Why Japan Matters

By Norman T. Masuda

Japan matters in the history classroom because its development as a modern country offers rich opportunities for comparison. Japan’s rapid change from a system with some characteristics of feudalism in the Tokugawa period to modernization in the Meiji period is unlike any other shift in world history. The economic, social, and political changes were so rapid that they destabilized the fabric of the nation and put them on the path toward conflict with the Western nations as well as with their Asian neighbors. Japan’s need to be a modern nation and an equal to Western powers gives students a case study on modernity and all its trappings. Empire building was on its way out following World War I, and Japan’s perceived need to create an empire in Asia ended in a war that devastated them. The Occupation of Japan (1945–52) provides yet another case study for students. US idealism to recreate Japan as a democratic, peaceful nation encourages American students to understand their own nation while examining the Occupation. Japan’s social and economic success in the postwar period stands as a model in the minds of policy makers of how military occupations can be successful. The occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan in our present time are guided—and misguided—by the postwar occupations of Japan and Germany. The world we live in today is connected to the postwar period just as it is connected to all history. Japan matters because its modern history is one example of what happens in nations that develop too rapidly and as a result are more likely to experience internal and external conflict. Cooperation and economic interdependence among nations supersedes military aggression and empire building. Democracy and governments that provide for the general welfare of their citizens are the favored models. Therefore, the construct of the world today can be found in and attributed to Japan’s modern historical development.

Norman T. Masuda

By Masumi Reade

Why Japan Matters

A long line of people—hundreds of selfless, patient citizens—quietly waiting to receive water:
A big smile on a rescue worker, walking with a just-rescued eighty-one-year-old lady on his back;
Rescue workers from the Self-Defense Force descending from a helicopter to retrieve a dog that was still alive on a rooftop of a home floating in the ocean, three weeks after the tsunami;
The emperor and empress visiting victims in several shelters . . .

. . . These are the images that will never leave my mind. These are the images that sent a strong message to the world. The world, in return, sent these messages to each other:
Japan has great qualities.
Let’s help Japan and reciprocate for what it has done for us.
Pray for Japan.
Japan will rise again.

Norman T. Masuda

Norman T. Masuda is a retired World Language instructor (Mandarin Chinese and Japanese) in the Palo Alto School District. Currently he is a consultant to language programs and teacher training workshops, Chair of school accreditation teams (WASC) in Northern California, and Lead Instructor for STARTALK Mandarin Chinese Summer Institutes.

Alejandro (Alex) Echevarria

Alejandro (Alex) Echevarria received the Elgin Heinz 2007 Humanities Award. He is a humanities teacher at Rampart High School in Colorado Springs and a teacher and examiner in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program.

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Japan has been in the news the past few months because of the natural and manmade disasters that have occurred in northeastern Japan. During the writing and broadcasting of the calamities that have struck the Japanese people, the news media pointed out the phenomenon of a population that waited patiently for food, water, and medical attention.

Seeing and reading about the Japanese reaction to such devastation, one asks why this reaction and not one of anger and widespread acts of vandalism? It is clear that there are lessons for the world to learn from Japan.

As a third-generation Japanese-American, I grew up with many ties to Japan and Japanese culture. Some of these connections included education about language and culture, interaction with Japanese here and in Japanese-speaking communities, and studying and living in Japan. I have been very fortunate to have developed a good understanding of what it means to be Japanese.

