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Japanskt Mál og Menning

The Captivating Car Culture of Japan

From the Takuri to Drifting

Hlynur Trausti Hlynsson

**Leiðbeinandi Gunnella Þorgeirsdóttir
Maí 2020**



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
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Abstract

This thesis will look into the automotive history of Japan, how it began in the early 1900's, how it evolved post-World War II and the high point of Japanese automotive history during the 1990's. How and what the main car cultures commonly known outside of Japan are as well as their sub car cultures. How these lesser known subcultures made their appearances in Japan, and how they've spread both domestically and internationally whilst both giving inspiration to foreign car cultures as well as being influenced by them as well. The intention of this thesis is to inform while connecting the different Japanese car cultures to certain points so as they diverge, they will still be associated with the core Japanese automotive history and the progress of it. How the prefectures, the state of Japan, geological aspects, rules and regulations all come together to form these subcultures as well as how the reader might be able to experience it in person.

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Introduction

Japan is known for many things in the west, from its beautiful cultural history, Japanese cartoons and animations as well as video games and technology. However, one thing that has been integrated into our lives in Europe and the US for which Japan is most known for are its passenger cars and motorcycles. If a person would be asked about Japan, they would probably mention some car brands like 'Toyota', 'Nissan', 'Subaru' or 'Mitsubishi'.

Twenty years ago, Japan was hailed as the automotive king of the car industry due to their production of low cost and low maintenance cars with decently high standards. Due to different demands and developments, their place in the automotive industry has slowly fallen and they are now considered to be in the third place which is by no means a low placement. In the 1990's with the mass Export of Japanese passenger cars, the public of Europe and the USA got a good glimpse of what the car culture back in Japan truly was. And during these times it was the unique craftsmanship and influences that still remain in countries outside of Asia. Like Croucher, T. (2014) explains: "Japan can seem like a magical, make-believe dream world, filled with all the automotive gems and treasures that your wildest dreams might conjure up for you if you're lucky" (para. 2).

These days even with the massive amounts of public transports and bicycles used for daily transport, the love and passion for the private car still remains considerable, even when finding parking spots in larger cities is getting increasingly difficult each year, people still hold tight to their passion that is the private car.

We will begin by examining the history of Japanese automotive industry from its inception, take a look at how Japan became one of the largest automotive manufacturers in exports, as well as the development of the roadwork infrastructure and the peoples-car. Then the motorsport aspect of the Japanese car culture will be examined, both the history of official motorsports and the underground ones

alongside with the modification and customization trends that are connected to the motorsport scene. Consequently, the third chapter will briefly explore the main differences between the regions and prefectures of Japan when it comes to car culture and customs due to their different geological aspects as well as foreign influences, and therefore also what Japan as a country has inspired in foreign car cultures. This will be followed by the various rules and regulations pertaining to driving in Japan. As well as how to drive and acquire a car in Japan and to be able to become properly immersed in the Japanese car culture.

For many in the west who have been captivated by the Japanese car culture and its conducts, Japan remains like a mystical fantasy world being the mecca which they will need to travel to and experience for themselves at one point in life. It doesn't matter where you go or stay in Japan, traces and passion for cars still remain at large if you know where to look for it whether it is Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu or even Okinawa.

Introduction to Methodology

But what exactly constitutes the Japanese car culture and consequently the Japanese car sub culture and has it developed through time and according to situational settings? In order to better approach the subject matter, it was necessary to engulf myself in participant observation. There is very little formal written documentation in this area. I managed to get to know active participants in the car club 'Car and Motorcycle Club of Seinan Gakuin University' who were immersed in Japanese car culture and through informal interviews and observation came to better understand the history and key concepts. I was based in Fukuoka as an exchange student for a little less than a year. I took photographs and kept note through all my encounters. I then followed any gaps in my knowledge with extensive searches for information online. Through my contacts I was also able to find the main blogs and other outlets where these subcultures have been written about and read about them extensively. This research will be further discussed and explained in chapter 5.0 and 6.0.

1.0 Japanese Automotive History

Looking back on the Japanese automotive history, Japan was quite quick on the uptake and only a few years behind other leading countries such as Germany, the United States and Britain. This was somewhat remarkable seeing as Japan had just recently started its industrialization period in the 1870's.

The first automobile or car that appeared in Japan was an American Locomotive steam car. As James, W. (2015) reports in his book,

In fact Japan's main supplier of vehicles was the 'Locomobile Company of America.' In 1901 the company set up a showroom in Tokyo, and although there was much curiosity surrounding the strange contraptions, there was little or no demand since people relied on railroads, bicycles and rickshaws (p. 28).

Despite the lack of demand this still made many people in Japan interested in the prospect of cars and so they started researching from that point forward.

A year later Komanosuke Uchiyama, a young technician, and a businessman named Shintaro Yoshida, according to James, W. (2015) "saw an opening and were determined to produce an all-Japanese automobile." (p. 28). They managed to make a prototype, but never made it into a production model, thus only two of them were ever made. Two years later or in 1904 a man named Torao Yamaha made the first domestic bus which had a steam engine and could only carry up to ten people. Then Komanosuke Uchiyama appeared again in 1907 with a car he named the 'Takuri', which was the first gasoline car entirely made in Japan. The 'Takuri' resembled a European car from the 1900's and had a two-cylinder engine fitted underneath the seats this engine would produce 12-horsepower and was water-cooled (James, W. 2015 pp. 28).

Around 7 years later or from 1914 till 1917 a company named 'Kaishinsha Motor Works' which was located in Tokyo and spearheaded by Masujiro Hashimoto manufactured seven entirely Japanese cars which made this company the first ever automobile manufacturer in Japan. At similar time 1917, a shipbuilding company

named 'Mitsubishi' made the first Japanese mass-produced car which was named the 'Mitsubishi Model A', they ended up producing 22 cars at that time.

Following the Russo-Japanese war which was between 1904 and 1905, the Japanese military saw a great opportunity in the usage of automobiles during war times, both for transportation as well as for strategic superiority. Therefore, the government and military gave manufactures considerable subsidies in 1918 so that cars that had already been produced could be drafted during war times.

The investigation Commission on Military Vehicles (Gun-yō Jidōsha Chōsa linkai) was established in 1912 in order to inquire into the requisition policies of military vehicles in European countries, and to work out appropriate policies for promotion of local automobile industry. The activities of this Commission culminated in the promulgation of the Act to Aid the Production of Military Vehicles (Gun-yō Jidōsha Hojo-hō) in 1918. (Odaka, K. 1983. p. 336).

On September the 1st 1923 a huge and devastating earthquake called The Great Kanto Earthquake overran the central area of Japan, making it so that afterwards the government saw an urgent need for the bolstering of the manufacturing of cars to move people and resources. This also led to the decision to import a couple of hundred 'Ford Model T' trucks from the USA which were then converted to busses and immediately served as transportation vehicles. While experiencing the transformation of public transport, Japan experienced a huge earthquake, which demanded a huge import of cars that led to 'Ford' as well as 'GM' to open factories in Japan between 1924 and 1927 (Odaka, K., 1983, p. 336).

