A Year in Japan – Final Report

Victoria Watts

SJCC Scholarship Recipient

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Table of Contents

1. Preface

During Christmas 2009 I packed my bags and boxes, but the latter into my attic and set out to Japan with a minimal plan: I wanted to study the language and work there for a year.

Now, a little over 12 months later, I am back in Switzerland, sorting my pictures and floating in memories and impressions. The job I found allowed me to spend a lot of time talking with Japanese people of all ages and backgrounds and when I re-read my notes I realise how much they taught me.

As a sociologist I enjoy contemplating and analysing everyday life. This report is a collection of quirks, common sense assumptions and snapshots of Japanese society. It is of little academic value as the collection and interpretation is subjective. Some insights will be shared by short-term visitors. Others, I am sure, require one to have lived and worked within the Japanese society. For that I am very grateful – what an experience it has been!

In this report I will review my year and experiences. I will start with the cornerstones of my year: arriving, studying and finding a job. The main focus of this final report is set on a number of peculiarities which caught my attention and which I find noteworthy.

I am deeply indebted to the Swiss Japanese Chamber of Commerce who supported this year generously, especially Mr Paul Dudler. In Japan I met Mari Miyamura who opened so many sliding doors for me to peek into the Japanese soul and without whom my experience would have not been as wonderful as it was.

2. Setting Out

I arrived on December 29th in midst of the New Year Holiday season. Most Japanese companies close down over the New Year and many Japanese return to their hometowns for the New Year festivities. When I arrived at Narita and asked to book a seat on the Shinkansen down to Hakata (Kyushu), the station staff gave me a soft, sympathetic look accompanied by a short, sharp intake of breath (a sound I was going to hear often) and a slight movement of the head. This meant that it was going to be a *chotto* – "a little" (difficult). Which it was. I could not reserve a seat and had to squash myself and my large suitcase onto the already packed train. Over a period of 5 hours I moved from the doorway into the carriage and further away from my suitcase. I was exhausted after the long flight and desperately wanted to sit down on the floor - the cleanest train floor I had seen in my life - but everybody else remained standing. So, for the first of many times I decided to do it the Japanese way. I smiled and waited until things got better. And they did. I arrived in Hakata, checked into my dormitory room and went to sleep lulled with exhaustion and great anticipation for what would come.

The next few days were a little hazy. Fukuoka felt like a ghost town. The subway was deserted, shops were closed and there were hardly any cars on the streets. However, the shrines were very busy with people praying for a lucky new year. I joined them.

3. Language Schools

I wanted to find language school which would allow me start in the middle of the academic year and offer me the flexibility to study for as long as I needed to before I found a job. Many Japanese Language schools are aimed at the Asian clientele wanting to enrol in a Japanese University. Their courses usually start in Spring or Autumn and last for 12 to 18 months, which didn't suit my plan. I originally looked into schools in Kyoto, but then opted for Genki JACS (Japanese Language and Culture School) in Fukuoka. I chose Fukuoka because it is located in an area of Japan I hadn't visited before. I can highly recommend Genki JACS. It is a very professionally run school and tries hard to cater to each student's individual needs.

Later during my stay I took a second course at ARC Academy in Kyoto and was a little disappointed by the teaching style and administrative procedures and inflexibilities. ARC

Academy only has four class levels between complete beginners and very advanced students. In my class about 60% of the students were significantly above the level we were being taught, but not fluent enough to join the next higher class. This was rather frustrating.

I emphasize this point and would like to recommend future recipients to check class levels with schools and, if possible, take an assessment test ahead of their stay with the school. This will allow you to study ahead (to be able to join a higher level) or choose a different school with classes at your level. If a language school only hast four class levels, students can waste up to 1 or 2 months of intensive lessons until the class they are in has reached the level they are at. Refund policies can be tricky. So, maybe only booking a few weeks to start with might be a good idea (it's much easier to add a few weeks than to leave a course and try to get your money back).

4. Looking for a Job

When I originally applied for the Scholarship I had hoped to find a job in my previous field of expertise, Marketing and Communications. Given the challenging situation I applied across the whole market, highlighting all my potentially interesting qualifications. As a backup option I had also obtained a CELTA Certificate (teaching English as a second language to adults). This turned out to be the decisive extra string to my bow which then got me a job at a private language school. It seemed perfect, just slightly mistimed, as they needed somebody very urgently, and I couldn't stay at Genki JACS and study Japanese for as long as I had hoped to.

