



JAPAN AND THE DEATH PENALTY

Voices From a Divided Society

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The death penalty is, needless to say, about taking human lives," former Justice Minister Hideo Hiraoka once stated. Japan remains one of the few developed countries that continue to carry out executions, primarily for severe murder cases. Since the mid-20th century, more than 110 nations have abolished capital punishment, reflecting a steady global shift toward alternative forms of justice. As this international movement grows stronger, Japan is confronted with the question of whether to preserve its long-standing system or reconsider it for the future. This article examines the perspectives shaping that debate.

On a cool afternoon in Shibuya, Tokyo, an anti-death penalty rally draws students, activists, and passersby. Their signs are simple but powerful: "A mistake cannot be undone" and "No justice through death." Among them stands Mr. Ryo Kachi, a long-time volunteer with Amnesty International Japan. He listens as speakers remind the crowd of past wrongful convictions. When asked why he continues this work, he explains, "When people learn the reality of executions, many start questioning whether the state should take a life." His tone is calm, shaped by years of trying to persuade a public that often disagrees.

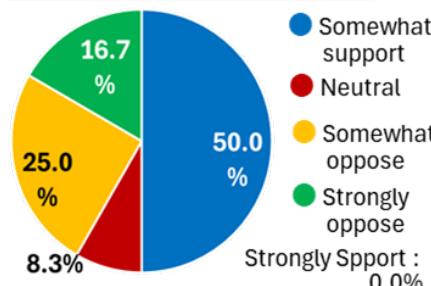
In contrast, the atmosphere at Nisshin Campus of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) is completely different. A student, Mr. Yoshiki Ota, explains why he believes Japan should keep capital punishment. "Keeping criminals in prison is expensive," he says. "People pay taxes for their food and clothing. I think many people support the death penalty because it has always been there." His reasoning is practical, and he speaks with confidence.

Another NUFS student, Ms. Aina Honda, connects her support to history. "After the war, there were too many criminals to hold. The death penalty helped maintain order," she explains. At the same time, she acknowledges the possibility of change, noting that social media and exposure to other countries' systems have influenced her generation. "Many young people are curi-



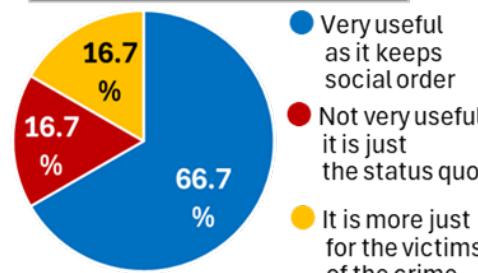
Mr. Kachi
(Amnesty International Japan)

Q: Do you support or oppose the death penalty in Japan?



Strongly Support : 0.0%

Q: How useful is the death penalty to Japanese society?



ous about how things work elsewhere," she continues, "so maybe opinions will shift."

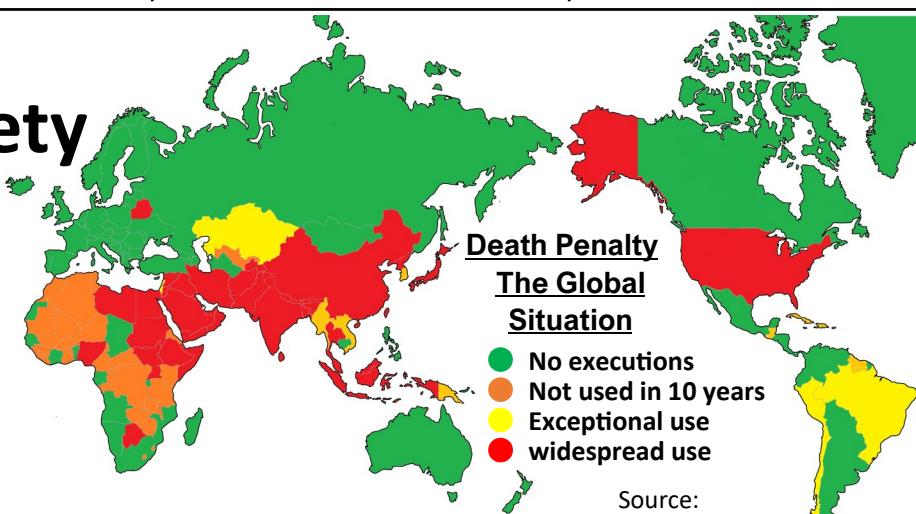
One more supporter, who asked to remain anonymous, expresses her views strongly. "It's not right that the murderer gets to live a long life while the victim never can," she insists. She quickly dismisses alternatives to execution and adds that discussions about wrongful convictions "do not gain much public attention," suggesting widespread trust in the justice system.

Together, these scenes, one rooted in human rights concerns, the other in ideas of justice and order, capture the emotional divide within Japan's ongoing debate.

Japan's death penalty system remains highly secretive. According to Mr. Kachi, inmates are informed of their execution only hours before it occurs, a practice he describes as psychologically devastating. He argues that citizens cannot meaningfully evaluate the system because "execution chambers and procedures remain invisible," unlike in parts of the United States where media are allowed to witness executions.

Supporters, however, often emphasize that Japan's low crime rate reflects strong public order. Many believe the death penalty deters violent crime or respects the suffering of victims' families. According to a Cabinet Office poll, over 80 percent of respondents say capital punishment is "necessary in some cases," a figure that has remained stable for decades.

During our interview, Mr. Kachi raised constitutional and ethical concerns: "Living without knowing the execution date, in near-isolation, is almost a form of torture." He also emphasized the risk of judicial error, referencing the case of Mr. Iwao



Source:
The 2013
classification of
executions published by
the Irish online media
outlet "The journal"



Interview with NUFS
students, Nisshin
City, Aichi Pref.
Left: Ms. Honda
Below: Mr. Ota



In Europe and Australia, abolition occurred gradually, often following wrongful conviction cases or human rights debates. France abolished the death penalty in 1981 after intense parliamentary discussion, despite public support at the time. The Netherlands followed a slower path shaped by rehabilitation-oriented justice, while Australia ended capital punishment state by state.

Japan stands apart. Public support remains strong, victims' families play a prominent role, and trust in the justice system has historically been high. Although the Hakamada case introduced doubt for many, it has not yet triggered a national reconsideration comparable to developments abroad. As a result, Japan's debate remains complex and ongoing.

Japan's discussion of capital punishment is shaped by competing values: justice for victims, public safety, human rights, and fear of irreversible error. The interviews and surveys conducted for this article show that, while supporters and opponents differ sharply, both sides express genuine moral reasoning.

Younger generations, increasingly exposed to international perspectives, may introduce new momentum to the debate in the coming decades. Whether Japan ultimately retains or abolishes the death penalty, the challenge remains finding a balance between justice, human dignity, and the future of Japanese society.

Culture

By Rafe A. BINSKIN,
Reia KUROKI,
Paulo A. PEREIRA DE AZEVEDO

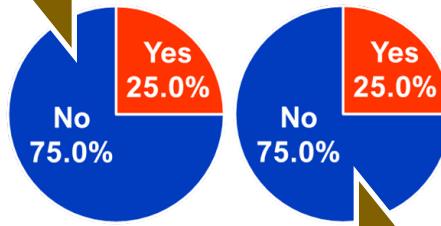
Japan's thriving art industry serves as a reflection of its rich cultural, traditional, and spiritual beliefs. The most prominent modern industry is anime, becoming a worldwide phenomenon in recent years. According to a cultural statistics database by Dentsu, an astounding number of 2.8 billion viewers watch anime globally, but does this media truly represent Japanese beliefs, or does it utilise them as an enriching source of entertainment? Even now spiritual beliefs are heavily present in Japanese daily life. Japan's official government statistics site, e-Stat, show that over 80 million Japanese follow Shinto and/or Buddhism. Understanding the prominence of these beliefs is key to answering whether religious iconography in anime is used to simply enhance the entertainment factor, or to truly represent aspects of Japanese religion.

