

外国人客員所員を経験して

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Since my first visit in 1991 as a young scientist to attend a conference, I have visited Japan many times! Last January, I started a three-month visiting professor in ISSP. I had done this once before back in 2004 and it was quite enjoyable. My host this time was Prof. Satoru Nakatsuji, a well-known scientist leading a world-class research activity on correlated electrons and frustrated magnets.

Japan is a fascinating country for a foreign visitor. This was discovered as early as 16th century by the Portuguese sailors who set foot on this island and were dazzled by what they saw. A wealthy society completely integrated in the world economy, today's Japan is visited by many tourists each year. However, globalization has not destroyed that flavor of otherness that sensitive strangers can smell as soon as they set foot on this high-tech island. I don't know any other place in the world showing such a capacity to change as fast as modernity requires and yet simultaneously cultivate an eternal recognizable national identity.

There are many things that I like about Japan, which make me come back as often as I can. Let me begin with food. Tokyo is not only the best first-world capital for finding anything decent to eat with less than 1000 yens (10 US\$), but also the one with the most Michelin-starred restaurants (well ahead of Paris). This variety of options makes Japan a paradise for food-lovers. However, what I find most admirable is the attitude of the average Japanese customer. They are fond of their own sophisticated culinary tradition, and yet quite curious about good food coming from any corner of the world. By being knowledgeable and demanding, they make the local food scene very competitive. It begins by the humble places selling delicious ramen and continues as one climbs towards those upscale restaurants, which can be assimilated to gastronomical research laboratories. They disappoint rarely. This all happens thanks to a public who is used to eating good food without vanity and exhibitionism. As for Izakayas, I contend that these venerable institutions for socialization are also pillars of a remarkable contemporary civilization.

I also admire Japanese urbanity. The foreigner can see that here people grow up learning how to behave in society. Statistics suggest that the crime rate is much lower than in cities of comparable size. Back in Paris, I have a favorite quiz for my friends: Let us rank the countries by the time it takes (in minutes? in hours? in days?) to see an unlocked bicycle disappear. Now, which country is at the bottom, where the bike could still be there after several years? Only those friends who have never been in Japan fail to give the right answer. I believe that the low level of violence explains the abundance of various Japanese institutions ranging from *Sentos* to capsule hotels with no equivalent in Europe and very efficient to manage various aspects of social life. Personally, as an amateur of urban life, I miss them.

With such details in mind, you can guess that I had a very enjoyable Japanese life during my three-month stay in ISSP. The hospitality was impeccable. Ms. Akiko Kameda is wonderfully efficient in making the foreign guests' lives easy. Thanks to her and Ms. Mariko Suzuki, Prof. Nakatsuji's secretary, I had little administrative tasks to handle during my stay. Here is another mysterious paradox. Japan is a country with many rules. But we foreign guest are handled with such a delicacy that in most cases we are not aware of them. They are taken care for us.

As a scientist, I was also impressed by the dedication, the intelligence and the modesty of young researchers in Nakatsuji group. I found myself lucky to work with such talented and motivated scientists.

Japan is an exceptional outpost of international science and will remain, I believe, a mecca for science in the foreseeable future. I advise young scientists, no matter their country, to visit Japan as soon as they can.

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