

Midterm Report

Scholarship Fund

by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce



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Personal Timeline: My Journey to Japan

2017

- I visited Japan for the first time on a two-week trip, primarily exploring Tokyo. This experience sparked a deep fascination with Japanese culture and strengthened my desire to learn more about the country.

2018

- I returned to Japan for a two-month stay in Tokyo, which confirmed my decision to pursue a long-term life in Japan. This trip played a major role in shaping my future goals and influenced my decision to study tourism management.

2019-2022

- I attended the College of Professional Education and Training in Tourism Management in Switzerland, where I earned an Advanced Federal Diploma of Higher Education. This program provided me with a strong foundation in the tourism industry.

2021-2022

- I completed an internship at Panta Rhei PR, the mandate holder for the Japan National Tourism Organization in Switzerland. During this time, I gained valuable insights into Japan's tourism industry, which further deepened my connection to the country.

April 2023

- I arrived in Japan as part of the scholarship program and began studying Japanese at JSL. While I was excited to start this new chapter, the initial months were challenging due to unexpected health issues and the adjustment to a completely different environment.

May 2023

- Towards the end of May, classroom issues arose when my class was suddenly overcrowded with additional students. On May 25, the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce contacted JSL on my behalf to address the situation. Shortly after, the school made changes by splitting the class and adjusting the teaching arrangements. Although the issue was resolved, this experience was difficult for me to navigate.

January 2024

- I started my internship at TokudAw while continuing my studies at JSL. During the internship, I focused on travel planning and finding ways to attract European clients. This role helped me gain practical experience in Japan's tourism industry.

September 2024

- At the end of my studies at JSL, I signed a document (written in Japanese) that I didn't fully understand but was told was standard procedure. I participated in a small graduation ceremony where I received my diploma, marking the completion of my language studies.

October 2024

- While applying to colleges, I discovered that JSL had informed immigration that I had withdrawn from the school, which was untrue. This caused significant complications with my visa and college applications. Despite my attendance rate being 89%, the school painted a false picture of my time there, which felt deeply unfair.

2025

- To better align with the Japanese job market and ensure long-term career opportunities, I decided to enroll in a Japanese college. While my Swiss education is high-level, I realized it is not widely recognized by many companies in Japan. This step is essential for me to build the life I envision in Japan.

Introduction

From a young age, I've been fascinated by Japanese pop culture, which initially sparked my love for Japan. Whether it was through anime, manga, or video games, Japan felt like a distant yet captivating world I wanted to explore further. This childhood interest evolved into a desire to experience the country firsthand, both personally and professionally.

In addition to my love for Japanese culture, I believed that Japan and Switzerland share many values, such as precision, punctuality, and attention to detail. This belief gave me confidence that I could find common ground between both cultures. Despite these similarities, I knew there would be challenges in adapting to Japan's unique work culture and social norms, which differ from Switzerland's more informal and flexible systems.

My journey to Tokyo began in 2017 when I visited Japan for the first time. The two-week trip left a lasting impression on me, and I returned in 2018 for two months to explore more of Tokyo. After those experiences, I was certain that I wanted to live in Tokyo long-term. This was a major factor in my decision to study tourism management and pursue an internship at Panta Rhei PR, the mandate holder for the Japan National Tourism Organization in Switzerland. My work there deepened my connection to Japan's tourism industry and reinforced my desire to build a career in Japan.

My primary goals for this program were to improve my Japanese language skills, gain insight into the Japanese travel industry, and establish professional connections that could bridge the gap between Swiss and Japanese markets. I also aimed to develop personally by stepping out of my comfort zone and facing the challenges that come with living in a foreign country.

Before arriving, I expected the language barrier to be one of the main hurdles, especially in everyday interactions and professional environments. Additionally, I anticipated some difficulty adjusting to Japan's hierarchical and formal work environment, and I was prepared for the challenge of building a social network in a completely new cultural context.

Initial Adjustments

Upon my arrival in Tokyo, the first few weeks were more challenging than I had anticipated. Despite my enthusiasm and prior visits, settling into a new life came with difficulties, particularly due to unexpected health issues. In Switzerland, I was rarely ever sick, so it was quite a shock when I encountered persistent health problems in Japan. It seemed that my immune system, unused to the different strains of germs and viruses, struggled to cope with my new environment.

During my first few months, I had several bouts of severe colds, and I even contracted influenza multiple times. The situation was made worse by the frequent need for antibiotics, which weakened my immune system further. This led to a frustrating cycle of illness and recovery, which directly impacted my attendance rate at JSL. I found myself unable to attend classes regularly, something that was very strange for me given how consistently healthy I had been back in Switzerland. Missing classes not only slowed my academic progress but also made it harder to establish a routine and feel fully integrated into my new surroundings.

