

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce

SJCC Interim Report
of Claudio Semini
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Sunrise on Mount Fuji in August 2005

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1. Introduction

This report describes the first part of my “Japan Year” in 2005/2006, which was financially supported by the SJCC (Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce). During the whole period I was living in Tokyo. The language school where I first studied Japanese was the Sendagaya Japanese Institute in Takadanobaba. Currently I am working as an engineer in the research and development centre of Toshiba in Kawasaki.

First of all I would like to give the reader some details about my prior experience regarding Japan before my SJCC-“Japan Year” and try to answer the question “Why did you choose Japan?”

During the last year of my studies at the ETH Zurich, I started to think about where to write my master’s thesis (6 months). Since I have already studied abroad as an ERASMUS-student, I knew that I definitely want to go abroad again. As my specialization lies in the field of robotics and Japan is probably the most active country regarding research in robotics, my focus was soon attracted to Japan. Luckily I found out that ETH Zurich has an exchange agreement with Tokyo Tech (Tokyo Institute of Technology), which allows two people per year to write the master’s thesis there.

About half a year later, in October 2004, all paperwork was done and I finally arrived in Japan for the first time. I had a great start; everything was organized very well and people were very friendly to me. Furthermore, my supervising professor is a well-known robotics pioneer in Japan and I was excited to discover the Japanese culture, customs and language. Since after about 3 to 4 months my enthusiasm was still high and I slowly started to understand simple Japanese, I realized that I want to come back to Tokyo after my graduation. I wanted to improve my Japanese first and then work for a Japanese company. Therefore I started looking for an internship or job. Marc Freese, a Swiss researcher, introduced me to a visiting professor at Tokyo Tech who is the leader of Toshiba’s home robots team. After meeting him twice, he started organizing a job for me as researcher in his team. In the end of April 2005, one week before leaving Japan, I received a letter from Toshiba’s human relations department offering me a 9-months position as researcher!

In the meantime I have also been looking for a scholarship to make my Japanese language training possible. It was not difficult to find the SJCC website and the email address of Mr. Paul Dudler, chairman of the SJCC scholarship fund. I asked him for more details about the requirements to apply for a scholarship.

After returning to Switzerland and the final presentation of my Master’s Thesis in May 2005, I sent my application to Mr. Dudler. A couple of weeks later, he invited me to his nice house in Arlesheim to talk about my year in Japan. This meeting was very useful for me, since Mr. Dudler was able to give me important information and contacts regarding accommodation, Japanese language studies and social networks in Tokyo.

This chapter ends with a short overview of this report: Chapter 2 contains information about my Japanese Language Course. In Chapter 3 and 4 I describe my job at Toshiba and the troubles I had concerning work contract and change of visa status. Chapter 5 provides details about my accommodation and Chapter 6 about my future plans in Japan including one of my dreams. This reports ends with a random selection of advice for future scholarship recipients and some experiences of my life in Japan.

2. Japanese Language Course

In July 2005 I started my 3-months intensive language course at the Sendagaya Japanese Institute in Takadanobaba. The school's location is only two stops on the Yamanote-line from Shinjuku, which means it lies right in the centre of Tokyo.

After some months of Japanese class at the Migros Klubschule and few lessons during my research at the Tokyo Tech, my level of Japanese was still quite basic. However I definitely did not want to start from zero again, so I was happy to hear that after the placement test at the first day I was put into the second level.

The size of the class was usually around 8 to 12 students: Only few Europeans and Americans and many Asians, especially from Korea. Since the Korean and Japanese grammar are quite similar, it was easy for my Korean classmates to understand and use new grammar. So they were always a step ahead of the rest of the class.

The picture below shows my class, including two of our teachers. I am on the very left side.



The Sendagaya Japanese Institute has its own textbooks. There are three books for each level: the main textbook, one for Kanji and one for exercises.

In my opinion, these books are not best suited to study Japanese. There is neither an English explanation of grammar nor a vocabulary part. In my opinion, some grammar points could be much easier explained with just the translation of the corresponding structure, for example into English. The teachers also introduced new vocabulary using Japanese only. Whereas for example words for objects are easily explained, more abstract things should be rather just translated than explained to avoid misunderstandings. Teachers often had to hand out additional copies to complete the textbook. I think that for example the *Minna no nihongo* books are much better, since additional books with vocabulary, translations and grammar explanations are available for many different languages.

