

Introduction to international students' lives in Niigata

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I have fled from Thailand and stayed in Niigata for almost a year now at the time I'm writing this article. During the whole time, I'm usually questioned about what it's like to be an international student in Japan? Any recommendations for new international students? Indeed, a lot of stories happened during this time, and I must admit that I need a lot of space to depict them in a clear picture.

To begin with, the hardest thing I could imagine about living here is the process of settling down. Here in Niigata, there are a lot of procedures for international students to settle down at the beginning of their lives here. Several processes, like going to the ward office to inform them of your address, applying for national insurance, tax exemption. Likewise, opening a bank account and registering for a mobile SIM card, all those mentioned above require Japanese language skills to communicate and write the details as well. Luckily, there's a system that provides all international students with a system that provides a tutor to help you with all the required processes. My tutor is the senior dentist in the same department with me. My life would be much more difficult if there were no such thing as a good system and a good tutor like him. I must thank him a mil-

lion times for his generosity, along with all the kindness I received from my seniors, project advisor, teachers, professors and all the Japanese people around me. Even though there are a lot of difficult processes, paperwork, etc., although there's a language barrier, I ensure you that everyone here is willing to help you no matter what it is. Please always keep in mind that you do not have to solve any kind of problem alone.

Another thing that I think you'd be surprised about living in Niigata if you're from any of the tropical countries like me, is Niigata's weather. Here in Niigata, even though we're living in the central area, which is not a mountainous geography like the boundaries of Niigata prefecture, the weather is not only pretty variable, yet also extreme. Last year, I experienced a strong snow storm, icy footpaths, and electrostatic shock during the whole time of winter.



Whereas in the summer, the temperature can reach about 35 degrees Celsius, which is worse than the actual number considering the factor of high humidity of seashore geography, making it feel like 40 degrees Celsius on some days. All of these things make it really easy for you to get sick. Keep in mind that the important thing whilst you're living here is the health of your physical body and mental health as well. Please stay healthy, like the first day you were enriched and delighted by Niigata's beautiful scenery that you might have seen through the Shinkansen window.



Because Japanese language skills are valued in everyday life in Niigata, I strongly advise all international students to enroll in a Japanese language class and/or participate in cultural activities as much as possible. For example, at the Crosspal Niigata, I have been studying Japanese language classes and sometimes I have received great opportunities to attend their cultural

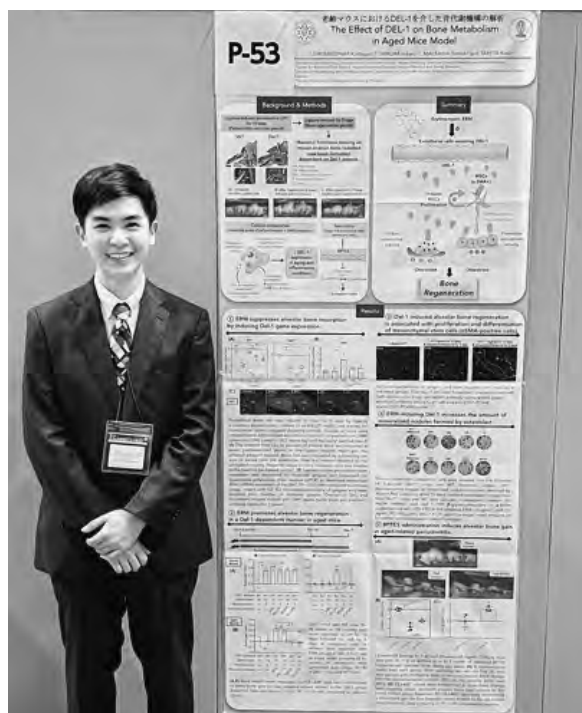


activities, such as, 浴衣で街歩き, which is an activity designed to give you an experience of wearing Yukata and stroll around the Furumachi of Niigata with the guide in Japanese / English narrative. This beautiful area of Niigata has such a long history and such a charming culture reflected through the architecture, national garments, and delicate Niigata cuisine. I do really enjoy learning new things regarding this unique culture, and I think it's worthwhile for any one of you to dive into Japanese culture in the time you spend here as well.

