

”Year in Japan” Scholarship Program
Swiss-Japanese Scholarship Fund

Midterm Report

Powered by
Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC)
and Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (SCCIJ)

Written by
Nicolas Zurbuchen

Enabled by
Ms Jacqueline Tschumi
Chairperson Scholarship Fund @ SJCC, Switzerland

With the support of
Mr Luca Orduña
Head of Scholarship Subcommittee @ SCCIJ, Japan

Nagoya, July 26, 2025

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Kappelergasse 15, 8001 Zurich
+41 (0)44 381 09 50 / info@sjcc.ch / www.sjcc.ch

Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan
Burex Kojimachi 209, 3-5-2 Kojimachi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0083
+81 (0)3 6256 9012 / info@sccij.jp / www.sccij.jp

Preface

Today marks the one-year anniversary of my arrival in Japan, on July 26, 2024. And what a journey it has been. As I reflect on this important milestone, I am reminded of how much has happened, how much I have learned, and how far I have come, both linguistically and personally.

As part of the conditions of the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC) Scholarship Program, recipients are asked to submit a midterm report documenting the first part of their year in Japan. The goal is to provide an overview of our experiences so far and reflect on both the preparation and integration process.

Throughout the following chapters, I have chosen to speak in the first person to offer a direct and honest account of my experience. I have done my best to remain precise and concrete, detailing not only what I did but also how I felt and what I learned along the way. At the same time, I have included general information and contextual explanations wherever I felt they could add value, whether for future scholarship recipients, long-term visitors to Japan, or anyone curious about the process of relocating and adapting to life here.

I hope this report serves as both a personal record and a practical resource. Writing it allowed me to take a step back and reflect on everything that has happened so far, what went well, what was unexpected, and what I would do differently.

Nicolas Zurbuchen
Nagoya, July 26, 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC) for awarding me this scholarship and supporting my journey to Japan. Their financial and administrative support made this experience possible, and I am especially thankful for the trust they placed in my long-term vision.

A special thanks goes to Ms. Jacqueline Tschumi, Chairperson of the SJCC Scholarship Fund, for her kind support and flexibility throughout the process, including the approval of my extended study period. I also extend my appreciation to Mr. Luca Orduña of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (SCCIJ) Scholarship Subcommittee for his thoughtful involvement during the interview stage and his encouraging presence throughout.

I would also like to thank the team at GenkiJACS Nagoya, whose professionalism and welcoming environment provided the foundation for my language studies in Japan. I asked countless questions throughout my time there, and they always responded with patience and kindness.

A sincere thank you goes to my family and friends for their unwavering support, especially for helping manage essential administrative matters in Switzerland, such as mail redirection and logistical coordination. Their help made my transition to Japan much smoother.

I would like to extend a special and heartfelt thank you to my father, whose passion for Japan and unwavering curiosity helped spark my own interest and ultimately led me here. His values and encouragement continue to guide me throughout this journey.

Finally, I am grateful to the many individuals such as teachers, real estate agents, housemates, fellow students who contributed to making my integration into Japanese life easier. Each of them played a role, big or small, in helping me settle into this new chapter with confidence.

Nicolas Zurbuchen
Nagoya, July 26, 2025

Abstract

This report provides a chronological overview of my first year in Japan, covering the main steps involved in preparing for the move, settling in, and adapting to daily life. It begins with the preparations made in Switzerland, including selecting a language school, applying for a visa, and completing necessary administrative procedures. The following chapter describes my arrival and first weeks in Japan, focusing on topics such as residence registration, housing, finances, and healthcare.

The report also covers broader aspects of life in Japan, such as language studies, social integration, and job hunting. It reflects on the challenges of learning Japanese, building a local network, and navigating the job market as a foreigner. One chapter is dedicated to user interface design in Japan, offering a personal perspective on how cultural factors influence digital products and services.

The final section shares practical advice and reflects on what I would do differently if I were to start again. The aim throughout is to offer both a detailed record of my experience and helpful insights for others considering a similar path.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Scholarship Application	2
1.2	Scope of the Stay	2
2	Preparation in Switzerland	3
2.1	Language School Selection	3
2.2	Language School Application	4
2.3	Visa Application Procedure	5
2.4	Deregistration Formalities	5
2.4.1	Residence Deregistration	5
2.4.2	Healthcare	6
2.4.3	Pension System	6
2.4.4	Banking and Finance	7
2.4.5	Army	7
2.4.6	Miscellaneous Matters	8
3	Settling in Japan	9
3.1	Arrival and Immigration	9
3.2	Mobile Phone and Internet	9
3.3	Accommodation and Housing	10
3.4	Residence Registration and Official Matters	11
3.5	Banking and Finances	12
3.6	Transport	13
3.7	Registering with the Swiss Embassy	14
3.8	Digital Setup and Useful Applications	14
4	Living in Japan	16
4.1	Japanese Studies	16
4.1.1	School Life	16
4.1.2	Language Learning Experience	18
4.2	Social Integration	19
4.3	Job Hunting	20
5	User Interface in Japan	23
5.1	Cultural Roots of Interface Design	23
5.1.1	Holistic Thinking and Visual Density	24
5.1.2	Stability Over Simplicity	24

5.2	Technical and Design Constraints	25
5.2.1	Typography Limitations	26
5.2.2	Legacy Infrastructure	27
5.3	Case Study: Yahoo! Japan vs. Yahoo.com	28
5.4	Evolution of Japanese UI	30
5.5	Final Thoughts	30
6	Conclusion	31
6.1	Advice and Tips	31
6.2	Tweaks and Fixes	32

Chapter 1

Introduction

My interest in Japan began at a very early age, largely influenced by my father, who has long been passionate about traditional Japanese culture. As a result, I grew up in an environment where Japan was present in small but meaningful ways, such as occasionally having homemade sushi and seeing how my father had decorated a room in our home in a traditional Japanese style with tatami, shoji screens, and a kotatsu.

Throughout my childhood in Switzerland, our family also had opportunities to interact with Japanese friends. They often visited us and brought souvenirs, which further sparked my curiosity about the culture. Over time, this interest gradually grew, not only through my father's influence but also through my own exposure to elements of Japanese pop culture. Similar to many children of my generation, I enjoyed collecting Pokémon cards and playing games on PlayStation and Nintendo consoles, which introduced me to another side of Japan's culture.

At the age of 19, I had the opportunity to travel to Japan for the first time, together with my father and sister. We spent two weeks visiting different parts of the country, and it was during this trip that my interest in Japan developed into something much more concrete. I was especially impressed by the way people behaved in public life and by the variety of cultural and natural experiences, from ancient shrines to modern cities like Tokyo. This visit left a strong impression on me and marked the moment when I first thought seriously about living in Japan someday.

Over the following ten years, I returned to Japan several times. These trips allowed me to explore the country more extensively, from the wilderness of Hokkaido in the north to the beaches of Okinawa in the south. Each journey strengthened my desire to one day live in Japan. However, during that period, no suitable opportunity arose to pursue this goal in a long-term and structured way until 2024.

The previous year, I learned about the scholarship program¹ offered by the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC) through a Swiss friend of my father who had previously lived in Japan. I saw it as a unique and valuable opportunity to finally take the step I had been considering for so long. After being selected, I was able to move to Japan in July 2024 and begin this new chapter of my life.

¹See <https://www.sjcc.ch/scholarship-fund/introduction>. Accessed July 26, 2025

1.1 Scholarship Application

Before diving into the concrete steps involved in preparing for my move to Japan, I will describe the application process for the scholarship offered by the SJCC.

The first step was to ensure that I met the eligibility criteria, such as the age limit, academic background, and sufficient knowledge of the Japanese language, as outlined in the official scholarship guidelines. As I was compliant, I followed through with the preparation of several documents, including a detailed plan of the intended stay, references, and copies of certificates. I dedicated significant time to clearly outlining not only my motivation but also my long-term interest in Japanese language and culture.

Following the initial screening of documents, I was invited to an in-person interview in Bern, where I had the opportunity to meet Ms. Jacqueline Tschumi, the newly appointed Chairperson SJCC Scholarship Fund, as well as Mr. Philipp Saurer, who was in the process of handing over the role. It was a valuable and engaging discussion, and I appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with those overseeing the program.

After successfully completing the first round, I was invited to a second interview, this time held online. This panel included Ms. Jacqueline Tschumi once again, along with Dr. Wieland Noetzold, SJCC Treasurer, and two members of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (SCCIJ) Scholarship Subcommittee: Ms. Naoko Koyama and Mr. Luca Orduña. It was both an insightful and encouraging conversation, giving me a deeper understanding of the expectations behind the scholarship and the people involved in its administration.

When I received the confirmation of my acceptance, I was very pleased and thankful. The scholarship not only provided essential financial support but also gave my plan a clear and structured framework. It marked the start of a new chapter and made it possible for me to move forward with confidence.

