



WAR BRIDES BREAK BARRIERS

Japanese wives of Australian servicemen transcend culture and language to share their experiences. **By Keiko Tamura**

It is not unusual in Japan to see busloads of elderly women travelling together for sightseeing, but the appearance of one group on 15 May this year was unlike any other. About 200 women in their late sixties and early seventies gathered in Beppu, a hot springs resort in Kyushu, in western Japan, and shared a wealth of emotional experiences. The group's fashions and hairstyles were rather different from those of other Japanese women. Their body language and gestures were far more westernised and conversations among themselves included as much English as Japanese. Furthermore, their English accents were varied; some spoke with Australian inflections, but others revealed Texan and Californian influences.

The gathering was the Fourth International Convention of Japanese War Brides. Most participants came from the US,

but 30 people, including war brides and their families, travelled from Australia. Many decided to make the trip as they thought it might be the last convention. Also, some were aware that it will be more difficult to make future overseas trips as age starts to catch up with them. For some children of the war brides, it was the first visit to their mother's country, a chance to experience the culture their mothers were brought up in.

These women had left Japan in the early 1950s after their marriage to servicemen from the US and Australia who were stationed in Japan during the occupation period. About 650 Japanese women arrived in Australia as war brides, and their extraordinary experience over the past 50 years came about because of strong personal relationships that overcame prejudice and hostility in Australia and Japan.

After the Pacific War ended with Japan's

Sergeants mess
dance, in Hiro,
Japan, in 1952.
AWM I48093

The Australian participants at the Fourth International Convention of Japanese War Brides, Beppu, Japan, May 2002. (Photo courtesy of author)



defeat in August 1945, the country was occupied by Allied forces until the peace treaty was signed in 1951. The first forces to land were from the US, and more than 430,000 American GIs were scattered throughout Japan. Australian servicemen did not arrive until February 1946, as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF), whose headquarters was established in Kure, about 40 kilometres south-east of

to treat the Japanese with detachment in order to carry out their aims as an occupation force. From the outset, BCOF enforced a strict anti-fraternisation policy toward the local population. According to instructions issued in 1946 by Lieutenant General Northcott, the Australian Commander-in-Chief of BCOF, a soldier was instructed to remain “formal and correct” toward the Japanese, but he “must not enter their home

In their lifetime, they have lived through war and peace for Australia and Japan, and nurtured the second and third generations of Japanese-Australians.

Hiroshima. Kure was one of the four major naval bases of the Japanese Imperial Navy, and the elite Naval Cadet College was located on the nearby island of Eta-jima. It also boasted large-scale shipbuilding yards, where the giant battleship *Yamato* was built. Even though the city and port were totally devastated by air raids in July 1945, the people of Kure still felt a strong pride in their naval tradition when the BCOF arrived in 1946.

BCOF consisted of troops from four nations: Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and India. Their responsibility was the western part of Japan, and their main duty was to disarm Japanese forces and to demilitarise depots and establishments in the occupied areas. The number of BCOF troops in Japan totalled more than 37,000 at the end of 1946. Of these, about 11,000 were Australians.

Since the war which Japan and Australia fought was filled with savage and horrific experiences, Australian sentiment towards Japan and its people was very tense and hostile when the occupation started. Thus, BCOF authorities believed it was important

or take part in their family life” and his “unofficial dealing with the Japanese must be kept to a minimum.”

Despite this policy, interactions between Australian soldiers and local people were close and frequent, as thousands of Japanese people, including many young women, were employed at the BCOF bases. Australian servicemen also went into the town and surrounding rural areas for entertainment and adventure, and mixed with the local population. Through these encounters, many Australian soldiers met Japanese women and a considerable number of those relationships developed into more intense and serious ones.

The BCOF authorities’ attitudes toward those relationships remained stern and prohibitive for a long time, as the anti-fraternisation policy was not officially lifted and a virtual marriage ban was in place. Furthermore, the Federal government banned the admission of Japanese women to Australia, even though they might be fiancées or wives of Australian servicemen. A particularly hostile reaction was publicly

expressed by Arthur Calwell, Labor Government Minister of Immigration in 1948, who stated that, “while relatives remain of the men who suffered at the hands of the Japanese, it would be the grossest act of public indecency to permit a Japanese of either sex to pollute Australian or Australian-controlled shores.” Despite these obstacles, several servicemen submitted formal applications to the military authorities to seek permission to marry a Japanese woman.

In March 1952, a month before the peace treaty officially became effective, Harold Holt, Immigration Minister in the newly elected Menzies Government, finally granted official permission for Japanese women to enter Australia as fiancées and wives of Australian servicemen. The first Japanese war bride to arrive in Australia was Mrs. Cherry Parker (née Nobuko Sakuramoto) accompanied by her husband, Gordon, and her two young daughters in June 1952. Their arrival was reported widely in the Australian media. Hundreds more brides followed Cherry and, in total, about 650 left Japan for Australia before Australian forces formally withdrew in November 1956.

The Japanese war brides arrived at a time when waves of migrants from Europe were also reaching Australia, and the government’s immigration policy emphasised assimilation. In particular, as wives of Australian servicemen who had fought for their country, the war brides were expected to assimilate quickly into Australian society. It was assumed that the protection of their husbands and in-laws would ease the transition from one culture to another.

The women also believed it was best to adapt as quickly as possible, not only because they wanted to be accepted in their newly adopted society, but so that their children might be brought up as “dinkum” Aussies. Only English was used in the family, as the husbands usually opposed the use of Japanese for fear of hostility towards the children.

However, many women had to struggle to find out what they needed to learn to be accepted as Australian wives and mothers. After almost 50 years, they reflect on their experiences with mixed feelings. They are happy to see their children grow up to be fully integrated members of Australian society. Yet, at the same time, they are conscious that they did not have much of a chance to teach the Japanese language and culture to the next generation.

In the past ten years, the war brides, who had been concentrating on assimilation and trying not to stand out in any way, started to get together publicly. In 1993, the first War Bride Convention in Australia was held in Melbourne to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their arrival. After this gathering, many war brides travelled from Australia to the US and Japan to attend the three subsequent international conventions, which were jointly held with Japanese war brides who migrated to the US. The Beppu convention in May was the fourth international convention, and possibly the last, as the organising committee members felt they did not have enough strength and energy to organise another.



Sergeant G. C. McCaughey and his bride, Fumiko Isumizawa, cut their wedding cake.
AWM 148137

At the conventions, the women shared their experience of leaving their homeland, establishing families and integrating in local communities. Individuals realised that others also suffered from a sense of isolation and homesickness for many years. They are proud to talk about their flexibility and adaptability in adjusting to the new language and culture as they raised their children.

Japanese war brides in Australia plan to assemble again in Canberra in October 2003, the 50th anniversary of their arrival. They know that a 60th anniversary meeting will be most unlikely. Yet, by getting together, they will be able to share experiences that transcend language, culture and race across the Pacific. In their lifetime, they have lived through war and peace for Australia and Japan and nurtured the second and third generations of Japanese-Australians. 🏠

AUTHOR

Keiko Tamura is the Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia. She is the author of *Michi's memories: the story of a Japanese war bride* (Canberra, 2001).