

2006

A year in Japan



Final Report

Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce

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Preface

This report describes my experience in Japan throughout this unique year, which started in January 2006 till end December 2006. I would like to express my thanks to the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC) for its financial support to make this Japan experience possible. I wish to thank Mr. Paul Dudler, for his help, advice and understanding during this year.

Cover picture:
O hanami 2006

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Introduction

The Dutch were one of the first foreign people to establish contact with the Japanese in 1600 after the Portuguese and got a (western) trading monopoly that lasted over 2 centuries until the middle of the 19th century. These intriguing facts exert a great attraction towards Japan on me. Up to today the Japanese culture is still very different from ours, a highly appreciated value is explicitly present in theirs: the way in which respectfully people behave towards each other. This is unfortunately we Western people tend to loose these days, and is something I desired to find back in Japan, and to bring these values home.

I had the opportunity to visit Japan (Tokyo) for 10 days in 2003 during collaboration with Hitachi, which made me even more enthusiastic about the country. Last year, 2006, was from the professional point of view in the framework of my PhD. studies in microtechnology at EPFL in Lausanne. In Japan, I worked in the laboratory of Prof. B.J. Kim at the University of Tokyo.

The fact of being and living in Japan and its culture have an impact on the way perceiving things, especially on the interpersonal side. This opportunity to learn from the Japanese culture strongly contributes strongly to one's experiences in a positive way, and will last for a lifetime.

I hope in the future being able to contribute to enhance mutual understanding and collaboration in both cultural and economical fields. As a Dutchman, it is my duty to strengthen the ties of over 400 years old.

Ideas and opinions expressed in this report are not only based on own experiences, but also on facts that I heard or read. It is hard to stay away from such things as they are directly integrated in your own way of judging and experiencing Japan.

Language Course

The very first thing when living in a foreign country is to learn the local language, for any communication purpose. Although these days English is often a means to communicate up to a certain degree – depending on the country, in other countries it is still not the case, where the local language provides access to the people and hence opportunities to learn from them, their culture and customs. Japan is an example of the latter. In addition, its language itself is so different in structure and writing from any European language making it another reason to study Japanese. I therefore strongly welcome and appreciate the obligation of a 3 months intensive language course in the SJCC scholarship programme. Some of my foreign colleagues at the University of Tokyo, despite their longer stay in Japan than myself, did barely speak any Japanese!



An impression of the class, fltr: Tsai, Ryan, Sophy and Chen

One week after arriving in Tokyo, my Japanese language course started in the Naganuma school, located in Shibuya. The day before starting the class, on-site registration was necessary: upon entering the building, at the first counter I was welcomed, counter number 2, serviced by the same person, was used to look up my name on the list. The third one was to sign some form, and the fourth one was to check if there was any unpaid balance left.

The teaching staff was very kind and professional, only in Japanese. The class consisted of Taiwanese, Korean, French and American people. No matter to say that the Taiwanese and Korean had a big advantage upon the European regarding kanji writing! With one Korean, communication was only possible in Japanese.

These 3 months of intensive course provided a fine basic set of vocabulary and sentences for daily life. Situations such as going to the bank and the real estate agent (see next chapter), were still very challenging and modestly expressed frustrating. This is not a reason to give up, - on the contrary – it stimulated to continue studying, which I did every day throughout my stay.

I did the 3-kyuu level Japanese proficiency test, which I passed, beginning December as an intermediate step towards the 2-kyuu level, hopefully in 2007.

Living

Before coming to Japan, I managed to find a furnished apartment in Izumi Tamagawa in a student housing complex: <http://www.tamaesty.com/>. Everything was settled on forehand from Switzerland, no pre-deposit needed. An agreement by e-mail was enough, the people were very trustful. The location was quite good on the Odakyu Line, 40 minutes travel to both the university and language school. Being very close to the Tama-river (多摩川) it was an excellent place for a run along the river with a wintry view on Mount Fuji (富士山). With the cold wind from the river and an airco heating up only the upper air layer in my room, a bath in Japanese style was a must every night to warm up before sleeping!

