

Kyoto's Modern History
KCJS Course
Daniel Milne

Introductory Information

Course Title: Kyoto's Modern History
Term: Fall
Class day/time: Thursday 1:10-4:25 pm
Class Location: TBA
Format: Lecture and fieldwork, English

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Course Description

Kyoto is a city with a cultural legacy arguably unmatched by any other city in Japan. Its national and global significance did not stop with the transfer of the capital to Edo/Tokyo at the end of the 19th century, however. Rather, from its early development of modern systems of education, industry, and transportation, to being at the forefront of efforts to counter climate change and overtourism in recent decades, Kyoto has been at the forefront of Japanese modernity.

In this course, students will learn both about the continuities and transformations in the city from the Bakumatsu period (1853–1868) through the imperial, war, postwar, and present era. The course will be organized thematically, examining modern Kyoto's culture and politics through topics such as: center of rebellion, search for a modern identity, transformations of the imperial institution, tourism and touristification, discrimination and minority experiences, war and peace, *hanamachi* districts, music and film, urban planning, and festivals and religion. As part of assessment, students will research an aspect of modern Kyoto history and, based on the example of modernkyotoresearch.org, present their findings online.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will have an understanding of the modern history of Kyoto and the people, movements, ideas, and places that helped shape it. They should

also come away with basic skills about fieldwork and how to make a simple website for sharing their research. Skills in presentation, group work, and report writing will also be developed.

Recommended Texts

Kyoto's Renaissance: Ancient Capital for Modern Japan (John Breen, Maruyama Hiroshi, Takagi Hiroshi, 2022); *Modern Kyoto: Building for Ceremony and Commemoration, 1868–1940* (Alice Y. Tseng); website modernkyotoresearch.org.

Course Requirements/Grading

- Weekly discussion questions based on readings: 30%
- Fieldwork report: 30%
- Research website: 30%
- Presentation: 10%

Each week we will have two **back-to-back periods**. Some first period will be devoted to discussing the week's readings and the second to fieldwork trips. For longer trips, both periods will be on site. You will be provided with **discussion questions** about the readings. Make sure the readings and your answers are finished before class.

Students will be placed into small groups to research and write about a topic on modern Kyoto, such as important figures, events, industries, or sites. This will be presented as a **written report** half way through the course, as a **website** based on the example of modernkyotoresearch.org, and then as an **oral presentation**.

Research must refer to **previous or related scholarship** and include **fieldwork** with academic methodologies such as interviews, surveys, and observation. Students are also encouraged to conduct research using newspapers and other archival sources. The project must be presented as an **online site** with visual materials and maps, as in the examples. It must be at least 1,500 words (up to 3,000) and be formatted in the APA style. This will be presented to the class in the 10th or final week. Grading will be based on this project, your presentation, and class participation.

Daily attendance is mandatory. NO make-up classes will be given. In the event of illness or other absence, please notify your instructor, the Resident Director or the office staff as soon as possible by telephone or via e-mail.

Course Policy

Students are expected to attend each class and to submit all work on time. During class, phones must be put away and students ready to focus and learn. All essays will be checked for plagiarism. Don't cheat yourself. As [recent research](#) shows, overdependence on Chat GPT and other generative AI has a negative impact on your learning.

As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity. In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent. Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated.

The use of ChatGPT or any other AI tools for course assignments (with the exception of artificial neural networks like DeepL for machine translations, duly cited) is tantamount to plagiarism. Any cases of plagiarism or cheating will be reported to Columbia Undergraduate Global Engagement and the academic advisor at your home institution and are subject to the code of academic conduct there. In such cases, your final grade will be determined by your home institution and not by KCJS.

Students with disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and have a DS-certified 'Accommodation Letter' please see the KCJS resident director to confirm your accommodation needs. If you believe that you have a disability that requires accommodation, you can contact your home school's Disability Services. The Center for Undergraduate Global Engagement (UGE) can also assist you to connect with Columbia University's Disability Services.

SCHEDULE

The schedule below is approximate and may change.

WEEK 1: Introduction - What is special about modern Kyoto?

