As a 5-year-old version of me sitting in front of the television, patiently waiting for what we may now call “ancient” animations such as Slam-dunk and Detective Conan, never would I have imagined that one day I would actually visit the places where my childhood heroes once lived (if at all). In fact, my interests in animation died down shortly. However, my experience during high school living with friends from Japan and learning from them the very preliminary Japanese sparked my interest and passion in Japanese culture in a different way. Having taken a course on contemporary Japanese society and culture coupled with a year-long Japanese course, I couldn’t help but relating my own experiences with this neighboring country and decided to see on my own—what Japan is actually like in person.

Of course, when I first arrived in Japan, I was embraced by the cleanness of the streets, the extremely polite people and the absolutely delicious food. I was lucky enough to have a host family who had hosted other Yale students for 8 years. Without a doubt, the Japanese language teachers were not only professionally experienced but also so friendly that they invited us to their home for dinner. On top of that, it was a pleasure to have over a dozen Japanese students of our age come visit every week and experience the local culture together. The conversations we had not only helped me understand my neighboring peers better but also put what I have studied at Yale into context in that it created a feeling that the world is deeply connected, and some problems should be solved together. By the end of the program, friendships were made, and I believe that they were here to last way longer than this program.

However, as much as I would love to illustrate the common views of a visitor in Japan, I would like to tell a story—one that is about the short encounter with two interesting people. The story may be regarded by some as slightly negative or even dangerous. However, this experience confirmed some of the assumptions I had before going to Japan and also taught me something I could never associate as much anywhere else. It was this encounter that revealed to me another side of Japan and brought my experiences and thoughts into perspective, and eventually made Japan another place to call home.

It was only a few weeks into the program, and my Japanese level was still far from fluency. I met up with some high school friends and went on a trip to Kyoto. As I was on my way back alone—for classes the next day—I met two most “dangerous” people I guess I would ever meet in my life. It was a coincidence for them to sit right next to me in the almost empty Shinkansen as they did not notice my luggage as I left for bathroom. They were two drunk
salarymen, as I could immediately tell. I tried to be as polite squeezing through back to my seat. Within a few exchanges, they clearly trusted me fully as an innocent foreign student and started to introduce their second identity—a yakuza and a what another called himself a “sexual salesman”. I took those as drunk words and even till now, I could not verify them. However, they started to treat me with food and drinks and ask me questions about China, the US and my impressions of Japan, repeatedly, of course. Trying to keep them entertained, I noticed that exchanges were mainly made between the older yakuza man and myself while the younger man only added a few words. Throughout the train ride, the older man frequently slapped the younger one on the back of his head, asserting the younger one’s loss of feeling from intoxication. In fear, I tried to keep the older man engaged with stories, hoping that would keep him distracted.

Eventually, life gave me a break as the older man left for bathroom. It was only then that the younger one suddenly appeared sober and started to share with me his life and showed me pictures of his family, in a peaceful way that I was more used to. It shocked me that the entire time, he was pretending to be drunk in front of his drunk superior and endured his bullying. Even though I have studied about the hierarchy in Japanese society and personally thought that as someone who was born and lived in China, I would to a large extent be able to associate with such social structures. However, it still shocked me as it happened right in front of my eyes. In reflection, I attributed such shock to my little exposure to the hierarchical issues in the “real world”. I started to question my view of the world I experienced in my social role as a student. The utopian experiences I had growing up had always been largely due to the protection from the society as a social construct, and the information and perspectives I accumulated over the years were extremely flat without any actual personal experiences. That moment greatly challenged my view of Japan as I was only enjoying it as a visitor and more importantly, it inspired further discussions and questions such as “How does the hierarchical mindset and thinking differ in China, Japan, and other countries.”

As my mind drifted away from the conversation, out of the blue, he pointed at his chest and sighed, “I have no courage.” Seeing my confusion, he explained, “I have to work hard and support my family no matter what. The dreams and future you younger generations talk about take so much courage and him and I, maybe us the old, just cannot suddenly leave our wife and kids with no money to live.” I was lost for words. It was not that I didn’t understand the importance of pursuing one’s dream as I was educated growing up; it would just seem simply inappropriate and irresponsible to persuade him to pursue his passion from the early days and leave his lovely family behind. I stayed quiet.

“Do you know about wabi-sabi?”

“What?”

“Google it.”
As I was googling the word, he explained to me that “wabi-sabi” is a Japanese esthetical philosophy which in short means the appreciation for the natural beauty and imperfections. At the moment, a quote I heard long time ago by Aida Mitsuo immediately intruded my thoughts—人間だも，which translates to “it’s because we are all humans”. Somehow at that moment, the esthetics of “wabi-sabi” transformed into the appreciation for the natural trajectories of people’s lives. The weight of life never appeared as heavy and all judgements against those two men were put away.

