

# 理学部見聞録

What brought you to RIGAKUBU?

第2回

Alex Vinogradov

(化学専攻特任助教)



The author

## 不増不減

Right before coming to Japan two or so years ago, I binge-watched the entire *Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex* (攻殻機動隊) anime saga. After seeing this cyberpunk dystopia set up in a post-apocalyptic Japan, all the while scrolling through photoshopped images of buzzing Shibuya, I dreaded the crazy pace of life that was to come. After all, Cambridge, where I was struggling to finish my PhD thesis at the time, was already bad enough. Two-story houses as far as the eye can see, that city looked like a village compared to Tokyo, yet even there I could barely keep up: biotech start-ups and university campuses hidden all over the place cranked up the rhythm.

Once I was in Tokyo, however, the futuristic vibe quickly faded away. Sure, the subway system seemed incomprehensible at first, and the first trip from the airport was a journey in its own right, but in just a week or two I began seeing the city in a completely different light. Everything appeared very much motionless. Somewhat of a paradox: Shibuya and Shinjuku were as chaotic and overcrowded as it gets, but they were always chaotic, to a point where it became almost predictable. And no matter how many times I passed by a Cajun chicken food truck on campus, people would always be lining up for a delicious lunch. Everything was in its right place; so much so that it seemed that nothing ever happens.

This paradoxical tranquility and repetitiveness captivated me since then. The university and the lab I work in felt the same, although I would be hard-pressed to point out exactly why: people come and people go, instruments break and get fixed, papers are published – all the usual – and yet everything looked still. Every spring starts with a hanami party, and then there is the Department of Chemistry softball tournament, UTokyo May festival, and the ginkgo trees on Hongo campus turn green again. All seemed cyclical. The research in the Suga lab

only compounded this feeling. Constantly running evolution-in-miniature experiments did not help it either. Every day starts with DNA and it ends with DNA; and the next day is like the previous one, except the DNA is slightly different. And ironically, the object of the evolution is *cyclic* peptides.

I was often told that Japan is an “easy to live in” country, when this topic came up. But is it so? It took me close to a month to open a bank account, more than a month to set up an internet connection at home, and way too many visits to a realtor to sign a lease. In lab, dry ice ordering is still done by fax – I had to learn how to use a fax machine just for the occasion! A lot can be said about the ease of living in Japan, but it always felt an entirely different topic.

Instead, I would often see a mental image of countless Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, all of which emanate some kind of hazy aura that sedates everyone in the vicinity. The stone inari (稲荷) foxes, overgrown by moss, seemed to radiate silence from within. For a while, I was apprehensive about all of this. Far from the futuristic nightmare, life in Tokyo is boring, I thought. At the same time, I was curious to get to the bottom of it, to understand where this imagery came from. I bought a goshuincho book (御朱印帳), and started going around the country collecting stamps. One day, about a year ago, I went to a Soto (曹洞宗) temple hidden in a forest near Kanazawa. The monks there were holding a meditation session for laymen, which, hesitating a little, I joined. Afterwards, thinking nothing of the experience, I came back to Tokyo only to realize some time later that I no longer feel the boredom, or tranquility, or anything special at all about living in Japan. Truly, 不増不減.



A fox at Fushimi Inari Taisha

### profile

2019 Project assistant professor, *ibid*  
2017–2019 Postdoctoral researcher, Suga lab,  
Department of Chemistry, UTokyo  
2012–2017 PhD in biochemistry, Pentelute lab,  
MIT, Cambridge  
2007–2012 Specialist in chemistry, Moscow State  
University