

The Japanese of Kansas City

They add subtle ornament, character to the Midwest

by Giles M. Fowler

They are a people, it seems, of delicacy and discretion, their presence in Kansas City visible but understated, like a single bright thread embroidered into the metropolitan fabric. Guesses of how many Japanese or Japanese-Americans live here range from 300 to 1,000, but no one really knows, not even the people themselves. Unlike some other minority groups here, they do not move in tight, ethnic circles or cling to special neighborhoods. Yet, as tiny a minority as they are, they lend subtle ornament and character to the mid-American scene.

One finds them often in the professions—medicine especially—and increasingly in the business community. One sees also, from time to time, expressions of their national heritage modestly offered as a kind of cultural Show and Tell: a classical noh, kabuki or puppet theater performance booked by local Japanese-Americans; programs on the growing of bonsai (tiny, artistically gnarled trees cultivated for home display) or the art of flower arrangement.

But to most of their Caucasian neighbors—even those aware that Japanese exist among them—they tend to be lumped into stereotypes: the docile Army bride in her exotic kimono. The formal industrialist, who bows elegantly before striking a million-dollar deal. The aesthete engaged in obscure arts like calligraphy or origami (decorative paper folding).

What the resident Japanese are really like as human beings or how they respond to a culture so alien from their own traditions are matters that seldom cross the Western mind. More Japanese are on the way, as

their businesses here proliferate and their families grow. Yet by many of their fellow Kansas Citians, they continue to be viewed in the nearsighted sense of a tired adjective—inscrutable.

Tak and Ayako Oda, both 32, live in an Overland Park town house and might, in their style and surroundings, be any couple of successful suburban Americans. His suit could be from Jack Henry, her sweater and skirt from Swanson's, their manner from a good Midwestern country club. No ritual bows at the doorway. Their sons, Masato (Mark), 5, and Hayato (Eugene), 2, romp over the couch, curious about the interviewer and his fascinating notebook.

Tak runs the U.S. sales office of Sokkisha Ltd., a Japanese manufacturer of survey equipment. The job involves much travel, and because of that, perhaps, he treasures his domestic life. He and Ayako enjoy showing the old furniture they have dug up at local antique shops and flea markets. "I can have Japanese things at home," he says. "Here we like to have American things." Sure enough, there's not a Japanese object on view in their home. "The garage sales!" Ayako rhapsodizes. "They come out in the spring here like mushrooms!"

Residents of America for the last seven years, including periods in Los Angeles and Chicago, the Odas "don't want to be Japanese all the time here—it's not necessary. We like to have American friends as well as Japanese." In another three years or so they expect to be transferred home to Tokyo. Meantime they are living by an old Japanese proverb that translates, more or less: "When you visit another land, live as the people there do."

Ayako likes taking the kids for walks, letting them experience nature—"there is so much na-



Dr. Kasumi "Casey" Arakawa, head of anesthesiology at K.U. Med Center





... enjoys U.S. living without forfeiture of his Japanese heritage.

The Arakawas' lifestyle is an amalgam of two worlds: Their suburban home has a rock garden; incense lingers in the living room.

photographs by
Roy Inman



In the United States with her family for the express purpose of learning English, Yurie Oshima, 12, is on the honor roll at Park Hill North Junior High.

ture in America." She wants them to feel a sense of place, of the Midwest. "Do you know any old people here who could tell the children folk stories from this area?" she asks. The older child is in preschool and takes piano lessons. Twice a week the little one goes to children's programs at a nearby library. She herself attends a literature class at Johnson County Community College.

But look beyond their apparent integration into American suburban life and you will find small gaps, tiny alienations, a subtle but resolute will to remain Japanese. Tak speaks idiomatic English but finds himself puzzled by American jokes: "I understand the words, but in my mind I miss something." Ayako misses the Japanese bathtub where families get together for steaming, relaxing soaks. She finds peculiar the American practice of uprooting dandelions—"In Japan we love dandelions." She regrets there are so few places here to buy Japanese foodstuffs—only three shops in Greater Kansas City sell them—and has to make due with a sort of hybrid cuisine, Western ingredients cooked in a Japanese manner.

At home they speak Japanese—no chance for the kids to forget the ancestral tongue—and much care is taken to indoctrinate the children in Japanese

culture after their playtime with American friends. On Japanese festival days, out come traditional decorations. The family gets back to Japan every two years, and when they can't go in person they do so vicariously, through short films borrowed from the Japanese consulate. Copies of a Tokyo newspaper arrive by mail.

