

I want to live in a place where I can enjoy life— I’ve never cared too much about my nationality.

Third-year student,
Faculty of Commerce and Management,
from Vietnam

Nguyen Phuong Bao Chau

Nguyen is from Vietnam, a country that is currently experiencing a “Japanese language boom.” In addition to Vietnamese, many young people can speak English; however, Japanese has gained popularity as a third language because of the recent surge in Japanese firms expanding to Vietnam.

With a population of more than 90 million, making it the third-largest consumer market in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations behind Indonesia and the Philippines, Vietnam has attracted investment from all over the world, and the country has experienced remarkable economic development. However, Nguyen came to study in Japan, riding the crest of this boom. Nguyen first came to Japan as a child, and she has lived here for almost eight years.

Therefore, she speaks Japanese so fluently that you would not know she is Vietnamese until she tells you her name. Although Nguyen is not your typical exchange student, we decided to interview her about why she chose to study at Hitotsubashi University and what she thinks about being global.

Nguyen came to Japan when her parents moved here to work. After she attended elementary school in Japan, Vietnam became more like a “foreign land” to her.

Nguyen’s father was a physicist, and her mother is a news translator and editor; Nguyen was raised as an only child at that time. Her experience overseas began when she was a young girl and the family moved to Japan for her father’s research work.

“I went back to Vietnam for a while when my father finished his research, but then I returned to Japan in 1999 because my mother found a job at a broadcasting station in Tokyo.

I attended an elementary school near my home from grade two to grade five, and it was then that I learned to speak Japanese. After my mother retired, we returned to Vietnam together; by then, I had already grown accustomed to the Japanese way of life, so I felt a culture gap when I went back to Vietnam, even though it



was my home country.”

Considered a “returnee child” in Vietnam, Nguyen entered junior high school in her home country. Then, she attended a national high school that provided special classes for language study. According to Nguyen, her parents recommended the school because they wanted to “send me to study abroad” after she graduated.

“I also wanted to study at an overseas university. However, 80 percent of the students in that class go to English-speaking countries, so many of my friends had studied English from an early age, and I thought that it might be too difficult for me to pass. So I decided to make use of my Japanese ability to study abroad.”

Nguyen made it her aim to study at a Japanese university. Nevertheless, studying abroad would be expensive. Price levels are also different between Japan and Vietnam because Vietnam is a developing country. Not wanting to burden her parents, Nguyen decided to apply for a national scholarship in Japan that would provide support for tuition and living costs. However, this was no easy task. “To apply for the scholarship, you



High school graduation in 2011—wearing the *áo dài*, the national costume of Vietnam (left)

First year at the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi, 2012—military training, a compulsory course

need to pass university exams in the last year of high school and receive certain grades in your first year at the university. So, I decided to enter the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi for the time being to fulfill these criteria. I studied there for one year and managed to pass the screening for the national scholarship.”

A national university with an “independent faculty of commerce and management”—the deciding factor

Having officially obtained her ticket to Japan, Nguyen attended the Japanese Language Center for International Students at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies for one year starting in April 2013. Then, after researching Japan’s national universities, she set her sights on Hitotsubashi University, which she entered in April 2014.

“I’d been interested in marketing since I was a high school student, and I wanted to conduct research on the topic of consumer behavior. I decided that I wanted to study at Hitotsubashi University after enrolling in the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi. As I was looking into Japanese universities, I began thinking that I wanted to study at a university with an independent faculty of commerce and management. Then I found out about Hitotsubashi University. When I asked my university instructor about it after my study abroad had been confirmed, he told me that Hitotsubashi University’s MBA program was famous.”

Even though there are courses on marketing in the Faculty of Economics, the subject matter of economics is different from that of commerce and management. This is what helped her make up her mind. What was her first impression of Hitotsubashi University when she began studying here?

“My first impression was that the professors were friendly. They weren’t overly formal, and it was more casual than I had imagined. The Japanese students were used to communicating with non-Japanese, so they didn’t treat us differently. For me, one of the best

things about Hitotsubashi University is that it’s an easy place to spend your student life. In terms of the learning environment, the idea of learning in small groups was highly appealing. It’s more fun to study like that, and we can deepen our understanding and gain greater satisfaction.”

