

1. Report

Please write a report on your study experience, addressing the matters listed below. Your report should be more than 500 words in English. Matters to include in your report: (a) Academic outcomes (how participation in this program affected your motivation, university study and international understanding, and what interests and plans you developed for further study in the future); (b) Your experiences in Kyoto University; (c) The content of the program; (d) The impact of the program on your career plans.

*The information you provide may be included in Re-discovering Japan Project reports, or published in printed materials or on our website in pages dealing with the outcomes of programs offered by the Asian Studies Unit and/or Kyoto University. Please ensure that your report only includes content which is publishable in light of privacy considerations and the need to safeguard personal information. Also note that depending on the publication format, we may need to edit parts of your report.

[Engaging Buddhism]

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I came to Kyoto with the intention of studying how Zen Buddhist philosophies relate to and influence the culture, aesthetic, and architecture of Japan. We visited many important sites like Ginkakuji, Nanzenji, Nijo Castle, Daitokuji, Kinkakuji, Gion Shrine, Kodaiji, Yasaka Tower, the Imperial Palace and the Katsura Imperial Villa. In addition, we also had a temple stay at Kojinji. My experience in Kyoto presented me with a first-hand insight into the real manifestations of Zen philosophy that could not have been achieved merely through academic study. The highly conscious utilization of empty space, the consciousness of emptiness and silence, the Japanese cultural emphasis on harmony with society, as well as its high level of context sensitivity speak to me of the deep influence of Zen philosophy.

During my previous visit to Japan, I had focused primarily on Shinto religious sites and architecture. While sites such as the Ise Grand Shrine had little Buddhist influence, and are representative of older and more traditional architectural styles, the majority of Shinto shrines can trace some aspect of their architecture to the arrival of Buddhism in Japan.

The syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism has always been a topic of great fascination for me, and this trip granted me the opportunity to explore how the two religious traditions overlap and blend. The strong integration of the natural environment in Japanese Buddhist architecture and the use of natural materials, for example, seems to be influenced by Shinto's reverence for nature. It has often been said that Japanese are "born Shinto" and "die Buddhist", and indeed, syncretism appears to be the norm, not the exception, with many Japanese who now also "marry Christian".

On the other hand, Japan is also one of the most irreligious nations in the world. In spite of that, religion has a strong influence on their culture, and there is a strong preservation of religious ritual, tradition and sites. My trip in Kyoto reinforced that fact greatly for me – it was amazing to see how often one could see a shrine or temple integrated seamlessly into the cityscape, a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity.

The seamless and harmonious integration of religious tradition into modern society as observed in Kyoto is deserving of study to me. With the rising threat of religiously motivated fundamentalist terror groups, sharia law, sectarian wars in the Middle East, and religious opposition to LGBT rights and the teaching of evolution, among other clashes around the globe, I believe that it is very important to study how different religions and tradition can not only peacefully mix with one another, but also operate in harmonious concert with modern secular society for the sake of a more peaceful and enlightened global community. I believe that there are many important aspects of religious spirituality that are extremely valuable to the human experience, and I came partially with the intention to explore if there are any elements within Japanese religious practice that renders them so compatible with a secularist mind-set. I think there are important aspects of Japanese culture that should be emulated in order to better achieve this goal, and I hope to spend more time in Japan in future in order to better learn how best to blend spirituality with materialist realities and concerns.