

Japanese Popular Culture: A History of Nation Branding

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Introduction: In 2013 the Japanese government launched the ‘Cool Japan’ initiative: a concerted attempt at nation branding through the association of Japan with its popular culture. Nation branding has thus far been the distinctive feature of Japan’s 21st century diplomacy. While nation branding is seen as quite a recent development, this course highlights that Japan has been using popular culture to improve its international image since the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868). With the intensification of international engagement from the late nineteenth century, Japan opened its culture to a global audience. Domestically, Japanese politicians also used culture to create a shared Japanese identity. Beginning in the Meiji period we will create a historical analysis of the evolution and the uses of popular culture to the present day. Focusing on popular culture gives us an alternative history of Japan allowing us to see media such as theater, manga, or music as sites of clashes or cooperation with official narratives or policies. Applying historical analysis, we consider the political implications of activities we often dismiss as mere hobbies to highlight that popular culture has long been an essential node in creating a modern, imperial, and global Japanese identities.

Method of instruction: The key method of instruction will be student led discussion in a seminar style. There will be some brief lecture work to provide context. As historians we aim to take a primary source focused approach to our study. Therefore, various primary sources will be assigned for viewing, listening, or reading for each class. To support our primary sources, academic texts which match each weekly theme will also be provided. Students will take the responsibility for thinking through the assigned materials and document their thoughts via short literature reviews, and in class discussion. Additionally, students will pursue their own research projects developed in consultation with the instructor. To ensure that this works and to benefit effectively from this class, students will come to class having thought about the assignments and how they fit into the overall theme of the course.

Evaluation:

***Class Participation:** Students will have to come to class having prepared the class assignment and prepared to share their ideas. (Grade estimate/feedback at mid-semester) (20%)

***Two In-Class Reflection Assignments:** First a short summary of the events and discussion covered in the class, and second a reflection on the course in general. (Weeks 6 and 13, 10% each) (20%)

***Four Short Literature Reviews** on assigned material, due at the start of class. The first is the set for the Tara Rodman reading in week 2. Students can then choose from any of the 3 remaining readings. Each review should be around 300-500 words. (4 x 5% = 20%)

***An In-Class Presentation** on your research project (Rubric to be provided) (20%)

*** A Term Project** on a Japanese Popular Culture topic of the student’s choosing (Rubric to be provided) (20%)

Recommended General Reading:

Before embarking on your study you may want to do some background reading. Here are some texts that I recommend to help get you started.

General Histories of Japan and Popular Culture:

Nancy Stalker, *Japan History and Culture From Classical to Cool* (University of California Press, 2018).

This is perhaps my favorite of the general histories on Japanese popular culture, a very good overview and will situate you well for our studies.

Matt Alt, *Pure Invention: How Japan's Pop Culture Conquered the World* (Penguin, 2020).

This is not strictly an academic text but provides interesting discussion and examples of Japanese popular culture from the post-war era to now.

E Taylor Atkins, *A History of Popular Culture in Japan: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present* Second Edition (Bloomsbury, 2023).

A very useful textbook-style guide to Japanese popular culture.

Kitaoka Shinichi, *The Political History of Modern Japan: Foreign Relations and Domestic Politics* (Routledge, 2018).

It will be helpful to have some background in Japan's politics and diplomacy during the period of our study. Kitaoka's text is a good choice for both beginners and experts, it is authoritative, concise, and informative.

Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic, Grotesque, Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (University of California Press, 2006).

Not a general history but is a personal favorite that brings the 1920s and 30s to life and provides us with useful ways to think about the production of popular culture.

Popular Culture Theory:

John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* 10th Edition (Routledge, 2024).

We will take a historical approach, but some theoretical background is important. Now in its 10th edition Storey's text is a great way to get an overview of approaches to the study of popular culture.

Iwabuchi Koichi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002).

Somewhat showing its age, but Iwabuchi's text has been hugely influential on the field of Japanese Popular Culture Studies. It is still difficult to avoid him!

Stephen Vlastos (ed), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1998).

A fascinating series of essays on the origins of many of Japan's modern traditions.

Class Topics

Each Week will focus on a single theme over two classes including field trips. As we wish to study as historians our focus will be on primary sources (in English or translated from Japanese). To help our discussion, most classes will also have a set reading text. In addition, there are suggested readings to assist those who wish to explore the weekly topics further.

(all class material will be available via Moodle)

Week 1: Introduction

Wed 14 January: Course Overview: Popular Culture and Politics

Primary Source: *The Cool Japan Proposal* (2014).

Week 2: Entering the Modern World

Mon 19 January: Global Modernity

Primary Source: Kawakami Otojiro, *Oppekepe-bushi* (1891).

Set Reading: Tara Rodman, A Modernist Audience: The Kawakami Troupe, Matsuki Bunkio and Boston Japonisme, in *Theatre Journal* 65, 4 (2013), 489-505.

Suggested Extra Reading: Alistair Swale, *A Cultural History of Late Meiji Japan: Empire and Decadence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

Fri 23 January: Field Trip 1: Ritsumeikan Museum for World Peace

Week 3: Inventing Traditions and Posing Challenges

Mon 26 January: Bushido and Baseball

Set Reading: Thomas Blackwood, 'Bushido Baseball? Three Fathers and the Invention of a Tradition', in *Social Science Japan Journal*, 11,2 (2008), 223-240.

