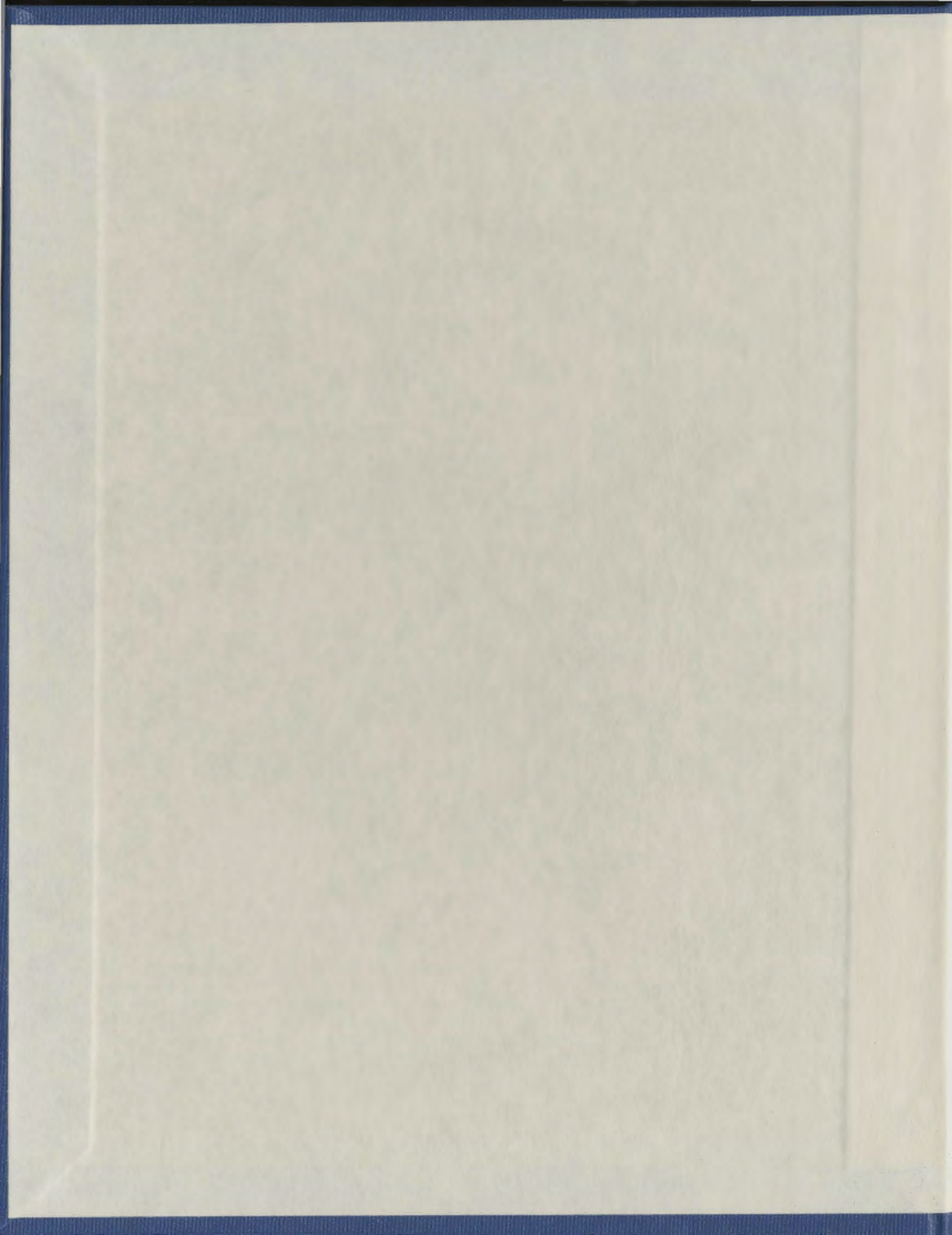


ORIENTAL SHOP:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MATERIAL COMMUNICATION
INSIDE AN ASIAN GROCERY STORE IN
MADISON, WISCONSIN

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**Oriental Shop: An Ethnography of Material Communication
inside an Asian Grocery Store in Madison, Wisconsin**



by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the creation, maintenance, and functions of social networks at an Asian grocery store located in Madison, Wisconsin, through an analysis of foodways and decor. The Oriental Shop is a family-run store that carries Japanese and other Asian foods, which has served the population of Madison and its vicinity for nearly thirty years. Like many small businesses, the store owes its success to the support of faithful customers with whom the owners establish personal relationships.

By describing the uses and functions of foods and store decorations among the owners and regular customers, I explain how these two aspects of material culture enable nonverbal communication among those who frequent the store. The objective is to research how personal relationships at the store—on the part of the owners as well as that of their customers—is cultivated by such material means.

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introduced me to material culture studies, which I found so fascinating that I have decided to continue working in the field. I am quite certain that he often found my hard-headedness annoying, but I thoroughly enjoyed our scholarly discussions, which I will remember always.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Oriental Shop is a small family-owned Asian grocery store, established in the 1970s, that is located in the central part of Madison, Wisconsin. As its name hints, the store sells Asian foods of various sorts, from fresh fruits and vegetables to dried and canned imported goods. This case study, based on ethnographic research conducted from 2000 to 2006, views the store as a place that exemplifies ways in which materials communicate human experiences. Specifically, it illuminates the complex ways in which people at the Oriental Shop exchange, consume, display, and otherwise manipulate food items and decorative objects for personal and cultural purposes in the cultivation of human relationships. Ultimately, this study seeks to explain why such a small-scale community store as the Oriental Shop remains visible and attractive to certain populations in the era of omnipresent chain stores.

My Introduction to the Oriental Shop

In January of 1998, having spent three semesters at a small university on the East Coast, I moved to Madison to begin anew my academic career at the University of Wisconsin. Although I did not know anyone in town, and my English skills were not fully developed, I was committed to making the best of this fresh start. I felt more excited than anxious.

After unpacking two overloaded suitcases, I decided that my very first mission in my new town would be to peruse local Asian grocery stores in order to get a sense of that which would constitute my food choices in the upcoming years. At my previous university, where I had no choice but to rely on a campus cafeteria and deli for daily meals, I learned how important it was for me to eat Japanese food regularly: my body demanded it. And I was miserable, day after day, staring at shelves and counters filled with types of foods that appealed not at all to my stomach. "No more of that," I thought to myself with a sense of liberation. Coming to Madison, a city that boasts of its cultural diversity, I expected to find a wide variety of ethnic foods. After looking up several addresses in the phonebook, I ventured out into the piercingly cold winter afternoon for a walking tour of the street on which several Asian grocers were located in proximity to one another.

The Oriental Shop was my last stop that day. I stepped into the store around six o'clock in the evening. After inspecting the selection of Japanese groceries, I took some foods to the checkout counter. I do not recall what they were, but I tried to pay for them with a credit card. The woman at the counter told me that the store did not accept cards. "Oh... I don't have any cash on me," I said, listening to her explain the cost of having a machine to process credit-card purchases. Apparently this confirmed for the woman that I was new to the store. "Are you Japanese?" She began asking questions. I told her that I had just moved to Madison and had not even opened a bank account yet. "Are you a student?" she continued, and I replied affirmatively. "Well, we are closing soon, so I'll take you to a bank where they have ATM machines, if you can get some cash with your

credit card that way.” Seeing that I was the only customer left in the store, I gladly accepted her offer. She then went in back to pour some green tea into a plastic cup for me, and we introduced ourselves. The woman’s name was Tamaki; she had been born in Japan before emigrating with her family to the United States as a teen. I learned that the store was hers, and that she had been running it for about twenty years with her Taiwanese husband, Kuang.

After making sure that every door on the store’s freezers and refrigerators was shut tight (something I later learned was one of the closing-time rituals), Tamaki took me to a bank a few blocks away. We returned to the store, I paid for my groceries, and then Tamaki and Kuang drove me to my downtown apartment. As we parted, she said that I would be welcome in the store anytime, and encouraged me to make a habit of coming in, even just to talk and relax.

I had never received such personal attention in grocery shopping, and I was touched by this display of kindness that went beyond the familiar sort of customer service based on perfunctory mannerisms. Since that day I have been a loyal customer of the Oriental Shop, and as I befriended Tamaki and Kuang I came to discover that their generosity is vital to the store’s prosperity, and is the key factor that continues to foster fealty in its clientele.

Objective

The goal of this project is to shed light upon the dynamics and diversity of material communication at the Oriental Shop. Since my initial encounter, the Oriental Shop has been for me an oasis in my personal and professional journey in North America. At this store I am able to purchase Japanese groceries in order to maintain my ethnic foodways, and because the place presents me with a wide spectrum of everyday culture, it is also here that I have tried to test the applicability of various academic theories and concepts in order to understand the making and practicing of what we understand as culture.

In my decade of patronage the Oriental Shop has always seemed special in terms of its ambience and its status among the regular customers. First of all, I have seen no other grocery store so profusely outfitted with purely decorative items. Other ethnic grocery stores that I have visited, in Wisconsin and elsewhere, also have on display ornamental objects such as lucky charms, but in most cases they are either for sale or positioned behind the checkout counter, out of reach of the customers. At the Oriental Shop, on the other hand, decorative objects are dispersed in a more carefree manner, creating a homey atmosphere. This alone was quite intriguing to me, and when I learned that some decorative items at the Oriental Shop were gifts from customers, I was able to connect this fact to another: the Oriental Shop has enjoyed long-term support from a roster of faithful regular customers. My fieldwork was motivated by my growing interest in investigating the connection between such accumulated decorative objects and the fidelity of regulars, as well as the making of this singular site that enables all of this.

At the same time, I have another agenda as an international folklore student.

Culture is always more intricate and complex than any scholar's can encapsulation based upon data, however carefully collected and categorized. Recognizing this, I believe that more effort should be made to expose the baroque reality of living culture. Ethnography should not simply engage in general cultural description; rather, its purpose should be to delve into the complexity of everyday life so as to expand our perceptions of human diversity.

In my role as an ethnographer who is a member of a racial and ethnic minority in North American academia, I aim to eliminate the gap between academic portrayals of minority groups and the reality of their daily lives. The accumulated knowledge of historical facts, cultural ideologies, and social norms and values does not ensure an understanding of the ways in which people actually behave within certain cultural settings. Learning about culture should involve illustrating commonalities among people from different backgrounds, rather than merely highlighting their differences.

In my experiences as an international student in North America, I have encountered many students and scholars who are knowledgeable about other cultures yet inept when it comes to interacting with people of cultural backgrounds other than their own. As a folklorist who promotes cross-cultural understanding, on such occasions I am forced to ponder how this can be. Possible reasons, it seems, are a scarcity of documentation depicting people's everyday lives, and an attitude still prevalent in academia that promotes the pursuit of the exotic in the cultures of "others." Surrounded by social norms, values, and ideologies, individuals make their own choices about how

to react to expectations prescribed by these constituents of their culture, which results in diverse ways of living despite common cultural knowledge. To understand others is to be able to feel what they feel, and the kind of ethnography I aim to conduct is a type that shares what it is like to live the informants' lives, rather than points out differences for the sake of exposing cross-cultural heterogeneity or championing the uniqueness of a particular cultural group. Today it might seem banal to state that people are people, first and foremost. Yet this is my stance as an ethnographer. It is my goal in this thesis to describe the folklore of the Oriental Shop so that the reader may feel what we, its habitues, feel.

Given this agenda, it is appropriate for me to illustrate the folklore of the Oriental Shop in a way that is holistic and truthful, which means that discussing the Oriental Shop only as an ethnic grocery store would be too simplistic. People come to the store not merely to shop. The store is the owners' personalized place, which welcomes anyone who finds comfort in its friendly, cozy atmosphere, and who understands this to be the principal charm of this small Asian enclave.

I analyze two aspects of material culture in investigating the nature of the Oriental Shop. One is food, whose circulation feeds the personal relationships cultivated among the storekeepers and customers. The other is store decor, which—being composed of the storekeepers' hobby objects and gifts from their customers—reveals the collaborative character of the store's space. Anchored in an exploration of material culture, my ethnography examines human interactions with and through the objects situated and circulating inside the store. The objective of this study is to discuss and explain why and

how these factors constitute the folklore of the Oriental Shop, by specifically calling attention to the store decor and the foodways practiced by the people who run the store and those who patronize it. While many elements and sources that I incorporate to make my points are primarily Asian or Japanese, I also intend my ethnography of the Oriental Shop to contribute to an understanding of the broader human experience.

Approaches and Arguments

Store as Locus of Social Interaction

Before supermarkets and chain stores dominated the landscape, nearly every town across America had its own general store that carried anything the community needed. The disappearance of such small local stores is often lamented, and it is perceived that communities have lost an important locus of social interaction.¹ In the overall history of North American economic development, general stores are treated nostalgically as relics of the olden days (see, for example, Cleghorn 1981; Mayo 1993). Although those old-fashioned corner stores and general stores have been replaced by modern retail outlets, this does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of places that foster sociability. In fact, public places for human interaction have increased in number. New locales have

¹ Many publications that share this view describe the way in which a general store or corner store played the role of community centre and economic base in North American towns: for instance, Laurence A. Johnson's *Over the Counter and on the Shelf: Country Storekeeping in America, 1620-1920* (1961); Gerald Carson's *The Old Country Store* (1965); and Enid Mallory's *Over the Counter: The Country Store in Canada* (1985). A more visual presentation of old-fashioned stores can be found in compilations of photographs by Carol Priamo (1978) and reports in *Foxfire* by Dillard, Taylor, and Walker (1976), and by Vinson (1980). And a short film on Ted Barylok's grocery store in Winnipeg recounts its history through a narration of anecdotes (National Film Board of Canada 1982).

emerged, and a person can belong to multiple social groups in multiple places, as discussed by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. In his book *The Great Good Place* (1997), Oldenburg calls the public place that fosters human interaction the “third place,” as opposed to the home (“first place”) and the workplace (“second place”), arguing that contemporary society has established its own social environments by developing such public places as pubs, coffeeshops, and beauty parlours. Times change, yet the fact remains that humans are social animals; community-building continues.

The Oriental Shop functions as a “third place” for many Americans and Asian immigrants in the vicinity of Madison. The store attracts a variety of customers, both Asians and non-Asians—Asians because of a desire to maintain ethnic foodways among the city’s growing Asian population, and non-Asians thanks to the steady popularity of Asian cuisines in mainstream American culture. Like other folklorists, I recognize that the folklife of a small family-owned store is rich, as the Oriental Shop serves as a centre of community life (see the case studies in Beck 1980; Hunt 1979; Long 1990). Wherever people gather, gossip and stories are exchanged (see Bauman 1972; Macpherson 1988). In my observation, the Oriental Shop is a “third place” where people come not only to shop but to seek human interaction. For many regular customers, to visit the Oriental Shop is to visit friends.

Beyond Ethnicity

In North America, running a grocery store has been one of the prominent means of making a living for immigrants and their descendants (see Dhaliwal 1995; Mankelar 2002). Often these are small-scale family-owned businesses that serve as unofficial communal centres for cultivating and affirming ethnic solidarity (Bonacich and Modell 1980). However, rather than framing my case study of the Oriental Shop simply in light of ethnicity, I want to shape my research in more general terms because of the following factors.

First of all, Madison is a mid-sized Midwestern city where the Asian immigrant population has historically been low, making it impossible for the people to establish their own sectors as they have in major cities. This has been the norm for Japanese immigrants throughout the Midwest.² With regard to the Madison area, a biography of a Japanese immigrant's son tells that in the pre-war era his was the only Japanese family in the region, except for a small number of students at the University of Wisconsin (Rathburn 2004, 12–13). Like other ethnic immigrants to Wisconsin, Toki's father had left his home country with dreams of owning a farm, which he indeed fulfilled after settling in the Midwest. However, his family was ethnically isolated; there was no recognizable community, as there was for Japanese immigrants on the West Coast, or for most European immigrants in Wisconsin. Such a condition of ethnic isolation seems

²Most studies of Japanese Americans have been concerned with their experiences during World War II. I find work by Yasuko Takezawa (1995) and Stephen Fugita and David O'Brien (1991) quite informative on matters of Japanese American ethnicity.

common among many Japanese immigrants and the Nisei Americans who lived in the Midwest (see Adler 1998).

Japanese emigrants in the post-war era consist of expatriates: war brides, military wives, wives of American professionals or students, and sojourners (professionals or students) and their families.³ Statistics from 1980 show that in Wisconsin the number of Japanese exceeds two thousand, more than half of whom reside in the highly populated areas surrounding the state's two largest cities, Milwaukee and Madison (Allen and Turner 1988, 185). However, there is no specific district in Madison for Japanese business establishments.

In Madison the Asian population, including a number of Japanese expatriates, has increased as the city has grown. It consists largely of professionals and international students, who—unlike European immigrants of the past several centuries—do not form traditional settlements or close-knit communities. Thus the classic immigrant folklore patterns described in Linda Dégh's "Approaches to Folklore Research of Immigrant Groups" (1966) and Robert Klymasz's "From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore: A Canadian View of Process and Transition" (1973) are not applicable to my case study here. For the same reason, this thesis does not shape its argument solely around the making and marking of ethnic identities and boundaries (see Oring 1986; Oring 1989; Stern and Cicala 1991).

³ Japan's post-war economic growth has enabled many of its corporate employees to migrate to the United States as sojourners, as stated by John F. Boatman (1992–93, 21–22), as well as by James P. Allen and Eugene J. Turner (1988, 301–03). Also, see Goodman, Peach, Takenaka, and White (2003) for sociological reports on recent Japanese immigrant communities in various parts of the world.

Instead, the Oriental Shop, along with many other ethnic establishments in the area, fits into the picture of ethnic diversity for which Madison is known. This factor and the shop's location on a busy street in the central area of town make the place less intimidating to non-Asian customers. Moreover, such accessibility characterizes the nature of the Oriental Shop; the store has thrived because of its inclusiveness. As Tamaki herself estimates, only about half of the store's customers are Asian. Although the regulars who are socially involved with the store are by and large Asians, the fact that the business is supported by members of other cultural groups cannot be ignored. Without non-Asian customers the store could not have thrived as it has, and this differentiates the Oriental Shop from the type of ethnic grocery store primarily supported by a single ethnic or cultural community.⁴

The fact that immigrants rely on ethnic grocers for the foods necessary to prepare their daily meals will be recognized and discussed in my observations on Japanese immigrants who shop at the Oriental Shop. Aware as I am of the cultural and social significance of ethnic grocery stores in the lives of immigrants, my ethnography focuses not on describing a particular ethnic folklore, but on modes of material communication at the Oriental Shop.

My relationship with the Oriental Shop as both a regular customer and temporary clerk was initially personal, which helped me to develop a microscopic understanding of the store's culture. While the Oriental Shop is an Asian grocery store, it is not ethnicity

⁴ The case studies of ethnic grocery stores that I have found focus on their roles within single ethnic communities (see Mankelar 2002; Stinson 1998). While I acknowledge the potential intraethnic plurality within such groups, I wish instead to explore a plurality that is not only interethnic, but that transcends ethnicity.

per se that draws people together at the store; rather, it is the compatibility of their personhoods.⁵

The sense of a group is developed by the way in which its members understand and interact with one another on a regular basis (Noyes 1995). Multiple social webs exist among the regular customers of the Oriental Shop. A shared cultural background certainly helps to bond them. Yet, embodying Alan Dundes's definition of "folk,"⁶ the informants I introduce are people who consider themselves connected on a more personal level. The common factor can be an interest, a sense of humour, a set of ethical principles, or any of the other elements from which one's personality is constructed.

In my observation, solidarity among the storekeepers and their regular customers derives from compatible personalities rather than ethnicity. That is, it is not shared ethnicity and ethnic traditions but shared human values and personal interests that have helped to forge connections. Although cultural differences in behavioural patterns may prevent people of different backgrounds from achieving mutual understanding, a sense of humanity that is grounded in friendship and integrity can trump cultural differences when one chooses to allow it.

To cite two examples: Tamaki has a good Japanese friend (also a long-term customer) with whom she shares an interest in gardening and craft-making, which appears to be far more essential to their friendship than the fact that they are both from Japan. A Caucasian regular customer named Jim has become very close to Kuang

⁵ Elliot Oring recognizes the need to discard the framework of ethnicity when such categorization would lead to misrepresentation of a group in his article "Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Folklore" in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: an Introduction* (1986).

⁶ "Any group whatsoever that shares at least one common factor" (Dundes 1965, 2).

because of their mutual interests in geology, cosmology, philosophy, and religion, in addition to their easygoing natures and similar senses of humour; ethnicity is extraneous to their friendship (Kuang is Taiwanese and Jim is American). As I introduce the key informants in the following chapters, it will become clear that personal compatibility is crucial for sustaining the social relationships at the Oriental Shop, however varied the reasons that initially drew the protagonists to the store.

Looking at the folklife of an ethnic grocery store beyond the framework of ethnicity allows me to explore a side of ethnic folklore that has long been neglected in North American folkloristics: the international influence on the constitution of ethnic folklore. For example, ethnic food research is concerned primarily with the making and marking of ethnic identity in the light of self-other issues. While food is one fundamental means by which members of ethnic groups vigorously express and communicate their ethnicity to both insiders and outsiders, practicing ethnic foodways is much more complicated than ethnic boundary-making,⁷ and this aspect of ethnic foodways will be explored in the third chapter.

The Material Expression of Folklore

Material culture studies should not be merely taxonomic but should strive to understand the human cognition of reality. Materialistic forms offer people a tangible means of expressing such intangible matters as values, beliefs, and feelings. Although in the discipline of folklore there seems to be a division between the tangible and the

⁷ This view forms part of the discussion in Michael Owen Jones's recent food article as well (2007, 131).

intangible as research areas, the study of material culture intertwines the two to argue that our concrete physical environments reflect abstract elements of our world.

