

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund

Mr. Paul Dudler, Chairman

A year in Japan

Interim Report

April – October 2009



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Preface

One question Japanese people have been asking me all the time is “Why did you come to Japan?”. Well, this question is not easily answered and when explaining it, I actually need to start more than ten years in the past.

My journey to Japan started during my language stay in London after I had graduated from high school. The language school I attended had a lot of Japanese students and it did not take long until I had befriended quite a few of them. Unlike the general perception that Japanese people are reserved, my fellow students were very open and easy to socialize with. Soon I also became interested in the language and for the first time started thinking about maybe living in Japan one day. Who would have thought that around ten years later this would in fact come true? I have now been living in Tokyo for six months already and the experiences here have by far surpassed all my expectations.

At this point I would like to sincerely thank the donors of the SJCC Scholarship Fund for their financial support and especially Mr Paul Dudler for his support and valuable advice during the preparation stage before coming to Japan. The previous scholarship grantees' reports have been especially helpful whilst I was preparing my departure to Japan and I hope that my report will provide an equally useful source of information to future grantees.

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Introduction

In July 2008, after having worked for almost three years as an Implementation Project Manager at UBS AG, I felt the need for a career change. For quite some time I had wanted to work in the entertainment industry, more specifically the video gaming sector. However, as there are virtually no (or only very few) game companies located in Switzerland I needed to try to find a job abroad. Unfortunately, I was not very successful with my job search, mainly for two reasons: first, my lack of industry experience and secondly, my job at the time required a three months resignation period and was therefore not ideal for moving into a job in the European job market.

That was when I decided that in order to become more competitive, I needed to resign from my job. With job opportunities even in the European market in this industry being rather scarce, I really started thinking about moving to Japan and getting a foot into the door of my dream job. I realized that if I was going to quit working, I should use the opportunity and complete a language course during my stay in Japan. I knew that if I was going to start a new job in Switzerland (or Europe), such an opportunity would not present itself again anytime soon. At that point I had been learning Japanese for two years in an evening course at the "Volkshochschule Zürich". I therefore knew how complex Japanese is and that in order to learn the language I would need to spend at least six months in Japan. As spending such a long time abroad without having any income is rather difficult, I started searching the internet for information about visas for Japan that allow part-time work. I eventually came across the homepage of the SJCC and read about their scholarship program. I did not hesitate and called the scholarship chairman Mr Paul Dudler to ask about the requirements and the application process. Luckily, I fulfilled all necessary requirements and after submitting the application form I was invited to a personal interview in August 2008. In early September I was lucky enough to receive the official acceptance for the scholarship and we agreed on a starting date of April 2009. This gave me enough time for all the necessary preparations, which I will describe in the following sections.

Search for an Internship

I had already booked a three weeks holiday to Tokyo in October 2008 to visit a friend and attend a Japanese course. As soon as I received the notice of the scholarship acceptance, I wanted to take advantage of this trip and tried to arrange job interviews for possible internships. Mr Dudler was so kind as to introduce me to some contacts at Hilti AG and I was able to arrange my first interview appointment. In addition, I activated my personal network and asked friends and former study colleagues for any possible opportunities. A former study colleague subsequently introduced me to the managing director of ABC Software GmbH, a Swiss Subsidiary Company of Electronic Arts (EA). EA is an American game publishing company, which operates globally and also maintains an office in Japan. This seemed to be exactly the chance I had been looking for. I was given the contact details of the responsible HR person in Japan (Ms Sato) and immediately emailed my CV to her. Since I did not hear anything for two weeks, I sent a follow up email, as EA was my preferred company. This time I received a reply from Ms Sato the very next day. She apologized and said that they were currently preparing for the Tokyo Game Show – the major event of the year for the Japanese gaming industry – and therefore she had not yet had time to ask the managers for an internship opportunity. However, she suggested that I should come to the office anyway and meet her. Thus I was able to get my second interview set up.

Whilst writing to Hilti AG and EA, I had also contacted the Managing Director of Sony Switzerland who happens to be a board member of the SJCC and he kindly referred me to the European HR office. As Sony is a large international corporation, the processes are very formal and structured and it seemed I would not be able to arrange an interview for my vacation in October. In fact, during my vacation I received feedback from Sony that all their recruiting processes, including internships have to go through their global recruiting webpage. I was also informed that internships for the following year are usually posted at the end of the previous year.

