

Underprepared but Overperformed: Explaining the Enigma in Study Abroad  
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As a history faculty member at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota, I led the study abroad program connected to HIST 372A: History of Japanese Popular Culture in May 2023 and May 2024, which included a research paper assignment. Compared to my regular history courses, the number of papers that stood out for their quality, originality, and other commendable aspects was notably and unexpectedly high. This overperformance was both gratifying and perplexing, especially given the significant challenges: the participants' limited training in history and the brief time available for me to provide adequate information on Japanese history. In this introduction, I will briefly describe seven papers from the 2024 program, following a discussion of the program's background, including student demographics and course design. I will also explore possible reasons for why these students were able to conduct strong research despite the obstacles. One such example, "Politics, Protests, and Popular Culture: The Global Legacy of Akira Toriyama and His Dragon Ball," by student Alex Elbaz, follows this essay.

Metropolitan State University is a commuter school with over 9,000 students; 91% are transfer students, 59% are part-time students, 56% are first-generation college students, and 51% are students of color. The average student age is thirty. This profile makes Metro State an unlikely place for study abroad programs, which are considered desirable high impact practices in education but are typically dominated by college-age, full-time, middle-class, white students who often do not have the same family or work obligations. These students frequently have parents and siblings who have studied abroad and encourage them to do the same.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Metro State does not have a dedicated Study Abroad Office to support faculty interested in developing programs or students wishing to explore foreign cultures.

However, in April 2022, under the strong leadership of the College of Liberal Arts Dean, who had previously run a study abroad program in France, I was given the opportunity to develop a new study abroad program in Japan. The dean introduced me to a former student of hers, originally from Japan, who had worked in Tokyo and recently relocated to Tateyama, a charming beachside community in Chiba, about ninety minutes from Tokyo by car or train. Although Japan was still closed to foreign students participating in short-term study abroad

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mark H. Salisbury, Michael B. Paulsen, and Ernest T. Pascarella, "Why Do All the Study Abroad Students Look Alike? Applying an Integrated Student Choice Model to Explore Differences in the Factors That Influence White and Minority Students' Intent to Study Abroad," *Research in Higher Education* 52, no. 2 (2011): 123–50, esp. 123–25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41483776>; Angela Bell, Rachana Bhatt, Donald L. Rubin, and Coryn Shiflet, "Effects of Education Abroad on Indices of Student Success Among Racial–ethnic Minority College Students," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* (2021), 226–35, especially, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000327>; and Jacqueline Murray Brux and Blake Fry, "Multicultural Students in Study Abroad: Their Interests, Their Issues, and Their Constraints," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 14, no. 5 (2010): 508–27, especially 513, 521, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309342486>.

programs due to the pandemic, I took a scouting trip to Tateyama and Tokyo in May 2022.<sup>2</sup> Captivated by Tateyama's rich history, culture, and its active community of public historians, I set out to create a study abroad program for Metro State.<sup>3</sup>

To make the educational experience affordable, we stayed in Tateyama for most of the program, with only a few days in Tokyo. This was modeled after the dean's previous French program, where students stayed for an extended period in Tours, a picturesque city in the Loire Valley, with limited time in Paris. I collaborated with Metro State's TRIO Office and the Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) Steering Committee, both of which generously provided scholarships to our students. In 2023, twenty students participated; nine received TRIO scholarships, and four received AANAPISI scholarships. In 2024, twenty-eight students participated, including twenty from Metro State and eight from nearby Normandale Community College, with whom we partnered. Among Metro State students, six were supported by TRIO grants, and five by AANAPISI grants, while several Normandale students received scholarships from their institution.

To recruit more students, we decided to use an existing 300-level history course focusing on Japanese popular culture which has seen an explosive rise in popularity locally, nationally, and globally since the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Other courses we considered as alternatives included environmental history, gender history, and religious studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Japan's travel bans affecting the program we were planning were finally lifted on October 11, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In the early nineteenth centuries, Tateyama became part of the Edo/Tokyo Bay Defense System built to keep Japan ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate when foreign visitors began demanding the opening of Japan for fuel, food, and trade. In the twentieth century, these forts and defense facilities were repurposed and modernized in case of foreign invasions, including one in the imminent Operation Coronet, which was planned to start in March 1946 if Japan had not surrendered after the droppings of atomic bombs in August 1945. Tateyama, where a Naval Airdrome was located, developed elaborate underground facilities and prepared some suicide operations to defend the capital. Multiple Pulitzer Prize winner, Norman Mailer (1923-2007), who landed at Tateyama as part of the 112<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment from Texas, after witnessing the Japanese representative Shigemitsu Mamoru officially signed the surrender documents on the USS Missouri earlier that day on September 2, 1945. Mailer's biographer J. Micheal Lennon captures the scene: Mailer's "unit was now a constabulary force charged with demobilizing Japanese combat units. Tateyama was on the lip of a mountainous peninsula honeycombed with caves and bunkers connected underground by roads wide enough to accommodate jeeps. As they did their work, they saw the big guns that rolled on rails through tunnels cut to the back side of the mountains into the harbor, while remaining unseen and impervious. The troopers shook their heads when they realized how deadly Operation Coronet would have been." See Tateyama Shiritsu Hakubutsukan, *Bakumatsu no Tokyo-wan Keibi* (Tateyama, Tateyama Shiritsu Hakubutsukan, 2013), J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer A Double Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 76-81, Awa Cultural Heritage Forum, *Tateyama Open Air Museum* (Tateyama: Awa Cultural Heritage Forum, n.d. [2021?]), 14-17. See also maps and descriptions of many Tokyo Bay war ruins in Matatabi Kurabu, Senseki Sansaku (Tateyama, Matatabi Kurabu, n.d.). Many individuals at Metropolitan State University and Tateyama helped me accomplish the task of developing and running the study abroad program. I also benefitted from advice and help from study abroad experts at St. Cloud State University and Normandale Community College. I am very grateful for their generosity. The dean left the university shortly after the program in 2023 and was not involved in the program after that.

