American-style beauty contests—complete with young women in tiaras, sashes, and swimsuits—became big business in Japan in the 1950s. Pageants were held for all kinds of reasons—to attract tourism, promote products, and, most interestingly, to do diplomatic work. Contests to crown Miss Black Ships, Miss World, and Miss Universe were even hailed as displays of women’s rights in the new postwar. My presentation today focuses on one piece of this story: the rise and fall of Itō Kinuko, who captured the Miss Japan crown in 1953, thrilled Japanese by taking 3rd place in the Miss Universe Contest, became the nation's first top fashion model, but later fell prey to charges of greed, ego, and too much independence. Her victory also intertwined with U.S. efforts to forge alliance with Japan in the early Cold War. By following the highlights of the pageant experiences of Miss Japan Itō Kinuko, we see how much the beauty queen’s iconic uniforms—her ball gown, native costume, and of course, her swimsuit—shaped her as a cultural figure and a cautionary tale about the allure and dangers of Americanization.

Jan Bardsley is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of The Bluestockings of Japan: New Women Fiction and Essays from Seitō, 1911-1916 (University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2007), which was awarded the 2011 Hiratsuka Raichō Prize by Japan Women’s University. With Laura Miller, she has co-edited two books, Bad Girls of Japan (Palgrave, 2005) and Manners and Mischief: Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan (University of California Press, 2011). She is co-producer/director with Joanne Hershfield of the documentary, Women in Japan: Memories of the Past, Dreams for the Future (2002). Bardsley has received several teaching awards at UNC-Chapel Hill including the Tanner Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching and the Sitterson Award for Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars.

For further information contact: Dr Laura Moretti (Lecturer in Pre-Modern Japanese Studies) Faculty of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies, Sidgwick Avenue Cambridge, CB3 9DA (UK), Email: lm571@cam.ac.uk