

# 2024

## Student Post Visit Trip Report

### 柏市派遣 トーランス市青少年 帰国報告

派遣期間 2024年7月10日～7月30日

タイトル	氏名	学年
Reflecting on the Social Role of Karaoke カラオケの社会的役割を考える	John-Milo Ernst ジョン・マイロ・アーンスト	高校 3年
塾 (Juku) 塾の考察	Anoop Ghuman アヌープ・グーマン	高校 1年
Biking in Japan 日本の自転車事情	Jordan Kisiler ジョーダン・キシラー	高校 2年
Crochet in Kashiwa 編み物で結んだ柏との絆	Maria Nadsady マリア・ナッツァディ	高校 1年
The Art of Bento Boxes お弁当箱の中の技 (わざ)	Kyra Nakamoto キラ・ナカモト	高校 2年
The School Uniforms of Japan 日本の学生服	Aidan Reynolds エイデン・レイノルズ	高校 2年
The Vibrant World of Matsuris 活気に満ちた日本の祭り	Mia Segovia ミア・セゴビア	高校 1年
Japanese Train Culture 日本の鉄道文化	Colin Welsch コリン・ウェルシュ	高校 2年

## Reflecting on the Social Role of Karaoke

by John-Milo Ernst

カラオケの社会的役割を考える

ジョン・マイロ・アーンスト（高校3年）



Throughout the Torrance delegation's trip in Japan, I have gotten to learn so much about karaoke and the role it plays in the lives of Japanese people. Even though karaoke was invented in the early 1970s, I know from my experience that its popularity continues to be prominent. While I knew a few things about karaoke going into Japan, I was blown away by many aspects of Japanese karaoke that make it a defining piece of their culture. What I also learned is that Japan has both large karaoke chains, but also small local karaoke clubs. The large ones are found mostly in bigger cities such as Tokyo and Osaka. These karaoke clubs can take up an entire building, filling all its floors with karaoke bars and rooms. You can easily find one by looking for its distinctive giant vertical neon sign with katakana reading "ka-ra-o-ke!" for the whole city to see.

My first experience of karaoke in Japan was with my first host family. They took me to their go-to karaoke spot, Manekineko, a small single-floor karaoke club. Since they have young kids, we rented a room with a play area and anime wallpaper. We took turns singing songs, in both English and Japanese. I had lots of fun, and my singing wasn't too bad, until I heard my host parents sing, and their singing was the best I'd ever heard. I asked them, how are you such good singers? They denied my compliments, but it was true.

My host father explained that it is common for businessmen to practice their singing before a work karaoke outing so as not to embarrass themselves and to impress their bosses. My host mother told me that her passion for singing as a child helped her work better with her coworkers due to the presence of karaoke in the workplace. I knew that karaoke was a work activity, but hearing the stories of my host parents and getting to experience it myself made my perspective much more complex. On one hand I experienced karaoke as a friendly bonding activity, but on the other hand, I could hear in the tone of my host parents' voice that it is also an additional expectation for all Japanese to meet.

I also did karaoke with my second host family, on their TV at home. Since my second host mother was an elementary school teacher and mother of three girls, she did not go to enka but preferred to do karaoke from home. All through the night they sang J-pop for me and I sang Party in the USA for them. The youngest, Iori, who was 5 years old, loved

singing along to her favorite Disney songs, even if it was just youtube karaoke on the TV.

What I didn't know was that oftentimes karaoke is featured inside of other sources of entertainment. For example, the bowling alley we went to on our second to last day had a separate hallway lined with private karaoke rooms. This made me realize how Japanese businesses can attract crowds by advertising easy accessibility to multiple forms of entertainment. It also made me realize how easy it is to spend all my money.

On Wednesday July 24th, the Torrance delegation, with some KIRA and Lions club members, went to karaoke in Kashiwa's downtown area. We were blessed with Mike-san's beautiful singing. But later that day, at the dinner hosted by the Lion's Club, our karaoke outing was mentioned frequently. The Torrance delegation then performed Count on Me by Bruno Mars in front of the club. In a way this expressed our appreciation of the role of singing in Japanese events.

One aspect that surprised me the most was the frequency of their karaoke outings. My host brother from Kashiwa, Genki, said he goes to karaoke once a week with his friends. And many other people I talked to said they visit the karaoke club at least once a month. This frequency surprised me, but I learned that it serves my Kashiwa friends in the same way that some of our popular entertainment, like the beach for example, continuously serves us. The abundance and popularity of karaoke in Japan contrasts that of America. Everyone in Japan was so surprised to hear that there's only one karaoke spot in Torrance!

