

LA, New Orleans, and DC. From August 1st to August 24th, 2024, the 76th Japan America Student Conference ([JASC](#)) flew, drove, trolled, walked, and rode through these iconic American cities. I am immensely grateful to have been a part of this conference - the friends, the interpersonal skills, and the countless memories stand out as my biggest takeaways from this year's JASC. If you're thinking about applying, please do (I almost didn't).

Here's the gist of what JASC is: the world's longest-running college-student-led conference, initiated in 1934 by university students concerned by the breakdown of bilateral relations prior to the Second World War. Its mission is to promote peace by furthering mutual understanding, friendship and trust through international student interchange. JASC alternates its host country every year (between Japan and America), with ~30 American students and ~30 Japanese students organized into 7 different roundtables. The roundtables discuss their topic and create presentations based on their discussions, culminating at the Final Forum at the end of the conference.

My JASC interview went well. It was over Zoom and the notes I prepared proved helpful as I glanced at them during the Q&A. I joined the Culture, Arts, and Technology roundtable (CAT). I'm interested in AI and cryptocurrencies, so I hoped to focus on the T in CAT during the conference. Looking back, now that it's over, I'm glad to have seen, heard, and respected my roundtable peers on their experiences and interests in the all-encompassing "topic" of Culture, Arts, and Technology. Their ideas helped me see the world in a different way and better appreciate design and creative expression.

Before the conference, the American side of our roundtable (three people, including me) met regularly on Zoom to discuss articles related to our interests. A last-year's-delegate-turned-Executive-Committee-member (an EC) organized the meetings and acted as our first point of contact with the wider conference. We talked to our Japanese counterparts (also a part of the CAT roundtable) on a Zoom once, but we joined forces completely when we met at the HI Hostel Santa Monica in Los Angeles.

I had been in Tokyo the previous month, living in a sharehouse, interning at an AI startup, and meeting interesting people. So I flew straight from Haneda to LAX (a day before the conference started so I could get my UK visa for WEPO) and started my eastward journey back to the Pine Tree State. I love hostels, and JASC does too. We stayed at places with bunk beds and shared bathrooms and wash-your-own-dishes vibes with nice spaces to hang out or do work.

American Orientation, 3 days to get to know each other before the Japadeles arrived, began in Santa Monica on August 1st. We worked on our first roundtable presentations and shared them at USC; I presented on the Llama 3.1 paper and Stable Diffusion. Then the Japadeles arrived and the hostel room (4 bunk beds, 8 people, in a small room) filled with suitcases, clothes, and delegates.

In Los Angeles, we visited Little Tokyo, the Huntington Gardens (where we participated in an Urasenke tea ceremony), the Los Angeles LGBT Center, the Bergamot Galleries, Venice Beach, and USC (where we gave our Midterm Forum presentations). At the Bergamot Galleries, I argued with a member of our roundtable. My thoughts were that we should practice voting on things we want to do as a group. Their thoughts were that voting would be a waste of time and we could come to consensus through discussion instead. This dispute resulted in strained relations for a few days, but I remained friendly with the other person and they warmed back up to me. I practiced not taking things personally, realized that our disagreement stemmed from misunderstanding, and now better appreciate the wisdom of the *Art of War* quote “the greatest victory is that which requires no battle.” We worked well together for the rest of the conference. In our Midterm forum presentation, our roundtable discussed copyright law and artists’ rights issues in GenAI. Our EC leader, a food illustration artist, agreed to let me use her art so I presented a photo-of-food-turned-illustration-in-her-style using code from Professor Hopkins’ Deep Learning style transfer lab. This real-world example helped us discuss the implications of style transfer and artists’ rights. That night we had pizza on the beach and prepared to leave early the next morning for New Orleans.

My fondest memory from LA, and perhaps the entire conference, was that night right before we left. My cousin, coincidentally, was also in LA so we met at the

Santa Monica beach and joined the other JASCers playing beach volleyball. Then, with a group of American and Japanese delegates, we walked over to the Santa Monica pier, tried the “Japadog” (a food stand selling Okonomiyaki/Wagyu hot dogs that I brought up unceasingly because I thought it was so funny - but turned out to be delicious), played classic American boardwalk games like Whac-A-Mole, Air Hockey, and Skee Ball at Playland Arcade, and rode the roller coaster. I’ll cherish these fun memories with my newly-made friends forever.

One thing I noticed about the conference sites, as someone from a Maine “city” and Williamstown, were the homeless people. The Japadeles (not Amedeles) had to attend safety lectures - and for good reason. At the Japanese American National Museum in LA, I discussed with my Japadele friends about the differences in history education in Japan and America, the internment camps, and anti-Japanese sentiment in the states. As we rode the train back, a woman (perhaps on drugs) told the Japanese delegates to "go back to their country" which felt surreal and was a blatant reminder that history isn't just a thing of the past.

In New Orleans, our first stop was the National WWII museum. My great-grandfather was a lieutenant colonel in the Pacific theater and I took a history tutorial about the Asia-Pacific War last fall, so I was well-equipped to appreciate the artifacts, exhibits, and oral histories in the museum. The Japanese delegates were impressed with the museum’s neutrality - my friend told me that the history museum next to Yasukuni Jinja (where top convicted Japanese war criminals are enshrined) paints Japan as a victim of American aggression. The next day we visited the Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum about incarceration in Louisiana (the nation's highest rate) and how slavery has changed forms but exists to this day as prison labor. Then we experienced traditional New Orleans Jazz at the Toulouse Theatre and ate beignets at Café Du Monde. On our free day, I joined a group of Japanese delegates on a bayou alligator-spotting tour. After the tour, we had lunch with my friend from high school who goes to Tulane, and I think it was great for both me and the Japadeles to learn about what she’s doing and the strained relationship between the Tulane student body and the citizens of New Orleans. That night, I led a productive roundtable meeting where we chose to focus on the intersections between the music industry, Japan-US relations, and technology. Our final day in New Orleans was a reflection forum where we

enjoyed mixed roundtable discussions about our experience so far. We also heard from Susie Allen, a JASC alum, about Hurricane Katrina and from Harrison Crabtree, the Director of the World Trade Center New Orleans, about how the gaming industry and NASA are contributing to the city's diversified and resilient economy.

In DC, the last stretch of the conference began and the days and nights started blending together into one long continuous blur. During JASC I slept the least I've ever slept in my life. The friends and the experiences continue long into the night. The first night, we walked down to the White House and I had a long conversation with Shimons about Bitcoin, US dollar hegemony, the future of AI, startups and venture capital in Japan, and how we will seek out and learn from cutting-edge researchers at Oxford and the University of Tokyo. The second night, August 15th, was a special day. In 1945, it was the day Japan surrendered to the Allies, effectively ending World War II. This year, not only was it my 21st birthday and the 90th anniversary of the first JASC, but it was also the 21st birthday of my friend Shimons (Takahito Shimoonoda) - a Japanese delegate in my roundtable who, like me, is interested in AI and finance! For the 90th anniversary, there was a reception, dinner, speeches, and networking between JASC alums, donors, and current members. The next day, we visited the IMF. I was impressed by their mission of macroeconomic stability and their clear reasoning about the future: climate change and geopolitical fragmentation are the two biggest threats to world prosperity. For our roundtable field trip, we visited ARTECHOUSE, a digital art experience similar to teamLabs. The current exhibition is Isekai (異世界) which means other world or parallel universe - a manga/anime trope. The immersive art demonstrated how technology and art can co-exist and augment each other; exhibits included an immersive projection room flying through fantasy worlds and a place to chat with an AI avatar with its own life story. In subsequent days, we visited Georgetown and prepared for the Final Forum. Our presentation addressed two topics: the dangers of cultural echo chambers and the question of can AI replace human artists. We also covered major differences between Japan and America's music market (CDs vs streaming), fandom culture, album cover art, Spotify DJ, and Suno's AI generated music. I presented a little app I made (open source at <https://github.com/ssocolow/CAT-Spotify-App>) that uses Spotify's API to recommend and play songs from a randomly selected country's market - to combat

geopolitical fragmentation by exposing listeners to different cultures. The day after the Final Forum we elected next year's ECs (I chose not to run), and the day after that I went on a run with my high school friend on the Georgetown XC/Track team and Shimons and I visited the Library of Congress, the Supreme Court, Union Station, and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The next day we said our goodbyes and I rode Amtrak to the North.

In DC - and around the United States - I kept noticing connections to Japan. Some were subtle like "NTT DATA" spray-painted onto the Washington Nationals baseball field and some were obvious like the Japadog stand. JASC helped me notice the depth and breadth of the US-Japan relationship - you can find it anywhere if you look hard enough. And JASC itself has strengthened the bonds between our two countries, through people-to-people diplomacy and personal connections that last lifetimes.

I would like to express my deep gratitude for the Williams College Japanese Program and the Department of Asian Languages, Literatures, and Cultures for generously funding my experience.