

Scholarship by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce

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Handed in to:

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Internship

In April 2008 I started the second half of my scholarship. For one month I went back to Switzerland and received an initial training at Genedata. Genedata is a Swiss bioinformatics company delivering software for pharmaceutical industry, biotechnology, Agriculture and Academia. Founded in 1997 as a privately held spin off from Novartis, it is headquartered in Basel and has branches in Germany, the US and Japan with more than 120 employees worldwide. I was introduced into Expressionist, a solution for the analysis of microarray-based transcriptomics datasets. Genedata's customers use machines to measure the degree of activity of all genes within a given cell. The data are generated in such large amounts that conventional software like Excel cannot handle them anymore. Genedata's software in contrast visualizes, analyzes and interprets the measured values. By comparing for example diseased and healthy cells it is possible to identify genes that behave differently in the two cells. Those genes are likely to play a decisive role in the course of the disease and represent potential targets for drugs.

Back in Japan I joined the small team and was within a few weeks skilled enough to present and explain the software in front of prospective customers from pharmaceutical companies. Thanks to Webex, a service enabling web conferences, we were able to address an audience scattered all over Japan without leaving our office in Gotanda. In addition I was responsible for the support of certain customers, which basically meant answering technical and scientific questions regarding our software and the analysis of expression datasets in general. Of course I was quite dependent on support from Basel myself. I communicated with clients always in English since clarity was important and my sense for politeness in Japanese was still far from being sufficient. My experience was that Japanese know more English than they think they do, and that they use it less than they could. But my Japanese language skills helped me a lot in understanding customers' emails and questions during presentations.

In the hindsight I must say that Genedata was an extraordinary good company to do an internship. Microarray data analyses revealed

itself as a fascinating area of biology I definitely intend to continue working in. The internship at Genedata is an excellent reference and will help me finding a future job in this area.

Summer in Tokyo

After my training in Basel I moved to another guesthouse in Tokyo. This time it was in Shirogane, a posh area in Minato-ku. Citizens of this area are called "Shiroganese" because it sounds like Milanese and should describe how hip these folks are. My room was next to a highway, shielded from daylight, inhabited by mice, without warm water in the kitchen and three minutes away from the next coin laundry. It cost 80'000 Yen per month which is a fair offer. It took me 15 minutes to reach Ebisu station and then some 5 more minutes until I entered Genedata's office in Gotanda. If life in my last guesthouse in Ota-ku was provincial, then this time it was urban. Too urban.

More and more I left Tokyo on weekends and searched for nature and tranquil lifestyle in the outskirts of the conurbation. Enoshima was

one of my favorite destinations. It is a beautiful island with all sorts of distractions to make it a pleasant journey. One restaurant was especially nice. Built at the far end of the island where the cliffs decline steeply towards the sea it served a variety of local dishes like grilled sepia, turban shells and octopus. I often sat on the terrace and watched over the wide Pacific Ocean. Open space as far as Australia. Nothing could have been more relaxing than this simple feeling of the void.

As it got warmer and more humid, insects appeared everywhere in Tokyo. Not so much mosquitoes, rather than big brown cicadas that filled the air with their chirring. Japanese call them aburazemi whereas abura (oil) comes from the resemblance to the sound of boiling oil and semi stands for cicada. At the end of summer when their lives were over they fell from trees like chunks of meat and could be found everywhere. Summer indeed turned Tokyo into a different city. My leather shoes grew mold, small white pimples I had to whip away regularly. I was told that the light



construction of Japanese buildings was a result of the high humidity. Brick stones would absorb all the water in the air and allow fungi to grow in muggy days. In the cooler and drier season the stones would disperse the spores again and cause infection of the pulmonary organs. Japanese architecture in contrast provides for a constant air current and prevents molding. Humidity was a bigger problem than heat itself. Sweat never dried, and everything got smelly. The sun could hardly be seen through the mist, but was strong.

