

FGL Community Newsletter



Dip into an *onsen*, enjoy the colours of Autumn, eat some pumpkin pie and enjoy the fall vibes with FGL Newsletter!



ASK SENPAI: JEROME MONSANTO
THE HIDDEN AUTUMN GEM OF YAMAGATA
UNUSUAL UNITS: COUNTING IN JAPANESE
MY EXPERIENCE WORKING AT A RYOKAN

Ask Senpai: Jerome Monsanto

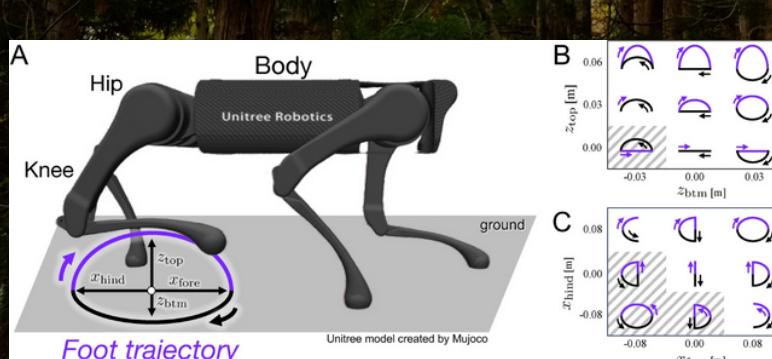
Alicia Adrian, Pavarit Phanichkul

Can you tell us a brief introduction of yourself and what you're doing right now?

Hi, my name is Jerome Monsanto. I'm from the Philippines. I am currently a second-year IMAC-G (master's) student. At the Hayashibe lab, I'm doing research on quadruped robots and how to make them more efficient for locomotion. Right now, I'm mostly busy job hunting, though.

Why did you choose to continue to master's (IMAC-G) after IMAC-U?

Ah, good question. I think my answer to this is pretty common among people; I just wanted to! When I first came to Tohoku University, or even maybe ever since high school, I had already decided that I wanted to go for a master's degree. I was already very familiar with the lab and Sendai and I didn't want to uproot myself to go to another city, basically, so that's why I continued to the IMAC-G program.



Foot trajectory design of a quadruped robot based on oscillator phase. (A) Overview, (B) the variations in the trajectory height, (C) the variations in the trajectory width. [1]

What kind of fields can quadruped robots be applied to?

There's a lot! Factory sites or exploration in very uninhabitable environments, like the moon, can use the help of quadruped robots. You can also use them for dangerous environments or disasters. Take, for example, an earthquake has just happened, then you can use a quadruped robot to go there in place of people to search for survivors. Or maybe you can also use them to defuse bombs using a robot with an arm on its head. A bomb disposal expert can instead control the arm, so it's very practical!

[1] Suzuki, S. et al. (2025) Foot trajectory as a key factor for diverse gait patterns in quadruped Robot Locomotion, Nature News. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-84060-5>



Are quadruped robots your main interest in the field of robotics?

When I started my research in undergrad, yes. Now, I'm more interested in arms (limbs, not weapons), actually. So, I did a lot of research on four-legged robots. I really wanted to do something that's closer to meeting its true potential in the near future. So, arms are more like a near-future type of robotics research than four-legged robots. Yeah, I think I prefer arms right now.

Weird question—but would you say, as an alumni of the Future Global Leadership program, that your global leadership skills have improved?

I think FGL was my first opportunity to interact with a lot of people from different countries. I basically had zero opportunities for that back in the Philippines. But now, I know what possible cultural differences can happen between people and how to bridge that gap. Basically, I try to consider myself in the other person's shoes whenever I'm trying to talk to them, while keeping my perspective as broad as possible. So I would say it really did help my communication skills. I think I'm getting better at not offending someone.

As of now, you do have the N1 certificate. What kind of practice did you go through to achieve this?

Wow, that's a really good question. Okay, so the reason why I took N1 is because a lot of companies want N1 as a certification. But the way I see it, increasing my Japanese skill level wasn't exactly to get N1—it was to connect with people here in Japan as much as possible, make a lot of good friends, and just make friends in Japan as smoothly as I can by forcing myself to use Japanese every day, so I can make friends like how I did in my home country.

What other extracurricular activities do you do here?

That's like 20 things. But one of the things I really liked was the help desk where I help exchange students and international students to settle in as smoothly as possible. When I was here in Sendai at first, it was during COVID. I didn't have anyone to help me at all. Thankfully, I had a Japanese friend. To be honest, without them, I would have been stressed and depressed. So, I wanted to give back to international students and help them not to be in that same situation.



Other than that, there's actually some elementary schools that I've been to where I introduced my country in Japanese. I get to showcase what's interesting about my country to kids. It feels like I'm connecting to the community of Sendai and integrating with the community at large. I also do a lot of translation as a part-time job for university as well. For example, if the international students go to Ishinomaki or Matsushima, usually they have to talk with somebody from a tourist spot. I have the chance to be the bridge between the locals and international students. It feels very nice being that bridge for society.