The lectures started at 9:30 and finished at 12:50, from Monday to Friday. This way there was enough time in the afternoon to study and practice Japanese. About once a week there was a test about 20 new Kanji and around twice a month there was a grammar repetition test. These tests gave the teachers and the students a feedback of how much was really understood and provided the necessary pressure to really study all the subjects of the last lessons.

The Sendagaya Japanese Institute also offers a 6-months course for Japanese people who want to become Japanese teachers. Since their class rooms are in the same building, it is easy to meet native speakers who are happy to help and talk to foreigners. Some of them often joined us for lunch and the following study sessions in a café.

As explained in Chapter 3, I had quite some problems to get my work contract and thus my new visa. This postponed the scheduled start of my work period for a few weeks or even months, which I did not know at that time. So I decided to continue the intensive Japanese language course (now level 3). After one month I left the course and took some private lessons at the same school. This helped me to individually fill in the gaps of basic grammar that have accumulated so far. During this whole time the teachers and secretaries of the school were a great help for my visa and contract problems.

At the end of this chapter I would like to sum up my experiences with the Sendagaya Japanese Institute: Most teachers are very skilled and motivated. The location is good and the environment with the other Japanese students is great. Good mixture of nationalities. Unfortunately the textbooks are not very good. However, I would still recommend this school to other people.

3. Change of Visa Status and Work Contract

As mentioned in the introduction above, the purpose of my first stay in Japan was to do research at a Japanese university. Therefore I got a one-year visa with “college student” status, valid till the end of October 2005. Since the scheduled start of my job at Toshiba was in the beginning of October, I planned to directly change my visa

from “college student” to work visa. That way, there is no need for a new certificate of eligibility.

Unfortunately, things turned out to be much more complicated than expected. The major problem was that I was not supposed to keep my “college student” visa after graduating from university. So during the time of my Japanese language training I basically had an illegal visa status. I did not know, that as a language school student I was not allowed to keep the “college student” visa. Anyway, this was not really a problem, since no one ever checked my visa status.

However people started to ask questions when the human resources person of Toshiba, who was preparing the necessary documents for my change of visa status, explained my situation to the local immigration office. They told her that I first have to change my visa into a “temporary visitor” visa. So I started preparing the necessary documents; some of them had to be translated into Japanese. By the time I went to the immigration office, they told me that it was too late now for this change, because more than three months after the end of my time at Tokyo Tech have passed. They sent me to the *business visa* section, where I got a written confirmation that a direct change to a work visa was possible.

With this paper I finally expected a fast proceeding of the application process. However to get the work contract ready and in a correct version, a tedious process with communication difficulties was about to start. Since I needed the contract to apply for the new visa and the expiration date of my actual visa was approaching, I started to get worried. In the worst case, I would have had to leave Japan.

Finally, only three days before the expiration of my visa, I was invited to go to Kawasaki to sign the contract. On the same day I applied for the new visa and got the permission to stay in Japan. Yokatta!

Three weeks later I got the new visa and another two weeks later I finally started my job at Toshiba on December 1st 2005.

This experience taught me a lot about administration and bureaucracy of authorities and big companies. Some advice for people applying for a Japanese visa: Be prepared to provide many documents, sometimes even the originals (e.g. diploma) are needed. Start as early as possible. Expect long waiting times if personally going to the immigration office (especially the one in Tokyo). Anyway, I guess that my case (change to work visa within Japan) was quite special and that things are different for trainee visas. If you have similar problems or any questions, do not hesitate to send me an email.

4. Work at Toshiba

As it is common for most people with an SJCC-scholarship, I also decided to work for a period of nine months. For some reasons Toshiba was not able to offer me an internship, but instead had to hire me as a so-called “shokutaku”, which is a (short-time) non-regular employee. In other words, I am not considered as an intern in

many aspects. So I luckily get a normal (Japanese) salary, am allowed to see various cutting-edge research projects, get business cards, a proper badge and so on.

