

What College Students in the United States Want to Know about Japan

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Some eight years ago, an international specialist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology observed that Americans had become more interested in learning *from* Japan than simply learning *about* Japan. His audience, of which I was a member, was composed of academic specialists and administrators in science and engineering, and we certainly agreed with him. At that time I was promoting efforts at a state university to improve scientific cooperation between the United States and Japan, which included promoting the learning of Japanese language and social organization among students majoring in engineering and natural sciences. The university (North Carolina State University) had large departments in those fields, and a core of interested students — modestly sized but of high quality — was just coalescing. They were young people who believed that more knowledge about Japan's way of doing research and development could help them put together more competitive professional careers offering more opportunity.

A subsequent career move gave me the chance to see what other kinds of students would find interesting about Japan. Some six years ago I left the engineering-oriented university to begin a teaching career that took me to a university with a liberal arts and professional school emphasis. The University of Oregon is a fairly typical second-or third-tier American public university, administered by the State of Oregon, in the country's Northwest. Almost two thirds (63 percent) of the University of Oregon's 16,000 students in the fall of 1993 were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences; Business Administration accounted for another 13 percent, and five other schools accounted for less than 10 percent each of the remainder (in descending order, Architecture, Journalism, Education, Law, and Music).

Since arriving at the University of Oregon, I have been teaching one or more courses on Japanese society yearly. At the beginning of each new course, I have attempted to assess students' backgrounds and interests with a one-page questionnaire. I had regularly tallied each new course's set of responses by hand and used the resulting figures only for information on the students I was teaching at the time; the subject of the Kyoto Conference, however, inspired me to at last assemble all of the questionnaires, code them, and analyze them systematically. Since the time of the conference I have added data from courses I subsequently taught. There are 571 valid responses, representing students in fourteen courses in Japanese society (of which two were modern Japanese history as social science) that I have taught since 1990. For this paper I have eliminated from the sample graduate students and

Japanese nationals, leaving a total of 446 cases. Since I have modified the questionnaire somewhat over the past six years, totals for responses to specific questions may be smaller than this figure, reflect missing values for questions not presented to some class cohorts as well as omissions in other individual students' forms. An appendix discusses important method-related information.

I offer the resulting figures as information concerning *students who have enrolled in social science of Japan courses*, and not as a random sample of all students at an American university. These students are significant, however, as consumers of the information that we as Japan specialists generate. The figures are of course more suggestive than definitive. I believe, though, that the issues they raise deserve more serious discussion among academic Japan specialists, and call for further empirical studies having more sophistication and reliability.

The survey provided three sources of information concerning the Japan-related interests among students at American universities: students' responses to a question about why they enrolled in the course; a distribution of the classes' declared majors, compared with university-wide distributions; and, students' descriptions of their Japan-related interests.

I. REASONS FOR ENROLLING IN THE COURSE

A sizeable number of students chose courses on Japanese society to meet specific requirements for graduation. There were 289 students who completed questionnaires having a closed-ended question concerning reasons for enrolling in my course. It had the following format:

Reason for taking this course (can check more than one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Major requirement	<input type="checkbox"/> Graduation requirement
<input type="checkbox"/> Convenient time	<input type="checkbox"/> Seemed interesting
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (fill-in)	

Almost a fourth of the students (24 percent) stated that one reason for taking the course was to fulfill a graduation requirement, and 16 percent took the course to meet a major requirement. Somewhat over half (58 percent) indicated at least one of the three instrumental or utilitarian reasons of fulfilling requirements or course time convenience.

Slightly fewer than half (48 percent) checked "Seemed interesting" as a reason for taking the course. These response may understate the interest in Japanese society among undergraduates, since actual class size in the lower division offerings was particularly large; my six lower division courses averaged 82 students per course. (Alas, I cannot claim that the instructor's greatness as a teacher drew in students: of the 59 students who wrote in their reasons for taking the course, only 5 said that the instructor's teaching approach was a factor.)

