



OIDEYASU!

FINDING COMFORT IN KYŌTO'S WINTER

Thanks to People Like Satō-san

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Winters are long in Kyōto, especially in my house, which is a traditional-style *machiya* (wooden tea house) that's ideal for Kyōto's hot and humid summer months. Windows and sliding doors open up to the Japanese-style gardens in the front and rear of the house. The open-style architecture aids in circulating air and wind throughout the house, thus producing a harmonious flow of energy that contributes in the spiritualistic ritual of Japanese tea. This all sounds good and fine in a dreamy, romantic state of mind — until reality hits you like a sharp hand across the cheek, fast and cold, like the bite of a sudden frosty chill that shocks you when you step out from a warm, toasty room into the frigid air. When the temperature outside is the same as inside the house — and even warmer on sunny days — it's easy to get discouraged.

In each room of our house, we have a small gas heater that blows warm, dry air. As a rule of thumb, we turn off the gas heater before going to bed at night, lest we end up in eternal sleep from the poisonous fumes. Unfortunately, once the heater goes off, the warmth quickly dissipates. On top of the *tatami* (straw mat), a "hotto carpet" (electric carpet) warms our feet and blocks the draft that travels upward in what Kyōtolites famously refer to as *sokobie*, or bone-chilling cold.

My favorite way to keep warm — and I think I may very well speak for the rest of the Japanese population — is with a good 'ol *kotatsu*, which is a table over an electric heater with a hanging quilt that retains the heat. In the old days, the *kotatsu* was a charcoal brazier in a floor well. Usually the size of a small square coffee table, it is placed in the center of the living room, on top of the *hotto* carpet. Family members sit on the carpet, place their feet under the table and cover the lower part of their body with a part of the extended quilt. When there are three or more people, it is usually hard to stretch out one's legs. However, if there are two people, or even just one person, they can extend their lower torso fully under the table by leaning back comfortably on a legless recliner. The magic of this bewitching table is that once I stretch my leg inside and bask in its cozy warmth, I am held under its spell, broken only by a life-threatening event like, say, a house fire. When the telephone rings in the next room, I let the answering machine pick it up, and if someone rings the doorbell, I mumble sleepily to myself, "They'll come back if it's something important."

Another colossal winter challenge is trying to dry wet laundry. Almost every household in Japan has a washing machine, even if the older models are small, toy-like, timer-ticking twist-ers — like the one I have. Dryers, on the other hand, are a rarity. On sunny days, except during winter, rows of laundry hang from balconies and verandas. *Futon* (comforters) and blankets are hung in the hot sun to kill off dust mites. As the sun goes down, a rhythmic pounding echoes in various directions, beating out that final bit of dust before the mattresses are brought in. Some women I spoke with said that drying clothes in the hot sun is more sanitary than using a dryer. They agreed unanimously that it simply "feels" better — "*kimochi ii*."

During the cold months, the weather forecast is a lifeline that dictates the day's schedule. When a sunny day is not in store for awhile, or the temperature is too low, leaving the clothes

damp, I make my way to Wassalon. The bright and roomy neighborhood laundromat with a misspelled name is a block away from my house. Wassalon's huge washing machines and dryers were imported from the United States 10 years ago for its grand opening. Three industrial-sized machines wash and dry futons and king-sized comforters for about twenty-five dollars. Smaller-sized machines wash clothes for \$3 and dry them for \$6. Dry-cleaning service, weighed by the pound, is also available, allowing each customer to have their clothes individually cleaned in a single spin, without mixing them in a big, communal load.

Sixty-year-old Satō Takako is Wassalon's "cleaning specialist." She works at the laundromat, offering her help, whether it be applying extra stain-removing chemical on shirt collars or expertly removing lint and fuzz from sweaters. She walks about briskly, helping customers fold their sheets and blankets as she talks about the weather or the latest news that blares from the small TV set in the corner. On slower days, she runs the vacuum suction deep into the dryer to keep it clean and ready for the next batch of customers.

I met Satō-san for the first time one day when I was puzzled by a cleaning label for the new Egyptian cotton sheets I had bought in America that read "cold only." I was looking back and forth between the machine and the label, uncertain whether the machine offered cold-only or hot-only options. Satō-san reached for the sheets and looked at the label up-close, squinting her eyes. "Oh, English," she muttered. "Korudo onri," she read in her heavily accented Japanese-English, and then said, "OK-*yo*."

In a slow Kyōto dialect, she explained that all of the machines use only cold water. How do the clothes get clean with only cold water? I asked. "These machines are different from what we normally have at home," Satō-san explained. "The Japanese machines that we have spin left and right only, so clothes don't get really clean. But, as you can see, these machines tumble the clothes with force, beating out the dirt, and that's how it gets things a lot cleaner." I nodded, convinced by her expert, professional tone of voice.

Since then, I've learned something new each time I've brought in laundry or dry-cleaning. In her no-nonsense manner, Satō-san will say, "Don't try to save money by washing things like silk, wool or cashmere at home with those 'special' detergents when the label says 'dry-clean.'" Placing a sweater neatly in a mesh net bag before putting it in the dry-cleaning machine, Satō-san continued, "Just like the way we remember our usual routine and it is hard to change, delicate materials remember the wrinkles and creases that develop when they are carelessly stuffed into an ordinary machine. So, even if you learn from your mistakes and dry-clean it afterwards, it'll remember the creases, no matter how well you iron them out." I nodded, hoping I would remember her advice.

Sometimes while waiting for the dryer to finish its spin, Satō-san will bring out two manda-



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rin oranges and we'll chit-chat about the latest health news or about something she had seen on TV as she worked. Other times, when removing my sheets from the dryer, Satō-san will drop what she's doing and take the other end of the sheets, pulling and shaking out the creases with a force and strength beyond her barely 5-foot build.

After wearing my winter sweaters for too long, I finally decided to try out the dry-cleaning service. I knew that dry-cleaning was a drop-off and pick-up service that costs a hefty sum for finer items and yet I was oblivious to the actual process of dry-cleaning. Satō-san explained the difference while carefully placing my sweaters into the machine and, once again, I was enlightened. As she closed the machine and pushed a red button, my education began.

"See the liquid that's spurting out? It looks like water, right? Wrong," she said. "It's a chemical, not water that tends to wash away the colors or shrink the fabric. That's the reason why delicate things like sweaters, silk or kimono are cleaned, and sweat odors are gone, without shrinking. In larger cleaning stores, your dirty clothes are stuffed into a large machine along with everyone else's. You have no idea whose clothes are mixed with yours. But here, at least you have peace of mind that your clothes are cleaned individually and not en masse." What she said made sense.

When I returned to Wassalon later than the two hours Satō-san had instructed, she was already gone for the day. But she had folded my sweaters and placed them in a large plastic bag on top of the shelf. They looked perfectly new. I smiled and carefully reached for the bag with both hands so as not to mess them up. It was as if Satō-san had taught each sweater its correct fold and the precise way it should lie.

As I stepped out into the cold winter day, I pressed the warm bag close to my body. **HH**

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.