

# A Day in Arashiyama: Encounters with ‘Strangers’

Ho Swee Lin

People often say to me that Japanese people are very polite—so polite that it is very difficult to become close friends. Even foreigners who have lived in Japan for a long time say they hardly have any close Japanese friends, and fewer still say they have been invited into the homes of their Japanese friends. The general impression is that Japan may be very modern and technologically advanced, but people’s attitudes are still rather conservative. You are either a friend and a member of a social group, or you are an outsider. Having lived in Tokyo for nearly 6 years, I can vouch for this a little. I have met many Japanese who are very curious about

anything foreign but somehow they also keep a distance from foreigners. When an encounter involves speaking in English, many people seem awkward, and even shy away. However, I have realised that many foreigners often have stereotypical ideas about what is ‘Japanese’ and how Japanese people behave. Too often, they bring with them some general and fixed ideas about the people and culture based on stories they heard, books and magazines they read, and TV programmes and movies they watched. It seldom occurs to them that it takes just a little sincerity and openness to appreciate the diversity, richness and even warmth of any people and their



View from the foot of Mt. Arashiyama

(Author)



Sagano No Takebayashi bamboo grove

(Author)

culture; it certainly doesn't require training in anthropology to know that Japan and its people aren't always how they have been depicted. Bearing this in mind on a trip from Tokyo to Kansai last summer helped me acquire some experiences that significantly enriched my life. I got lost, but found friends in Japanese strangers who opened up their lives to me.

It was a sizzling hot September afternoon when I arrived in Kyoto, having boarded the shinkansen at Tokyo Station a few hours previously. A Japanese friend had travelled with me, but returned to Tokyo a week later, leaving me several days to explore the area on my own. I decided to visit Arashiyama where I met two kind souls—Takeuchi-San and Sugiyama-San (both pseudonyms). Despite numerous previous visits to Kyoto, it was my first visit to this rather touristy but nonetheless picturesque and idyllic area west of Kyoto.

Armed with a colourful tourist guidebook from Kyoto Station, I boarded a local train to Saga Arashiyama Station at 10:00. The train was so packed with tourists—foreigners and

Japanese—that there was hardly any space to stand. There was also a school outing for a group of disabled children. One boy asked a teacher about where they were heading and if he could see *tonkatsudon* (pork cutlet with rice) when they arrived in Arashiyama. Several passengers smiled on hearing the boy, when the elderly man sitting next to me suddenly said, 'It is good to know these children can get the kind of care they need today. There were no schools for such unfortunate children when I was younger.' I nodded in agreement, and saw a forlorn look on his face. 'I lost a very good friend after he became very ill,' he continued. 'His family couldn't understand why he was abnormal, and tried to make him normal by forcing him to do things that other children could do.' I had wanted to ask him some questions, but refrained when he heaved a deep sigh and dropped his head in silence.

Takeuchi-San later told me that he was 77 and born in Nara, but had moved to Kyoto where he worked as a carpenter all his life until he retired several years ago and began wood-carving. He had gone to Kyoto to run some errands and was on his way home to Arashiyama. We had only chatted briefly when the train arrived at Saga Arashiyama. As the crowd rushed out of the train, I quickly lost sight of him. I followed the

instructions on my map and walked along a quiet, narrow street towards Tenryuji, a Zen temple built in 1339 that ranks as one of Kyoto's Five Great Zen Temples. After spending an hour or so admiring the beautiful architecture and strolling through the luscious landscaped garden, I moved on to the famous bamboo groves known as Sagano no Takebayashi, when I bumped into Takeuchi-San again. He was standing in the middle of the path flanked on both sides by thousands of tall, slender bamboo trees swaying gently in the breeze. He looked mesmerized by the rustling of the leaves and faint, drumming sounds made by the bumping of the bamboo stems. This time he greeted me with a smile and exclaimed how nice it was to be among the trees. As we strolled along the path, he began telling me about his childhood and how he lost his friend, but stopped abruptly as we reached the end of the path. I saw tears in his eyes, but before I could say anything, he politely bade me farewell and wished me a pleasant day in Arashiyama.

