Visualizing Japan (1850s-1930s): Westernization, Protest, Modernity

A HarvardX / MITx MOOC (2026)

The Syllabus outlines the course structure, with links. Please read "**Important Information About the Course,**" below the Syllabus **(click here).**

SYLLABUS (VJx)

Entrance Survey
How to Use the Course

INTRODUCTION – New Historical Sources for a Digital Age

Day 1 - Welcome to VJx (2 Questions)
About MODULE I - Black Ships & Samurai: The Perry Expedition
About MODULE II - Social Protest in Imperial Japan: the Hibiya Riot of 1905
About MODULE III - Modernity in Interwar Japan: Shiseido & Consumer Culture
DISCUSSION - Lady's Handbook
ARCHIVES: Overview of the Visits to Japanese Archives
Challenging Stereotypes

Day 2 - Doing History with Visuals (3 Questions)
Doing History with Visuals, part 1
Doing History with Visuals, part 2
Doing History with Visuals, part 3
Challenges and Controversies
Global Reach
Then and Now
DISCUSSION – Goals for the Course
VISUAL EXERCISE - Sorting

MODULE I - Black Ships & Samurai: The Perry Expedition

Day 3 - Original Sources for the Perry Encounter (5 Questions)
The American Record: Perry's Official Narrative
Images of Perry
Blue-eyed Barbarian
VISUAL EXERCISE – Images of Perry
READING - Chapter Two: "Perry"
The Japanese Record
DISCUSSION: The Form of Historical Sources

Day 4 - Historical Context: Medieval & Early Modern Japan (2 Questions)
Japanese Seclusion
Hidden Christians
VISUAL EXERCISE - Timeline
READING - Ch 1 "Introduction"
Day 4 QUIZ

Day 5 - Japan in the Pacific and the World (6 Questions)
Steam-powered Ships
Consequences of Seclusion
Whaling
Views of Japan Before Perry
"Gospel of God"

Day 6 - Visualizing Japan ca. 1853 (6 Questions)
Impressions of/by William Heine
VISUAL EXERCISE – Black Ships: Facing "East" & Facing "West"
VISUAL NARRATIVE – Facing "East": Gunboat Diplomacy
VISUAL NARRATIVE – Facing "West": Foreign Intruders
READING - Chapter Three: "Black Ships"
No Photographs?

Day 7 - Perry's Expeditions (8 Questions)
Delivering a Letter
Hidden Samurai
Perry Returns, the Treaty of Kanagawa

Day 8 - American Barbarians in the Eyes of the Japanese (5 Questions)
Ryōsenji Temple
Troops in Shimoda
Demon Ship
Observing Perry's Staff & Crew
VISUAL NARRATIVE: Commodore and Crew
VISUAL EXERCISE – The Officers: British Museum Scroll
"Meet the Officers" Game

Day 9 - Shore Life and the Black Ship Scroll (8 Questions)
Juxtaposition 1 – The Funeral Procession
DISCUSSION – Private Williams' Funeral
Juxtaposition 2 – The Tombstone
Juxtaposition 3 - The American Graveyard
ARCHIVE VISIT - Ryōsenji Temple and the American Graves
Public Bath Scene from Perry Narrative
Introducing the Black Ship Scroll
Sailors and Sons

REFERENCE: The Black Ship Scroll
View the "Black Ship Scroll"
"Black Ship Scroll" scenes explained (VIDEO)

Day 10 - Hakodate and Social Encounters (3 Questions)
Kojima's Book of Perry in Japan
Social Encounters
Entertainments: Sumo
Race & Ethnicity in the Perry Expedition Graphics
VISUAL EXERCISE & DISCUSSION: Sorting a Database

Day 11 - Black Ship Screen, Conclusion (4 Questions)
Black Ship Screen
DISCUSSION - Top, Black Ship Screen
DISCUSSION - Middle, Black Ship Screen
DISCUSSION - Bottom, Black Ship Screen
ARCHIVE VISIT - Historiographical Institute, University of Tokyo
CONCLUSION - Significance of the Perry Encounter

MODULE I QUIZ (2 Questions)

REFERENCE: Module I Gallery
"Black Ships & Samurai" Image Gallery

TRANSITION — After Perry

Day 12 - Yokohama Boomtown and Meiji Modernization (7 Questions)
Treaties
VISUAL EXERCISE – Yokohama Boomtown
The Meiji Political Order
Rapid Westernization
VISUAL EXERCISE – Westernization: Constitution
Print Culture in Meiji Japan
Aspirations and Empire

Day 13 - Modernization, Westernization, the Rise of Imperial Japan (3 Questions)
The First Sino-Japanese War
The Russo-Japanese War
Imaging Victory
VISUAL EXERCISE – A Moment of Celebration & Protest

MODULE II - Social Protest in Imperial Japan: the Hibiya Riot of 1905

Day 14 - The Hibiya Riot (4 Questions)
Historical Context of the Hibiya Riot
Themes
VISUAL EXERCISE – Timeline of the Hibiya Riot

REFERENCE: The Complete Tokyo Riot Graphic & QUIZ
Scroll through "The Tokyo Riot Graphic"

Day 15 - Illustrated News (10 Questions)
From Enthusiasm to Disappointment
VISUAL EXERCISE – The Wartime Graphic
The "Tokyo Riot Graphic" Special Issue
READING – Chapter 1: "Making News Graphic"
Hibiya Park as a Protest Site
VISUAL EXERCISE - Panic-stricken Crowd
Summing Up
DISCUSSION – Reporting on the Hibiya Riot

Day 16 - The Urban Crowd (11 Questions)
ARCHIVE VISIT - Meiji Bunko
The Composition of the Crowd
Day 16 QUIZ - The Urban Crowd
READING - Chapter Two: "Challenging the State"
READING - Chapter Three: "Identifying 'the People'"
DISCUSSION - Evidence & the Urban Crowd

