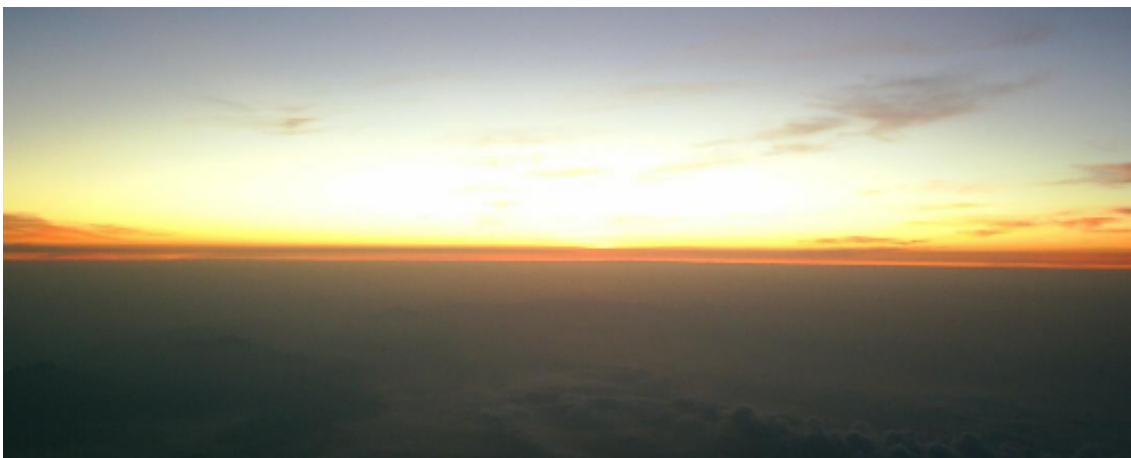


To the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce

Midterm report

Account of my experience in Japan



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Language school: IFIE, Kanazawa, Ishikawa (3 months)

Internship: Hitachi GST, Fujisawa, Kanagawa (9 months)

Program organized by: EPFL and Prof. MIZUNO

Preface

First, I would like to thank Mr. DUDLER and the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC) for offering me their scholarship fund, which made my stay in Japan possible. Without it, I would be in much of a financial hardship, and would not have been able to discover the country and the culture as much as I did up to now.

Table of content

Introduction.....	4
Getting prepared.....	4
First impressions.....	6
Kanazawa.....	7
Japanese classes.....	8
Cultural activities.....	9
Host family.....	9
The people of Kanazawa and us.....	11
Moving to the Tokyo area.....	13
Life in dormitories.....	14
Life at the company.....	16
Living on a budget.....	17
Living as a foreigner.....	19
Conclusion.....	22

Introduction

It has been seven months since I have been here in Japan, and I cannot help smiling when I try to reckon the time I took the decision to come here, which was about a year and a half ago. I can remember the first time I saw, on the wall of the Microengineering department, at EPFL (Swiss institute of technology, Lausanne), a small poster that advertised a one-year program in Japan for young graduates, starting with a three-month intensive language course in either Kanazawa or Okazaki, and followed with a 9-month internship in a high-tech company.

Being Swiss of Asian descent, I have always had the plan of going live in Asia for a few years, especially since I never had the chance to stay there for more than a few months at a time, usually during summer vacation. From my youngest age, I went once or twice a year to Thailand, and I have always enjoyed my time there. Every time I came back to Switzerland, I felt frustrated not being able to really experience living there. But, growing up, I realized that Thailand would not offer as many opportunities, especially for an engineer, as Europe or North America.

I never had the idea of going to Japan before I saw that poster, but then, I started thinking about it. Wouldn't it be a good chance to match my desire to live in Asia with a great professional experience? If the Japanese people are as kind as the Thai people, and work as interesting as it would be in Switzerland, wouldn't that be perfect for me?

Getting prepared

With this state of mind, I applied for this program. When I learned that I was selected, and that I would be first doing a home-stay in Kanazawa, learning Japanese, and after that working near Tokyo for the hard-disk section of Hitachi, a huge company involved in nuclear power plants as well as in air-conditioners, I started to realize that I really didn't know anything about that country. So I watched "Stupeur et tremblements", a film adapted from Amelie Nothomb's book, started reading internet forums about Japan, and realized that it was indeed a country very different from anywhere I had ever been to.