Material culture provides the best way to illustrate the folklife of the Oriental Shop for several reasons. First, material forms of human expression are simply more abundant and salient within the store scene than are verbal forms. Second, material forms are the primary means for expressing cultural diversity within the Oriental Shop. Third, I can deliver my findings through photography and precise description with fewer concerns about translational errors that may affect studies of verbal aspects of culture. Inside the store, a visitor will find religious charms, handmade objects, stone and wooden carvings, *bonsai* plants (盆栽), and many other decorative objects. These are either items from the shopkeepers' collections or gifts donated by their customers, all co-existing in harmony, contributing to the Oriental Shop's homey ambience.

As for the foodways, the practice of food exchange—in the form of give-aways and gifts—nurtures the friendships between the shopkeepers and their customers. Various types of foods—be they Asian or American, traditional or contemporary—are brought into the store for sharing. The culinary experiences cherished by those who gather at the Oriental Shop are diverse, because, as far as food choice is concerned, the exotic and the familiar, the old-fashioned and the modern, are simultaneously desired and consumed.

In order to clarify further what I will present in the following chapters, I should articulate which aspects of material culture studies this thesis does not cover. Many studies of contemporary material culture revolve around issues of consumerism. For

example, Daniel Miller, among the first ethnographers to research shopping behaviour, argues that the act of buying is a means of expressing love for, and nurturing social relationships, with others (1998); Norine Dresser examines dialogues between Jewish American storekeepers and customers, such as those involving bantering and bargaining, that characterize the performance of a particular ethnic group (1971). Although my ethnography examines the material culture of a grocery store, an extensive analysis of shopping behaviour and oral communication is beyond its scope.

Because I am a native of Japan, many examples in this ethnography are derived from Japanese culture. Yet my approach differs from a monolithically anthropological one not because the anthropological study of material culture in Japan tends to focus on consumerism, but because discussion of it is customarily shaped according to dichotomous viewpoints: cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, globalization and localization, West and East, self and other, and so on (see Ashkenazi and Clammer 2000; Goldstein-Gidoni 2001; Tobin 1992). While such frameworks may help Western scholars to comprehend Japanese culture, their ways of shaping the discussions themselves suggest a veiled ethnocentrism (see Appadurai 1986). As a native I find their models mostly incongruent with my experience.

My interest in material culture has grown within the discipline of folklore, where the research platform involves investigating human expressive behaviour through objects, seeking intangible information in tangible forms, and exploring the ways in which people engage with the physical environment—that is, “material behavior,” to

borrow Michael Owen Jones's locution (1997).⁸ By focusing on the informants' experiences related to food and decorative objects, I aim to show that the Oriental Shop is a place that is more than a store for people to obtain groceries and more than a social hub for particular ethnic groups.

Methodology

This thesis compiles ethnographic work done over an extended timespan. Primarily my observation was made possible through personal experience at the store, as both customer and clerk, beginning in 1998. I worked at the Oriental Shop periodically for four summers, from 1998 to 2001. After moving into the apartment above the store in December 2002, my relationship with Tamaki and Kuang and their customers strengthened as I frequented the store more often than ever. Following my move to Canada in August 2003, I was fortunate to have several multi-month stays back in the apartment until the beginning of 2006.

I conducted my first field research at the Oriental Shop, in which I documented the store's history and decorations, for an undergraduate course in the summer of 2000. The basic history of the store comes from an interview with Tamaki and Kuang at that time, while more recent customer interviews (recorded 2004–2006) and analysis of newly acquired store decor constitute important additions to the present study. Also

⁸ According to Michael Owen Jones, "material behavior—short for 'material aspects and manifestations of human behaviors'—refers to activity involved in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world" (1997, 202).

incorporated into this work are my research and interviews on such topics as foodways and immigrant culture, which were conducted for a separate project in 2004.

When I approached Tamaki and Kuang in 2004 with my thesis proposal, they seemed to prefer not to draw attention to themselves or to their store. I was grateful to receive their consent to conduct additional ethnographic research on the store; however, remembering how nervous Tamaki and Kuang were during our first recorded interviews in 2000, I felt that I needed to seek other means of enriching my description of the store. Fortunately several regular customers believed in the uniqueness and specialness of the Oriental Shop strongly enough to embrace my project. As a result, the portrayals of the storekeepers' characters relies heavily on customers' viewpoints articulated in narrative form. All these various strands are woven together into a single yarn.

Thesis Structure

The chapters that follow unfold the details of my ethnographic findings at the Oriental Shop. Chapter Two provides an overview of the Oriental Shop, designed to relate the basics of the store's culture. The history, work routine, and clientele are summarized, and the key informants introduced. The information given in this chapter helps build the image of the Oriental Shop.

Chapter Three examines food-related experiences and practices. It begins with a detailed report of immigrant experiences based on my interviews with two Japanese homemakers who patronize the Oriental Shop, which illustrates their endeavours in

North America as mothers, and the role that the store plays in enabling them to maintain their ethnic foodways. Then the food culture of the Oriental Shop's clientele is analyzed in order to elucidate the significance of food-giving as material communication in nurturing personal relationships.

Chapter Four explores the way in which the store decor contributes to the construction and assertion of the Oriental Shop's character. Decorative objects from the owners' personal collections and gifts from their customers are scattered inside the store. Some key objects are discussed individually to underscore their significance in Japanese folklore as well as their reasons for existing in the store. Ultimately, it will become apparent that the decor of the Oriental Shop evidences the fruitful human interactions enjoyed by Tamaki, Kuang, and their customers.

Chapter Five reviews the highlights of my ethnographic findings and discusses possibilities for future research into material behaviour and communication.



Located on a street in the city centre, where one notices dashing cars more than a series of small businesses, this ethnic grocery store has its own clock that runs at a different speed from that of the bustling outside world. One need only step into the store in order to sense the unique atmosphere of this space. It is my hope that the reader will find the Oriental Shop as fascinating as I do.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAKING OF THE ORIENTAL SHOP

This chapter covers basic information about the Oriental Shop, such as its location, work routine, and clientele. Witnessing the types of services provided, and the business ethics upheld, by Tamaki and Kuang reveals which qualities of the store attract certain people and make them want to return, and which characteristics foster the interactions between the owners and their customers. This fundamental information about the Oriental Shop will underpin my discussions in subsequent chapters.

Entering the Store

The Oriental Shop is located in Madison, Wisconsin, on Park Street, a main conduit that connects the city centre to the south side. Stores and offices of various sizes line this wide busy thoroughfare, but those with narrow fronts easily go unnoticed. The Oriental Shop is one such store that may be passed without drivers or pedestrians paying it any attention. In fact, when I mention the Oriental Shop to people, they often think I am referring to another larger, more visible Chinese market several blocks away. First-time customers are either those who spot the store serendipitously; those who, having driven or walked past many times, finally grow curious enough to step in; or those who hear about the store from others, and actively seek it out. One customer who once telephoned the store to find out its location recalls, "I was confused about where the



Figure 1: Facade of the Oriental Shop.

store was. I thought she [Tamaki] was talking about M___ [the Chinese grocery store] but she said it wasn't M___, so I knew that wasn't it. So I had to look around a little bit and I went past, so I had to turn around and come back again."

The building is a little house with white siding and a green roof. After Tamaki's family purchased the property, it was remodelled, with the store space on the ground floor and the second floor as an apartment. The facade is ornamented with a wooden relief in the shape of a Shinto shrine gate (*torii*: 鳥居),⁹ announcing that this store's prominent ethnicity is Japanese. Both the gate relief and the front door frame are painted red, an auspicious colour in Japanese culture (Fig. 1).



Figure 2: Backyard of the store, with remaining grapevine.

⁹ The *torii* consists of two pillars connected with two crosspieces (one between the upper parts of the pillars and one above them), often painted in vermillion. The gate marks an entryway to a sacred space such as a shrine or mountain.

The part of Park Street on which the Oriental Shop is located used to be a predominantly Italian section of the city (known as the Greenbush neighbourhood).¹⁰

The house was once owned by an Italian American family. In the backyard there survive Concord grapevines as proof of times past on this now Orientalized property (Fig. 2).

One customer testifies that the grapevine arbour used to cover the entire parking area at the back of the store, but it

has been greatly reduced in size, now extending for only two hundred square feet, near

Tamaki's shelves of *bonsai* trees (Fig. 3). Still, the Italian spirit lives on; for many years

an American man came by to



Figure 3: Tamaki's *bonsai* collection in the backyard, viewed from above.

harvest the grapes in order to make wine. When he became too old to do this, several Japanese families took on home winemaking themselves.

Likely the first thing that visitors see as they step into the store is a piece of purple quartz, one of Kuang's treasures, welcoming them from atop a shelving unit at the centre. By the entrance, visible through the front window, stands the checkout counter with two padded antique chairs behind it. From these chairs Tamaki and Kuang can watch over whomever enters, or turn to enjoy the view of Park Street. Inside the store,

¹⁰ As a part of the city's urban development, this area was demolished and reconfigured in the early 1960s. It was called "Triangle Project" because the heart of the neighbourhood was bounded by three major streets (South Park Street, Regent Street, and West Washington Avenue), forming a triangle.

products are arranged and shelved in a space of approximately four hundred square feet. It is amazing how many different goods—rice, tea, noodles, vegetables, fish, canned goods, and cooking tools—are neatly organized, all in their own places. Beyond the shopping area, the floor extends to accommodate a washroom and kitchenette, and farther in the back are a walk-in refrigerator and walk-in freezer for storage, opposite each other, sandwiching the path to the back door (see Figs. 4–5 for interior photos and Fig. 7 for the floorplan).

The space in front of the checkout counter is open, providing a clear view of the back so that shopkeepers will notice visitors entering through the rear door. Heavy, large sacks of grain products accumulate on one side of the store out of sight of the counter, whereas candies (easily stolen items) and produce (for which customers need to obtain thin plastic bags from the checkout table) are located near the counter. Cooking knives (which can be dangerous) are kept on the lowest shelf behind the counter.

Tamaki and Kuang sit in their chairs behind the counter when resting or doing paperwork. One of these chairs might also be occupied by a regular patron if one of the shopkeepers is absent. There is also a stool that fits under the table by the counter, which functions either as temporary extra counter space for boxes brought out of storage, or as a seat for a third person. The counter area serves as a primary spot for socializing, a hub where people gather to enjoy small talk (Fig. 6). Also, this is the area where the decorative objects are clustered most heavily, epitomizing the home-like nature of this store. I discuss the decor in depth in Chapter Four.



Figure 4: Interior view from the front entrance.



Figure 5: Interior view to the left of the front entrance.



Figure 6: Kuang talking with a customer at the checkout counter.

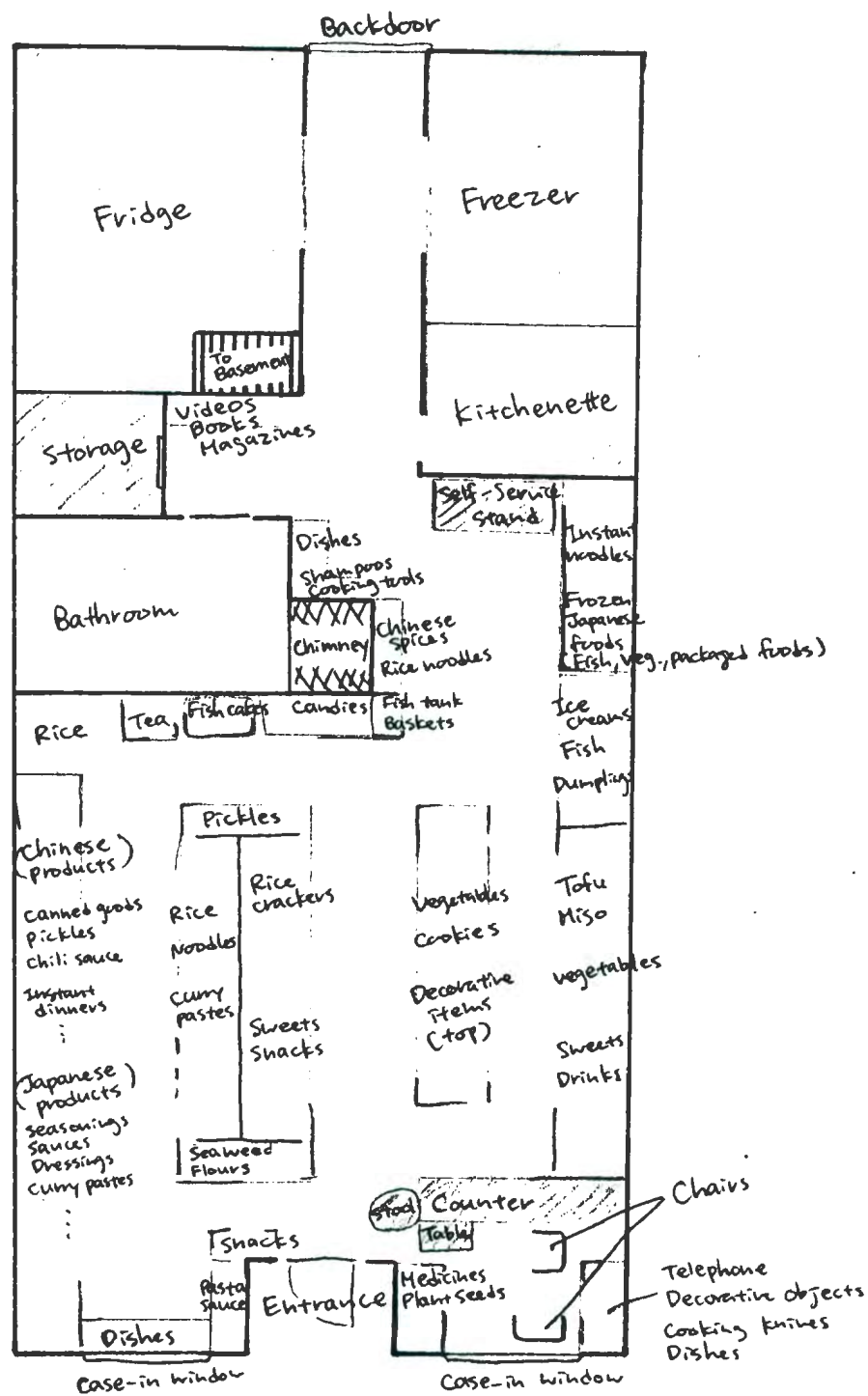


Figure 7: Floorplan.

Business History and Work Routine

Birth of the Oriental Shop

The Oriental Shop is also known among regular customers as “Tamaki’s place,” because she is the one who started the business. Tamaki came to America with her family after World War II, when she was a teen. They settled in the Midwest, and in the 1960s moved to Madison, Wisconsin. After finishing school, Tamaki worked for a Chinese man who ran an ethnic grocery store in town, and when he retired in 1979 she bought his business and re-established it as her own. Immediately she changed the name of the store from “Oriental Mart” to “Oriental Shop.” “I wanted the store to be small, a small store. ‘Mart’ seemed like it’s bigger. So I changed it to ‘Shop’.” Being more knowledgeable about Japanese food, Tamaki started to stock items more essential to Japanese cuisine than to Chinese. As the business became stable, she relocated to the current site by moving several blocks down the street in 1981. Then along came a man who was to become her partner, Kuang. Kuang’s life in America began in the South, but he moved to Wisconsin to be near relatives. He started to work at Tamaki’s store, and the two eventually married. For over two decades Tamaki and Kuang have been running the store together.

Among the dozen or so Asian grocery stores in Madison, the Oriental Shop is the only one run by a Japanese person. Tamaki remembers an older Japanese woman who kept a grocery store in town, but her business folded upon her retirement without an

inheritor. By the time Tamaki's business had matured, hers was the only Japanese-run grocery store.

Madison boasts a wide range of Asian grocers: Chinese, Korean, Southeast Asian, and Indian. They are scattered all over town, for there are no clear settlement patterns that characterize these ethnic groups. While each ethnic grocery store caters primarily to those of its own ethnicity, these Asian grocers stock basic food items for cuisines other than their own. This is an important business strategy for ethnic grocers in mid-sized cities like Madison. The clientele of these stores is not limited to the members of their owners' ethnic groups, nor is it even limited to Asians. Asian foods are popular in mainstream North American culture, and an Asian store needs to know how to welcome non-Asian customers, or else the business will not survive, especially since nowadays even chain grocery stores carry Asian food items. Japanese groceries are therefore available in many establishments other than the Oriental Shop. However, in terms of variety, Tamaki's store tops all others in the area, which certainly makes it attractive to those keen on Japanese cuisine. I will address this point further in the following chapter.

Routine of the Store

Like any business, the Oriental Shop operates with its own rhythm. It is open six days a week, from ten or ten-thirty in the morning to six or seven in the evening. The day begins with Tamaki and Kuang getting vegetables and fruits from the back refrigerator, pouring water (for tea and coffee) into the electric hot pot, and turning on the radio to play either classical or soft rock music. Then the two set off to do their

chores: Tamaki does paperwork, takes telephone orders from restaurants, or organizes the shelves, while Kuang puts items needed for deliveries onto the truck or trims wilted leaves from *nappa* cabbages, wrapping them in plastic before affixing the price. It is very important that the store be ready in the morning because sometimes early birds are waiting at the door, eager to get inside. After cleaning the vegetables and stocking the shelves, Kuang sips tea behind the counter, while Tamaki continues her paperwork. The day goes by sometimes quickly, other times slowly. The visitors are a mix of familiar faces and newcomers, their numbers some days large and other days small. Regardless, Tamaki knows how to keep herself busy, whereas Kuang knows how to take it easy. Their attitudes toward work contrast yet harmonize in a way that is common in couples in long-lasting marriages. When closing time arrives, money is counted and stashed in a safe place. Boxes of vegetables and fruits are returned to the back refrigerator, and all the freezer and fridge doors are shut tight. The actual closing time is always a bit ambiguous because Tamaki and Kuang often stay late to do paperwork or to finish deliveries to local restaurants. When people peep through the window or knock on the door to see if the store is still open after its official closing time, they are let in to grab what they need in a hurry. When a customer telephones with a plea to drop by after closing time to grab an urgently needed item, Tamaki typically acquiesces.

Every Tuesday Tamaki and Kuang drive their white truck to Chicago to buy merchandise. From speciality shops and bakeries in Chinatown and the Japanese market district they pick up fresh produce and Asian-style breads and pastries, reserved by Tamaki a few days in advance. The store is closed on Tuesdays because of this day-long

excursion, which requires three hours of driving each way. They leave in the late morning and usually get back before midnight. For those who live in the upstairs apartment, the nocturnal thuds and vibrations of boxes being moved around announce their return from Chicago.

Wednesday is the busiest day of the week at the Oriental Shop; this is the day when fresh produce is put out, and new products make their debuts. Seasonal fruits and vegetables such as persimmons, apples, squash, and radishes are treats for recent Japanese immigrants who yearn for tastes of the homeland, even if they are often grown in the States.¹¹ Asian breads and buns from Chicago are also displayed. Since there are no Japanese or Chinese bakeries in Madison, customers who prefer Asian-style bakery flock to the store. Shopping at the Oriental Shop on Wednesdays is crucial for patrons eager to know what products are available. Wednesday thus brings excitement to customers aware of the store's cycle, and in fact there are many "Wednesday regulars."

Another highlight comes every other Saturday, when the Oriental Shop sells various kinds of raw fish, *sashimi* (刺身), a renowned Japanese delicacy. The night before *sashimi* day, the truck of an Oriental fish company delivers frozen seafood such as tuna, salmon, yellowtail, and left-eyed flounder. It is not until Saturday mid-afternoon that Tamaki starts to cut fish. She carves the fish into portions of various sizes. The largest chunk I have ever seen is a twenty-pound block of tuna, the sort of thing that a customer desiring multiple *sashimi* meals would special-order in advance. Usually Tamaki cuts the fish into smaller blocks so that all a customer has to do is slice them into

¹¹ Japanese-style vegetables and fruits have been made available through farms in California, and even a few farms in the Madison area.

sashimi-sized strips at mealtime. Ready-to-eat kinds of seafood such as shrimp, squid, and fish roe are packed into small plastic containers. All of these are weighed and priced accordingly.

Even though it is possible to place an advance order for certain types of seafood, many customers come to the store on *sashimi* day and swarm in anticipation around the kitchenette, where Tamaki prepares the fish. They peek in, asking Tamaki for a certain part or portion of the fish they want, while chatting among themselves. Waiting around in the store creates an occasion for customers to socialize. They converse on various topics: new products, food recipes, celebrities, family matters.

It is not easy to work in the store when the space is crowded with people. I remember carrying, from the kitchenette in the back to the checkout counter in the front, plastic trays filled with *sashimi* chunks to be weighed on the scale. The customers were so busy talking to each other or looking at the shelves to kill time that they paid little attention to the few of us needing to work. There was no time to think; we just moved around frenetically to get the fish ready on that *sashimi* day.

Most of what goes on inside the Oriental Shop is repetitive. The same routine runs daily and weekly. Best-selling products keep refilling the shelves, whereas new trial goods come and go. The store's routine is predictable (and therefore comforting to the customers), marked by small but significant featured events each week. Customers visit the store according to its routine, expecting to procure what they want, hoping to run into their friends, while anticipating finding something new.

