

Japan Year

INTERIM REPORT

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Mr Paul Dudler, Chairman of the Scholarship Fund

Preface

In this report I would like to set forth some of my experience during the first half of my “Japan Year”. Future scholarship holders should gain insights on how to best organize and plan their own stay in Japan. It will be difficult to give exact instructions as each individual case is different. But still, knowing about other people’s experience is very valuable. Even if some information might be the same as in other scholarship holders’ reports I would like to highlight some of the major tasks that can occur in connection with staying in Japan. Besides this I would like to share some of my experience and views on living and working in Japan.

So far it has been an outstanding stage in my life and I would like to take this opportunity and express my gratitude to the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce, its supporters and its’ Scholarship Foundation especially Mr Paul Dudler who is dedicating so much time and effort for this institution. His work is invaluable and highly appreciated. Furthermore, I would like to express special thanks to Mr Armin Frauenknecht, President of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan and Mr Felix Moesner, Science & Technology Attaché of the Embassy of Switzerland.

Last but not least I would like to thank my parents who always offer indispensable and unlimited support in all my endeavors.

お世話になりました。

Nico Eckart
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1 Application and preparations

After graduation originally I wanted nothing more than to go back to a full-time job and pursue my professional career. But as graduation came closer I started to think about going back to Japan in order to learn Japanese and possibly get some work experience. In my childhood and teenage years I had the great opportunity to spend more than 5 years in Japan. That was when I fell in love with the country and began to appreciate many things related to it – from its culture and society to all its very own particularities. Going back to my second home has always been one of my dreams and after graduation seemed to be a quite suitable moment. When I found out about the scholarship I didn't hesitate, called up Mr Dudler and sent in my application. Of course I was thrilled when I got informed that I was granted the scholarship and from then on preparations began.

Many little things had to be taken care of. What should I do with my apartment, furniture, (health) insurance; what about military service and so on. I decided to follow the advice of a former scholarship holder and did not worry about getting a visa or anything before leaving. I thought it would be no problem to enter Japan with the tourist visa, go to school for 3 months, find an internship and consequently get the visa... Little bit too optimistic as it turned out.

But getting these things done out of Switzerland is also difficult as this would mean that you would already have obtained a contract well before you leave (approx. 3 months in advance). This means getting a contract maybe 1 year before you would actually start to work.

I tried to find internship positions from an early stage on but as expected this was very hard. Either the concept of internships was not sponsored or it was too early for the company to agree on a contract. This entailed the next stumbling block. Without contract you have practically no chance to get the Certificate of Eligibility which you need in order to get a (working) visa. As I chose a 3-month language course a student visa was also out of question (period too short). Even though it would have been best to already settle the internship and visa issues before leaving to Japan I left without either of those being solved. I planned on approaching these challenges locally.

2 Arrival and housing

I arrived in the beginning of January and just one day before having to go sign in and take the entry exam at my language school. As for housing I opted for a room in a guesthouse. I chose Sakura House from all the agencies because it seemed to be quite easy (in terms of requirements and procedures) to get a room and the location of the guesthouse was one of the most convincing points. It was located in Sendagaya which lies between Harajuku and Shinjuku on the JR Yamanote line. The closest stations are Yoyogi, Sendagaya and Kokuritsu Kyogicho. This meant that I could get to school in a very short time (two stops by train).

At my arrival everything went smoothly. I chose to take the limited express train (cheap and slow) into the city. First I had to go to the Sakura House Office in Shinjuku to get my room key. I also got a mobile phone from 'go mobile' for the first month. This way I had a number right away and companies where I applied were able to reach me. I planned on staying in the guesthouse at least for the duration of my language course (3 months) and then if possible move to an apartment. In the end I lived in the guesthouse for about 5 months. Staying in a guesthouse was very interesting. You automatically get to meet many people from all over the world. The house mates in my case were also in Japan for language school, some had internship positions others were on working holiday. There was even someone from my class living in another unit of the same house. Even though I only had a very small private room and had to share other facilities with everybody else I had a lot of fun in the guesthouse. But after having started working as an intern and already having lived there for longer than planned I decided to move to an apartment. Again I chose Sakura House. Mainly because it didn't require any of the usual preconditions having to be fulfilled (I still only had the temporary visitor visa). Usually it is quite difficult to get a regular apartment. In addition to the rather large initial sum (key money, agency fee, deposit, etc) you would have to pay, often there is a certain minimum renting period (up to 1 or 2 years). Further barriers to renting a regular apartment from a typical Japanese agency include that you have to provide a guarantor, possess a proper visa (not temporary visitor) and in many cases the real estate company wants its lessees to be able to read and understand the contracts which are only in Japanese. Of course there are other providers that focus on foreigners and do not have all these conditions. But often in this case typically expatriates are targeted and rents are rather steep. For affordable apartments I also heard good things about an agency called Leopalace 21.