As I heard some stories about tensions between a fringe of the Japanese population and Asian foreigners living there, I also looked into that matter, sending a few emails to former Asian students who did the same program as the one I was going to. They all replied the same thing, which is that they were not always treated the same way as their "more-foreign-looking" classmates, that they didn't have the same "star-status", but they never felt hostility against them. Even if not totally relieved, I felt that I wouldn't miss not being a "star" in Japan.

And there was the **language**, too. I bought the book "Genki 1", which is arguably the best book for self-study, learned Hiragana in one week-end (even though it took more time to stop confusing the similar-looking ones), attended a couple times the Japanese class given at EPFL, before going one semester to the University of Florida for my master project. I tried to take Japanese classes there too, but unfortunately, I arrived at the Fall semester, and the beginner's courses were only being given in the Spring semesters. Nevertheless, I attended "beginner-intermediate" classes, which were a lot too advanced for me, and studied on my own, sometimes doing intense three-hour streaks, sometimes not opening my book for weeks. Thus, my level of Japanese was lower than those who stayed at EPFL and took beginner classes there, although, as I would find out later, the difference was not dramatic.

In March 2007, I finished my project and flew back to Switzerland for a few weeks. In parallel with preparations for my final project presentation, I took care of the few **administrative steps** I had to take before leaving, namely getting an airplane ticket, my Visa and an international insurance plan, renewing my passport and announcing my departure for the Swiss retirement plan (or AVS). The procedure for the Japanese Visa was much less nerve-wracking than for the American one, as I just had to send an application a few months before entering Japan, and then just had to go to the consulate at Geneva and give them my passport (and the Certificate of Eligibility), before receiving it back two days later by mail, with the new Visa included. As for the insurance, I got a one-year contract with my Swiss insurance company, but a Japanese national plan seems to be available, for about ¥50'000 a year, applications being available at City halls (at the same time as alien registration).

The week following the graduation ceremony, I got on the plane for Tokyo, with a very low level of Japanese, with the fear that nobody would speak English there, that my home-stay in Kanazawa would be a disaster due to the clash between uptight traditional

rules and my independent spirit, that the classes there would be going to fast for me, that the working environment would be terrible, and, somewhere in the back of my mind, that perhaps I would suffer from some form of discrimination. Needless to say, those pre-departure worries disappeared quickly enough, as they all proved to be false.

First impressions

What struck me the most during the two days I spent in Tokyo before going to Kanazawa is that how lonely one can feel even when surrounded by a crowd. People in the train looked sad and tired, and so was I after only a few hours on Japanese territory. The language happened to be a big barrier, for example when I wanted to buy a train ticket, with the gigantic railway-network plan displayed all in kanji and no attendants in sight, or also when I decided to venture into a tiny *yakitori* restaurant, with again all the menus in Japanese and no English-speaking waitresses.

However, every time I started to feel overwhelmed by the culture shock, I received help that would make me see the bright side again. For instance, in the *yakitori-ya* in question, the couple seated next to me at the counter helped me order, and then offered me the food and the *shouchuu* they were having. It is at this moment that I learnt that *sake* just meant alcohol in Japanese, not the national rice-liquor. In another situation, a woman who couldn't speak a word of English got more than two hundred meters out of her way to take me to the front steps of hotel I was looking for. In other words, these first few days showed me that, behind an apparent coldness, Japanese people were in fact nicer and more helping than one could think.

Kanazawa



The first impression I had when I arrived at Kanazawa is that it seemed really quiet, I was afraid I was going to get bored there. Luckily, I would be proved to be wrong. It was in fact a city with twice as many inhabitants than Lausanne, with a modern downtown area contrasting with more traditional-looking streets and neighborhoods.

It was at the **IFIE** (Ishikawa Foundation for International Exchange), the institute where we would learn Japanese and which organized everything for our stay in Kanazawa, from the home-stay program to cultural activities, that I met for the first time the three EPFL graduates who were in the same program as me. The IFIE is a small institute which holds most of the time no more than a dozen students, but with sometimes peaks of forty students. Nevertheless, the number of overall students did not affect our program much, as we did not have any common classes with other groups.

The Sunday we arrived, we were welcomed by the school staff very formally, with tense smiles. A one-hour "course" was held in order to instruct us about what we should or should not do in our host families, including such topics as showers in the morning and going out on weekends, which made me worry even more about feeling "imprisoned".

