

Interview with Yixuan Zhang & Shu Kittaka, Presidents of Jing Forum 2018

Jing Forum — a Venture for Youth Exchanges Between China & Japan

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

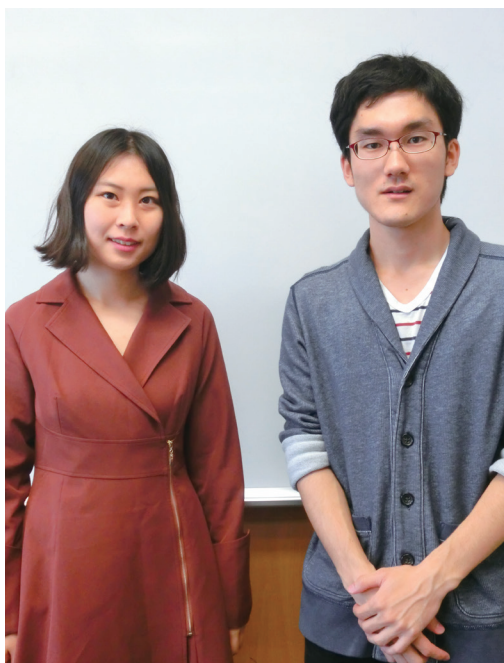
Have you heard of Jing Forum, a venue for academic discussion between students at the University of Tokyo and students at Peking University? Friendships made at a young age can be invaluable and can often last a lifetime. If such friendships involve people of different nationalities, they could help those nations achieve better relations in the long run. Is this a sentimental or idealistic view? *Japan SPOTLIGHT* interviewed a Chinese president and a Japanese president of Jing Forum in October 2018 in Tokyo. We found them both to be forward-looking and optimistic about the future, as most young people are.

(Interviewed on Oct. 4, 2018)

Jing Forum Presidents

JS: Please introduce yourself and tell us how you joined this forum.

Kittaka: My name is Shu Kittaka, and I am a senior at the University of Tokyo, majoring in International Relations. I'm going to work for my country as a bureaucrat from next spring and I joined Jing Forum because a friend of mine was participating in it two years ago and recommended it to me. I also found that this forum gives us the chance to discuss interesting topics with top students from China and through that process I wanted to get a deep understanding of what Peking University students think about their society and politics and so on. I participated last year as a delegate and enjoyed the discussion, so decided to become the president and manage the forum this year.



Ms. Zhang Yixuan and Mr. Shu Kittaka

Zhang: My name is Zhang Yixuan and I am a senior student from Peking University. I major in Spanish Language and Literature in the School of Foreign Languages, and after graduating I intend to continue studying law. I have been in Jing Forum for three years, as I joined as a freshman in 2016, and was a delegate to the section on social justice. Later on I became vice president in charge of academic preparation, and that year we had three section topics: gender, elitism and globalism. This year, I am in charge of Jing Forum and my reasons for participating are multifaceted. I really want to understand

Japan as a neighbor, because Japan is one of the first countries I grew up to know; I came from Shandong Province, which is just across the sea from Japan. I have seen a lot of activities sponsored by Japanese corporations so I basically grew up influenced by Japanese culture. So, when I got to Peking University and had the chance to join Jing Forum, I saw it as a good opportunity to deepen my understanding of Japan. So I stayed in the forum for three years and found it a great experience.

What Is Jing Forum?

JS: Could you give a brief background to Jing Forum? Also, it seems there is a very detailed procedure for publishing reports or conclusions, so could you

explain about this procedure?

Kittaka: Basically the forum was founded in 2005 and at that time there was strong mistrust between China and Japan over Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine. So, some of the members of the University of Tokyo thought they could do something to ameliorate relations, and asked students at Peking University if they would like to come together in a forum to discuss such issues. That is the basic foundation of the forum. We have three sections for each year. This year we have cultural diversity, regulations in cyberspace, and competition and justice. Each section has five people from the

University of Tokyo and five people from Peking University, and then we also each have four members of committees, making 19 students from each university. We have discussions around the table, but also interview professors or people in companies to deepen our understanding of relations between our countries or social problems in each country.

