

Ties and bonds



Rakuten, Inc. **Ulku Cakir**

Graduate School of Economics,
Master's Program

Born in Turkey. After graduating from Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Ms. Ulku Cakir came to Japan in 2008 to study in the Master's Program at Hitotsubashi University's Graduate School of Economics. After earning her degree in 2011, she joined Rakuten, Inc., where she is currently employed.

My first time in Japan, I was met by the sight of rows of cherry trees in full bloom lining Daigaku-Dori

Thanks to an invitation from a friend at her university, a Turkish woman developed an interest in Japanese culture. Origami, shogi, tea ceremony... she was attracted to this unique Eastern culture. Before long, her interest turned to the economics of this industrialized Asian nation. Although she had received a scholarship from the Japanese government, she spoke hardly any Japanese. Relying on an English route map that had been given to her by a school friend, she was able to take the train from Narita Airport and made her way on her own to Kunitachi. When she exited the train station, the first thing that met her eyes was the sight of Daigaku-Dori lined with cherry trees in full bloom. That woman's name was Ulku Cakir. Her life in Japan began with those cherry trees at Kunitachi.



An invitation to join a Japanese cultural club was the starting point

Ulku Cakir first came to Japan from her home country, Turkey in April 2008 as a research student at Hitotsubashi University, and has now been living in Tokyo for more than four years. Currently, she is carrying out managerial work for Rakuten Research, Inc., the research business of Rakuten, Inc.

"I was studying in the economics department of a Turkish public university called Middle East Technical University," says Cakir. "I chose that university because they offer high quality education in English, so I thought it would be a good choice for acquiring language skills as well as technical skills. Speaking of languages, in Turkish, the official language of Turkey, the word for 'Hello' is 'Merhaba' and the word for 'Thank you' is 'Teşekkür ederim.' The grammar is similar to Japanese."

Cakir first became interested in Japan when a close friend of hers at her university in Turkey invited her to a Japanese cultural club. "I was a bit skeptical at first, thinking, 'I can't even speak English yet and I'm going to learn about Japan?' But I went to just check it out, and the atmosphere in the club was really fun." At the club meeting, Cakir met Turkish students who were interested in Japan as well as Japanese foreign exchange students, and they hit it off. "Up until that point, I had never been particularly interested in Japan, but thanks to joining the Japanese cultural club, I became attracted to traditional Japanese culture, like origami, shogi, and the tea ceremony. I think it was appealing because we don't have that kind of culture in Turkey. When there was an exhibition related to Japan, for example, we would all go together to see it. And I started to think that I would like to visit Japan."

Despite some apprehension, she decides to study in Japan

Rather than just make it a pastime, Cakir wanted to learn about Japan in a bit more depth, and so she chose

Japanese for her foreign language class. There is a story that long ago a Turkish boat was shipwrecked off the coast of Japan and the passengers were saved by Japanese people, and ever since then there are many people in Turkey who like Japan, but in fact, Cakir remarked, there are very few students in Turkey studying Japanese. "Among people I know, even if they don't know the old story, many people say they like Japan. Also, Turkey is situated on the border between Asia and Europe, and although not to the same extent as Japan, we respect team play rather than individual play, we place importance on family, and have other values as well that are similar to those of Japan. However, in terms of economic ties, Turkey's connections to Europe and the United States are much stronger, and the reality is that, after English, the foreign language that most students select is German or French." Incidentally, at the university Cakir attended, the Japanese class was only held once or twice a week, and they focused primarily on grammar, so they did not get to the point where they could actually use the language.

As her graduation from college approached and she thought about her future path, Cakir had to choose between finding a job in Turkey or going on to graduate school. But hardly any students from Turkey choose Japan as the place to further their academic studies. "In Turkey, students who go on to graduate school think about their future jobs, and when they study overseas, they choose Europe or the United States. That's because Turkey has close ties to Europe and the United States, so studying there often works to one's advantage. Of course, there are some Japanese companies that have set up operations in Turkey, but in many cases these are local subsidiaries set up to do business with Europe, so even though it might be a Japanese company, you don't sense a need to study in Japan to be employed by the company."

