



SO 310 LIVING TOKYO: EVERYDAY LIFE IN URBAN JAPAN
IES Abroad Tokyo

DESCRIPTION:

This course explores Tokyo's urban society through ethnographic fieldwork and social theory. After reflecting on city life in Seoul, you'll examine how everyday life in Tokyo reflects a set of broad social, spatial, and historical forces. Using Ulrich Beck's Risk Society as the primary framework, we investigate how individualization, manufactured risks, and reflexive modernization shape contemporary Japanese urban life.

Through direct engagement (50% of class time in neighborhoods), you'll study spatial organization, community structures, housing patterns, children's environments, work life, and traditional practices. Occasional references to contemporary media (anime, film) provide cultural context, but the focus is urban sociology and anthropology. You'll create weekly sketch-notes, produce an ethnographic video, and conduct independent research on Tokyo.

CREDITS: 3

CONTACT HOURS: 45 hours

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION: English, with Japanese terms introduced

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Mariia Ermilova

PREREQUISITES: None

ADDITIONAL COST: Approximately ¥7,500 (\$50 USD) for field trips, museum admissions, and meals during excursions.

METHOD OF PRESENTATION:

- Lectures and theoretical discussions
- Extended field trips and walking observations (50% of class time)
- Film screenings and visual ethnography
- Workshops (research methods, traditional games, sketch-note techniques)
- Student presentations and peer discussions

REQUIRED WORK AND FORM OF ASSESSMENT:

- Participation and Attendance – 15%
- Weekly Sketch and Notes – 15%
- Midterm Exam: "Day in the Life" Video and Essay – 10%
- Research Proposal – 10%
- Literature Review – 10%
- Fieldwork Portfolio – 10%
- Final Presentation – 10%
- Final Paper – 20%

Participation and Attendance

Given the intensive short-term nature of this program with only 12 sessions, attendance at all sessions is essential. Students will be evaluated on active participation in class discussions and theoretical debates, professional engagement with community members during field visits, contribution to group learning through sharing observations, and respectful, curious approach to cultural immersion. All 12 sessions are mandatory, including field trips. 1st unexcused absence = -1 full letter grade; 2nd = -2 letter grades; 3rd = course failure. Excused absences require medical documentation or advance instructor approval.

Weekly Sketch and Notes

Create hand-drawn observations with text on specific weekly themes. Keep in sketchbook throughout program, submit photos to Moodle before each session. These works will be discussed in the beginning of each session, so please punctually.

Themes:

- Week 2 (Session 3): Community infrastructure - Neighborhood elements
- Week 3 (Session 4): Precarious Society

- Week 4 (Session 5): Tokyo Vernacular
- Week 4 (Session 6): Tokyo's livable neighbourhoods
- Week 6 (Session 8): Children's places and places for children
- Week 7 (Session 9): Dwelling spaces - Housing
- Week 7 (Session 10): Consumption spaces
- Week 8 (Session 11): Sacred spaces

Midterm Exam: "Day in the Life" Video and Essay

Create a 3-5 minute TikTok-style ethnographic video documenting "A Day in the Life of [specific Tokyo role]" (e.g., housewife, convenience store worker, salaryman, university student, elderly person in danchi). Must be based on literature review and real ethnographic research (observations) with accurate details (schedules, costs, locations). Write a 500-word theoretical explanation essay connecting to concepts mentioned in the class. Due Session 7 (Nov 18). Session 7 includes video presentations (3-5 min per student) + essay defense + review of course materials (Beck, Allison, neighborhood theory, methods).

Research Project

- **Research Proposal (10%, Due Session 4):** 500-1000 words outlining topic, research questions, preliminary literature, and fieldwork plan. Must include bibliography of at least 5 academic sources.
- **Literature Review (10%, Due Session 10):** 1000-1200 words synthesizing existing scholarship on your topic. Minimum 5 academic sources. Must engage with at least one major theoretical framework (Beck, Allison, etc.).
- **Fieldwork Portfolio (10%, Due Session 12):** Compiled portfolio of field notes, interview transcripts/notes, photographs, sketches, maps. Document minimum 3 substantial site visits over several weeks.
- **Final Presentation (10%, Session 12):** 12-minute presentation with visual documentation sharing key findings from research. Must include theoretical analysis.
- **Final Paper (20%, Due December 18):** 3000 words with introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, analysis, conclusion. Must integrate primary fieldwork data with scholarly sources. Minimum 8 academic sources.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

