

SJCC Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund

Paul Dudler, Chairman

Year in Japan

7/2006 – 7/2007

Midterm Report

January 2007

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Contents

Preface - North Korea's missile launch and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 2

Studying Japanese - KAI Japanese Language School 3

Studying Japanese - Friends and the media 5

Permission of residence - Tourist, student and cultural activities 5

Bank account - Not for tourists 6

Living in Tokyo - Nichio Guesthouse 7

Searching for an internship - Kopra and personal contacts 8

The first internship - United Nations University 9

Outlook - Going into Japanese politics 10

Preface - North Korea's missile launch and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

The aim of the SJCC scholarship program is stated as “to encourage and support [...] efforts to acquire a thorough knowledge about Japan, its culture, language, economy, social and business environments” in order to “contribute to the Swiss economy and to the further development of bilateral trade relations between Switzerland and Japan”¹. In addition to this general objective, I set myself a personal goal for my year in Japan: Being a student of international affairs, I wanted to make Japan my field of specialization. This means that together with the Japanese language, it is Japanese politics, international relations and diplomacy that were to become the focus of my training and studies in Japan.

When I set off for Tokyo in July 2006, I had been studying Japanese for two years, had attended a semester at a university in Tokyo and written my bachelor thesis on Japanese foreign policy. I knew, however, that this was far from being enough if I wanted to become an expert on Japan. I was thus enthusiastic about the intensive language course, which would allow me to fully concentrate on studying the Japanese language, something I had not been able to do during my studies at university.

I was waiting for my flight to Tokyo at the airport in Frankfurt, when the news appeared on the TV screens: The North Korean regime had test-launched several long-range missiles. This unfortunate and from an international relations perspective important incident coincided with the start of my year in Japan. North Korea, as it turned out later, was to become a focal issue in Japanese media and politics for the next several months.

It was still at the airport that for the first time I got hold of a Japanese newspaper. I could hardly make any sense of the articles written in Japanese, but what is more important, this newspaper made me set another, this time more concrete objective: I wanted to be able to read Japanese newspapers by the end of my year in Japan. As my Japanese teacher in Switzerland would say, reading Japanese publications is the only way to get reliable, first-hand information on Japan. There was no doubt I needed to be able to read the newspaper, if I wanted to make Japan my field of specialization.

The following report covers the first six months of my year in Japan, a period that started with North Korea's missile launch 5. July and ended with my visit to the NHK² Hall on Christmas Eve, where the national broadcaster's symphony orchestra performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. It has become a tradition for Japanese orchestras to play The Ninth during the Christmas season. For my part, having completed the first internship at the United

¹ Article 2 REGULATIONS Scholarship Fund of the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce

² Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan's public broadcaster

Nations University two days before, the experience of listening to a Japanese choir singing Friedrich Schiller's 'Freude, schöner Götterfunken', became my Christmas present.

Studying Japanese - KAI Japanese Language School

In order to find a school for the three-month intensive language course I first looked through the reports written by former scholarship recipients. The reports were a valuable source of evaluations of language schools. Out of the many schools that had been attended by SJCC scholarship recipients I selected a few according to their location, which I wanted to be in Tokyo, and according to the assessments given in the reports. After collecting information on course schedules, course contents, tuition fees and exact locations of schools on the respective websites, I called the selected schools in order to confirm the information and get impressions through direct contact. After those calls, I selected one school according to my preferences. When I made my application for the chosen school, it turned out to be too late, as the summer course starting in July was already fully booked. I thus turned to the second school on my list, KAI Japanese Language School³ in Shin-Ōkubo, which proved to be a very good choice.

The course I was going to take was a full-time general course, 20 class hours per week, from Monday to Friday. There are eight different class levels from beginner's to advanced offered by KAI, which I think is a good degree of differentiation. In order to be placed in the right class, I had to complete a test and send it to KAI by fax while still being in Switzerland. A telephone interview was also conducted, in order to assess the oral skills. I was put into intermediate level five, a level that turned out to be very high and challenging.

Upon my arrival in Tokyo – I came here a couple of days before starting the course – I visited the school in order to register, to get the course material and to meet with the people of the school office. It was good to have a couple of days to settle in Tokyo before the beginning of the course, which consumed most of my time and energy once it had started.

I soon realized that the course level was too high for me as I could hardly follow the teachers and compete with my colleagues. However, as I raised this question on the second day, the teacher would only encourage me to remain at level five, telling me that I could do it, promising to support my efforts to pick up with my colleagues, who also encouraged me to stay. With all that support behind me, I decided to take the challenge and stay with my class. For the part of Kanji, however, my knowledge proved to be insufficient indeed, and from the third day on, I participated in the third level's class when it came to Chinese characters.

