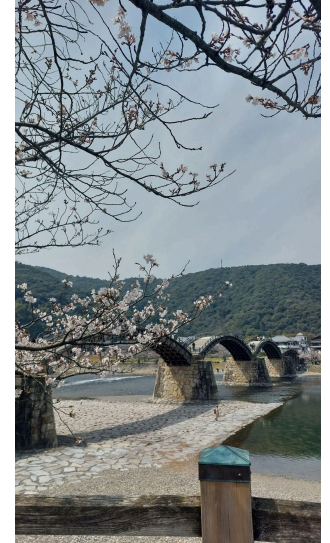


## Korino Bursens. MEXT 2025 Ph.D. Student at Tohoku University.



Winter coats have been exchanged for spring ones, a new school year has started and yes, the sakura are also in bloom: spring has arrived. For me as a MEXT student, a year has now passed, and what an eventful year it has been. During the lovely autumn, my days were coloured by beautiful autumn leaves, which are said to be the brightest in the North where I am. The refreshment brought by cool air after the relentless summer helped me focus on cramming knowledge for the upcoming entrance exam in February, and when I needed to re-energise after long days of study, my club activities proved the perfect remedy.

By the time winter rolled around, we had our performance, and after that, my days were taken up by exam-preparations and moving house preparations at the same time. I did see snow and the fairy lights which always decorate the zelkova trees in Jozenji-dori during the holidays, but more than that I must admit I've spent the winter seeing the inside of my books and not enough my eyelids. The efforts paid off, however: in the first week of February I took the entrance exam to the Ph.D. program, and in the second week I moved to my own apartment from the student dorm, along with finding out I passed said exam. This freed up my spring holiday to do some travel in Kyushu and Chuubu, allowing me to see the cherry blossoms for longer than if I had just stayed in Sendai.

Since I believe there will be quite a few among you who are planning to take the entrance exam at your respective universities after spending a year or two as a research student, I thought I would dedicate this season's report to exactly that.

## *Preparations*

Let me start by reiterating what you probably already know: to enter a bachelor's, master's or Ph.D. program at a Japanese university, you need to pass an entrance exam (in most cases, though I have heard that there are some changes planned in the future). Therefore, when being accepted to the MEXT program, I became enrolled as a research student, or *kenkyuusei*, and not in any official program. MEXT covers up to two years of activities as a research student, in which you work on your research on your own without having credit obligations, and if you pass the entrance exam, your scholarship will cover the rest of your program. After one year, because I wanted to be on track for an actual degree, I took said exam.

The specifics differ from university to university, major to major; some allow or even require exams in English, some in Japanese, and some mix it up or allow other languages than those two. In my case, I took the entrance exam for Cultural Anthropology at Tohoku University, which had a written part and an interview: during the written part, there was one question which had to be answered in English, and two where you could choose between English and Japanese; the interview was wholly in Japanese.

What was a surprise to me was that one actually has to apply to be allowed to participate in the exam: this application deadline was about a month before the actual exam. You need to submit things like your previous degree, grades, resident record, a summary of your research, and all the things you're already used to submitting for various applications. It's important to not forget this, or you will not be allowed to participate in the exam, at least in my case.

The actual studies involved mainly two things: cramming basic anthropology knowledge and preparing how to present my research. Two thirds of the exam was about summarising your previous research and your plans for the upcoming research, which is quite easy to prepare for. However, as I did not have any background in Cultural Anthropology, coming from Japanese Studies, I had to spend most of my time reading books and attending classes about the history and methodology of the discipline. After doing so for one year, though I felt I had learned a lot and made some breakthroughs in my own research methodology by learning from Cultural Anthropology, I still felt there was so much more to learn and discover, which is why I would urge you not to postpone basic studies if you find yourself in a similar situation to me.

## *The exam*

The actual exam, as I already wrote, consisted of a written part and an interview, both of which occurred on the same day. Before starting, it was important to get your attendance registered at the reception while carrying your exam slip. Then, the written part took place in a large auditorium along with students from many other disciplines, in a way that was just like any other exam I've been familiar with so far, so I cannot tell whether there was

anything of note about it. The interview took place a few hours later at the lab with the two main professors and was about thirty minutes long. About this part, I will relay the advice that was given to me by my Japanese friend who had studied Cultural Anthropology before me: be honest and talk about what you know. Do not attempt to put on a persona or smooth talk your way in: authenticity is most appreciated and Japanese teachers are not different in that way from teachers in other places. If you've regularly been to your lab, you probably already know your professors' personalities and more importantly, they know you and what you're working on: don't be afraid to consult with them over the course of the year and know that having troubles and insecurities is very normal at any stage of your research, especially now. If there is potential within your research, professors will want to see you reach it.

When it's finally done and hopefully you've passed: travel. Take a breather. Many students go abroad in March and in my lab, "where have you gone (on vacation)?" was the standard question asked to anyone who hadn't shown their face in a while during this month. I myself went to visit friends in Kumamoto and Hiroshima, allowing me to see the South of Japan where I hadn't been before. Kyushu's landscapes are so varied, which I especially recommend if you like nature, and both Kyushu and Chuubu hold many interesting cities and historical sites like Nagasaki, Dazaifu, Izumo and Iwakuni, to name a few. In the pictures above, you can see some of the places I've been over the course of last semester: the wonderful thing about studying in Japan is that, even when busy with studies, I didn't have to go far to see wonderful sights. I hope you will get to experience it too.

*Pic. 1: Autumn foliage in Nihonmatsu*

*Pic. 2: A snowy morning in Sendai*

*Pic. 3: Volcanic beach at Sakurajima*

*Pic. 4: Kintai bridge in Iwakuni*