

Freshman Seminar 192 (S2025)
Pure Land:
Japan's Path to a Sustainable Future

Princeton University

Tu/Th 3:00-4:20 in Forbes 121

Office Hours: F 1-2 pm and by appointment

Overview



Garden: [Adachi Museum of Art](#): Shimane Pref. Japan

In a world facing unprecedented environmental challenges, dominant approaches often exacerbate anxiety and alienation: we're told the problems are too big, that only experts can solve them, and that we must wait for technological breakthroughs. This course offers a different orientation. By examining Japan's unique approach to environmental stewardship, we explore how the *perception* of limits, not the limits themselves, shapes our capacity for sustainable practice. The question is not "how do we become Japanese?" but rather: what made certain choices sustainable, and what can we learn for our own situations?

From the Edo period's circular economy to contemporary innovations, we will uncover what we call the "beauty of limits": an aesthetic appreciation that makes constraint itself generative rather than something to overcome. Remarkably, nineteenth-century Western scientists recognized Japan's circular agricultural systems as superior to Europe's, yet Europe systematically abandoned comparable practices while Japan retained them for another century. This course investigates why, and what that difference reveals about the conditions under which limit-wisdom can take root and persist: embodiment, place, intergenerational transmission, and ongoing practice.

The course provides students with an immersive and collaborative learning experience, combining readings on Japanese history and culture with virtual, zero-carbon-footprint trips to Japanese sites, both real and imagined. These virtual trips (ranging from the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum to futuristic innovations in robotics and AI) reinforce course themes while demonstrating how historical practices and modern advancements can work together. Rather than promising glamorous breakthroughs, we focus on the less glamorous but more effective: distributed agency, action at available scales, and the unglamorous daily practices that sustain communities over time.

Progressing chronologically through Antiquity, Middle Ages, Pre-Modern, Modern, and Contemporary periods, the course culminates in forward-looking questions: How might these insights redirect energy from passivity toward engagement? How can individuals, communities, and policymakers reorient technology and innovation as tools for situated adaptation rather than solutions descending from above? We will not only learn from Japan's history but seek to apply these insights in addressing contemporary global environmental challenges, recognizing that a fulfillment-oriented relationship to sufficiency, not endless growth, may be the foundation for a sustainable future.

By the end of the seminar, students are expected to do the following:

- Develop a global perspective from which to think critically about sustainable development in a culturally sensitive and globally interconnected way. See UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) [roadmap](#).
- Grasp key scholarly debates on the role of Japanese history and culture in shaping sustainable futures.
- Analyze scholarly articles, books, and multimedia resources to evaluate evidence and arguments effectively.
- Engage actively and respectfully in class discussions, fostering collaboration and critical thinking.
- Research and write persuasive, evidence-based analytic arguments.

Students interested in opportunities to apply the above skills should refer to the [Career Compass page on Sustainability](#).

Assessment & Assignments

Grading:

- Presentation or performance - 25%
- Papers/writing assignments - 35%
- Participation - 20%

- Final paper/project - 20%

Citations, Scholarly Integrity, Artificial Intelligence:

As a scholar, you must acknowledge your intellectual debt to others in all assignments submitted for evaluation in this course. Use in-text citations or footnotes to ensure your sources are clear and identifiable to your readers (classmates or your instructor). Your final paper must also include a bibliography. The [Purdue OWL](#) has useful resources and information on citation methods. Please meet with me or follow up with a [Writing Center Fellow](#) if you have questions or need assistance.

This course emphasizes that critically engaging with technology is a valuable skill for building a positive and sustainable future. Therefore, I wish to encourage your use of technology. However, I aim to help you develop a critical awareness of technology and a nuanced understanding of its role, rather than simply assuming that technological or convenient solutions are always the best approach to problem-solving. If you use Generative [Artificial Intelligence \(GAI\)](#), [Large Language Models \(LLMs\)](#), [Foundation Model](#) tools on an assignment for credit in this course, you must describe how you used the tool and include both the prompt and the relevant output on the assignment. Using these tools without disclosing when and how you used them is a violation of the University's [academic regulations](#) (See [Section 2.4.6](#). Note, other classes may prohibit use of GAI/LLM entirely so be sure to follow the specific policy for each course).

Use of GAI tools on class assignments is subject to the following constraints:

1. Acknowledge/cite the use of the tool when it is used.
2. Answers should include a reflection, expansion, condensation, etc. based on the output, not a verbatim quotation from the tool.
3. Factual errors arising from the GAI not identified and corrected by you will result in (at least partial, but potentially full) reduction of your grade. You should work to understand the material well enough to identify these errors.

