

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: HAJIME KUMAHATA
Interviewers: EMILY HUGHES AND JOCELYN MONROY
Date/ Time of Interview: APRIL 2, 2012 at 2:00PM
Transcribed by: EMILY HUGHES
Edited by: DANIEL NGO
Audio Track Time: 44:49 (minutes:seconds)

Background:

Hajime Kumahata was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1965. At the age of three, he moved to Kofu, Japan and resided there until his transfer to the United States at age seventeen. He first moved to Wisconsin in 1982 to complete his foreign exchange program, liking it so much that he continued his studies there until graduation. He eventually went to a small college in Missouri to complete his degree in Music. He decided to continue his degree and received a Masters in music from Baylor University. Other than small gigs, he was unable to find a substantial job in the music industry; thus, he went to Cornell University and received his masters in second-language education. He began teaching Japanese to English-speakers at Baylor and continued with that job for twelve years. In 2002, he joined the Rice University's language technology department and has worked as there ever since. Most of his family still lives in Japan or other countries in that area, but he is able to visit them once every couple of years. His parents have retired and live in Thailand, while his younger brother works in the hazardous material safety division of the Japanese military. He currently resides in Houston with his wife and two children.

Setting:

This interview focuses on various aspects of Mr. Kumahata's life, with emphases on family life, the first-generation immigration experience, education, and childhood memories of Japan. The attention of the interview is split between his past experiences in Japan and those of the United States.

The interview took place in the Faculty Development Lab of the Center of the Study of Languages at Rice University. Mr. Kumahata often works in this lab, along with the Language Lab that is in the same building. Because of certain scheduling conflicts, the interview was less than an hour (around 45 minutes); nonetheless, Mr. Kumahata was able to answer many key interview questions within this timeframe. There were little interruptions, thus the interview flowed smoothly. Mr. Kumahata was quite responsive and will be a great addition to the Houston Asian American Community Archive.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

Hajime Kumahata (**HK**)

Emily Hughes (**EH**)

EH: All right, my name is Emily Hughes, and I am interviewing Hajime Kumahata—is that correct? Okay. Um, first of all, basics: what’s your name? Where and when were you born? Um, where have you lived and where did you grow up? (laughs)

HK: Okay, my name is Hajime Kumahata. I was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1965. I moved to Kofu, Japan when I was, uh, almost three years old. I lived there until I was... seventeen, junior in high school. Uh, junior [year] in high school, I came to Wisconsin to do my foreign exchange for one year. I was a high school foreign exchange student, and I liked, uh, United States so much that I decided to come back for the second year, senior year. Uh, I liked it so much, I decided to move on to college in the United States, graduate school, uh, etc. Found job, found myself teaching Japanese language at Baylor University, I did that for twelve years. And then I was—I got an opportunity to work for Rice, so I moved to Houston, uh, [in] 2002.

EH: Oh that’s great. Where did you go to college?

HK: Went to a small, uh, small school in southwestern part of, uh, Missouri. Yes.

EH: For both levels, graduate school and...

HK: Graduate school I came down to Houston. For...I mean—I mean to Texas to do my graduate work. Yes.

EH: Did you like teaching Japanese?

HK: Oh very much.

EH: You decided to come here just...to try something new?

HK: Um...I did enjoy teaching Japanese a lot. Uh, the—mostly what I enjoyed the most was the, uh, interaction with the student[s].

[Paused interview—someone entered the room]

EH: Okay well going back to, um, I don’t know...

HK: Yeah, I really enjoyed, uh, teaching, especially with student interaction. In the language teaching you get to know your students so much. At Baylor we met 50 minutes every day, so we got to know them really well and I really enjoyed that. When I had opportunity to come down to Rice University, it was opportunity for me to be able to give my children better education.

EH: Oh okay.

HK: My children could go to Baylor University free because I was teaching there, but Rice University is a better institution, academically. So, I thought, if I would come to Rice, uh, my—my kids will have a better opportunity of, just an opportunity. They might not be able to get into Rice, but at least they have an opportunity to get in and get a good education. So, that's the reason I came down to Rice.

EH: Okay, and would you say that...how would you compare education in Japan to here, do you say?

HK: In Japan the education is so focused into getting into a college, uh, which, uh...in order to get into college you have to have, you have to pass the very rigorous entrance examination. Therefore, the focus really is in taking that entrance examination. Once you get into college, basically you can...a lot of people just party their four years, and, you know, don't do anything. However here is a little bit more different, that you do get into...there are exams to get into college, but once you get into college you get more challenged, which I think is a, uh, very good role, very good model.

EH: I guess going backwards in time here: what are some of your childhood memories, that you can think of, in Japan? Or some of your best/favorite ones?

HK: My favorite ones...when I was two years old, uh, there was a... my father was a, uh, was a minister, preacher. And then, so the...after church there was, the congregation was having a meeting. The...I overheard them conversing that they wanted, they wanted have lunch—have sushi for lunch—so I took it myself, felt that it was my duty to go downtown to go get sushi. And I was two years old, and I walked down from church to the uh, big street, get on the bus, on my own. And I assume I was following some adult and so that people thought that I was with that adult. I got on a bus, went downtown. Of course I didn't have any money, went downtown to buy some sushi, but I didn't know where to get off. So at the end of the bus line, um that the bus company found out that I was by myself, bus company called police, by [that] time my parents called the police, put two and two together, and I got to come home.

EH: I can't believe you remember that still! That's amazing. So you never got the sushi?
[jokingly]

HK: Never got the sushi, no. I recall back then the bus...there's a bus driver. And there's typically a lady that would sell ticket[s] inside the bus, or collect money. And so I do recall some interaction with that lady. It was a very pleasant experience.

EH: Did you have any brothers and sisters [living with you] growing up?

HK: I have a younger brother who is eleven years younger than I am. He came to us when I was fourteen. He came to us as a foster child. He was three. I was fourteen. So, I didn't have much interaction with him because I came here when I was sixteen or seventeen. So, you know, very little interaction. But he has come visit me, since, you know, while I was here. I go home, every

time I go home I get to have some [interaction] with him. It's a lot of fun. He now, he is a...he is in the military, in the army, and he is in the division of hazardous material safety. Therefore, soon as there was a problem with nuclear power plant, he was called in, and he was at the power plant trying to clean up the mess. He is back home now. One of his, one of his group[s] when he went in, when they go into the, um, to the area where, um, the nuclear building was getting too hot, they went out there to shoot some water to cool down the building, cool down the reaction. However, when they were just to get out of the vehicle to take care of it, the house, th—the surrounding, the building had exploded, and they were saying that a large piece of, uh, concrete would just fly off of the building, they'll come down and hit them. One got hurt pretty badly, the others got minor injuries.

EH: Wow.

HK: Yeah, so he was out there having fun. He... well I talked to him on the phone. He said that he was very proud that he was now contaminated. *[laughter]*

EH: Oh gosh, I can't believe he had to work in that though—that's terrifying. Has it made it—has that actually made it difficult to go back and visit? Like how often would you say you go back to visit?

HK: Oh, I would not go [inside], of course...there are like twenty kilometers around that nuclear power plant [that] you cannot go in.

EH: Right.

HK: But outside of that, I don't feel uncomfortable going. Yeah, um, my son and I are going to Japan this summer. My hometown is not near the power plant. However, it really just doesn't bother me at all.

EH: So, you would say you...do you go back once every couple of years? Or...it's probably hard to get to I suppose.

HK: When I was teaching, I was able to have more free time. You know, when we teach college we have summer off. So, I was able to go almost every year, but now as staff I don't get that much free time. So, uh, *[pauses to think]* every other year maybe? Yeah.

EH: And do you take your whole family with you?

HK: Not typically, not typically. No, like I said, this summer I'll be taking just my son. When I was teaching, because of more time flexibility, etc. I was able to take my family.

(time—00:09:34)

EH: How would you say it's changed since when you were growing up there? I'm sure it has changed a lot but...

HK: It has changed a lot. Um... [*pauses to think*] Japan is getting a lot more Westernized. That's not necessarily bad, that's not necessarily good. It's just different. Um... the traditional value of such as respecting elders is, um, is having less importance in society. When you're riding a bus, train, when you see older people you—you get up and let them sit down. That was how we grew up, but that's no longer... the trend—that if you're sitting down you have the right to sit. Yeah so, and most Japanese people are blaming that to the Western influence of the more of an independent, more freedom...that you can do whatever you wanna do. You have right to do whatever you wanna do. Don't have... Don't have to worry about other people.

EH: Is that just in the cities or is that in the [towns]—did you grow up in a small town?

HK: I did grow up in [a] small town.

EH: And it's changing there as well?

HK: It's changing there as well. My city only had about 200,000 people so, yeah. But especially in Tokyo it's really changing.

EH: Yeah, I... Yeah I bet.

HK: Another thing is changing is [that] we are having a lot more foreigners...which is, you know, good and bad. The good thing is that more diversity in the—in the country, and then diversity brings in the understanding of, you know, different culture and different people and the way different people think.

EH: And the bad?

HK: The bad. The people don't understand Japa—when they come to Japan they don't understand Japanese culture. Therefore, there are tensions. People who come to Japan sometimes...stay there, you know, illegally to, to, to commit crime, so we have to deal with these people. Um... Yeah.

(time—00:12:09)

EH: Um, would you say that, for your children—you have a son and a daughter correct?

HK: Yes.

EH:—Um, would you say that you're teaching them more Japanese values I guess? Like the respect that you were speaking of earlier?

HK: Yeah, I think so. As far as value goes, they are taught more of a...well not current Japanese values, but older Japanese values. Yeah. Not like World War II time of the values, but it's more of my time of values. Yeah.

EH: Right. And is your wife Japanese as well?

HK: No. My wife is, um, somebody from Texas.

EH: Oh. Was that ever, like, a cultural change?

HK: Not necessarily. Uh, my wife was very much interested in Japan since... as she was growing up. So, she was very much knowledgeable of Japan, and she was always open and eager to learn Japanese way of things -

EH:—Right. -

HK:—Japanese way of cooking, Japanese way of treating each other. Um... So yeah.

EH: And has she been back with you as well, to Japan?

HK: She goes to Japan, yeah, quite often.

EH: That's great. Hmm, let's see...can you describe the hometown where you grew up? Was it more of an urban neighborhood? You said it was a small town -

HK:—It is a small town, however, like I said two hundred thousand people, but it's crowded because, uh, because the landmass is not as large as [the] United States landmass. You got to, you got to recognize that Japan as a country, as a landmass, land is smaller than California, state of California. But the proportion is about a one half of the United States. So, you put a half of American people in California, plus then thirty percent of Japan is flat and seventy percent is mountain, so the most people live on the thirty percent of that land mass. So, it does get very crowded. So, my coun—my hometown itself [*unknown*] of people. It's... It's considered countryside in Japan, but it is crowded.

EH: Very crowded. So, does that mean you had a very close-knit community growing up?

HK: [*pause to think*] Yeah, I would say so, especially compared to the United States. What's important in Japan is that you make a community with, uh, with your neighborhood. The neighborhood community is very important. And we would have, uh, typically a, um, like sign-up sheet or notice board, a notice on these boards that you have to take from house to house, uh, to communicate what's happening in the community. Then you get to know, you know, you try to watch out for each other in the neighborhood. So...it's a little bit different. Of course, if you live in bigger city like Tokyo, in [an] apartment, etc., they don't even talk to each other [like] the neighborhoods. And those things are happening but, um, my area still... is small community. It's important that they talking to each other and watching out for each other is very important. Yeah.

EH: Did you guys ever do any, like, community activities or events that really stuck with you?

HK: Community ev...ahh because of the... the religion, the festival is very important, uh, event once a year.

EH: What was the religion? I'm sorry [to interrupt].

HK: That festival was, I believe it was a Buddhist temple festival. There are some Japanese religions. You have Shinto religion, and there's Buddhist religion, and there's Christianity, and Christianity's the smallest. The Buddhist...most Japanese people will tend to believe in both Buddhism and Shintoism, and believing that Buddhism is the religion for the dead and Shintoism is for the religion for the alive. So, once you die you sort of become Buddhist person, you go to heaven. As you... As you live you get like a wedding ceremony or... or bringing children to get blessed, stuff like that, will have take place in Shinto shrines. So it's a little bit different. But anyway, so the, uh, our community, we would have festival, they had the Buddhist temple, and they will have different stores, some—some big Shinto shrines, they would have, uh, the theater called noh theater, N-O-H. Noh theater, and they would use those the—theatrical, um, event to, you know, to bless god or whatever [unknown]

EH: Oh, so it was like a play or a musical type thing?

HK: Play...play and musical, yeah. Something like that, something like that. Very subtle. Here in the United States if you think of a play or a musical, you think of something fancy and extravagant. But those are really quiet, subtle plays. Yeah, yeah. Other community things, or something like them, growing up, uh, each—each this, uh, ...what do you call them [*Japanese word/phrase*], the local, local group, section of the city, would have children of my age and they will create something like a baseball team, and each section of city will play against each other. Um, and, uh, those are fun memories.

EH: Do they still have them at all?

HK: I don't know. I wish that it's still going on.

(time—00:18:19)

EH: Yeah that would be great. Let's see. What about your family: are your parents still in Japan...?

HK: No, they're not. My parents have moved on to Thailand. They live in Chiang Mai, Thailand because of the cost of living is very expensive in Japan. They feel that even, even counting the traveling between Japan and Thailand, back and forth, once in a while, it's cheaper for them to live and they can live better in Thailand. So, they've moved to Thailand, and they have retirement visa and bought an apartment, a condominium, and they are having good time.

EH: Have you visited them there?

HK: I have visited them once in—at there, apartment because... this is long story now... but my parents were living in Australia for a while, and then after there, retirement. They asked me

the question of, you know, what do I think about living in Australia and Thailand, and my main concern was their, uh, medical care because they are getting older. I felt that Australia would probably have a better medical care, but my parents thought that probably Thailand is cheaper to live. So, they moved on to Thailand. One day my father took the medicine, the new medicine that was prescribed to him to lower his blood pressure. It lowered blood pressure, but it went too low so he passed out, hit his head on the wall, broke his neck...so, um, so I had to fly to Thailand to take care of [a] few things.

EH: Oh my gosh. Is he okay?

HK: Yeah, he's somewhat paralyzed, but he's okay.

EH: Oh god...okay good.

HK: So yeah, the medical things I'm still not convinced that Thailand is the best place to retire.

EH: Right. What about the medical care in Japan compared to, like, America would you say?

HK: Compared to America...it may not be as advanced as United States, but it is one of the most advanced medical care in the world.

EH: Right, that's what I figured.

HK: Yeah, you know. Uh, and our—a lot of Japanese people still come to the United States to do some of the research, or to learn the new procedures and stuff like that. Yeah. We have a lot of Japanese here in Houston with the medical, uh, doing medical research, medical training, because of the Houst—Texas Medical Center, that there are a lot of Japanese here doing that. Yeah, the medical practice is pretty good in Japan. So, I wouldn't feel un[comfortable]...I will feel comfortable living in Japan.

EH: Do you think you would ever do that? Do you think you would ever go back?

HK: I don't know. I don't know, I am still a citizen of Japan, so I can go back any time I want. Because I'm citizen it makes easy for my family to come with me to live in Japan. That's one of the reasons why I'm still hanging on to my Japanese citizenship instead of becoming an American citizen, because we do not recognize the dual citizenship like other country[ies] does with its dual citizenship.

EH: Oh, Japan doesn't recognize it.

HK: Japan does not.

EH: Oh, I see.

HK: Yeah, yeah. [pause] But...so yeah, my parents now live in Thailand, but they come back to Japan once in a while. So, this summer they're coming back and my son and I are going this summer.

EH: Have they ever visited you here?

HK: Yes, once in a while. Uh, but they...they don't find [the] United States that exciting. So, they come to visit once in a while. They think the United States too expensive, so they don't... So they don't like to come.

EH: That's fair [laughter]. Even more so than Japan?

HK: I would say it's almost compatible. America. The United States and Japan are about the same, but they feel—they want to go to more of a third world country so that, you know, they can use their...they feel that they can use their money wisely.

EH: Right. Do they have any, like, qualms about, I don't know, the way people act compared to how people act in Japan, or, like, surrounding communities—like, was there big differences that they've noticed or that you've noticed?

HK: What communities?

EH: Japan and America, like when they came to visit and through your own experience.

HK: I don't think so. They have had some American friends, uh, before and I think they all treated them well. So, I don't think there's any problems that...I certainly haven't had much racism here in the United States, and in fact if anybody asks me if I have any problems racism, I really don't think I have had much problems with racism at all.

EH: And when you first moved here, did you know English really well?

HK: No. Well...no.

EH: Oh -

HK:—Uh, when I moved I was seventeen, I did have, uh, English courses, of course. In Japan you have to take English from seventh grade, yeah—seven, eight, nine, ten—so I had four years of English, but mostly it's writing and reading. So not much speaking. So, what hap... What happened here is [that] I come to United States, I can't really hear. My listening comprehension was poor, my speaking was poor, so I di—I cried probably first week or so every night because it was very difficult, could not believe that there was a country that I could not communicate, you know? But it went on, and I lived with a host family—very good family. They had young children so we watched Sesame Street together and learned English together, and that was very helpful for me. And so, we acquired English together. And, uh, I stayed in the same family for two years.

EH: So, assimilating was never really difficult for you? Uh, I mean, besides language barrier of course, but –

HK:—Well language barrier, you know, after three months or so, gotten really comfortable. After six months, it was really doing well. Yeah. Other than that, I really haven't had much problem.

EH: What about—are your children learning Japanese?

HK: My son when I...when he was born I was only speaking Japanese to him. And this lasted for about three years or so. And then we started having foster par—foster children of our own, and in those situations I tend to speak more English to the foster children. So, at that time, you know, I started speaking to him less Japanese. And then... out of that foster children, the one that we got to keep to come to Houston was my daughter. So, we got to adopt a daughter out of the foster kids.

EH: So, they... they have studied it a bit, but not nothing –

HK:—Nothing formal. You know, nothing serious, but we do talk a little bit in Japanese. We eat a lot of Japanese food. Just this weekend we were at the Japan festival here at the Hermann Park, and just hang out and enjoy Japanese culture, enjoy Japanese food...you know, stuff like that.

(time—00:27:05)

EH: What about education—what did you study in school? Or what did you prefer to study in school? In college, I'm sorry.

HK: College, okay. So, uh, college... my undergraduate degree is in Music.

EH: Oh, really? -

HK: And I play the contrabass. And I played with, uh... played with Springfield Symphony Orchestra as an undergraduate student. It's in Springfield, Missouri. And learned a lot from them. Giggled a lot in Branson, Missouri, which is a country music, like, uh, capital of the United States. Played some bluegrass and other things, musical theaters, stuff like that in Branson, Missouri. That's how I did my living in undergraduate years. Came down to, uh... came down to Baylor University, actually as a graduate student.

EH: In music?

HK: In music. I got my composition degree. And then after that, uh, couldn't find a job, couldn't find...yeah anyway, so I went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and studied teaching Japanese to, uh... non-Japanese speakers, to English speakers. Then after that I started teaching, and came back to Baylor, taught the Intro to Japanese after that.

EH: Oh, that's great. How did you end up switching to here? Did you just apply to the –

HK:—Here?

EH: Yeah, at Rice. Because that is a pretty different style of work there.

HK: Yes, yes. It was the most, that was probably one of my biggest decisions that I had to make, and it turned out to be really good. Um...since I started teaching at Baylor, my research was focused in teaching foreign language with technology. So, we did a lot of things. The Internet was just... just coming on, coming along back then, and so we, you know, we did a lot of things with the Internet, did online text chat with students in Japan, with some video... video conferencing in Japan, we create video content and do a video letter exchange—so, they send us a letter and we send them a letter—and then do the email exchange...you know, stuff like that. And so, I started doing a lot of conference presentations, um, at the, uh, different conferences. And then there was a Rice employee, who was in language, the field of language technology, and she found me at one of the conference. And she encouraged me to apply at Rice because my previous position was open, so that's how I applied to Rice University. So, I'm here now.

EH: Yeah, and you like it a lot still?

HK: I like it a lot, yes. One of the best decisions I made in my life, I think.

EH: That's great. Um, now what about—what about your parents? What did they do, um, occupation-wise?

HK: My father was the, was a, uh, Christian pastor –

EH:—Oh yes, you said that. Minister.

HK: And my mother was a school teacher. She specialized [in] special ed teacher. And she was, she taught for a while, then she was an administrator for a while before she, uh, she retired. Now they retired, probably retired a good ten years now.

EH: Mhmm. And they enjoy Thailand you said?

HK: They enjoy it a lot, yes, yes.

EH: Was learning, switching languages like that hard for them?

HK: I don't think they speak much Thai anyway.

EH: Right, I figured that would be a hard transition.

HK: My father speaks some English. My mother speaks little less, but she can get away with, you know, get around. But I don't know how much Thai they speak. So... but there is a pretty

good amount of Japanese population in the city of Chiang Mai, so I think they have pretty good Japanese community.

EH: Oh okay, and why do you think they all moved to there?

HK: Oh, I don't know. I'm sure some of them are retiring [or] retired people. But other, they just move there for one reason or another, I don't know.

EH: Right, I was just wondering if there was an immigration patter there or something.

HK: No there isn't an immigration pattern there. Not like the late 1800s early 1900s in like Hawaii or South America when there were huge amounts of Japanese farmers that [unknown] and settled. Nothing like that.

EH: Okay, I was just curious. Alright, let's see... um... how are holidays traditionally celebrated in your family? Is there any particular Japanese holidays you still celebrate? Or...

HK: I think the biggest holiday really is the New Year's Day, and, uh, New Year's Day. The three days of the New Year, and that's the equivalent to me is Chri—Christmas here in the United States. That's the time to get together with the family, it's family time. So throu—for three days of the New Year's...so for example, my situation would be I would go to my grandparents' house, or at least I'll get together with my par... my uncles and aunts. That was the only time that we would get together—so I would only see him—them once a year or so.

EH: Oh, and this was back when you were in Japan or is it currently too?

HK: Back in Japan, yeah. So, that's... New Years is the biggest time, as... growing up we [had] a tradition that kids get money from adult[s]. So more adult I see, like aunt[s] and uncles, more money I make. In re—but on the other side of the coin, that I didn't know, is that more aunt and uncle I see, which means that I see cousins, which means my parents seeing cousins—so they have to give their money.

EH: [laughter] It's a cycle.

HK: It is a cycle, vicious cycle. So, I'm raking in good money, but my parents are losing a lot of money. Yeah. So, what's the difference between them giving to money to them, or maybe we just don't even go see them but then they don't give me money. So...

EH: Now do you still do that here at all? Or...

HK: Yeah here, with my children, I give my children money on New Year's Day.

EH: Do you have any extended family around? Did anyone else move to America with you?

HK: No, we don't have any family here. Yeah, we don't so, really, we don't. And we don't go back New Year's time to Japan...so we don't have to do the money exchange. [laughter]

EH: [*laughter*] Probably really stressful at this point, with all the generations and stuff.

HK: So yeah New Years is different...and the food, the celebration food—New Year's celebration food, is very special—it's a once a year thing. Therefore, it's something that just... you know, you will remember the rest of your life. These foods that you grow up [with], and special food that you get to eat once a year.

EH: Do you remember anything in particular?

HK: Oh, definitely, definitely. Some of the, what we call the mochi, which is the pounded sweet rice, is very special for those days. You—you can bake it or you can put it in soup. Um, just many different ways of eating it. And the... people try to make food that would last, they'd put it in these three layers—like not Tupperware, but wooden... wooden nice container—and the ladies make enough food so that it will last typically three days.

EH: Oh right -

HK:—Because three days is, you know, the celebration. So, try not to eat everything in first day, but try to... to last three, uh, three days. So, they will typically make something that has enough flavor, but at the same time something that doesn't spoil immediately.

(time—00:36:01)

EH: Right. And you guys still make those types of food during New Year?

HK: Yeah, we do, we do -

EH:—Or at least some of it. -

HK: Well my wife at least she tries, and she tries—she pretends that she's making them, [*chuckles*] so I really appreciate that. And, uh, we do pound those rice, uh, rice... rice cakes at home, and I pound them and my kids get, you know, portion of it. And I will do that every Christ—at every New Years.

EH: Well that's great. That's very cool. Um, this is kind of a personal question, because I've always wondered: how is the Japanese food here in comparison to actual Japanese food? [*laughter*]

HK: Very good question. There are some restaurants that are not bad. For example, Kubo's here in Rice Village is very good. I've always been impressed because I think, because the owner is Japanese guy. Uh, so he... really, he grew up—actually he comes from my home town. So, we... we have same... same flavor taste buds, uh, that we grew up in. So that, um... they tend to be a lot more authentic. However, there are a lot of restaurants here that other Asians own and call it Japanese restaurant, which is... which is okay, and they, you know, they try to make it—or they make it to a fusion, Asian fusion type of food. And you know, it has its own creative flavor to it, and, you know, that's okay. But, um... there are some good home cooked...there's one more place, home cooked one—Genji on Westheimer. It's a sort of

pseudo bar slash restaurant. There... Kubo tends to be more fashion—fashionable place to go out to eat. -

EH:—Yeah, it's pretty high-tech. -

HK:—Genji seems to be more of a down to earth, dirty bar. You know. Not dirty as in –

EH:—No, I know [*laughter*] –

HK:—dirty as in not clean.

EH: A more home feel.

HK: More home yes, yes. But very good food.

EH: Is there variation within Japan itself, of like the different types of foods, because Japan is—as you said—a pretty condensed area.

HK: Yeah, yeah—especially the eastern half and western half has a very distinct not only food culture, but language as well. So, Tokyo area is—Tokyo is a large city in eastern half and Osaka is a large city in western half. The language intonation, tone, is somewhat different. The Tokyo language, we call it, is a standard language, and western accent [is] western accent—that's fine. Western Japan has better food than eastern Japan, and the flavor is a little bit different also. The western food tends to be more subtle, more... less salty—eastern Japan being a lot saltier.

EH: Oh, interesting.

HK: But Japanese food, as far as Japanese food goes, we tend to eat something that is very natural or...for example, something coming out of the sea, something that's coming out of the field—but during that season. Right? So, seasonal food is very important. So, we—we feel that the best flavor of that particular vegetable is this season. I mean nowadays you have this... a house, the plastic house, what do you call the...not sun house, solar house –

EH:—Oh, greenhouse?

HK: Greenhouse! Greenhouse, yeah. So now you can have tomato for twenty-four, I mean twelve month out of the year—but, you know, when those are grown in natural time, that's when Japanese find it most flavorful. And we still choo—we still hang on to that idea, and we still enjoy that flavor, when it's the best flavor of this vegetable. And, you know, still, uh, something like, uh, one week...expressing, uh, in our language, that when we use this particular vegetable, we're talking about that season. -

EH:—As well, like when you talk about it...

HK:—Yeah, so the vegetable becomes the seasonal word in all of the conversation -

EH:—Oh! Interesting. -

HK:—So if you say tomato that's... we're talking about summer. Or we talk about watermelon, we're talking about summer. We talk about some squash, we're talking about winter...yeah, stuff like that.

EH: That's interesting.

HK: And the same thing with sea... seafood, also.

EH: Was that hard coming here, then, in high school? That's quite a change of food intake.

HK: Yes and no. I di—I do miss a lot of Japanese food, but there are a lot of American food—there are a lot of interesting American food[s] as well.

EH: That's true.

HK: I always seek for something interesting. For example, the, uh... every year in Texas, second weekend of March in Sweetwater, Texas is the Rattlesnake Roundup. So, you go to Sweetwater, Texas and you get to have fried snake.

EH: Oh! [*surprised laughter*]

HK: And those are the things that I'm always looking for, just different culture –

EH:—It is, it's true. –

HK:—and learning the culture through your tongue. I think that's very important.

EH: Very cool.

HK: So, you know... so I'm always looking for different flavor and different region, and what... what people eat, yeah. So, it really keeps me entertained here in United States. Like up in, uh, Wisconsin, where I lived first two years, they would eat steak tartar—which is, uh, like a ground meat, but it's raw, yeah, with the... the quail egg on top. It's very good!

EH: Really? [*laughter*] I'll have to try it.

HK: Steak tartar and what else...some fish out of the, uh, Great Lake, Lake Michigan—stuff like tha—just local flavors. They would have—the church guys will have this fundraising called smelt fries, that they have small fish called smelt. That's...actually, the season is winter, so they have, during wintertime they deep-fry these fish, and you sell it to the church and their fundraising, and very good flavor. Stuff like that, you know.

EH: Yeah, that's a good idea, I should actually do that more too—trying new things...I guess we have to wrap up kind of, so one last question: um... going back to Japan—like after, essentially,

you moved here—did you ever get any sentiment from the locals that, I don't know, that you were different now that you didn't live there? Or was there any, like, judgment from them at all?

HK: Not necessarily towards me, no. Well, even if there were, they wouldn't have come out and told me. Uh, however, when I take my—last time I took my wife, we were walking down the street and near our house, and this...because my home town doesn't have too many foreigners, this person came out just to look at my wife. She had apron on with potato in one hand, potato peeler in the other hand, and she just came out and just look[ed] at her. You know? Those things—those really funny, but...really Japanese people would not come out and just, face to face, and say 'Hey...'.

EH: Right, so you've never felt uncomfortable at all going back?

HK: Just, that's...no I don't feel uncomfortable. And you know, that's when the ignorance is really a blessing. Then, of course, now I have a lot of American ideas that, you know, 'I don't care what other people think'. You know? Right, so... yeah.

EH: That's interesting...well thank you so much for doing this-

HK:—You're welcome. -

EH:—I really appreciate it -

HK:—I hope this will be useful for you guys.

EH: Yes, it will.

(end of interview, time 44:49)

