

Most stereotypes or generalizations that I have heard about Japan I take with a grain of salt. I have heard a lot of generalizations that I disagree with so I prefer to base my beliefs about Japan and Japanese culture on my own personal experience. But there is one thing that I heard before I came to Japan, and reinforced by some of the foreigners that I have known here, that I always believed and also really scared me. I was told at an orientation before coming to Japan: “Don’t go to the dentist in Japan. If you need dental work done, make sure you do it at home!”

It is commonly agreed among many foreigners that dental work in Japan is not the same as what we are used to at home. I heard of a friend who went to the dentist for a small cavity, and he drilled and drilled away at her tooth until there was only the thin shell of a tooth with a giant filling inside. For the past few years, I have been avoiding the dentist in Japan. When I went home to visit about two years ago, I had two small cavities filled. It was expensive (more than 500 USD but it was worth it for piece of mind and knowing that I wouldn’t have any problems when I came back to Japan.

Unfortunately, I haven’t had the chance to go home for a visit lately. I knew that I should go in at least for a cleaning, but I kept putting it off. I started to think I could feel a cavity, but still fearing what damage the dentist might do to my teeth, I waited. Finally, I couldn’t wait any longer and I gave in to the fact that I might have to get a cavity filled in Japan. When I went to the dentist and had my teeth cleaned, I found out that I had not 1, but more than 8 cavities! I started to tear up just thinking about it, imagining my teeth all being drilled away to nothing and regretting for the rest of my life that I didn’t take better care of my teeth.

To my surprise, I had a wonderful experience at the dentist. As it turns out, what is considered a cavity in Japan is usually just called “slight decay” at home. So when I thought of cavities, I imagined that I had 8 gaping holes in my mouth! It turns out that they were small cavities and I only needed to have a few filled. What pleased me even more was the high quality of the work that I had done. My dentist was so helpful and I didn’t have any problems! The only thing that scared me was the first time I had a cavity filled and he started drilling before I was ready. In America we always get Novocain (to numb the tooth) before having any kind of work. It didn’t hurt too bad but I was still nervous and scared to have my teeth drilled with no numbing.

My experience at the dentist in Japan was not as bad as I had expected. That first day when they told me that I had 8 cavities, and the feeling when he started to drill my tooth for the first time made me feel pretty uncomfortable. But in the end, it all turned out all right. It has taken me this long to have faith in Japanese dentists (at least this one!) but also to remember that I shouldn’t always believe what I hear. My friends at home in America have had bad dentists and I still get work done there! It is a relief to know that I have a good dentist in Japan now and I don’t have to stop eating sweets anytime soon!