My current Sakura House apartment is very small and simple but fully serves its purpose. It is located very close from where I work (only 3 stops by subway) and very close to the Sumida River and the neighborhood is somewhat more typical (or traditional) Japanese (下町 "shitamachi") than before. The closest train stations are Monzen-Nakacho on the Tozai and Oedo subway lines and Suitengumae on the Hanzomon line. I enjoy living in this area very much and it has brought closer to me yet another facet of this exciting metropolis.

3 Bank account

As in most other cases to open the bank account was very difficult and troublesome. But after arriving this is one of the first things I had to get done since the scholarship money will only be transferred to a Japanese bank account. The problem in my case was the visa. Officially banks here are not allowed to open accounts for people who hold temporary visitor visas. Some banks also require that you have already lived in Japan for at least 6 months. The key to the problem was just trying one bank after another. So equipped with all documents that might be necessary (passport, alien registration card) and the Hanko (name stamp) I still had from my previous stay in Japan I started checking the major Japanese banks. After about 4 or 5 tries I finally got my account at The Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ. Although the lady in the bank did not speak any other language than Japanese I finally had opened the account. My guess is that this time it was simply overlooked that my visa is only for 3 months. In my case I had to use the Hanko but I also know of other cases where a regular signature was sufficient. When opening the account, taking along a friend who speaks Japanese most probably makes things much easier.

4 Language school

Based on what I have heard and on my own impression I decided to take a 3-month morning course at the Naganuma School (The Tokyo School of the Japanese Language) in Shibuya. I attended classes every day from 9 am to 12.30 pm. On the first day besides registering there is an entry level test for students who already have some knowledge of the language. Even though I have lived in Japan before unfortunately I did not pick up as much Japanese as I wanted during that time. Mainly due to the reason that I went to the German School. Nevertheless, I was able to get some basics back then and before leaving for my “Japan Year” I took private lessons in Zurich. These fundamentals got me into one class above the total beginner class. My classmates mainly came from other countries in Asia, some from Europe and the USA. In the beginning of the course my level was a little below the others’ but this forced me to catch up and do study properly. Fellow students from countries such as China, Taiwan or Korea tend to be quicker in learning as they have much less trouble understanding Kanjis and in the case of Korea also are used to the grammatical structure of Japanese. The pace at the school was quite high and I was able to make good progress. Also with most of the classmates not knowing English I was forced to speak Japanese even between classes or after school. Teachers at this school also do not speak English. They have strict rules regarding presence, handing in homework and attending tests. The structure of a regular morning is as follows:

1st period: Drill and repetition
2nd period: Drill
3rd period: Introduction of new grammar
4th period: Dictation, various exercises (listening, reading), tests (at least once a week),
Language Laboratory (once a week) to practice pronunciation and listening comprehension

The school offers many other courses such as Calligraphy class once a week. There are also special seasonal events that usually take place on Friday after the lessons during lunch time. E.g. in January you can see how 餅 “mochi” is made (New Year tradition 餅付き “mochi tsuki”) or on the occasion of the 雛祭り “hina matsuri” (girl’s day) there were origami lessons.

I enjoyed school very much and I am thinking about going back to the morning course after my 6-month internship. Currently I am attending an evening course (twice a week) at the same school. The evening course is less strict and sometimes a little bit too casual for my taste. But the good thing is that classes are very small. At the moment there are officially 3 other people in my class but there is almost always someone who doesn’t make it to class so it is not unusual to have only one or two other students in the classroom. Although progress is much slower now it helps me to ‘stay in shape’ and not to forget what I have learned so far.

5 Internship

As briefly mentioned it was extremely difficult to find an internship. Luckily with the help of connections I was able to get an internship at UBS. First my contract was only for 3 months but fortunately I was able to extend the contract for another 3 months. With my internship contract and a Japanese Immigration Law Office in charge of getting a working visa for me I thought it will not be long until I receive the visa. But it still turned out to be very hard. First they weren't exactly sure for which type of visa it would be best to apply. On the one hand I had already graduated from University which made it difficult to explain why I was doing an internship. On the other hand my salary was too low to apply for a regular working visa. Also the cultural activity visa would not have served its purpose as it doesn't allow you to work 100%. So after many meetings between the law firm and the authorities and countless negative reports the only solution was that UBS would raise my salary. Kindly UBS did so and after more than 3 months back and forth I finally received my Certificate of Eligibility which allowed me to apply for a working visa at a Japanese Embassy outside of Japan. Although there would have been ways to change the status of my visa within Japan, both the law office as well as my employer suggested planning a short trip outside of Japan in order to apply for the visa. Changing the status of the visa in Japan would have taken at least 3 weeks and I could have imagined that any unforeseen troubles could have arisen as this was not the proper way of receiving the visa. And since I wanted this issue to be over as soon as possible I decided to head to Seoul for a few days and visit the Embassy of Japan there. Once in Seoul everything went extremely quickly and unexpectedly easily. I handed in my application in the morning and got my working visa for 1 year in the afternoon.

