

Canada-Japan Co-op 2007

Experiential Report

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DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL

When I first applied for COOP Japan, I had been imagining the kind of life that it will be in Japan. For me, it was not the first time away from home but I still felt a little anxious and excited. Although I got the idea of what Japan is like through Japanese TV programs, but I suddenly realized that I did not really know much about Japan during our training week. To be honest, I became worried while absorbing information from our previous alumni and the guest speakers. With all these worries in mind, I stepped onto the plane and began my unforgettable journey.

At the moment of walking out of Itami Airport, located in Kansai, I did not even feel any tiredness after long hours of flight. Everything was so fresh and so different from Canada; highways for example are narrow and the sides are mostly covered which we can hardly see any views. My previous images of Japan, for example, were these tall buildings with a huge TV screen on them, but the places where our shuttle bus passed by did not seem to be an urban area. The closer we approached Kyoto-Nara border, the place where I live, the more it is suburban. It was not what I expected but I loved it. In addition, I could feel this totally different weather, wet and hot.

RESIDENCE

I worked at ATR (Advanced Telecommunications Research) which is somewhat famous among COOP Japan students for its big company residence. I got a family-size apartment though a little expensive but it was perfect especially that traditional Japanese Tatami room. The amazing thing is that toilet, sink and bathroom are separated. I guess for a family, this really solves the morning rush minutes, but not in my case.

On my second day, I explored around the neighbour and shopped for groceries. I was surprised to see garbage disposal sites are just right beside the driveway. In Canada, we usually have a central spot for garbage collection and it is located at the back of the apartment. In my residence, these disposal sites are like cages, which is somewhat distracting yet not so disgusting after all. Even till now, I still do not know how to properly identify different types of garbage besides the general ones, i.e. plastic, combustible, incombustible, and paper recycling. Fortunately, I did not run into any indistinguishable items.

Even at the suburban area, the population density is much greater than in Vancouver. Supermarkets, banks, train/bus stations are all within walking distance which is very convenient. Fortunately, right beside our residence, there is a newly built mall called AEON. It was just opened a month before I arrived there. I guess that was the time I began to realize an interesting fact, the “old” and the “new” lies side by side.



PICTURE 1 - AEON mall near our residence



PICTURE 2 – A view from my balcony

JAPANESE LESSON AT COMMUNITY CENTRE

The Japanese lesson that I went to was probably one of the most valuable opportunity to communicate with Japanese people. The teachers are mostly housewives who volunteered once per week to teach foreigners Japanese. Each of us had one teacher and we were not just learning Japanese language but also many things like their culture, traditions, some geography, and food. They had created a relaxing learning environment. At first, I did not have enough Japanese skill to understand the conversation and my teacher tried to combine her awesome body language and basic English to describe certain words. Then after a few lessons, she started to share her own story and chat with me.

During the break, we would sing a song together with everyone in the class then have some cookies and tea. I guess that was the only time I could meet a lot of foreigners and use English as freely as I can.



PICTURE 3 - The food and drink during Tea Break

One of the best classes was Yukata Day in which I wore yukata for the first time. I was like a child standing there and one of our teachers helped me to dress up. The steps to put everything on were so complicated but at the end everyone looked great. However, it is so tight that I could not bend down and we have to do traditional Japanese dance in a circle, some people looked gorgeous, some people tried to be funny, but most of us were shy. I was embarrassed because I could not even catch up with the music or dance steps and some people asked the teacher to slow down.



PICTURE 4 – Yukata & Traditional Japanese Dance Lesson



PICTURE 5 – End of Year Game Party

Outside of Japanese lesson, some teachers also invited us to “Nabe Party” (Hot Pot Party) at their house. One of them was in a very old and traditional Japanese home as shown in PICTURE 6. There were 3 or 4 of these tatami rooms. We could tell that these are quite old, maybe more than 50 years old, because the tatamis were sinking down. At first, I thought this whole area was just a display but we actually had our Nabe Party in one of the room. That was my first time having dinner at a home like this. It made the Nabe even tastier and brought us even closer. By the way, we had hot but delicious Kimchi Nabe.



