

SOCI 123
Japanese Culture Inside/Out
Prof. Jeff Tirshfield

Spring 2026

Time: Tues/Thurs 9:30 am – 10:50 am

Location: RWAC 0103

Course Reader: Looks like just me this time out

email: jtirshfi@ucsd.edu

Office Hours: Tues. 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm, Bird Rock
Coffee by the Epstein Family Theatre;
and by appt.

Course Information:

This course takes a historical approach to exploring Japanese culture and examines specific cultural encounters and dialogues between Japan and the West. We will explore how particular socio-political and socio-economic structures—such as Samurai-based feudalism, *Baburu Keiki* [the Bubble Economy], and *Ushinawareta Jūnen* [the Lost Decade]; cultural practices like Martial Arts [*Jiu-jitsu*, *Judo*, etc.], *Seppuku* [ritual disembowelment], *Keiretsu* [cross-ownership of businesses], and *Madogiwazoku* [employees with no employment responsibilities]; and philosophical and religious practices—such as: Bushido [samurai code of ethics], Buddhism, and *Shinto*—developed within Japan, how they formed through (as well as resisted) interactions with other societies and cultures, and how these cultural elements have influenced societies outside Japan. We will consider the significance and limitations of national boundaries and transnational relationships, as well as the connection between the creation of meaning and political, economic, and social factors.

We will draw on a variety of primary, scholarly, business, and artistic sources, with a special focus on transitional periods in Japanese history and how developments during those transitions affected modern Japanese culture and its relationship with the West. We will pay close attention to the appeal of Japan in the West and the influence of the West in Japan, as well as the connection between cultural production and shifts in Japan's political economy on the global stage. What I aim to “prove”—in as much as “prove” means illustrate—is that culture truly matters. Threads of the old are woven together to create culture anew. In weaving a 700-year feudal history into an advanced post-industrial economy, Japan is unique. We will explore Japan's uniqueness.

Because the material we will be reading and the topics we will be discussing are so interesting—OK. I'm biased... just go with it—I ask that you contribute to group knowledge by sharing your thoughts and insights. Most Thursdays (04/09, 04/16, 04/23, 04/30, 05/14, 05/21, 05/28 and 06/04 — weeks 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10), I will ask you, working in four-person groups, to comment on and discuss a [historical] cultural structure or practice exemplified within the readings, and to contribute to a class-wide discussion—I will be an active participant and guide. While I encourage all group members to participate in each class discussion, one member from each group will be responsible for summarizing their group response(s) in writing—2 pages (1-inch margins, Times New Roman 11 or 12 pt font, with the names of all group members listed at the top of page one). In summary, each group member will be responsible for writing two responses over the course of the course.

I expect you, like the scholars we will read, to apply theory where relevant. *While the discussion topics will align thematically with the week's readings, your response(s) should not consist of a summary of the readings; it should present your group's thoughts, position(s), and assertions regarding the question(s) posed.*

Just a note: while our themes are holy (in a decidedly non-religious way), our discussion topics are not. Time permitting, we should be able to explore other thematically related topics of interest to the class. More on this later.

Our *Mokuyokai* discussions (Mitsubishi has a *Kinyokai*, which we will cover during weeks 9 and 10) will last between 20 and 40 minutes. I expect each group member to be prepared—meaning they have completed the readings and attended the prior Tuesday's lecture. The group member responsible for sending me the group response must upload it to Canvas by Saturday at 6:00 p.m. (approximately 55 hours after Thursday's lecture—no later). These discussions will account for 28% of your course grade—10% for each response you author (20% total), .5% each for your contributions to the remaining six papers, and 5% for your peer evaluation (you

will be graded 50% on your evaluation of your peers' work and effort, and 50% on their evaluation of yours); if you are not present, you will not receive credit. Late papers will not receive credit—all group members will be affected. The person responsible for any given response will be called upon to comment on that response the following Tuesday.

You are expected to attend lectures (yeah, all of them—how else can you participate in our *Mokuyokai*?). As you might ascertain by the tenor of this syllabus, I seek and value your input and participation—a small victory for supporters of Socrates and Hegel everywhere. If you are not in attendance, you can't share—and not sharing can have a negative impact on your grade. Participation and Attendance will account for 7% of your course grade.

