

Japanese Studies Institute Final Report

David Kinkela
State University of New York at Fredonia

I would like to thank Professor Higurashi and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities for organizing a wonderful and thought-provoking Institute. Professor Higurashi not only constructed a meaningful learning environment for all fellows, but she skillfully herded a group of scholars from 13 different institutions, 10 states, and 3 countries with much grace and patience. I would also like to thank the team of student interns, who helped make our time at the Institute extremely productive. Thank you all.

In my application to the JSI, I wrote that I wanted “to learn more about Japanese culture and history.” Furthermore, I indicated that “if awarded the opportunity to participate in the JSI [I would] return to Fredonia with a stronger ability to integrate Japanese culture and history into the curriculum.” Well, after an intense two weeks of study, I can report that I learned a great deal about Japanese culture and history, which ultimately will strengthen my ability to teach aspects of Japanese history within a series of courses that I teach on environmental history.

For example, for my course, Global Environmental History, I will introduce students to Japanese ways of thinking about nature and the environment, including concepts like the Aesthetics of Nature, Parks and Park Building, Transportation Networks, City Building, Food Systems, Consumption and Waste, and the environmental legacies of Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Power. To explore the issue of nuclear weapons, for example, I will use Keiji Nakazawa’s manga story, *Barefoot Gen: Life After the Bomb: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*. In addition, I will use films, including Ishirô Honda’s 1954 landmark film *Gojira*, which will expose students to the legacy of atomic weapons and environmental politics. Other Japanese films on the environment might include *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Sushi: The Global Catch* (2012), and the recent documentary, *Fukushima: A Nuclear Story* (2015).

I also teach a course titled, “The Ecology of Waste,” which, in its initial incarnation asked students to explore the following questions: Why do we throw things away? How did we become a society defined by convenience and disposability? And what are the human and environmental costs of a disposable society? When I first taught this class, it focused exclusively on the United States. The next time I teach the course, it will be comparative in nature by investigating concepts of waste in Japan and the United States.

And while many of these environmental concepts were not explored explicitly in the JSI, my work over the past two weeks have enabled me to see the paradoxes of Japan’s environmental past and present in profound and important ways. Indeed, the JSI has left me with more questions than answers, which, as an educator, underscores the value of this experience. For example, throughout the two weeks we were introduced to the significance of nature in Japan, from the power of particular places within Shinto religion to the importance of trees, rocks, rivers, ponds, and animals in understanding the Japanese aesthetic. We also explored how transformations of the Meiji Restoration reframed gender relations, established an industrial economy, and restructured the

natural world. During the postwar period, Japan emerged as an economic powerhouse, which not only created new standard of living for millions of Japanese citizens, but also has come at a tremendous environmental cost.

Indeed, Japan's embrace of nature, industrialization, and consumption has created a curious paradox. Industrialization and the rise of a consumer culture in 20th century Japan left undeniable scars on the landscapes of Japan and bodies of the Japanese. Beginning in the 1930s, for example, the release of industrial waste containing methylmercury by the Chisso Corporation, a chemical manufacturer in Minamata in Kumamoto prefecture, poisoned residents of Minamata through the aquatic food chain. Since 1960, over 1,700 people died as a result of "Minamata disease."

Similarly, the Japanese economic miracle had a profound environmental impact. Amid the era of hyper-consumption, waste and pollution became a problem. By the late-1960s, the Tokyo Bay landfill called, "The Island of Dreams (Yume no Shima), was near capacity as postwar consumerism produced a prodigious amount of waste. In 1971, the governor of Tokyo declared a "Garbage War" (gomi sensō), leading to tense battles between Tokyo communities about where and what to do with their post-consumer waste. And that same year, Godzilla returned to screen to do battle with "The Smog Monster," a film that I will introduce to students in my class. And since the 1970s, the development of single-use plastics bottles, bags, and other packaging systems has compounded the waste problem in Japan and throughout the world. More recently, Japan's embrace of the concept of *mottainai*, which places value on not being wasteful—wasteful with things, time, and one's life—has propelled the country into the forefront of global environmental stewardship. These issues will bring a strong comparative framework to my class, enabling students to investigate how two consumer societies dealt with their respective waste problems over time.

As a historian, I am interested in exploring the paradoxes of the human world in both my research and teaching. And my work at the JSI has provided me a more nuanced understanding of Japan's past and present. It has opened up a number of important questions about the complexity and contradictions of a nation that has and will continue to shape our world in profound and unexpected ways. I look forward to sharing material from the Institute with my students.

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