Japan as a society and nation offers many important and valuable traditions and products that have been borrowed (but also indigenous traditions too) since Japan was opened to the West by Commodore Perry and even before. While importation of ideas is often associated with Japan, we think less about Japan’s need to become a modern nation and an equal to Western powers gives students a case study on modernity and all its trappings. Empire building was on its way out following World War I, and Japan’s perceived need to create an empire in Asia ended in a war that devastated them. The Occupation of Japan (1945–52) provides yet another case study for students. US idealism to recreate Japan as a democratic, peaceful nation encourages American students to understand their own nation while examining the Occupation. Japan’s social and economic success in the postwar period stands as a model in the minds of policy makers of how military occupations can be successful. The occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan in our present time are guided—and misguided—by the postwar occupations of Japan and Germany. The world we live in today is connected to the postwar period just as it is connected to all history. Japan matters because its modern history is one example of what happens in nations that develop too rapidly and as a result are more likely to experience internal and external conflict. Cooperation and economic interdependence among nations supersedes military aggression and empire building. Democracy and governments that provide for the general welfare of their citizens are the favored models. Therefore, the construct of the world today can be found in and attributed to Japan’s modern historical development.

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In adversity, people need to help one another. We need be more considerate and resourceful. Japan was able to show these qualities in the wake of a most horrific tragedy. I have never been more proud, happy, and truly thankful to be Japanese.

I have taught young American students about Japan, not just the language and products of its culture, but some of the priceless qualities that have been shared by people and handed down through generations in a long, rich history.

Japan still matters. There is so much to learn from Japan. This is the message I would like to give to my students by exercising the qualities that I admire, respect, and cherish. I am forever thankful to be in a position to share Japan with today’s youth.

Why Japan Matters

By Patricia Burleson

There are many reasons that Japan still matters, most of them well founded in economic statistics and geopolitical analyses. For this commentary, I decided to bypass those and focus instead on my personal experiences and those of local high school students. Students quoted here were participants in one of eleven annual study tours I have led in Japan.

I think that Japan matters because there are many lessons about life that can best be learned from the Japanese. Students say:

Signs in the US tell citizens what not to do and threaten punishment if rules are broken. Signs in Japan encourage good behavior.

I learned that it is possible to appreciate religions other than my own.

I admire the strong moral base that prevents Japanese from stealing or defacing public property.

The kindness I experienced from the Japanese has inspired me to be patient and compassionate to foreign tourists.

I think the world needs to learn from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After visiting the Hiroshima Peace Museum, students say:

The meaning of the museum was to educate, not to blame.

I felt a universal compassion that I had not known before.

I now believe that the most pressing problem in our world is nuclear weapons. I have decided to regularly donate to “iCAN” and do all I can to ensure that something like that never happens again.

I think Japan matters because there we find a shared sense of responsibility.

Students say:

It was interesting talking to one of the young teachers and realizing his hopes and aspirations were similar to mine in terms of world peace and helping others.

Ganbare, Japan!

By Masumi Reade

Editor’s Note: Masumi Reade informed us that the 2011 theme of The Woodlands High School Japanese Club annual Haiku contest was “Ganbare, Japan!” Although Ganbare is difficult to translate, its English meaning is a combination of perseverance and hard effort. Mrs. Reade was moved enough by her students to create her own Haiku about Japan’s great disaster, which follows.

昨日まで ありし人生 語る写真
Life that existed until yesterday today the photos will tell its story

気仙沼 燃える画面に 独り泣く
Kesen’numa in flames continues to burn in the screen makes me cry

生きていた 大の救助に ヘリ五人
A helicopter with five workers coming down to rescue a surviving dog in the ocean

列長し 動かぬ辛抱 見て涙
Long, quiet lines not moving and testing your patience makes me cry to watch

避難所に 跪き頷く 陛下かな
Emperor and Empress visiting the victim’s shelters getting down on their knees

雪の道 珈琲一杯の 温かさ
Snowy road home — a cup of warm coffee supplied by a kind heart

老人の 笑顔 肩揉み 小学生
Elementary school children going around the shelter to give shoulder massage to the elders Award of a big smile

救われし 老女の笑顔 背に揺れる
Faint smile on the face of the old lady just rescued (after ten days) on the back of the soldier

MASUMI READE is the 2011 Elgin Heinz winner in the Japanese Language category. She teaches at The Woodlands High School in The Woodlands, Texas.