

Bernard Lynch (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

Japan is my second home

I often tell Japanese I meet all over the world that Japan for me is my "*Nihon wa dai ni no furusato da*" or "*Tooku ni arite omou mono*". For those readers who do not yet speak Japanese, these phrases are roughly translated as "Japan is my second home" and "Far away, but always in my thoughts".

My first experience of Japan was as a high school Rotary International exchange student in rural Japan. This gave me a love of the place, prompting me to apply for a five year Monbusho Undergraduate Scholarship to Tokyo.

In hindsight, this experience was far more than a course of study or a university degree. It changed the direction of my life and gave me lasting lessons in cross-cultural communication that have proved invaluable in my subsequent diplomatic career.



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Learning the Japanese Language

I am writing this from the middle of the desert in Saudi Arabia, where I am currently on my fourth diplomatic posting. The experience I gained through my years of living and studying in Japan continue to support me in engaging with Saudi society and culture and even in my current efforts to master the Arabic language.

At the same time, I maintain a large network of Japanese friends and contacts, as a direct result of my knowledge of Japan and the Japanese language.

I recall when I first took up the Monbusho Scholarship it felt a little daunting. How could I master the Japanese language to the extent that I could study in Japanese at tertiary level?

But the care and attention of my Japanese teachers and the Monbusho government officials who supported us could not be faulted.

We were not only provided with a very high quality of language tuition, six days a week at the Japanese language school affiliated with the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, but also treated to a range of trips and cultural events to help our understanding of Japanese culture and society.

This was a particularly valuable element of our language learning. As I progressed in my Japanese language studies, I realised that real proficiency came hand in hand with a sense of understanding the people of Japan and their style of communication.



Communication beyond language

In essence, language is about effective communication and communication is so much more than correct grammar and sentence structure. What I have found most fascinating about Japanese is the allusive nature of communication inherent in the language.

This concept is well summed up in many Japanese expressions, such as *ishin denshin*, conceptualising the idea that a similar sensibility allows for instinctive communication.

This is tied to another Japanese concept of *tatemae* and *honne* as communication tools. *Tatemae* is the overt behaviour and opinions displayed, which carry within them a covert expression of one's true feelings, desires and views, the *honne*.

For a Westerner, where being upfront and direct is touted as a virtue, the Japanese style of *ishin-denshin* or *tatemae-honne* communication is, at first blush, perplexing and sometimes frustrating.

The supposed paradoxes of Japanese culture and communication style are what make one's journey into Japanese learning so rich and rewarding. It is an osmotic process, requiring a student of Japanese language to adapt and to tear down one's own preconceptions if one wishes to achieve the level of cultural acclimatisation necessary to achieve true language proficiency and understanding of Japan.

This scholarship program is a unique opportunity in this respect. The cultural exposure and understanding gained, along with the opportunity to gain a tertiary degree, leaves the graduate well-placed to contribute to the building of greater understanding between Japan and Australia. This obviously has benefits for both countries, including in regard to business and people-to-people links.

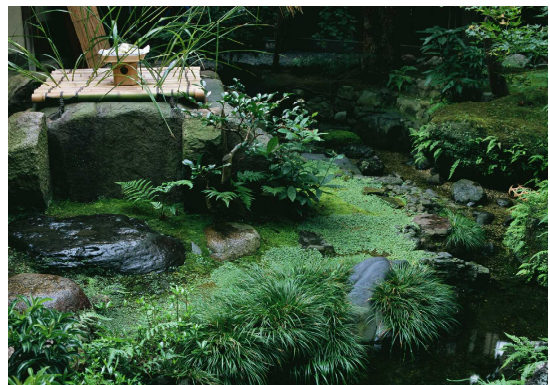
In addition to what I have outlined above, there is much to be enjoyed as a student in Japan. Many Australians take the opportunity to learn traditional Japanese arts, which aids cultural understanding and linguistic proficiency.

In addition, there are so many historical sites to visit, and well as places of great natural beauty. I loved my visits to *onsen* or hot springs resorts. The cuisine, with which most Australians are very familiar, is delightful and, of course, there is much more of it to experience across Japan, with great regional and seasonal variance.

The Japanese are very welcoming, and as part of a university community, you will have a ready-made social circle.

While foreign students often gather and can support each other, sharing experiences, my advice is to try to immerse yourself in local culture and society.

This will pay dividends in terms of your overall experience of Japan.



Life as an university student

In regard to your academic studies and associated arrangements, universities will provide advice and assistance to support you through your program. In my experience, it was always important to heed the advice of academic supervisors.

Joining university clubs, of which there are many, is a great way to expand your networks and gain some insights into acceptable behaviours in Japan for members of organisations.

Contrary to some stereotypes, there is plenty of scope to have fun and enjoy great camaraderie in such activities. One thing it is important to note is that, within Japanese culture, there is a tendency to separate strictly work and play and to respect more senior members of any organisation.

Accordingly, as a newcomer to, for example, a university sports club, you may be asked to take on initially a more peripheral, supporting role until you have 'done your time' and 'proved' your commitment. It is well worth persisting, as, over time, you will start to feel the embrace of the Japanese team spirit and loyalty to fellow team members.

That is not to say that you cannot shop around until you find the right fit for you in terms of sporting and cultural activities. As an undergraduate student at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, I tried out with a range of clubs and enjoyed each experience.



Different ways to experience Japan

You may be fortunate enough to have the opportunity to do a home-stay. This again is a wonderful way to experience the daily culture and life of the Japanese firsthand. In a homestay, you can expect to lose a few personal freedoms, but the potential rewards are well worth it.



The important thing is to avoid rushing to judgment and to be flexible and respectful of your hosts. A homestay will usually give you a great opportunity to improve your spoken Japanese, as well as to enjoy some home cooking.

I encourage you to apply. It is a great adventure and potentially life-changing experience.

Bernard Lynch