

Crossing Borders and Forging Bonds: The Campus Asia Adventure in Singapore

Just a few hours before reaching Haneda airport, I found myself frantically packing my luggage for the Campus Asia program's Social Innovation Forum in Singapore. Despite having an early-morning exam, the reality struck me that we would soon be in a completely different country. Excitement surged within me, but so did nervousness about what lay ahead. Our critical assignment, meticulously prepared during Professor Koyama's Social Innovation in Global Asia class, would soon be presented to students and professors from top Asian universities – a prospect that both thrilled and terrified me. However, I knew this journey would offer a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Our group of nine from Japan and a friend from Korea embarked on our adventure to Singapore. Upon arrival, the familiar and inviting tropical air wrapped around us, reminding me of my home in Singapore's neighboring country of Indonesia. Even the Singaporean Immigrant officer welcomed me in Bahasa, my native language, as it shares similarities with Malaysian. After enduring a seven-hour flight, we were all exhausted, but our eagerness to dive into this enriching learning experience through the Campus Asia Program overshadowed any weariness.



Nanyang Technological University (NTU) embraces us with its expansive campus and the warmth of its staff as we step into our home for the next four days. Having never lived in a student dorm back in Japan, arriving at this unfamiliar accommodation provided me with an intriguing experience. After spending a few hours preparing and unwinding, we set off to meet our potential new friends from Korea University, Peking University, and NTU.

As we strolled into the School of Social Sciences, a delightful *Prasmanan*-style lunch awaited us, featuring a diverse array of dishes commonly enjoyed in Singapore. This setup felt incredibly familiar, reminiscent of how we serve food at big events and gatherings back in my home country. The flavors of the dishes even transported me back to the taste of home, evoking a sense of comfort and delicacy. Our



professor suggested that we dine separately from our friends from Waseda, encouraging us to foster stronger connections with our new acquaintances. This short yet delightful lunch was filled with simple introductions and new conversations, marking the beginning of our exciting journey ahead. It acted as a precursor to more engaging and stimulating discussions that await us during our time here.

The first-day agenda kicked off with an exciting Social Innovation treasure hunt. Initially, I had envisioned a simple exploration around Singapore, searching for hidden objects or deciphering puzzle pieces scattered across various buildings and locations, courtesy of the NTU staff. However, the reality was far more intricate and intellectually stimulating. The essence of this event revolved around the concept of "Social Innovation." Our task was to delve into how people in different parts of Singapore collaborated and harmonized to tackle everyday challenges, fostering a sustainable society. The significance of Singapore's diverse population played a central role in our exploration. With three primary ethnic groups – Chinese-Singaporean, Malays, and Indians – alongside immigrants from all corners of the world, the city displayed an enriching tapestry of cultures and communities. Our mission was to comprehend how these various groups managed to coexist and cooperate despite their differences, while also exploring the common threads that bound them together. Armed with our social innovation hats, we set out to navigate the city with these essential questions in mind, eager to gain insights into the remarkable dynamics of Singaporean society.

We were all divided into different groups with a mix of one to two students from each university, along with two student volunteer guides from NTU. And off we go, to our first destination in the east area of Singapore, Katong. As NTU was located in the west area, we had to travel for about an hour to Katong. It was a long commute and we spent the time chatting, getting to know each other, and even napping on our ride there because we were all exhausted. One of our members from NTU apparently went to a high school in this area and live a station away from there. The landscape of the shorter buildings, unique cultural architecture, and a visible view of diversity from the different religious monuments we passed by showcased the multicultural setting of Singapore. From an Advent Church with residentials surrounding it to an Indian Hindu temple just a five-minute walk in distance, we can see how people from different beliefs can cohabit with one another.



Our primary objective was to explore the renowned Peranakan houses in the area. During the orientation lecture, we learned that Peranakan refers to individuals of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage. Interestingly, I discovered that this term also includes Chinese Indonesians, perfectly describing my own identity with both Chinese and Indonesian ancestry. As we leisurely strolled around the vicinity, we encountered a diverse array of shops, from charming old wooden furniture stores to ubiquitous open food courts, a characteristic of Singapore. However, the highlight awaited us in the form of the captivating and colorful Peranakan houses we had come to see. The atmosphere in this part of Singapore felt distinct from the bustling city center I was accustomed to, radiating this warm sense of community.



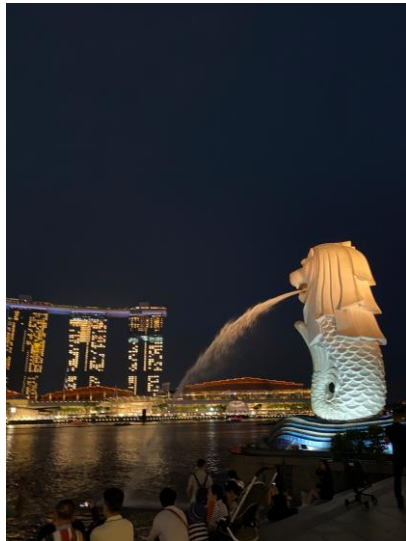
Our guides led us to one of Singapore's most renowned Laksa spots, a place even praised by the world-famous chef, Gordon Ramsay. As expected, the Laksa was a delightful treat! Laksa is a Malaysian noodle dish with various regional styles, similar to the diversity of Ramen in Japan. Though I wasn't certain of the specific Laksa style served, I knew it was the Peranakan version, which is non-Halal. Relishing the flavors of this traditional dish, we replenished our energy for the continuation of our journey.



We made our way towards the bustling city center, where Marina Bay's vibrant area awaited us. During our transit in Bugis, we could already sense the contrast from the tranquil Katong neighborhood. As we arrived in the heart of Singapore, the familiar sight of high-rise buildings and the diverse blend of people from various walks of life welcomed us. The colossal malls lining the streets showcased a vast array of stores and culinary delights, embodying the essence of Singapore's urban lifestyle.



