

Stories from a mountain town: I am Japanese Canadian



Asking what it means to be Japanese Canadian while in Japan

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI, Japan — What is being Japanese? Where you are born or your citizenship? What part do skin colour and facial features play? This question has intrigued me for a while.

Growing up in Canada, I struggled with who I was because I didn't look like the other kids in my class. In high school, I was one of a handful of Asian students.

Even being Canadian, I feel by the way others talk to me, look at me and treat me, that I am different. I am proud of my Japanese ancestry, but sometimes, I wish my Japanese features weren't one of the first things people see. I still get comments that make many Asians cringe. How long have I lived here? Or complimenting me on my English fluency. When I was opening my restaurant in

Ottawa's Chinatown, a media person commented on how nice it must be for me to be "with my people."

I thought it would be different in Japan. I would blend in because I look Japanese and thus, my features wouldn't define whether I would fit in or not. But I realized it's not that easy.

Since August, I have been working as an assistant English teacher with JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, in Ochi town, Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku Island. The more I try to fit in Japan, even dying my hair jet black and understanding more Japanese, the more I realize how Canadian I am.

When I hear people speaking English—which is a rare thing in this rural town of 5,000—my ears perk up. When I see a group of *gaikokujin* (foreigners) speaking English, I want to rush over and say, "me too!" I know they will think I am not any different from the Japanese they see around them. But I know. I am Canadian.

When I was younger, I hated being Japanese. I wanted to be like the other girls with their blond hair, thin noses and wide eyes and dreamt about plastic surgery to change who I was. I followed the advice of magazine experts on how to use makeup to widen your eyes and make your nose look thinner. To be anything but be who I am.

Skip forward a few decades,



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Columnist Caroline Ishii showing off Canadian cuisine, with cups of poutine in Ochi, Japan.

and I wondered how I got to a place where I don't know who I really was.

I was worried people wouldn't like me. I had worked hard to establish the titles, accomplishments and accumulate things to show my worthiness. But the more I had, the more empty I would feel inside. Why?

I have found that these are the things that don't matter to our spirits. What does is being authentic, honest and who we are. But what if we don't know who

we are?

We must find out. We start by removing the layers that we've put on year after year. It's like wallpaper that we put up at the time because it was fashionable.

But then another sheet goes up to please our partners, another layer to please our parents and so on. It's complicated.

I had been in this process of unravelling for years when I ar-

rived on the doorsteps of Japan. I was passionate about digging into my Japanese roots, and I wanted to learn more about Japanese culture and language. It's been a dream of mine for a long time to live and work in Japan. I love Japanese food and wanted to eat lots of it.

Living in Japan, I don't stand out and am part of the majority. Wherever I go, I am treated like any Japanese person.

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Frankly speaking: Will I give talks in the coming year?



On sharing memories of the war with many generations of JCs

Frank Moritsugu
Columnist

TORONTO — This past November, I gave two talks, first during the annual Nikkei Veterans Memorial Luncheon at Toronto's Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, as well as during the Remembrance Day Sunday service at Bayview United Church in North York.

The JCCC event was naturally a modest one with few surviving Nisei Second World War vets plus a few Korean War vets and relatives.

The Bayview United Church service was an elaborate event, attended by 91 members this year. During that service I was the guest speaker.

The church has a congregation with many Japanese Canadians, and Rev. Cindy Cooper has been the minister since that congregation was previously at the Centennial Japanese United Church in North York.

Not being at Bayview United for some time, I was quite impressed by the updating of the church chapel. A large screen at the front showed the words of hymns and Bible extracts, so no one has to carry heavy hymn books.

The sound system was excellent as well. I found speaking to the entire congregation was comfortably easy and clear.

My Remembrance Day talk came after symbolic items such as a reading of *In Flanders Fields*, the singing of *O Canada*, the Last Post, played perfectly on trumpet, placing of poppies on wreaths in front and singing of hymns plus Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind*.

