



One Year in Japan: Final Report

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1 Foreword

Not so long ago I found myself captured and fascinated by all the interesting tales told in the reports of previous scholarship recipients. From then on everything went very quickly and only a few months after applying for a scholarship myself, I already found myself on a plane headed for Japan. Even though it now strikes me as quite unfortunate, my time in Japan passed equally fast and has already come to an end for now. In fact, several months have already passed since my return to Switzerland. It is my hope that this helps me to look back and analyse in a more balanced way and with the benefit of hindsight rather than merely clouding my memories.

One goal of this report is to provide practical information and advice relevant for future scholarship recipients. A lot of anecdotes help to paint a picture of my personal experiences. It is my hope that this report will be of some use to people interested in the scholarship offered by the SJCC and helps them to gain an impression of this endeavour in the same way that previous reports were helpful to me.

The overall goal of this report is to provide an evaluation of my time in Japan - for the SJCC, its sponsors, future applicants and of course also for myself. Before going to Japan I had a lot of expectations, vague ideas, goals and aspirations. Towards the end of this report I discuss what has become of those. In a way, the scholarship offered by the SJCC is an investment into a person, so I think that it also makes sense to look at the return on it so to speak.

This report gradually grew longer and longer and before I knew it, it had already reached its present length. It is my hope that this is viewed as an indicator for the wealth of experiences that Japan bestowed upon me rather than an attempt to scare away potential readers. The structure of this report should help to make it less intimidating by allowing the reader to find the parts of interest to him and to skip the rest. The final conclusions are probably of some interest to a general audience. In contrast, the other parts are mainly relevant for people who consider applying for a scholarship themselves.

Finally, I would also like to use this occasion to thank the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce, its sponsors and especially Mr. Paul Dudler for the support and trust they have so generously provided. Going to Japan has been a dream for me and having been able to turn that dream into reality means a lot to me.





2 Introduction

2.1 Motivation

Note: You can find a much more detailed account of my motivation and goals in the appendix where I have included the letter of motivation that was originally part of my application for the scholarship.

Even though I have been asked to explain my motivation for going to Japan countless times, I still find it hard to express it in words. Somehow the idea of going to Japan just seemed to be a very good one to me, even despite a lack of special reasons and connections. Having met many other people on similar endeavours, it seems that this is actually a surprisingly common issue. But let's try once more. My initial desire for wanting to go abroad is due to the very good experiences I have made during an exchange year in Sweden during high school. In Sweden I encountered a lot of new perspectives and realized the value of living in a foreign environment. Staying in a foreign country forces one to see new values and perspectives and constantly places oneself into new situations, which enables one to learn a lot.

However, during my stay in Sweden I also came to the conclusion that Sweden and Switzerland are very similar if seen from a global perspective. There are a lot of people that confuse the two countries, and in my opinion that is rightfully so and hence an excusable mistake. Therefore, I concluded that given another chance to go abroad, I would like to go to a place that is very different from Switzerland, because that also implies the greatest potential for learning from differences.

When thinking about where to go next, the search was quickly narrowed down to Asia. Within Asia, Japan happened to interest me the most. It seemed to me that this country would still be very special, peculiar and different, especially due to being an island country with a long history of isolation from the rest of the world. Once the initial interest was sparked, it steadily grew as I informed myself more and more.

However, there was of course the problem with regard to the language barrier. As an university student the most obvious option to go abroad is of course an exchange semester. However, I feared that due to the high language barrier and rumours about Japanese people being notoriously bad at English, one would mainly end up interacting with other foreigners despite living in Japan. Hence, one would not be able to gain an insight into Japanese culture and mindset due to not understanding the language. In addition, it was time for me to choose the direction of my studies regarding a Master's degree. As I was eternally torn between physics and engineering, I was considering pausing my studies in order to do an internship and explore one of the fields in detail in order to be better able to choose afterwards. Therefore, I was of course delighted when I first heard of the scholarship offered by the SJCC in March 2013 at a forum regarding exchange between Japan and Switzerland held at ETH Zurich. During the presentations, I was already dreaming about being in a different world. During the following weeks I was supposed to determine the direction of my further studies at ETH Zurich, but for some reason I

was much more fascinated by the idea of going to Japan. Reading many reports of previous scholarship recipients only deepened the desire to also experience all the wonderfully strange things Japan has to offer!

In conclusion, a Japan year supported by a scholarship of the SJCC seemed to perfectly address all my concerns and desires. On the one hand it would enable me to discover a new country, language and culture. On the other hand, I'd be able to make up my mind regarding my future studies and career with the help of an internship.

2.2 Timeline

For a quick overview, I have listed the major events and their dates below.

Time	Event
March 2012	First heard of the scholarship
May 2012	Applied for the scholarship
June 2012	Interview with Mr. Dudler and notice of acceptance
June 2012	Applied for language school in Kyoto
September 2012	Finished Bachelor's Degree in Physics at ETH Zurich
September 2012	Arrival in Japan
October 2012	Start of language school in Kyoto
February 2013	Secured a suitable internship
March 2013	Move from Kyoto to Yokohama and start of internship
September 2013	Return to Switzerland and ETH Zurich for a Master's Degree in Robotics



3 Preparations and Administrative Duties

Moving from Switzerland to Japan requires some preparations. Here I provide some explanations and stories about my experiences when I felt that I can contribute either something useful or at least an entertaining account of my personal experience rather than merely replicating a lot of the excellent previous reports. Feel free to skip my lengthy accounts!

I would also like to mention that while the preparations are of course important and can seem overwhelming at times, please do not waste too much time reading up all the details in beforehand. Usually it is sufficient to be aware of the upcoming tasks and then tackle them as they come. Please also note that the information provided here might not be accurate anymore as contrary to some notorious rumours claiming otherwise, change does occasionally happen in Japan.

Finally, I would also like to mention that it has been a painless experience for me so far. After hearing and reading a lot of entertaining horror stories about the infamous Japanese bureaucracy, I was prepared for the worst. However, I have never really encountered any serious problems and all my requests have been resolved quickly and pleasantly.

3.1 In Switzerland

Language School Finding an appropriate language school is of course one of the most important tasks. There are many points to consider:

Where do you want to live? Do you prefer living in a big city or smaller places (although to be honest, from a Swiss point of view almost any place within Japan seems to be very big!)? Do you want to go to one of the business centres (Osaka, Tokyo) in order to be close to possible employers and business opportunities or do you want to explore other areas of Japan?

As for me, after being given a lot of testimonials about different schools from previous scholarship recipients by Mr. Dudler, I soon settled for Kyoto. This decision was mostly based on the fact that everybody I ever spoke to about Japan mentioned that I should definitely visit Kyoto at least once due to its immense beauty. So I asked myself why not just choose it for language school? With this thought and images of Tokyo's rush hour traffic in my mind it was an easy choice, especially as the probability of ending up around Tokyo for the internship later on was rather high anyway¹.

Afterwards, I quickly settled for Kyoto Institute for Culture and Language, KICL². The main reason for choosing this school in particular was that it made a really serious and tough impression to me as they have daily vocabulary tests, weekly kanji tests, monthly progress tests, midterms and finals - you get the picture! As someone who tends to perform best under some pressure this appealed to me. Furthermore, as my goal was to progress as quickly and far as possible, it seemed adequate to go to such a strict school that supposedly attracts mainly serious students. Furthermore, KICL is officially recognized by the Japanese Government and can therefore help its students to get a college student visa.

By the time I contacted KICL, I had already missed the official deadline for registration for the autumn term³, but luckily they accommodated me anyway. After rushing to fill out the lengthy paperwork, I finally got my visa a few days before departing for Japan.

Visa As a Swiss citizen, it is possible to get a tourist visa for three months upon arriving in Japan. Afterwards, this visa can be extended for another three months. If possible, that should be avoided though as many basic things such as opening a bank account, buying a mobile phone etc. require another visa. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to invest some time and effort to get a college student visa before going to Japan. This will also enable you to legally work for up to 28 hours a week

¹While I actually did end up near Tokyo for my internship, I ironically found public transport there to be much more adequate than in Kyoto.

²<http://www.kicl.ac.jp/en/>

³Note that the Japanese school year starts in April and is usually divided into two semesters. The autumn term often starts in October.

after filling out another form upon arrival. Usually your school of choice will help you to handle all the comprehensive paperwork.

Flight While researching flights, I discovered that for some strange reason⁴ one-way flights are ridiculously more expensive than return flights. It can very well happen that a one-way flight is more expensive than a return flight! Therefore, it is of course desirable to book a return flight. However, one then faces several problems: Almost all airlines have some clause that the return flight is not allowed to be later than one year after the initial flight. In addition, you probably don't know the date of your return yet. And even if you knew, the flight plan usually only extends about nine months into the future, so it is impossible to actually book your return flight.

I am happy to report that I have found a somewhat functioning workaround for those issues: After discussing them with Swiss International Airlines, I learned that it is possible to just book a flight to Japan as well as a placeholder return flight and then later on adjust the return flight to the desired date free of charge⁵.

Luggage Of course you will amass quite some luggage before going to Japan. Luckily, most airlines have special luggage regulations regarding flights to and from Japan: Instead of the usual free 23kg piece of luggage, it seems to be common to be allowed to take along two suitcases for free. As I travelled to Japan via Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Shanghai, I could unfortunately not profit from that peculiarity and had to keep the weight of my luggage down. After looking at some climate charts, I naïvely determined that I won't be in need of warm winter clothes, especially as I supposedly am a tough Swiss citizen and hence used to cold winters. Big mistake! Even though temperatures may not be that cold, it still feels very cold due to the humidity. So instead of trumping Japanese winters with my light clothes, I had to go buy a lot of warm clothes. Looking back, I am still astonished by the amount of clothes I wore and how I still felt cold more often than I would have liked. On the positive side, after freezing all day long a visit to the local onsen becomes an exceptionally enjoyable experience!

Credit Card I strongly recommend to get a credit card before heading to Japan for the following simple reason: In order to open a bank account you need to provide a Japanese phone number. However, in order to buy a mobile phone (other than prepaid) you are required to provide a Japanese bank account! Luckily this vicious cycle can be escaped if you have a credit card (you don't actually have to use it, as you can quickly switch to your bank account later on).

Debit Card Warning: Previously it used to be no problem to withdraw money with a foreign-issued MasterCard or Maestro Card at postal or 7-Eleven ATMs. However, both places have stopped accepting foreign-issues card with an EMV chip (at least for the time being). Please inform yourself about the current status before leaving for Japan, as you otherwise might end up there without being able to withdraw any money!

Temporary place to stay Even though my school offered various housing options, I was very reluctant to decide on a place to live without actually having seen it in person. Therefore, I only arranged a hostel to live at while searching for a suitable place to stay locally. Obviously, it is hard to judge how long the housing search takes, but luckily it seems like most hostels are very understanding and usually accommodate your wishes. From my experience, it takes roughly one to two weeks to find a suitable place to live, so if you have enough time, it is no problem to conduct the housing search locally. I can definitely recommend it, because you can obviously gain a much better impression and have a lot more options because you are not limited to the few ones that are available online. Especially if the places target foreigners, you will definitely pay a premium!

⁴Yield management!

⁵You of course have to inform the airline of your intentions at the time of booking.

3.2 In Japan

Housing The choice of housing is very important, as it will shape your daily life. There are a wide range of options ranging from one-room apartments (very common among students), dormitories, share houses, guest houses to homestays. Each one has its advantages and drawbacks, so think well before choosing!

I would now like to present my housing search odyssey, because I think it is a rather entertaining account of how I first felt after arriving in Japan.

