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JASWDC Tanaka and Green Scholarship Final Report

Prior to studying abroad, I often heard how much the experience away would change my life. I cannot overstate just how much studying in Japan actually did. Upon arriving in Japan, I had a minor panic attack at Haneda Airport in Tokyo. After weeks of pure excitement and anticipation, my lack of nerves finally caught up to me when I realized that I had flown across the world and didn't know a single person in the country. However, it was this same realization that taught me the first lesson I would ever learn here. Confidence is an incredibly important part of leaving your home country and successfully embarking on your study abroad experience alone. I always imagined myself as being very confident, but the level of combined trust, bravery, and faith that I had to develop within minutes was something that set the tone for the rest of my trip and possibly even life.

Leaving the airport was perhaps the hardest step I had to take to get here, but I'm so happy I did. After arriving at my dorm, I hit the ground running and immediately headed out to explore the city with people from my hall. The first place I visited was Shibuya—a rite of passage for anyone visiting Japan. On this outing, I met the friends who would shape my experience. We all clicked instantly and I can't imagine a better group of people to have explored Japan with. Living in Tokyo was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Nothing quite compares to the perfect mix of old and new that lines each street or the quiet mornings and bustling evenings. I've always believed that each city has an energy unique to the people who live there and Tokyo was no different. I met many Japanese natives during my time abroad and each person changed my life for the better. I met my closest Japanese friends early on during a night out in Shibuya and they have been an integral part of my abroad experience.

Originally, I communicated with my Japanese friends in English. However, after a comment from a friend of a friend about how they were all speaking English to accommodate me, I began to speak more and more Japanese. After all, it made sense. I was studying Japanese in Japan and any experience I could get speaking and listening was invaluable because these opportunities weren't always available at home. I made a habit of reading each sign I saw to improve my reading skills and I spoke Japanese whenever I could to practice my speaking. Though I wasn't always able to respond fully in Japanese, I found I could understand the language much better than I thought and the support of my friends encouraged me to strengthen my language skills. This taught me the lesson of just how much language learning came from outside the classroom. Language immersion was an invaluable experience that taught me more about the language in mere weeks than I had learned in a classroom in months.

Academically, I was challenged at my university here in Tokyo more than I ever was at home. I attended Temple University Japan, an extension of my home university in the US, Temple University. I expected that my courseload abroad would be similar to how it was at home, however, I couldn't have been more wrong. I took three Japanese history and modern culture classes and one Japanese language class, all of which challenged me in ways I hadn't been challenged before. In addition to this, I also picked up a credit-bearing internship with a Japanese company in which I gained vital experience in my major field of PR and international communication. Balancing studying with exploring abroad was one of the most challenging parts of my time abroad, but like most things, I persevered and learned something from it. Academic success is important, but it won't come without balance, especially when abroad.

Some of my favorite time abroad was spent exploring more local cuisine with foreign and Japanese friends such as eating at restaurants and izakayas often missed by foreign visitors. Food was such a large part of my visit and I was happy to eat at my friends' recommended places. In addition to this, I also became a regular at a couple of places and enjoyed getting to know the employees who worked at them. They often went above and beyond in customer service by memorizing our regular orders and even presenting us with additional food for no extra cost at each visit. Getting to know locals was a large part of my complete lack of homesickness. There was never a moment I felt alone or out of place as I was surrounded by the most welcoming people. I heard a lot about how hospitable Japanese people were before I arrived and I can confirm without a doubt that Japanese hospitality is unmatched.

Throughout my time in Japan, I had the opportunity to visit well-known places such as Kyoto, and Osaka and of course live in Tokyo. However, my favorite places were always the lesser-known towns I would visit on day trips with my friends. I visited the beautiful towns of Hakone, Fujiyoshida, Kibune, Kawagoe, and more but my all-time favorite experience was in Chichibu of Saitama prefecture. Chichibu isn't typically a place that would've crossed my radar but I'm glad it did. Along with a friend, I traveled two hours outside of Tokyo to attend my first festival in Japan which was the Chichibu Night Festival. We visited the neighboring Nagatoro before heading to Chichibu to enjoy the festival.

As some of the only foreigners in the town, I felt a bit uneasy originally. Though I am of a lighter complexion, I'm still a Black woman in Japan which isn't common to see. In Tokyo, people are much more used to foreigners, however, in the small town of Chichibu, we were more of a rarity and thus got a *lot* of stares. It felt odd at first, however when people realized my friend and I spoke some Japanese, people opened up to us a lot more. It didn't take long for us to realize most people were just curious about us. We conversed with quite a few people throughout the day and had many wholesome conversations about our studies and time in Japan. We got lost a few times, rode an old steam engine train, tried almost every street food, prayed at the shrine the festival was celebrating, and probably walked the length of the town's center about six times. However, the absolute highlight of the day was the float procession through the town and the breathtaking firework display. It was a wonderful day and the people around us went out of their way to welcome us and make sure we had a great time. To this day, it is probably still my favorite experience from my first semester abroad. I learned just how important it is to treasure every moment abroad even if that moment is getting lost and having conversations with strangers at a festival. You may easily find that it's one of your fondest memories.

Following my fall semester abroad, I decided to extend my Japan program to the full academic year abroad as I decided I wasn't ready to leave yet. After my graduation in 2023, I want to take time off to travel to more countries where I can explore the local cultures. As for career, I am leaving my options open. I've started to explore graduate school opportunities here in Japan and am excited to see where that takes me. I once heard a quote by Mary Anne Radmacher that stated, "I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world." As an avid lover of the moon with an appreciation for travel and the country of Japan, I can confidently say that I am definitely not the same. My perspective on life and culture has changed for the better and so have I. I am beyond thankful to have studied abroad in Japan and the opportunity could not have been possible without the support of the JASWDC Tanaka and Green Scholarship committee.