The popularity of Japanese religious references in anime remains even today, with the current box office top five highest-grossing Japanese films all featuring strong religious imagery. One of the most influential examples, Director Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001), stood at the top of Japan's box office for an astounding 19 years. Mr. Miyazaki frequently utilises Shinto elements such as sacred spaces, rituals, and religious figures to evoke feelings of spiritualism and harmony between humanity and nature. More recently, 2025's *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle* (directed by Mr. Haruo Sotozaki) continues this tradition through vivid depictions of both Shinto and Buddhist imagery, with frequent references to Japanese demons, *kagura*—traditional Japanese religious performances—and Buddhist characters, highlighting how contemporary anime continues to draw upon Japan's religious heritage to create powerful visuals.

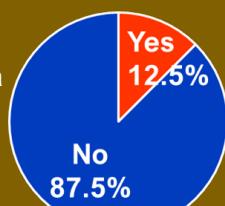
In order to understand more about the relationship between anime and Japanese religion, we interviewed three students from Aichi Gakuin University's (AGU) Department of Religious Culture: Ms. Mizuho Kamimura, Ms. Nanaho Iwata, and Mr. Sei Itozawa. When asked about the anime that they felt was 'the most religious', we received several intriguing answers. "Golden Kamuy has strong themes of animism that are present within Ainu culture. It is even stated in the first episode that things such as bears can be viewed as gods," Ms. Iwata stated. "It was so interesting that I decided to study religion." Upon asking what aspects of religion made the anime more interesting, she stated, "A character's depth of religious belief can also reflect their attitudes and strength. For example [...] characters like Asirpa from *Golden Kamuy* or Himejima from *Demon Slayer* are able to stay grounded in their actions, thanks to their belief in religion." This example highlights how characters who follow religion are perceived as drawing

ANIME AND ANIMISM From Screens to Japanese Shinto and Samsara

Q: Do you think that religion is widely practiced in Japan?



Q: If they are mistaken, should media producers receive detailed explanations from shrines and such before starting anime production?



Q: Do you think media covers Japanese religions to increase the number of believers in Japan?

power and strength of mind from their beliefs, in contrast to the familiar "god-like characters" or other characters with significant religious influence. Another response from Mr. Itozawa presented a more esoteric example. "Saint Oniisan portrays Buddha and Jesus as roommates." In this anime, the aforementioned religious figures participate in a variety of religious and non-religious activities, such as ping-pong, Christmas shopping or visiting a temple on New Year's Eve. Mr. Itozawa further elaborated, "as a polytheistic society, Japanese viewers may not find it offensive. But, is it realistic to portray Buddha and Jesus Christ as friends?"

This leads us to our next question: "How much do you think international viewers can understand the religious backgrounds of Japanese anime?" While there are many depictions of religious elements in both Japanese and Western media, Japanese anime contains deep-rooted connections to religion as a result of their vast and flexible belief system. However, some of these may result in the alienation of foreign viewers, as the thematic elements and narrative parallels are made with Japanese viewers in mind. Mr. Itozawa furthered this sentiment, stating, "Concepts of animism may not connect well with foreign viewers as a result of the differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religious views." However, Ms. Kamimura rebuked that "There are elements of niche Japanese knowledge that even many Japanese do not know, meaning Japanese and Western viewers may have similar experiences." Amongst the conversation, we determined that, while viewers may miss some obscure references to specific religious figures or stories, the symbolism of religious places and objects are often made clear through imagery, characters' actions, and how they interact with important aspects of the story. For example, Torii gates present outside of shrines symbolise a safe space that evil entities cannot enter. Simi-

larly, *kekai* (barriers) represent a division between the human and spiritual realm. While slightly different, the meanings can be inferred through similar imagery present within Western media, such as churches and salt lines acting as barriers to ward off evil.

In order to determine whether these sentiments are shared by viewers with lesser knowledge on the subject, we conducted a survey amongst Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) students regarding religious beliefs and their connection to anime. When asked about which anime they watch with strong religious connections, the most common response was Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke* (1997), followed by the currently popular *Jujutsu Kaisen* (Gege Akutami, 2018), as well as similar period dramas like *Rurouni Kenshin* (Nobuhiro Watsuki, 1994) and *Record of Ragnarok* (Shinya Umemura, 2017). When asked if they think that religion is widely practiced in Japan, 75% of students responded "No." This data reflects that even though it is not necessarily widely practiced, many viewers still enjoy watching anime with religious themes or references.

When asked how viewers learned about the history and iconography of Japanese religions, a majority responded that they learnt through school, meaning that many students have similar knowledge of Shinto and Buddhism. In regards to the accuracy of religious depictions in anime, one student says, "I think it's accurate sometimes," elaborating, "even though it might be different from the textbooks, I think anime sometimes exaggerates [religious imagery] to make the story more interesting!" This belief highlights a common perspective present within our survey data: the use of culturally significant elements and iconography to enhance



Interview conducted with
▼ Aichi Gakuin University students, Nissin City, Aichi Pref.

the entertainment value and viewer relatability. When asked if they felt religions are featured in anime to increase the practice of faith in Japan, 87.5% of respondents answered "No", reinforcing the idea that such symbolism is not generally interpreted as an expression of religious belief, but rather as a narrative and aesthetic device.

Utilising commonly known tropes and character traits present within famous religious stories or scenes allows viewers to easily understand a character's narrative position and personality. In addition to this, some anime pay close attention to specific elements or practices within Japanese religion. For example, *Dandadan* (Tatsu Yukinobu, 2021) portrays many symbolic and literal representations of Shinto culture, such as the use of paper seals, *torii* gates, and various *yokai* such as *Kasa-obake* (umbrella monster) and *Tsuchinoko* (a type of snake yokai). While these representations are mostly faithful to their original depictions, they remain a way to enhance and enrich the entertainment value of the story, with many of these elements being key parts of the narrative. Adding to this notion, Mr. Itozawa stated, "It is important to consider the accuracy of religious representations", furthering, "For example, the religions shown in *Golden Kamuy* and *Your Name* are written with a lot of respect and research." As stated by Mr. Itozawa, Makoto Shinkai's works *Your Name* (2016) and *Weathering With You* (2019), Shinto and folkloric beliefs such as *kami* and *musubi* (the belief that all things are connected in fate) play crucial roles in developing the character's personalities, actions, and relationships. In both films, characters' interactions with shrines and religious objects allow them to draw strength from the power of these *kami*. Seeing this, writers can lead viewers to draw upon their existing knowledge of religious beliefs to create more grounded and engaging settings within a story.

Ultimately, the relationship between anime and Japanese religion focuses more on inspiration, as opposed to instruction. While Shinto and Buddhist imagery remain deeply ingrained in many of Japan's most influential and historical works, as well as daily life, these elements are used to enrich storytelling, strengthen characterisation, and create distinct, visually and emotionally compelling stories, rather than promote religious practice itself. Through insight from the students at AGU, as well as survey data of NUFS students, religious symbols in anime can be viewed as an accessible tool for viewers to engage with. These symbols can be used to identify a character's beliefs, personality, strength, and even more mysterious factors such as connection to fate. In this way, anime continues to serve as a bridge between modern and traditional Japanese culture and entertainment, embracing the nation's rich cultural heritage while still being engaging to global audiences.

By Florian BUZHALA,
Levin SAHIN,
Nana YOSHIDA

If you go to a graduation ceremony, you can see how young people change the kimono. They mix it with their own ideas, and that is how the kimono comes back in style”—lecturer Junko Nishikimi from Nagoya University of Arts and Science (NUAS).

