

This is the first lecture for this course Introduction to Japanese Society. In this course we will be looking at Japanese society from various angles.

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But, before I say anything, I just want you to pause and think for a moment. What comes into your mind when I say the words, "Japanese society"? What images does this create for you? Please discuss this with a partner. In a minute or two I will ask for some of your images.

[Wait a minute or two]

OK, now please just shout out a single word or short phrase ...

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Brainstorming

• How many of these did you come up with ...?

Kamikaze Convenience Bowling Earthquakes
 Homogeneous Mountainous Salaryman Bullet train Apologizing
 Electronics Sushi Insular Idols Baseball Manga Kimono
 High tech Aging society Unique Cool Middle class
 Kanji Mt Fuji Tradition Samurai Modern Karaoke Anime Culture
 History Rice Clean Polite Crowded Disasters
 Trying hard Shinto

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I expect we got quite a few of these. Look over all the words on the screen. These are the sorts of words you will often find in books about Japan.

Brainstorming

• How many of these did you come up with ...?

Cheap Organized crime Individualism Poverty Bribery
 Ethnic minorities Gender equality Pornography
 Immigration Skiing Creativity
 Curry Cycling Musicals Communism
 Rudeness Pollution English Potatoes Beach holidays Christianity
 Bureaucracy Jeans Charity Lawns Pianos Flat land
 Hip hop Scandal Renewable energy

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Now look at all these words on the screen. I wonder how many of these you came up with. Let's just mention a few of these very Japanese things which perhaps are not part of your immediate image of Japan. Curry. It's from India. But, curry rice is Japanese soul food and available absolutely everywhere. How many times a year do you eat sushi? How many times a year do you eat curry rice? I bet many of you eat curry rice more often than sushi, especially if you eat regularly in the university cafeteria! Let's take another one: English. Yes, English is an important part of Japanese society. How many advertisements have you seen written in English? How many English words are used regularly in everyday Japanese conversation? English is a vital part of Japanese society. And what about poverty? Japan has an image as a rich nation and society. But, if you look at the actual statistics, for example the OECD relative poverty rate, Japan has high levels of relative poverty for an advanced industrialised nation. Japan is not an equal society, but a *kakusa shakai*, or society with high levels of inequality. I could go on about all the other words on the screen. But the important point is this: One of the first jobs we have in this course is to think about why we have certain images of Japanese society, and how those images might not be entirely accurate.



We can also start challenging our images of Japan while thinking about something that seems very simple and uncontroversial: Japan's geography.

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In your own time, please read the first chapter of the Statistical Handbook of Japan. I do not need to repeat all that basic information here. But, let me ask you to consider two things. The first is about Japan's seasons. How many seasons does Japan have? Many people will tell you four, and there is a phrase in Japanese *shiki* 四季. But the statistical handbook talks about the rainy season, or *tsuyu*. So, there's a fifth season. I lived in Hokkaido for 14 years. To me, Hokkaido is the only part of Japan that genuinely has four seasons, but Hokkaido has only been part of Japan for 150 years. So where does this myth of Japan's four seasons come from?

Let's tackle another point of debate: the area of Japan. Every single book produced by the Japanese government, including the Statistical Handbook of Japan, counts the Northern Territories as part of Japanese land area. But, these islands were lost to the Soviet Union at the end of World War II and are now inhabited by 17,000 Russians and administered as part of Sakhalin Oblast. The Japanese people might believe these islands rightfully belong to Japan, but in day-to-day reality they do not. My point here is not to discuss the rights and wrongs of the territorial dispute. My point is

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to demonstrate that regarding even what seems like a simple numerical fact, i.e. land area, we need to ask questions about how these “facts” are generated. Only when we are skeptical can we really start to think deeply about what “Japan” actually is.

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So, let's take a big step back. This is Japan in its immediate environment, sitting just off the Asian land mass. Japan's borders are not shown on this map, which is why I am using it. Forget human-made national borders for a moment. They are only a few hundred years old. However, for a few thousand years, the inhabitants of the area we now call “Japan” have been connected by geography, culture and history to the broader Asian and Pacific environment. Japanese society today has emerged from the many different societies that have inhabited this geographical space over the millennia. Inhabitants of this groups of islands have never been cut off from the rest of the planet. This is why Japanese write using kanji from China, eat curry from India, make pianos based on instruments originally from Europe, and have English all over signs, T-shirts and advertisements.

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The “Neat” Japan Myth

- A nation-state with clear borders.
- The modern Japanese state and culture can trace their roots back through history to time immemorial.
- An “in/out” view of “Japan”: things are either Japanese or non-Japanese.
- A list of characteristics that define typical Japaneseness (based in the perceptions of the powerful).
- This is the “Nihonjinron” view.