Only after this could we meet our respective host families, who warmly welcomed all of us. Thanks to the 127 students she hosted before me for the past 15 years, my host mother could speak English quite well, which made communication possible in the first

few weeks. Her having such a big experience with foreigner's habits, and sometimes blunders, quickly enough put me at ease. We went over the list of "household rules" that the school gave us, which items we should agree upon for the home-stay to go smoothly, and I was relieved when she replied "yes" to every question, more specifically that I would be able to take a shower whenever I want, and that I would be able to go in and out however I want (no curfew, in other words), as long as I tell her in advance, so that she knows whether she has to cook for me or not. It really was a relaxed household.

Japanese classes

The three-month-long Japanese course started with the very first chapter of the "Genki 1" book. The first week, we even had some hiragana writing practices on the blackboard and pronunciation exercises. However, some teachers were too kind to dare correct our pronunciation from the beginning, and this was even apparent at the end of the program, when, for instance, German-native speakers would pronounce *vatashi* instead of *watashi*. Also, we all still had trouble after those three months to consistently pronounce long and short vowels distinctly. While those points are not important to make oneself understood, as the meaning can be deducted by the context, they are nevertheless necessary in order to be able to speak Japanese without too much of an accent.

During the whole program, the class consisted of only the four of us, which was optimal for fast learning, with a lot of speaking practice time for all of us. In all, we had six different teachers, three for each half of the program, in alternation day after day. This is another great strength of this language school, as we could experience the different approach, pace, and also voice, inherent to each teachers. Some liked our sense of humor, as after only a few weeks we started to constantly create funny or absurd sentences to practice new grammar, and a couple others took more time to get used to it. Thanks to that, with some teachers, we could quickly learn some new structures by continuously playing with the language, which requires more concentration and a more complete comprehension than saying straight-forward sentences, while with other more strict teachers, we learned example-type patterns that we would hear more frequently.

After a week, we covered everything my classmates have learned for one semester during the weekly Japanese class at EPFL, and we finished the two "Genki" books at the end of the program. The first few weeks were especially intense, as new words were

hard to memorize. We covered on average two of the book's lessons a week, listening exercises included. This was a good pace to keep us challenged at all times, as we had to do homework and practice vocabulary everyday in order to keep up with the fifty new words that come with each lesson. Adding the kanji practices, it would take approximately two hours of daily studies outside the classroom, which was perfect, considering we only had classes in the morning.

The classes, combined with daily contacts with the host family and the school staff, in particular, were so effective that we could sustain simple conversations after a few weeks, and express more complex ideas after a few months. At the end of the program, with a little more kanji practices, we would have improved enough to pass the level 3 of the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test). Furthermore, provided a similar continuous studying effort is pursued afterwards during the internship, the level 2 could be attainable by the end of the year, the test being given once a year on December.

Cultural activities

In addition to the language classes, we had once or twice a week activities during the afternoon, which were also organized by the IFIE. At the first glance of the program, I wasn't particularly thrilled, as most of the activities proposed, such as pottery and ikebana (flower arrangement), were not in my usual field of interests. However, I really came to appreciate all of them, and I was the first surprised when I caught myself taking so much care fixing the flowers at the correct angle, for instance.

Most of the activities showcased the traditional craftsmanship present at, and sometimes even specific to (as for example the "golden-leaf chopstick" class), Kanazawa. Living there was really a great chance to discover arts and lifestyle that are so traditionally Japanese that they might even be foreign to Tokyoites.

Host family

At first, the relationship between my host family and me was hindered by my lack of knowledge of Japanese, as only the host mother could speak English. Even though all of them were very nice to me, we would run out of words to say rather quickly at dinnertime. However, they never kept me out of their daily activities, introducing me to

everyone who came visit them, which made me practice the language on a continuous basis. They would also tirelessly reply to my numerous questions about Japanese grammar. Thus, I learned many expressions before they were introduced to us at the language school, making the learning process smoother. In fact, I owe my progress in the language at least as much to my host family as to the courses.

Conversations grew naturally longer and longer, along with my language capabilities. Before long, I became close to each member of the family, and during the second half of my stay in Kanazawa, I would often talk until past midnight with the host family's mother. My sense of humor, quite different from the Japanese one, was understood and appreciated in this household, or to be more accurate, nearly only in this household.

The last month of my stay, sensing that I would leave soon, the host mother generously took me to many sightseeing spots in the region, planning and fitting those trips in her tight schedule. For instance, she took me to *Shirakawa-gou*, a village in the Gifu prefecture with old-style houses. I would discover later on that it was one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites.