As such, by the time I visited Tokyo in October I had managed to arrange two interviews. The first one was with Hilti AG, whose office is located in Yokohama. The interview was with the Vice President of HR Japan and it went surprisingly well. We spoke for about an hour and he explained to me that Hilti AG had had SJCC interns before and that the experiences had been very good so far. We discussed the structure of the internship and I was also introduced to the

head of IT who in turn gave me a small tour around the IT department. The interview was very casual and friendly and in the end the Vice President said that I just needed to let him know if I was interested in doing the internship so they could start my visa application process as soon as possible. Their HR administrator was already familiar with the process, so all I needed to do was to hand in all the necessary documents and they would take care of the rest. At the end of the interview I had gained a very good impression of Hilti AG and was happy that I already had secured one possible internship position. But since I had another interview two weeks later I did not want to accept it right away. Instead, we agreed that I would inform them of my decision within three weeks.



1 - View from the Metropolitan Building in Nishi-Shinjuku (Hotel Park Hyatt and EA Office)

The interview at EA took place during the last week of my vacation. The office is located in Nishi-Shinjuku and I got a very friendly welcome by Ms Sato, the head of HR. The interview was very professional and yet very relaxed. First, she gave me an overview of the company and told me that an internship position at the Japan office would in general be possible. We then discussed possible fields and agreed that the online publishing team would be the most interesting area for me. She also asked me about the visa and since I had done the research beforehand I was able to explain exactly which visa I would be applying for and that it could be handled through a special organisation (Nippon Carl Duisberg Society). At the end of the interview she showed me around the office and even introduced me to some employees as a probable future intern. We agreed that she would contact the manager of the online

publishing team to ask if she would be interested in supporting an intern and promised to get back to me as soon as possible. I was very surprised when she mailed me in the evening of the same day, saying that the online publishing manager was indeed interested and would like to meet me the very next day. The second interview also went well and the online publishing manager told me that I could start the visa application process with Ms Sato immediately. I was very happy that it all went so well and that my dream finally seemed to be coming true. Unfortunately, there were going to be some unexpected hurdles to overcome, as I would find out a little later. But before going there, I would like to explain the actual visa application process in more detail.

Visa application process

Based on Mr Dudler's advice I contacted the Nippon Carl Duisberg Society (www.ncdg.jp) to find out whether they could support the visa application process and what the process would look like. Ms Dehne, who is the representative in Japan, explained that the Nippon Carl Duisberg Society will apply for the Letter of Eligibility for a one year Trainee visa for a fee of 100'000 JPY. As a prerequisite one must already have an internship position. At my interview at EA when the question about the visa came up I was able to negotiate that the Nippon Carl Duisberg Society would be handling the visa application process and that Ms Dehne would contact EA to request the necessary documents and information. Therefore obtaining the visa was not difficult in my case.

As the visa application process may take up to six months, we started working on it immediately after my return to Switzerland after my holidays. I had to hand in the following documents and information:

- Copy of University diploma (translated into Japanese)
- Copy of Passport, Passport number, validity of Passport
- Curriculum vitae
- Proof of financial resources (Scholarship confirmation letter and internship salary, it might be necessary that additional financial resources need to be shown through a bank statement)
- Proof of health insurance coverage
- The address of the consulate where I was going to apply for the visa
- All previous stays in Japan (date and duration)
- Planned date of entry in Japan
- A pass photo
- Enrolment confirmation of the language school or where not available detailed information of what course at which school you are planning to enrol to

As the company needs to fill in Japanese documents it is necessary that the person providing the information is able to speak and write Japanese.

My visa application was handed in at the immigration office in Japan by Ms Dehne at the end of December and it took two and a half months until the immigration office issued the

Certificate of Eligibility. Ms Dehne then immediately sent it via registered express mail to Switzerland and only three days later I was able to get the mail from the post office. The Letter of Eligibility has a validity of three months during which one has to go to the embassy to hand in the actual visa request. As my departure date to Japan was drawing closer I went to the embassy two days later. At the embassy I had to fill in the visa application form and the Letter of Eligibility needs to be handed in along with the passport. The visa will be issued in the passport upon successful application. In addition I was required to hand in an envelope with my address written on it including CHF 5 for the registered mail fee (the embassy will send the passport via registered mail). The fee for the visa also needs to be paid directly at the embassy (approx. CHF 50).

Five days later I was very happy when the postman rang and I finally received my passport back. And I was the proud holder of a one year trainee visa which had just arrived in time as half a week later I departed to Japan.

