



# KOMABA *times*

English Newsletter by Komaba Students

<http://komabatimes.wordpress.com/>

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Photo: Erika Nakayama.

## ACADEMIC LIFE

### Lectures of University of Tokyo: Where two educational systems co-exist

By Isshin Inada

A student arrives at his international school and classes begin. During class, he is bombarded with difficult questions and so, like his classmates, he would simply ask the teacher for help. Later, the bell would ring, radiating happiness to students who've realized that their tiring day has finally come to an end. The student breaks through the cheerful crowd, and makes his way to his second school – the Japanese cram school. At the cram school, he would restrain his curiosity and questions and keep his head down. He would then, only endeavor to absorb everything that is told to him.

The protagonist of this little story is me. Having experienced these distinct educational styles in this way, I have developed a greater understanding of what differentiates the two. This is congruent with the stereotypical impression of Asian and Western education; the former places emphasis on conformity, while the latter more on individualism. Now as a PEAK student of the University of Tokyo, I am presented with a similar situation of both Asian and Western educational systems incorporated into our learning.

PEAK is a relatively new program that was introduced with the aim to promote the globalization of the university. It is targeted primarily for those who have studied at a foreign school and its lectures are taught entirely in English. Yet we are also given the liberty to join domestic classes, and vice versa. As a result, it has become a commonplace to see students with utterly different educational backgrounds study alongside one another. In this sense, there is now a co-existence of the two prevailing educational systems.

I observed stark differences in the approach in which domestic and PEAK students learn. The small number of students in PEAK classes allows for interaction between teachers and students. Students sit around a circular table which prompts active discussion and participation among students. The teachers encourages them to interrupt them anytime to ask questions or to share their own perspective on a particular matter. Conversely, the desks in domestic classes are arranged in such a way that limits communication among the students. They have no option but to face the front of the class and absorb information solely from the teacher. In some domestic classes, however, there may be as many as 300 students. The professor would merely hold up his microphone and deliver his purely one-sided lecture. Questions are not

asked. Opinions are not shared. Responses are not elicited. "The only voice I hear in almost all my lectures is that of the professor. But this, for me, is nothing extraordinary." says Kugishima, a first-year domestic student.

Personally speaking, the above-mentioned aspects of western education is beneficial to our future. The articulation of our opinions is an important skill and plays a large role in how we interact with the people around us. And like all skills, we can acquire it through constant practice. Consequently, it is wise to begin to polish this skill by thinking and speaking as we see fit, even in the context of a classroom. To listen and absorb information solely from the professor, who is bounded by his own perspective, can be limiting. I believe that by voicing our individual thoughts and exchanging our unique opinions, we open more doors for learning. We can then acquire multiple insights into a certain issue. But to do this requires courage to speak up in public as well as fluency in the way we do so. As a result, it is important that we make an effort to overcome the tendency of suppressing our voices in class.

This is all to say that, one day I hope most of the classes, including the domestic ones, is replete with constructive and meaningful conversations. On the surface, speaking in class may seem trivial and less economical, but it provides an excellent opportunity to exchange our thoughts. Through this, we become exposed to numerous perspectives, and hence grow into open-minded learners. Therefore, I am an advocate of the university's movement towards a globalizing community that incorporates both Asian and Western educational systems.



Voicing one's opinion is the key to unlock multiple perspectives. Image by Sean Dreilinger | Flickr.

## Clash of two worlds: From a professor's perspective

By Chiwu I. Kim



Pop quiz: Which one is the PEAK student? Photo by Kamiyu Hijikata.

We PEAK students are able to take many classes at the University of Tokyo, but we often forget who make it all possible: the professors who teach us. As PEAK is a program that started just three years ago, many professors teaching PEAK students usually have taught at the University of Tokyo prior to the start of the program. PEAK

students often like to compare ourselves to the regular, so-called “domestic” students, but is there really a difference? Do we live in separate worlds? I interviewed Professor Gregory Noble, who specializes in comparative political economy in East Asia and teaches both domestic students in the Hongo campus as well as PEAK students, to find out more about what professors think about their new students, as well as their old.

Professor Noble started off by saying that he wanted to dispel a common misconception that people may have of the domestic students. The domestic students at the University of Tokyo have a reputation of being passive, but Professor Noble argues that reality is far from the case. He says that once the professor gives them the signal that he or she is open to opinions, the domestic students tend to be very active, and eager to have a discussion. While their writing and speaking skills in English fall just short of their PEAK counterparts, Professor Noble has said that he was pleasantly surprised by their high levels of reading and listening comprehension.

According to Professor Noble PEAK students tend to be more diverse. In his class of political science, many PEAK students come from different countries with different government systems. Unlike the domestic students, there is no one set of knowledge that he can expect from the PEAK students. He was also surprised by the level of English in PEAK as well; although English is indeed a requirement in getting into the PEAK program, he says that the students have sur-

passed his initial expectations with their English proficiency.

Professor Noble also noted that a key feature of domestic students is that they are never overbearing. Having taught in two other universities, the University of California and Australian National University, Professor Noble says with confidence that the domestic students at the University of Tokyo are distinctively polite. A key feature of PEAK students, on the other hand, is once again the diversity in this respect. Professors teaching at PEAK must not only overcome the challenge of switching their language of instruction, but also must expect to be met with students who may have had an education that is completely different from what he has seen before, where challenging the professor may be more valued than politeness. This, he argues, creates a unique and exciting challenge as to whether he can “shatter assumptions” that the students have.

In the end, while PEAK students may be sometimes intimidated by the domestic students' native Japanese language, high intellect and reputation, we may have more in common than we think. Professor Noble feels the same; while PEAK students and domestic students do have their differences, there seems to be something universal about the behavior of students at this University. Perhaps PEAK students and the domestic students can learn a thing or two from each other about what they could bring to the classroom, both in terms of behavior and ideas.

## What you need to know about the new “4-term system”

By Erika Nakayama

On September 26th, 2014, The University of Tokyo officially announced the switchover to the 4-term system from the current semester system, and both students and faculty members cannot help but more or less confused. This change in the school calendar, which applies to every student at Todai, is a part of the “Comprehensive Education Reform” which has been promoted by President Junichi Hamada since 2011. According to the Office of the President, the aim is to make students more globally competitive by allowing them to reduce their time attending classes and giving them longer breaks, which makes it much easier for them to participate in overseas programs overseas and various social activities.

How exactly is our school life going to change?

First of all, from next April, two school calendars will run simultaneously. They are roughly divided between the arts faculties and the science faculties (Figure 1). Type I will have a month of summer vacation and three months of winter vacation, while Type II will be the opposite. Some faculties will start with Type I, but then eventually switch to Type II. To secure enough class time, some faculties may hold classes on Saturdays and Holidays.

(Figure 1)

|         | Apr. | May | June | July     | Aug. | Sept. | Oct. | Nov. | Dec. | Jan. | Feb.     | Mar. |
|---------|------|-----|------|----------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|----------|------|
| Type I  | S*1  |     | S2   |          | Hol. |       | A*1  |      | A2   |      | Holidays |      |
| Type II |      | S1  |      | Holidays |      |       | A1   |      | A2   |      | W*       | Hol. |

Type I: Faculties of Law, Letters, and Education, and the College of Arts and Sciences

Type II: Faculties of Medicine, Agriculture, and Pharmaceutical Science

Type I to Type II: Faculties of Economy, Engineering, and Science

\*S= Spring Semester, A= Autumn Semester, W= Winter Semester

Another major change will be the extension of class time by 15 minutes to 105 minutes. Morning classes will start 30 minutes earlier, at 8:30 a.m., and normal classes will end 35 minutes later, at 6:35 p.m. (Figure 2)

(Figure 2)

|            |                 |
|------------|-----------------|
| Period 1   | 8:30 ~ 10:15    |
| Period 2   | 10:25 ~ 12:10   |
| Period 3   | 13:00 ~ 14:45   |
| Period 4   | 14:55 ~ 16:40   |
| Period 5   | 16:50 ~ 18:35   |
| (Period 6) | (18:45 ~ 20:30) |

In addition to these, each faculty can decide their own policies concerning early graduation, curriculum revisions, reduction of credits needed for graduation, and the cap system (limiting the

number of credit obtainable per year).

Although the university emphasizes the advantages of this new term system, students' impressions on the new school calendar system is not very good, according to a small-scale online questionnaire conducted on both April-entry and PEAK students from Nov. 2nd to 6th. Twenty-two people out of 30 April-entry students said they were more or less “against the 4-term system,” while 3 out of 12 PEAK students said the same. Those who were against the reform mainly gave the following 2 points.

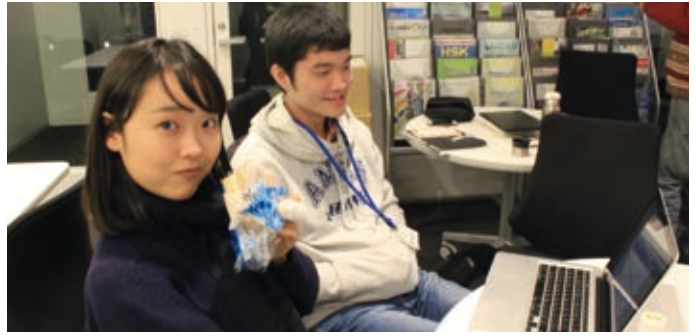
First of all, the university's explanation that the new system will promote participation in overseas programs is questionable. This is apparent not only from the fact that less than one-third of

## Study hideouts: When studies call for peace and quiet

By Tran Ngoc Lam Vy



Open Space where students are having lunch and studying. Photo by author.



Student getting help from GO tutor during lunch. Photo by author.

One of the things that is crucial as an international student, or any student for that matter, is scouting for a place to get down to business and study.

The question is where. Where can you find a quiet zone to concentrate on working and not let yourself be distracted? Rest assured as the Komaba campus has many study hideouts to offer. The first and most obvious choice is, of course, the library. Within the library, you can find an array of study spots according to your preferences as there are four floors in the library and plenty of space to get into your study mindset. On the first floor, there are computers always ready to accommodate students with high-speed internet and the ECCS system, which helps you access your saved documents on any computer in the library (or any computer on campus).

“Open spaces” or silent rooms with transparent

glass doors are also a great choice for studying. Unlike the library where you cannot bring food and drinks, open spaces are completely free for you to study, whilst having snacks or even lunch. With one situated on the basement floor of the KOMCEE West Building and many more I have yet to explore, they offer a sophisticated and tranquil atmosphere. You can also have group study sessions in these rooms too, as long as you keep it down. Another option is the Globalization Office (GO), located right outside of the Open Space. For PEAK students, as many of our classes are held at this building, it is very convenient to go there for lunch and study sessions between classes. It is here that you can get experienced help from upperclassman tutors. It is also a great place where you can interact with other students, domestic as well as international. The GO office is however often crowded as there are not many tables, but it is still a great go-to place for Komaba international students.

Many students also choose to do their work in the cafeteria as it is incredibly convenient in terms of getting study food. Although some may find it a bit crowded and noisy, the cafeteria is still one of the popular choices for studying, more so when it is not lunch time and after 5th period. Last but not least, as you advance onto the PEAK senior division, you will have access to the common room. Located on the fourth floor of Building 8, the common room provides current 3rd year PEAK students with a personal space on campus, where they can study, relax and socialize.

As you can see, there is no shortage of good study spots on campus. So when you feel like you are not being productive, just hightail yourself to campus, bury yourself in your studies and sink in one of those cozy seats, be it in the open space or the library, and get to work!

April-entry students answered that they wanted to spend their entire three-month break attending school as an exchange student in foreign universities, but also because the curriculum of some universities that has University-wide Student Exchange Programs with Todai, such as Princeton University and Peking University, do not match the new schedule at Todai.

Secondly, 105 minutes of class seems simply too long for both students and professors. True, this class time may be inevitable as a result of realizing efficient learning by keeping the semester 2 weeks shorter than other national universities while making class time equivalent to those, as the university says. However, it will not be so effective if students cannot concentrate as well as they did in the 90-minute classes.