As mentioned in the Introduction above, I was quite lucky to get this job offer. As in many other situations, a good social network and knowing the right people helped me a lot.

So I finally started working in the Research and Development Center of Toshiba in Kawasaki on December 1st 2005. I entered the human-centric laboratory, which among other interesting projects is doing research in the field of *home robots - partner robots*.

My team has developed two so-called “life support partner” robots, shown in the picture below. They are called ApriAlpha and ApriAttenda.



ApriAlpha is the small, ball-shaped robot on the left side. It can recognize the voices of several people and multiple instructions from different directions at almost the same time. The robot turns towards the speaker and answers the questions or does what it was asked to do. For example read and send emails, check the weather forecast for a particular city, turn on/off the light, air-conditioner, change the TV channel etc.

The taller version, ApriAttenda, is almost one meter in height and is able to recognize a registered person and follow that individual from place to place, even among groups of people.

Toshiba's vision is to create a robot that can accompany people to the shopping centers and carry things, look after young children and elderly people, and send images to family members outside the home showing what is happening inside the house. Toshiba plans to commercialize such a robot in about five to six years.

For more information on the robots, have a look at the latest press release at http://www.toshiba.co.jp/about/press/2005_05/pr2001.htm

or at

<http://www.toshiba-europe.com/technologyinnovations/robots/>

After the description of *what* I am working on, I will now give some details of *how* I work. First of all, apart from a trainee from France, I am the only foreigner in the whole team. This certainly helps a lot to improve my Japanese, since I hear nothing else all day long. I generally try to speak in Japanese with my colleagues, but often have to switch to English when speaking about technical things. Some people speak English quite well, whereas others seemed to avoid me in the beginning, probably because they are embarrassed about their English skills.

The work atmosphere is great. Most team members are very friendly, relaxed and make jokes. Since we have flexible work hours, most people arrive at around 9 to 10 o'clock in the morning and stay until around 8 to 10 o'clock in the evening. Everybody is supposed to be gone by 10 p.m. according to an internal rule.

I have to work 7:45 hours per day on average plus 10 hours of overtime work per month. So it is roughly 8:15 hours per day. As I also have flextime, I usually start at around 9:30 a.m. and leave at around 7 p.m. Sometimes I start after lunch and sometimes I stay until 10 at night. I very happy with my working hours and enjoy Toshiba's flextime system.

Regarding overtime work, my boss told me in the beginning that according to the budget of the group I am allowed to do 10 hours of paid overtime work. After I had only 0 and 5 hours in my first two months, my boss wanted to talk to me. He asked me very politely if I knew how many hours I am allowed to work more and if I remembered how much overtime I actually worked so far. After the conversation I was rather confused and had to ask a colleague, what my boss might have wanted to tell me. Apparently very obvious to her, he had told me in a very indirect way that I was actually supposed to work the whole 10 hours more. But apart from this situation there are luckily no big conversation problems with my coworkers/boss.

All in all, I really enjoy working for Toshiba. I get a lot of freedom for my research; the environment is great; the team consists of very skilled people from all over Japan and it is of course fun to "play" with the robots.

5. Accommodation

Most of my colleagues live in dormitories owned by Toshiba. On one hand a very cheap way of living, but on the other hand restricted by rules and possibly far away from the company. So it is for example officially forbidden to have a guest in the

room after a certain time in the evening. Furthermore the dormitory and thus its location cannot be chosen – one way commute times of more than 70 minutes are possible.

As I have already been living in a Japanese dormitory during my first six months in Tokyo and I generally prefer to separate my private life from work, I was not very enthusiastic about this kind of housing. My decision to look for my own apartment was confirmed, when Mr. Dudler gave me the rather negative report about Toshiba's dormitories written by a former SJCC-scholarship recipient.

He also gave me a booklet about furnished apartments in Tokyo that can be rent for reasonable prices. Since the owner is Swiss (Mrs. Beatrice Ito, president of the Swiss Club Tokyo), the common non-refundable key money *shikikin* and gift money *reikin* to the landlord does not have to be paid.