To begin with I was a little apprehensive about the job as I would be spending most of my day speaking English. I also thought that working for a language school would not really be working in a Japanese environment. However, this turned out to be a misconception: The language school was lead by a Japanese Businesswoman; our main customers were Kumamoto University and another local company. Therefore, the environment was very Japanese and my job offered me a lot of insight into a Japanese Small and Medium Enterprises. In hindsight, was the best experience I could have hoped for.

5. Travelling in February

Before things got too serious and as long as I was still on my Tourist Visa I decided to do some traditional and historical sightseeing in Honshu and Shikoku.

I then returned to Fukuoka, said a short goodbye to my new friends there and got on the Tsubame Limited Express (soon to be the Tsubame Shinkansen line) down to Kumamoto. For the first two weeks I lived in a home stay accommodation with a friendly couple. These two weeks were very interesting as I could live the authentic lifestyle including soup and rice for breakfast, evening baths and cheering for the Japanese figure skaters during the Olympic Games.

6. Royale English Services

I was very lucky to find employment with Royale English Services (RES). It is a privately run business which was originally set up by an English Language teacher and his Japanese wife about 12 years ago. It has grown sustainably over this time and some students have been taking their lessons at RES since day one. At some stage RES was operating three classrooms around Kumamoto, but decided to refocus and build the one school in Obiyama, an affluent area about 20 minutes from the town centre. Currently the school has about 140 students. RES also provides translations, interpretations and dubbing for TV productions. A second part of the business focuses on the distribution of medical devices.

I worked a fulltime schedule teaching English and presentation skills to the students at Kumamoto University's AIDS Research Centre, some classes at the University Hospital and at a large Chemical Plant. In addition, I taught some private adult students and three groups of children and teenagers. Working with such a wide range of students was great fun and mentally stimulating. When applying for teaching jobs I had been a little apprehensive and worried that I could end up spending my days singing songs to children (an honourable job, but not quite what I had come to Japan for). Therefore I was relieved to have found a position which was intellectually challenging and allowed me to interact with Japanese people.

7. Getting a Life in Kumamoto

One advantage of living in Kumamoto is its abundance of cheap and available flats. I looked at two and chose one. The price was very decent (34000 yen/mth plus utilities) and it was conveniently located. I had to pay a two month deposit, fire insurance and the first month upfront. When I moved out I was a little surprised to realise that one month's rent was deducted because I stayed in the flat for less than 12 months and most of the second month's deposit was deducted from my deposit for the final cleaning (and no, I did not leave the flat in an awful mess when I left). This seems to be common procedure so I recommend other recipients to check the details of the contract when renting an apartment.

Moving into an unfurnished flat meant I had to buy some basic furnishings: A cheap table and chair, some crockery and kitchen appliances, a futon and curtains. After two months I decided to invest in a small sofa – it was worth every yen.

I could take on an existing company phone contract and my colleague Mari came along to the bank as an interpreter which helped a lot. There was a small hiccup when the bank insisted on a proper inkan. I was prepared and had a stamp made when I was still in Fukuoka which I proudly presented. It spelt my name in Katakana. But the bank wouldn't accept it – it had to be a proper inkan with a Kanji, not a rubber stamp. So we went to the local 100yen shop, where I bought one with a surname that sounded a bit like Watts and ended up with Wakazuki ("young moon"). I still don't quite understand why a 100yen shop inkan is regarded to be safer than a made-to-measure one.

Clichés and Truths

After living in Japan for a year I have come to the following conclusion: whatever you hear about Japan – it's true. And so is the opposite. Some Japanese will still shy away from foreigners, others are eager, open and very chatty. Some will have to go drinking with their boss three times a week, others never. Some areas of public life are super high-tech, others seem to be stuck in the 1970s. The following paragraphs are a collection of things I found noteworthy, amusing, surprising or simply strange.

8. Teaching English in Japan

Enter the term “teaching English in Japan” into google and you will be overwhelmed by the amount of hits you get – and the things you read. It’s a bitter-sweet story. The English language teaching market boomed in the 1990s and many large chains established themselves throughout the country. The quality they provided varied immensely – as their primary purpose wasn’t educational but to make money. Most Japanese people I have spoken with have mixed attitudes towards foreigners teaching English. After teaching for 8 months I have come to understand why:

During the 90ies all you needed to be able to enter Japan and obtain a visa allowing you to teach English was a Canadian, American, Australian or British Passport. No qualifications in teaching were necessary. The large chain schools gave the aspiring teachers a 2 day introduction to teaching (core message: BE FUN) and then put them into a classroom. The students often had to pay for lessons up to a full year in advance! Rumour has it that some schools required a 2 year commitment. Many students lost these investments when the large chains went bankrupt a few years ago.