Although both of these are valid points, it became clear from the questionnaire that the main issue was not the content of the reform, but the way it has been promoted. In the questionnaire, the majority of both the April-entry and PEAK students answered that the announcement of the new curriculum was “too late.” Moreover, many students felt the university just went ahead

with the decision without listening to concerned voices. Even one of the very few to express a positive reaction to the 4-term system, a 1st year April-entry student, says although the content of the reform itself is good, “the university should have asked for students’ opinions.” No matter how good the new curriculum itself may be, “the change in policy will not positively affect the international outlook of the students unless it is properly explained and justified in the Todai community,” as a 2nd year PEAK student stated.

It is possible that the university could have done more to listen to the students’ and professors’ opinions. However, now that the 4-term system is beginning, the best thing we can and should do is to stay informed on this issue and to try to deliver opinions to the school office when necessary.

According to the Student Affairs Group, further information about the 4-term system in Japanese will be updated on a dedicated webpage that will open up soon on the Student Page of

the University of Tokyo Website. However, they also say, the availability of information in English will vary among faculties.



Ten minutes left, or thirty minutes to go... Big difference. Image by Dan Klimke | trickr.

## PEAK academic life: A different beast to Australian university life

By Kamiyu Hijikata

While the academic and social life within a university always varies from place to place, you'll be hard pressed to find a bigger difference than between large Australian universities and PEAK's small liberal arts program at the University of Tokyo. For good or for bad, within my first month in Todai I have noticed stark differences in the way that university life operates in these two very different countries.

Despite the fact that I did not attend university in Australia due to taking a gap year, I was still exposed to university life through my friends' experiences, in addition to my occasional visits to universities. Consequently, I became accustomed to the general routines my friends followed, including attending lectures, tutorials and lab classes required for the 3-5 courses they undertook each semester.

These perceptions of university life were quickly contrasted with PEAK upon my arrival. Reading through our course handbook, it was startling to realize that we would be required to take a minimum of 36 courses over the first three semesters, a far cry from the standard 12 courses my friends would be taking. But this was accompanied with a reminder that each course only has one 90-minute class conducted weekly,

compared to multiple lectures and tutorials of varying lengths each week back at home. In addition, The University of Tokyo has five assigned periods each day, with a designated lunch break in the middle of the day. This is contrasted with classes in Sydney that follow no set timetable, as classes could be held at any hour of the day, even beyond the 9am – 6pm at Todai. To top it all off, our PEAK cohort consists of 20 students, a small group that would be studying and socializing together for the next four years.

It is interesting to note the good and bad traits intrinsic of the dichotomous university styles. Discussing with a friend back in Sydney, he pointed out how relaxed university life was for him, noting that he had freedom in how he arranged his timetable and how he could afford to skip lectures. In PEAK, however, the same personalisation of one's timetable is impossible as each course is held in a predetermined time slot.

He also noted that lecture attendance can often be in the hundreds, and with it being rare to have more than one class with a friend, he explained about having what he called "lecture buddies", friends he hung with at each lecture, but nowhere else. The enormous class sizes are also a double-edged sword regarding the social aspect

of university, as a greater number of classmates mean more people around, but simultaneously, it makes befriending new individuals in such a large presence a daunting task for all but the most gregarious and social individuals.

Such an issue does not arise in the PEAK program, as each year's cohort functions as a tight knit family. Class sizes are also very small, allowing for greater student-teacher interaction, and more in-depth intellectual discussions. Of course, these smaller classes also mean attendance at each and every class is a must, with a small portion of grades often assigned to student participation.

Another noticeable matter is the structured daily timetable at Komaba, which, combined with the small classrooms we use, is reminiscent of high school learning, which is somewhat underwhelming compared to the more drastic change in environment and need for greater autonomy that my friends experienced moving into university. On the flipside, PEAK's similarity to high school is arguably a positive thing too, as it provides a less strenuous transition from high school to university for students who are already coping with settling into a new country.

It is difficult to assign a superior label to either

## PEAK: An insider's approach

By Eve Bentley

Misaki herself.  
Photo credit:  
Misaki & Alba.



When reflecting on our first 3 months at UTokyo in the PEAK program, despite feeling like we are thoroughly settled in, a multitude of questions still come to mind. What does the future truly hold for us twenty fresh-faced, international students? Our questions range over a vast array of topics, from course requirements, 'living in Japan' advice and general university enquiries, to the best kept secrets of places to relax, to study or simply to meet new people.

Hence, following the Japanese tradition as *Kohai* (underclassmen), we look to our *Senpai* (upperclassmen) for the advice and knowledge we crave. Misaki Hata, a third year Japan in East Asia Studies (JEA) student is half Japanese, half British and came to the PEAK program for a global outlook, a unique educational experience, and an opportunity to immerse herself in her Japanese heritage.

By choosing PEAK, she suggests that such a decision often in itself indicates a desire of moving oneself outside of the realm of comfort. When deciding to move, Misaki, like many of us, felt the weight of expectation and reality, that is, that like our peers we would probably go to the same university, in the same city, same language and same culture. Misaki says, faced with a somewhat predictable future, it is important to engage

with a new part of yourself and take the risks and rewards that such an international program provides. Whether you are like Misaki and wish to engage in your Japanese heritage for potential future children, or simply to fulfil a specific interest, rewards are abundant.

As many international students and travelers worldwide would swear it is indisputable that "Travel opens up the world to you," says Misaki. She mentions that staying in one country your whole life is not unprofitable, but it is limiting in that your understanding of the world is generally second-hand. That said however, it is ultimately up to you to engage with the surroundings around you, to make the most of the opportunities offered.

Moreover PEAK, unlike most international programs due to its small size, comes with such a range of students from across the globe that not only do you develop strong bonds and friendships throughout classes, but your learning is a personal investment to your professors. An international community in such intensive classes allows for deep discussions revealing our multitude of perspectives, which reflect our cultural, religious, linguistic as well as moral assumptions and beliefs. Importantly, Misaki indicates that these ties to our foundational beliefs are what we should intrinsically follow, regardless of peers or external pressures.

When consulting with Misaki as to the future,



A typical lecture hall with many students. Image by velkr0 | Flickr.

of the university systems, and I believe it comes down to a personal compatibility with each system. I have found myself settling in nicely in

PEAK, as I find the structured and orderly timetable, along with a small, intimate cohort, works well with myself. In the end though, university

life is always fast paced and exciting regardless of where you are, and I am excited for what lies ahead in the PEAK program.

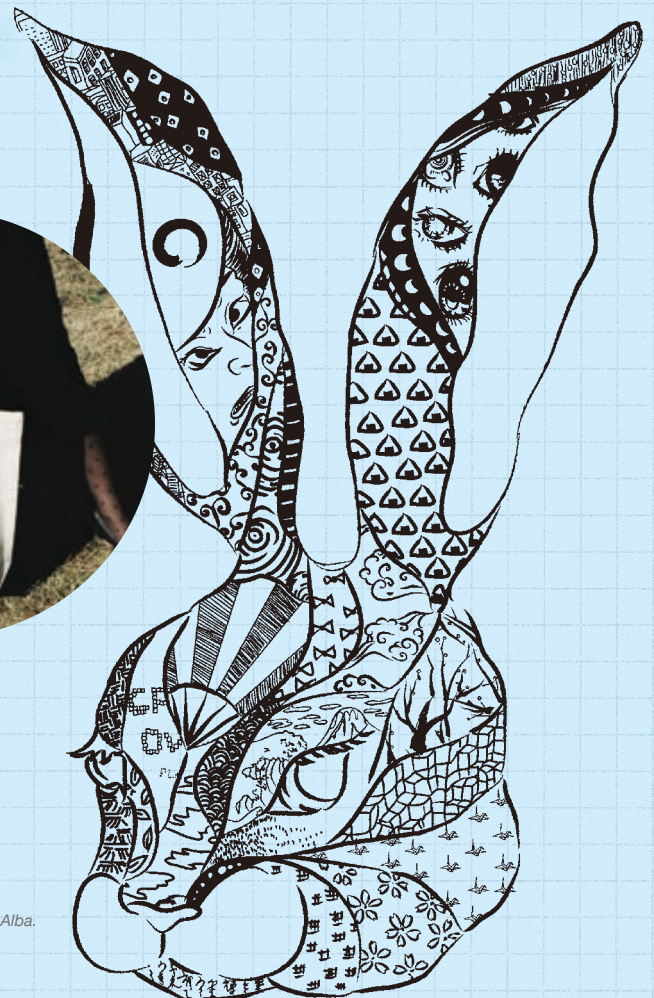
she ultimately sees herself hopefully continuing to do “graduate studies in global communications,” probably in the UK. Her intention to move back is motivated by her belief that it is integrally important to “get many viewpoints, from many different educational systems.” In doing so, you not only promote cross-cultural exchange, but you directly immerse yourself in a new and often highly different environment from what you are previously accustomed to.

For us PEAK students, the program has moulded itself so that each student can individually choose their path, and moreover allows a foundation to be built with regards to knowledge of Japan’s place in the global environment. Misaki, is hence representative of the way PEAK has allowed for a development of ideas and thus a promotion of not only cultural exchange, but a serious interest in global communications and cultural significance. Recently, she developed a mini business with her friend, designing and selling bags. While currently engages her in interests outside of PEAK itself, this kind of innovation and entrepreneurship perhaps simultaneously indicates the beginning of future endeavours.

With this in mind, I know that whilst the future remains ultimately unknown, as a new PEAK student I can look forward to the multitude of opportunities, ideas, cultures and ultimately the completely new environment that PEAK will expose me to.



Cat design tote bag from Misaki and Alba. Photo credit: Misaki &Alba.



Rabbit in production. Photo credit: Misaki &Alba.

## Komaba Lodge

By Kamiyu Hijikata

As a new PEAK student, the first thing you will do when you arrive in Tokyo is to settle into your new home for the next two to four years, the University of Tokyo's Komaba International Lodge. I quickly got accustomed to the cosy room, my new neighbours and the shared kitchen facilities in the lodge, followed by my exploration of the areas surrounding the lodge. In just a few short weeks, I realized how lucky I was to be living here, as there are a multitude of aspects that make it the perfect accommodation for PEAK students.

First and foremost, the great thing about the Komaba Lodge is its location. Right next to the Keio Inokashira line's track and a few minutes walk from Komaba-todaimae Station, its location provides easy access to the university campus, a mere ten-minute walk away. Not being a morning person myself, I cherish the moderate amount of extra sleep I can enjoy in the mornings avoiding the daily hustle on Tokyo's perpetually crowded trains. Additionally, options of what to do during free periods increase when you have the ability to return to your room. Whether you want to

study in the comfort of your own room, take a well-deserved nap to reenergize, take the free time to do some cleaning or cook a homemade lunch, the options will always be there.

Not only is the dormitory close to the campus, one of Tokyo's most famous city districts, Shibuya, is in close proximity too. Heading east along the Inokashira line, Shibuya is only a four-minute ride away, or for those feeling more adventurous, a 20-30 minute walk. Here, students can purchase almost anything they need, from clothes (at retailers such as H&M, Uniqlo, Forever 21, ABC mart) and appliances/electronics (Yamada Denki, Bic Camera etc) to various everyday needs at Japan's ubiquitous 100-yen stores (Daiso, Seria) and Don Quijote. Those looking for a nice meal can find an endless selection of restaurants to choose from, ranging from cheap establishments such as Hanamaru (udon) and Sukiya (donburi – dishes served on a bowl of rice), to more lavish eateries, usually located within department buildings. Entertainment such as bowling alleys, movie theaters and countless karaoke establishments can also be found, and

for those over twenty years of age, cheap izakayas exist everywhere. It is extremely beneficial to live so close to an area with a comprehensive assortment of shops and facilities that are accessible at any time of the day.

