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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE



2018 JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROGRAM FOR SPECIALISTS IN CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC FIELDS (SHORT-TERM) BY JINNY JESSICA MCGILL

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I was extremely fortunate to spend the summer in Japan and participate in the Japan Foundation's Japanese-Language Program for Specialists. Much more than a language program, this two-month course at the Kansai Institute is a training ground for scholars whose research area focuses on Japan. For me, the program was a capstone to the years of classroom learning of Japanese that I had received at Penn State where I am a doctoral candidate in Art History.

From the preparatory materials that were sent to me in advance of the program, I knew that there would be daily language classes as well as scheduled cultural events. What I did not expect was the level of individual attention we would receive from the teachers in terms of course instruction, advising, and tutoring. My adviser took my language-learning needs and wants into consideration when crafting my course schedule, and I was very satisfied with results. One of my favorite parts of the curriculum was a self-reading course, where we would

select and read materials in Japanese to support our research and then meet weekly with one of the teachers to review or clarify our understanding of what we had read. My teacher introduced me to older forms of Japanese writing that was required for me to read Meiji era prints that are a part of my doctoral dissertation work.

On a regular basis, I attended classes for grammar, kanji, presentation, and conversation. Rather than drilling new grammar points as though preparing for exams—“teaching to the test,” as it were—we spent time using the grammar deliberately during language classes and made short presentations until each grammar point became a naturalized part of our speech. The kanji course material was also designed with a purpose in mind, as was evident by the context-specific modules that were selected for us to learn, such as kanji related to Japan’s train and subway systems.

The librarian at the Kansai Institute played a special role in our training. As graduate students we had already learned the methods of conducting research in our own countries, but navigating research in Japan has its own rules and nuances. There were special courses that I participated in that provided instruction on crafting correspondence to scholars and institutions, using scholarly databases, and using the library system in Japan.

This summer there were thirteen student-scholars in the Program for Scholars course, representing countries all over the globe (e.g., Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Brazil, Hungary, Russia, Ukraine). It would not be an exaggeration to say that spending two months with such an intellectual, diverse, and fun group of researchers with a shared interest in Japan’s language, history, and cultures was the true highlight of the program. We ate together, learned together, played together, and had new exciting experiences together. A few of the fun cultural classes we participated in together include: calligraphy, haiku, yukata, and bunraku. It was sad to part at the end of the two months, but I really will cherish my memories of the time with this group of wonderful scholars.

The Kansai Institute is in Tajiri, a quiet town in Osaka Prefecture, and only a couple stops away from Kansai International Airport by train. Finding tasty food and drink nearby is no problem in Tajiri, with a large grocery store within walking distance and a fair number of Japanese izakaya. Worthy of special mention, the ramen shop just a block down the street from the Institute offers a delightfully spicy kimchi ramen bowl, and on Sunday mornings across the street at the harbor there is a lively fish market where you can buy delicious and fresh seafood from stall vendors. Also, the bustling city of Osaka, with its skyscrapers and seemingly infinite number of cultural venues, takes only an hour to get to from the Institute.

Marble Beach is across the street, and our Brazilian student-scholar organized an afternoon beachside barbeque. Summer in Osaka Prefecture is hot, but we had a shady spot on the beach and borrowed a BBQ pit from the Institute. Some of the staff and teachers stopped by as well, and it was a really great way to spend a Friday afternoon after the rigors of classroom study during the week.

Between the first and second month of the program, the Institute facilitated a four to five-day trip to Tokyo. We each designed our individual research itineraries with our advisers and made independent arrangements to visit archives, museums, or Japanese scholars, but the Institute took care of our travel and accommodations. By the time of the trip, we had gotten to know each other very well, and it was a lot of fun to take the bullet train together with friends.

Many Fridays during the summer were free for us to do our own research. I was able to take a trip to Osaka and meet with a company representative who allowed me to examine archival materials related to the architect who I am studying for my dissertation research, Takeda Goichi. I owe a lot to the training and opportunities awarded by participating in this two-month program and I will be recommending it to other graduate students studying Japan.



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