

Japanese Lessons

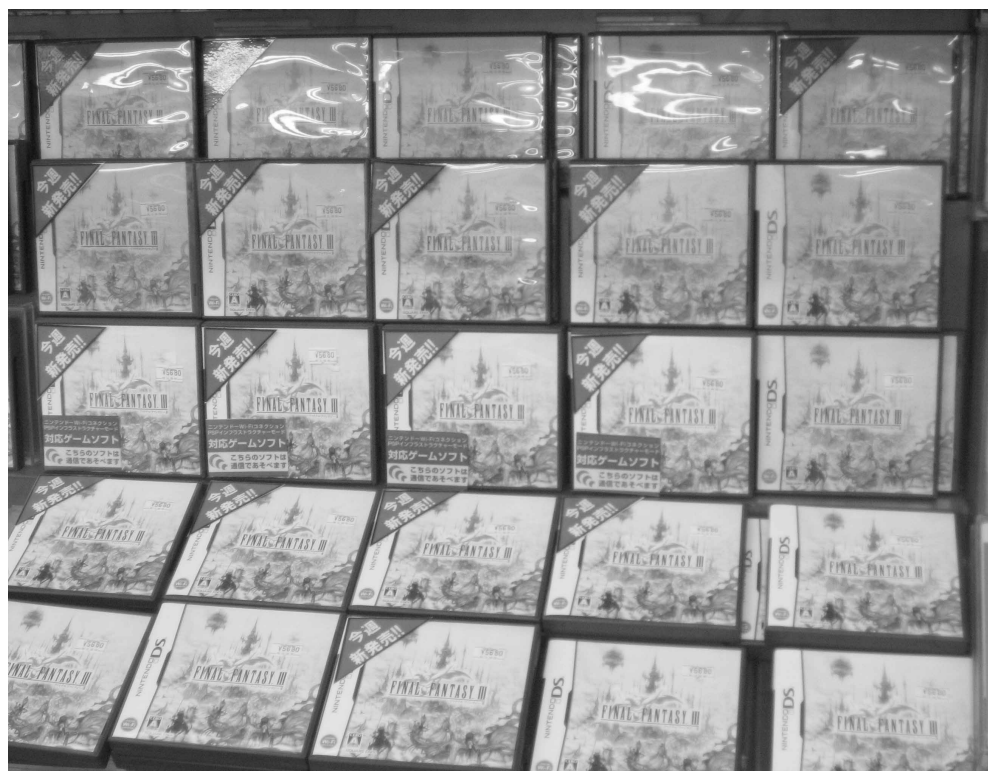
Chris Kulesa

Being asked to write an article for the *JRTR* is quite an honor, especially after I paged my way through previous submissions. I fear that my English vocabulary and composition skills aren't as extravagant as those of past authors. I also hate to admit that I don't come prepackaged with any particularly interesting characteristics or fun facts about my past. What you see is what you get; I guess that's why I included the photographs (take a good long look—they're a lot more interesting than my bantering).

I can't begin to explain how difficult it is to describe an experience as tremendous as my stay in Japan has been. From the beginning, my main purpose in coming to the land of the rising sun was to study its language—up front and personal. What I ended up studying, however, was myself. For example, in America I've never had to do

anything as simple as ask someone for directions. If I got lost, I'd just wander around a bit and eventually stumble into that which I sought. But for some reason Tokyo station refused to work out quite as smoothly.

From San Francisco I flew straight into Narita airport, but my final destination was actually in Kyoto. It all looked good on paper. After all, the instruction 'board a shinkansen bound for Kyoto Station' seemed to be simple enough. Unfortunately, in its simplicity, it failed to describe exactly how to go about finding a shinkansen to board. I hadn't initially seen that as a problem, since I'd heard these things were pretty big. But Tokyo Station wasn't all that small itself, and I hadn't anticipated on getting lost in some sort of underground shopping center, carrying around what seemed to be hundreds of kilograms of luggage. It was the middle of the night and I was



A display in Shinjuku of the just-released Nintendo DS remake of Final Fantasy III. I bought my copy immediately after this photograph.

(Author)

pretty tired, so I gathered my courage (in this case my desperation) and asked the first approachable man where I could board a shinkansen. To my disappointment he replied by saying that he would show me the way, but that he had to go to the bathroom first. I was devastated. In America, if you ask someone directions and they reply by telling you that they have to go to the bathroom, they're probably trying to run away from you. So, having failed in my first attempt, I started to look around for another victim to subject to my *gaijin*-ness. But, as you may have expected, he came back and took me to the ticket office just like he said he would.

Rather pleased that I had proven the stereotypical politeness and caring of all Japanese people to be an all-encompassing truth, I hauled my ridiculously oversized and heavy luggage onto the nearly empty train. The only seat that I could see which would fit my baggage was the very front one, so rationalizing that if the train somehow filled up, I would just explain to the person who had previously reserved the seat that I had a bunch of heavy baggage and that I was dripping with sweat, and then I would ask him if I could exchange tickets with him. Well, he didn't like that idea and chased me out of the roomy spot, telling me I could put my luggage at the other end of the car. That's exactly how I ended up walking my roller bags (one at a time since they were gigantic) all the way down the corridor of the now-filled train, bumping into passengers every step of the way and nearly killing an innocent, young lady. Awkwardly stumbling past these many annoyed individuals, I realized that there were all types of people in Japan, and that after a hectic day of work some of them might not want to go out of their way to help a clueless foreigner who stole their seat without asking for permission first. I guess some lessons are better learned late than never. From that point forward I vowed to never fall in love with the not-all-that-special country of Japan, despite it being the origin of my all time favorite video game series, *Final Fantasy*.

Japan, however, had different plans in store for me. I ended up staying with a wonderful host family and finding a spectacular internship with JR East. Through these arrangements I met people who convinced me that my experience on the train wasn't something I could generalize. In fact, I became aware that I would make many more mistakes in my new social environment (such as inadvertently ripping off the handle of my host family's bathroom door), but that at the end of the day the good would always outweigh the bad. I also became aware of karaoke.

Karaoke is amazing. Despite my lack of ability, I love to sing. I also have an excessive fondness for Japanese music, so it all worked out perfectly. Whenever I met up with someone that I particularly wanted to hang out with, I would beg them to go karaoke-ing. I actually spent an entire night singing at a karaoke box (private room) with a friend who came to visit me from America. Unfortunately,

as an unplanned aftereffect of this strategy, everyone I associate with has become tired of karaoke. So, having found out that a large number of people are singing at karaoke joints by themselves (a phenomenon dubbed by members of the online community as *hitokara*), I decided to jump on the bandwagon and tried it out for myself. I wasn't disappointed. But then how could I be—I love everything about Japan! Except *natto* (sticky fermented soya beans), I can't eat *natto*.



After an entire night of karaoke with a good friend from the US, I've looked better. (Author)



Chris Kulesa

Mr Kulesa is Stanford University student majoring in Mathematics and Japanese Language. He visited Japan in 2005 and worked as an intern in JR East.