

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Program

Final Report: 千里の道も一歩より始まる The beginning of a thousand step journey



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SUMMARY

Should you not have much time, please check page 21 where the most relevant information is placed;

The primary purpose of this final report is to help the holders of Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (henceforth, SJCC) Scholarship decide about the details of their Japanese Year as well to encourage the potential candidates to make use of this amazing possibility and apply for this scholarship. It is directly oriented toward the reader, presenting very practical and direct approach. This report will only briefly answer questions like how to get visa, where to look for apartment, how to get a bank account etc – many other reports answer those questions and repeating same answers would be redundant. The secondary objective is to summarize almost two years the author has spent so far in Japan, highlighting the most important events. It is given that all experiences are unique and all situations special, however, the hope of author is that through presenting some most common patterns, challenges and tips, others might be able to plan and conduct their Japanese Year more efficiently. Therefore rather than just describing experiences, main focus will be committed to practical tips derived from personal experience and passionate love of Japan.

This report consists of seven main chapters, which focus on simultaneously illustrating my experiences as well as providing handful information regarding living in Japan. The first chapter describes the general motivation for undertaking the Japanese Year. Second and third parts present insights into effective planning and settling down in Japan. Chapter four introduces in more detail the first six months of author's stay in Japan, firstly at the internship with AIESEC in Kobe and then at a Kyoto Japanese Language School (henceforth, KJLS), while fifth part summarizes experiences of working for Rakuten Inc. in Tokyo. Sixth chapter describes potential leisure option, whereas final, seventh section illustrates handful tips that will undoubtedly be helpful for people interested in living in Japan.

Finally, the hope of author is to present useful insights for general public at large, but especially for:

- Potential SJCC Scholarship applicants, searching for a motivation
- Scholarship recipients, searching for further information
- People interested in living in Kyoto or studying at KJLS
- Non-Swiss citizens
- People interested in alternative approaches to planning a Japanese Year
- Vegetarians
- People who want to get the fullest of their Japanese Year, whilst staying at the budget

CHAPTER I: 千里の道も一歩より始まる

WHO AND WHY: the beginning of a thousand step journey

Foreword

First and foremost, I would like to thank once again Mr. Paul Dudler and whole SJCC for supporting me to live that Japanese dream. As a token of my gratitude, I intend to write this report as a very direct form of communication between me, the person who has been conducting the Japanese Year, and you, the potential or current recipient. I apologize in advance for a maybe excessively personal way of writing, but I trust in this way I will be able to convey all the useful information more effectively. Before writing more specifically about my experiences in Japan, I believe some bio data about me could give you a chance to find some similarities between the two of us:

千里の道も一歩より始まる -
*a journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step*
Chinese philosopher Laozi

- My name is Daniel Kałuža
- At the moment of writing I am 27 years old
- Swiss resident, but a Polish citizen (ergo European Union passport, but not a Swiss citizen)
- Travelled to 95 countries, lived in 10
- Graduate from University of St. Gallen, Master of Arts in Strategy and International Management, studied MBA in Entrepreneurship at Babson College, USA
- Fully pledged lacto-ovo vegetarian (i.e. no fish, meat or chicken ingredients, milk and egg is all right)
- Entrepreneurially-driven, planning to do my own business in/with Japan (most probably import/export activities)
- Spoke *some* Japanese at the time of application (circa 300 kanji, casual conversation); ended up with *near* business level (ability to work completely in Japanese)
- Nature, sports and outdoor lover, always attempts to use his time to the fullest
- In committed love with Japan

Finally, I would like once to more to acknowledge that your Japanese Year will be a unique situation, and no advice can guarantee success. I hope this report will be useful for anybody interested in SJCC scholarship, but the more similarities you can find between my description and yourself, the more valuable information you are likely to find in this report. However, nothing will help you more than confirming your questions yourself actively!

Why Japan



The skyline of Tokyo

reserved culture and crazy Akihabara, lively metropolis and breathtaking nature; and finally, because I consider Mt. Fuji as the most exquisite, inspiring and beautiful phenomenon I have seen in my entire life.

Japan has been my childhood fascination; it started immaturally as a typical anime and manga obsession (which, frankly, continues to this day), to evolve into decision to connect my future career with



Mt Fuji - the single most beautiful phenomenon I have seen in my life

Japan as an entrepreneur. I have participated in 2009 in a six-months-long student exchange with Keio University, Tokyo, and at that time my fascination in Japan has only increased. On the personal side, I consider Japan as simply the most beautiful place out of 90 countries I had a chance to

traveled to; on the professional side, I believe foreigners can have great chance to grow in Japan, especially with recent structural changes caused by Abenomics. Finally, even though Japan is in the continuous economic stagnation since 90s, it is a place full of opportunities. Finally, when speaking about my Japanese dreams many times I have heard the question: Daniel, why not China? China is growing, China is booming, China is... but China *is not* Japan. I believe that as long as you follow your passion, you will make best out of any situation.

Why? Because it is simply the most different place you can imagine on earth. Many countries have their unique characteristics, but I do not think any of them compare to Japan; because Japanese people are said to possess three hearts – one for society, one for closest friends and family, and one for only themselves – and understanding people's inner hearts and becoming their real friend is what drives me; because Japan is a fascinated blend of shamanic religion of Shinto and skyscrapers,

"(...) a man has a false heart in his mouth for the world to see, another in his breast to show to his special friends and his family, and the real one, the true one, the secret one (...), hidden only God knows where."

James Clavell, Shōgun

CHAPTER II: 一年の計は元旦にあり

INITIAL PLANNING: success is when preparation meets the opportunity

Planning of the Japanese Year

I think other report extensively describe the process of application for a scholarship and the preparation, so I prefer to focus as much as possible on providing some new valuable information. My process of planning the Japanese Year followed the subsequent order:

Started preparations for scholarship 01/03/2011

I learned about the scholarship from a friend at the University; made research about the fund, read reports, interviewed previous recipients; prepared for the application process and interview.

一年の計は元旦にあり

- the sum of the year is on New Year's day - if you worked at something for 365 days you've been preparing and improving all year round - that builds up.

Preparation and planning are the foundations of success – I live by this mantra daily.

Received the acceptance 26/05/2011

I researched in more detail the language schools; extensively examined the employment possibilities (cannot stress it enough: the more time you spend on research, the better results will you get!); prepared visa-wise; participated in the Boston Career Forum (a three day employment convention with over 200 Japanese companies) where I interviewed with few pre-selected companies.

