

JAPAN YEAR



MIDTERM REPORT
SWISS-JAPANESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



TOKYO
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SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT
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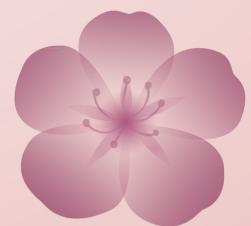
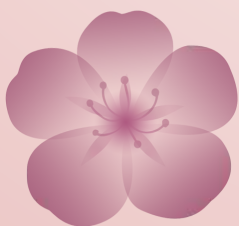


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PREFACE

I would like to first of all thank everyone, especially the SJCC committee, including Martin Stricker, Nicole Schuetz, Noetzold Wieland and Martin Herb for making this journey possible. I would also like to thank the SCCIJ for being so supportive, especially Luca Orduna, Philip Saurer, and Liselotte Schneider, thank you all for supporting me through this amazing journey in Japan. And of course I would also like to thank my family and friends who have always been supportive of everything I do.

I would like to start off this mid-term report by describing a little bit about myself, for the reader to understand my choices and interests, what motivated me to come to Japan, and the things that I have experienced so far. Later on, I will talk about things that will hopefully be helpful for the reader if he/she is planning to come live here, and about the differences that stuck out to me the most within Japanese culture. I would also like to add that when I talk about the differences in culture or the hardships I might have felt, it is purely based on my subjective interpretation and personal experience, and therefore many people might not experience anything similar to what I have so far.



Zojoji Temple, Tokyo, 2017

INTRODUCTION

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MYSELF

I have grown up in Switzerland and lived there until I was 19 years old. My background is half Swiss and half Japanese and I have lived in England for 4 years before starting my year in Japan. Additionally, I have lived in different parts of Switzerland (Swiss-German part until I was 8 years old, French part from 8 to 16 years old and in the canton of Graubunden from 16 to 19 years old), so I've been exposed to similar but still different cultures.

The reason I'd like to specify this is that I will talk a lot about culture and its similarities/differences with Japan within this report. However, since I have lived in different parts of Switzerland and had my mother's Japanese culture influencing me as well, my own understanding of the Swiss culture could be very different from others', especially since I think the Swiss-German and French parts of Switzerland have quite different cultures on their own.

MOTIVATION

As said above, I am half Japanese; therefore the main reason I wanted to go live in Japan was to get to know my own culture better. I am a very proud person when it comes to my own identity and ethnicity, and I think that it is important to know where you are coming from. I have always known that one day I will live in Japan in order to fully experience its culture and to get better at the language, so it was only a matter of time. I speak Japanese with my mother but it is nowhere near perfect, so I really wanted to improve on my Japanese level, and since it is my mother's native language I think that I should be able to speak it fluently.

This is not the first time that I came to Japan though, I came to visit many times to visit my mother's side of the family and also to travel around with my parents. In addition to that, I had also lived in Okinawa for 3 months during summer the year before, where I worked in a hotel.

Although I think that Okinawa is very different from the mainland of Japan, it has given me a first impression to what it is like to live in this country and therefore I knew what to expect within the culture and the work environment. The 3-month stay has motivated me further into living in Japan for a longer period of time. After finishing University I knew that it would be the perfect opportunity for me to go live there for at least one year.



Okinawa, 2016

WHY TOKYO

I decided to go to Tokyo, because I am a very active person and although I love cities like Kyoto and Osaka, I think that Tokyo is definitely the most vibrant city in Japan, where everything is possible and something new is always happening. I also think that Tokyo has the best opportunities in terms of internships and work.

I do not particularly recommend Tokyo for people who don't like crowds or crowded places and prefer calmer, less busy environments. Of course, there are also relaxing and calm areas in Tokyo but the busy and quite hectic areas are not completely avoidable.

One downside to Tokyo though, is that the people are quite cold and not very outgoing in comparison to the Kansai area, like Osaka, where people are known to be louder, sociable and more relaxed.

TIMELINE

3 rd February	Application to KAI Japanese Language School
27 th February	Application for scholarship
24 th March	1 st interview for scholarship per Skype
7 th April	2 nd interview for scholarship in Zurich
15 th April	Scholarship granted
10 th May	Secured a place at the KAI Japanese Language School
26 th September	Deregistered address from national register
2 nd October	Departure to Japan
3 rd October	Arrival in Japan
3 rd -10 th October	House viewings
10 th October	Move in to a share house
11 th October	Start of KAI language school
26 th October	Meeting with former scholarship recipients
11 th November	First SCCIJ Event
16 th November	Start of part-time job waitressing
1 st December	Introduction to BMW internship from Luca
18 th January	Internship Interview
23 rd February	Quit part-time job
26 th February	Start internship part-time
26 th March	Graduation from KAI school
27 th March	Start of internship full-time



Sumo Wrestling, Tokyo, 2018

SJCC & SCCIJ

SJCC

PREPARATION & SCHOLARSHIP

The first time I heard about the SJCC scholarship program was from my mother who works a lot with Swiss and Japanese relations. I knew that the program would be a great opportunity and that it suited perfectly to what I wanted to do in the first place: live in Japan, learn the language, and experience its work environment. I felt very lucky to have found such a great program and was very eager upon receiving it.

After the application process and being fortunate enough to receive the scholarship offer by Mr Stricker, I started preparing for my year abroad to Japan. I would like to thank the SJCC Committee and its sponsors again for their support and their kind generosity.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS IN JAPAN

Through Nicole Schuetz from the SJCC, I have managed to contact Luca Orduna and Philipp Saurer two former scholarship recipients around a month after coming to Japan. We decided to meet for lunch and it was really interesting to see how their Japan Year went and how they have evolved from it. They were also very helpful in every aspect and ensured that I could ask for their help anytime. They have also offered to help me with the search for internships, since I still didn't have one at the time. I have sent Philipp my CV and he was kind enough to help me and look over it.

SCCIJ

SCCIJ (Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan) is the sister chamber of the SJCC, thus they have a close relationship, and Luca and Philipp are also part of its committee.

EVENTS

On the 11th of November, it was the first time I attended a SCCIJ Event, although it wasn't entirely a Swiss Chamber event, but rather a European Joint Chamber Event. The reason for going to the party was to network and meet new people who could hopefully help me find an internship. The party was really fun; I enjoyed meeting lots of new people and became close friends with some who I went to more events with in the future.

NOW

I continued going to several events throughout the year and it was nice to always recognize some familiar faces. However I usually went to the free Young Professionals Networking events, as many other SCCIJ gatherings have a price and they were usually out of my budget. I have also met one of the scholarship recipients who came in January, so it was really nice to meet someone who has gone through the same process and similar experiences as me. All in all it feels nice to be part of a small community, which is there for you if you are in any trouble, and I have also done a few things with some SCCIJ members outside of these gatherings, which was nice too.

Furthermore, I have found my current internship thanks to Luca Orduna who has directly put me in contact with the marketing manager of BMW. So if it wasn't for the SJCC, SCCIJ and especially Luca, I wouldn't have managed to find such an amazing internship that I am enjoying very much at the moment. In conclusion I think that it is very important to network once arriving to Japan and there is a great opportunity for that with the SCCIJ.



Inari Shrine, Kyoto, 2016

JAPANESE LANGUAGE

SCHOOL

PREPARATION

I have read through quite a few end-of-year and mid-term scholarship reports and noticed that many have chosen the [KAI Japanese Language School in Shin-Okubo](#). Having read only positive feedbacks from that school and trusting the recipients' judgments, I decided to sign up for it. For me, the most important thing is to enjoy the time at the school with understanding and supportive teachers, which I could see were the main positive points of KAI.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I had a very good impression of the KAI School; they really help you out with anything you need, including any problems with your VISA, bank account, SIM Card, residency, etc. Therefore if you have trouble with any of these, I recommend you to go to the reception and ask.

