SOZ330: Japanese Popular Culture  
Sophia University, Summer 2019  
Professor Alisa Freedman (alisaf@uoregon.edu)

Course Description
Japanese fashions, games, manga, anime, toys, music, and more have spread worldwide and have created a new form of national superpower. Popular culture has changed Tokyo space and revitalized neighborhoods. Hello Kitty is arguably the most recognizable icon in the world and was made tourism ambassador to Asia in 2008. Emoji are programmed into global cellphones; Pokémon continues to inspire new franchises. Words like “sushi” and “otaku” are well known in several countries, and the suffix “zilla” (from Godzilla) is part of American slang. Tourists from around Asia are coming to Japan in droves to buy popular culture goods, shopping patterns that are influencing the economic relationship between China, Japan, and South Korea. What makes Japanese popular culture so fascinating? How are cute characters like Hello Kitty transforming global politics and the ways people construct their own identities? Are there any negative effects of regarding Tokyo as the “capital of cool”? We will look at how women and men of different age groups around the world have used Japanese popular culture to form new communities, make statements about gender and identity, and to overturn cultural stereotypes. We will discuss how artists and corporations have spearheaded major trends, often with support from the Japanese government and through efforts of fans. We will analyze how Japanese popular culture both “belongs” to Japan and has become an “international” culture, linking people around the world.

To cover several topics in a few weeks, we will adopt an “object-centered” approach and introduce key trends through use of example historical and contemporary trends that have shaped artistic production, as well as, politics, society, and economics in Japan. These case studies are also a way to examine broader themes in Japanese culture (e.g., cultural literacy, otaku, and kawaii). As a result, more than delving into a “time capsule” of influential trends, we will learn enduring lessons about how popular culture reflects the societies that produce and consume it.

We will experiment with methods of the new academic field of Japanese popular culture studies. We will engage with Tokyo popular culture and its sites and events firsthand. Students are encouraged to bring in materials related to course themes and to share their own experiences. Please come to class ready to share insights and debate issues. Prior knowledge of Japanese culture and language is helpful but not required. All readings and discussions will be in English. The syllabus can be adapted to fit the interests of the class.

Assignments

“Taking Stock” Exercise (25%) Students will be required to submit a “taking stock” exercise (instructions and assignment sheets will be provided) on July 19. Late papers will not be accepted! Questions will be assigned and will concern course readings and discussions. Some questions will be creative; others will be more analytical and ethnographic.

5 Participation Exercises (total of 25%) As noted on the syllabus, 5 participation exercises will be assigned in class. These assignments are designed to encourage participation, assess what you are learning, and add to the enjoyment of the class. Most are assigned for in the first half of the course. You must be present in class to do the exercises.

Group Project (30%): Guidelines will be given and groups decided during the first classes. Groups will present their projects in the last class and turn them in to the professor to be graded.

Attendance and Participation (20%): Attendance is mandatory and will be checked during every class. Students are also expected to come to class having done the assigned reading and ready to share their insights and impressions. Pop quizzes may be given at any time!
Assignments and Learning Outcomes

Through this class, it is my hope that students will 1) gain a general overview of important Japanese trends, 2) consider ways popular culture shapes our worldviews, international relations, and images of Japan, 3) better understand the social, political, economic, historical, and aesthetic significance of popular culture, 4) practice analyzing different media, 5) become familiar with Tokyo, 6) experience methodologies of popular culture studies, 7) learn to better express ideas orally and in writing, and 8) work collaboratively. Accordingly, the assignments evaluate you in terms of these goals and stress active engagement with course texts and themes. The time required for each task has been carefully considered. **You will get more out of this course if you do the reading on time.**

Regular attendance and participation are crucial in this intensive course!

Requests: I don’t think I need to remind you, very diligent students, but **no cheating on any level will be tolerated. Nor will any back chatter** in lectures and discussion sections! To avoid disturbing the other students, please **do not get up and walk around the room during class. Use of computers during class is strongly discouraged and should be reserved for taking notes. Refrain from talking, sleeping, texting, and emailing during class. No cellphones are allowed.** Your professor and classmates deserve your full attention. **The glare of computer screens is distracting, especially during films. Loud typing is a disturbance. Please be considerate of the people around you.**

Course Reading List
2. Readings on Moodle. (Indicated by an * on the syllabus.)
3. Websites indicated on the syllabus

Course Syllabus

**July 8: Introduction to the Course and What is Japanese Popular Culture**
- Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, “Introducing Japanese Popular Culture: Serious Approaches to Playful Delights,”
- **Participation Exercise 1 (done in class)**

