

Brian Chen, Ph.D.

Department of English

Westfield State University

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JSI Project Summary

The project aims to incorporate the knowledge acquired from Japan Studies Institute into my curriculum in order to promote Japanese literature and culture. I am most enlightened by the lecturers who emphasize the diversity of Japan. Professors Aki Hirota and Stephan Tanaka both reinforce the notion that Japanese society demonstrates coexistence of different layers/levels in culture and that it is imperative to reconsider the stereotypical image of Japan as a homogeneous, predictable country. My project will highlight this influential notion. Currently, my teaching assignment includes World Literature to second- and third-year non-English majors who are required to take courses that reflect global diversity and international experience. With this mission in mind, my project comprises four representative Japanese writers and reference from contemporary Japanese popular culture to be incorporated into my World Literature course. The contents will be covered within 2-3 weeks during the semester. One teaching strategy that I apply in the classroom is to allow students who have little knowledge about a foreign culture to find common ground by looking for the universal elements that both American and the target cultures share. The abovementioned contents are selected based on the common theme: **water**. During a lecture by Professor Kotaro Nakamura, who refers to the wisdom of a Buddhist monk in *Hōjōki*: “The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world,” I ascribe the malleable nature of water to Japan’s multifaceted, heterogeneous culture. Water imagery, a common figure of speech in literature, appears in many different forms: physical water (e.g., river, rain, snow, ocean, well, pool, fountains, etc.), water in the form of tears, water with religious connotations (e.g., baptism), water as a medium for cleansing purposes or relaxation (e.g., hot spring bath), water as a metaphor that represents abundance, desire, anxiety, danger, disaster, and many others, depending on the contexts and the moods of the characters depicted in the story. As students have prior knowledge about symbolic meanings of water presented in Western literature, I would like them to explore the potential connotations of water in select Japanese stories by utilizing their literary analytical skills. Simultaneously, I would share my understanding about the symbolic meanings of water in Japanese aesthetics to bridge the gap between the foreign and the local, and to further increase students’ interest in Japan. The select works include Fumiko Hayashi’s “Tokyo,” Yukio Mishima’s “Fountains in the Rain,” Yasunari Kawabata’s “The Dancing Girl of Izu” (for which I will supplement the filmic and TV adaptations to discuss why this piece becomes a Japanese classic), Kenzaburo Oē’s “Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness,” and the film and pop culture materials where water serves as a motif. The objective for this project is to let students understand the universality of figurative language in literature which brings audience of different cultures together, and appreciate the beauty and diversity of language despite cultural difference. Meanwhile, depending on the orientations of different courses, I would manipulate the contents to suit their various objectives. For example, were I to teach Introduction of East Asian Literature and Culture, when it comes to Japan, I would include cultural materials, such as the blend of traditional and modern in Japan’s contemporary pop music, film, and current social issues.