1.2 Scope of the Stay

While the scholarship program is typically designed to support a one-year experience combining language studies and an internship, my personal objective extended beyond this structure. From the beginning, my plan was to stay in Japan for several years. This long-term perspective shaped both the way I approached the scholarship application and the practical decisions I made during the preparation phase.

With that in mind, I wanted to begin by dedicating a full year to intensive Japanese study before moving on to the work experience component. I discussed this plan with Ms. Jacqueline Tschumi and received her acknowledgement to proceed accordingly. However, as this extension fell outside the official scholarship structure, I committed to personally covering the additional costs involved.

Chapter 2

Preparation in Switzerland

Before moving to Japan, I undertook a number of important steps in Switzerland to ensure a smooth and sustainable transition. From administrative formalities such as deregistration and pension decisions to financial planning and visa procedures, each task was approached with the goal of making my relocation as seamless as possible. The following sections detail the most significant of these preparations.

2.1 Language School Selection

The first important step was to choose a language school in Japan. This was not a straightforward task, as there are several important factors to consider when evaluating the many available options (over 800 nationwide):

- Program Type: Schools vary widely in focus. Some specialize in university entrance preparation, others on job-hunting and business Japanese, while some offer short-term courses centered on cultural experiences or tourism.
- Visa Sponsorship: Not all institutions provide student visa support. For long-term studies, it is essential to choose a school that is certified to sponsor visas, especially when planning to stay for more than three months.
- Class Size and Teaching Style: Some schools adopt a cram-school model with larger classes (up to 20 students), while others prioritize small-group instruction (around 8–10 students), which allows for more interaction. This difference significantly impacts both the learning experience and tuition cost.
- Tuition and Cost Structure: While prices vary depending on class size and teaching intensity, schools targeting long-term international students with visa support generally fall within a similar price range.
- Accommodation Support: Many schools assist with housing arrangements, offering options such as share houses, host families, or private apartments. This can ease the transition, particularly for first-time visitors to Japan.
- Location: The city or region where the school is located affects both lifestyle and post-study opportunities. Each location has a different pace of life, access to events, and professional or cultural networks.

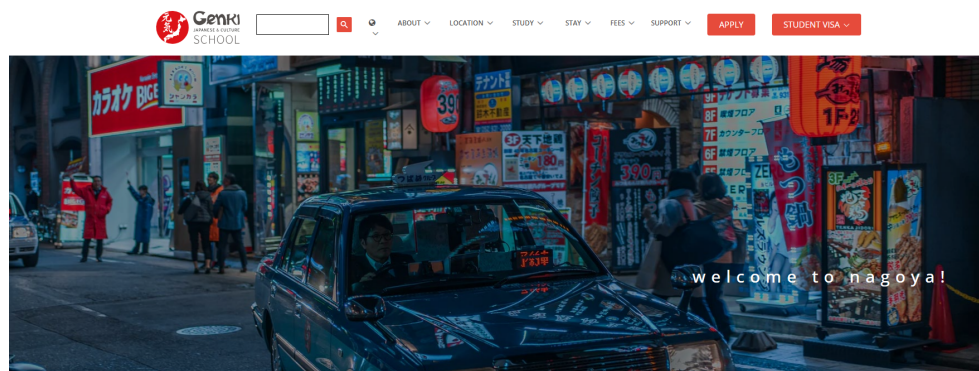


Figure 2.1: GenkiJACS Nagoya Homepage

With these criteria in mind, my main objective was to find a school that emphasized quality teaching and a serious, structured approach to learning. I ultimately chose GenkiJACS¹ (Figure 2.1), a well-regarded language school recommended by a relative who had studied there. GenkiJACS operates in five cities across Japan, but only its Fukuoka and Nagoya campuses offer student visa sponsorship for year-long programs.

I opted for the Nagoya location, as it offered both flexibility in travel, due to its central location, and access to job opportunities in a city known for its industrial and business activity. While the school offers support with housing arrangements, I chose to search for my own accommodation independently.

2.2 Language School Application

Once I had selected my language school, the next step was to complete the application process. GenkiJACS provides a user-friendly online platform where prospective students can indicate their preferred location, intended study duration, and desired start date. Based on this information, the system automatically generates a tuition estimate, which in my case amounted to approximately 990,000 yen for a one-year program.

After submitting the application, I was asked to complete a placement test. The goal of this assessment was to evaluate my current level of Japanese in order to assign me to the most appropriate class. The test focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary. In addition, I participated in a short Zoom interview with a teacher from the school to evaluate my speaking and listening ability.

These steps helped ensure that I would be placed in a class matching both my proficiency level and learning objectives. Thanks to the combination of written and spoken evaluation, I felt confident that the program would start at the right level for me and allow for steady progress throughout the year.

¹See <https://www.genkijacs.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

2.3 Visa Application Procedure

Once I received confirmation of my enrollment at the language school, one of the most important administrative steps was to apply for a student visa. Fortunately, most language schools in Japan support their international students through this process by handling communication with the immigration office and providing translated instructions. This greatly simplifies what would otherwise be a complex and bureaucratic task, especially for those not proficient in Japanese.

Despite this support, the visa application process still requires the applicant to submit a significant amount of personal information, which some may feel is excessive. Among the documents requested was a detailed academic history, listing all schools attended and major subjects studied from primary school through university. I was also required to provide information about my previous experience with the Japanese language, including whether I had studied it before, how many times I had visited Japan, and the exact dates of those visits. A motivation letter explaining the purpose of my stay was also required. Fortunately, the school used a platform called SpeedVisa² to manage the visa application, which was quite convenient. It allowed me to upload the required documents and track the status of the application in one place.

Once all the necessary documents were submitted, the school compiled the application and submitted it to the Japanese Immigration Bureau on my behalf. The review period can take up to three months. If the application is approved, the applicant receives a Certificate of Eligibility (CoE), which is a prerequisite for obtaining the student visa itself. In my case, it took two months before receiving the CoE.

With the CoE in hand, the next step was to apply for the visa at the appropriate Japanese embassy or consulate in Switzerland. There are three locations in Switzerland that handle visa applications: Bern, Geneva, and Zürich. Each is responsible for specific cantons. As I am from the canton of Vaud, I had to apply through the consulate in Geneva. The visa application at the consulate involved two visits. During the first, I submitted the CoE and my passport, which the consulate retained for approximately one week in order to process the visa. After that, I returned to collect my passport, now containing the visa. This visa includes a three-month window during which I needed to enter Japan, after which the formal residence procedures continue on arrival.

2.4 Deregistration Formalities

Preparing for a long-term stay in Japan required me to complete several important administrative steps in Switzerland. Since I was planning to be away for an extended period, I needed to formally end or adjust various legal and financial obligations. The following subsections outline the key steps I undertook before my departure.

2.4.1 Residence Deregistration

The first step I took was to officially deregister my place of residence with my local municipal office. This is a mandatory process for anyone leaving Switzerland for an ex-

²See <https://lp.s-visa.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

tended time, and it serves as the foundation for many other formalities, such as cancelling health insurance or adjusting tax obligations.

In my municipality, I was allowed to complete the deregistration up to one month before my departure. The procedure was fairly straightforward: I informed the authorities of the country I would be moving to, and in return, I received an official deregistration certificate, which was then used as proof when completing other formalities.

2.4.2 Healthcare

The next step I took was to deregister from the Swiss healthcare system. Since all residents in Switzerland are legally required to have basic health insurance and pay monthly premiums, this obligation can be suspended only by providing proof of departure from the country. I submitted an exemption request along with my official deregistration certificate to my insurance provider, which allowed me to stop paying premiums during my time abroad. This suspension is generally accepted for students staying temporarily in countries that offer their own healthcare systems, Japan being one of them.

In addition to the basic plan, I also held complementary health insurance in Switzerland. These plans cover treatments not included in standard coverage, but they can be more difficult to rejoin later due to medical screening requirements. To avoid losing access to this coverage in the future, I chose to keep the policy on hold by paying a reduced monthly premium. This allowed me to maintain the right to reactivate full coverage upon returning to Switzerland without needing a new medical evaluation.

2.4.3 Pension System

Preparing for a long-term stay in Japan also required me to evaluate what to do with my Swiss pension contributions. Switzerland's pension system is divided into three pillars, each with its own rules when moving abroad, especially to countries like Japan that do not have a bilateral social security agreement with Switzerland. The following describes how I handled each pillar.

First Pillar (AHV/AVS – State Pension)

When it came to the first mandatory pillar, there wasn't much to arrange, as contributions stopped automatically and the funds cannot be accessed before retirement. However, I learned that it is possible to keep contributing voluntarily³ to the first pillar, provided that the application is submitted within one year of deregistration. This could help avoid gaps in contribution years and improve future retirement benefits. While I have not applied yet, I am currently considering enrolling in this voluntary scheme.

