

MIRAI-Programme in Japan in December 2015

Writing my bachelor thesis about a comparative analysis of Japanese and American video games' innovation, I never imagined actually visiting Japan so soon. Hence, I could hardly believe my luck when my application to the MIRAI programme, which followed Prof. Dr. Storz's proposal, actually was successful and I was invited to Japan amongst 150 students from Europe and Central Asia.

MIRAI – fittingly the Japanese word for future – is a one-week study programme sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and aims at fostering Japan-Europe relations and the network building of students studying in the areas of politics, international relations, economics and Asian studies.

Before our arrival in Tokyo, we prepared in small groups in an interactive webinar and cultural self-study in order to realize our own cultural background and learn how to make the most out of the upcoming intercultural experience.

Time passed quickly and in mid-December I flew via Helsinki to Japan alongside nine other German students and several other participants from Sweden, Island and Finland. Altogether, students from 42 countries came together in Tokyo (including some countries like Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan I hitherto knew only little about) and I was excited to meet the fellow participants and exchange views and opinions about economic, political and cultural topics.

Once we arrived in Tokyo, the programme was packed with one exciting activity after another – we visited delicious restaurants, the remarkable Meiji Jingu Shrine, one of Japan's Mega Corporations ITOCHU and the Mori Corporation Building. Through the extensive efforts of the Japanese MIRAI volunteers, we received real insights into the functioning and the management of Japan's companies, which was of main interest for me since it underlined hypotheses I had already discussed in my thesis. Although our days were already quite long, we always came together in small groups after the programme for the day had ended to explore the mega city Tokyo on our own. The bodacious Shibuya ablaze with tremendously big Christmas decoration, the second busiest crossing in the world, the renowned Manga area with Manga as high as skyscrapers and long Karaoke nights are just a few of the things the city has to offer, and I was glad we did not pass up on these golden opportunities.

One highlight marked the visit to one of Japan's most prestigious universities in Tokyo – the Keio University.

We had been able to chose between the lecture topics politics, economics and society and culture. Since I already learned a lot about Japan's economy at my home university, I opted for the lecture "Society and Culture" held by one of current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech writers. I was not disappointed: We learned a lot about the development of Manga as an important part of Japan's endlessly rich culture and had the opportunity to engage in discussions with Japanese students. Regarding the latter, I was particularly interested in the expectations placed on female students and their later role within the internal labour market and was therefore happy for the chance to talk openly and honestly with the forthcoming students. Conversations like those and also with the other participants about differences in our cultures and everyday lives will long remain in my memory.

Yet, the most exceptional highlight of our Japan experience was the weekend-long stay with the host families. In groups of up to 12 students, the 150 of us spread across all of Japan, from tropical Kyushu to snowy Hokkaido. I reached my destination – a lovely city called Obu-Shi near Nagoya within the Aichi prefecture – with the fast and famous Shinkansen train, passing by the beautiful Mount Fuji. Once we had been welcomed by the mayor and I had held a small speech as the representative of our group, we met our families for the upcoming days. For certain, I have never seen such a warm welcome and hospitality despite the allegedly rather reserved nature of Japanese people. I feel blessed for having had the chance to experience authentic Japanese family life like it would never have been possible as a normal tourist. My host family were young mother Aki, father Yuki and their two children, the most adorable 3-year-old Kiichi and baby Nao. It was very interesting to see how the Japanese home is structured differently from

our European understanding. There are, for instance, quite opposing conceptions of “inside” and “outside”, so that we had multiple pairs of slippers to wear depending on our location in the house. Moreover, I took a liking in all the small rituals that take place in Japanese everyday life such as the small bow when you put your hands together before every meal and say ‘Itadakimasu’ which means ‘to receive’ and is used in order to say thank you for the coming meal.

During the homestay, the families made every effort to show us local places of interest and so we visited a Toyota plant, a Buddhism temple, a Shinto shrine and a very entertaining rice cake event.

The most unforgettable and special event for me was the kimono fitting since I personally like the geisha culture and the corresponding artful clothing and rites. Having been dressed by skilled elderly women also wearing kimonos, we attended a tea ceremony in a proper tatami room, all the while feeling like a true geisha. It was moments like this in which I realized that I was literally in Japan!

This trip has been a truly exceptional and unforgettable experience and I would like to express my gratitude to the MIRAI organisers AFS and EFIL and Japan MOFA for creating such an amazing programme as well as the faculty of Management and Microeconomics at Goethe-University Frankfurt for taking part in it. The resulting friendships with the fellow participants as well as with my Japanese host family and the students of the Keio University are what made this programme priceless and they will last for a long time to come.

My special thanks goes to Mrs. Kiradjieva and in particular to Prof. Dr. Storz for making this programme possible for me – it has been an once-in-a-lifetime experience!

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