

JSPS RESEARCH REPORT

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Current Position: Research Associate in Digital Humanities
Centre for Computing in the Humanities
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Host Institution during fellowship: The Institute of Scientific and Industrial
Research - Osaka University

Title of Research in Japan: *"Enhancing the Computational Representation
of Humanities' Artifacts in Order to Facilitate
Knowledge Transfer Among Different Cultures"*

Fellowship Period: 5 February – 5 May 2010 (3 months)

A. CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF MY RESEARCH

I decided to spend three months in Japan as to be able to deepen my understanding of the approach and results of Prof. Riichiro Mizoguchi, a leading researcher in the field of knowledge representation and ontology engineering, two sub-fields of artificial intelligence.

At the time of departure, I had finished a PhD in artificial intelligence the previous year and started a post-doctoral fellowship position at Kings College, London, at the Centre for Computing in the Humanities. In general, during my daily work I design, create and test software systems aimed at facilitating and transforming the work of humanities' scholars in the digital age. In particular, I am interested in the employment of semantic technologies to the purpose of representing and working more effectively with different data providers.

What follows is the original short abstract used in my JSPS research proposal, which may be useful in order to better contextualize my research.

"Metaphorically, the world wide web may resemble a large forest, mysterious and exciting for the incredible amount of unexpected paths it conceals, but at the same time, confusing and distracting for the seeker who wanders without a guide. Very often, the main tool used to direct our wanderings would be a search engine (e.g. Google), which can give us the "vibrant" sense of what's hot and most linked-to in the whole of cyber space; or it could be a more structured directory of resources (e.g. Open Directory Project), which brings us the reliability of a pool of experts reviewing and classifying the best sites available on a specific subject. Now, let's imagine that the two things were put together. Namely, the computational advantages of a purely 'syntactic' search, added to the high levels of precision guaranteed by a search that is based on some experts' 'semantic' (i.e. meaningful) descriptions. The first impression we could have from this vision is one of a lot of power and complexity. This is the vision the Semantic Web [<http://www.w3.org/2001/sw/>] is pursuing, and the driving technologies which are making this possible rotate around the usage of metadata, in order to describe resources at a high level of accuracy.

In my research I look at the most appropriate set of metadata usable for describing the world of humanities scholars. Of course this is quite a difficult and delicate matter: meaning is not fixed, but is continuously negotiated among humans. This leaves very little hope for a definitive formalization,

especially in the much debated humanities domains. For this reason, we must strive to create metadata structures which will stand the test of time. The ontological approach to metadata creation is one which has at its roots principles coming from ancient Greek philosophy. Prof. Mizoguchi has further developed this approach during years of research, crafting solutions that are fertile outside their original context of creation. During my research visit I intend to properly investigate the extent to which such solutions could benefit digital humanities scholarship. In particular, based on Prof. Mizoguchi's work, I will create computational and scholarly resources that will facilitate the discussion and evaluation of such an approach; furthermore, they will lay some foundations for future joint projects with Japanese humanities' institutions."

B. DOING RESEARCH IN JAPAN

The research experience at Osaka university, considered in its entirety, has been extremely stimulating. Three months went by incredibly quickly, and this seemed to me even more incredible given that settling in practically required no time at all (contrary to what I expected). The reasons for this are to be found in things such as the formidable organization of the research lab, my host making sure everything was in place before I got there, the other researchers constantly assisting me in with any request I could come up with, and, maybe most than anything else, the department secretaries duly filling out for me all the numerous forms required by the Japanese bureaucracy.

So, all in all, soon after I got there I couldn't avoid expressing gratitude to all the people I ran into while walking down the department corridors. Showing emotions, people say, is not the most rewarded attitude for the traditional Japanese *shogun*, but I can guarantee nowadays academics do appreciate this. Not only that - it seemed to me as if Japanese people enjoy even more something else, that is, doing anything in their power in order to make you at ease. This whole process, in some cases, may end up in some sort of never-ending self-reinforcing gratitude spiral, but still, I truly believe it's important to say thanks while you're out there. That's my first advice. And a slight variant on this is the gift-giving practice: Japanese give gifts on any occasion, they do not have to be costly or big, just something cute or tasty will perfectly do. So my second advice is, do make sure you bring over a couple of gifts, people will love that and, even more, they'll love the fact that you thought about doing something *the Japanese way*.

