

**Reflections:
A Journey of Understanding and Being
Accepted**

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March 15, 2005

1.0 Forward

It was only recently, a full year after I returned to Canada from Japan, that I have finally been able to think and start to make sense of everything. Because of this long delay, I entitled this work “Reflections”. Honestly, that is all I have been doing for the past year. I have been reflecting back and remembering the good and tough times. “Reflections” is a collection of short integrated stories of my experiences. The experiences’ mission is to reveal to the readers the development of myself. I would like to accentuate that these experiences are factual but the interpretations are to my views and opinions.

I would like to thank Prof. Smith, Prof. Inomata and Prof. Ng for giving me this chance of a lifetime. I would like to express my everlasting friendship to the friends I have made in Japan, particularly Hanamura, Honma, Yoshikawa, Ogihara, Machida, Aikawa, Ai-chan, Nozomi, Satoshi, Kunio, Yumi-san, Ota-san, Nishimura and anyone I have missed. You are my family in Japan. Also to my dear fellow exchange friends: Aayam, Felica, Martin, Wu dang, Joaun and Eunjoo. You were there to understand and be there for me in times of need. To my volunteer club friends: Yasu, Noripi, Kasumi, Ikeji, Kimu. You shared your lives with me and accepted me. I will keep on smiling like I promised.

2.0 Misunderstanding

Reflecting back and comparing to the life here in Canada, it seems that the Japanese culture and society really triumphs not on the achievements of the individual but as a whole. My initial understanding of Japan was that the Japanese people were being oppressed by the system, which limited their creativity and ability to express themselves as a distinct individual. In fact my original thinking was utterly false. Instead the Japanese culture has grown to understand the power and usefulness of a team. Everyone has their role to perform to make this team work. What is success if there is no one to share? The whole group succeeds or fails together. In either case, the burden of winning or losing is shared among members. My friends in Japan were students that came from

very different parts of Japan. They depended on each other for strength. They also knew that when they were in trouble they had friends to help them.

3.0 Background Information

Since first year at University of Waterloo Engineering (2000), I have been trying work on an exchange with a Japanese University. I have met with varying degrees of rejections and obstacles. Finally, with 4 days left till my departure, I was officially allowed to depart for Japan by the University of Waterloo and the Japanese government in April of 2003.

4.0 The Journey there

It wasn't until I boarded the plane to Japan, did I realize the hardwork that I had put forth in the last two years had been a success. It took endless meetings and planning to get to this point. Now that I was on my way, I began to have doubt about my choice of exchange. Don't get me wrong, I was totally excited about observing the different culture and food. However, the daunting question was: "Would I be able to accomplish what I have set out for myself?"

I spent the first week after arriving in Japan living in Tokyo for sight seeing. Tokyo was overwhelming! It provided such a contrast to a Canadian lifestyle that it even exhausted and confused me. I remembered the very first place I randomly walked into was the local red-light district. Everything had an "in your face" attitude with men wearing suits trying to lure you into their hostess bar. The days preceding this experience became more enjoyable, especially with the sakura flowers blossoming.

I especially enjoyed the local festivals that were held by different temples celebrating the blossoming of the cherry blossom trees. A narrow street leading to the temple was lined with different stalls of merchandise and food at either side. The street extended to an island at the middle of a pond. The pond was surrounded by blooming cherry blossom trees. The busy hustle of the merchants and the chatter of the locals made the festival an outstanding initial experience.



Following the first week in Tokyo, I relocated to Sendai, Japan. Within Sendai I attended the Tohoku University and where I spent the next 9 months. The next few weeks in Sendai were very interesting. I was able to setup a bank account, insurance, solve municipal legal issues, found my way around the city, utilized local transportation, bought daily living supplies and fed myself with what was strangely available. Everything was new and it was great! I took great pride in doing everything myself and tried to learn how everything worked. I learned later that most foreign exchange students got help with translators. Looking back, not having the translators, allowed me to learn the language faster and understand the system better.

For a foreigner, the language difference, like me, seemed like a large barrier. However the anxiety of the people who worked at the banks, national insurance offices or local shops was much greater. As a foreigner in a country, we expected the difficulty. It was more frightening as a local resident being confronted with this problem unexpectedly.

5.0 Meeting my Life Long Friends

The most exhilarating and fearful moment in the whole exchange experience was meeting Professor Smith, Prof. Inomata and their laboratory group members. The two professors were the reason why I could participate in this exchange. They had gone out of their way to make this possible in the respect of Prof. Ng (University of Waterloo Chemical Engineering Professor) and the exchanging spirit. Their impression of me was vital to my success and the success of the exchange.

To my surprise and amazement, the two professors were of great caring personality. I still remember Prof. Smith's smile when he first met me. It was like sunshine that hits you in the morning telling you that things will go smoothly for the day. Prof. Smith invited me to join him for tea in his laboratory. He stated that this would be the perfect time for me to meet his laboratory students. Would these laboratory members be open minded to my strange ways? Would they have patience for my inadequate language ability? Would I be accepted?