The “be fun” attitude partly made up for the teachers’ lack of formal training. On the other hand it was also part of the teaching concept. Classroom English in Japanese Schools is rather strict and grammar focused and the private language schools try to fill the gap, focusing on conversation and the playful aspects of language learning.

I was often impressed by the texts some of my high school students brought into class. They read articles with very advanced vocabulary and complex topics (e.g. Nature and Science). I couldn’t help comparing these to the topics we covered in our French lessons at school where Simone and René went to the bakery, bought tickets at the station and admired the Eiffel Tower.

Although the students learn this advanced and rather specific vocabulary they struggle when asked to speak about the contents of an article. It seems that the Japanese idea of teaching a language prioritises on writing, reading, listening and speaking whereas the Swiss education system prioritises speaking, reading, writing and then listening skills. Swiss students don’t worry about grammatical accuracy when speaking during a lesson – the aim is to simply

express an idea - the Japanese students will think about their answers for quite a time and then offer a grammatically perfect structure.

I don't know how many times I heard Japanese people say "We don't have the confidence to speak English". In everyday situations I often experienced the following: My Japanese counterpart would claim not to be able to speak any English. So I tried to communicate in Japanese. After realising that I was making a complete fool of myself they seemed to take pity on me, dared to speak up and produced an astounding level of English.

9. Negotiating with Customers

Besides the actual teaching, there were also some serious business relationships to be maintained. I spent hours considering, interpreting and rephrasing emails and documents for our customers. Our company was contracted to teach at the University and we worked closely with one of the secretaries who coordinated these classes. In early June the University requested us to offer a curriculum of additional intensive Saturday courses for some students. After the coordinator had approved our proposed curriculum the students had to apply to the coordinator with a letter of motivation. I was requested to give an overview of all the students' current level of English and choose the three (out of four) applicants which expected to show the most progress from the course.[1] Which ones to choose? And why were we being asked to choose only three? I didn't understand.

It was in my own interest to have all four in the course and I felt it was my job as their teacher to give them all the opportunity to profit from the extra classes. I wrote up the requested report including my recommendation for all four students to join. The immediate reply helped me understand which student the University wanted us to eliminate from the course by asking explicitly if this one student would not keep the course from progressing.

I felt that if the coordinator for some reason wanted to eliminate this student from the course then she should do so. But asking us to do it for her seemed a little cheap. In addition, I had a clear preference for having all four students on the course. And I didn't want one of

[1] This in itself I found noteworthy: choose the students that would make the most/fastest progress in the course. Not the students who needed the course most, but the ones that would make a great leap in their abilities – the one's we could show off with.

my students to think that I had denied him the course. I was too stubborn to just give up, so I rephrased my recommendation repeating that in my opinion all students should participate, but, if there was one student to be taken off then course, then it should probably be the one the university had in mind from the start. And that's what they did. I still don't understand why the secretary couldn't take this decision from the beginning and remain baffled by the amount of time and energy I spent speculating and discussing on how we should act and respond.

This episode illustrated nicely how Japanese negotiation can work. In this case the outcome was clear from the very beginning and it was also very obvious who had the power to take the decisions. Nevertheless both parties spent a decent amount of time laying out their arguments and hinting their desired outcome.

10. Kohai -Sempai

Traditionally, a younger person[2] (kohai) needs to show their respect to the older person (sempai) in behaviour and language, even if the age difference is only a year. I could see this rule determine behaviour in my university classes. Originally it had even determined the members of the classes. So I had classes filled with students of the same seniority, but with vast differences in their abilities. Over time I tried to regroup the classes according to ability more than seniority. After this reshuffling, one of the senior students discontinued his participation. I am not sure but strongly assume that he did not want to share classes with the younger students. During discussions the more senior students spoke for longer, steered the discussion along their own line of interest and did not pick up on any of the junior's comments.