There will be an in-class midterm. The short answer essays will be based on the readings, lectures, and class discussions—another reason to grace us with your presence. The midterm will account for 25% of your course grade.

Finally, there will be a final exam worth 40% of your course grade. Don't stress about it; it's eleven weeks away. If you attend class, do the readings, and participate, you will do just fine. Seriously, you will.

Oh, one more thing: I am here for you. I teach because I view education as a calling (nod to Weber), and I learn as much from you as you learn from me. That learning feeds back into my research; it's kind of an autopoietic system, but as such, it requires both you and me to contribute. I am happy to meet with you during office hours, when I practice *jiu-jitsu* or yoga, or at some other mutually convenient time. I love to talk shop. Use me as a resource; I know stuff; that's why they pay me the big bucks.

Evaluation:

- Discussion responses (28% of course grade)
- Midterm exam (25% of course grade) - Short Answer, Short Essay
- Final exam (40% of course grade) – Two to four prompts
- Participation and Attendance (7% of course grade)

Required Materials – online at HathiTrust.org, online at CalCopy, and at a bookstore:

- 📖 Okakura. *The Book of Tea* – PDF available online on Canvas and [HathiTrust.org](https://www.hathitrust.org). Book available at an online bookseller near you
- 📖 Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows* – PDF available online on Canvas and archive.org. Book available at an online bookseller near you
- 📖 Nitobe. *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* – PDF available online at Canvas and [HathiTrust.org](https://www.hathitrust.org). Book available at an online bookseller near you
- 📖 Rankin. 2011. *Seppuku* – PDF available online at Canvas. Book available at an online bookseller near you
- 📖 Smith. 2025. *The Weeb Economy* – PDFs will be made available on Canvas
- 📖 Movies held on Course Reserves (through UCSD Library):
 - *Shichinin no Samurai*
 - *The Magnificent Seven*
 - *Chushingura*
 - *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*
- 📖 The SOCI 123 Japanese Culture Inside/Out Reader will be available at Cal Copy, 3211 Holiday Court, #201A, La Jolla, CA 92037 (Villa La Jolla Plaza--just off campus) – calcopyscd@gmail.com. **To purchase a print copy (hard copy) of the reader, please click (or cut and paste) the following URL: <https://calcopyscd.com/products> (www.calcopyscd.com)**

The syllabus may (will) be updated throughout the course to address relevant social phenomena or social facts (for you Durkheim fans).

Note on the (non)use of Electronics:

Please place all electronics on silent mode during lectures. Also, cool it with the fuzzy kitty videos, TikTok influencer talks, YouTube fail videos, phone calls, and yes, even texting. You might think you can multitask; research suggests otherwise. Additionally, and perhaps more important to the success of others taking this course, I am easily distracted by all of the aforementioned.

Academic Integrity:

Students should be familiar with UCSD's regulations concerning plagiarism and the integrity of scholarship. Plagiarism is serious, and suspected cases will be referred to UCSD's Office of Academic Integrity. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating, please ask me.

ChatGPT and the like:

Generative AI tools are just that: tools. Don't rely on them to write your papers, fact-check your work, or provide and verify sources. These tools work tremendously fast, yet they are still quite buggy—hallucinations are but one issue. Remember, these tools use the information provided by their programmers (and more recently, themselves) and the Internet to inform their responses to your queries, and the Internet is riddled with—to quote the title of an excellent book by Harry Frankfurt— [*On*] *Bullshit*.

Use these tools to explore and experiment. Question their results...our brains are still infinitely better and more capable of addressing socially constructed ethical dilemmas—new, very new, research confirms this thesis.

Schedule

Week 1: Review of course syllabus and course expectations, along with a [very short] history of Japan

A bit on Japanese feudalism and its effects on [more modern] Japanese culture

- Ikegami. *The Taming of the Samurai*. 3-43 (reader)
- Okakura. *The Book of Tea*. 1-160 (entire book—don't stress about the length of the book; there are very few words on each written page... what you do not read this week, you can finish next)

Week 2: Japanese cultural migration during the late Meiji period

- Okakura. *The Book of Tea*. 1-160 (whatever you did not finish last week)
- Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows*. 1-42 (entire book—again, don't stress, it's a concise book)
- **Things on which to think**
 - Why tea? Hint... It's not as much a question of taste as it is one of geopolitics
 - Okakura and Tanizaki on gender

Week 3: The influence of *Bushido* on Japanese culture

- Nitobe. *Bushido: The Soul of the Samurai*. (book, Chapters 1-12)
- Watch movie: *Shichinin no Samurai* (on your own; held in course reserves)
- **Things on which to think**
 - The influence of *Bushido* on the Japanese *Salaryman*
 - *Shichinin no Samurai* as exemplars of *Bushido*. Hint: What is the meaning of *Samurai*?

