

Midterm Report

to Mr. Paul Dudler, Chairman, SJCC – Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce
Scholarship Fund

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Preface

Having enjoyed the Japanese life and culture already for six months, I would like to share my experiences with successors in order to give them confidence for the coming 12 months and help them avoid mistakes, I did.

I dreamed for years about going to Japan and discovering this country more deeply, as parts of its culture enjoy such an appreciation all over the world yet a deeper understanding still remains hidden to most westerners. I am, therefore, especially pleased about all the support for my plan to make a one year journey to the country of the rising sun.

First of all, I would like to thank the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund and particularly Mr. Paul Dudler, who is devoting much of his time enabling youngsters, like me, to discover Japan on their own conditions by providing support and knowledge. Furthermore, I feel much obliged to thank Dr. Felix Moesner, who is coordinating all the operations of the Scholarship Fund in Japan and provides invaluable support and advice about internships, etc. I am also very grateful for the support I received from Dr. Hiroshi Tomono and Mr. Yuji Suzuki during my search for an internship. At last, I would like to thank all my family and dear friends, who supported me during the planning and throughout my time in Japan.

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Introduction

During my visit to Japan in 2006 as responsible team member in charge of Japan within the St. Gallen Symposium, I had the opportunity to discover already the surface of Japan's society and culture. What I discovered gave rise to a continuously growing interest in understanding more about the way of life in Japan and the cause of harmony, which seems to be omnipresent in every instance of daily life. Since this trip, my dreams turned to the idea of taking a sabbatical from my studies at University of St. Gallen and devote my time during one year to the studies of Japanese language as well as my continuous work for the St. Gallen Symposium. Proceeding with this idea, I was introduced to Mr. Dudler on the occasion of a reception of the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce in Zurich and was immediately attracted by the prospect of applying for the Scholarship Fund and matching reality with my dreams. Parallel, I was preparing my absence from university and after receiving positive feedback from Mr. Dudler, was ready to leave.

Expectations were high when I left Europe as I had seen already many places in Japan and experienced the culture temporarily and it turned out that even my highest expectations have been fulfilled and my first six months proved to be one of the greatest times in my life so far. Although it turned out to be difficult to integrate my language course attendance with my working obligations during that time, but it was definitely worth the difficulties. I was able to see Japan through the eyes of a Japanese businessman in the afternoon, experiencing the life of foreign language students in the morning and in the evening I was able to experience the life of Japanese students together with my friends from various universities all over Japan. The next logical step for me is now to make an internship with Sumitomo Metal Industries Ltd. in order to deepen my understanding of Japanese society and business.

Arrival

Alien registration

I already informed myself about the procedure about the application for an alien registration card in Switzerland, which is required to open a bank account, buy a cell phone and Japanese authorities require persons staying longer than 90 days to apply for an alien registration card. As a result, I did not face any difficulties in finding the appropriate “kuyakusho” – ward office in Minato-ku and had to wait around two weeks until I was able to pick up my proper new alien registration card at the ward office. However in order to proceed with creating a bank account and buy a cell phone the ward office issued a preliminary registration card, which was valid until I would receive the proper card.

However when leaving Japan on a trip to extend my tourist visa, I was astonished that the Immigration officers requested me to return my alien registration card, which seems to a general rule for tourist visa holders leaving Japan. In addition to the before mentioned, the authorities require you every time your address changes to pay a visit to the responsible ward office to inform them about your new contacts and incorporate them on the card.

Visa

Since I started putting my plan into action three months before my departure to Japan, I missed the deadlines to apply for a visa through my language school from Switzerland and therefore, postponed this issue to Japan. Having arrived in Japan on a tourist visa, I was able to stay with extension (Extension is possible for all Europeans but not for Americans) for six months in Japan and, therefore, planned to receive a cultural activities visa before the expiration of the six months term. As this seemed to be far too ambitious, I left two weeks prior to expiration for a three day trip to Seoul. Returning to Japan was not too difficult, as I explained about the present situation and about my application for a cultural activities visa and the Immigration Officer instantly issued the new tourist visa.

