History 352 - The City in Japanese History

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Office Hours: Mondays 1:30-3:00, Wednesdays 10:30-noon or by appointment

“Broadly speaking, a city can be conceptualized in two ways. It can be seen as an artificial creation, following an urban plan based on the ideas of the rulers or leaders. This process becomes possible only when it is sustained by a definite zeitgeist and urban ideal. Or a city can be seen as the space that its people actually inhabit. The varied activities of the people who live and work there give meaning to urban space and add to it an image of abundance.”


Course description: This seminar examines the urban experience throughout Japanese history from two perspectives: first, as a physical, functional space, and second, as a social unit, a place to live. The two are in fact related and cannot be completely separated, but we will begin with the first perspective in a three-week historical survey of the main patterns of Japanese urban development. This will provide both a quick review of Japanese history and an acquaintance with the basic Japanese urban forms over time. From there we will move to a topical approach to cities, including urban cultures, commerce and trade, labor issues, government/self-governance, etc. In each topic emphasis will be on modern cities, with a historical component. We will practice the research methods of historians, including the use of primary sources and the critical analysis of secondary sources. Course format is discussion.

Main texts:


*Low City, High City* by Edward Seidensticker. Knopf, 1983. (out of print but available used on Amazon.com; please purchase by the end of February)

Other readings are available on reserve in the library or on ERES. The ERES password is hist352.

For basic historical review, see entry on “Japanese history” in the *Encyclopedia of Japan*, a large, blue, multi-volume set in the reference section of Mudd Library.

Course requirements:

Class participation based on thorough preparation is 40% of the grade in this course. Weekly attendance is required; if you absolutely must be absent, please inform Ms. Gay in advance and an alternative assignment will be devised for you. As part of class participation, each student will lead one class discussion.

Writing is also a very important element of the course, including the following requirements:

—one- or two-page position papers assigned in preparation for some class discussions (these are not expected to be polished pieces of writing; in total they will comprise 20% of the grade);

—one short analytical paper (6-8 pages) on one historical city type (15% of grade, due by Mar. 5);

—a longer (~15-pages) research paper (25% of grade, oral class presentation and first draft due on May. 7; final draft due by May 17, 9 p.m.).
Sources should be properly cited. Please consult a standard reference work like the MLA Style Sheet or the Chicago Manual of Style for citation forms. Footnotes, endnotes or social-science notation are acceptable on papers in this course.

There are no exams in this course. This is a reading-intensive seminar; in some weeks there will be more reading than in others.

**Honor Code:** As it applies to this course, the honor code means that any ideas not your own should be properly credited to the author, including both direct quotations and summaries; the writing itself should be done by you and not by anyone else. Please write and sign the honor code on all written work.

**Course Schedule and Major Assignments**

*(Specific assignments will be given in advance for each topic)*

Feb. 6: Orientation, introduction to course themes, sources, periodization

Feb. 13: Defining the urban; Chinese-style imperial capitals.

Please note: today only class will be held in Peters 212.

Feb. 20: Medieval expansion, the castle town

Feb. 27: Early modern and modern: Edo/Tokyo

Mar. 5: Academic Commons Classroom, Mudd library: research methods session + primary materials from special collections/archives. Short essay due today.

Mar. 12: Read *Low City, High City* — critical analysis of a secondary source

Mar. 19: Neighborhood life: government, self-governance

Mar. 31-April 4: Meet with Ms. Gay this week to discuss your research project topic.

Apr. 2: Commerce, Trade, and Industry: read *Tsukiji*

Apr. 9: Meet in the Print Room of the Allen Memorial Art Museum to view prints, maps, and other art historical sources.

Apr. 16: The Underside of Urban Life: Day Labor, Prostitution, Crime Read *San'ya Blues.*

Apr. 23: Foreigners and Minorities in Japanese Cities

Apr. 30: Culture and Cities; Cities as International Symbols

May 7: Brief project presentations; first draft of research paper due today.

May 17, 9 p.m.: Final draft of research paper due.

**Periods in Japanese History**

**Prehistoric** — fifth century and before, gradual emergence of clan rule and dominance by Yamato clan.

**Ancient/classical** — 6th century to about 1200; Asuka/Nara/Heian periods; evolution of centralized rule by aristocratic bureaucracy; pervasive Buddhism; thriving aristocratic culture; imperial city model.
Medieval — 1200-1600, Kamakura/Muromachi periods, rise of the warrior, intellectual dominance of Buddhism, political decentralization, rise of market economy; concept of “miyako” = beyond capital to largest metropolitan center. Other types of cities as well: trade nodes/markets, entrepots, port towns, temple towns, castle towns.

Early modern — 1600-1868, Tokugawa or Edo period; central warrior government in Edo; economic center in Osaka; dozens of castle towns; prevalence of urban society and culture; emergence of secular cultural forms especially in cities.

Modern — 1868-1945, Meiji Restoration, capitalism and industrialization, establishment of modern state with Tokyo as capital, expansionist foreign policy, adoption of Western cultural forms especially in major cities, defeat in war. Modern cities were built rather smoothly on early modern ones, facilitated by existing financial institutions. Nevertheless, much dislocation with rapid industrialization and huge disparity between rich and others. City as locus for western-derived cultural forms.

