

# *Komaba Times*

*Issue 13 Spring 2024*

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We  
all find our  
own ways to belong.



Komaba Times welcomes the spring of 2024 with the most multilingual and multimedia edition of our magazine yet. “Issue 13: Belonging” showcases writers, artists, and academics across the University of Tokyo’s campuses covering the gamut of what it means to belong. No two contributors to this issue agree on the concept of belonging. However, as difficult to grasp and unpack the word “belonging” is, the beauty of this issue lies in the polyphonous song composed of voices, minds, and hearts hailing from different origins, each on their journeys. A song, a magazine, and a story open to your interpretation emerge thanks to our differences. “Belonging” is a constant debate and tireless assessment of a given situation, wrapped up in associations with emotions, material things, ephemeral moments, technologies, and amorphous concepts.

From the complicated history of our university, ChatGPT use in classrooms, social outcasts in Shinjuku’s Toyoko district, to house plants that remind us of home, our authors engage with the often tenuous but incredibly rewarding question of how they belong, where they belong, and how they can help others belong. We welcome readers to find in themselves their profound sense of belonging. The articles you are to read in this issue are also available online in a digital format, available on our website. Yet, our exploration of belonging does not stop there.

As a team of international students working to exchange knowledge and art with those within and outside our circles, we dedicate this issue to the displaced people all around the world and the journalists working to share these stories with us. With heavy hearts, we mourn for all the relationships disrupted, the lives lost, and stories abruptly ended in global conflict not only in the last year but in long-standing struggles against oppression. Every member of Komaba Times is from different backgrounds and our identities and ways of expressing them are complex; our life paths are certainly far from determined. Thus, in a time where writers and artists are at the core of historical remembering, we extend our call to all students, teachers, family, friends, and companions in life, to dedicate time and effort in reflecting on whose and which lives that have been lived and are yet to be lived are remembered. Issue 13 asks readers to remain active in helping others feel the sensations and meanings of being in loving comfort, whatever form it may take. We hope that this issue helps our readers find inspiration to contribute to the belongingness of themselves and those around them.



# Komaba Times Issue 13

\*This digital edition includes two exclusive articles before the Credits and Acknowledgements.

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# 52 YEARS ACROSS ROOM 900

*Chien-Cheng Chiu (James)*

Someone shouted through the megaphone. My superior in the Komaba Festival Committee told us not to approach them, but I could not help myself. I hid behind the bushes and listened to their speech, anxious about what would happen next.

Photo © Graduate School of Arts and Sciences,  
University of Tokyo

It was November 23, 2021 in front of Room 900 at the Komaba Campus. Inside Room 900 was the ceremony where the winners of the beauty pageant, "Miss Todai" and "Mister Todai" were to be announced. Outside Room 900, students held placards and spoke through megaphones. Behind the door was like a wedding ceremony – Miss Todai candidates wore white dresses, paired with Mister Todai candidates who wore black suits. Each contestant delivered speeches thanking everyone and everything that had gotten them there – parents, pets, etc. In front of the door, however, indignant protesters condemned every injustice from lookism and patriarchy to capitalism. Between them were my superiors at the Komaba Festival Committee, who stood in front of the door, unfazed by the protesters.

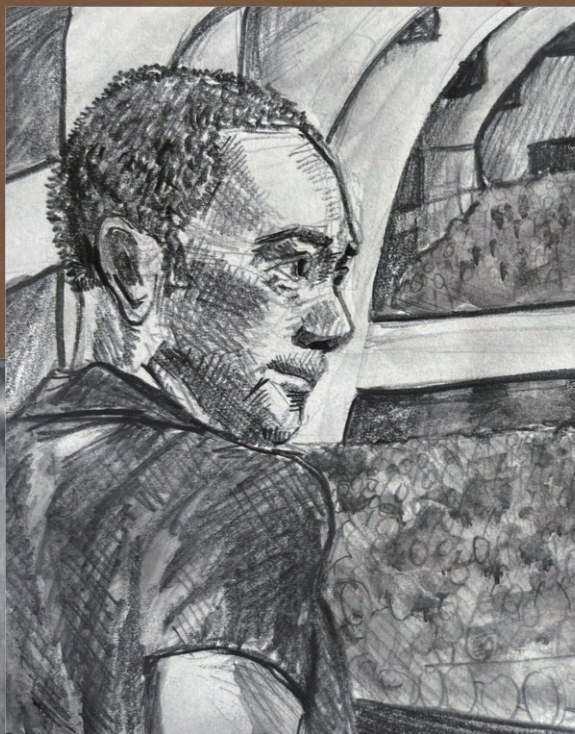
I was baffled by the scene. The beauty pageant participants, the protesters, and the Committee members shared the same space, but between them there was no interaction – no conversation or conflict. The organizers of the beauty pageant held the ceremony inside Room 900

as if nothing was happening outside. Criticisms of the beauty pageant had been pronounced for many years, but the organizers of the event never responded to them.<sup>1</sup> The Komaba Festival Committee took a laissez-faire position on the issue, only hoping that the protests would not turn into violence. Even the anti-beauty pageant activists seemed reluctant to engage in conversation. They never suggested a discussion with the organizer of the beauty pageant or the Committee but simply demanded the event stop. The protester's slogans evoked memories of extreme leftists in the 1960s; "misukon funsai" (smash the beauty pageant), for example, was widely used in their campaign. The concerns or interests of these three parties intersected at Room 900 but ultimately, went in different directions. The result was the bizarre scene I saw: protesters were angry, beauty pageant winners delivered their speeches affectionately, and Committee members stood outside with poker faces.

The divide was not only on the beauty pageant or gender issues. Another divide was between

international students and local Japanese students. According to one of my friends at PEAK (Program in English at Komaba), many of the participants of the protest were international students. The protest was organized by a PEAK student born and raised in Japan but had studied in the United States for several years. From my time here, I found that international students are more familiar with the culture of social activism because of their experience in other democratic countries. On the other hand, Japanese students tend to associate protests with violence because of the terrorism-like student movements in the 1960s and early 1970s in Japan.<sup>2</sup> Large-scale demonstrations are also rare in Japan now although it is a democratic country. That is probably why my superior posted an alarming message in the Committee's chat group, warning all the junior members to stay indoors and not to approach the protesters – the Committee was mostly composed of local Japanese students. The first divide was on the beauty pageant and gender issue. The second one was on the culture of social activism.





Room 900 was no stranger to social activism, though.

As the largest assembly hall at the Komaba Campus, it has witnessed numerous conflicts. The most well-known event was the "legendary debate" between writer Mishima Yukio and Zenkyoto members in 1969. Whereas the incident in 2021 was marked by indifference, the 1969 debate demonstrated the possibility of conversation.

On May 13, 1969, Mishima Yukio, a literary titan and right-wing activist, was invited to a debate with the members of Zenkyoto, a leftist student organization.<sup>3</sup> Both Mishima and the Zenkyoto were radical in ideologies and belligerent in practices – Mishima was obsessed with bodybuilding and founded a militia, whereas college students were occupying Yasuda Hall and clashing with the police in the 1960s. On the day of the debate, a poster drawn with a human-faced guerilla lifting weights appeared at the Komaba Campus. Titled "Special Exhibition of Todai Zoo: Modern Guerilla", the poster was a welcome – or a taunt – for Mishima. The poster satirizes Mishima, who was obsessed with the idea of strength and power (both of the individual and the nation), by suggesting that such thinking is primitive and outdated. It seemed that the debate would inevitably turn into a violent fight. Uneasiness surrounded Room 900 before the debate.

Nevertheless, Mishima and the Zenkyoto member conversed. The debate was heated but never violent. The atmosphere was grave but with some light-hearted moments. At some point, one Zenkyoto member accidentally referred to Mishima as "Mishima sensei", causing the audience to break into laughter. The Zenkyoto member corrected himself but added that to him, Mishima is more of a "sensei" (which means "teacher" in Japanese) than professors at the University of Tokyo. Despite seemingly irreconcilable stances on issues such as the emperor system, Mishima and the Zenkyoto tried to persuade their opponents and the audience. The debate was later given "legendary" status because it demonstrated the power of conversation – that a conversation transcending ideology is possible. Unreleased footage of the debate was edited into a documentary titled "Mishima: The Last Debate" and released in Japan in 2020.

The 52 years across Room 900 – the drastic contrast between the 1969 debate and the 2021 incident – make me wonder whether indifference has taken over conversation. In this light, the title of the documentary seems to suggest that the Mishima-Zenkyoto debate was not only the "last debate" in Mishima's life, but perhaps also the "last debate" in modern Japan. Of course, debates

take place every day in classrooms, conference rooms, the Diet, and so on. Yet, a genuine conversation acknowledging and embracing conflicting ideologies is rare. Mishima committed "seppuku" suicide the year after the debate, whereas the radicalization of student movements in the early 1970s brought an end to the "season of politics" in Japan.

Japan is now known for a low voter turnout, especially among the young generation, and a reserved attitude toward politics. A scene strikingly similar to the anti-beauty pageant protest in front of Room 900 took place at the Japan National Stadium in 2021. As you can guess, it was the opening ceremony of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Protesters shouted "Stop it!" outside the stadium, worrying that the Olympics would lead to a deterioration of the coronavirus pandemic. On the other hand, inside the stadium were the Prime Minister, the mayor of Tokyo, and officials of the International Olympic Committee, who celebrated the start of the Olympic Games in a merry atmosphere. Again, there was a divide but not a conversation, just like that between the protesters in front of Room 900 and the organizers of the beauty pageant inside. Conversation that embraces divide seems to have gone extinct. As Akuta Masahiko, one of the Zenkyoto members who debated with Mishima, comments

in the documentary film, "It was the last era that words still held power."

If the legendary debate between Mishima and the Zenkyoto has any lesson for us, it is to embrace, rather than to evade, our divide – to discuss, rather than to pretend they do not exist. Have we lost the ability to converse?

Room 900 reminds us that it is time to pick it up again.

1 Let's also do justice to them: the organizer chose "Todai-versity" as the theme in the next year's contest although the content of the contest, including the way the candidates were selected, did not change much.

2 The student movements radicalized in the early 1970s and culminated at the Asama-Sanso Incident, where five members of the United Red Army held civilians as hostages in Nagano Prefecture. Two police and one civilian were killed, and many were injured. Now, some of the extreme leftist organizations were still present, and Japanese universities have been especially cautious of the influence of such organizations at the campus.

3 In the Japanese context, "the right" is usually associated with nationalism, Shin-toism, support for the emperor system, remilitarization (or the normalization of the Self-Defense Forces), etc. On the other hand, "the left" is related to communism, pacifism, anti-government, support for Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, etc.

# Teaching the future impact of generative AI – reflections on the “ChatGPT Lab”

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**Michael Facius, Associate Professor, Tokyo College**

When ChatGPT trended in the media last spring, it was clear to me that I needed to rethink my original teaching plans and offer a seminar on generative AI instead. We were in the middle of a hype cycle: suddenly, everyone was talking about AI – more often than not in life-or-death terms. A piece of software able to engage in human-like conversations on seemingly any topic sounded both endlessly promising and deeply scary. Promise was mostly overshadowed by fear, however: fear of the dawn of the age of machines, and of millions of jobs being lost to AI. In the context of higher education, an AI that can produce usable essays in a matter of seconds seemed to spell the end for traditional forms of writing exercises and assessments.

Even though teaching on ChatGPT in the context of the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies' ITASIA program – which is, after all, about “Information, Technology and Society” – was of obvious relevance, I needed to think hard about how to approach it. How to teach about an emerging phenomenon whose true impact on society is still in the stars, all the while being overdetermined by the storylines of panicking media outlets?

The starting point had to be the basic technical background of generative AI – how does contemporary machine learning in general and large language models in particular work, and what are their limits? In two further introductory sessions, we discussed readings that shine a light on AI from software studies and media studies perspectives. Software studies proposes to analyze AI not as an abstract entity, but as a phenomenon embedded in technological, social, political and economic assemblages, from the immense electricity demands of the server farms in which applications such as ChatGPT run to the political ideology of techno-optimism that places the hopes for humanity's future in the hands of the tech overlords of Silicon Valley. From the perspective of media studies, storytelling itself becomes the object of study – how are current apocalyptic fantasies informed by the long history of cultural imagination about robots, AI, and other advanced technologies, from Terminator to the Y2K scare?

While these three critical lenses – technology, society, media – are essential to understand generative AI beyond the hype, they didn't answer the urgent need of the historical moment in the early spring of 2023 to get a handle on its future potential. Thankfully there are well established academic fields and methodologies to do just that, often grouped under the loose label of future studies. While the future is inherently open and unknowable, it is also not entirely random. It is dependent on social, technological and ecological developments in the present. In other words, there are path dependencies





that allow us to think about the future in systematic and academically rigorous ways. Future studies tries to identify current trends and develop plausible scenarios about what could happen, so it seemed to me a fitting underlying approach for the seminar.

Yet, future studies is not an easy approach to take or teach. For one thing, ITASIA students are a multidisciplinary bunch. In our seminar, there were participants with backgrounds in the humanities and media studies, but also software engineers and some with experience working for governments and railway companies. That's a great basis for a stimulating learning environment and intellectual exchange, but it also meant there was no way I could act as a content expert for the impact of AI on all these fields. In order to enable everyone to effectively explore their own area of interest and expertise, my role needed to be that of a guide to future studies methodologies and facilitator of a shared knowledge base.

The default learning management system was not fit for this purpose because it was designed for lecture-style teaching with one-sided file sharing by the instructor and a very basic forum function. After checking out several third-party alternative apps, I decided to use *Notion*, as it didn't have a steep learning curve for newcomers and was both simple and flexible enough to grow with the changing needs of the projects on which we were about to embark. It allowed me to add and arrange content on the go, and all participants to equally develop content together. Given the emerging nature of the ChatGPT hype, we needed a place to share relevant news, studies, and memes from week to week. We also needed a space to try out ChatGPT and share prompts and results. Above all, I wanted everyone to be able to create a workspace for their projects that they could manage based on their own learning style and progress, but where we could also see and comment on what everyone else was doing.

The expected outcome of the participant projects was a scenario story on the impact of generative AI in five or ten years on a social, political, technological or cultural domain of their choice. Getting started with the scenarios was quite a challenge for both me and the participants. It was challenging for me because it was the first time that I taught a future studies class, but also because I wanted to give participants as much freedom as possible to develop their projects. Freedom isn't always the easiest option though, and allowing choice in how to approach and write scenarios instead of offering a fixed template right away made the first weeks a bit of a trial-and-error exercise until everyone found their groove.

For participants, the format was challenging for the obvious reason that we are all socialized into writing traditional academic papers, a clearly delineated genre with defined rules on how to develop an argument, present evidence, and a narrow window of accepted writing and citation styles. Scenario stories are quite different: writing about things that haven't happened yet and aren't properly researched can feel daunting, and writing a story requires imagination, perspective-taking, and empathy.

