Why I’m interested in Japanese culture.

It started a while back; as far back as I can remember, in fact. Endless hours of videogames such as Pokémon and The Legend of Zelda, not to mention Super Mario, were spent, over evenings, weekends, and summer breaks. Beyblade toys and Yu Gi Oh cards were fought with in the playground, with girls constantly checking their Tamagotchis, in case they needed feeding. Every night I’d come home to watch another episode of Candy Candy, or a Studio Ghibli film, my personal favourite being Spirited Away, and during lessons I’d read Dragon Ball Z and feel clever about it because the books were big for me at the time, although admittedly I’d sometimes colour in the pictures rather than read. I once saw an Asian woman on the street and I remember thinking that her eyes looked like a Disney princess’ eyes. I was around 6 at the time, and ever since then I’ve found Asians in general quite beautiful. Those were the best years of my life, spent so carelessly with no worries about the future, and also the start to my fascination with Japan.

Years passed by as we moved to a whole new country: England. Hours of studying every night were spent on perfecting the language, although it took me as little as a year to learn enough to move up to Set One in English; the highest set for the smartest kids in the year. A few years were spent trying to fit in, as no one I knew at the time even knew what anime or manga was, but as I moved up to Secondary school, I gave up on that, unfortunately causing me to stand out more than I should’ve. I’d left my fascination with Japan behind, focusing on studying, but what I’d realised was that German and French were learnt with ease. Because I spoke fluent Swedish, English and Kurdish, I could easily pick up resemblances between the languages and I soon realised my memory helped with it too; I was good at learning languages.

Soon, as soon as last Christmas, I’d remembered how much I once loved the Japanese culture. I spent most of Christmas watching Youtube videos teaching you the basics of Japanese, which was just as well as at the time everyone were busying themselves with Christmas dinner and me being in the kitchen would only cause delays. I taught myself to count to twelve, to introduce myself and to ask someone how they are, as well as minor things such as apologising and thanking. I was so excited about it I started teaching my best friend at the time to count in Japanese, with very little luck. Nevertheless, I’d started to pick up my interest once again.

Over the course of the year, Japanese was the least of my worries as tests were coming up, until last March, when I befriended a Japanese boy over the internet. His name was Hiroto, and I remember feeling so happy whenever I spoke to him. He’d always be so kind to me, and he’d make me laugh a lot, too. He told me about Shinto and other religion-based facts about Japan. Soon I began reading manga again, bought myself new Pokémon and Zelda games and watched Candy Candy once more. I had weeks of nostalgia, enjoying the things I enjoyed in the past, so much so that I bought myself an old V3 Tamagotchi. I’d lend my friends my new manga books and anime series, and soon they were all obsessed with it too.

Over the summer, I’d watch video after video on Youtube about the way society is in Japan, their strictness on PDA, their table manners, the way their houses were set up, host clubs, TV adverts, school rules, but most importantly, exchange students in Japan. Their stories and videos got me so desperate to study in Japan, I Googled everything I could to find an exchange group that would take someone from England to Japan. This proved to be very difficult, not to mention too expensive, and so I dropped it. Lessons in my area to learn Japanese were also extremely difficult to find and far too expensive, and so I dropped it, in fear that I’d try to teach myself Japanese, but then do it wrong and teach myself bad Japanese.

Hiroto once told me about J-Rock, a foreign genre of music to me at the time. The band he showed me was called The GazettE, and they were the start to my new interest; Japanese music. I’d listen to all kinds of Japanese music, from Vocaloid to metal, and started learning to sing them. Learning the songs helped me learn a group of random words which I’d never be able to put to use, such as “wagamama” and “kokoro”, not to mention everyone in school were highly fascinated by my ability to sing in Japanese. They were already very confused as to why my books were “the wrong way around”, and why I’d dress in a blouse with a puffy skirt, decorating my hair with flowers and ribbons. My friends would joke around and call me a “super kawaii princess”, and I’d laugh, telling them they pronounced kawaii as “kowai”, then explained that it means scary. That’s what I was known as; the girl obsessed with Japan.

Months later, a couple of Japanese exchange students came into our school. One sat next to me in German, and so I introduced myself in Japanese, much of a surprise to her. I learnt that her name was Ai, telling the people around us that it means love, and she took an interest to my Totoro-themed bag. I thought she was lovely and exchanged emails with her.

Years of influence has taken me to a stage in my life where some sort of reference to Japan, may it be a book or a song or the language, comes up in everyday conversations. It’s what makes me stand out and it’s what makes me who I am today. It’s very different from any country I’ve been to. The most amazing things come from Japan, and just the country itself is full of history and has an exciting background; and that is why I’m interested in Japanese culture.