Secured full time employment at Rakuten (starting 01/10/2012!) on 11/10/2011

I passed the interview with few companies, but decided to focus on Rakuten; after two face-to-face and three Skype interviews, received the full-time employment offer at the most prestigious e-commerce company in Japan.

Started first internship by AIESEC 27/02/2012; Started language school 01/04/2012; Scheduled to start full time employment 01/10/2012

Described more in Chapter IV.

Finding the best language school

In short, I strongly believe that the more time you prepare and plan your Japanese Year, the better results you will get. You should start as soon as possible and think of different potential plans, as well as

make some backup planning. Finding a language school is a lesser issue, but few tips on the process:

- Think of cities you would like to live in (small vs. big town): remember that most working opportunities will be in Tokyo, so you have to decide if you want to spend both language school in Tokyo (opportunity to get better, deeper relationships with friends/business network) or in different cities (opportunity to see more of Japan). I recommend the latter – Japan has a lot to offer, and just staying in Tokyo will limit your vision of the country
- Get the list of available language schools from the website: read what they offer, compare pricing and overall package
- Read extensively through reports on the website: if you have any questions about experiences at specific schools, contact the writers. We all feel an amazing thankfulness towards the SJCC fund, so I am sure everybody will be willing to help you

Finding the best employment

Getting the job in Japan is more difficult. Most of the SJCC scholarship recipients tend to firstly go to the language school and search for an employment whilst being in Japan. Though I believe you should keep it as an option, I am convinced that finding an internship a priori is definitely better. Many Japanese companies (especially big, listed corporations) employ at most twice a year: in April and October (after the graduation of the local universities). The process of finding an employment is usually **very** long in Japan – local students usually secure it a year before graduation. Searching for something just few months before desired employment date is possible, but seriously limits your options. Some general tips on searching for the employment:

十人十色 - *ten people, ten colors - to each their own; so many people, so many minds.*

Each person has different employment needs – be sure to follow what fits you most!

- Decide your career path: you can of course find employment just for the sake of being in Japan, but respect your time and search for something that will help you grow more. If you are a student, I recommend using your University's career center to discuss the profession that will match your skills/interest
- Realistically evaluate your Japanese skills and match it with potential companies: search, search and again search! To find companies, check the companies previously employing SJCC scholarship recipients and do an **extensive** Google search. Every minute you spend here will save a lot of your time in the future
- Contact whomever can help you: use your network for contacts in/about Japan; use LinkedIn to search for positions; after you read the information on the company website, write to HR departments (Japanese are very polite and they will almost always address your questions; that also shows them your interest in the company)
- Do it slowly over a long period of time: your results will be much better than just rushing with it few days/weeks before leaving for Japan

- Search for career events: if you can find Japanese companies it would be great, but do not forget that many international companies have their offices in Japan (safest bet if your Japanese is not fluent)

You can really make the Japanese Year as effective as you wish. In my talk with professionals in Japan and previous scholarship recipients I have heard countless times that with my weak Japanese and lack of experience it will be extremely difficult to find *any* employment, and I should settle for the first thing I find. Although I believe it is difficult, I am also convinced that if you plan it in advance you can overcome most of the obstacles and ‘impossibilities’. Therefore, without raising your expectations, I will just tell you that: believe in yourself, because absolutely anything you want is in your reach.

Timing and the composition

Firstly, few very basic tips about the timing. Japanese school terms are slightly different than European ones. Language schools I have encountered start their semester twice a year: in April and October. Very importantly, you have to apply for your school of choice much in advance (generally at least 5 months!) In my case, the deadline was 15th Nov for a school that starts on 1st April – which once more highlights the ‘plan well in advance’ advice that I am giving you. Regarding the applying for a job, you should bear in mind that Japanese apply for corporate positions a year in advance before their employment. That does not have to be necessarily the case with your employer, but the best advice I can give you is to simply check the employment policies of the company you want to apply to. Again, if the information is not on their website, I am pretty convinced contacting HR will help you to answer your doubts.

善は急げ - *it is good to hurry*

In Japan, planning *a lot* in advance is indispensable.

Secondly, as I mentioned already few times in this report, you should be aware the scholarship is very flexible with the composition of your Japanese Year. There are two main formal conditions: you have to spend at least a year in Japan, out of which at least 3 months is a language school. I believe that every report I have read so far about the Japanese Year started with a language school and then followed by an employment. Whilst this common approach has many advantages and I do not attempt to discredit it, I would just like you to think a little more flexibly. Since we all go to Japan to become more fluent in the language, I would like to suggest another approach, in my opinion the more efficient one: first go to Japan (preferably to work, but even traveling would be a great experience) and then follow it up with the standardized version. The advantage is very straightforward: no matter how much you study in advance, nothing is comparable to an experience of actually being in a country, surrounded by Japanese speakers and immersed in the culture. Considering that level of your classes during your 3-6 months at language school is going to be decided based on a single test, this way you could have an opportunity to tremendously improve your entrance exam result, and hence greatly increase efficiency of your language studies.

CHAPTER III: 案ずるより産むが易し

ABOUT ARRIVAL: save yourself a trouble by organizing it

Getting there & Visa issues

I believe those information are basically the same in most of the reports, so I will not get into much of detail here. There are some important points to note about getting there and managing your visa, though.

First of all, if you are on the budget, I recommend the website www.orbitz.com for finding cheaper flights. Generally, flight tickets are cheaper in the middle of the week (Tue-Thu) rather than on weekends, so be sure to check different dates. You should also check different departure and arrival options – major and generally cheapest hubs to departure from Europe are Frankfurt, Munich, Paris and London. If you have just some spare time, however, I recommend that you *do not* go directly to Japan – you can often easily design very cheap Asian itineraries for a price similar to a direct flight to Japan. It requires some time and planning, but it gives you an opportunity to discover an Asia, of which Japan is distinct yet integral part, and gives you a better perspective into Japanese culture in overall terms.

案ずるより産むが易し -
*giving birth to a baby is
easier than worrying about it
- an attempt is sometimes
easier than expected.*

You can easily take care of
all administrative issues if
you prepare in advance.



