

From Kibyōshi to Shōgun: Teaching Japanese Cultural Continuity Through Disaster Narratives

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Abstract:

This pedagogical essay presents a narrative-based approach to teaching Japanese cultural continuity and developing intercultural historical competence in university classrooms. Drawing on classroom experience at the University of Osaka, the essay examines how students engage with cultural values through disaster narratives spanning the Edo to Reiwa periods. Texts such as *kibyōshi*, modern manga parodies of *Japan Sinks*, and the 2024 adaptation of *Shōgun* serve as compelling entry points into enduring cultural themes such as resilience, mutual reliance, and harmony with nature. Framed through Edward T. Hall's iceberg model and Watsuji Tetsurō's theory of *fūdo*, the method helps students move beyond surface-level comparisons and stereotype-driven interpretations. By experiencing historical and contemporary storytelling from Japanese and outsider perspectives, students develop a deeper understanding of cultural identity as historically layered and environmentally shaped.

Keywords: *Edo-period literature; intercultural historical competence; disaster narratives; narrative-based teaching*

Introduction: Teaching Culture Beyond Criticism

As a university educator based in Japan, I teach international students enrolled in short-term exchange programs. These students typically arrive enthusiastic and curious about Japanese society, eager to experience a culture that is often familiar to them only through surface images such as anime, sushi, or temples. However, many have limited Japanese language proficiency and little exposure to the country's historical or cultural foundations. As a result, they often encounter practices they find confusing or difficult to interpret: indirect communication, hierarchical social structures, collective decision-making, and the apparent absence of overt personal expression. Lacking the conceptual tools to contextualize these behaviors, students frequently respond by interpreting them through their cultural frameworks. This often leads to instinctive judgment or criticism, especially when these practices differ sharply from what they consider "normal."

This response reflects a deeper challenge within intercultural education. It is not simply a matter of misunderstanding etiquette or social customs; it stems from a limited awareness that cultural norms are historically and environmentally shaped, rather than governed by universal logic. To guide students beyond superficial interpretation, I draw on both UNESCO's intercultural

communication education framework¹ and key ideas from Japanese cultural history.² In particular, I use the iceberg model of culture, introduced by Edward T. Hall,³ which distinguishes between visible cultural practices and the deeper, often invisible, values that inform them. I also incorporate Watsuji Tetsurō's theory of *fūdo*,⁴ which emphasizes how the natural and social environment influences human behavior and national character. These frameworks enable students to explore how Japanese culture expresses itself through change and continuity.

Through this lens, I help students recognize that the surface-level aspects of Japanese culture have evolved significantly from the Edo period (1603–1868) to the current Reiwa era (2019–). However, core values such as resilience, social interdependence, and a harmonious relationship with nature and others have remained remarkably consistent. Understanding this continuity encourages students to move beyond viewing Japan as a collection of puzzling or exotic behaviors. Instead, they view it as a complex and coherent cultural system, shaped by distinct historical experiences and environmental conditions.

This paper argues that integrating historical and contemporary cultural narratives, ranging from Edo-period comic books⁵ through modern disaster fiction to the 2024 adaptation of *Shōgun*, offers an effective and engaging way to teach cultural continuity and complexity in Japan. Drawing on my classroom practice at the University of Osaka, I demonstrate how these materials support student learning through visual storytelling, humor, and crisis narratives. When framed with critical reflection and comparative discussion, these works help students develop intercultural historical competence, reduce reliance on stereotypes, and cultivate empathy for culturally embedded worldviews.⁶

2. The Iceberg Model and Japanese Historical Identity

One of the most helpful tools I use to guide students beyond cultural misunderstandings is the iceberg model, a visual metaphor that illustrates the layered nature of culture. Only a small portion, such as language, clothing, or food, is immediately visible, while deeper values and norms remain hidden beneath the surface. Beyond the visible aspects of culture lies a much larger set of unseen elements, including values, social norms, emotional expectations, group behavior, and assumptions about nature, time, and identity. Most misunderstandings arise within this hidden layer, where people often project their cultural logic onto unfamiliar behaviors.

While Hall's model is often used to compare different cultures, I apply it diachronically to show how a single culture, Japan, can display many different "iceberg tops" across historical periods, all connected to the same deeper foundation. I encourage students to think of Japanese culture as one large iceberg mostly hidden below the surface, with the small visible parts showing different historical periods. For example, Edo-period society and modern Japan may appear

¹ UNESCO, *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework* (Paris: UNESCO, 2013).

² Csendom, Andrea. "Reading Edo through *Kibyōshi*: Intercultural Historical Competence and Reflections on Women's Roles" *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2025, pp. 249-276. This article explores intercultural competence through the lens of Edo-period satire.

³ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).

⁴ Watsuji Tetsurō, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Yushodo, 1961). Originally published in 1935 as *Fūdo: Ningengakuteki Kōsatsu*. Watsuji argues that climate and geography shape collective ethics and emotional dispositions. He contrasts Japan's monsoon culture, marked by impermanence and interdependence, with the individualism of more temperate regions.

⁵ *Kibyōshi* (黄表紙), or “yellow-covered books,” were satirical illustrated texts for adult readers in 18th-century Edo. They often blended humor, parody, and visual art to critique contemporary society and politics.

⁶ Parts of this article were presented at two academic conferences: the Japan Studies Association (Hawaii, January 2025) and the Conference on Language and Culture Studies (Mount Koya, March 2025).

fundamentally different. However, through the iceberg framework, students begin to see that although outward practices have evolved alongside modern developments, the underlying values remain remarkably consistent. This approach helps students understand Japanese identity as layered and evolving yet grounded in enduring continuities.



Figure 1. Iceberg Model of Japanese Cultural Continuity.

Created by DeeVid AI under the author's direction. This visual illustrates the concept of cultural depth and continuity used in classroom teaching. In my courses, students are permitted to use AI tools under specific ethical and creative guidelines, and this image represents part of an ongoing development of AI-assisted educational materials designed to support imagination and conceptual understanding in lecture slides.

Edo and Modern Examples: Tattoos and Foreigners

We begin with a cultural practice that is highly visible, yet often misunderstood: tattoos in Japanese society. The late eighteenth-century comic book, *Edo umare uwaki no kabayaki*⁷, portrayed tattoos (*irezumi* or *horimono*) as fashionable and expressive markers of urban style and individuality. In Edo's merchant districts and pleasure quarters, tattoos were strongly linked to the aesthetic of *iki*,⁸ a cultural ideal that valued elegance, cleverness, and subtle rebellion. Popular literature and woodblock prints from the period often depicted tattoos as theatrical and stylish, worn not only by kabuki actors but also by women, monks, and other urban figures. Rather than being marks of criminality, tattoos functioned as signs of individuality, flirtation, and aesthetic flair within a vibrant, fashion-conscious urban culture.

At the same time, this aesthetic appeal conflicted with state policy. The Tokugawa shogunate issued repeated bans on decorative tattoos. While officials sought to maintain a rigid social order, many urban commoners celebrated tattoos as markers of identity and fashion. This contrast between government regulation and popular expression reflects a cultural dynamic that continues to shape modern Japan.

In modern Japan, tattoos remain stigmatized. They are strongly associated with organized crime and are prohibited in many public spaces such as hot springs and gyms. Although not illegal, tattoos are often seen as signs of social deviance. This can lead to cultural misunderstandings. For example, an exchange student unfamiliar with these associations may feel confused or frustrated when denied entry to a hot spring, interpreting the restriction as rigid or exclusionary. In class, students reflect on such experiences to explore how tattoos have long functioned as cultural boundary markers, and how they should interpret these cultural differences within the context of

Japanese societal values.

The iceberg model helps clarify this layered symbolism. Although the surface meanings of tattoos have shifted over time, their underlying function, as expressions of individuality that challenge dominant norms, remains. Students often comment that in their native countries, tattoos represent freedom, personal style, or carry no particular meaning at all. Through this comparison, they begin to understand how Japanese views on conformity and public appearance are shaped by historical and cultural expectations that differ significantly from their own.

Another illustrative example involves the depiction of foreigners in Japanese cultural texts. During the Edo period, foreign visitors were uncommon and often portrayed through imaginative or exaggerated representations. In *kibyōshi* such as *Tenka ichimen kagami no umebachi*,⁹ as well as in other forms of satirical literature and visual art, foreigners from known regions like the Korean Peninsula or the Ryukyu Islands (present-day Okinawa) appeared occasionally and were depicted with relative accuracy.

⁷ Santō Kyōden. *Edo umare uwaki no kabayaki* 江戸生艶気樺焼 [The Playboy, Roasted à la Edo Style]. (Edo: Tsutaya Jūzaburō, 1776). This

kibyōshi satirizes the fashions and romantic pursuits of Edo's pleasure quarters.

⁸ Shūzō Kuki, *The Structure of "Iki"*, trans. John Clark (Tokyo: Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1979).

⁹ Tōrai Sanna. *Tenka ichimen kagami no umebachi* 天下一面鏡梅鉢 [The Mirror of Plum Blossoms: Reflections of the World] (Edo: Tsutaya Jūzaburō, 1789). This *kibyōshi* reimagines a volcanic disaster as a utopian rain of gold, offering sharp critique of social inequality.

