

ANTH 2327/5327 UGEC 2657
Ethnographies of Japan
Fall 2025

Instructor: Aaron HAMES, ajhames@cuhk.edu.ck, NAH 325, 3943-5550

Course time: Monday 12:30-2:15 (NAH 11)

Office hours: Friday 10-11:30 or by appointment

Updated: 2025.7.31



This course provides an introduction to contemporary Japanese society and culture. In the popular imagination, Japan occupies a complex and often contradictory position. It is home to futuristic anime and an aging population, picturesque villages and dolphin hunts, high-end cameras and the widespread use of quaint fax machines. Engaging with anthropological literature, students will learn to analyze, discuss, and write about various issues and cultural features of Japan, including youth, popular culture, self, family, labor, medicine, and health. An overarching theme will be how Japanese culture and society is changing in the transition to a highly aged society. We will examine persistent cultural patterns as well as the emergence of new forms of social life as residents of Japan grapple with smaller families, precarity, migration, and a rising population of older people. Students will learn how to apply theoretical concepts from anthropology and think critically about Japanese culture and its portrayals in the media. The ethnographic approaches and theoretical perspectives covered in this class will be applicable to other cultural contexts. Since Hong Kong, China, and Korea are following Japan's path of population aging, this course provides an opportunity to explore cultural issues that have a local and regional significance.

Required Texts

All readings are either posted on Blackboard or available as an eBook through the University Library.

Resources

The following suggestions are not required reading, but they may be helpful in getting oriented. Both are available as eBooks via the University Library:

Bestor, Theodore C. 1989. *Neighborhood Tokyo*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

White, Merry I. 2002. *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*. University of California Press.

Learning Outcomes

Knowledge

- Students will acquire a robust knowledge of contemporary Japanese society and culture. They will develop an understanding of cultural diversity within Japan and the broad shifts associated with population aging.

Analysis

- Students will gain the ability to apply anthropological theory to analyze Japanese society and culture. In conjunction, students will learn to critically evaluate scholarly and media portrayals of Japan. These critical faculties will also be relevant for understanding their own or other societies in daily life as well as for future anthropological studies.

Expression

- Students will develop their writing skills. In addition to conventional academic essays, students will learn to write ethnographically about a specific site. Through writing, students will gain skills in communication of their own observations and perspectives on cultural features. These skills can be used for further academic study as well as personal and professional life.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A	1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes. 2) The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. Observations are nuanced, the argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims. The work responds directly to the assignment prompt.

A-	<p>1) Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.</p>
B-range	<p>1) Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.</p> <p>2) The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to handling complexity, building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence. Response to the assignment prompt may not be sufficient.</p>
C-range	<p>1) Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.</p> <p>2) The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing are not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made. Understanding of course materials and key ideas have not been demonstrated.</p>
D-range	<p>1) Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.</p>
F	<p>1) Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.</p> <p>2) The work has failed to respond to the assignment prompt.</p>

Evaluation

<i>Grade Item</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Due Date</i>
Participation and Response Papers	15%	Weekly
Discussion Facilitation	15%	--
Ethnographic Sketch	10%	September 29
Reflection Paper	20%	October 20
Final Paper	40%	December 15

Participation and Response Papers (15%)

This course will consist of a combination of lecture and discussion. In order to make the course lively and informative, it is important to keep up with the readings and participate

during class. During the last portion of each class, you will be given time to write an **informal, brief** response (<200 words). In addition to your general thoughts, please include any questions or issues you would like to explore further in future classes. For tutorial sessions, you need to post a question for the class on blackboard about the session's reading(s) by 5pm the day before the session. Facilitator(s) of that tutorial may use the questions to help foster a discussion.

Tutorial Discussion Facilitation 15%

Once during the term, you will work alone or in pairs to facilitate a discussion in the tutorial of a week's reading(s). After providing a short introduction to the reading(s), your main task is to offer questions about the reading to stimulate discussion. Please keep in mind that you are free to disagree and be critical about the material in the paper. After leading the discussion, you will be responsible for a short write-up that includes: 1) your introduction to the reading (<300 words); 2) your prepared materials; and 3) a short reflection on how the discussion went (~300 words). It will be due on the Sunday after you lead discussion. A signup sheet will be sent out once enrollment settles.

