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Reflections on Educational Aspects of the RyuDai
Study Abroad (Kaigai Bunka Kenshu) Project of
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**“United in Diversity” - Europe from Within.
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By Till Weber

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has been featured in Japanese media reports more often and with more details. Often, it seems to be with a sense of astonishment that Japanese journalists and members of the public look towards the EU – the degree of unification achieved since the signing of the Treaty of Rome fifty years ago indeed exceeded everybody's expectations. Bitter enemies like France and Germany have become close partners and friends, important countries such as Britain and Spain have come in from longer spells of isolation within Europe and recently, key East European countries have been allowed to join, thus closing the bitter chapter of Europe's East-West division during the Cold War once and forever. The EU now has 27 member states, and more are willing to join.

Europe's integration has wisely been driven by economic and financial cooperation, because the removal of obstacles to trade, free movement of citizens seeking work and, since 2001, the adoption of a single currency by 12 key countries, aptly named the Euro (€), are clearly in every country's interest. Basically, the EU now is a large Free Trade Zone of 494 million people.

Political integration has progressed much slower, mainly because of a basic disagreement whether the EU should be like one super state or a much looser federation of independent nation-states. However, much progress has been made in building trust between nations on a continent scarred by World Wars One and Two as well as in eliminating the possibility of a recurrence of armed conflict between members of the EU. These are rewarding topics to study from an Asian perspective. Rivalries between countries, unsettled issues from the past and virulent nationalisms in East Asia remind many of what Europe was like when the EU project started in the 1950's. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned and ideas to be gained for Japanese students from whose ranks some of the future leaders in Asia will be recruited.

2. EU in Japan / EU Seminar at the University of the Ryukyus

As much as the EU is important in the relations of its member states, it also links various fields of study and research at this university: The German, French, and Spanish course students and scholars (with the European Cultures Department of Kokusai Gengo Bunka Gakka); English Departments at the Faculties of Law &

Letters and Education; and various specialists in International Relations, Politics, History, the Economy and the Law but also Music and the Arts.

Our plan was to present the experience of the European Union to as many RyuDai students as possible. To adapt the saying of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of Europe's great literati, studying something foreign inevitably means to reflect on one's own culture and background. So studying the EU and European cultures should have value for Japanese students beyond the sheer knowledge obtained about another part of the world. It should provide them with new ideas and a backdrop against which things in their own backyards come into a new perspective.

Our approach included preparatory seminars and finally a study trip to various European countries and institutions to be conducted in September of 2006.

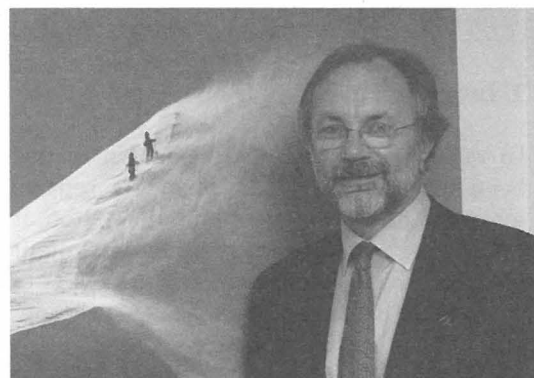
Fortunately, the European Commission which is the equivalent of a government running the EU's affairs, has a Delegation to Japan which resides in Tokyo's Sanbancho.¹ We had met with Ms Anne Kofoed, Attaché for Press, Public and Cultural Affairs, when she visited the EU Document Centre at our University Library in 2005. At the EU Delegation, our project was met with immediate sympathy and cooperation was stepped up. It is true to say that the cooperation of the EU Delegation made the whole project possible. It also received much support from institutions and professors within the University of the Ryukyus.

To teach basics about the European Union and highlight a number of fields that might be of special interest to Japanese students, we conducted an EU Introductory Seminar at the University Library Hall from February 20-22, 2006. Dr Michael Reiterer, Deputy Head of the EU Delegation, and Ms Hiroko Ishikawa made

themselves available for three full days to give lectures to a group of about 100 students from all over the University of the Ryukyus. Topics covered included the following:

General introduction to the European Union;
EU-Japan relations;
Regionalism, culture and education;
The Euro €;
Researching the EU – Documentation & the "Europa" server

The lectures and discussions were conducted in English.



Dr Michael Reiterer, deputy head of the EU Delegation to Japan, guest lecturer at RyuDai and now Austria's ambassador to Switzerland.

