

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 3: Pearl Harbor: American and Japanese Perspectives

Viewing:

December 7th, 1942-'43, Ford. (35-minute version or 82-minute version)

War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya, 1942 Kajiyo Yamamoto

Tora Tora Tora, 1970 (U.S. and Japan co-production) Fleisher and Matsuda

Grand Admiral Yamamoto, 1987, A and E Biography

Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance, 1991, Bird, Crowley, and Johnson.

Recommended Readings:

1. Prange, Goldstein, and Dillon. *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1981.

2. Conroy and Wray, eds. *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1990. (for both American and Japanese points of view).

3. Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The Reluctant Admiral, Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha, 1979, 1990.

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college, 5 to 10 class periods.

Central idea:

In an article "Understanding Japan - U.S. Relations 1945-1995" (Japan Quarterly, July-Sept. 1995) Professor Akira Iriye of Harvard wrote that it was time to move beyond the nationalistic framework of history and to write and teach a binational and international history of the war. He suggested that Japanese and American teachers should approach controversial subjects such as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the atomic bombings in ways that open up questions of fact and interpretation.

In many history textbooks and courses, Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima are reduced simply to the events which opened and closed the war between the United States and Japan. Missing is the complexity of causes and legacies, the important lessons of history. This unit focusing on the Pearl Harbor attack and the next unit dealing with the Japanese experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki attempt to examine those causes and legacies and to understand the events in the larger context of history.

An effective way of teaching about the complexity of the Pearl Harbor attack and the opening of the Pacific War from the points of view of both the United States and Japan is to study the feature film *Tora Tora Tora*. The 1970 film, a joint U.S. -- Japan production offering both a good story and reasonably well-grounded scholarship, represents a possible model of how the historical event, its causes and legacies, can be studied.

The main objectives of the extended unit are to have students:

1. consider the attack on Pearl Harbor and the opening of the Pacific War from both American and Japanese points of view;
2. understand that the causes of the war involve the history of U.S.-Japan relations from 1853-1941, a history of mutual misperception and misunderstanding of each other's motives, intentions, policies, and power;
3. see Pearl Harbor as the event which thrusts the United States into a position of dominance as a Pacific power with continuing ramifications and responsibilities in the region.

Teaching:

This unit is based on my longer, more detailed curriculum unit (available from [The Five College Center for East Asian Studies](#) at Smith College and from [MARJIS](#) at College Park, the University of Maryland). The full unit showing the entire *Tora Tora Tora* (143 minutes) plus excerpts from December 7th and other suggested films includes class activities on American and Japanese expansion in the Pacific region 1846-1941, the events leading to the attack at Pearl Harbor, an examination of the U.S. Pearl Harbor war narrative and propaganda, the causes of the war as interpreted by scholars from the U.S. and Japan fifty years later, and an imaginary war-crimes trial for Admiral Yamamoto. This all may involve as many as ten or more classes or as few as five. However, the curriculum package as well as the individual films are designed as a resource for film clips and exercises which may be used in established courses.

December 7th and the American Pearl Harbor war narrative: John Ford's 1942-'43 "documentary" on Pearl Harbor (either the 1943 35-minute censored edition or the original 82-minute version released in 1991) reflected and shaped the U.S. war time narrative of the Japanese "unprovoked," "sneak" attack. It is also the primary source for images for all Pearl Harbor documentaries and news-history footage since. Either version can be studied for wartime propaganda techniques. Compared and contrasted, they can be used to examine the issue of why the government and military felt the need to withhold and edit the original version before releasing it to the public. Here, however, the suggestion is to use a 14-16 minute excerpt available in both. Since there were only a few grainy shots of film footage of the actual attack, Ford was forced to recreate the entire attack.

The recommended clip begins with the Japanese planes in the air preparing to attack while peace negotiations are taking place in Washington. It continues to the end of the attack and mention of F.D.R.'s "infamy" speech (in the 35 minute version, minutes 6-20; in the 82 minute version, minutes 44-60). Asking students to identify which scenes have been recreated and which are original, helps them realize that there is little actual historic footage and that this supposed "documentary" is a work of propaganda emphasizing the treachery of the infamous "sneak attack." The irony is that almost twenty years later, the more objective American-Japanese coproduction *Tora Tora Tora* still used the Ford film as the basis for many of its attack scenes. The result is an example of historical recreation shaping the public's memory and records of the event.