Even when we would just stay at home, living with this family was always fun. The mother was holding a small restaurant in the front part of the house, and thus, she was a

great cook, and even taught me how to make sashimi once. Whenever guests would come to have dinner with us, she would frequently steer the conversation in my way, so that I wouldn't feel left out, and this would often cause a salvo of questions about Switzerland to be launched at me. I think I surprised at least a few dozens people in Kanazawa by saying that Switzerland was not much colder than Japan, or by talking about the multilingual aspect of that country. Such dinners would usually finish not earlier than midnight. In a more general sense, living with this family made me discover a completely different lifestyle than what I have been used to in western countries, a much more relaxed and stress-free one, indeed.

The people of Kanazawa and us

Having a schedule that left most of our afternoons free, we had time to roam around in the city, do our homework in coffee shops, or practice some sports. I went to a "batting center" and played baseball once every other week, and one of my classmates did *judo*. He was the only foreigner in the class, and everyone was very friendly with him. According to him, the children stared at him with surprise the first time they saw him, but later on, he was well accepted and some elementary schoolboys would repeatedly want to practice against him.

Other contacts we had with the local population occurred when we were out on the weekends. Several times, we would eat in a restaurant (mostly *okonomiyaki* or traditional restaurants) and the people from the table next to us would start speaking to us, asking where we were from, and so on. The stereotype of the shy Japanese proved to be wrong at night, especially after they had had a few beers.

I noticed that the Japanese way of thinking is different from the western one as soon as I stepped into the airplane, but it struck me once more two months later. I was allowed to use the host family's bicycle to go to school, a fifteen-minute ride. On that day, as on many others in Kanazawa, it rained, and right in front of the school, on the slippery broad sidewalk, I fell when I took sharp turn. At that instant, at least five people, most of them *salary-men* in suits, were walking on that same sidewalk. I was so surprised of my sudden fall that I remained motionless on the ground a few seconds, and during this interval, nobody helped me get up, asked me if I was alright, or even dared looked at me. Moreover, one of the pedestrians, me and my bike being in his way, skillfully avoided

the obstacle by walking around it. It was only at that instant that I felt pain, but it was not a physical one, for I only had a few scratches.

As anecdotal as this event seems, it made me wonder about the reasons of what they did, or as a matter of fact, of what they did not. Having only met friendly people up to then, strangers that would walk out of their way to make sure you arrive at destination, I was stunned by their behavior. One of my classmates also told me a story about an old lady who could barely get into the bus, and whom nobody helped. How can people be so nice and unsympathetic at the same time?

The only answer I could find by myself, beside them being too busy to get out of their way, was honor. Perhaps, helping someone would mean that this person is helpless and pitiful, which would embarrass him or her. I also asked Japanese people around me, and most considered what happened to me rather normal, with nothing surprising, others just laughed it off. My host family's mother, whom I would describe as being much less uptight than most of the Japanese population, could not provide any explanations, but added that, as regretful as it is, Japanese people don't usually help out strangers. On the other hand, a Japanese friend of mine, who assured me that not everyone was like that, jokingly adding that she would have helped me for sure, told me another explanation, which is that they simply did not know what to do in face of this less-than-ordinary situation, and that perhaps they feared that I would angrily refuse their help if they came up to me. She further told me that she once felled from stairs in a subway, and that people started gathering around her and asking how she was doing. Although I was a little unsatisfied by those explanations, I gradually got more and more used to this aspect of the Japanese mind, and later in Tokyo, I would not be shocked anymore to sometimes see in trains a man lying unconscious on the floor after too much of a drunken night, with people just looking away.

Moving to the Tokyo area

After three months in Kanazawa, it was time to move to the *Kanto* area for my internship. I was very sad to have to leave my host family, who became like a real family to me, the few friends I had made, and also the calm yet merry life I lead. Nevertheless, I was also up for a new challenge, motivated to test my new language skills in a more immersed environment. Also, after such a long period of daily classes, I felt compelled to discover something new.

Promising to everyone that I would come back often, I took the bus for Tokyo. It took eight hours, but cost half the price of the local train and Shinkansen combination (Kanazawa is not served by Shinkansen lines, and one needs to transfer either at Niigata or at Gifu). Then, following the instructions of my supervisor-to-be 's e-mail, I took the Tokaido line to Totsuka, transferred for the Yokohama municipal subway, to my final destination, Shonandai. Part of the city of Fujisawa in the Kanagawa prefecture, it lies approximately one hour by train away from Tokyo, or half an hour from Yokohama.

