



## Report on International High School Arts Festival 2012 in Japan

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The Japan International High School Arts Festival was a good and refreshing experience for me. I met very wonderful people and opened my eyes to such new ways of seeing the world. For the first two days, we went on a tour around Tokyo. We had a taste of high quality and authentic Japanese food, visited many traditional Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, soaked in coffee/green tea/sake/wine baths in a hot springs theme park up in the mountains, caught a breathtaking view of Tokyo city at night from the top of the metropolitan office tower, went shopping in the streets of Harajuku, and basically immersed ourselves in the Japanese atmosphere. On the third day, we attended the actual prize-giving ceremony and were given the opportunity to interact with Japanese high school students during the buffet lunch. During the lunch, each representative from each country also delivered their one-minute speech giving thanks to various groups and individuals, in English.

The best and most memorable part of the trip was the interaction with other international students. I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to bring students from all over the world to unite in art. We all shared one commonality, which was our love and passion for art. I particularly appreciated how everyone from all over the world, from vastly different cultures, came together and shared about our own countries and art forms. For most part, we embraced cultural differences and learnt to learn with humility from each other. Everyone brought something different to the table and we could see the same thing from different perspectives. I thought such a trip was useful in establishing good ties and connections between countries, since purposeful opportunities are hard to come by. I met Irish, Cambodians, Burmese, Israelis, Malaysians, Indonesians, Egyptians, Chinese, Japanese, English and Vietnamese. It was like being in 12 other countries at the same time! It's a point where East and West meet for a single purpose of uniting as an arts community, and where we get to share our own life experiences with each other. I remembered most conversations to be so meaningful, simply because such different insights were surfaced from the same situation. I definitely think that every art student should have the chance to somehow be exposed to the outside world and not be content with being comfortable in our little bubble of Singapore. There's just so much to learn from others.

In terms of how the trip benefitted me, I must say that it really helped me to put things in perspective. After being in such a small, overly populated and relatively competitive country,

Singapore, it is very refreshing to see that the world isn't all about the grades or academics. While these are important, what's also important is seeing the world and creating strong relationships with people from all over the world. I learnt to see the importance and value of the arts in society and in our individual lives. In our competitive country where good results are highly valued, I feel that the arts should not be negated or ignored. It has the power to influence, move, and transform people. This trip has shown me that the arts is such an important tool in bringing people together and sharing, transmitting, and communicating ideas cross-culturally. Personally, the trip has reminded me to not hold a narrow worldview or perspective on things, but to recognize that we only see a glimpse of reality from Singapore. I think that everyone should have the opportunity to experience other cultures and be reminded of how little they know. Singapore is such a sheltered country with little history, and to immerse myself in cultures with such strong and rich histories and cultures has opened up my worldview. I truly believe in the value of the arts and this trip has reinforced my belief in its influence and impact.

I owe the success of the trip largely to the organizers. The organizers were very hospitable and they put in so much effort in making us feel welcome and at home. We were brought to the best restaurants in town and ate food of high quality. They often went out of their way to ensure that we were well taken care of. Whenever we had a problem, they made sure that our needs were met. Whenever my mom and I had enquiries about hotel bookings, or about anything we didn't understand in Japan, be it in terms of expected behaviour or conventional customs, the organizers would be quick to explain them to us. They were very patient and proved to be very knowledgeable with regard to their culture. Because my mom and I extended our trip, the organizer helped us to ensure all our bookings were made and gave us specific transport details, as well as which eateries were good. In all, the service was excellent and I felt safe in their hands. I definitely could trust the organizers to give me the best taste of Japan. I have no complaints about the service of the organizers as they prioritized our welfare and went the extra mile to ensure that we received only the best experience. This warmth and proactive hospitality is definitely something Singapore can also learn from Japan.

That said, there are only two aspects that I think could be improved on during the trip. The first aspect is the crammed itinerary and secondly, the space for interaction with the students. Although the programme was very well planned, I felt that we were constantly rushing from one place to other to get as many things done in one day that there was little time to soak in the environment. As soon as we got to one tourist site and managed to take a couple of pictures, we were rushed to the bus to move to the next destination. The rushing was very draining and made us very tired at night. It also makes the interaction very contrived and difficult, as proper conversations could not be held. My suggestion to the organizers is that perhaps the trip could be extended by one day to allow for more time to explore and build good relationships among the students. With more time, more quality friendships can be fostered and ties between countries, strengthened. A (subpar) alternative would be to decrease the number of activities. However,

that would not be as effective because the experience of the students would be shortchanged since they would receive less than what is intended. An increase in the trip length would still be the best option as it gives time to leave impressions and nurture lasting friendships.

The second aspect that can be improved on is the limited space for interaction with the students. Although the trip only comprised students and their guardians, I felt that there was little opportunity to mingle around with the other students because most were always sticking with their guardians. It took a few days to break the ice and start talking to each other, and by the time that happened the trip was already over. My suggestion would be to mix the seating plans such that the students are seated with each other on the bus, or at dinner tables, to create opportunity for interactions. It is difficult for some students, especially the quieter and shy ones, to move out of their comfort zone and mingle with the other students. They simply stick to their parents/guardian out of obligation or because of social comfort and hence, have limited conversations with other students. This, I feel, is a pity, seeing that the purpose of the trip is to encourage building links and good ties with the different countries. More emphasis, perhaps, could be placed on creating a good environment for interaction. Another limitation that may be related is the lack of a common language. Not every student speaks English, and thus it is very difficult to communicate. Perhaps the guardian accompanying the student should be able to speak basic English to allow for easy communication with the other representatives from other countries? It would make things easier for the students and make for more effective communication. As of now, language is a bit of an issue. In all, I feel that inter-country communication can be enhanced in terms of opportunities and language.

In general, I had an extremely pleasant and memorable experience in Japan. I've learnt so much from the others and saw so many things differently! I think that there is a lot Singapore can learn from Japan and the other countries, and it so important that we broaden our horizons and always remind ourselves that there is more to the world than we think. I felt very honored to represent Singapore on an international stage and I can only hope that I gave them a lasting and good impression of our nation!