NOW

After going there for 6 months I was quite sad to leave, as I have enjoyed it very much. I have definitely learnt a lot and can confirm that personally, I was really happy with my decision. I think that the lessons are very well structured, and the teachers really care about their students.

PROGRESS OF JAPANESE LEARNING

I think that the best way to progress quickly with your Japanese level is of course to use it as much as possible. School gives the basics to understand the language but for further improvement it is definitely important to use it on a daily basis and to speak it as much as possible. One thing that I have noticed while going to the language school is that 6 months go by very quickly and it definitely isn't enough to be completely fluent at it. I have also noticed that many people in my school would be very good at their writing skills, but their speaking skills were mediocre, which is a shame. The main reason for this is that they never use it even though they live in Japan. I would advise anyone learning Japanese that they should try to become friends with Japanese people, preferably with ones who can't speak any English so that the conversation has to be in Japanese.

In terms of kanji, there are many helpful [Apps \(www.fluentu.com/blog/japanese/best-japanese-kanji-learning-apps/\)](http://www.fluentu.com/blog/japanese/best-japanese-kanji-learning-apps/) out there, which are always easy to use on the way to work/school, for example. Other than that a good way to remember a kanji is to make up a small story of it relating to its meaning or reading. For example the kanji “寝” means sleep and a good way to remember it is to picture it by turning it anti-clockwise by 90 degrees, which makes the bit inside the house radical “宀” look like a person sleeping on a bed (丩 = bed, 又= legs).

Also, I have realized that learning Keigo at school definitely helps a lot with the internship afterwards. The KAI Language School offers Business classes additionally to the normal classes, which can be useful for people wanting to work in Japan afterwards. I have realized only after starting the internship, how important Keigo is and how I should have definitely tried to learn it more intensely. Another important factor is that studying Japanese should be part of a weekly routine, especially after leaving the school, to make sure to keep on progressing. A good motivation to continue studying a lot is to sign up for the [Japanese Language Proficiency Test \(https://www.jlpt.jp/e/\)](https://www.jlpt.jp/e/), so that it forces you to study more intensely. Another method would be to meet up with friends to study weekly, or have weekly conversation classes scheduled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

[Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com/) is a website/app that does many events, which are good to meet new people in general. Some events are used as an exchange platform, specifically organized for English and Japanese-speaking people who want to improve at each others' languages. I have personally never attended any of these events but they seem to be a good way of socializing.

[HelloTalk](https://www.hello-talk.com/) is another useful app to meet Japanese people who want to learn English and vice versa. Unfortunately I haven't tried it but some of my friends have, and met many Japanese people through it.



Mt Fuji, 2018

ADMINISTRATIVE

IN SWITZERLAND

As I am fortunate enough to have a Japanese passport, I did not need to do much administrative work, except of deregistering my address in Switzerland.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If you have **any questions or trouble concerning the preparation for Japan**, moving, finding accommodation, finding schools etc. **consult: GoGoNihon.com**. It is an agency that helps with all these troubles for free, they can give great advice about which schools would suit best for the person, which accommodation to take, VISA enquiries, etc. They also give advice in different languages, such as German, Italian, French, so it is really suited for everyone. I personally didn't use it but I have heard that it is very useful and a lot of people I know used it to come here.

IN JAPAN

I have underestimated the time these entire administrative procedures take and since I only came 1 week before school starts, I had to do all of it while already going to school, which was stressful.

Also note that **in Japan especially, any administrative work takes a longer time than anywhere else**. Therefore I would highly recommend coming to Japan a few weeks before school starts, and stay in a Sakura house or hostel for example. This way, there is enough time to do the house viewings, move in without any hassle, and finish up all administrative work, such as getting a SIM card, registering for residency and opening a bank account (I recommend [Shinsei Bank](#)), etc.



Snow Monkeys, Nagano, 2018

HOUSING

Depending on what you want there are different possibilities of housing, such as staying in a host family, share house or an apartment.

MY EXPERIENCE

I definitely wanted to stay in a share house, because I think that it is a great way to meet new people alike and I did not want to live on my own. I have not decided to get any place straight away because I wanted to see what the houses look like in real life, therefore I scheduled many house viewings prioritising places with a convenient location, affordable prices, and a good mixture of Japanese and Western housemates.

