

“History is made by how we remember it.”

Juan Rivera, August 2009



At the Kyoto Museum for Peace

War, Memory, and Comics: A Summer in Japan

Juan Rivera, August 2009 / NYC Program

The way a society looks at history is a mirror of the different tensions that lie within that society. This summer, I examined official and unofficial approaches to how people in Japan learn about World War II. I visited several schools and examined approaches to teaching this still controversial subject. With the help of an excellent Japanese tutor, I also read Japanese comics--from a young person's manga history of World War II to a veteran's autobiographical work about the horrors of his experience in Guam. I found that all of these experiences gave me a richer and more complex understanding of what led to Japan's participation in World War II, in addition to a treasure trove of new Japanese political and military vocabulary.

This vocabulary was invaluable as I headed out from my home base in Numazu. At the Kyoto International Manga Museum, I explored the breadth of Japanese manga and how it relates to more traditional Japanese art forms. There was an excellent exhibit on how Japanese comics changed during World War II. At the Kyoto Museum for Peace, which is one of the few museums in Japan to examine Japan's abuse of human rights in its conduct of World War II, I interviewed the curator and viewed the exhibit.

During the remainder of my visit, I followed the rapid time line of the atomic bombings and the surrender of Japan. On August 6th, I witnessed the 64th memorial of the bombing in Hiroshima. At the World Friendship Center, I heard the personal testimony of a survivor, who at the age of 70 decided to draw her story to release the survivors guilt she felt. That evening, I had the opportunity to float a lantern for peace along with thousands of others in a beautiful ceremony.

On August 9th, I was in Nagasaki. In addition to attending the ceremony and museum, I decided that I needed to connect with the beauty and humanity of the place, instead of just concentrating on its destruction. I visited the Nagasaki Museum of History and Folklore, Dejima Island, and beautiful temples that reflect Nagasaki's distinct history.

On August 15th, the date of Japan's surrender, I traveled to Tokyo and experienced two contradictory events. I saw a film about Japanese soldiers who chose to live in the countries invaded by Japan. I also went to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine and Yushukan Museum, which honor the spirits of dead soldiers, including kamikaze pilots and class-A war criminals.



Meeting the director of a film about Japanese soldiers



Sending a message for peace with a floating lantern



At the Atomic Dome Memorial in Hiroshima



Studying Japanese at a manga cafe.

Personal and Professional Growth

- Relearned to love history, research and learning.
- Expanded my knowledge and love of the Japanese language.
- Learned more about Japanese history and it's connection to world events.
- Purchased a multi-volume manga history of Japan (In Japanese) for a life-time of exploration of Japanese history for myself and my students.
- Expanded my knowledge of Japanese pop culture as a way to reach students.

Benefits to Students and School Community

- Created a "Japanomania" elective class and will teach about Japanese culture, katakana, hiragana, and kanji.
- Created a Japan and the United States Orientation to Social Studies class, which allows students to learn to use different social studies tools such as geography, language, economics, social structure, and culture to compare the two different societies.
- Created a Japan and the World class, which will examine how Japan "modernized" and how that effected Japan and the world. Students will create different exhibits and examine how different museums and institutions in Japan look at World War II.
- Learned how to approach the written Japanese language in order to help students learn "kana" and kanji.
- Obtained a rich collection of museum catalogs, post cards, comic books and other materials that can be used in these and future courses.

Works in Progress

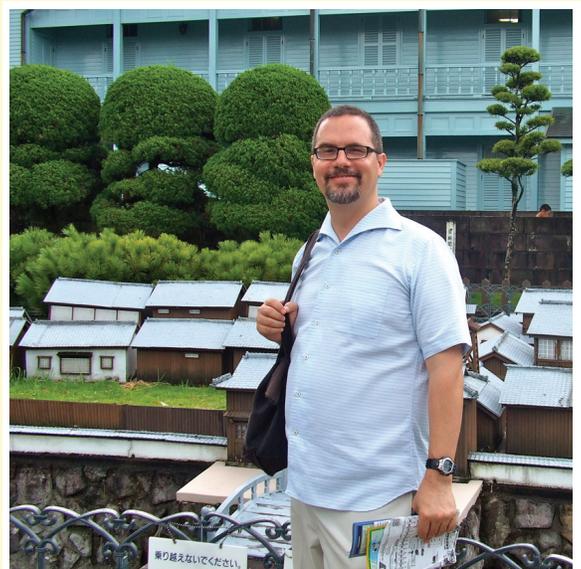
- Application to donorschoose.org for "Reading Samurais", books on Japan and Samurai to encourage reluctant readers to research and write more effectively.
- Application to donorschoose.org for books to help students learn kanji.
- A photographic essay on the different approaches of museums and shrines to World War II.
- An interdisciplinary unit on World War II museums and memorials in Japan.



August 15th at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine



Reading historical manga with the help of Japanese tutor



At replica of Dejima Island in Nagasaki