Second of all, as you might read from other reports, it can get a little complicated with the visa. Many nationalities (among others, Swiss and Polish) can enter Japan for 90 days without a visa, just by getting the passport stamped on the airport (Tourist Visa). Generally it means that you cannot be in Japan continuously for more than 90 days – you can, however, leave for Korea, be back the same day and spend additional 90 days in Japan. You cannot use this method continually - all together you can spend up to 180 days in Japan within a year. You should note, however, that at that time you cannot perform any **paid** employment. Nonetheless, usually you can still participate in an internship if it is unpaid (which was case for me). If you start your studies, you are

most likely going to need a College Student Visa - and if you are already in Japan this is where the business gets a little tricky. Theoretically, my language school informed me that changing the visa status would not be possible in Japan, so at that time I considered going to a Japanese embassy in Seoul, Korea, and changing my visa status there. Although it is nominally possible, it seems it is a very risky procedure, and you might be forced to go back to your own country to change your visa if it fails. What happened in my case, then? I was polite, but persistent, and I managed to get my language school to support me at the immigration office for changing my visa status *whilst* in Japan. Please note that I do not guarantee you will be allowed to do that, but if you secure a support of your language school whilst

you are still planning your Japanese Year, you might save yourself some time, money and make your year more efficient. Lastly, in order to start working full time you will need to change your visa again. In my case, I managed to do it once more whilst being in Japan.

To sum up about visa changing: it is not easy, but it is possible. As always, the best way is to directly communicate with interested parties – call Japanese embassy in your country, discuss the possibilities with the language school, message previous scholarship recipients who will inform you about their experiences. There are many other visa options which I am not enough knowledgeable about, but you can inquire about them at your embassy. Everything is manageable, if you put some effort into planning it.

Administrative: Alien Registration, cell phone, bank account, apartment

In this section I will briefly touch on administrative issues. Firstly, in order to do anything in Japan you will need to obtain your Registration Card. This small document will open many of doors for you, starting bank account and getting cell phone among others. Once you start a language school, they will assist you in all those administrative issues.

When you look for a cell phone, Japan is very restrictive in this matter so you need your Registration Card for that. You will have two options: prepaid and contract. This can get very costly, so I strongly recommend opening a prepaid account with Softbank, where you just need to paid 3000 yen every 2 months or so. Calling is extremely expensive, but with the advanced Japanese technology sending the text message is totally free – take advantage of it to cut on save on your budget! I have yet another advice for people who do not like writing on their cell device – register your cell phone email account within your usual email provider; thanks to that you can type quickly on your laptop, and the message will be send from your ‘mobile email’ address. Quick and efficient! As I mentioned previously, you cannot get the cell phone without the Registration Card. Living in Japan without the phone can be very troublesome, but here you have some options too. You can use your phone on roaming (usually extremely expensive and you have to check your device for compatibility with Japanese network – there is no GSM service here!). You can also rent a cell phone; the service is usually available at the airports. However, there is also third, less known and somewhat tricky option. If you have some good Japanese friends (or foreigners with the Registration Card), you can ask them to buy the prepaid phone for you. They do not bear a risk of being charged for your calls, but if you use this method you should be respectful of someone’s help and register your phone in your name as soon as you get your own Registration Card.

To open the bank account, again, you need the Registration Card. Generally, you will also need your own official stamp (easy to make anywhere in Japan). However, also in this case there are exceptions. Some banks (especially in Tokyo) will make you an account with just a sign. Shinsei Bank generally has higher fees, but it is also quite easy to get their account without a stamp. I managed to get my bank account at Sumitomo Banking Corporation (one of the three biggest banks in Japan) in Kyoto without having a stamp, too, even though I was continuously assured by both my language school staff and employees of banks I encountered, that you *do need* a stamp. As always, a little polite persistence will help you achieve the theoretically unachievable in Japan.

Lastly, some advice on finding your accommodation. Landlords in Japan are generally very foreigner-unfriendly, so it can get troublesome at times, especially if you think of renting something on your own.

Considering that you start with a language school, your safest bet will be an accommodation provided by them. Homestay will give you an opportunity to talk with your host, but at a price of a strongly limited freedom. There are usually dorms available too. I changed from living in a friend, through homestay, student dorm to a shared house, and I describe further my housing adventures in the next section. Final budget tip here: the further the place from the station, the cheaper it tends to get!

If you plan in living in Tokyo, there are plenty of opportunities to live independently from your language school or employer. You should check offers of Sakura house, Oak house, Borderless house – I have lived in each of them and more. However, if you stay in Tokyo you **have to** check the hidden gem called “Crossworld” – they offer unbeatable prices, close to the center, with loads of privacy and amazing atmosphere. Finally, this is English-learning oriented place – so you can be sure that all Japanese residents will die to make contact with you.

*If you stay in Tokyo and look for accommodation you **have to** check the hidden gem called “Crossworld”.*

<http://crossworld-residence.com/en/>

CHAPTER IV: 七転び八起き

INITIAL INTERNSHIP AND LANGUAGE SCHOOL: what I have learned in six months

Living in Japan has been my dream and I do my best to get most out of it. In this section I will share with you my experiences from the first six months here. I had many difficult situations, but through overcoming of each of them, I could become a little stronger.

七転び八起き - fall seven times and stand up eight - when life knocks you down, keep trying.

Problems always happen – but if you face them, your character will grow.

AIESEC Internship in Kobe

AIESEC is the biggest student organization in the world with plenty of internship offers in Japan. I recommend you check them on the internet and contact the local committee at your University for more information (most likely you do have one). To cut the long story short, you have two options to get to Japan with them, let us call them ‘push’ and ‘pull’. To ‘push’ yourself on the Japanese market, you need to contact your AIESEC local committee, check the possibilities and organize your internship to Japan. You can do it either as an AIESEC member, or just as a person interested in a one-time internship



with them. The other, less common but much more efficient (as you might have realized already, this word means worlds to me) way is to ‘pull’ yourself there – i.e. find representatives of that organization in Japan and directly ask about opportunities they have. This was, obviously, the method I have used. I have found online the contact emails to representatives of that organization in 10 different cities in Japan and discussed what I could do there. In my case, I was helping the local committee in Kobe with their international operations and sales from 27/02/2012 to 5/04/2012.

