

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

By Michael VanHartingsveldt

University of Kansas

Lawrence, Kansas



Figure 1 Robot at Ghibli Museum

When I was in high school, I aspired to become a university professor or a museum curator. In which specialization, I had no idea. All I knew at that time was I felt drawn to a career which would allow me to educate and inform. After drifting through odd jobs and various life experiences, in 2016 I found myself working at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in the Pavilion for Japanese Art with curator Hollis Goodall and then ultimately attending the University of Kansas in 2019 for an MA and PhD in Japanese Art History. I am currently on the cusp of completing my PhD coursework, after which I will devote my time and energy to the PhD dissertation. In my search for ways to “beef up” my Japanese language skills to better engage with pre-modern materials and contemporary research, I

came across the Japanese-Language Program for Specialists in Cultural and Academic Fields (JLPS) offered by the Japan Foundation through their Japanese-Language Institutes. They offer two-month and five-month courses which combine intensive coursework and immersive integration into Japanese society to provide language instruction. After applying for the five-month course in December 2021, I received an enrollment offer at the end of April 2022. Of course, I accepted.

When I arrived at the Center in late-July, I met my colleagues/classmates. Collectively referred to as “22CA5,” the eight participants in the five-month program came from all over the globe: two from Vietnam, one from England, one from France, one from Slovakia, one from South Korea, one from Taiwan, and myself from North America (Canadian living in the USA). Our areas of specialization and research topics were

equally diverse: from the cultural nostalgia evoked by representations of Yokai in contemporary Japanese animation to the now-outlawed practice of self-mummification in certain Buddhist circles, from the philosophical considerations of Zeami as presented through his development of Noh theater to the effects of the COVID pandemic on parent-child relationships. Over the program, I would become deeply familiar with these topics through daily conversations with my peers.

The Japan Foundation Japanese-Language Institute, Kansai Center (there is also a Center in Urawa, near Tokyo), is located in Tajiri, a beautiful town just across the bridge from Kansai International Airport (KIX). The larger region of Izumisano has all the amenities one would need in their daily lives within a 20-minute walk: convenience and grocery stores, shopping centers, cafes, restaurants, etc. While it did take roughly one hour to get to Osaka proper by train – and two hours for Kyoto or Nara – I found the Center’s quiet location was ideal for language studies and personal research. During the week, participants stayed in a dorm with private bathroom; on weekends, we could fill out an ‘Overnight Stay’ request and, if approved, spend the weekend off-site (more on this later). Many of us would work in our rooms or in the Center library, which boasts a large selection of books on diverse topics related to Japanese and international cultures.

The team of library staff were exceptionally helpful; they made notes of our areas of interest and would fill a shelf on a book cart with relevant reading material for each participant, as well as contact us individually to show us a resource they had found. They would also guide us through the process of requesting books or articles from other libraries. The staff and faculty were equally helpful and generous with their time. The staff would regularly communicate with the participants regarding travel policies, special events, and health checks to ensure that we were all comfortable and in good spirits. The faculty would, aside from instruction and grading, inform us of extracurricular events which might be of interest. My tutor in particular told me when an important researcher in my field (Buddhist sculpture) was delivering an online lecture and when a modern sculptor would be available for an in-person meeting at an



Figure 2 Thunderstorm over Tajiri and Mt. Inunaki, from the dorm

exhibition of their sculptures.



Figure 3 Aizen Myoo and its portable shrine at the Tokyo National Museum

Upon arrival at the Institute, the program participants attended a series of orientations, meetings, and tours of the center and its immediate neighborhood. The information conveyed through these activities would prove indispensable to maximize the five months we would be studying there. Then came the placement tests. By evaluating the participants' abilities in reading and writing through a written test and listening and speaking through an oral interview, the faculty assigned

participants to the intermediate or advanced level of the following classes: Integrated Japanese (Grammar), Kanji & Kanji-based Vocabulary, Presentation, Conversation and Interview, and Academic Writing. All participants attended a Computer class, through which we were introduced to useful self-study resources, and individually met with tutors to read through relevant literature in weekly Specialized Reading sessions. Classes were held Monday to Thursday, 9:00 am to 3:10 pm. Twice during the program, once per term, participants were given one business week (plus the weekends on either end, so a total of ten days) to travel to other parts of the country for professional activities. Participants worked with their tutor to develop a plan before that week and a written report of their activities afterward. Some participants interviewed specialists in their respective fields, while others visited significant historical sites and institutions. The information independently gathered during these weeks, as well as coursework for the Institute, culminated in two presentations: a ten-minute introductory presentation at the end of Term 1 and a fifteen-minute professional presentation at the end of Term 2.