This experience was emotionally challenging, as I had to manage the isolation of being unwell in a foreign country without a strong support system in place. However, the staff at JSL were incredibly understanding and helped me navigate the healthcare system, often accompanying me to doctor's appointments. Their support was invaluable during this time, as I struggled not only with the language barrier but also with the complexities of the Japanese medical system.

Fortunately, over time, my body seemed to adjust to the new environment. After those initial months, my immune system gradually became stronger, and I haven't been sick for quite some time now. This improvement allowed me to focus more fully on my studies and social integration. Despite the setbacks, I managed to raise my attendance rate to 90%, which was a significant achievement for me given the challenges I had faced.

Socially, the initial isolation was another hurdle. Moving to a city like Tokyo without a strong network in place felt daunting, especially in the first two months. It took time to build friendships and develop a social circle. However, through school and social events, I gradually began connecting with both Japanese locals and people from different countries. These new relationships became the foundation of my life in Japan, and over time, I no longer felt like a visitor but a part of the community.

Looking back, the initial adjustments were tougher than expected, but they laid the groundwork for personal growth. From learning to navigate practical tasks in a foreign country to overcoming feelings of isolation and illness, these early experiences taught me resilience and shaped my ability to adapt to my new environment.

Social Integration

One of the most rewarding yet challenging aspects of my time in Japan has been building a social network and finding my place in the local community. While I did participate in cultural events organized by my language school, such as traditional tea ceremonies and local festivals, the majority of my closest friendships have developed outside of the classroom. At school, I met several wonderful people, including friends from Bangladesh, with whom I've built meaningful connections. However, many of my most significant relationships have formed through attending social events and gatherings around Tokyo.

For example, one of my closest Japanese friends I met during a social gathering in Shinjuku. It was a spontaneous encounter—he approached me out of the blue, and despite our language barriers (my Japanese was still basic, and his English wasn't fluent), we formed an immediate connection. Through him, I gained deep insight into the daily challenges young Japanese people face, such as the pressures of work, family expectations, and navigating relationships. Our friendship has had its ups and downs, but it has been an invaluable part of my experience in Japan, helping me not only to improve my language skills but also to better understand Japanese culture.

Another pivotal relationship has been with my best friend, who is originally from Portugal and has lived in Japan for 14 years. We met at a techno event, and while we mostly communicate in English, she introduced me to a broader social circle, many of whom are expatriates or long-term residents of Tokyo. Through her, I have built a strong support network that has been essential in helping me manage the challenges of living abroad. She has become an important figure in my life, offering guidance and emotional support through difficult times, and helping me feel more grounded in my life here.

In addition to social events, I have also been active in professional gatherings, such as those organized by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. I regularly attend the Young Professionals events, which I truly enjoy because they offer a unique opportunity to meet other Swiss people living in Tokyo and to speak in my native language. Given how rarely I get to speak German or Swiss German here, these events provide a comforting connection to home. However, I often catch myself mixing in English or Japanese words when I speak German, as I've become so accustomed to switching between languages daily.

These friendships and professional connections have made a significant impact on my social integration in Japan. They've provided me with emotional support, cultural understanding, and professional opportunities that I wouldn't have found otherwise. I've learned that relationships here often work differently from what I was used to in Switzerland, but the challenges have been outweighed by the rich experiences and lessons they bring.

Learning and Language Skills

When I first arrived in Japan, learning the language was one of the most significant challenges I faced. My language school, JSL, provided a solid foundation in Japanese, helping me improve my reading and writing skills, but I found myself struggling to learn the language through traditional methods. Classroom learning was valuable for grammar and vocabulary, but I often felt overwhelmed trying to retain the information without enough practical use.

Surprisingly, I made the most progress outside of the classroom, through weekly meetings with my Japanese friends. These casual interactions allowed me to practice what I had learned in a real-world setting, and I discovered that listening to native speakers and trying to respond, even when I made mistakes, was the best way to improve. Over time, my friends began to tell me how much my Japanese had improved since we first met. These conversations gave me the confidence to engage more fully with the language.

However, this also led to an interesting challenge: while my conversational Japanese became much stronger, I noticed that my business Japanese was lagging behind. I often have to be mindful not to use casual expressions in professional settings, which is something I still need to work on. Understanding the difference between casual and formal language in Japan is crucial, and I realize I still have a long way to go before I reach the level of fluency I aspire to.

