Epilogue

Personal Reflections – Keiko Tamura

I CAME BACK to Australia in 1990 after three years of academic nomadic life, which took my family and myself to Japan and Germany as my physicist husband moved with his jobs. We had two young children and did not have much money, as shifting from one country to another depleted our savings. I was determined to do a PhD degree in anthropology, but I desperately needed an appropriate topic. While we were in Japan, I carried out preliminary research on the Ainu and their craft industry by visiting Hokkaido. At that time, the Ainu craft industry and tourism seemed to be an interesting topic as it would be an extension of my MA thesis on the Aboriginal craft industry in Central Australia. However, by the time we came back to Australia, I realised I could not pursue the original topic because fieldwork in Hokkaido would involve another uplifting of my family from Australia. Furthermore, living costs in Japan would be too expensive for those who needed to support themselves with the weak Australian dollar.

I searched for a topic which did not require long-term fieldwork in a remote place. I felt I could not cope with more moving and raising two young boys without my husband’s involvement. Around that time, Dr Nicolas Peterson, who had been patiently acting as my supervisor throughout my nomadic and baby-producing years, mentioned to me a documentary film on Japanese war brides. He had not seen it, but he heard it was good and the title included words such as cherry ripe and tea. The term “war brides” did not grab my attention straight away. I knew some of them previously, but they did not seem to be a particularly interesting group of women to me. I recalled an occasion when a war bride talked about her past experience soon after I had arrived in Australia in the early 1980s. She told my Japanese friend and
I that it had taken more than twenty days by boat to travel to Australia. She could not buy soy sauce in Australia so she had to mix water with Vegemite and use it as a substitute. Upon hearing those stories, I remember that my friend and I looked at each other with amazement. Even twenty years ago, direct overnight flights were already in service between Japan and Australia, and Japanese food had started to become more readily available in the country. I did not find much in common with their experience. Thus, the research prospects of Japanese war brides seemed to be similar to studying antiquities, and not very appealing.

However, I thought I should see the film before I decided, and went to the National Library to view the 1989 film *Green Tea and Cherry Ripe* which was directed by Solrun Hoaas. In a small theatrette, I watched the documentary and was struck by the energy each woman was emitting on screen. I soon realised they were not just aging women who were talking about the boat trips to Australia and scarcity of Japanese food as reminiscences. I could sense that their lives in Japan and Australia in the past four decades were evident in the Japanese and English they spoke, and in the way they looked and behaved. I realised I had finally found my thesis topic.

Although the topic was decided, the research did not progress substantially for another two years. With a part-time job and family commitments, I could only keep a small flame of my research interest burning. However, I managed to talk about my intention to Mrs Teruko Blair, a war bride whom I met when I used to work as a tour guide for Japanese tourists. Teruko was very encouraging and assisted me to meet other war brides. We went to a British Commonwealth Occupation Forces national meeting which was held in Canberra. At a dinner after the meeting, I met a group of war brides for the first time.

In 1993, I obtained a postgraduate scholarship and resigned from my part-time job to commence a PhD at The Australian National University as a full-time student. The research finally started to move forward. It was very lucky for me that war brides had started to form networks in Australia and the United States a few years before, and the first ever convention of war brides in Australia was planned that year. Before asking for permission to attend the convention as an observer, I tried to meet some of them informally. The chance came as war brides
in Melbourne gathered for their bi-monthly luncheon at a Japanese restaurant, but I felt I could not turn up on my own to introduce myself. Mrs Chiaki Foster who lived in Albury came to the rescue and kindly offered to take me there. She had been living in this inland country town for over thirty years. She was also one of the main characters in the film Green Tea and Cherry Ripe. First, I travelled to Albury by bus to meet Chiaki there. I stayed overnight with her and travelled to Melbourne by train the next day for the luncheon meeting.

I still remember how nervous I felt when I arrived at the restaurant, and faced a roomful of women in their sixties. One odd factor which made me very uneasy was that the women looked Japanese, but did not behave like the Japanese women I knew. Their voices were strong and their bodily gestures were more Australian than Japanese. I wondered how I should relate to them, either as Japanese or as Australians. They did not fit into any category I knew. I was there to observe them, but they were observing me as well. I felt intensely self-conscious about what I said and asked. I was worried they might regard me as an intrusive person who wanted to find out about their past. I realise now that, in spite of my best intentions, I had the suspicion that some of them must have had a shady past in Japan which they did not want to reveal.

