



Japan Year Mid-Term Report

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC)
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Contents

FOREWORDS

1. Acknowledgment
2. Background
3. Internship

WASTE MANAGEMENT

1. Switzerland
 - a. Key points
2. Japan
 - a. Key points
3. Conclusion

Forewords

Acknowledgment

First, I would like to thank again the SJCC for their support and for giving me this great opportunity to come to Japan for one year. I would like to thank as well the SCCIJ in Japan for their kindness and being so welcoming all the time, especially at the many events they organize.

Background

I first wanted to write a few words about my first 6 months here in Tokyo to potentially give some extra tips for future applicants of this scholarship when planning their year in Japan. To give some background information about myself, I am originally from Geneva and moved to Montreal after finishing High School to study Sustainable Development and East Asian Studies at McGill University. I have been very lucky to have spent 15 months in Japan already before being granted this scholarship, first as an exchange student at Sophia University and then doing an internship at the Swiss Embassy. When I applied for this scholarship then, I could already speak a little of Japanese (but mostly to get by in my everyday life) and was also a bit familiar with life in Tokyo (such as how to find an apartment, how the metro works, etc.). Japan is such an interesting place however; there is always something new to learn and discover that 15 months were hardly enough to understand it (and I still have so much to see and learn). I am thus very happy to be able to further explore this amazing country for another 12 months.

School

I started my 6 months at System Toyo Gaigo School in Tokyo. It was recommended to me by "Go Go Nihon", which is a great free service for foreigners interested to come study Japanese in Tokyo. They assist you with your application to various schools in Tokyo as well as with your visa application and I would highly recommend contacting them. Finding a school in Japan can be tricky but communicating with the school can be trickier, so this is a great help.

Forewords

Unfortunately, I can't say I was satisfied with my school and would not recommend it. It was their first year doing a partnership with Go Go Nihon, so I think they just did not really have any review of the school yet. System Toyo Gaigo is part of a larger educational group of "senmon gakko", or professional schools, so all the students here typically come from southeast asia, are under 20 years old, attend the program for the full 2 years in the hope to then join the professional schools that belong to the same educational group (so in that sense I was a bit of a "black sheep" studying there only for 6 months).

It was also somewhat hard to connect with the other students as we didn't really share much in common and had a large age difference, most of them also had "baito" (part-time jobs) and working very hard outside of school, so not a lot of free time to hang out. Being part of this "senmon gakko" system also, a good 5 days of class throughout the semester were cancelled and replaced by presentations by the professional schools, which as you can imagine, isn't of much interest if you're already graduated from university, it was thus a bit disappointing to have a full week of classes cancelled to have information sessions instead.

The classes themselves weren't bad, but very repetitive, focusing solely on grammar and kanji from the book with no conversation practice. I was quite disappointed to not have more oral practices but I feel like this is often the norm in many Japanese language schools as the JLPT does not have any conversation component. I thus went to language exchanges every week in order to practice my conversation outside of school and would strongly advise anyone to do so (I found my language exchange on meetup.com). When looking for your school, I personally would recommend a school that focuses more on conversation rather than JLPT training.

The thing that annoyed me the most with my school was that I was placed in a level way too easy for me, I had finished Genki II before attending this school (which is just above JLPT 4 level), and for some reason they forced me to attend a beginner class starting Minna no Nihongo 1. After much negotiations over 2-3 months, I was eventually changed to another level, which was this time way too hard and completely killed my motivation.

Forewords

It turns out this school does not have an intermediate level at all, right after finishing Minna no Nihongo 2, the students go straight into studying the JLPT 2, which made absolutely no sense to me. So I just went back to my original class level and studied things I already knew, thinking I would at least solidify my bases in Japanese. I thus felt like I did not learn anything much beside kanji.

