



From First Cycle Tobitate to Master's Candidate at Stanford University

*The story of a former Commercial Section Intern,
Megumi Yoshinaga*

As the Japanese Government has made efforts to support study abroad programs, its first generation of Tobitate Scholars are now entering the real world. One such Tobitate scholar, Megumi Yoshinaga, sat down to recall her experiences. Her story is a firsthand example that demonstrates how government assistance can help students go abroad.

With her relocation plans finalized as she prepares to start a Master's Program in East Asian Studies at Stanford University this fall, Megumi recalls how she first heard of the Tobitate Program. "Due to the fact that I applied to a double degree program between Waseda and Peking Universities, I had to be disciplined in order to finish credits from both universities, and graduate on schedule. I was in fact so disciplined that despite aiming for two bachelor degrees and completing coursework from both universities, that I finished in three years. This allowed me an additional year to pursue internships, and the Tobitate Program was announced at that opportune time."

Taking advantage of her gap year, Megumi decided to pursue what she had always wanted to do, and that was to do international internships. She applied to the Tobitate Multifaceted Personnel Development Course with a plan to intern at two international educational institutions. She ended up interning in Indonesia and India.

When asked about the application process, Megumi notes, "There was an application process, and an interview. I believe I was chosen because I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to do."

And, what Megumi aspires to do is no easy task. The daughter of Chinese immigrants to Japan, Megumi came to Japan as a pre-teen and learned a whole new language and culture. Wanting to succeed in her new country, she aimed for admission into one of Japan's most prestigious private universities. While admission to Waseda University alone is quite an achievement, Megumi did not stop there. In fact, she pushed herself to maintain not only Japanese, but also Chinese by

securing admission into Peking University as well. This set her up for a demanding course load from two universities in two different countries and languages.



One may be familiar with the typical college life of a Japanese student, which is usually classified as a “break” between rigorous college examinations and demanding professional life. Academic course loads are not as heavy in comparison to other countries, and junior year loads are kept low in order to allow for students to spend time looking for jobs. College is meant to be filled with social activities. For Megumi, this was not the case as she budgeted credits, and spent time between Japan and China. She devoted countless hours of study in both languages while her friends had time to engage in clubs, and sports activities.

This did not mean that she was not involved in non-academic activities. In fact, she remained active, devoting her time to her passions. In 2012, she was the youngest delegate to the G20 Youth Summit. She then was a youth leader to the APEC CEO Summit in 2013 where she met Prime Minister Abe, and was encouraged to continue to follow her dreams. In 2012, she decided to plan and execute the first student organized Middle Eastern themed fashion show in Japan. Her goal was to change negative perceptions towards Middle Eastern culture through a medium all could appreciate. She solicited the support of several Embassies, hired models, and was able to secure a venue in downtown Tokyo that never rented to students. Her event was a huge success with 650 attendees, and the money raised was donated to refugee camps in the Middle East. In recognition of her many activities, she was awarded the College Student of the Year Grand Prix. One should not forget to mention that while she did all of the above, that she also was on the President’s list for academic excellence and taking an economics and investment course at Cambridge University.

So, what does a student like Megumi aim to achieve? “My dream is to make a school in East Asia. Specifically, I would like to make schools in both Japan and China in order to promote peace and mutual understanding. As the power balance continues to shift, relations between Japan and China, and Japan’s positioning with the United States and China will become more important. My goal is to objectively study East Asia relations in order to create educational exchanges to help promote the foundations for peace,” she says. From personal experience, she has seen prejudices in both countries, and has seen how such prejudices have resulted from misunderstandings and a lack of communication.

Through Tobitate, Megumi explored unique educational institutions in Bangalore, India and Bali, Indonesia.

In Bali, she interned at the Green School, a school focused on sustainable education in English with an emphasis on liberal arts and entrepreneurship. Voted as the 2012 Greenest School by



USGBC Center for Green Schools, the school boasts 20 acres with state-of-the-art renewable energy facilities. There, Megumi joined the development team to help raise and administer scholarships for local residents to attend the school. This obviously was critical in maintaining relations with the local community. She organized a Silent Auction, selling organic goods to residents, and gave daily tours of the school in three languages. She also designed the local scholarship logo. To encourage entrepreneurship, she coached students on multiple

projects, helping them develop their new NGO, Bye Bye Plastic Bag.

In Bangalore, Megumi customized her program to allow her to spend time with children living in slums and on the street while working in a microfinance internship at Nirantara. She visited almost all major NPOs and orphanages in Bangalore, Goa, and Mumbai. In total she visited nine, interacting with children and communicating with them through dance. At Nirantara, Megumi was the token foreigner. In fact, her presence was so unusual, and her persona so charming, that everyone started coming to work on time to be able to speak with her. At Nirantara, she conducted field research to determine lending frameworks for those in need. She was responsible for conducting proper due diligence through interviews to determine actual funding needs, and was faced with the daunting task of prioritizing who would receive such financial assistance. She carefully analyzed situations being fully aware that her input could drastically affect the lives of funding recipients.

Megumi recounts her experiences as extremely valuable saying, “As my eventual goal is to establish a school in the future, I needed to study community relations and fundraising. I wanted to start in communities specifically in need of educational institutions surrounded by multiple ethnic and religious groups. It also was extremely beneficial to be outside of Japan, a highly developed nation where education is considered a right and not a privileged. Seeing how excited children in Indonesia and India were to be mentored and educated, I realized the true importance of what I wanted to achieve. Watching the children from different cultures and religions interact from an early age, and collaborate on meaningful projects seemed to be the best solution to many problems we face in the world today. I plan to continue towards my goals by focusing on the future, which is with the children that will grow up to be our leaders. I hope that to them, I can also be a role model and leader as well.”

When asked about how she feels about Tobitate, Megumi explains that it allowed her to challenge herself and go abroad. Without funding, her desire to intern abroad would have remained a desire. The same goes for many Japanese students who need that extra push to consider international options. Even just one short experience is enough to encourage students to



look beyond Japan, and consider international options. Funding is often the make it or break it decision in convincing parents who are unsure about the value in paying for programs that are significantly more expensive than ones in Japan.

While numbers attending long term programs in the United States have been decreasing, interest in short term programs coupled with internship and volunteer opportunities remains high. Japanese students are eager to go abroad for two week to six week periods, and learn English while gaining meaningful career experiences. Programs that package lodging, volunteer/internship options, and language classes are in demand.

With the Olympics a short five years away, we hope that the Japanese Government will continue programs such as Tobitate, giving Japanese the courage to pursue dreams abroad. We encourage U.S. educational institutions to explore creating such options in order to attract eager and motivated Japanese students.

And lastly, we are truly fortunate to have had Megumi intern with us during a busy time when the Secretary of Commerce led the first trade mission to Japan in 23 years. We wish her the best as she starts her Stanford Program, and are sure she will become a global human asset for not only Japan but the rest of the international community.