



KAMAGASAKI

Saul Chan Htoo Sang

Zine
2025



Fifth week began slow. I felt heavy in my chest from the cigarette and alcohol. I partied so much I lost the sense of time. Alcohol became my best friend. I started drinking during the day. **Ma Soe Yu Nwe** came to visit me. She told me, "Saul. You're sitting on many resources." I know. But there is a burden to that too.

Sixth week. I visited Minpaku Museum. Yuto-san arranged a meeting & tour with Ayako-san. We spent hours walking around the museum. The same week, we also installed a new exhibition based on MAYDAY performances. Jun-san from Production Zomia came to help curate the new show. I ended up yelling at a co-worker, causing a lot of troubles for the whole team.

Seventh week began slow with summer breezes. But the rain fell heavily on the last Friday. Losing friends feel worse on overcast days. With a tightness in my chest, I hosted a few farewell parties.

This seven weeks have taught me so much. Thank you to Tansu for welcoming me & teaching me how to stitch. The two beautiful kimonos became treasures for me. Thank you Sanno X: Yamada-san, Sensei, Kona-san, & everyone who worked for Study! Without you all, I would not have the experiences I get! Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!

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This zine is born out of a seven-week artist residency in Osaka, Japan. I was invited by **Production Zomia** to participate in **Study: Osaka-Kansai International Art Festival** from April 1st to May 20th, 2025. In this introduction, I document my memories from the residency.

One afternoon in late January 2025, an unexpected message came from **Ko Aung Myat Htay** of **School of Contemporary Art (SOCA)**: "Hi bro, good news! Do you wish to join an Asian Artist residency in Osaka this year?" Surprised but excited, I responded that I was interested within minutes. Visiting Japan had been my dream since my teenage years. Little did I know what it entailed.

Over the next few days, I became connected to **Production Zomia**, a network of artists, curators, and researchers from Japan and Southeast Asia. This project has been on my radar since it began because I considered Zomia as my root and as an important political movement for the future of indigenous sovereignty in Southeast Asia and beyond. But only through this invitation to participate in **Study: Osaka-Kansai International Art Festival** did I become connected to the whole team on a personal level.

Professor **Fumihiko Sumitomo-san** of Production Zomia who is working as the main curator sent me an email explaining the team's expectation:

"Our aim is to ask participating artists to propose your ideas on the future of Expo without national borders. **World Expo** is strongly connected as a legacy of imperialism, industrialization and nationalism. We will invite you to share your vision on its future."

I immediately felt the weight of this task on my shoulders. I haven't heard about the **World Expo** before. After a short research, I realized that this is a major international event to promote modern capitalism and new technologies. It occurs every five years, and this year's theme proposed by Osaka city government proposed is **Designing Future Society for Our Lives**. As a human from a postcolonial country who is witnessing the **Anthropocene**, I felt ready to criticize it and envision a better way of organizing the **World Expo**. However, I decided that I cannot limit my understanding of this seminal event before being there to experience the way it is happening this year. So, I kept this task in the back of my mind.

Memories of Osaka

25th May 2025

From my youth, I've always dreamt of visiting Japan. This stay in Haginochaya during spring of 2025 pushed me to learn more about myself and the many beautiful people I've encountered in the drunken alleys of Kamagasaki. Reality becomes blurred with dreams & nightmares.

The first week during this stay was full of surprises & new meaningful connections. Meeting Daisaku-san (Dai-san) & Fumihiko-san (Fumi-san) my first arrival in Japan is a true blessing. I was taken to a very deep part of Osaka. Nishinari is the official name. Kanayo-san from Cocoroom tells me: "It's in-between," during a visit to Tempozan to see musicians play on the rooftop as the sun slowly sets behind the mountains. The second week I settled in. With the help of Study staff, the new exhibition is up & running. Getting to meet new people everyday was a special gift for my soul. As I get used to Sento, showering naked together with strangers, I became one with the people around me.

My third week began with my old self. Screening Underneath My Chin taught me that I need to write more. I've been thinking about why we make art. Art for our sake. Who we are is only clear the new accept our unique existence. Fourth week arrives so quickly. But I've finished the flag for the MAYDAY anatta performances with the help of Tansu members. It was my first time to perform in the streets. But with the help of friends & loved ones, we completed the performances!

