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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hey *hennns*, how ya diddly doin'? How's everyone holdin' up?

Warning: This side effect may occur if you've watched way too many [Plumbella Youtube videos](#). Read in a Northern English accent.

After completing my two years on the JET Programme, I have finally made it home to New Zealand. This was an almost four month process of stress, cold feet, and cancelled flights, so I can really empathise with folks' decision to leave Japan because saying goodbye is not the easiest thing to do. Moving home is a huge step, even if it is to a COVID-19 free country. As we've seen before in the past, alert levels can change quickly, and I am very grateful for our frontline workers for keeping us safe. They have been nothing but lovely and the food has been a huge highlight to this two week hotel stay. An unpopular opinion, but Japanese food is kinda average, sorry *Nippon*.

If you have to complete a two-week quarantine period in the future, I can suggest some things which made my own stay a bit more bearable. I highly recommend a daily sweat session, which has been very helpful for my mood and energy. I am currently completing Chloe Ting's two week 2020 [summer shred challenge](#). Sticking to a routine of waking up and getting *out* of bed has also been essential. Check your country's subreddit forums, as I learned a lot of useful information about people's quarantine experiences such as poor cutlery quality (thankful for chopsticks), laundry availability, free phone SIMs offered, and general encouragement to get you through. Luckily I have **CONNECT** to still keep me busy throughout!

My top picks for the February issue are: it's widely known that Japan lacks when it comes to gender equality, but how does this manifest in the sporting world? Read about it in "The "Ideal" Woman: Defying Beauty Standards in Japanese Sports"; How has Valentine's Day changed since it was introduced to Japan through a marketing campaign in the 1930s? Read about it in "A Day of Chocolate"; A UK JET reflects on how his fashion has changed while living in Japan and offers his take on how Japanese fashion has been influenced by queer culture in "Pretty Hurts: 'Manly Men' are Not the Norm in Japan"; and Jessica, our own Arts Section Editor, takes us through the recently opened art museum of Japan's largest publishing company that has the COVID-19 pandemic at the forefront of its current exhibition—read about it in "The Kadokawa Culture Museum."

That's all from me for now! As always, I can be contacted at connect.editor@ajet.net if you are keen to be a contributor for **CONNECT** or have anything else to share with me.



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Alice Ridley

"Spotify Wrapped is like wow girl u a pioneer, a trailblazer, no single genre can contain you, the essence of you cannot be defined by the language u speak... anyway your top artist is Ariana Grande again." — Twitter user @sheshecummings

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"I can't do this face-to-face, but I'll admit that I'm afraid. Let these moments go to waste—excuse me for my plastic taste." — Joji, "Plastic Taste"

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"Man suffers only because he takes seriously what the gods made for fun." — Alan Watts

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*"All according to Keikaku. *Keikaku means plan."*

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"You are much stronger than you think you are. Trust me." — Superman

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"Happy Lunar New Year!"

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"I haven't eaten in weeks!" — says the doodle of a hand making the peace sign on the back of a 6th grader's jacket

Day Bulger

"Keep the change, ya filthy animal." — Gangster Johnny, "Home Alone"

Natalie Andrews

"Klaus became more and more tired as the night wore on. Occasionally his eyes would close. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over." — Lemony Snicket, The Bad Beginning

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"Great, I'd like your eight dollar-est bottle of wine, please." — Jake Peralta, "Brooklyn Nine-Nine"

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An Interview with WaniKani and Tofugu Founder, “Koichi”

Jaered Koichi Croes interviewed by Sarah Baughn (Ishikawa)

As a long-time user of WaniKani, I’ve always been curious about the process behind the service. It’s one of the most often recommended resources for learning Japanese, kanji in particular. Tofugu, the blog about more general Japanese topics of interest, also has a large following. So, I reached out to the founder of both, Jaered Koichi Croes—who goes by “Koichi” online—to ask about these things and he was kind enough to reply to my questions.

For those who don't know, can you tell us about Tofugu and WaniKani?

Tofugu is our blog on Japanese language and culture. We’re trying to help people to have a better experience in Japan, whether visiting or living there. WaniKani is our program that helps people to learn kanji and vocabulary. People still need to show up and put in the work every day, but if they do there’s a decent chance they’ll be able to read around 2,000 kanji and 6,000 vocabulary words in a couple years.

Tofugu has a wide variety of articles ranging from Japanese learning resources to cool Japanese places to travel, as well as ALT resources. What was the initial focus of Tofugu and how has it evolved over the years?

At first Tofugu was just sort of about anything Japan or Japanese related. Now it’s a lot more focused on language, as well as some of the things that might help one to better use the language they’re learning.

What was one of your favorite articles to write for Tofugu?

Although we don’t do these so much anymore, I enjoy the travel articles the most. I get to go to weird places, eat awesome food, and meet cool people. I like the people the best (you can still go places with them, and eat food with them), so probably [Ossan Rental](#) and [Homeless Kotani Rental](#) are my favorite articles to experience and then write.



How did Tofugu evolve from its start to the creation of WaniKani?

I'm constantly unhappy (and usually embarrassed) with everything we've done in the past. So most of the evolution is driven by that dissatisfaction. WaniKani came about as something I wish I had when I was younger, and we were lucky that we weren't the only ones who wanted it.

WaniKani uses SRS (Spaced Repetition System). How did you discover SRS and then later decide to use it to teach kanji?

I'm not sure where I discovered SRS. I think it's been around for a while. It's certainly no secret anymore, and most flashcard systems nowadays have it. So, I don't think that part is very revolutionary. I also don't think that a super accurate SRS system is all that important. I think our SRS is decent and "good enough,"

but the difference between that and "perfect" is quite small for a huge amount of work. The biggest difference-makers of WaniKani are the mnemonics, which help you to keep more information in your short-term memory, for longer. That way you can recall that information when we ask you to recall it—another important feature. We don't have multiple choice, or any kind of passive learning. We actually make you retrieve it. We also include several other inconveniences as well. Interleaving, which we do by mixing item types together in reviews, keeping you out of a flow state by making you pay attention to whether you need to type in a reading or meaning answer (flow states are when you're "in the zone" and they do bad things to deliberate study), and so on. If it's not uncomfortable, it's not learning. There are a lot of fundamental principles around learning and how our brains work that we implement, with SRS being just one of many.

What's the general demographic breakdown of WaniKani users? Is there a certain age range that's more likely to use the service?

I suppose being an online service, we attract more people who are most comfortable online. That tends to be younger people, though we have plenty of learners who are older than the 60 levels they make it through. This is probably true for anything, but our users do need to be at an elementary reading level to use WaniKani well. So if I had to guess, our demographic breakdown is something like "somewhere between high school and one's 30s or 40s." But, that's just a guess, I don't really have a way of actually knowing.

What factors have helped WaniKani grow to the level it is now?

That's pretty simple—WaniKani works. It's not easy. It takes time, and you're not going to "learn Japanese in 30 days" or whatever other services say. But we make that process of learning kanji, and vocabulary, very simple. If you sit down and do your lessons and reviews on WaniKani, you'll make progress in your Japanese. It'll be a little painful, and you won't want to do it some days, but I think we do a good job of helping people to keep up with their studies and learn in a sticky and useful way.

SRS in particular has become heavily associated with Japanese learning across the internet. Do you think WaniKani had a significant part in that?

I have no idea.

What have been some of the difficulties in making Tofugu the company it's become today?

I think it's just all the normal stuff. Growing pains. Figuring out how to run a company in a way I feel good about. Luckily most of our problems happen nice and gradually, so I can't think of one particular thing that was particularly difficult or out there.

Why the combination of "tofu" and "fugu" or "wani" and "kani" for the names of your services? Are there any particular meanings behind the combined words?

No real meanings behind the words. I first figured that it didn't matter what we named these things. Like, it doesn't have to be a 90s style "learnjapanesite dot com" for people to know what we're about or find us. I was just trying to a) use Japanese words, b) choose a couple words that rhyme, and c) repeat as many letters as

possible—the u’s in tofu and fugu, for example, and the ani’s in wani and kani. Then, I tried to keep them under 8-10 letters. Just the sorts of things that make a name easier for people to remember. Sadly, it didn’t work with Tofugu and everyone thinks we’re “tofugo”. They’re repeating the “o” instead of the “u,” probably because “go” is more recognizable than “gu.”

I know many JETs who use WaniKani and Tofugu as Japanese language resources, as well as general ALT resources. Did you have ALTs and other English speakers working abroad in Japan in mind when creating the platform?

I know this is a JET-related publication so I should probably lie, but no—I don’t think we really had it in mind when creating the platform. I think that JETs are people who certainly have a reason to learn some Japanese, so in that sense WaniKani and Tofugu is made for a lot of JETs, but I don’t want to get presumptive here. 😊

WaniKani is a well-known kanji learning platform. Have you considered creating a similar service for Japanese grammar or general vocabulary?

We’ve considered a lot of things and this is certainly one of those things.

What are your future plans for Tofugu and WaniKani?



Jaered Koichi Croes is the founder of Tofugu, LLC that makes Tofugu and WaniKani. In his free time, he cheers for the Mariners, plays kendo, and thinks about education.

Sarah Baughn has been using WaniKani for two years now to supplement her kanji studies. Currently studying for Japanese Language Proficiency Test at N3 level (just for fun) in her spare time, she also enjoys playing koto and collecting goshuin.





A Look Into the Mind of Nathaniel Reed: Founder of ALT Training Online

Nathaniel Reed (Niigata)

Note: Oftentimes when we read something in an article or blog, we find some useful knowledge but quickly forget where we read it. This usually results in us not acting on anything we read. This piece was written to empower you and is not meant to be stored away somewhere in your subconscious. One way of making this piece more useful to your future self is by including a number of references for you to follow. It is important to understand where you teach, who you teach with, and who you teach. Ultimately, a more effective teacher is a better result for everybody.

It's 2021, and there are 20,000 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan. Despite that, the language competency of students in

Japanese public schools, for decades straight, has been one of the lowest in Asian countries: currently trailed only by Laos and Tajikistan (Sawa, 2021).

So, why do our students consistently rank at the bottom of all international language tests like TEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, PISA, etc.? *Furthermore, are ALTs to blame for this?* For anyone that has taught in Japan, even for just a short time, you'll know the answer is 'no'. There are many 'barriers' (a word borrowed from Kano et al. 2016) to us teaching effectively, including the 'one-shot' system, lack of structured teacher training, hiring standards and the English competency of our co-workers.

What's stopping us from delivering a high standard of language education?

The 'one-shot system' is the phrase that describes the number of places we work at: we don't work in one school but in any number each week or month. The one-shot system has been in place since the beginning of the current ALT system, which started in 1987. The regularity with which we teach each class and the agency to impact learners' language learning progression are significantly hindered by this. To put it clearly, one may work at five different schools each week with 15 classes in each school, which is 70 classes in total. For example, you'll see class 1-1 in school one about every 6 weeks, maybe 8 times in an academic year. Can you really affect your student's level of English in this context?

Another barrier is the lack of structured teacher training. Of the 2,000 ALT employers, few provide pre- or in-service teacher training. Those that do train their teachers offer between zero and five days of pre-service training, and any in-service

training ranges from once-a-month meetings to once-a-year conference-style events. While some existing training is conducted through professional teacher trainers, most still rely on teachers sharing ideas with one another. The lack of direction from the ministry is shown in the hiring patterns of ALTs. One way of reading the table below is noticing the shift to more private and direct hire ALTs that generally acquire more training than the orientation and annual SDC offered by CLAIR.

We are all, and truly, in the age of 'open access' where people can share their opinions on things to the whole world, on multiple platforms, with the click of a button. And so these 'barriers to effective teaching' are found all over the internet, and not just in academic articles, and books, but tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube, etc. People are sharing negative aspects of our position (such as the one-shot and lack of training) with ease. Just type 'ALT' in Google to see for yourself (for a recent paper looking at ALTs writing online see Borg, 2020).

Year	JET	Non-JET	Source
1987	848	0	CLAIR, 2016
2002	5,676	3,090	Kashihara, 2008
2006	5,057	5,951	Kashihara, 2008
2013	4,089	11,343	Kano et al, 2016
2016	4,529	13,955	McCrostie, 2017
2020	*6,400 est.	*13,600 est.	Clavel, 2014

** These figures are estimated as official figures are yet to be released.*

Behind the barriers to our effective teaching?

Perhaps the main reason why our training standards are like they are is because of the lack of a job description. The Ministry of Education has never provided a detailed description of our job. In the 2008 Course of Study (the syllabus from the Ministry of Education), our position is just a footnote: 'ALT stands for Assistant Language Teacher. An ALT is a foreign helper to be employed for foreign language education at schools. ALTs are supposed to work along with school teachers for "team teaching."' (MEXT, 2008). Without a detailed job description of ALTs' roles and duties, employers have little guidance on how best to prepare teachers.

Awakening

Japan is a different place than it was in 1987 when the political agreement to bring unskilled non-Japanese people to Japan as teachers was made. Daniel Ussher's video on YouTube titled 'JET 30 years On: Still Meeting Needs?' is a simple summary that paints a picture of how Japanese society is completely different from what it was in 1987 (Confident English, 2018). He mentions a couple of important points, including how other school teachers and parents are tired of the current outdated ALT system and prefer qualified teachers to teach children in Japan.



Japan is a different place than it was in 1987 when the political agreement to bring unskilled non-Japanese people to Japan as teachers was made.



The Ministry of Education has never provided a detailed description of our job.

Some examples of how the teaching landscape has changed include:

- By 2015, 3,079 ALTs were Japanese nationals.
- The number of non-Japanese ALTs with teaching credentials, Masters degrees and PhDs, and who have worked in this role for more than two or three decades is technically unknown as such records aren't kept. But, the numbers are in the hundreds (possibly thousands) as my research over the last 6 years has found.
- There are ALTs who have been teaching since before the JTEs they work with were even born.
- More universities are training non-Japanese people (mostly former ALTs) to be teachers. Perhaps 'J' should be dropped from 'JTE' as 'Japanese' Teachers are increasingly not Japanese.
- Media and online platforms are exposing the realities of school life and educational standards. For example, stories feature ALTs who work with JTEs they used to teach in *eikaiwas*.
- As the foreign community in Japan is in the millions now, social media is flooded daily with comments from people about the number of English mistakes on handouts, mock tests and notebooks that their children bring home from school.
- BoEs have been publicly expressing their frustration at the institutional constraints in sending untrained ALTs to work in schools for some time (Tope, 2003).

However, the modern reality of vastly more experienced and qualified ALTs deserves official recognition. There is a growing army of very capable teachers that could support their learners in getting better results, and who can train other teachers.

From at least the late 1990s, research has consistently found that ALTs are not teaching in assistant capacities but teaching on their own (McConnell, 2000. AJET, 2014. Walter & Sponseller, 2020). Should the 'A' be dropped from ALT too? This can be viewed from at least two angles: teaching unaided with no experience, qualifications, or training is less likely to improve student language competencies. However, ALTs with credentials are a good thing for improving learner competencies. Views of JTEs follow this line of inquiry, too. They are increasingly stating that they prefer working with qualified and skilled teachers, with comments such as 'Teachers leave just as they're getting good,' and 'Getting a good ALT is like winning the lottery' (Clavel, 2014). Other JTE comments include 'Ideally I'd like the ALT to be the main and the JTE to assist' (Walter & Sponseller, 2020), which is quite a common finding these days.

You're probably reading this thinking 'Of course teachers need training. Nothing new here'. And you'd be right. I'm certainly not the first to say that ALTs need higher quality and specific training. So, let's revisit the original question: are ALTs to blame for low standards of English education in Japanese public schools? The answer is 'no'. However, to what extent *could* ALTs improve the foreign language learning competencies of Japanese students?

Previous Training Initiatives

In 2010, Dr Chizuko Kushima and others set up an online venue for ALTs to ask each other questions about the job and build a community of peer support (Kushima, 2011). The Sendai Board of Education also has a solid ALT training system. They hire teachers with five years of experience and provide regular team training with both JTEs and ALTs (Crooks, 2001 and K. Hill, Personal communication, November 29, 2016). Numerous other researchers have put forward a large variety of ways to effectively train teachers. You could see Tajino & Walker (2010); Luxton, Fennelly and Fukuda (2014); and Machida (2019) as some accessible examples. While there have been previous successful ALT training initiatives, and countless ex-ALTs (now working in universities) have researched what to include in the training, there was no resource that consolidated all the research together.

And, it takes a group to put these together and do it. But how?

Providing Training for all ALTs

In 2015, I finished an MA in Linguistics, done completely online. My eyes were open to online learning and training. Whilst writing my dissertation, I got the ALT job and quickly became motivated to improve the level of training provided and to raise the standard of language education in Japanese schools. So, I got to it, and [ALT Training Online](#) was born. But how in the world would I put a complete training programme together, keep it free, and maintain the highest quality standards?

I had been a member of The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) for some time, and within JALT I could network with textbook

writers, MEXT officials, teacher trainers, ALT researchers, online teaching specialists who were mainly all ALTs back in the day. I asked many people to contribute in various ways and always received positive responses. These people write the courses for ALTTO, contribute blogs, proofread our work, act as consultants and much more. Without JALT members, ALTTO wouldn't exist.

Through JALT, I've built relationships with numerous JETs mainly at the international conference in November. Since 2010, AJET and JALT have had a reciprocal affiliation agreement, meaning that JETs get a pass to present at the annual conference. I'm sure that this agreement is why I've seen a clear rise in the number of ALTs attending the November conference. This steadily rising number is further motivation to supply training, as ALTs are actively seeking professional development.

Creating ALT Training Courses

ALTTO has courses ranging from how to effectively teach the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) to teaching special education, CLIL, vocabulary, ICT and more. The order of courses is meant to be linear, as the skills and knowledge in the later courses build on to the earlier courses. But, depending on background and interest, courses can be completed in any order. The content of the courses is pitched at around the graduate level as a continuation of ALTs' undergraduate backgrounds. We also considered people who have completed TEFL or CELTA type courses, and our content compliments those, too.

My MA was all text and a lot of reading. Knowing that completion rates of online courses are below 10%, we worked hard to develop features that assist ALTs to complete the courses. Our primary

way of delivering content has been to provide multimedia and strategically placed reflection questions. Some courses are more text-based while others use more video and audio so that different learning styles are accounted for. The courses are constantly evolving too. Feedback from ALTs on course content is used to edit course content: the feedback loop ensures our courses remain relevant.

