

AJET

CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

MARCH
2020

Far From Home And Politically-Engaged

Terrace House: A Window into Japanese Dating Culture

From Dust to Dust: Anthropocene Art
Adventures in Asia

Interview with Kabuki Actor Taiki Yokobayashi

In Jesus' Name, (R)Amen



The Japanese Lifestyle & Culture
Magazine Written by the International
Community in Japan

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in Japan?

2020



submissions open

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c-theartissue.tumblr.com

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I'm happy to present the March issue of *CONNECT*. For those who are working in schools, March is a bittersweet month. With graduation ceremonies nearing, it's a time period of change. It's when familiar faces leave and get replaced by new ones. But on the brighter side, March finally brings the ease of winter. This must be a huge relief to those living in the northern areas. I am lucky that I live in a milder area of the Kanto. I can't imagine what the -12 felt like up in Sapporo during the snow festival! You troopers. Although Gunma is known for its extremely dry winds that are swept across the plains. Winter in Japan is truly drab. I often forget during this season about how stunningly green Japan is in warmer months. Suddenly nature awakes from its hibernation with a vengeance. Flowers are a major part of the coming months. So much so that our Travel Editor Shao Ting dedicated her whole section to showcase the magnificence of them! I recommend checking out travel this month if you are a flower enthusiast! In April I hope to catch Hitsujiyama Park (Saitama) in full bloom for the first time. Check out the flower forecast [here](#). But you don't need to go all the way to these speciality flower parks. Many locals will have mini showcases of their own! I love how Japanese people manage to squeeze flowers into pots even in the urban sprawl of Tokyo.

For my monthly round of up article favourites it's a mixed bag. I love how varied each section is with the topics. And I hope you do too! I love this about *CONNECT* so much. Let's get into my top sections:

1. Community presents a thought provoking piece about staying politically engaged: **Far From Home And Politically-Engaged**. It is written by an American organisation and at the end there are some perspectives from other countries. I'm looking at you fellow kiwis!
2. Culture presents an article that I was keenly waiting for with **Terrace House: A Window into Japanese Dating Culture**. If you somehow have lived under a rock, Terrace House is a very mild version of a reality TV show. I think it's strangely addictive for how little happens during the show and you can always use the excuse of "Japanese conversation practice" to watch it.
3. Art presents an intriguing piece from an artist who works with dust as a focal point about Asian pollution in **From Dust to Dust: Anthropocene Art Adventures in Asia**.
4. Entertainment presents an in depth and rare conversation with a Japanese Kabuki actor. If you have never heard of Kabuki before, it's an unusual style of Japanese theatre. Our entertainment section editor Rachel interviews the actor herself in **Interview with Kabuki Actor Taiki Yokobayashi**.
5. Community presents a two-part piece about Christianity in Japan in **In Jesus' Name, (R)Amen**. The first half introduces it's complicated history in Japan and then an interview with a native Japanese Christian.

From finding love on reality TV to dust art, you can't get more diverse than *that!* If you are an artist yourself don't forget that our June issue is the special art issue. Submissions are open until the 30th of April. You can learn more about the guidelines and submission process [here](#). If you have any questions about anything *CONNECT* related please feel free to contact me at connect.editor@ajet.net.

Alice Ridley
Head Editor
2nd Year Gunma ALT

Alice R.

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna

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"you must get outside, and feel all right, producing some creativity that can stand the daylight (and the smog)."—Sesshu Foster

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"When you act in anger, you have already lost your battle." —*"The Merciful Crow"* by Margaret Owen

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"You're jealous. You are just like a rat jumping around the corner looking for a food! Very jealous." —Maritess Trosper

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"Do the best you can, because that's the best you can do."—*Rolie Polie Olie*

ASSISTANT DESIGNER

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"So many of our dreams seem impossible, they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will they soon become inevitable."
—*Superman*

SOCIAL MEDIA

Hannah Lysons

"people say nothing is impossible, but I do nothing everyday"
—*A.A. Milne*

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"And what would humans be without love?" RARE, said Death. —Terry Pratchett, *Sourcery*

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Rebecca Ruth

Photo: Rhema Baquero (Kobe)



迷子・落とし物

Events Calendar:

March 2020

For Japanese only webpages, you can download the Google Translate extension to read the pages in other languages

Block 1

Hokkaido
Aomori
Iwate
Akita

Block 2

Miyagi
Yamagata
Fukushima
Niigata

Block 3

Ibaraki
Tochigi
Gunma
Saitama
Nagano

Block 4

Chiba
Tokyo
Kanagawa
Yamanashi
Shizuoka

Block 5

Toyama
Ishikawa
Fukui
Gifu
Aichi

Block 6

Shiga
Kyoto
Hyogo

Block 7

Mie
Osaka
Nara
Wakayama

Block 8

Tokushima
Kagawa
Ehime
Kochi

Block 9

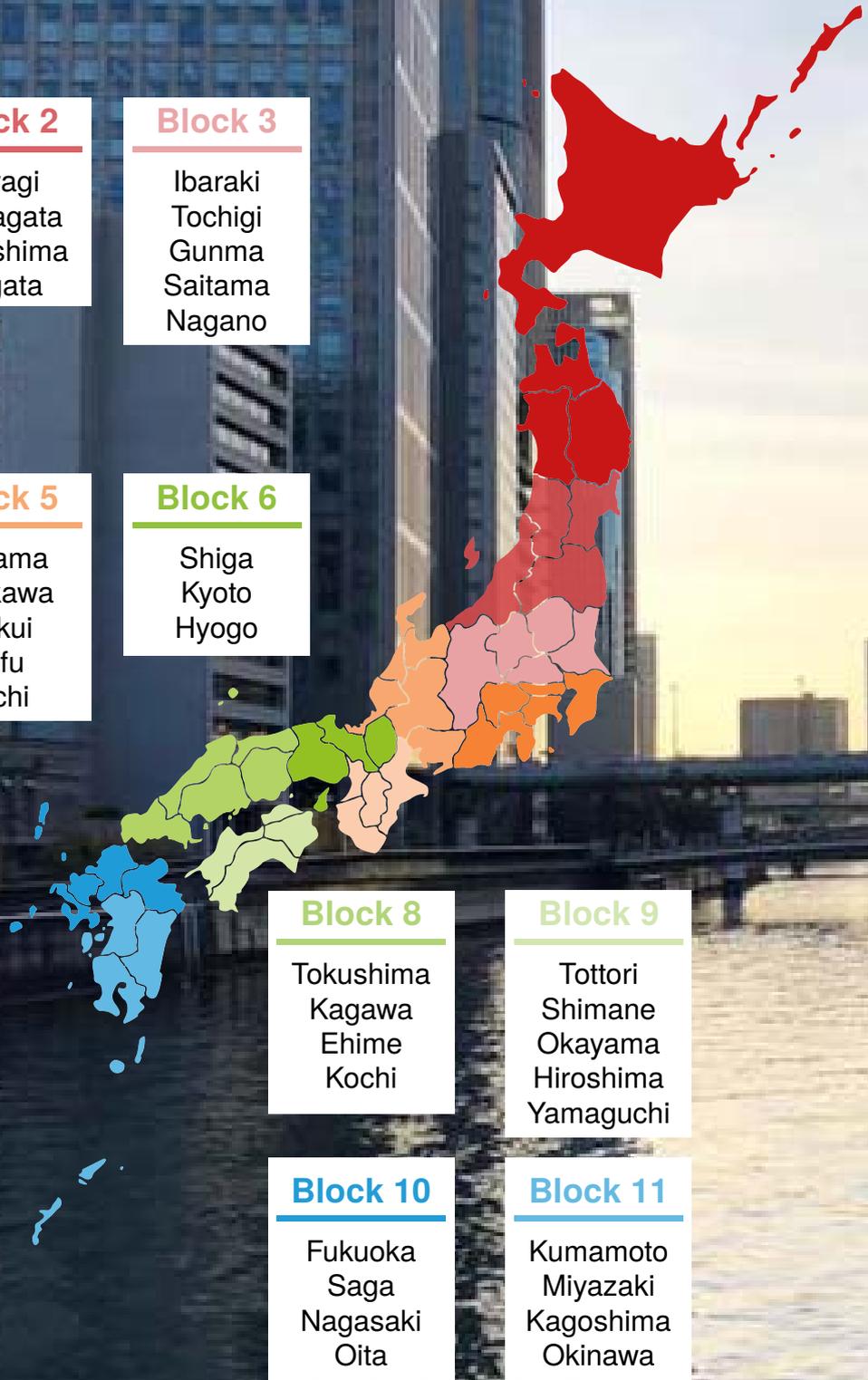
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

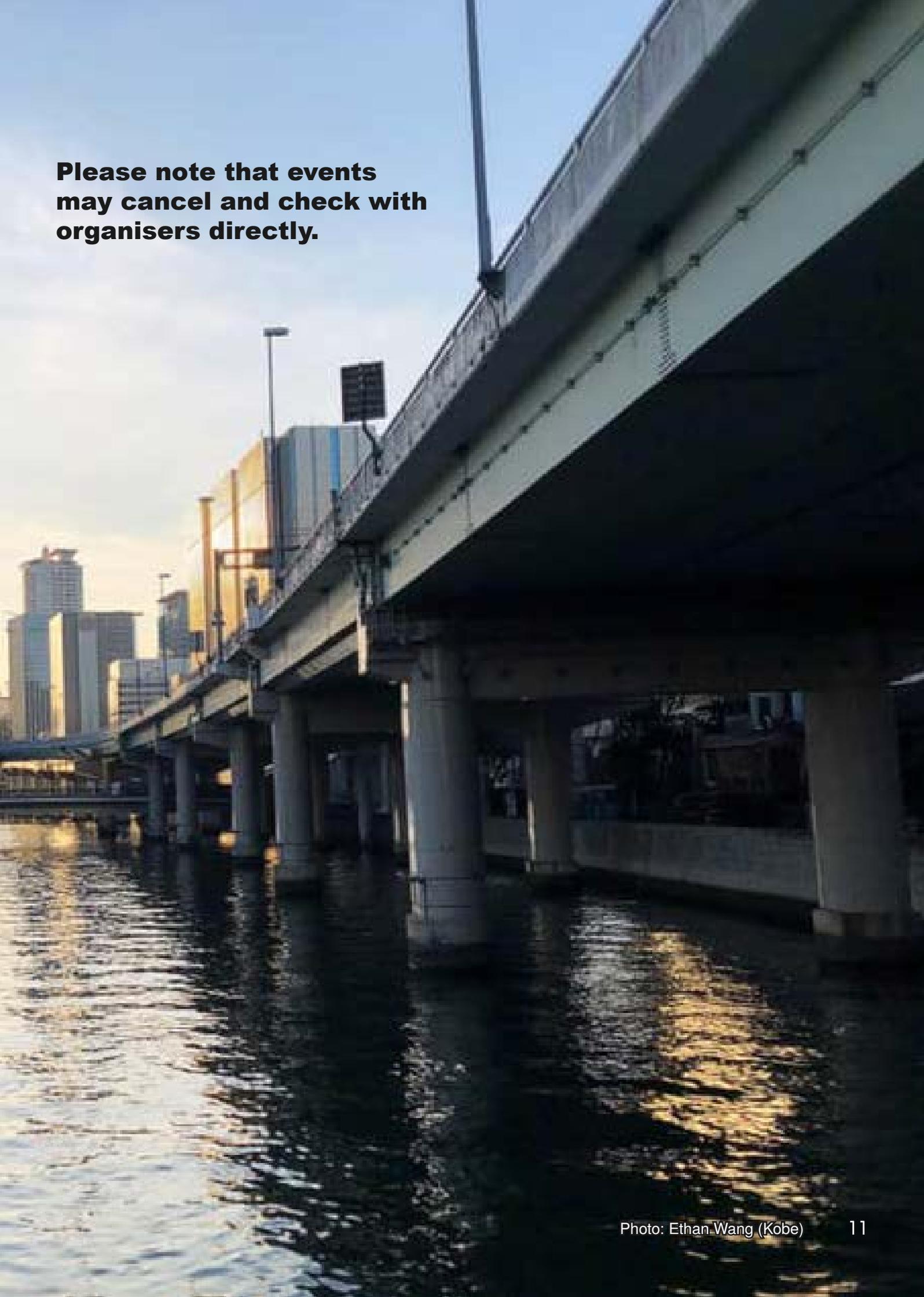
Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

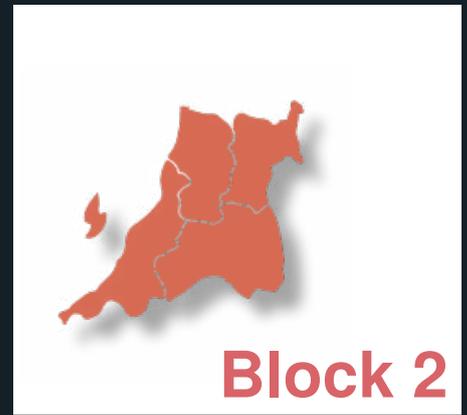
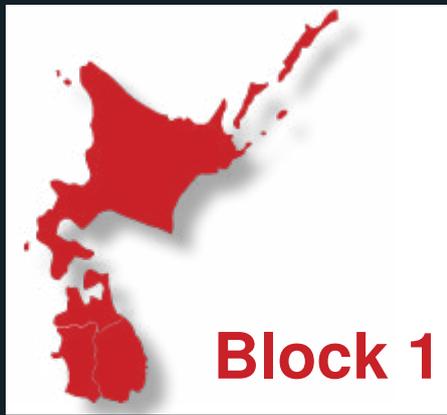
Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa



**Please note that events
may cancel and check with
organisers directly.**





40th Vasaloppet Japan

March 7 - March 8

Asahikawa City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Karurusu Onsen Winter Festival

March 3

Noboribetsu, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Day of Kagura

March 8

Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hayachine Shrine Somin Festival

March 17

Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Semboku International Drone Film Festival

March 20

Semboku City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Aikawa Matobi

March 21

Kitaakita City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

33rd Yogoshiyama Orchid Festival

March 1 - March 22

Hiranai Town, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hakkoda Snow Corridor Walk

March 30 - March 31st

Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Niigata Sake no Jin

March 14 - March 15

Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

The Doraemon Exhibition Niigata 2020

March 20 - May 17

Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tsunan Snow Festival

March 14

Tsunan Town, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hodare Matsuri

March 8

Nagaoka City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sakata Hina Kaido

March 1 - April 3

Sakata City, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nihon-ichi Bisyuken Yamagata Fair

March 21 - March 22

Yamagata City, Yamagata Prefecture

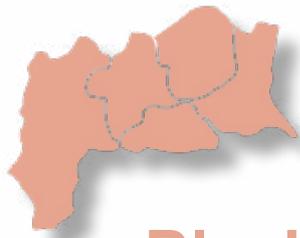
[Website in Japanese only](#)

39th Mishima Town Living Crafts Exhibition

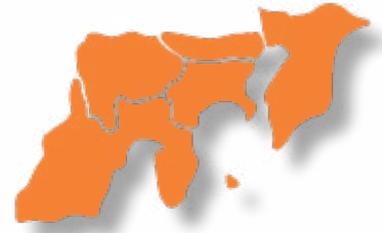
March 14 - March 15

Mishima Town, Fukushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 3



Block 4

Mito Plum Festival

February 15 - March 29

Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Oigami Onsen Bikkuri Hina Exhibit

February 22 - March 29

Numata City, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Misato Plum Festival

March 1 - Late March

Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Koinobori Village Festival

March 25 - May 15

Tatebayashi City, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

The Be-so 2020

March 7

Nagano City, Nagano Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Winter Tomyo Night Festival

March 7

Nozawa Onsen, Nagano Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Snow Monkey Beer Live 2020

March 20 - March 21

Yamanouchi Town, Nagano Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Utsunomiya Daidougei Festival

March 21 - March 22

Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

5th Kawagoe Edo Day

March 28

Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

I Love Ireland Festival

March 14 - March 15

Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Mount Takao Fire Walking Festival

March 8

Hachioji City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

AnimeJapan

March 21 - March 24

Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

5th Tokyo Holi Mela

March 7

Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English only](#)

Uchikuroda Hadaka Matsuri

March 15

Yotsukaido City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

18th Chiba Spring Sake Fair

March 21 - March 22

Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Enoshima Spring Festival

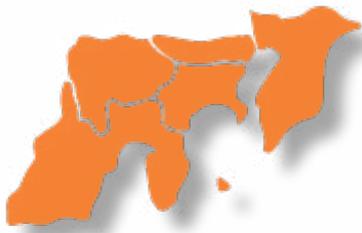
March 14 - March 15

Fujisawa City, Kanagawa Prefecture

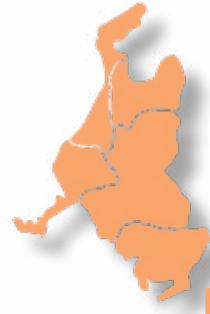
[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Photo: Rhema Baquero (Kobe)



Block 4



Block 5

Maso Festival

March 20

Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Okichi Festival

March 27

Shimoda City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shizuoka Oden Fair

March 13 - March 15

Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nanto Inokuchi Tsubaki Festival

March 21 - March 22

Nanto City, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Honen Festival

March 15

Komaki City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kasugai Gourmet Championship Final

March 7 - March 8

Kasugai City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Spring All Japan Gyoza Festival 2020

March 20 - March 22

Nagakude City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Gifu Plum Festival

March 14 - March 15

Gifu City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

138 Tower Park Sakura Festival

March 14 - April 5

Kaizu City, Gifu Prefecture

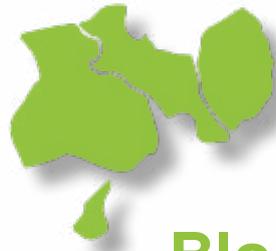
[Website in Japanese only](#)

7th Echizen Crab Thanksgiving Day

March 7 - March 8

Echizen, Fukui Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 6

12th Kurabiraki Sake Festival

March 14

Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kobe Elvis Festival

March 21

Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hatsuuma Festival

March 20 - March 22

Toyooka City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

14th Nihonshu Festival in Fushimi

March 20

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nishiki no Umaimon and Kyoto Sake Festival 2020

March 7

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Public Showing of the Nehanzu

March 1 - March 31

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Square DE Hinamatsuri

February 21 - March 29

Ayabe City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hiei's Great Houma

March 13

Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mikabe Festival

March 15

Higashiomi City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

March Osaka Sumo Tournament

March 8 - March 22

Osaka, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

15th Osaka Asian Film Festival

March 6 - March 15

Osaka, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

65th Jingu Sumo Dedication

March 29

Ise City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Visit to Akame 48 Waterfall

March 29

Nabari City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shuni-e Hanaeshiki

March 25 - March 31

Nara City, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 7



Block 8

Kasuga Festival

March 13

Nara City, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kawahara-dera Sakura Illusion Night

March 20 - April 7

Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Ninouma

March 16

Kinokawa City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Floating Hina Dolls

March 3

Wakayama City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Goro Nanohana Festival

March 8

Ozu City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dogo Onsen Festival

March 19 - March 21

Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tosa Okyaku

March 7 - March 15

Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

6th Manga Artist's Conference in Manga Kingdom Tosa

March 7 - March 8

Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

[Alternate English Website](#)

Takamatsu Castle Gun Troop Performance

March 20

Takamatsu City, Kagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

UDONNOWW EXPO 2020

March 21 - March 22

Takamatsu City, Kagawa Prefecture

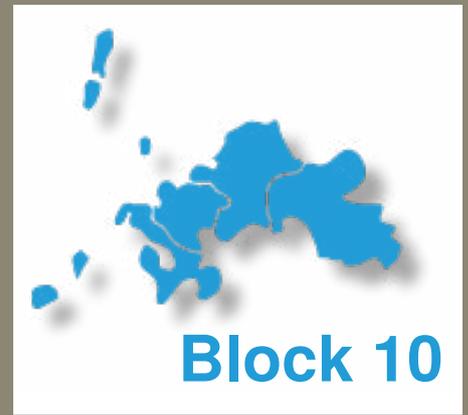
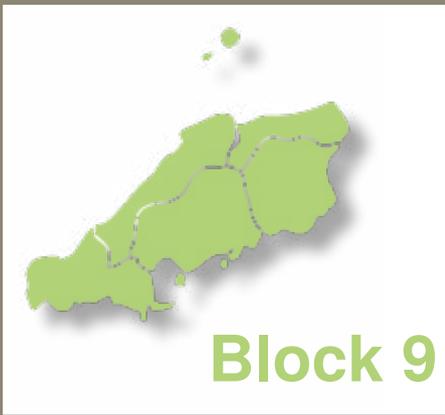
[Website in Japanese only](#)

17th Katsuura Sakura Festival

March 25 - April 10

Katsuura, Tokushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Hagi White Fish Festival

March 15

Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

yab Ramen Expo in Kudamatsu

March 19 - March 23

Kudamatsu, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Niku Road Walk

March 21

Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mochi-gase Flowing Hina

March 26

Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nakatsui Hina Culture Festival

March 28 - March 29

Maniwa City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

34th Kurashiki Music Festival

March 8 - March 22

Kurashiki City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Jyoukamachi Spring Sake Festival

March 7

Higashihiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shukkei-en Night Sakura Festival

March 22 - April 4

Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hiroshima Kanzake Festival 2020

March 20

Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Umeshu Festival

March 20 - March 23

Dazaifu City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kitakyushu Ramen Championship 2020

March 14 - March 15

Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kyushu Sakagura Biraki 2020

March 19 - March 22

Hakata, Fukuoka Prefecture

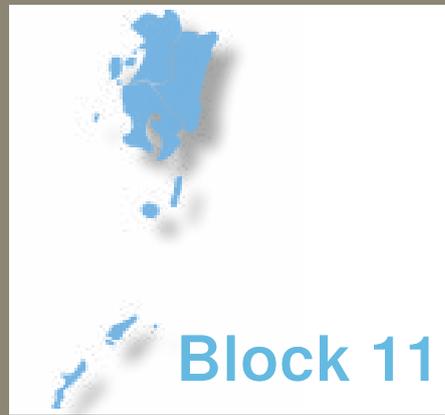
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kashima Sake Brewery Tourism

March 28 - March 29

Kashima City, Saga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 11

The 10th Karatsu Niji no Matsubara Two-day Walk 2020

March 14 - March 15
Karatsu City, Saga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kanoukaen Festival

March 28
Unzen City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Bungo-ono Megurukura 2020

March 15
Bungo-ono City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hiburi Shinji

March 18
Aso City, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sengoku Park 2020

March 21 - March 22
Kumamoto City, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yuyama-onsen Sakura Festival

March 28 - March 29
Yuyama, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

24th Ryoma Honeymoon Walk in Kirishima

March 21 - March 22
Kirishima City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

38th Higashimura Azalea Festival

March 1 - March 22
Higashimura, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

3rd Nakijinshuzo Awamori Distillery Festival

March 14 - March 15
Nakijin Village, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

70th Mochio Sakura Matsuri

March 28 - March 29
Miyakonojo City, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sylvanian Families Exhibition

March 20 - May 10
Miyazaki City, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

33rd Miyakonojo Archery Festival, National Kyudo Meet

March 28 - March 29
Miyakonojo City, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



ICE AGE AT THE FUKUO SCIENCE MUSE

Touching Ghosts from t

The Ice Age.

For many of us, this phrase brings images of cavemen battling sabertooth tigers, giant mammoths, or even the tragic romance between a squirrel and his poor acorn. Relics like bones, spears, and cave paintings are a testament to the difficulties of humanity's not so distant past. However fascinating, most of this history is as dry and stale as the bones in a local museum.

Or is it?

On a recent trip to Hakata Station in Fukuoka City, I noticed an advertisement for an unusual exhibit. The local science museum had announced a special Ice Age display presented by a team of Russian and Japanese scientists. It's unusual enough to see traveling displays of this nature, so I decided to take a look.

Upon entering the museum, I was confronted with numerous Ice Age posters and the imposing skeleton of a real-life woolly mammoth. Interesting, but not unlike what you might find in the Smithsonian or various other national museums.

However, it was not the mammoth bones that caught my eye, but the small and unassuming box to the side carefully guarded by a staff member. To my surprise, it contained genuine mammoth hair. What truly blew me away, however, was that visitors were allowed to reach into the case and handle the contents! It's one thing to touch the fossilized bones of ancient animals, but it's a truly wondrous and eerie experience to handle the actual fur and hair of an animal dead for nearly 20,000 years. I ventured further into the room and was met with displays with more mammoth hair, dung, and even massive molar teeth. The following room also displayed the skeleton of a woolly rhinoceros, another large and unusual herbivore from the arctic reaches of the north. Various articles written in English and Japanese detailed the origins of such creatures and how they spread around the world. Then, I saw the black curtains.

Drawing them back, I was met with something truly wondrous.

There, carefully encased in a series of cryogenic displays, were the actual biological remains of various Ice Age animals. Not the sterile bones of



a museum display, but the flesh, skin, hair, and even entire bodies of animals extinct for tens of thousands of years. It was, needless to say, an incredible experience.

Some of the preserved animals were fairly minor. One was a ptarmigan, a small bird akin to a grouse or chicken that still exists to this day. It was easily the youngest specimen at a mere 2000 years old and was a mummified mixture of feathers and bone.

Others, however, were far more exotic. One case contained a fuzzy wolf cub that had been smothered by a collapsed tunnel and was almost perfectly preserved in the Russian permafrost.

One of the creepier recoveries was an entire persevered Steppe bison that had evidently died in its sleep. While the body didn't look too different from that of a cow, it had a ghastly death grin. I found it remarkable that such a massive body had been recovered intact.

Even more fascinating still was the preserved body of an extinct Lena horse foal. The animal had the misfortune of falling into a mud trap . . . but the fortune of being recovered by chance during an expedition in Russia. Evidently, with the warming of the Arctic regions some sinkholes have formed and released the previously unknown bodies of ancient animals locked meters below the surface.

Mammoth body parts were, of course, a specialty of the exhibition. The severed but preserved trunk of one mammoth was curled in a display and looked remarkably like a modern elephant's trunk. Another tank contained a mammoth hide that had been discovered separated in the ice.

However, the final section was the most shocking of all. The last cryotank was stored in a small area that completely restricted photography. Inside the tank was the pride of the exhibition: the preserved head of a mammoth. While the head wasn't in perfect shape, much of the flesh and hair was still intact, giving an idea as to what the creature once looked like, as well as its gargantuan size.

Needless to say, it was a spooky, but fascinating experience to see these tangible Ice Age ghosts. While bones, drawings, and other artifacts can stir the imagination of what life may have been like in the past, the opportunity to witness the real flesh and bodies of ancient animals is truly special. In the



late nineties, my imagination had been captured by the discovery of the frozen Jarkov Mammoth. I had always wanted to see something like that in the flesh, and I finally got the opportunity.

As I left the museum, I realized the value of the experience. Not only did it teach me about the Ice Age, but it gave me the rare gift of witnessing and interacting with extinct animals. If you get the opportunity, I highly recommend visiting the exhibition while it is still in Japan.

Photos by: Mark Christensen





Mark is a first-year high school ALT in Fukuoka hailing from Snohomish, Washington. Outside of teaching and the adventure of being an ALT, he enjoys cosplay, alpine mountaineering, and nature photography.

Getting my Winter Snow Fix

(Maybe)

Abbie Philpott, Nagasaki



Photos by: Abbie Philpott



X

I'm very lucky to live in vibrant Nagasaki, where the locals are as warm as the weather. Apart from the snowmageddon that hit Nagasaki my first winter here in 2015, I have rarely seen snow since. It gets cold enough here to make getting out of bed in the morning a tortuous endeavour, but not quite cold enough to make up for it with snow to play in. So, when my friend Charlie asked me if I wanted to join her in taking an adventure north to see a snow festival, I leaped at the chance.

We planned our trip around the Uesugi Snow Lantern Festival in Yamagata and visiting my friend Zoë in Fukushima (a much overdue visit). We booked our flights, worked out the train and bus schedules, looked up some of the area's must eat foods and sights, (I say "we", but it was mostly all Charlie!) and then half-forgot about the trip as life got in the way. It wasn't until January with the trip less than a month away that we started talking about our plans again. Zoë then delivered the bad news that they still hadn't had any snow and that many snow festivals might be cancelled, or at least altered heavily. You can't have a snow festival without snow, right?

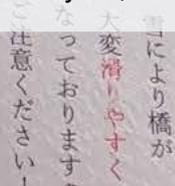
We were worried, but our flights were already paid for and our paid holiday approved, so we resolved to still go. After travelling to Tokyo via Fukuoka (thanks for letting us crash Diana!), we met up with Zoë, ate a huge yummy lunch, and then caught the shinkansen to travel a further two hours north to Fukushima City. It was while rushing through the countryside that we saw snow for the first time! Zoë had told us over lunch that Fukushima had gotten snow a few days earlier, and seeing fields and houses dusted in white had further lifted our hopes that we would experience a proper snow festival.

We arrived around 5pm and then headed straight to the lightly snow dusted city of Aizu Wakamatsu to see the Aizu Erousoku (Painted Candle) Festival. Tsurugajo Castle and its grounds lit up by thousands of candles made for a gorgeous ethereal scene. It was a little sad to watch the beautiful painstakingly hand-painted candles burn down, but it did make it extra special to see this fleeting beauty.

The next day, we headed out early to enjoy a day in Yamagata prefecture. Our first stop was Yamadera to visit Risshakuji Temple, an ancient temple complex that sprawls high up the steep mountainside. It's famous for offering breath-taking views of the surrounding forest covered mountains and the valley at its base. It did not disappoint. The arduous climb up the 1,015 snow covered stone steps (it was -3 but we all started sweating!) and the more than a little terrifying descent down, were a cheap price to pay for the spectacular winter views. Queen Elsa, eat your heart out.

Feeling satisfied we got to see a picture-perfect winter wonderland, and having met our snow quota for the time being, we headed to the picturesque town of Ginzan Onsen to warm up and get refreshed in one of its famous onsens. Unfortunately, all the ryokan were closed to day-bathers when we got there, but luckily the public onsen was open. It was small and the custodian was a little grumpy, but being able to watch the snow gently drift down over the river below while soaking in steamy, natural hot water was bliss.