PREPARATION

Everything happened quite fast from the moment I applied for the scholarship to the moment I left Switzerland. I bought my flight, had received my space at the school and had some house viewings planned.

I have a friend in Tokyo who kindly let me stay at her place for a week, before I found my own place.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS – CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

From my own experience I have always seen and thought of a share house as a very social house, where the people living together would be good friends and hang out together, go out together, etc. In previous houses, where I have lived with friends or other people, this was the case and I think it is mostly the case in Europe. However **after moving in in Japan, I quickly realized that people in my share house were not as open and sociable as I had expected** and experienced in the past. It took me a few weeks to just meet all the people living in the house, as no one had really noticed that I had moved in.

This was quite a shock to me, because personally I want to know who else lives in my house and shares the bathroom and the kitchen with me everyday. Of course this is only my own experience and it cannot be generalized but since I was curious about it, I asked around and noticed that many people have had similar experiences, saying that some of their housemates would hardly say hi when they see them in the kitchen.

My friends who have become friends with their housemates are usually people living in very big share houses, similar to hostels with approx. 80-100 people living there. I would recommend these places for people who want to meet new people, because they are more sociable, as usually out of 80 people there will be at least 20 that are social, and I have only heard good things about these places.

I had moved into a 9 people share house and only one of them was sociable. From other people having moved into a 5-20 people house, I have heard of none of them being sociable to many of them being sociable, therefore it will always depend on who you live with of course. But in general they are not that sociable especially for share houses with a small number of people (4-8 people).

It also depends on the nationality of the people living there. It has a lot to do with the culture and in general, from what I have experienced and heard, Asians are very reserved and hardly come out of their room. I think that it might have to do with the fact that they have a different perspective of what a share house is than most Westerners. They don't see it as a place to live with friends, but rather as a cheaper place to live in than a one-person apartment.

NOW

Since I have moved into the house at the beginning a lot has changed, out of 7 people, 4 have moved in after me, as all others had moved out during that time. Now I feel very comfortable in the house and get along very well with 4 other people. Thus, 4 others are still not very sociable, I am fortunate enough to be able to have nice conversations and do things together with my other housemates.

TO SUM IT UP

SOCIAL HOUSES

Sharehouse:

- 7-20 people:

It might sound like a lot of but it isn't because usually half of them will hardly ever be around.

Social sharehouse:

- Approx. 80-100 people:

It is more like living in a hostel, than a house.

It is a very social house and it is very easy to meet many people. BUT usually most of them only stay for 3-6 months and there is a small chance that there will be many Japanese people, so it would be trickier to practice the language.

OTHER OPTIONS

The less social options are as follows:

Sharehouse:

- 4-7 people:

It will most likely feel similar to living in a one-person apartment, there is a small chance that the housemates will ever be seen.

Host family:

- Good way to practice Japanese, but Japanese families are quite strict with rules and less flexible, ie. Cannot skip dinner, have to be home at a certain time, etc.

Own apartment:

- Definitely the best way to have some privacy and intimacy.

PART-TIME JOBS

OWN EXPERIENCE

Since the scholarship was not enough to cover my expenses and I had no savings, I decided to do a part-time job, in order to make a bit of money on the side.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Initially I wanted to do part-time teaching job, since I knew that there is always a lot of demand for these jobs and thought that it would be a good experience. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any places that would offer the right hours that would align with my school hours or places that wouldn't ask for a certain teaching certificate.

After giving up on becoming an English teacher and needing a job quite soon, I decided to walk around and see where they offered jobs. With the population declining, I have quickly noticed that almost every place is hiring, giving me a wide range of possibilities. I decided to prioritize on location and convenient hours and applied at a Gusto family restaurant 10 minutes away from my house.

