

What I Have Received from Japan

Young-Sue Choe

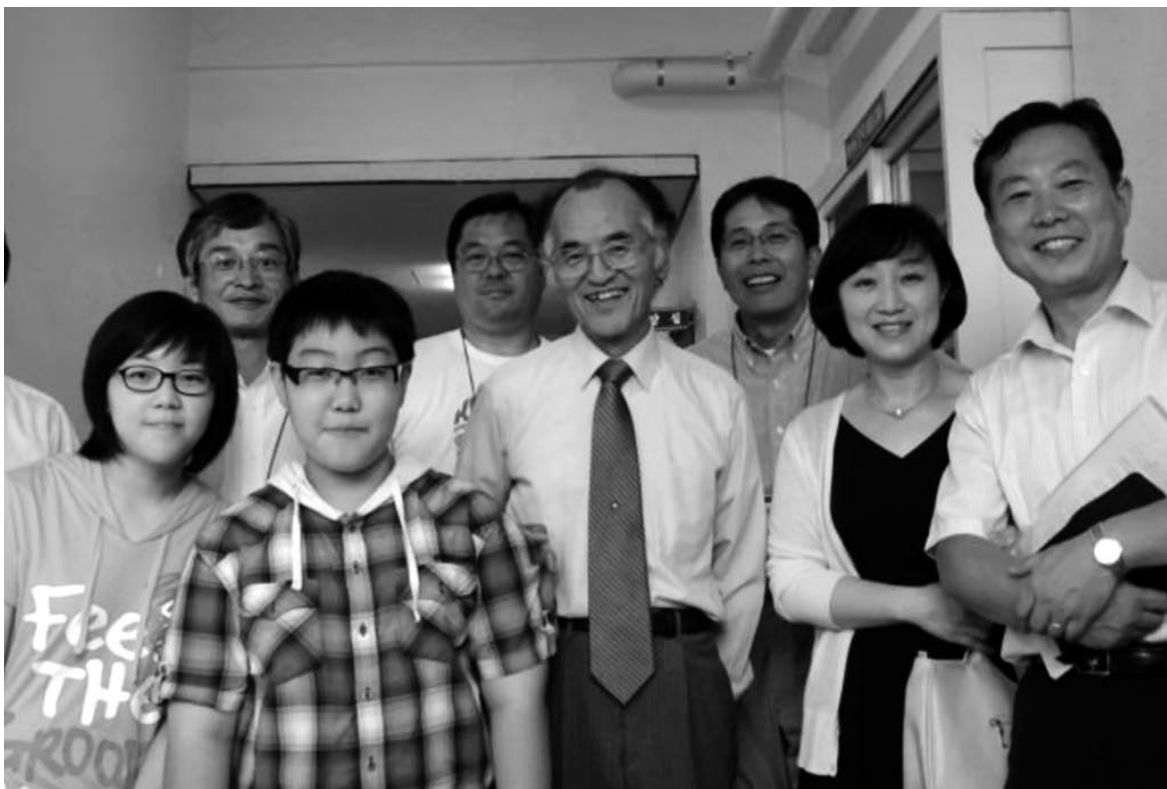
My job is teaching Japanese to university students. I never thought I would become a Japanese teacher, but when I look back it was probably fate that I did.

I started learning Japanese upon entering university, thinking that it would be enough to study Japanese, join a company and do the things I wanted to do. My specialization was in Japanese literature and my studies encompassed everything to do with Japan, including language and culture. I started to gradually understand Japan and in the fourth year I spent 1 month on a language training course at Nanzan University in Nagoya. I participated in a home-stay with a local family and my feelings as I went about daily life could probably be called culture shock. The extreme diligence, kindness, and genuine thoughtfulness to strangers were very different from what I had learned at school. It is no exaggeration to say that the month I spent in Nagoya changed my life. I gained another precious family there—my kind and

hard-working home-stay mother, my home-stay father who would always understand everything, and Eisuke, who was at that time a popular second-year high-school student.

As I came to like Japan more, I sought to know more about the country and her people. When I graduated, I joined Seiko Epson Corporation, which was how I came to begin my life in Tokyo. The company provided everything I needed to live, including a roof over my head, and my home-stay family from university days would send other daily necessities and food items. I spent the New Year and the Obon holidays with them too. To have a family in Japan supporting my efforts was a great encouragement and gave me the courage to believe I could do anything.

Although I had been confident about my Japanese ability, when my job began, I soon realized my confidence was misplaced. I found that the Japanese I learned in the classroom was hardly any help. At lunchtime, everybody



Friends from Tsukuba came to visit my family

(Author)



With members of English conversation class in UK—nearly all Japanese

(Author)

would talk about various topics, and if I am honest, I would have to say that I did not understand half of what was spoken. This was a disappointment, but I resolved to start again from scratch, and I started jotting down phrases and expressions from daily life. In order to learn not just words and phrases but also culture and customs, I attended nearly every after-work party and other events. I also responded eagerly to invitations to join trips at weekends and holidays. Thanks to this I was able to make many good friends, including Yoshiko, Kikuji, Yumiko and Mina. The 2 years I spent in Japan are part of my life I will never forget.