Haikus from Kamagasaki

An old man lying
On the floor. He gets up but
Sake still smells strong.

Haginochaya.
Old men and women sitting,
Talking about life.

In NISHINARI,
The locals are lost in thought.
Tourists are rushing.

Workers of the past
Still living without riches.
So, who profited?

Young girls yell, "Come here,"
I smiled. "Oni-Chan, beer?"
My wallet, empty.

A neighbor lady
Wandering in back alleys,
Gives me an old bike.

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On April 1st 2025, I landed at the Kansai International Airport (KIX) from Chiang Mai, Thailand. **Fumihiko-san** and **Kitamura Daisaku-san** came to pick me up at the airport as per my request. “You remind me of myself,” says Daisaku-san upon our first encounter. He is the main art coordinator for the neighborhood, **Nishinari Area**, where I was invited to stay and work for the international art festival. My intuition tells that this is a person I can trust and rely upon after working with him for a few days. I learned **D.I.Y.** (Do It Yourself) spirit from Daisaku-san (whom I was allowed to call **Dai-san**). Later I learned that Daisaku-san is also an artist, creating paintings and sculptures. Through conversations with him, I learned more about the art festival and the festival’s purpose of connecting different communities of artists together in Osaka. For me, this festival embodied the vision of **EXPO 2025**.

One week after installing my works at **Cafe Atariya**, I began learning more about the art festival: **Study: Osaka-Kansai International Art Festival**. The festival is working with nine venues all over Osaka in addition to hosting talk events and live performances. This international art festival is organized by **Artlogue Inc.**, “a social enterprise that works to solve social problems through art.” Learning more about this art festival is truly inspiring for me. **Yuto Yabumoto-san** of **Production Zomia & Aura Asia Contemporary Art Project** and I went to the opening of the art festival.

KOKO: I didn’t have any work experience before coming here. I learned everything here. But for others like me—observe and adapt. Be patient. Think about others. Sometimes, I see younger folks acting selfishly, forgetting we’re all here to work and coexist. Respect the workplace and the people in it. Even if the Japanese aren’t always expressive, we still have to do our part. We’re representing Myanmar whether we like it or not. We need self-control.

This interview is edited for length.



SAUL: And you, Koko?

KOKO: When I first arrived, I didn't live alone. I was in a shared house with two other Myanmar friends. The owner, a Japanese woman, later rented rooms to Japanese women too. It never felt lonely. We became like family. That's been the highlight of my five years here. I felt safe and warm.

SAUL: Is it difficult interacting with Japanese people?

KOKO: I try to follow the saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." We're guests here. We represent our country. One mistake can reflect poorly on all of us. So I try to be careful, to respect their ways.

HTOO: I haven't had trouble, but I've seen others struggle. In Japan, people think about others first. They're strict, but very empathetic. In Myanmar, it's different. People eat on trains, talk loudly on the phone. Here, that's not acceptable. Especially at work, you have to respect others' space and peace. If we don't, it reinforces the idea that foreigners don't follow rules.

SAUL: Any advice for others coming to Japan?

HTOO: For newcomers, mental preparation is crucial. The behavior, habits, even how people move—it's all different. Have discipline. Live like the people around you. Also, get work experience before coming. It helps a lot. Someone who's worked before can read situations better and adapts more quickly. If you haven't worked before, it's harder to get along with Japanese bosses.



On the opening stage of the festival, I gave a short speech about the need for artists to serve the people over corporations. However, **Kanayo Ueda-san** from **Cocoroom - Guesthouse, Cafe and Garden ~Kamagasaki University of the Arts~** reminded me after my speech that without sponsorships and support from the corporate world, this festival could not have happened. It made me think about the interconnected reality of modern industry and the art world. Focusing on the negative aspect of capitalism comes naturally to me, but throughout my time in Osaka, I began to realize that reality is much more complex and complicated than my naive idealistic stances. Good and bad, it seems, come together.