At this point the Automobile industry was booming in the United States and both 'Ford' and 'General Motors' saw Japan as an untapped market hence they established manufacturing and assembly lines in Japan to meet the local demands for automobiles.

After 1935 automobile and other industries boomed in Japan. Later on, the Japanese government decided that they wanted to support the domestic market hence putting forth laws and legislations that would immediately halt the production of foreign companies such as 'Ford' and 'General Motors.' This gave birth to two world-known

car-manufacturing companies 'Toyota' and 'Nissan' and by the start of the World War II vehicles were really well received in Japan. Driver's licenses hadn't been implemented yet but instead a lot of loan words such as *haiya*, which means driver for hire like limousine drivers and *takushii*, which means taxi, had become a common place. An affordable car for the public was no longer impossible (Plath, D., 1990, p. 233).

Soon after, World War II began and the military and government made car-manufacturing part of the military regime, so production of public cars was halted and instead military trucks and vehicles were produced.

Due to the Second World War and the aftermath thereof, the proper restart of motorization did not resume immediately since there were more pressing matters to tend to and the economy had taken a hard hit. The only proper productions of motorized vehicles were motorcycles and 3 wheeled motorized vehicles, which were closer to a motorcycle than a car. Promotions of exporting Japanese cars became apparent when the legislation that was in effect after World War II was dismantled. This allowed Japan to explore their exporting possibilities (James, W., 2015, pp. 35).

1.1 History of Public Cars and Roads

After 1955, the Japanese government and manufacturers started to stimulate the motorization ideals that had been halted due to World War II, this included new improved legislation and long-term plans for paving roads and building cars for the public.

One of these plans was to build a car for the general public which would be lightweight, possess a small engine and be inexpensive, these cars were called the people's car. This was the beginning of the so-called *kei*-cars which are inexpensive small and compact cars that have reduced taxes and insurances and would make a big impact on Japanese car culture and history.

The increased manufacturing of smaller passenger cars boosted sales immensely which meant the Japanese government needed to start producing more facilities, highways as well as service centers. When 'Toyota's' sales president Shotaro Kamiya had sent a team to the US, to make headway to feel the market, after initial reports the export of 'Toyopet,' which is the Japanese name for 'Toyota' was set in stone, it was considered ready for the US market at this time (James, W., 2015, pp. 36). This would help fight the unemployment rates and boost the economy. This would start the massive exporting and overseas plantation plans that Japan would start after the success of the 'Toyopet Crown' in 1956.

From 1960 to 1973 the growth in the manufacturing of cars including commercial vehicles went from 481.551 automobiles up to 7.082.757 in thirteen years which made Japan the second largest manufacturer in the world after the United States. This massive increase in production was also linked to overseas factories and exportation, Japanese cars were becoming popular outside of Japan due to their reliability and inexpensiveness. Like James, W. (2015) writes,

There was no question that Toyota was now producing an excellent product. But according to John Jardine, owner of a New York Toyota dealership established in 1968, it was not only the cars that put Toyota in the top spot – it

was also superior management and efficiency coupled with an above-average dealer relationship (p. 56).

The 1960's and 70's were a huge success for small affordable cars for the public. More expensive luxurious options in vehicles also increased as people's income had grown substantially. This demand increased research and development of luxury sedans which had up till then been mostly imported and the Japanese manufactures wanted a share of that market. As Cheney argues "Japan's rise to automotive pre-eminence was based on several key strengths, including focus, consistency and detail-oriented engineering. Japanese automakers were known for producing reliable cars with well-executed details." He also points out that what they weren't famous for was "design flair, innovative marketing and driving passion" (Cheney, 2015, para. 12). This led to a completely new idea of what the car for the public should be like, economical and inexpensive.

At the same time road works had to be increased and made to adjust to the mass growth of vehicles driving around in Japan, as of 1964 only 3.9% of Japan's road network was completed. With increased sales both domestic and exported, the resulting taxes were spent on paving road networks that could sustain the car fleet of the public. This was not enough to cover these costs so the Japanese government increased taxes on fuels and other car related expenses to bear the cost of the massive road constructions that were put on the drawing board.

During the 1980's Japan made its mark on the world as one of the largest and fastest growing car manufacturers as Cusumano, M (1985) mentions in his book:

In 1980, the first year Japan led the world in automobile output . . . No less than five of the world's top dozen motor vehicle producers in 1983 were Japanese companies and all appeared, seemingly, only a decade or two after Japan began to make automobiles (p. 1-26).

1.1.2 The Kei-Cars

It is nigh impossible to mention Japanese car culture and not mention the *kei*-cars. They were born from the initial idea in Japan about a people's cars which should be lightweight, cheap and have small engines. This idea remains in the works even today as *kei*-car make up most of Japanese car fleet, every Japanese car manufacturer has at least five different models of a *kei*-car in their product line. They are beloved and respected still today as Lopez-Valido, H. (2018) mentions in his article:

Kei cars are easily the most unique thing about Japanese car culture. These are basically mini vans with a maximum of 660cc engines. They were first introduced to meet tax and insurance regulations in Japan post war. They are still a far cheaper option of motoring in Japan but they are now popular with petrol heads in the land of the rising sun due to a MASSIVE range of aftermarket parts! The Japanese take huge pride in their Kei cars and you see staggering variety of modifications done to them (Para. 3).

These cars due to their lightweight and small engine are registered with yellow license plate numbers and have lower taxes and insurances. Japanese women and the elderly love the *kei*-cars since they are small and nimble, have great visibility, are easy to park, as well as to navigate the narrow streets of larger cities in Japan. Tabuchi, H. (2014) in his article in 'The New York Times' mentions regarding the owners of *kei*-cars that slow income growth has resulted in more young adults living in the cities wanting a *kei*-car, along with those who had to reduce the size of their current car and Japanese women (Tabuchi, H., 2014, Para. 15-16). But it is impossible to import a *kei*-car to any country that has rules and regulations made by the European Union, as these cars even though economical, light and easy to drive they don't stand up to high EU crash test standards as well as emission regulations hence they can't be registered within a European Union country.

2.0 Early Modifications and Tuning in Japan

The 1950s saw the start of a long relationship between Japanese subculture and vehicle customization, with the *bosozouku* and what would follow them. Despite the ban on modifications of cars and other vehicles in the late 1950's a group of youth appeared that came together to make noise and race on their modified motorcycles. Later during the 60's and 70's in Japan when acquiring a car or motorcycle became even easier these groups rose to massive numbers.

These groups of youngsters were called *bosozoku* or in English 'Speed Tribe' or 'Family,' according to Endō (2010). "The term "*bōsōzoku*" was coined in 1972, and it quickly gained nationwide circulation, but the motorized youth subculture that it refers to had been around at least since the late 1950s" (p. 106-107). These groups still exist today but in much smaller numbers. Their vehicles were laboriously decorated with all sorts of attachments including loud horns and illegal exhaust systems hence it was hard to recognize them even if you placed a brand-new same model besides them. They would drive around wearing flashy clothing called *tokkofuku* which the pilots of fighter planes wore during World War II on a heavily modified vehicle while racing or showing off. This custom slowly but surely spread over to cars and trucks as well (Sato, I., 1998, pp. 37-38).

