I started teaching Japanese popular culture in the 1990s when there was an increased interest in Japan due to the country’s economic expansion in the US and the world. I taught it in person first and then shifted to online, using different textbooks, other learning materials and activities. In the essay that follows, I focus on the online format and explain what I teach and how I do it in detail to help others develop their courses. The same format can be used to teach the popular cultures of other Asian countries.

Overview of the Course

Whether I teach a course on Japan or the US, popular culture is defined as the daily cultural environment which includes beliefs and values, rituals, icons, heroes, stereotypes, traditions, religions, education, foodways, etc., too numerous to list all. It is different from pop culture which refers to popular entertainment forms, such as music, anime and manga, sports, and video games. Needless to say, pop culture is part of popular culture. Because my goal is to teach students how ordinary people experience their lives, the course description and Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for my Japanese popular culture course are as follows:

This course will introduce you to the major cultural environment in which a majority of Japanese people have lived during the past seventy years. We will examine the activities, objects, and entertainment forms Japanese people commonly encounter in their daily lives and consider the values and attitudes expressed in them. The course will consist of readings, lectures, discussions, and media presentations.

After taking this course, students will know:

- The influence of traditional religions on contemporary Japanese society and culture.
- The socialization experience of Japanese people.
- The Japanese worldview.

After taking this course, students will appreciate

- A culture, including popular art and entertainment forms, different from their own.

There were some concerns on my part about the focus of the course in the early days of teaching. I thought students would want to learn about Japanese pop culture and might get turned off by the focus on the cultural environment. My experience has taught me that a majority of students who take the course are already familiar with Japanese pop culture; they read manga, watch anime, play video games and listen to J-pop. They do not need to learn about them but want to know Japanese culture that has produced them. I have had students who actually started their own exploration of history and aesthetics. Therefore, the focus of the course actually meets their interest and they enjoy learning about the daily life of Japanese. In contrast, a challenge I have experienced is how to teach the daily cultural experience of Japanese people to students in southwestern Ohio and northern Kentucky who have limited opportunities to encounter Japanese people, let alone visit Japan. Published teaching resources are of little help. Textbooks and AV resources on Japanese culture are readily available but they mostly cover traditional (high) culture, such as noh theater, tea ceremony, and calligraphy, which are not necessarily part of the daily cultural environment of contemporary Japanese. Books on popular culture, on the other hand, focus on pop culture which is only one aspect of the contemporary Japanese experience.