ALTs Connected

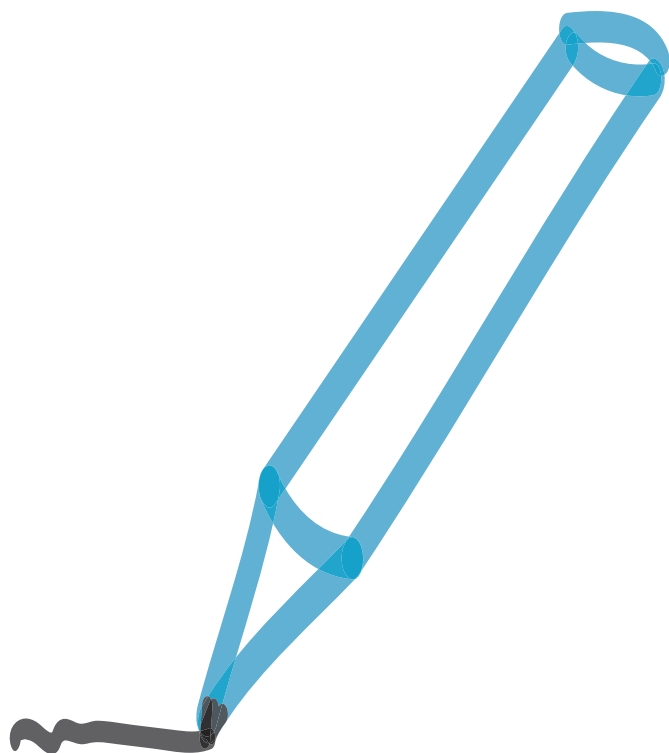
The courses form the complete training, but that's not what it's all about. Remember that there are over 2,000 ALT employers, and there is no communication (or standardised training) between them. Any training must be complemented with network building and social relations. So along with the courses, the 3,000+ ALTs currently subscribed to ALTTO make wide use of our various platforms including [Facebook](#), [Line](#), and [LinkedIn](#). The army of very qualified and experienced ALTs play a key role here in responding to queries and shaping discussions.

ALTTO Blogs and ALT writers

On top of the above, we have a guest blog. Writers range from ALTs sharing ideas and experiences, to book writers, university professors, researchers, teachers with specialised teaching approaches and more. My knowledge base has grown substantially by reading them. The various topics have molded and shaped various aspects of my teaching. If you feel you have something to share, contact our Blog Editor, [David](#)!

Here's a call for your input. The bulk of the articles and books on ALTs (a couple mentioned above) are generally written by university faculty, and not always because they are motivated to

improve teaching standards. However, each year there are a handful of published articles by ALTs themselves (e.g. my latest paper, Reed, (2020)). These articles are read by all kinds of people and sow the seeds of change. Publishing also gives writers more strength on their resumes. One additional goal of ALTTO is to encourage and fully support ALTs in both conducting research and writing up their work (for publication in a quality blog or elsewhere). The final two courses on our site provide full support on how to do this. The Doing Research module was written by a widely published researcher who has written about ALTs numerous times. The Getting Published course is written by a widely published author on education and former editor in chief of an international teaching journal.



Join the ALTTO Team

Currently there are six people on the ALTTO team keeping everything together, and we are always looking for more to come on board to help steer teacher professional skills and to support the other 20,000 ALTs. As more ALT employers are using our training (provided for free), and users grow, we're actively looking for new people to join the team. Contact [me](#) to say 'hi' and become a part of the change.

Nathaniel Reed has been an educator since 2001, working in many countries around the world before settling, unexpectedly, in Japan. A keen tap dancer and dedicated father of two little angels, he's reminded everyday of the importance of delivering high quality education and his mission of continual improvement.



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LEAPING IN AT THE TOP

DEREK HURST (NAGANO)

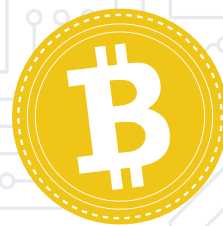
Bitcoin's meteoric rise during the past 10 years is hard both to overlook and to overstate. It has been far and away the best performing asset class of the past decade, with a staggering 8.9 million percent growth rate since 2009; its year-to-date growth in 2020 was 40 percent. (1) So, just in case you need it spelled out, that summarily beats the S&P 500 return. To give you some perspective, if you had bought a mere 100 bitcoins back in 2010 (at the time, this would have cost you approximately 80 US dollars), you would now have almost four million to your name.

However, we need to take a step back and put some of these numbers into perspective. Bitcoin's current market cap, just north of 673 billion US dollars, (2) still makes it a shockingly small player in the otherwise saturated and gilded commodities market; gold's market cap is just over 10 trillion dollars, (3) silver is a tenth of that at around one trillion, and oil is somewhere in the middle. Investors can take these numbers two ways: either Bitcoin is the definition of a small fish in a gigantic pond dominated by whales, or it is a leviathan of Lovecraftian proportions that has barely hatched from its egg. Personally, I am inclined toward the latter. The technology on which Bitcoin is constructed (blockchain) has far-reaching and, frankly, worrying potential to disrupt the famously insular global finance markets, regardless of whether Bitcoin itself actually performs over the long term. The question we need to grapple with now is whether it is still worth it to jump in at the all-time high

and risk getting whipsawed by Bitcoin's famous volatility—potentially leaving us holding a very heavy and risky bag—or sitting on the sidelines with a bag of popcorn, ever-inflating fiat currency, and a beer. There are solid arguments for both, but, if for no other reason than being “in” on the newest financial fad, I say we examine the bull case.

First and foremost, foreign investors in Japan often have few options in terms of making their money work for them. Bitcoin is different. Unlike traditional brokerage accounts, you don't need to meet rigorous residency criteria in order to begin investing in the crypto markets, whether it be Bitcoin or anything else. The decentralized nature of the Bitcoin makes it much more difficult (at the moment, in any case) to regulate. Because of that, opening up a wallet with any one of the many cryptocurrency exchanges around the world is comparatively easier than going through a legacy broker.

Second, there's the trust aspect, which, up until recently, has been on shaky ground. Although, things are changing fast. Both PayPal (PYPL) and Square (SQ) were the first two major firms to go in on Bitcoin and have recently expanded their offerings to include cryptocurrency, (4) making it easier and more accessible than ever to jump into the space. With Coinbase, the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange, planning an initial public offering later this year, it's clear crypto is becoming a mainstay on Wall



Street. Every investment bank from Goldman to Blackrock have now rebalanced their portfolios to include at least a bit of crypto; (5) even Warren Buffet is eyeing the digital currency. Institutional interest is there, and that should give investors true confidence in Bitcoin's staying power.

Reason three is more speculative in nature, but, if we run just a bit of technical analysis, I think it'll soon become clear Bitcoin's continued dominance is all but assured. Back in December of 2014, Bitcoin rallied to an eye-watering 19,200 US dollars per coin, which, at the time, was an all-time high. Unfortunately, it soon came crashing back down to the four figures; but sure enough, at the end of 2020, driven by renewed hype and the aforementioned institutional interest, Bitcoin rallied back up to 14,000, then 19,000, later 25,000, and finally, an all-time high of 40,731 US dollars per coin in early January. It has since come corrected a bit, but when we draw lines and look at its rolling average, the sky looks like the limit. Some bulls are even setting their price targets over 500,000 US dollars per coin within five years.

We have no idea what the world will look like in 2025, much less a month from now, but I think it is clear that Bitcoin is here to stay. Quantitative easing by central banks around the world is going to continue to depreciate fiat currencies, and Bitcoin, along with other more traditional safe-havens like gold, are almost guaranteed to continue to shoot up. The difference with

Bitcoin is that buying crypto has never been more accessible. If today's price looks too high for you, ask yourself this one question: would you rather get in now, when you can easily buy even fractions of a Bitcoin, or ten years from now, when the price is a hundred times what it is today? Leaping in at the top may be scary for some, but for the investing astronauts, the moon is the only destination worth mentioning, and I'm pretty sure that's where we're headed.

Derek Hurst is not a financial professional, so his words are not intended to constitute investment advice. However, he is a passionate follower of investing, business, and tech who works and lives in Nagano.

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On Being a Renaissance Man in Japan, Canadian-Punk Style

Laurier Tiernan (Tōkyō) interviewed by Derek Hurst (Nagano)

Though it may not look it outwardly, Tōkyō is one of the most diverse places around, and home to a bustling live music scene that would hold its own against Austin, Nashville or any other chic music city. What makes Tōkyō, and Japan, to a larger extent, special is that the idea of performance seems to be an inextricable part of the Japanese identity, as ingrained and critical to the national character as honor and respect and duty. Such a stoic land as this requires their release valves to

keep everything running smoothly, and whether it be hot springs, end of the year parties, or music club-hopping, it's an itch that just has to be scratched. Savvy and talented folk with keen eyes and nimble fingers can take advantage of the situation, and with a little luck, hard work, and vision, carve out a place for themselves in the land of the rising sun. Laurier Tiernan is one such act, and in this candid and illuminating interview, shows us exactly what it takes to do what he does.



Give me an overview of what you do.

I am mostly a musician (mostly as an eponymous solo artist “Tiernan” and with my acoustic duo “nature airliner”).

Besides my own projects, I have also played guitar and bass behind some of Japan’s most famous entertainers, in their music videos; Exile, SMAP, Yazawa Eikichi, etc. In addition to this, I am a broad-spectrum media figure, having done innumerable voice-overs for radio and television, as well as having written extensively for outlets around the world. As a side note, I have also done a smattering of acting, with my first speaking lines in a major movie allegedly coming out in the summer of 2021. In short, I am mostly a musician, but I also do whatever else that strikes my fancy, in a creative vein.

How exactly did you get started in the music business? It seems like a pretty insular industry.

It is prohibitively insular and hermetic here in Japan. My music career actually began, as with many westerners, from teenage angst. My mom bought me a \$60 guitar from a department store catalog when I was fifteen, and I immediately began writing songs like a madman with it. Soon afterwards, I was screaming for my first punk band, with which I performed in my first competition. I was already a bit of a veteran of the indie music scene before I moved to Japan, so it wasn’t something I started up here.

What's something that would surprise people about your work?

How many people have seen me naked [laughs], and how it doesn't bother me at all? As I mentioned before, outside of music, I've always let myself do whatever creative work appeals to me, and I kind of accidentally started a career as a nude model when I was twenty-three. A room mate was doing it, and offered me the chance to try it out. Since then, I've appeared nude in countless photographs, paintings, sketches, and sculptures for artists around the world. The most "surprising" one so far, for me was that—in 2017—a photographer with whom I had a mutual friend offered me a gig to pose naked for the cover of an upcoming album being released by a legendary Japanese heavy metal band. My immediate thoughts were, "I'm not sure I'm ready to be seen naked in every record store in this country!" However, my manager immediately said, "Do it!" and, so we did.

What kind of effect has COVID had?

The disease itself has had absolutely no effect on my work. However, the public (and industry) response has been nothing short of havoc. Most notably, my acoustic duo, nature airliner, was booked for a huge festival in Lithuania in August 2020, as well as a connected tour of Eastern Europe, but that was all cancelled on the promoter's side due to the restrictions that came about in regards to the pandemic.

Apart from that, I have seen innumerable offers for potential voice-over and TV gigs be quashed because of the fear created by this disease. It has been supremely trying, but I understand everyone's need to stay safe. On the lighter side of the issue, it's mostly been slight adjustments or implements, like I *always* bring my own microphone when I play concerts now, and all TV and movie shoots have thermometer guns to take our temperature before we are allowed to start our workday.

What has been the biggest shock for you about the biz?

The biggest shock for me has been learning how much of this industry is (or *these industries are*) not how you'd imagine from the layman's perspective. The layman's (and amateur's) preconceptions are often terribly wrong. Even, as I get closer and closer to my goals, I'm embarrassed to learn how much of my own preconceptions were false. As a few concrete—and more explicit—examples, I can tell you that when I won a certain competition in Vancouver in 2001, media veterans were predicting my allegedly imminent fame, but it didn't happen. And, then in 2008, when I was getting airplay around the world on my own steam, I thought for sure this would lead to the life of my dreams, but I am still working on that. So, things are not always as they seem. One of the hard lessons I've learned is that most "overnight success" stories have had millions of dollars poured into their making, by investors that most people never hear about.

What do the next five to ten years look like?

Laurier: Well, as I said, it *seems* like my major (Japanese) film debut is slated for summer 2021, and before that I have a handful of singles and music videos that I will be releasing and pushing hard. I have my latest (fashion) catalog modeling work coming out in the next few months as well. In the grand scheme of things, I want to perform in bigger festivals in Europe with different projects, get my songs into major movies and move to London. We'll see how much of that I can get done before 2030.

Nature Airliner



Any words of advice for people looking to break into the Japanese art scene?

Regardless of how cheesy one might think his band is, Blackie Lawless of W.A.S.P. said one of the most intelligent things I've ever heard about the music industry: it doesn't need people who want to make it, it needs people who *need* to make it. Having a hobby is fine, and I encourage everyone to have a creative hobby, but if you really want to break into this industry, I wouldn't suggest trying unless it's something your heart cries out for and your mind thinks about 24/7. If you're not consumed by your drive to be professionally creative, the pain and adversity of these industries will discourage you really quickly. Also, realize that most artists face "failure" or rejection way more often than success. Even the successful artists only manage to record 3-7% of what they write, because the rest just "isn't good enough". And, even then, what percentage of those recordings receive critical acclaim, or even just sales off of which one can live?

So, I reiterate, I'd only advise people to "get into this" industry if they feel that their creativity is an irrefutable part of themselves. If they just feel that their art is "something they do," then it's probably best to just regard it as a hobby—which is entirely valid and important, in and of itself.

Laurier Tiernan is a Canadian musician, model and voice over artist living in Tōkyō, Japan. He currently tours the world with his acoustic singer-songwriter duo, "nature airliner," while also working on his own solo projects. In addition to all major online retailers, you can find his work on [his website](#) or on [nature airliner's website](#)

*Derek Hurst is the business editor for AJET **CONNECT**, and when not skimming the pages of the Wall Street Journal usually finds himself behind a piano or a guitar, bringing his own music to life.*

ARTS AND CULTURE

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"Can't repeat the past? Why, of course you can!"
— Jay Gatsby, from *"The Great Gatsby"*
(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

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"The biggest mistake I made was believing that if I cast a beautiful net, I'd catch only beautiful things."
— *The OA*

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"To be able to play and experiment through fashion and beauty in a judgment-free space is the best way to learn who you are and come into your own." — Christina Zervanos, head of PR at *"The Phluid Project"*

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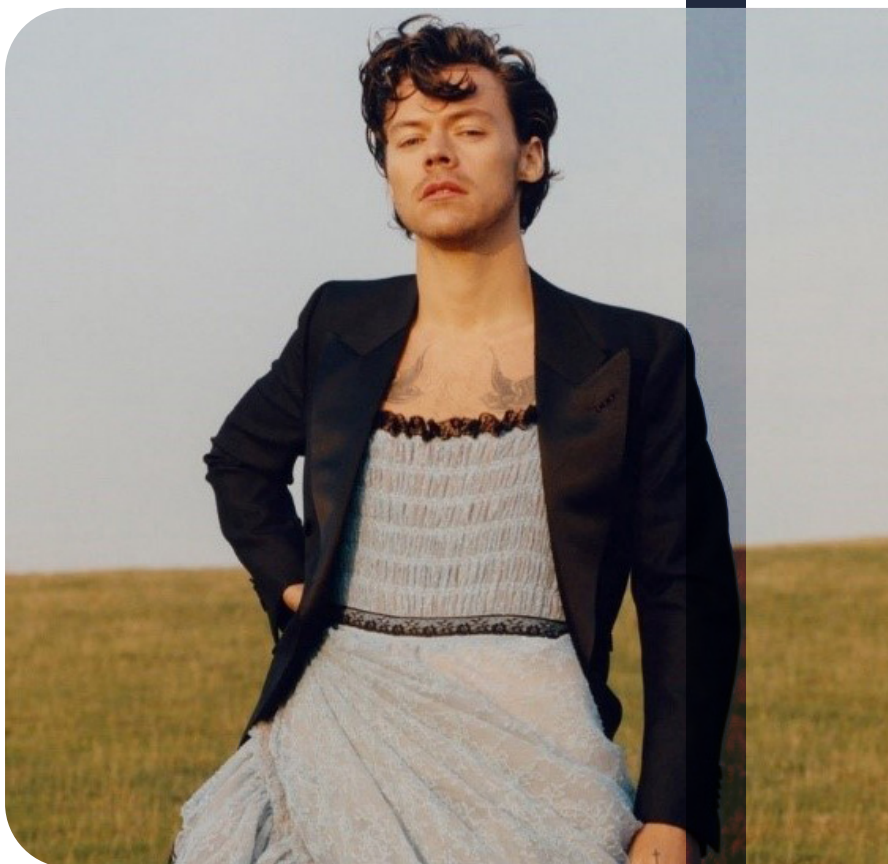
Jessica Craven

"Success can be destructive to the creative process. I say it all the time: success is as dangerous as total failure." — Marilyn Minter



Brett Borthwick (Tottori)

Harry Styles exploded into the media once again after becoming the first man to ever appear solo on the cover of *Vogue* in November, and he did it all wearing a dress. While many supported Styles, a [tweet](#) written by conservative commentator Candice Owens circulated online blasting the singer for his choice of garment. The tweet disapprovingly called for a revival of traditional gender-norms with the tagline “Bring back manly men.”



He blasted back by posting a picture of himself eating a banana and reclaiming the mocking phrase as the caption. These actions helped some people in the general public to acknowledge a new age of gender expression. A place where asking pronouns is becoming more commonplace and even the idea of a conventional binary gender system being acknowledged as arbitrary. As such, transgressive clothing choices are on the rise. It would be easy to pitch masculinity and femininity against each other.

Pretty Hu

“Manly M Not the Nor

The fight to achieve the ideal vision of beauty is a tale as old as time for women and femme-identifying people. Magazines can attribute their success to feeding on their insecurities, no matter where they live. Whether the battlefield is in London or Tōkyō, a minefield is still a minefield. I remember the stares my friend received on an Ōsaka subway for wearing a crop top at night.

It's not just a faux-pas in the wardrobe department that can make you a fashion outcast. Now that the world of fashion has been globalised, with social media dictating the trends just as much as fashion houses, there are new battles arising. Whether it be modesty vs. exposure, dark skin vs. light skin, dramatic vs. soft make-up, sexy vs. cute—there are more ways than ever to feel “in fashion,” but there are also more ways to be discriminated against for your choices. These themes are very telling of the discrepancies between how ideal fashion is viewed through the lenses of different communities. And so, I was intrigued to look at the same issue from a different angle.

arts

Men" are m in Japan

Like Styles, I'm also a white British man whose fashion and self-expression has changed over time. Unlike Styles, I'm not an internationally acclaimed musician or icon in any way. However, after noticing his shoot, I couldn't help but scrutinise my own fashion choices over the last few years. In my case, the influencing factor in my style progression was the fact that I now live in Japan. Even in the depths of the countryside, somewhere not known for being particularly fashion-forward as somewhere like Tōkyō, the feminine inspirations in men's style are still noteworthy. In stores, tall, slender mannequins sporting oversized flowing silhouettes proudly market the "ideal" look. In stations, posters of idol members display their soft make-up, floppy hair and dangly earrings.



Before

Before and after my style became "Japanised".



After

This new environment has obviously had an impact on me. After a new wardrobe, a perm, a significant amount of weight loss, an earring and starting to apply simple make-up, maybe I am slightly closer to what is considered the “standard” here in Japan. I took to TikTok to document my change where I was met with mainly positive comments. A few—perhaps jokingly—said I had been “Japanised.” Speaking of TikTok, you may be aware of the phenomenon known as the e-boy.