On the train, we struck up a conversation with two young men who were enjoying their weekend break from their mandatory two-year military service in Singapore, as is the norm for all Singaporean men. We inquired about life in Singapore and whether the city's multicultural and diverse façade genuinely translated into the everyday lives of its citizens. They acknowledged a high level of racial tolerance at the surface, but they also disclosed the persistent presence of underlying systemic racism. The educational system, for instance, highlighted a significant gap between the Chinese ethnic group, which enjoyed privileged access to elite education, and other ethnic groups, who faced substantial disparities. This reality was a reminder that like any country, Singapore still had room for reforms and improvements, particularly addressing the concerns of the less privileged.



Upon arriving in the Marina Bay area, we were greeted by a captivating blend of tourists from all corners of the world. The city lights illuminated the calm waters of the river, with iconic landmarks like the Merlion statue and the magnificent architecture of Marina Bay Sands forming the epitome of Singapore's nightlife statement. Our journey led us past government buildings, grand hotels, and luxurious restaurants often frequented by tourists and expatriates. It proved to be a relaxing way to conclude this eventful day as we gathered by the riverside, chatting away and capturing countless photos to immortalize our memorable experience.

Day two proved to be an engaging and focused affair, brimming with lectures and discussions among all members of the Campus Asia program. We kicked off the day on a delightful note by savoring one of my favorite Malay dishes, Nasi Lemak. Embracing my cultural roots, I unreservedly relished the meal with my hands, just as we do back home, particularly when our rice is wrapped in brown paper. Our satisfied stomachs prepared us for the eventful day ahead.

Another participant and I edited our scripts and practiced diligently to ensure a smooth performance. Despite our preparations, the moments leading up to our presentation were filled with anxiety and trembling. However, our worries were soon put to rest, as all of our presentations went remarkably well. Our efforts were lauded by members from other universities, who commended us for our dedication and thoughtful approach to the project.



The most valuable aspect of the day was the feedback we received from our new friends. Their fresh perspectives offered us new ideas and questions that expanded our thinking and enriched our project. It was heartening to learn that the issues we were tackling also resonated with our peers from different countries. For example, when a group from Japan presented on the topic of single mothers in Korea, one of the students from Korea University confessed that he had not been fully aware of this issue until their presentation, which broadened his understanding. This exchange of ideas and thoughts was exactly what we had hoped for and eagerly anticipated, and I was grateful for the opportunity to engage in such enlightening discussions.



The remainder of the day was packed with stimulating lectures delivered by professors from Waseda University, Peking University, Korea University, and NTU. Following each lecture, we engaged in intense discussions, delving into a wide array of topics. Our conversations covered the spectrum, from

the various forms of violence prevalent on both small and large scales, to the ramifications of the current era of deglobalization. We also explored the complexities of the US-China conflict and its far-reaching impact on our societies, along with the role our individual value systems play in shaping our political and daily decisions.

Coming together from diverse backgrounds, these dynamic discussions proved fascinating. We all held distinct views and perspectives on the pressing issues of our time, shaped by the different media and information we encounter in our daily lives. Despite our differences, we recognized the importance of engaging in productive and reasoned conversations that could enrich our understanding of the world. This, we believed, was the essence of Campus Asia – a platform for fostering meaningful dialogue and cooperation among Japan, Korea, China, and Singapore. While our countries' histories may have been marked by conflicts and controversies, our generation bears the responsibility of innovating new resolutions that foster not just unity, but peace and tolerance among us all. This sentiment resonated as a key message that emerged from our discussions.

We acknowledged that unanimity on every issue may be unrealistic, but we saw value in prioritizing productive and peaceful conversations. Through these interactions, we not only expanded our own perspectives but also contributed to building bridges of understanding between our nations. As we continued on this journey of intellectual exchange, we embraced the notion that collaborative efforts, even with differing viewpoints, could pave the way for a more harmonious and interconnected world.

Over the final two days of our trip, we relished the opportunity to explore Singapore without any academic tasks hanging over us. Despite it being the finals season for us Waseda students, we wholeheartedly embraced the chance to make the most of this unique experience – after all, when else would we get such an opportunity? NTU's thoughtful arrangements provided us with a comfortable tour bus and an insightful guide who led us to various cultural spots in Singapore.

Our first destination was the renowned Chinatown, a vibrant district boasting delectable food and beverages, as well as stunning architecture. It was here that I finally satisfied my year-long craving for the infamous durian fruit. As I savored the delicious yet pungent fruit, my companions, including our professors, playfully captured the moment on camera, turning it into a fun memory to cherish. Next, we explored the colorful alleyways of Kampong Glam in the Arab town, encountering a diverse array of unique stores along the way. Lastly, we immersed ourselves in the sights and sounds of the Indian town before the rain forced us to seek shelter for lunch. This was our final bonding session with our Korean and Chinese peers, as tomorrow would see us parting ways back to our respective countries.





We exchanged Instagrams and bid heartfelt "See you later," fully aware that the future might hold uncertainty as to when our paths might cross again. Despite the brevity of our time together, the experiences we shared were invaluable – from city exploration to engaging in serious discussions about the world affairs that ignited our passions. It truly was one of the most memorable getaways with a fantastic group of people amidst the chaos of the school semester.

Reflecting on my initial last-minute panic while packing for the trip, I couldn't help but feel grateful for how this experience had transformed me. It had allowed me to connect with wonderful individuals, broaden my horizons, and create lasting memories. As our journey drew to a close, I couldn't help but marvel at how this adventure had shaped and enriched my life.



