

Interview @ KIZUNA

On November 15, 2021, Student Lounge KI-ZU-NA had a chance to interview one of our international students, Shreshth Sapra, about his student life at Kyoto University. Mr. Sapra is an undergraduate student majoring in mechanical and systems engineering. He was appointed as a friendship ambassador for Kyoto Prefecture* this year. At the appointment ceremony, he received a letter of appointment and memorial plaque, and he delivered a speech on behalf of his fellow new ambassadors.

This interview was conducted in Japanese by Hsin-Hua san and Nakura L.H. san, two graduate students who serve as tutors at KIZUNA. The interview was conducted in-person in accordance with the university's COVID-19 prevention guidelines.

*For reference: Kyoto Prefecture Friendship Ambassadors

Every year, Kyoto Prefecture enlists international students who are studying in the prefecture and keen to become a bridge between Kyoto and their home countries as “friendship ambassadors.” The ambassadors are appointed from among a group of applicants by a selection committee, and are expected to contribute to the promotion of internationalization in the local community through various activities. The activities, which the ambassadors will continue even after their period of study in Kyoto, include visits to local elementary, junior high, and high schools, and participating in exchange projects with states and provinces that have linkages with Kyoto Prefecture.

Kyoto Prefecture: <https://www.pref.kyoto.jp/en/04-01-03.html>

1. Please introduce yourself.

My home country is India, and I grew up there until the age of 19. It has been five years since I came to Japan. For the first year after coming to Japan, I studied in a preparatory course at Osaka University, and then I enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program at Kyoto University. I am an undergraduate student in the university’s Mechanical and Systems Engineering Course in the Undergraduate School of Engineering Science, of the Faculty of Engineering. I am also a member of the Gangsters, an American football team affiliated with the Kyoto University Athletic Association (<http://gangsters-web.com/>).



2. What brought you to Japan?

When I was in high school in my home country, I had the opportunity to be involved in research. One day, a scientist that I met asked me what I wanted to do after high school. When I said that I wanted to study mechanical engineering somewhere, they advised me to study in Japan. After a while, when I was studying at a university in India, I learned that the Japanese government offers a scholarship* for international students, and I ended up to enrolling at KU.

* For reference: Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship at Kyoto University

<https://www.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/education-campus/procedures/scholarships/mext>

3. What is the difference between your home country and Japan?

In my opinion, there are two differences. First of all, in Japan, politeness is an essential part of the culture, and we use honorifics in conversation to show respect to others. In India, it is uncommon to use honorific expressions in everyday conversation. I think that respect can be expressed in many ways, not just words. When I joined the American football team, I was supposed to talk to my senior members using honorifics, but I couldn't. However, with the help of the strict rules within the team, I have learned how to use honorifics, and I can now speak to my senior team members in the proper manner. Having said that, for me, speaking in a friendly manner can be an effective way to open up to others. The point is to choose the appropriate way to communicate depending on the situation.

Secondly, Japan has an excellent reputation for public safety, and I think that it is deserved. When I began living in Japan, I was surprised at how well people behave on buses and trains. In India, when you are in a long line and finally approach the front row, you are almost always pushed aside by someone trying to cut in front of you. In Japan, most people value a basic idea of not violating the rules, and I think people should be proud of it.

4. Can you explain to us what you are studying in the Mechanical and Systems Engineering Course in the Faculty of Engineering?

Simply put, my study is related to cars and engines. In fact, I can build an engine.

For reference: Kyoto University Faculty/Graduate School of Engineering

https://www.t.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en?set_language=en

5. What motivated you to apply for a Friendship Ambassador for Kyoto Prefecture?

An Indian friend of mine who knows that I am fluent in Japanese suggested that I would be suitable for the position. To be honest, I had never heard of a friendship ambassador, but as my friend explained it to me, I became interested. In my opinion, when we are blessed with an opportunity, we should not pass it up, so I took this chance and applied to be an ambassador, and luckily I was appointed.

6. What kind of activities do you do as a friendship ambassador?

In my case, I visit junior high schools and high schools. The purpose of the visits is not to give the students lectures, but to have discussions with them on topics that they have learned about and prepared in advance. For example, the last time I visited a high school, the students gave a presentation on SDGs, and then I had a panel discussion with them. It was interesting to know how much they know about SDGs and helped me see things from a new perspective.

When talking to students, I try to speak slowly and choose my words carefully. When speaking with junior high school and high school students in English, it is important to consider their English proficiency. I have had the experience of hesitating to express my opinion in Japanese because I was not sure if I could explain what I wanted to convey. The students may have the same feeling when speaking in English, so I hope that by taking the opportunity to meet and talk to me, they can build confidence in their English ability and express their opinions more.



7. As a friendship ambassador, would you share one of your favorite places in Kyoto with us?

My pick is Kameoka, which is rich in nature and has many historically famous spots. Of the city's many attractions, the best is a sightseeing train from Arashiyama to Kameoka. You can enjoy beautiful views of streams and mountains throughout the route.

8. What made you decide to join the Gangsters American football team?

When I was a freshman looking for a sports club, their flyer to recruit new members caught my attention. I have a host family in Osaka, and when I talked to them about the team, they explained to me that the team was very famous, and encouraged me to join. Following their advice, I participated in the welcome party for new members and in their training sessions, and eventually I decided to join the team.

At Japanese universities, senior students hold parties called “*Shinkan*” as a means to recruit new members to student associations, clubs, and circles. At the parties, new members can usually enjoy food and drinks for free. But the idea of *Shinkan* was unfamiliar to me, and my initial thought was that if I attended the party and enjoyed a free meal and drinks, I would be obliged to join the club. To avoid feeling pressured into making a decision, I refrained from participating in the party, but I later realized that this was a normal part of Japanese culture and I did not have to worry about it.

9. Can you tell us your plans after graduating from the university?

I am currently thinking of working in Japan. From a global perspective, there is still room for growth in Japan's trade market. I think it is my role to work as a bridge between Japan and other countries.

10. Will you continue living in Kyoto after graduating from the university?

I like Kyoto, but from a business perspective, there are other attractive places as well. I plan to move to Tokyo to expand my network and seize opportunities, and then return to Kyoto after achieving business success.

11. Would you give some advice for newly enrolled international students?

Although every country and region has a unique culture and customs, from my perspective, Japan is full of surprises. After arriving in Japan, you will have trouble with the unfamiliar living environment, customs, etc. However, please remember that a wonderful life awaits you once you have worked through the mentally challenging difficulties. Some of my friends gave up trying to adapt to the new lifestyle, make friends, and communicate with Japanese people as soon as they started living in Japan. They are just waiting for the day when they will graduate from the university and return to their home country. In my opinion, however, living that way, even for just a few years, is not a good idea. If you wait for time to pass without dealing with the problems you face, you will regret it later. I suggest that students find a meaningful way to spend their time in Japan. Everyone will have a difficult time at some point in their lives. Difficult times can also be seen as opportunities to learn how to strengthen your mindset and achieve personal growth.



Comments from the KIZUNA tutors

Hsin-Hua san

Interviewing Mr. Sapra was like listening to a legend about a young hero. He has never hesitated to take on new challenges, and his courage will inspire many of readers. I couldn't help but wonder how he managed to do so much with only 24 hours in a day, just like all of us.

Nakura L.H. san

Mr. Sapra is the most energetic person I've ever met. His way of managing his time, confidence to tackle continuous challenges, as well as his ubiquitous sense of humor left a really deep impression on me.