How did this internship look in practice? Firstly, I have lived with a Japanese person, so I had an opportunity to constantly train my language skills. Secondly, by staying with AIESEC I was already welcomed as a part of their community and subsequently invited to all the events such as traveling and drinking parties. For two weekends I also had a chance to stay with families of other committee members – it was an unforgettable experience to see the Japanese culture really from the inside. Thirdly, the professional opportunities I got were just unparalleled: together with other members I went to companies to sell our products. Generally, if you work in a Japanese company, in order to speak to a client you need a lot of training – in AIESEC they allowed me to try that almost instantly.

In summary, I had a chance to tremendously improve my language, even if that was just over a month, I could be an integral part of a Japanese culture, and I had an excellent opportunity to see the local business environment. Go AIESEC!

Kyoto Japanese Language School

I had hard time to choose where I want to study the language; I knew my employment will be in Tokyo, so it made sense to stay there in order to start building networks and get into deeper friendships. This was also, however, an excellent chance to understand more of Japan. The country has a lot to offer, so I truly recommend you take this opportunity and discover it. I decided therefore to discover Kyoto with KJLS, on the term from 05/04/2012 to 28/09/2012.



My favorite Shrine in the entire world: Fushimi Inari

I have settled for Kyoto for many reasons: it is surrounded by mountains, which I greatly enjoy (I hike here almost every weekend), it is an old Japanese capital (I am fascinated by history), and I have fallen in love with this city whilst traveling here three years ago. Kyoto is, in my opinion, absolutely the most fascinating place in Japan. It is overflowing with traditional Japanese culture: you can see Geishas walking in Gion district, there are many workshops (I participated in making Japanese traditional sweets, traditional paper and tea ceremony), and the number of temples and shrines is just outstanding. I believe the temples and shrines here have a very special atmosphere – this is why almost every day I either studied or read a book in one of them, or just went for a walk. Obviously you can get all the information from the tourist office, but I recommend that you do not settle just for tourist traps such as Golden Temple and Kiyomizudera. They are amazing, but they do not compare to my favorite Fushimi Inari, for example. Other than that, Kyoto is an extremely bike-friendly city, as opposed to Tokyo. For six months here, I have ridden a bus or metro maybe three times, and my bike meter computer shows that I made approx. 2000 km by bike. Much of that being separate trips outside of the city, which points to



Temples of Kyoto

yet another advantage of Kyoto – it is surrounded by amazing spots; biking distance to Lake Biwako is 30 km, Nara is 60 km, Osaka is 80 km, Kobe is 100 km, for example. Finally, if you are lucky enough to be here during spring season, Sakura in Kyoto is considered as one of the most exquisite experiences one might have in a lifetime. I am in love with this city and I recommend you live here too. However, considering how incredible Japan is, I am pretty convinced that you will be happy wherever you decide to live.

As for the language school, I have made an extensive research about many of them, and I do not think they differ a lot. The two leading, awfully similarly sounding schools in Kyoto are Kyoto Institute of Culture and Language and KJLS. I have chosen KJLS mainly because of its central location in Kyoto. The teachers and the staff are extremely helpful, not only in the classroom, and I cannot even count how many times they assisted me with my inquiries. School has many events and other students are

very open too. On the negative side, you have to remember that Japanese teaching methods might differ from what you are used to. I was often very stressed about the inefficient, in my opinion, way of conducting the class. Once you get used to following and accepting that teachers 'do know better what is good for you', you can learn a lot.



Taking water from Pacific Ocean...

Interestingly, I started in Kyoto by living in a host family provided by the school. It was very tough to find someone willing to take me, since I am a vegetarian and Japanese have only very blurred idea of this concept. Finally, I was accepted at Matsuoka-san's. Her place was very close to my school (5 min walking). However, I was not satisfied by the experience. The fee was almost double as compared to a student dorm, yet the whole 'host family' consisted solely of Matsuoka-san. She was helpful in preparing dinners and correcting the Japanese mistakes, on the positive side. On the negative, however, she took three students for the homestay and

I had the feeling that she is trying just to get our fees and save money on anything she provides. We had conflicts on some lines, e.g. I was not allowed to have my food in the fridge (not really an option for a vegetarian who can hardly eat outside), I did not feel a proper privacy, and you had to agree in everything with the opinion of your host mother. Having my freedom totally stifled and not seeing a chance to really progress with my Japanese, after just 10 days I moved to live in a student dorm. It was cheaper, I made many friends and enjoyed freedom I could not imagine at Matsuoka-san's. What is my recommendation about your accommodation? No tips this time, but just one advice: think of your objectives. Homestay will give you maybe better opportunity to train the language, but limit your living a lot as well.

What about the free time? Long time ago I decided that I would spend every weekend traveling, and I am pretty consistent with this resolution. I have visited many incredible places in Japan and had many adventures. For example, I climbed Mt. Fuji from the seaside (as in the pictures: 15 hours, starting at midnight at the beach where filled the bottle with sea water, biking for 50 km until the elevation of 2400 m., then climbing without sleep and finally emptying the bottle at the top), or I hitchhiked through golden week from Kyoto to Kumamoto in Kyushu, staying every night in a tent in the most random places like parks (all together circa 1000 km, 10 cars and 7 days). During summer holidays I have traveled for 7 weeks through Malaysia-Indonesia-India-Bangladesh. On the weekdays, I participated in events organized at the university clubs or met up with friends (many useful tips on that in the next section). Finally, although it was a tough mission, I managed to stay a vegetarian in this fish-obsessed country (believe me, it is ingredient of almost every food); if you are vegetarian, first Kanji you learn should be the ones for different kind of meat and fish, you will have to be careful about what you buy and you will need to cook more by yourself, but if you really want it, it is manageable.

To sum up, living in Kyoto has been one of the best experiences in my life. I improved my language, had an opportunity to live in the probably the most beautiful city I know, traveled throughout Japan and Asia, and fallen in love with Japan even more.



...and delivering it within 24h to the top of Mt Fuji by bike/hiking.

CHAPTER V: 天は自ら助くるものを助く

1.5 YEARS IN RAKUTEN: the bushido of a modern salaryman

Working in Rakuten improved my Japanese language, cultural understanding and business skills – with very fixed business rules it reminded me of a bushido of a salarymen, the modern samurai. It was fun and productive time that gave me solid foundation to start my own businesses.