In August, life settled down in Tokyo for a while. There were some national holidays, and I hardly got any work from customers anymore. So I went to the Izu-peninsula for a week, with two books and my swimming trunks. This lovely spot lies in the vicinity of Tokyo, well known for its beaches and rugged coastline. Since a few years it has not been a frequently visited place anymore, because of the bad economy as I was assured by the local people. I hardly met any tourists and often even had troubles finding an open restaurant. Each day I set out for a new village and a new minshuku. Once again I was

astonished by the loneliness of the Japanese hinterland. I could walk on two-lane roads into the mountains without meeting anybody for hours. Fast growing plants took over some parts of the concrete, landslides and earthquakes had led to large fissures in the streets, and beams and poles were corroded by the salty winds blowing from the sea.

Thoughts about the future

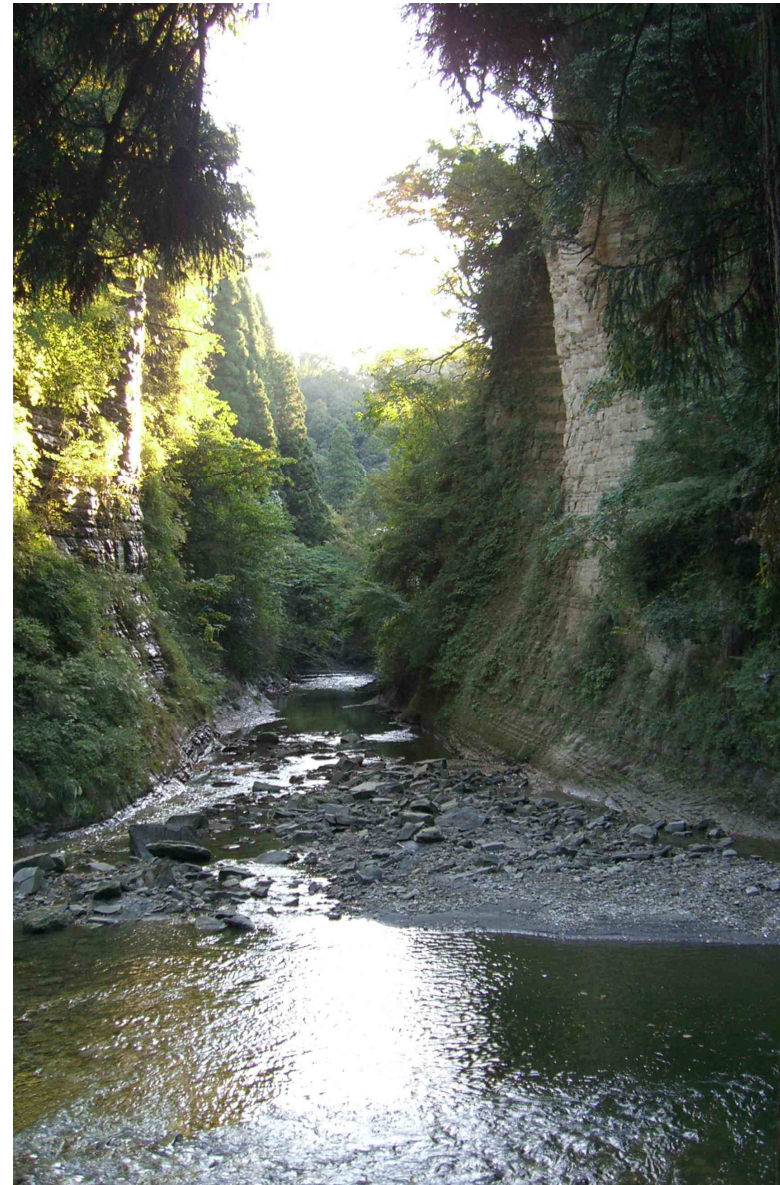
The Izu-peninsula lies at the foot of Mount Fuji, an area which is expected to be hit by the strongest earthquake in Japan in the near future. During the last months of my stay I experienced a series of minor earthquakes. Usually they lasted for about half a minute or a minute, making furniture, cups, lamps and other things around me rattling peacefully. The epicenters were always far enough away to damage Tokyo, but in areas like Iwate prefecture the earthquakes had a magnitude of 6-7 with major destruction on houses and the landscape. The expected earthquake near the Izu-peninsula, however, is supposed to be a real big one, more devastating than the earthquake in Kobe of 1995. It is called the Tokai earthquake and reappears with a

frequency of 110 ± 33 years. The last Tokai earthquake happened in 1854, the following one is still outstanding. The longer it will be delayed, the more energy will be built up. To make things worse, a nuclear power plant has been built in the 1970ies at the location where the hardest shaking is foreseen. And some simulations say Mount Fuji will be woken up by the Tokai earthquake and erupt.

