UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Area Studies: Japan

2526-1-F0102R016

Course title

Cultures and Societies of Japan

Topics and course structure

Through a journey through European travel literature of the last few centuries and ethnographic literature of the 20th century up to the present day, with a stop at Ruth Benedict's classic The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, the course examines the construction of the category of Japan (and East Asia) within Western knowledge and imagination. It will address past and current debates on exoticism, Orientalism and self-Orientalism.

At the same time, it will show the complexity of the indigenous and non-indigenous origins of Japanese modernity and post-modernity. It will investigate the philosophical and religious foundations of the social fabric common to other regions of East Asia, the terms of the Confucian koiné, and Japan's place and role in relation to colonial and post-colonial history, inter-Asian flows and hegemonies in its relationship with the Chinese and Korean Asian-continental otherness.

Emphasis and analytical detail will be given to the capital Edo-Tokyo in its historical constitution, topography and the daily practices of its inhabitants, as revealed in dedicated monographs, with methodological insights into urban research.

Objectives

Students who have attended classes regularly and participated actively can reasonably expect to achieve the following results:

1. Knowledge and understanding
· ACQUIRING solid and systematic knowledge of East Asia, with particular attention to the peculiarities of Japan and the reciprocity/circularity of the processes of perception, understanding and stereotyping with Western countries.
· IDENTIFYING the historical, theoretical and methodological specificities that characterise ethno-anthropological studies on Japan, on the one hand by Western researchers (and their continuing marginality in the disciplinary mainstream), and on the other by Japanese researchers starting with the father of folklore studies on the archipelago, Kunio Yanagita.
· UNDERSTANDING the particularities of the Confucian cultural area and the ideographic linguistic area and their relevant research topics, whether identity, religious, territorial, racial or commercial policies, also investigated in their less obvious hierarchical and discriminatory aspects.

2. Ability to apply knowledge and understanding
· ARTICULATING the dialogue between scientific literature and research with a classic historical-thematic approach with specific references to events in Japan, particularly in relation to Europe and China.
· DETECT misunderstandings, mutual positioning as well as obstacles found in the relation and confrontation between Far East and Western countries.

3. Independence of judgement
· UNDERSTANDING the complexity of cultural processes, welcoming and valuing different points of view while overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.
· TAKING a reflective and responsible attitude which enables to weigh the reliability of different sources and perspectives.

4. Communication skills
· EXPRESSING ideas, knowledge and arguments clearly.
· FORMULATING well-founded judgements, integrating information from different and reliable sources.

5. Learning skills
· DEVELOPING and refine one's own learning methods, independently identifying and constructing objects and topics of study.

Methodologies

Lectures will be held partly in the classroom ((roughly 13 classes) and partly remotely (roughly 6 classes).
Lectures by the teacher and external researchers will alternate with discussions and debates on films and documentaries, not only ethnographic, on maps, objects, as well on essays and diverse materials brought to the classroom.
Lessons will be held in Italian.

Online and offline teaching materials

The lecturer will publish information on elearning.unimib regarding supplementary reading, films and documentaries to watch, and information about visits and events.

Programme and references

Oral exam on two volumes:

1. Corradini Piero 2003. Il Giappone e la sua storia. Roma: Bulzoni.
   and one to be chosen from:
   2a. Dale Peter 1986. The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
   2b. Monceri Flavia 2002. Altre globalizzazioni. Universalismo liberal e valori asiatici. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.
   2c. Urru Luigi 2007. Il fantasma tra i ciliegi. Topografie di primavera a Tokyo. Napoli: Liguori..

Please note: only students who have sent the lecturer (luigi.urru@unimib.it) a scientific essay in .pdf or .doc format on a book of their choice from the following list at least ten days before the exam date will be admitted to the oral exam:

- Bestor Theodore 1989. Neighborhood Tokyo. Stanford: Stanford U.P.
- Blacker Carmen 1975. The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan. Londra: Allen & Unwin.
- Cox Rupert 2003. The Zen Arts. An Anthropological Study of the Culture of Aesthetic Form in Japan. Oxon: Routledge Curzon.
- Dalby Liza 1983. Geisha. Berkeley: California U.P.
- Dore Ronald 1978. Shinohata. A Portrait of a Japanese Village. Londra: Allen Lane.
- Fowler Edward 1996. San'ya Blues. Laboring Life in Contemporary Tokyo. Ithaca: Cornell U.P.
- Hendry Joy 1999. An Anthropologist in Japan. Glimpes of Life in the Field. Londra: Routledge.
- Ivy Marilyn 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing. Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: University of Chicago P.
- Iwabuchi Koichi 2002. Recentering Globalization. Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism. Durham: Duke U.P.
- Kelsky Karen 2001. Women on the Verge. Japanese Women, Western Dreams. Durham: Duke U.P.
- Kirby Peter 2011. Troubled Natures. Waste, Environment, Japan. Honolulu: University of Hawai?i P.
- Knight John 2003. Waiting for Wolves in Japan. An Anthropological Study of People-Wildlife Relations. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Kondo Dorinnne 1990. Crafting Selves. Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lock Margaret 1980. East Asian Medicine in Urban Japan. Varieties of Medical Experience. Berkeley: California U.P.
- McVeigh Brian 1998. The Nature of the Japanese State. Rationality and Rituality. Londra: Routledge.
- Moeran Brian 1984. Lost Innocence. Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan. Berkeley: California U.P.
- Nelson John 1996. A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine. Seattle: University of Washington P.
- Robertson Jennifer 1998. Takarazuka. Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan. Berkeley: California U.P.
- Rohlen Thomas 1974. For Harmony and Strength. Japanese White-Collar Organization in Anthropological Perspective. Berkeley e Los Angeles: California U.P.
- Sand Jordan 2013. Tokyo Vernacular. Common Space, Local Histories, Found Objects. Berkeley: California U.P.

In the essay, students will critically address at least the following points:
• a reasoned summary of the book;
• the author's thesis, with its strengths and weaknesses;
• historical and cultural context;
• comparison with scientific writings on similar topics;
• reception (supported by references to relevant reviews), debates sparked by the publication and subsequent events.

The lecturer recommends consulting at least the following works at the Central Library, building U6 Agorà, 2nd floor:
Robertson Jennifer (ed.) 2006. A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan. Malden: Blackwell.

The essay should be 15,000 characters long and include footnotes and a bibliography, both of which are excluded from the word count. Students should accompany their essays with photographs of the cover and colophon of the volume and preface them with a signed statement: 'The essay I am submitting is the exclusive result of my own work and is not plagiarised from the work of others or the use of artificial intelligence. All references are correctly attributed with quotation marks and bibliographical notes'. The lecturer will submit each essay to the software provided by the University and will report any student found to have plagiarised the work of others to the Degree Course Board and the Department Board, with academic, civil and criminal consequences.

*The lecturer will not consider essays that do not meet the conditions set out in these instructions, including the strict deadline for submission, and will not admit to the oral exam students whose essays show signs of plagiarism or the use of artificial intelligence. Similarly, students whose essays are considered insufficient will not be admitted to the oral exam. Immediate grounds for failure will be the lack of appropriate quotations in quotation marks or footnotes or an adequate bibliography.

Books that students cannot find new in bookshops are available on the second-hand market and in libraries.

Students will benefit from previous knowledge of the Japanese language. In addition to what is already included in the Bibliography, Erasmus students may request the entire exam programme in English.

Assessment methods

Type of assessment
Interview on the exam texts indicated in the Bibliography, subject to the submission of a written essay.
A limited number of students, chosen at random, will be given the opportunity during the course to give a presentation to the class on a book assigned by the lecturer according to a schedule to be defined at the beginning of the course.

Assessment criteria
The choice of an oral interview for the exam is consistent with the objectives of the course, as it allows the teacher, in a dialogue situation, to assess the knowledge that the student has acquired of the texts as well as their argumentative and critical skills.
Similarly, the requirement to submit a preliminary essay before the interview encourages students to engage with written academic language, editorial conventions, citation methods and the distinction between citation and plagiarism, thus acquiring skills and sensitivity that will be of great benefit when writing their degree thesis.

During the interview, the lecturer will ask the student at least one question on each of the texts studied.
The assessment criteria will be the completeness of the preparation, the clarity of the presentation, the acquisition of the disciplinary language, the ability to link the topics covered and the critical approach. Depending on the degree of satisfaction, the student will receive a mark out of 30, based on the following scale:

1. Not sufficient (0-17)
2. Sufficient (18-21)
3. Fair (22-23)
4. Good (24-26)
5. Very good (27-28)
6. Almost excellent and excellent (29-30)
7. Excellent (30 with honours).

Office hours

Friday 20th March 2026, 9-10 am
Or by appointment.
Office 4126, 4th floor, Building U6 Agorà.

Programme validity

Programmes are valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES