

Curriculum Report for the Being Japanese: Histories, Identities and Modernities Workshop

Michael Rodman

I attended the workshop **Being Japanese: Histories, Identities and Modernities** held in Seattle April 14-17th 2011. The purpose of this workshop was to “explore how the meaning of “being Japanese” has changed over time, with a particular emphasis on the uses of history, literature and visual culture in shaping and representing a distinctively “Japanese” culture. The 3 presenters were all excellent, both erudite and clear, and the Workshop was very stimulating and thought provoking for me. At the same time, integrating aspects of the emphasis of the workshop has been challenging and has motivated me to read more specifically within my disciplines on psychological/sociological changes in Japanese society. The workshop, it seemed to me, focused more about how collective identities are constructed at different times both within and between cultures (in this case vis a vis Japan of course) rather than more concretely about any specifically “Japanese” attributes of identity. If anything, the presenters debunked (or deconstructed) some of the prevailing views of what might constitute essential characteristics of “Japaneseness”. Below, I’ll provide a more detailed narrative about some of the ways in which I’ve incorporated material from the Workshop into Units of my Adolescent Psychology course and will provide a bibliography that I’ve been using and adding to since participating in the Workshop.

Dr. Peter Nosco oversaw the workshop. His presentation covered a variety of topics related to how History is constructed, specifically, the characteristics of “modernity” and its relationship to the categories of “early modernity” and of “post modernity”. Accordingly, one way to describe modernity is as a contrast or dramatic change between “what came before and what is now” (for example, in contrast to traditional or classical culture). From this perspective, the characteristics of “the modern” include shifts toward urbanization vs. the rural, toward a civil society, public spheres and common notions of nationalism vs. family and village identities, and economic and political changes that lead to greater agency, self-determination and individuality. However, “post modern” perspectives take issue with many of these assumptions. For example, they question the universality of collective identity altogether (is there actually a “Japaneseness” shared collectively by this or any culture?). Further, they question whether there is a single path to modernity (such as that followed mostly by the West) versus multiple paths to modernity, especially by non-Western cultures. Post-Modernism similarly critiques the ways of thinking about cultures, such as “what are the Japanese people like” in terms of several limitations: first, in terms of the whole concept of cultural essentialisms, collectively shared characteristics of all members of a culture and secondly, the “Orientalist” judgments made historically by Westerners from outside of (in this case) Japanese culture. Finally, they question the “auto-orientalism” of those within Japanese culture whose goals have been to identify those characteristics that make

their own people “unique” (such as uniquely Japanese qualities of personality, sensitivities, gender-roles, language, and mythologies) that add to the perceived specialness of Japanese group

2

and individual identities. As you can see from the above much of this workshop consisted of a somewhat Post-Modernist critique of how notions of cultural identity (in this case specifically collective notions of Japanese identity—their limitations and the purposes that they serve—are generated). As a result of this presentation I made several changes to the opening unit of my Adolescent Psychology course.

First, over a number of years I’ve taught this course in a cross-cultural manner by making comparisons between Adolescence as experienced and framed in the US and in China.

In **UNIT ONE** of the course I focus on the questions “what is adolescence” and “what are the cultural contexts in which adolescence takes place”. I discuss and compare Modern and Traditional Cultural expectations and compare the meanings and directions of Identity Development between Individualistic and Collectivist cultural norms. Finally, I discuss with students the ways in which adolescence is a universal experience and an invented one. **As a result of the workshop I’ve added in UNIT ONE to these “binary” comparisons a discussion of:**

- The ways in which observers from outside of a culture (in this case Japan) and those within the culture may see and interpret the same experiences of growing up to suit their own cultural narratives (whether “Orientalist” or “Auto-Orientalist”). In presenting this I asked students to talk about what it means to be “American” for example. Then I asked them to respond to the question of what came to mind when they thought of “Chinese” and Japanese”.
- I’ve added more discussion of the question of whether adolescents (and persons in general) are “the same everywhere” or whether the cataloguing of culture-specific tendencies is valid and valuable (do such categories simplify and stereotype what adolescents are like).
- I’ve also changed the way in which I discuss and compare Traditional and Modern societies as a result of this workshop, moving away from a more distinctive dichotomizing of the topic to discuss the idea of multiple variations instead. Adding Japan to this topic (rather than the US/China comparison) was helpful for discussing how cultural change can take many forms. For example, I added to the discussion of traditional/modern notions by 1. asking students how notions about our “founding fathers” influence contemporary American expectations, 2. how Confucian thought continues to influence Chinese society and 3. How Japanese traditional beliefs such as Shinto, Zen and Samurai culture might be reflected in modern life.

Subsequent presenters at the workshop continued the theme of the role of “invented traditions” that connect the pre--modern world to the modern world. For example, Dr. Hitomi Tonomura, focused on gender roles and women in pre-modern (before 1600) and modern (after 1850) Japan. She noted that changes in gender relations and roles are often thought of as a measure of modernity itself, for example, in the increasing equality of women and of women’s rights in modern cultures. At the same time she mentioned that historically in pre-modern Japan there were many female emperors but that in modern Japan (since 1889 during the Meiji period) women are no longer legally allowed to be Emperor. She then traced the historical roots of gender institutions such as marriage—its patrilocality and of women losing property—back to the 14th c and related gender role traditions to present day examples such as the under-representation of women in political leadership positions and in the business world and in the promotion of “wise motherism”, the elevation of the mother/child axis of domestic relationship (rather than the more Western husband/wife axis).

Dr. Adam Kern, spoke, primarily, about Haiku and Manga. He emphasized what he described as the “invented traditions” that each of these forms had been embedded in. For example, he talked about how the haiku is frequently considered a traditional form of Japanese poetry that has certain particularly Japanese qualities about it. In contrast, he stated that what we call haiku had been “invented” in 1894 by Masaoki and that Basho, the most famous haiku writer, had never written one (instead, , this form was a shortening of a tradition of hiraku, linked verses with interior 17 syllable stanzas). He deconstructed the Manga visual comic and manga culture in much the same way, indicating that attempts to ground the manga in older traditional Japanese art forms such as wood block prints and picture stories from the period of the “floating world” culture (ukiyo), the pleasure district of 17-18th century Edo were overstated.. His overarching themes, it seemed to me, was the need to be aware of the “constructedness” of the past—history—to serve either external or internal cultural goals.

These presentations were very intriguing and informative, but have proven less directly applicable to my course so far. In **UNIT TWO** of my course I focus on Puberty, Body Image and Sexual Behavior and Moral decisions. **As a result of the workshop I’ve added a few examples of the following in UNIT TWO:**

- I provided examples of body image and body ideals in contemporary Japan. I added material on Chinese research on Anorexia among adolescent girls (and plan to add information on eating and body image disorders in Japan in the future).
- Provided some preliminary examples about Japanese adolescent sexual behavior contrasting the rates for girls in Japan, for example, with those in the US. I made comparisons between pregnancy rates among Japanese youth compared to adolescent

women in the US, and explored reasons to explain the reasons for the much higher unintended pregnancy rate in the US.

UNIT THREE of my course focuses on the Social Contexts of Adolescence including Family, Peers, School and Work. **As a result of the workshop I've sought to learn more about Japanese families and have incorporated some of what I've learned into my course as well. In UNIT THREE I've added the following:**

- I've provided examples of changes (nuclear) and continuity (traditional *ie* vertical structures in Japanese families (from Kumagai)
- I've added examples from Japan to my discussion of attitudes toward marriage and child-rearing among US youth (from Rebick and Takenaka)
- Finally, as a result of this workshop I've begun doing more reading in Japanese generational issues such as the generation gap, social pressures, and delinquency (from Matthews and White). Though not ready yet, it's my intention to add Japanese examples to these areas of my Adolescence course in the future.