



Being Japanese American

by Yoshiko Uchida

Superstitions were not the only Japanese things in my life. A lot more of me was Japanese than I realized, whether I liked it or not.

I was born in California, recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag each morning at school, and loved my country as much as any other American—maybe even more. **1**

Still, there was a large part of me that was Japanese simply because Mama and Papa had passed on to me so much of their own Japanese spirit and soul. Their own values of loyalty, honor, self-discipline, love, and respect for one's parents, teachers, and superiors were all very much a part of me.

There was also my name, which teachers couldn't seem to pronounce properly even when I shortened my first name to Yoshi. And there was my Japanese face, which closed more and more doors to me as I grew older.

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1 Key Literary Element

Cultural Reference The Pledge of Allegiance is a custom practiced in many schools across the country. By reciting the Pledge of Allegiance daily, Uchida shows her loyalty and involvement in American culture.

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How wonderful it would be, I used to think, if I had blond hair and blue eyes like Marian and Solveig. Or a name like Mary Anne Brown or Betty Johnson.

If only I didn't have to ask such questions as, "Can we come swim in your pool? We're Japanese." Or when we were looking for a house, "Will the neighbors object if we move in next door?" Or when I went for my first professional haircut, "Do you cut Japanese hair?"

Still, I didn't truly realize how different I was until the summer I was eleven. Although Papa usually went on business trips alone, bringing back such gifts as silver pins for Mama or charm bracelets for Keiko and me, that summer he was able to take us along, thanks to a railroad pass.

We took the train, stopping at the Grand Canyon, Houston, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, Niagara Falls, and on the way home, Chicago, to see the World's Fair.

Crossing the Mississippi River was a major event, as our train rolled onto a **barge** and sailed slowly over that grand body of water. **2** We all got off the train for a closer look, and I was so impressed with the river's majesty, I felt impelled¹ to make some kind of connection with it. Finally, I leaned over the barge rail and spit so a part of me would be in the river forever.

For my mother, the high point of the trip was a visit to the small village of Cornwall, Connecticut. There she had her first meeting with the two white American pen pals with whom she had **corresponded** since her days at Doshisha University. She also visited one of her former missionary teachers, Louise DeForest, who had retired there. And it was there I met a young girl my age, named Cathy Sellew. We became good friends, corresponded for many years, and met again as adults when I needed a home and a friend.

Everyone in the village greeted us warmly, and my father was asked to say a few words to the children of the Summer Vacation Church School—which he did with great **relish**.

1. Here, to feel **impelled** means to feel a strong urge to make a connection.

Vocabulary

corresponded (kor uh SPON did) *v.* wrote letters to one another

relish (REL ish) *n.* enjoyment or delight

2 English Language Coach

General Context Clues You can use context clues to figure out the meaning of **barge**. The train uses one to cross a river. Also, notice the word *sailed*. You know that boats sail. What do you think a *barge* is?



Analyzing the Photo Yoshiko Uchida, second from the left, is ten years old here. Her parents, grandmother, and older sister are also pictured. What does this photo suggest about Uchida's family?

Most of the villagers had never before met a Japanese American. One smiling woman shook my hand and said, "My, but you speak English so beautifully." She had meant to compliment me, but I was so astonished, I didn't know what to say. I realized she had seen only my outer self—my Japanese face—and addressed me as a foreigner. I knew then that I would always be different, even though I wanted so badly to be like my white American friends.

I hated having Mama stop on the street and greet a friend with a series of bows as was customary in Japan. "Come on, Mama," I would say impatiently tugging at her sleeve. I felt as though everyone was staring at us. 3

I was **humiliated** when the post office called us one Sunday requesting that we pick up immediately a package of rotting food. Actually, it was just some pungent² pickled *daikon* (long white radish), sent by a friend who knew Papa loved eating it with rice and hot tea. But the man at the post office thrust it at us at arm's length, as though it were a piece of stinking garbage.

2. When something is **pungent**, it has a very strong smell.

Vocabulary

humiliated (hyoo MIL ee ayt ud) *adj.* embarrassed; ashamed

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3 Key Literary Element

Cultural Reference In Japan, bowing is the traditional way to greet someone. Bows signify respect and are used both when meeting and parting. How does Uchida react to her mother's bowing? Who is more Americanized, Uchida or her mother?