It is a warm September night in Nagoya. The smell of grilled corn drifts from food stalls, and taiko drums beat in the background. Many people walk around in colorful yukatas. Some girls take selfies under the lanterns while smiling and making peace signs. A man in a navy yukata walks by wearing sneakers. He looks a little embarrassed but laughs along with his friends. Children run around pointing at the fireworks with excited faces. When the fireworks explode in the night sky, everyone stops and looks up. Some people smile softly, and others look surprised. At this moment, we realized that traditional clothing still has an important place in modern Japan.

Japan is well known for mixing tradition with modern style. One of the clearest examples of this is the kimono and the yukata. Even though most people today wear Western-style clothes, traditional clothing still appears at festivals, ceremonies, and in modern fashion trends. Designers, young people, and craftsmen all help keep these traditions alive in different ways. To learn more about how the kimono has survived in the modern world, we visited NUAS and interviewed Ms. Nishikimi, who taught us about traditional clothing and the changes happening today.

The kimono is one of the oldest types of clothing in Japan. The word kimono means “thing to wear.” Long ago, people could understand a person’s class, age, or even the season just by looking at the colors and patterns of their kimono. Wearing a kimono was not only practical but also a way of expressing identity.

During the Heian period (794-1185), nobles wore several colorful layers. In the Edo period (1603-1868), common people wore simpler designs. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan modernized quickly and men started wearing Western suits. After the Second World War, women also changed to Western-style clothing. Because of these changes, the kimono became less common in daily life.

However, the kimono never fully disappeared. Today people still wear it for events such as coming of age ceremonies, weddings, and graduation. Many young people rent kimono for photos or wear yukata during the summer festival season. Ms. Nishikimi explained that color combinations in kimono have deep meaning. She said, “There are so many colors. Color combinations

SILK AND STREETWEAR

When the Kimono Meets Modern Japan



Left: Traditional Japanese kimono fashion is still cherished today, but many young people adapt it into their modern style. Photo credit: pixabay.com

Left Below: Master kimono maker Ms. Tsuyo Onodera carefully measures the fabric for kimono construction. Photo credit: Ms. Tomomi Kitami

Below: Interview with Ms. Nishikimi, Nissin City, Aichi Pref.



can express the season.” She also said that wearing kimono affects a person’s posture because “your posture must be upright.” Even now, the kimono remains a strong symbol of Japanese culture.

Modern Designers and Fashion

Modern designers often look to traditional Japanese clothing for inspiration. They do not make exact kimonos, but they use ideas such as loose shapes, movement, and layering. This helps keep traditional elements alive in modern fashion.

According to interviews in Vogue, designer Issey Miyake believed that clothing should allow the body to move freely. His Pleats Please line includes soft and flowing pieces that feel light and move easily. These pieces have a connection to kimono ideas even though they are modern.

Ms. Rei Kawakubo, the founder of Comme des Garçons, also uses Japanese ideas in her work. In an interview with Vogue Japan, she said she wants to “create something new” instead of following normal fashion rules. Some researchers at Waseda University said that her ideas connect to the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, which finds beauty in things that are irregular or imperfect.

Younger designers are also changing traditional clothing in creative ways. The Kyoto brand SOU SOU keeps traditional patterns and wide sleeves but redesigns them into clothes that people can wear every day. Their goal is to bring old patterns into daily fashion. Mr. Takyuki Yajima from Y and Sons said in another magazine that he wants to create kimono-style clothing that fits modern life, such as outerwear that can be worn with trousers or sweaters.

When we asked Ms. Nishikimi if the kimono can exist together with modern fashion, she said yes. She explained that kimono has always changed along with society. She told us that many young women at graduation ceremonies now mix kimono with Western fashion items. She said, “Girls wear scarves that are very fluffy. I like it.” She also pointed out that yukata has changed. The traditional obi was tied tightly around the waist, but many young people now use a belt instead because it is easier. She said, “Because it is easier to wear, more people wear it.” These changes help kimono culture stay alive and easier to enjoy.

Craftsmanship and Handmade Skills

Behind every kimono is a long process of craftsmanship. Making a kimono requires time and skill, and many parts of the process are still done by hand. Traditional techniques are an important part of this work. One example is yuzen dyeing, where artists paint detailed designs directly onto the fabric. Another technique is shibori, which is a tie dye method where cloth is tied tightly before dyeing and then untied to reveal patterns. Nishijin ori is a weaving style from Kyoto that uses silk and sometimes gold threads. These methods have been passed down through many generations.

Ms. Nishikimi taught us about Arimatsu shibori, a tie dye technique from a town near Nagoya. She explained that modern artisans also use polyester because it is thermoplastic, which means it keeps its shape when heated. This allows them to create new three dimensional designs. She also told us about a German brand called Suzu-

san. The brand was started by artisans from Arimatsu who moved to Germany and continued their work there. She said, “I think it is wonderful,” because it shows how traditional skills can grow and travel to other countries.

She explained that yukata can be sewn by machine, but expensive kimono are almost always handmade. She likes handmade work because, as she said, “With hand sewing you can have flexibility and softness.” Skilled craftspeople can adjust how strong or gentle each part of the kimono should be.

Craftsmanship faces challenges today. Fewer young people want to become artisans because the work takes a long time and does not always pay well. Many workshops are small family businesses trying to continue traditional methods. However, there is hope. People around the world have started to care more about slow fashion and long lasting clothing. The kimono fits this idea because it can be repaired, reused, and passed down for many years. Ms. Nishikimi said that craftsmanship is important “not just for kimono but for any kind of clothing,” and that keeping these skills alive is important for protecting Japanese culture.

Global Influence and Opinions

Kimono inspired clothing can be found in many countries today. Long robes or jackets that look similar to kimono are sold in fashion shops overseas. They are not traditional items, but they show how Japanese design has influenced global fashion.

Tourists in Japan often rent kimono or yukata to take photos or explore the city. Some people think this is cultural appreciation, while others believe that people should learn more about the meaning behind the clothing before wearing it. These different opinions show how important the kimono still is.

Even though most people in Japan wear Western clothes every day, the kimono and yukata still hold a special place. Young people continue to wear them during festivals, ceremonies, and for social media photos. Designers also keep exploring new ways to mix traditional ideas with modern clothing. This balance between old and new helps keep kimono culture alive.

The future of the kimono does not depend on choosing between tradition and modern fashion. Instead, it depends on understanding, creativity, and respect. Our interview with Ms. Nishikimi, the designers we researched, and the things we saw at festivals all show that the kimono can survive by adapting. Supporting workshops, craftsmen, and educational programs can help younger generations learn about traditional skills. Social media can also help spread interest in kimono culture. If traditional methods and modern ideas continue to work together, the kimono will remain an important part of Japanese culture.

Society

By Jelmer L. BRONDIJK,
Jan E. DIETRICH,
Dmitry D. JONES,
Reina KADOYAMACHI

Japan is amazing at creating rules and regulations, and not enforcing them”—Dr. Joe Enright, Clinical Psychologist.

Overtime pay and labor laws, the adult industry, and perhaps the best example—gambling, specifically pachinko. Japan's government puts in place bans and regulations on activities but often lets loopholes and other vices slip by. Gambling in Japan has long been tied to criminal activity and has faced strict bans, leaving only underground venues able to survive. Considering this, how do you handle the future? More unenforced regulations? Opening gambling resorts? Silence? We asked trained psychologists and gambling students alike—the best time to stop gambling was yesterday.

Pachinko

In the 1920s, a simple children's toy resembling American pinball, called pachinko, appeared. Over the decades, it transformed into a nationwide pastime that uses legal loopholes to function as Japan's most prominent and widely accepted "gambling alternative." Here is how the pachinko loophole works—the pachinko avoids being classified as an illegal gambling activity through the "Three-Shop System." When you play pachinko, you do not get money directly from the machine, you win prizes such as shiny cards or metal balls that you can then trade for money at an 'independent' prize-exchange shop. This system functions as a bridge between the pachinko parlor and the player. The government accepts this system because the exchange shops are legally independent, and the parlor does not technically pay cash rewards. However, we all know that this is gambling.

