

Vol.5 Dr Richard Culleton



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This time, Dr Richard Culleton, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Nagasaki University doing research in Japan for more than 10 years gave the article. It is hilarious that how Dr Culleton felt about Japan generally, but at the same time, it is very interesting that the people outside and inside science are quite different in Japan. You can't miss it!

They kept topping up the awamori (a type of Okinawan sake), and I kept drinking it, under constant encouragement from my host researcher, and not realising how strong it was. Suddenly I was up on stage with an out-of-tune Fender Stratocaster, belting out an excruciatingly bad version of Redemption Song by Bob Marley. Even though I was four sheets to the wind, I could tell I was out of tune, out of time, out of it. I finished. Silence. Then rapturous applause and requests for an encore. Eh?

This experience, one of my first in Japan, was to be repeated for the next 10 years; give something a go, do it badly, and get praised. Overly so. Embarrassingly so. Praised to the point that the giver of praise (the praiser) makes it sound like you (the praisee), has scaled Mount Everest naked carrying a goat, whereas in actual fact all you've managed to do is shovel a clod of rice into your face using a pair of sticks. "Amazing!" the praiser will say "Incredible!" as you wipe away a few stray grains from your chin, and go back into the bowl to repeat the feat. Perhaps later you will be praised disproportionately for mangling a few words in Japanese; "Arigato" you will say, astounding the

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Biography

1996-2000 BSc (hons) Biological Sciences, University of Edinburgh
2001-2004 PhD Malaria Parasite Genetics, University of Edinburgh
2000-2001 Research Assistant, University of Edinburgh
2004-2005 Research Associate, University of Edinburgh
2005-2008 International Research Fellow, Osaka University (JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow)
2008-2011 Assistant Professor, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Nagasaki
2011 - Associate Professor - Malaria unit, ITM, Nagasaki University

JSPS Concerning

• 2005-2008 JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowship (Standard)

old lady selling you plastic keyring in the shape of Mount Fuji; "You are unbelievably gifted in the use of Japanese!" she will exclaim, perhaps even fumbling with the change in excitement. In truth, you're rubbish at Japanese, and a three year old child can use chopsticks (despite a popular misconception in Japan, it's really not difficult to pick things up with a pair of sticks). So what's happening? A combination of things probably; you're making an effort, which is certainly worthy of some sort of encouragement, but you're also defying a Japanese misconception that all foreigners are monolingual and inept at wielding eating utensils.

This penchant for dishing out the praise does not, however, extend to the sphere of science. I quickly learnt that the rules of engagement in Japan are different to those in the UK when it comes to critical appraisal of science. I'll come back to this, but first some background.

I moved to Osaka from Edinburgh in 2005 to take up a JSPS international fellowship working on malaria. After the mandatory period of disorientation, I soon settled down in one

of the best cities of Japan and began enjoying life as a researcher in a standard Japanese laboratory. Lots of meetings, lots of lab work, lots of 'hilarious' cultural and social faux pas, lots of fun. Towards the end of my two-year tenure, I had begun to think of moving back to Europe, but then a job was advertised that offered me exactly what I was looking for in the next stage of my career. Unfortunately, it was in Japan. Even worse, it was in Nagasaki, which is so far south it's not even on the bullet train line. Imagine a Japanese Swansea. After the bright lights of Osaka, Nagasaki seemed positively sleepy, and not a little provincial. However, the main point is that now I had to consider furthering my career in Japan, and the number of foreign senior scientists that I knew there was few to say the least. Nevertheless, after much consideration (actually no consideration, as I had no other offers), I decided to take the plunge. And guess what? Pursuing a science career post-post-doc in Japan is brilliant! And here's why...

The science over here is top notch. Seriously; there are some fantastic scientists knocking about, and Japan keeps notching up the Nobel laureates. It's easy to generalise about Japanese universities and research institutions as being overly hierarchical, patriarchal and non-meritocratic, and yes, there is a certain amount of truth to this, but it is not the whole truth. There are many talented, inventive, interesting and imaginative scientists here, and their number is increasing. All scientists are generally passionate about their work, of course, and this is also true here; I have met many of the most enthusiastic researchers, young and old, here in Japan.

Coupled to this is strong will amongst researchers in the same fields to help each other, and this has certainly been one of the greatest benefits I have enjoyed. Japanese scientific societies tend to be relatively small and close knit, so that everyone knows each other, nurturing a strong community spirit. This typical Japanese trait – the tight bond between co-workers – that has translated very well into the scientific system. Many of the best opportunities that have come my way in terms of collaborations, grant funding opportunities, mentoring of students etc have come directly through the scientific society to which I belong. Science in Japan is well funded. Japan is one of the world's richest countries, and one whose recent development owes a lot

to technological and scientific innovation. Hence a large investment in science, and Japanese universities and research institutions are therefore amongst the best equipped and most well funded in the world. Consequently, there is not only great scope for performing your own research, but this situation also encourages collaboration with scientists from outside of Japan. In my case, the vast majority of my research is conducted via such international collaborative links.

All in all, Japan is great place to pursue a scientific career, and I heartily recommend it to anyone. There are negatives, of course, such as occasional old-fashioned attitudes towards hierarchy, difficulties in communicating, a bloated, over-indulged and massively inefficient level of bureaucracy; but these are not unique to Japan, and things are changing for the better.

I'm often asked what are the differences between Japan and the UK in terms of working in science. Well, to go back to the start of this piece, what made the biggest impression on me when I first started taking part in journal clubs, lab meetings, seminars etc, was the level of criticism aimed at presenters – quite the opposite of the chummy encouragement and gentle coaxing I was used to in Edinburgh, and massively at odds with the odd overpraising that takes place outside science. Japanese scientists can be brutal, and often seem (to me) to take great pleasure in pointing out the deficiencies in other people's work. This startled me at first, but I've since grown to relish it. It keeps me grounded; I may be a black belt in chopstickery, but my science skills need working on...

It also turns out that Nagasaki is actually quite a nice place to live too. Nice beaches, and the scenery is beautiful. Come and visit.



With the lab members. (Dr Culleton is second from the right.)