Swiss feelings

Maybe I am just too much Swiss and lack the necessary indifference towards earthquakes. Swiss and Japanese are anyway quite different. Swiss are taller and heavier. Japanese dress more elegantly and in less colorful but more gender-specific ways. None of my Swiss friends are married but some have children. Some of my Japanese friends are married, but none have children. Some of my roommates have never left Japan in their whole life. And Japanese stand up for old and handicapped people if there is no seat in the train. Even young ones do so.

I will probably not see the year 2100. By then, the Japanese population will have shrunk to



half of today's size. What will be the effects of population decline on society, individual behavior and economy? As young Japanese get less and less numerous, they will become more important for the whole society. Will the young still pay as much homage to the old as they do now? Will they still be dispensing tissues instead of doing real jobs? In Shibuya one can take a look at the forerunners of the new age. These young citizens dress like punks, behave impolite and everything on them heralds that they do not need anyone.

It is not easy for Western companies to gain ground in the Japanese market. The provision of services offered by Japanese companies ranks probably highest in the world. The word "no" is hardly ever spoken towards customers. I remember once arriving with a flat tire at a bicycle shop after closing time. The two employees had just locked the door, wearing already their clean clothes. Nevertheless, they reopened the garage, switched on all lights, searched for the right valve and inflated my tire. For free, of course, and without showing any signs of annoyance. Such a service is hard to deliver for Western companies, as a lot of extra work needs to be done without direct



compensation. I had the impression that Japanese employees simply continue working until all customer requests are satisfied resulting in uncounted hours of overtime work. Western employees rather ask themselves whether they are supposed to deliver the required service and stick to the contract. In the long run, of course, the Japanese way of doing business will build up confidence and good customer relationships. But it requires a lot of extra energy and stamina to get a business running in Japan.

Towards the end of my scholarship I went with friends into the Japanese Alps. I myself probably would not have gone hiking in the mountains as I was more enthusiastic about the sceneries I could not find in Switzerland. It was though a very Japanese experience. My friend Satoshi, the organizer of the tour, heavily overloaded the program and kept us running for two days around Kamikochi. The landscape resembled the foothills of the Swiss Alps very much. To climb the highest peak in the area and document it with the camera was the goal. The neighboring peak we could tick off as well. Not that this peak was spectacular in any sense, but it was a peak.



I was surprised to hear many familiar words when we stayed the night in the mountain hut, the "hyutte". At four a clock we got up and took photographs of the "morugenroto" and walked up through a "koru", a pass between two mountain ridges. Back in his days at the university, Satoshi was a "wandaogaru", which helped him finding our way on the hiking map. Are there no Japanese words for it? Each fish can be named, there are dozens of terms for preparing tofu, but they have no words for this? Did Japanese prefer food and social pleasures to the beauty of nature and survived without the word for aurora? I do not know. But most likely they just copied from Switzerland the culture of hiking including all related terms.

Harvest

I learned a lot during my year in Tokyo and had a time rich with new impressions, emotions and insights. Again and again I am surprised to hear me talking Japanese, to see me reading texts I could not decipher by any means one year ago. Maybe I will forget some of the Japanese words I know now. Probably even a lot. But over the last year I realized that

I can become fluent in one of the very difficult languages on earth within a short time. This was a great experience. I encountered a completely different Japan once I managed to communicate with the people in their own language. When speaking English, Japanese were hesitant and reduced their comments to phrases they thought would please me. When talking in Japanese, however, I was like a small child again and could learn a lot as the Japanese talked much more deliberately about everything. I learned as well to be modest again and more polite as I was ignorant of almost everything.

Inevitably, stacks of business cards piled up on my desk. There are too many to keep track of. But there are about a dozen contacts or so where relationship has become very strong. They will remain my reliable partners in Japan wherever I am.

Acknowledgements

The Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce has likewise been a wonderful benefactor and partner during my year abroad. The financial support and the helpful advice, in particular

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