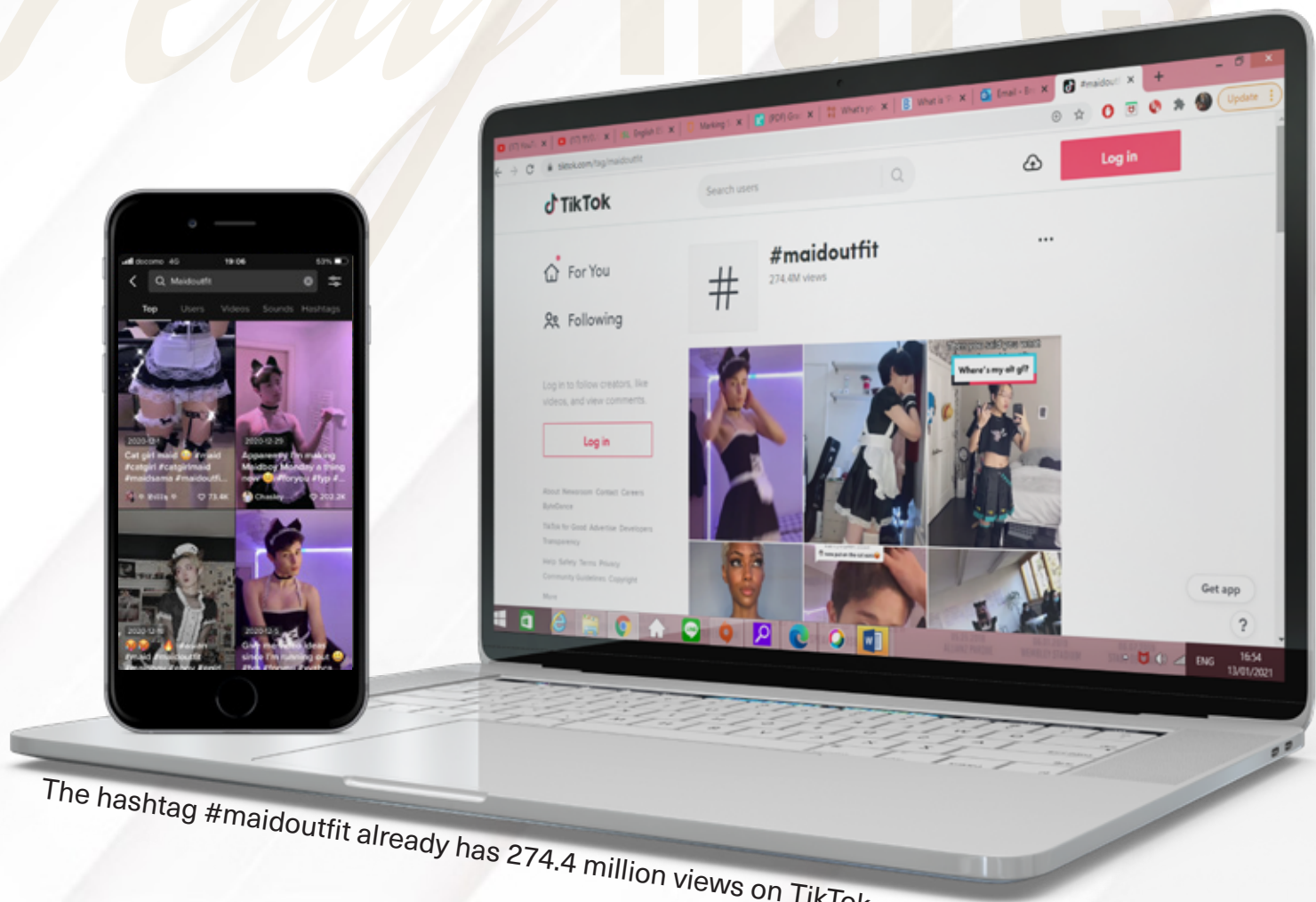


The screenshot shows the Urban Dictionary website interface. At the top, the 'urban' logo is in a stylized font with 'DICTIONARY' in smaller letters below it. Navigation links for 'Browse', 'Categories', 'Store', and 'Blog' are visible. A search bar prompts the user to 'Type any word...'. The main content area features a 'TOP DEFINITION' label in a yellow box. The word 'eboy' is displayed in a large, blue, bold font. Below it, the definition reads: 'A boy that probably skates, has his nails painted w rings, wears [beanies](#), maybe has a cute [egirl](#) girlfriend, always wearing vans and [long sleeves](#) or hoodies under tshirts, their hair is sometimes parted down the middle. They basically only exist on the internet unfortunately but we can still appreciate them on instagram:('. Below the definition is a quote attributed to 'Nobody': '[eboys](#): "I listen to [brockhampton](#) and [lil peep](#) 🙄👀👀"'. Social media sharing icons for Twitter, Facebook, and a generic share icon are located to the right of the definition.

Of course, all of this seems to have come into the mainstream very quickly. So, considering the upheaval of last year, did commands to stay home give men space to try something new without fear of being judged (or worse)? Without the routine of school, work, or the threat of judgement from family or friends to dissuade them, lockdowns saw men curiously pick up the nail varnish. Many proudly shared their designs on TikTok and Instagram. Many of those experimenting with their self-expression in this way found community in the culture of “e-girls” and “e-boys” (electronic girls and boys) that has had growing popularity in recent years. This isn’t the first time that a wave of young men has painted their nails and embraced more feminine styles. Typically, chipped black nails

were associated with the punk and emo subcultures of the 90s and early 2000s. By definition, a subculture goes against the grain of mainstream society, so it makes perfect sense that Avril Lavigne-era skater boys would lacquer their nails to give the middle finger to rigid societal norms. Although at the time it might not have seemed to be much more than kids being punks, it has evolved into a statement against an outdated binary. As has been previously mentioned, fashion comes in swings and roundabouts, so it is about time that Gen Z brought the look back to the spotlight (or ring light). In fact, the e-boy staples seem to give a nod to the subculture’s emo origins, as grungy padlock necklaces and heavy chains are considered a staple alongside dangly earrings. A perfect blend of masculine and feminine.

Pretty Hurts

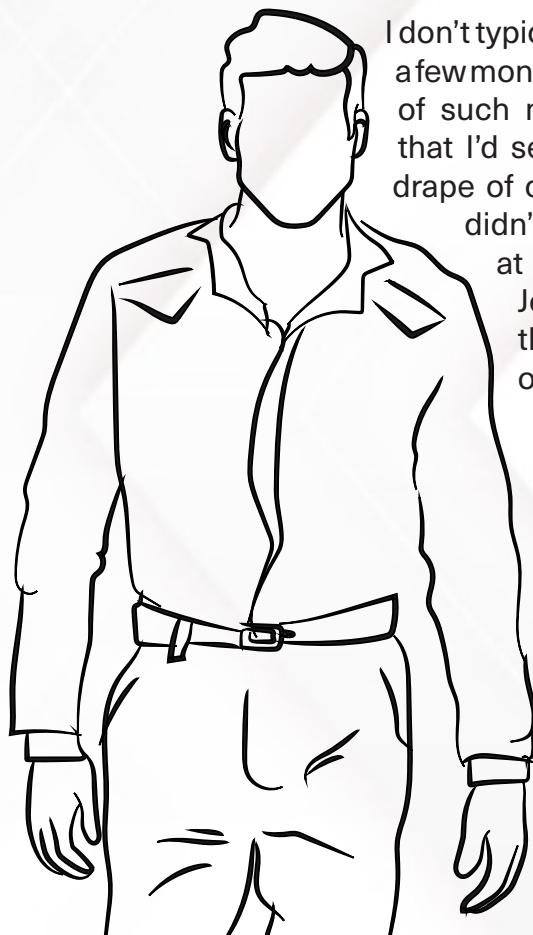


The hashtag #maidoutfit already has 274.4 million views on TikTok.

Some might argue many men are joining this trend to “get clout,” as it were, meaning to garner a sense of power or influence, specifically by winning over online followers. That’s what a trend is though; it’s picked up, gathers traction, becomes overused, then changes into something else. Which brings us to the rise of *shudders* . . . maid outfits. I just had a flashback to visiting a maid café in Ōsaka (an experience I don’t want to repeat). However, this time it’s not middle-aged women eerily speaking in young squeaky voices while serving

middle-aged customers. It’s once again young men who are the ones mass-ordering the kind of outfit that stereotypical “weebs” (foreigners obsessed with Japan) would want their anime *waifu* (wife) to wear, in order to be noticed. So what we have now is more men indeed wearing dresses, but is it all in the name of freedom of expression? Some TikTokers are against it, citing fetishisation of Asian men, which perpetuates stereotypes of submission and inferiority.

Magazines targeting university students give tips on how to apply make-up.



I don't typically buy fashion magazines, but I started a few months ago. While perusing the glossy photos of such magazines like those above, I realised that I'd seen the same angular cut, and flowing drape of clothing before. I had seen people who didn't identify as women wearing dresses at publicised events before. For example, Johnathan Van Ness, widely known from the hit life-makeover show "Queer Eye," often shows off their "women's" clothes on their Instagram account. Actor and singer Billy Porter iconically wore his tuxedo/gown combo to the Oscars in February 2019. He also wore an outfit designed to resemble a uterus to the Tony Awards in June of the same year, to honour the women's reproductive rights moment.



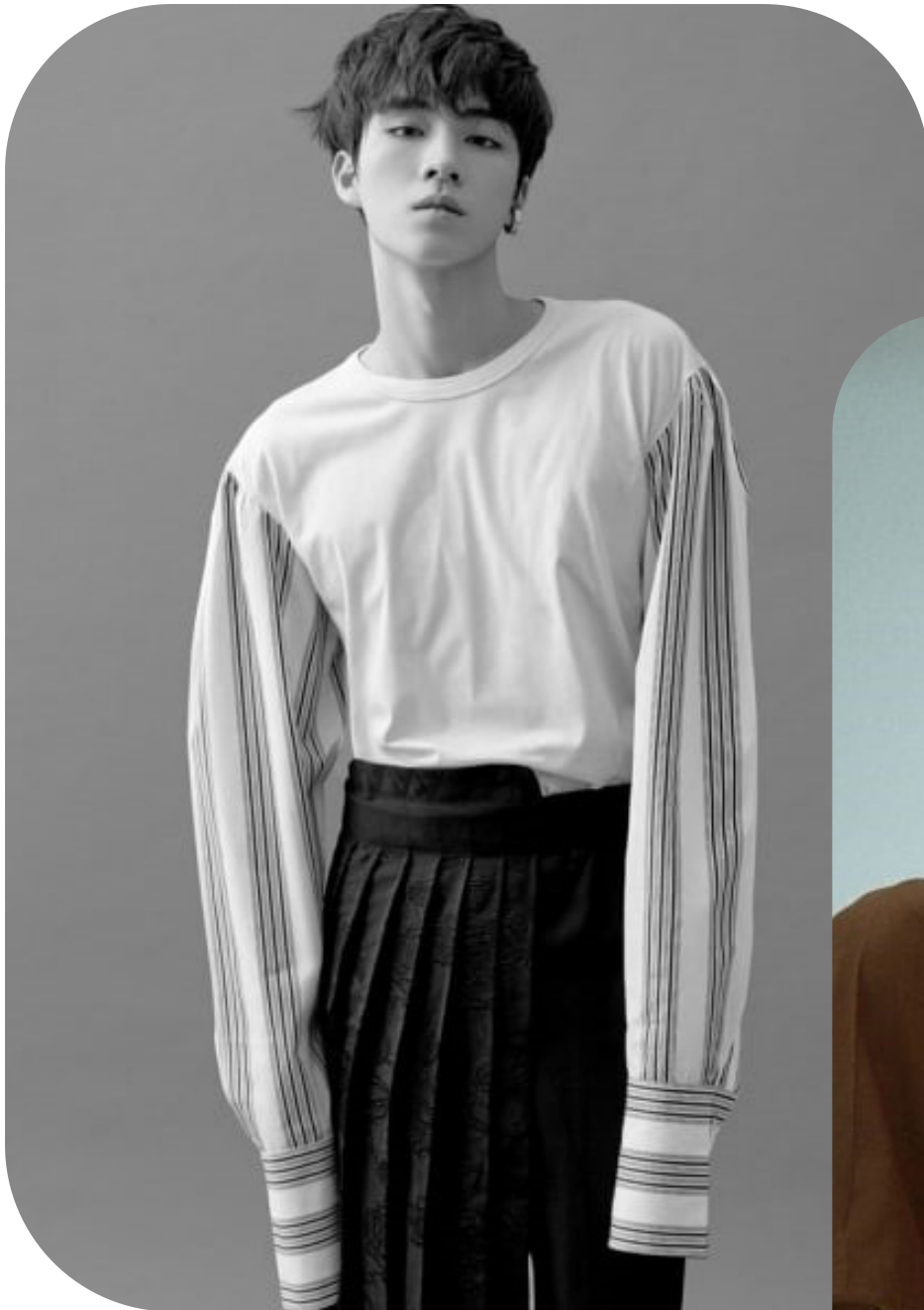
So when it comes to the December issue of Vogue featuring Harry Styles, why is the world going crazy over this seemingly unoriginal move? The answer is that Vogue deciding to publish the photo of Styles has set in motion the wheels of acceptance of gender-non-conformance on a large scale. And thanks to what is probably the biggest film centred around fashion, “fashion influences everything.” In “The Devil Wears Prada”, Meryl Streep’s scathing character enlightened us all to how fashion influences our choices, even if we are unaware of it.



Once the biggest fashion magazine in the world OKs something, it will trickle down until even the most unassuming man who doesn’t seemingly care about his clothing choices picks up a reincarnation of a once controversial piece that ended up in a fast-fashion shop.



You’re also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn’t it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic “casual corner” where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. — Meryl Streep, “The Devil Wears Prada”



The feminine touches to Asian idols' clothing are evident.





So is femininity the new trend? Or is it acceptance? And if yes, when will it become so last season? Even if the next autumn/winter selection has moved on from the place of acceptance we are experiencing now, just remember that fashion always comes full circle.

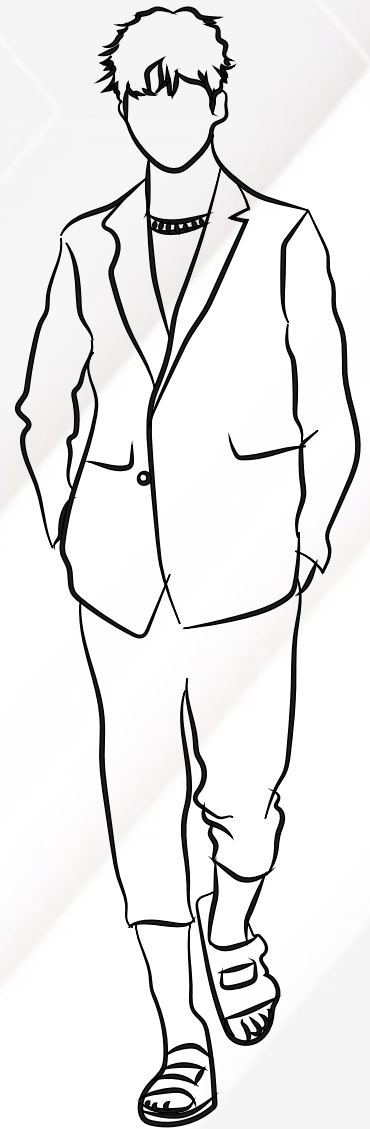
There seems to be a bittersweetness to this. As advancements towards freedom of expression are being made, disappointingly it is typically straight, cis, white (in the case of Styles) men being applauded for doing something that, specifically, Black, indigenous and other queer people of colour have been doing in their daily lives since time gone by. What's more, there seems to be a certain irony in Japanese men's fashion being inspired by queer culture, in a country where LGBTQIA+ people are not often fairly represented.

And while some might see themselves as pioneers, or simply even fashion-conscious in this new age of gender fluidity, whether they know it or not, men around the world have a lot to owe to queer fashion icons who broke the ground on merging once-gendered fashion.

Brett is a 26-year-old part-time writer/full-time foreigner from the U.K. Having lived in rural Japan for two and a half years, he is now the main character. Instagram/TikTok: @yasaitabetai

Images sources:

1. [Harry Styles Vouge dress](#)
2. [Billy Porter tuxedo dress](#)
3. [K-pop Idols](#)



FEBRUARY REVIEWS & RECOMMEN DATIONS

Recommended Album:

Discovery by fox capture plan

Ryon Morrin (Hokkaido)

Released: November 4th, 2020
Jazz/Progressive

Despite their continuous evolution, fox capture plan's unique blend of jazz and progressive rock remains instantly recognizable. After contributing to soundtracks for TV dramas, anime, and films and winning numerous Jazz Japan Awards early in their careers, the critically-acclaimed trio are now back with their 8th full-length album, *Discovery*.

On *Discovery*, pianist Ryo Kishimoto, bassist Hidehiro Kawai, and drummer Tsukasa Inoue have masterfully melded genres from across the spectrum into a stunning collection of songs. Punchy rock n' roll speed, stylish jazzy progressions, and laid back hip hop beats are all present on this record. These three are technical musicians of the highest caliber, and it's clear each song was written and performed with laser focus. Remarkably, fcp's lack of a vocalist is almost unnoticeable. Kishimoto fills the role with countless memorable melodies and, although purely instrumental, the band's music is highly accessible.

Jazz remains the core of their work, but inspiration from techno can be heard in the robotic synths on tracks like the energetic yet melancholy "PRDR." Inoue's danceable beat pushes the



techno theme further, blurring the lines between a jazz club and a rave. "Sprinter" is aptly named, coursing with urgent speed and triumphant, adventurous piano runs. Its abrupt transitions between bright and sparkly chords and darker somber ones carry you on a journey. Rapid-fire, bubbly synths float in the background, reminiscent of a game about a well-known blue hedgehog.

Discovery strives to cover a lot of ground stylistically and is mostly successful.





However, a few songs, namely “夜間航路” (Night Route), feel oddly out of place and disconnected from the rest of the album. The funky rhythm sounds jarringly casual, and constant handclaps make for a cheesy, low-budget feel. Thankfully, the album’s overall atmosphere is left intact despite this misstep.

From start to finish, fox capture plan’s latest release is a sonically beautiful record. *Discovery* is evidence that an entirely instrumental album can reach far beyond the label of “musician’s music.” These songs don’t need lyrics to be memorable or communicate deeper meaning. Emotive melodies and soulful solos speak for themselves.

Stream *Discovery* now on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music.

Ryon Morrin is a second-year Assistant Language Teacher from Boise, ID living in Shintotsukawa, Hokkaido, a small farming town known for its high-quality rice and beautiful scenic views. He’s a writer, a traveler, and a lover of live music.