Depending on what participants felt more comfortable with, they started with collecting research on current trends in their chosen area, or with potential directions these trends might take and impacts they might have. Towards the middle of the seminar,



we had a short in-class writing session to jumpstart everyone's imagination on the story part. In the latter half, participants gave research-based inputs so we could think about potential future developments together.

The range of topics was wide and fascinating: How will generative AI be deployed in healthcare, from mental health support to pharmaceutical interventions? How can AI help streamline and optimize political decision-making and democratic processes? How will it affect dating and intimacy, and to what extent can it enhance or replace creative endeavors that were until very recently seen as an exclusively human domain?

Obviously, all of these use cases are being explored by engineers and pondered by experts in the respective fields in which generative AI is being deployed. What is often missing is a human component. Traditional approaches in future studies such as scenario planning tend to center economic concerns of the companies that develop AI products, or the concerns of policymakers and governments. A scenario story approach rooted in the humanities instead attempts to imagine how these technologies will affect the very concrete human beings who use them: the clients, professionals, or general users of AI-powered apps.

What was very important to me in this context was that participants didn't take the easy way out and imagine a dystopian scenario. Dystopian visions are so prevalent because they don't require a lot of intellectual effort. They are well-rehearsed cultural tropes. The fear of AI somehow taking over the world plays on the century-old fear of Western empires that those mistreated, exploited and enslaved by empire will, given the chance, exert revenge. In this regard, people of color, aliens, and machines (robots and AIs) all fill



## Komaba Times Design Team



### *A dystopian future of AI*

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the same story space. However, this story space is a purely fictional one, even if recent philosophical discourse on post-humanism or the singularity has attempted to elevate it to an academically substantial endeavor.

Scenarios in which AI is abused for surveillance, political gain, and the replacement of jobs, on the other hand, might be more realistic, but so what? Focusing on this type of dystopia allows us to evade a much more urgent question: What kind of AI-assisted world do we want to live in? Which present conditions need to be in place to create a world where the useful potential of AI is maximized while harmful tendencies are kept in check or mitigated? Dystopia leads to passivity and hopelessness, while what this world desperately needs more of is people with the ability to imagine a better world and concrete pathways to get us there. In that sense, storytelling rooted in both clear-sighted analysis of current trends and conditions as well as strong, empathetic and hopeful imagination is a key leadership skill for the mid twenty-first century.

Given the complexity of scenario stories regarding methodology, writing style and imagination, I offered to hold optional writing workshops in which we could discuss everyone's drafts from these various angles; I was happy that most participants decided to join. I felt that everyone, including me, was surprised by how powerful and engaging the stories turned out to be, even in their draft versions. So powerful, in fact, that we are currently preparing to publish them as a booklet that will be made available open access on the Tokyo College website (<https://www.tc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/>). We're planning to get the revised scenarios out in spring, in time for the first anniversary of the release of ChatGPT 4.



## Komaba Times Design Team



### *A utopian future of AI*

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# grab a drink!

## the water server saga continues



*Mahi Patki*

Have you noticed the fancy water refill spots around campus? If you are new to UTokyo, you might think the 25+ water servers across all UTokyo campuses have always cozily belonged there. In fact, they were only installed recently! Check out my article in the Komaba Times' Issue 12 entitled, "Quenching our thirst for change: Transforming Komaba Campus into an oasis" to learn more about the process. But for now, here is a quick summary:



The water server project is an ongoing student-led initiative that began in 2021. After years of separate but interrelated work on various projects, different environmental circles in UTokyo eventually started collaborating. This led to the formation of the UTokyo Sustainable Network (UTSN). Together, we wrote an evidence-based proposal where we argued for the need to install bottle refill stations on campus. UTSN then presented this proposal at numerous student dialogues, and even in front of UTokyo's President. In February 2023, after over two years of lobbying, 13 new servers were installed at Komaba and 3 at Hongo Campus. In the following months, more have popped up in all UTokyo campuses, leading to a total of 25 water servers!

Without shying away from its ambition, the project continues to grow as we work towards a near-zero-waste campus where reusables are the norm, and superfluous single-use packing is eliminated.

In other exciting news, the challenge of not knowing who or how to contact evaluation committees or funding bodies for a sustainability-related project on campus has been overcome! In May 2023, the Todai Sustainable Campus Project (TSCP) and UTSN merged, leading to the formation of the UTokyo Green Transformation Student Network (GXSN). In doing so, the organization became

the official student committee working with the Green Transformation Promotion Subcommittee, towards advancing the just transformation of socio-economic systems into regenerative ones within the boundaries of natural systems at UTokyo. This transformation is what GX stands for, and GXSN with its Promotion Subcommittee serves to realize a sustainable and inclusive society in which everyone can live happily and with dignity. With a focus on becoming carbon-neutral, nature positive, and a circular economy, GX (the official abbreviation for Green Transformation) is one of the pillars of the "UTokyo Compass", the basic policy regarding the philosophy and direction of the university.



GXSN has many different projects and seeks to explore the campus space as a testing ground for global GX. The concept of thinking globally and acting locally is a key starting point. As students, isn't our university campus one of our most local places? If we can transform our campus, we can attempt to discover what it takes for GX nationally and globally. So far, GXSN projects include introducing more plant-based food options on campus, race-to-zero planning, and monitoring and recovering biodiversity. Surely, many more timely projects will emerge that will push further the frontiers of GX at UTokyo and beyond.



Another highlight of 2023 was the first-ever UTokyo Sustainability Week held in June. This event featured daily “Sustainability Talks” where professors, researchers, and students shared their sustainability-focused work. During the week, we harvested garlic and onions grown in our on-campus community garden, Komabatake, held a water server stamp rally and library exhibition, and collaborated with the UTokyo Co-op <sup>2</sup> to provide a special menu in the cafeteria. Keep an eye out for

our 2024 events including the April 2024 inter-university Sustainability Week collaboration!

With all of these new and ongoing developments, it is crucial to quantify the impacts of our work and its relationship to our desired outcomes. In doing so, I hope that this work can serve as an example of student leadership, substantive change, and environmental action. Below are three main strategies for measuring our impact:

1

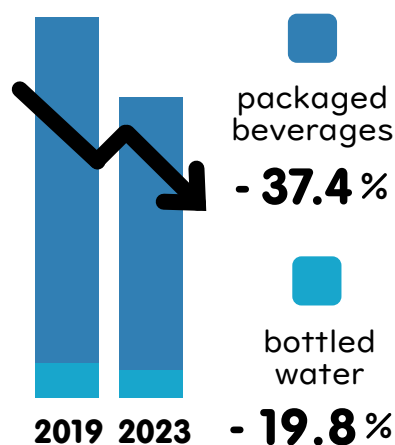
Biweekly tracking of water consumption at 12 servers on Komaba I campus through installed water meters. We found that between March 28th, 2023 and January 29th, 2024, a minimum of 149,752 liters of water was refilled, equivalent to over 299,500, 500 mL PET bottles. In the 2023 spring semester alone, a minimum of 208,000 bottles were collectively refilled!<sup>3</sup>



2

To put the water refill data into perspective, The Komaba Co-op kindly provided us with on-campus beverage sales data for 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2023 (post-pandemic and post-server installation). In the 2023 spring semester, 76,676 packaged beverages were purchased from the vending machines on Komaba I campus – a 63% rise in sales since 2019. This increase is likely caused by the installation of vending machines in 2 new locations on Komaba campus. On the other hand, 110,338 packaged beverages (including PET bottles, cartons, cans, etc) were sold in the Co-op stores, of which 12,854 were bottled water – a decrease of 37.4% and 19.8%, respectively, since 2019. Although this may seem like a massive decrease, we cannot conclude that it is directly caused by the server installation, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic likely had an unpredictable impact on sales.

### DECREASE IN BEVERAGE SALES



Feedback is crucial to understand how members of UTokyo feel about this project. It is evident that consumption of packaged beverages is high and sales can be reduced significantly. Buying packaged beverages remains the status quo, and many people still hesitate to carry a reusable bottle. Due in part to sparsity, water servers remain insufficient for incentivizing people to refill bottles over buying packaged beverages. Additionally, since the servers are all located indoors, on weekdays after 8PM, weekends, and national holidays, most servers are not accessible. We need to install more water servers in strategic locations, but we also must figure out how to change single-use culture. To this end, we are searching for solutions that work for everyone and greatly rely on user feedback to sharpen our focus and action.

**If you have any thoughts  
about the project,  
feel free to share them  
with us at the link  
in the QR code!**



<https://www.utokyo-gxsn.org/water-server>

Towards fostering a support system for university and high school students interested in running waste-related projects on their respective campuses, UTokyo GXSN hosted the Campus Changemakers Summit in collaboration with mymizu (an app to access free water refill spots globally). Participants came up with ideas from tackling waste from eraser dust, to making art out of repurposed garbage. As universities in Japan realize just how fundamental free water provision is to campus welfare, to preventing heat-related illnesses, and to promoting waste reduction, it comes as no surprise that a wave of inter-campus and inter-university collaborations towards installing water refill stations is finally washing over us.



The water server project exemplifies that we have more power than we imagine. I invite you to be a catalyst and take action for anything that you feel passionate about!

<sup>1</sup> The policy was released on September 30, 2021. It is available via the University's official post on UTokyo GX, at <https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/about/gx/about.html>

<sup>2</sup> UTokyo's Consumers' Cooperative Society, responsible for everything from the on-campus cafeteria to travel center

<sup>3</sup> Data can be accessed through our website: <https://www.utokyo-gxsn.org/water-server>

*Photos by Mahi*

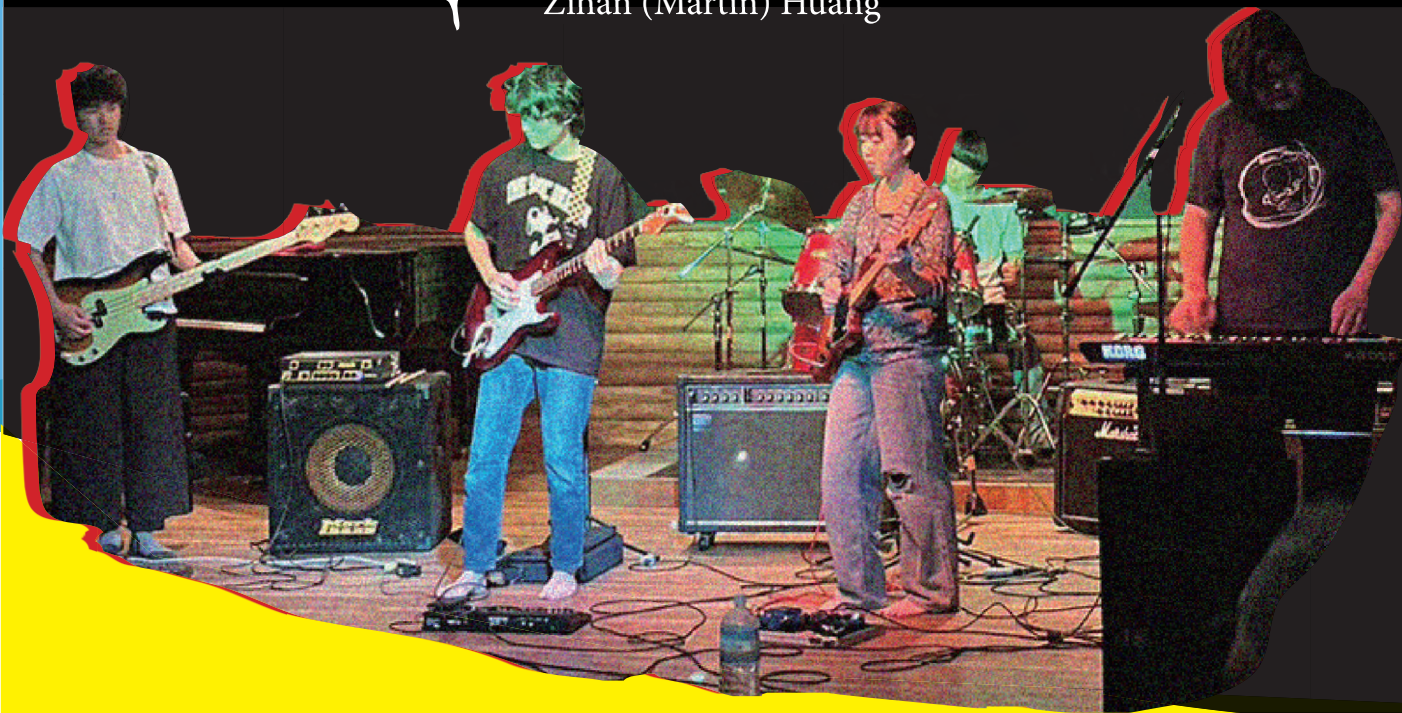
*Designed by Pedro*

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*Illustrations by Eriko Yamada & Leah Han*

# A Life of Possibilities: my 2023, and finding belonging through music

Zihan (Martin) Huang



February, in Hangzhou. I spent a few days on the edge of Xihu, and for a few more I went elsewhere, somewhere else in Zhejiang, down to the southwest. On the train over, I listened to about 5 hours of music, non-stop. For part of it, I listened with one earbud in. My first time getting really into what people call “Plunderphonics” - using samples from pre-existing sources to make wholly new compositions. I listened to The Avalanches’ *Since I Left You*, and for the next week I think I listened to *Frontier Psychiatrist*, the album’s highlight single, twice a day. Another highlight: DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing*, a rich instrumental hip-hop album lauded by critics and fans as some of the best that plunderphonics has to offer. I was eating well. Then too was Oneohtrix Point Never (one of the many names used by musician Daniel Lopatin). I’d tried to get into his music before, and the only album I really liked from him was *Garden of Delete*, a feast of synths vastly different from the work he’s probably most known for, *Replica*. *Replica* was a weird one - I’d listened to the record multiple times but always had some distaste for it. Short, ghostly loops of 80s commercials twisted into haunting compositions. Dreams in waking life. But it was only in the context of this trip that I really broke into the rich vein that is Lopatin’s work. *Replica* finally clicked in Hangzhou, riding the taxi from the train station to the hotel. His music would accompany me throughout the year, culminating in his 2023 release, *Again*, which I’ve bought tickets to see him perform live. Some honorable mentions from the trip include Dorian Electra and Richard Dawson (especially his 40-minute long song *The Hermit*).



I found something in 2023 I can at least be happy with, I think.