Zhang: Maybe I can add something about the procedure. In early April we have a pre-session, which is for topic selection. A University of Tokyo student will fly to China and join us for topic selection, and so we will recruit members at our respective campuses and then collect some basic proposals for our general topics. In that session in April, we get together to select the three final topics for the year. Afterwards, with the help of professors and also other students, we prepare other interesting topics from our respective universities. Then in September, we have the Beijing session, which lasts for a week, then the Tokyo session in October. After these sessions, we summarize our discussion results and publish the report books, one in Chinese and one in Japanese. Basically, we then start to recruit more members and start to prepare for next year's discussions, so we are busy all year round.

JS: So you publish your report on a particular website for this forum?

Kittaka: Yes, we post them on the website, and also publish an actual booklet for supporters.

Zhang: On the Chinese side we have various ways of publishing our results tailored to different sections of the public.

JS: How about language? One in Japanese and the other in Chinese?

Zhang: Japanese and Chinese. We use English in our discussions, and sometimes when we make a report book to target our Japanese audience, we use English.

JS: I am curious about the participating students. Are they mostly majoring in international relations or politics, or economics?

Kittaka: Some are majoring in international relations, but there are also law faculty students, and even science and computer science students.

Zhang: This year we have cyberspace regulations, so that is why we have computer science students. A wide range of students participate in the forum.

JS: I am also curious about the process of topic selection. You explained about the procedure, but is it a spontaneous discussion, not based upon any public information? Do you just get together and talk about recent news or topics in the media?

Zhang: Basically, for topic selection, the various section leaders have different disciplines and so their academic background pretty much contributes to their topic section. A student majoring in international relations was a member of the globalism section last year, and after that discussion she wanted to try to explain why both our societies are becoming more diverse, and so she raised the topic of cultural diversity as the main topic. We finally decided on that topic, and that is just one example of how it works. One student with a particular academic background comes up with a proposal, does some academic preparation work, and tries to identify a topic that is pertinent to current debate. Then, that person will be in charge of introducing that topic and explaining its significance. Although it is a spontaneous discussion, sometimes it is a little bit more like a debate because we are trying to clarify our positions and persuade other people regarding them.

Kittaka: Most of the board members of the committees are from the Jing Forum of the previous year, and then we recruit section leaders around January. When we interview them, they bring up some ideas that they want to discuss. When we go to Peking University in March, section leaders from both universities decide on what they will talk about. So the topics are all up to them in a sense.

Zhang: The section leaders from each country will probably have different ideas about what they are going to discuss, so that is why we need to gather in April, to try and combine these ideas into a unified topic.

JS: For example, this year's topics are very interesting: cultural diversity, cyberspace, competition and justice. I think these are relevant to the global economy, not necessarily to bilateral relations between Japan and China. So are you focusing on issues from a global context or a bilateral one?

Zhang: I think we need to take both into consideration. We think globally sometimes because we discuss these issues in English. Also, sometimes I find that our universities have a lot of similarities, so we usually select topics that are pertinent to worldwide debate. This is an interesting point because it shows that our individual identity is also diversified; we do not just focus on one country or international

relations between two countries. As academia often involves international exchanges, our backgrounds are becoming more diverse.

Kittaka: For this year, the topics are related to the global economy and globalization, but looking back five or six years ago we discussed the education systems in both countries. There were also times when we discussed leadership, labor or social gaps, which means that the topics are not necessarily related to economy.

Zhang: Although those topics are related to worldwide issues, when we hold debates we tend to focus on cases that are more familiar to Chinese and Japanese audiences. For example with cyberspace regulation, this year we focused on regulations in each country and their differences, so for any given topic we will look at the situation in both countries.

JS: I am curious about both universities' faculty's involvement in Jing Forum. Could you tell me if the faculty are also involved in your forum and if so, how are they involved?

