

# Oichan and I

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I have been blessed by having a number of wonderful people come into my life. Jin Akiyama is one of them.

Jin and I met in 1979. It was a charmed decade, the nineteen seventies. The Pill was used widely and AIDS lay dormant, patchouli disguised the scent of marijuana, Rolling Stones released *Sticky Fingers* in 1971 and *Some Girls* in 1978. More to the point, Canadian travel grants were dispensed liberally. “We award prize money”, said later a member of the NSERC Grants Selection Committee and continued, “we don’t care if he uses it to take his mistress to Rio de Janeiro, as long as he brings back a first-class theorem”. Such was the atmosphere where David Avis and I sensed a license to travel around the world and let NSERC pay.

The vehicle for our round-the-world junket was Pan Am Flight 1 from New York to New York, westbound from beginning to end, with a number of stopovers allowed along the way. To justify its expense, I picked my stopovers in places to which I had some professional connection: Honolulu, where the Institute of Management Sciences held its 24th International Meeting on June 18–22, 1979. Tokyo, where the IEEE Circuits and Systems Society held its International Symposium on Circuits and Systems on July 17–19, 1979. Further along the trajectory, I had lined up graph theorists in Singapore, Bangkok, Bombay, and Paris. But the three-day meeting in Tokyo did not seem to justify a stay of several weeks in Japan and the desire to get to know Japan was our motivation for the whole trip.

The idea of going to Japan crossed my mind first when I read Koestler’s *The Lotus and the Robot*: his venomous sneers at Zen notwithstanding, his portrayal of the 1950s Japan intrigued me. If, even having read it, I still imagined Japanese life as revolving around tea ceremonies, listening to geishas plucking shamisen strings, and watching cherry blossoms float gently to the ground, two films disabused me of such stereotypes. I was fascinated by the

cross between Chandler and Kafka in *The Man Without a Map* and I was riveted by the refined perversion of *Odd Obsession*. Now I really wanted to get to know Japan.

But my contacts in Japan were only tenuous, and so one day I phoned Frank Harary in his Ann Arbor office and asked him if he could introduce me to any Japanese graph theorists. He replied that one was sitting right next to him and he handed the receiver to Jin. I am immensely grateful to Frank Harary: He may have saved my life in the summer of 1971 and less than eight years later he introduced me to Jin Akiyama.

And so it came to pass that one fine June evening David and I were met at Narita by Jin Akiyama, his assistant Hiroshi Era, and Hiroshi's wife Akiko. They whisked us to Jin's parents' house in Eifukuchō for a reinvigorating nap and then the four boys were off to a hostess bar in Kichijōji. Where we met the beautiful convivial Fumiko Yano. To whom we dedicated our joint paper *Balancing signed graphs* nine months later. I still have her self-portrait. And later that night, futons unrolled once more on the tatami floor in Eifukuchō, we slept and slept and slept. And next day Jin took us to our new home away from home, the Sun Route Hotel in Shibuya.

Our first impressions of Japan? Alice in Wonderland does not begin to describe it. The sights and smells and sounds were intoxicating. The elegant tall buildings with a number of bars on each floor and the floors stacked up up up all the way to the indigo heaven flanked by beautiful brightly lit kanji and kana, the occasional shout of rōmaji a reminder of how mysterious the rest was in the aroma of yakitori, shioyaki, yakisoba floating through the din of pachinko parlors and the incessant *irasshaimase* of greeters in the street. In short, Shinjuku san-chōme.

Soon there were five of us carousing around the magic city: in addition to the original team of Jin, Hiroshi, David, myself, there was also Dr. Umemori, a recent medical graduate. Gaijins in Japan realize sooner or later that (with the single exception of 'n') consonants in Japanese cannot stand on their own: not Vašek, but Basheku and not Chvátal, but Fubātaru. Which goes towards my excuse for parsing our new friend's name as *dokutoru Memory* when he was first introduced to us. Umechan's round face was beaming beatitude and calm well-being. In his presence you felt reassured and safe. "It's all

right: I will take knife”, he liked to say with a smile that hovered between eerie and comforting when the slightest medical mishap seemed to threaten any of us. His misheard name radiated mystical significance as our humid summer Tōkyō nights were being recorded in eternity behind time warps and black holes. Dr. Memory was looking after us then and is looking after us still.

From the first moment, Jin and I recognized kindred spirits in each other. This intuitive revelation was confirmed by the following years and the confirmation was superfluous. We are brothers, our birthdays 84 days apart, and I like to imagine how, if the circumstances of our births were reversed, Jin could have been me and I could have been him. Speaking of kinship: Jin liked to accost vagrants in the street and, in the manner of Japanese children speaking to strangers, address them as uncle, *oichan*. Eventually he extended the use of this sobriquet to me and I reciprocated, so now I am his *oichan* and he is mine.

There is an art to playing tourist guide to acquaintances and friends. Shepherding them too much may suffocate them and its opposite may leave them feeling neglected. The art is to strike the right balance and Jin Akiyama is one of its undisputed masters. In the beginning, he took us to places and introduced us to people. Then, having settled us in the new environment, he let us run around on our own and luxuriate in unfettered adventures. Like a rocket, he launched us into orbit. Keeping himself in the background, he was ready to spring to our rescue in any emergency and we knew it. Thank you, Jin.