The rental contract was till end March 2006, after which it was planned to move to the IIS International Lodge, 50 meters from my work. Unfortunately, 3 weeks before moving in, the lodge informed there was no place available. From that moment, I had to find a place in a limited amount of time. Since none of my colleagues was available, I started on my own visiting real estate agents in the area, where limited Japanese knowledge and a restricted budget were challenging to find a place. Most of the time the agent would be very nice. However it happened more than once that a foreign guarantee-person, my Korean 先生 (sensei/professor), was not accepted. A 先生 itself was very welcome of course, but the moment I told them he was a foreigner and Korean to be more precise, it was suddenly chotto. I felt quite upset about this form of discrimination.

I tried to find an apartment through <http://www.tokyo-information.com/> where I had an appointment for looking an apartment. The apartment itself was fine, no bath though; the only inconvenience was a very expensive train ticket, since each day would be 3 different lines for going to the job. I asked then if we could make some deal about a bit lower rent to make it more affordable in exchange for a guarantee I would rent the place till the end of the year. He would consider it and let me know the next day. Upon saying goodbye, I promised him to call him, he promised to have a look for cheaper travel expenses for me... A great indirect answer that lowering the rent was actually impossible!

Finally I found a nice apartment in my initial village. The agent was very nice, he knew the owner of the dorms, and within a half an hour I had visited an apartment and basically everything was settled. The owner of the apartment – again a friend of the agent - was fine with lowering the deposit to only one month instead of 2 months. The bedroom had actual tatami mats, providing the apartment a very typical smell! With gas-based cooking it was nice



Izumi Tamagawa – 静かけれども楽しい, quiet but pleasant!

to experiment with Japanese cooking and combine with western style. My favourite soup is a miso with a good dose of tabasco sauce. With the hot summer, I avoided the airco as much as possible, since it hardly cools anything and is just wasting energy. Instead when coming home, I opened the front door and the back window to create a draught. Since then, my Japanese neighbours started to copy it!



Yamaguchi-san and wife. My friendly house owner and greengrocer.

To live in a small town like that, my place was actually in the pedestrian zone-centre, it was a pleasure to get to know the people: Besides a regular talk with the agent and the owner of the apartment, Yamaguchi-san, who has a vegetable shop at the ground floor of his building I also started to know some other people in my town: the barber, the florist, the owner of a bar where I went for a drink with the real estate agent, the people from the supermarket, the baker. It felt like a small community where you've in some

way a certain place, giving a comfortable feeling.

Basically every day guarantees a new experience, either at work, in a shop, restaurant, in the train. It is among other things that make life in Japan so interesting.

Society and people

History, religion, society and its people: The historical development of a country with its government, religion and society. All together they determine the way people in a culture are at the moment of today. In this respect Japan is very interesting, since it provides very nice historical clues to try to understand and interpret the Japan and its people of today.

If we look back at the Tokugawa shogunate, the Shogun's task was to remain in control of the country, to rule over the rival clans and the people. Absolute power was needed to keep the fragile equilibrium of the country in his favour. Rival clans would always try to cause unrest among the people, group together if needed: the Shogun was a common enemy. Therefore at the slightest sign of danger, Tokugawa would come into action to protect his own interests. Within the view of power, it was absolutely not surprising that the Portuguese were expelled from Japan: Their intermingling with the Japanese society whilst preaching Catholicism was a direct threat to Tokugawa. The Dutch were just trading with Japan, and as such not interfering with interior business. On the contrary, through the Dutch, the shogunate was informed and regularly updated about the geopolitical situation. Also, it was also highly interested in weaponry. One error was made though: a Dutch merchant decided to build a storehouse of stone, to not to fear the regularly burn down of the wooden houses in Japan. Unluckily he mentioned on the