The Numbers

According to the reports of the web media [nippon.com](#), parlors reached their peak in 1990, when 17,000 were operating nationwide. However, the number has currently dropped well below 10,000. Although this is a significant decrease, addiction is still prevalent. In the study on gambling addiction (2018) by Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, around 700,000 people, or 0.8%, were estimated to have shown signs of gambling addiction over the past year. Another survey (2017) by the National Medical and Addiction Center found that "The average amount spent by gamblers over a year was ¥58,000 per month."

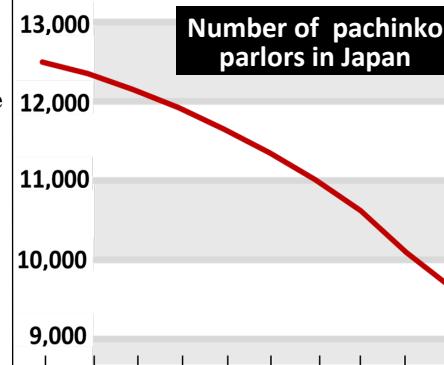
Why Gamble?

The reason comes down to inconsistent variable reward schedules with highly potent rewards. "When people get rewarded at a predictable, constant rate, they value it less," says Dr. Enright. Gambling, on the other

Japan's Gamble: Pachinko and Future



Number of pachinko parlors in Japan



Source: [nippon.com](#) based on statistics from the National Police Agency and the White Paper on Police

hand, keeps you on the edge of your seat, and the rush from the random win is euphoric and addictive. People crave this reward, and although the possibility is extremely low, they do not know the exact percentages and believe they have an opportunity to win. Even a slight chance at a million yen is a chance to buy that new car, pay off student loans, or play even more pachinko. On top of that, once someone puts money into the pachinko, they feel like they need to keep playing in order to win their money back or to feel like they did not give up. This is the sunk cost fallacy, and you can see it in things as basic as a claw machine at an arcade. With a pachinko, the stakes are much higher. Savings, family, and friends are at risk of being gambled away and lost.

Across Age and Time

Even though younger people are technically at higher risk of addiction, due to the frontal lobe not being fully developed, the number of younger pachinko players has drastically decreased over the last few decades, and the age demographic has shifted slightly to the right. Meanwhile, the number of 60+ year olds has stayed roughly the same although young adults make up the majority of gamblers. Dr. Enright explains that the reason for this could be that older individuals became addicted to pachinko at a young age and have nostalgic memories or habitual tendencies. On the

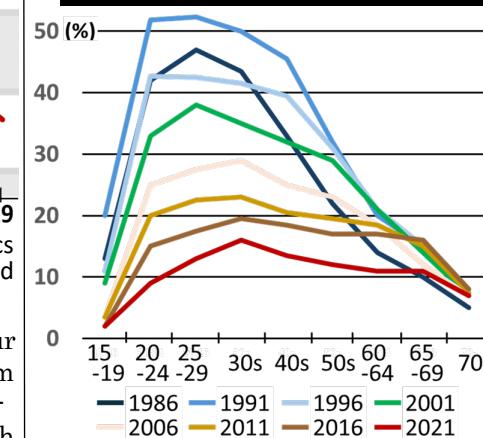
other hand, younger people have more familiarity and access to other forms of entertainment, which provide similar stimulation.

Flashing Lights

Why has pachinko slowed down? The answer may have to do not with

The number of pachinko parlors has significantly decreased, but gambling addiction remains a problem...

Male pachinko participation rate by age group



Source: Research on trends in pachinko use (2024 edition)

how pachinko has changed, but with how the world has changed. In 1990s Japan, at the height of pachinko, the flashing lights of the machines brought in rushing salarymen and bored teenagers alike. During the economic boom, many had disposable income to spend—they were caught hook, line, and sinker. However, as lights, electronics, entertainment, and technology evolved and rapidly expanded, so did the average individual's exposure to these noises and sounds. This trend continued, and many no longer need to go to pachinko parlors to experience this rush. Just look at your phone, and immediately, an eager burst of information runs straight through the optical nerves to the brain, like drugs through the veins.

Youth

We have asked several Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) students about their opinions and behaviors related to gambling. Several have never gambled or know anyone who plays pachinko regularly. A vast majority do not gamble but know people, who do including family members and friends. By interviewing students who knew pachinko enthusiasts, we discovered following. When asked how often their close acquaintances gamble, the overarching consensus was once or twice a week. How much money they lose gambling ranges from roughly zero to almost 10,000 yen a week. However, when asked why they and others gamble, the students often had no answer beyond a shallow "I don't know," or "It's fun." One individual has even won big at the pachinko and will likely gamble again. Here is what

he had to say when asked why he will continue to gamble, "I'm a winner," says Bobby Sato (pseudonym), a 19-year old first year student from NUFS. Fair enough, however, many more individuals go down this same path and lose. There may be several "winners," but this winning is typically short term and far in between. Ask yourself: if people won, how could the pachinko possibly make money? Simple, the house always wins.

The Future

Japan's cautious steps toward legalizing casino resorts, called "integrated resorts (IRs)," suggest a government torn between moral restraint and economic ambition. Officials argue that regulated casinos can attract tourism and tax revenue while curbing illegal gambling—a "win-win." The opposition says that it will deepen addiction problems and normalize what the country has spent its entire history trying to contain. Whether to legalize IRs or not is a gamble. Japan is at a crossroad. It can chase economic revival through casino resorts, hoping regulation keeps addiction in lower numbers. Or it can bolster prevention, education, and treatment, understanding that the battle is as much psychological as legal, and that it must be stopped. However, in today's society there are plenty of vices people have access to. Can you really ban all of them?

Two Faces

Among rolling landscapes of misty mountains and rice fields, the stress of Japanese daily life and work are exhausting. Cultural rules and roles, work and life balance, *keigo*, hiding emotions (*tatemae*), and many other elements often lead to these hidden resentments and discomforts spilling over. Dr. Enright highlights the systematic and cultural issues regarding mental health in Japan. With limited awareness, education, and openness about mental health issues, these emotions outlet as vices like gambling. How will Japan handle the future? Mountains and valleys, farmlands and metropolises, *hone* and *tatemae*, rules and regulations. On the train home from work, you can hide your true feelings from strangers. But can you hide from yourself? Can you hide from human nature?

Afterword

Gambling is a unique addiction. Unlike drug reliance, the body does not go into physical withdrawal. Gamblers do not fall to the ground in pain, covered in sweat, shaking. Going to the pachinko is not often seen as a serious, life threatening issue. But it is. Paycheck after paycheck dumped into the slots, to earn back the hundreds of hours of life and pay lost. This is an issue that can only be fixed with education, support, and openness. If you or any loved ones have a gambling problem, treat it like a real addiction. Even if they say it is a hobby, do not ignore it. You would not turn a blind eye if your brother lit up a crack pipe and brushed your concern aside with "It's just a hobby." Be a good sibling, a good friend, and a good person. Get help.



Dr. Enright

Resources for gambling addiction and mental health are available with Dr. Joe Enright on the third floor of the NUFS Communication Plaza.

Why has pachinko slowed down? The answer may have to do not with

By Aina HONDA,
Manon L. MOUSSET,
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Kaboel VOSSEBELD

In recent years, working abroad has become an increasingly popular goal for students worldwide, offering a unique opportunity to gain experience outside their home country. This trend appeared in a survey we conducted at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). 78% of the 30 students would like to work abroad in the future. And we asked about preferred countries (multiple answers allowed) and found out that Japan and Canada (15%) ranked after Europe (31%). The development of international programs has made this dream more achievable than ever before. Working abroad offers a wonderful experience but also presents challenges, particularly when it comes to preserving one's cultural identity while adapting to a new environment. This raises an important question: how can someone maintain their culture while integrating into the collectivist society of Japan?

