

King's Student Perspectives

Asian and Middle Eastern Studies: Japanese

Rebecca, 2nd year

What attracted you to the course?

One great thing about studying Japanese is that everyone on the course is there because they're really passionate about the subject. Personally, a mixture of family interest in the country and encounters with Japanese culture when growing up fostered a strong desire to learn more about the country. The reasons for studying Japanese are as varied as there are people on the course – Japanese art, Buddhism, Sino-Japanese relations, even manga and anime have sparked people's interest and spurred them on to degree-level study.

About the course

In first year, you don't have a lot of choice in what you study. This is because Japanese is taught as an ab initio language, and there is intensive language study throughout the year. As someone who arrived here thinking of the language as simply a means to the end of learning about Japanese culture, this was both a difficult and an eye-opening experience. The workload is extremely high, but learning so much language in first year means that in second year more time can be given over to optional papers.

In second year you choose two papers to study on top of language, translation and history. Personally I decided on East Asian cinema and Japanese and Korean politics (J10). Other options may include classical Japanese, Japanese society, modern Japanese literature, linguistics, and some Chinese papers such as dynastic history. In fourth year students also choose two papers, the options varying depending on student interest and lecturer availability. However, such topics as classical Japanese, international relations, Japanese history, Korean language and Japanese society tend to be available.

Of course, in third year you don't study any papers in Cambridge, as you are abroad! You can decide for yourself what to do so long as you inform the faculty of your plans early, but the faculty facilitates study at a Kyoto university for students who don't have other plans. The vast majority of students choose this option, and almost always come back raving about the experience to the first and second years.

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Which parts of the course have you found most interesting, and why?

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For me the biggest surprise has been my discovery of Korea! In my first year a compulsory module of East Asian history was introduced (EASI), focussing on Japan, China and Korea. Not only was this an excellent way of reminding me that any society needs to be set in a wider context, but it created an interest in the fascinating history of Korea. In fourth year there is often the option of studying Korean language alongside Japanese, which I am strongly considering.

Other than this, I particularly enjoyed studying the East Asian module (Cinema East) in my second year, and attending various evening seminars. I strongly recommend these, as the quality of the speakers is generally extremely high; the talk which I found most interesting was delivered by Japan's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Akiko Yamanaka.

Supervisions

Supervisions are hour-long sessions on a pre-decided topic, based usually on a piece of work you have already handed in such as an essay or Japanese-language composition (though these are not expected of you in first year, don't worry!). You will either be talking only with the lecturer, or as part of a small group of students with the lecturer. They are extremely useful, enabling you to explore topics in a lot more depth than usual and also to get specific feedback on your work. They might be a bit nerve-wracking at first, but you very quickly realise that the lecturers aren't out to get you – they just want to help you improve!

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What is the workload like?

It would be wrong of me to pretend that Japanese isn't an intense course – the workload is very high, and you aren't eased into it slowly! However, if you are hard-working and learn to manage your time well, it will be manageable, and the amount of language you learn over the first year is really incredible – you cover four language and grammar lessons and their corresponding exercises per week in first year. You may not have as much free time as in some other subject areas, but it's absolutely necessary to have some time to relax, see friends, and take part in activities you enjoy!

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There is a lot of contact time, and as the department is small, lecturers will be aware if you don't come to classes very often. While you have no obligation to attend all the

lectures (supervisions, though, are compulsory), I would strongly advise attending as many as possible – the standard of teaching is generally very high, and it makes all the difference to how you do on the course.

What is your timetable like?

First year

Michaelmas and Lent terms: four grammar lessons per week (from the green book); four language lessons per week (from the red book. Based on the corresponding grammar lessons); two EASI (East Asian history) lessons. As far as supervisions go, I think we had maybe one or two for language, one or two for grammar and one for history each term. There are optional weekly evening seminars as well.

Easter term: six translation lessons per week; two EASI lessons per week; three oral language lessons per week. Weekly evening seminars. Fewer supervisions, only for the first part of term. The latter part is freed up for exam preparation.