Week 4: The influence of *Bushido* on Japan and beyond

- Nitobe. *Bushido: The Soul of the Samurai*. (book, Chapters 13-17)
- Benedict. *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum*. Chapter 4, pgs. 76-97 (reader)
- Friday. *Bushido or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition*. 339-49 (reader)
- Ikegami. *Shame and the Samurai*. 1351-78 (reader)
- Watch movie: *The Magnificent Seven* (on your own; held in course reserves)
- **Things on which to think**
 - *Gamanzuyoi* vs. Stoicism. The effects of religion and the political economy on moral and ethical systems. What ethical foundations led the characters in the movies *Shichinin no Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* to behave the way they did?
 - Shame is the consequence of honor lost. Guilt is a finding that a rule or law has been violated—the absence of innocence. Guilt can be addressed via atonement, expiation, or sanction. Can one atone or be sanctioned for shame? How are shame and guilt similar? How are they different? Contextualize these questions within the works of Nitobe, Ikegami, and Friday.

Week 5: *Seppuku*

- Rankin. *Seppuku*. 1-31, 87-102, 123-138, and 201-211 (book)

- Watch movie: *Chushingura* (on your own; held in course reserves)
- **Things on which to think**
 - Informal social controls and suicide. What was it that made suicide a rational outcome of shame in feudal Japan—a nod to Durkheim?
 - Given the change in the political economy of Japan over the past 150 years, why might suicide rates still be higher than in most other post-industrial economies?

*****MIDTERM EXAM, TUESDAY, May 5th, BRING A BLUEBOOK*****

Week 6: Midterm - Religion

- Bellah. *Tokugawa Religion*. 51-70 (reader)
- Nukariya. *The History of Zen in Japan*. 28-51 (reader)
- Griffis. *The Religions of Japan*. 37-58 (reader)
- **Things on which to think**
 - The relationship of religion(s) to the State (formation, function and stability)

Week 7: Martial arts

- Hurst. *Armed Martial Arts of Japan*. 27-46, 53-60, 64-88, 92-100 (reader)
- Kano. *Jiu-jitsu: The Old Samurai Art of Fighting Without Weapons* 192 (229) – 205 (242) (reader)
- Green & Svinth. *Martial Arts in the Modern World*. 47-59 and 61-70 (reader)
- **Things on which to think**
 - *Bugei, Bujitsu, Budo*. Why *Bu* in the context of sports? (Hint: What is the meaning of *Bu*?)
 - Is Brazilian Jiu-jitsu a unique martial art, or is it merely a *ryu* of *jiu-jitsu*? Further, does this matter? Why?

Week 8: Yakuza & Policing

- Hill. *The Changing Face of the Yakuza*. 97-116 (reader)
- Bayley. *Forces of Order: Policing in Modern Japan*. 126-167 (reader)
- **Things on which to think**
 - The similarities and differences between State enforcement apparatuses and Yakuza-type organizations—structure, function, and culture

Week 9: Zaibatsu & Bushido as business ethic

- Hosoya. *Zaibatsu Dissolution in Occupied Japan*. 1-14 (reader)
- Bisson. *Zaibatsu Dissolution in Japan*. 6-32 (reader)
- Watch movie: *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (on your own; held in course reserves)
- **Things on which to think**
 - Carlos Ghosn and the limits of Japanese law - *Deru CEO wa Utareru*--the CEO who sticks out, gets hammered down
 - Is *Bushido* alive and well as the foundation of “the” Japanese work ethic, or is Jiro merely an anachronism?

Week 10: Keiretsu, Ushinawareta [Ni]Jūnen and Japan's economic future

- Smith. *The Weeb Economy*. (reader)
- **Things on which to think... also, a review for the Final**
 - The effects of culture on the economy, and the economy on culture

*****FINAL EXAM, Tuesday, June 9th, 8:00 AM, BRING A BLUEBOOK*****