I was based at the Suita campus, Osaka university. The campus itself is quite far away from the city center (some 30 miles or so) which made it a bit difficult to fully experience the buzzing city life of Osaka. But on the other hand, I soon realized that this was an ideal setting for my work: Monday to Friday I could just focus on doing research, while the weekend was entirely devoted to sightseeing and traveling around. The university flats in Suita campus are very small but also very cheap, so the trade off was pretty positive, in the end. Right next to the campus there is another international students house, called JICCA, which has bigger rooms and a more international atmosphere, if needed. The university has several canteens and restaurants, so getting food is not a problem at all. Obviously, we're talking about Japanese food mainly (Indian is quite common too), so do not expect to order pizza too often if you live in the campus (hopefully you haven't gone all the way to Japan for that). The quality/cost ratio of the food at Suita campus is very high too.

As regards stuff like research meetings, seminars and the like, you must keep in mind that, compared to ours, Japanese society is traditionally very hierarchical and that, in general, doing things within a group, and totally identifying yourself with your work team, is considered to be the right thing to do. Within the academic world, I recognized these 'culture traits' in several occasions: often, during research seminars I was the only person making objections to the speaker, and I bet my words would have been considered very rude were I not a foreigner. In fact, it is not common for students to openly challenge their teachers, and if this happen, it must be done in the most respectful way. In other occasions, I felt that my intellectual inquiry regarding a specific approach or decision could not progress anymore, for my interlocutor had run out of rational arguments and resorted to some mysterious 'we decided to do things this way'. Individual thinking is often not prized as much as it is building up a 'collective' view of the world.

In all these situations, I always found admirable the enormous amount of kindness and patience my colleagues had, while attempting to let me understand their culture. Also, I have to say that with time I started learning better ways to pose my questions, or to challenge widely agreed upon assumptions about the research I was conducting. I noticed how my colleagues started learning themselves, from my way of approaching things, and from my often rather 'individualistic' approach (to their eyes). It is truly a magnificent experience, the process of immersing yourself in a such a different culture, and at the same time feeling the appreciation the other people have for your diversity.

C. LIVING IN JAPAN

Living in Japan, to say it in one word, has been fun.

For me, it's been a world to discover, a world entirely different from the usual one I was used to, but, differently from other countries, a place incredibly safe and welcoming. Really, I never felt so safe as in Japan. This may not seem a big deal to many, but keep in mind that you are in country where the signs (and most of the people) use a language that is impossible to decode. So, before going there I was thinking - I must be careful not to find myself in the wrong corner of the city, or walking into a dodgy shop. Well, I did visit places like that (due to a mixture of innate curiosity and fortuitous encounters) but even in the darkest of the alleys I never felt in danger. I was in Osaka, and I guess that Tokyo is a different story, but still I believe there's something deep down in Japanese culture that make people very respectful, especially with foreigners.

I was in Osaka, and soon enough I started considering myself fortunate to be there. I realized this after visiting Tokyo for a couple of days. Tokyo is much more international, you can easily run into foreigners in the streets, or speak English to random people in bars. Osaka instead is somehow left out of the major international tourist routes, meaning that the majority of people are non-Westerners, and the food most truly Japanese (to be precise, Osaka has its own cuisine which is extremely variegated and well known). This aspect of Osaka may result in hotel attendants not being able to speak a world of English, true, but it also gave me the 'full experience' of being in a foreign country, which is, I believe, one of the things I was really looking forward to have.

While there, I started a blog about my daily experiences. More tips about life in Japan can be found there: <http://thejapanexperience.wordpress.com/>