3. Preparation for the Kaigai Bunka Ken-shu

Completing the assignment from the introductory seminar qualified students to apply for joining the European Study Tour in September. There were four entrances: Through the English, German, French and Spanish departments. In general, students who had a working knowledge of English and of one of the other languages, were at least in their second year at RyuDai and completed the special classes offered in the spring semester of 2006 were eligible to join – indeed, students from five different faculties signed up, although a major-

¹ Website at:
http://jpn.cec.eu.int/home/index_en.php

ity was from Hobun Gakubu, the Faculty of Law and Letters.

Each department designed specific courses for their students, but there were also joint compact seminars designed to enhance the students' knowledge about European countries to be visited, their languages, and common history. Teaching included some unconventional approaches such as students teaching students some basics of their chosen foreign language.²



Students teaching Students: A French language lesson during one of the preparatory seminar days in July, 2006.

One of the EU's mottoes is "United in diversity" – the aim is not to suppress countries' individual cultures and languages, but to promote them within a framework of common interests. At RyuDai, we aimed at uniting students and scholars from different backgrounds and with interests in different European countries around a common centerpiece, a one-month study trip into the heart of Europe.

All seminars were regular seminars also open to students who would not join the tour in September but still wanted to study the subjects offered.

² This concept was based on principles of LdL (Lernen durch Lehren – Learning by Teaching) originally designed by Prof. Jean-Pol Martin of Eichstätt University.

In the end, our overseas study group consisted of 21 students in the English group, 16 in the German, 8 in the French and 10 in the Spanish group, for a total of 55 students. The English group was led by Prof.es Ryuji Ishikawa and Minako Yogi, the German group by Prof.es Koichi Yoshii and Till Weber, the Spanish group by Prof. Hiroyuki Kinjo. The French group was conducted from Okinawa by Prof. Atsuko Miyazato.

The actual study trip started on September 1, 2006, when the groups to Germany, France and Spain left for "their" countries, to be followed by the English group on September 6.

4. Stage One: The "Diversity" Stage of the Study Tour

Our concept split the roughly four weeks in Europe into three stages: Firstly, the four groups spent up to two weeks in their target country to study one EU member country in-depth, see first hand what the EU has meant for each country and how its citizens judge it. Also included in all four programmes were intensive language courses, partly at universities, as well as homestay experiences.

The English group visited London and studied at the University of York, the German group stayed at Heinrich-Heine-Universität in Düsseldorf where it was welcomed as the third major group from RyuDai in five years. The French group was based in Paris and trips included one to Burgundy. The Spanish group had their language training in Barcelona, then visited Andalusia and Madrid.³

5. Stage Two: The "Unity" Stage of the Study Tour

³ For detailed overviews of this part of the Kaigai Bunka Kenshu see the article in Japanese in this issue of the University Education Center Bulletin.

After finishing acclimatization to Europe, all four groups traveled across the continent and met on September 17 in the EU administrative capital, which is Belgium's capital, Brussels, conveniently located between Western and Central Europe.

The "unity" stage of the tour was meant to show what Europe has in common and to contrast this with what had been learned so far in the "diversity" stage in four major EU countries. Foremost and very much visible in Brussels are many of the EU's central institutions, most notably the European Commission (government). The EU Delegation in Tokyo had arranged for various visits for our group and meetings with well-ranked officials.

On September 18 we visited the economics and financial politics hub of the EU commission and received a detailed briefing on the workings and the design of the currency, the Euro. This topic proved to be excellent for our students, as it is very "hands-on" and everybody had already used the currency in Europe. The design of the Euro coins and bills itself is a crash course in European arts and history. It became evident that using the same currency brings countries closer together; thus is it a good means of building trust. The Euro experience also eliminated stereotypes such as "Those people cannot be trusted with our money" – Well, they can, as the short history of the Euro already testifies.



September 18 – during the Presentation on the common European currency, the Euro.

On September 19 we were guests at the Committee of the Regions, which is an institution that designs policies for Europe's many regions and minorities. In the past, there were heavy conflicts within nation-states about the degree of independence to be given or denied to individual regions. This even led to armed internal conflicts, e.g. between the Spanish government and the Basque and Catalan independence movements or between Britain and minorities in Northern Ireland. The EU has initiated policies that give these regions more freedom while generally preserving national unity. These freedoms include respect for cultural and linguistic autonomy and have largely succeeded in ending or reducing armed conflict and bringing enemies back to talking to each other. – The topic of regionalism is especially enlightening as it reflects a trend that has only recently started in the complicated relations between (mainland) Japan and Okinawa. Acceptance of the peculiarities of distant regions such as Okinawa and Hokkaido has not always been high on the agenda in Tokyo and it brings much needed self-esteem and a cultural boost to the regions.