11. Medical Sales People

Teaching at the University Hospital offered further insight into the way things work differently in Japan. Around 4pm the hallways and entrances started to fill up with people in suits and business cases. There seemed to be some prime positions: next to the elevator, at

[2] Kohai is usually used for a younger person. However, originally it refers to a person who entered the organisation (company, club) later, and is a "younger member". Sempai refers to the older member.

the bottom of the staircase and in the hallway connecting the hospital with the research labs. I found this a little awkward as every time I came around the corner all eyes turned to me for a moment before (disappointedly) looking away again. It took me a few days to realise and understand. These people were salespeople from pharmaceutical companies waiting for the doctors and senior managerial staff to come along in order to offer samples or introduce new products to them. When the target doctor did arrive the sales rep did all the bowing and walked alongside the doctor, explaining his products and handing over his goods. The whole procedure took something between 20 and 80 seconds. To me this process looked a little subordinate. The doctors didn't seem too interested and occasionally looked slightly irritated (which is something one doesn't see very often). What a job, I couldn't help thinking. These people spend their days standing in hallways chasing a doctor who might or might not turn up. I could hardly believe that profitable business can be conducted this way, but it is, as one of the doctors confirmed – and it's quite a well paying job, too.

12. Married to Meiji, Daiwa or Kagome

Salarymen married to their corporation are another famous cliché. And I did meet some Japanese people who really do have to stay in late and/or go drinking with their managers. Others however, work a straight-forward 40 hour week and return home on time every evening. A young couple I got to know told me that the husband used to work late before he was married, as this was expected. However, now he is married with children he returns home earlier and nobody gives it a second thought.

13. Long Term Planning

One of my students originally comes from Kyoto. After graduating from University he found a job on the west coast of Kyushu in Uto. He rents a room in the company dorm-house with 2 meals a day. Most of his co-workers are significantly older (30 upwards) and he was the only graduate to start in April 2009[3]. This means he has no colleagues of his own seniority (see chapter 10). It seems that the kohai – sempai system can make it hard for some (more traditionally inclined) Japanese to make new acquaintances. This specific young man claimed

[3] April 1st is the day of change and new beginnings and many employment contracts start on April 1st.

that he couldn't make friends with his co-workers as he couldn't talk openly to them if they were older or younger. When I asked him if he considered returning to Kyoto (as all his friends live there) he replied "yes, of course I will return; when I am retired". It is hard for me to understand this train of thought. The young man is 25, not happy where he is, but plans to stay around for another 40 years?

14. Defeatism or Wisdom?

Westerners are often surprised by the Japanese spirit of accepting the things as they are. I am still very impressed by the way they accept and endure hardship and uncomfortable situations. The western attitude is to change the things one does not like, to take one's fate into one's own hands and to be proactive. The Japanese ideal is to accept situations, focus on the positive aspects and not let people around one be affected by one's personal discomfort.

This surely improves the general atmosphere when spending time together. No whining, no open disagreements when deciding on a joint activity or procedure and no open losers after a decision has been taken. This social paradigm allows interaction to flow smoothly and keeps everyone in the boat and no one feeling left out. On the other hand it also slows down procedures and innovation in some areas of society.

15. How to Lose with Grace

I have mentioned before that I experienced decision making processes to be rather slow and full of vague hints about one's preferences. The statements are clear enough to be picked up on and used as an argument supporting the final group decision. However, they are also kept vague enough to be ignored without *obviously* being ignored. This makes it easy for the overruled person to smile at an outcome he or she might not have been in favour of, and take an attitude of agreement with the final decision. In western society, where preferences are more openly stated, the overruled person often ends up being publicly in an opposing position. This can make the situation a little uncomfortable. Firstly, the decision is not what he or she had hoped for and secondly everybody knows it. The Japanese etiquette allows the individual to "change" his mind and accept the final decision with an open and positive attitude as if he had never wanted any other outcome. Personally I think this is a very

elegant approach that shows how some of the Japanese social procedures do not only help the “group” to be happier with outcomes, but also smoothes the situation for the individual person.

16. Courteous, Respectful, Polite or Kind?

Most first-time visitors to Japan return home with the impression that all Japanese are friendly, smiling, polite, eager to please the customer and that the Japanese are born (or raised) to serve. When shopping, the clerk will carry your purchases to the exit of their store and then hand it to you with two hands. On rainy days transparent plastic covers are put over paper carrier bags to ensure everything stays dry. The trolley ladies on the JR lines are most elegant and bow when entering and leaving a carriage. Presents are wrapped beautifully (beware - wrapping styles reflect the occasion and formality of the relationship and there are probably a million ways to get it wrong). There’s even a correct way to open the sliding doors which includes kneeling down and placing one hand after and above the other before sliding the door.