<sup>4</sup> Anime Expo (AX) was launched by a group of UC Berkeley students who were anime fans in 1991. Its attendance exceeded 10,000 in 2001 and 100,000 in 2016. AX's article published last year states, "Anime Expo has celebrated its 32nd anniversary at the Los Angeles Convention Center, bringing together global fans and industry professionals for the largest celebration of Japanese pop culture in North America. Hosted by The Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation (SPJA), the sold-out four-day convention saw a turnstile attendance of over 392,000 from more than 60 countries coming to Los Angeles to generate an estimated economic impact of over \$100 million for area hotels and businesses." See "About AX," Anime Expo (n.d.), accessed August 6, 2024, <https://www.anime->

From a curricular perspective, our goals of affordability and linking the program to a specific course presented both challenges and opportunities. One of the primary challenges was the limited budget. Similar to the dean's previous French program, our Japan program was developed internally without involving a third-party study abroad company, which helped keep costs significantly lower. In order to keep the program more affordable, we also restricted the locations we would visit. As a result, we did not include major sightseeing destinations such as Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, Hiroshima, Mt. Fuji, and Hakone. However, this limitation turned into an opportunity because it allowed us to spend more enmeshing ourselves in local culture, visiting local sites, and dedicating more time to lectures instead of traveling between cities.

Another challenge was ensuring that our trip and class activities were directly relevant to the history of Japanese popular culture, rather than simply visiting popular tourist attractions in Tateyama and Tokyo. To address this, I compiled various definitions of popular culture and included them in the syllabus. I encouraged students to identify which of these definitions applied to the places we visited in their assignments (group daily activity summaries and research papers). The concept of popular culture as “ordinary people’s culture” or “folk culture” was particularly useful.<sup>5</sup> This perspective justified visits to temples, shrines, museums, and other sites showcasing the artifacts of local farmers, fishers, and craftspeople as representations of folk life. We engaged in hands-on activities such as rice transplanting, Japanese cooking, bamboo *uchiwa* fan making, fragrance making (*zūkō*), calligraphy, and participating in a Buddhist fire ritual (*goma kitō*) within this context.

I also included visits to military ruins and the Yasukuni Shrine because depictions of and commentary on war in films, anime, and manga shape collective memories of these events. We even organized a discussion session following the screening of a war-themed anime film. Our itineraries were intentionally designed to include places with strong ties to popular culture. As noted by Alex Elbaz, a museum inside Tateyama Castle is dedicated to the long-time bestseller of the Tokugawa era, *The Eight Dog Chronicles* by Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848). This popular story was inspired by Ming China’s novels like *The Water Margin*, and it influenced many subsequent generations of Japanese writers, filmmakers, playwrights, manga artists, and videogame creators.<sup>6</sup>

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[expo.org/ax/about/](https://www.anime-expo.org/ax/about/); Anime Expo, “Anime Expo 2023 Celebrates 32nd Anniversary with Attendees from Over 60 Countries, Over 400 Exhibitors and 1,000 Hours of Programming,” Anime Expo (August 8, 2023), accessed August 6, 2024, <https://www.anime-expo.org/2023/08/08/anime-expo-2023-celebrates-32nd-anniversary-with-attendees-from-over-60-countries-over-400-exhibitors-and-1000-hours-of-programming/>. Currently, over one hundred noteworthy anime conventions around the world are listed in the “List of Anime and Manga Conventions,” Wikipedia, accessed August 6, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_anime\\_and\\_manga\\_conventions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_anime_and_manga_conventions). Among them, more than seventy are in the United States. Locally, Minneapolis’ Anime Detour also experienced its share of growth. Its attendance increased from 1,219 in 2004 to 8,168 in 2023. Anime Detour, “History,” Anime Detour, accessed August 6, 2024, <https://animedetour.com/about-us/history/>.

<sup>5</sup> For example, E. Taylor Atkins discusses one sociological concept of popular culture: “Folk culture is considered the collective property of preindustrial, mostly rural communities, integrated into the daily life of the people, with no identifiable authors and no value as a saleable commodity.” See Atkins, *A History of Popular Culture in Japan: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 23.