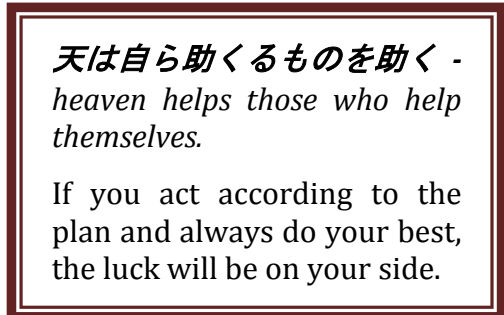
Company overview



Rakuten, Inc. (楽天株式会社 Rakuten Kabushiki-kaisha) is a Japanese electronic commerce and Internet company based in Tokyo, Japan. Its B2B2C e-commerce platform Rakuten Ichiba is the largest e-commerce site in Japan and among the world's largest by sales. In 2012, the company's revenues totaled US\$4.6 billion with operating profits of about US\$244 million. In June 2013, Rakuten, Inc. reported it had a total of 10,351 employees worldwide.

Recruitment

As previously described, after extensively examining the employment possibilities, I participated in the Boston Career Forum (a three day employment convention with over 200 Japanese companies) where I interviewed with few pre-selected companies. I passed the interview with few companies, but decided to focus on Rakuten, where it seemed my potential could be most realized with regards to my objectives; after two face-to-face and three Skype interviews, received the full-time employment offer at the most prestigious e-commerce company in Japan.



My work ID card. Since after long deliberation I decided my Japanese name to be 本道 (Motomichi), everybody called me “Mokkun”

Probation period

This is a training period of which importance I cannot stress enough. In Japan your impression (a.k.a. your ‘face’) is almost everything – and the major part of it in a corporation comes from your probation period. Be an average person, and it will be difficult to get out of that impression; do more than you are asked for, shine with your talent and start productive networking as early as possible, and you will be assigned serious responsibilities from the onset.



Drinking with new coworkers – vital part of Japanese corporate culture

Probation period in Rakuten took 1 month of training all the new employees from Fall together. This group is your 同期 (douki), people you will spend a lot of time together. Be sure to show from the beginning your talents and forge lasting friendships – many of those people will be assigned to other departments and will be your entry into solving any business you might have in the most efficient way. Also, it is important to make good friends with them simply so you can share your worries and discoveries regarding the company. In this period I did my best: I won the prize of best performing person in the group (as voted by my douki), my team won one competition and I presented it in front of over 200 employees, and I forged many friendships

within my douki as well as with interesting employees at large. When meeting new people, be courageous and learn from everybody. I promise you that other people will love to be asked by new employees about their job – that is your entry hook.

After probation I was assigned to Social Media Team within the Business Planning Group. I was first foreigner in the division which was great news for me, since I had an opportunity to polish my Japanese. In short, our work was to create and oversee Facebook accounts of over 15,000 merchants who sold their goods through them.

Working culture

Understanding corporate culture in Japan is as necessary to work there successfully as knowing Japanese. Culture among different companies surely differs, but there is one thing that is fundamental in every environment: respect. Being polite beyond measure will always take you far way. Always show your respect to supervisors and other people, even if the atmosphere seems loose and all your douki do differently – once our head trainer during probation period scolded whole group that they never show respect, and named me as the only exception. Your douki might give you laughs, but your supervisors will remember your behavior.

*郷に入っては郷に従え -
when you enter the village,
obey the village's laws.*

If you prove you are not just a senseless barbarian who does understand Japanese working culture, your coworkers and bosses will note!



Daniel working in Yukata

I had an amazing experience of learning Japanese working culture. Working on interdivisional teams was much easier thanks to network I have built, I always had some friends or mentors to consult on projects, and generally was quite well known within the company as an active change-maker. I cannot overstress how much making good name means – enough to say I was one of the few people to get promotion and salary raise just after six months. I enjoyed immensely working with my team: teaching them international perspective, whilst they always explained me the Japanese way. I always brought my team sweets from my travels, discussed both personal and business issues and participated in external events together. Strong bonds helped me to

achieve better results and the trust build with my coworkers and supervisor effected in higher trust and thus more responsible tasks. At the same time learning as much as possible about their culture fulfilled my always inquisitive mind. If you show others that you are sincerely interested to know about their culture, they will be open to share it – and you can have a lot of fun on the way (e.g. in Summer I often came to work dressed up in... yukata).

Improving skillset

Being advisor to 15,000 shops is not an easy task. My main responsibility was to analyze foreign trends and suggest improvement ways for our merchants. I also prepared business slides for my supervisor to



I Japanese TV debut! I appeared in a program about working cooperation among Japanese and foreigners

present on meetings. I often also suggested my own projects. One of them made me particularly proud: preparing a quick check-list for merchants on all stages of Facebook account, with easy-to-follow instructions both in Japanese and English. My number one objective, however, was to further improve my Japanese: when on some meetings all the presenters made their speeches in English, I always did them in Japanese; I participated in all-Japanese meetings; generally in all communication within the team I used Japanese.

Bright future ahead

Working in Rakuten Inc. was a mind-blowing opportunity that made me extremely satisfied. Although being often told finding full-time employment in Japan is hardly possible I managed to do it and perform well. I have improved my cultural understanding, Japanese language and business skillset. However, after almost 1.5 years I realized that the long-term perspective of the company on the employee, although solid in its assumptions, is too slow for me: often people are developed very slowly since they are expected to work all life within the same company. After long consideration I decided to quit the company and start my own businesses. At the moment, I am working as a sales representative of some Japanese companies in Poland (where my knowledge of Japanese language and their corporate culture is simply pivotal) as well as managing social media for foreign tour operators (skillset completely acquired during my job). I will always remember this period as immense learning and will always be thankful for it.

打も積もれば大木を倒す -
*with many little strokes a
large tree is felled.*

Success takes time – but with
every effort you do, you are
always a step closer.

CHAPTER VI: 盛年重ねて来らず

LEISURE: get the most of your time

When working in a completely new environment, during constant overtime and with never ending stress, it is really easy to get burned out during your work. This is why it is extremely crucial that you take a proactive approach to spending your free time on things that make you relaxed and allow you to 'charge your batteries' to perform even better at work. For me it was mainly travels, discovering Japanese culture other countless activities like sports.

*盛年重ねて来らず -
the prime of your life
does not come twice.*

Simply YOLO!