Prof. Smith and I walked down to the laboratory and my attention was instantly focused on the members that were sitting around the table. The members had tea set out with biscuits as refreshments. As Prof. Smith explained about the exchange to everyone, he asked me to introduce myself. I stood up and introduced myself in Japanese. No matter how hard I tried I could not convey what I wanted to say in Japanese. I had to resort back to English and hoped for the best. Eventually, all members of the laboratory had to introduce themselves in English as well. They struggled as much as I did in Japanese. As tea time ended, the laboratory members showed me around and assigned me a desk within the laboratory. The desk was surrounded by other members, which I found out later was their plan to maximize contact with them.

As a requirement for the exchange, I took Chemical Engineering courses in Tohoku University that were taught totally in Japanese. Lucky, I was given contacts to some classmates that were able to assist me in my studies. I attended my first class and discovered that I blended in very well. My classmates had the hardest time trying to distinguish me from a regular student. It was through the process of elimination that they finally found me. To my surprise, three of my classmates were able to speak English very fluently. They were also outgoing and fun to have around. Later on, they took me out and showed me some night life in Sendai. They taught me many interesting facts that a normal tourist would not be able to learn.



To improve upon my Japanese skill, I was able to have a tutor from my class once a week to help with my studies. Lucky, a friend who was also a classmate offered to help. This worked in my favor, because she was the top student in the class and she wanted to improve upon her English ability as well. Studying in Japanese took a lot of time, effort and determination. It was easy to just give up and hope for the best. However, I was determined to get the credits I need to graduate and accomplish everything I had set out for this exchange. It wasn't until the final exam did I realized that, the professors of these courses had denied my request for an English given exam. Reflecting back, I understand their reasoning. In the end, I passed all my courses. I even achieved some high scores.

6.0 Building relationships

It was my first cafeteria meal with everyone as a Tohoku student. I was terrified, not knowing what to expect. I followed their every step. I lined up with everyone to be served. We sat down and ate. That was how our relationship started. The cafeteria itself was open concept with rectangular table rows. On two sides of the cafeteria there were food stations serving different varieties of food that were proportioned. At dinner times, most of the tables were full of students talking and eating.

My first cafeteria meal consisted of a packaged milk box, deep fried chicken, a side cabbage salad and a bowl of rice. To my surprise, Japanese mostly drank homo milk that

was on the border line to being yogurt. Every other meal after this one would be similar. The only difference was my ability to order different foods and converse with my friends. By breaking bread together in a daily scenario we were able to understand that we were not that different. With every meal together, I learned their customs well. I tried everything at least once to show them that I am open minded and willing to understand.

7.0 Adapting

Their English skills improved as much as my Japanese skills. The laboratory members including me communicated more and more. More importantly we became good friends. They changed themselves to fit me; as well I changed myself to fit them.

I was determined to fully adapt and become one of them in everyway possible. I never noticed it before, but I tried really hard to fit in unconsciously. Thinking back there were a lot things that I didn't have to do, but I did anyways. In one instance, I insisted to sleep in the laboratory. I was talked out of it many times and gotten a ride home. Finally it happened. I slept in the laboratory to study for examinations. To be honest, studying at home would had been a better choice. However, by sleeping in the laboratory I had just become so much closer to everyone since everyone has experienced this previously. I told everyone about it and actually felt proud.

I heavily participated in the laboratory events. I never refused any invitations to go anywhere. I would participate in parties and also laboratory cleaning days. I even attended a dating party, where single guys and girls were matched together at dinner. The laboratory cleaning was a monthly event, where all members arrived early and cleaned the laboratory from top to bottom. I would offer to do all and any jobs. Eventually, I learned what was needed to be done and initiated myself. Lastly, after completing my courses I was allowed to participate in a research project. This allowed me to share what ideas I had to offer.

8.0 Reciprocating

It was obvious that no matter how much I adapted and how much I conformed, I will never be Japanese. Everyone knew this aspect from the start. The fact that separated me from being a foreigner was that I had made everyone around me feel that I was trying

my best to understand. It was because of this, that all my friends respected me as an individual and equal.

When I first started to participate in the laboratory experiments, I was performing experiments with normal clothing. All other members had a laboratory jackets. One day, they presented me with my own jacket. It was one of the best moments of the trip. I put on the jacket and didn't want take it off. I wore it to lunch and dinner. They laughed at me, but I knew deep down they felt the same way.

9.0 Can never forget

The nine months that I stayed in Japan passed by extremely fast. It was a year and half since I left and it only seemed like yesterday that I was eating in the cafeteria with my friends. With all the memories that we have created over the nine months, I am revitalized. My friends in Japan were more then anything I could hope for. Whenever I dream, I would dream that I was with them. If I could visit anywhere in the world I would visit Sendai to see them. If I won a million dollars I would share my luck with them all. For all the love and caring they have offered to a stranger like me, I don't know how to repay them except for being the best I friend could to them.

I surround myself with these memories to this day. These pictures remind me of my family in Japan. There are many moments in my daily life that makes me reminisce to special moments that we have shared. I hope we can reunite and bring those memories alive once more. I know one day, we can find it in our busy schedules/life to make more happy memories together.

ホントニありがとうございます。皆は僕のために幸せでいてください。ある日に私たちはもちろん一緒に会う。どこでも、いつでも僕は絶対皆の事をおぼえている。乾杯！



じゃまたね。

Tony Cheung
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