

Contemporary Japanese Society and Culture Through Film, GLOBAL 143

July 28 - August 15 2025 – 3 Week Intensive

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4:10-7:30 Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday

Instructor: Noam Schimmel

Wheeler 200

Summer 2025

UC Berkeley

Email address: noams@berkeley.edu

Please email me with any questions and I will try to respond as quickly as I can.

Office hours immediately after class in the classroom.

Course Description

In this course we examine Japanese culture through the lens of contemporary film from 2000-2024. We use film as an entry-point to examine diverse topics in Japanese culture including the rights and welfare of girls and women, spirituality and religion with an emphasis on Buddhism and Shintoism, urban and rural life, nature and the environment, wealth, poverty and inequality, the individual, family and society, employment and work life, education and school experiences, ethnic diversity and responses to it, war and peace, immigration and emigration including diasporic communities, human resilience, natural disaster and responses to it, minorities in Japan, and human rights.

Course Goals & Learning Outcomes:

- Knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences and personal narratives of Japanese individuals and communities as depicted in film
- Appreciation of diverse aspects of Japanese culture including politics, economics, food, pop culture, music and arts, literature, and religion/spirituality depicted in their national and diasporic films with emphasis on Buddhism and Shintoism
- Exposure to contemporary photojournalism from Japan and ability to discuss key themes and concerns of this photography
- Capacity for critical thinking about a range of social issues – with particular attention to human rights and the relationship between self and society as well as minority experiences in Japan
- Exposure to a broad selection of Japanese films providing students with an immersive education in contemporary Japanese cinematographic creative expression and familiarity with how the medium of film depicts and transmits culture
- Appreciation of Japan's nature and its place in Japanese culture including art, literature, poetry, and photography as well as within the context of Buddhism and Shintoism
- Study of Japanese contemporary culture through journalism and insight into how journalism 'translates' and communicates Japanese culture to audiences from outside those countries/societies and ability to reflect on prevailing interests and themes of journalistic storytelling about Japan.

Please note that some of the articles, films, and books we study address difficult subjects including war, violence, and sexual violence. To ensure your well-being you can step outside of

the classroom when we address these topics if you feel that will be helpful for you and you can speak to me about any concerns you may have about these subjects and approach them with the care that reflects your needs and well-being.

No recordings of the course should be made out of respect for the privacy of fellow students and to insure a comfortable space for discussion, sharing, reflection, questions, and exploration.

Grading and Assessment

A primary value for me as a teacher is your learning and that is the focus of the course, rather than assessment. To that end, beyond the grading rubric listed below, I invite you to approach me with any questions you may have on how to improve your learning. Our aim is to learn effectively together as a team and the purpose of assessment is – in large part – to provide you with feedback that advances your learning, in addition to evaluating your work and upholding high academic standards of quality.

25% - Attendance, class participation, including class discussion. Participation includes listening attentively alongside speaking as well as always engaging with one another respectfully. It includes posting questions and comments online. **Note that at the beginning of the third week of the course on Sunday, August 10 by 10 pm, you are required to post online on bcourses several questions and/or comments you have/are thinking about regarding our readings, the movies, and our discussions as well as brief responses to questions posed by the instructor. Everyone should read these postings and each student is required to provide a brief response/comment to at least three other students on Monday the next day, August 11, by 9 pm. These comments are not formal or long – just five-seven paragraphs in your reflections and one paragraph of brief comments to other students in response to their postings. You may not use AI, Artificial Intelligence, for this or any other coursework.**

75% In class open book exam on Thursday August 14: Open book short answers and brief essays to a list of questions addressing our books, articles, and films. You can use books, articles, and notes from our class to consult when answering the questions.

To succeed in the class you will need to have done all the readings and watched all movies in class and those assigned for homework. You will need to be able to comment thoughtfully and knowledgably on all the assigned readings and movies both in class discussions and on the final exam. If you are concerned about your grade and you think you may not have the time to devote yourself to the course you are encouraged to consider taking it on a Pass/No Pass basis.

Grading Scale:

A – Outstanding work of the highest standard, well made and well substantiated arguments that show advanced critical thinking and originality and in-depth analysis and attention to detail

B – Very good work but still demanding some improvement in evidence, coherence, depth, and rigor

C – Satisfactory work that meets basic standards of achievement but shows substantial potential for improvement

D – Very poor quality work

F - Fail

Attendance

*All students can miss one class over the course of the summer session and this will not impact your grade negatively. However, any further absences will impact your grade and lower it by 8% for each additional absence. If a student misses the first day of class that counts as their one unexcused absence; any further absences will lead to a reduction in the grade. Please contact me in advance if you will miss a class. Medical, personal/family emergencies, and observance of religious holidays may cause you to miss a class. That is entirely understandable and will not impact your grade adversely if you are able to make up coursework. Please let me know about them – to the extent reasonably possible – in advance. I will always do my best to be accommodating and responsive. Please provide a note from a doctor for medical absences and similar documentation for other emergency absences. **To pass***

the course (grade of C or better). you must attend at least 9 out of our 12 class sessions regardless of reason for absence.