Recommended Podcast:

Made in Japan—Conversations with Meljo Catalan

Alice Ridley (Gunma)

Made in Japan—Conversations with Meljo Catalan is a society and culture podcast hosted by Filipino-American Meljo Catalan. The podcast’s tagline is “This is not your run-of-the-mill ‘Cool Japan’ podcast,” and after thirty-six episodes to date, this still rings true. The podcast consists of conversations between Meljo and various guests who hail from all walks of life, from Japanese-local hip hop fanatics to long-term international resident beer brewers. Although the host himself is a corporate English teacher, most of his guests are long-term residents, older and more stably-settled in Japan than your average fresh-faced JET participant. They discuss making it in Japan, and their experiences getting where they are today. The podcast features a heavy dose of Meljo chuckling between sentences, which is quite endearing and puts the listener at ease. Overall the tone of the podcast is similar to a conversation between friends and steers clear from common stereotypes of living in Japan. Meljo’s previous students also regularly appear as guests, making for nostalgic moments between them. The podcast’s warm atmosphere makes it a great way to get your socialisation fix in these trying times.

Made in Japan makes a point to seek out non-white voices and experiences, making it a breath of fresh air from the comparatively privileged “white male foreigner in Japan” narrative. Meljo discusses actively seeking POC guests in episode [thirty-five](#) with the host of [Tokyo Speaks](#), and it was really great to hear Meljos’ perspective on it.

At the time of writing, *Made in Japan* has just wrapped up a five-part series of interviews with other Japan-based podcasters. It’ll be back to its regular schedule moving into the new year, featuring online-based interviews due to Japan’s COVID-19 restrictions. You can find *Made in Japan* [here](#), and it is available wherever you get your pods. The best way to get in touch with Meljo is through his instagram on [@madeinjapanpodcast](#).

*Alice Ridley is the Head Editor of **CONNECT**. She likes podcasts, mountains, and quiet art galleries. Find her current favourite podcasts [here](#).*



The PlayStation 5 is out in the wild now, or at least it would be if there were enough units to go around. PS5s are sold out across the world. Most retailers are not even taking preorders for them at this point. And supply is so scarce now that used units are selling for upwards of 100,000 yen—twice the retail price of new ones! If you do manage to get your hands on one, though, here are some of the next-gen treats you can expect from it.

Shiny New Hardware

The first thing you'll notice about the PS5 once seeing it in person is how big it is. This is one chunky boy. The console is 39.0 cm x 10.4 cm x 26.0 cm. That's about twice the volume of the PS4 Pro. It's also quite heavy, weighing 4.5 kg compared to the PS4 Pro's 3.3 kg. It's definitely not the kind of system you'd want to be regularly carrying between TVs or anything, but once you have it set up and stowed away, the size isn't much of an issue.

While the PS5's wavy black and white design is eye-catching, the controller is where the new hardware really shows. PS5 controllers are a bit bigger than their PS4 predecessors and fill the hand in a way that's more akin to the Xbox's. It definitely feels the best to hold of all the PlayStation controllers. It still has the light bar and touch pad from the PS4 era, though they are resized and moved around a bit, plus a headphone jack (which is extra-appreciated in this modern headphone-jack-less age). New to this generation is a built-in speaker and microphone, adaptive triggers, and a completely reworked rumble system.

The speaker and mic can be used to let you chat with your friends without a headset, and the speaker can also be used for immersive sound effects while in game. In *Astro's Playroom*, the tech-demo platformer that comes with every PS5, the speaker plays your character's footsteps when you move around, plus some ambient sounds like wind



blowing or leaves crunching. It mixes with the main game audio well and makes the whole experience feel more immersive.

The new “adaptive” triggers are also a great addition. They can change their resistance level from smooth and loose to stiff and resistant, and anywhere in between, depending on context in game. When using a bow in *Demon's Souls*, for example, the trigger will smoothly pull halfway down as you ready your bow, then provide more resistance as you pull it the rest of the way, emulating the bow string. In *Astro's Playroom*, there are sequences where it will convincingly mimic the feeling of pulling a gun's trigger or pressing down on a spring. This is something I had never seen a game do before that left me with a genuine smile on my face. It's just one small touch, but it is definitely something that you can only experience on the PS5.

The improved rumble also provides a sizable boost in immersion. Before now, rumble was mostly just about how hard or fast the controller was shaking, but with the PS5's controllers, it can now approximate the weightiness and feel of different actions. For example, swinging a big metal sword into a wall in *Demon's Souls* will cause the controller to vibrate in a ring-y sort of way like a tuning fork. It also feels different when you hit your weapon against stone, metal, and wood. *Astro's Playroom* also alters the rumble feel with your footsteps to imply what kind of ground you're walking on. Even with no audio or video cues, I could feel if my character was walking on stone, sand, or grass. It's extremely impressive, and I hope that more developers will make similarly good use of it in the future.

Graphical Upgrades: 4K, SSD, RTX, and Other Exciting Acronyms!

New console generations are first and foremost about the boost in visual fidelity (unless you're Nintendo, anyway), and PS5 definitely delivers in that regard. Many of PS5's launch games support native 4k, 60+ frames per second, and ray tracing technology. If you're unfamiliar with ray tracing, put simply, it's a new and very resource-heavy way to render stunning lighting and reflection effects, and it's been the talk of the town coming into this new generation of consoles and PC video cards.

These new technologies all place a lot of demand on the CPU and GPU, though, so you'll often be choosing how to spend that power by selecting between a crystal-clear 2160p (otherwise known as 4k) image at 30fps, or silky-smooth 60fps gameplay—usually at somewhere between 1440p and 1800p. *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* even offers an impressive 60fps ray tracing option, though it doesn't run at native 4k in that mode. Simpler games like *Astro's Playroom*, however, are able to offer an impressive 4k experience at a locked 60fps, even with ray tracing enabled.

Perhaps the most impressive hardware upgrade from the PS4 is the PS5's blazing-fast solid state drive, or SSD. This allows games to load insanely fast, to the point where the PS5 remake of *Demon's Souls* completely removed the original's loading screens and replaced them with a momentary puff of fog to hide zone changes.




Games also load from the system menu in a matter of seconds now, which is particularly appreciated after some last-gen offenders like *Final Fantasy XV*, *Monster Hunter World*, and *Destiny* could take over a minute to load.

One other big change for PS5 is that the system now enables HDR for everything at a system level, whereas before it was a toggle on a game by game basis.

All of these improvements combine to create a visual experience above anything available on last-gen consoles. That said, visual improvements between console generations are reaching the point of diminishing returns, so while PS5 games absolutely look better than PS4 games, the generational leap is smaller than it has been in the past. That's one reason the other new hardware features the system brings to the table on the controller front are so appreciated.

Backwards Compatibility: Everything Old is New Again

While some of the PS5 games on store shelves right now are good enough on their own to warrant the hardware upgrade (if you can find one, anyway), its improvements to PS4 titles bring new life to some of the best titles of this past console generation. Though backwards compatibility isn't completely new for the PlayStation brand (PS2s and some PS3s were backwards compatible with old games), this is the first time a console has actually been able to make those games look and play significantly better. In addition to playing PS5 games, the system is also doing double duty as a PlayStation 4 Pro... Pro!




Many PS4 titles had their own set of options letting you choose between a high resolution and a high frame rate since the PS4 wasn't powerful enough to support both at the same time. But now on PS5, many of those titles will let you have your proverbial cake and eat it too, running at 60fps even on the mode that used to run at 30fps to allow for a higher resolution. Many recent PS4 games have also gotten patches to take advantage of the PS5's hardware, such as the excellent *Ghost of Tsushima*, which now offers a higher resolution, better frame rate, and faster load times on PS5.

This is a great excuse to go back and play or replay excellent PS4 gems with enhanced features on PS5 like *Final Fantasy XV*, *God of War*, *Dark Souls III*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *Destiny 2*, *No Man's Sky*, and more. This deal is doubly sweet since, just by purchasing a PS5 and activating PS+, you are entitled to free copies of 20 of PS4's best games, including many of those mentioned above.

To 2021 and Beyond

The PS5 is available now (if you're lucky!) in two configurations, a 50,000 yen standard configuration with an Ultra HD Blu-ray disc drive, and a 40,000 yen "all-digital" configuration that lacks the drive. They both have the same amount of storage, identical specs, and everything else aside from the drive, but do note that "all-digital" really means all digital. It won't be able to handle any physical media, which may or may not matter to you in this ultra-futuristic year of 2021.



With 2020 wrapped up now, it's nice to have had something exciting like a new console launch among all the chaos. The fact that the system and its games are such a delight makes it all the better. And while PS5s are still very difficult to get your hands on, if this console generation is anything like the last few, that problem should subside in the coming months as the supply catches up to the demand. Good luck on the hunt for one! Happy New Year, and happy gaming!

Nathan Post is a former JET who worked for five years in Gunma middle schools. He now works as a Japanese to English game translator in Tokyo. His New Year's resolution is to catch up on his embarrassingly long gaming backlog.

FEBRUARY RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

February 4

- Melancholy (2021)

February 5

- Daniel Isn't Real (2019)
- Diego Maradona (2019)
- Illuminated (2019)
- The Fable: Chapter Two (2021)

February 10

- Yuna (2021)

February 11

- Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (2019)
- Under the Open Sky (2020)
- Princess Principal Crown Handler: Chapter 1 (2021)
- First Love (2021)

February 12

- Cosmoball (2020)
- After the Wedding (2019)
- Okay Madam (2020)
- Conviction (2018)

February 15

- Asakusa Kid (2021)

February 19

- A Tale of Love and Darkness (2015)
- Babyteeth (2019)
- Beasts Clawing at Straws (2020)
- Daniel (2019)
- Mestari Cheng (2019)
- The Door Into Summer (2021)
- Let the Child Be the Guide (2017)

February 20

- Journey to the Safest Place on Earth (2013)

February 26

- Skylines (2020)
- Guns Akimbo (2019)
- Capone (2020)
- Force of Nature (2020)
- Stage Mother (2020)
- Playmobil: The Movie (2019)
- Mia and the White Lion (2018)
- Miss (2020)
- My Rembrandt (2019)
- Nazha Reborn (2021)

February 27

- DAU. Natasha (2020)
- Moving On (2019)

GAMES

February 2

- Destruction AllStars (PS5)

February 4

- Werewolf: The Apocalypse – Earthblood (PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S)
- Blue Fire (PC, Switch)
- Nuts (PC, Switch)

February 5

- Nioh 2 – The Complete Edition (PC)
- The Nioh Collection (PS5)

February 11

- Little Nightmares 2 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

February 12

- Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury (Switch)

February 16

- Hellish Quart – Steam Early Access (PC)

February 18

- Rustler – Steam Early Access (PC)

February 23

- Persona 5 Strikers (PC, PS4, Switch)
- Curse of the Dead Gods (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

February 25

- Ghosts 'n Goblins Resurrection (Switch)

February 26

- Bravely Default 2 (Switch)

February - Unannounced Date

- Century: Age of Ashes – Steam Early Access (PC)
- Capcom Arcade Stadium (Switch)

Sources:

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

<https://www.vg247.com/2021/01/22/video-game-release-dates-2021/>



WHAT'S THAT YOU SAY? IT'S HATSUMŌDE!

Three Experiences of "The First Shrine Visit"





In my first year on JET, as the new year approached, I learned about *hatsumōde*—the first temple or shrine visit in the new year, and how some people lined up before midnight to sometimes literally ring in the new year by hitting a temple bell. I tasked my husband with picking out a temple or shrine for us to have our first *hatsumōde* experience at. One of his *eikaiwa* (English conversation class) students suggested Seimei Shrine. The student told him about Abe no Seimei, the *onmyōji* honored there. Onmyōji were sort of government-sanctioned magicians, practicing astrology and divination. Abe no Seimei is the most famous one. He has appeared in manga, movies, and even mobile games. Although he was a real person, the tales of his abilities have turned him into a more legendary character, a sort of Japanese Merlin. His abilities and exploits are recorded in famous Heian-era texts such as the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (*Anthology of Tales from the Past*).

“NEW YEAR, NEW BOOK”

Chelanna White (Kyōto)

新年

It was the perfect night for a visit to Seimei Shrine. The full moon shone down brightly, adding to the magical atmosphere. Five-pointed stars, representing the five classical Chinese elements of water, wood, earth, fire, and metal, could be found throughout the grounds, from plaques hanging on the *torii* gates, to the shape of a well (used by tea ceremony master Sen no Rikyū!), to adorning all manner of lucky trinkets called *omamori*. And of course, on the *goshuin* (seal stamp).

Having filled my first *goshuinchō* (seal stamp book) in the five months I had been in Japan, I decided that I would save starting a new one for the new year. Hatsumōde was the perfect opportunity to start a new collection. New year, new *goshuinchō*. This one was black, and featured Hello Kitty in a kimono on the cover. Adorable! The woman who I tried to hand the book to thought so, too. Unfortunately, I could not get the stamp in my book. Instead, they had loose papers which could be pasted in later. Some shrines and temples do this year-round, while others do it just on special occasions when they expect many visitors, such as the first few days of the new year.

I have participated in hatsumōde every year since then, visiting a different temple or shrine each time. I have visited Kurodani Temple, Seiganji Temple, and Kitano Tenmangū Shrine. This year I nearly broke my tradition of “new year, new book” since I have not completed the *goshuinchō* I started last year. But I have started collecting loose pages in a “goshuin holder”, which is like a cross between a *goshuinchō* and an old-school photo album, and in addition to the five *goshuinchō* I have already filled, my holder is now full, so this year’s hatsumōde goshuin will take the first page in my new holder. The tradition lives on!

Chelanna is the prefectural advisor for Kyōto, where she lives with her husband and three goldfish. She really, really likes Hello Kitty.

伊藤家菩提寺

平成三十年

六月二十三日

菩提寺

書
唐



宝蔵寺





HATSUMŌDE IN COLD STONY STREETS TO A HOT SANDY BEACH


Alice French (Yamagata)

Since coming to Japan, as a Brit, I have found it difficult to part with the typically rowdy, prosecco-fuelled New Year's celebrations I am used to in favour of a, grantedly far more civilised, visit to the local shrine. However, of the three New Year's I have so far spent in Japan, I am proud to say that I have twice managed to drag my (rather hungover) self to receive my fortune for the upcoming year, in keeping with Japan's hatsumōde tradition.

My first experience was during my year abroad in Kyōto. On a biting cold January morning, I found myself at Yasaka Shrine in Kyōto's historic Gion District, queuing for an *omikuji* (fortune) with my friend, surrounded by many other, equally cold, shrine-goers. The atmosphere at the shrine was one of excitement and anticipation (it's worth noting that this was January 2018, before the world had started ending). I chose my *omikuji* by sticking my hand in a box and drawing out a wooden stick, which I then exchanged for a folded piece of paper at the register. I have to be honest and say that I can't actually remember the contents of the fortune, but I do remember that it was 中吉 (medium luck), which I think I was pretty satisfied with.

The highlight of this hatsumōde trip was not this mediocre fortune, however, but the seemingly endless food stalls (*yatai*) that lined the path to the shrine. The stalls often come out at festivals and special occasions, but there seemed to





be an especially large variety of goods on offer for this New Year's celebration. My most vivid memory is enjoying a very delicious, if slightly obscene, chocolate-covered banana on a stick.

My second hatsumōde experience took place under very different conditions. I was in sunny Okinawa for the winter break last year, and made a very sweaty trip to a shrine near our hostel in order to see what 2020 had in store for me (little did I know). The sunshine and sea breeze were a stark contrast to the freezing greyness I'd experienced in Kyōto two years earlier. I remember being struck by the large number of middle-aged men in suits at the shrine. I was surprised not only by their attire, which must have been swelteringly hot, considering the almost 30 degree Celsius heat, but also by the fact that they had come on a work trip. For me, New Year's had always been a time for friends, family, and forgetting about work duties completely. As my accompanying Japanese friend explained, however, in Japan, the first shrine visit of the year is important not only for individuals and families, but for companies too. During the first week of January, senior management from many companies will visit their local shrine, in full business dress, in order to receive a blessing of prosperity for the upcoming year. I have heard that, in Yamagata Prefecture, where I am currently living, some workplaces even ask for visits from the local *yamabushi* mountain monks, in order to cleanse

the office and bestow it with good luck for the next 12 months. I think it's fair to say that such luck would have been very much needed throughout the rollercoaster that was 2020!

I still have my omikuji paper from my shrine visit last year, and writing this prompted me to look at it and reflect. It came with a rather handy, and incredibly entertaining, English translation on the back. One of my favourite parts was a section labelled "Removal," under which was written, somewhat cryptically, "The sooner, the better." To this day, I am not sure exactly what this referred to, but I like to think that it was an indirect way of telling me to finally take the plunge and invest in laser hair removal. As for the omikuji's overall fortune, it told me that "Hard time has gone," and "you are becoming happier and happier." Considering the impending coronavirus pandemic and ensuing global turmoil, I cannot entirely agree that "hard time" had gone in January 2020. However, despite all of the chaos, I did find a lot of happiness last year, and hope to carry it over into this year too. Whether that was thanks to my omikuji or not is up for debate, but I like to think that it, maybe, played a part.

Alice French is a second-year CIR from Cambridge, England, based at the Prefectural Office in Yamagata. When she is not singing in the shower or taking pictures of sunsets for Instagram, she can be found hiking or skiing on one of Yamagata's many mountains.

MOUNTAIN PRAYERS AMONG THE SNOWY CEDARS

Haroon Hussain (Tōkyō)

Since coming to Japan I have tried to follow some of the traditions which are held here, one of the biggest being visiting a shrine for the new year. The first year I went to Senso-ji in Asakusa, the second year I went to Hiroshima on my own and explored the city alone. This year, I was in Nagano Prefecture alongside friends and some locals and we all went together to visit Togakushi Shrine, which is perched at the base of Mount Togakushi in Myōkō-Togakushi Renzan National Park.

The entrance starts from the huge traditional torii gate, leading to a path surrounded by huge Japanese cedar trees. The night before had heavy snowfall, so the path and trees were

coated in a beautiful white, making this hatsumōde a little more special than the usual. Two pathways had already been made by people who had already visited the shrine before us. Though the snow was flattened, it still had some height to it and the journey was a little more tiring than could've been any other time of year.

There are three different shrines at Togakushi and the trail goes on for around two kilometres from the entrance before it reaches the upper shrine, Oku-sha. Unfortunately, the lower and middle shrines were closed off due to the snow, but we were still able to climb up to the upper shrine. After what felt like 40 minutes of walking on an uphill, snow-laden and sometimes very slippery path, we finally reached the top. There were a few locals already at the top praying and were behind us taking a moment's rest as they waited for the queue to go down. After taking a breather myself while planted in a fresh pile of powder, I threw some coins into the *saisen* (money offering) box and made a short prayer for a better year and less coronavirus. My trip to the shrine ended after I bought myself a goshuin. With our hatsumōde adventure finished, we walked back down the slippery slopes and onward into 2021.

Haroon is a third-year British JET based in Tōkyō. He plays League of Legends as though he is going to eventually climb out of silver, but he probably won't. Should definitely be using his time better.

新年

A Day of Chocolate

Valentine's Day Traditions in Japan



Haruka Matsuzaki (Tōkyō)

Japan is a very unique country, and Valentine's Day in Japan is no exception. In most Western countries, Valentine's Day is a day when all genders express their love by sending cards, flowers, gifts, or going out for dinner. However, in Japan, it is usually girls and women who express their love by sending chocolate to their lovers.

