

A Place Called Home

Siubing Nagata

After four and a half years working as Assistant Editor for *JRTR* before moving to Los Angeles last year, I now find myself in the unusual position of being a contributing author.

Like many of the other authors of the Another Perspective series, I was a *gaijin* (foreigner) in Japan for 16 years. I landed at Narita Airport in 1984 armed with only a few greeting words in Japanese and many not so up-to-date images from the movies *Zatoichi* (the blind masseur who delivers justice with a Japanese sword), *Tora-san* (the vagabond hero of the world's longest-running series of movies), and *Godzilla* (the green monster with radioactive fire breath). The anxiety of starting a new life in an unknown country took shape in a surrealistic dream of pink cherry blossoms flowering under a cloudless blue sky with a snow-covered Mt. Fuji in the background.

Yokohama, where I made my home, was nothing like the black and white Zen-like images I saw in Japanese interior design magazines. Instead, it was *nomiya* (a hole-in-the-wall bar) and *pachinko* shops (pinball gambling salons) clustered around stations, and *sarariman* (company workers) zigzagging hurriedly through bicycles parked in narrow streets. It took many years to get used to Tokyo's hustle and bustle, but once I got the hang of it, I even enjoyed the physical agility of navigating the Shinjuku rush hour. But when the *JRTR* editorial team took on the challenge of publishing the world's first history of Japanese railways in English, it was always the merry crowds leaving the *nomiya* late at night that greeted me.

Of all the *JRTR* columns I worked on, I like the Another Perspective column most because I can share the feelings of foreign authors in Japan or get a glimpse into the lives and thoughts of people from other cultures. Many of the columns show that while foreigners in Japan have quite a few similarities, they are also very different, especially in their encounters with

Japanese culture. I often talked with our editorial team about the various column topics we would like to see. For example, how some horror scenes in western movies seem grotesque to Orientals, while Chinese *jiangshi* (hopping corpses in Qing Dynasty costumes) seem comical to Japanese and westerners. But I should save this topic for someone with an inter-cultural supernatural experience!

Unlike many foreigners who come to Japan for business or study, I came to adopt the life of an average Japanese housewife. I remember lining up with other anxious mothers to get immunization shots for our young children at the local health office, going to school PTA meetings to discuss how much pocket money we should give our 8-year olds, patrolling the school neighbourhood to ensure safety, and helping organize community summer parties complete with the usual curry rice, competition to burst a watermelon with stick while blindfolded, and fireworks. Being a foreigner and housewife in Japan can be a disorienting experience. It was hard for someone who had just graduated from a US business school to comprehend why many talented Japanese women give up a career to become housewives. And what a change! While many single working women live with their parents and have the financial freedom to visit *onsen* (hot springs) or travel, a newlywed Japanese woman soon finds that she has to learn to manage on her husband's small salary while shouldering the formidable task of bringing up children single-handed because of his long working hours.

Some traditionalists still think that getting an education from a 'good' school will help a Japanese girl find a wealthy husband and a ticket to a comfortable life. Indeed, given the long working hours and commuting times, long waiting lists for short daycare hours, and an unsympathetic taxation system for double-income households, married Japanese

women find good reason to stay home instead of being working parents. But slow institutional and social improvements over the last 20 years are making working a viable choice for married women in Japan, although not quite in the career sense yet.

In my new work as a Japanese-English translator in Los Angeles, I work with Japanese clients from different industries and I have developed a deep respect for the Japanese work ethic and commitment to quality and innovation. Besides Japanese cars, TVs, cameras, electronic good, etc., I think karaoke and Japanese *anime* (cartoon animation) are two of best less-tangible exports. Not only have they had a profound impact on popular culture, but they have also brought joy to many people.

