

## From the South Bronx to Osaka: Reflection on my identity and time in Japan

Written by Omar Hernandez Rodriguez, CET Japan Fall 2018

*Who is the intended audience(s) for your Perspective Piece?: Everyone*

With the completion of an experience, new perspectives can emerge. This sentiment rang true for me when I completed my year abroad with the CET program in 2018. I studied abroad in São Paulo, Brazil and Osaka, Japan in the respective spring and fall semesters. With the existence of numerous differences in culture, program focus, and language, it comes as no surprise that the experiences were different and I gained a plethora of knowledge from both. Yet, despite having already completed a semester abroad, I felt apprehensive about numerous concerns before traveling to Japan. Furthermore, there remained a lot for me to learn about living abroad. Still, I had an amazing experience filled with new challenges that helped me grow and new friendships that made me happy.

Having spent my childhood in New York City – specifically the South Bronx – I am accustomed to seeing and living in a very racially diverse society and walking through rather loud and perhaps slightly unsafe streets. São Paulo, Brazil definitely mirrored New York City in these descriptions and I could see why the program staff told us during orientation that anyone one of us, “looked Brazilian.” In Japan, this of course was not the case and it became one of the first times I reflected deeply on my identity in a context outside of the United States. Interestingly enough, due to my rather racially ambiguous appearance and the large Japanese population in São Paulo, many Brazilians asked me if I was Japanese. In Japan, I received the same question but rarely and it only if I did not have a beard.

I did not think my appearance would influence my experience, as it had not in Brazil, until I began to notice subtle behaviors on my train rides. For some time I noticed that whenever I sat in a crowded train, the seat or seats next to me would be empty while all the others occupied. This occurred for some time until I noticed a change happen when I began to shave regularly. Now other commuters would sit next to me, even if the seats next to me were not the last available. A part of me wanted to ignore and shrug off that observation – to think that it was not a big deal –yet, I still had a feeling of loneliness just from the thought that my appearance could compel others to develop preconceptions about me. I once heard one of these preconceptions when showing an elderly Japanese woman a picture of my family just before I left New York. Upon seeing me in the picture she had said, “Woah, it’s a good thing you shaved! You looked a little dangerous.” This person and I were good friends and remained so, even after that comment since we talked about it and why I felt uncomfortable, but it still disappointed me to know that perhaps that thought could have occurred often from other people. Now, I must state such a feeling and experience only describes an extremely small portion of my time in Japan and with so many positive experiences, I will do my best to condense it into a few paragraphs.

During my time abroad, three distinct, yet all equally positive experiences had shaped my time in Japan. The first, my Intensive Beginner Japanese class, pushed me every day to learn the basics of the

Japanese language in order to survive in daily situations. The tough course, however, led by three of the kindest and sweetest professors I ever had, became an integral part of my experience and helped me improve my conversational Japanese. My Japanese professor at my home university helped me become excited to study in Japan, while my CET professors have helped further my desire to continue studying Japanese in the coming years.

Another great experience I had involves the optional internship program; working as an English tutor at Osaka Gakuin University's International Chat (I-Chat). Prior to my time abroad, I taught English at an NGO partnered with my university and that work began my interest in pursuing a career teaching English, but my experience at I-Chat has greatly furthered my interest in pursuing this career path. My time at I-Chat challenged me to find more effective and adaptive methods of teaching, but also helped me form great friendships with the OGU students that I worked with. Additionally, it was through the I-Chat internship that I made most of my friends and began to feel comfortable at the university. Further, the I-Chat staff, led by their affable director, Jordan, provided a welcoming environment that made me look forward to the days that I taught.

Finally, the CET excursions, especially the overnight trip to Tottori, Japan, introduced me to countless interesting and fun cultural aspects of Japan. The excursions included Osaka Castle, the Sand Castle Museum at Tottori, and a presentation at a local elementary school. The intensive language class was quite rigorous and required great effort in order to obtain success. Thus, having the opportunities to learn about Japan in a non-academic environment proved to be valuable and relaxing experiences. Additionally, there were a lot more events and activities hosted by the university that provided even more chances to meet new people and learn about Japan. The CET roommates were also great resources in informing us about other fun events and locations that we would not have known about otherwise. The previously mentioned Tottori overnight trip, proved to be my favorite experience as it was the one time all the CET international students and roommates spent a long time together and it gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with everyone in the program. The trip proved to be an invaluable bonding experience that I will continue to remember long after my departure from Japan.

The experiences I had in Japan and the CET Osaka program both challenged me to reflect on my identity but also survive and thrive in an environment different from my own. Despite all the fears and worries I had before my trip and even during the first couple of days, I would ultimately happily refer to Osaka as a home away from home, thanks in large part to the amazing friends I had, who helped me to succeed in the classroom and enjoy life in the city. Although I left Japan with numerous things I still wanted to do, the four months I spent in Osaka already have provided memories I will cherish for many years to come.