Let's look at the history of Valentine's Day in Japan. It is said that the idea of Valentine's Day was first introduced in Japan around the 1930s, when one confectionery shop put an advertisement of heart-shaped chocolate as a Valentine's Day gift in the newspaper. Valentine's Day became more popular in Japan around the 1960s, after major department stores and confectioneries saw it as a business opportunity and started campaigns. Their customers were mainly women, so it is said that the Valentine's Day campaigns were mostly targeted at women on the premise that "Valentine's Day is the day women express love to their loved ones." Later, the chocolate-giving tradition became popular among school girls. In Japan, many school girls give home-made chocolate or cookies to boys that they have crushes on at school.

According to one statistic, it is estimated that around 20% of total consumption of chocolate is consumed on Valentine's Day in Japan (1). The economic impact is said to be around 120 billion yen (\$1.16 billion). There are many different types of chocolate given on Valentine's Day in Japan. *Honmei Choco* (本命チョコ, or "true feeling chocolate") is a type of chocolate given to men whom the giver has romantic feelings for. This is often given to husbands, boyfriends, and desired partners. Honmei chocolate is usually higher-quality and more expensive.

On the other hand, *Giri Choco* (義理チョコ, or "obligation chocolate") is often given to male co-workers, bosses, and acquaintances out of appreciation and politeness. This type of chocolate is usually cheaper when compared with Honmei Choco. Surprisingly, in some Japanese companies, there is a kind of pressure on women to give Giri Choco to their male co-workers or bosses in order to appear polite or nice. According to a survey, 80% of working women answered that they don't want to give Giri Choco (2). However, around 30% of them answered that they will (or they feel they have to) give Giri Choco.



Let's write a love letter

Tomo Choco (友チョコ, or “friendship chocolate”) is a type of chocolate often given to female friends. Tomo Choco is most popular among school girls.

In recent years, a new type of chocolate, called **Jibun Choco** (自分チョコ, or “chocolate for oneself”), has emerged. This is a type of chocolate women buy for themselves as a kind of reward. Perhaps surprisingly, according to one survey, more than half of women have bought chocolate for themselves on Valentine's Day (3). Actually, this trend is very understandable, owing to the rise of ‘Herbivore Men’ (草食系男子, meaning “young men who express little interest in getting married or being assertive in relationships with women”), and the simultaneous increase in financial independence among women. There is even a type of chocolate called **Gyaku Choco** (逆チョコ, or “reverse chocolate”), now given to women by men.

Another significant tradition related to Valentine's Day in Japan is “White Day.” White Day is on March 14, one month after Valentine's Day, and it is when people give reciprocal gifts to those who gave them gifts on Valentine's Day. The idea of White Day was actually created by the National Confectionery Industry Association in 1978 as a business opportunity. At first, white marshmallow was given as a White Day gift, so it was called “Marshmallow Day” in the beginning. One of the reasons why White Day became common in Japan is due to the Japanese gift-giving tradition, or the ideal that, if you receive a gift, you should give a gift in return (known as お返し文化, or “return gift culture”). People usually give a wide range of confectionery, such as chocolate, candy,

marshmallows, and cookies, as White Day gifts. There is also a cultural ideal of *Sanbai-gaeshi* (3倍返し, or “triple the return”) which means you should return a gift two or three times the worth of the Valentine's Day gift you received. According to a statistic, the economic effect of White Day is around 53 billion yen (\$514 million) (2). However, the sales of White Day gifts have been decreasing in recent years. This might be because not as many people are giving Giri Choco (obligation chocolate) nowadays.

It is very interesting to see how Valentine's Day has evolved in Japan and how the trend is changing as Japanese culture and gender roles have evolved. Of course, Valentine's Day is a great opportunity for people (perhaps especially Japanese people, as the cultural atmosphere of *tatemaie* often makes it difficult to express feelings outright) to express their love or appreciation to their loved ones, friends, or co-workers. However, I hope that no one feels any pressure to give chocolate (especially Giri Choco), nor sadness of not being able to receive chocolate on Valentine's Day. I hope Valentine's Day in Japan is a day for everyone (regardless of gender) to express their love or appreciation!

Haruka Matsuzaki is originally from Niigata prefecture and now works in Tōkyō. She loves travelling, eating, watching Netflix documentaries, and yoga. She's taking an interpretation course to become an English-Japanese interpreter.

Sources

- {1} <https://bit.ly/39zApaO>
- {2} <https://bit.ly/3oMy6HS>
- {3} <https://bit.ly/39ul4IS>



Creative Writing

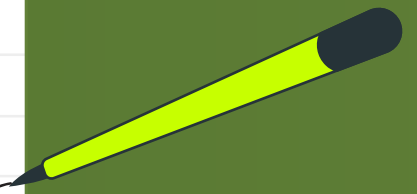
Interview with Kahlan Dunn

Kahlan Dunn (Aomori) interviewed
by Jessica Craven (Saitama)



In my quest to interview various creatives across Japan, I stumbled across someone who practices an art form I admittedly know little about firsthand—creative writing. It seems like more and more people are into creative writing and National Novel Writing Month these days, so I hope that makes this interview all the more interesting for you.

creative writing



J: Where are you from, how long have you been in Japan, and what made you decide to come here?

K: I am from Seattle, WA, USA, and I've been in Japan since July, 2018 to work as an ALT in Aomori City. I've always wanted to teach English in Japan, and honestly it's been just as amazing and fulfilling as I had hoped!

J: What got you started with creative writing?

K: I've been reading and writing since almost before I can remember, but my interest in writing was sparked by my love for reading. Reading has always been one of my passions, and after years of living in other people's worlds and living vicariously through their characters, I started wanting to create my own.

J: Tell us about your work.

K: I write poetry and fiction and enjoy creating both immensely. My poetry is usually emotional and introspective, and is heavily influenced by my own feelings and surroundings. My prose usually takes the form of flash fiction or novels, and I prefer to write in the fantasy genre. Sometimes I also like to write in the drama or thriller genres.



I will share a sample of one of my poems called "Drunk on Faerydust". . . .

*Return to me, lovely, and let's tell
the rest of our story in the lilting
tongue of our dreams and the wild
music of our fantasies.*

J: Tell us about the novel you are currently working on now.

K: I've never been more excited about a project than I am about this one! It's called *Elekindra* and it's the first book in a series intended for young adult or new adult audiences, and is classified as high fantasy. It's all about warriors and dragons and monarchs, and how two of them band together to protect themselves from the third.

Here's an excerpt:

*As night falls, the light of the sun dies a bloody
death against the knife-edge horizon beyond the
turrets and towers of Castle Elekindra.*

*I don't understand why we say "night falls".
. . . Night doesn't fall. It collapses, smothers,
extinguishes. . . . It creeps over the ceiling
of the universe like an infection . . .
like a blight . . . like a bleed.*

creative writing



J: What kind of themes or ideas does your work explore?

K: I think that books of any substance should not only be entertaining and engrossing, but should also impart some truth or wrestle with some dilemma that is relevant to its modern readers. This world is filled with people of every race, sexual orientation, gender identity, walk of life, and role in society, and it makes no sense to me that so much modern fiction only reflects a small sliver of that diversity. And so, my characters are mold-breakers and “natural order” subverters and unique beings in and of themselves. My characters are women who lead and men who follow; people who believe love is love, and who hail from worlds that accept that truth as fact . . . people who suffer from anxiety attacks, or come from troubled

My characters are women who lead and men who follow; people who believe love is love, and who hail from worlds that accept that truth as fact . . .

homes, or struggle with undeniable flaws such as greed or arrogance or cowardice . . . people my readers can intimately relate to, and who challenge their view of our own world, whether or not the story takes place within it.

J: What inspires you as a writer?

K: When it comes to poetry, I am very inspired by music and art and nature. My prose is also often inspired by such things—especially when I am creating new worlds for my fantasy fiction—but my characters are usually inspired by the people around me and heavily influenced by my own life experiences.

J: Do you have a “formal” education in creative writing, or how do you learn to improve your writing?

K: I majored in creative writing when I was in college, and I actually just finished submitting my application to the University of Washington’s MFA in creative writing

program! Besides school, I have also found invaluable feedback and support online with the DeviantArt literature community. I have been a member of the community since 2012, and I know without a doubt that I would not be the writer I am today without their support.

J: Has being in Japan influenced your work in any way?

K: Absolutely! These last two and a half years have been a time of growth and development for me, both as a person and as a writer. Throughout my time here, I have come to realize that though I love teaching from the bottom of my heart—and always will—but writing is my number one passion. It makes me the happiest, compared to everything else I've ever done.

J: What advice do you have for people who are interested in creative writing?

K: Read! Read, write, and practice writing like what you've read. The best way to learn how to write the kind of work you want to create is to read books by authors who write the kinds of stories in the kinds of styles that you favor. Then write—and find a community that will help you develop and hone your craft.

Kahlan Dunn is a third-year American JET from Seattle, Washington now living in Aomori. She has an undergraduate degree in creative writing from the University of Washington. More of her writing can be found on her Deviantart page [here](#).

*Jessica is a fourth-year American JET from Arkansas state now living in Saitama. She is the art section editor for **CONNECT**. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tokyo. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [@jessica_craven_art](#).*

THE KADOKAWA CULTURE MUSEUM

A Fusion of Words, Pictures, and Curiosities

Jessica Craven (Saitama)

One of Japan's largest publishing companies, Kadokawa Corporation, opened the Kadokawa Culture Museum in Tokorozawa, Saitama in August of last year. The word "museum" hardly describes it because it's actually a fusion of a library, art gallery, and cultural museum. In addition to the reflection of Japanese pop culture that it houses, the museum makes quite a powerful artistic statement that dares to get a lot more political than other museums are willing to risk.

Even before entering the museum, the view of its exterior struck me with a sense of cultural disorientation. There is actually a shrine in front of the museum building that was designed alongside it. The red *torii* gates cut across your view of the very modern and distinctive geometrically-shaped museum building as you approach it from the bottom of a small hill. If you follow the torii with your eye, you end up gazing upon a small shrine covered in *ema*, the small wooden plaques you often see at temples or shrines with wishes written on them. These *ema* are all decorated with anime characters. I have seen *ema* decorated with anime characters before, but the totality of this scene made me wonder, "Am I in a traditional place or a contemporary one? Is this place religious, irreverent, or a paradox of both?" I suppose, for me, that is one of my main questions about Japan as a whole—this is simply something that is difficult for me to wrap my head around.



"New World Transparent Specimens" by Iori Tomita

After reading museum director Seigow Matsuoka's message, I suppose that is one of the questions he is also exploring. Part of his message reads, "Out of (humans') imaginative minds sprang constellations, deities, Buddhist statues, and other minds created stories about monsters, Little Red Riding Hood, Kaguyahime (the Moon Princess), Superman, and Astro Boy" (1). In the entirety of his message, he seems to disregard neither religion nor pop culture but holds them to the same level of reverence as things that arise out of one of the core humanistic features: the imagination.

The museum opened in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic (with social distancing measures enforced), and director Matsuoka comments on this directly in his statement:



“Although the world and Japan today are struggling with the effects of a permeating, invisible power, we are all trying to fight back and establish a new outlook on the future of humanity. Challenges are arising daily from a complex environment and networks, resulting in the mutation of genes and viruses. However, civilization and cultures have a history of turning invisible power into visible forms. For both local residents and global citizens, Kadokawa Culture Museum . . . shall devote itself to turning the invisible into the visible to the best of its ability.”

“Picture of Amabie: Pandemic Evacuation” by Makoto Aida



The "Editown" library

A large print in the entry lobby by Makoto Aida, called "Picture of Amabie: Pandemic Evacuation," makes it clear that this museum will not shy away from the topic that is heavy on everyone's minds. At first look, the print appears to be merely an illustration of a fantastical character, but the text in the upper right-hand corner references epidemics. In his statement, the artist reflects on the fact that epidemics have always been a threat to humans throughout history and notes that artists Egon Schiele and Gustave Klimt were killed by the Spanish flu 100 years ago.

In response to the current crisis, the artist has created a story of hope and given it tangible shape. He writes that Amabie, a creature of historical Japanese folklore, is summoned by people's anxiety during this time and thus appears in the picture. Although Amabie doesn't promise to do anything to better the people's situation in the traditional folklore, his appearance gives everyone hope. The artist's message seems to be that although we don't know what will happen next or what exactly will save us, there is always a reason to hope that things will get better somehow.



With this work of art already shaping my thoughts, I then headed to the “Editown” library on the fourth floor. The books are organized into mostly unconventional categories that are in a way more pragmatic for creative purposes. Categories such as “Forest of Memory,” “Japanese Identity,” “Between Man and Woman,” and “A Whole Lotta Images,” spark a sense of curiosity and wonder that is innate to humanity. The description under the “Japanese Identity” category sheds just a little light on the paradox that Japan can seem to be. It reads: “Among gods and Buddha, the secrets Japan holds dear never stay the same. From ancient jade stones, to security policy, from poetry to Pokemon.”

I once heard Japan be described as a country that is so visually stimulating that it's shocking. The Kadokawa Culture Museum is the epitome of this. Books, posters, artwork, scientific specimens, and cultural artifacts are arranged in such a way that it exudes the disorganized energy of a creative mind. It reminded me of the animated home of Belle's inventor father (from *Beauty and the Beast*) . . . or what I would imagine polymath Leonardo da Vinci's personal library would be like if he had access to this much information in his time.

One of the most striking pieces hanging from the ceiling of the library were these two shirts that were sculpted out of pictures from world news. The most instantly recognizable images were of a medic who is heavily masked and of a headshot of Donald Trump. The image seemed to beg the statement: as viruses and autocrats threaten our society, the creativity of humans will endure to create a new situation.

Shirts sculpted out of 2020 world news photos





Kadokawa Art Museum

The library bleeds into the “Edit + Art” Gallery. Unlike the jargon on many museum and gallery walls, the introduction to the exhibition is short and to the point: “Welcome to Ken + Julia Yontani: That is why I want to be saved. Our health, the economy, climate change, environmental destruction, pandemic . . . it can be said that we live with constant cause for anxiety. We are forever faced with the question of how to live with these fears. Artist duo Ken + Julia have dealt with these fears through the creation of artworks. Using their own anxieties as motivation, they seek the essence of these fears and in turn sublimated them through research, consideration, and artistic expression. We are pleased to have the opportunity of presenting you with their works, which are imbued with beauty, humor, and a sense of irony. We hope they present an occasion for all of us to face our own fears.”

One of the several large installations in the room is a long solid-white table made out of porcelain clay. The table is absolutely covered with sculpted fruits, breads, corn, and bottles of wine made out of the same material. The installation is aptly named “The Last Supper,” in clear reference to the famous tempera painting of a Christian scene by Leonardo da Vinci. However, when you consider the stone-like material that’s almost reminiscent of fossil or bone, and the anxiety related to environmental destruction that is central to their work, you can’t help but think that they tongue-in-cheek intended for this to mean the “last supper” for all of humanity. Perhaps this is an imaginary artifact from a dystopian future where humanity has gone extinct and these fossilized remains of our societal

over-consumption are our only legacy. It's a sad thought. It's an ironic thought. We don't want it to be the case. It seems absolutely ridiculous . . . and that's what arouses our collective hope to change the world that we live in.

Behind "The Last Supper" are taxidermied deer heads made out of the same white porcelain-clay material called "Disbiotica Deer." The heads are clearly disfigured and covered in this coral-like material that reminds you of a virus or some other threatening biological growth. Although the environment is certainly under threat, it is nearly impossible to imagine a scenario in which deer could be so drastically disfigured by other life-forms. It's like something out of a bad sci-fi horror movie, which makes it all seem ridiculous and comical. Once we laugh the anxiety away, we can clear our heads to do something about the actual environmental problems we are facing.

So which does Japan reverse more: tradition, religion or fantasy and pop-culture? After a visit to the Kadokawa Culture Museum, I've come to view Japan as more like a microcosm of human society as a whole: we're a bit of a paradox, but our imagination allows us to fit things together that don't appear harmonized at first glance. Hopefully this trait will allow us to continue to solve our problems and be our salvation as a species, as it always appears to have done for humankind. The exhibitions currently on display in the Kadokawa Culture Museum reflect directly on the coronavirus pandemic and how the power of knowledge, science, and creativity can help us move past it.

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{1} <https://bit.ly/2LiboCa>

"The Last Supper" installation by Ken + Julia



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"Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first."

— Ernestine Ulmer

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"I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better." — Maya Angelou

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My Raw Vegan Journey Continued

A Reflection on the Benefits
of Raw Veganism

Sheila Mulherin (Hokkaido)

Raw veganism is a clean and healing lifestyle for bubbling energy, power, vitality, and improved mental and physical wellbeing. Flavors are fresh, rich and bursting. Food is considered raw when cooked under 45 degrees Celsius, so the living medicinal enzymes are retained. Preparing methods include dehydration, and sprouting legumes and grains to promote peak nutrition. This follows up from my first [article](#) in September about starting my raw vegan journey. Refer back to it for the basics on raw veganism. I will talk about changes I've noticed in my body, tips for food preparation and maintaining the raw vegan lifestyle, more restaurants in Japan with a partially raw menu, and recipes working with what's available in Japan or frugally purchased from abroad.

My Body Condition and Changes

With a 70% raw vegan/30% plant-based whole foods lifestyle, I continue to maintain a healthy weight for me. I haven't lost any weight, but over the course of two months, my jeans and trousers fit looser. Many clothes I bought online last year arrived a smidge too tight to wear, but I didn't bother returning them due to the shipping fees. They now fit comfortably. I'm shedding fat and building muscle. My energy level has been consistently high, and I trust my body to get through my ultramarathon training, and be ready for work every day. My gut health has improved so much, and my tummy isn't bloated anymore. My face has more color. I have a hunch the lack of weight



Sprouted chickpeas

loss is due to consuming lots of high-calorie raw foods such as nuts, avocado, coconut, and cold-pressed coconut, sesame, and olive oils. I also still eat cooked soybeans, since a giant bag of soybeans has resided in my house for a couple years and they need to be eaten. I believe the fat loss is due to the lack of additives, preservatives, empty carbohydrates, and starches formerly in my conventional vegan diet.

Raw Vegan Meals

My meals are limited by what's available and affordable in Japan, which crosses out many recipes in American raw cookbooks. One raw cookbook with many recipes compatible with typical Japanese ingredients is **Ani Phyto's Asia Food Fusion cookbook**. Mornings include a smoothie made from homemade yogurt (made of raw sprouted rice, soybean puree, or coconut milk), whatever extra fruit and greens are around, chia seeds soaked overnight, turmeric, ginger, maca, and sesame seeds.

Since I used up the (not raw) rolled oats, I needed a filling replacement. Adding nuts or psyllium husks to the smoothie, or eating a snack along with the smoothie suffices. I also got the (expensive) **Garden of Life raw organic meal replacement powder** for emergency breakfast smoothies from **iHerb**. Lunch includes a huge green salad with walnuts and dressing, wakame salad with walnuts, or zucchini "noodles" with a soybean based homemade ramen broth. Wraps are wonderful and versatile, but take care bringing them in a tupperware container for lunch. The wrap can become soggy throughout the morning and fall apart when the time comes to pick it up and eat it. Often, by the time evening comes, I am so full from breakfast and lunch I don't even need a proper dinner, so a handful of nuts or a piece of fruit suffices.