Church member Barbara Marshall introduced me. She is a good friend of ours, since we lived in the North York neighbourhood, where the church had been until its move to Bayview Avenue.

Following Barbara's introduction, I went up to the podium wearing my medals and khaki beret with the Canadian Army Intelligence Corps badge. Some kind friend behind me said, "For someone who's in his 90s, he walks pretty straight."

That may have helped to boost my confidence as I spoke about celebrating Remembrance Day by commemorating those who died for our country, like during the First World War, when 54 of 184 Issei from Canada died in battles in France and Germany.

The annual remembrance also reminds us of the 148 Nisei who volunteered to serve with the



PHOTO CREDIT: KELLY FLECK

Frank Moritsugu during his speech at the Nikkei Veterans Memorial and Luncheon at Toronto's Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre on Nov. 6.

Canadian Army when the ban against us enlisting was finally lifted.

Most of us served in Southeast Asia attached to British forces fighting the Japanese. Our role was to be Japanese-language interpreter-translators dealing with Japanese prisoners of war and also doing propaganda campaigns aimed at the Japanese troops in the nearby jungles.

The Nisei who enlisted finally had a chance to prove that they were 100 per cent Canadians, no

matter what racists in BC government insisted. Our postwar futures gave us opportunities that once seemed impossible in the province where most of us had lived.

After the service, I was asked to stay by the exit of the chapel so that persons, young and old, could talk to us. It was amazing how many smiled and thanked me, and several of them men-

tioned that they appreciated learning about Japanese Canadian history.

The welcoming nature of the Bayview United Church members and their reactions and feedback made this talk one of the best-ever received. Ironically, I had been thinking as I prepared the speech that it might be the last Remembrance Day talk I would give.

After all when I did the talk on

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National Association of Japanese Canadians president's message



Japanese Canadian community members and honoured guests delivering the NAJC report, "Recommendations for Redressing Historical Wrongs Against Japanese Canadians in B.C." to NDP MP Lisa Beare on Nov. 15

Report of community consultations presented to BC government

Lorene Oikawa
Contributor

Members of the Japanese Canadian community and honoured guests gathered in a government boardroom on Nov. 15 to witness a delegation from the National Association of Japanese Canadians hand-deliver the report, "Recommendations for Redressing Historical Wrongs Against

Japanese Canadians in B.C."

The key actions recommended in the report are initiatives the government could undertake as meaningful followup to a 2012 Motion of Apology in the BC Legislature.

As we have been reporting in our e-news and messages in *Nikkei Voice*, there has been a lot of work in preparing, organizing and carrying out months of community consultations with hundreds of Japanese Canadians and collecting those findings. This report is

the result of that hard work.

During community consultations, the NAJC listened to members of our community who experienced the discrimination, uprooting, dispossession and internment. At the live event, we heard from Mary Kitagawa and Judy Hanazawa. This is deeply personal issue for our community. Many Japanese Canadian families were longtime settlers in B.C., like my family, who came

from Japan in the 1800s.

They were denied their rights, denied education and forced to endure internment until four years after the end of the Second World War.

The Canadian military and RCMP told the government there was no need to take action against Japanese Canadians, but they were ignored. Not one Japanese Canadian was ever charged with an act of disloyalty.

We appreciate the BC government's support for the commu-

nity consultations to determine meaningful measures to redress the violation of rights and losses.

This report examines what is needed to rebuild the Japanese Canadian community and ensure what happened to Japanese Canadians never happens again to Canadians of any ethnicity or orientation.

This is an opportunity for us to foster positive changes that not only pay tribute to Japanese Canadians, but also benefit B.C.

Lisa Beare, Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, acknowledged "the significant harm that

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However, as soon as I try to communicate in Japanese, people are surprised that I can't speak like a native and realize I must be a foreigner. They are confused as I look like them, but I am not like them. This makes me equally confused, because I look like the people around me, but I know I am not like them too. Who am I then?

