Canada Japan Co-op Program Experiential Report

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1. My Work in the Osaka Gas Oishisa Laboratory

1.1. Osaka Gas Background

Osaka Gas Co., Ltd. is a company with a very long history, having been founded in 1897. Osaka Gas is now a very large company with nearly 20,000 employees and over 140 affiliated companies. Osaka Gas’ core business is energy supply and distribution but it is also involved in many non-energy business fields such as materials, real estate and IT. Osaka Gas’ operations and assets are not only within Japan; Osaka Gas has a variety of international projects such as oil and gas assets in Norway, Australia, Oman and solar power in Ontario, Canada.

A large part of Osaka Gas’ competitive strategy is advanced technology research and development, investing in energy and environment fields such as distributed energy supply systems, low-carbon technologies and wastewater treatment. The R&D operations at Osaka Gas are thus very large and can be departmentalized into the Technology Planning Department, the Engineering Department and the Energy Technology Laboratories.

1.2. My Lab Group and My Work at Osaka Gas

My lab group was the Oishisa Laboratory within the Energy Technology Laboratories. Broadly speaking, the Oishisa Laboratory’s mandate was to evaluate the means by which healthier and more delicious food can be cooked. My role was to help provide insight into the heat transfer mechanisms within cooking environments that lead to healthy and delicious cooking. To this end, I was working on developing two systems: a cooking environment visualization system and a simulation system of the cooking environment.

My work helped me develop skills in many areas. My tasks and projects were quite varied and so I was able to learn a range of technical skills such as experiment design and setup construction, Matlab programming and in-depth knowledge of several heat transfer topics.
Of course, a large part of the skills learned during my internship are valuable transferable skills. I was given a large amount of freedom to organize my daily tasks, which helped develop my time management skills.

Several of my projects involved teamwork with my coworkers, which was very fortunate as collaborating directly in a different business cultural environment and with an increased level of communication complexity due to language considerations provided an novel teamwork practice environment.

I also gave several presentations during my internship. As my comfort with the Japanese language increased, I was also given the opportunity to practice my Japanese in a presentation format.

I was also given opportunities to attend several food industry conferences as well as meetings with other researchers in the food science field. These were really great opportunities to learn more about related research and get a real sense of the scale and scope of the food industry.
1.3. Work life and Colleague Relationships

While I would say that the workplace that I experienced at Osaka Gas was significantly more formal than some of my previous workplace environments in Canada, this was by no means a cold formality. To the contrary, I found the elements of formality at the workplace encouraged, perhaps counter-intuitively, a real sense of teamwork. In fact, many of the differences between the Osaka Gas Laboratory workplace and the workplaces in Canada seemed to have the benefit of encouraging a group atmosphere.

For example, the office at Osaka was organized in an open office style. This means that workers in the office, including management positions, all had desks open and visible to other workers in the office. This has the benefit of increasing accessibility and transparency.

Everyone that I met at Osaka Gas was friendly and respectful. I was able to develop excellent relationships with my co-workers and superiors due to their welcoming demeanor. Many people were willing to help and converse with me despite my poor Japanese language skills. I was able to participate in some after work activities with some of my coworkers such as bowling, karaoke and fishing. My coworkers also occasional joined me on daytrips to nearby sightseeing areas such as Kobe and Nara.
The living accommodations that I was provided were excellent. I had a spacious and comfortable room in the Osaka Gas company dormitory. I had both self-regulated air-conditioning and heating as all the basic necessary furniture and a fridge. The room even had elements of Japanese style such as sliding paper doors over storage cupboards and a small space to remove your shoes before stepping in the room.

My room did not have a bathroom however toilets and sinks were just a few steps from my door. The shower/bathing facilities in the dorm were communal. There was a large room with many showerheads as well as a fantastic bath (essentially a large “hot-tub”) that I thoroughly enjoyed using in the colder winter moments.

The dormitory had a cafeteria where an excellent dinner was served during weekdays. I almost never ate there however as I had Japanese class two nights a week and I was often busy exercising or doing other activities.

The dormitory was located about an hour and fifteen minutes from the research laboratory where I worked by train. The commute was not much of an issue however as I had Internet access on the train and could easily occupy myself. The transportation systems in general in Japan are very punctual and efficient, which made my daily commute generally quite relaxing.
3. Trips and Cultural Experiences

3.1. Trips

During the Goldenweek holiday period (during which I had about a week and a half off of work), I was able to travel around southern Honshu and to Kyushu and visit Mount Koya, Hiroshima, Fukuoka and Beppu. Mount Koya is an ancient mountaintop area in which 120 Buddhist temples are concentrated. It is a very serene location and, by spending a night in one of the temples, I was to experience some aspects of the temple monks’ lifestyle. In Hiroshima, I visited the war museums and the atomic bomb monuments. In Beppu, I visited the Jigoku (Hells) and relaxed in the famous hot springs.

