

Japanese culture and society:
Contemporary social issues and identities

Japan Center for Michigan Universities
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Course Description

This course examines several pressing issues in contemporary Japanese society with focus on changing economic environment, social condition and identities. Although Japan is commonly known as peaceful and well-ordered country, underneath this image is the economic instability after the collapse of bubble economy and cultural norm that pushes people to suicide, *karoshi* (death from overwork) and *hikikomori* (social withdrawal). In addition, the disastrous earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in 2011 revealed the huge risk underlying the convenient lives in Japan. By investigating these challenges, the lecture encourages students to critically assess both bright and dark sides of contemporary Japanese society and culture. Each lecture will have a group discussion in which students are expected to compare and contrast their own experience with the reality of Japanese society.

Objectives

- To understand the social issues of contemporary Japan and analyse their cultural and social backgrounds.
- To critically discuss the bright and dark sides of Japanese society by comparing and contrasting them with your own society.
- To work collaboratively in a team and give constructive feedback to your peers.

Evaluation methods

1) Group presentation (30%)

Analyse one of the social issues in contemporary Japan and provide suggestions for improvement.

2) Papers (40%)

Students are required to write two papers.

3) Attendance and participation (30%)

Participation means good preparation for class, and active engagement in group discussions and activities.

	Date	Contents
1		Introduction Your image of Japan / Is Japan peaceful?—definition of peace and violence / Course objectives
2		Changing social conditions in Post-war Japan Post-war reconstruction and economic miracle / collapse of the bubble economy and recession / Great East Japan earthquake
3		Identity crisis in consumer society 'Crystal' tribes and 'transparent' self / Aum incident / suicide, prostitution and juvenile murder / violence in popular culture
4		Labour and employment Understanding 'precariat'—freeter, working poor and net café refugee / <i>karoshi</i> / <i>hikikomori</i>
5		Friendship, love and family 'Herbivore men' and <i>otaku</i> culture / 'friendship-hell' and 'reading the atmosphere' (<i>kuuki wo yomu</i>) / shrinking population
6		'Monocultural' Japan and its outside Who are the Japanese? / minorities and discrimination / immigration policy / self-representation of Japan
7		Democracy in Japan Japanese political system / a constitutional monarchy / elections and voter turnout / female and youth representation
PAPER ONE DUE		
8		Nature and disaster Geography and natural disasters / 3.11 Earthquake and tsunami / Fukushima nuclear disaster / recovery and change [You will be asked to provide your possible presentation topics]

9		War and peace Japanese imperialism and the Pacific war / atomic bombings / US bases in Japan / current international relations
10		Fieldtrip (to be arranged) Participatory observation to uncover a distinctive 'Japaneseness'
11		Discussion— What is 'Japaneseness'? Reflection on fieldtrip
12		The role of Japan in the global community How can Japan contribute to the global society with its cultural, political, economic or technological capabilities? [You will be given time to prepare for your group presentation]
13		The future of Japan How might Japan overcome pressing social issues such as shrinking population and natural disasters? [You will be given time to prepare for your group presentation]
14		Preparation for your presentation
15		Group presentation / PAPER TWO DUE

Fieldtrip: The location will be discussed during the course with the students.

Required reading: Students will be supplied a course pack containing all the reading assignments.