PICTURE 6 – Traditional Japanese Home



PICTURE 7 – Nabe Party

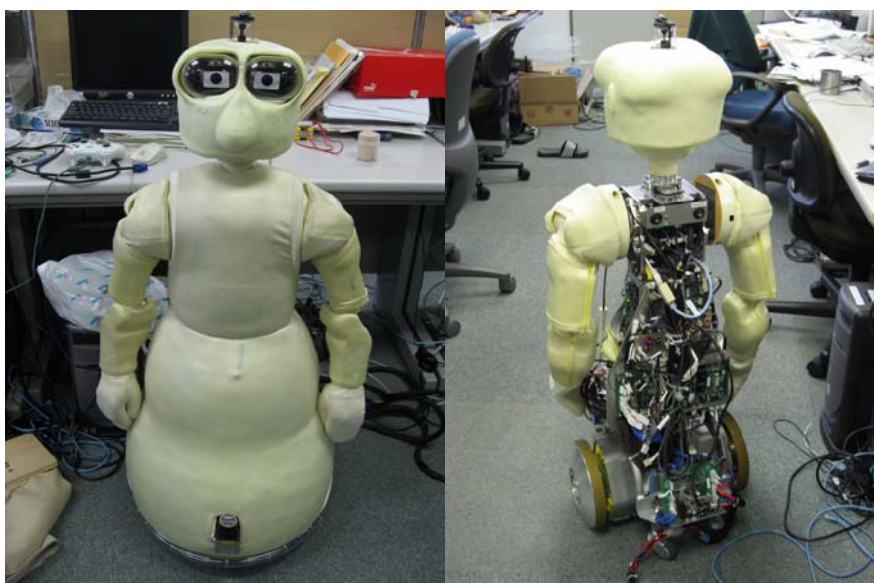
After dinner, we had dessert in another separate building which is more modern. While the taste of Nabe still remained in my mouth, I saw this table full of western desserts. Our teachers had planned all these just to show us the contrast between Japanese and Western foods. I loved their idea and of course both were great. I remembered that day was a rainy cold winter but inside this house, it was as warm as anyone can imagine.



PICTURE 8 – Dessert after Nabe Party

AT WORK

Our company, ATR (Advanced Telecommunications Research), works in different area to develop innovative technology for human communication. My department specializes in Intelligent Robotics and Communication. On my first day, my boss showed me different kinds of robot that had been developed so far. PICTURE 9 illustrates different generations of Robovie. Unfortunately, my task did not involve in any of them but I was one of the test subjects to interact with Robovie I. My best Robovie friend is Robovie IV who always stood right beside my desk. I could see him everyday either being peeled or naked (PICTURE 9).



PICTURE 9 – Robovie IV

On my left side was this Robovie IV; interestingly, the most famous robot, Gemanoid was in a room to my right. He is an android of our Group Leader, Dr. Hiroshi Ishiguro. Often we had visitors from TV News Report coming over to do interviews with Dr. Ishiguro and his android. Gemanoid is able to speak and do a few gestures. If we take closer look at his face, we could see nearly natural eye-rolling and blinking and also skin wrinkles. When the operator speaks, Gemanoid would imitate human mouth movements.



PICTURE 10 – Dr. Ishiguro’s Android, Gemanoid

During lunch time, I ate with my coworkers at our company cafeteria. Our Japanese coworkers usually finish their lunch fast and head back to work. At first, I was chatting with someone while eating and did not realize that most of other people already finished. Then afterwards, I tried not to talk to catch up with their speed but I was always the last or second to the last person. Because of this, I realized that some foreigners do not want to join us; rather, they would like to enjoy that one hour of lunch time outside. However, dinner was much different. They looked more relaxing and enjoying their meal. Even if everyone has finished their dinner, they would sit there and chat for a while. I guess maybe lunch break is not the end of the day, so they could not completely put away the pressure whereas foreigners tend to use full one hour to relax and refresh the brain.