Doing Business at “Tamaki’s Place”

The Oriental Shop is a mom-and-pop grocery store. The place is small, the space is limited, but chores need to get done inside: opening boxes, pricing items, stocking shelves, disposing of emptied boxes. It is not a fancy place, yet it exudes a charm and a sense of comfort, which a person begins to understand and appreciate once learning what this place has to offer besides groceries. The Oriental Shop is much more than a grocery store for many of its patrons. One regular customer eloquently describes her feelings toward the store:

For one thing, this store is very organic. Now it’s equipped with an up-to-date scale.¹² But not long ago, if a turnip was placed on the metal plate of the older machine, the scale nodded gently back and forth till it came to a stop, only then giving an accurate reading. This was a little annoying and at the same time a bit humorous.

This store has its own pace—not of the computer-run, greedy kind, but a pace packed with friendliness which humours you even if you have to wait while the “lady of the shop” runs out the back door talking to a customer or two to show the just-discovered rabbit’s nest packed with a bunch of wriggling baby bunnies. Perhaps this is a kind of strategy, because you browse while you wait and often find more things you need. Or I may find unusual things which escaped my attention while running in and out of the store in a hurry.¹³

People may walk into the store, look around, and conclude that it is just another Asian grocery store. It may appear that the place has no special atmosphere. However, if they are so lucky as to witness interactions between the regular customers and the shopkeepers, they will learn that the store is in fact an interesting place simply because of the kinds of people that gather there.

¹² Several years ago, Tamaki and Kuang replaced an old-fashioned spring-operated scale with a digital one capable of price calculation.

¹³ Excerpts from a letter by Rumi, given to me in June 2004.

The appellation “Tamaki’s place” is apt because she not only owns the business, but controls it. She processes all the paperwork in addition to taking and placing orders and setting prices. On the other hand, Kuang handles the physical work: affixing price tags with the price gun, stocking shelves, delivering to local restaurants. Some customers even joke, “It’s Tamaki’s store, and Kuang just works for her.” And Tamaki knows her business. Although I was told that she used to make many mistakes and lost a lot of money at the beginning, as far as I have been able to observe, Tamaki handles the store’s operation quite capably indeed.

In my personal experience, one thing that struck me deeply was the customers’ dependence on Tamaki for acquiring food items. This became particularly noticeable when I answered the phone while tending the store alone. Often non-native speakers of English would just hang up, puzzled by a voice unfamiliar to them, or would mutter something indecipherable before putting down the phone upon learning that Tamaki and Kuang were absent. This was understandable since I did not know which items had been ordered for the following week, or whether or not a special request could be negotiated through a dealer. There would have been no point for the customers to speak to me, for I could not have answered any questions they might have had.

I felt inadequate also when restaurateurs called to place orders. At that time, the Oriental Shop delivered to about ten local Asian restaurants (Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese). It was difficult for me to understand the English spoken by non-Japanese Asians. I was not only unaccustomed to their accents, but unaware of the names of

certain Asian products belonging to cuisines other than Japanese. In such cases, I had to ask them to call back so that the answering machine could take the order instead.

Since I served as an occasional helper rather than a regular employee, I was only trained to do basic tasks such as ringing up items and packing them into a bag. No one but Tamaki makes decisions for the Oriental Shop. She owns and manages this business essentially single-handedly, and it grinds to a halt without Tamaki to steer it. If Tamaki has not yet fixed the price of an item, no one can purchase it. Customers often must patiently wait their turns. Such is the pace of this family-owned business. “I wanted to be able to handle it myself. I didn’t want to have to hire many other people. My husband and I can work together.”

The two have created a particular sense of place inside the Oriental Shop by their behaviours toward customers, adhering to a certain work ethic and expecting certain manners from customers in return. People’s behavioural patterns are often monitored by those who take charge of a place (see Bell 1989), and it is Tamaki and Kuang who set the standard of courtesy expected in their store. As I came to understand through working for Tamaki and Kuang, the Oriental Shop possesses its own moral stance, which resonates with that of the owners.

When the store was busy, Tamaki always encouraged me to take my time in keying each item into the cash register, “because accuracy is more important than speed.” By saying this aloud in front of customers, she publicly asserted one of her business principles. Watching Tamaki and Kuang at work, I learned the high standard of customer service to which they adhere. They open the door for customers with heavy

loads—a twenty-pound sack of rice, for example. They help customers transport purchases to their cars—for instance, if a mother has a child in arms or if a senior has difficulty in carrying a heavy shopping bag. Tamaki gives a discount to shoppers who purchase in large quantities. Some regular customers who are especially close to Tamaki occasionally receive some products for free, whether brand-new items, withered produce, or *omake* (おまけ: giveaways) from salesmen. Cheerful and attentive, Tamaki and Kuang create a homey atmosphere in the store. As one customer comments, “People don’t come here just to shop. They come here to see Tamaki and Kuang because they are their friends.”

The degree of care toward customers extends to complimentary services. There is a stand equipped with a microwave and electric water boiler, along with a stack of plastic cups, a bin of instant coffee, teabags, sugar, and powdered milk. Tamaki and Kuang heat their lunches in the microwave and pour themselves tea throughout the day, but this setup is really a self-service stand for customers (Fig. 8). Customers may savour a pastry they have just purchased; or, when several regulars gather, Tamaki may open a



Figure 8: Electric hot pot and microwave.

bag of rice crackers and convene an impromptu tea break. It is not unusual for one of the

regulars to bring over homemade sweets or lunch to share, and tea always encourages sociability.

Customers can also borrow cookbooks on Oriental cuisines, Japanese novels and magazines, and videotapes of Japanese TV programs, all free of charge. This collection of entertainments has accumulated via donations from people moving away, including those returning to Japan. One Japanese family has recently assumed responsibility for building the collection by tape-recording Japanese television dramas and sitcoms from a Japanese cable channel that they receive at home. Videotapes and DVDs circulate most frequently, and the store maintains a binder to keep track of borrowed items.

The Oriental Shop's atmosphere echoes the disposition of Tamaki and Kuang, and many regular customers adhere to the values of their store: generosity, loyalty, sincerity, and compassion. Yet different sorts of people come to shop, and the peace can be disturbed. I have been impressed with Tamaki and Kuang's ability to maintain their level-headed and easy-going attitudes while attending to various types of customers. While I am easily irritated by rude shoppers, they do not let such customers get under their skin.

It is not pleasant for me (and for many other regulars) to see Tamaki and Kuang treated in an unappreciative manner. Snobbish people can take advantage of their generosity. I once witnessed a female professional indicate that Kuang should carry a twenty-pound rice bag to her car outside, with white-collar condescension evident in her speech. A sense of annoyance percolated inside me. Kuang always helps people carry heavy groceries to their cars, but it was unmannerly of this woman to expect it so

arrogantly. Yet Kuang remained as cool as a cucumber. He just picked up the bag and followed her to the car. Beneath his jocular persona Kuang is a philosophical man of profound dignity, and during this incident I think I witnessed a Taoist teaching that extols the virtue of self-control: invincibility achieved by inaction, a doctrine of yielding and self-accommodation to surroundings as a means of gaining inner-strength. By not succumbing to desire, one is freed from negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, and disappointment. Without letting exterior influences nettle him, Kuang simply carried out his task as demanded. Watching Kuang attend to the chore, seemingly oblivious to the woman's rudeness, was rather awe-inspiring.

Tamaki and Kuang take pride in being fair and loyal to their customers. Yet sometimes friction occurs. One regular male customer testifies to an unpleasant incident that occurred between Tamaki and another customer:

This guy ordered twelve roll cakes with cream in them for a home party. When he came in, he accused Tamaki of stealing one piece from each one of the packages, because they weren't completely tightly packed. Of course Tamaki was shocked. So she called the bakery and asked how many inches the cakes were. She let the guy talk to the baker and [the baker explained that] "No, they are not tightly packed because you'll never be able to get them out without destroying them." But he was still accusing her of taking one slice out of each package, so she gave the money back and took the cakes back. He just wanted a reduced price for cheaper, her already low cheap price, because when you bought something like that she'd always give you a discount on it. That quantity. She was really upset and she wouldn't sell it to him. She told him, "This is it," and sold it to other customers. She reduced the price and in two days they were gone.

It was a special order from a Chinese bakery in Chicago. He wanted a cheaper price, or his wife did. People were saying that he was just doing what she told him to do. Basically they screwed themselves out of the cakes. And he asked what he would do for cakes and she told him to go to L___ [a bakery several blocks away] and buy some. She wouldn't sell the cakes to him after that.

He accused her of cheating. Tamaki doesn't cheat anybody. If anything, she'd give you a better deal. That's just not her way, and everyone knows that. Kuang is the same way.

Fortunately this kind of confrontation does not happen often, unlike shoplifting.

This customer had another incident to share. Tamaki told him that some small *sake* cups had disappeared from the display shelf by the front window. "Ones she kept getting out were stolen, shoplifted. She only had a few left, so she gave me two of them. She decided not to get them out anymore. She decided to give them to her friends. She had about a dozen and she was down to five or six, so half got stolen. Apparently they're hot items. Small, fit into your pocket." Shoplifting seems to happen more often than Tamaki and Kuang would like, but I know of no cases that have been reported to the authorities.

Tamaki is by nature mild-mannered, but when dealing with business contacts she assumes a no-nonsense posture. It is interesting to watch Tamaki's attitude transform according to the person with whom she is dealing. One evening a salesman from a Japanese trading company came in for a business meeting. He was there to negotiate a contract with the Oriental Shop. He was a very polite Japanese man of middle age. It appeared to me that the man had arranged an appointment with Tamaki in advance, yet because the store was so busy Tamaki kept him waiting for over an hour. I was helping in the store that day and I wanted to offer him a seat or at least some green tea, as Tamaki would typically do for anyone waiting. But I was shocked by her response to my proposal. Tamaki told me that he was a businessman, and that there was no need to fawn over him. "We'll just let him wait. It's okay because he is here for business. Businessmen are used to it." Hence this poor man was left standing with a huge business binder in his arms, trying to stay out of the way of shoppers, which meant he had to shuffle about constantly because every corner was piled with products. This was the first

time that I had witnessed Tamaki being so indifferent toward a visitor. Not understanding why Tamaki was behaving as she was, I just expressed my sympathy to the salesman. He remained pleasant, and eventually his patience was rewarded.

At last Tamaki called him to the checkout table, and the salesman brought out samples of new merchandise and the list of imports offered by his company. Tamaki's tone of voice differed from the one she uses when dealing with customers. She turned into a sharply assertive businesswoman, making it clear that she was in charge. While I busied myself by staring fascinatedly at the photos of all the new products from Japan, Tamaki peppered him with business questions about his company's new items, most popular items, price comparisons with rival companies, the smallest lots in which the company sells goods, and so forth. In the end, she ordered several new products to try out in the store. After he had gone, Tamaki mentioned that she knew the manager of the company for which the salesman worked. From this confession I inferred that she had never been in doubt about placing an order with this salesman, but had merely been putting him through a sort of good-natured initiation ritual. That salesman seems to have passed the test. Since that evening, I have seen him at the store on multiple occasions, eating food or drinking tea in a chair behind the counter, which indicates that Tamaki trusts him and approves of him as an upstanding business dealer.

Salesmen from trading companies drop by the Oriental Shop periodically to take orders or introduce new products. Tamaki and Kuang sometimes go to lunch with them, or Tamaki fixes something for them to eat in the store. When business associates become acquainted with Tamaki and Kuang in such an amicable way, it is a sign of

acceptance, which means that they are reputable business associates for the store.

Restaurateurs also are granted the same kind of respect. Trustworthy ones befriend Tamaki and Kuang easily, while ill-mannered ones (for instance, those delinquent in payment) receive stern rebuke from Tamaki.

The Oriental Shop is operated within a set of social norms founded upon by the values of Tamaki and Kuang. Their customer-oriented work ethic advocates a personal touch in this family-style establishment. Indeed, the place appeals to a certain kind of person who responds positively to the business and ethical codes enacted there.

Clientele

The position of ethnic grocery stores in North America is ambiguous. Because of the ubiquity of Asian foods in the everyday culture of North America, it may appear that ethnic grocery stores play an important role as providers of once-exotic food items. However, the popularity of Asian foods, resulting from their successful marketing by the food industry, has encouraged major chain grocers to carry standard ingredients for many Asian cuisines. Ethnic food aisles are filled with such items as soy sauce, fish sauce, black bean sauce, rice vinegar, *wasabi* (山葵), Chinese spices, noodles, and rice; and produce sections have Oriental vegetables like bean sprouts, Chinese cabbages, and *daikon* (大根: Asian radishes). Some stores even carry raw fish—usually tuna and salmon—for *sushi* (寿司 or 鮓) in their seafood sections, while deli departments offer boxed *sushi* and spring rolls. All of this enables the general public to enjoy the flavours

of Asia without ever traveling to speciality stores. This Asian food boom in a way hurts ethnic grocery stores, because the mainstream markets cater particularly to Americans. Small businesses like the Oriental Shop, then, need to concentrate on things that make their stores preferred options for certain people.

With regard to clientele, the Oriental Shop certainly welcomes a variety of people, ranging from one-time visitors who drop by out of curiosity, investigator-types who come in to compare its goods and prices with those of other ethnic grocery stores, and temporary regulars who visit frequently only for a short time before drifting to other stores, to long-term regulars who have patronized the store for many years. The Oriental Shop has succeeded in sustaining a faithful clientele, no matter how varied the frequency of individual customers' visits may be—from a few times a year, to once a month, to several days each week. In Tamaki's observation, about half of her customers are "Asian" (Asian immigrants and Asian Americans), while the others are European Americans. There are regular customers who have developed friendships with Tamaki and Kuang, whereas some people who have befriended them elsewhere come by occasionally to visit rather than shop.

Among less-frequent shoppers, there are those who come in just to take advantage of special deals or to purchase certain brands unavailable elsewhere. Customers who come to the Oriental Shop only on *sashimi* day are the best examples of this type, yet there are other cases as well. Once a Caucasian customer walked in to get twenty pounds of frozen shrimp. While Tamaki went into the back freezer to fetch a box of shrimp, the man explained to me (I happened to be in the store) that he needed it for a family

gathering. He appeared uninterested in looking around at the countless other goods in the store. "She's got the best shrimp in town!" he exclaimed as he walked out the door.

When I worked at the Oriental Shop during the summer, one Asian man came in periodically to clear the shelf of dried rice noodles, usually the only item he bought, except for when he occasionally reached for Chinese pastries (I supposed that the price was cheaper than at other stores). Between Christmas Day and New Year's Day, the store is "taro-washing" packed with people.¹⁴ This is when Japanese and Japanese Americans congregate at the store in order to prepare for the Japanese New Year celebrations, because celebratory foods such as *mochi* (餅: rice cakes) become available then.

The best way to illustrate the types of customers who patronize the Oriental Shop faithfully is to introduce regular visitors. I have selected five, whose interviews help in explaining what draws them to the place. I first met all five of them at the store, and our relationships deepened through years of casual talk on site. Especially with Mami and Jim I have developed close friendships.

The first three customers are Japanese homemakers, who take on the responsibility of family nurturers. I chose them as informants because of their special connections to Tamaki and Kuang. Not only do they rely on the store for procuring certain food items, but they also understand and appreciate the ways in which the business is operated.

Next come two long-standing customers who are not Japanese. They too have developed close ties with Tamaki and Kuang, and their narratives about the culture of

¹⁴ A Japanese expression used to describe crowdedness in a confined space. The metaphor comes from a traditional way of washing taros: pack them in a wooden tub to be rubbed against one another.

the Oriental Shop help to reveal the personalities of the storekeepers. Because the primary reason for their continuing visits is not grocery shopping, these non-Japanese customers' contributions to the store demonstrate yet another mode of interaction with its culture.

Rumi

A Japanese woman, Rumi is one of the longest-standing customers of the Oriental Shop. Although she and her husband live on the outskirts of Madison, they have continued to visit the store since its inception. "I buy mostly staples for Japanese cooking at the shop—rice, soy, *tofu* (豆腐), seaweed, and so on." Older Japanese women like Rumi who grew up in Japan before the advent of packaged foods and ready-made sauce mixes buy only these basic food items. While other Asian grocery stores closer to her house also carry such ingredients, Rumi and her husband have not stopped coming:

Occasionally [at the Oriental Shop] I have the luck to encounter groups of older Japanese women who drive a long distance to stock up on Japanese ingredients. Over the years I have become familiar with several groups. Often the husbands accompany the women and sometimes just one man seems to have driven them. The women chat in Japanese and, as I don't often have the chance to hear these domestic exchanges free of pretension and politeness among close friends, it's really fun. Their speech is rather coarse, revealing the working class they came from. I think of the Brooklyn accent when I hear them.

Some class-conscious Japanese might frown upon hearing their speech. When I was growing up in Tokyo, I would often see groups of women who carried big cloth-wrapped bundles on their backs while riding the trains. They would hawk, I presume, whatever merchandise was in the bundles. They were a tanned and sturdy bunch, and I was always fascinated by them and their coarse manner of speaking. Naturally the women at Tamaki's shop must be daughters of those brown women, and they must have come to the States most likely as war brides. As I listen to their speech, I imagine the hardships they must have gone through, and now they seem to be comfortable and well adjusted. And they still come a long distance to stock up on rice, yellow pungent pickles [*takuan*], and something fishy to go with the rice. It's a nice scene.

These people, as well as other Asian customers, gather at this store because of the personality of the proprietors. By being helpful and friendly to the customers, they eventually created a sense of community in and around the store. Although Tamaki, who came as a child to this country, is much younger than I and the ladies I spoke of, she still operates the shop in a manner that evokes the memory of a neighbourhood grocery those of us older than she were familiar with back home. A small space crammed with merchandise—no gleaming cash register or tall plate glass windows, just the quick movements of Tamaki herself, running here and there, reaching for merchandise and accommodating her customers.¹⁵

Rumi stresses her belief that the attraction of the Oriental Shop resides in the personalities of Tamaki and Kuang. In a mom-and-pop store like the Oriental Shop, the atmosphere of the place is defined directly by the dispositions of the storekeepers.

The other older Japanese women whom Rumi mentions are presumably those who visit the store only occasionally to stock up on basketsful of groceries totalling over a hundred dollars. Some of these women live outside of the Madison area, and are brought to the store by either their husbands or their adult children. They speak in some of the dialects of western Japan, which may sound a bit rough to those from Tokyo like Rumi and me. However, watching these women enjoying themselves shopping for Japanese snacks and other treats like pickles always produces a smile. For Rumi and for other older Japanese women, shopping at the Oriental Shop provides a glimpse of the homeland culture they left many years ago.

Older Japanese women continue to patronize the Oriental Shop partly because several decades ago mainstream grocery stores did not carry basic Japanese food items, and it has become a habit for them to buy certain foods at the Oriental Shop. Yet being

¹⁵ Excerpts from her letter given to me in June 2004.

able to speak with other Japanese people in their native tongue at the store brings joy to otherwise isolated individuals.

In addition to their shared ethnicity, Rumi and Tamaki have in common the hobbies of gardening and hand-crafting. Several years ago, Tamaki gave Rumi a patch in the backyard to start her own garden. In the summertime, Rumi can be spotted tending this garden intently and methodically under the blazing sun. Rumi recounts her intentions behind her desire to have the flower patch:

I always noticed as I shopped that Tamaki was fond of plants. One day I realized that I had worked hard all my life and had reached a point where I had a bit of spare time which I could share with other people. Not only do I have a little extra time, but I'm old enough to teach or share the knowledge that I have accumulated over my lifetime. There are many ways to do this as a volunteer, but for me it came down to making a flower bed at Tamaki's. Not only would she enjoy the flowers, but so would the other people who come to shop there. I like the idea of sharing the garden with them. It's been about three years, and the flowers are beginning to bloom steadily. Though the customers who come to the shop are strangers to me, except for a very few, I do feel that I belong to this small community of expatriates.

Rumi is also known as a skilled needleworker, and her handmade objects can be spotted among the store decor (which I discuss further in Chapter Four). Despite the fact that Rumi visits less frequently than some other Japanese women, her importance to the store is apparent from the material evidence on site.

Hiromi and Mami

In addition to older Japanese women, a group of young and middle-aged Japanese women forms a prominent part of the clientele. These women are more recent immigrants, and are a generation or two younger than Rumi. Because today Japanese

women still predominantly bear the responsibility for feeding their families, my discussion of recent Japanese immigrants involves female homemakers. For younger Japanese homemakers, dietary habits depend upon their family members' food preferences. For instance, if a woman is in an interethnic or interracial marriage, Japanese foods may not constitute a large part of the family's diet (her husband and children may not even like Japanese foods); thus she has little need to travel across town to obtain Japanese groceries. Some such women still may come to the store to enjoy daytime chats in Japanese with Tamaki or other customers, and to savour some snacks or buns for a quick lunch. Others visit only when the times for Japanese customs draw near. If a woman is married to a Japanese man, and if the family's diet is heavily Japanese, the chance of the wife patronizing the Oriental Shop is higher. So it is with Hiromi and Mami.

Mami remembers her initial entry into Tamaki's shop:

We came to Madison in May of 1998, and around the end of July a flower seller at the Farmer's Market that we got to know told us about the Oriental Shop. Her son was studying Japanese in high school and they'd been to the shop several times. And she asked where we shopped for our Japanese groceries. So we told them it was hard to find Japanese groceries in Madison, but that we went to M___ [a local Chinese grocery store]. Then she said there was a place owned by a Japanese person. We were really surprised to learn that! So we went there that evening. We got a map from the woman. But that day, Tamaki-san¹⁶ had a party to attend for a Japanese student who was returning to Japan, and she was closing the store early. We were so excited to find all kinds of Japanese foods there and really wanted to begin our shopping, but she was antsy to get going. She said, "Well, please come back tomorrow. And we'll talk!" So we didn't buy anything, but we went back on Sunday. Then we chatted a lot.