What's the biggest challenge you've faced so far in life in Sendai? Or maybe in academics?

So, actually, during the first year, I stuttered a lot while making conversation in Japanese. I didn't know how to make friends during that time (COVID). So, the people I could interact with were very limited, especially during the first year. But now, the biggest hurdle I've come across is job hunting. Job hunting is like the second barrier that I've experienced here. Especially in engineering-centered jobs in a company, they will explain everything in Japanese without breaks and with a lot of technical terms for us who are still learning Japanese. It's very mentally taxing, and you have to write a lot of essays in Japanese as well, along with group discussions.

Can you give us some short advice for fellow FGL juniors?

I really think that studying is only a really small part of your life here in Tohoku University. You should try to do as many things as possible and try to experience as many things as you can while you are still here. Because once you go back, you will never be able to experience the things you've experienced here again. So, try to maximize what is possible, what you can do here in Japan, with no regrets.

The hidden autumn gem of Yamagata

Maximilian Fernaldy

Everyone in Sendai probably already knows about Yamadera, the temple perched atop the mountains separating Yamagata and Miyagi Prefectures. At this point, it's almost a rite of passage for newly arrived FGL students to make this destination their first trip outside the city. Deservedly so, to be sure, which is why I initially set out to write an article about this long-honored tradition for this year's seasonal article. However, sitting on the local train to Yamagata (because I slept through my alarm and missed the rapid train), I accidentally tapped on a landmark pin titled "Omoshiroyama Autumn Leaves River Gorge" on Google Maps. Feeling spontaneous, I decided I would get off just before Yamadera Station to check this place out instead. Even if it turned out to be a bust, I could always just go to Yamadera another day anyway, since the leaves just started turning brown. So there I was, on the platform of Omoshiroyama-Kogen station, where they didn't even have an IC gate (or a single attendant staffing the clearly long-abandoned station office, for that matter), looking back at the tunnel the train just came out of. Not even ten steps out of the train, and I already have my first picture.



Taking a look around the station, it was clear that this place used to be a lot more popular. There was a building that looked like it used to be a visitor information center, another that looked like it used to be a big restaurant, and near what used to be a ski course, there was even a cable lift that doesn't run anymore, giving this area in particular an eerie vibe. The early November weather was perfect, though, and I had zero complaints outside of the creepy, broken-down buildings. The air was clean, the sky was clear, and that distinct smell of autumn was in the air.

Unfortunately for me, it rained the day before I went, making the hiking trail too slippery and dangerous. Although this means I couldn't see everything this place could offer, I decided I should at least check out the waterfall at the other end of the hiking trail via the paved road that snakes around west of the area. I'm glad I did, because even though the waterfall wasn't as grand as I expected, it still made for a beautiful scene. Not to mention the fact that I had this spot all to myself. After taking pictures and a video for Mom, I checked the train schedule and realized I still had about an hour until the next train, so I decided I would sit down for a bit on one of the dryer rocks next to the stream, listen to music, and get some reading done.

Walking back to the station, I realized that if I had woken up on time and taken the rapid train to Yamadera, I wouldn't have found this hidden gem. I guess the best paths are often ones we stumble onto.

Unusual Units: Counting in Japanese

Koharu Miyoshi

The Japanese language comes with many hardships: the three writing systems, formal *keigo*, borrowed foreign words... the list goes on. Among these, one challenge you may have encountered is with units. Some common ones you likely learned in Japanese class are 枚 (まい) for sheet-like objects and 本 (ほん) for stick-like objects. To make things more complicated, there are also exceptions within units, such as the unit 人 (にん) for people, which is read ひとり for one person and ふたり for two people; or variations within a category, such as the counting units for animals: 匹 (ひき) for small animals, 頭 (とう) for large animals.

These common units and more have actually been compiled into a book called 『数え方の辞典』, The Dictionary of Counting. Published by Shogakukan in 2004, The Dictionary of Counting is a small dictionary with under 400 pages, written by Asako Iida and Ken Machida. For this article, I'll introduce six especially interesting counting units described in this dictionary.

1. 捧 (きく)

- An amount of liquid that can be cupped in both hands. (e.g. One *kiku* of tears)

2. 葉 (よう)

- Used to count flat, thin objects that fit in one's hands, such as photos, postcards, bookmarks, or cards. (e.g. One postcard you sent from overseas)

3. 竿・棹 (さお)

- ① A chest of drawers.
- ② Used to count laundry on a clothesline. (e.g. Two *sao* worth of laundry)
- ③ Unit for long, stick-shaped traditional Japanese sweets such as *yōkan*.
- ④ Unit for *shamisen*.

4. 番 (つがい)

- ① A set of two or more items.
- ② A pair of male and female animals. (e.g. One *tsugai* of waterbirds)

5. 年・歳 (とせ)

Used to count age or years. (e.g. A period of *mitose* (three years); *chitose* (a thousand years old))

6. 膳 (ぜん)

- ① Food, especially rice, that has been plated on a dish. "Zen" is used to express a feast or cuisine. (e.g. One *zen* of rice)
- ② A pair of chopsticks. Not used for chopsticks that are not used for food, such as those used for charcoal. (e.g. One *zen* of lacquered chopsticks.)