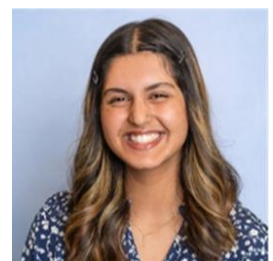
While I am not able to enjoy karaoke the way I can in Japan, that's what makes the Japanese experience so special. The stories I heard and the experience of karaoke while in Japan will stay with me forever.✳

## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### 塾 (Juku) by Anoop Ghuman

#### 塾の考察

アヌープ・グーマン (高校1年)



My trip to Japan was filled with the most incredible experiences, and it was more than I could even imagine. This trip was special due to the many landmarks and sites we visited, along with all of the people we had the chance to interact with. Everyday was a new type of experience where we would get to learn about another aspect of Japanese

culture, and in my case also learn more about my report topic, Juku, which is the cram school which Japanese kids attend in order to pass their entrance exams and to stay ahead in school. I was lucky to learn about Juku from multiple sources, starting from the students we got to meet at the Kashiwa schools, all the way to my host families.

As we had the chance to meet students in many Kashiwa schools, we were able to firsthand learn about their school life experiences. Many of the students I talked to told me that they attended Juku, and that in fact after our meeting, they would be heading there shortly. Although I had read about the amount of discipline that was needed for Juku, hearing the students mention it and talk about its long hours still surprised me, as if I had been in their place, after school all I would be thinking about would be crashing straight into my bed. Since the kids were still in school at the time of our visit, I asked many of the students how they could balance school work and the work they received and had to do in Juku. I learned that due to the fact that school and Juku have their own set times, the students would plan and organize their time around it, and they would use those small pockets of time to rest or to do their homework. Many of the students also mentioned how in order to avoid burnout, they would take short breaks after Juku, and on weekends spend time participating in their favorite activities such as sports and spending time with friends since it would get closer to nighttime after their Juku sessions on weekdays. I had an excellent time with the kids from the High schools, elementary school, and the colleges we visited, and learning so much from them about their personal experiences.

Secondly, another thing I could never ever forget, was the bond we made with the Kashiwa delegates. Each of them were amazing and unique in their own way, and were all so welcoming when we came to Kashiwa, and were full of enthusiasm when they arrived in Torrance. I was able to form a great bond with each of them, and in by doing so, I was able to learn so much about them and their lives. Tamaki Kato, one of the delegates, who is actually a college student, was able to tell me so much more about Juku as she herself had not only attended Juku, but had worked as a teachers assistant in one. She had so many amazing points to offer me about Juku, more so on the way it works and less on the personal perspective side, which was just as equally important for me to know. Although I knew some of the basic ways Juku worked, Tamaki was able to prove an even deeper understanding on some of it's aspects. I learned that there are some cram schools where you can also study by watching videos rather than face-to-face lessons, as when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, many Juku adapted to offer online lessons as an addition to traditional in-person lessons. In the traditional format, students can have face-to-face interactions with their teachers and other students in which small group settings or one-on-one tutoring may be offered. In doing so these students benefit from interacting with their peers, which can be helpful and motivating for group learning dynamics. In the

online format, Tamaki explained that the scheduling is more flexible and that it greatly reduces travel. Students are able to access pre-recorded lessons in which they can study at their own pace, and they are also able to attend live virtual classes. These online platforms actually also give students access to teachers from different parts of Japan, without the limitations of location.

Third off, this report wouldn't be complete without mentioning the caring host families that hosted me in their amazing homes. I not only had the most amazing overall experiences with each of my host families, but made lifelong bonds with each and every member of both families. I learned a different way of life and culture that I wouldn't have been able to experience in America. I became particularly close to each of my three host sisters. They each told me about their interests and hobbies, as I told them about mine. Whenever we would have some extra or free time, we would spend time talking regardless our language barrier. In my first host family, I spent time with my first two host sisters who were 17 and 18. Yui, the older of the two, had been homeschooled most of her school years so she did not attend Juku, and Kanade, the younger sister was going to one of the Kashiwa High schools we had actually visited. Kanade told me of her Juku experiences, and how they were incredibly time consuming. When I told Kanade that she should apply to be a Kashiwa delegate next year, she told me that since as she was in her last year of high school, she would be taking university entrance exams next year, which would require her to soon start attending Juku, which would make the exchange trip a little difficult for her to be able to do. Kanade explained how many students attended Juku according to their specific goals, whether that would involve attending all year round or only at certain times of the year or their lives. She told me that she herself did not attend it all year round, and only previously attended it when she needed to begin studying for her school entrance exams. I was impressed with how much pre-planning my host family had already done for Kanade. In my second host family, I spent time with my third host sister, Ayumu, who was 9 and an elementary school student. Of course being that age, Ayumu only said negative things about Juku and complained about going. As she would have to take a middle school entrance exam in about a year or so, she was actively attending Juku at the time of my stay with them. I remember sitting down with my host mom and Ayumu as I asked them some questions about Juku. My host mom explained that Juku was held less often for elementary kids such as Ayumu, and was quite an emotional investment from the parents side as well. She explained how she could never get Ayumu to leave the house in a cheerful manner, as Ayumu absolutely dreaded going to Juku, even though she only attended once a week at this age. My host mom mentioned that Juku was quite expensive too, as it could vary from sessions of Academic and exam specific Juku to Vocational, Art, Music, and Sports Juku.