She recounts her first impression:

¹⁶ It is a Japanese social custom to add the suffix "san" in addressing a person, as a way of showing politeness and respect. I leave "san" in my translations of interviews with Japanese informants in order to convey their respectfulness.

When we stepped in, I was surprised to see a variety of snacks. Because at M___, I recognized Pocky [a Japanese snack that has become popular in China], but the others were Chinese. So my eyes caught those Japanese snacks, I remember. Also, ready-made foods (*retoruto*: レトルト), like the Cook-Do brands, I thought if the store had these, it probably had a large selection of Japanese food products. At least that was the impression I had. And in the freezer, I saw some fish and *natto* (納豆: fermented soybeans), and I thought, “Oh, Japanese foods!” because it’d been three months since we had had real Japanese foods.

Both Hiromi and Mami stress that there are many Japanese homemakers who do not patronize the Oriental Shop. Unlike older Japanese women who had begun to patronize the store long before the popularity of Asian foods in mainstream American culture, recent Japanese immigrants can procure ingredients basic to Japanese cuisine in chain stores closer to their homes. But Hiromi and Mami identify themselves as selective when it comes to groceries, which according to them is the reason that they patronize the Oriental Shop. As Mami states, “Nowadays you can get essential ingredients for Japanese foods anywhere. So, I think picky Japanese people go to the Oriental Shop.”

In the following chapter, Japanese women’s experiences as homemakers in diaspora, and the reliance on the Oriental Shop of selective homemakers like Hiromi and Mami, will be explored in more detail.

Ati

In addition to Japanese food items, the Oriental Shop carries a small amount of Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian items. Because there are Chinese-owned supermarkets in its vicinity that offer much broader selections of Asian merchandise, it

means that there is something special when non-Japanese Asians patronize the Oriental Shop, be it a cheap price on certain goods or something other than an economic benefit.

An Indonesian woman, Ati, tells me that she first stopped by the Oriental Shop to check out its grocery selection. She quickly realized that the store did not carry Indonesian ingredients, yet she found the shopkeeper amiable. "Tamaki, she was so nice, so since then... I am a regular customer!" Ati does not care much for Japanese foods, which she pronounces "too bland"; yet she counts on Tamaki to get particular items such as half-gallons of soymilk from a Chicago supplier. Occasionally she purchases a new product that catches her eye, such as pastries or rice crackers, but for one long period, soymilk was the only item for which she came to the store.

Besides Tamaki's personal-level services, which touched her heart, Ati wanted to help a working woman like herself. "I have a belief that, you know, you have to help especially women in business. Not a lot out there at that time. So she just started and you should help, you know." Ati comes to the Oriental Shop in the evening when the store is not too crowded, and visitors can find her seated on the stool by the checkout counter, talking to Tamaki as they sip tea together. Just as in the cases of Rumi, Hiromi, and Mami, Ati has developed a friendship with the storekeepers, especially Tamaki. Even though their relationship began as one between a storekeeper and a customer, the compatibility of their personalities has developed enough trust between the two for Tamaki to accept Ati's personal orders for specific items. This aspect of the storekeeper-customer relationship becomes crucial in the following chapters, as I explore what sustains the relationships.

Jim

With their dedication to customer service, Tamaki and Kuang have established a circle of customers who exhibit allegiance to the store. Yet Tamaki and Kuang's dedication goes beyond mere business. Rather, it is more appropriate to claim that their commitment to their customers is an extension of their personal qualities, for the store's attraction owes much to the personhoods of the storekeepers. Customers patronize the store because of personal compatibility with Tamaki and Kuang.

The best example of this is the case of Jim. While the majority of customers step into the Oriental Shop initially to shop for Asian groceries, Jim's reason for visiting had nothing to do with food:

At that time, I was carving walking sticks and canes out of corkscrew willow [which were sold] at a local rock shop, and Tamaki and Kuang had seen them and wanted to know who did it, so N___ [the owner of the rock shop] took down the name and phone number and gave it to me when I came in again. N___ told me they were interested, so I called them. They gave me directions to their store and I brought a bunch of sticks to choose from. Tamaki is an excellent artist in metalwork and we admire each other's work, and I found out that Kuang and I had a lot in common: things like belief system, cosmos, nature, and just about anything else. Started to talk about those things with him and about arts with Tamaki. This is about eight years ago.

[At our initial meeting] we talked about what she wanted me to do... so I had probably six or seven pieces of wood that she could choose from. I had them in the trunk of my car, so we went outside and stood there for quite a while. Tamaki was looking and Kuang and I were talking. And she chose the one she wanted and I was invited to come inside and have tea. Customers were coming in and I thought I was getting in the way. "Oh, no, no, no. Sit down and have some more tea. If you don't have anything to do, you know. Between customers, we'll talk."

Of course she had to feed me something. Kuang and I were talking, and all of a sudden Tamaki disappeared and she showed up with a couple of plates. My first introduction to Japanese American food.

Jim began to pay periodic visits to the Oriental Shop as he deepened his friendship with both Tamaki and Kuang by virtue of their mutual interests. Through their friendship, Jim was exposed slowly to Asian foods. “I’d been to Chinese restaurants here, and that’s as close to Asian as I got before I met them, you know.” Jim has since acquired a taste for *miso* (味噌), rice vinegar, *hijiki* (ひじき: a type of seaweed), *takuan* (沢庵: pickled *daikon*), *kimchi*, and Japanese candies.

Eventually his involvement with the store brought him some business responsibilities. When he is in the store and Tamaki and Kuang are busy, Jim sometimes offers return rides to students who do not own cars. Jim, with Kuang, has also helped with students’ in-town moves with the store truck. And Jim’s help became highly significant after he moved into the apartment above the store in 2002. Every time Jim goes grocery shopping at a large supermarket, he makes a habit of



Figure 9: Jim in the backyard.

asking Tamaki if she needs any supplies for the store (paper towels, etc.). Every morning he turns off the night light by the back door. Moreover, he has earned Tamaki’s trust to the extent that he has been given the responsibility of letting delivery men into the store and making sure the door is locked during her and Kuang’s absence. He even lends a

hand with the business inventory as tax time draws near. Most recently Jim was given another responsibility: to water Tamaki's plum trees and *bonsai* plants as well as Rumi's garden in the backyard (Fig. 9).

Regular customers of the Oriental Shop have their own reasons for liking the store, but they all would agree that the people and the aura of the place generate a sense of comfort. The variety of the clientele, ranging from Japanese to non-Japanese, attests to the fact that the store's charm extends its appeal to people of a similar ethical stance. This is expressed primarily through the owners' dispositions, reflected in the way they run the business, and how their customers respond to their business principles. In the next two chapters, I will explore the ways in which the regular customers contribute to the making and sustaining of the Oriental Shop's amicable atmosphere.



A small ethnic grocery store like the Oriental Shop could not have thrived as long as it has if not for the patronage of faithful regulars. What contributes to maintaining regular customers is Tamaki and Kuang's ability to provide care at the individual level. Operating with its own routine and running at its own pace, the Oriental Shop has cultivated and maintained solid relationships with its customers. As Tamaki states, "You have to take care of your customers. From the minute they walk into the store, it's our job to make sure they find what they need and to help them out as much as possible. Be

nice to your customers because they are your customers.” This statement of hers is the foundation of the store’s principles, and the following chapters will unfold the ways in which personal relationships within the store community are developed through material communication.

CHAPTER THREE: FOOD THAT NOURISHES AND GIVING THAT NURTURES

This chapter examines in more detail how meaningful it is that the Oriental Shop caters to individual needs, and the way in which appreciation is expressed through the giving of food. In the first section I discuss the ways in which the Japanese in the Madison area experience changes in their foodways after migration, by incorporating an extensive interview with two female homemakers that includes general information regarding Japanese food. Because the Oriental Shop specializes in Japanese foods, it is useful to discuss why self-proclaimed selective Japanese homemakers patronize the store, so as to emphasize the significance of Tamaki's store for their maintenance of ethnic foodways.

Then the discussion shifts to the role of food-giving in sustaining relationships between the storekeepers and customers. Food-giving has been a means of non-verbal communication among them. Tamaki and Kuang appreciate their regulars' faithfulness as much as the regulars appreciate the Oriental Shop, which is often manifested in the practice of food-giving. It is crucial to note the profundity of such frequent informal giving for strengthening their human connections.

The types of food that circulate in these relationships vary according to the food preferences of Tamaki and Kuang as well as those of the customers. And the practice of food-giving is not limited to the relationships between recent Japanese immigrants and

the storekeepers; it extends to other types of customers as well. Discussing food-giving practices that include non-Asian people not only highlights the diversity of customers but also helps to explain why it is not shared ethnicity but personal compatibility that sustains the relationships at the Oriental Shop.

The Case of Japanese Homemakers in Diaspora

Getting Accustomed to a New Food Environment

Among the manifold changes that immigrants undergo in a new country, foodways is one aspect of their lives that is affected considerably. The absence of familiar food from the homeland, the sight of new foodstuffs, as well as finding different those foods expected to be similar are challenges commonly experienced by immigrants (see, for instance, Lockwood and Lockwood 2000).

In order to examine the experience of recent Japanese immigrants, I will incorporate here a lengthy joint interview with Hiromi and Mami.¹⁷ Both homemakers are natives of Japan who married Japanese men and started families before coming to the United States. Thus they established their homemaking skills, including their repertoires of meals, in Japan, and their roles as fulltime homemakers and mothers have been constructed in a way that reflects the ideology of Japanese society.

Hiromi and Mami both immigrated to the United States in the 1990s because of their husbands' careers, and they considered their families to be "relying on Japanese

¹⁷ My interview with Hiromi and Mami was conducted in Japanese. The translation is mine.

ways of life after migration,” at least in the domain of foodways. Both of the women continue to act as fulltime homemakers in Madison, relishing the responsibility for preparing the family meals everyday.

The biggest culinary challenge these women face is posed by the different ingredients available in local grocery stores. For example, American varieties of vegetables are different from their Japanese counterparts, grown under different water and soil conditions. American eggplants and cucumbers are larger in size and blander in flavour. Green peppers and carrots do not have as strong and earthy a bitterness as their cousins in Japan. Leaves of American leeks and cabbages are thicker and harder, barely suitable as the fresh garnishes or side dishes so vital to many Japanese meals. But not only do they render different savoury experiences in fresh salads, they also taste different even after cooking. Common cooking techniques of Japanese cuisine include simmering and stir-frying with a blend of soy sauce, rice wine, and/or fish broth, so that each vegetable retains its original texture and flavour—a palatal sensation essential to Japanese cuisine. The different American vegetables make it virtually impossible to recreate the everyday Japanese dishes that the women learned in Japan.

As for meat... while beef, pork, and chicken are common ingredients in Japanese meals, these animals are butchered differently in America, and my informants report that their cooking results are not the same. Mami said, “I couldn’t tell which parts of the animals they were! So it was hard for me to figure out which cuts to buy for the dishes I wanted to cook.”

Hiromi related a similar experience in detail:

We came to the States in 1995, and the most shocking finding was that they don't have thinly sliced meat.¹⁸ In Japan we are so used to cooking meals with thinly sliced meat, and I went to a regular supermarket and they didn't have it. So my recipe routine changed. When I cook *yakisoba* [焼きそば: a stir-fried noodle dish] with meat I sliced myself, it turns out to be different from when I use [store-bought] thin meat, I think. Also, the fat is cut off already. So you don't get enough grease, and the *yakisoba* becomes light. The meat itself lacks fat. As for chicken, it comes without skin usually. Even though I'm cooking the same recipe, I feel like it comes out differently. It tastes different. For me, meat definitely tastes better in Japan.

The lack of fat on meat was pointed out as a problem by Mami as well. After discovering the rarity of ground chicken in regular grocery stores, she tried ground turkey as a substitute. In her opinion, turkey—which has not made its way to the tables of ordinary Japanese homes—is too dry for such a common dish as simmered ground chicken with vegetables. Mami even thought of purchasing a meat grinder. However, considering that she uses ground chicken only about once a month, she has decided to undertake the bothersome task of finely chopping chunks of chicken herself.

The cuts of meat available in North America and their different tastes in comparison to their Japanese counterparts are unexpected obstacles frequently faced by Japanese immigrant homemakers. An Okinawan woman who lived in Madison for a year once told me that she was never able to replicate the Okinawa-style simmered pork that she had routinely made in Japan, and she supposed that North American pigs were fed differently. While none of the Japanese women with whom I spoke ever made any attempt to investigate North American practices of livestock feeding and raising, all suspected them to be responsible for the differing tastes of North American meats.

¹⁸ Similar to bacon strips in shape (though uncured), thinly sliced beef and pork are used often in contemporary Japanese cooking for their convenience in stir-frying, and because they are fundamental to many Japanese dishes, including *sukiyaki* (すき焼き).

Worse yet is the lack of variety in seafood. In Japan, the fish section in a regular grocery store extends farther than the meat section, whereas the opposite is true in North America. The unavailability of familiar seafood can pose a serious problem. Mami recalled her early days in America:

For me, it's fish... I didn't know about the Oriental Shop for the first few months after we moved here. We learned about M___ [a Japanese chain grocery store] later; so we drove to Chicago, and I was impressed with their variety. But before that, in regular stores here you don't see fish with heads or tails attached too often. They all have pre-cut fish. So I didn't know what kinds of fish they were or what parts of the fish they were. They were unknown to me. I recognized salmon and tuna. They didn't have any *aomono* [青物: blue-skinned fish].

But this type of pickled fish from Scandinavia, I can't remember the name [later confirmed to be pickled herring]. But it's *hikarimono* [光物: shiny-skinned fish]. Well, it's something we had when we traveled in Holland and we liked it. I saw that at C___ [a local chain grocery store] and tried it and we liked it. It's not *aomono*, but at least it's *hikarimono*, so it tasted familiar. But before I found Tamaki-san's place, I missed fish like *sanma* [秋刀魚: horse mackerel], *aji* [鰺: jack mackerel], and *saba* [鯖: mackerel]. And when you know you can't have it, you want it all the more, right?

When the search for familiar ingredients ends only in disappointment, immigrants simply have to face reality: they are not at home anymore. They may seek consolation in temporary alternatives (e.g., the pickled herring Mami luckily found in regular grocery stores, thanks to Wisconsin's Scandinavian American population!), or just in reminiscing about the good foods back home to share common yearnings. Immigrants sigh wistfully while recounting trips back home or while viewing delicious-looking foods on a Japanese cable channel. As Hiromi confessed:

There are local fish speciality stores, but they have the same kinds of fish as regular stores. You feel like maybe they have more fresh stuff. But as far as the variety is concerned, it's the same. They may have tuna for *sashimi*, but that's about it. When I watch a travel channel and see some fish, I wonder, "Oh, those *aji* look really good. Where are they headed?"

Not having the variety of seafood available from local markets has caused Hiromi to restructure her cooking routine:

Because I couldn't incorporate fish into our meal pattern, I didn't know what to do. Because of the variety of fish in Japan, I could have a different type of main dish for each day of the week—not even one week, but two weeks. But here we have to have meat all the time. Meat, meat, fish, meat, meat, fish, like that. I don't like it. Fish is easy to cook. You just have to grill it or something. When I was in Japan, a fish day was *tenuki no hi* [手抜きの日: a day to take it easy]. Because you just need to poach it and add vegetables later or something. You can do it quickly. But now I can't slack off. So when I want to [slack off], I cook a pasta dish.

Because the ability to cook an array of recipes is an important part of the homemaker's art in Japanese culture, not being able to create a rich diversity of meals over the course of a week or month could potentially threaten a homemaker's status as a nurturer.

However, a bigger compromise comes when the homemaker needs to alter her recipes in order to accommodate the preferred tastes of Americans. Talking about their children's American friends who have come to visit, both Hiromi and Mami conceded that their young guests do not always appreciate their homemade cookies and cakes, and they think that it is because American children are more familiar with packaged sweets. Generally speaking, sweets in America contain large amounts of sugar, seeming excessively sweet to the palates of most Japanese, and some Japanese believe that this is why Americans do not care for homemade Western-style sweets attempted by the Japanese. A Japanese mother once told me, "It's not like they can tell the difference

between muffins made from scratch and those from a box, so then you don't feel like being bothered the next time.”¹⁹

It becomes necessary for Japanese homemakers to guess, test, and learn the flavours that please Americans. Mami once told me that she tries to cook something similar to Chinese dishes for her daughter's American friends, expecting them to be more familiar with Chinese food from local Chinese restaurants. She was relieved to see her fried rice become a hit at her daughter's last birthday party.

Hiromi also experienced a cross-cultural difference when hosting her daughter's birthday party. While birthday celebrations have become important social events in Japan since being imported as a Western tradition, for many Japanese people, North American birthday cakes topped with vivid frosting epitomize the marked differences in the aesthetics of food presentation. When Hiromi went to a store to purchase a birthday cake, she was astonished to see large cakes with frostings in such bright colours as blue and green. The excess of garish, artificial hues on cakes is often a turn-off for Japanese used to sweets decorated with less ostentatious cut fruits, jellies, and marzipans. However, in order to play the good host, some Japanese homemakers opt for American-style cakes for their children's parties.

Foods for special occasions are often encoded with symbolism that reflects cultural values and beliefs. Among the challenges faced by immigrants is the difficulty of observing native customs when confronted with the unavailability of native foods. In order, then, to maintain a semblance of tradition, drastic changes must be made to the

¹⁹ An interesting study of Arab Americans' perception of "American" food in connection with the Thanksgiving feast is that by William G. Lockwood and Yvonne R. Lockwood (2002).

native foodways. These proud Japanese homemakers take such modifications in stride. For example, foods for the New Year's celebration, the most important calendar event in Japanese culture, are highly symbolic. Yet the lack of certain ingredients or regional delicacies requires simplifying the culinary aspect of this celebration, often by reducing the scale of its festivity. As Hiromi explains: "As long as we can create the atmosphere. Just to have *ozōni* and *toshikoshi soba*.... We can't do something elaborate because we can't get enough ingredients." Simplifying the celebration usually means having only the key foods for certain selected key events among the series of customs associated with the New Year. "Some things, just at least to get the festive feeling. *Toshikoshi soba*, *ozōni* on the first of January, and *zenzai* on the day of *kagami biraki*."

Toshikoshi soba (年越しそば) are buckwheat noodles eaten on New Year's Eve to wish for longevity (because the noodles are long). On January 1, people eat *ozōni* (お雑煮), which is a clear soup flavoured with seafood broth, containing rice cakes, vegetables, and chicken.²⁰ Eating a rice cake is itself a very symbolic act: a rice cake stretches, thus metaphorically connoting longevity. Also, rice cakes are the most important offerings to the deities of the New Year, who are believed to visit households to bring good luck. Called *kagami-mochi* (鏡餅: mirror rice cakes), layered round rice cakes ornamented with other symbolic items are placed in the family room or kitchen, or in front of a Shinto altar,²¹ and it is in the cakes that the deities are believed to nest

²⁰ The ingredients for this dish vary depending upon the region.

²¹ The *kagami mochi* consists of two round rice cakes, the smaller one placed atop the larger and decorated with a citrus fruit that symbolizes familial succession. Green leaves emblematic of a variety of values, among which righteousness and familial prosperity, are sometimes added.

temporarily during their visits to the households, due to the rice cakes' resemblance to a mirror, one of the sacred objects in Shinto. On January 11, the day of the “mirror-opening” (*kagami biraki*: 鏡開き), the deities leave this temporary dwelling, which family members then consume to digest its blessings, often in an adzuki bean soup called *zenzai* (善哉).

The foods for the New Year's celebration usually carry positive metaphors that reflect social values and auspiciousness, enabled by the use of punning. For instance, *mame* (豆) is served to wish for diligence because *mame* denotes both “beans” and “hardworking.” *Kobumaki* (昆布巻き) is a simmered sardine rolled in kelp, which symbolizes felicity, from the pun with *yorokobu* (喜ぶ: be happy) and *kobu* (昆布: kelp). Other foods represent lingering traditions and values from olden times. For instance, *tatsukuri* (田作り) is the name of a dish consisting of caramel-glazed dried sardines, which wishes for an ample harvest. In pre-industrial Japan sardines were considered the most desirable of fertilizers. Although most farmers were not able to afford them, it became auspicious on the occasion of the New Year to be able to have food from the ocean due to its rarity in the mountainous regions, and to have something that symbolized a good harvest. *Kazunoko* (数の子) is herring roe, the plenitude of whose eggs symbolizes family prosperity. Another significant value in Asian culture is longevity, which is encoded in shrimp because their bent backs and long moustaches resemble those of an old man.

For those who believe strongly in the power of symbolism and the significance of observing traditions, it is hard to eliminate from this New Year event the practice of ingesting such highly meaningful food items. Consuming auspiciousness is an act of self-empowerment. Moreover, eating foods may be the only custom tied to the New Year's celebration that immigrants observe in the New World. No longer in Japan, they cannot participate in other customs surrounding the holiday, such as peregrinating to temples and shrines to wish for a fresh start; buying new talismans and charms that ensure protection of their homes; visiting relatives, and sharing meals and playing traditional card games with them. Savouring auspicious foods, then, allows the Japanese in the Madison area to engage in a ceremonial rite to celebrate the beginning of the calendric cycle, however modified the whole event may be.

While they may at times feel constrained by the available ingredients, immigrants rise to the culinary challenge to realize celebrations more modest yet no less meaningful than the ones remembered from the homeland. These transitional experiences have led Hiromi and Mami to re-evaluate and re-adjust their roles as nurturers and to re-establish their statuses as homemakers. Hiromi now bakes a birthday cake herself on her daughter's birthday, and buys another cake from an American bakery for the party to which her daughter's American friends are invited. Hiromi confesses that she used to buy a cake from a local bakery when they lived in Japan. However, not being able to find familiar sweets in America has prompted her to do the baking herself. Since her daughter appreciates homemade sweets that are geared to Japanese tastes, it is worthwhile to perform the mother's role in this new way in North America:

I think I've been making more effort here [*kufu siteru*: 工夫している]. In Japan, for instance, a Christmas cake, you can buy it. There are things you can just buy in Japan. So to keep our calendar customs, it was easier in Japan, as far as foods were concerned.