façade of his edifice: Anno 1640. This was just enough reference to the Christian beliefs to give the Shogun the possibility destroying the building. Worse: from that moment the Dutch could not longer travel freely throughout Japan and were “banned” to Deshima, the former settlement of the Portuguese. By doing this, the Shogun could not only better control the whereabouts of the Dutch people, but also control the trade the Dutch were doing: Japanese merchants had become wealthy throughout the years and once again this could jeopardize the power of the Shogun. Money buys influence – power. From that time, the Dutch merely traded with the Shogun directly, trade along the way between Nagasaki and Edo was still possible in driblets, albeit under supervision. This yearly travel of the Dutch merchants by land (!) to visit, honour, trade with and bring novelties about the world to the Shogun, was compulsory. Imagine such an event of a trade-fleet of foreigners traveling more than 1000 kilometer through all kinds of cities and villages!

Not long thereafter all weapons were forbidden throughout the country. The only people allowed carrying weapons were the elite samurai, servants of the Shogun. Another countermeasure to remain and better secure His position. This is without any doubt one of the reasons why there is so little crime in Japan.

To come back to the previous statement: the Japanese government had a big influence on its society, and this seems still the case the day of today. The way the government influences and controls the economy¹, the way of education, starting from primary school. Here we find some roots of the difference between western and japanese people. As for us it is very important to give each individual the possibility to develop oneself, the emphasis in the japanese educational system is on collective discipline. The sensei (先生) is the knowledgeable, you do not question him – what would be more disrespectful? The same holds for the hierarchy in a company and explains why it is so successful in Japan. The European individual has an instigation to express oneself, take his own responsibility, give professional output a personal character. This is often a problem in companies and hence very important to watch closely and keep under control.

This difference between japanese and western people is striking and explains why the “japanese company-style” would never work in Europe or the States – this despite of the attractive idea having a company as efficient as a japanese one!

This western individualism can not only be a problem in a company – I will give an example about my personal experience in the next chapter about work – , but in the society as a whole. How often don’t we read news about vandalism and violence- which would be completely unnecessary from the beginning! Hence too much individualism threatens mutual respect, an effect amplified by the disappearance of religion. The debate on norms and virtues has been opened in the Netherlands, and in several other European countries. I believe there is no better example than Japan to learn about mutual respectful behaviour, and I am convinced this would by no means endanger our beloved freedom and individuality.

¹ K. van Wolferen, The Enigma of Japanese Power (1989)

As a final remark in this chapter I would like to show my respect for the capability of Japanese people to see the beauty in and esteem small things. Here I do not refer only to the respect for nature, but especially to enjoy things that seem completely childish to us. I believe Shinto and Buddhism have historical roots in this capability. Shouldn't we cherish a bit more the small and stop complaining about everything and nothing?

Working

As my workplace was at the university of Tokyo in a group with a Korean professor, I only had few Japanese colleagues. The technical assistant and two master students were Japanese. Then there is one Swedish guy, one Taiwanese and for the rest 4 Korean people. Most of the time, communication was in English, unfortunately. Moreover, quite a few French postdocs are working at the university, whom I regularly met for a lunch. In my very first week at the university, I had lunch with 10 French people, making me feel to be in a Japanese restaurant in France. Meetings were in general held in Japanese, making them a very good moment to test my level of understanding.

Japanese master's students have very often already a job before they graduate from university. Companies actively recruit them in a very early stage to assure new smart employees. Of course this is a very nice thing for any student to find relatively easily a job, but for their research output during their master's it is not very stimulating.

Although my professor was Korean, I think a lot of things run according to the Japanese system. It was not always easy to understand the real message of a discussion, how to interpret it correctly. For example if something is qualified as: "chotto muzukashii", but in my opinion it should not be a problem, I still felt I should give it a try, due to the indirect formulation.

Access to the cleanroom equipment, necessary to do my research, takes time: the system is based on a Super-User – Instructor – User system. An instructor should give a "wannabe" user an introduction on a system, followed by a second appointment to show the mastering of the equipment. Depending on the type of equipment and instructor, it can take up to several training sessions before the Instructor will tell the Super-User that the "wannabe" user can become a registered User of the equipment. Therefore, other foreigners, gave most of my formations, to facilitate communication and acquiring the rights of use. For other equipment I didn't need to use often, colleagues were always willing to give a hand.