In Kyoto, finding an appropriate place to live was of course my first task. Unfortunately I hardly knew anything about the Japanese housing market and to make matters worse I hardly spoke any Japanese. Therefore, I first went to a local book store and read up. I was actually a bit shocked to read about all the numerous payments that usually need to be made to the landlord: Shikikin, Reikin, Hoshoukin, real estate agent fee - several months of rent just for moving in! I am happy to report that this seems to have changed lately and there are now also many places not requiring any of those fees.

Scared by those findings, I went to the tourist information at Kyoto main station hoping that they



Castle in Hiroshima. Probably not really the kind of housing you are looking for though.

could point me in the right direction. There they sent me to the 'Kyoto Prefectural International Center'. Despite its name, people there did not actually speak any English, but still somehow managed to send me to my next destination: 'Kyoto International Community House'. There, two elderly women were very friendly and tried their best to help me, but unfortunately we were mostly talking at cross purposes.

As a last resort I turned to my language school for help. After finding out once more that the housing provided by the school didn't really suit my needs, they sent me to a real estate agent who suppos-



edly spoke English fluently. Unfortunately, that didn't actually turn out to be true, which is why the actual consultation became rather strange but somehow also quite comical and entertaining. Using pictures, pen and paper, google translator and gestures, we could actually communicate more or less. It always astonishes me how much you can convey if you really want to! In the end, we settled for some apartments that we would visit in the following days.

In the meantime, I also found an interesting offer online to which I replied: A Japanese family offered a spare room for rent. As I wanted to deliberately put myself into an environment where I'd have to use Japanese, this sounded perfect. After visiting the place and the other ones found by the real estate agent, I quickly settled for the former.

Looking back, I couldn't be happier about my choice and think that I was really lucky. In my opinion, it combined all the advantages of a homestay with having my own small apartment. I could always do things together with my landlord's family, but also had the privacy of my own small place. I also had a lot of opportunities to experience the Japanese way of life: Every week we had dinner together once or twice. Furthermore, we went to see the autumn leaves together, explored Kyoto, celebrated New Year and attended a traditional dance performance.

At this point I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the 森野 (Morino) family for accommodating me so nicely and making me feel at home. If you are interested in going to Kyoto yourself, I can only recommend living there and they would be very happy to welcome you. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions!

Zairyu Card, Ward Office and National Health Insurance Recently, Japan changed the registration system for foreigners, so unfortunately it is no longer possible to officially register yourself as an Alien within Japan⁶. Instead, you will get a residence card which also goes by the name of Zairyu Card (在留カード). If you land at one of the major airports, you can directly pick it up there, but at smaller airports they don't have it, so you will have to pick it up at the local ward office. There you also need to register your new address and join the national health insurance plan. Both tasks are very simple and can be completed quickly.

Bank account After hearing many good things about Shinsei Bank, I chose to open an account with them. Unfortunately the starter kit which one can order online never actually arrived, so I went to their local office. By chance, I happened to meet an acquaintance near the bank who was kind enough to accompany me and help me open a bank account. However, that didn't seem to be possible,

⁶In the previous system, you literally got an 'Alien Registration Card'. I still wonder if nobody noticed that it might be perceived as strange.



as I did not have a mobile phone at the time. After my colleague left, I was still without the desired bank account, so I decided to just try it once again on my own. While previously the personnel could communicate with me through the help of my colleague, we could hardly speak at all this time. After trying to explain that my landlord's phone number should also be acceptable, they gave in and after another ten minutes I already had my bank account and debit card. My guess is that due to not being able to communicate clearly with me, they couldn't get rid of me and decided that it was easiest to just fulfill my request! From what I have gathered, this seems to be a somewhat common pattern: If you are friendly but determined, you can usually go a long way (and not being able to speak Japanese can also work in your favour).

Mobile phone I don't want to spend too much time voicing my opinion about Japanese mobile phone providers. Let me just say that weak competition and blatant copying of each others plans combined with a lot of unnecessary and arbitrary rules will make it a rather unpleasant experience to buy a mobile phone. Good luck, you have been warned!

Internship search As expected, the search for a suitable internship turned out to be the most difficult task. Ideally, you'd already have an internship lined up before departing for Japan, but that seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Considering the fact that most Japanese companies have a strong focus on the domestic market, this is not so surprising though, as it is rather hard to even get in touch while not in Japan.

Therefore, my advice is to already think deeply about what kind of internship you would like to do and gather as much information about companies, organizations and contact persons as possible before heading to Japan so that you can start your search immediately upon arrival.

Unfortunately, I was not quite in this position and only had the vague idea that I'd like to do research or development either in physics, robotics or some technical field in general. While that sounded good to me, it was actually way too vague and not convincing at all to possible employers, especially considering that it is already an uphill battle. Therefore, it took me a lot of valuable time to address those questions first instead of actually searching for an internship.

Another thing worth mentioning is that while Kyoto was definitely a good experience, it does not provide a lot of opportunities for networking or job-hunting. While I am the first one to admit that I am not particularly experienced at either one of them, it definitely seems that this kind of task is much easier to do in the Tokyo area where most of the meet-ups and events take place.

I definitely recommend you to use all the contacts you might have within Japan, be it alumni from your university, previous scholarship recipients etc. After having been in Japan for some time now, I can definitely say that I am better connected and that it would now be easier to find an internship, so use the connections of others to your advantage. However, don't solely focus on contacts but also use other channels as well.

Finally, it is important to keep your spirits up, even though you might get rejected countless times. For

example, it was very hard for me to hear from a colleague that there is simply no merit (his wording!) in doing an internship at his company, even though I felt that it would be a good match. In those cases it is very calming to know that your endeavour is not just some madness that you have come up with on your own, but that there are actually people back in Switzerland that believe in you.

As for my personal experience, I first focused on contacting all my acquaintances with some connection to Japan. While that resulted in one or two possible options, I decided against pursuing them as the first one at the Swiss Embassy was not within my preferred field, while the other one at a research institute would have been unpaid. After some despair and in the last possible moment, I happened to find the perfect opening at Robert Bosch and was also promptly accepted.

Visa change In order to be allowed to do an internship you need to get the appropriate visa, which is usually the one with the cryptic name of 'designated activities'. You can apply to change your college visa at your local immigration bureau without leaving Japan. However, be prepared to fill out a lot of paperwork - about 20 pages in my case!

Beware: In order to be eligible for the designated activities visa, it seems like you are required to be enrolled at an university and that the internship is part of your studies. You will need to provide a letter from your university stating exactly that (even if it might not actually be the case), so *I highly recommend you to stay enrolled at your Swiss university if somehow possible*. It will make visa matters much simpler.

Finally, please note that due to the extensive paperwork the whole process takes about one to two months, which is why it is advisable to find a suitable internship early enough. I almost missed the start of my internship due to visa reasons, but surprisingly the Kyoto Immigration bureau processed my application within a mere two days! One last word of advice: The new visa period begins right after it is issued rather than being synchronized with the start of your internship. As I intended to do some more travelling after the end of my internship, my visa expired prematurely. Luckily, extending it once more by adding a tourist visa didn't turn out to be very difficult, but you might want to save yourself another trip to the immigration bureau.





4 Japanese Language School

Kyoto Institute of Culture and Language is a well established school and located at some distance to the city centre. As is common for Japan, they have two terms starting in April and October respectively.

The main lessons are held in the morning. During that time, all the aspects of the Japanese language such as listening comprehension, reading comprehension, conversation, writing and of course kanji are covered extensively. Especially at lower levels there is also a lot of hand-holding: Daily homework, vocabulary quizzes and weekly kanji exams keep you occupied. Furthermore, there are monthly exams to test your progress and finally also midterms and finals. In order to advance to the next level after half a year you need to score a certain percentage, which is why it is all rather serious.

The teachers were very motivated and the atmosphere was pleasant. The lessons are all conducted in Japanese and the use of foreign languages is actually forbidden, although this wasn't enforced too rigidly. This might sound rather harsh, but works surprisingly well. The teachers knew exactly what we had already covered and adjusted their level accordingly. Furthermore, lots of gestures and the occasional drawing helped a lot. My countless questions were always answered diligently by the teachers. In addition, the staff of the school was also very supportive and helped me regarding the internship search, visa inquiries and any other problems I faced.

During the afternoon, there are some additional courses: Japanese Language Proficiency Test preparation classes and calligraphy are mandatory. In addition, you can choose other courses such as Kyoto Culture, reading newspaper articles, business Japanese, etc. If you have the time and motivation, I can definitely recommend taking some of those courses as it is a good idea to be exposed to Japanese in a lot of different contexts instead of only following your main textbook.

Besides classes the school also organized some cultural activities and excursions. Furthermore, as the school shares its facilities with the Kyoto University of Arts and Design, it is rather easy to get in

contact with Japanese students. For example, you can eat at the shared canteen or simply join one of the local sports clubs.

Now, I'd like to shortly sketch my time at KICL. One week before the start of the courses, a placement test was conducted. Not surprisingly, I was assigned to the lowest level as I had close to zero previous knowledge. I actually scored so poorly that I was strongly urged to attend additional lessons before the official start of the semester in order to catch up. While that definitely was a blow to my self-confidence, looking back it was well justified.

Starting from the very bottom definitely helped to acquire a solid understanding of basic grammar. However, the main drawback was that in contrast to the higher levels, my classmates were mainly Westerners instead of Asians. This drastically reduced the need to speak Japanese for daily communication.

After struggling to remember all the new strange sounding words in the beginning, I soon found



myself progressing at a steady pace. I actually scored so well in the midterm exams that after a discussion with my teachers, it was decided that it might be best if I advanced to a higher level after the Christmas break. While that brought the burden to cover about three weeks worth of lessons on my own, my new classmates were now mostly of Asian descent. Therefore, more often than not the strongest common language was Japanese, which obviously helped tremendously. While it was again challenging in the beginning, I soon caught up and could profit a lot, especially because a lot of my new classmates already had quite some previous exposure to Japanese.

In conclusion, I am very happy with KICL and what I have learned. Thanks to my time there, I could overcome the high initial barriers of entry into Japanese. Of course the proficiency achieved after just five months and especially after starting from scratch is nowhere near sufficient in order to function in an all-Japanese business environment. However, it is enough to master daily life without major problems. For example, after moving to Yokohama for my internship, I was able to conduct the housing search completely in Japanese, which opened up a lot of new options. More importantly, it set me on track and enabled me to continue to effectively study Japanese on my own, which I really don't think would have been possible without this great opportunity.



5 Internship

In this section, I would like to share my experiences as an intern at Robert Bosch in Yokohama. I first cover my aspirations and motivation leading up to the internship. I then describe the progression of my time at Bosch. Of course this section wouldn't be complete without a slew of anecdotes. Finally, I will draw some conclusions.

5.1 Aspirations and position

Having been a student almost all of my life, I was very eager to learn how things work in the real world where there is business to be done rather than nicely designed assignments. Furthermore, I was hoping to explore the field of engineering. So when I discovered the position described below, I immediately applied. My motivation seemed to resonate well during the phone interview and I ultimately got the position.

At Bosch, I joined the group responsible for airbag control units. This device is usually located in the middle of a car. Based on a variety of sensor data, it decides whether to deploy a specific airbag. While this seems like a pretty straightforward task, it actually isn't all that simple. As cars differ widely with regard to their price class, structural features, targeted level of safety and so on, there is a lot of customization that has to be done in accordance to the specifications of the customer. In my case, I worked in the group responsible for the development and calibration of the algorithm making the decision to fire the different airbags. As sensor configuration and placement varies widely and the signals recorded during crash scenarios depend heavily on the structural features of the specific car in question, the control unit has to be calibrated carefully, especially as an airbag is a safety-critical device. My main responsibility was to improve and manage the internal tooling used by my co-workers to do this calibration.

