

A report on my exchange semester in Keio University, Tokyo

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Being a foreigner to both Germany and Japan, I have to some degree observed how ways of modernization can differ, though there are some similarities. Both were the defeated forces of WW2, and have become the pivots of the United States in two big continents of the globe. I thought successful modernization would result only in the western way of life. Japan proves the otherwise. My stay in Japan was an unforgettable experience and I learned a lot from it, both in the aspects of economics and culture. Availing myself of this opportunity, I will discuss the learning experience as well as the insights I got from what I observed.

First, I must mention that Keio University is so generous that they provide free Japanese language courses as well as textbooks for exchange students. I learned a lot of Japanese language basics which made a solid foundation for my further studies in Japanese. Courses are nicely designed so that even students with less quantitative background can catch up. The hours assigned to a class is adequate to convey the knowledge while allowing students to take more courses to expose to other fields of knowledge. I especially appreciate the opportunity to learn knowledge of finance. I also seated in a history class on the Japanese military adventure before and in the Second World War.

Japanese are well-known for their seriousness and professional spirit towards work. The Japanese language teachers are so intense as to make us always feel stressed while in the process we learned a lot. They wrote everything on the blackboard like what primary or secondary school teachers do. Not only in language courses but also in all other classes of different fields, computer usage during the class is not preferred. Traditional learning method of writing is much emphasized. I think it helps better memorization.

As an ethnic Chinese, I would like to learn much from Japan. Since early 20th century, Chinese people have despised traditional culture and embraced western, enlightenment values, which at the end gave rise to the seizure of power by the Chinese Communist Party and reached its climax in the Cultural Revolution. Enlightenment could nurture Tolstoy, but also could give birth to Robespierre. This is the dialectics of Enlightenment. Chinese fail, but Japanese sail. It is because Japanese haven't abandoned their culture and traditions like what the Chinese did. With the traditional culture, Japanese can openly contact western culture, and innovate cultural products to export to the rest of the world. Though its military power was deprived of after WW2, it preserves its power in its culture.

I was quite shocked when I saw Japanese shops are selling chopsticks, pottery and porcelain at such high prices. Why can they sell a pair of chopsticks at more than 10 euros when the Chinese machine-made chopsticks can be sold at less than 0.1 euro? What is the crux of the lesson? It is the recognition of value. Successful economic nationalism and cultural marketing add aurora to a product. Chinese people abandon their handcraft and embrace western machines. Chinese people then become slaves of western machines and thus their lives are even more dispensable than the machines. Without the protect of folklore and traditions, handcraft is disdained and can no longer be passed to next generations. Chinese people do not respect handcraft and thus the value of human is not respected. China became the sweatshop of the world, and when its labour wage starts to surge, it is abandoned by the West. Japan, on the

other hand, still win the world's respect, because they know self-respect. Handcraft, ancient buildings and traditions are well kept. Only these can protect people economically from technology.

Japanese don't usually go abroad compared to other Asian countries, a few of them study abroad. For their country has everything necessary to live on. It is not only about material needs which they have abundant supplies, but about cultural and spiritual support. But Japanese are highly stressed in their culture as well. People are very polite in the service sector. Several sentences of speech have to be repeated by the service sector people from dawn to night. There is a supermarket chain named Don Quixote opens daily until 3:00 am. In terms of personality, people are repressive in their emotions. This repressive psychological character might contribute to the staggering number of suicides. It would not be a easy place to work.

But after all it is a good nation, for it exports so much culture to the rest of the world. A world without Japanese will be boring. And in comparison to Germany, there is a point I feel sorry about Germany. Germany has nurtured so many great scientists, artists and philosophers, but its philosophy has long been downplayed in the American dominated world.

In addition, I observed that some westerners cannot bear some conservative rules of Japanese dormitories and feel strange about Japanese culture. An "outrageous" one is that female residents cannot step into the male floors and vice versa. Another one is that alcohols are prohibited in the dorm. Some dormitories even impose curfew, upon a time limit like 12:00am after which residents are not allowed to return home. However, public space within the dormitories are well maintained compared to other countries. "Tragedy of the commons" is minimized to the lowest possible extent, due to the daily work of cleansing workers. Western people have to bear some inconvenience to enjoy the well service of Japanese.

Another aspect that is inconvenient is that general Japanese people don't speak too much English and they are very shy to talk to foreigners. Given that having some classes in Keio University, my Japanese was gradually improving, which made my life a bit easier. But for those who don't speak even a word in Japanese, it would be harder. Not that Japanese don't like to speak English, as opposed to European big nations who refuse to speak English, it is that general Japanese are not able to speak English well.

All in all, I learnt a lot from the trip to Japan and also the stay in Germany. Living in states where I do not speak their languages is not that convenient, whereas in the process more skills than languages can be learnt. I would like to express my gratitude to Goethe University Frankfurt for giving me such unforgettable and precious experiences in Germany and Japan.