

YFU Student Exchange Experience in Japan

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“The Odyssey” by Homer has been one of my favorite epics, a tale of Odysseus and his long journey from Troy back to his homeland, Ithaca. When he returned, he was no longer the same person who walked the same streets, spoke with familiar faces, and looked at the same sky. Just like Odysseus, I was strangely disoriented to go back home after my own journey. Despite the chaotic crossroads I encountered along the way, never once I felt grief for myself—only gratitude and joy. My journey did not take me across borders; it reshaped my view of the world and redefined my place within it.

Growing up, I did not have any siblings. I was raised with the most unconditional love and support by my parents. They brought me up with great values, a passion for my studies and my hobbies, and a lover of multiple cultures. Our family loves traveling -- either visiting relatives, participating in orchestra competitions, or simply for leisure. But out of all the countries that we have been to, Japan is our top pick due to its proximity to the Philippines, wonderful seasons, and breathtaking scenery. I have seen Japan through the eyes of a tourist, but I am intrigued how it is to live like a local. The Youth For Understanding (YFU) organization has operated student exchange programs with Japan and they gave me the opportunity to realize my desire to develop a greater insight into the Japanese culture.

On January 14, 2026, I travelled to Japan with four other Filipino delegates. We were greeted by the YFU staff at the Haneda arrival area and took a train to the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center, our home for the next four (4) days and three (3) nights. There, we met our other counterparts from South Korea, Thailand, and India for the YFU student exchange orientation. Together, we studied Nihongo, learned dining etiquette, and were taught proper manners to observe while in public. Lunch time and dinner time were always my favorites. I remember waiting for everyone to be seated at the table and recite “いただきます” (or Itadakimasu, meaning “I humbly receive”) before meals. While eating, we taught each other phrases from our own languages, exchanged stories of our school adventures, and shared laughs on funny moments.



The last day of our orientation came, and we rendered presentations about our countries. South Korea talked about their traditional costumes; Thailand presented a dance from the city of Korat; India discussed their diverse cultures. But for my counterparts and I, we introduced the “Hampas Palayok,” a traditional Filipino game where a blindfolded player tries to hit a hanging clay pot filled with candies or prizes. Once the clay pot breaks, participants are free to grab the treats. In our case, we had an improvised cardboard version of the clay pot and filled it with Filipino snacks. Everyone loved the treats and the thrill of the game. It was such a memorable event and for just a short span of time, we became family.

After completing the orientation, each of us travelled to our own assigned destination -- my designated location is Nara. I had to take a domestic flight from Haneda (Tokyo) to Itami (Osaka). It was my first time flying alone, but I took it with a positive mindset. I met Maori and Akira, my host family at the arrival area. They were happy to see me while holding a welcome sign with my name. Akira drove from the airport to their home in Nishinokyo (Nara), my home for the next two (2) weeks. There, I also met Yuki and Wakana, my host sisters. I also met their lovely cats, Kanata, and Mi. They helped me settle in their home, and we shared stories about my family, school life, and travels. They were super ecstatic to hear my stories. And as I was talking to them, there was such comfort in knowing that I was safe, loved, and welcomed into their home.



My host family’s dynamics are like mine. Both Maori and Akira work during the day, same as my parents. Yuki and Wakana, just like me, spend most of our day in school. Maori prepares the food for the family. She would wake up early in the morning to prepare breakfast and bento meals. On evenings, Yuki and Wakana would help Maori with dinner. I had an opportunity to introduce a Filipino dish in one of our dinners. We cooked “Sinigang na Baboy” which is a sour soup with pork and vegetables. This is eaten together with rice. Maori and Yuki liked it, but Akira and Wakana found it too sour.

One weekend, we went on a day trip to Kyoto. We painted scrolls and handkerchiefs, explored the Kinkakuji temple, and had dessert in a relaxing cafe. It was amazing exploring a historical city and doing traditional activities with my host family. We were able to celebrate the Setsubun, the beginning of spring! We ate Ehomaki while facing at a 45 degree angle. They said that if you make a wish while eating (with no talking among anyone), your wish will come true. I passionately wished for what I desired as I ate the Ehomaki. My wish shall remain a secret. We watched Kyouusuki (“I Fell in Love Today”), a show centered on high

school students finding love. We watched the show for about an hour, and I cherish that moment while sharing giggles to express our amusement. The activities we had further strengthened my relationship with them.