After returning home to Korea, I decided to teach Japanese at companies and schools. My Nagoya home-stay mother came to Korea to see me, bringing a friend with her. The friends I had made in my job also came to visit and we spent enjoyable times together touring Korea. My friends also went to the trouble of flying to Korea to attend my wedding. My Japanese family and friends are the greatest presents Japan gave to me.

After marrying, I decided I wanted to return to my studies, so I entered graduate school where I specialized in Japanese language teaching. After completing the master's course, I moved back to Japan with my family, studying at Tsukuba University in Ibaraki Prefecture where I studied Japanese literature as a doctoral research student. In Ibaraki, I again met many Japanese people who were all kind and generous

to me. These encounters were totally different from those I had experienced previously when single in Tokyo. With my husband and daughter, we enjoyed many interactions with Japanese families. At Christmas and New Year, we would be invited to people's homes where we would be treated to delicious home-made food, and in return I would make Korean food and invite people round to our home to sample it. I came to truly believe that wherever you are in the world it is always possible to make friends. My old friends from the company also came to Tsukuba to visit. As time had passed, each of us had experienced changes in our lives, but our feelings remained unchanged. I spent just over 2 years as a student at Tsukuba, and I was able to learn much more than just from books, making it a significant and happy time that I am grateful for.

During that period, our son was born and we returned to Korea as a four-person family. I raised my children while teaching Japanese language at companies and universities in Korea. Friends and their families from Tsukuba came to Korea to visit us too.

When our son was in his first year of primary school, my husband gained a position as a guest researcher at Kansai University in Osaka for 1 year, so we moved to Osaka where I enjoyed another side of Japan, especially the food. My daughter and son enrolled in a local primary school, where they learned penmanship and made many Japanese friends.



Interpreting at explanatory meeting on hotel internships (Author)

I started learning Japanese cooking and I made Korean food with students and also introduced Korean culture in a special class at Kansai University and at my children's primary school. At the university festival, we participated together in introducing Korean culture, resulting in a valuable exchange and interaction with people. My family was also featured in a radio programme in which we were given an opportunity to introduce education in Korea. My friends from work, my Nagoya home-stay mother and my friends from Tsukuba all came to Osaka to meet us and I was delighted to be reunited with all of them. The teachers of Kansai University and their families, my rail-enthusiast dentist Dr Takagaki, my children's friends and their families, and my Japanese cookery teacher are all treasures from my time in Osaka that I will never forget. My foremost joy is that during the 1 year in Osaka we met so many people.

In the year we returned to Korea, I went to the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation at Ewha Women's University, because I wanted to study Japanese more systematically. Although I knew it before starting, the study was really hard. During this time many friends and acquaintances from Japan came to Korea to visit and a Japanese radio station came to report on how my family were doing after our return to Korea!

After 1 year, my husband became a visiting researcher at Oxford University in the UK so I was forced to curtail my own studies and we set off again. Living in the UK for the first time was not easy. Unlike Japan, British customs and foods are completely different to our own. Our children attended a local school. It was difficult at first because they did not understand the language, but thanks to their experiences in Japan they did not panic. Fortunately, they had Japanese friends at the school who they asked for help in familiar Japanese!

I went to English language school and Japanese people at the Newcomers Club of Oxford University befriended me. In contrast to Japan, UK food was not so much to my liking,

so it was fun to make and eat Korean and Japanese food. I attended a Bible study group with Japanese people and went shopping with Japanese friends, enjoyed afternoon tea, and learned about French cuisine. We would join the families of our friends for meals and trips together. I was able to become really close with these Japanese friends because we were all foreigners together and my time spent in the UK was enjoyable because of them.

After returning to Korea, I resolved to return to graduate school and continue the last year of study. During that time, my Japanese friends from the UK returned to Japan and came to Korea see us. And because our children are the same age, they became friends too, talking in both English and Japanese. This is a happiness we would not have experienced if we could not speak Japanese. A friend with a British spouse comes to Korea to see us when she visits Japan for holidays.

Now I have joined a different generation and am teaching young people, who will be future leaders. What I can do for them is to teach them Japanese while they are students and teach them correctly and accurately about Japan.

Currently, one of my students studying hotel and tourism management is in Japan as an intern, working not at a Western style hotel, but at a traditional Japanese *ryokan* because I thought this experience of traditional Japanese culture would give real knowledge about Japan. Gaining experience of Japan and Japanese culture and making many friends is an essential part of stepping out into the world as a person with a global outlook.

I am also actively advancing training in language studies by sending students to study overseas at sister schools. I believe that studying a language is the basic starting point for getting to know a country.

I have received tremendous benefits from Japan and now it is my turn to return the many favours I received by becoming a conduit for Japan-Korea exchange. It is with such hopes that I look forward to the future. ■



Young-Sue Choe

Mrs Young-Sue Choe is an adjunct professor at Woosong University in Daejeon Metropolitan City, South Korea. After graduating from Chung-Ang University in 1988, she joined Seiko Epson Corporation. She has two master's degrees in Japanese education from Chung-Ang University, and in translation and interpretation from Ewha Women's University.