

The Unique Japanese Ladies in the Los Angeles Area

Kyoko Saito

I lived with Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt in Palos Verdes Estates, California from April 1980 to December 1990. I went to California State University, Long Beach to pursue a master's degree in linguistics.

There were serious economic problems between the U.S.A. and Japan in the 1980s. Japanese started purchasing real estate in the U.S.A. These investors bought a famous hotel in Los Angeles, a casino in Las Vegas, and some buildings at the Rockefeller Center in New York City. Around Palos Verdes Estates, some very expensive houses were sold to Japanese people. Japanese also bought Columbia Pictures Industries. Many Americans were upset about such situations and even some of my schoolmates complained that Japanese raised the price of real estate.

On the TV news, many American workers pounded on Japanese products such as TV sets and cars in the street and they destroyed various Japanese products because the Americans were angry at the trade imbalance between the U.S.A. and Japan.

I became acquainted with some Americans through Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt. I also met some Japanese nationals through my own activities.

There were many Japanese people living in the Los Angeles area. They were tourists, students, workers, or immigrants. Some of them immigrated because they had married American citizens. I would like to introduce four of these unique Japanese whom I met when I lived there.

1. Yoko

Yoko had married an American soldier and came to the U.S.A. According to Yoko, when she was 16 years old, she ran away from home and started working at the bar where she met her husband just after World War II. When she came to the U.S.A., she was 36 years old and she had a son. Several years after she had arrived in the U.S.A., her husband died of alcoholism. After the death of her husband, she went to a beauty school and became a beautician. She ran her own beauty salon and had three beauticians, a Japanese, a Korean, and a Hispanic working for her. Her beauty salon looked shabby. When she was in her 50s, she met Ralph and got married to him.

Yoko sometimes told me about her relationship with her second husband. He was an accountant and had divorced twice. As soon as they moved into a new house, they put it on the market and started looking for another new house. Ralph did this to invest his money in houses and while I was in the U.S.A., they moved house six times.

Yoko and her husband regularly went to Las Vegas and Hawaii. Yoko told me that she spent between \$5,000 and \$6,000 which her husband gave her for gambling in Las Vegas on each trip. During Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas holidays, Ralph took his entire family, eight adults and two or three his grandchildren, to a hotel and stayed there for a week. Ralph paid all the expenses.

Ralph bought Yoko a Cadillac once a year or at least once every two years and it seemed that Yoko was very happy. On the contrary, she had many worries. She once asked me to tell her husband that I went to Las Vegas with her. Yoko had gone to Las Vegas by herself and kept it secret from her husband. Once a week, her husband met one of his children by his second wife and Yoko was afraid that her husband would divorce her because they hadn't had a child. She could forget her fears while she was gambling in Las Vegas.

One day she told me that she had lung cancer and would not live much longer and she asked me to lend her \$1,500 because her son from her first marriage had caused a car accident. As he didn't have car insurance, he had to pay \$1,500. I asked Yoko why she couldn't ask her husband to help her son. She said, "If my husband knew about this, he would divorce me. As I'm over 65 years old, I can't live without him financially." When Yoko needed her husband's help, she couldn't ask him. I felt sorry for Yoko and I lent her the money but I thought that she would not be able to pay me back. Luckily, she paid me back the \$1,500 little by little.

Even after she borrowed \$1,500 from me, she sent me letters and cards. She told me in the letters what a wonderful time she and her family had on a holiday at the Holiday Inn. Even though Yoko told me about her luxurious life, I felt sorry for her.

After I came home to Japan, I asked Yoko to send me some empty boxes of frozen food. Yoko used to tell me that she and her husband eat frozen dinners when they don't go out. I sent her 10,000yen worth of Japanese food such as cookies, dried sea food, etc. instead of sending her money for the empty boxes and postage but she sent me a receipt for the frozen food and the postage and asked me to pay the money. I have never heard that she has cancer or has been sick in bed, and she is still healthy.