I attended school in Sakurai Senior High School. The travel from Nishinokyo takes around an hour on foot and train. I was loaned a blazer uniform, which I needed to wear every time I was in school. The uniform helped me blend well with other students. While inside the school, it was necessary that we changed to slippers. We keep our outside shoes in a locker. The school flooring was spotless, and the facilities were pristine. On my first day, I introduced myself to my teachers and classmates in Nihongo. Instantly, I felt welcomed, and everyone was willing to interact with me. The Classic Japanese subject is interesting when the tale of Genji was translated. Classic Japanese is challenging for a foreign individual who is still a novice in Japanese, but I had the support of my classmates helping me understand the texts. English classes were also fun and a time for me to help my classmates with the English language. I am amazed at my classmates' ability in running non-stop during Physical Education. They have high endurance. I love being in Sakurai. They have shown me nothing but warmth, hospitality, and care.

I joined the annual Mt. Miwa marathon of Sakurai. All students participated and I felt compelled to join, but I could only walk at that moment as I had sprained my ankle a few days prior. Jeremy sensei walked with me through the marathon, and I did not feel alone. He was one of the people I could converse with in English at Sakurai. He would accommodate me in the English room and give me advice about school -- like my research project back home and the stories we shared about the culture of our home countries. I appreciated his translations for me every time I could not understand Japanese. Kato sensei is the head of the English department. It was amazing knowing that Kato sensei and I shared a fondness for music and the Cello. He allowed me to use his Cello after school so I could practice. He gave me important tips on how I can improve my technique. He also gave me a special lucky charm, which he got from a temple. Kato sensei said I should attach it to my Cello as this can help me play better -- he also has it in his Cello. I considered him as my mentor. I did a presentation about myself and my country in Jeremy sensei and Kato sensei's class, Debate Discussion. I talked slowly so that my classmates could understand. It was very memorable as I proved that within me, I had more depth than who I am on the outside. Tsujikami sensei was my homeroom teacher.



She made sure that everything was well with me throughout my time in Sakurai and ensured that I was keeping up at the same pace with my other classmates in school. There was a time when I reported to the school with a headache, and she checked in with me from time to time in the clinic to ensure that I was feeling okay. My senseis showed me nothing but sincerity throughout my time in Sakurai.

On my last day in Sakurai, I remember tears flowing in my eyes on the way to school. I did not realize how much my senseis and classmates would mean to me. During the long homeroom, they planned a farewell program for me. My classmates prepared a collection of "Thank You Notes." We all took a photo together. It was the last time that I would be with all of them as part of their

class. My two friends, Mao, and Ayana wept, and I hugged them for the last time before I left. I could not be more grateful for their kindness. My goodbye to Tsujikami sensei was the most difficult because she was my pen pal for the past two weeks. We exchanged messages through a journal she gave me. I never had a pen pal in my life, but even if it was for two weeks, it meant everything knowing she always had my back, like an older sister. I realized how much she really cares for me as a student and like a younger sister.

To say this experience changed my life feels too small for what it did to my heart. I have visited Japan before, but this was the first time being alone —just me and the world, and scary at first. But I found fragments of myself that I did not know I was missing. It is true that people come into our lives for a reason.

There are many things that I learned from the Japanese, but there were a few that made a significant impact on how I do my daily life now that I am back in the Philippines. First, I learned how one's responsibility for cleanliness is important. I noticed how my host family cleaned their dining tables after eating, while my classmates cleaned the classroom after school. This made me realize how important it is to keep our surroundings clean because it prevents us from inhaling bad bacteria or from getting infected by a virus. Second, I learned the importance of showing respect. Everywhere I went in Sakurai, it was necessary for me to greet the teachers by bowing and greeting them. Moreover, as I went to the temples, the people were very respectful when it came to praying and asking for wishes. This proved to me that when we show respect to the people and the customs around us, positive energy is reciprocated and deeply nurtured. Lastly, I learned the importance of hard work. It builds character and discipline, leading to personal growth and achievement of goals.

My host family spent long hours at work and endured distant commutes, my classmates adamantly studied for their exams, and my teachers translated and prepared every learning material in English for me to understand the current lessons too. These are just a few of what I have observed, but these are also values that I still carry with pride, to this day.

These people and organizations will forever hold sacred places in my heart. There was a time when I was a girl who did not know how to fly in an airplane alone and carry life by myself. I did not even know what I was capable of and saw the world with cautious eyes. Now, I return home with eyes widened by trust, strength in independence, and softened by love. The journey did not merely change my surroundings; it changed me. Somewhere between the chilly air, the unfamiliar streets, and the uncertain days, I found a version of myself that was braver, more confident, and more open. The people I encountered did not just pass through my life; they left imprints that will long remain with me, no matter if the memories fade.

I once believed home was a place you return to. Now I understand that home is something you carry in your voice, your choices, and your courage. And with a full and grateful heart, I can say that I have been changed in unfathomable, beautiful ways for good.

The student exchange program to Japan was sponsored by YFU Japan Foundation, Inc. and MONKASHO. YFU has been sending students all over the world since 1967. It aims to promote international goodwill and understanding among the youth.