

Round Table Talk: Life in Japan, Life at IPMU

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From left to right: Johanna Knapp, Simeon Hellerman, Susanne Reffert, and Matthew Sudano

How did you decide to come to Japan?

Hellerman: Matt, how and when did you decide to come to Japan? I think we are extremely lucky to have obtained high-caliber researchers such as yourself, well, such as all three of you.

Sudano: Thank you. I got my email from Hitoshi on Christmas Eve and spent all of Christmas and the rest of Christmas vacation reading everything on the internet about Japan and trying to figure out if my wife and I could actually live here. We did have other offers which would have been much easier personally.

Hellerman: I'm sure you had a lot of them.

Sudano: But this was the most exciting offer professionally. Before the email came, I don't think my wife realized that this was a serious consideration and that this was actually one of the options that I thought was very attractive. I think she was quite stunned but we decided

we could make it work and it has gone pretty well.

Hellerman: What did you find particularly attractive about it?

Sudano: I like the style of the institution. I like that it's a large, pure-research institution, so I have access to many brilliant people studying many different things. So if I want answers to my questions, they are very easy to obtain. I also like that there is a lot of energy and enthusiasm here. At least one other place that I was considering, I had heard – it had sort of the opposite energy.

Hellerman: Really! That is interesting.

All: (Laughs)

Hellerman: So the energy and enthusiasm in IPMU was one of the things I take it that you found particularly attractive.

Sudano: Yes, besides reading on the internet about Japan and IPMU, I talked to everybody I could including people who are already here and other people in the physics

community. We are a pretty small community, so word of mouth is a big thing. And everybody had positive things to say, only positive things.

Hellerman: I am happy to hear that.

I don't think that I talked to you but if I had then I would have only said positive things too, just that way.

Sudano: Since I didn't ask you before, I'll ask you now, how's IPMU been for you?

Hellerman: It has been fantastic, nothing short of extraordinary, in fact. If you had told me that such an exciting opportunity for scientific research would exist, I wouldn't have believed you. As you say, we are a pure research institution and so there are no distractions from what we are truly supposed to be doing – our fundamental mission which is to conduct and carry out world class scientific research and that's one exciting thing. Another is the lack of disciplinary barriers here. People in different fields of

research not only are expected notionally to interact regularly with one another and collaborate but it actually happens. A lot of groups and institutes I believe have this sort of idea that a lot of interdisciplinary interactions are to occur all the time but it is quite seldom realized to the extent that it is here. String theorists interact with mathematicians, with particle phenomenologists, with cosmologists. Experimentalists and phenomenologists talk to each other. Experimentalists and theorists... I'm quite impressed with the level of interdisciplinary collaboration that has been occurring here.

Susanne, what do you think about the opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration that had been afforded you here at IPMU?

Reffert: I think it's a lot better than other places, because at places I have been before, you were not expected to talk to other people, such as those from another floor, or the other side of the hallway, and if you did, you received strange looks. And here it is completely the opposite. And that is very nice. I enjoy that a lot.

Hellerman: Here in fact, I would say that even the physical structure of the building makes it almost mandatory to interact with our colleagues. I mean, there is this complicated spiral ramp way which is practically the only way in and out of the building. And it takes you by every office of every researcher in every scientific field who works in the building at IPMU – that by itself is a stimulating journey.

Sudano: It feels very open. From a given point – on the third floor, say, you can see into most peoples' offices. You can't help but feel connected with the other people doing research.

Knapp: Yes, it's great that people here don't seem to avoid each other, which

is what I've experienced at other places, and here you don't feel like you're disturbing people when you knock on their doors and just want to talk to them.

Sudano: Yes, the glass doors make a big difference.

Hellerman: Yes, very well thought out.

Knapp: Glass doors but not glass walls - I think that here there's just the right amount of privacy versus no privacy.

Sudano: So you are actually quite new, and you are still perhaps in this transition period. How's it going for you?

Knapp: I'd say it's just going as smoothly as possible. I mean, I've moved to new institutes before, but here everything seemed to be taken care of for me, so I think this was probably the easiest and smoothest move I've ever made.

Hellerman: So Johanna, would you say that you have positive feelings towards IPMU's administrative support?

Knapp: Absolutely. How can you not?

Hellerman: I certainly do as well. So you wouldn't have any suggestions to improve IPMU's administrative support?