Travels within Japan



24 hours - 50 km - 3,776 m vertical gain

- **Climbing Mt Fuji:** I climbed it... three times. Once normally and once by biking from the Ocean seaside to the highest available level with the paved road (Fuji 5th station, about 2400 m.) and then walking. However, the biggest achievement was to climb Mt Fuji by foot from the Pacific Ocean (Taganoura beach in Fuji City). So called 'Sea-to-summit' challenge took 24 hours over 50 km continuous walk and all with almost 4,000 m vertical gain!

- **Biking through Nakasendo (600 km):** in Tokugawa-period Japan there were two main roads connection Kyoto with Tokyo: 東海道 (Toukaidou, on the coast, now with plenty of highways and heavy traffic) as well as 中仙道 (Nakasendo, literally 'a road through mountains'). During Silver Week (holiday in Japan) I decided to tackle this road in 3 days on my bicycle. I am a fan of traditional Japan and this journey was absolutely incredible: sometimes I felt as if I came back in time to Tokugawa Japan. On the second day I had an additional challenge: Japan was struck by... a typhoon, so I spent most of the day completely soaked. After successfully arriving at Kyoto, against all challenges, I celebrated in my favorite shrine: Fushimi-Inari. Seeing my beloved Torii gates was a prize in itself.



600 km through Shogunate Japan in 3 days



Fireworks of Niigata

- **Niigata fireworks:** watching one of the biggest fireworks display in Japan in Niigata; discovering nearby places like Nagaoka and Murakami by bicycle.
- **Kamikochi:** an absolute landscape beauty, a national park in Japan with extremely beautiful views and nature. Hiked mountains around, slept under tent.

- **Biking to Hakone (150km):** whenever I had a stressed week I often biked to Hakone (~150km) and stayed there overnight. Very often it happened with some of my coworkers, which further helped to strengthen our bonds.
- **Biking through Shikoku (~300km):** Shikoku is arguably the most rural and backward region of Japan, hence I had great interest to discover its traditional secrets. During 3 days travel I managed to see many forgotten temples, bath in seemingly oldest onsen in Japan, as well as to bike through しまなみ海道 (Shimanami Kaido), a number of bridges spanning over 100 km and connecting Shikoku with the main island.



Diving in Okinawa

- **Okinawa:** most northern Island, the only one of four main islands to fall to American invasion. Full of history, beaches and beautiful rural spots. Very soaked blend of Japanese and American cultures due to an overwhelming presence of US military on the island.
- **Izu Islands:** biking around island for two days, swimming in open onsen, talking to local people, sleeping under a tent on a campsite.

- **Hokkaido:** most northern area, with great cuisine, interesting landscapes and great night life. However, absolute must-see is the ZOO in Ashikawa with its world-famous penguin walk.
- **Many other weekend trips** (Mt. Fuji, Disneyland, Fuji Q Highland Amusement Park, Shiga, Ise-Jingu, Hiroshima, Osaka, Chiba, Izu Islands, Saitama, Odawara etc.)

Travels outside Japan

- **Mongolia:** I used my first holiday period after work to go to Mongolia. Reason was simple: being tired of work and so many people I went to the country with lowest density of population in the world! After a 5 day horse trip through country I rented a motorbike from a friend and went without direction for 3 days adventure. Absolutely amazing place: one of the top 3 countries I ever visited.



Би баат'ар байна!



With a friendly Indonesian monkey.

- **Indonesia, India, Bangladesh:** after finishing my language school and before starting employment I went on 1.5 months holiday through South Asia. After participating in two weeks International Student Conference in Indonesia I discovered many gems of India, including Taj Mahal, castles of Rajasthan or ancient city of Varanasi. It was heaven considering that I am vegetarian. After that I was more than positively surprised by amazing Bangladesh, where people, although poor, are always doing their absolute best to help you.

- **New Zealand:** I used my second holiday period at work for following Lord of the Rings filming locations. I am a hardcore fan of Tolkien's and seeing all those places was fulfilling my dream. Also, New Zealand enjoys a pristine and unspoiled nature that will help you relax instantly.



One Ring to rule them all,
One Ring to find them...

Japanese culture



Carrying 1,000kg Omikoshi!

- **Asakusa Festival:** my Japanese friends, who knew of my passion for Japanese culture, invited me to world-famous Asakusa festival as a participant. I had an honour to help carry 1,000 kg Omikoshi and experience the essence of Japanese culture from inside-out.

- **Tsurumi Festival:** differently from Asakusa, it was just a local festival - but that made the occasion just so much better. I had there one of the best experiences during my Japanese stay: at one time I was requested by fellow team of omikoshi carriers to go on top of omikoshi and direct everybody's work: a task that is always given to the eldest, most respectful person in the whole group!
- **Anime conventions:** as a hardcore anime fan, I took part in many conventions (Tokyo International Anime Fair or Comiket) – always with appropriate cosplay!



Dragon Ball themed interview

Other activities

- In my daily life, I participated in many startup events (Startup Weekend, hackaton, many networking sessions), sport events (run two marathons, regularly played in a football club), as well as constantly improved my photography skills through workshops.

CHAPTER VII: 弱肉強食

TIPS: how to get an excellent start in japan

Anybody on Japanese Year can surely speak about their experiences for more than it can be included in a simple report. I hope that reading through my experiences you will be able to understand the reality of Japanese Year a little more and that you find solutions to some potential questions you might have. However, if you are short on time, this is the one chapter I suggest you focus on the most. Some of the most important points are repeated from midterm report, others are updated based on new experiences I had. However, I hope that in this section you will find practical and specific tips as well as advice that can help you with your adventure in Japan.

弱肉強食 – *the weak are meat; the strong eat - survival of the fittest.*

With proper preparation, become the strong one.

10 DOS

RULE #1: Aim for the stars regarding your employment

I have heard maybe 100 times that finding an internship in Japan is difficult and I should settle for anything that comes. Whilst you should be thankful for any possibilities, do not expect that a mediocre internship is best you can do; I got the full time employment offer in the area of my biggest interest, a year before commencement of the job, without saying a single word in Japanese on the interview.

⇒ **There are endless opportunities for employment– it is up to you how much time you will invest in the search.**

RULE #2: respect, respect, RESPECT

You probably already know that respect is a big part of Japanese culture – yet it is even bigger than you can imagine. Always show your respect to elders, supervisors or teachers, even if the atmosphere seems loose. They will appreciate it. However, it does not end with Japan: please remember about showing your appreciation to people who helped you become who and where you are, SSJC and Mr. Dudler being primary example.

