Becoming Japanese American—A Personal Journey

Eri F. Yasuhara

I am deeply honored to be able to contribute to this volume, a commemoration and celebration of the career of Professor Iwao Yamamoto on the occasion of his retirement from Ritsumeikan University. Like many others, I owe Professor Yamamoto a great debt of gratitude and am happy for the opportunity to thank him publicly. About fifteen years ago, I joined a research group he was forming to study and publish articles on Japanese American literature and culture. That collaboration resulted, for me, in a life-changing experience of which I'm sure Professor Yamamoto is unaware. In addition to the opportunity to work with wonderful Japanese colleagues and to visit Japan, my work with the group helped me to take a further step toward "becoming Japanese American." Since ethnic/cultural identity formation has been one of Professor Yamamoto's areas of interest within Japanese American Studies, I thought it fitting to devote this essay to one particular case study—my own—in acknowledgement of his role in the continuing evolution of my personal and professional identity. While there may be some unique aspects to the story, I believe its general contours are well-aligned with those of generations of immigrants from Japan and other parts of Asia. My hope, therefore, is that this exercise might contribute to the larger narrative of the Japanese immigrant and subsequent Japanese American experience—a story that Professor Yamamoto has done so much to study, analyze, and record for posterity.

First, some background. Though my generational peers in the Japanese American community are *sansei*, I am what my Korean-American friends would probably call a member of the 1.5 generation: I was born in Japan, immigrated with my family to the United States as a child, and was raised in a bilingual, bicultural environment. A small, though hardly unique, variation to this otherwise quite common pattern is that my mother is *kibei nisei*, born in the United States but raised in Japan. My grandparents were typical *issei*. My grandfather was one of thousands of young men who came to America from Western Japan (Wakayama-ken), worked in the fields of California, and went back to Japan in search of a bride, my grandmother. They settled in northern California and had three children in quick succession. When my mother, the oldest, was five, her mother returned to Japan with the children, partly to ensure that they received a proper Japanese education. My grandfather stayed in California and sent his earnings back to Japan to support his family. Though my mother subsequently spent some time with my grandfather in southern California, she lived the war years in Japan with my grandmother, while my grandfather was interned in Manzanar. The family was eventually reunited after the war. My parents had by then married and had two children, my sister and myself. We joined my grandfather in America and settled down in the San Gabriel Valley, about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

There were very few Asians in the suburbs where I grew up in the fifties and early sixties, although I remember Boyle Heights and Monterey Park as having larger contingents of Japanese Americans and, later in the case of Monterey Park, Chinese immigrants. Little

Tokyo itself was still a vital, thriving center of Japanese American community life, but it was close to an hour's drive away. We did go there regularly, though, and a particular treat for me was the monthly visit to the Japanese bookstore, where my parents bought me the current editions of Japanese magazines for young people. Isolated as we were from large communities of Japanese Americans, and given our family's status as very recent immigrants, it is not surprising that whatever ethnic or cultural identity I grew up with was entirely "Japanese," as opposed to "Japanese American." This was reinforced by attendance at Saturday Japanese schools, where both the *sansei* children of those who had survived the camps, as well as recent immigrants like myself, studied Japanese language, history, and culture under the tutelage of teachers the majority of whom were themselves recently arrived from Japan.

Beyond my personal and family circumstances, though, I think it would be safe to say that, in the fifties and early sixties, there was not really a strong collective sense of "Japanese American" society, history, or culture. Those who had survived the camps were busy rebuilding their lives and trying to forget about the years lost to internment. The postwar immigrants were struggling, too, to establish lives, families, and careers, while combating the racism and discrimination of the larger society. It would take the Civil Rights movement followed by the antiwar movement and the counterculture revolution of the late sixties to galvanize a broad coalition of young Asian Americans in an ethnic awareness movement that led to political action. They helped establish ethnic studies programs in universities, reached out to the community to combat discrimination, and fueled the successful drive

to win redress and reparations for those who had lost so much in the camps during World War II. It was a time when individuals of various Asian ethnicities collectively “became Asian American,” and when those of Japanese ancestry “became Japanese American” as well.

I was in college by this time, and, true to my upbringing had majored in Japanese, primarily language and literature, with courses in history and culture as well. A summer spent in Japan as a teenager, followed by a college year abroad, also in Japan, had cemented the leaning toward things Japanese that had been nurtured at home by my parents. As I contemplated graduate school, my choice of field of study followed naturally upon my undergraduate major. I received my Ph.D. in 1982 from UCLA’s then Department of Oriental Languages (now Asian Languages and Cultures), with a specialization in Japanese classical language and literature and a secondary field in Japanese history.