Second Pillar (BVG/LPP – Occupational Pension)

In contrast to the first pillar, the second one comes with various possibilities. Once I officially left Switzerland, I had the option to withdraw the full amount since Japan does not have a pension agreement with Switzerland. However, this withdrawal is subject

³See <https://www.zas.admin.ch/zas/en/home/voluntary-oasi-di.html>. Accessed July 26, 2025

to taxation, which varies depending on the canton where the pension is held.

To keep my options open, I decided not to withdraw the funds and instead left them in a vested benefits account. This allows me to defer the withdrawal until a later time, possibly after transferring them to a lower-tax canton, which could reduce the tax burden.

Third Pillar (Private Pension / Pillar 3a)

I had also contributed to the third pillar, both through a bank-based account and an insurance-based plan. After moving to Japan, I was no longer eligible to contribute to these accounts, as third pillar contributions are only permitted for Swiss residents.

The bank-based account required no action on my part, so I left it as is. The insurance-based plan, however, involved monthly payments that could not continue indefinitely from abroad. While there was an option to temporarily pause the payments, this wasn't sustainable over the long term. I ultimately decided to cancel those payments, which unfortunately reduced the policy's projected final return.

2.4.4 Banking and Finance

Before leaving Switzerland, I took steps to review and adjust my banking setup. I began by informing my bank of my upcoming move and checking whether I could maintain my accounts while residing abroad. Traditional banks usually offer services for clients living overseas, but these often come with high maintenance fees, typically around CHF 300 per year. After evaluating the options, I decided to retain my account for the time being, as it still served several practical purposes during the transition.

I also looked into other financial services to help manage everyday expenses in Japan. Many daily transactions in Japan are still conducted in cash, but having access to a cost-efficient international card is essential. To prepare for this, I opened a Revolut account, which allowed me to hold multiple currencies, benefit from competitive exchange rates, and manage transfers between my Swiss and Japanese accounts with ease. This setup greatly simplified my financial operations abroad and helped reduce unnecessary fees.

Additionally, I reviewed my accounts with neobanks like Yuh and Neon, which generally do not support clients once they are no longer Swiss residents. As a result, I planned to phase out my use of these services and ensure my funds were accessible through more flexible platforms.

2.4.5 Army

As part of my preparation for moving to Japan, I also had to address my military obligations as a Swiss citizen. Although I had previously been granted an official exemption from military service, this exemption comes with a financial responsibility: the payment of a substitute tax each year until the age of 31.

At the time of my departure, I still had two remaining payments to make. Since my move abroad was indefinite, I contacted the relevant military authority and submitted the necessary form explaining the nature and expected duration of my stay. Because I was going abroad for study purposes, I was eligible for the minimum rate of CHF 400 per year. I was asked to settle both remaining years in a single payment, which I did before leaving Switzerland.

It is important to note that the amount and timing of this tax can vary depending on the reason for leaving. For example, individuals working abroad are required to submit proof of income and may be charged a higher amount based on their earnings. In some short-term cases, the payment may be deferred until the person returns to Switzerland.

For those who still have military service days remaining, leaving the country without prior approval can lead to serious consequences. A formal request must be submitted to postpone or suspend service, and failing to do so may result in being classified as non-compliant, potentially leading to fines or legal penalties. This is why I made sure to handle all necessary formalities well in advance of my departure.

2.4.6 Miscellaneous Matters

Alongside the major administrative tasks, I also had to take care of several smaller but practical matters. These included keeping access to my Swiss mobile number, managing postal correspondence, and cancelling unnecessary subscriptions.

Mobile Phone Access

Since my Swiss phone number was linked to various essential services such as banking apps, two-factor authentication, and government platforms, I needed a way to retain access to it without continuing a full mobile subscription. To solve this, I switched to a prepaid SIM card with my existing provider. This option eliminated monthly fees while still allowing me to receive calls and texts. To keep the number active, I just need to send an SMS every few months.

Postal Redirection

For mail, I arranged with a family member to receive everything sent to my Swiss address. They open letters when needed and forward important documents to me digitally. This setup has worked well and avoided the complications and fees of international forwarding. Although Swiss Post does offer official redirection services to foreign addresses, they come with limitations, especially for packages or registered mail, which made the personal solution more convenient in my case.

Subscriptions and Services to Cancel

Before leaving, I also did a cleanup of all my active subscriptions. I cancelled things like local gym memberships, public transport passes, and some streaming platforms that I wouldn't be using in Japan. Doing this early helped reduce monthly costs and made sure I didn't forget anything once abroad.

Chapter 3

Settling in Japan

This chapter outlines the main administrative and logistical steps I undertook upon arriving in Japan to establish a stable foundation for daily life. It covers essential procedures such as airport immigration formalities, acquiring a phone number, registering with the local city office, enrolling in national health insurance and the pension system, opening a bank account, securing accommodation, and registering with the Swiss embassy. These tasks were necessary to ensure legal compliance, access to services, and a smooth transition into long-term life in Japan.

3.1 Arrival and Immigration

Upon arrival at the airport in Japan, the first administrative procedure began at immigration control. I had to make sure to queue at the section designated for issuing residence cards. There, I presented my passport and Certificate of Eligibility (CoE).

During the process, I was asked whether I intended to work part-time during my stay. Although I did not have a concrete plan at that point, I answered yes, as this grants immediate permission to engage in activities outside the scope of a student visa, specifically, part-time work of up to 28 hours per week. As a result, a stamp was placed on the back of my residence card authorizing this (Figure 3.1).

While this permission can be obtained later by visiting a local immigration office, I recommend to request it directly at the airport, as doing so avoids additional paperwork and time-consuming appointments later. Other than this, no further procedures were required at the airport, and I was able to proceed directly to baggage claim.

3.2 Mobile Phone and Internet

One of the first things I had to take care of after arriving in Japan was getting a local mobile phone number. This step is essential, as a Japanese number is required for nearly all types of administrative paperwork and service registrations.

To arrange this, I visited a branch of GEO Mobile¹, one of the many stores in Japan that offer SIM contracts. Other common options include large retailers like Bic Camera

¹See <https://geo-mobile.jp> Accessed July 26, 2025

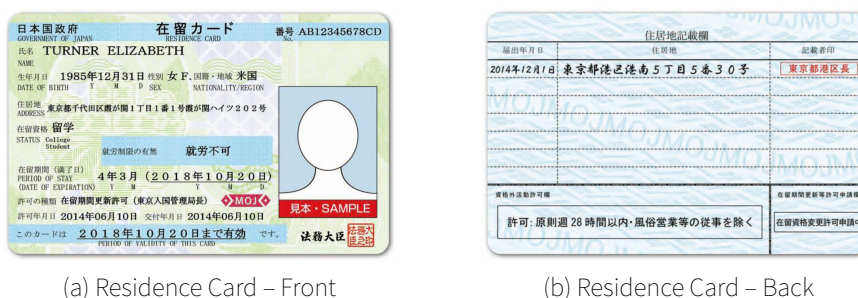


Figure 3.1: Sample of the official residency card in Japan.

and Yodobashi Camera. To sign up, I had to present my residence card, passport, and a credit card for monthly payments.

Choosing a plan was surprisingly time-consuming, as the number of available options felt overwhelming. I conducted a comprehensive comparison of mobile plans and eventually decided to go with HIS Mobile², which offered one of the most affordable plans at the time: 7 GB of data per month for 990 yen. While unlimited data is common in Switzerland, it is much less so in Japan and tends to be quite expensive.

Fortunately, my phone supports dual SIM functionality. This has made things much easier, as I can use my Japanese number for daily life while keeping my Swiss number active in the background to receive verification codes and important messages.

3.3 Accommodation and Housing

Securing accommodation in Japan turned out to be more complex than I had initially expected. My original plan was to stay in a hotel for the first few weeks and then find a private apartment once I had received my residence card and was physically in the country. Before arriving, I had already contacted a real estate agency³ known for supporting foreigners, and I was informed that it would be possible to find an apartment relatively quickly. Based on this, I assumed that a short hotel stay would be sufficient.

However, upon arrival, I encountered an unexpected complication: I was required to submit a valid residential address to my language school within two weeks of starting classes. Hotel addresses are not accepted for official registration purposes, and to apply for a long-term apartment, one must already have a valid address in Japan. This created a circular problem, which is not uncommon for newcomers.

Thanks to the support of the school, I was able to move into a share house⁴ on short notice. I stayed there for about a month and a half, which gave me enough time to look for a more permanent place to live.

The real estate agency I had contacted had its own listings, but none matched what

²See <https://his-mobile.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

³See <https://www.rise-property.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁴See <https://share-leaf.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025



Figure 3.2: Rented appartement's floor plan

I was looking for. I shared with the agent the area and type of apartment I was interested in, and we visited several properties together. We also used the well-known Japanese housing website Suumo⁵, which aggregates rental listings from various agencies. Through this, we were able to find an apartment that met my needs and was within a reasonable price range (Figure 3.2).

