**Introduction**

I spent the latter half of spring semester and most of summer break studying at Waseda University in Tokyo. Though the overlapping semesters, different teaching styles, and life in the world’s most populated city were all challenges, the four and a half months I spent there were great. I went into the experience hoping to learn a few things while fostering the connection between our two schools, and looking for professional opportunities. Having lived in northern Japan for five years previously, I wasn’t exactly going into unfamiliar territory, though I did expect life in Tokyo to be different. I did not expect that I would be able to add several new identities to my personal list: amateur sumo wrestler, minor television personality, and apprentice harpist.

Rather than using just words to describe my experiences, I made a photo essay to introduce the reader to all the people and places that made my time there special.
On and Around Waseda University Campus

Academic and social life on campus was great. Waseda is known for its large variety of student clubs, circles, and organizations. Two of them, Waseda International Club (WIC) and the Niji no Kai (Rainbow Group) both focus on bringing international students and domestic students closer together, with events, trips, and socializing. Participating in these two clubs led to several learning opportunities, and enabled me to make many friends. Helping them to spread the message of international friendship on campus was a great experience. My most memorable day with them was when the club president of Niji no Kai demonstrated his ability to recite the name, hometown, previous and current school, and major of all 125 members of the club, both Japanese and international, flawlessly.

Despite the large university setting, I participated in several small classes, with a very close knit feel to them. In my “Comparative Study of Basic Culture Types” class, several times the professor ended class early to treat all of us to a bite to eat at a nearby café. It was also a very interesting experience learning about and expressing a love of Japanese culture in a class composed of only female Chinese students, excluding me and the professor.

At Waseda, I was a student of the Graduate School of International Culture and Communication Studies (GSICCS). To the left is a picture of my advising professor with me and his other two advisees. We parsed international relations-related materials in our weekly seminar together. It was a small class of diverse perspectives: Professor Min is a Chinese IR professor focusing on the political economy; Sara is Icelandic and a budding environmentalist; Mei Lin is Chinese and focused on women’s rights issues; and I am a black American IEM/MPA student focused on issues facing youth.

Our little group’s diversity did not go unnoticed. Professor Min moderated a conference on European Reconciliation, which we all attended. A photographer shot this picture of us there, and it became the header image for Waseda’s webpage about the conference. We represented diversity at Waseda.
Doing New Things While Exploring a Familiar Culture

Thanks to very active dormitory life activities planning, I was able to have both familiar and new experiences, all accompanied by the people I lived and ate with in the same building. We toured the Japan Airlines Maintenance Facility, visited a Japanese Castle famous for its matchlock gun museum, and also learned how to make Japanese rice cakes out in the countryside. My advanced level Japanese comprehension abilities enabled me to help interpret instructions for those that did not know Japanese. This especially came in handy when we did homestays with rice farmers, as we learned more about who grew the food that we ate everyday. We even got our feet muddy planting a whole paddy of rice by hand.
Extracurricular Connections: Music, Athletics, and TV Stardom

While in Tokyo, I became four things that I did not expect. Three of them make me quite happy, and are things that I want to continue to pursue and share with others. One of them though, is something I wish I did not have to be, but motivates me to continue pursuing my goals.

I became an apprentice harpist. After inquiring about harp lessons at the Miyabi Method Harp School, I befriended the founder, Miyabi Matsuoka herself. Our mutual interest in the importance of spreading the love of music around the world led to a deal being struck up: in exchange for help with translating some of the more difficult parts of her harp playing method book into English, this world-class, award winning harpist agreed to give me free intensive lessons for the last two months I was in Tokyo. My advanced language skills allowed me to play a part in the spread of a new school of music across the ocean. I also gained a mentor with a similar personality and outlook to my own.

I became an amateur sumo wrestler. A long-standing interest in Japanese sumo led me to enter Waseda’s 5th Annual Amateur Sumo Cup, put on by its long-running Sumo club. After learning a few basic moves together, we clashed wearing real sumo loincloths over our shorts. Thankfully none of the large, actual club members entered, so us small framed folk had a chance. With two victories and three losses, I didn’t come out on top, but I had so much fun that I continued to attend practices with them.

I became a minor television personality. I was asked to be on the television program Gakusei Heroes (Student Heroes), co-hosted by the popular comedian Odori Kasuga and female TV announcer Mori-san. (To the left: I am in the back throwing bunny ears on Kasuga-san from the back) The show brought together about nine internationals working or studying in Tokyo, and invites them to talk and joke about taboos, phrases, and culture points with the hosts. The show played at 1:25AM Thursdays and we all appeared in about two months’ worth of 15 minute episodes. Making cultural jokes in Japanese and occasionally getting recognized on the street was great!

I don’t have a picture for the last thing I became. I became a mourner. In the city I previously worked in, up in northern Japan, there was a horrific car crash that made national news and remained a regular topic for months. A drunk driver hit a car and killed an entire family. The three children involved were all former students of mine, whom I knew well. Not being able to escape hearing about their fates for a month made me incredibly sad. My motivation in pursuing social change for youth is that I don’t want to see any more of their lives cut short.
Working with Kids as Both a Teacher and as Playground Equipment

I really enjoy working with kids for the fun and energy they have when learning new things. Though I have years of experience as an English teacher in Japan, I really wanted to move away from teaching as a career, which is why I am in the IEM/MPA program at MIIS. My veteran teacher status quickly put my skills in demand, however. I found myself teaching part-time once per week for three months. My pupils were the twins Kai and Mei, energetic 8-year-olds. Our afternoons together were filled with laughter once I introduced an activity where we used English to draw pictures of animals...with their extremities replaced by food. Have you ever seen a lion with cheese for legs before? Or a gorilla with a banana for a head? I also taught them how to carve character stamps from erasers.

Near the end of my time in Tokyo though, I worked at a daycare center owned by my boss for three days. Unlike my time with Kai and Mei, here I was merely playground equipment to be climbed on, kicked, and bossed around by little kids. I can’t say it wasn’t fun though... very tiring fun. Highlights included taking funny face pictures on my tablet and amazing them with my ability to moonwalk.
Conclusion

My time at Waseda University was engaging personally, academically, and professionally. There are many pictures to attest to the first two, but the last one was mostly met by a class led by the dean of my school, and Waseda’s excellent guest speaker series. My dean’s class brought us together with real international professionals working in various fields in Japan, allowing them to share their experiences and give us advice on finding work and working in Japan. Waseda’s speaker series brought several big names, like the former CEO of Starbucks Japan, to the school to give talks and chat with students afterwards. I now have many friends and professional contacts from this experience. Hopefully all of this will serve as a bridge leading to more students participating in the Waseda Exchange Agreement, and more Waseda students visiting MIIS.