Day 17 - The Rioters' Goals and Targets (3 Questions)
Police
Streetcars
DISCUSSION – Retelling the Riots

Day 18 - Protest and Imperial Democracy (6 Questions)
Imperial Democracy
READING – Chapter Four: "Democracy & the Crowd"
READING – Chapter Five: "Protest & Profits"
DISCUSSION – Readings & How We Learn

MODULE II QUIZ (7 Questions)

REFERENCE: Module II Gallery
“Social Protest in Imperial Japan" Image Galleries

TRANSITION — From Hibiya to Shiseido

Day 19 - New Forms of Protest in Interwar Japan (7 Questions)
Reinventing Tradition
The Rise of Moderate Labor Unions
Radicalization of the Labor Movement
Women in the Workforce
ARCHIVE VISIT - Ōhara Institute
Research at the Ōhara Institute

Day 20 - From Protest to Consumer Culture (10 Questions)
Labor Unions
The Farmer Movement
Protest & Proletarian Art
Comparing Posters
VISUAL EXERCISE – "100 Views of New Tokyo" by Eight Artists
VISUAL EXERCISE – "100 Views of Great Tokyo in the Shōwa Era" by Koizumi Kishio
Social Protest & the Urban Consumer

MODULE III - Modernity in Interwar Japan: Shiseido & Consumer Culture

Day 21 - Art and Commerce in an Age of Mass Production (7 Questions)
New Liberatory Modes of Expression
Cosmopolitan Chic
Abstraction of the Female Body
VISUAL EXERCISE - Patterns in Shiseido Ads
DISCUSSION – Patterns in Shiseido Ads

Day 22 - Ginza, the Shiseido stores and Archive (7 Questions)
VISUAL EXERCISE - Shiseido Buildings
READING – Chapter One: "Introduction"
ARCHIVE VISIT - Shiseido Collection
READING – Chapter Two: "Cosmopolitan Glamour"

Day 23 - Advertising and the Shiseido Network (14 Questions)
Advertising and Branding
A Complex Jigsaw
Geographical Expansion
Packaging Elegance
READING - Chapter Three: "Marketing Beauty"
Day 23 QUIZ

Day 24 - Shiseido Graph (11 Questions)
VISUAL EXERCISE - Gallery Sort - Shiseido Graph Covers
Cinema, Montage, & Mass Production
Transportation and Speed
Fusion
Traditional Yet Very Modern
The Global Modern Moment
"Good Wife, Wise Mother" & **Day 24 QUIZ**

REFERENCE: Shiseido Graph and Shiseido Geppō
Shiseido Graph, 1933-1937
Shiseido Geppō (monthly), 1924–1931

Day 25 - Modern Girl Modern Women (14 Questions)

What is a Modern Girl?
Women's Roles in the Popular Imagination: Schoolgirls
Women's Roles in the Popular Imagination: the New Woman
Women's Roles in the Popular Imagination: the Modern Girl
VISUAL EXERCISE - Types in Shiseido Advertising
Working Women
Escapism & the Road to War
READING - Chapter Four: "Luxury & Thrift in Wartime"
Day 25 QUIZ

MODULE III QUIZ & DISCUSSION (1 Question)
MODULE III QUIZ
DISCUSSION - Pick a Shiseido Image

REFERENCE: Module III Gallery
“Selling Shiseido" Image Galleries

CONCLUSION– Modernity, Militarism, March to War

Day 26 - Conclusion: Modernity, Militarism, March to War (9 Questions)
VISUAL EXERCISE - Complex Forces
The Horrors of a Modern War
New War for Liberation of Asia Slogan
Shiseido into the 1930s
Conclusion: Disastrous End, Starting Over

FINAL EXAM (10 Questions)

Important Information About the Course

Scope of the Course
This course will not provide a comprehensive survey of Japan's modern history. It studies history through visual sources as presented in three units published on Visualizing Cultures. This means that certain important and sensitive topics, such as Japan's imperial aggression in East and Southeast Asia, will not receive much attention. The essays are as follows:

"Black Ships & Samurai," by John W. Dower. Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853-54 expedition to force Japan to open its doors to the outside world is an extraordinary moment to look at by examining and comparing the visual representations left to us by both the American and Japanese sides of this encounter.

"Social Protest in Imperial Japan: The Hibiya Riot of 1905," by Andrew Gordon. The dramatic daily reports from participants in the massive 1905 "Hibiya Riot"—the first major social protest in the age of "imperial democracy"—offer a vivid perspective on the contentious domestic politics of an emerging imperial power.

"Modernity in Interwar Japan: Shiseido & Consumer Culture," by Gennifer Weisenfeld. The vast archive of the Shiseido cosmetics company opens a window on the emergence of consumer culture, modern roles for women, and global cosmopolitanism—from the 'teens through the 1920s and even into the 1930s era of Japanese militarism and aggression.

Please note that we expect all students to participate with respect for one another. By showing certain images or discussing certain topics, we do not endorse the views or opinions they present. Rather, we seek to understand the complexity of the past, even when the past is distasteful or offensive to us. This course does not reflect the views of Harvard University, MIT, HarvardX, MITx, edX or **MIT Visualizing Cultures**.

Expected Workload

VJx requires 3-5 hours per week to complete the lessons. This includes watching the video lectures and assessment questions. Additional exercises are marked "optional" or "ungraded" and can add to your course experience. Please feel free to go at your own pace, studying whenever convenient.

Additional Reading

For additional reading, we recommend Professor Andrew Gordon's *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, available **here.** (this link is external to MITx and will open in a new window).

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