5.2 Thrown into the water

After a nice welcome and dealing with various administrative matters, I found myself thrown into the cold water: I had very little background in programming, knew nothing about embedded systems, airbags and the calibration process, yet somehow I was supposed improve the software used during calibration. The real world sure was as messy as I supposed it to be. To make matters worse I found it very intimidating to seek help from my co-workers and supervisor, as I did not really know how to best approach them as they seemed to be extremely busy at all times.

After the initial shock and being at a loss about what to do, I started tackling the challenges lying ahead of me. I obviously had a lot to learn in order to be able to contribute in a meaningful way. Therefore, I spent a lot of time reading internal documents, books and reports in order to familiarize myself with the subject at hand. Furthermore, I gradually taught myself programming. Due to a lack of imagination, I decided to implement various kinds of simulations of physical systems. While that made me feel quite useless at times, especially since all my co-workers were working so hard on things that actually mattered, I eventually got the hang of programming.

After some time I got the task to extend the functionality of an internal tool. While that initially seemed quite daunting, it turned out to be not so hard after all and I completed it rather quickly. Encouraged by my progress my supervisor, Goto-san, gave me increasingly harder tasks with more freedom on my side.

Eventually I got the vague task to improve another internal tool that was universally disliked. After learning about the usage scenarios of the tool, its main flaws and inner workings, I set out to improve it. Luckily for me nobody had modified the tool in many years. Therefore, I discovered a low hanging fruit: With the help of a simple change, the program could be sped up by an order of magnitude. As speed was the main gripe my co-workers had with regard to that tool, my job was done rather quickly. After some extended testing and making sure that everything worked the way it was supposed to I released the updated tool. The initial thrill that accompanied finally having achieved something meaningful was quickly replaced by agony though: One of my colleagues reported an error while using the new version of the tool. After confirming the error, I decided to just revert the program to the old version while investigating the error on my local machine. However, despite reverting the software to the exact same version that worked well for the past few years, the error refused to disappear and I had no clue as to why! I was truly in trouble. As all of this happened late on a Friday afternoon and company policies forbade overtime on Fridays, I headed home and spent the weekend worrying.

Almost immediately after arriving at the office on Monday morning I discovered an email from a co-worker showing that the error still persisted and stating the urgency of the situation as the tool was quite critical for normal operations. After some troubled thoughts and some more time spent investigating, I luckily found the root cause. As it turned out, the error was completely unrelated to my changes and had gone unnoticed despite the tool being used almost daily over several years. It just so happened that the example files my colleague used to test my changes contained some unusual data which finally brought the error to light. Talk about bad luck!

After clearing up the situation and introducing my speed improvements once again, I felt a great sense of relief. The handling of this situation also helped me earn the trust of my colleagues and I henceforth enjoyed even greater freedoms to pursue my own ideas and got entrusted with more responsibilities. All of this helped to make me a contributing member of our group.

While saying that my progression doesn't make me proud to some extent would be a lie, it is not the main reason why I recounted it here. Much rather, I'd like it to serve as an example of how an internship in Japan can turn out. As the notion of an internship isn't commonly known in Japan, it is not surprising that they are rare and hard to come by. Furthermore, even if a company offers internships, it doesn't mean that the people assigned to supervise the interns know what to do with them. I've definitely heard my share of stories from interns complaining about having nothing to do, only doing menial tasks and so on. And while I initially also struggled with some of those problems, I am happy to say that they can be overcome.

5.3 The lighter side

In this section, I would like to present some more selected anecdotes from my time as an intern.

Lunchtime speeches After lunch our group always had a brief lunchtime meeting where small announcements and reminders were passed on. Furthermore, every day somebody had to hold a short speech about his current situation and work. While that sounds quite boring, it turned out to be quite the opposite. Some of my colleagues were very skilled at crafting elaborate stories involving superhuman powers to overcome the mountains of tasks that had accumulated. Or at least that is what I think they were telling, as these speeches were held in Japanese. I occasionally found myself smugly feeling content as I perceived to be following the speech quite well, only to be surprised by everybody starting to laugh out loudly a few seconds afterwards while I had no idea as to why and could only exchange confused looks with our German group leader, Brandt-san.

Meetings There was of course no shortage of meetings to attend. While I often did not have much to contribute as an intern, I still found them very interesting. For one, the way meetings are held in Japan differs markedly from the West. Oftentimes, Brandt-san was desperately trying to get my co-workers to voice their opinions on different topics in order to get a discussion going. Only to find out that they (supposedly?) held no personal opinion. Another time we had a meeting that struck me as particularly strange: Brandt-san was trying to convince everybody that it is okay to actually use one's holidays and tried to encourage everybody to also consider taking longer holidays, as he firmly believed that this will have a positive effect on productivity. However, it sure seemed as though my colleagues were not really sure if this was a trap or not and in light of the risk opted to go with the safe choice. So the meeting ended with Brandt-san looking for a volunteer who would be so bold as to take a long vacation⁷ in order to show that doing so is actually feasible. Quite a sight to witness for somebody like me!

More Meetings and Japanese What did you expect?! As this is the business world, there are of course even more meetings to attend. And while that at times may seem to interfere with more important tasks like actually doing one's work, I always welcomed them. If possible, meetings were held in Japanese, which was always a good opportunity to learn the jargon of the trade including very important words such as 敷居値 (shikiichi), 積分 (sekibun) and 斜突 (shatotsu)⁸. This in turn helped me to understand more and more of the topics that my colleagues discussed. This made it easier to approach them and discuss matters with them, especially if they were not very comfortable with English. I'd often talk to them in English, while they replied in Japanese. While knowledge of Japanese was formally not required for my position, I still found it a great enhancement to my experience. I could pick up certain behavioural patterns such as the deferential way in which customers were always treated. And of course simply being able to join the conversations during lunchtime helped to become a part of the team.

Visit from Germany We once had an expert from Germany visit our group for two weeks, which was a very interesting experience. As the cultural differences between Germany and Japan are large, as is the geographical distance, it is of course easy for misunderstandings to occur. And they did of course happen, especially if they were not rightfully addressed. There actually were some quite entertaining jokes floating around with regard to some of the decisions made in Germany. Therefore, it helped tremendously to have somebody from Germany come visit our office. Open issues could be addressed

⁷Even though employees in Japan legally have a good amount of vacation days, they usually don't use them to the full extent. And if they use them the duration of the vacation usually spans a few days rather than weeks.

⁸Threshold value, integral and side crash respectively. When I first learned the words for integral and logarithm while reading the Japanese translation of the biography of a famous physicist, I thought that I'd never be able to use those words. I couldn't have been more wrong: I encountered them almost daily at work!

and discussed and there was a mutual feeling of appreciation. Without this first hand experience, it would probably have been hard for me to fully grasp the benefit of such exchanges.

Interning at Bosch Being an intern at Bosch was a very pleasant experience for me as they took good care of us. For example, they had an intern mentoring program that assigned a seasoned ex-pat to each intern. That way one had a person to talk to, be it about troubles at work, accustoming to Japan or just some gossip. Furthermore, a guided tour of a factory enhanced the experience, as did intern (and various other) 飲み会 (nomikai), drinking parties. The freedom to visit trade fairs further allowed one to acquire a view of the industry as a whole.

5.4 Any smarter?

Looking back, I am very happy with my internship. Not only did I get to learn programming and could hone some of my technical skills, but I also got a pretty good insight into the workings of a large multinational company and the challenges associated with operating at a global scale. I definitely realized that I am but a minuscule part and that therefore clear communication, a good understanding of different cultures and teamwork are all the more important and not just some fancy buzzwords used by people employed in human resources. Going forward, these experiences will definitely be helpful for me, especially as I now know where to focus my efforts for improving myself. Furthermore, I was able to get a pretty good impression of the work culture in Japan and some of the more subtle points that come with it. I would like to thank my group leader, Brandt-san, and my supervisor, Goto-san, for all their support and freedoms they have granted me. I initially didn't really understand why they decided to hire a physicist to do a programmer's job. In retrospect, it is quite obvious though: In order to acquire new perspectives and out-of-the-box solutions, it is of course best to hire somebody who was never even in the box to begin with.



6 Leisure

While studying Japanese, searching for an internship and all the other duties might feel like a full-time job at times, there is of course also plenty of room for leisure. In this section, I describe some of the things I have embarked upon. However, as hobbies vary widely, I have kept it rather short, especially because this report has already grown quite long. I'd recommend people to use this great opportunity to explore as many different things as possible and just be curious about everything. Lastly, it goes without saying that it becomes a lot easier to enjoy your spare time if you don't have to worry about finding an internship all the time.



Host Family As previously mentioned, I spent quite some time together with my landlord's family in Kyoto. Besides random daily encounters, we would usually meet once or twice a week in order to eat dinner together. As my landlord took great pride in his cooking skills which he has honed over decades, I got to experience a great variety of traditional Japanese dishes. More often than not, it actually felt like a challenge to eat and try all those exquisite things. However, I am happy to report that although my mind usually had strong reservations, almost everything was actually enjoyable! As somebody who never used to eat fish and seafood, I was initially somewhat worried with regard to Japanese cuisine. However, that turned out to be no problem at all. On the contrary, I am now dismayed by the lack of affordable Japanese food in Switzerland.

Besides the usual dinners, we also went to view the autumn leaves, went to a classical dance performance of the daughter and celebrated New Year together. Through all those activities and of course many long discussions, I feel that I had a good opportunity to actually experience a Japanese family and the Japanese mindset.



Ice Hockey As I spent a lot of my time growing up playing sports, it was only natural for me to continue that habit in Japan. That way I'd hopefully get into contact with Japanese people and have an enjoyable activity that is not overly reliant on communication, as that would prove rather difficult in the beginning.

As a child, I always dreamt about playing ice hockey. However, due to some reservations on my parents side regarding the effort required to enable me to do so⁹, I never actually started. Eventually, I picked up floorball (some variant of hockey played inside without ice and protectors) and have been playing that happily for many years.

In Japan however, far away from the veto power of my parents, I schemed to finally start playing ice hockey. My secret hope was that the level of play wouldn't be insurmountably high as ice hockey doesn't exactly have a long tradition in Japan. With the help of a Japanese colleague I wrote an exceedingly polite inquiry to a team in Kyoto. What followed from then on still amazes me. Even though I was just some random stranger writing them, they then went through great efforts to accommodate me: With the help of dictionaries, auto-translate and a lot of good will they communicated with me in English. They then also gathered an almost complete set of protectors to lend me. And in order to buy the missing skates and stick, they drove me to the closest ice hockey shop in the neighbouring prefecture! Writing those lines already makes me feel bad again for all the troubles I have caused them¹⁰.

Needless to say that playing ice hockey was great fun and I always looked forward to practises and league games even though we had a habit of losing them. As I joined a team associated with a company (in contrast to a school or university team), I got to meet a lot of people with whom I otherwise wouldn't have had any contact. So that way, it also served as a good window into another part of Japanese society.

Because ice hockey was so enjoyable, I definitely hoped to continue playing it after moving to Yokohama. Luckily, a teammate recently made the move in the opposite direction, so he introduced

⁹At the time, it seemed like a cheap excuse to me. After experiencing the required effort myself, their side of the argument suddenly became much more reasonable.