I also had the opportunity to climb Mount Fuji with a group of friends at the end of my internship. We split the hike up into two days so that we were able to see the sunrise from the peak of the mountain. Not only was it a great hike it was also a Japanese cultural experience as we were sharing the experience with thousands of like-minded climbers. As we were climbing the upper stages of the mountain, it was incredible to see the long lines of climbers both in front and behind us, lighting up the night with their lamps.
Of course, I also visited Tokyo and its many attractions. While in Tokyo, one of the more interesting cultural experiences was staying in a capsule hotel. In this capsule hotel, every guest is provided a set of pajamas, which they must wear while at the hotel, creating an interesting sense of uniformity in the hotel guests. The facilities, such as the bathing and relaxation areas, I found to be much better than a similarly priced hostel but they are far more open and communal. In all, I thought it was an interesting reflection of the strong community aspects of Japanese culture.

3.2. Other Cultural Experiences

Japan is a very culturally rich and dense country and cultural experience opportunities abound. I was able to take advantage of many of them during my time in Japan.

I saw a variety of cultural shows and performances during my stay. I went to a Kabuki theater performance that was very interesting. During the performance, special members of the audience, called kakegoe, yell out phrases to encourage the performers and show their excitement and appreciation. It was a form of audience participation that I had never seen before. I also attended a kenbo sword and fan dance demonstration and after the demonstration, I was able to try out kenbo myself.

During my stay in Japan, I was able to spectate a few sporting events. I watched one of the local professional baseball teams, the Orix Buffaloes, play. It was incredible to watch the fans of two opposing teams cheering with vigor and passion when it was their team’s turn to bat and then respectively becoming silent to allow their counterparts to cheer during their team's turn. After the game, the all of the fans helped to pick up garbage and clean up the stadium.
I also went to tournament of the professional sumo organization in Japan. The organization holds a few major tournaments every year and I went to the tournament held annually in Osaka. The tournaments are large events, lasting several days, and involve a large variety of wrestlers from the low-ranked to the champions of sumo, the yokozuna. I learnt that sumo-wrestling matches typically last only a matter of seconds but dozens of matches take place every day in the tournament. At the tournament that I saw, the day’s matches began with lower ranked fighters and progressed to the higher-ranked divisions, leading up to a climax of excitement at the end of the day as the best wrestlers face off.

Finally, I also thoroughly enjoy museums and I was able to visit many of Japan’s numerous history and art museums. I was even able to visit some of the more original museums such as the Cup Noodle Museum and the Doraemon Museum. While every museum that I went to was excellent my strongest recommendations are the Edo-Tokyo Museum, the Kobe City Museum and the Osaka Peace Museum.

At the Cup Noodle Museum

Practicing Kenbo
4. Recommendations to Other Students

I was very privileged to receive such an amazing opportunity and I would certainly recommend other students to pursue a work term in Japan and at Osaka. For any interested students, my strongest recommendation to help obtain an internship in Japan is to learn at least a rudimentary amount of the Japanese language. Not only does this communicate interest, it is also very useful for life in Japan.

Once in Japan, another recommendation is to join a Japanese language class. I attended class held at the Osaka Red Cross building. Not only is it, of course, an excellent to keep up a steady pace of Japanese language learning, it is also an excellent way to meet other foreigners and many Japanese locals. I was invited by the members of my Japanese class to attend hanabi parties during the sakura cherry blossom season, community lunches and a local theater production.

5. Overall Reflections

I have thoroughly enjoyed and I am extremely satisfied with my experience with the Canada-Japan Co-op Program and with Osaka Gas. I think that my time in Japan will contribute positively to both my academic and career development. I have learnt much from the Japanese people and Japanese culture.

Firstly, in general, I think that it has been a valuable experience to be immersed in a culture that is not my own for an extended period of time. I believe that few places could have provided an experience that has truly helped broaden my perspective as well as Japan. By this I mean that
Japan has a very homogenous, strong, rich and different culture and linguistically background while at the same time being very welcoming and easy from logistical standpoint (e.g. transportation and communication systems).

Secondly, I think that exposure to many of the specific characteristics of Japanese society and culture has been beneficial. For example, Japanese culture has a collective nature that I think contrasts somewhat with the individualistic culture of North America. In my opinion, this collective nature has contributed to many of the positive aspects of Japanese culture such as the high level of safety and security in the country. Another example is the high level of respect and humility that Japanese people tend to show throughout their everyday activities such as when saying “itadakimasu” before every meal.

Overall, my impression of living in Japan has been very positive and I am grateful to have had the opportunity. I will bring back many fond memories back to Canada and I hope to one day return to Japan.