



A Japanese traditional wedding ceremony at Meiji Jingu Shrine in Tokyo.



A screen grab of the film "From Me to You," which will show Thursday at USJ.

Japan Days promotes cultural exchange

USJ event to provide young Lebanese with link to land of sushi and anime

By Beckie Strum
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Two women raised their fists to fight in a side classroom at the University of Saint Joseph. Trained in the traditional Japanese martial art of karate, the two black belts demonstrated for an audience an open sparring match reserved for only the most advanced students.

"Jab! Block! Kick! Jab! Kick! Bow. He must master his mind to be ready to receive any situation," explained Walid Tasso, a student. The unusual scene at USJ's department of social sciences kicked off Japan Days, a weeklong celebration of Japanese culture through the university's Japan Academic Center (CAJAP). A collaboration between the Japanese Embassy to Lebanon and USJ, Japan Days seeks to raise awareness about the East Asian country through performances and lectures open to students and the general public.

Interest in Japan is growing among young people, Nayla Mansour, assistant to the director of CAJAP, told The Daily Star. One of the biggest influences has been the scores of Japanese anime cartoons and graphic novels enjoyed by younger generations since childhood, she said.

"There is a growing interest because of the manga, all of the animated films that are originally from Japan. A lot of young people who speak some Japanese, they learn from the manga," she said.

Beside cartoons, other cultural contributions from Japan have also spread like wildfire throughout Lebanon. Take karate, a common extracurricular activity here, or sushi, which continues to grow in popularity as more Japanese restaurants open



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and international menus dedicate sections to the rice-and-fish-based fare. The growing interest in Japan's culture has also spread to professionals like local designer Grace Rihan, whose most recent collection was an ode to origami and Japanese minimalism inspired by a trip to the cities of Tokyo and Kyoto. Rihan gushed over her experience, particularly the elegance and structure she found in daily life.

Karate instructor Fady Antakly was struck by the honesty he encountered in Japan. Antakly, who leads classes at a dojo in Jounieh, travels regularly to Japan for training. In one of his most memorable moments in

Tokyo, a man staying at his hotel found and returned his passport and wallet containing \$5,000 with only the cautionary "please be careful next time," Antakly recounted.

"The Japanese way of life always intrigued me," Antakly said. "It is full of respect and humbleness."

Learning about different cultural traditions has made "a lot of people fond of Japan," Mansour said. It's not only about cultural exchanges, she said, CAJAP's role is to boost the academic relationships between Japan and Lebanon. Japan Days will feature several practical talks on living, working or studying there.

Monday evening, students queued

for a talk by Masami Ishii, first secretary at the Japanese Embassy. Ishii was covering business etiquette in Japan. Ishii returned Tuesday evening to explain to students special scholarships for students with a minimal background in Japanese to continue their studies in Japan. The annual scholarships are offered to a handful of students through the embassy in Lebanon.

USJ is the only university in Lebanon to offer a program in Japanese studies, and CAJAP is the only center to offer formal classes in the Japanese language. "There is not another Japanese cultural center in Beirut. It's the only center that teach-

es Japanese, unless you have private instructor," Mansour said. Since its opening in 2008, CAJAP has been held local Japanese cultural events, such as a traditional flute concert and a vigil on the anniversary of the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

USJ's classes are taught by Junko Hoki. The professor is one of less than 100 Japanese nationals living in Lebanon, according to statistics from the Japanese Embassy. There are between 50-100 Lebanese in Japan. Japan Days' other events with broader interest include film screenings of two movies picked by the embassy. "From Me to You," a 2010 movie by director Naoto Kumaza-

AGENDA

Japan in a nutshell
USJ social sciences campus,
Huvelin Street
March 20, 5 p.m.
The talk will introduce Japanese language and culture.

Film screening
USJ social sciences campus,
Huvelin Street
March 20, 6 p.m.
A screening of the film "From Me to You" (2010) with French subtitles will be held.

Opera and piano concert
Abu Khater auditorium,
USJ human sciences campus,
Damascus Street
March 21, 8 p.m.
Japanese soprano singer Yukako Hiramori and pianist Naomi Fujiya will perform both European and Japanese classical music.

Japanese play 'Momotarou'
Beryte Theater,
USJ human sciences campus,
Damascus Street
March 26, 8 p.m.
This Japanese play will be performed by CAJAP students in Japanese with English narration.

wa, will be shown in Japanese with French subtitles Thursday at 6 p.m. The romance takes place in a high school and is based on the plot of an anime film by the same name.

The main event will be a musical performance Friday evening led by award-winner pianist Naomi Fujiya and soprano opera singer Yukako Hiramori. The program will include both Japanese and European music.

For more information, please call 01-421-410.