The application process involved filling out several documents, setting up a Japanese bank account for automatic rent transfers, and being approved by a guarantor company, which is commonly required for any resident in Japan. Since I was a student without a regular income, my first application was declined. Fortunately, a second attempt was successful. My real estate agent, who spoke English, guided me through the entire process and also helped contact the gas and electricity companies to set up utilities. Without this kind of support, navigating the Japanese rental process would have been extremely difficult, as all paperwork and communication are conducted in Japanese.

Through conversations with my real estate agent, I also became aware of the challenges that many foreigners face when looking for housing. Property owners are often hesitant to rent to non-Japanese tenants, largely due to concerns about language barriers and the assumption that foreigners might not follow social norms or could disturb the community. Although discrimination based on nationality is not permitted by law, it remains a common practice in subtle forms, with various excuses sometimes used to reject applications. In my case, I was fortunate to find an apartment in a foreigner-friendly building, and I have always had positive interactions with the landlord.

3.4 Residence Registration and Official Matters

Once I had secured a valid residential address and phone number, I was able to complete several important administrative procedures at the local ward office. This marked the beginning of my formal registration as a resident in Japan and was essential for gaining access to healthcare and public services.

The first step was to declare my address. This is a mandatory procedure for all for-

⁵See <https://suumo.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025

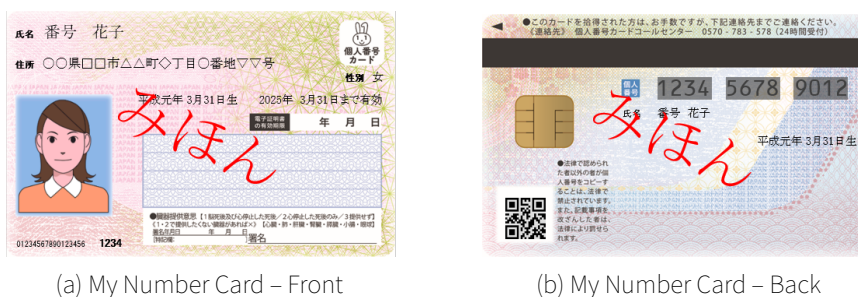


Figure 3.3: Sample of the official "My Number Card" card.

eight residents and must be completed within 14 days of moving into a new residence, or when changing addresses. During this visit, the staff updated the back of my residence card by printing my registered address on it, which serves as official proof of residence.

After completing this, I proceeded to the health insurance and pension counters within the same ward office. I was enrolled in the National Health Insurance system, and a few weeks later, I received my insurance card along with the first payment slips. The monthly cost was just under 2,000 yen and I decided to pay the full amount upfront for the entire insured period so I wouldn't have to think about it again. Health insurance is mandatory for all residents in Japan and covers 70% of most medical expenses.

Regarding the National Pension System, as a student temporarily residing in Japan, I was eligible for an exemption. While it is possible to contribute voluntarily, particularly for those planning to stay long-term, I opted to request a full exemption, which only required a simple declaration at the counter.

Included with the pension and insurance documentation, I also received my "My Number" notification. The "My Number Card" is a personal identification number assigned to every resident in Japan and is used for various administrative procedures, such as taxes and certain online services. After receiving my notification, I registered through the official app and later returned to the ward office to complete the final steps. Once the process was finalized, I received my physical "My Number Card" (Figure 3.3).

3.5 Banking and Finances

I continued on by opening a Japanese bank account, although this is not strictly necessary as it is mostly used to get paid from part-time jobs. However, in my case, it was required in order to receive scholarship funds and set up monthly rent payments via direct debit. For students or individuals without full-time employment or corporate sponsorship, options for opening a bank account are limited, particularly during the first six months of residency, when foreign nationals are still classified under a provisional status.

Given these constraints, the only option was Japan Post Bank⁶. Fortunately, their

⁶See <https://www.jp-bank.japanpost.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025

account opening process can be completed entirely online through their mobile app. I was required to submit a photo of my residence card along with a live selfie for identity verification. A few weeks later, I received a cash card (Figure 3.4a) in the mail. This card allows basic ATM access but does not support debit or credit card functions.

To complement the limited functionality of the cash card, I also set up an account with a mobile payment service. Japan offers a wide range of digital payment platforms, and the number of options can be overwhelming at first. I chose PayPay⁷, which is currently one of the most widely accepted mobile payment solutions across Japan.

Using PayPay turned out to be very convenient. It allowed me to pay various utility bills directly through the application, saving time and avoiding extra service fees at convenience stores. Much like Twint⁸, PayPay also enables peer-to-peer transfers and payments in stores. I used it as a prepaid account and was able to link it directly to my Japan Post Bank account, making it easy to top up my balance whenever needed.

3.6 Transport

Getting around efficiently was one of my early priorities after settling in Japan. Fortunately, I already owned an IC card from previous trips, which made things much easier right from the start. For anyone arriving in Japan for the first time, I strongly recommend getting an IC card such as Suica (Figure 3.4b). These rechargeable cards simplify access to public transportation and are widely accepted not only on trains and subways, but also in buses, convenience stores, and even vending machines.

Initially, I looked into purchasing a commuter pass to reduce daily transportation costs. In Japan, commuter passes can offer significant savings, sometimes up to 50%, but they are configured for specific point-to-point routes between two stations. Unlike in Switzerland, where public transport pricing is often based on zones, this system is less flexible if your travel destinations vary. Since I live relatively close to the center of Nagoya and didn't have a fixed daily commute by train, I decided that a commuter pass wasn't the best fit for me.

Instead, I opted to buy a bicycle, which quickly proved to be one of the best decisions I made. It gave me the freedom to move around the city with ease and helped me save on transport costs. I now use it for commuting to school, going to the ward office, shopping for groceries, or simply exploring local neighborhoods.

For times when using my own bicycle isn't practical, I also make use of bicycle-sharing services. Nagoya offers several convenient options such as Cariteco⁹ or Luup¹⁰. These services are especially handy for short trips or when traveling light, and they add another layer of flexibility to daily transportation.

⁷See <https://paypay.ne.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁸See <https://www.twint.ch/en>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁹See <https://www.cariteco-bike.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁰See <https://luup.sc>. Accessed July 26, 2025



Figure 3.4: Samples of official cards used in Japan.

3.7 Registering with the Swiss Embassy

Since I had officially deregistered from Switzerland prior to moving to Japan, I was required to register with the Swiss embassy within three months of my arrival. This is a straightforward formality that ensures my residence status is properly recorded abroad.

I contacted the Swiss embassy by email to inquire about the procedure. They responded with clear instructions and a registration form. I simply had to provide basic information such as my current address and Japanese phone number. Once submitted, the registration was processed without issue.

3.8 Digital Setup and Useful Applications

Finally, to live conveniently in Japan, I set up various digital things. Many everyday services, such as payments, bike rentals, or printing, rely on smartphone apps. However, I quickly discovered that several of these applications are region-locked. As an Android user with a Swiss-based Google account, I was unable to download certain Japan-only apps. While Google does allow users to change their country setting, this can only be done once per year, which limits flexibility for those needing access to both Swiss and Japanese services.

To resolve this, I created a new Google account specifically for my life in Japan. I linked this account to a Japanese address and used it to download and manage apps related to daily life. This not only solved the issue of regional restrictions but also helped me keep my Japanese services organized and separate from my personal or international accounts. Some of the most useful applications I installed include:

- LINE¹¹: the dominant messaging app in Japan, essential for communication with both individuals and businesses.
- PayPay: a widely accepted QR code-based mobile payment service.
- Japan Post Bank App: for managing my local bank account.
- Cariteco and Luup: bike-sharing apps used for commuting and short trips.

¹¹See <https://www.line.me>. Accessed July 26, 2025

-
- Convenience store apps: including the Seven-Eleven printing app¹², which was especially useful for printing documents during my job search.
 - Food and café apps: for store-specific rewards, orders, and coupons.
 - Meetup¹³ and Tandem¹⁴: for meeting new people and participating in language exchange activities.
 - DeepL¹⁵: my preferred translation app, which I found to be significantly more accurate than Google Translate.
 - Kanji Study¹⁶: a helpful dictionary and kanji learning tool that I use daily.
 - Surfshark¹⁷: VPN to access some region-specific content.

¹²See <https://tinyurl.com/4tkdt8pd>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹³See <https://www.meetup.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁴See <https://tandem.net>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁵See <https://www.deepl.com/>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁶See <https://tinyurl.com/9xhaxn9c>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁷See <https://surfshark.com/>. Accessed July 26, 2025

Chapter 4

Living in Japan

This chapter focuses on the personal and cultural aspects of my life in Japan beyond the initial administrative procedures. It covers the entire period of my first year, during which I was enrolled as a language student. I describe my experience studying Japanese at school, the challenges and progress I encountered while learning the language, and how I gradually adapted to Japanese society. The chapter also touches on social integration, daily life, and job-hunting activities.

