

Lesson Plan: Construction of National Identity Through Images of Warfare—Viewing Woodblock Prints from the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars

Author

Michelle Mascote, California High School, San Ramon, CA

Introduction

“Reading” of visual text is nothing new in the history of human experience. From the cave paintings in France, Spain, and Central and North America, to medieval cathedrals in Europe, classical Asian scrolls, black-and-white photography, television, and the Internet, people throughout time have had visual experiences informing their understanding of themselves and their environments. The significant issue is not that humans have visual experiences, but that they understand how to assess and analyze the visual information they encounter. What makes pre-historical and classical images so different from those of this modern generation is the advent of technology. Cyberspace and the Internet guarantee the rapid dissemination of images at an unprecedented daily rate. As a result, students are bombarded with images and must be carefully taught how to view, analyze, and filter cross-cultural data.

Drawing on MIT’s *Visualizing Cultures* website, this lesson, designed to introduce a unit entitled “Visual Literacy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation: The Mythological Hero,” engages students in structured analysis of woodblock prints, with the aim of identifying the characteristics of an “archetypal-hero.” Through discussion, they consider how the woodblock images of war helped to create the Japanese national identity.

Guiding Questions

- What are the characteristics of an “archetypal-hero”?
- How did the construction, production, and dissemination of woodblock prints of war imagery support creation of a Japanese national identity near the turn of the 20th century?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss various definitions of *art*.
- Define and articulate the concepts of the *archetypal-hero*, *mythology*, *propaganda*, and *national identity*.
- Assess and analyze the role of Japanese woodblock war images in establishing cultural narrative and national identity during the Meiji period.

Background Information for the Teacher

After Commodore Perry's arrival and "opening" of Japan in 1853 and 1854, Japan became vigorously engaged in the process of modernization and the creation of itself as an "international" nation: competitive, sophisticated, equal to, and on par with European powers and the United States. The Japanese desire to be recognized by the international community as a legitimate modern nation led to a process of unified "identity-formation," which had not previously existed. Japan's creation of a modern self relied heavily upon imagery generated out of warfare with China, during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), as well as woodblock print imagery of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).

During this eleven-year period, not only did the Japanese engage in two wars, they also portrayed themselves during these wars as powerful, paternal, modern, and ultimately victorious. The artistic medium of the woodblock print functioned as a prototype for modern photojournalism; several thousand woodblock images were produced, sometimes hastily, marketed in common shops and vending stalls, and purchased by the masses. The great irony is that most woodblock print makers witnessed neither warfare, nor battle, yet created the "reportage" based upon the works of other artists or on verbally transmitted tales of events. The selling of "Japan" as protagonist-hero, mythological archetype, benevolent father, and modern-power created a public image catapulting Japan into the 20th century.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell wrote that the hero's journey underlies the literature of all cultures. Typically, the hero leaves the safety of home to cross into strange lands where he must prove that he has the wit, will, and strength to survive. During his quest, the hero comes into conflict with a host of adversaries—evil knights, monsters, and dragons—that he must fight or outsmart. He may be aided in his quest by a faithful companion or by magical weapon. He often has a mysterious connection to the world of nature and is sometimes aided by animals. The heroic images in Japanese woodblock prints, during both the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, incorporate the above-mentioned characteristics of the universal hero.

Preparing to Teach This Lesson

- View the images and read the accompanying narration in the following *Visualizing Cultures* units: "[Throwing Off Asia I](#)," "[Throwing Off Asia II](#)," and "[Throwing Off Asia III](#)."
- Preview the four images from the *Visualizing Cultures* website that will be used as the foundation of this lesson. Download the images or bookmark them for students.

- [Captain Higuchi](#)
 - [Picture of Our Armed Forces Occupying Ryuko Island](#)
 - [Illustration of the Russo-Japanese War: Our Armed Forces Occupy Chongju](#)
 - [After the Fall of Weihaiwei the Commander of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Admiral Ding Ruchang, Surrenders](#)
- Reserve a computer lab for one 50-minute session on the day that students will view the online material as a class activity. Students will need to be able to print out one image.
 - Make copies of Handouts 1 and 2 for each student.

