

**Japanese Society and Culture:**  
**Contemporary Social Issues and Identities**

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**Course Description**

This course explores several pressing issues in contemporary Japanese society, with a particular focus on the evolving economic landscape, social conditions, and shifting identities. While Japan is often perceived as a peaceful and well-ordered nation, this image masks underlying cultural norms that contribute to serious social problems such as *karoshi* (death from overwork) and *hikikomori* (social withdrawal).

Once a global economic powerhouse, Japan has faced prolonged economic stagnation and a growing sense of insecurity since the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s. Today, the country stands at a crossroads, grappling with unprecedented challenges including a declining population and the looming threat of major earthquakes. These factors contribute to a growing uncertainty about Japan's future, raising critical questions about how both individuals and society as a whole will respond.

Through an examination of these complex issues, the course invites students to critically analyze both the bright and dark sides of modern Japanese society and culture, and to consider potential pathways forward. Each session includes group discussions where students are encouraged to compare and contrast their own cultural experiences with the realities of life in Japan.

In the second half of the course, students will work in small groups to investigate a specific social issue in contemporary Japan. The course ends with group presentations, where students share their findings and offer perspectives on Japan's future.

**Objectives**

- To develop a critical understanding of key social issues in contemporary Japan, including their economic, cultural, and historical contexts.
- To analyze the challenges Japan faces by comparing them with students' own cultural experiences and global perspectives.
- To foster collaborative skills through group discussions, research, and presentations on current social issues.
- To enhance the ability to provide and receive constructive feedback in an academic setting.

## 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.

Paper 1 Due: Nov 19, 2025

Paper 2 Due: Dec 10, 2025

### 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 17	<b>Introduction</b> Course orientation / Your image of Japan
		Quiz: Japanese buzz words
2	Sep 24	<b>Lecture: Changing social conditions and youth culture</b> Economic growth and recession / activism, nihilism and deviance
		Group discussion
3	Oct 1	<b>Lecture: Labor and employment</b> Freeter and working poor / New graduate recruitment / <i>Karoshi</i>
		Group discussion
4	Oct 8	<b>Lecture: Identity and interpersonal relationship</b> "Shame culture" "Other-directed culture"? / <i>Hikikomori</i>
		Group discussion
5	Oct 15	<b>Lecture: Gender inequality</b> Gender role / Women in economy and politics
		Group discussion
6	Oct 22	<b>Lecture: Aging society</b> Shrinking population / Welfare system / Regional revitalization
		Group discussion

7	Oct 29	<b>Lecture: Ethnic minorities</b> Homogeneous Japan? / Refugees and immigrants / <i>Hafu</i> Group discussion
8	Nov 5	<b>Lecture: Environment and disasters</b> Natural disasters / 2011 Nuclear disaster / Energy policy Group discussion
9	TBD (Sat or Sun)	<b>Fieldtrip</b>
10	Nov 12	<b>Group research project</b>
11	Nov 19	<b>Group research project</b> <b>Paper One Due</b>
12	Nov 26	<b>Group research project</b>
13	Dec 3	<b>Group research project</b>
14	<b>Dec 10</b>	<b>Group Presentation</b> <b>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.