2. Mary

In 1980, when I started living in the U.S.A., I attended Harbor College for four months until my tourist visa expired. I took three courses which were two speech courses and an English grammar course. One speech course was for native English speakers and the other was for English as a Second Language. The E.S.L. course consisted of people from various countries such as Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Mexicans, Vietnamese, and Iranians. Many of them had immigrated to America and a few, like me, were studying in America. I was very curious to know where they came from and why they came to the U.S.A. It looked like there might be some Japanese students but they avoided the other oriental students.

One day, all the students had to introduce themselves and because of this, I discovered that there were five Japanese in the class and that three of them had immigrated to the U.S.A. From Mary's speech, I knew that Mary was Japanese and she looked to be in her 50s. I wanted to

know why her name was Mary and why she avoided her Japanese classmates.

Mary said, "My husband is Abraham and he is a Jew. Many Japanese people believe that Jewish people are the most intelligent in the world but it isn't true. They only spend their money on education. Education is always with you and it can not be stolen. People can't take their land and houses with them if they were forced to move but their education is always with them until the day they pass away. They can use the education for their jobs and their lives." Mary also said, "Some Japanese people are upset when they are mistaken for Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese but they are lucky. It could be worse at least they aren't mistaken for an animal."

Mary and Abraham were childless. Her husband worked for "The Stars and Stripes" which published American military newspapers. She had longed for the things of American life such as nice clothes, handsome men, and nice houses; therefore, she started working at the American military base as a typist. She met her husband in Japan and had got married. When Mary got married, her husband's family named her Mary as this would make it easier for her to get American citizenship. After she came to the U.S.A., she worked at a part-time job as a typist.

The first time I talked to her, she told me that she might have cancer and she would not live long so that she had prepared for her death: for example, she threw away all her photo albums. Since then, even though she went on a trip to Europe, she didn't take a single picture. She said, "When I die, I can't take anything with me except my memory. I don't have any one who will accept my things." Every time I talked to her, she told me about how she was going to divorce her husband. It was because her husband wasn't interested in how to save or spend their money: for example, when they needed an apartment, Mary had to find it. When they decided to buy their house, Mary had to look for it. She also had to handle all her husband's money and take care of it. She said, "In the U.S.A., the husband should take care of the money." Even though we talked in Japanese, Mary put many English words in her Japanese sentences: for example, "Several years ago, 私がアパートを looking していた時、I made a mistake. 私 nursing home に入ったの。The smell was bad. Old person が出てきて。It was terrible. もう考えたくない。" She said, "Speaking in English is more comfortable than speaking in Japanese." A month after we talked to each other, she stopped coming to the class. I called her and found out that even though she studied English hard, she couldn't receive a good grade so that she quit the speech course.

In 1982, she and her husband moved to San Rafael which is near San Francisco. She sold their town house for around \$200,000 to their next door neighbor. The day she left Rancho Palos Verdes, her neighbor didn't bring her the check on time. Mary told me that she could sue her neighbor for not bringing her the check on time. In the U.S.A., if a buyer didn't pay, a seller can cancel the negotiation and can sue the buyer because the seller had to worry about the payment very much. She thought about doing this but the neighbor finally arrived with the check and the deal was finished. She also told me, "Could you believe that I have a \$200,000 check in my purse and now I have to drive to San Rafael? This kind of thing would never happen to American wives because American husbands handle their money." At this time she was angry and upset and was complaining about Mexicans. She told me, "Even though my

Mexican cleaning lady didn't understand the quality of the table, she wanted to buy it for a very low price. I hate it. She is Mexican.”

The following year after Mary had left Rancho Palos Verdes, I visited her in San Rafael. She and her husband lived in an apartment. Her husband was in Las Vegas and she told me that if they divorce, her husband might go to Las Vegas or Reno every day. Both Las Vegas and Reno are famous for gambling. In Nevada, gambling is legal. She suggested to me to go to Las Vegas and gamble there. She said, “Some people don't gamble in Las Vegas. They are fools. They should enjoy gambling there. My husband never loses money when he plays poker.” She was so proud of herself that she was good at investing money in stocks.

