

Interpreting Japanese Culture and Society (2 credits)

**The Japan Center for Michigan Universities
Hikone, Shiga JAPAN
In affiliation with Michigan State University
Fall Semester 2014
Instructor: Dr. C.J Boland**

Fridays, Time TBD, unless otherwise noted in this syllabus.
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This course compliments the four-credit module 'Japanese Culture & Society'. This module will examine aspects of Japanese culture, social norms and identity, employing the critical perspectives of social anthropology, semiotics and social psychology. Documentary films and various readings will provide a cultural discourse and focus for class discussion. Students will be required to critically reflect on their ongoing experience of living in Japan and share their thoughts in class discussions and an 'Ethnographic Diary'. The ethnographic diary will constitute the primary mode of assessment for the module, although attendance and active participation in class discussions will also be factored in.

Instruction objectives include:

1. To cultivate a multifaceted analytical perspective towards the study of Japanese Culture and Society
2. To extend cultural knowledge of Japan by engaging in critical reflection on personal experiences.
3. To gain skills in ethnographic enquiry and writing.

Course Requirements/ Assignments and Evaluations

- ◆ **Punctuality and Attendance:** Students are required to attend all lecture meetings, field observations, and other scheduled events programmed for this course. Excessive tardiness to class and class activities may result in the dismissal of a student from a program.
- ◆ **Absence Policy:** Your attendance is very important not only to you but also to other classmates. Due to the nature of Study Abroad, no unannounced absences will be permitted. Please refer Office of Study Abroad for further details (<http://studyabroad.msu.edu>). Your tardiness may be counted as 1/2 unexcused absence. Excessive unexcused absences may result in dismissal from the course.
- ◆ **Preparation and Participation:** This class will require some background reading and review of the readings covered in classes. This background reading is required and necessary to facilitate your meaningful participation in class discussions. Students are also expected to participate fully in open discussions about their experiences of living and studying in Japan. Participation and a willingness to engage in discussion are the key element to your success in this course. Class discussion and interactivity with the class as a whole is critical to developing

your awareness of the content covered. Students that are either not prepared or reticent to participate will be asked to leave the class and will be marked as absent. Participation constitutes 20% of your grade.

Ethnographic Diary: Students are required to maintain a personal journal that records significant culture experiences over the course of the module. Instruction will be provided on how to write in the style of an ethnographic diary. It is imperative that the student keeps ‘field notes’ about their experiences and writes them up regularly. The tutor will ask to see examples of the diary work throughout the course. Students are given complete academic freedom in all other aspects of the assignment. Guidance on word length and formatting will be given in class, however the diary should be grammatically correct.

Required & Recommended Reading

All required and recommended readings will be provided as either class handouts or links to documents / articles online. For certain articles and documents online, Students will be expected to print off a copy and bring it to class.

Academic Honesty and Classroom Etiquette

Students should always value academic honesty in their own work. In addition to other things, plagiarism is considered among the most blatant forms of academic dishonesty. This means that a student will not submit any written work that has been copied from the internet or any other form of published media. Additionally a student will not submit any work that has been written by another person without citing that source and will never submit another’s work as his/her own. This would also include unacknowledged paraphrasing. As specified by university policy, such academic dishonesty may result in a penalty grade for the course. For more information on academic dishonesty policy please refer to the Ombudsman webpage: <https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/honestylinks.html>

Grading Criteria and Grading Scale

You will be graded on three elements: a) attendance, b) participation, c) Ethnographic Diary.

Attendance	Participation	Diary
10%	30%	60%

NOTE 1: Attendance makes up to 10 % of the whole course grade. However, if a student misses three (3) classes without permission or medical excuse, the student maybe terminated from the course.

NOTE 2: Participation means “active” participation. Simply being there is not the same as participating. Points for participation will be awarded only when students are actively engaging in classroom activities, discussion, field exploration, and other learning activities for this course.

Grade Breakdown

Conversion Table between 4.0 Scale and Points

4.0	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.0	1.5	1.0	0.0
point							
90-100	85-89	80-84	75-79	70-74	65-69	60-64	59 & below

Class Schedule and Assignments

Please note that the student is expected to have read and studied the assigned reading and prepared for discussions prior to each class. Be sure to bring to class any materials under discussion.

