

# Medical Anthropology: Japan in Comparative Perspective

Fall 2026

This syllabus can be accessed electronically:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1imnmjdhhqM40CKwKU4J6N9\\_7T2SHHEgAaWKW-TxA9Ss/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1imnmjdhhqM40CKwKU4J6N9_7T2SHHEgAaWKW-TxA9Ss/edit?usp=sharing)

## Instructor

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## Office Hours

TBD and by appointment

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the intersection of health, illness, and culture within the context of Japanese society. Drawing on the principles of medical anthropology, students will examine how cultural beliefs, social structures, and historical processes shape the understanding and practice of health and medicine in Japan. While the course attends to similarities and differences between Japan and “the West,” especially the United States, it also looks at medicine as a global phenomenon, one that does not always stay within national borders. Topics include a comparative investigation of death and dying, reproduction, manga and medicine, mental health, the global politics of fat and obesity, and organ transplantation.

## WELCOME TO THE COURSE!

This syllabus is designed to clearly detail what we’re going to read and study, what is expected of you in terms of the course, and when assignments are due. There is a lot of information here. Please read it carefully. You are not expected to memorize it, but you are expected to consult it when you need information about what we’re reading or when a deadline is coming. I also clearly detail what the course policies are, and you should make sure that you are familiar with these.

The syllabus is a living document, subject to change based on the needs and desires of the class. You are responsible for any changes to the syllabus announced in class; these changes will also be reflected on the Moodle course website. If you are unsure about where we are in the schedule, check the Moodle site. It will always be the most up-to-date. You are required to check your email at least once daily during the semester.

There is an [online version of this syllabus](#) where you can click on the links to take you to readings, assignments, and other course materials.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

- To introduce students to the discipline of medical anthropology through immersive cross-cultural engagement with Japanese culture and society
- To help students to build and improve skills in critical reading, writing, and research
- To help students develop critical visual literacy skills
- To challenge students to develop new perspectives and to expand their skills of critical thinking
- To prepare students to undertake independent research and creative work (*manga*, 漫画)

## **EVALUATION CRITERIA**

- Effort, especially willingness to challenge oneself
- Attendance, preparation, and participation
- Cultivation of intellectual curiosity
- Skills development especially in critical reading and writing
- Quality of written work and attention to detail
- Individual improvement throughout the semester

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

Assignments are designed to help you further engage with course themes and materials and are carefully aligned with the course objectives (see above). Assignments are scaffolded and parts of them will be completed throughout the semester, both inside and outside of class. The assignments are:

- [Course Engagement](#) (20%)
- ["Low-Stakes" Assignments Portfolio](#) (20%)
- [Field journal](#) (20%)
- [Short paper](#) x 2 (10% each) (20%)
- ["Illness Narratives" Manga](#) (process portfolio including interview 10%, final product including artist's statement 10%) (20%)

Each assignment is labelled with a colored dot to help you navigate the syllabus and identify which course work and activities correspond to which assignments. If colored dots are not accessible to you, please let me know, and we will work out another way of signalling different parts of different assignments.

Unless otherwise indicated, all assignments must be uploaded electronically to Moodle.

## GRADING SCHEMA

A+	98	C	73
A	95	C-	70
A-	90	D+	67
B+	85	D	63
B	82	D-	60
B-	80	F	<60
C+	77		

## READINGS

Books are available for purchase at [the bookstore]. Texts will also be available on reserve at the [Library] Unless otherwise indicated, other course readings are available for download on the course website and/or through direct online link. The syllabus is organized chronologically. **You should do the readings in advance of the class for which they are scheduled.**

Because the course is text-based, and we will often reference the text during the class period, it is imperative that you have either the text itself or a copy of the reading with you. It is not sufficient to "read" the text online and come to class. You must have the readings and your notes. If you prefer, you may purchase the texts for e-readers like

Kindle; I will look for evidence that you have read the text on your e-reader, so you must have it with you for class. Texts, like tuition, room and board, are a part of the cost of college and are not optional. **If you are having trouble obtaining course texts for any reason, please speak to me as soon as possible in private.** You are responsible for ensuring that you have read the assigned readings in advance of class, so if you need help to do that, get in touch with me.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

The following book(s) are required for the course:

Tezuka, O. (2008). Black Jack, Volume 1. Kodansha USA.