Following this recommendation I was lucky enough to find a small but nice and reasonable apartment in Osaki, Shinagawa-ku. The picture below shows half of my one-room apartment.



The location – at the Yamanote-line – is perfect for me since I can take a direct bus to go to work; it is less than 20 minutes to the language school I used to go to and less than 10 minutes by train from Shibuya, where I usually go out.

For more information about these apartments, visit:
<http://www.tokyo-information.com>

6. My Future in Japan

My time in Japan goes by *sooo* fast, that I urgently have to start planning my future. My nine month work contract with Toshiba ends in the end of August 2006. However I still do not want to leave Japan yet. My fascination for this country has not faded at all.

Since I wanted to do the annual Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) in December 2005, but was too late to apply, I decided to try it this year instead. Last year I would have applied for level 3, but this year I am thinking of doing level 2. The problem is that this level requires 1000 kanji and 6000 words. Compared to the 300 Kanji and 1500 words of level 3 it is a lot tougher. Fortunately only 60% of the questions have to be answered correctly to pass the exam.

To get a proper preparation I decided to do another three months of Japanese language training and therefore stay in Japan until the end of the year. But this time I want to live in a different part of Japan. As I love the nature and especially the sea, it is one of my dreams to visit Okinawa (tropical islands in the south of Japan). So I am currently looking for a good Japanese language school in Okinawa.

7. Miscellaneous

This chapter is a random collection of information that might be useful to some of the future scholarship grantees. It ends with some short facts and experiences of my everyday life in Japan.

The **Japanese Language Proficiency Test JLPT** that I was talking about in Chapter 6 takes place only once a year. It is always in the beginning of December (this year it will be on December 3rd). Please be careful not to miss the deadline of the application, which is already in the beginning of September (this year on September 5th). Application forms (including the test fee) are usually sold in bookstores and might run out toward the end of application period. Late applications by phone are possible but cost more, are difficult because the phone is often busy and the popular exam locations (e.g. in Kanto area) might not be available anymore.

Many **books about Japan** and its interesting culture have been written. Before coming to Japan for the first time, I read the following two books in German:

“Gebrauchsanweisung für Japan ”, Gerhard Dambmann

“Darum nerven Japaner. Der ungeschminkte Wahnsinn des japanischen Alltags“, Christoph Neumann

Both books provide a funny and interesting introduction to Japanese culture and manners. However, especially the latter one should not be taken too seriously, because many things are quite exaggerated. Anyway, it is definitely worth to read.

As my total time in Japan will sum up to almost two years, I decided to join the voluntary OASI/DI scheme (**freiwillige AHV/IV-Versicherung**). Since I am not paying any contributions during my stay in Japan, I would create a gap in my history of contributions (eine Beitragslücke), which is rather bad. You can get more information about this at the Swiss embassy.

Working in a big Japanese company like Toshiba means also following a set of rules and procedures. In the first month I had to watch a 20 minutes video about safety at work. The first of the 12 proposed rules is to politely greet the coworkers in the morning when entering the company site. (!) Another more general rule is to avoid putting the hands in the pockets when walking. For a smooth flow of people in the corridors and staircases there is a white line drawn in the center, accompanied with arrows indicating the direction of the “traffic”.

Speaking of traffic, as you know, cars in Japan drive on the left side of the road. I perfectly know that, but I still cannot cross a street without first looking left and right! Growing up in a right side driven country like Switzerland must have shaped my brain forever and now it is simply too hard to accept, that I first have to look right – even though cars are on the left ...

It took me almost a year to figure out why some of my closer Japanese friends told me that my Japanese is ”cute” or “kawaii”. Everybody that starts studying Japanese first learns the polite verb form (teine-go: -masu, desu) and I was no exception. Therefore I also used this form whenever I tried talking Japanese to my friends. In German this would be similar to using *Sie* instead of *du*... Indeed, kawaii desu ne.

To be continued...

In my final report in the end of 2006, I will write about my experiences in Okinawa (if everything works out well and I am really going to “Japan’s paradise”), my travels to other destinations in Japan (Yakushima, Fuji-san, Nagano...) and neighboring countries (South Korea, China, ...) and the second half of my time as a *salaryman* at Toshiba.

以上