All these behaviours are very impressive and further nourish the cliché about the harmonious and civilised society of Japan. As a foreigner you probably will, at times, feel slightly embarrassed by the procedures, respect and attention you receive and return home with a slightly strange feeling that the Japanese are a rather subordinate people. This is a great misconception. After speaking with various people I came to the conclusion that although these procedures are performed to express respect, they are also a vehicle to demonstrate one’s own finesse, ability to adhere to the rules of etiquette and knowledge of correct conduct.

A lot of etiquette is still based on the etiquette of the Edo Period when people put a lot of effort into refining social interaction. Today, being able to perform these rituals correctly reveals one’s character, education and social standing.

As one of my students explained, politeness is mainly about adhering to the correct etiquette, and has very little to do with being kind (from the heart) towards the other person. Japanese politeness is more about flattering oneself than the other person. This student went even further by saying that the Japanese lack true empathy (and thus kindness coming

from the heart vs politeness based on a set of behavioural rules) as the culture has no concept corresponding to the Christian notion of loving your neighbour. I'm not so sure about the validity of this reasoning, as I experienced a lot of empathy in our little school business, but it surely is an interesting point.

17. Non-verbal Communication

Another thing that surprised me regularly was how Japanese are communicative minimalists. People rarely repeat themselves. However, sentences are full of hints and vague pointers. This minimalist approach is usually attributed to the fact that Japanese communication is strongly guided by context – and the assumption that the other person will be able to interpret the situation in the same way as one does, especially if the people involved know each other well.

I often saw Japanese couples or friends communicating by simply looking at each other for a few seconds or longer. They seemed to exchange information about leaving a location, comment on a situation, evaluate a performance or a person's behaviour without saying a single word. A small facial gesture and an utterance of "interesting" or "difficult" or "soso" sufficed for people around to know as much as they needed to know. I found this fascinating.

Upon returning to Switzerland I couldn't help thinking: Do we Swiss really talk so much about the obvious? Is it really necessary to talk about a bad meal for 5 minutes instead of looking at one another, realise that the other person is thinking the same and then move on to the next topic of conversation?

18. Inhibited or Expressive

We often believe that Japanese people are a little inhibited as most social interaction and behaviour is ruled by the abovementioned etiquette. Westerners like to think that Japanese people don't let their hair down or can't get out of their own skin. This might be true in some aspects of life and social interaction. However, I saw many Japanese people do things openly which would raise eyebrows (or even seem a little rude) in Europe. Whereas Europeans will buy a yoga mat and DVD and practice their gymnastic exercises in the privacy of their own apartment or room, Japanese stretch and wriggle wherever they are. They'll

play imaginary golf while waiting for the commuter train or practice their trumpet along the riverbanks in the middle of Kyoto.

19. Mirror, Mirror Everywhere

What struck me to be socially inacceptable in Europe but fully accepted in Japan are the obvious and openly presented acts of vanity. While westerners try to catch a discreet glimpse of themselves when passing a shop window or mirror and quickly rearrange a straggly fringe without being too obvious about their vanity, Japanese girls and women talk to each other while looking at themselves in their little (or not so little) pocket mirrors. Mobile phones have integrated mirrors and young men and women will be fidgeting with some perfectly arranged strands of hair until they're fully satisfied with their looks. This would be considered highly rude, if not pathologically narcissist in Europe.

20. Genki Lifestyle

I was impressed by the general level of fitness. In Kumamoto I found a nice little park near where I lived and went there regularly for a run around the tracks. Doing my rounds I could observe a whole lifecycle of activities. One pre-schoolers' gym lessons consisted of a group of about 20 children and 2 teachers all in colourful caps marching figures in the grass and "freezing" whenever the music stopped. The lesson also included a tea-break where everybody received a cup of tea from the class thermos. Junior High and High School students mainly ran their tracks (at an impressive speed I may add). The middle aged women and men tended to march their rounds with exaggerated upper body movement and added some body-stretches at the end. And then, one of my favourite sights: Groups of genki old pensioners playing baseball in full gear. The precision and subtleness of their movements was lovely to watch and their playfulness made me smile every time.

21. Newspapers

Many long term foreigners with whom I spoke still could only read the English newspapers, mainly the "Japan Times". Due to my own level of Japanese, I too, had to refer to this publication to know what was going on in the political and cultural world of Japan. After a few months I couldn't shake the impression that I only had access to a simplified, non-

diversified source of information. I cannot judge if this is the way Japanese newspapers report or if the Japan Times' authors are all foreigners who are part time journalists and part time language teachers. Many of the cultural topics and columns sounded strongly like ex-pat experiences, views and observations of Japan.[4] This further confirmed my impression that it remains very hard for foreigners to fully immerse into the Japanese society, even when they have lived there for many years.

