

**Japan-Denmark People to People Interchange Program,
Cultural Study Tour in Tokyo 2012 Evaluation Report**

By Lars Strobaek

This report is divided into two parts. The first part will contain an overall evaluation of the trip, and the second part will contain an evaluation of the specific details of the programme.

Overall Evaluation

Seen as an overall experience, this has been a fantastic journey and a truly exceptional experience for me. I have returned to Denmark with a deep appreciation of Japanese life and culture and a feeling of having experienced something special that only few people are lucky enough to achieve.

Our programme director and guide, Prof. Kusunose, was an extremely kind and welcoming host, and she and her assistant Yuuki made sure that we had everything we needed to be comfortable and get around in Japan. It was interesting how she introduced us as candidates: Lærke as the diplomat and social scientist, Camilla as the army officer and economist, and myself as the cultural and religious scholar. From a perspective of diversity, the selection of candidates seemed to have done a good job of making sure different aspects of Japanese Studies were represented. Both Camilla and Lærke are exceptionally kind and friendly and it was a joy to be partnered with them in this project, especially since they both are fluent in Japanese and therefore could help me understand much of the practical information that I could not understand myself.

The goal of the programme

I do have one slightly critical comment about the overall organisation of the project. This comment is related to the goal of the programme and how this goal is related to the selection of candidates.

As I see it, there are two basic ways of viewing the goal of a cultural exchange programme such as this. One approach is to see it as a chance for inexperienced candidates to see what Japan is like from the inside, as a totally new experience. A different approach is to see the goal as an opportunity for experienced candidates to see new sides of Japan that they may not have seen before, and to improve their ability to network in Japan by having meetings with important people. As far as I can tell, the programme this year has been intended to cover both of these goals at the same time.

The main reason I describe these two goals as being separate concepts is because they involve different types of candidates to participate. If the goal is to give the candidates a taste of Japan as a new experience, then it makes sense to choose candidates that have not been to Japan before and that do not speak fluent Japanese. If the goal is to allow networking and elite meetings, it makes sense to choose candidates that have experience living in Japan already and speak fluent Japanese. Also the types of arrangements should be different depending on what the goal of the programme is. If it is for inexperienced students, it should mainly contain events that introduce Japanese culture, such as museums and workshops. If it is for experienced students, it should mainly contain special visits and meetings. Most importantly, a programme for inexperienced students should not have the events take place entirely in Japanese, and a programme for experienced students should have an entry requirement that the candidates must be able to understand and speak fluent Japanese to participate.

Since this year's programme has been a mix of the two approaches, this has caused some problems for me personally. The problem is that I represent the "inexperienced" type of student, as I have never been to Japan before and I therefore do not speak or understand Japanese fluently, since this was not a requirement for applying. The reason this was a problem during the trip was that almost all of the scheduled events were held in Japanese, and many of them were meetings with important people, which I could mostly not participate in because I could not understand what anyone was saying.

My two fellow participants, Camilla and Lærke, have both lived in Japan for extended periods of time and therefore speak and understand Japanese fluently, and represent the "experienced" type of student. Their experience of the trip was therefore very different from mine, because they could both understand all the explanations we received in Japanese about all the different types of topics we heard about, and were able to talk with people during meetings. In terms of communication, they were able to interact with the programme 100%, whereas I could only interact perhaps 30%. The only scheduled events that had any English language content were the general assembly of the Denmark-Japan Society, the Tokyo-Edo Museum, the meeting with American Rotary Club students, the tour around the Kikkoman factory and the meeting with the Jinja Honcho representatives. All other activities were entirely in Japanese. This was not always a problem, especially because Camilla and Lærke could often translate for me, but it was often very awkward and uncomfortable that people expected that I could understand Japanese when I could not, especially in the case of our tour leaders who did not speak English.

For this reason, I recommend that in the future, it is decided whether this programme should be aimed at non-fluent speakers who have not yet lived in Japan, or aimed at fluent speakers who have already lived in Japan for extended periods. This would make it possible to adjust the type of activities in the programme to the appropriate level. If it is decided that the programme should be for advanced Japanese speakers who have lived in Japan before, then I suggest that both the application essay and the application interview should be entirely in Japanese, so the candidate can demonstrate their ability to participate fully in the programme. If it is decided that the program should be for non-advanced and inexperienced speakers, then the programme should not contain personal meetings with non-English speakers, and should have an English-speaking person to act as the guide and supervisor.

