

Japan Reference – Essay contest

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What aspects of Japanese culture intrigue you the most?

Wow. Where do I even start? With its mixture of bustling, trendy cities and rural villages with beautiful scenery, all enveloped with a sense of duty, belonging, family and tradition, Japan has more than a few aspects that all combine to create the intrigue and passion I feel for the country. However, if I had to narrow it down to just a couple of aspects, I would choose Japan's devotion to its **positivity** and **paranormal**.

Firstly, Japan's **positivity**. I recently learned about the mindset of shōgenai (しょうがない). As you already probably know, this phrase translates to “it cannot be helped”, and it's so much more than a phrase. It's a way of life. Shōgenai is used to replace the negativity of everyday issues with a positive attitude that won't be shaken. Something was more expensive than expected? Shōgenai. Too busy at work to go for that meal with friends? Shōgenai. Didn't win a competition for two weeks of life-changing Japanese lessons? Shōgenai. Hopefully I won't have to use it on that last one, but if I do, the Japanese mindset would help me.

As a result of this mindset, Japanese people seem to cultivate an extremely friendly, helpful culture in which the group is just as important as the individual, if not more so. If more people thought like this, I can't help but think the world would be a better place.

Without the negativity of daily life, there's more time to spend enjoying the people and places of somewhere as beautiful and diverse as Japan. After all, Christmas is coming up, so there'll be lots of KFC with friends and family to enjoy... Who could feel negative about that?

Onto the second aspect that intrigues me; Japanese's love for the paranormal, and the essence of spirituality that is intertwined with the country. From its rich tapestry of myths and ghost stories to its shrines and shared connection with those that have passed away, Japan is a country that has embraced the spiritual with open arms.

At one end of the spectrum I can't tear myself away from Japanese horror films or anime (such as Yamishibai, designed in a similar way to the paper-theatre storytelling of kamishibai), and at the other I am humbled by the ongoing respect for loved ones that even transcends to the other side.

I can only imagine the feeling of lighting a lantern during Obon and floating it down the Sasebo river while paying my respects. A personal experience shared by many to create a night that would be hard to forget. An equally unforgettable experience I'd love to have is walking through the towering forest of Aokigahara, known as the Sea of Trees or Suicide Forest, watched over by Mount Fuji. While discovering the spirituality that is present all over Japan, this infamous forest once again piqued my interest as an important, and mysterious, part of Japan's culture.

I've been learning Japanese for about a year now and still haven't been able to visit Japan to explore its beauties and practise the language I'm trying to understand in its natural setting. If I were to win this competition, it would help me to realise my dream of going to Japan, where I hope to live one day. Not only would it help me to practise Japanese, but it would allow me

to surround myself with the very people that I'm trying to connect with. In doing so, I'd hope to take on some of the very aspects that intrigue me most about Japan; an innate positivity and spirituality that enriches daily lives in a country that I so want to be a part of.

In short, it would change my life. Won't you help me?