

From Japan to the UK: The academic journeys of two fashion design students

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We often read about the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by international students as they adapt to life in a new country and a different academic setting. As well as adjusting to a new way of life, on and off campus, they are often faced with some quite fundamental differences in the way their subject is taught and studied. Shi Qianqian and Junzaburo Iwasawa both completed a pre-sessional EAP course before embarking on their MA degree in Fashion Design at Nottingham Trent University. Prior to coming to the UK they both studied for their Bachelor degrees in Japan. Here, in conversation with their EAP teacher (Martin), Shi and Jun reflect on some of the main differences they encountered between studying for Design degrees in a Japanese university and at NTU and the challenges they faced.

Martin: Shi, could you tell me something about what you did before coming to NTU and why you chose the UK?

Shi: Before coming to the UK I studied at undergraduate level in Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, the best dressmaking school in Japan. As a child in China I loved to draw, and I dreamt of becoming a fashion designer. During the first two years at Bunka, I learnt the basics of garment making and in the following two years I developed specialized knowledge through collaborations and internships with external companies. Although I improved my apparel making techniques in Japan, I wasn't confident in the research and design process. I was aware that the methods and focus of design study in the UK were quite different to that of Japan and I felt that learning these different things could help me reach my career goal. That's why I chose the UK for the next stage in my education as a fashion designer.

Martin: What about you Jun? Why did you choose the UK?

Jun: I came here with the aim of developing transformable garments that suit multiple identities. Before coming here, I did a 4-year bachelor degree in Fine Art at Musashino Art University in Japan. During this period, I also attended the Pratt Institute in America for one year on an exchange. Although we have different backgrounds Shi and I shared similar surprises when we started our degree here in the UK. We both encountered differences between the approach to the study of design in a Japanese university and in a British university.

Martin: What sort of differences?

Jun: One of the main differences I found between the two approaches is the importance of process in learning in a UK university. In Japan, I didn't have to document how I developed my ideas. I just exhibited my paintings and then gave a short presentation about the work. That was the only thing the professors looked at or heard from me to assess my work. So when I first started my course at NTU and was told to document how I developed my design ideas, for a while I struggled with keeping a record of this. This was especially difficult for me because, personally, I like ambiguity when developing ideas. I like to keep things abstract in order to think freely. I scatter my ideas and inspiration all over the place which sometimes makes it difficult for others to understand what's going on in my head! But this ambiguity and

uncertainty was considered a good thing in Japan. I think the concept of the beauty of unknown area comes from the Japanese language itself.

Martin: What about you Shi?

Shi: Yes, I also had a similar experience. At the beginning of the MA fashion design course at NTU, we were told to keep a record of everything because our ‘journey’ is of great interest to our tutors. It means that we have to record every step of our thinking process and design development - even if they are negatives. So we were told to keep a reflective journal and were also required to show critical analysis in our research sketchbooks. This was totally new for me because it was not required when I studied my BA in Japan. In Japan, our tutors could know our design development through tutorials, but it wasn’t necessary for students to do written work as evidence. I think the possible reason for the difference is that in the UK much more importance is attached to students’ ability in independent study than in Japan. Here, in the UK, we spend most of our time working independently on our own projects. In Japan, although we also did our own project in our final year, we were able to speak directly with our tutors almost daily as we had to go to class every day. Another reason is that most conscientious Japanese students do not like to show their thinking or their unfinished work to others. Although I am not Japanese, I also dislike showing my weaknesses or failures to others. So, like Jun, it has not been easy for me to change to a new approach.

Jun: Yes I also didn’t have to keep a detailed record of my thought processes when I studied in Japan. But after having done this here in England, I have learned that this is important not just for assessment but also to help me review my path, and understand how I am developing as a designer and where I want the journey to take me. Now I have more control over the outcome I want by keeping the process documented. However, even though I knew I had to evidence my thought process in detail, at first I didn’t want to write every inspiration down in my sketchbook. It took time to get used to it.