By the end of the course students will be able to:

- Conduct ethnographic research using observation, sketching, and interviews
- Apply risk society theory to analyze Tokyo's social dynamics
- Understand Tokyo's spatial and social structure interaction, its historical background
- Critically assess contemporary urban challenges and their solutions (aging, precarity, social isolation)
- Understand how traditional community practices persist and adapt under conditions of individualization

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Following the attendance policy of IES Abroad Tokyo, attendance at all class meetings is strictly required. Students need to attend every session, including excursions. Missing one session is equivalent to missing an entire week of a regular course. The first unexcused absence will result in a penalty of one full letter grade from your final grade; the second unexcused absence will result in a penalty of two letter grades; the third unexcused absence results in course failure. An absence is considered "excused" only if it is unavoidable due to illness (confirmed by doctor), or for other reasons approved by the instructor in advance.

CONTENT:

Week	Content	Assignments and Readings
Week 1 Session 1	PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO TOKYO Session 1: Introduction to Tokyo & Risk Society Indoor 3 hours Course introduction, Seoul reflections, introduction to Ulrich Beck's Risk Society framework. Ethnographic methods workshop.	Readings: - Beck & Beck-Gernsheim "Losing the Traditional" (pp. 1-21) - Sorensen, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-44) - Cybrirsky, Chapter 3 (pp. 54-99)
Week 2 Session 2	Session 2: From Edo to Contemporary Tokyo Outdoor 3 hours Fukugawa Fukugawa Edo Museum (¥400). Walking tour of waterways and gardens. Tea and discussion on reflexive modernization.	Readings: - Berkhof "Feeling at Home in Tokyo" in Tokyo Totem - Fanelsa "Hidden Terrain" in Tokyo Totem - Jinnai Intro + Ch. 1 (pp. 1-65)
Week 2 Session 3	PART 2: SOCIAL STRUCTURE Session 3: Japanese Society Overview Indoor 3 hours Japanese society overview, family system. Precarious society. Discussion on social infrastructure breakdown and precarity through risk society lens. Film screening: Shoplifters (portions).	Readings: - Allison Precarious Japan Ch. 1-2 - Allison "Ordinary Refugees" (2012) - Sugimoto Chapter 6 Gender and Family System IThe Family Registration System and Ideology pp 156-163 Due: Research Proposal Due: Sketch+Note #1
Week 3 Session 4	Session 4: Neighborhood Ethnography Outdoor 3 hours Iwase, Matsudo (TBD) Lecture on traditional social structures in Japanese neighbourhood. Chonaikai and machizukuri. Chonaikai visit - facilities, leaders, residents. Walking tour. Group lunch and discussion.	Readings: - Bestor "Tradition and Social Organization" (pp. 121-135) - Houwelingen "Neighborhood Associations" (pp. 467-497) Due: Sketch+Note #2
Week 4 Session 5	PART 3: METHODS OF URBAN EXPLORATION Session 5: Methods Lecture - Street Observation & Tokyo Vernacular Indoor 3 hours Lecture on ethnographic methods and Tokyo vernacular. Workshop on street observation techniques. Discussion on found objects and local histories.	Readings: - Bestor "Inquisitive Observation" (pp. 315-334) - Deviant Properties: Street Observation Studies, 88 - Sand, J. Tokyo Vernacular (selections) Due: Sketch+Note #3
Week 4 Session 6	Session 6: Shimokitazawa - Applying Methods of Urban Exploration Outdoor 3 hours Shimokitazawa Walking class in of one of the most lively neighbourhoods in the world with music venues, vintage shops, etc. Practice street observation techniques. Small group exploration. Cafe discussion on creative precarity. Evaluation of city livability.	Readings: - Farrer "Tokyo Street Drinking" (pp. 49-65) - Dimmer "New Urban Commons" (pp. 298-302) Due: Sketch+Note #4

