

# Friendships I Will Always Treasure

Hwang Young Jin

I first went to Japan as a student in March 1991 and the next 5 years—until March 1996—brought me many wonderful experiences I would never have had in my native South Korea (Republic of Korea). Although 5 years seemed too short, they were very worthwhile because I had a wonderful opportunity to broaden my field of knowledge.

I had to face some difficult situations while in Japan, but many people showed true friendship and guided me through with kindness that I will never forget.

My time in Japan was divided into two parts—2 years studying the language and 3 years at the Graduate School of Tokyo's Waseda University. The first 2 years at language school were hard—I didn't understand or speak much Japanese and everything was new so I ran up against one obstacle after another.

One person I will never forget was a graduate from the University of Tokyo. He was the first Japanese who proved to be a true friend during my time in Japan. He showed great interest in South Korea, rivalling my own interest in Japan and offered to help me whenever I had

trouble adapting to life in his country. When I told him about some difficulty, he would give me advice and say 'Hang in there.'

Sometimes, he would invite me to his home for a meal. This was a great opportunity to get to know all kinds of Japanese cooking—*sushi* (raw fish on rice), *sashimi* (slices of raw fish), *natto* (fermented soybeans), *tonjiru* (pork and vegetable soup), *chanko-nabe* (a high-calorie fish and meat pot stew eaten by sumo wrestlers), *oden* (popular winter foods stewed in thin broth), *ramen* (Chinese noodles), and a lot more. These meals accustomed me to life in a typical Japanese home. I learned to like Japanese food a lot and now look forward to the luxury of deciding what to eat on business trips to Japan. My friend was also very patient with my broken Japanese and helped correct my grammar to speak something like a native.

Although I don't live in Japan now, our friendship remains as strong as ever. When he visits South Korea I want to show him some of the things the country has to offer so he can appreciate it even more. If it had

not been for his friendship, I might have given up studying in Japan. Instead, I kept at it, learning more and more Japanese during those first 2 years. Looking back, I see that I owe him a great deal.

After 2 years, I was ready to put my nose to the grindstone at Waseda University. In my new surroundings, I could communicate fairly well with other students and professors in their own language. Unlike my time at the language school, when I felt at sea much of the time, during my 3 years at university I was able to grasp many aspects of Japan, gaining a good understanding of its politics, economy, society, and culture.

Waseda University opens its doors to people of all ages and I was able to study what I wanted. The professors and students were patient, trying hard to understand what I was thinking and feeling. They talked without reserve, always keen to discover how Japan and South Korea are similar and how the two countries can move forward together for mutual benefit. I was lucky enough to be exposed to new exciting concepts and



Author (centre back row) with fellow students at Japanese-language school



Graduating in 1996 from Waseda University (Author)

new ways of thinking. Too soon, my student days were over and I returned home to begin working at the Korea Railroad Research Institute (KRRRI) where I am today.

My work at KRRRI gives me opportunities to visit Japan and to learn more about the country and its advanced railway network.

On my first business trip in 1997, I visited the Institute of Transportation Economics. In Japan, even more so than in Korea, it is customary to call and make an appointment before visiting anybody, but I broke with convention by dropping in unannounced. I was very surprised at the wholehearted welcome I received—it was as if a family member had appeared out of the blue. Everybody cooperated in giving me all the information and materials I had hoped for and making my trip a success.

I was even invited to a bar for supper where the *sake* (rice wine) and *otsumami* (nibbles) served in a traditional atmosphere formed the backdrop for a most enjoyable time. Our talking gave me the opportunity to broaden my knowledge of railway-related matters and to better understand the situation facing Japanese railways today. Through this get-together we developed a greater interest in railways in each other's countries, and discovered how mutual friendship can spring from a common interest. Their kindness is something I will never forget.

If it had not been for the goodwill that many people in Japan showed me, I would not have the skills and opinions I have today. I owe them a lot.

Before I went to Japan as a student, I viewed the Japanese as a people who were geographically close to Koreans, but as far away as possible in outlook and sentiment. But my 5 years in Japan taught me that the people are warm and kind and that we can communicate from the heart. I now realize that my former



Dining with personnel from Institute of Transportation Economics during first business trip to Japan (Author)



On business trip this year to Kyushu at Hakata Station (Author)

prejudiced view of Japan was wrong. I am happy to say that my ties of friendship with Japan still give me an

inner strength that I can draw upon in my work and I look forward to visiting Japan again to renew these friendships. ■



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