

## 7th(Final) Column (2015. 7. 15)

### “Oh, it’s not goodbye. I will see you again.” – Typhoon Generation - Arashi

Coming from a relatively small and unknown Asian country has its advantages. People are curious about Singapore, and I usually receive nothing but compliments of my country. I also get to live my life fuss-free while my non-Asian friends get stared at or approached by strangers trying to practice their English.

At the same time, it can be a little grating when I am being treated differently from non-Asian foreigners, when I am told that pictures of me at events do not look “international” enough, or when people tell me, “Your English is really good!” during interpretation jobs despite English being my native language. Despite the good intentions of people who say that, it can be disconcerting when it happens often, and I felt like I was losing my identity.

However, a friend once said, “ [We are] in a unique position when it comes to internationalization”, and I agree. I like to think that by interacting with the locals, I am breaking stereotypes of foreigners as people who are completely different and unreachable, and showing that while we may have our differences, we are also the same.

This July, I will be leaving Toyohashi to return to Singapore. It has been an interesting and memorable ride. My only goal in coming to Japan was to improve my Japanese language skills but in these two years, I have gained so much more. I have not only experienced the Japanese culture, but learnt a lot about myself, my country and my culture. Living in an unfamiliar environment meant that things and values that I have taken from granted were constantly questioned. What is Singaporean food? Why is my name so long? Why do you not serve the same school lunches for all students in Singapore?

All of these experiences helped me to learn lessons that I will never have had if I had stayed in Singapore within my comfort zone. And for that, I am grateful to have the opportunity to work in Toyohashi. There were many firsts for me, but if I had to pick one experience that I enjoyed the most, it would be my school visits. As the Coordinator of International Relations, I visit schools, mostly elementary, to talk to them about Singapore. Students are always curious and energetic, and I’ve always felt overwhelmed by their interest in my little-known country. Once, I met the parent of a student who attended the school that I went to out of pure coincidence and was told that she was surprised by her child showing sudden interest in Singapore. I felt happy and honoured to be able to plant the seeds of internationalization in the children of Toyohashi, to teach them that the world is not so scary after all.

Thank you, readers, for always reading and appreciating my columns. I’ve had people coming up to me to talk about what I have written, and I have always been pleasantly surprised by how well-received my column has been. You have been so kind and receptive and it has been a joy writing for such an appreciative audience.

Thank you for the wealth of experiences, thank you for your kindness and hospitality. I hope the spirit of internationalization and hospitality will continue to be extended towards everyone, locals or non-Japanese.

Thank you, Toyohashi, and keep fighting the good fight.