

MIRAI Program – 10/03/17 until 10/10/17 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Report by Jonas Strauch



I think it is fair to mention that I was not aware of the MIRAI program until I have read the former report by Dana Winkler and until a fellow student told me about it. Understandably enough, there was not much talk about this opportunity as it is not directly advertised compared to other exchanges. I still decided to apply even though I was not quite sure what to expect. After sending my résumé and my current grades to Daniel Ehnes, a Ph.D. student from Prof. Dr. Storz, I had to wait for the final approval from the Chair for the Study of Economic Institutions, Innovation, and East Asian Development. A letter of motivation was mandatory in which I expressed my interest in foreign affairs, especially regarding Japan. After some weeks I had to prepare for an interview, in which the embassy asked me a fair amount about the current Japan-Germany relationship. Another few weeks later I received a positive answer and was more than happy to participate. A local tourist agency then booked the flights a week later and sent me all necessary information.

The MIRAI Program is a Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) funded one-week study and cultural exchange program. The MOFA runs the programme as part of a much wider “Friendship Ties Program”. The overall aim is to help all participants understand as much as possible about Japan’s economy, society, history, culture, politics, and diplomatic relations. It also tries to breed mutual-understanding between participants’ nations and Japan further to obviously raising awareness of what Japan has to offer in all the listed contexts.

I departed from Frankfurt on the 3rd of October. Most Europeans flew via Frankfurt, London, or Helsinki. Once I arrived in Tokyo, I realized that I was part of an 85 person group which featured people from almost every country in Europe/Asia between Iceland and Kazakhstan. Everyone studied a subject broadly related to politics, economics, international relations, Asian studies, Japanese studies, and law. Each European nation was represented by at least one person. Germany was represented by a law student, a Chinese/business student and me, an economics student. I was very excited to meet everyone as they all seemed like interesting characters. To make things easier, our guides separated us into two smaller groups. We stayed in these groups for the rest of the week and did not really get into contact with the other one, which was quite unfortunate. It was, however, a lot easier to communicate with each other. I have „met“ everyone by the end of the week and made some good friends whom I definitely visit in later years.

The majority of us did not speak nor study Japanese though everyone had had an interest in learning about the place at a minimum. We ranged in age from twenty to early thirties with the average person at the age of doing a masters.

We spent the first two nights in Tokyo and visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the very first day. As one can imagine, everyone was still very exhausted and jetlagged from the flight. However, we still had a very interesting seminar on Japanese foreign policy in South-East-Asia, especially regarding North Korea.

It was very interesting for me to be involved in discussions with other European students because everyone saw things differently. On the next day, we all did a „university exchange“ with Keio University (a well-known university in Tokyo, if not the most prestigious one). We again visited some lectures about the current Japanese situation in a globalized world and how Japan has always played an important role in history as well as in today's international trade. The lecturers actually have classes in several prestigious university in Tokyo and even advise the government on certain issues. During lunchtime, we got to meet Japanese students and therefore sort of experienced the typical university life in Tokyo as we walked around the campus.

Day three was probably my favorite day as we visited Hiroshima. To be quite honest, I did not know much about the city apart from the atrocity of WWII. I was amazed how lively and green the city is and how it got rebuild from scratch on. Visiting the Itsukushima Shrine (a Shinto shrine) was absolutely stunning. I have rarely seen such majestic architecture anywhere else. Afterwards, we listened to the testimony by the survivor of the atomic bomb and visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Listening to someone who has experienced the 6th of August in 1945 was a very touching moment. Afterwards, we were able to ask questions which I thought was a great honor for us.

On the next day, we headed back to Tokyo with a one-night stop in Kyoto. As well as Hiroshima, Kyoto is a very lovely place. It has the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Japan and the structure of the city has been the same over one thousand years (what I actually learned by visiting a theatre). The Higashi Honganji Temple was just as beautiful as the shrine from the day before.



Itsukushima Shrine, next to Hiroshima



Higashi Honganji Temple, Kyoto

Coming back to Tokyo felt like coming back home. We spent another three nights in the capital and explored all kinds of tourist attractions as well as another (final) visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the very end, the Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs gave a speech about how important the European-Japan linkage is. Sadly, this was the formal farewell of the whole journey and we all went out to explore Tokyo at night.

All in all, I can most definitely confirm that I had one of the best weeks of my life. The trip was truly unforgettable. The overall organization was outstanding and I cannot think of anything that was missing or disorganized. I brought a lot of important memories and insights back to Germany, and with a new point of view when it comes to Japan.

My special thanks go to Daniel Ehnes and Prof. Dr. Storz as they have proposed me to represent our university and most importantly Germany. Also, I would like to thank the MIRAI organizers, the MOFA, and all the amazing students I have met from Europe as well as from Japan. It was a great honor for me to participate in this program!

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