It was way past lunchtime when I emerged from the winding path and reached the main street that was filled with souvenir shops, cafes and restaurants. Many had stopped serving lunch, sending me scuttling up and down the street looking for a place to eat and rest my aching feet. Suddenly, I saw Takeuchi-San again at a street corner, this time bending slightly as if looking for something he had dropped. I greeted him again, and asked him if he knew any place that was still open for lunch. He looked a little amused. After pausing for several seconds, he asked if I would like to visit his home where he would cook me some soba (buckwheat noodles). I hesitated for a moment, taken aback by his generosity and sudden invitation. I have lived in Japan for 6 years, but have never received such an invitation from a stranger. I followed him through several narrow streets, past the train station, and soon found myself in a low, two-storey house in a residential area. Takeuchi-San told me that his family was away visiting relatives in Kyushu and that he was alone that week. I looked around and saw that he had hundreds of miniature figures carved in wood displayed all over the living room, bathroom, stairs, kitchen and the garden. The wooden figures were mostly of Buddha and he had also carved a short poem on the back of each one. He explained to me each was a prayer for every friend, acquaintance and relative he had lost over the years to illness, hunger, poverty and war. He started telling me his life story.

Before we parted, Takeuchi-San told me that Arashiyama is a very special place, and that I must visit again. I thanked him for his hospitality and made my way across the Togetsukyo Bridge towards Mt. Arashiyama, where I met Sugiyama-San, an 83-year-old retired baker-turned political activist-turned painter. Drawn by the picturesque canyon, I wandered along a meandering, concrete path at the foot of the mountain—under a thick canopy of trees hanging on my left and the Hozu river flowing on my right—when I saw a small, hunched woman gazing at something on a branch. As I approached, I looked up and saw several red-faced macaque monkeys staring down at us. ‘They are beautiful, aren’t they?’ she said as she nodded and smiled. ‘There are so many tourists here these days that these monkeys have become very shy and scared.’

As she spoke, a group of tourists rushed over to catch a glimpse of the monkeys, sending them scrambling into the forest. Sugiyama-San shook her head and sighed. As we strolled along the path and talked, I learned that she had moved to Arashiyama from her hometown in Shikoku in the 1950s after her husband died. She worked in a bakery in Kyoto and later participated in activities lobbying for world peace and anti-nuclear policies. After her two children settled in Tokyo, she moved into a little wooden house in Arashiyama with two dogs and began to paint as a way of expressing her anti-war sentiments. Though we had just met, she asked if I

would like to drop by her home briefly for some green tea and to see her paintings.

After Takeuchi-San’s earlier invitation, I was less hesitant this time and graciously accepted her invitation. Unlike Takeuchi-San’s house, Sugiyama-San lived in a traditional Japanese wooden house where almost every room had a *tatami* (rush mat) floor. The entire house had a pleasant calming scent of sandalwood and hanging on each wall was a calligraphy scroll that Sugiyama-San had written. Some were poems, while others simply had one or two *kanji* (Chinese characters) with bold yet elegant strokes. As we sat and talked over tea and sweets, she told me about the circumstances and various events that had inspired each painting. She took up calligraphy to express her feelings about life in Japan after WWII, and how Japan had changed drastically since the war. Most importantly, she also wanted to express the various struggles in the lives of many people she knew. I was moved by her stories, as by Takeuchi-San’s.

I had intended my visit to Arashiyama merely as a relaxing day-out, but it turned out to be unexpectedly enriching. More than that, I had learned a little about the ‘hidden’ lives of some Japanese people. I am still in touch with both Takeuchi-San and Sugiyama-San through letters and postcards. What I had thought were one-off chance meetings have become special friendships endearing Japan and its people to me even more. ■



**Ho Swee Lin**

Ms Ho Swee Lin is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at the University of Oxford. Her article, *Private Love and Public Space: Japan’s Love Hotels* was published in *Asian Studies Review* in 2008. She has worked as an insurance consultant, auditor, financial journalist, and business/project analyst.