After soaking we got lunch and then headed to Yonezawa city, home to the Uesugi Snow Lantern Festival. We were a little apprehensive at first. Would this festival live up to our expectations? Due to the lack of snow this year, there were only 42 lanterns, made using imported snow, instead of the usual 300. There might have been a lot fewer lanterns this year, but they were still a magical sight! Lining the path to the



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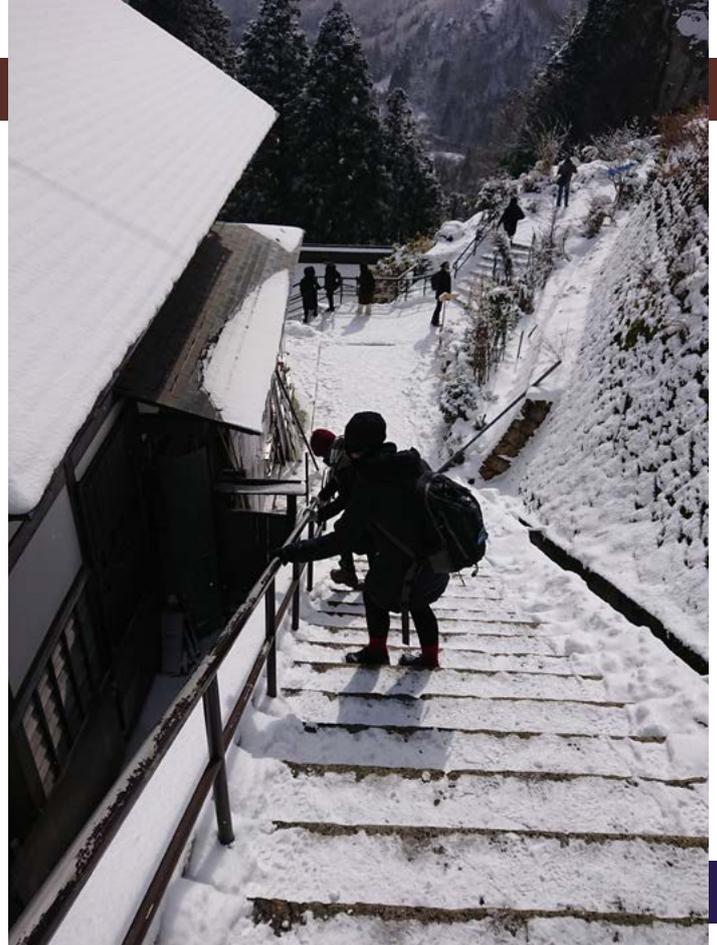
main shrine, walking between the lanterns made you feel as if you were in a Studio Ghibli film. Adding to the mystical Ghibli vibes were snow *bonbori* lanterns and little ice lanterns. Usually there are around a thousand of the snow bonbori lanterns, but because of the lack of snow, there were a lot fewer. I honestly didn't mind however! It was because they didn't have enough snow to make many bonbori lanterns that they had the idea to make these very pretty ice lanterns from used milk cartons.

Adding to the festival atmosphere were colourful stalls lining the old castle moat, where you could enjoy the usual festival fare and some local specialities. There were also various light art displays dotted about to stop and admire, and earlier in the evening, there were a few performances to enjoy. Even though the Uesugi Snow Lantern Festival this year was distinctly different from what it's normally like, and a sombre reminder of the effects of climate change, we still enjoyed it thoroughly and I would recommend anyone to go!

We spent our last day in Fukushima City. After filling our stomachs and emptying our wallets at the import store Jupiter (10/10 best import store ever!) Charlie and I hustled up the steep slopes of Mt. Shinobu. Hot and sweating, we finally managed to catch up to the Mt. Shinobu Dawn Procession, a very special festival held every year in Fukushima on February 10th. This 400-year-old festival revolves around a gigantic two tonne, 12 meter long and 1.4 meter wide straw sandal, or *waraji*, being carried by a team of over 80 people through the city and up the mountain to Haguro Shrine at the top. We had a lot of fun encouraging the carriers and chatting with the locals, learning more about the festival and politely declining when they asked if we wanted to carry the huge sandal!

After descending the mountain, we did some omiyage shopping before meeting up with Zoë and her husband Toby for dinner, where they shared delicious Fukushima specialities such as crispy *Enban gyoza* and silky-smooth sake. We finished our journey with one more trip to an onsen, where we were again lucky to have it start snowing gently while we bathed outside. It was a perfect end to an amazing adventure with fantastic friends, and I can safely say I got my fill of snow for the year.

Abbie is a fifth-year ALT in Minami Shimabara, Nagasaki. She enjoys shuji, collecting goshuin and baking. She is currently posting a photo a day to commemorate her last year on JET, you can see her posts on Instagram at @kazusagirl.





WHO'S AFRAID OF THE

*Big
Bad
Native Speaker?*

Jocelyn A.S. Navera (Okayama)



The term “native speaker” is usually seen plastered on hiring advertisements for ALTs and has become a prerequisite condition for the English-teaching industry. In Japan, where these services are in demand and competition is stiff, it is not difficult to find posts that go as far as expressly restricting potential candidates. It is not abnormal to come across such straightforward addendums such as “Americans only” or “US/UK applicants are preferred.” The prevailing notion is that specific nationalities are seen as “experts” of English, given their exposure and constant use of the language. However, do these certain groups actually carry a pedagogical advantage or is the notion of the “native speaker” a dated concept that perpetuates discriminatory biases?

WANTED: NATIVE SPEAKER

Historically, a native speaker is defined as someone whose first language is English. Recently, this definition has become more difficult to unpack because many educational institutions and businesses identify this term with speakers who do not have just English as a first language, but also those who are stereotypically seen to be ideal speakers of the language (i.e. white people). In effect, the “nativeness” of a speaker has come to be preliminarily determined by factors other than actual proficiency in communicating in (and most importantly, teaching) the target language. In advertisements like those mentioned, similarly or even better qualified individuals from other parts of the world are excluded because they do not fit the socially constructed mental image of a native speaker of English.

THE MYTH OF THE NATIVE SPEAKER

For language researchers and specialists, however, the existence of the native speaker is a myth and is considered problematic in that it promotes monolingual bias and discrimination. In 2006, Watson compiled spelling errors made by native speakers, invalidating the claim that these speakers are perfect models of the English language (1). In 2012, Kumaki acknowledged that learners were statistically more likely to communicate with “non-native” speakers and hence, were more exposed to lesser-known varieties of English (2). In 2016, a study conducted by Levis et al. concluded that teacher identity (native versus non-native) did not impact even the teaching of pronunciation (3). In sum, there is evidence that the superiority of the native speaker is more of belief rather than fact.

DEBUNKING THE MYTH

What should be prioritized in the search for English teachers are pedagogical experience and qualifications. After all, acquiring a language via exposure vis-à-vis intensive study will eventually affect one’s ability to explain rules and simplify linguistic concepts to English language learners. When it comes to language learning, “nativeness” should no longer be part of the equation. Rather, it would be beneficial for both educational institutions and language learners to reject prevailing assumptions that dichotomize speakers. Ultimately, the glorification of the native speaker negates the point of learning any language and underestimates the innate human ability to learn. The emphasis on “nativeness” sets an impossible goal and only promotes racial inequalities that should no longer exist in a globalized, multicultural world.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Expanding Japanese schools’ linguistic horizons and helping them accept that English comes in many forms from many places are part and parcel of being an ALT in Japan. At the end of the day, communication is the goal and clear, contextualized goal-setting can help teachers appropriately position themselves and the English they teach in the classroom.

SOURCES:

1. [The Myth of the Native Speaker as a Model of English Proficiency](#)
2. [Native Speaker Myths](#)
3. [Native and Nonnative Teachers of L2 Pronunciation](#)

Jocelyn A.S. Navera is a second-year SHS ALT assigned in Okayama. She has a BA and an MA degree in English Studies Major in Language from the University of the Philippines, Diliman and is currently taking her PhD in Applied Linguistics at De La Salle University, Manila. Apart from being the Director of Alumni Resources in the National AJET Council, she is also passionate about broadening approaches to English teaching and learning from the multicultural perspective through opportunities such as the annual Skills Development Conference (SDC). This article was born out of a group presentation during the 2019 Okayama SDC.

A Different Kind of Love Language

Jo Watts (Tokyo)

If you have been learning a second language or have a strong interest in living in a different country (such as Japan!), then you may have experience dating someone who may not speak the same native language as you. Cultural differences aside, some of you may encounter a language barrier. This is especially so in Japan, where the majority of the Japanese population are either monolingual or are very limited in knowledge of other languages.

The language dynamics of a relationship vary from couple to couple, but no matter how fluent one may be in, say, Japanese or English, communicating more intricate thoughts seems to be a common issue.

I met my Japanese partner in Australia. I was still in the middle of my Master's degree, and he was completing a diploma at a specialisation school. At the start of our relationship, his English wasn't as good as it is now but since I could already speak Japanese fairly fluently, we usually communicated in Japanese. This was a hindrance for him especially when it came to talking with my family, who don't speak any Japanese. Well . . . apart from a few phrases like "konnichiwa" ("hello"), "arigatou" ("thank you") and "wakarimasen" ("I don't understand").

Throughout our relationship, there have been many minor miscommunications because of subtle cultural nuances that ended up turning into arguments or hurt feelings. I remember six weeks into our relationship, we parted ways for the day on a bit of a rough note. Then I received a text from him saying, "We need to talk". To us native speakers, this usually means a breakup conversation is to follow—so that's exactly what I thought! However, it was simply to talk about resolving what happened during the previous day.

Phew! Needless to say, I explained to him why he should avoid using that phrase!

We've had other bumps along the way, especially when communicating over text. There are many phrases or words that we use frequently in both languages that may have a different nuance in the other's language that would lead to a misunderstanding. For example, in English, we sometimes write "oiiii" in jest, but in Japanese many 'i's comes across as aggressive. Instead, they write "ooooi" (おーい). Such a small difference has a completely different meaning!

My partner's English dramatically improved throughout his diploma as his course was conducted entirely in English. As such, we began communicating in English more frequently and both languages became used as much as the other. We both came to understand each other's language culture a lot more than before.

One key point that has helped us avoid needless arguments is maintaining open and clear communication. We've agreed to address all things—no matter how small—that may not sit right within us. When it's over text, we would ask to clarify what the other meant. When it's in person or over the phone, we try to translate said phrase into the alternative language, or use body language to assist us in explaining.

We've been living in Japan for several months now, and the amount of Japanese used at home has once again increased. We still try to keep up with both languages by being conscious about it and changing languages mid-conversation. It can be quite fun to mix it up, especially when there are phrases we want to use that don't translate well into the other! For example, "Otsukare (Good work today)! How was your day?" or "Shouganai (It can't be helped), if you can't do . . .". Sometimes I even like to throw in Japanese onomatopoeias like "boroboro", "gorogoro" or "kosokoso" ("worn-out", "lazing about", "sneaking about").

Doing this, however, has a downside . . . especially when I am speaking to non-Japanese speakers. When I get in touch with my family and friends, we'll be chatting and then suddenly I'm met with a blank face or a "huh?". It would turn out I had thrown in some random Japanese words in or completely mixed up the grammatical pattern of my sentences! I have become so used to mixing Japanese and English together that I have to rethink my entire sentence so that the other person can understand my train of thought.

Aside from cross-lingual communication, there are times when we don't understand pop-cultural references in conversation. This may come from shows and movies we've grown up with in our own home countries, different senses of humour between the West and Japan, and occurrences that only one of us would be familiar with.

I've asked other friends also in multilingual relationships about this too, and there seems to be a consensus that either person can get frustrated because they can't understand everything being said or presented in a film or in a group of people. Sometimes one will laugh at a joke and the other might not. Sometimes having to translate what is being said, and the reason it's funny can be frustrating. Sometimes humour in one language can be rather offensive in another.

Perhaps, the one thing that myself, my partner and others can find frustrating is expressing intricate details—our deeper inner thoughts. It is difficult because sometimes the other person can't fully understand what is trying to be expressed. As a result, some couples stop communicating these thoughts to each other, which can lead to problems later on. This is especially a problem in relationships where one person is more fluent than the other in one language.

There are also some topics, such as politics and specific social issues, that I and others sometimes find difficult to discuss with our partners, mainly because of different societal upbringing and lack of knowledge of specific vocabulary. Some people find this an issue because they enjoy these kinds of intellectual discussions.

Furthermore, it can be extremely tiring to constantly think and communicate in a language other than your native one, especially after a bad day or a full day of work. Obviously, unless you're willing to talk about it, it's never wise to poke the bear. Many couples have different ways of getting around this. Talk about it when you are more relaxed or have some quiet time to wind down, and then you can let your partner get things off their chest whilst comforting them.

There are many forums on the internet that offer advice and solutions to multilingual relationships. For example, "Futon Party! A love/dating discussion group for expat women in Japan" is a group on Facebook that—as the name suggests—provides a safe platform for women living in Japan to openly discuss any issues they may have in regard to dating or their relationships. The language barrier seems to be a recurrent topic of discussion and members always give supportive and constructive advice on tackling these relationships.

In addition, there are many foreign resident/Japanese YouTubers—called J-Vloggers—that sometimes vlog about their relationships and the struggles and upsides of being in a multilingual, multicultural relationship. The most prominent J-Vloggers are probably [Rachel and Jun](#), and [Texan In Tokyo](#), both of whom are married Japanese/American couples.

Nurturing multilingual and -cultural relationships like these requires good and open communication as well



Photo by: Jo Watts

as self-awareness, which is also necessary for monolingual or -cultural relationships. Although it may seem like hard work, it doesn't mean that it's impossible. I hope all of you reading this have successful, fun, and loving relationships. Or if you're single and still mingling, I hope you find your own PB to your J, or your garlic to your bread!

Jo Watts is an Australian living in Tokyo, teaching English. She enjoys meeting new people, archery, and doing creative projects such as writing and painting. Thanks to this winter season, she has recently taken an interest in snowboarding and visiting hot springs!

STUDYING LANGUAGE ON

Jo Dennis (Kumamoto)

Ever found yourself staring at the trending topics on Twitter and not knowing what's going on at all? (What could #としまえん even be about?)* Have you ever thought there's no use using Facebook while you're in Japan? (Nobody in the country uses it, right?) With a few tweaks to how you absorb information on the SNS you frequent, you can keep up with the Joneses and pick up a few words on the way.

Follow accounts in your target language

My best advice is to follow accounts related to things you already like doing, in the language you want to learn. The information that you seek is usually hidden behind a few minutes of looking up translations. Or, if you want to dedicate yourself to some more serious study, set up a block of time for reviewing grammar forms that appear in the post.

I'll lay out my recommendations for how to do this on Twitter and Facebook below, but this can apply to any social media you use. Similarly, this works for any language you're planning on studying, not just Japanese!

Twitter

With posts that are short and sweet, [Twitter](#) is one of the best places for learning a little bit every day. Twitter is also one of the most popular apps in Japan, so there will be no lack of content to sift through.

Follow any account that posts about your hobbies or interests in Japanese. Search for keywords such as サッカー (soccer), 編み物 (knitting), etc. and follow the accounts that pop up in the results. Follow **any and every** account at first. If it ends up being too much, feel free to sparse it down later on. I personally started my Japanese language learning quest by following Japanese Twitter accounts that covered video game news (shoutout to [@famitsu](#)). You'll be able to read about things you want to know about, but in small enough chunks that you don't get demotivated.

But as the English language posts and Japanese language posts jumble up in your feed, it becomes easy to skip the tweets that you can't read. It's your precious relaxation time—you opened Twitter to decompress, not study! To counteract this, I recommend dedicating the first five minutes on Twitter to reading the Japanese tweets you come across. Or, instead of a time limit, read and study the first ten tweets in Japanese that show up in your feed. Afterwards, you're free to ignore any tweet you want.

If, like me, your Twitter usage has fried your attention span, I recommend making a point to economize on the tweets you read. For example, follow bots that repeat the same or similar phrases, or viral accounts

‘SMS’



that keep trying to repeat their first successes; the repetition will help you to pick up new phrases.

Some bots to follow:

[@wadainotweetRT](#) Retweets the most relevant trending tweets. The topics covered run the gamut, with the account retweeting politicians to the most absurd manga panels.

[@limitedboard](#) Similar to the account above. Seems more inclined to retweet cat videos though. Occasionally overlaps with what [@wadainotweetRT](#) covers, but that means more exposure! I see you scrolling! Read the tweets twice for good measure.

Celebrity Accounts:

[@55_kumamon](#) If you follow this account, Kumamoto's favorite mascot, Kumamon, will give you a nice おはくま and おやくま (good morning and good night respectively, but with bear puns!) every day. Kumamon has been traveling around the world recently, so this is the best place to keep up with their travels!

[@hanae0626](#) Hanae Natsuki, famed voice actor in anime like Mobile Suit Gundam: Iron Blooded Orphans, Food Wars!, and Samurai Flamenco. Loves sharing pics of his cat. Has also been uploading to his [gaming channel](#) recently. (Some of his videos have subtitles if you really need a break!)

[@lotusjuice](#) Rapper and musician known for his work on the soundtrack of Persona 3. Sometimes posts in English, sometimes posts in Japanese. Has a [gaming channel](#) as well.



Accounts I follow for Eikaiwa (English cram school) ideas:

[@OdenEnglish](#) This twitter is connected to their long-form blog, where they really flesh out the topic. For instance, the difference between lay and lie was recently featured. When I get difficult questions about how or why English grammar is the way that it is, I usually bring up this page.

[@KoalaEnglish180](#) Their charts are extremely handy, with a cute koala motif to boot! Learners of all ages will appreciate their clear design and how they cover common mix-ups of English learners that are native in Japanese, and vice versa.

Facebook

While regarded as the app forgotten by Japan in favor of LINE, Facebook hosts many pages dedicated to social figures, organizations, and events within the country. Your best bet on Facebook is to follow professional organizations dedicated to cultural exchange between Japan and the world. International associations, tourism pages managed by CIRs, multilingual newsletters, and other community based pages can expose you to more day-to-day vocabulary and writing style.

Other than that, many online Japanese language teachers host their material here, including pages by the [Nihongonomori group](#), [Sanbon Juku's Akkie-sensei](#), and even a recently formed [JET-exclusive Japanese language learning group](#).



Pages

Types of pages likely to have bilingual (English-Japanese) posts:

International Associations Example:

1. [Ashikita Town International Association 国際交流協会](#)

2. [Japan Foundations, Sister Cities, Japan Societies Example: Japan-America Society of Washington DC](#)

FB pages dedicated to Japanese language learning:

1. [Nihongonomori](#)

2. [Sambon Juku](#)

3. [JET-Exclusive Language Exchange!!!](#)

Changing the App's Language

A further step in your SNS language learning quest can be to change the language of the app itself. With this forbidden knowledge you can bump up your motivation to post in your target language as well. Just be sure to know how to switch it back, if absolutely needed! (Access 設定, and click on 言語)

One of the most interesting things I found out while turning my entire phone's language to Japanese was that many apps use the same word in Japanese for "post" and "posts": 投稿. You can upload content yourself by clicking on 投稿, and you can see an account's posts by clicking on 投稿. This can vary, with Facebook displaying 作成 in the uppermost blue bar where

you would create a new page or group. But both words appear in the "What are you doing?" box, as 投稿を作成.

You might also be surprised at just how many things are communicated through katakana. On Twitter, to tweet is simply ツイートする. To get back to your main feed on Facebook, click on ホーム. The trends page on Twitter is just おすすめトレンド. I'm not sure if this is a characteristic of SNS platforms made outside Japan or not, but it seems to be working for Twitter.

In the end, the least following some accounts can do is expose you to the language. With some time and effort put into learning something you want to know, you can build up your vocabulary related to the topics close to you.

Happy studying!

**The hashtag #としまえん trended on Twitter after Toshimaen, a long-standing amusement park on the western side of Tokyo, announced that it would close.*

Jo Dennis is a CIR in Kumamoto Prefecture. Originally from Virginia, USA. Spends all their time in Book Off, Hard Off, Home Off, Mode Off, etc. when not trying to budget for a Nintendo Switch.

ARTS AND CULTURE

CULTURE EDITOR

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Taylor Skultety

"Reset as many times as you need to"

—An Instagram caption I really took to heart

ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

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Rachel Fagundes

"A stage play ought to be the point of intersection between the visible and invisible worlds."—Arthur Adamov

FASHION AND BEAUTY EDITOR

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Devoni Guise

"Be miserable. Or motivate yourself. Whatever has to be done, it's always your choice."

—Wayne Dyer

ARTS EDITOR

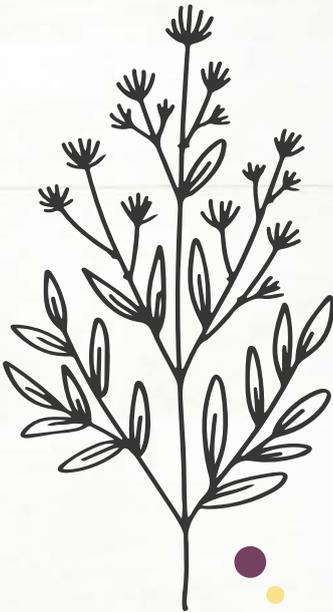
connect.arts@ajet.net

Valerie Osborne

Photo: Megan Luedtke

*Katsuyama Fire
Festival 2020*





Viveka Odmann (Saitama)

Japanese people are often perceived by the outside world as healthy, young-looking and more importantly, beautiful. When my mother came to Japan for the first time, she admitted that she had not imagined there were any ugly Japanese people. She thought all Japanese people were somehow beautiful because she had only ever seen beautiful Japanese people on TV before. She was quite shocked to discover this was not the case. From a western viewpoint, it is easy to see where her ideas about Japanese people come from. I can imagine the same can be said for any Japanese person whose only exposure to foreigners are Hollywood movies.

I am often complimented on my body here in Japan—my white skin, my long legs and my small face. But, the longer I live in Japan, I find it harder and harder to accept these compliments. In a recent resurgence of self-love and acceptance, inspired by influencers such as The Fab Five and Jameela Jamil, I have changed my perspective and wish to do the same for others here in Japan.

When it comes to any culture's societal beauty norms, there is a desire and expectation to fit in especially for women. However, the more collectivist a society, the stronger the pressure to conform. Simply put, the



Japan's Beauty Standards and Me

Learning why I love

Photo: NordWood Themes on Unsplash.com

group's values, opinions and ideas are considered more important than the individual. To break out from the mold, you must be willing to face strong social backlash and rejection. Those who choose to live by their own beauty standards are seen as rebels of society. The same goes double for those with extreme body modifications—people with piercings or tattoos. However, it is not just subculture groups like goths or lolitas who are beginning to break out and stand up. Today, beauty standards are beginning to face backlash from women who will no longer tolerate sexist expectations of their appearances. The KuToo movement against the mandatory high heels policy in workplaces and the reaction against the 'glasses' ban for office women are a couple of signs that show things may be changing for women in Japan (4).

The Struggle with Beauty Standards

According to a 2015 German market research survey of 270,000 people aged 15 or older, the Japanese rated the lowest out of the 22 countries surveyed with their overall satisfaction with their appearance (1). This might come as a surprise, as Japanese people tend to have better skin-care routines, eat healthier and in general *are pressured to evaluate* their outward appearances more than westerners. For me, despite my best efforts, my fashion choices always seem to fall one step behind every time I step into Tokyo.

One of the most obvious beauty standards for women in Japan is the fairness of their skin. How did this come to be? The first theory is from the Meiji period, when the western influence grew strong, and adapting to western trends and looks became associated with a modern look and power. Adopting the western preoccupation with white skin thus became a fashion and socio-economic show of strength. The second theory cites the difference in appearances between the laborers (tan from working outside) versus the Japanese aristocracy (lighter in complexion from spending more time indoors) as the reason fairer skin is valued.

Regardless, of how fair skin became so highly valued, the result is the same. Nowadays, keeping your skin "white and beautiful" is one of the biggest slogans of the cosmetics industry, and often you will see these "white and beautiful" women on TV advertisements and acting in dramas. Many Japanese women therefore wish to be like these women. Women will go to extreme lengths to be pale; they will wear arm socks and long sleeves in sunny weather, use parasols and buy face-whitening cream.

When Japanese people compliment my skin tone, it therefore makes me uncomfortable these days; it is not something that should be praised as it disvalues darker skin tones and perpetuates colourism. This in turn leads to prejudices and can lead to further struggles for equality in the workplace and other social situations.

While it seems most Japanese women naturally have slim frames, being thin is another beauty standard that is becoming increasingly problematic in today's media-pressured society, creating spiraling unhealthy body-image issues. Another beauty standard is of course the 'double eyelid' that makes your eyes seem larger and rounder. Many young women around east Asia have 'double eyelid surgery' and it is now the most popular cosmetic procedure in Japan (5). It should be noted that they are not aiming to look like white peoples, but rather to imitate Japanese celebrities, who in turn may have gotten the surgery as another appeal point to look younger and cuter.



Photo: Viveka Odmann | Graphics: Freepik



Lastly, being completely hairless is another crucial beauty point for Japanese women. Most will shave both their leg and arm hair from a young age. I've heard fellow foreign ladies start to shave their arms because their co-workers did it and they started to feel 'unclean' if they didn't.

These are all physical beauty standards and while emphasis is placed on physical appearance, Japanese women are also expected to be the full package. She should be hardworking, diligent, kind, honest and above all, selfless. Simply put, to remain a 'beautiful woman' in Japan requires a lot of work, but what else is new?

Culture of Shame

There is a cultural philosophy in Japan called *kaizen*—to constantly improve yourself and always do your best. While inspiring, it can also become a heavy burden and a stifling pressure to those unable to do so. A Japanese colleague told me it comes down to a matter of *jiman*—self-pride, something that is strongly discouraged in Japanese society. It is not good to think too highly of oneself, as self-satisfaction is tied closely with complacency; this seems to form the foundation of the Japanese work ethos. As a result, there might not only be a sociocultural pressure to feel unsatisfied but an internal expectation as well, which can further lead to a downward spiral of unhappiness. I believe the cultural pressure to 'never be satisfied with what you do and who you are' is so strong, it might hinder Japanese people, especially women, to see themselves as beautiful.

Throwing Away Femininity

In Japan there is a phrase, *Onna o suteru*, to 'throw away your femininity,' and it is used in a variety of ways to describe when a woman has given up on trying to adhere to society's often sexist assumptions of femininity. It could be when a woman chooses to prioritize her career or family over themselves. Some women have even come to accept that to 'lose femininity' or to 'act without femininity' is the only way to survive in the corporate workplace (2). Another way it is used is when a woman chooses to not behave in traditionally feminine ways, such as wearing no makeup every day or simply getting

sweaty when running to catch the train in the morning (3). This is centered around the whole idea that a woman's intrinsic value is tied to her beauty. Such stress is enough to make one consider simply 'abandoning being a woman' as it's simply too restricting for everyday life!

Flowers and Fairy Light

I am a believer that a more accepting society is a happier society. I hope that more people in Japan can someday see different forms of beauty within themselves and others, rather than one ideal. At the moment, many seem to think that there is only one type of beauty, but that's obviously not true. By accepting and finding beauty in other forms, people may start to accept their own appearances as they are too. After all, we think both flowers and fairy lights are beautiful, yet look nothing alike. Self-love is a struggle for anyone in any society, but acceptance for oneself and others leads to valuing yourself more, and no longer tolerating behaviour that so obviously discredits that.

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- (2) <https://koigaku.machicon.jp/column/49789/>
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Viveka Ödmann is a half-British, half-Swedish second-year ALT in Saitama. She graduated in 2016 from the University of East Anglia (UK) with a degree in Japanese with Management Studies, and spent a year abroad at the International Christian University in Tokyo. She is currently looking into jobs that will get her to work for the Olympics.



Stylish at Work

By Chantal Brown (Tokyo), Annelise Wilp (Saitama), and Yentel Le Roux (Nara)

Chantal Brown

The alarm goes off at six and every pleasant dream shatters into the bleary wakefulness of morning. From then on, it's a mad rush stumbling over sheets and tripping over my own feet to get to the bathroom. The time always slips away so quickly between waking and getting ready for work. If you're anything like me, even more precious seconds tick by retracing steps because I've forgotten my apartment key, or train pass—or deodorant.

As an assistant language teacher, fashion and nitpicking what you wear may not be the foremost thing on your mind. Especially when dress code regulations fall on the more conservative side, it may not inspire creativity to play around with your wardrobe and try different looks. Sometimes I'll second-guess a skirt or dress, whether it's appropriate or too showy, but I'll still take that risk.

For me, dressing for work is more than just abiding by the rules and being professional. As with most fashion, how I dress is a statement; an expression of my style and the things I like. Bold prints, bodycon dresses, bright colors, elegant chic tops, pleated and flared skirts—even girlish garments—are important parts that make the sum of my wardrobe.

Whenever I go through my closet, I'll look at colors that contrast nicely, and articles of clothing that would make a good outfit. Burgundy blends well with beige and navy blue; the pleated yellow skirt with twin black bands around the waist goes well with my black, silk long-sleeved top. The process goes on and on as I set aside suits for the week. Or the month.

The winter period had me donning more sweaters and heat-tech layers than I would have liked. But some days I still put together looks that made me feel good. That's part of what fashion is for me: something that can generate positive vibes for me and perhaps those around me.

There is no question that when you look good, you feel good. Your entire attitude can be influenced by how you perceive yourself and how good you feel at any moment. This is part of the reason I shopped around for bright colors in particular. Early mornings and I don't go together, but seeing myself in flowery colors can instantly soothe my grouchiness.

When you like the way you look, it can help you walk with more poise and confidence. To take it a step further, your appearance can help set the tone for the day. Everyone's

style is different, but there is one commonality—if it looks like people will admire your style. A no-brainer is the fact that you can make an impression just by the way you carry yourself.