Knapp: I can't think of anything. I wish the support were as good everywhere else. I mean, two or three weeks before I came here, I got an email asking me if I'd like to move into an apartment provided for me by the university. If I'd gone somewhere else, I probably would have asked my colleagues and been told that it might be good to look at a particular newspaper to find an apartment. Here, all I had to do was turn up, and everything was set.

Sudano: The administrative staff is extremely helpful. I don't know what

I'm supposed to ask them to help me with but I ask them to help me with everything. I always do. They are very generous with their time and effort.

Knapp: Because I'm illiterate in Japanese and wouldn't know what to do without their help.

Sudano: Yes, some things are tough. For example, it is very difficult for me to Google anything in Japan because I can't read or write very well. So I rely on others to do these little things for me, to find various things.

Hellerman: And yet IPMU makes available intensive instruction in the Japanese language free of charge to the scientific staff.

Reffert: I think the Japanese staff is really great, and I also think that the Japanese teacher is extremely helpful in all sorts of other situations. I mean, if you have any questions about life in Japan, she will help you, and she will also tell you about life in Japan, not just about the language.

Knapp: She also gives us lots of things; this morning we had some Japanese sweets that she brought. I would never have bothered trying them before, but you just know that they're special and she offered them to us without our asking.

Hellerman: I agree. Nishikawa-sensei*¹ is truly an exceptional instructor and it is hard to imagine myself or any of the other scientific staff from abroad integrating into life in Japan nearly as smoothly as we do without her assistance.

Sudano: Yes, I learned very quickly enough Japanese to get by. I learned how to order food and find things in the store and get around on public transportation, ask for directions. So the basics are pretty easy. More complicated things have taken some

*1 Masami Nishikawa, a member of IPMU administrative staff

effort. I had to furnish and decorate a large house, which was difficult, but it worked out well in the end.

How to make long-term stays in Japan attractive?

Reffert: Apparently MEXT is preparing a budget request for funds to encourage foreign researchers to come to Japan. What kinds of things do you think would help foreign researchers to stay here for extended periods?

Sudano: I meant to ask what we mean by long term? I think that it makes a pretty big difference, depending on how long it is.

Reffert: But anyway, what do you think would be helpful if you were to stay for a period of more than a week in Japan... what types of things that money can buy would be useful?

Sudano: I think it would be very useful to offer housing, if you could just offer them some dormitory-style housing, something like Johanna has.

Knapp: I found that extremely useful, because it was one of my main worries before coming here. Even if they had offered to help me search for an apartment, just the thought of spending two to three months, and always having to find somebody to go with me, I would...

Reffert: But they actually also do that for you.

Knapp: Right, but still, I mean they actually offered me housing, and that was a really great bonus that I didn't expect. I'd have to say that I think they already do as much as possible to make the stay in Japan as comfortable as possible for the researchers here. I think that many of the issues people have with regard to coming here are not actually Japan's fault, but people have partners who have to get a job or something, and that's

terribly difficult when you go to Japan because Japanese is a hard language, and it's also hard for their partner to find a job if the partner doesn't work in research. I think that may be one of the main reasons why people are reluctant to come here.

Hellerman: Do you feel that active guidance from IPMU in trying to find employment for a spouse or partner would be helpful? Would it be helpful in bringing people?

Knapp: I guess it might.

Reffert: I think another thing that can be done with money is to make sure there's enough travel money, so that people can travel abroad and bring collaborators from abroad, because one of the problems with Japan is that it is a long way from many western universities and research centers. So as long as there is enough money for you to maintain your connections, or even form new ones, then there is no problem in staying in Japan. What I find problematic is that when you receive this JSPS fellowship,^{*2} the amount of time you can spend outside Japan is limited.

Knapp: It's quite a long time, isn't it? It's three months or something.

Reffert: I think you can stay for like one month, and then they start cutting your salary. So it's not that long, and that's problematic because you risk becoming isolated. So something that does the opposite, that also allows you to go abroad, that would be useful, I think.

Hellerman: Yes, that is one of the key parts of the offer that was the most attractive...

Reffert: That was also one of the things that convinced me, because some people said that maybe it's not a good idea because you risk becoming

^{*2} JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowship for Foreign Researchers (FY2008)

isolated. But that problem is addressed by IPMU with the travel arrangement that allows you to stay away for three months and provides you with money for travel.