NOW

Waitressing in a restaurant was a really nice experience, I really enjoyed it as it was always busy and I like working in a busy environment. Of course using Keigo and Japanese at all times has helped me further with my speaking skills and the coworkers, managers and customers were very friendly. I was very lucky that everyone was so understanding of my language ability, since my Keigo was far from perfect and since I know that in Japan people usually demand a high level of service. I think that in good restaurants they would be stricter, but many of my classmates who don't have high speaking levels also had jobs in restaurants, therefore I think it is definitely also an option.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I now know that there are websites that connect English speakers with students and that the hours can be very flexible. I would definitely recommend becoming an English conversational teacher, since it doesn't involve needing a certificate and the hours are flexible.

Check out the website: Gaba.co.jp

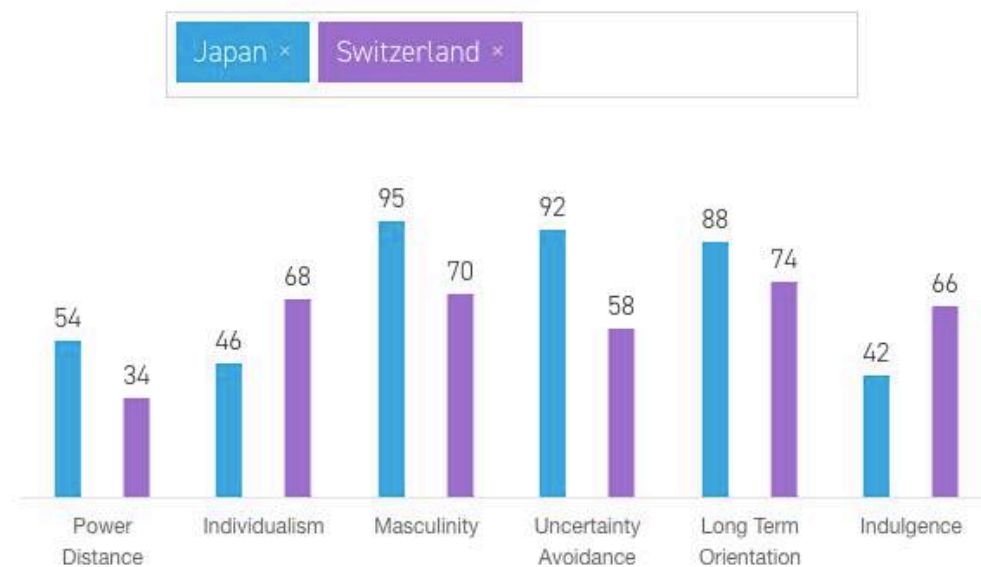
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

I wanted to include at least one cultural aspect of Japan and compare it to the West. I think that the Japanese culture has a lot of positive sides that the West still has to learn from, but also a lot of negative sides, that I don't think many people outside of Japan are aware of.

Below is Hofstede's cultural comparison chart between Japan and Switzerland. Of course the culture of the country does not define the individual, but it is a good way to compare the values of the society that people were brought up in, which of course plays a strong role in people's personalities and personal values.

"Culture is defined as the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another. ,"

-Hofstede



(Hofstede, 2018)

Looking at the chart I have definitely noticed the lower individualism and higher uncertainty avoidance in Japan.

COLLECTIVISM VS INDIVIDUALISM

A lot of things that make Japan a collectivist country are the fact that they always try to consider and respect others. For example there are many rules that are set in order to not disturb others, such as not talking on the phone in the trains, walking on a certain side on the escalators or in the crowded streets, stations etc.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Furthermore, another aspect that makes Japan more collectivist than some Western countries is the fact that family is very important. In the Western society, people are encouraged to take every opportunity they can to grow and be successful without depending on anyone else. In Japan and also other Asian countries, people usually don't have such freedom, as the family has a large influence on what the person's future will look like. It is more common that they will be asked to take over the family business, pursue a certain career or care for a sick family member, although they might want to follow other dreams. Therefore, in this sense it is normal for people to do things for others and care for others, when in Europe people usually do what they want for themselves. They don't need to think of their parents' desires and don't usually live with their parents for a long time. Japanese people have been brought up with a mindset that it is normal to sacrifice their own happiness for their family's happiness.

