



# SOUNDINGS

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## THE JAPAN EDITION

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### About Weatherhead

Since its establishment in 1949, Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute has been a major center for research, teaching, and publishing on modern and contemporary Asia. The Institute's mission is to train new generations of experts in the humanities, social sciences, and the professions and to enhance understanding of East Asia in the wider community.

## Japanese Forces Caught on Film

By Andrew Scheineson, CC '09

What's in a name? Is the identity of an organization defined by its title or its function? In late September, director Micah Fink came to the Japan Society to discuss just that after a showing of his latest film, *Japan's About-Face*, a groundbreaking documentary that probes the complex social questions, contradictions, and identity of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

After the Enola Gay loosed its cargo on Hiroshima and the Emperor broadcast Japan's surrender to his suffering subjects, the war-weary nation turned its swords into plowshares, in a rare fulfillment of the old proverb. Japanese citizens enthusiastically supported a constitutional ban on having a military, even as their occupiers had a change of heart. Japan became a pacifistic nation. Unfortunately, this picture is greatly complicated by the creation of the SDF and recent expansions in its missions and capabilities.

In *Japan's About-Face*, Fink focuses on the young cadets at Japan's National Defense Academy. While he often leaves the academy to place the training there in a

*ABOUT-FACE cont. on page 4*



The documentary film, *Japan's About-Face*, explores Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

## Dining in Secret

By Christine E. Kwon, CC '10

Going to Tsukushi is like entering a secret chamber. Tucked away behind a colorful burger joint on a quiet hill, its understated black awning is almost hidden from view.

Through the portal lies a narrow flight of stairs, which descends to a modest dining room, whose arrangement and décor are reminiscent of a residential basement. The setting is intimate, but without being warm; I am struck by a similar feeling of unfamiliarity as when being a newcomer in someone's home. My companions and I are the only non-Japanese speakers present. The other patrons sit huddled over their dinners in pairs or

threes, deep in conversation—a scene which later prompts one companion to liken the place to “a secret club for Japanese businessmen.” Secretive, indeed.

This certain air of mystery carries into the culinary component of the dining experience. Our waitress approaches, carrying a single laminated sheet which she sets upon the table and pronounces is the drinks list. She stops and gazes expectantly, as if waiting for something. Then, she drops the bomb: “We have no menu here.” Okay, we agree, but to what, we have no idea. We look around the table setting, searching for clues, but we have been provided with no utensils or dishware specifying any particular dish.

The waitress disappears, and soon returns with three small

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Original Illustration by Sonia Tycko, CC '09

## From Kyoto, With Love

By Andrew Boyd, CC '10

This is a little embarrassing: For the past four years, most of the important decisions in my life have been made with the explicit goal of winding up in Kyoto. I moved frequently as a child, and ever since I visited Kyoto for a week during my senior year of high school, this strange blend of suburb, city, forest, and historical relics has been an irresistible destination on my horizon.

I'm not sure if this removes any objectivity from my perspective, but so far I am thriving. Not everyone is—some students have gone home; others complain daily about how weird

Japan is (it is). But I love it here, and I've tried to appreciate and take advantage of every free moment to go out and explore the endless things to do. So far my classes have made this easy with assignments such as “find a building from the 12th century,” field trips to famous sake breweries, and a midterm that consists of going to a local festival and writing a report.

And making friends here has proved to be the easiest process of all. The city is home to 100,000 students, many of whom are itching to practice their English. Japanese students audit my classes as well. Most social activities revolve around shared interest clubs, all of which are open to exchange students.

I could not have asked for better

living arrangements. The city is nestled in a large valley surrounded by lush mountains rife with hiking trails and incredible temples. A shallow river, home to an incredible array of cranes, storks, turtles, and fish, runs through the center. Part of the banks are cultivated into beautiful parks where musicians practice their instruments and people play pickup soccer games, while in other areas, the river is lined with restaurant patios on stilts. Nothing is farther away than a thirty-minute bike ride, and a convenient network of subway and train stations ensures that no one ever needs to spend much on a taxi cab. My boarding house is in the northwest part of town, and from my road I can see the enormous Chinese character for “big” carved in the mountainside (which they set ablaze for three days each August to attract ancestral spirits).

