

## **Paraic Chung (Engineering) - Japan JLSP Exchange Programme, Tokyo Autumn 2013**

After four years at Cambridge, most people go straight into further studies or a job. However, I decided to go to Japan on the JLSP programme at Nihon University, organised through the international programmes department in Pembroke College. My reasons for enrolling on this programme was primarily to improve my language skills as I had learnt Japanese in the Engineering department for 4 years. At the time, I felt that I had hit a metaphorical wall which could only be overcome by immersing myself in the Japanese culture. So I packed up my bags and got on the plane bound for Tokyo in September, readying myself for a culture I had been learning about for so long.

The programme offered classes in Japanese reading, writing, listening and speaking; all of which were offered at different levels decided by the entrance exam on the first day. I was placed in the third class out of five, class C, which roughly corresponded to preparing for the N3/N2 JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test). Almost all classes were conducted in only Japanese, and the fact that English was not the first language for many of my international classmates also meant that sometimes talking in Japanese outside of class was easier, adding more to the learning experience.

While the classes and homework occupied us for much of the week, many chances to experience Japanese culture were organised by the JLSP office at Nihon University. The trip to Hakone, a place not far from Mount Fuji, gave me the chance to eat some of their famous black eggs, which were eggs boiled in the natural hot springs (or onsens in Japanese) in the volcanic area there. These are believed in Japanese culture to be good for you as the first two eggs are said to extend your life by 7 years each, while the Japanese people joke that the third will let one "live until they die".

We also had a chance at learning how to cook traditional Japanese cuisine in a cooking class organised by one of the teachers. We were taught how to cook shougayaki, a traditional Japanese dish which roughly translates to ginger fried pork, and I also learnt a lot about Japanese food culture and customs. One of the most memorable phrases from that class was that "Japanese people eat with their eyes". What this means is that the presentation of the food matters just as much as the taste, as it is customary in Japan to eat a small main dish surrounded by a number of small side dishes, often with different colours and tastes, as opposed to the Western style of having one large main dish. This was meant to create the impression that a lot of food was being consumed and to create a diverse diet for the consumer.

Unlike previous years, I was also able to home stay with a Japanese family for a weekend. They were incredibly kind and showed us many places of interest, of which included waking up at 5am to visit Tokyo's second largest fish market and Kamakura, most famous for its giant statue of Buddha and incredible natural scenery. The home stay also included spending half a day visiting classes at the high school; I never thought I would ever learn Chemistry in Japanese, but I guess there is a first for everything!

I believe that when learning a language, only studying the grammar and vocabulary without a deep understanding of the culture will make improvements incredibly hard. Therefore the programme was not only valuable for its language courses, but rather the ability to fully immerse oneself in the culture and customs of Japan, while making new friends from around the world. These three

months have not only improved my Japanese, but also given me a rich understanding of Japanese culture and an appreciation of different ways of thinking.

When asked about Japan, most people think of samurai, ninjas and sushi, however it is so much more than that, and one does not fully appreciate this until experiencing this all first hand. I am very thankful to the Calbee grant as well as all the people who worked on the JLSP programme for making this unforgettable experience possible. Living in Japan's capital for three months really opened my eyes and showed me so much more than I could learn in a lifetime from books. This programme has enriched my studies and will definitely play a major role in my future career as I plan to return to Japan in the near future.