After a night in a "business hotel", which are relatively cheap (around ¥6'000 a night), but small compared to standard western hotels, I woke up with my first day of work awaiting. Wearing a suit, I took the taxi to go to the company, where I had first to deal with a security guard and the paperwork he handed in order to have access to the inner compound. Seeing my name, he asked me whether I was Thai. Since I applied for the internship as a Swiss citizen coming from EPFL, I said "no, I come from Switzerland." "Where?", he asked once more. "*Su-i-su*", I repeated. He nodded. Then, he called a secretary so that she called my superior, to know if I should be allowed to actually get in or not. On the phone he said, "there's a Thai who ..." at which time I just gave up. I was worried for a split second that they would not let me in, my superior saying "what, a Thai? No, we are not waiting for anyone Thai here." But my worries were groundless, since I was given access a few minutes later.

My direct superior, a kacho-san (translated as 1st line manager), spent nearly the whole day taking care of me. Now knowing how hard he always works, looking back, I can say that he really sacrificed a lot of time so that I would feel good at my new workplace.

He explained to me the structure of the company. Hitachi Group, the giant mother company, owned Hitachi Global Storage Technologies, bought years ago from IBM in order to have a foothold in the hard-disk industry. HGST has facilities worldwide, the biggest factories being in Asia (China and Thailand for example), and the main headquarters in Japan and at San Jose, California. Several thousand employees belong to this subsidiary of Hitachi. The group I would be working in is the Adtech (Advanced technologies) department, or more specifically in the servo group of this department. In this department, research is done for the next generation products, and the group I was in was thus involved in developing automatic control techniques such as to make the head position itself more and more accurately, a requirement so that the capacity of hard-disks can keep on increasing. At the time I entered the company, one-terabyte (1000 Gb) hard drives had been recently commercialized. I was especially motivated as the domain I would be working in fitted perfectly with my major and specialization.

The servo-group was composed of a little bit more than ten engineers, but was mixed with several other groups in the huge office, an open-space of nearly the size of a football field, hosting approximately two hundred employees. Cubicles gave a little bit of privacy, and were large enough to be comfortable for two persons and their computers, testing equipments and books. As intimidating as it seemed at first, it was good, although not convivial, working environment.

Life in dormitories

After being told that wearing a suit was unnecessary, I was took later in the afternoon to my "dormitory", even though the term "corporate apartments" would be less misleading, as every tenants had an individual room. In western standards, my apartment would be described as tiny, just as I was reminded by a friend who came visit me from Switzerland. But, I feel quite lucky to have a small kitchenette and a private bathroom. Indeed, most of the company dormitories usually have common showers and restrooms.

All of the hundred tenants of the apartment complex, comprising between five and ten small buildings, are male employees of HGST. Most of them are single, but there are actually a lot of them that are in their fifties, have somewhere far away a house, a wife and children, whom they go to see only on weekends.

There also is a small cafeteria within the compound, which serves daily meals for the small price of ¥400 for dinner and ¥200 for breakfast. The quantity/price ratio can hardly be beaten, and the quality is good enough, even though it takes time to adapt after three months of Kanazawa's freshest and finest Japanese cuisine.

That same day, the person in charge of the complex explained with great details the rules for living there. I understood quite well what he was saying, but he requested the help of my superior to translate every one of his sentences, that plastic should be separated from burnable garbage, and also that I should activate a switch next to my door every time I go back home, and switch it off when I quit my room. I asked him the reason for the latter, and he replied (addressing to my boss) that it was to deactivate an alarm system, and also for him to see when I am there or not, "for my well-being". He then added that sometimes, he goes into rooms around 11 in the morning to check that "everything is alright".

Even though I realized at that very instant that there were perhaps other reasons than my well-being for those measures, my worries turned out to be confirmed after a few months living there. The switch is indeed a good tool to control employees during non-working hours. For example, if I went on a trip on the week-end, I would sometimes, on the way to the cafeteria, hear a remark on Monday night from the complex supervisor, who after a few weeks were not afraid to talk to me anymore, which would sound like "you weren't here this week-end, were you?", with a somehow discontented expression on his face. I am supposed to inform him of my whereabouts, but my plans are usually made at the last minute, and most of the time I either don't have the chance, or simply forget to tell him about my plans.

The other occasions at which the use of this switch is made apparent to me, is when I go to work late. My superior gave me some flexibility in my working time, which makes me sometimes go to work around 11:00, but finish after 20:00. Once, after one of these long days, I saw that *Oyasan*, and he asked me if I was "in flexible time" now.