War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya, 1942 (Japanese production) Kajiro Yamamoto: This is the Japanese counterpart of Ford's recreation of the Pearl Harbor attack, shot in a studio with large scale sets and crane lift cameras. I mention this film even though it may not be available in this country and certainly not with subtitles. However, images and scenes from it have appeared in many U.S. Pearl Harbor documentaries since the end of the war. One of the earliest, "The Pacific Boils Over" from the *Victory at Sea* series interweaves both the American and Japanese versions. The difference can usually be determined from the point of view of the shot. Most of the American shots are from the ground on the receiving end while the Japanese shots are from above delivering

bombs and observing explosions. However, another important difference is worth noting. The Japanese film does not create and vilify an enemy. More important are the scenes on the training of the seamen and airmen. They are not super warriors but rather ordinary young men from farms and families doing their duty joyfully. The attack on Pearl Harbor comes 1 hour and 26 minutes into the film and lasts only 8 minutes. This is followed by the air attack on and sinking of the two British battleships, the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales* off Malaya. Thus, the Pearl Harbor attack and battle victory are placed in the larger context of the opening of the Pacific War. Like Ford's December 7th, this film also provides *Tora Tora Tora* with basic images and scenes.

Tora Tora Tora is the centerpiece of this unit. In contrast with most American war films produced during and immediately after the war, it provides no enemy and no propagandizing of wartime values and beliefs. Part of the effectiveness of the film is its placing the student as a binational and omniscient observer to history, knowing what the tragic outcome will be and watching the participants move toward the inevitable and climactic clash.

The film interweaves two stories. In the Japanese strand Admiral Yamamoto, "The Reluctant Admiral," hopes to avoid the war yet is forced by Japanese politics and army advances into China and Southeastern Asia to plan and execute the Pearl Harbor strike, knowing that Japan cannot win a prolonged war with the United States. The second strand has the American government officials in Washington negotiating skeptically with the Japanese to avoid war, while the military prepares for what appears to be an inevitable war. Finally the two strands meet in the powerful 40-minute recreation of the Pearl Harbor attack.

One approach is to divide the class into two groups - one to analyze the American scenes and story; the other, the Japanese narrative. The students in each group should study the film and assigned readings to determine the apparent causes of the war from their nation's point of view. The goal is to have them experience the attack from both Japanese and American viewpoints, seeing it as the basis of each nation's emotional and patriotic response. If the students are able to deal with the style and form of the film, they can analyze the distinct national and cultural narratives to understand each director's interpretation of the historical event and its meaning for the present. Other activities and lessons are described in my longer *Tora Tora Tora* unit.

Grand Admiral Yamamoto: This A and E Biography is discussed in the Imperial Japan section. If time is available, the biography complements the study of Yamamoto in *Tora Tora Tora*. Whereas the overall view of the 52-minute biography is that of a complex, at times, compassionate leader who went to war against the United States reluctantly, the introduction includes a questionable remark that he had sworn to destroy America. Otherwise, this BBC-Time, Life production is well handled creating a portrait of a man who, caught in the classic Japanese conflict between "girl and ninjo", would question but choose duty to his nation and Emperor. For the students the key question is: Why did Admiral Yamamoto undertake a war he felt that Japan could not, in the long run, win?

Pearl Harbor: Surprise and Remembrance: Of all the war documentaries, including those developed for the fiftieth anniversary this, I find, is the most penetrating, balanced, and insightful as to the complexity of the causes and legacies of the historical event. However, at 1 hour 28 minutes its comprehensiveness is its limitation; the teacher must be selective. The third section "Beyond Paradise" (minutes 18-31) deals with the causes of the war from the Japanese point of view. Teachers interested in the background of the making and censorship of Ford's *December 7th* will find the last section "Remembering Pearl Harbor" (minutes 70-83) of interest. This concluding section also examines the legacies of Pearl Harbor.



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