The application process for the cultural activities visa seems to be quiet difficult and you can not apply on your own for this visa. At first, your language school or internship company has to apply for a Certificate of Eligibility and the necessary

documents have to be submitted at the latest two or three months prior to the time of the start of the internship. The following documents were needed for the application:

- 1.) Copy of your passport
- 2.) Graduation certificate of your university or if not existent yet, your grades so far acquired in university and your grades from high school
- 3.) Confirmation that you are enrolled at university
- 4.) Recommendation letters for the SJCC scholarship
- 5.) CV
- 6.) Declarations of your objectives for your stay in Japan
- 7.) Excerpts from the regulations of the SJCC Scholarship fund
- 8.) Agreement between you and the SJCC Scholarship Fund
- 9.) Explanations about the SJCC Scholarship Fund
- 10.) Application form for the Certificate of Eligibility
- 11.) two pictures
- 12.) Documents from your parents guaranteeing for you financially and showing that your financially well situated
- 13.) Letter or documents showing that the internship is an integral part of your studies

As I applied through Sumitomo Metal Industries Ltd. for such an visa, I was told from the beginning that it was not very likely that I will receive the Certificate of Eligibility, as there are very few cases before where students received this Certificate of Eligibility for an internship and I could only hand in the PDF copies of the original documents. Regardless of the insecurity, I finally receive the Certificate two months after application and directly paid a visit to the Immigration Office to apply for the visa, which took another two weeks to be issued.

In addition to the before mentioned, I believe the reputation of the company, which is applying for the visa plays also a significant role for the success of your application.

Accommodation

Due to my experience with Sakura House before, I was strongly inclined to use their facilities again, as it is easy to make a contract with them and they have rooms all over Tokyo. However, I made two bad choices at the beginning when I stay two times in very old houses, which had not been so clean and comfortable. But at the final

end, I was so fortunate to move into a newly build Sakura House facility only 45 minutes by train from school. Documents required to make a contract with Sakura House are only your passport and the money for the first rent as well as the deposit of 30'000 Yen, out of which 20'000 Yen are refundable when moving out. You can move out anytime you just need to inform Sakura House three weeks prior to your planned moving out date. The biggest advantage of Sakura House is that their staff is fluent in English and it is very easy and cheap to rent a room as there is only a deposit required. Japanese agencies, however, require a prepayment of around two or three months rent out of which nothing is refundable, this obviously triggered my decision to choose Sakura House as the rental company.

Another company I had in mind was Tokyo Information, which offers several houses in South-West Tokyo. However after visiting the facilities, I decided to stay with Sakura House as Tokyo Information's facilities turned out to be less comfortable and looked quite old.

Language School

Before coming to Japan, I had to make the hard decision to choose the language school without knowing which one would offer the best price-value relation. I, therefore, contacted several friends in Japan and they all without exception recommended Tokyo Language School also called Naganuma School. This language school has a quite long history and is known all over Japan as the oldest Japanese language school and also the best language school. Given this feedback, I decided to apply for a language course there.

I had language courses first in the afternoon, but changed after one semester to the morning classes, since I realized that the afternoon is better to realize appointments. The classes started usually from 9:00 am on until 12:30 am and included during that time four periods with each 45 minutes.

- 1.) Repetition of the yesterday learned grammar
- 2.) Practice of conversation and repetition
- 3.) Introduction of new Grammar and texts
- 4.) Tests and continued introduction of new grammar (Kanji tests are conducted daily, every Friday there is a big grammar test and every one and a half months there is a part test followed by a unit test after three months)

During the classes you are using different books produced by Naganuma School for your level of Japanese class and teachers will use tapes and videos from time to time to illustrate certain topics or to sharpen your listening comprehension. Additionally, the school offers a language laboratory which is used weekly to improve your pronunciation, a computer lab, where you can check emails as well as a small library where you can borrow books or tapes in Japanese to improve your language further. The other students were coming from all around the world, but mostly from the South East Asian area and, therefore, most of them knew kanji already, which gave me big difficulties to keep up with them. The pace of progress was really amazing and I sometimes faced difficulties only with keeping up and learning the whole grammar by heart until the next morning. Summarizing, I could only recommend everybody to join this language school not only because of the before mentioned, but also because Shibuya is probably one of the best places to have drinking after class and engage in social activities with your classmates.

However this school is definitely not the cheapest available in Tokyo area, as I paid 170'000 Yen per semester + a registration fee of 50'000 Yen.

Bank

Reading about all the problems which my predecessors faced when trying to open a bank account in Japan with a tourist visa, I decided to use my Citibank account in Japan, as Citibank possess an extensive ATM network in Japan and no fees occur when withdrawing cash from my account in Germany. This way, I was able to receive from the first day of my arrival cash without problems and could avoid another difficulty at least for the beginning.

I planned to open my bank account later, after starting the internship and receiving the necessary documents such as visa, alien registration, hanko, etc.

Another important issue to keep in mind is that Japanese banks have a special withdrawal system for their accounts and, therefore, EC Maestro cards from Europe can only be used at Citibank ATMs or on international ATMs.

