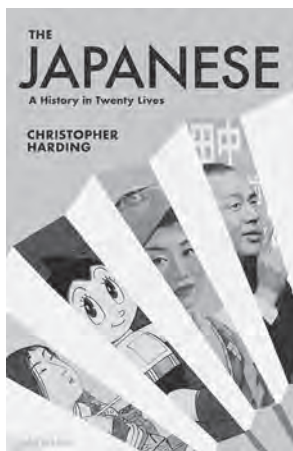


Teaching Christopher Harding's *The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives in High Schools*

By Stephen O'Connor

The Japanese *A History in Twenty Lives*

BY CHRISTOPHER HARDING
LONDON: ALLEN LANE, 2020
528 PAGES, ISBN-13: 978-0241434505, HARDCOVER



Globally, most secondary school curricula have world history requirements. Ideally, the curriculum for history in high schools includes multiple perspectives when needed. As such, the contemporary curriculum endeavors to remember the impacts on all the participants involved, in a critical sense, both positive and negative. This is to not selectively forget history, but to recognize the past as complicated and complex.

Given the above criteria, Christopher Harding's new book, *The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives* would be an excellent choice to use in any high school history curriculum. Teachers would be able to select a range of Japanese individuals from the volume applicable to world history courses anywhere. The book is an enlightening and captivating tour through the story of Japan depicted through vignettes of the lives of iconic individuals. Harding focuses on the complex historical interweaving of those individuals within a Japanese society that at times has been unforgiving. Under Harding's careful tutelage, the reader clearly feels the tension between the official narrative, and the extra digging into the more personal experiences within each biography which makes compelling and lively subjects for students.

Students may have the idea that Japan is a largely homogeneous apolitical society, but the stories encountered here show the determination of people in Japan to speak out against oppression and sexism across the political, religious, and moral gamut of the country.

Because the stories are written with an engaging wit and wisdom, they are accessible and very readable, moreso than the usual conventional textbook that presents the facts as often only selective emphasis. In this way, the book will help students understand the experiences of these passionate people fighting against the rigidity of Japanese society. Even though the book is a weighty 528 pages, it is organized so that students can easily choose the era or person. The volume is divided into five equal sections, with four core biographies for each section. They range from the earliest recorded history of Japan to the present, with each biography divided into twenty pages each, making the volume accessible and convenient for students.

A complete list of each person included in the volume is provided. Teachers and professors who are familiar with Japanese history will note that the biographies include both widely known figures from Japan's past and a few individuals who aren't particularly well-known.

The Twenty Featured Japanese Lives:

1. Himiko (c. 170–248)—Shaman
2. Prince Shōtoku (573–621)—Founding Father
3. Emperor Kanmu (737–806)—Boundary Pusher
4. Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–unknown)—Court Reporter
5. Hōjō Masako (1157–1225)—The Nun Shogun
6. Shinran (1173–1262)—Power to the People
7. Zeami (1363–1443)—Master of Arts
8. Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582)—Unity or Else
9. Hasekura Tsunenaga (1571–1622)—Voyager
10. Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693)—Amorous Man
11. Sakamoto Ryōma (1835–1864)—Revolutionary
12. Kusumoto Ine (1827–1903)—Building the Body
13. Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931)—Entrepreneur
14. Tsuda Umeko (1864–1929)—Culture Shock
15. Ikeda Kikunae (1864–1936)—Taste-Maker
16. Yosano Akiko (1878–1942)—Poet of Peace and War
17. Misora Hibari (1937–1989)—Starlet
18. Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989)—Dream Weaver
19. Tanaka Kakuei (1918–1993)—Shadow Shogun
20. Owada Masako (1963–present)—Uncertain Symbol

This article focuses on modern Japanese from the Meiji to the Heian era, which Harding discusses in the final two sections of his volume.

These last two sections of the book are filled with stories of memorable individuals for teachers to critically examine and incorporate into their history classes. Each of the biographies could be used in a high school history or an undergraduate course at a university. One advantage of the book is that it focuses equally on both genders. Not for Harding are women on the edge of stories. Instead, they are the cornerstone of the chapters that cover them, marking a refreshing change from other history books where women are underrepresented.

