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Japan in retrospective: language study and work

Final report

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Introduction



On the way back to the Old Continent ...

“I felt imbued with magic. The magic of an experience that went far beyond simply love, friendship, culture, language courses, and internships. The magic of a mixture of scenes and perceptions, that even now, continues to fill my memories with an exquisite feeling of harmony and beauty.”

I wrote the above sentences on my way back to Europe. They were supposed to be the beginning of a story about friendship and love, scenes and perceptions. However, as it often happens, life takes us in its flow, and as a consequence, I postponed that initial story... who knows... maybe one day I will continue with it.

To put it straight, my stay in Japan was a busy mixture of language learning, cultural experiences and hard work with some wonderful escapes for scenes and perceptions. In what follows, I will try to summarize my experiences and draw some conclusions from what I did and did not.

For completeness for those who have probably not read the interim report, my stay in Japan officially consisted of a three month language study in Kanazawa and a nine month internship at NEC Corp. I further extended it for another two months to enjoy the presence of a special person and complete my work with NEC. This was all done in the frame of the post-graduate industrial internship program organized by EPF-Lausanne and kindly supported by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce(SJCC).

I am grateful to the Service d’Orientation et Conseil in EPFL for their support before and during my stay in Japan and to my host family Nishinaga for the nice time spent together. My sincere thanks go also to Toshio Kamei at NEC for his excellent supervision and friendliness. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Paul Dudler (SJCC) for taking into consideration my case for scholarship.

Language School

Overview

The language course was in Kanazawa, the capital of Ishikawa prefecture. It was organized by the Ishikawa Foundation for International Exchange (IFIE) with the support of the city of Kanazawa. We stayed in a host family during its duration (3 months). In addition, a number of cultural activities were organized for us and the other participants.

In my opinion, the whole concept of the language course was excellent. IFIE had an agreement with my university, EPF-Lausanne (as a matter of fact also with many other universities around the world). As a consequence, IFIE took personal care of our group of five students, part of the EPFL Industrial Internship Program. They carefully evaluated our language skills through a written test and an oral interview. We were then divided into two smaller groups of two and three students respectively. The classes continued for 3 hours in the morning, such that we had time to catch up with the vocabulary and homework in the afternoons. This naturally allowed us to spend the evenings with our host families. Occasionally, on average once per week, we had various cultural activities in the afternoons.

TIP

*For helping you with understanding Japanese written text, I recommend using **Rikaichan** for Mozilla Firefox. The plug-in is extremely user friendly. You just need to point the mouse to the kanji or combination of kanji and the meaning is displayed.*

The teachers were very dynamic which made the course interactive with lots of variety. This was highly appreciated by all of us. The

courses focused a lot on vocabulary and oral conversations as we explicitly asked for. In my free time, I was trying to memorize the Japanese characters so that I could understand written text.

In retrospective, the combination of intensive language studies and the frequent interactions with our host families, was very beneficial. After 3 months, we estimated our language knowledge to be between Level 3 and 2 on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test scale. While this was enough to cope with daily life situations, it was a big struggle to discuss more complicated topics. Furthermore, my level of Japanese was only satisfactory in oral conversations. Most written text was a complete mystery and to read emails, I needed online tools. If I could return the time, I would probably have insisted that the teachers examine us also on the kanji in the textbooks, so that we learn the pronunciation and meaning of the kanji in the context it appears in the text. In my opinion, the separation of oral and written we insisted on, was inadequate. Also, learning kanji by using association-based methods such as “Remembering the Kanji” was far from optimal. I am now more in favour of learning the kanji meaning in their context, i.e., usage situation. Of course, 3 months is really a short time, so fighting on two fronts would require much longer courses.

Host family

The stay at a host family was a definite must of the program we followed. My Japanese mother (okaasan) and father (otoosan) were a traditional Japanese family in that sense that they were observing various Japanese customs in their daily life. My Japanese mother (okaasan) was taking care of me as if I were her own child. A sincere and fond relationship developed between us. Even though, she appeared very relaxed in general (she has welcomed more than 50 students in her house), I was following rigorously the rules in the house: Japanese etiquette, breakfast/diner times, ofuro planning. I do believe that this was well appreciated and welcomed.

She was also an amazingly dynamic person, managing a number of external to the house activities: she was an Ikebana teacher, a member of a festival group and participated in concerts. Thanks to this, I was honoured to assist some her Ikebana expositions and concerts in Kanazawa. Additionally, many of my friend's host families knew each other, which gave us numerous occasions to meet other host families, and each one of them subsequently invited us for excursions, dinners, expositions, etc.

Being in a host family, I think, gives you an additional understanding of the people and allows you to understand how to respect them in the way you would like them to perceive. If I have to compare with friends who had only intensive courses and were not in touch with Japanese families, I would say that it is comparable to a foreigner who speaks a language in an improper way: speaking Japanese is more than uttering words, it is establishing a relationship.