<sup>6</sup> “Like Yomihon: History and the Supernatural Revisited,” chap. in *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, abridged ed., edited by Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 483-

At the foot of Nokogiri-yama (Saw Mountain) stands the Hishikawa Moronobu Memorial Museum, dedicated to Hishikawa (c. 1630–94), a native of the region and the founder of Japan’s woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*). Nokogiri Mountain, offering a striking view of Mt. Fuji across Edo Bay and home to Nihon-ji Temple with its Great Buddha and 1,500 Arhat stone statues, became a popular travel destination during the Tokugawa era. Travel guidebooks illustrated with woodblock prints played a significant role in attracting pilgrims and visitors. In Tokyo, we visited Asakusa, a major tourist spot today, which was historically a center of entertainment from the Tokugawa era to the twentieth century, especially before 1945. While our 2023 itinerary included the Kabuki-za theater in Ginza, in 2024, we expanded our visits to include Waseda University’s Tsubouchi Shōyō Memorial Theatre Museum, the Kusama Yayoi Museum, and Anime Tokyo Station.

Third, we needed to ensure that this short-term study abroad history course was comparable to other fifteen-week-long 300-level history courses in terms of reading and writing assignments. Before the trip began, students were encouraged to read two historical texts: E. Taylor Atkins’ *A History of Popular Culture in Japan: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, 2nd ed. (2023), and William Tsutsui’s booklet, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* (2010). However, I am unsure how many of the students in the 2024 cohort completed these readings because most were enrolled in multiple courses during the spring semester.

During the two- to three-week trip, students were given only a small number of readings, but they were required to complete group work summarizing daily activities, identify relevant definitions of popular culture for those activities, and find academic books and articles from provided lists on the day’s topics. After the trip, students were responsible for selecting their research topics, which needed to be relevant to both history and Japanese popular culture. Most of this work was done online, with feedback provided asynchronously. All students were required to present their research during one of our two Zoom meetings. In 2024, they completed their research within a month after the trip ended.

Fourth, we had to accommodate students who were unfamiliar with 300-level history work, as we accepted any undergraduate students who met the eligibility criteria.<sup>7</sup> To address this, I set the grade option of Pass/No Competence as the default while encouraging students who felt confident and comfortable to choose the letter grade option. I also designed the assignments

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506, especially 483; William C. Hedberg, *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction: The Water Margin and the Making of a National Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), especially 4, 55, 83, <https://search-ebscohost-com.mtrproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,url,uid&db=e000xna&AN=2088031&site=e-host-live&scope=site>; Zilia Papp, *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010). ProQuest Ebook Central, Accessed August 12, 2024, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/metrostate/detail.action?docID=771981>, 38.

<sup>7</sup> The policy to accept undergraduate students at the time of application and during the program from Metro State and other Minnesota State Colleges and Universities was set in the 2022-2023. This policy along with other factors resulted in the partnership with Normandale Community College in the year 2023-2024. In addition, students needed to have a GPA of 2.5 or higher.

so that about sixty percent of the course grade could be earned through participation and group work in Japan and most students earned nearly sixty percent. This made it relatively easy to pass the course, but failure to complete post-trip research would result in a grade of D, F, or No Competence.

I have discussed the challenges and opportunities we faced, so now let me turn to the profiles of the two student groups. In 2023, we had twenty students from Metro State, and in 2024, we expanded to twenty-eight students, including twenty from Metro State and eight from Normandale Community College. Both groups were diverse in terms of age (ranging from 19 to 52), gender (female, male, and non-binary), and race (White, Asian, Black/African, Latinx, and multiracial).

In 2023, the group included four Black or African American students (three male and one female), seven Asian American students (three female and four male), two multiracial students (one male and one female), and seven White students (two male and five female). In 2024, we had seven Black or African American students (two male and five female), six Asian American students (three female and three male), four Latinx students (two male and two female), and eleven White students (four male, five female, and two non-binary). The proportion of White participants was 35% in 2023 and 39.3% in 2024, significantly lower than the national average of 71.6% (based on 325,339 study abroad participants in 2015-16).<sup>8</sup>

One notable change in our program was the gender ratio. While 65% of the participants were male in 2023, less than 40% identified as male in 2024.<sup>9</sup> History majors (one in 2023, one in 2024) and minors (two in 2023, one in 2024) were a small minority. Additionally, only five students in 2023 and seven in 2024 chose the letter grade option, which suggests the other students (fifteen in 2023 and twenty-one in 2024) were not confident they could produce strong research papers and aimed primarily to pass the course instead.<sup>10</sup>

Some of these attributes, such as the low number of history majors and the limited number of students opting for a letter grade, might have raised red flags that students would have subpar research outcomes. However, I was pleased to see many papers that were noteworthy in various ways. Instead of discussing too many projects, I will focus on seven examples from the 2024 group. Notably, the racial diversity among high achievers and original thinkers in this group mirrors the overall racial diversity of the participants.

