

Turning Japanese

Teaching English Overseas

建玉神話秘地
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絶壁人難攀石隙
峯秀神洲

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I graduated from the University of Alberta in May 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in History and Psychology. Not ready for the real world of careers, I decided to seek adventure by travelling abroad to teach English. On 5 September, 2006 I waved goodbye to family and friends as I boarded a plane in Edmonton to Vancouver, and then from Vancouver to Japan, where I've been teaching English as a foreign language for the past six months.

Seeing Sumo wrestling on TV didn't prepare me for the real thing. Asashoryu Akinori, Mongolian by birth and the current grand champion, enchants the crowd. At 148kg, he's slightly smaller than most of his opponents. Before the bout, he slowly raises and then stomps each foot once, and gives two enormous claps of his hands to thunderous applause. As the two adversaries square off, dead silence falls over the spectators. The tension is palpable. Then the grand champion touches both fists to the ground and the whole stadium erupts. The two enormous men charge toward each other with remarkable agility, and there's a collective intake of breath as the two combatants' heads crash together. After all the fury, Asashoryu tosses his foe out of the ring with an almost-graceful ease. The crowd loses control—Asashoryu has secured his title.

In November, Fukuoka city, on the southern-most island of Japan, is home to a month-long sumo-wrestling tournament. It's a thrilling taste of traditional Japanese culture—a glimpse into the past, which is contrasted markedly with the city's neon signs, Starbucks coffee shops and ubiquitous vending machines. The Sumo wrestlers wander around Fukuoka in traditional kimonos, and the scent of sandalwood perfume, which they treat their hair with, lingers in the air as they walk by. Seeing them casually stroll through the city adds to another quirk to life in Japan that make the whole experience a little surreal.

The arrival of the Sumo wrestlers also means that I'm not always the tallest person in the train station. Standing 6'4", I generally stick out of a crowd in Canada, but in Japan I'm a giant. Even though I'm in a big, cosmopolitan city of about 1.5 million people, curious eyes are constantly pointed in my direction. I learned the Japanese word for tall (*takaii*) after about two weeks of living here, and since then I hear it on a daily basis, whispered amongst friends as I walk onto trains and out of elevators.

I will never fit in here. This became a fundamental truth the first time I went to a traditional Japanese hot spring, or *onsen*, at the recommendation of some of my students. When I was in elementary school I had a reoccurring nightmare that involved solving particularly hard math questions on the board in front of my peers. Night after night in my dreams, I'd shuffle up to the blackboard, only to realize that I was completely naked, to the great mirth of my classmates. After what seemed like an eternity I would give a violent start, and wake up in a cold sweat, mercifully ending my dilemma.

Despite the omen-like qualities of these dreams, I did decide to try an *onsen*, to see what all the fuss was about, and whether it was as relaxing as everyone proclaimed. As I lay soaking in uncomfortably hot water, completely naked, I was fully cognizant of the fact that everyone was staring at the enormous (no, not like that) foreigner, pinching himself as if he wanted to wake from a bad dream.