Spaghetti made from spiralized zucchini

Here are my go-to dishes for a proper evening meal: a walnut-based paste from Ani Phyto's raw cookbook on a bed of salad, a wrap from raw nori sheets, coconut wraps, or a homemade wrap—such as a tortilla wrap made of blended flax meal, corn, and onions. The "mince meat" for the tortilla includes sunflower seeds, walnuts, zucchini, lime (or lemon) juice, and assorted spices and herbs. Another evening meal or snack includes chia tomato crackers with homemade raw sprouted hummus.

Raw (or mostly raw) yogurt is a staple in my lifestyle now. Yogurt makers are plentiful and thrifty on the online marketplace **Mercari**. For the rawest yogurt, sprout



brown rice, blend it with water and sweetener in the Vitamix, and put it in the yogurt maker. Next add vegan yogurt starter. If you don't have that, take two capsules of high quality strong probiotic, open the capsules and empty the contents in the yogurt, and whisk it. Then set the yogurt maker's temperature to 42-46 degrees Celsius, and heat for at least eight hours. If you want a tart taste, set for 14 hours. Chill in the refrigerator for at least two hours before eating it, to "shut off" the live and active cultures. Additionally, blending cooked soybeans with water and sweetener also creates a tasty yogurt, as does blending any raw nuts with sweetener and yogurt starter.

Tips for Following a Raw Vegan Lifestyle

Walnuts are tastier after soaking in water for two hours. Nuts may also be easier to digest if soaked in water for 7-24 hours, then dehydrated in the Excalibur for 12-24 hours.

If you're in Japan and you're health-conscious, brown rice probably resides in your cabinets. Good news is you can sprout raw brown rice! It's not particularly palatable without further preparation. It's crunchy, so I recommend blending it with water in the Vitamix to make yogurt with it. You can also grind it into a powder, dehydrate it, and add to smoothies for a protein boost.

Recommended supplements include Vitamin B12 and Iron, and Vitamin D in the winter for those who live in snowy climates.



Raw sushi plate at Raw Foods Lohas in Sapporo

Shopping Advice

An average Japanese grocery store reliably carries the following raw items: walnuts, raisins, and fresh produce. Sometimes you may find raw nori, soy sauce, sesame oil, and sesame seeds, but usually they are cooked, so read labels carefully. I shop online on **Amazon Japan** to find these, where labels are easily translated. You may find raw food in surprising places! A man in my town who visits schools and the Board of Education to sell seaweed actually had many raw varieties of seaweed available. I'm a loyal customer of his. **Tengu Natural Foods** is an online organic food seller in Japan. In addition, **iHerb** is an American company shipping food products and supplements to Japan without extra shipping charge if your purchase is around 4000-14000 yen. Purchasing with a credit card or through the convenience store is possible. **Mercari** and **Tabechoku** sell organic produce in bulk, directly from the farm. Tabechoku often has the option to pay through a convenience store. The shipping fees are high, though. Mercari proves useful for used kitchen appliances, such as a Vitamix and spiralizer.

Recommended Restaurants

1. Raw Food LOHAS in Sapporo serves a lovely raw sushi set and smoothie bowls.
2. Café Dream (2-Chome-408 Sakae, Nisshin 470-0113) is a vegan restaurant in Nagoya with raw vegan options. Be aware of one or two other Dream cafes in Nagoya city!
3. Raw Souk in Kumagaya, Saitama
4. Hareto-Keto Raw Chocolate and Detox Café in Hikone, Shiga has raw vegan chocolates, smoothies, salads, granola bowls and desserts.

5. Chandan Cafe in Fukuoka has raw desserts.

6. Veggy Mom in Tokushima is a high-quality raw vegan restaurant.

7. .RAW in Roppongi is a salad buffet, with many vegan and nonvegan options.

8. Victoria Station is a chain family restaurant with a salad bar, if you don't mind the beefy smell in the air, due to the popularity of their hamburger steaks.

For more restaurant recommendations, see **the first article**.

Tips for Daily Life

Not eating after 6pm will ensure you sleep soundly, without a full tummy working hard to digest food. Also, the following morning, your tummy will feel happier. I always keep walnuts and dried fruit in my car for a snack, and in my purse in case I am out and need a filling snack. In winter, cravings for hot food come. Heating soup until hot to the touch, and eating wraps, "burger" patties and other food straight from the dehydrator satisfy the craving for hot meals. As well, work towards putting on your body only what you would put in your body. It may take a while to use up the products in your house before replacing them one by one with something purer or homemade.

Good luck on your raw food journey! Don't be hard on yourself if you slip up. Every little bit helps. Experiment and enjoy the process. Trying a raw vegan lifestyle now is a special opportunity, while many restaurants are closed and Nomihodais are cancelled due to the virus. Everyone stays home, so now is your opportunity to experiment at home with various foods and recipes. Enjoy living foods and vibrant bubbling energy!

Sheila is an English teacher in Hokkaido. Originally from Boston, USA, she can be seen hiking, reading, trying out new raw vegan recipes, playing with her adorable cats Bailey and Maisy, or running obscenely long distances on the roads and trails. She also looks forward to the Hokkaido winters when she can cross-country ski.



NEW ORLEANS STYLE COOKING

CAJUN CHICKEN AND RICE

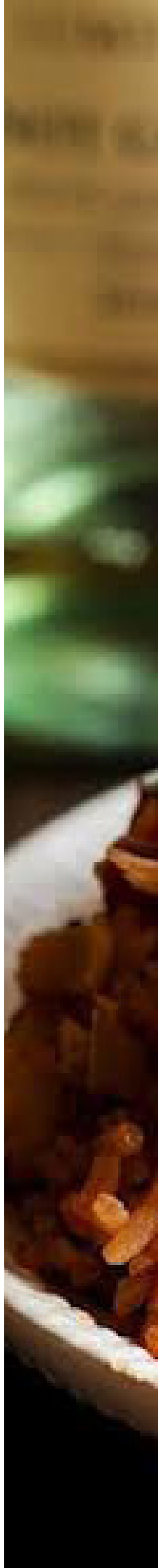
Jessica Craven (Saitama)

Louisiana Creole cuisine (or *Cajun*, for short) is one of the greatest masterpieces that emerged from the blend of the various cultures in the port city of New Orleans. The style of cooking blends West African, French, Spanish, Italian, and Amerindian influences, as well as influences from the general cuisine of the Southern United States, making it the most distinctive and iconic regional American cuisine.

To some Louisiana natives, only Southern Louisiana has “true” Creole cuisine because the cuisine of the northern part of the state is generally more influenced by traditional southern cooking. While I am not a Louisiana native, my homeland of Southern Arkansas also has an abundance of Creole cuisine, including the iconic crawfish boils. Also, my family has learned and exchanged many recipes with our

long-time neighbor who is a native of Southern Louisiana, so I would consider myself somewhat of an expert when it comes to the cooking style. I often cook these recipes from my childhood when I feel homesick, and it helps me feel much better. In general, I think Creole recipes are warm and hearty, so they can lift most people's spirits both mentally and physically.

Today I will share how I managed to make a popular cajun dish with ingredients straight out of a normal Japanese supermarket. I really like to eat it when I'm tired of the comparatively more mild taste of Japanese cuisine.





CAJUN CHICKEN AND RICE

Serves: 2



INGREDIENTS

- 2 chicken breasts, butterflied (**Tutorial** on how to butterfly chicken; also, it doesn't have to be the "perfect" shape. The point is just to cut the meat into thinner pieces so it's easier to cook through.)
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 medium sized bell pepper, diced (or about three of the smaller Japanese type)
- Approximately half a bag of dried black beans (*kuromame*)
- 1 cup rice, uncooked
- 1 can chopped tomatoes
- 1.75 cups chicken stock
- Olive oil
- Cajun spice, to taste*

*I have found what is called "Creole Spice" (in katakana) in a Japanese supermarket, but I haven't found a similar spice I consider strong enough even in Kaldi.

Personally, I have a big bottle of Zataran's spice from America that I use for extra spice, but in lieu of that, I will include how you can make a cajun spice from scratch, although it might be a bit milder.

CAJUN SPICE

- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper (chili pepper also works)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme

DIRECTIONS

1. Rub chicken breasts with olive oil and then the cajun spice mix.
2. Sear the chicken breasts on each side for about two minutes, then remove from the pan.
3. Add some more oil and fry the onions and peppers until softened.
4. Add the black beans and fry for a couple of minutes. Add the uncooked rice and fry for a minute further.
5. Place the chicken back on and cover in chopped tomatoes.
6. Add chicken stock and more cajun spice (to taste).
7. Bring to boil, then cover and simmer for 25 minutes.
8. Enjoy!

Hope my recipe brings a bit more flavor to your kitchen in Japan!

EXTRA NOTE ABOUT CREOLE CULTURE

Creole is a term that was originally used in the 1700s to describe people descended from the French and Spanish during their colonial rule of the Louisiana territory. It took on greater political and cultural meaning when the United States acquired the territory in the 1800s. These people share cultural ties that differ from other parts of the United States, such as the use of French, Spanish, or a combination of these languages with English. The term was expanded to mean something more like “native-born,” regardless of race, so the identity came to include African-descended people brought to Louisiana through the slave trade and Native Americans born in Louisiana. Therefore, people of fully

African descent, fully European descent, or a mixture may identify as Creoles. In the early 19th century, later immigrants to the New Orleans area, such as Germans, Italians, and Irish, married into the Creole group and thus became a part of it. Most of Creole culture is strongly Catholic, as opposed to the rest of the United States, which was predominantly Anglo-Saxon Protestant at that time.

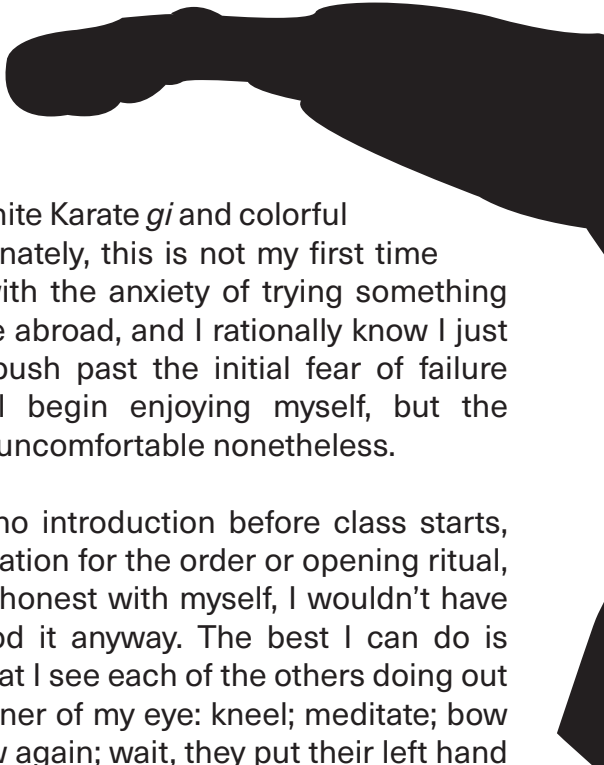
Personally, my family descends from early 20th century Italian-American settlers in the nearby Mississippi Delta region. So, while we aren’t considered “Creole” in the strictest of terms, we share a lot in common with the people of this culture and have exchanged a lot of ideas, recipes, and customs. Certainly Creole is a rich culture with an influence that has extended beyond its geographical borders. There is a plethora of information out there about the culture beyond just recipes if you are interested to learn more!

*Jessica is a fourth-year American JET from Arkansas state now living in Saitama. She is the art section editor for **CONNECT**. On weekends she enjoys hiking in remote areas of Saitama or taking day-trips to Tokyo. When not adventuring, she can be found reading or creating her own artwork, which can be seen on her Instagram [**@jessica_craven_art**](#).*

It's October when one of my first-year junior high school students approaches me after English class. He is shockingly tall, but quiet and reserved, and I have to ask him to repeat himself to make sure I correctly understood what he said with my very limited Japanese. But, no, I heard him right the first time: would I be willing to come to Karate club practice next week? Maybe it says something about me that my mind raced to find an excuse not to go, that the first thoughts in my head were about the coronavirus, lesson prep, or making dinners. It was my secondary thoughts that won out in the end, the ones that said, "Say yes. Even when you're not sure, even when you doubt yourself, say yes."

Living in a rural town in Hokkaidō means that options are limited. There are few martial arts clubs, even fewer places to practice, and barely a handful of members available to join. So, when I walked into the auxiliary gym of my town's only junior high school, I didn't expect a full roster of students, but I was still taken aback by just how small the "club" really is. My first-year student and his two high-school-aged brothers are the club's only black belts, and an elementary school boy less than half my height is the only other student. Despite it being the norm that I stick out while living in

Japan, my nerves still have me listing out every current irregularity as I watch the others warm-up before practice: I am the only foreigner, the only woman, the only adult. Wearing whatever comfortable and loose-fitting clothing I own, I stick out in another way, my dark pants and purple sweatshirt clashing against the clean, crisp lines of the



others' white Karate *gi* and colorful *obi*. Fortunately, this is not my first time dealing with the anxiety of trying something new while abroad, and I rationally know I just need to push past the initial fear of failure before I'll begin enjoying myself, but the feeling is uncomfortable nonetheless.

There is no introduction before class starts, no explanation for the order or opening ritual, but if I'm honest with myself, I wouldn't have understood it anyway. The best I can do is mimic what I see each of the others doing out of the corner of my eye: kneel; meditate; bow once; bow again; wait, they put their left hand down first, should I do that too? Bow; stand;

Empty Hands, Full Heart

Introductions to Karate-do in Rural Hokkaidō

Alexa Fisher (Hokkaidō)



stretch, thankful I can at least count to eight in Japanese. Moving on to practicing strikes and blocks, the black belts turn and face the younger green belt and me. The name of the movement is said at the start of each set, but I can barely keep up with putting my hands in the correct starting position. The eldest black belt directly across from me slows down his movements, exaggerating the details he sees me missing, and resuming his natural speed once I copy him satisfactorily. It brings some relief that, while there are always going to be a language barrier and learning curves, some teachings and kindnesses can still exist unspoken.

Western Popularity, Eastern Origins

Despite Hollywood's insistence that Karate is the epitome of Japanese martial arts, it's history is much more diverse. In some ways, Karate is only about as Japanese as ramen. Developed on what are now the islands of Okinawa and inspired by the Fujian tradesmen who travelled and settled in the area, Karate is actually a homophone, the original kanji being 唐手, referring to the first century Tang Dynasty of the Chinese Empire, rather than 空手, which was adopted in 1935. Karate would branch and evolve one more time in post-WWII Korea, where the Korean reading of its original name 唐手道 (*Tang Soo Do*) would become Taekwondo, but still retain many of the fundamentals and *kata* (forms) of modern Karate.



空手

Small Gestures, Grand Meaning

It's November, and we are practicing in the judo building behind the town hall. After a month of practices, the club is slightly bigger than I first thought. Various adult instructors attend when they are available, and another young woman from the next town has been occasionally practicing with the club for about a year. She is originally from the Philippines, and we joke about learning a second (or third) language and the difference in weather. I rely on her half the time for translations but have otherwise gotten into a rhythm of nodding along to the slow bit of Japanese I've picked up and gesturing. I'd feel like a burden if I didn't leave every week with some small gift from the others in the club or their parents: sports drinks on a particularly strenuous day, homegrown potatoes and daikon, or once a Karate-themed *tenugui*. Practice ends (*seiza*, meditate, bow, bow, bow, *owarimasu*, *otsukaresamadesu*), and my first-year student's mother waves me over, bag in hand. I'm already thinking about vegetable soup when, instead, a lightly greyed and worn gi is produced. She has me try it on while explaining that it was her son's and has since been outgrown. I laugh as the sleeves only come to half my forearms and at the old white



obi's tiny tails as it barely knots around my waist. Could the gentle giant that helped me through learning to snap during the punches of my first kata have ever really been this small? It was yet another gift, a small gesture to make me feel like I belonged and was welcomed.

National Treasure, World's Stage

No matter its history or how the laymen of the outside world view it, Karate is not and never will be solely a Japanese art. A boom of international schools and clubs began post-WWII, particularly in English-speaking and European countries. Karate has been a part of the World Games since the 1980s and has begun to spread in the past decade in Africa, especially in South Africa and Ghana. It was submitted for inclusion into the Olympic Games in 2015 and will debut this year at the Tokyo Summer Olympics. With estimates of as many as 100 million practitioners worldwide, Karate has perhaps returned almost fully to its Okinawan roots: the art of those without weapons or rank shared and taught among the travelers and locals alike as a means of cultural exchange and community.

Cold Winter, Warm Future

It's December and the last practice of the year. The older heaters are losing their battle against the Hokkaidō winter, and the long sleeves of my extra layers peeking out from my borrowed gi do little to keep me warm. Class begins with words it took me three months to understand. *Seiza. Meiso. Rei. Rei. Rei. Tatte.* My mind wanders as we go through the stretches, thinking about the small handful of people in the *dojo* I've become so grateful for. The shy student

who plucked up the courage to invite me. The high schoolers correcting my form in a mixture of languages and examples. The boundless energy that can only be found in grade-schoolers. The patient and kind fellow female foreigner. The variety of instructors, old and young, local and visiting. The chatting parents in the back of the room, making sure all in the club are watered and fed and clothed. In a country that can feel so homogenous, sticking out can often lead to being hammered down, but I feel incredibly lucky that I found a sense of belonging while still being me. The white on my belt may mean that I still have much to learn, but none of us have to learn it alone, and the more forgiving of ourselves we are, the further we can grow.

*Alexa Fett Fisher is a second-year JET based in Samani, Hokkaidō. Originally from the Chicagoland area, she is currently spoiled by the picturesque views of ocean, mountains, and stars that rural living provides. She also writes and produces dramatic podcasts for **Dayton Writers Movement**.*



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The "Ideal" Woman:

Defying Beauty Standards in Japanese Space

Lisa Paper (Tōkyō)



TW: The following article discusses suicide, sexism, racism and eating disorders.

The Japanese term, “*yamato nadeshiko*”(1) refers to the personification of an “ideal Japanese woman.” It covers a lot of ground: she’s beloved for her beautiful, pale skin (*bihada*), willowy hips (*yanagigoshi*), and her modesty (*okuyukashisa*), among other attributes. She’s also, perhaps unsurprisingly, considered increasingly rare. While many argue that modern Japanese culture is gradually ditching traditional gender norms such as these, the leftover pressures of embodying the ideal of



Female athletes in Japan
may face a plethora
of similar, subtler
stigmas in their
daily lives when it
comes to narrow,
contemporary
beauty standards.

