

Japan's Best National Export: Entrance Ceremonies

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A New Look for April

Growing up in the state of Michigan, we often said “April showers bring May flowers.” This was because it always seemed to rain a lot in April before spring finally arrived in May. So for me, April always was a grey, gloomy time of year that I hoped would soon be over. My image of April has changed drastically since living in Japan thanks to two major events that happen at that time: cherry blossom season and school entrance ceremonies.

Although Japan is well known for cherry blossoms, they still take my breath away every year. My favorite spring pastime is to walk under the trees at night eating ‘*Ikkyu-dango*’. Cherry blossoms bring with them the potential of starting something new and as one feels the fresh spring breeze rippling through the trees and cascading those beautiful petals to and fro, it is easy to feel that anything is possible.

However, the April event that I find far more meaningful is the junior high school entrance ceremony. I cannot even remember my first day of junior high school. Of course there was an orientation but that was just to look around the school and to drop off school supplies. The first day of school started without any special welcome and hence I have no memory of it.

But in Japan what an event the first day of school is! Although each school is different, I am sure many of the elements of that special day are the same no matter which junior high school you attend. So I would like to share with you my impression of the first day of school in Japan as seen through my blue-green eyes.

Speeches, *Sempai* and *Ouendan*

At the junior high school I know best, the *taiko* club stands outside the school drumming as the first year students approach the

building. The remaining 2nd and 3rd year students are busy rehearsing for the ceremony in the gymnasium. There is a feeling of excitement in the air until five minutes before 1 o'clock, when with all the parents and students eagerly awaiting the start of the ceremony, the order for silence is given. Not another sound is heard until the vice-principal announces the beginning of the ceremony.

The doors to the gymnasium are opened and in march the first year students. Many have uniforms that look far too big and the boys' new haircuts look far too short. As they make the long walk to their seats, it is easy to envision that until just a few weeks ago, they were elementary school students.

I have often tried to imagine what it must feel like to be one of those students. I suppose I would be scared to death wondering if I would fit in, make friends, and yet excited about my new junior high school life. I would probably be too nervous to truly hear the words of encouragement from the principal and other speakers. And just as I was thinking junior high was exactly the same as elementary school, I would be introduced to my *sempai*.

At our junior high school, each grade sings to welcome the first year students and then the *ouendan* take the stage. They lead the school in cheers to welcome the first year students who are now looking more relaxed and enjoying the ‘show’. There is a spirit of welcome that if I were a first year would make me want to do my best in my new school life.

As the first year students turn to leave the gymnasium, they no longer look the same as when they entered. There is a sparkle in their eyes and the bloom of potential to grow and be nurtured in this new environment of caring *sempai* and teachers. I truly wish that students all over the world could just once experience April in Japan as I have.