Working Abroad: A Rising Trend
Japan is a particularly interesting example, because its culture is strongly present in everyday life through food, media, language, and social expectations. Many students and workers who arrive in Japan from Western countries often experience a contrast in values, especially regarding communication, decision-making and workplace relationships.

According to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, there were about 2.3 million foreign workers in October 2024, which has an increase of 12.4% from the previous year. That is the highest number since records began in 2008. Most foreign workers are employed in manufacturing (26%), followed by the service sector (15%) and wholesale and retail (13%) (nippon.com 2024).

The numbers above highlight the rise of foreign workers in Japan. This raises the question of how they integrate into society without losing personal or cultural identity, and how this can be done respectfully without disregarding Japanese culture.

This leads to another question: has cultural identity remained among foreigners working abroad? Have they found meaningful ways to teach and express their culture while respectfully adapting to their host country?

To explore this, we conducted a survey among students at NUFS and interviewed two foreign professors with long-term experience working in Japan, Professor Phillip Rush from the United Kingdom and Professor Kandel Bishwa Raj from Nepal. Their testimonies reveal different yet complementary ways of maintaining one's cultural background while adapting to Japan.

WORKING ABROAD

How To Maintain Culture & Protect Cultural Identity

Right:
Prof. Rush teaching the Japanese Education System class at NUFS



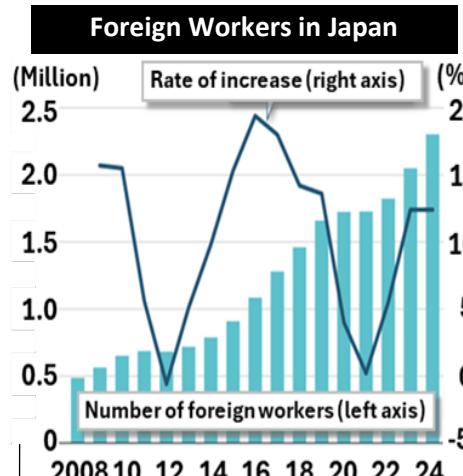
Below:
Prof. Kandel being interviewed for the article at NUFS, Nisshin City, Aichi Pref.



Learning to Balance Two Cultures

Professor Rush, originally from the United Kingdom, has lived in Japan for almost 40 years. He is currently the Director of the International Institute for Japanese Language Education, responsible for international students. He described his first months in the country as both exciting and a bit of a culture shock. He mentioned how Japanese people acted nervously when spoken to in English. "Back in 1985," Professor Rush said, "it felt like people panicked the moment I spoke. I had to learn to soften my communication just to make them comfortable." Over time, he adapted to Japan's indirect communication style while keeping parts of his British identity—politeness, openness, and humor. As he explained, "I'm less ironic now. British people use a lot of irony, but in Japan it doesn't work. I also tend to listen more than I did when I arrived." For him, understanding Japanese workplace culture is key to adapting. One notable concept is *nemawashi*, which involves privately discussing decisions with colleagues before a formal meeting so there are no surprises. Professor Rush gave a concrete example: before changing a class schedule or introducing a new teaching method, colleagues confirm privately that the idea is acceptable. This approach preserves harmony but can feel passive or unclear to foreigners.

Despite these adaptations, Professor Rush emphasized that core aspects of his British identity remained. "I decided to be a British gentleman here, and I have kept that," he said. He noted, "It's been easier for me because British and Japanese values aren't hugely different. Other cultures, like the Dutch, who are very direct, might find it harder. My upbringing was



Source: nippon.com based on data from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare

basically 'keep your mouth shut, don't complain.'

Overall for him, decades in Japan have subtly shaped his identity. "The older I get, the more British I feel, strangely enough. I haven't lived in England for a long time, but Japan, it isn't really home either," he said, highlighting the tension of navigating between two cultures, but for him, his experience shows that living abroad can subtly reshape identity, blending adaptation with preservation. "You don't lose your culture, you just learn when to adjust," he said. By adjusting to local norms while retaining essential cultural traits, foreign workers can integrate successfully without losing themselves. Our survey of NUFS students confirmed this. "On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is it to maintain your own culture while adapting to another country?" the majority answered 4, showing they consider it important.

However, students also identified real challenges. When asked "What aspects of your culture are the hardest to maintain while living abroad?" the most common answers were keeping in touch with loved ones, maintaining food habits, and preserving cultural norms. One student explained, "For me, the hardest thing to maintain is talking to everyone around me. In the South, it's normal to say hi or smile at strangers, but in Japan it's not. When I first arrived, it was a culture shock, but I adapted quickly."

Different Culture, Same Identity

For our second interview, we talked with Professor Kandel, who is originally from Nepal. Before arriving, he imagined Japan as very industri-

al and fast-paced. Instead, he moved to a rural area, where he found life more peaceful than expected. He noticed major differences in communication. He explained, "In Nepal, people call each other even for small things. Talking directly makes it easier to understand someone's feelings. But in Japan, most communication happens through written messages." Professor Kandel does not see these differences as a problem. "A challenge is only a challenge if you feel troubled by it," Professor Kandel said. "If you accept it as just a difference, it becomes easier." Many coming to Japan may struggle with the normality of Japanese politeness also known as *tatemae*. "It takes more time, but when you build a relationship you will have some of the closest friends."

Both professors emphasized the importance of keeping their culture alive in personal ways, such as celebrating national festivals, speaking their original languages with family, and sharing cultural experiences with students. At the same time, they show respect for Japanese habits and noted that knowing local culture is important in the long-term. In Professor Kandel's case, hosting and joining Hindu festivals such as Janai Purnima or Maha Shivaratri—either by celebrating with Nepalese friends or sharing their meaning with students—helps him stay connected. For him, these festivals are not just celebrations but reminders of home and family. Speaking Nepalese with his children, cooking traditional foods, and teaching his culture help him remain connected to where he comes from.

Growing through Global Experiences

Our student survey also shows that many young people share this perspective. Most respondents believe that living abroad changes a person's cultural identity, though not necessarily in a negative way. Several students said that maintaining their native language through family conversations helps them stay connected to their culture, while others miss festivals and traditional foods most. One student wrote, "Culture becomes even more important when you live far from home." Another offered a broader reflection: "Every experience can change us, and living abroad especially can give you a whole new vision of the world. It makes you aware of its size and how different people are, while also showing the similarities we share. It's such a rich experience that it will definitely change you as a person."

This brings us back to the main question. Have foreign professors found a way to express their culture while also respecting Japanese culture? Based on the interviews, it seems so. Many foreigners in Japan try to balance their own culture with the expectations of Japanese society. Instead of letting go of their identities, they blend habits from both cultures.

Culture

By Ana B. CANO ORTIZ,
Soma HARA,
HSUN ROMAH

Japan has a lot of famous cities, from Tokyo to Kyoto and Osaka. Japan itself is a huge country, which makes it difficult to enjoy everything it has to offer. Although Aichi Prefecture is located in the middle of Japan, traveling to other regions can be quite costly. As an international student, how can you experience the most of what Japan has to offer with little time and little money? The answer is simple: stay local and plan accordingly.

According to a 2024 census for international students done by the Japan Student Services Organization, approximately 330,000 foreign nationals came to study in Japan with half of those students studying in the Tokyo region, followed by Kyoto and Osaka. It is no surprise that

most international students, when asked about where they want to go, often answer Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka.

Out of those 330,000 students, less than 4% study in Aichi Prefecture. The Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) has 116 international students enrolled as of December 2025. We conducted a small survey with a randomized sample from the NUFS international students to gauge their interests in traveling.

Aichi Prefecture is a rich cultural hotspot, with moderately mild temperatures, access to the sea, and bordered by beautiful mountains and valleys. After conducting the survey, we held an interview with a local travel agent, Ms. Aya Funahashi from Meitetsu Kanko Service Co., the local transportation company in Aichi Prefecture. Ms. Funahashi, born and raised in Aichi, has been working with Meitetsu since 2015, thus able to offer both professional and personal insight into its hidden local gems.

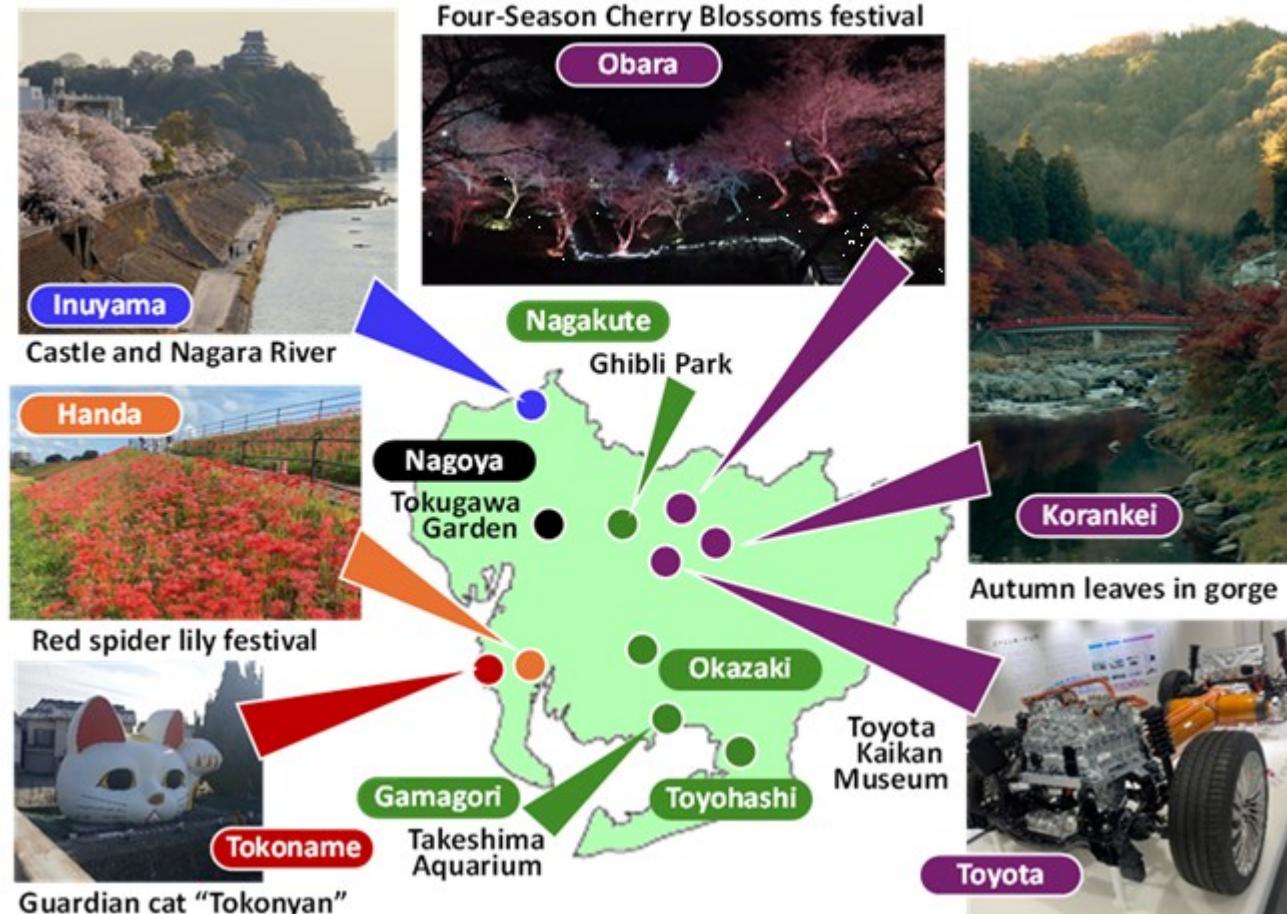
As a travel agent, Ms. Funahashi works with many people to customize their travel plans based on their needs. "I understand the desire to see as much as possible, but if you can create a plan with a clear goal, then it may eliminate some barriers," Ms. Funahashi advised. As a travel agent, she hopes to give back to the prefecture and revitalize it through what she does.

What are some popular destinations in Aichi?

Undeniably, Nagoya City is the most famous destination in Aichi, so during the interview, we asked Ms. Funahashi about local attractions.

According to Ms. Funahashi, in

No MONEY AND NO TIME FOR TOKYO? Explore the Hidden Gems of Aichi



Aichi, Nagoya Castle comes out on top. "Next is Ghibli Park, Toyota Memorial Hall, and Museum," she added confidently, "Ghibli is famous worldwide, and Toyota is also popular on a global scale. It is an essential part of Aichi history."

Situated in the western part of Aichi Prefecture is Ghibli Park, located in Nagakute City. Using the local train lines, you can easily travel to Toyota City to visit Toyota Kaikan (Toyota Memorial Hall and Museum) and Korankei Gorge, famous in the fall for its maple viewing festival.

Another scenic spot in Toyota, relatively near Korankei Gorge, is the underrated *Obara Senmi Shikizakura no Sato*, or Four-Season Cherry Blossoms, which bloom twice in the spring and fall. Located in Obara, visitors can view cherry blossoms blooming beautifully next to the blazing autumn leaves in November every year.

"I also recommend visiting Inuyama," said Ms. Funahashi. "Inuyama Castle is known as one of the best preserved castles in Japan. The Nagara River also flows near Inuyama City, allowing both domestic and international visitors to enjoy the scenery and cormorant fishing."

During the spring, Aichi Prefecture is littered with plenty of cherry blossoms. Travelers can visit Inuyama, Tokugawa Garden, and Okazaki Park before Japan's transition into summer. The summer is humid and extremely hot, so it is advised that travelers consider seasonality. "The season of cherry blossoms and autumn leaves would be best," commented Ms. Funahashi.

According to our survey, many students are interested in the culture

of (1) tea ceremony, (2) festivals, and (3) hot springs. Where do you recommend they travel?

"There are hot springs in Mikawa and Sanage, but they're not the typical hot springs international students may imagine," Ms. Funahashi replied. Enthusiastically, she continued, "I personally recommend the brewing culture in Handa and Okazaki. Do you know Mitsukan? They're famous for their vinegar, and their headquarters is located in Handa. The city is currently working on developing brewing and fermentation tourism. It is uniquely exclusive to Aichi Prefecture, and you may be able to have many different experiences there, so I recommend it."

Flowing through Handa is also the Handa River, within walking distance of the Kunizakari Sake Museum. Another special feature not well known is the *Higanbana Matsuri*, or red spider lily festival. This festival happens between late September and early October. It is easily missed because the beautiful flowers have a short blooming period and quickly wilt. Located next to the festival is the Nankichi Niimi Museum. Nankichi is an iconic children's book author.

And at the heart of Okazaki City sits Okazaki Castle, where visitors can enjoy the natural scenery along the castle's moat. The area is known as the birthplace of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan's former governing power.

Ms. Funahashi also mentioned the town of Tokoname for those who are interested in learning about antiques and pottery. Tokoname City itself was featured in the anime, *A Whisker Away*.

"There's this festival that is held

every July called *Tezutsu Hanabi* in Toyohashi City. Personally and partly because I'm from the town of Toyohashi, I would recommend this festival," Ms. Funahashi happily stated. The *Tezutsu Hanabi* festival is unique and also unusual as huge fireworks are held and set off from the hands, described Ms. Funahashi. Recently, Toyohashi has seen an increase in both domestic and overseas visitors.