The common feeling is important; being present has a priority to being useful. The other day, the laboratory was going to move to a new office. Wanting to help, but not understanding either Japanese or Korean, I felt completely obsolete while standing in their way. The next day I decided to work home, until the moment I received a message from my professor if I would come to the lab to help! When I came over, as expected, I could not do anything but watch how the workers (not from our lab) were drilling holes and installing cupboards. The same situation occurred more often to me, something which was confirmed by other colleagues.

Research done in the university is different in methodology from the western style. Instead of working in logic steps towards the goal, it seems that it is more based on trial and error. Naturally, this can also give good results, but also increases the risk of finding nothing, or not being able to reproduce a result, if the conditions under which the result was obtained are not known.



New year dinner with my colleagues

As mentioned in the previous chapter, individualism and taking own decisions can harm the interest of a company. If we add this to the difficult access to the cleanroom and the language barrier between staff and western people, we have the optimal ingredients for trouble. I experienced this myself in the cleanroom, when I was working on my project. Due to a misunderstanding, an manageable situation deteriorated in a very short time into a climax. Result: I could not work any longer in the cleanroom. This situation was my worst experience during this year and cast me in some state of a culture shock. The important lesson here however was that following the rules is of the foremost importance; breaking them - how small they may be – is unthinkable in Japan.

Food

The Japanese food is highly varied and at least completely different from our kitchen. As a gourmet most of the dishes are delicious: sushi, sashimi, yakitori, yakiniku, tempura, donburi etc etc. My absolute number 1 is sushi; I went at least once per week to a kaiten-zushi restaurant. The sushi-restaurant at 渋谷 (Shibuya) is highly recommended. The ambiance is great, with very enthusiastic Sushi chefs. If you walk from Hachiko into the shopping street for foot passengers only, the restaurant is located at the right in the street leading to the Loft.



Sashimi

From time to time, I loved to experiment with the available ingredients in the supermarket and mix them with traditional western cooking: e.g. the miso-soup I liked and still like to prepare is a Japanese one to which you add some tabasco sauce to make it spicy. Delicious and easy to prepare! Another example is to season chicken meat (surprisingly cheap, like 8 CHF per kilo and low in fat) western style, but then add some wasabi. Success guaranteed! Prepare some cooked or fried potatoes with some pieces of カボチャ (Japanese pumpkin). Another reason to cook was that the lunch menu at the university was always nearly the same, which made it necessary to change from time to time.



Living baby fish in vinegar, hard to catch with chopsticks!

Music

During my stay I visited a few concerts. One was a concert with Baroque music, another a flute recital and a third one a piano recital. The common factor in music played by Japanese is their aim for perfection. So technically there is not a single flaw in it. With such a level of perfection I found the music sometimes without any soul, emotions. I wonder if it comes that the concentration is on a perfect performance that the emotions cannot be expressed in the sound.

Karaoke

Another unique thing in Japan: カラオケ (Karaoke). The density of the Karaoke bars in Tokyo beats the density of kebab-spots in Lausanne. I found that the amount of people liking karaoke is about 50-50. With colleagues we've been several times and it is indeed a lot of fun! Especially having drunk a bit of 酒 (sake) increases the singer's self estimation to improve one's performance. At the evening of my good-bye party we went to a karaoke bar in 下北沢 (Shimokitazawa); the picture below illustrates well the ambiance.



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Public transport

Every day I took the Odakyu line from my place to Yoyogiuehara, from which it's about 15 minutes by foot to arrive at the university. The rapid train is always overcrowded and to get in, it was sometimes a matter of moving backwards through the doors, pushing gently the people behind you, till the moment you have enough space. No one ever complains about it, it's something accepted. It is interesting how people stay calm in the train: either playing with their mobile, reading a book, enjoying being tipsy after drinking (in the evening) or staying Zen while reading the advertisements. The moment however people are behaving not according to the rules, such as making a phone call, you see sometimes the judgements expressed in their looks, instead of holding a poker face.



