

Japanese Lessons at IPMU: A Success Story

Zoltan Kunszt

Professor, Institute for Theoretical Physics, ETH Zurich

Alexander Kusenko

Professor, UCLA, and Senior Scientist, IPMU

Since its inception, IPMU has become a magnet for scientists from around the world, because it is arguably one of the most exciting places to do physics and mathematics. However, there is another reason why foreign scientists find it attractive to visit IPMU. The opportunity to come to Japan and learn about its fascinating culture makes the prospect of working at IPMU even more appealing. While all of the scientists speak the universal language of mathematics, few foreign visitors have even a basic knowledge of Japanese.

Obviously, one cannot fully experience the beauty of Japanese culture without some basic language skills. Fortunately, IPMU has provided foreign scientists with an opportunity to take an intensive Japanese language course. It is, however, hard to learn Japanese, even for people who have the experience with several languages. It is very fortunate that with Masami Nishikawa, the course benefits from an outstanding, creative, experienced, and dynamic instructor who clearly understands the initial difficulties of learning Japanese. She is very motivating. She has superb teaching skills with a rigorous working style, and she is very enthusiastic. She has a broad knowledge of the diverse cultural backgrounds of her students, and it is a great pleasure to attend her lectures.

Each two-hour class with Nishikawa-sensei is

packed with different kinds of learning, including new materials, oral exercises, rules of grammar, and readings in the relatively easy hiragana and katakana syllabaries. But she also finds time to prepare introductory materials on the fascinating world of kanji ideograms. The only thing that is missing is the break. Actually, no one complains; indeed, the material is so interesting and so well prepared, that having to break in the middle would be a disappointment. Some students, who are professors of physics and mathematics in different universities around the world, wish that their own students were half as enthusiastic about their lectures!

The style of Nishikawa-sensei is to blur the distinction between work and play, and to spice up the learning with real-life examples, dialogues, and specially prepared exercises. Her rigorous yet enjoyable lectures help to dissolve the inhibitions that students usually feel when they are first requested to say something in a new language.

Nishikawa-sensei is able to connect the small amount of Japanese that the students have learned with local cultural events, Japanese historic moments, tourist attractions, as well as Japanese culinary art and delights. Most remarkably, she has adorned her course with ... yes, a theatrical performance.

The production of *Ryoma-den*,^{*1} written and



From left to right: Masami Nishikawa, Jiayu Tang, Cornelius Schmidt-Colinet, Johanna Knapp, Alexander Kusenko, Lada Kirich, Marika Kunszt, Zoltan Kunszt

directed by Masami Nishikawa, involved all of the current students and some volunteers who have already finished the course. It was fitting that Nishikawa-sensei's script dealt with the historic events that led to the development of stronger ties between Japan and the rest of the world, since IPMU is playing a similar role today by bringing together scientists from Japan and other countries.

The script was excellent, and the cast was stellar, even if not necessarily in terms of acting skills. It was obvious that the actors were delivering their lines with the fervor and passion of ... your typical physics lecture. Still, though they may not have been Yoko Maki^{*2} or Masaharu Fukuyama,^{*3} the actresses and actors made such excellent use of swords and the other props that the audience could only hope that the swords were made of plastic (which all but one of them were). More importantly, the actors made excellent use of the vocabulary and grammar that

they had learned in Nishikawa-sensei's class. The play has also greatly benefited from the enthusiastic support of the IPMU administration.

Each student who completes the demanding but exciting course is given the opportunity to make a public presentation in the Japanese language, after which the successful graduate is presented with a certificate signed by the IPMU Director and the Instructor. Of course, this is but a small first step into the boundless universe of Japanese language and culture. Yet it is with a great deal of gratitude and appreciation that the graduates of Nishikawa-sensei's course will remember their first Japanese lessons, as they continue to improve and practice their knowledge of Japanese on their future visits to IPMU and Japan.

*1 A parody of a Japanese TV NHK's 2010 Sunday drama, *Sakamoto Ryoma* (1836-1867) played a crucial role in the movement to overthrow a feudal regime of Japan, the Tokugawa Shogunate, at the end of Edo era.
 *2 An actress, playing the role of Ryoma's wife O'Ryo in NHK's *Ryoma-den*.
 *3 A singer and actor, playing the role of Sakamoto Ryoma in NHK's *Ryoma-den*.