



Jimotogaku: Building Healthy Communities for Future Generations

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By Greg Lowan

Professor Yuko Oguri of Kagoshima University's Research and Education Centre for Lifelong Learning recently visited Calgary during a tour of Canada jointly sponsored by the Royal Society of Canada's Women in Science, Engineering, and Technology (WASET) program and the Science Council of Japan. While in Calgary, she delivered a public lecture at the University of Calgary and visited Sir John A. Macdonald Junior High School to share her experiences and research with grade eight and nine students.

Professor Oguri's current research focuses on *jimotogaku*, an approach developed by civic leaders in Minamata, a small coastal community in southern Kumamoto Prefecture. Minamata is infamous worldwide for "Minamata disease": widespread mercury poisoning due to pollution of their river by a local chemical factory in the 1950's. Minamata disease recently gained renewed international exposure in the Academy Award winning documentary *The Cove*.

Minamata disease affects the nervous system of its victims, commonly resulting in mild to severe paralysis and loss of hearing, vision, and motor control. Unfortunately, it can also be passed on congenitally. Due to negative stigmas associated with Minamata disease, people from Minamata have been discriminated against over the past fifty

years in education, employment, and even marriage.

Jimotogaku

Jimotogaku is derived from the Japanese words *jimoto* (地元), which means "local" and *gaku* (学), which means "learning". Tetsuro Yoshimoto, the visionary behind *jimotogaku*, believes that people will only begin to care for themselves and their social and ecological surroundings if they have a strong sense of self and community awareness and esteem.

Rather than focusing on short-term individual environmental and social issues, the civic leaders of Minamata decided to embrace *jimotogaku* in order to foster a healthy community for generations to come. Their initiatives have included a wide variety of social and environmental initiatives aimed at empowering the local community and restoring the health of their ecosystem. Initiatives include organizing regular community consultation meetings, community mapping, watershed and waste management education and clean-up programs, and a "living village" designed to preserve and share traditional farming, fishing, and forest skills and knowledge.

In the spirit of *jimotogaku*, the citizens of Minamata were encouraged to learn more about the unique strengths and characteristics of their local culture. They have been surprised by the interest shown by people from larger urban areas who now regularly visit their "living village" to learn traditional rural skills and philosophies that have been lost in other areas of Japan. Professor Oguri reported that the *jimotogaku* approach has created an increased sense of community in Minamata. The community has also successfully addressed many of its ecological challenges and has even



gained acclaim as one of Japan's "greenest communities". Other rural communities have followed Minamata's example and are also embracing *jimotogaku* to improve their social and ecological health.

Professor Oguri believes that despite a recent trend of depopulation in rural areas and overpopulation of urban areas, rural Japan has much to offer their urban neighbours. She suggested that many urbanites are now looking to rural areas to rediscover the traditional skills, knowledge, and philosophies for healthy community living that have been lost with modern industrialization. Oguri's insights are globally relevant and they certainly provoked many interesting conversations here in Calgary, leaving us to ponder the potential applications of *jimotogaku* in Canada...

Greg Lowan has lived in both Kochi and Oita prefectures and dreams of skiing in Hokkaido someday. He is currently a doctoral student and Outdoor Centre instructor at the University of Calgary. Greg welcomes correspondence at gelowan@ucalgary.ca.



Photo by Greg Lowan

Welcome Vice Consul Sasahara

By Miho Trudeau

ようこそ!

We would like to wish Vice Consul Yukiko Kobayashi the best of luck in her recent move to Bratislava, Slovakia, where she will be working at the Japanese Embassy. Although we are sad to say goodbye to Vice Consul Kobayashi, the Consulate General of Japan here in Calgary has just welcomed a new Vice Consul of information and culture. Vice Consul Naoki Sasahara came to Calgary March 8th, 2010 from Tokyo where he was working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters. He is fluent in Japanese, Spanish and English, having spent time working in Spain and Uruguay. In Canada one of the programs under his jurisdiction will be the JET programme. We are very happy to welcome the new Vice Consul to Calgary!

Focus on Culture: Hina Matsuri

By Miho Trudeau

During my time in Japan, I was able to experience many different kinds of festivals. In the spring, with the onset of blossoming cherry trees, I can remember seeing a brief glimpse of Hina Matsuri, the Japanese doll festival. Many of the schools that I visited and in some of the stores around my local town had sets of the dolls that are displayed during this time. Still I didn't really know much about the event and it was not until I came back to Canada and did some more research.

'Hina Matsuri,' the Japanese doll festival, is held annually on the 3rd day of the 3rd month. It is also known as 'Momo no sekku' or peach blossom festival because it is around this time