Kittaka: For Jing Forum in 2018, Professor Akio Takahara and Professor Tomoko Ako supported us, and Prof. Takahara actually came to our opening ceremony in Tokyo and made comments about the three sections. He sometimes introduces companies or people who can support Jing Forum, or helps us find conference rooms or other spaces for discussion. They only support us, but do not actually take part in the discussions.

Zhang: We also receive similar support, usually from the office of International Relations of Peking University. Teachers from that department help us with logistics, to recruit members, and to provide academic guidance. Some professors come to our Opening Ceremony and enlighten us regarding issues in Japan or China.

Discussions in Jing Forum 2018

JS: How is this year's Jing Forum going so far?

Kittaka: On the topic of cultural diversity, they discuss more abstract ideas — the questions are about cultural identity or whether all cultures are equal. What they are doing is to analyze this globalized world and seek a desirable model in which a majority culture can compromise with a minority culture. They are also looking at more specific cases such as the Okinawa problem in Japan or the Xinjiang issue — the separatist conflict in the far northwest province of China — or gender issues.

JS: I am very interested in the third issue: competition and justice. What was generally discussed?

Zhang: Competition and social justice is interesting because of its continuity. Through discussions over 13 years in Jing Forum we have found a lot of issues related to social justice. I myself joined the social justice section in 2016. Competition can somehow contribute to more efficient work, but can also be harmful to society because it can fuel inequality, and especially on equality of outcomes and opportunities there is a lot of philosophical debate. We want to cover education and business because these are topics related to everybody, and everybody can have something to say. We illustrate the differences between Japan and China in high school education, and can figure out different levels of high schools and why they are different, whether they emphasize comprehensive education or education that merely focuses on getting higher grades. We are comparing these different factors and how they affect competition and whether they affect equality. We have discussed, in the context of China and Japan, whether some corporations are creating a monopoly, and whether that can affect both individuals and society in general. After graduation, students in both countries want to go to big firms to work, and in the recruitment process they want to find out if there are any factors relating to gender or other issues.

JS: This is a very important issue, as there is now a trend toward populism in various parts of the world, including in the United States and Europe. What is behind this? Is it due to expanding income inequality between the rich and poor? This is often interpreted as an outcome of competition. In your discussions, do the majority of students support the idea of social justice, or competition? Was there a consensus?

Zhang: Personally I don't think that social justice and competition are in conflict. As for the trend of populism, actually last year we covered two topics related to that: globalism and elitism. The idea is that globalization only contributes to the welfare of the elite class and that the public in some societies are suffering. My personal idea is that, when it comes to abstract terms like social justice, of course everybody will support it, but when it comes to specific cases we can see a lot of factors involved and there might be differences between Chinese and Japanese standards. We need to remember that our delegates from each country do not represent our respective societies in general as we have similar educational backgrounds. We read similar books and accept similar ideas that are quite Westernized, so we have to keep this in mind. We try to use statistics from both countries to compare our ideas.

JS: This is a very important point. The students represent individuals rather than the country.

Zhang: When it comes to your personal identity, it is hard to separate that from the identity of the community.

Kittaka: Yes, and many of the delegates in the Tokyo forum come from the Kanto area rather than regional areas and so their opinions are somewhat city-oriented and do not represent the rural areas. We try to keep in mind that we're not representing our country. The delegates in Peking University may be more diverse and represent different regions.

Zhang: On the composition of delegates in Peking and Tokyo, in last year's discussion they actually compared the individual background of each delegate, and it showed that most Tokyo delegates are from the Kanto area and have a similar background, while the Chinese students had more diverse backgrounds. Also, Tokyo delegates see themselves as being the elite, while the Chinese students do not see themselves that way and feel it is hard to regard yourself as one of the elite in China as it is so competitive to become one.

Kittaka: In Tokyo, students felt that they were among the elite just by having entered the University of Tokyo, while this was not necessarily the case with Peking University. There they need connections to political power to join the elite. So when it comes to fairness, there is a big difference in values, as University of Tokyo students' emphasis is on individual rights or individual backgrounds when thinking about competition. In China, there might be more emphasis on social mobility than in Japan in terms of getting into a top university.

