



Why Japan Matters

By Norman T. Masuda

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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 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.