



21st Japanese Speech Contest, King's College, London

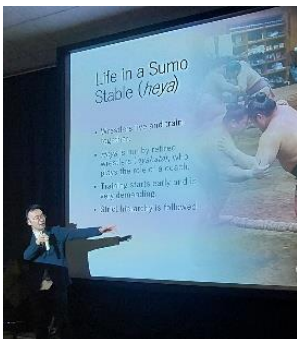


A finalist for the individual presentation category, Jessie Baker (Stage 1 in Japanese studies) gave her speech at the 21st Japanese Speech Contest for University Students on 7th March 2026. Sakurako Kataoka, Koyuki Nakanishi, and and Suzunosuke Kanai, three Japanese exchange students at Newcastle, offered great support. In the presentation, Jess explored conceptual differences of 'alternative identity' between Japan and the West. As she explained in perfect Japanese, while in Japan, the term is largely associated with fashion and subcultural aesthetics, it is linked to left-wing political movements and often attracts social hostility in the West. Jess also examined the historical and cultural factors behind this divergence and considered possible approaches to reducing related stigma.



Japan Film Festival Event

On Wednesday 4th February, the East Asian section, School Modern Languages at Newcastle University co-hosted the annual Japanese Film Festival with the Consulate General of Japan in Edinburgh and the Japan Foundation. Prior to the screening of "SUMODO-The Successors of Samurai-(2020)", our own Dr Shiro Yoshioka,



Lecturer in Japanese Studies, gave a fascinating talk on the cultural background, tradition and etiquette of the sumo world. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the documentary and Sumo culture. At the following reception, which offered Japanese refreshments and snacks, one audience member commented, "It isn't often we get such an intimate window into traditional Japanese cultures. Watching the *rikishi*'s devotion to their craft, has made me more eager to experience a live tournament first-hand in Japan." With over 100 participants, including students and locals, the event was a great success.

Two successful PhD defenses

Zack Grey and Matteo Giacchè successfully defended their PhD dissertations. We thank the Sasakawa Foundation for its support throughout much of their academic journey and wish them all the best going forward!

Another round of Sasakawa studentship success

Congratulations to Yueying Wu and Sophie Oldroyd who were both awarded a generous Sasakawa studentship which will enable them to continue with their PhD work related to Japan.

Heroines in Miyazaki Hayao's Anime

-- from Childhood Passion to Dissertation Topic

Jonty Nordon
Japanese Studies



I've just come back from a year at Ryukoku University in Kyoto. While I was there speaking the language, eating the food and experiencing the culture, I thought about my dissertation topic. Living somewhere so different from the UK made me realise that I wanted to share my interest in Japanese culture with others, particularly through writing. After giving it much thought, I decided to analyse female characters in the films of Hayao Miyazaki, the renowned

Japanese animator and co-founder of Studio Ghibli.

While it is widely known that Miyazaki tends to foreground female characters in ways that feel nuanced, capable and emotionally authentic; I am examining how Miyazaki's portrayal of identity, agency and power changes between different films and potentially shifts over time. My project focuses on three of his films released between 1984 and 2004: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Together, these films span twenty years of his career and feature very different heroine types (from a near mythic warrior determined to heal her broken world, to a young witch navigating independence, and a not-so young woman whose magical transformation reflects her changing self-worth). Rather than approaching each film separately, I hope to illustrate how Miyazaki's depiction of female protagonists has changed.

I first became interested in this topic through my long-standing love of Studio Ghibli films which I have watched since a young age. Growing up, I was always intrigued by how different Miyazaki's female characters felt compared to many Western animated heroines. They were brave without being invulnerable, compassionate without being passive, and allowed to be uncertain or flawed without being diminished (the opposite of what some might call a "Mary Sue"). As I began studying both gender and film more critically at Newcastle, I became curious about whether these portrayals had changed across Miyazaki's career and if these bore any reflection about gender and culture in society at the time of their inception.



Therefore, I feel that this dissertation has allowed me to combine personal enthusiasm with a culmination of my academic study at university, drawing on feminist theory and animation studies to explore how women are represented on screen. It is very rewarding to revisit films I have loved for years and discover new depths in their characters and themes.

(Images from screenshots)

My Year in Tokyo:

Contemporary Japanese Literature and Conveyor Belt Sushi

Lily Ana Waggitt
Japanese and Spanish



I spent my year abroad studying at Sophia University in Tokyo. After a 14-hour flight that consisted of practicing how to ask for directions, I landed in Haneda airport feeling quite apprehensive about the year ahead. However, it surprised me how quickly such a bustling city began to feel like home.

I was lucky enough to reside in an international dorm located in a quiet town called Kamisoshigaya, about 30 minutes from Shinjuku. I quickly came to appreciate the balance between city and suburban life that my accommodation offered. Most of my days were spent attending university in the morning, exploring Tokyo neighbourhoods with my friends in the afternoons and eating conveyor belt sushi in the evening - and yet the novelty never wore off.

Whilst the workload for Japanese was more than expected, it felt extremely rewarding being able to put what I had learned back in Newcastle to good use.

The liberal arts modules were given in English which sometimes made me feel that I wasn't as immersed in the Japanese language as some of my Newcastle mates doing their Year Abroad at other universities. That said, these English taught modules allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of Japanese culture.

The module that had the greatest impact on me was a Contemporary Japanese Literature class by Professor Matthew Strecher. I am not an avid reader by any means but have always been drawn to foreign literature as it not only enriches my language skills but also my cultural knowledge. The classes followed a purely discussion-based structure which I felt effectively maintained a lively and enjoyable atmosphere. As someone relatively new to Japanese literature, I will say that it is vital to keep an open mind as some themes took me by surprise. However, when I discovered that Newcastle offered a similar module on Japanese literature I was elated to continue exploring this field.



My year in Japan was one of both academic and personal growth which I have undoubtedly carried with me into my final year of university, and I hope that I am lucky enough to return soon - although perhaps not in the summer heat.

My Time as President of the Anglo-Japanese Society

Mio Grason
Japanese Studies



One of the most important realizations I had as president of the Anglo-Japanese Society, is the significant role social groups play in fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Whether it is through shared values, interests, or experiences, our society has served as a welcoming space for everyone, including myself, to forge valuable friendships and create lasting memories.

Despite the challenges we faced due to various constraints, I was determined to steer the society towards a more active and engaging year. Working in collaboration with our dedicated committee, we organized a series of events that aimed to bring members together and celebrate our shared interests. From our successful inaugural event at a pool bar in Newcastle's Chinatown, which saw a record turnout of approximately 120 students, to our weekly pub socials and collaborative ventures with other Asian societies, each gathering was an opportunity for our members to connect, learn, and have fun.

Our participation in the Teikyo Festival in Durham was a particular highlight, providing an enriching cultural experience for our members as they immersed themselves in Japanese traditions and activities. The Asian Halloween party, ice skating, the Asian Winter Ball, karaoke nights, and movie screenings further enriched our calendar, offering a diverse range of activities for our members to enjoy.

Stepping into the role of president was at first a daunting prospect for me, especially as someone not entirely comfortable with public speaking. However, this experience has helped me grow and become more confident in addressing larger audiences, a journey I couldn't have embarked on without the support of my fellow committee members. I am immensely grateful to Connor, Matt, Hannah, and Sophie for their dedication, hard work, and teamwork in making each event successful. Their contributions helped shape the society's activities and fostered a welcoming environment for all.



Ultimately, my goal in leading the society was to provide opportunities for others to connect with the like-minded, explore the rich facets of Japanese culture and language, and simply enjoy the company of friends. It is pleasing to know that many have derived as much fulfillment and enjoyment from these events as I have.

I now look forward to witnessing the society's continued growth and the next chapter. I am sure that the spirit of camaraderie and shared experiences will continue to enrich the lives of all those who are part of this community.

I am grateful for the incredible memories, the friendships forged, and the personal growth that this experience has brought me. I will forever cherish my time as president of the Anglo-Japanese Society, and I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has been a part of this unforgettable journey.

From Japanese and Spanish at Newcastle to the BBC

Nadine Wilson
Japanese and Spanish, 2025 graduate
Growth Marketing Coordinator, BBC



Sixth form was a bit of a whirlwind for me. I was in Year 13 when Covid hit; I never got to sit my A Levels and was suddenly faced with choosing what and where to study next. While some people seemed to have a clear five-year plan, I definitely didn't. Instead, I put my trust in the one thing I knew I was passionate about: languages and learning about different cultures. Taking that leap into the unknown was the best decision I could have made.

In 2021, I began my degree in Japanese and Spanish at Newcastle University. People often asked, "What can you do with a languages degree?" or "Can't you just learn from Duolingo?" Those questions made me realise just how much there is to discover when studying languages at university - and how many doors it can open. Japanese at Newcastle isn't just about grammar and vocab. There's a great mix of language classes and cultural modules, from anime and pop culture to history and society. Classes were always fun and creative - some of the quirky group activities we did are memories I'll never forget!



Then came the best experience of my life: my year abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo. I made lifelong friends and deepened my understanding of Japanese language and culture - not only in the classroom, but through everyday experiences. I visited the temples and shrines of Kyoto, explored the history and islands of Okinawa, skied in the mountains of Nagano, and even climbed Mount Fuji - steep, challenging, and absolutely breathtaking (quite literally!). That year confirmed I had chosen the right path.

My final year, and the prospect of the "real world," felt less daunting than I expected. I had grown academically and personally and was ready to apply everything I had learned. Although I still wasn't certain about my exact career path, I quickly realised how highly employers value language skills and cultural awareness - particularly in Japanese. In many ways, my Japanese studies gave me the tools to thrive in a role I never imagined when I first started university: strong cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and creative thinking with a global perspective. These skills led me to my current role as a Growth Marketing Coordinator at the BBC, where I deliver targeted email and push notification campaigns across BBC iPlayer, BBC Sounds, and BBC Sport.



A Japanese degree might not seem like the obvious route into marketing, but that's exactly the point: the possibilities are endless. I often think about the BBC's mission to inform, educate, and entertain - because that's precisely what studying Japanese at Newcastle University did for me.

My Experience as a Japanese Language Teaching Assistant

Hikaru Tsukada
Exchange student, Hitotsubashi University

I studied at Newcastle University as an exchange student. It has been three months since I left, but I often reflect on my time there, which was both memorable and valuable. Among many experiences, participating in an outreach activity was one of the most meaningful.



This involved assisting with Japanese language classes at a local junior high school in Corbridge, a small town located about 40 minutes by bus from Newcastle. At first, I was very nervous and concerned about my English skills. However, the Japanese language teacher was kind and supportive, which helped me feel more comfortable.

In the classes, the students learned how to count, introduce themselves, and refer to family members. As time went on, more and more students started speaking to me in a friendly manner, which made me very happy.

To help them experience Japanese culture, we also introduced various traditional events. One example was *setsubun*, a Japanese festival that marks the end of winter. In Japan, people throw roasted soybeans to drive away evil spirits and then eat the same number of beans as their age for good luck. Since soybeans were unavailable, the students used kidney beans and raisins.

We also enjoyed traditional Japanese games such as Origami and Hanafuda. Origami is the art of folding paper, and in class, we made paper cranes. I was impressed that all of the students could create beautiful cranes. Hanafuda is a Japanese card game that uses small, decorative cards with flower designs. Players match cards to form sets and earn points. Through these cultural activities, the students seemed to develop a deeper interest in Japanese culture and language.

Through this outreach experience, I was not only able to learn about the cultural differences between Japan and the UK, but also to look at Japanese culture and the Japanese language from an objective perspective. In particular, I realized how difficult it is to distinguish between the subtle nuances of Japanese that I had always used without any hesitation. I am proud to have been able to help spread the culture of my home country during my study abroad at Newcastle University.

Our Japanese outreach activities are generously supported by the Japan Foundation, London.



Folds of the Past, Strokes of the Heart

Haruka Kikuta
Exchange Student, Dokkyo University



I had the wonderful opportunity to participate as a student helper at the Discovery Festival, held at the Great North Museum. The Japanese section at Newcastle University hosted taster sessions of *origami* (paper folding) and *shodo* (Japanese calligraphy), which attracted a wide range of visitors curious about Japanese culture.

Origami dates back to the Heian period (794–1185) and became especially popular among the general public during the Edo period (1603–1868). During the workshop, the most popular models were the samurai helmet (*kabuto*) and the ninja star (*shuriken*). We used large sheets of paper for the *kabuto*, and many participants enjoyed taking photos wearing their handmade helmets in front of the real *kabuto* that is part of the museum's permanent exhibition. *Shuriken* were slightly more advanced to fold, but participants managed well and clearly had fun making them. It reminded me of my mother making a lot of *shuriken* for the sake of my desire to collect them. I had forgot how to make one and it was this event which gave me the chance to remember.

With roots in Chinese calligraphy introduced to Japan around the 5th to 6th century, *shodo* was less familiar to many, but still drew a lot of interest. Visitors tried to write simple kanjis such as 心 (heart), 友 (friend), and 山 (mountain). Some also attempted to write more difficult ones and even their names in katakana. It was interesting to hear that many people found *shodo* easier than they had expected. I had attended a calligraphy class between the age of six and fifteen, and the scent of the ink (*sumi*) reminded me of how much I used to love it and how strict my teacher was. The stain stayed on my nails for about a week and that somehow helped me prepare mentally for my return to Japan.



Seeing everyone's smiling faces and enthusiasm made me happy because I had never thought my country's cultures were this popular in foreign countries, especially as it was my first time staying abroad. Before the event began, Kumi-sensei and I were quite anxious about whether anyone would come, but more people than we had imagined dropped by to enjoy *origami* and *shodo* despite the rainy weather. It was great fun for me to teach both *origami* and *shodo* – activities I had once fallen in love with and used to practice regularly when I was younger. I hope that more students will become interested in learning Japanese and eventually visit Japan themselves in the future. It was a memorable and meaningful experience for me before going back.

For information about admissions, please email sandra.salin@newcastle.ac.uk

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