

The Challenge of Teaching Comparative Culture to Contemporary Japanese Students

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Background and Basic Observations

I want here to discuss my experience teaching courses in culture to students in the faculty of letters in a competitively-ranked private Japanese university, and to present my own reflections upon methodological questions of what should be taught and how, and what goals should be aimed for.

The majority of my students are majors in the English Language and Literature Department, where the emphasis is primarily on studying classic literature, although many students have also come from the French, German, Chinese, History, Education, and Philosophy Departments. The courses I have taught have been based on themes such as blues music and American culture; European colonialism, its relationship with Christianity, and its re-presentation in novels and film; British aesthetic values and imperialist culture; and Anglo-American / Japanese comparative culture.

The curricular context to these courses is important and should be explained before I offer my observations and critique. The English Language and Literature Department at my university is a very traditional one wherein the focus is upon literature (British literature is ranked higher than American literature, very little contemporary literature is taught, and Shakespeare is at the summit). Very few of the classes are conducted with English as the primary language of communication. The most common theoretical approach applied in literature classes is New Criticism, which places the focus upon close reading of classic texts in order to understand what they say. “Language” study (*eigogaku* 英語学) is basically English-based linguistics: students usually study practical English usage in a theoretical manner, mostly with Japanese as the teaching medium. In

recent years, the great majority of students have opted for seminars in linguistics, rather than seminars in literature. Often, however, they have done so without understanding what this specifically entails—they simply either think that this will make them speak better English (which it usually does not), or they just want to do anything other than literature. This causes many practical problems, of which some of the most obvious result from an imbalance in faculty specializations: there have been three times as many literature professors in the department as linguistics professors. The addition of a culture track came in 2001, the year I was hired. At present I am the only full-time staff member who is teaching in this area, although the popularity of the program has led us to hire two new faculty members who will join us in 2004.

I feel that I can make a few general observations on the attitude of students in the faculty of letters:

1. Students in literature departments are dissatisfied with the traditional Japanese style of teaching foreign literature (author-based research [*sakka kenkyū* 作家研究] and teaching based primarily on close reading of the original text with little reference to the social or cultural context surrounding it).
2. Students coming to culture classes seem to expect something very different in these classes from what they obtain in literature or history classes. They want to learn about more contemporary issues and things that seem more practical to them and useful in their lives. Students are dissatisfied with the lack of practical material they learn in college. Many think that it helps them little in their lives, particularly in their job searches.
3. Students are not, at the outset, necessarily willing or prepared to put a lot of time into studying culture. Many judge their classes to a great extent on entertainment value.
4. Many students are extremely dissatisfied with the foreign language training they receive in university, particularly English language training.

In such an environment, one easy thing to do would be to fill up classes with discussions of the connection of English language to Anglo-American culture, and of Western popular culture based on non-print

media. Such classes certainly possess great entertainment value, and they are thought to be practical by many students, especially when they are taught in English by a native speaker. I do in fact include both of these facets of culture in my classes, but there are important theoretical issues that need to be dealt with in regard to such an approach. In the first place, putting a great deal of emphasis upon issues in “language and culture” overlaps with what linguists are doing, as well as what native English Conversation and Composition teachers are doing in their classes (or at least what these groups are supposed to be doing in their classes). Secondly, if one decides to teach contemporary popular culture, one still has to make normative decisions concerning what to teach and how to present it. Choosing merely on the basis of entertainment value is always an option, but I believe an ethically questionable one, especially in light of the second of the four observations I stated above. Students can be entertained by television, radio, and cinema; it is the duty of an educator to offer something more. Many students expect this, even if a substantial number would be satisfied with simple entertainment. And anyway, classical education theory from both East and West tells us that what students want to learn is less important than, and often quite different from, what they need to learn. This point also seems to be becoming clear to students in recent job interviews. Many of my students have found that they were unprepared for what seemed like a new style of interviewing that they came up against, where, rather than looking for the “nail that doesn’t stand out,” companies are searching for creative, expressive students who can and do think for themselves rather than simply going along with the crowd—students who show promise of being able to bring new innovations to the company.