At the luncheon, I joined a table with Chiaki and tried to have friendly chats with other women in spite of my nervousness. Although I was very self-conscious, they were relaxed and not guarded towards me. Some expressed interest in my research topic, and some did not. However, the words of one woman stuck with me for the rest of my research period. When she heard that my study was about the war brides, she said, “Whether a war bride could lead a happy life in Australia or not all depended on her husband’s attitude towards his work and nothing else.” I could see there was some truth in her words, but I also wondered if that was all there was. If her happiness completely depended on her husband, her fate had already been determined before she came to Australia. I wanted to explore whether and how she could change her life course through her own initiatives. And my research commenced at last.

It was lucky for me that the research started in 1993. The first convention of Japanese war brides in Australia was held in Melbourne in
1993. The first international convention of Japanese war brides was then held in Hawaii in 1994. This new development provided my research with more dimensions, as I could include information I gathered through participant observation of those activities as well as through historical research. Thus, my research was dealing not only with the war brides’ past but also with their present. Inevitably, I soon realised that their present activities were closely connected to their past.

Although historical research and participant observation were important parts of the research, my main focus was on the life history interviews I carried out with the women. I taped twelve life histories, and interviewed more than forty women about various aspects of their lives during my research. Each life history interview was loosely structured although I had a list of questions I wanted to cover. I went back to those women who lived in Canberra as many times as necessary until I could cover all the questions I prepared. With other women, such as Michi, who lived away from Canberra, interviews needed to be carried out in a more intensive form. I often stayed at the war brides’ houses when I visited them for interviews, so that we could spend many hours, including evenings, talking about their lives. After some hours of interviews, both of us became exhausted and we decided to have a break and enjoy dinner or cups of tea. Then the topic went back to the issues we were discussing in the interviews and I needed to push the recording button of the tape recorder again.

I did not realise how difficult it was to interview somebody until I actually started. I used to think I was quite good at listening, but I soon realised listening passively and interviewing actively were quite different matters. I organised two trial interviews, one with Teruko since I knew her very well, and another with a daughter of a war bride. At the beginning of those trials, I constantly felt I was violating their privacy by asking intrusive questions. In addition, to keep track of my questions without interrupting the flow of their narratives was mentally exhausting. Eventually, I realised I could not expect an informant to provide me with relevant information unless I asked, and the awkward feeling on my side gradually disappeared. As long as a question was within an appropriate context, an interviewee was quite willing to answer frankly even though it covered sensitive matters. However, the art of steering back the women’s narratives along my list of questions was more difficult to master. I still felt exhausted after conducting a few
hours of interviews towards the end of my research even though I had become more experienced.

What I gained in my research process was not only the skill of in-depth interviewing. I had a lot of fun as well. Firstly, I managed to get to know so many people in meaningful ways. They became “alive” to me as I learned about their reasons and emotions through the interviews. They were not those who lived completely different lives in different times from me any more. As I learned the social and historical background of their times, their actions and decisions started to make sense to me.

The biggest excitement of all for me was that I was able to explore the war brides’ experiences with them. Some of the experiences and emotions they told me had never been revealed to anybody before. At the beginning of interview sessions, women often said that they could not remember the past so well. Some even declared it was their principle to forget about the past. However, as interviews proceeded, they were surprised how much they remembered. Some of the memories came back to them so vividly, it was sometimes disturbing to them. The process of remembering was a joint venture which was carried out through the dialogues between the women and myself. None of them talked about their experiences as a monologue to a tape recorder. At the same time, the interviews were not carried out in the form of an interrogation. I felt I participated and contributed in their rediscovery of their past as a co-explorer.

In the process of analysing their life histories, one aspect proved to be striking. That was the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary. When we see the war brides’ life course simply as a process of aging, it is nothing extraordinary. It can be described as follows:

Young women with an ordinary family background went out to work and fell in love with young men. The families expressed concern about their future, but they persisted and got married. The women left their families and moved to their husbands’. They mainly stayed at home to have children and to raise them. Most of them did not have a professional career and their husbands were not public figures. Now in their late sixties, many of them are widows. With modest levels of financial security, most of them live peaceful lives, enjoying interaction with their grandchildren and their female friends.
In fact, this is the way many of the war brides see themselves. When I approached war brides to ask for interviews, a typical response was: “Why do you want to interview me? I have nothing interesting to tell you. I have led such an ordinary life.” One daughter said, “I have never seen my mother as a war bride. She is just a mum to me.”

