The JET Set

Over the last twenty years the Japan English Teaching Program (JET) has brought tens of thousands of young language instructors to Japan. **Tony McNicol** talks to some of the present-day JET set.

By the time the train approaches Kagemori Station I am alone save for a couple of middle-aged hikers. I disembark onto a deserted platform before the train disappears up into the mountains, and search in vain for a turnstile or someone to take my ticket. Outside the dilapidated station a spick and span outhouse is cheerfully marked "Kagemori Tourism Public Convenience."

I have come to spend a day with assistant language teacher Jonathan Weng, who works at two junior high schools and one elementary school in the Chichibu district of Saitama prefecture. Today he is at Kagemori Junior High. Jonathan came here two years ago on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, a government-run scheme through which young graduates from abroad are dispatched to schools all over Japan.

This year the scheme marks its twentieth anniversary with an intake of 5,508 young graduates from forty-four different countries. Most work as English teachers, but there are also teachers of European and Asian languages, sports instructors, and "coordinators for international relations." Participants generally spend one to three years in Japan.

Weng is one of ten JET teachers to teach at Kagemori Junior High over the last decade. The school has 269 students, almost all of whom live within walking or cycling distance. Some parents are local farmers or construction workers, but many make the two-hour commute to Tokyo each morning and back again in the evening. The school is bright and airy with a noticeably relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The students all say hello when we pass them in the corridors. All the same, it is surprisingly subdued. Once the school had almost twice as many students as now, but like many rural areas in Japan, Kagemori's population has been falling for decades.

Today Weng has four classes to assist. One begins with a tape of "Yesterday Once More" by the Carpenters. (Next month it will be John Lennon's "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)." Another class starts with the students standing up and asking each other questions. Weng helps students

Jonathan Weng at work at Kagemori Junior High

BOTH PHOTOS BY TONY McNICOL

When his JET contract ends, Weng hopes to work as a fully qualified English teacher in a Japanese school.

with their writing exercises and reads out conversation texts with the teacher, demonstrating the correct pronunciation.

"It's good to have a native-speaker teacher," says Noguro Isamu, an English teacher at the school. "It's more natural. If the students want to know about America they can ask there and then." Jonathan's students are enthusiastic about English. "I'd like to go abroad—to Canada, America, or Spain—and see historical buildings like Gaudi's cathedral. I want to work in a trading company when I am older," says one second grader with no shortage of plans. "I want to go and visit England. Maybe I can see the Eiffel Tower!" added a perhaps less focused classmate.

Back in 1987, the first group of "JETs" to come to Japan comprised 848 teachers from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. "The program had two objectives from the start," says Ishiwatari Takahiro, a manager at the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, the JET scheme's organizer. "One was to teach foreign languages, the other was international exchange." Then as now the program gave students a chance to learn from native speakers. Also, it gave Japanese people in regions where few foreigners lived a chance to learn about life overseas. And it offered young graduates like Weng a taste of life in Japan.

In the last two decades since then, a total of 46,437 JETs have come to Japan to teach English, French, German, and more recently Chinese and Korean. As well as helping improve language teaching in schools, part of the scheme's stated aim is to make "ambassadors for Japan." Back in their home countries many ex-JETs retain an interest in Japanese culture or take up jobs connected with Japan.

"Cheesy though it may sound, I do think my experience has fundamentally changed who I am," says Rachael Botley, who worked as a JET from 2001 to 2004 before returning to the United Kingdom. "I question a lot of things about my own society." Like many JETs, Rachael learnt Japanese while she was on the scheme, although she says that she had some problems at first. "I had only very basic knowledge when I went over to Japan. I remember very clearly the first time I was faced with my absolute inability to communicate on any sensible level. I had bought a gift for my neighbor, as I had been advised was the custom," she recalls. "I rang the doorbell and she answered over the intercom, but took fright at a crazy foreigner at the door who couldn't explain why she was calling. And she refused to come to the door!"

Some JETs have even settled into Japan so well that they have never left. One is Jeanie Fuji, who was in the second set of JETs to arrive in 1988. Now she is the proprietress of a 350-year-old hot-spring hotel in Yamagata prefecture, northern Japan. Her husband is one of a long line of innkeepers. When Jeanie arrived in remote Yamagata, foreigners were still a rarity. "I kept thinking, why is everyone so interested in me?" she remembers. "I'd go shopping for my dinner, be in the supermarket buying some fruit and vegetables, and there would be a big crowd around me." Foreigners aren't so unusual now, she says, though as the foreign-born owner of a traditional inn, she gets a different kind of attention. She estimates that she has been interviewed by the Japanese media several times a year for the last decade and a half.

JET Age

After twenty years of bringing language teachers to Japan, however, recently the JET scheme has been facing cutbacks. The number of participants has gradually been falling since 2002. One factor is a squeeze on local authority spending. Another is the falling birthrate and rural depopulation. Schools are closing all over Japan and fewer teachers are needed. At the same time in the big cities, particularly Tokyo, schools are choosing to hire language teachers directly. There is no shortage of instructors as the private language school industry has grown enormously in the twenty years JET has been running.

But JET's organizers stress that the program is still very much needed elsewhere. "If you go to the Japanese countryside, there are still places where people have never seen a foreigner," says CLAIR manager Ishiwatari. The prefectures with the most JET teachers are the most rural: Hokkaido and Hyogo top the list. And the JET scheme is well regarded abroad; around 8,000 people apply for the scheme's 5,500 places each year. The competition for places is highest in developing countries; in 2005 there were fifteen applicants for each of the thirty-nine posts for Jamaican teachers. The number of participant countries is still increasing.

Twenty-four-year-old Weng studied Computer Science at Berkeley University in the United States, before applying for the JET scheme. "I liked Japanese computer games and animation," he says. "I guess you could call me an otaku." But once he came to Japan, his interests changed, he adds. He learnt more Japanese, and more about traditional Japanese culture. In two years he's traveled to Kyoto and Nara, Nikko, and Nagano. For a while he studied *taiko* drumming. Next month he'll be helping pull a float in nearby Chichibu's famous night festival.

Jonathan has already decided that he will spend a third and final year teaching in Kagemori—and he has plans for after that too. He speaks and reads Japanese, and is studying hard for the entrance exam of a Tokyo university. He wants to work as a fully qualified English teacher in a Japanese school. "It is funny because I never gave teaching a second thought before I came here," he muses. "But I really enjoy teaching."

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