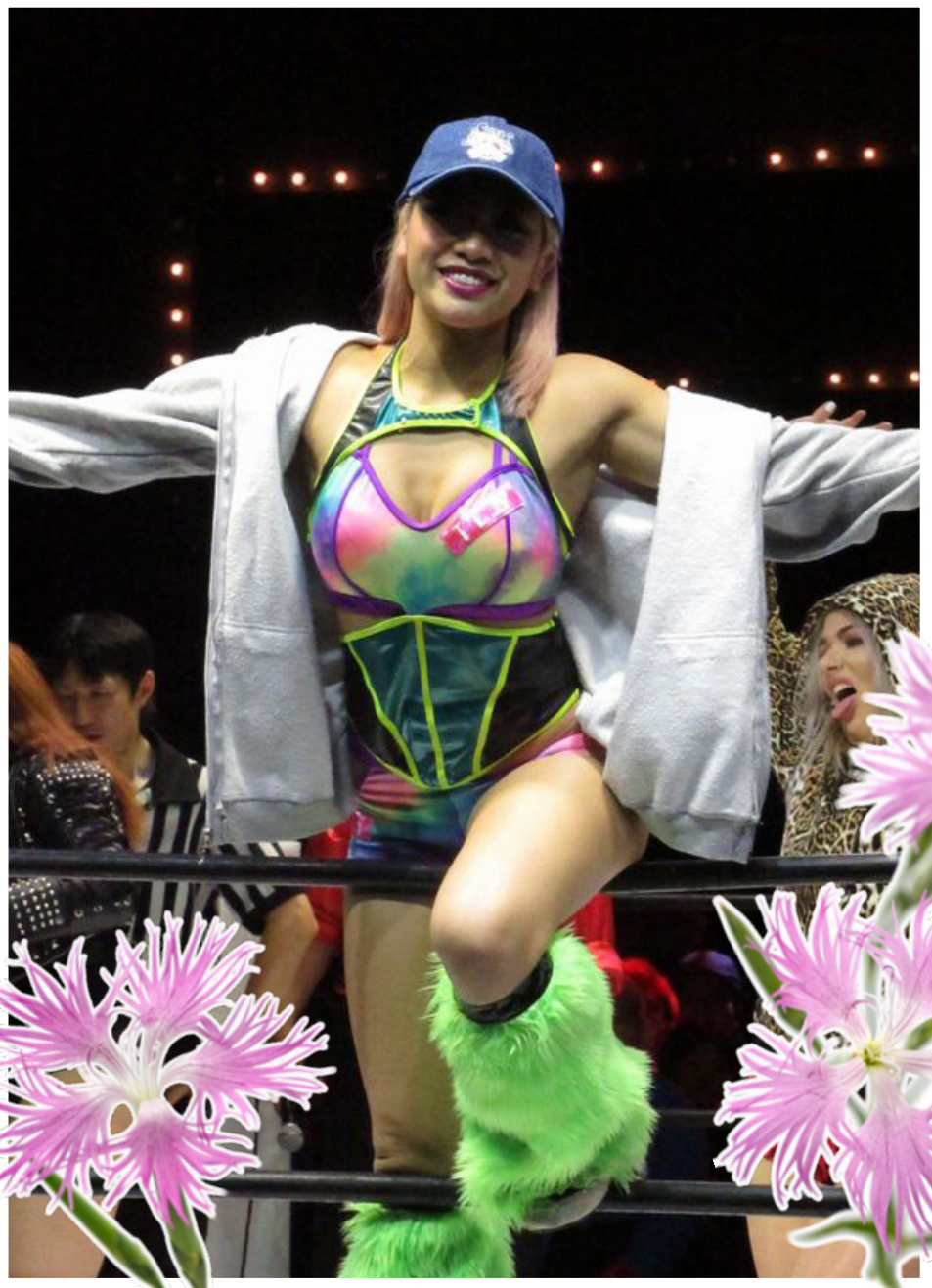
sports

being appropriately “feminine” while balancing the sometimes (seemingly) contradictory kinds of personal attributes needed to rise to the top of their fields in competitive sports can create a strain on female athletes. This expected duality seems as pervasive as ever: even the Japan women’s national soccer team is affectionately nicknamed(2) “*Nadeshiko* Japan.” The struggle of juggling being both “feminine women” and “athletes” is not new—but many female athletes grapple with these seemingly conflicting pressures in silence, which can have devastating effects on their mental, emotional, and physical health.

On May 3, 2020, Japan was rocked by the tragic death of 22-year-old *Terrace House* star and pro-wrestler, Hana Kimura(3), in what was deemed an apparent suicide(4). Kimura and her teammates openly discussed the difficulty of dating as an athlete in Japan on the show, citing concerns that they didn’t want to intimidate men. They would often go so far as to keep their careers a secret(5) when navigating the ins and outs of a budding new romance. Kimura’s wrestling teammate, Jungle Kyona, told her that, “You should want to be with someone who accepts you and your work, who likes you for who you truly are.” Kimura

was an inspiration to many and was able to shed some much-needed light on life as a biracial female wrestler in present-day Japan. The beloved pink-haired star and successful second-generation female wrestler wrote to followers on Twitter that she only ever “wanted to be loved in life.”(6)

Instead, Kimura faced a wave of online cyber-bullying. In particular, she was targeted after an episode aired in which she had a confrontation with a male roommate over one of her wrestling outfits. Following Kimura’s death, there was an outcry against bullying which spanned the international community, and *Terrace House* was deemed “toxic” by many avid former fans. Her apparent confidence as she body-slammed opponents while decked in bright colors undoubtedly made her a role model to many young, aspiring female athletes who watched the show. Her loss was a tragedy, and some argue there is culpability in the way in which she was portrayed by producers. Pro-wrestler, Chigusa Nagayo, stated(7), “She was an athlete, a professional wrestler with a future. She just played the villain. In reality, she was a polite and kind junior professional wrestler.” In response to the tragedy, *Terrace House* suspended the 2019-2020 season, issued an apol-



Kimura Hana, 2019 (Yoccy441, Wikicommons)

ogy, and posted a note of condolence on their website. Still, many wondered if this was enough.

Kimura is not the only female athlete to have struggled with warped representations in the spotlight. Naomi Osaka, a professional Japanese tennis player who’s been consistently ranked as one of the world’s top players by the Women’s Tennis Association, spoke out about controversial cartoon representa-

tions which have received notable backlash. Noodle company, Nissin(8), ran an animated advertisement of the Haitian-Japanese star with lightened skin and muted brown hair in “Hungry to Win” in January 2019. The company was quickly accused of “whitewashing”(9) Osaka. At the Australian open, she told journalists, “It’s obvious, I’m tan. It’s pretty obvious.” She was forgiving, saying that she didn’t think the company had “whitewashed”(10) her on purpose and that “. . . next time . . .

I feel like they should talk to me about it.” (Surprisingly, this wasn’t the first time Osaka had faced this situation—in September 2018, an Australian cartoonist depicted(11) Osaka as a blonde-haired white woman). The ad has since been removed from YouTube.

Osaka has been known to push back against negative comments on her personal photos, famously clapping back at internet trolls who had made disparaging comments about her biki-

ni body in July 2020 by tweeting(12), “You don’t know me, I’m 22, I wear swimsuits to the pool. Why do you think you can comment on what I can wear?”

Female athletes in Japan may face a plethora of similar, subtler stigmas in their daily lives when it comes to narrow, contemporary beauty standards. In particular, muscles are often viewed as unfeminine, while being ultra-thin is “in:” according to one government survey, just 10% of Japanese women in their twenties and thirties engage in



Osaka US16 (si.robi, Flickr)

regular exercise(13), instead choosing to diet to achieve a specific body type. Diet culture is very popular among Japanese women, which has sometimes been documented as a rise in disordered eating(14). Athletic builds sculpted by training tend to be more muscular, which is a body type that doesn't "fit" in with this ideal.

Meanwhile, female athletes who "fit" within these societal and beauty standards tend to receive largely positive press and high praise—take Hinako Shibuno(15), for example, a professional golfing sensation who has won the Japan LPGA four times. She has been dubbed as "Smiling Cinderella" in the world of professional golf due to her cheerful disposition and the fact that she is always sporting a demure smile. However, maintaining this facade has taken its toll on Shibuno. Shibuno has come forward during the U.S. Women's Open to say that she has only recently felt as if she could come out of her shell as a celebrity and is working on the ability to "be herself again" in the face of celebrity pressures.

Despite all of these hurdles, there's a growing admiration for women's fitness in Japan. Fitness trainer, Aya Osanai(16), has reached celebrity status as a fit fashion model. Her Instagram(17) account features photos of Osanai proudly displaying sculpted abs and arms as she models for her over 400,000 followers. Osanai thinks that Japan has the potential to become the "next fitness nation." There is momentum growing behind a female fitness movement, which is usually promoted with a focus on women's overall health. Tomoko

Katagiri(13) from the PR department of the fitness company, Curves Japan, in an effort to promote female fitness, commented on the benefits of exercise by saying that, "Maintaining muscle strength is a key for prolonging healthy life expectancy."

There are also a number of body positivity bloggers and influencers who are fighting back against the traditional idealization(18) of the Japanese female figure as being petite and light-skinned, including plus-size fashionista(19), Naomi Watanabe(20). One YouTuber personality, Ryo(21), gained mass attention by addressing viewers on her channel, Ryo :3(22), where she speaks candidly about her experience as a tanned and taller woman in Japan. She encourages Japanese women to not let negative remarks bog them down and to instead have confidence in themselves and their bodies.

One former female athlete is looking to reshape the narrative surrounding female athletes' bodies and empower future Olympians when it comes to women's healthcare. Retired Olympian swimmer, Hanae Ito(23), is working publicly to destigmatize menstruation for female athletes. Ito has said that, had she known about ways to manage menstruation (specifically, she has talked about birth control), she believes she would have performed better as an Olympic athlete. She has stated that she believes that lack of access to information had an effect on her ability to compete up to her full potential during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, as she was competing while on her period. It wasn't until after returning from the

games that the professional swimmer was presented with the possibility of period-managing contraceptives. Ito is now working in the Tōkyō Olympics and Paralympics committee PR department and hopes to support the health and wellbeing of sportswomen.

Sayaka Nose(23), an OB-GYN who specializes in female athlete care at the University of Tōkyō hospital, said that, according to one study, only 27% of female athletes representing Japan were using a contraceptive during the 2016 Rio Olympics, a number she finds “shockingly low.” Furthermore, very few female athletes return to careers in sports after childbirth, according to Nose. Nose has said that “there is a lot more work to be done in terms of scientific and cultural change” in regards to educating and supporting Japanese female athletes. Nose feels that Japan should be doing more in terms of reproductive education for teens, saying that “These girls are potential future Olympians.”

From cyber-bullying to “whitewashing,” from access to education regarding contraceptives to supporting Japanese female athletes who happen to be mothers, there is still a great deal of work to be done when it comes to helping female athletes in Japan to feel empowered and positively represented in the media. The year is 2021. Perhaps it’s time to destigmatize women’s bodies in Japan and start applauding them instead—for their ability to golf, swim, wrestle, dominate the tennis courts on a global scale, and so much more—all while representing Japan. At the end of the day, the stats and world records won’t be based on skin color or muscle

mass, BMI, whether an athlete has had a child, or whether or not an athlete was taking birth control to manage her symptoms. The only important factor will be that athlete’s ability to compete effectively in her field. Maybe *yamato nadeshiko*, and its personification of the ideal woman, is due for an update.

Lisa Paper is a Tōkyō JET and a returned Peace Corps volunteer. She studied English and Telecommunications at the University of Florida.

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"Life offers up these moments of joy despite everything." — Sally Rooney, "Normal People"

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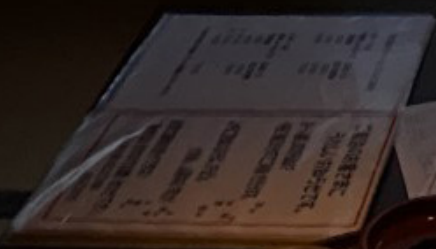
Nate Ryman





AONI ONSEN

ESCAPE TO A WINTER WONDERLAND




Clarissa Combe (Aomori)

This winter has brought heavy snowfall to large areas of Japan, with endless days of white skies, white streets, and whiteouts. While some of us relish in living in an endless winter wonderland, it undoubtedly has some drawbacks; notably, my persistent lower back pain from repeating the laborious process of unearthing my car from beneath a mountain of snow every morning. However, all the snow brings a wealth of wintry activities to enjoy as well. From skiing to snowboarding and snowshoeing to ice fishing, there are countless ways to enjoy the snowy weather. While everyone has their favourite way to make the most of winter, no one can deny that nothing feels better than getting into a steaming hot *onsen* after a long day battling the icy elements. Hidden deep in the mountains surrounding Kuroishi, Aoni Onsen is the perfect *ryokan* to enjoy the restorative tranquillity of a hot bath beneath a wintry sky.


Famous for *kokeshi* dolls and the Yosare Festival, Kuroishi is a small city in south-west Aomori Prefecture. At the edge of the city is Kuroishi Onsen Village, a collection of several onsen and ryokan nestled in the southern Hakkōda Mountains, the most isolated of which is Aoni Onsen. During the winter months, the ryokan is only accessible by a shuttle bus that departs from Michino Eki Niji no Mizuumi several times a day. However, even the shuttle bus struggles with the steep and winding path that takes you deeper and deeper into the woods until you reach a quaint ryokan in a small valley.





Staying at Aoni Onsen allows you to experience a true sense of isolation. With no reception, no accessible electricity, and nothing but nature on all sides, it starts to feel like you and the other guests are the only people left in the entire world. Although the ryokan has electricity in recent years, it is only used by staff and for emergency purposes. None of the rooms have electricity sockets, and the entire inn is lit by old-fashioned oil lamps. Once night falls, it feels like the world grows smaller and more intimate as the dim lighting gives every room a muted atmosphere and the snowy mountains lurking outside close in on all sides. Speaking loudly feels almost sacrilegious, and guests quietly pad from bath to bath before enjoying a scrumptious feast in the large dining room. Despite being in a remote corner of Tōhoku, Aoni Onsen also offers a vegan option if you notify them in advance.

There are four different baths at Aoni Onsen: Kenroku-no-Yu, Takimi-no-yu, Honkan-Uchiyu, and the outdoor *rotenburo*. Besides the *rotenburo*, all of the baths are separated by gender, and the *rotenburo* has a female-only time as well. Honkan-Uchiyu is the only bath inside the main accommodation building, making it perfect for a late-night dip before bed. The baths at both Uchiyu and Kenroku-no-Yu are made from Aomori's aromatic cypress trees. Takimi-no-Yu's main draw is the stunning view of a small waterfall in the corner of the valley. Although the main *rotenburo* is covered, you can enjoy bathing under the falling snow in the small tub perched on the edge of the main bath. As ethereal flakes slowly drift down from the sky, instantly melting as they collide with the hot onsen water, all your worries slowly drift away. There is only the endless white sky and the faint murmur of the nearby stream.





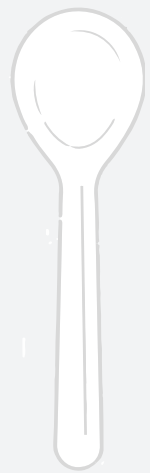
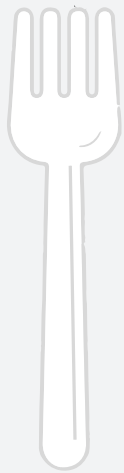
Dinner normally includes various specialties from Aomori's Tsugaru region.

Once your body is sufficiently melted and stuffed, you can retire to your small, traditional room lit only by a single oil lamp and the orange glow of the kerosene heater. Two words of warning: make sure to switch off the heater when you sleep, and watch out for your head. Despite being considerably large and low-hanging, the oil lamp somehow manages to always just be out of your eye line. Personally, I managed to whack my head on it the sum total of five times during the one night I spent at the ryokan. To prevent any serious concussions, it's probably best to adopt a slight stoop at all times before you commit yourself to your futon for the night.

Founded in 1929, Aoni Onsen feels like a small pocket of the past hidden away from the modern world. The world we live in at the moment is full of stress and anxiety, and sometimes we need to switch off and escape our worries, even if only for a day. Aoni Onsen is the perfect place to do this. The lack of electricity and reception keeps the outside world at bay as you relax amongst the serene, snowy scenery. Switch off and plug into nature with a stay at Aoni Onsen.

Clarissa Combe is a 3rd-year CIR living in Aomori City who loves the winter, snow, and the cold, but less so when clearing her car before work in the morning.

TREADING ON ICE
TREADING ON ICE



FISHING FOR WAKASAGI

In February 2020, I managed to squeeze in one final trip to Sapporo before the pandemic blew up in Japan. I had planned the trip together with another Singaporean friend—coming from the tropical little red dot, experiencing full-blown winter in Hokkaidō and attending the Sapporo Snow Festival were the highlights of the trip. We got off to a bumpy start, with snow in Hokkaidō threatening to divert our flights to land at the airports in Asahikawa and Obihiro (my friend and I flew separately from Tōkyō and Matsumoto respectively) rather than the intended New Chitose, but with some luck and a break in the snow over Sapporo, we managed to meet up as planned.

When planning the trip, I suggested to my friend that we stay with my host family from the exchange programme I took part in back in secondary school, and they happily agreed to take us in. They were not only excited to give my friend and me a place to stay but were also enthusiastic about showing us around. They asked if we'd like to go do *wakasa-gi-tsuri* (ワカサギ釣り, aka Japanese smelt fishing) together, and having never done that before, we were both eager to try.

On the morning of our fishing trip, we loaded the car with lots of food and gear and set off for Lake Katsurazawa. The wintery snowscape that greeted us once we alighted from the car was almost magical—the image of the quiet lake and its surrounding forests accented by colourful tents dotted along the perimeter will probably remain etched in my mind as my idea of 'winter' for some time to come. Making our way downhill to the lake while carrying the gear and trying not to slip on the powder snow was great morning exercise, though! It differs from place to place, apparently, but Lake Katsurazawa had staff operating a rental hut where you paid to use one of the holes they have ready on the frozen lake surface and also where you could rent fishing gear if you did not have your own. The night before, my host dad had shown us the equipment he used to bore holes into the ice at secluded ponds and rivers, but we did not need it this time round.

After picking a nice spot, we put up a tent around our fishing hole—I am sure some of you who hail from countries with winter might have tried ice fishing and are familiar with the relevant gear, but please pardon this tropical city girl who was really fascinated by the tent that had no base (so the hole in the ground was not covered, right)! It was reportedly one of the coldest days of the year with the maximum temperature only reaching -16°C where we were, but wrapped up in layers and sheltered from the wind in our tent, the adrenaline from my first fishing experience kept me warm. The water was so clear we could see the tiny *wakasagi* swimming around, and we must have gotten a good spot because we caught a total of 52 that day!

In between, for our lunch, my host mum produced delish homemade *onigiri* and a full-sized kettle, which she used to boil water for our cup noodles and to cook sausages in. The Japanese really know how to enjoy their picnics in all forms!

After trying a couple of different spots, and when the Japanese smelt stopped biting our bait, we packed up and went on to fill our tummies with Hokkaidō's



creamy desserts and attend another ice festival at Lake Shikotsu before heading home. The real closure of wakasagi-tsuru, however, only happened then. The fresh smelt were battered and deep-fried *karaage*-style (there are a variety of ways of eating it, but they usually entail frying coupled with marinade or seasoning), and the piping hot, crispy fish doused with lemon juice disappeared into our tummies in probably less than 10 minutes.