Ethnographic Sketch (10%)

For this short essay (~500 words UG; ~600-900 MA), you need to visit a place in Hong Kong that is in some way connected to Japan. It can be a Japanese restaurant, department store, museum exhibit, art gallery, sweet shop, or anything space that has a link to Japan. Spend some time in the place and take notes on what your senses tell you. Use those notes and your recollections to write a short sketch that communicates what it is like to be in that space. The sketch is due 11:59 pm September 29 (Week 5).

Reflection Paper (20%)

You will write one short reflection paper of (~600 words UG; ~900 words MA). The paper will address the themes of one or more of the readings. Do not simply restate the content of the reading(s). Instead, give your own critical perspective. Anything you did not think or write yourself requires a citation – e.g. an in-text citation, footnote, or endnote. Paraphrases require citations. Use quotations marks “ ” for phrases, sentences, and passages you did not yourself write. Include a reference list/bibliography (not included in word-count). Please submit your paper to VeriGuide, and your signed declaration to Blackboard. The reflection paper is due 11:59 pm on October 20 (Week 8).

Final Paper (40%)

A final paper (1500-1800 words UG; 2100-2400 words MA) on a topic of your choosing will be due at the end of the course. This is an opportunity for you to engage in research that uses, develops, and/or critiques the concepts from class. You may go deeper in one of the topics the class addresses or pursue a different aspect of Japanese culture. You must use at least five sources. The final paper is due December 20, but you may turn in a draft for feedback no later than December 2. I will give you an initial grade as well as indicate areas for improvement. If you are satisfied, you can keep the initial assessment as your final grade for the paper. However, I highly encourage revision and resubmission of the final paper. The timeline for completion is as follows: your topic and a list of tentative sources (Week 10);

300-word abstract (Week 12); optional rough draft (December 4); and complete final paper (December 15).

Schedule

Week 1 (September 1): Introduction: What is Japanese Culture?

- 📖 Nakamura, Karen. 2013. Chapter 1 in *A Disability of the Soul*.
- 📖 **Optional:** Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretative Theory of Culture." Chapter 1 in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Pp. 3-30.

Week 2 (September 8): Foundational Works

- 📖 Nakane, C., & Roquet, P. (2013 [1967]). "Group Characteristics Based on 'Place.'" *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, 25, 170–178.
- 📖 Benedict, Ruth. 1946. "Debtor to the Ages and the World." Chapter 5 in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Pp. 98-113.
- 📖 **Optional:** Hearn, Lafcadio. 1894. "A Pilgrimage to Enoshima" in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*. Houghton, Mifflin.

Week 3 (September 15): Mistakes and Myths of "Japaneseness"

- 🗣️ Martin Fackler. "Fearing Crime, Japanese Wear the Hiding Place." *New York Times*, October 20, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/20/world/asia/20japan.html>
- 🗣️ Nicholas D. Kristof. "In Japan, Nice Guys (And Girls) Finish Together." *New York Times*, April 12, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/12/weekinreview/correspondence-uncompetitive-tokyo-japan-nice-guys-girls-finish-together.html?pagewanted=all>
- 🗣️ Ross Douthat. "Japan, the incredible shrinking country." <https://www.twincities.com/2012/04/30/ross-douthat-japan-the-incredible-shrinking-country/>, *Twin Cities*, April 30, 2012.
- 📖 **For 5327:** Koch, Gabriele. 2020. Introduction and Chapter 1 in *Healing Labor: Japanese Sex Work in the Gendered Economy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Week 4 (September 22): Traditions and Inventions

- 📖 Friday, Karl F. 1994. "Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition." *The History Teacher* 27 (3): 339–49.
- 📖 **For 5327:** Bestor, Theodore C. 1985. "Tradition and Japanese Social Organization: Institutional Development in a Tokyo Neighborhood." *Ethnology* 24 (2): 121–35.