In light of these problems, I have chosen to focus my teaching upon issues that have grown out of my own experience as a Westerner living in Japan, researching Japanese culture, and trying to relate to Japanese people and institutions on a day-to-day basis. This seems reasonable to me, first of all, because most of my students—that is, those studying foreign language, literature, culture—will be grappling with the same difficulties from the opposite direction. But it seems to me to be a reasonable approach for another reason, namely that the cultural milieu of contemporary Japan is

built upon precisely the same dialectical relationship: that between modern Western civilization and the forms of civilization that existed in Japan before the Meiji Restoration, and it seems reasonable to say that most of the problems that my students are facing, and many that the society as a whole is facing, are in some way related to the (mis-)blending of American-style capitalistic consumer society with traditional Japan. This appears especially true in regard to this generation of students, particularly those with urban upbringings, because most of them know traditional Japanese culture only through what they have been taught in school, which is not always Japanese culture as it existed historically. I think many are not sure exactly what aspects of the way they think can be seen as traditional and which should be seen as Western, or, for that matter, which have been constructed for them *as* traditional in reaction *to* the Western.

The tension that arises from this confrontation is seen both in my students' dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods (point one above) as well as in their confusion about their job searches. In regard to these long-standing institutions (dating back at least to the end of World War II, and certainly having elements that are much older), a great number of students are asking "Is this all there is?" and are searching for other options. Evidence of this discomfort is the high number of students entering their final year of university who opt at the last moment to postpone their thesis writing and job search for a year of overseas study. At my university, and probably at most others, study abroad is normally done during the student's third year, but many students who have not been able to participate in a university-sponsored program (usually either on account of low test scores in English, or because they just didn't know such opportunities were available—which is another problem altogether), find a way to go on their own. Often the reason given is that they felt their time spent in university to be quite useless, and want some kind of skill or experience that will really help them to find a job they will like, and not just one at whatever company decides to hire them. They hope that a year abroad will give them the language skills and experience necessary to do something meaningful in their future. It must also be admitted, though, that for a certain percentage of these students, the underlying reason for going abroad for a year is to put off the excruciating job search and subsequent

entrance into the working world as long as possible.

A certain amount of the blame for these students' confusion rests with the education system which, especially in the humanities, is far estranged from everyday social reality. Arguments on the side of correcting this aspect of the system are often answered by recourse to appeals to the value of preserving "disciplines." It is especially disconcerting, and occasionally unsettling, to hear arguments based on *nihonjinron*—arguments generally supposing that dissatisfaction with the way things work is based on an inability on the part of students today to understand their roles as Japanese—coming from scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying things like English or French literature.

After an initial knee-jerk reaction against all such arguments, I have begun to feel that the best way for me to approach this matter is to make a special effort to understand the way the system has actually worked, in practice, in the past. This has enabled me to appreciate that the system does have its good aspects. As recent work on the invention of tradition has well shown, many of the values that are claimed to be characteristics of the Japanese race since ancient times are really not that old at all, and have been put in place for various ideological reasons. For me as a scholar, understanding this is an academic task, an intellectual exercise. But to my students, it is an existential matter that is directly connected to real outcomes in their personal lives. Simply to reject the system or refuse to engage it might have serious consequences, limiting or eliminating their future chances. The challenge for me has been to get students to think about expectations placed upon them as Japanese and the various realistic options available to them, and to see these expectations and options in a cross-cultural context. It is of course my professional responsibility to do so without idealizing or proselytizing for the values that I grew up with. This takes us to the very foundations of the study of culture, and usually must be approached in as concrete a manner as possible, with explanations being as simple and clear as they can be. I find it most effective to let students come to their own conclusions about Japanese culture after they have been presented with various evidence pertaining to both Japanese and foreign cultures.

This is actually a very complicated task, because any kind of critical

treatment of Japanese culture or society conducted by a non-Japanese will certainly be viewed by at least some of its Japanese audience as some form of cultural imperialism at best, or as racist Japan-bashing at worst. Such reactions are not uniquely Japanese, of course. They are perhaps found in any society. The whole rhetoric of *nihonjinron* as taught to school children here, however, seems to me to have the effect of multiplying the usual human reaction to criticism, for one of the basic elements of these theories of Japanese uniqueness is that no non-Japanese can ever truly understand the way Japanese think and communicate, or the nuances involved in human relationships in Japanese society (it should be mentioned that at the same time, those making such claims usually do not see any comparable difficulty occurring when Japanese people try to understand “foreign” societies).