The lecture at the Committee of the Regions. The EU councilor briefing the group is a gentleman from Scotland which has seen sweeping devolution, causing a strengthening of regional autonomy. It is

this kind of first-hand accounts that make Study Abroad trips virtually irreplaceable to the serious student.

The topic of September 20 was the ongoing controversy over the possibility of Turkey joining the EU which was presented in a very substantial lecture by a senior EU official from France who had himself taken part in some of the negotiations. This controversy exposes fundamental questions within the EU – How far does “Europe” reach (only about 1% of Turkey is physically in Europe)? – Is the EU ready to accept a country which had been seen as a threat by Central and Eastern European countries for centuries? – Is there enough tolerance for a large Islamic member state or is the EU in truth a “Club for Christians”? The Turkey accession problem had constantly been one of high interest to the RyuDai students as it reflects an Asian “outsider’s” experience with Europe.

The following days were designed as a historical journey through Central Europe (Belgium, Luxemburg, Germany, France) highlighting common foundations of European identity as well as the divisions and catastrophes of the past which led to the strife for a better future for all.

The focus of the visit to Luxemburg, one of the smallest but oldest EU member states, was the old mining settlement of Fond-de-Gras. Mining and heavy industries had since the Industrial Revolution dominated large swaths of Central Europe stretching from Western Germany into Belgium, Luxemburg and Eastern France. The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 was an innovative approach to allow former foes to monitor each other’s coal and steel production which were crucial for building arms and waging wars. It also proved to be a major step towards launching the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, a forerunner of the European Union (EU). The idea of allowing international supervision of facilities crucial to producing arms still lives on in the inspection regime

of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for nuclear materials.

September 22-24 were mainly devoted to studying the oldest layer of common European identity, the inheritance of the Roman Empire. All visited countries were at one point Roman provinces. These centuries have created a strong legacy in fields as diverse as urban culture, architecture, the law, language and literature, philosophy, political thought and eventually even Christianity. The RyuDai study group traveled up and down the River Mosel in Germany whose surrounding banks and hills are still covered with wine which Roman soldiers brought here almost 2000 years ago. The region’s capital, Trier, has several extant buildings from the Roman Empire. During this part of our journey, our group was welcomed by several local volunteers who helped making these days memorable.

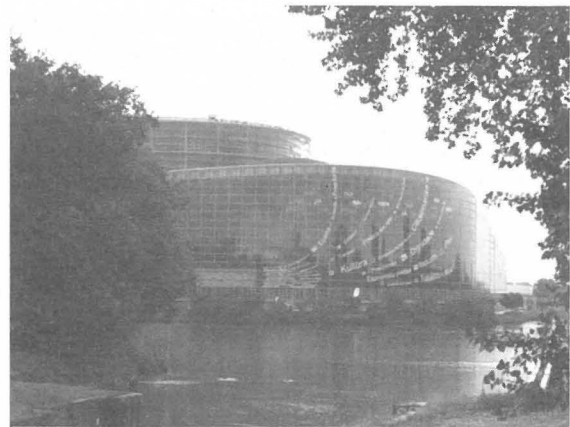


RyuDai students giving a hand at harvesting wine grapes at the River Mosel, September 23, 2006.

Following the lovely River Mosel our large bus brought us into Eastern France to the ancient city of Verdun. Verdun is in the

consciousness of French, Germans and other people a place that shows clearly the ultimate futility of warfare between states on an industrial scale. The fierce World War One battle that took place here in 1916 cost over 700,000 casualties for almost no territorial gain. It was not finished by victory, but by exhaustion on all sides. Verdun has strengthened Europeans' conviction to never again wage such a war – an emotion and fundamental conviction that links Europeans and Japanese, especially Okinawan people, in an often underestimated way. Verdun is also a symbolic place in Franco-German relations as it was over the soldiers' graves here at Verdun that President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl met in 1984, holding each other's hand and pledging peace. For the students, the changed landscape at Verdun and the many remnants over a wide area were reminiscent of the legacy of the battle of Okinawa. It is open to individual reflection when the will to peace in this region of the world will reach the profoundness displayed in Verdun.

The final visit was on September 25-26 to Strasbourg, capital of the Eastern French Alsace region. Alsace was once fiercely disputed between Germany and France, but now it is at ease with several languages that are spoken by its inhabitants and proudly is one of two seats of the European Parliament. Thanks to Dr Reiterer's excellent support we were able to meet six Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from five different countries for two hours despite an ongoing plenary session. The talks and opinions given to us on all topics formerly covered on the tour were insightful and frank as were the questions of our students who by now had lost shyness and felt at ease with using the English language.