Zhang: We have different perspectives on these issues and different results. When it comes to the University of Tokyo, I think most students come from urban areas, especially in Tokyo. But the process is fairer because there are unified tests for students of all regions. In China, we have different tests for different regions and this gives different outcomes. If you live in Beijing or Shanghai you have a good chance of entering top universities, but if you come from a province like mine, it is increasingly hard. When it comes to the results, it seems that we don't have that high a concentration of students from Beijing or Shanghai. Social mobility in China is kind of diminishing because when it comes to the process of development it is a global trend — social mobility improves alongside development. In our debates and thought experiments, I think delegates are not just representing themselves; they are trying to summarize social impacts that they perceived themselves.



Forum's Merits

JS: It seems that exchange of opinions, information and values between students of both countries is a major priority for this forum. This will certainly enrich your knowledge and experience and be very useful after graduation in whatever you do in your work.

Kittaka: I agree. Our main goals are to exchange information and see the fundamental differences in our values. Sometimes we try to reach a conclusion about what an ideal society is and how to get there, but we found that is very difficult because we have completely different societies so actually cannot imagine such an ideal society.

JS: What does the conclusion look like after each debate?

Zhang: Sometimes it is hard to reach a conclusion about what an ideal society looks like in the context of fairness, so in our report book we have some interesting conclusions, and we just truthfully record our discussion process and also whether people are reaching a consensus, and the reasons why we cannot reach it. We don't look for a one-sentence conclusion but more to identify the reasons why there are differences, and to analyze the roots of those differences. I think that reaching conclusions and making policy suggestions is not the main goal; rather, it is about mutual trust and mutual inspiration and to really understand our respective societies.

JS: Having listened to your comments, I think this is a very useful forum for improving friendship because you discuss many important issues as individuals.

The forum was founded in 2005 and has been going for almost 15 years, so friendships must have grown a great deal. Do alumni of the forum sometimes address you or talk about their experiences?

Kittaka: Sometimes we have the chance to meet alumni, and we invite them to the party after the final presentation. Other than that, I sometimes hear that alumni chapters gather in places like New York, or that alumni end up working together in the same companies, for example in the banking sector.

JS: You have made these friendships at a young age and they last a long time.

Zhang: Yes, and not just delegates of the forum, but also university students whom we present to, because we promote our ideas and friendship to them. When we introduce Jing Forum to Peking University students, we are trying to show them how wonderful Japanese society is and to attract them to our forum, by which we can promote friendship. We are not just providing them with images; we are trying to invite them to join us in order to find the answers to their long-held questions. Through this process, we can create mutual trust and understanding, and discover that while we have many differences there are also lots of similarities. We are also trying to understand our own identities: my first time in Jing Forum was very enriching as I didn't have a clear identity as to who I was and who I represent, but through debating these ideas I think I am able to understand myself more deeply.

JS: Whatever you do after graduation, this experience is very useful. Are any of your senior members in China living in Japan or vice versa?

Kittaka: Yes, I know some alumni from Peking University now living in Japan.

Zhang: One of our past delegates was interested in the environment, and after graduating he worked in Japan for seven years and then returned to China, where he gained an MBA. I interviewed him and had a deep impression of how Jing Forum can impact on your future life. I also know a student from Peking University who worked in Japan for nine years after graduating. The friendship and inspiration that they got from Jing Forum was certainly a big help to them.

Next Year's Topics & Future Issues

JS: We mentioned topic selection, but are there any topics selected for next year, such as the issue of

trade wars or other rising geopolitical risks?

Kittaka: Of course, many students are interested in these issues but they are a little far removed from our daily lives so it is hard to talk about them individually, based on our own individual values. It is going to be based more on research or academic background provided by professors; we need to focus more on the actual discussion process.

Zhang: Especially when it comes to the trade war, it is more relevant to China so perhaps Peking University students should be more familiar with that issue; I personally feel it is more of a zero-sum game, but when it comes to the Jing Forum discussion, the idea is to say no to a zero-sum game. We prefer the idea of a plus-sum game, and that is why we are trying to reach that goal through cooperation and communication.