Academic Integrity

Be honest, accurate, cite your sources (for both data and arguments) and err on the side of caution and attribution if at all concerned that you may be using someone else's ideas. Be sure to use quotation marks when quoting. Paraphrasing someone else's ideas/data/information requires citation. Familiarize yourself with Berkeley's standards of academic integrity and with the norms of citation. AI cannot be used for posting comments online and during the final exam. Use of AI will disqualify your work and prevent your from passing the course. Your work in the course should be yours alone and original in nature.

Technology

Unless you have a unique reason for needing to do so that you share with me for approval, (such as a special educational requirement or if you find taking notes by hand difficult and request exceptional permission to use a laptop or tablet to facilitate your learning) laptops and tablets may not be used during class EXCEPT when required for our discussions when I will ask you to take them out and turn them on. **Phones must be packed away at all times. It is prohibited to record any part of the course in any form.**

Course Texts

The course readings require time and investment. To benefit from the course and engage with it meaningfully you need to ensure that you are taking the time to undertake the readings and not to do so only selectively. Please be sure to bring the books we will be discussing to class to facilitate your referencing the texts during seminar discussions. Note that for most classes we will read short selections of journalism addressing photography, film, politics, human rights, and culture. These are required readings and it is essential to read them so that you can participate fully in both seminar discussion as a large group and in small group discussions. During the first two weekends of the course you will complete extended readings of several books. Please give yourself adequate time on Thursday night and on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the first two weeks of the course to complete these readings. Film viewing both at

home and in class is a central part of the course. Please be sure to watch the films assigned prior to class so that you are ready to discuss them in class.

Booklist:

The library also contains physical copies of these titles, some of which are also available digitally. See the links for digital access via UC Berkeley which will require you to login. You will need to use your Berkeley email addresses to access our readings and films.

Getting Help with bCourses and Accessing Online Books and Films via UC Berkeley Library

<https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/help/research-help/remote-resources>

<https://dls.berkeley.edu/services/bcourses-0>

- Email: bcourseshelp@berkeley.edu(link sends e-mail)
- Phone: [\(510\) 664-9000](tel:5106649000)

How to access digital book and films:

<https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/using-the-libraries/connect-off-campus>

also:

<https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/c.php?g=530750&p=3630485>

also a short film explaining how to access digital books:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PR6pcQ04fh-98Y0mMpCN4SkY_Kuciy4r/view

Required Readings:

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A Very Short Introduction to Japan by Christopher Groto-Jones; pages 1-149.

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<https://libproxy.berkeley.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Facademic.oup.com%2Fbook%2F449%3Flogin%3Dtrue>

Although you have unlimited digital access to this book it is recommended – though not required – that you purchase a copy for the ease of your reading and accessibility when studying and taking the exam.

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Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations by Roger J Davies

<https://libproxy.berkeley.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Febookcentral.proquest.com%2Flib%2Fberkeley-ebooks%2Fdetail.action%3FdocID%3D4563489>

Pages 13-123 but skip the Discussion questions and notes, so in total it should be about 80 -90 pages of reading.

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The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture edited by Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ukeno

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<https://libproxy.berkeley.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Febookcentral.proquest.com%2Flib%2Fberkeley-ebooks%2Fdetail.action%3FdocID%3D729217>

Pages 9-241 but skip the Discussion questions and notes, so in total it should be about 200 pages.

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Be More Japan: The Art of Japanese Living

<https://libproxy.berkeley.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Febookcentral.proquest.com%2Flib%2Fberkeley-ebooks%2Fdetail.action%3FdocID%3D31098346>

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(Digital access is very limited for this book and may not be available. All students are therefore requested to purchase the book.)

The Magic of Japan by Hector Garcia; selections:

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/lib/berkeley-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6462558>

(Unlimited digital access so there's no need to purchase the book.)

Films:

A selection from the following depending on library availability for the course (both for at home viewing and in class viewing) :

Rental Family, Message from Hiroshima, Only Yesterday, Kiki's Delivery Service, My Neighbor Totoro, The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness, Hafu, Tokyo Godfathers, Grave of the Fireflies, The Wind Rises, The Tale of the Princess Kaguya, Jiro Dreams of Sushi, Shoplifters,

Suzume, Tampopo, Still Walking, Departures, Spirited Away, Chronicle of my Mother, Letter from the Mountain, Tokyo Godfathers, Fukushima: A Nuclear Story, National Geographic: Returning to Fukushima, The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossoms, Tokyo Sonata, Sweet Bean, Our Little Sister, In This Corner of the World, Rent a Cat, Rhapsody in August, Ponyo, Plan 75, Love Life, My Small Land, A Man, Drifting Home, Best Wishes for Tomorrow, Fragments of the Last Will, The Boy and the Heron, Call Me Chihiro, 37 Seconds, Violet Evergarden, Words Bubble Up Like Sodapop, Child of Kamiari Month.

In class viewing will include a selection from:

Grave of the Fireflies, Departures, Tokyo Sonata, Sweet Bean, Spirited Away, Our Little Sister, After the Storm, In this Corner of the World, Rhapsody in August, The Red Turtle, Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness, Message from Hiroshima, I Want to Be a Shellfish, Fragments of the Last Will, Song of the Canefields, Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms, Love Life, Letters from the Mountains, Hafu, Perfect Days, The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness.

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WEEK 1

Class 1 Monday July 28 – Welcome to the Course

Class 2 Tuesday July 29

Read for class:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/jul/15/japan-lgbtq-photo-weddings-in-pictures>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/arts/design/shibunkakus-tefaf-maastricht-nihongaa.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/arts/design/zen-painting-japan-society.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2023/nov/20/japans-dying-art-of-cormorant-fishing-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/oct/09/interview-daido-moriyama-photographers-gallery-london-retrospective>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/29/world/asia/cherry-blossom-tree-japan-korea.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/23/japan-kisho-jinja-weather-shinto-shrine-tokyo>

<https://www.vox.com/world/2015/12/13/9989250/japan-crime-conviction-rate>

<https://www.newthinking.com/culture/why-japan-is-one-of-the-worlds-safest-countries>

Class 3 Wednesday July 30

Watch at home for our class today:

Jiro Dreams of Sushi:

https://digitalcampus-swankmp-net.libproxy.berkeley.edu/ucb312556/play/88E5295FB7D7A56C					
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Read for class:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/25/japan-upper-house-election-sanseito-japanese-first>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2018/nov/10/japanese-kabuki-prints-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2023/oct/24/dali-or-not-dali-the-uncanny-eye-of-hiroshi-sugimoto-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2017/jul/21/hokusai-the-influential-work-of-japanese-artist-famous-for-the-great-wave-in-pictures>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/opinion/japan-south-korea-friendly.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/10/us/politics/biden-state-dinner-japan.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/19/playing-for-survival-the-blind-japanese-woman-keeping-a-music-tradition-alive>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/26/world/asia/japan-death-row-exonerated.html>

Class 4 Thursday July 31

Watch ‘Shoplifters’ at home for our class today:

https://berkeley.kanopy.com/video/11578698		
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Read for class today:

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/26/travel/japan-kyoto-zen-gardens.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styln-travel-planning&variant=show®ion=BELOW_MAIN_CONTENT&block=storyline_flex_guide_re_circ

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2019/sep/21/the-vending-machines-of-tokyo-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/dekatora-the-decorated-trucks-of-japan-a-photo-essay>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2018/dec/29/back-with-a-bang-japanese-fireworks-from-the-1800s-in-pictures>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/05/arts/hayakawa-hibi-okubo-japanese-art-exhibit.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/19/japan-asks-young-people-views-marriage-population-crisis>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/06/opinion/hiroshima-nagasaki-atomic-bombing.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/06/opinion/nuclear-threat-hiroshima-survivors.html>

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WEEK 2

Class 5 Monday August 4

Be ready to discuss ‘Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations’ which you should read for today and the ‘Very Short Introduction to Modern Japan.’ Please pace yourself from Thursday, July 31, until today to give yourself enough time to complete the reading of these two books.

Watch at home for today’s class:

Still Walking: <https://lumiere.berkeley.edu/films/1653>

Read for class today:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/arts/design/masterpiece-london-japan-art.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/18/travel/yoshida-japan-steel-furnace.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/15/arts/dance/ushio-amagatsu-dead.html>

<https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/travel/lion-cafe-classical-tokyo-kissa-hnk-intl/index.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/04/chiune-sugihara-my-father-japanese-schindler-saved-6000-jews-lithuania>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2024/jul/08/tokyos-oldest-train-line-jr-yamanote-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2024/jun/12/japanese-scenes-shin-noguchi-street-photography-in-pictures>

Class 6 Tuesday August 5

Read for class today:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/20/tokyo-governor-election-2024-yuriko-koike-renho-murata>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/jun/19/yoshida-review-dulwich-picture-gallery>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/may/02/japan-whale-meat-industry-kangei-maru-mother-ship>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/29/oppenheimer-finally-opens-japan-mixed-reviews>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/mar/27/the-oxford-english-dictionarys-latest-update-adds-23-japanese-words>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/15/world/asia/japan-randoseru-backpack.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/25/world/asia/japan-election-surnames.html>

Watch 'Grave of the Fireflies' for our class today:

<https://lumiere.berkeley.edu/students/items/78096>

Read the first 80 pages of 'Be More Japan.'

