



My Family is the Source of My Strength

Hello, my name is Waris. I came to Japan from China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region to study archaeology.

Waris

18 years old, first-year university student,
Tokyo, Japan

Photos by Kaneko Satoshi

My hometown is Urumqi, in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.¹ In September 2004, I came to Japan with my mother and younger brother. Back home my mother was teaching Chinese and Uygur at a university when she befriended a Japanese exchange student, and that later led to our move here. My parents suggested that we move here, because they believed living and studying in Japan would benefit my brother and me in the future.

Japan is Heaven?

I didn't know anything about Japan, but I decided to come with the easygoing attitude that it might be fun to live in a foreign country. My first impression, after arriving in Japan and visiting places like Disneyland, was that Japan must be heaven. Once I actually took up residence, though, I realized that it's not such an easy place to live, and that not everything is fun and games.

The first problem I encountered was language. Since I had studied Chinese in Xinjiang for five years, I could read about 30 percent of written Japanese by following the kanji. But I couldn't understand anything that was being said or say anything myself. At the high school I entered as soon as I came to Japan, I couldn't understand a thing my friends or teachers were saying. My English isn't very good, and I had trouble understanding the accented English that Japanese people speak, so I had a lot of problems. Every day was a real struggle, but all of a sudden, about three or four months after getting here, I started understanding Japanese. In six months, I became able to express most of what I wanted to say in Japanese.

When I talk about the language problems I've had, Japanese people kindly say, "You must have felt really uneasy not understanding the language." But that wasn't the case at all. This may be an attitude typical of we Uygurs, but we think that God is with us wherever we go on earth, so nothing is really frightening and we don't really worry about what is going to happen tomorrow. As long as we are healthy, we can do anything, and things will work out somehow. Of course, I think about things that require deep thought, but with things that can't be helped no matter how much I think about them, or with things that I can't know about in the future, I don't worry.

Eating, however, is a problem for me everyday. When I go out to eat, I can't eat 90 percent of the things on the menus. I'm Muslim, so I don't eat pork, but a lot of Japanese food like ramen, curry rice, and hamburgers, have pork in them. There can be pork products even in pickled dishes and salad dressing. About the only thing I can eat for sure is gyudon.

In Xinjiang, we eat a lot of *nan* (a type of bread made primarily of wheat flour to which yeast is added to leaven the dough and then baked). We mix in nutritious ingredients like milk and eggs, so it's good for your health. But at home in Japan, we don't make Uygur food every day. We're very busy with studying and work, and we can't spend much time cooking. We make Uygur food about twice a week when we have the time, and eat as a family. Generally, though, we make noodle dishes or chicken or beef curries.



Praying at the mosque

Waris goes to a mosque in Yoyogi Uehara for the first time in a while. As a rule, Muslims pray five times a day, but with his busy schedule of study and part-time work, this is difficult.²



Family

Waris says, "As the first-born son, I have a responsibility to my family." In place of his father, who is working as an oil researcher in Xinjiang, he takes care of his mother and younger brother. His mother works as a translator in Japan.

Learning to Live in Japan

There are many things that I've incorporated into my life while living in Japan. One of them is saying "Arigato." In Xinjiang, we don't say thank you for small things. If someone saves your life, for example, or for things that are serious or that we are really very grateful for, we say "Rähmät," which is a word of some weight intended for such situations. But in Japan, people say "arigato" for the simplest things, and you end up saying it dozens of times a day. I've studied the timing and occasions when Japanese use "arigato," and try to use it that way myself.

Also, even when I have a question, I try not to ask too directly. Uygurs are very open people, so we don't hesitate to talk about our problems, concerns, and things we need help with. But I've found that Japanese people often don't express their feelings very candidly.

Neighbors interact with each other differently, too. In Xinjiang, if you've met once, you're acquaintances. If you've met twice, you're already friends. We call each other on the phone and invite each other to our homes. Neighbors love to go back and forth between each other's homes, eating and chatting and having a good time. Communities such as those in Tokyo, where neighbors don't interact with each other, would be unthinkable.

For example, if exchange students come to Xinjiang, we all gather to have a party in honor of them. Then we invite them to our homes, ask them if they've encountered any problems, and if they need anything, accompany them to go shopping, and basically take care of them. Here in Japan, we go to school by ourselves and go home by ourselves. When I started at high school, nobody offered to see me home or to teach me how to use the trains or buses. Now, I've become fairly accustomed to the way people interact, but it feels as if everyone's all alone here. That seems kind of sad.

Important Things I Would Not Change

Living in Japan, there are things in which I adopt the Japanese way, but there are things I don't want to change, too. I guess I would describe it as my "kokoro"—my inner self—the basic ways of feeling, thinking, and living. I am an Uygur, and my cul-



A Friend from His Hometown

At a Silk Road festival in Tokyo, Waris runs into a close friend he's known from his childhood, Nadir. Nadir is also studying in Japan, but this was the first time they met here. All smiles, they had a great day.

ture and ethnic background are different from that of Japan. No matter how hard I try, I can never become Japanese.

I think the most important thing in life is family. Uygurs believe that "men should protect their families." Our families are the source of our strength, after all. When I see my mother and brother's faces, all my worries and regrets disappear, no matter what has happened. For about an hour everyday, the three of us talk about what happened that day as we eat dinner.

Whenever we have Japanese friends to our house, they are all impressed that our family is so close. I had taken the closeness of my family for granted, so their reaction came as a surprise. There doesn't seem to be much time for families to eat meals together or talk in Japan. But I can talk about anything with my father and mother. There is nothing I can't talk about or that I'm embarrassed to talk about with them. I talk to them about the girls I like and I joke around with them, too. They're family, after all, the people with whom I was reared and to whom I feel closest. They're the most important people in my life. There have been incidents in Japan of children killing their parents or parents killing their children, but that would be unthinkable and impossible in Xinjiang.

Dreams of the Future

Currently, I'm studying cultural anthropology in the Department of Image Cultures in university. University is a place not where you're taught things, but where you go to learn yourself, so I think that you can't gain anything unless you take the initiative to study and research on your own. Right now, I'm reading up on archaeology and learning computer skills and information that will be useful in archaeological research.

In the future I'd like to go on to graduate school, return to Xinjiang, and do research on the ruins in the Taklimakan desert. Xinjiang has a history that goes back approximately 7,000 years and mummies from about 4,000 years ago have been excavated. I would also like to be involved in research on Buddhist ruins from the Silk Road era.

Edited and translated by TJF on the basis of an interview

1. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region: Located in the northwestern part of China, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region covers an area of 1.6 million square meters equaling about one-sixth of China's territory, and is the largest region of the country. From ancient times, oasis cities on the edge of desert flourished as way stations on the Silk Road. In general, the area is very arid, with an average annual precipitation of 145 millimeters. Summers are extremely hot, and winters extremely cold. Ethnically, about 8.7 million Uygurs, who are of Turkic stock, comprise about half of the region's population, and the other half are of forty-seven other ethnic groups including Han people, Kazakhs, and Mongolians. Uygurs speak Uygur, a Turkic language, and most are Sunni Muslims. The provincial capital is Urumqi.



2. Mosque in Tokyo: Tokyo Camii was built on the site of the former Tokyo Islamic Institute in Oyama-cho, Shibuya Ward, demolished in 1986 because it was in disrepair. The new mosque opened in June 2000. It boasts a prayer hall with a capacity for 2,000 people, and provides opportunities for visits and cultural understanding classes for non-Muslims, serving as a center for disseminating information on Islamic and Turkish culture.