¹⁰In order to register as a player and to join league games, information regarding my blood group was required. Despite searching everywhere, I could just not come up with it though. Luckily, my teammates even accommodated for that: Instead of sticking to the rules, they became creative and just randomly assigned a blood group to me. So they even bent the rules for me, which seems to be a rare feat!



me to his former team. In another act of incredible generosity, my team in Kyoto told me to just keep all the gear they were lending me despite moving halfway across the country! Due to all this luck and generosity I found myself already joining my new team only one day after leaving Kyoto for Yokohama. Once again I had the pleasure to play ice hockey. More importantly, it helped me to quickly integrate and accommodate in another new environment. Further team activities such as nomikais (drinking parties), end-of-season celebrations and a training weekend that actually turned out to be another elaborate and extended nomikai helped me to feel at home and made me part of the local community.

Even more hockey As you probably have guessed by now I am quite fond of hockey. So when I accidentally read about a floorball team looking for some more players for an upcoming tournament, I of course couldn't help but join them. So I ended up in another team. Their weekly practises (as well as the ensuing beers) were a welcome diversion from more serious matters. In a way, it is actually quite remarkable how much social interaction can change simply due to sharing a common interest in chasing an object with a hockey stick. You suddenly get to meet a lot of interesting people whom you probably would have tried your best to ignore in another setting. It definitely seems as if some random but socially accepted pretext such as hockey is necessary for social interaction to take place.

Travel During my time in Japan I made an active effort to explore the country as much as possible. While Japan's location also allows for interesting travels all over Asia, I decided to focus on domestic destinations. Over the span of one year, I got around quite a bit and can only recommend it to others



Quite an unusual setting for an ice hockey training weekend, don't you think?

as well. While the absolute area of Japan is not very big compared to other countries, it extends over several thousand kilometres. So it definitely doesn't come as a surprise that there are also a lot of regional differences to be discovered.



Various places I have visited during my time in Japan.

Miscellaneous There are of course a lot of other ways to pass time in Japan. Allow me to share a few more anecdotes:

As somebody with a complete lack of singing skills, I initially tried my best to avoid karaoke. While that worked for some time, it didn't take too long before I found myself at a local karaoke place with some friends. Nervous and frightened at my prospects, I was foolish enough to choose a song by Eminem for my *début* after anxiously spending several minutes just looking for a song that I was vaguely familiar with. What a foolish mistake! You never realize how ridiculously fast his lyrics are until you have to sing along yourself. I could hardly keep up with reading, so you can probably infer the result. However, I am happy to report that the guide for new interns at Bosch was right with regard to karaoke: It actually doesn't really matter if you can sing or not, it's just a matter of will (and some alcohol to mask better judgement).

During the summer months viewing firework competitions is another enjoyable pastime. As it luckily doesn't seem like there must be a special occasion in order to hold a huge firework, there is one to be enjoyed almost every weekend.

Another thing that there is no shortage of are 飲み会 (nomikai), also known as drinking parties. For people with an interest in exploring the inner workings of Japan, they are probably the most valuable resource. While Japanese people are usually extremely disciplined, self-restrained and well behaved, that changes progressively after some drinks. Coworkers who at times seemed to be too afraid to have an own opinion let alone voice it suddenly become able to ask their bosses the most daring questions. It of course goes without saying that the next day at the office, all the newly found courage is lost again and everybody acts as if nothing unusual ever happened. Such are the wonders of Japan!

7 Japanese

Japan is a very civilized and developed country and it is possible to live there without knowing any Japanese at all, especially if you are in the greater Tokyo area. That being said, if you want to understand anything of what is going on around you, there is no way around learning Japanese. Unsurprisingly, Japanese reigns supreme within Japan, so you better learn it!

Unfortunately and despite many warnings, I ended up going to Japan with hardly any knowledge of the language as my final thesis and exams kept me busy in Switzerland. On my first day in Japan I had the pleasure of meeting the family of the girlfriend of my colleague with whom I travelled through Asia for two weeks before settling in Kyoto. While it was a fantastic experience to meet them, I unfortunately didn't understand anything of what they were saying. That day convinced me of the absolute necessity of learning Japanese and provided a strong motivation. Because I wanted to understand what is going on around me, I have spent a large fraction of my time diligently studying Japanese. While doing so, I think that I have found some valuable resources that I would now like to share in the hope that it will help others in their quest to learn Japanese.

7.1 Japanese in General

While it is usually claimed that Japanese is exceptionally difficult, I'd beg to disagree. Rather than being terribly difficult in itself, there is just a lot to learn. Every single piece is easily manageable though. Furthermore, Japanese grammar is mostly logical and has few exceptions: Verb inflection is very regular, there is no distinction between singular and plural or genders etc. In addition, the pronunciation is rather easy for Westerners as there are no sounds which we cannot discriminate. The main difficulty lies within using the appropriate level of politeness in accordance to the situation. The rather strict hierarchy is deeply engrained within the language, and therefore the vocabulary, grammatical patterns and even verb forms all have to be adapted.

7.2 Writing System: Kana and Kanji

One of the main obstacles towards mastering Japanese is of course the unique writing system. Japanese uses a wide variety of different alphabets:

- ローマ字 (Romaji) The usual western alphabet as we know it. Occasionally used for names of companies and similar purposes.
- ひらがな (Hiragana) The main syllable alphabet used in Japanese. All the particles and a lot of grammatical structures are written with them. Furthermore, words of Japanese origin for which there is no commonly used kanji are also written with hiragana. Finally, they can also appear in conjunction with kanjis and modify their meaning.
- カタカナ (Katakana) The second syllable alphabet which is mainly used for words of foreign origin (mostly borrowed from English).
- 漢字 (Kanji) The Japanese characters which pose most problems to learners of Japanese, especially due to their sheer number: 2200 so called jōyōkanji (常用漢字) are recommended for common use by the Ministry of Education, but in reality there are still a lot more!

7.3 Learning the Kanji

As the kanji usually pose most problems to learners of Japanese, I'd like to cover them in-depth here. First of all, not being able to read the kanjis offers some advantages. For example, you won't be able to discriminate against certain foods solely based on its description as you won't be able to read it in the first place. That way, you are forced to judge solely by the actual taste and might discover that some things you thought you disliked aren't that bad after all (at least that is what happened to me).

However, in order to learn Japanese it is extremely beneficial to also learn the kanji, as they are very tightly intertwined with the language. For example, there are many words with exactly the same pronunciation but wildly differing meanings. For example the word しこう (shikou) can have the following meanings (among many others¹¹).

試行 trial (as in trial and error)
施行 enforce
思考 thought
志向 intention, aim
指向 being orientated towards

In order to somehow deal with this great mess, the kanji are very helpful as they are essentially the building blocks of words. Even Japanese people sometimes have trouble discriminating between equally pronounced words and usually resort to drawing the kanji on their palm with their pointing finger. As you have probably noticed, it is nearly impossible to get rid of the kanji now, even if one wanted to. Knowledge of the basic building blocks also makes it a lot easier to learn new vocabulary, as more often than not, you already know some parts if not all of them and only have to stitch them together. 四捨五入 is one such wonderful example. The meanings of the individual kanjis are: 4, throw away, 5, add. Are you able to guess the meaning¹²?

Another difficulty is that one kanji can have many meanings and its usage can completely change the reading depending on the context. For example, the kanji 生 can be used in the following ways (and many more¹³):

生ビール namabiiru, draft beer
生きる ikiru, to live
先生 sensei, teacher
生かす ikasu, to make use of

Learning the Kanji can be overwhelming at the start, but it is actually not as hard as it first looks. With a systematic approach they can actually be learned rather quickly. One such approach is the Heisig method¹⁴, which has become rather famous, especially because people either love it or hate it. The basic idea behind the method is to assign one keyword to every Kanji and then learn only that while completely disregarding the actual usage of the kanji as well as its kun and on readings.

In order to systematically learn all the kanji, they are broken down according to the radicals which they contain. Each radical is also assigned a keyword. You are then encouraged to come up with your own mnemonics in order to remember the kanji. Because humans tend to be much better at memorizing stories rather than some seemingly random assortment of strokes, the relatively hard task of remembering a kanji can be converted into the simple task of remembering some radicals and stories involving them, thus greatly reducing the time required to do so.

Let's look at an example: 傲 means something in the line of arrogance. It consists of the following radicals:

人 Person
土 Earth
方 Direction, compass
父 Archenemy

Now that we have broken the kanji down into its pieces, we only need to put them together again in order to memorize all of it. In this case my story goes as follows:

The great physicist Richard Feynman (the person 人) intentionally puts some earth on top of his

¹¹[Dictionary entry for shikou](#)

¹²rounding (as in rounding a number)

¹³[List of words containing this kanji](#)

¹⁴“Remembering the Kanji: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters” by James W. Heisig

compass to obstruct his view of it. That way he will not perform to the best of his abilities, which prevents him from looking arrogant in the peering eyes of his archenemies. Very simple to remember, right?

Another example:

笑, to laugh, contains the following radicals:

竹, Bamboo

天, Sky

There is this rather infamous old torture method called the bamboo torture. In it, the pitiable victim is placed on fresh bamboo sprouts, which will quickly grow through its body and ultimately kill it. Based on this background knowledge, my story goes as follows: Once the bamboo has grown and reached the sky (that is also why it is on top), there is absolutely no reason left to laugh anymore.

Using this approach, it becomes rather easy to remember the kanjis, because you can relate those strange signs to things you are already familiar with. Of course, the better your stories relate to your personal knowledge and experiences, the easier it will be to remember them, which is also why it is highly recommended to take your time and come up with your own stories.

Based on my experiences, I can only recommend this method to learn the kanji. Due to its high level of reuse of previously learned parts, it is very efficient and systematic and hence allows one to learn the kanji rather quickly. Furthermore, once one has gone through all of the kanji, one has already overcome one of the main obstacles regarding Japanese. Instead of being eternally plagued by the kanji, they suddenly become allies and helpers in daily life. In a way you acquire the same seemingly unfair advantage you always envied Chinese students for.

While it may seem inadequate to only learn one keyword for every kanji and disregard everything else, I have found it to be quite helpful. For example 原子力発電所 might look very scary at first, but already knowing one rough meaning for each kanji allows one to more or less guess the meaning: origin, child, power, emit, electricity and place altogether stand for nuclear power plant. So already a rudimentary knowledge of kanjis allows one to guess a great deal, which is very encouraging and also entertaining.

Of course there are also downsides to this method. The biggest one is probably that due to being arranged in a very systematic way, you are forced to completely buy into the system, as its efficiency is drastically reduced otherwise. Furthermore, the kanji are introduced in an order that suits this specific method with the intention of teaching you all of them. Therefore you end up learning the rather obscure kanji 嘲 for 'ridicule' as number 54, while the much more useful one for 'send', 送, comes only as number 2172. However, if your goal is to eventually master all of the kanji, that shouldn't really be too much of a hindrance. Finally, this method is of course only the first step and needs to be supplemented by further efforts. Those will be greatly facilitated though!

As for me, after arriving in Japan I felt quite bad about the fact that I knew almost no Japanese, even though the official requirements for the scholarship stated otherwise. Because of this and the limited time to study Japanese before the internship, I somewhat jokingly set myself the goal to learn 25 kanjis a day. Using this method in combination with the highly recommended electronic flashcard software aptly named Anki¹⁵ (暗記, to memorize) I was able to memorize all the 2200 common use kanji in about three months while spending about one to three hours a day.