Through all the different voices, opinions and information I heard throughout my

time in Japan, I learned that Juku plays many important roles in a Japanese society. While the formal educational system provides the core curriculum, Juku helps to reinforce what students learn in school. This intense routine of balancing school and Juku creates strong sense of discipline, time management, and perseverance in young students. All of these traits are highly valued in the Japanese work culture, where long hours, intense dedication and a strong work ethic are the common expectations. Although Japan's education system is tightly linked to its professional opportunities, it also plays a part in high stress and pressure, which carries into a person's professional life. High expectations, fear of failure and a competitive atmosphere are all factors that contribute to the bad mental health that these students face. These factors later travel into their work lives, making their lives only revolve around the work they do, and this is because of the school life and Juku ideologies that were put into their heads as students. Their academic success comes at the expense of their personal well-being.

Lastly, this trip's golden aspect was not only that we were able to travel around in such a beautiful country, but the personal connections we made, and each of the individuals we got to interact with. Although for us delegates, many times there was a language barrier, we didn't let that stop us from talking with people and learning about Japan. In my case, I wasn't able to actually see the events of which I would be writing about in my report and witness an actual Juku classroom, but I was able to learn so much more about Juku through all the amazing people I talked to, which made it extra special for me. This entire trip could not have been possible without TSCA and KIRA, which made this the trip of a lifetime, in which I made countless lifelong friends, and gained new families which I can always look forward to seeing when I return to Japan. Thank you! ❁

## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### Biking in Japan by Jordan Kisiler

#### 日本の自転車事情

ジョーダン・キシラー (高校2年)



Getting around Japan is done in many forms. I was told that the most common is riding a bike and I was not deceived. Every day while I was there, I would see people out and riding even in the scorching hot sun. Although I had done research in advance with

regards to infrastructure, norms for cyclists, and the practicality of riding a bike everywhere, it was definitely not the full picture. I found that while most of my research was very true about biking in Japan, there were still some surprises.

Throughout the trip I saw a lot of infrastructure in place for riders. While I was researching, I was expecting there to be more bike lanes as a little bit more parking space. In my initial research, my source made it seem like these bike parking lots were under construction and I was surprised to find that they were so commonplace. There was a bike rack everywhere. At the train station, there were rows of bike racks. At schools there were normally sheltered areas where students could lock their bikes while they studied. One of the things that shocked me the most was how even the Seven Elevens and Lawson convenience stores had a place to lock up a bike.

Along with the bike parking zones, I expected to see more bike lanes, but I was very surprised to find that more often than not, that there was no bike lane at all. Riders would have to ride on the narrow roads, or on the sidewalks. Within Kashiwa, I never had problems with the lack of a bike lane while I was out riding with my host brother. The culture around cyclists was very respectful.

Another aspect of cycling in Japan that I found interesting was the whole culture and norms around biking. I initially expected for there to be control in the way people rode, which turned out to be true. I had also expected that everyone would wear a helmet, and was shocked to find out that nobody wore a helmet while riding. According to my host brother who rides to school every day, "helmets are too hot and uncomfortable to ride in, so we just don't wear them and ride carefully".

Actually, riding in Japan was a much different experience than I had imagined. I thought going out for a bike ride would be just like at home or on my way to school, but it wasn't anywhere near as crowded or dangerous. While I was out with my host brother, we would sometimes have to ride on the side of the road, and the cars were very respectful. They would give us enough space to ride comfortably before we could let them pass. While I was observing the cyclists, I also looked at the design of their bikes. Every bike that I saw followed the same slim and practical design of narrow tires, a thin but ergonomic frame, a small basket in the front and a muted paint scheme. The convention was to blend in and not look too fancy. The bikes were completely practical.

The popularity of biking in Japan comes from its practicality compared to using a car. On a free day with my second host family, we went to the supermarket by car. The market was close to their house. Parking took quite a while, was crowded and would end up costing a bit of money. It is understandable why biking is such a popular way to pick up groceries and make small trips as it alleviates the need to find and pay for parking. The practical design of most of the bikes make transporting the food back to home very efficient and simple, and the short distance to the grocery store makes it worth the effort.

