GHUM 252: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

# Catalog Description

This course is a cross-disciplinary study of a non-Western culture. Students examine the ways people have responded to the human condition from different historical, religious and philosophical positions, and with their own artistic, musical and theatrical expressions. Sections, which vary by instructor, include East-Asian experiences and West-African humanities.

# Overview of GHUM 252 in Japan

In Japan, GHUM 252 will focus on the spiritual, philosophical, and artistic traditions that have shaped modern Japan. Japan is per capita one of the wealthiest and most advanced countries in the world, but it is sometimes known as a country of contradictions.

Modern Japan has over 120 million people that live in a country that is smaller than California, of which nearly 80% is unlivable because it is steep mountains or rocky coastlines. The Japanese have adapted to life in such a tightly constricted space by adopting a strong and pervasive sense of group identity, a culture which enforces conformity, in which “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” This group identity is strengthened by the fact that the country lived in self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world for many centuries. Coupled with comparatively low rates of immigration, and a strong central government, this culture of conformity has led to Japan being a very homogeneous society.

Japan’s homogeneity stands in stark contrast to the United States which prides itself on its diversity. This course will explore how Japan’s unique culture makes it different from the U.S. with a focus on the contrast between Japan’s collectivist versus the U.S. individualist ethic.

# Proposed Course Activities

## Topics for Study

The unifying theme for all of the studies will be an exploration of the differences between the individualistic culture of the U.S. and collectivist culture of Japan, and the tensions and difficulties that arise therein.

### Feudal Japan

Starting with a trip to the Edo Museum in Tokyo, students will begin to understand the class system in Japan and the way that society was organized both historically and in the present. Excursions may include trips to historical feudal sites like the shrine at Nikko, the Imperial Palace, Nijo Castle, and Himeji Castle. Parallels between feudal society and the current structure of society will be drawn. This will be an opportunity also to observe Japanese architecture and begin to understand how it plays into the organization of everyday life in the country.

### Japanese Religious Tradition: Shinto and Buddhism

Shinto and Buddhism are the main religious traditions in Japan. The influence of these religions pervades the day to day lives of the Japanese people. Students will have the opportunity to visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples and experience some of the rituals and traditions practiced at these places. In contrast to the pervasiveness of these influences, the typical modern Japanese person does not appear to be very “religious” from a Western perspective. Students will have an opportunity to discuss and observe how religious practice in Japan differs from that in the U.S.

### Calligraphy

There are over 2000 kanji (Chinese characters) in everyday use in Japan. A large part of a Japanese child’s schooling involves learning these characters, and despite their sheer number, Japan has an extraordinarily high literacy rate. While most Japanese can read and write the kanji, relatively few study it to the extent required to bring it to the level of art. Learning Japanese calligraphy, like other uniquely Japanese art forms, requires the student to spend many years imitating the masters before being free to find self-expression in the kanji. Again in the kanji is a place for students to observe how Japanese can only earn a right to self-expression through submission of the self to the established tradition. Students will have the opportunity to do calligraphy and to observe great works.

### Japanese Poetry: Haiku and Tanka

The Japanese style of poetry, haiku, is well known in the U.S. with its strict 5-7-5 meter. However, there are other elements to Japanese poetry that get lost in translation when they come to the U.S. After having studied calligraphy, students will be more aware of the depth and significance that certain kanji add to a poem. They will be able to see the multiple layers of meaning that arise from the construction of good Japanese poems. Students will have the opportunity to write their own poems following more than the 5-7-5 rules that they may know, and to read and critique each other’s work.

### Music and Drama

Traditional Japanese music and drama have a very distinctive style. From distinctly Japanese instruments such as the koto, shamisen, and shakuhachi flute, to the fantastical kabuki theater. The discipline of becoming a musician or actor in Japan is similar to that of becoming a master of calligraphy—only after years of imitation does a practitioner find freedom for self-expression. By attending musical and dramatic performances and interacting with the performers, students will have an opportunity how the dialectic of individual versus collective plays out in these Japanese arts as well.

### Sumo Wrestling

Contrary to the impression of many westerners, sumo wrestling is much more than fat guys pushing each other around. With a long and deep tradition rooted in a Shinto ritual to ward off evil spirits, sumo combines ceremony and combat in a way that simultaneously shapes the character of the wrestler and celebrates the safety of the community. Activities would involve visiting a sumo stable, where the wrestlers live, and watching or perhaps even participating in their highly disciplined and structured daily life. The May sumo tournament takes place in Tokyo and the culminating event of this unit will be to attend the bouts during one day of the tournament.

## Learning about Japanese Home Life: Homestay Experience

Students either singly or in pairs will live with a Japanese family for the month that they are living in Japan. There is a tremendous amount to be learned by observing the way that a Japanese household is organized and run, and how family members interact with each other on a daily basis. Observations about their home lives will be part of their required journaling assignments.

## Schedule

The course will last for five weeks. Weeks one through four would be spent in Tokyo. Students will live with a family and have class or excursions during the week. Weekend excursions will also be planned, but will be flexible if students express an interest in taking part in other activities in the country. During the final week of the trip, students will take a train trip to see other parts of the country, likely Mount Fuji, Kyoto, Himeji, and perhaps Hiroshima if there is time. Students would leave for Japan immediately following the end of the spring term at JMU and return in mid June.

## Assessment

Assessment for this course will comprise two elements—participation in a course blog, and a comparative paper, or multimedia presentation that they’ll create upon returning to the U.S. The blog will document the students’ engagement with the culture while they are in country. The paper or presentation will demonstrate the students’ ability to synthesize what they’ve experienced into a form suitable for communicating to their peers who have not experienced the culture.

### Course Blog

The central means of assessing students’ appreciation of Japanese culture will be via their contributions to the course blog. A blog will be established to which all students will be given privileges to contribute. Each student will be responsible for contributing to the course blog by posting reflective and reactive entries accompanied by photos and videos that the students have taken during their experiences. Students will also be required to read and comment on the postings made by their classmates. It is anticipated that some of the blog topics will be assigned and that others will be open. While there will be a minimum number of acceptable postings per week, students will be free to post as much as they wish over and above the minimum.

### Paper or Presentation

The target audience for this work will be their colleagues at JMU who have not had the opportunity to experience Japan. The work would pick one aspect of Japanese culture that differs from U.S. culture and create a compelling narrative that allows audience members to begin to get into the Japanese mindset. Students can choose to write a research paper rooted in their experience or they can create a presentation or other multimedia experience that they will then deliver to an audience at JMU.