

## ISS 325: SAMURAI: THE REALITY AND THE MYTH (4 cr.)

Japan Center for Michigan Universities

Spring 2026

Professor: Elizabeth D. Lublin

Mtg. times: TBD

Mtg. room: TBD

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Office hrs.: TBD

Office location: TBD

**Course description:** Ask someone in Times Square, at the base of the Eiffel Tower, or virtually anywhere else around the world to identify a figure in Japanese history, and undoubtedly samurai will top the list of replies. While the success of Hulu's series *Shogun* and a plethora of appearances by samurai in feature films, anime, manga, and video games have contributed to such awareness today, samurai have long been part of popular perceptions, not to mention misperceptions, of Japan. This course will examine this iconic figure through two lenses. The first will focus on the reality of samurai lives from their beginnings in the Heian period until their dissolution as a distinct status group in the Meiji period. The second will consider not only how they have been presented and what values and meanings have been ascribed to them, but also how and why those depictions have changed over time.

**Course goals:** This course seeks to help students hone their skills at:

- Identifying established disciplinary ways of knowing within the social sciences and integrating these perspectives and methods around complex social issues.
- Expanding their personal perspectives around shared and complex problems to better understand and include the diverse perspectives of others—particularly in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion from underrepresented and/or marginalized voices.
- Identifying ways to use social scientific thinking to positively affect their own lives, their local and global communities, other disciplines, and/or their career fields.

**Course materials:** I have listed your reading assignments below under the “schedule of meetings.” These include scholarly articles and chapters, short stories, a memoir, and a manga. I expect you to complete these before each session and to come prepared to discuss them. Without that preparation and the knowledge and context that come from doing the work, you hinder your ability to contribute in meaningful ways, limit what you get out of conversations, and impact your participation grade. You will be able to access most of these readings online as PDFs. In addition, you will read the following three books:

Wert, Michael. *Samurai: A Concise History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Katsu, Kokichi. *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai*. Translated by Teruko Craig. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1991.

Watsuki, Nobuhiro. *Rurouni Kenshin: Volume 1*. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2017.

**Graded work – participation (and attendance):** Not to sound like a broken record, but active and thoughtful engagement with this course's content, your classmates, and me is essential to your success in this class. Why and what does that mean? This class will operate much like a seminar, with a focus on discussion interspersed with mini-lectures and audiovisual presentations. So, you should not expect to act like a wallflower. Rather, participation entails contributing regularly to the

conversation with comments, questions, interpretations, opinions, and personal observations from your time exploring Japan outside of JCMU. To encourage/reward such, I have allocated 20% of your final grade to participation. As the above comment about being a wallflower should have made clear, attendance is not the same thing as participation. Note as well that anyone who misses more than three classes will receive zero points for participation unless the reasons are particularly extenuating.

**Graded work – short essays:** For this course you will submit two short essays on assigned books. These papers are designed to improve your ability to analyze sources critically, write coherently, and make arguments convincingly. Each essay is due at the start of class on the designated day. Both papers should be typed, double spaced, and in a font equivalent to 12 Times New Roman. They should be written in the third person [so, no “I,” “my,” or “me”]. Both should also have a clear introduction and conclusion with the thesis highlighted in the former and with the body paragraphs including specific references to the related readings as evidence. If those references are quotations, page citations need to be provided in parentheses right after. Any paper without proper citations, based on AI, or otherwise plagiarized will receive a zero for the assignment. See below for descriptions of these two essays.

*Analysis of Musui's Story:* This memoir by Katsu Kokichi represents one of the few texts available in English detailing the life of a samurai and shows a sharp divergence from the ideal described in the Aoki/Dardess article and the selection from *Chūshingura* that you will read for Feb. 24 and March 5 respectively. In 2-½ to 3 pages, describe how with a focus on Katsu's actions, relations with elders and social superiors, values, and the things that were important to him. Also, consider how Katsu's purpose in writing and his intended audience might have shaped his characterization of himself. **Due March 10**

*Commentary on Rurouni Kenshin:* Originally serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, *Rurouni Kenshin* by Watsuki Nobuhiro ranks in the top 40 of best-selling manga and has been adapted into animated TV series, live-action films, and video games. In 1-½ to 2 pages, comment on how the first book characterizes samurai following the Meiji Restoration and offer an opinion, in the third person, about how accurately it does so based on your readings for March 12. **Due March 31**

**Graded work – thoughts on field trips:** During the semester, the class will take two field trips, and you will submit 1 to 2-page write-ups on each outing. Unlike the short essays, you should use the first person in these. Like the short essays, though, the reflections should be typed, double-spaced, and in a font equivalent to 12 Times New Roman. They should also be well organized, free of grammatical mistakes, and submitted by the beginning of class on the day due.

*Hikone field trip:* In connection with our field trip in Hikone, you will read several short articles about the merging of historical sites with pop culture to promote tourism. In this paper, describe the image that you think Hikone presents of itself through the places visited and comment on how and how effectively that image comes across. **Due Feb. 10**

*Kyoto field trip:* Nijō-jō served as the residence of the shogun when in Kyoto for most of the Edo period, and its structures and layout reflected a desire to assert shogunal power over the imperial palace, located nearby. Based on our tour, what about the castle and its surroundings conveyed that

position? As part of your commentary, also consider how Nijō-jō compares to Hikone-jō, which was also a showcase of authority but by a daimyo rather than a shogun. **Due April 7**

**Graded work – final reflection paper:** During our first day of class, I will give you 15 minutes to write down your impressions of samurai. I will return these jottings to you in early April to use as a jumping off point for your final essay. That will be a 4 to 5-page reflection paper in which you discuss how your understanding of samurai has changed since the start of the term. To rephrase as a question, what do you consider the most important aspects of samurai in history and myth that you learned from this class? While the word “reflection” suggests a personal statement, use only the third person. Also, you should cite at least five readings from the syllabus to help substantiate your comments. To stress, this is not a research paper, and you should use only materials assigned for the class. For citations, in lieu of footnotes or endnotes, simply put the last name(s) of the author(s) cited and the page number(s) in parentheses at the end of the sentence or, if the source is a film, the film title. [ex., “...” (Wert, 22) or (*Harakiri*)] The instructions about an introduction, conclusion, thesis, etc., in the write-up about the short essays above apply. Before you submit this final, be sure to attach that write-up from the first day. **Due April 16**

Grading policy:	% of final grade:
Participation	20%
Analysis of <i>Musui's Story</i>	20%
Commentary on <i>Rurouni Kenshin</i>	15%
Thoughts on the field trips	25% [each worth 12.5%]
Final reflection paper	20%

**Grading scale based on MSU's GPA and point system:** 4.0 (90-100), 3.5 (85-89), 3.0 (80-84), 2.5 (75-79), 2.0 (70-74), 1.5 (65-69), 1.0 (60-64), 0.0 (59 or less)

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### Schedule of Meetings

[I may adjust this schedule if necessary.]

#### Week 1:

Jan.13 (T)     *Ikuzo!: Let's Go [i.e., Get Started]*  
Viewing in class: *Ancient Mysteries: Samurai Warriors of Feudal Japan*  
[1997, 45 mins.]

Jan. 15 (Th)     Samurai Origins and Their Rise to Power

#### Readings:

- Wert, *Samurai*, pp. 1-32
- Friday, “Once and Future Warriors: The Samurai in Japanese History,” pp. 31-38

#### Week 2:

Jan. 20 (T)     The Gempei War  
Viewing in class: *Cosmos* episode with Carl Sagan on Heikegani [9 mins.]

Readings:

- Butler, “The Heike Monogatari and the Japanese Warrior Ethic,” pp. 93-108
- “*The Tales of the Heike (Heike monogatari, Mid-Thirteenth Century)*,” pp. 345-382

Jan. 22 (Th) The Kamakura Shogunate: Japan’s First Warrior Government

Readings:

- Segal, “Kamakura and the Challenges of Governance,” pp. 203-212
- Kondo, “1247 as a Turning Point for the Kamakura Bakufu,” pp. 25-33
- de Bary, ed., “The Jōei Code,” pp. 415-417 [hand out in class]

**Week 3:**

Jan. 27 (T) Warrior Rule and Life in the Medieval Period: An Overview

Reading: Wert, *Samurai*, pp. 33-63

Jan. 29 (Th) The Muromachi Bakufu and the Relocation of Warrior Rule to Kyoto

Readings:

- Goble, “Go-Daigō, Takauji, and the Muromachi Shogunate,” pp. 213-223
- Eason, “Warriors, Warlords, and Domains,” pp. 233-243
- de Bary, ed., “The Kenmu Code, pp. 418-420; “The Yūki House Code,” pp. 423-425 [hand out in class]

**Week 4:**

Feb. 3 (T) Castles in Warfare, Administration, and History-Related Tourism

Readings:

- Takahashi and Stavros, “Castles in Kyoto at the Close of the Age of Warring States: The Urban Fortresses of the Ashikaga Shoguns Yoshiteru and Yoshiaki,” pp. 41-66
- Fujiki and Nakai, “Castles and castle towns in Japanese tourism,” pp. 61-65
- Kaneko, “An Analysis of Japan’s Popular Cultural Tourism: Constructing Japan’s Self-Image as a Provider of ‘Unique’ Culture,” pp. 1-6

Feb. 5 (Th) A Classic Film on the Sengoku Period: Part I  
Viewing in class: *Kagemusha* [1980, 180 mins.]