The sole knowledge of one keyword for each kanji has helped me tremendously in my studies of Japanese. Suddenly, everywhere I went there were new things to be deciphered and guessed. When reading texts, while not knowing the exact meaning of a lot of words, I can often make an educated guess. Learning new vocabulary has also become much easier. Before coming to Japan I questioned the value of learning the kanji as it looked like an insurmountable task. However, it actually is not that difficult and I can only recommend learning them as it will make your life a lot easier!

¹⁵<http://ankisrs.net/>

7.4 Advice on Learning Japanese

Learning Japanese can be an intimidating and humbling experience at times. And even though many people like to claim to have figured out the secrets to mastering it, it seems to me that in the end it mainly boils down to conscious effort. There is just no way around it. However, there are some strategies to make the process more efficient and enjoyable. Here, I would like to share some of the things that have worked for me. Your mileage may of course vary¹⁶.

Look up anything you don't know With the advent of electronic dictionaries and especially smartphones, there is no excuse not to anymore. However, after looking something up also go the extra mile and try to memorize it. One thing that has worked extremely well for me is to save all the words I look up during the day in a list in the dictionary on my smartphone. Every evening I export that list to the flashcard program Anki and memorize the words that way. This takes some additional effort, but compared to learning vocabulary without context, it is much easier.

Use every opportunity Try to (ab)use everything as an opportunity to learn Japanese. This mainly means being active and on the lookout. Don't know that word on the ad in the train? Look it up. Have a business meeting in Japanese where you hardly understand anything? Just view it as a language lesson. Be on the lookout, stay curious and make an active effort not to switch your brain to standby mode. Unfortunately, this gets progressively harder as you fool yourself into believing to understand things solely due to them looking familiar.

Embrace mistakes Don't be scared to speak and don't get stuck trying to form perfect sentences. It is more important to get started at all. You can always correct your mistakes later on.

Actively shape your environment in a way that forces you to communicate in Japanese. For example, my ice-hockey team always arranged practices and games using a mailing list. Thanks to that, I learned a lot of overly polite ways to explain why one is unable to attend practice, but of course feels terribly sorry about it.

Integrate your studies with daily life Even despite best intentions, it's easy to pass days without studying anything at all. Therefore it is important to integrate ones studies with daily life so that it becomes natural to do them. For example, instead of simply wasting time spent on public transport, I always used it to review flashcards on my smartphone.

Never stop learning If you just learn a little bit every day, that will add up rather quickly over time. Learning Japanese and running a marathon are quite alike in that they both require a lot of dedication, but if you keep going at it, you will eventually get the desired results¹⁷.

In the end, learning a foreign language doesn't really depend so much on your intelligence but rather on active effort. The scholarship offered by the SJCC bestows one a unique and splendid opportunity to solely focus on learning Japanese. Take it and make the best out of it¹⁸! While I definitely had the opposite of stellar prerequisites, I am actually surprised how far I've come since the beginning. Before going to Japan, I doubted if the level achievable within the short time frame would be of any use at all. That view has changed drastically and I actually passed the level N2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test in July 2013, less than one year after starting my studies.

¹⁶I'm always surprised by the huge variety of methods successfully employed by students of Japanese. It sure seems as if a lot of ways lead to Rome in this case.

¹⁷Although in contrast running a marathon, it seems as if learning Japanese is a never-ending journey.

¹⁸However, it's also important not to lose sight of the grander picture. While it may often seem as if Japanese is the only thing holding you back, there are also a lot of other things to be learned. Don't get stuck on a single piece of the puzzle!

8 Conclusions

8.1 Conclusions about my time in Japan

In this section I would like to take a lot of the small pieces that I have touched upon previously and join the dots in order to draw a larger picture.

Language With regard to learning Japanese I am very satisfied. While I was initially quite sceptical about the merits of attending a Japanese language school for only one semester, those doubts have all but vanquished. While school first seemed to be a nice pretext for going to Japan and enjoying a nice life as a student¹⁹, I now firmly believe that it was a crucial component for the positive outcome of my stay in Japan. Getting a solid grasp of basic Japanese enabled me to avoid a trap that many foreigners fall into:

When they first arrive in Japan, they don't speak the language. Therefore, they craft themselves an environment where they can function without it. Hence they befriend mainly other foreigners and generally end up living in their own little world. As time progresses and they become increasingly comfortable in that environment, the urgency to learn Japanese also vanishes. Unfortunately this seems to be a fate that many foreigners share²⁰.

From this point of view, the requirement of the scholarship offered by the SJCC to attend a language school suddenly makes a lot of sense. Given enough efforts it is definitely possible to acquire a reasonable command of Japanese within the time frame of the scholarship. Knowing Japanese obviously helped me tremendously during my time in Japan and made it much more enjoyable and insightful.

Internship The experiences gathered during my internship have also been very positive. In addition to learning technical skills, I have gained an insight into the working of a large multinational corporation and the challenges associated with operating at a global scale. I learned about the importance of clear communication, teamwork, and understanding cultural differences. This will definitely be very helpful for me when starting my career in the near future, especially as I can now address the areas where I currently deem myself lacking.

Scholarship I'd now like to discuss the merits of the scholarship offered by the SJCC. For my purposes, I found it to be very well suited. Compared to simply studying abroad, I could leave the comfort of academia and experience a whole new world. Simply doing an internship abroad would of course also have done the trick, but then I would probably have been stuck in the foreigner bubble (even though that is also interesting in its own right). In contrast to a lot of other foreigners in Japan, I had the opportunity to dive deeper into Japanese culture. So in my opinion the scholarship is definitely more than the sum of its parts. While organizing something similar independently is of course also feasible, I found it very valuable to have the SJCC backing up my mission and providing a vision. Especially in Japan where deviating from the official path is not always looked upon favorably, it is very helpful to have a socially accepted 'excuse' for pursuing one's plans. It sure seems to me as if the SJCC achieves its goal of nurturing competence with regard to Japan very efficiently by providing a vision, rough framework and initial impetus while leaving the rest up to the individual.

Personal development On a personal level I also found my time in Japan very stimulating. Initially, life in Japan felt like growing up again, albeit at an accelerated pace: You start out illiterate, you can't discriminate between relevant and useless information and you are unable to convey the most basic emotions. Slowly reclaiming various abilities is extremely rewarding.

Things in Japan often struck me as strange. I initially often caught myself thinking how silly the Japanese way is and how things work better in Switzerland. Only after some deeper reflection it

¹⁹As often seems to be the case when parents send their children to a language school during holidays...

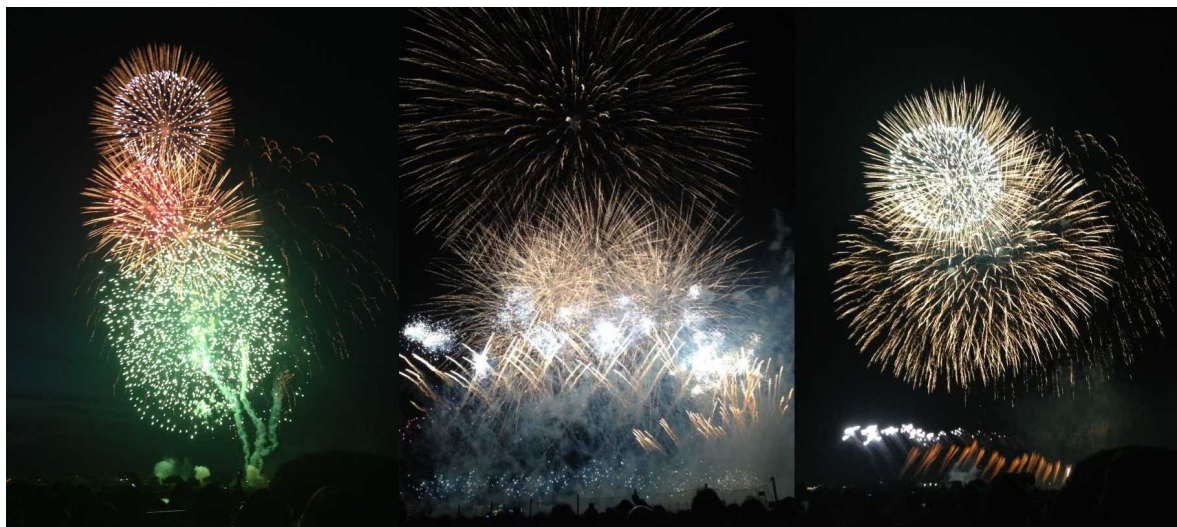
²⁰I don't want to make a value judgement with regard to ending in this situation. My main lament is that for a lot of people, the outcome is not based on a conscious decision but rather the result of circumstances.

dawned on me that matters are not as clear-cut. Upon taking the cultural context into account matters suddenly started to make sense. As so often it is much easier to spot the flaws in the thinking of others while implicitly imposing one's own values. Living in an environment where one's own way of thinking differs from the norm forces one to question it and its underlying assumptions which initially seemed beyond any doubt. So in a way, in parallel to learning about Japanese culture, I also learned a lot about my own one and Japan served as a mirror to look into and reflect.

Life in Japan provided me with a slew of completely new challenges. This in turn helped me to broaden my horizon, look at matters in a grander scheme and also identify unifying themes. While participating at an event called 'Startup Weekend Kyoto' where the goal was to come up with (internet) startup ideas, I once more witnessed how much our thinking is dictated by our environment. While I mainly came up with ideas related to my troubles as a foreigner, others mainly addressed their immediate worries, but hardly anybody could leap out of his respective bubble. Interrupting my studies and going to Japan helped me achieve exactly that.

Before going to Japan, I had some vague aspirations and goals such as broadening my horizon, finding out what I want to do in the future, learning more about myself and my limitations and becoming a more balanced person. I'm happy to say that I've made significant progress in all those areas and now hopefully have a more balanced and global perspective. More importantly, my time in Japan has spawned a lot of new thought processes and I can now also take corrective measures in the areas I currently deem myself lacking, so my actions and choices in life have definitely become more conscious. Claiming to have everything figured out would of course be foolish and inaccurate. A more accurate statement would be that my time in Japan had a similar effect on my life as attending a language school had on my Japanese: While it was of course nowhere near sufficient to master everything, it has made me aware of some of the tasks lying ahead of me and set me on a good track to tackle them.

Overall I am actually a bit surprised by how well everything has turned out. Going to Japan initially seemed like a rather radical departure from my chosen path only to pursue the vague and intangible idea of broadening my horizon. Looking back, it surely seems as if I have met and exceeded all my initial aspirations. I feel that thanks to this experience, I could elude the fate of becoming an expert within my own narrow field of study²¹ and gain a much broader perspective, which I don't think would have been possible without the drastic change of environment. I wouldn't want to trade my time in Japan for anything and feel confident in saying that going to Japan has been one of my best decisions so far!



²¹Occasionally also called 'ETH Fachidiot'. Looking back I was on the best path to actually become one!

8.2 Quo Vadis - Where to go from here

Back in Switzerland In a way, re-integrating in Switzerland felt much harder than getting started in Japan. Suddenly, a lot of the things that I based my life around for the past year became painfully irrelevant. For example, I expended a lot of efforts in order to learn as much Japanese as possible. Back home that was however hardly worth noting. I suddenly had to accept that while all the new experiences were very dear to me, they meant very little to others, and rightfully so.

Despite trying my best to learn Japanese, I oftentimes found myself guessing about what was going on around me which made things appear mysterious at times. Therefore, even a mundane task could often be interesting, as it represented a small challenge in itself. Back in Switzerland the sparkles vanished and only the mundane aspect remained. I immediately noticed this when my brother came to pick me up at the airport. On the way home he called the doctor in order to schedule an appointment. Despite being terribly tired from the flight and not actively paying attention, I could follow the conversation perfectly, which greatly surprised me despite being perfectly self-evident. In Japan, the same task would have required all my attention and even then there'd still be quite some guessing involved.