³ <http://www.kaij.co.jp/e/>

The organization of the course was as follows. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays the main class teacher taught grammar and vocabulary based on a text book created by KAI. The main contents of the book were texts on various topics ranging from societal issues to biology and from fairy tales to psychology. On the basis of these interesting texts, vocabulary and expressions were studied, discussions were being held and presentations given. In addition to that, the teacher provided us with material to practice at home. Also on those days, Chinese characters were taught. On Tuesdays, our other teacher taught composition. With the help of qualified Japanese volunteers, we would first discuss the topic of the day in small groups, then write our own composition and finally present the written work in front of our class of twelve students. What was probably the most challenging part of the course, turned out to be the most interesting and instructive one. On Thursdays, the same teacher taught reading and listening comprehension which was based on exercises from the Japanese Language Proficiency Test⁴ and exercises involving television programmes and audio sources.

The decision to remain at level five was the right one for a couple of reasons. First, the topics that were dealt with were of great interest to me. Not only did I learn Japanese language but I also learned a lot about Japanese culture and society. Second, the level of the discussions was decently high. The lessons were not only about learning Japanese but about using Japanese to explain one's opinion and to understand and make oneself understood on a variety of topics. Finally, the challenge to 'compete' with my classmates, as their initial level was much higher than mine, drove me to study. The environment was one in which I could learn much and make a lot of progress.

Both the quality of teaching as well as the quality of services provided by the office at KAI School was very high. My teachers were all very open-minded, well-qualified and knew how to involve students. The latter is very important as classroom and learning behaviour among students was very diverse as were nationalities. My colleague from Italy, for example, was the most active and talkative in class, whereas colleagues from South Korea would rather work silently and scored first when it came to Chinese characters. The staff at the office was very helpful with solving all kinds of problems, for example the issue of getting a new visa, and showed great flexibility, as in the case of allowing me to take part in classes at different levels.

There is one negative aspect I would like to mention, though. I got the impression that KAI Japanese Language School offers too few social activities. There were one or two parties and one excursion during the three-month course. Although it is important to concentrate on studying, it is by social interaction, as I think, that one needs to learn a language, at least when

⁴ <http://www.jees.or.jp/jlpt/en/>

it comes to conversational skills. Social interaction needs to take place in classroom but also outside, and I think that a school should also provide opportunities for the latter.

I was very happy with KAI Japanese Language School. After having completed the three-month intensive course, I decided to continue with weekly private lessons from October until December, for which I returned to KAI.

Studying Japanese - Friends and the media

Going to school and studying at home, even if done intensively, is not enough to learn a language. I turned to Japanese radio and television for two reasons. First, I wanted to inform myself about Japanese current affairs and to learn about Japanese society, politics and international affairs. Second, I wanted to train my listening comprehension, and, in the case of television, also reading skills. The latter is possible, as with most Japanese programs, the spoken word is also shown in subtitles. As the news program, I chose NHK's daily 'News 7' program, which comes close to the Swiss television's 'Tagesschau'. In addition to that, I often watched NHK's 'Close-up Gendai'⁵, a weekday programme that focuses in detail on one of the current affairs issues. I regularly listen to 'J-Wave'⁶, a private radio station that, with its innovative and intelligent programs appeals to mainly young listeners. Listening to the radio is a good way to familiarize with new vocabulary and expressions and very helpful to passively learn Japanese.

To train conversational skills, on the other hand, it is crucial to talk as much as possible. Making Japanese friends is a good way to do that. In contrast to England, where I had studied English for two months and found it very difficult to make friends among, or even talk to, local people, I found that most young Japanese people are very keen on talking to foreigners. One reason for them is to improve their English. But also in my case, as I would always insist on talking in Japanese, Japanese people almost always seemed to be interested in having a chat, be it the hairdresser, the man at the table next to me in a café, who helped me with reading a newspaper article or the young fellow at a bar.

Permission of residence - Tourist, student and cultural activities

When registering for the language course a couple of weeks before my departure from Switzerland, I was confronted with the question, whether I wanted to have the school apply for a Pre-college visa on my behalf or whether I would simply enter Japan as a tourist or

⁵ <http://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/>

⁶ <http://www.j-wave.co.jp/>

Temporary Visitor. The latter would have allowed me to stay in Japan for 90 days to begin with, during which I could have taken the intensive course. Moreover, as several previous scholarship recipients had pointed out in their reports, I could have had the permission of residence extended after three months for another 90 days. As I was thus quite sure to be able to stay in Japan for half a year without applying for any special visa, I decided to begin my year in Japan as a tourist. This would save me complications and about CHF 200 at the time of my course registration.

It worked out quite well and before the first 90 days of my stay had passed, I went to the immigration office to apply for an extension of my permission as a Temporary Visitor, which I received after filling in some forms in a couple of hours. This extension allowed me to stay in Japan even after the three-month language course, and it was as a Temporary Visitor that I did my first internship at the United Nations University. This was possible because, first, I did not earn any money from that internship, and second, because the official reason for extending the permission of residence was to continue my studies of Japanese language.