Week	Content	Assignments and Readings
Week 5 Session 7	Session 7: MIDTERM EXAM Indoor 3 hours "Day in the Life" video presentations (3-5 min per student) + essay defense. Review of Beck, Allison, neighborhood theory, and methods.	Review all previous readings DUE: "Day in the Life" Video + 500-word Essay
Week 6 Session 8	PART 4: LIFE SPACES & PRACTICES (生活空間) Session 8: Childhood Spaces (子どもの間) Hybrid 3 hours Classroom + Parks and streets Lecture on children's mobility, school life, generational play changes. Possibly: traditional games workshop (beigoma, otedama, kendama, etc). Parks walking tour. Memory mapping exercise.	Readings: - Kinoshita "Generational Differences in Play" (pp. 53-77) - Drianda & Kinoshita "Danger from Traffic" (pp. 226-242) Due: Sketch+Note #5
Week 7 Session 9	Session 9: Dwelling Spaces (住まい) Indoor 3 hours Lecture on housing crisis, aging society, kodokushi. Film clips. Group discussion on danchi evolution, solo living, ie system breakdown. Possible visit to housing museum (UR danchi, Akabane).	Readings: - Dahl "Governing through Kodokushi" (pp. 83-102) - Sugimoto "Gender and Family System" (pp. 156-163) Due: Sketch+Note #6
Week 7 Session 10	Session 10: Labor/Consumption Spaces (働く場) Outdoor 3 hours Akihabara Tour of Akihabara transformation. Small groups explore themed cafes, retail spaces, game centers. Discussion on urban subcultures, service labor, consumption patterns, character capitalism.	Readings: - Azuma Database Animals Ch. 1-2 - Galbraith "Akihabara" Due: Sketch+Note #7, Literature Review
Week 8 Session 11	Session 11: Sacred Spaces and Festival (祭り) Hybrid 3 hours Shrine + Classroom Lecture on shrines and matsuri in urban life. Shrine visit - sacred architecture, community functions. Discussion on traditional vs modern risk management.	Readings: - Bestor Neighborhood Tokyo Ch. 7 "The Festival" - Plutschow "Matsuri in Everyday Japan" Due: Sketch+Note #8
Week 9 Session 12	PART 5: SYNTHESIS & CONCLUSION Session 12: Course Synthesis & Final Presentations Indoor 3 hours Peer fieldwork presentations (5 min each). Final research presentations (12 min + Q&A). Course conclusion. Seoul-Tokyo reflections. Farewell.	Review Beck & Allison readings Due: Fieldwork Portfolio, Final Presentations Final Paper due December 18

COURSE-RELATED TRIPS:

- Fukugawa area - Fukugawa Edo Museum (¥400), traditional waterways, Kiyosumi Gardens
- Iwase Neighborhood Association, Matsudo - Community ethnography (includes group lunch)
- Shimokitazawa - Creative district exploration with street observation methods
- Parks, playgrounds, school zones - Children's environments observation

- Akihabara - Urban subcultures and consumption spaces
- Local shrine - Sacred space in urban context

REQUIRED READINGS:

- 0.5mm (0.5 Miri, 2014) - Depicts precarious labor, elderly care crisis, and social isolation in aging Japanese society. Relevant to Session 9 on dwelling spaces and kodokushi
- Allison, Anne. Precarious Japan (2013) - Chapters 1-2
- Azuma, Hiroki. Otaku: Japan's Database Animals (2009) - Chapters 1-2
- Beck, Ulrich & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. "Losing the Traditional: Individualization and Precarious Freedoms" in Individualization (2002), pp. 1-21
- Berkhof, Anna. "Feeling at Home in Tokyo" in Tokyo Totem: A Guide to Tokyo edited by C. Fruneaux and E. Gardner, flick studio, Tokyo
- Bestor, Theodore. "Inquisitive Observation: Following Networks in Urban Fieldwork" (2003), pp. 315-334
- Bestor, Theodore. Neighborhood Tokyo. Chapter 7: "The Festival and the Local Social Order"
- Bestor, Theodore. "Tradition and Japanese Social Organization: Institutional Development in a Tokyo Neighborhood" (1985), pp. 121-135
- Cybriwsky, Roman. Tokyo: The Shogun's City at the Twenty-First Century. NY and Chichester: John Wiley, 1998. Chapter 3 (pp. 54-99)
- Dahl, Nils. "Governing through Kodokushi: Japan's Lonely Deaths and Their Impact on Community Self-Government" (2020), pp. 83-102
- Deviant Properties: Street Observation Studies, 88
- Dimmer, Christian. "New Urban Commons" pp. 298-302
- Drianda & Kinoshita. "Danger from Traffic to Fear of Monkeys: Children's Independent Mobility in Four Diverse Sites in Japan" (2011), pp. 226-242
- Fanelsa, Niklas. "Hidden Terrain" in Tokyo Totem: A Guide to Tokyo edited by C. Fruneaux and E. Gardner, flick studio, Tokyo
- Farrer, James. "The Space-Time Compression of Tokyo Street Drinking" (2021), pp. 49-65
- Galbraith, Patrick. "Akihabara: Conditioning a Public Otaku Image"
- Houwelingen, Pepijn van. "Neighborhood Associations and Social Capital in Japan" (2012), pp. 467-497
- Jinnai, Hidenobu. Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology. Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-65)
- Kinoshita, I. "Charting Generational Differences in Conceptions and Opportunities for Play in a Japanese Neighborhood" (2009), pp. 53-77
- Love Exposure (Ai no Mukidashi, 2008) - Examines religious movements and social marginality in contemporary urban Japan. Relevant to discussions of alternative communities
- Old Enough! (Hajimete no Otsukai, Netflix) - Documentary series on children's independent mobility and risk perception in Japanese urban society. Referenced in Session 8
- Plutschow, Herbert. "Matsuri in Everyday Japan" (1997)
- Sand, Jordan. (2013). Tokyo Vernacular: Common Spaces, Local Histories, Found Objects. University of California Press (selections)
- September 1923 / The Fukuda Village Incident (2023) - Historical examination of ethnic violence against Koreans in Japan following the Great Kanto Earthquake. Addresses social stratification, minority communities, and historical trauma. Relevant to Sessions 2, 3 and 11 on historical consciousness
- Shoplifters (Manbiki Kazoku, 2018) - Screened Session 4. Ethnographic examination of marginal communities, precarious housing, and alternative family structures in contemporary Tokyo
- Sorensen, André. The Making of Urban Japan. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-44)
- Sugimoto, Yoshio. An introduction to Japanese society. Cambridge University Press. 6 Gender and Family System I The Family Registration System and Ideology (2010) pp. 156-163
- Sugimoto, Yoshio. "Gender and Family System" pp. 156-163

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Allison, Anne. "Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan" (2012)
- Beck, Ulrich. Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity (1992)
- Condry, Ian. Hip-Hop Japan (2006)
- Condry, Ian. The Soul of Anime (2013)
- de Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life (1984)
- Galbraith, Patrick. Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan (2019)

- Gill, Tom. Men of Uncertainty: The Social Organization of Day Laborers in Contemporary Japan (2001)
- Ivy, Marilyn. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity and Nostalgia in Japan (1995)
- Robertson, Jennifer. Native and Newcomer: Making and Remaking a Japanese City (1991)
- Sorensen & Funck, eds. Living Cities in Japan: Citizens' Movements, Machizukuri and Local Environments (2007)
- Steinberg, Marc. Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan (2012)
- Terada, M., & Ermilova, M. (2024). "Swinging on the Virtual Playground: Children's Perspectives on Green Time and Screen Time" in Social Capital for a Child-Friendly City (pp. 3-15). Routledge
- White, Merry. The Material Child: Coming of Age in Japan and America (1993)
- White, Merry. Coffee Life in Japan (2012)

INSTRUCTOR BIOGRAPHY:

Dr. Mariia Ermilova is Assistant Professor at the Children's Body Research Institute, Nippon Sport Science University. She has lived in Japan for nine years and holds a Ph.D. from Chiba University's Isami Kinoshita Spatial Planning Lab, specializing in community design (machizukuri) and citizen participation in landscape planning and governance.

Dr. Ermilova conducted seven years of participatory action research with the Iwase Neighborhood Association in Matsudo City (which students will visit in Session 3), bringing extensive firsthand experience of Japanese community life, urban planning processes, and ethnographic research methods. Her research focuses on children's play environments, community development, climate adaptation in urban schools, and intergenerational relationships in Japanese neighborhoods. She has published on topics including collective memory in suburban planning, green community projects, and children's environmental rights.