Through my observations, I found that there is much more riding infrastructure than what was depicted in my initial research, the conventions of riding a bike are very different from what I expected to see, and I now see how practical biking is for a Japanese citizen.

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## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### Crochet in Kashiwa by Maria Nadsady

#### 編み物で結んだ柏との絆

マリア・ナツァディ （高校1年）



When I chose crochet as the topic of my pre-trip report, I was a little concerned I wouldn't find a meaningful way to experience and learn about it in Japan. After all, I had a massive language barrier, and I thought I'd have to be pretty lucky to casually encounter crochet out and about in Kashiwa beyond my plan to visit yarn shops with my host family on the free days.

My fears were averted pretty quickly — nearly instantly, in fact, as on our trip to meet the City Council in Kashiwa, each of our cups of barley tea were placed atop a dainty crochet lace coaster. I wish I'd had the foresight to take a picture before we'd left, but that chance encounter with a crocheted item in our first 24 hours in Japan only foreshadowed the many random opportunities I'd have to bond over crochet or randomly stumble upon it throughout our three week trip.

One of the most significant things I learned about crochet while in Japan was that there was no actual word for crochet (as distinguished from knitting) in the Japanese language, or at least not one that people were colloquially familiar with. Instead, everyone I met referred to my work as knitting, and then would occasionally ask whether I used one hook (which is what crocheting uses) or two (for knitting).

My first host mom was in the 'two sticks' category, as she had knitted in college. In fact, when she and my host dad were dating in college, she had knitted him sweaters throughout their relationship! Though she had cast aside the hobby as she aged, it was beautiful to see the love and craftsmanship she'd poured into hand-knit sweaters for the man that she would eventually marry and raise two children with, sweaters still kept and loved all these years later. My first host family was the one that I visited yarn shops with, as I had already overspent so much at said shops by the time of the host family switch



that I made sure not to ask my second family to take me to any! In these yarn shops I saw Japanese amigurumi culture alive and well, as most yarn brands and colors had examples (often stuffed animals!) that showed what would be best made with them. I'm so, so grateful to my first host family for not only taking me into their home but for going out of their way to take me to all these yarn stores so that I had the chance to see all of the unique creations and designs popular with Japanese crocheters and knitters! Though I have not yet finished any of the projects I've started with the yarn I bought in Japan, I've begun to work on a bag and a top, and I have lofty ambitions for amigurumi with the remainder of my yarn!

However, just because we never visited yarn stores or other craft shops does not mean that I didn't have a chance to make crochet-related memories with my second host family! Almost immediately after they took me into their home, my six-year-old host sister, Koko, asked if I could teach her how to crochet. Earlier that day, she had gone with my host mom to Daiso to pick up blue yarn and a 4 mm crochet hook. When they returned and Koko showed me the purple crochet hook she had picked out, I realized it was the exact same crochet hook that I had brought with me to Japan, which I had purchased years before at a Daiso in Torrance!

Over the course of my stay with them, I spent almost every night working with Koko on the amigurumi she had chosen to make: a small, rotund, adorable blue penguin. According to my host mom, Natsumi, English classes were a major part of the curriculum at the school Koko and her younger sister, Nono, attended, but given their young ages, there was still very much a language barrier between Koko and I amidst these lessons. I heavily relied on Google translate throughout it, often typing in short commands like 'hold your hands like this!' before trying to show her the best position to hold the yarn or the hook so that she would understand what I was trying to show her. Of course, she found it hilarious to hear my instructions delivered not in my voice but in the monotone voice of Google Translate's text-to-speech function, and that usually derailed our lessons for a few moments as we both giggled over the ways we were forced to communicate.

Near the end of the project, I realized that some of the more complicated skills involved in the making of the penguin would likely take longer than the few days left in my stay in their house, so I quickly finished the difficult last steps while asking Koko to help me with the sewing through, of course, none other than Google Translate. In the end, we were able to finish the project by the second to last day of my stay in Japan, and Koko toted along the little blue penguin to the Sayonara banquet and all other events we had together.

As I was making the penguin with Koko, I began to realize that Nono had begun to feel left out because of the sometimes-exclusive activity I was doing with her sister. She would occasionally help Koko and I with the stitches, but I could tell that she felt even

more left out when Koko's new penguin was finished, meaning her sister suddenly had a new toy and she didn't. Luckily, given that the penguin was finished so close to the time I would leave Japan, she didn't have to watch Koko carry it around for too long before I thought of a solution.

