

## Reflections from My Study Abroad at NTU, Singapore

I studied at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore as a CAMPUS Asia student from August to December 2025. During those four and a half months, I had a life-changing experience that I could never have had in Japan. I am extremely grateful for this precious opportunity.

As I participated in CAMPUS Asia program with interest in solving social issues, I was especially concerned with the way people of Japan face or do not face the history of WW2 prior to my study abroad. Although my focus was on acknowledging the history of atrocities committed by the Japanese army, I was prompted to face Japaneseness as a whole, including the nature of the nation, society, culture, language and people, and how I consider myself in relation to being Japanese, by living in and knowing about Singapore.



### National Day

I landed in Singapore on 6 August, the date on which an atomic bomb was detonated in Hiroshima eighty years ago. Soon after disembarking the plane, I found a number of signs and objects celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country's independence. 9 August is National Day of Singapore, while the date is considered as the remembrance day for the city of Nagasaki in Japan. I felt the clear contrast between the



celebration

mood physically surrounded me and the information popped into my phone via social media where I connect with people in Japan. As a citizen of the country which had occupied Singapore and operated purges during WW2, I wondered if I was entitled to saying "Happy Birthday, Singapore!" or "Majulah Singapura!" like other people in the country, even though the university's office welcomed exchange students to join the National Day Observance Ceremony on the same day I reached Singapore. On

National Day, I headed to the National Museum of Singapore, hoping to learn the history of the country. There I learnt the country transitioned from Singapura, Crown Colony, Syonan-To to nowadays Singapore. As you can clearly see in the classification of eras, the Japanese occupation forms a big part of Singapore's national history despite being the shortest of the four. Most people in Japan know little or nothing about the Sook Ching massacre whereas students in Singapore learn the past entailing it at school. I did not even know the fact that Japan has renamed the island and had to ask gen AI how the name was written in Japanese character. Part of the reason for my ignorance is that I did not take history courses in high school because I was a science student, but I felt I should have learnt the history of atrocities in our own language, at our own expense, in primary and secondary education.

### **Singapore Studies**

Week 1 of Semester 1 started on 11 August, and the first two weeks were the add-drop period often referred to as the "STARS war" named after STARS (Students Automated Registration System) used for course registration. I lost the "war" and ended up taking less popular courses with vacancy. However, a Singapore studies course I did not initially hope to take turned out to be very intriguing to me and soon became my favourite course of the semester. The course focused on forming and reforming the images of Singapore through examining the local works of literature and film. I read sixteen poems, four short stories, a novel and a play and watched three films throughout the course, which was a wholly new experience for me as a math student back in my home university. We explored Singapore society from various perspectives including social success, saving face, education system, food and migrant workers. This course helped me better understand Singapore society despite my short stay in the country and made me think about how I live my own life in the society as a foreigner, an exchange student. For the midterm essay, I wrote about the theme "forgiveness" regarding the ways people in Singapore, Malaysia and Japan face the history of the Japanese occupation through reading several texts.



## Civilian War Memorial and St. Andrew's Cathedral

On the last day of August, I visited Civilian War Memorial, which is a monument to the civilians killed in the Japanese occupation. The 61-meter-tall white monument consists of four blocks with inscriptions in the four national languages of Singapore. A few groups were picnicking in the park; it was a peaceful Sunday. A five-minute walk from the monument is St. Andrew's



Cathedral, which functioned as a hospital during WW2. The cathedral has the exhibition about its history entailing the days during the Japanese occupation, and when I was looking at the section between 1939-1945, an elderly person working there talked to me. They told me the memorial board was for the victims who lost their lives during the occupation and asked me where I was from. I answered I am from Japan and was stunned by the next words from them; they said "thank you" to me and talked about the two Japanese Christian individuals who supported the cathedral during the occupation. They said the cathedral could not have been maintained during the time



without the two members' effort and said "thank you" again to me before ending our conversation. I was deeply touched by the person's attitude focusing on individuals in the days of battle between nations and the blessing in the time of hardships. Although I was a bit confused since I did nothing to be thanked by them, I was reminded of the forgiveness in Christianity I had learnt before but did not understand then.

## Mid-Autumn Festival and Deepavali

The city was full of decorations and products celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as Mooncake Festival, in September. My local friends invited me to make snowskin mooncakes with them on 13 September. Eight of us gathered at a co-working space and had a mooncake jamming session. We divided the snowskin dough into a few pieces and coloured and



flavoured them variously. We had creative fillings as well: pandan, peanut butter, black sesame, matcha, strawberry, chocolate etc. Pairing dough and filling, we created colourful and flavourful mooncakes, totalled over a hundred. Since I seldom eat mooncakes in Japan, making mooncakes myself was an exciting and eye-opening experience. A week later I

joined a mooncake potluck, where I tried various mooncakes including traditional ones and snowskin ones. On 7 October, which is the next day of the official date of the festival, the moon reached its fullest and the NTU Mid-Autumn Night Carnival was held in Yunnan Garden. Three days later, I visited Jurong Lake Gardens, which is a few stops away from the nearest MRT from the campus, to see Lights by the Lake with my friend. I enjoyed the festival-related activities and food for a month.