They moved to Novato, near San Francisco and I visited her. After I had a bath, she told me that taking a bath was a waste of time. Everybody has only 24 hours in a day and it is very important how you spend that time. Intelligent Americans don't take baths; instead, they take a shower and spend their time very carefully. She said, “Taking a shower is quicker than taking a bath, isn't it? Why don't you spend your time more carefully?”

She was still talking about divorcing her husband. She also told me that she and her husband loved gambling and went to Las Vegas and Reno often. She told me that she and her husband would divide their assets and Mary would live in Japan. She planned to open an English language school and teach English and American etiquette in Kobe. According to Mary, Kobe is the safest place in Japan from earthquakes.

Many times she said, “I don't associate with Japanese people. I have many Caucasian American friends.” She had a lot of curiosity about my associates at school, church, and in my neighborhood. When I started telling her about one of my university classmates who received her best friend's baby in a will, Mary stopped me from talking. She said, “I don't want to listen to bad news. In American society, Americans only talk about good news. That is the American way.” As soon as I mentioned that the classmate had two million dollars, Mary asked me to tell her more about my classmate. When she took me to Berkeley and downtown San Francisco, she pointed out from her car and said, “Look at that couple. The woman is Asian but she got a handsome Caucasian husband, even though she is not beautiful.” She added, “Caucasians whose wives are foreigners are usually eccentric because there are many attractive Caucasian women around them. My husband is very peculiar.”

After I arrived in the U.S.A., I had a great curiosity about people, especially about their racial background. This was because I am from Japan where I could see only people who have similar features - black hair, dark skin, dark eyes, etc. On the contrary in the U.S.A., I could see many races such as Caucasians, black, dark or light brown-skinned people. They also have many colors of hair such as black, brown, red, or blond. I was really interested in knowing where they came from or where their ancestors came from. Mary said, “Americans don't care about their race.” At a restaurant we went to there was a very attractive waitress and I wondered where she came from or where her ancestors came from but I didn't mention this to Mary. But then she said, “Can you guess where she comes from?” She also said, “Why don't you ask her?” I thought that Mary made contradictory statements but I asked the waitress,

“Where are you from?” The waitress replied, “I’m from Mexico. Many people ask me the same question that you did.”

In Mary's home, she drank Japanese powdered green tea every day. She mentioned that a can of the powdered tea cost 20,000yen. She also ate Japanese food such as “natto,” “unagi,” “curry and rice,” “soba,” etc. She said that once a week she went to Japanese town in San Francisco and bought a lot of Japanese food. Once in a while, she pointed out the economic problems between the U.S.A. and Japan. She said, “Japan sells too many of their products to America but they hardly buy any American products.” She also said, “Japanese won't sell their real estate to foreigners. One of my American friends wanted to buy a house in Japan but the Japanese realtor refused to sell him the house because he is a foreigner. It's not fair.”

After I came home to Japan, I communicated with Mary by letters and telephone. Every time I received letters from her, she mentioned continually that she didn't associate with any Japanese. She associated only with Caucasian Americans or Caucasians who came from Europe. The Americans and Europeans who Mary associated with talked about only good news. They made everybody happy and enjoyed being with each other.

In December 1992, I sent her a Christmas card. I enclosed a letter in which I told her about the death of Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt. After I sent her the Christmas card, I didn't hear anything back from Mary. I thought that she might be sick because she had mentioned that she might not live much longer. I also thought that she might have divorced her husband. Anyway, something might have happened to her so I decided to call her. Her husband said, “Mary is not here. She went to San Francisco for shopping.”

Several days after I called her, I received a letter from Mary. The reason why she hadn't communicated with me was that I had made her unhappy because I had told her about Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt's death. According to Mary, in American society, nobody tells bad news. Everybody says only good news. She suggested to me not to tell any bad news to anyone. Tell only good news and make other people happy.