I had used different textbooks, book chapters, and journal articles and tried to teach by using theatrical films but none of them had been satisfactory until I found *A Geek in Japan: Discovering the Land of Manga, Anime, Zen, and the Tea Ceremony* by chance during my random Amazon search. The author Hector Garcia, who has lived and worked in Japan since 2004, writes about his experience and observations of life in Japan. While there are a few questionable observations and spelling errors, the author covers concepts and aspects of Japanese daily life, which are hard to find in other books, ranging from concepts like *amae* and *nemawashi* to architecture. An additional strength is its abundant use of photos. I am a firm believer in seeing is believing/learning. Other valuable resources which improved my course tremendously are the *Begin Japanology* and *Japanology Plus* videos produced by NHK World. According to the NHK World website, these videos provide “fresh insights into Japan. Stories behind Japanese life and culture through the eyes of Peter Barakan, a forty-five-year resident and watcher of Japan.” Just like the textbook, the videos are about Japanese society and culture as experienced by non-Japanese.
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<th>Module</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students can know the course content, schedule, and requirements. Gain an overview of Japan.</td>
<td>History of Japan [bill wurtz video] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ywb3kj9a">https://tinyurl.com/ywb3kj9a</a></td>
<td>BJ – Holidays of Japan <a href="https://tinyurl.com/4wb7f2hj">https://tinyurl.com/4wb7f2hj</a> BJ – Geisha <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ymc98y3s">https://tinyurl.com/ymc98y3s</a> BJ – Hiragana <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2p89nk9">https://tinyurl.com/2p89nk9</a></td>
<td>• A concise history of Japan • Geography of Japan</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The Traditional Arts and Disciplines Students can explain 1) various traditional art forms, 2) Japanese influence on western paintings, 3) various forms of martial arts, and 4) the relationship between teachers and students.</td>
<td>Chapter 2 BJ – Holidays of Japan <a href="https://tinyurl.com/4wb7f2hj">https://tinyurl.com/4wb7f2hj</a> BJ – Geisha <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ymc98y3s">https://tinyurl.com/ymc98y3s</a> BJ – Hiragana <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2p89nk9">https://tinyurl.com/2p89nk9</a></td>
<td>• Traditional art forms, such as ukiyo-e, shodō, sado, theater, etc. • Western fascination with ukiyoe • various martial arts forms • Zen kōans and Japanese teaching style • Teacher-student relationship</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>The Unique Japanese Character Students can illustrate the different concepts that govern human and social relationships in Japanese society. Students can summarize the difference between high-context culture and low-context culture.</td>
<td>Chapter 3 BJ – Gift Giving <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2ue9s4jr">https://tinyurl.com/2ue9s4jr</a> 5 Reasons Why The Japanese Are So Polite [xReasons video] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/529naky9">https://tinyurl.com/529naky9</a></td>
<td>• Honne and tatemae and the Japanese communication style (enryo – sashii) • Virtue of humility • Importance of apology (“I’m sorry,” “Excuse me”) • Giru • Chotto culture • Amae • Soto-uchi • high-context culture vs. low-context culture</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Curiosities and Symbols Students can describe the meaning of objects, events, and behavior which may seem strange to them at first.</td>
<td>Chapter 4 BJ – Sentou <a href="https://tinyurl.com/he2yzv84">https://tinyurl.com/he2yzv84</a> BJ – Japanese Onsen <a href="https://tinyurl.com/kyyauff7">https://tinyurl.com/kyyauff7</a> BJ – Cherry Blossoms <a href="https://tinyurl.com/29c978bm">https://tinyurl.com/29c978bm</a> J+ – Yurei: Japanese Ghosts <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ye287mec">https://tinyurl.com/ye287mec</a></td>
<td>• Animal figures that are part of the Japanese cultural environment • Popular rituals, such as cherry blossom viewing and the public bath • Symbols and objects commonly seen in Japanese daily life • Yōkai</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>The Japanese at Work Students can summarize 1) Japanese business practices, 2) the concepts such as “kaizen” and “nemawashi” and 3) the role of the salaryman in the postwar economy.</td>
<td>Chapter 5 J+ – Job Hunting <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2bzsj7bw">https://tinyurl.com/2bzsj7bw</a> J+ – Shinise: Long-Established Businesses <a href="https://tinyurl.com/mwte3t5n">https://tinyurl.com/mwte3t5n</a> Day in the Life of Japanese Salary Man [Paolo fromTOKYO Video] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/98sas4bx">https://tinyurl.com/98sas4bx</a></td>
<td>• History of the Japanese economy since WW II, including the most recent change that is taking place • Business concepts such as “invisible hand,” “kaizen,” and “nemawashi” • Typical business practices • Role and importance of the salaryman and syufu</td>
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<td>Module</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Japanese Society and Daily Life</strong></td>
