



OIDEYASU!

UNCENSORED BEAUTY Kyōto From the Ground

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Hawai'i Herald Columnist

Editor's note: A pleasant surprise of an e-mail arrived in my in-box a few weeks ago. It was from author Jackie Kim, whose book, "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan," the Herald had featured in 2006. While a JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) teacher and later a graduate student in Japan, Jackie had interviewed 10 elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan in the latter half of their country's colonial period. The women's lives were filled with unspeakable hardship, and yet they endured, sacrificed and persevered for the sake of their children and families. Jackie's book was a treasure.

Her e-mail said that her husband's work had brought them to Kyōto and she wondered whether the Herald might be interested in publishing off the beaten path-type stories about life in Japan's ancient capital. Needless to say, we jumped at the offer. Here is the first of Jackie J. Kim's "Oideyasu!" — meaning "Welcome!" in Kyōto dialect — columns.

It is sunny outside, but small flakes of snow carried by the light yet icy breeze scatter without aim, having no chance to gather into form. The snowfall from the night before blankets my neighbor's roof and coats a cotton-candy frost on the dark-green pine tree in front of my house. The tree branches stretch into the clear and cloudless blue sky of this New Year's deep winter in Kyōto. I exhale in the crispness of the morning and see my warm breath turn to smoke from the cold air. Quickly turning the small metal knob on the side of the old-fashioned wooden window to lock it, I look out into the small Japanese garden where a stone lantern stands under the pine tree.

It's already been a year and a half since we moved into our home, which was once an old teahouse. On our small block, it is one of the few traditional wooden houses still standing. The walls are cemented with sand and the frame of the house is made from wood. Delicate details are hand-carved throughout the house in the shape of waves or small petals on door frames, beams and hinges. The *tokonoma*, a small raised platform within the main room where elegant

scrolls are usually hung behind a simple *ikebana* showpiece, is built of a dark rich mahogany wood over half a century old. Within our *tokonoma*, however, instead of a scroll hangs an enlarged view of the turquoise green and blue view of home — the magnificence of the



Jackie Kim's home in Kyōto, once a teahouse, has a Japanese garden with a stone lantern and other treasures.

lighthouse at Makapu'u, a picture I brought to remind me of the warmth of the ocean breeze that cannot be compared to anywhere else. At the corner of the *tokonoma* sits a *hibachi* carved from a single wooden trunk and hand-lacquered with gold chrysanthemums. We found it collecting dust in a small storage room in the back of the main house. It belonged to the owner, who passed away a decade ago.

Our first few weeks in this house were like a treasure hunt. In the front garden, in between the branches of the *Sarusuberi* (crape myrtle tree), we found the piercing eyes of an eagle made of iron peering at its new residents. One afternoon as I looked out the front window at our garden, I noticed that on top of scattered black stones lay a porcelain fish flat on its side. I quickly went out for a closer look and, sure enough, it was a trout. I gathered the black, smooth-edged stones in a circle to create a tiny pond and then sat the fish up to let it swim with the current as I imagined it would want to do. Instinct prompted me to look behind the pine tree, where I was

greeted by a rusted piece of iron shaped like a frog, looking curiously up at me.

I then ventured out into the back garden, where colorful carp once swam in a small pond. Now, instead of water, the hole was covered with the moisture of green moss from the droplets of water still leaking from the faucet in the shape of a small country house with a straw-thatched roof. Between the pine and plum trees — a harmonious combination of luck and fortune within a typical Japanese garden — sat a fat brown clay partridge. I smiled at the playfulness of the garden.

When I first heard that the late proprietress had lived and died alone in the house, a sense of eeriness came over me. But then I began to feel her child-like and playful spirit, a spirit that loved living and sharing herself with others. Slowly, I got to know her and am still getting to know the presence that has left a legacy within these walls.

Miss Fujii was a master of tea ceremony. She hosted many tea events in this house, offering a place of quiet, meditation and solace to guests and students who enjoyed the colorful and harmonious garden with its corners of hidden secrets, bringing a smile to the unexpected. She also taught the art of *ikebana*. I can tell from the various bright buds that greet us throughout the year, like the rose of Sharon that blossoms right before the first fall of snow, just how much she loved flowers.

Miss Fujii, who came from a very old and prominent family in the *Daitokuji* temple area of Kyōto with roots that can be traced back three centuries, was a woman of her own right. As a young girl of 19, she was baptized a Catholic, which is very rare in a Buddhist-dominated household. She further surprised and puzzled those around her when she decided at a very young age that she would not marry and independently supported herself as a master of tea, *ikebana* and *haiku* poetry.

When I came to Kyōto, I had to once again leave behind a familiar way of life — surroundings I knew by heart and wonderful friends in the Swabian region of southern Germany. Many in Hawai'i asked me, "What is a local girl doing all the way in Germany?" Sometimes love takes you to unexpected places far and wide. I never expected to meet my partner in a graduate school in Tōkyō, just as he never dreamed that a girl born in Korea, raised in a small town in Florida and later in Hawai'i would become his wife. We come from opposite ends of the world and now, for the time being, we live in the middle, Kyōto, as a kind of unexpected compromise.

Getting used to new surroundings is a bit daunting for anyone in the beginning. But now, as I come into my second year here in Kyōto, I have come to appreciate the beauty beneath the towering monuments of history and breathtaking temples, shrines and world-famous gardens. It is the uncensored beauty of "Kyotoites" who

are living their lives to the best of their abilities that I hope to share in this column. Sometimes it will be of people who share common ties to Hawai'i. Other times, it will be of inspirational women. But at the center, it will be of ordinary lives that will have a small moment in the spotlight because people in another part of the world opened their hearts and minds with interest and curiosity. **HH**

JU-ROKU PUZZLE (Solution on page 11)

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