

PROTO-NEURODIVERSITY AND AUTISTIC
LIFE AT A RURAL CARE FACILITY IN
JAPAN

Arden Tsang

ABOUT ME

- Autistic autism researcher
- Born and raised in Hong Kong to English-speaking parents
- BA Neuroscience at Balliol College, University of Oxford
- Currently working as a research assistant at Winnie Mak's lab, Department of Psychology, Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Heading to the University of Edinburgh to do an MSc in Psychological Research under Dr. Catherine Crompton

MY EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN

- Working holiday visa from May 2025 to May 2026
- Travelled from Tokyo to Okinawa from May-July 2025
- Worked at Kokoromi Gakuen, care facility for people with very high support needs, from July 2025 to March 2026
 - Responsible for work supervision, assistance with daily tasks such as bathing
- Learned to drive, then travelled from Tochigi to Hokkaido and back from April to May 2026



DIAGNOSIS AND CERTIFICATION

- Categorised as a psychiatric disability along with mental illnesses, other neurodivergences (ADHD, epilepsy) excepting "intellectual disability"
 - Severity levels 1 (inability to perform daily activities) to 3 (restrictions on daily activities)
 - No distinction made between temporary and permanent conditions – need to prove duration of at least 6 months
- Japanese physician's assessment needed independently of UK diagnosis
 - Clinicians are much more willing to take your lead than in the UK
- Completed one initial autism assessment followed by 6 months of brief monthly follow-ups as required by government
- Received Grade 3 (mild) Psychiatric Disability Certificate

PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS

- Official certification necessary for residents
 - Diagnosis letter/disability card sometimes accepted for tourists
- Free entry to national and municipal museums for self and one carer
 - Subsidised entry to other attractions such as cinemas, zoos
- Free public transport (local public buses and trains)
 - Full price on private buses/trains/outside city of residence
- Tax subsidies
 - Reduced TV license fee
 - 270 000 yen flat reduction in income tax owed
- Specific accommodations available depend on prefecture

WORK ACCOMMODATIONS

- Disclosed disability after being hired and was accommodated, but was eventually asked to obtain official certification under Japanese system
- Casual dress in the workplace (business suits ordinarily required)
- Noise-cancelling headphones allowed for sensory sensitivities
- Successfully requested substitution of duties (setting up meeting room rather than taking meeting minutes)
- Employers with over 100 employees – at least 2.5% of workforce must be disabled
 - Pay 50 000 yen (~250 pounds) per person below quota per month
 - Receive 29 000 yen (~150 pounds) per person over quota per month
 - Grants also available to improve facilities, facilitate working from home, provide counselling etc. for disabled employees

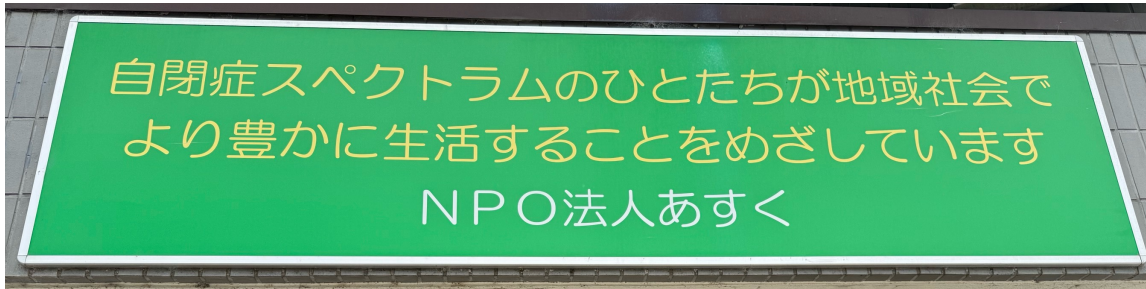
SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

- Day services (workshops, accommodating workplaces)
- Residential care homes
- Group homes (assisted living facilities)
 - Middle step between independent living and care facilities
- Partner with businesses to employ autistic people unable to find mainstream employment
 - e.g. bakery Peter Pan and support organisation Selp Kizuna
- Sometimes one organisation performs multiple of these functions