4.1 Japanese Studies

Learning Japanese was the central focus of my first year in Japan. This section reflects on my experience as a language student, both inside and outside the classroom. It is divided into two parts: the first describes daily life at school, while the second focuses more specifically on the learning process and my personal progress.

4.1.1 School Life

Attending a language school (Figure 4.1) gave structure and rhythm to my studies in a way that self-study in Switzerland could not. Having daily classes, homework, and tests helped me stay consistent and focused throughout the year. The program was generally organized into five-week blocks, each ending with a test. Based on the results, students could either advance to the next level or review the material again. This cycle provided clear milestones and a sense of progress.

As previously mentioned, the placement test and short interview I completed before arriving placed me in Beginner 2, which broadly covers the grammar points required for the JLPT N4. While I was already familiar with most of the material, going through it again helped me consolidate my foundations and build greater confidence in applying the language in everyday situations. At Beginner 2, I used *Minna no Nihongo II* as the main textbook and then moved on to *Try! N3* and the *Quartet* series as I progressed to intermediate Japanese. These textbooks are commonly used across language schools in Japan. While the materials themselves don't always provide in-depth explanations, our teachers filled in the gaps by breaking down grammar clearly and providing real-world examples to reinforce the lessons.

The curriculum was well-balanced, covering grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading comprehension, writing essays, and even oral presentations, making the overall learning experience diverse and engaging. The only area where the school was slightly more easy-going was kanji writing. Although we had occasional practice sessions, the emphasis remained primarily on being able to read kanji rather than write them from memory. I also appreciated the school's consistent emphasis on Japanese particles, which are crucial to mastering the language.

Among my classmates and other students at the school, the majority came from Western countries. While classes could accommodate up to eight students, I was fortunate to always be in smaller groups of four or five. This made a significant difference: there was ample opportunity to speak, ask questions, and receive personal feedback from teachers, who were not only professional and well-prepared but also approachable. They were always willing to answer questions during breaks or after class, not just about Japanese but also about daily life in Japan. I asked many questions and always received kind and thoughtful answers.

Outside the classroom, the school organized cultural activities on national holidays. These events included barbecues, traditional Japanese crafting experiences, and day trips to places such as Shirakawago and Ise Shrine. It was a great way to get to know students from other classes and explore Japanese culture more actively.

I would like to emphasize two points that, based on my experience and the stories I have heard from fellow students, are important to keep in mind when attending a language school in Japan:

- Progression might not always align with your pace. While the initial class placement is based on your Japanese level through a test and interview, challenges can arise later. Depending on how quickly or slowly you progress, there may not always be a suitable class available for your level. This is often due to scheduling or class size constraints and can lead to frustration for students who don't match the average learning speed.
- Strict attendance rules are tied to visa status. Accredited language schools must report to immigration authorities. Students are required to maintain at least 80% attendance to graduate, and falling below 50% can result in visa complications. Long-term students are also expected to reach at least JLPT N4 level and take the JLPT exam during their stay.

Overall, my experience with the school was very positive. The staff was helpful and welcoming, the program was well-structured, and the small class size made a big difference in the quality of learning. My only real criticism is that the Nagoya campus had limited space for self-study, which occasionally made it difficult to find a quiet place to review or do homework, especially because they share their space with another language school called I.C.Nagoya¹. I have heard that the main Fukuoka campus offers more extensive facilities in that regard.

¹See <https://icn.gr.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025



(a) GenkiJACS hallway



(b) GenkiJACS building

Figure 4.1: GenkiJACS office

4.1.2 Language Learning Experience

I genuinely enjoy learning Japanese. It is a beautiful and rewarding language that opens the door to an entirely different way of seeing and interacting with the world. However, it has also been the most difficult challenge I have ever taken on. Despite my motivation, I often felt overwhelmed, confused, or frustrated along the way.

At first, I approached Japanese like a giant mathematical problem to be solved step by step with perfect logic and structure. I expected to understand each grammar rule completely before moving on to the next, treating the process almost like solving an equation. But language doesn't work like that. With this mindset, there wasn't much space left to "feel" the language, to absorb its rhythm and patterns more intuitively.

Over time, I came to realize that learning Japanese is not a linear path. Progress happens gradually, through repeated exposure, immersion, and a certain level of tolerance for ambiguity. Making peace with not understanding everything right away and learning to live with the confusion was a major turning point for me. That shift in mindset was essential to keep going and find joy in the journey.

Throughout my studies, I encountered a wide range of challenges that made the journey difficult at times:

- Perfectionism and expectations: I often expected myself to fully understand a grammar point the moment it was introduced, which quickly led to frustration. I had to learn that deep understanding comes with time and practice.
- Nuance overload: Japanese has an overwhelming number of ways to say the same thing, each with subtle differences in formality, tone, or emotion. Choosing the right expression requires sensitivity to context, which was hard to develop.
- Way of thinking: Japanese communication patterns differ significantly from Western languages. Shifting my mindset to express my thoughts differently, such as in reverse order, was mentally exhausting at times.
- Listening comprehension: Especially in conversation, distinguishing sounds clearly and understanding them fast enough to respond was a real struggle. Japanese can sound fast and fluid, with sounds blending together in ways I wasn't used to.

- Reading material: Finding engaging texts that matched my level was a persistent challenge. Most materials were either too simple to be interesting or too difficult due to vocabulary, grammar, or kanji complexity.
- Vocabulary complexity: There are many near-synonyms in Japanese, and while they may look or sound similar, they are often used in different contexts. Understanding the subtle distinctions took time and exposure.
- Comparison trap and resource overload: With so many learning apps and stories of people passing JLPT N1 in a year, it was easy to feel behind. The abundance of resources sometimes left me unsure of what to focus on.

To support my learning and stay engaged despite these challenges, I turned to a combination of tools, reading materials, and podcasts. For kanji, I used WaniKani², which follows a spaced repetition system and helped me establish a regular study routine. I later incorporated Anki³, a powerful but customizable flashcard tool, to focus more on vocabulary. Later on, I explored Migaku⁴, a newer language-learning platform that integrates well with immersion-based methods and is easier to use right out of the box. Each tool brought a different advantage, and combining them helped me stay on track and maintain variety in my learning. As for the reading materials, I mainly used the NHK News Easy website⁵ at first which turned out to be a good resource not only to practice reading but also to stay informed about Japan.

A turning point came thanks to a piece of advice from Luca Orduña, who told me, “You will know the Japanese that you are going to use in your life.” That helped me shift away from chasing perfection and instead focus on the language I actually needed. I stopped worrying about mastering every corner of Japanese and started building fluency in areas relevant to my daily life and interests.

Today, I believe that learning Japanese should be done with kindness toward oneself. It is a long journey, one that should be enjoyable and meaningful. I highly recommend using content you personally enjoy: manga, anime, YouTube, games, podcasts, anything that keeps you engaged and curious.

Above all, consistency made the difference. Some days were better than others, but by sticking with it and staying connected to the language, I gradually made progress, and that’s what mattered most.

4.2 Social Integration

In Japan, I found it relatively easy to connect with other foreigners, especially through language school. Many of us shared similar experiences, and there was often a common language to fall back on, which made forming friendships quite natural. However, integrating into Japanese social circles proved to be much more challenging.

²See <https://www.wanikani.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

³See <https://apps.ankiweb.net>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁴See <https://migaku.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁵See <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/easy/>. Accessed July 26, 2025

The biggest obstacle for me was language. In the early stages of my studies, my limited vocabulary and listening skills made it difficult to follow conversations or actively participate. Even when I wanted to speak, I often struggled to keep up, which naturally created some distance. On top of that, Japanese people tend to be more reserved, and spontaneous interactions don't happen often. I could relate to this, having grown up in Switzerland, where people also tend to keep to themselves unless there's a clear context for engagement.

I also realized that many people in Japan already have established routines and social groups, so they don't always have the space or time to welcome new acquaintances. At first, I found this discouraging, but I came to understand that it is not personal; it is just part of adult life in any country.

Still, I was determined to find ways to connect. I began attending local events and meetups focused on cultural exchange and language practice. These were great entry points for socializing, and I would strongly recommend them to anyone in a similar situation. Many of these gatherings were centered around shared interests such as board games, sports, or simply chatting in Japanese and English, which provided an easy and structured way to meet new people.