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<sup>8</sup> Jakia Marie and Kimberly N. Sanders. "Diversity Competence within Faculty-led Study Abroad Programs," *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (JCScore) 4, no. 2 (2018): 91–111, especially, 92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48645348>. Accessed August 3, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> It seems a larger number of female participants in 2024 fits in the study abroad norm. According to the experts, "[d]espite repeated efforts to balance the proportion of male and female students who study abroad, women continue to participate at a ratio of almost 2:1." See Mark H. Salisbury, Michael B. Paulsen, and Ernest T. Pascarella, "To See the World or Stay at Home: Applying an Integrated Student Choice Model to Explore the Gender Gap in the Intent to Study Abroad," *Research in Higher Education* 51, no. 7 (2010): 615–40, especially 616, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40927270>. Accessed August 3, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> This observation proved right. In 2023, four out of five students who chose the letter grade option received grades of A or A- (80%). In 2024, five out of seven received grades of A or A- (71.4%).

The selection of these seven papers was somewhat arbitrary and subjective. Not all of them received an “A” grade for their papers; in fact, some did not even reach the “A” level. However, each paper stood out to me for its distinctive elements. The first three papers were written by Normandale Community College students, while the remaining four were authored by Metro State students.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, the former had spent less time in a post-secondary educational environment than the latter. The first two papers, in particular, needed more work, but their originality and ability to think outside the box were impressive.

The first student, of Mexican American heritage, noticed restaurants and shops with Spanish names in Tateyama.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, when our group visited a local fish wholesaler, the font used for the alphabet letters on the T-shirt worn by the business owner also caught his attention. These observations led him to explore the subcultural links between Mexico, Mexican American communities in the US, and Japan, including Chicano and *Cholo* cultures. According to the student, “*Cholo*” refers to Mexican gang members. The *Cholo* culture was influential in northern Mexico and California, with a fashion style originating from Mexicans and Mexican Americans who began wearing work clothes and jerseys, possibly due to limited financial resources.<sup>13</sup> The font associated with this culture is used in gang graffiti in Los Angeles and other places.

In his research, the student examined not only fashion but also art, music, and anime, exploring the cultural connections between the two countries. For example, he critically analyzed Mexican characters like Ricardo Martinez and Alfredo Gonzalez, represented in the boxing anime series *Hajime no Ippo* (2000-2014 in Japan, released as *Fighting Spirit* in North America in 2020). He found the absence of negative Mexican American stereotypes, which are common in US popular culture, as well as some positive portrayals of Mexican Americans as refreshing. Driven by a strong sense of ethnic identity, this student highlighted overlooked subcultural ties and applied Chicano studies tools to examine Japanese pop culture and history. The end result was a globally informed research paper.

Another student compared two forms of Japanese popular culture: the traditional *bunraku* puppet theater, which became prominent during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), and the

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<sup>11</sup> Normandale Community College students were recruited by Aimee DuBois (Normandale’s Study Abroad Coordinator) and participated in our study abroad program as guest students at Metro State University. I am grateful for Aimee to find eight excellent participants.

<sup>12</sup> I believe Spanish names had little to do with Mexico, but more to do with Spain, however. The city of Tateyama tried to reinvent itself as a resort town emphasizing sea, flowers, green, and nice warm weather in the 1980s and 1990s. In this process, pine trees were replaced by palm trees along the beach. K, “Naze Tateyama niwa Nan’ō-fū no machinami ga aruno?” *Hanaumi Kaidō* (2011), accessed August 10, 2024, <https://hanaumikaidou.com/archives/9533>.

<sup>13</sup> To learn more about the *Cholo* culture beyond the student’s interpretation described here, see Karen Thomas, “Cholo Is Bursting out of the Barrio,” *USA Today* (October 3, 2003), Accessed August 6, 2024. <https://search-ebscohost-com.mtrproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,url,uid&db=aph&AN=J0E331664488203&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; Gilberto Rosas, “Cholos, Chuntaros, and the ‘Criminal’ Abandonments of the New Frontier,” *Identities* 17, no. 6 (2010): 695–713, doi:10.1080/1070289X.2010.534000; and Nadiah Rivera Fellah, “Graciela Iturbide’s Cholos/as Series: Images of Cross-Border Identities,” *History of Photography* 43, no. 3 (August 2019): 308–30. doi:10.1080/03087298.2019.1715021.

contemporary Vocaloid concert featuring the virtual young female idol, Hatsune Miku. She begins her discussion by describing the three components of a *bunraku* performance: the chanter, who narrates and voice-acts; the puppeteers, who control half-life-sized dolls; and the shamisen player, who provides the music for the play. Although not discussed in her paper, *bunraku* owed its popularity to Japan's greatest playwright, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), whose plays were inspired by historical events as well as real-life events experienced by ordinary people. For example, his *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1703), based on a true story of the double suicides of a clerk from a large soy sauce merchant house and a prostitute in the licensed prostitution quarter in Osaka, belonged to the latter "real-life" genre.<sup>14</sup> Chikamatsu ended the era of theater monopolized by a small elite and made *bunraku* entertainment for the urban masses.

