

Tanaka-Green Scholarship Reflection Essay

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Last August, I departed from D.C. as an eager student of IR full of enthusiasm and bookish know-how but completely lacking in overseas experience. I was beyond excited to go to Japan, a country I had dreamed of visiting since childhood, but was also anxious as it would be my first time leaving the United States. Once boarded, the misty hills of Appalachia disappeared behind me, and I started my journey bound for a new land. Now August has come again, and as the summer rain pours down in Charlottesville, not so different to the monsoons that drenched Tokyo, I sit and reflect on the time I spent in Japan. A year spent roaming the streets of Shinjuku and Shibuya, forging lifelong friendships, and delving deeper into the socio-political puzzles that attracted me to the study of Japan. Immersion in a foreign land taught me more about my own culture, while at the same time giving me a greater appreciation of an alternate way of life.

One of my key goals in studying abroad was gaining some level of competency at Japanese. I immersed myself in comprehensive Japanese courses where my ability improved by leaps and bounds. I am so grateful to the skilled and enthusiastic sensei who encouraged my curiosity and often stuck around to talk with me after class. With the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills I acquired I was able to pass the JLPT N3, and have plans of studying for and taking N2 in December.

I delved deeper into the sociological and political realities of East Asia through the courses I took at the School of International Liberal Studies (SILS). I was thrilled at the diversity of courses offered; I took classes with topics ranging from Japanese politics to the contemporary Japanese Buddhism to the Chinese diaspora. There is one class I would especially like to note: a course called "Contemporary Issues in the Pacific" taught by Prof. Greg Dvorak. I learned about how neo-colonialism, militarism, and tourism have converged in the Pacific and how the peoples of Pacific island nations are advocating for their homelands. I later applied these lessons as an intern at the Embassy of the Marshall Islands in Tokyo, where I saw first-hand how Pacific Islanders are pursuing their peoples' interest across the globe.

In addition my internship at the Embassy, I had many out of class experiences that filled my days in Tokyo. I participated in language and culture exchange groups, which was a great way to meet Japanese students and improve my speaking skills, as well as discuss the interesting similarities and differences of our two cultures. I joined Waseda's English debate circle to better integrate into campus life and discuss political and philosophical issues with other students. It ended up being conducted almost entirely in Japanese (despite its supposed status as an English club), so it was excellent language practice and I shared a lot of great memories with my teammates. I also went through a string of strange and dysfunctional part-time jobs, from which I gained a treasure trove of *interesting* experiences. I once was working at a place where everyone got fired in a group LINE message, and an 英会話 where the manager would cancel classes right before they started. I believe, however, that you can learn as much from a failed job as a good job, and I certainly learned my share about mismanagement and bad marketing strategies that semester.

Any recount of my time in Japan is incomplete without mentioning the wonderful people I crossed paths with. I have to start with my host family, who opened their home to me for six months and showed me how they lived. Their generosity knew no bounds and I can never repay them for their kindness. I was lucky to befriend a group of Japanese upperclassmen and exchange students, who gave me tips about life in Tokyo for the average college student, and served as co-adventurers on my trips through Japan. We went everywhere from Kamakura to Korea together. Late night practices and travel competitions led to me becoming incredibly close with my debate partners, we all grew from one another. Although oceans now separate us we are still bonded together, and I hope to see them all again someday. s

After returning from my year abroad I feel like my life is in transition. As a rising senior I will be striking out into the workforce soon, but what I want to really do feels unclear. My initial goal was to become a policy expert in East Asian affairs, but after watching my friends go through the arduous job-hunting process, talking with professionals in Tokyo, and some honest soul-searching, I am starting to reconsider that. Rather than staying in the think tank bubble, I am more compelled by people whose jobs required them to use research and an understanding of current events to solve a problem and take an actionable solution. So now I am looking at the private sector, specifically US companies expanding into Japan or visa versa, for potential opportunities. In the meantime, I am going to continue studying Japanese and sharpen my expertise in Asian political and economic affairs, both because it continues to be my passion and because these skills could translate into a future career.

I would like to end by thanking the Japan-America Society of Washington, D.C. for selecting me as a recipient for the Tanaka-Green Scholarship. Not only was it a great boon financially towards affording life in Tokyo, but it was incredibly affirming to have my goals and interest in Japan supported by a local organization. If this scholarship was created in the hopes of strengthening the ties between the U.S. and her ally in the East, then in my case that goal was certainly fulfilled. Through my yearlong study at Waseda University, I was able to focus my studies on both the Japanese language and the sociological and geo-political aspects of East Asia, try my hand at a variety of volunteer and part-time jobs, and befriend people from around the globe. My year in Japan has made me reexamine and reorient my future goals, and no doubt I will carry this experience as a treasured memory for the rest of my life.

私にタナカ・アンド・グリーン・アカデミック奨学金がもらったワシントン DC 日米協会に誠にありがとうございます。奨学金をもらって東京の生活費が安くなって助けていただいたから、緊張を抜いて日本語や日米の政治を勉強に集中ができてよかった。一年間交換留学の経験を通して、日本の伝統的な文化や現代的な生き方を学んだこと、自分の文化を見つめ直したこと、色々な新しい体験ができて嬉しい。そして、たくさん友達を出会って遊んだことができてよかった。一生にこれほど一番素晴らしかった経験と思う。アメリカと日本の結びは大切なもの、そして未来にその結びを強化したいと思っている。