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Scholarship Fund of the SJCC

SJCC – “Japan Year” **Midterm Report** grantee Vincent Sennhauser



ようこそ日本へ！
Welcome to Japan!



ずいぶん前に A long time ago...

Why Japan?

Background & Motivations

Ever since I studied civil engineering in the French part of Switzerland, I have been dreaming of an international career. As I have always had a special affinity for East Asia, especially Japan, I decided to study business administration at the University of St. Gallen. This degree was the best solution to have an opportunity to apply for a job abroad and this would be a perfect combination with my first diploma.

I worked as a civil engineer in the region of Winterthur for two years before starting university. During this period I improved my German skills for my future studies. In October 2003 I obtained my degree in business administration with a specialisation in Finance, Bookkeeping and Controlling.



Fuji san from Hakone

In May 2004, after having planned my Japanese trip for several years and thanks to the help of the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC), my dream came true and I left Switzerland for Japan. I spent two months in Kanazawa and four months in Sapporo. On both occasions I stayed with a Japanese family and attended private and intensive courses in Japanese.

First contacts with the Japanese culture

Why Japan ? I used to do judo and karate in my youth. This was my first contact with the Asian traditions. Since then I have been regularly in contact with Japanese culture through books, travels, movies, mangas and... culinary delights, not to mention the astonishing electronic equipment. At the university of St. Gallen I chose two subjects related to Japan: East Asia as cultural subject and Management in Asia as cluster. This allowed me to improve my knowledge of Japanese history, culture, society, politics and the Japanese economy. At university I also attended the Japanese course of Dr. Heinrich Reinfried, owner of the asia intensive language school in Zürich. Furthermore, after several trips to Japan, I made some friends and contacts over there.

In the future, after my stay in Japan, I would like to keep in contact with my Japanese friends and more generally, with the Japanese culture and business environment. Ideally, I would like to work for a company in Japan for a number of years or a company which has strong contacts with Japan, so that I can use my Japanese knowledge and travel to Japan on business.



Matsuri in Nikko



Sakurajima from Kagoshima Kyushu

旅行、勉強、仕事 Travel, Study or Work ?

Different status, different rules...

Experiences differ greatly depending on your status

Living in a foreign country for a while is a completely new experience, especially in Japan. In summary, there are three main different kinds of status when you come to Japan as a foreigner.



Itsukushima near Hiroshima

The easiest one is to come as a tourist. As the case may be, you can have contacts with local people. For someone who wants to make the most of his trip, the experience will certainly be enriching. He will prepare his trip and in Japan he will try to make contact with the Japanese. Usually they are very friendly to tourists, assuming you don't behave badly, and if you once meet an unpleasant person, just move on.



Homework in Kanazawa

Then you can come as a student. You have the Japanese school student, typically in homestay, who stays for three weeks or more. Usually this does not exceed six months and you are still a kind of tourist. This is certainly an easier way to live than an exchange student, or someone who has to take an entrance examination (能力試験、入学試験) in order to study at a Japanese university or professional school. In this case, except if you are very lucky, i.e. wealthy, you will have to work (アルバイト). That means that you will not only be confronted with the Japanese rules at school but also at the working place.



Tokyo tower and Odaiba

The third status is when you come as an employee (会社員), not to mention the immigrant workers' status (移民労働者). Here again you can differentiate between lots of positions, namely status. In my opinion, the more specialised and experienced you are, the easier it is to work with cultural differences, once again, especially in Japan. If you come as a specialist, you will be well respected by your Japanese colleagues and therefore you will not have to submit to all the rules in the company. If you have some experience without being a specialist, it will be slightly different. You will be fairly respected but will have to follow the rules of the company. Of course, it is up to you; do not respect them and you will really have a tough time in Japan.

Intra- and interpersonal skills, the key factor in Japan

In summary, in Japan, probably more than in any other foreign country, you have to pay special attention to your interpersonal skills. Some people speak about EQ, our emotional quotient or how we manage our emotions and the way we relate to others. Our EQ is the ability to make and deepen connections at three levels: with ourselves, with another person (one-to-one), and within groups/teams¹.

The Japanese experience is a question of whether you can endure frustration or not. The language is so difficult to learn and to use (leading to misunderstandings), and the culture and way of life is so different from ours that you will inevitably be confronted with conflicts and frustration.

At this point your intra- and interpersonal skills come into play. They must be developed well enough in order to manage the huge emotional flow you will be confronted with.