I appreciate that having the programme be open to both fluent and non-fluent Japanese speakers is very fair, and I feel extremely lucky that I was able to go despite my language problems. My main reason for the suggestion I present here is that I feel that students such as Lærke and Camilla are able to gain much more benefit from the current programme than myself, and I therefore feel guilty that by going, I deprived a fluent Japanese speaker the chance to experience the programme 100%, since I only experienced a smaller percentage due to my lack of ability to understand the language.

Next, I will discuss the different types of events that we participated in during the trip.

Programme Details

In this section I will evaluate and categorise each activity in chronological order. All time that was not spent on any of the following scheduled or described activities were spent by the three candidates together, enjoying a little free time by talking and eating or preparing for presentations. Most of this took place during train journeys and a little bit in hotel rooms during the evening.

Saturday 11 February, 2012

First activity: Visit to Edo-Tokyo City Museum.

This was a nice activity to start the programme with, as it did not require a lot of input from us and it was entertaining. Also, we were lucky enough to have an English-speaking guide. Very enjoyable, and very much a tourist activity. Not special, but entertaining and made us feel like we were in Japan. See photo 1.



Photo 1: At the Edo-Tokyo Museum. Camilla, Lars and Lærke are excited to finally be in Japan after their 10 hour flight.

Second Activity: Visit to Aki-Oka Artisans.

This was a slightly strange visit, since it was basically a trip to a shopping arcade or centre, with no apparent purpose. Some of the craftsmanship was very nice, I liked the shop that made kaleidoscopes, but it was just shops. I still do not understand why we went here. See photo 2.



Photo 2: Aki-Oka Artisan. A shopping arcade with various types of craftsmanship, including paints. Camilla bought an interesting designer flower vase/plastic bag.

Sunday 12 February 2012

First activity: Visit to Higashi Matsushima.

This was one of the main important visits of the trip. We went on the Shinkansen to for many hours to Sendai and further to Higashi Matsushima, where a man somehow related to the city council drove us around the disaster area and told us about what had happened. It was very moving and a meaningful experience. However, everything was in Japanese so I could not understand anything he was saying. This was definitely a special, non-tourist activity, and a powerful experience. See photo 3.



Photo 3: At Higashi Matsushima. Lærke is inspecting the flooded ruins.

After this visit, there was free time where Camilla and I went to meet my friend Axi and visited Yasukuni Jinja, then Yoyogi Park and did some shopping afterwards. It would have been nice with more free time, but the Higashi Matsushima visit was definitely worth it. See photo 4.



Photo 4: Yasukuni Jinja at sunset. Lars and Camilla are off sightseeing during their free time. Camilla was intending to go to a kabuki performance, but there were no tickets available so she decided to join me instead.

Monday 13 February 2012

First activity: Lunch at luxury restaurant at Meguro Gajoen.

This was, as far as I can tell, entirely a networking event where we were supposed to meet with selection of people to do with Danish-Japanese interchange. However, I believe some people did not show up, and the only people we met were two Japanese people involved with business studies. Since they only spoke Japanese, and I do not know anything about business or economy, I was not able to participate in this and basically just sat and waited for it to be over. See photo 5.



Photo 5: Luxury restaurant at Meguro Gajoen. The design was very traditional and the interior was made up of wooden and paper sliding panels.

Second activity: Dyed textile workshop.

This was a tourist-type event, where a small workshop showed us how they used to make kimonos in the old days. It was fun and cultural, but everything was in Japanese so again I did not understand most of what was said. See photo 6.



Photo 6: At the textile workshop. The staff were very cheerful and friendly.

Third activity: Dinner with Mr. Hideaki Oda and American Rotary Club students

This was another networking event, but unlike the others, this took place in English since one of the American students was also a beginner at learning Japanese. Mr. Oda showed us a printed brochure of images of the tsunami disaster, and he spoke about the problems of earthquakes and water sanitation. It was interesting, but like all networking events, it depends on how much you enjoy meeting and getting business cards from people. I was very grateful that I could participate at least. See photo 7.



