

**Japanese society and culture:**  
**Contemporary social issues and identities**

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**Course Description**

This course examines several pressing issues in contemporary Japanese society with a focus on the changing economic environment, social condition and identities. Although Japan is commonly known as a peaceful and well-ordered country, underneath this image is the economic instability after the collapse of the 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 the 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 experiences with the reality of Japanese society. In the latter half of the course, students are divided into small groups and asked to analyze one of the social issues in contemporary Japan. A group presentation will be held at the end of the course.

**Objectives**

- To understand the social issues of contemporary Japan and their cultural backgrounds.
- To critically analyze the pressing issues in contemporary Japan by comparing them with other cultures or historical periods.
- To work collaboratively in a team and give constructive feedback to your peers.

**Evaluation**

1) Group presentation (30%)

Analyze 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.

## Schedule

Week	Date	Contents
1	Sep 11	<b>Introduction</b> Course orientation / Your image of Japan
		Quiz: Japanese buzz words
2	Sep 25	<b>Lecture: Changing social conditions and youth culture</b> Economic growth and recession / activism, nihilism and deviance
		Group discussion
3	Oct 2	<b>Lecture: Labor and employment</b> Freeter and working poor / <i>Karoshi</i> / <i>Hikikomori</i>
		Group discussion
4	Oct 9	<b>Lecture: Interpersonal relations</b> Friendship in schools / 'Herbivore men' / Idols, characters & robots
		Group discussion
5	Oct 16	<b>Lecture: Gender inequality</b> Work and family / Feminism in Japan / Sexual minorities
		Group discussion
6	Oct 23	<b>Lecture: Aging society</b> Shrinking population / Welfare system / Regional revitalization
		Group discussion
7	TBD	<b>Field trip</b> *This could move to November. *It will be either Saturday or Sunday.
8	Oct 23	<b>Lecture: Ethnic minorities</b> Refugees and migrant workers / Racial discrimination / <i>Hafu</i>
		Group discussion
9	Nov 6	<b>Lecture: Environment and disasters</b> Geography and natural disasters / Nuclear disaster / Energy policy
		<b>Group research project</b>
10	Nov 13	<b>Group research project</b>
	Nov 13	<b>Paper One Due</b>

11	Nov 20	<b>Group research project</b>
12	Nov 27	<b>Group research project</b>
13	Dec 4	<b>Group research project</b>
14	<b>Dec 11</b>	<b>Group Presentation / Paper Two Due</b>

**Required reading:** Reading materials on the subject will be provided by the instructor a week before the lecture.

**Recommended reading:**

Allison, A. (2013) *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press.

Iida, Y. (2002) *Rethinking identity in modern Japan: Nationalism as aesthetics*.  
Routledge.

Yoda, T. and Harootunian, H. [eds.] (2006) *Japan after Japan: Social and cultural life from the recessionary 1990s to the present*. Duke University Press.