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So, we can now begin to deconstruct the neat Japan myth. In this myth Japan is a nation-state with clear borders. There is a history of Japan in which the modern Japanese state and culture can trace their roots back through history to time immemorial. One of the consequences of this conception of the Japanese state is that it creates an “in” or “out” view of Japan. Things are either “Japanese” or “non-Japanese”. But, as we have seen some things like curry cannot be categorized so simply. The result of all of this for the study of Japanese society is that a list of characteristics that define typical Japaneseness is created. However, this image of Japan is created by the perceptions of the media, politicians and creative artists who have an interest in seeing Japan this way. Let’s call it the Nihonjinron view. These “theories of the Japanese” tell us a package of characteristics that we can expect to see when we encounter Japanese people and society.

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The “Messy” Japan Reality

- A political unit in a constant state of territorial and political flux.
- An “imagined community” constructed over the course of millennia.
- A population of people who self-identify (to a greater or lesser extent) as “Japanese”, and who are certainly not monolithic.
- A subset of our species, homo sapiens, that has most things in common with other human beings around the world.
- In this course, we are all part of Japanese society!

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In this course we will turn all of this on its head. We will not dismiss every generalisation made about Japanese people: there is always an element of truth to popular images or stereotypes. This is why they are powerful and why they can spread widely. But, we will focus on the messy Japan reality rather than the neat Japan myth.

First, we will think of Japan not as a self-evident nation-state, but as a political unit in a constant state of territorial and political flux. Japan’s borders have shifted repeatedly throughout history and remain contested. And inhabitants of this collection of islands have had many different types of government and community organization.

Second, we will think of Japan as an “imagined community”, to use Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase, constructed over the course of millennia. The Japanese national community is imagined because it is impossible for everyone in Japan to know each other personally. The sense of togetherness is created because people imagine themselves to be connected somehow via national culture. In reality, there is a population of people who self-identify (to a greater or lesser extent) as

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“Japanese”, and who are certainly not monolithic in a cultural or social sense. Instead, these so-called Japanese people are a subset of our species, homo sapiens. On a biological, physiological and genetic level, Japanese people have far more in common with other human beings around the world than they have differences.

Allow me one more comment turning upside down what we consider to be “Japanese”. This is a course taught by an English-native-speaker professor to a group of students from dozens of different countries. Yet, we are in a Japanese national university. This class is a small part of Japanese society. Our understanding of what Japanese society is, therefore, must be able to include us and our studies this term.

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In This Course ...

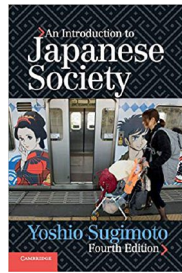
- We will think of Japanese society as ...
 - **diverse** rather than “homogenous”;
 - **evolving** rather than “inherent”;
 - **contested** rather than “harmonious”;
 - **connected to the world** rather than “isolated”;
 - and not “uniquely unique” but “**typically unique**”.

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In short, in this course we will think of Japanese society as diverse rather than homogenous, evolving rather than inherent, contested rather than harmonious, connected to the world rather than isolated, and not uniquely unique but typically unique. Let me just warn you of one thing. The one word that I always challenge in student essays is “unique”. As a teacher of Japan Studies courses, I often have to read lazy statements about how Japan is “unique”. Will someone please tell me a country that is not unique?

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A Good Starting Question ...



"Suppose that a being from a different planet arrived in Japan and wanted to meet a typical Japanese, one who best typified the Japanese adult population. Whom should the social scientists choose?"

(Sugimoto, page 1)

"[T]he person chosen should be female, because women outnumber men in Japan ... she would definitely not be employed in a large corporation but would work in a small enterprise ... Nor would she be guaranteed lifetime employment ... She would not belong to a labor union ... She would not be university educated ..."

(ibid.)

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So, in this course I want you to challenge all your existing preconceptions of and stereotypes about Japan. Here is a good question to get you going from *An Introduction to Japanese Society* by Yoshio Sugimoto. He writes: [Quote 1 on the slide].

He continues: [Quote 2 on the slide]. We will not be using this book as the class text. But, I highly recommend that you look at this book if you have the chance.

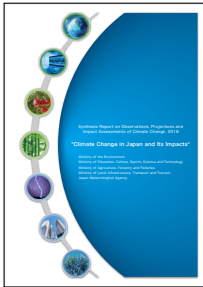
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So, our course is about Japanese society and its place in the world. But there is one more theme I want to alert you to which will come back again and again. No, I am not talking about the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a massive effect on Japan from 2020 to 2023. Actually the Covid-19 pandemic was a relatively small and temporary change in our lives. It caused massive disruption, and as a long-term result we can do much more online now, but societies and the world have faced bigger disruptions in the past. No, I am talking about climate change, or global heating. A theme running throughout this course is how Japanese society will have to change as the full extent of human beings' destruction of the environment becomes visible in daily life.