Karaoke, which means 'empty orchestra,' is a clever idea. Although I was never too comfortable with my own ability, I can see the magic it makes in bringing the sociable and fun-loving nature out of many shy and stoic Japanese. It has a wide-ranging repertoire, so I was not surprised to see my 70-year old mother going to a karaoke party in Chinatown, and hear my Mexican neighbour singing salsa in the local karaoke bar.

Perhaps, the biggest cultural shock I had after moving back to the USA was seeing *Pikachu* and *Totoro*, two famous Japanese cartoon characters, speaking English. Japanese cartoons are very popular with American children because they are so different. American cartoons mainly target 6- to 11-year olds with a healthy Disney-like morality. Many are based on familiar childhood tales such as *Pinocchio*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White*, etc. However, a recent trend is to reflect the cultural diversity of American society, with *Aladdin*, the Chinese heroine *Mulan*, and even the *Lion King* from the animal kingdom. My favourite is still the *American Tale*, which epitomizes the American cartoon with the romantic notion of childhood dreams and heart-



Author (far right) and her two sons (far left and third from left) joining her former colleagues from Tokyo at Universal Studio, Los Angeles (EJRCF)

warming family values.

On the other hand, Japanese anime can be violent with a sexual connotation because they target a wider age range and reflect different facets of Japanese life. Although many Japanese anime find their roots in comics, they also serve as cartoon vehicles for academic subjects, historical novels, political advocacy, financial management, religious sermons, operating manuals, corporate training programmes, advertising, etc. Japanese computer games, which dominate the world, are a natural outgrowth of Japanese comics and anime.

The long-running and rather old-fashioned *Sazae-san* series portrays the familiar daily life of an idealized traditional three-generation Japanese family, while *Chibimaruko-chan* is a more ironic but honest portrayal of a modern three-generation Japanese family.

Osamu Tezuka is the father of Japanese TV anime, but Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki polished the medium into an eloquent expression of Japanese social themes. One of my favorites is *Porco Rosso* where Miyazaki deftly utilizes animation to express his notion of dandyism in the impossible character of an old-fashioned biplane pilot with a pig's face!

My move to LA has helped me appreciate different cultural perspectives. Here, I

have the luxury of watching news from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong in Mandarin after my favourite Spanish drama about the lives of black slaves and Italian immigrants on plantations in Brazil. I still go to PTA meetings, but LA is a city of such cultural diversity that I rub shoulders with Vietnamese, Armenian, Mexican, and Iranian parents. In Japan, the PTA used to talk about earthquake drills, but here we discuss drills to prepare our sons for a random schoolyard shooting!

Despite this, no history or social science class in Japan ever stimulated the inquisitive mind of my teenage boys to ponder the meaning of cultural and ethnic differences and to understand, accept, and appreciate the differences. In homogeneous and harmony-loving Japanese society, it is natural for young people to want to be like everyone else. In Los Angeles, the choice is between clinging to one's roots in the company of

people who speak the same language, or making the extra effort to blend into America's cultural melting pot.

America is still a country where children are taught to have big dreams. While my sons are struggling to read and write in English, one dreams of becoming the Japanese Steven Spielberg and the other of becoming an education reformer who integrates the merits of the American and Japanese education systems into one that will bring Japanese children back to school, not for the sake of examinations, but for the love of knowledge and the yearning for an independent mind.

These may be just the big dreams of immigrant kids but times sure have changed when my eldest signs up on the Koizumi Cabinet Internet website to follow the transformation of Japan under the popular Koizumi government. It is an exciting time for a young Japanese to observe Japan from outside while at the same time wondering what he can do to create an Asian presence in America's rich cultural heritage. As my family crisscrosses national and cultural borders, we seem to be getting a clearer picture of what we want to accomplish while having the courage to face adversity and live life to the fullest.

Although I will probably have to toil like the first immigrants to make America my new home, there will always be a warm place in my heart for Japan and her people whom I called family for 16 years.

My thanks are also due to all the *JRTR* authors, readers and colleagues. It was a great pleasure knowing you and working with you. ■



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