Full house at 下北沢 (Shimokitazawa)

One day, there had been a technical problem with the train, resulting in a few hundred people on the platform at Shimokitazawa. Then suddenly when a train arrived, people did not stay calm, but would fight to get a place in the train. That was another nice surprise to observe that in certain situations also the Japanese will act more according to their primary needs. As a common rule, when people want to get off the train, they rush out, not taking care of others. Again in such a situation, there is no

need to be polite and respectful, since the people in the train are complete strangers to each other without any social link. As a matter of fact, a Japanese keeping the door open for someone is highly improbable.

Gomi

When collecting litter: glass, metal, paper, plastics and other burnable waste, it needs to be collected separately. For the latter category, special yellow bags exist. However, the use of plastic bags in the supermarket is so tremendous, I started to use those as the litterbin. At first it was ok, but at some point after the usual pick up day, I found two of my bags, heavily smelling at 30°C still lying at the assemble point. Again, rule is rule... I started now to bring my own bags to the supermarket and to refuse the bags whenever possible. These days they try to reduce the amount of bags used, but in practice I did not see much difference.

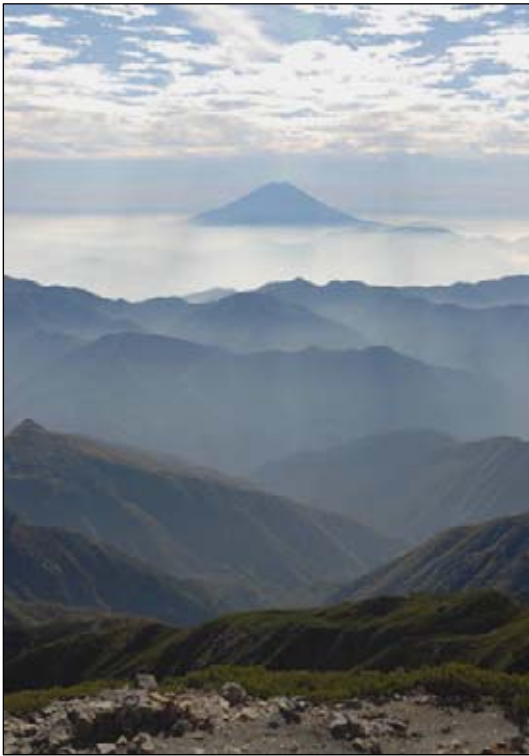
Whales and fish

Many Japanese believe whales need to be killed since they eat away all their fish. I did not believe this until some people who I asked confirmed it. For sure, amongst the plankton and krill they mostly eat, it is impossible to prevent eating some fish from time to time. The most worrying I would say in that scope is then orca's, sea lions, seals and dolphins, which are luckily also protected species.

Without any doubt, in some decade's time, with the growing world population, there will be a shortage in available fish. Japan already imports an enormous amount of fish to supply the demand. The recent conference on worldwide (tuna) fishing, held in Japan, attests the situation is becoming critical. Environment activists however do not agree with the modest quota reductions, since in their opinion this will not prevent the eventual extinction of several tuna species.

Hiking

Being absorbed and retained by the ever-moving Tokyo I decided it would be a good idea to meet the Japanese nearby nature. A big city is always “dangerous”. On has constantly something to do, and nature is not easily reached. Having discovered the marvellous Japanese hiking maps however, it didn’t take much effort to extract myself from the big city. My first trip went to 赤岳 (Aka-dake), a top of about 2900 meters high. It was a three-days-hike trip, where I spent the nights in a small tent that I brought in my backpack. Suddenly it was very easy to get in touch with the Japanese people, since we all were belonging to the same people/group, enjoying hiking and nature. That was a most pleasant experience. The fact that some people were wearing small bells, unveiled that a bear could sparsely be in the neighborhood. During the second day, I met a few people from Osaka: we had an “apero” just before dinner. I ate outside, the others went for food in their lodge. After dinner, I went with one of the Japanese guys to the onsen nearby. It rained a bit and we had to use the headlight to manoeuvre ourselves through the forest towards the onsen. Suddenly we were eye in eye with a big shika, a Japanese reindeer. It slowly walked away from us. The onsen, the highest in altitude in Japan, could be smelled from some hundreds meters distance.. I don’t remember where we talked exactly about, me in fragmentary Japanese – but for sure about the constellations and Shinto. The next day when going back to Tokyo, I happened to meet them again in the train – a pure coincidence!