Apart from settling the visa issue I was also able to meet 2 Korean friends whom I met in Tokyo while staying at the guesthouse. This was a lot of fun and also it was interesting to visit another Asian metropolis.

Regarding salary: compared to Switzerland internship salaries are very low in Japan. But I think it's ok if you bear in mind that you can have a lunch meal (set) for below JPY 1'000 and that Japanese students go to work for around JPY 1'000 per hour in restaurants and convenience stores.

6 Work life

I am still excited every morning to join the morning rush to the office. Our office is located in Marunouchi (directly in front of Tokyo Station) which lies within the financial district of Tokyo. It is amazing to see this city and its massive population going like clockwork each morning. Although or because of the huge crowds everything works in an order and has a system. For me a busy Saturday at Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse is far more stressful and chaotic than any subway station during the rush hour in Tokyo. Here in Tokyo everything seems to have a system and I find it far more relaxing to travel in the main commuting hours and to just go with the flow of Tokyo "salary men" than going from A to B in a busy place in Switzerland. Here, even though hectic and busy everybody knows where to go and respects other people. For example even after trains arrive packed with people going up the stairs from the platform you will always find space left for people want to go in the other direction; and this without having special separating fixtures or alike. These might be "little" things but they still amaze me.

And I noticed that I have already gotten very used to some of the Japanese customs. During my trip to Seoul I found myself automatically standing on the left on escalators so that the people could walk on the right-hand side or pushing and holding the "open door" button in elevators until the last person was safely in- or outside. The Japanese society is a very rule abiding one and you might argue that rules only constrict your freedom but in this case I think that rules (or manner) only make things easier and are part of common sense.

6.1 Working hours

Official hours are from 8.45 am to 5.15 pm. The bulk of my colleagues arrive shortly before 8.45 am and if someone is late the person does everything to look as much in a hurry as possible. Some of the employees, especially those who live further away from the office try to avoid the peak rush hour by starting work a little bit earlier.

6.2 Some peculiarities

For me "breaking the ice" between my Japanese co-workers and myself was a little bit harder than at places I have worked before. This might have several reasons. It is not common in a Japanese office to go to some other guy and say: "Hi, are you new here? My name is ... Nice to meet you. Have a good start." And to approach someone and introduce yourself is also not common in Japanese culture. Although you have the foreigner bonus (in most cases) and will be forgiven as Japanese people don't expect foreigners to know their "rules". So the best thing probably is when you have someone else who introduces you to all your colleagues in the beginning. In my case this hasn't been done but after a while you have some kind of key situation with everyone and suddenly the relationship eases and everything gets more loose and casual.

A colleague once approached me in front of the elevator and asked me how old I was. Nothing else. Just: “o ikutsu desu ka?” Afterwards I was asked if I would like to join some colleagues for an after work drink. Turns out that in Japan you don’t ask colleagues out who are older. So probably it was important for him to know my age first before being comfortable to ask the second question.

Furthermore, something that I noticed particularly was that there are almost no private conversations in the office. Also it’s always very quiet. People (usually) don’t go to their friends’ desk to chit chat. You don’t just talk to people in the corridor but go somewhere where you do not disturb others. Normally the people talking too loud on the phone are foreigners. Or as I have observed it’s Japanese speaking in a foreign language. When speaking in English for instance some suddenly speak strikingly louder.

Phones get picked up after the first ring and with customers on the other end you make sure not to hang up first after the conversation is over. Additionally you put the phone down very carefully and slowly and try to make as little sound as possible.

At work but also in general ways of interacting with each other are very respectful and polite. There are many Japanese expressions that underline this. Some examples include that you apologize to your colleagues for leaving the office before them (“o saki ni shitsurei shimasu”) and the counterpart thanks you for your work (“otsukare same desu”). Or when ending a phone conversation you use “shitsurei (ita)shimasu” (literally: “I’m doing something impolite”).

Another attribute of the Japanese language is the hesitation (省略 “shouryaku”) or simply the fact that sometimes you don’t vocalize certain things. This can be quite convenient both at work or anywhere else as you are not expected to be very direct in your questions or requests. On the other hand it can get tricky to find out what someone really wants.