Sudano: Yes, that makes all the difference. I think it would be useful for people – this does not take money – if we assigned a buddy, you know, if I signed up as say, being Johanna's go-to person for "how do I do X in Japan," to get rid of some of the struggles that people go through in transition. You know everybody – the more people I spoke to, the more tricks I learned, and if I had had somebody who had been here awhile and figured it all out, guiding me through some of these things, it would have saved me some trouble – just little things, like getting a Suica card...

Reffert: That's a good idea. Of course, for the first people who came here, there was no real experience for them to draw on, but now it would be possible.

Knapp: So do you mean especially non-Japanese people who would think of things that the Japanese may not be aware of...?

Reffert: I think it might be helpful, as they don't understand some of our problems because things are just so natural for them.

Sudano: Like I taught Simeon that Costco exists in Japan a long time after he had been here.

Hellerman: Oh boy! That was very exciting to learn.

Sudano: A Japanese person might not think of this as being attractive. In fact, I spoke to some Japanese people about how this had allowed me to acquire almost anything I want and they had never heard of it. I think being in close contact with foreigners who have been here awhile is helpful.

Reffert: Yes, that is a good point.

Tea time, cookies, Japanese food...

Hellerman: Susanne, how do you feel about tea time?

Reffert: Oh, I think it's a great invention, because it allows you to get to see everybody at least once a day. You can talk to all your other colleagues whose offices you might not pass on the way to your own office. So I think it is really the social heart of IPMU.

Knapp: And I think it's unique. I don't think there are many similar things anywhere else.

Reffert: Sometimes there is something like tea time, but it usually isn't for everyone. Like in Amsterdam, we also had tea time, but since there were these kinds of borders between the disciplines, it definitely wasn't as good as it is here.

Sudano: I think all great research institutions have great tea times.

Hellerman: But this is in particular to IPMU but one thing I wish was that at tea time, they have something healthy, like apples or carrots.

Sudano: The Institute for Advanced Study has fruit.

Hellerman: Why didn't they do that when I was there? Because IAS and here at IPMU, at IAS particularly, it was in essence also a quasi mandatory at IAS, but I was terrified to go, I was terrified that I would see the cookies and immediately begin chewing them down, just uncontrollably, because they were so good, as the cookies here are also very good. So I had and still have to some extent a phobia about coming to tea time for that reason which I overcome. I mean, I come regularly as expected and it is always an enjoyable and illuminating experience for me but...

Reffert: That's a very good point. I've also been missing that a bit, lots

of sweets and once in a while there was fruit, which was always a great highlight.

Hellerman: But if you knew it was going to be there, you would not have to be afraid as I am.

Knapp: But for me, that's not a problem. Japanese food is so healthy that I don't mind having cookies at tea time at all.

Hellerman: That is quite a good point. Unlike in...

Reffert: You know, eat a lot of *natto* for lunch.

Hellerman: That is right. There are ways to make up for it. Even if they have *natto* at tea time - that would be interesting.

Sudano: I have been slowly building up my menu - the set of things that I can make for myself. Now I can eat quite unhealthily if I choose to. I have a very large toaster oven. I can make cakes. I can make cookies.

Knapp: Okay, you cook Japanese. That's something I would really like to do. The problem for me is that now I need to get Nishikawa-sensei to go to the store with me to explain what's what, because I stand in front of a rack of one soy sauce after the other, and I want a particular one, and I don't have a chance of getting it, and I would really love to cook Japanese.

Sudano: I am experimenting. I'm learning some things.

Hellerman: By trial and error?

Sudano: Yes, well, Shiga-san^{*3} has taught me a little bit about cooking, but mostly through trial and error.

Knapp: I would like to make the most of all the products that only exist here, and probably nowhere else. One has to know what it is and what to do with it.

Sudano: That is true. I am sampling the vegetables that I am not familiar with like *negi*, that kind of thing. We

like the long *negi*. It is like a green onion, a very large green onion.

Hellerman: Interesting. What about the daikon radish?

Reffert: Oh, I love it!

Sudano: I've experimented with it. It is pretty good.

Hellerman: I like it, too.

Sudano: I think I like it better raw than cooked.

Knapp: So back to IPMU, but also to Japan, Susanne, how are you enjoying writing your blog?^{*4} It's famous worldwide, I know.

Sudano: That is one of the things I read before coming here, before making the decision.