One of my favorite parts of my weekly routine was visiting public baths (Figure 4.2a). Over time, I became familiar with some of the regulars, and casual conversations would occasionally unfold. It wasn't anything deep, but these moments helped me feel more grounded and part of the community. I also joined a beginner-level Japanese archery class (Figure 4.2b). This was a fantastic experience; not only did I get to try something uniquely Japanese, but it also gave me a chance to meet Japanese people in a natural, interest-based setting. Practicing together allowed for small conversations that helped me gain more comfort with the language in real situations.

In addition, I took part in several events organized by the Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (SCCIJ). These provided me with opportunities to network, speak with Japanese professionals, and gain insight into the country's business culture and social norms.

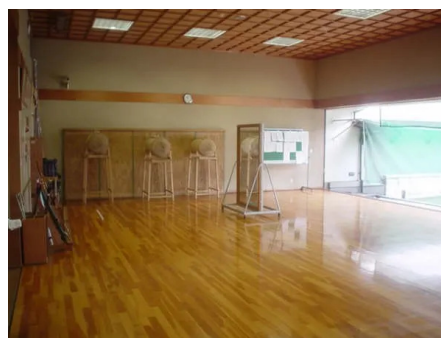
Looking back, I found that social integration in Japan takes time, patience, and consistent effort. But by being proactive, open, and genuinely interested in connecting with others, I was gradually able to build meaningful interactions, even across cultural and linguistic differences.

4.3 Job Hunting

Job hunting in Japan turned out to be more challenging than I had anticipated, even as a software engineer, a field generally known to be in high demand. A few years earlier, I had already tried applying to jobs in Japan from abroad without success. This time, I believed that being physically in Japan on a student visa, which requires a lighter process to be converted to a work visa, and having conversational-level Japanese would naturally open the doors. However, to some extent, that didn't turn out to be the case.



(a) Osu Shopping District public bath



(b) Japanese archery class

Figure 4.2: Places I visited on a weekly basis

Given my five years of experience in software development, I was aiming for a mid-level position rather than an internship. At first, I applied mostly to companies with a more international environment. I used my English-language resume and focused on online job boards such as LinkedIn⁶ and JapanDev⁷. However, I found it surprisingly difficult to pass resume screenings. Unfortunately, I rarely received feedback explaining why I was rejected, which made it hard to know what needed improvement.

Another challenge was explaining my recent career change. Over the past two years, I had only worked for six months before leaving to pursue language studies in Japan. While this decision made sense to me, it didn't inspire confidence with recruiters and often raised concerns. I had to work hard during interviews to present it as a thoughtful and purposeful step forward.

Things began to change when I created a Japanese-language resume and started using it alongside my English one. Around the same time, I also began applying to more positions within Japanese-speaking environments. This shift led to a noticeable improvement in passing the initial screening stage. It became clear that even for international companies, showing the effort to communicate in Japanese, especially through a properly formatted Japanese resume, made a strong impression.

But what had the most impact was meeting people directly. In many job descriptions, fluency levels such as JLPT N2 or N1 were listed as requirements, which initially felt out of reach. However, once I had the chance to speak in person, recruiters could assess my communication skills more realistically, and the strict language requirements often became negotiable.

I came to realize that job hunting in Japan is not only about sending applications; networking plays a vital role. I took part in several events that allowed me to speak face-to-face with recruiters and company representatives, and I could feel how much more effective this was. Some of the most impactful events I attended included:

- Tokyo Startup Career Fair 2025:⁸ This was the very first job-related event I at-

⁶See <https://www.linkedin.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁷See <https://japan-dev.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

⁸See <https://startupcareer.info>. Accessed July 26, 2025



(a) Reception at Vigience Tokyo office



(b) Lounge at Vigience Tokyo office

Figure 4.3: Vigience Tokyo office

tended. It served as an important introduction to how career fairs work in Japan. I had the chance to talk to a few companies in a relaxed atmosphere, which helped ease me into the job-hunting scene and build confidence.

- Sushi Tech Tokyo 2025:⁹ A large-scale tech exhibition and networking event. The number of participating companies was impressive, but also somewhat overwhelming. I found it challenging to identify which companies were a good fit for my profile, especially given the mix of industries and technologies represented.
- Tokyo Summer Career Forum:¹⁰ One of the most prominent bilingual job fairs in Japan. The atmosphere was more formal, with many companies conducting interviews directly on site. I actually received a job offer from a company I first encountered at this event, which made it one of the most rewarding experiences during my job search.
- CLIC Event at Tokyo Comedy Bar:¹¹ Hosted by multiple chambers of commerce, this was less about job applications and more about connecting with professionals. What struck me most was how helpful and supportive everyone was. People were genuinely interested in each other's stories and eager to share advice or contacts. It was a kind of openness I hadn't experienced in Switzerland.

As I was starting to feel the pressure of time, I received a major boost thanks to the support of the SCCIJ. I reached out to Mr. Luca Orduña, who kindly shared my resume within the SCCIJ network. Around the same time, my application independently reached a company called Vigience¹², and the timing aligned perfectly.

Vigience (Figure 4.3) is a Swiss-founded company based in Japan, and after three rounds of interviews, I was offered a position as a technical consultant. I felt deeply thankful for the trust they placed in me and excited to start my Japanese career in such a promising and supportive environment.

⁹See <https://sushitech-startup.metro.tokyo.lg.jp>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹⁰See <https://careerforum.net/en/event/tks>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹¹See <https://tinyurl.com/3wrhezby>. Accessed July 26, 2025

¹²See <https://www.vigience.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

Chapter 5

User Interface in Japan

During my stay in Japan, I often found myself puzzled by the user interfaces of websites and applications. Whether it was ordering food online, checking train schedules, or simply browsing an e-commerce site, I kept encountering interfaces that felt dense, visually overwhelming, or outdated, at least by Western standards. I wasn't alone in this feeling. In conversations with other foreigners, this same impression would often come up: "Why do Japanese websites look like they haven't changed since the early 2000s?"

Coming from a culture where clean design, minimalism, and intuitive user flows are prioritized, this contrast was striking. At first glance, it felt like a design failure, as if usability principles had been overlooked. But the more time I spent using these interfaces, the more I began to question my assumptions. Could it be that these designs are not flawed but simply built on different principles? What if what appears to us as "cluttered" or "inefficient" is actually optimized for a different kind of user?

In this chapter, I aim to explore the underlying reasons behind Japan's unique approach to User Interface (UI)/User Experience (UX) design. From cultural norms and cognitive psychology to language structure and technical constraints, a range of factors shape the digital experiences of Japanese users. This is not a search for a definitive answer or a verdict on what makes "good" design, but rather an attempt to better understand how UI/UX reflects deeper cultural values and historical patterns.

5.1 Cultural Roots of Interface Design

One of the most visible contrasts between Japanese and Western user interfaces lies in how information is presented¹. What may appear to Western users as cluttered or outdated often reflects deeply embedded cultural norms, especially in East Asian societies that prioritize context, completeness, and visual density.

These differences are not unique to Japan. In fact, many of the same traits can be observed in Chinese and Korean websites and applications, where similar cognitive and cultural preferences influence how digital interfaces are structured and perceived. While this chapter mostly focuses on Japan, the broader trends are part of a regional approach to design rooted in holistic thinking.

¹See <https://tinyurl.com/p5haeprv>. Accessed July 26, 2025

5.1.1 Holistic Thinking and Visual Density

Eastern cultures tend to emphasize holistic thinking², where meaning is derived from the overall context, the relationships between elements, and the bigger picture. This contrasts with analytical thinking, more common in Western cultures, which focuses on isolating individual components, categorizing information, and breaking down systems into linear steps.

These differences affect how people observe, remember, and interact with the world, including digital interfaces. A concrete example is asking both cultures to describe a living room: an analytical thinker might say that it has a sofa, a television, and a lamp. A holistic thinker might say that it is a place where the family gathers and spends time together. Both responses are accurate but reflect different ways of processing reality (i.e., object-focused versus context-focused).

This thinking style carries over to how people engage with screens. East Asian users, accustomed to holistic processing, are comfortable with, and may even prefer, interfaces that display a large amount of information simultaneously. They are skilled at scanning, identifying patterns, and interpreting meaning from the entire context. This preference for context-rich layouts explains why many East Asian websites include multiple menus, sidebars, icons, banners, and links all on one screen. Where Western users might see chaos, local users see familiar structure and functional completeness.

This approach to presenting information is not limited to digital spaces, as it can also be observed in everyday life³, such as in the visual density of advertisements, shop displays, public signage (Figure 5.1), and even printed materials like flyers. The same cultural comfort with complexity applies across both physical and digital environments.

5.1.2 Stability Over Simplicity

As we have seen, East Asian users are generally more comfortable with complex, rich information interfaces. But in Japan specifically, this preference is further reinforced by deeper cultural and psychological factors.