Shi: Another big difference I found between Japan and the UK regards research. It seems there was no real focus on research when I studied in Bunka, I didn’t even know the differences between primary and secondary research. Also referencing was not as strict as in the UK. Here, when we use other people’s work, such as photographs or paintings, we have to write down the names and years clearly nearby. On the other hand, In Japan we spent much more time on more technical things, such as pattern cutting, sewing skills and CAD.

Jun: I think it is very helpful for me to look at the written feedback from my supervisor and the course leader. Each time when I have an individual tutorial with my supervisor, myself need to fill in the tutorial feedback form. This form has three different columns - "agenda for meeting", "aims for progress before the next tutorial" and "supervisor feedback". I never had this kind of form to fill in when I was in Japan. The only feedback I got in Japan was verbally right after a presentation. I think this difference also shows how British academics put more emphasis on the learning process than in Japan. At the very end of each module at NTU I had to submit a self-evaluation form. This makes us realize where to make improvements. I think Japan is a naturally verbal country - sometimes we don't want to put everything in writing. In fact, in the past, we didn’t even have a writing system. We started to write by importing Chinese characters. Generally, we were a more verbal culture than written and I think this idea is still running in our soul, even if now we have developed our own writing system.

Shi: Yes, there is big difference between Japan and the UK in terms of academic feedback. We received both oral and written feedback in the UK. But in Japanese Universities the written feedback system is hardly applied. I received oral feedback very frequently when I studied in Japan, but rarely got written

feedback. In my opinion, one of the possible reasons is that written feedback is usually clear and to the point, and Japanese people have a tendency to avoid expressing their ideas very clearly. Actually, when I got my first piece of written feedback here I felt shocked to read about my weaknesses, because it was so clear and direct. I had never had my weaknesses so clearly evaluated in writing before. Although in Japan I had received oral feedback this was usually quite vague. However, I have to admit that now I really appreciate written feedback as it can constantly and clearly remind me of some important points and it can activate the learning process. It's true that students coming from a culture like Japan where people tend to be less critical and direct have to have a hardy soul when they study in the UK!

Jun: Yes, indeed, I think this ambiguity is supported by the Japanese language itself. When I am writing in Japanese I don't have to say "I did this" or "I did that". It is left to the reader to make sense of it without putting the subject in a sentence. The Japanese like others to interpret language in their own way rather than stating it clearly. Even in the structuring of an essay this ambiguity is present. I think that sometimes this ambiguity comes from trying not to hurt other people's feelings. By making our opinion not so clear it makes room for others to think what it really means. Sometimes this can be problematic for foreign students studying in Japan because they cannot understand the meaning behind a tutor's comments - especially on critique day. Finding someone who is willing to tell you the weak points in your work and your working methods in a straightforward way isn't always easy in Japan.

Martin: Did you find time-management more of an issue here in the UK?

Jun: The university where I used to go to in Japan had a lot of freedom and I had to control my time. In UK universities I think time management is stressed much more but it is considered to be a skill you learn by yourself. They ask us to take responsibility for our individual actions such as asking for help or accessing the facilities.

Shi: Yes, I think time management is a common problem among design students in both Japan and the UK. It must be considered and improved no matter where we are because of the nature of design work. However, a key difference is that in the UK there is actually an assessment criterion named, "Applying planning and time management skills to support an independent and collaborative working approach.". There is no such evaluation criterion to guide students in most design college in Japan. This doesn't mean that time management is less important for students in Japan, but more attention is paid to it here. I have heard from my friends who are taking their masters course in Japan that they also have quite a lot of free time as we do here. So, in my opinion, you should put just as much emphasis of time management when you study in Japan even though it will not be assessed formally.

Martin: Thanks very much Shi and Jun. It's been really interesting. I think your reflections will be very helpful for any students who are considering studying in another country with a very different academic system. You have made the point very clearly that adapting to a new academic culture can be just as challenging as adjusting to a new lifestyle and cultural mores.

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