

Regional

SIUE prof finds Japanese culture enlightening

For some professors at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, to study cultures halfway around the world is no problem — not even when they have to learn a new language.

One such scholar is Christienne Hinz, an associate professor in the department of historical studies at SIUE. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, she received her bachelor's and doctoral degrees in East Asian international studies, Japanese and Japanese history from Ohio State University.

So how does someone from Ohio become interested in East Asia, particularly Japan and its history?

"I didn't have a big idea of what the options were at Ohio State and so I took a course in East Asian Studies when I was a sophomore and fell in love (with it). It was an accident and then I began slowly sliding downhill into higher and higher degrees of study," Hinz said.

"The first hurdle was learning Japanese, and when I discovered that learning Japanese was not as difficult as learning differential equations, I was hooked."

Japanese history has always been peppered by big events, from being forced to trade with the United States, to losing a war with Russia, to Pearl Harbor, to becoming a major economic power. It seems that our opinion of Japan keeps changing as much as Japan itself.

"The American perception of Japan and the Japanese and the Japanese culture changes depending on the immediate needs of American social and political conditions," Hinz explained. "These kind of images follow Americans' own identity issues, so it doesn't tell us very much about the Japanese at all."

Hinz is particularly interested in how the

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

Japanese see Americans.

"There is a real identity crisis that the Japanese, culturally, politically, industrially, and economically experienced with the West and that continues to some degree to operate even to this day," Hinz said. "A kind of pathological admiration for things American. It has been a real struggle for the Japanese to perceive of themselves as equal to the West and this was a very important identity issue that the Japanese developed in the 20th Century."

Another phenomenon has been the way the Japanese have at times tried to "sanitize" their history.

"The writing of history is by its nature about illusions, things you do not say, things that are forbidden to speak about and that is true wherever you go," said Hinz. "For the American understanding of the Second World War, the inclusion of certain kinds of events and the exclusion of other kinds of events is critical to the way that we have shaped that story. It's important to understand what makes that necessary for Americans to think about that specific war in a particular kind of way. That operates in Japan as well."

A case in point is how little mentioned is the fact that the U.S. government interned hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II for no other reason than their ethnicity, something they did not do with people of German or Italian descent. That is why many call the war in the Pacific a "race war," something that did not happen with the war in Europe.

The decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan is still much debated today, but in Japan it takes a different twist.

"In Japan there is very much a sense of a full mea-culpa in terms of the causes of the war, Hinz said. "In Japanese understanding of warfare, when you lose a war you accept responsibility for it — you lost the war. Japanese rage is mostly towards the Japanese government, because they felt duped, they felt lied to, they felt propagandized. All of this was true and they made a huge number of sacrifices."

She has also carefully studied the position of women in Japanese society. "The notions of getting the same jobs as men are not symbols or signals of equality in Japan," Hinz said.

She explained that there are certain jobs that have very heavy cultural baggage, some that Japanese cannot imagine women doing — such as sumo wrestling. While women are excluded from some organized sports in Japan, Hinz said that when it comes to business, the rules are completely different.

In her studies Hinz has found that women began venturing into business management in Japan in the 1990s. "You began to see more and more who had started their own businesses," Hinz said. "That certainly has empowered younger women to choose entrepreneurship rather than going into pink-collar work or other kinds of work that would be more expected of them."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



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