Disability Services and Academic Accommodations

Students must register with the [Office of Disability Services](#) for disability verification and determination of eligibility for reasonable academic accommodations. Requests for academic accommodations for this course should be made at the beginning of the semester or as soon as possible for newly approved students. I encourage students with approved accommodations to contact me at the beginning of the semester and again before major course assessments. Please

note that no accommodations for a disability will be made without authorization from ODS or without advance notice.

Week 1: Japan's Geography and Foundational Myths

Unless otherwise noted, assigned films and readings can be found on the Canvas Course site under [Reserves](#).

1/28 TU Japan's geography, natural resource scarcity, and their influence on sustainability.

Readings: short story "[Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey](#)" (品川猿の告白, Shinagawa Saru no Kokuhaku, 2020) by Murakami Haruki 村上春樹

1/30 TH Readings: Primary source excerpts from *Kojiki* 古事記 (712 CE) and *Seeking Sustainability* (pp. 1-4)

- Zero Carbon Footprint Trip:- Watch *Little Forest* (リトル・フォレスト, *Ritoru Foresuto*, 2014) dir. Junichi Mori 森淳一.

- Assignment:- Write a reflection paper (1-2 pages/250-500 words) on what sustainability means to you, include at least one example of something you have personally observed or experienced. Submit by email to caddeau@princeton.edu by 5 pm on 2/1/25.

Week 2: Buddhism, Nature, Time

2/4 TU Read from *The Formation of Shinto to Folk Religion* (pp. 29-74) in Earhart *Japanese Religion*

2/6 TH Read *Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy: Indian Background* (pp.20-28)

- Zero Carbon Footprint Trips:- Visit [Ise Shrine](#) (first 8 mins of video) examining sacred sites that embody the Shinto reverence for nature. Watch [Princess Mononoke](#) (もののけ姫 *Mononoke Hime*, 1997) dir. Hayao Miyazaki 宮崎駿

Assignment: Reflection paper (1-2 pages/250-500 words)

Watch the film *Princess Mononoke* and write a **1-2 page (250-500 words) reflection paper** discussing how religion or religious philosophy influences views on or treatment of the environment. In your response, incorporate observations from the film by addressing the following questions:

- How does the film depict *Kami*? Is *Kami* synonymous with Nature?
- Are *Kami* always benevolent?
- What acts of purification do you observe in the film? What is the process? How is this connected with what we have read about Shinto?
- Does the film depict sacred spaces? How can you identify them?
- What other Japanese religious traditions do you see at work in the film? What role do these religious traditions or ideas play in the film?

We will begin discussing your answers to these questions in class on **Thursday (2/6)** this week. Use this discussion to refine your thoughts and build upon what you prepared for class when writing your response paper. Submit your response via email to caddeau@princeton.edu by **5 PM on Saturday, February 8, 2025**

Week 3: ZEN 禪宗 school

2/11 TU Read: *Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy: Zen School* (pp.153-65); watch *Zen* (禪, 2009) dir. Banmei Takahashi 高橋伴明 selections and NHK [Todaiji](#).

Assignment: Compare history of the Zen School in Japan and the life of Zen master Dogen in the film *Zen*.

The Takakusu reading outlines how during the Kamakura period (1185–1335 A.D.), Buddhism in Japan became more practical and focused on personal enlightenment. The Zen school, in particular, emphasized meditation, to provide insight into one's true nature. This approach was a response to earlier Buddhist practices that had become overly speculative or ritualistic. By prioritizing meditation, Zen sought to return to a more immediate and experiential understanding of Buddhism, fostering personal enlightenment through direct experience rather than through doctrinal study or ritual. How does the film *Zen* seek to convey the importance of meditation through Dogen's life?

2/13 TH watch *Spirited Away* 千と千尋の神隠し *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (2001) dir. Hayao Miyazaki 宮崎駿

Assignment: [Journeys of self-discovery \(detailed instructions\)](#) & [Progress Tracker](#)

The animated film *Spirited Away* does not specifically focus on Zen, but it does depict a journey of self-discovery. Compare the journeys of two fictionalized characters, Chihiro from *Spirited*

Away and Orin from *Zen*, and Dogen's actual journey as depicted in *Zen*. All three journeys result in self-discovery. In what ways are they similar, in what ways are they different?

Week 4: Pure Land School 浄土宗 and *Mappō* 末法

2/18 TU Round table discussion of group postings from week 3. Read *Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy: The Pure Land School* (pp. 166-75) and "Debates on [Buddhism and Ecology](#)" from the [Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology](#)

2/20 TH Reading—Hōjōki 方丈記 (1212) Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明

Week 5: Edo Period Circular Economy

2/25 TU Watch: [Explaining the circular economy](#) (Ellen MacArrhur Foundation, 2021) and read "Self-sufficiency as a way of life" in Brown's [Just Enough](#) (pp. 47-53). If you are unfamiliar with Japanese history, be sure to read *Chapter 1: Japan's Encounter with the Modern World* (pp. 14-41) in *Modern Japan, A Very Short Introduction* by Goto-Jones for important historical context, pages 19-36 are especially helpful in understanding the basic points of Edo/Tokugawa history.

