UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Japanese Culture

2627-1-E2002R010

Course title

Japanese Culture

Topics and course structure

This course is conceived as an introduction to Japanese culture and its developments from its origins to the second half of the twentieth century. The major expressions of this culture, particularly in the fields of literature and the visual and performing arts, will be examined in relation to the historical and social contexts in which they emerged, as well as to the political, philosophical, and religious factors that contributed to shaping their aesthetics and content.
The first half of the course, taught by Prof. Andrea Maurizi, will focus on the cultural history of Japan from its origins to approximately 1600. The second half, taught by Dr. Giacomo Calorio, will cover the subsequent period, from the beginning of the Edo period through to the end of the Sh?wa era (1989). Particular attention will be devoted, through focused case studies and thematic discussions, to literature and film production.

Objectives

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By the end of the course, students will have acquired a solid and systematic knowledge of the cultural history of Japan, from its origins to the end of the twentieth century, as well as an understanding of the main historical, social, political, philosophical, and aesthetic dynamics that have shaped its development.

Students will be able to use the knowledge acquired to analyze and interpret the major expressions of Japanese

culture, placing them appropriately within their historical and cultural contexts. They will also be able to synthesize information effectively and establish connections between cultural phenomena, historical processes, and systems of thought.

The course aims to foster students' critical and independent thinking by encouraging them to develop personal interpretations of the topics covered and to support them with well-founded and coherent arguments. At the same time, the course contributes to the strengthening of communication skills through active participation in class and critical engagement with the materials presented. Learning skills are further developed through the analysis and discussion of course content, promoting an autonomous and reflective approach to study.

Methodologies

The course consists of 56 two-hour sessions, delivered primarily in person through a lecture-based teaching format. While maintaining a predominantly instructional approach, the classes will include frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion, actively engaging students in the analysis and examination of the topics covered through the use of textual and audiovisual materials.

Online and offline teaching materials

Textbooks and supplementary materials uploaded to the e-learning platform.

Programme and references

The course in Japanese Culture aims to provide a historical and cultural overview of Japan from its origins to the contemporary era, tracing its main political, social, and cultural transformations. It begins with the ancient period, examining the origins of the Japanese people and culture, the formation of a unified state, and the earliest cultural influences from the Asian continent, while also highlighting the processes of adaptation and indigenous development. It then moves on to the so-called feudal age (12th-16th centuries), with particular attention to the Kamakura shogunate and the dominance of the Ashikaga clan. This period also includes the first contacts with the West and the gradual process of pacification and unification following a long phase of internal conflict. The course continues with the Edo period (17th-19th centuries), characterized by the establishment of the bakuhan system and the influence of Confucian philosophy and ethics. It also examines the development of urban spaces and popular culture, as well as the distinctive policy of national isolation known as sakoku. The Meiji period (1868-1912) is then addressed, marked by the Meiji Restoration and the emergence of the modern nation-state. A central focus of this phase is the debate surrounding Westernization and modernization in Japan. Finally, the course covers the 20th century, focusing on the rise of mass society, nationalism and militarism, as well as the wartime and postwar periods, up to the birth of contemporary Japan.
Particular emphasis will also be placed on the analysis of literary and cinematic production, understood as a key tool for interpreting and understanding the cultural and historical dynamics of Japan across different periods.

- Paul Varley, Introduzione alla cultura giapponese, Lindau, Torino, 2020 (entire volume);
- Spiritualità ed etica nella letteratura del Giappone premoderno, a cura di A. Maurizi, UTET, Novara, 2012 (nine chapters to be specified at the beginning of the course);
- Maria Roberta Novielli, Storia del cinema giapponese, Marsilio, Venezia, 2001 (up to p. 198; any sections to be excluded will be specified on the e-learning platform - A short list of films to watch for the exam will be made available to students as a supplement to the course handbook.);

- Three novels to be chosen from a list that will be provided at the beginning of the course;
- Course handouts prepared by the professors and available on the course’s e-learning page.

Assessment methods

Oral exam on the textbooks and other materials indicated in the Bibliography.

The final assessment takes into account the degree of acquisition and understanding of the contents related to the cultural history of Japan, the ability to critically analyze the historical, social, and cultural phenomena discussed, as well as the appropriate use of the discipline’s specific terminology. It will also assess the ability to apply acquired knowledge, to establish connections between different historical periods and cultural domains, and to develop an independent reflection on the topics addressed.

The assessment is based on the Dublin Descriptors, structured into the following performance levels:

Low level (0–17/30): insufficient
Knowledge and understanding: the student demonstrates fragmentary and superficial knowledge of the course content, with difficulty in understanding the main historical and cultural processes of Japan.
Ability to apply knowledge: unable to correctly place events, periods, and phenomena within their historical and cultural context and shows difficulty in using disciplinary terminology.
Autonomy of judgment: shows no critical capacity or interpretative autonomy.
Communication skills: oral expression is uncertain and poorly structured; use of the discipline’s specific terminology is limited or inappropriate.

Learning skills: shows difficulty in reworking the contents and in establishing connections between the different topics of the course.

Medium level (18–24/30): sufficient – good
Knowledge and understanding: the student demonstrates a general knowledge of the course content, although with some gaps or minor inaccuracies regarding non-essential aspects.
Ability to apply knowledge: able to place the main historical and cultural phenomena in their correct context, although with some uncertainty in analysis.
Autonomy of judgment: shows a fair degree of critical ability, though not always fully independent.
Communication skills: oral presentation is generally clear and correct, with a satisfactory command of disciplinary terminology and a sufficient ability to structure the argument.
Learning skills: demonstrates good ability to rework and connect the main contents of the course.

High level (25–30/30): very good – excellent
Knowledge and understanding: the student has an in-depth and well-structured knowledge of the course content and a secure understanding of the main historical and cultural processes of Japan.
Ability to apply knowledge: fully able to place, interpret, and compare cultural and historical phenomena in a coherent and informed way, making effective connections between different periods and domains.
Autonomy of judgment: demonstrates strong critical thinking skills, interpretative autonomy, and originality in the analysis of the topics discussed.
Communication skills: oral expression is clear, precise, and well-structured, with appropriate and confident use of disciplinary terminology.
Learning skills: shows excellent autonomous learning abilities, critical reworking skills, and integration of knowledge.

N.B. The professors are available for any clarification regarding lecture topics through individual appointments, either in person or online. Students holding a PUOI certification must send the document by email to the instructor well in advance of the exam date.

Office hours

By appointment to be arranged via e-mail (andrea.maurizi@unimib.it; giacomo.calorio@unimib.it).

In person, on teaching days or as indicated by the instructors, at Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo 1, Building U6, 4th floor, Offices 4104 (Maurizi) and 4110 (Calorio).

Online, via the following Webex rooms:
https://unimib.webex.com/meet/andrea.maurizi
https://unimib.webex.com/meet/giacomo.calorio.

Programme validity

The programme is valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

None

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION