

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, July 2024

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

July : Summer Open House

Last week I attended my grandson's school's open house. He is in the second grade of junior high. The school had informed us that we could visit freely from first to sixth period, so I was able to spend some quality time looking around the library and school grounds.

The class that left a particularly strong impression on me was in the "Comprehensive" department. During a fifty minute class, the teacher, whose first language is English, talks with the students in English.

This is separate from the so-called "English" classes.

There were six parents in the classroom. Except for me, they were all mothers of the students. Later in the class, the teacher asked each parent in turn to stand.

All of the students are looking back. The first mother stands up. The teacher asks the students, "Whose mother is it?" One of the female students answers, "She is my mother." Then she answers questions about her name, age, and so on.

Soon it became my turn. The teacher asked, "Whose mother is it?" My grandson answered, "She is my mother." I immediately replied in English, "I'm not a mom, I am a grandma." Then the teacher asked him my name and my birth month. He answered "The name is Hiroko. The birth month is June." So I corrected in English, "No, my birthday is in March."

It was just a small conversation, but I was very happy to be able to catch up with my grandson and his teacher in English. All six parents and the students enjoyed the class together.

At the end of the class, the teacher came to us in the back and said, "Thank you very much for today." We replied "Thank you so much, we had a lot of fun."

I will never forget that I had such a good time with my grandson. And it was all in English. A wonderful and unforgettable experience for us. (Hiroko)

I'm really into *ai-zome* indigo-dyed fabric.

Last spring in Izumo, Shimane, I ordered a handmade *noren* door curtain for our home.

Ai indigo is one of the longest utilized plant dyes in the world. It's been said that *ai* is effective against cold and rough skin, helps to stop bleeding and keeps mosquitoes and other insect pests away.

Since the 8th century, *ai* has been a popular dyed fabric in Japan, long before Levi Strauss ever marketed Indigo-dyed jeans in 1873 San Francisco.

By that time, one British scientist had already named its distinctive shade "Japan blue".

To his eyes, every Japanese town was full of people wearing indigo-dyed clothing. Until the mid-19th century, ordinary Japanese people were only allowed to wear cotton clothes in subdued colors such as blue, brown, or gray.

When Lafcadio Hearn, an Irish American journalist born in Greece, arrived in Matsue, Shimane, he wrote about indigo in an essay, **Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan**. From a rickshaw, Hearn enjoyed looking at shop assistants' kimono and the blue-dyed *noren* in the doorway of every business.

Last year, I was glued to a TV documentary on indigo production in Izumo, a place Hearn once called "the chief city of the province of the gods", and decided I'd go and visit there myself.

I got the opportunity when I was in the area to visit our daughter working at a hospital there.

Without an appointment, I knocked on the door of their family-run studio. A craftsman kindly ushered me in and talked to me about the studio's work for over an hour and showed me their prize-winning designs using a paste-resist hand-drawing technique.

After the craftsperson draws a design with rice glue, the white fabric undergoes a process of dyeing, washing, soaking in a color, solution fixing and finally hanging and drying over a couple of months.

Last June, I got an email attached to the final design of our family crest of crossed arrows.

They'll be sending us our *noren* soon.

(Kay)

The oldest hot spring in Japan, Dogo Onsen, has been a popular tourist spot for centuries.

But just this May, when I guided students from Thailand around the Dogo area, they told me they'd never seen a hot spring. According to them, it's not customary to soak in a bathtub at home. It's hot all year round, so they just take cold showers.

By contrast, Japanese people take a warm bath even on a hot day. I explained to these Thai girls that the manner of bathing in Japan was especially exhilarating.

The reason why Japanese people take a warm bath during the summer is similar to how many people eat spicy food in tropical areas. Something hot improves your blood circulation and makes you sweat, so you end up feeling refreshed after all.

People from abroad might not get used to the idea of soaking in 42°C water for a long time, if ever. But once you dare try soaking in it, you will soon be addicted.

Friends of mine from Ghana, Mexico and America really enjoyed themselves at Dogo Onsen. In the warm, relaxing water, we became more open-minded than usual, and we talked a lot while in the bath. The thermal water took away our fatigue and made us feel loose and supple. Our skin felt smooth and we were completely refreshed.

We put on the free *yukata* they lent us, and tea and sweets were served in the spacious *tatami* room. Our warmed-up bodies felt the pleasant breeze coming through a bamboo blind hung over a wide window.

Now that the earthquake resistant retrofit has been completed, the main public bathhouse (originally built in 1894) will reopen for the first time in five-and-a-half years on July 11.

This Important Cultural Property will no doubt be crowded with a large number of bathers soon.

(Miwa N.)