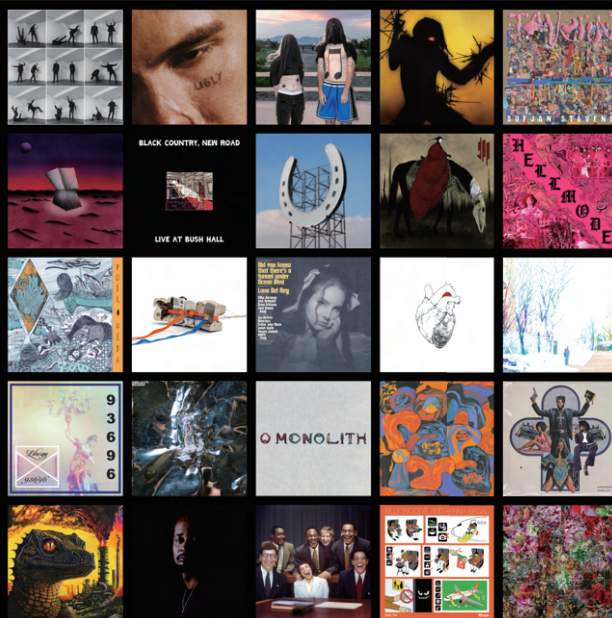
Throughout my first semester I always heard about how fun it would be to be in a circle. Some people in my year joined them right off of the bat. I wasn't really fussed – I had a couple of high school friends I would go out with every week or so, and so I had at least some social life. When April came around, I felt obligated to try something, anything – out. I checked out some clubs and circles online, and I found a couple that looked pretty interesting. One such circle was a music circle I'd never heard of before, but according to the charts I saw them post on Twitter, we had some pretty similar music tastes. I thought I'd shoot my shot, and I DMed them on with a collage of 400 albums I've listened to, arranged in a rainbow pattern. They seemed impressed (being impressed doesn't carry over well in Google Translated Twitter DMs). I went to see them when they were looking for new recruits (I'd gone the day before they were there but didn't see them. I ended up hanging around a couple of circles/clubs I couldn't have possibly joined either). I was really scared walking up to the people at the music circle's booth. I awkwardly looked around, pointing at CDs I recognized and saying one-word sentences. I showed them a couple of my album charts. None of the people there remembered me from that day, probably. I took their flier and joined their *shink-an* Discord server.

Spending Golden Week outside of the city, first in Toyama and then in Kanazawa. Beautiful places, small cities where shops close early. I went to Tateyama, with its huge snow walls. And in came DEVO, pioneers of the New Wave sound, with their seminal Q: *Are We Not Men? A: We Are DEVO!*. This was the time I really discovered them, listening to the entire album in one go at Toyama Station. This one I'd tried before, but it only clicked when I got around to *Jocko Homo* or *Mongoloid*. And it finally hit me, listening to the guitars of Bob Mothersbaugh and Bob Casale, that New Wave was just an evolution from punk, that it didn't just emerge from nowhere in the 80s – a fact I had known, but never really *felt*. And I never looked back – from there I began to go and listen to New Order's *Power, Corruption and Lies*, which clicked as well, and Tears for Fears' *Songs from the Big Chair*. I re-listened, too, to OMD's *Architecture and Morality*, which I had already

liked for a long time. At Kanazawa Castle I listened to the entirety of Justice's *Cross*, which I compared to Daft Punk's *Discovery* (I listened to *Discovery* on the

train to Tateyama from Toyama), two albums I had listened to a lot but never really gotten into. I feel a bit ashamed in saying that only *Cross* clicked hard – I like *Discovery*, but *Cross* is just good on a different level, a seamless dream-like experience with catchy vocals and punchy bass. Walking around Hie Shrine in Toyama I listened to Controlled Bleeding's *Knees and Bones*, a shiveringly harsh album with a fair amount of beauty hidden in the noise. What was possibly the weirdest was

The Smiths' *The Queen is Dead* finally clicking on the upper floors of the Daiwa Toyama department store and bookstore. I never really got it before despite it being one of the most liked albums among people I know.



About a week later, the circle invited everyone in the Discord to a live show. So did another circle (that does basically the same thing, but that I didn't join). I ended up going to both, and for the circle I didn't join I slinked off into the night after they were done performing. At least they had free pizza. The other live performance was much smaller. At the end, I was invited along with a couple of other new people to a dinner. There I really let loose. I spent hours, even after dinner (in some sort of after-party) discussing music, showing off my album list – I was home. This was the first time I actually felt anything like this since coming to Japan – being able to talk with people who like the exact same things as me. I remember very clearly getting into about an hour-long discussion with someone who moved over to my side of the table, mostly about electronic music – we talked about Dilla, the Avalanches, Machine Girl – I hadn't felt so alive in months.

And so it was that I was roped into the circle – I would go to their events, their lives, their dinners. I signed up first to sing – I couldn't play any instruments – and sang some covers. I didn't take it very seriously in the first few months, though – I didn't practice, so I would spend lives looking at my phone for the lyrics. I was really there, during the early days, to talk about music – every time we went to a restaurant or park after the show, I would loudly play whatever music I was into at the time, shuffling through songs I thought people would like. Where I couldn't really communicate because of the language barrier I could through music. I discovered a lot of music, and helped other people discover music. I talked a lot with people about shoegaze, EDM, whatever – and I loved it. Community was what saved me – it's what made my university life an *actual life*. I don't think I could be more grateful. Music was, and is, what connected me with a group that called me one of their own.

I've been to a good few concerts and live shows this year. Tokyo has a lot of them, with bands I actually listen to – I wasn't really involved in the underground music scene in my home city, and the extent to which I was included only a few anime cover bands. My experience with these live shows was very positive – although I don't really like going outside, loud noises I can't control with a button, or crowds of sweaty concert-goers, there's something about seeing bands I've known and loved in front of me that just feels good.

I remember seeing Black Country, New Road play songs from their album *Live at Bush Hall* live at Spotify O-East – a euphoric experience, especially Luke's performance of *Across the Pond* Friend. I bought tickets to SONICMANIA but realized I couldn't go at the last second because they didn't allow people under 20 in. My concert-going ramped up towards the end of the year – I bought tickets to a festival only to see Fatboy Slim (I didn't know any of the other artists). I went to see Yo La Tengo – I saw someone faint in the audience, and I could have fainted as I had almost fallen asleep by the second half of their 150 minute performance. DOME Festival, a one-day music festival held solely in one building, was great, though – I experienced the genius of pioneers in dance music, from the frantic noisiness of BBBBBBBB to the more

subdued performances of Grischka Lichtenberger and the one and only Bogdan Raczynski (World's End Girlfriend was there as well, for some reason, and their performance was fantastic). Squid was a good experience, and the way they transitioned between songs was magical. Interpol was good, but the people next to me kept talking really loudly during the performance. Soul Glo, the creators of one of the best albums of 2022, almost blew my ears off and had my ears ringing for two whole weeks. Tinariwen interacted with the audience very well, and I was surprised so many people went to see them – the entire venue was pretty much full, and I couldn't even find my way to a spot where I could see all members of the band. My final show was Pool Kids, which was backed up by two opening bands, of which I really liked Texas 3000 – the band came on 2 hours and 30 minutes after opening. I missed Mass of the Fermenting Dregs opening for them the day before I saw them, though. I saw one of the members' posts on my Twitter timeline, saying that they were playing in Japan, and although I had never heard their music I impulse-bought a ticket for the next day's performance. It was a very good decision. In hindsight – the show was probably the most fun I had in 2023.

I ended up going to the circle's *gasshuku* in August. It was the first time I had ever done something like it – a week-long retreat in the mountains of Nagano, discussing and performing music. It was a week of joking around, doing fun activities, and talking for hours on end. But I felt like, to some extent, I shirked a lot of my responsibilities to the circle during this event by not practicing and spending an inordinate amount of time sleeping. This was when I decided I would be taking the entire circle thing much more seriously – I would start learning an instrument and memorizing the lyrics beforehand to anything I was doing the vocals for.

And then, once the school year started anew, and I finally had underclassmen, I started roping my *kouhai* in. I began learning the drums seriously with a friend of a friend. I performed at Komabasai (and got sick, because the flu had spread to basically everyone in the circle). I wanted my *kouhai* to have the same fun that I did, to have a more fulfilling university life that the circle gave me, to feel like I did when I found out there was someplace I *belonged*.

2023 was a good year, I think. And it's a good year precisely because I found a community in which I could feel comfortable and talk about something I liked. And for that, I am grateful to everyone who helped me along in the journey, and to those I brought into it.



# Tōdai's Tokenized Internationalization

Chien-Cheng Chiu (James)

In 2016, an article written by Higo Haruka, a student journalist at the University of Tokyo, positioned the Program in English at Komaba (PEAK) as the “*de-jima*” of the university.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of *dejima*, the name of the only trading post opened to European powers during the isolationist Tokugawa period, speaks about the hopes for PEAK to foster the much-needed internationalization at the University of Tokyo. In 2017, *Todai Shimbun*, the student newspaper at the University of Tokyo, also published two reports on PEAK's obstacles and potential.<sup>2</sup> Then, PEAK seemed to be the wonder child, burdened with not only challenges but also hope.

Recently, however, news about PEAK in the media is nowhere to be seen. Have the goals been accomplished, challenges been conquered? Can we now conclude that the *dejima* has effectively triggered internationalization at this university? This in-depth investigation examines PEAK's student body and faculty members under the key and yet ambiguous concept of internationalization. It finds that PEAK is more a token than an actual catalyst of internationalization and diversity at the campus.

PEAK is a bachelor-degree program taught entirely in English at the University of Tokyo. Founded in 2012, it was the university's response to the “Global 30” project put forth by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The Global 30 project urges top universities in Japan to internationalize, including setting up English-taught programs. Once MEXT approves the reforms proposed by these universities, they receive a grant of up to ¥400 million

1 比護遥「東大の「出島」は国際化をもたらしたのか」:<https://newspicks.com/news/1735511/body/>

2 宮路栞「【東大PEAKに迫る①】PEAK生が語る、制度の利点・欠点とは?」:<https://www.todaishimbun.org/peak20171128/>





from MEXT every year. Following Global 30, the “Top Global University Project,” launched by MEXT in 2014, also provides financial incentives for top universities to set up or expand English-taught programs. PEAK is considered as an international program by the University of Tokyo under this context, but the increasing homogeneity of its student body and faculty renders the university’s commitment questionable.

## STUDENTS

PEAK is designed for international students who receive non-Japanese secondary education. Around 250 students apply, around 60 of them are admitted and around 30 enroll in September every year. The students are divided into two streams of study: the humanities and social sciences-oriented Japan in East Asia (JEA) program and the natural sciences-oriented Environmental Sciences (ES) program.

Surprisingly, the student demographics are largely skewed toward East Asian nationalities. The data of currently enrolled students are unavailable, and the Academic Affairs Division refused to disclose it because “the use of personal information is strictly restricted.” However, the admission statistics show that in the last five years, three out of four successful applicants to PEAK hold a passport from the East Asian region (China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Japanese nationals account for a third of all successful applicants. Most of the Japanese nationals completed their secondary education abroad or went to international schools in Japan, seeing PEAK as a route to reconnect with their Japanese heritage. They are eligible to apply to PEAK despite a possible familiarity with the

Japanese culture and language because the eligibility requirement is being “educated in languages other than Japanese” according to the application guidelines for September 2024 enrollment.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to conclude whether a Japanese passport makes one less international or not, but a high proportion of East Asian nationals – among it a high proportion of Japanese nationals – raises the question of diversity. As Narita Daiju, a professor in the ES program since 2017, described such homogeneity, “I have some research projects in Africa, and I’m quite interested in Africa, but at PEAK, we find few African students. [...] It [PEAK] is not the real representation of the world. It’s not really global,” said Narita.

This no doubt contradicts the original purpose commissioned to PEAK by MEXT: to attract foreign students. In addition, the University of Tokyo prepares special admission apart from PEAK for Japanese citizens who have completed their secondary education abroad. PEAK might not be the most suitable destination for these Japanese students.

On the other hand, the high proportion of East Asian and Japanese nationalities can be attributed to the challenges Japan is facing as a destination for international students. Jonathan Woodward, an ES professor who has been involved in PEAK since its establishment, points out the difficulty for PEAK to compete with prestigious universities in the world. “Japan had no prehistory of being a destination for international students,” Woodward says, “why would they [foreign students] choose to go to Japan over one of the well-known, well-established existing destinations for study?”

In fact, the student body has become more and more homogeneous recently.

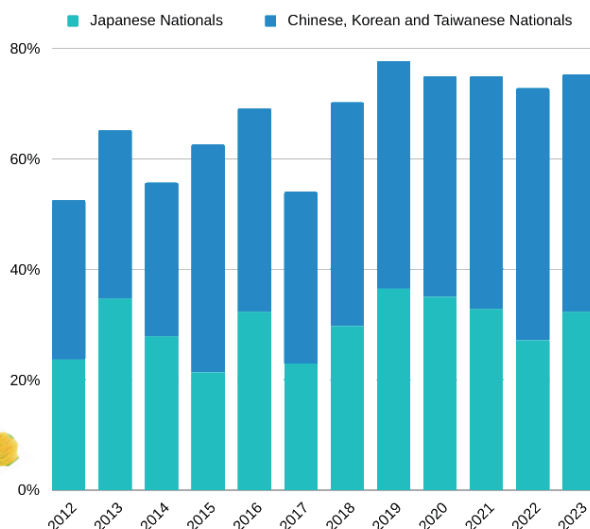
According to the admission statistics published on PEAK’s admission website, the percentage of students from East Asia hovered around 60 percent in the initial years. In 2018, however, the figure rose to 70 percent and remained largely the same until now.

## ISOLATION

Despite such East Asian-centered demographics, PEAK students report a sense of separation or isolation from the primarily Japanese student community. In some parts, these feelings are a result of structural division. PEAK courses are conducted in English and listed

3 PEAK Admission Statistics: <https://peak.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/why-peak/documents/index.html>

Percentage of Successful Applicants who hold at least one East Asian nationality (Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan)



4 Application Guidelines for September 2024 Enrollment: [https://peak.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/vcms\\_lf/ApplicationGuidelines\\_2024.pdf](https://peak.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/vcms_lf/ApplicationGuidelines_2024.pdf)

in a separate section on the syllabus provided to regular undergraduate students (referred to as “April-entry students”). April-entry students have to actively look for courses offered by PEAK and work out how they can correspond to various course categories. As for extra-curricular activities, most *bukatsu* (clubs) and *sākuru* (associations) recruit new members in spring, when April-entry students enter the university. PEAK students, enrolling in September, are often unaware of the recruitment schedule of Japanese *bukatsu* and *sākuru*, missing the recruitment period as a result.

Yifei Guan, the president of the PEAK Student Council at the time of the interview, shared her experience of the division. “PEAK is not treated as a very equal part in the university,” Guan said. The PEAK Student Council mediates between the administration office and PEAK students and organizes projects related to campus life, such as making the yearbook. However, the Student Council is not registered as an official student organization at the university like the Jichikai (UTokyo Komaba Student Union), which represents junior division students at the College of Arts and Sciences. According to Guan, it is difficult for the Student Council to “collaborate with any office or professors to disseminate information” because of its unregistered status. “That showcases some part of the exclusion that we were talking about in terms of information,” Guan said.

In addition to the structural division, there are also implicit cultural reasons. A third-year PEAK student who preferred to be anonymous recalled, “Some of my peers attempted to join a *bukatsu* at one point during our first year and were repeatedly told that they were not Japanese enough to fully participate in the activities of the club.” Eventually, her peers were able to stay in the club, but there was a rule that members “could not take more than a week break to leave the country during the holidays or else be expelled from the club.” In the end, most of her peers decided to leave the club because they had homes in other countries.