<td>Students can describe the daily experience of different groups of Japanese people. Students can summarize the cultural meaning of drinking in Japan. Students can illustrate the symbolic meaning of train systems in Japanese culture.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 6</strong></td>
<td>BJ – Railways <a href="https://tinyurl.com/4rnabuzj">https://tinyurl.com/4rnabuzj</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Subways <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2y7hn598">https://tinyurl.com/2y7hn598</a> (on Dailymotion video site) &lt;br&gt; BJ – Parties and Gatherings <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yktodb3sv">https://tinyurl.com/yktodb3sv</a></td>
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<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Japan Today</strong></td>
<td>Students can summarize various subcultures that have existed in postwar Japan. Students can illustrate youth experience.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 7</strong></td>
<td>BJ – Uniforms <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ys36znvy">https://tinyurl.com/ys36znvy</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Cram School <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2xzhuwsb">https://tinyurl.com/2xzhuwsb</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Convenient Stores <a href="https://tinyurl.com/mr8fjczf">https://tinyurl.com/mr8fjczf</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Vending Machines <a href="https://tinyurl.com/3s2647tt">https://tinyurl.com/3s2647tt</a></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td><strong>The World of Manga and Anime</strong></td>
<td>Students can explain 1) the origin and history of manga and 2) the development of the anime industry.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 8</strong> and <em>The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture</em> Chapter 13 “Manga, Anime and Visual Art Culture”6</td>
<td>J+ – Akibahara <a href="https://tinyurl.com/3zzuxf7f">https://tinyurl.com/3zzuxf7f</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Cafes <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2p87hnhh">https://tinyurl.com/2p87hnhh</a> &lt;br&gt; The Secret World of Comiket [NHK Documentary] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/5n75espz">https://tinyurl.com/5n75espz</a></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td><strong>Modern Japanese Music</strong></td>
<td>Students can describe a comprehensive view of Japanese popular music.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 9</strong> and <em>Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture</em> Chapter 8 “Popular Music”7</td>
<td>J+ – A Nation of Singers <a href="https://tinyurl.com/3but26bu">https://tinyurl.com/3but26bu</a> &lt;br&gt; BJ – Karaoke <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ybn8rwcc">https://tinyurl.com/ybn8rwcc</a></td>
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<td>11</td>
<td><strong>Movies and Television</strong></td>
<td>Students can describe the movies that are considered classics. Students can explain 1) geino-jin (celebrities) seen on TV and in movies and 2) idols and their significance.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 10</strong> and <em>AKB 48 Introduction + Chapters 1 &amp; 2</em></td>
<td>BJ – Television <a href="https://tinyurl.com/m23t9any">https://tinyurl.com/m23t9any</a> &lt;br&gt; Taking a Look at Idol Culture and the Strange Industry Around It [The Rpg Monger video] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yccyywrfw">https://tinyurl.com/yccyywrfw</a></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td><strong>Video Games</strong></td>
<td>Students can describe the development of the video game industry. Students can explain the meaning and significance of kawaii in contemporary Japanese culture.</td>
<td><strong>Chapter 11</strong> and <em>Women, Media and Consumption in Japan</em> Chapter 6 “Cuties in Japan”9 and Online articles: 1. “Fifteen Theses on the Cute”10 &lt;br&gt; 2. “Japanese Video Game Industry”11</td>
<td>BJ – Video Arcades <a href="https://tinyurl.com/kj9d7nnv">https://tinyurl.com/kj9d7nnv</a> &lt;br&gt; Day in the Life of Japanese Game Programmer [Paolo fromTOKYO Video] <a href="https://tinyurl.com/4hvxm2xh">https://tinyurl.com/4hvxm2xh</a></td>
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<td>13</td>
<td><strong>Student Presentations of Research Project</strong></td>
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*BJ = Begin Japanology  **J+ = Japanology +Plus*
Each video is thirty minutes long and covers a wide range of topics from cherry blossoms to *ramen*. Some videos are edited down to 10 minutes and offered as *Begin Japanology Mini* along with a full version. Furthermore, the videos complement the textbook. For instance, there are several videos on the train systems—trains, bullet trains, subways—which can be used with the textbook discussion of these topics. *A Geek in Japan* and the *Begin Japanology* videos are the main sources of information for students which are supplemented by additional readings, videos, and websites as illustrated in the course modules structure and content pages. The information provided by the supplemental videos is accurate but generalized so that I add an explanation when it is appropriate. Students respond to the learning materials positively as represented by the comment on the course evaluation: “the learning was greatly enhanced by mixing textbook reading with videos and additional articles.”

