Self-Discovery in the Cross-Cultural Context
—A case study of Australian students who studied at Komazawa University—

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I. Introduction

The School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies of The University of Queensland organises an annual study program over November and December during which students participate in a Japanese language course at Komazawa University in Tokyo and take part in an informal cultural studies program known as “KOMSTUDY.” This is a particularly good program for students who have not spent significant time in Japan to find their feet and enjoy using Japanese to form friendships with the Komazawa students and start planning further Japan experiences. This is a self-funded program and students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree or a BA/parallel degree are eligible for 2 academic credits towards their BA after successful completion of the Komazawa Japanese course.

Accordingly, at the end of KOMSTUDY program, surveys entitled “Self-Discovery in the Cross-Cultural Context” were taken of students to give them an opportunity to look back once more on their experience and reflect on themselves. From 2004 to 2008, a survey was conducted on 32 students. When the University of Queensland students finished KOMSTUDY program, a questionnaire was given to them asking what sort of self-discoveries they had made. The hope was that this might become a starting point for investigating that understanding others goes on to link with one’s efforts in understanding oneself.

The results of this survey were not only for the benefit of each individual, but may be regarded as a valuable reference for public institutions, in particular Komazawa University, and dare it be said, the Japanese Government, Education and Science Ministry and the Japanese Tourist Commission. For international student advisors in particular, the ways in which international students go about attempting cultural understanding is an important matter, and on top of that, a major role they play as an advisor is to encourage this cultural understanding. It can be thought that cultural understanding is essential not only for the students who come, but also for the receiving side. Hopefully these valuable opinions are regarded earnestly and may be of some reference in cross-cultural understanding between Australia and Japan.

II. Survey Sheet

Self-Discovery in the Cross-Cultural Context

Sex  (Male Female)
Duration of Stay in Japan ( )
Nationality ( )

Questions
1) At which times did you feel a difference between you and the local community?
2) At which times did you feel a member of the local community?
3) At which times did you want to remain separate from the local culture and keep your own culture?
4) At which times did you want to participate in and adopt the local culture?
5) At which times did you feel opposed to the local culture?
6) During your overseas experience, at which times did you feel particularly happy?
7) During your overseas experience, at which times did you feel particularly unhappy?
8) Whilst overseas, at which times did you feel a desire to make an extra effort to try harder to improve your experience?
9) What part of the local culture was of greatest interest to you?

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III. Survey Results

Q1. At which times did you feel a difference between you and the local community?
- The times when I felt a difference between myself and the community were those times when decisions which would affect me were being made without my consultation. For example, when the volunteer students assigned to us were organising our activities, I often felt ignorant of what was taking place. I felt left in the dark about what was going to happen, that I was an outsider who was not allowed to know exactly what was going on.
- I sometimes didn’t know if the volunteer students wanted to learn more English, or really just make us happy by taking us around to places that we wanted to go to etc.
- Generally I did not feel a difference apart from the language gap. However there was an instance when a little kid came up to me to tell me I looked weird.
- In the customs of everyday life — e.g. When the shops opened & closed. Most of the times, and especially when miscommunication occurs due to inability to express thoughts (due to level of language ability), and when expectations differ.
- If I made a mistake or visited a place of religious significance and I did not participate in praying because I am a Christian. When I was with other Australian students, I felt separate from the local community.
- When trying out different dishes of Japanese cuisine and realising that sometimes, I did not enjoy it as much as they do. (e.g. natto)
- When I am in a crowded place surrounded by a lot of Japanese speaking in their mother tongue, I can strongly feel the difference between them and me.
- When I first arrived in Japan.
- Certain custom and formality. Japanese are very formal at times and some customs are very different.
- Time in the city and when I talk to the locals.
- When they talked about TV shows/magazines I had never heard of.
- When they know the customs and certain situations like tea ceremony.
- When trying to fit in with my host family.
- When I would speak to someone in Japanese and they would say “Sorry but I don’t speak English.”
- When I have dinner with my host family, the eating culture is a bit different.
- When my needs weren’t recognised or paid attention to.
- When eating breakfast with girls my age and realising how Japanese people take their customs and rules very seriously. Also when on the train, people I sat next to would get up and move.
- When I walked in the street, the local people walked faster than Australians.
- In the beginning when I first arrived.
- The language was barely a problem at all—they saw that I was trying my hardest and so there were no terrible misunderstanding. The big differences were all the rules and etiquette.
- At times when I failed to convey what I wanted to express properly.
- When locals refused to speak Japanese (e.g. when asking someone for directions in Japanese and they wouldn’t reply)
- I felt a difference sometimes at mealtimes with their different customs and habits (e.g. slurping noodles) or during some conversations.
- At sometimes while I was staying with my host family. At some cultural activities.