Even though it's quite considered a short time for the time I've just spent here, I might not be a perfect representative of all the international students living here, yet I feel delighted to have received a chance to write this article. However, I only want you all to keep reminding yourself of the goals you had set before living here. Up to this point, and for around 3 years from now, my goals still include trying my best to broaden my specific-field knowledge obtained from all teachers and seniors as much as I can. Nevertheless, I also set a goal of studying Japanese language in order to communicate with Japanese people seamlessly. One thing, which has been told by

all of our faculty's international graduates during their time here, is to balance your work-life balance properly and to enjoy your Niigata life in many aspects as much as possible in order not to regret your time spending here. There is a splendid speech conveyed by an amazing, pretty Filipino senior from the department of surgery, Andrea, at the graduation party before she had to leave Niigata after her graduation. I'll pass through her amazing speech here and hope to see all the new international students enjoying their lives in Niigata like she did.

"I hope that once the time of your turn arrives, you'll realize all the precious moments you'll have spent here, and you'll be able to proudly tell yourself and others that, once in a lifetime moment, Niigata was my home." - Andrea Rei Salazar, 2021.



My Adventurous Journey: from Golden Land to Land of Sakura

Division of Preventive Dentistry Tin Zar Tun



Hello everyone! Greetings from Niigata!

I am Tin Zar Tun, from Myanmar. But here in Niigata, you can call me Tina as of convenience. My hometown

is Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon), the former capital city and the largest city of Myanmar.

Myanmar (once designated as Burma), a southeast Asian nation with major 8-ethnic groups and more than 100 small ethnic groups, is bordered by India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand. The majority of Myanmar people are Buddhists amidst with other religions. There is a tropical/subtropical climate with only 3-seasons in Myanmar, the utmost difference with Japan.

In 2011, I graduated (B.D.S.) from the University of Dental Medicine, Yangon. I served as a general dental officer in 500-bedded Patheingyi General Hospital, Aungmye Thayarwaddy Division, Myanmar, for 2-year. After clinical practice, I have a chance to serve as a demonstrator in the Department of Preventive and Community Dentistry, University of Dental Medicine, Yangon. I received a master's degree (M.D.Sc) specializing in Paediatric Dentistry in 2017 and continued working as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Paediatric Dentistry in the same university.

As Japan is one of the leading countries

that conducted scientific researches, my Professor Sun Sun Win introduced me to the Japanese Government Monbukagakusho: MEXT Scholarship Program by the end of 2018. That is the moment I made up my mind to study in Japan for my future study regardless of Language and cultural differences. After nearly 2-years, I had an opportunity to stay and learn here at the WHO-CC (World Health Organization Collaborating Centres), the division of Preventive Dentistry, Niigata University.

I could learn intensive Japanese courses online from my country before I had a chance to come to Niigata because of the Covid-19 incidence. Moreover, I studied some private Basic Japanese Courses in Myanmar for improving interpersonal communication in Japan.

It was on 5th December 2020 that I was here in Japan for the first time. According to the middle of the peak of the Covid-19 era, I had to stay 14 days quarantine in Narita Mystays hotel. After the quarantine period, my destination to Niigata was arrived by Shinkansen from Tokyo on 20th December 2020. As soon as I arrived at the Niigata





station, Prof. Ogawa and his wife picked me up and treated lunch to me, a heart-warming introduction of Niigata that swiped away my anxiety and worries. Moreover, there was a snow that I would eagerly attract by since my childhood, welcoming me, as I have not been experiencing in touch of snow.

As our department is WHO-CC, a chance to work with an international organization, like WHO, FDI, hit me. Indeed, the contingency of several epidemiological types of research and has come in contact with me.

Under the guidance of the Professor, I participated in a bunch of events that could fulfill my adventurous desire, as in COP 26 (26th United Nations Climate Change Conference).

From my point of view, I have to admit that Japan has a lot of beautiful places amidst rich in traditional cultures that could attract a bunch of foreign people. It is enchanting to see many Japanese young people wearing traditional clothing in various traditional festivals and ceremonies.

To date, I participated in Yukata festivals, and enjoyed wearing Yukata.

In addition, I can experience skiing and

ice skating here, which I was longing for a long time ago.

In Japan, there are different breathtaking scenarios in every season, mainly colorful seasonal flowers. By visiting Echigo Hillside Park, I can witness Japan has charming attractions over me. Moreover, it possesses abundant beautifully fascinating attractions to go around to feel nature. I have been to Sado Island, one of the famous tourist attractions of Niigata in last summer with my friends from other countries.