I am a five-minute bike ride from the famous Golden Pavilion commissioned by the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, and my landlord and lady are avid art collectors. The husband's mother was a famous painter whose work is in the permanent collection at the Kyoto National

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**The city is home to 10,000 students, many of whom are itching to practice their English.**

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Museum, and the rooms in their traditional Japanese house are crammed floor to ceiling with classical ceramics, paintings, and woodblock prints. The wife is a connoisseur of Japanese Kimono, and advises clients on what color schemes and accessories to wear for particular occasions.

But my brain craves the safety of boxing people into categories. Now that I am in a totally unfamiliar locale filled with people who look and act so different from my standard model, the judgment department

of my mind is on overdrive. I continually make generalizations about Japanese culture only to have my own experience prove otherwise, and soon I catch myself fabricating new ones.

Yet I may have finally defeated this impulse after discovering a little piece of rural America hidden in Japan. I attended a three-day home stay in a small rice-farming village south west of Kyoto. I expected an elderly couple, tatami floors, peace and quiet. In actuality, the father drove a '70s-era American muscle car and spent the weekend driving me at breakneck speeds around these tiny, swerving country roads. As we passed through steep, bamboo-covered mountains and cultivated valleys, the Japanese equivalent of Lynyrd Skynyrd was blasting from his low rider. I plan to return as soon as possible.

*Andrew Boyd, a junior in Columbia College, is currently studying abroad in Kyoto.*

### About Soundings:

Published monthly by the Weatherhead Undergraduate Council, *Soundings* aims to help better incorporate undergraduates into the broader East Asian Studies community at Columbia by providing increased access to information about East Asia-related groups, activities, and events. Incorporating academic as well as non-academic news and listings, it seeks to help interested undergraduates further pursue their interest in East Asia, whatever form it may take. *Soundings* is edited by Preeti Bhattacharji. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to contribute, you can contact her at [pb2205@columbia.edu](mailto:pb2205@columbia.edu).

# Japanese Drumming

By Hannah Kim, GS '10

The Columbia Teachers College Taiko Society explores the ancient Japanese musical art form of Taiko. In feudal times, Taiko — which literally means “great drum” — was used to motivate troops, set the marching pace, and call out orders or announcements. Although popular throughout Japanese history, Taiko was reinvented in 1951 by Grandmaster Daihachi Oguchi, who was the first to assemble Taiko performances in an ensemble format. He was credited with forming or helping to form over 200 Taiko groups to popularize Taiko in Asia and North America.

Taiko involves the musician striking the Taiko drum with a wooden stick called *bachi*. The

size of the *bachi* varies and is appropriate to the drum it will be used to play. The Taiko drums are generally made from one single piece of wood and can vary greatly in size, from as small as twelve inches in diameter to massive permanent fixtures in shrines and temples.

The Taiko music, like any other art form, varies according to the performing artist. Grandmaster Oguchi's personal style reflected his jazz background, and his jazzy flare eventually produced the acclaimed Osuwa Daiko group.

The Teachers College Taiko Society currently hosts two sub-groups: the Manhattan Taiko for adults (16+) and the New York Taiko Aiko Kai for adults and youth. The Manhattan Taiko group was founded in 1999 by a Columbia doctoral student named Janet Youngblood, and the New York Taiko Aiko Kai, which was established in 2002, enjoys

an affiliation with Grandmaster Oguchi. The New York Taiko Aiko Kai hosts a broader range of age groups due to its family-oriented origins, but both groups sincerely welcome newcomers.

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## Did you know?

The composer Bear McCreary heavily relied on the use of Taiko drums in composing the music for *Battlestar Galactica*.

