4. Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies (KCJS)

a. Anna McClain-Sims, Summer 2019 Final Report

To give some background, I spent 2 months in Kyoto in KCJS’s 4th Year Japanese Summer Program. I really enjoyed my experience with this program, and though I know of one person who did not get along well with their professor, I greatly enjoyed learning from my own professors. I felt the material pushed me and introduced me to a much larger array of vocabulary and ideas than I had previously seen. In particular, I learned to speak Japanese and to debate on relatively complex issues with far more proficiency than I had ever achieved before. This was thanks to a focus on in-class discussions. In addition to my professors, everyone running the KCJS program was incredibly kind to me. The extra curriculars, in particular the trip to Nara, were fantastic as well. I would very gladly take more courses with KCJS.

I would also gladly stay with my homestay family again. Being with them was very fun, and they took great care of me while also helping me get plenty of opportunities to speak Japanese outside of class. They were my lifeline to socializing with people who weren’t college students or professors, and through them I got to meet people in the neighborhood and plenty of cute kids who were excited to meet me. I felt very welcome as a foreigner, though I was certainly treated “as a foreigner” in the sense that people looked at me differently and a few tried to speak to me in English even if I had said some Japanese to them. I wondered if that would stop once I sound more confident when speaking Japanese.

I spent a very long time walking around Kyoto, both in its downtown areas and its residential areas, sometimes until I quite literally hit the end of a road. Having studied Japan for a while, I found so many things that still threw me for a loop. There are far too many beauty salons. People leave their filled trash bags out by the side of the road to be picked up, making the road look dirty yet technically clean at the same time. A single street which transformed from a line of Buddhist temples complete with Murasaki Shikibu’s old home into a cluster of antique stores into a trendy downtown shopping center over not that long of a walk. Even Christian Scientists! I went to the local library, which was clearly geared toward the very young and the very old. I explored the Children’s Future Center, designed to help parents raise their children well, and was happily surprised that there were many dads there. I stepped into a Help Center for the elderly and an after-school center for elementary schoolers. There were so many things that I had previously known about but had never been inundated in. It’s one thing to know about cram schools, and quite another to be in Japan and see ads for them everywhere. The sheer number and frequency of groups offering English education specifically was a bit of a wake-up call for me in terms of the privilege of having English as my first language.
Anime and video game advertising campaigns seemed to be everywhere, something I expected from Tokyo or Osaka, but not from Kyoto. I’ve heard Western fans of anime criticize companies for assuming that anime is for kids when it isn’t necessarily, but given the amount of sleazy looking manga I saw displayed questionably near to the children’s section and the front door in some bookstores, perhaps the same misconception exists in Japan. Speaking of advertisements, I had a great time reading political posters. I was impressed by the number of female politicians featured- it seems like at least in the big cities, progress is being made toward more equal representation for women in the Diet, even though it’s still a big problem in Japan as a whole. It was interesting to see smaller parties try to make their mark. On my walk to school, there was one building which seemed to be outfitted as the “home base” of the Olive Branch Party, decked out with banners and posters for their candidate. I even saw many posters calling for marriage equality, gender equality, renewable energy, etc. I bought a Pride-themed drink from a vending machine in Kyoto and saw a large mural prominently featuring a gay couple in Tokyo, which I did not expect either. Because many people still struggle greatly to come out to their families and coworkers in Japan, I was surprised to see so many positive images in public.

There were a few difficulties. The first was that for a while I felt that in order to be respectful to Japan and to represent America in a good light, I had to follow all of the social rules to the T. Of course this was fine when it came to being polite and courteous. What drove me insane was the fact that almost nobody jaywalks. I knew that before coming to Japan, but it’s another matter to really be stuck standing at an intersection under the blazing sun when there’s absolutely nobody coming and the road is only ten feet across. Then I began to notice that some Japanese people do jaywalk (and if one person did, more people would), people ride two to a motorcycle pretty often, and I don’t think a single bicyclist follows the bike laws. That was when I finally told myself that crossing against the light when nobody was in sight for miles was not being disrespectful to the people of Japan. Eating could be a problem too. In America, I would buy something from a convenience store, sit down anywhere, and just eat it. In Japan, it felt like there was never a place anywhere near a convenience store where I could sit down to actually eat. I walked for about half an hour just to find a tiny park sandwiched between two roads. One time I was so exhausted that I just had to sit down on the side of a curb to eat, and the pressure I felt from people’s stares was intense. One day though, I saw a young Japanese man get off his bike and quite literally pee into the bushes at the side of a city street before getting back on his bike and leaving in broad daylight. No judgment, honestly (he went into the dirt, and concealed himself well enough), but that was the point where I realized that jaywalking sometimes and eating on a curbside once were far from the most questionable things I could be doing. Somehow, it had never occurred to me that any Japanese person would ever do that in a city. But why on earth not? It takes all sorts, even in societies pegged as being rule-obsessed.

I began to not just know intuitively, but to understand from experience the fact that the Japanese are not homogeneous rule-followers and certainly not weirdo maniacs, as they are often stereotyped to be. Things that I assumed were entirely accepted and largely stripped of their
queer implications by their cis-normative execution, namely the Takarazuka Revue, greatly bothered one member of my host family who lamented that her friends were squealing about the otokoyaku who looked “completely like women”. Articles in English extol extremely well-behaved children in Japanese classrooms, but you wouldn’t know it from how loudly they yell and play together after school and at after school lessons (I could hear it from my bedroom window every day). I saw bike shops run by a family of Chinese ancestry, a nikkei-run restaurant with a Brazilian flag proudly displayed, and one which humorously claimed to be run by the Mafia (at least, I hope it was humor). I met many people from other countries who had come to try and make a living in Japan while staying briefly at a hostel owned by an 80’s nerd nostalgia-obsessed Japanese man. He brought in his baby daughter to see us one night, and she was wearing a tiny Dragon Ball Z onesie.

The Japanese are so often praised but made unrelateable by foreign media; they are portrayed as working machines, unfeeling samurai, impossibly talented ninja, incomprehensible otaku, vapid high school girls, crazy fashion gurus, technological superiors, and people who wear masks to hide their honest selves. Because of this, the greatest thing about going to Japan was simply getting to spend time with so many wildly different Japanese people as fellow human beings and talking with them in a way that let us all express ourselves on equal footing. The Future is not in Japan, but I want to go back nonetheless.

b. Josh Ip, Summer 2019 Final Report

As I prepared for my trip to Kyoto, I thought that I really knew and appreciated international culture -- being a Chinese person born in England, and who’d called California, Philadelphia, Connecticut, and Texas his home. But within days of arriving in Japan, I knew I had completely overestimated my understanding of the world, and also the United States’ impact on other countries.

For me as a Light Fellow applicant, reading reports which detailed the nitty gritty details of the summer really helped me decide which programs I wanted to apply for, so I’ll be doing just that for the Kyoto program. I was a summer student at the Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies (KCJS) studying second-year Japanese. While about half of my peers chose to participate in program-long homestay, I ultimately chose to live in an apartment with a fellow Light Fellow from Yale. I primarily chose apartment for three reasons: independence in a foreign country, proximity to the university, and price. First, I really wanted the opportunity to maintain and operate in my own apartment, a first for me and my roommate. It forced us to practice language skills communicating with our landlords, as well as small tasks that seem so easy when in America, like reading the Japanese on the four different types of trash bags that you have to separate your refuse into! Before my Light Fellowship, I’d never lived in an apartment by
myself, so I’m thankful to have had that opportunity -- especially in a foreign country! Furthermore, many of my peers’ homestay were very far from our home university (Doshisha University), meaning many had daily commutes between 45 minutes - 1 hour each way. In contrast, my apartment, located in the Nijo area of Kyoto, was only a 20 minute bike from Doshisha -- easy and convenient! Lastly, the rent cost of the apartment meant that I could spend the leftover on dinner, allowing me to purchase/cook my own dinners. I was thankful for that in the end as I had heard many stories of homestay families who either didn’t serve breakfast (as had promised), or offered very little food for dinner. While I do not want to completely discourage interested KCJS students in applying homestay, I just wanted to shed light on the pros and cons of both options. I have heard so many stories of homestay families going out of their way to show a student Japanese culture and hospitality, but also heard the opposite. And I’ve also heard stories of apartments so old and dirty that the amount of cockroaches that a peer saw on a daily basis eventually forced her to move out to a hotel halfway through the program.

While housing arrangement can certainly influence which program you choose (CET Osaka has roommate system, Hokkaido is all homestay, and SUN Academy is half apartment/half homestay), the program experience is most important! I’ll start by saying this: KCJS was not easy for me. It pushed me in ways no other class has with three hours of class and homework each a day, daily quizzes, and weekly lesson tests, I’ve never been so immersed into one subject at once, let alone a language. And in many ways, this “total immersion” did exactly what you’d expect. Going into the summer, my Japanese teacher asked me: “When you think about making Japanese sentences, do you think in English and then translate back and forth.” My answer to this was yes, something I’d done with Mandarin and Cantonese in the past. While my teacher understood why I would do this, he encouraged me over the summer to start trying to think in Japanese as opposed to thinking English and saying/writing Japanese. And this daily, 7-8 hour, nonstop immersion forced that transition to happen. About halfway through the program, I found myself letting go of trying to morph english grammar structures into Japanese, but rather taking the building blocks of hiragana, katakana, keigo, and grammar structure and forming Japanese language in my mind.

Now, just to get into the exact breakdown of how my class was (because I know I was dying to know before I went to Kyoto): I was placed in class 2A at KCJS and had one head instructor and a sub instructor (who happened to teach at Yale)! Every day we’d either start with a writing or reading kanji quiz followed by a vocabulary quiz (yes, this required 1-2 hours of studying daily). Afterwards, we’d have 3 hours of class with a heavy focus on grammar structure and reading comprehension. Every 1-2 chapters or so (we’d often do a chapter in 3-4 days), we’d have an hour long lesson test. At the midterm we had an oral test and written test, and at the end we had a final, oral test, and presentation. So yes, a LOT of work, but completely manageable. Now to go a little more into detail about the KCJS program outside of class. One of my favorite parts of the program was my language partner, a local student of the university who I met once-twice a week to talk about life and practice my language skills! Speaking with Kohei, a
senior rugby player at Doshisha provided a super cool insight to student life in Japan, which is completely different from our in America. Furthermore, KCJS had various after school activities like sushi making, cultural field trips, and even a midterm overnight trip to Nara! Overall the KCJS staff were very helpful and excited to have so many kids participating in their program.

So now I guess for the big questions: are you happy you did Light Fellowship? Should I choose KCJS? Yes and yes! I feel incredibly lucky and honored to have received the Light Fellowship -- I will never forget the nine weeks I lived in Japan finally getting the chance to experience a culture so different from America’s. Japan takes America’s love for efficiency and convenience to the next level and raises the ante with unconditional professionalism and cleanliness. Kyoto was a beautiful, fairly small city which I believed combined the small town charms of a city like Hokkaido with the hustle and bustle of a metropolitan like Tokyo. In Kyoto you will truly understand and live the daily life of a Japanese person, not just the life we see as a tourist looking through the lens of an American.

c. Nate Lovdahl, Summer 2019 Final Report

As a graduate student who is taking Japanese as a secondary research language, KCJS wasn't the most obvious choice for a summer language program. However, because I work on Buddhist topics and hope to spend a year doing research in Kyoto at some point, I had secondary reasons for choosing KCJS over, say, IUC-Yokohama. Though I think the KCJS program itself has some problems, I do not regret my decision.

Kyoto is a beautiful city. Sure, it's hot and humid in the summer, and the rainy season can make for some dreary days, but that does not detract from the splendor Kyoto has to offer. A restaurant on near every block, mountains to hike nearby, and more historical sites to visit than one could possibly see in a single summer. The locals are incredibly generous, especially if you try to speak with them—to any degree—in Japanese. There are ample opportunities to get out into the city to explore, and the transit is fast and convenient enough to allow for day trips to places like Nara or Osaka.

Though my Japanese undoubtedly improved, the KCJS program did leave something to be desired. The program is divided into three levels (Second, Third, and Fourth year), and each of these levels is further divided into various sub-levels (i.e., 2A–C, 3A–C, and 4A–B). The instructors are excellent. Each class has two instructors, one primary instructor and a secondary instructor, which allows for some variety in teaching style from day to day. While I think the instructors themselves were, again, effective, the curriculum was less so. Each three-hour class day was spent in a single room, with the same eight to ten students (depending on class), and much of the class time was spent in a lecture-style format. Relative to other programs I have attended, this setup was less pedagogically useful than it might have been. In several of the
classes (including my own, 3A), we often spent approximately one hour each day reading through the lesson text aloud. The problem with this is that we were to have read through this material before class as well. Having read through the material on my own time, and doing the same again in class, often felt like an inadequate use of time. I feel this time would have been better spent discussing the content of the lesson text, answering questions about it, or even more thoroughly exploring the ways in which the new grammar was used in the text. These alternatives would have allowed us to create new sentences in Japanese, something we were not able to do through simple reading.

I also question the usefulness of the language partner system at KCJS. The language partners are local students, mostly from Doshisha, with a few are from Kyoto University. Though I enjoyed chatting with my language partner, he was not trained to teach Japanese and did not provide the sort of feedback I might have received from a one-on-one session with an actual instructor. I see no way to mitigate this problem other than having more instructors (or fewer students), which is likely not possible. While nobody should view this as a dealbreaker, it is something to keep in mind.

If possible, I would suggest living in a homestay. Perhaps I was especially lucky, but my host family experience was wonderful (if not slightly strange). My homestay was a convenient distance from Doshisha, and reaching any place within Kyoto was a breeze. My host family was incredibly generous—I was well fed, and, as I was leaving, my host parents gave me various gifts to pass on to my wife (including two traditional haori and an obi sash). More importantly to my language-learning, every dinner was an opportunity to practice the Japanese I had learned during the day in discussions ranging from current politics in Hong Kong to representations of the microcosm/macrocosm in Zen Buddhist aesthetics. While I will not pretend to have understood everything that was said or to have been able to respond as articulately as I might have in English, these dinner conversations were tremendously helpful for my language development. I rarely saw my host mother, however, as she was often in my host family's part of the house, even at dinner. I also had a roommate (though we didn't share a room), and we got along swimmingly. Our respective skills were complementary, so we were able to help one another in our dinner conversations and with certain elements of the program itself.

As I mentioned above, though I have qualms with KCJS, I would still recommend the program. There is little doubt that my language skills improved in all areas. Kyoto is an incredibly fun place to spend the summer, especially if you're interested in Japanese history, architecture, or Buddhism. Because I spent most of my time with several other graduate students working on similar research areas, we explored a number of shrines and temples, of which there is no dearth. KCJS also offers many extracurricular activities, every one of which I attended was worthwhile. This range from simple lectures to a full weekend trip to Nara (which I highly recommend). Assuming the program runs the same time in subsequent years, students will also be in Kyoto during Gion Matsuri, which is a month-long festival with three/four especially lively days. During these days (mid-July), Kyoto gets an influx of some two million tourists, both from
within Japan and abroad. The festival is incredible, and standing in awe of the hoko and yama floats with thousands of other people is an unforgettable experience.

For graduate students (or undergraduates who are interested in doing research in Japan), do not be afraid to reach out to local scholars. I met with an academic at Kyoto University, and we spent a lovely afternoon chatting about various topics, both academic and not. At the end of our conversation, he offered to serve as my host scholar should I ever decide to come to Kyoto for research. Given my initial goals for choosing KCJS, I am very satisfied with the summer.