



## Why Japan Matters

By Norman T. Masuda

First Winner, Language Category, 2002

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 the impact that Japan has had on the world and the potential for even greater impact that Japanese society could have on the United States and the rest of the world in the future.

Conversely, Japanese ideas have found their way into other cultures around the globe. Many Japanese words and phrases have found their way into English vocabulary, such as *sushi*, *Zen*, *futon*, *tofu*, and *karate*. Among these, Japanese religious practices such as Zen Buddhism and the so-called *Dō*, or “Way,” have had the most profound influence on Western culture and thinking.

*Dō* is found in many expressions used in the traditional Japanese arts, both aesthetic and martial. With origins in Daoism and Chan Buddhism in China and Zen Buddhism in Japan, this philosophy of single-mindedness and expanded consciousness is found in teachings of the traditional Japanese arts that all end with the suffix *-dō*, such as *Sadō* (tea ceremony), *Budō* (martial arts), and *Kadō* (flower arrangement).

This brings us back to the Japanese reaction to adversity and how this practice is embodied in the expression *ganbari*, or determination and patience. Examples from history are found in the modernization of Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the reconstruction of Japan following World War II. Everyone is expected to *gambaru* (do one’s best and “hang in there”). From early childhood, pupils and students are expected to *gambaru*, athletes are encouraged to *gambaru*, and workers *gambaru* in their job. This expression does not appear to have an exact equivalent in other languages, and so we must settle for “doing one’s best.”

Together with the Japanese expression *Gaman* (to be patient and bear hardships), we can see how the Japanese way of thinking can be something for us to study and consider in the West.

I firmly believe that Japan still has many valuable things to offer us and still matters to us. It is up to educators teaching about world cultures to help our students understand concepts that might otherwise be overlooked in the study of Japan and Japanese language and culture. ■

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## Why Japan Matters

By Alejandro Echevarria

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. ■

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## Why Japan Matters

By Masumi Reade

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.

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. ■

## 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 犬の救助に へり五人

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 跪き顔く 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.

## 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 learned that humility is the key to ending war and violence. 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. ■*

PATRICIA BURLESON works with K-12 students and teachers and for eleven years has led a Freeman Foundation-funded Japanese Studies course and study tour to Japan for high school students.

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