JS: What do you think is particularly important when considering how to maintain good relations between Japan and China?

Zhang: I think that economy and trade are definitely important. To use my experience in international exchange and student forums, I think that people-to-people relations are also important. For example, China and Australia have very close trading relations, but on the level of politics or people-to-people we are not so close. However, between China and Japan, there are very strong linkages between Japanese and Chinese people and these take place irrespective of the policies between the two countries. We know that over history there has been communication between our two nations and even in difficult times our cooperation never really stopped. We learn a lot from Japan, and a lot of more abstract words that we use enter our lexicon from Japan. These two countries have influenced each other throughout history and so it is not just about economy or trade, but really about people and people relations. When Chinese tourists come to Japan, even if they can't read everything, they feel a sense of familiarity and this is the foundation of mutual trust.

JS: So you think people-to-people relations are an important element of this forum. Also, I believe that "soft power" is very important for such relations.

Kittaka: Yes, when I ask Peking University students why they are interested in Japan, they often say that it was because they saw Japanese movies or animation, and so I think that soft power is indeed important as a way of getting people to develop an interest in Japan. This is very different from the formality of newspapers or the government. I am sure that trade and economic relations are very important between our two countries, as the Japanese economy is

certain to go down over the next 50 years. Meanwhile, I am a little pessimistic about political relations because over the past 100 years we have fought against each other, and it is kind of inevitable for the Japanese and Chinese governments to try and blame each other. That is why soft power can play an important part in forming people-to-people relationships.

JS: Will your forum discuss these cultural matters in the future?

Zhang: Yes. One reason why Chinese students join Jing Forum is that they grew up watching Japanese cartoons and are attracted to Japanese. On the other hand, China has not traditionally had such a strong cultural industry and its soft power is weaker, so it is somewhat curious as to what exactly attracts Japanese students to join Jing Forum.

Kittaka: The reason why I joined Jing Forum is because I was studying China and Chinese language too, and when I was entering the University of Tokyo people told me that this is the era of China and that China would dominate economically, so I thought it would be good to understand China better. I think it is easier for us to have a discussion with students from China using English, because it is a second language for both of us, so it is easier than discussing with English natives.

Zhang: When it comes to soft power, it has a foundation in hard power. Especially with China's burgeoning economy in the last few decades, Japanese students are very interested in understanding China, so it is a combination of hard power and soft power that forms the attraction of understanding each other.

JS: My last question is about language. Someone told me that in Japanese schools we pick up Chinese as a second or third language. Could there be a mutual line where China expands Japanese education and Japan expands Chinese education? This could help promote good relations, as language is an important form of soft power. In the future, could Jing Forum be held in either Japanese or Chinese exclusively?

Zhang: A lot of the delegates in the University of Tokyo are learning Chinese, and can speak it as their third language. Similarly at Peking University, delegates are learning Japanese and are doing this voluntarily rather than as a compulsory course. Personally, I feel that language barriers are diminishing around the world — studying a foreign language will become easier, and sometimes less important — because we have a lot of resources to help us communicate. In that



sense, attraction to another culture to study its language spontaneously will have a big impact. My personal wish is that China and Japan can be more attracted to each other to bring about mutual prosperity and understanding of each other's cultures.

Kittaka: When we debate, we realize how our cultures are really similar to each other, and while we usually use English, we sometimes find it difficult to define terms such as culture or Westernization. In that case we sometimes write down the kanji, and then we can express what we meant in English. It takes a lot of effort to learn each other's language, and I think that using English makes the discussion kind of neutral rather than Chinese or Japanese dominant.

Zhang: Another thing is that in academic research English is the dominant language, and this is really hard to change. We have to use English for the academic background to our debates. I am actually quite optimistic about our future, because if the world is more and more focused on cultures of civilizations, Japan and China actually have a lot of similarities compared to other nations. We have easier access to transport and communication, so when these barriers come down we will have even more opportunities to communicate with each other and understand each other, and when we can put aside our differences and understand each other, we can enjoy a more harmonious relationship.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender, who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.