One area where I particularly struggle is with kanji. At JSL, we didn't build up to kanji by learning radicals, but were instead given kanji characters to memorize. This method didn't work well for me, and I found myself unable to keep up with the school's approach to learning them. Recently, however, a friend recommended an app to help me study kanji, and I plan to use it to supplement my learning. I believe that a more structured, self-paced method will help me gain confidence in this area.

This experience reminded me of my early struggles with English. In school, I wasn't particularly strong in the language, and it wasn't until I began using English outside of class—engaging with people on social media, reading content, and playing games in English—that I truly became fluent. In a similar way, while the structured learning at my language school gave me the necessary basics, I've found that I learn languages better in informal settings, through real-world interaction and immersion.

In summary, learning Japanese has been a gradual process, with both classroom and social learning playing important roles. The school provided me with the essential knowledge, but it's my experiences outside of the classroom that have truly accelerated my progress. Despite the challenges, each step forward has made my life in Japan richer and more meaningful.

Internship at TokudAw

In January 2024, I began an internship at TokudAw, a company specializing in creating tailored travel experiences for visitors to Japan. This opportunity was particularly exciting for me, as it allowed me to combine my academic background in tourism management with hands-on experience in the Japanese travel industry. The internship offered me the chance to learn about Japan's unique approach to tourism while contributing my knowledge of European travel preferences.

During my time at TokudAw, I worked on designing custom travel itineraries for European clients, ensuring their experiences were immersive and culturally enriching. My responsibilities included identifying destinations and activities that would resonate with European visitors, such as nature-focused excursions, traditional Japanese accommodations, and culinary experiences. This required a deep understanding of cultural differences and travel expectations, which I developed further throughout the internship. Seeing how my contributions improved the travel plans and created memorable experiences for clients was highly rewarding.

In addition to itinerary design, I assisted in developing strategies to attract more European tourists to Japan. This involved researching market trends and analyzing how Japan's offerings could be presented in a way that appealed to European sensibilities. For instance, I focused on emphasizing aspects of Japanese culture that are particularly popular in Europe, such as onsen experiences, Japanese craftsmanship, and seasonal events like cherry blossom viewing. These tasks helped me better understand how to position Japan as an attractive destination for specific markets.

While the internship was incredibly rewarding, it also came with challenges. One of the most significant hurdles was navigating the professional environment while still improving my Japanese. Although I didn't directly communicate with Japanese colleagues, understanding certain materials and instructions occasionally required translation or additional effort. This experience underscored the importance of continuing to enhance my language skills, particularly in reading and understanding formal Japanese. However, these challenges also motivated me to push myself further in my language studies and adapt to new professional settings.

The internship at TokudAw provided me with invaluable insights into the Japanese tourism industry, particularly how companies balance traditional values with the needs of an international market. It also reaffirmed my commitment to building a long-term career in Japan. The experience solidified my belief that Japan's emphasis on quality and hospitality is a model that can inspire innovation in the global tourism sector.

Overall, my time at TokudAw was a formative and enriching experience. It not only strengthened my professional skills but also deepened my appreciation for Japan's unique approach to tourism. This internship confirmed for me that pursuing a career in Japan's tourism industry is the right path, and it gave me a clearer vision of how I can contribute to bridging Swiss and Japanese markets in the future.

Cultural Insights

Living in Japan has been an eye-opening experience, offering me a unique perspective on a culture that is both deeply traditional and highly modern. One of the first things I noticed was the emphasis on respect and harmony in daily life. From the way people greet each other to their interactions in public spaces, there is a strong sense of consideration for others. This is something I've come to admire and has encouraged me to be more mindful of my own behavior.

At the same time, I've learned that cultural norms in Japan can sometimes feel rigid compared to what I'm used to in Switzerland. For instance, social hierarchies and formalities play a significant role in both professional and personal interactions. Adapting to this has been a learning process, especially when navigating situations where subtle cues and unspoken rules carry a lot of meaning. While this has been challenging at times, it has also given me a deeper understanding of how Japanese society values structure and respect.

One cultural difference I've found fascinating is how relationships and communication styles differ from those in Switzerland. While Swiss people are also relatively indirect compared to Germans, this similarity can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, as neighboring countries often expect closer cultural alignment. I was surprised to find that Japanese culture shares this indirect communication style to an even greater degree. In Japan, there's often a strong hesitation to openly express feelings or opinions, far more than in Switzerland. This has taught me the importance of reading between the lines and being sensitive to nonverbal cues. It's also made me reflect on my own communication style and adapt to build stronger connections.

Another striking aspect of Japanese culture is the deep appreciation for beauty and aesthetics, evident in everything from traditional architecture to seasonal events like hanami (cherry blossom viewing). Experiencing these cultural highlights has enriched my time here and deepened my connection to the country.