The *dejima* metaphor conveys the hope for PEAK to bring internationalization to this rather homogeneous university. Before the *dejima* takes effect, however, it will have to worry about being sidelined first.

## FACULTY

The situation on the side of faculty members is much more complicated because professors at the University of Tokyo have multiple affiliations and often teach courses for different departments and programs. In the case of PEAK, courses are taught by not only faculty members primarily affiliated with PEAK but also faculty members affiliated with other departments or hired by other internationalization-related initiatives.

The number of foreign faculty members who are hired by and primarily affiliated with PEAK remains low. Currently, foreign faculty members account for only half of the faculty members primarily affiliated

with the ES program and less than half of the faculty members primarily affiliated with the JEA program.

One barrier for Ph.D. graduates of foreign nationality to work in PEAK is the administrative tasks required. As a general principle, faculty members at the University of Tokyo are expected to undertake administrative tasks. However, guidelines, formal documents and regulations are overwhelmingly written in Japanese, often in a convoluted style. Woodward pointed out that there is a mindset among hiring officials that “it is extremely difficult for international faculty to be able to undertake those administrative roles unless their level of Japanese skill is extremely high.”

Ai Kihara-Hunt, the director of the JEA Senior Division at the time of the interview, described the repercussions of such a mindset, “It’s not blocking foreign or non-Japanese faculty, but it’s actually, in reality, blocking.” The hiring officials might not intend to stop foreign faculty members from joining the university, but the mindset that high Japanese proficiency is required makes them disadvantaged in reality. Kihara-Hunt called it “unrealistic” to demand faculty members to undertake administrative work in Japanese if PEAK is a so-called “English” program.

In addition to language barriers, the type of employment is another challenge that foreign faculty members face. For foreign professors, obtaining permanent positions can be onerous. According to *The University of Tokyo Data Book*, 73 percent of the Japanese faculty members at the University of Tokyo are on permanent positions whereas only 24 percent of the foreign faculty members are on permanent positions in 2023.<sup>5</sup> Academic jobs are more insecure for foreigners.

In the case of PEAK, the ES program has a more balanced faculty composition than the JEA program. In the ES program, there are around the same number of foreign and Japanese faculty members, and several foreign faculty members are on permanent positions. In the JEA program, however, five foreign professors have been hired based on temporary contracts since 2012, but none of them landed on a permanent position. Some underwent a tenure-track contract along with a review – a process in which a professor’s research and teaching in a given period of time are reviewed by a committee in order to determine whether the university should offer a permanent (tenure) position to him or her. Arguably, there might have been complex reasons why the university did not offer permanent positions to them. For example, another Japanese faculty member might simply be more qualified for the permanent position than the foreign one.

Kihara-Hunt points to cultural practices as a possible obstacle for foreign faculty members to at-

5 東京大学の概要資料編: <https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/content/40022323.pdf>. Includes professors, associate professors, lecturers, assistant professors, researchers and research assistants.



tain permanent positions. Kihara-Hunt's career at the University of Tokyo started with a temporary contract, but in the third year (of her five-year contract), "there was apparently already *nemawashi* without me knowing, *nemawashi* for keeping the position that I am in." *Nemawashi*, or "laying the groundwork" in English, refers to building a consensus before the formal discussion through one-to-one, informal conversations. "Somehow people who wanted to keep me went around, did the *nemawashi* and got the position which I am in now," she said. Presumably, a senior faculty member convinced other faculty members that Kihara-Hunt was a suitable candidate for the permanent position. The prevalence and importance of *nemawashi* in hiring procedures are unclear, but their presence point to the vital role that network and connections can play in the hiring processes. Foreign professors who are unfamiliar with such cultural practices and lack of interpersonal connections may face hardships in attaining permanent positions.

The results are a lack of foreign faculty members and, at worst, academic inbreeding – the phenomenon that a university constantly hires its own graduates to be professors. Out of the 14 JEA faculty members listed on the website only accessible to JEA Senior Division students, at least 9 have a degree from the University of Tokyo, and 7 of them have more than one degree from the University of Tokyo. Academic inbreeding in the JEA program is not only harmful to PEAK's diversity but also deviates from one of the objectives of the Global 30 project – to foster the hiring of foreign professors and researchers.

## SIZE

Many of PEAK's challenges come from its small size. The University of Tokyo accepts around 3000 undergraduate students every year, but only around 30 students enroll in PEAK. Woodward said, "You cannot expect one percent level of anything to have a dramatic impact." He argued that the scale of PEAK is the "biggest issue" that fundamentally challenges the internationalization of the program. Indeed, opening around 200 courses every year in English for only about 140 students is not cost-effective (although April-entry students can take PEAK courses). Changing formal regulations and informal conventions for around 10 foreign faculty members in the program is also unlikely.

Nevertheless, any dramatic increase in the number of international students is impossible because MEXT puts a cap on the number of students (*teiin*) in national universities. If the number of total undergraduate students is fixed, then an increase in international students means a decrease in Japanese local students. In a high-profile university like the University of Tokyo, such an attempt will be very controversial because a country's public university is usually considered to serve its people. In 2020,

however, *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that MEXT was planning to remove the limitation on the number of international students from 2022.<sup>6</sup> There is no follow-up news regarding this policy, but if the limitation has indeed been lifted, then the expansion of PEAK will be an important step toward meaningful internationalization.

## INTERNATIONALIZATION

Twelve years have passed since MEXT launched the Global 30 project. PEAK is no doubt an international program. For the first time, international students who cannot speak Japanese can attain a bachelor's degree at the University of Tokyo. However, its current internationalization is akin to, as one PEAK professor who prefers to stay anonymous said, "tokenism." Many students are already familiar with the Japanese language and culture while foreign professors, already a minority, never stay. Let alone the sense of separation, unequal treatment or isolation that foreign professors and students face. Is the University of Tokyo, perhaps the most well-funded university in Japan, satisfied with just tokenized internationalization?<sup>7</sup>

Recently, the University of Tokyo announced the "College of Design," a combined bachelor's/master's degree program set to integrate PEAK in 2027.<sup>8</sup> The design of the new program is similar to PEAK in some aspects: fall entry, English courses and foreign students. On the other hand, the number of students in each cohort will be increased to 100, around half of whom will be recruited from high schools in Japan. The details are not clear yet, but some of PEAK's challenges are expected to persist in the new program. For example, how to increase the diversity of the student body, how to ensure the job security of foreign faculty members and how to prevent the students from being sidelined by the primarily Japanese community? The College of Design deserves our careful watch.

6 読売新聞「【独自】国立大留学生の定員増、22年度から容認…国際競争力の向上狙う」:<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/kyoiku/kyoiku/news/20201102-OYT1T50178/>

7 国立大学法人運営費交付金の配分状況:[https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210204-mxt\\_hojinka-000011436\\_3.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210204-mxt_hojinka-000011436_3.pdf)

8 College of Design(仮想)構想に関する報道について:<https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/content/400233752.pdf>

## Disclosure of Possible Conflicts of Interests

*The author of this article is a student in PEAK, the program discussed in this article. However, he is not under any influence from the sources and strived to maintain a balanced attitude and independence during the interviews, research and writing of this article.*

# Belonging as “Knowing Others and Being Known”

## Komaba Times in Conversation with Temple University Japan’s Student Leaders

On January 10th, 2024, Komaba Times (KT) members, Will and Alyssa, visited Temple University Japan (TUI) in Sangenjaya. In our 11th Issue “Reality”, we collaborated with students of the “Polyphony” magazine in Okayama University for a conversation about international student life and publication. This time around, KT engages in yet another nuanced exchange and meaningful dialogue to strengthen cross-campus exchanges among Tokyo’s international student community.

We were welcomed by the polyphonous sound of multilingual introductions, and many events in store for the incoming students that week. It was the start of TUI’s spring semester, and the campus was decorated with red banners, a captivating hint for the new students to the life of diverse and vibrant connections they are soon to be a part of in this close-knit campus. As international students new to the TUI Campus ourselves, we blended into the crowd mesmerized by the unfamiliar architecture, signs, and faces. When our prior liaison, Tomoko, spotted us, she led us up to the meeting room to meet Soren, Ume, Stacey, Nona, Jiyeon and Yu, an amazing group of student leaders who were ready to explore the theme of “belonging” with us. This article overviews the highlights of our conversation.

**KT Alyssa:** What does “belonging” mean to you?

**Soren:** For me, it is “to know and be known”. This means knowing people including the faculty at your school, what their lives are like, and to also be known by them. You should also feel like you have a voice in that space, among this community of speakers who acknowledge each other. It’s like you’re part of this bigger community where everyone knows each other.

**Jiyeon:** It’s about how I feel. If I feel welcomed, I feel like I belong in that community.

**Ume:** It is being comfortable in your own skin. It doesn’t matter where you are. Your cultural background might be different and you might dress differently, but as long as people are accepting of that, and inclusive of that, I think that is pretty good.

**KT Alyssa:** That’s really interesting. I’m not sure if everyone was here when we were talking about TUI’s building. But, it is clear that everyone is quite familiar with the community, and most people can bump into one another in the corridors and see each others’ faces. This seems to be a core part of belonging here at TUI. Stacey and Nona, do you feel the same?

**Stacey:** Honestly, when I came to this school I did feel welcomed. For universities that are larger than TUI, they don’t often experience inclusivity and belonging because there are so many different departments. But here, we seem to all understand what the different majors are and what each one specializes in. Although we all do take different classes, we still are able to get close to one another, even though we’re under different majors. **KT: Do you feel that helps with your studies?** Yes, it does. Some students have different majors and they have different study habits as a result.

When you get to know students in different majors, you get to learn different things that help you in your own chosen major.

**KT Alyssa:** I see! The two of us here today are from an interdisciplinary program, so we don’t get to feel the strict study habits of each discipline embodied by the students who major in them. Being interdisciplinary, we feel “fluid”, but having the ideas compartmentalized into fields and students in psychology, IR, or business for instance, would be really enlightening.

**Nona:** Yes, well, I’m a first year student. I take general courses and take classes with students who still have their majors undeclared. I also feel the diversity and fluidity. It is certainly different from universities where students have declared and expect to rise towards a certain major. Overall, being comfortable around other people is important.

**Stacey:** I think TUI is pretty unique in the sense that we have many group-based projects. In General Education courses, we do a lot of group projects, and stick together with the teams according to the theme of the project. You get to know one another easily throughout the semester because of these group projects in the GenEd courses.

**Ume:** There are 36 credits dedicated to GenEd courses which are science, history, math, and all the daily stuff you need to know, so these are all required for all students. Transfer students also have to take an Intellectual Heritage course, even if they might already fulfill the GenEd requirements with transfer credits for their major. So, everyone ends up taking a course where they talk to one another for group work, bringing their own thoughts in, even with different ideologies and majors.



**Soren:** There is also a required academic writing seminar. They are separated for those whose native language is English, and those who don't have it as their first language. Still, everyone has to take these courses and they are not easy in any way. So, I've noticed a bonding among friends, especially with Japanese friends who think "Oh, this teacher's tough! What am I gonna write?" and we work together when they need help summarizing an article, or need help editing a paper. Through these, we get to know our community because we all have to take these courses together, and usually early on in the program, they're all tough!

**Yu:** How I define belonging is different in a way. For me, it is not to be "displaced" meaning you feel safe in the community that you are in, be it in TUJ, a company, somewhere you live, or other communities. It is to not feel under threat if one is not the expected identity in that community. I have a slightly different perspective to the other students, in a way, because I also went to another American university in Tokyo. It was very similar to TUJ but far smaller. There, even if you have the different professors from different disciplines in the same university, it's all about whether you feel you belong.

Belonging in that university really depends on how the university functions. In my perspective, TUJ pushes more into diversity and inclusion far more compared to the other university I was in. When I was there, I did not feel as if I belonged; I did not belong in the Japanese community, and I also didn't belong in the American community. They have completely different cultures and the way they communicate is also different. I can communicate with both but I'm not part of both. So, this did not feel as if I belonged in that university. At TUJ, however, I do feel like I belong at the workplace. But, in my perspective it doesn't really matter if you don't belong in the larger community, as long as you have a place somewhere that alleviates the stress of being outside everything else.

**KT Alyssa:** Great words. Following Soren's word "tough" and linking it to Yu's response as a segue, what things do you think challenge your definitions of "belonging"? Do you have experiences, at school or in extra-curriculars, that made your ideas of belonging falter?

**Stacey:** I think as a whole, for the full-semester students it was easier to connect with one another. I think in June of last year for instance, it was very popular to post yourself in student accounts on Instagram. There would be like "Class of '27" accounts and pages for different universities, and TUJ has one for the fall semester. This made it super easy for new students to connect and know each other by name in that way.

Now, however, for this wave of newcomers, they lack this same advantage that we had. So, I think it is harder for them to connect. I don't know what will happen in the semester, I think it might be difficult for them to become friends with students who were part of the fall-entry semester social media network. Especially if one is an introvert, like me, and it's hard for me to talk to people. But, when I'm forced to it's fine.

I think it was an event that the student government had where they invited different students from different universities. I honestly did not know what the event was about until they told us, "You guys have to get to know one another even though you are from different universities." Although it was a challenge at first, I was able to make new connections. Putting yourself out there is what truly counts.

**Jiyeon:** For me, communication was challenging because I am a non-native speaker. In order to figure out if this place is safe in the class or in any group, I need to communicate that in spite of my fear. However, this proactive approach should also be conducted not just by me but from outside of me: like professors, or classmates. When I saw these efforts, I finally got to know about others and the feeling that this was a safe space. TUJ made me think I can speak up.

**Soren:** I was raised homeschooled so this is actually the first time I have ever been to a formal school. Because of this, I felt like I didn't belong because I was different and I wasn't appreciated. It's like, "You're too different, you don't know the same things we do". I think that's the toughest thing about "belonging": it's feeling like your differences are an obstacle rather than an asset. My experience at TUJ has been the opposite of what it was before. Everyone here has been different so it's been embraced that, "You're different, we like that you're an individual." You're uncomfortable but everyone here's a bit uncomfortable: if you're Japanese, speaking a different language, from an international school, moved to Tokyo, or if you're from America and you have to learn Japanese, everyone kind of is, I think, a little bit uncomfortable at the start but it kind of forces you to embrace differences a lot more because you don't have the room to be comfortable.

There's no hierarchy in my opinion, at least in my experience. But, you still can feel alone and come to another country, especially if you don't have family coming with you and you haven't been there before, it's overwhelming. It's really hard to try new things when you feel alone and you just try to survive. So, I have tried to approach it like: making friends or going to talk to people or just doing something that scares you. Lean into it. I think there's a big barrier, not having groups or parents around, feeling isolated, alone, and



like your difference is not appreciated.

**Ume:** The tough part for me was breaking the stereotypes. Japanese people only seem to have second-hand information about how I look. They already have an image of how I'm gonna behave and everything so that was the tough part. There's not a lot of correct information, and I feel like Japan is already pretty closed off from international news and media. There is not a lot of information about the southern part of the world. So, I'm half Pakistani and half Japanese, so there is a lot of misinformation about that as well. It's only when you explain to them that "This is not how we work", then everybody's super accepting.