II. ACADEMIC MAJORS

Table One

Undergraduate Academic Majors at the University of Oregon and in Japan Social Science Classes, 1989, 1991-1993, in Percent

Academic Field	Japan Social Science Classes	U. of Oregon
Architecture, Arts	7.6	12.3
Asian Studies	14.7	0.8
Business, Journalism	27.2	22.2
Humanities	5.9	10.4
Natural Sciences & Math	8.5	9.8
Social Sciences	24.6	23.7
Undeclared	11.6	20.8
TOTAL	100.1*	100.0

N=423

* Error due to rounding

Notes on Subsample and Composition of Academic Field Categories

Sample excludes Japanese nationals. The "Humanities" category includes History Majors. The "Social Science" category includes Education majors (.5 percent). Business and Journalism were grouped together as professional majors with a common policy-related interest in Japan. Only 5.5 percent of the sample declared more than one major. They were grouped as follows: Social Science plus Asian Studies (2.4 percent), with Social Science; International Studies (a Social Science) and Business (2.1 percent) with Business; Asian Studies and Humanities (.5 percent) with Asian Studies; and, Natural Science and Japanese (.5 percent) with Natural Science.

Table One provides a comparison between the distribution of majors for the University (using totals from the first five years of the study) with a distribution for the sample's undergraduate non-Japanese students. The somewhat greater popularity of the course among students in Business and Journalism is probably due to Japan's rather high profile in business circles and in international news. Asian Studies students have an area course requirement that social science of Japan courses fulfill. Regarding the groups with a rather low representation, humanities majors have the option of taking a wide variety of courses offered by our university in Asian humanities: the University of Oregon has three Japanese literature specialists and two historians of Japan and among our regular faculty, as well as a Japanese art historian and a specialist in East Asian religions who regularly provides a course on Japanese religion. Undeclared students might be under-represented because they perceive a social science course on Japan as too specialized and demanding.

III. THE NATURE OF JAPAN-RELATED INTEREST

An open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire form asked, simply enough, "What interests you most about Japan?" I coded the answers using 58 values and then grouped the

Table Two

Responses among University of Oregon undergraduates to the Open-ended Question, "What Interests You Most about Japan?" Grouped by Major Category.

Type of Interest	1st Answer (%)	I. II in 2nd Answer (%)
I. Social Issues	10.7	18.8
II. Business, Economic Success, Technology	21.6	24.5
III. Classical Asian Humanities, Culturalist	24.1	20.3
IV. Differences, Exotica	11.2	10.1
V. Culture and People, Everything	25.3	19.8
VI. Personal Connections, including "Roots"	7.2	6.4
TOTAL*	100.1	99.9

NOTES: N=403. Sample excludes Japanese nationals and 12 miscellaneous responses. Question not included in 1990 forms. * Totals do not equal 100.0 due to rounding error.

Contents of the Major Categories of Interest in Japan:

- I. **Social Issues:** commonalities [Japan, U.S.] / crime, conflict / education / family, community, generational differences / gender, women's issues / homogeneity and diversity, minorities, discrimination / lifestyles, standard of living / model society (e.g. discipline) / tension between modern versus traditional
- II. **Business, Political Economy, "Japanese Miracle":** business / economy, economic power / global status / management / relations with [the respondent's] country / technology / tourism development / government / career potential
- III. **Classical and Culturalist Interest:** arts, traditional and modern / customs / history / ideals, national character / language / literature / religion, ritual, mythology / traditional sports (sumo, martial arts) / traditions
- IV. **Differences, Exotica,** curiosity / mystique / uniqueness, differences, "otherworldness"
- V. **Culture and People/Everything:** culture / the people / Japanese society / ignorance ("I know so little about anything")
- VI. **Personal Connections:** contact with Japanese (spouse, friend, visitor) / personal like of Japanese people / visit to Japan (past or planned) / Japanese-American Heritage

answers into six categories, as summarized in the bottom portion of Table Two. Most of the categories emerged from *a priori* ideas about motives for studying Japanese society. The two interests of greatest concern to me as a social scientist are: comparative social organization and social issues common to Japan and other industrialized countries; and, explanations and analyses of Japan's rise to international prominence as an industrial megapower. I have labeled these interests, respectively, "Social Issues and Business, Political Economy, & 'Japanese Miracle'." Both of these interests have important policy- and career-related applied dimensions.

Since many students have decidedly humanities-related interests in Japan that focus on religion, language, and history, I created the category, *Classical and Culturalist Interest*. This

category could arguably have also included those students who were interested in Japan as an exotic culture or impressed by its “differentness,” but I decided to group such interests separately — The *Differences, Exotica* category — to see if the two contrast in various ways. I constructed a fifth category to reflect the University of Oregon’s geographical location on the Pacific Rim: labeled *Personal Connections*, this category represents the effects of propinquity, i.e. interest generated by contact with Japanese people and travel to Japan, and it also contains Japanese-Americans wanting to learn about their ancestors’ cultural heritage — “roots,” if you will.