Heading in the opposite direction, Shimokitazawa is just two stops west from Komaba-todaimae station. Marginally closer than Shibuya, it takes three minutes on the train and approximately 20 minutes on foot. This area offers similar things as Shibuya in terms of food, shopping and leisure activities, but in a smaller, more local area. In addition, Shimokitazawa's main convenience lies in its two main supermarkets, Ozeki and Foodium that are frequented by the lodge occupants for groceries. Some PEAK students may find particular interest in Kaldi Coffee Farm, a store that sells a variety of foreign foods that may appeal to those who miss their local delicacies (I was delighted to see Australian Tim Tams when I first visited). Between Shibuya and Shimokitazawa, as well as the several convenience stores in the vicinity of the lodge, there is little that lodge occupants would not be able to purchase within

## Painting on the canvas at Komaba-sai

By Chiwu I. Kim



The long line of visitors from all over is silently watched over by the autumn trees. Photo by author.

Komaba-sai, held from November 22nd to 24th this year, is a school-wide event in which almost every single club, team or class has a part in what essentially is a massive school festival. Over four hundred clubs and classes come to participate in dance shows, food stands, band

performances, skits, debates and many more. Over 100,000 people, both University of Tokyo students and people from all over Japan come to visit, and it is definitely one of the highlights of the year at Komaba campus. This year I participated through performing in a skit, selling fried bananas, and just exploring the festival on my own, each of which had its own fascinating aspects.

First of all, Komaba-sai is an almost completely student-run event, something that is not common in many other countries. For stage performances, nothing other than the stage itself was prepared beforehand. Students come with their own props and instruments, making for a thrilling journey to campus as they are forced to trudge through the streets with, for instance, a small cart carrying tables and chairs. From the preparation for the skit itself to the actual performance day, there is no faculty in sight, and everything is left to the students. This creates an atmosphere that is chaotic yet at the

same time natural in contrast to the plays seen in the United States.

The same goes for food stands. Hundreds of food stands line the campus from the main gate to the very end, selling foods from ordinary hot dogs to fried bananas. Selling food within this

hyper-competitive environment forces those working in the stalls to come up with creative methods of advertising their products, and the campus is filled with voices from every corner asking customers to eat at their stand. Selling food is a challenge, especially for PEAK students, who have no prior experience in school festivals in Japan, or *Gakuensai*. There is neither a manual nor an adult to teach the ropes, so many have to improvise. In contrast, many of the domestic students are natural salesmen with years of *Gakuensai* experience behind them. International students try to bridge the gap with their unique traits, such as advertising in multiple languages.

However, many usually spend most of their time exploring the festival itself, pushing through an endless sea of people. Searching for a specific attraction requires a map, and getting lost is almost obligatory. There are so many different attractions that every twist and turn through the campus is hiding something new. Even stands selling the same food have different ways of calling for customers, from chants and songs to colorful signs and dressing in costume.

There is no doubt that the University of Tokyo has a reputation for having a rigid student body, comprising of students whose lives revolve around studying and nothing else, attending university in a robotic fashion. Komaba-sai completely shatters this stereotype, as each student illustrates their creative talents and innovative ingenuity in a flourish of colors. Komaba-sai, allows one a glimpse into the wild side of many of the students, and experiencing it is absolutely necessary to understand the true nature of the Komaba campus.

walking distance in either direction.

Apart from the prime location of the lodge, dormitory life in itself has been a very beneficial experience. Having arrived from a multitude of different nations, we were all the epitome of being strangers to each other upon our arrivals. However, living in close proximity with each other has created

a situation that quickly cultivated strong friendships amongst us all. Being able to do things such as knocking on a neighbour's door a few steps away for a late night talk, or taking a spontaneous midnight trip to the convenience store has brought us closer together. Additionally, the



PEAK students enjoying dinner in the lodge common room. Photo by author.

common room in the boys' lodge B is frequently livened by gatherings for birthdays, pizza parties or general dinner relaxation.

The longer I live here, the more thankful I am that we were assigned housing at the Komaba Lodge.

While not the most technologically modern building, its convenience has made living alone in a foreign country a much less painful episode than what could have been possible, and I will surely continue enjoying the liveliness and spontaneity that occurs from living here.

## The Senpai-Kohai custom in Japan

By Ririka Takahashi

Have you ever experienced a seniority system where the social position of a person is determined by their age? The *Senpai* and *Kohai* custom is probably something unfamiliar to international students coming to Japan. In Japan, the seniority system of *senpai* (先輩) and *kohai* (後輩) applies in many relationships, ranging from those in schools, businesses as well as sports clubs. The University of Tokyo is no exception. Even if you are an international student, because this

culture is still taken very seriously in modern-day Japan it is important to be informed.

Directly translated, *senpai* is defined as "one's upperclass student," while *kohai* is defined as "one's underclass student." The relationship of *senpai* and *kohai* is a fundamental element in the seniority-based social relationships in Japan where relationships are mainly determined by age. The *senpai* are responsible for mentoring

the *kohai*, while the *kohai* are obligated to listen to and follow the *senpai*. Unless a *kohai* is on very good terms with the *senpai*, they usually use *keigo* (敬語), the special style of Japanese that shows respect towards another.

In many universities in Japan including the University of Tokyo, the *senpai-kohai* relationship is respected especially in the clubs and circles. Even though it is more common in sport clubs, it exists in other clubs and circles as well. Theatre and chorus are some examples of circles with strict rules. The stricter *senpai-kohai* relationships have the tendency to occur in clubs and circles that function mainly through teamwork.

Recently, this unique *senpai-kohai* custom has been creating some controversy

amongst students in Japan. Some people oppose the seniority system. This is due to the extreme behavior of some *senpai* who treat the *kohai* not as their underclass student, but instead somewhat as "slaves." This can be seen from a famous expression that is used to describe the sport clubs of universities: "A god in the fourth year, a nobleman in the third year, a commoner in the second year, and a slave in the first year." This expression indicates that the older one gets, the more superior one becomes.

There are reasons for the continued existence of this incomprehensible hierarchical system. First, people believe that this system teaches students to respect one's seniors. By keeping a strict system, it prevents the *kohai* from being impolite. It informs the *senpai* the happiness and difficulty of teaching the *kohai*. It also gives them the feeling of honor and responsibility to be a *senpai*. At the same time, it teaches the *kohai* the importance of learning. It also is aimed to make the *kohai* mentally stronger by being strict. In reality, age does not indicate skill and experience. People can learn manners even without this system. Nevertheless, this diminutive seniority system has been passed on from the past as a peculiar Japanese tradition. Although there is some controversy over this system, this culture may be worth preserving as a Japanese tradition, as long as the members of the clubs and circles agree to the arrangements.

From the perspective of an international student, it may be strange to see such hierarchies existing within student groups. Nonetheless, when you are in Japan, it is recommended to respect this traditional Japanese custom whether you adopt it or not.



A hierarchical structure exists even within students who are only a couple years apart. Image by Fisserman | flickr.

## A new appreciation towards sports

By Isshin Inada

Self-growth has always been central to my life. By training one's mentality, the confidence that is necessary to accomplish certain goals can be acquired. University provides an excellent opportunity for self-growth; I am given ample time and autonomy to do what I desire, that is self-growth. Therefore, after much consideration, I decided to join a rather distinctive club that intertwined sports and self-growth. Although, frankly speaking, I have only been a member of this club for several weeks, I have become more aware of how sports can play an immense role in bettering ourselves.

The reason I described the club as "distinctive" is because the primary purpose of the club is not to play sports merely for entertainment, but for obtaining valuable life skills through them. Hence the structure of the club is simple: before every football match, the players attach a "theme" to the game. The theme is essentially a constructive statement that the players think about throughout the match. The theme, for instance, for one of the sessions was: the importance of setting definitive goals in life.

Now one may wonder how this correlates with

a match of football. As obvious as this sounds, the "goal" of the game is to literally score a goal. Hence it does not matter how many times or how well one passes the ball to his teammates if this is not done for the purpose of scoring a goal. In other words, the entire act of passing be-

Cultivating inner strength through a simple game of football.  
Image by Faungg | Flickr.

## Photo article - The beauty of Komaba campus

By Amaël Cognacq (Text) and Xuan Truong Trinh (Photos)



Entering the campus through the South-West gate feels like entering a forest. And yet, once you are walking on this worn road, a river on your left and a copse on your right, you are inside the Komaba campus of the University of Tokyo.



A century ago, the campus used to be the faculty of agriculture of the University and before that, a hunting reserve for the shoguns during the Tokugawa period. A lot of space has been kept nowadays for greenery. Here, the clock tower, main building of Komaba, envired by trees of all colors.



The campus is hence not only one of the best centers of knowledge of the world, but also a spirited, charming place for everyone to have a stroll or to spend some time. Indeed, many retired people come to sketch the scenery throughout the seasons, and young children come and play with their parents in the Communication Plaza.



Added to retired painters and frolicking children, persons of all age come in autumn to collect Ginkgo fruits on the campus very emblematic Ginkgo alley. Autumn nights are the best to enjoy the carpet of yellow leaves while walking or biking back home after a weary day.





comes meaningless. Therefore, it is paramount to intentionally pass the ball with a clear objective of scoring a goal. It does not end in vain even if one passes the ball backwards, because eventually it will reach the goal. In this way, major themes of the match can be applied to life in general.

Stumbling and going backwards are inevitable, but trivial, at the same time. As long as one has a definite goal in mind, failure only becomes a part of the process.

During the game, every player treats this theme seriously; they constantly think about how they can adopt and incorporate certain “strategies” used in the game to their own life. After the end of every match, there is a discussion session where people reflect on their performance and in particular, how well he has managed to practice the theme. Playing sports in this way can have a

positive influence in other aspects of one’s life.

Sports can be a good approach to self-growth. I believe that setting a “theme” when playing any sports or even exercising add meaning to it. University is not all about achieving straight ‘A’s in class. Of course, academics are important, but I believe that self-growth is also a major part of university life. Life skills cannot be taught through textbooks, but they can be through playing sports. It is critical for our future endeavors to develop these skills from as early as possible, and sports provide the means to do this.



The prominence of nature on campus is something planned by the Environment Committee which is a faculty advisory board, and the Facilities Office of the College. They hire tree doctors to do medical check-ups on trees, circle them with band-aid when they are sick and plan their replacement before they actually fall. They also discuss what to do when accidents happen to the trees. Here, the tree in front of Bldg 101 that fell during the 2012 Winter.



The Committee has assigned identification numbers to each tree on campus. This meticulous maintenance is the key to Komaba Campus’ charm. Here, cherry blossom trees in spring next to the Rugby field.



The campus even has a lake beyond the Japanese Style House! This romantic place is a hideout for the numerous cats of the campus, when they are not wandering around Yanaihara Park, also on campus, situated behind the Library.



Climbing down the stairs of Komaba Todaimae Station, this is the first vision students have of their campus every day. The charming main building humbly lies behind one of the biggest trees of the campus. This harmonious association of nature and architecture symbolizes the whole campus: a green oasis of knowledge in which buildings blend in the scenery without outshining the beauty of the environment. Photo by Kamiyu Hijikata.

## Ikato: "Typical" Todai Students?

By Ririka Takahashi

Just like many other universities, Todai has a lot of slangs which are often used only within the university. *Ikato* (イカ東) is one of them. *Ikato* is the abbreviation of *Ikanimo-Todaisei* (いかにも東大生), which translates to "Typical Todai Student." The term *Ikato* is used for Todai students who dress or behave like a stereotypical Todai student. This term surfaces in various occasions in Todai. For example, there was an *Ikato* cafe and an *Ikato* contest during the Komaba Festival. Jun Matsumoto, who participated in the *Ikato* contest, shared his thoughts and opinions regarding *Ikato*.

Jun is a second year student who graduated from Kaisei Senior High School, a prestigious high school famous for its students' high acceptance rate to the University of Tokyo. In high school, with his outstanding academic results, Jun was at the top of his class. Asked about the definition of *Ikato*, "It is difficult to define *Ikato*, as no one has precisely described it before," Jun said. "It is the stereotypical image people have towards the students of the University of Tokyo.