When I travel, I usually crochet an amigurumi to come alongside me, just in case I feel homesick and need a hug from the toy that I can't get from my family all the way back in Torrance. In my haste to finish the coasters I was planning to give to my host family when I arrived (which ultimately were gifted to them at our Sayonara banquet, as I couldn't finish in time), I had almost forgotten to uphold this tradition, and so I hastily crocheted a Hello Kitty plushie (while it didn't quite end up looking like the Sanrio character, I maintain that it did look cute) from thick yarn, stuffed with socks and dish towels as I had run out of stuffing. The end result was a somewhat stiff yet still soft toy that kept its shape regardless of how it was squished into a suitcase — the perfect gift for a three-year-old to drag everywhere without worry that it might be ruined if she ever treated it roughly, even though it was almost exactly her height. At first, I was worried Nono wouldn't like it, as it wasn't really similar enough to any character she would be familiar with for her to recognize and it was, after all, huge. But when I saw her tote it around to say goodbye to me and the other delegates at City Hall, as well as to the airport when my host family drove to meet us there for a final farewell (along with Koko and her penguin of course!) I knew I had nothing to worry about. Looking back, I'm so glad that both of them (especially Nono, since she may not remember a lot of the life she lived at three years old once she grows older) have their respective crochet amigurumi to remember me by now that we're once again separated by an ocean.

One of my favorite parts of the exchange trip was visiting a multitude of schools in Kashiwa. One of the most meaningful friendships throughout these trips to schools also came about because of my ability to crochet! When we visited Kaichi International College in Kashiwa, my fellow ambassador Colin introduced me to a Vietnamese International Student named Bánh, and served as an interpreter as she and I bonded over a shared love of crochet. Though Bánh had only begun to crochet three months before, it had rapidly become a passion of hers, and we spent the remainder of my time at Kaichi talking about crochet.

When she first realized that I also crocheted, Bánh slipped a lace scrunchie that she had crocheted off her ponytail and gave it to me as a gift. It was such a kind gesture, and I know it made her feel terrible when she ended up requesting it back right before I had to leave when she realized that she wasn't going to be able to go about her day in the overwhelming Japanese heat without her hair tied up. As a substitute, she gifted me a little amigurumi keyholder, which I already would've been delighted to have been gifted even before I realized she had just given me the first item she had ever crocheted.

However, Bánh still felt bad that she had to take back the original gift of the hair tie, and so we made a plan together that, on the day of the Kashiwa Matsuri, she would come on her break from work (as she had a part-time job at a ramen shop within the festival grounds) and she would give me a new scrunchie. I also wanted to give her something, so over the course of the next three days I worked on a small crochet pouch for her, as I had seen a couple crochet pouches of different designs in her bag already. Before I met up with the other Torrance and Kashiwa delegates at the Matsuri, I found Bánh, and she handed me a small gift bag. I knew that she was going to make me a scrunchie, but when I looked inside, I realized that she had also crocheted a small pouch in the shape of a strawberry cake for me! I was so, so grateful that she had gone out of her way to make me multiple gifts all because of our shared love of crochet. I don't think what I made for her was anywhere near the level of the gifts she gave to me, but I am so grateful that I got the chance to give her something in return and to see her again before I left Japan.

Given that I wanted to make sure that I finished the pouch I was making in time to give it to Bánh on the day of the Matsuri, I ended up crocheting the majority of it on the bus ride to and from Nikko. While I was casually working on it and chatting with another ambassador, Kyra, I felt a tap on the back of my bus seat. When I turned around, the Kashiwa adult leader, Yumiko Harasawa, pointed at what I was working on and asked if I was knitting. When I showed her the pouch, which at that point was more or less finished, she looked amazed and started pointing my work out to the other Kashiwa delegates seated near her in the back of the bus. Mrs. Harasawa told me that she, too, knitted, as well as a multitude of other crafts, and that she was hoping to visit craft stores when she came to Torrance. Though I wasn't familiar with many craft shops in Torrance beyond big retailers like Joanns and Michaels, certainly not the artisan craft stores she was hoping to visit, I helped her research some possible places to visit on the bus ride, and continued to give her suggestions even after she came to Torrance. Thanks to our mutual interests in arts and crafts, I was able to bond with Mrs. Harasawa in a way I likely wouldn't have otherwise, and that made it all the more special when I was able to give her, as well as the other Kashiwa delegates, a hand-crocheted teddy bear at their Sayonara Banquet.