Sitting at my desk in the office has also been very valuable to listen to my Japanese colleagues when talking on the phone to clients. This has turned out to be a good practice for the very polite version of Japanese (敬語 “keigo”).

7 Society

Especially during the time at language school it may take more effort to get in contact with Japanese people but still there are many occasions when you can get to meet locals and start interacting on a deeper basis than in everyday life. For instance I was able to make some new friends at an event organized by the German Embassy. Of course it's best when you meet people who don't speak any other languages than Japanese. This way you are forced to speak Japanese and use the things you have learned at school. Moreover you get a better understanding of the Japanese way of life and might be able to unveil some of the Japanese mysteries. Also this way you can find out about nice places or activities in or around the city where you usually simply wouldn't go as a foreigner (and there are lots of such places). But also with my classmates I had a good time exploring Tokyo and taking part in some of the typical activities such as 花見 "hanami" during the cherry blossom season. In fact this is just one kind of the social gatherings I really appreciate in Japan. It's nice to see how the whole population gets excited about the blossoms, take pictures of them everywhere and of course pack their picnic baskets and head to the park to sit under the cherry blossom trees for hours and enjoy delicious food and drinks. This typical spring tradition gets followed by various traditional festivals (祭り "matsuri") until the end of summer. Then the impressive 花火 "hanabi"-season follows. During this time in summer there are huge firework displays at many different locations, often at rivers or near Tokyo Bay. I had the opportunity to go to one of the "hanabis" together with one of my 先輩 "senpai" (senior) from work. As this colleague used to work at Daiwa Securities we met up with some people from his former employer. It was interesting to experience how some things 'work' at Japanese companies. E.g. they sent off their 後輩 "kouhai" (junior) already in the afternoon to reserve a good space at the river and to buy food and drinks for the rest of the group. So after having spent some lonely hours we finally joined him just when the firework was about to begin and the riverbank was already fully packed with people sitting on their blue vinyl sheets and enjoying their picnic. Also I was once more astonished of how well and smoothly everything went at such a gathering of thousands of people at one small place. And when the event is over and everybody returns to the train station at the same time there's no pushing or shoving, no chaos, no discomposure.

Maybe this is connected to the Japanese value of 和 "wa" (harmony). Besides being extremely polite and respectful I think that Japanese people are very balanced. One example might be Japanese cuisine. It usually is very balanced and you often find a little bit of everything in the dishes.

Something else that I thought about is the Karaoke phenomenon. It amazes me how popular this spare time activity is here. This especially came to my attention when I met a Japanese friend on a beautiful sunny Saturday and after some shopping we decided to go to karaoke. In the middle of the afternoon all the karaoke rooms were completely booked. And

this was in Shinjuku where you can find one karaoke place after another. So after waiting we finally got our room and we sang some of our favorite songs. I realized then that much like sports and exercising singing can help you a lot to unwind. Also for my friend that was exactly the purpose it served. She told me that it helps her to relax and regain strength after a busy work week. And I also think it absolutely does this. Singing is something we usually don't do in our modern day lives and just like sports it helps to balance. I was also surprised because for me it would have been totally unthinkable a few months ago that I would decide to spend a Saturday afternoon at karaoke. I thought karaoke is just stupid and embarrassing and maybe something for drunk people. Also I wouldn't have dared to pick up the microphone in front of other people out of sheer embarrassment. But just giving it a try changed my way of thinking. Even if you don't excel at singing, just go ahead, don't worry what other people think, don't take yourself too serious and do something goofy. It's plenty of fun. After all the second kanji of 音楽 "ongaku" (music) also has meanings such as comfort, accommodativeness, ease, affection, effortlessness and legerity.

8 Closing remarks

Sometimes it might simply be too difficult for foreigners to understand certain Japanese ways and you just have to go with it. Whether it makes sense or not. But I think to make compromises and sometimes just accept a different method is not a bad thing.

Maybe it's true that a lot of times you can't actually tell the state of mind of a Japanese person because they naturally do not show bad feelings, discomfort or get upset in public and so on. Also the concept of 本音 "honno" and 建て前 "tatemae" make it difficult to really know and understand your Japanese fellows. Nonetheless I think that after a while you are able to step by step reveal more and more of the true feelings of this complex society.

I am looking forward to continuing this great learning experience and am excited about exploring more of this wonderful country and its people.

9 Pictures

9.1 My room at the guesthouse



9.2 Traditional mochi making at school (餅付き “mochi tsuki”)



9.3 My first origami (折り紙 “origami”)



9.4 View from our office



9.5 花見 Hanami – cherry blossom viewing



9.6 神田祭り Kanda matsuri



9.7 荒川花火 Arakawa hanabi

