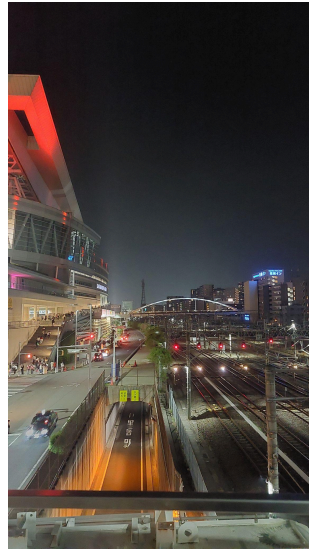


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As the merciless heat of the summer sun has finally made way for the tentative beginnings of Autumn, I am honoured to write a report looking back on my first semester as a MEXT scholarship student.

Currently, I am a research student of the cultural anthropology lab at Tohoku University, but before I was able to get to this point, I went through the MEXT scholarship application process, which I presume if you're reading this, you might be interested in learning more about.

The application process

The first step is, of course, interest. In my case, why I would want to study in Japan is rather straightforward: I had already obtained my Master's degree at Ghent University in Japanese Studies, naturally I wanted to continue my research on Japan, in Japan. However, you do not need a degree in Japanese Studies to be eligible for this scholarship: all you need is the will to do it. Among MEXT students and others, you will hear many different reasons as to why people sought to continue their studies in Japan, ranging from job prospects, to the prestige of Japan's economy and institutions, to its respectable history and culture, all of which are equally valid if those aspects interest you personally.

My own two cents is that if you want to learn, the best place to learn is one you are unfamiliar with. You're already looking to further your education: by doing so at a foreign university, you will not only improve your book-smarts, but also the very undervalued

street-smarts. You learn a new language, try different foods, meet people who were raised differently from you and not only will you discover both the differences and similarities within the rich variety of the human race, you will also learn more about yourself, grow your independence, and nurture an open heart. Such, in my opinion, is the value of cultural exchange: all the knowledge in the world can never be confined to the borders of one country and only by experiencing do you learn to appreciate and understand. You could do it anywhere, but why not do it in Japan?

Japan, where I have personally felt the most comforted in my clumsy inexperience by the hospitality of those around me. Where you only have to stand around looking lost in the city hall for a short moment before someone comes to help you as best as they can, regardless of how well you speak each other's language. Where many people are actively looking to get to know people from other places, because they are as curious and open as we are. Above all, Japan has always felt safe to me. Safe to go out and explore.

If you also feel like you want to pursue a learning path in Japan, MEXT is a wonderful opportunity to do so: not only do you get a monthly stipend, the scholarship also pays for your tuition, which is a rarity. On top of that, the scholarship doesn't pressure you to show results with progress reports or any of that, so you can fully focus on what your institution expects from you without worrying about additional homework, so to say.

Because all of this sounds too good to be true, you might think there is some hidden downside to MEXT, but the case is simply that it is competitive and the application takes a long time and hard work. I personally live by the principle that I don't want to regret anything for not having tried it: why give up before you've even tried? You might as well give it a shot.

You need to prepare a big pile of paperwork, including a research proposal, a letter of recommendation, and perhaps unexpectedly, a health checkup form filled out by your doctor, among other things. All I can recommend here is that you start preparing plenty ahead of time, at least a month beforehand, to make sure you get everything done.

After you deliver this pile of paperwork to the embassy by the deadline, you need to take a test to measure your Japanese language ability, but do not fret! You do not need to know Japanese for this test, it is simply a means to see how much Japanese you know, even if that is zero! There have been plenty of students who didn't know a lick of Japanese that got accepted to the MEXT program and were then given an intensive language course, so this is not a part you need to be worried about. There is also an English language test on the same day, unless you can present a recent TOEFL/TOEIC score or the like.

Perhaps the most stressful part of the application follows a few weeks later: the interview. Quite intimidatingly, you are sat down in front of a panel of experts and are required to talk about your plans and motivation in English. If you know Japanese, they will also ask a question or two in Japanese. This part is stressful, but I can say that the people of the panel were extraordinarily kind and the talk was surprisingly laid back. I even remember chatting about my favourite Japanese food with them at one point. Really, all you

can be is honest: don't try to put up a facade, because then you will put too much energy into that instead of talking about what you are passionate about, i.e. your research! If you show you want this and have been working hard to get it, they will take note.

Early summer, if you're lucky, you might get a notice that you have passed the first round of applications. This starts the longest part: round two, where you apply to universities yourself. For this phase, I can only recommend that you start emailing universities as quickly as possible. Of course, you need to find out if a certain university, a certain research lab, is compatible with your research, but also, if you can, try and find out how long the procedure of getting back to MEXT students usually takes within the university you're interested in replying to (some universities have specific application channels for MEXT students). I'm saying this because in my case, the two universities I applied to took the entire summer, until right before the embassy's deadline, to send me confirmation. Since you are only allowed to apply to two institutions at the same time (and also must apply to a minimum of two), if you happen to get rejected by both and only receive notice right before the deadline, you've lost your chance at the MEXT scholarship in a most unfortunate way. I was lucky to get accepted by my first choice, but some might need to shift through multiple institutions to find a good match.