My personal advice as well is that as much as everyone talks about the JLPT, I don't think this exam is actually a good representation of one's capacity in Japanese. I had some students in my beginner class successfully passing the JLPT 3 because they knew their kanji very well, but they were not able to simply introduce themselves in Japanese, nor understand the simple questions the teachers were asking them. I think having a good conversation level is way more useful than knowing so many kanji (which you can learn on your own quite easily too...); so again, I really can't stress enough how better I think it is to find a school with a strong conversation component.

Internship

I decided to look for my internship once I was in Japan as I thought it would be easier to network and do interviews from here directly. My advice is really to take advantage of all the great events the Swiss Embassy or SCCIJ offer, such as the Swiss Young Professional or Swiss Experiences. The Swiss Community in Japan isn't huge (or even the expat community in general, compared to other cities in Asia like Shanghai or Hong Kong), which I think makes it also very friendly. Everyone is genuinely nice and willing to help as much as they can, whether they are a student or the CEO of a company. I would recommend also to print some business cards (even if you are a student) because it shows that you are serious and know already some of the business manners in Japan - and obviously it is also easier for the people that you met to reach you afterwards. I was also advised by a friend who works in recruitment in Japan to prepare a resumé in Japanese to send along my resumé in English, a gesture that is much appreciated by the HR staff that tends to be predominantly Japanese, and even though if you don't necessarily plan to work completely in Japanese.

Forewords

Not necessarily having a “specialized” university background (such as engineering, or design, etc.), I was a bit nervous about finding an internship without having a very strong Japanese level. To find my internship I not only attended many networking events, but I also skimmed through so many websites like linkedin, lightened, and less professional ones like craigslist on a daily basis. I surprisingly ended up finding my internship through instagram. This small travel agency that I loved and followed for a couple of years were recruiting and posted about it on instagram, so I just applied and everything worked out! It turned out to be the best of both world because the work itself is in English but all meetings are conducted in Japanese, so I get to strengthen my oral skills.

With this I conclude my brief recap of the first 6 months and I continue now with my take on waste management in Switzerland and Japan.



Waste Management

Being born in the early 90s, I've been hearing (and fearing) for climate change for most of my life. Sustainability is the challenge of our generation, which is why I studied it at university and was particularly interested to make it the theme of this report. What can Switzerland and Japan learn from each other, what is currently being done in Japan and Switzerland towards sustainability and what more could we potentially do as individuals to reduce our impact on our planet?

Sustainability is about being able to sustain and maintain change in a balanced intertwined environment. It is thus key to have a holistic view and approach towards the various issues that we face. Since it is such a wide topic however, I will focus only on one aspect of sustainability that I believe is particularly interesting in Japan and Switzerland: waste management.

Switzerland

Let's start with some data. The current status of Switzerland in terms of waste management is a little bit counter-intuitive. Switzerland is one of the best country in Europe in terms of overall recycling - [actually ranking 5th in Europe in terms of the best recycler](#) - with about 54% of waste getting recycled, which is [almost double of the European average of 28% in 2015](#).

Switzerland is however among the biggest waste producer with about 700 kg of waste per capita per year, [as opposed to about 500 kg for its european counterparts and just 350 kg for Japan!](#) [Switzerland is also one of the countries in Europe that consume the most plastic](#), with about 100 kg of plastic consumed per year per capita - 75% of which comes from single use plastic packaging - and recycle the less plastic (about 25% v.s. 40% for Sweden for instance).

Switzerland imposes a ban on landfill since 2000, therefore the remaining non-recyclable waste must be incinerated, which accounts for about 45 % of the total waste. Incineration is also used to produce energy (heat and electricity) in a process called "waste to energy".

Waste Management

Switzerland has a “polluters pay” principle in most cantons for individuals (i.e. you pay a tax on your garbage bag). This principle is thus a great incentive for people to recycle and compost as much as they can. The issue however is that it puts the blame on consumers and their so-called “bad” trashing manners, rather than putting the blame on producers that use way too much packaging. In order to shift the blame and reduce waste, the European Union planned to ban single-use plastic by 2021, and even though [Switzerland as a whole does not plan to impose this ban](#), a few canton like [Geneva will ban single use plastic by 2020](#).