I don't think I could ever fully express my gratitude to the Torrance Sister City Association for choosing me to be an Ambassador for Torrance last summer. I am so, so glad that I got to visit Kashiwa, and that I knew how to crochet and was able to connect with so many people in Japan because of it. Thank you, each and every one of you, for the lifelong memories and friendships you allowed me to create. I know that I will never forget this experience. ✨

## The Art of Bento Boxes by Kyra Nakamoto

### お弁当箱の中の技（わざ）

キラ・ナカモト（高校2年）



The dictionary definition of a bento box is “a lacquered or decorated wooden Japanese lunchbox”. Bento boxes today still have the light and portable aspect. Bentos are eaten by children, students, and parents of all ages. A standard bento box includes a main dish, usually being protein high food, including fish, beef, chicken, eggs, etc. A side dish, which is often vegetables that are packed with fiber. They can be prepared raw, stir fried, pickled, or boiled. Lastly, there is rice, which is filled with carbohydrates that give an energy boost, that also tend to have 梅干し (ume boshi) AKA pickled plum on top of the rice. Bento boxes have many colors to appease the eye of the consumer and make them crave it more. Japans bento industry is worth 6 trillion yen overall in sales per year. These bentos are commonly bought in Japan and found in local communities.

During my time in Japan, I got to experience Bento boxes first hand and noticed how they impacted peoples lives on a daily basis. On the second day of my stay while visiting one of the private high schools, they each gave us a nice big bento. Mine contained pork, cabbage, and vegetables. Along with, rice with ume boshi on top, an egg roll, and some yellow pickled vegetables that I could not identify. It was very filling considering they were already spoiling us with so many snacks and drinks. During lunch, I got to talk to two girls who attended the school. They both brought their own bentos from home. I learned that they had to bring lunch to school everyday, as they have no cafeteria at their private school. But when going to public schools, I noticed that they had cafeteria lunches. I asked students if they brought Bentos from home at public schools and they looked at me confused and shook their heads. I find it fascinating as at our public schools you have the option to bring your own food from home or buy the school lunch. One thing that stood out to me at the elementary schools was that the kids served each other food from a food cart. The kids would take turns serving the food to each other everyday. The kids serving the food after washing their hands would put on a white smock, white hair net, and a white face mask to keep hair or spit from getting in the food. The kids would form an assembly line and serve food to each of their fellow students. After eating they would all line up and stack their plates, trays, and utensils onto the cart which was then taken away to be cleaned by school staff. As we traveled to Hiroshima & Kyoto by the Shinkansen (also known as a bullet train), there were a variety of bento options at the stations. A good example of a popular bento shop was surprisingly at 7-11.

There were many occurrences that we'd stop by a 7-11 to get dinner, lunch, and snacks. The 7-11s in Japan would have an array of bento options which would always be neatly organized and stacked together. The 7-11s in Japan are much cleaner, organized, and popular than the 7-11s we have in the United States. On many occasions where I had early mornings and didn't have time to sit down and eat at the table, my host mom would make me onigiri which is an easy to make rice ball including salmon, nori, or tuna with seaweed surrounding it. Onigiri was a very easy dish to bring on the go and overall is one of the most popular Japanese bento items.

Overall, Bentos had greatly affected my time in Japan, whether it was an onigiri or a handpacked bento from my host family or a large bento from the convenience store. If I had to take one thing out of learning about bentos it was the people who gave them. Each bento I received was always thoughtfully put together with love. From our tour guides who would always buy us our meals, to the senseis in schools, and my host families who would continuously show their appreciation through the meals they made. I always felt spoiled and pampered every time they would offer me food and snacks throughout every fun filled day. Lastly, I would like to thank TSCA for this wonderful experience that would not be possible if not for them putting in hundreds of hours of work and effort for 8 students to go to Japan every year for the past 51 years. Thank you for helping me learn more about Japanese culture and how wonderful it is.

ありがとうございました。✿

## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### The School Uniforms of Japan by Aidan Reynolds

#### 日本の学生服

エイデン・レイノルズ (高校2年)



I had a delightful time while I was in Japan. It was an amazing experience to visit schools and interact with people my age from another country. While at these schools, I was able to look at and ask questions about the school uniforms the students would wear. This report will summarize my findings about Japanese uniforms in Japan.

I will first talk about what I expected. In my pre-trip report, I mentioned two types of uniforms in Japan. Although I was unable to see the more traditional uniforms, I was

able to see and ask questions about the blazer-style uniform. The research I did regarding this type of uniform was accurate and I was not surprised with what I saw. Another thing that I knew beforehand was PE uniforms. Students are required to wear school-issued jerseys whenever they are in Physical Education classes.

Despite doing research on uniforms before the trip, there were many new things that I learned. The first thing I learned was about uniforms for middle school. Since I focused most of my attention on researching high school uniforms, I knew little about the uniforms of middle and elementary school students. More accurately, I was surprised to learn that they had no uniforms. The students were able to wear their clothes instead of school-issued uniforms. Another surprising thing was the popularity of uniforms outside of schools. On many occasions, including Tokyo Disney Land, I saw students wearing school uniforms. When I asked about it, it turns out that uniforms are commonly worn outside of schools. The reasons behind this are that they are used as a way of identifying students as well as many students find them comfortable.