However, Cakir's desire to study at a Japanese university was getting stronger. In order to achieve that goal, in addition to studying the Japanese language, she made various other efforts during her time in college. She of course

studied in order to pass the scholarship exam, she took all the classes on Japan that were offered, such as classes on the Japanese economy and Japanese management, and she wrote her senior thesis on Japan as well. After successfully passing the exam for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) scholarship, Cakir began looking at universities. “I didn’t really know any Japanese universities other than the University of Tokyo, so I talked to some of the older students in my club who had studied in Japan and, in addition to universities like Waseda and Keio, they also told me about Hitotsubashi University. When I looked into it further, I found out that Hitotsubashi is a public university just like my alma mater in Turkey, and also a top-class school specializing in the social sciences, similar to the London School of Economics. There was a Turkish student studying in the Faculty of Commerce and Management who gave me insights about the high quality education and the enriching student life at Hitotsubashi, so I chose Hitotsubashi.”



Captivated by the cherry blossoms along Daigaku-Dori on her first day at the university

On April 2, 2008, Cakir landed at Narita Airport and set foot on Japanese soil for the first time. She boarded a train and headed straight for Kunitachi. With the Tokyo train route map she had received from a school friend clutched in one hand, she changed trains, listening intently to the train announcements spoken in Japanese, which she was not used to hearing. She says that her school friend told her, “When you hear the name of the station, Kunitachi, get off the train. But if you fall asleep and miss it, just get off at the next station and get on a train going in the opposite direction.” She explained, “In Turkey, you never see people sleeping on the train, so I thought it was really strange to be told something like that. But when I got on the train myself, I understood. In Japan, there really are a lot of people who sleep on trains, aren’t there! [laughs] Musashi-Sakai, Higashi-Koganei, Musashi-Koganei—when the station names were announced in the train, they all

sounded the same to me. [laughs] I was really concentrating on the announcements, so I didn’t fall asleep and was able to get off the train at Kunitachi Station without any trouble.”

As soon as she arrived at Kunitachi Station, Cakir’s eyes were drawn to a dreamlike landscape. That day just happened to be the day that the cherry blossoms were declared to be in full bloom in Tokyo. “The rows of cherry blossoms lining Daigaku-Dori were so beautiful, that sight is still etched in my mind.”

By the end of that day, Cakir had moved into the International House’s dormitory on the Hitotsubashi University campus. “The students in the club that supports foreign students and the staff of the International House went to the bank with me to open a bank account and they took good care of me. The people in the town of Kunitachi also were very kind to Hitotsubashi students, and I am truly grateful to them.” When she first arrived in Japan, Cakir could not say much more in Japanese than “*konnichi wa*” and “my name is...” but she does not have any bad memories. “Although I had learned a bit about Japanese culture during my college days in Turkey, this was my first experience actually living in Japan. Everything in Japan is different than in Turkey, but rather than being bewildered, I kept feeling a sense that everything was new. For example, I found some vegetables in a Japanese supermarket that I thought were the same thing we have in Turkey, so I bought them but they turned out to be something completely different. One of my friends at the dormitory bought tofu once, mistakenly thinking that it was cheese. [laughs] Also, at the register in the supermarket, when they asked me, ‘Do you want it in a bag?’ I didn’t know what they were talking about, but since I had to answer, I just said yes. It was only later that I found out that they ask that out of consideration for the environment. Each and every day, I tried to take what I learned and apply it the following day, so little by little I got used to Japan.” Cakir looks back on her days as a student in Japan not as one of being bewildered, but as a stimulating and fun experience.

Studying half in Japanese and half in English

During her first semester as a research student, Cakir’s studies were concentrated on mastering Japanese. The



next semester, she studied for the master's program entrance exam. Of course, the entrance exam is in Japanese, so she worked extremely hard to study the language, including the Chinese characters, so that she would understand the exam questions. As a result of her efforts, she passed the exam within the year. Nonetheless, she notes that there was a lot that she did not understand. "I chose as many of the graduate courses taught in English as I could, and I continued to study half in Japanese and half in English. The graduate school professors' English was easy to understand, so luckily I did not have any trouble with the classes."