**Course Modules**

The course consists of thirteen modules each of which is based on a chapter in the book and two modules—the first and last weeks of the semester—which are reserved for the introduction to the course and student presentations. Between Module 2 and Module 12, the module titles correspond to those of the book chapters.

**Learning Activities and Evaluation**

I do not believe objective tests and quizzes are effective learning tools in this course and have used a variety of other methods to enhance students’ understanding of Japanese popular culture. For instance, instead of memorizing the national holidays, students are asked to discuss the perception of religions among the Japanese by responding to the scenario in an essay exam. As new pedagogical approaches that focus upon student engagement and active learning were introduced in the last decade, the following methods have proven to be effective for my classes.

**Student-led Discussion Board**

For each learning module, two to three students are appointed as discussion leaders. Each leader is responsible for posting two discussion questions by Wednesday each week and other students respond to the questions for the rest of the week. This creates a livelier discussion because, when I pose a question, it tends to be more difficult and some students do not respond well. Students feel more comfortable with answering the questions posted by their peers as attested to by a student's comment on the course evaluation: “She was good at not expressing her opinion but getting us to examine our own opinions.” Another advantage of student-led discussion is that I can find out students’ perspectives on the topic which gives me a teachable moment. For instance, many students said that they were too shy to sing in front of strangers and this gave me a chance to discuss the function of **karaoke** in Japanese society as well as to remind them of the concept of *amae* which we had studied earlier. Even if a person does not sing well, others will forgive him/her. Generally, I do not intervene in a discussion but I do jump in to supply information that facilitates further discussion.

**Module Reflection**

Every week students are asked to briefly describe two takeaways and one question about the module material. This provides me with another opportunity to know students’ perspectives and interests as well as the effectiveness of the teaching material because, interestingly, the takeaways and questions tend to focus on one or two topics which are covered in the module. For instance, many students did not understand the high suicide rate among the Japanese which was mentioned in the textbook and this became another teachable moment to introduce the concept of the face which was influential in Japanese culture. After reviewing all reflections, I give feedback to the whole class usually by sending an email and sometimes by adding additional learning materials to the module. I also answer the questions individually, thus building rapport with students. Students like the feedback as attested by the following comments on the course evaluations:

> She gave excellent feedback to our written reflections and questions. The instructor had wonderful supplementary materials and would often give more information or corrections through email. Her feedback was also meaningful and timely.

**Student Feedback**

In addition to those which were cited above, below are some of the comments I received on the course evaluations in the spring semester of 2020.

> Along with Japanese popular culture, the instructor had a very good understanding of American popular culture so she was able to help us compare and contrast.

> Many of the Japanese concepts were very difficult to grasp from a western perspective but she did a great job relating them to something we could understand or had experience with.

> While there were no quizzes, it allowed me to study to learn instead of studying to succeed.

> The content was interesting, kept me engaged.

> Posted relevant and interesting resources.
Of these comments, the first two are instructive to those of us who teach a foreign culture. We should use students’ prior knowledge, i.e., their own culture, to teach a new culture. This makes it relatable to students. I frequently use examples from American culture always with the disclaimer that “I am not saying Japanese culture is better than American culture or vice versa…” This statement is important in order to achieve the last SLO: “students will appreciate a culture, including popular art and entertainment forms, different from their own.”

I hope this article provides helpful information to teach Japanese popular culture online. I want to reemphasize that the same format can be easily adapted to teach popular culture of another country. For instance, Tuttle Publishing has the A Geek in series on China, Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia and I am certain that books that cover the daily life of people in other countries are also available. As to the videos, I would recommend exploring international broadcasting services like NHK World and Arrirang TV which offer cultural programs in English or with English subtitles. Needless to say, YouTube offers a variety of videos. So, good luck with developing your popular culture course. Feel free to contact me.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Articles Included in Modules


NOTES
2. Instructional design is based on the cognitive load theory.
3. The Begin Japanology and Japanology Plus videos are produced by NHK World and narrated in English. Each video is thirty minutes long and covers a wide range of topics from cherry blossoms to ramen. Some videos are edited down to ten minutes and offered as Begin Japanology Mini along with a full version. Most of the videos included in the course modules are available on YouTube.
12. Typically, a module begins on Monday and ends on Sunday in my course.

YASUE KUWAHARA is a Professor of Media & Communication, Director of Popular Culture Studies, and Faculty Diversity Fellow at Northern Kentucky University where she created and teaches a variety of courses on American culture; international popular culture; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Her scholarly interest has expanded from the US influence on postwar Japan to the popular culture of East Asia in recent years. She is the editor of the East Asian Popular Culture series by Palgrave.