For the Girl's Day, stores have *hina-gashi* [sweets designed specifically for the custom: 雛菓子] and you just have to go get them. But here we can't. In our family, my husband makes *momo manju* [桃饅頭: peach buns] for that event....²² Even for birthday cakes like a strawberry shortcake, here you don't find the kind you've known from Japan. So I've made sponge cake myself from scratch. And I feel like I've been acting as a model mother in a way [*hahaoya rashii koto wo shiteiru*: 母親らしいことをしている].

Since coming here, I feel like I've done more "made-from-scratch" types of cooking. That's my impression anyway.

Her comments echo other homemakers' reports of discovering a new arena in which to demonstrate motherhood; migration put them in a situation wherein they need to cook the foods that they used to be able to buy at specialty stores in Japan. The dialogue between Hiromi and Mami below attests to this:

M: Like *oseki-han* [お赤飯: red-bean rice], you can buy it anywhere.²³ You just need to go to a supermarket or somewhere to buy it when you want it. When my daughter had her first menstruation, I wanted to make *oseki-han* for her. So I soaked adzuki beans, simmered them, and I got some sticky rice and made *oseki-han*. And I thought, "I wouldn't make this if I were in Japan." Because you can get decent ones at the store, better than you can make on your own.

H: Simmering beans, I didn't do it myself when I was in Japan, to tell the truth. Because you can buy good ones. But here you spend a whole day cooking from scratch.

M: *Kuromame* [黒豆: black beans] for New Year's Day, for instance. I bought them from the store when we were in Japan because it's not like you eat that many. But here I bought a bag full of black beans because you can't just buy a small portion here. So I cooked a huge amount of *kuromame*. But for the kids, it's an unfamiliar taste, so they didn't eat much [laugh]. I really wanted to have *kuromame* for New Year's. We wish for industriousness by eating beans [*mame ni naru*: まめになる], so I cooked it. *Kobumaki* and *tatsukuri*, too.

²² Hiromi explains that *momo manju* is a type of steamed bun with a pinkish hue created by food colouring, filled with *anko* (餡子: adzuki bean paste).

²³ *Oseki-han* is made for celebratory occasions such as graduation, marriage, and other life events including girls' first menstruation. Red beans called adzuki are added to sticky rice to create a combination of auspicious colours in Japanese culture (*kō-haku* [紅白: red and white]).

As both mothers acknowledge that coming to a new country has given them new tasks in preparing special-occasion foods due to the lack of specialty shops, their voices project a hint of pride, even if their children may not appreciate everything they try to cook. While being aware that their children's experiences with foods will not be the same as theirs, these Japanese mothers attempt to confect what will be childhood memories for their young ones.

Oriental Shop to the Rescue

Once the Japanese leave their archipelagic cradle for overseas, the continuation of their foodways is at the mercy of local food supplies at their destinations. For immigrants, the daily activities of cooking and eating are constant reminders that they are no longer in their homeland, and that their foodways have been affected as a result. Nevertheless those who have settled in Madison can at least seek harbour at the Oriental Shop.

And what exactly do selective Japanese patrons of the Oriental Shop seek? Firstly, they want Japanese-style vegetables such as cabbage, leeks, eggplant, cucumbers, chives, apples, and Asian pears. Although these types of produce are available in local supermarkets, the flavours of American varieties are sufficiently different for the Japanese to feel the effects in the dishes they prepare. Hence it is important that Japanese varieties be made available at the Oriental Shop. When a person makes a specific request for Japanese-style vegetables, Tamaki will shop for them at the Japanese supermarket in Chicago. This saves the person a long trip down to Illinois.

Seafood is essential to the Japanese diet, and the store's freezer is always stocked with items such as mackerel, horse mackerel, sea bream, and eel. Though not nearly as ample as they would be in a native Japanese market, the Oriental Shop's seafood offerings nonetheless are appreciated by customers who wish to maintain this aspect of their foodways.

Seafood provided by the contracted wholesaler is often a treat of great consequence. Mami exhilaratingly recounts the occasion on which Tamaki obtained *mongo-ika* (もんごいか: cuttlefish):

Tamaki-san listens to our requests well. The other day, *mongo-ika* came in. Did you know that? I kept telling Tamaki-san I really wanted it so much. Then she told me she could get some finally. But only three. So I reserved one for my family! It doesn't become available too often. It's hard to get it or something. Once before Tamaki-san got some, but they were so thin. They don't taste good when they are thin. So I think she returned them. But this time, they were thick and of good quality. So if we ask, she tries to arrange things for us.

Mami is one of the customers who regularly makes requests, and she depends upon Tamaki to obtain seafood only available through the wholesaler. The seafood supplier, who seems to know that Tamaki has good customers, often offers her great deals, and when seafood that is rare or of particularly high quality (e.g., thick flounder) comes to the Oriental Shop, Tamaki contacts her regulars who love such delicacies.

Sashimi day is also looked upon with great anticipation by many Japanese immigrants, both new and old, in the Madison area. As Hiromi says:

I look forward to *sashimi* day once every other week. I've even marked the days on our meal schedule. We always get *sashimi* from Tamaki-san. Actually, I get fish only at Tamaki-san's place.

For her close customers, Tamaki will save the best parts (the fattiest pieces of tuna or salmon, for example), and this is another way of ensuring customer satisfaction at the Oriental Shop.

Rice has long been prominent in Japanese cuisine, and while short-grain rice has been widely adopted by mainstream America, the types available in regular supermarkets are not the kinds that Japanese consider delectable. Again the difference in taste leads the Japanese to deem inferior those in the mainstream supermarkets. For the Japanese, the types of rice (e.g., *koshihikari* [コシヒカリ], a Japan-born species of short-grain rice) and the freshness of the crop matter immensely. Regular supermarkets typically carry only a few types of often overpriced short-grain rice, whereas the Oriental Shop carries five or more brands, many of which come in different quantities (five, ten, or twenty pounds), as in Japan. Every year when the new crop becomes available, orders pour in, keeping Tamaki busy. Some Japanese people request ten or more bags of new-crop *koshihikari* rice to stock up for the year.

The Oriental Shop's penchant for carrying multiple brands and types of rice evidences the importance of this food within the culture served by the store, as the more essential a food is, the stronger is the sense of preference harboured by each customer. This factor requires that the store assemble a variety of rice types so as to accommodate the preferences of as many customers as possible. At the same time, the store needs to be able to draw a large enough number of customers who purchase these products, lest the stock not circulate and go stale. The fact that many varieties of rice fly regularly from

the shelves, shipment after shipment, indicates that multiple brands of Japanese rice are in demand, which proves the importance of the store's carrying specialty rice.

The same can be said for *miso*-paste and *tofu*. American grocery stores have only one or two brands of *miso*-paste, each of which may offer “white,” “red,” and “mixed” varieties. As for *tofu*, they typically stock only a “soft” kind and “hard” kind. In Asian grocery stores, however, one expects to find multiple brands to accommodate a range of individual preferences. The different flavours of *miso* result from differences in the type of grain, length of fermentation, and different combinations of *miso*. And there are many regional varieties as well. It is common for a Japanese person to be fussy about *miso*. For *tofu*, the choice between “soft” and “hard” depends more upon the recipe than personal preference. The firmness of hard *tofu* withstands simmering, making it desirable for such a dish as *sukiyaki*. Soft *tofu*, on the other hand, may disintegrate in the cooking process. Yet it has a smooth texture that may be preferred for raw consumption or in soup; it swims down one's throat. These aspects of *miso* and *tofu* in Japanese cuisine need to be understood by the owner of an Asian grocery store.

For selective immigrants, made-in-Japan products still have adherents. Soy sauce makes a good example. Before discovering the Oriental Shop, Mami had tried a type of soy sauce whose brand was unknown to her: “I bought some soy sauce at a Chinese grocery store, but we didn't like its flavour. I made *nikujaga* [肉じゃが: simmered pork with potatoes] with it, and it tasted awful.” She eventually learned that Kikkoman soy sauce is available in the Madison area, but she disliked the varieties made in the United

States.²⁴ Even though Kikkoman has become a household name in North America (or at least in Wisconsin), some Japanese customers prefer the Kikkoman soy sauces made in Japan over their North American cousins, as their Japan-trained palates detect a difference in flavour. Japanese immigrants with whom I have spoken proclaim that soy sauce made in Japan simply tastes “better.” In Mami’s household, North American soy sauce comes in handy for cooking, while a Japanese type is reserved for pouring directly on food (*tofu*, unseasoned boiled vegetables, etc.) because then the flavour is obvious, and the difference in quality between the two kinds becomes apparent.

The immigrants’ faith in made-in-Japan products extends to foods that were originally adopted from other cuisines. Japan’s most famous brand of mayonnaise provides a good example. Kewpie mayonnaise, a brand first introduced to Japan in 1925 by a Japanese entrepreneur, has long been a household name among the Japanese.²⁵ Although plenty of mayonnaise and mayonnaise-like products are available in North America, Kewpie mayonnaise is preferred by Japanese people who want to maintain their native foodways. None of my informants has investigated the actual ingredients in Kewpie mayonnaise and comparable American products, yet the difference in taste is obvious enough for them to cleave to the familiar brand.²⁶

²⁴ Kikkoman is the best-known brand of soy sauce in Japan as well as in North America. Kikkoman is one of the first successful Japanese food companies to have established a North American division. One of the production facilities is located in Walworth, Wisconsin.

²⁵ This brand name, Kewpie, which is also the company’s name, is taken from the eponymous cartoon character invented by Rose O’Neill in 1909. As it did in America, Kewpie became a cultural icon in early-twentieth-century Japan, frequently appearing in advertisements and as celluloid dolls that captured the hearts of children.

²⁶ According to the company’s website, Kewpie mayonnaise includes only yolks rather than the whole eggs, which results in a rich and mild flavour. Q. P. Corporations <<http://www.kewpie.co.jp/world/history/index.html>> (accessed on June 22, 2008).

In addition to familiarity of taste, familiarity of variety is a factor that influences Japanese people's continuing inclination toward Japanese-style foods. Two prominent foods adopted from other cultures,²⁷ *rāmen* and bread, will be good examples for this discussion.

Rāmen (ラーメン: Chinese lo-mein noodles in soup) is a type of food without which Japanese cuisine as a whole cannot be discussed. Japan's *rāmen* culture boasts a long history and a great diversity of products. *Rāmen* was first introduced to the Japanese by Chinese immigrants, and today it is a part of everyday food culture in Japan. The noodles are frequently savoured at eateries specializing in *rāmen* and at Chinese restaurants, or enjoyed at home in instant varieties. Japan's leading anthropologist in food research, Naomichi Ishige, states that *rāmen* is a national food of Japan (2001: 251–53), and instant *rāmen* has been deemed one of Japan's best inventions.²⁸ A great deal of marketing drives Japan's *rāmen* business, which takes into account things such as the flavour of the soup base, chewiness of the noodles, and richness of the toppings. And these matters are not trivial, as is reflected in the many varieties of instant noodles launched by Japanese food companies, of which dozens are sold at the Oriental Shop.

Bread is another staple in Japanese foodways, as common nowadays as rice. In the early twentieth century, Japanese entrepreneurs introduced various kinds of bread, many

²⁷ This category of food is called, in Japanese, *gairaishoku* (外来食: food coming from outside).

²⁸ While Western foods were vigorously absorbed into the mainstream of Japanese culture, foods from China and Korea also influenced the culinary experiences of the Japanese despite lingering discrimination against these peoples. *Rāmen* in particular was popularized as a fast food available at noodle shops and food stands, and in 1958 the invention of instant noodles altered the culinary scene in Japan and elsewhere. See Aoki (2001) for a brief overview of the dissemination of *rāmen*, and Sidney Cheung's article that summarizes the importation and alteration of Chinese food throughout Japanese history (2002).

of which have become standards in Japan's bread industry and bakeries. Every Wednesday at the Oriental Shop these staples of Japanese bread culture appear on the counter for display, having been procured the day before from Chicago's Japanese bakeries. From a simple white tetragonal bread, *shokupan* (食パン), to pastries like *an'pan* (餡パン: buns filled with red-bean paste), *karē-pan* (カレーパン: buns filled with curry), *kurīmu-pan* (クリームパン: buns filled with custard cream), and *korone* (コロネ: twisted horn-shaped bread filled with chocolate cream), undoubtedly Japanese-style breads fascinate many Japanese people (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Two types of *an'pan* and *kurīmu-pan*.



Figure 11: Bun in the shape of the Japanese cartoon character *An'pan-Man*.

Many Japanese customers come to the Oriental Shop on Wednesdays, specifically targeting these bakery goods. Some buy *shokupan* every week because it is a part of their daily breakfast, while others pick up buns for quick lunches or snacks, and sweets as treats for their children. Although my informants state that they do sometimes explore the local breads available from supermarkets and independent bakeries, Japanese-style bread remains in demand. Bread in North America simply cannot substitute for

Japanese-style bread. Japanese food culture has developed its own repertory of breads whose shapes and tastes differ from those of North American bread. Some buns come in the shapes of animals or cartoon characters that people remember from childhood (Fig. 11). The aroma and sight of these Japanese-style breads remind people of their home country.

Similarly, other *gairaishoku* (foods adopted from other cultures) have so deeply permeated Japanese food culture that they cannot easily be replaced. For instance, ready-made foods such as curry sauce, pasta sauce, and sauce for Chinese foods are steady sellers. Curry is another acclaimed “national food” (Ishige 2001, 156–57), as beloved in the Japanese diet as *rāmen*. Initially brought by British officials living in nineteenth-century Japan, curry was appropriated by numerous native entrepreneurs and modified to suit Japanese tastes. On the home-cooking scene, ready-made curry sauce and curry sauce mix are sold at stores nationwide. Also, the varieties of ready-made pasta sauce that incorporate Japanese delicacies such as cured codfish roe (*tarako*: タラコ) or spicy codfish roe (*mentaiko*: 明太子) reflect the hybridity of the Japanese diet.²⁹ These various food items available at the Oriental Shop allow a researcher to observe the extent to which contemporary foodways of the Japanese have been influenced by other cuisines.

In addition to providing such everyday foods of contemporary Japanese culture, the Oriental Shop plays an important role in enabling Japanese families to keep ceremonial traditions. When the times of calendar customs draw near, the Oriental Shop gears up for

²⁹ For a more comprehensive overview of *gairaishoku* and their influences on Japanese cuisine, see Chapter Six: Changes in the Modern Age, in Ishige’s book *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (2001, 141–71).

the celebrations. For Girl's Day (March 3) and Children's Day (May 5), certain confections—*sakura-mochi* (桜餅: a rice cake with adzuki bean filling, wrapped in a cherry leaf), *kashiwa-mochi* (柏餅: a rice cake wrapped in an oak leaf), and *chimaki* (粽: a rice cake wrapped in bamboo leaves)—appear on the counter, reminders of native customs even for those with no children.

The end of the year is by far the busiest period at the Oriental Shop because of the New Year's celebration. About two weeks in advance of New Year's Eve, Tamaki hurries herself making *mochi* with an electric rice-cake maker. Homemade *mochi* is one of the featured items at the Oriental Shop during the New Year's period. Many people travel to the store only for *mochi*. This is the time of year when sales boom. Products that come only for this once-a-year occasion—such as *kobumaki*, *tatsukuri*, *kazunoko*, and *mitsuba* (Japanese parsley)—visually generate an auspicious mood. More *konbu* and *kuromame* are ordered because of the high demand for these celebratory foods. All kinds of New Year's foods become available at this time of year, prompting many homemakers to flock to the Oriental Shop to place special orders in anticipation of their family gatherings. In these weeks the Oriental Shop teems with excitement despite the severity of the Midwest winter.

Other seasonal foods including *Fuji* apples (ふじ), persimmons, oysters, and flatfish bring excitement as well, sparking the recounting of nostalgic stories and the exchanging of regional recipes remembered from the homeland.

It is not merely for food items that are hard to obtain in mainstream markets that selective homemakers patronize the Oriental Shop. Tamaki attends well to her

customers' concerns about health because she cares equally about her own family's health. Organic mushrooms and organic eggs arrive weekly, and Tamaki tries to obtain foods with no additives when possible. Because Japanese immigrants know that U.S. food regulations differ from those of Japan, some are quite sceptical about the safety of American foods. Therefore, foods labelled "organic" at least give the suggestion that they are better and safer than their non-organic counterparts. Without necessarily knowing any specific differences between the regulations of the two countries, Japanese immigrants are inclined to trust their home country's policies. They often state, "Well, I know that they have different food regulations here," as a means of justifying their food choices. This attitude may explain why Japanese immigrants hold faith in products made in Japan in the first place, but the fact that Tamaki herself cares about health, and orders merchandise accordingly, provides an extra level of assurance.

Some Japanese people argue that the difference in the two cultures' eating customs explains their scepticism toward American foods. For example, people in Japan enjoy raw scrambled eggs as a dipping sauce for *sukiyaki*. However, because Americans do not generally eat raw eggs, Japanese immigrants suspect that the quality of eggs in the United States might not be as high as it is in Japan. For similar reasons, they question the freshness of seafood. Mami stated, "When I was in Japan, I made *shiokara* myself from store-bought raw squid. Here, even if it looks fresh, I wouldn't eat it raw."³⁰

Regardless of the legitimacy of their concerns, my informants need to be assured that their food comes from a trusted source. Eggs at Tamaki's store come from free-

³⁰ *Shiokara* (塩辛) is a dish made from chopped raw squid (and other seafood) mixed with its salted viscera for the purpose of fermentation.

range chickens raised on California farms, and are packed in cartons with Japanese labels. This lends them a stamp of approval, and the eggs are presumed to be bred in a way that ensures enough freshness that they can be eaten raw. Likewise seafood must come from Asian wholesalers for many Japanese customers to feel that it is safe to eat raw.

Despite the difficulties immigrant homemakers may experience in their new environment, they do not consider such things to be burdens. Instead, they reinvent the notion of motherhood, and certainly the existence of the Oriental Shop helps them to have peace of mind. It's a matter of compromise, as Mami says, "At least we can go to Tamaki-san's. There are many places where they have much less [Japanese food] than we can get here. At least we can go to Tamaki-san's."

Both Hiromi and Mami are aware that more Japanese groceries are available in bigger cities like Chicago. However, having small children to look after does not allow them to travel a long way on a regular basis. Packages from their Japanese relatives back home supplement daily meals, yet in general the families must depend on locally available foodstuffs. And this underscores what an important role the Oriental Shop plays in helping Japanese homemakers maintain their native foodways while providing their families with the kind of nourishment they value.

Being able to purchase good-tasting familiar products is an important factor that draws Japanese immigrants to the Oriental Shop, and cooking with products made in Japan allows them to recapture a sense of their native diet. For a Japanese person to feel

that he or she is eating Japanese foods, it is necessary to have not only rice and soy sauce, but Japanese versions of imported foods (bread, pasta, *rāmen*, etc.) as well.

Moreover, the fact that Tamaki understands Japanese people's views on food safety is a key factor in explaining why recent Japanese immigrants who are conscious of such matters patronize the Oriental Shop. These features mark the Oriental Shop as a unique store where the storekeepers exhibit personal-level care for individual needs. In the case of the recent Japanese immigrants, it is this very quality of customer service that makes the store a reliable grocery provider in the Madison area for those who intend to maintain their native foodways, as Hiromi attests:

When we lived in another state, there was a Japanese grocery store, but they didn't order things according to the season. So they just had the same things all year around. They didn't sell anything special because it was in season. So we could get Japanese groceries, but all year long we had the same kinds of food. I didn't go there too often. I tried to use things from regular grocery stores because that Japanese store wasn't interesting. Tamaki-san tries to fill our requests. We lived there for two years but I didn't frequent that Japanese store. But since we moved here... [Tamaki-san] sincerely cares a lot about our foods, so it has been nice. I think her store is special that way.

Such customer service is derived from none other than personal ethics. Giving individual-level attention has been Tamaki's principle, as reflected in the scale of her business. This quality, more than the sharing of language and cultural knowledge, is the factor that makes the Oriental Shop appealing to certain people.

Nurturing through the Giving of Food

As described above, the Oriental Shop's stock enables recent Japanese immigrants to nourish their families through their ethnic foodways. Since they take pride in being responsible nurturers, dedicated homemakers and serious food lovers appreciate Tamaki and Kuang's efforts very much.

Particularly for special regulars like Hiromi and Mami, customer service extends to the distribution of free items. While Tamaki and Kuang understand how much their close customers appreciate their devotion, they too appreciate these people's faith and continuous patronage. In storekeeper-customer interactions, food is used as a tangible manifestation of gratitude. Food-giving practiced by the storekeepers is not only a business strategy but a means of nurturing their relationships with customers. The practice of food-giving, which is often reciprocal in nature, serves as non-verbal conversation.

For example, Tamaki and Kuang give away week-old vegetables and recently-expired but still safely edible products to regular customers so as to minimize waste. Mushrooms, eggplant, scallions, and other produce do not always sell steadily. When excess vegetables are left after the arrival of a new batch, older ones are either marked down or given out. Some customers always ask for fresh ones, but regulars who are more sympathetic to the storekeepers understand the situation and voluntarily help them get rid of less desirable produce. In such circumstances, occasionally Tamaki distributes vegetables to her friends for free.