Soon after that the city started to celebrate Deepavali. 20 October was the holiday and Week 10 starting from the Monday was the home-based learning week. Following local friends' advice, I visited Little India on Sunday, 19 October to see how the festival was celebrated. There I experienced something I had not experienced before in Singapore; I felt out of place. People there were mostly Indians, and I saw only a few groups of tourists from overseas. I looked like a tourist too, and I ultimately was. In fact, when I was walking through the street market, a stall owner said “こんにちは” to me, and this was the first and only time when someone spoke to me in Japanese on a random street in Singapore. I usually passed as Chinese if I did not speak, and even after people found out I did not speak good Mandarin, they assumed I was Korean. I realised I felt comfortable when people could not tell my ethnicity, and I asked myself why the Chinese festival felt relatable to me while the Indian one did not. Because the Chinese are the largest



ethnic group in the country? Because I was always mistaken as Chinese? Because I knew some Chinese languages but nothing about Indian languages? Because I had many Chinese friends but no Indian friends? Because I usually ate Chinese food and seldom ate Indian food? Then I asked myself why I did not know Indian languages, have Indian friends and eat Indian food. Because our skin colours are different? Because our faces are not alike? Am I a racist? In the first place, even if I have a Chinese passing, I cannot be Chinese just as I cannot be Indian, Malay or with any other ethnicity. After this, I came to enjoy buying food at Indian stalls as well.

## Trip to Hong Kong, Macao and Hanoi

We had the recess week between Week 7 and 8, and I went for a trip to three cities during the break. I landed in Hong Kong on the evening of 27 September to see a friend of mine from Waseda. On the next day, we visited Hong Kong Museum of History. Since I was very interested in how different Chineseness and Japaneseness are, I was excited to learn about the Overseas Chinese and Hong Kong as the hub. Also, we saw the “Promulgation and Implementation of Hong Kong National Security Law 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Thematic Exhibition” and the “80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chinese Victory in the War of Resistance Exhibition” apart from the permanent exhibition. I felt the former was written in more evaluative, subjective language to



justify the enactment of the law, whereas the description of Japanese cruelty in the latter sounded more objective. Especially, I found it meaningful that it was clearly stated that the Ryukyu Islands were colonised by the Japanese, which is the fact that Japanese schools usually do not teach. And yet, Hokkaido was not mentioned as a Japanese colony. This was my first time learning about our history from the PRC's perspective, which was interesting and enlightening.



On 29 September, we visited Macao by ferry. I was astonished by the view of the city which was totally different from Hong Kong's. I saw the clear influence of the colonial powers still existing in both cities. The view of Hong Kong felt a bit similar to Singapore's as both are former British colonies whereas I saw many buildings with Portuguese architecture in Macao. It was surprising for me to see the red flags everywhere, saying "熱烈慶祝中華人民共和國成立 76 周年" with a Portuguese translation. Through comparing the views of the cities to Japan's, I thought the impact of colonisation does not stay in the past but continues to affect people's life even now. Japan is one of the countries which colonised and occupied other people's lands, and to the local, Japanese invasion is remembered as even worse than what the western countries did, which I believe is something we Japanese must face seriously even now.

We flew to Hanoi on the next day. The city was full of the red-and-yellow national flags of Vietnam and the USSR. Knowing little about Vietnamese history, I visited Hoa Lo Prison and Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum. Especially I was impressed by the workers at the mausoleum in military uniforms who surrounded and ushered visitors in a big group. They were smiling and talking to each other, and they did not look authoritative despite their occupation. From the exhibitions at the two places, I learnt fragments of Vietnam's nationalism, which I read about in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in September. I felt the need to study history and reread the book. No more than a three-day stay in Vietnam was not enough at all for knowing about the country. Still, the three days remained unforgettable for the rest of my stay in Singapore, eventually encouraging me to visit the country again. What was the most impressive to me is that people there were really kind and willing to help others regardless of differences in ethnicity, language and so on. Although Japan is known



for its hospitality, I cannot help but think that the hospitality is selective, as those with non-Japanese nationalities and those regarded as "foreigners" easily face racial discrimination in Japan. Since I left Japan, however, I had never faced any discrimination for being a foreigner. I wondered if it was simply because people are kind or tolerant, or, because I am Japanese and being Japanese gives me a privilege in Asia.