Which brought on the *kaido* racers in the late 1970s, *kaido* racers were heavily illegally modified cars which still remained fully functional, and these would street race throughout streets of Japan. As Carbonare, D. D. (2013) mentions in his article "owners take a great deal of inspiration from the old Silhouette racers of the late seventies and early mid eighties" (para. 2). During this time *dekotora* or decorated trucks appeared alongside the *bosozoku* and *kaido* racers, these are heavily customized trucks but only appearance wise as they were inspired by the film 'Torakku Yaro' as well as the 'Gundam' anime series which was airing around the late 1970's. Chandler, S. S. (2008) reports in her article about the *dekotora*,

I learned later that the most hard-core truck drivers made their rigs into “dekotora,” or decoration trucks. They were decked out in steel attachments and multi-colored lights, and painted with elaborate murals depicting such national icons as samurai or Mount Fuji. Seeing one in a rearview mirror felt like being followed by a casino on wheels (p. 23).

It wasn't until the opening of speedways and circuits that interest in fast and unique cars grew substantially and car magazines with custom modified vehicles started to appear in Japan as well as in 1983 the largest modified and tuned vehicle show in Japan started which was the Tokyo Auto Salon. It started in 1983 and would grow to become one of the world's largest car shows featuring custom cars (Braithwaite-Smith, G., 2019, para. 6).

The ultimate highpoint for modification in Japan was in 1995 when they changed the laws and made it easier to own a heavily modified vehicle. Which was also due to influences from the US as there was a huge market to be had in Japan in selling of aftermarket parts but that was due to the United States threatening Japan by increasing taxes on cars and parts that were exported from Japan. According to Krishna, K., & Morgan, J. (1998) “on 28 June 1995, Just 12 hours before the threat of punitive sanctions on Japanese automobiles was to become effective, an impending trade war between the US and Japan was averted” (para. 1).

Which ultimately led to Japan becoming one of the larger exports for aftermarket parts and support, made in Japan is a trusted stamp amongst car enthusiasts.

2.1 History of Motorsport in Japan

Nagatsuka Kaz (2016) reported in his article “it may surprise some, but motor racing competitions have been held in Japan since the 1920s. At that time, there were no motor racing-only courses, so temporary venues. Such as vacant lots and horse racing tracks, were used” (para. 6). This meant that motorsport events were held in Japan quite early but the actual growth of popularity began much later or in the late 1970’s.

With distribution of foreign magazines especially from the US soldiers stationed in Okinawa the interest of motorsport increased in Japan in late 1970’s so racing and race tracks became widespread in Japan and this further bolstered the car culture in general since racing is one form of it that is widely spread and during the late 1970’s the appearances of super silhouette race cars was something that caught the eyes of the race enthusiasts, the street racers and custom car builders. Hsu, B. (2016) reports in his article,

One of the biggest treats from the NISMO Festival at Fuji Speedway the display of Nissan’s Super Silhouette racers from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Developed for Group 5 specification, their extreme aero styling inspired a generation of bosozoku and kaido racers (para. 1).

As the interest in motorsport grew in Japan, Japanese manufacturers and tuners chimed in and started manufacturing parts and cars that catered towards motorsport, thus the cars used for racing grew more powerful and became easier to obtain. This resulted in street cars becoming more powerful thus bolstering the street racers that wanted only the best and fastest cars. This made the street racing culture in Japan skyrocket in popularity and by the 1990s it was the leading automotive culture in Japan. Like Garlitos, K. (2020) mentions in his article,

Tokyo street racing was very real in the 1980’s and 1990’s, and while racing in the metropolitan city has subsided in recent years, there are still areas in the city where it happens. Car racing used to be an after-hours staple in Tokyo’s streets (para. 31).

2.1.1 Official Motorsport in Japan

Even though first known motor-races date back to 1920's they were discreet. As Nagatsuka Kaz (2016) reports the "idea of building a permanent track was introduced by Gunji Fujimoto, a Seattle-raised Japanese auto fanatic who returned to his native country in the '20s. Fujimoto came up with the grand idea of creating Japan's first motor racing circuit" (para 7-8). Though the first official motorsports centered mainly around motorcycles as they had been the most commonly owned and fastest vehicle on ground after the 1950's there were recordings of car races pre-World War II, these races were not common and were not very well known. Though Later when modified cars gained popularity, they soon took over the motorsport popularity and the fan base grew a fair amount.

Between late 1970s and 1990s Japanese motorsport was mostly practiced inside of Japan with few exceptions but it had its own league and rules while the rest of the world had seen a few Japan manufactured cars competing in races outside of Japan, they were not very common. As Henry, N., Angus and T. Aylett, J. C. (2007) reported,

Japan is a contradictory case study country in motorsport—a strong domestic racing scene but global presence delivered entirely through overseas partnerships. An interesting point is the relative strength of Japan's national motorsport scene. National series involving saloon cars and sportscars are dominated by Japanese specialist motorsport organizations-such as Mugen, TOMS, TRD, Le Mans Co and NISMO- who have close links to the Japanese OEMs. In domestic series motorsport specialists from outside Japan are rare (p. 57).

One car would shake and create a shockwave that lasts up till today but that was the groundbreaking 'Nissan Skyline R32 GT-R'. When it launched back in 1989 it was a highly technical car featuring ground breaking electronics and *drivetrain* which is the link between the engine and the wheels. This allowed it to win twenty-nine out of twenty-nine races from 1989 till 1993 in the Japanese 'Touring Car Championship' and as well as from 1991 till 1997 they managed to get other fifty wins out of fifty competitions in the 'N1 Super Taikyu' which is the 'Super Endurance' competition. This

sparked Interest in the car in Australia as they would import it there and have it compete in races there which brought out plenty of legends as well as nicknames such as 'Godzilla' which would bring Japanese sports cars closer to the racing world outside of Japan. Branch, J. (2019) writes in his article, ""Godzilla" had monstered the competition and also prompted the ruling bodies to change the competition rules: The Skyline GT-R had certainly made its mark" (para. 68).

Today Japanese manufacturers have a tight seat in the world's motorsport whether it is circuit racing, drag racing, rallying, Formula 1 and drifting.

2.1.2 Underground and Illegal Motorsports in Japan

As the boom for official motorsports grew so did the underground illegal racing interests, during the 1990s fast cars were easily obtainable and getting more power out of them was relatively easy. Hence the street racing culture became one of the biggest subcultures of the car culture. As a culture, the street racing of Japan had its peak from the 1980s to the 1990s but would then start to decline dramatically, especially after the increased involvement of the police (Garlitos, K., 2020, para. 20). But under the street racing culture sprouted many different types of subcultures, such as highway racing, mountain racing and drifting.