Week 5 (September 29): Health and the Body

- 📖 Kuriyama, Shigehisa. 1997. "The Historical Origins of *Katakori*." *Japan Review* (9), 127–149.
- 📖 **For 5327:** Koch, Gabriele. 2020. Chapter 4 in *Healing Labor: Japanese Sex Work in the Gendered Economy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Ω Ethnographic Sketch Due

Week 6 (October 6): Gift-giving and Ritual: Chocolate and Accounting

- 📖 Rupp, Katherine. 2003. Chapter 5 in *Gift-Giving in Japan: Cash, Connections, Cosmologies*. Stanford University Press. (Chapter 1 is included on Blackboard for reference.)
- 📖 **For 5327:** Hendry, Joy. 1995. "The Ritual of the Revolving Towel." Chapter 10 in *Ceremony and Ritual in Japan: Religious Practices in an Industrialised Society*. Jan van Bremen and D. P. Martinez, eds. Pp. 210–226.

Week 7 (October 13): Love, Marriage, and Children

- 📖 Tanaka-Naji, Hiromi. 2009. "Stated Desire versus Actual Practice: Reviewing the Literature on Low Fertility Rates in Contemporary Japanese Society." *Japanese Studies* 29(3): 415–430.

Week 8 (October 20): Childhood and Schooling

- 📖 Allison, Anne. 1991. "Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus." *Anthropological Quarterly* 64(4): 195–208.
- 📖 **For 5327:** White, Merry I. 2002. Chapter 4 from *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*. University of California Press.

Ω Reflection Paper Due

Week 9 (October 27): Cute and Otaku

- 📖 Kinsella, S. (1995). Cuties in Japan. In L. Skov & B. Moeran (Eds.), *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan* (pp. 220–254). University of Hawaii Press.
- 📖 Galbraith, Patrick W. 2017. "Akihabara: Promoting and Policing 'Otaku' in 'Cool Japan.'" In *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Alissa Freedman, 373–85.
- 📖 **For 5327:** Miller, Laura. 2011. "Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan." *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 20(1): 18–29.

Week 10 (November 3): Labor, Precarity, and Social Class

- 📖 Cook, Emma E. 2013. "Expectations of Failure: Maturity and Masculinity for Freeters in Contemporary Japan." *Social Science Japan Journal* 16 (1): 29–43.
- 📖 **For 5327:** Ozawa-de Silva, Chikako. 2021. "Meaning in Life" (Chapter 4) in *The Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan*. University of California Press.

Ω Final Paper Topic and Tentative List of Sources Due

Week 11 (November 10): Gender: Office Ladies, White Collars, and Beauty

- 📖 Miller, Laura. "Male beauty work in Japan." *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan*. Routledge, 2002. 55-76.

- Moore, Katrina L. 2010. "Sexuality and Sense of Self in Later Life: Japanese Men's and Women's Reflections on Sex and Aging." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 25 (2): 149–63.
- For 5327:** White, Merry I. 2002. Chapter 1 from *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*. University of California Press.

Week 12 (November 17): Aging and End of Life

- Onishi, Norimitsu. 2017. "A Generation in Japan Faces a Lonely Death." *The New York Times*, November 30, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/asia/japan-lonely-deaths-the-end.html>
- For 5327:** Long, Susan Orpett. 2003. "Becoming a Cucumber: Culture, Nature, and the Good Death in Japan and the United States." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 29 (1): 33–68.

Ω Final Paper Abstract Due

Week 13: (November 24): Atomic Radiation

- Morimoto, Ryo. 2023. "Radioactive Mosquito Bite and Its Surreal Life: Science, the State, and the Invisible." *Public Culture* 35 (3 (101)): 319–30.
- For 5327:** Sternsdorff-Cisterna, Nicolas. 2015. "Food after Fukushima: Risk and Scientific Citizenship in Japan." *American Anthropologist* 117 (3): 455–67.

Ω Optional Rough Draft for Final Paper Due (December 4)

Ω Final Paper Due (December 15)

POLICIES

Late Submissions

Papers submitted after the due date will suffer a fraction of a grade deduction for every day it is late. For example, an A- will become a B+, a B will become a B-, et cetera.

Academic Honesty

The Chinese University of Hong Kong places very high importance on academic honesty and adopts a policy of zero tolerance on academic dishonesty. Any such offence will lead to disciplinary action including possibly termination of studies at the University. Students should know how to properly use source material and how to avoid plagiarism. Detailed guidelines and examples for the acknowledgement of sources can be found on the University's website at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>. All papers must be submitted through VeriGuide.

Use of AI Tools

Use of AI tools for course papers is strictly prohibited. You are expected to work independently, and to cite sources for any and all information you did not collect yourself.