

Kakehashi Project: A Reflection

The Kakehashi Project was an eye-opening experience that allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the Japanese culture, foreign policy, and political issues. Seeing Japan, meeting people there, and listening to a variety of lectures helped me to relate the Japanese Politics and Diplomacy course materials to real-life Japan and apply my knowledge to what I experienced through the Kakehashi Project.

After living in Germany for 6 months while completing my undergraduate exchange program, I believed that Germany was the “Japan” of Europe. Others have also told me that Japan and Germany share similar cultures and lifestyles. Although I had this general understanding of the two countries’ similarities, I wasn’t aware of the factors that created them. Through the “Introduction to Japanese Law and Society” lecture given by Professor Nobuyuki Sato, I learned that the Meiji government introduced the German culture to Japan’s legal system, with modifications to fit the Japanese tradition. I was able to see how German’s conservatism shaped the framework of Japan’s legal system, social norms, and culture.

Other lectures we received from Mr. Yamaji and Professor Tadokoro helped to reinforce course learnings and help me understand Canada’s role in Japan’s international strategy and foreign policy. Although we learned about Japan’s stance regarding revising the Article 9 of the Constitution, and the political risks involved in doing so, I gained new perspective from the lecturers, who helped me to apply my knowledge to Japan’s present political and international strategy. Also, it became clear that Japan wanted to maintain and grow its “peacekeeping” status, despite growing threats from North Korea and China. With the growing economic power of China, Canada-China relation is also of important focus to Japan. With both China and Canada seeing each other as a great economic growth opportunity, the two countries are developing closer ties. Japan is interested in Canada for this reason, and Canada’s international image as a global peacekeeper. Not only is Canada a peacekeeping nation, but also an expert in public health and disaster relief. Japan, seeking to become more of a global peacekeeper as well, wants to learn from Canada through closer relationships. This gave me a new understanding of potential roles I could play in Canada-Japan relationship, and how political relations form the foundation for other international matters between countries.

When we visited the Meiji Shrine, it was unreal to see what the shrines look like. We also had a chance to see two traditional wedding ceremonies (with traditional garments for bride and groom) being carried out at the Shrine, which was an interesting experience for us all. We also saw the President of Chile walk into the Shrine, and that reminded me of the past controversy in Japan when Prime Minister Nakasone visited the Yasukuni Shrine. Seeing the President’s visit the Shrine reminded me of the backlash and suspicion of military re-empowerment Japan received from its neighbouring countries (South Korea, for example). It also made me think about the reasons behind including the visit to the Shrine as part of the President’s of Chile’s schedule in Japan, and if there are any political risks involved with her visit.

The homestay, I have to say, was the highlight of the trip for me. It was an opportunity for me to see Japan’s culture play into people’s daily lives. Japan’s international stance on environment and energy conservation was also evident in my host family’s house. They only heated the common area, where all the family members usually spend their time, and the bathroom, and was very diligent with turning off all the lights in empty rooms and even unplugging any appliances that were not in use.

The Kakehashi Project gave me an opportunity to see course-learnings come live in Japan, and develop further understanding of the culture and norms that ultimately influence the nation’s foreign policy.

— Jenny Kim
Master of Global Affairs Candidate