Highway racing was all about the speed and the fastest cars, they would race the huge highways located in larger cities such as Tokyo and Osaka during nighttime. Those who competed only wanted the fastest vehicles so many of them were highly illegal for street driving and had capabilities of going well over three hundred kilometers per hour.

One of the most famous groups in the highway street racing was the 'Mid Night Club', it gathered all sorts of people from doctors, lawyers to tuners but one thing they had in common was the need for more speed. During the time of the 'Mid Night Club' nights on the 'Shuto Expressway' were filled with fast cars and spectators but as for

how they contacted each other was through a coded advertisement in the Tokyo Newspaper. McElroy, R. (2017) in his article writes,

Meetings were organised on a clandestine basis too. In an era before the widespread use of the internet, the gang would organise races via the classifieds section of local Tokyo Newspapers. In order to avoid unwanted attention, the time and location would be hidden among an innocuous-looking advertisement, for example for the sale of discount handbags (para. 17).

'Mid Night Club' followed strict protocols such as not harming others and not to bother others but after a devastating accident in 1999 they disbanded the group immediately. As the 'Mid Night Club' had rules about not involving bystanders and innocent, as it was a prominent race club. The members all disappeared alongside the cars due to this incident (Hodges, J., 2019, para 9).

In Osaka another type of Highway racers emerged in the 1990's but unlike the 'Mid Night Club' their choice for cars were the 'Honda Civic' and other small yet nimble cars since their playground was the Osaka Highway Loop and as it was in the middle of city they had to dodge other drivers while racing hence speed wasn't everything but handling was the key factor. This group of racers named themselves the *kanjozoku* or the *kanjo* tribe or family and *kanjo* means the Osaka highway loop. Garlitos, K. (2020) reports: "Car clubs like Kanjozoku help keep street racing culture alive and well in Japan" (para. 24). They are still around but as for now it's rather a tradition than an actual race. Which Garrett, M. (No date published) mentions in his article,

These Days the pool of active Kanjo racers is much smaller, and the guys who still run the loop seem to do it for their own personal reasons more than anything. Many old rivalries between old teams have faded away in the spirit of keeping the scene alive (para. 4)

Mountain pass races or *touge* in Japanese like Hodge, J. (2019) explains "Touge or Tōge, means "Pass" in Japanese, with these mountain roads being created with various S bends so the mountainous terrain could be conquered in Japan" (para. 1). These races are still around because as the highways started to appear a lot of mountain passes became devoid of traffic hence perfect place for illegal races though there were

always chances of oncoming traffic hence; they raced during the nights so headlights of oncoming vehicles could be seen. These races were highly popular in mountainous areas such as Fukushima, Gunma and Nagano. As these races were a true challenge of driver's skills, these roads were unruly with a lot of bends and twists. This would lure spectators to watch drivers flaunt their skills on these mountain passes. Car related media such as the Japanese car show 'Best Motoring' have been known to use the *touges* for road testing (Hodges, J., 2019, para. 5).

The practices of these *touge* races themselves were quite simple, one car started ahead and the other one chased, and if the car that was chasing managed to keep up or overtake, they would be the winner, while the one being chased tried to get away from the chaser. This practice did not include as much speed as Japanese mountain passes are quite narrow with a lot of turns and bends. Through the *touge* another highly popular motorsport was born but that was the drifting, Butters, J. (2018) explains,

Japanese illegal street racers (known as hashiriyā) had been racing from A-to-B on mountain roads, or *tōge* (also spelled *touge*), in a bid to set the fastest time. Reaching the limits of grip on these twisty roads . . . The drift style began to gain favour in maintaining a fast line though the course (para. 6).

It was late on the uptake but has since then gained large numbers of followers and practitioners, skilled drivers who owned high powered cars with rear wheel drive would make the back end loose traction in mountain pass races to block the chaser, create smoke to disturb him and to keep speed in tight cornering. It became such a show that attracted a lot of spectators and thus drifting was born. As the track was just a public mountain road they had to worry about oncoming traffic as occasionally random cars from nearby cities would use these roads but nevertheless it brought many spectators to view the performance of the competitors (Stallwood, O., 2016, para. 5)

As for how a drifting competition works—there is a set of tracks and the point is to have the car lose its grip on the rear tires, while producing a lot of tire smoke and then

the judges evaluate the angle and how close to certain clipping points the car is either with its front end or rear end, clipping points can be a wall, side rails or cones. As well as how much smoke there is and the speed of the car, then there are extra points for time through the track. Sometimes there are two or more cars drifting side by side and they gain extra points depending on how close they are but lose a lot of points if they touch. Like McElroy, R. (2017) reports in his article “. . . with forty drivers competing and a crowd of three thousand spectators. Drivers were judged individually in the first round, but from the second round onwards, the series introduced one-on-one elimination battles . . .” (para. 21). This type of motorsport also has a distinctive style as cars are doing a show for points so they will need to be flashy and loud, so often they have big spoilers on the rear with flashing lights and colourful paint jobs.

2.2 Modern Modification and Tuning

As of the 2000's Japan no longer was the leading manufacturer in the world as more European manufacturers were growing and now China was making their own cars. Even with low export numbers China had the edge due to their massive population and production speeds. As Nakano, T. (2017) explains in his book, “facing strong headwinds, in the early 1990's profitability had dropped sharply, and three of the weight Japanese passenger car manufacturers experienced severe crises that led to their surrendering controlling equity stakes to overseas rivals . . .” (p. 107). This did not affect the car culture in Japan though since most motorsports were still really popular whether it was the official or the illegal ones. But one thing did change and that was the popularity of styling and body modifications, this allowed cars to look more unique and draw much more attention especially when taking a drive through busy streets in any major city in Japan. Zronik, J. P. (2006) reports, “Tuner culture originated in Japan, where teenagers raced on streets in Tokyo in sport compact cars. They tuned the engines to increase their cars' power and speed” (p. 9) Nevertheless not every car culture was following the leading trends of the official motorsports or the illegal ones,

as some would be inspired by other ideals such as different cultural fields, by combining them with cars thus creating a different type of car subculture.

Itasha or painful car is a styling culture that applies wraps of anime, manga or game character onto the cars making them painful to look at, this culture came from Akihabara in Tokyo which is famous for its massive glowing lights and endless signs and arts from popular *anime*, *manga* and games. This style incorporates the love for some *anime*, *manga* or game characters as well as the love for cars or vehicles as this style can also be seen on trains, helicopters, aircrafts, bicycles and racecars. This styling culture has become widely spread in Japan and even outside of Japan. Seaton, P. A. Yamamura, T. (2018) wrote,

The fourth form of behavior is decorating cars with anime stickers and illustrations. Such cars are called *itasha*. The term *itasha* is derived from otaku humour. The cars look *itaitashii* (painful, in the sense of embarrassing) but at the same time *itasha* is the same term as for an Italian-made car, so it has the ironic nuance of being upmarket too (p. 26).