When a brand-new product arrives, it is common for Tamaki to open up a package for sharing. Snacks are most often shared over tea this way when several familiar faces gather around the checkout counter. This occasion benefits Tamaki for several reasons: she can taste the new product herself and receive feedback from her close customers, which will help her to decide whether or not to order more; and those customers who constitute the informal panel may tell others about it, and through the power of word of mouth its sales may increase.

To receive the privilege of special deals, customers need to show steady support of the store. Whereas processing special orders and looking out for seasonal foods are services that Tamaki and Kuang provide to anyone, in order for a customer to be granted the privilege of enjoying free or heavily discounted foods, he or she needs to demonstrate the ability to give as much in return.

In response to receiving free food, close customers often bring their homemade dishes or foods bought from other stores to return the favour and show appreciation. For example, people have presented baked goods such as breads, pies, cookies, muffins, and fruit cakes. These baked goods may come from Madison's local Farmer's Market or from suburban speciality shops that people have visited, or from people's home kitchens. For instance, a customer brought a loaf of German-style bread that she routinely buys because she thought Tamaki and Kuang might enjoy it as well. Rumi is known as a great baker, and every autumn she brings one of her famous homemade apple pies. Mami once brought a box of chocolates when she traveled to a chocolate shop on the outskirts of Madison, and she came to the Oriental Shop bearing wheat muffins after trying to bake

them at home for the first time. More commonly, small side dishes (*okazu*: おかず) such as *tsukudani* (佃煮: soy sauce-flavoured preserves) and *harusame* salad (春雨サラダ: bean-starch noodle salad) are presented, as are rice dishes like *okowa* (お強: steamed sweet rice) and *futomaki* (太巻き: thick *sushi* rolls).

Considering my own case, when I make marinated tea-boiled pork (*kōcha-ni*: 紅茶煮) or simmered green soybeans (*hitashi-mame*: ひたし豆), I always try to cook a large quantity so that I can take some to Tamaki and Kuang. Both *kōcha-ni* and *hitashi-mame* have a light soy sauce flavour, making them nice additions to any meal, as they do not interfere with the tastes of other dishes. Also, when I bake oatmeal cookies, I make sure to bring some to Tamaki and Kuang because they are filling and are easy to pop into their mouths on busy days.

These foods are not necessarily elaborate or luxurious, nor are they symbol-laden ceremonial foods. Instead, they are inexpensive everyday foods that are not sold in the Oriental Shop. People may prepare these foods for a party or an event to which they are invited, or may make extra when cooking for their families, with some portion reserved for Tamaki and Kuang.

This kind of casual giving is in fact crucial in sustaining healthy shopkeeper-customer relationships. Anthropologists have studied the highly systematized and ritualized gift-giving customs of the Japanese, which are based on a sense of obligation and solidarity within family, community, and occupational groups (Ashkenazi 2000; Befu 1968; Bestor 1989: 194–207; Brumann 2000: 224–48; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 203–

06, 217–18; Rupp 2003). While ethical concepts of obligation (*giri*: 義理) and a sense of owing a debt (*on*: 恩)—both of which are claimed to be so profoundly characteristic of Japanese gift-giving customs—may work as incentives when Japanese people bring foods to Tamaki and Kuang, my observations reveal that such unofficial giving is more spontaneous, less calculated, than a model appealing to notions of socio-culturally defined responsibilities would suggest. As argued by sociologist Aafke E. Komter, personal relationships are sustained by reciprocal giving, the continuation of which is propelled less by feelings of obligation than by a mutual sense of gratitude (2005, 57–58; 66–68). And I believe that the core motivation for the casual giving practiced at the Oriental Shop.

This casual gratitude-driven giving that takes place at the Oriental Shop I will call “*tsuide* (ついで) giving”—giving in passing. I will define this as a type of giving in which both giving and receiving parties are voluntary participants in giving cycles that occur within no specific time frame, such that one scarcely remembers whether one is returning a gift or starting a new round of giving. Also, since they know that this is not a one-time quid-pro-quo exchange, there is no pressure to proffer immediate return gifts. *Tsuide* giving happens in a non-formulaic or non-ceremonial manner, and its participants do not concern themselves with whether each act of giving initiates or concludes a cycle; thus the ritual continues infinitely. Willingness is the primarily fuel for *tsuide* giving, even though participants are aware of its bothersome nature, expressed in the Japanese proverb: “*Tada yori takai mono wa nai*” (タダより高いものは無い: “Nothing costs

more than a free gift"). The irony embedded in this proverb is that a free gift incurs a sense of debt, and since a person does not know how to repay it properly due to the lack of obvious value attached to the original gift, it consequentially costs the receiver more, both monetarily and emotionally, in looking for an appropriate return gift.³¹

Although this sense of debt can be a burden, participants in such *tsuide* cycles at the Oriental Shop invest personally in their giving, as though it were natural for anyone who valued relationships. As a matter of fact, whether or not a customer repays a gift or favour is a yardstick by which Tamaki and Kuang, as well as fellow customers, measure that person's manners. Tamaki gives a product for free to someone, and if the person does not return anything, she may choose not to give the person any more products for free. This may serve as a means of testing a customer's willingness to get involved on a personal level with the storekeepers, which as a result may separate the regulars who are fully aware of Tamaki's business principles and routines from those who are not. Customers who do not establish personal relationships do not receive phone calls from Tamaki when seafood specials come in, nor do they receive bread leftovers from the previous week, or occasional discounts or give-aways. Much like Tejano women who distribute tamales as a means of identifying those who will commit to the community's well-being (Williams 1984), Tamaki screens the regulars to determine which ones meet the criteria for her extended services.

This way of distinguishing the close regular customers from the rest is not a sign of stinginess; rather, it is a justifiable necessity. A small mom-and-pop store like the

³¹ In this sense, even *tsuide* giving does not yield "free" gifts, as Marcel Mauss argues in his signature book *The Gift* (1990).

Oriental Shop depends heavily on long-term customers. Tamaki and Kuang invest especially in customers who have demonstrated a higher degree of commitment, rewarding them so as to encourage continued patronage. Tamaki originally wanted her business to be small so that the environment would allow her to enjoy personal-level interaction with the shoppers. Thus the giving of food serves as a means of building and reaffirming mutual dependence and commitment.

Close regular customers practice *tsuide* giving not only with the storekeepers but among themselves. It is common for close regular customers to be introduced to one another at the Oriental Shop. At the store, it becomes evident from observing the interaction between a customer and a storekeeper whether or not they have cultivated a close relationship. The fact that Tamaki and Kuang have a close relationship with someone indicates that this someone is very likely to be a responsible, courteous person who knows the value of personal-level connections and the virtue of returning favours. When two regulars notice that they each have a friendship with the storekeepers, they may initiate the same type of relationship between themselves. For example, I first met Mami and her family at the Oriental Shop, and over the years we have become good friends. Both of us follow the kind of ethics prescribed by Japanese culture: when someone treats you with respect and does you a favour, you are to return the favour, paying respect at the same time. Enactment of gratitude is very important to us. Thus between the two of us, the giving of *okazu* takes place as often as with Tamaki. When I lived above the store, because I knew which days of the week Mami usually visited, I would sometimes cook various *okazu* for her to take home.

One time I gave Mami a few cups of brown rice (from a bag purchased at the Oriental Shop) because she told me that she became curious about its texture and flavour after hearing that brown rice was better for one's health than white rice. She had been reluctant to buy a whole bag, for fear that her family might not like it. So I, who had been eating brown rice since being introduced to it several years earlier by my mother, offered Mami some of mine so that her entire family could taste it for themselves.

On another occasion, a Japanese mother cooked *oseki-han* from scratch when her daughter had her first menstruation. This rice dish was distributed among her friends from the store, including Tamaki and me. It is customary to celebrate such a hallmark life event with *oseki-han* among family members, but since her family had no relatives in Madison, she wished to share her daughter's rite of passage with those whom she deemed close. A social network is revealed by identifying the people who get a share of the food. One year Tamaki obtained from a bakery in Chicago a chocolate birthday cake for Jim. They celebrated his birthday several days in advance at the store when other regulars who had befriended him arrived. I was absent at the time, but a small piece of cake was saved for me in the fridge.

Although gifts like boxed chocolates or other fancy foods appear occasionally, *tsuide* giving usually involves the sharing of everyday meals because the relationship between giver and receiver is founded not on a sense of obligation but on mutual friendship. The sharing of everyday food shows that relationships go beyond superficial politeness.

Because I want to focus on the dynamic of human connections in this thesis, my discussion of *tsuide* giving does not exclude the contributions of non-Japanese regulars. For example, Ati brings stuffed chicken or other Indonesian treats for Tamaki and Kuang and their customers to share. When Tamaki gives fresh cucumbers to Jim, he will pickle them with onions, then bring a generous serving back downstairs.

Jim's participation in *tsuide* giving is unique because he has taken on the role of cook since moving into the apartment above the store. On certain days of the week when the store is especially busy, Jim prepares lunches or dinners for Tamaki and Kuang. The meal often consists of Jim's everyday food: meatloaf, pork chops with stuffing, spaghetti, scalloped potatoes and ham, or Sloppy Joes, often served with vegetables such as yams, mashed potatoes, boiled corn, broccoli, and green beans. Jim remembers how it all began:

I got to know when they were busy, when they don't have time to cook. Tamaki is busy and Kuang is busy. So I offered to cook them something and we could split it. Because I couldn't eat everything. If I made spaghetti, I'd be eating spaghetti for a week. This way, I can eat it for the night and maybe next day for lunch. So I started to figure out what they liked and what I liked. Sometimes Tamaki or Kuang would cook, sometimes I would cook. Not everyday, but it started out once a week. But Monday is like a catch-up day because they are so busy on the weekends, so I'd offer to cook on Mondays. And I started to offer to cook on Wednesdays because they come back from Chicago on Tuesday night and Wednesday is really super busy so I offered to cook something. You can almost tell by the day of the week who's cooking.

This food exchange prevents foods from going to waste as well. Since Jim lives above the store, it is easy to do this family-like sharing:

Sometimes I just don't feel like cooking, and am just gonna eat something out of a can, and Tamaki would call me and say, "Don't cook anything tonight 'cause I am making *sukiyaki*." Sometimes they have too many vegetables left, and they use them instead of throwing them away. They give them to customers, too. But that's what she cooks. She cooks a lot out of what's left in the store.

As Jim himself summarizes, “Food goes downstairs and food comes upstairs, depending on the day of the week and who has the time.” Jim participates not only in the storekeeper-customer exchange; he figures prominently also in the giving among the regulars. Mami, Jim, and I exchange food often, and we learn recipes from one another. I learned how to make casseroles (something my mother never made) from Jim, and he learned how to cook Japanese-style curry from me. Mami and Jim having eaten each other’s potato salads for some years, finally exchanged recipes. Mami’s potato salad recipe follows the Japanese prototype, using semi-mashed potatoes and thinly-sliced cucumbers, carrots, and ham, mixed with mayonnaise.³² Jim found it quite different and at the same time fascinating, because it struck him as a foreign dish: “Mami makes potato salad, which I really like. It’s made with mashed potatoes, which is kind of unique for Americans.” On the other hand, Mami was struck by the different type of potato salad introduced to her by Jim.³³



³² “*Poteto saladā*” (ポテトサラダ) is common in modern Japanese cuisine, often served as a side dish in both Japanese and Japanese-style “Western” meals. The recipe for potato salad is already to be found in a cookbook published in 1920 (Ishikawa and Ehara 2002, 130; Kosuge 1997, 132). Debuting in Japan in the nineteenth century, the potato itself was not widely consumed until the early twentieth century, when the rice shortage during the wars necessitated a carbohydrate substitute. In later years the potato became a standard ingredient for popular *gairaishoku* including croquettes. (Croquettes once epitomized the West in Japanese home cooking. See the discussion by Cwierka [1998, 45–47]).

³³ Jim explains his recipe: “Potatoes, of course, onions, and eggs, celery, and kosher dill pickles, cut up into small pieces, some pickle juice, Miracle Whip, salt and pepper, and paprika to make them look pretty. Everyone seems to like it. I take it to cookouts and bring back an empty bowl—and it’s a big bowl, too!”

For cultivating human relationships, food sharing serves an important function. Once a person falls into the vortex of *tsuide* giving, it becomes a part of his or her lifestyle. Since the law of *tsuide* giving encourages a chain reaction, it occurs repeatedly over a long period of time. The idea of giving sometimes arises so naturally that participants no longer care about the order of giving and receiving.

The quotidian nature of this practice is well reflected in the types of containers used for reciprocation. The frequency of meeting determines the type of container to be used. When Jim or I give food to close friends that we see often, we use Pyrex or plastic containers. And the containers are often returned filled with something our friends have made (*sushi* rolls, salads, cookies, muffins). Thus a cycle of reciprocation is completed. On the other hand, this does not happen with friends we see only occasionally, or when we go to a potluck party; then we prefer using disposable containers due to concern over not receiving them back.

As long as the giving occurs, the participants continue strengthening their ties. Not returning a favour from Tamaki and Kuang means that a person is not interested in building a relationship with them. In the cases of Ati and Jim, it is the compatibility of personhoods that connects the storekeepers and customers. Despite the large number of Japanese immigrants who patronize the Oriental Shop, the number of regulars receiving extra services is limited. Although Ati and Jim will not be contacted by Tamaki for squid or fish roe because of their food preferences, they enjoy friendship with Tamaki and Kuang just as do Japanese regulars like Hiromi and Mami. This is due to the fact that both Ati and Jim exhibit a level of generosity and manners that match those of Tamaki

and Kuang. When Tamaki and Kuang initiated *tsuide* giving, Ati and Jim knew it was courteous to reciprocate—particularly with food.

It is impossible to understand the kind of human interaction that takes place at the Oriental Shop without recognizing the significance of this frequent food-giving, because it depicts the most essential way that the people there establish and develop relationships. Although its ordinariness may make it sound insignificant as a social activity, the *tsuide* giving of food plays a vital part in nurturing the friendships between the storekeepers and customers, as well as among the customers. And it is not shared ethnicity or race but a willingness to become engaged that drives the people to continue this voluntary giving practice. The next chapter introduces the other important way in which these people express their mutual gratitude: in the giving of more tangible objects.

CHAPTER FOUR: STORE DECOR THAT SPEAKS

The interior of the Oriental Shop is decorated with various objects—from religious to secular, handmade to mass-produced, ceramic to stone to wooden. Together the objects might seem a cacophony of styles. Yet once one learns the reasons for their occupying the store space, one comes to understand these decorations as material expressions that harmoniously project the store's character, reflecting Tamaki and Kuang's personal tastes as well as their relationships with customers. Unlike ephemeral verbal exchanges or consumable foods, the decorative objects inside the store provide lasting memories of the values upheld in the Oriental Shop: home-like comfort and friendship.

Humans rely upon material forms to make sense of the world, as objects are both a means of engaging surrounding environments and projecting inner worlds. Scholars of material culture pay particular attention to physical evidence, rather than speech, as a venue of human performance and communication (e.g., Ames 1984; Jones 1997; Musello 1992; Prown 1982; Ward 1984). For example, Michael Owen Jones's study of the workplace shows that people tend to seek patterns and create routines so as to maximize efficiency and comfort in their work environments; and this includes decorating their offices (1987, 119–31; 133–57).³⁴

³⁴ Verbal means of controlling workplace atmosphere are studied by Michael Bell (1989), who discusses the verbal lore of bartenders. In addition to serving drinks, bartenders play a role of regulating customer behaviours by encouraging them to relax and talk, and when necessary, intervening in quarrels. By

The decor of the Oriental Shop consists of a myriad of objects gathered and arrayed to serve multiple purposes. This chapter explores the making of space and ambience inside the Oriental Shop by examining the significance and interrelation of objects contributed by Tamaki, Kuang, and their customers.

Decorating the Workplace Like Home

The Oriental Shop is a public place that possesses the quality of a private space. The space is arranged for business, but the arrangement and decoration reflects the storekeepers' values and tastes. Both Tamaki and Kuang admit to spending more time at



Figure 12: Picture of noodles and *tempura* behind rows of products.

the store than at home, and therefore making the workplace like home is important for their well-being. Hence it is natural for them to personalize the store by arranging objects to create an ambience that exudes the comforts of home.

The store's decor consists of objects purchased by the owners as well as gifts received from customers, and these items inhabit walls and nooks amid the merchandise.

keeping an amicable atmosphere, the bartenders maintain the social order of their workplace for their own well-being as well as that of their customers.

For instance, Tamaki displays pictures of noodle dishes and various types of *sushi* on the walls between shelves to enhance the store's theme of Oriental-ness and encourage an appetite for good foods (Fig. 12). Occasionally these pictures function as conversation-starters when people comment on how delicious the foods look. *Noren* (暖簾), cloth room dividers, convey a sense of home because they are still used in traditional-style homes and businesses in Japan. Some of the *noren* were purchased by Tamaki, and others were given to the store by regular customers.

Among the decorative objects procured by Tamaki and Kuang themselves, religious figures predominate, mostly chosen for their auspicious effects. Upon opening the store at its current location, Tamaki placed lucky charms to wish for success. In Chicago's Chinatown she purchased carved wooden masks of the Japanese deities *Ebisu* (恵比寿) and *Daikoku* (大黒), which have presided over the entryway ever since (Fig.

13). Traditionally in Japan these two deities together represent prosperity: *Ebisu*, the abundance of the ocean; *Daikoku*, the richness of the agricultural harvest. Fishing and farming having been the two dominant means of earning a living in pre-industrial Japan, these deities were cherished among the



Figure 13: Wooden masks of *Ebisu* and *Daikoku*.

common people, and although Japan has long since developed into an industrial country, people still worship these deities—now as prominent symbols of mercantile success.

A wooden statue of Buddha was supplied by an owner of a Chinese restaurant (Fig. 14). Tamaki explained: “Well, I wanted a Buddha for my business, so I asked for it. He

didn't want to sell, but he said he would give me the Buddha if I'd give him two hundred pounds of rice. So I traded him." This Buddha sits on the top shelf behind the counter, as if watching over and protecting the entire business. A wooden open/closed sign that shows the store's hours came into the fold when Kuang inherited it from the manager of a local furniture store. He had known of Kuang's fondness for the sign, and gave it to him upon closing down the business.

The numerous figurines of Chinese deities such as *Hotei* (布袋) and *Kuan-Yin* (觀音)³⁵ were either acquired by Kuang or donated by customers (Fig. 15). Kuang likes browsing in antique shops, and his findings usually end up in the store. Ati has added a pink crystal Buddha to the store's collection of religious figures. And all of these are dispersed in various places: on the shelf by the window, on the small refrigerator (Fig. 16), or atop the radio on the tall refrigerator. While these deities may bring blessings to the Oriental Shop, they also retain ornamental value to enhance the Asian atmosphere.³⁶

Displaying one's hobby collections is a common part of home decoration, and Tamaki and Kuang both contribute to the store decor in this respect. The plants in and around the store belong to Tamaki. "Because I'm usually at work all the time, I don't have a chance to work in the garden at home." Hence Tamaki tends a small garden behind the store and keeps some of her *bonsai* plants indoors (Fig. 17). As a member of the local *bonsai* club, she is very knowledgeable about plants. She has even ministered to withered plants brought in by her customers. Some years ago Tamaki ventured into

³⁵ Both *Hotei* and *Kuan-Yin* are Buddhist deities, popular in East Asia. There are iconographic differences among the cultures. For instance, a statue of *Hotei* in a *banzai* posture is characteristically Chinese.

³⁶ Kuang loves telling stories that involve these deities and demonstrate Buddhist teachings. See the Appendix for a story of a man who found enlightenment.

making spiral bamboo, and some of these customized plants have been distributed to business associates, such as restaurateurs. Wiring bamboo so that it twists as it grows takes time and expertise; thus such a gift showcases Tamaki's artistry and at the same time builds trust in business relationships.³⁷

All the pieces of purple quartz come from Kuang's personal collection (Fig. 17). He began collecting crystals because he believes in their power to enhance the flow of good energy. According to the Chinese philosophy of *feng-shui* (風水), crystals radiate cosmic energy called *qi* (氣) that betters the minds and bodies of those around them. Placed at different spots around the store are large geodes purchased by Kuang—after careful inspection, of course—during periodic visits to a local rock shop.

Kuang's passion for crystals becomes evident when he eagerly shows a new piece to regular customers like Jim with whom he shares an appreciation of the geodes' glowing beauty. His eyes twinkle as he explains how to select a good geode, pointing out the radiant features of his latest acquisition. He humorously recommends that customers own a piece of crystal in order to bring good energy to themselves. Jim jokingly praises Kuang's crystals, saying that the *qi* they beam is so strong that it penetrates into the upstairs rooms to energize him. Then Jim makes buzzing noises, and everyone laughs.

Kuang likes telling stories about the power of crystals, such as this one:

³⁷ Gerald Pocius, in *A Place to Belong*, traces webs of social relationships by observing the distribution of plants in gardens within the town of Calvert, Newfoundland (97). A similar point is made by Suzanne Waldenberger in "Barrio Gardens: the Arrangement of a Woman's Space," *Western Folklore* 59.3/4 (2000): 241.

This doctor, he always gets tired on Thursdays, but he doesn't know why he gets tired on Thursdays. So one day, he went to see a crystal expert. Then the crystal guy asks him, "What do you do on Thursdays?" The doctor says, "On Thursdays I always see one patient. This patient always comes on Thursdays." So this guy told him, because you have lost some energy to this patient, this is why you feel tired." So the doctor asked, "What can I do?" Then the crystal guy told him, "You better buy one crystal and put it in your drawer. When he comes, then put it on the table." So he do that. And after that, his tiredness is gone.