One thing that Cakir noticed while studying in Japan was that compared to Turkey, where studies come first, Japanese students seem to focus on clubs and part-time jobs. However, that tendency did not particularly bother her. "I think clubs and part-time jobs can also give you a sense of responsibility. I understand that this trend is also due in part to the need to be able to give an answer when you are asked during a job interview, 'What types of things did you focus on?' On the other hand, when you are looking for a job in Turkey, they place priority on the name of your university and your grades."

Her graduation ceremony for the master's program was scheduled for mid-March 2011. Cakir was looking forward to wearing a *kimono* and *hakama* like the Japanese female students. But the ceremony was canceled due to the effects of the Great East Japan Earthquake. "It was a shame, but it couldn't be helped. After the earthquake, my family contacted me to tell me to come home as quickly as I could. But since I had already been offered a job in Japan, I decided to wait and see how things went. Before long, the chaos that followed the disaster began to settle down and things returned to normal, so now I'm glad that I didn't panic and return home."



She choose Rakuten, a company that is aiming for true globalization

When she finished her studies, Cakir debated whether she should find a job in Japan or return to Turkey and find work there, but in the end she chose the former. "In fact, for a while after entering Hitotsubashi University, I was thinking that I would return to Turkey after I graduated. I entered Hitotsubashi thinking, 'I want to have a chance to live in Japan, a country that I really like! I want to study Japan's economy at a top Japanese university!', but I didn't intend to live here permanently. I thought I would return to Turkey in the future." But as she studied at Hitotsubashi, she began to think about working in Japan. She wanted to experience Japan not just as a student but as an adult member of society as well. In addition, she thought that having job experience in Japan would be use-

ful when she eventually looked for work in Turkey. "Of course, job-hunting in Japan begins before graduation, so I didn't have much time to waver."

When looking for a job, Cakir searched for a company that was stressing internationalization. At the companies' informational sessions, she found that companies—from big to small to medium-sized—would talk about "emphasizing internationalization," but most of them in fact did



not have any foreign employees and were not making any special efforts. "Even companies that were talking about globalization would have entry sheets written in Japanese. For me, that was a huge hurdle. The reason that I chose Rakuten in that context was that they are thinking about true globalization and actually working to achieve it. The classic example

is their decision to make English the official language within the company. Also, they have a large number of foreign employees. At that time I was 25 years old, so there was an age gap compared to other recent college graduates. This is a common concern for foreign students, but I was attracted by the fact that Rakuten don't mind this kind of difference. And since the president of Rakuten, Mr. Mikitani, is a graduate of Hitotsubashi, I felt an affinity toward the company."

She wants to serve someday as a bridge between Turkey and Japan

Once she actually started working at Rakuten, Cakir found it very easy to communicate with people, in part because English is the official language. "Since I joined the company, they have continued to hire people from other countries. You really get a keen sense that they are working to globalize. My current work includes things like analyzing research findings, so I am able to apply the statistics and quantitative economic knowledge I learned in my economics courses as background."

Cakir is now approaching her fifth year in Japan. In her daily life, she says that she particularly likes the fact that Japan is safe and that it is easy to live here. "I've gotten used to Japanese food, and I now love natto and sashimi. [laughs] In Turkey, you never eat raw fish. When I go home, my friends always ask, 'Are you still eating raw fish?'" [laughs]

When Cakir visits Turkey each year, she tells people, "Japan is a great country!" Some day, she thinks she will move back to Turkey. "At that point, if I can, I would like to find work related to Japan. If possible, I'd like to convey to others in Turkey what I've learned in Japan and how wonderful Japanese culture is, and to serve as a bridge between the two countries. Until then, I'd like to stay here in Japan a while longer and give it my all," she says with a smile.