Second year

Michaelmas and Lent terms: schedules are similar again. One (two-hour) grammar lesson per week; one language lesson per week; two hours of Japanese History per week; two hours each of your two optional modules per week (so four hours in total). Maybe one language supervision, one grammar supervision, one history supervision, and one supervision each for your optional modules per term. Weekly evening seminars.

Easter term: one two-hour grammar lesson; one language lesson; two oral language lessons; two translation lessons; two lessons each of your two optional modules; two history lessons. Again, this tails off to allow revision time in the second half of term. Maybe one supervision each for grammar, language, optional modules, and history. Weekly evening seminar.

Practical issues

The faculty is small and as such has a good sense of community, which makes it quite a nice place to work.

The department is part of FAMES (the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) on the Sidgwick Site. This is just past the river, in the corner of the site by the Classics, MML (Modern and Medieval Languages) and Criminology buildings. The faculty is small and as such has a good sense of community, which makes it quite a nice place to work. The library is excellently stocked, and any books which aren't there will be in the UL (University Library). King's library is also a great place to work, but unfortunately the selection of books for Japanese students is very small!

What is the application process like?

Unlike some subjects, there are no tests to sit for Japanese. You simply apply as usual, then have two interviews. One of these is subject-specific, but don't worry, you needn't know any

Japanese for it! The other is your general interview, which involves broader discussion and is more about how you respond to difficult questions and engage with different topics.

How did you prepare for the degree?

Personally, I was too busy with preparations for leaving home and so on to do much other than read a couple of the suggested books! It is a good idea to read one of the broad historical overviews. Also, have a look through the textbooks to familiarise yourself with the format – don't be intimidated by it, it's not as bad as it looks once you get used to it! Don't worry about getting through everything on the reading list – apart from anything it's all available in university libraries. The most important thing to do in preparation is a long-term effort: develop a good work ethic and time management skills. My first year would have been a lot easier had I tried to develop this in sixth form!

Two amazingly useful websites I'd recommend in addition to the faculty suggested reading:

➔ <http://www.jisho.org/> - this is an online Japanese-English dictionary where you can look up words, kanji and example sentences.

➔ <http://nihonshock.com/2010/02/japanese-cheat-sheet-2/> - this is a printable sheet, which sums up a lot of the core grammar for first year in only two sides of A4!

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Does it matter where you're from?

In terms of the subject, it doesn't matter in the slightest. In my year there are people from state schools, private schools, abroad, who did IB, who did A-levels, who took a gap year... So long as you're passionate about the subject and prepared to work hard, you'll be

welcome. In terms of the college, once again it makes no difference to anyone else where you're from – the important thing is what you do once you arrive! King's is well-known for being a friendly environment for people of any background, having a very high state school intake and large number of international students. All this combines to create the friendly, open atmosphere you've probably already noticed!

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What's the social life like?

In terms of the subject, you do have to be prepared to spend a lot of time on work – but this in no way means you have to give up your social life! The faculty itself organises some events, and there's also a university Japanese Society, which holds events and language classes all year. King's holds some FAMES parties itself, which provide a chance to relax and talk with King's staff and students from across Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and other FAMES subjects.

Personally I found in first year it was a bit of a struggle to keep the balance between my work and my social life. However, by second year I had learned to manage my time a bit better, and found myself able to enjoy seeing

friends, going

to parties, and spending time on the activities I enjoy without the thought of all that work I hadn't done yet hanging over my head! It really is about trying to find balance for yourself – if, like me, you aren't one of those people who wakes up and wants nothing more than to practice kanji for three hours, don't worry! Just create a loose schedule and make sure you do all the work you have to, and you needn't feel guilty for having fun as well.

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Rebecca at Ginkakuji (the Silver Pavilion) in Kyoto.

Do you need to do a lot of work in the vacations?

Generally the faculty will set something relatively small for you to complete over the vacations, and it may be suggested to you that you complete any unfinished work from the year to ensure you haven't missed sections of the course. But overall, the faculty seems fully aware that the relatively high workload over the terms means students need the vacations to relax!

A note to current King's AMES students:

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying AMES at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk.