

## 2024 Social Innovation Forum at Waseda University

I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend the CAMPUS Asia Social Innovation Forum representing Waseda University, along with students from partner institutions Peking University, Nanyang Technological University, and Korea University. Participating in this program has reinvented my personal definition of “social innovation” thanks to the fruitful and stimulating conversations that I had with my fellow peers who come from different cultural backgrounds. Here is a brief recap of the enriching three days of the 2024 Social Innovation Forum held at Waseda University!

Friday July 5th, 2024

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The first day of the forum began with lunch, and as we gathered into our assigned small groups and introduced ourselves, we ate lunch while getting to know one another. Our student staff recommended a popular udon shop for Waseda University students, and when we arrived, we were lucky to be seated fairly quickly. Everyone was surprised with how fast the food arrived, and how generous the portion sizes were. We all agreed on how this restaurant deserved all its popularity amongst the student population. The food was delicious, and the exchange students from partner institutions had the opportunity to try authentic Japanese udon! We pointed out other trending shops on the way back to campus.



After a brief introduction of groupwork, we split off into groups again to embark on an excursion to either of the four neighborhoods near Waseda: Toyama apartments, Takadanobaba, Kagurazaka, or Kishibojin. Our group was sent to Kishibojin, and by using the last local tram operating in the area, we toured the area. Although it was a relatively small area, there were many points to observe. There was a small temple, and in the area were many booths with colorful signs that seemed like preparations for an upcoming summer festival that weekend. Inside the temple was a tiny shop that sold traditional Japanese treats and postcards, and the old shop owner was kind enough to let us take a group photo with her. We walked around and looked into the shops of small businesses, such as one that sold traditional matcha powder. Although I have lived in Japan for the past several years, this was also my first time visiting Kishibojin, and I am glad I was introduced to this location. The overall serene and relaxing atmosphere had left a peaceful impression on me.

Upon returning to campus, we split off into groups with new members, and shared our reflections on the area we visited. Some of the comments overlapped, such as several locations not having as much people on the streets, or how convenient the region was in terms of access to a variety of services.

The first day of the forum was wrapped up with a lecture by Mr. Shigeyuki Yamamoto about the history and significance of the Shin-Okubo region. He shared about the history of Shinjuku and the influx of immigrants, and with people of different backgrounds assimilating into the community, he talked about the need for brainstorming solutions to new problems that the immigrants were facing. It was an insightful lecture, and I was able to learn how Shinjuku became to be a hot spot for immigrants.







Saturday July 6th, 2024



The day kickstarted with a brief explanation on the excursion that was planned for today by Professor Koyama, and the thought processes that we should keep in mind while navigating through this particular destination that was home to diverse ethnic communities. We were encouraged to think more in depth about what exactly we want to observe, and where we wanted to go.

Then it was time for the excursion to begin, and an adventure to one of Tokyo's popular locations for youth, Shin-Okubo began! Before we began exploring, our group ate lunch at a Thai restaurant, and time quickly passed by as we had fun conversing with one another about the differences in each of our home countries. It was fascinating to know more about how university or everyday life can be so unique to each country. Since myself and our student staff were Japanese, we answered questions from others regarding Japanese culture and lifestyle. As entertaining as it was, we wanted to utilize our time to the fullest, so our group hit the main streets of Shin-Okubo.

The blazing sun did not stop hundreds of people from strolling through the popular sidewalks. To escape the heat, we decided to enter a cute cafe that was designed to make it look like you entered a 2D world. The color usage of the interior played a trick in our eyes, making it seem like everything was flat like a drawing. While sipping on our drinks, we chatted some more and decided on where we wanted to go. The students from outside Japan were highly interested in the museum for Comfort Women, so we made sure to drop by before time ran out. By then, our group was really comfortable with one another, and conversation flowed smoothly and laughter was continuously shared. What a blessed moment to be able to interact with people from all over the world!



While heading to the museum for Comfort Women, we took a look around the bustling Shin-Okubo streets and commented on the architecture, shop styles, and diverse food options. The students from Korea University acknowledged how the architecture reminded them of Korea, but the environment depicted a Japanese leaning Korean style. We also could not resist taking a photo at the Korean-styled photo booth, where we cut two sheets to split a photo equally for all the members as a little souvenir. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to look properly at the museum, so we opted to head back a little early to campus.

Similar to yesterday, the second day of the forum ended with another lecture from Mr. Shigeyuki Yamamoto, this time educating us about the community development activities in Shin-Okubo. The Shin-Okubo that I often visited with my friends to hang out, had such a rich history and community background than I realized. The active efforts that the city is taking by considering the needs of the immigrant communities was evident, and I now see Shin-Okubo through a redefined lens.

Sunday July 7th, 2024

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On our last day of the forum, we had the chance to hear from a couple of students who enrolled in CAMPUS Asia study programs in the morning session. I was also selected to give a presentation about my study abroad experience at Korea University since I had just completed the semester-long exchange this spring. Listening to the students from other universities highlighting their study abroad experience at Waseda allowed me to view my school through the lens of an exchange student: it was a refreshing perspective!