My experience so far

As a tourist, I made several trips to Japan and it was always a delight. I think if you can speak a little Japanese and have a basic knowledge of the Japanese etiquette, things are quite simple. People are very kind to you and seem to appreciate your interest in their culture. As in any other country in the world, you will notice that people are perhaps a little friendlier outside the metropolis: in Japan, the tri-city 東京・逢坂・名古屋 (the three major metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya). However, as far as I can remember, I've never had a bad experience as a tourist. On the contrary, I was very surprised because the contacts were quite natural.

As a Japanese school student, I didn't have to take a job (アルバイト) and I was spared from experiencing it. After having been told about contrasting job experiences by my class mates, I do not regret this. With my temporary visitor visa, I wasn't eligible for a job anyway (the Japanese immigration is quite strict). Therefore, I could really enjoy my time as a student both in Kanazawa and Sapporo.



Sapporo Language Center

¹ <http://www.trainersdirect.com/outlines/KW/EmtnlQtnt.htm>

In Sapporo I studied with about 20 other class mates and the rules were rather strict and the teachers as well. But nothing bad, it was just somewhat different from my last experiences in Switzerland at the engineering school or at university, where you are relatively independent. The students I met in Japan were mostly young people, and generally people in their situation have a hard time. They have only one year to prepare for the entrance examinations and actually they usually work about 28 hours a week and come to school 4 hours a day. In addition, they are supposed to study and do their homework. They do not really have a lot of time left to enjoy life in Japan and if they had the time, they would not have sufficient money. As a result, the policies at school regarding the attendance are severe. If you miss more than 20 percent of the course in one month, your student visa will be taken away by the school and you will have to leave the country. The schools have to do so because they have a certain quota of visas each year and many young people, mainly Asians, are interested in studying in Japan. Additionally, some individuals come to Japan as students in order to work, mostly illegally, and return after one year.

As we can see, the rules at school and the Japanese influence on them were only partly related. Therefore, I can not claim that I had a real Japanese experience at school. In contrast, I learnt much more about the Japanese culture and mentality at home, with the families, during the six month spent in homestay.

About the life as an employee in Japan, that is to say within a Japanese structure, I am at a very early beginning. At this stage, I can mention numerous recommendations made by experienced foreigners in Japan. I will cover this subject in detail in the final report, i.e. in the second part of this paper. However, after four weeks of work, despite occupying a privileged position, I can already confirm the conventional wisdom: working in Japan as a salaryman is tough (大変な生活).



中泉校長先生

金沢 Kanazawa

One of the rare old towns in Japan

New country, house and family

I spent two months in Kanazawa with the Nakamura family (中村家族). Mr Nakamura is an entrepreneur and his wife, Mrs Nakamura, works part-time at an institution for the elderly. Their children have already left the house for the metropolis, except one daughter, named in Japan a parasite single. These are single women who continue to live with their parents well into their twenties and thirties, hence the name “parasite”. They are part of what is known in Japan as the *mukekkon sedai* (無結婚世代), the non-marriage generation.²



Nakamura family in Kanazawa

The family is comfortably off. I could enjoy a spacious house with a wonderful view on Kanazawa. Every evening was a feast, always Japanese cooking. It enabled me to get used to the traditional Japanese food. Fortunately, the house was a traditional Japanese one with tatami rooms (和室) and there were two little Japanese gardens (庭). One of them just in front of the bathroom (お風呂) which was indeed almost a *rotemburo* (露天風呂), an outdoor bath. Actually we can speak about an *onsen* (温泉), the water coming directly from a hot spring, just under the house.

On the other hand, as the family was used to accommodating homestay students, I had little exchange with them. In fact, if I had known it, I would have left after one month; In that case, the experience would have been only positive. Anyway, in spite of the second month, where I felt like in a hotel with almost no contact, except during the meals, I am looking forward to visiting them again.

² lonely planet Japan 8th edition

Kanazawa or the golden river in English, is one of the rare old towns in Japan. During WWII, the absence of military targets spared the town from destruction, thus preserving several historical and cultural sites². My favourite is the 兼六園(*Kenroku-en*), ranked by the Japanese as one of their nation's three top gardens. The place is also well known for *kimono* and *o-kashi*, confectioneries.



Kenrokuen in Kanazawa

Ishikawa Japanese Study Center

During my stay in Kanazawa I went to the Ishikawa Japanese Study Center. Every day I took two hours of private classes. My goal for the first two months was to acquire the basis of the Japanese language. I concentrated on the grammar and vocabulary; communicating was relatively difficult. By the end of June I had finished both books of the method *Minna no Nihongo* (みんなの日本語) and had a global understanding of the language, its structure and particularities.

The first month was especially tough. Besides studying Japanese, I had to prepare for the CFA examination, Level I, which took place in Tokyo. I usually started studying Japanese at 9 in the morning, went to school at 11 a.m. and returned in the afternoon to prepare for the CFA until midnight. It was worth it because not only did I successfully pass the CFA level I in early June, but I was also able to start communicating well in Sapporo.

北海道・札幌 Hokkaido・Sapporo

Modern Japan without the crowds

Same country, different place, mentality and... generation

It was the right timing to move to Sapporo in early July. Despite being situated on the same latitude as the north of Italy, the winter in Sapporo is tough. Japan's west coast is much more exposed to precipitation than the east coast, and because of the jet stream and the proximity of the Asian continent and especially Siberia, the snow is very, very abundant in the northern part of Japan. Thanks to this particularity, Sapporo was able to host the Olympic Winter Games in 1972, which still influence Sapporo's identity through its Olympic sites and the *Yuki Matsuri* (雪祭), the famous snow festival in early February.

During *Yuki Matsuri*, thousands of visitors from all Japan and abroad arrive to see dozens of large, and in some cases, amazingly elaborate, ice and snow sculptures³. During this year's festival, I will go there to visit the Kitamura family (北村家族), in whose house I stayed for 4 months.



Umi chan, Kouji, Kanae and Ema chan

The Kitamura are very young people, Kanae and Kouji are about 26 years old and they have two adorable children: Ema-chan is 4 and Umi-kun is 2 years old. As mentioned above, the mentality in Sapporo is slightly different from Honshu or the south of Japan. Japanese history takes its roots in the south of Japan, not in the north, where the Ainu lived, the indigenous population of Hokkaido. The Ainu suffered a historical experience similar to Native Americans in North America³. Therefore, traditions and religion are less embedded in Hokkaido's society. As result, we can notice for example an higher divorce rate in Hokkaido than in the rest of Japan.

³ lonely planet Japan 8th edition

The Kitamura family had almost no experience with foreigners. It was the first time they lived with non-Japanese people. A friend of mine, who has been working in Japan for 5 years, knows Kanae's mother. Kanae and Kouji heard about a Swiss couple who wanted to live with a Japanese family for a couple of months. They showed their interest and in 2003, we visited the family in Sapporo. The first contact was good and we decided to "risk" the adventure.



The Kitamura, Irene and I

For the purpose of this report I decided to use "I" as a pronoun, but in fact I was not alone. I went to Japan with Irene, with whom I had lived together in Switzerland for 6 years. We have always shared the same passion for Japan. Irene is going to work for the *Pavillon Suisse* at the Aichi World Exhibition (愛知万博), starting March 2005. Without her, my "Japan Year" would have been much tougher.

With the Kitamura family, we cooked and ate together every day and it was ideal to practise Japanese. It was also another language because I had to use informal Japanese, which I could not do in Kanazawa. In addition, we spent much more time together during evenings, weekends and sometimes vacations.

In the evenings, we usually cooked together and I learnt a lot about Japanese cooking. They had the opportunity to discover Swiss specialities like spätzli, rösti, fondue and also Italian, Indian and Thai food. They were actually very open to new experiences in contrast with the first family, which was reluctant to try something new.

We spent some evenings watching movies in their terrific home theatre. Movies from every corner of the world, mainly in Japanese or with Japanese subtitles. At weekends, we went to parks, temples or restaurants but usually not more than twice a month. We really shared the house and therefore had privacy on both sides.

Once we went camping in a national park. Hokkaido is famous for its national parks and beautiful nature. We enjoyed a Japanese style picnic prepared with tons of vegetables, fish and meat together, mixed with *miso* on the large but thin plate just put on the fire... it was simply delicious. We went there with Kanae's father and sister. I will never forget this experience because it was during a heavy rain storm and some of us had to sleep into the car. Even the ones who stayed in the tent could not sleep because it was so cold and we didn't have enough sleeping bags...

To keep it short, we had a very good time with Kanae, Kouji, Ema-chan and Umi-kun. We shared a lot of things and I am really looking forward to seeing them again in February.



Umi chan & Ema chan

By the way, Kouji is a soldier and often leaves the house for a couple of days. Kanae works full time for an insurance company, besides bringing up their children. I do not want to go into detail but it is not easy for her to combine both activities, especially when Kouji is away.