Photo 7: Dinner with Mr. Oda. One big happy family, showing Mr. Oda, the three americans, the three Danish candidates and Prof. Kusunose.

Tuesday 14 February 2012

First activity: Tour of the Kikkoman Soya Factory in Noda.

This was another tourist-type facility tour, for learning all about how soy sauce is made. For my sake, this tour was held in English, which was very nice. We got little present bags with soy sauce, and got to taste soy sauce ice cream. Very enjoyable. See photo 8.



Photo 8: At the Kikkoman factory. In addition to the main facility, we also saw a special building used to make soy sauce for the Imperial family.

Second activity: Visit to the Court Music section of the Imperial Household Agency.

This was a mix of a networking-type event and a tourist event, as we got to visit and talk to two court musicians working at the department, who showed us around the building and showed us some of the instruments and costumes used. It felt quite personal because it was clearly not a place that many people got to visit, being on the Imperial Palace grounds. It was all in Japanese so I had to rely on my friends translating. Very good experience though. See photo 9.



Photo 9: At the Court Music section. The three candidates in front of the stage where concerts are held.

Third activity: Calligraphy workshop.

This was very similar to the textile workshop, except that the main activity was not to listen to explanations (which I could not understand), but to actually physically perform the calligraphy yourself. I therefore enjoyed this activity very much. Tourist-friendly and a great feeling of Japanese culture. See photo 10.



Photo 10: The art of calligraphy. Camilla shows her skill at reproducing a classical style rendition of “love”.

Fourth activity: General Assembly of Japan-Denmark Society.

This was the event that both of the two girls were very nervous about, since we had to perform speeches at this event, and they both stayed up late to prepare. I had prepared from home so I was less nervous, and also probably because I am not connected to official diplomatic channels like Camilla and Lærke are, so in a sense I did not have anything to lose by embarrassing myself. As it happens, none of us embarrassed ourselves, and the assembled guests seemed to enjoy our speeches in Japanese. My speech was a very naive expression of my personal relationship with Japanese culture, and the listeners laughed and seemed to appreciate the light, comic tone I was aiming for. This made me very happy, and this was therefore the high point of the programme for me. Afterwards we got to shake hands with his Imperial Highness Hitachi no Miya, which was a great honour.

Fifth activity: Live TV performance on Tokyo MX TV Golden Hour.

Immediately after the speeches we had to rush to taxis to get to the TV studio to participate in the programme. This was very interesting also, and we were quite nervous. We had prepared some of the things we were going to say from home, but even though I was intending to speak in Japanese, the excitement and stress of having to be interviewed on live TV made me decide to speak English instead, as I felt that I was otherwise quite likely to freeze and panic by having to speak Japanese. It was a little bit humiliating to be speaking English when the two girls spoke perfect Japanese, but it was a fun experience overall. Definitely a very unique activity.

Wednesday 15 February 2012

First activity: Visit to Ookunitama Jinja in Fûchû.

This last day was mainly a day of meeting people and seeing places of interest in Fûchû. First was the shrine visit, which was an extremely interesting and powerful experience. After the normal ceremony, the chief priest held a special ritual asking for a safe journey on our return flight. For anyone interested in religion and culture, this was very special. Afterwards we got to see the shrine's small museum of treasures, including a robe worn by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Very exciting, and Japanese language skills were not so important here. See photo 11.



Photo 11: Ookunitama Jinja. An extremely beautiful location, and one of the oldest shrines in the Tokyo area.

Second activity: Meeting with the mayor of Fûchû.

Next we went to the mayor's office which was right next to the shrine. At this stage I got an interpreter, who was very nice, but it was not easy listening to her at the same time as everyone else was talking, so it did not help much. Also, we did not have anything to talk to the mayor about, so this felt more like a diplomatic duty rather than a rewarding experience.

Third activity: Tour around Suntory Beer Factory.

