

Spreading grassroots foreign-culture exchange

Mainichi shinbun¹, Kyoto prefecture edition, November 16th 2006
Tatsu Shingu (translation by Josh Hale)

There are 64 foreign researchers at the “Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International” (ATR, Seika town). This is the most among all the establishments in Kansai Science City². There are many foreigners studying Japanese in parallel with their research, but this Japanese study group is a little bit different. That’s because their text books are manga³.

Last month on the 6th, at lunch time: 10 people bring their lunchtime sandwiches and juice, and gather in the 8 mat⁴ rest room within ATR. There are Americans, Chinese and also Japanese. The text is the science-fiction suspense serial-manga, “20th Century Boys”. Each person reads out one frame in Japanese and English. “The meaning of this ‘許す’ is ‘permit’” echoes the voice of the instructor, Joshua Hale-san (29). This “Manga club” began half a year ago, and the “lesson begins” every Friday. Perhaps because it is related to science “Doraemon⁵” was also chosen as a teaching material. Hale-san talks about manga as an ideal text for natural conversation, and also for studying with a dictionary.

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According to the Foundation of Kansai Research Institute the foreign researchers in Kansai Science City 10 years ago numbered 80 but this year, in April, the number had risen to 214 people. Of the researchers at ATR, many enter a contract for the duration of a whole project, but replacements are also frequent and the average period of stay is 6 months to a year. In order for foreign researchers to make an immediate impact and become immersed in research, Japanese classes with external teachers are organized,

¹ Mainichi Shinbun (“Daily newspaper”) is one of Japan’s main national papers.

² Kansai Science City is a national project conceived as an international, creative, interdisciplinary, and multi-industry nucleus for the promotion of culture and academic research.

³ Manga(s) means comics. In English, Manga denotes Japanese comics in particular.

⁴ The number of mats is a common way of describing the size of a Japanese-style room. A mat is (2x1)m².

⁵ Doraemon is a childrens’ manga involving a robot cat from the future which is quite inventive and entertaining even for adults although its nominal audience is primary-school children.

and the foreign researchers' support office was established, which also offers advice regarding private life.

According to Makiko Tatsumi-san (33) from this office⁶, an average of 80 issues are discussed every month. These cover a variety of topics such as how to apply for visas, the method of dividing rubbish in company-owned housing, and introducing local sight-seeing spots. "The reward of the job is hearing someone say they were helped, but there is a shortage of information that foreigners can use quickly, such as a list of hospitals that can handle conversations in English", indicates Tatsumi-san.

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With this support, residents' horizons are also broadening. For example, there is the "Seika Global Network", a group of around 80 local residents (chaired by Masatoshi Wakita). Formed in 2000, the aim is to promote cultural exchange through interpreting and home-stays *etc.* The Japanese classroom on Tuesdays every week in the Seika town hall offers "man-to-man"⁷ guidance with an organized partner, and sometimes witnesses the delivery⁸ of foreigners who are unable to speak Japanese.

The connection formed by building deep personal relationships through these activities has led to many cases where cultural mixing extends to exchanging Christmas cards and so on. Administrative secretary Sachiko Kitano-san (52) gladly remarks that during the course of her assistance she has made contact with various different cultures.

We ought to be able to say a town that's easy for foreigners to live in is also easy for Japanese to live in. The accumulation of exchange between individuals can be thought of as ultimately increasing the cohesive strength of Kansai Science City.

Photo caption: Making good use of electronic dictionaries, foreign researchers study Japanese through Japanese manga. ATR, in Seika town.

Sub-heading: **Foreign support**

⁶ Although not mentioned in the article, Eriko Nobata-san, the other member of the foreign researchers' support office deserves grateful mention for assisting with the organization of the "manga class" without fail every week, and also attending every session since its inception.

⁷ 'Man-to-man' is Japanese for 'one-on-one'.

⁸ *i.e.*, birth/liberation