Class Sessions

No.	Dates	Content
1	05.09.14	<p>Introduction <i>Note: This introductory session may be 3 hours. All other classes are two hours.</i></p> <p><u>Pt. 1 Module Overview</u> - Two components to class sessions 1. Discussion of personal impressions and experiences of Japan 2. Discussion of contemporary issues (psychological, societal, cultural, political etc.)</p> <p><u>Pt. 2 Lecture & Discussion: The Study of 'Exotic' Culture</u> - 'Etic' and 'emic' perspectives / Approaches to cultural analysis - Introduction to Social Anthropology and Ethnography - 'Reading' contemporary culture: media, music, films and books. - The Social Phenomenological Viewpoint - Introduction to Semiotics: Roland Barthes <i>'The Empire of Signs'</i>.</p> <p><u>Pt. 3 Discussion of Cultural Expectations vs. Experiences (themes)</u> - Critical self-reflection - cultivating awareness of the 'lens of cultural knowledge' or seeing things a certain way. - Examining our expectations of Japan and the Japanese. - Going 'beneath the veneer' of Japanese culture.</p> <p><u>H/W (Preparatory Readings)</u> From Barthes' <i>Empire of Signs</i>. - 'Faraway' - 'The Unknown Language' - 'Without Words'</p>
2	12.09.14	<p>Part 1. Ethnographic Writing: Methodology and Practice</p> <p>- Content and instruction to support the module assignment</p>

No.	Dates	Content
		<p>Part 2. Class Discussion: <i>Occidental – Oriental, Exposing Myths</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of readings from Barthes' <i>Empire of Signs</i>. 'Faraway' 'The Unknown Language' 'Without Words' <p><u>Class Discussion (themes):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deconstructing social myths & stereotypes. - Western preconceptions of Japan and the Japanese. - The Japanese view of foreigners, ethnicity, class and social hierarchy. <p><u>H/W:</u> Further Readings on Ethnographic writing and method.</p>
3	19.09.14	<p>Interpreting Signs & Symbols in Culture</p> <p><u>Documentary screening:</u> 'The Sumo Tokoyama'</p> <p><u>Class Discussion (themes):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the film and its themes - Discussion of signs and symbolism within traditional Japanese culture.
4	26.09.14	<p>Japanophilia, Otaku & Cultural Participation</p> <p><u>Documentary Screening:</u> 'Three Big Men'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The film charts the experiences of three amateur British Sumo wrestlers who aspire to represent their country at a tournament in Japan. <p><u>Lecture & Class Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the film and its themes. - Ontological myths that surround 'being' a Japanophile or Otaku. - The participant-observer in culture.
	03.10.14	BREAK
5	10.10.14	<p>Beneath the Veneer</p> <p><u>Documentary Screening:</u> 'Japan: A Story of Love and Hate'</p> <p><u>Class Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the film and discussion of its social themes.
6	17.10.14	<p>'No News is Good News': Lensing the Japanese Media</p>

No.	Dates	Content
		<u>Class discussion (themes):</u> Casting a critical (western) eye on Japanese mass media, particularly television journalism and trends within light entertainment (e.g. 'talents' and variety shows).
7	24.10.14	The Japanese Political Landscape: Loudhailers & Revolving Doors <u>Documentary Screening:</u> 'The Kawasaki Candidate' <u>Class Discussion (themes):</u> - Analysis of the film. - <i>Patterns in Japanese Politics</i> : The 'revolving door' metaphor, fracture vs. coalition, the persistence of dynasties, reactionary politics, leadership and accountability (a lack thereof), public disengagement. - 3.11: Natural disaster and political failure. - Village politics and religion.
8	31.10.14	Dualism and the Japanese Mind: Honne & Tatamae <u>Class Discussion (themes):</u> - The social psychology of 'honne' (true feeling) and 'tatamae' (social façade). - Social conformity and the group. - Image and Individualism. - The Family Unit. - Corporate Identity.
	07.11.14	BREAK <u>Preparatory Readings:</u> Barthes' <i>Empire of Signs</i> . - 'Water and Flake' - 'Chopsticks'
9	14.11.14	Food Culture (Pt.1) <u>Documentary Screening:</u> 'Fish: A Japanese Obsession' Pt.1 Readings from Barthes' <i>Empire of Signs</i> . - 'Water and Flake' - 'Chopsticks' Class Discussion.
10	21.11.14	Food Culture (Pt.2) <u>Documentary Screening:</u>

No.	Dates	Content
		<p>'Fish A Japanese Obsession' Pt.2</p> <p>Readings from Barthes' <i>Empire of Signs</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Food Decentered' - 'Interstice' <p>Class Discussion.</p>
11	28.11.14	<p>Squaring the Circle</p> <p><u>Documentary Screening:</u> 'Whale Hunter's</p> <p><u>Class Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the film and its themes - Japan's position, image and influence across the Asia-Pacific region. - Regional insecurities, nationalism and social outlook in post '3.11' Japan.
12	05.12.14	Course Review Session
	12.12.14	Term Closing Ceremony.