Cell Phone

Since I owned an old cell phone from my visits prior to Japan, I was good equipped for the beginning. However when I wanted to try to buy a new cell phone, as my old one was no longer fashionable enough, I faced some difficulties. First of all, after

visiting a number of different stores my expectations became reality that all of them required a visa other than tourist visa to make a contract or to even buy a pre-paid phone. Second, several mobile phone companies finished their pre-paid services and this left me with the choice between AU and Softbank's pre-paid services, which both were launching a new cell phone during my arrival time and therefore, were out of stock. Given both difficulties, I asked a Japanese friend to purchase a cell phone over the internet on her name and one week after, I had a new cell phone in my hand.

From my experience, I would recommend to you to ask your Japanese friends to purchase a cell phone for you, it is certainly the most convenient way.

Internship

Learning about all the difficulties of finding an internship in Japan, I started searching for it from my first day on. Since I had been in touch with a number of companies through my work for the St. Gallen Symposium, I tried first Toyota Motor Corporation only to find out that they are not interested in me particular but generally offer internships. As I wanted to do an internship in a Japanese company I inquired Sumitomo Metal Industries Ltd. and the company agreed to create an internship position. It seems that I was quite lucky to find an internship so easily at a Japanese company all together, however it took a long time to coordinate all the details between them and myself as I will be the first intern in that company. But two weeks prior to the start of the internship at least my visa and other organisational matters were fixed, though I still did not know what I would be doing through the next six months within the company.

Generally, I believe to be successful in finding a good internship place, it is useful to join the luncheons of the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry for which Mr. Armin Frauenknecht so kindly reduced the participation fee for recipients of the SJCC scholarship to 3'000 Yen. On these occasions you will be able to talk to a number of businessmen in Japan who might be very willing to offer you an internship in their company. Furthermore, just sending your application documents to the big multinationals such as Novartis, Nestle, Roche, Credit Suisse, UBS, Sony and Toyota might also produce some more options.

Furthermore, if you would like to join not necessarily a Swiss company, I could recommend you to contact the European Business Council (EBC) or the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which have substantial operations in Japan and could certainly give you an advice.

Comments on society

Since staying in Japan also gave me the opportunity to extensively observe Japanese habits and culture, I would like to elaborate on some of my findings below.

Discipline

Going through small alleys, walking along big streets and crossing parks it always impresses me to see that regardless of the number of people walking by that place everyday, it looks tidy, nice and enormously clean. Although when being here the first time it looked contradictory to me that a city without any public trashcans can survive one day in such a clean condition. The key might be the strong discipline by which most Japanese are driven and which requires them to carry their trash home instead of throwing it away in the instant it is produced.

Dedication

If you are touring a supermarket you will be astonished to see fruits nicely arranged and decorated in a way you might never find somewhere else on earth. Why are Japanese so fond of presenting food or goods in such a way? To me it seems that regardless what Japanese perform, the result should be extremely high quality and it should be beautiful for the eyes. This obviously applies even more for the variety of Japanese food, which is served during one meal on a huge number of plates and is presented and decorated very carefully in order that the also the eye is pleased with the consumed food.

Japan the service country

As Europe is sometimes described as the service desert, I can only agree with this assessment after living in Japan for six months that Europe certainly has to understand as soon as possible what service really means. Japanese companies and restaurants try everything to attract clients. Even in branches where products can not be easily differentiated Japanese are doing an enormous job to make the client

be satisfied with the good he is consuming. For instance taxi driver in Japan wear white gloves and a suit and the doors are opened automatically. However in order to differentiated the product of driving passengers from A to B a company in Kyoto offers clients to recharge their computers within the taxi by putting plugs in the car. This seemingly strong determination to make the client happy with anything he want to consume, is definitely unique and makes every visit to a restaurant, store or even a taxi a great experience.

Analysing a visit to a Japanese restaurant, one most striking difference to Europe was the big number of staff present in the restaurant ready to serve you anything you would like to consume, while the prizes for a meal still remained on a reasonable level. My personal explication is that the act of consuming food is regarded by many Japanese as a time, where one would like to relax and enjoy the time, which requires a big number of staff around them to be ready to serve anything needed.

Future Plans

Leaving Japan in the near future for a two weeks trip to Switzerland on the occasion of the Golden Week, I will return thereafter and continue my internship with Sumitomo Metal Industries Ltd. until September. Following that, I have to return to university to finish my studies but might be back in Japan soon after my graduation.

If you have any questions or need some advice please do not hesitate to contact me under: philipp.k.r@gmx.net.