Knapp: It was recommended to me before I came here.

Reffert: I hope it helped to convince you to come. Actually, I mainly started writing it to keep in touch with friends, but of course I'm happy if prospective postdocs read it and gain an impression of what it's like to live in Japan.

Going to the doctor in Japan

Hellerman: Have you ever used the Japanese health or hospital system?

Sudano: Well, of course I went to a mandatory physical exam. It was interesting. A very different experience and now I am looking at maternity clinics because my wife and I are planning to have a baby here.

Hellerman: Well, good luck. Oh, that is interesting.

Sudano: We have had some trouble finding a place that is not too hard to get to and where people speak any English. There are options. We are still looking at things.

Reffert: Yes, I think it is challenging

^{*3} Tomoko Shiga, a member of IPMU administrative staff

^{*4} <http://chipango.wordpress.com/>

to find... I'm happy I haven't needed anything. But for something specific like that, you need to be comfortable with the place, right?

Sudano: Yes.

Reffert: So that is a challenge I think.

Sudano: It is very different looking.

The patient-doctor relationship seems to be very different.

Reffert: In which sense?

Knapp: Like the doctors are very highly respected or...

Sudano: Um, in America, doctors make a big show of it. They try to make you feel confident, they try to make you feel comfortable, they do a lot of talking to you and they will try to explain things to you. And from what I have heard, and my limited experience has been consistent, doctors in Japan are highly respected and they give their opinion, they give their diagnosis and the prescription and there is no further discussion about it, and there is not a lot of discussion between patients and doctors about what choices there might be and how the patient might want to proceed. So given the cultural differences and the language barrier, finding a doctor we are comfortable with might be difficult but we have only met with one person.

Reffert: I've heard that if you even go with a cold, they just prescribe you like lots of stuff, like ten different pills even if you have a common cold, and there was this student who tore a couple of ligaments in his foot and they kept him in hospital for about a month. So I think that if it isn't serious, I'll try to avoid going to the doctor.

Knapp: You know, Nishikawa-sensei also told me that the concept of a general practitioner doesn't really exist in Japan, so even if you have something small you have to go to a specialist in Internal Medicine or

something.

Hellerman: Yes.

Reffert: You have some firsthand experience. I don't have experience since I have never actually gone to a doctor yet.

Hellerman: Yes, I went not only to a doctor but to the hospital. I had an injury, an unavoidable sports injury and it resulted in an ambulance having to be called and I was taken to the hospital and I must say it was, compared to what would have been my experience in the US, I am sure it was an extremely efficient, good experience, as good as these things can be. I dislocated my shoulder and well, I mean, dislocating a bone is extremely painful under the best of circumstances, but the paramedics and the ambulance were very helpful and despite the fact that I did not speak the language well at all and despite the fact that I did not have my insurance card with me at the time, the doctors in the hospital saw me very quickly. I was waiting for a rather short time in the waiting room, just about no more than 15 minutes.

Reffert: Oh that is very short.

Hellerman: If you go to a hospital in the United States, any hospital without an insurance card, you are lucky if you can be seen within 12 hours. It was really quite a different experience and then they did the rest, they fiddled around for a while and I cannot say the fiddling around was particularly pleasant but...

Knapp: Probably not the fault of the Japanese doctor.

Hellerman: It is not, certainly not the fault of the Japanese doctor. I think it is just like trying to pop your zipper back into its track if it has come off the tracks and I was just, some unavoidable amount of jiggling around and fiddling around and well,

I have every confidence that it was probably the minimum amount that was possible under the circumstances despite the fact that it felt like quite a lot at the time and they did their best and after some amount of trial and error they popped it right back in and I was entirely satisfied. Afterwards the doctor showed me some x-rays of what it had been like. I was shocked actually but I think they did a very good job, they gave me some advice and they bandaged.

Reffert: Now you are good as new?

Hellerman: Now I am as good as new and in fact even though I had neither of my insurance card nor any money to pay them because I had been out doing athletic activity, they let me go home with a verbal promise to come back and pay them later. Well, I did, I actually just came back and brought my insurance card and it was all good. So I have nothing but good things to say about the system here.

Reffert: But why do you imagine people would hesitate to come to Japan?

Knapp: Now that I'm here, I don't understand why they would.

Sudano: But you had concerns?

