

2022/2023 Japanese Language Program for Specialists in a Cultural and Academic Field - Short Term

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From January 11 to March 8, 2023, I participated in the Japan Foundation 2-month Program for Academic and Cultural Specialists at the Foundation's Japan Language Institute at its Kansai International Center. As a PhD student in anthropology gearing up for qualifying exams and long-term dissertation fieldwork on fermentation culture, I had applied to the program with the goal of brushing up on my language skills in a dedicated environment before going into the field. The combination of living in Japan and daily classes was

the perfect cocktail of intensive review and around-the-clock practice I needed to solidify my existing skills and develop the ability to converse naturally with Japanese in everyday and fieldwork situations.

The Kansai Center is in Tajiri town in the broader outskirts of Osaka, directly across from Kansai International Airport. This made it incredibly convenient to access from the airport and made for an easy ride to Osaka on the weekends; the trip took 45 minutes to an hour depending on your destination within Osaka. This also meant that Nara, Kyoto, and Kobe were all within a day trip range of the Center, as well as much of coastal Wakayama in the other direction. Several of my colleagues also spent a weekend in Nagoya, less than an hour's shinkansen ride away from Osaka. Another easy weekend trip is Koyasan, the mountain famous for its Buddhist temple stays and vast, possibly haunted cemetery laying along the mythical Kumano Kodo trail that crisscrosses the Kii peninsula.



1) *Taiyaki*

The Center itself is right on the shore of Osaka Bay in a deep suburb rich in family-friendly activities, ranging from a weekly local fishermen's market, nationally famous pebble beaches, sailboarding, and an outlet mall prized internationally for its last-minute, close to the airport convenience and, amongst the Center's students, for its diverse food options. Very close-by combinis and several restaurants made for a good, all-around supplement to the Center's Monday-Friday cafeteria. The Center has many bicycles available to borrow for a breezy ride around town (although the bridge over the harbor is treacherously steep!) and a regular shuttle to the nearby Rinku-town mall and station.



2) A view from the marina



3) Morning view from my room, with the fishermen already hard at work below

Nothing beats the view from the tall, wall-to-wall, west-facing windows of our rooms at the Center. I looked forward every single day to a cotton candy, pastel-soft awakening and a dramatic sunset, tracking the sun's northward shift as the season progressed and watching the boats in the marina sway on a windy day. As I sipped on a coffee every morning before heading down to the cafeteria for a full breakfast, I enjoyed watching the fishermen down in the harbor and the police cadets jogging at the academy across the water, both sets awake and at work long before me. Our rooms were equipped with a private bathroom with full bathtub, thermos, kettle and mini-fridge, ample closet and shelf space, a single bed

whose sheets were changed weekly by the housekeeping staff, and a desk and chair. We also had access to microwave, toaster oven, and free laundry facilities in the floor's common areas, which we shared with members of our program and our sister-program for Indonesian researchers, who also participated in cultural activities with us.

My cohort was made up of 10 researchers, ranging from master's to post-doctoral researcher. Three of us came from the Americas: a Brazilian, a Quebecois and myself; seven were from Europe: Serbia, Croatia, Italy, Spain and Catalonia. From what I gathered, this geographical distribution was rather unusual for this program which typically sees more researchers from non-Western countries. Our research interests varied drastically, covering many fields across the humanities and social sciences and including topics such as translating onomatopoeia, matsuri in areas affected by the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami, eco-critical literature, discriminatory discourse against burakumin in the Meiji era, the Anpo protests, Japanese language education, and others. In addition to making new friends who share so many of the same overarching concerns and ways of



4) Plum blossoms at Osaka Castle

living, being able to learn about each other's areas of research was an unexpected highlight of the program. Also at the Center at the same time as us were a cohort of international diplomats and foreign service officers, the aforementioned Indonesian researchers, Australian undergraduates and, for a brief time, Korean high school students. The atmosphere at the Center was always friendly as well as studious despite the limitations still imposed by the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.



5) Setting fire to a snowy mountain at Nara's annual Wakakusa Yamayaki festival

The classes were, of course, the core of the program. We were each assigned one tutor depending on our area of specialization—language and literature, culture and society, or history and politics. We started our stay with a placement test and an initial meeting with our tutor to assess our capabilities and priorities and choose our electives, and from there we were assigned to one of two levels for each class. One strength of the program is that the level was chosen for each subject rather than in general, meaning the groups were different for the Integrated Japanese class (focusing mostly on grammar, reading, and composition), and the elective Kanji and Conversation classes. In

addition, we were free to select our electives based on our research needs. As an anthropologist preparing dissertation fieldwork, it made sense to me to opt out of kanji class at this time, while one of my literature colleagues did not attend conversation classes (an absolute must for me!). Most people did, however, choose to participate in all the options to make the most of their time at the Foundation.

In addition to these classes, we were offered special, optional classes on alternating weeks devoted to various specialized skills or fun topics. The guided reading or writing class involved from one-on-one time with your tutor to discuss a relevant article or reading in depth (there was also an option to work together on a piece of writing, but none of us chose that option). The email class gave us scripts, set phrases, and some guided practice time on the art of writing emails in Japanese, which involves extra-polite language and expected turns of phrases I had no knowledge of beforehand. Nihongo café was an opportunity for relaxed conversation on fun topics, which included Kansai dialect, anime, and character mascots. Finally, there was a weekly session dedicated to preparing our capstone project: a presentation, all in Japanese, about our research. We were split into two groups that met every other week to practice giving our presentation, and had individual meetings with the professor on alternate weeks to go over our presentation slides and polish our text.