Kuang takes good care of his crystals. On sunny summer days, he takes them into the backyard and hoses them down with water before sunbathing them. According to him, the rays of sunlight revitalize the crystals so that they can continue generating good *qi*. He even tries to coax people into buying crystals, and in fact he has for sale three pocket-sized crystals displayed on a shelf by the kitchen. Each costs about five dollars (he jokes that this is his modest side-business), though unfortunately none of them has yet found a new owner. Nevertheless, Kuang's love of crystals shows no signs of waning, and he argues that this hobby of his is less costly than golfing, for example. Even though the store is often referred to as Tamaki's place, Kuang's contribution to the interior is equal to Tamaki's. After all, it is his place as much as it is hers.

It is natural for humans to create their own sanctuaries by surrounding themselves with things they favour. The Oriental Shop is both a workplace and a second home for Tamaki and Kuang. The store is organized in the way they like, adorned with objects they like. They work at a store that projects a sense of home-like comfort.



Figure 14: Wooden Buddha (left) and pink crystal Buddha, with other ceramic figurines.



Figure 15: Figurine of *Hotei* in a *banzai* posture.



Figure 16: Glass-encased Japanese doll, with wooden carvings of Buddha (left) and *Kuan-Yin*.



Figure 17: Tamaki's *bonsai* and Kuang's geodes.

Objects with Multiple Meanings

As much as the Oriental Shop is personalized according to the likes of Tamaki and Kuang, it is impossible to ignore the contribution made to the store's ambience by customer gifts. The Oriental Shop is a special place for its devoted customers, and donated decorative objects serve as material evidence of storekeeper-customer relationships that have evolved into friendships. It has become a source of prestige for regular patrons to bring in small objects to be added to the decor, because this constitutes a more advanced form of participation in the store's social network. The giving of decorative objects usually occurs after the relationships between the storekeepers and the customers have been solidified through a series of food gifts. It is then that those customers who want to take a further step will begin to make small contributions to the store decor.

Some gifts are presented as tokens of departure or as souvenirs from trips. For instance, a finely-crafted Japanese doll in a glass case was a gift from a Japanese professor who taught for a year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under an exchange program (Fig. 16). After returning to Japan, in order to show his appreciation for Tamaki and Kuang's friendship, the professor sent the doll all the way to the store. "It must have been expensive!" Tamaki exclaimed. Indeed, it is surprising that the large glass case managed to cross the ocean without incurring any damage. While departure gifts may never again be seen by the givers, long-term regulars enjoy seeing their own

gifts on display, visual reminders that they have been acknowledged as valued customers and friends.

In order to highlight the way in which the decorative objects inside the Oriental Shop demonstrate the complexity of material meanings and expressions, I will introduce one by one several key objects from the decor and discuss generally the cultural and religious significance of each, as well as their reasons for existence at this particular site.

Lucky Charms

Maneki-neko

The Oriental Shop has on display several *maneki-neko* (招き猫: beckoning cats), one of the best-known lucky charms of Japanese folklore. Some were purchased by Tamaki, while others were gifts from customers. In Japan a beckoning cat is a lucky charm commonly seen in small-scale business establishments like family-run stores and eateries; the figurine is supposedly effective for drawing customers and money to the business. The origin of the association between cats and coins is unknown, yet the idea is so pervasive that a traditional Japanese proverb says “*Neko ni koban*” (猫に小判: literally, “coins for cat”), which according to tradition implies that a cat has no



Figure 18: Two traditional beckoning cats (right and centre) and one contemporary version (left).

need for coins; thus, in the context of the beckoning cat trope, the coins pass from the gathering cat to the business.

In its orthodox guise, the figurine is a black-spotted white cat wearing a red collar with a small golden bell, raising one arm while holding a pre-modern-era gold coin in the other (Fig. 18). The cat's posture imitates a colloquial gesticulation of beckoning in Japanese culture. In Western culture, the gesture of invitation is to raise one's hand upward and wave toward oneself, while in Japan the hand moves downward, resembling a Westerner's farewell gesture. This Japanese gesture is analogous to the motion of a cat's paw when it washes its face or swats at a flying insect. According to legend, the origin of beckoning cats as lucky charms can be traced to a cat that brought prosperity to a poor priest: The priest takes in a stray cat that has wandered into his temple. Out of compassion he decides to care for the cat, despite his acute poverty. One day when an equestrian procession led by a lord of high rank passes by the temple, the lord notices this cat signalling him to come forward. Curiosity gets the better of the lord, and he dismounts his horse to approach the cat. It is at this moment that lightning suddenly strikes the spot that he had occupied a second ago. The lord praises the cat for having saved his life and grants his patronage to the temple. The temple prospered thereafter, and so did the priest. Upon the cat's death, its body was enshrined as the patron saint of the temple.³⁸

At the Oriental Shop, three *maneki-neko* figurines greet visitors from the top shelf that faces the checkout area, and their differing appearances reveal much about the

³⁸ This legend has many variants and versions, but none of them is listed in Hiroko Ikeda's *A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk-Literature* (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1971).

material culture of contemporary Japan (Fig. 18). The visage of the traditional kind has large eyes that contrast sharply with those of the modern version, which comes with an animated smiley face and without the gold coin in one arm (Fig. 19).



Figure 19: Other contemporary versions of beckoning cats—and one beckoning dog (second from right).

This dramatic alteration reflects changing consumer tastes in contemporary Japan. While religious institutions continue to issue this lucky charm in more orthodox incarnations, the *maneki-neko* has also been marketed as a mock religious charm in consumer culture. In this vernacular environment the charm is subject to the playful influence of postmodernism, which results in its appearance acquiring cartoonish qualities. (This postmodern mischief reaches its apex in the trans-species mutation that produces a beckoning dog.)

In recent years *maneki-neko* figurines have begun to circulate on the international market, which has enabled the Oriental Shop to sell them. Several years ago Tamaki ordered a few boxes of a tiny modern version of this feline charm. These figurines



Figure 20: Miniature beckoning cat.

were a half-inch tall, similar to other modernized *maneki-neko* on display in the store; they came with smiley faces and no coins (Fig. 20). Moreover, the charm possessed some playful traits: the cat's excessive chubbiness, and a posture of raising both arms instead of one. Despite its relatively high price (about five dollars), the beckoning cat became an instant hit. One customer read the two raised arms as mischievous: "This cat is greedy! It's a greedy cat, having both arms up like that! It wants to grab two handfuls of something!"

Often people do not concern themselves with the efficacy of the *maneki-neko*, but I have a personal experience to recount regarding the charm's effectiveness. During this short-lived excitement over the miniature beckoning cats, Jim and I were trying to sublet our apartment in order to move into the flat above the Oriental Shop. I bought a cat figurine for Jim simply because it was cute. This he taped onto our answering machine at home, hoping to invite phone calls from prospective renters; the cat did its job, and we were able to complete our move within a month.

Daruma

Daruma (達磨) is another signature lucky charm of Japanese folklore that has made its way to the Oriental Shop. This figurine is made of papier-mâché painted with an austere expression, and is modelled after the Chinese Buddhist monk



Figure 21: *Daruma*.

Bodhidharma.³⁹ Its countenance is characterised by a thick moustache and eyebrows, and what is more, the doll has no legs or arms, following a legend that tells that Bodhidharma meditated in place for so many years that his limbs were absorbed into his body (Fig. 21).⁴⁰

The *Daruma* in the Oriental Shop was a Christmas gift from a Japanese woman who befriended Tamaki while living in Madison during her husband's studies at the university. After the two returned to Japan, the woman sent the figurine to Tamaki to express gratitude for their friendship during her sojourn in Madison. Tamaki placed the *Daruma* on the top shelf near the main entrance, making it the first object that captures the eye of anyone who enters.

Like the *maneki-neko*, *Daruma* is one of the most widespread lucky charms in Japan, but *Daruma* differs from other charms because of one unique custom. It is a convention for people to obtain a *Daruma* themselves rather than receive it as a gift. The figurines are sold at temples during the New Year's celebration, and they come with no eyeballs. When a *Daruma* is purchased, the owner needs to paint upon it one circular black eye, making a wish to activate the figurine; only after the wish comes true should the *Daruma* receive the other eye. A comical notion behind this practice is that the *Daruma* is pressured to work hard to make the wish come true in order to earn the other

³⁹ For more details on Japanese folklore surrounding the *Daruma*, see H. Neill McFarland's "Feminine Motifs in Bodhidharma Symbolism in Japan," *Asian Folklore Studies* 45.2 (1986): 167–91; and *Daruma: The Founder of Zen in Japanese Art and Popular Culture* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987). Henry Punsmann provides a brief description of a Japanese custom involving *Daruma* and its makers in "Daruma, a Symbol of Luck" *Folklore Studies* 21 (1962): 241–44.

⁴⁰ *Daruma* figurines come in many different styles, owing to regional variations across Japan. The most common colour for its body is red (the auspicious colour), though other colours such as black, white, and green are available.

eye. In Japan, once a *Daruma* figurine receives its two eyes, it will be taken to a temple to be cremated in a sacred bonfire around the following New Year. The types of wishes and hopes that can be addressed to the *Daruma* may be as general as those for a stable and healthy year for a family or business, or as specific as pleas for safety while traveling, for academic advancement (acceptance to certain high schools or universities),⁴¹ or for success in romantic pursuits.

The life of the *Daruma* at the Oriental Shop has taken a course different from those of its relatives in Japan. First of all, it has been dissociated from the homeland custom, for there are no Japanese temples in the area that sell lucky charms and maintain sacred fires to cremate them when they have completed their lifecycles. Moreover, the *Daruma* was a gift; Tamaki and Kuang did not buy the *Daruma* themselves, as do owners of family-run businesses in Japan. Having long since garnered both eyes, this *Daruma* has no place to go. Nonetheless it continues to serve a decorative purpose, maintaining its ever-august presence.

Lucky charms for the New Year's celebration

The most conspicuous of all the lucky charms in the Oriental Shop is a lucky charm for the New Year that hangs on the wall behind the checkout counter (Fig. 22). This was a gift from Mami and her husband, who wished Tamaki and Kuang's business

⁴¹ The *Daruma* is often used by Japanese students to wish for luck on high school and college entrance exams. See, for example, Kangmin Zeng's article, "Prayer, Luck, and Spiritual Strength: The Desecularization of Entrance Examination Systems in East Asia," *Comparative Education Review* 40.3 (1996): 270.

a successful year. The charm is loaded with various auspicious symbols, all of which are significant in Japanese folklore:

1. Basket base (*takemi*: 竹み): a traditional container symbolizing abundance.
2. Pair of sea bream (*tai*: 鯛): the Japanese word for sea bream (*tai*) makes a partial pun with the word that means “auspicious” (*mede-tai*: めでたい), and the fish’s skin colour is red, an auspicious colour in Japanese culture.⁴²
3. Pair of arrows hitting bullseyes (*atariya*: 当たり矢): achieving one’s goal or acquiring that for which one wishes—because hitting the bullseye is the ultimate aim of any archer. Every January ritualistic archery is performed at certain shrines to mark beginning-of-year blessings, which may explain why this has become an auspicious symbol of the New Year celebration.
4. Three golden straw bags of rice: rice represents an abundant harvest, and the golden colour is considered auspicious.
5. Gold coins: a symbol of wealth. The centrepiece reads “*kai-un*” (開運), calling for good luck.
6. *Daikoku* and *Ebisu*: wealth and abundance in farming and fishery, and business prosperity for merchants.
7. *Otafuku* (お多福): a round-cheeked female as a symbol of abundance.
8. Pair of golden bells: the sound of bells is believed to ward off impure entities.
9. *Shochikubai* (松竹梅): pine trees, bamboo plants, and plum trees. These three are auspicious plants in Japanese culture, following the Chinese “three friends of winter” tradition. Pine trees and bamboo plants are evergreens, symbolizing eternity, longevity, and good health. Plum trees blossom in early spring as though celebrating the beginning of the seasonal cycle.

⁴² Sea bream is popular seafood as well. Since the *Edo* period (1600-1868), it has consistently been ranked as one of the tastiest fish in Japan, according to Sachiko Matsushita in *Iwai no shokubunka* [The Culture of Festive Foods] (Tokyo: Tokyo Bijutsu, 1991), 3–4.

10. Inserted paper signs with Chinese characters reading (a) “safety in travel and transportation,” (b) “safety for the household,” and (c) “business prosperity.” The “business prosperity” sign comes in gold, indicating that this particular lucky charm is designed to be especially effective for the blessing of one’s business. The white sign on the right (d) shows the name of the shrine from which the charm was obtained.

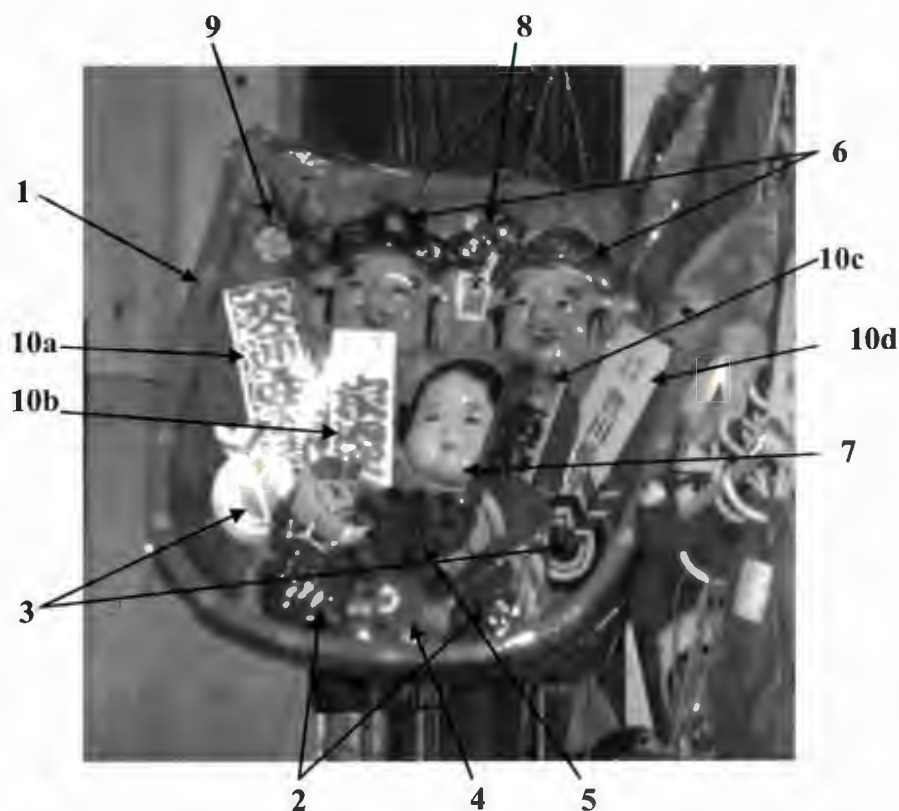


Figure 22: Lucky charm.

This type of charm is sold at temples and shrines across Japan during the period of the New Year celebration, and Mami and her husband arranged for it to be sent to their

Madison home. The charm came from a shrine in the family's hometown that they used to visit for the New Year.

The charm's prominence in the store makes this heavily ethnic object impossible to overlook. While it may remind the Japanese of their homeland, it may register as bizarre exotica to those unfamiliar with Japanese culture. Whatever it may evoke for the beholder, this charm has realized the same destiny as the *Daruma*: to be detached from its native ritual. In Japan, this type of lucky charm would need to be replaced annually; each year the old one is to be burnt in a sacred fire, and a new one obtained so as to renew the New Year's wish.

Some years later, Mami's husband brought back another charm of this sort from his hometown after a business trip (Fig. 23), and the old one was passed on to a Japanese man who runs a restaurant near Milwaukee. When I noticed that the old charm had disappeared and inquired into its whereabouts, Tamaki and Mami (who happened to be in the store at the time) told me that it had been given away.



Figure 23: Newer lucky charm.

They said that they had informed the Japanese man that the charm had exhausted its effectiveness, since by then several years had passed. But the man insisted that it would still make a great ornament in his Japanese restaurant.

Object Carrying a Folk Pun

Kaeru

The readiness with which Japanese culture embraces the use of puns is also on display at the Oriental Shop. Occupying a shelf behind the counter is a cluster of stuffed-animal frogs and other frog figurines, all presents from customers (Figs. 24–25). Over the years, the frog has become among initiates the unofficial logo of the Oriental Shop. Tamaki explained the origin of this local frog tradition:

Twenty years ago, one of my customers gave me a very, very small frog and she told me to put it in my wallet, and if you put it in your wallet, it's supposed to... *kaeru* means "return," so anytime you spend your money, it comes back. Money comes back. So it's "return." And anyway, after one frog, everyone started to bring me frogs. I have frogs all over. I have maybe about thirty to forty frogs at home: glass frogs, stone, wood, plastic, cloth, and so on.

Such use of a frog in Japanese culture has its origin in a longstanding tradition that links two homonymous Japanese words: *kaeru*,

one meaning "to return" (帰る or 返る) and the other meaning "frog" (蛙). Thus a frog motif has served as a lucky charm in Japanese folklore in wishing for the return of things (e.g., treasure, luck, money, love). Familiarity has won for this amphibian a position in folk religions, as temples and shrines throughout Japan issue various frog-shaped



Figure 24: Frog collection next to the lucky charm.

charms. However, not every frog object enjoys status as a charm. Unless it comes from a religious place and is labelled as such, a frog figurine is, in the mind of the Japanese, a mere decoration with no qualifications or effectiveness as a charm. Such clarification is crucial in distinguishing supposedly magical frog figurines from ordinary ones. An explanatory statement, often in the form of a certificate, needs to accompany a figurine to ensure its talismanic function.



Figure 25: Close-up of the frog collection.

The pervasiveness of frog merchandise in American consumer culture has encouraged regular patrons to purchase frog objects for the store's collection. From a folklorist's perspective, this phenomenon is an intriguing example of the spontaneous adoption by North American culture of a secular folk tradition from Japan. The majority of frogabilia in the Oriental Shop consists of ordinary mass-produced items from the North American market—for instance, from the Beanie Baby series.

Because these objects can be collected by any individual—American or Japanese—who simply likes frogs, they are unlikely to be recognized by customers unfamiliar with the store's culture (even Japanese fully aware of the native tradition) as bearers of the *kaeru*-as-return pun. The metaphor is based only on punning, which makes *kaeru* figurines different from other lucky charms like the beckoning cat, whose posture prompts instant recognition, or the *Daruma*, which is a secularized religious icon. It is this phonology-oriented metaphor that enables non-

talismanic frog figures to carry the meaning, should viewers decide to perceive it.

Therefore, this making of the *kaeru* symbolism at the Oriental Shop is unique in its spontaneous adopting and tweaking of a Japanese folkloric element, abetted by the abundance of frog merchandise in North America.



Figure 26: Frog from Rumi.

Moreover, this frog phenomenon epitomizes what has been vital to the prosperity of the Oriental Shop: friendships between the shopkeepers and their customers. The trend started among Tamaki and her closest friends, but the frogs have proliferated as others have followed suit. “They saw that I had little frogs everywhere. They must’ve thought, ‘Oh, [she] must like

them!’ So every time something comes up, something with a frog, they bring that... so I have A LOT of frogs.”

Because the cluster of frog figurines is so noticeable, customers often ask Tamaki about it. On many occasions, especially when busy, Tamaki simply replies that she likes frogs and collects them,



Figure 27: Frog from Jim.

without mentioning the Japanese pun. However, regulars sooner or later learn what the frogs signify. Then, whenever they travel, frogs begin to remind them of the Oriental Shop. Some customers travel out of the state or country and bring back frog figures as souvenirs, while others do so even while going about their daily errands. For example,

one day when I was working the cash register, Rumi brought a stuffed frog to the store, explaining that she had seen it at a gift shop and had thought it cute. Then the frog had reminded her of Tamaki, prompting her to purchase it (Fig. 26). Once Jim was browsing in a hardware store and came across a clay frog holding a fishing pole, and he picked it up for the Oriental Shop (Fig. 27). And one winter, while paying for coffee at a gas station, I spotted a stuffed frog with an implanted recording device. Now this frog hangs near the counter, and at the push of a button it plays the voice of Tamaki's sister proclaiming in Japanese, "Welcome to the Oriental Shop. We appreciate your every visit. We wish you a happy New Year!" (Fig. 28).



Figure 28: Frog from the author.

By virtue of mutual understanding among the storekeepers and customers, frogs at this particular site bear the metaphor of returning, as frog gifts signify the customers' commitment to return and their wishes for the store to thrive. Tamaki's statement summarizes it all: "A lot of customers return. They come back."

Handmade Objects

Quilted open/closed sign

On the glass front door, a hand-sewn sign reads "open" during business hours. In the past, homemakers have given the store quiltings that showcase their needlework and taste. In recent years Tamaki has been using two signs made by Rumi, one for spring and

summer, the other for fall and winter. These whimsical two-sided quiltings display not only her highly touted needle skills but also her perception of the Oriental Shop's character. The fall/winter sign contains the phrase "Let's go coffee" (instead of "Let's go *for* coffee"), which according to Rumi is what Kuang says when he wants to step out for a break at a nearby coffeeshop (Fig. 29).



Figure 29: Open and closed signs for fall and winter.

Having learned that I like sewing, Tamaki and Kuang once suggested that I too might quilt such a sign for their store. However, I have always felt that the space near the entrance is reserved for homemakers who pride themselves on their needlework, and that my position as a regular customer is not as eminent, nor my quilting ability as expert, as that of those homemakers who frequent the store and express their gratitude by presenting handmade signs. Being just a student who does not shop as often nor buy as many groceries as those responsible for taking care of full households, I was reluctant to create a sign because I feared that Tamaki and Kuang would then need to remove someone else's. Although Rumi is not a frequent visitor to the Oriental Shop, her long-

term friendship with Tamaki and her renowned quilting skills are likely to ensure that her signs will grace the front door for many more years.

