

Essay for 2023 Winter Homestay

November 30, 2023-December 16, 2023

Writing about my experiences in Japan has been the hardest thing about this whole trip. Not because there was nothing to write about, quite the opposite. So many wonderful things happened in such a short time period, it was hard to find the right words to describe it. But I will do my best to describe what I learned from my stay in Kagoshima in this essay.

First off, one of the most major differences between American and Japanese culture, I feel, is relationships of all types. Whether that be familial, friendships, dating, or even just the interactions between strangers; the very core of these connections in both cultures are similar, but different. When it comes to Americans, we tend to be very open and laid back. Our relationships reflect this. Total strangers will share their whole life stories in the checkout line at the supermarket. However, in Kagoshima, though it is more countryside, I noticed that these types of occurrences were quite rare to happen. Of course, people would greet each other as they walked past each other, but these conversations with strangers you'd never see again aren't something I really saw in Japan like I do in America.

In America, we have this image of Japanese people as being very reserved and shy. While, now after having gone to Japan, I still do think Japanese people are more reserved, I don't think most Japanese people are shy. A lot of my classmates and friends described themselves as being shy, but they were some of the funniest and outgoing people I've ever met. While comparatively speaking, America to Japan, you could say Japanese people are shy; on their own, I don't think they are. However, due to the more general reservedness, it can be a lot harder to make friends and meet people than in America. But that's one thing that I do like about relationships in Japan. Because I feel it's a bit more difficult, the connections you do end up making are ones that will last a lifetime.

To go further on relationships, as the oldest sister of four children, one thing that I had been very curious about was the relationships between siblings in Japan. Because in America, most people I know with siblings tend to always fight with them. Maybe I was just lucky with the families I met, but though Japanese teens and kids are pretty similar to America's, I noticed that they were a lot more respectful to their siblings. Even when it came to younger, elementary aged students, I saw that there was a lot less fighting between them than a lot of same aged students in America.

Second, when it came to Japanese and American education, while the school systems are pretty different, I noticed more similarities than differences when it came to students themselves. One of the things I liked most about Japanese students was that there weren't anything like "cliques". While even in America, there really aren't cliques like you see in the movies, there was a lot more unity between the students at Japanese schools. I also noticed that there's a very minimal dating culture, even in Japanese high schools, especially when compared to America's high schools. Which helps unity even more because both male and female students were able to work together without it being "weird". In America, I feel that we're starting to get better about it, but I hope someday we can completely move past it!

School itself, though, was very different from American schools. Especially when it came to respect. In Japanese schools, there's so much respect for everything! The students and teachers greet each other whenever they pass by each other. And even just the fact that there aren't custodians who clean the school and that it's the students themselves who take care of it! In America, students are the ones who make the school a giant mess for someone else to clean up. That's why I really like the fact that students clean, because not only does it create respect for the school and its members, but also accountability for yourself too.

I've shared a bit about my and American's general image of Japan and Japanese people, but it was very interesting to hear the perspectives from Japanese people on the United States and American people! I found it funny how their general perspectives on American culture (such as eagles, wild west, and cheeseburgers) weren't too far off from reality. However, just as there is more to Japan than anime and sushi, I hope I was able to show that there is more to us Americans than just Hollywood and french fries. Just as I was able to not only learn, but experience, true Japanese culture that you could only see through experience.

Going on this trip has definitely reinforced the idea in me that no matter where you go, people will always be people. Even though Japan and the United States have quite a few cultural and language differences, Japanese and American people aren't actually all that different at their core. And on the things where we're not all that similar, being different isn't necessarily a bad thing, quite the opposite.