Feb. 7 (Sat) Hikone Field Trip

Sites to visit:

- Yume Kyōbashi Castle Road [to enjoy the Edo-period architecture]

- Hikone-jō [to explore the administrative headquarters of the Ii clan]
- Hikone-jō Hakubutsukan [to see how the Hikone daimyo lived]
- Hikone-shi Kaikoku Kinenkan [to learn more about the castle's history]
- Sengoku Zakura [to peruse the sengoku-period items and samurai goods on sale]

**Week 5:**

Feb. 10 (T) A Classic Film on the Sengoku Period: Part II  
Viewing in class: the rest of *Kagemusha*

Reading: Hattori, "Utilizing Comical Mascots (Yuru-kyara) to Create City Authenticity?" pp. 226-242  
**Due:** Thoughts on the Hikone field trip

Feb. 12 (Th) Ninja: Warriors Under Another Name

Readings:

- Souyri, "Autonomy and War in the Sixteenth-Century Iga Region and the Birth of the Ninja Phenomenon," pp. 110-123
- Kamm, "The Ninja in Tourism and Larp," pp. 146-170

**Week 6:**

Feb. 17 (T) Samurai and the Early Modern World: An Overview

Readings:

- Wert, *Samurai*, pp. 64-96
- Lu, ed., "Oath of Fealty, 1611," pp. 205; "Laws of Military Households (Buke Shohatto), 1615," pp. 206-208; "Amendments of Kanei to Buke Shohatto, 1635," pp. 208 [to hand out in class]

Feb. 19 (Th) A Challenge to the Samurai Establishment  
Viewing in class: *Harakiri* [1962, 132 mins.]

**Week 7:**

Feb. 24 (T) Education and the Construction of a Samurai Ideal During the Edo Period  
Viewing in class: the rest of *Harakiri*

Readings:

- Aoki and Dardess, "The Popularization of Samurai Values: A Sermon by Hosoi Heishu," pp. 393-413
- Tocco, "Norms and Texts for Women's Education in Tokugawa Japan," pp. 193-218

Feb. 26 (Th) Women of the Warrior Class

Readings:

- Roberts, “Women’s Roles in Men’s Narratives of Samurai Life,” pp. 21-39
- Roberts, “Governing the Samurai Family in the Late Edo Period,” pp. 149-173

### **Week 8:**

Mar. 3 (T) Samurai in Early Pop Culture

#### Readings:

- Gundry, “Samurai Lovers, ‘Samurai Beasts’: Warriors and Commoners in Ihara Saikaku’s *Way of the Warriors Tales*,” pp. 151-168
- Callahan, “Tales of Samurai Honor: Saikaku’s *Buke Giri Monogatari*,” pp. 1-20

Mar. 5 (Th) The Akō Vendetta and the 47 Rōnin

Viewing in class: clips of *Kanadehon* as presented in kabuki and film

#### Readings:

- Daliot-Bul, “The Legacy of *Chūshingura*: Cinematic Adaptations and Myth-Making in Japan,” pp. 339-358
- Shirane, ed., “Takeda, et al., *Chūshingura*,” pp. 179-196

### **Week 9:**

Mar. 10 (T) The Reality of Samurai Life During the Late Tokugawa Period

Reading: Katsu, *Musui’s Story*

**Due:** Analysis of *Musui’s Story*

Mar. 12 (Th) The Meiji Restoration and Its Impact on Samurai

#### Readings:

- Wert, *Samurai*, pp. 96-109
- Harootunian, “The Progress of Japan and the Samurai Class, 1868-1882,” pp. 255-266
- Harootunian, “The Economic Rehabilitation of the Samurai in the Early Meiji Period,” pp. 433-444

### **Week 10:**

Mar. 17 (T) The Real Last Samurai [spoiler alert – not Tom Cruise]

Reading: Ravina, “The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori: Samurai ‘Seppuku’ and the Politics of Legend,” pp. 691-721

Mar. 19 (Th) The Promotion of Bushidō and the Making of a “Modern” Japanese Identity

#### Readings:

- Narroway, “Symbols of State Ideology: The Samurai in Modern Japan,” pp. 63-79
- Hurst, “Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal,” pp. 511-527
- Benesch, “Reconsidering Zen, Samurai, and the Martial Arts,” pp. 1-23

### Week 11:

Mar. 24 (T) Japan’s Conscript Military: Carrying on the Warrior “Tradition”?

Readings:

- Friday, “Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian’s Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition,” pp. 339-349
- Mishima, *The Way of the Samurai: Yukio Mishima on Hagakure in Modern Life*, pp. 3-29

Mar. 26 (Th) Yukio Mishima: A Self-Acclaimed Samurai Postwar  
Viewing in class: *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima* [1985, 55 mins.]