Q2. At which times did you feel a member of the local community?
- When I was spending time with the volunteer students.
- When living at homestay.
- Most of the time people were friendly and helpful.
- Doing activities such as playing with local kids and talking with local members, host family and kids etc.
- When people mistook me for Japanese and spoke Japanese to me.
- When Japanese people said my Japanese was very good.
- When at university and on trains.
- When I was able to participate with host father and friends in a tennis match.
- Going out with university students.
- After interacting with the students and the host family, I felt welcomed.
- When I was staying with my first host family, I felt most at home. They had 3 children in the family and playing games with them (e.g. Uno, Shiritori, etc.) and learning Kanji from them was when I felt most at home.
- Most of the time.
- When doing activities with a large group of volunteer students.
- I think just walking down the streets, like anyone else made me feel part of the community.
- When spending life with my host family and their
friends and relatives, and when going out with people my age.

- I felt a member of the local community when people took a genuine interest in communicating with me and in sharing their own life stories. Thanks to this I felt like I was being invited into the community. However, although at these times I felt like a member of the community, I remained aware that due to the language barrier and being a foreigner my “membership” was different to that enjoyed by native Japanese.

- I felt a member when we were participating in cultural activities, making food with the family, playing games, making origami with them, helping with the homework.

- Once I was used to riding on the trains I seemed to be just one in a crowd.

- When spending time with students my own age, exploring without a tour guide or in a really big group.

- At dinner times, doing things with the neighbours of my family, activities with my family.

- When I felt the sincere hospitality and friendliness of the host family and volunteer students.

- Nearly all the time. When I was doing normal, everyday activities, using public transport, eating in a restaurant, shopping. When I was with Japanese friends.

- When they know I can appreciate things in the culture. (e.g. I like the local food etc.)

- When I was able to buy things without much problem in communication.

- When I became fluent with the Tokyo train system.

**Q3. At which times did you want to remain separate from the local culture and keep your own culture?**

- Never
- Whenever people smoke. Japanese tend to keep quiet but I would have preferred to be able to voice my distaste.
- No, I am happy with their lifestyle and I can adapt to the environment.
- While doing seiza, it's too painful and I'd rather sit on chairs. Praying at temples because I'm of a different religion.
- Sometimes when eating—but trying new things is part of the experience.
- When I had a shower in the trip to Tomiura in Japan.
- Not at all
- Mainly with food. I still find something disgusting about eating live squid.
- Sometimes I felt the Japanese people worked too hard—I would rather the balance between work and rest of the Australian lifestyle.
- When there were too many cultural rules to obey (e.g. it is not nice to walk on the streets and eat at the same time.)
- When I just wanted to do my own thing.
- In the evenings when I wanted time to rest. When I did not want to go to an Izakaya because smoke gives me a headache.
- The times I wanted to remain separate from the local culture coincided with those times when people implicitly or explicitly highlighted my “foreignness.” Not being treated as just another person but rather a foreigner often compelled me to remain separate from the local culture.
- Using a Japanese toilet, sometimes when we were expected to do things and were not able to communicate well enough to get our feelings across.
- When my family wanted to eat chicken feet.
- None
- At some meal times, taking shoes off all the time, sitting on the floor for meals.
- There were some nights when I was homesick and just wanted to be somewhere as home-like as possible.
- When accepting the local views/values mean a significant drastic change to my view of the things & hence require me to change a significant part of myself.
- When I went to a temple or shrine I did not want to participate in praying, or when I was with a group of Australians. When I met other foreigners (non-Australian), I wanted to retain my own culture.
- When talking about my heritage and the culture of where I come from.

**Q4. At which times did you want to participate in and adopt the local culture?**

- When I feel comfortable enough to do so, when it does not require changing too much of myself.
- Japanese culture interests me but I don’t necessarily want to adopt it. I enjoyed participating in traditional and untraditional Japanese activities such as karaoke, tea ceremony, cooking, etc.
- When I was with Japanese friends or alone.
- When I was listening to the conversation between the volunteer students.
- Immediately.
- When I asked strangers in the street for help and directions (which I found I was doing a lot as I lived in Yokohama) I felt that the Japanese had a warm and friendly response that Australians
generally lack.

- During classes such as Zazen class and Japanese lessons with the teachers.
- In calligraphy, karaoke, tea ceremony
- I was particularly keen to participate in and adopt the local culture when it involved activities I was interested in. For example, since I am interested in temples and shrines I am very keen to understand the formalities and rituals surrounding them better. I was always very interested to visit a new temple or shrine, and determined to properly follow the prayer rituals etc.
- Most of the time, especially when the young people were getting together.
- Participating when I was at school, I was really intrigued with being a student in Japan.
- I enjoyed doing most of the traditional Japanese activities such as calligraphy.
- At all possible opportunities.
- Meal times, cultural activities.
- At the theatre, staying with host family, while visiting a butler café while sightseeing all alone.
- Anytime.
- When we visited the local historical sites and also when we were doing special activities like Zazen.
- As much as I could.
- Most of the time.
- With the volunteer students I tried to be a peer and communicate with usual plain language.
- More conversations and understand their TV shows.
- Learning how to make Japanese food. Hearing the language and speaking authentic Japanese, honorific forms included.
- At the university refectory.

