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JAPAN STUDIES INSTITUTE 2016 PROJECT SUMMARY

With the knowledge and inspiration gained from the Japan Studies Institute, I will incorporate Japanese Studies into several aspects of my undergraduate curriculum. For example, in the Spring 2017 semester, I will offer a course on Japanese Religion, focusing on Shinto, Buddhism, and Japanese Confucianism. I also intend to incorporate Japanese studies in my course, Philosophy East & West. This course in comparative philosophy has variable content, with a different theme uniting East and West each time it is offered. In the 2017-18 academic year, I will offer “Loyalty East & West,” focusing on philosophies of loyalty in ancient Greek and Japanese philosophical traditions. I also plan to develop a course for my institution’s East Asian Studies program, on the subject of China & Japan. It will compare the two countries through the lenses of various cultural phenomena. For the current project, however, I would like to share my ideas for a course entitled, “Life and Death in Japan.”

“Life and Death in Japan” will be an interdisciplinary course that will be integrated into the East Asian Studies major and minor at my home institution, but will also satisfy our International course requirement of general education, inviting students across the university to learn about Japanese culture through a framework with universal significance. After all, we are all alive, and we will all die.

The theme of “Life and Death in Japan” will be explored through study of Japanese religion, philosophy, literature, and film. Religion and philosophy will be encountered first, providing a theoretical framework for interpretation of subsequent materials. Inhabiting the role of student again at the institute has underscored the pedagogical power of images to enhance learning of the unfamiliar. Consequently, teaching of Japan’s religious and philosophical traditions will include use of images of shrines, temples, and artistic depictions of deities, persons, and episodes from scriptures. Conceptually, my focus will be on what Japanese religions and philosophies have to say about fundamental questions concerning the nature of human existence: What kind of life should we live? How do we find meaning in a life full of suffering? What conditions might justify ending one’s own life? Is death the end of life or a transition to another form of life? The JSI has helped me to appreciate more acutely the permeability of the categories of “Japanese religion” and “Japanese philosophy.” This portion of the course will include attention to thought systems as diverse as Shinto, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Bushidō.

Matters of life and death abound in Japanese literature. Excerpts from *The Tale of Genji* will be pertinent, but I will emphasize modern Japanese literature. Among titles that I am considering are Natsume Sōseki’s *Kokoro* (1914), Yasunari Kawabata’s *Thousand Cranes* (1952), Sawako Ariyoshi’s *The Twilight Years* (1972), and Akiko Mikamo’s *Rising from the Ashes* (2013). The first three are novels taking up transitions through stages of life, finding meaning in life, coping with death, and the specter of suicide. The latter is a biography by one of our institution’s speakers, recording the story of her father, a survivor of Hiroshima, and his message of love and the power of forgiveness.

Questions of life and death also punctuate narratives in Japanese film. Among films that I am considering are Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* ("To Live") (1952), Shōhei Imamura's "The Ballad of Narayama" (1983), Hirokazu Koreeda's "After Life" (1998), and Yōjirō Takita's "Departures" (2008). Each of these films conveys philosophically rich ideas about life and death that are inextricably rooted in aspects of Japanese culture.

If time permits, I will devote space to the subject of ghosts, who occupy an ambiguous space between life and death. Japanese ghosts may be explored through several lenses. Among those I am considering are Buddhism (e.g., *gaki* and *jikininki*), Noh theatre (e.g., "Tamura" ["Dance of the Ghost"]), literature (e.g., Lafcadio Hearn, *Kaidan* [*Ghost Stories*] (1904)) and film (e.g., Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away" [2001]).

Student presentations on related subjects not yet discussed comprise the concluding portion of the course. Suggested topics—many gleaned from the JSI—include:

- Population trends in Japan
- Education and prosperity in Japan
- Living and working in Japan
- Peace and war in Japan
- Natural disasters in Japan
- Elder care in Japan
- Funeral ritual and industry in Japan
- Relics and tombs in Japan
- Aesthetics of life and nature in Japan (*wabi-sabi*, *miyabi*, *shibui*, *iki*)
- Life and death of flowers in *ikebana*
- Life and death in Japanese poetry
- Life and death in *manga*
- Life and death in the works of _____ (Japanese author, director, philosopher...)

Using this course as a springboard, I hope to motivate my students to further engage with Japanese studies, and to pursue study abroad in Japan.