

My Time in Japan on the MEXT Japanese Studies Scholarship

by Zachary Kok, MEXT Japanese Studies Scholar (Keio University; September 2018 - 2019)

When I first began studying Japanese language at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, it was somewhat difficult to gauge how much I had really grown in my understanding of both the language and its associated culture. I had great teachers that had acknowledged my skills and helped me grow, fluent friends who encouraged me, but due to being unable to fully apply my Japanese speaking ability to my everyday life, I was never fully sure how my skills would translate when pitted against everyday life in Japan, nor what my future trajectory would be in the realm of language studies. Through my academic endeavors, the opportunity to study abroad in Japan made itself ever clear to me as I considered these thoughts to be relevant to my growth. I had learned as much as I could, and it was now a test to see how much I had grown in my understanding of Japan and Japanese culture; to see how far I had come and how much farther I could go.



If it were not for the MEXT Japanese Studies Scholarship I had received, I would not have had as rich and full of an experience as I did during my study abroad. Before anything else I need to acknowledge the staff present at Keio University. I had a lot of anxiety over figuring out my living situation and logistics to my funds when I first arrived in, but they very quickly helped me out with every question I had, and were always so kind to me, and made me feel like it was the right choice to both come back to Japan and receive aid from MEXT. The classes I took during the program were also of huge benefit to my experience. They definitely stretched me and my abilities in ways I was not expecting, but it was all the better that I felt challenged, and thus felt the need to strive for excellence. The classes I took helped instill new ways of studying and understanding Japanese language, and all of the lessons taught naturally flowed out of the classroom into my everyday life.



So many of my favorite memories and moments I had during my exchange program came from the amazing Japanese friends I met with during my time. Because finances were not an issue, I never had to forgo gatherings and meet ups. I never felt like I had to cut back on costs

and trips in order to sustain myself. The MEXT Japanese Studies Scholarship gave me the freedom to not only explore and experience Japan at my own pace, but also the ability to see many unique places such as the kabuki theater in Ginza, the beautiful Cherry Blossoms in Shinjuku Gyoen, or even the quiet and peaceful town of Tsunashima that I lived in for the year.

On top of having the freedom to explore more of Tokyo and developing a greater love for the city and its people, I was even able to spend my Winter Break with friends who live in the northern area of Sendai. I never once felt limited in terms of where I could go and what I could see in Japan. And I was always grateful to have friends (old and new) by my side to make the exploring and learning all the more worthwhile. With their help in affirming me in my growth in my Japanese language abilities, and by illuminating all of the interesting and beautiful aspects of Japanese culture, I now know for certain that I see my future career and life in Japan. I have the MEXT Japanese Studies Scholarship to thank for making my study abroad experience be a catalyst for helping me realize this goal.