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Student Exchange Reflective Journal

Japan is a weird place. Some called it the nation of the polite, some called it the nation of the cutting edge and primitive, some called it the place of the 2-faced... There seems to be a lot of different opinions by different people. What I want in this exchange, is to see what's true, albeit half a year might not be enough for that.

While my host university is in the hearts of Tokyo, my dormitory is not, instead I live close to Yokohama, a harbour city filled with history and surprises. I usually need to take a 30 min train to the station next to the school campus, and I get to experience first hand on the crazily crammed trains during rush hour. However, even though the train was so crammed I don't even have space to move my arms, it is usually very quite, with the only sound being the running noise of the tracks. Such a bizarre contrast to Hong Kong's metro, where it would be lucky to not find someone blasting videos out of their phones. Another thing I noticed is the fact that people would rather live outside Tokyo and take the crammed train for 30 mins. Seems like the house pricing has taken a toll on a lot of workers in Tokyo.

Keio University was known to be one of the best private schools around Japan, being called the best university and one of the only two A rank private universities (the other one being Waseda University), certainly feels like a school for the elites, and by that I mean elites of the elites. The campus, the students, the teachers... the atmosphere is fantastic. Unfortunately being one of the very few exchange students here with an engineering major, most of my course time are not engineering related at all. However, these courses made me learnt much more than what I had. A lot of them are in different topics that I would not usually approach, such as education, Japanese history, unique subcultures etc., these are topics that I would never think to be able to study and know about. Unlike the long term rival school Waseda University, Keio University have very few exchange students, given how many local students. Due to this reason, most of our special class that were offered in English have a lot of local students joining as well. These are unexpected for me as I thought local students would rather give up on English classes for the hassle, which also proven how strong the English basis here is.

Besides school, what surprised me the most is the culture here.

Foods are not surprising, given Hong Kong people loves Japanese cuisine, and unfortunately, a lot of restaurants here are in fact, Japanese style cuisines (which includes Japanese style "Chinese cuisine". They are 100% Japanese and I did not like them). What surprises me however, is there are restaurants outside of the Japanese style food, and it is more than what I expected. Kebabs and Shawarmas, curries, Italian food, Brazilian food, Mexican food, even fast food restaurants are plenty. You can even find the Hong Kong beloved Cha Chaan Teng here. There are plenty amounts of bento boxes being sold in supermarkets and convenient stores as well, there is no need to worry about the absence of great food, even if you usually a shut-in like me.

Another thing that surprises me is how tight they are in complying with the trash separation policy, of which I usually have 2-3 trash bags inside my dorm room! And my dorm managers are kind to guide us through the sorting process, and have no mercy in punishing students

who did not sort them out correctly. Even though there trash sorting, the amount of plastics I found in everywhere are absurd, to the point where almost everything I buy, food or not, are layed with plastics.

Finally, is how Japanese people are intertwined with their believes. All Japanese friends I met her have visited shrines multiple times, and most of them have a shrine near their residence. Buildings and constructions respect the shrines that scattered across Japan and instead work around them. This is a culture I don't see a lot, especially in Hong Kong where temples and shrines are far fewer.

One thing I would also like to point out is the integration of technologies in Japanese society (coincidentally, it is one of the topics I studied here as well). As some have said, Japan is very "stubborn" in terms of adapting to technologies. One example is the electronic queue tickets I use during my process of registering my residential status, where I have to register online for a timeslot, go to the government office, then I need to get a physical number ticket for my position, which I already registered online. It is uselessly complicated and ultimately only served as a high tech supplement of a low-tech required process. While Japan have introduced multiple high-tech solutions to social problems such as their own e-payment app, smart ID card (which can be used to print personal documents), e-processing for government relation procedures (even though most of them still send out paper forms in mail after the process), it seems like people would still like to use a more traditional methods. In fact, a lot of what considered "old" currently was what was once cutting edge technologies. Japan currently even has the largest dumb folding phone market in the world! The contrast between the high-tech things Japan had brought up and the low-tech that they are still using (Japanese government have only decided to end the use of floppy disks recently) fascinates me, especially being majoring in a subject where technology changes every few months.

All in all, this exchange certainly gave me a lot of experience that I can boast with my relatives, and valuable insights in different aspects as well. For others who are considering for an exchange, Japan might an interesting choice outside of the typical countries. If you are interested, learn Japanese before you come.



Taken in the Mikasa Park, Yokosuka, Kanagawa. Mikasa is currently a memorial ship which joined the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. On board is a museum that detailed the Japanese side of the Russo-Japanese war, WWI and WWII.



Mount. Nantai in Nikko, Utsunomiya, Tochigi. Nikko is a mountainside city where multiple famous shrines and temples are located, including Toshogu, a world heritage shrine worshipping the famous general Ieyasu Tokugawa.



Taken in Tomakomai, Hokkaido. What was once a bustling harbour city with heavy industries, half abandoned like many other Hokkaido cities. Walls filled with water stains and roads with rubbles, this is the fate of many other cities alike.



Taken in the Tokyo Horse Racecourse, Tokyo. Having one of the deepest history in horse racing in the world, it has become an integral part of many Japanese citizen. Besides the course of the viewing stands, a museum, a kids playground, a picnic ground and a very large food court are also included in the venue. For some, horse racing has become more than just gambling, but an activity for families to enjoy. Horse racing has long removed its stigma of just a form of gamble in Japan.