Then came the main highlight of the forum: designing a social innovation project with our team. This year's theme was the aging population demographic, so we discussed how we can build our communities with the elderly in mind. We each went around and described how the aging population dilemma is like in our respective countries. A common foundation was the existence of elderly disrespect: people looking down on the old citizens who are "not contributing" to the economy since they are too old to work. We brainstormed the struggles that the elderly may face in day-to-day life by putting ourselves into their shoes. Many examples were brought up, such as loneliness, being handed low quality work, and their lack of digital intelligence in this current Internet era.

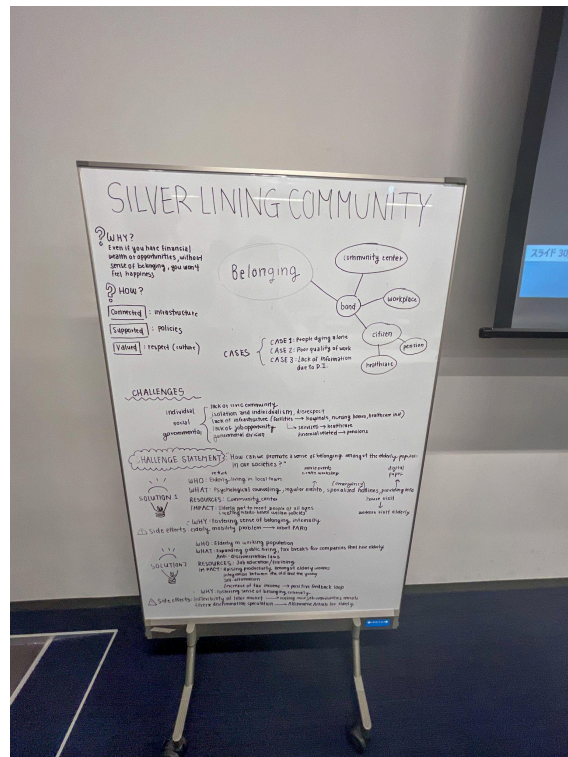


Of course, we could not continue without adding some fuel to our bodies, so we went out to get lunch at one of the famous Wase-meshi (Waseda food spots). The menu included a variety of Japanese dishes, and it was hard for everyone to choose what they wanted to eat. We enjoyed some cold noodles and tonkatsu cutlets, a staple for a hot Japanese summer! During our meal, we mentioned how the names of the noodle dishes in Japan were interesting, such as Kitsune (Fox) udon or Tanuki (Raccoon) udon. Our stomachs were fulfilled, and with a quick trip to the convenience store to stock up on snacks for motivation, we were back and in the classroom and ready to resume our project.

Our project was named "Silver Lining Community" as a reference to the gray hair that the elderly start to gain as they get older, but also conveying that there is a silver lining of hope to improve quality of life even when one becomes old. We agreed upon the fact that even if people had financial wealth or opportunities, without the feeling of belonging, it is difficult to experience true happiness. We applied that theory to the aging population: even if they were financially well off or had access to plentiful opportunities, if they feel like outcasts having no place in society, there are prone to dying alone in loneliness. In order to prevent that from happening, we settled on three points. We could make the elderly feel more connected by creating more facilities such as community centers, feel more supported through policies directed at solving the needs that they face, and feel valued by citizens by cultivating a culture of respect.



Therefore, our challenge statement turned out to be “How can we promote a sense of belonging amongst the elderly population in our societies?” And to that, we raised two possible solutions. The first one was establishing community centers that can host psychological counseling, regular events, and offer valuable information such as specialized hotlines in case of emergencies, in order for elderly of all ages to have a sense of community. The second one was opening more job education training sessions, so the elderly who have confidence in being in the working field can be integrated with the younger generation, which raises productivity. There are a number of limitations that can be pointed out for each solution, but we were able to dissect those as well. During the final session of sharing our projects through group presentations, three representatives including myself spoke in front of the audience. When all the groups finished presenting, the professors from each university gave us constructive feedback, which was great!



And alas, an evening reception was held at a nearby restaurant called Good Morning Cafe, which everybody was excited about as it felt like a reward for using our brains continuously throughout the day. Thrilled voices and laughter filled the room as everyone helped themselves to beautifully arranged courses that appeared one after the other. As time passes by, the crowd faded one by one, and the high-pitched voices of excitement slowly turned into bittersweet tones as we all bid each other farewell and exchanged social media information. Although we do not know when we can see each other again, we have created a connection that is filled with support regardless of where we are situated in the world.

All in all, the Social Innovation Forum was an incredible event that allowed me to collaborate with students from various countries and have eye-opening conversations on pressing issues in Asia. This program further ignited a spark of passion within me that wants to be a social innovator that can contribute to the betterment of the world !! I highly encourage all students to participate in this amazing experience, if one is interested in expanding their worldview and partaking in important discussions with other passionate individuals from Peking University, Nanyang Technological University, and Korea University.