Switzerland is home to Nestlé, which is ranked as one of the biggest plastic polluters in the world along with Coca Cola and Pepsico; together being [responsible for as much as 14% of all plastic waste in the world!](#) Recently however, Nestlé pledged that by 2025 they would make 100% of their packaging either recyclable or reusable, thus giving a good example in the war against plastic on the corporate side.

On a daily basis, people in Switzerland seem more and more conscious about waste and how to make more educated choices when buying products, favoring either products without heavy plastic packaging or buying bulk products and bringing their own containers for instance. Buying in bulk has become increasingly accessible in some regions of Switzerland. In Geneva for instance, some supermarkets like Migros are following the trend and offer bulk alternative for nuts, rice and other cereals, customers can thus now really just shop for the exact quantity they need. Single-use plastic bags have also vanished a long time ago from our supermarkets in Switzerland, forcing consumers to bring their own bags when doing their groceries. Then,, the “flexitarian” (or semi-vegetarian) diet is gaining in popularity in Europe and Switzerland, with people eating meat only once a week, thus reducing their footprint on the planet. Some supermarkets even offer now some “insect steak” and more vegetarian options, which makes it very easy for consumers to adapt their diet towards something more environmentally friendly. These are all little steps and habits that people are increasingly taking that overall have a positive impact on the planet; it is trendy to be green!

Waste Management

Key points

1. Switzerland is good with recycling but still needs to reduce its overall waste and plastic to really set a good example. We need to consume less.
2. Some initiatives are happening to reduce plastic pollution both at the individual and corporate levels. Geneva and Nestlé for instance are banning single-use plastic in the near future.
3. People are increasingly concerned about the environment and are changing their habits to be more sustainable, adopting a more flexitarian diet or buying in bulk for instance.

Japan

Japan made tremendous change in its legislation during the 60s - 80s to reduce pollution as much as possible. Following the rapid economic expansion in Japan, pollution issues were a big concern in the cities especially. The air quality deteriorated, illegal landfill was common and some deadly diseases directly linked to pollution like the Itai-Itai and Minamata diseases started to appear. At that time, along with other initiatives to fight other pollution-issues, Tokyo called for a "[War Against Waste](#)" to educate people about the dangers of poor waste management and help them along with government organizations to change their habits towards more environmentally friendly practices. Through this, they successfully reduced their pollution levels, showing that when the government pass meaningful policies, the results are very positive and happen fast. Some years later, Japan went further and put in place their 3R strategy: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle", which imposed some very strict recycling rules to reduce waste as much as possible, especially landfill.

Still today, Japan's waste either is recycled, is incinerated or goes to landfill. However, being land scarce, Japan can no longer rely on landfill to store waste. Some solutions need to be found.

Waste Management

Data for waste management in Japan is almost impossible to find. One of the reasons being that the data isn't really centralized. Waste management is assigned to municipalities by the government without actually any clear or set structure and requirements, it is up to each municipalities to decide what they want to do. Some municipalities do the bear minimum, while other are over-achiever like the town of Kamikatsu, that set itself a "Zero Waste" target and currently has a 81% recycle rate.

The available national data for Japan however is as follow: for household waste that isn't recycled, [17% is dumped in landfills, and 83%](#) is incinerated. It is important to note however that about [10% of the waste incinerated remains in the form of ash](#), which will then either go to landfill with the non-burnable waste or will be upcycled for instance as paving blocks to build roads. Up until 2018, Japan (like many other western countries including Switzerland) was sending its plastic waste to China, until China refused to accept waste anymore. This obviously creates some issues for waste management in Japan, specially in light of the recent estimations that stated that if Japan continues to accumulate waste at the same pace, [all landfill in the country will be filled up by 2035](#). Japan thus has no choice than to urgently find alternatives to landfill.

