

Winleth Dukes

From the second to the twelfth of June, I— alongside a group of seven other students and three of our teachers— went on a trip to various places in Japan. We went to Niigata, Tokyo, Shibuya, and Hiroshima. The trip to Japan was educational, fun, and brought us together as a group. On the Japan trip, we learned about how to make Japanese cuisine, experienced its culture, and learned its history. I was enthused to be learning about Japan.

Mochi, okonomiyaki, and Momiji Manjū were all foods we made in Japan. On June fifth, we watched others pound mochi from sticky rice as a part of a tradition that is no longer commonly practiced when making mochi; we got to assist by taking turns pounding the mochi with the mallets they were using. A few days later, on June tenth, we went to a restaurant in Hiroshima and made Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki with the guidance of the chefs who showed their skill in making okonomiyaki— personally, I'm not a good cook, but my okonomiyaki turned out delicious, especially due to the fact that it was hot and freshly-made. The day after, we went to Miyajima Island and made two Momiji Manjū, a baked wagashi shaped like the Japanese maple leaf, typically with sweet red bean filling— although, we also made one with chocolate filling— which we could eat afterwards. Every ingredient and flip of our dishes, even if guided, contributed to how good each of the foods tasted. I had a lot of fun making the okonomiyaki and Momiji Manjū with my own hands.

Through attending Japanese events, visiting schools, and staying a night with our host family, we learned about Japanese culture. The Japanese event that we attended was the Shirone Kite Festival— an annual event where two massive kites are flown on

either side of the Nakanokuchi River in attempt to tangle their strings together, which would send both kites into the river— once this happens, both sides would then tug on their ropes in a manner similar to that of tug-of-war, hoping they will have the longer section of rope when it inevitably breaks. We met with the Ajikata JHS students at the kite festival, who made two kites to fly with us. We also visited various schools and learned a bit about how their schools work (which is fast-paced, with many classes compacted into their days) as well as the experience of being a part of their classes— although their normal material was altered due to our presence. Spending time with our host families from Kanto Daiichi HS also helped us learn more about Japanese culture, with whom we got to experience a day in the life of the students we accompanied to school the next day. My host student, Mina, and her family were amazing; though it was short, I loved playing games (such as UNO and something akin to Marco-polo) and going places (like the Senso-ji temple and Tokyo Skytree) with them— Mina and her sister, Rika, were very funny, and their mother, Youko, was very kind.

We learned Japanese history through visiting the Shirone Kite Museum as well as the Hiroshima Peace Museum— alongside other sites in Hiroshima. At the Shirone Kite Museum, we were taught the history behind the Shirone Kite Festival as we know it today— a massive kite flown by Shirone residents got blown into a crop field on the other side of the river by accident, destroying the crops in said field. The residents of West Shirone retaliated by flying their own massive kite into the other side of the river. At the Hiroshima Peace Museum, we learned the stories of those who were impacted by the tragic Hiroshima atomic bombing by the US and viewed the remnants of what was left behind or recovered. Also, at Hiroshima, we saw the A-Bomb Dome, which was located

about 160 meters from where the bomb hit, as well as the Children's Peace Monument, which was built to commemorate Sadako Sasaki, a girl who tragically died as a result of the bombing but clung onto hope that she would make it. She folded a thousand paper cranes, believing it would allow her wish— a wish to live— to come true, although her body was slowly rendered immobile due to her leukemia. Each bit of Japan's history that I learned about intrigued me, and I wish to learn more.

In conclusion, the trip to Japan was engaging and educational for both students and teachers. Over the course of eleven days, we went from hands-on cooking and experiencing the culture to learning Japan's rich history. We came to understand things about Japan we might not have prior. Many of us got to experience and make things we never have before— including a variety of events that have gone unmentioned, such as the trip we took to Tokyo Disney Sea and visiting the Itsukushima Shrine, making small kites and rice paddles, and more. In fact, quite a few of us have never been to Japan before this trip, including myself. I greatly enjoyed each day we spent on the move, discovering things I never knew of before, and I would love to go again.