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Treasures from the Nikkei National Museum

Discovering a wooden carving in the Nikkei National Museum

Lisa Uyeda
Contributor

BURNABY — A few years ago, our education coordinator found this treasure amidst the museum's supplies of *kimono*, *kendama*, suitcases, and replica registration cards used to educate students of all ages on Japanese Canadian history and heritage.

We decided to pull the mystery item from the education supplies and add it to the museum's repository in the hopes of finding out more information about it one day.

This item stands only a few inches tall and is hand carved from a single piece of wood. If

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PHOTO CREDIT: NIKKEI NATIONAL MUSEUM

Image information: "Carving of a Woman." Found in the Nikkei National Museum collection. Accession Number: TD 1393. Year: 1930.

Lessons from a mountain town: Saying goodbye to Ochi



The importance of *aisatsu* and saying goodbye to Japan

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — I am back in Canada!

The journey back began with several flight changes and delays, an hour-long car ride from Ochi town to Kochi city, three flights, five airports, and an hour airport change by bus through Tokyo. This was the most direct route I could find from Ochi, Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku Island, Japan, to Ottawa, Canada.

For the past year, I was an assistant English language teacher at the Ochi Junior High School with JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program.

I wondered what it would be like to fly during a global pandemic. I was armed with masks, a plastic protection shield, sanitizer, and the drive to return to a home on the other side of the world. I was scared that I might be exposed to COVID-19.

Once I embarked on my journey, I was excited to go home, and I realized most of my fears were unwarranted. The airports were empty and departure boards filled with cancellations. The only people around were catching the same flight or airport staff.

I arrived early at Tokyo Narita airport, before the Air Canada counter was open for check-in. I was excited to go shopping and



Left: A sign in Ochi Town. Right: Columnist Caroline Ishii waiting for her flight in an empty airport in Tokyo.



PHOTOS COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

have something to eat. Almost everything was shut down, many places looking like they were closed for good.

One of the only places I found open was Starbucks. I had a café au lait and wrote while I waited for check-in. There is comfort in eating or drinking something familiar when everything around you is unfamiliar.

I looked forward to checking out the duty-free store before boarding. They were all closed too. There were not many people in the terminal except for those boarding the flight and staff, checking boarding passes and temperatures.

There is limited social distancing on the plane. I was happy the middle seat beside me was vacant, but the airline warned that they could be sold. Couples and families sat together.

The flight was full. The flight attendants wore protective gear over their clothing; masks, gloves, and gave welcome sanitization kits.

Landing in Canada and arriving at customs, it used to be questions about what you bought back. Now it's about what contagions you may be carrying. You are served the Order of Mandato-

approach to COVID-19. There is no forced quarantine or self-isolation. It is entirely voluntary, because Japanese law forbids restricting people's movements and other freedoms.

But Japanese people—for the most part—are compliant with government orders. When the prime minister announces a state of emergency, the protection goes up.

If he says the state of emergency is lifted, then the protective gear comes off. Individual sacrifices for the greater good, whether at work or in their communities are part of the Japanese culture.

Throughout the height of the pandemic, I was still expected to work every day in the office. The desks are beside each other, but everyone wears masks. There were new COVID-19 protocols and procedures. Otherwise, it's

business as usual—the same with the school.

When the state of emergency was lifted at the end of May, students returned to school, and everyone wore masks. Wearing surgical-style masks is commonplace in Japan and part of social etiquette. They are usually worn to help prevent the spread of colds and flu in winter and protect against pollen in the spring allergy season.

At first, I was surprised by the mask culture and thought I could never wear a mask, but it became part of my daily attire.

We were soon back to the full schedule of school lessons, clubs after school, band practices, and baseball and soccer training, all while wearing masks.

School opening and closing ceremonies also continued, adjusted because of the pandemic. These ceremonies are an essential part of Japanese customs. Another essential Japanese custom I learned about was *aisatsu*, the customary greetings exchanged in Japan to meet or depart.

I never realized how critical greetings are in Japanese culture. It's more than a quick hello or goodbye, like in North America. It's part of the social consciousness of acknowledging and showing respect to others through your words and actions.

I first came across *aisatsu* at the junior high school. Upon entering the office in the morning, you must loudly announce *ohayo gozaimasu!* meaning "good morning." The same when leaving the office. You can't sneak out, you are expected to stop, bow and say to everyone, *sakini shitsurei shimasu*, meaning "excuse me for going ahead." Colleagues reply, *otsukaresama deshita*, as a way of saying, "you've worked hard."

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PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Students giving Caroline Ishii farewell gifts in the school year's closing ceremony.

From AISATSU P. 6

When I came to school early one day, I heard loud voices at the school. When I came closer to the entrance, there was a lineup of students, 12 to 15 years old, in their traditional black and white uniforms.

When they saw me, they looked directly at me and said aloud, *ohayo gozaimasu*, in unison while bowing to me. They did this for everyone that went by, teachers, staff, and students. Even parents dropping off their children in cars would receive the greeting.

The greeting was surprising, and I was utterly charmed by the intention and sincerity the students expressed in their welcome. It made me feel acknowledged and special.

I went into the office, excited by the encounter, and asked a colleague about it.

"It's *aisatsu*," she said. She explained that the student council decided to do this two mornings a week to welcome people to the school. Children in Japan learn from an early age about *aisatsu*. They are taught by their families and there are even moral education classes at school, which emphasize the importance of enthusiastic greetings. In the Japanese tradition, greetings must be loud, clear, proud, and you must mean what you say.

I also ran across *aisatsu* when I was leaving Ochi. I had thought that I could spend the last weeks packing, cleaning up my apartment, and saying goodbyes. I didn't realize that most of my time would be spent on the farewell side of *aisatsu*.

In Japan, it's not a simple act of saying goodbye or 'see ya later' when leaving a workplace or town. It's a formal farewell pro-

cess orchestrated and encouraged by your superiors to show appreciation and respect to the community you have been part of.

I was asked to say goodbye to the town hall staff. This involved saying goodbye to all of the hundreds of staff members. I went from floor to floor and to each division. My supervisor would

write my name in Japanese on a piece of paper.

The clerk took this and carefully wrote my name in Japanese calligraphy in black ink on a sheet of paper covering the box. By the time she was done with the calligraphy, paper, ribbon and bag, it was a work of art.

At the junior high school, I participated in the closing ceremony before the summer holidays. The school year starts in April in Japan. Opening and closing ceremonies are an essential part of school life.

In a farewell speech to the junior high students, I expressed in Japanese how I hoped they reached for their dreams, followed their hearts, and that I enjoyed being with them. They had a presentation to me with flowers and cards. A student representative from each year said what they appreciated about me and thanked me.

Then there was loud, lively music, and all the students formed a long tunnel by standing in two lines, facing each other and grabbing each others' hands. I ducked down and went through the long human tunnel to the end with my flowers and cards. When I got out, I felt like I was getting married. I did a little dance, bow, and thanked everyone. This was undoubtedly one of the most exuberant official farewells I've had.

I said many goodbyes in the last two weeks in Ochi. I even went to the post office to say goodbye with a gift. I went to the post office often with my letters and packages to Canada and limited Japanese. The entire staff would diligently and kindly help me.

I was also asked to say a farewell speech to the town council members in the town hall cham-

ber.

I wore my black suit, the official attire for ceremonies. There is a formal procedure of set bows on the way to the podium and on the way out. I had my speech memorized in Japanese and told them what I loved about being in Ochi and that I appreciated the support and kindness of residents.

When I started to say that Ochi would be in my heart forever, a knot suddenly appeared in my throat. I felt a swell of emotion and started to cry. Not in a sobbing way, but enough to have me pause for a second, with tears rolling down, and my voice shaky as I continued. I'm not sure if others noticed.

This was a true *aisatsu* for me. With an open heart, respectful, appreciative, and sincere, I said an official goodbye to Ochi. I understood then why greetings are valued by Japanese society. It acknowledges people and places who help us, it makes others hap-

"I understood then why greetings are valued by Japanese society. It acknowledges people and places who help us," writes Ishii.



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

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py, and it provides closure.

In saying goodbye to Ochi town, I realized that places have personalities. I see Ochi as a grandmother who is fierce, determined, and courageous, and kind and generous too. I will miss her.

She is in the spirit of the population who tend to their small farms regardless of age and weather.

The trees, flowers, plants, and moss intertwined in the fields after centuries of living together. And in ancient shrines beside rice fields, mountains, and roadways, where residents gather hope and strength. She has a particular fondness for Ochi's children who carry on her determination and innocence lost.

We may travel far from people and places that we love. When we see, hear or taste something that reminds us of a person or place, we remember. They are where we left them—in our hearts.