A source of real worry is that Masato will be well into his schooling when the family comes home. The Japanese educational system is ruthlessly competitive, from grade school on, and the Odas fear that Masato may not be prepared for the pressures ahead. So the parents give home lessons from textbooks sent here by a grandmother in Tokyo. Already the child can read and write some Japanese and can add and subtract.

"The Japanese are very competitive people," Ayako explains. "They are very busy going on, going on, do you know what I mean? Making sure they always do better."

In depth if not in numbers, the Japanese are here. At least enough of them, in the corporate sense, to lend a vigorous element to the Kansas City business scene. Japanese companies with sales or distribution branches here include Sokkisha, Sony, Toyota, Hitachi Metals, Daitom,

Japanese

Basketball hoop in the driveway

Inc. (pharmaceuticals) and the Sord Computer Company. Sord, which handles national distribution from Kansas City, is working on plans to build a manufacturing plant here.

No doubt about it, says James Burke, a lawyer who has served as Japan's honorary consul in Kansas City—the outlook is for more and more Japanese business inroads into this area. There is hardly a night, adds a local Japanese sales representative, when you can't find visiting executives from Japan sipping hot sake at the Tokyo Plaza Restaurant on 103rd Street and talking about the city's potential as an expansion site.

Further evidence of Japanese interest is the recent establishment here of a full-scale Japanese consulate general with jurisdiction in six states. And the International Trade Club of Greater Kansas City, by way of encouragement and welcome, has built its current World Trade Week, through May 25, around the theme: "Focus on Japan."

Set on an expensive block in Prairie Village, the house is a serene world of its own, Western and Oriental in exquisite harmony. There are two matched Steinways in the living room—and a 380-year-old Japanese screen. One finds priceless Asian paintings and porcelains, but also a small Chagall print. A guest room is totally Japanese, with reed matting on the floor and an inset area where an antique scroll hangs over an arrangement of dried flowers.

The home expresses much about the people who live there—Dr. Kasumi Arakawa, who heads the anesthesiology department at the University of Kansas Medical Center; his engagingly graceful wife, June, and their three children, 19-year-old Jane (now studying at K.U.), 15-year-old Kenneth and 10-year-old Amy. An exuberant, cultivated man, the doctor represents the 23rd generation of his family to practice medicine. Many ancestors were poets, artists and scholars as well. June is also Japanese-born, from a wealthy family, but there is a difference: Her mother is an American from

South Dakota, who married a Japanese and raised her children in Japan during World War II.

"It was a very trying time," June remembers. "You know how cruel children can be. We had to fight continuously. People would often tease us. I felt so out of place—I was a head taller than everybody else in school." When the war ended, so did the open discrimination. But many years later, after her marriage, her new in-laws refused to accept her. "We had kept our purity for 600 years or so," says her husband, "and mixing in a little Caucasian blood seemed a terrible thing to them." Finally, in 1961, his parents decided to grant their blessings and have since visited the Arakawas in Kansas City.

Arakawa—Casey to his friends here—came to America in 1954 on a Fulbright grant to support his internship in Des Moines. He had chosen Des Moines by odd whim: He knew from the film *State Fair* that Iowa had abundant food, at a time when Japan still suffered some shortages, and he admired Dvorak's *New World Symphony*—written in Iowa.

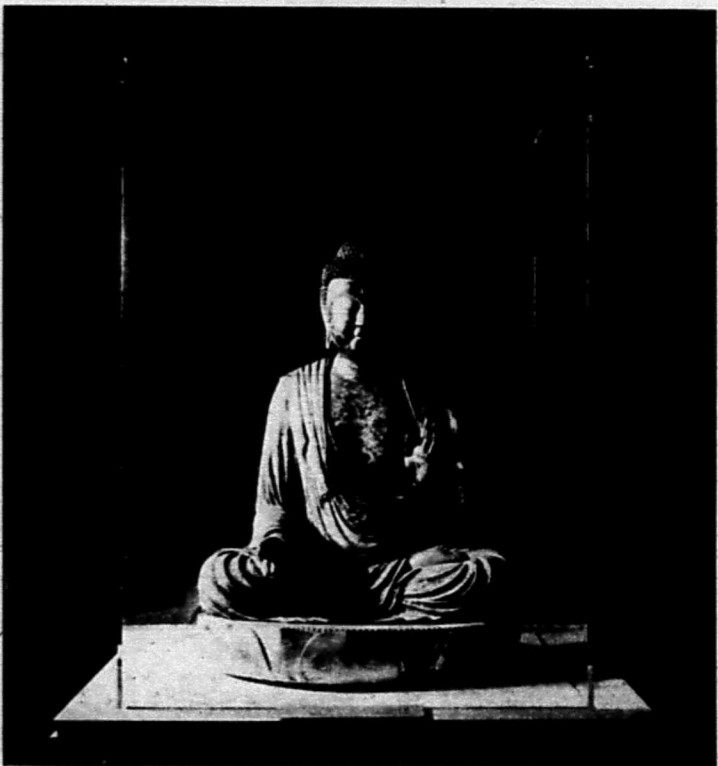
He and June had met in Tokyo, but did not become friends until both had reached America, she as a student at Huron College in South Dakota. They were married in this country in flat defiance of the Japanese tradition of parentally arranged matches. Not only did this disturb his family, but so did his decision to take up anesthesiology instead of urology, his father's specialty. The parental "unhappiness" was one reason, along with Casey's professional opportunities here, that the couple decided to remain in America. They have since become U.S. citizens.

