On Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017, the East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted a panel discussion entitled “Talk on Japan with Fulbright Alumni: Japan as the Front Runner of Dealing with Emerging Issues”. The panel was headed by Prof. Tomohiko Taniguchi who currently teaches at Keio University Graduate School of System Design and Management. He is also a special adviser to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet and has served as the councilor to the prime minister’s office.

Also on the panel was Ms. Renge Jibu, a journalist and councilor of the Japan Association for the Advancement of Working Women Foundation. She serves as a committee member for promoting gender equality at Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

In addition, the panel included Dr. Masaru Karube, an associate professor of the Institute of
Innovation Research at Hitotsubashi University, and a member of the university’s Center for Japanese Business Studies as well as Dr. Ayako Hirata, a project-based associate professor of law and society at Kyoto University Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies.

More than 70 students, faculty, as well as community leaders in San Antonio were in attendance. Topics discussed were the Fulbright Alumni’s own American experiences, Japanese gender equality, and Japanese governmental policies.

Karube discussed what he and his family experienced while living in the United States. “The first thing we learned is the importance of being different,” said Karube. “In Japan, we believe in conformities while people in the US are more likely to put emphasis in diversity.” Karube also mentioned they learned about the importance of expressing themselves to others and telling others about themselves. While in Japan, it is not common to express yourself. “In Japan, it is becoming more difficult to have unexpected interactions,” said Karube who is a researcher of innovation in Japan focusing on the downsizing of the Japanese organization and society.

After Karube, Dr. Ayako Hirata shared a story about her law school experience. “I was driving down the road and wanted to change lanes. My friend told me to turn on the turning signal and to just do it, and tell them that you want to change lanes,” says Hirata. She stated that she realized that in order to make a change, “you just have to do it.” The experience may have been a small episode, but a very symbolic experience for her, according to Hirata.

Professor Taniguchi then began his lecture, first by discussing back casting and what he would like Japan to look like in the future. “Diplomacy had existed since the prehistoric times,” said Taniguchi. “Diplomacy is not complete without engaging people at the grassroots level and that we have to reach out to our communities.” Taniguchi then began to discuss why America is the most important ally to Japan, and referred to the fact that Shinzo Abe reached out to President Donald Trump, mainly because it is important to reach out to America’s president, regardless of who it is and whether you agree with him or not. “Even though the United States and Japan were archenemies, the two countries forged alliances despite the bitterness the U.S felt towards Japan. Americans committed themselves to the growth of the Asian Pacific, with Japan benefitting the most,” said Taniguchi. “Japan and the United States are now envisioning
that in the future, these two nations have to work together even more to help a system that has given us prosperity, safety, and peace.”

Taniguchi also discussed back casting, a technique one can use to impose a set of goals for oneself. In Japan’s case, Taniguchi believes that from now to the year of 2040, some of the most serious challenges are looming. “Demographic challenges are the most serious,” said Taniguchi. “There are also challenges psychologically speaking such as the shrinking self-esteem among the young, which is what Taniguchi says he is most concerned about.”

Taniguchi mentioned, “In order for one to grow, there are three ingredients: capital stock, labor input and labor standoff. What is even more important is expectation for the future. Without this expectation, Japan will not grow. This has been the dilemma hitting Japan for many years.” Taniguchi said he hopes Japan will solve these problems and begin to grow by 2040.

Mrs. Renge Jibu began her lecture shortly after Taniguchi. Jibu’s presentation was about Japanese women, their changes and challenges, as well as work and family. Her lecture consists of many personal experiences related to gender equality and inequality.

Jibu began by discussing a previous conversation she had with her daughter about the presidential election, her daughter asked “Do men always win?” Jibu encourages her daughter to become president, and that there are, in fact, female leaders in some countries.

Jibu also has a son, who enjoys cooking and taking care of babies. “These daily gender equality practices are important,” emphasized Jibu. “Gender equality is not only public policy, but also a theory.”

Jibu also discussed the changes of women’s status throughout Japan’s history. She talked about her grandmother’s generation, where her grandmother was a farmer and factory worker. “The women standard a century ago was to have devotion primarily to her family members,” said Jibu. “I really wish I could tell my grandma that time has totally changed.”

Jibu then mentioned that there was a new Japanese constitutional law that guarantees equal rights, and declares that couples can marry based solely on mutual consent. She then talked about a woman named Beate Sirota Gordon, who is one of the most respected American feminists among Japanese women.

Gordon had lived in Japan, and realized that Japanese society taught her that gender equality was
unnecessary. “All of my friends knew about her name,” says Jibu. “Gordon was very important to many women in Japan.” In 1986, there was a law passed in Japan that enabled women to have the same types of jobs that men do. “The law is not perfect, but passing this law is very important,” said Jibu.

Only recently, in August of 2015, a law passed in Japan that promotes women in the workplace. “This helps gender equality because only 10% of women in Japan have managerial positions,” commented Jibu. She then emphasized that the U.S and other countries also struggle with gender inequality in the workplace.

After the two short lectures, there was a Q&A session. A student from the audience asked “What can we do as students to showcase ourselves to the Japanese workplace?” Karube responded, “It depends on the industry. Some large and medium sized companies are concerned about hiring professionals from abroad.” Hirata added shortly after, “Japanese universities are very keen on getting more internationalized, mainly because they know that the current students will work with more foreigners and need to practice English.”

Following the students’ question, one was directed towards Taniguchi. “What is your opinion on how Japan and its people are going to reset the focus toward more risk management and grow into the future, versus being reactive to the future?” Taniguchi replied, “The worst situation in my view is over. The Japanese have finally come to a point where you can envision the better future. That is a foundation in which people can be more ambitious.” Several more questions were asked and ideas were exchanged among the panelists and the audience.

“I enjoyed the ‘People to People’ event like this. I was most enriched by the content of the lectures and Q&A period, and I appreciated that efforts made by Japan to keep a good relationship with US. Thank you for bringing valuable and distinguished guests to San Antonio,” said an event participant after the event.

Special thanks to the following offices for making this event possible:
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