

# **JENESYS Programme 2008**

## **Reflection**

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Japan has always been one of the most influential countries in Asia with its state-of-the-art technology and innovative entertainment. What lay hidden behind the façade of this pioneer nation has always intrigued me greatly. Via the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) programme, I am privileged to be a representative of Hong Kong in my first visit to Japan, being a part of the mission to strengthen friendship ties between China and Japan and gain deeper comprehension of each other's culture.

My first stop, Tokyo, immediately gave me the thought that I have not yet set foot on Japan, owing to the maturity of constructions and transport systems. Rather, it seemed more of an advanced version of Hong Kong. However, what truly amazed me was the lush greenery that penetrated the entire capital, especially the ginkgo trees, which is actually a symbol of the city. The vast grassland and shade outside the Imperial Palace, along with the Nijubashi Double Bridge, constituted one of the most spectacular instances of both environmental protection and heritage preservation together I have ever seen. Tranquil yet majestic, it is a landmark in the core of Tokyo. The message is in the air: we do not need to sacrifice our soothing nature and historical relics to expand our city to a new height.

I soon discovered that there is more to how much the Japanese really loved our planet. When I visited the Kobe Resources Recycle Centre, the ample efforts and resources placed into sorting bottles and cans according to their materials and colours was indeed impressive. What I did understand is that conservation is not empty talk in Japan, but is considered to be an imminent issue that must be tackled actively. The Japanese government did devise a solution to deal with this problem in a most realistic manner. While Hong Kong may lack the technology to achieve this far, at least we too could devote more resources into this topic.

What is more astonishing is that it is a tedious chore to locate a rubbish bin in the streets of Japan. Even recycling bins are uncommon, not because the Japanese do not encourage reducing waste, but in fact it has become an instinct for most of them to carry their trash home to dispose of properly with respect to their categories. As an example, milk cartons and aluminium cans are washed before dumping to facilitate the recycling process. Despite the lack of litter bins, the streets are actually cleaner than those in Hong Kong! What we can grasp in this phenomenon is that the standard

of our surroundings that we all live in is a direct outcome of collaboration of the government and the citizens. It is evident that the quality of our environment in Hong Kong is deteriorating, and while there is now public education via the mass media, we still have a long way to go in safeguarding our environment. The crux lies in how this sense of unity can be instilled in every one of our minds, to cease putting our comfort at top priority and help make a step to improve our planet. This is not a question of ability but ethics, and we will have a far better place to live in when we all realise this common goal. We must consistently care for our world with passion like the Japanese do, and not be suddenly conservative when problems arise.

The vigour of the Japanese race was further exemplified when I visited the Disaster Reduction Museum in Kobe. This museum commemorates the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 that devastated Kobe, which claimed over 6,000 lives and caused trillions of yen of damage. What is thought-provoking is not the magnitude of this disaster, but the way the Japanese responded to it. Needless to say, recovery work proceeded soon after, but even when the city was restored to its former vitality, a museum was specially built by the government to serve as a living reminder to the destructive power of this calamity, as well as providing in-depth evaluation of the tragedy. In this way, future generations can have easy access to information regarding this incident and receive education on this aspect. The Japanese is admirable due to their foresight and commitment in planning for the future, and this is an attitude that we should adopt when handling any obstacle in our lives. In addition, our Chinese government can similarly construct a museum for the Sichuan Earthquake, keeping a detailed record of the catastrophe for the young to contemplate retrospectively.

Through this trip I had considerable exposure to authentic Japanese culture, like the many sumptuous and scrumptious meals with tempura, udon and miso soup and other Japanese cuisines. Yet what made the deepest marks in my heart was the teaching of traditional arts in the schools, such as Judo and Kendo in Kobe-Suzurandai Senior High School, and then there was Enbu, a traditional cheerleading dance, taught in Konan Senior High School. Being my first time in close contact with these arts, I have no denying at all that it was a thoroughly fascinating experience. Integrating customary skills into daily learning acts as both the channel of carrying these traditions into the future and allowing students to have all-rounded exposure in school. These events outside lesson time did not tighten their time schedule for studying, and contrarily alleviated their examination pressure. It is conceived in Japan that extra-curricular activities are one of the critical criteria in evaluating a youth's development. The education system in Hong Kong, on the other hand, places heavier emphasis on academic performance, with pursuits beyond the

examination syllabus being more of an auxiliary nature in a student's education.

It may perhaps be this very difference that I observed the zeal consequently established in Japanese students. They show admirable devotion to their school, often staying after school to play sports like baseball and swimming. Part of this can certainly be accounted by a much larger campus size in Japan on average, and hence far more amenities. Nevertheless, the students have no reservations in their emotions whichever activity they take part in, and the scene is instantly filled with laughter and cheers. The day we visited Konan Senior High School was coincidentally the last day of their school term, and it is their custom that the students would take over the janitors' task of cleaning the campus for an afternoon. The thought of vexatious and enervating manual labour has been realised as a jubilant gathering before dismissal for summer vacation. In Hong Kong, we often consider our alma mater as more of a site for providing us curriculum specific education. We do not have occasions as frequent where we can perform group activities to cultivate dedication a degree this high to our schools. Education in Japan is effective because of its aim at nurturing adolescents into mature and responsible individuals in the society. Hong Kong has long been successful in bringing up elites in work management, and our education can too be enhanced by attributing more time on founding a sense of morality in the young.

Exactly how high ethics are valued in everyday life of Japan is easily observable. What really counts as a plus in their race is their courtesy in even the most minor aspects. Every single interaction I had with the natives was conducted politely, be it on the streets or in shopping malls. When our Japanese tour guide was asked if she will miss us after we returned to Hong Kong, her reply, surprisingly, was negative. Her reason was perfectly sound and logical: she has treated us wholeheartedly throughout the entire journey, and she will not have any regrets even if we never meet again. It struck me as the reason why the Japanese we met was always most kind to us during our presence. To top it off, their sense of punctuality is astounding. It is a trait long embedded since their childhood that they should make it to every appointment at least 5 minutes before the arranged time. At every bus stop or train station, there is headway description correct to the nearest minute, and it is known that these transports will strive to match the predicted time intervals, making the system highly accurate and reliable. All these add up to not just a technically noteworthy country, but a highly civilized one as well.

The most challenging yet rewarding event of this tour was none other than its highlight – staying overnight with a local host family in Kagoshima. With me being Japanese illiterate, while they could speak only simple English words, there is blatant difficulty in conversation. We used every means we could – gesticulating, looking up an electronic dictionary, and even writing Chinese characters, which proved to be

most effective as they compose a substantial portion of the Japanese language (known as Kanji) with only occasional variations in the meaning. Despite the barriers, we still chatted fervently, and we were able to gain deeper understanding of one another. This is a lesson that I learnt the hard way: no matter how tough it is, communication is possible as long as you indulge your entire self in it.

I was particularly touched by the earnest welcome and endless endeavours by the Japanese government in this trip. I had the invaluable opportunity to visit places that usually required authorization in Japan, such as the University of Tokyo and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, clearly portraying how significant they considered this exchange trip to be, and I hereby express my sincere gratitude for all that they had planned for us Hong Kong and Macau students, including but not limited to every meal, accommodation and transport arrangement. Their credits are beyond words and are the roots of this wonderful experience.