**KT Alyssa:** Can you explain a little more about those visual aspects of belonging?

**Ume (continued):** Well, a lot of people look at me weird because I wear the headscarf. There's a lot of people, especially the old people who just come up to me and ask, "Why do you wear this?" and I have to explain in my broken Japanese why I wear it. So, at first it was weird. For me it was a norm, but this isn't a norm in Japan. I get things like "Oh, you're here now. You don't need to wear it," and I have to say it's my choice. It's a stereotype to think I'm forced to wear this in any capacity.

**KT Alyssa:** Interesting. I guess these barriers of belonging happen both online and offline. Do you have any feelings that your online and offline sense of belonging differ?

**Soren:** One big difference is about actually feeling connected. If it's only an online connection, I don't really feel like there's something that really bridges us and it feels a bit more topical and actually kind of distant and disconnected. So, what I like is an offline connection that is enhanced by an online one, but not the other way around.

**KT Alyssa:** I guess so! Are there any differences you feel between connections that are student-led versus university-led or otherwise?

**Stacey:** At the dorms especially, TUJ has students connect on Discord accounts. It's a way to bring new students to ask questions like "When's your flight?" or "What would you recommend around here?" and I think that really helps build connections among us online. Nonetheless, I agree with Soren. Connections are better offline, but sometimes when you're coming to a new country and you don't know what you're doing and others are the same, then you work on it online, and then finally eventually meet, you think: "Wow, we finally did it". It's a way that social media helps with connections.

**KT Alyssa:** Everyone seems to be in agreement so I want to ask, how do you feel like international student communities "belong" in Tokyo and broader communities or spaces?

**Soren:** I kind of think you belong because you don't belong! In Japan in a way, it's either you're Japanese or you're a foreigner. Everyone who falls outside of "Japanese" builds this bigger community of "not belonging". I thought about this: I don't fit in my own country, not in my own state, or not among my friends, so well then why not just be a foreigner? Why not embrace the fact that I don't fit in? I think it was somewhat paradoxical but special in that way, especially here in Tokyo.

**Ume:** I agree. Since everyone in Tokyo seems to be living such a fast-paced life, every time you go to any station, somebody's like running and then you're just walking. You think: "Wait, what's the rush?" That's like the distance between being a local and a foreigner: observing these differences in pace.

**Soren:** Yeah, everyone has these observations. No matter where they're from, you really want to be friends with them because you have a shared struggle whereas if you're back in America, there's certain people you don't want to associate with. So, it really kind of breaks down a lot of those stereotypes and you're all on the same boat. It feels a lot more "communal" in some sense.

**Stacey:** I noticed a difference living in America and in Japan. When you live in America, there aren't many stereotypes and you are not confronted with them in a harsh way. I think since Japan is such a closed society, questions about difference became questions of curiosity. When people ask "Why are you wearing a hijab?", it is not necessarily exclusionary, but because they haven't seen it as much before.

**KT Alyssa:** Nona, you described yourself early on as "fully Japanese" so I wondered if you also felt these differences in your own life in Tokyo or in TUJ.

**Nona:** I don't feel there's a wall between Japanese and foreigners. In my experience living in Japan as a Japanese person, even though I spoke Japanese, it's sometimes hard to understand Japanese thinking. There was still something different. There are misconceptions and stereotypes about certain people, but as I spent time with more different people here at TUJ, I learnt that we're all the same as human beings.

**KT Alyssa:** Will, do you have anything to say about how you might resonate or relate to these thoughts as someone also relatively new to Japan as an international student?



**KT Will:** I think TUJ has a lot more going on for university-led initiatives for inclusion, and I agree that in Japan “being a foreigner is the only way to live” (referring to Soren’s points), and it is paradoxical. But, it is a way to bond.

**Ume:** Maybe it’s still harder to make local friends because people are busier making their life here? Most locals are trying to get a full time job or part time job, but as a foreigner you have that at home too and you can talk about the same stuff. Kind of like trauma bonding.

**KT Alyssa:** Right, haha! Let’s move on to the last question: what are the few things you might want to say to Komaba Times’ readers to share your different senses and definitions of “belonging”?

**Soren:** Build a relationship with your local community. I have a restaurant and the owner speaks no English, but I have gotten to know them quite well. Just having the curiosity to ask people about what they do is great. I can’t walk ten steps without running into someone and having a side conversation! This is all just about “knowing and getting to be known”.

**Ume:** On campus, I helped create a club called MSA (Muslim Students Association) and we have everyone from different Muslim backgrounds come together, freshmen and sophomores, to help them adjust to life in Tokyo. We have lists of brands or products and Japanese terms to look out for on labels. That’s what I do to share belonging.

**Stacey:** I found a job in Tokyo as a waitress, and at first I didn’t think it was for me. But, getting to know the owner and staff made me feel like I could just be

myself. With me, growing up in southern hospitality, I love talking to people! “How’s your day going?”, “How are you?” and these things are part of putting myself out there and taking a risk. It helped me feel like I belong, while making others feel like they belong too.

**Nona:** It’s easier for me to feel like I belong when I’m part of a team. As a member of the student government, my role in that organization is to encourage students to join clubs. I also volunteer for organizing events for this town (Sangenjaya). We are trying to make an online platform to connect people for special activities.

**Jiyeon:** I try to take action in daily life, in organizing events with people who have the same beliefs for instance.

**Yu:** I tend to think of it from a student-worker perspective. My job is to be at the front desk and be the first person to help a student when they come in. It could just be a “living in Japan” issue like bills or utilities, or even issues like medical help or mental health. However, I want to focus on how I can speak for those who can’t speak for themselves. Those who come to the front desk already have the initiative to speak up, so I wonder how I can reach other students who can’t do the same yet. I have made several posters for this, and things that are in the student handbook.

**KT Alyssa:** Thank you everyone. I really hope that we can foster the connections we’ve made today towards a longer-lasting intercampus relationship! We look forward to more collaborations and activities that can help us share our many versions of belonging, and share knowledge and skills about doing these on the university campus, and in Tokyo.



You have met (from left to right of photo): **Yu**, DEI Peer Mentor for the Office of Student Services and Engagement; **Alyssa**, Editor-in-Chief of Komaba Times; **Will**, Head of Editing for Komaba Times; **Nona**, a Student Government member, career office member; **Soren**, the Student Government President majoring in International Affairs; **Stacey**, a member of the Emerging Leaders program; **Ume**, a Success Coach at TLC and Stress Management Peer mentor for OSSE and member of the Muslim Student Association; and **Jiyeon**, a TUJ LEAD fellow. Photo taken by Tomoko Matsui.

Special thanks to **Tomoko Matsui** for helping organize this exchange between Komaba Times, and TUJ’s excellent students.

# Reclaiming time, place and belonging: **FUKUSHIMA 12 YEARS ON**

*Abigail Chua*

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on 11 March 2011, on a cold winter day. The devastating triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident resulted in over 19,700 deaths, over 6,000 injured and more than 2,500 still unaccounted for. 12 years on, I had the chance to travel to Fukushima with Professor Hattori Takahiro from the Graduate School of Public Policy, officers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and my classmates as part of the CAMPUS Asia + course offered in the Graduate School of Public Policy (GraSPP). I witnessed the quiet beauty of the place, the resilience of the locals, and the steadfast hopes for the future the residents hold close to their hearts. I reflected on the place, nature's might and the role of policy for its future.



Still, there are some who chose to return, such as the head of the local residents community of Namie Town, Sato-san. Even though

Namie continues to lack secondary supporting infrastructure, such as nursing homes, Sato-san chose to come back to what he views as his home. Speaking to us as CAMPUS Asia + students, he firmly said that he welcomes newcomers to Namie to create a new future for the place, and establish a new community; a viewpoint which is rare to find among small towns in Japan.



<sup>1</sup> Visit to the The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum in Futaba

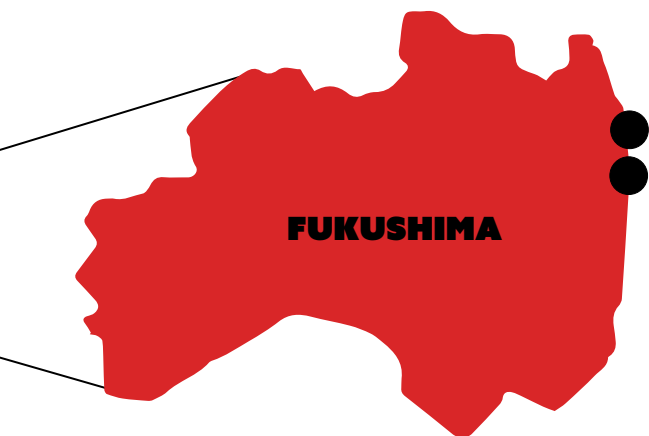
Our trip brought us to the two towns of Namie and Futaba in Fukushima, both of which were directly impacted by the disaster, often referred to as 3.11. As the radiation spread outwards from the Daiichi Nuclear Plant, residents were forced to evacuate and leave their homes in haste, many not knowing when they would return, if at all. Today, many continue to reside outside of these towns, as they do not want to be uprooted once again. For others perhaps deep unspoken emotions pertaining to the trauma of the tsunami linger.



<sup>2</sup> Ukedo Elementary School in Namie

It is this sense of a new creation which sparks excitement and innovation in Fukushima. The government has made efforts to revitalise the region through building new plants and research outposts in emerging industries such as renewable energy, drone and robot technologies and entrepreneurial incubation spaces. Driving through the towns, large swathes of unused farm plots have been transformed into solar panel plots, converting sunshine into clean energy. Dedicated grant schemes and innovation support have been set up to inject new forms of industry and kickstart the recovery of Fukushima's economy.





**NAMIE**

**FUTABA**

On the flip side, there were multiple learning points which I personally took away, from a policymaking perspective. There were various risk assessment lapses done for the Daiichi Nuclear Plant, including greatly underestimating the likelihood of a tsunami impact on the plant. Further, the coordination between government level and the operations on ground could be improved, especially in the evacuation of residents, many of whom were kept in the dark about the actual extent of the disaster and what course of action to take. These remind me of the importance of scenario planning and enhancing communication flows not only within the government, but also externally to key stakeholders. These are important policy-related learnings which we as policy students should be cognisant of.

Still, even as progress is made, the past continues to colour present-day life in Fukushima, and a sense of loneliness persists. Viewing the photographs and exhibits at the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum, I witnessed the smallness of man against the great might of nature. In the wake of a tsunami, one struggles to comprehend what is left. Pictures showed metal signages folded like paper and concrete structures crumbling like sand. The most mundane of everyday items are the most affecting. A traffic light bent almost 30 degrees to the left, a timesheet punch card soaked and dislodged from its case, a pair of shoes adrift.

Coming from Singapore where there are no natural disasters, I recognise I have no basis to understand the true depths of loss and pain the disaster inflicted on the people of Fukushima. All I could do was stare out at the vast ocean, imagining the height of the wave that arrived at the shore all those years ago, and be simultaneously amazed at the peace and calm we experienced then on that sunny December day.

While the sheer force of nature depicted in the town's archived history was certainly humbling, I was nonetheless inspired by the human spirit. We visited the Namie Town Ukedo Elementary School, where we learnt how one of the students plucked up enough courage to guide his teachers and other students through a path upwards to the nearest hill, saving all the students and teachers from the tsunami. Other reports spoke of the graciousness and kindness extended between locals in looking out for each other. The assistance offered by other countries also spoke of the larger international community and shared humanity we have.

As an international student studying at GraSPP, I am excited to see what the future holds for Fukushima, and I am grateful to have had the chance to visit. I am also heartened that this trip allowed future policymakers such as GraSPP students to see first hand the implications of policy implementation, in particular the need to drive innovation while being sensitive to the viewpoints of various stakeholders. May Fukushima continue to thrive and may the various hopes of residents continue to find space to grow and take root.



<sup>3</sup> One of the many abandoned houses in Futaba



<sup>4</sup> Kozen-ji Temple in Futaba

*Edited by Suyeon & Alyssa | Designed by Pedro*  
*Photo 1 by Nobue Nachi, Senior Program Manager at GrasPP*  
*Photos 2-4 by Abigail*

# On whom will the lights :

Amid Tokyo's ceaseless rhythm, there lies Kabukicho Square, a peculiar microcosm cradled by the towering sentinels of high-rise buildings. Better known as the *Toyoko* (ト一横) area, it is located around the Shinjuku Toho Building, a complex built on the site of the old Shinjuku Koma Theater. It is a paradoxical haven, a canvas where light and shadow dance in a delicate, dangerous ballet.

The buildings, garbed in their neon armor, stand as silent watchers over the stories unfolding below. As modern-day gargoyles of an urban cathedral, their flickering lights cast an otherworldly glow on the faces of those who traverse the square.

Here, pleasure seekers roam, their pockets heavy with the promise of opulence, seeking the ephemeral delights of the flesh. The air is thick with the scent of desires, each corner whispering secrets of carnal escapades. Beneath this veneer of indulgence, there runs a dark undercurrent, a lurking danger that preys on the unwary. It's a reminder that even in a city as vibrant as Tokyo, shadows linger close, ready to ensnare those who tread without caution. Tourists flock to this spectacle, standing on tiptoes as they gaze with a mix of awe and apprehension, their forays into this realm are nothing more than a brief brush with the unknown. To them, *Toyoko* is a fleeting glimpse into a side of Japan seldom seen in postcards and travel brochures.

In the midst of this urban jungle, the homeless find their solace, their presence a stark contrast to the city's otherwise pristine image. They wander, often inebriated, their minds clouded by medicines that mimic a

more potent escape, a desperate bid to dull the edges of their harsh realities. They exist in a perpetual twilight, voices often raised in argument and revelry. Among them walk the lost children of Tokyo, their young eyes reflecting a world that has pushed them to the fringes. They are the runaways, outcasts, misfits, their teenage years marred by dislocation. In *Toyoko*, they find a semblance of kinship, a place where their stories find an echo in the hearts of others.

It was into this mosaic of human experience that we, students working on an ethnographic film, stepped into. We came as observers, our cameras poised to capture snippets of the raw, unvarnished moments of life in *Toyoko*.

On the first day, we observed from a distance, maintaining a respectful, if somewhat awkward, boundary. The kids congregated in their corner, and we loitered, unsure, across from them.

For me, that gap was not borne of fear, but of a profound sense of being out of place, of standing on the edge of a world I did not comprehend. We were outsiders, intruders in a land that spoke a different language of life and survival. Our attempts to bridge this divide were clumsy at best. We hoped to catch one of the teens alone, following them to the convenience store, hiding behind shelves in a comical dance of cat and mouse. We half-heartedly wished they would notice us, confront us, and force us into the interaction we were too apprehensive to initiate. But such confrontations never came. To them, we were just shadows against the backdrop of their world – unremarkable, unnoticeable, easily forgotten. Our first foray into this realm was



# in トー横 shine tonight?

Madeleine Shi

uneventful, a day marked more by what didn't happen than by what did.

