
2014-15 Field Notes

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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Person to Person in Japan

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IDST 031

Mid-Semester Assignment

For this assignment, I interviewed my two host parents over a period of a few days. My host family consists of a middle-aged couple and their three young children — ten, six, and four — so the only time of day we are able to simply sit down and talk uninterrupted is at night.

When first arriving in Japan, there were two things that surprised me, the first being the overall feeling of trust and safety. The second was the extreme importance of the family unit. I was not entirely ignorant about the culture before coming to Japan, but it was still a slight shock to see the differences in person. While simply walking around Yokohama during the morning and late afternoon, it is easy to spot the large number of young children out and about. But what makes this remarkable is that they are often without parental supervision. And Yokohama is not a small, provincial town with only one main road, but a very sizable city. Regardless, it is not uncommon to see children as young as eight or so navigating their way through the city without an adult. This sense of safety also extends to the adult citizens of Japan as well. Bike locks are not an often seen fixture here, unless bikes are left at a train station or other well-traversed area. But even on Kanto Gakuin's campus, there are rows of bikes left unattended for periods of time. Nighttime also has a much safer atmosphere. Again, it is not too uncommon to see groups of children wandering on their own, and sometimes I feel like a paranoid fool for how tense I am when walking back in the evening. Even in a residential area.

The second difference was how family-oriented Japan is. This is not to say family is not an important value in the United States, but it has a much stronger presence in Japan, which shows in a variety of ways. Before joining my host family, I noticed that a larger percentage of advertisements also promoted the family unit. Even mundane products like insurance and air fresheners were not exempt from this. Furthermore, family often extends beyond just the nuclear family unit. In only the past few weeks since my home stay began, I have seen host parents' parents more frequently than I typically see my own grandparents in a year. My host father's mother often takes care of the children after school, whereas my host mother's parents often visit or call.

Culturally, Japan is also a very humble country. A good Japanese citizen is one who works for the whole before the self. Individualism is viewed as more harmful than beneficial, whereas in the U.S. being an individual is a fact to be proud of. During one of the conversations I had with my host parents, they mentioned that they were surprised by how "Japanese" I was. Before my arrival, they had the idea that all Americans were very direct about themselves and what they wanted — essentially picky and hard to please. Japanese, on the other hand, rarely talk about their own interests and wants. It is not difficult to see how my host parents formed this conclusion. Not only are the cultures blatantly different, but even the languages themselves. On one hand, English is very clear and straight to the point. On the other,

Japanese can be quite vague. Time is sometimes hard to interpret, unless a time is specifically mentioned, and frequently, multiple questions — or entirely different questions — will be asked in Japanese in place of what would have been one question in English. I also had my own preconceived ideas about the Japanese and the Japanese culture before living in Japan for an extended period of time. However, after these frequent evening talks, I believe cultural misconceptions are being quickly corrected. Of course, beyond the “why” someone should have these talks, it is frankly also a fun way to learn directly from the culture. When first coming to Japan, Bond-sensei of the International Center told us to get out and explore. Studying is important of course, but we could easily do that without even leaving home.