Overall, living in Japan has not only broadened my perspective but also encouraged me to adapt and grow. While there are differences that can be challenging, they've also offered me valuable lessons in patience, understanding, and respect. I've come to see these cultural nuances as an integral part of my experience and a key reason why living in Japan has been so rewarding.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Reflecting on my journey in Japan so far, I am grateful for the immense growth I've experienced, both personally and professionally. The challenges I faced—adjusting to a new environment, overcoming language barriers, and navigating cultural differences—have pushed me out of my comfort zone and taught me resilience. From building a social network to gaining hands-on experience in the Japanese travel industry, every step has been a valuable lesson.

One of the most significant aspects of my time here has been the relationships I've formed. My Japanese and international friends have not only supported me but also given me unique insights into life in Japan, helping me to better understand and appreciate the culture. These connections have been instrumental in making Tokyo feel like home.

Professionally, my internship at TokudAw and my participation in events organized by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce have strengthened my understanding of Japan's work culture and its emphasis on precision, hierarchy, and hospitality. These experiences have shown me the importance of improving my business Japanese, which remains a key focus as I work toward advancing my career in Japan's competitive job market.

One of the biggest realizations I've had is the challenge of finding employment in Japan with a Swiss educational background. While my education in Switzerland is high-level, it is not widely recognized by many companies in Japan, which has made the job search more difficult than I anticipated. To address this, I have decided to enroll in a Japanese college to gain a Japanese education. I believe this step is essential to better align with the local job market and demonstrate my commitment to building a long-term life and career in Japan.

Looking ahead, I am committed to further enhancing my Japanese language skills, particularly in kanji and business communication, to reach a level of fluency that will allow me to thrive in a professional environment. I also plan to continue building my professional network, as I believe that fostering strong connections between Swiss and Japanese organizations can lead to meaningful opportunities for collaboration.

On a personal level, I aim to maintain the friendships and support systems I've developed here, as they are vital to my well-being and sense of belonging. I also look forward to continuing to explore Japan's rich culture and traditions, deepening my appreciation for the country and its people.

In conclusion, this scholarship program has been a transformative experience, providing me with the tools and opportunities to grow in ways I couldn't have imagined. While there are still challenges to overcome, I am excited about the future and confident that the lessons I've learned will guide me toward achieving my goals in Japan.

Appendices: Challenges with my Language School

While my time in Japan has been transformative, one significant source of unnecessary challenges has been my language school, JSL. Unlike other scholarship holders, I attended language school for an extended period, which was due to two main reasons. First, I recognized that my Japanese level was lower compared to other scholarship recipients, and I felt it was crucial to invest more time in improving my language skills. Second, I completed my internship simultaneously with my extended studies because my company could not provide me with a working visa.

Initially, JSL informed me that my course would end in September 2024, and at the end of my studies that month, they asked me to sign a document. The document was entirely in Japanese, and although I could not fully understand it, they assured me it was standard procedure. I signed it in good faith and even participated in a small graduation ceremony where I was given my diploma. However, when I later applied to various colleges, I discovered that JSL had informed the immigration office that I had withdrawn from the school—a claim that was entirely untrue.

During this time, I was consulting with a lawyer to ensure everything I was doing complied with Japanese immigration laws. Despite my lawyer's attempts to contact JSL for clarification, the school refused to provide the necessary information. Later, when my prospective college contacted JSL, they were told that I was a problematic student who caused trouble and had refused to attend classes—claims that were both baseless and defamatory. My attendance rate was 89%, which exceeds the minimum requirement set by immigration, and while I did have health issues in the first few months, I made every effort to maintain good attendance and comply with school rules.

I suspect that this behavior may stem from an issue that occurred early in my time at JSL. After two months of classes, my cohort was abruptly moved to a smaller classroom, where we were combined with 14 additional students from Nepal, resulting in an overcrowded and chaotic learning environment. The classroom was so cramped that three students had to share one desk, and the teacher was unable to provide adequate instruction due to the group's varying skill levels.

When I raised this issue with the school, they were unresponsive, so I reached out to the Swiss-Japanese Scholarship Initiative (SSJI). SSJI intervened, contacting the school and urging them to address the problem. Following this, JSL split the class into two groups, with one teacher initially rotating between classrooms until another teacher was hired. While the situation improved, I believe this intervention may have caused the school to harbor a grudge against me, potentially influencing their later actions.

This experience has been both frustrating and disheartening. Despite my efforts to follow the rules and maintain a positive relationship with the school, I feel that their actions have unnecessarily complicated my ability to stay in Japan and pursue my goals. It is my hope that future students will not encounter similar difficulties and that better systems can be put in place to ensure fair treatment and clear communication.