Cultural and Leisure Activities

Our language school was definitely not missing cultural and leisure activities. It organized various events such as pottery making, tea ceremony, kimono dressing, Ikebana, zazen practice, calligraphy, chopstick and seal (hanko) making. Thanks to these activities, we naturally progressed in the Japanese traditions and crafts.

Some of the events inspired us to further explore the traditions. Personally, I became very interested in the Japanese spiritual places: Jinja, which is a Shinto shrine, and Otera, which is a Buddhist temple. A photography project at IFIE inspired me to photograph different places of the kind, together with different rituals taking place. Observing the people and their practices allowed me to get a better understanding of the people's beliefs. I also observed this spiritual life in a number of festivals such as the *Kuriku*, *Futanama* and *Hyakuman matsuri*.

In addition to what IFIE organized for us, our host families were also very eager at making us discover some well-hidden secrets of the region such as open lacquerware museums, picturesque onsens, etc.



Kuriku ...

Internship Experience

I was offered two alternatives for pursuing my internship. One was at the NEC research center near Nara, and the second was again at NEC, but in the Media and Information Research Laboratory in Kawasaki. The research topics were quite different, so the choice was hard to make. I opted for the one in Kawasaki, which not only allowed me to be in the Tokyo region, but also positioned me in a well-established research center which had some experience with supervising international students. In retrospective, I think that this played a major role in the successful completion of my internship.

During the stay in Kanazawa, I did not think that much about the internship. As a matter of fact, all my attention was focused on studying Japanese and discovering the country and its culture. Only when the end of language school was imminent, my mind started asking questions such as: what style will the dorm be? What will it be like to work with Japanese researchers? How is life in Tokyo?

Dormitory

The building was quite old and the facilities were basic. I was assigned a room with a bed, a big shelf and a TV set. To my surprise, while basic the room was quite spacious and with a real bed. Toilets and washers were available on each floor which was expected. The showers were only three and unfortunately for me were on the ground floor. My room was on the 5th floor and there was no elevator.

The good thing about the dormitory was that the research centre of NEC was just at a 20 min walking distance. Also it was very well positioned, in the middle between Shibuya and Yokohama (each was accessible within 15 min by train), so I had the best of two worlds: Shibuya with its night life, cosy bars and lots of young people and Yokohama with its wonderful sea coast, Chinese town and modern architecture.

The rules in the dormitory were quite strict. I had to indicate my presence in the room using a purpose-built wall with the names of all occupants. Different tokens indicated if you are in/out, on weekend or on longer vacation. At the beginning I thought the system is simplistic and useless, but with time you realize that is really important for the guards to know if you are in or out in case of fire, earthquakes, etc.

For future students going to NEC, do not be disappointed. NEC is currently completely renovating the dorm, so I would expect much nicer living conditions, with extras such as Internet for example.

Researching the Japanese way

Prior to going to Japan I had almost two years experience in industrial research. As such, I was



To be a researcher ...

eager to see how the Japanese researchers lead their work compared to their European counterparts.

I spent my first week at NEC to get used to my working place and to get to know my colleagues. Some of them felt a little bit uneasy at the beginning, or at least this was my impression. I could explain it probably by the fact that they all tried to talk to me in English, and many times this just did not work as they expected. However, as the time progressed, they discovered that I was able enough to communicate in Japanese, and even more I knew quite a lot about Japan and their culture. I could see that this really helped them to feel better in my presence, and from that moment until the end of the internship we were always together talking during lunch in a kind of mixture of Japanese and English. However, my level of Japanese was not enough to discuss issues related to my work, so all technical conversations with my supervisor were in English.

My knowledge of Japanese and Japan culture distinguished me from other international interns which NEC labs welcome regularly (2-3 interns per year) and helped me to integrate quite smoothly in the team. Subsequently, one of my colleagues invited me to play soccer with other NEC employees every Wednesday after work. This was a unique opportunity which I took straight away. It was interesting to observe that even if we were playing for fun, my colleagues were trying to push themselves to the limit. The first couple of times, I thought that I will never keep up with their rhythm. After the game, we would go to an isakaya (Japanese style pub) to celebrate and talk.

A very good friendship developed with one of my colleagues, Yuki Hidaka. As he had lived in the US for a number of years, he was naturally open to foreigners. He was helping me with almost anything I could think of. We even mounted Mt. Fuji together, something that he would not probably have done if I was not there pushing for it.

At the beginning, my supervisor, Toshio Kamei, gave me the possibility to explore two different topics of research. I subsequently chose one of them. I opted for researching on novel algorithms for biometric recognition, focusing on analysing the spectrum of fingerprints. We divided the work into two parts. The first part was the implementation of an already existing algorithm, so that I could get used to the field and the existing challenges. This took me about 3 months. I spent the following 6 months researching how to improve the initial algorithm. By the end of the internship, we had some good results that led to a conference paper publication and a journal manuscript. This was very rewarding and I must say that the feeling of having achieved this in Japan and in NEC is unique.