Fast forward to the present: twenty years ago, in 2004, Japan's Yamaha Corporation, best known for its musical instruments, released computer software that could synthesize a singing voice. Vocaloid is unique in that it allows users to select a specific voicebank from among many options and make it sing. One of the most popular voicebanks is associated with an anime-like character, Hatsune Miku, developed by Crypton Future Media and released in 2007. Miku is depicted as a sixteen-year-old girl with long teal twin-tails. Her extraordinary popularity led to the organization of live concerts featuring her hologram, drawing large audiences in both Japan and the US.<sup>15</sup>

The student, born the same year Vocaloid was created, has followed Hatsune Miku and other Vocaloid characters since 2016, downloaded over 1,000 songs by Miku, attended her concert, and viewed her merchandise in Akihabara before the study abroad program. During our stay in Tateyama, we had two student-led discussion sessions exploring J-Pop music and Japanese video games. Like the author of the *Cholo* paper, this student volunteered to facilitate the J-Pop session, sharing her extensive knowledge about Vocaloid music.

In her paper, she demonstrated stunning similarities between *bunraku* puppets and Vocaloid Hatsune Miku. She captures these resemblances with the concept of "the art of illusion." Indeed, both *bunraku* dolls and Vocaloid characters are not human actors, but they move as though they are, with the help of humans and technology, or through the collaboration of elements with life and elements without life. Although her paper focuses on these similarities across time rather than placing her observations within the context of existing scholarly work, her insights align well with those of media and cultural studies experts exploring the interplay of organic and inorganic elements, or realism and unreality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Karen Brazell and James T. Araki, eds., *Traditional Japanese Theater: An Anthology of Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 303-313; Haruo Shirane, "Chikamatsu Monzaemon and the Puppet Theater," chap. in *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, abridged ed., edited by Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 121-75, especially 125; Haruo Shirane, "The Golden Age of Puppet Theater," chap. in the same volume, 176-96.

<sup>15</sup> *Vocaloids* (Gelderland: Flame Media, 2015), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/Vocaloids>. Professor of Critical Media Practices, Tara Knight, of University of Colorado, Boulder, documented the Hatsune Miku phenomenon in her *Mikumumentary* project. See [http://taraknight.net/portfolio\\_page/mikumumentary/](http://taraknight.net/portfolio_page/mikumumentary/).

<sup>16</sup> Stevie Suan finds one origin of anime in the highly stylized forms in Japan's traditional theaters, including *bunraku*. He juxtaposes them by focusing their visual, aural, and narrative elements, and the balance between

I asked if the student developed this brilliant idea partly because of the assigned textbook, which discusses *bunraku*, and Waseda University's Theater Museum, which has a section on *bunraku* with artifacts and videos. Disappointingly for me, she said she was inspired by Hatsune Miku merchandise in Akihabara and an actual *bunraku* play she watched in Kyoto before and after the program. Regardless, while scholars have discussed the link between present-day manga and anime and earlier visual traditions, including *Chōjū giga* (The Animal Scrolls) by Bishop Toba (1053–1140) as well as Tokugawa-era woodblock prints,<sup>17</sup> she may be the first to point out the parallels between *bunraku* puppets and Vocaloid Hatsune Miku explicitly alluding to Miku's eighteenth-century origins within the context of Japanese popular cultural history.<sup>18</sup>

Though these two papers clearly exhibited the authors' limited experience in writing history papers, especially in terms of finding and citing sources, they compensated for this deficit with their rich subcultural knowledge and remarkable sensitivity and insights on what they saw,

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realism and unreality, but he does not discuss Vocaloid or Hatsune Miku. See his *The Anime Paradox: Patterns and Practices Through the Lens of Traditional Japanese Theater* (Boston: BRILL, 2013), 6, 171-173. Accessed August 8, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central. [https://mnpals-mtr.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01MNPALS\\_MTR/nove9u/alma9989765073704285](https://mnpals-mtr.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01MNPALS_MTR/nove9u/alma9989765073704285). The most relevant scholarly work that I have found are Krisztina Rosner's "Layers of the Traditional in Popular Performing Arts: Object and Voice as Character: Vocaloid Opera AOI," *Mutual Images* 6 (Spring 2019): 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.32926/2018.6.ros.layer>; and Liudmila Bredikhina, "Virtual Theatrics and the Ideal VTuber Bishōjo." *Replaying Japan*, 3 (2021): 21-32, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03781959/>. Rosner discusses the 2014 Vocaloid Opera Aoi, a film directed by Hiroshi Tamawari. The character Lady Aoi (adapted from *The Tales of Genji*, an eleventh century literary work) is usually represented not by person by *kimono* (clothes) in the traditional *noh* theater. However, Tamawari used *bunraku* puppets to represent Aoi and other characters who sang Vocaloid songs composed by Tamawari. Rosner explores the interplay between human (organic) actors and non-human (inorganic) agents in the Vocaloid Opera theoretically. Rosner also uses the term, illusion: "I interpret the theatrical application of the Vocaloid as a method that challenges the concept – and the illusion – of performative presence defined by the live human body and voice (p. 8)." Bredikhina's subject matter is VTubers, who are computer-generated virtual characters or avatars. The Japanese VTuber, Kizuna AI, created in 2016, has artificial intelligence and a synthesized voice generated from the samples provided a human voice actress just like the voice of Miku Hatsune. Like Rosner, Bredikhina uses the term, illusion. She writes that *bunraku* "mixes reality and unrealism...by creating an illusion that the puppet moves and speaks freely on its own (p. 23)." I learned about Bredikhina's work from a student from the 2023 group. He wrote a well-researched paper on Kizuna AI.