Another Fûchû facility, this was quite tourist-friendly even though the tour was in Japanese. At this point my interpreter helped. We got to taste the beer and got promotional glasses. Quite nice and good fun. The chief priest was still with us and seemed to enjoy escorting us around his town. He also liked the beer very much. See photo 12.



Photo 12: At Suntory Beer production facility. Picture shows the facility managers, Prof. Kusunose, the three candidates and the chief priest from Ookunitama Jinja.

Fourth activity: Lunch at the Rotary Club Meeting in Fûchû.

This was a little bit stressful since there were many speeches being held during the lunch, so we had to clap a lot of the time, and I had no time to finish the food. Camilla had been to Japan with the Rotary Club in the past, so this was probably more meaningful for her.

Fifth Activity: Visit to the Tokyo Horse Racing Track in Fûchû.

Although it was somewhat fun to see the track, this activity, meeting with the mayor and the Rotary lunch felt mostly like it was our duty to be there and meet people as a diplomatic function, and not as activities we would actually enjoy or gain anything from. This is of course understandable, since our mission is not just to enjoy ourselves, but to promote Japan-Denmark relations.

Sixth activity: Visit to the Fûchû Native Province Forest Museum.

I do not think I understood this activity very well. At this point, the group of people we had following us (mainly the chief priest and two guides from the shrine) went home and we went on our own to this museum. However, it did not seem like a museum, basically we just went to a park outside and sat around and chatted for a little while. It was nice and relaxing, but I saw no Jômon ruins or anything museum-like.

Seventh activity: Visit to Jinja Honcho office in Tokyo.

Prof. Kusunose made sure to explain that this was arranged especially for my benefit. It was also a very simple meeting, we met with an executive of the office and someone from public relations, who spoke very good English, and had the opportunity to sit and talk. For me, this was very interesting indeed because I

could ask detailed questions about issues related to Shinto (mainly we talked about Ookuninushi and Amaterasu, and the relationship between earthly and heavenly kami) and he would talk about them in English. However, this was probably not that interesting for Lærke and Camilla since they mostly just listened and they do not have the personal interest in religion that I do. Afterwards we were given a brand new book about Shinto in English and Japanese and a very beautiful bookmark. This was a very good experience for me, and the only networking activity that I actually felt a great benefit from.

At this stage I should note that with regards to religion, it became very clear that it was most useful for our hosts to state that my interest in religion was mainly focused on Shinto, and there were no activities related to Buddhism or temples in the programme. I conclude that this is most likely to do with the fact that Shinto is a uniquely Japanese religion and is promoted as representing the spirit of the Japanese people, whereas Buddhism is a foreign religion, so since this programme exists to promote Japan-Denmark relations, Shinto is seen as a vehicle for transmitting Japanese values and Buddhism is not.

Eighth activity: Dinner with Mr. Karita at private club in Roppongi Hills.

Our last activity was a networking dinner, which was very pleasant but also a little bit difficult for me to participate in. The restaurant was on the 52nd floor and the view was beautiful. See photo 13.



Photo 13: View of Tokyo Tower from the high rise building in which we had dinner. Very luxurious, and having dinner in the restaurant felt like a very exclusive experience.

Conclusion

Being able to participate in the People to People Interchange Program has been a great honour, and it has definitely been a great inspiration to continue with the study of Japanese language and culture, and to promote the cooperation between Denmark and Japan in the future. For me personally, it has opened the

door to a real direct contact with people and places in Japan which had until now only existed for me as theoretical concepts.

As described above, the type of activities we participated in could be categorized as a mix of tourist events, where we candidates were passive recipients of information, networking events, where we met and engaged personally with different types of people that it was relevant for us to meet, and diplomatic events, where we mainly were there to be seen as representatives of the programme. Some of these activities were very interesting and rewarding; some were not very interesting and difficult to understand. See the chronological list above for details.

The only point of criticism I have regarding the programme and its organisation is how the programme seemed to be designed for candidates that are fluent in Japanese language, but there was no requirement to actually be able to understand or speak Japanese as part of the selection process. It may seem a bit odd that I criticise this point, since I myself would not have been able to go if there had been a language skill requirement, but my intention with this report is to offer suggestions on how to improve the experience of any candidates selected to participate in the future.