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Climate Change and Japan



The National Institute for Environmental Studies
Climate Change in Japan and its Impacts
2004

The temperature over Japan is rising faster than the global average (Present/Projection)

Annual mean surface temperature over Japan, as with the global annual mean, has increased, with some fluctuations, at a rate of 1.19°C/100 years. Significantly high temperatures were recorded mostly in the 1990s and thereafter. Projections with the four RCP scenarios indicate that annual mean temperature at the end of the 21st century will rise throughout Japan. Specifically the RCP2.6 scenario projects an increase of 0.5 to 1.7°C, while the projected increase with the RCP8.5 scenario is 3.4 to 5.4°C, suggesting a greater increase at higher latitudes.

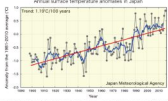


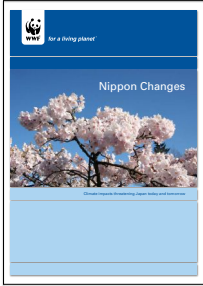
Figure 5. Annual surface temperature anomalies from 1980 to 2015 in Japan. Black: anomalies from the baseline (the 1981-2010 average). Blue: 1981-2010 average. Red arrow: trend. Source: Reference 5

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There are two key reports linked from the class website that I strongly recommend you to read. They can be read as part of the Active Learning Hours Project. The first is a Japanese government report: “Climate Change in Japan and its Impacts”. A short extract is on the slide. Japan is getting hotter. If we do not act quickly, temperatures of over 40 degrees C in Tokyo in summer will be fairly normal.

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Climate Change and Japan



World Wildlife Fund
for a living planet
Nippon Changes
2004

Impacts to humans

- Increase in heatwave intensity and heat stress, putting vulnerable populations, such as the aged, at risk
- Increased likelihood of infectious and vector and water-borne diseases
- Expansion of dengue fever into Hokkaido
- Increased allergies and allergy-related diseases
- Increased cost of living and protection from more extreme weather events
- 67 to 70% increase in wind-related losses from more intense typhoons
- Deteriorated freshwater systems and increases in chemical nutrients affecting fish production and harvests from warming temperatures and changes in precipitation
- 1.2 to 3.2% increase in the demand for water supply (with a 3°C warming)

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What does this mean in practice? Read the report Nippon Changes published by the World Wildlife Fund. This means more heat stroke, new infectious diseases, and increases in allergies. More of our lives will be spent protecting ourselves from the environment. There will be more frequent and stronger typhoons. Fishing and agriculture will change completely. Perhaps most significantly, the combination of rising sea levels and stronger typhoons will probably mean that the low lying coastal areas of Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and many other cities will have to be abandoned by our grandchildren. They will have to retreat to higher ground. Have you ever been to Disneyland in Urayasu? Well, your grandchildren are highly unlikely to go to Tokyo Disneyland in Urayasu. Climate change will most probably have forced that site to be abandoned by then. Do you like apples, especially those from Aomori? Well, when you have retired in 45 or 50 years time, it is likely you will only be able to eat apples from Hokkaido because Aomori is too hot.

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Climate Change and Japan

Links:

Japan Meteorological Agency: [Climate Change Monitoring Report](#)

[The Science](#), from 350.org

BBC (2021), "Japan's cherry blossom 'earliest peak since 812'"

BBC (2022), "Living through Japan's hottest summer on record"

気象庁 (2023) 、[「夏 \(6-8月\) の天候」](#)

Mainichi (2023), "Japan logs hottest September on record, 2.66 C higher than average"

BBC (2024), "[2023 confirmed as world's hottest year on record](#)"

NHK (2024), "Japan melts through hottest summer ever"

Note: You cannot use "Links" in the Active Learning Hours Report, but do read them for your interest/education.

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On the class website, I have gathered together a large number of online materials for you to read during the course. I update the materials each year as new issues arise in Japanese society, but notice how I am creating a little database in the "Links" section for Week 1. Since I started doing this four years ago, there has been some kind of weather record set in Japan which is clearly linked to global heating. This trend of extreme weather is just going to get worse and worse as we go through the twenty-first century. Do read these articles, but please note that you cannot use articles listed in the "Links" section for the Active Learning Hours Report.

In This Course ...

- We will think of Japanese society as ...
 - part of a global ecosystem facing extreme danger;
 - a country that is at high risk of impacts from climate change;
 - a society that will have to adapt significantly in the 21st century;
 - a country that cannot afford to be isolated;
 - a country that will be very different in 20, 50, 100 years' time.

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So, to wrap up, in this course we will be looking at what Japanese society is now and where it has come from. But let's also think of the challenges Japanese society, and all human societies, face. We are part of a global ecosystem facing extreme danger as a direct result of destructive human activity, which is slowly but surely destroying the planet on which we depend for survival. Japan is a country that is at high risk of impacts from climate change, particularly because of deadly heat in summer and the increasing destructiveness of storms that we will face. Japanese society will have to adapt significantly in the 21st century and cannot afford to be isolated from the international community. This country will be very different in 20, 50 or 100 years' time. Japanese society and Japanese culture as we know them, therefore, exist in a particular time and place, namely here and now. In this course, let's think about where our society has come from, where it is going, and what we can or should do about it now.