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Witnessing the silent transformation –my seven years as a gaikokujin–

Andi Demo MPP/IP 1st Year

Twenty-one at the time, after spending the summer in Massachusetts, I landed in Narita airport on August 18th, 2007. I remember that day particularly well, because it was two days prior to the start of my orientation week at Temple University, Japan Campus. Junior year ahead, I was transferring my courses from the American University in Bulgaria and my life from the city of Blagoevgrad, inside three big pieces of luggage, to Tokyo. In a bizarre attempt to roam the surroundings solo style, “hiding” from the designated tutor, for two long days I struggled with the jetlag, the humidity and the crowds of people at Shibuya and Shinjuku station. Everything was novel, different and refreshing with a strong aura of excitement and adventure pending on my head and filling my chest.

A lot of things have changed in the past seven years, albeit Shinzo Abe is still the Prime Minister of the country. In retrospect, what started as a byproduct of a Dragon Ball induced fantasy and a lighthearted conversation with my high school history professor about the “Imperial University of Tokyo”, subconsciously left a lasting impression. People have asked me time and again, the “why Japan?” question, and time and again, I have failed myself in trying to come up with a convincing answer. However, given the opportunity, I would like to share with my friends and colleagues, some of my thoughts and emotions from living in the Land of the Rising Sun as a student, a government official and a scholar-in-waiting, for the past seven years.

In a growingly interdependent world, understanding [other] people and accommodating [external] cultures has become of prime importance. Factoring that in, I graduated in International Affairs from the offshore campus of Temple University and pursued further research at Waseda University, with focus on East Asia. Throughout my studies, I have benefited from the generosity of the MEXT scholarship, which has helped me tremendously in fending off rent prices, allocating quality time to studies and travel, and of course, in not bankrupting my family. After graduation and a successful internship at the Embassy of the Republic of Albania, my native country, I was appointed as the Secretary of the Ambassador in 2010, and later on as the Financial Manager. Thanks to my job, I have had a great opportunity in understanding the world and diplomacy a little better, meeting famous people from all walks of life, and more importantly growing as a person.

The geostrategic momentum is back in Asia, and Japan is a formidable country to witness the dynamism of world politics and economy. The learning environment, the safety, the cleanness combined with great hospitality and terrific food, made me stay and make this country my second home. Wherever I resided, be this in the shitamachiness of Nishi-Magome or Edogawa, the convenience of Itabashikyukushomae or the exuberating Roppongi neighborhood, I always felt at ease. In Tokyo, one can learn as much from school textbooks, as interacting with the city and its complexity. In addition, Tokyo, much like New York, nourishes your ambition and a strong desire to succeed. In 2008, I took a picture in front of the Japanese Diet Building, waving as a tourist and by 2012, I was accompanying the Speaker of the Parliament of my country to meet Her counterparts, in the Drawing Room



of that very building. Dreams do come true sometime, albeit only if you work toward them [and with a twist of luck].

My father is a history and geography teacher and raised my brother and me in the midst of world Atlases and interesting “foreign” books. James Clavell’s novel, later made into a film, *Shōgun*, was my first window into “the Japans”, as addressed in the movie by a pilot John Blackthorn (the character loosely based on Miura Anjin, the first Englishman coming to Japan). For many Europeans and in particular Albanians, the cliché images of sword swinging samurais and capricious geishas of the Edo days strangely remain as bulk knowledge, associated with the country. In addition, I fell in love with enka songs. They have a warm and familiar melody, reminding me of my furusato, as well as a strong incentive in improving my modest Japanese skills, by trying to sing them in karaoke parlors.

In March 2011, the very foundation of Japan was shaken to the core by the triple catastrophe. I remember being in my office, reporting live on the phone, to an Albanian news edition. Japan persevered graciously throughout that most unfortunate disaster, and while still problems remain for the people in the affected areas, that turn of events strongly affected me. I decided to pursue graduate studies in public policy, focusing on disaster and crises management at the University of Tokyo, disrupting my studies at Waseda in search of a more concrete set of knowledge and skills. I chose UTokyo because it is UTokyo. But, I gladly opted for GraSPP because of the exciting potential output of the economics and law interdisciplinary symbiosis. I believe that good public officials should have a strong “grasp” of social sciences in order to better implement positive social engineering.

Japan is changing and transforming from within. I am very happy to be part of the internationalization process of Japanese universities. It is a promising project and with a greater potential to alter the country and show to the world. In this regard, Tokyo Olympics in 2020 will serve as a midterm exam, a litmus test of the new Japanese social fabric. Human-to-human interaction is the only way that we can reduce the considerate geographical distance in between, better understand each other and serve as intellectual bridges, able to explain to the West “the Asian values” and still approach Asia, with the curious and positive eagerness of Marco Polo (and Miura Anjin).

Hiroaki Miyamoto Project Associate Professor



An Encouragement to Studying Abroad

I have had the one-in-a-lifetime opportunity of working in research and teaching at GraSPP since April 2014. The appointment at GraSPP was my first time back in Tokyo, my home town, in ten years. Looking back over my time away, I spent the first five years as an international student myself, studying in the USA, and the second five years providing guidance to international students at a university in Niigata. To tell the truth, to end up engaged in research and teaching work in such an international environment like GraSPP was something I never expected.

The trigger for my overseas study came while I was still a university student when a former professor told me, "to expand your horizons, you need to move to an international environment where you can study with talented people from around the world." Based on my own experience, I see overseas study as an ideal opportunity to strengthen your inner self and become a broader and deeper person.

Naturally, even more so than the study itself, studying overseas means living in a place where the language, culture, and customs are different. In an environment in which the things you take for granted in your own country are no longer a matter of course, everything you encounter becomes an invaluable experience. It also provides numerous opportunities to learn as a person by living among people and deepening your mutual

understanding beyond the boundaries of nation and culture. While being able to study your area of expertise at an international level is one of the obvious benefits of overseas study, it also has a "utility" that goes beyond this, which is the real thrill of studying away from your home country.

GraSPP provides something rare in Japan: an international environment for learning and research. I have found it to be a wonderful place which, if approached with a high-minded attitude, offers enormous scope for study. I urge all students to strengthen your inner self and take an active role in international society while deepening your understanding of your specialist field through valuable encounters with other people.

My areas of expertise are macroeconomics and labor economics, and my primary interests are in the problems of employment and unemployment. Employment is the major concern in leading developed nations, whether it be in relation to the globalization of economies, ongoing technical innovation, or the effects of recession. Furthermore, the problems of employment and unemployment apply not only to those in work, having rather a central role in the economy and a close relationship with social stability. Through my research and teaching, I intend to devote myself to making a contribution to the economies of Japan and the world, and to international relations between Japan and other countries.

GraSPP International Students Trip to Izu

Warran Kalasegaran MPP/IP 1st Year



Singing Karaoke (author on left)

One week into the start of the academic year, the international students of the Graduate School of Public Policy (GraSPP) took off on a department-organized trip to Izu. The two-day trip was aimed at providing an opportunity for students to get to know each other through an excursion that also exposed them to Japanese traditions and a little of Japanese life outside Tokyo. In this regard, it would be an undeniable success. By the end of the first day, all the guys were lounging comfortably naked alongside each other in an onsen. I was told that the girls were

tourists and locals fishing near the idyllic Joren Waterfall. The braver ones tried the wasabi ice cream available. The highpoint of the trip however, would be the Saturday night we spent at the Dogashima New Ginsui Hotel.

We excitedly changed into the kimonos and slippers the hotel gave us and rushed to what was a wonderful Japanese banquet in the dining room. This was followed by a horrendous round of karaoke that made me relieved we were interested in careers related to public policy and not music. This activity indeed put the "high" in highpoint. The need to soothe our eardrums hastened our move to the onsen. There, it was our eyes that suffered. We enjoyed soaking in the hot spring or sitting in the massage chairs while chatting with each other before we decided to re-join the girls. A little impromptu gathering of the entire group allowed everyone to mingle late into the night.

