Japanese Popular Culture

MW 5–6 in Cohen 402; optional film screenings to follow on M 6–8:00

Learning Outcomes
The purpose of a liberal arts education is not merely the accumulation of facts. You will leave this course with more general knowledge about Japanese popular culture, but its primary objectives are to facilitate opportunities to engage in the transferable skills of critical reading, spirited yet civil discussion, and meticulous analytical writing.

Overview of the Course
Today, Japanese manga, anime, J-pop, and film have a global audience. But these exports can only be truly understood in light of longstanding domestic anxieties about sex, violence, “the kids these days,” and vulnerability to natural and anthropogenic disaster. This course traces some of these anxieties through critical examinations of manga, anime, teen fiction (light novels), television commercials, music, and fashion in Japan.

As we engage with the assigned texts and films, we will investigate how the popular culture products of the present reflect Japan’s past and envision its future. We will also have opportunities to ask whether these media products are truly “Japanese,” why people call them “popular,” and what exactly the commonplace word “culture” actually means.

Weekly Tasks:
1) Do the readings. Take notes.
2) Attend lecture.
3) Watch the film/read the manga.
4) Post to the discussion board at least 24 hours before recitation (preferably earlier in the week so I can address your questions in lecture).

Books to Buy
• Inoue Takehiko, Vagabond, vol. 1 (VizBig edition; actually vols. 1–3).
• Yazawai Ai, Nana, vol. 1.
• Tanigawa Nagaru, The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya, vol. 1
— all other readings available in PDF form on Canvas —

Attendance
Attendance and participation (including online) will count for 20% of your grade. Writing assignments reward those who attend lecture and recitation regularly.

You may miss one recitation session without penalty, no questions asked. If you know you will be absent due to illness or travel, please be courteous enough to email your TF ahead of time.
**Expectations**

Please come to lecture and recitation regularly and be an active participant.

We expect you to demonstrate awareness of your own biases and healthy suspicion regarding stakeholders’ truth claims, both in your writing and in your contributions to class discussion.

**Workload**

Each week you will have approximately 75 pages of academic reading, plus viewing a primary source (anime, live action films, and, in some weeks, reading manga). You must watch assigned films on your own time, but I have arranged group screenings after class on some Wednesdays this semester. Screenings will take place in Cohen 402 from 6 to 8:00 and will include some time afterward for open discussion. In previous semesters, students who attended these optional screenings have tended to have an easier time writing the papers.

Class sessions will balance short lectures interspersed with review of specific passages or clips in small groups. You are expected to come to each lecture and recitation prepared to discuss the assigned material.

**Discussion Board Posts**

Beginning in Week 2 and continuing through the semester, you will be expected to post a question or comment to the discussion board at least 24 hours before your recitation meets (so, if you have an 11 a.m. recitation on Friday, you must post by 11 a.m. on Thursday). Your question or comment should cite or refer to a specific passage in the readings or a specific scene from the assigned films. Ideally, your post should not just be a request for factual information, but rather should be a point of interpretation (trying to figure out the meaning of a confusing passage, for example) or perhaps a point of comparison (picking out two passages or scenes and highlighting an apparent continuity or discontinuity between them). You are welcome to respond to somebody else’s post to satisfy this assignment, but please make sure that your response addresses the person’s question substantively or takes the conversation in a new direction.

You must post at least 10 times over the course of the semester. In our 14-week semester this schedule gives you the flexibility to skip a post during those weeks when you are busier than normal, but in principle you should post every week.

**Screen Time**

Please resist the lure of social media, shopping, and other non-academic activities while you are in class. I do not allow screens to be open during lecture unless we are discussing one of the readings. If you need to take notes, do so by hand. I periodically upload PDFs of lecture slides, so your notes can be minimal.

Your TF has final say on the use of screens during recitation.
Professor Jolyon Thomas  
Office Hours  
jolyon@sas.upenn.edu  
T 2–4 or by appointment

**Written Assignments**

You will also have **two short response papers** of no fewer than 400 words and no more than 800 words. Each is worth 20% of your grade. The first of these asks you to describe the compositional techniques and industrial trends that structure the creation of manga, anime, and pop music. The second asks you to think about how the Japanese popular culture of the present exhibits continuities and discontinuities with the pop culture of the past.

40% of your grade will be based on **one final paper** of no fewer than 2000 and no longer than 2500 words. The assignment asks you to reflect on how popular media products embody or reflect anxieties about Japan’s present and future.

All papers should be written in Times New Roman 12-point font with one-inch margins. Submit them through the designated course dropbox. Papers should be formatted according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. A sample grading rubric for each of the papers is available on Canvas. You are encouraged to seek help from the Writing Center for your assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading Scheme (100 Points Total)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation:</td>
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<td>Discussion Board Posts</td>
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<td>Response Paper #1</td>
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Extra credit is available through participation in Japan-studies related events. Details in class.

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**Academic Dishonesty**

If we catch you in an act of plagiarism, or if it is evident that you have arranged for someone else to do your work for you, you will fail the assignment and possibly the course. *There are no exceptions to this rule.* If you are struggling to finish an assignment on time, talk with your TF about getting an extension before you gamble with your future by cheating. It’s not worth it.
Office Hours

My office hours are on Wednesdays from 2–4 or by appointment. I encourage you to contact me by email ahead of time so that I know to expect you. It also helps me to know in advance what you would like to discuss.

(Dis)comfort

In accordance with the guidelines laid out by the American Association of University Professors, I do not provide trigger warnings for course content. Please approach all course material as if it has an “R” rating—you can expect some explicit sex and some gratuitous violence.

If this will bother you, then take another course. It is a big, scary, messy world out there, and undergraduate education is designed to prepare you for it, not shield you from it.

Communication

As practice for the post-baccalaureate professional world, your e-mail communication with us should be formal. You are expected to use a formal salutation ("Dear" works well), identify yourself ("My name is X and I am in EALC 069"), and write clearly and politely about what it is you need ("I am afraid that I am going to miss recitation on Friday because I am ill").

Teaching Fellows

Mark Bookman bookman@sas.upenn.edu
Xiuyuan Mi xmi@sas.upenn.edu

Grade Grubbing

Don’t do it. I will only entertain concerns about fairness in the very exceptional cases where there seems to be a major inconsistency in grading practices. The TFs and I meet regularly to discuss grading practices, guidelines, and expectations to ensure consistency across discussion sections. Needlessly needling me or your TF about a grade may very well work against you.

That said, math was never my strong suit and we occasionally make mistakes. If you catch a calculation error, I promise to fix it immediately.
COURSE SCHEDULE
(STILL SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Part I: The Basics

Week 1: “Japan”/“Pop”/“Culture”
Wednesday (30 August): No readings, but familiarize yourself with the syllabus.

Week 2: Manga
Monday (4 September): Labor Day. No Class.
  ▶ OPTIONAL FILM: Kon Satoshi, dir. *Paprika* (2006, 90 mins.) NOTE: Film cannot be streamed because of copyright restrictions. It is on reserve at Van Pelt; screening after class on 6 September.

Week 3: Anime
  ▶ Ōtomo Katsuhiro, supervising dir. *Short Peace* (2013, 68 mins.)

Week 4: J-Pop and Japanese Takes on Global Musical Genres
  ▶ Linda Linda Linda

Part II: Imagining the Past

Week 5: Drawing on Classical and Medieval Tradition
  ▶ Takahata Isao, dir. *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013, 137 mins.)
Wednesday (27 September): Hirasawa, “The Inflatable, Collapsible Kingdom,” 1–50
EXTRA CREDIT OPPORTUNITY: Attend Gergana Ivanova’s talk on Thursday, 28 September and ask a question (details on this assignment in class).

***RESPONSE PAPER #1 DUE ON 29 SEPTEMBER***
Week 6: The Floating World

- Kitano Takeshi, dir. *Zatōichi*


Week 7: Empire and War

- REQUIRED FILM TBD
- Optional Film: Takahata Isao, dir. *Pom Poko* (screening on Thursday 10/12)

Wednesday (11 October): Orbaugh, “Kamishibai and the Art of the Interval,” 78–100; Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen*

Week 8: Nostalgia for the Impossible Past


***RESPONSE PAPER #2 DUE ON 21 OCTOBER***

Part III: The Precarious Present

Week 9: Good Girls and Bad Gyaru

- Nakashima Tetsuya, dir. *Shimotsuma Monogatari (Kamikaze Girls)*, 103 min.)


Week 10: Boys to Men

- Kon Satoshi, dir. *Perfect Blue* (1997, 121 mins.)

Week 11: Sex
  ▶ Kore’eda Hirokazu, dir. Air Doll (2009, 125 mins.)

Week 12: Violence and the Kids These Days
  ▶ Michael Arias, dir. Tekkon kinkreet

Week 13: Alienation and Death
  ▶ Takita Yōjirō, dir. Departures (2008, 130 mins.)

Week 14: Robots and Cyborgs
  ▶ OPTIONAL FILM: Ghost in the Shell

Week 15: Fantasy and Desire
Monday (4 December): Takeyama, Staged Seduction, xi–20; 39–69
  ▶ Shinkai Makoto, dir. Your Name

Week 16: Every Word in the Course Title Is Wrong

***FINAL PAPER DUE ON 15 DECEMBER***