Very early in graduate school, however, I got a job working on the Japanese American Research Project, an important, early research project that helped to establish Japanese American studies at UCLA. On the heels of the ethnic power movements of the late sixties, a major effort had been undertaken to collect documents and memorabilia that in many cases were gathering dust in the garages of *issei* throughout Southern California. Working with and under the supervision of Yuji Ichioka and Yasuo Sakata, I and another graduate student—Nobuya Tsuchida—read, sorted, catalogued, and annotated the items. Because of my training, I was assigned to work on the literary items: dozens of journals and volumes of poetry, essays, and fiction written in Japanese and published by the first generation of immigrants. This effort was

published in 1974 by the University of California Press under the title *A Buried Past: An Annotated Bibliography of the Japanese American Research Project Collection*.

Despite my love of Japanese literature and choice of field of graduate study, I was by this time well aware of Japanese American history and the issues facing Asian Americans. However, the field of Asian American Studies itself was still in its infancy, and there was then really no place where I could have pursued the study of Asian American, let alone Japanese American, literature, even if I had been so inclined. I knew of only a handful of students pursuing doctorates in Asian American studies, most of them in the disciplines of history or sociology. And while I was still completing my dissertation, a young assistant professor who specialized in Japanese American history was denied tenure at UCLA. I had no reason then, nor have I any now, to regret my choice of mainstream Japanese literature as my field of study.

We now fast-forward to the fall of 1991. I was a tenured associate professor teaching Japanese language and literature at California State University, Los Angeles. I had received a fellowship from the Japan Foundation and was in Tokyo continuing my study of the eighteenth century *haikai* poet Yosa Buson. Toward the end of my three-month stay, I was contacted by Professor Yasuo Sakata, my mentor from the Japanese American Research Project, who by then had returned to Japan and was teaching Japanese immigration studies at Osaka Gakuin Daigaku. He introduced me to Professor Yamamoto, who was looking for a U.S.-based academic to join a group he was forming at Ritsumeikan University for a research project on Japanese

American literature and culture. I cannot now recall many of the details of the project, but the important thing was that, as a member of the research team, I would have to prepare an article on Japanese American literature for publication in the University's journal *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture*. This in turn meant that I would have to conduct research in the archives of the Japanese American Research Project Collection, housed at the UCLA Library in Special Collections.

This return to material that I had not looked at for over twenty years produced in me a completely unexpected, powerful, and visceral reaction. After a preliminary search through the material, I decided to focus on the *Remonchoo*, the coterie magazine (*doojin zasshi*) of a group of agricultural laborers and housewives living in Southern California in the 'teens and twenties of the twentieth century. As I read the poems and essays that captured so well the lives and struggles of these *issei*, I found myself moved in a way I had never been before. At first I could not understand my reaction. I had spent years reading, studying, and teaching Japanese literature, which could be even more beautiful and deeply moving, as well as much more skillfully written. The poets of *Remonchoo* were, after all, amateurs writing with varying degrees of literary skill. After a while, though, I understood. The powerful impact of these works stemmed from the fact that the lives inscribed therein were precisely those of my maternal grandparents, particularly my grandfather. He, too, had worked as an agricultural laborer in California during those same years; he, too, was an educated man who I am told could write *kanshi* (Chinese poetry); the hardships and joys he experienced were, I was certain, the same. In

his travels up and down the state, he could even have met and spent time with some of the members of the *Remonchoo* group. In the voices speaking to me from the pages of *Remonchoo*, in other words, I was hearing the voice of my grandfather, who had lived an all too typical *issei* life.

This emotional reaction was not, however, the most important part of my epiphany. Precisely because of my personal connection with the material, I realized that this literature was 'mine' in a way that no other literature could ever be, including the literature of Japan to which I had devoted my entire professional life. The power and impact of this realization truly astonished me. I did not then and do not now, believe in the ultimate efficacy of "ethnic identity politics." The particular ethnic or cultural background of a researcher has—and should have—nothing to do with whether s/he can do scholarly work on the material. It would be ludicrous to suggest, for example, that only men of British extraction can do scholarly work on Shakespeare—though there was probably a time when that was true. But I could not deny the feeling of power and authority that accompanied the realization of my personal connection with this literature. This epiphany represented another, important stage in the evolution of my identity, this time my professional identity as a Japanese American.

Like most immigrants from Asia, I first identified with my "home culture," Japan. As I grew up, and especially through the turmoil of the late sixties, I became increasingly conscious of being Japanese American, then Asian American. My professional identity followed a similar trajectory: I started with a strong interest in and commitment to mainstream Japanese literature, which I have by no means aban-

doned. Then, thanks first to my mentor Yasuo Sakata and then to the opportunity presented to me by Professor Iwao Yamamoto, I was able to meld my professional identity with my personal one and "become Japanese American" in my research as well. For this, for having provided the impetus for rediscovering the literature of the *issei*, I shall be forever grateful to Professor Yamamoto.