Q5. At which times did you feel opposed to the local culture?
- Sometimes with 'Senpai' ‘Kohai’ structure, I disagree with the locating of someone’s status purely based on age.
- In the hierarchy of ‘Senpai’, ‘Kohai’ and other honorific terms that felt like it was demoting me.
- When I feel misunderstood.
- I did not really feel opposed to the local culture.
- At temples and shrines.
- Cannot remember any such incident.
- Not at all
- I felt opposed to the local culture when its value conflicted with mine.
- For example, I sometimes feel uncomfortable with the status and treatment of women in Japanese society. I also felt opposed to the local culture when it was overly proud of itself. Very nationalistic Japanese who repeated point out to you how “superior” Japan is can be frustrating to associate with.
- When I accidentally stepped outside of the house wearing my socks and not shoes, host father became angry with me.
- I don’t think I ever felt that way. The only example [exception?] maybe is the food.
- I cannot think of anything I felt opposed to in the local culture.
- When it isolated us because we were foreign.
- Never
- When we visited an aquarium in Chiba. The marine lives were kept in very tiny, dirty tanks.
- The spirit of keeping quiet and accepting things.
- The way I do things, such as show time.
- I do not feel opposed to the culture at all.

Q6. During your overseas experience, at which times did you feel particularly happy?
- At uni, on trips with other KOMSTUDY students, on weekend trips with volunteer students.
- When I experienced snow, because Singapore has no seasons.
- When I visited some landmarks I saw in TV show/dramas/books.
- When I ate Japanese food.
- With host family.
- When I could communicate efficiently and could navigate my way around Tokyo.
- When we went on a trip to Kamakura and sea paradise with volunteer students.
- When I was able to fully participate with my Japanese peers in conversation and other events.
- The Kamakura trip.
- Spending time with the volunteer students.
- Eating dinner with my host family, shopping with my Japanese friends, visiting historical places.
- When I was travelling and exploring, as well as meeting long-time friends.
- When we started to become friends with our host family and volunteer students, and once my Japanese improved enough to be able to have a conversation with someone.
- When I was finally understood by my host family. When my host family understood me. Going out. Shopping. Eating.
- When activities were enjoyable.
- When I was having fun with everyone.
- When I was communicating most effectively and felt less of a barrier between myself and those around me.
- After completing cultural activities, talking with Japanese people and doing the some of their ac-
tivities with them.
- While spending time with friends, while participating in organised activities I probably wouldn’t have experienced on my own, when I got to wear a *Kimono*.
- When I managed to go somewhere/find my way somewhere and enjoy myself.
- When I managed to communicate successfully (using Japanese) with a local.
- When I was with Japanese friends.
- Interacting with the students/host family and sharing our experiences and background.
- When I began to know the host family better and bonded with the daughters in the family.
- Able to enjoy myself with Japanese students.
- When I was going out with the volunteer students and my group members.
- I felt particularly happy when I was able to become close friends with my host family and Komazawa students, even though our languages weren’t the same.

**Q7. During your overseas experience, at which times did you feel particularly unhappy?**
- When I went to the hospital and the doctor didn’t know how to handle an allergic reaction.
- I had a great time, so I didn’t feel unhappy at all.
- Never.
- When people would not make an effort to appreciate the culture.
- When I was sick and wanted to rest. My host family were eager to show me a good time so I wasn’t unhappy, just uncomfortable and tired.
- When times I felt I didn’t fit with our own exchange program members.
- When people smoked outside of my room, when professionals neglected to take safety precaution or did certain things to make fun of us.
- No. I enjoyed the trip very much.
- Not at all
- When I was unaware of a cultural rule/expectation and I unknowingly made a mistake. For example, passing food from chopstick to chopstick, then learning the next day in class that it was wrong, and why my host family had reacted.
- During rush hour at tram stations, it’s too crowded.
- I get annoyed when things are too expensive. (Tokyo being the most expensive place to live in the world.)
- When the stress of living in Japan got to me and I felt that it was particularly difficult because I couldn’t convey myself/express my feelings due to the language barrier.
- Sometimes feeling out of place with my host family.
- When it seems like I may have offended people through my ignorance. And when I experience great difficulty understanding people/what they are trying to say.
- I was sometimes a little homesick, missing my friends and usual food. I lived in a host family with three kids and as I am only child I missed peace and quiet.
- There were no times when I felt the extreme feeling of being particularly unhappy.
- When I was communicating least effectively and felt isolated.
- When I could not find a decent cup of orange juice or tea. As well, when I had to pay ridiculous amounts for everyday items.
- When I wanted to go back to Australia.
- When I couldn’t understand conversation or was not able to say what I wanted.
- If I made a mistake, or felt isolated due to cultural misunderstandings.
- There were some nights when I was terribly homesick.
- When I did not understand what was happening, or felt I may have accidentally offended someone due to ignorance or bad language skills.