<sup>16</sup> Camilo Diaz Pino, "Weaponizing Collective Energy: Dragon Ball Z in the Anti-Neoliberal Chilean Protest Movement," *Popular Communication* 17, no. 3 (2019): 202–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2018.1554807>; and Atkins, 29.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, see Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 21; Kinko Ito, "Manga in Japanese History," in Mark W. MacWilliams, *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), accessed August 6, 2024, 26-47, especially 26-29. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/metrostate/detail.action?docID=1900027> and William Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2010), 24.

<sup>18</sup> More on Vocaloid and Hatsune Miku, see Jessica Tsun Lem Hui, "Reconfiguring Voice in *The End: Virtuosity, Technological Affordance and the Reversibility of Hatsune Miku in the Intermundane*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 34, no. 3 (2022): 364–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586722000301>; Sandra Annett, "What Can a Vocaloid Do?: The Kyara as Body without Organs," *Mechademia* 10 (2015): 163-177, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/664564>; Eve Klein, "Feigning Humanity: Virtual Instruments, Simulation and Performativity," *IASPM@journal* 6, no. 2 (2016): 22-48, [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2016\)v6i2.3en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2016)v6i2.3en); Ian Condry, "Hatsune Miku: Virtual Idol, Media Platform, and Crowd-Sourced Celebrity," chap. in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 123-33, and Adriana Sabo, "Hatsune Miku: Whose Voice, Whose Body?" *INSAM*, no. 2 (2019): 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.51191/issn.2637-1898.2019.2.2.65>.

heard, touched, and felt. The sensory approach to learning made them true beneficiaries of study abroad, a high-impact practice.

While these papers were driven by sensory stimuli and keen observations, Alex Elbaz's paper was more research oriented. Initially, Alex proposed writing two short papers, an option available to students not ready to tackle a longer research paper. However, when one of his topics was deemed unsuitable, he decided to focus on a single, more extensive paper exploring the legacy of Akira Toriyama (1955-2024), the creator of the mega media franchise *Dragon Ball*. Toriyama's untimely death in March motivated Alex to explore the impact of *Dragon Ball*, particularly the anime version with which he was very familiar.

During an initial research session with a librarian, Alex discovered an intriguing article about the 2011 student-led protest in Chile, which prominently featured *Dragon Ball*'s main character Goku and his signature weapon, the Spirit Bomb. Alex used the concept of popular culture as "the arena of resistance" to analyze Toriyama's global legacy.<sup>19</sup> Although his paper would have benefitted from including more academic sources, Alex demonstrated a talent for interpreting his materials and effectively quoting relevant sections.

When he presented his research via Zoom, Alex shared images from the Chilean movement, helping his classmates visually grasp the connection between Chilean youth activism and Japanese popular culture. Several classmates praised Alex's work for examining cases across three continents. His project showed marked improvement over the course of a month, thanks to his tireless efforts and effective use of available resources.

While the three papers discussed thus far are unique in their topics, ideas, and approaches, some themes were independently explored by multiple students. These themes included woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*), representations of gender and sexuality in Japanese popular culture, and the rise of Japan as a global producer and exporter of popular culture. Below, I will comment on four papers written by Metro State students.

One student, a business major considering a minor in history, was inspired by seeing an explicitly sexual pillow picture (*makura-e*) series at the Hishikawa Moronobu Memorial Museum. This reminded her of the textbook discussion on *hentai* (perverted) manga, prompting her to investigate and compare pornographic woodblock prints from the Tokugawa era with their contemporary counterparts.<sup>20</sup> She posed important questions: Was Japan historically a sexually

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<sup>19</sup> Camilo Diaz Pino, "Weaponizing Collective Energy: Dragon Ball Z in the Anti-Neoliberal Chilean Protest Movement," *Popular Communication* 17, no. 3 (2019): 202–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2018.1554807>; and Atkins, 29.

<sup>20</sup> The image she saw in the museum was part of *Intimate Talks on Forty-eight Kinds of Love* (1679). It can be found in the museum's catalogue (Image 34). See Hishikawa Moronobu Kinenkan, *Ukiyo-e-shi Hishikawa Moronobu*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Kyonan-chō, Chiba: Hishikawa Moronobu Kinenkan, 2009), 28. Historian William Tsutsui notes that "[a]t least in the United States, Japanese pop culture has long had the reputation for being extremely violent and strongly sexual in content.... Japanese adult anime and manga, known in the West as *hentai*, feature every imaginable form of sexual perversion, and some genres of Japanese film (gangster movies, horror features) are renowned for their explicit, even exaggerated gore." Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 22. Historian E. Taylor Atkins also writes that in the 1970s "*hentai* (perverted) cartoons began presenting deviant, sadomasochistic sexuality and graphic violence." Atkins, 243.

liberated country with gay rights and legal prostitution? Was Japan expected to follow the same path as many Western countries?

Drawing on sources from respected scholars such as Sumie Jones, Gary Leupp, Miriam Silverberg, Henry Smith, and Chizuko Ueno, as well as academic work on Japanese hard-core animation and statistical data from pornhub.com, she approached this challenging and complex subject from a feminist perspective. She noted that the creators, marketers, and consumers of pornographic popular art have been predominantly male, contributing to the overt sexualization of women. Additionally, she observed that Japanese attitudes toward homosexuality have differed from those in the West and that pornography in Japanese popular culture has been regulated in its own distinct way.<sup>21</sup>

The following three papers all dealt with Japan's dramatic transition from an exporter of manufactured goods to an exporter of popular culture in the 1990s and 2000s. Although these papers are well-researched and well-argued, I will discuss each concisely due to their overlapping themes.

The first paper, written by a non-binary computer science major and long-time video game aficionado, argues that this transition occurred in the 1990s, following the 1985 Plaza Accord, which led to a significant devaluation of the US dollar against the Japanese yen. They supported their thesis by comparing the earnings of two giants: Toyota, a leading automobile manufacturer, and Nintendo, a company that started as a humble toy maker but grew by selling hardware and software featuring iconic characters like Super Mario Brothers and Pokémon. They highlighted the impact of fluctuating exchange rates, illustrating their thesis with a graph showing that Nintendo's earnings surpassed Toyota's in yen in 1991. Although Nintendo's dominance over Toyota was not permanent, the video game company remained a major player. Like the authors of the *Cholo* and Hatsune Miku papers, this student shared their expertise during our student-led discussion on video games.

The second paper, by a business major and newly declared history minor (b. 1987), is an autobiographical exploration of the experiences of US millennials, born between 1981 and 1996. According to him, culture generally flowed from West to East in the modern era, with some exceptions.<sup>22</sup> However, in the 1990s, Japan began challenging this unidirectional cultural flow and Western dominance as Japanese entertainment products became ubiquitous globally. Many millennials, including this student, grew up with *Pokémon*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Sailor Moon*, and *Gundam*, which aired on Cartoon Network's "Toonami" (a play on "toon" and "tsunami"), starting in 1997. The network later introduced more anime titles with mature content through its "Adult Swim" block, including *Inuyasha*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Death Note*, and *Ghost in the Shell*. The student notes that, like *Dragon Ball*, *Inuyasha* was inspired by *The Eight*

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<sup>21</sup> Her analysis is nuanced in that she finds examples of female use of the Tokugawa pornographic woodblock prints in brothels and education for upper class brides. She also finds that not only female bodies, but also male bodies were subject to objectification.

<sup>22</sup> The student is aware of these exceptions which are discussed by Tstutsui's *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*.

*Dog Chronicles*, exposing viewers to Japanese history, society, and culture.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, *Pokémon* was heavily edited to remove conspicuous Japanese elements.<sup>24</sup> His paper also explores millennials' encounters with Ghibli movies, Nintendo and Sega games, *Kawaii* or cute culture, and Japanese food. This student quickly mastered the Chicago Manual of Style, using Microsoft Word's bibliography formatting function, online resources, and by sending questions to me.

While this student emphasized millennials as a captive audience of Cartoon Network, the final paper, written by another business major, argues that they became liberated from television in the 2000s. Viewers could now pick and choose what to watch through Internet-based digital video sharing and streaming platforms like YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and Crunchyroll. His paper contends that in the 2000s the internet globalized and facilitated the expanded consumption of Japanese manga and anime, transforming this once marginal soft content into major exports. He situates this narrative within the context of Japanese business history, discussing initiatives like the 2002 "Cool Japan" campaign by the Japanese government. He effectively supports his main points with statistical data and infographics. The quality of his paper is undoubtedly influenced by his background as an anime fan, his work with a company that distributes Japanese anime merchandise, and his experience as a freelance writer covering news about Japan.

These three papers examine Japan's transition from an exporter of manufactured goods to a global exporter of popular culture or "soft superpower" with each offering different perspectives and each focusing on slightly different time periods.<sup>25</sup>

Among the seven papers I subjectively selected, four were authored by students of color (57.1%) and three (42.9%) by white students. Since about 60% of the 2024 participants were students of color, the racial distribution of these strong papers aligns with the demographics of the study abroad group. In terms of gender, four papers were written by male students (57.1%), two by female students (28.6%), and one by a non-binary student (14.3%). Given that male students made up only 39.3% of the class (eleven out of twenty-eight), they are overrepresented among the high achievers.

