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Project Summary

World Regional Geography, GE 101, is offered every semester at Emporia State University as part of the general education program. It is an option for all students, and required of students pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Education with a major in Social Sciences. The course aims to present students with an overview of the world's regions and major current issues of concern, including environmental, demographic, economic, political, gender, socioeconomic status, and other cultural issues.

As a result of the past two weeks of Japan studies, I plan to significantly increase the focus on Japan when I discuss East Asia. I (and the textbook) tend to focus more on China in the coverage of East Asia, giving Japan an undeserved lack of attention. I do not mean to simply add information about Japan into the mix of topics I cover in East Asia, but to emphasize the country's ongoing role in the region and the world.

The new approach will focus on geopolitical relationships in the region and beyond. This will include readings, lectures and discussions of Japan-U.S., Japan-China and Japan-Russia relations, the Pacific Trade Partnership, Japan's role in dealing with increasing tensions in the South China Sea and related new geopolitical relations with India and Australia, Japan's response to threats from North Korea, and the ongoing debates over contested territories around Japan (Senkaku Islands, Dokdo, and Northern Territories).

Population issues will also be a new feature. Rather than solely focusing on China's demographic issues, as I have tended to do in the past, I will compare and contrast the demographic challenges facing China and Japan, along with the government and private sector responses to them. This will include discussions of a great variety of social/cultural issues in the two countries: changing gender roles; changing family structures; attitudes and policies regarding immigration and diversity; caring for the elderly; and the different economic impacts of changing demographics in the two countries.

Either as part of World Regional Geography or as a separate class (World in Films, a course I have offered in the past), students will also learn about Japanese and other East Asian cultures through watching films from the countries of the region. The films will focus on a theme (such as food, gender or youth culture, e.g.) as a way to discuss geographic diversity of culture throughout the region. Ideally this would be a film series featuring East Asia, so discussion of the films would focus on the countries of the region and Japan's influence (through anime, for example).

As I mentioned above, my intent is not to merely add Japan into the mix and stir, in hopes that my students will understand more about Japan. Rather, I will use the information gained in the Japan Studies Institute to focus on Japan in its geographic context and as it relates to East Asia and the rest of the world. Japan has a long and rich history and has been a significant factor regionally and globally for centuries. I hope to inspire and foster a sense of curiosity and interest in Japanese culture among my students that will lead to more of them pursuing a minor in East Asian Studies and to an interest in participating in long- or short-term study abroad opportunities.