Mt. Fuji showing her symmetric shape.

Later I went with a friend to climb the 北岳 (Kita-dake), the second highest peak in Japan, after the Fuji. The marvellous climbing journey began early Saturday morning by bus from Koufu (甲府). We had taken a late train to there from Tokyo, and slept for a few hours in a park. When we arrived at 5 o’clock at the bus-station, it was overcrowded, with in total 5 buses of about 15 people each going up the mountains! As with the previous trip, climbing would be straight up whenever possible, making some ascents very steep! We spent the night at 2800m beginning October – the first time ever to spend the night in nothing more than a sleeping bag. The night was very clear, ice crystals appeared early morning on the ground. Just before six o’clock in the morning, we were given a very nice sunrise, with 富士山 (Fuji-san) in the background! Just after 8 we were at the top of 北岳, to have even a better view on the 富士. This trip made eventually 富士山 the next destination.



Waking up and continue dreaming...

One week later I went with another friend – also from EPFL – to 富士山. The evening before departure, I tried to get some icepick and/or crampons, since it had been snowing a bit the week before. At one shop, when inquiring the clerk went crazy to hear I wanted to climb Fuji off-season!! Too dangerous! I am still wondering if he really thought it was too dangerous – I understand he wouldn't want send inexperienced people over there, or his reaction was merely since I ignored the rules of the “closure” of the mountain. (In reality, the mountain-trails are officially not open above 2500 meter altitude, though they are accessible at own risk, as usually.) The trip was fascinating, we started from station 0 at about 3 o'clock in the morning. At 10.30 we were at the top, where we climbed over the lava-rocks to bypass the ice on the path.. (Next time I would definitely buy the icepick, even for a single time use :). During that day, in total some 12 people tried the summit, we felt compassion with the people after us especially when we were in the bus taking us back to the train station: as soon we drove off, dark clouds started to cover the mountain followed by rain...

Japanese nature is beautiful, *very* clean and really worthwhile to visit. The Japanese alps are between 2,5 and 3 hours travel by the JR Chuo line from Shinjuku. A night in the lodge will easily cost 7000 Yen, so sleeping in a tent can save a lot of money. An excellent hike-shop (Victoria's) can be found just next to the Takashima building at Shinjuku. Name it, they have it! (Except icepicks).

Cultural visits

Throughout the year, I visited Kyoto, Asakusa during the visit of my girl friend to Japan and later Nikko and Kamakura when my brother came over. Jobwise I had the opportunity to visit Okinawa and Sapporo. All places are very impressive. Kyoto, fortunately not destroyed during the second world war, has up to today about 2000 temples, placed throughout and around the city. That makes the city very mystical, especially when wandering around in the evening hours. Also the fact of seeing geisha's in the street is adding to the ancient ambiance. Besides the usual visits of the Golden Pavilion, we also visited Kodaiji (<http://www.kodaiji.com/>), the temple constructed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's widow in 1606. This place really breathed a mystic atmosphere, very different from Roanji's Zen-garden that is overcrowded by visitors.



Kodaiji

Nikko's most impressive religious complex is the Toshogu shrine, constructed to honour Ieyasu Tokugawa, the most powerful Shogun that Japan has ever known. Ieyasu ruled from 1600 until 1616 over Japan and initiated trade with the Dutch, who landed in April 19th 1600 in Japan. The shrine holds the mausoleum of Ieyasu.



