The Ts, with whom I spent a weekend in December, were gracious and warm. They had a 12-year-old daughter, R.

On my first day, Mr T taught me the rudiments of calligraphy (習字). It was a curiously surreal experience; the kanji were essentially the same as the Chinese characters I had filled out countless copybooks with as a boy; and now, I was at it again, striving for perfection in every stroke.

After practising for a while, I chose for my final piece the character 心。Guided by Mr T, I drew out the character on a fan he kindly supplied, and then stamped my name on the left.

As it turned out, R was as accomplished at calligraphy as her father. She wrote a little note for me for my omiyage.

The family was relatively new to Singapore, having just arrived in April; although they had visited the principal attractions, there was still much they had not seen. They were eager, as well, to find out more about the Singaporean educational system.

What I found noteworthy, during our late-night comparison of both the Japanese and Singaporean educational system, was how the Japanese do not have a PSLE; students progress from primary school to junior high school without a national exam. Nor do they have a gifted programme.
For Japanese studying in Singapore, however, their options are limited. I followed the family to the open house of the middle school in Clementi. On display was the school’s various CCAs and lessons. Classes were large – 40 or more students a class, at least at the lower levels. The school premises looked as if it could do with a fresh coat of paint; it was clean, but clearly past its prime. The CCAs seemed to be split along gender lines: those students in the music or dance activities were mostly girls, and those in sports, boys.

Furthermore, the nature of the international school system here seems to have undermined the raison d’être of competitive sports in school. As R noted, what’s the use of training when you have no opponent?

Of course, no description of a Japanese homestay can be complete without the food. I sampled the infamous natto – best with rice, they say – and staples like tonkatsu. And yes, natto is something everyone should try at least once in their life. I got to sample a bit of everything – 茶碗蒸し, ナットウ, トンカツ.

Figure 2: Our dinner, prepared by Mrs T.

Mrs T takes pride in her cooking. She wakes up at 5 am everyday to prepare bento for her husband and daughter; she even bakes bread and other sweets for the family. Step into her kitchen, and you will be greeted by miraculous cooking gadgets that help her serve up food at its hot, piping best. Consider the ultra-fast steamer, which can finish cooking everything in just one minute.

I have learned a lot on this homestay, and would recommend the programme to anyone who is at all interested in Japanese culture.