However, other foreigners, especially those from unknown or mythologized lands, were shown with fantastical or distorted traits, such as extreme height, elongated limbs, or origin in so-called “women’s countries.” These visual caricatures served multiple purposes. They reflected a mixture of curiosity and amusement, while simultaneously reinforcing the logic of Japan’s closed country policy by depicting the foreign as inherently strange or other. This stylized imagery allowed Edo-period audiences to engage imaginatively with the outside world while maintaining a sense of domestic cultural superiority and control.¹⁰

By contrasting Edo-period depictions with modern media and everyday discourse, students realize that stereotypes persist across time as tools for boundary-making and self-definition. While the forms and details of representation may change, the deeper cultural logic of constructing identity through contrast with the “other” remains consistent.

At the same time, I encourage students to reflect on their position as foreigners in Japan. They are not simply observers of cultural difference, but participants in a living process of intercultural exchange. This dual role calls for careful awareness: students are asked to interpret cultural representations through a Japanese lens, while also considering their reactions and experiences.

Rather than feeling excluded, they are invited to see this position as an opportunity for thoughtful reflection and dialogue. Cultural learning grows through empathy, curiosity, and a willingness to understand perspectives from within. As seen in works like *Shōgun*, just as Japan has historically imagined foreign cultures through narrative frames, the world often views Japan through external narratives that diverge from Japanese self-understandings. Recognizing this mutual process deepens students’ intercultural insight.

3. Teaching Cultural Depth Through Disaster

Narratives of disaster provide a particularly effective way to explore cultural continuity in Japan, especially since many exchange students come from regions where natural disasters are uncommon and may struggle to grasp the cultural attitudes shaped by such experiences. Whether satirical, dramatic, or speculative, these stories reveal how shared values emerge and are expressed in moments of crisis.

In my classroom, I draw on disaster representations across Japanese history. These include Edo-period *kibyōshi* such as *Tenka Ichimen Kagami no Umebachi*, which satirically transforms the 1783 Mount Asama eruption into a rain of gold coins, and modern parodies like *Ōsama wa Roba: Nihon Chotto Chinbotsu*,¹¹ which humorously reimagines Japan sinking by only 80 centimeters. The latter directly parodies the well-known disaster novel *Japan Sinks* (1973) by Komatsu Sakyo¹² and its many adaptations, reframing national anxiety as comic inconvenience. I also include global productions such as Disney’s *Shōgun* (2024),¹³ which dramatizes a foreigner’s internal transformation in response to a natural disaster. Although these texts differ in tone and

¹⁰ Andrea Csendom, “‘Closed Country’ from the Perspective of the Edo’s Inhabitants,” in *Kortárs Japanológia V*, ed. Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2024), 277–296. Analyzes how Edo readers imagined and interpreted foreign cultures through picture books.

¹¹ Hayashi Seiichi, *Ōsama wa Roba: Nihon Chotto Chinbotsu* [The King Is a Donkey: Japan Slightly Sinks], serialized in *Nobody Knows*, 2006–2009. This manga parodies Japan’s disaster genre by portraying the country sinking only 80 centimeters.

¹² Sakyo Komatsu, *Japan Sinks*, trans. Michael Gallagher (New York: Kodansha International, 1976). Originally published as *Nihon Chinbotsu* in 1973, this science fiction novel uses disaster

to explore national resilience, identity, and political critique.

¹³ James Clavell, *Shōgun* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975); *Shōgun*, dir. Jerry London (NBC, 1980); *Shōgun*, created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks (FX/Hulu, 2024). The 2024 version uses more Japanese language and cultural nuance, depicting a foreigner's gradual integration into Japanese society.

genre, they serve a shared pedagogical purpose. They allow students to engage with Japanese cultural values through resonant and narratively compelling stories.

In Edo-period *kibyōshi* and contemporary manga, disasters are often portrayed with irony, exaggeration, or playful inversion. This humorous framing does more than entertain. It functions as a culturally embedded strategy for coping with fear, questioning authority, and preserving social bonds. In *Tenka Ichimen Kagami no Umebachi*, the devastation of the Mount Asama eruption is reimagined as a fantastical rain of gold coins. Similarly, *Ōsama wa Roba: Nihon Chotto Chinbotsu* presents the gradual sinking of Japan as a sequence of absurd inconveniences, poking fun not only at the situation itself but also at the people struggling to adapt. These stories use laughter to reframe hardship. They build a shared affective language that helps sustain social cohesion. These narratives can be understood as cultural icebergs. While surface elements such as tone, genre, and format may shift over time, they remain grounded in enduring values such as cooperation, adaptability, and measured self-control. What changes above the surface reflect enduring continuities rooted in deeper cultural foundations.