Every year, the Japanese army is involved in the *Yuki Matsuri*. Kouji explained that they have to prepare the huge ice blocks to be sculptured by the artists. He is personally involved in this job. Sometimes the sculpture are 10 meters high or more.

Sapporo Language Center

It was a big issue to find the right school in Sapporo after studying in private classes in Kanazawa. I visited no less than 7 schools before finding the right one, and at that time, I was not sure at all that it was the right one. After reaching a certain level in Japanese, it becomes more difficult to find a school. As mentioned in the second chapter, *Travel, Study & Work*, there are different kinds of students. The ones who want to “meet” the Japanese culture and language, without being obliged to use Japanese professionally or for studies, i.e. as a hobby, and the others, who need it to work or study. Generally the big gap between both groups is the kanji. A very small word for a gigantic gap. The first group will learn some of them, nice to have, but the second group has to know them, at least 2000, to enter university.

Consequently, if you reach the intermediate level (中級), you have to learn the kanji and it takes time and patience. In fact, you will hardly find a school which teaches at this level without using kanji. I didn't learn them in Kanazawa, or more exactly, I only learnt to read them without writing them. I also thought it was possible to carry on like this but that was a mistake. I was lucky to meet Nakaizumi *sensei*, who is in charge of the Sapporo Language Center. I was quite afraid to study in a school where I would be obliged to write the kanji and to learn with books without *furigana* (Furigana refers to the practice of writing small hiragana or occasionally katakana characters beside kanji characters so that those who don't understand the kanji can still read their meaning).

Nakaizumi *sensei* convinced me to seriously start learning kanji and gave me extra classes every evening for 3 months, free of charge ! I could not refuse such a good deal, even though I thought the extra classes would take place two or three weeks at most.

Every day, four hours a day, I commuted to school by bike. Sapporo is about the fifth-largest town in Japan with about 2 million people and it is a very wide city. From south to north or from west to east you have to cover 45 kilometres to cross Sapporo. I lived on a hill in the south, *Minami-ku*, and it took me about 30 to 40 minutes to get to school, about 14 kilometres. The journey was very pleasant along the major river in Sapporo, Toyohiragawa (豊平川). Depending on the direction of the wind, the journey could take less or

more time. The large majority of rivers in Japan are dammed. As the Toyohira-gawa has a large riverbed, it is a kind of gully into which the wind rushes. If you are lucky, you will not need to cycle hard, but if you are not, it can be tough.



Toyohira river by night

My class mates were all Asians, except an African from Guinea; together we felt a little bit like outsiders. We also had a Mongol who had the same problem as us, the kanji. More than ninety percent of the students are Chinese and the rest, Korean and Mongol. The Chinese are very lucky because of the writing. They immediately understand the meaning but have some difficulty with the kun-yomi (くんよみ), the Japanese pronunciation, and the grammar, which is much more complex than Chinese grammar. The Koreans also have problems with the kanji but have a similar grammar. Some Mongols speak perfectly and write Chinese, some not, but they have some similarities in the language, pronunciation.



Classmates Sapporo Language Center

It was very motivating to study with them because you had to fight during the class. Especially with the Chinese, who will not wait for you to answer a question. At least, Western people have perhaps one sole advantage on them, the 和製英語, or the Japanese English, the made-in-Japan English. For Chinese it is very difficult, they have almost no reference to understand *waseieigo* and I was delighted when we had *katakana*-dictations, the only moments I did not feel totally bad in Japanese in comparison with Asians. One more point perhaps, in which we are not bad, the pronunciation. As my mother tongue is French, ninety-five percent of the Japanese sounds are familiar. For the Chinese, it

depends on where they come from. For example, people from Shanghai speak Japanese quite well.

The majority of my class mates merit respect. Besides studying they have to work hard (しごと) and in only one year, they usually pass the first level of the Japanese Proficiency Test, the *nouryokushiken* (能力試験), with a pass rate of about seventy, eighty percent. If you are not Chinese, I do not think that you can realize this achievement in only one year.



コミュニケーション

After 4 months in Sapporo, I was able to communicate in Japanese and make myself understood in predictable everyday situations. I am also able to maintain a conversation and chat with friends and respond flexibly to different situations. Japanese is a very difficult language and there is no comparison with German or English. After six months of intensive studies I still have great difficulty to express myself and especially to understand people, not to mention the radio or television programs.

So far, concerning the Japanese language, there is only one thing which comes to mind:

頑張て！



Akan national park

横浜・サラリーマン Yokohama • salary man

Japan from another point of view...

First days with Hilti Japan K.K.

Coming soon...