This lack of privacy is nearly the only problem I have with my accommodations. Indeed, it is conveniently situated, as I it takes only ten minutes on foot to get to the company, and as much time to get to the Shonandai station. It is also very cheap, ¥20'000 a month for the regular employees, and even free for me. In fact, if I had the same salary, without these company-run apartments, I would not have enough money to live, as rent is

expensive here, comparable to Switzerland. Nevertheless, I feel that this total lack of respect for privacy is hard to accept, as a matter of principle. What they do is not really visible, but it must affect every tenant at least in a subconscious level, as daily life becomes linked to work, and what is done outside of work can have repercussions at the workplace later on. The fact that everyone seems so sad, and that people eat dinner alone at the cafeteria, where the only audible sounds are those emitted by the TV, might be linked to that. How can one relax and talk freely if every words said can be heard by colleagues and managers, if friends outside of the company cannot come visit unless announced in advance?

The worse part is that what is done here in my dormitory can be considered as mild compared to other companies' dormitories. For instance, other dormitories are usually contained in one single building, with the landlord keeping an eye on the entrance, whereas several buildings constitute the complex I live in, which makes this kind of surveillance unpractical. Another Swiss friend of mine who is also doing an internship in Japan has his room checked in three times a week, first noticing it when he saw that things were moved during his absence, whereas, as far as I know, mine has not been intruded yet. Looking back, I find it ironic that what I was afraid of before doing the home-stay at Kanazawa proved to be unfounded there, but became true when I least expected it. Indeed, I actually felt that I had more freedom when I lived in a stranger's house than when I had in my own apartment.

Life at the company

I was nervous the first few weeks because of what I heard about Japanese corporations, and also because the teachers at Kanazawa told us to use *keigo* (honorific Japanese) with our superiors. I was nervous being rude without knowing it, but I soon realized that the atmosphere was more relaxed than I thought. Hierarchy can sometimes be noticeable, for instance when a superior speaks in "short form" and the subordinate replies in "polite form" (verbs ending in "*mas*" and "*desu*" at the end of sentences), but not in such a different way than in western companies. I also heard that everything was rigidly organized, and although I cannot disagree with that, big Swiss companies can sometimes be that way too. There are nevertheless a few rules, but not enforced very strictly. For instance, in order not to overcrowd the cafeteria, there are "shifts" to go to eat, but it is not rare to see people eating before or after they are supposed to.

Another point that shows that the rules are not as unbreakable as one could have thought is the working hours. Punctuality is a quality as appreciated in Japan as in Switzerland, but not everyone is on time in the morning. Also, some people have flexible schedule and come late and stay late. Furthermore, most of the people are gone by 19:00, which is in contrast with the stereotype of the Japanese employee working every night until past 22:00. My boss told me it did not always used to be like this, but that recently the attitude of Japanese companies tended to be more flexible, trying not to make employees overwork. The idea that working until late is well-perceived by superiors is still widespread, especially among young employees, who think that they should stay late and show that they have the will to work hard in order to be promoted. Thus, some employees do everyday at least 2 hours of overtime work, even if they do not have anything in particular to work on, but they are most of the time reminded in a friendly manner by their bosses that there is no need to stay that late and that they should go back home.

Also, in big companies, anywhere in the world I would dare to say, presence is often valued over efficiency, but this way of thinking is more visible in Japan. For example, beside the people who smoke, nobody takes breaks. Even though it must be more efficient to sometimes take a short coffee break, my colleagues would buy a coffee at the machine and hurry back at their working place, perhaps by fear of being considered to be lazy if they were having a chat next to the coffee machine.

Beside those points, there are not many differences between this Japanese company and western multinational corporations.

Living on a budget

By itself, the ¥100'000 salary that I am receiving during my internship would hardly be enough to live a decent life, and thus, I cannot thank enough the help that the SJCC provided me with. Beside the salary, my company let me rent the aforementioned apartment free-of-charge, and takes care of other housing related charges, such as electricity and water. In the same fashion, when I was living in Kanazawa, I had accommodation, breakfast and dinner offered, and went everyday to school by bicycle, and thus my daily charges would be limited. Thus, one might feel that less than

¥150'000 a month would not be enough to live in the expensive country that Japan is, but it is in fact enough for me to travel a few times and discover a little bit the country.



