A Yonsei's Life in Japan

by Jeff Asai

"I'm American." It was seven years ago, at the age of twenty that I said those words for the first time. It sounded so strange. So...foreign.

Made in America

I was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area as a fourth-generation Japanese American, and was used to seeing kids of all different backgrounds. Even so, the inevitable: "What are you?" question would arise.

I spent my childhood saying: "Japanese American." Or sometimes, just: "Japanese."

It came out of my mouth smoothly, with no hesitation, or even pride. It was just a fact. It didn't contain any particular meaning to me at the time, because for all I knew, I was just like all the other kids around me. I couldn't speak Japanese, or do any of the things the Japanese stereotypes were doing (karate, bonsai tending, etc.). We were eating rice and eggs one night, spaghetti the next. My family went to San Jose Buddhist Church and participated in mochi-tsuki and other events. We went to Obon every year and danced with our church friends.

It wasn't until around high school that I began actively thinking about my Japanese identity. Ethnicity became something to flaunt. The Asian Americans at school often talked about "AP" which stood for Asian pride. It was another way of expressing individuality, something all high schoolers crave.

Ironically though, many first generation Asian immigrants were still teased for being 'too Asian.' They were called "F.O.B.s" which stands for: "fresh off the boat." Oftentimes though, this was more of a joke than a derogatory expression. Many Asian Americans called themselves F.O.Bs as a matter of Asian pride.

I was interested in exploring my own identity and had developed a 'fobbish' interest in my ancestral roots. Since I was a high schooler from 1996-2000, the climate for this was perfect. Japanese things were becoming popular - indeed, even chic. Celebrities were getting tattoos in kanji characters, and Japanese anime, while still a bit 'underground' at the time, had it's own cult following.

At the same time, the internet was becoming popular. Message boards and penpals, Japan hobby groups and downloadable J-pop were all available within a few mouse clicks. Something that would've cost a lot of money – in the form of postage or import costs – was now free: the perfect price for a high school student.

One memory I have from my high school days was when I was in a parking lot with my dad. We saw a car that had a sticker with the kanji for "Honda" on it. I remember thinking it was the coolest thing. But my dad said: "I don't know if it's a good idea to put that kind of thing on your car." I remember thinking how 'old-fashioned' my dad was. Now, as an adult, I can look back and think: "Well, yeh. Maybe dad was right." (In the funny way, dads usually are). Japanese things may have become more accepted, it only takes one crazy racist to get your car keyed. But at the time, it stood out in my mind; things were different between my dad's generation and mine.

Turning Japanese:

One surprising obstacle in getting to know my Japanese roots was the lack of 'real' Japanese culture in America. Of course we can look back to the internment camps to understand why so much culture was lost. Who would continue traditions that got you thrown in a desert prison?

The unfortunate consequence is that there is little tradition for the younger generations of Japanese Americans to draw on. This lack of knowledge of my own culture had often been a source of embarrassment.

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Many of my other Asian friends could speak their native language. Granted, many were second generation, which made native language acquisition important, if not mandatory. Some of them even served as translators for their parents! I felt envious but on the other hand grateful that I didn't have such a difficult burden.

Since my friends were often 'the authority' on Chinese things, or Vietnamese things, or Filipino things, I felt that being Japanese American should've made me some sort of authority on Japanese things. And as Japan became more popular in pop culture, I had to try to keep up.

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The Winter Olympics were held in Nagano, I felt I had to have something to say to assert my Japanese authority. "Hah! Those newscasters are saying it wrong! What bad pronunciation! They don't know anything about Japan!" These criticisms came out despite never having heard of Nagano before the Olympics.

So when I went to university, I started studying Japanese. It started out mainly as a hobby and a natural continuation of my high school curiosity. But the more classes I took, the more interested I became, and at 20, I decided to study abroad in Kyoto for a year.