We participated in several Center-sponsored cultural activities in addition to the classes, some at the center and some outside. They were all educational in some way and while they were typical Japanese cultural activities, they were also somewhat beyond the classic activities a tourist or even more long-term visitor would probably have a chance to engage in. The Japan Foundation staff first took us to attend a show at the National Bunraku Theatre, an operatic puppet theatre with sung and shamisen accompaniment that originated in Osaka in the 17th century. We were most fortunate to be given an introduction to the art form by one of the puppeteers. While most plays are accompanied by a single singer and a single shamisen, of the two short plays we attended that day, one involved multiple singers and three instrumentalists, one of whom played three separate instruments throughout the play: shamisen, koto and kokyū. While the singing is in classical Japanese and essentially inaccessible to us, I was very impressed with the musical elements, the intricate puppet costumes, and the skill of the puppeteers. We were also introduced to kadō/ikebana,



6) A bunraku puppet

(flower arranging), and to shodō (ink calligraphy), both taught by skilled practitioners. I was particularly pleased with shodō, which I would have never thought to try on my own but greatly enjoyed.



7) *Fermenting soy sauce vats at Yuasa Shoyu in Wakayama prefecture*

The Center also organized a day trip to Kobe, where we were given free rein to explore and have lunch before heading over to Kobe University where we participated in an afternoon of quiz games, snacks and exchange with Japanese and international graduate students in International Studies. A four-day research trip was also organized, with the option of going to Tokyo and staying at the Japan's Foundation Center, Urawa, in the city of Saitama or of organizing our own trip to a destination of our choosing. Unsurprisingly, my cohort's other two cultural anthropologists and myself chose the latter option, spending the time at our respective field sites. As I did not attend the trip in Tokyo I cannot speak to that experience but know from my colleagues that they devoted their time to visiting collections and libraries and meeting with fellow academics. As for myself, I took the opportunity to conduct a field site feasibility assessment in Kyoto, visiting various sites across the city and meeting with a professor from the University of Kyoto. While I ultimately decided not to pursue further dissertation research in Kyoto, I was able to get all the data I needed out of the area at this stage and to sharpen some of my research questions, making this an excellent use of a long weekend. I also visited some sites in Wakayama prefecture during my free time, making good use of the Center's proximity to that usually remote prefecture.



8) *A perk of Kyoto in the off-season: Ginkakuji almost to myself*

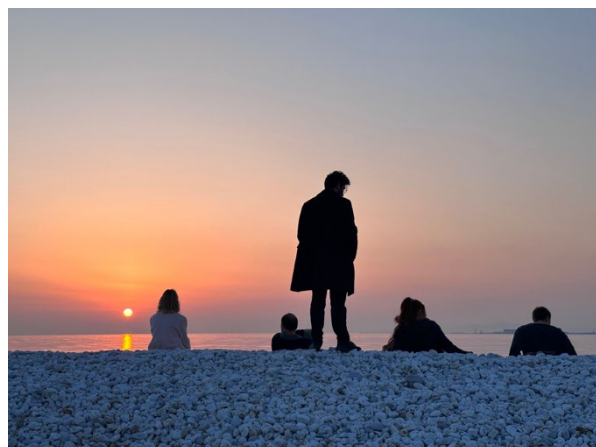


9) Cohort and tutors after a successful day of

For our final days at the center, after wrapping up classes we took the placement test again to assess our progress since the program start, and we had several more meetings and a big rehearsal dedicated to preparing for our capstone: the presentation. Presentation day was held in the Center's large hall, in front of an audience made up of our cohort, Indonesian colleagues, and the Center's teaching, administrative and

library staff. This meant that our presentations had to strike a difficult balance between being in a Japanese accessible to our fellow Japanese learners, and also with content intelligible to non-academics, all the while not dumbing anything down on either level. Our tutors poured a lot of effort in helping us meet that goal and refine our sentence structure, pronunciation, and delivery. I had many back-and-forth sessions with Chiba-sensei going over phrasing and ideas, figuring out the best wording for important concepts, debating whether to keep certain paragraphs on complex ideas, and often rewriting entire sections to improve the overall tone and message. As a result, I felt as confident on presentation day as one can conceivably feel when giving a presentation in a foreign language about a research project still in its planning stages! The experience was truly unmatched not only in helping me develop the specialized vocabulary and ability to talk about my research in Japanese, but also in helping me sharpen my ideas and research questions by forcing me to distill them to their essential components.

We had the chance to interact with a lot of different professors each week throughout the program. All of them were incredible instructors, personable as well as highly competent. They provided us with timely and personalized feedback on every assignment and were readily available to answer questions and provide advice. This holds true for the supporting staff as well, who went out of their way to provide us with an incredibly well-organized and clearly communicated experience so that we could make the utmost of our limited



10) Enjoying our well-earned last sunset on the beach

time at the Foundation. One truly unexpected perk of the program was the above-and-beyond services provided by the two staff librarians, who scheduled individual consultations about our research with all of us. Not only did they find and set aside relevant books from the Center library for us, but they purposely borrowed others for us through Interlibrary Loan. Every few weeks, I would receive a message from them notifying me of new arrivals awaiting me at the library desk. Overall, I was simply blown away by the quality and thoughtfulness of the educational programming. I believe no other program could have gone such a long way in Japanese language preparation in such a short time. I am incredibly grateful for the Japan Foundation's trust in my research project and for the opportunity to develop both my Japanese and my research, to make new friends and experiences, and to enjoy life in Kansai for a winter.