It was a little stressful seeing the money I received from the SJCC slowly deplete when I was living in Kanazawa, but with my moving to Tokyo, new monthly provisions came and make a normal life possible. Thus, I could make small excursions, as I went to Kyoto, Hiroshima, Osaka and Nara on short three-day trips, when there was a national holiday on Monday or Friday. I always could discover beautiful temples, busy streets, magnificent landscapes or great food during each of those trips. In August, I went up the Mt. Fuji, and could experience the most unreal "traffic jam", from midnight to 5 in the morning, at an altitude of 3000m, the way being so crowded that it took eight hours to get to the top, instead of the four hours predicted. I could only agree with the Japanese proverb that says "the one who has never climbed Mt. Fuji is stupid, but the one who climbed it twice is also a stupid", because even though the view of the rising sun from the top is really worth the trip, group tours with guides shouting "*gambatte!*" and holding fluorescent lights on the way up, painful legs on the way down, and the long wait for a bus to get back to Tokyo after a sleepless night are definitely big enough reasons to prevent the wise one to admire Mt. Fuji only from afar.

It is also during those journeys away from daily life that one can most feel that he is actually in Japan. The scenery and people met during those trips make one realize how lucky he is to be able to live in such a fascinating country. And this feeling can also become apparent without going too far away, as just going eat with Japanese friends in an *Izakaya* is enough to make one realize the exoticism of the situation.

With the SJCC scholarship fund and the internship salary, it is thus possible to live an interesting, full life in Japan, although, obviously, choices have sometimes to be made. For instance, when I left Kanazawa, I told my host family that I would come visit them every two months, but I was only able to go visit them once in the past five months, the other trips in Shinkansen having cost a lot (more than ¥30'000 for the round trip ticket to Hiroshima, for example). Also, on weekdays, I nearly eat all my meals at the company's or the dormitories' cafeteria, in order to save money for the week-ends. Thus, in my opinion, ¥150'000 a month is, provided that housing is free, enough to have a lifestyle similar to a student's one, with a few trips made possible if daily expenditures are kept low.



Living as a foreigner

My worries of not being treated well as foreigner in Japan vanished as soon as I stepped into the plane, and never reappeared again. Japanese people are indeed very friendly people, and although foreigners are usually treated differently, it is either to make them feel more at ease in the unusual setting that Japan must be, or simply by fear of communication problems.

A good example of the will to please the foreigner is the "*Nihongo ga jouzu desu ne*" phrase (your Japanese is good). It is probably one of the sentences that a foreigner can hear the most, whatever his level of Japanese is. It is thus not always a sincere compliment, but it is said to make the foreigner feel good, which shows this welcoming face of the Japanese mind. After two months in Kanazawa, I once said "*arigatou gozaimasu*" to a woman selling *tako-yaki*, to which she replied with that phrase. I felt a little frustrated at first, that after so much effort learning Japanese, I was praised for saying something I knew even before flying to this country, but then I realized that she was just trying to be nice with me. A good way to determine the sincerity of the speaker is the timing of the utterance, and a good native-like answer would be to disagree politely and in a humble way, with a tint of timidity, saying something like "*sonna koto wa arimasen*" (this is not the case) or "*mada mada desu*" (not yet).

Some Japanese people can feel intimidated to have to deal with a foreigner, especially if they only have had limited contact with foreigners up to then. Most of the people I met at Kanazawa are obviously not part of this group, such as my host family, their friends or the staff at the language school. A friend of my host family's mother's once told me that it was thanks to the numerous encounters she had with the international students living at my host family's house that she got used to talking with foreigners, realizing that mastering English was not a requirement for being able to communicate with them. She added that a few years ago, she would have panicked if a foreigner started talking to her, even if it was in Japanese.

Unfortunately, a lot of people react that exact same way. In Tokyo, where foreigners are more often seen than in Kanazawa, Japanese people seem to be more used to them, but this kind of reaction can be still be noticed frequently in the capital. For instance, it took a while before people started not being afraid to talk to me at my workplace, although I talked in Japanese most of the time. When I used to say "*ohaiyou gozaimasu*" to colleagues I happened to run into in corridors, the most common reaction would be them showing signs of uneasiness before replying without confidence "good morning" or not replying at all. Of course, Japanese people who do not see foreigners in a different way than their compatriots exist, and those are the ones whom it is easiest to become friends with, as they are not intimidated as much. Most of the people belonging to this group have either lived abroad, or have good foreign friends.

