

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, August 2025

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

Island Days

In Tosashimizu, Kochi, on the south side of the John Mung Museum, is a rough patch of the Pacific Ocean where hordes of whales migrate.

In 1841, a fishing boat and its Japanese crew were caught in a sudden storm that blew them far out to sea, washing them up on a small uninhabited island.

Despite their fear, thirst and hunger the fishermen somehow managed to survive, until one day the crew of an American whaling vessel came ashore, discovered the castaways and rescued them.

The captain of the ship recognized how especially clever and observant one castaway, a 14-year-old boy, was.

In those days, our country was closed to the outside world, so foreign ships were prohibited from approaching Japan, even ships that had rescued Japanese people. So Captain Whitfield renamed the boy John Mung, and decided to take him to the United States to be educated.

The exhibits at the museum portray John Mung's great courage and fortitude, his wonder and amazement at first arriving in America. How he undertook this great ordeal, persevered and emerged triumphant.

The way he adapted to his new surroundings somehow reminded me of my first time in the United States, although, of course, the times and circumstances were very different. John Mung was the first Japanese to come to the States and become truly international in outlook.

While serving onboard the whaler, John listened intently in order to understand the meaning of the words the crew used.

He was proactive in virtually everything he did, making judgements based on experience and the situations he found himself in, always displaying curiosity and absorbing the customs of different cultures he encountered.

It's a pity that his wonderfully effective method of language acquisition has not been incorporated into English education in Japan.

For more than 170 years since John Mung introduced English to Japanese people, English has remained the language of a distant country.

When I was a student, we learned English through reading our textbooks together or memorizing whatever information was in them to pass tests. Test questions generally have just one answer, and as a result, Japanese hesitate to speak English for fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, they don't know what to say in real-life communicative situations.

One method of developing true communication skills is to practice in the way John Mung did, choosing colloquial expressions as each new situation one encounters demands.

Students should attentively listen to native pronunciation and actively discuss familiar topics to master grammar, which is how I try to teach students English now.

John introduced not only language but also ship building and navigation techniques to Japan. His many contributions helped usher in an age of Western enlightenment to this previously closed country and establish an inviolable relationship between Japan and the U.S.

Compared to his tumultuous life, today's young people have endless possibilities and opportunities to learn and grow.

John Mung's indomitable spirit has always been the very life force we need to learn from and nurture in ourselves. (Miwa N.)

What is it that makes Japanese people want to huddle around a hot grill when it's already 35 degrees Celsius outside?

Okonomiyaki! It's stick whatever you like (pork, curry, cheese, green onions, and for you braver souls, octopus and squid) on a savory pancake and slather it in Worcestershire sauce and mayo. In Kansai or Hiroshima-style. Oh, and Osaka-style, too.

A few weeks ago, we were out and about island hopping, more or less to try on some island okonomiyaki the local media has been pushing lately.

Little tiny place. Seven stools or so lined-up in front of a teppan grill that pretty much took up the entire space.

There were three or four fishermen, a little wobbly at the knees, wiling away the afternoon drinking and gabbing. I could tell they were fishermen from the BMWs and Mercs parked out front.

Anyway, this was the first time in probably seven years a complete stranger bought me a beer because, "...if you eat okonomiyaki, you gotta have beer." And I, drat, forgot to save this momentous occasion in pictures, I was so astounded. Nice fellas.

I'm not sure which came first: The island okonomiyaki trade or the notion of a potential okonomiyaki tourist trade, but there's an island with one entire street given over to okonomiyaki restaurants.

But no matter what the current temperature is outside, if you're looking for a savory summer treat, find the nearest okonomiyaki-ya-san, plop yourself down on a stool in front of the griddle, order whatever ingredients suit your fancy and enjoy. (Editor)