Living in Japan presented a whole new world to me, and I am quite reluctant to abandon it again. The saying "There's no such place as home" has acquired a whole new meaning for me: The more time spent away, the more the notion of a single place to call home fades.

Towards a more balanced view Even though this report has been overwhelmingly positive, life in Japan of course also had its downsides. At times, I found never knowing what people actually thought or meant and always having to rely on guesses quite frustrating. One definitely needs to be able to deal with uncertainty to remain sane in Japan, especially as a foreigner. Furthermore, life as foreigner in Japan can be quite lonely at times as it is quite hard to establish meaningful friendships. The saying that Japan is heaven for tourists, but hell for workers also rings true to me despite obviously being a catchy overstatement. The good things and the bad things are not isolated from each other, but often just different aspects of the very same thing. On one side you may enjoy great service, but on the other side of the counter somebody has to work hard to provide it. You might enjoy the politeness, but on the other hand a lot of the social conventions which enable the peaceful coexistence in densely populated cities inhibit spontaneous interaction. I found that in order to survive in Japan, one definitely needs a sense of humour to prevent little annoyances from turning one into a raging madman.

Quo Vadis The question that now begs itself is of course where to go from here²²? On one side, I greatly enjoyed life in Japan. It is therefore of course very tempting to scheme a return. Unfortunately, matters aren't that simple. Starting out from the bottom at work in Japan can be very tough as the hierarchy is mostly determined by seniority, as are the wages. The perceived focus on time commitment over efficiency, following orders without questioning them, the often passive stance, risk aversion and doing things the way they've always been done run counter to some of my values²³. Also, economic prospects are not as bright as they once used to be to say the least²⁴. In addition, I'd also wager that life as a 社会人 (shakaijin) - full member of society - offers quite a different outlook compared to the one I enjoyed as a student and intern. So while my heart would gladly return to Japan as I somehow just felt more alive there, my mind raises some doubts. Actually, over the course of the past few months I've even come to question if I am drawn specifically to Japan, or if I mainly enjoyed the thrill of living in a foreign country that could also be found elsewhere.

Having said that, I am definitely interested in a position involving Japan in some capacity for the future. Should a suitable opportunity arise, I'd of course gladly head to Japan once again. But I'd also

²²As seen over the span of the next few years. For the immediate future I am set on pursuing a Master's Degree in Robotics at ETH Zurich.

²³However, I don't want to condemn Japanese work customs prematurely. It may very well be that I just haven't had enough exposure to see all of the advantages yet. In the meantime my reservations remain.

²⁴Recently, Abenomics seems to have provided a new stimulus. It remains to be seen if it will last.

wager that quite a lot of the experiences and abilities acquired in Japan are universal and transferable to some extent. Learning how to deal with a different culture and going through the process of packing up, leaving and getting set up again will surely help me going forward, be it in Japan or elsewhere. While it remains to be seen how matters turn out, it is already clear to me that I have gained a more global perspective and aspirations and find it hard to go back to the small world I have previously come from. Therefore, my time in Japan has definitely been a good stepping stone for my future career and life.

9 Contact

As I have hopefully succeeded to convey, the time in Japan has been invaluable for me. I am very thankful for the opportunities so generously given to me and feel greatly indebted to all the people who have helped me along my journey. The least I can do is to forward the pleasures bestowed upon me. So don't hesitate to contact me should you have any questions, no matter how vague or silly they might appear to be. You can best reach me by email: robin.oswald@gmail.com

Bon voyage!



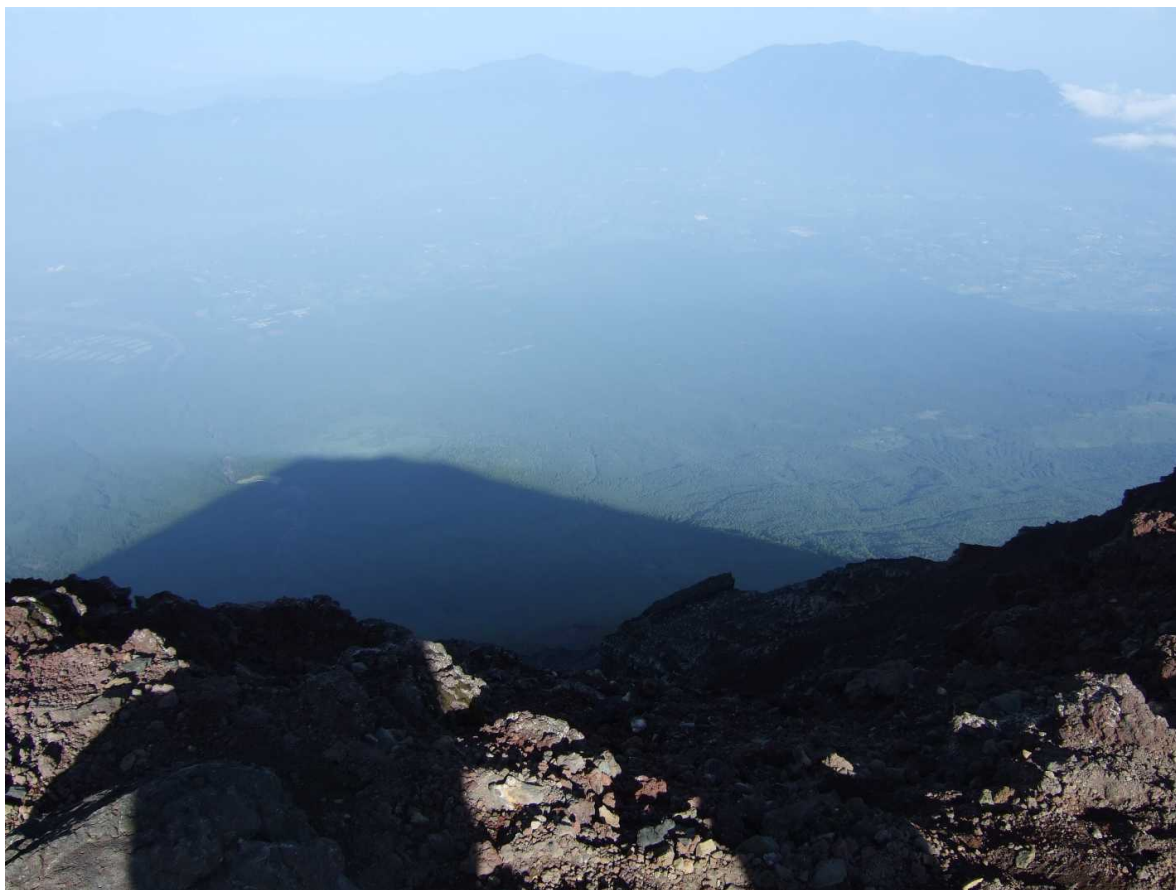
10 Acknowledgements

Now that almost everything has been said, it is time to thank all the people who have contributed to make my time in Japan so valuable and memorable. First and foremost I would like to thank the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. I previously joked that the best thing about their scholarship is that it lends credibility to the often vague ambitions of the recipients. I strongly doubt that I'd have pursued my ambitions without their support - assuming I would have come up with a similarly well thought out plan on my own in the first place. I would like to express my deep gratitude to the SJCC, its sponsors, members, previous scholarship recipients and especially Mr. Paul Dudler for encouraging and supporting me along my journey.

Next, I would like to thank my parents who stood behind this venture from the very beginning despite it being a bit of a deviation from the normal path. I also owe my gratitude to the Morino family for making me feel at home in Kyoto. I also want to thank Bosch for their courage as well as the trust they have placed in me by hiring a physicist to do a programmer's job.

Finally, I would like to thank all the other people who have gone unmentioned so far. Their omission is not due to a lack of gratitude, but rather due to an imperfect memory and space constraints.

どうもありがとうございます
これからもよろしく申し上げます



11 References

About Japan

- “Darum spinnen Japaner” by Christoph Neumann provides an account about some of the more frustrating aspects of Japan. However, I couldn’t help but feel that the book actually told more about the German culture rather than the Japanese one as the attitude of the author is ever-present.
- “The Blue-Eyed Salaryman: From World Traveller to Lifer at Mitsubishi” by Niall Murtagh is a highly enjoyable account about Japanese corporate culture and life as a salaryman. In contrast to the aforementioned book, Murtagh manages to not take himself too important and presents a lot of the stranger sides of Japanese companies in a self-deprecating way.
- [This Japanese Life](#) Insightful blog about the struggles encountered by an American during his time in Japan. Even though it is based on his encounters, the entries are not about himself but mainly serve to illustrate topics of general relevance.
- [Japanese Rule of 7](#) Highly entertaining blog about life in Japan from the perspective of a foreigner. In contrast to other blogs that focus only on the good²⁵ or bad side²⁶, this one manages to convey a surprisingly balanced and thought-provoking view.

Living in Kyoto

- [Kyoto City International Foundation](#) organizes various events for foreigners, has a meeting place, message board and a lot of information about living in Kyoto
- [Easy Living in Kyoto](#) Guide containing everything you will ever need to know about living in Kyoto
- [Kyoto Visitor’s Guide](#) Monthly updated guide on festivals and special events around Kyoto.

Living near Tokyo

- [Tokyo Street Hockey Association](#) Street hockey near Tokyo. The website is filled with humorous accounts, stories and lore and is worth a visit on its own right.

Travel within Japan

- [HyperDia](#) Timetables for any kind of transportation within Japan.
- [Japan Guide](#) Guide about almost everything you ever wanted to know with regard to travelling within Japan.
- [ANA Experience Japan Fare](#) Special airfares for foreigners: Any domestic flight for 10800円.

Internship search

- [Kopra](#) Internships in Asia. As it is one of the few resources, it seems like competition between applicants is rather fierce though.
- [AIESEC](#) Internships aimed at managerial positions.
- [IAESTE](#) Internships mainly for engineers and scientists.

²⁵Often written by people who have just arrived in Japan.

²⁶Often written by bitter long-term ex-pats who can’t easily leave anymore.

- [Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammer in Japan](#) has a good guide on conducting a job/internship search in Japan.

Learning Japanese

- [Heisig Method for learning the Kanji](#) Website for the German edition of the infamous book “Remembering the Kanji” by Dr. Heisig.
- [Anki](#) Electronic flashcard program for memorizing just about anything. Also available on iOS and Android.
- [Koohii](#) Forum with lots of discussions regarding learning Japanese and tons of resources. For example you can find programs to generate flashcards from subtitles.
- [Rikaichan](#) Firefox add-on that displays the meaning of Japanese words if you hover the mouse cursor over them.
- [Denshi Jisho](#) Free online dictionary
- [Imiwa?](#) Excellent free dictionary for iOS. Especially useful if you save any unknown words you look up and export them to Anki in order to memorize them!

12 Appendix

12.1 Letter of Motivation

I opted to include the motivation letter that accompanied my application for the scholarship here. While I have decided to write this report in English in order to reach a wider audience, the motivation letter was initially written in German. In order not to alter anything²⁷, I refrained from translating it to English, so you'll have to excuse me this time. The reasons for reproducing it here are varied. First of all, I thought that it might be insightful for future applicants. More importantly, one of the main goals of this report is to evaluate my time in Japan. As the motivation letter provides an in-depth explanation of my initial hopes and goals, it also serves as a reference to which I can compare the actual outcome.