Those who owned flashy cars but wanted to be more noticeable would make them even more flashy by adding neon lights, flashy paint jobs with expensive wheels and neon lights. In the west owners of expensive supercars generally wish to keep them as close to the original way the manufacturer intended them to be. In Japan however a small group of owners beg to differ as these cars scream for attention and making them even more intriguing is the point, these owners are not street racers but rather go for group drives and meet up in parking lots to showcase their cars and ideas behind them. D’Orazio, D. (2014, May 25.) stated, “What do you do with your Lamborghini if you think it isn’t getting enough attention? For some of the yakuza in Tokyo’s underground, you customize it with vinyl wraps, flashing lights and strings of colored LEDs” (para. 1).

Then there are two more styles, which are the street racing styling and the stance look. Both of these styles are more about the overall look than performance though the street racing styling will sometimes back up the looks with some performance

modification but often relatively related to show off rather than to compete or go fast. Stance on the other is about the ultimate styling where owners would make their cars lowered with body and paint modification similar to the street racing look but these cars are just for the show. Both of these are highly popular outside of Japan as well so they have gone from Japan and returned to Japan with foreign influences as of now.

3.0 Different Car Scenes Between Prefectures and Locations

Even though Japan is quite large, the diversity in car culture isn't that large as it is rather uniformed and hard to pinpoint where some of the trends started so the four main island plus Okinawa all share nearly identical liking except for few different key points which is the climate and type of area the prefecture is located in. Like Croucher, T. (2018) explains "it's definitely worth trying to see as much of Japan as possible while you're there, as each city and area is so different, and will give you a completely different impression" (para. 2). Most populated areas of race-oriented cars are most often found in prefectures that house race tracks, cars built for *touge* and drifting are found in prefectures containing rarely used mountain passes and so forth. Looking at the prefectures and the islands to see the difference in climate and geologic advantages.

Hokkaido is the northernmost island and is famous for its massive amount of snow during winters as it gets very snowy there, even comparing it to northern Europe and America. Garrett, M. (2011) reports in his article: "Japan's northern-most island of Hokkaido might not get the same attention of as the rest of the country when it comes to car culture" (para. 1). This means even if it shares common ground with rest of Japan in ideas of car culture it is less known as well as there are some key differences such as the snow, ice and mountains which means that inhabitants of Hokkaido would prefer something with four wheel drive as well as larger ground clearance, and since that is the case Hokkaido has more customized small SUVs, trucks and skis or snowboards than the other islands.

Okinawa is a small island in the extreme south, which is quite unique in car culture due to outside influence mainly the US military housed there, so they have mixed Japanese and US car culture together. Drag racing is really popular alongside big old American muscle cars that the US soldiers have had imported for them, as Tarkenton, S. (2017) reports,

LIVING IN OKINAWA IS DIFFERENT THAN LIVING IN THE REST OF JAPAN. All of Japan is filled with the most ridiculously awesome car scene anyone could ever imagine but Okinawa two different cultures of car enthusiasts smash together. Okinawa holds the largest presence of US military personnel in Japan and that just makes for an even more diverse car scene (para. 1).

The Tohoku and Chubu regions are mountainous areas with plenty of rarely used mountain passes as taking the expressways or highways takes much shorter time. Therefore, they often house large gatherings of people that want to race or drift in the mountains. This includes Fukushima Prefecture located in southern Tohoku region, which is home to the most infamous drift track in Japan. As “Ebisu Circuit: A Holy Site in the World of Drifting” (n.d.) describes it.

The Ebisu Circuit in the northern area of central Fukushima Prefecture, is referred to as a holy site in the word of drifting. The vast grounds boast nine different courses of a variety of types and difficulty levels from racing courses to drifting courses (para. 1).

Kanto region is also close by and it is very famous for its night time activities of its racers in the mountains as well as being one of the key locations of the *manga* and later *anime* “Initial-D”. As Garrett, M. (2013) Reports in his article on Initial-D.

“. . . The Japanese manga and anime series which is set primarily in Gunma Prefecture. While the characters and events in the racing-themed story are fictional, the locations are not. It’s not just the mountain passes that are real either. The town where Takumi Fujiwara lives and the tofu shop his family runs are also based on actual locations (para. 1-2).

Kansai, Chugoku and Shikoku as well have plenty of mountain passes thus share similar car culture as Tohoku, Chubu and Kanto regions.

Kanto region, especially Tokyo, which is the capital city but as well the capital for car culture in Japan. Most of the car culture sub genres start in Tokyo then spread out from there, as it is the most populated city in Japan. Street racing and car meetings are very common there as well as the largest car shows that Japan has to offer as well as all the famous car workshops that helped create the unique styles of Japanese car culture as most of them are located in the Kanto region. However:

...you have to remember it's a city, so there aren't any race tracks here and very few workshops or events are actually in central Tokyo. Most of the action goes on in other smaller cities around the edge of Tokyo, like Saitama, Yokohama and Chiba (Croucher. T, 2018, para. 20).

Osaka is also a big car culture city but pales in comparison to Tokyo though it has its unique attributes such as the *Kanjozoku* mentioned earlier.

With strong roots in the VIP, drifting and street racing scenes, the Kansai area has an incredible car scene that's definitely worth taking the time to discover, and there are lots of cool things to see and do in Osaka. But the most exciting part is the food! (Croucher. T, 2018, para. 22).

Kyushu island is the southernmost island of the four big islands since Okinawa isn't connected by a road or expressway to the main four islands. This means that Kyushu has short and mild winters and warm temperature so cars from there last longer than places where temperature is fluctuating more, thus is car culture called *Kyusha-kai* popular in Kyushu, this word means old car, and they are able to remain in good condition for longer in Kyushu. This car culture only referees to the age of the car so they exist in all kinds of conditions and stages of modifications. Like Croucher, T. (2017) writes in her article about exploring car culture in Kyushu,

Maybe it was just this particular event, but there seemed to be some amusing parallels between the car scenes in Kyushu and New Zealand. In comparison to the types of enthusiasts you might find in the big cities like Tokyo or Osaka, these guys from the very south of the country were much more relaxed and loved nothing more than producing a whole lot of tyre smoke . . ." (para. 10).

3.1 Foreign Influences

Japan early on was famous for taking ideas from European manufacturers and turning them into something similar but much more practical, like for example the 'Toyota Century' which is a large luxury sedan made to appeal congressmen, high profile business people and royalties but its core ideology is due to the fact how many foreign luxury sedans were popular in Japan so Japanese manufacturers wanted to get into that market as well by making something exclusive to Japan and catered towards Japanese culture and ideology. As Edsall, L. (2008) reports in his book,

While Japan's culture absorbs these foreign influences. It also assimilates them in a way where, after a generation or two. The foreign influence will become accepted as being "Japanese". Certain aspects of car ownership and buying, as well as car culture-including an appreciation of sports cars-had, by the 1980s, percolated into and become fully accepted by portions of Japanese population (p. 18).