Postwar — 1945-1990, recovery from World War II, emergence as economic superpower, parliamentary democracy, predominately urban society. Tokyo becomes Japan’s central city like no single city in America.


What Is A City? Some Observations:

“A city provides goods and services for its surrounding area, exchanging food from the countryside for the products of its sophisticated craftspeople. By definition, its inhabitants are urban—they aren’t farmers.” Charles C. Mann, 1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus.

“What, then, are the salient and distinctive features of the city? . . To many, the city is first and foremost a physical thing, a compact cluster of relatively permanent buildings. . . . [secondly], population concentration, more often than physical structure, has been taken to mark the presence of a city. . . . A third mark of the city—political autonomy—derives from ancient and venerable origins. . . . the city is a local congregation of people who possess the right of self-government. It is a place occupied by citizens. . . .

What is the quality of life described as urbane and how does the city dweller acquire it? The answer lies in the position of the town as a center on which are focused the interests and activities of a more or less widely scattered population. The center may be the seat of ecclesiastical and political institutions which extend their services over the surrounding countryside. Of greater importance . . . is possession of a market and of a specialized class of traders. Where [a market] occurs, specialists of various kinds gather to serve the . . needs of . . all. In other words, a permanent market usually is found in company with administrative, religious, communication, and other services. . . . It is precisely this feature of a permanently settled place that generates its urbane character. The flux of commerce brings together people from various cultures and backgrounds and requires that they learn to live and work together. They become detached from the parochialisms of locality and are led to dwell in a wider realm of experience. Moreover, out of necessity they become accustomed to pursue their needs and interests through relatively complex organizational arrangements in which indirectness of relationship and rationality of procedure are operating principles. These organizational arrangements are the basic
ingredients of urban life; sophistication of outlook and of behavior are inescapable by-products of sustained participation in a market nexus.” —Amos H. Hawley, Urban Society: An Ecological Approach

Urban anthropologists concentrate on individual persons in a wide variety of cultures while some social sciences, like economics, concentrate on aggregate statistics and large, impersonal samples in primarily Western industrial cities. In much of urban studies, the essential condition of cities has been assumed to be dehumanized scale, denoting unmanageable size and complexity in which the ordinary individual feels helpless, meaningless, and alienated. There is a widespread stereotype that “city life” is large scale by nature and therefore dehumanized. In urban studies there is also a prevailing overgeneralization that urban work (= livelihood) is essentially alienating and dehumanizing, in contrast to rural work. Another widespread notion is that the nature of city life is primarily inhumane due mainly to the high population density of cities. In reality, however, cities have both human scale and dehumanized scale. Negative models such as “disasterism” (including abandonment of areas by their populations) have been applied to contemporary and future cities; in reality, however, cities have always evolved over time and presumably will continue to do so. In practice, city dwellers characteristically find ways to reduce the size of their cities to manageable, small-scale social entities with small-scale support systems. These small-scale social entities within cities can be called communities. It is their resilience that allows city dwellers to weather the vicissitudes of urban life. The negative stereotype of urban life as anonymous and impersonal is countered by the idea that city dwellers can and do form meaningful connections with one another in the form of networks, institutions, communities, and individual friendships. Finally, cities are heterogeneous places made up of various subcultures that may be defined by ethnicity, class, age, gender and sexual orientation, spirituality, work, political movements, intellectual preferences, and daily pastimes like sports or hobbies.

—summarized from John Gulick, The Humanity of Cities

“Cities are not simply material or lived spaces—they are also spaces of the imagination. . . How cities are envisioned has effects. Urban designers and planners have ideas about how cities should look, function, and be lived, and these are translated into plans and built environments. Cities are represented in literary, art, and film texts, and these too have their effects. . . . two themes . . organize thinking on the relationship between the city and the imagination: how the city affects the imagination and how the city is imagined. . . Cities might act to constrain the imagination or to consolidate it in collective imagination as tradition and authority. . . . This collective imagination might be held in place through the exercise of discipline and authority. These influences [can] act as chains on the imagination . . . [or] they can be a source of identity and security. . . . The city in its complexity and abundance of sensory data can also be seen as a space which contributes to our sense of fragmented subjectivity or overload. . . . The city . . constitutes sites of pleasure . . and its crowds are intoxicating, fascinating, productive, and creative. . . Urban imagination can also be read in terms of realization or nonrealization of the individual — the self. It was in the ordinary spaces of the city that James Joyce’s characters achieved self-realization — those epiphanies or moments of insight and revelation, so extraordinary, came in the everyday spaces of the city. Urban writers and scholars . . . look to the encounter with others as a form of psychic development and enlightenment. On the other hand the city and urban experience may also act to separate the self from imagination and creativity. Alienation is estrangement. . . . We can also think of the city as a space of anxiety and fear. The modern city [reflects] the divide between subjective and worldly experience. . . . Clearly, for people living outside of conventional norms . . . or for those seeking to break the bonds of earlier ties, the city can represent a space of liberation.” —excerpted from Bridge and Watson, eds., A Companion to the City