In contrast to these comic portrayals, *Shōgun* (2024) presents disaster as emotional rupture and personal transformation. This difference reflects the narrative's Western perspective. While many Japanese cultural texts use satire to normalize disruption and reinforce resilience, *Shōgun* treats the earthquake as a profound shock. In Episode 5, the European protagonist, Blackthorne, experiences an earthquake and a tsunami that overturn his assumptions about Japanese society. Until this point, he views local customs through a Western lens focused on mastery, hierarchy, and individualism. The disaster forces him to confront a worldview in which nature is not to be conquered, but accepted, and strength lies in communal cooperation.

This cultural contrast becomes more understandable when viewed through Watsuji Tetsurō's theory of *fūdo*, which argues that climate and geography shape a society's ethics. Watsuji characterizes Japan as part of the monsoon zone, a region marked by climatic unpredictability and environmental disruption. Within this setting, cultural values such as interdependence, adaptability, and acceptance of impermanence have historically taken root.

In contrast, Watsuji's concept of the pastoral zone is often associated with Western societies. It reflects a more stable natural environment and a worldview in which nature is perceived as something to be managed or subdued. Blackthorne enters Japan with this perspective, assuming that nature can be controlled and that human mastery over the environment is natural.

The earthquake radically unsettles this belief. It forces Blackthorne to confront a worldview in which people must live alongside natural forces rather than dominate them. This experience helps him grasp the ethical principles that form the foundation of Japanese society. Leadership is quiet but unquestionable. Responses to a crisis are collective. Loyalty and personal duty are not matters of individual choice, but moral imperatives necessary for communal survival. In this moment, he recognizes how profoundly he had misunderstood the values that shape Japanese life.

Although later scholars have critiqued Watsuji's environmental determinism, his concept of *fūdo* remains a valuable lens for classroom discussion when approached critically. It helps students understand how a society's ethics and habits can be influenced by the environment in which it develops. By examining *fūdo* through stories like *Shōgun*, students see how cultural values emerge through experience rather than theory. Blackthorne's growing ability to act in coordination with others and respond with measured calm offers a vivid illustration of this process. More significantly, his journey reflects the intercultural awareness that exchange students are encouraged to develop in Japan. Students learn to pause their assumptions, engage with unfamiliar

cultural frameworks, and reflect on how historical experience and environmental realities shape cultural values.

Comparing the serious and transformative portrayal of disaster in *Shōgun* with the ironic and satirical approaches found in *kibyōshi* and manga helps students understand how cultural frameworks influence the ways societies narrate catastrophe. In much of Japanese popular media, humor often serves as a culturally embedded response to crisis. It offers a means to confront fear, critique authority, and maintain social cohesion through indirect expression. *Shōgun*, in contrast, presents disaster from a Western perspective, not with irony but as a moment of psychological upheaval and cultural awakening. As a scholar of the Edo period, I find this portrayal especially meaningful for a contemporary global audience. It vividly illustrates how an outsider gradually adopts Japanese values through direct, immersive encounters with nature and community, rather than through instruction or translation. The absence of humor is not a weakness in the narrative but a deliberate strategy that guides the viewer through the protagonist's growing awareness. This contrast helps students recognize that different storytelling approaches reflect underlying cultural perspectives, much like cultural icebergs, and influence how communities understand and respond to disaster across time.

Conclusion: Experiencing Cultural Continuity Across Time

From Edo-period satire to contemporary global media, Japanese disaster narratives demonstrate a remarkable continuity in cultural values. Although their surface forms vary, whether comic books, manga, or streaming dramas, they consistently portray crisis as a shared, communal experience. These stories emphasize composed self-management, collective responsibility, and perseverance, offering students a multi-layered understanding of Japanese culture from internal and external perspectives.

Reading Edo-period *kibyōshi* alongside modern parodies of serious fiction, and contrasting both with the outsider perspective in *Shōgun*, allows students to engage with a cultural system that is both evolving and coherent. Storytelling in these works serves not only as entertainment or critique but also as a means of preserving and transmitting deeply rooted values.

This comparative and narrative-based approach strengthens student engagement and supports the development of what I call intercultural historical competence. This refers to the ability to interpret culture not only across geographical boundaries, but also through historical layers. Using tools such as the iceberg model and Watsuji Tetsurō's concept of *fūdo*, students learn to view culture as more than visible practices. It is a layered structure shaped by memory, environment, and historical experience.

Most importantly, they approach cultural differences not through criticism or direct comparison, but through shared human experiences. Disaster, humor, and endurance offer powerful ways to access the deeper layers of cultural meaning.

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