This week you will be introduced - through lecture, film, and discussion - to some of the themes of the course, such as the changing image of Kyoto, modernization, music, rebellion, discrimination, the emperor, entertainment districts, tourism, war, and peace. You will also be introduced to modernkyotoresearch.org, which will provide a model for your course project.

WEEK 2: Bakumatsu and rebellion

Kyoto became a magnet for anti-Tokugawa and anti-foreign sentiment in the *bakumatsu*, a volatile period in the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate. We will look at two of a number of important incidents from this time.

- “Off with Their Heads! The Hirata Disciples and the Ashikaga Shoguns.” Anne Walthall. *Monumenta Nipponica* 50, no. 2 (Summer, 1995) (pp. 137–170).
- “Expelling the Barbarian and the Last Stand: Examining the Newly Established Meiji Government’s Reaction to Foreign Pressure and National Strife in 1868.” Eleanor Robinson-Yamaguchi. 愛知県立大学外国語学部紀要第 47 号. (pp. 47-81).
- Visit Tōji-in, site of the Tōji-in Incident.

WEEK 3: Emperor system and Iwakura Tomomi

Iwakura is well-known as the leader of Meiji Japan’s missions to learn from and negotiate its treaties with the West. He was also perhaps the most important figure in the early modernization of Kyoto. What was his role in this?

- Reading: “The Emperor System and Kyoto: Images of the Ancient Capital” (Takagi Hiroshi, pp. 3-32). In *Kyoto's Renaissance: Ancient Capital for Modern Japan* (John Breen, Maruyama Hiroshi, Takagi Hiroshi, 2022).
- *The Origins of the Modern Japanese Bureaucracy* (Shimizu, 2020, pp. 5-38).
- Visit Iwakura Tomomi house

WEEK 4: Transformations of the imperial capital

The emperor and imperial court had been the center of Kyoto’s life for centuries. After this was all relocated to Tokyo, the heart of the city—the Imperial Palace and its surroundings—was abandoned and the city in crisis. How were city leaders able to utilize its imperial history to remake the city?

- “Bridge to the Modern” (173-184). In *Kyoto: An Urban History of Japan's Premodern Capital* (Matthew Stavros, 2014).
- “Ch 1: A New Imperial Garden and Imperial Shrine.” *Modern Kyoto: Building for Ceremony and Commemoration, 1868–1940* (Alice Y. Tseng, pp 23-65).
- Visit Imperial Palace

WEEK 5: Modern gardens in Kyoto

Kyoto is known worldwide for its gardens. They are not, however, simply legacies of an ancient past, but shifted in important ways during the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, and became places of politics and the emergence of new national and local identities.

- “Building New Gardens—The Meiji and Taishō Periods.” (pp 57-95). In *Turning Gardens in Japan into Japanese Gardens*. (Christian Tagsold, 2025).
- “A Kyoto Garden Renewal? From Meiji to Early Showa Period.” (Toshio Watanabe, pp 163-181). *Kyoto Visual Culture in the Early Edo and Meiji Periods The arts of reinvention* (Edited By Morgan Pitelka, Alice Y. Tseng, 2016).
- Visit Heian Shrine and Murin-an

WEEK 6: Meiji & imperialism: Fushimi

It was not only the center and east of the city but also the Fushimi area to the city’s south that became important to Kyoto’s new identity and tourism, especially following the construction of the immense—but now rarely visited—Meiji Emperor tomb. Why was it built here and not in Tokyo?

- “Warlords, Generals, and Emperors: Branding Fushimi Momoyama in Modern Japan.” *Japan Review*. (Oleg Benesch and Ran Zwigenberg, p 1-26).
https://nichibun.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/2000437/files/jare_2025_ea_BeneschZwigenberg.pdf
- Visit Meiji Mausoleum and vicinity

WEEK 7: Festivals & ceremonies

Festivals played an important role in attracting visitors to Kyoto, especially the Jidai Matsuri, which emphasized the city’s central and long role in Japanese history. What is the story behind Kyoto’s modern festivals?

- “Performing History: Festivals and Pageants in the Making of Modern Kyoto” (John Breen, pp. 33-64). In *Kyoto's Renaissance: Ancient Capital for Modern Japan* (John Breen, Maruyama Hiroshi, Takagi Hiroshi, 2022).
- Selections from *Kyoto's Gion Festival: A Social History* (Mark Teeuwen, 2023).
- Visit Jidai Matsuri (Oct 22, departs Goshō at 12:00, arrives at Heian Shrine at 2:30).