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In this essay, we will focus on three biographies from the last two sections. One of these stories from part 4 is about the cultural outsider Tsuda Umeko, who initiated the merging of Japanese and Western values in young women's education in Japan during the Meiji era. The story tells of Tsuda's journey as her father sent her to the United States in hopes of giving her a full picture of the world. She was one of the first Japanese women to study abroad. However, this was tempered by the realization that her father might never see Tsuda again, allowing the students to see the intensity with which Japan was willing to modernize. These personal sacrifices made by Tsuda and her father are clearly in the historical context of Japan embracing Westernization so that the nation could become stronger and compete with European powers and a rising United States. Harding not only demonstrates Tsuda's skillful attempt to bring about cultural change in Japan through American and Christian values, but he also underscores Tsuda's determination to work to ensure that Japanese women shake off the preconceived notion in Japanese society that they should be seen and not heard. In doing so, she became a pioneer of higher education for women in Japan. She published a groundbreaking book in Japan for that time, *Japanese Girls and Women* (1891), which called for a higher quality education for girls and equal marriages between the sexes. Significantly, she also opened her own school in 1900, the *Joshi Eigaku Juku* (English School for Women), which later became Tsuda University. When the school opened, she had to overcome a number of hurdles. This included securing adequate funding, attracting potential students, and finding capable teachers. By outlining the reforms the government had been enacting along with Tsuda's independent determination, Harding adroitly contributes to the

discussion of women's rights in Japan. The chapter shows that Tsuda's challenges and obstacles made her a pioneer for women in Japan. Her vision was to empower women's self-esteem with a level of independence that not only heightens awareness of the narratives of the past, but also connects them to the future. Therefore, this chapter on Tsuda Umeko offers students the opportunity to focus on the connections to the modern context of gender inequality in Japan, where Japan is now ranked 116 out of 146 countries in the *World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2022*.¹ This could then lead to students' discussions about historical paths and cultural attitudes that have prevailed in Japan so far, and could then open up connections with the issues of gender equality in their own countries.

Also, the chapter reveals the domestic political problems that underlay the dramatic changes during the Meiji era. An example is the protests and riots of the samurai disgruntled at their change in status and conscription to fight overseas. In showing these different competing narratives, Harding has invested in clearly showing the challenges faced by the people of Japan during this period, which might inspire students to critically research and learn more about these events.

The chapter on Tezuka Osamu would be a good place to start to give students an opportunity to reflect on the sometimes-difficult problems and issues we face today and how we might move forward differently. Growing up amid postwar poverty and occupation by American forces, Tezuka catapulted manga into an unsuspecting world, eventually becoming Japan's most influential cultural export. Students would enjoy not only the rags to riches story of the artist but also the rising popularity of the manga/anime industry. A closer reading on Harding's writing of the life of Tezuka also reveals the nuances of his art. The work of *The Mighty Atom* (*Astro Boy*) and other characters he created was guided by the larger concerns of the real world and Japan's place or trajectory therein. Harding also gives the reader a glimpse into the history of Japanese manga, but then criticizes Tezuka for introducing the poor conditions for manga artists that have, frighteningly, caused some artists to drip blood because they drew too much. Classes may wish to make historical comparisons with work and working conditions in their own countries. Ironically, however, his legacy from *Astro Boy* and *Phoenix* was to make the Japanese think about their post-occupation value systems while also exploring the future of technology in Japan. History students will find these themes particularly relevant these days as society steers toward possible climate catastrophe and human irrelevance from the advent of AI and other modern technologies. Also, Tezuka addressed gender issues in his creations. He was one of the first artists in Japan to actively highlight gender identity with *shōjo manga* and his character Princess Knight. This could prompt reflections on how gender identity was represented in students' own histories.