After I received the letter from Mary, I wondered about Americans and American society. While I was in the U.S.A., I met many Americans who were Caucasians, African American, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, etc. Every time I received Christmas cards from them, I received letters with the cards, too. In the letters, people told what had happened during the year. They told both good news and bad news; for example, they had got married, they had a baby, their children got good grades at their schools, their children entered a good university, their daughters or sons had got married, they had a new grandchild, they had gone on a trip, and they had fixed up their houses. But they also told about how they had divorced, their sons or daughters had divorced, they had sent their parents or parent to a nursing home, their parent or parents had passed away, or their family members were sick in bed. My neighbors at Rocky Point, Palos Verdes Estates told me in their Christmas cards about one of their neighbor's sudden accidental death. One of them sent me a copy of the newspaper story about the death.

If Mary lives in real American society and associates with only real Americans, who are the people who associated with me? Are they Americans, too, or are they unusual Americans?

Why does Mary concern herself about Caucasians? Even though she is eager to be an American, American society will not accept her because her physical appearance is Asian.

On the one hand, Mary told me not to talk about unhappy things and that Americans don't care about race. On the other hand, every time I met her, she told me that she had cancer and she was going to divorce her husband. Moreover, she told me that she associates only with Caucasians. What she suggested to me to do and what she actually did were contradictory to each other.

Even though Mary is Japanese, why did she avoid associating with Japanese other than me? She asked me what magazines or newspapers the Bernhards subscribed to, or what their favorite TV programs, supermarkets or department stores were. She judged their wealth and their knowledge from these questions. However, both Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley while Mary didn't have a college degree. It seemed that Mary longed to be like rich, intellectual, Caucasians Americans.

3. Kieko

At California State University, Long Beach, I took Historical Linguistics lectured by Dr. Sawyer, the Syntax course about Chomsky's Transformational Grammar and Case Grammar lectured by Dr. Herts, and the English Syllabus Design course lectured by Dr. Ross. I barely passed English Syllabus Design but I received a "C" in Historical Linguistics and Syntax. When I took English Syllabus Design, Kieko, who looked between 55 and 60 years old, was in the same course.

A year after I had met Kieko, she showed me a picture of an old African-American man. She said, "This is my husband. As you are not a racist, I decided to show you this picture so you could understand my situation. None of my schoolmates or Japanese friends know about my husband." It was her first marriage and her husband's second marriage. Kieko told me that she had been an English language professor at a private university in Tokyo. She was always proud that she was brilliant. She was also proud that she had a brilliant son. According to Kieko, her husband had three or four children from his previous marriage. I asked her, "How many children does your husband have, three or four?" She said, "I don't know." She also told me that she didn't know what her husband's job was. She only knew that her husband worked in the evening. Every time I had a chance to talk to her, she always told me how poor she was. Her husband never permitted her to go shopping or never permitted her to use the telephone. When she had to use the telephone, she had to beg her husband to use it. He gave her only eight dollars a month for her pocket money. She told me that she had to give her pocket money to her son. Sometimes I took her to a Japanese restaurant and treated her to Japanese food. As soon as she started eating Japanese food, udon, her eyes filled with tears. She said, "I've never eaten such delicious food since I got married." Even on campus, I had to buy a cup of coffee and a muffin for her because she always told me that she didn't have any money. Not only didn't she have any chance to use one dollar but she also didn't have any chance to use a checkbook. When a school semester started, Kieko had to wait for at least an hour to enter the

school bookstore because it was too crowded. And even after she entered the bookstore, she couldn't buy any textbooks without cash or checks so she had to find out the prices of the books then go home and ask her husband to write a check. She waited again for an hour outside the bookstore then after going in, she had to wait another hour in line in front of the cashier. Sometimes all her waiting time was in vain because her husband hadn't calculated the tax of the books. Between November and February, it is cold even in California. Especially, after sunset, we need a sweater or a cardigan. Some people even wear a down jacket. Kieko was shaking with cold and I felt sorry for her so I bought her a sweater, a cardigan, and a polo shirt. Kieko said, "I haven't had any chance to buy clothes after I got married. I wear only used clothes from my friends." Even Mr. Bernhardt felt sorry for Kieko and he bought her a briefcase which was \$100.

