a test on postwar Japanese literature and asked the students to analyze attitudes expressed within the poem.

Only the jeeps
seem to receive
the May sunshine.⁶

One student responded that the writer was very critical of the occupation, feeling that the Americans in their jeep got all the luck. Another wrote, "The Japanese are expressing the opinion that, in the occupation, only the Americans were getting benefits; the Japanese were living in ruins with nothing to eat." What better way to understand the disparity felt by some Japanese between their dire plight during this postwar period and the contrasting state of their American occupiers?

Including poetry from *Embracing Defeat* has not only helped to fill the gap in attention to the postwar period in my humanities course, it has also taught my students about the personal stories and emotional reactions of a range of Japanese people in the face of defeat and reconstruction, thus increasing students' ability to empathize with people throughout the world. ■

NOTES

1. Tsuboi Hanji, "History" in *Tsuboi Hanji Shishū* (Tokyo: Shinrisha, 1948), quoted in John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 417.
2. Gary Mukai and others, *U.S.-Japan Relations: The View From Both Sides of the Pacific. Part I: Episodes in U.S.-Japan Relations* (Stanford: Leland Stanford Junior University Board of Trustees, 1993), 141–168.
3. Mukai (1993), 158.
4. Dower (1999), 418.
5. Poem by Yamanoguchi Baku, quoted in Dower (1999), 420.
6. Dower (1999), 420.



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