Success in this task, then, demands much of the lecturer. In order not to be seen as a mistaken or naïve *gaijin*, one must be thoroughly knowledgeable of Japanese history, culture, and society. Being able to speak the language fluently, and not just academic or formal Japanese but at the students’ level as well, is also helpful in gaining their trust. It helps to be able to work the illusion that one is as thoroughly Japanese as he is a foreigner (usually impossible, but...). In my experience, however, it has appeared to me that more important and more effective than anything else is to treat students on a level equal to oneself, with respect and as adults. Many would of course say that this is indispensable in any teaching situation, and I would agree, but I have found it especially important in Japan, where few native professors seem to treat their students in this way.

Making sweeping generalizations is dangerous, and I certainly do not want to make any claims about the attitudes or actions or Japanese educators as a whole, but it is clear that a certain Confucian or, to put it negatively, feudalistic mentality still exists among many university lecturers in this country. I must qualify by noting that I am not trained in the methods of researching in the field of education, and in making this observation I am drawing on just two sources: the behavior and comments of professors in regards to students and junior colleagues, and the words of my students themselves. Still I venture to say that it is clear that such a mentality remains widely current.

There exists in the Japanese university system even today the notion that professors should teach and students should simply listen. Such may have been reasonable in the temple schools of the Edo period when students had no other sources of information and were forced to rely upon what Sensei taught them, but today such a notion is laughable. Students rarely challenge such a system for fear of being singled out, scolded, or failed, but they are certainly conscious of it, and rather than respecting professors who work this way, tend to look down upon them as being unable to defend their knowledge in the face of student questions. Many of today's students will not even begin to put forth effort in classes when they are confronted with such an attitude.

Furthermore, I have found that treating students with the respect due to adults, as well as demanding of them that they take responsibility as adults should, goes a long way in getting them interested in new ideas presented in and out of class. In an administrative system that often gives them few choices in their own education once they enter the university and tends to divorce them from the processes by which their schooling is managed, such treatment, if multiplied, may also have the result of making them better equipped for their job hunts and subsequent entry into the working world.

Classroom Content in Comparative Culture Courses

Comparative culture is probably the broadest and most flexible area within which one can teach. This truth makes it quite possible to design the content of one's classes in order to respond to the concrete needs of one's students. In response to the various considerations mentioned above, I have found three major areas about which I wish to teach:

1. The net of cultural values that are said to be traditionally Japanese: where did they come from, why are they there, and what do they mean in today's society?
2. The history of the relationship between Japan and the West: what things that are now part of everyday life here are actually recent adaptations? Why were these things adapted, and what institutions, if any, did they replace?

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3. What are competing “Western” values based upon, and what are the historical inconsistencies that have arisen in the manner in which Europe and America have dealt with the rest of the world based upon these values?

Dealing with all of these areas is certainly a broad task, too broad for any one class, of course, although it might be possible over a four-year university career. In my attempts at teaching such things so far, I have come up with the following observations.

Head-on discussions of *nihonjinron* have not generated much outward interest. Students often accept most of the traditional claims uncritically, even though when they are questioned in an indirect manner about their own experience, they generally do not respond as the typical *nihonjinron* predicts that they, as Japanese, should respond.

Students have not thought much about the connection between contemporary Japan and the traditional arts and values that they have been taught are truly Japanese. They generally also have not thought very critically about American culture or about the influence it, and Western culture in general, has had on the world, Asia, or Japan in particular. They tend to be uncritical about globalization. They are consumers in this consumer society, and have rarely wondered why, or even considered different lifestyle possibilities. They do not see any reason to connect capitalistic consumerism with Western imperialism or with American policy during the occupation years 1945-52. Consumerism is seen as a natural Japanese way of being.

One point that has brought about a great deal of reflection and concern among the students regards the various freedoms that European workers enjoy which most Japanese do not. Students come to hold doubts concerning their fathers' few vacation days per year when confronted with the fact that French, Germans, and Danish, for example, enjoy six weeks per year.

I have seen some of my best results when teaching in Japanese about European imperialism. I found that students have started to look critically at the spread of Western culture in their own country, as well as in the rest of the Asian world. Then, interestingly, they have begun to connect that with twentieth-century Japanese imperialism and also with America's policies

today. When I have showed how other colonized peoples have been depicted in Western film, for example, this elicited sympathy and a certain amount of anger. I cannot discount the possibility that success in this class was partly due to the fact that it was taught in Japanese, and I should note that the students in this instance came from several different departments.