Another place that has seen a recent influx of tourism, Ms. Funahashi mentioned is the Nagoya Port Aquarium where Fuji, an Antarctic Research Vessel, is docked. The vessel was also recently featured in Tokai TV.

For international students staying in Japan between January and March, what are your travel recommendations?

"I think Takeshima Aquarium in Gamagori City is worth seeing. This aquarium is quite small, and

you can see everything in 2 hours, but it's really unique to Aichi," recommended Ms. Funahashi.

Takeshima Aquarium was previously on the verge of collapse due to depopulation, but with the help of the local community, they redirected their focus to deepsea fishing. The introduction of the fish is also handwritten by staff in a fun and humorous way. With such an iconic recovery, the aquarium was often featured in the media nationwide.

Why travel locally?

Although tourism greatly contributes to Japan's popular destinations, Japan is currently experiencing overtourism. In recent years, local governments and businesses have begun implementing countermeasures. The famous snowy *Ginzan Onsen* has begun to limit visitors to prevent overcrowding, and in Kyoto, some areas are closed off to tourism. If you travel locally, you distribute tourism demand and help the local economy thrive.

But how can we obtain information about what is happening locally? Thankfully, there is a website called *Aichi Now*. Through the collaboration of Meitetsu Kanko Service Co., and the local government, locals and tourists alike can browse to discover current events in Aichi Prefecture.

Now that you know more about Aichi, and how to find unique travel experiences, would you still rather spend 12,000 yen on that one-way Shinkansen ticket to Tokyo?



Access the
"Aichi Now"
website



By Angelina S. BAUMANN,
Selim M. K. KHENNICHÉ,
Allan SCHAUKAT,
A'aone A. TIAULI FAIFILI

Japan's JDM (Japanese Domestic Market) has evolved into one of the world's most recognized automotive subcultures. Its appeal and the passion of enthusiasts both domestically and internationally continue to grow. We interviewed three individuals—young enthusiasts and an automotive expert—to uncover Japan's unique values, its global influence, and its appeal that transcends generations, revealing how this culture continues to evolve.

Originally referring to vehicles designed, built, and sold exclusively for Japan's domestic market, JDM has grown from a small underground street-racing scene into one of the world's most recognisable automotive subcultures. Cars such as the Honda NSX, Mazda RX-7, and Toyota AE86 were once seen only on Japanese roads, yet they gained global admiration for their engineering precision, affordability, and distinctive style.

Global exposure through anime such as *Initial D*, action films like *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*, and the rise of social media propelled JDM onto the world stage. What began as a local phenomenon now shapes global automotive trends, fashion, and lifestyle—while remaining deeply rooted in craftsmanship that defines Japanese vehicles. This moment became the symbolic starting point of our deeper journey into JDM culture.

Media Influence on JDM
—Ms. Riko Mizuno



Interview with Ms. Mizuno (left), NUFS campus, Nissin City, Aichi Pref.

During our interview with Ms. Riko Mizuno, an English Communication major from Aichi, she shared thoughtful insights into how global media shapes the way young Japanese people are first introduced to JDM culture. As seen in our photo with her, Ms. Mizuno's enthusiasm and openness reflect the blend of local identity and international influence that defines the modern JDM scene.

When asked how she became interested in cars, Ms. Mizuno immediately pointed to the impact of Western media: "*The Fast and the Furious* made me interested in JDM cars."

Her response highlights a key theme in our research: global entertainment often reconnects Japanese youth with their own domestic car culture, reversing the expected flow of cultural influence.

Discussing dream cars, she mentioned the Nissan GT-R R34, one of the most iconic symbols of JDM

DRIFT NATION

How Japan Became the Heart of Car Culture



worldwide.

Japan's vehicle exports reflect this worldwide demand, rising from 3.74 million units to 3.82 million the following year. "The success of *The Fast and the Furious* franchise further accelerated international interest and helped Supra became famous worldwide," she added, showing her awareness of how Japanese cars have achieved legendary international status.

Reflecting on current car culture, Ms. Mizuno observed that Japanese youth establish a highly lucrative JDM market, particularly in the United States.

Our exploration began at the Auto Prestige Service Lab in Nissin City, where polished car hoods reflected the bright showroom lights. It was an immediate reminder that today's young are spending less money on cars compared to previous generations, a trend that could shape JDM culture moving forward. Ms. Mizuno also expressed a safety-oriented perspective regarding horsepower restrictions. "Yes, we should remove horsepower for safety reasons."

This aligns with Japan's cautious, regulation-heavy approach to driving compared to countries with higher-speed environments.

Finally, she noted a clear decline in street racing. "Street racing isn't popular anymore. There are more policemen now... Tokyo is more popular for car culture than Nagoya."

Her insights illustrate how lifestyle changes, increased regulation, and regional differences shape Japan's evolving JDM landscape. Overall, her perspective deepens our understanding of how JDM is changing within Japan while continuing to expand globally.

Youth, Community & Customisation
—Mr. Tenta Endo

While Ms. Mizuno emphasised media influence, our interview with Mr. Tenta Endo highlighted a more

Above: A drift-style 86, representing the excitement Mr. Endo described during our interview. Toyota Chaser (left) & Toyota AE86 (below), JDM vehicles reflect Japan's craftsmanship, innovation, and cultural influence in global car culture. All photos were taken in Aichi Pref.



social, community-driven connection to JDM. In our group photo, Mr. Endo's confident posture mirrors the lively energy he brought to the conversation.

He explained that his interest began through peer influence. "Many of my friends love cars, so that got me interested too."

His experience shows how modern JDM enthusiasm often emerges from social circles rather than family tradition.

Mr. Endo hopes to own either a sedan or a sports car, and became visibly excited when discussing modifications. "I want to modify my car. I want to lower the ride height and change the fog lights—like adding underglow neon."

His passion reflects how young enthusiasts today use customisation as a form of personal expression, keeping the culture alive in creative and legal ways.

He also acknowledged the role of entertainment. "I think *The Fast and the Furious* made a lot of people fall in love with cars."

Although he has not driven fast himself, he recalled an unforgettable experience. "I've never driven a fast car myself, but I experienced 220 km/h in my friend's 86."

When speaking about drifting, his voice shifted to admiration. "Drifting is incredibly cool. I've ridden with friends drifting, and I'll never forget it." Finally, he expressed pride in JDM's global following. "I feel really happy when foreigners import Japanese cars. I think it shows their popularity."

Together, his views highlight how young people keep JDM alive through friendship, creativity,

events, shared experiences, and evolution from the subculture's underground roots.

Professional Industry View

—Mr. Haruo Takahashi

Our final interview took place at a dealership specialising in premium vehicles, as shown in the photo outside the Toyota Corolla showroom. Mr. Haruo Takahashi offered a more professional, industry-focused perspective that contrasted with the student interviews.

Despite working daily with Japanese vehicles, he surprised us by admitting, "I'm not really into Japanese cars. I prefer German cars." He explained that German engineering fascinated him since childhood, describing it as "super cool." Yet, he humorously added, "I drive a Mazda because German cars are expensive."



Interview with Mr. Takahashi (left), Auto Prestige Service Lab, Nissin City

His comment underscores how practical considerations often influence car ownership more than personal preference.

On the topic of horsepower restrictions, he firmly emphasised safety. "I think horsepower should be removed because fast cars are dangerous. If you want to drive fast, you can go on the Autobahn in Germany. But in Japan, they should be taken away."

His viewpoint reflects Japan's professional automotive priorities: safety regulation and social responsibility.

Mr. Takahashi's industry insights introduce a broader theme: JDM culture is shaped not only by passion and global influence, but also by Japan's professional standards, economic realities, and regulatory expectations.