2/27 TH Class visit to [Studio Japan](#) in Rocky Hill (please be prepared to depart campus at 3:00 pm and return by 4:30 pm). Read *Soetsu Yanagi* (pp. 208-23) in preparation for visit to studio Japan.

- Zero Carbon Footprint Trip: Optional [Virtual Edo](#) sites and exhibits, studying the architecture and resource-efficient practices of Edo

MID-TERM WEEK 3/3-7

Week 6: Agriculture and Food

3/4 TU Read: The Taboo on Eating Meat (pp. 52-62) in *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* and watch: *The Ballad of Narayama* 楢山節考 *Narayama Bushikō* (1983) dir. Shōhei Imamura 今村昌平

3/6 TH Watch: NHK [In Praise of Shadows](#) 陰翳礼讃 *In'ei Raisan* (1933) Junichiro Tanizaki 谷崎潤一郎 (from start to 33 mins); Read: [Sashimi and sushi](#); sample Japanese food in class

SPRING RECESS 3/8-16

Week 7: Atomic Warfare and Godzilla

3/18 TU -Watch: *Godzilla Minus One* (ゴジラ-1.0, *Gojira Mainasu Wan*, 2023) dir. Takashi Yamazaki 山崎貴; those not familiar with Japanese history can review the section on [Early Showa and the War in the Pacific](#) in *Japan, a Very Short History*.

3/20 Virtual Visit to [Hiroshima Peace Park](#) and [Nagasaki Peace Memorial Hall](#) viewing of selections from the original [Godzilla](#) (1954, both Japan and US release version)

Week 8: Minamata and 3.11.11 disasters

3/25 TU - -Investigate the Minamata disease. Read: 1) "[Minamata Disease: Japan's Painful Lesson to Protect Nature](#)" by Roger Ong and 2) [Web Japan's "Environmental Issues"](#). Class time will feature a Zoom tour of [Minamata City Disease Museum](#) with museum curator Hatsue KOIZUMI 小泉初恵

3/27 TH -Investigate the 3.11.11 Fukushima nuclear disaster: Watch *The Days* (ザ・デイズ, *Za Deizu*, 2023) dir. Masaki Nishiura 西浦正記 and Hideo Nakata 中田秀夫

Week 9: Robotics and Sustainable Innovation

4/1 TU VISIT To [Robotics Lab to meet SPOT](#) (meet at VR Deck, Green Hall 0-C-10, Lower level at 3 pm) and read: [Masahiro Mori's Buddhist philosophy of robot](#) pp. 72-81, watch NHK [Future Robotics Technology Center](#).

4/3 TH Watch: [Doughnut Economics](#) talk by Kate Raworth; Read: [Artificial Intelligence and the Circular Economy](#) (2019) & [Circular design](#)

** 4/4 is DEADLINE to DROP OR PDF courses this term**

Week 10: Recycling and Waste Reduction

- -Theme: Examine Japan's recycling systems, waste reduction strategies, and energy efficiency laws.

4/8 TU Watch: *Evil Does Not Exist* (悪は存在しない *Aku wa Sonzai Shinai*, 2023) dir. Ryusuke Hamaguchi 濱口竜介

4/10 TH - -Watch: [NHK Design X Story: PoopLoop](#) ; Zero Carbon Footprint Trip:- Virtual exploration of [Kamikatsu](#) and [Osaki](#), two of Japan's zero-waste towns where students can observe and analyze Japan's advanced recycling practices. Read: [Japanese home appliance recycling law](#) and [Recycling rates in Japan](#)

- -Assignment:- Take steps to reduce your own waste and increase your reuse of items for 48 hours. Report back on your experience. What did you learn?

Week 11: Japanese Art, Architecture, and Design

4/15 TU [Virtual Visit to the Expo 2025](#) being held in Osaka Japan: The [Expo 2025 guidebook](#) and this [Road to Expo 2025 video](#) give you a good sense of the exciting innovations being featured at the Expo.

4/17 TH Final Project Proposals DUE (1 page outlining project idea) by 5 pm by email. Class time will be drop-in hours to meet with me with questions/clarifications on your proposal.

Week 12: Sustainable Futures Imagined

4/22 TU Discuss contradictions between Japan's leadership in sustainability and its support for controversial practices like whaling and nuclear power, which are seen by many countries as unsustainable

4/24 TH In class presentations of [Final Projects](#) and Summing Up



4/25 LAST DAY OF SPRING TERM CLASSES

4/28-5/6 READING PERIOD

5/6 DEAN'S DATE

5/7 (W) Take-home Final due by 3:30 pm

5/9-15 UNIVERSITY FINAL EXAM PERIOD