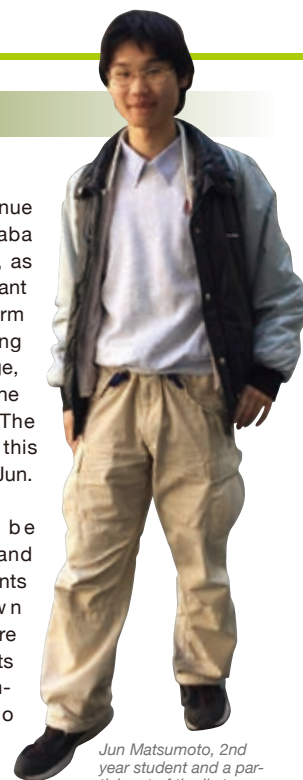
These are nerds, who have communication issues, as well as a terrible sense of fashion."

With this definition, who would ever be happy to be called as *Ikato*? Among Todai students, the term *Ikato* is often received negatively. Jun explained, that the positive aspect of *Ikato* is little known amongst the general public. In reality, people who are called *Ikato* are all very unique who have a great deal of personality. In the *Ikato* contest that was held during the Komaba Festival, the participants demonstrated their uniqueness in various ways. One ate insects, another shared his love towards an anime heroine, the third played the traditional Japanese instrument *Shakuhachi*, and Jun made a speech about his experience of his first love. The purpose of this contest was to show the unique original sides of students who are called as *Ikato*.

This contest gained a favorable reception amongst the audience. Jun, who was a contestant at the last Komaba festival, wants to see

the contest continue in the next Komaba festival, this time, as an organizer. "I want to redefine the term *Ikato*, by dispelling the negative image, and focusing on the other side of it. The contest will help this cause a lot," said Jun.

"*Ikato* should be promoted more and more. *Ikato* students have their own ideas, and they are passionate students who devote themselves heavily to fields that interest them. They are cool!"



Jun Matsumoto, 2nd year student and a participant of the *Ikato* contest. Photo by author.

## 美: A series of creative talks

By Kamiyu Hijikata

When one thinks of the Todai community, in particular on Komaba campus, art is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. In a bid to change this, the 美 (read "be") initiative was created last year to introduce art in various ways to students. Run entirely by members of the 2017 PEAK cohort, the initiative introduces "artists in the contemporary art scene in Tokyo to share their work and inspire."

For those unfamiliar with Japanese, the character "美" carries the meaning "beauty." "The character suitably encapsulates the beauty of the

art around us and the ephemeral sense of 'being,' and is a play on words; 美 (be) creative," said 美 founder, Manasa Sitaram.

The initiative, inspired by the "artist talk" culture of art colleges and schools, as well as the ever-popular TED talks, aims to achieve the goal for a more artistically aware campus through exposing students to various forms of art by hearing the currents of the contemporary arts scene in Tokyo.

The second event was held on Friday January 9th 2015 in the Communications Plaza on Komaba campus. "We looked for professors as

speakers in order to show that art is closer to us than we think," said their online publicist, Chae Yeon Christy Kim. She went on further to explain that the aim of the theme was to present to the audience how art need not simply be a profession, but something that anyone can enjoy as a means to express oneself. Indeed, this strong theme was conveyed effectively through the two speakers, Associate Professor of Chemistry Dr. Jonathan Woodward and Associate Professor of Japanese, Dr. Fusako Beuckmann, a musician and a ceramic artist respectively. Each professor spoke for half an hour discussing their art form, their own personal experiences and their interpretations of their chosen medium.

The inaugural session, held in July 2014, centred around the topic "childhood and heritage," and involved theatre artist James Sutherland discussing his work with masks, and mural artist Divya Cherian talking about her work constructing murals in the Tōhoku area following the 2011 earthquake.

Closely following the first two successful talks, the organisers are planning an additional two talks for the upcoming spring semester. "We're aiming to bring in a more diverse range of artists from now on, including culinary art and street or performance artists," stated Sitaram. Additionally, the team is looking to expand through recruiting new members and amassing a wider audience by catering to Japanese speaking audiences and diversifying the artists invited.

Sitaram says, "I think a university campus and its events are representative of its student body – and so we'd like to show that Todai isn't just about the academics, we can be artistic, too!"

Dr. Woodward presenting to the students. Photo by author.



## Rush hour in Komaba

By Tran Ngoc Lam Vy



Food counters in the Komaba cafeteria. Photo by author.

At first look, Komaba campus, where every student of the University of Tokyo spends at least two years, appears as tranquil as it can be. The campus is so quiet that one can hear the rustling of the trees and birds chirping in the morning. Who would think that just a few hours later, complete chaos would occur as students stream to the cafeteria, also lovingly known as “shokudou.”

As second period ends at 12:10 p.m, the rush hour begins. Students from every building and

classroom hurry to the cafeteria, walking so fast that one might think they are starving, which could be true in some cases, but mostly, it is a race for seats. The normal self-serve cafeteria lunch in most countries would go something like this: get a tray at the door, get food, pay for the food and sit down to enjoy the meal.

At Komaba, if you follow that process, you will find yourself with a heavy tray frantically searching for a place to sit down. With four counters

for ordering set lunches, noodles, curry and rice bowls, four check-out counters, a self-serve salad bar on both floors and efficient staff, it takes a maximum of 15 minutes to be able to hold a tray of a hearty meal in your hands. But with the limited number of tables and chairs, the common novice mistake is getting food before getting seats, especially when you want to enjoy lunch with a group of friends. Even if you look for a table beforehand, it will still be a difficult task to find a table. There will be empty seats, but they will have been “reserved.” Students put their bags, umbrellas, even their scarves down to mark their temporary ownership of the table.

So, what to do if your class runs longer than expected, but you still want to have lunch at the cafeteria? The answer is: stay alert. Look for seats before queuing for food and learn to covertly see if students at a table are finished with their food. Once your target is locked, wait around a bit until they leave, put your bags down and hurry back after you get your food. Because even if you’ve marked a table, your chair might not be where it should when you return.

Is all this worth it? The answer is yes. The curry at the cafeteria is so addictive that some students can have it at least four times a week! What is more, as winter draws near, the cafeteria is the ideal location for a lunch or dinner gathering. With hot food and a warm, bustling atmosphere, the competition for seats is not a chore, but part of the fun!



Even at 4 pm, the “shokudou” is still packed with students. Photo by author.

## Homosexuality: It's time to talk about it

By Amaël Cognacq

"Basically, in Japan, homosexuality's existence itself is outrightly denied. I cannot be satisfied by this," says a lesbian student at the University of Tokyo.

In Japan, same-sex couples do not exist legally. Socially, homosexuality lacks both recognition and representation. In this uncomfortable situation, how do LGBT students of the University of Tokyo feel about their future? What can everyone do to raise awareness and create recognition of homosexuals and open the debate for their rights?

LGBT is an umbrella term that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. The first three initials, LGB, describe non-heterosexual orientations, while T stands for people who feel that their gender assigned at birth does not match who they are. In order to avoid confusion and also because of the lack of transgender students who answered the survey conducted, this article aims

to shed light mainly on the plight of homosexuals.

"I think the problem is that no one is curious or interested in this issue, and because of their lack of curiosity, they start judging it in a biased manner," remarked a bisexual student.

In one word, what everyone needs is this - understanding.

First, the understanding that LGBT people exist. "People are unaware that LGBT people might be your neighbour, friend, colleague or family, which makes it harder for LGBT to live openly," said a gay student. Statistics vary but it is often said that one out of twenty people are homosexual or bisexual.

Second, everyone has to understand that homosexuality is neither a problem, nor something to laugh at, but rather, simply a sexual orientation. It

is also not something one decides to become.

By becoming more concerned about homosexuality, we can create a more comfortable place for LGBT people to live in, and in doing so, help them to come out and live a happier life without constantly hiding their sexual orientation. Conversely, homosexuals can help to create awareness by coming out to those in their social circle - perhaps beginning with their family and friends, and then co-workers and other acquaintances. "Coming out has helped dispel some misconceptions that people have," said a homosexual student.

Third, the understanding that LGBT people deserve more legal rights. While homosexuals are just regular people who love another person of the same sex, they are legally considered different. They cannot marry, they cannot adopt, and they cannot benefit from any of the privileges given to heterosexual couples.

## Survival cooking

By Tran Ngoc Lam Vy



A cramped kitchen cannot stop reinvention. Photo by author.

Going away for college and living alone means that whether you like it or not, you will find yourself eating out a lot. At first this idea might seem exciting because, after all, this is Japan, a culinary heaven. However when the initial buzz wears off, you will realize: there is no such thing as cheap, delicious and healthy as home-cooked food. But how can you cook with a busy class schedule and social agenda? Here is how.

### 1. Bulk cook

You do not have to cook everything in advance, but it might be a good idea to make things which take time when you can. More specifically, dishes that require simmering and a lot of prepping should be made on the weekend. Some salads like potato salad or pumpkin salad, which keep for quite some time, can be made in advance and kept in the fridge for more than a week.

### 2. Freeze your food

A common problem with self-cooking is that you might cook too much and over-eat to avoid throwing away food. Moreover, cooking in small portions every time can be a challenge to measure ingredients. So instead of cooking less, you can actually cook more, enough for 2 or 3 meals, ration out the food in cling wrap or ziplock bags and freeze for later use. Especially with rice, you

can save time by cooking a lot, cling wrap and microwave each time you have a meal.

### 3. Dorm kitchen

A common problem with dorm kitchens is that they are small. If this is the case, then think of cooking in a small kitchen as "mastering efficiency." No matter what you cook, efficiency is first. Be ready to be quick and to move your things around to make room for others. Once you have got used to sharing a close space with fellow dorm mates, it could actually become a fun hangout spot!

### 4. Grocery shopping

The bigger supermarkets are not too far from the lodge, but it does take 20 minutes by foot, or 130 yen one-way by train. Some people might get discouraged by the walking or the train fare, but if you think about it, cooking by yourself and going to buy groceries by train is much cheaper than saving the train fare and eating out locally. Walking saves you even more money, but carrying heavy grocery bags back to the lodge by foot is quite tiring.

Popular supermarkets among PEAK students include Foodium, Ozeki and My Basket, all can be found in Shimokitazawa with another My Basket located right in Komaba. It is a good idea to shop around before you buy things because each place has special offers for different items but if you are running short on time, My Basket generally offers the cheapest price, although with limited variety compared to Foodium and Ozeki.

By and large, the most important thing to keep in mind about cooking at the lodge is, in actuality, learning to say no sometimes to other people who invite you to join them for a meal out. Don't be tempted by the easy way out and avoid cooking, because eventually, eating out will wear you down.

In short, being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not that special; it just means feeling attraction for someone of the same sex. The problem is that many people do not understand it, and as a result no rights are given to same-sex couples.

What can students of our University do to encourage LGBT acceptance in Japan? Dr. Noritaka Moriyama is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Advanced Social and International Studies, specializing in Queer (otherwise referred to as Sexual Diversity or LGBT) Studies at the University of Tokyo. To the question above-mentioned, he answered: "Todai must produce self-assured queer people and queer-friendly allies in order to change various fields of this world to more queer-friendly ones."

Openly discussing homosexuality with friends or teachers, attending conferences, gay prides, or reading about it in the Internet - there are many

ways to develop awareness about the inequalities that homosexuals face.

"I want to marry," said many gay, lesbian and bisexual students. By developing a new generation that understands homosexuality, we are giving hope to queer people.

Education may be the key for accelerating this process of understanding. "Some teachers realize the significance of providing correct information about queer topics for queer and non-queer students in schools, but most teachers do not recognize it and there is still plenty of room for improvement," noticed Dr. Moriyama. As a positive answer to this blooming realization, several students said that they found the younger generation generally more receptive to LGBT concerns.



The rainbow flag, symbol of the LGBT movement. Image by Benson Kua.

"I believe homosexuality needs to be taught in elementary schools and middle schools. If you are exposed about this since you are little, I feel the discomfort around this issue will decrease," remarked a lesbian student.