Reading it now, it is quite amusing to see just how little I initially knew about Japan. While I'd certainly hope that this has changed a bit, I do think that my naïvety probably served me well. Rather than having a preconceived picture of Japan, I had a blank sheet. So instead of discovering that Japan does not live up to my imaginary image, I could acquire one on the fly²⁸.

Finally, it is definitely not my intention to cause an arms race and force every future applicant to write such a long-winded motivation letter. Even though it might be hard to believe in light of this long report, I am usually a person of few words. For some reason it just required quite a lot of them to present my whole perspective.

Motivationsschreiben

Ich hoffe dieses Motivationsschreiben entspricht in etwa dem, was sie sich erwartet haben. Es ist deutlich länger geworden, als ich das vorgesehen habe, aber ein Jahr ist ja auch eine lange Zeit, weshalb ich denke, dass die Länge doch angebracht ist. Da es schon so umfangreich wurde versuchte ich immerhin gelegentlich etwas locker und humorvoll zu schreiben, damit der Leser nicht ganz einschläft, oder zumindest ab und zu wieder aufwacht. Zusätzlich helfen die Zwischentitel beim Überspringen einzelner Passagen. Für einen groben Überblick sollte es reichen jeweils kurz das Fazit der einzelnen Teile zu lesen.

Einleitung

Meine Bewerbung um das Stipendium der schweizerisch-japanischen Handelskammer ist die konsequente Kulmination einer ganzen Reihe von Beweggründen, welche ich in diesem Motivationsschreiben darlegen möchte. Dabei werde ich zuerst zeigen wieso ich gerne einen Auslandsaufenthalt machen möchte. Anschliessend durchleuchte ich meine Wahl für Japan und danach für das Stipendium der Handelskammer. Am Schluss folgt dann ein Abschnitt über das, was ich mir von einem Japan-Jahr für die Karriere und das weitere Leben erhoffe.

Erster Teil - Wieso ein längerer Auslandsaufenthalt

Zuerst möchte ich nun auf meine persönlichen Beweggründe für einen längeren Auslandsaufenthalt eingehen. Dazu muss ich etwas weit in der Vergangenheit ausholen. Die Geschichte beginnt im Schuljahr 2006/2007, welches ich als Austauschschüler in Uppsala, Schweden, verbrachte.

Schweden: Neue Perspektiven

²⁷Even the mistakes have been retained!

²⁸It must however be mentioned that this image frequently changes. Things that initially seemed to be obvious and clear suddenly become quite confusing and much more complex than initially suspected. In a way, Japan now seems more mysterious than ever. Clearly, this is part of the fun.

Das Austauschjahr in Schweden war eine sehr lehrreiche und schöne Zeit für mich. Ich lernte viele neue Sichtweisen kennen. Auch alltägliche Sachen aus der Schweiz erschienen plötzlich in neuem Licht. So hatte ich immer einen sehr vorbildlichen Eindruck von Schweden was die Umweltfreundlichkeit betrifft. Ich realisierte aber erst in Uppsala, wo die Busse mit irgendeinem angeblich speziell umweltfreundlichen Ökogas fahren, dass ich in der Schweiz eigentlich nur mit Elektrofahrzeugen (Bahn, Bus, Tram) unterwegs bin, was wohl noch ökologischer ist. Dass ich die Vorbildlichkeit der Schweiz in dieser Hinsicht erst im fernen Schweden realisierte mag komisch wirken, aber ich denke, dass solche Erkenntnisse in der Ferne öfters vorkommen. Man ist sich den Alltag so sehr gewohnt, dass man gar nichts mehr hinterfragt. Erst wenn man genug Distanz dazu hat, kann man gewisse Sachen erst erkennen - das Sprichwort mit den Bäumen und dem Wald trifft hier absolut zu.

Schweden: Wo ist der Unterschied?

Noch in Schweden fragte ich mich jedoch, wieso ich keine entferntere Destination gewählt habe, ja ich bereute es sogar fast ein bisschen. Die Antwort dazu ist einfach: Initiiert durchs Unihockey wuchs in mir ein Interesse an und eine Faszination für Schweden, welches im Unihockey total dominierte (zumindest damals noch, mittlerweile wurden sie von den Finnen um ihre sicher geglaubte Alleinherrschaft beraubt). Folglich wollte ich natürlich nach Schweden und ein anderes Land habe ich gar nicht erst wirklich in Betracht gezogen. Nun ist es ja so, dass die Amerikaner gerne Schweden und die Schweiz verwechseln, was uns natürlich immer zum Witzeln über sie veranlasst. Aus meiner Sicht ist diese Verwechslung aber gar nicht so abwegig (natürlich bis auf den geographischen Fehler, der überschreitet dann doch meine natürliche Fehlertoleranzgrenze). Kulturell und gesellschaftlich sind wir Schweizer den Schweden jedoch ziemlich ähnlich. Wir feiern zwar zum Teil andere Feste, aber auf dieselbe Art und Weise. Wir essen dieselben Sachen nur in etwas unterschiedlichen Mengen. Schlussendlich sind wir uns aber ziemlich ähnlich, nur die Nuancen unterscheiden sich. Deshalb habe ich mir in Schweden vorgenommen, dass ich bei einem allfälligen nächsten Auslandsaufenthalt weiter weg gehen möchte, sowohl was die reine Distanz als auch die kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Unterschiede betrifft.

Studium: Routine

Mittlerweile liegt Schweden weit zurück und bei meinem Physikstudium sind auch schon fast drei Jahre vergangen. Diese waren sehr lehrreich - so kann ich zum Beispiel jetzt mit Gleichungen, die mich anfangs des Studiums noch unbequem verwirrt haben, ganz gut zusammenleben und arbeiten. Eigentlich wollte ich nach den guten Erfahrungen in Schweden einen Teil meines Studiums im Ausland absolvieren. Leider eignet sich das Bachelorstudium in Physik an der ETH aber nur sehr beschränkt dazu, denn man hat sich an einen sehr starren Rahmen zu halten: Man muss zwingend dieselben Vorlesungen, die an der ETH vorgesehen wären, absolvieren, weshalb es eher ein Krampf ist, auswärts zu studieren und von den Stärken der Gastuniversität zu profitieren. Folglich habe ich diese Pläne auf das Masterstudium verschoben und brav an der ETH studiert. Nach fast drei Jahren stellten sich folglich eine gewisse Routine und ein Gleichgewicht ein. Die Routine mag ja ganz gut sein, aber das Gleichgewicht stört mich. Dies möchte ich mit einem Beispiel aus der Physik erläutern, zumal Gleichgewicht normalerweise eigentlich immer positiv gewertet wird. In der Physik lernt man zuerst mit Gleichgewichtssituationen umzugehen. Diese sind jedoch relativ langweilig: Weil alles gleich ist, kann man keine Richtung definieren, denn es gibt ja keine ausgezeichnete und es passiert auch nichts mehr, da der Endzustand erreicht wurde. Die dazugehörigen Phänomene folglich relativ berechenbar und zahm, wenn nicht sogar langweilig. Die richtig spannenden Phänomene wie Selbstorganisation und Symmetriebrechung tauchen erst im Nichtgleichgewichtszustand auf. Meiner Meinung nach lässt sich diese Einschätzung auch grob aufs Leben übertragen, weshalb ich dieses gefühlte Gleichgewicht gerne durchbrechen möchte. Ein Auslandsaufenthalt ist nun natürlich eine Möglichkeit um den gewohnten Alltag hinter sich zu lassen und sich ins Abenteuer zu stürzen. Folglich möchte ich mich weiterentwickeln, indem ich meine Umgebung drastisch ändere und mir somit eine entsprechende Reaktion darauf

aufzwinge.

Allgemein: Aus anderen Sichtweisen lernen

Ein weiterer Grund für einen Auslandsaufenthalt sind neue Perspektiven, welche ich mir davon erhoffe und welche ich wohl viel eher in der Ferne anstatt zu Hause gewinnen kann. So spiele ich zum Beispiel schon seit über zehn Jahren aktiv Unihockey, aber als ich letzten Monat ausnahmsweise einmal die Goalie- anstatt Spielerposition einnahm, realisierte ich erst wie viele Sachen ich als Stürmer falsch mache. Dies schockierte mich fast ein bisschen, denn eigentlich dachte ich, dass ich nach so langer Zeit doch praktisch alles wissen müsste, was es zu wissen gibt. Ich denke, dass das Leben in einer fremden Kultur einem einen guten Spiegel auf die eigene vorhält. Ich hoffe aber auch, dass die Japaner von meinen Ansichten lernen könnten, denn kultureller Austausch ist keine Einbahnstrasse.

Fazit zum ersten Teil

Zusammenfassend möchte ich also gerne einen längeren Auslandsaufenthalt absolvieren um das Gleichgewicht hinter mir zu lassen, neue Perspektiven zu gewinnen und um mich persönlich als Mensch weiterzuentwickeln.

Zweiter Teil - Wieso Japan

Nachdem ich meine Motivation für einen Auslandsaufenthalt skizziert habe, möchte ich nun aufzeigen, wieso ich genau nach Japan möchte. Das ist jedoch relativ schwierig, zumal dieses Vorhaben sich in meinem Kopf auch ohne klare Gründe gut festsetzen konnte. Aber versuchen kann ich's ja mal, also los!

Durchstöbern der Weltkarte

Wie vorhin schon angedeutet, habe ich in Schweden beschlossen, dass ich das nächste Mal lieber weit in die Ferne und ins Ungewisse gehen möchte. Ich begann also meine Länderwahl mit dem Durchsuchen einer imaginären Weltkarte. Europa eliminierte ich schon einmal, da ich weit weg will. Afrika und Südamerika auch, da mich beide (möglicherweise völlig zu Unrecht) nicht wirklich interessieren. Bleiben also grob noch Asien, Australien und Nordamerika. Die letzteren zwei habe ich aber auch relativ schnell eliminiert, denn dort wird primär Englisch gesprochen, welches ich schon gut beherrsche. Da eine Sprache die Weltanschauung und das Zusammenleben stark prägt möchte ich schon eine neue Sprache in Angriff nehmen. Bleibt also noch Asien übrig. China konnte ich nicht nehmen, da mein grosser Bruder schon Sinologie studiert und es ja bekanntlich uncool ist, wenn man alles dem grossen Bruder nachahmt (zudem kann ich dem gefühlten China-Hype nicht viel abgewinnen). Taiwan ging mit China unter, Hong Kong und Singapur waren wiederum zu englischlastig. Folglich blieben grob noch Südkorea und Japan übrig in meinem stark vereinfachten Bild von Asien. Da ich ja bisher wunderbar skrupellos, naiv und unbegründet Länder eliminiert (oder gar ignoriert) habe ist es nicht verwunderlich, dass auch Korea dieses Schicksal getroffen hat. Die Wahl hat sich natürlich nicht genau so abgespielt, sondern über die letzten Jahre hat sich Japan in etwa so ursprünglich herauskristallisiert und seither verstärkt und verfestigt. Diese Erklärungsweise ist also eine überspitzte Karikatur vom wirklichen Prozess, aber wohl genau mitunter deshalb mag ich sie.

Japan habe ich also gewählt, weil es sowohl kulturell als auch sprachlich radikal anders ist als Alles, was wir uns hier im Westen gewohnt sind. Seither hat sich in etwa derselbe Prozess wie vor meinem Schwedenaufenthalt abgespielt: Nachdem einmal ein Funke auf mich hinübersprang, hat sich das Interesse über die Zeit verstärkt. Was genau mich an Japan interessiert möchte ich nun mit ein paar Beispielen illustrieren.