Admittedly, I've never really cared much for fashion. I always went for easier, more neutral colors that blended in. But the more I stepped through business and business-casual looks, I found it suited my growing tastes for casual, classic, and elegant chic designs. Plus, it's fun to experiment with different pieces from your wardrobe!

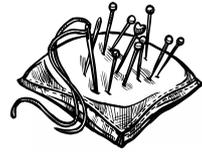
Winter wasn't my favorite period for rocking coats with faux fur and the collar made up for the lack of dressing up. Spring will see more dresses with flower patterns to match the blooming cherry blossoms, chiffon tops, skirts, and the heels I have been sadly catching dust on the shelves in my closet.

How will you be dressing this Spring?

Chantal is a first-year JET working in Shibuya. Hailing from the tropical island of Jamaica, she seeks to maintain cultural ties between her country and Japan in her own way. Her spare time is normally spent writing and exploring the best eating spots around her area.



Chantal says! You can never go wrong when pairing your outfit with a stylish blazer!



ANNELISE WILP

My style in Japan is very different from what I wear in the U.S.. The first thing I noticed was that many women wore long skirts, so I went on a shopping spree at Aeon Mall to buy some. I specifically like the store Honeys, which has a lot of my favorite colors and florals.

In Japan, showing cleavage is a no-no. I always wear conservative shirts that go above my collarbone. For this reason, I ended up sending a lot of my American shirts home because they were too low-cut.

These photos were taken in February, so you can see that I am wearing sweaters with long skirts. Since



insulation in the schools isn't very good, I always bring a scarf or shawl to wear. I love scarves to begin with, so I always coordinate my scarf with the color of my skirt.

I was worried about the conservative style in Japan, but in the end, I was able to find my style and am still able to express myself at work. I will probably not bring my long skirts back home, but I definitely enjoyed experimenting with my style over these past two years.

Annelise is a second-year ALT from Chicago, currently placed in Saitama. When she's not teaching high-schoolers, she enjoys reading, traveling, and trying to finish writing her future best-selling novel.





Yentel Le Roux

As South Africans, being vibrant, loving colour and expressing ourselves is a part of our DNA. This is evident, in not only our cultural attire, but our choice of work fashion. When I was placed as a prefectural ALT in Nara and made aware of the 'strict' rules for work attire, I was excited for the fashion challenge to still keep true to myself while meeting work standards. I was also more than willing to bend certain rules that aren't as stern—wearing COLOUR, bright colours!

It is important to remember that JET is an exchange program as well, and my not being afraid to wear bright colours shared a part of myself and culture with my co-workers and students. In fact, a few of my co-workers told me that they started wearing more bright colours to work because of me. They loved the fact that I wasn't afraid to stand out and they were willing to give it a go. Everyone I interacted with at work loved the fact that every other day, I had a different hairstyle. Some days I would have a French braid, other days a ponytail, some days a simple bun with a fringe(bangs).

To keep your style consistent and true to who you are, I think you should bring a few staple items (such as pants) from your home country that may be difficult to find in Japan, perhaps due to size. I also think that you shouldn't be spending an arm and a leg for certain items. I shopped for really cheap items at 2nd Street, a second-hand store, and at a few of those random underground stores at the train stations. I shopped at Honeys which sells clothes similar to Uniqlo but cheaper. I would often shop at Uniqlo if I wanted something simple, but if I wanted something more ornate, I would shop at GU. For items that I could wear professionally and casually, I would shop at Forever 21 and H&M.

Here are a few of the outfits I wore. I generally had a specific colour palette, and items that worked well together that I was able to mix and match. Here are some examples you can use as inspiration.

Use this as a blueprint, but remember it's all about how the clothing item makes you feel. Be yourself and play within your comfort zone!

Yentel is a South African graphic designer who was an ALT in Nara on the JET Program (2016-2019). While there, she enjoyed sharing her culture and creative talents at school and with those around her. Constantly travelling, she expresses her love for museums and people. Instagram: [@blackrose31](https://www.instagram.com/blackrose31)



Outfit 1

A long sleeve collared blouse with slim ankle pants.

How I mix it up: Wear a sweater or different coloured blazers, and roll up the sleeves.

How you can mix it up: Straight cut loose pants or high waisted pants that are either crop or wide-leg fits this look best, but wear what's most flattering and comfortable on your body type. You can also make this look less formal and more comfortable by wearing a cardigan.

Where I bought the items: Pants, Honeys; blouse, 2nd Street; sweater, GU and blazers from South Africa.



Outfit 2

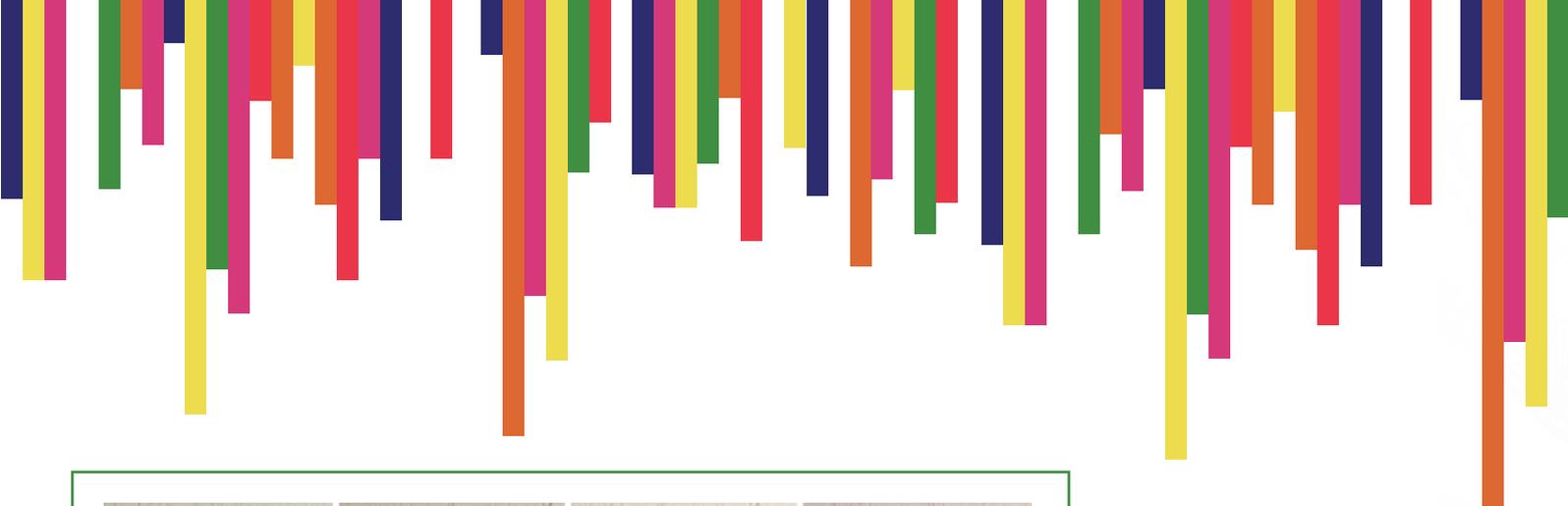
A turtle/polo neck and slim ankle pants.

How I mix it up: Wear different coloured blazers.

How you can mix it up: The same styles of pants suggested for Outfit 1 work here too, but this look will also work well with a pencil, A-line, flared, bell, circular or gathered skirt.

Where I bought the items: Pants and turtle/polo neck Honeys and blazers from South Africa.





Outfit 3

A long sleeve V-neck collared shirt with slim ankle pants.

How I mix it up: Wear different coloured blazers or a cardigan, and roll up the sleeves.

How you can mix it up: Layer it with a sweater. And yes, the same pants styles work here as well—versatility!

Where I bought the items: Pants, Honeys; shirt, Forever 21; cardigan, H&M, and blazers from South Africa.



How I mix it up: Wear with a sweater.
How you can mix it up: Wear with a sheath dress, but again, wear it with a cardigan, and what you are more comfortable in.
Where I bought the items: South Africa.



Outfit 4

A bodycon dress.

with a blazer.

Layer it with something you are comfortable with. I'd suggest a shift, A-line, or something that best fits your body type and is comfortable with.

Items: Dress, H&M; blazer from



Outfit 5

A shirt/blouse with a pencil skirt.

How I mix it up: Half-tuck the shirt/blouse in front and let the rest hang loose at the back—the classic French tuck!

How you can mix it up: Choose shirts/blouses with different necklines or cut sleeves. If you go sleeveless, it's best to wear a cardigan or blazer to cover your shoulders and respect the professional Japanese dress code. This look will also work well with a flared or A-line skirt.

Where I bought the items: Skirt, H&M; fuchsia pink sleeveless blouse, Forever 21; the rest of the shirts and blouses, 2nd Street.



Navigating the Drugstore Beauty

Devoni Guise (Saitama)

Aisles: Basic Survival

This is the scenario: You venture to your local drugstore needing a face wash, because the two bottles you bought from home are gone and there is no way you are paying 10,000 yen plus shipping to buy them online. You have dry skin with patches that look like the onset of eczema, so you'll prefer a face wash that is relatively creamy and non-drying. Your skin is also sensitive around your jawline, so nothing with harsh ingredients or acids. You are also aware of the skin whitening effects some products in Asia claim to have, but you like your skin tone *thankyouverymuch* so those products are a hard no. And with the scenario set, where do you start?

1 Well, looking for a special product and need recommendations? Search Cosme rankings!

[Cosme.net](https://www.cosme.net) is a review portal site. It also has information about beauty trends and news. Majority of the products come from Japan. Cosme is useful because it has over four million users, many Japanese women, who review various beauty related products. What is really helpful is that at certain points of the year, Cosme will rank products and crown favorites based on reviews. I specifically seek out products with Cosme backing and have never been disappointed. You can find Cosme awarded products by the seal placed on them. Be careful, though; some products sport replica seals that look *almost* exactly like the one Cosme doles out.

You can find English translations of the rankings [here](#). I find Cosme a better resource for discovering new products than Reddit or Youtube which focuses on well-known brands that are easy to get internationally. Being in Japan, it would be a waste not to venture out and try amazing products by little known or new brands. So, if you are interested in Japanese products and want something that has been reviewed and loved by the public, go to Cosme.net

2

Amazon, Ebay, Reddit, and Youtube are great resources for finding reviews of products you are not sure about and in ENGLISH! However I would caution against buying them online, unless you are buying from a seller verified by the company, or from a website by a major distributor. Fake products are a problem in the beauty industry.

Learn the return policy before you buy! Some stores do not allow returns on products that have been opened, to ask in Japanese: すみません、これ、返品(へんぴん)できますか。(Sumimasen, kore, henbin dekimasuka?)

3

4

Use point cards. Over time, depending on special promotions, you can save money on future purchases, get samples of new products, and receive discounts. Point cards are not only good for beauty purchases but can be used for a variety of goods.

As you are going through the store, be cognizant that not all products are grouped together by brand or use, I noticed at my local Welcia that the placement of the product on the shelf really depends on the brand. For instance, a brand will have its face emulsion cream always placed next to a competitor, while the rest of their line is separate. This can make it hard to find products you are interested in, but don't give up! I always keep a screenshot of what I want so for when I am tired of perusing the aisles by myself, I can show it to a clerk and we can scan the aisles together.

5

Japanese products are relatively safe and you don't have to worry about noxious or injurious chemicals, but there are ingredients people wish to avoid based on their skin type. To make that a little easier, here is a list of five common ingredients people avoid in their hair and beauty products (and a little bit on why for the curious).

Products with alcohols (the non-fatty type)—

While there are chemicals with 'alcohol' in their name, these 'fatty alcohols' are usually some type of emollient and work well in moisturizing products. People avoid non-fatty type of alcohols as they are often too strong for sensitive skin. Short-chain alcohols are also avoided due to a tendency to cause frizz for curly and wavy hair [types](#). Non-fatty and short-chained alcohols can also be too drying for hair (especially for wavy to kinky hair types), particularly when they are used in leave-ins or deep conditioners. In Japanese, alcohol is usually written as アルコール. The type of alcohol will be written in katakana before アルコール.

Parabens—Many people choose to avoid parabens due to their association with cancer. The European Commission on Endocrine Disruption has listed parabens as having a possible association with cancer due to their ability to mimic estrogen in the body. Parabens have also been found in cancer tissues. In Europe, some of the more toxic parabens have been banned from use. Generally, it can be hard to avoid parabens since they are used to preserve products (including foodstuff), and many countries have not banned paraben use to any extent. If you are interested in avoiding them, in Japanese parabens are xxxパラベン.

Sulfates—Specifically, sodium lauryl sulfates can be extremely drying for hair and skin. Commonly used as a surfactant, you can find this chemical in products meant to degrease tires! In Japanese sulfates can be found by locating one of these words: ドデシル硫酸ナトリウム, ラウリル硫酸ナトリウム, 硫酸ラウリルナトリウム, ラウリル硫酸Na, or ドデシル硫酸ナトリウム. In general keep an eye out for ナトリウム, which is written in shorthand Na.

Silicones—Not all silicones are made the same, but for many avoid them as a whole in their skin and haircare routine. Frequent use of silicones can result in buildup that is extremely hard to entirely remove. This buildup then prevents other treatments from doing their job or being absorbed into the skin/hair. In Japanese silicone is written as シリコン or ○○メチコン, depending on the type of silicone used.

Mineral Oil—Specifically for haircare, there is a movement to avoid mineral oil due to its ability to cause buildup on hair strands, and eventually cause scalp problems. There are also concerns (though not yet confirmed) by several consumer groups concerning the source of mineral oil and how it is processed, which determines if it could be carcinogenic. In Japanese mineral oil is 鉱油.

Skin-whitening products—There are various chemicals used to whiten skin. For the most part, Japan does a very good job keeping out the dangerous chemicals some people use, such as mercury, out of the market. If you are trying to avoid skin-whitening products, they are usually distinguished by the inclusion of hydroquinone (ヒドロキノン or ハイドロキノン in Japanese) in their ingredient list, or the use of 'white' (ホワイト, in katakana or the kanji 白) in its name or description.





Photo: Evie S. on Unsplash.com

These are not fail-safe tips, however, so when in doubt put it down. Also, there is no need to be afraid of some of the common acids found in skin care products, such as glycolic, mandelic, or lactic. These are simply great exfoliants. Same with Vitamin C; it will not lighten skin by itself, or at the dosage found in most drugstore products. If you do find yourself accidentally using a skin-lightener, it will only cause issues with prolonged and repeated use. So, there is time to dispose of the product before it ruins your skin. Once again, be sure to research any concerns you may have. Google does a decent job of translating ingredient names.

I hope this article is a small help in navigating your local drugstore. Happy exploring!

Devoni Guise is a second-year ALT living, reading, and daydreaming in Saitama. You can follow her journey into true independence in her home country of the US on Instagram [@getting_wealthy](#).



You can see this has skin whitening products by its inclusion of 'white' in the name of the product. It translates to beautiful white skin...! I pass...



Be careful of fake "Cosme-like" stickers



Many brands will attach stickers to their products that have no real indication of quality

MARCH

RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

March 6

- Judy (2019)
- The Room (2003)
- All Is True (2018)
- Romeo and Juliet: Beyond Words (2019)
- Nancy (2018)
- Fukushima 50 (2020)
- Sisters (2019)

March 13

- Onward (2020)
- The Death and Life of John F. Donovan (2018)
- National Theatre Live: Fleabag (2019)
- Monstrum (2018)
- The Invincible Dragon (2019)

March 14

- The Biggest Little Farm (2018)
- Columbus (2017)

March 20

- Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn (2020)
- Dolittle (2020)
- Human, Space, Time and Human (2018)
- The Cured (2017)
- Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2019)
- My Extraordinary Summer with Tess (2019)
- Not Quite Dead Yet (2020)

March 21

- Letter from Masanjia (2018)

March 26

- GTA V: THE FINAL WAR: The Second Chapter (2020)

March 27

- Sonic the Hedgehog (2020)
- Little Women (2019)
- Harriet (2019)
- Saaho (2019)
- Serial (Bad) Weddings 2 (2019)
- El Pepe: A Supreme Life (2018)
- Psycho Pass 3: First Inspector (2020)
- My First Client (2019)

March 28

- Gekijouban Fate/Stay Night: Heaven's Feel - III. Spring Song (2020)
- The Green Lie (2018)

GAMES

March 3

- Curse of the Dead Gods – Steam Early Access (PC)
- The Division 2 – Warlords of New York expansion (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

March 6

- Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX (Switch)
- Yes, Your Grace (PC)

March 11

- Ori and the Will of the Wisps (PC, Xbox One)

March 13

- Nioh 2 (PS4) – March 13
- My Hero One's Justice 2 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

March 17

- La Mulana 1 & 2: Hidden Treasures Edition (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

March 19

- PC Engine Core Grafx mini/ TurboGrafx-16 mini (PC)

March 20

- Animal Crossing: New Horizons (Switch)
- Doom Eternal (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Doom 64 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

March 23

- Half-Life: Alyx (PC VR)

March 24

- Moons of Madness (PS4, Xbox One)
- Bleeding Edge (PC, Xbox One)

March 26

- Down the Rabbit Hole (Oculus, PS VR, Steam VR)

March 27

- Saints Row 4: Re-Elected (Switch)
- Lost Words: Beyond the Page (Stadia)
- One Piece: Pirate Warriors 4 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

March 31

- Persona 5 Royal (PS4)
- Mount and Blade 2: Bannerlord – Steam Early Access (PC)
- The Complex (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

Sources:

<https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp>

<https://www.vg247.com/2020/02/18/video-game-release-dates-2020/>

Photo: Georgia Vagim on Unsplash.com



A Brief Introduction to Kabuki

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

Kabuki theater, with its striking face paint, wild wigs, and bold poses, has become an iconic image of Japan internationally. However, the art form is not always well understood abroad, or even by Japanese people. The heightened and archaic language can make the dialogue difficult to access even for native Japanese speakers, and its stylized form is an extreme departure from the more naturalistic style of acting preferred in the west. Nonetheless, this unique form of theater is a delight, and well worth experiencing if you get the chance.

Kabuki, which derives its name from the Japanese word for “bizarre” or “outlandish,” is currently the most popular and well known of Japan’s traditional theater forms. Its plays usually have a five act structure and are performed exclusively by

male actors, appearing in both male and female roles. Men playing female characters are known as *onnagata* and have developed highly stylized posture, gestures, and mannerisms to capture the ideal of alluring feminine beauty in their performances. In fact, all of the roles in kabuki are quite stylized. Audiences can spot certain character archetypes by their costumes and makeup. The actors paint their faces stark white and exaggerate their features using colorful paint that not only made their features easy to see in the dim Edo-era theaters, but also communicates their character’s social standing and temperament. Wild, blustering warriors would be made up very differently from thoughtful, delicate aristocrats or scheming villains. The actors speak in a kind of old, elevated

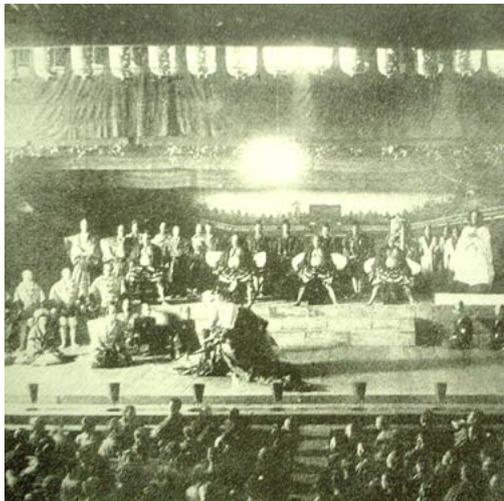
Japanese, somewhat akin to Shakespearean English. They are accompanied by musicians and a narrator, who apparently sings his lines in an even older and *less* accessible form of Japanese.

Although modern kabuki may include more variation and experimentation, most traditional kabuki falls into one of three main genres: *jidaimono* (historical dramas), *sewamono* (domestic melodrama), and *shosagoto* (dance).

As in noh theater, kabuki acting is passed down in family lines, often from father to son. Kabuki actors will also take on, and pass on, their father's stage name. Some particular plays are performed only within certain family lines, while the most famous and

skits performed by women who wore outlandish men's clothes, sometimes carried swords, and played both male and female characters. This form of kabuki caused a sensation and became wildly popular (until 1629 at least, when it was banned by the shogun on account of being too sexy). The actresses who founded kabuki were then replaced by adolescent boys, who were themselves banned shortly thereafter—also for being too sexy. Eventually, adult male actors took over the roles and were allowed to perform. At this point, kabuki evolved to have less emphasis on dancing and more on narrative and drama.

Unlike noh, which was the theater of the upper class, kabuki was the theater of the common people. It flourished throughout Edo's Golden



popular plays are known to all troupes. Kabuki connoisseurs may even delight in comparing how a father and son will interpret the same roles.

If this all sounds a bit dry and formal, you may be surprised to know that kabuki has quite a wild history. It was even seen as a dangerous influence by the Tokugawa Shogunate, which struggled (and generally failed) to contain and regulate kabuki for hundreds of years.

Kabuki was actually founded by a woman, Izumo no Okuni, in 1603. In its early form, kabuki consisted of dancing and short, often funny or provocative,

Age from 1673–1841. Numerous kabuki theaters were built in Edo's entertainment district, and lively theater districts appeared in Kyoto and Osaka as well. Bunraku puppet theater developed alongside it, and the two art forms frequently borrowed popular scripts and innovations from one another. Many tropes and conventions of the art form were codified during this period, including the act structure and genres. Kabuki also developed into two prominent styles of performance: *aragoto* (rough style), which is characterized by dramatic *mie* poses, and bright, stylized *kumadori* makeup, and *wagoto* (soft/gentle style) which is more natural.

In the early 1700s innovations in stagecraft included revolving circular platforms built into the floor of the stage, allowing the whole set to revolve for quick and dramatic scene changes. Later, some stages were also built with trapdoors in the floor, and even elaborate flying rigs that allowed actors to float over the crowds in dramatic scenes where clever fox women make daring escapes or deities ascend into the heavens.

Despite being “The Common People’s Theater” and therefore considered inappropriate for the upper class, kabuki remained of interest to a broad swath of Edo society. At the height of its



popularity, the kabuki theaters and the tea houses around them became the center of fashion, culture, and social mixing in Edo, and productions would last all day long. Kabuki became a favorite subject of *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, with famous scenes from kabuki plays and portraits of popular kabuki actors selling like hotcakes in the theater district. *Oshiguma*, face prints of the kabuki actor’s makeup, were also sold on strips of cotton or silk as mementos of

their performances. Kabuki actors were so popular that fights could sometimes break out in the theater over their favor, and high ranking nobles snuck into private boxes to see performances, despite being banned off and on from doing so. Kabuki even spread outside major urban centers with local variations becoming popular in some rural towns.

Throughout the Edo period, the Tokugawa Shogunate viewed kabuki as a source of mischief and societal disruption, and fought a losing battle against its popularity and influence. Kabuki actors of Edo were banned from leaving the theater district to give private performances in noble houses; they did so anyway. Onnagata were ordered to adopt deliberately unattractive hairstyles to curb their sexiness; they developed elaborate wigs. Theaters were ordered not to use exquisite fabrics in their costumes, since this would be above their station; these bans were eventually worn down and rescinded. Plays were strictly forbidden from critiquing the government, or depicting contemporary events or political figures; thinly veiled political satires simply changed the character names and setting to that of an earlier historical period.

In 1868 the Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed, the emperor was back in power, and Japan went through a radical transformation from a feudal state to an industrialized nation. The samurai class was gone, but kabuki survived into the Meiji era and saw new innovation and experimentation during this time.

Kabuki was also briefly banned by the American occupying forces after WWII, but it was eventually allowed to return to the stage.

Although kabuki struggled somewhat in the postwar period to compete with that advent of television and other modern forms of entertainment, kabuki has been recognized as an important cultural asset was declared by UNESCO to be intangible heritage possessing outstanding universal value.

Kabuki continues to adapt and evolve in the modern era. In addition to still popular classics from the Edo period, new kabuki plays continue to be written, as well as adaptations from sources as varied as Shakespeare plays, Italian operas, and Ghibli movies.

You can enjoy kabuki productions in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka at such venerated theaters as [Kabukiza](#), [Minamiza](#), and [Osaka Shochikuza](#). If you’re lucky, you may even find local kabuki groups performing in the countryside to this day.

Sources:

1. [Begin Japanology Kabuki](#) (NHK Documentary)
2. [“Bakufu Versus Kabuki,”](#) Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies
3. [Wikipedia](#)

Rachel Fagundes is a third-year ALT in Okayama Prefecture and the Entertainment editor of CONNECT. She previously worked as the associate editor of Tachyon Publications, and once taught a Lit class at UCSC on ethics and social justice in the Harry Potter novels. She likes science fiction, fantasy, the Italian Renaissance, and Japanese festivals. She will steal your cat.





INTERVIEW WITH KABUKI ACTOR TAIKI YOKOBAYASHI

Taiki Yokobayashi (Okayama) | Toshie Ogura (Okayama) | Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

After driving through rice fields on tiny, unlit, dirt roads in the dead of night, circling and searching for a location that would obviously scream KABUKI FESTIVAL, I came upon Katsuga Shrine. The locals had been performing kabuki here since the late Edo period, and built a theater behind the shrine to house their annual autumn festival. Dozens of cars were clustered around it, trying to park, jostling to pass each other on the narrow inaka roads. *This must be the place*, I thought. As I stepped inside the little theater, I saw that it was packed to the gills. The audience, entirely comprised of (mostly older) locals, sat on rows of floor cushions facing the stage, all the way to the back of room, where latecomers stood. On stage young boys costumed as exquisite cranes whirled like dervishes, dipped and bowed and fluttered their wings around a beautiful maiden (also a young boy) dressed in brilliant red. Whispers began to circulate as the locals realized a wild *gaijin* had appeared in their midst, and I was excitedly ushered into a better seat toward the front.



For the next several hours I was treated to a dazzle of color and sound. A variety of self-contained scenes, and a few longer plays, were presented, broken up by intermissions where the little old ladies in the audience chatted happily with their neighbors and whipped snacks out of their bags to share with one another. Some of the scenes were dance performances with little discernible plot. Others appeared to be family dramas or historical epics, where I could mostly figure out the characters and their relationships from their interactions and costuming. Even without understanding every element of what I had just seen, I left the theater at the end of the night enchanted, and feeling very lucky to have been invited into such a traditional space in my *inaka* community.

Almost a year later I returned with my friend and translator, Toshie Ogura, to interview one of the kabuki actors and sit in on a rehearsal for the upcoming kabuki festival. This time we entered from backstage, and found images of painted kabuki actors peering down from the walls. Every surface seemed to be covered with old posters, yellowing newspaper clippings, and playbills of past shows. Backstage was also surprisingly full of women, working on props, costumes, and equipment. On the stage itself, rehearsal was already in progress. Actors—and surprise again, a few actresses!—mostly in street clothes, rehearsed their blocking.



We were introduced to our contact, Taiki Yokobayashi, a mild-mannered young teacher by day and master kabuki actor by night, who showed us around the theater before settling into an interview. In particular, he directed us to a wall of photographs, rows upon rows of pictures of groups of children and teens in full costume and makeup, posing on stage. “This is me!” He said, pointing to one young boy, then to another, “and that is my friend, there!” He gestured to a grown man practicing on stage, and then back to the photographs, “That’s him many years ago, and this one’s his father!” And on and on, the faces go back for generations.



Note: All interview responses were originally in Japanese. They have been translated into English by Toshie Ogura and transcribed and edited by Rachel Fagundes.

Rachel: Thank you so much for letting us interview you! Please tell us about this kabuki troupe.

Yokobayashi: This group is the Awai Kasuga Kabuki Preservation Association. This building is 20 years old. Before that, this kabuki group used to act on the outside stage of the Kasuga shrine for roughly 30 years. So they have roughly 50 years as a formal group. Before that, there was no fixed group in this area, but the indigenous people used to perform kabuki to worship the gods in autumn and to celebrate the harvest.

We are quite famous in Japan, in Okayama. It's because the young people are disappearing from the countryside. They want to hunt for their jobs in the city. The countryside people want to revitalize the villages, so the city and the countryside people focus on this kabuki group.

This is an authentic kabuki place. It's rare for communities to have places like this, and active kabuki groups. So kabuki gets a lot of attention. We want more young people to revitalize the villages and to pass on the kabuki to the younger generation.

Rachel: Your kabuki festival is in October, right? What about the rest of the year?

Yokobayashi: From July we begin practicing. Each person has their work. There's no admission fee so it's all for free, all volunteers.

There are three places for us to play kabuki every year. This is our main location. We also play in Nagi. There are two big kabuki groups in this area. Our group, and the Nagi group. We have our festival here, at this temple, and two weeks later the Nagi Group has their festival. The Nagi Group

always asks us to perform one play at their festival with them. This year I am playing Hatsugiku at both festivals.

Have you ever heard of Konpira Kabuki,* in Shikoku? We also perform in the "Sanuki Kabuki Festival" there in Kagawa Prefecture every October.

**Konpira Grand Theatre, also known as "Kanamaru-za" is the oldest kabuki theater in Japan still standing. It was built in the 1830s and recently restored to its original Edo period appearance.*

Rachel: What types of stories were performed to worship the gods?

Yokobayashi: We have all the scripts for all the titles this group plays, have ever played ever. There are 16. We pick four of them to perform every year, plus the crane dance, which we do every year at the start.

However, we don't write a special story to worship gods. Instead we perform with worshipping thoughts and feelings in our minds.

Rachel: How long have you been a kabuki actor?

Yokobayashi: For 21 years. I started when I was maybe turning 6 or 7.





Rachel: Do you come from a kabuki actor family? How long has your family been performing kabuki?

Yokobayashi: My great grandfather, grandfather, father, and I have all been playing kabuki together as a family—so four generations. A few families in our theater troupe are like that, but that’s kind of rare.