There was, however, one problem. The status of Temporary Visitor did not allow me to open a bank account in Japan. This meant that I was without a Japanese bank account during the first six months of my year in Japan. Only recently when I finally got a mid-term permission of residence under the title of Cultural Activities could I open a bank account.

There are, as I see it now, a couple of advantages in getting a Pre-college visa from the beginning. Pre-college visas are designed for students of Japanese language and allow for an initial stay in Japan for one year. They are issued upon application for students at certain private Japanese language schools, as is the case with KAI Japanese Language School. The status of Pre-college student allows opening a bank account. Furthermore, the long validity allows for a relatively carefree and smooth stay in Japan, even though the status of residence might have to be changed later upon commencement of the internship, depending on working hours and salary.

Bank account - Not for tourists

After having moved into my room and after having bought a prepaid mobile phone from Vodafone⁷, the third thing I did upon arrival in Tokyo was to look for a bank account in order to receive the first part of the scholarship. However, as mentioned above, that proved to be impossible. I tried with the big three, Tokyo Mitsubishi UFJ Bank, Mizuho Bank and

⁷ What used to be Vodafone Japan was bought by the Japanese telecommunications company SoftBank in October 2006. In addition to SoftBank, there are two other mobile phone service providers, namely NTT DoCoMo and au KDDI.

Sumitomo Bank but in vain. I visited smaller retail banks such as Citibank and Shinsei Bank and I went to different branches of the same bank, but without success. The point is that with the new banking law enacted in 2004, banks are not allowed to open bank accounts for customers with a permission of residence less than six month, which excludes all foreigners that stay as a Temporary Visitor, as I did. It seemed to be possible to open bank accounts even for tourists in the transitional phase to the new law shortly after it had been enacted, according to former scholarship recipients. However, those times are over and the new law is now strictly abided by all banks.

Having been at something of a loss, my last resort was postal savings. I had heard a lot about postal savings in relation to former Prime Minister Koizumi's major political project of postal privatization. I went to a small post office close to my place without expectations. However, with the great help of a most friendly, young employee at the office, I was finally able to open a savings account, as the result of my first major transaction performed completely in Japanese. I left the post office with a sense of both relief and achievement.

The postal savings account was only a partial solution, however, as the SJCC is not able to transfer scholarship instalments to postal accounts in Japan. I thus had the SJCC transfer the first instalment to my Swiss bank account and then received the money by way of postal transfer to my postal account in Switzerland and finally to the new account in Japan.

After having got a twelve-month permission of residence in December, I went to Shinsei Bank⁸ and opened my bank account. Shinsei bank, as I had learned, is the only Japanese retail bank operating all over Japan and is renowned for its good, uncomplicated customer service and inexpensive handling fees. Not only is it easy to open an account by using signature, but also do they offer bilingual Japanese and English services and internet banking, which is very convenient particularly in Japan, with its short banking hours.

Living in Tokyo - Nichio Guesthouse

I was looking for a room in Tokyo, while still in Switzerland. There are a couple of companies which are specialized in letting rooms and apartments to foreigners, one of them being Sakura House⁹. Companies like Sakura House offer good services for people who want to rent a room from overseas. These include detailed descriptions of the facilities and locations including photos or even videos and relatively uncomplicated contract procedures, all offered in English as well as Japanese.

⁸ <http://www.shinseibank.com/english/>

⁹ <http://www.sakura-house.com/>

One of these companies, Nichio Koyu Kikaku¹⁰, was co-founded by a Swiss. I contacted Nichio, saying that I was looking for a room which was not too far away from school starting from July. And indeed, after a week or so, an inexpensive room, with shared kitchen, bathroom and toilet that matched with my preferences was offered to me, which I then reserved by paying a deposit. When I mentioned my affiliation with the SJCC I was even given a special discount. Upon arrival in Tokyo, I immediately went to Nichio's office to sign the contract and to collect the key, being able to move in to my room near Ueno a couple of hours after my plane had landed.

After six months, I am still living in Nichio's Ueno House. Although these kind of guesthouses do get relatively expensive, if one stays there over a long period of time, compared to normal apartments or rooms with the same size and features, they have a couple of advantages. First of all, they are completely furnished. In the case of Nichio, free internet access is available instantly in every room, which is a most useful feature indeed. Second, they only require relatively small deposits. Third, their services are also provided in English and procedures are simple. Fourth, guesthouses provide a good environment to meet people. Guest houses are also popular with Japanese people and sharing the guesthouse with them is a very good way to learn Japanese and to get integrated into the Japanese society.