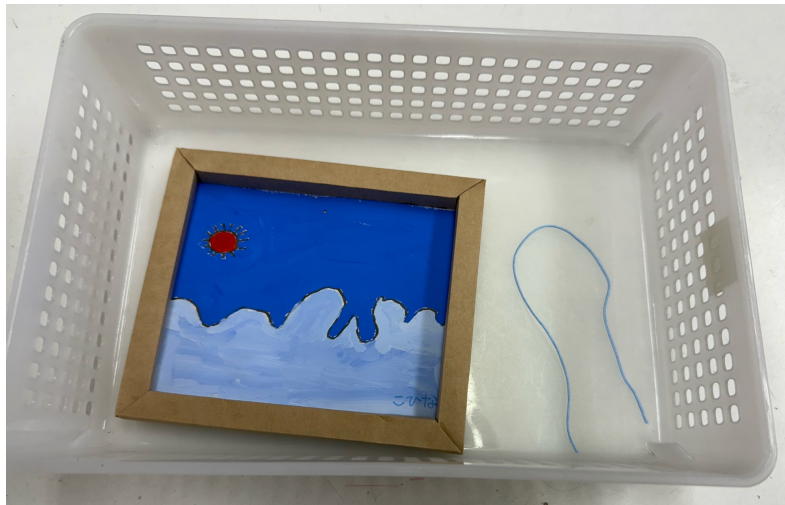
工房あすく (ASK WORKSHOP)

- Day service in central Kyoto, founded in 2001
- Subcontracts manual work such as handicrafts, mechanical part assembly from companies, for service users to perform
 - “Through work, we aim to help them acquire social adaptation skills”
 - Aims to transition service users to mainstream work after two or three years

工房あすく (ASK WORKSHOP)



"We aim for people on the autism spectrum to live richer lives in their local society"



COCOROMI GAKUEN: HISTORY

- Vineyard purchased and cultivated in 1958 by special education teacher Kawada Noboru and his students
 - Steep slope – machinery unusable, cheap land
 - Originally edible grapes, pivoted to wine grapes
- Building constructed by Noboru and students in 1969, named Cocoromi (to try) Gakuen (academy)
 - Accredited as a care facility that same year
- Separate organisation created by parents of service users in 1980 and named Coco Farm Winery
 - Difficult for one organisation to simultaneously hold alcohol-making and care facility licenses
- Gradually accumulated renown, expanded to neighbouring fields
- Recently (2018?) merged with a day service called the Red Pine Workshop
- Wine is now occasionally used at government functions such as the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting

COCOROMI GAKUEN IN THE PRESENT

- Over 200 service users doing the day with around 100 residing in either the main facility or affiliated group homes
 - Sequestered rooms also available
- Long waiting list – spaces open up when a service user moves to another facility (rare) or dies
 - Majority of service users are elderly
- Variety of support needs
 - Those with lower support needs tend to be older (changing social attitudes? Greater need for prioritisation?)
 - Some are able to read and write simple kanji, majority are non-verbal
- Six work divisions
 - Outdoors: grass-cutting, grape cultivating, log hauling (for shiitake mushrooms)
 - Indoors: crafts (former Red Pine Workshop), laundry, rehabilitation
 - Cooking done by contracted catering company since the pandemic

A TYPICAL DAY

- 6am - wake up, clean room and hallway
- 7:15am – breakfast
- 8:30am-9am – start work
- 10am-10:30am – tea/energy drink break (5 mins.)
- 11:30am – lunch and nap time
- 1:30pm – start work (end time varies depending on group)
- 3pm – tea and snack break
- 6:30pm – dinner
- 6:30pm-11pm (Fri-Sun) – TV and own snacks

OUTDOOR WORK



INDOOR WORK



REST



FOOD



AN AUTISTIC UTOPIA?

- Service users entrusted with teaching guests/new employees how to do tasks such as grape harvesting
 - General assumption of competence at their work
 - Load-bearing tasks such as preventing hepatitis cross-contamination when collecting dishes
- Friendships and trust between care workers and service users
 - Lack of formally-enforced boundaries
 - Physical affection allowed – hugs, tag, playful punches
- Highly consistent routine, repetitive tasks, yearly cycle of events
 - Became more anxious when at home sick
- Lots of other autistic people with learning disabilities to socialise with as equals
 - Sense of being normal
 - Lack of stigma around hobbies usually associated with children (esp. Pokémon)
- Allowed to walk around outside the property during free time
- No enforced socialisation time outside work
 - Service users with rooms can enter and exit them as they wish during rest times, including to skip/delay meals