But not to the forfeiture of their Japanese heritage. June Arakawa feels "comfortable" in America; her husband admires the fluidity and democracy of American society. Yet their psyches, their lifestyle and their group of friends are amalgams of both worlds.

"I suppose, if I analyze myself, that I think and act like an American while I'm at work," Casey says. "But at home where I can relax, I begin to feel Japanese again, to adopt a Japanese



Treasures from the Nelson: above, Head of a Guardian King; below, Amida Nyorai, both from the Kamakura Period (1185 to 1392).





Buddhist Guardian King, Early Heian Period (794 to 897).

There are huge painted screens, boldly decorative or subtly mystical; porcelains and ceramics of delicate beauty and antiquity; woodblock prints by acknowledged masters; objects in lacquered wood; religious statuary; noh costumes; saddles and war helmets; swords and a definitive display of sword guards. The Nelson Gallery's Japanese collection is not large compared with the vast Chinese exhibi-

tions, says Marc Wilson, curator of Oriental art. "But it is good—and we've been buying more from Japan in the last two or three years than from any other part of Asia."

Only since the gallery opened its new west wing has the Japanese collection had a fitting showcase, Wilson adds. Now there are frequent visits by Japanese scholars to view this Midwestern repository of their country's treasures.

philosophy. Yet I find I can communicate better with my children in English. They think like American children, so I become more American with them."

His wife found her balance less easily: "At first I felt I would never really belong. I'd be a gaijin, or foreigner, anywhere—in Japan or America. But then I decided in my heart that I was lucky to have lived and felt two cultures so intimately. Here I feel American. When I go to Japan I feel Japanese."

June has enrolled her children in Japanese language classes, despite their protests. At the same time, it was she, over her husband's aesthetic objections, who insisted on installing a very Yankee fixture for their son, Ken—a basketball hoop over the driveway.

Yorihiko and Mimi Oshima understand little English, leaving the translation to their daughter, Yurie, 12, as poised and pretty as a porcelain figurine. A younger daughter, Hana, 10, seems less reserved—maybe it's her T-shirt that reads "Tennis is my racket, but love is my game." The two boys, 8-year-old Katsu and 6-year-old Masa, play in another room, too young to join the family at tea with their guest. Hospitality is a pleasant ritual in the Oshima house, which is small, new and much like other houses in this Parkville development.

But for all the eager courtesies, the smiles, the perpetual praises of Middle America (the people so "nice," the air so clean, the sky so blue), one reads in the words and faces a hint of not-quite-concealed wistfulness. And the home, with little furniture, a Japanese kite hung on the wall like an afterthought, seems as impermanently occupied as a motel room.

Materially, the family is well off. Yorihiko owns several office buildings on Tokyo's Ginza Street, as well as Honda dealerships and an import-export firm. His business interests oblige him to live in Tokyo, only visiting here every few months for three-week stays. Mimi and the children came last July and plan to remain four years, for the express purpose of learning English—perfect English, one of

the most marketable skills that a Japanese in today's world can possess. So the family has relinquished its full life together, the wife and children have left friends they admittedly miss, and now they confront a strange land in order to enhance their future.