The EU Parliament building in Strasbourg (France). The facade is decorated with words from all 23 official and working languages of the European Union.

The last institution visited during the second stage of the Kaigai Bunka Kenshu was the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), also in Strasbourg. Independent of the EU, it is recognized by 46 European countries who each send one judge to the court. Judge Renate Jäger of Germany explained that the prime purpose of the court is to protect European citizens' human rights even against their home states. If a European citizen has put his complaint to every court available to him in his home country and still feels his basic human rights are denied he is free to ask the ECHR for a judgment. Often citizens win against their home countries which then have to change their policies. With the concept of human rights as such not being as deeply rooted in Japan as in Europe (where it was invented during the 18th century in France), and the Japanese state almost inevitably on the winning side, it is a tempting idea to think what boost reformist ideas might receive if Japan accepted an independent international court to check its rulings.

6. Stage Three: The "Individuality" Stage of the Study Tour

From September 27 on students had the option of returning to Japan or to spend

several days in small groups or individually in Europe to study subjects of their own choice. Places and topics ranged from classical music in Vienna (Austria) to environmental policies in Freiburg (Germany). Actively pursuing a small project in Europe without the presence of a group and teachers could be considered as a test for the students. As it appeared, all students were able to show their ability to navigate their way in Europe independently.

7. Conclusion

Apart from returning without any major negative incident, but truly exhausted, what is the legacy of this study tour? From the educator's point of view there were several goals. These included improvement in language skills and the building-up of confidence to interact freely with Europeans in their home countries. Answers from students show that they had indeed become more confident and classes from October 2006 on have shown that many returned home more motivated to pursue their studies, and happily building on their improved language skills. Spanish students interviewed for this paper expressed that they no longer felt embarrassed to speak up in the foreign language and actually started to enjoy it ("shabero de ki ni natta").⁴

At least in the case of German general education classes the numbers of students increased, with many freshmen expressing their interest in joining the next Study Abroad tour almost as soon as they enrolled.⁵

Personally I was impressed by students' changed behaviour in my German Communication course. In Europe, they had

made the experience that it is not always necessary to understand one hundred percent of what is being said in the foreign language to receive the main message. The Spanish students mentioned above put it this way: "mimi ga nareta" ("Our ears have gotten used to it"). Now these students do not panic any more at the language they had been little used to before, but try to understand what they can and to interact based on this. – English major students started to greet me in English whereas before they had always spoken in Japanese to me. – When it comes to foreign languages, courage and "yaruki" have generally increased. One key experience made in Europe concerns the English language which was the *lingua franca* used by all EU officials and many members of the general public. The students were amazed to listen to a Frenchman speaking English, Germans, Eastern Europeans... all spoke English reasonably well and freely, but few seemed to care about imitating the "proper" accent of native speakers. After all, when the main goal is to understand and to be understood, this allows for "French" English, "German" English and many other accents, of course including "Japanese" English. Hopefully this linguistic experience will further encourage RyuDai students not to become obsessed with native speaker-like pronunciation but to be pragmatic and put the communicative intention first. Of course this also applies to the other foreign languages involved in the project, with the Spanish students echoing this sentiment exactly.

The question how much the cultural, historical, and political contents of the tour have changed students' attitudes and injected fresh ideas is more difficult to answer than to find evidence of improved language skills and attitudes to language learning.

Clearly, the educators wanted to initiate reflection among the students and let them have a fresh perspective from abroad. There is evidence that this process already began during the tour. Students explicitly

⁴ Interview with Ms Saya Omoto and Ms Naomi Yamashiro, on file, May 11, 2007.

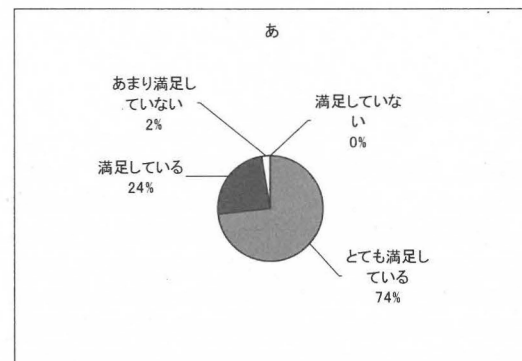
⁵ This is confirmed by Prof Koichi Yoshii and other German Studies colleagues (May 2007).