One of the best ways to motivate Japanese language learners is to immerse them in aspects of Japanese culture which require and activate particular skills. The Japanese-Language Institute organized several outings and workshops to achieve this, including a calligraphy workshop under the guidance of a calligraphy master where participants focused on drawing a specific kanji to explore the relationship between Japanese

paper, writing brush, and ink. On two separate occasions, participants were able to watch examples of traditional Japanese theater: Bunraku, or puppet theater, at the National Bunraku Theater in Namba, Osaka, where participants first attended a private lecture and Q&A session with puppet masters who explained the mechanisms and skills which bring life to the puppets on stage, then enjoyed the theatrical performances as members of the audience; and Kyogen and Noh at the Kanzei Kaikan in Kyoto. A field trip to Sakai provided several unique



Figure 4 The Golden Hall and Five-Storied Pagoda at Horyuji

opportunities for the participants to learn about Japanese history and its traditional crafts. A visit to the burial mound of Emperor Nintoku (r. fourth century) and its related museum provided insights into Japanese culture and trade with the East Asian continent during the Kofun period (300-538 CE). A guided tour and conversation with the staff at the Plaza of Rikyu and Akiko introduced the cultural impact of Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) and Yosano Akiko (1878-1942). An informational session at the Traditional Crafts Museum revealed Sakai to be a significant historical center for the production of incense, metalcraft, papercraft, and textiles. Some participants even purchased handmade knives to bring home!



Figure 5 The Tokae Lantern Festival in Nara

When the participants were not attending classes, completing homework, or participating in the various Institute-organized activities, we were able to do our own activities. This was usually on weekends or public holidays. As an art historian with a particular interest in Buddhist visual culture, I made it my personal goal to see as many temples, shrines, and museum exhibitions as possible to see firsthand many of the sculptures, paintings, and architecture I had only up to that point read about in textbooks. On my first full weekend, I traveled to Ikaruga to see the historic temples Horyuji and Chuguji, then on to Nara to see Kofukuji, Gangoji, Shinyakushiji, Todaiji, and Kasuga Taisha. In fact, I purchased a goshuincho (a book for collecting temple and shrine seals) at Horyuji. Over the five months of the program, I traveled to Kyoto, Nara, and Tokyo



Figure 7 Taoca Coffee Roaster in Jurinji



Figure 6 Architecture at Jingoji and brilliant fall foliage

several times each and visited roughly 130 temples, shrines, and museums (and completing two goshuincho), many of which showcased the finest examples of visual culture produced during the Asuka to Kamakura periods (sixth to fourteenth centuries) at the patronage of the Imperial House and wealthy aristocratic families. Highlights include: the Lecture Hall and Main Hall at Toji, the former holding an impressive 21-figure sculptural mandala from the ninth century; the pond and temple architecture at Daikakuji; the Treasure Hall at Koryuji, which includes a seventh-century pensive bodhisattva sculpture purportedly brought over from Korea; the multiple images of Kannon and the 28 protector deities at Sanjusangendo; and the sculptures (and gorgeous fall foliage, too) at Jingoji. As a

coffee enthusiast – to the point that I set up my own little coffee corner in my dorm – I also patronized independent specialty coffee shops, many of which roasted their own

coffee beans in-house. Some of the more popular pieces of equipment for simple but delicious homemade coffee – Hario V60, Kalita Wave, Origami Dripper - are produced in Japan and were a mainstay at many of these shops.

22CA5 was the first group to physically attend the Japanese-Language Institute, Kansai, for this type of program after the COVID pandemic and, despite the preventative regulations, the transition to in-person instruction was relatively seamless. And even though everyone was wearing masks, the atmosphere in the classrooms was warm and gentle – in no small part due to the gregarious and compassionate personalities in attendance. My own language abilities improved drastically; I feel more confident using Japanese in the classroom and in social settings, both with my peers and my social superiors. The connections I made through this program – as well as the resources I was introduced to through the library, professional activities, and my instructors –

has led to some incredible professional opportunities. I feel more confident with my research skills, too, and will comfortably (but still with considerable effort) delve into primary resources, such as temple records and Imperial courtier diaries, to find evidence which supports my PhD dissertation. Before I left for Japan, my academic advisor told me this experience would be “life-changing.” I had no doubts, but now that I am on the other side, I would encourage anyone who has a chance to study abroad – and the means to do so – to seriously consider this program offered by the Japan Foundation. It is indeed “life-changing.”



Figure 8 Michael looking at a Kamakura period (12th-14th century) stone carving of Fudo Myoo near Joruriji