Rachel: What was it like learning kabuki from your father?

Yokobayashi: Autumn is kabuki festival season for me. It’s a matter of fact. It’s natural for me. From my childhood I have admired kabuki, thinking, “Oh, it’s so cool!” So I wanted to do that. My father has never said “Do kabuki!” or “You have to do this!” but since I admired the kabuki players, it was natural for me.



Rachel: Were you able to see your grandfather perform also, when you were a child?

Yokobayashi: I don’t remember actually. My grandfather died young, but there are many pictures that I can see. And I’ve seen videos of him performing.

Rachel: Usually kabuki actors are all men, playing both the male and female roles. But some modern kabuki troupes allow women. There are women in this group, right?

Yokobayashi: There are professional Edo kabuki groups or Edo families, so they are kind of real, high-class professional kabuki players. When it comes to the professional kabuki players, women are totally not allowed to play on the stage. However, when it comes to our local kabuki troupe, Awai Kabuki, anyone is welcome. This group especially is very inclusive, regardless of ages, sexes, whether you are from a kabuki family or not.

Most of our actors are people who are connected to the Awai area in some way. They aren’t all from kabuki families. Some have not played kabuki before, but I invited them in so that we could perform kabuki together and they said “why not!” As long as they come to practice anyone is welcome.

A couple of years ago foreign people used to practice for this kabuki play for a couple of years in a row. They used to act on the stage, not in leading roles, but it was very impressive.

Rachel: You have sisters also, right? Are they involved?

Yokobayashi: They used to act on the stage!

He proudly directs us back to the pictures on the wall, where his sisters can be found among the others.

Three brothers and sisters on the stage when we were children. After they graduated from junior high, they stopped acting, but I decided not to stop acting. My sisters got married and they live in Tsuyama, but they come back to this kabuki in the autumn festival. My oldest sister has two children, the oldest is turning 2 so we are discussing him playing on the stage. So that's how our family is going to be. With my friend's children, it's the same. We are chatting happily "maybe next year, or maybe next-next year, your children are going to join our kabuki!"



Yokobayashi explains the plot of *Revenge of Hideyoshi Part 10—Amagasaki in a Hidden Place*, a tragedy about the doomed young lovers: Jujiro, who must go off to battle, and Hatsugiku, his devoted fiancee. While he is getting into the somewhat complicated historical circumstances that led to this scenario, our interview is interrupted by his own father who, grinning, shows us a picture from last year's performance.

In it, Yokobayashi stands in full costume as the noble young warrior Jujiro, and his father poses delicately on his arm as Jujiro's 16 year old fiancee.

Both laugh.

"Everyone was busy!" Yokobayashi explains, "A girl my age was supposed to be Hatsugiku, my fiancee, but everybody got busy, so my father had to stand in!"

Rachel: Can you tell me about the kabuki makeup? Does each actor apply their own?

Yokobayashi: We don't put on makeup by ourselves. There are professional makeup artists for kabuki who are called *kaoshi*.

Rachel: Does that run in families also?

Yokobayashi: It's not a family-style. If you really want to be a makeup artist for kabuki, you have to ask the master for training. To be an apprentice.

Rachel: So how many makeup artists work with this group?

Yokobayashi: This group doesn't have any professional kabuki makeup artists which are exclusive to this Awai kabuki group. So we always ask the Nagi Kabuki group to borrow their makeup artists. Maybe three or four makeup artists.

Rachel: What is the makeup made of?

Yokobayashi: Horse fat. Horse oil.

Rachel: What—Wait, what?

Yokobayashi: Horse oil.

Rachel: So, is this oil you put on the horse, or is this oil made from the horse's body?

Yokobayashi: It's kind of a solid oil. It's not liquid. So you take the oil and get it melted on your palms and then spread it on our faces and then put white powder on it. It's kind of a face painting. Body paint. So with the horse oil, it will be easier to spread the face painting better, smoother.

It's really really hot on stage because of the light and we have to wear kimono and heavy costumes, but the makeup doesn't move or sweat off. Afterwards, it's really difficult for us to remove the makeup because of the horse oil.

Rachel: Does it smell?

Yokobayashi: A little. It's kind of a fat oil.

Rachel: So how does the makeup define the different characters?

Yokobayashi: Ah yeah, it depends on the character, how to do the makeup is different. Totally different. Have you heard of *Kuge*? *Kuge* are like, high society people. So the eyebrows should be like dots. Round dots.

The makeup of samurai should be straight. Straight lines. Straight and thick. When it comes to the strong characters, the makeup should be like *kumadori***.

There are books on how to make up each character. So when it comes to *Hatsugiku*, she should be like this. So the makeup artist should always see the textbook of each role, and they makeup according to the textbook.

**stage makeup worn by kabuki actors in the *aragoto* acting style. *Kumadori* makeup is highly stylized and characterized by bold stripes and symmetrical patterns on the face.

Rachel: So, her character type will appear the same every time.

Yokobayashi: Yeah. And so when it comes to the veteran makeup artist, he doesn't have to see the textbook because he knows everything. That kind of craftsmanship.

Rachel: Tell me about the character archetypes.

Yokobayashi: When it comes to kabuki, there is not purely good heroes or purely villainous characters. For example, even though he is an asshole in this play, there is a good point to *Toyotomi Hideyoshi*. The characters are complicated.



Rachel: I know that the language of kabuki is very ancient. It can be difficult for modern Japanese people to understand. So, as an actor how do you communicate to the audience?

Yokobayashi: Actually I don't understand the lines myself at first. When I first get the script for a new play, I don't understand what kind of lines they are and what they are saying. I have to research the meaning, or ask someone, until I understand. And after I understand the lines I try to express it using emphasis in my voice, or in my body language and behavior, or using *mie*.



Mie are theatrical poses struck at the height of a dramatic moment to emphasize its importance in the scene. They are an important element of the *aragoto* style of kabuki acting.

The *hyoshigi*, wooden block instruments, are key to marking these moments. Yokobayashi explains, "When it comes to doing *mie*, the wooden instruments should create a beat that becomes more intense, to a crescendo. *Ton! Ton! Ton! Ton! Ton! Ton!*"

We practice striking the wooden instruments in a fast rhythm. He strikes a pose as each strike rings out, freezing his face in a dramatic expression, moving slightly in between the beats. It's almost like vogueing. The strikes become more rapid and intense as the moment escalates towards its emotional climax.

Rachel: Can you tell us about the stage?

Yokobayashi: This is a rotating stage. During a performance, backstage staff put a peg into this hole, from the top, and they rotate the stage. This changes the set, so there are scene changes.

Rachel: Is this a common feature in many kabuki theaters?

Yokobayashi: Yes, it's often.

Rachel: Are there any special effects, or tricks?

Yokobayashi: The lights are so hot for the actors, the lights are designed not to shine on the audience but to be bright on the actors, to focus on their faces. So the lights are a kind of special effect. At this theater the performances are at night.

Rachel: Can you tell me about the musicians who perform with the kabuki plays?

Yokobayashi: There is a narrator, a shamisen player, a hyoshigi (wooden block) player, so there are three players with kabuki. For each title, the lineup can be different. Sometimes there are three shamisen players for one title, like a high tone shamisen, a low tone shamisen, and a normal shamisen. There should always be one narrator and one wooden block player, but there could be one, two, or three shamisen players depending on the play.

When it comes to the wooden block player, there is no fixed musician for that. For example, if I do not have a role to play in a particular title, I can play the wooden blocks. But the narrator and the shamisen players are fixed roles, they are not actors. We borrow them from Nagi.



Rachel: It sounds like all the local kabuki groups help each other.

Yokobayashi: Our group cannot live without the Nagi kabuki group. We borrow many costumes from them also. So indigenous kabuki groups help each other to pass on their traditions.

Rachel: What do you want foreigners to understand about kabuki?

Yokobayashi: Kabuki is really unique to Japan, so I want foreign people to understand the whole uniqueness, so for example, the atmosphere itself, the story itself, is really Japanese-like. I want foreign people to experience authentic Japan.

Maybe foreign people won't understand the whole story completely, but if they think 'this part was really impressive' or 'I felt a really moved by their acting'—if they think so or they feel so, then we will be very happy.

Taiki Yokobayashi is a junior high PE, crafts, and computer science teacher. His motto is "Try anything! Experience counts." He loves kabuki, has been performing since he was 7, and is the fourth generation in his family to be a kabuki actor. He'd like as many people as possible to learn about kabuki.

Toshie Ogura is a Japanese English teacher. She treasures her family, friends, and students, and loves to travel around the world. She also loves Japanese culture and studies tea ceremonies, calligraphy, kimono culture, Buddhism, and Japanese cooking. She enjoyed learning more about kabuki as well!

*Rachel Fagundes is a third year ALT in Okayama Prefecture and the Entertainment editor of **CONNECT**. She previously worked as the associate editor of Tachyon Publications, and once taught a Lit class at UCSC on ethics and social justice in the Harry Potter novels. She likes science fiction, fantasy, the Italian Renaissance, and Japanese festivals. She will steal your cat.*



歌
Song

舞
Dance

伎
Artist

TERRACE HOUSE:

A Window into Japanese Dating Culture

Yoshika Wason (Aomori Prefecture)



Note: this article contains spoilers for all seasons of Terrace House released at the time of publication.

Why Terrace House Became a Sleeper Hit

Terrace House is a reality TV show about six strangers living in a house, but to understand the international popularity of Terrace House, you need to understand what the show is *not* about. There are no challenges, no eliminations, and no prizes. Instead, people “graduate” from the show on their own terms, usually when they feel they have completed a personal goal. People on the show generally get along and when drama does happen, it’s usually of the someone-ate-my-food-without-asking variety. Stripped of most artificial structures and constraints common

on reality TV, the show focuses on new friendships, romance, careers, and personal development. At its core, Terrace House presents itself as a relatable slice of life program in the format of reality TV.

Terrace House appeals to viewers abroad because it provides a window into Japanese culture. I first started watching the show in 2017 as it was easily accessible on Netflix and I wanted to listen to conversational Japanese. I became intrigued because the season that was airing at the time, *Aloha State*, took place in Hawai’i as opposed to Japan. Although *Aloha State* gets a bad rap among Terrace House fans, I related to the cast because, like many of the members from that season, I’m a half Japanese person who grew up abroad.



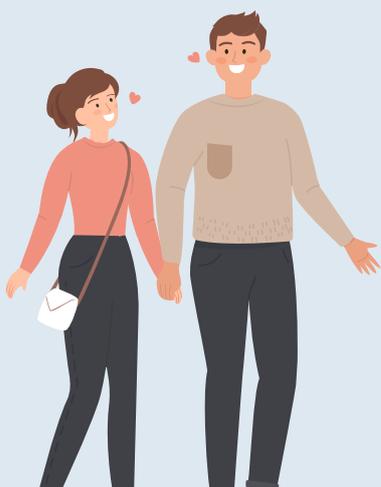
I found it interesting to see members code-switch between Japanese and English. I paid close attention to how members integrated Japanese, American, and local Hawai'ian values to varying degrees into their daily lives. It felt like a social experiment to see these cultural dynamics play out in a group living environment. The current iteration of *Terrace House, Tokyo 2019-2020*, fortunately, continues to include an increasing number of people who are not Japanese as well as Japanese people who have lived abroad.



As the show, like any reality TV program, portrays an intentionally curated version of the daily lives of real people, Terrace House can give insight to the larger cultural context that the show is situated in. Of course, taken alone, Terrace House is not a definitive guide to Japanese culture and often individual differences hold more weight than broader societal norms. In fact, I believe one of the strengths of Terrace House is that it shows how individual people who have a diverse range of personalities, opinions, and backgrounds can all coexist together. With this in mind, I believe that it's still a worthwhile pursuit to draw connections between Terrace House and Japanese culture.

Finding Love

Dating is one facet of Japanese culture that I have never experienced first hand. That's why while watching Terrace House, I like to compare what I know about dating in the U.S. to dating in Japan. Though it isn't strictly a dating show, the structure of the program promotes dating by casting people who are usually young (in their late teens through 30s), single (though singledom isn't a requirement), and attractive (so many models and actors). The show's equation always has three men and three women. This setup is reminiscent of a *合コン (goukon)*, a blind group date, where there is an equal number of men to women. When members first meet each other, they often ask questions about their goals, relationship status, and ideal romantic partner. Many members say that they hope to find love on the show. All this leads us to the question, what can Terrace House tell us about dating in Japan?



Maintain harmony. A big reason why Terrace House works is that people generally make an effort to get along with each other. This is tied to the Japanese concept of *和 (wa)*, which means harmony. *和* is used to explain an ideal group dynamic where each person considers how their words and actions impact not only themselves but also the group. That's a major reason why cast member, Cheri, became a villain during the Aloha State season; she disrupted the *和* of Terrace House by refusing to forgive or apologize to her fellow cast-mates in the wake of conflict. On the show, maintaining harmony becomes complicated as there are several layers of relationships to keep up with, including that between potential love interests, roommates, and friends. In real life, the stakes are probably not as high but preserving a good group dynamic is relevant if you are interested in dating a coworker or someone from your groups of friends. With only six people in the house at once, love triangles often form. The fact that conflicts rarely ever rise beyond awkward conversations is a testament to the strength and importance of the *和*.

Read the air. Indirect communication is an important part of Japanese culture, especially when it comes to dating. As the modern Japanese saying *空気を読む (kuuki wo yomu)* goes, one should read the air, and if you fail to do so you risk being labeled "KY" or unable to read the air (*kuuki wo yomanai*). Terrace House has many examples of indirect communication, like the infamous Costco scene in *Boys and Girls in the City*. When Yuki (aka Tap) tries to ask out Arisa on a date, she rejects him in a roundabout way by suggesting that they turn their plans into a group outing to Costco. Though some find indirect communication annoying, if Tap could understand the unsaid subtext, he would be spared a full-on rejection. Unfortunately, Tap is "KY" so Arisa has to dish out a harsher and more direct rejection.



Confess your love. Want a boyfriend or girlfriend? According to Terrace House, the ideal process of dating generally follows this pattern: go on a few dates, confess your feelings if things go well, wait a few days for the other person to think it over, become a couple if the other person accepts the confession, and then leave Terrace House together. Of course, there is more than one path to coupledness and some people are looking for a more casual arrangement. Still, parts of this template are relevant to dating in Japan outside of Terrace House, particularly the confession or 告白 (*kokuhaku*). After feeling out the situation (*kuuki wo yomu*) there is an expectation that a direct confession of one's feelings must happen and an answer must be given before the relationship can move forward. Which is often on Terrace House treated as a very serious step in the relationship. As someone who grew up in North America, confessing but not asking for an immediate answer is an unfamiliar extra step in the dating process. When I really think about it, however, not expecting an answer right away gives the other person time to seriously think about their future without impulsively making a decision.

Age is nothing but a number. I have to admit that the older I get, the more critical I have become of people who actively pursue relationships with others much younger than themselves. In my eyes, two people with a large age gap are often operating at different life stages. Even bleaker, I think that a large age gap can create an unbalanced power dynamic. I held onto this belief while watching the infamous fling that occurred during *Boys and Girls in the City* between Riko (18) and Hayato (29). I felt uneasy because Hayato convinced her to try to hide their relationship from the cameras when she was okay with it being out in the open. Contrary to my opinion, Riko's mom, other house members, and the panel did not see an inherent issue with their age gap. In another season, *Opening New Doors*, filmed in Nagano prefecture, house members Seina and Noah leave the house together to start a relationship. Seina and Noah were another age-gap couple, Noah being just 21 at the time to Seina's 30. For such a widely-watched, main-stream show, there simply doesn't seem to be a strong stigma against age gaps. Honestly, this is one cultural difference that is difficult for me to wrap my head around.

How real is Terrace House?

While Terrace House can tell us many things about dating and other aspects of Japanese culture, there are some notable limitations. Terrace House can never be one hundred percent real because the members are placed in an unnatural living situation where they have no say in their roommates. Also because cameras monitor each person's daily routine, participating in the show necessitates trading privacy for screen time. In return, members indirectly promote their personal brand and projects. Everyone wants to look good for the cameras. Some people even try to hide certain parts of themselves from the screen, like the aforementioned relationship between Hayato and Riko. Other attempts at curation include when Risako, a cast member on Terrace House: Tokyo 2019-2020 tried to hide her smoking habit because she thought it would negatively impact her image as a fitness coach. It's not just house members that distort the truth, the production team can also alter reality through their off-screen interactions with the cast and through post-production editing.

Considering the filtered nature of the show, can successful relationships start on Terrace House? I think the threshold of success in a relationship is subjective but there are some clues based on the longevity of relationships that start on Terrace House. On the show, lots of people go on dates but only a few couples emerge and even fewer relationships last after the show. Does this mean that love is dead and Terrace House is all fake? Personally, I don't need Terrace House to be one hundred percent real. As long as the show is still a close approximation of life in Japan with diverse, relatable members, I don't mind that the show is curated. Each week I will keep watching Terrace House so that I can cheer on members during their journey to find love and beyond all while learning a bit of useful Japanese.

Yoshika Wason is a second-year high school ALT in Aomori. She is also co-president of API AJET, a group for JETs of Asian and Pacific Islander descent. When she's not watching Terrace House, she likes watching reality shows and listening to true crime podcasts. She writes poetry and nonfiction at www.yoshikawason.com

Usaburo Kokeshi:

A New Branch for Wooden Dolls

Linka Wade (Gunma)



Have you ever walked into a Japanese souvenir shop and seen rows of beautifully carved and painted wooden dolls? These are *kokeshi*, one of Northern Japan's most well known traditional art forms. You've seen them everywhere from antique markets to keychains. The wooden dolls come in all different styles and shapes, frequently depending on the region the artisan is from. Eleven styles in total are found throughout the Tohoku area, the home of kokeshi. Kokeshi makers in the region have created their own signature styles for painting faces or designs, and even shaping the body of the doll.

Its history goes back to the Edo Period. At Togatta onsen in Miyagi prefecture, wood craftsmen called *kijishi* branched out from their traditional wares to carve dolls. The dolls were decorated with scenes from around the area and were sold as souvenirs to the onsen visitors. The fad quickly spread to other onsen in the region. Because kokeshi is written only in hiragana, there's no distinct meaning assigned to the word, but they were still viewed as good luck charms. Visitors came to onsens to improve their health and relax. When they left, their souvenir dolls came to signify good luck and well-being.

Kokeshi are characterised by wooden bodies with round heads, usually painted with a black, red, and yellow motif. They feature more rustic styles being carved simply from one piece of wood. There really are a lot of styles that make it hard to define what a kokeshi is. However, if they're shaped like cute girls with smooth, dark wood for hair—chances are pretty high that those kokeshi were



made at the Usaburo Kokeshi studio in Shinto Village, Gunma Prefecture. Usaburo Kokeshi has been a major part of bringing the art of kokeshi into the modern age, preserving and developing this living tradition.

Making the Leap to Modernity

Kokeshi have always been hand-crafted using traditional methods and tools. However, Usaburo Okamoto, the founder of Usaburo Kokeshi who was in the business of making dolls from 1950 until his passing in 2009, came to the realization that it didn't have to be that way. There was no kokeshi police stopping him from designing a whole manufacturing system. So he did. Usaburo is responsible for the creation of a new style of kokeshi; *sosaku kokeshi*. Although *sosaku* (創作) is translated as "creative," the colloquial translation for *sosaku kokeshi* is "modern" kokeshi. This style is known for feminine facial features and a distinctive dark, bobbed hairstyle. Traditional dolls are hand-carved and painted. Usaburo updated the craft by designing machines that artisans could use to mass-produce doll bodies, but kept the painting and some carving by hand. He also threw in some poker-drawing for fun, a technique where artists use hot wires to etch designs into the dolls. Through a combination of all these unique styles and techniques, the Usaburo Kokeshi studio was born.

The kokeshi makers, or *koujin* at Usaburo Kokeshi still preserve tradition by learning from senior artists; in fact, many of the artists at the workshop are direct descendents of Usaburo, or have been working for Usaburo Kokeshi their entire lives. However, by using the (relatively) new machines, they are also able to produce about 15,000 kokeshi a month, which is a lot more than they could do by hand. This enables Usaburo



kokeshi to be sold not only all over Japan, but all over the world. The other modern twist at the workshop is in the design of the kokeshi. Usually, kokeshi display traditional scenes and have roughly the same body shape. Usaburo artisans threw all that out the window and decided to not only make their signature kokeshi, but also make pop culture figures. Now, you can buy a kokeshi version of TV and anime characters, mascots, and more. Because why not? I myself am the proud owner of a Gunma-chan Usaburo kokeshi, but I've also definitely had my eye on a Yoda one. Check out all the neat designs at the studio's [online store](#).



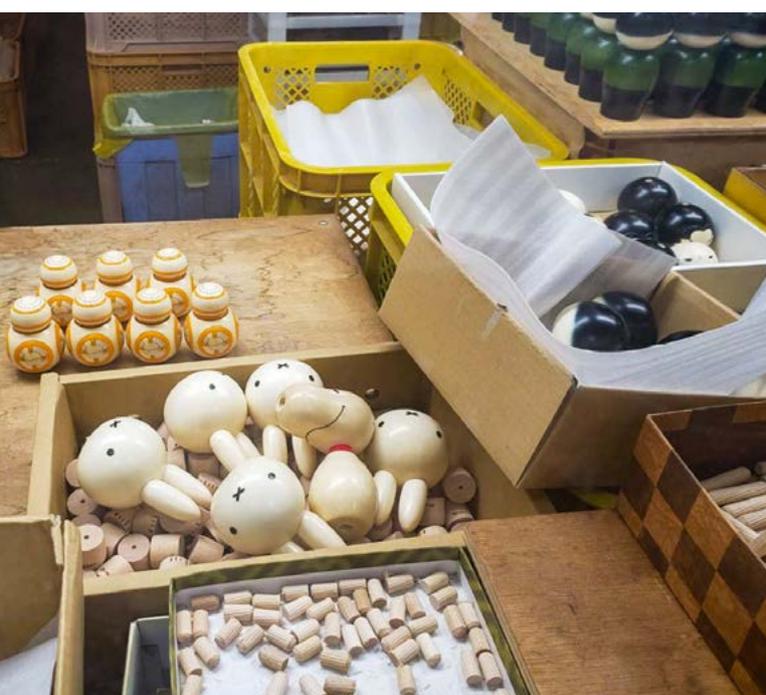
At the Workshop

One of the fantastic things about visiting the Usaburo Kokeshi studio is that you can tour the factory, completely free. If you're lucky, the artisans will be at work when you go in for a look. The machines and work stations are behind plexiglass screens, and helpfully have English signs explaining the process that happens at each station. Unfortunately, the English on these signs is . . . questionable at best. You can watch as the individual parts of the dolls are shaped, lathed, and polished. Although the machines are doing the hard work of high-speed carving, the artisan has hands on the pieces at all times. You can tell the amount of skill and precision that goes into making each part of the doll. Usaburo kokeshi are technically mass-produced, but each one is still a handcrafted work of art.

When you leave the factory and head into the shop, you can also see the decorating artists at work. They use hot bits of wire to delicately etch designs into the assembled dolls, and traditional tools for painting and carving. None of these decorations are sketched on beforehand; everything is totally freehanded. Personally, I cannot freehand draw a potato. The mind boggles at what these artists are able to create, almost magically. If you really want a deeper appreciation for their craft, you can sign up for a workshop to paint your own kokeshi. Nothing will make you realize that magic of what they do more than having a brush in your own hand.

The shop itself is a delight to wander through. There are so many dolls to look at, in all varieties. If you get bored of looking at the dolls on sale, you can pop upstairs to a free museum of kokeshi. All the signs are in Japanese, but you can get a pretty in-depth history lesson just from walking through all the displays of kokeshi. It's incredible to see how different designs and styles developed, and just how versatile this art is.

Almost all the information in this article, and much more, can be found at Usaburo Kokeshi's [website](#). If you are at all like me (a big history nerd), and interested in the history of kokeshi at Usaburo and in Gunma, I'd highly recommend reading through the information there.



*Linka is the Events section editor for **CONNECT**, and a second-year ALT in Gunma. One of her hobbies is collecting kokeshi, which is probably why she was asked to write this article. She also enjoys traveling, dragging her husband to events around Japan, contemplating her life in onsen, and spoiling her guinea pigs. You can find her on Instagram at [@linkaslens](#), or on her blog, [Linka Learns Things](#)*



INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF THE TOKYO ART SCENE

Amy Brereton (Tokyo)



Just a few weeks ago, I found myself standing on the 52nd floor of Tokyo City View in Roppongi, gazing out on the skyline of a city that never ends. There is something surreal about living in the largest city in the world. Tokyo truly seems like a city full of infinite possibilities, and as an artist, this is nothing but inspiring. I was placed in Tokyo as an ALT on the JET Programme five months ago. Prior to this, I had been studying illustration and graphic design at Emily Carr University in Vancouver. When I'm not working as a teacher's assistant, I love to immerse myself in the local art scene by attending gallery exhibitions and going to concerts. I still have a lot more to experience, but so far my impression of Tokyo's art scene has been overwhelmingly positive.

Japan seems to have an appreciation for art unmatched by anything I've experienced in Canada. Growing up, I was always made fun of for loving comics,

video games, and animation, but here in Tokyo, it brings me so much joy to see people of all ages and occupations enjoying manga and anime. Geek culture here doesn't share as much of the stigma that it once did in North America. You can find anime and videogame characters on everything from advertisements, packaging, school supplies, and toiletries—even themed cafes. This kind of acceptance of illustration makes me feel proud to be an artist, as well as inspired to keep creating.

Furthermore, as someone who is still acquiring Japanese language abilities while living in Tokyo, I find myself increasingly more appreciative of illustration and art as a method of communication. Illustration is a universal language in a sense, sometimes being the only thing I can rely on besides Google Translate when I'm basically illiterate in the Japanese written language. For instance, when I'm at a store looking for a particular item such as shampoo, I feel thankful when I find a bottle

with explanatory images since I can't read much of the Japanese. On more than one occasion, illustration and art have made my daily life here much easier. Being such a large city, Tokyo offers gallery spaces and events for both up-and-coming and established artists alike. Some of my favorite gallery experiences so far include seeing installation artist Shiota Chiharu's work at an exhibition titled "The Soul Trembles" at the Mori Art Museum, and stumbling upon Final Fantasy illustrator Yoshitaka Amano's work in Shibuya at Kikka Gallery.

Tokyo certainly knows how to cater to specific fan bases. As someone who loves *shojo* manga and the acclaimed film *Akira*, I took great pleasure in attending both the Nakayobashi's 65th Anniversary Exhibition at Yayoi Museum and the *Akira* Art of Wall exhibit at PARCO Gallery. Larger fair events such as the Tokyo Art Book Fair, Yokohama Handmade Marche and Design Festa provide spaces for independent artists



to sell and promote their work in a collaborative environment. Additionally, the expansive music and nightlife in Tokyo offers many opportunities to meet other creatives. At concerts such as Tohji, Bladee, Tzusing and Virgen Maria I have been able to meet many other aspiring artists to collaborate and network with.

The artist community is encouragingly supportive, perhaps especially so due to the intrinsically international nature of Tokyo. Many creatives that I meet are here only temporarily on a one-to-three-year visa, and are therefore enthusiastic to promote their work and to collaborate with others while they still have time. In particular, Tokyo Love

Hotels, an event held monthly at Sankeys Penthouse in Harajuku, offers opportunities for foreign and local artists to showcase their work to a large audience. This event promotes artists of all genres including DJs, musicians, jewelers, designers, performance artists and illustrators, making it a memorable and inclusive event that fosters an environment where creatives from all across the globe can meet.

Currently, I am working on an illustration series with graphic designer Tanner Nielsen (@psi.tallstar on Instagram) titled "Horrosopes" in which I am drawing the twelve zodiac signs as characters one might find in a horror movie. This series

will consist of 12 illustrations and accompanying explanatory pages which express a morbid sense of humour in combination with an exploration of horror and astrology tropes. The project is definitely inspired by the amazing people I'm meeting and culture I'm being exposed to here. I feel truly blessed to have been placed in Tokyo as a JET and to experience the Tokyo art scene to its fullest. My love of illustration has only grown stronger since arriving here five months ago.

Amy Brereton's illustrations and comics present the tender duality of our world—a balance of gloom and beauty simultaneously. This harmony reflects that there is as much luminescence as there is darkness and that we have the power to choose what we want to see. Themes in her work include surrealism, horror, and femininity. Aesthetically, her work is inspired by low-brow comics, anime, and tattoo flash.



Instagram:
[@amybrereton](https://www.instagram.com/amybrereton)

Website:
amybrereton.bigcartel.com

Contact:
amybreretonart@gmail.com

Untitled (Dust Pic)

Dust, ink, gum arabic, and honey on paper

25 x 34 cm

2019

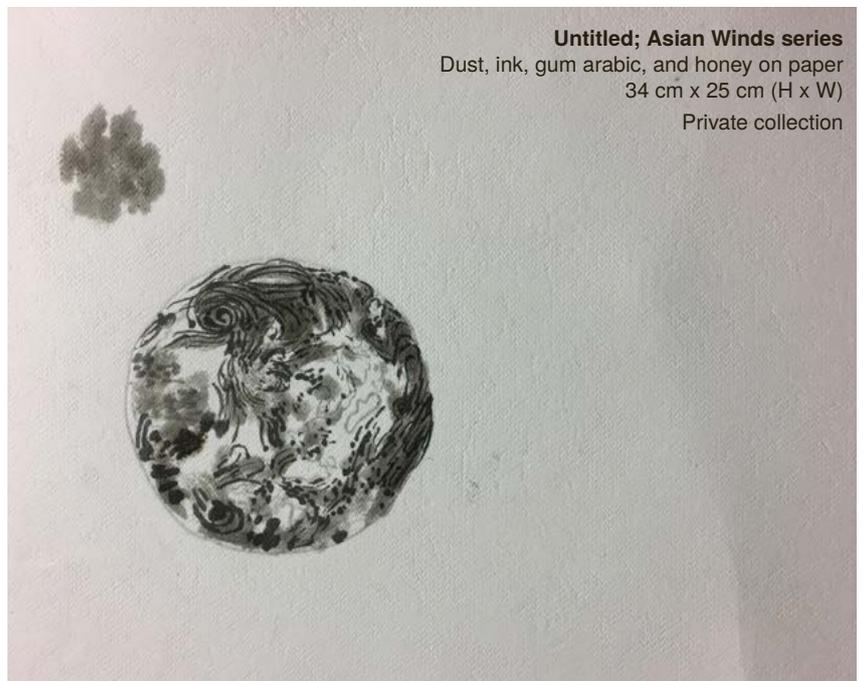


Untitled; Asian Winds series

Dust, ink, gum arabic, and honey on paper

34 cm x 25 cm (H x W)

Private collection



From Dust to Dust: Anthropocene Art Adventures in Asia

Michelle Zacharias (Saitama)

Writers are always advised to write about what they know and the same thing applies to artists and their art as well. What, in my everyday life, is unique to me and how could I express that in visual form? The flowers in my garden? The Tokyo art world dismissed them as simply “pretty.” I needed something more conceptual, unique, and more representative of myself. Being an outsider? Maybe. My allergies? Bingo!