Eventually, the older man came back and the younger one put on his mask as he had to. After the encounter, I gained a completely different perspective as I continued my program. The casual chats with cab drivers, guards and convenient store people became even more interesting. Every decision they made and every word they said became a mirror of their life, and the countless lives of the society. This unexpected and humbling encounter presented me with a new perspective to appreciate life and also with more interests in understanding the world.

b. Kelsey Kissane, Summer 2019 Final Report

Academically, I found Sun Academy Nihongo Center to be very helpful in learning Japanese, especially in more advanced, literary discussions. We weekly read some kind of short story, poem, or news report, and would spend the rest of the week discussing themes and meanings at about the level of a middle school English class. We also watched films in Japanese to practice our listening comprehension, and had similarly rigorous discussions regarding the films. We also had to write essays very frequently, which improved my written Japanese substantially. There were daily kanji quizzes and weekly tests, which kept the learning pace brisk but kept my memorization of terms sharp and constantly engaged. Homework took about 2 hours a week maximum, which I think provided an equal amount of time for learning adequately and having enough to time to explore and interact with my host family.

However, we did not practice everyday Japanese conversations much at all, and I found myself struggling a lot in my first few weeks. Appropriate phrases for talking to my host family and dealing with daily life, such as talking to store workers or train station employees. I had to look up a lot of helpful vocabulary, phrases, and terms myself, something I would have preferred to have done in a class environment. I wish we had more practice of more useful grammar and conversations, or some kind of guide given to us to deal with day to day situations from day 1. A lot of the words and grammar we learned were also kind of archaic and not frequently used, so I found myself forgetting them rapidly since I never had a chance to actually employ them in conversation.
The true highlight of the Sun Academy program is the housing environments provided. Half of the program students live with a Japanese host family, and the other half is spent living in fantastically located individual apartments. I found that this allowed me to practice day to day Japanese with my host family, while also learning how to deal with life in the city on my own. I'm glad the host family was first, since they gave me the basic phrases, vocabulary, and know-how to deal with solo living later. To be honest, I think I learned substantially more Japanese from my host family than I did in class. I still stay in contact with my host family to this day, and I could always call or text them with questions if I needed help. Being able to live on my own in a beautiful apartment in Tokyo was my absolute favorite part of the Sun Academy program though. I got to go out to Japanese grocery stores and cook on my own, get to know my neighborhood shops, coffee spots, and restaurants, and really feel like an adult living in Japan.

The biggest problem I came across was an inability to connect with locals outside of my host family, particularly people my age. Sun Academy touts as one of their benefits weekly visits from Japanese university students, as well as group outings with them. That did exist, but I found these relationships to be so formal and almost transactional as to be prohibitive in creating any kind of lasting friendship. Also, the class visits from the students actually felt like they were detracting from class, and were often quite repetitive.

Since Sun Academy is not affiliated with any Japanese university, like most of the Korean programs and CET Osaka are, there is no campus community or pool of local students to interact with, which potential students should keep in mind. I was very proactive in making friends outside of the classroom, but it was very difficult and involved a lot of drawing on acquaintances I had prior to arriving in Japan. However, Sun Academy is uniquely a Yale student only program, so I felt very comfortable in a community of like minded people. If a student is worried about being in an unfamiliar environment, I think Sun provides a fairly comfortable social scene that is an easy transition from New Haven to Tokyo. For other students, however, that may be undesirable, and it can be easy to fall back on the other Yale students as a crutch and not get involved in actual Tokyo daily life.

Another issue is money management, which is something I definitely struggled with. Unlike other programs in smaller cities, there are unlimited things to do in Tokyo, which gets expensive alarmingly fast. The subway as well is quite expensive. Light covers all necessities with a little wiggle room, but it can get easy very fast to go over-budget in Tokyo. Students looking for a more budget-friendly experience would probably be better served going to a smaller city, like Nagoya or Hakodate.

I chose Sun Academy primarily for its location in Tokyo. The class locations varied day to day between Shibuya and Roppongi, two central hubs of activity that were great launching points for after school exploration. Additionally, our apartments were located in West Shinjuku, so the commute was very short and manageable. Tokyo is also the easiest city to get to from the US, so that would be great for students who are intimidated by significant travel immediately upon their arrival. I think it was a great location for less advanced learners, because while most
interactions will be entirely communicated in Japanese, it is easy enough to find an English speaker in an emergency situation.

I would recommend Sun Academy highly to students that have experience living in cities, are very adaptable, and are fairly solitary. Tokyo is one of the most crowded cities in the world, and the commute can be intense for people not used to subways or crowds. Being adaptable is completely a necessity, especially in acclimating to living in a Japanese household, dealing with homework, and moving from host family to apartments, all in Japanese. There will be a lot of time spent alone in the apartments, and there aren't any opportunities for doing clubs or organizations unless you go out and find them your own. This kind of experience was great for me, and I loved it and thrived in it. Someone who needs significant administrative hand holding, a campus atmosphere, and quiet would not be suitable for this. Some of my fellow students seemed to struggle a lot, and some had a fantastic time, so it is kind of a polarizing program. But if I had to do it again, I would choose Sun Academy once again.

c. Erin Choi, Summer 2018 Final Report

I would first like to thank the Light Fellowship for supporting what has become such an enriching and unforgettable summer. Without the guidance and support of the fellowship, its donors, and the Light Fellowship team, this amazing experience would not have been possible.