22. Rock - Scissor - Paper

If a situation or a game comes to a stalemate situation "Rock-Scissor-Paper" takes on the role of the ultimate judge. And its decisive power doesn't only apply to the 5 to 12 year olds. Adults will still use it as an objective decision maker. I guess that used throughout a lifetime, Rock-Scissor-Paper is a very fair way of deciding debates.

From: Japan Times - December 12th, 2010

23. I like sleeping, shopping and watching TV

In small group lessons I sometimes started the lessons by asking my students what they did during the weekend. Besides warming the students up this also helped to learn something about their hobbies and adapt the lessons to include topics of interest. However, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed with the answers. Up to the age of about 35, most of my

[4] As the Ex-pat community in Japan mainly consists of a homogenous group of American, Australian or English men who teach English part- or full-time I assume that is the language teachers who write.

students seemed to spend their weekends sleeping, watching TV, shopping or driving around in their car. At first I had hoped that this answer was based on their lack of vocabulary. But now I'm not so sure. They either really do spend their weekends doing one of these activities or they don't want to tell the class about what they really did.

After one lesson a student came up to me and said: "Well, errrm, actually, I bought a TV. But I couldn't say that in class." I was quite surprised. Monday morning coffee breaks in my previous jobs had been a game of "who had the most exciting weekend?". Hiking highest peaks, cycling over the Alps, weekend trips and running marathons; part of the fun of doing these things was being able to tell your co-workers about them on Monday morning. Not so in Japan: When my Japanese friend from Kyushu came to visit me in Kyoto she hadn't even told here co-workers or her partner's family that she was visiting Kyoto. She explained that they might regard it as being a little extravagant of her, so she preferred to keep it to herself.

24. Family

Down in Kyushu area family values are still very important. When houses are built, the idea of a parent moving in for a few years is considered and the house built accordingly. Traditionally it is the first born child who takes care of the parents. My Japanese friend told me that some of her friends take this into consideration when choosing a partner. Is he a first born? Will she have to take care of his parents?

Thinking about this I realised that many of the stories my students told me about their families reflect this custom. Students who have moved to Kumamoto from other prefectures often mentioned that their older brothers and sisters live and work in their hometown.

25. Lack of sleep

I have already mentioned that my students often spend their weekends sleeping, which I couldn't quite understand until I learned more about "normal" sleeping patterns. Next to my apartment there was a large Juku (Cram School) and I was surprised time and time again at seeing these teenagers coming out of their final lessons at 10pm and then seeing the same students cycling to their day school at 7am the next morning.

Talking to my JHS[5] students I learnt that around the age of 14 it is usual for them to go to bed between 11.30 pm and 1 am and to get up between 5 and 6.30 am, depending on how far away their school is and if they take extra lessons before their regular classes. Depending on which area the JHS or HS[6] is located in, these teenagers spend up to an hour commuting each way, by bicycle or by bus. Now I understand why half the population in buses, at train stations and even in class is dozing - they simply lack sleep.

26. Poetry and Hyakunin Isshu

Traditional Japanese poetry generally describes nature as a fragile, subtle beauty which is experienced through focused appreciation and offers the observer quiet happiness. Most Western poetry however, depicts nature as raw, forceful, sometimes frightening and outside human influence. I found this noteworthy, as these descriptions oppose the experience of natural forces in everyday life. Whereas Japan is inflicted by typhoons, rainy seasons, large temperature swings and earthquakes, Central and Western Europe are not.

The Japanese seem obsessed with finding miniscule nuances in nature and defining these accordingly. One of my students brought along a book containing over 800 expressions for rain. Spring rain alone can be expressed in 45 ways. And there's a poetic expression for the moon on every single day of the year. Obviously, this is not everyday language but the field of the poets, however it does reflect the Japanese approach to nature – paying painstaking attention to the detail, the single blossom, the faintest scent.

There is a famous game that used to be played by the cultured samurai class and is still played today – mainly by JHS and HS students - called Hyiakunin Isshu. Cards are laid out on the floor with poems written on them and two players play. The part of one poem is read out loud by a referee and the two players compete in finding the card with the whole poem on it as fast as they can and slap it. This seems quite a rough way to handle their delicate poetry – but then again, very Japanese too. There was a little competition in Kyushu and I found this picture in the newspaper.

[5] JHS – Junior High School

[6] HS – High School