**July 9: Popular Culture in Tokyo**
- Damien Brennan, “Hanabi: The Cultural Significance of Fireworks in Japan”

**July 10: Popular Culture to Teach Disaster, I – Local Mascots and Warning Signs**
- Debra J. Occhi, “Kumamon: Japan’s Surprisingly Cheeky Mascot”
- CNN news report of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7cmsOvoD-A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7cmsOvoD-A)
- Nuclear Boy has a Stomach Ache” (*Onaka ga itakunatta genbatsu-kun*) video, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sakN2hSVxA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sakN2hSVxA)
- Maho no kotaba” AC Japan public service advertisement video, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=EsRm78ZSOgc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=EsRm78ZSOgc)

**Participation Exercise 2** – Choose 1 or 2 1) Please find a warning sign you have seen in Tokyo. Do you think this sign is effective? Does it use or has it been incorporated into any kind of popular culture?

July 11: Emoji, Cultural Literacy, and Globalization


**Participation Exercise 3** – Emoji Translation Contest! The class will vote on the winner. Translate at least 2 sentences of one of your favorite books, manga, or anime into emoji or write an original emoji narrative. To inspire you: http://narrativesinemoji.tumblr.com

July 12 Anti-War, Anti-Nuclear Godzilla


July 15: Japanese Characters Invade the World, II – Hello Kitty

• Christine R. Yano, “‘Hello Kitty is Not a Cat?!?’: Tracking Japanese Cute Culture at Home and Abroad”

**Participation Exercise 4** – Please choose 1 of the following: 1) Please think of a fear that could be depicted through use of a monster. This fear can be a personal emotion or a larger global problem. Please draw your monster and write a few sentences about what it/he/she does to worsen or solve the problem. Use Godzilla as your inspiration. 2) Please describe in a few sentences one important way Godzilla or Hello Kitty has influenced the life of someone you know or have read about. Please find examples not included in Christine Yano’s article!

July 16: Japanese Characters Invade the World, I – Doraemon as Asia’s Friend

• Toyota Reborn Doraemon Commercials (2012), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGFemrtv7-M

July 17: Manga – Activist, Historical, and Gender Marked

• Jennifer Prough, “Sampling Girls’ Culture: An Analysis of Shōjo Manga Magazines”
• Deborah Shamoon, “The Beautiful Men of the Inner Chamber: Gender-Bending, Boys’ Love and Other Shōjo Manga Tropes in Ōoku”
• *Miyazaki Hayao, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, Volume 1, pp. 3-17. [PDF]

July 18: Magical Girls and “Robot Boys,” Part 2: Sailor Moon Goes Global and History

July 19: Media Mix Goes to School
• Marc Steinberg, “Condensing the Media Mix: The Tatami Galaxy’s Multiple Possible Worlds”

Taking Stock Exercise Due.

July 22: From Guitar Heroes to Idol Wars
• Michael Furmanovsky, “Electrifying the Japanese Teenager Across Generations: The Role of the Electric Guitar in Japan’s Popular Culture”
• Patrick W. Galbraith, “AKB Business: Idols and Affective Economies in Contemporary Japan”
• David Novak, “In Search of Japnoise: Globalizing Underground Music”

Short Exercise 5 – If you were to add a character to any of the manga and anime we have discussed, who would you add? Why? What is their gender identity?

July 23: Pokémon Secrets
• *Ann Allison, “Gotta Catch ‘Em All: The Pokemonization of America (and the World),” Millennial Monsters, 234-270. [PDF]

July 24: Fandoms Change Tokyo – Otaku and Korea Wave
• Optional: Manga adaptation Husky and Medley by Retro, fan translation of Chapter 1 by Kurosada, http://dynasty-scans.com/chapters/husky_and_medley_ch01
• Eun-Young Jung, “Korean Pop Music in Japan: Understanding the Complex Relationship Between Japan and Korea in the Popular Culture Realm”

July 25: Future Directions and Unpopular Culture
• Adrian Favell, “Aida Makoto: Notes from an Apathetic Continent”
• James Jack, “Art from What is Already There on Naoshima and Other Islands in the Seto Inland Sea”
• Tong Lam, “Japan Lost and Found: Modern Ruins as Debris of the Economic Miracle”

Participation Exercise 6 – Please make a prediction of what will be one of the most influential popular culture trend of 2019. In other words, please choose a key term, image, or object that you feel will become increasing important this year. Why will this trend be so powerful? Who will make it so? Will it become more popular through television, advertisement posters, social media, or other means? This exercise asks you to consider the most important social, economic, and political issues facing Japan and the role of popular culture in these issues.

July 26: Final Projects and Wrap-Up Discussion