All other materials are available online through the Moodle course management system.

## COURSE FORMAT

Most classes will begin with an orienting lecture followed by discussion and/or an in-class assignment. Readings form a context for lecture and discussion; they do not comprise the whole of the class. In other words, while we will certainly discuss the assigned reading, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have about it, in general I will not spend class time simply covering the reading. Rather, we will engage these materials in the larger context of the course as a way to explore our ongoing questions about medical anthropology in the specific context of Japan. Students should come prepared with questions about the reading. We will also often start assignments in class.

## UNITS

- Introduction and Community-Building
- “The Body” in Cross-Cultural Perspective
- Lifecycle: Aging, Dying, and Death
- Lifecycle: Menstruation, Conception, Pregnancy, Birth
- Lifecycle: Menopause
- Manga and Medicine
- Mental Health
- Fat in Two Cultures
- Lifecycle: Death and Dying Revisited
- Conclusion

## COURSE SCHEDULE

NB: The course schedule is subject to change based on the needs of the class and the priorities of AKP. Field trips in particular might have to be rescheduled. Any changes will be announced via email and/or in class if time permits. You are responsible for any changes. You are also responsible for knowing and accounting for assignment deadlines.

### **WEEK 1: September 7, 2026**

Introduction and Community-Building

### Class 1.1

- Read: Sobo, E. J. (2022). "Re/inventing Medical Anthropology: Definitional Struggles and Key Debates (Or: Answering the Cri Du Coeur)." *A Companion to Medical Anthropology*: 7-25.
- Review: [Intellectual Curiosity](#)
- Review: [Expectations and Requirements](#)

● **In-Class:** [Read](#) and discuss Rich's "Claiming an Education" [I will distribute printed versions of the reading in class]

- **Out-of-class field trip:** *Thinking like an Anthropologist: an introduction to the field journal* [we will explore our neighborhood in Kyoto with specific prompts and learn how to take fieldnotes]
- **Field Journal prompt:** What do I know about health, medicine, and technology in Japan? How are things the same and/or different from my home country?

### Class 1.2

- Read: Lock & Nguyen, "Introduction," *Anthropology of Biomedicine*, pp. 1-10 (T)
- Read: Conrad, "Medicalization," (excerpted, pp. 1-8)

● **In-Class Exercise:** [Medicalization](#)

- **Field Journal prompt:** write a journal entry about your own experiences of medicalization
- **Due:** [Initial course reflection](#)

## WEEK 2: September 14, 2026

"The Body" in Cross-Cultural Perspective

● **Keeping track of your low-stakes assignments for your portfolio**

### Class 2.1

- Read: Lock & Nguyen, "The Normal Body," *In An Anthropology of Biomedicine*, pp. 29-50 (T)

*In-Class: Lecture/discussion: The Body in Cross-Cultural Perspective*

● **In-Class Exercise:** *Mapping the "Normal Body"*

### Class 2.2

- Read: Matsunaga, L. (2015). "Bodies in question: narrating the body in contemporary Japan." *Contemporary Japan* 27(1): 1-11.

- *Field Journal prompt: write a journal entry about your own experiences of “the normal body”*

### WEEK 3: September 21, 2026

Lifecycle: Aging, Dying, and Death

To coincide with [“Respect for the Aged Day” 敬老の日 \(Keirō no Hi\)](#)

To coincide with [Autumnal Equinox Day](#)

Keyword(s): *Ikigai* (生き甲斐)

#### Class 3.1

- Read: Kavedžija, I. (2019). Making Meaningful Lives: Tales from an Aging Japan. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. Chapters 1-2.*

#### Class 3.2

- Planned activities through AKP (TBD)*
- *Field Journal prompt: TBD based on planned activities through AKP*

### WEEK 4: September 28, 2026

Lifecycle: Menstruation, Conception, Pregnancy, and Birth

- *Field journal: Take a walk through your neighborhood and document references to menstruation. For example, visit the pharmacy and/or look around campus. You may do this on your own or in groups. Bring your findings with you to class 4.1*