⇒ **Always showing respect will help you to achieve success in Japan**

RULE #3: Study as much Japanese as you can a priori/ keep learning when in Japan

Obviously, the more you learn before your departure, the higher level of class you can get, and the quicker your Japanese will improve. If you can participate in Japanese classes, that is the best. If you want to study yourself, do not worry – you can achieve great skills in this way too. I recommend self-study book called *Genki*, but I can also suggest many materials depending on which skill you want to work on. If possible, try to befriend some Japanese people – preferably in person, but there are many pen-friends and Facebook possibilities, too. Once you start working, remember to keep up with the learning – mastery will build over time.

⇒ **Investing in your Japanese before arrival will allow you to start studies at higher level, ergo master the language quicker.**

RULE #4: Contact your local AIESEC committee for information about potential internships before your language school

There are many possibilities to have an internship before you start a language school, which will greatly enhance your language learning. Out of various potential organizations, AIESEC has probably the biggest number of managerial jobs for people who do not speak fluent Japanese. Think also of some potential voluntary activities, homestay or work as a language teacher. Being a waitress/waiter at the hotel or a bar can give you an immense opportunity to use your Japanese in daily situations, and many hotels will accept you with just English!

⇒ **Use internship/ work to enhance your language skills whilst being in Japan before you start a language school.**

RULE #5: contact clubs and associations (e.g. at nearby universities)

This is the opportunity that is greatly overlooked. Typically, after joining their language school or starting work students tend to keep together, sometimes participate in events organized by the school. However, there are plenty of Japanese students who are dying to meet foreigners. One of the best options to do it is to join university clubs and circles. To do it, get in contact with your language school about nearby universities and their 'club promotion days'. At that time all the clubs at given university have their stands outside, where you can freely inquire. Many of them are super welcome to foreigners and hardly ever have any rules about people outside of the university joining. *Use that loop*. Get the email addresses from as many as possible clubs of your interest and then just join their activities – enjoying doing what you like, and at the same time being surrounded by real-life Japanese language and culture.

⇒ **Participating in university clubs gives you free opportunity to immerse yourself in real Japanese experience.**

RULE #6: Make extensive use of networking sites whilst in Japan

It is easy to get lonely and separated from other people in Japan. Often people have no contact with external world outside their language school. In addition to using university clubs and finding a part time job, I recommend that you take advantage of the multitude of opportunities presented to you by networking sites. For professional contacts, you can use alumni databases of your university, or just mail people directly on LinkedIn (I have done it many times myself). In addition to that, be sure to check regularly such websites as Couchsurfing and Meetup – they organize numerous events where Japanese and foreigners mingle together, and are full of hungry-to-meet-a-foreigner Japanese.

⇒ **Networking sites are a chance for you to meet more Japanese people, participate in interesting events and develop professionally.**

RULE #7: Save smartly on your budget

There are many ways to save on your budget without an effort, and you might be already aware of some of them. If you buy your food at supermarket or convenience store, try to do it in the evening – you can often find stuff at half price. Be sure to check many different stores for ‘special’ products: I tend to get milk, bread and frozen vegetables from 100 yen Lawson Store, vegetables from a close vegetable store, and general food from three different supermarkets. Additionally, there are many second-handed stores all around Japan that sell almost anything at much lower prices (I bought there tents, shoes, books, electric fans, anime action figures and loads of electronics). Be smart about how you travel around the city: buses and metro work great, but in many places (especially anywhere but in Tokyo) moving by bike is cheaper, quicker and healthier. When you travel to other cities, try to use overnight buses rather than trains, you can sometimes save three times the price. Finally, when you find your apartment, try to look for places slightly further from the stations – they tend to be relatively cheaper. Also, if your visa allows it, you should consider getting a part-time job when studying in Japan.

⇒ **There are many possibilities to save in Japan – take advantage of them.**

RULE #8: Give and take at work

Let us face it: often your Japanese supervisors or colleagues at work will be scared of your gaijin’ness. However, by accumulating the trust slowly you can build a great relationship with them. One of the best entry gates is helping them with their English: most workforce is learning it, and most still have problems. You can also share your perspectives on business issues you tackle – they employed you also for your international perspective. If you do it in respectful way, they will be open to teach you: improve your Japanese, teach you about business, show you how to tackle Japanese corporate culture. Go for this win-win situation!

⇒ **You can help your supervisors and colleagues with your international perspective and English – they can teach you corporate culture and improve your Japanese.**

RULE #9: Make it a rule to be active every weekend

Japan is unimaginably beautiful – make your best to discover it bit by bit! No matter what happens, make it a rule to discover it a little more every weekend. Plan a weekend out in different part of the country, bike to nearby city, hike the mountain you see from your window, go to a temple you read about in the guidebook, or just get yourself lost in the city. You can easily do your homework in the trains or buses, and you gain a chance to live fully the chance that was given to you. Once you start working, you will have much less time to travel or follow your passions – but you will need it even more. Discover the country you have passion for, and your stress levels will be controlled.

- ⇒ **Make it a goal to spend every single weekend of your Japan Year actively, and be sure you live that experience to the fullest.**

RULE #10: Be Gaijin. Be Japanese

Probably the most important advice I can give about being in Japan. Never, absolutely never get angry in Japan – it will bring you nowhere. By being polite, smiling and helpful, you can successfully deal with almost any situation, be it at the shop or discussing with the police. However, and I cannot emphasize this point enough, you also have to use your foreign roots to your advantage: be persistent about what you want to achieve in any conversation. In most situations, it is very simple to make impossible possible in Japan, if you just politely continue to strive for your goal.

- ⇒ **Adjust with the smiling and politeness level to the local people, but use your foreign persistence to your advantage – there will be hardly anything impossible to deal with in Japan.**

10 DON'TS

RULE #1: Do not fight the world on your own – but be responsible for your own life

Planning and conducting Japanese Year is not an easy task and do not take it lightly. SJCC members are willing to help you, but they will not make everything happen for you. However, although you should not expect others to make decision for you, you can surely count on them in advice. Your teachers and supervisors will greatly appreciate if you go extra mile and ask them for advice. Build a good relationship with them and your life will be simply more effective: they have valuable experiences to share and referrals in Japan can work miracles.

- ⇒ **Supervisors and teachers, through their advice and referrals, can help you greatly – but eventually you must be responsible to take your fate in your own hands.**

RULE #2: Do not leave everything for the last moment

Procrastination is a horrible habit and it has especially terrible repercussion if you leave everything for the last moment in preparing your Japanese Year. Remember, language schools require your application usually at least 6 months in advance.