She wanted to borrow my notebook for Dr. Knafel's History of English course. She also wanted to use my notebook, term papers, and returned examinations for Dr. Sawyer's Applied Linguistics. When she looked at my notebooks, she said, "Your notebooks are perfect." She also said, "Your term papers are excellent." Then she asked me if I still remembered the questions in the examinations for History of the English Language by Dr. Knafel. We had had to return our examinations to Dr. Knafel. As soon as she took the examination, she told me, "Kyoko, your memory was excellent. The examination for History of the English Language was exactly the same as what you told me." When Kieko received her examinations' results, both of them were almost 100% correct. According to Kieko, Dr. Knafel and Dr. Sawyer told her that they were proud that they had such a brilliant student.

After she received a master's degree in linguistics, she realized that it was impossible to teach English in American society so she decided to teach Japanese. In spite of being a native Japanese speaker, she needed a certification to teach Japanese language at colleges in California. To get the certification, she had to take special classes for how to teach Japanese language. But to register for the classes, she had to pay around 200 dollars and her husband refused to pay the tuition. I felt sorry for her and gave her the money for the tuition. As Kieko is Japanese and she is very poor in the U.S.A., I could not stop helping her financially.

4. Reiko

As I didn't have a car, I had to go to the college by bus. It took at least 15 minutes on foot to go to the nearest bus stop from the Bernhardts'. The earliest bus came around 8:00 A.M. and the latest bus came around 7:00 P.M. One day while I was waiting for the bus, I saw a teenage girl who was also waited for the bus. We looked at each other's faces and exchanged smiles. The girl was cute and had light brown hair, and hazel eyes. Her name was Suzy and she lived on Rocky Point Road which was close to the Bernhardts. She also told me that she was a student at Harbor College. As she was an excellent student, she entered the college a year earlier than other students. Sometimes we had a chance to meet each other at the bus stop or on the campus. One day, I saw a young man who looked like a Mexican with his dark brown skin, dark hair, and dark eyes waiting for the bus. I realized that he was one of my classmates on the

speech course for native English speakers. He was Danny. Sometimes he made a funny speech in the class: for example, he imitated how Japanese people pronounce English words. Danny told me that he lived on Rocky Point Road. I asked him if he knew Suzy because they lived on the same street. Danny replied, "She is my sister." One day Danny told me that his mother, Reiko, was Japanese. Reiko worked for Ikegami, which was a Japanese company that sold TV cameras. Danny worked for Ikegami, too. He said, "My mother hired me."

In December 1980, I had a chance to meet Reiko. She looked about 50 years old and she was plump with a double chin. After I had met her a couple of times, she started telling me about her life. She used to work for an American military base in Japan, where she met her husband. She had got married 25 years ago and came to the U.S.A. After she and her husband started living in the U.S.A., her husband asked her to send him to medical school. As soon as she had given birth to Suzy and her husband became a medical doctor, her husband divorced her. Reiko decided to raise her four children, three boys and a girl, by herself; however, her husband did not pay any child support for bringing up his four children. She said, "My husband's family background is Scottish so that he was extremely stingy. When I served a cup of coffee to one of my guests, he complained about it." As Reiko seemed very bossy in her family, I couldn't understand why she didn't receive any support money for her children. I also wondered why she didn't sue her husband to force him to support his family and why she had sent him to medical college.

Reiko was as proud of herself as if she were a vice president at the company. She told me that she had the power to hire and fire the employees. She also told that she could control the Japanese president because he could not speak English. Reiko lived in a large house on the cliff which belonged to the company. The houses on the cliff are very expensive and these houses are often used for shooting TV dramas and movies. On the one hand, Reiko complained about the house often. She didn't want to live in that house because it took time to clean it and to take care of the garden. It took all day long to water the lawn and the flowerbeds. On the other hand, she was proud of herself for living in that beautiful house. As the president couldn't trust any of his employees except Reiko, he begged her to live there.