Class 7 Wednesday August 6

Watch at home for today's class:

(If we already watched it in class we will consider an alternative and I will post it online.)

The Wind Rises: <https://lumiere.berkeley.edu/students/items/78094>

Read for class today:

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/may/01/akya-houses-why-japan-has-nine-million-empty-homes>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2022/sep/05/tokyo-traditional-sento-bathhouses-fight-for-survival-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/20/the-sento-owners-making-group-bathing-in-japan-cool-again>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/asia/japan-lonely-deaths-the-end.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/dec/17/host-clubs-in-tokyo-force-women-into-sex-work-to-pay-off-huge-debts>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/09/world/asia/lgbtq-japan.html>

Class 8 Thursday August 7

Read for class today:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/13/travel/japan-festival-setsun-kyoto.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/18/arts/design/katsushika-hokusai-prints-auction.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2024/jan/27/takayo-kiyota-tama-chan-sushi-edible-art-van-gogh-picasso-frida-kahlo>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/19/world/asia/fbi-japan-looted-artifacts-boston.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/article/2024/may/11/how-embracing-72-japanese-micro-seasons-could-change-your-garden-and-your-life>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/asia/japan-wasabi.html>

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Read pages 80-160 of Be More Japan.

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WEEK 3

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Class 9 Monday August 11

Be ready to discuss ‘The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture.’ Note that this is a longer book of about 200 pages, so take care to start your reading for it well in advance of our class today and pace yourself between Thursday, August 7 and today so that you read about 50 pages a day.

Read the following selections from, ‘The Magic of Japan,’ by Hector Garcia. Pages 10-12, 20-21, 24-34, 37-45, 55-73, 75-113, 123-135, 145-185, 189-191. This text has many photos and large print, so it’s a much quicker read.

Read for class today:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/15/mie-prefecture-guide-pachi-pachi-or-kachi-kachi-a-foreigners-guide-to-the-tricky-world-of-japans-onomatopoeia>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/01/world/asia/japan-baby-names.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/30/how-can-such-a-tiny-woman-drive-a-big-truck-japans-labour-shortage-forces-it-to-rethink-gender-stereotypes>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/05/our-minds-are-blank-how-earthquake-resilient-japan-fails-its-ageing-rural-communities>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/aug/03/hirosugi-sugimoto-time-machine-museum-of-contemporary-art-sydney-interview>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2024/feb/06/japan-tokyo-snow-photos-2024-february>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/28/birth-rate-japan-record-low-2023-data-details>

Class 10 Tuesday August 12

Read for class today:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/01/tokyo-braces-for-another-big-one-on-100th-anniversary-of-deadly-quake>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2023/aug/31/tokyo-coin-operated-laundries-japan-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/manhole-covers-become-collectors-items-in-japan>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/14/lost-to-the-climate-crisis-japan-haiku-poets>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/27/oji-holdings-japan-switch-adult-nappies-ageing-society>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/10/tokuryu-japan-criminals-yakuza-ntwnfb>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/01/life-at-the-heart-of-japans-solitary-deaths-epidemic-i-would-be-lying-if-i-said-i-wasnt-worried>

Read for class today pages 160-224 of Be More Japan.

Watch at home, 'Departures.'

<https://lumiere.berkeley.edu/students/items/78095>

Class 11 Wednesday August 13

Read for class today:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jul/27/tokyo-art-and-photography-review-ashmolean-museum>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/feb/28/vibrant-progressive-and-bold-graphic-designs-of-japanese-modernism-in-pictures>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2017/aug/16/brothels-cherry-blossoms-and-weary-travellers-glimpses-of-a-lost-imperial-japan-eisen-hiroshige-in-pictures>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/14/sports/sumo-wrestling-madison-square-garden-nyc.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/28/world/americas/yukihiro-shimura-baseball-brazil.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/20/japan-married-surname-law-change>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/30/world/asia/the-boyfriend-netflix.html>

Watch at home for today's class:

Tokyo Godfathers:

https://digitalcampus-swankmp-net.libproxy.berkeley.edu/ucb312556/play/E479F0C5D63F8F26					
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Class 12 Thursday August 15

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In- Class final exam.