

JAL Foundation interns were given an opportunity to visit the final destination of the famous and popular Gishisai event of Tokyo, Sengakuji Temple.

The Gishisai event is held in Tokyo every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December and is dedicated to the famous story of the '47 loyal retainers in Akoh'. The Gishisai is based upon true events that occurred in 1703 and honours the loyalty and fealty shown by 47 roshi, whom through exacting revenge on Kira Kouzukenosuke Yoshinaka for their master Asano Naganori, were all ordered to commit seppuku (self disembowelment). All of the 47 loyal roshi's remains are buried at Sengakuji Temple, along with their master Asano Naganori.

The Gishisai event usually involves a group of people who parade along a set route through the streets of Tokyo dressed as the 47 roshi, with their final destination being Sengakuji Temple. This year, guided by a staff member from JAL Foundation, the interns were given an opportunity to visit Sengakuji Temple during the afternoon. After reaching and exiting Sengakuji Station, we made our way through the abundance of people who were seen leaving the temple grounds. Whilst walking towards the temple, the faint smell of incense smoke mixed with the fragrance of food from the many food carts could be smelt. As per norm, my attention was yet again caught first by the food being sold at the many food stalls that occupied the temple entrance. Though it has been said that the Gishisai is not a festival but more of a memorial event, the array of food stalls with their owners boisterously encouraging passers-by to buy and taste food, gave a very festival like feel to the atmosphere. Not only were there food stalls, but stalls with summer festival like games were also seen further within the temple grounds.



An understanding of why few people were seen during our walk through Sengakuji temple became apparent when we proceeded towards the gravesite. Everyone seemingly had lined up and was waiting patiently to have a chance to pay their respects to the 47 roshi and Asano Naganori. At the time, the prospect of having to line up in the winter cold was not particularly appealing. However, during our wait, the JAL Foundation staff member kindly provided us with further explanations of the Gishisai event. Pointed out to us was the moss covered rock that Asano Naganori

apparently had died upon and also the well in which the roshi had washed the severed head of Kira Kouzukenosuke Yoshinaka in.

Personally, it was a truly surreal experience to be a stone throw away from objects with such a colourful and somewhat bloody history.



After the wait, we were finally able to enter the area where the famous 47 roshi and their master were buried. Before commencing to the individual graves, green incense sticks were bought to be offered before the loyal roshi's and Asano Naganori's grave.



Together in a slow pace, we moved along with the crowd from one grave to another, briefly stopping at each one to place an incense stick and to also offer a prayer. The wooden tablets found next to each of the graves not only had each individual roshi's name written upon it, but also the age when they had passed away. The ages ranged from a young eighteen year old boy, to older men in their late sixties.

Also, evidence of how the people of Tokyo revered the loyal warriors could be seen through the piles of ash and incense sticks that were left burning in front of each of the graves. The white incense smoke drifting from the numerous smoking incense piles seemed to also



envelop us as we walked passed. Not only did the billows of smoke obscure my sight and semi sting and water my eyes, it also caused the darkened gravesite, with its overhanging, glowing yellow lanterns, to have a slightly eerie quality.

Once we had completed paying our respects, we slowly made our way back through the temple, which had become quite beautiful at night by the numerous lit lanterns. Before leaving Sengakuji temple, it was only befitting to try one of the many foods being sold on the day, taiyaki. The crisp, fish shaped, custard cream filled taiyaki, not

only managed to warm my hands, but also thankfully made me all toasty inside as well.



The visit to Sengakuji temple was an interesting and utterly absorbing experience. Not only was it fascinating to discover that the Gishisai is based on true events, the admirable loyalty that the 47 roshi had for their master Asano Naganori and the lengths they willingly went through to obtain revenge was sincerely impressive. It is to no wonder that the story of the 47 roshi is seemingly etched within the hearts of the people of Tokyo.

Having had the opportunity to visit the final resting place of these brave and loyal warriors and their master Asano Naganori was yet again another truly memorable experience in Japan. (end)