One day, Reiko called me and asked me if I knew a Japanese cleaning lady. As she had to have uterus surgery, she needed someone to clean her house. I told her about Maria, who is a Mexican-American cleaning lady. Reiko asked me how much Maria charged, then she said, "I can't trust Mexicans. Nobody stays at home during the daytime and while we are gone, a Mexican might bring her friends and might steal many things from my house. I don't want to take a chance." I asked her why Suzy didn't help her. Reiko said, "Suzy left my home and lives with her boyfriend. In the U.S.A., we shouldn't ask for something unless someone offers first. Even though Suzy is my daughter, she doesn't offer to help me." As I didn't know any Japanese who could clean her house, I offered to help her.

When I started cleaning her home every Sunday, she asked me to fix her dinner, too. After the surgery, she was too weak to cook for herself for a while. She asked me to clean three bedrooms, a living room, a family room, three bathrooms, and a kitchen. She also asked me to

wash the windows. Moreover, she told me to clean the oven, the stove, two refrigerators, and shelves. The oven was extremely dirty. Even though I used two cans of oven cleaner, I couldn't remove the grease which was almost 5 mm thick. I used a knife and scraped the grease off. While I was cleaning the oven, I understood why Americans didn't want to rent their houses or apartments to Japanese. When I heard that Japanese left their houses dirty, I couldn't understand it. As we never step into the houses with shoes on, our houses must be kept clean. But when I looked at Reiko's oven, I understood what the Americans meant.

One Sunday, while I was cleaning her home, I heard someone singing and playing the guitar. That was Danny. I was helping Reiko but her son was fooling around. Reiko told me an excuse why Danny didn't help her. She said, "Danny is very busy studying. He needs to relax on Sundays." At that time, I used to go to California State University at Long Beach, where Danny also went. I had to study hard and take care of Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt. I needed rest, too. I told Reiko that I would not come to clean her home again. She gave me three jars of Knotts Berry Farm jelly and a used T-shirt which had a hole in it. She forced me to try on the T-shirt and said, "You look very nice in it." Of course, she didn't give me any money. She only wanted to use me as free labor.

Two years after I had cleaned Reiko's house, I heard that she was moving out of that cliff house. She said that she had quit Ikegami. She didn't want to work for the company anymore because the president was a "damned liar." When she announced she was quitting the company, everybody was surprised and begged her to stay. Even though the president had asked her to live in the cliff house, she was going to live in an apartment. She said, "I found a nice apartment in Torrance. The apartment is located in a very quiet and convenient area." Several months after she moved into the apartment, she called me and told me to visit her. It was almost like an order. I visited her and found out that Reiko had her own business. She was selling some kinds of vitamins. The apartment was located in a noisy area and it was small. There was one bedroom, a bathroom, and a combined room with a kitchen and a family room.

Every time I met Reiko, she asked me who lived in that cliff house where she used to live. She also asked me not to tell the people who lived there where she lived or what she was doing.

According to the new resident, Reiko had been fired. They said Reiko had been too bossy and none of the employees liked her. Reiko had told me that she had as much power as a vice president but the new resident in the cliff house told me that she was only a clerk.

Reiko used to tell me that Japanese cars were junk. American cars were far better than Japanese cars. At that time she was driving a small Chevrolet. A year after she said that about Japanese cars, Reiko started driving a Japanese car, a small Isuzu. She explained how wonderful her Japanese car was. She talked to me as if she could sell the health products very well but she also asked me to introduce her to rich people such as Toyota's president who lived a couple of minutes away from the Bernhardts on foot and to my other neighbors because she wanted to sell her products to them.

In 1987, Reiko called me and announced that she had married the newspaperman who was Mexican American. She asked me to stay in her home while they were on vacation. She told

me, “You can enjoy freedom while you are staying in my home. You need rest instead of taking care of Mr. and Mrs. Bernhardt.” I realized that she needed a house sitter. I asked her to hire Maria to be a house sitter but she turned it down immediately. I couldn't understand why she had married a Mexican American but she still couldn't trust Mexicans.

Conclusion

I learned for myself that to know about American society from TV programs, movies, newspaper, books, meeting some Americans, or even visiting the U.S.A. for a short period as a tourist is very different from what I actually experienced in the U.S.A. living with an American family for 11 years and studying at the university.