Having lived and worked in southern Japan in the shadow of a huge chemical factory that looks like a science fiction metropolis, I've been regularly exposed for many years to aeolian dust—or, yellow dust—which comes from the semi-arid areas of the Asian continent, such as the Gobi Desert in China, as well as toxins from the factories in the area.

As a prairie girl, I developed sensitivities to the smog and other types of pollution that surfaced annually and had reactions that were similar to allergies but are actually common reactions to smog or fine particulate matter (called PM 2.5 in Asia). The Kyushu area has more yellow dust than PM 2.5 and the Kanto area has more PM 2.5 than yellow dust, but both areas have yellow dust and PM 2.5. I have become an expert on the different reactions triggered by each of those two types of dust and rarely need to look at the details of the air quality index (AQI) anymore. So, why not use my art to talk about air pollution?

I started drawing the flow of air across China—the spring

winds which carry yellow dust from the Gobi Desert as well as other pollutants, blowing across the entire Asian continent. I felt like I had to push it further and tried painting portraits on masks, but that felt too gimmicky. At the same time, I tried self-portraits dirtied by the suggestion of air pollution by using layers of plastic. I was trying to use coloured pencil since I had developed a reputation for using that medium in unusual ways, but I felt I had to stress the conceptual aspect even more.

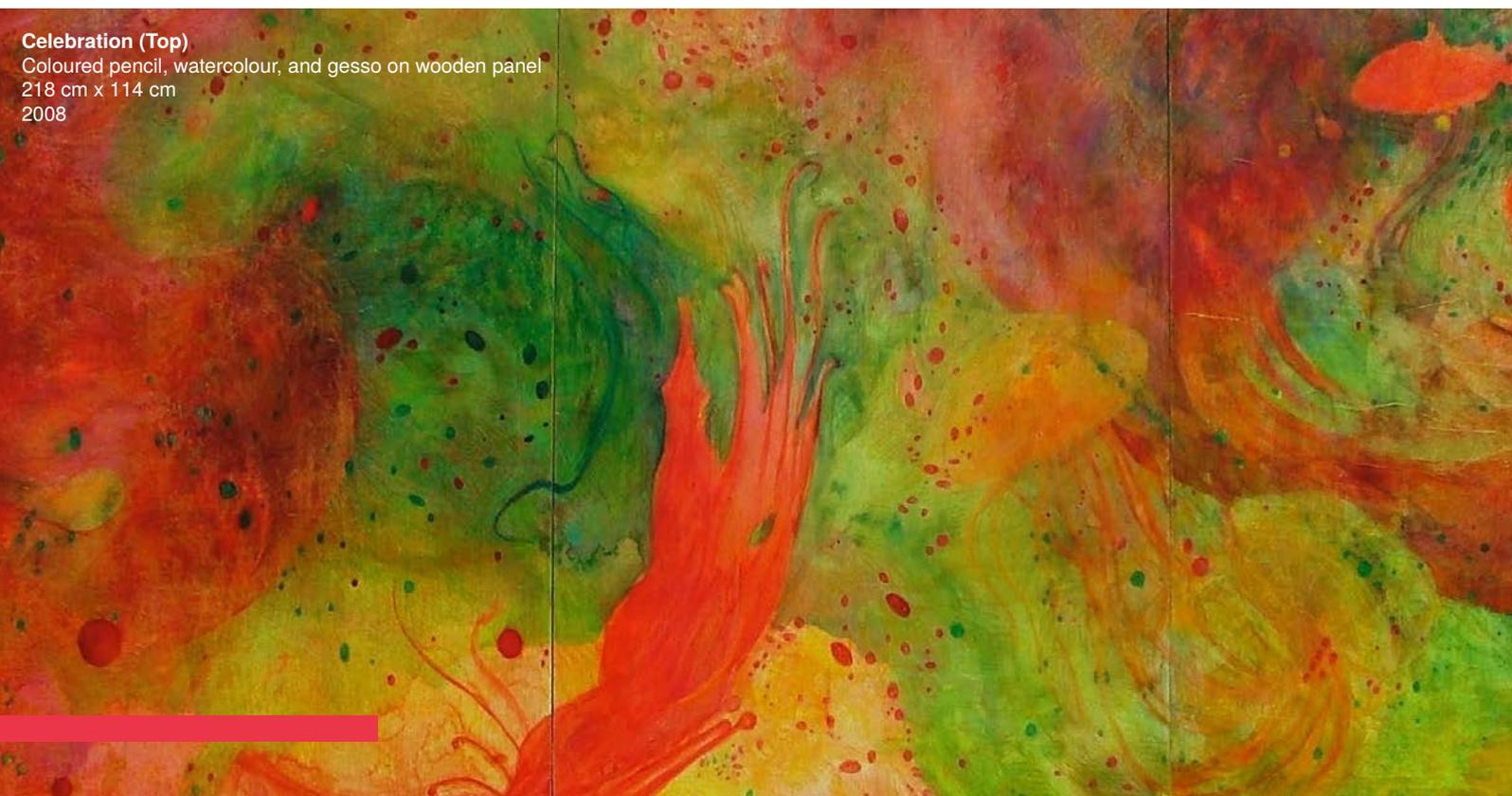
Then I got the idea to make paint from the dust in the air. Yes, that's right. D-U-S-T. I even asked the staff at Pigment, an incubator for artists in Tokyo where I had been taking occasional classes if they thought it might work. [Pigment](#) focuses on traditional Japanese materials, such as specially crafted, lacquered-handled brushes, to help preserve artistic traditions and introduce them to artists. One of their regularly held classes teaches how to make paint from the powdered pigments made from crushed stones, clay, or minerals, that line their [walls](#).

Pigment's staff agreed, albeit a bit reluctantly, that my idea should work in theory. They even emptied the Roomba vacuum cleaners and gave me their dust! They also suggested using a glass muller to crush the particles for a smoother paint.

To prepare the dust, I filter out bugs, cat hair, leftover popcorn, and other bits from the vacuum. More than 80% of the household dust blows in from the outside. Japan is

Celebration (Top)

Coloured pencil, watercolour, and gesso on wooden panel
218 cm x 114 cm
2008



semi-tropical with bugs everywhere, so I zap the dust in the microwave to kill any mites.

Most of my collected dust comes from the outside, so the contents and the colour are affected by external factors such as traffic, soil conditions, proximity to industry, as well as climatic conditions that cross international borders. Dust obtained from the half of my apartment in Saitama that faces train lines and busy roads contains more tiny black particles and is darker than the dust obtained from the other half that faces a large cherry tree on a sandy lot. Dust from the Big Island of Hawaii is very black, and discussions were held about whether or not the goddess of Pele would curse me for taking it off the island or not.

After starting to use dust in my work, I've found reactions to be very interesting. Tokyo loves the concept and has embraced the project; Kyoto prefers the beauty and detailed nature of my coloured pencil work. An elderly artist friend who was the last to join the Gutai art movement* in Kansai wishes she had thought of it first. After approaching Cafe 104.5 in Chiyoda, which is run by Blue Note Japan, their curator championed my work

and displayed it at the cafe and at Bigakko, an alternative art school in Tokyo. He likes an underdog and, as a non-Japanese woman artist over 25 years old, I tick all those boxes. These dust paintings also fit with the current trend of Anthropocene art: art which shows the effects of humans on the environment.

Cafe 104.5 usually has one feature artist who fills the room and the stage with bright colour, and another artist with one small piece usually near the register. The curator was on board from the start and collected dust from Ochanomizu, so the paintings would be specific to the site and show what kind of particles float in the air in and around the restaurant.

At first, the manager was opposed to the whole idea, especially the curator's idea of including samples of the dust, because people think dust is dirty and unhygienic despite the fact that we breathe it in, touch it, and are covered in it all day. In the end, it was decided not to display the sealed vials of dust at the cafe but at Bigakko instead—and reword the descriptions to say “natural pigments”, not “dust”.

Tangled Windy Webs

Colored pencil, watercolor, and gesso on wooden panel
80 x 100 cm
2018





The painting on the right shows wind currents in Japan, and the one on the left shows winds in the Eastern hemisphere despite the dust used being locally sourced. Why? Because the aeolian dust from China has long been regarded as only seasonal in Japan, but recently has affected neighbouring countries such as Korea and Japan year-round. Flights have been cancelled, paint stripped off of vehicles and an increasing amount of people are suffering from respiratory problems. The dust is no longer limited to only spring, as many Japanese people would believe, but now blows all year. My personal theory is that the dust from the Gobi Desert was pure sand hundreds of years ago, but it now picks up pollutants from the increasing number of factories and in turn is affecting people's health. If you look for smog-related health problems, the symptoms will often include headaches, coughing, asthmatic attacks, fatigue, runny noses, and others.

For my next project after resolving some health concerns (that may or may not be related to Pele), I intend to make portraits of people using paint made from their own dust; and to suggest that air pollution goes across national borders, the people should wear surgical masks in the portraits to make them both more anonymous and more universal.

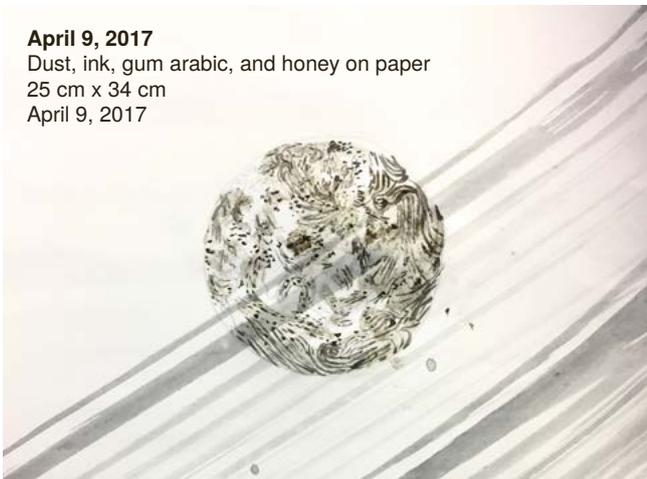


Through these paintings, I would like to show that air pollution affects anyone and everyone. I also want to say that you can make beautiful art from materials perceived as dirty and distasteful—in fact, aside from the filtering of the dust, all of the materials I have used are eco-friendly and not harmful to people's health, unlike many other mediums.

But above all, I want to start a dialogue amongst people, especially in Asia, about the problems of air pollution. Economic development in China has increased dust content in the air, affecting the health of people in China, Korea, and Kyushu. Yet, medical professionals did not and still do not seem to recognise the correlation. My own dust sensitivities are being treated as having an unknown cause.

It has taken me a while to figure out a way to convey my message in an engaging manner, but I think I have finally found the solution. Awareness on all counts can start with discussion—and I want to offer the opportunity to participate in this discussion to as many people as possible.

April 9, 2017
Dust, ink, gum arabic, and honey on paper
25 cm x 34 cm
April 9, 2017



Desert Blossoms

Dust, ink, gum arabic, and honey on paper
27.3 cm x 22 cm
2019

If you want to be involved in my dust portrait project, all you have to do is get in touch with me at misheru32@gmail.com, send me a Ziploc bag of your dust, and a photograph of you wearing a mask.

I would like to hold the exhibition of both the dust paintings and my coloured pencil drawings in a gallery, hopefully with a corporate sponsor. If anyone working at Duskin or Sharp's air purifier department is interested, please contact me.

**Gutai was a radical, post-war artistic group initially based in Kansai that inspired several later generations of Japanese artists. Originality was important and performative immediacy was valued more than traditional styles. Gutai ended in 1972 with the death of their leader Jiro Yoshihiro. For more information visit [The Art Story](#).*

Born in Canada, worked in Yamaguchi as an ALT from 1992-1995, and currently based in Saitama and Kitakyushu as a visual artist, Michelle Zacharias always seems to be on the outside looking in. As a Canadian in Japan, is she now a Canadian artist or a Japanese artist? Although this is the 21st century in a digital world, she works primarily in etching, coloured pencil, ink, and dust. Too conservative for the arts and too artsy for the conservatives; too analog for the digital age and too abstract or organic for those doing photographic copies. Do labels like these work in an international or Internet context?

Artist website (English): [Viewed From the Outside](#)
Additional info (English and Japanese): [TANA Gallery Bookshelf](#)



Sandstorm

Dust, ink, gum arabic, and honey on paper
27.3 cm x 22 cm
2019

Dust to Dust

The Art of *Sui*

Jessica Craven (Saitama)



Painting by Jessica Craven

Japanese ink painting is experiencing a boom of popularity in the West—many artists are looking to expand their materials and methods—and right now there is a particular interest in Asian art. Nevertheless, in Japan it seems surprisingly to be a somewhat overlooked art form. Perhaps this is because the younger generation of Japanese people have less interest in it. Despite this, ink painting, or *suiboku-ga*, is an art form with an incredible expressive power and profound history, and it is sure to reach a peak of popularity in Japan again later down the road. Quite a few foreign artists like myself are studying *suiboku-ga* in Japan, so I hope I can pass on some of my experiences and knowledge of this art form to you all.

First, I'll run through a brief history of *suiboku-ga* (also known as *sumi-e*). It is a type of ink painting that was first developed in China during the Sung Dynasty (960-1274), and brought to Japan by Zen Buddhist monks in the mid-14th century. Over time, the styles of painting between Japan and China



Painting by Jessica Craven

became distinct, with Japanese art generally having softer lines and forms. A distinguishing feature of *suiboku-ga* is its limited color palette. Paintings are often monochromatic, or only one or two colors are used in addition to black.

For me personally, I began studying the *suiboku-ga* technique after meeting my teacher, Abe Michiko, largely by chance. A couple of years ago, one of my friends invited my parents, who were visiting from the U.S., and I to participate in a tea ceremony at Ms. Abe's house. It quickly became apparent that Ms. Abe was an extremely active and multi-talented woman, despite admitting to being over 80 years old. Incredibly, she taught herself traditional Japanese ink painting techniques when she was in her 60s, and has exhibited and sold her work worldwide. She has had solo art exhibitions in Taiwan and several galleries in Tokyo. She regularly teaches students *suiboku-ga* painting at her home in Saitama Prefecture, and has other students of tea ceremony and contemporary kimono design.

Upon seeing her work, I immediately decided I wanted to study with her, but I was worried she wouldn't be willing to take on a foreign student. Those worries turned out to be unwarranted, as I speak a reasonable amount of Japanese. Now, I have been studying with Ms. Abe for about two years. For the first few months, it was very challenging. When working with ink, every brushstroke is permanent. Extreme focus is necessary in order to avoid mistakes. As a result, it is a very slow and meditative process, even a small flower painting takes about two hours to make. Much

suiboku-ga

Painting by Abe Michiko



like yoga, it cultivates mindfulness and forces you to be active in the present moment. A single brush can make a large variety of different shapes and lines, but you have to always be aware of your process. That way, you can adjust the position of the brush and the amount of water mixed with the ink for every stroke.

Practicing in Ms. Abe's home, I can see her admiration for Western art as well. Copies of many Western modern and contemporary artists' works hang on her walls alongside her ink paintings. This isn't the first time that such admiration has existed between Eastern and Western artists. Western artists, such as the abstract painter Franz Kline and the later generation of Minimalist artists, also drew much inspiration from Japanese calligraphy and ink painting. It will be interesting to see what this global exchange of art and ideas leads to next!

If you would like to try suiboku-ga painting for yourself, it's pretty cheap to start out. You can practice with calligraphy (*shodo*) paper and black ink that you can find at any 100 yen store. The only other things you need are a black mat to place the paper on, and metal weight to hold the paper down, and two shodo brushes (one small and one medium size). These can also be found at most 100 yen stores, or in the calligraphy section of many stationary or department stores. There are also specialty suiboku-ga papers and colored inks that you can use. Tokyu Hands has a selection, and a wide variety can be found at art speciality shops, such as Sekaido in Tokyo or on their [online store](#). These are a bit more expensive, but you can use them for a long time. If you have any questions about ink painting, or just want to chat about art in general, feel free to contact me through my Instagram page!

Jessica is an American third-year ALT in Kasukabe City, Saitama, where she teaches at two high schools. She is a graduate of painting and Japanese language. Her other hobbies include traveling, ceramics, and video games. She has recently taken part in several group exhibitions in Tokyo, including TJET artists' "Transitions" exhibition and Agnes B Gallery's "Got it for Cheap" Exhibition. You can see more of her art on her Instagram page at [jessica craven art](#).



LIFESTYLE

A dog, possibly a Weimaraner, is dressed in a black soccer jersey with a white camera icon on the chest. The dog has a microphone on its head, which is part of a costume that also includes a white fringed collar. The dog is sitting on a paved surface, and the background is slightly blurred, showing people in white clothing.

WELLNESS EDITOR

connect.health@ajet.net

Caroline Allen

SPORTS EDITOR

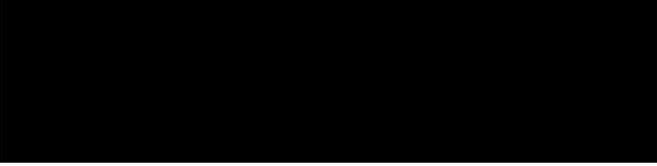
connect.sports@ajet.net

Rashaad Jordan

"Football is a simple game. Twenty-two men chase a ball for 90 minutes and at the end, the Germans always win."—Gary Lineker

Photo: Charlotte Coetzee





JAPANESE GYMS: WEIGHING UP YOUR OPTIONS

Allan Freedman (Osaka)

I love lifting weights. I love the feeling of being strong and never needing to worry if I will be physically fit enough to carry out a task on my own. For me, going to the gym in Japan wasn't an optional activity, it was a matter of how to do it.

Whether you went to a gym back home and want to maintain your fitness, or you are considering joining one for the first time, I want to give you a good summary about what to expect from the average Japanese gym.

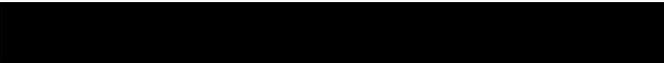


Photo: Samuel Girven on Unsplash.com



WHAT'S GREAT?

Firstly, there are some distinct pros when it comes to going to the gym in Japan when compared to most gyms I have visited in other countries.

2 | *Equipment is maintained to a high standard.*

Like in most Japanese businesses, customer service is considered very important. As a result, the equipment is maintained well, and anything broken is fixed quickly. Remember those times back home when equipment was missing for weeks or months? Not an issue here.

1 | *Gyms are almost always kept exceptionally clean by the staff, other gym-goers, or both.*

Usually, machines, weights and the surrounding areas are cleaned daily by the staff. Of course, this varies from gym to gym, but a general high level of cleanliness is kept and you'll rarely see any dirt gathering in the gym or on the equipment. At one gym in Kyoto, each weight plate and bar were cleaned and oiled on a weekly basis.

This standard of cleanliness also applies to the typical gym-goer's behaviour. While there is the odd selfish person who doesn't clean up after themselves, I have very rarely seen someone not put weights back and wipe down the equipment they were using. This is, in part, assisted by the towels and cleaning sprays abundantly provided, often with a towel for each individual machine.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

With that said, there are some things that will be different from home and may take some getting used to.

1 | *Tattoos are not allowed in the gym. At all.*

Yes, you may have heard of someone visiting a gym in Japan and not having a problem. I got away with it once when travelling here. Sometimes, staff might not notice a tattoo. Sometimes, they are new to the job and don't want to confront a customer.

If they notice and say something, at best you will be asked to cover it. They might even give you sports tape to do so. At worst, you will be asked to leave and they will note your name so you can't come back. Trust me, just cover tattoos up—it isn't worth the drama and there's plenty of stylish gym gear out there to cover tattoos.

3 | *What is considered standard equipment is different.*

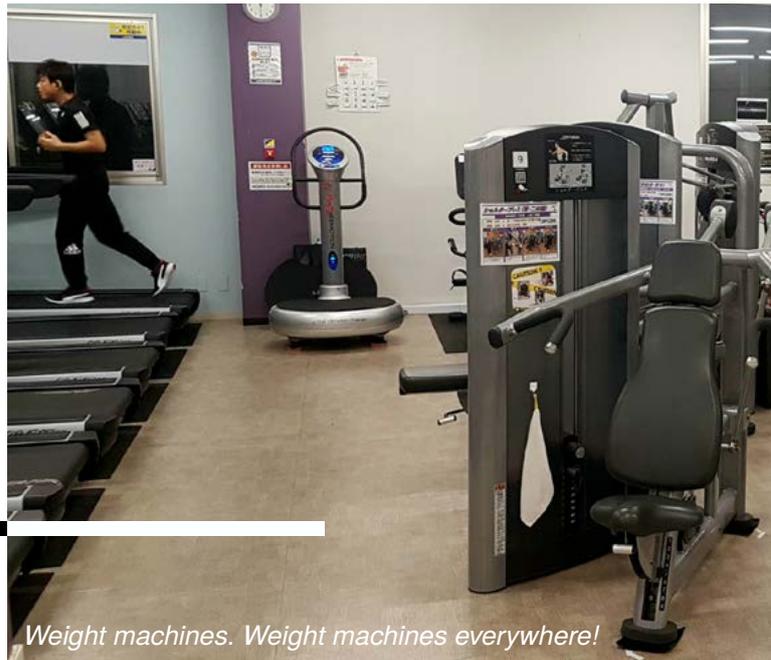
In general, nowadays most chain gyms in Australia will try to be all-round gyms, catering to most gym-goers' needs. My gym back home had cardio machines; all the usual weight machines; dumbbells up to 45 kilograms and sometimes even 70 kilograms; some powerlifting bumper plates; multiple barbel racks; a weight sled and track; and a boxing bag with gloves. Outside of Gold's gym, Japan is not generally like this. You'll need to go to a boxing gym, powerlifting gym or CrossFit gym if you want to use this kind of equipment.

2 | *Gym membership costs more in Japan.*

In Australia, my gym costs around AUD\$60 per month. In Japan, the same gym charges around 7,000-9,000 yen, which is around AUD\$100-130. There are discount rates for students.

Some gyms will also provide different membership price options based on peak and non-peak hours, or how many visits a week. That's useful if you have a very structured schedule and it can be a good way to save money. Personally, I prefer to have the flexibility of my 24-hour gym with no restrictions on the time and frequency of my visits.

Either way, be honest with yourself about what will work for you and keep in mind that gyms may not let you change your membership once you sign a contract.



Weight machines. Weight machines everywhere!

WHAT TO EXPECT

Imagine the average Japanese chain gym split into five parts. Two parts will be cardio machines like treadmills and exercise bikes, two parts will be weights machines. One part will be free weights.

There will likely be:

- 1-2 squat/bench-press racks
- 1 smith machine (the squat rack on rails)
- 1-2 extra benches
- dumbbells up to 30 kilograms or 40 kilograms
- around 250 kilograms of weight plates for the whole gym (this seems a lot but isn't if a few people are working out).



Some chain gyms will include things like fixed weight barbells, dumbbells with adjustable weight, or alternative hand grips for a lat pull-down cable machine, but these are rare variations. Many bigger local gyms will include classes, which can include things like yoga, aerobics, boxercise, and even dance.

FOR NEWCOMERS

If you just want to keep a general level of fitness, health or appearance, and you are new to the gym, the weights machines and basic free weights will be enough to do the most important exercises—weighted squats, bench press, pull-ups and deadlifts.

If you are unsure where to start, definitely hire a reputable personal trainer, research online workout plans, ask a friend who exercises, or ask an international residents social media group. While the staff will be able to show you the facilities, often they are part-time workers who are not personal trainers. I have seen many staff giving questionable advice to customers.



ADAPTING TO JAPANESE GYMS

For more advanced gym-goers, this is a good opportunity to practice one of the most important skills to have in life—the willingness to adapt to one’s situation and make the most of it. I’ll explain using a couple of examples of my own.

Sometimes the exercise needs to be replaced with something similar. Unfortunately, the maximum dumbbell weight in my gym is 30 kilograms, so I can’t do single-arm training. While I prefer the challenge of single-arm training, the bent-over barbell row also trains the same major muscle group and can be loaded more heavily with the equipment available. The bent-over dumbbell row is one of my favourite back exercises. Alternatively, I do the exercise later in my workout when I won’t be lifting at my maximum strength.

Similarly, sometimes no specific equipment is available at all. There don’t seem to be calf raise machines in any of the Japanese gyms I have visited. If social media memes and firefighting have taught me one thing, it’s that strong legs are a must. I have found calf machines more effective than other methods of training them. As a makeshift calf raise machine, I rest the smith machine bar on my shoulders, load up the weight, and use any step or weight plates in the gym to create a step.

If you absolutely need specialist equipment for a sport, or you have a strong preference for particular equipment, it’s better to search for a business that caters to that niche market. This is likely to be more expensive than a typical gym and it might not be near where you live. However, they do exist, so do a quick google search for whatever you’re looking for.

In conclusion, whatever your fitness needs or level, I definitely recommend you start or continue your fitness journey in Japan. Deciding to start seriously working out and looking after my health was the best decision I ever made. In Japan the facilities are clean, comfortable and convenient, making it a great place to do so. **がんばってください!**



70kg bent over barbell row



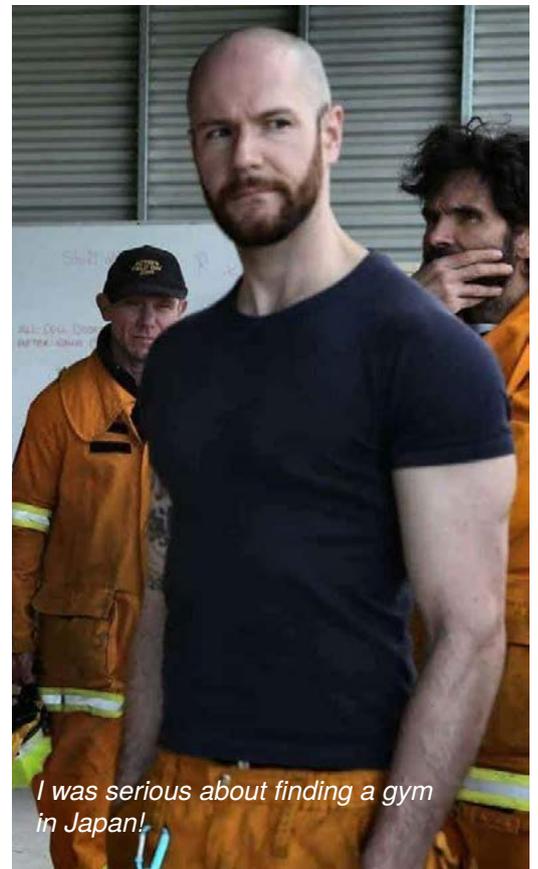
30kg bent over dumbbell row



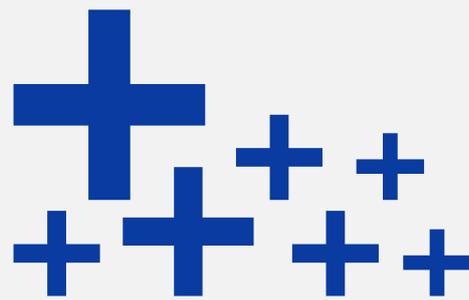
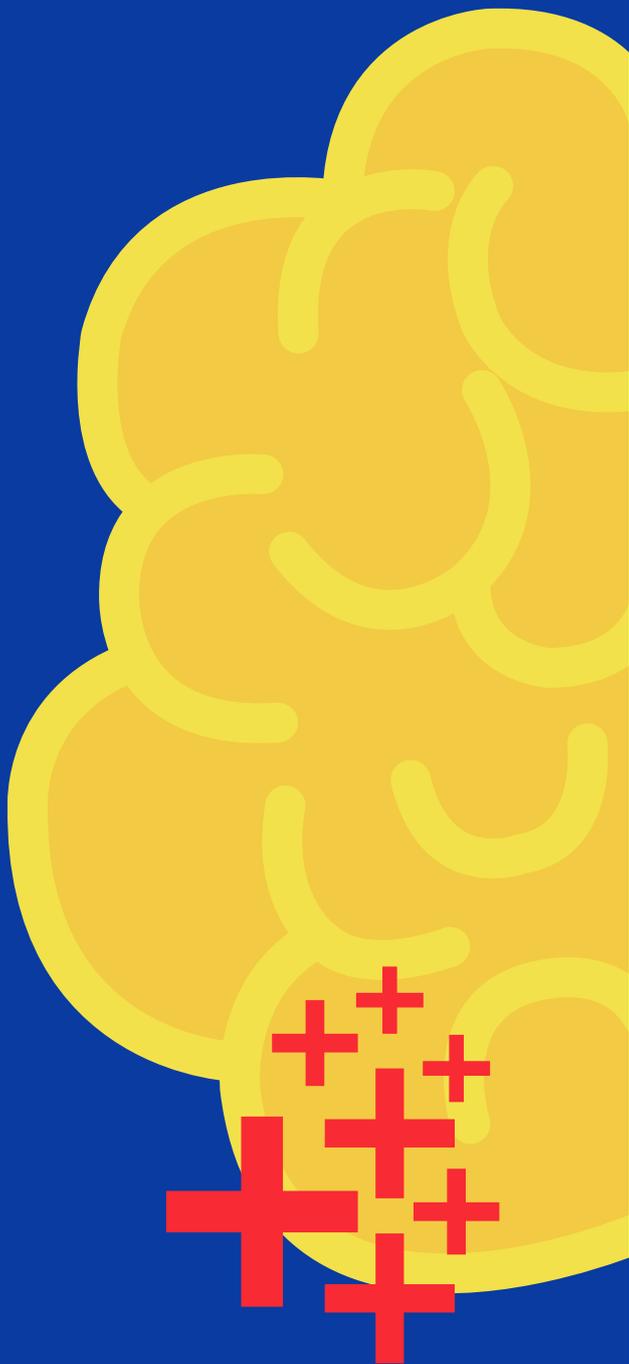
All Photos: Allan Freedman

Allan is an Australian working as an English teacher. He is currently living in Osaka after living in Kyoto for a year. Allan came to Japan on a temporary working holiday to broaden his life experience and enjoyed living here so much that he stayed.

