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.

# Learning Objectives

The objectives of this course are to have students:

1. Question their own and others’ opinions about and responses to the world.
2. Apply the methods of the discipline(s) studied to material from the humanities.
3. Identify and evaluate arguments using appropriate concepts and techniques and to formulate logical arguments on the same basis.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of broader cultural, historical, or conceptual contexts of particular issues, ideas, objects, or events - past and present.
5. Experience appropriate humanities events (such as exhibits, films, performances or public lectures)

# 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.

# 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. Additionally, this course will explore the history of Japan’s culture, religion and the arts with a unique opportunity to experience the progression into today’s Japan. A reading packet will be given to each student to supplement their in and out of class experiences. Students will be tested on this information throughout the duration of this course.

### Pre-trip Assignment

Students will be required to decide upon 2-3 assumptions about life in Japan and or the Japanese. These can range from very personal and small, to more global and large. These are to be discussed on the first day of class in Japan. The purpose of this assignment is to gauge the student’s growth on their perspective of the world, specifically pertaining to Japan and the U.S.A.

### History of Japan

Students will begin their study in Japan learning about the rich history of the Japanese culture, religion and creative avenues. The classroom time will be augmented with exploration and experiences, in the three areas of focus, culture, religions and the arts. Exploration of these aspects of Japan will include trips to the Edo Museum in Tokyo, historical feudal sites like the shrine at Nikko, the Imperial Palace, Nijo Castle, and Himeji Castle.

**Religions of Japan** The importance of religion in Japan is vital to understating the evolution of the country. Shinto and Buddhism are the main religious traditions in Japan. Students will learn about each of the major religions practiced in Japan and will have the opportunity to visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples to experience some of the rituals and traditions practiced at these places The influence of these religions pervades the day-to-day lives of the Japanese people. 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.

**The arts of Japan**  There are many creative traditions in Japan and the range of disciplines varies within a wider spectrum than Western traditions. The students will learn about the theatrical traditions of Kabuki and No theater, Joruri puppet theater and butoh dance. Painting, pottery, silks, lacquer and ikebana (flower arrangement) are examples of visual arts that are prevalent in Japan and the students will have opportunities to learn about each of these forms. Additionally, students will come to understand the importance and the aesthetics of Japanese architecture and the famous gardens of Japan. Further understanding of these forms will be experienced through excursions to Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kabuki-za, and Dairakudakan’s Kochuten Theater. The excursions are not limited to only these venues and are subject to change depending on the availability of performances and exhibits.

### 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.

### 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. This is a unique opportunity for students to receive an insider’s perspective on how the Japanese live.

## 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 Shinkansen, or bullet train, 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

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| **Assignment** | **Percentage** |
| Course Blog | 20% |
| Paper | 30% |
| Quizzes | 25% |
| Art Project | 25% |
| **Total:** | **100%** |

### Course Blog (20%)

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 (2), students will be free to post as much as they wish over and above the minimum.

### Paper (30%)

The students will revisit their pre-trip assignment of their assumptions of Japan and/or the Japanese, and discuss if their assumptions changed or not. This paper is a reflection on their experience and growth throughout this adventure. Students must reference readings, lectures and experiences (at least two for each). This paper should be double spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, using MLA format/citation and no less than 5 pages. The due date for all papers is June 23rd at 5pm. Students will be evaluated on depth of thought, use of experiences and gained knowledge and grammar. Papers should be written in 3rd person. All papers must be submitted electronically through Blackboard or via email to either Dr. Benton or Ms. Vessey.

### Quizzes (25%)

Quizzes will be given each week to evaluate the students’ understanding of the material.

### Art Project (25%)

The students will choose one or more artistic genre and create a 2D or 3D visual project. This assignment will be further discussed in Japan. This project is due by the end of the stay in Japan.

### Readings

Students will be asked to read selections from the following works:

Varley, P. H. (2000) *Japanese Culture.* University of Hawaii Press. 400pp. 0824821521

Keene, D. (1978) *Landscapes and Portraits: Appreciations of Japanese Culture*. Kodansha International, 342pp. 0870111469

Fieser, J., and Powers, J. (2011) *Scriptures of the World’s Religions*. McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 560pp. 0073535842