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Interviewee: Hajime Jim Kumahata

Interviewer: John (Jun Xin) Chen

Date/Time of Interview: Tuesday, March 26, 2013, at 9 AM

Transcribed by: John Chen

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/25/2017)

Audio Track Time: 1:08:56 (Hours, Minutes, Seconds)

**Background:**

Hajime Jim Kumahata was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1965. He grew up in a small town called Kofu, where he attended elementary, junior high, and the first two years of high school. Jim grew up in a family of four, and lived a typical Japanese teenage life. After his father encouraged him to study abroad, he became an exchange student and studied at Suring High School in Wisconsin. There, he lived with a host family, experienced American culture, and having gone back to Japan again, he decided to come back to the U.S. He got his music degree in Missouri, and later obtained his Masters in Linguistics at Cornell University. Jim had taught Japanese at Baylor University at Waco, Texas, for twelve years before he became part of the technology staff at Rice Center of Language. He is married to an American wife, and his son is a junior in high school. Jim still visits Japan from time to time, as he still holds onto his Japanese citizenship. He currently resides in a suburban neighborhood in downtown Houston.

**Setting:**

This interview centers on various aspects of Jim's life. Several emphasized aspects include his experiences in Kofu as a teenager, his perspective on Japanese education, and his practice of Kyudo, the Japanese art of arrow shooting.

The interview was conducted in Jim's office in the Faculty Development Lab of the Center of the Study of Languages at Rice University. The interview also emphasized on aspects of labor and capital, in which Jim explained his transition from Waco to Houston, and his eventual decision to forgo his teaching position at Baylor University and became a faculty staff here at Rice. The interview was recorded on a recorder from the Digital Media Center and from an iPhone. Jim articulated his experiences well and his response will be a great historical addition to our archives.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

|          |                                    |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| JC       | John Chen                          |
| HK       | Hajime Kumahata                    |
| ...      | Speech trails off; pause           |
| Italics  | Emphasis                           |
| (?)      | Preceding word may not be accurate |
| Brackets | Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)      |

**JC:** Okay, so this is going to be very informal, so it's a conversation.

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**HK:** Okay, sounds good.

**JC:** So I did a lot of research into your background.

**HK:** Okay.

**JC:** Since you returned this (background application) to me so quickly, I had enough time to do everything.

**HK:** Good.

**JC:** Yeah. So you grew up in Fukuoka, Japan?

**HK:** Well, that's where I was born. I grew up in Kofu, Japan, K-O-F-U, just outside of Tokyo about an hour and a half by train. Fukuoka is a bit down south from Kofu. So yeah, Kofu was where I grew up, born in Fukuoka.

**JC:** What was it like?

**HK:** What was it like...Kofu is a very beautiful place surrounded by mountains. Uh I grew up looking at Mount Fuji, everyday and uh the seasons, the four seasons of Mount Fuji were quite uh...the most...most, most impressive one is the winter time, you wake up with white top of the Mount Fuji that I can see from my own room and that was, that was a nice way to wake up every day.

**JC:** Were there like sakura trees around?

**HK:** Of course, sakura trees, especially right now, this season, is very big, you know, sakura, cherry blossom viewing time and uh yeah, um not only that, this is the uh end, and the beginning and end of the school year. Uh the end of March is the end of the school year, and the beginning of April is the beginning of the school year. So uh cherry blossom has the, the corresponding meaning of that either you're graduating or you're starting a new life, yeah.

**JC:** Yeah, it's like uh I have seen from watching TV shows the cherry blossoms, the wind blowing, the petals flying, that was beautiful. Um so you talked about looking out the window, seeing Mount Fuji every day. What were some memorable childhood memories?

**HK:** Memorable childhood memories...uh really related to the Mount Fuji, when I wake up and of course in Japan back then, this is back in the late 60s or early 70s, uh we did not central heat or central air. Therefore, you wake up, your house is probably 2, 3 Celsius, when you wake up, um you know inside the house. So I see a beautiful mountain, but I don't want to get out of the bed, because it's very cold. So I would wait for my mother to turn on the space heater downstairs and then uh as soon the room is somewhat warm, my mother would call me down to the living room, that was the only place we had space heater, so I would go down there to the living room and change my cloths, uh etcetera. So that's, that's something related to Mount Fuji in winter time, but you know, uh something like that, other childhood memories...public schools, we had a lot of good times with friends, yeah, um um playing baseball, playing soccer, um uh just hanging out with friends, um you know, innocent good times in elementary childhood, um riding bicycle around, falling, getting hurt, getting hit by a car. Um you know those crazy things. You know, many years ago. [laughs]

**JC:** Yeah, regarding the winter, did you have a table where you had to tug your legs under?

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**HK:** Right, kotatsu table, where um our house was rather old, uh built in 19...right after the war, so it was built in late 40s, so it had um...it had like a mud wall, and it was just a real old-styled Japanese house. Then you have tatami - tatami mat on the floor, then when, back then, electricity was not abundant back in the 40s or early 50s, therefore, what they do is they put hot coal and ground level of that kotatsu table, so what happens, you know in Japan, you go up a about this far up, a foot long, a foot or so, just for the sake of the recording, one foot or so, so you go up from the ground inside the house, you take your shoes off, and you go up to the inside level, okay. So tatami is about a foot up from the ground level. So when you remove part of the tatami, the square part, then it's indented about a foot or so down. Then you put hot coal down in the indent, and cover with the table and blanket, then you have nice warm kotatsu table. Um we did that 'til probably seventy, probably seventy, early seventy, 72, 73, until then, then we bought electric kotatsu, so we didn't have to do the trouble of making coal and bring it in. But then now, we have just uh plug-in electricity, and then you have hot kotatsu, nice, more comfortable. More convenient, um yeah, it's—you know starting with the electronic, electric, generation; the new generation - electricity become abundant.

**JC:** That's what uh they use in most of Japanese households now, right?

**HK:** It's very common, and I don't know any household that doesn't have a kotatsu table. Yeah. That's where families get together, and that's where family spend time together, and it's a small table so um it brings family closer.

**JC:** It's very intimate.

**HK:** Intimate, yeah, space, space thing. Exactly, we were really close and yeah, therefore, the family, and of course the house itself is pretty small, so you don't want to have large furniture. You know, have small furniture.

**JC:** I think the small house actually adds to the intimate atmosphere.

**HK:** It does, it does.

**JC:** Can you tell me more about Japanese education; [**HK:** Japanese education. Certainly.] you went to middle school there right?

**HK:** Sure. Um Japanese education still to this date six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, three years of high school, and four years of college. That's very common and then the uh... what requires for Japanese students to finish is the elementary school, and junior high. Students are not required to go on to high school and college. However, 98, 99% of students do go on to high school, beyond that, nowadays, more than 50% of...I don't know statistics, but many students goes on to college. Now, um of course before elementary school, you have kindergarten, et cetera, et cetera. But they are not required. I did go to one year of kindergarten and then um after that, I went to typical public uh elementary school. Uh like I said, school starts in April, ends in March. Uh back when I was a student, we went 6 days a week, Saturday we went uh until noon, and then we got to come home. So Saturday afternoon and Sunday we had off. Um probably late 80s, maybe early 90s, no late 80s, they changed to the uh five days a week. Um other than that, something noticeable about Japanese education is that um each school may have entrance exam. Typical life is that you go to an elementary school and junior high, and beyond that, you have to take an entrance exam to go on a high school. So if you do academically well, you go on to higher-level uh academic high level. If you don't do academic well in junior high, you typically go to a commercial, business high school, to get some skills, sometimes, [**JC:** Vocational.] vocational, some will go to industrial high school to get you know vocational training, some students will go to farming, agricultural high school, for that, those reasons. Typically, if you go to the vocational schools, after high school, you get a job. If you go to academic school, then you just go to college. So, so early on really when you go into high school, a lot of times your future gets determined. So, but nowadays, if you look at it backwards, in

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order for you to get into good high school, you need to have good middle school education, so now a lot of people go to private middle school which are known for very rigorous academic activities to - so that that becomes competitive so everybody wants to—everybody takes this entrance exams to those middle schools. All right. So in order to get to a middle school, you have to go to a good elementary school. Then kids—some kids have entrance exams to elementary schools. So this just goes- yeah it goes crazy.

**JC:** How was your academic...?

**HK:** Mine was... I would say average. I went to typical elementary school, public elementary school, public junior high, at the time, I think I guess I was in the third year of my middle school took the uh entrance exam to typical, typical public senior high school where most people go on to college so um took that, luckily I got accepted and uh - so went to high school. Then I went to this particular high school for a year, one year, and about uh four months or so before I came to United States as an exchange student. So, I came to the United States as an exchange student and back then I did one year public exchange, first plan was I do one year of exchange um of um exchange, then I go back start where I left off, [**JC:** Second year.] second year, yeah. Second year, second term. Uh so, what I mean is that American education did not count towards Japanese. Yeah I did not want to do that. Number one I did not want to go back to my old high school with my you know, completely new class. Number two, I realized, United States, I just decided to come back for the second year of high school to graduate. At the time, in my high school, this is very typical, that you can only be absent from high school for only one year. You cannot be absent for two years. So if I wanted to be absent for two years, I had to quit high school so yeah so I went to the principal's office to turn in my resignation from the uh high school. So academically in Japan, I am a high school dropout. Um but um...like I said the uh entrance to the uh high school was not easy, but entrance exam to college is very difficult, and that really determines your future if you are academically inclined. Um some of my friends got into very good universities; some of my friends couldn't get into the universities they wanted to get in. So what happens is that if they don't get in to the high- the college they want to go to, they wait another year then try again. [**JC:** Study.] Yeah. So we call them 'masterless samurai' during that period. You graduate from high school, you don't have a job, but you study, study, study entire year, then you retry for the uh to, to retry to get into college you wanted to go on to. And some people do this for like five years.

**JC:** Wow. So it should be very competitive.

**HK:** It is, and it used to be. Less - it's getting less and less competitive because the population of children is quite bit declining so we used to have...during my generation, it was *very* competitive. After our generation, it's getting less and less competitive and then you know the top tier university was the most competitive ones and then you got second tier and third tier et cetera alright. But the bottom of the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier universities are now...can't find any students to attend, so they are closing the door, they're actually going out of business. Some of the universities towards the end of the third tier uh universities, because they didn't have - if you don't have certain number of students, you don't get assistance from the ministry of education. There are a lot of money going to college from ministry of education. But you have to have so many students. Therefore, some colleges would hire, not hire, would count city employees as students actually they would let city employees come take courses at college for free so that they can have the money from ministry of education. And still they struggle, and end up closing the doors. It's just getting worse and worse now, the population in Japan is declining quite a bit, so um I'm a bit concerned. So that's where education is right now. Uh education - stories...junior high school...um you typically become uh - many kids get very active with club activities. Uh some clubs are athletic clubs, some clubs more of uh are art-oriented clubs. So here in the U.S. you would have football season, track season, basketball season. In Japan, if you belong to the baseball team, you do that for an entire year, you don't go from sport to sport, you just dedicate on that one sport and then you dedicate yourself for three years, three entire school years, um and um baseball teams are the most rigorous um club activities and they would you know sometimes go to school six o'clock in the morning and run and morning practice, and evening practice, you, you do it until it's dark and um you do this all year around.

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**JC:** Were you in the baseball team?

**HK:** I was not in the baseball team, uh let's see, I was, uh I was first year of my middle school, I was in table tennis, ping-pong, table tennis team. And that was okay. Second year, they newly created a Japanese uh archery called Kyudo. Uh you probably heard like jyudo, karate, those martial arts, there's an archery called kyudo, K-Y-U-D-O. Kyudo. Yeah. And uh - so they created this team so I joined the uh kyudo team and uh so that was my second year in middle school and third year of middle school uh I became a captain of the kyudo team and we had a lot of good times. We did a lot of uh physical conditioning, uh a lot of practice, uh a lot of za-zen which is you fold your um knee down and you sit on the floor you know, with your back straight and put your hand on your thigh and you close your eyes and what we tried uh what we tried was to thinking nothing, emptiness. [**JC:** Zen.] Instead of, it is difficult to think nothing, you sit there, and you - your mind is completely blank, void, and the way - the belief is that when you have the void or blank, all you see is the target, alright. So your physical motion is muscle memory. Mental- mentally you only see the target but then uh then you know the muscle memory releases the arrow and hits the target. So that, that was the idea. At the same time, the—from, from having nothingness in your mind, you don't get distracted [**JC:** Right.] from around you, because you don't hear anything; you are completely within yourself and all, all you see is the target. Uh then you're not—you, you as a person who's releasing the arrow, you are not hitting the target, you are letting the arrow hit the target. You are guiding the arrow; you're not releasing the arrow. You're even not guiding it; you're letting the arrow go where it's supposed to go to. You know, it's rather, rather philosophical. That was the point. So we do a lot of training, in this uh you know, sit, close your eyes, and think nothing, yeah we do that like 30 minutes at a time.

**JC:** Can you still do it? Right now?

**HK:** Oh no, no, this is how long ago, no no no no, there's no way I can do that now. I mean, I can probably go up there and still shoot arrow and hit you know, hit the target, but nothing like try to go into a trance, where you know you feel like nothing but void. I don't think I could do that. Yeah. I think it takes training.

**JC:** It does.

**HK:** Yeah.

**JC:** And after that, you immigrated to—you, you were an exchange student, here?

**HK:** Exchange student yeah.

**JC:** Which high school did you go to?

**HK:** I went to a high school called Suring High School. S-U-R-I-N-G. Suring High School. It is in a small town uh in Wisconsin and um you know, I went from a population of 200,000 people from my hometown, Kofu, to this small town population of 581.

**JC:** 200,000 to 581.

**HK:** Yes.

**JC:** Wow.

**HK:** Yes, it's a small farming uh dairy, dairy farming um uh place. And my graduating class had 60 students.

**JC:** Wow.

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**HK:** Yeah that was one of the largest that they had. So. It was a lot of fun. Came to, came to Suring, uh did you know, did some music, did a lot of athletics, was uh everybody—just, just enjoying American life. You know, just experience what American students experience. You know?

**JC:** What was your first impression when you came to the high school, the only Asian Kid?

**HK:** Only Asian kid, only minority, everybody was white. [**JC:** Was white. Yeah.] No black, no Hispanic, I was the only non-white and uh you know it was fun. My first impression was that everybody was so friendly. That was my first impression. Um they would yell at me from the hallway, you know, there were some kids who love to be loud and be noticeable, alright, so those kids would down the hallway, and just yell at my name and be loud and obnoxious. And I took it as more of a friendly gesture and made a lot of good friends. Uh I'm involved with some athletics, and involved with some music. Language was difficult. First, first week, I couldn't speak any. I could read and write a bit. But uh speaking, listening and speaking training in Japan is minimal. [**JC:** From middle school?] Yeah. I took English from middle school, so 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, so I had four years of Japanese English training in Japan but I could not, I could not understand what I am hearing, and I could not speak anything uh and the read and write I could a little bit. It tells you the English level back then in Japan...many teachers could not speak [**JC:** Really?], they could not speak English, and they could read or write. But they could not speak. So we didn't do the speaking practice because our teachers couldn't.

**JC:** Oh okay.

**HK:** Um. Anyway, back to, back to Suring, yeah the first week, I cried every night, because just couldn't understand, couldn't communicate. It got better, little by little, by third month or so, I was doing much better, you know catching up on a lot of words. I think the key was really making friends and even though I didn't have good English command but we just hanged out and laughed and you know just do physical funny things, you know, make music together, uh play athletics together, those things they are just beyond language, I think.

**JC:** Where did you live, by yourself or-?

**HK:** I lived with a host family. The host family had four kids. Oldest was probably 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and elementary school, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 1<sup>st</sup> grade, then they had 3 month - 3 year old, and they had six-month old. So three-month old, six-month old, we always watched Sesame Street together after school. You know so three of us we learned English together. [**JC:** That's great.] You know yeah. Well that was a lot of fun. The whole family would take us to different places, and experience, experience different American cultures. Um typically those northern cultures, uh Germans, so there were some German background things, some Swedish, some Swedish background things, I got to do that. Things I wouldn't do here in Texas you know I got to do in Texas. It was a lot of fun, a lot of fun. Got to experience some dairy farming, some of my friends are farmers. Um um I never got to milk a cow but uh they produced good cheese. And uh yeah it was a lot of fun up there.

**JC:** Did you get used to the American food?

**HK:** Immediately. Immediately. Of course, American food is pretty popular in Japan. So—the um getting used to American food was not difficult. What was difficult was I'm missing Amer-Japanese food,

**JC:** Which they don't have—they didn't have in Wisconsin.

**HK:** Yeah. What we find in grocery store, as frozen food, as Japanese food, what they labeled as Japanese food is nothing like Japanese. Their American concept of American food, which they think that would taste good to American consumers, right, so has nothing like Japanese food. So yeah, I did miss uh quite a bit of

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uh...Japanese food. But getting used to American food, eh American food is pretty simple. And my host mom didn't cook much. She's, she's a bad cook, number one, number two; she did not like to cook. So we had a lot of stuff like, you - she would boil noodles, put butter salt on it, and have side salad, and that was dinner. Uh lunch was typically a bologna sandwich, cold cuts, sandwich so just bread, mayonnaise, and mustard, cold cut, that's it—that was lunch, very simple. Breakfast was cereal or toast. So uh it's a lot less involved as far as food goes to me. Japanese people like to eat elaborate stuff (?). Every meal we'd like have rice, every 3 meals, we have to have rice. But here you know, American food, I got used to it quite bit - quickly. But I did miss Japanese food quite a bit.

**JC:** Did uh did you the whole family or your American friends about Japanese culture?

**HK:** Yeah. Japanese culture, I did. I was not a, I was not a cook and as a high school kid you don't cook that much. So I didn't know how to cook. Um so I, I taught them as far as cooking goes I taught them as much as I knew. But other than that, I brought some stuff that I'm going to need from Japan. Such as - one thing that I felt, I felt that was needed was the ear cleaner; that we have a special ear cleaners in Japan. [inaudible] to everybody. Other cultures, um what did I do—um you know I would bring a book, then they get a kick out of it because they are written, written backwards because Japanese books, I don't have any but uh Japanese books you uh - it's written vertically, and when it's written vertically when you read from right to left, [**JC:** Yes.] so the books open backwards like a manga book, [**JC:** A manga book: right to left] exactly, exactly. Opens backwards. Some, some people get a kick out of, you know, looking at my book. Um music, uh you know, I brought a lot of music with me. And they were fascinated how Japanese popular music sounds just like American popular music.

**JC:** I believe Japanese music at the period was at its highest level.

**HK:** Probably so. Yeah, and uh so yeah - those are the cultures that I felt that I brought in uh...to, to my friends. Those were the things my friends were very interested in. Yeah.

**JC:** And your experiences here, were they—did they make you want to come back to the U.S.?

**HK:** Oh definitely, definitely, so yeah my first - let's see. When I first came to the United States, right uh six—that, that program that I had to re-, recommit or the submit the request to, to return after six months. So after six months, I knew that I wanted to come back [**JC:** You want to come back?] to—wanted to come back to the United States. So I turned in my request to come back to the United States to do the second year of the exchange.

**JC:** Same high school, right?

**HK:** Same high school, same program, uh we technic- in Japan, when you become an exchange student, there typically is an agency in between and that I had to apply to—I had to let the agency know I would like to come back for the second year. Yeah.

**JC:** Any reasons why you chose United States, why not any other country?

**HK:** Well, that's very interesting. Uh...my interest in United States really began; first time I was- first time I thought I come to the U.S. was after watching a movie called *Convoy* back in the 70s. It was a—I think Burt Reynolds was in it, and it was a movie about truck drivers going across United States, and they're semi-trucks, trailers, hundreds of them, just they're travelling together and they kept making the road havoc for everybody else, called *Convoy*. And uh I was very impressed and very amused. And after the movie, I said I'm going to the U.S. and become a truck driver. Uh so uh I still have the dream, maybe one day I will become a truck driver. [laughs]

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**JC:** Did you try to drive a truck in Wisconsin?

**HK:** No, I didn't. [Laughs] But that's the first time that I thought uh the United States was cool. I really like the big open space, which in Japan we don't have.

**JC:** It's very crowded.

**HK:** Yeah, very crowded and in Japan, you never see a horizon. Here in the United States, some—you go some places you actually see the horizon on land, alright. In Japan you go to the ocean and you see, you know, the flat horizon on the ocean. Um but as far as land goes, you never see the horizon. In Japan, you see mountain. And there was never a flat line. So uh I felt that, that I really like to see the horizon so big, open place, space, horizon, straight road, you know, yeah, the road just goes, and you can see the end of the road, and the horizon. Those were the things I really liked. But then I really got into music.

**JC:** American music?

**HK:** American music. Oh American and British music. I was very much interested in rock and roll, uh punk, rock, uh and you know, hard rock, some pops, some folk music, et cetera, and music—pop music in general. So um you know many bands back then, popular in Japan were English singing bands, either from Britain or America—United States. So there's another reason that I wanted to come to the United States to do some music.

**JC:** What music did you—what instrument did you play?

**HK:** I played bass, well, I played guitar, but I was mainly a bassist, so um yeah, I came to high school, brought my guitar, brought my bass and high school if they needed me to play bass, I you know played bass for them, like a jazz band, you know stuff like that.

**JC:** Were your parents supportive of you going to the U.S.?

**HK:** Well, glad you asked that. Um my father, and you know I had this fascination with the United States.

**JC:** Yeah.

**HK:** Then one day I come home, I was—it was first year in high school. One day I come home and my father says - had this package of papers, throw down the table, and he says, 'you're going to take this exam to become a foreign exchange student.' And I didn't have a choice; I didn't have a choice to say yes or no. Uh at that time, I actually was not interested in becoming an exchange student because that means I have to leave - go away from friends back in Japan, I didn't want to do that. I'm just a high school kid, I have my friends, I have my life, life is good; I have a girlfriend. You know, c'mon! So I didn't want to do that, but I didn't have a choice. And you know, it turned out to be a good, good decision on my dad's part. Um but of course, since then, I haven't seen my parents very much. It was because I was an exchange student yeah. So that's how I basically came to the United States. After that pile of paper I filled all in and turn it in to the agency, and to become an exchange student, you have to go take uh written exam and once the written exam gets um approved, then you go back for speaking exam and then uh you know, like I said, I couldn't speak much. But uh they said good enough, they let me come.

**JC:** Sort of like the TOEFL, right?

**HK:** Yeah, something like that, something like that. But, but you know, overall, I have no regrets coming

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to the United States. Yeah.

**JC:** And you uh—so—did you continue to attend that high school?

**HK:** I went there for two years and graduated from there.

**JC:** Oh.

**HK:** Yeah. With all my buddies.

**JC:** And did you go back to Japan between those years?

**HK:** Between those years, yes. Summer time I typically would go back to Japan for a month or two. Uh... then, got into college. Yeah just during summer I would go back home and work places and just you know, um save enough money. So that I can - summer job so I can, I can save up enough money for living expense - to aid living expense the following year.

**JC:** And you went to - what were you doing in Bolivar, Missouri?

**HK:** Bolivar, Missouri was my undergraduate school. I was there for three and half years. My uh you know one interesting thing in the United States is that if you work hard enough, you can graduate from college in three years.

**JC:** Yeah, that's true.

**HK:** You know. Uh and we're not, we're not rich by any means so my dad wanted to cut the cost of living expense. So my father was asking me if I could finish high school in three, not high school, college in three years. So I tried my best. Um I think my degree required 124 credits and I graduated with 125 credits. Um but happened was I was on my way to graduate in three years, I was taking 21 hours per - every semester [JC: Wow. It's intense.] it was intense, and have to take - sometimes I have to take summer classes. Or my school had what is called the winter term. So uh January uh was like a short, summer term that you can do uh you know you can do all day for three and half weeks and then you get three credits hours. So I did winter, winter course, winter term every uh every winter. Anyway, um I think I, I got sick on the last spring semester so I had to drop some classes. Um and uh so I didn't graduate in three years and it took me three and a half years to graduate.

**JC:** What was your major there?

**HK:** I was to there to study music. So from my passion uh coming here to the United States to follow the rock music, and be a musician, whatever, uh yeah so after that, went home to study music, very broad in general. General music.

**JC:** You also studied linguistics.

**HK:** I did study linguistics and that was after, after music, and after I grew up and come to a reality. [laughs]

**JC:** Oh yeah. Like a truck driver.

**HK:** [laughs] Like a truck driver. It took some maturing from my end, yeah, so I did some maturing, then linguistics I didn't study until graduate school. After yeah.

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**JC:** And that was in Texas, right?

**HK:** Linguistics I did some study in Texas, some study at the uh Cornell University in New York. [**JC:** Cool.] Yeah. Applied to linguistics, uh teaching Japanese, and you know, stuff like that. Yeah.

**JC:** How was uh how was teaching Japanese?

**HK:** I love teaching Japanese. It's a lot of fun. I taught Japanese for 12 years uh at the uh Baylor University at Waco, Texas. That was—I started 1990, started teaching when I was twenty-five then 2002, May—well actually July of 2002, I turned in my resignation because I got this job here at Rice. Uh so yeah for twelve years, I had a blast teaching Japanese students—uh the students taking Japanese. Um I was the only teacher, so I got to know a lot of students. Um Baylor University, first year language classes means every day, for one hour.

**JC:** Same here. It's the same here.

**HK:** So uh I get to—I got to know students very well. And some students would take language from me for three years. So we got to know each other very well. We still keep up, keep up with each other on Facebook now. And uh yeah - let's see. The biggest, the biggest group I had was 100 students, 30 in one section. Yeah. 30, 30, 30, and 10. Uh 30 in first year, one section, 30 in one section, another section of first year, 30 second year, and 10 students in third year. That was the biggest uh class that I had to teach—biggest year that was I think during—you may not know this '92ish, 92, around that time, early 90s, United States had what called Japan-bashing. And uh back—up in Detroit, people were um sledge- with a sledgehammer, they are bashing Japanese cars, uh very interesting period. During Japan bashing, my uh class population probably peaked because you know everybody was talking about Japan so kids wanted to know what was you know Japan like. They come to my class and of course, not only I teach Japanese language, but a big part of teaching Japanese language is teaching Japanese culture. So they felt that perhaps knowing Japanese may be useful to their career. So yeah, sometimes these bashing problems or the uh - intense moment, either diplomatically or economically, uh brings a good thing out too.

**JC:** How did you keep going for 12 years? Keep - you really enjoyed it.

**HK:** Oh I loved it. I, I think I loved the interaction with the student. Get to know students, talk to them, watching them grow, as a you know, going from high school graduates to adult, you know. They go through this transformation. Like I said, some students will take class with me for three years and I really see the transformation. It's really good to see uh how you know how they're maturing, and how their, how their thinking is evolving and those things I really, really enjoyed. Um having—yeah being in contact with student, communicating with students—yeah I think that really kept me going.

**JC:** How was the uh working environment?

**HK:** Very good. Uh I was part of the foreign language department. So the uh we are all foreigners. So we were just a group of foreigners. Uh so we, we had—we understood the difficulty of living in a small town like Waco where it's pretty country, countryside, American small town, Texas a small town. You know, uh so if I wanted to go get some decent food I would either go to Dallas or Austin you know over the weekend or if I want to get some Japanese groceries, I would have to go to Dallas or Austin. So uh many weekends, most weekends, actually I was either in Dallas or Austin, just you know, having fun. So—but because of the department itself was compartmentalized with mostly foreigners, it was a very easy place to, to work. Yeah.

**JC:** When you were teaching Japanese to these students, did they really like the language?

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**HK:** Oh yeah, definitely—

**JC:** Improved a lot over three years.

**HK:** —they improved a lot. And you know I tried my best to make the language learning fun. Sometimes - some faculty takes it as an academic approach. But you know, Japanese—any language in my approach is that you want—we—it's our responsible to help students to want to use the language. You know? So uh I tried to make the atmosphere light, casual, and try to make it as fun as possible, but at the same time, academically challenging. Um so I—I taught some—so mostly I taught some Japanese language and culture class. Sometimes I would teach, some—they will ask me to read with student, the uh some literature that's translated—Japanese literature that's translated into English. And literature is not my specialty but I would read with students and I would give my stu—my idea or broad Japanese idea of the culture and how that applies to this particular uh novel. Um so through that literature translation, course is called 'literature translation,' I was able to teach without teaching any Japanese language, just in English. Uh we also taught some of more of a...big general class some like it was against (?) to some of the uh you know history class—uh you know general world history class. And they wanted to talk about you know modern Japan. Stuff like that so.