I am the only person I can be, me. The person who has always been there through all the changes and layers I have put on. I am Japanese Canadian.

For me, this means that I am Canadian with Japanese roots. I was born and raised in Toronto with English as my first language, French as my second.

I have Japanese ancestry as part of how I look but also in what I learned from my mother.

My parents are Nisei or second-generation, born in Canada to Japanese immigrants. When my mother was a young girl, her parents died, and she was sent to a rural town in Fukuoka, Japan, to live with her relatives. My mother was more like an Issei or first-generation because she did all her schooling in Japan and returned to Canada in her mid-twenties. She was sponsored by her older brother, who had remained in Canada after their parents died. This early uprooting from Canada and her siblings, and then returning decades later,

made my mom conflicted about where she fit in and was home for her: Canada or Japan.

From my mother I learned about Japanese culture, traditions and cooking Japanese food. My mother used to make Japanese meals almost every night, from sukiyaki and teriyaki salmon to tempura and tonkatsu. She would buy the Japanese ingredients downtown at Sanko and Furuya Japanese food stores and would take the whole day to make things from scratch for dinner.

At our family get-togethers, there would be "Canadian food" such as fried chicken, cabbage rolls and lasagna. There also would be Japanese food such as

futomaki and inarizushi, tempura, takuwan pickles and always hot Japanese rice and green tea.

Food stirs up memories more quickly than most things. I called these memories "taste memories" in my first book, *The Accidental Chef*. In smelling, tasting or seeing food, there are often memories and emotions associated with it.

What I took away from those times of food shared with my mother, was the "taste" for good Japanese food, but more than this, my mother's love of it. Even though she has been gone for almost thirty years, I feel she is close by in Japan as I taste so many foods that she loved.

I feel that my ancestors have pulled me to Japan. I have felt a deep longing to come to live and work here for a while, and I am not sure why. It is part of my ancestry, but I think it is more than this. It was tugging at me in Canada. I needed to find out more about my past and that part of me that makes me look Japanese, and I can't get rid of with makeup remover or cosmetic surgery.

I sense that by appreciating our pasts, whatever they may be, we can truly move forward into the future.

There is part of being Japanese that is defined by the way I look. And, there is another part that is in my heart. I was born with this love of Japan. It is in my DNA and passed on from generation to generation.

My mother loved Canada, but I feel that her heart belonged to Japan. She was here during her formative years when she went through the school system, worked, made lasting friendships, and was immersed in the language, culture and the food.

My mom transferred her love of Japanese food to me, through customs that she continued in Canada, such as the traditional New Year's feast. She would spend weeks preparing for this. My mother's making and sharing of Japanese cuisine with us was her way of expressing her love. It also consoled her when she would long to return to Japan and missed her life and friends.



A sign on a telephone post in Nanaimo, B.C., that said, "Human Kind Be Both."

Over time, I've come to appreciate that my identity is both Canadian and Japanese. What matters most, I feel, is what is in our hearts.

I have a deep love for Canada and Japan, and other countries that I have explored, and I have yet to explore. What I remember most—after the food that I have eaten along the way—is the people during my travels.

The people I meet every day in my small mountain town inspire and touch me deeply, even though I can't speak the language fluently. The more that I am here and talk in my broken Japanese with English, along with a great set of gestures, I realize that there is a language that is common to us all. This is being human.

It's the nod and smiles you exchange with another person when you meet them in the morning and say *ohayou gozaimasu*. It's the cheering you give to a student before a race or test when you say *gambatte*, don't give up. And it's when I bring an elderly person some food and they reach out their hand to mine, and say *arigato gozaimasu*.

When I was living in Nanaimo, B.C. as I was out walking, and saw a sign that I had to stop and take a picture of. It was on a telephone post and in colourful letters. It said, "human and kind, be both." It's my motto now, and perhaps it has always been.

I am Japanese, Canadian, and humankind.