Eventually, I was able to fulfill my part in the research project by publishing two articles on *Remonchoo* in the *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture* (Vol. 4, no. 6 [March 1993] and Vol. 8, nos. 5-6 [March 1997]). I also made some presentations at scholarly conferences and even received funding from the project to travel to Japan to report on my research. A few years after that, though, I became a full-time academic administrator and since then have had less and less time to devote to anything resembling research. Yet I cling to the hope that someday, I might still return to this material and produce some definitive account and translations of *Remonchoo*.

There is an interesting postscript to my article on *Remonchoo* that was published in 1997, and I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to present an update of sorts. In October of 2002, I received a letter from a journalist for a local newspaper, a Mr. Joe Blackstock. He is an editor and writes a twice-monthly column on local history for the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin* of Ontario. Ontario is a community about 45 miles east of Los Angeles and not too far from San Bernardino, where I had just moved the previous year. During a visit to a local cemetery (in Ontario), he had come upon a seven-foot-high stone monument erected in 1937 to a Japanese man who was, among other things, a poet. Mr. Blackstock had done some research

already but was trying to find out as much as possible about this man. As may be seen in the photograph, it is a monument dedicated to Jikihara Toshihei. The English inscription beneath his name in Japanese reads as follows:

JAPANESE PIONEER
TOSHIHEI JIKIHARA
Came to Upland July 1903
Born Daito (?) Kume-gun
Okayama-ken Dainippon
Died Los Angeles Nov. 1929
His Life was Politics
Contemplation and Poems
May 1937

I could not believe my eyes when I saw this, for Jikihara Toshihei was none other than the editor of *Remonchoo*. Subsequently, I spoke with Mr. Blackstock, we also met, and eventually he wrote a column about this monument and the man to whom it was dedicated. The article, “Cemetery obelisk honors Japanese man lost to history; Immigrant and poet key to Inland Valley agriculture in 1900s,” appeared in the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, Monday, September 1, 2003.

According to Mr. Blackstock, Jikihara “arrived in Upland in July 1903 at age 34, and within a few years operated ‘the Jikihara Camp.’” (Upland is a community located west and north of Ontario, perhaps a few miles closer to Los Angeles. It, like Ontario, is in San Bernardino County, just beyond the borders of Los Angeles County.) From there,

"he contracted with ranchers to provide laborers from about 1905 to 1915." The article acknowledges the role played by Jikihara "in the explosion of agriculture in the Inland Valley in the early 1900s" not only by providing laborers, but also by the invention of farm machinery for which he obtained three patents from the U.S. Patent Office. Mr. Blackstock went through the Jikihara papers at UCLA Special Collections, and found "invoices for goods and services sent in 1910 to two firms still open today" in the area, as well as invoices "sent to ranchers who used his crews." These read "'First class laborers promptly furnished on short notice'."

In his research, Mr. Blackstock also found "a March 1931 school paper by Sadako Nagasaki, a 9th-grade student at Upland Junior High School" about the first Japanese in Upland. (This document is in the Model Colony local history room of the Ontario City Library, according to the article.) It was written less than eighteen months after Jikihara's death, and contains descriptions of his personality. The young schoolgirl wrote that, in his labor camp, Jikihara "was very kind to the men and treated them like brothers. Whenever anyone got into trouble or were sick he would help them." Jikihara was an eccentric, which is clear from others of his papers that I saw some time ago at UCLA, but Sadako Nagasaki also states that "There were several peculiar things about him. He wore his hair long and wouldn't cut it. He didn't believe in Christ, doctors or in keeping money."

Despite—or perhaps because of—his eccentricities, Jikihara must have been respected and even beloved in the local Japanese community. His reputed kindness to the laborers in his camp, as well as his standing as editor of *Remonchoo* and one of the leaders of the poetry

group would also account for the esteem in which he must have been held. For as Mr. Blackstock pointed out in his first letter to me, the monument was erected seven years after his death, Jikihara is not even buried in Ontario but in Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles, and, finally, it is a very expensive monument to be built during the Great Depression. Only someone held in high regard could have inspired such an expensive expression of respect and the desire to have his name and life memorialized for posterity. Young Sadako Nagasaki's final paragraph about Jikihara is appropriate: "After he had died the Japanese people grieved because they realized they had lost a wonderful friend. They never had such a good man as he was and they suppose they never will. He had accomplished so much for them, the people still feel indebted to him."

I am indebted to Professor Yamamoto for having sent me back to material that I had helped to organize and catalog when I was still a young graduate student, but that I was clearly not yet ready to appreciate. By recruiting me to his project, he made it possible for me to "rediscover" a treasure trove of literature left by *issei* who had lived and worked in Southern California, where my maternal grandfather had also lived, a life very similar to that of the *Remonchoo* poets. In reclaiming this material, I reclaimed my own roots as a Japanese American, and in so doing, "became Japanese American" in my professional life as well.

I wish Professor Yamamoto a happy and fulfilling retirement, during which I hope we will have many opportunities to continue our conversations on Japanese American literature, culture, and identity.

Photograph by Thomas Cordova, *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, Ontario, California