Our second week was a series of tumultuous highs and lows. Driven by a need for progress, Ronnie, with a boldness I admire, raised her camera and began to film.

The teens seemed unperturbed by our presence, and I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. A boy with foxlike, slanted eyes caught our gaze. He scrunched his face into a half-smile, his hand fluttering up in a playful victory sign. This small acknowledgment emboldened us, and we approached them with our rehearsed introduction: we were university students working on a school project, and we would be grateful if they allowed us to film their activities here. They listened with polite indifference, their smiles brittle, plastered on in an unnatural manner. The cracks were visible beneath their facade.

As we asked each of them for permission to film, those who were half-heartedly willing to talk came up with immediate excuses: work obligations, agency contracts, discomfort with cameras. Those less inclined to engage simply melted away from us. Conversation among themselves resumed, and they began to give us a wide berth.

Debating our next move, I felt a sudden, rough tug at my arm. Turning, I was confronted by a disheveled man reeking of alcohol, his bloodshot eyes bearing down on me, his mustache unkempt, his baseball hat skewed. He was one of the homeless who had been lingering near the kids.

—お前ガキたち、なんでここにいる？ カメラを持って俺らの写真撮ってる？

“Why are you kids here? Whatcha doing with a camera? Taking photos, are we?” He lunged at Ronnie's camera.

We stepped back, trying to ward him off. He was uncomfortably close.

—カメラをよせ。

“Gimme that camera,” he demanded again but was pulled away by another man who had crept up unnoticed.

—落ち着けよ、子供たちに手を出すな。  
“Easy there. Do not manhandle the children,” the newcomer said, his voice sleekly smooth but more venomous than the first man's drunken slurs.

Instinctively, I grabbed Ronnie's arm, seeking safety in proximity. This man was taller, his bulk accentuated by a fur coat. Long white blonde hair framed a hard, angular face, and his icy blue eyes looked down on us with unconcealed disdain.

—さっき、俺らの写真、撮ったのか？

“Did you take photos of us?” he asked. I struggled to keep my voice steady,

—撮ってない、子供たちに動画を取る許可を求めます。君たちの動画ではありません。

“We didn't. We were trying to film the children over there, not you.” I stood a little taller, bolstered by the truth of my words.

—じゃ、カメラ俺に見せて。

“Then lemme have the camera!” the first man interjected.

—手を出すな！

“Don’t touch them,” he was blocked again.

—あそこの子たち、「撮っていい」と言ったか？

“And did the children agree to be filmed?” the taller man pressed.

—えっと…言わなかったけど、聞く途中なので…

“Well… No,” I deflated. “But we were asking…”

He cut me off, stepping menacingly closer.

—偉そうな言い方だね。でもさ、なんで撮らせてくれると思ったの？

“You spoke of high-and-mighty things. But did you stop to think why they would allow you to film them?”

—それは…ちょっとわからないけど…

“I don’t know, but…”

—ノーメリット。全然ノーメリット。お前、彼らが何を経験したか知っている？

“No merit for them. No merit at all! Do you know what they have been through?”

—えっと…

“I…”

—何も知らねーじゃん。それでここに来て友達になろうと思ってるのか。

“You know nothing. And yet you come here expecting to be friends?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

—誰にも無理に話したり撮影したりしていません。だから許可を求めたんです。

Anger flared within me. “We are not forcing anyone to talk to us or be filmed. That’s why we were asking for permission.”

—じゃあ、もう一度聞いてみてなよ。答えが変わるかどうかなんて、知ったことか。

His mouth curled into a mocking sneer. “Well, go on then. Ask again. See if their response will be any different.” He gestured flamboyantly towards the group of kids, who were observing our exchange.

We didn’t move.

His tsk-tsk and dismissive shake of his head sealed our defeat.

—聞いてない？ やっぱな。俺が聞いてやるよ。おい、お前ら、この人たちに撮影されたい奴いるのか。

“Not asking? Thought so. I can ask for you. Oi! You kids, you want to be filmed by these people?” No one responded. He smirked as if his point was proven.

—ほら、だれもてめえなんか要らねんだよ。さっさと帰れ。

“See? No one wants you here. Why don’t you get out of here? Leave, right now.”

I tightened my grip on Ronnie’s arm, standing my ground.

—ここは誰でも出入りする場所なのに、どうして私たちはあなたの言うことを聞かなければならないのか。

“Everyone comes and goes around here. Why should we listen to you?”

—残ってもいいけど、お前たちはここに居場所なんかない。なにがいいかわかってるなら、さっさと消えろ。

“Stay then. But you don’t belong here. If you know what’s good for you, you should hurry up and leave.” His humorless laugh echoed in our ears as he left us with a chilling reminder – we were in a world that did not welcome us, a world where belonging was a currency we did not possess.

His words hung heavily in the air, a palpable reminder of the chasm between our worlds. Despite the intimidation and the clear message that we didn’t belong, a resolve solidified within us. We were not there to unravel mysteries or claim understanding but to simply bear witness to the life unfolding in this corner of Tokyo.

I looked at Ronnie, whose determination mirrored my own. “We stay,” I said quietly, my voice firm.

Ronnie nodded, her grip on the camera unwavering. “Let’s keep trying,” she said. “Maybe not today, but we’ll find a way to connect, to see their world.”

We watched as the man, his fur coat trailing behind him, disappeared into the crowd. The homeless man, now calmer, retreated to his spot. The teens, still huddled together, cast curious glances at us but remained distant.

“We respect your space,” I called out gently to them. “We’re not here to intrude. We just want to talk a bit if you’ll let us.”

There was no immediate response, just the bustling sound of Toyoko around us. But in their glances, I sensed a flicker of curiosity, a possible opening for the days to come.

As the night deepened, we made our way out of the square, the neon lights casting our silhouettes on the pavement. Our journey in Toyoko was far from over. It was a path fraught with challenges, but it was one we were committed to walking.

# Basso Continuo

Mizuki Igata

The heat concealing pain  
Invisible  
Only three seconds until it  
Colonizes  
The northern side of my  
Middle finger

My index anger  
Touching the ash  
Lotus gas explosion  
Only the eyes of a child  
Stuck in the pale LED  
Caught the pillar of fire

Find the basso continuo  
With bare hands  
You know when you touch it  
Never let it go

A high-class courtesan  
Stuck in the pale LCD  
Nambu Line Totsuka Station  
In the moment I looked away  
The a-little-bit-insane lady  
Tumbled into a second-class river

Above the red emergency stop button  
Only the eyes of a  
Security camera  
Caught the ripples of nipples

Find the basso continuo  
It leaks  
Becoming black, jelly-like  
Hold onto it

Hold onto it  
Hold out it  
You see  
One broken musical scale appears  
Scale each sound and sound and  
Sound

Do not breathe  
Do not ask questions  
From the topmost step you see the  
Arcs

Undulating lotus pillar of fire  
Resonating ripples of nipples  
Each drawing their own  
Arc

The next morning, Shinobazu Pond is silent  
Because to the muddy bottom  
The oil floating settles with  
The sound of rain and rain and  
Rain

The next morning, Tokyo Bay is bustling  
Because to the clear sky  
The milk floating sends back  
The sound of rain and rain and  
Rain

漢

字

歌

# Sing Kanji, Sing!

Yang Xu

My relationship with *kanji* ( 漢字 ) is a silent one. It's an immediate conversation, a tacit agreement, and a blink whenever we bump into each other on the streets and in bookstores. We have a friendship of twenty years, and after all that time, we still have not become estranged. Walking through neighborhoods in Tokyo, it's easy to pretend that I am just in another Chinese city with signs of neon characters embracing me. The sense of belonging never goes away.

Nonetheless, relying on kanji makes me illiterate in Japan. To me, I am illiterate when I am unable to utter the pronunciation, to "read" it out, and to share its cultural richness with others through conversations. Don't get me wrong – the *onyomi* ( 音読み ), which is the Chinese pronunciation, is bearable and even ideal if there isn't an inconvenient Japanese *kunyomi* ( 訓読み ), counterpart to add a sense of ambiguity. When a kanji character has more than one possible pronunciation, the sense of loss feels so poignant. It is enough to shatter the bricks of Mandarin Chinese, my mother tongue, that shelters me from ambiguity and timidity.

My hostility to the sound of kanji has grown so strong that I have kept my kanji name a secret ever since I landed in Tokyo. I hid the actual kanji characters of my name from everyone, including the *kuyakusho* ( 区役所 , ward office), so that they would not compromise my identity with strange onyomi or kunyomi combinations of consonants and vowels to which I would never turn my head with a smile. I still find my sense of belonging in kanji, but it can be hurtful when my obsession with uniformity prevents me from speaking it, and learning the breadth of its true identity. I am revenged on as well: my name has to be written in *katakana* ( 片仮名 ) so that nobody would corrupt my kanji name with an incompatible pronunciation. With the heavy cost of forever concealing who I truly am, my relationship with kanji becomes a battle with no winners.

Complicated as my affinity with kanji may be, it is still a privilege for me as someone with a culturally Chinese upbringing to learn Japanese, although privilege often becomes "invisible" to those who have it. While Japanese learners from other cultures find learning kanji one of the most formidable processes, my sentimental struggle seems excessive and even brutal. Isn't it unfortunate that I fail to appreciate the excitement and novelty of a new culture? Isn't my nostalgia a form of arrogance, shunning the beauty of the unexplored? Kanji builds me a cocoon, a belonging that feels so secure. But maybe my silence abuses it, turning it into a trap of self-isolation.

Unmute kanji. Let it sing. While pronouncing my kanji name with kunyomi still feels estranged, and my cringing expression always makes my sister laugh over video calls, I am starting to become more active in my kanji lessons and vocabulary quizzes. Unlike the way I speak Chinese, my voice turns thicker and deeper with a slower pace when I read kanji, as if the process of learning kanji unlocks the access to a new personality invulnerable and unperturbed by unfamiliarity and discomfort. Linguistic learning complements personality growth – what a surprise! While relishing my "Japanese voice" is a narcissistic secret I would only wish to keep to myself, I want to unmask the truth of belonging: stop alienating others, and you will feel less alienated. Here it goes: sing kanji, sing.



# Lost in Tokyo, Found in Japan: Snow-covered Discoveries on Belonging

Andrew Lee

Belonging is about being in a place where I am happy, engaging freely in activities I enjoy, and behaving naturally. This is what I imagined I would feel living in Tokyo and studying in a master's program at The University of Tokyo, a long-held dream that led me to leave my life and career plans in Taiwan behind. Yet, lately, I've found myself wondering, "Am I really where I belong?"

When I first arrived in Tokyo last September, my joy knew no bounds: I was ecstatic to start anew in Japan, traveling extensively from Tohoku to Kyushu, savoring the best ramen and *konbini* (コンビニ, convenience store) delicacies. Each day was a slice of heaven, marked by the repeated thrill of declaring, "This ramen is the best I've ever had!" Before the semester began, I forged new friendships and eagerly anticipated the diverse courses offered. I looked forward to joining a *zemi* (ゼミ, research lab) and collaborating with my advisor on my thesis. These experiences filled me with a sense of rightness, a feeling of belonging.

However, as time passed, doubts crept in. The initial thrill of class days morphed into routine Tuesday night seminars. The excitement of commuting to school by subway turned into concerns about crowded trains. The pleasure of learning was overshadowed by the relentless pursuit of deadlines. My dream life – once so vibrant and desirable – gradually lost its sheen, becoming just another mundane existence. I would reassure myself that this was normal, a typical response to the monotony of daily life. But the more I delved into my master's thesis and term papers, the more I felt disconnected. I questioned, "Am I still myself? Do I truly belong here?" My once dreamt-of life in Tokyo began to feel like a challenge to my sense of belonging and purpose.

My last Christmas trip to the Tohoku region transformed what "belonging" really means to me. When traveling across Japan, I cherish the moments spent gazing out train windows, absorbed in the ever-shifting landscape. Whether arriving at an *onsen ryokan* (温泉旅館, Japanese hot-spring hotel) or just after





soaking in the onsen, I take time to admire the view. I still remember clearly what my emotions were the first time I caught a glimpse of the snow from the *Shinkansen* (新幹線, bullet train). As we passed Morioka Station, I was left in awe, and excited by this first opportunity to enjoy the stunning snow view from a *ryokan* in Misawa City. Aomori Prefecture was simply breathtaking. I often feel as if I am entering a different world, as my inner world settles into a state of serenity as the scenery unfolds. In these moments, a profound sense of belonging envelops me, affirming that I am exactly where I should be. I then ask myself this when I am facing the changing views outside: “Since I am now at a different place, I can truly become what I want to be, right?” The act of looking out the window becomes a meditative dialogue with myself, reinforcing my reasons for being here. It strengthens my bond with the natural world, offering a retreat from daily life and fostering a deep conversation with my inner self about identity.

Traveling past Misawa to Aomori City, I was struck by the amazing sense of excitement brought by my first experience with Aomori snow outside Aomori Station. Despite numerous visits to Japan, I had never witnessed Aomori snow firsthand. Ecstatic and overwhelmed with curiosity, I joyfully tread on the fresh snow, my laughter becoming uncontrollable. Even as I fell into an unexpected tumble, I found myself laughing even more heartily, telling my friend, “This feeling is so delightful!” Her bemused smile in response deepened my wonderment as a sense of refreshment washed over me. It was as if these happy tumbles in the snow and the first experiences of Japan I’ve held close to my heart since middle school were converging to remind me of my purpose here and the true self I am striving to become. From learning Japanese to majoring in international relations in undergraduate studies to eventually enrolling in The University of Tokyo for my master’s, Japan has been the compass guiding my journey. That moment, with my head in the snow, novelty and joy transformed into belonging.

The pivotal event that ultimately crystallized my sense of belonging was going snowshoeing on Mount Hakkoda. Stepping outside my comfort zone for the first time in Japan, this experience opened up new horizons, allowing me to rediscover myself and find belonging. I was initially hesitant, but I now realize that refusing my friend’s invitation at that time would later haunt me as a lifelong regret. The sensation of walking through snow, the stunning silver thaw (ice-covered trees) along the trail, and the view of Aomori Bay from the mountain’s summit were unforgettable. “This is truly something I’ve never thought about trying before; thank you,” I told my friend. The encouragement from the tour guide – a Taiwanese national who encourages youth to engage in snowshoeing – was also enlightening. I learned that embracing new activities and forging connections energizes me and allows me to be my authentic self in Japan. Such experiences and relationships deepen my understanding of my identity and purpose.

My experiences in the Tohoku region last Christmas did more than just bring me back to my roots; they clarified the person I aspire to be and the objectives I aim to fulfill. These journeys highlight the importance of exploration and embracing new experiences in my quest for a sense of belonging. Such moments of clarity are rare yet profound, marking not just the passage of time but the growth of the self. As I continue to weave through the fabric of diverse cultures and landscapes, each step, each discovery becomes a stitch in the tapestry of my identity. Travel serves as the loom on which I find and define myself. It is in these adventures that I realize belonging is not a destination but a journey – one that I am crafting with each new dawn, each mountain traversed, and each snowflake that settles silently in the palm of my hand.