Finally, one last comment from a homosexual student of Todai to conclude this article: "Rather than being black or white, gender is like a spectrum. There is no clear delineation. I hope that the label LGBT will slowly diminish and instead, we will just be able to freely love anyone we want."

## A guide to productive naps

By Erika Nakayama

When feeling weary, school life can be a daily battle with sleepiness. Many students might have had the experience of nodding off during class and waking up to find worm-like scribbles sprawling all over their notes at least once. One of the major causes for this is lack of sleep during the night. In fact, according to a 2014 survey conducted by Aino University, 60% of its students sleep for 6 hours or less, and one-third of them sleep less than 5 hours, which is far below the recommended 8 hours. The most effective cure is obviously to get more sleep during the night, but that is actually not the only way. Napping is also a surprisingly effective way to get rid of sleepiness.

Napping has long been considered a symbol of laziness, and many people think it is for young children, the elderly, and the ill. However, it has been proven that it actually has numerous beneficial qualities. According to an article from the online magazine "Bit Rebels," napping does not only increase alertness and stamina, but also enhances performances and mental abilities, elevates the mood, increases physical health, and improves the quality of interactions. Moreover, it also improves the quality of sleep during the

night, enabling one to fall asleep quicker and to stay asleep throughout the night. Politicians such as Napoleon, Bill Clinton, and Margaret Thatcher, and geniuses such as Edison, Einstein, and Da Vinci are known to have had regular naps. Big companies such as Google and Nike acknowledge these benefits of napping, and they promote napping at work by having designated rooms or areas for napping.

The National Sleep Foundation (2014) mentions some downsides to napping. First of all, naps can cause a state called sleep inertia, especially when it lasts more than 20 minutes. Sleep inertia is a groggy and dizzy feeling that accompanies awakening from deep sleep. Most of the times, it lasts only up to 30 minutes, but it can be problematic if there is a need to take certain actions right after waking up. Secondly, although they do have beneficial effects as mentioned above, naps can have a negative effect on sleep at night if it is taken too long or at the wrong time in the day.

However, these problems can be avoided by choosing the appropriate length and timing of naps. There are mainly 5 types of naps, distin-

guished by their length of time. The shortest one is called the "nano-nap," which only lasts for 10 to 20 seconds. It is still a mystery whether this type of sleep is beneficial or not. A nap for 2 to 5 minutes can be classified as a "micro-nap," and it is said to be quite effective in getting rid of sleepiness. A 5 to 20-minute long "mini-nap" has some more beneficial points, also increasing alertness, stamina, motor learning, and motor performance. The best type for fully eliciting the benefits of napping is the 20 minute long "power nap." It has the combined benefits of both micro and mini-nap, and in addition, it also organizes inside one's mind and enhances long-term memory. A nap this short can also avoid sleep inertia. The last kind, a 30 to 90 minute long "lazy man's nap," goes through a complete cycle of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and NREM (Non-REM). This kind of nap is great for recovery of bones and muscles, but it is also likely to cause sleep inertia.

Knowing some tips can also maximize the benefit of naps. Jennifer Soong's article in "Web MD" and the National Sleep Foundation's website offers some advice. The best timing to have a nap is between 1 and 3 in the afternoon. If it is too later than this, nighttime sleep might be affected, and if it is earlier than this, the body may simply not be ready for more sleep. Securing a comfortable environment to sleep is also essential. It is best to choose quiet places as napping places and to avoid having light in the face by covering the head with a jacket, hat, or other items. Consuming caffeine will make it easier to tune in to whatever activity you have to do right after the nap.

School life is the last time when all the time one has is reserved just for oneself. One way to make it exciting as possible is to be fully alert when enjoying student life. All it takes is a few minutes in a quiet place... What are you waiting for?



Catching some z's before (NOT during) class. By Pink Sherbet Photography | Flickr.

## Kamakura: Experiencing Japan through its many treasures

By Eve Bentley

Seeking to escape from the constant bustle and vivacity of Tokyo, you can utilise the endless convenience of the Japan's vast train network and make occasional getaways to some of the most beautiful historical and natural heritage sites this country has to offer.

On a bright and unusually warm November Sunday, the eight PEAK students made the trek to this magnificent site. Quietly serene, Kamakura offers not only the grandeur of the Buddha, but a peaceful and comfortable spot to enjoy a day, or just an afternoon. Embracing the coast of Kanagawa prefecture in all its glory, one of our first year PEAK students quickly managed to bury his bare toes in the sand whilst the rest of us admired the sea, sky and warmth. Along our walk to the Great Buddha, we came across a multitude of hidden treasures, in the form of both abandoned and maintained miniature temples and a fusion of modern and traditional Japanese architecture.

Nestled amongst the autumn colours only an

hour away from Tokyo, and of course accompanied by a swath of milling tourists with camera in hand, lies the Kamakura Daibutsu. Known in English as the Great Buddha of Kamakura (Kamakura Daibutsu), this magnificent Buddha is a bronze statue of the Amida Buddha, which stands on the grounds of Kotokuin Temple. With a height of 13.35 meters, it is the second tallest bronze Buddha statue in Japan, surpassed only by the statue in Nara's Todaiji Temple.

After taking a sufficient amount of photographs, we took a short walk from the Great Buddha itself, to Hasedara Temple. Famous for its statue of Kannon, or the goddess of mercy, this temple houses the 9.18-metre tall gilded wooden figure, with its eleven heads. Each representing a characteristic of the goddess, this statue is mesmerising to say the least. Built along the slope of a hill, the Hasedara temple offers unparalleled views across the coast of Kanagawa, and over Kamakura itself. With a number of other smaller temples along and up the hill, as well as a cave

at the bottom, this temple was superb under the canopy of changing autumn leaves. Although there was a flurry of visiting tourists, I appreciated the way the visiting Japanese regarded these historical structures, and the consideration they maintained for their long and varied history. This consideration is not only the respect with which they treat these sites, but the conscientious nature in which they travel long distances to visit, admire and pay homage to their historical and spiritual importance.

Priding itself on this fusion of the old meets new, Kamakura offers, what I believe to be a truly authentic contemporary Japanese experience. The ability of the Japanese to maintain their most famous temples, statues and historical flashpoints indicates a sense of importance in history that I find unparalleled elsewhere. Not only was I able to enjoy my first plate of cold *udon* noodles with sesame in Kamakura, but also I was able to experience awe in the presence of these wonderfully conserved sites.



1 The view from a walk along the Hasedara temple site. Photo by author.

2 Eight people, eight countries. Photo by Xuan Truong Trinh.

3 The great Kamakura Buddha. Photo by Xuan Truong Trinh.

# A day in Kichijoji

By Truong Cong Yen Nhu



1 A street sign in Inokashira Park. Photo by AIKOM exchange student Trang Nguyen. 2 An artist focusing on his work. Photo by Trang Nguyen. 3 A side of Ghibli museum. Photo by Trang Nguyen.

To access the Komaba campus of the University of Tokyo, the best way is to take the Inokashira Line and get off at the Komabatodaimae station. This is a piece of basic information that every Todai student knows. But have you ever wondered about the line that you may perhaps be using everyday, and where it leads to?

If a Todai student is asked where the line leads to, they would most definitely be able to answer 'Kichijoji.' However, how many of them have been to Kichijoji, and what can we find there? I have been asking myself that question, but it was not until last Sunday that I had a chance to go there. Follow me for a day in Kichijoji!

**10:00** After 30 minutes from the Komaba campus, I finally arrived at Kichijoji. Near the station, there is a long, covered shopping arcade called 'Sunroad,' with many shops ranging from small boutiques to department stores. Although Kichijoji is not as big and modern as Shibuya, you can still find everything you want in this arcade: clothes, shoes, grocery, electric merchandise. People living nearby seem to frequent the area on Sunday morning - the road was quite crowded. To get ready for the adventure, hot, fresh croissants are readily available from the many bakeries around the station.

**11:30** One and a half hours is quite enough to explore every corner of the arcade; then head straight to Inokashira Park. To get from Kichijoji Station to Inokashira Park, you will have to pass an alley with some outside cafe shops along the

mosaic pavement, which can make people feel as if they are lost in a European town. In particular, this road is full of nice bohemian-styled shops, but the prices are not as pretty - almost everything is fairly pricey. However, if you want to change your usual style to a bohemian one, this place is worth visiting.

**12:00** Inokashira park is not so far away from Kichijoji station, but if you are a person who loves wandering, you may have to spend a bit more time getting there. Autumn exists everywhere in the park- trees bring an atmosphere of serenity and romance to the park with their yellow and red leaves. In the middle of the park exists a big lake - the Inokashira lake. There is a myth that if a couple rows a boat there, they will break up. Perhaps because of this myth, there were only families rowing boats, as far as one can tell. However, at the lakeside, there were also some couples sitting around, eating ice-cream and chatting. Some artists were trying to capture an autumn moment with their pencil. Every being is a small detail that makes for a peaceful and charming picture.

**13:00** After going around the park, maybe stopping at a roadside eatery would be an good idea . I decided to buy grilled *mochi* (rice cake) from a small food shop near the lake and have a picnic lunch. In such a cool weather, it is not a bad idea to have lunch outdoor while enjoying the peaceful atmosphere and watching leaves getting blown by some light wind.

**13:30** If you are a fan of Japanese anime, the next destination is a place you should definitely visit while in this area. It is the Ghibli Museum, headed by director Hayao Miyazaki, with the purpose to give visitors an experience "that makes you feel more enriched when you leave than when you entered." There is a very large Totoro figure standing at the front of the building with the sign 'Ghibli Museum, Mitaka.' In the museum, you can witness the process of how drawings on paper become animated on a roll of film. However, the ticket, which specifies the appointed date of the reservation, needs to be purchased in advance. Your ticket will be exchanged into a 'Film ticket' - this is a cardboard frame that contains three frames of a 35mm film from an actual Studio Ghibli Movie theatrical print. Depending on your luck, you may get the frames of your favourite film.

**16:00** It will take you around two to three hours to see the exhibit, depending on how big a fan you are. If you feel tired, you may want to visit Straw Hat - a pretty cafe next to the museum. The cafe is decorated in the same style as the museum. But this cafe is quite crowded, so if you want to spend the rest of the day relaxing in music and your favorite book, there are also many eateries around Mitaka station for you to choose from.

Kichijoji offered many beautiful scenery and interesting places. I will definitely come back. Are you ready to go to Komaba-todaimae station and get on the next train to Kichijoji?

## Explore our neighbor Shinsen

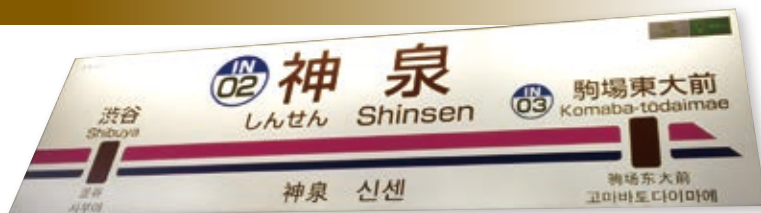
By Ririka Takahashi

If you are a Todai student, you have probably taken the Keio Inokashira Line to Shibuya before. Shinsen, our dear old neighbor, is a calm and peaceful residential area located between Komaba and Shibuya. Shinsen may not stand out much compared to other stations on the Inokashira Line such as Shibuya, Shimokitazawa and Kichijoji. Nonetheless, being just next to the University of Tokyo's Komaba campus, it is a convenient spot for Todai students to hang out around. This article will introduce various places in Shinsen, based on recommendations by various Todai students.

If you are looking for something to eat, there are many choices to choose from. If you feel like having ramen, *Men no Bou Toride* (麵の坊砦) is what you are looking for. Here, you can choose the preferred thickness and hardness of your noodles. You are also allowed additional toppings, such as boiled eggs, seaweed, and bean sprouts to create your very own ramen bowl. The *tonkotsu* soup mixes very well with the noodles. Another restaurant that is well-known amongst Todai students is the *Ryuseisaikan* (龍盛菜館). About four minutes from the station, this Chinese restaurant is run by chefs from China. It is quite a big restaurant and it can fit 130 customers at once. For that reason, this Chinese restaurant is frequented by clubs and circles after their practices

and events. What is outstanding about this restaurant, however, is the volume of each meal served. Both restaurants are relatively affordable - having 1000 yen would be enough to make yourself full and satisfied.