### Local Food and Cultural Experiences

November passed a bit faster because of the midterm and final assessment. Japan's new prime minister challenged China, and I was even more put off by my own country and was unhappy going back to Japan, but I had only one month left in Singapore. I decided to try as many local dishes as possible during the month. My local friend took me to the Singapore Hokkien Festival on Telok Ayer Street on 8 November. All the Hokkien dishes I tried there were very





tasty. After eating, we listened to traditional Hokkien music at Thian Hock Keng Temple. Next weekend I visited the Peranakan Museum with another local friend to join a pengat cooking workshop and a museum tour. I enjoyed the cooking demonstration of the traditional dessert by a Peranakan Indian community member. Another member guided us around the museum and emphasised their community's openness and embracing diversity. We had lunch and dinner outside of the museum, and I tried eight Peranakan dishes for the first time. On 26 November, I had sumptuous Malay lunch near the Sultan Mosque with my friends. After visiting the Asian Civilisations Museum in the afternoon, we had

Hakka thunder tea rice for dinner. One of the jokes that Singaporeans often say is that they are always thinking about food, and in fact I also thought about food more often in Singapore than in Japan. I like Singapore food very much and think that having food is always a good way to take a glimpse into the people and the culture it belongs to.



## Fort Siloso and Former Ford Factory

I wanted to learn more about the Japanese occupation before leaving Singapore, so I visited Fort Siloso on 2 December accompanied by a local friend. Captions were written in English, Mandarin and Japanese instead of Malay and Tamil, from which I received the message that we Japanese must learn the history and be responsible for the past. This was my second time visiting Sentosa, and I realised the secondary school I went to did not take us to the west side of the island but only the oceanarium for the school trip seven years ago. The exhibition taught us heartbreaking facts including how the Japanese treated local Chinese, Malay and Indian people differently and forced them to learn Japanese language. We visited Former Ford Factory a week later. The museum was cozy in size but was full of information with many questions placed between captions prompting us to relate to those who lived the days during the occupation. One of the questions asked us whether we would learn Japanese language for better job opportunities or not even if our family members were killed by the Japanese. I tried to look for my answer, but those questions were obviously for the local, and I was reminded of the irreversible effect of occupation, genocide and colonisation once again.



## Trip to JB, KL, Bangkok and HCMC

Finally, my Student's Pass expired on 12 December, and I left for Johor Bahru on that day. After enjoying food, coffee and shopping with Singaporean friends, I said goodbye to them and took an overnight bus to Kuala Lumpur. Because of the time restriction, I visited only a few tourist attractions, and that might be why I heard more Japanese words said to me than other languages. That was a major difference about how people saw me in Malaysia and Singapore. I tried some Malay dishes and flew to Bangkok on 14 December. I was eager to visit Thailand





because I wanted to see what the Asian city, which was not colonised by any Western power, looks like. I walked around the beautiful city with decorative temples and art streets. Although I missed the opportunity to visit several museums since they were closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, a brief visit to the Museum Siam gave me an insight into the country, as the question “What’s Thainess?” was the core theme of the exhibition. Starting from the typical images of Thainess, visitors were encouraged to explore the diverse Thai culture in depth. Learning that Thai cuisine has its roots in various regions in the world, it got even more enjoyable for me to try Thai dishes. After leaving the museum, I was moved by the view of Wat Arun



glittering in gold at the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River. On the next day, which is 17 December, I flew to Ho Chi Minh City to visit Vietnam again. The destination of greatest interest to me was the War Remnants Museum. After getting an overview of history of South Vietnam at the Independence Palace, I visited the museum to learn about the Vietnam War, which I knew nothing about. What I saw there was beyond my expectation. Especially the section titled “War Crimes” was shocking and heartbreaking. I learnt that Vietnam was used as an experimental field by the US to see how new weapons including chemical weapons worked. Many photos of people affected by Agent Orange were exhibited. I wished the same cruelty would never happen again but was overwhelmed by the fact that similar experiments were held in Gaza. Still, I was moved by the people in family photos smiling, looking they loved their family members regardless of their appearance and disability. I felt like I saw the strength of the people there in the photos and was also reminded of how humanely they treated the US soldiers at the prison in Hanoi I visited. And I myself was helped a lot by the local people’s



kindness during my stay. Although communism is always criticized in our capitalist world, I felt Vietnamese society has some kind of humanity that at least Japanese society does not have. I flew back to Japan with an ambition of visiting and hopefully living in Southeast Asia again.



## Conclusion

The participation in the CAMPUS Asia program allowed me to take time in right places to think deeply about Japaneseness through facing social issues but to a very personal extent. I do not have the feeling of belonging to the people of Japan anymore, but I have a privilege of not being questioned my nationality and ethnicity in Japan, and I benefit from my Japanese passport inside and outside of the country. This is why I think I must keep facing the history of Japanese fascism, which is not a past thing at all. Our world has certain groups of people who question and other the people of different social groups without being questioned themselves, while also having those who are unreasonably questioned the very existence of themselves. Being Yamato Japanese -not Ryukyuan, Ainu or Zainichi- usually means being the former. When it comes to discussing social issues in class, we tend to think about how to provide help to people in need, but that is almost the same as trying to have power over the “people in need” and question them without being questioned ourselves. Therefore, I believe questioning the unquestioned must be the key to come up with truly effective solutions to social issues. Questioning myself and the quality of being Japanese through participating in CAMPUS Asia is a significant part of my learning path, and I hope it will continue to broaden my horizon in the future.