The fact that the seminar in the Faculty of Commerce and Management began in the first year was also appealing to Nguyen; however, she did encounter some challenges of her own.

“In the first year, a majority of classes were conducted in Japanese, a language I was used to speaking; in the second year, the seminars are conducted in English. I’d taken a special English class in high school and at the Foreign Trade University, so I felt that, academically, my English was better than my Japanese. In that sense, the classes that I took in English were relatively easy. However, after returning to Vietnam as a fifth-grade elementary student, I had very few opportunities to study the Japanese language, and I felt that I was not really used to writing reports or reading technical books in Japanese. After completing the second year and taking more seminars, I’m now familiar with academic Japanese, but I’m also worried that my proficiency in English will decline because I have few opportunities to use it. So I want to strike a balance between Japanese and English and improve my skills in both.

I have two years until graduation, so I want to focus on improving my level of English.”

Tokyo is where I feel most at ease—I like the “sense of distance” between people.

Nguyen will become a third-year student this spring, and her seminar activities will begin soon. She is hoping to join a seminar where students can research marketing in developing countries. When we asked her about her motivation for studying, she replied, “I’ve always enjoyed studying. I also really like investigating things and summarizing the results in reports. When-



ever I study, I always want to get good results—I can't forgive myself if my grades are bad."

Nguyen is cheerful, honest, and hardworking. She speaks Japanese so fluently that you would never know she is Vietnamese until she tells you her name. The place where she feels most at ease is not Hanoi, where she was born, but the place where she currently lives alone: Tokyo. "I like the 'sense of distance' between people. People want to make connections and they care about others, but they don't interfere with other people too much. When they sit on a bench, they usually leave one space open between each other.

The way people keep a reasonable distance is just right for me. In Vietnam, people prefer to have close relationships with others, but I want to cherish my personal space."

Nguyen recognizes the importance of spending time alone to revitalize herself, but she also cares about communicating with others when studying and working. Incidentally, on her days off, she often takes a walk or travels somewhere with her camera—her hobby. She is a member of "EN-noshita," a student group based at Hitotsubashi University Library, where members promote the reuse of secondhand books. To earn money toward her living expenses, she also has a part-time job delivering information to Vietnamese people who are interested in Japan, working as a radio announcer at the Tokyo broadcasting station where her mother used to work. "At the moment, the smoothest way for me is to read in Vietnamese, speak in Japanese, and listen in English."

Even if we can't understand other people, we can still live together if we are "willing to accept" one another

What kind of future for herself does Nguyen envision after graduating from Hitotsubashi University? "I want to find a job where I can use both Japanese and English, but I'm still looking into what kind of job will allow me to make the most of my abilities. If I decide to work for a company, I would aim for a multinational corporation, but I really want to find a job where I can help people experience happiness and joy while communicating with them rather than doing desk work. I want to refine my English as well, so I'm also considering the option of going to graduate school in Europe or America. Whichever option I choose, it means that I won't be returning to Vietnam any time soon. I should go forward, enjoying the paths I choose to take, with the world as my stage. My parents also agree with me on this."

When Japanese people think of exchange students from developing countries, we tend to imagine a future vision or mission that has to do with "returning home and contributing to economic development," yet Nguyen seems less than eager to take this path. After all, she has had global experiences from a young age. "When you think of the word 'global,' you tend to think about countries, but I've never cared too much about my



Making soba in Nagano in 2013—with friends from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Japanese Language Center for International Students (second from right)



At a Ryokan in Nagano in 2013—with friends from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Japanese Language Center for International Students (center)



First snow of 2014—with friends from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Japanese Language Center for International Students (left)

nationality. Because I feel that it's not that important going forward in life. If I have a field where I can apply my strengths and enjoy my life, I think it's fine to go anywhere in the world. Even within a single country, there are various culture and values. Even if our cultures and customs are different, it's still not difficult to live together if we are 'willing to accept' people for who they are."

When we step out into the world, the existence of our home country tends to influence our identity and vision. We should probably dispel this old-fashioned preconception. Viewed from the outside, where globalization has already become the norm, Japan's heightened awareness of globalization is itself somewhat behind the times. Nguyen's liberal, global way of life and worldview seem to be a testament to this state of affairs.