

Takehashi Report

Praveena Saktikantan

During the February reading week, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in the Takehashi Project program and visit Japan. The Takehashi Project was established by the Japanese Foreign Affairs Ministry, in partnership with the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada and JICE to promote cultural exchanges between Canada and Japan. Their ultimate goal is to increase and foster new bonds between Japan and Canada. I would say that this trip was successful in doing so; not only did I get the opportunity to learn about Japanese culture and people from a more intimate perspective, I also got the chance to share about similarities and differences between Canada and Japan.

During the visit to Japan, 18 Canadian participants, partook in various activities – guided and unguided – that shed insight on Japanese traditions and culture. For example, we had the opportunity to converse with Kihara Seiji, the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan. Our talks were fruitful, and we mainly discussed the East Asian sociopolitical economy. Furthermore, we also conversed with Shingo Miyamoto, the Deputy Director General for the North American Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. Personally, this was one of the most memorable experiences for me. Mr. Miyamoto is a deeply humble and easy-going person. I felt so at ease talking to him – talking to him can be compared to a lifelong friend who is honest and earnest. We talked about international relations, and somehow our talks led to the topic of Japanese culture. Mr. Miyamoto not only spoke about the importance of preserving culture by sharing it, and allowing yourself to be fully immersed in a different culture that may teach you certain things about yourself and the world that you were not aware of. I also gained deep insight of Japanese culture through my various interactions with the Kanagawa University students at

the Minato Mirai campus. They gave us a tour of their university, and also gave us a mini tour of Yokohama. I learned that the similarities between us far outweighed the differences. At the end of the day, we're all students, working hard and striving for a successful future. However, I also learned that entering the work-force is streamlined for Japanese University graduates, with students having a full-time contract with a company in their third year before graduation.

Through our various interactions, I'd say we became really good friends, and we continue to stay in touch with each other. Another cultural experience that I deeply appreciated were the various shrines and temples that we visited. In Japan, there are two main religions: Buddhism and Shintoism. While many of us are familiar with Buddhism, Shintoism may not be as familiar. Shintoism worships "kami" – spirits of the natural world. Both religions are very much integrated into everyday life. For example, it's not uncommon for a student to visit a shrine prior to an exam and state their wish for a good mark on an ema – usually a wooden plaque – and hang it at the temple or shrine, where it is believed that the spirits will receive it.

Through this trip, I learned that Japan is a place where traditional, and unconventional come together in blended harmony. I was enthralled to find that shopkeepers and people in general were eager to help me and talk to me even though I sometimes struggled with Japanese. I also found that Japan is so welcoming of different cultures – usually with a Japanese twist. For example, the multi-cultural food scene in both Tokyo and Yokohama was splendid – I enjoyed Indian, Thai, Italian, and American food as well. I also enjoyed the collective mindset that was very apparent in Japan where people are extremely considerate of others and the environment. Overall, my trip to Japan was definitely the highlight of my undergrad career and has definitely ignited a passion for learning more about Japan in me. I hope to visit Japan again soon.

Pictures:



Hanging out with the Kanagawa University students at the Yokohama Cosmo Clock 21
Ferris Wheel



Wooden blocks where shrine and temple visitors write down their prayers and wishes – also known as ema.



Courtesy Call with Mr. Miyamoto Shingo - Deputy Director General for the North American Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan.



Mt. Fuji, as seen from the top floor of the Kanagawa University's Minato Mirai campus.