The present is another thing. Oh yes, they have some Japanese friends here. Mrs. Oshima counts five, including a young secretary at the Japanese consulate, who knew her in Tokyo and helped her get settled here. Yes, the kids are doing fine in school: Yurie is on the honor roll at Park Hill North Junior High, and the others are admired by their teachers at Garden Elementary. Both girls are studying ballet. And Mimi Oshima, who has a music degree from a Tokyo College, has just resumed piano studies at Park College, as much to pick up English as to refine her musicianship.

Then you hear—not stated as complaint—that for months she spent her daytimes in solitary study of the TV set, jotting down words she ought to learn, waiting for the kids to come home from school, the friends from work, so she would have someone to talk to. And Yurie seems ambivalent, guarded, about her American social life: There are friends but not "close" friends, many schoolmates she likes and others who "show off—in Japan not many people show off." And the rented house is cramping, with only three bedrooms. And the enjoyment of Japanese cuisine has to wait for the father's visits, when he brings culinary items from Tokyo. And the driving, among huge and reckless American cars, is a frightening experience. (Especially in the snow. One day last winter Mrs. Oshima's car slid into a horrifying zigzag and struck an ice bank.)

True, the neighbors have been kind, sending over home-baked bread and rolls in gratitude for some lunch Mimi has cooked for their children. Hana has a chum whose home she visits, and little Katsu, who had spent an earlier four months here staying with family friends, has adjusted especially well.

But isn't a temporary self-exile to Parkville a heavy sacrifice, just to learn English? Twice the question is asked, and twice the

Japanese

English is a marketable skill

Oshimas reply ambiguously, as if they didn't quite understand.

One day, they tell you, Yorihi-ko would like to come for a longer visit—maybe six months if he

can find the time. "Whenever he comes back," says Yurie, "he measures us to see how tall we have become. He asks how much vocabulary we have learned. He



The Odas at home, from left: Masato, 5, Tak, Hayato, 2, and Ayako.

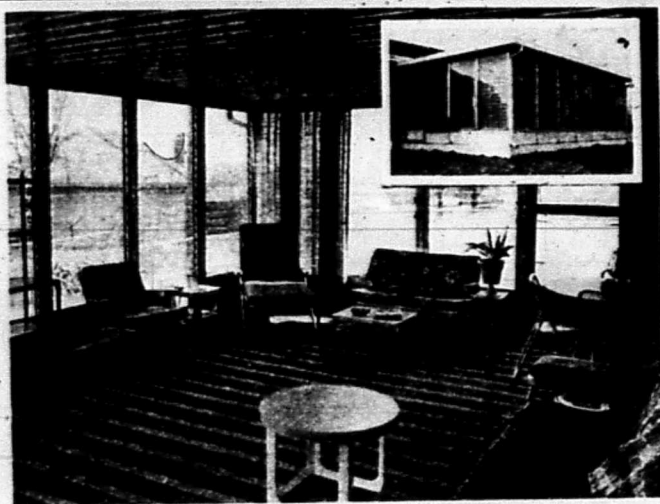


Oda runs the U.S. sales office for Sokkisha Ltd., a manufacturer of survey equipment.

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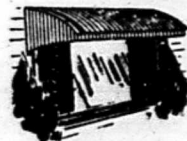
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Never mind that it's small (200 members) and that its membership is only 29 percent ethnic Japanese. The Heart of America Japan-America Society still provides, perhaps, the only window into Japanese culture as a living, local entity. Since its 11 founders first got together in 1962, the group has practiced to the letter of its predictably worded bylaws—"to promote understanding" and goodwill between the two countries. During the current World Trade Week, its members will trot out their arts, costumes and folk customs for display in the mall of the Ward Parkway Shopping Center.

Not only has the group arranged entertainments, granted scholarships, organized language classes and sponsored visits here by students from Kansas City's Japanese "sister city," Kurashiki, but it has acted at times as a kind of benevolent society to aid resident or transient Japanese in need. On one occasion, an immigrant mother had been abandoned by her husband and was threatening suicide. Members stepped in to help straighten out her domestic and financial woes, and the story ended happily when the husband returned.

Not that Japanese usually need—or at least demand—much assistance. Though they once faced formal discrimination in America (it was once illegal for Asians to marry Caucasians in Missouri, for example), they have kept their resolve to prosper by self-reliance on alien soil.

Mrs. Lena Dennis, wife of a dean at Park College, made a study of the Japanese community several years ago that revealed some striking facts: "The Japanese don't go to agencies or even each other for help, as a rule. You don't find them on the welfare or juvenile court rolls. That would be a terrible loss of face. Japanese parents insist on extra work, accomplishment, competition and success."

Giles M. Fowler is a staff writer.