Keiko and I absolutely refused when Mama wanted us to learn how to read and write Japanese. We wanted to be *Americans*, not Japanese!

"Wouldn't it be nice to write to your grandmother in Japanese?" she asked.

"It's easier if you write her, Mama," we said.

"Don't you want to be able to read those nice storybooks from Japan?"

We didn't. Not really. We liked having Mama read them to us. We read our own favorites in English.

I loved going to the South Berkeley branch of the public library, where I would head for the children's corner. There I looked for the books with stars on their spines, which meant they were mysteries. I read such books as Augusta H. Seaman's *The Boarded Up House* and *The Mystery of the Old Violin*. I also liked Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Doolittle* books, and loved Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Little Men*. Other favorites were Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

Learning Japanese, Keiko and I felt, would only make us seem more different from our white classmates. So Mama didn't force us to go to Japanese Language School after regular school, as many of our Nisei (second-generation Japanese) friends did. ⁴

We finally agreed, however, to let her teach us Japanese during summer vacations when she also taught us how to embroider. We loved learning how to make daisies and rosebuds on pillowcases, but we certainly didn't make it easy for Mama to teach us Japanese. Keiko and I grumbled endlessly as we tried to learn how to read and write the complicated Japanese characters,³ and by the time each summer rolled around, we had forgotten most of what we had learned the year before.

3. The Japanese language uses three different sets of **characters**, or letters: Kanji, Hiragana, and Katakana. These characters look nothing like the letters used by languages like English and Spanish.

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4 Key Reading Skill

Identifying Author's Purpose

The author wanted to be more like her white classmates than her *Nisei* friends. Remember that the author is a *Nisei*. What does this tell you about her purpose for writing this selection?



Analyzing the Photo This picture of Yoshiko and Keiko was taken in Berkeley, California. Does this photo help you understand their relationship? Explain.

Still, we managed to learn a lot of Japanese by osmosis. Our parents spoke Japanese to each other and to us, although we usually answered in English, sprinkling in a few Japanese words here and there.

Then there were many Japanese phrases we used every day. We always said, “*Itadaki masu*,” before each meal, and “*Gochiso sama*” afterward to thank Mama for preparing the food. The first thing we called out when we came home from school was “*Tadaima!* I’m home!”

The Japanese names Mama gave to the tools and implements around the house were the sounds they made. The vacuum cleaner was the *buhn-buhn*. The carpet sweeper was the *goro-goro*. Mama’s little sewing scissors with the silver bell tied to it was the *chirin-chirin*.

Keiko and I often talked in a strange **hybrid** language. 5 “It’s your turn to do the *goro-goro* today.” Or, “Mama said to *buhn-buhn* the living room.” And anytime Mama asked us to fetch the *chirin-chirin*, we knew exactly what she meant.

Every night when we were little, Keiko and I would climb into bed and wait for Mama to come sit between our two beds and read a Japanese story to us. I first heard such wonderful folktales as “The Old Man Who Made the Flowers Bloom” and “The Tongue-Cut Sparrow” from her.

Although Papa loved to sing American folk songs, he and Mama taught us many Japanese songs that still float through my memory today. Their prayers, too, were always in Japanese—Papa’s grace before meals (nice and short) and Mama’s prayers at bedtime (not so short). So when it came to praying, I always did it in Japanese, even after I grew up.

We always celebrated Doll’s Festival Day⁴ on March 3, as all girls did in Japan, displaying special dolls for the occasion. Mama would open the big brown trunk in the basement and bring up dozens of tiny wooden boxes containing her Japanese doll collection. These

Practice the Skills

5 English Language Coach

General Context Clues The author uses examples of phrases that use a **hybrid** language. The phrases use both English and Japanese words. What do you think *hybrid* means?

On Doll’s Festival Day, Japanese girls dress dolls like this one in ceremonial kimonos. Why are traditions like this one important? What traditions do you celebrate?



4. **Doll’s Festival Day** is a holiday in Japan to pray for the growth and happiness of all young girls. On this day, girls display dolls in their homes and dedicate peach blossoms to them.