...OR MAYBE NOT

- No choice of food, encouraged to finish what is on one's plate
 - Not allowed to eat between meals
 - Old custom of pouring tea into leftover plate sauce and drinking it
- Indoor spaces can get quite loud
 - Frequent meltdowns in cafeteria
 - Often preferred to wait outside the lounge rather than with others
 - Complaints of roommates keeping people up at night
- Variance in start times
 - Employees will arrive slightly earlier/later to open up cafeterias or work areas without notice

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

- Here refers to the neurodiversity **paradigm**
- The view that autism, and other forms of variance in brain functioning (neurodivergences), are not inherently negative or abnormal
 - Therefore, autistic traits do not inherently require treatment or correction
 - Treatments or interventions should have the aim of improving the life of the autistic person themselves
- Neurodivergences can make people more well-suited to certain environments or tasks rather than simply causing deficits
- Neurodivergent people and neurotypical people are not inherently “better” or “worse” than one another

COCOROMI GAKUEN: PHILOSOPHY

- Engage with service users as people, rather than as patients
- Focus on support needs to the exclusion of formal diagnoses/medical categorisation
 - Not expected for employees to know the diagnoses of any service users
- Teaching of the social model of disability at company lectures
 - Separation of “primary disabilities” (inborn) and “secondary disabilities” (caused by societal stigma and trauma)
- Radical tolerance of behaviours that would be seen as harmful in the outside world
 - e.g. stealing food, hitting, heavy touching
 - Solutions to interpersonal conflicts determined based largely on the abilities of the people involved rather than normal/abnormal

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

- Younger man on the laundry team
 - Very strongly attached to certain care workers
 - Directive was to only interact with him in groups
- Service user licked me on the elbow
 - Colleague saw me looking distressed and suggested that management meet with me
 - Directed to interact with service users equally so that none got jealous

NEURO-HIERARCHY

- Enforcing normality
 - Throwing away trinkets without prior permission (bits of plastic wrap, newspaper) because service user “wasn’t going to use them”
- More boundaries set on behaviour than would be expected for independent adults
 - Food and drink intake heavily restricted (Prader-Willi syndrome)
- General infantilisation
 - Service users referred to as “students” (園生 ensei), care workers referred to as teachers
 - Use of age-inappropriate honorifics (-kun for older service users, lack of honorifics)
- Different rules for service users and care workers: screens, sauce tea
- Lower-level care workers will bend rules in favour of service users
 - Performing actions by themselves/screen time/extra snacks
- Care workers do manual work alongside service users rather than just supervising

AUTISTIC-AUTISTIC INTERACTIONS

- Some service users are better able to interact with/soothe each other than the care workers
 - One calming another down from meltdown
- Service users frequently supervised/corrected other service users
 - Work tasks
 - Behaviour during free time
- Hierarchy between very verbal and less verbal service users
 - Employees generally nicer to them as well

IS IT NEURO-AFFIRMING?

Neuro-affirming aspects

- Focus on support needs over diagnostic categories
- Assumption of competence in field of work
- Individualised tasks and supports
- Environment where neurodivergence is the norm
- Lack of enforcement of neurotypical behavioural norms

Deficit-based aspects

- Hierarchy of care workers over service users
- Different rules for service users and care workers
- Infantilisation of service users
- Strict behavioural restrictions
- Over-standardised rules, restrictions and structures

LIFE AS AN AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE

- Several intersecting marginalised identities
- Accommodations not provided by default and seemingly not expected to be needed despite initial disclosure
- Benefited from structures/routines designed to benefit service users
- Utilised own sensory sensitivities/intuitions to provide care
 - Did not always work
- Skepticism and curiosity from other care workers
 - Generally well-treated
- Chafed under Japanese hierarchical culture due to sense of justice
 - Frequently antagonised management with suggestions/assertions

FRIENDSHIPS AS AN AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE

- Deep friendships possible with service users but discouraged by management
- Mutually beneficial double empathy with service users
 - Still struggled to understand some service users
- Seemingly more popular with service users than other care workers?
 - Better understanding of service users as autistic person?
 - Less-well-developed professional boundaries?
 - Volunteer status?
- Got along well with care workers
 - Foreigner status generally taken more notice of than autism

CONCLUSIONS

- Everyone generally seemed happy and content
 - Care workers enjoy their job
 - Service users enjoy the community and the work
 - Parents seem pleased at the treatment of their children
 - Local residents and tourists also enjoy products of work
- Is this what neuro-affirmation looks like for those with very high support needs?

THANK YOU!

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