Quilted wall hanging with a Christmas tree pattern

During her first winter in North America Mami made a quilting with a Christmas tree pattern for Tamaki to show appreciation for their growing friendship (Fig. 30). She had been taking Western-style quilting lessons for a few months at that point, and it was her first major piece. The celebration of Christmas entered Japanese culture after World War II as a result of capitalism and consumerism.⁴³ Also, Western-style quilting itself has become a large part of craft culture in Japan. Thus it comes as no surprise



Figure 30: Mami's quilting.

that Mami sewed a wall hanging with a Christmas tree motif. Far from being a sign of post-migration assimilation, the quilting shows Mami partaking in America of two Western traditions imported long ago into her homeland. And yet the quilting's presence may seem incongruous to those who would regard it as insufficiently Oriental.

One winter evening in 1998 Mami came to the Oriental Shop with her family and presented the quilting to Tamaki. Mami explained that she had joined a local quilting club, and that she wanted Tamaki to have a piece she had created. I happened to be in

⁴³ Because Christianity remains a marginal religion in Japan, this phenomenon is owed chiefly to the forces of commercialism.

the store just then, and I witnessed Tamaki start to look for a place to hang it as soon as she had received it. And finally she found a narrow strip of wall by the kitchen.

Mami never asked for her piece to be added to the store decor, and certainly Tamaki could have taken it home. Yet this Christmas tree quilting has never been taken down from that spot on the wall since that winter day. Hanging year-round, it ceases to function as a Christmas decoration; still this handmade object participates in the discourse of gifts in the Oriental Shop. Mami has been a prominent customer since discovering the store in the summer of 1998. She comes to the store three to four times a week, often spending more time than she needs for shopping. Initially her reason for visiting the Oriental Shop was to talk with Tamaki as much as to buy groceries. Occasionally Tamaki and Mami go out to lunch or shop together with other Japanese women. Moreover, Mami has begun to help at the store on Wednesdays, and her sociability contributes to increased sales, as she spreads the word about any newly arrived products.

The Christmas tree quilting is equipped with a pocket, perhaps to serve as a letter holder, yet it has never been used for that purpose; the only function this piece assumes is to make a symbolic statement of the lasting friendship between Tamaki and Mami.

Multivocal and Polysemic Qualities of Gifts

Christopher Musello, in his article "Objects in Process: Material Culture and Communication" (1992), discusses the way in which a piece of furniture such as a

drysink can show traces of human relationships. The life of a drysink that has undergone multiple refurbishments and relocations within a household reflects the dynamic of interpersonal relationships within one family. Also, passing around furniture among the households of an extended family (Musello calls this “furniture pooling”) serves “to mark or reinforce existing relationships, to demonstrate concern and commitment, to honour someone or show respect” (51). Through such activity, the piece of furniture is imbued with multiple meanings. If a researcher of material culture is to explore meanings of an object other than those inherent in its conventional communicative tasks (the making and marking of ethnic identity, for example), then it becomes necessary for the researcher to employ a more flexible, site-specific approach. Only by doing so can the multivocal and polysemic capacities of any given object be examined (see Musello 1992, 54–55).

This case study of the Oriental Shop’s interior decorations reveals that the gifts displayed inside the store communicate multiple things. Each object possesses qualities that cannot be determined simply by its appearance or the properties conventionally bestowed by a given religion or culture. For the *maneki-neko*, *Daruma*, and New Year’s lucky charms, the qualities immediately detectable by any researcher would be the symbolic values derived from Japanese folklore. From a broader perspective, these objects exemplify the way in which Japanese folklore has survived and mutated in diasporic settings. The objects persist within customs modified by, for example, the elimination of annual replacement and ritual cremation, and they assume a new function as solely decorative objects after their purported original effectiveness wanes.

The collection of frog-abilia shows the flexibility of Japanese folk punning, which can be applied even to mass-produced objects. The contemporary metamorphosis of the *maneki-neko* bespeaks the influence of postmodernity on folklore-bearing objects. As for the quiltings made by Rumi and Mami, they demonstrate the popularity of Western-style quilting among the Japanese, while on a personal level these textiles showcase their tastes and needle skills. The store decor harbours so much information about Japanese culture and Japanese people that potential readings are endless. However, it needs to be understood that principally it is under the umbrella concept of a personal place that all decorative objects in the store should be contextualized, because any object needs the approval of Tamaki and Kuang to be included.

Within that context, the most important sense that these decorative items exude derives from their communicative value. Customers present gifts to Tamaki and Kuang to show appreciation, and by adding them to the store decor Tamaki and Kuang return that appreciation. The exact positioning of gifts within one's home reveals the degree of investment the receiver recognizes in the relationship with the giver, and incorporating gifts into one's home decor is a way of appropriating the gifts in terms of personal ties (Daniels 2001, 221; Glassie 1982, 369; Musello 1992, 51, 54). Because the Oriental Shop is a workplace for Tamaki and Kuang that behaves in some sense like a home, the gifts harmonize to contribute to the store's characteristic homelike ambience. As Tamaki says, "Everybody gives us these things. So we like to display it. So when they come, they see it and they remember. They do come back. So when they come to visit, [they'll say,] 'Oh!' Yeah, they remember it, you know, [because] they come back."

Moreover, an object intentionally placed in a certain space becomes a form of communication, and the message is louder when the space is heavily trafficked.⁴⁴ Interestingly, at the Oriental Shop, the closer the personal relationship, the more visible the gift that betokens it, as is demonstrated by the prominence accorded the lucky charm from Mami's family and Rumi's set of open and closed signs.

The ambience of the Oriental Shop can seem exotic or familiar, depending upon the perception of the viewer. The Asian ornaments enhance the sense of the Orient, inviting visitors to experience something different from the world just outside the door. As for the handmade objects, they add a home-like touch to the interior, branding this place as a mom-and-pop store. Every object admitted to the store decor contributes its aesthetic value and contextual meaning, whether it is because the item comes from a valued customer or because the shopkeepers find it attractive. These decorative items reflect the taste of Tamaki and Kuang, presenting their customers with a sense of home.



The decorations in a personal space reveal characters and values that empower the decorators, whether in terms of personhood, gender, religion, or community (Burgess 1996; Glassie 1982, 361–71; Waldenberger 2000; Ward 1984). It is human nature to want to create a pleasant work environment (Jones 1987), and no matter how strongly traditions may shape people's lives, there is always room for individual perception, the

⁴⁴ See, for example, Kenneth L. Ames's study of the parlour piano (1984).

interpretations and appropriations through which a person gains a sense of self-assurance in the world (see Jones 1989, 235–63). The goal of ethnographic studies of material culture is to analyze the way in which people communicate through the use of objects, and this phenomenon at the Oriental Shop is to be understood as “material behaviour” (Jones 1997).

The communication achieved through the material behaviour involving decor articulates the value of personal relationships in this family-run store. All these items contain multilayered messages comprised of personal values and cultural meanings that help demonstrate what the Oriental Shop stands for: quality customer care and a small homey space managed and operated by Tamaki and Kuang, which are the very characteristics of the store that have touched so many visitors.

At the Oriental Shop, the decor is indeed a collage of human relationships, as a result of such close storekeeper-customer interaction. The interior initially must accord with the tastes of the storekeepers, which explains why their hobby items adorn the space. And gifts added to the decor represent regular customers who have found compatibility with the storekeepers and comfort within the store’s embrace. The dynamics of human interaction are embedded in the positioning of gift decorations, communicating by eloquently coded non-verbal means.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The character of a small family-run business is often influenced directly by the personhood of its owners, and such is the case with the Oriental Shop. In this store, the business matters personally to Tamaki and Kuang—and so do the customers, who appreciate their diligence in caring for them. The uniqueness of the Oriental Shop radiates through its homey atmosphere, because the place functions like Tamaki and Kuang's home, where different people come each day to shop and socialize.

Storekeeper-customer relationships are cultivated through the giving of consumable and therefore

ephemeral food; and as these friendships develop they are fortified by more lasting materials, in the form of decorative objects. Every winter the wall behind the checkout



Figure 31: Greeting cards from customers covering the wall behind the counter.

counter will be covered with greeting cards sent by regulars and former regulars who have moved away (Fig. 31). This sight alone reveals the personality of the Oriental Shop.

The Oriental Shop is an oasis created by Tamaki and Kuang, in which they operate their own business in their own style. There is no doubt that the Oriental Shop means much to the recent Japanese immigrants who shop there. The store provides an immersive environment filled with familiar smells and sights that satisfy these immigrants' desire for homeland sensations. Periodic visits to the store are invigorating because this is one of the few places in the Madison area that effuses such a sense of comfort as to transport immigrants' minds to their home country. This is a place in which Asian immigrants can become, however temporarily, members of the majority.

Yet there is more than shared cultural background that contributes to the making of this place. The Oriental Shop treats its customers as people regardless of their ethnicities. This is a crucial factor in the character of the Oriental Shop. While the sharing of Asian virtues yields a sense of compatibility, it is not necessary for a customer to be Asian in order to enjoy shopping at the Oriental Shop, because the store welcomes whomever finds the place comfortable and whomever demonstrates personal compatibility with the owners. What is important in the social network there is whether or not one's personality resonates with the atmosphere of the store.

Because I have been involved with the social circle at the Oriental Shop as both customer and employee, I was able to explore the meanings of material communication on a very personal level. My observation of the foodways at the Oriental Shop has

brought up several points for contemplation. *Tsuide* giving in everyday life is more meaningful as a locus for studying human behaviours and relationships than is more formal gift-giving, since the former happens among people who see one another on a regular basis by choice. Such an everyday practice of giving is vital to strengthening their ties, and it is my view that the significance of this quotidian activity deserves more recognition, as human interactions revolve around it.

As revealed in the previous chapters, through such everyday giving many storekeeper-customer relationships have deepened, which has led to the giving of decorative objects. The assemblage of store decorations represents a collage of the storekeepers' personal tastes and their customers' substantial expressions of commitment to the store. Behind the collaborative creation of the store's homey atmosphere lies a binding interpersonal trust that has been cultivated through everyday interactions.

There are many aspects of ethnic and immigrant culture that need to be explored more carefully, because the cultures of many ethnic and immigrant groups today are becoming more diverse and more complex as globalization burgeons. Now that we live in the twenty-first century, older paradigms for the study of immigrant culture require revision. Today immigrants do not necessarily live in ethnic enclaves as they did in previous centuries. Young immigrants and children of immigrants adapt to mainstream culture much more quickly and smoothly than did their forebears. Or, as my study of recent immigrants from Japan exemplifies, immigrants today have been immersed in

elements of other cultures (due, for example, to the global economy) prior to migration. Traditionally the study of ethnic folklore has followed a principle that I call “ethnicity matching”: scholars have tended to focus upon situations in which the ethnicity of the lore (e.g., foodways) matches the ethnicity of the group. While ethnicity matching no doubt retains relevance in ethnic folklore studies, different approaches are needed in studying the folklore of post-globalization immigrants. My research indicates that, for example, a potato salad recipe or mayonnaise brand may well function as a marker of ethnic boundaries. Investigating the foodways of recent Japanese immigrants reveals that not all foods they enjoy bear the mark of Japanese ethnicity. When so many *gairaishoku* dominate the foodways of my informants’ lives as I observe them, I am left to question precisely what should be deemed “ethnic” about a given ethnic group. Within the realm of Japanese cuisine, its famous representatives such as *sushi*, *tempura*, and *miso*-soup seem so small, overshadowed by a series of other imported foods that might also be enthroned as epitomes of Japanese food.

I am aware of previous studies that have assessed the ways in which an ethnic group domesticates the food of “others.” Some of these studies have been conducted in order to measure the degree of acculturation resulting from migration (Cwiertka 2001; Miller 2006; Tuchman and Levine 1998), interethnic marriage (Coggeshall 1986, 192–96; Sackett 1972), or curiosity and creativity on ceremonial occasions (Prosterman 1984). While many *gairaishoku* entered Japanese foodways initially as the foods of “others,” after a century or two those items became everyday foods to which have accrued uses and meanings more esoteric than exoteric. And Japanese in diasporic

situations yearn for those once-foreign food items as representatives of their homeland traditions.

I am not suggesting that folklorists study post-globalization phenomena among ethnic groups by measuring the prevalence of Western materials among non-Western ethnic groups and vice versa. As my ethnography shows, the Oriental Shop's *maneki-neko* collection reflects the way in which changing consumer tastes have led to the altered appearance of a traditional lucky charm. On the other hand, the frog-abilia exemplifies the fecundity of a pun-based metaphor, a signature of a centuries-old Japanese vernacular linguistic practice. And my research has shown how different cultural components are interwoven to constitute the store's essence, and how people's experiences there derive from such cultural interplay.

The contour of what constitutes the lore of a people is ever-shifting, and the axes of measurement must be redrawn accordingly. Diversity is born out of the matrix of intricate human interactions. In it, people can find multifarious ways of conceptualising, materialising, and practising ethnicity, personality, tradition, modernity, hybridity. It is a challenge for an ethnographer to pinpoint core factors that bind a group of people together. Yet after careful individual-level investigation, the magnet that draws individuals together manifests itself.

For me the Oriental Shop has been a sanctuary in North America, a place where I shop for groceries, meet friends, and discover and experience new products—all while reaffirming the feeling that I am Japanese. At the same time, this is the place that prompted me to recognize that socio-cultural understanding alone is not enough truly to

know a culture or a people. The objects and foods inside the store proved contextually far richer than they initially appeared. Decorative folk objects seemed no less important for ensuring friendship between the storekeepers and their customers than for bringing the business luck. Given the personal values with which these objects were imbued, I understood why the home-like ambience filled the inside of the store. And this was a “eureka” moment for me.

To know or understand a culture or a people is not only to learn of the contexts of socio-cultural systems and constructions but also to grasp the personal meanings of objects and the people who live with them. By so doing, one grows genuinely to appreciate the rich dynamics of a living culture. Recognizing this kind of value has been the most satisfying experience I could have as a folklore student. And I attest to the necessity of personal-level understanding of ethnic or minority folklore. Under the umbrella of a socio-cultural system lies a myriad of personal ideas, opinions, and values that functions as a primary driving force in people’s actions and interactions. To know a culture is to plumb the depths of its people’s psyches in order to uncover their personhoods; otherwise, the cultural understanding is one that merely brushes the surface of convenient socio-cultural categorizations, denying the core qualities of humanity.

Lastly, by reflecting upon my own experiences as an international student in North America, I suggest that the appreciation of cultural diversity should be taught through the documentation of human interactions among a variety of people, and through examination of the intricate conjunction of various objects in our society, rather than by

dividing people in order to stress multiplicity according to biologically or socio-culturally prescribed features. The role of ethnographers, then, will be to promote a better understanding of humanity through an approach that describes how people of different backgrounds can interact with one another in hopes of creating a society that is more fully whole.

APPENDIX

Kuang is a philosophical man who is often eager to discuss his latest cosmological visions as he contemplates religious teachings of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. When he deems a customer compatible enough to appreciate his ideas, his humorous preaching begins. Because of his interest in physics, the status of the universe is often discussed, as he understands it both scientifically and philosophically: “Everything is just a phenomenon. You see something, you can touch it, and you think it pretty. And you believe it. But it’s just an illusion. It doesn’t really exist; that’s the phenomenon.” While many customers tend to brush off Kuang’s lectures, Jim and I are among the few truly appreciative listeners. Kuang’s views on the universe and the way in which humans ought to live within it unfortunately do not adhere to the store’s food-oriented mood that calls rather for gossip and other small talk.

Personally I feel a cleansing effect from Kuang’s preaching because it helps me to stay anchored to my East Asian background. Living in North America has required me to be able to maintain a healthy balance within my conscience between East and West, and Kuang’s religious stories have always brought me solace, allowing me to imbibe East Asian virtues such as diligence and patience. Here is my favourite story told by Kuang:

One guy, he believed in *Hotei*. So he went into the mountains to meditate, trying to meet *Hotei*. His name is Wu Zhe [無者: literally, nobody]. And his purpose was to try to meet *Hotei*, and *Hotei* would teach him some type of Buddhism—knowledge or wisdom. But he went into the mountains and meditated for so long: five, six years. But he still could not meet *Hotei*. So he gave up and came back from mountains, and tried to go back to city. But when he was on the way back to the city, he saw a guy on a big piece of iron. He [the guy] used the cloth to wipe the iron. He asked the guy, “What are you doing?” And

the guy said, "Since I don't have a needle, I try to use this cloth to wipe this big iron piece into a needle." So Wu Zhe thinks about [it]. "That's impossible! Even in your whole life, you can't wipe with a cloth, and change an iron [block] to a needle." The guy continued to work, never answered him. So Wu Zhe [thought], "Look, he's so concentrating on his work. I only was in the mountains for six years. I don't have such patience. He would take his whole life to wipe the big iron." So Wu Zhe went back to the mountain to continue on meditation.

So other four-five years passed. He still cannot meet *Hotei*. He gave up again and came back from the mountain. And when he went back to a city, he met the guy nearby the lake at the big big stone. He tries to wipe the stone with a feather. Wu Zhe asked, "What are you doing, sir?" He said, "I try to use this feather to wash this big big junkstone away because the stone blocks the sunlight to my house." So Wu Zhe started to think, "That's impossible! Even if you wipe all your life, you cannot wipe off such big, such a large stone like a house." The guy never answered. He just continued to wipe the stone. So Wu Zhe think about this—the guy so concentrates, so patient. I was in the mountains only for four, five years. Even I lose my patience. So he went back to the mountains again to continue his meditation.

Then after four, five years passed, he still cannot meet *Hotei*. So he's so disappointed, so finally decided "Let's forget everything and go back to city." So when he went back to city, on the way, he saw one sick dog. The dog's body already had a worm on the back of his leg.... Wu Zhe tried to help him but saw this worm—so scary. Then he thought if he used a pin to pick the worm out, maybe it would hurt the dog and hurt the wound. So he thought about [it]. Suddenly his heart said, "Maybe, use his tongue to dig the worm out. That may be better." So he closed his eyes and used his tongue to dig the worm away.... Suddenly, the dog vanished and on the side way, *Hotei* was standing there. So he quick bowed to *Hotei* and asked, "Why? So long, I meditated for so long, but you never appeared until today." And *Hotei* said, "I always appear, but just you cannot see me because you have a very very heavy karma. You cannot see me. Right now, because you have a compassionate heart, which helped this dog, your compassionate heart wiped off all of your karma out, so you can see me now." *Hotei* told him, "If you don't believe me, put me on your shoulder. Let's go to the city and ask the people, can they see me or not." So Wu Zhe picked up *Hotei* on his shoulder then went to the city. Then, he asked everybody, "Do you see something on my shoulder?" Most people told him, "No, we don't see anything on your shoulder." And finally one old lady, he asked the old lady, "Do you see something on my shoulder?" She said, "I just see a sick dog on your shoulder." Then, *Hotei* told him, "Because the lady has less karma, not so heavy; so she can see the dog on your shoulder but still she cannot see me. She still has a heavy karma to cover me. So she cannot see me." So after that, Wu Zhe believed *Hotei*.

So every night when Wu Zhe slept, he always dreamed going up to the heaven to listen to *Hotei*'s teaching, and every night he went there. So he came back to the human world and next day when he woke up, he wrote down his [*Hotei*'s] ideas.

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Tamaki. Interview by author, 23 June 2000 and 26 June 2000, Madison, WI.

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Letter

Rumi. Given to author, June 2004.

Epilogue

On February 22, 2008 there occurred a tragedy that had a wrenching effect on the folklore of the Oriental Shop. Jim passed away unexpectedly that afternoon. It was a nice sunny day, following several weeks of severe winter weather. Jim went downstairs to help Kuang chop the ice in front of the store. He was happy to be able to get some exercise under the sun, but within twenty minutes, he had started to experience breathing difficulty because of the road salt residue coming up from the broken ice (he had weak lungs, and this had been a recurrent problem for him). He retreated to his apartment, and when Tamaki and Kuang went upstairs to check on him shortly thereafter, he was already gone.

The passing of this key figure altered greatly the dynamic of the Oriental Shop. Tamaki and Kuang lost their trusted watchman, necessitating the rescheduling of the wholesalers' deliveries. No one was there to cook lunches and suppers for those who worked downstairs, and Rumi's garden lost its caretaker. Most of all, we missed our dear friend, who always brought humour into our lives.

Several months later, Kuang handed me a piece of junk mail addressed to Jim, sent from a publisher of a magazine to which Jim had quit subscribing because all the issues had not been delivered. The mail was intended to solicit re-subscription, which was obvious from the envelop emblazoned with a red stamp reading "We want you back!" I pointed to this, and Kuang and I giggled, finding some humour in the timing of this mail and reminiscing about our friend: Jim would think this funny, too. Then Kuang showed

me a baseball ticket from the 1950s that Jim had given him several years prior. The ticket was framed in an acrylic menu stand and was placed on one of the shelves behind the checkout counter. Kuang asked me if I wanted it, but I declined.

Every year the Oriental Shop attracts new customers, but from now on none will meet the man who used to come down every day to retrieve his mail and ask whether Tamaki and Kuang needed anything. Nor will they understand how vital Jim was to the well-being of the store, notwithstanding that he spoke no Japanese and ate few Japanese foods. His antique baseball ticket is yet another seemingly out-of-place object in the decor that speaks to the character of this store. Perhaps someday someone will ask Tamaki and Kuang what it is, and then they will talk about the man, who was loved, trusted, and respected by the storekeepers and regular customers alike. I suppose it is through such material presence that the departed live on.