To start off, I must say the Sun Academy Nihongo Center (SANC) consists of some of the most dedicated and hard-working language professors I have ever encountered. Each of them has their own charm and getting to learn bits and pieces of their personal lives has been one of the most memorable parts of the program experience.

The 8-week program was designed in this way: meet Monday through Friday, 9:30am to 12:50pm. Each morning during the first ten minutes of class, there was a vocabulary and kanji quiz from the material we had to learn the night before. Once the longer readings from the Sura textbook commenced, we also had true/false reading checks alongside the vocabulary and kanji quizzes. On Fridays, instead of a quiz, we had a weekly test, basically like a unit test of the material we learned that week. The professors made it very clear which grammar points were going to be assessed so studying was not a problem. Many students made quizlets which ended up being very helpful to review while out exploring Tokyo or while riding the subway. After those thirty-minute tests every Friday, we had Japanese language buddy sessions during which Japanese university students came to our classroom to interact with us in Japanese. I looked forward to this session every week as it was so fun to engage with people our age but from completely different cultural backgrounds. After every session, we would often go to eat lunch together or do an activity together.
At the end of the first four weeks, there was a midterm exam made up of grammar, vocabulary, kanji, writing, and reading comprehension. I found all the assessed content to be fair but the teachers’ grading methods were a bit difficult to understand at times. However, if you ask the professors, they are always quick to explain and provide feedback so do not ever hesitate to ask! They love questions and when students make mistakes—as long as you don’t keep making them over and over again. They are truly an encouraging bunch until the very end, which brings us to the finale of the program: the final exam and the speech contest. On the very last Friday of the program, there was a final exam but it was not cumulative. It tested the same kind of material as did the midterm. The following day, there was a speech contest where we each presented the speech we had been working on and fine-tuning for approximately a month. Our host families and Japanese language buddies were all invited. It made for a bittersweet but apt final event.

Besides learning at SANC, I also dived into Japanese culture and came to deeply appreciate three specific aspects: Japanese baseball, Tokyo’s city sprawl/architecture, and Japanese hospitality.

Attending a professional Japanese baseball game, or three in my case, was one of the best experiences I had while in Tokyo. I’ve attended games in the U.S. thanks to my dad who is a baseball fan but I found none of them compared to how much fun baseball games in Japan were. First off, each team has a hype band and cheer squad in the outfield seats. When a player is up to bat, the cheer squad and band leads the rest of the fans in cheers, chants, and songs created specifically for that player. Everyone is in high spirits whether their team is winning or losing because they forget about themselves to focus entirely on supplying the stream of support channeled towards their players. As a result, in Japanese baseball the fans and the players become one unstoppable entity. Despite this fierce competition though, Japanese baseball fans and players hardly question the umpire and hardly utter negative words to each other—a phenomenon unheard of in American baseball culture.

When not attending baseball games, I was falling in love with Tokyo’s city sprawl and architecture. Walking through the streets of Tokyo, it’s hard not to appreciate the way urban planners and architects probably worked to create a seamless and beautiful cityscape, rich with eclectic but harmonious buildings and greenery. I found myself often climbing to higher places to observe the sprawl, such as Sunshine60’s Observation Deck in Ikebukuro, the Mori Building’s observatory in Roppongi, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building in Shinjuku. The last building mentioned happens to be my favorite building in Tokyo (and it was only one stop away on the Oedo line from our apartment!) You can see how the puzzle pieces of Tokyo fit together from above and how life thrives in Tokyo’s arrangement. I highly recommend going in the evening to the government building; the view will make your jaw drop. Did I mention admission is free?

I also unexpectedly found myself exploring a few of Tokyo’s university campuses, namely Tokyo University (Todai) and Waseda University. As a student myself, it was exciting to see how Japanese university students live and learn. Grabbing a meal at Todai was an interesting
experience as was exploring and observing campus architecture and peeking at campus bulletin boards. Plopping oneself down at a college café to do some homework is also never a bad idea!

What I will miss more than anything though is the Japanese hospitality. No people will make you feel as welcome into their restaurant, their shop, their home, nor their institution as the Japanese. No matter where you go in Japan, people are ready to help you and make your stay, however short or long, as smooth and pleasing as possible. I will miss hearing the drawn out “Irassyaímaseeee” of certain ramen restaurants’ cooks, the kindness and generosity my host family offered me, as well as the countless other times Japanese people extended their care to me, a complete stranger.

In sum, this summer was both an eye-opening and humbling experience. Thank you Light Fellowship, SANC, fellow SANC students, and Tokyo!