The entire experience was new, exciting, beautiful, fascinating and delicious, but most importantly, it allowed for quality time spent together with the people whom I was sitting around the fishing hole with. I went for the winter festivals, but the ice fishing experience turned out to be my best takeaway from the trip, no less thanks to my beloved host family who has welcomed me with open arms for the past 12 years.

If you are keen on experiencing Japanese winter like the locals do (I am pretty sure most tour packages do not include ice fishing), I highly recommend checking out the lakes nearby if your area is cold enough! Although the wakasagi is native to Hokkaidō, it has made its way around the country and even to other parts of the world. I hope that those of you who give wakasagi-tsuru a try enjoy it as much as I did—go fish!



HOW TO ENJOY WAKASAGI-TSURI ON ICE

(FROM THE AMATEUR WHO HAS ONLY BEEN ONCE):

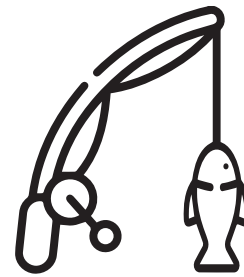
1. Make sure your car is ready for the drive—the fishing spots are usually away from the city and understandably in cold areas where roads could be snowy or icy, so you want to get there and back safely.

2. Wear proper shoes, preferably winter boots with grip—you don't want to slip and fall on the ice, nor do you want to sit in wet shoes after trudging through snow!

3. Layer up and bring heat packs/warmers—you'll be sitting in one spot and it could get cold! Better to sport layers which you can remove as necessary.

4. Bring hot drinks and plan for a hot meal if you can—I cannot emphasise how much I enjoyed my piping hot instant noodles in the snow!

5. Bring good friends—well, you'll be stuck together for quite some time, you know.



Where to enjoy wakasagi-tsuru on ice:

[The Wakasagitsuri Portal website](#) is pretty informative, with details about the pricing, how to access the different places, and when the spots are open for fishing. (The website is in Japanese, but plug it into Google Translate and the result is pretty decent and makes sense!) You can click on your preferred region and prefecture to find a spot near you. One point to note, though, is that the term 'wakasagi-tsuru' refers to fishing for Japanese smelt in general, and this can mean doing it from a boat or from the shore, not just over a hole in the ice. So if you are looking to tread on ice like I did, make sure to select the spots that say "on ice" according to the translation, or for those who read Japanese, 氷上 ('on ice') or 穴釣り ('hole fishing').



Deep fried wakasagi



Shao Ting is **CONNECT**'s social media manager and a second-year ALT who cannot wait to try ice fishing in her home ground of Nagano while surrounded by its glorious mountains this winter. Follow her adventures [@inSakuraLand](#) for tidbits and tips on Japan travel.



A
community
affair

JET Local Internationalization Workshop

Justin Swift (Tottori)

If you are anything like me, getting involved is hard. While I really want to connect with others and try to have a positive impact on my community, it is still a daily struggle to say yes to opportunities that come my

way. This is because I feel drained from being a happy English teacher for eight hours each day. However, I still yearn to connect with people who don't call me sensei or are not my coworkers. Much like all of you, I want to participate in organic, mutual cultural exchange and feel like I made a difference; like I made the world a little bit better. So, when approached about the JET Local Internationalization Workshop, I jumped at the chance to partake in a conference that I felt might allow me to contribute to my community in a meaningful way.

Unsurprisingly, due to the current state of affairs, the event was moved to an online format. Though the thought of participating in a two-day teleconference with a group project filled me with a sense of dread, missing a potentially moving opportunity to communicate with community members about a topic dear to me was worse. In hindsight, I can confidently say that I made the right call.

A Familiar Yet Impactful Format

This event's fundamental structure is likely familiar to all JET participants. After the opening address, there was a keynote speech. The speaker was Anthony Lieven, a

former JET CIR who returned to the town he was placed in to continue his work with the community. There were activity sessions where we learned about a cultural practice, a location, or an organization that is special in our region followed by a question and answer time where we could pick the brains of the presenter. In my experience, all of this is pretty standard procedure when it comes to elective events in the JET Program.

What made this conference truly worth it was the previously mentioned group project. There were eight groups, comprised of five members, tasked with tackling one of the following themes: building relationships with locals, creating a favorable environment for the participation of non-Japanese, dissemination of the local appeal, and the role of non-Japanese in local internationalization. It was

“In hindsight, I can confidently say that I made the right call”

through these lenses that we approached our experiences in this conference. After each activity, we were to meet with our group members and discuss what we learned, how we wanted to integrate these lessons into our lives, and what challenges we believed each activity could face when examined through our assigned theme. Each challenge was to be accompanied by a few solutions to

overcome the anticipated speed bumps. At the end of the conference, each group would present their overall conclusions to the other attendees and session leaders. I dread group projects, especially online ones, as much as the next person, and I generally try to avoid them at all costs. However, this project grounded each of us in a specific theme that

was still broad enough to allow interpretation and creativity. For that, I commend the organizers.

These assigned themes made the Q&A portions of each session significantly more interesting. In my sessions, some asked for clarifying specifics, but the majority of attendees were keen to know more about the efforts made by the presenters (and their affiliated companies and NPOs) to include the international community members. Many were also interested in the methods utilized by the companies and NPOs to spread information about their activities. Were they using local channels, such as newspapers and billboards, or were they using social networking services, such as Facebook or LINE, which are more accessible for the international community? And finally, many parties were curious about how each of these groups are adapting to fit the needs of the community (international and local) in these ever-changing, confusing times.

Lessons Learned, Waves Whirled

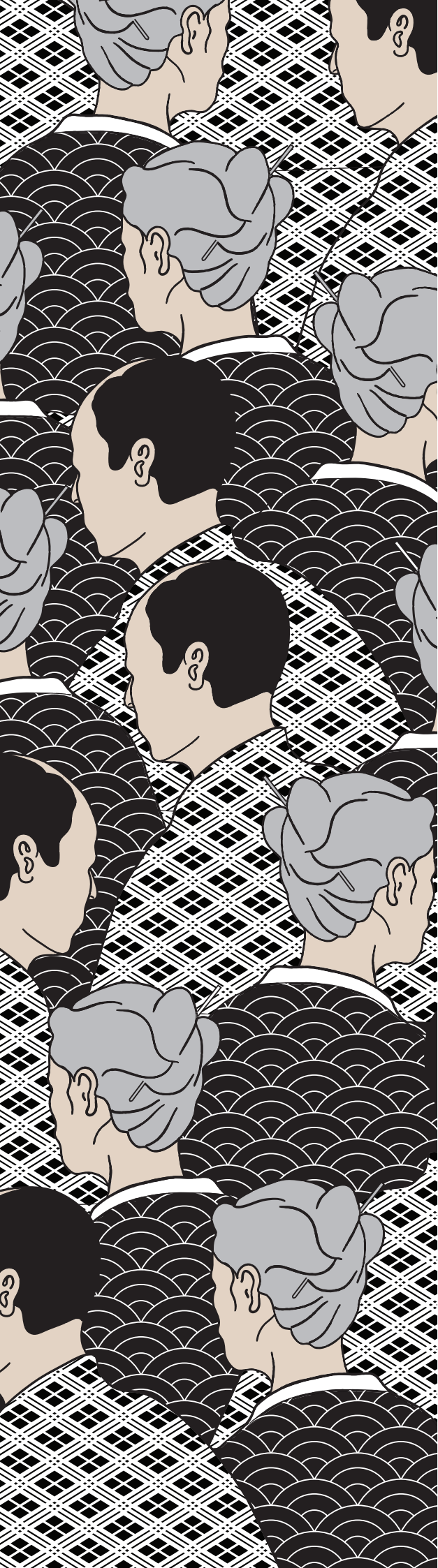
I want to preface this section by saying that I won't waste space reporting our final group conclusions and findings. In my mind, they weren't particularly revolutionary. What was special about this experience was that we, the attendees and presenters of this virtual conference marred with technological complications and poor microphone quality, were given a platform on which to constructively work together to make a difference in our region. While it may have been under less-than-optimal circumstances, we all showed up with the goal of discussing internationalization. Presenters described their

“Every effort you make to get involved, regardless of the magnitude, makes a difference somewhere”

experiences as business owners or operators, as well as their efforts of inclusivity; JET participants provided helpful feedback. A simple concept that I personally believe provides the most effective results when both parties approach it with the right mindset. Thankfully, most in attendance came to make positive change.

It was refreshing to hear that, generally speaking, our communities are making efforts to more effectively connect with and accommodate non-native residents—both English and non-English speakers. Some of us may live in the rural parts of the country

where change often occurs at what feels like a snail's pace, but the community members are trying! As we learned through this event, even small onsen towns and small(ish) businesses who are off the beaten path are seeking the help of non-Japanese residents in order to better fulfill the needs of visitors or prospective residents who do not hail from Japan. Following our group presentations, some community members who led previous events delivered their impressions and comments about our findings. A fair amount of the comments told us that our work and perspectives provided inspiration for future improvements to make Japan more globalized. One gentleman told us he even contacted his organization before the conference concluded to share his impressions and discuss the changes the organization should make in order to accommodate international communities and inspire further growth.



We did it. Even if it is small or short-lived, we did it. We made a difference. Unfortunately, kind words do not often indicate action, and one organizational change isn't enough. No one in attendance is so naive to think that we have officially accomplished internationalization. But it means that the community is trying. It means that we are trying together. It may not feel like foreign residents and native community members are meeting in the middle all of the time, but this experience at the JET Local Internationalization Workshop showed that we are indeed working together, and it provides me hope for the future.

I have seen and heard many international residents, be they JET participants or otherwise, express their feelings that they feel excluded and believe that their efforts to get involved and become connected with the various communities around them is often fruitless. While this may serve as little consolation, I can only tell you that change is coming! You are an important part of that change, and every effort you make to get involved, regardless of the magnitude, makes a difference somewhere. You challenge people's perspectives every day, and you control which direction the tide flows. Perhaps you can't feel it now, and you may never have the opportunity to feel it directly, but the future native and international residents alike will feel the waves you made.

Justin Swift is a classically trained oboist with a Bachelor's and Master's in Music Education. In his free time, he enjoys good coffee, playing video games with his wife, studying photography, programming, and Japanese — and having absolutely no free time whatsoever.



COUNTRYSIDE COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION RICHI-YADO GUESTHOUSE

Richard Pearce (Tottori)

Situated in the historic fishing village of Mikuriya, the Richi-Yado Guesthouse is at the centre of the local community's revitalization project. Its owner and namesake is me, Richard Pearce, an Englishman who has been a Tottori resident and ambassador for 12 of the last 14 years.

The guesthouse concept was the brainchild of town councillor and life-long resident, Noriyuki Kato. At the time, Kato-san was heavily involved in local Machizukuri efforts. The term Machizukuri literally translates as "town planning," but since the 1960s it has come to mean a form of locally driven town planning and community enhancement initiatives which contrast with the traditional, highly centralized model, known as Toshi-keikaku. At the time, I was looking for ways to both promote and give back to the community that had given me so much. So when Kato-san contacted me, it seemed like a happy coincidence.



The Coastal Cost

Mikuriya, like many rural towns in Japan, is suffering from the dual impact of an ageing population and urban migration. In recent years, it has seen a slight upturn in repopulation from urban centres, but it's still pretty much a one-way street. Coastal towns haven't benefited as much from this positive trend however, as families and individuals relocating to the countryside tend to prefer less densely populated inland villages where houses often come with a small plot of land. Also, the tsunami of 2011 is still fresh in many people's minds and many are wary of living directly next to the ocean.

Just a generation ago, Mikuriya was a lively and affluent fishing community with a vibrant high street running through its centre. The street was lined with *ryokan*, restaurants, shops and bars. All but a few of these businesses are gone now and many of the buildings stand empty or have been demolished. Councilor Kato said, "We really wanted to find a way to attract both Japanese and international visitors to come to the village. We hoped that if people could come and stay here they could appreciate the local scenery, delicious fish and enjoy talking to the local people. They might think, this is a pretty nice place, I could live here quite happily." He continues, "when we see the international guests coming here and enjoying themselves, local people can feel a source of pride".

Kato-san is keen to stress the importance of the guesthouse visitors to the local economy. "We are at a point now where local businesses need all the support they can get. We are close to the tipping point. Once the local supermarkets, banks, post offices etc close, it will be very hard to attract them back. Even if we can get more people to live here in the future, it would be very hard to bring these important businesses back. In addition, some of the smaller shops have been trading here for centuries. They are a part of our identity, our soul".

When asked why his Machizukuri group reached out to me specifically, Kato-san explains, "We needed an expert in inbound tourism and Richard's experience is well-known around here. His work with the Japanese giant salamanders in Nichinan Town is really great. We have salamanders around here too. We in Tottori are proud of Richard. He knows more about this area than most local people!"

From Savannahs to Mountains

I originally came to Tottori as an ALT with the JET Program in 2006. After two wonderful and life-changing years, I left Japan to further my travels and have more adventures. I headed back to Africa and conducted biodiversity surveys in Madagascar before completing my life-long dream of qualifying and working as a Safari Guide in South Africa. I returned to Japan in





Mikuriya, like many rural towns in Japan, is suffering from the dual impact of an ageing population and urban migration.

2010 and after briefly working as a private teacher, began working as a Tour Leader for Inside Japan Tours, an industry-leading tour operator based in the United Kingdom.

The job of a tour leader is very cool . . . on paper! You get paid to travel all over the country, stay in luxurious ryokan, meet geisha, eat exquisite *kaiseki ryori* and more. Of course, that is all great! But in truth it can be EXTREMELY tiring and stressful to escort a group of up to 15 people of all ages, nationalities, backgrounds and character types around Japan for two weeks at a time. It certainly was character-building though and after several tours it was mostly a very rewarding and enjoyable job. The experience and knowledge I gained about the inbound tour industry in Japan was priceless and would transfer well into running the Richi-Yado Guesthouse.

Personally, I've always loved Mount Daisen and had decided it was where I wanted to put down roots. Knowing the area well, I was aware that there were many empty houses around and I was convinced I could find something special at a very reasonable price. With this in mind, I contacted the local Akiya Bank. *Akiya* means "vacant home" in Japanese and the "Bank" element is a service that aims to connect a database of "akiya" to potential buyers. However, what they had at the time of my initial search didn't suit my re

quirements, so I decided to put it on the back burner for a while.

A few months later, a representative from the Akiya Bank contacted me, and to my surprise, asked if I was interested in opening a guesthouse in a fishing village at the foot of Mount Daisen. They said that through coverage in the local press and on regional television, the local group was aware that I had experience in bringing in foreign visitors to the area through my tours, language school, and salamander conservation experience. They also added that the property would be rent free and that the government would pay for the renovations. I decided it would certainly be worth listening to their proposal!

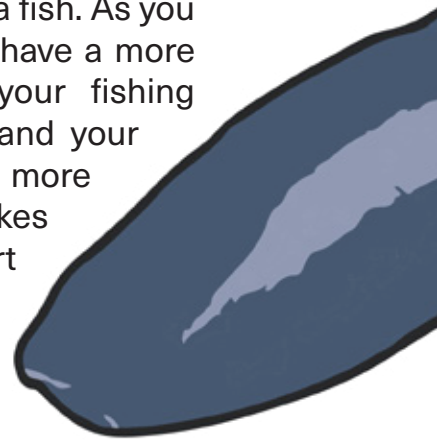
It turned out to be a lot more complicated than it first appeared and I ended up buying the house and land from the owner and investing some of my own savings to get the renovations to a level I was happy with. The results have been great though and we've welcomed several hundred guests from overseas so far. In recent times, the Japanese Language camps aimed at ALTs and foreign residents living in Japan have been very well received and a lot of fun.


Wisdom on Business in Japan

In regards to advice on starting a business in Japan, I have a few words of wisdom. I'm a great believer in making your own luck. If you

are proactive in your approach to life, then you have a better chance of being successful. I think of it like fishing. Imagine that each idea for a project or business opportunity is attached to a hook on the end of an individual line that you cast out into the world. The more fishing lines you cast, the more chances you have of catching a fish. As you gain experience and have a more extensive network, your fishing technique improves and your bait becomes even more tempting. Sure, it takes some time and effort to bait each hook, but the chances of catching a juicy fish improves with every effort!

For Japan specifically, it's all about building a profile and being true to yourself. In a conservative society such as Japan, people are often afraid of taking risks for the fear of failure and losing face. Of course nobody wants to fail and do all we can to avoid that, but I think as foreigners we are free from many of these restraints. In my experience, many Japanese people will go out of their way to help you behind the scenes if you are the "face" of the operation. Don't be afraid or too proud to receive help from someone when you need it, but also be strong enough to say "no, thank you" when the assistance being offered is to the benefit of the person offering it and not your own.





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As for the future of small local communities, I hope the future moves towards a sustainable society and local shopping increases. Post-COVID, whenever that might actually be, I think we will see more and more people moving back to their ancestral lands and also higher levels of counterurbanization overall. This will be driven both by financial concerns and the desire to live in less crowded conditions. I hope and believe that the demand for locally created and quality made products will increase as an attitude of quality over quantity prevails. For the good of the planet, I hope I'm right.

Kato-san's vision is also one of optimism: “Richard, the guesthouse, his staff, and most importantly the guests have been like a breath of fresh air for the local community. They have given us hope.”



Richard Pearce is owner of Richi-Yado Guesthouse and Bushido Japanese Language School and Director of Bushido Adventure Travel Ltd UK. Bushido is an official partner of National AJET. For information about Japanese Language camps for ALTS in the school holidays, online Japanese classes and a chance to help with the conservation of Japanese giant salamanders in the wild, please see [bushidojapan](https://bushidojapan.com).

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WHY NOT GET CREATIVE WHILE SUPPORTING AND PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEES!**

From December 10th - February 28th National AJET is having a Holiday Fundraiser! JET's can volunteer to make holiday cards that will then be sold. You can make cards for any holiday you wish, or even cards for general use. All of the money that the JET's collect from selling the cards will be donated to the non-profit organization Refugee Empowerment International (REI). Our goal is to fundraise at least 25,000 yen!

To learn more about the fundraiser and how to participate, click [here](#) to access the Fundraiser Packet:

If you have any additional questions, comments, or concerns, then please email the Director of Volunteering at volunteering@ajet.net

LINK TO FUNDRAISING PAGE [HERE](#)

National AJET



Join AJET in creating and selling **holiday cards**
in support of **Refugee Empowerment International (REI)*!**

FUNDRAISING PERIOD
December 10th ~ February 28th

**REI is a non-profit organization that supports projects
that provide opportunities for refugees and international displaced persons
to lead an independent life.*



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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.

SPOTLIGHT

Tell us about someone in your community who's doing something neat and noteworthy. Cooks, collectors, calligraphers — we want to hear about the inspiring people around you.

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Members of the JET community contributed to the photos you see in this issue. If you're an aspiring photographer and want your work published, please get in contact with the lead designer, Meg Luedtke, at visualmedia.connect@ajet.net.

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