#### Class 4.1

Menstruation (Gekkei) 月経

- Read: Otake, T. (2025). [“Menstruation in Japan. Breaking the Silence. Slowly.”](#) Japan Times*
- Watch: TikTok, [Menstruation Terms in Japanese](#)*
  
- Recommended: Stephens-Chu, M. (2019). “From Sacred to Secret: Tracing Changes in Views of Menstruation in Japan.” *Silva Iaponicarum—Japanese studies LX/LXI*: 66-92.*

- *Look for advertisements for menstrual products in Japanese magazines and social media. Bring at least one example with you to class.*

## **Class 4.2**

### Assisted Reproduction

- Read: Gagné, N. O. (2025). Pursuit of Pregnancy: Assisted Reproduction and Women's Repro-Activity in Japan. The New Reproductive Order: Technology, Fertility, and Social Change around the Globe. S. Franklin and M. C. Inhorn, New York University Press: 47-66.*

● *In-Class Exercise: We will look comparatively at websites promoting assisted reproduction in Japan and elsewhere in the world.*

## WEEK 5: October 5, 2026

Lifecycle: Menstruation, Conception, Pregnancy, and Birth/Menopause

- Short paper 1 on one of the topics featured in any of the “Lifecycle” units due Sun Oct 11 at midnight.

### Class 5.1

Childbirth (*shussan*) 出産

- Read: Williamson, K. E. and E. Matsuoka (2019). "Comparing childbirth in Brazil and Japan: social hierarchies, cultural values, and the meaning of place." *Birth in Eight Cultures*: 89-128.

### Class 5.2

Menopause (*kōnenki*) 更年期

- Read: Lock, M. M. (1993). *Encounters with aging: mythologies of menopause in Japan and North America*. Berkeley, University of California Press. (Prologue, “Scientific Discourse and Aging Women, pp. xiv-xliv)

## WEEK 6: October 12, 2026

Lifecycle: Menopause/Illness Narratives

- Midterm self-evaluation due at the end of this week

### Class 6.1

Lifecycle: Menopause (*kōnenki*) 更年期

- Cheung, S. Y. (2022). ““Let Your Ovaries Rest”: Pathologizing Hormones in Japan’s New Economy.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47(3): 689-714.

### Class 6.2

Illness Narratives

- Read: Kleinman, A. (1988). *The illness narratives: suffering, healing, and the human condition*. New York, Basic Books. [excerpts]

● IN-CLASS EXERCISE: [The Illness Narratives](#)

● IN-CLASS WORKSHOP: *Ethnographic Interviewing I*

- *Field Journal prompt: Do a short “illness narratives” interview with someone on a “Lifecycle” topic) and write a 1-2 pages of field notes based on the interview; we will prepare for this interview in class.*

## **WEEK 7: October 19, 2026**

Manga and Medicine

### ● Introduction "Illness Narratives" Manga Assignment

#### **Class 7.1**

- Read: Okuyama, Yoshiko. “Theorizing Disability.” In *Reframing Disability in Manga*, 3–23. University of Hawai’i Press, 2020.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvn1tbm8.6>.*
- Read: [Disability Legislation Timeline](#)*
- Read: Tezuka, O. (2008). *Black Jack, Volume 1*. Kodansha USA.*

Other Recommended Resources

[Graphic Medicine](#) (website)

[Graphic Medicine Manifesto](#) (online book)

#### **Class 7.2**

*Reframing Disability in Manga*

*You will be assigned one of the following chapters from Okuyama’s *Reframing Disability in Manga* to prepare for jigsaw activity/class discussion:*

- *CHAPTER 3 Portrayals of Deaf Characters*
  
- *CHAPTER 4 Gender and the Wheelchair*
  
- *CHAPTER 5 Narratives of Blindness*
  
- *CHAPTER 6 Heterogeneity of Autism*
  
- *CHAPTER 7 Gender Identity Disorder/Gender Dysphoria*

**AND**

- Listen: Find a relevant episode of [Disability News in Japan](#) related to your assigned chapter. Be sure to take notes for class.