We woke up the next day to a glorious view of the Pacific Ocean, ready to make our way back to Tokyo by sunset. I think it is safe to say on behalf of everyone on the trip that we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly, and appreciated the opportunity to interact with each other in an informal setting while exploring a different part of Japan. It would thus be fitting to end this note by saying thanks to GraSPP, and in particular the International Affairs Office, for putting everything together so wonderfully.

getting along just as well too.

Travelling by coach and accompanied by the very fun and informative staff from the GraSPP International Affairs Office, we departed from Hongo at 9.30 am on a very sunny October Saturday morning. Already, the staff had sorted us into groups, and I found myself sitting next to a rather lanky British chap called Kieran. I found a good friend in Kieran, and the many more people I met or got to know more about over the next two days.

In fact, the highlight of the trip for me was appreciating the diversity of students that filled up the two buses. I met Korean students from the CAMPUS Asia program, double degree students from the Hertie School, and exchange students from Sciences Po. The students that had started at MPP/IP with me were also a sundry bunch, including a garrulous Albanian diplomat who had already been living in Japan for a while and a lawyer who had just moved from the Philippines. The heterogeneity of our travelling fellowship made for lively, interesting and many times educational discussions. The atmosphere was fantastic.

To and from the hotel we were staying overnight at, we stopped at several tourist sites. At Shuzenji many of us visited our first Japanese shrine, took in the beauty of the bamboo grove nearby, and used the free time to explore more of the charming town. On Sunday, we observed



Mitsuketaro, a mascot for Suzu City in Ishikawa Prefecture



Rachel Olanoff

MPP/IP, 2nd Year

International Student Interview

▶ No. 5



Hiking in Akita with a friend from GraSPP

— I understand you have lived in Japan before?

That's right. I started out teaching English as an assistant language teacher, while also taking private lessons in Japanese. My Japanese teacher introduced me to an acquaintance who knew the person in charge of the Okunoto Endemura tourist facility in Ishikawa Prefecture. After getting the job, I went back to America to prepare a visa application, returning to Japan to work there from March 2010 to May 2011. The job included selling Noto salt made in the traditional way and leading tours for overseas visitors. I was also interviewed by reporters and appeared a couple of times in the newspaper.

During that time, a friend of mine told me about a system for taking dual degrees (double degrees) from American and Japanese universities. This was the double degree program available through the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University and GraSPP. I also met a staff member from GraSPP while I was living in Noto who left me with a strong desire to participate in this program of study.

That said, I felt it would be good to get some work experience before recommencing study, having never lived in Tokyo before and needing to save up money for my tuition fees. To this aim, I worked for two years in Japan at a foreign-owned recruitment company. By bringing me into contact with many job-seekers and companies looking for staff, this job provided me opportunities to talk to all sorts of different individuals and helped me develop an eye for people. In my work, I placed an emphasis on my relationships with the people I was dealing with. While meeting my sales quota was important, I realized there are things that do not show up in the numbers alone. In the future, I hope to be involved with work that has a public policy element while also being in the business sector. If possible, I would also like to work somewhere that takes staff training seriously. As I am not ready to become an entrepreneur, I intend to look for a job at a large company that looks after its staff. I would also consider working as a consultant. Best of all would be a public policy consulting job that deals with government agencies.

— Was there anything in particular that struck you as different between SIPA and GraSPP?

I have only just finished my year at SIPA and started my year at GraSPP.

Studying at any graduate school, not just GraSPP, is rejuvenating. GraSPP has students from Germany who are very diligent despite being so young, and students from the Philippines who are very intelligent, etc. My age makes me feel I should be advancing more quickly. I enjoy how graduate school brings you into contact with new ideas and concepts. There are times, though, when the class is full of Asian students but I am the only one speaking. It leaves me thinking there are many cultural differences, even just in communication, with everyone contributing to classes in their own way. I particularly like Professor Nishizawa's classes because he looks for ways that everyone can contribute to the class while at the same time guiding discussion and also arranging for lectures by guest speakers. Compared to that, classes that consist only of getting students to summarize assigned texts and make presentations are boring.

