

Cross-Cultural Studies Firsthand: A Homeschool Grad Goes to College in Japan

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One of the most important lessons I learned as a homeschool student is that learning can take many forms, and most of life's most important lessons are taught outside the classroom. This has been especially true during the last seven months I have spent attending Temple University in Tokyo, Japan. Every day here has been a new chance to strengthen my character and expand my knowledge. While the demands of my courses and the social atmosphere of the school are important, they pale in comparison to the everyday challenges of living abroad in a country with a vastly different culture and language than my own.

The challenges started before I left home. When I made the decision to pursue the remainder of my undergraduate education at Temple University Japan (TUJ), I had nowhere near enough money to pay for tuition and Tokyo's astronomical living costs. Despite working since the age of 14 and saving the majority of my pay, I was about \$20,000 short of my projected needs. This started a frantic search for scholarships that kept me up into the early hours of the morning typing out essays, forms, and worksheets and had me running trips all around, tracking down transcripts, delivering applications, and mailing off paperwork, all while working and doing the host of things such as getting passports and visas that are necessary for travel abroad. It was a very stressful time and I probably would have given up if it weren't for the constant encouragement and understanding of my parents. After everything was sent off, a period of waiting began to see whether I would get the scholarships and so forth that I needed. As the deadlines for payment approached, there was no sign of scholarships in sight. I was confused about what to do next and prayed that God would give me a clear answer. A couple of days before the deadline, I wrote to my admissions counselor to let her know and withdrew my application, explaining that I lacked the funding to attend. The very next day I received a series of emails telling me that I had won more than \$20,000 in scholarship money. I had my sign.

The following months were a whirlwind of preparation and goodbyes. I spent so much time slogging through red tape and doing all the things that I knew I'd miss that I didn't research living in Japan very much. As a result, when my plane arrived at Narita International Airport on August 18, I was clueless. I had no idea what I was doing, so I was forced to rely on God. As always, He was faithful, and I got through the confusion of those first few weeks without getting myself into any real trouble.

One of the first tasks I had to master was the use of Japanese transportation systems. I took the bus to school, but incomprehensible routes that befuddled even the natives prevented me from taking it anywhere else. So, like the vast majority of everyone in Tokyo, I have learned to rely on the trains. Inside the city I'm never more than a 15-minute walk from the nearest station, and for a few hundred yen (a dollar is worth about 115 yen) I can get from anywhere to anywhere in less than an hour. While this is very

convenient, all those train tickets can really add up. So, like many other Tokyo residents, I use a bike as much as possible.

My first trip aboard the train was made on my way to church a few days after arriving. I had located the church online and was eager to meet up with my Christian brothers and sisters in Japan. That first service was one of the most meaningful times of worship I have ever experienced. Seeing hundreds of believers from a radically different culture praising the same God with joy and exuberance filled me with awe at the power of our God, who isn't restrained by national, cultural, or language borders. It was undoubtedly the most moving experience I have had in my time here. After church, I went out to dinner with several new friends.

That night we had curry, one of my favorites here, but not all Japanese food seems wonderful to my American taste buds. My first experience with Japanese food came the day after my arrival when I ate out at one of Japan's popular restaurant chains, Denny's. It sounded comfortingly familiar, but back home Denny's doesn't serve spaghetti topped with seaweed and tuna. Since then I've tried a lot of different things, everything from sliced octopus legs and raw fish to whole pickled fish that are eaten with their scales and bones. Among the myriad of strange dishes I've found several that I really like. The *donburi* shops that are on seemingly every corner serve large, tasty bowls of meat and veggies on rice. The Japanese version of curry is quite good and very affordable. Ramen here is quite tasty and very different from the instant varieties found at home. Other foods that I eat often include *soba*, a kind of wheat noodle; *onaghir*, rice balls wrapped in seaweed containing fish or other seafood; and *yakisoba*, fried noodles with vegetables. One notable absence in my diet is teriyaki. One of my favorites at home, I've discovered that it is much more American than Japanese.

It didn't take long after my arrival for life to settle into a routine. Get up, ride to school, sit through class, come home, eat dinner, read or surf the Internet for a few hours, go to bed, and repeat. My class schedule had me coming in to school every weekday, so for my first semester I had little opportunity to really explore Tokyo. I managed trips to the fashionable Shibuya, home of the world's busiest Starbucks, perched next to an intersection that is crossed by 2,500 pedestrians every cycle of the signal. I squeezed in weekend visits to the Imperial Palace, Tokyo Station, and the Sunshine City mall, but I really wanted to get out and see more of Japan.

That chance came when I had the privilege to help staff at a weekend English camp for Japanese high schoolers. The camp was hosted in the beautiful and rural prefecture of Gunma in central Honshu. Surrounded by mountains and the beautiful fall colors of broadleaf forests, about 20 of my fellow TUJ students and I helped 250 Japanese freshmen practice their English. The kids and their teachers loved us. It was a great time to connect and get to know a lot of new people, both Japanese and my fellow American students.

One of the things that has contributed most to the pleasantness of my time here is the friendly, helpful nature of the Japanese people. Whenever I have gotten lost or needed

help finding my way, helpful Japanese people have gone out of their way to assist me. Even when they don't know the way themselves, they ask until they find someone who can help me. One time I lost my wallet with the equivalent of \$400 in cash, my credit card, ID, and train tickets in it. It was returned with nothing missing. I've since learned that 70% of all cash lost in Japan is returned to its owner. Another admirable mark of Japanese hospitality is their patience and tolerance of what must appear to them strange foreign behavior. In the months I have been here I've encountered really rude behavior only a few times.

A perfect example of this is the Japanese couple who allowed two friends and me to stay at their house for a couple of nights before we went home for Christmas break. Their home was close to both the airport and Tokyo Disneyland, so I was able to go to Disneyland for the first time the day before I left for home. The generosity shown to us was humbling.

This semester I managed to arrange my schedule so that all my classes are spread over only three days. This has allowed me to do a lot more sightseeing. I've seen the view from Shinjuku's skyscrapers, visited Toyota's auto showroom in Ikebukero, visited the historic shrines, museums, and lush parks of Ueno, browsed through the anime shops and electronics vendors in Akihabara, walked across the Rainbow Bridge to visit the manmade island of Odaiba, and gawked at the crazy fashions on Takeshita Street in Harajuku. All in all, it has been a much more satisfying and enriching semester, and I am so thankful for the opportunities God has given me to explore this city.

For those who may be interested in attending a university in Japan for more than a short visit, there are a couple of ways to do so. If you are just starting college, the Japan Student Services Organization, an agency of the Japanese government, provides placement and funding for hundreds of foreign students to study at Japanese language schools and universities. If you want to study in English and receive an American degree, Temple University Japan, my current school, is the only real option. To find more information about either of these options you can visit the organizations' websites. If you have any specific questions or just want a more detailed view of life in Japan, you can email me at the address provided at the end of this article.

Currently I am finishing up my second semester here at TUJ. I plan to return home over the summer to work and earn money for the fall. I will be graduating at the end of the fall semester and returning home to once again live in the United States, but I will never forget my time here. The lessons I've learned, the memories I've made, and the friendships I've formed will shape the rest of my life.

Biographical Information

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