Outside of working hours, I also took a Japanese class in ATR. Although our teacher jumped fast through the lessons, but without it, I do not think I would pass the level 3 Japanese Language Proficiency Test held in December. After a few months in Japan, my coworkers were surprised that I could understand their conversation but until now, I cannot use proper sentence to respond. There was also a manga (comic) club in ATR in which they take turns reading dialog and translate into English. It was more like foreigners and Japanese people trying to learn language from each other. The funniest part was to explain the meaning of some Japanese sound words which there are no such words in English.

Throughout these 7 months in Japan, we had a welcome barbecue party, project celebration party, open house, baseball game (staffs in each department compete against each other), farewell parties, and end-of-year party. I loved privately held farewell parties the most. After a couple glasses of beer, some of our shy workers began to talk more. Attending my own farewell party was not as fun as usual; it signaled my turn to leave but I will never forget these happy moments in Japan.



PICTURE 11 – Some little kids also joined our Baseball Game

TRAVELLING

Kyoto

Each weekend, my friend and I travel to many places in Japan. Kansai area, our dwelling location is probably the region where we covered the most. Everywhere we visited in Kyoto and Nara, the place always has a sign saying “World Heritage Site”. We saw many historical temples, shrines, 5-level towers, Japanese gate, etc. The buildings are either well-preserved or rebuilt after burned down. Since Japan encounters many typhoons and earthquakes, buildings that are more than 500 years old really amaze me. Japanese people must have tried very hard to protect their ancient properties.



PICTURE 12 – Countless Torii Gates in Fushimi Inari

Fushimi Inari has this well known Torii Gates and we heard that it takes about 2 hours to finish the entire trail. Unfortunately we would like to travel to other places as well so we did not walk to the end. During that hot summer day, I felt cool and comfortable walking along this Torii Gates but it would be a little scary to walk by myself.



PICTURE 13 – Togetsugyou Bridge in Arashi Yama

My friend had a Kyoto Traveling Tour Guide and we just followed the routes that it suggested for Arashi Yama. First, we passed the famous Togetsugyou Bridge and as usual we saw a lot of historical sites. I saw a very cute stone Buddhist statue along the side, PICTURE 14.



PICTURE 14 – Stone statue along the side

Toei Movie Land was one my favourite places. It is like a small village where we could see lots of ancient houses, streets, shops, and even equipments that normal people use in the old time. It has been used to shoot several films or dramas. My friend even dressed up like a himeji (princess) and took several pictures. We had so much fun and stayed there for the entire day.



PICTURE 15 – Toei Movie Land



PICTURE 16 – Shops in Toei Movie Land

There are also other places that we went to for example Mt. Fuji, Tokyo, Nara, Osaka, Kyushuu, and Hokkaido. Tokyo and Osaka are like general urban city with lots of shopping places. In Kyushuu and Hokkaido, we saw a lot of gardens and farms; too bad, we only had limited time to travel around these two islands. Somehow, I felt like being in Greater Vancouver when we were in Kyushuu or Hokkaido, especially the cold weather in Hokkaido.

CONCLUSION

I am glad that I lived in a place like Kyoto where the city is not crowded and has lots of unique historical sites which, if time allows, I would like to spend a few days living in those houses.

To me, 7 months in Japan was just not enough. After 3 months, I have only started to get used to the life and work. There were more experiments that I wanted to try for my project and so much more I wanted to do in Japan. After I left Japan, I never felt so depressed even until now; it was like leaving home. I almost forgot that after all, I was just a visitor in Japan. However, in the future, if time and money allow, I would visit Japan with my family or finding another job again if possible. I would say Coop Japan is the best once in a life opportunity and the best journey I ever had. Except, I am getting use to Japanese more than English and since both are not my first language, I find it difficult to switch between the two. English no longer pops up naturally in my head and seems like Japanese is occupying some space but not as much as English. In other words, my English is getting worse throughout these 7 months.