Reading: Mishima, *Patriotism*, pp. 93-118

### Week 12:

Mar. 31 (T) Manga as a Forum for Learning about Samurai

Reading: Watsuki, *Rurouni Kenshin*, book 1

**Due:** Commentary on *Rurouni Kenshin*

Apr. 2 (Th) Video Games, Dramas, and Booms in Samurai-Related Tourism

Readings:

- Sugawa-Shimada, “*Tōken Ranbu* and samurai swords as tourist attractions,” pp. 56-60
- Seaton, “Taiga dramas and tourism: Historical contents as sustainable tourist resources,” pp. 82-103

Apr. 4 (Sat) Kyoto Field Trip

Sites to visit:

- Samurai Ninja Museum [to take a guided tour and participate in an immersive experience as a samurai and/or ninja]
- Nijō-jō [to explore the residence of the shogun when in Kyoto and compare this castle with that of the Ii clan in Hikone]

### Week 13:

Apr. 7 (T) The *Sarariiman*: A Samurai Under Another Name ... Maybe  
Viewing in class: *Salaryman* [2021, 80 mins.]

Readings:

- Dasgupta, “Creating Corporate Warriors: The salaryman’ and masculinity in Japan,” pp. 118-134
- Schad, “Samurai and *Sarariiman*: The Discourse on Masculinity in Modern Japan,” pp. pp.199-211

**Due:** Thoughts on the Kyoto field trip

Apr. 9 (Th) The Repurposing of Hideyoshi

Reading: Furukawa, “Deconstructing the Taikō: The Problem of Hideyoshi as Postwar Business Model,” pp. 81-96

#### **Week 14:**

Apr. 14 (T) Is Baseball in Japan Based on Bushidō?: Part I

Viewing in class: *Koshien: Japan’s Field of Dreams* [2019, 93 mins.]

Readings:

- Kelly, “Samurai Baseball: The Vicissitudes of a National Sporting Style,” pp. 429-441
- Whiting, “The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate,” pp. 104-122

Apr. 16 (Th) Is Baseball in Japan Based on Bushidō?: Part II

Reading: Hayford, “Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan,” pp. 1-10

**Due:** Final reflection paper

### **A Few Additional Pointers**

**Course etiquette:** How we communicate with each other is as important as what we communicate to each other. Below are a few baseline expectations that I have for all to try to ensure that we have a productive, engaging, and meaningful semester together:

- 1) Have an open mind. This means being willing to: a) consider different opinions and perspectives on their own merits; b) learn from others; and, c) reconsider one’s own position.
- 2) Keep in mind that learning is a collaborative endeavor and the more you encourage others’ participation and promote their understanding the more enjoyable and productive the class will be for all.
- 3) Ask questions. Everyone will benefit by learning something from the answer, and the response may spark interest and a new and stimulating direction to the discussion.
- 4) Be respectful of others, their opinions, and their understanding of the material that we will cover. This means no name-calling, no teasing, no hazing, no cyberbullying, and no demeaning or discounting of what a classmate has said or written or of a classmate’s race, religion, or sexual identity.



- 5) Be constructive rather than critical, condescending, or judgmental with your comments. Put another way, be polite and professional with your communications, and do not say or write online what you would not utter in person or say to your grandparents.
- 6) Whether you agree or disagree with what a classmate has conveyed, explain why. Your reasoning will advance the conversation and enhance the learning experience for all.

**Communication with me:** Outside of our class meetings, you can connect with me via email and during office hours. Email is your best bet for a relatively quick response, as I promise to check at least once a day. Office hours will be conducted in person. If my scheduled hours do not work for you, send me an email, and we will find a convenient time for both of us.

**Special needs:** Please communicate with me any special needs that you have as soon as possible. These include a documented disability that merits accommodations for any part of this class, religious observances, medical and mental health issues, and technology failures. While I do not mean to pry, the more that you share with me about anything that impacts your ability to succeed in this class the more accommodating I can be.

**A few final requests and ground rules:**

- 1) Check your email regularly. I will use email to share out-of-class announcements, and saying that you did not see a message will not work as an excuse for missing something.
- 2) Cell phones and recording devices should be turned off at the beginning of every class unless you have an accommodation for a recording device.
- 3) Using a laptop during class for anything other than taking notes or accessing readings pulls your attention away from discussion and disturbs the learning environment for everyone. So, avoid engaging in such distracting behavior.
- 4) If you arrive late or need to leave early, please do so quietly in order not to disrupt class.
- 5) If you bring in food, plan to provide enough for everyone to have a taste.
- 6) Not to sound like a broken record, but please be in touch with me if you have any questions and/or concerns about the course. I am a resource and one who is interested and invested in seeing you do your best.