Photography credits: Wataru Maitani



MAKING HOME IN OSAKA: Interview with Koko & Htoo

Conducted by Saul Chan Htoo Sang on April 18, 2025 at Cafe Atariya.

SAUL: My main question is: How do you make home here in Japan?

HTOO: Living here means doing everything on your own. No family to lean on. You've got to take care of yourself—buy your own cooking ware, clean up, cook, wash clothes. Things we never really had to do back home. Now, it's essential. We learn by doing.

Towards the end of my time in Osaka, I learned about the **Integrated Resort** project for the man-made island, **Yumeshima**, where **EXPO 2025** is taking place. What it means is that Osaka is building more casinos and luxurious hotels for the rich. During my conversation with the owner of Earth Cafe, he explained that it is better to take money from the rich than to take money from the poor. My gut instincts felt correct again. What is the point of building an expensive infrastructure that only the rich people can benefit? Investing more in the arts & culture I believe would bring more prosperity to Osaka.

With many mixed feelings, I decided to be in solidarity with the workers of Osaka. My performances on Mayday are dedicated to the struggling communities. Instead of a conventional documentation of the poor people, I embodied the spirits of my neighborhood to promote more possibilities of creativity and connection for the diverse communities that reside here. Most importantly, the performances serve as a testament to my newfound kinship with the people in Kamagasaki.

I'm calling this zine: "**Kamagasaki**" to honor and highlight the workers who have helped made Japan advanced into the modern world. But as capitalism demands, those who sacrificed the most gained the least in our contemporary world. May justice prevail for us all.

Saul Chan Htoo Sang, July 2025



Photography credits: Tomasz Jurewicz

The neighborhood I stayed in Osaka is commonly known as **Nishinari Area**. But I choose to use the name **Kamagasaki** because of its connection to the working class history. **Kamagasaki** is famous as a Yoseba, “a place where employers and laborers directly meet for possible employment.” In “The History of Kamagasaki: After 1945,” Ariuma Sen writes that because of “the construction boom leading up to the 1970 World’s Fair in Osaka, day laborers came to Kamagasaki from all over the country.” This shared connection to the **EXPO** made me empathize with the people in this neighborhood as I was also in Osaka due to the **EXPO 2025**.

The inviting organizations provided me a house in front of **Sankaku Triangle Park** in **Kamagasaki**. This park is where many aging people gather daily to spend time together. But the first few weeks I moved into the house, I did not know how to interact with the local community. Most of the people in the neighborhood are drunk or trying to get drunk. I began witnessing strange phenomena such as fights between the police and the residents as the rain pattered with bitter cold winds. Some mornings, I woke up to the sound of electric bass guitar as a local musician shredded to popular songs. Some nights, I heard loud bangs on the door of the house along with angry voices yelling, keeping me far from sleep. After three weeks, I began seeing the neighborhood as a place in between. In between, past and present. In between, spiritual and physical realms.



I drank beer and smoked cigarettes heavily to cope with the culture of **Kamagasaki**. But during my time in this neighborhood, I discovered the feeling of lightness and ease in my social life with day drinking and chain smoking. But alcohol and nicotine addiction began taking a toll on my mental and physical health. After one month of being in **Kamagasaki**, I began to lose control of my emotions during the day. At night, I felt a heaviness spreading in my chest as I try to sleep. The urge to drink or smoke sat on my shoulders like a yokai. Even when I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a yokai looking back at me. My hair and beard grew longer than I intended. And I became one with **Kamagasaki**.

Living in Kamagasaki for seven weeks, the barrier between the spiritual and physical realms slowly crumpled for me. I tried my best to capture the transformation I was going through with **anatta** performances. My personal understanding of yokai also evolved from an alienating perspective to a real phenomenon as I live among the people of **Kamagasaki**. Reflecting on the lifestyle of this neighborhood, I recognized how much alcohol and cigarettes can affect us deeply as humans. I noticed that pachinkos, alcohol and tobacco companies, along with the big development companies (which monopolized the land ownership) continued to exploit the struggling people of **Kamagasaki**. Believing in the supernatural became a way of making sense of the strangeness that I face daily in this neighborhood.



Photography credits: Tomasz Jurewicz