One of the most significant is Japan's low tolerance for uncertainty. In both business and daily life, ambiguity is avoided, and careful preparation is viewed as a sign of competence and trustworthiness. This cultural mindset directly influences interface design: users expect to see all relevant information upfront, not only to make informed decisions, but also to feel reassured that nothing important is being hidden. This expectation is not purely functional, it is also tied to ethics and trust. In Japanese society, thoroughness is equated with sincerity. A product page that includes every detail, even if redundant, or a website that displays all steps, options, and legal notes without simplification, is seen as honest and professional.

This mindset helps explain why many Japanese interfaces feel dense or even outdated to foreign users. Where Western UX often favors progressive disclosure, Japanese

²See <https://tinyurl.com/5nc94tpa>. Accessed July 26, 2025

³See <https://tinyurl.com/mercvdzz>. Accessed July 26, 2025



(a) Hakusen Street in Tokyo



(b) Rue de Bourg in Lausanne

Figure 5.1: Japan and Switzerland street visual density

design emphasizes visibility and completeness, displaying everything, such as specifications, disclaimers, delivery terms, and related links, all at once.

This cultural logic also explains another common observation: the resistance to change. In Japan, changing a familiar interface can introduce confusion or anxiety. A system that works, even if it is visually outdated, is often seen as better left untouched. Users and organizations alike prefer the certainty of the known over the risks of re-design. A useful concept here is the idea of a "local maximum", when a process or interface is refined and optimized to such a high degree that it feels like the best possible solution within its current framework. Once this point is reached, it is no longer questioned, even if better solutions exist outside that framework. This pattern can be seen across many aspects of Japanese life: in business practices, urban planning, service design, and in user interfaces.

Moreover, there is usually a preference for functionality over aesthetics. If a system performs reliably, that may be more important than whether it looks modern. Therefore, the logic is simple: if something works well and users are used to it, why change it?

While similar traits can be found in Chinese and Korean design, Japan takes this principle further, often favoring visual completeness and long-term stability over design trends or cosmetic improvements. It is not that innovation is lacking, it is that aesthetics are rarely prioritized over usability and trust. Once a design achieves stability, it may remain unchanged for years, meaning that the local maximum has been reached.

5.2 Technical and Design Constraints

Beyond culture and cognition, Japan's UI landscape is shaped by practical constraints and infrastructure realities originating from the complexities of Japanese typography

to legacy systems, design processes, and linguistic norms. These factors are just as influential as cultural preferences in shaping the user experience.

5.2.1 Typography Limitations

One of the most overlooked but important constraints in Japanese interface design is typography⁴, specifically, how difficult it is to work with Japanese text compared to languages that use the Latin alphabet.

In Western languages such as English, designers have access to a wide range of fonts in different styles, including bold, italic, light, condensed, etc. This flexibility comes from the fact that Latin scripts use a relatively small set of glyphs, around a few hundred characters including letters, punctuation, and symbols. This makes it feasible to create and distribute many stylistic variations of a single typeface without excessive development or performance overhead.

Japanese, on the other hand, uses a combination of three scripts: kanji, which are complex logographic characters, and two syllabaries, namely hiragana and katakana. To cover even common use, a font needs to include thousands of individual glyphs. While it is technically possible to create bold or italic versions of these fonts, doing so would require redrawing thousands of characters per style, resulting in huge file sizes, slow performance, and high development costs. For this reason, most Japanese fonts come in only one or two styles, and options such as italic or semi-bold are rare.

To simulate hierarchy and emphasis without multiple font weights, Japanese designers often use workarounds such as bold outlines, color fills, or layout tricks. True italics are almost never used. Additionally, fallback fonts can introduce visual inconsistencies or misrendered characters, so designers tend to stick with safe and basic fonts, further limiting expression.

Because of these constraints, many Japanese websites rely heavily on images that contain text. Promotional banners, menu headings, or product titles may appear like styled text, but are actually embedded in static images. This gives designers full visual control without having to render styled fonts, but it also means that the text can't be selected, copied, searched, or scaled, and it reduces accessibility and SEO effectiveness.

These typographic challenges are not unique to Japan. Other East Asian writing systems, such as Chinese, Korean, and Thai, also involve large character sets and complex combinations. This helps explain why interfaces in these countries often share similar traits: limited font variation, layout-based structure, and reliance on imagery.

In response to these limitations, Japanese interface designers typically rely more on layout tools to organize and structure content, such as boxes, borders, and icons, instead of using font weight and style. To Western users, this can make interfaces feel visually dense or boxed in. But these are not arbitrary design choices, as they are practical adaptations to the reality of the written language and how it renders on screen.

⁴See <https://tinyurl.com/4x5sb8y8>. Accessed July 26, 2025

Typography in Japan, then, is not just a stylistic constraint; it is a technical and infrastructural challenge, and one that continues to shape the country's distinctive approach to digital interface design.

5.2.2 Legacy Infrastructure

Another key technical factor behind Japan's unique UI design is the country's persistent reliance on legacy systems. Many enterprise, government, and even consumer-facing platforms still rely on architectures that were developed in the late 1990s to early 2000s, during the rise of Japan's domestic mobile web.

These systems were built to run on early mobile phones, often referred to as "Galápagos phones," a generation of highly advanced, closed mobile devices that evolved independently from global standards. Before the iPhone and Android era, Japanese feature phones already supported email, e-wallets, and web browsing. However, because these phones operated on proprietary networks and software stacks, websites had to be densely packed, strictly formatted, and optimized for tiny screens with limited input methods.

Even as global smartphones took over, many of Japan's core digital services were never fully redesigned. Instead, they were incrementally patched to run on newer devices and browsers, while preserving compatibility with old infrastructure. This need for backward compatibility restricts the adoption of modern front-end technologies such as flexible grid layouts, component-based frameworks, or responsive design.

This resistance to redesign is not just about cost, it is also driven by a deep-rooted aversion to risk. In Japan, once a system works reliably, changing it can seem unnecessary or even irresponsible. This mindset reinforces the idea of stability as a core value, even in technology. While the system may appear outdated to outsiders, it is often highly refined for its original purpose and viewed as "good enough" for continued use.

This phenomenon, where domestic systems evolve in isolation and resist global convergence, is commonly known as the Galápagos syndrome. Originally used to describe Japanese mobile phones, it now applies to any domestic technology ecosystem that becomes so optimized for local users that it fails to adapt or scale globally. In the context of UI/UX, this syndrome contributes to:

- Interfaces that look outdated but function exactly as users expect
- A reluctance to adopt design systems or frameworks developed outside Japan
- Fragmentation, where each company or institution develops its own internal tools with little incentive to standardize

So while many Japanese websites may feel frozen in time, they are often the product of an infrastructure that prioritizes continuity, reliability, and internal compatibility over innovation for its own sake.

5.3 Case Study: Yahoo! Japan vs. Yahoo.com

To better understand the contrast between Japanese and Western approaches to UI/UX design, we can look at a concrete and revealing example: the evolution of Yahoo! Japan compared to Yahoo.com, between the years 2010 and 2025.

Despite sharing a name and historical roots, these two sites have followed different design paths, shaped by cultural preferences, technical limitations, and user expectations in their respective regions.



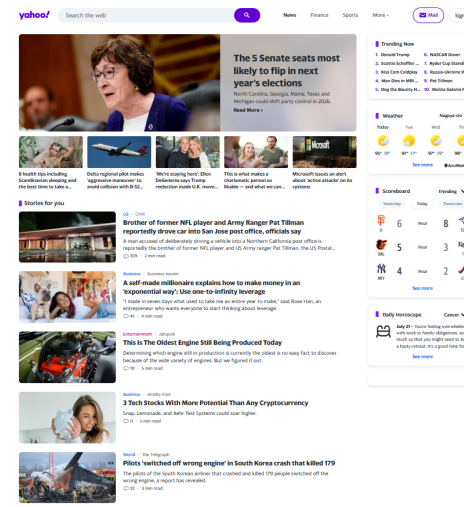
(a) Yahoo! Japan in 2010



(b) Yahoo! Japan in 2010



(c) Yahoo.com in 2010



(d) Yahoo.com in 2025

Figure 5.2: Comparison of Yahoo! Japan and Yahoo.com between 2010 and 2025

In 2010, both Yahoo.com and Yahoo! Japan began with a shared starting point, displaying layouts that might now be considered "cluttered" by modern Western standards. However, there were already key differences.

- Yahoo! Japan (2010) (Figure 5.2a) featured a dense layout with multiple columns, numerous menus, tightly packed headlines, and very little whitespace. Navigation options were extensive, offering direct links to services like auctions, shopping, news, blogs, and dictionaries, all visible at once.
- Yahoo.com (2010) (Figure 5.2c) also presented a multi-column layout, but it incorporated more visual segmentation, bolder headers, and larger thumbnail images. While the interface was not minimalist, it showed early signs of a shift toward a more image-driven, simplified structure.