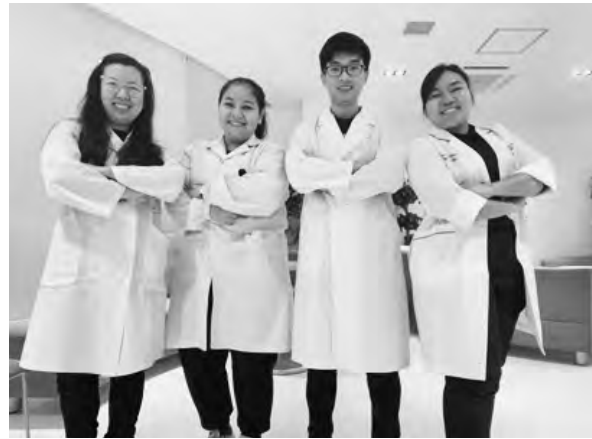
Apart from the above new experiences, the new inspiration is, I can broaden up my





society to an international level. I am grateful to be here because of my kind friends: from different countries with various backgrounds.

For those who stay away from home, it is such a tight condition that we are out of our comfort zone, struggling to be familiar with different weather, cultures, and difficulties in communications. I cannot entirely say that my research journey here is as flat as a pancake. Nonetheless, with the homely support and encouragement from Professors, teachers, friends, colleagues, and staff from Niigata University, I can overcome those obstacles. Finally, I would be very excited to learn and travel around Japan, and I am sure that those enthusiasms would never end.



Embracing silver linings

Division of Comprehensive Prosthodontics
Ma. Therese Blanche Sta. Maria

The year 2020 was off to a bad start. Some people said that it was not the year to get everything you want, but the year to appreciate everything you have. Well, not in my case though, because in 2020 I was able to get what I want and still appreciate what I have. I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to study in Japan. I remember praying fervently on a soul-searching hiking trip in 2019 about my plans of living and studying in Japan. But then COVID-19 happened, and everything went gray. I felt my world crumbled in an instant, while dark clouds loomed over my head. Until one day, I saw some light peeking over the dark gray clouds. The pandemic was not yet over but the world slowly got back up on its feet. And just like a blink of an eye, I found myself living in the Ghibli world.



My name is Ma. Therese Blanche Ortiz Sta. Maria. Okay, I know what you're thinking, my name is way too long. Well, you can call me "Mari" for short. I was born and raised in the Philippines. I must say, Filipinos are very resilient. We don't let the bad things overcome us. We look way past beyond the challenges and see the brighter side in every situation. Have you ever heard about the idiom, "every cloud has a silver lining?" It means that, whenever there is a bad situation (cloud), there is always a positive side to it (silver lining). Why am I telling you this? Because from the past year, I have embraced a lot of silver linings. And I will be telling you tons of it.

Before I moved to Japan, I belonged to my Manila Central University (MCU) family. I earned the degree of Doctor of Dental Medicine from Centro Escolar University, Manila in March 2013, and passed the May 2013 Dentist Licensure Examination. Since I am the youngest faculty member in MCU, College of Dentistry, I was able to learn a lot from my colleagues through the years. My beloved Department of Prosthodontics has enriched my clinical and teaching skills. MCU has developed me to become the person I am now, and I owe this opportunity to them especially to my Dean, Dr. Ma. Cristina Aurea Garcia. I even remember crying in front of her because she asked me the question, "how do you see yourself

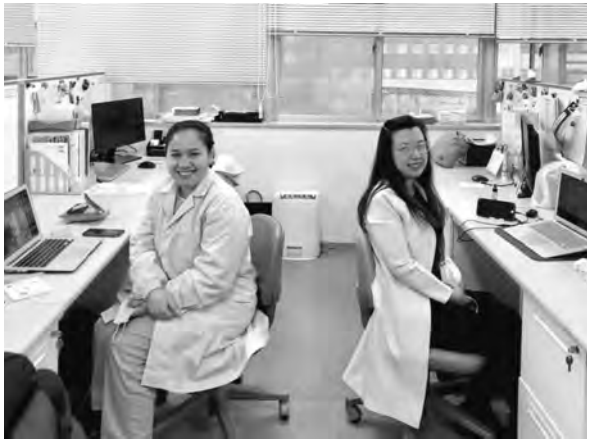


5 years from now,” and I froze because I couldn’t see myself in anything. I just realized now that maybe the reason why I couldn’t see myself in anything because the view was covered in snow. Also, I don’t want to take up my master’s degree, but because she pushed me to do it, I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to study in Niigata University. Another silver lining well-embraced.