I can honestly state that these positive achievements gave me the courage to finally pursue a doctoral degree after the internship: a decision that I was not able to make before. Furthermore, during the internship, I gained an understanding of a new field to me, that of biometric security. This naturally opened my mind to research biometrics for computer networks instead of humans and motivated my current PhD topic at ETH-Zurich.

Personally, I could only praise my supervisor, Toshio Kamei, who led my research in an extremely competent and timely manner. He showed me a way of thinking and pursuing that I am currently applying in my research. If I did not have good reasons to return to Europe, I would still be working in the laboratory as a regular employee, living and sharing the common dream of innovation.

Actually, before my internship at NEC, I was working as a research assistant in Europe (Ericsson R&D) for almost two years. While the environment at NEC was similar, it completely differed in terms of flexibility and organisation. At NEC the flexibility depended much on your rank in the hierarchy. As an intern, I officially had fixed working hours (9h00 – 17h45). However, interns as well as junior employees were allowed to come to work later than 9h00, but not after 10h00. As an intern, if you came after 10h, you were not paid for that day. As a junior employee, if you estimated to arrive later than 10h00, you should better declare that you are sick, otherwise this might have consequences on your bonus and promotion at the end of the year.

The organisation of research at NEC was very similar to that at Ericsson. There were a number of different teams, each team consisting of 5 to 20 people. However, I was surprised to see that all teams were also collaborating and deciding together the laboratory priorities. In addition, each team had weekly meetings to discuss the progress made, which personally, I found a little bit too much. I also found the Japanese colleagues very perseverant in their work. The spirit in the laboratory was very optimistic with the idea that a researcher must be able to attack new topics regardless of her previous experience. Another thing that made me very good impression was that all employees were very proud to work at NEC. They truly believed that they are moving the company towards new horizons.

In retrospective, I do believe that this experience taught me independence and perseverance, which are vital ingredients for a successful research.

Life in Tokyo

Living in Tokyo was a vibrant and unforgettable experience. You can navigate the city quickly and conveniently which allows you to explore anything you could think of: parks, museums, discos, food, movies, etc. Shibuya became my favourite place for enjoying night life in Tokyo because of its location and vibrant atmosphere. I do miss the Friday and Saturday evenings spent with my friends in Tokyo.

Shibuya and Roppongi are really exclusive places to be for their abundance of young people, night clubs, restaurants and plenty of craziness. There are many places to eat, drink and dance. As an advice, I would suggest to take a look at the menu or ask if the pub has an initial charge fee. Sometimes, we were unpleasantly surprised by seeing our bills increased by 500-600 Yen per person due to charge fees.

As probably for any technology lover, Akihabara, the electronics shopping district in Tokyo, became another favourite place to walk in the weekends.

Some people may argue that there are big electronic stores also in Shinjuku and Ginza, but the atmosphere in Akihabara is just unique. Its main street is full of small and big electronic shops, while the small streets spanning from the main street are full of good surprises. In only nine months I was navigating Akihabara like a home town. Very often my purpose was just strolling around and seeing what new gadgets have appeared on the stands.

All in all, Tokyo is a real cosmopolitan capital which can offer something to everyone. However, many times you may feel oppressed by the size of the city, its lack of space and crowds of people leaving you out of bread. Instinctively you would like to find a peaceful place to have a rest.



Scenes and Perceptions

More than everything, my experience in Japan was a mixture of scenes and perceptions. They strike with their variety and convey a feeling of peace and harmony. I profoundly keep in my memories the glory and beauty of the sky above Mt. Fuji, the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, the quiet and exquisite nature in Nikko, the crystal and warm waters of the onsens in Sakurajima, the subtle smell and tender colors of sakura in Kenrokuen and plums in Kairakuen, the delicate taste of fresh sashimi, the magnificent sounds of hanabi. The list would continue indefinitely.

Conclusion

My experience was a balanced mixture of language and culture study, and serious work. I enjoyed every single minute of it and will strongly work towards building new relationships with Japan both in personal and professional perspective. I would again encourage the students going to Japan to do their best in Japanese before leaving, as well as during their stay in Japan. In addition, I would highly recommend to stay with a host family during the language school. This will have a tremendous effect on your language skills and understanding about Japan. Last but not least, respect the way Japanese think and live, and you will make live-long Japanese friends.

"Why have you come to this temple?" one young novice is asked. "To meet the founder (Dogen) face to face" (to learn his teaching) replies the novice.

Then he is asked, "how should this be done?" "I think by forgetting oneself," he replies.

Then he is asked, "What was written inside the summon?" The novice cannot remember and the senior monk asks, "do you always enter places when you don't know what lies within? -- The founder's teachings can be studied in your home temple; to take the trouble to come here to this main temple was unnecessary. Those who do not see and comprehend what is written inside the summon cannot understand the teaching.

To learn about Buddhism is to learn about oneself, to learn about oneself is to forget oneself."

(from The Way of Eihei-ji : Zen Buddhist Ceremony)