**Q8. Whilst overseas, at which times did you feel a desire to make an extra effort to try harder to improve your experience?**
- When communicating with local Japanese students, when I can’t express myself fully in Japanese and when I can’t understand their Japanese fully.
- Perhaps I should have tried to socialise more rather than save money.
- When I speak to them I wish my Japanese is good enough to talk more.
- I would speak Japanese more to Japanese people and ask them questions about anything I see that is different from my local culture. When talking with the volunteer students.
- Constantly I was trying to improve my Japanese so I could communicate better.
- When the period of this program was getting close to the end.
- When communicating between me and Japanese. What I learned in that language is still not enough for me.
- When my host family’s relatives came over, I made an extra effort to talk to them as much as possible.
- All the time.
Q9. What part of the local culture was of greatest interest to you?

- The greatest interest to me is their lifestyle.
- The traditional feel of a rural town that I visited in central Japan—it was very serene.
- Sights in scenery, food, people.
- The language, the people.
- Japanese arts.
- Anime and Manga culture, also fashion. Food definitely caught my attention.
- The part of the local culture which was of greatest interest to me was the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and the role they play in people's everyday life and the numerous festivals which occur throughout the year.
- The young culture and the way that the ancient traditions have influenced modern culture, also Sumo.
- Food, Japanese language, Kyogen was a unique and eye-opening experience too.
- Youth culture
- The language, people, food, history, etiquette, traditions (especially at New Years), mixed religions, efficiency of transport, size and design of the houses-every small difference was obvious. I took photos of every trivial thing, including the vending machines!
- Difficult question since I am interested in pretty well everything.
- Their honesty and friendliness.
- Mass media which includes TV, music, magazines, famous people.
- Entertainment and school culture.
- Day to day life.
- Food.
- Language.
- Seeing the difference in pop culture between western and eastern countries and the attitude of Japanese people toward foreigners and Australians.
- Getting to take part in lots of different areas of culture was the most interesting.
- Observing the way Japanese people my age act and behave.
- Eating culture.
- Ordinary life. Day to day activities.
- Temples, arts, pop culture (music, cartoons, Manga, movies), youth culture, consumerism culture.
- Food. Theatre.

IV. Remarks

Compared with the similar questions to Japanese students who stayed in Australia, there is a most significant phenomenon—the independence of an Australian student. They have their own opinion, own religion and own attitude. That means if they are forced to do things which go against their conviction, they tend to feel opposed to Japanese people and culture. That said, the majority of students still exercised their best endeavour to experience new things as much possible.

Living overseas, even for a short period of time, is not always smooth sailing. Dissatisfaction with regard to food was particularly evident. However in despite of all this, many students appeared not yet ready to return home to Australia and already wanted to come back again. This is pleasing news for the Japanese.

Realizing that foreign countries have, at the same time, both differences and points of commonality
is the very first step in international exchange, and can be thought of as the beginning of understanding matters empathically.

*Internationalism* is now a familiar term in both Japan and Australia. It has also been some time since student exchanges between these countries grew in popularity. Over the past 10 years, the number of Australian students coming to Japan to study, whether for the short- or long-term, has increased dramatically. The number of exchange and other students from Japan heading to Australia to study also appears to be on the rise. However, the focus has always been and still is on the actual process of studying abroad. Any cultural understanding, particularly that of daily life, appears rather neglected, being left solely to the host families and the like. The international understanding and exchange inherent in studying abroad is an issue that is yet to be considered at a deeper level.

International exchange not only heightens the level of empathetic understanding of other cultures, but may even extend as far as contributing towards international security. It therefore goes without saying that it is important to increase the number of people who hold an interest in, understand the appeal and have a love of the culture and lifestyle of their own country. As people make an effort to understand others, they also find themselves working toward a deeper personal understanding. As such, promoting this process could also be considered as being an added value of studying abroad. Studying abroad is the best form of obvious international exchange and as such, it may be used to play an important role in the future betterment of international understanding.

The author believes that the starting point of international exchange is dialogue between people, and hopes that this will continue to make a contribution, however seemingly insignificant, for the sake of both nations. She looks forward to the new, younger generation playing an even more active part, burning with spirit to propel cultural exchange into the 21st Century.

KOMSTUDY really contributes to the internationalization between Australia and Japan and Komazawa University’s efforts have been much appreciated.