- ⇒ **If you leave everything for the last moment, you might just miss some unavoidable deadlines and have serious problems with effectively conducting your Japanese Year.**

RULE #3: Do not be scared of Japanese economic depression

In 2006 the GDP of Japan as a share of global GDP was 12%, whilst it is projected to fall to 3% in 2050. Furthermore, Japan is in a continuous economic stagnation since the Real Estate Bubble of 1990. However, Japan still is and will continue to be one of the world's economic super powers. It is a leader of many industries (High-tech, as the most obvious example) and many Japanese companies invest heavily abroad, so the growth possibilities are endless.

- ⇒ **Japan is an economic giant abundant with opportunities – if you seek them.**

RULE #4: Do not take culture differences lightly

Whatever is your international experience, be prepared that Japan will be different than anything you have seen. I have lived in 10 different countries on four continents, yet nowhere have I felt as separated from the society as in Japan. You can expect to be here lonelier, more limited, sometimes unable to cope with the proper living in the society or to have normal exchanges with other people. Seeing all the kanji on the streets and understanding hardly nothing can be an overwhelming experience.

- ⇒ **Be aware of the immense cultural differences of Japan, but strive to get used and overcome them gradually.**

RULE #5: Do not expect 'yes' always means 'yes'

Japanese are extremely polite, sometimes to the unthinkable, for a western person, level. If you ask for something, the answer 'no' is basically impossible to hear. You must be very, very careful about differentiating between 'yes, I am interested' and 'yes, it is interesting but...'

- ⇒ **Work hard to discover the real meaning behind the words, to avoid yourself frustration about Japanese seemingly not keeping their promises to you.**

RULE #6: Do not stop studying even for one day

Learning language is not like any other task – you cannot cram it all just before an exam. And as sages say, repetition is a mother of success. Studying daily will give you advantage of taking things slowly, but improving gradually.

- ⇒ **Commit some fixed, absolutely unmovable time of your day to study Japanese, and your progress will be steady but always increasing.**

RULE #7: Do not ever, ever be late!

It is sometimes fashionable to be late in the West: it is completely unacceptable in Japan. Different cultures have different approach to being on time, but none I know is that strict on the matter as Japan. To make things worse, Japanese people will usually not even complain when you are late – so you do not lose your 'face' in front of them – but they will remember and judge you accordingly. Surprise them by being always on time and they will appreciate your high cultural IQ!

- ⇒ **It is unspoken rule to be always on time in Japan.**

RULE #8: Do not get friendly only with non-Japanese

Getting foreign friends is surely easier, but certainly less rewarding in your language studies. There is a swarm of Japanese people who are dying to meet you and have the language and cultural exchange with you. Straightforward as it sounds, best I can recommend to you is to find yourself a Japanese boyfriend/girlfriend - you will have plenty of opportunities to practice your language skills and to understand the society from the inside. I got completely drawn in the Japanese culture and I believe Japanese name I have chosen, 本道, is single most elaborate thing I ever invented.

- ⇒ **Do not take the easy way of befriending mostly the foreigners - there is plenty of (Japanese) fish in the sea too, and it will be much tastier experience!**

RULE #9: Do not lose hope if you are a vegetarian

Not every meal in Japan includes meat – but almost everything is based on the fish. If you are a lacto-ovo vegetarian and you do not want to contribute to killing animals, this task is more difficult in Japan than in any country I have been to. Difficult - but not impossible. Firstly, you will have to cook much more often by yourself – additional advantage is saving money. Secondly, you need to learn the kanji for fish, chicken, meat and anything you cannot eat – when in doubt, always ask the sales person if the given food includes the ingredients you cannot eat. Thirdly, be extremely persistent when inquiring if the given food 'is vegetarian' – people here have only a very blurred idea of the concept. Often shrimp is not considered a meat, or a soup based 100% on fish oil is not thought to include meat.

⇒ **The task of staying vegetarian in Japan is not an easy one, but it is manageable, so stay true to your beliefs.**

RULE #10: Do not forget to contact me shall you have any other questions!

I attempted to include in this report as much practical information about living in Japan as possible. Obviously, considering the limited scope of this work and its generalized character, I was not able to convey all of the useful information. On one hand, I feel extremely indebted to SJCC for offering me the scholarship, and helping you to perfect your Japanese Year would be one of the ways for me to repay this debt. On the other hand, I do believe I am pretty knowledgeable about living in Japan and I would love to help any other person who shares my fascination about that incredible country. Therefore remember: should you have any personal or organizational questions, should you want to inquire more about business and entrepreneurship in Japan (maybe even open something together?), or should you just want to learn more about my experiences – I am here for you.

⇒ **Feel absolutely free to contact me with any questions you might have!**

AFTERWORD: 一期一会

Was it worth it?
Absolutely yes.

Would I do it again?
Absolutely YES.

Should you take this “once in a lifetime” opportunity?
ABSOLUTELY YES.

一期一会 - one opportunity, one encounter - once in a lifetime meeting.

All we have is today, so let's be thankful for the chances given to us and live the life to the fullest!

Japanese year was, in every possible sense, a fulfillment of my dreams. Of course it was not always easy: I had to commit much time for preparation, I had constant problems with finding a proper accommodation, I worked countless hours in overtime at the company, and simply Japanese culture was quite often more than overwhelming. However, all those ‘problems’ became a hardly important matter, an insignificant and distant voice in comparison to all that I achieved. I spent over a year time in a country of my dream, learning the language, corporate environment and local culture; I traveled extensively and took part in local traditions hardly available to foreigners; I got a Japanese name that reflects my life philosophy; I met plenty of helpful people and made life-long friendships and business relationships; and most importantly, I improved my cultural sensitivity and simply matured as a human being.

Once more, I am thankful to Mr. Paul Dudler and whole SJCC for supporting me to live that Japanese dream, a dream whose repercussions I still feel in my every single day, since I decided to center my career at entrepreneurship connected with Japan. Therefore, should you be wondering whether to take up that chance, do not hesitate a slightest moment and life will be changed forever – because it is, indeed, 一期一会.



Me during Tsurumi festival – the proudest moment of my Japanese journey. I was allowed to stand on the top of Omikoshi, something generally allowed only to the eldest and most respectable person.

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