Then it is September, and hopefully you have gained a tentative admission certificate from your desired institution, but it will still take until January or February for the final result of the second round to be announced. The months will seem long, so take this time to do what you enjoy, perhaps save up with a temporary job like I did, or work on your research or Japanese some more by yourself, if you want to. If you already have permission from a university, most likely, your round two result will be positive.

Afterwards, there will be more procedures and paperwork in your preparation for the start of your scholarship period, and for this part, I want to extend my thanks to the wonderful staff of the embassy, who were ready to help with any questions and actually rooted for me to get here smoothly and safely. Their kindness alleviated a lot of my stress during these months, for which I am eternally grateful.

Daily life as a MEXT research student

The other part you're most likely interested in, if you're reading this, is what it is like living as a MEXT student in Japan.

The first few weeks will be dedicated to the different procedures you will need to handle after your arrival: registering your address, opening a bank account, taking care of your insurance and the like. Do not fret, because you can apply for help with any of these if you need it.

After that, however, you will experience a freedom such as you probably haven't experienced in a long time. As a research student, you don't need to take classes for credit, so you can explore subjects that interest you without pressure. Your lab will probably have

its own rules and expectations of you, but one of the more general tendencies here is that people expect attendance: make sure you show up to your lab regularly. Aside from that, you will most likely experience a lot of freedom while you prepare for the entrance exam, in my case almost a year after I started (which leaves me with still five more months to go at the moment).

So, what do you do with that newfound freedom? You have just landed in a strange place far from home, and though in these times we have more ways than ever to contact home, you might find yourself overwhelmed, fighting a sudden sense of isolation.

Thus follows the most important piece of advice I want to give here: avoid isolation. It's all too easy to fall into it, when you get busy, when you don't speak the language or whatever other reason there might be. In my case, the heat of Japanese summer was absolutely unbearable to me, even here in the North-East, and I could scarcely leave my room: but there are plenty of ways to fight this. Show up to your lab, as I said before; build a routine. During my first semester, I came every weekday except for Wednesdays between the same hours, because the habit helped bring structure to my days. On Wednesdays, I worked in the library and often went to cafes. Your labmates are the first people you can ask for advice and vent your research woes too, as you are all in the same boat, and could become your first friends in Japan.

I also joined a circle I was interested in, a choir. These people whom I meet thrice a week and prepared a concert with are some of my best friends, and the schedule basically 'forces' you to come out and have social contact at least a few times every week. Tohoku University has such a rich variety of clubs and circles for students: I highly recommend that you arrive in April if you can and check out which clubs your institution has to offer. Most are very open to foreign students and you might spend the most fun you'll have during your scholarship in one of these.

Lastly, take little trips for yourself. While you're in Japan, every now and then, it is totally fine to try out the tourist life. Even when you're out on your own, when you're at a festival or beautiful seaside town, there will be so much to see and experience that the feeling of isolation will have a hard time putting its clutches in you.

Fortunately, doing cultural exchange is simply fun. Living in Sendai, I was able to experience the Aoba Matsuri in May, where people danced the Sparrow Dance in the streets, and of course the famous Tanabata Matsuri in August, when the centre is adorned with gorgeous paper decorations that people from all over the country come to witness. I've had the opportunity to visit the World Expo in Osaka where my friend happened to be working in the Belgian pavilion. I've cooked Belgian waffles with my friends one day, and made takoyaki with them another day. I've even had the opportunity to try other students' homemade Chinese and Indonesian: it is at these moments when I truly realise that the core MEXT mission and the one thing they expect from you, aka being a bridge between Japan and Belgium, is one of the most fulfilling and frankly enjoyable things to do. You can do it by living and absorbing, by trying out and keeping an open mind.

A final note about my personal progress. My research is on music, namely Japanese electronic music from a posthuman perspective, but I will not bore you with the details of that. I was fortunate enough to be accepted to the EAJIS conference which took place at Tohoku University in September and spent most of my research during the first semester preparing for that. If you enjoy Japanese music, one other great advantage is that in the country, you have the opportunity to see so many more artists than you ever would in Europe; I certainly have taken advantage of that opportunity so far. During the second semester, I will focus more heavily on studying for the entrance exam while continuing to work out the methodology of my future fieldwork. I am looking forward to another semester of new experiences, learning and most of all, the relief of colder weather. I thank the MEXT, the kind people at the embassy, Tohoku University and my supervisor for making this possible at all.

Pic. 1: Cherry Blossoms in Sendai

Pic. 2: Saitama Super Arena and surroundings by night

Pic. 3: Tanabata Festival decorations

Pic. 4: Matsushima