All in all I can say that the visa application process went very smoothly. I can recommend the Nippon Carl Duisberg Society to everybody whose company does not have experience in applying for trainee visas. Ms Dehne has been very professional and has made sure that the whole process went well. She always answered my (numerous) questions promptly and has been very reliable. In my opinion the 100'000 JPY definitely were a good investment. In the next section I am going to talk about my experiences with administrative tasks after my arrival in Japan.

Administrative things to take care of in Japan

In this section I am going to write about finding housing, how to register for the Alien registration card, how to open a bank account etc. Since I was able to travel to Japan with a one year visa, most of the administrative tasks went more or less without any problems. I strongly recommend to apply for the trainee visa or for a one year pre-college visa through your language school (please note that both visa applications need to be handed in half a year prior to travelling to Japan) since it will really make your life easier once you arrive in Japan.

Housing

I was in the lucky situation that I could move in with my Japanese friend, therefore I cannot tell you much about my own experiences but instead I will mention some of my friends' experiences. The rents in Tokyo are quite high and the apartments usually very small (one room apartments are very common). But on the other hand it is extremely easy to find a new apartment as there are a lot of offers on the market.



2 - My flatmate Aya and me on the way to the Tokyo Bay Hanabi

Most of my friends are renting monthly apartments through agencies, which has the added benefit of having at least one person who speaks English. The apartments can be rented on a monthly basis and no long-term contract is required. The monthly prices usually start from 90'000 JPY for the rent and an additional utilities fee of approx. 20'000 JPY. The apartments are fully furnished and usually have a broadband internet connection included in the price. An

agency I can recommend is Ichii (www.japt.co.jp); they have a fully English translated website and offer around 650 rooms in the centre and outskirts of Tokyo. Another good point to mention about Ichii is that they do not require any deposit, key money or guarantor.

If you are looking for a cheaper place then you should look for guest houses. The most well-known is Sakura House (www.sakura-house.com). The housing is very cheap compared to an apartment; the rent usually starts from 60'000 JPY per month. Kitchen, living- and bathrooms are usually shared; internet is usually available through wireless LAN. The standard of the Sakura guest houses can be quite low, as I have heard from several people, therefore it might be advisable to arrange a visit before signing the contract. A classmate who stayed at a Sakura guest house was not happy with it but he said it was the cheapest place he could find.

Rather than Sakura House I would like to recommend the Borderless-Tokyo guest house (<http://guesthouse-tokyo.jp/>). Another classmate living there likes it very much. These guest houses are a bit different from others like Sakura. The 13 houses are run by a Japanese couple that after returning from a language stay in Australia wanted to create a place where foreigners and Japanese people could live together. In these guest houses you will find a very interesting mix of Japanese and Western people. This provides an ideal opportunity to practice Japanese with native speakers. The rents are very cheap starting from just 50'000 JPY, a deposit of 30'000 JPY is required to be paid before moving in. The style of living comes very close to flat sharing which is very common in Switzerland. Also each house organizes a party once a month and invites all residents of the other houses to join. These guest houses seem to be very popular and therefore it is advised to enquire after available rooms early on.

Alien Registration

After having arrived in Japan, the first thing you should do is register yourself at the local ward office (Kuyakusho). Everybody staying in Japan for more than three months is required to register as an alien. For the registration you are required to hand in a passport sized photograph and to register with the current place of domicile. Depending on the ward office it will take about 3-4 weeks until you can go pick up your alien registration card.

The alien registration card is very important and will be required to open a bank account, sign an apartment contract or a mobile phone contract and you are requested to carry the card

with you at all times. However, since it comes in a credit card format this is not a problem and as it provides a means of identification as well, you do not need to carry the passport with you.

The ward office will issue a temporary registration confirmation letter for a small fee of approx. 500 JPY. This way you do not need to wait until the real alien card is ready in three weeks. When moving to a new address it is necessary to register at the new ward office with the new place of domicile. A new alien registration card will be issued and it will also take around three weeks until it is ready to be picked up. When leaving Japan to return to Switzerland you need to return the alien registration card at the passport checkpoint at the airport.

Bank account

Since I came to Japan with a one year visa I was able to open a bank account at Mitsubishi UFJ bank (MUFJ). The reason why I chose MUFJ was because they can be virtually found everywhere in the city. As an alternative I can recommend to open the account with the Japan Post Bank (JP Bank). As post offices can be found everywhere too it is also very convenient.

Very important when opening a bank account with MUFJ is that you visit a branch within the ward of your local domicile. I first went to two random branches outside of my ward and they both refused to open the account for me. Only when I went to the branch next to where I live I was finally successful. Make sure you have an Inkan/Hanko with you when filling out the documents as you will be required to sign with it. An Inkan/Hanko is a seal with your name and can be purchased either at 100 Yen shops or at shops specialized in selling seals.