It is the same with many other Japanese manufacturers but even if they were inspired by foreign designs and ideas they always managed to make it their own as a finished product so even if there are noticeable similarities it will never be looked at like it's a copy or borrowed idea, rather as a product build with inspiration in mind but perfected in the Japanese ideology.

3.2 Japan's Influence on the World

Khan, B. (2017) reports on cars that have influenced the world: "Japan is home to some of the most influential cars of our time. The Toyota AE86 and Nissan R34 are just two of the many chassis that have left an everlasting impact on the automotive world (para. 1).

Japan's contribution to the car culture and community has been quite large and started right at the beginning when they started to export cars to the west, as these Japanese cars even though they didn't look like much at beginning, were inexpensive, reliable and simple, thus the general public took an instant liking to them but by no means were the initial Japanese cars exotic or fast but for daily commute all that mattered was that the car started and ran without much effort which was the biggest selling point of the initial Japanese cars released in the west.

Later on, when Japanese manufacturers wanted to build cars that could be used for racing, rallying and just to be enjoyed they were often released in the west in limited numbers and many of them became Japan-only makes. This changed during the 1990s when a Japanese car gave the racing community in Australia a big scare and the interest in these cars grew sensationally—as well as the increase in Japanese video games and magazines exported to the US and Europe surged interest in Japanese car culture.

This led to people discovering modifications, tricks and tips that the Japanese had been making by themselves for some time and people started to realize how much unexplored territory the Japanese car culture was.

In recent years one of the largest contributions and discoveries that Japan made, drifting, has become explosive in the car culture as every country is practicing it in some way. As Banner, J. (n.d.) reports in his history of drifting report,

In 2003, the D1 Grand Prix decided to export their series to US shores at Irwindale Speedway, now known as Toyota Speedway, in Irwindale, California with help from Slipstream Global Marketing. This half-mile short track was

home to NASCAR Weekly Racing and the West Series, but when D1 Came to town, Irwindale became the home for drifting in the US (p. 4).

Even here in Iceland there is now an Icelandic drifting championship, which is held during summers and has been going on for more than ten years. Drift competitions are now in the big league a long side rallying and 'Formula 1,' one of the largest drifting competitions are the 'D1 Grand Prix', 'Formula D' and 'Drift King Europe' which gets people all over the world to compete in series of leagues and with point system.

4.0 Driving Rules and Regulations in Japan

The Japanese police is fairly lax on modified and customized vehicles as long as they follow the laws while driving. *Shaken* pronounced as *sha-ken* is the Japanese version of vehicle inspections where they will go over the car and see if it's roadworthy and safe for traffic. Celestine, R. (2019) reports,

Vehicle owners in Japan have three options when it comes to the shaken inspection. The first and cheapest is to simply get rid of your car . . . The second option comes with lesser headache... Lot of shops in Japan make their living by handling the whole shaken process on behalf of their customers. But this is not cheap . . . The third option comes with the biggest headache of them all, but is significantly cheaper than option two, and that's for an owner to do everything themselves (para. 5-7).

People in the car modification community will mask or change to more standard modifications while going through the inspection as the procedure of getting Shaken can cost from 60.000 yen up to 200.000 yen, like Ainley, D. (2014) reports,

Typically, Japanese and many expat vehicle owners opt to have their local dealer take care of the inspection on their behalf. These dealers, going along with the manufacturer's recommendations, may add many unnecessary items to the final billing cost, which can and often does exceed the 100,000 yen mark (para. 3).

Newer cars are exempt from *shaken* for a few years, then they will need to go once a year hence they are often the best cars to buy as they are less expensive, then when

cars hit a certain age, they will need a *shaken* every second year. For those not confident enough there are workshops and mechanics that will do the *shaken* procedures alongside fixing anything that might not pass the inspection they charge extra for these services but is well worth it if paperwork in Japanese is not the strong point as with all official Japanese businesses a lot of paper is written and filed.

Bicycles have very few set of rules follow the rules of pedestrians if cycling on sidewalks and follow the rules of traffic if cycling on the roads, as well as to have a light on the front and a red reflector or red light on the back for visibility, other than its advised to register them at nearby police station where its serial number is registered and a registration sticker is applied on it, since bike thefts are quite common in Japan, buying two sets of locks is also highly encouraged. Like Guthrie, M. (2016) notes in his article about bicycling and laws in Japan,

Bicycle theft is a particular concern in Japan, and with good reason. It sometimes seems like drunken salary-men will take the first bike they find on their way home, and rates of theft seem a contradiction to the widely held “safe and honest” image of Japan (para. 11).

Wearing a helmet is advised but not required unless you are thirteen years old or younger, as well as you are not allowed to cycle intoxicated as you will get fined as you were driving a car and your license will get confiscated. Sometimes there are special bicycle lanes but not all cyclists will use them as well as pedestrians walk on them as well as there are many blind spots so precautions are required while commuting on a bicycle.

4.1 How-to Drive-in Japan

For anyone with experience driving in Europe it is quite similar except the fact the traffic is on the left while the cars have steering wheel on the right but as for traffic laws they are quite similar thus when applying for Japanese driver license many European countries are exempt from the actual tests if they already have a valid European driver license that includes Iceland, however United States citizen with driver license from there will need to take the full test. You are however allowed to drive rental on an International driver permit (Darnbrook, J., 2014).

It is recommended to have a GPS while driving as the guide signs are only in Kanji except for the distance. The road layouts are also often very confusing especially when getting into a narrow street which has traffic both ways but no axles or aisle to let the car coming from the opposite site pass especially when driving a fairly large car.

There are bicycles, mopeds and motorcycles driving all the time everywhere and they will often use a narrow lane furthest to the left. One thing to keep in mind is that there may be a small moped or a poorly lit bicycle right next to the car when you are driving as well as turning so extra mindfulness is required.

Finding a parking space and knowing where you are allowed to park is quite the hassle, "You may think that you can get away with parking your car anywhere for couple of minutes. Unfortunately, that is wrong. Most public roads in Japan are "no parking" zones unless there are signs that say so" (Takiguchi, T., 2020, para. 4). Bigger towns and cities in Japan employ what is called coin parking, where coins are required for every hour and they are commonplace, free parking is non-existing in larger cities even going to the mall requires a payment for parking. Smaller shops don't have any parking and even fairly large supermarkets have none close by so in that case Japanese people often park on or near the sidewalk with their hazard's lights flashing while shopping at these places. This is due to parking lots taking away important land area that could be used for buildings, so to legally own a car in Japan it needs to be registered to a personal parking space through the police, hence the process of buying a car in Japan

gets a bit complicated. Although in the countryside where there is more unused area and people often own larger lands parking gets way cheaper and often free, and those who own a farm lands they can have multiple cars registered on that address while those who have accommodations in larger city are often stuck to the buildings registered parking spaces or may as well need to register it further away as not all accommodations come with a included parking, as Takiguchi, T. (2020) mentions in his article “. . .don't think for a second that it's okay to park in unmarked spaces in various parking lots found outside apartment complexes and in neighborhoods. These are reserved spots paid for by car owners” (para. 11). *Konbini's* or convenience stores in Japan by the roads and restaurants are usually the only places where you will find free parking in a city center.