Knapp: I didn't have many concerns. But I have been moving around sort of within my own cultural background from one country to the next, so I felt like it was about time I went somewhere further. I was a bit hesitant about the language, and well, it's still a problem, but it is manageable.

Sudano: I did not worry much about technical things. I worried about my wife. I worried about whether she could be happy here. I think it is a little harder to meet people, to make friends. She does not necessarily want to be friends with a bunch of physicists and I think she is more

bothered by little difficulties. She has actually lived abroad in Europe and she didn't love it. She appreciates being able to speak English to people and being able to find whatever she wants. She wasn't really excited about going to another new country. But it has gone very well. And now that she is here... She hasn't been here very long but she is very happy with our home. She likes our town. I think generally Japan is treating her well. She does not have trouble with the food or getting by in everyday circumstances. She still needs to meet people but I think that will come and of course we still need to figure out this issue of having a child. But I'm sure that will be fine too.

What is cool about coming to Japan?

Reffert: Maybe we shouldn't just think about what is difficult about coming here, but also what is cool about coming to Japan.

Sudano: Yes.

Reffert: Because actually, I think it's a very cool country to live in, and I've really enjoyed going around and visiting different parts of Japan and also Tokyo, which is huge. And even though I've lived in Tokyo for one and a half years, I'm nowhere near done seeing everything worth seeing.

Sudano: It is a very different, very interesting and very lovely culture. I am enjoying getting to know it.

Knapp: And there is a lot of culture to find out about.

Hellerman: Yes, temples, shrines.

Knapp: Food, traditional music, traditional dance, whatever you like; it's all different to what I have known before.

Reffert: Also, it doesn't get boring quickly. I mean, I'm still not at all bored. I find something new every

time I go out of the house.

Knapp: I find this very exciting. There are many people in your report who are totally fascinated by Asian culture, and they like Japan because they know *manga* or they know martial arts, but I was never such a person, so I came to Japan not knowing much. As a result, it now really hits me every time because there is so much new stuff to discover, and I'm really enjoying that. I mean, right now for me there is just no regular everyday life, or not yet, because everything is new and exciting, and it is a lot of fun.

Sudano: I should say that – we were saying that we shouldn't just talk about the difficulties. A lot of things I was surprised to find were much easier than I expected. Of course people are very helpful and friendly but even little things like I didn't expect to be able to find as much food as I have found, in particular things like Oreos, you know. There is a lot of American influence, there are a lot of American goods and American culture at least and I think not just American. That is what I notice.

Knapp: There's Italian pasta here.

Sudano: Yes. You can get almost any type of ethnic food and a lot of things turn out to be easier than other places like of course public transportation is very easy.

Reffert: Yes, it is amazing. Always on time.

Hellerman: Yes, on the whole, the country is very organized and efficient.

Sudano: Yes and very convenient.

Reffert: And very safe too.

Knapp: You probably can't find a safer country.

Reffert: Twice already, I've left my backpack on the train, with all my camera equipment, like a couple of lenses and my digital camera, and I was not even worried. I mean, we just

asked and got it back immediately, once after only half an hour. Yes, it is really nice that you don't have to worry about your belongings, or yourself for that matter.

Hellerman: On one of my first trips to Japan I lost a cell phone or I dropped it on a side walk, reasonably busy side walk and I was able to you know retrace my steps and figure out where it must have been and I came back and it was right exactly where I left it about more than half a day later, just so remarkable.

Sudano: I constantly leave my umbrella on my bike and while umbrellas are not terribly valuable things, it would instantly be snatched up in America.

Hellerman: Yes, I put down my cell phone, another cell phone on a train in New Jersey for about 45 seconds and it was stolen.

Knapp: I guess in most countries when you ride a bike you take the saddle with you, otherwise the bike would be stolen, unless there's a part missing from it so that it's not that attractive. I think that's also a good thing, and it's a motivation to go to a country that may have a different culture, because you are in East Asia but everything is safe and clean, and you don't have to worry about eating something and getting sick from it. That's quality of life, and that's something I really like.

Sudano: I ate raw oysters for the first time in my life. This is the one country where I trust the oysters.

Hellerman: Well, this has been a very fruitful discussion. Ideally, I have really gotten a lot out of it. I hope the rest of you feel the same way.

Reffert: Absolutely.

Hellerman: Well thanks for sharing your thoughts and all that stuff.