**JC:** Did any of these students like visit Japan because...

**HK:** Yeah definitely. Um we had uh two, two universities actually that we could send students to in Japan. One in Fukuoka, where I was born, the other one in Tokyo. So uh yeah, we encourage our students, any of the students to apply to go study abroad. And um and actually those are the ones who go abroad, percentage wise, are the ones on my Facebook the most. [laughs] Those are the one I sent to Japan—they still keep up with me. Yeah. I think those are the students who are most interested in Japanese language and culture. Yeah.

**JC:** Did you visit Japan in the time you were in Waco?

**HK:** I probably did that uh at least once—at least every other I think. I go back often. Um my parents were still there. And you know I had a brother back in Japan. So just go back once in a while. And once I had kid, once I got married to an American bride, I wanted to show my American bride Japan. Then once I had a kid, um you know I wanted my kid to experience uh Japan. Yeah.

**JC:** Because like Japan industrialized really rapidly during those years, right, how did you feel about the transformation when you went back?

**HK:** I, I welcomed that quite a bit um and uh you know, progress is a good thing. Um...in, in most areas, there are some areas, it's arguable. But industrially, commercially, um...development I think a really helped Japanese people really to come out to be more internationalized, which uh which helps them to understand how other people live, how other people think, and at the end, Japan can become better - a better member of the international community. So in that regard, I think that progress is very good.

**JC:** How did—did uh your hometown change?

**HK:** Yes, you know, something very similar to what happens in the United States is that downtown becomes less populated because people move out. You know. So the uh—when I was—when I grew up, there are a lot of stores in downtown. Those stores are almost all gone. And all the stores surrounding. So even my city, it was almost impossible to live without a car. You know? Um a lot of people have cars now um and um public transportation, back when I was growing, public transportation was more important, I think. But now, more convenient because you have a car. You have, you have more money to spend so you

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can afford your own car, you can afford your own gas. You know, back when I was growing up, we didn't have money, we didn't have car, we just had to use public transportation.

**JC:** How did your family about—going back and visiting Japan?

**HK:** Me coming back?

**JC:** Your family.

**HK:** My family?

**JC:** When you took them to Japan to visit.

**HK:** Ohhh, okay, okay. My family. Yes. Oh they loved it. My wife would move to Japan any day.

**JC:** Cool.

**HK:** But I don't want to. [laughs] I like United States so much. Yeah so uh we, we've explored a bit uh we went to Japan [inaudible]. But uh yeah, and we might um after, after my kid's all grow up. We might spend some time in Japan, after we retire, who knows. But uh I just went to Japan for a month uh with my son, just two of us, this past summer, he is, he is seventeen now. So uh yeah we had a blast just visiting different places, just hanging out, um eating different food.

**JC:** Oh yeah Japanese food. How does he—how did he like Japanese food?

**HK:** He, he is a very picky eater, so there are—occasionally he didn't like some food but, but there are a lot of American food that are refined in a way Japanese people would eat. So uh those, those food that has more—those food that have American root, my son liked it a lot. But uh those foods that had more of Japanese root, he did have a problem. You know, he's only seventeen, so.

**JC:** Does he speak Japanese?

**HK:** He speaks some, some. Not as much as I would like him to. I wouldn't call him fluent. Um but you know, he speaks at the level at the end of first semester college level.

**JC:** That's impressive.

**HK:** He does okay. He does okay. So we hang out...and uh visit places, castles, old castles, we talked about history, and, and got to see some of the relatives, some friends, um so it was a fun trip.

**JC:** Did you go back and visit your high school?

**HK:** High school. You know, last time I was in high - that particular high school was the day that I turned in my resignation. I hadn't been back since then because you know...the reason I would go back to high school would be to see my friends and my friends are not there so it's just a building. You know, uh I like the people, not the building. [laughs] So social networking—really the great thing about social networking is that you can find a lot of friends, lost friends, you know, so either Facebook or the Japanese version called MIXI. M-I-X-I. I remember. We just keep up with old friends and I have two there that I know since uh since they been - we were in kindergarten. We still keep in touch. We're friends. So social networking, it's great, it just brings, brings down the time difference, brings down the distance, brings down the uh border. It's just, you know. Happy world!

**JC:** Yeah. And uh when you were offered a job at uh Rice, did you want to leave Baylor? Because you

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were having such a blast there?