● *In-Class Exercise: Jigsaw exercise for Reframing Disability in Manga*

*Jigsaw definition: "The jigsaw technique is a method of organizing classroom activity that makes students dependent on each other to succeed. It breaks classes into groups and breaks assignments into pieces that the group assembles to complete the (jigsaw) puzzle."*

- *Field Journal prompt: Disability studies: how is the physical environment on campus or in our neighborhood organized? Take a "walking tour" and note your observations. See e.g., <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/access-map/>*
- *Write a formal reflection based on your observations/walking tour due by Sunday of this week.*

## WEEK 8: October 26, 2026

### Illness Narratives Manga

- Short paper 2 on one of the topics featured in any of the following units: "Mental Health," or "Fat in Two Cultures" due November 20th

#### Class 8.1

● "Illness Narratives" Manga

- Read: [O'Neil](#)

*We will also revisit the Kleinman reading from earlier in the semester, especially the part entitled "The Mini-Ethnography"*

● [In-Class Workshop: Interviewing II](#)

- *Bring your field journal with you to class for a quick check-in*
- *Short reflection on interview process due by next class*

#### Class 8.2

● *Field trip to [Osamu Tezuka Manga Museum](#)*

## WEEK 9: November 2, 2026

### Class 9.1

#### Mental Health

##### *The Sociotechnical Self*

- Read: Lock & Nguyen, "The Sociotechnical Self," *In An Anthropology of Biomedicine*, pp. 241-264 (T)
- Read: [Ayaya & Kitanaka, Tōjisha-kenkyū](#), Aeon
- Read/listen: Ogino, "[Japan needs to rethink how it helps hikikomori](#)"

● In-Class Assignment: What is the "sociotechnical self"? What is Tōjisha-kenkyū ("science of the self")

### Class 9.2

#### Mental Health



Case Study: Gudetama (ぐでたま)

- Read: Nakamura, K. (2013). *A Disability of the Soul*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press. [Chapter 2, "Psychiatry in Japan," pp. 41-72]

- Read: Harding, C., (2016). [How Japan came to believe in depression. \[Online\]. BBC News website.](#)

## WEEK 10: November 9, 2026

### Class 10.1

- Field Trip to Visit [Kyoto International Manga Museum](#) including group workshop
- Field Journal prompt: TBD based on planned activities at Manga Museum

### Class 10.2

- Read: Kitanaka, J. (2011). *Depression in Japan : Psychiatric Cures for a Society in Distress*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press. ["Introduction: Local Forces of Medicalization," pp. 1-18]
- Read: Rao, T., (2022). [Gudetama. the incredible. miserable egg.](#) New York Times

## WEEK 11: November 16, 2026

### Class 11.1

- Read: Sturtz Sreetharan, C., et al. (2021). *Futotteru (Fat) in Osaka, Japan. Fat in four cultures: A global ethnography of weight*. C. Sturtz Sreetharan, A. Brewis, J. Hardin, S. Trainer and A. Wutich, University of Toronto Press.
- Read: "[Japanese Words for Fat](#)," Japanese Teacher Mari

### Class 11.2

- Field Trip to Osaka ("kitchen of Japan")
- Field Journal prompt: TBD, during Field Trip to Osaka

## WEEK 12: November 23, 2026

### Thanksgiving Break

### Class 12.1

- In-Class: Manga gallery/peer review
- Rough draft of illness narratives manga due in class

## WEEK 13: November 30, 2026

Lifecycle: Dying and Death Revisited

- *Field Journal prompt: Revisit what you wrote for the first prompt. How has your perspective changed since the beginning of the course?*

### Class 13.1

- Read: Lock, M. M. (2002). Twice dead: organ transplants and the reinvention of death. Berkeley, University of California Press. [Excerpts]*

### Class 13.2

- Read: Allison, A. (2023). Preparedness: A Biopolitics of Making Life Out of Death. Being Dead Otherwise, Duke University Press: 99-120.*

## WEEK 14: December 7, 2026

Finals Week

### Class 14.1

*Conclusion*

## END-OF-SEMESTER DEADLINES

All outstanding work due by [DATE]

- [Course engagement self-assessment](#)
- *Low-Stakes Assignments Portfolio including [Final Self-Evaluation](#) (Instructions [here](#) and checklist [here](#))*
- [Field journal](#) (turn in your notebook; if you've been working electronically, include all entries in chronological order in one pdf document)
- [Illness Narratives Manga](#) (final manga and process portfolio)