Before coming to Japan, Allan was a member of the Australian Rural Fire Service for 5.5 years. He started lifting weights in 2011 with the goal of transforming into Hugh Jackman. Following a moderate degree of success, he took up Tae Kwon Do in 2014 and fought competitively. After an injury that prevented him from fighting again, his focus is now on health, wellness and joining the Avengers.



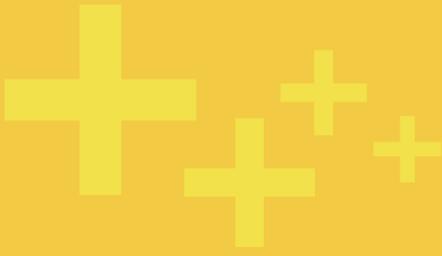
I was serious about finding a gym in Japan!



A GUIDE TO COUNSELLING IN JAPAN FOR FOREIGN RESIDENTS

*How to Talk
Yourself Well*

Caroline Allen (Tottori Prefecture)



Why therapy?

You don't have to hit rock bottom to consider talking to somebody. In fact, consider this article permission to talk to a professional without reasoning to yourself that "other people have it worse" or "it's self-indulgent." I'm a firm believer that everyone can benefit from therapy: it can teach you all-important coping skills, clarify unhelpful thinking patterns and help to put messy problems into perspective. So, if you've decided that therapy is something you're interested in, read on to learn more.



A reason why you might consider therapy.

Living in Japan as a foreigner can throw up all kinds of issues related to culture shock. The thing is, people don't generally despair because they have "culture shock." Sometimes pre-orientation presentations suggest that the "shock" largely consists of remarking "Wow! I can't believe this place is so different! I can't believe it's not more like home." Maybe that is how culture shock manifests for some people.

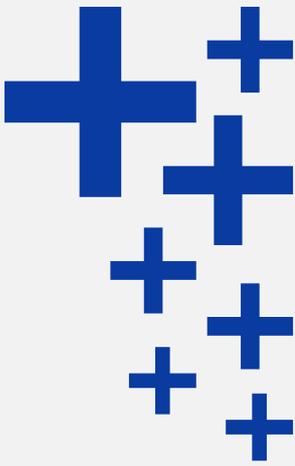
I'm talking from personal experience here, so take a proverbial heap of salt with this anecdote, but I think the shock can be both more subtle and pervasive than that. Many foreigners who move to Japan have a well-defined idea of who they are as individuals. This identity is usually informed by Western ideas of a well-educated young adult, who has an interest in foreign travel and cultures and specific (commonly progressive) worldviews. Coming to Japan and then having that entire identity reframed can be shocking.

Suddenly, the markers you use to identify yourself aren't recognisable to others around you. Many of us arrive here effectively illiterate, deaf and dumb in the language of our adopted country, to the extent that we can't communicate as adults. Many of our values—those related to what it means to

accept and celebrate difference and diversity, the roles of men and women, what is truly important to cherish—can be directly at odds with the society in which we find ourselves.

When you can't communicate effectively as an adult, it thrusts you back to a stage of childhood. You have to rely on other people for information and advice. You start to feel like a child and for some people, especially those who are susceptible, this brings up a lot of anxiety and self-doubt. The loneliness of our adopted country doesn't help. Often, you can't connect to the other foreigners as well as you thought you might.

There is a certain stage of the year, when the honeymoon phase of crazy parties and new discoveries fades and complaining about Japanese culture becomes what bonds people. You read yet another "Hard to Swallow" meme, implying that you're wasting your time here in Japan, and your Japanese is probably terrible too. You read yet another passive-aggressive comment aimed at a fellow ALT; "What, you mean you don't do (insert whatever great teaching activity that person does) . . . ?" It's easy to feel demoralised and adrift.



Where to go?

Unless you live in a larger city, English language, foreigner-friendly clinics are hard to come by. Your options may be limited, depending on your Japanese language aptitude. Also, it's worth considering cultural differences in how mental health is seen and treated; you may prefer to see someone used to dealing with foreigners.

Who provides talking therapy?

If you're a JET, you probably know that CLAIR does. However, many people I've spoken to are completely opposed to using the CLAIR counselling service. I think that's a shame. It's not the greatest, tailor-made psychotherapy in the world, no, but it's free, easily available and the people on the other end know the kind of problems you're likely to experience. If you'd rather not, fine, but you won't get free therapy often in life. There's a lot to be said for availing of it, for the time being, then turning to something a bit more tailored later on.

Essentially—bluntly—I had a crisis of identity and a bit of a nervous breakdown, to use a non-medical term. Everything I thought about myself as a young woman was called into question. I was reacting to things that were echoes of previous events in my childhood and, in this brave, new world of rural Japan, were being played out with higher stakes. It was in that moment I decided I needed to do something, but was sure to proceed with caution.

Unscrupulous providers.

AJET can't afford to be sued so, on that front, I can't name names but a quick Google search will confirm that there are providers of psychotherapy and mental healthcare, working in this country, who are less than legitimate. They target vulnerable foreigners who have fewer resources and choices. Even one encounter with an unscrupulous provider can be harmful, so it's important to choose your therapist wisely.



Who provides therapy?

In the popular imagination, people pour their hearts out to only either psychologists or psychiatrists. In reality, the majority are probably talking to a clinical social worker or a licensed counsellor.

Psychologists are trained up to doctorate level in psychology and they usually specialise in one particular style of therapy. They're highly trained and can give very specialised treatment.

Psychiatrists are trained medical doctors who specialize in disorders of the mind. They can diagnose conditions (though more common conditions like depression and anxiety are usually diagnosed by family doctors) and prescribe medication. They sometimes offer talking therapy, but often, they deal with mental health conditions in a more clinical way and don't offer talking therapy whatsoever.

People who work as counsellors should have a qualification in marriage counselling or something similar, whereas others are licensed clinical social workers.

For ALTs working for the JET program, you should contact your supervisor who can give you the appropriate login details to access counselling. CLAIR offers the JET Programme Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme : a 50% subsidy (up to 30,000 yen a year) for consultations with a mental health professional in Japan. This is only available for use in Japan, meaning your options are more limited. They also offer free Skype counselling sessions (up to seven per year) as well as a limitless number of text sessions. These can be helpful for a quick check-in or for less serious issues.

If you're not interested in CLAIR's counselling service, the first place to look for a mental health professional is the [International Mental Health Professionals Japan \(IMHP\) website](#). This site offers a comprehensive directory of everyone providing talking therapy in Japan, where they are, what languages they can offer therapy in and how much they charge.

Another place to look for counselling is [TELL](#). TELL is best known for their free helpline, where trained volunteers can talk to you in a supportive and non-directive way, but they also have a counselling service which is charged according to a sliding scale. They have offices in Tokyo, Yokohama, Okinawa and Kyoto but they also offer therapy online. They're caring and committed to helping those in need.

Personally, I've used the CLAIR service and found it to be helpful. I moved on after the free sessions because I wanted something more tailored to my needs. Where did I find such therapy? Online. The best known e-therapy website is [Better Help](#) (though it has become somewhat controversial lately). I didn't have an amazing experience with Better Help, so when I was looking for therapy the second time around, I chose a British start-up company called [My Online Therapy](#), which is linked to the Chelsea Psychology Clinic.

I can't express how much I love this site. It's fairly priced and comprehensive: you can look through a list of different clinical psychologists and psychiatrists with different specialities. You tell them when you're available and what your problems are and then they give you a list of specialists who are well suited to you. They charge for either a 30-minute or 50-minute session and you can book in advance.



Choosing a type of therapy.

There are many different types of therapy available. The most recognisable type for many of us is CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), popular because it is time-limited, practical and can be used to treat a number of different conditions. That means, in effect, it's the most talked-about and championed. Personally—and remember that sea-load of salt I mentioned earlier—I found CBT a bit “paint by numbers”. Yadda, yadda this thought is unhelpful, so think this instead . . . If it works for you, fantastic.

It's worth noting that there are many, many different types of therapy out there. If CBT doesn't work, you could consider DBT (Dialectical Behavioural Therapy), ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), CAT (Cognitive Analytic Therapy) among others. Some types can be done through a self-help book or online course, while others are better worked through with the help of a licensed professional.

I found Schema therapy to be the thing that saved my life. It's derived from CBT but it's integrative, meaning it incorporates aspects of psychodynamic therapy (Freudian, “lie back and tell me about your mother” therapy), Gestalt therapy (where you cry and shout at a chair) and good old fashioned CBT. It works well for me, acknowledging that I'm an individual with a past and a story and finding a way to link that story to the problems I'm facing in the present. Also, and this was vital for me, it doesn't present my thoughts or reactions as “broken,” because my mind isn't broken. It's finding a way to keep me (and let's face it, my ego) alive and sometimes it does this in a way that isn't helpful in the present but I need to respect it, and myself, and find ways to honour who I am and who I want to become.



GO FORTH AND TALK YOURSELF BETTER.

I hope this has given you an overview of some of the options out there, but this is just my story. There are many stories out there and many different routes to feeling better and looking after your mental health. Please know that however difficult life might feel at the moment, there are people who can listen and can help lay the groundwork to good mental health, even if it takes a few tries.

READING LIST

+ *Maybe You Should Talk to Somebody*

- Lori Gottlieb

Gottlieb writes for the Atlantic's Dear Therapist column, and in this book, she talks about talking therapy from the perspective of both a therapist and a patient. It's moving, informative and hugely heartfelt.

+ *Talk Yourself Better*

-Ariane Sherine

This is a great compilation of different interviews with (mostly British) celebrities and psychologists, divided by style of therapy and it gives a good overview of the pros and cons of different methods and a basic idea of what to expect with each style.

+ *Mad Girl*

- Bryony Gordon

Gordon is a journalist and mental health advocate, who writes honestly about her experience of living with OCD and using CBT to combat it. This is just her experience but it can be useful to humanise a condition by reading someone else's account of it.

PODCASTS

+ *Where Should We Begin?*

with Esther Perel

Perel is the queen of couple's therapy and intimacy. It helps that she has a very sexy voice and a way of wrapping up a point in a slinky metaphor.

+ *Other People's Problem*

A pretty general counselling podcast but this one is a little different because all the people featured on it are regular, ongoing clients rather than one-off volunteers.

+ *How Did We Get Here?*

Recordings of sessions led by Tanya Byron and hosted by Claudia Winkleman. This is a great one: ostensibly it's about family problems, but, like all good therapy, it ends up being about so much more. Byron also has a great tone throughout; reassuring and comforting but not smarmy or condescending.

+ *Motherhood Sessions*

Sounds niche but ends up being entirely relatable, especially for young women.

Resources:

- (1) <https://www.imhpij.org/>
- (2) <https://telljp.com/counseling/>

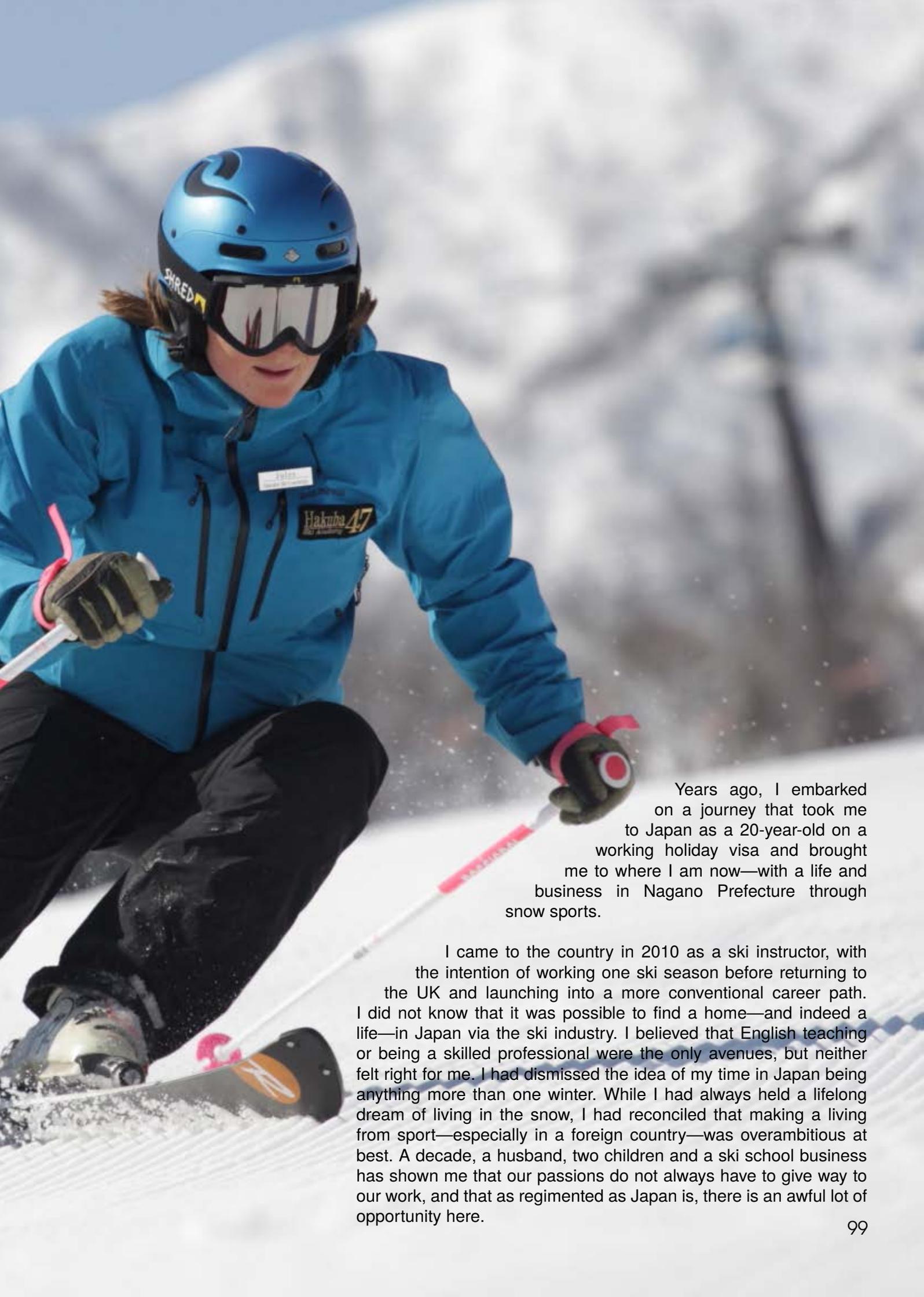
Caroline is a second-year JET from Ireland, living in Tottori prefecture. She enjoys learning about Japanese culture, getting lost in a good book, exploring new foods and contributing to **CONNECT** magazine. She can be seen wearing a colourful yukata and saying something about wellness.



My Office in the Kita-Alps

***Finding An
Alternative Path to a
Life in Japan***

Nadine Robb (Nagano)

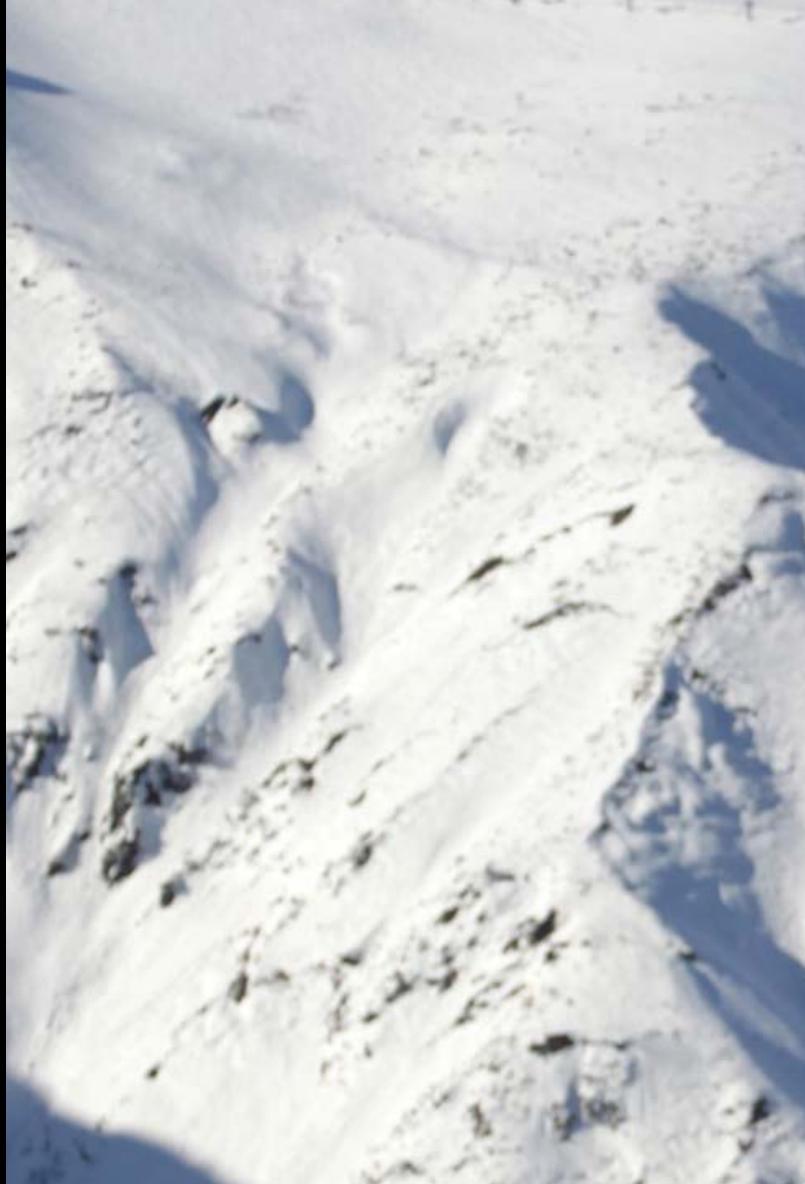


Years ago, I embarked on a journey that took me to Japan as a 20-year-old on a working holiday visa and brought me to where I am now—with a life and business in Nagano Prefecture through snow sports.

I came to the country in 2010 as a ski instructor, with the intention of working one ski season before returning to the UK and launching into a more conventional career path. I did not know that it was possible to find a home—and indeed a life—in Japan via the ski industry. I believed that English teaching or being a skilled professional were the only avenues, but neither felt right for me. I had dismissed the idea of my time in Japan being anything more than one winter. While I had always held a lifelong dream of living in the snow, I had reconciled that making a living from sport—especially in a foreign country—was overambitious at best. A decade, a husband, two children and a ski school business has shown me that our passions do not always have to give way to our work, and that as regimented as Japan is, there is an awful lot of opportunity here.

My attraction to Japan—and specifically Hakuba—stemmed from the whispers of bottomless powder snow and an abundance of ski resorts that permeated every ski school locker room around the world. It was not long before curiosity got the better of me, and like many others, I decided to see for myself. Having worked as a ski instructor in Canada, Austria, and the UK, securing employment as an instructor in one of Hakuba's ski schools made sense. The rumours of lots of snow were founded, and for such a foreign country, I strangely felt at home.

Following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, that first season ended abruptly, and left a lingering sense of unfinished business and sadness for Japan. When the opportunity arose to return to instruct again the following winter and to work as an outdoor guide in the summer, it was too appealing to turn down. Living in rural Japan year-round with my (now) Canadian husband was freeing, fun and abundant in sporting opportunities. As with anywhere in the world, there were significant cultural barriers that I have still not fully grasped—and likely never will—but in a mountain town such as Hakuba, a mutual love and respect of immersion in the mountains seemed to transcend many of these barriers. I did my best to fit in where I could, didn't take it personally where I could not, and began to build a life with skiing and outdoor recreation at the forefront.



Reaching the Glas

That said, life as a western woman in a male-dominated industry in rural Japan has not always been smooth sailing. Over the course of five years, it felt as though both my gender and age brought challenges in the workplace, and it was a tiring battle to find both my voice and worth in that environment. Fitting into neither the “mother” or “office worker” category, I seemed to be an anomaly and understood that despite all the time I spent trying to fit into the structure of the company, I might not reach my full potential. I realised too that I might have to build my own framework if I wanted to remain in the outdoor tourism industry and make it a serious career. It seemed like a good time to step back, recalibrate and have our first baby.

When I look at the ski industry as a whole, I see a real shortage of veteran instructors—those that have somehow managed to sustain themselves

on their passion, and not give into the external pressures to “grow out of it” or move on to something “proper.” Unfortunately, it has become a stigma that instructing is a gap-year job—and this is reality in more cases than not. If we can promote more career instructors, it is to everyone's advantage as they are the best ambassadors of the sport.

Even less common than career instructors are female career instructors. Already a male-dominated profession with women being outnumbered significantly in most ski schools globally, a rare few stay with the sport and work their way to the top of the instructing levels. Interestingly, most ski holidays and any corresponding lessons are organised and booked by women, and the bulk of participants in those lessons are women and children. So while women largely feed and sustain the ski industry, few actually lead it.



ss Ceiling

With those observations in mind, I wanted to create something that was conducive towards veteran instructors continuing their passion, and at the same time provide the very best experience to visitors of Hakuba by retaining excellent instructors. Aware of the imbalance between men and women, attention to detail would always be duly given throughout the booking process to ensure that the best match was made between guest and instructor, and having a balanced team of men and women would be key in doing this. One contributing factor to the lack of female career instructors is child-raising, so flexibility and autonomy for the instructors is also necessary. As Japan is utterly unique in culture and language, our instructors provide insight and guidance in navigating Japanese culture, whilst intimately knowing every slope, powder stash, onsen and restaurant in order to deliver the best experience.

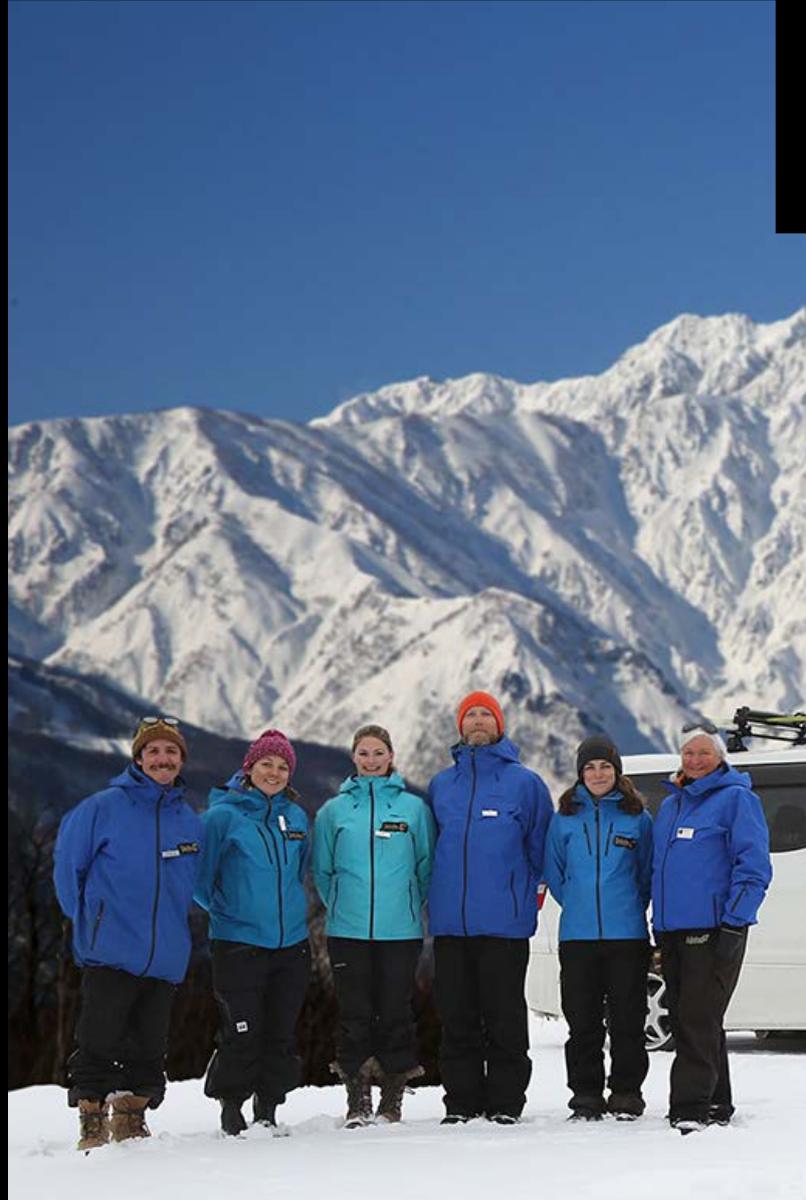


Time to Create

With a vision in sight, I went to work, making connections with the local resorts in a bid to get permission to operate a full service ski school that would focus on the private experience, include complimentary transportation and be fully customised to the guest's needs and preferences. My first choice—Hakuba47 Winter Sports Park—took some time to consider my business proposal before giving me the go-ahead. It was a leap of faith on their part, but I was fortunate I had the backing of a female colleague within their own ski school as well as numerous character references. With a newborn baby, a second on the way and new business, my vision began to take shape.

Navigating business in Japan of course had its hurdles, and lessons were often learnt the hard way. One in particular was acknowledging that I was in Japan and not England, and to stop comparing every system and process to its western equivalent; to love Japan for Japan. Another was to accept that there would be lots about this culture and society that I will never understand, but to be unendingly grateful for the opportunity that this often insular and male-dominated society has given me—a young western female.

Four years later, Hakuba Ski Concierge has gone from one instructor to ten—mostly, local residents with a long history in the valley and extensive experience in the snow sports industry (in addition to half of us being parents ourselves).



Outlook

As a village and resort, Hakuba has seen enormous changes over the last decade, becoming increasingly popular on the global ski map. More North Americans are being drawn by the “Epic Pass,” Scandinavians by the backcountry terrain. Australians view it as an economical ski holiday when compared to resorts Down Under. Most recently, the Chinese market has begun emerging. While people from Thailand,

Malaysia and India do visit, guests from Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China are leading the most recent market surge—and will most likely carry the industry through more challenging times. With the winters being affected by climate change, more of the season is lost to inconsistent conditions and as a result, many Westerners may condense their visits into peak times—when the odds of powder snow are more in their favour.



Acknowledgement and Appreciation

I believe that for many the perception of Japan is that of an insular country, resistant to change and one that unquestionably follows long established rules and norms. While this may have gravity in parts, a decade in Hakuba has proved quite the opposite to be true. A modest mountain community comprised of third-generation ski instructors who turn into rice farmers when the snow melts, cultural norms have been turned upside down and years of routine practises are shifting with the winds of change. In part, I believe it is an adaptation of this region's evolution, but more so I feel it is in recognition of our desire to share a life in these beautiful mountains—and their incredible grace in making space for us to do so.

I hope to see Hakuba Ski Concierge continue to thrive and meet the growing demand for high-end private lessons. I hope too that it will continue to provide stable employment for our instructors and enable them to continue in a profession that they are passionate about.

I did not expect to find my office in the mountains of Hakuba, Japan. Yet in doing so, I have unintentionally stumbled upon my home.

All Photos: Nandine Robb

Nandine Robb is the owner and an instructor at Hakuba Ski Concierge. Originally from the UK (and having spent time in Austria and Canada previously), she has lived in Japan for ten years now. Author of the children's book [Joey's First Ski Lesson](#), Nadine is also a professional ski and snowboard instructor, wilderness first responder, swift water rescue technician and mother of two.

By contrast, for many Chinese visitors, the draw has never been the powder snow, but rather the lure of foreign ski culture. While most Europeans and North Americans are no strangers to the world of skiing, to the average Singaporean, ski equipment is quite foreign, and therefore a new level of service is needed to assist these guests in navigating this. Snow sports should be accessible to as many people as possible, not just the already athletic. And I suspect over the next few decades, this emerging market will be at the forefront of it.

FINDING RACES IN JAPAN: *It doesn't have to be that difficult*

Faith Suzuki (Tokyo)

Sports in Japan. Three words that no doubt evoke a myriad of feelings and activities. Many of us immediately think of spectator sports—soccer, sumo, baseball, rugby, etc. Others may think of personal and group fitness endeavors, such as everything from yoga and pilates, to boxing, cycling, and CrossFit.

In my work, we mainly think about swimming, cycling, and running. From registration to pre-race inquiries, athlete guides and post-race follow-up, my team and I work to ensure participants and race

directors feel prepared. To do this well, I have to know about sports to best assist people of varying athletic abilities.

Now, they say that the toughest part of the race is the training and preparation beforehand. In Japan, however, sometimes the toughest part is learning about all the races out there, then trying to register for the one that catches your attention. It's like banking or trying to find an apartment in Japan; what used to be so easy "back home" is often complicated by Byzantine processes.

THINGS THAT MAKE IT HARD

Finding a race

Finding a comprehensive race calendar in English is almost impossible. Plenty exist online in Japanese, but those who don't understand Japanese often rely on word-of-mouth recommendations and friendly suggestions to piece together their race calendar.

Registering and communicating with event staff

Few races offer registration and communication in English. The inability to decipher a trail race course map, read a triathlon athlete guide, or understand the directions of a cycling traffic safety volunteer could quite literally mean the difference between life or death.

Logistics can be difficult

Depending on the race, the start area, nearby lodging, and even the finish line (for point-to-point races) may not be easily accessible, especially by public transportation. For instance, the Gokayama Doshu Trail (deep in rural Toyama Prefecture) has four distances, two athlete check-in locations, two start locations, and just one finish location—45 km from the start.

Early closures

Compared to many races overseas, the deadline to enter races is well before they actually start. For instance, the [Miyakojima Strongman Triathlon](#) requires applications by the end of November for a race in mid-April. The [Nagoya Women's Marathon](#) is held in early March, but registration starts and ends in August.

Frequent technical difficulties

A lot of websites (especially [Lawson Do! Sports](#)) can be glitchy, making registration a time-consuming process.

Wherever your endurance muscles lie, once the “hard part” is over, everything else might seem like a piece of cake. A phrase I like to throw around is “Go for the race, stay for the weekend (or longer).” Practical constraints aside, find time for domestic “destination races,” like the [Ishigaki Triathlon](#) or the [Niseko Classic](#). Go as hard or easy as you'd like, but also, make the most of your getaway and explore! Do that peak-Japan experience. Eat that extra snack before dinner. Be spontaneous.

THINGS THAT MAKE RACES WORTH IT

Exploring Japan

Races often take you to lesser-explored parts of Japan. Were it not for the [Oise-san Marathon](#) and [Ise Shima Satoumi Triathlon](#), I would never have traveled to Mie Prefecture, visited the “soul of Japan” at Ise Jingu, or celebrated Marine Day with a refreshing dip in some of Honshu’s clearest waters.

The camaraderie

From the volunteers to the race staff, back-of-the-packers to the podium hunters, you feel like you’re all in it together.

Meeting people and interacting with people like yourself

Smile at the start, high five spectators you pass, converse with fellow competitors near the finish line. Connecting with all kinds of people is good for the soul.

The general experience

Whether it’s the pre-race jitters, heavy lead legs, or crossing the finish line with a personal best, each race comes with a unique set of emotions.

Around Japan, from the northern tip of Hokkaido to the southern edges of Okinawa, there is no lack of races and active fitness events. Since coming to Japan almost three years ago, I’ve participated in and/or worked at countless races. A handful were cancelled, some were memorable, and others were abysmal. Then there are those that consistently come up when you talk about races (because they’re just that good). Here’s a shortlist of notable events that I’ve participated in, worked at, or which are on my bucket list:

PROMINENT EVENTS WITH ENGLISH REGISTRATION

Ise Shima Satoumi Triathlon

Ranked the #1 Olympic distance triathlon and #3 triathlon in Japan by the nation's leading triathlon magazine, the Ise Tri sells out annually. As popular as it is beautiful, the race starts in the clear, brilliant blue waters at Oyahama Beach and finishes with a run along gorgeous coastal roads.

Participants starting the swim at Oyahama Beach at the Ise Shima Satoumi Triathlon.



Photos: Faith Suzuki

A Shinto priestess blesses and prays for safety prior to the Ise Shima Satoumi Triathlon.



2018 Ise Tri Bike Course.

Finishers after successfully completing the notoriously challenging Hiroshima Osorakan Trail Race.



Hiroshima Osorakan Trail Race

Even the most experienced trail runners will find Osorakan's 22 km and 65 km courses a formidable test of endurance. With a total elevation surpassing that of from sea level to the summit of Mount Fuji, the 65 km course requires considerable grit and determination to complete. It's a great opportunity to toe the line with some of the nation's hardest trail runners to see where you stand!

Alps Azumino Century Ride

Held in April each year, the AACR Sakura Group is a 160 km journey through the Japan Alps on two-wheels (the self-powered kind). With just about 1,200 meters of climbing, the ride is challenging for most cyclists. The main draw of this sold-out event are the sakura blossoms and snow-capped mountains that are prominent from start to end. Aid stations provide plenty of food to fuel the riders and it's an event that truly displays the best of springtime in Nagano.

Mount Fuji Summit Race

Officially known as the Fuji Tozan Mountain Race, this is the crown jewel of the Japan Sky Running series. Weather conditions greatly impact the race each year but if you can power your way to the summit in good weather, you'll have conquered a very technical climb to the peak of Mount Fuji within the strict cut off time of 4.5 hours.

Frostbite Run

Best known for its half-marathon (shorter distances are also available), the Yokota Striders host about 12,000 runners at Yokota Air Base, an American military facility. It's a hugely popular race for triathletes eager to kick off their season, running elites keen for competition, and those seeking the unique experience of being on base.

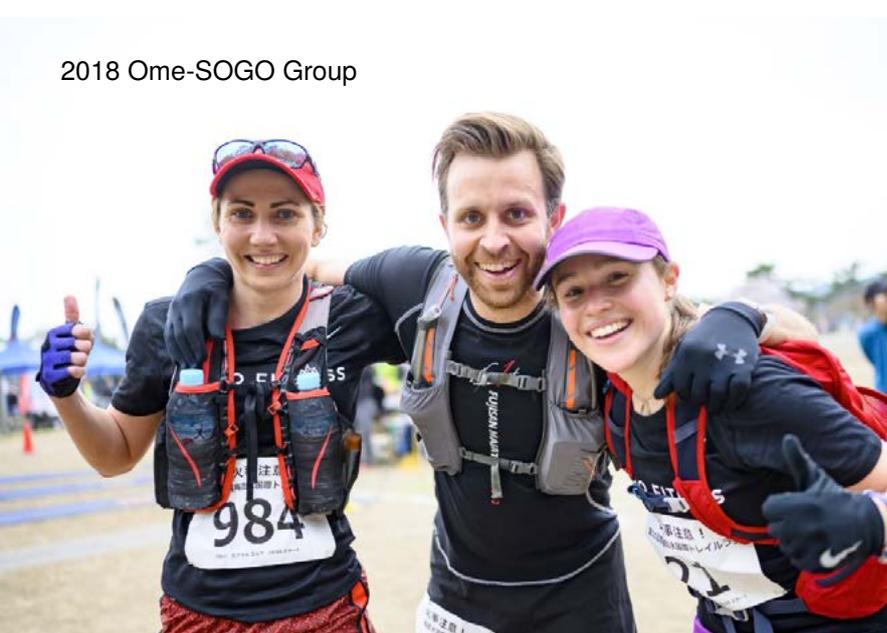
Whether you participate in a race seeking the podium, just want to finish before the cutoff times, or want to complete your first century ride, there's literally something for everyone. Yes, you may have to search high and low—and you won't always find exactly what you're looking for—but your race is out there in Japan.



2018 Okinawa Tri Group



2018 Okinawa Tri Finish - Ceri



2018 Ome-SOGO Group



2019
Hinohara
Hill Climb
Challenge



2019 Okinawa Tri-Run

2019 Okinawa Tri Swim - Faith



Born in Singapore and raised in Malaysia, Faith Suzuki holds a Japanese passport, a BA from Southern Methodist University, and an M.Ed from Vanderbilt University. She trains regularly year-round for her triathlon pursuits and hopes to one day qualify for Kona. Faith is the Communications Manager at Samurai Sports; she spends her weekdays at a desk and weekends at races.

All Photos Provided by: Faith Suzuki

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Clare Braganza

"The shortest lives can cast the longest shadows."

—Mark Lawrence, *Red Sister*

TRAVEL EDITOR

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Hoong Shao Ting

"How many, many things. They call to mind. These cherry blossoms!" —Matsuo Bashō

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna



Kankan

Logan Phillips (Nagano)

I grew up in a small country-side town in Western New York where the cows outnumbered the people and I was almost always outside. My backyard was a forest and so were most of my friend's backyards. When it was time for dinner our moms would yell as loud as they could and hope we could still hear them. Growing up so close to nature to me meant climbing trees, starting fires, accidentally hurting yourself, sleeping outside and trying and learning things without anyone telling you what to do. It was quite different than what kids in Japan are used to today. Despite moving to another small-county town, backyards here are nearly non-existent. The kids near me, however, still live very close to nature so they must still have a lot of chances to enjoy nature right? Well, that doesn't seem to be the case because many of the kids here I met had little to no experience with it. Eventually, a friend introduced me to a group that he has been volunteering for where kids can not only experience nature but also learn about other cultures and try new things.

Kankan Shizenmura is a non-profit organization for children. A few times a month, children meet for an experience involving nature that they might not have an opportunity to do at home or in school, including talking to staff members from foreign countries. With Kankan, children work towards becoming



Photos: Logan Phillips



more understanding, to enjoy the differences in personalities, and how to become friends no matter the language, nationality, or disability. This might be one of the few times a month they have to experience nature and they have a short amount of time to try and learn something new.

Throughout the year we try things they can't do in schools like starting fires, kayaking, cutting bamboo, water fights, climbing trees, planting & harvesting rice, learning about foreign cultures, and much more. Some of the things mentioned require a lot of thinking and are not easy to do for kids and at first, it's hard not to give them the answer or do it for them. However, doing so robs them of the chance for the kids to figure it out for themselves.

When we need to start a fire, the kids think about the fire triangle: heat, fuel, and oxygen.

These are the three things every fire needs to start and with that knowledge and some fire-starting tools given to them, what they do next is up to them. It takes a few minutes for them to think about who should get firewood, where to get firewood, how to arrange the firewood to burn but they are making their own choices and deciding what is important to them. Children need to have some actual

choice and control in their lives when they are learning. Kankan provides those opportunities for them with having the kids do things like starting a fire by themselves they can develop the ability to make appropriate choices and take responsibility and control over their own learning. They are learning to be autonomous in a way that is different from the classroom.

Kankan also holds different cultural events such as Brazilian BBQ, Halloween, and Christmas. Although many kids in Japan know about some Western holidays like Halloween and Christmas, their image of these events is different from someone from the USA or other places. During these events, the kids have a chance to get to know about these events from a different cultural perspective. Halloween, Kankan's biggest event with over 500 people, gives kids and their parents a chance to experience the holiday in a more Western context, with costumes, face painting, apple bobbing, and trick-or-treating.

Although English is not a requirement to join or even enjoy Kankan, many kids participate in the few English activities that the organisation hosts during the year. Last March, several Kankan kids got to experience something very rare for children. During their spring vacation, they went on a trip to New

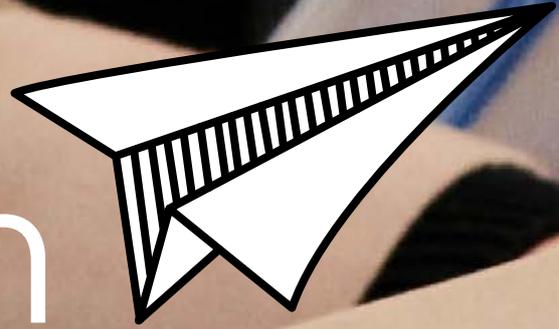
Zealand, flying to another country and using a second language. That trip for them, even if short, showed the kids that the future is beyond what they can learn from a textbook or a classroom. They ate, played, laughed, slept, and talked with people who speak a different language than them. They might have even realized how similar their lives were back in Japan to the people in New Zealand, despite living in different countries.

My first experience of something like this wasn't until university. I had lots of previous exposure to foreign countries and people throughout high school, but I realized I could never truly understand those places until I experienced them outside of the classroom. I went to Spain and became friends with people from across the world, living life like them for a couple of weeks whilst in their homes.

I think the result of these two weeks led me to Japan three years later. Then here in Japan I found Kankan, led by people who have spent major parts of their lives living in a different country, who are teaching kids about understanding and enjoying those differences between people while experiencing nature.

Logan is a third-year direct-hire working at elementary, junior high, and high school levels in Southern Nagano. His hobbies are cooking, hiking, traveling by motorcycle and working out. He also helps coach his local running team and has a clothing brand called Mukimuki Clothing.





Far From Home And Politically-Engaged

Eric Gondree (Nagoya) and John Baumlin (Tokyo)

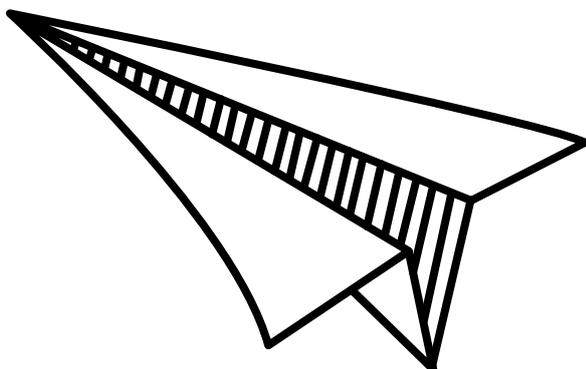
Regardless of where you're from, it can be easy to forget about what's going on back in your home country when starting a new life. Reading the news from afar can sometimes evoke feelings of remoteness, apathy or, even worse, powerlessness. Fortunately, living in Japan is full of opportunities for people who wish to become more politically engaged, and volunteer a bit of their time, skills and energy. The old saying "Think globally, act locally" may sound strange when living far away from your home soil, but it is possible to find or create local volunteer opportunities for international residents to make an impact on the community—and world—around them.

"My reaction to the 2016 election in the U.S.," recalls Eric Gondree, an American living in Nagoya, "was that I needed to do something." But what? After some research, he found that the 2016 overseas voter participation rate in Japan was only roughly 6 percent of eligible U.S. voters. That settled it quickly: He decided he would do what he could to increase the number of registered voters among U.S. citizens in Japan. Given the close election outcomes in the Midwestern states, Eric concluded that greater—and more global—overseas voter mobilization

could make a crucial difference in tight elections. After some investigation and leg-work, Eric soon discovered that he didn't have to reinvent the wheel. American citizens are already organizing overseas, and even contribute to the selection of Presidential nominees. He soon endeavored to form a local chapter for Democrats Abroad Japan in Tokai, which seeks to improve political engagement among the estimated 8 million U.S. citizens living abroad. Democrats Abroad is the international arm of the Democratic party which organizes local events, shares ideas and even sends pledged delegates to the Democratic Party National Convention. "The opening three years of the Donald Trump administration have been a tumultuous and baffling experience for much of the world," Eric recalled. "We want to be sure strong candidates are elected and that citizens are participating."

Setting up a local chapter was fairly simple: After contacting the national organization for approval and guidance, he created a posting on Meetup.com. Within weeks, a number of politically-interested individuals began to show up for a monthly night out at a local pub. Democrats Abroad Japan has already established chapters in Kansai and Kanto. What started from a few people at a local bar in Shibuya has grown to over 3,100 members. The goal of the organization? In a single phrase: "Get Out The Vote (GOTV)." U.S. citizens over 18 are eligible to vote anywhere in the world for federal elections, but need to request their ballots. Since each state has different rules, the best way to do this is through the website [Vote from Abroad](#) which can help you navigate the process. Americans can use it to get a pre-filled form, sign it, and send it to their County Clerk to request a ballot. For most districts, ballots can be requested and sent via fax, email, or postal mail.

How to request an absentee ballot for U.S. Citizens



If you have any questions while filling out the form on [VoteFromAbroad.org](#), click the orange chat button to send a question to the Voter Help Desk.

1. [Go to Vote from Abroad](#) to complete the Ballot Request form (FPCA). With the FPCA, only one form submission is needed to cover all 2020 elections, including the November 3 general election!
2. Choose to get your ballot by EMAIL or ONLINE to get it fastest.
3. Follow the instructions to attach your signature online, or print out the completed form to sign it.
4. Send the signed FPCA to your election official. Registered voters can EMAIL, FAX or MAIL the FPCA.
5. After you send the form, be sure to contact your Local Election Official to verify they received it and will send a ballot to you. You can find contact information for your election official using the State Voting Guide on [VoteFromAbroad.org](#) or on the instructions printed with your completed form.
6. You can expect to receive your ballot 45 days before the election. Send your FPCA as early as January, 2020 to get your ballots as soon as they are available. Mark your calendar: the November ballot will be sent to you by September 19.

Eric recounts, “Not long ago, I bumped into a traveler from New Zealand. We started chatting and he mentioned that he was born in the U.S. but moved to New Zealand as a child. He was surprised when I informed him that he was entitled to register as a U.S. voter. There are eligible voters out there who don’t even know it. There are American students living overseas who are turning 18 every year, too. They need to register to vote and request their ballot.”

Eric wanted to help create a chapter to organize people and let them know they can vote, even if they are residing in Japan. The chapter currently has a small number of regular attendees, but the local mailing list boasts over a hundred members and he aims to expand membership from 2020 onward.



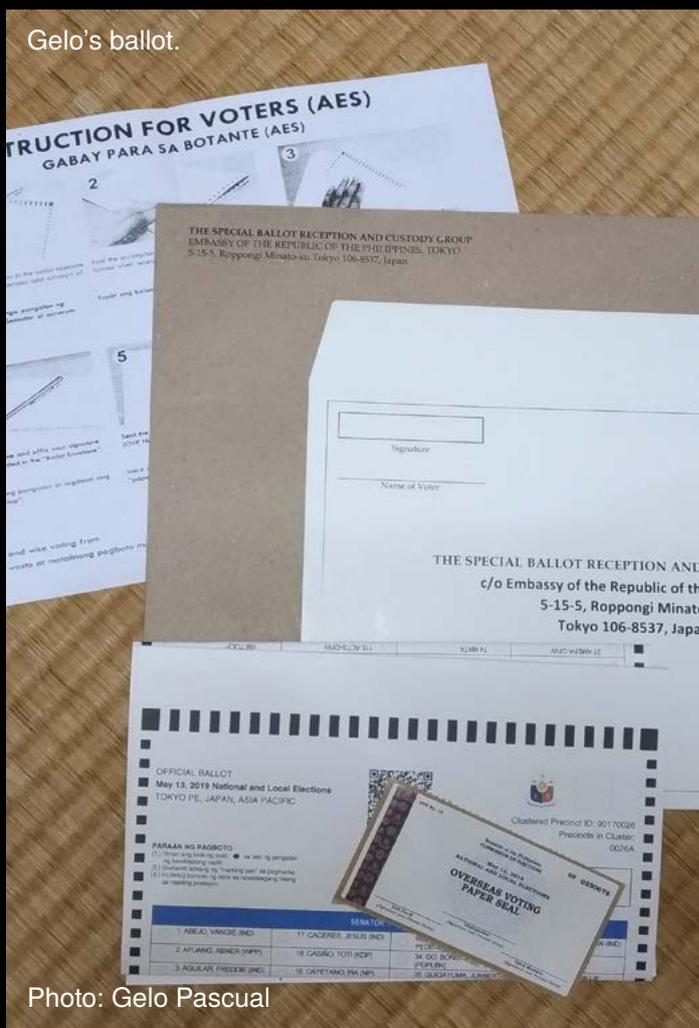
A meeting of Democrats Abroad.

Photo: Eric Gondree

With roughly 10 million Filipinos working overseas, the Philippines is among those countries that allow their expatriate citizens to vote in the national elections remotely. As a registered overseas voter who lives in Gifu City, I participated in the Midterm Elections last year by sending my accomplished ballot to our embassy in Tokyo. Although none of my candidates won, I still felt that I did the right thing by exercising my right to suffrage and fulfilling my duty even if I am away from home.

Since coming to Japan in 2018, the Philippines has had its fair share of injustice and repression. As someone who identifies as a left-leaning progressive, I have always found the need to keep myself updated of the sociopolitical dynamics in my country by following the national news from legitimate sources and engaging in political discussions both online and offline. Although I am not explicitly affected by these backward developments, I have always believed that it is my duty as a Filipino to express dissent against tyranny and bigotry by sharing my political posts and evidence-based arguments to my friends and to some extent, to my Japanese colleagues.

-Gelo Pascual, Gifu PA, Filipino progressive, global citizen, and avid traveler.



Gelo's ballot.

Photo: Gelo Pascual

John A. Baumlin Jr., PMP was elected National Chair of Democrats Abroad Japan in 2019. He is a project manager by trade and web developer by hobby. He graduated from The College of New Jersey in 2012, and currently resides in the

A critical upcoming event in the 2020 Election cycle is the Democrats Abroad Primary, which runs from March 3-10. This will select delegates for the July Democratic National Convention in Milwaukee to help nominate the next Democratic presidential candidate. People who wish to participate in the overseas primary can join [Democrats Abroad](#), request a ballot and cast their primary vote all at once in a voting center that week.

Some overseas voters may feel that their votes won't make a difference in the larger political process, but some recent races have been entirely decided by absentee ballots. March 2018's special Congressional election in Pennsylvania's 18th District was determined by only 627 absentee votes, for instance.

"Thanks to the spectacle of the electoral college, people are always thinking in terms of 'blue states' and 'red states'," commented John Baumlin, National Chair of Democrats Abroad Japan. "But the reality is, the House of Representatives is up for vote every two years, and they're as competitive as ever. The voices of overseas voters are decisive in elections and nuanced in primaries. We bring some valuable input to the party and primaries, as we live out many policies that domestic voters do not have the opportunity to. It doesn't matter where you're from when it comes to issues like climate change or a free and open internet."



This one goes out to all the Kiwis in Japan: register to vote! Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced earlier this year that our next general election will be held on Saturday 19 Sept. That gives all of us New Zealanders the chance to register or update our details in time to vote. You can check your details, update or enrol over at [Vote NZ](#).

If you've been out of the country for a while and you're unsure if you're still eligible to vote, don't worry! I got you. The basics are: you must be at least 18 years old, a New Zealand citizen or permanent resident and you must have lived in New Zealand for a minimum of 12 months *continuously* at some point in your life! There's just one additional condition for those of us living overseas—you must have visited New Zealand within the last three years.

Tick all those boxes? Congrats! You're eligible to exercise your democratic right to vote. As it stands at the time of writing, the main players are: current PM Jacinda Ardern with Labour, her coalition partner of' mate Winston Peters with NZ First, Green Party co-leaders James Shaw and Marama Davidson, and Simon Bridges heading up the current coalition government's main opposition, the National Party. Oh, and I guess ACT's David Seymour is still around too.

If you're looking for some more information on the ins and outs of the election process, head on over to [Vote NZ](#). To make sure everyone is in the know, information is also offered in a variety of languages. These include but aren't limited to: te reo Māori, gagana Sāmoa, traditional/simplified Chinese and even Nihongo.

From me and the Orange Guy, happy voting!

-CONNECT Copy Editor Damien Levi (Tokyo)

"Being more involved is not only politics. I think the best part is the social aspect," Eric asserts. "You get to meet people with similar—but definitely not always the same—world views and can exchange ideas. If you feel the need to widen the circle of people you know, creating a monthly meet-up group is a great way to meet people who reflect your values and learn a lot of new things. It's helped me out a lot."

Eric Gondree has taught in Japan for 15 years, including university-teaching in and around Kobe and Nagoya. He is originally from upstate New York and has an MBA and Masters in TESOL from the University at Buffalo.

In Jesus's Name, (R)Amen

A Peek Into
Christianity and
the Christian
Identity in
Japan

Erica Park (Kyoto)



Growing up in a Christian home, my favorite thing to learn about wasn't Bible verses, Jesus's parables, or the Psalms. Nah. Despite a fairly sheltered childhood, at the very appropriate age of twelve, I was fascinated by the gory, violent deaths of Christian martyrs throughout history. Somehow, I was able to get my hands on a book all about this child-friendly subject, and I remember spending hours flipping through the pages with rapt, undivided attention.

The book did not skimp on the gruesome demises of these Christians, early and contemporary, detailing (and maybe dramatizing) their torture. What began as morbid curiosity gave way to genuine interest, especially when it came to martyrs in Japan, of which there were surprisingly many. The most famous incident was the 26 Martyrs of Japan, where a group of Christians were killed at Nagasaki in 1597. Aside from the brutality of the execution method (being crucified and pierced with spears; a cruel parody of Jesus's own death), their deaths piqued my

tweeny curiosity because, up to that point, I hadn't realized that Christianity was a minority religion in other countries.

As a Korean-American, Christianity played an important role in both cultures I was part of: in the United States, vacations were centered around Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, and I used to attend one of the many Korean-American churches sprinkled across California. Although I don't practice it anymore, Christianity continues to influence what I consider 'normal' (it still feels strange we don't get Christmas off in Japan!).

After a deep dive into Japan's relationship with Christianity, I soon discovered that the 26 Martyrs wasn't some random act of violence; it was both the culmination of years of complex economic, political, and cultural factors and represented the beginning of Japan's dark history regarding religious freedom. As an island nation, Japan had very little contact with Western countries. In fact, the first-ever documented Europeans to step foot in Japan arrived by complete accident when, in 1543, two Portuguese traders were blown off-course during a trade expedition to China. Within six years of this encounter, the first Christian missionaries from Portugal set out to Japan, beginning with Kagoshima. These initial efforts had . . . mixed success on the Japanese people, and it took time to really take off.

Nowadays, though, Christianity permeates many aspects of modern Japanese culture. Some of the country's top-ranking universities, like Sophia University and International Christian University (ICU), were established by Christians and openly advocate the religion. Western-style weddings are popular in Japan, with many couples forgoing formal kimonos in favor of dresses and suits and ditching Shinto shrines for Western chapels, complete with a white foreigner playing as the minister—regardless of whether or not they're actually ordained. Even mainstream anime incorporate Christian iconography or themes; one of Japan's most successful franchises, the *Evangelion* series, appropriates Christian mythos and angelology (the study of angels) despite staff members admitting it was purely for aesthetic reasons.

All this and we haven't even touched on the wide array of Christian literature in Japan, including Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, which was adapted into

an Academy Award-nominated film directed by Martin Scorsese in 2016!

With such a conspicuous presence, it's hard to believe that Christianity is still very much a minority religion in Japan and, despite its prevalence and general acceptance, is still considered very foreign to Japanese people. Many seem fascinated by the aesthetics of the religion, but less by the actual practice of it. In fact, the entire time I lived in Japan, I'd only ever met *one* person who openly told me she was Christian. Still, I wanted to better understand what Christianity was like currently. I knew that there were other Japanese Christians, and it was clear research would only do so much: I would need to talk to someone who actually practiced Christianity.

Luckily for me, I knew exactly *one* person who did.

I was delighted to find out that she was willing to speak about her personal experience in her faith. During our conversation together, I finally found answers to my questions about being Christian in Japan, as well as further insight into why Christianity is still a minority religion despite over 100 years of religious freedom in Japan. I hope you will enjoy our discussion as well.

The following interview was conducted almost entirely in English. At the interviewee's request, she will not be referred to by her real name nor will certain details about her personal life be revealed. In addition, parts of the interview have been edited for clarification or grammatical reasons.

Can you please introduce yourself and your background?

I am a Japanese woman, and I began to believe in Jesus Christ as a high schooler. On Christmas, I went to a bookstore and found a book by a Christian author.

My family, however, was Buddhist.

Do you remember the author's name?

Her name was Ayako Miura. She has since passed away. She wrote many novels, essays, and songs.

The book I found was titled *Michi Arika*, and was about how she became Christian. I was so impressed with it. I read the book, and I felt that Jesus Christ is the real God. The Christian God is full of love, and knowing that Jesus Christ loves me, that he saved me from my sins and gave me a new life, made me so happy.

Did it comfort you to know that Jesus and God was with you?

Yeah, that's right. I was so happy.

Really? But with Buddhism, you didn't feel that same love?

Yeah, because when I was a child, I thought if I did bad things, I had to be punished.



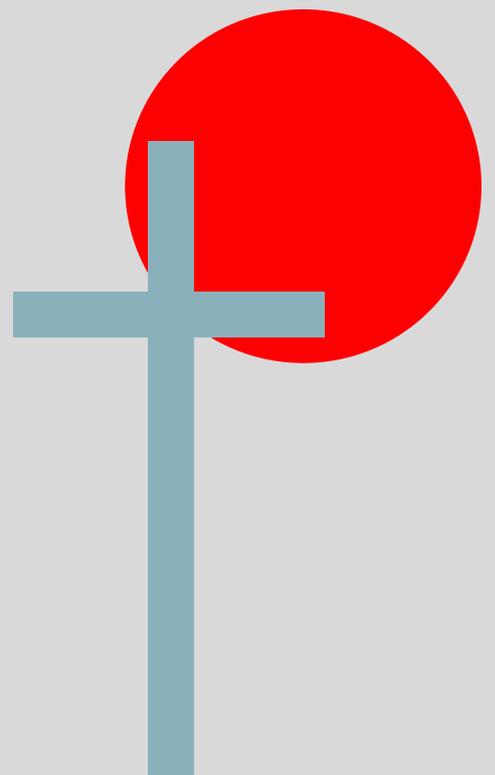
In Japanese, we say "bacchiga-ataru". If I do bad things, bad things will happen to me. It's like Heaven is going to punish you.

Oh, I think I understand. Is it like karma?

Yes, kind of like that. I was afraid of what I might do. But, Jesus Christ is the opposite. Even though I was so sinful, Jesus Christ died for me, because he wanted to save me from sin. I was so happy to hear that he would do that so that I could live in heaven.

Were you the only Christian in your family?

Yes, exactly!



How did your family react to you being Christian?

My family was so shocked, and they had difficulty accepting that I was a Christian. I had to wait until I was 20 years old to be baptized. I told my family that 20 years old is considered a legal adult age.

How do other people react when you tell them “I’m Christian”?

Hmm. Well, when I was a university student, I told people I was Christian, but most weren’t surprised. I think it’s because there are some schools in Japan founded by Christian missionaries. Even though most students don’t believe in Jesus Christ, they know about Christianity, and their image of it isn’t so bad.