Fuel stations are everywhere and most of them should be mapped on the GPS, almost all of them are self-service and require cash or special cards from said fuel station company, Diesel cars are less common in Japan though larger trucks and busses are diesel almost all passenger cars are gasoline. They usually don't house any convenience stores except when driving on the expressways or in the countryside.

4.2 How to Acquire a Car in Japan

Buying a car in Japan is the least problematic thing but many will say that having a residency card isn't a must but it is. Acquiring a car is a lengthy process so all the groundwork has to be completed. The first step of the process is to get a proper residential card, all exchange students get them and anyone staying for a longer time and you need a valid address.

For any dealings to be properly valid a personal stamp and seal is required which is called *hanko* and *inkan* in Japanese, and for foreigners this isn't something acquired from a nearby hardware store or similar store. The catch is that a customized stamp with *romanji* letters written on it corresponding to the name is required. As "Registering Personal Seal" (n.d.) writes in their guide: "For official purposes or for foreigners without a Japanese name, personalized or hand-made *inkan* can be made at specialty stores. Depending on the material used, the price of an *inkan* can range from 1,000 to over 10,000 yen." (para. 2) Personal experience led to a great online shopping for custom stamps as all stamps with *romanji* are custom made and quite rare to see in Japan even for Japanese.

Personal stamp is only the beginning of a lengthy process as the next step is to acquire a Japanese phone number, being able to call was not necessary but rather to receive phone calls, so any SIM-plan will work as long as it is a local Japanese phone number. Like Williamson, C. (2018) writes in her article about Japanese phone numbers: ". . . you might feel like it isn't worth the hassle, but in order to rent an apartment, ship a package, open a bank account and complete other logistical tasks, having a Japanese number is a necessity" (para. 1).

This step involves registering the stamp and acquiring a stamp card, for those looking both into buying and selling a car this stamp card is required and as well for the fourth step. As this requires the owner of a newly required stamp to head to the nearest official building for example where the residency card was issued, and fill in papers that will make the stamp official instead of the typical signature that is known in

Europe. As “All About Japanese Hanko/Inkan” (2018) explains in their guide: “In order for the hanko to be a “Jitsuin”, you need to register the seal at the city hall or the local government office that has jurisdiction over the area you live” (para. 7). But *Jitsu-in* means the real registered *hanko* or stamp. For the next important step, a stamp certification paper is required as well as stamp and phone number.

Fourth step is quite simple in practice but for those who speak little to no Japanese they can be caught off-guard as it requires to make a bank account. Bouwers, K. (2017) reports “honestly, having someone with you who speaks Japanese does help, but if you know a bit, have time to spare and are willing to practice your kanji in the wild, then you’ll probably be able to handle things” (para. 11). The bank account system in Japan is quite old fashioned hence requiring you to write your name, address, phone number and stamp it. The process of completing it if everything is in place is up to a week.

On the fifth step of this process, the main issue is where to register the parking for said vehicle you are intending to buy. Stevie, B. (2013) writes,

Firstly, is best to know that in Japan you need to have a car park in order to own a car. That’s correct. If you don’t have your own car park, you cannot register a car in Japan. Part of the process is to have the police in your area verify your car park, and this verification document that the police issue is needed to complete the registration of your car (para. 1).

If the apartment or dormitory already have parking spaces available then it can be considered as lucky since that is very seldom especially if it’s a cheap apartment, for those who don’t have access to such necessities, a website or nearby rental company can sort it out as well as nearby neighbors that aren’t using their allocated parking. In larger cities and closer to the center these parking spaces go for a high numbers per month even if there is no one using them, but the registered parking has to be two kilometers or less in straight line to your accommodation, this procedure just needs to be finished before buying the car so after acquiring an car, it can be parked nearby.

Most rental companies won't have anyone speaking English or close to it so either be well versed in Japanese or bring a translator as well as the stamp, certificate for the stamp and the residency card. Most rental agreements have at least one to two years of rental agreement so it is advised to ask what the cancellation fee is early on. As YuOi (2019) writes,

In contrast to a rental apartment, you can easily terminate the contract and make a new contract for another car park... However, there is a car park owner who set a minimum contract period . . . You should make sure the contract content about contract period before you conclude it (para. 47-50).

To begin that process you will need to get your international license translated to Japanese this is done in any JAF or the 'Japan Automobile Federation' as it stands for. This procedure does not take long and costs around three thousand yen and you can wait there as well, JAF also sells a helpful handbook about how-to drive-in Japan as well as meaning of markings and signs which is good to keep in the car.

Acquiring a Japanese driver license is fairly simple as the procedure for it is located in the official driver license and test center of that city. The driving testing center will require a passport photo, translated international license and residency card as well as paperwork that is filled out there and some countries need to take the driving part of the test. But as Phanthanh, C. (2018) reports,

Those coming from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan or the United Kingdom, do NOT need to take the driving portion of the test (para. 8).

They will make the license the very same day though it might take up to four hours but depending on prefecture they might mail it to you or ask you to pick it up at a later date. The easiest way to buy a car is through a third individual such as a used car shop but the third individual will take payment for their services so many will want to take a look at the internet and buy directly from individuals, as they are less expensive and have more variety of choices. Bonds, W. (2008) found,

Car sensor and Goo are two massive publications... that can give you an idea of prices, which vary quite a bit, and dealers in your area. Another easy way to find a car is privately. I have been offered old cars without a “shaken” for free, and in the countryside you can find good cars for sale by the side of the road for as little as 50,000 yen” (para. 11).

‘Yahoo’ auctions and ‘JMTY’ are the leading fronts in buying used cars directly from the seller one thing to keep in mind is the *shaken* or the inspection, when it is due as the process of getting an inspection can be very costly especially for an older used car, other thing to keep in mind is where is the car located as if it is registered in different city it will require new number plates.

After contacting someone about the car they have for sale and arranging a meeting, be sure to receive the Proof of the car transferring ownership paper, certification of the stamp and car registration payment receipt or proof. As Barter, P. (2014) reports, as you may know, Japanese law requires motorists to prove they have access to a local parking space. To register a car, or when changing address, motorists need to obtain a ““parking space certificate” (“garage certificate” or “Shako shomei sho”) from local police” (para. 1).

To obtain the certification of parking you will need to copy the current owners registration papers and head to the police station where they will hand out two sets of papers, one is for registering the parking space the other is for drawing two maps one is the to place distance and landmarks between current housing and parking lot where as the other is for mapping the layout of the parking lot and both need to be hand drawn. When these have been filled out, hand them to the Police station alongside the confirmation of parking rental paper that was given by the rental company or the owner of the parking space. It takes at least a week to receive the confirmation and the sticker that shows that the car is legally parked there.