SIPA has a wealth of resources and also benefits from its location, such as its proximity to organizations like the UN. In a class on microenterprise development conducted by someone who does consulting for the United States Agency for International Development, we prepared an actual private sector intervention proposal, which was worthwhile. There were also many lectures and symposiums. However, at times the competition between students was intense and made me feel more stressed.

In this respect, GraSPP provides a chance to relax, with less competition and everyone wanting to do different things or having different interests that do not compete with each other but rather complement one another.

(Interview and text by editor)

Thoughts from Seoul

Yuka Yamanouchi Economic Policy Division, 2nd Year

I am studying at the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) at Seoul National University in South Korea. It feels so much like a country that is close and yet so far. I have been studying cultural export policy since my time as an undergraduate and I have come to feel genuinely passionate about South Korea given how they have been so successful in this area. My days feel very full and I find it inspiring just to walk the streets or talk with friends. On the other hand, I am aware of a constant niggling problem that this genuine passion has not been enough to dispel, an ever-present irritation concealed beneath my happy exterior.

It is often said that studying abroad makes you think about your home country, and it is true that the issue that was in my thoughts related to Japan throughout my first semester at GSIS. What struck me most of all was that I need to feel more confident and responsible about my own country. My generation in particular, perhaps because we have grown up through the two "lost decades", has become too ready to be dismissive



Trying on traditional chima jeogori dress at a festival celebrating links between Japan and Korea. (the author is on the left)

about Japan. But no matter how much we talk down our country, we cannot expect anyone to take pity and come to our rescue. In other words, we are the ones who need to do something about our own predicament.

This applies to individuals as much as to countries. While the term "globalization" tends to be used in the sense of striving toward some sort of greatness, meaning "overseas" or "foreigners", it is not the case that their thinking and actions are always correct. There are times when you need to assert your own views and have them prevail, and this too is a sort of globalization. While it is true that Japanese education does not exactly encourage creativity, I believe it compares favorably to other countries in the application of logic. We should be more confident and have a greater sense of responsibility for expressing our own ideas. Being able to say "no" when appropriate, and explain the reasons: while simple, this is extremely important.

Naturally, achieving this requires a certain command of language. While I have always been aware that I am not very good at English, I now feel the constant frustration of wanting a more "combative English". I also feel I need to become familiar with Korean, enough to convey my honest emotions. Whether it happens soon or in the distant future, if a second joint hosting of the World Cup by Japan and Korea occurs in my lifetime, it is my heartfelt wish that I will be able to smile with a truly happy face.



Group photograph with others in CAMPUS Asia Program Participants come from the University of Tokyo, Seoul National University, and Peking University



GraSPP's Tenth Anniversary Homecoming Day Memorial Lecture and Gathering

Yuna Yamamura Chairwoman, GraSPP Alumni Association (Tatsuoka-kai)

Attended by more than 120 people, the memorial lecture and gathering held on November 15 last year to mark the tenth anniversary of GraSPP's founding was a great success. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank everyone who came along.

As a graduate myself, I was thrilled to hear the presentations by Professor Takatoshi Ito and Professor Shinichi Kitaoka and to mingle with the cosmopolitan students and the graduates now active in a diverse range of fields. I was particularly surprised by the number of overseas students. Their number has increased considerably in the three years since I graduated, making the place even more multinational. Along with looking forward to what changes GraSPP may make in the future, the day reminded me that I need to continue growing myself, without being scared of change.



This issue has contained articles expressing the contributors' thoughts on "international" topics, a subject that is very abstract and difficult to pin down. This has resulted in a mix of hard and soft articles that have left me, the one who commissioned them, more surprised and delighted than anyone. No doubt this is because the word "international" is not limited to one simple meaning, rather having many facets. (Editor)