For anyone living in Japan, [making sure you throw away the correct thing in the correct bin can be a nightmare](#). Between burnable, non-burnable, cans, PET bottles, milk cartons, paper, clothes, electronics, larger furniture and more, you get easily confused! You could also get fined if you don't follow the rules - and these rules are also different for every municipalities, including within Tokyo's 23 wards! And let's not get started how impossible it is to find garbage bins in the street, and yet there is not a single trash in the streets - not even a chewing-gum. As opposed to Swiss streets that are actually quite dirty. With such strict rules on where to put your trash, one would expect very high rate of recycling and yet, confusingly enough, the overall recycling rate in Japan is only about 20%, less than half of Switzerland's rate (a bit over 50% as mentioned earlier). There is thus obviously a problem somewhere, but with the lack of available data, it is hard to really point out where it comes from. The easiest solution could probably be stricter regulations from the government when they assign municipalities to take care of their waste management.

Waste Management

In terms of the current initiatives being made from the Government, Tokyo being home to the 2020 Olympics, decided to make medals made out only of recycle waste, such as phone parts that contain various precious metals. A great initiative to show the potential of upcycling. During the next G20 Summit in Osaka, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe planned to make the main focus of the event on ending micro-plastic pollution, which is a big concern for Japan at the moment, with an increasing rate of plastic pollution along the seashores of Japan and in the rivers. I witnessed this pollution myself strolling around the beach in Kanazawa (see picture right), I was really shocked at the amount of waste laying over kilometers along the beach. Most of the waste came from Japan but some of it also came all the way from Korea, for instance PET bottles with Korean written on it). Some people were cleaning the beach, but with so much waste it seemed a bit of a lost battle.



On a daily basis, I notice that there are way too much packaging in every stores, konbini and supermarkets. For instance, most vegetables are wrapped individually in plastic. The other day I stumbled upon individually wrapped potatoes, which left me somewhat concerned. Single-use plastic bags are also still the norm here, but a few supermarkets are adding a little fee if you need one, which is a positive step! Single-use chopsticks and wet tissues in restaurants generate also a lot of waste and could probably easily be replaced with reusable ones. I believe many easy fixes could be made to effectively reduce waste. If everyone takes little step, it makes a big difference overall.

There are more and more startups that aim at changing the habits of people, like "Just Smile" (www.just-smile.co), a Tokyo based startup that sells recyclable bamboo toothbrushes, or Ciclo (www.ciclo.jp), a magazine about sustainability that aims to educate people. The lack of greener habits in Japan really seem to be connected to a simple lack of awareness, which is something that could be easily fixed. History proved that when the government effectively educates its citizen about pollution issues, real change happens. There is no reason that all the great change made during the bubble economy cannot happen again today.

Waste Management

Key points

1. Japan's data on waste management lacks transparency and the numbers are confusing. Japan is advertised as a good recycling country, but then when looking at the national data, it is still far behind Switzerland.
2. Some initiatives are happening to reduce waste and the younger generation seem more conscious about environmental issues.
3. The government is trying to make efforts towards waste, especially plastic waste in the oceans.

Conclusion

Japan and Switzerland face similar challenges in terms of waste management. Being both land-scarce, they need to be very efficient about what to do with their waste.

In connection to plastics for instance, both Switzerland and Japan will have to find alternatives since China is not accepting their waste anymore. On the national level, neither Switzerland or Japan have any set regulations in place. Some cantons like Geneva are planning to ban plastic by 2020, and Japan is set to actively talk about plastic during the next G20 conference in Osaka.

Switzerland is a good recycler as opposed to Japan but overall individuals' waste is close to double of Japanese, so they could learn from each other on how to better recycle and how to consume less. Japan should be more transparent regarding its data on waste management, and impose maybe stricter rules on a national level rather than letting each municipality do as they please. Switzerland on the other hand should try to consume less overall and only use what is necessary.