3 monkeys at the Toshogu shrine

Kamakura was the political and cultural capital of Japan between the political from 1192 to 1333. The daibutsu is the second largest Buddha statue in Japan. The statue was cast in 1252 and originally located inside a large temple hall. However, the temple was destroyed by a tsunami at the end of the 15th century. Today, it is possible to get in the daibutsu to have a look inside.



Daibutsu

During centuries, at least since the 14th century, the Okinawaian people traded with the Korean, Chinese and Japanese and other South East Asian countries; they were able to cross the seas with their seaworthy canoes. As a result this merchant nation, the Ryuukyu Kingdom, became very wealthy. From 1609 the Kingdom was invaded by the Japanese Satsuma-clan, but they could maintain sovereignty until 1879 when Okinawa became officially part of Japan. Today, the first language is Japanese, the okinawaian language struggles for its survive. On the islands the numerous ruins witness the once prosperous life of the Okinawaian. Hashi Shou, the first ruler of the Shou dynasty, built Shuri caste in 1430. The annexation of Okinawa by Japan in 1879 marks the end of the line of kings in Okinawa. The last time the palace was used as a fortress was during the second world war, when the japanese used it to hold up against the Americans. Unfortunately, the palace consisted mostly of wood, so that fire was a most effective weapon to dismantle the entire palace. Today it has been rebuilt in its original state, and repaint in its typical red colours.



Shuri castle

Hokkaido, quite recently inhabited by pioneers from 1866. The Japanese government had set-up a programme to stimulate its citizens to move to the “new world”. This meant an opportunity for a new life for many people. When visiting the historical museum of Sapporo, I could feel the excitement to have lived during such a time. To colonize area, to build up a new community. In real, circumstances were not that romantic. Sentenced criminals were the working force for the heavy work of clearing the land, constructing the railways. Especially during the harsh winters work could not progress, the working force suffering heavy losses. In later years, it became socially unacceptable that criminals were forced to work till death. Very handily, some regulations were created, but practically nothing changed. Sapporo is a city built according to the american system. The streets divide the city in square blocks, so that a place can be at e.g. North 3, West 2. Handy to know where you are, but making it a bit boring to walk around and wait every 150 meters for a traffic light.



Sapporo by night

Conclusion

One month after having returned from Japan, the European every-day-life has taken over again. Life and work are regular, shops are closed too early. People are direct. Sometimes too direct and impolite. I've been only a few times to a restaurant. Walking at the left side is still an automatism, as is sometimes expecting traffic from the wrong side – as dangerous as it was in Japan, since it took a whole year to get used to left side driving.. The metro to EPFL is harsh with its clashing doors and 120 dB sirene to announce its departure. A world of difference with a soft Yamanote jingle and soundlessly closing doors. After all, packed trains are just a minor thing!

It seems already a long time ago that I was in Japan. I believe the big differences between the cultures are responsible for this. As is the easy re-adaptation to European life. Things I really miss are the good food – especially the weekly visit to a 回転寿司 (Kaiten-zushi), my friends, and going out with them. In a way life in Japan (Tokyo) is a bit more dynamic: There is always something to do, the city is crowded 24/24. Eating at home is an exception for most people. My first weekend back in Switzerland, it was a Sunday evening, I found the deserted *dark* streets *very* unusual, hostile.

The rediscovery of the direct and straightforward way we handle things was suddenly so pleasant something I appreciate more than ever. The time in Japan helps to reframe and review all things you would normally take for granted. The same counts for the Switzerland. I try to see my life and the people here in a different perspective again. I am trying to integrate the patience, respect and politeness I gained in Japan into the European style. The right mix has to be made, I am still looking a bit for it, but it is certainly possible.

I would every one encourage to visit Japan, to learn from its culture. And especially do not let yourself scared by the language. The language is very beautiful and people stay mostly very patient when you try to express yourself in japanese.

When someone asks me if I would like to go back, then the answer is a firm yes. Somewhere in future I wish having the opportunity to work on a project within a company, to re-experience Japan on a different level.

Once again I thank SJCC for their support making this everlasting experience possible.

Jeroen Steen