# Did we grow up online?

Lucia Stallard & Jenna Stallard

*This piece is based on a text conversation about **online personas** between sisters: Lucia (19) who lives in New Zealand, and Jenna (21) who lives in Japan.*



I think the extent to which we are perceived is crazy

like I'm so happy rn sitting in the cafe but if I were to take a photo and put it onto instagram it could be perceived so many different ways and I am so aware of that and have to cater to that!!!!

literally steals your ability to look at yourself in a simple matter

like am I now the perception others have of me?

I really look at some people and feel jealous

who seem to just act without this complex



and I feel so critical of other people

like I have an unlocked ability to really criticise people and so dating men is difficult because if they lack that then they're an extension of me I can't curate in the same way I curate myself is this... 'the ick?'



I'm currently  
unraveling the fact  
that everyone isn't  
just an online  
account.

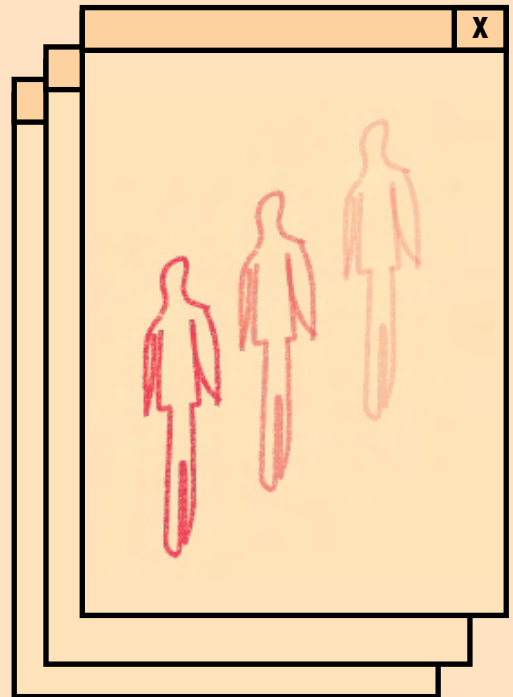
like I think this has a couple  
aspects but

**When people would say that there are  
so many people out there like you I  
didn't really feel the magnitude of  
that**

as someone who has grown up with  
online presence being EVERYTHING,

it's incredible to realise how that  
has affected who I associate with

and how much I respect their  
intellectual and social ability -  
based on captions and



it is a realisation for me that  
like someone can have an ugly  
instagram

and they're still as complex and  
valid as me HAHHAHAA

# Between the Illusions of Home & th

Priya Mu

Do you remember your first existential thought?

For me, it happened when I was four. I was sitting in my kindergarten classroom. It was during the lunch break, and I vaguely remember the classroom surroundings. Other kids were actively playing and giggling. The shape of the window rails and the height of the coconut sapling outside the window were a bit clearer than the inside of the classroom. I am not sure if it was because the room was darker. But one vivid memory from that day unfolded in the space of my own mind. I was lost in thoughts of my mother, wondering what she was doing at home. I thought about how my mother was always with me whenever I ate something and was surprised at the crushing realization that I was able to eat lunch on my own. I had always imagined my mother and I as one single entity; our bodies extensions of each other. In that moment, though, I realized that we were separate people. She – her own, and I – my own.

It was probably from that day onwards that, as soon as I reached home from school, I would run to her and hug her, pressing my face against her stomach gently covered by the drapes of her *sari*. Every night when I went to sleep I would crawl into her arms like a fetus. I've read that children find a sense of home by being close to the womb, the place that nurtured and protected us before we came into this world.

As I grew older, the distance between me and my mother grew both physically and emotionally. Home, I thought, should be a place where I felt not only safe but also free. Living with my family, oftentimes, did not feel like home. I felt suffocated from the constant expectation to become someone I did not want to be. The need for freedom took my feet to places further and further away from my home. While I did taste freedom from time to time, my search for home was in vain, as no place felt safe enough to be called a home. Eventually, I gave up on idealizing the notions of home, for it felt nothing more than an illusion to me. Home was left behind in the innocence of the four-year-old, that the world was a safe place as long as her skin was in touch with her mother's.







# *the Ephemeral Sense of Belonging*

But ‘belongingness’ was different;  
it was real.

I felt belongingness in moments shared, whether they were mundane everyday events or intense moments of joy or grief. Particularly grief, as the only way I found any trace of salvation was through belonging with someone who walked with me through the silence.

Grief is a silent path because words are superfluous. We could tell what the other person is thinking about, as it doesn’t forgive distractions.

But everything fades away with time.

Grief does. So does the momentary sense of belonging. It fades away quickly for those brief moments, and as for those longer and intense moments, it fades away much more slowly. But it definitely fades away.

The slow fade – that’s the tricky one. It happens without any forewarning, and by the time I notice something is off, the others and I are already walking on different paths, having chosen different means to move forward. Yet, we find each other once again, longing for that nostalgic sense of belonging, or we seek out new people in anticipation of a new sense of belonging, while being well aware of the ephemerality of it all.



# Breathing In



Belonging is a place. Belonging is a haven. Belonging is spending time with you. Belonging is having a meal together. Belonging is sharing our days. Belonging is smelling my favorite food, which you've made on the stove. Belonging is listening to you because you know what is best for me. Belonging is doing what you tell me to. Belonging is living out your anxieties and regrets. Belonging is achieving your definition of success. Belonging is breaking down in the middle of the night when the world is asleep. Belonging is hearing the yelling and screaming across the room. Belonging is carrying the burden of your failures. Belonging is a mistake. Belonging is not wanting to exist in the first place. Belonging is guilt. Belonging is fear. Belonging is a wound that never heals.

*Belonging is gasping for air.*

Belonging are nights of insomnia fearing the doctor's call. Belonging is seeing the last breath drawn and letting go. Belonging is knowing there is no going back. Belonging is the gorgeously sunny weather on that day you left me forever. Belonging is feeling a part of me wasting away. Belonging is a void. Belonging is the feeling of numbness. Belonging is this innermost fear of seeing anything that reminds me of you.

Belonging is drowning out the sorrows.

Belonging is feeling utterly helpless.

Belonging is desperately trying to grab onto you.

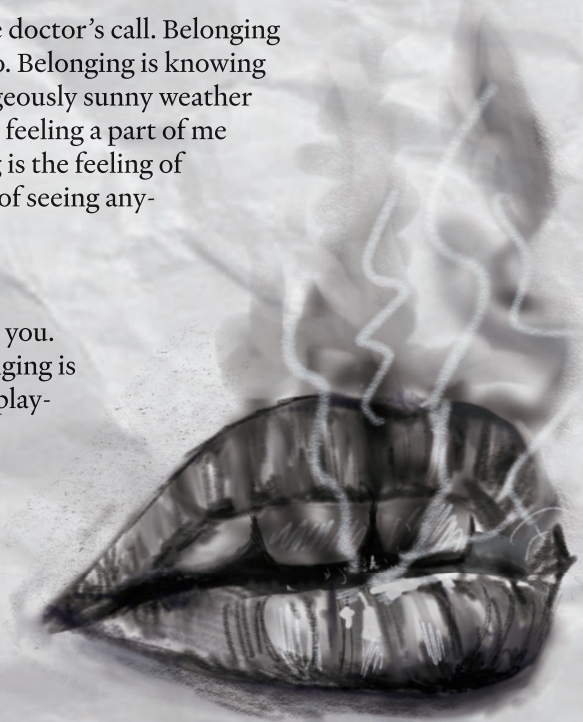
Belonging is grabbing nothing but air. Belonging is

accepting that you are gone. Belonging is replay-

ing that moment in my head over and over

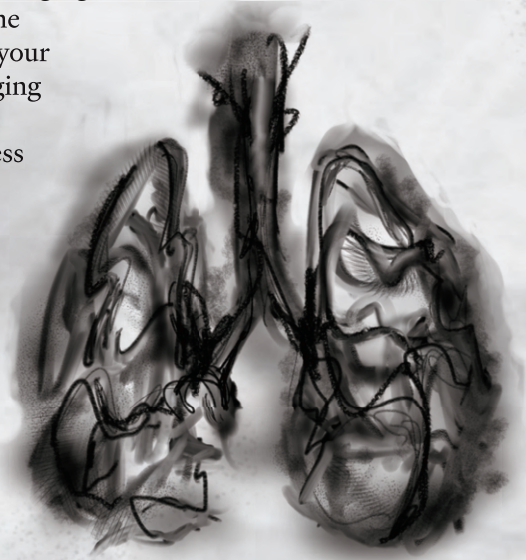
again. Belonging is a deafening silence.

*Belonging is suffocating.*





Belonging is you. Belonging is being by your side. Belonging is waking up next to you as the sun shines through the curtains. Belonging is watching the light bounce off your hair. Belonging is listening to your heartbeat. Belonging is running my fingers across your skin. Belonging is breathing you in. Belonging is feeling all the happiness in the world rushing through my veins. Belonging is hearing your voice. Belonging is feeling your presence. Belonging is wanting to melt my body into yours. Belonging is wanting to spend every waking moment drowning in your eyes. Belonging is wanting this to last forever. Belonging is giving you my heart and soul. Belonging is making myself vulnerable. Belonging is the fear of losing you. Belonging is sacrificing myself to make you feel whole.  
*Belonging is holding my breath.*



Belonging is finding out I am not the only one. Belonging is seeing traces of her. Belonging is hearing all of your excuses. Belonging is seeing you for you. Belonging is the rose color fading. Belonging is the blurring of my vision and the uncontrollable trembling. Belonging is your handwritten letter. Belonging is my whole world shattering and you not having a clue. Belonging is all the times I thought of you. Belonging is feeling like the worst person in the world. Belonging is the smoke in my lungs. Belonging is wanting to rip myself apart from the inside out. Belonging is wanting to scream at the top of my lungs and explode into the tiniest pieces. Belonging is a high pitched ringing. Belonging is denial. Belonging is falling into the abyss. Belonging is absolutely overwhelming, swallowing me whole. Belonging is detachment. Belonging is closure. Belonging is forgetting the sound of your voice and forgetting what you look like. Belonging is thinking of you and feeling nothing.  
*Belonging is breathing out.*

Belonging is the other shoe dropping. Belonging is not having any expectations. Belonging is the sheer happiness of a fluffy puppy with floppy ears as it runs towards you. Belonging is picking up a perfectly shaped golden ginkgo leaf. Belonging is knowing that the sun will rise tomorrow. Belonging is everything. Belonging is nothing. Belonging is this moment. Here and now. Forever and never.  
*Belonging is taking a deep breath in, and breathing out.*

8.

# 客厅

撰文 Text /

现在是晚上 10 点 39 分，我在家，东京。

妈妈打来电话，问我在哪。在家，我说。很难不留意到妈妈的犹豫，她总是在寻找合适的词汇来指代这个我称之为“家”的地方。大多数时候她把这个地方叫做“住处”，有时她也说“寝室”，尽管清楚知道我已经一个人在这住了一年多了。当她问“你什么时候回家”的时候，我知道，她指的只是她和爸爸、奶奶住的那个地方。

去年夏天我回了趟家，中国南方的一个小县城。从中学开始，关于家的记忆就是断断续续的，由一个个以回来开头，以离开结尾的周末拼接而成。家总是敞开的，爸妈在一楼开的彩票店就像客厅，每次回家我见到的都是不一样的客人。偶尔也会有一些熟悉的面孔，见到我，他们就像招待自己人一样用家乡的方言说，女儿回来啦。

他们也是我的家人吗？这些赤裸着上半身的男人，在一面墙努力制造意义的随机数字前叫嚷，把还没熄灭的烟头掷在瓷砖地面上，打电话给妻子说要晚点回家。这个客厅总是这样拥挤，人来人往，或者我也是其中的一个客人。

妈妈总是说，等以后搬进更大更好的房子里，要在真正的客厅茶几上插上鲜花。

现在就可以，我说。

现在家里乱糟糟的，四楼的客厅也没人用。每次她都这样回答。

# Living Room

诸葛蓉蓉 Rongrong Zhuge

如果会有一个更像家的地方，那么我们现在拥有的是什么呢？

其实我能明白。在东京的这个家里，我一直想养一株植物，龟背竹或者棕榈之类的什么。它会在我不见的地方悄悄呼吸、生长，伸出枝蔓温柔地拥抱我。但我没有。在这个十几平米的小空间里，我的椅子上长满了衣服，伸手抽一张纸就会打翻水杯。不知为何，我打扫的速度总是跟不上房间变乱的速度。家有自己的自由意志，却尚未有我的气息。

最近这些日子，我每天窝在家里玩好几个小时的动森，在岛上建造并装饰一个房子。这感觉就像我刚来东京时一样，兴致勃勃地购置家具，慢慢填满一个空房间，在这片异国的土地上成为一个空间的主人。有趣的是，这款游戏发布并蔚为流行的一年，也是很多人因为疫情被困在家里的一年。不断寻找家的人们，追求的不仅是一个供人居住的空间，也是在逃离的过程中重建人与人、物、空间之间的联结，拼凑零碎的自我。

今年春天妈妈来东京的时候，我们一起去买一株植物。





It's 10:38 pm. I'm at home. Tokyo.

Mom calls, asking me where I am. I tell her I'm at home. I can't help but notice her hesitation on the phone when choosing a word to refer to the place I call "home". Most of the time she calls it a residence. Sometimes she calls it a dorm, even though she knows that I've been here all by myself for more than a year. When she asks, "When will you come home?", I know she only refers to the place where she, my dad, and my grandma live.

Last summer, I went home to a small town in the southern part of China. Since junior high school, my memory of home has been fragmented, stitched together by weekends that start with returning and end with leaving. Home is always wide open – the lottery ticket store my parents run on the first floor feels like a living room where I constantly meet new guests. Sometimes there are familiar faces. Every time they see me, they greet me like one of their family members, calling in the hometown dialect, "The daughter is back!"

Are they my family too? These half-naked men, who yell at a wall of random numbers – the winning lottery numbers of past weeks, which strive to cobble themselves into an array that makes sense. The men toss their still-lit cigarette butts on the tile floor, calling their wives to say they will be home late. The living room is always crowded like this. People come and go, and I sometimes feel that maybe I'm one of the guests too.

Mom said, "When we move into a bigger and better house in the future, I'm going to put flowers on the tea table, in the real living room."

"You can do it right now." I told her.

Our home right now is a mess. Nobody uses the living room on the fourth floor. This is how my mom always responds.

If there is gonna be a place more like home, then what do we have now?

These days, though, I have begun to understand her feelings. I've always wanted to have a plant – a turtleback bamboo or a small palm tree – in my Tokyo home. Something that will quietly breathe and grow, reach out its arms and gently hug me. But, I haven't bought the plant. In this small space of a dozen square meters, clothes grow over my chair, and my cup always leaps off the table when I reach for a napkin. For some reason, I can never clean fast enough to keep up with the speed at which my room becomes a mess. My home has its own free will, not yet imbued with my smell.