What do you think non-Christian Japanese people’s image of Christianity is in general?

In general? I think Japanese people, basically, have no religion. Things like keeping graves clean and songs, those are more like customs, now. I think their image of Christians is so . . . *katai* (hard), or serious?

Really?

Well, some people think Christians are *majime* (strict), or too rigid. Have you heard this phrase before: “Japan is the grave of missionaries”?

No, I haven’t. Does this phrase mean many missionaries died in Japan? Or is it because people give up being missionaries in Japan?

The second one. It is so difficult for people to become Christians in Japan. The Christian population is less than one percent here.

Is your family Christian?

Yes, they are Christian.

Was your husband Christian when you met him? Or did he decide to convert later?

After marriage, he became a Christian. He wanted to know me better and to understand me, but he had to understand Christianity first. So, he went to church, attended Sunday service, and read the bible.

Wow! He was a very good student.

(laughs) Well, I think it wasn't his attitude, but God's love that helped him.

Did you have a Japanese-style or Western-style wedding?

I thought the wedding would be a very good chance for my husband and others to learn about Christianity, so I asked for a Western-style wedding. The pastor of my church came and gave a sermon. Many people came to my wedding and were able to listen to a Bible message.

How do you think Christianity's image has changed since you were in high school?

I think it's difficult to change the image of Christians, but I want to live my life honestly. I don't have a lot of power, but I want to try to help other people in need. I want to be kind to other people through Jesus Christ.

So, I guess not many changes?

This is my personal opinion, but I think Japanese people are actually afraid of being different from other people. For example, many years ago, there was a bad accident that happened in the name of religion. A cult was responsible for the accident.

I think Japanese people still keep looking for God, because people are weak. In Japanese society, we work so hard, and our country is unstable. We have so many things to stress about, and I think they want a God to look after them.

But it's difficult for them to be Christian because we are the minority in Japan, and Japanese people want to be the same as each other.



What do you think Christianity is like in other countries?

Some Korean missionaries came to my church, and I had a chance to speak with them. They were so kind. My image of Christians in foreign countries is of these missionaries. Even though I have never been to a Korean church, I think it would be similar to this experience.

How about America?

My image of American church is pretty good. If they believe in Jesus Christ, they are my brothers and sisters.

What do you think American churches are like?

I had a chance to talk with some American Christians. Some of them were missionaries, but everyone was so nice. I think church in the United States would be really fun and welcoming. But, maybe this is because I saw movies like *The Blues Brothers*. . . .

(laughs) Oh, I see!

The church atmosphere seems so cheerful in movies.

Are there many young Christian people in your church?

Good question! In my church, there are many different generations, from babies to the elderly.



Do young people come with their families or by themselves?

Young people, especially little kids, come with their parents. My pastor believes that children are extremely important. He thinks if children are familiar with Jesus while young, they will lead better lives because He will always be with them.

The average age of Christians in Japan is very high, so we are afraid that churches will disappear in the future.

If too many people leave, our churches cannot exist here.

What do you think the future of Christianity is in Japan?

If the number of young people in Japan decreases, I think many churches will close because it will become difficult to find Christians in Japan. I hope God sends many young people to our churches one day.

If you enjoyed what you've read so far, look out for the next article in this series, where I'll be diving much, much deeper into the complex history of Christianity in Japan. It's got samurai, it's got the Pope, it's got... Sino-Japanese trade disagreements? Check it out!

Erica is currently working as an ALT in Kyotanabe City, Kyoto Prefecture. Her main interests are Japanese traditional culture, going to art museums, and chatting with new people (preferably over a tumbler of Laphroaig). When she's not doodling or daydreaming about finally getting tickets to a Takarazuka performance, she's trying to hunt down 80s city pop records.

All Photos: Erica Park

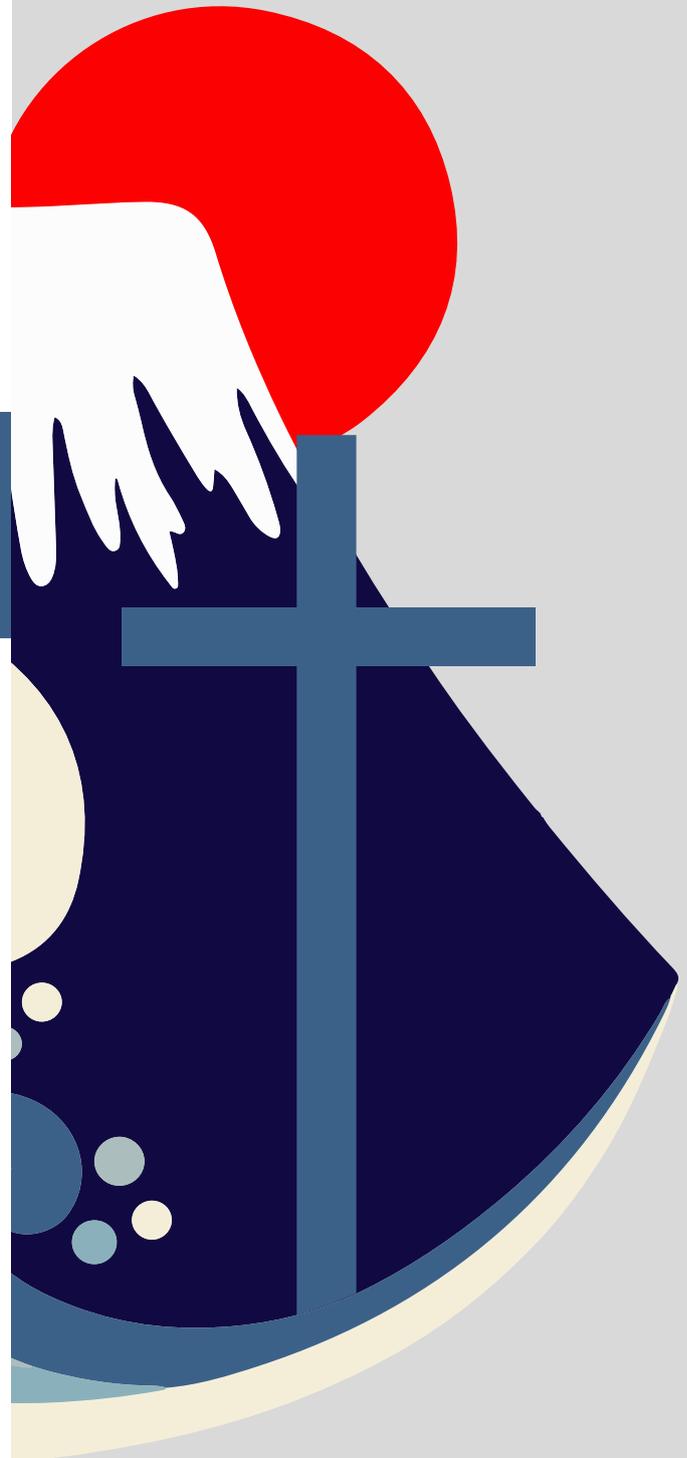




Photo: Charlotte Coetzee

Flowers

DISCLAIMER

Due to the biasedness of *CONNECT*'s travel editor, this final section of the March issue will be extremely flowery.

HEALTH ADVISORY

- 🌸 The beauty of various blooms featured may cause heart palpitations—it is merely a sign of you falling (further) in love with Japan's flowers and there is no cause for alarm.
- 🌸 Safe to enter for people with hay fever.



Daisy Braid (Tokyo)

[Rainbow fields](#) at Shikisai no Oka, Furano, Hokkaido.

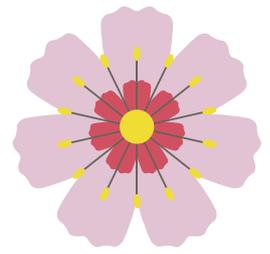


Alivia Hancock (Iwate)

Lavenders and sunflowers in Furano, Hokkaido.



Ahead!



A very colourful collage

Before we dive into the details of which-flowers-bloom-when and the stories of fellow flora fans, Ailsa and Anna, here's a look through the lenses of some of our contributors!

P.S. We had an overwhelming response to our call for flowery pictures, and it was such a challenge to choose.



Michelle Zacharias (Saitama)

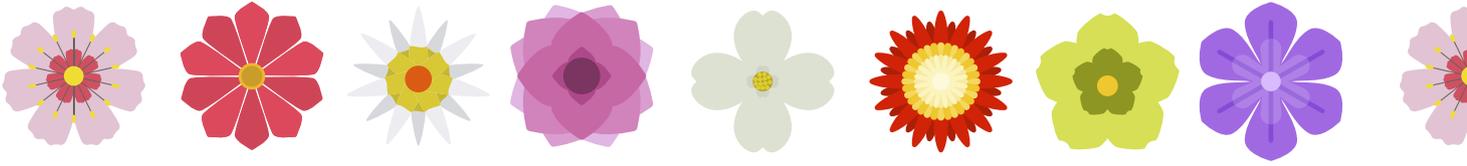
Red spider lilies in Saitama and wisteria in Ashikaga, Tochigi.



Chelanna White (Kyoto)

Capturing *sakura* with a polaroid at Daigoji and Tōji in Kyoto.





BLOOMING BLISS

Japan's exquisite flowers Hoong Shao Ting (Nagano)

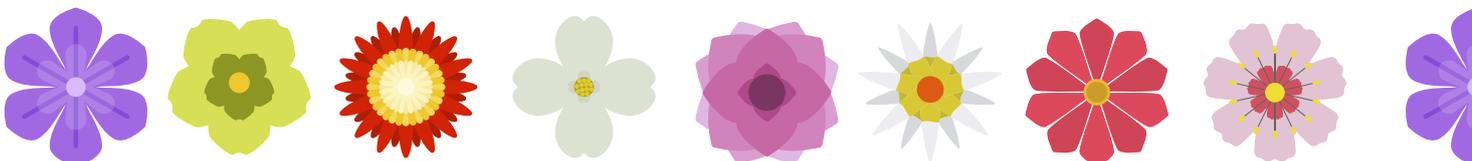
Weather around the world has been weird—think the terrible Typhoon Hagibis and fires in Australia—and Japan has seen a warm winter these past few months. This also means that nature's rhythm has been affected, and if you haven't heard, the 2020 *sakura season* is going to be plus-minus one week earlier than past years.

As compared to travellers who only visit for a short week or so, people living in Japan have a big advantage when it comes to chasing after the fleeting cherry blossoms. Many of us will be travelling to different parts of the country, though, and like me, you may be worried (to varying extents) about whether you will catch those elusive blooms. Check out the [tips and insights](#) I have summarised from my past few sakura seasons, and let me know if you have any advice to share too—I am always looking to up my *hanami* (花見, lit. flower-viewing) game!

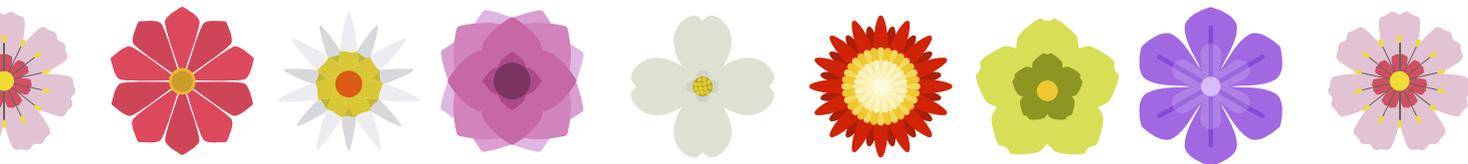
Having lived in Singapore with an abundance of tropical flowers blooming by the roadsides and in

parks, as well as the UK with its elegant gardens, I can say that the Japanese love and do their flowers on a whole different scale. Here, you can find yourself wandering among thousands of blossoming trees, admiring carefully-designed patchworks of flower beds, and looking at expansive hills or fields carpeted in blooms. Apart from the iconic cherry blossoms in spring, Japan with its four seasons also boasts a plethora of blooms in every hue, so much so that many of the traditional colour names are inspired by flowers. For example, sakura (light pink), wisteria (light purple), peach blossoms (pinkish coral), canola (yellow), forget-me-not (blue) . . .

For the uninitiated, here's welcoming you to the fantastic floral paradise; for fellow anthophiles (yes, I just found out there is a term for people who love flowers!), here is a reminder to start charting your course for 2020.

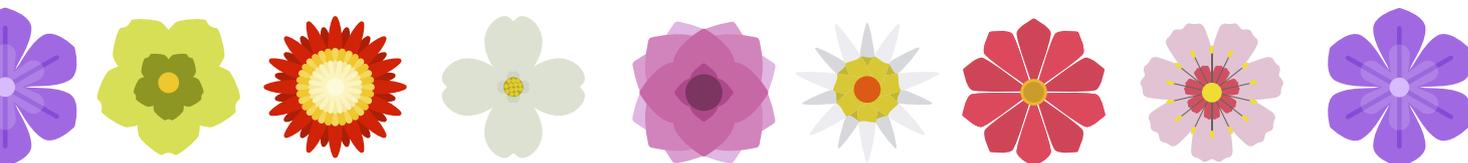


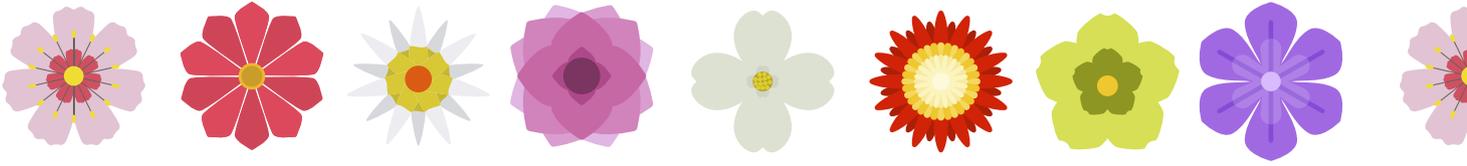
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COLOURFUL SNAPSHOTS

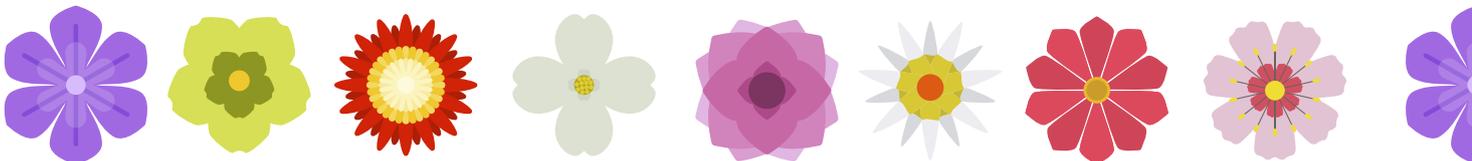
Looking at these never fails to make me happy and I can still vividly remember the heart-fluttering moments when I pressed the shutter. You know I can't wait for spring to be in full swing.





JAPAN'S FAVO

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	J
梅 <i>ume</i> Plum blossom		● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ●	
菜の花 <i>na no hana</i> Canola		● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	
花桃 <i>hana momo</i> Peach blossom			●	● ● ●	●	
桜 <i>sakura</i> Cherry blossom		●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	
Tulip		● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●
芝桜 <i>shibazakura</i> Moss Phlox				● ●	● ● ●	● ●
(a.k.a. Baby Blue Eyes) Nemophila				● ● ●	● ● ●	● ●
あんず <i>anzu</i> Apricot blossom			●	● ●		
Poppy				● ●	● ● ●	● ●
薔薇 <i>bara</i> Rose					● ●	● ●
藤 <i>fuji</i> Wisteria				● ●	● ● ●	
躑躅 <i>tsutsuji</i> Azalea				● ● ●	● ● ●	● ●
紫陽花 <i>ajisai</i> Hydrangea						●
蓮 <i>hasu</i> Lotus						
Lavender						
向日葵 <i>himawari</i> Sunflower						
蕎麦 Soba						
秋桜 <i>aki-zakura</i> Cosmos						
百合 <i>yuri</i> Lily						
水仙 <i>suisen</i> Narcissus	● ●	● ● ●		● ● ● ●	● ●	
椿 <i>tsubaki</i> Camelia		● ● ●	● ● ●	● ●		



Sakura in Secret Places

Anna Reyes (Nagano)

For as long as I can remember, cherry blossoms, or *sakura*, have always held a special place in my heart. I vividly remember back when I was a child, my uncle telling me the story of his trip to Japan. At the time, he worked for an advertisement company that was having a special event in Japan and he witnessed the blooming pink cherry blossoms. Once he returned, he brought photos for me to see, and it was at that moment when I realized how much I wanted to see them in person someday.

Fast forward to many years later, my thoughts on cherry blossoms have not changed. It became my goal to experience them while living in Japan. Despite going to famous *hanami* or flower-viewing spots in Japan, I unexpectedly found myself appreciating more of the lesser known areas, and specifically a place in my small town.

Ueda City in Nagano Prefecture is described as being an *inaka* by most of the locals, and yet it still has cafes, malls, and night spots for the young people to enjoy. The symbol of the six golden coins, the *rokumonsen*, from the Sanada Clan is famously plastered on sidewalks and the station. Surrounded by beautiful mountains, wide farming pastures, and a community of warm and friendly people, I have come to view Ueda as my home. With four long years under my belt as an ALT in Ueda, one would believe that I know most of the well-known parks, restaurants, and events. However, that is not true. Every time I venture out in my town, there is bound to be a place that I have yet to discover.

[Iwayado Kannon](#) is a Buddhist temple and park introduced to me by my friend, Keiko, a longtime resident within the Ueda area. She and her family lived in Maruko, one of the smaller surrounding towns that merged with Ueda a few years ago. One peaceful night in





April, Keiko invited me and a friend of mine to go to Iwayado Kannon shrine. It was the first time I heard about the place, so I agreed as I was genuinely curious.

Keiko spoke about how the temple was popular amongst those who lived in the tiny town, and I was wondering what it could be. Whenever I went to see cherry blossoms, it would only be during the day time. Having this opportunity to see my favorite flower in the evening made me excited and I looked forward to what it would be like. Once we arrived at the park and I laid my eyes on the spectacular scenery, my expectations were definitely exceeded.

Iwayado Kannon was situated on a cliff on the mountain. The only way to access it was to climb steep stairs. Around the stone stairway, dozens of cherry blossom trees encompassed it with its vibrant pink and weeping branches. The light from the lanterns were bright enough to illuminate the beautiful flowers throughout the night. When we arrived, I was surprised to see that there were not a lot of people who came to see the park—it gave the park a peaceful atmosphere as Keiko and I ventured towards the entrance.

The climb to the temple would have been exhausting if there weren't any cherry blossoms to distract me. They were everywhere and the branches draped with pink flowers covered us like a roof. The darkness of the night sky

created a sharp contrast, making the flowers' colors pop in a fun way. Once we had reached the top of the stairs where the temple was, we were greeted by the local volunteers and guides that took care of the temple. I smiled when they rewarded us with traditional Japanese snacks for our hard work climbing the steps.

Afterwards, the guides showed us to a small sitting area by the temple and served us green tea. As I sat, the view from the top felt so surreal because I did not realize how high up we were. We could see most of Ueda and the Maruko town area, as well as the shadowy outlines of the nearby mountains and the dotted lights of the stars. While drinking my warm green tea, we listened to the temple guides tell us the history of the temple, the red gates that were built near a rocky cave, and the main spectacle: an 800-year-old cherry blossom tree.

The temple was built supposedly around the Heian period (784-1195) and was regarded as one of the more sacred places in the little town. Though there were no festivals celebrated in the temple, people still came to visit to enjoy nature, serenity, and solitude. The guides also recommended visiting the Iwayado Kannon cave because of its interesting architectural design. As much as I loved the traditional designs of Japanese temples and shrines, I wanted to see the old cherry blossom tree.

After finishing our tea and appreciating the overlook, I was

finally able to see with my own eyes the 800-year-old cherry blossom tree. My eyes grew wide; it was the largest flowering tree that I had ever seen in Ueda. Its bark and trunk were surprisingly sturdy and its branches were filled with myriads of pink-petaled flowers. The temple guide commented that the tree was the very symbol of the enduring nature and community that thrived in small towns. If it wasn't for the people taking care of it, the tree would not have survived like it did for so long.

In many of the stories that I had heard or read about cherry blossoms, they were often represented as fleeting because of how they disappear so quickly. However, after seeing this specific tree, I feel that this isn't true. Not only does the cherry blossom continue to endure as a symbol of beauty and purity in Japan, but for me, it's more than that. It reminds me of strength and longevity.

Being able to experience this in my own town helped me realize that there were still small and charming places to explore. If anything, it made me appreciate my little piece of home and that my favorite flower wasn't too far away.

Anna Reyes is currently a fourth-year ALT in Nagano. When she's not busy helping her students with speech contests, she enjoys drawing, reading books, traveling, studying languages, and dreaming about her next trip to the yakiniku restaurant.

All Photos: Anna Reyes



Memories of
**Flowery
Days**

Ailsa van Eeghen (Kagoshima)



Wake Shrine Wisteria Festival

(和氣神社藤祭り)

Up in the mountains of Kirishima is the beautiful [Wake Shrine \(和氣神社\)](#). Overlooked for most of the year, the shrine comes to life during the month of May when the vast wisteria vines burst into life. Completely surrounded by trees up on a hill, arriving at the flower festival is like arriving at your own little haven in the mountains.

Just as we arrived, the *kyumen taiko* drum troupe began their performance. Wearing *tengu* (a type of Japanese mythological creature) masks and swaying their bodies madly, it really felt like we were watching a performance played by demons. But nothing

could truly distract us from the beautiful flowers beckoning us to enjoy them.

As we walked under the trees bees hummed lazily, enjoying their bounty. Planted to create a roof-like structure, the wisteria sparkled overhead as light leaked through. It is said that gardens and flowers have a way of bringing people together, drawing them from their homes. And as I watched the light-dabbled faces of those around me, their eyes and smiles bright and full with happiness, I knew that coming here was and will continue to be a great idea.





Shinonome no Sato Hydrangea Garden

(東雲の里紫陽花園)

As the thick, cloying warmth of summer sets in, the nature of my prefecture comes alive. There is nothing, however, that truly signals the start of summer like bushes of hydrangeas springing to life. Fortunately for myself, I live in a town where you can see one of the best hydrangea gardens in the prefecture. For hidden up in the mountains, just outside of Izumi, is a magical valley bursting with hydrangeas.

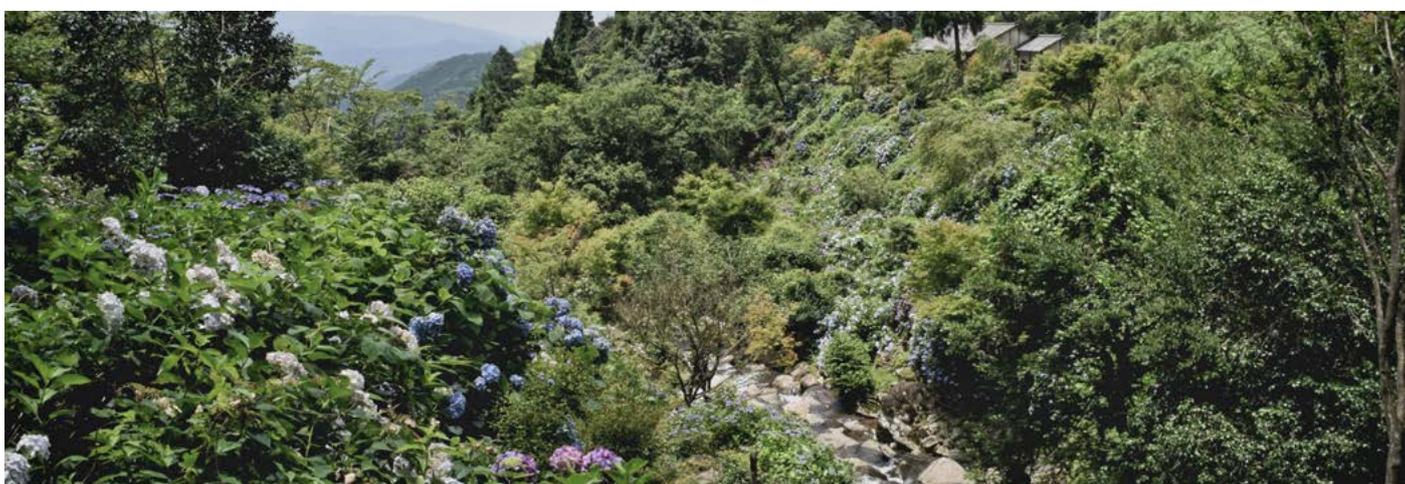
[Shinonome no Sato \(東雲の里\)](#) is a huge garden nestled in the valley of a mountain. Driven by the desire to make a place where

he can display his creations, Miyagi Makoto decided to create a space of his own. Illuminated by car lights, Miyagi cut through the overgrown trees, discovering long forgotten stone walls and terraced rice fields. In 1995, the garden was opened and has been welcoming visitors ever since.

Every year I take the drive up there, and every time it feels like I'm stepping into a different world. Following the path, we're soon surrounded by lush, green nature. A rich warm smell is coming from the soba restaurant tucked away amongst the leaves. All around us

are small clay creatures, probably hand-crafted by the owner himself.

Our stroll takes us past moss-covered houses, through rows of hydrangeas and up to a waterfall. We take in views of the valley, dotted with colour from all the flowers. We pass by walls of hydrangeas, their heads bobbing as we slide by. That ever-present summer hum fills our ears as we take a rest, taking in the expansive views around us. "This doesn't feel like Izumi," I say to my friend. "I feel like I've stepped into a fairytale."



Uwaba Cosmos Garden

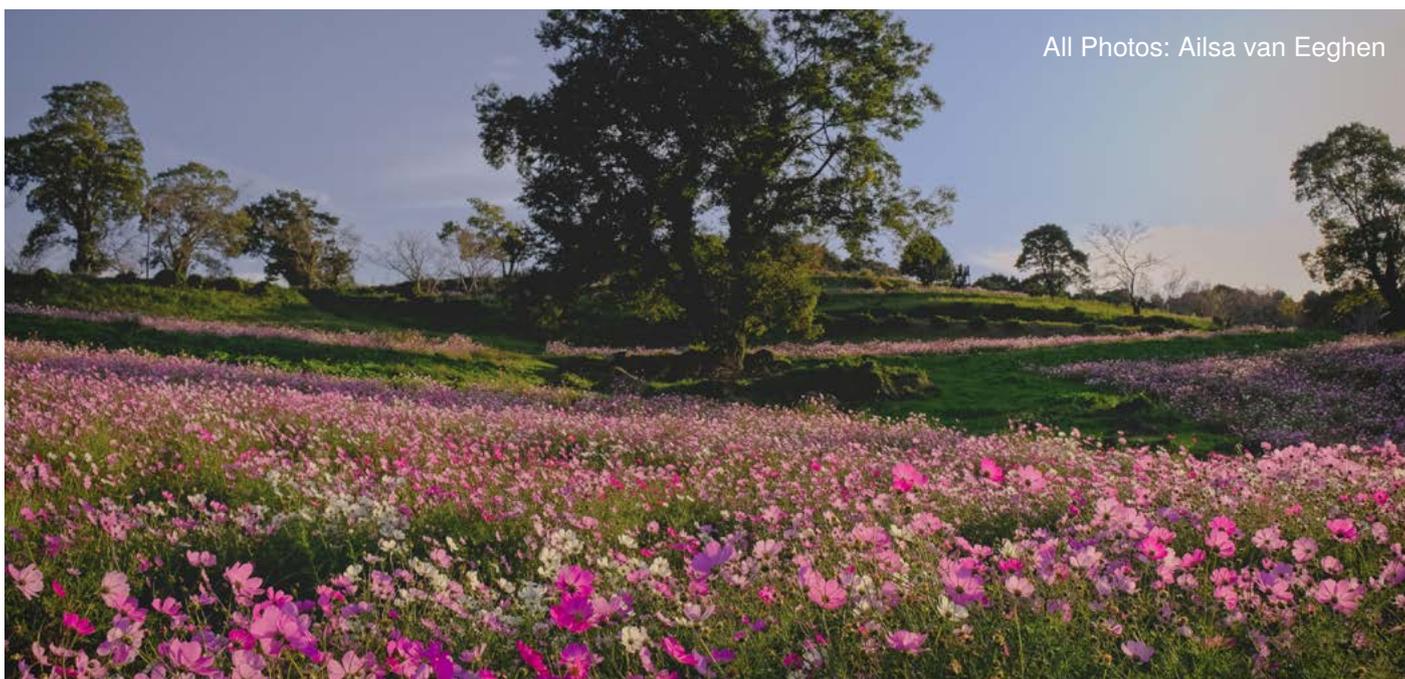
(上場コスモス園)

It's October. The days are shorter. The wind is cooler. And the roadsides come to life as cosmos flowers bloom seemingly out of the grass. "It's time to go to Uwaba," I tell my friend.

Our drive takes us through the mountains of Izumi, up to the highlands of [Uwaba \(上場\)](#). What was once just a hill has been turned into a huge flower park for the months of autumn. Each year, the local people come together to plant over a quarter of a million flowers. For these few months the souvenir shop comes to life, selling local produce and fresh ice cream made from the local milk. From around the neighbourhood, the people of Uwaba gather to greet those who have come to see

the sea of cosmos.

Arriving in the late afternoon, we had the place to ourselves. The cosmos spread out before us, gently swaying in the wind. Shades of pink and white dotted the landscape as we strolled through the fields. 'What a perfect picnic spot this would make,' I thought to myself. We watched the sun set over the mountains, before eventually accepting that it was time to leave. Walking back down the hill, we enjoyed the view of the flowers for the last time, the cosmos spreading out before us like some kind of living carpet. The sounds of cows slowly drifted away as we headed back down the mountain.



All Photos: Ailsa van Eeghen



Photo: Charlotte Coetzee

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Contact the Head Editor of *CONNECT*, Alice Ridley, at connect.editor@ajet.net with your submissions, comments, and questions.

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Write about something you're doing. Write about something you love. Tell us a story.

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