The last chapter of the volume gives an account of the current Empress, Owada Masako under the title of "Uncertain Symbol." This chapter not only offers an in-depth look at the Japanese imperial family, which must embody the patriarchal, rigid, and conservative values of traditional Japan, but also goes into Japan's foreign policy toward its neighbors, Abe's political span, and the disastrous Tōhoku earthquake. Harding points to the trials Empress Masako endured when she gave up a promising diplomatic career to marry into the royal family. Harding draws parallels to the reworked Japanese corporate culture with the rise in depression and suicides and the

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mental health issues Empress Masako has suffered from. Harding makes it clear that Japan is now at a crossroads economically, politically, and socially. However, there is a glimmer of hope that Japan and Empress Masako can look pragmatically to the future, building on the past. Thanks to Harding's specialist knowledge and compellingly written narration, this chapter offers students an insight into the day-to-day problems and challenges that Empress Masako has faced, as well as an opportunity to reflect on the limitations and opportunities that the Empress' role has had in Japanese society.

To encourage "storytelling" through biographical stories in my history class, I instruct students to read these very accessible narratives. I assign the stories to group discussions, with each narrative fitting into the broader narratives of Japanese history. That these twenty lives in the stories convey the message that the past can have an impact on the present and also the future is a constant part of the discussions among students. Having previously taught high school history, I believe that the book's biographies are written in a captivating and enjoyable manner. This comprehensive selection of study options provides not only university students but also high school students with an easily accessible resource.

When I first look at the book to use in my class, I start with some appropriate and engaging activities. To help students work through their limited understanding of the historical backdrop presented in the stories in the volume, I use two strategies. These activities can also be used for high school students. First, I try to draw on whatever prior knowledge they have about Japan so they engage in metacognitive reflection. To do this, I ask them to identify ideas that are consistent with their previous understanding of Japan by watching a video about Japan and its history, and get them to answer the following three questions:

Connect: How do the ideas and information connect to what you already know?

Extend: How does this video extend or broaden your thinking?

Challenge: Does this video challenge or complicate your understanding?

Second, when students first dive into the book, they make predictions about the narratives by studying the cover. This is an excellent opportunity for them to do some quick research on some of the people featured in the volume. In journals, they then record associations that come to mind based on the research they have done on the cover. Using the information on the cover, students then work in pairs or small groups to discuss the stories in the book and develop possible questions. Later, as they read the text, they try to answer these questions. This would be an ideal way to introduce the time period covered by Harding's book, as the illustrations depict the key figures from each part of Japan's history.

Next, as a further introduction to the text, I use a "reader's theatre" strategy in which students in groups are assigned a chapter from which to present the theme to the class. I find this to be an effective way of helping students process some of the dilemmas or problems raised by the people in the book so that the students can then better understand the text. Also, students may want to get even more creative and write their own "found poems." Students can review the text or chapter they read and write down words, phrases, or quotations that are particularly interesting or meaningful. They then identify a theme or message that represents some or all of the language they have chosen and create

(compose) their poem. I find this to be a structured way to have students review the material and synthesize their understanding of the characters in the volume.

Overall, this book by Harding can be used by educators to critically engage with the facts and themes when students study about Japan. It is also a must-read for students, as it tells the tangled history of Japan through the lives of these interesting people in a succinct and compelling way. ♦

NOTE

1. "Global Gender Gap Report 2022," *World Economic Forum*, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/h2eztzip>.

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The Nobility of Failure

BY IVAN MORRIS, SUMIO ASAYAMA, AND JULIET CARPENTER
KURODAHAN PRESS; ILLUSTRATED EDITION 2020
392 PAGES, ISBN-13: 978-4902075502, PAPERBACK



Long recognized as a core book in any study of Japanese culture and literature, *The Nobility of Failure* examines the lives and deaths of nine historical individuals who faced overwhelming odds, and, realizing they were doomed, accepted their fate—to be killed in battle or by execution, to wither in exile, or to escape through ritual suicide. Morris then turns his attention to the kamikaze pilots of World War II, who gave their lives in defense of their nation in the full realization

that their deaths would have little effect on the course of the war.

Through detail, crystal-clear prose, and unmatched narrative sweep and brilliance, Professor Morris takes you into the innermost hearts of the Japanese people.

Supported by extensive notes and bibliography, the chapters cover:

Yamato Takeru
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Arima no Miko
Sugawara no Michizane
Minamoto no Yoshitsune
Kusunoki Masashige
Amakusa Shirō
Ōshio Heihachirō
Saigō Takamori
The Kamikaze fighters of World War II

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