If you are looking for some art, the Shoto Museum of Art (松濤美術館) is the place for you. The Shoto Museum of Art is owned and managed by Shibuya Ward. Due to this, the entrance fee is relatively cheap, costing only 300 yen for adults. The substantial building of the museum



Shinsen station is sandwiched between Komaba-todaimae and Shibuya. Photo by author.



Todai students enjoying their Chinese dish at Ryuseisaikan, in Shinsen. Photo by author.

is designed by a Japanese architect Seiichi Hirai, and has just reopened after renovation in January 2014. The exhibition at the Shoto Museum of Art changes periodically. Currently exhibits include paintings and block-prints of Michizane Sugawara, an ancient, deified spiritual figure who was known as the god of academics. After this exhibition, in February 2015, will be an exhibition of artworks from public submissions by the residents, workers, and students of the Shibuya ward. This special exhibition is accompanied by an exhibition of artworks by a French oil painter Robert Coutelas. These exhibitions on February is being displayed free of charge. Therefore, even though you may not usually be interested in art, dropping by an art museum in the neighborhood might be a nice and refreshing way to spend your free time.

Shinsen has many interesting places of which many people, even Todai students, are unaware. When you find some spare time at Komaba, why not take a walk to Shinsen? A new discovery awaits next door.

## A New Year's Eve with "Kohaku"

By Erika Nakayama

"What do Japanese people typically do on New Year's Eve?" What would come to your mind if you were asked this question? Some might say cleaning the house thoroughly. Some might think of visiting temples to wash off the bad things that happened during the year. Others might mention eating Soba and wish for longevity. My answer, however, would be *Kohaku-Utagassen* (Often called just *Kohaku*).

*Kohaku-Utagassen*, or *Kohaku* meaning the celebratory colors used in Japan, "red and white," and *Utagassen* meaning "song battle," is an annual musical event televised by NHK, the public broadcasting network in Japan, on New Year's Eve. Each year, singers with the hit songs from that year compete in two teams which each consist of approximately 25 singers or groups. Red is for women and white for men. It started in 1951 and is celebrating its 65th anniversary this year.

In the show, which goes on for 4.5 hours, singers with songs from all genres, from the traditional

folksong, *Enka*, to modern Japanese pop music, each come out on stage and sing their song of the year. It also includes special sections that have backstage interviews and features songs connected to a certain theme such as a popular drama or movie. The winning team is decided by vote, which is done not only by 10 "people of the year" assigned as judges by NHK, but also by those who are invited to the concert hall where the program is recorded and those who are watching the program through TV, radio, and smartphones.

Along with the "Record Awards", which is also a music TV program broadcasted on New Year's Eve, *Kohaku* has long been watched by the majority of the Japanese population, more than 80 percent in the best of times in its long history, according to the survey conducted by Video Research Ltd. *Kohaku* was considered a national event, and was almost always at the center of the holiday family reunion, bringing families together around the TV and giving them a chance to spend time together. Yuji Yasui, a critic, states,

"from 1951 to the end of 1980s, the 'normal' and the most fun way to spend New Year's Eve for most Japanese was to get together with family members and watch *Kohaku*," describing the popularity of *Kohaku* in its golden age. (2012, my translation)

But now, also according to Video Research Ltd. (2013), less than half of the population watch *Kohaku*. Although the program ratings are over 40% and are still higher than regular TV programs which usually record 10-20%, other New-year's-eve programs are beginning to exceed *Kohaku*'s ratings.

This reflects the process in which the preference of Japanese people has become diversified. When *Kohaku* was first broadcasted and went through its golden age, a limited selection of music or fashion were likely to be exposed to the public repetitively. Therefore, as evident in the major hit of Hibari Misora in the 1960s and of idol singers such as Seiko Matsuda in the 1980s, once something became popular, most of the



## Tips for the nocturnal tourists in Tokyo

By Cezar Visan

Tokyo is by far the most iconic city of Japan. Given its population of approximately 13 million people, which is equal to an average-sized European country, Tokyo is a city for everyone. No matter what you are looking for in a city to visit, or to live in, it certainly suits everyone. Just by walking around Shibuya, which has been called the “Times Square of Tokyo,” you can find any kind of restaurant, be it Italian, Indian, American, Chinese, as well as plenty of shops, cafes, bars, and cinemas. Here are some pieces of advice particularly to the nocturnal travelers.

In Japan, shops close down comparatively later than most of the countries around the globe, which makes it very convenient for whoever wants to spend the whole day shopping. Moreover, if you want to buy groceries, you can find convenience stores at almost every corner; and they are open 24/7.

But there is another side of the coin as well. Tokyo’s pace stumbles at night, as most of the trains stop between 1am and 5am, hindering lots of people, especially tourists, from exploring the city outside the area of their accommodation beyond a certain time. Taxis are expensive in Japan, and they are rarely a desirable option for a low budget traveler. As a student in Tokyo, I often find myself rushing to catch the last train back home. Usually, the last ride of the night is crammed with youngsters who have been out socializing, as well as typical Japanese employees (*kaishain*) on their way home after a typical working day.

Another issue that is often not taken seriously by people coming to Tokyo is the ATMs. If you

run out of cash and want to withdraw money at any time after 8PM, the chances of finding an open ATM are rather low. Even if this measure makes an ATM no different from a bank cashier who needs to rest, in Japan it is nothing but normal. If you are a tourist, you should always carry cash with you, as you might have trouble with electronic payment if your credit card is issued overseas. Moreover, as electronic payment is not as popular in Japan as it is in some European countries, you might find yourself unable to pay by credit card in, for instance, a restaurant.

In conclusion, paying some attention to less obvious, often undermined aspects can avoid some unpleasant moments while holidaying in Tokyo. I can assure you that it is not very comfortable to find out that you are unable to return back home after the trains stopped, while your accommodation is 20 kilometers away. On top of that, when you realize no ATM is open, and you do not have enough money to afford a taxi.



Just make sure you make it here on time! Photo by author.



Typical service hours for an ATM. Photo by author.

population followed that trend. However, after more than 60 years since *Kohaku* started, people have more options, and consequently, people’s interest have become diverse. A survey of people’s preferences, conducted by NHK (2007, my translation), shows that recently, “it is more unlikely that there is ‘something everybody likes the same’ or ‘something nationally popular’ appears.” Although fashion still come and go, there is no longer a dominant trend in society. *Kohaku*, along with the diversification of the selection of TV channels, also ceased to be the “only” thing people watched and people started to substitute it with other programs.

But, for me, New Year’s Eve is not complete without *Kohaku*. *Kohaku* remains a precious opportunity to look back on the passing year through the songs that represents it. Furthermore, it is one of our family occasions just like celebrating Christmas or Thanksgiving. We spend our time together sitting around the TV and have happy chats. I am already looking forward to this day, for this year will be no exception.



A family gathered around the TV to watch Kohaku. Drawing by author.

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## Snow Country

By Isshin Inada

“The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.”

This is the opening sentence of *Yukiguni*, a novel written by one of Japan’s renowned author, Kawabata Yasunari. The protagonist of the story travels from the busy city of Tokyo to a tranquil town of Yuzawa. He rides the bullet train, and as it comes out to the other side of a long tunnel, he observes an enthralling change in scenery. The landscape replete with a multitude of skyscrapers and busy streets were no longer present but was replaced in lieu with smaller single-unit houses and spacious yet uncrowded avenues. By and large, however, what clearly differentiated the two was that everything had become coated in white snow. He had finally arrived to Yuzawa.

Akin to the protagonist, I also rode the bullet train from Tokyo to Yuzawa. Still seven o’clock in the early morning, I was awoken by a sudden chill. As I slowly opened my eyes, I witnessed the very same serene and picturesque scenery. After an hour train ride, I had finally arrived at Gala, a small town located in the heart of Yuzawa. Yuzawa, being one the closest place from Tokyo that snows, the purpose of my trip was to snowboard. After I arrived at the platform, I made my way to the service counter. It was conveniently placed only a few minutes away from the train station. Yet, later I found that was not surprising since Gala is actually run by Japan Railways and was initially founded to attract Japanese tourists.

Having changed into our skateboarding wear, we took the gondola and slowly ascended the mountains. With the sun already high above us, the weather was fine and clear. Although it was not snowing, the surroundings covered in snow still evoked an ambiance of winter. As the gondola continued to ascend, we were presented with another breathtaking scenery of the vast

natural landscapes as well as the petite town of Yuzawa. Having lived in Tokyo for a few months, I could see that life here was utterly different. The rushing of people, the honking of cars and the noise of bustling streets - commonplace in the populous city of Tokyo could not be seen here. As cliché as this sounds, being in Yuzawa felt like I was in a new country altogether. With all this aweing thoughts flooding into my mind, I did not even realize that the temperature was a chilly zero degrees.

As we reached the top of the snow mountain, we rode a smaller lift to reach the peak. It was my third time snowboarding, but the first time in almost a year. It was difficult to maintain balance as well as the speed. As a result, I tripped numerous times and even managed to ram straight into soft snow. My muscle ached and it was a constant loop of standing up only to trip back down again. Yet despite this experience being a physically tiring one, I still had an exhilarating time. This was an activity that was out of my everyday routine.

During the lunch break, we went to one of the two cafeterias. The price of each lunch menu was expensive, yet this is understandable as this



The sun rising as we slowly ascend the snowy mountain. Photo by author.

cafeteria is only open during winter, and therefore has to make its sales in a short period of time. There are also a few crepes shops that one can enjoy during a break. Since Gala closed at five o’clock sharp, we only had a few more hours to go. Thus after having eaten, we quickly made our way back to the ski lifts and continued with our activities.

At five o’clock, we took the gondola back down. We marked the end of the long day by taking a traditional Japanese bath, the onsen. It was what my exhausted and sore body yearned for after the countless times of falling to the ground. I am relieved to know that I can come back here anytime to escape the fast-paced life in Tokyo within just a few hours. I hope to be back in the near future.

## New Year’s Eve in Japan

By Cezar Visan



The unlucky Omikuji are being tied down in places like this. By Spiegel | Flickr.

December is known as a month of celebration. After the symbolic commemoration of Christmas, one of the most important Christian celebrations, New Year hastily approaches. In Japan, New Year’s Day represents the most important holiday, and many people are actively involved in it.

Yokohama is a symbolic place for celebration,

and is an iconic image on international media under the “New Year in Japan” headline. Being there, I could see the large Ferris wheel transformed in a massive countdown clock minutes before the dawn of the New Year. After the strike of midnight, a fireworks show starts, and it is often broadcasted worldwide.

Some Japanese people go to shrines to celebrate *Hatsumode* (the first shrine visit of the New Year), and it is a great chance for tourists to experience the authentic Japanese traditions. At the shrine, people buy *omikuji* (oracles) that would predict their life in the new year in various aspects such as business and love. If the *omikuji* predicts bad luck, it is tied on a tree within the shrine area, in the hope that its predictions does not come true. Most people visit temples during the first 3 days of the New Year to pray for their well being; for this reason, each year, the Meiji

Shrine in Tokyo attracts over three million visitors during the first week of January.

There is also a special meal that is served only during the New Year occasion. *Osechi* consists of various traditional dishes that are prepared at Japanese homes and packed together in beautiful lacquer boxes, called *jubako*. Interestingly enough, each dish represents a symbol of hope for the upcoming year. For example, black soybeans represent good health, herring roe stands for fertility, while the shrimps are a symbol of longevity and regeneration.

While there is a trend of westernization in the celebration of winter holidays in Japan, the local culture still exists. The large number of traditions during this time make the Japanese New Year a special and unique experience that must not be missed. For my first winter vacation in Japan, being immersed in the local culture has been one of the most interesting experiences I have lived.