It was in Japan that I began to see how little I really knew about Japanese culture. I would yell out "Haha! You got bacchi!" fully expecting Japanese people to join in and nudge each other, thinking: "This guy. He knows." I was met with confused looks.

I was expecting to impress people with my knowledge of Buddhism. After all, I went to the temple every Sunday. Japanese people thought because I went to temple every Sunday that I must be Christian, since Japanese people don't go to the temple for service.

I guess the real blow came when people asked me: "What are you?" And the automatic response would come up. "Japanese." Or "Japanese American." They would look at me funny for a second and say: "No. You are American."

And so at 20, I had started saying: "I'm American."

Japan in America's Eyes - 2009

I've been living in Japan for the past three and a half years, across the street from my in-laws' Buddhist temple. (Hah! I guess all those Sundays in church did pay off!)

Whenever I go back to America, I am always surprised at how popular Japanese things have become. Bento articles in the *New York Times*. A Japanese baseball player splashed across the sports page with 'MVP' written in bold. Sushi at Safeway. Japanese anime on the "Cartoon Network."

I feel that now, the yonsei and gosei are free from social constraints that previous generations may have felt about exploring their Japanese identity. And as a result of exploring my own roots, I've learned that Japanese Americans have a unique identity that's neither Japanese, nor American. We're the amalgamation of two differing cultures; a mix of individuality as well as not wanting to be the nail that gets hammered down.

So while I have had the opportunity to say both: "I'm American." and "I'm Japanese." I have decided to say the one thing that truly identifies the experience I have lived.

I'm Japanese American. ✺

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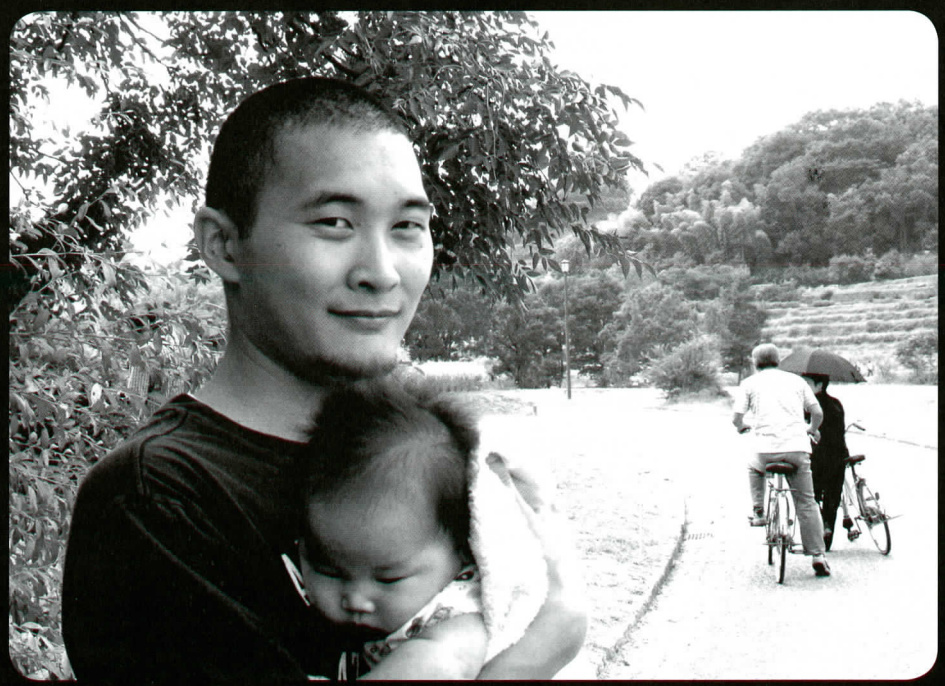


Photo by Yae Hosokawa

If a fourth generation Japanese American marries a Japanese citizen and has a baby in Japan, what is the baby? A gosei? Shin-issei? Nisei?

- Jeff Asai on what to call his baby girl