I highlight these statistics because there is a common perception that academic under-preparation is often linked to race and gender, based on data showing that racial minorities and male students (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) tend to lag behind in secondary schools.<sup>26</sup> While I do not claim that my study abroad class is an equity utopia, it is worth noting

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<sup>23</sup> Papp, *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 3; and Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

<sup>26</sup> Maithreyi Gopalan, "Understanding the Linkages between Racial/Ethnic Discipline Gaps and Racial/Ethnic Achievement Gaps in the United States," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27, no. 154 (2019): 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4469>; S. F. Reardon, E. M. Fahle, D. Kalogrides, A. Podolsky, & R. C. Zárate, "Gender Achievement Gaps in U.S. School Districts," *American Educational Research Journal*, 56, no. 6 (2019), 2474-2508, <https://doi-org.mtrproxy.mnpals.net/10.3102/0002831219843824>; Katherine Kersten, "At Minnesota State, Equity's In, Learning is Out: Equal Outcomes by Decree are Now the Top Priority at Our State's Largest

that students of color and male students were well represented among the high achievers and original thinkers in the 2024 study abroad program. It would be easy to attribute under-preparation to a lack of exposure to college-level history courses or general knowledge of Japanese history, but collecting further data and considering other factors might suggest a more complex picture.

Rather than commenting on other meritorious papers, I would like to offer some explanations for why I received a disproportionately large number of original, insightful, and excellent papers. While receiving an A course grade is not necessarily equivalent to producing A-level work, it is indicative to some degree. Between Spring 2018 and Spring 2024, a modest proportion of students in my history courses at Metropolitan State University earned a grade of A or A-.<sup>27</sup> However, in my study abroad course, where the default grading option was Pass/No Credit (which most students chose), nearly twice as many students in 2023 and 2024 would have received an A or A- if they had opted for a letter grade. This significant increase in high-achieving students in the study abroad courses was quite unexpected.

As mentioned, few students had taken college-level history courses, conducted history research, or written longer papers over ten pages. Only a limited number were confident and committed enough to produce solid papers, as indicated by their intentional switch to the letter grade option. The general lack of familiarity with Japanese history was also discouraging—only one out of forty-eight participants in the past two years had taken a Japanese history course before the trip.

So, what factors contributed to the overperformance of these students? First, they were self-selective. They were willing to navigate the complicated application process, which required the submission of many documents. Those who could not manage the paperwork were excluded from the study abroad group. Second, many students were motivated by their love of Japanese popular culture, which led them to choose paper topics related to their passions and interests, such as Vocaloid, anime, and Nintendo/video games. They already had a deep knowledge of these subjects.

Third, many students chose topics related to their identities and experiences. For example, a Mexican American student explored the Japanese-Mexican subcultural and popular cultural connections, and a female student critically examined male dominance and gaze in historical and contemporary porn industries in Japan (and the US). A millennial student wrote about his generation's considerable exposure to Japanese pop culture. While they might not have been exposed to history courses, some had a solid grasp of business and the anime industry through their majors and employment.

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Higher Ed System,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 28, 2022); and Eder Campuzano, “Minnesota Reading, Math Scores Still Lag behind Pre-pandemic Achievement: Look up your school,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 24, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Metrostate Reporting Services, Equity by Design Faculty Data, <https://reports.metrostate.edu/reports/report/Reports/Miscellaneous/Equity%20by%20design%20Faculty%20Data/Equity%20by%20design%20Faculty%20Data>, accessed August 4, 2024.

Fourth, some students took full advantage of available resources. Metropolitan State University received a five-year AANAPISI grant, part of which was used to support our library's acquisition of materials in Asian, Asia-Pacific, and Asian American studies. When I compiled bibliographies for class assignments and provided feedback on the students' research project proposals, I was astonished by the improved availability of sources pertinent to the wide variety of topics in this class. Most of them were available online, which was especially helpful for students at a commuter institution. The expanded library collection made a huge difference in our ability to support undergraduate research. Some students, including Alex Elbaz and the student who wrote the paper on pornography, also utilized the Writing Center multiple times. The millennial student used the MS Word function to format his paper successfully.

Fifth, our program's popular culture-focused activities, including visits to the Tateyama Castle with the *Eight Dog Chronicles* exhibit, the Hishikawa Moronobu Museum, the Waseda University Theater Museum, and student-led discussion sessions on J-pop music and video games, likely helped students identify research topics. Finally, concerned about the students' presumed under-preparation in history coursework and the limited time for lectures during the short program, I worked extra hard to provide meaningful feedback and source recommendations to the students. Since each project was different, even with some overlapping themes, this was undoubtedly time-consuming. Was my overcompensation approach worth it? I would say yes—I enjoyed reading many quality papers on varied topics, learning about contemporary popular culture from the students, and staying updated on growing library resources.

In summary, this essay has discussed my experiences in developing and teaching the study abroad course, a high impact practice, on the history of Japanese popular culture. Despite some predictable challenges, such as inexperience in history and inadequate lecture time, the students performed exceedingly well on the paper assignments. After discussing seven papers that exemplify this observation from the 2024 group, I have offered several possible explanations for the “underprepared but overperformed” pattern. These include the self-selective nature of the participants; their extensive knowledge of Japanese popular culture; the alignment between student identities and research topics; access to resources, including the AANAPISI grant-supported library collection; the relevance of the program activities to the research projects; and the faculty's feedback to help overcome perceived deficiencies. In my opinion, the most important factor was the students' love for and knowledge of Japanese popular culture. On this foundation, they were eager to conduct research and write papers, much like fans who are passionate about learning more about their favorite shows and celebrities and sharing their knowledge. Alex Elbaz's paper, which follows this essay, demonstrates this point perfectly.