Suggested Extra Reading: Shun Inoue, The Invention of Martial Arts: Kano Jigoro and Kodokan Judo, in Stephen Vlastos (ed), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1998), 163-173.

Wed 28 January: Modern Girl and Consumerism

Primary Sources: The Seito Manifesto (1911), Share Otoko, Enomoto Kenichi (1928).

Suggested Extra Reading: Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic, Grotesque, Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (University of California Press, 2006).

Week 4: Erotic Grotesque Nonsense

Mon 2 February: Revue Theatre: Challenge of Conformity?

Primary Sources: 'Revue Japan' in *Japan Today and Tomorrow 1930-1931* (Osaka Mainichi 1930) 'New Trend in Recreation' in *Nippon Today and Tomorrow* (Osaka Mainichi 1941).

Suggested Extra Reading: Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1998)

Fri 6 February: Field Trip 2: Takarazuka Revue Theatre

Week 5: Popular Culture at War

Mon 9 February: War and the Anime Industry

Primary Source: Momotaro Umi no Shinpei (1945)

Suggested Extra Reading: Hori Hikari, *Promiscuous Media: Film and Visual Culture in Imperial Japan, 1926-1945* (Cornell University Press, 2017).

Thurs 12 February: Culture under Allied Occupation

Primary Source: Bill Hume, Babysan A Private Look at the Japanese Occupation (1953).

Set Reading: John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (2000) Chapter 4.

Suggested Extra Reading: Shibusawa Naoko, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

Week 6: Post War: Culture and Trauma

Mon 16 February: War Memory and Recovery

Primary Source: Godzilla Minus One (2023)

Set Reading: William Tsutsui, Is Your War Over Now? Nationalism, Nostalgia, and Japan's Long Postwar from Gojira (1954) to Godzilla Minus One (2023), in *Humanities* 13 (2024).

Suggested Extra Reading: William Tsutsui and Ito Michiko, *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

Wed 18 February: Rejoining the Family of Nations

Primary Source: Ishikawa Kon, The Tokyo Olympics (1964)

Set Reading: Jessamyn Abel, *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933-1964* (University of Hawaii Press, 2015), Chapter 5.

Recommended Extra Reading: Barbara Holthus, Issac Gagne, Wolfram Manzenreiter and Franz Waldenberger (eds), *Japan Through the Lens of the Tokyo Olympics* (Routledge, 2020).

Week 7: Midterm

Mon 23 February: No Class

Wed 25 February: Mid-Term Quiz and reflection

Week 8: Pop-culture Rebels

Mon 2 March: Rock Music in Radicalism

Primary Sources: Uchida Yuya's Flowers, Challenge! (1969), Les Rallizes denudes, Yodogo a go go (Bootleg).

Suggested Extra Reading: Carolyn Stevens, *The Beatles in Japan* (Routledge, 2017).

Wed 4 March: No Class (AKP Field Trip)

Week 9: Manga Origins and Expansion

Mon 9 March: Student Presentations 1

Fri 13 March: Field Trip 3: International Manga Museum

Week 10: Manga: Social Panic

Mon 16 March: Who are Otaku?

Primary Source: Otaku no Video (1991).

Set Reading: Sharon Kinsella, 'Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement', in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 24,2 (1998), 289-316.

Suggested Extra Reading: Azuma Hiroaki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Wed 18 March: Student Presentations 2

Week 11: National Discourse and Video Games

Mon 23 March: Japan Bashing in the USA

Primary Source: *Losing the War With Japan* (PBS, 1991).

Suggested Extra Reading: Heale MJ, Anatomy of a Scare: Yellow Peril Politics in America, 1980-1993, in *Journal of American Studies* 43 (2009), 19-47.

Wed 25 March: Video Games and Identity

Set Reading: Rachael Hutchinson, Japan and its Others in Fighting Games, in *Japanese Culture Video Games* (Routledge, 2019).

Primary Source: *Super Street Fighter II*, Nintendo Super Famicom 1993.

Suggested Extra Reading: Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Video Games in Global Contexts* (MIT Press, 2016).

Week 12: Anime and the 20th Century

Mon 30 March: Anime

Set Reading: Christopher Bolton, *Interpreting Anime*, Chapter 1 (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Suggested Extra Reading: Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Duke University Press, 2013)

Wed 1 April: Field Trip 4 Film Screening (start 7pm at Pop Pizza).

Primary Source: *Akira* (1988):

Week 13: Nation Branding and its Complexities

Mon 6 April: Washoku and UNESCO

Primary Source: Washoku UNESCO Nomination form (2013)

Set Reading: Katarzyna Cwiercka and Yasuhara Miho, Branding Japanese Food: From Meibutsu to Washoku (Hawaii University of Press, 2020), Chapter 5.

Wed 8 April: Global Anime

Primary Source: KPOP Demon Hunters (2025).

Set Reading: Keith Wagner, *South Korea: Successes and Controversies of Recombined Japanese Animation* (Routledge, 2022).

Suggested Extra Reading: Stevie Suan, *Anime's Identity: Performativity and Beyond* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

Week 14: Review

Mon 13 April: Review

Suggested Reading: Daniel White, *Administering Affect: Pop-Culture and the Politics of Anxiety*, Chapter 2 (Stanford University Press, 2022).

Wed 15 April: Final Quiz and Reflection