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PDF issue: 2026-11-14

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(Citation)
神戸大学医学部神緑会学術誌, 19:131-132

(Issue Date)
2003-08

(Resource Type)
departmental bulletin paper

(Version)
Version of Record

(JaLCDOI)
https://doi.org/10.24546/81007806

(URL)
https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/81007806

留学記——

Living in Japan

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I arrived in Japan in 1999 and what I had in mind primarily, was to study my PhD and at the same time, learn things about the Japanese way of life and their culture.

I remember clearly the panic I felt on my first time walking around my new neighborhood, after returning from school one night. I thought I was tracking in the right direction to get home, after I had gotten off at Shimin Byoin Mae Station, but then, as I rounded what I thought was the final corner, I realized that I was lost. The fear I felt soon abated however, because of the gentle kindness the Japanese are so well known for. A nice young man took the time to help me. He could hardly speak English and at that time, I could hardly speak Japanese, but with his two words of English and my gracious Japanese greetings, I was able to say "konbanwa" and "sumimazen" to him. He just smiled and continued to bow, as we walked together, but somehow we managed to understand each other. So, I continued along with him until finally, he lead me to my Kobe University International Residence (Port Island). Even now, we still keep in touched and he has become one of my best friends here in Kobe.

Living in an International Dormitory for about a year also gave me an incredible opportunity to meet and exchange cultures with people from all over the world. I have had the pleasure of sharing a kitchen with my friend from Ireland, Central Africa, Iran, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Poland, USA, Philippine, Korea, Australia, and China as a family. We often cooked and had dinner together and we shared our foods, too. One will always find food available for sharing in our common kitchen especially whenever we feel tired and the energy was dwindling. We used to go out shopping as a group, we organized small parties to celebrate each other birthday, achievements and other special occasions ; we spent long weekends chatting about each other's culture, and our experiences here in Japan. We shared our troubles and we could readily rely for support from each other.

It's always a good experience to live in a country that is different from where you came from. We just have to be willing to adapt and be open to learn new things around us. Yes, there are certainly huge difficulties that you may encounter, some may even experience what they call "culture shock", but for me, it is primarily a matter of good disposition, positive attitude, adjustment and acceptance. The next important thing to keep in mind is to avoid making comparisons between your our culture and those of others. We are different people of different races coming from different places, we certain have our differences, but that should not be a hindrance personal or career wise. I had many good experiences and memories here in Japan that I would treasure forever.

Albeit the many advantages of living in an International Dormitory, there was one disadvantage that I realized though living in International Dormitory limited my chances of learning Japanese at early time since there were no native Japanese students. As a result, I didn't push myself to speak Japanese outside the Japanese classroom since we could readily use English to communicate. I think this hindered progression of my learning Japanese.

After a year living at International Dormitory, I moved to the other Dormitory where 85% of the

residents were native Japanese. Making Japanese friends in the beginning was not easy for me. Japanese are so nice to foreigners, and it seems like they want to talk to foreigners, but generally they are shy and don't want to make the first move. However, if you know a little Japanese and you start talking, mostly they are very nice and friendly. Later on, I befriended many, and in fact, a lot of my new found friends here, a way from home now are Japanese. I was living in that dormitory for six months. From living there, I think, I learned enough Japanese to get around, ask questions, and carry on simple conversations. I know Kanji just enough to read some signs and labels. It's an amazing thing to study a new language in a country when reading and writing is a big limitation. I'm learning not only Japanese language and culture, but also things about humanity and myself in general.

The most impressive thing about living here is that Japan is a very neat country with a well-organized society. It seems that everything in Japan have been carefully planned even before the civilization began. The Japanese in general, are peace-loving people. They don't like trouble and they wouldn't like to be troubled, too. With this thought you sleep well and wake up the next day peacefully. The transportation and communication systems are just excellent, too. The train network and time schedule are great. One hardly finds a train, or commercial bus in Japan that is not punctual, or fails to operate according to its time schedule (unless there is a major accident). You could ready reach family and friends anywhere you are in Japan. The telephone system, Internet access, electronic media and all other forms of communication network are just within your reach in this country. You have no excuse for not being able to be in touch. The way the nature is being protected here is another good impression of Japan. Despite the high level of industrialization (Urbanization) the natural environment appear to be well protected. You still see mountains and forest and clean bodies of water all over the place, and even at the heart of the city like Kobe.

I also love the politeness and hospitality of Japanese life and the way everyone works to fit in with everyone else. I love the way everyone always tries to help you and make you feel at home. I had and am having a wonderful time here. Moreover, Japanese are also very tolerant of others. My own experiences in school, particularly in my Laboratory are my own basis for this. My professor, supervisor, teacher and friends are always ready and willing to teach and help me. They also allow me to observe my religious practices as a Moslem. They give me free time for my prayer schedule, which is five times a day, and a time off to go to Mosque every Friday afternoon. They, especially my supervisor, always support me and show me the proper attitude for becoming a good scientist. It is really a big blessing to be in an environment like this one I have. In addition, I also like the fact that I feel very safe here, even walking alone at night. I am indeed having a great and wonderful time living in this country for quite sometime now, the country, which I considered as my second home after Indonesia, and to this, I am truly thankful.

The most important advice I can offer to foreigners, who plan to live in Japan, is I think, that people here are friendly and are willing to assist when you need them. Language may be a barrier factor preventing you enjoying the people and their culture. Sometimes this may bring stress or frustration to the individual concerned. Therefore, you must consider learning Japanese language and give it a top priority. Everything seems to be evaluated with money in Japan. Perhaps, this could be the reason why the Japanese people are said to be workaholics. The cost of living in Japan is quite high, that is a fact so one needs to master the art of "proper budgeting" and "wise spending". People here do not like a prolonged argument or confrontation so beware to avoid such attitude. Please concern your work, show them that you can afford what you came for. Sometimes it's difficult to express yourself, but you should try at every opportunity and do your best.

One more thing, during your time living here, do not miss the chance to attend activities such as visiting elementary schools, cultural centers, Japanese camp and host family programs. These are the best opportunities to mix with Japanese people and learn more about their culture and society. I was lucky to have experienced much of this and meet such a wonderful family and friends during my stay here that we can build our friendship more.