The “Kakehashi Project” is a cultural exchange program sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan, directed towards American students with an interest in the Japanese language or the culture. Various selections of students are formed into a group for this project, and I was a part of the nine-people group consisted of students who placed highly in the different Japanese speech contests across the U.S. One week of group trip to Japan was provided to us, with all expenses paid. What follows is my reflection, accompanied by some pictures I took, based on my experiences during the trip.

I tried to refrain from making any generalizations, as I was only in Japan for 7 days and in Tokyo and a small town in Chiba. As I express, in no particular order of importance, the different findings I observed in Japan, the readers should read them with a grain of salt.

_Aesthetics_ - It is not difficult to find, in the streets of Tokyo, these types of decorations (below).

Impeccable urban planning demonstrates is just one of the many instances of Japan’s aesthetics. The packaging of their merchandise, setup of tables in restaurants, advertisements - the list would go on. Their sense of aesthetics, which I found to be “clean” or “unintrusive,” seemed to have been embedded in their society, culture, and in their lifestyle (e.g., they always have the disinfectant tissues/towels at restaurants, etc.).

_Rules_ - Even during a relatively brief stay of one week, one can easily identify some rules that govern the Japanese society. I identify some of them as _rules of hierarchy_, which divide a group of people based on ranks and ages, _rules of protocols_, which maintain the procedures for any organization efforts, and _rules of social distance_, which keep “the others” from “me.”
Rules of hierarchy could be seen in our observation of the Emperor’s residence area. Though we did not go to the garden to appreciate its beauty, we were on a bus that was traveling on the road near the imperial palace. When our coordinator pointed it out, I realized that the road had been winding around the palace, almost to the degree that it could have been more efficient. This respect and submission to the authority can be seen, though to a lesser degree, even in everyday interactions between the young and the old and the newcomers and the experienced. For instance, when I partook in entertainment at Karaoke, there was a noticeable increase in the enthusiasm of the audience when the higher-ranked person of the group was singing.

I saw rules of protocols when we were handed the “Japanese Conversation Book.” As finalists of Japanese Speech Contests, we surely did not need to be taught how to say “Good morning,” or hold a functional conversation. Even the organizers admitted it, and told us to gift the books for our friends back in the States who may be learning Japanese. If they knew that we didn’t need them, why did they give the conversation books to us? I interpreted this as an instance of implied rules of protocols. It was simple: rules in Japan are rarely contested, whatever the reason may be.

There was one time when I got lost in Ginza, and asked for strangers’ help. The two ladies, co-workers in a company on their way home, so kindly took time out of their nights and walked me to where I was looking for. The whole process took more than 30 minutes, and, thinking it would be courteous for me to ask them for at least their name, I asked, “あの、失礼じゃなければ、お名前は。。。” (“If it wouldn’t be rude of me, could I ask what your name is?”). One lady did not hear me, and the other one who did hear me scoffed at me, as if I had done something wrong. (It must be noted that there was no context of flirtation in this setting, as both of us had exchanged the fact that I was a short-term visiting student from America and they were working members of the society.) This account confused even my coordinator, who later asked a taxi driver for his perspective. And he said the following (in translation).

“In America, it might be the courteous thing to ask someone’s name after being helped for so long. But in Japan, you don’t really ask for someone’s name, unless it is a social or business occasion. So maybe she found it funny that a naive foreigner nonchalantly tried to walk into a Japanese person’s private bubble.” There was the rule of social distance. “Friendly” and “courteous” carry different meanings in Japan than in America, and they are something one has to learn through experience.

**Nature and history** - For being such a developed country, Japan had maintained an astonishing volume of nature and history. Near Kyonan Town (鋸南町) in the Chiba Prefecture, we climbed the Nokogiriyama (鋸山, “The Saw Mountain”), and saw beautiful nature and sculptures (below).
To me, Japan’s ties with history were inspiring. It was beautiful not necessarily because it was “clean,” like the aesthetics seen in the cities, but because it was truly admirable. Created before the times of technology, the world of tradition and history in Japan was eye-opening. Simply imagining the number of people who must have poured their souls into their cause and the amount of sweat they must have shed impressed and empowered me.

**Innovation** - It is a little known fact that Japan is geographically disadvantageous to prospering in the world. That is, it has little natural resources like coal, and it is surrounded by the ocean, which made international exchanges more costly in the distant past. How they rose in the world, I would say, would be in their innovative minds.

One example, Hota Elementary School, was once considered for deconstruction. Like Japan as a whole, the town was suffering from the grave problem of the increasing elderly and the decreasing youth, which meant that some of the schools such as the one above would no longer be needed. However, deconstructing these schools was also an action just as costly as, if not more costly than, maintaining them. The pictures below show the town’s solution: make it a visitor (tourist) attraction. Not only does the school retain its classrooms (note the beds on the side. The classrooms were modified to function as hotel rooms), it has retained a music room and even a small gallery for the visitors to enjoy. Situated next to the school is a fresh produce market (not shown in the pictures) that appeals to the visitors of this elementary school.
Another example is the Aqua Line, which we crossed to move from Tokyo to Chiba Prefecture. To put it simply, it is a highway that goes straight across a small area of the ocean which impedes quick traveling from Tokyo to Chiba Prefecture. But look at the picture below, which I took at the waiting area on the Aqua Line. If you thought it reminded you of a ship, you are not the only one, as all of whom I showed this picture to have said the same thing. It was designed to look like a ship, and the resting traveler is supposed to feel like he or she is on the deck of a gigantic ship, sailing across the ocean. I thought that this was a brilliant idea executed beautifully.
Conclusion

And so, the above descriptions accompanied by pictures sum up the parts of the experience I can reiterate through words. The rest were subtle verbal and nonverbal communication and observation which took place within split seconds, and will be difficult to describe. Overall, the Kakehashi experience had an ample amount of interaction with the Japanese people and culture, and was a wholly educational opportunity that I feel fortunate to have been a part of.

*Starting on the next page are some of the pictures during this trip, not included above.*
Shinjuku (Kabukicho)

Asakusa (Sensouji: Market area)
Food from Tsukiji Fish Market (Uo-ichiba 魚市場)
Odaiba

<Tokyo Sky Tree: Sora Machi (not inside the Sky Tree itself)>