One other thing I learned about was Japanese gals. Although not specifically related to my topic, a significant portion of their subculture involved modifying school uniforms. When I saw them while in Japan, I noticed that their uniforms were less taken care of when compared to other students. Their clothes were baggy, skirts short, loose neckties, and their bags were covered in decorations. They also wear a lot of cosmetics and hair accessories, something that is not allowed in Japanese schools. Although I never directly interacted with any at the schools we went to, I saw some on trains and out in public. After learning more about them from the internet and my guides, I decided to include them and the modifications they make to their uniforms.

According to a survey I used in my pre-trip report, an overwhelming majority of high school students liked their uniforms. I decided to do my own smaller survey to see if this information is accurate. I had twelve people respond to my questionnaire with the following results. Out of the 12 people I asked, eight said that they liked the uniform. Some of the reasons they gave were that it was nice not being able to worry about what to wear, it made them look cool and like students, and that the uniform was cute. Out of the 12 people I asked, eight said that they didn't like the uniforms. Some of the reasons they listed were because it got rid of individuality and the uniforms are gender divided. Both groups agreed that it would be nice to have shorter skirts and get rid of the rules regarding school uniforms. One issue I had with this survey was whether students felt the uniform was comfortable. Many of the students who said they liked the uniforms thought that the uniforms were comfortable and were better than the uniforms they used to wear.

The students who said they didn't like the uniforms thought that the uniforms were too hot and uncomfortable. This makes me believe that the differences between summer and winter uniforms and the school you go to influence if you like the uniform.

Some other information I learned about school uniforms in Japan is their cost. In Japan, you have to buy your school's uniform from special shops, and this tends to be very expensive. This means that many students only have one uniform. Students go to great lengths to make sure that their uniforms do not get ruined to avoid having to buy a new pair. I like the uniform that my school makes me wear. Although it isn't as formal as the uniforms in Japan, I agree with what many of the students I surveyed said about their uniforms. I had a lot of fun asking questions about and learning more about school uniforms. I wish I could have spent more time in Japan learning about their uniforms and interacting with those who wear them. I can't wait to go back to Japan and see if there are any new uniform trends or if anyone I asked has new opinions about school uniforms.

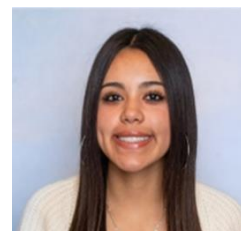
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## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### The Vibrant World of Matsuris by Mia Segovia

活気に満ちた日本の祭り

ミア・セゴビア (高校1年)



Whilst living in Japan for a couple weeks, I got to experience so many wonderful things that I will always be grateful for. I made so many memories during my stay there with the various people that I had the pleasure of meeting and I'm very happy to now be able to share my experiences with you. Time flies fast when you're having fun but it's so fascinating how you could learn several things in such a short period of time. Over the course of my stay I got to learn more about Japanese etiquette, Japanese traditions, and Japanese culture as well. There are many things involved within Japanese culture, including, traditional clothing, traditional arts, and festivals, which is what brings me here today.

I decided to do my report on festivals, also known as matsuris. Many of you may not know, but matsuris are actually a big part of Japanese culture and traditions. They are

celebrated throughout the year and often involve traditional rituals, parades, music, dancing, and best of all, food. However what's most intriguing is how each matsuri has its own unique customs and can be specific to a particular religion, shrine, or temple. Throughout my visit, I was actually lucky enough to experience not one, but two matsuris. My first ever matsuri was actually with my first ever host family. We weren't planning on attending a matsuri during our free day, but it just sort of happened. We actually had gone to a small neighborhood nearby to eat unagi which was really good eel and rice which I was obsessed with. So, my host family decided to take me to a great restaurant that sold delicious unagi. On our way out of the restaurant, after eating the best meal ever, we heard these really loud drums playing and noticed someone being carried around by multiple people. I got to learn that they were carrying around what was known as a deity, a sacred spirit, which was used to bless the areas and people around them the day before the big festival or celebration. This was known as purification and on this day, people actually purified themselves through abstinence and bathing. Before going on this trip, I thought that Matsuris were just this big festival that people came together to celebrate, but it's actually that and so much more and it was so interesting to be able to learn the religious reasoning behind matsuris.

I then realized that Matsuris actually have two parts to them, purification and then the celebration of it that comes after, which I was also fortunate enough to experience. Over my stay in Japan, all the Torrance and Kashiwa delegates went to the celebration part of a matsuri together. We also had the pleasure of being a part of the ritual, where we danced the Kashiwa Odori. We were dressed in traditional clothing that included very tight pants, a happi coat, and a hachimaki which was used to go around your head. Within the Matsuri, they had a variety of different music playing, various performances, and plenty of tasty food that we were able to eat.