A sixth category was necessitated by its sheer frequency among responses: *Culture and People/Everything* is a broad, vaguely stated interest subsumed by brief answers like “culture,” “the people,” and “ways of living.” These inchoate responses could represent either the buds of a social science oriented interest or a classical culturalist interest. (There were 12 other responses that I excluded from analysis because they did not fit into any of the six categories.)

The category commanding the most responses was “Culture and People,” Category V. A nearly equal proportion, however, was claimed by classical humanities interests. The social science and political/ economic/ business categories together accounted for somewhat less than a third of the responses (32.3), yielding to the combined responses of interest in classical humanities and exotica, as represented by Categories III and IV in Table Two (which together accounted for 35.3 percent of responses). Nor was proximity to Japanese or Japanese-American culture a major source of interest in Japan, as shown in the small showing for Category VI.

Since my concern is the social sciences and applied, policy-relevant issues, I examined the responses of 183 students who wrote in a second interest to see if additional comments would indicate an interest in these matters. There were 43 indications of more than one interest in which the latter (but not the first statement) concerned social issues or business/ political economics (Categories I and Category II); these cases were moved those into Categories I or II, changing the results somewhat in favor of those categories. The recoded results appear in the second column of Table Two, and were used in subsequent analyses.

Even with compensation for additional comments that indicate social science-related interests, I believe that the results show a lamentably low level of interest in applied, policy-related issues. If my evaluation seems too harsh an appraisal of students’ lack of interest in “learning *from* Japan,” I note that these are students enrolled in a university *social science* class: one would expect some self-selection for issues of interest to social scientists summed in Categories I and II. Among my 446 undergraduates, there were only 9 students interested in educational issues, 2 interested in crime problems, and 1 who mentioned poverty and homelessness. None mentioned health care. These may sound like rather specialized topics, but they are the stuff of both daily media fare and political debate, in which these students will soon be participating (if not already) as adult citizens.

Nor does a cross-tabulation of type of interest by academic major, as shown in Table

TABLE Three

Type of Interest in Japan Expressed by Undergraduates by Academic Major at the University of Oregon (1989, 1991-93), in Percentages. Parentheses show row and column case totals.

MAJOR ¹	INTEREST						TOTAL*
	I. Societal Issues	II. Business, Polit Econ	III. Classical Culturalist	IV. Difference, Exotica	V. Everything, People	VI. Personal, Roots	
Arts, Architecture	20.0	6.7	50.0	3.3	10.0	10.0	100.0 (30)
Asian Studies	23.0	16.4	34.4	3.3	18.0	4.9	100.0 (61)
Business ²	14.7	39.2	9.8	8.8	23.5	3.9	99.9 (102)
Humanities	10.7	25.0	21.4	10.7	25.0	7.1	99.9 (28)
Natural Sciences ³	13.9	33.3	13.9	11.1	19.4	8.3	99.9 (36)
Social Sciences ⁴	20.8	19.8	18.8	14.6	18.8	7.3	100.1 (96)
TOTAL SAMPLE	17.8 (63)	25.5 (90)	21.2 (75)	9.3 (33)	19.8 (70)	6.2 (22)	99.8 (353)

Notes:

* Totals may not equal 100.0 due to rounding error.

1 Excludes Undeclared Majors

2 Includes Journalism

3 Includes Mathematics and Computer Science

4 Includes Psychology and Education

Three, provide much sharper differentiation. The social science majors evidenced only three percent more interest in societal issues than the sample as a whole, and were somewhat *less* interested than the entire sample in issues subsumed under business and political economy. Also notable was the pattern of responses among Asian Studies students, which exceeded the total sample in its emphasis on humanities subjects at the expense of political economic and business issues. This tendency probably reflects the dominant role of humanities specialists in Asian Studies at the University of Oregon.

About one in five students expressed an interest in Japanese society so broad (and vague) that it called for creating a separate category for analysis. In order to see if more years of classroom study would lead to more definition of interest, I cross-tabulated interest against a split in lower division (freshman and sophomore) and upper division (junior and senior) courses. (Subtotals were 342 students in the former and 62 in the latter; this analysis included undeclared majors.) None of the categories showed any difference worth noting; the greatest divergence was a 3.4 percent increase in interest in the political-economic and business category. (A chi-square test was insignificant at any level of probability.)

