

Unexpected Encounter

What comes to mind when you hear, “traditional Japanese culture?” Even though Japan is considered to be one of the most modernized countries in the world, we still practice our traditional culture. We are a nation of rich culture based on tradition and history. However, there are some aspects of traditional culture that even native Japanese people might not know about. For example, *rakugo* and *maiko*.

I first saw *rakugo* at a farewell party for the third-year students at my school last year. *Rakugo* is a form of traditional comedic story-telling. All roles in the play are performed by one person, the *rakugoka*. He changes roles only by using a fan held in one hand, and a cloth-like towel in the other. I was surprised and impressed. Despite the *rakugoka* being the only person on stage, he really made it look like there were two people talking face to face.

Recently, people don't go to see *rakugo* so often anymore. Doesn't this mean that the tradition will die out? If this continues, we will lose a part of Japanese history and the future generations would never be able to experience this traditional art.

Have you heard of Katsura Sunshine? He's from Canada and was the first foreign *rakugoka* to emerge in Japan after WWII. He's incredibly enthusiastic about *rakugo*. I watched his performance, “*Jugemu*,” on YouTube. He speaks Japanese fluently like a traditional *rakugoka*. Furthermore, he can also perform in English, French, and Slovenian. I would like to see a society where even more people around the world become interested in *rakugo* and becoming *rakugoka* like Katsura Sunshine.

When I visited Kyoto on our school trip last June, I saw a real *maiko* performance for the first time. I was surprised to learn that she was only 17 years old! She decided to be a *maiko* when she saw a *maiko* performance during her school trip. So, after she graduated junior high school in Ibaraki, she moved to Kyoto and is now attending one of the famous *maiko* schools there.

To be a good *maiko*, she practices Kyoto accent, dancing, and playing instruments. Aside from that, she has to learn various behaviors and mannerisms. She also has to follow strict rules. For example, as a *maiko*, unlike her senior *geiko*, she isn't allowed to wear a wig. Instead, she has to style her own hair. The hair ornaments she wears are also determined by the years of training.

As you see, this *maiko* is trying her best to achieve her dream despite the challenges she meets. I was very impressed! I didn't expect that a single exposure to a culture could lead to a dream like this. Because of people like her Japanese culture is still present until now. I want to be like her. She inspired me to find my own way to share Japanese culture with others. I want to learn more about *rakugo* and deepen my knowledge of it from now on. One day, I want to show the world a powerful *rakugo* performance.

In two to three years' time, many people will gather in Japan because of the Tokyo Olympics, Paralympics and the Rugby World Cup. As a result, people from all over the world will be coming to Japan. There will be many opportunities to show these people what we consider our “traditional culture.” I want the world to see its greatness. It would be superb if we could have foreigners saying, “Japanese culture is amazing!” How can we do that? Which part of Japan's greatness do you want to show? Let's all think about Japanese culture today, and forever.

Thank you for listening