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My first experience of experiencing life in Japan was in the spring of 2019, where I was enrolled in a semester long student exchange programme as part of the Japanese studies curriculum at Ghent University. My destination was Hitotsubashi University, located in Kunitachi, some 20 kilometres to the west of the Tokyo city centre. The semester being over too fast for my liking, I was determined to return as soon as possible. When I heard that MEXT was offering scholarships to study in Japan, I did not hesitate to apply. At the time it was my conviction that returning to Japan would be perfect to not only further improve my Japanese language, it would equally give me access to valuable information and archives that could be used for my research. Moments of stress assembling the required paperwork notwithstanding, the application process itself was explained in great detail, and I could always rely on the helpful support of the embassy employees.

After a few months of patiently waiting I received the great news that I had been recommended by the Embassy to receive the MEXT scholarship and return to Japan as a research student for two years, equally taking care of the flight arrangements. Hitotsubashi University would again be my destination from April 2020.



*Left: Kunitachi's main artery, Daigaku-Dōri, in spring*

*Right: Hitotsubashi University's central library*

At least, it would have had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic. The stringent measures implemented by the Japanese government meant that entry into the country had been made impossible, and consequently my studies abroad had been temporarily put on hold.

In consultation with MEXT it was decided that I would enrol from April 2021 and fly to Japan as soon as the measures would be eased. . After deliberation with my academic supervisor, I tried and successfully passed the Hitotsubashi University exam meaning that I had now become a degree seeking student, writing a thesis in Japanese. After 4 months of participating in classes online, in August 2021 I boarded a plane to Narita with a blend of excitement and a fair dose of trepidation. Finally, my life in Tokyo would begin.

Despite the wearing of masks and the strict sanitary measures, life in Tokyo was just I had remembered it. The bustling streets brimming with life, the remnants of a bygone age lined next to skyscrapers, the efficiency of the public transportation system that puts Belgium's to shame, it had all remained exactly as it was when I had left it. Having grown up in the Belgian countryside , I was yet again struck with a sense of awe at the enormity of the city and amazed at the efficiency with which one could live here. The people are friendly and very patient at understanding my attempts at speaking Japanese. Despite the communication challenges, their generosity and empathy transcended the language barrier.

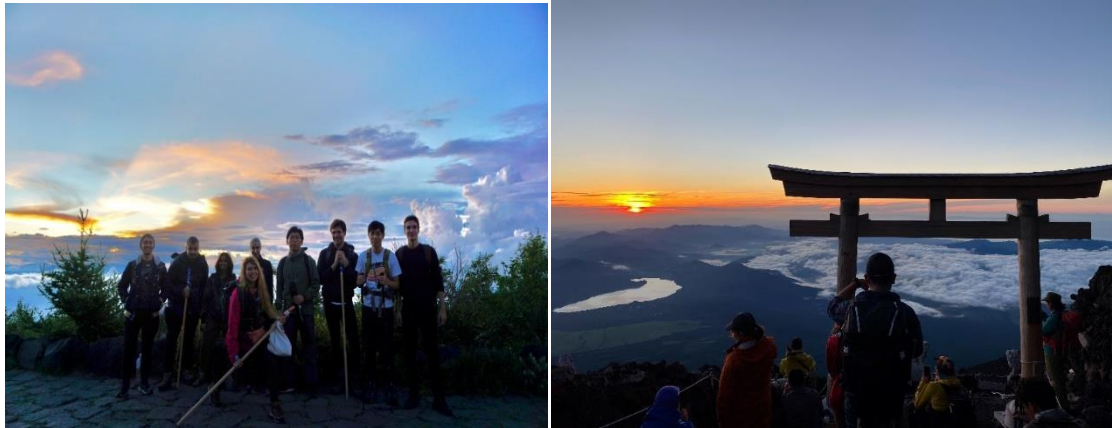
By contrast, life at Hitotsubashi felt more relaxed. Founded in 1875, it remains one of the oldest universities in Japan. Walking through many of well-preserved edifices, such as the central library and the main auditorium, I couldn't help but to feel a sense of reverence and awe. Surrounded by lush greenery, the university grounds have become a place for students and non-students alike to unwind and relax. Furthermore, with an enrolment of 8500 students, it remains relatively small compared to other universities within Tokyo. This fostered a close-knit academic community and created a more intimate learning environment. And while the university library remained relatively small, its resources were more than appropriate for the goals of my research. Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

My living quarters were in an international dorm in Hitotsubashi Gakuen, a quiet sleeper town on the outskirts of Tokyo and about 20 minutes by bike from the University proper. It offered

a welcome respite from the at times overwhelming frenetic pace of the city centre. Some of the friends I have made while living there, both Japanese and international will remain lifelong connections.

*Left: Preparing for a climb of Mount Fuji with friends from the dorm at Hitotsubashi Gakuen*

*Right: Viewing the sunrise from the top of Mount Fuji*



The stipend offered by MEXT provided enough to live modestly in Tokyo, but to supplement my income, I took on various part-time jobs such as waiting tables, teaching, and even modeling. With a demanding schedule of coursework and research, my weekdays fell into a predictable routine.

Lectures at Hitotsubashi University differed somewhat from those I had experienced at Ghent. At the graduate level, research seminars were mandatory, providing an opportunity to share research findings with our academic advisor and peers. These weekly sessions proved highly beneficial, deepening my understanding of my chosen field of research. In addition to the mandatory seminars organised by our academic supervisors, we were free to participate in additional research seminars, offering the chance to further refine our research topics or explore other areas of interest. Participation and input were expected. Although most of the readings, presentations, and discussions were conducted in Japanese, my grasp of the language remained a work in progress, and the experience often felt overwhelming. On the weekends, however, I had the chance to explore different parts of the city and discover hidden gems such as remote shrines, authentic eateries, and traditional ceremonies. Tokyo never ceased to amaze me with its boundless array of interesting places and experiences.



*Left: Winding streets of Ichiya with Tokyo Skytree in the background*

*Right: Cherry trees in bloom*

While it may be difficult to leave one's comfort zone, doing so opens a door to a realm of countless possibilities and new encounters that, while at times difficult and unnerving, are always rewarding in the end. Thanks to MEXT, I have been able to graduate from Hitotsubashi, and am now employed in Tokyo, hoping to further my career here.

If you're interested in gaining a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and want to experience life in Japan beyond the usual tourist activities, I highly recommend considering the MEXT scholarship. It's a great opportunity to immerse yourself in the country and learn about all facets of Japanese life. I truly believe that you won't regret taking a chance and applying for this scholarship.