These days I have spent hours at home in the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing*, building and decorating my virtual house on the island. It reminds me of when I first moved to Tokyo. I selected furniture with excitement, slowly filled up the empty room, and gradually became the owner of a space in this foreign land. Interestingly, the year when the game was released and went viral, 2020, was also the year that a lot of people were stuck in their homes due to the pandemic. Those who constantly seek a home look for more than just a room for living. They struggle to rebuild connections between people, objects, and space all in the process of running away... piecing together bits and pieces of self.

When mom comes to Tokyo this spring, we'll go buy a plant together.

# Sakura Bicycle

Sinugdanan nga kasaysayan,  
Sa mga baybayon nga bulawan, sa kaulohan nga mahayag,  
Sa gugma sa katawhan, nagdala'g kasadya'g kahamugaway

Pag-usbong ng kabataan, sa pagsilay ng hamon,  
Mga hakbang sa karera, sa unang lihim ng tagumpay,  
Hamon ng pagtanda, naglalakbay ang pangarap,  
Mga pagkakamali'y guro, mga tagumpay ay ganti,  
Sa paglipad ng oras, ang puso'y laging handang wasiwas

A splash of color, a kaleidoscope of hues,  
Diverse voices echoing, each a unique muse  
Independence met culture in a vibrant collaboration  
In the mosaic of experiences, a tapestry unfurls,  
Each thread a lesson, as the world spins and twirls

新たな章、かけがえない瞬間へ  
柔らかな風が語る、かつてない始まり  
カキツバタとオナガ、心の中で鳴り響く  
居場所を求めて、遠くへと懐かしさが募る





## Art and Poetry - Lian Sabella Castillo



The beginning of history,  
On the golden shores, in the vibrant city,  
Carrying joy and harmony in the love of the people

The bloom of youth, in the dawn of challenges,  
Steps in the career, in the first secrets of success,  
Challenges of aging, dreams journeying afar,  
Mistakes as teachers, successes as rewards,  
As time flies, the heart is always ready to flutter

A splash of color, a kaleidoscope of hues,  
Diverse voices echoing, each a unique muse  
Independence met culture in a vibrant collaboration  
In the mosaic of experiences, a tapestry unfurls,  
Each thread a lesson, as the world spins and twirls

A new chapter, to an irreplaceable moment  
An unprecedented beginning, told by a soft wind  
Iris and magpie, ringing in my heart  
In search of a place to stay, nostalgia grows far away

(Bisaya) This first about my birthplace,  
Davao City, where I spent the formative  
years of my life.

(Tagalog) I moved to Makati/Manila  
in my heyday and spent a good amount  
of time working through regrets and  
developing my weaknesses.

(English) In my mid 20s, I moved to  
Japan for the first time in Mitaka, and  
spent summers in Europe and the East  
Coast of the US. It was my first time living  
alone.

(Japanese) I went back to Japan through  
Kashiwa (magpie) and Katsushika (Iris)  
for the long-term this time around. With  
age, I struggle and long for community.





*Edited by Will | Illustration by Joanna | Graphics & Layout by Alyssa*



# Three Bleached Corals Talking About Politics

Alyssa Castillo Yap

I am a coral; caregiver, companion, creator of homes for living and breathing things.

I was born in tropical weather, but now in order to live I yearn for the distant calm and cool.  
Bleached by the world tick-tock-turning, everyone whitens around me – paler and ever-so forgetful.  
I am forced to dream of foreign shores. Extractive communities displace us; forlorn bodies into tools.

I contort as metaphors for the young, making waters bearable. Positive to save  
Others like me, tirelessly working for security in one form or another. Until...  
We are taught we are only spectacular when we are colorful, exploitable, and immobile.  
We are soft bodies with hard exoskeletons; bare and sensitive to waves.

Sporadically, we cry and weep over how far and large the innocent things we house will grow,  
To swim and travel more than we are allowed.

To those living in such comfort, you may not want to let it go:  
Do you stop to think about it as something endowed?  
Once you and I were superfluous gametes with nothing and yet everything to show.  
No X or Y now, only XOXO.

Who do you owe, who do I owe, who do we owe?

With tender tentacles stowed away to kill, little will the thieving powers ever know of my own will:

I am *already* a sister, and I am *already* a brother.  
I *have everything to be* a mother, as much as I *have everything to be* a father.  
I was *destined to be* a friendly shelter for vagabonds in the water.

Body, money, sex, politics, colonial territories: it is so hard to feel under the weather.  
Stressed and expelling the historical warmth of mutually beneficial others, we try so hard not to shatter.  
We hope our offspring remembers these matters. This is our love letter.

Us polyps evolved to thrive in colonies.

To be more than memories,  
To be more than things.

*In December 2023 at a cafe in Shibuya, I was lucky to reunite with two exceptional women, “M” from Malaysia and “D” from Indonesia, both of whom I (from the Philippines and Vietnam) met at the November 13th demonstration in Hachiko Square where we dried our lungs and banged our hearts demanding a ceasefire in Gaza. In that cafe, we explored the issue of activism in Japan as international students, as prospective mothers and as activists for the next generations. M and D were already planning futures for their future sons and daughters, I sat wondering why hope for children is as everlasting as it is fleeting.*

*At the time of the protest where we met, I thought the local organizers of the demonstration deliberately and perfectly timed the event – it had to overlap with a cute dog’s “100-year birthday celebration.” I left the demonstration desperately hoping that passers-by in Shibuya Crossing might feel the violent irony of furnishing a bedroom as a gift to a century-old Imperial University dog statue, and the erased history of hundreds of homeless citizens evicted from Mitake Park during the construction of now-Miyashita-Park’s superfluous high fashion stores, plastic rock-climbing facades, and concrete skateparks. Hachiko, the dog who the open-air space we were screaming on and fictitious queen-sized bed is named after, has been dead for nearly a century. Could these commuters stop to think whether we will make beds and furnished rooms honoring the dead children in Gaza 100 years on?*



by MAX

“We all change when you think about it. We’re all different all through our lives. And that’s okay, that’s good. You’ve got to keep moving. As long as you remember all the people that you used to be.” This is a quote from *Doctor Who*, in the Eleventh Doctor’s last episode. I believe that this is a brilliant quote to remind yourself why and how you are in the place that you are right now, and what brought you here. Or, you may ask yourself, “Well, how did I get here?”.

As a person who was born to live with two different nationalities, I was asked by many people: what my identity is, if I ever have an identity crisis, and how I get along with such crises if I do have to face them. To be honest, I never thought about it deeply, or at all for that matter. I was born and raised in Japan, so although I may have some Westernized tastes, I’ve always considered myself Japanese. This question about identity was mostly asked by my half-Japanese or other foreign peers, where the biggest difference lies in the fact that I’m ethnically Japanese, but existing in a similar environment. So, I took my time and saw this as a reminder to myself of how I think about my own identity, and perhaps help those who are having identity issues of their own.

I won’t get into specific personal details for this essay. Although I was born and raised in the environment of two different countries, I am not strictly half-Japanese, based on technical definitions. But, I would say I am someone living between Japanese and Western... But, ethnically or racially, I am Japanese.

When I was a kid, due to my grandfather’s health condition, I needed to get in the car for an 8 hour trip, without doing anything... which is probably how I learned the meaning of patience. While we were in the car, my parents used to play several CDs, and one of them was “The Music of Millennium”. It was an omnibus album of pop artists from the 1950s to 1990s, including Queen, Eric Clapton, David Bowie, and The Rolling Stones. That significantly served as my first and

major musical influence. So, while I do listen to modern music, it’s not as often. Also, my mother was a big fan of movies and TV shows, so she used to play *Back to the Future*, *Star Wars*, and the *Star Trek* series. Back then, *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* wasn’t popular for kids in Japan. So whenever I said “May the Force be with you” or “Live long and prosper”, most of my classmates didn’t get it.

I did watch *Doraemon*, or *Dragonball* like the other kids did, so I would say the pop culture influences that I grew up with were mixed. I believe this kind of childhood experience contributed to the formation of a quite unique personality, I would say.

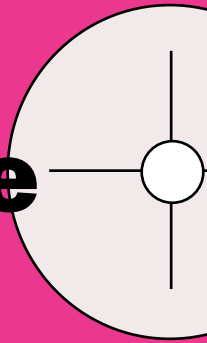
To be honest, I could feel that some people were confused and couldn’t understand my background, which I suppose was because they were trying to categorize people as being Japanese or not. The reason for the confusion could be my personality, or the fact that I was able to understand and communicate in English as a second language, thanks to the cram school I went to for over a decade.

But it didn’t bother me, because it was simply a different way of thinking from theirs. *How?* My core identity in terms of my nationality is Japanese, but the culture or experiences I have had are not only Japanese but also influenced by Western culture. Speaking English as a second language could be a factor; the language itself creates its persona, so mixing it while speaking Japanese probably resulted in a few reactions – both internally and externally. This whole chemical reaction contributed to my identity, something not only at the nation level, something bigger, but unique as in the saying “the one and only”.

This is probably why I never thought about my identity, or these questions as a part of having an identity crisis. I was just me. The first time I was asked “What is your identity?”, I was not sure how I should answer, but now I do. Back to quoting my favorite show: “I am MAX. The definite article, you might say.”



# Nippon Connection: Connecting Japan to the world, in a filmy way!



Written by Suyog Garg (UTokyo Physics D1)

Frankfurt-am-Maine is a large urban conglomeration, along the river Maine in the centre of Germany. This quintessentially German city takes on a Japanese vibe every year in late spring. This year too, at Frankfurt-am-Maine, spring is going to end with a downpour of Japanese cinema and art, colouring the skies with pinkish hue towards the end of May and early June. The reason for this transformation as usual is the arrival of Nippon Connection - a film festival like no other!

**This year marks the 24th edition of Nippon Connection.** Since its inception in 2000 the fest has grown itself to be the largest gathering of its kind anywhere in the world. It has become a major cultural phenomenon transcending political borders and bringing together the east and the west in its unique way. The festival is not just about films, although they are a huge part of it. It's also about music, arts and crafts, and food, and more importantly, it's also about the human connection. This is enthusiastically supported by the increasing frequency of footfalls at Nippon Connection year on year. In fact, a record number of 18,500 participants attended the event last year alone.

## History

Back in its infancy, Nippon Connection was a small affair. The story starts one quiet summer when Marion Klomfaß and Holger Ziegler, two film studies students at the Goethe Institute of Films, thought about putting up a Japanese film symposium. They were fuelled by a mutual interest in Japan, its culture, people, and films. Their conviction that the excellent cinema

being done in Japan is going unnoticed in Europe, had held a steady increasing pace. With this amateur idea, their intent was to introduce not only the avant-garde Japanese films to a wider, yet untouched audience, but to also have a platform to distribute works by lesser-known artists. This idea resulted in the first Nippon Connection, during which only about 13 films were screened, the whole fest lasting four days.



**Event: The 24th Nippon Connection  
Film Festival**

**Dates: 2024 May 28 ~ June 02**

**Place: Frankfurt-am-Maine, Germany**

**Venue: Artists' House Mousonturm  
and Production House NAXOS (main)  
and six other film screening centres**

**Website: [nipponconnection.com/en/](https://nipponconnection.com/en/)**

## On films, short and long

This year, a total of around 100 films of all genres will be screened, which is an evidence of the festival's remarkable growth over the years. **More than 50 Japanese filmmakers and artists will be showcasing their creations in this edition of Nippon Connection.**

Nippon Connection features the German, European or International premier for many of these films screened.

Up on the line for the films to be screened are some tantalising works by the stalwarts of the Japanese film industry. To name a few, the list includes Takeshi Kitano's samurai film *KUBI* (2023), Shunji Iwai's musical drama *Kyrie* [top right] and Nobuhiro Yamashita's heart-warming comedy *Let's Go Karaoke!* (2023) [bottom left]. Many of these films are inspired from or refer to actual events in Japanese political and social history. Another great work being showcased is *Fly me to the Saitama: From Biwa Lake with Love* (2019) by Hideki Takeuchi that hints onto some regional peculiarities of Japan in a comedy.

Nippon  
Connection



## Cultural extravaganza

The theme of the 24th Nippon Connection Film Festival has been chosen as **"Crossing Borders"**. Exploring the relationship between Japanese and international film landscapes. The festival will bring together old and new co-productions, Japanese noir films and will host several discussions and talks aligning with the theme.

Given its origins in a university campus, it would also be natural for the festival to be inclined towards film studies. Indeed, lectures and talks by university professors also often take place as part of Nippon Connection. For instance, this year Dr. Iris Haukamp will be talking about the intriguing history of the somewhat controversial 1937 film *The Samurai's Daughter* by Arnold Fanck, which will also be shown at the festival as one of the first German Japanese co-productions.

Once preventative measures for the COVID-19 pandemic settled down, the in-person held events in Nippon Connection rejuvenated with a new vigour last year. This year too, the festival continues its legacy of cultural programs organised in-lieu with the main film festival. A rich selection of more than 50 Japanese cultural events, art workshops and venues for culinary delights are slated to be part of the overall program. Visitors to the festival will not only be greeted with world-class Japanese cinema, but **they will also get to enjoy various traditional Japanese experiences, from arts & crafts to sake tasting and cooking lessons** (pictured left). For the kids accompanying their older attendees, the venues will have special kids-only programs like *aikido* workshops and traditional Japanese paper theatre called *kamishibai*.

## Awards

Since 2023, the organising committee of Nippon Connection has been awarding the Nippon Rising Star Award to promising young talents from the Japanese film industry. This year the coveted prize will be accepted by the talented **Ms Kotone Furukawa** (pictured on the right). Furukawa-san is also the guest of honour at this year's film festival. She gained international acclaim for her outstanding role in Ryusuke Hamaguchi's romantic drama *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, which won the Silver Bear at the 2021 Berlinale. A highlight of this year's festival will be the world premiere of Kotone Furukawa starring romantic mystery *Secret: A Hidden Score*.

Additionally, for the first time this year, the Nippon Storytelling Award will also be presented for the best screenplay.



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## A lasting charm

A major distinctive characteristic of Nippon Connection is that a majority of the organising committee members are students and other locals volunteering their time for the festival. Every year hundreds of these professionals and non-professionals join hands in managing all aspects of the event, from sending out the invitations, to monitoring the queues at the food stalls. Further, all editions of the festivals have been organised by the eponymous non-for-profit association. For such a volunteer driven non-profit festival to be able to garner widespread fame and reach record-breaking heights year-on-year, speaks volumes about the hard work and dedication that goes into its making.

Much like a film itself, Nippon Connection also seems to have a lasting charm. "Every time I return to the Mousonturm, it feels like both forever and no time at all since I last left.", wrote Noah Franc on the Nippon Connection blog after attending last year's edition. For sure as usual the festivities at the 24th Nippon Festival will also be magnificent, and Frankfurt-am-Maine will once again take on a Japanese turn.

**So, auf Wiedersehen (as they say in Germany) and see you at the fest!**



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