Lesson Plan

1. Discuss, explain, and review with students the following terms applicable to viewing, analyzing, discussing, and writing about the Japanese woodblock images:
 - **Universal-archetype:** An archetype is the original model on which all items of the same type are based; a universal-archetype is a prototype that is applicable everywhere, not just in a single culture.
 - **Protagonist-hero:** The protagonist-hero is the lead character in a story or the leader in a political or social movement.
 - **Mythology:** Mythology is a set of stories, traditions, or beliefs associated with a particular group; myths may arise naturally or be deliberately fostered.
 - **Propaganda:** Propaganda is information, ideas, or rumors deliberately disseminated widely to help or harm a person, group, movement, institution, or nation.
 - **Nationalism:** Nationalism is devotion to the interests of a nation; the desire for national advancement or independence.

Ask students to give examples of each term.

2. Introduce Handout 1, which provides an image-viewing guide for students. Explain that students will use this guide as they look at four images. They will be examining the images for qualities and characteristics of the “national-hero.”
3. Take students to the computer lab and allow them to analyze the following four images:
 - [Captain Higuchi](#)
 - [Picture of Our Armed Forces Occupying Ryuko Island](#)
 - [Illustration of the Russo-Japanese War: Our Armed Forces Occupy Chongju](#)
 - [After the Fall of Weihaiwei the Commander of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Admiral Ding Ruchang, Surrenders](#)

They should take notes about the images on the viewing guide. If on-line viewing is a new experience for students, you may want to allow them to work in pairs, sharing one image-viewing guide; more adept students may work independently.

4. Allow time for the class, in small groups or as a whole class, to discuss notes and observations recorded on Handout 1.
5. Bring closure to the lesson by facilitating a class conversation on the following questions, which may be written on the board or on an overhead:

- Describe elements that seem “heroic” in the woodblock prints. What actions are actually taking place?
- How are the men in the woodblock prints dressed? What about their appearance makes them seem like a leader?
- Describe the colors and objects in the woodblock prints. Are the colors or objects symbolic?
- What is the mood or feeling conveyed by the woodblock images?
- What messages and ideas are being non-verbally communicated in the woodblock images?
- Who would have created these woodblock images and why? Who would have bought, sold, or traded these images and why?

Assessment

Students, working in pairs, will write a three-paragraph, one-page description and analysis of one of the images. This analysis should be developed as explained on Handout 2. After submission of the final drafts, students will, on a voluntary basis, read their interpretations aloud to the class.

Extending the Lesson

Throughout the school year, ask students to use foundational concepts from this lesson to further investigate images of the nationalistic hero found in world literature and world history materials.

Additional Information

Grade Level: Grades 10-12

Subject Areas: World Literature, World History

Time Required: 4 class sessions of 50 minutes each (including assessment)

Skills

- Literacy and reading printed text.
- Defining, sorting, and categorizing language and visual information.
- Interpreting and analyzing visual text.
- Working with a partner.
- Synthesizing key concepts.
- Constructing a thesis statement, organizing paragraphs, and writing an analysis in a logical manner.

NCSS Standards Alignment

I – Culture

II – Time, Continuity, and Change

IV – Individual Development and Identity

VIII – Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Handouts

Handout 1, “Image-Viewing Guide”

Handout 2, “Essay Instructions”

Links to Online Sources

Captain Higuchi: http://oki-dev.mit.edu:8080/narravision-web/medium_view_toa.jsp?mediumImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC11139.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&wid=500&cvt=jpeg&assetId=2000.439a-c&largeImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC11139.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&hei=700&cvt=jpeg

Picture of Our Armed Forces Occupying Ryuko Island: http://oki-dev.mit.edu:8080/narravision-web/medium_view_toa.jsp?mediumImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC131924.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&wid=500&cvt=jpeg&assetId=2000.251a-c&largeImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC131924.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&hei=700&cvt=jpeg

Illustration of the Russo-Japanese War: Our Armed Forces Occupy Chongju: http://oki-dev.mit.edu:8080/narravision-web/medium_view_toa.jsp?mediumImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC11146.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&wid=500&cvt=jpeg&assetId=2000.460a-c&largeImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC11146.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&hei=700&cvt=jpeg

After the Fall of Weihaiwei the Commander of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Admiral Ding Ruchang, Surrenders: http://oki-dev.mit.edu:8080/narravision-web/medium_view_toa.jsp?mediumImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC131786.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&wid=500&cvt=jpeg&assetId=2000.123a-c&largeImage=http://72.5.117.144/fif=fpx/sc1/SC131786.fpx&obj=iip,1.0&hei=700&cvt=jpeg

Links to Additional Online Resources (for Teacher Background)

“Throwing Off Asia I”: http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_01/index.html

“Throwing off Asia II”: http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_02/index.html

“Throwing off Asia III”: http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_03/index.html