WEEK 8: Discrimination & minorities

Kyoto, like many cities around the world, has a long history both of discrimination and of survival and resistance by minorities. Here we will focus on Koreans in Kyoto.

- “A Place of "Re-collect": Zainichi Experiences with/in Utoro, Japan.” (Han, Min Wha, 2023). *Seoul journal of Korean studies* 36(2), pp. 415-441.
- “The Struggle against Loss of Living Space: Squatter Resident Practices and Local Politics in Postwar Japan” (Motooka & Mizuuchi, pp. 82-92). In *Transforming Asian Cities* (2007).
- Visit Utoro Peace Museum https://www.utoro.jp/en/top_en/

Higashi Kujo Madan festival (Nov 1)

Project Report due

FALL BREAK

WEEK 9: Hanamachi & gender

A central part of Kyoto’s tourist and wider city branding is its *hanamachi* and the geisha/geiko and maiko who inhabit them. How did modern fashion, laws, and awareness of women’s rights reshape these districts?

- Campbell’s section in modernkyotoresearch.org
 - <https://www.modernkyotoresearch.org/modern-geisha-1918-1941>
- “Social Discrimination and Architectural Freedom in the Pleasure District of Kyoto in Early Modern Japan” (Nicolas Fiévé). In *Japanese Capitals in Historical Perspective: Place, Power and Memory in Kyoto, Edo and Tokyo* (Edited By Nicolas Fieve, Paul Waley, 2003).
- Visit Sumiya, Shimabara. <https://sumiyaho.sakura.ne.jp/>

Nov 15 (Sakamoto Ryoma Lantern Parade)

WEEK 10: Tourism & war 1; Presentation Group 1

Modern Kyoto has been shaped by domestic and international tourism perhaps more than any other city. This is largely because of the survival of its rich architectural and cultural heritage, even through the bombings of World War II. How did it survive when most other cities were greatly destroyed? How might this have shaped the tourism of the city today?

- Ch 5: “Kimono Crowds Inhabiting Heritage on the Beaten Path in Higashiyama.” (pp. 153-180). In *Kyoto Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Contemporary Japan* (Jennifer Prough, 2022).
- “Remembering and Forgetting the War Dead at Ryōzen Kannon: A Site of Entangled and Transnational War Memories.” *Japan Focus* 12(11:2). (Daniel Milne & David Moreton, 2022).
- # Half the class will present their project.

WEEK 11: Tourism & war 2

Drawing from what we learned last week, and sections from modernkyotoresearch.org, this week we will visit sites of tourism and war in the Shichijo/Gion area of east Kyoto.

- Inbound Tourism in Kyoto, 1872–1941. Andrew Elliott. <https://www.modernkyotoresearch.org/inbound-tourism-1872-1941>
- Kyoto during the Asia-Pacific War: Modern Warfare in the Old Capital, 1931–1945 (Moxham). <https://www.modernkyotoresearch.org/war-in-the-old-capital-1931-1945>
- War in the City of “Peace and Tranquility” (Daniel Milne). <https://www.modernkyotoresearch.org/modern-kyotos-war-sites>
- Visit Shichijo and Gion district to learn about war and tourism in Kyoto.

WEEK 12: Music & activism

Kyoto has not only been a hub of ‘traditional’ Japanese music but – as evident in the city’s folk and punk music scenes – also sometimes one for modern music. Kyoto has also seen important activist movements against established politics and development, often in collaboration with musicians. What were these music scenes? What causes have stirred activism?

- *Don’t Be Swindle* (Mahon Murphy & Ran Zwigenberg, 2025).

- Ch 1: “Origins and Infrastructures of Kyoto Scene.”
- Ch 2: “The Organization of the Wider Kyoto Punk Scene.”
- Ch 1: “Invisible Infrastructures of Protest in Kyoto.” (pp. 20-63). *Dream Super Express: Shinkansen*. (Jessamyn Abel, 2022).

- Walk Demachiyana and Kyoto University area to learn about activism and music.

WEEK 13: Presentations Group 2

The latter half of the class will present their project.