I started my journey as a PhD student in the Division of Comprehensive Prosthodontics led by Professor Takahiro Ono, with my Indonesian friend and research buddy, Pinta. We were able to experience videoendoscopy as a clinician and as a patient with the guidance of Jin Magara Sensei, observe videofluorography with Takanori

Tsujimura Sensei, and assist in numerous experiments inside and outside Niigata University. And you know, I realized that the best thing about doing research, is that it takes you to other places, may it be for experiments or for presentations. It changed the way I looked at the world, and it opened up my mind about so many possibilities and future opportunities.

It was not so long ago when I barely understood the concept of the different possible statistical analyses. We were on the brink of exhaustion looking over the numbers in SPSS when yet again, I saw another silver lining. Because we pushed way past it, Pinta and I were able to start writing our own papers within a short period of time. I was even able to present my paper



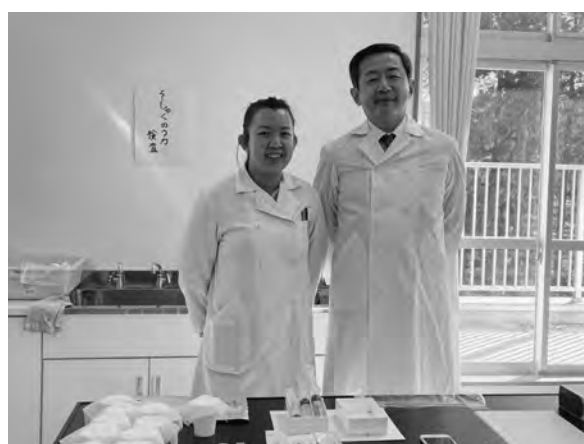
in the Annual Scientific Meeting of Japan Prosthodontic Society Kan-etsu branch last November 7, 2021. This would not have been possible without the mentorship and guidance from Yoko Hasegawa Sensei, Kazuhiro Hori Sensei, Professor Takahiro Ono and our Ihotetsu family.

When I was introduced to them for the first time during the department meeting, it was cold and windy outside, but I felt the warmest greetings they gave me. We are really lucky to be a part of this division, because everyone genuinely helps us in any way they can even if it's something unrelated to PhD life. Settling in Niigata during winter was the hardest part, but with their help, it became easier to adjust.

I have been in Japan for more than a year now, but I can still vividly remember the first day I came to Niigata. As I rode the Shinkansen from Tokyo, the view from the window changed from blue skies and skyscrapers to everything covered in white. The intro song of "Game of Thrones" suddenly played in my mind while the cold shivered down my spine. Feeling a little bit excited, I thought to myself, "winter has come." When I arrived, it was in between 14:00 to 15:00, but the sky was cloudy, dark,

and gloomy, and the wind was blowing me like crazy.

Coming from a very tropical country with 28-32 C temperature, the kid in me danced for joy when I experienced the first snow fall. I was out with my "ate", Andrea, waiting at the bus stop when my world played in slow motion. Little streaks of white filled the running cars and the streets started turning white. Little did I know that it was



going to be the toughest challenge I have to overcome. I was not prepared to be living alone, especially in an excruciatingly cold place like Niigata. Luckily, I have the best Senpais in the world. My "ates" (The Filipino way of saying older sister), Andrea and Simonne, taught me everything I need to know, the places I need to go to, the things I need to buy, the food I must try, to be happy even when it's gloomy, and most of all, to enjoy what life has to offer. I have never felt sad and lonely because ate Andrea was always there, like my happy pill.

The only things I miss are my mom's homecooked food, Jollibee, my sister waking me up in the morning, and the bear

hugs from my dogs. Even though ate Andrea has gone back home, I know I can survive three more years because I have made new friends and acquired a new family. Luckily, I have Tina, Quang and Pinta to guide me where to go, literally and figuratively, because I always get lost easily (^_^). I know they will pull me out when the dark gray clouds above my head had engulfed me.

And as the pandemic loom over with new mutations, we must be strong enough to withstand the challenges that may try to knock us down in the future and embrace its silver linings.