If possible try to have a Japanese speaking friend with you when opening the bank account as the documents are only available in Japanese and it is very rare to find a bank clerk, who speaks English. Please note that the bank opening hours are rather limited (banks close at 3pm) and make sure that you have enough time as it might take more than an hour until everything is completed. If you request a cash card (strongly recommended) it will be sent to your home address after approx. 10 working days. I have also tried to order a credit card, the first time from the bank and the second time from a shopping mall, but in both cases my request was declined as I have no prior bank history and therefore was determined as not creditworthy.

With a cash card you can withdraw money from ATM's found at banks or also from ATM's at Convenience stores (Conbini). This is very convenient as Conbini's can be found nearly

everywhere. One important thing to mention is however that if you withdraw money outside certain hours, approx. 9-18hrs during weekdays or on weekends, you will be charged with a handling fee of 105 JPY. A Japanese friend then explained me that I had opened a Basic Savings account and that it is possible to upgrade it to a Super Savings Account. The advantage of a Super Savings Account is, that if you have 100'000 JPY or more deposited on your account you can withdraw money at anytime free of charge. Of course the pamphlet and documents for the Super Savings Account are available only in Japanese and I needed my friend's help to correctly fill out the application forms.

Mobile phone contract

The signing of a mobile phone contract was also not a problem for me. I went to the Big Camera branch in Yurakucho and was lucky, as one of the salesmen actually spoke English. Since I wanted to buy an I-Phone I had to sign a two year contract (there was no one year contract period for the I-Phone) but the salesman confirmed that I can cancel the contract early by paying a cancellation fee of 10'000 JPY. I wanted the monthly fees to be debited directly to my bank account, but for some reason this was not possible and instead the monthly fees are charged to my Swiss credit card. Again if possible, have a Japanese friend come with you who can translate and explain the very complicated phone plans to you.

Learning Japanese at a language school

When I visited Tokyo last year during my three weeks' vacation, I was already looking for a language school that offers short term intensive language programs for tourists. I was looking at several language schools which I had received recommendations for and decided to book a three weeks intensive course at the Kai Nihongo School (Kai) as their course offer best fit my schedule and financial budget. Having been very happy with the three weeks course, it was clear to me that I would again choose Kai for my year in Japan. The school is located in Shinjuku (JR Yamanote Line) which is located near Shinjuku.

Course structure

Kai offers 3-months general courses starting in January, April, July and October, with classes in the morning or afternoon. The classes take place every day from 9am - 12.50pm (morning class) or 1.20pm - 5.10pm (afternoon class). The classes are taught on 8 different levels (3 beginners, 3 intermediate and 2 advanced levels) and it will take an entire term (3 months) to complete one level. The beginner levels focus mainly on hiragana, katakana, Kanji and grammar, the intermediate levels focus on Kanji, reading, writing, listening and conversation whereas in the advanced levels students will have the possibility to choose elective classes and focus on specialized topics.

When applying for the general course each student is required to do a placement test which consists of a written test and a phone interview of about 5 to 10min. No placement test is required for people starting at level 1. The placement test takes place while still in Switzerland and you will already know in which level you are placed before the course starts.

After I took my placement test I was given the choice to either start with level 2 or level 3. As only level 3 still had available spots in the morning class I enrolled in level 3. Regarding grammar it was exactly the right level, regarding Kanji however, I was behind the class. The class had already learned 250 Kanji by the end of level 2 and I had so far only learned around 150. Therefore, during the whole course I was mainly focusing on learning Kanji, as in addition to the new Kanji in level 3 I also needed to catch up on the previous ones. All in all level 3 was still the right choice for me; although it was very hard and required a lot of studying after school, my efforts paid off and by the end of the course I had managed to catch up with the rest.

Curriculum

All the teachers at Kai are native Japanese speakers and certified language teachers. Starting from level 1, classes are taught in Japanese only. In the beginner levels the teachers will use a lot of pictures and teaching aides to explain the grammar and the vocabulary. Each class has two different teachers who alternate every day.