Across all three interviews, it is clear that JDM culture today involves far more than fast cars or street racing. It is a dynamic blend of global influence, personal creativity, community pride, and safety-conscious values.

While global media such as *The Fast and the Furious* inspires many young fans, peer communities, drifting events, and Japan's strong automotive industry all contribute to keeping JDM culture alive.

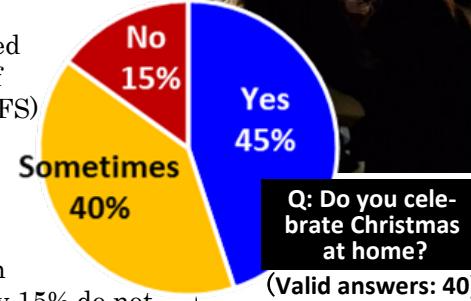
Whether expressed through the excitement of students like Ms. Mizuno and Mr. Endo, or viewed through the professional lens of Mr. Takahashi, JDM remains a powerful symbol of identity, innovation, and cultural connection.

From Japan's mountain passes to its modern highways and across the world, JDM continues to evolve while staying true to its roots. It is authentically made in Japan and loved worldwide.

By Ibrahim B. M. ALMAGRABI,
Leonie M. BÜRGIN,
Cara L. F. KELLER

Bright lights, festive markets, and cheerful decorations—Christmas in Japan may look familiar at first glance, but the holiday has taken on a uniquely Japanese character. What began centuries ago with the arrival of Christian missionaries has gradually transformed into a modern, largely secular celebration shaped by local customs and global influences. Today, Christmas is less about religion and more about atmosphere: romantic dinners, illumination displays, Western-style foods, and charming “Santa-san” imagery. In this article, we explore how Christmas first entered Japan and how its meaning has shifted over time.

In a survey, we asked Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) students if they celebrate Christmas at home. 45% of the respondents answered with “Yes”, 40% with “Sometimes” and only 15% do not celebrate Christmas at all.



Origin and Modern Context

The story of how Christmas arrived in Japan begins in the mid-16th century, when the Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, and his companions landed in Japan in 1549. Through their mission work they introduced Christianity and the celebration of December 25 as a holy day. The first Christmas service is thought to have taken place in 1552 in a converted Buddhist temple in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), the Tokugawa Shogunate imposed strict isolationist policies, banned foreign religions and suppressed Christian practices. As a result, Christmas disappeared from public view for decades. The turning point came after the Meiji Restoration, (1868) when Japan opened up to Western influence. Western holidays and customs began to appear in urban life, including Christmas decorations, gift-giving and festive dinners.

In the post-war era, especially during the rapid economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s, Christmas shifted from a religious observance to a secular, socially oriented event—a symbol of modernity, consumer culture and international connection. Although only a small part of the Japanese population identifies as Christian, the holiday became widely visible in major cities.

We interviewed Ms. Kaori Tamamura from Mori Building Co., Ltd. She is part of the planning team for the German Christmas Market in Yokohama and Roppongi, Tokyo. She stated, “While Buddhism has long been practiced in Japan, I believe the majority of people in modern Japan identify as non-religious. Therefore, I believe that Christmas is seen as a major winter event for Japanese people.”

Today in Japan, Christmas is cele-

CHRISTMAS IN JAPAN

How Christmas Found Its Way to Japan



Above: Roppongi Hills Christmas Market 2025, Tokyo
Below left: KFC store Christmas display, Nissin City, Aichi Pref. Below right: At the Christmas market German cuisine is served, Sakae, Nagoya City



brated through illumination displays, festive outings and special meals. We interviewed Mr. Bastian Semmel, the First Secretary of the Food and Agricultural Affairs Department of the German Embassy in Tokyo. He noted that markets “have to have a bit of a rustic feel to it. So the more traditional it seems, the more desirable it is.” This is the ambiance that Japanese visitors associate with the Western world and Germany.

Nevertheless, Christmas has been adapted to Japanese cultural norms, celebrated by couples and friends rather than centred around the family in a Christian way. As Mr. Semmel stated, Japanese people “want to transport themselves into another world.” This evolution shows how an imported tradition was localised into a Japanese seasonal event.

Religion or Culture?

Japan’s attitude towards Christmas is a reflection of the nation’s larger trend of integrating local beliefs with international traditions. Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity are Japan’s three main religious influences, but the first two continue to be the predominant spiritual frameworks, influencing daily customs, holidays, and worldviews. Only about 1% of Japanese people identify as Christian. Strangely though, Christmas has emerged as one of the country’s most prominent seasonal festivities. During our interview, Mr. Semmel touched upon

why Christmas in Japan is so special, “It is quite deliberately a Western celebration, but then it mixes with customs that you only find in Japan.”

In actuality, Christmas in Japan serves much more as a social and cultural occasion than a religious one. According to the one blog on Christmas in Japan (2020), the majority of Japanese people appreciate Christian aesthetics, such as church weddings, gospel music, and European cathedrals, without necessarily discussing Christian theology. As the responses from NUFS students in our survey show, only 33% see it as a religious holiday. Thus, Christmas in Japan is largely a secular and social occasion, centered more on enjoyment, relationships, and food than on religious meaning. Here, Mr. Semmel touched upon the German Christmas spirit by adding that Western traditions are “taken on board as part of the atmosphere, and it’s nice and it’s lovely, but this contemplativeness, if you strive for it in Germany, is not so central and important in Japan.”

Japanese families celebrate Christmas cakes or fried chicken dinners; shops advertise discount sales; and couples eat under city lights—a re-interpretation that is far different from the birth story.

According to the article *Celebrating Christmas without Jesus in Japan* (2019) of Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), Christmas some-

times serves as a link between the sacred and everyday life. Some Japanese churches plan charity activities or concerts that gently and inclusively promote biblical themes. However, a “Christmas meeting” at a Shinto shrine on the same day can include games, juggling, and snacks, evidence that “Kurisumasu” has been linguistically and symbolically cut off from Christ. This distinction demonstrates how the secular majority in Japan rejects the religious content of Christmas while embracing its form, the images, ambiance, and sense of community.

Traditions in Japan

In many European households, falling snow marks the start of Christmas decorations, with the Christmas tree as a central symbol. In Japan, glistening trees are also popular, but are mainly found in public spaces rather than private homes.

According to Mr. Semmel, “the Christmas market in Yokohama attracts around 30,000 visitors every year.” He highlighted the popularity of German food such as bratwurst or cheese spaetzle, showing how strongly food is linked to the Western Christmas image.

In Japanese supermarkets and bakeries, German Christmas foods like Stollen can also be found. However, the most popular Christmas dessert is the Japanese “Kurisumasu Keki”, a sponge cake with whipped cream and strawberries. While it has little connection to European traditions, Ms. Tamamura noted that “German beer, mulled wine, sausages, stollen, and other dishes are popular Christmas favorites among Japanese people.”

Since no traditional Christmas dinner existed in Japan, the fast food chain KFC introduced its famous “Kentucky is Christmas!” campaign in the 1970s. Today 56% of NUFS students say chicken is their favorite Christmas food. In fact, according to Reuters, in 2019, KFC’s Christmas sales reached over 7 billion yen.

“Santa-san” is now a familiar figure in Japan and is sometimes linked to the deity *Hotei*. Yet, Japanese Christmas focuses less on Christian gift-giving and more on entertainment and atmosphere.

At first glance, Japanese Christmas looks similar to European celebrations with trees, lights, Santa figures and festive food. However, it is not a holiday of deep religious importance, but rather a product of globalization with a unique Japanese twist. As Ms. Tamamura said, in Japan, Christmas markets are valued “as a place to experience Christmas and a time to enjoy time with friends and loved ones, more than as a celebration.”

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