

Pop culture influences members of society through the creation of the media-conscious consumer citizen. As a result of globalization, the power of pop culture in comparatively and increasingly wealthy East Asian countries has created regional and transnational flows of money and ideas that are working to redefine the relationships between the historically connected—but at times antagonistic—countries of Japan, China and South Korea. This phenomenon warrants comprehensive academic study. In my Asian Languages and Civilizations concentration I plan to study the societal, political and economic consequences of the rise of pop culture in these three countries (with a particular emphasis on Japan) while analyzing the feasibility of a “national” culture in the context of a transnational East Asia. In order to do this, my plan of study includes four courses—*Fashion Matters*, *Japan on Screen*, *Apocalypse Japan* and *Contemporary Chinese Cinema*—which take an interdisciplinary approach to the study of popular culture by considering different aspects of the phenomenon—film, television, and fashion.

In my course of study I plan to integrate the study of pop culture with larger issues prevalent in the region. Representations of citizens in pop culture and the reactions those representations elicit provide a useful prism through which one can consider the relationship between the individual and both the nation and region, as well as how certain classes of individuals—like women—may be impacted by these forces. Thus, these courses function to provide not only a media-focused analysis, but one that includes an anthropological, historical and political understanding of contemporary East Asia. The course of study is comparative in nature in that it concentrates on Japan through both eight semesters of language study and two Japan-exclusive culture courses (*Japan on Screen* and *Apocalypse Japan*) while including the study of a specific form of pop culture in China (*Contemporary Chinese Cinema*) and a more comprehensive analysis of fashion and contemporary aesthetic culture in East Asia that concentrates heavily on Japan and China while integrating the increasing economic and cultural influence of South Korea (*Fashion Matters*).

Through *Japan on Screen* and *Apocalypse Japan*, I hope to gain a concrete understanding of the development of pop culture in Japan and how it has changed over time. Through *Japan on Screen*, I have studied the history of Japanese film while questioning the very nature of national cinema, thus developing an understanding of how history has influenced this popular art form as it attempts to constitute and re-constitute an ideal of what is “Japanese” in globalized context. *Apocalypse Japan*, by analyzing the how the theme of apocalypse, of destruction—in a country that has repeatedly been impacted by natural and man-made disasters—is expressed in film, manga and anime, provides an opportunity to analyze how the politics and economic consequences of destruction shape culture as expressed through consumer-driven mass media.

*Contemporary Chinese Cinema* provides a means of comparison because the same questions about the relevance of the idea of nation grounding *Japan on Screen* are present. *Contemporary Chinese Cinema* asks “What is Chinese cinema?” by taking into account not only globalization but also the extreme diversity of the People’s Republic of China as a country with 55 distinct ethnic minorities some of which could theoretically form independent nations. It also considers the impact of economic incentives on how the decisions as to which films are produced is made by tracing the careers of specific, highly influential, filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke in order to consider how commercial and artistic concerns are reconciled in order to create beautiful and socially-responsible films with mass-market appeal.

In *Fashion Matters*, I have integrated all of these ideas by studying fashion practices specifically and aesthetic practices more generally throughout East Asia. This course has allowed me to understand pop culture as expressed through sartorial practice and media representations of those sartorial practices. Because in the course we studied not only broad ideas of fashion and consumption, but also specific examples of narratives (like the originally-Japanese manga *Hana Yori Dango*) adopted in different East Asian countries—especially Japan, China and South Korea—it allowed me the opportunity to consider the similarities and differences of pop culture products produced in various countries within the region. As a result of this, I have become interested in the ways these various political, cultural and, most importantly, economic influences impact mass consumer practices within and among East Asian countries. My proposed capstone project is based on this interest.

Stemming from my final project for *Fashion Matters*, my capstone project is an attempt to explain the popularity of plastic surgery and other invasive beauty practices in Japan, China and South Korea in recent years. Rejecting the notion that self-Orientalizing is the primary cause of the popularity of plastic surgery, I seek to prove that it is economics that drives this trend. My research so far has proven that, especially when considering the cultural history of aesthetic practices in these three countries, plastic surgery functions as a signaling mechanism and a luxury consumer product in a highly competitive market. Ultimately, my capstone seeks to incorporate my studies of pop culture by analyzing one particular aspect of pop culture—fashion—economically while considering how culture, politics and media have differentiated the practice in these three countries.