Searching for an internship - Kopra and personal contacts

At the time I arrived in Tokyo, I had not found an internship. I started to look for an internship a couple of months before my departure from Switzerland but without success. The Swiss embassy and consulate did not offer internships and Switzerland Tourism, with which a former scholarship recipient worked during her time in Japan, was not looking for an intern at that time. A valuable source for internship offers is Kopra, an international internship platform focusing on East Asian countries. However, the applications I made while still in Switzerland were not successful. Talking to a university professor of mine, whom I knew had taught in Japan before, gave me some more ideas about internship possibilities and also contact persons in Japan. One of them was a post-doctoral researcher at United Nations University [UNU] in Tokyo.

I called her in Tokyo and learned about the internship programme offered by UNU. I was told that my chances would be fairly good and the optimal duration of an internship at UNU would be three months. It was at that point that I decided to split the internship period of my year in Japan into two parts. This would, first, allow me to experience two different jobs and

¹⁰ <http://www.tokyo-information.com/>

work environments, and second, give me more time to look for an internship for the second half of the year in Japan. I thus applied, upon arrival in Tokyo, to UNU for an internship for the period after the language course from October until December.

While I was waiting for an answer, I applied to three other offers, the first of which had just been opened: An internship with the Technology and Science Attaché at the Swiss embassy, an internship at the delegation of the European Union in Japan and a post as an editorial assistant with a German magazine that publishes articles about the Japanese market and economy. One month before the intended start of the internship at UNU I got their reply: My application was successful.

The first internship - United Nations University

I began my work as a research assistant at the Peace and Governance Programme of United Nations University¹¹ in October. I was very happy to enter the programme which deals with international peace and conflict studies and international justice, as I plan to focus my graduate studies in international affairs on international security issues. I would work at UNU from Tuesday to Friday noon and take Japanese private lessons on Monday and Friday afternoon. The constellation of working part-time with UNU and to continue studying Japanese intensively was very fortunate. First, my work at UNU was mainly in English and chances to improve my Japanese at the workplace were rare. Second, the combination of studying and working and the variation that resulted in doing both activities at the same time suited me very much.

Two weeks after the beginning of the internship, a big conference was held at UNU at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Japan's membership in the United Nations. My activities during the first period of the internship thus focused on Japan's role in, and relationship with, the UN. Building upon my bachelor thesis which I had written on Japan's possible permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, I did research into Japan's achievements as a member of the United Nations over the last fifty years and into its future role and contribution to the UN. I also helped the Academic Programme Officer to prepare his speech for the conference.

The next task was to prepare a book proposal addressed to UNU's publishing department, UNU Press. The book on religions and war to be published by UNU Press this year was co-edited by my supervisor. I then did research related to the follow-up book project by my supervisor and Academic Programme Officer, for which the excellent library of the UNU was

¹¹ <http://www.unu.edu/> The mission of the United Nations University is to advance knowledge for human security, peace and development through both research and teaching.

a useful instrument. Other tasks included escorting an American professor from Harvard University, who was to give a lecture on nuclear proliferation, to one of UNU's institutes in Yokohama. I also took part in several other conferences and events, including the lecture by the president of Rwanda held at UNU. Towards the end of the internship period I did research on human security and wrote a paper on the issue. I also assisted the Academic Programme Officer with teaching Japanese undergraduate students in a course at UNU.

The working environment at UNU is international, which in the end means English. Apart from the conferences, which were either held in, or translated into, both English and Japanese, my work was to be done in English. However, in addition to my co-workers from Spain, India, Russia and Vietnam, I was sharing my office with Japanese people from a Japanese NGO. I was thus able to listen to Japanese, both informal and polite language and their respective usage during my time at the office. Working in the same room with Japanese people gave me a first idea of Japanese working and business practices.

Working at UNU also gave me the opportunity to meet with important people, for example the rector of the UNU who at the same time is vice secretary general of the UN, and to train my conversation skills at reception parties. I got interesting insights into an international organization and into diplomatic-political practices on an international stage.

Outlook - Going into Japanese politics

With the end of the internship at United Nations University before Christmas, I left the international sphere. At the beginning of the new year, I will find myself still dealing with international affairs, however, from a different perspective. I am going to enter the office of Member of Parliament Suzuki Keisuke in January. I have read and heard a great deal about Japanese politics especially over that past six months. The opportunity, thus, to experience politics in Japan as an intern at the office of a lawmaker means very much to me. As Suzuki Keisuke is an expert on international relations, I will find myself at the very heart of Japanese foreign policy making.

In addition to building on, and further developing, my knowledge of Japanese foreign affairs, I will be able to experience the workings of politics in Japan. The summer of 2007 will see Upper House elections, an event of great importance, which to be involved in I will get the opportunity. I am thus very much looking forward to the second half of my year in Japan. It is going to be a period, I am sure, during which I can further deepen my knowledge about Japan, Japanese language and – politics.

Tokyo, January 2007

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