Did you recognize any of these units? *Tsugai* and *zen* are still sometimes heard in conversation when referring to animals (for the former) and chopsticks (for the latter), but many of these are now considered obscure. Linguistic quirks like these units can be an obstacle, but hopefully, you can look beyond that and find the intrigue of the Japanese language's specializations and evolution.

My experience working at a *ryokan*

Mannun Murshed Anam

University is full of first-time experiences, especially for FGL students living away from home. It's a chance to step outside comfort zones and collect stories—good, awkward, or unforgettable.

This September, I decided to do exactly that. I flew to Hokkaido to work at a *ryokan* for three weeks. I found the job through an Instagram ad that appeared right after I searched for work there—suspicious, but interesting enough to try. With no contract, no guarantee, and only a handful of messages exchanged, I accepted.

With just a few thousand yen left after travel and rent, I boarded a flight from Kansai to New Chitose and hoped for the best. I felt anxious, almost the same as when I first landed in Japan. Once again, I was heading to a faraway island with no safety net if something went wrong.

The journey from Chitose via Sapporo was a blur. I didn't even look at Sapporo properly for fear of running out of money. It took almost the entire day to reach the *ryokan*, located in a place called Shakotan, a few kilometres north of Niseko, protruding into the ever-blue Cape Kamui.

I entered the *ryokan*, welcomed by a loud *irasshaimase* from behind the counter. She introduced herself as Oka-san and called for her son, the manager. That was when I also met Clement and KT, seasonal workers from France and Thailand. We exchanged quick greetings before Clement and *tenchō* whisked me away to show me my quarters. Little did I know how their presence would shape the following few weeks.



Most days I worked outside, doing various odd jobs like in a Karate Kid training montage. I repainted old fences, climbed and painted roofs, trimmed wild bushes, and pulled out weeds. It was physically demanding at times, but taking in my surroundings for a moment was enough to dispel the tiredness. From the roof we were painting, the dark blue sea lay just a few hundred meters away and the mountains stood guard silently on all three sides.

As the first week went by, I started getting friendlier with my coworkers, Clement being the person I talked to the most, shooting the breeze while we worked outside. He had a dry sense of humour, in contrast to KT; loud, energetic, and full of stories from her travels around the world. The three of us spent much of our free time together, going to onsen, ice skating, and taking night walks at the docks.

After a few days, I realised how different life felt when stripped down to the basics. Wake up, work outside, eat simple meals, stare at the sea, and sleep early. There were no glowing convenience stores at midnight, no trains rushing by, no constant notifications. At first, the quiet felt strange—almost uncomfortable. But slowly, I found myself breathing easier. I began to enjoy the rhythm of the day, the honesty of physical work, and the way the wind carried the sound of the waves straight into my chest.



One afternoon, I took a day off to visit Kamui Misaki, a cape wrapped in old Ainu legends. They say an Ainu princess once threw herself from those cliffs, unable to chase the lover who left her behind. For centuries the place was considered cursed for women, and even today the stories cling to the wind. But standing there myself, all I felt was wonder. The water stretched out in impossible shades of blue, the horizon melting into the sky as if the world had no edges. A lone lighthouse stood guard on the cliff, small but stubborn against the sea breeze. I sat down and sketched it, hoping to hold onto even a fraction of that quiet magic.

Not every day was peaceful, though. There were mornings when the cold sank into my bones, when the work felt endless, when I questioned why I had ever left my warm apartment in Sendai. One afternoon, after hours of pulling stubborn weeds under a harsh sun, I felt exhausted and alone. But when I looked up and saw the sea stretching endlessly, shimmering as if reminding me that the world was bigger than my worries, something shifted.

Two days before my departure, I set out with KT to find the perfect sunset—a picture of which I had seen hanging in the *shokudō*. The sun was setting gently behind Kamui Rock, the sea shimmering gold right before it, while the hills cast a dark shadow. It was still a few minutes before sunset, and we drove east hugging the coast, trying to find the exact angle that would make that scene possible. As we drove past a beach, I looked back and finally saw the sight I was searching for. We pulled into the car park and I sprinted across the sand, jumping over dunes until I found some high ground. There, alone, I watched the show begin. The sun slowly sank behind the rock. I took a flurry of pictures—only to realize I almost let the moment pass without truly being in it. It was one of the nicest sunsets I had ever seen.

And sometimes, you don't need to wait for the perfect moment—just go. Every risk I took on that trip, and after, became a memory I treasure. So take that leap of faith. Go somewhere far away for a few weeks. Get a dodgy job off Instagram. Work, draw, appreciate each sun that rises and sets. Immerse yourself in the relentless rhythm of the waves. Appreciate the little things in life.

I arrived in Hokkaido afraid, and I left with sunburnt arms, stronger legs, and a little more trust in myself. Maybe that's what growing up is about—doing things before you are ready.



Thank you for reading the Fall 2025 issue of the FGL
Community Newsletter! See you next season!

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