asked Members of the European Parliament about their views on the adaptability of European experiences to Japan and Asia. Talks with groups of students showed a high level of interest in this, but also an awareness that nothing could be copied straight because the countries and cultures involved are very different. As the Spanish students pointed out the EU was in its Western European beginnings very much helped by the fact that most countries' economic and financial development was not too different from each other; since new, poorer members from Eastern Europe have been taken in, problems of massive labour migration and financial demands have risen. Discrepancies between, especially, the economic development of Japan, and that of most of her neighbours are even more dramatic. On the political front, the EU has set a policy that only mature democracies can join, bound by clear legal standards. In East Asia, on the contrary, one finds a wide array of political systems and conflicting values. Still, some students expressed that much could be gained by studying European ideas and that this could make a small contribution to improve relations in other parts of the world. At least studying Europe and their main target country has become much more focused and less abstract to the students because they have seen the basics with their own eyes (Omoto/Yamashiro).

Reflecting the current debate about patriotism in Japan, students said that the one-month tour not only increased their understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures but also of their own country, Japan (Okinawa). Ms Omoto and Ms Yamashiro quoted the lack of interest in high-grade service in shops and restaurants in Europe, which had come as an initial culture shock to them but then made them happy to be from Japan where standards are higher and service generally better. Getting into more intimate contact with other cultures of course increases awareness for one's own and marks differences.

All students' experiences and opinions are covered by an extensive survey designed by the Study Abroad team. The results were prepared by Prof. Minako Yogi. Selected results show that the general satisfaction with the project (preparatory seminars and study tour) was very high for 74%, high for 24% and less than satisfying only of two percent of respondents (Chart 1).

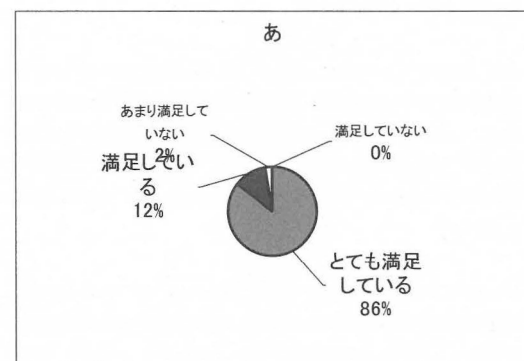
海外文化研修の総合評価



(Chart 1)

The project has increased interest in language, history and culture very much for a whopping 86% (Chart 2).

海外文化研修旅行に参加することで更に言語、文化、歴史に対する興味・関心が高まった。

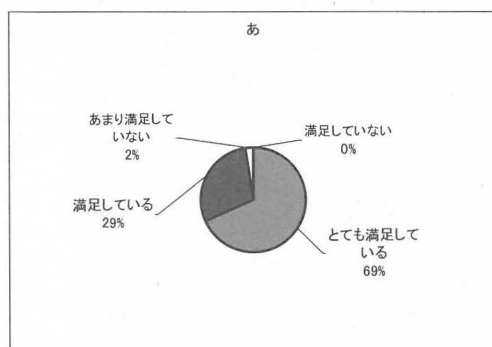


(Chart 2)

One of the prime educational purposes – to induce students to reflect on their own

culture and country through experiencing others' – has also been achieved, with 69% answering this happened very much, 29% saying it did happen and only 2% disagreeing (Chart 3).

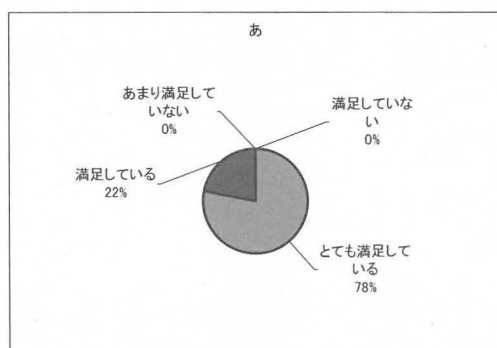
研修を通して自分自身の普段の習慣や自国の文化などについて考えさせられた。



(Chart 3)

In the end, 78% said they would recommend this study trip very much to their junior students, with the remaining 22% also saying the project was recommendable (Chart 4).

海外文化研修への参加を後輩にも勧めたいと思う。



(Chart 4)

Concluding, it seems safe to say that the 2006 Study Abroad programme was a success that exceeded expectations and rewarded hard work put into it. It is to be hoped that the open approach involving many parts and subjects within this university can be preserved for future edi-

tions of the project, which could again focus on the EU, but might also choose other main topics.



Kaigai Bunka Kenshu group in front of tour bus. Strasbourg, September 26, 2006.