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Those interested in participating are encouraged to attend a class. Both groups meet every Sunday afternoon at the Horace Mann building of Teachers College. The *bachi* can be borrowed for the first few lessons and can be purchased relatively cheaply online for those seriously interested. The Taiko drums are provided on a weekly basis through the generosity of Peter

Brown, a skilled drum builder and performer. There is special student pricing available and both groups frequently host special guest instructors. Currently, the New York Taiko Aiko Kai is enjoying the instructions of Kaoru Watanabe, and Hiro Kurashima, who was certified by Grandmaster Oguchi himself.

**Columbia Teachers College Taiko Society**

**Every Sunday  
Horace Mann Building  
(TC 120<sup>th</sup> and Broadway)  
Room 512**

**New York Taiko Aiko Kai  
1p.m. to 2:30p.m.  
\$5/class with CUID\***

**Manhattan Taiko  
4p.m. to 7 p.m.  
\$10/class with CUID\***

**\*Pricing can vary with  
guest instructors**

*TSUKUSHI contd. from page 1*

bowls of *ohitashi*, a chilled appetizer of boiled dark greens steeped in a light broth flavored with soy sauce featuring the subtle tang of bonito flakes. The “club members,” we notice, are too supping on bowls of *ohitashi*, and this serves almost as acknowledgement of our initiation within the ranks of the club. The *ohitashi* is palatable but light and airy, and so the next course, a dense

and compact omelet, serves to round out the palette.

These first two courses have been good but primarily have whetted my appetite for something more. Sashimi comes next, simply served on a rectangular white ceramic dish, arranged in such a way to make clear which pieces to consume in what order. The servings, though small, are substantial: the fish is sweet and tender,

but with body. There is logic to the progression of our courses, but this does not make it any more possible to predict the course that will follow. The waitress clears our table and returns with bowls once more, this time holding morsels of succulent pork melting into a hearty stock and complemented by rustically-cut chunks of potato and onion. This is delicious—it is satisfying and comforting, and with each heaping spoon, it is as if the secret club is warming to my presence. We sit in the basement not of a stranger, but now perhaps that of an acquaintance.

I'm getting full. We've had four courses, and we have no idea how many more will come. Concerns are raised: What was in that egg thing, exactly? Will there be dessert? How much will this cost, anyway? The arrival of the next course, however, promptly quells my anxieties. A glazed sliver of

cod, beautifully caramelized, succulent and flaky. Then, the sixth course, which arrives with the announcement that this will be our last. Our meal closes with a bowl of creamy stew, buttery and sweet, with morsels of corn and mushroom slices, and hidden among the vegetables, a few pieces of toasted mochi. It sticks, and its flavors linger.

Leaving Tsukushi, I feel as though I'm leaving someone whom I have met for the first time. At first, it's a bit of an awkward affair, but throughout the course of the encounter, the foundation of a relationship begins to be laid. A single encounter, however, will not complete that foundation. I will visit Tsukushi again.

**Tsukushi  
300 E. 41st St.  
Murray Hill  
(212) 599-8888  
Price: \$4 - \$10 per item  
Reservations recommended**

Secretive restaurant Tsukushi resembles a club for Japanese businessmen.



# Upcoming Events at Weatherhead

**Tuesday, October 21:**

## **"China's Grand Return: Serving Africa, or Stripping it Bare?"**

Brown Bag Lecture

Howard French, Associate Professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism; former senior writer and bureau chief in Shanghai and in West and Central Africa for *The New York Times*

12:00 PM-1:30 PM

International Affairs Building, Room 918

No Reservations Required

*Co-sponsored by the Institute for African Studies*

**Thursday, October 23:**

## **"The Wound and the Bow: Honoring Injured Servicemen in Wartime Japan"**

Brown Bag Lecture Series: "Soldiers and Soldiering in Twentieth-Century Japan"