DISCUSSION

There are some compelling pragmatic reasons for devoting more attention to social science approaches to Japanese society in order to develop subjects of applied concern. Cultural Anthropology in the United States is particularly poised to benefit. A profound shift in career patterns for anthropologists has taken place: the number of Anthropology Ph.D.s employed in non-faculty positions has swelled in the last two decades. The majority of Ph.D. recipients in Anthropology today must turn to non-academic careers that require policy-relevant expertise (AAA 1991).

This development was triggered primarily by the collapse of the academic job market that began in the mid-1970s, but the same period also witnessed career alternatives created, in one knowledgeable observer's words, "by the burgeoning information and policy needs that spring from the transformation of social, economic, and organizational systems on a global scale" (Baba 1994: 174). Although optimism must be tempered by current rounds of budget cuts in public spending for research and education in the United States, the fact remains that new social science careers are currently being forged in response to problems of public policy having a social and behavioral dimension. As observed in a 1993 article on social science careers in *Science*, "...policymakers realize that most human problems — from lung cancer to the fighting in Bosnia, from crack babies to global warming — are problems of human behavior" (Holden 1993). Coining the term "Applied Japanese Studies," Richard Samuels and I adumbrated a role for Japanologists in the Japan-related training of natural scientists and engineering professionals (1986).

If there are unrealized vistas in our undergraduate students' interest in studying Japanese society, they reflect an omission on our part as academic Japanologists. I believe that undergraduate students in the United States deserve more exposure to approaches that shed light on the problems they will face in their lives, ranging from the quality of the work they do to their health and personal safety. There is a plethora of problems in the United States with which the Japanese have also grappled — in many instances successfully — from public safety to adolescent parenthood, from health care costs to literacy. Such investigations do not require the uncritical premise that the Japanese have somehow found "Perfect Cures": all that is required is a pragmatic approach that entertains the possibility of learning from Japan. (Our Japanese colleagues have maintained the same premise vis-a-vis the West for the last century or so.) If we give more of our attention to these issues, we will be responding effectively to the demand that we as university faculty conduct more teaching and research in areas having relevance to pressing real-world problems. My colleagues in other countries, including Japan, face the same challenges (Jordan 1994).

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APPENDIX ONE:

Survey of Students in Social Science of Japan Courses at the University of Oregon, Fall 1990 to Spring 1995.

Survey Instrument: a one-page questionnaire form, self-administered. Sample of latest iteration in Appendix 2. Coded into a data set having 36 variables per case, including students' final grades for the course.

Total Sample Size: 571 cases

Distribution Method: The instructor personally distributed one-page questionnaire forms on the first day of class. Students were told the results would help in determining course content and structure of future courses. Completed forms were collected some 10 to 15 minutes after distribution.

Return Rates: Based on final course enrollments (somewhat lower than initial attendance, which was not counted), 88.5 percent (539/609). Individual class return rates varied from 81 percent to 100 percent (in smaller classes). Class size ranged from 23 to 108 students.

APPENDIX TWO: QUESTIONNAIRE FORM (March, 1995 Iteration)

JAPAN QUESTIONNAIRE: COURSE NUMBER _____,

TERM/YEAR _____ /19 _____

Your Name: _____ Your Major: _____

1. Reasons for taking this course (you can check more than one):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Major requirement | <input type="checkbox"/> Graduation requirement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Convenient time | <input type="checkbox"/> Seemed interesting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It may help my
career / job search | <input type="checkbox"/> I have Japanese relatives
/ ancestors ("roots") |

Other: _____

2. Have you had other college-level courses on Japan?

- No Yes, in the following:
- Japanese History
 - Asian History
 - Japanese Literature

- Social Science (CIRCLE the appropriate field[s]):
 political science / sociology / anthropology / business & economics
- Japanese / Asian Art or Art History
- Japanese / Asian Religion
- Other (*except for Japanese language*) _____

3. Are you now taking a Japanese language course?

- Yes: Year/Level _____
- No, but I *have* taken Japanese language classes, ending at year/level _____
- No, never have
- No, I am a native speaker of Japanese

4. Have you ever been to Japan (since age 10 or so)?

- No Yes
 - I have visited there (for a few weeks or months)
 - I have lived there (for over half a year, up to several years)
 - I have lived there for much of my life
 - I am a Japanese citizen/permanent resident

5. List the first three adjectives that come to mind when you think about Japanese people.

_____, _____, _____.

6. What interests you most about Japan? (Please answer in one sentence.)