Another different aspect is that Japanese people care a lot about their reputation and what image they give out to society. Most people want to go by their day being unnoticed and do not want to stand out, making sure they are not seen as "weird" by others. The positive side is that everyone is very polite and well behaved, and everyone tries to go by their day without disturbing anyone. Personally, I think that the negative side is that being different or pursuing their personal dreams and not what the family wants them to do is frowned upon. Since they have to impress someone or reach a certain level of success, they are brought up in an environment where they have less choice compared to people in Europe. This also shows how society and families can put a lot of pressure on the person, having high expectations.



*Oedo Onsen Monogatari,
Tokyo, 2017*

EDUCATION SYSTEM

This difference can also be seen in their educational methods in schools and other institutions. In Switzerland, I was fortunate enough to receive an education that always taught me how to think for myself and question things.

However in Japan they do not teach pupils how to think in that way and in the majority of schools they are never asked about their own opinion. Talking to other Japanese people, they told me how they never had to write essays, do presentations or were encouraged to ask questions and debate certain topics. The education relies mostly on their reading and understanding ability, thus they are used to agreeing to rules and other opinions without questioning them or trying to understand its reasons behind them. I think that this kind of education can be very counterproductive in terms of growth and development of a society. If everyone blindly follows the rules that are set without understanding its reasons, how will those rules ever change or improve.

HIGH VS LOW UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

I think that following a certain structure is very easy to do and comforting. This culture of liking rules and safety mirrors the high uncertainty avoidance as seen on Hofstede's graph. However high uncertainty avoidance and not trying to question rules, etc. shows high inflexibility within the society. I have noticed this inflexibility on many occasions, where people would prefer to do something in the way they were taught, instead of a new more effective way, because they are too scared of change. If asked why they are doing it the less effective way they would either answer with "because this is the rule" or "because we have always been doing it this way, so we know that it works", which in my opinion are both invalid reasons.

I think this is another reason why many things in Japan are still following old, less effective systems, such as endless administrative work that we all have to experience moving here. Their high fear of risk-taking can be seen through the fact that it is the norm to stay in the same company for over 30 years or through the low levels of innovation within companies. For more check this article: [BBC – "Can Japan reboot its anti-innovation start-up culture?", 2013.](#)

I have noticed that in that aspect Japan is more conservative, as people don't welcome change and have a hard time adjusting to new ways of thinking as much as behaving. This high uncertainty avoidance is a factor of the economy and population declining at the moment. However not all Japanese people have the same mindset of course and society is slowly evolving away from this conservative behavior. Companies are becoming less controlling of people's lives and more and more international people are immigrating, which also influences the society.

LOOKING FORWARD

I think that in everyday life little structures are definitely helpful and make life easier, however there are also other aspects that I think still need a lot of progress in Japan, such as sexism and environmental consciousness. Men are still considered higher than women and sexism in the work place is still common ([Kyodo, 2015](#)). Environmentally speaking I think that Japanese people have a hard time understanding the concept of being vegetarian/vegan and they are quite in denial about how much overfishing they do, ie. the bluefin tuna being severely endangered because of overfishing ([Renton, 2005](#)). However these aspects are also slowly improving, which is a good start.

Of course there are also many values that the West can learn from the East. One of the admirable things in Japan is that people are very respectful especially to the elderly and their families. I believe that respect is very important and that if considering others and compassion was taught more prominently in Europe, maybe the crime rates would be as low as in Japan. I definitely think that people should be able to pursue their individual dreams, but I also think that people should be more considerate of others and not only care about themselves. This is what I see as the best of both worlds.



Mori Museum, Tokyo, 2018

Finally I don't think there is any culture or society that is "perfect" in this sense and with every positive aspect, there will come a negative aspect with it. I have deeply enjoyed learning and understanding different cultures and it is very interesting to see the reason behind people's different behaviors and values. I am excited to continue to learn, understand and appreciate this different culture and its people further.