Even at this stage, Yahoo! Japan prioritized information completeness and functional access, presenting everything upfront. In contrast, Yahoo.com leaned slightly more toward hierarchy, visual cues, and progressive discovery of content.

By 2025, the difference between the two versions has become even more pronounced, highlighting the diverging design philosophies of cultural and technical contexts.

- Yahoo.com (2025) (Figure 5.2b) adopts a modern, modular design with large images, spacious layouts, and personalized cards for news, weather, trending topics, and stock information. The interface is heavily optimized for mobile use and visual clarity, relying on white space and a clear visual hierarchy to guide the user.
- Yahoo! Japan (2025) (Figure 5.2d) remains dense and information-rich, with multi-column sections filled with headlines, icons, user tools, advertisements, and real-time updates. Rather than reducing options, it has expanded its navigational surface, featuring sidebars packed with service links, compact article lists, and scoreboards, all above the fold.

This stark contrast illustrates several key principles discussed in earlier sections, reinforcing how user expectations, cognitive models, and infrastructure constraints shape interface design in different regions.

- Holistic thinking and information density: Yahoo! Japan reflects the East Asian preference for scanning dense layouts and drawing meaning from the overall context. The interface is built for fast access to multiple services, not for simplicity.
- Cultural value of completeness and trust: The visible abundance of content on Yahoo! Japan reassures users by offering transparency and full control. Nothing is hidden or deferred. Yahoo.com, by contrast, relies on selective visibility and clean design to build user trust.
- Typography constraints: Yahoo! Japan continues to use boxed layouts and uniform fonts with limited emphasis, avoiding the complex task of rendering kanji in multiple font weights or styles. Yahoo.com uses varied font sizes and styles to guide the eye, leveraging typographic flexibility.
- Legacy systems and design inertia: While Yahoo.com has undergone a clear design evolution, Yahoo! Japan appears to have remained relatively structurally consistent. This reflects the influence of legacy infrastructure and a resistance to change, where trusted systems are preserved rather than reimaged.

These differences are not simply cosmetic, as they reflect deeper societal values. Yahoo.com represents a Western approach to design that emphasizes user focus, simplicity, and emotional engagement. Yahoo! Japan, on the other hand, continues to prioritize functionality, density, and completeness, even if that comes at the cost of visual elegance. Both sites ultimately serve their audiences well. What might seem outdated or overwhelming to a Western user may feel intuitive, efficient, and trustworthy to a Japanese one. The Yahoo! example illustrates how global brands must adapt their interfaces not just linguistically but also philosophically in order to align with local expectations.

5.4 Evolution of Japanese UI

While traditional Japanese interfaces remain shaped by cultural values and technical constraints, there has been gradual change. Younger users, influenced by global platforms like Instagram and YouTube, are more familiar with minimalist, responsive design. As a result, companies targeting this demographic, such as Mercari⁵ or PayPay, blend modern UX conventions with local preferences.

Even larger players like LINE have introduced cleaner visuals and mobile-friendly interfaces while maintaining layered functionality. At the same time, global platforms like Google and Amazon, operating in Japan, subtly influence user expectations, particularly among bilingual or tech-savvy users.

Still, progress is uneven. Sectors like government, banking, and healthcare continue to rely on legacy systems. In these contexts, stability and trust often outweigh visual innovation. Overall, Japanese UI is not being replaced but reinterpreted, balancing tradition with modern usability in a slow but steady evolution.

5.5 Final Thoughts

The contrast between Japanese and Western user interfaces reflects more than just design preferences. It embodies cultural values, thinking styles, and historical context. What seems cluttered to some feels complete and trustworthy to others. Japanese users tend to value transparency, stability, and dense information, while Western users often prioritize clarity, hierarchy, and simplicity. Neither approach is inherently better, as each reflects the mindset and habits of its users.

Personally, what once felt confusing to me now makes more sense. My own reactions shifted as I better understood the logic behind Japanese design choices. This experience mirrors my broader cultural adaptation in Japan.

Rather than judge, this chapter aimed to understand. By recognizing the depth behind different design paradigms, we gain not only UX insight but also a greater appreciation for cultural diversity in digital experiences.

⁵See <https://jp.mercari.com>. Accessed July 26, 2025

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Reflecting on the past year, I realize how deeply transformative this experience has been. Moving to Japan meant stepping away from everything familiar: my family, my friends, and the comfort of a life I knew well in Switzerland. It was not an easy decision, especially given how much I love my home country. Being abroad, particularly in a place as far as Japan, comes with a kind of emotional distance that even modern technology can't fully bridge. The time difference alone can make simple conversations feel out of sync.

Yet despite these challenges, I've come to see this year as one of the most meaningful chapters in my life so far. Living in Japan has been a long-standing dream, and finally experiencing it in depth has been incredibly rewarding. I've had the chance to enjoy everything I already loved from past visits while also discovering countless new things, many of them hidden in plain sight, like a small shrine tucked between two buildings or a small local festival I would have otherwise missed.

At times, this experience has felt like an endless journey of discovery. But it hasn't always been as glamorous or easy as it might appear on social media. Being alone abroad can also feel isolating, especially during festive periods like Christmas, when you are reminded of traditions back home. I did feel homesick at times, and there were moments when I questioned my choices. Still, I never stopped moving forward.

Looking back, I am proud of how I adapted. I built new routines, took care of myself in a new environment, and found joy in small victories, from completing bureaucratic tasks to understanding a joke in Japanese. This experience didn't just teach me a language; it reshaped the way I see the world and myself.

6.1 Advice and Tips

During this year in Japan, I encountered moments of joy, struggle, discovery, and personal growth. While every journey is different, I believe some of the lessons I have learned may resonate with others planning a similar path. Whether you are coming to Japan to study the language, look for a job, or simply explore life in a new culture, here is some advice I would offer to anyone preparing for this unique experience:

- Be proactive. In Japan, things rarely happen on their own, you need to take the initiative. Whether it is learning the language, making friends, or finding a job, being active makes a real difference. Attend events, reach out to people, and don't be afraid to ask questions or start conversations. The more you engage, the more opportunities will open up.
- Be patient with the language. Learning Japanese takes time, and it's important to go easy on yourself. Even a small amount of preparation before arriving, like learning basic phrases, can make a big difference early on. Progress may feel slow or uneven, but that's normal. What matters most is consistency. By making Japanese part of your daily routine, through apps, media, or simple conversations, you'll build familiarity over time and gradually gain confidence.
- Balance structure with enjoyment. Having a clear study routine or job-search plan is essential, but don't forget to enjoy Japan for what it is. Take time to explore new places, try local food, visit historical sites, or just walk through a new neighborhood. These moments not only provide a welcome break, but they also deepen your connection with the country and its culture.
- Keep your eyes open. One of Japan's greatest charms lies in the small details. A hidden shrine between two buildings, a handwritten sign for a summer festival, or a narrow alleyway filled with tiny cafés, these are the things you discover when you slow down and look around. Walking without a fixed destination can lead to some of the most rewarding experiences.
- Be curious and embrace the unknown. Some of my best memories come from moments when I pushed myself to go somewhere new or try something unfamiliar. Whether it was joining an archery class, attending a cultural event alone, or simply saying "yes" to a last-minute invitation, I found that stepping outside my comfort zone always brought growth and often joy.

6.2 Tweaks and Fixes

Looking back, there are a few things I would approach differently if I were to start this journey again.

First, I would begin the job hunt much earlier. Finding employment in Japan can take longer than expected, especially when language skills, visa status, and timing all come into play. I underestimated how competitive the process can be and how important it is to adapt both your mindset and your application materials. Starting earlier would have given me more time to build my network, fine-tune my strategy, and respond more effectively to feedback.

Second, while I enjoyed my time in Nagoya, I would strongly consider moving to Tokyo from the start. Nagoya is a wonderful and livable city, with all the conveniences of a major urban area. However, as a foreigner, it can feel somewhat isolated from the broader international community. In Japan, most events, whether related to business, tech, or networking, tend to happen in Tokyo first. While Nagoya is geographically central, it still feels somewhat distant from the country's main hubs of activity.

From a language learning perspective, I would place much more emphasis on vocabulary acquisition. In the beginning, I focused heavily on grammar, but I later realized that knowing more words, even if my sentence structure wasn't perfect, helped me express myself more clearly. Expanding my vocabulary earlier would have made communication easier and boosted my confidence much sooner.

Finally, I would have made a more conscious effort to surround myself with Japanese speakers. It is natural to gravitate toward other international students, especially at the beginning when everything is unfamiliar, but staying in that comfort zone can slow language progress. I now see how important it is to embrace the discomfort of not understanding everything and to actively seek out immersive situations, even if they feel intimidating at first.

Despite these lessons, I have no regrets. This year has been an incredibly valuable chapter in my life, equipping me with practical tools, a broader perspective, and the confidence to take on new challenges, not only in Japan, but anywhere in the world.