3 - Our teacher from level 3 (left corner) had invited our whole class to her beach house during Golden Week

The weekly timetable is structured and follows a strict schedule. At level 3 we started every morning with a short test to review the grammar of the previous day. Every day we had 3 hours of grammar and 1 hour of Kanji classes and once a week we also had one hour Bunka class (Japanese traditions). For the grammar we used a textbook which was written by the school. First I was a little bit sceptical but I have to admit that it perfectly suited the timetable. Every day we studied one chapter which contains one grammar pattern. Another good thing about the textbook is that Kanji which have already been taught do not have furigana on top. This, in my opinion, greatly supports the learning. The Kanji class in level 3 did not use a textbook, but rather a printout with all the 250 Kanji which we were going to learn. Every day we learned about 10 Kanji having the same radicals. The teacher demonstrated the correct stroke order at the whiteboard and we practiced the correct writing. Other than that we did

not do any special exercises during class and I found it very difficult to learn the Kanji just by memorizing. Since the Kanji were all taken from a textbook, after two weeks I decided to buy the textbook (Basic Kanji Book I&II) and started learning the Kanji by the book. I can recommend this book to anybody as the Kanji are taught in thematic order and each chapter contains reading and writing exercises to practice the Kanji.

In level 4, the first class in the intermediate level, we had a totally new weekly schedule. The Grammar and Kanji classes were reduced to only three days a week and in exchange we had one day listening and reading class and one day conversation class. We used three different text books from a publishing company, one book for grammar and text structures, one book for the conversation class and one book for JLPT 2 (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) Kanji. Level 4 was much more fun than level 3 as we had much more chances to practice speaking and were able to learn a lot of useful expressions which are used in daily conversation for casual and business environments.

In level 5, which will start this week, we will again use a textbook which was created by the school. Three days per week will again focus on grammar and Kanji whereas for the other two days we were given the choice between conversation and writing class or JLPT 2 preparation class. Everybody in my class including me chose the preparation class as we are all going to take the test this December (2009).



4 - Summer Party at Kai Nihongo School

During each term everybody has to write a midterm and final exam. The final exam is divided into several small exams (e.g. Kanji, reading, grammar, listening) and a minimum grade of 70% is required to pass. Everybody needs to pass the final exam in order to be allowed to proceed to the next level. Besides the regular curriculum there are also special events once per term, such as the mother tongue day where everybody with the same mother tongue gathers together and useful information and tips are exchanged. Once per term there is also a Kanji contest where the top 10 of the school win a prize. The school also regularly offers extracurricular activities, which are always advertised by the teachers during the classes.

The class sizes vary from 8 to 15 people from many different countries with the majority coming from Sweden. In my previous class we were 10 students: one from England, two from Korea, one from Taiwan, one from Germany, one from Iran, two from Sweden one from Spain and me from Switzerland. All in all I am very satisfied with Kai, it offers a good and enjoyable study environment and I can recommend it to everybody.

Internship and the next six months

As already mentioned I was able to find an internship before going to Japan and thus could apply for a trainee visa from Switzerland. However, when the economy started taking a down turn at the end of the year (2008) my worries increased. And in January I indeed received an email from Ms Sato at EA saying that the projects in the online publishing team had been cancelled in order to cut costs. Therefore they could not offer me the internship position anymore. My biggest worry first was my ongoing application process for the visa. Luckily, the company was very cooperative and Ms Sato said it did not need to be stopped. In addition, she even offered to ask other teams and even other game companies for alternative opportunities. I was more than happy to accept the offer and indeed a few weeks later she contacted me saying the head of marketing had expressed interested in hiring an intern and we agreed that I would come to the office for an interview after I had arrived in Tokyo. In April 2009 I met the head of the marketing team and luckily the interview went very well and in May I was able to sign a six month's contract and start working on a half day basis. The company has been very flexible with my language study goals and allows me to work 50% which gives me the opportunity to attend the school in the morning. During school vacation I can work 100%. I will discuss my internship in more detail in my final report, here a little summary of my experiences thus far.



5 - The EA Japan Team

So far the internship has been a great experience and the work extremely interesting. As a Marketing Assistant I am mainly assisting the product managers but I have also had the chance to be involved in the preparations for a special press event which we held one day prior to the Tokyo Game Show. The working atmosphere is casual and the people are very friendly. It also provides a very good environment for improving my Japanese. Two weeks ago, the head of marketing confirmed that I could extend my contract for the time until the end of my visa and I decided that I would attend another term at the language school with the goal to take and hopefully also pass the JLPT 2 in December 2009.

As I have been very busy with studying and working in the past six months I did not get many chances to travel around Japan. So far I have only been to Kyoto and Yokohoma. But I am definitely planning to do some travelling during the next half year and in 2010. Again, I will write about my travelling and other interesting excursions in more detail in my next report.

Tokyo, 14. October 2009

Patrizia Bischof