



JAPAN FOUNDATION

Japan. A land where traditional and modern culture somehow coexist in unity. Before I went on this trip, I did not really know much about Japanese culture. I had studied Japanese for four years in high school, but during that time, we had focused mainly on the language. We learned about traditional culture, but anything about modern culture came in bits and pieces. Based on what I learned in high school, I expected Japan to be modern. I mean, they are one of the world's leading countries in technology. However, I also expected a much more traditional culture to dominate the country, something similar to the other Asian countries that surround this island nation. My experiences during this trip certainly transformed my perception of this great and wondrous country.

When I first arrived in Japan, it did not seem that different from America. The Kansai airport seemed just like a normal American airport. On the bus ride to the Institute, I didn't see anything surprisingly different. Rinku mall even had store signs in English. After our first two days there, it seemed like Japan was very modernized and even somewhat Americanized. It was a little disappointing. Rinku mall had so many foreign department stores. I had expected to see something much more distinctively Japanese, like what you see about Japan in magazines or books. Of course, there were some differences between the two countries. The styles sold were different and there were stores selling yukatas and other traditional Japanese clothing. It was also surprising to see so many people biking and walking to places. Where I live, that rarely happens, but in huge cities like New York, that was also quite normal. However, everything was so much cleaner in Japan. It was rare to find a trash can anywhere or litter on the ground. It was also nice to see how much people recycled in Japan. Those small things amazed me, and I find that I miss the clean streets of Japan and all the recycling bins now that I am back in America.

During the Osaka Orienteering and the Kyoto study trip, I was surprised at how closely modern and traditional culture could be in Japan. Going through Kyoto and Osaka, it was amazing to see how quickly the busy, bustling city could transform into neighborhoods with traditional Japanese houses and quiet gardens. Kyoto was definitely the biggest shock. We went into a huge building to eat lunch, and a short bus ride later, we were at Kyomizu Temple. The area around us completely transformed from the city to a quiet traditional town. There were people in traditional Japanese clothing and the whole place looked like the traditional Japan that I knew. Kyomizu was amazing and I was surprised at how huge it was. The shopping district at the temple had both traditional goods and more modern goods. It was very nice. I only wish we had more time to look around that beautiful area. Kinkakuji was also beautiful, although it was smaller than what I expected. Also, it was disappointing that we could not enter Kinkakuji. Still, it was very enjoyable walking through the beautiful Japanese gardens that surrounded Kinkakuji and marveling at it from afar. Kyoto was very enjoyable and beautiful. It was nice to see how the city retained some of its traditional history amidst the modern city that it now is. The Osaka orienteering was somewhat of a culture shock as well. I had learned about Osaka Castle in my Japanese class, but I also knew that Osaka was one of Japan's largest cities. It was surprising going from the secular city of Osaka to the traditional part of the city. It went from being busy to being quiet and relaxed. Experiencing these changes from modern to traditional culture deepened my understanding of Japanese culture in general. It was amazing to see how the Japanese people could live in a modern world while still embracing their traditional culture that has been passed down for centuries.

Semboku high school was definitely a learning experience about what Japanese school is like. I had learned about the basic structure of Japanese schools and a bit about how school is like. However, actually meeting and talking to the Japanese students really allowed me to see how school is like in Japan. Before, I had thought that school must be very stressful for Japanese students. There were hard classes, cram school, and then after school activities and clubs. It was quite surprising to learn that the majority of Japanese students really enjoyed school, even though they did think it was difficult. Attending the calligraphy class and the English class at Semboku was very enjoyable. When I first entered the school, it was surprising to me how old it seemed. The school seemed much more traditional than I expected, which was surprising considering the area it was in and the students that attended the school. Putting on sandals was also a surprise. I had not learned about that in class, but it was nice how they kept the school cleaner by this simple practice. It amazed me how students and teachers could keep the school clean with just a few minutes spent every day after school cleaning, but I see how they can do that now. It was also very shocking to discover that some of the rooms did not have any air conditioning and they only form of ventilation was the open windows in the classroom. School seemed to be very traditionally Asian to me. This was a very insightful experience though. It was nice to see how respectful all the students were to the teachers and how hard they all worked.

My homestay was probably the most enjoyable and insightful experience of the trip. It really let me experience how Japanese people live. I thought it was interesting how Japanese families have one traditional room in their house, while the rest of their house is modern. The Kubo family was very open and welcoming to me and I enjoyed spending the weekend with them. It also let me see how busy the normal schedule of a Japanese student was. My host sisters had lots of homework and they also had a busy schedule of extra-curricular activities and clubs. I had expected the family to be very formal and strict, but after a few minutes of formal greetings, they quickly slipped back into the normal, everyday speech they usually used. They made me feel very welcome and were very nice, another aspect that I noticed about Japanese people. Despite their busy schedule, they never cease to lend a helping hand. I had expected Japanese families to be somewhat traditional, but they were surprisingly modern. There was very little traditional Japanese culture in their household. Even their traditional room had items that would belong in the typical America living room. Despite the lack of traditional culture, modern Japanese life was still distinctively Japanese. Living in a small house, that is, small to American standards, was very different to me. However, despite the tight quarters, it was nice to see how no one got into each other's things and how the space was shared. Japanese life also seemed much more relaxed for some reason. There was just a much more friendly air. Even after a busy day at work or school, everyone got together and talked or watched television together. Spending time with this wonderful family was a fun experience and probably my favorite.

There was so much more that happened on this trip, if I wrote about all of it, I would have to write a book. All the learning, the friendships, the new things, the food, all of it was so amazing. The only thing I did not like about this trip was that it was too short, but that just means I have to come back to Japan sometime in the future. I learned so much about Japanese culture in those short ten days, much more than I learned in four years of high school. I loved how close everyone seemed to be and how safe it was in Japan. There were not very many security bars in stores and you did not have to lock up your bike as well as you do in America without the fear of it being stolen. In those short ten days, I grew to love Japan, its unique culture, and its people. Thank you so much for this amazing experience.