# EXPLORING JAPAN

## Living in Tokyo with a (temporary) handicap

By Chiwu I. Kim

Going to college is a frightening experience for many, especially for people who are going to one in a foreign country. In addition to living alone, there are so many obstacles that we must face as international students. When I arrived at Komaba, I braced myself for what I thought would be an intense struggle to survive. But I was surprised at how smoothly things went; indeed, there were a few hiccups in my adjustment to this exotic place known as Tokyo (who would have thought that my first day of classes would be met with a major typhoon?), but I was prepared for anything. I grew to adapt to the new and fascinating things that both the University of Tokyo and Tokyo itself threw at me; in fact, I loved being thrown around and being challenged on a daily basis.

And then, I crushed my foot.

It was during my first Physical Education class, and we were playing Frisbee, of all things to get injured in. At the time of the injury, despite the agonizing pain that ran through my body I found myself being more worried about how to get treatment in Japan than my foot. After all, I barely knew my way around the area; how was I supposed to find a hospital, fill out the paperwork, and most importantly, understand what the doctor was explaining to me? These questions circled around my head and filled me with anxiety as my friend carried me like a wounded soldier to the Komaba medical center.

The Komaba medical center surprised me. As I approached it I braced myself for the endless amount of confusion and paperwork that I assumed would follow with the arrival of an international student. Contrary to my fears, the Komaba medical center was well-equipped and ready for such a situation. The medical staff quickly grasped my situation and immediately went into action, no questions asked. The staff was not only used to dealing with foreign students, but I was also treated with the same care given to domestic students, despite the language barrier between me and the medical staff. Ironically, my moment of peril was also a moment of awe as I came to the realization that I attended what can be called a truly “global” university, in which students from all over the world are not just welcomed but expected and fully accommodated for.

The people at the medical center sent me to a clinic in Shindaida to have my X-rays taken and to see if I had broken any of my bones. The trek to the clinic was filled with drama as I struggled to use crutches for the first time and stumbled all over the sidewalk.

And then the clinic was closed. It was a Thursday. As someone who comes from the United States, having a facility closed on any day of the week other than a Sunday was simply unthinkable. Yet there the “closed” sign was, defying what I perceived as common sense for my entire life. It was at this point in time when it struck me that I was living in a place that did not just have a different flag or a different language. Japan functioned with a different set of rules, and it was me who was the outsider, not the other way around. What little confidence I had built up in the past few weeks prior to the injury about living in Japan quickly vanished.

Yet over time I realized going through such a crisis makes one prepared for the next, and that is one aspect of the beauty of going somewhere

abroad for college. Going abroad allows you to face odds that you could never have imagined before, and overcoming them will give you a sense of confidence that cannot be obtained in any other way.

Even if there are times when you struggle, you can be carried on the shoulders of people from all over the globe. I can personally say that it was the support of my friends that helped me trudge through my daily life with my injury. Living together in a foreign country presents a challenge, yet it simultaneously accelerates the strengthening of the bonds between your classmates through the trials you endure together and the environment which forces you to rely on others. Experiencing life in Tokyo with a (temporary) handicap was definitely on my top ten list of “situations to avoid,” but actually going through that challenge gave me the experience and the confidence to brace for the next one.

So go ahead; take the leap. There will be people below to catch you.

*Walking through the main gate with a pair of crutches was no easy task. Photo by Tran Ngoc Lam Vy.*



## More than meets the eye

By Eve Bentley



PEAK class of 2018. Photo by Kamiyu Hijikata.

We all like to think that we are worldly, that we have experiences others can not comprehend, that we are the exception to the rule of ignorance, but perhaps the best aspect of the PEAK program is that it not only illuminates the true gaps in our understanding but also ultimately builds us from our often limited foundations of knowledge and experience upwards to truly global individuals.

I always used to believe that I could describe the countries in the world. I mean: I knew where they were geographically and could probably describe them in a few words. That equates to knowledge right? It honestly was not until my move across hemispheres to this university, and to a whole new environment, that I realised just how narrow my scope of vision was. As individuals all from different countries, cultures and languages, the

way we perceive each other is noticeably limited to the so-called 'national icons' that forms the countries, and the cultures within them.

When international students discover I am from Australia, they most often jump to ask whether kangaroos live in my backyard and why our wildlife is so dangerous. Of course, I happily answer their questions, but internally I think, "Is this really all people know of Australia?"

I am overcome by a sense of disappointment that this is all they know about the beautiful, rich country that I am so proud to call home. However, after a few weeks of constantly meeting new people and being asked the same questions, I realised that it is not just me, but everyone has these limited ideas of what a country really is, especially when they have not had the opportunity to visit.

I discovered I was exactly the same when I first met Amaël and Manon, who are first-year PEAK students from France. Upon meeting them, my thoughts immediately jump to Paris, the Eiffel Tower, baguettes and berets.... But for them, France is so, so much more than this. Similarly, my understanding of my own close friends completely revolved around my meagre understanding of their most iconic foods. I began to ask myself why we initially identify them more by their country's somewhat generic identity than by their own experiences, personality and ideas.

Each one of us perceives our own home nations differently, and that is what I think makes the most beautiful and real impression on our peers. Of course, it is easy to be idealistic, and think we can all pursue a life where we will not see people as simply countries, and we will not initially identify them by their accent or cultural background. Yet, I find it difficult actually implementing and endeavouring to think beyond the stereotypes on a day to day basis when meeting new international students.

I think that at the end of the day, we have to acknowledge that the country or countries that an individual hails from will always hold some weight in our initial impressions of them. Perhaps in life, it is instead our task to get to know the person behind the country and behind the stereotype.

## A Guide for Vegetarians in Tokyo

By Truong Cong Yen Nhu

Tokyo is known as a multicultural city, with many people with different nationalities and religions. Since Japan is famous for tofu, and Buddhism is one of the two main religions here, this country may seem to be vegetarian-friendly to most. Yet, when you tell a Japanese person that you are a vegetarian, their first question will be, "So what do you eat?" Although around 40% of Japanese people consider themselves Buddhists, most of them go to temples less than twice a year and – different from Buddhists in other countries – do not follow a vegetarian diet. Vegetarianism is not a widespread or well understood concept in Japan. Despite the fact that Tokyo is a paradise of food, it is quite difficult to find a real vegetarian restaurant (which does not use meat or fish broth in their dishes). In other Buddhist countries such as Vietnam and Thailand, regular restaurants will more often than not serve some vegetarian dishes, but this is not the case in Japan. Now, imagine yourself a vegetarian, deciding to live in Tokyo despite the difficulties in finding vegetarian restaurants. It is difficult, but not impossible. Here are several ways for vegetarians to survive in Tokyo.

The easiest way is, arguably, to cook yourself. Although Japan is not a paradise for vegetarian cuisine, it is the paradise for vegetarian ingredients. With various kinds of vegetables, beans, seaweed and tofu, you can create your own healthy daily meal. Every supermarket has these kinds of products. Moreover, in Tokyo, there are many weekly or monthly farmers market where you can buy fresh, good quality and fairly cheap vegetables directly from farmers. By chance, I have found this blog [japanfarmersmarkets.com](http://japanfarmersmarkets.com), with up to date info on these events. There are quite a few websites on which you can look for vegetarian recipes such as <http://www.vegetariantimes.com/recipe/> or <http://www.godairyfree.org/dairy-free-recipes>. Also, you can add variety to your diet with bread. At both convenience stores and bakeries, you can easily find a wide range of bread with different fillings and flavours. For vegans, buying dairy-free bread may pose as a challenge, though it is not entirely impossible. However, to be sure about what you eat, read the ingredient label carefully or clarify with the salesmen.



A vegetarian curry set in Nataraj. All photos by author.

What about when you want to eat out with friends? First, it is necessary to learn some key survival words in Japanese! 'Watashi wa begetarian desu' for 'I'm a vegetarian', 'Watashi wa o-niku to sakana ga taberaremasen' for 'I don't eat meat and fish', 'Niku' / 'bekon' / 'toriniku' / 'sakana' / 'ebi' for 'meat' / 'bacon' / 'chicken' / 'fish' / 'shrimp'.

If you want to eat vegetarian with other non-vegetarian friends, Italian cuisine may be a good option. It is easier to order vegetarian food such as non-animal -product salad, pasta or pizza

## France: Does its Japanese perception match the reality?

By Amaël Cognacq

Since I arrived to Tokyo in September I noticed a lot of references to my country. From Lever Son Verre, the French restaurant at the Komaba campus to Tokyo Tower that looks like the Eiffel Tower, not to mention French language on mugs, notebooks, and other goods at 100-yen shops, lots of things made me wonder about the perception of France in Japan.

Then I also started thinking whether I noticed all those French things because I am French or because they have a dominant presence? After all, there is also an Italian restaurant on campus, and the colors of Tokyo Tower are those of Japan, not France. To get to the bottom of this, I asked University of Tokyo students several questions about how they see my country. To the question "Do you think Japan is influenced by French culture?", almost all of them answered yes.

That being said, it needs to be nuanced by other answers I got from the interviews. Indeed, to the question "Do you think French culture is better-liked than other Western cultures in Japan?" the majority of the answers was "Yes, but not that much more than the others." Therefore, it is important to note that other European cultures such as German, British, Spanish or Italian cultures are also well-known and appreciated in Japan.

Then the next question that entered my mind was if there were a "Western interest," that mixes the Western European cultures together in the eyes of the Japanese, or if it was more of a distinct interest for each culture. According to Yuzo Hoshino, a graduate student of the University of Tokyo going to study in Italy, "We [Japanese

people] have a common understanding of some differences of Western Europe cultures and people, like we consider French people romantic or Italian men more like play boys. However, we do not make clear distinctions between all of these cultures like we would do, for example, between Chinese and Taiwanese cultures."

I also asked another question to the students: "What is your idea of French people?". Many of those asked used the same adjective to describe the French: 「おしゃれ (oshare)」 - fashionable. Another adjective often mentioned was proud. Interestingly, both Japanese students who have and have not actually been to France used these two adjectives. It is hard to decide whether those appellations are true or not as it does not only depend on French attitude – if there is any – but also on the perception of it by the Japanese people.

However, one thing is for sure: just as the tip of an iceberg represent only a minuscule part of the whole, first ideas about France do not offer a panoramic vision of the country.

Because of that, some Japanese tourists are really surprised when they visit Paris for the first time. The gap between their vision of the city and the reality, their inability to speak with French people, and the differences in manners cause them to sometimes undergo a sort of disillusion. An example of this could be the security. While in Japan pickpockets are not that common, this kind of misfortune can happen from time to time



The Eiffel tower (on the right, ©Julie Anne Workman) and its younger sibling, Tokyo Tower (on the left, ©東京太郎)

in Paris and experiencing it can be a very difficult moment. In order to make Japanese people aware of that fact, security advice are given in their language in all the Paris subways.

A lot of other things could be said about the way Japanese people seem to perceive France. However, at the end, I think the best way to have an opinion about something is to experience it by oneself. Therefore, please, come and visit France! Go to Paris, but also to other wonderful cities like Bordeaux, Aix-en-Provence or Lyon, or in the countryside such as the Pays Basque or Normandy. Each region is for sure rich of discoveries as it has its own particularity be it tradition, architecture, or food. Being a French student living in Japan, I believe there is a mutual and vivid curiosity between Japanese and French cultures. Having seen it from the two sides, I now hope more people will, like me, cross the bridge and taste the other country's culture from the inside.



A vegetable stand UNU farmers' market



Natural house, an organic products supermarket.



Nuts and cereal are also a good choice for vegetarians.

compared to other cuisines. In any case, my advice is to check the restaurant's website or call them beforehand to confirm about your case. Although it seems to be a nuisance, being careful is never excessive: you will feel even more frustrated when you go into a restaurant, feeling starving and then discover that there is nothing for you to eat!