As for me, most of the people think that I am Japanese until I start speaking, and then, I am treated nearly the same way as any of my more western-looking friends. The only difference is that, if I am alone or among Japanese friends, people would be surprised that I am not Japanese and ask me where I come from (before getting even more surprised when I say that I come from Switzerland). On the other hand, if I am among western friends, I would lack their "star appeal" and Japanese people interested in foreigners will talk to my friends sometimes without even noticing me. Some people don't seem to understand easily that I come from Switzerland, and although I don't think that my pronunciation is that bad, apparently the way I pronounce *suisu* is very close to *chuugoku*, as I experienced the following dialog many times:

"Oh, you are not Japanese? Where are you from?"

"Switzerland."

"China?"

"No, Switzerland"

Then, if my pronunciation is still not good enough the second time, I need to add "I was born in Switzerland but my parents are Thai" before I can see the eyes of the person I am talking to lighten up.

But beside those awkward introductions, there is not much difference between the way I and more Swiss-looking Swiss are treated. Anyway, I was already used to having trouble explaining that I was Swiss, experiencing the same stupefaction in every country I have been to, and ironically, also in Switzerland. Thus, I would say that Japan is in this aspect not different from any other country in the world, living as a foreigner here is not easier, nor more difficult than in Switzerland. My earlier worries about being an Asian foreigner were thus proved to be unfounded.

Conclusion

Japan is a country that I really like, and coming here made me discover new lifestyles, ways of dealing with problems, ways of thinking, in short, a new culture, but also, as most travels far away from home in general, it also made me discover more about myself. Although going to live in Japan is not as adventurous as trekking in the Amazonian rainforest, the daily encounters, may it be people, scenery, or even posted signs, can be just as surprising and different from anything seen up to then, and it opens one's mind all the same.



I appreciate living in this country so much that, like many of my *sempai*, I am seriously considering about working a few more years here. I have hardly seen a quarter of the Tokyo region, not to mention other parts of the country, so I would need more time to get to know the country better.

Also, somehow unexpectedly, I really happen to appreciate learning the language, in order to communicate better with the people surrounding me, but also just for the knowledge in itself. I rediscovered how learning a language can be interesting and

rewarding. However, since I left Kanazawa, I haven't been taking any classes and haven't had the chance to speak as much Japanese as in Kanazawa, where I spent at least two hours a day talking in Japanese outside of the classroom, especially at the host family's house. At the company, there are only a few people I can talk to, as there are no real occasions in which colleagues can get to know each other, as people eat together always in the same groups and nobody takes breaks. Company's *nomikai*, such as welcome parties or year-end parties, do put people in a more relaxed setting, but some people still seem to be intimidated to talk to me, and were I to ask a question, a common practice would be to reply in an embarrassed way to my boss so that he translates their answer in English for me. Thus, for the past months, I mostly learned Japanese on my own. I have been studying new grammar using a book called "A Dictionary of Intermediate Japanese Grammar", which gives detailed explanations of nuances and uses of many grammar points. As for the kanji, I look up on the internet when I see an unknown one, and though the rate of progress is not as fast as during the time of the intensive classes, I can read a lot more now than when I left Kanazawa. At the same time I look for a kanji signification, compounds with this kanji appears on the internet dictionary, and I can thus learn new vocabulary. At work, I could memorize technical terms, such as "stability", "frequency" or "coefficient". Also at the company, very formal e-mails are sometimes sent to all the employees, and in such occasions, I can learn new expressions and kanji. Because of these reasons, most of the words I have learned the past months are either formal or very specialized, and I hardly learned any new verbs. Due to the only limited number of words I can pronounce each day, it also takes more time to get used to new words or grammar constructions. Fortunately, my weekends are more socially active, and with my Japanese friends, I can practice my speaking skills more efficiently and listen to more casual language.

The main reason that would make me hesitate to stay longer in Japan is the salary. Indeed, I have heard that the starting salary for an engineer is around ¥200'000 a month, approximately 3 times less than in Switzerland, for a cost of living definitely not three times less expensive. With a salary of ¥200'000, compared to now, my lifestyle would not be improved. Indeed, as I would prefer not to stay longer in the company dormitories, I would move, and it might even be possible that, due to the charges related to the apartment, less money would be left at the end of the month. With such a salary, I would hardly be able to save enough money to go visit my family in Switzerland once a year. In other words, my living standards would be a lot lower if I stay in Japan than if I go back to Switzerland, and I would need more time to consider this question.