Matsuris are an integral part of Japanese culture, celebrated with great enthusiasm and joy across the country. These festivals, often associated with Shinto and Buddhist shrines, serve not only as a means of honoring deities and ancestors but also as a way to strengthen community bonds. They play a crucial role in preserving Japanese heritage emphasizing the importance of passing down customs and stories from one generation to the next. They provide a sense of identity, reminding people of their shared history and values. Furthermore, Matsuris attract visitors from around the world, like us, promoting cultural exchange and understanding.

Matsuris are not just festivals, but a vibrant expression of Japan's rich cultural heritage. They provide a way for communities to come together, celebrate their traditions,



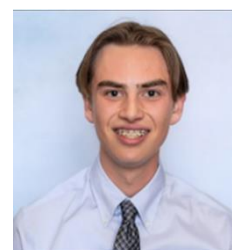
and honor historical events, and I'm so very glad that I got to experience it and be a part of not just Maturis, but the whole trip overall. This trip wouldn't have been possible without all the TSCA members and community which is why I will forever greatly appreciate all of you and the work you have done. Thank you. ✨

## 2024 Student Post Visit Trip Report

### Japanese Train Culture by Colin Welsch

#### 日本の鉄道文化

コリン・ウェルシュ（高校2年）



When I visited Kashiwa in July, my motivations included meeting my host families, practicing Japanese and savoring the incredible cuisine. But above all, I was excited to explore the complexities of Japan's train systems and the culture surrounding them. Before visiting, I thought I had a clear understanding of Japan's trains—a beautiful system that was used by all, and with manners followed and supported by everyone. However, thanks to the Sister City Exchange Program, I learned that Japan and trains are not as simple as I once thought. Coming out of the trip, I now have a much more nuanced and educated understanding of how the Japanese use trains.

First, I'll start with the areas of Japan's train culture being just as passionate as expected.

Previously, I had heard about the significance of Japan's train fandom. As someone who is interested in Japanese trains and public transportation all over the world, I have been exposed to this fandom for quite a while. With my Instagram "For You" page constantly filled with pictures of Japanese trains, I was well aware of their popularity. My host family selections worked perfectly with this. In the words of my first host mother, it was a "perfect match". My host brother, Hidehiko, is a massive train enthusiast. He has ridden every single Shinkansen line in Japan, and together we bonded over our love of railways.

On our free day, I was able to see—and purchase—the incredible variety of goods available for the Japanese train fandom. The presence of train fandom in Japan can even

be seen in the stations themselves. Hidehiko taught me that many major stations sell platform admission-only tickets, a train-sighting cheat code that we used on our free day to view dozens of Shinkansen up close and personal—for an affordable 150 yen per person. We were joined by many train fanatics taking pictures of the trains together with us, many with expensive cameras set up to get the perfect angle of their favorite train.

But not all things proved to be the same as I expected. In my pre-trip report, I raved on and on about the massive amounts of ridership Japan’s railway network boasts. While this is certainly, the case, and I learned that many of the Kashiwa students use trains when going towards central Tokyo, some of them almost every day, I also learned a lot about the many situations that people choose not to use trains.

My second host family was my biggest example of this. A family of four with a preschool-aged daughter, they showed me that there is still a calculation of whether or not to use trains. According to them, for people with toddlers and young children, taking the train can be quite burdensome, and that taking a car is often the easier option.

Another spot where my expectations were subverted came in the area of train etiquette. Going into the program, I had an image of Japan’s train etiquette as quite black-and-white. The area that I was particularly convinced of was the shunning of conversation. Scared to be the “noisy foreigner”, I was always embarrassed when me and my fellow Torrance Students busted onto a train in the middle of a conversation. However, my host families challenged the reality I assumed I knew. They said that when Japanese people ride trains in groups, they talk all the time. They unanimously agreed that talking on the train is completely allowed, and that the only reason it can feel prohibited is because most people taking the train—especially in Tokyo—are riding alone.

Thanks to my time in Kashiwa, I was able to experience Japan and its train culture firsthand. Before coming to Japan, I thought I knew everything. However, in Kashiwa I learned that Japan and trains aren’t as simple as I once thought. Because of my experiences in Kashiwa, I now have a much better understanding of the nuances of train culture in Japan—and for that, I cannot express my gratitude enough. Thank you to my parents for supporting me in taking this opportunity.

Thank you to my teachers and coaches for endorsing me for this program. Thank you to my host families for generously hosting me in your homes. Thank you to all the Torrance and Kashiwa delegates for giving me some of the best friends I have ever had. And thank you to everyone at TSCA and KIRA who spent countless hours planning and fundraising for my trip of a lifetime. Thank you for giving me a second home—Kashiwa, Japan. ✨