Another idea is going to a café or an ice cream shop and of course, with this choice, everything you can choose is sweet. Do not worry about the lack of variety, for the world of sweets in Tokyo is

truly amazing! Tokyo chefs have created all kinds of sweets you can imagine in this entire world: parfaits, puddings, crepes, and hundreds of ice cream flavors, not to mention seasonal sweets and more.

If you would like to introduce the healthiness and enjoyment of true vegetarian cuisine to your friends, these websites may be of help: <http://vegetariantokyo.com/tag/ginza/> or <http://www.vegguide.org/region/37>. I have tried a restaurant called Nataraj in Ginza after consulting the veg-guide site. It is quite expensive but the food is

worth its price. This restaurant has a menu for vegetarian, a menu for vegan and a menu with non-garlic and non-onion dishes. Regardless of your dietary requirements, I believe that you will be able to find a meal that satisfies you at this restaurant.

In conclusion, being a vegetarian in Tokyo, and Japan in general, may require you to put a lot of effort into maintaining your way of life. Regardless, in doing so, go forth and enjoy the wonderful food that Japan has to offer. Good luck with your vegetarian cuisine journey!

## Corporate visit part 1: Japanese work environment through the eyes of an international student

### By Truong Cong Yen Nhu

It is not common for a freshman to have a chance to experience a work environment in a big company. Last month, I had that precious opportunity to visit Fuji Heavy Industries, Ltd. (FHI), which is well-known for their automobile brand "Subaru." Through the visit, I was not only able to witness a typical Japanese office, but also learnt a lot about the current employment situation in Japan. The company's building, the Ebisu Subaru Building, which is a 5-minutes' walk from Ebisu station, is located in Shibuya Ward. The lower floors are used as Subaru car showrooms and the office area is from the 7th floor. Before getting into the office area, guests are required to fill their name in a registration form and are given a visitor name tag.

Each floor belongs to one or two different departments. Prior to the visit, I imagined that workspace in Japanese companies was closed and divided into separated compartments where everyone worked in his or her own private space. On the contrary, in FHI, it is quite a comfortable and open office space with new and modern facilities. Every staff member seemed to be proud of this new building. The company had just moved from the previous building in Shinjuku to this new one last September. Tables are laid

next to each other, without any partition so that people can easily have discussions. Some FHI members often joke that this is a solution for the boss to prevent employees from doing their own personal work. Observing the difference types of chairs used by managers as opposed to that of other employers, it is easy to recognize that hierarchy has an important role in Japanese society.

On each floor there is a coffee corner, where vending machines are located for a quick break. However, what FHI members are most proud of is the meeting corner, where small meetings are held. The way in which the furniture in this corner is designed potentially leads newcomers to feel confused about whether they are still in an office building or whether they have mistakenly wandered into a family restaurant. The only defining factor that resolves the confusion is the computer screens at the end of each table. For that reason, this place is also affectionately called 'the family meeting place' of the Subaru family. Also, different from the stereotype of aloof Japanese salaryman, FHI employees are very friendly, not only with guests but also with each other. The way they tenderly call their company 'a family' makes everyone seem to become a real family

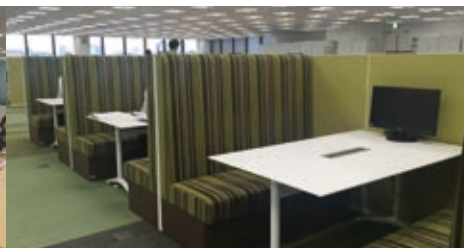
member. It is clear that the physical work environment can have a large impact on the working attitude of employees.

The company tour ended at the highest place of the building: Skyteria, the cafeteria on the 12th floor. With a capacity of 300 seats, this is the place where FHI staff members often come for lunch or a snack. There are various kinds of food and most of them are fairly affordable. Furthermore, this cafeteria also has an outdoor space, where people can enjoy their meal under the bright sunshine. In good weather, Tokyo Tower can be seen from this place.

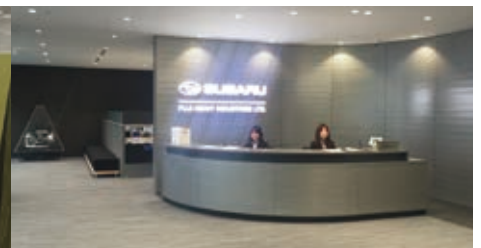
Ending up at a major company like this is considered a feat for many university students. Job hunting is an annual activity of third-year students in Japanese universities, which often starts from January. Almost every student has to prepare carefully for this major event, since it is considered to have a huge effect on his or her future. The competition is quite stiff; each student typically sends up to a hundred or more applications, goes to dozens of presentations and attends interviews with up to 30 other candidates before landing themselves a job.



Work space in a typical Japanese company. All photos by author.



"Family meeting" corner.



Reception, before getting into the office area.

## Corporate visit part 2: Japanese work environment through the eyes of an employee

### By Truong Cong Yen Nhu

I had a chance to interview Ms. Taguchi Yoko from the Human Resources Department at Fuji Heavy Industries, Ltd. It was a frank discussion on Japan's employment situation and labor conditions with a particular focus on jobhunting in Japan.

**Author (YN):** Good afternoon, thank you for spending time with me today.

**Ms. Taguchi Yoko (TY):** Nice to meet you.

**YN:** From 2014, FHI began to award some scholarships to students at the University of Tokyo. Is it a way to contribute to society? Why did you choose to contribute in this way?

**TY:** Yes, it is. First of all, we wanted to build a relationship with foreign students and make it stronger in order to know what they are interested in and what kind of thoughts they have regarding their future potentials. We haven't had a chance to get to know foreign students like you, so we are very happy to get to know you.

In addition, as our business grows, our responsibilities also become heavier because we have higher expectations from customers and the community. This practice also has multiple ef-

fects. One goal is to contribute to the society, another one is to match our policies, which is enhancing global aspects in FHI. This is the reason why we chose to award scholarships to international students, who are global talents and may bring new perspectives on to Japan.

**YN:** What is your opinion about the work environment in Japan? I understand one of the reasons why Japan has a relatively high suicide rate in the world is because of pressure at work. Does FHI have any solution to deal with this problem?

**TY:** I do not know about other companies, but from my experience at FHI, in the case of our company, it is reasonable. There are sources of pressure, but they are forms of positive pressure that motivate us to improve ourselves and maximize our potential. As for solutions to deal with this issue, yes we do. FHI has many policies to promote a good work environment for our

employees. For example, every Wednesday and Friday, we require employees to leave the office right after working hour and spend time relaxing with family or friends. We also have "Flex time policy," which means that employees can come a little late or leave early due to their circumstances. Everyone has 20 days of paid holiday annually, and they can also save it for the next year, if they wish. Furthermore, abiding by Japan's law, there is an industrial physician in our office, to help our employees with their physical as well as mental health issues. We want to facilitate our workers with the best condition so that they can feel comfortable, not pressured, in their company.

**YN:** The next question will be about your office, the human resource department. It is now the job hunting period in Japan. As an employer, what qualities do you look for in candidates?

**TY:** We require candidates to be tough, and by this I don't mean physically tough but mentally tough. There are three points we look for in a candidate: foresight, careful consideration, which means the ability to think well before acting, and lastly, the desire to achieve targets. Putting it in

## School spirit in Japan: A taboo subject?

By Cezar Visan

Prospective students are interested in various factors when choosing a university: university rankings, facilities, the quality and diversity of the courses offered. For me, among these, was also student life. While considering which universities I would apply for, I already imagined myself proudly wearing a sweatshirt with a huge university logo printed on it.

In Japan, however, the school spirit appears to be less prominent than in some other western institutions.

For instance, without entering the campus of the University of Tokyo (hereafter 'Todai', as the Japanese call it) through its main gate, you might not realise that you are treading the grounds of a university considered best in Japan and amongst the top in the world. On campus, there are no flags, no logos, and no sign of students wearing any kind of Todai merchandise. This could be due to the narrow range of products offered by the university. Whilst American colleges have entire shops crammed with hats, pins, umbrellas, rings, and even chairs, the memorabilia offered by Todai is much smaller, and can barely be seen in the CO-OP shop at Komaba.

During the first days of school I saw one of my classmates wearing a Harvard sweatshirt. When asked why he chose the well-known burgundy product instead of a Todai one, he mentioned the prestige, as well as the fact that his pullover was specially designed by a famous American apparel company. In America, branding has become such a large spread phenomenon, that

famous companies develop very specific lines of clothing just for a limited market. Moreover, even though The University of Tokyo is well known over the world, the school spirit did not have a contribution to its prestige, he concluded.

A point that is often omitted is that most universities which spend large sums of money on advertising are privately funded. Todai is a public school, and investing public money in its image is likely to provoke public discontent. Another argument, more subtle, regards the Japanese mentality. By showing off that you study at the best institution in the country, the others might perceive you as ostentatiously making a claim of superiority.

Is the situation to be changed in the near future? Most certainly, as The University of Tokyo undergoes structural changes meant to attract more international students. I hope that in a few years, the blue and yellow ginkgo leaves logo will speak for itself when seen.



The small merchandise section in Komaba campus. Photo by author.



Outdoor space of Skyteria.



Skyteria.

another way, we look for people who can find problems, think of solutions and carry it out to solve the problem.

**YN:** Do school rankings affect your choice?

**TY:** No, university name does not matter, and it will never do. What we want to see is the candidates' real ability, not their grades or which university they come from. In recruitment, the company will base their decision on many criteria, such as personalities, abilities, experiences. The name of the university is just a part of the personality, and hence it cannot reflect everything.

**YN:** Finally, do you have any advice for students who are or will be making their way into the workforce?

**TY:** For this question, I want to share the words from FHI's president, Mr. Yoshinaga: "Find your strengths, and try to enhance them. The sky is your limit; it is endless, and so are you. There is no limit of your potential and what you can do." I think students should be interested in everything and be willing to challenge new things. Through those experiences, you can know your strengths

and weaknesses. Some people think that "I don't have any strong points," however, everyone does. To find your strengths is to identify yourself. We want to advise students to differ themselves from others. Being identifiable is an advantage because it is not interesting to see the same people with the same personalities. Everybody is unique, with different backgrounds, different characteristics. That is why global resources, and a global perspectives are very important in our human resource strategy. If I were an interviewer from a company, personally, I would hire someone whom I would like to work with. Therefore, be confident, smile and show us who you are! Do not forget to show your enthusiasm in the work and in the company!

**YN:** Thank you for your answers. Today you have taught me a lot. I am sure that these answers will be very helpful for other students in the preparation for their future, too.

**TY:** You are always welcome.

Ms. Taguchi Yoko,  
Human Resources  
Department, Fuji  
Heavy Industries, Ltd.  
Photo by author.





Photo: Xuan Truong Trinh.

## Editor's Note

Komaba Times is an English-language newsletter written by students at the University of Tokyo. Our goal has been to create a place for students to voice their opinions to the university community as well as to the wider world, and we are proud that we have managed to keep it going for four years. We hope to hear from readers as well as students who'd like to join our endeavor.



## Contributors (As of April 2015)

**Erika Nakayama**, HSS\*III, 2nd year student

**Eve Bentley**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Amaël Cognacq**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Chiwu I. Kim**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Ririka Takahashi**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Tran Ngoc Lam Vy**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Cezar Visan**, HSSIII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Kamiyu Hijikata**, NS\*II (PEAK), 1st year student

**Isshin Inada**, NSII (PEAK), 1st year student

**Truong Cong Yen Nhu**, NSII (PEAK), 1st year student

\* HSS: Humanities and Social Sciences, NS: Natural Sciences

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**Editor/Supervisor** Yuko Itatsu

**Assistant editors** Asuka Yamamoto and Dionne Ng

**Supported by** Globalization Office + PEAK Junior Division, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo

**Contact :** Komaba Times, PEAK Program, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tokyo  
3-8-1 Komaba, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-8902, Japan

**Email :** komabatimes@gmail.com

**Website :** <http://komabatimes.wordpress.com/> **Facebook :** "Komaba Times" **Twitter :** @KomabaTimes

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