Lee Pennington, Assistant Professor of History, U.S. Naval Academy

12:00 PM-1:30 PM

International Affairs Building, Room 918

No Reservations Required

**Friday, October 24:**

### **Reel China, the 4th Documentary Biennial—Day 1**

2:00 PM–2:15 PM—Introductory Remarks: Gregory Mosher, Weihong Bao

2:15 PM–4:15 PM—Screening of *Bing Ai* (dir. Feng Yan)

4:30 PM–6:00 PM—Panel Discussion

8:00 PM–9:30 PM—Screening of *My Dear (Qin ai de)* (dir. Gu Yaping)

9:30 PM–10:00 PM—Q&A with Director Gu Yaping

Pupin Hall 301

No reservations required.

*Co-sponsored by the Columbia University Arts Initiative and the Department of East Asian Languages & Cultures*

**Saturday, October 25:**

### **Reel China, the 4th Documentary Biennial—Day 2**

2:00 PM–3:00 PM—Screening of "Painting for the Revolution" (dir. Hu Jie)

3:15 PM–3:45 PM—Q&A with Director Hu Jie

4:00 PM–5:30 PM—Screening of *We are the ... of Communism (Women shi gongchan zhuyi shenglüehao)* (dir. Cui Zi'en)

5:30 PM–6:00 PM—Q&A with Director Cui Zi'en

7:00 PM–8:30 PM—Screening of *Who is Hao Ran (Shei shi Hao Ran)* (dir. Yang Yishu)

Pupin Hall 301

No reservations required.

*Co-sponsored by the Columbia University Arts Initiative and the Department of East Asian Languages & Cultures*

**Monday, October 27**

## **"Chinese Lessons: Roadblocks on the Way to China's Superpower Status"**

Brown Bag Lecture Series: "Reporting China"

John Pomfret, Outlook Editor, Washington Post

12:00 PM-1:30 PM

International Affairs Building, Room 918

No Reservations Required

*Co-Sponsored by the APEC Study Center and the International Media and Communications Concentration at the School of International and Public Affairs.*



*Filmmaker Micah Fink gives the Japanese Self-Defense Forces a human face.*

*ABOUT-FACE contd. from page 1*

military, historical, or social context, he always returns to the teachers and students, who give the SDF a human face. Mr. Fink was able to interview new and graduating cadets, teachers, the academy head, and even the Defense Minister, deftly intermingling the daily life of the cadets with discussions of their duties and limitations.

The rare footage from the Defense Academy, as well as from joint US-Japanese military exercises in Hokkaido, reveal how much the SDF resembles a standard army. Yet, despite this, the film emphasizes their limitations. In one telling moment, the Minister of Defense outlines the circumstances under which troops could fire on an enemy, and what body parts they can shoot in order to limit fatalities.

Running parallel to the snapshots of military life are short segments on societal reactions to a strengthened SDF. In particular, Fink follows a 750-mile peace march from Hiroshima to Tokyo, with a particularly powerful interview from a former World War II soldier. He also asks regular civilians about the SDF in man-on-the-street interviews, finding

what he called a "surprising" lack of knowledge about their own military.

Overall, *Japan's About-Face* is a truly impressive look into an organization little understood even by the Japanese people, and provides valuable insight into one of the major debates in modern Japan. Fink was able to gain unprecedented access for the documentary, and his accounts of the filming process itself are fascinating in their own right. For those who would rather not see the latest Richard Gere vehicle in box offices, I recommend this as an interesting, educational, and entertaining look at what it means to be a soldier in the land of the rising sun.

The Weatherhead East Asian Institute will be hosting a screening of *Japan's About-Face*, followed by a discussion with Micah Fink, the filmmaker, on November 20, 2008. For more information, visit the website: <http://www.columbia.edu/weai/japan-military.html>.

***Japan's About-Face***  
**Screening and Discussion**  
**Micah Fink, Filmmaker**  
**Thursday, Nov. 20, 2008**  
**6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.**  
**IAB, Room 413**  
**No Reservations Required**