The confirmation paper for the parking is only valid for forty days after receiving it so the next step is to bring the previous owners car registration, owner transfer deed, personal stamp certification as well as previous owner’s, parking space confirmation,

confirmation of residency alongside with the newly purchased car to the Transportation Bureau of the city. As Explorer Publishing (2008) reports “when transferring ownership of a vehicle, the responsibility for registering the change will fall with the buyer, unless you go through a dealer” (p. 142).

This process will include writing *kanjis* for hours on many different papers as well as waiting each time at different locations after handing in one set of paperwork, after paying and receiving the new number plates which need to be changed right there alongside the prefecture anti-thief seal. The new owner’s registration papers are complete and one thing left is to get it confirmed at the inspection station nearby, where people will check the registration number of the car and see if everything is installed correctly which afterwards the new owner is confirmed and registered into the system, according to Viriyayudhakorn, K. (2013) who says “fill in the form. Submit all documents. And finally you will get a new road-worthiness certificate, and it is finished” (para. 15).

What to keep in mind is the required insurance alongside the taxes are paid once a year, they are due on different dates depending on which prefecture the car is registered in. The fine for driving without inspection is not advised as it can mean high fine as well as suspension of license.

5.0 Research and Experience

After Arriving in Japan for my exchange studies and settling, finding a source of information and experiences of the car culture was one of the main goals. But finding one when not in a tight knit circle of friends with similar interests was quite daunting. Similarly, to what Croucher, T. (2014) mentions,

It's true that if you just randomly book flights and show up in the city with no clue about where to go or what to do, you might not see any cool cars at all. The secret to enjoying the Japanese car scene is planning, research and having friends or contacts that can help you with your adventures (para. 6).

Luckily, 'Seinan Gakuin University' where I did exchange studies from 2019 till 2020, just had the thing, the 'Seinan Gakuin Car and Motorcycle Club.' This club did not advertise to the international division so it was either that they were not recruiting or were not interested in taking in foreign exchange students, but after finding a poster inside one of the school building and doing some research, an email was sent and a week later a response was received, the car club leader wanted a meeting which after few questions and talking, the car club leader accepted the request.

Thus, began an eight-month experience with the car club as a second advisor and helping out with problems and fixing which in return the other members helped greatly when the decision to buy a car in Japan was made.

Bi-monthly the car club brought their own cars as well as a club car to a race track to compete with other car clubs in Kyushu as well as for practice. Three times a year the club held parties with the supervisor, all its members and even the alumni joined in.

The surprising thing is how dedicated the Japanese are in cultivating their interests and hobbies everyone had extensive knowledge and knowhows which made interacting with them even without perfect Japanese more so interesting and worthwhile experience, which Croucher, T. (2008) writes about in her article:

“Another reason is perhaps Japan's otaku culture. This is a word that you might've heard before, and although it translates to 'nerd' or 'geek', it really

refers to someone who is extremely enthusiastic about something. Somebody who's an otaku isn't just passionate about their hobby, they also have in-depth knowledge of it to the point of obsession – they get really, really into it!

Perhaps it's this cultural trait that's helped Japan's car scene thrive" (para. 2).

During evenings on weekends searching for sporty and fancy looking cars driving in groups will often lead to a meeting spot where they will gladly talk to any strangers that show interest, as they would exchange emails or social accounts with you and allow taking pictures of their cars and vehicles while telling stories of it and what the idea behind it is. Croucher, T. reports about unofficial car meetings, Late night parking area meet-ups to hang out with friends are a ritual, and 'Daikoku-futo' parking area in Yokohama is the sacred ground most famously known for this (para. 17).

One of more thrilling experiences was to be invited to a dimly lit mountain pass and allowed to sit in the passenger seat while racing through the mountain at high speeds in a car customized for mountain pass races, squealing of tires through narrow passes at highest speed possible.

6.0 Conclusion

Experiencing the car sub cultures in Japan as well as meeting people that are pursuing it firsthand is both amazing and inspiring. It is so much more than anyone would expect as long as the right connections and groups are found. Japanese car culture in Japan is special and different from Japanese car culture outside of Japan as the Japanese who cultivate it shower it with passion and love. It is not strange for foreigners from outside of Japan to long to be a part of the Japanese car culture scene. Outside of Japan, Japanese influenced car cultures and car scenes are commonly referred to as 'JDM' which is the acronym for Japanese domestic market, this one of the first car scenes to receive a name for the general style coming from Japan, no matter which part of the car culture in Japan the inspiration is taken from. It is hard to single out exact birth point of each style and subcultures but what matters is that it all came from Japan. As Biermann, R. (2018) Reports,

JDM is more than just an acronym for vehicles hailing from the small island nation of Japan. JDM has become a culture, a way of life for gearheads the world over, influenced by motorsport, street culture, technological advancement, and even by the country's small confines. It's a culture that has influenced the world, seeped into every crevice of automotive culture and left a mark that can't be scrubbed, JDM culture would live on in automotive legend (para. 1).

In Japanese society it often takes a while to get accepted into groups, hence it might be a bit harder to find friends that share the same interests in cars, though if shown interest and passion from the start, they will accept you readily. It does not matter which style, scene or subculture interests the most in Japan they are accepting of all and everything is interesting as long as there is passion behind it. For any car enthusiast Japan is truly a mecca for car cultures as long as some effort is spent on seeking it whether the preferences are expensive or cheap, fast or slow, new or old. It is all there, although during daily commuting it might be hard to spot it since small economical cars are dominant in Japan on the common streets and roads but with enough digging it's there just hiding behind the everyday.

These car cultures and their subcultures are not preserved so much in academic resources since they are found to be rebellious in Japanese culture, breaking the norm whilst at the same time commanding respect. Hence it is hard to trace the timeline on who and what started each trend and subculture in Japan, as most of the knowledge has been passed down through spoken stories instead of being documented. This is quite similar to the Icelandic car culture where almost nothing has been documented except the things that stood out while the rest was just passed down orally. Therefore, it is important to experience the culture if at all possible, by yourself and make notes on the interesting inspiring findings and experiences you come across. To talk to those who are deeply embedded into the scene as their knowledge far exceeds what you can find in written sources. As Croucher, T. (2014) mentions in her article,

If you love cars and you've never visited Japan before, I'm sure it'll be at the top of your travel bucket list. Let's face it, whether you're a car freak or not, it's still an incredible place to discover. The culture is simply fascinating, and don't even get me started on the food! But if you do happen to be a gear head, in my opinion, Japan is even more enjoyable (para. 1).

No matter where in Japan you end up, a little bit of research and looking around, will be the guide to finding possible locations of car culture hotspots to enjoy meeting friendly people who love nothing more than to talk about their cars. What more could a car enthusiast ask for? This helped me immensely in the actual research, allowed me to immerse myself in the community, to meet other car enthusiasts hear their stories and answers. The Japanese car culture and its subcultures are unique, as well as the Japanese who participate in it so even if this culture is practiced outside of Japan it is something else to get to experience it at its roots. I am fortunate to have had such a close look and to have been adopted as a fellow car lover of the craft. I am fascinated by its ever evolving, morphing nature and look forward to following its developments lifelong.

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