Was an Japan so toll ist

Während bei uns jeder seine Individualität gross schreibt liegt in Japan der Fokus eher auf der Gruppe. Wir streiten gerne offen, doch in Japan scheint man alles zu unternehmen, um dem aus dem Weg zu gehen. Die Gesellschaft scheint so aufgebaut zu sein, dass alle zusammen in Harmonie leben können, was, falls es nicht zutreffen sollte, zumindest gut tönt. Diese extremen Unterschiede interessieren mich und ich denke, dass man davon viel lernen kann.

Ein weiteres für mich interessantes Merkmal Japans ist die technologische Fortschrittlichkeit. Mich interessiert es, wie die Japaner einerseits dem Stand der Technik folgen, aber andererseits ihre Traditionen aufrechterhalten.

Als nächstes möchte ich das Verhalten der Leute erwähnen. Für mich ist es sehr spannend zu sehen, dass die Japaner nach dem verheerenden Erdbeben von vorigem Jahr all' das Leid eisern ertragen und trotzdem so gut es geht versuchen in Harmonie zusammenzuleben. Ich nehme an, dass das bei uns wohl ganz anders wäre, zumal wir wohl deutlich egoistischer handeln. Da mich das ewige Klagen von uns Schweizern über belanglose Anliegen nervt (als Zürcher kommt mir da spontan mein Lieblingsbeispiel "Schattenwurf von gewissen Gebäuden" in den Sinn), gewinnt Japan von mir natürlich auch hier Sympathiepunkte.

Als jemand, der mit dem Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), SNES und N64 aufgewachsen ist, muss ich Videospiele natürlich auch erwähnen. Während ich früher natürlich primär Freude an den Spielen selbst hatte, ist es heutzutage hauptsächlich deren Musik, die mich noch immer in ihren Bann zieht. Spiele wie "Chrono Cross", "Final Fantasy", "Kingdom Hearts" haben alle eine fantastische musikalische Unterlegung. Deren Komponisten kommen natürlich aus Japan und sind mittlerweile sogar ziemlich berühmt. Die Werke werden sogar schon seit den Neunzigerjahren an speziell einberufenen Konzerten von bekannten Orchestern gespielt!

Zuletzt möchte ich noch das langfristige Denken der Japaner lobend erwähnen. Wenn man unseren Medien Glauben schenkt, so haben wir den Fokus viel zu fest auf kurzfristigen Zeitskalen. Ich habe letztes ein Buch über Toyota gelesen und es hat mich tief beeindruckt, wie ganzheitlich und vorbildlich diese Firma agiert (inwiefern Toyota repräsentativ für japanische Firmen ist, kann ich natürlich schlecht einschätzen). Es scheint, als ob Toyota das übliche "Corporate Blabla", welches andere Firmen oft nur heraus posaunen, auch wirklich selbst lebt!

Fazit zum zweiten Teil

Zusammenfassend kann man sagen, dass ich primär gerne nach Japan gehen würde, da es sich sehr stark von unserer westlichen Kultur unterscheidet und somit meiner Meinung nach am meisten Potential zum Lernen besteht. Zu dem folgen dann noch Respekt für die Industrienation Japan, vor den Leuten und Umgangsformen und sicherlich auch eine Prise Abenteuerlust.

Dritter Teil - Wieso ein SJCC-Stipendium

Nachdem ich bisher dargelegt habe, weshalb ich überhaupt ins Ausland will und wieso genau nach Japan, möchte ich nun erläutern wieso ich denke, dass ein SJCC-Stipendium und das damit verbundene Japan-Jahr der richtige Weg für mich nach Japan ist, denn es gibt ja auch noch zahlreiche andere Möglichkeiten wie zum Beispiel ein universitärer Austausch oder Ferien.

Vorteil#1: Sprache ordentlich lernen

Einer der grössten Vorteile eines SJCC-Stipendiums ist in meinen Augen, dass man die Möglichkeit bekommt, sich für einige Monate vollends auf das Erlernen von Japanisch zu konzentrieren. Dies erachte ich als sehr wichtig, denn bekanntlicherweise können Japaner wenn überhaupt nur mässig Englisch. Um folglich wirklich an ihrer Gesellschaft teilzuhaben und nicht nur mit ein paar wenigen Leuten zu interagieren sind Sprachkenntnisse unabdingbar. Aus der Erfahrung Anderer fürchte ich, dass man während einem universitären Austausch wohl kaum genügend Zeit und Motivation hat, um sich der Sprache in angemessenem Umfang zu widmen. Etwas Ähnliches habe ich auch selbst während

meinem Austauschjahr in Schweden erlebt: Da praktisch alle Schweden sehr gut Englisch sprechen und auch keine Hemmungen haben es zu tun, habe ich leider anfangs nicht sehr viel Schwedisch gelernt. Erst als ich mich in der zweiten Hälfte des Jahres stärker darum bemühte, erreichte ich ein ordentlicheres Niveau. Von diesem konnte ich dann im Alltag profitieren, denn es macht eben doch einen Unterschied ob man mit den Leuten in ihrer Muttersprache redet oder nicht, selbst in Schweden, wo die Leute immer sehr überrascht davon sind, wenn man ihnen sagt, dass man Schwedisch lernt (eine Sprache die sie selbst als unbedeutend und dementsprechend als nicht erlernenswert einschätzen). Ich nehme an, dass dies in Japan eine noch viel stärkere Rolle spielt, weshalb ich motiviert bin Japanisch zu erlernen und eben darum einen Intensivsprachkurs zu absolvieren.

Vorteil#2: Praktikum anstatt Studium

Der nächste grosse Vorteil eines Japan-Jahres via SJCC-Stipendium ist für mich, dass man ein längeres Praktikum absolviert. Wie mir beim Schreiben meines Lebenslaufs wieder einmal aufgefallen ist, habe ich praktisch mein ganzes bisheriges Leben in Ausbildung verbracht. Dementsprechend habe ich keine Arbeitserfahrung und weiss ehrlich gesagt auch noch nicht so genau, was ich nach dem Studium einmal machen will (böse Zungen würden gar behaupten, dass ich ein "ETH-Fachidiot" wie aus dem Bilderbuch bin). Folglich erachte ich ein Praktikum als eine wertvolle Möglichkeit, um herauszufinden ob mir eine Tätigkeit gefallen würde und um erste Berufserfahrung zu sammeln. Momentan kann ich mir nämlich noch nicht sehr viel unter der Arbeitswelt vorstellen und neben der Physik interessieren mich noch andere Fachrichtungen wie Robotik, Informatik und Elektrotechnik. Nach einem Praktikum wäre ich hoffentlich in einer besseren Lage um zu beurteilen, was ich später einmal machen möchte. Mit einem konkrete(re)n Ziel vor Augen könnte ich dann auch die Wahl meines Masterstudiums besser treffen und motivierter daran arbeiten. Aus diesen Gründen würde ich sehr gerne ein Praktikum machen, was natürlich sehr gut zum SJCC-Stipendium zusammenpasst.

Vorteil#3: Eigenverantwortung

Als letzter Vorteil möchte die Eigenverantwortung betreffend der Gestaltung des Japan-Jahres und die damit verbundenen Freiheiten und Herausforderungen erwähnen. Verglichen zu einem universitären Austausch kann und muss man nämlich viel mehr selber mitgestalten, was mir gefällt, da ich mich ja bewusst aus meiner Komfortzone begeben möchte. Meiner Meinung nach wäre das bei einem SJCC-Stipendium viel stärker gegeben als bei einem Austauschsemester, zumal man da immer noch im gewohnten Universitätsumfeld ist und viel Unterstützung von der Mobilitätsstelle bekommt.

Fazit zum dritten Teil:

Zusammenfassend sehe ich die Vorteile eines SJCC-Stipendiums also darin, dass ich mich der Sprache widmen kann und dadurch mehr von der japanischen Kultur lernen kann, da ich sie ja dann hoffentlich besser verstehen kann. In meiner momentanen Situation würde ich viel lieber ein Praktikum absolvieren anstatt direkt weiter zu studieren. Von dem Praktikum erhoffe ich mir, dass es mir bei der Planung meiner Zukunft hilft, indem ich herausfinde was mir gefällt (oder zumindest was nicht). Zusätzlich betrachte ich ein Japan-Jahr als eine Herausforderung, welche ich gerne annehmen würde.

Vierter Teil - Fürs Leben und die Karriere

Nun möchte ich noch kurz darauf zu sprechen kommen, was ich mir generell von einem Japan-Jahr fürs Leben erhoffe.

Nach dem Austauschjahr in Schweden fiel mir zurück in der Schweiz auf, dass ich in meiner Freizeit relativ wenig "Sinnvolles" unternahm. Als Reaktion darauf habe ich mich mit zwei Klassenkameraden einfach bei "Schweizer Jugend forscht" angemeldet und ein Projekt gestartet, um sozusagen gezwun-

genermassen etwas Interessantes zu tun. Dadurch haben wir einen Stein ins Rollen gebracht und das Projekt wurde immer grösser und erfolgreicher. Schlussendlich konnten wir nämlich sogar die Schweiz am "European Union Contest for Young Scientists" vertreten. Momentan habe ich das Gefühl, dass es wieder einmal Zeit dafür wäre, um einen Stein ins Rollen zu bringen, was ich mit dieser Bewerbung um ein SJCC-Stipendium machen möchte. Idealerweise erhoffe ich mir nämlich davon, dass sich dadurch viele neue Möglichkeiten eröffnen und ein neues Feuer entfacht wird.

Ein weiterer Grund ist, dass ich mich persönlich weiterentwickeln möchte. Momentan bin ich nämlich meiner Einschätzung nach ein Mann der Absichten und Worte. Dies möchte ich ändern und den Worten auch Taten folgen lassen. Zudem habe ich momentan das Gefühl, dass ich nicht mein volles Potential ausschöpfe. Ich spiele die von mir erwartete Rolle zwar ganz gut, aber wie ich über die Jahre gelernt habe, ist es sehr einfach um einfach nur brav mitzuspielen, das können die Meisten. Etwas neues, eigenes zu machen erfordert hingegen Eigeninitiative und Einsatz und ist viel schwerer, dafür aber auch viel lohnenswerter (man denke nur an Apple, welches mit dem iPhone die ganze Mobilfunkindustrie auf den Kopf gestellt hat). Ein Japan-Jahr sehe ich als eine Möglichkeit, um diese Ziele in Angriff zu nehmen.

Als letztes möchte ich natürlich idealerweise während meinem Japan-Jahr herausfinden, was ich in meinem Leben erreichen möchte um danach fokussierter darauf hinarbeiten zu können. Bis vor einiger Zeit hatte ich noch keine solchen Gedanken, aber wenn ich zum Beispiel Eishockey schaue und sehe, dass die neuen jungen Spielertalente Jahrgang 92 haben (ich wurde 1990 geboren), empfinde ich eine Art Dringlichkeit und Verantwortung, um auch meine Rolle in der Gesellschaft zu finden. Ich glaube, dass ein Japan-Jahr eine gute Möglichkeit bietet, um sich mit solchen Fragen zu befassen.

Fazit zum vierten Teil

Mit einem Japan-Jahr möchte ich also ein neues Feuer entfachen und wieder einen Stein ins Rollen bringen. Zudem möchte ich mich als Mensch weiterentwickeln und mehr aus mir herausholen. Auch möchte ich herausfinden, was ich wirklich will, um diese Ziele dann fokussierter in Angriff nehmen zu können.

Vielen Dank fürs Lesen, sie haben nun endlich das Ende erreicht!