On Friday January 25, 2013, UTSA’s East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted “Celebration on Life in Japan.” The event lasted from 5:30 to 8:00 p.m. and was packed with lectures and short presentations emphasizing Shintoism, traditions, and customs on Japanese holidays that mark one’s milestone in life.

Over 150 guests participated. The East Asia Institute would like to give many thanks for the generous support from The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership for making this even possible.

The start of the event kicked off with a lecture from Roger Pratt, former Japanese lecturer at UTSA, accentuating Shintoism and its importance in Japanese culture and everyday life. His lecture was entitled “In the Life of the Japanese”, introducing Shintoism with the simple question of “why?”. Pratt wanted to dispel misconceptions about Shintoism to the class before delving into the origins of Shintoism and explaining what the spiritual practice actually is. Pratt interestingly introduced Shintoism and its “religion negatives”, opening the class’s eyes to the fact it is not a westernized concept of religion. Shintoism has no founder, no scripture and no church, which is non-inclusive of Western religious ideology; however, it does have a primary focus upon spirituality of Japan and the people of Japan. Jay, a participant of the event, explained how he “learned the most about Shintoism”, that it “has no deity and no parallels with western religions.”

Indeed, Shintoism comes from ancient religious indigenous belief and to this day, incorporates things that come into the country of Japan and are then made part of the Shinto religion. Interestingly enough, many of the participants of the event claimed they
really enjoyed Pratt’s lecture on Shintoism and nearly every participant was able to attend the lecture, since there was one available every half hour.

Following the lectures, participants went to the other two rooms to do various arts and crafts activities. Each activity was explained in detail to the participants as well as explaining the festivals and celebrations in Japan, such as miyamairi (taking a newborn to a shinto shrine) and seijin-no-hi (Coming of Age). Tomoe Kumashiro, East Asia Institutes Japan Outreach Coordinator was very involved in the activities, explained how each one represented a milestone in one’s life.

“Ema are the shrine tablets,” said Kumashiro, “Many people write about their wishes on Ema and pray for next year’s health or for life.” The participants also enjoyed the Omikuji trees, which are fortune lottery trees. The participants would enter the room and be given a fortune while their faces lit up with anticipation. Kumashiro explained how omikuji trees are significant in Japanese life, “During the year, people go to the shrine for next year’s fortune. For this event, the fortunes were often kept in wallets or they were tied to the tree.” The tree standing next to the table of fortunes had a numerous amount of fortunes tied to it, filled with wishes and hopes for the next year.

The last event of the evening was the making of chirasizushi, or cup-sushi, which is a very traditional style of Japanese sushi. The participants gathered around the tables and happily gazed upon the various assortments of ingredients that they were about to eat. A sushi expert then showed them exactly how to make their cup-sushi, and they participants gladly filled their plates. Japanese tea was also available to everyone, which was a nice complement to the sushi. The room was full of chatter as the guests talked among their tables, exclaiming how delicious the food was. Many people had questions about the ingredients, though they were pleased to be able to try something new. For participants who were familiar with chirasizushi, this was a wonderful treat.

Children’s Day was also a big theme at the event. Koinobori, carp streamers, were made to represent the Japanese celebration of Children’s Day. Children’s Day is in May of each year, and the koinobori represents
children’s health, life and happiness for the next year. Participants at the event really enjoyed making their own koinobori and decorating it according to their own style. Participants also learned how to make kabuto hats, or helmets. Additionally, participants learned about Japanese weddings and how they are celebrated. Shugibukuro were made, which are money envelopes that are given at the wedding along with mizuhiki (paper cords).

As the arts and crafts were wrapping up, participants showed one another what they had made and expressed what they had discovered about Japanese traditions and celebrations. Ryan, a UTSA student studying Japanese, said he “learned more about culture and traditions, especially seijin-no-hi”, which is the Coming of Age festival. Sovicheth, a Ph.D. student at UTSA from Cambodia, showed the koinobori he designed and shared his experience of the event, “I learned about Japanese cultures and ways of life. The culture is very interesting and I plan to learn Japanese one day.”

The participants left with a kabuto hat, an artistically crafted koinobori, and a sense of satisfaction with their new knowledge about Japanese culture and way of life.

The hum of laughter in the background carried on while the participants talked with friends, showed off their crafts, and ate their remaining chirashi zushi. Christina and her nine year old son Dylan, both participants of the event, said they both “enjoyed crafts and drawing on Ema.” “The lecture on Shinto was very informative”, says Christina, “I learned about the Japanese culture and how they are more family oriented. My son and I really enjoyed this event.”