Students were also quite likely to sympathize with the problems of minorities and disadvantaged groups in America. This has become clear in my class on Blues and American Culture, where students quite quickly come to understand and feel indignant about the historical situation of African-Americans. When, however, I try to draw analogies between the struggles of African-American slaves and ex-slaves with those of the feudal Japanese farmer and the present Japanese worker, such analogies are much less likely to be understood.

The importance of re-thinking the manner in which Japanese society has adopted, and adapted to, American-style consumer society was brought home to me recently during a lecture that I gave on Japanese culture to fifteen young professionals and scholars from Southeast Asia. They were very interested in how it was that the Japanese have held on to their traditional arts, values, and ways of thinking while building a high-tech, modern, wealthy society. In fact, many of my listeners were dealing directly with similar problems in their own work, in their own countries. I found it difficult to formulate an answer to this question. It seems to me that the Japanese have not really held on to their traditions so much as they have re-invented them in ways that protect the interests of the political, bureaucratic, and capitalist elite. After this experience, I have come to reflect that most discussions about Japanese culture have used the West as the point of comparison. This is something generally known, I admit, but I had never given it much thought before in relation to my teaching. The whole dialog concerning Japanese culture and nihonjinron appears in a totally different light when other Asian societies are used as the point of reference for comparison. Certainly trying to look at the problem from this point of view should bring out more clearly the relationship between traditional and Western elements in contemporary Japan. This is something that I am not at present prepared to do, but it is likely that I will make it an object of research in the near future.

Conclusion

This has been less a conclusive proposal than a summary of personal reflections upon two-and-a-half years' teaching. The breadth of my teaching lately, besides presenting many practical difficulties, has, however, also enabled me to see the reaction of students to several different problems and methods of presenting them. One nagging problem is the difficulty of dealing successfully with different cultural theories (Marxist critical theory, the invention of tradition, gender). This difficulty springs both from the fact that few of my students have the language competence to grasp these problems in English, and that I am too inexperienced with the Japanese writings in these areas to effectively teach them in Japanese. In general, though, I find few undergraduates ready to handle such difficult theories, at least in their early years at university. The lack of any kind of rigorous critical training means that before most students are ready to handle such difficult contemporary theory, basic training in logical argument and debate seems to be necessary.

The difficulties of teaching well are compounded by various attitudes, both old and new, that are present in the contemporary Japanese higher education system, as well as the structure of that system itself. As Jonathan Augustine has observed in his contribution to this volume, it is generally said that there are three "pillars" to a university instructor's job: teaching, research, and administration. As any full time instructor in a Japanese university, especially a private university, knows or at least *feels*, it is the third pillar (not infrequently rephrased pejoratively as *zatsuyō*, miscellaneous jobs) that takes up much of his or her time. So much so, in fact, that the extent to which one gets to pursue one's own research is often inversely proportionate to the effort one is able to expend teaching. It is often presumed that if one has managed to become a university professor, then one naturally must be teaching well, or at least such an excuse is common.

With the crisis that many universities now face on account of the declining birthrate and the new independent status of public universities,

many sweeping changes are occurring. This seems to me on the whole to be a very good phenomenon, for it brings with it the opportunity to address many of the long-standing problems that were mentioned above. On the negative side, however, such reforms often also lead to an increase in administrative work for instructors. Recent policy changes in the Ministry of Education and Science, moreover, have gone so far as to add what many consider to be a “fourth pillar” to the basic duties of a professor: the responsibility to make a *concrete* contribution to society. Whereas one might think that as a scholar and educator the best contribution one could make to society would be in coming up with new ideas and ensuring a solid, useful education to one’s students, the Ministry is now demanding more visible results (this attitude seems best explained by the Japanese notion of *tatema*). From now on, public funds to universities will be based to some extent upon the interaction that the school’s instructors have with members of society outside of their schools. Whether it be in visiting high schools and discussing problems in education with students and teachers there or giving public lectures to the general community, what is certain is that as a result of this new policy university instructors will have even less time and energy to expend in educating their own students. In the end, this policy is thus quite likely to have an exactly opposite effect to the one intended. Again, obscuring this possibility is the basic idea that we are already succeeding in our teaching, or, to put it another way, the arrogant refusal to face up to the fact that most of our students’ needs are not being met. I only add these remarks as a reminder of how difficult it can be to teach well.