Listening to Students: How Seichō Added Meaning to My Life

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How *Seichō* Added Meaning to My Life

BY RUBI GARCIA

Studying abroad at an early stage of my undergraduate career refined my college experience as a scholar and individual. After completing my first year in college, I immediately traveled abroad, 5,000 miles away from home. From the study-abroad program that took me to Japan, I learned the importance of respect, tolerance, and self-awareness.

As I was starting this new chapter in my life, I experienced unfamiliar mixed emotions: nostalgia, delight, curiosity, hope, and a strong desire to learn. Upon my return, I realized that studying in Japan meant more than just visiting a country I wanted to cross off my bucket list; it symbolized a strong desire to see the world and to be swept off my feet by all that was unknown to me.

Until I went to college, Watts was the only home I knew. I was unfamiliar with everything beyond the boundaries of South Central. I never gave myself much opportunity to explore the very diverse parts of Los Angeles. So when Christina Yokoyama—one of the two innovators behind the summer study-abroad course offered through the Norman Topping Program—informed me of my selection to travel to Japan, I was ecstatic. I had never imagined that I—a first-generation college student—would be studying abroad.

During my two-week stay in Japan, I constantly interacted with people whose backgrounds were completely different from mine. From Shinto temples to vending machines on every corner, I saw things I didn’t see at home. My observations sparked curiosity and growth. I reflected on my experiences continuously, investigating global culture and discovering myself all at once.

It was during this process that I recognized how much I valued diversity. Japan’s homogenous population made me better appreciate the freedom I have here in the United States to be an individual, because people in a heterogeneous culture have more possibility of choosing who to be. Although my friends, family, and other significant individuals have all shaped my identity, at the end of the day, it has always been up to me to decide who I am—and that is something that I had taken for granted.

Being far away from home also reminded me of my roots. Even though the Japanese were not seeing me as a girl from the “hood” or thinking of me as a “beaner” or “wetback,” I did. As offensive as those terms sounded, I realized how engraved in my heart they were and how much of a role they continue to play in shaping my character.

For as long as I can remember, I have always had trouble balancing my two cultures. I have sometimes felt that being an “outsider” in both of my cultures was a burden. If I was not “Mexican enough” for my family, I would be criticized for being *gringa*, or too “white-washed”; and if others thought I was too “Mexican,” I would be criticized for that. While I was in Japan, however, I had no problem expressing myself as both a Mexican and American. And what was the best part about this? That, for once, I could be my actual, true self.

My growing self-awareness made it possible for me to practice tolerance. The affection and generosity I received from the Japanese allowed me to step out of my comfort zone. Despite the cultural and language barriers, I was able to adopt some of the simple practices the Japanese revere:

*Rubi Garcia* (rubigarc@usc.edu) is in the class of 2015 at the University of Southern California. Here she describes her experience of an intensive study-abroad “Maymester” course that lasted three and a half weeks. Students spend the first preparing for the experience, the second two in country (in this case, Japan), and the last half week debriefing and making presentations.
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nodding one’s head to express attentiveness and acquiescence, greeting and thanking everybody after every kind act to show respect, eating with chopsticks, and even respecting nature.

At first, I believed I would be able to get away with living like an American abroad, but I soon learned I was wrong. When I visited my first non-Western toilet, I was appalled at the inconvenience. I burst out, “Where are the normal toilets? How can people use the restroom squatting down, as if they were going to sit on the floor? Who on earth came up with the idea of toilets being on the floor?”

Yet, after almost two days of complaining, I began to see how much of a brat I had been. Who was I to say what was “normal” and what was not? Who was I to judge? The Japanese were warmly welcoming me into their homes, so the least I could do was appreciate their culture and country. And I did. I did my best to adapt to their customs, and that adaptability started to become second nature to me—something that my parents were able to see upon my return.

They could appreciate my experience abroad because it mirrored the journey they had embarked on 40 years ago when they immigrated to the United States. Upon their arrival, they were forced to mature into responsible adults, despite being only 17. Without speaking the language or understanding the culture, they managed to put food on the table every day.

As a result of the seichō (growth) I had experienced on this trip, I was able to find a major that matched the interests I had developed. American Studies and Ethnicity—a comparative and interethnic program that studies the peoples, cultures, history, and social issues of the Western United States—provided me with the opportunity to study what is most important to me: the intersectionality of gender, race, and class and how diverse groups of people respond to these phenomena. In my efforts to understand my two cultures, I hope that the program can provide me with the insight necessary to continue the growth that started in Japan.

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