However, such ordinariness transforms into extraordinariness when the trajectory of the women’s personal lives is laid over the historical and cultural transitions in Japan and Australia during the last five decades. This transformation is as dramatic as the changes in colour-separated negatives: they are dull and uninteresting on their own, but will suddenly transform into a vivid picture when one is superimposed on top of the other.

There are three separate “negatives” of the war brides’ experiences: the dimensions of gender, space and time. Firstly, the war brides’ experiences were, at most, women’s experience in the context of families, and it is possible to interpret them appropriately only when we note this aspect. Their transition from daughters to young women with independent minds in Japan was followed by their becoming wives and mothers in Australia. Now, many of them are widows. At each stage of their lives, their actions and decisions were carried out not just as individuals with their own will and intentions, but also as female members of families and societies.

Secondly, by crossing the Pacific Ocean from Japan to Australia, they also crossed cultures, races and nations. Their departure from Japan meant their removal from the Japanese way of life. After arriving in Australia, they wholeheartedly put their efforts into adjusting to the new way of life. They also crossed the racial boundary from Asia to Australia where the white European population was dominant. While the women had comfortably belonged to the racial majority in Japan, they could not disappear into the crowd in Australia as the number of Asian migrants was small. Lastly, their migration resulted in their movement from one nation to the other. This was no ordinary crossing, since, as it followed the Pacific war so closely, they faced the difficult task of reconciling national histories. The war brides had to incorporate both sets of histories and search for their own position within them. The shift from one nation to another, in space and allegiance, was obviously complicated by the fact that it was taking place in the
immediate post-war period. Some Japanese saw them as joining the enemy while some Australians saw them as still being the enemy.

Finally, the war brides’ experiences have spanned almost half a century. During this period, Japan’s economy has been transformed from a war devastated state to one of the world’s leading economic powers. In parallel with the economic development that has played the key role in this transformation, Japanese society has also rapidly opened up to the outside and presently “internationalisation” has become the vogue word throughout Japanese society. In the meantime, Australia has also transformed from white Australia, with a strong assimilation policy, to multicultural Australia advocating cultural tolerance.

When I started the research project, I was simply happy to find an interesting topic. As time passed, I could identify myself more and more with the situation the war brides were in. As my children got older, they were growing up to be Australians, not Japanese, speaking English and thinking like Australians. That forced me to realise that the basis of my life has shifted from Japan to Australia. It was still possible to visit Japan as often as I wanted, but to go back to Japan permanently became almost impossible. As the rest of my family belonged to Australia, I also belonged to this country. This was exactly the situation the women found themselves in several years after their migration. I felt I developed better empathy with the women’s thoughts and emotions when I found myself in a similar position to them.

What I personally learned through my research was how strong individuals could be, in this case women, even when they were isolated from their familiar culture and they needed to adapt to a new culture. For the war brides, they were further expected to raise their family as Australian even though they did not know what an Australian family was like. In their cases, their strength was not expressed in the form of a power display or confrontation. Often the existence of their strength was in the form of resilience. From a bystander’s point of view, they might have looked frustratingly passive at a certain stage of their lives, but in the long run, they were patient enough to realise what they really wanted, at least to survive. I wanted to convey this type of strength in this book through Michi’s life story.

Some war brides thought this resilience was a characteristic of Japanese women and often they used the term “Yamato nadeshiko” to describe
themselves. *Yamato* means “pure Japanese” without any foreign influence. *Nadeshiko* is a type of plant which belongs to the *dianthus* genus and has pink flowers in early autumn. Although this term was traditionally used to describe the delicate beauty of Japanese women, in contemporary Japan, “*Yamato nadeshiko*” is generally regarded as old-fashioned and rarely used to praise the virtues of Japanese women. When the war brides employed the term to describe themselves, its attributes were not limited to physical beauty. The term also indicated that Japanese women were flexible but resilient in change, just as the flower might sway in a strong wind but never break. The war brides identified themselves with this particular quality. For many of them, their efforts to assimilate and their achievement in becoming good Australian wives and mothers were a manifestation of Japanese women’s characteristics of flexibility. At the same time, they continued to pursue their commitment to marriage and their children as a manifestation of their resilience. Thus, by being adaptable to change as well as doggedly pursuing their initial commitment, they had demonstrated their strength — their delicate strength — as Japanese women.

I am not sure whether such characteristics are particular solely to Japanese women. It could be interpreted as characteristic of women in general, or more broadly as characteristic of human beings. However, almost fifty years after leaving their home country, they have established their own place in Australia and the second and following generations are thriving in this country. By establishing themselves in their adopted country and producing successive generations, they have certainly left their own mark here in this country. This is the proof of their strength.