**HK:** Yeah, it was a very difficult uh decision. Uh at Baylor, of course, teaching, being a professor, you have pretty flexible schedule. Um you know spring break, off, summer you're off, during Christmas, as long as the students are not taking classes, you pretty much had it off, although you do some research and you do you know some studies and, and you do preparation for class, grading, etcetera. But it was very flexible. Moving from that to this my- this position of staff at Rice University, staff positions forty hours a week, and I get, what twenty, first year I came here, I get twenty-one days of vacation, quite a bit different, quite different. Of course, paying was you know better at Rice. So that was very difficult, whether to be poor and have flexible [laughs] you know flexible hours or more restrictive but have better income. But what made me come to really, Rice University is this: in universities- most universities that you work at, either professor or staff, your family, your children gets what's called tuition remission, which means that uh my kids can go to Rice free of tuition. Same at Baylor, if I was at Baylor, if my kid can get into Baylor, then tuition would have been free. Yeah. I mean living on campus, living in college, we will have to pay for that, living expenses, but you know, tuition is free. So I compared Baylor, which is a second-tier university, Rice University is a first-tier university. And I said okay, if I'm going to invest my time for my children, I probably should, although I have to work harder, I probably should go to Rice University so that I can give my kids better opportunity. Yeah. So that's, that's the main reason.

**JC:** He's seventeen, going to college next year?

**HK:** He's seventeen. Yes, he is a junior in high school, so he's he would have to apply and hopefully do the early commitment—early decision.

**JC:** How is he doing?

**HK:** He's doing okay, he's at borderline. So we'll do, hopefully we'll do the early decision next - this coming in November. Really hoping and he wants to come to Rice.

**JC:** So he visited—he visited here?

**HK:** Yeah. He comes here once a while, you know hang out, see students, stuff like that. Yeah. He feels comfortable at Rice.

**JC:** Why uh—did you think about teaching Japanese at Rice?

**HK:** No I didn't. I didn't. Rice already has a very good Japanese teacher, Professor Sato. She is very good and I had no intention of replacing her. I was more interested, at that time really interested in doing this research in teaching, teaching language with technology. Uh so uh yeah I'm very content with what I am doing now. However, I do, as an adjunct faculty, at University of St. Thomas, you know up here, Montrose area, I'm a adjunct faculty there teaching Japanese. So yeah, I get to do this research, do faculty support during the day, at night, I get have fun with my students at University of St. Thomas, it's great. I have, I have a you know, have good life. Yeah.

**JC:** How was your transition to Rice? The working environment?

**HK:** Going from one academia to another academia really isn't much, much different. Um the only different probably—uh the most difficult part was getting used to the life style of that particular city. Coming from a small town in Waco, and you know living over here, uh Waco's living expense is reasonable. Here in Houston it's a lot more expensive. Houses are expensive, um you know so overall, everything is expensive. And what causes a problem is I can't get - with my salary it is hard to get a decent house in a decent neighborhood around the campus. The houses I looked at around the campus had one

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extra zero at the end of the price. [laughs] So uh we ended up moving out to the suburb. We bought a house in the suburb of Houston. So the commute now is 30 miles one way, 60 miles round trip, so it's about—it takes me about you know 45 minutes to an hour uh one way. So that's, that's the change, back in Waco; I can get to work in twenty minutes or so.

**JC:** Any other positive things living in Houston?

**HK:** Oh Houston! Positive things wow, I love the diversity; I love the avail—availability of Asian food. You go to a regular grocery store and you can get Asian food. Um. Couldn't do that in Waco. Um. Diversity is good, food is good, culture, I mean around here, Museum District. Um so much culture. Art museum's good. Kids love zoo, very good zoo. And kids love the science museum. Then great music theater downtown. Uh so uh yeah those are all good things. All very positive things uh living in uh Houston. Yeah so very grateful as a family; we feel it was a good move for all of us to come here.

**JC:** Uh did you want to move your parents to Texas?

**HK:** Yeah we talked about that. Um...I - my parents' weird. So after they—after they retired, they moved to Australia, they lived there for a year, try to get uh retirement visa, they never got the retire- got it granted of retirement Visa. So they moved to Thailand and then they received retirement visa there so they bought a house. Condominium. So they bought condominium now. And so they were living in Thailand for maybe last five years or so. My father's health is not doing very well so uh they bought a condo back in Japan, sold our old house which was an inconvenient place, bought a condo in a convenient place so now they are selling, end of this month, condo in Bangkok and move back to Japan permanently. All this time I've offered them to come and live with me because I am the first son of the family, I feel the obligation to take care of my parents. And um so uh I've offered them to come live with us but their reaction is that United States is too expensive to live. And you know, whether that's true or not, I just let it be because that's their excuse, whatever the reason, true reason, or maybe that is the true reason, who knows, but that's okay. If they don't want to, you know I don't want to force them. I want them to be where, where they feel happy to be. So uh they will be back in Japan at the end of the month.

**JC:** And plus you have a brother there, he can take care of them too.

**Both:** [Laughs]

**HK:** Yes and no. My father and my brother are not in speaking terms right now. Yeah they are - my brother has forgiven my father and my father has not forgiven my brother. So they are not speaking to each other. So yeah my brother is useless right now.

**Both:** [laughs]

**HK:** But uh yeah, you know, we all have family things. [laughs]

**JC:** Well it was very good - it was very kind of you to take your time out.

**HK:** Oh you're welcome, you're welcome, I really enjoy talking to you, John.

**JC:** Yeah um...