We may have been intrepid in the early days, David and I, but our digestive systems were less so. Fortunately, compassionate and brilliant *mamasans* understood our exotic dietary needs and supplied us with fatty foods as a matter of course. One of these angels, the owner of an open-air snack bar, was getting on in years and was nearly blind. One day, as she was preparing an omelet for us and stirring it with her long chopsticks while she tried to peer at a small TV in the corner, a cockroach appeared on the wooden counter and began marching toward the smell. This was not one of your dainty *aburamushi*, this was a big mother *gokiburi*. Fascinated, David and I watched the animal’s progress to the spot directly above the frying pan, where it waved its antennae voluptuously in the intoxicating aroma, teetered momentarily on the edge and then plunged straight into the pan. The sound

of sizzling eggs and vegetables differs from the sound of a sizzling cockroach. David and I can attest to this and so could the mama. Unerringly, without taking her eyes off the TV screen, she grasped the insect in her chopsticks and neatly dropped it to the ground. Need I say that we were impressed?

There is an art to making people feel at home in a foreign country. *You belong here*, you say to them, implicitly at least, *you belong here and all this is yours. Of course, you will come across people who disagree. Ignore such idiots. They are beneath us. We know better, you and I.* This is how Claude Berge gave me France. This is how Jin Akiyama gave me Japan.

One evening during my first Japanese summer, Jin took me to a restaurant owned by a friend of his. Little by little, the customers thinned out until there were none and the owner locked the door. Now only he, Jin, I, and two beautiful waitresses remained. With the lights dimmed and sandalwood wafting in gently, the two enchantresses sat me between them and sang to me *Ue o Muite Arukō*, the song that, with Czech lyrics, had been one of my favourites fifteen years earlier, four years before the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. I knew then, quite rationally and quite lucidly, that I was in paradise. I knew that I had come home.

I never knew where the powerful magic that Japan attracted me with was coming from. When I was a child, a small tin statue of Buddha, painted black, stood watch over my sleep night after night. My maternal grandfather had brought it from Yokohama on his return from the First World War via the long route —Siberia, Japan, North America. Growing up, I was hopelessly inept at almost all sports. All except one, to which I took like fish to water and at which I excelled. That sport was judo. At the age of eighteen, I experienced a *satori* just hours before finding out from a literary magazine that there was something called Zen Buddhism.

“You will die in Japan,” Jin said to me once and I was happy to see that he understood the intensity of my love affair with our country. I did my best to make his prophesy come true when I went on an alcoholic binge during the Kyōto conference celebrating our sixtieth birthdays, but that was accidental, I did not do it on purpose, and it is a different story altogether. Except that I am glad of the opportunity to say now what I meant to say then and to add that I am sorry to have screwed up ten years ago.

There is an art to making people feel at home in a foreign country and Jin Akiyama is one of its undisputed masters. For years I had on my key ring, next to the key to my Montreal apartment and the key to my McGill office, a slender key stamped with the Lion's Mansion logo. It was the key to Jin's Nishi Eifuku apartment. Just looking at it back in Motreal warmed my heart and made me feel safe. I would get off the plane at Narita and hop on the train — Ueno, Shinjuku, Meidaimae — and the key fit, of course, and here I was, back in the familar haven. After a thorough wash outside the ofuro, with much hot water sloshed around on the floor (none of the Western shower nonsense for me, thank you) and a slow sensuous soak up to my neck in the ofuro, a restorative nap on the futon rolled out on the tatami and then off to Golden Gai. With renewed thanks to Jin, silent ones if he happened to be away from Tōkyō.

In Confucianism, Jin's first name denotes the ethical constant of human kindness. The name fits him. He is compassionate and he is kind-hearted. What redeems him from appearing sanctimonious is his gift for laughing at himself and his voracious pursuit of fun .

About to return to Japan after a five-year hiatus, I was apprehensive that reality might not live up to my reminiscences. I could not have been more mistaken: Tōkyō proved even better than my memories of it. It felt even more exhilarating, even more welcoming, even more soothing. Blueprint for Utopia.

On this first return to Japan, I made a survey of our old haunts and could not find the snack bar where the cockroach incident had taken place. The neighbourhood was rebuilt and none of the people I asked knew what happened to the owner. That night, soaking in Jin's ofuro, I meditated wistfully on what Japan teaches us. The transience of life and its ephemeral beauty. Gokiburi mama gone the way of all flesh and cherry blossoms.

Jin Akiyama is a romantic figure. Rather than relying on help from rich relatives, he left home at the age of around 20 to earn his own livelihood, including the university tuition fees. He worked as a tutor and as a computer operator in IBM Japan at night during terms and he worked as a guard at a mountain cottage near Japan Alps during long holidays. This was in keep-

ing with the principles of simplicity, fortitude, and self-reliance, by which Jin's relatives on his father's side lived. Among these relatives, there were scientists such as Dr. Shōten Oka, one of the pioneers of biorheology; Jin's father was a physicist and studied acoustics. They held academic achievements in high regard. On Jin's mother's side, there were many relatives who succeeded in business. His grandfather was the president of Japan Victor Co. Ltd and his uncle was the Vice Minister of Finance of Japan. With their privileges and strong connections to high society, these relatives tended to regard wealth and status as important. Such was the atmosphere where Jin Akiyama came to disdain the snobbery of class distinctions and inherited entitlements.

Jin Akiyama is a romantic figure. When he ventured to Ann Arbor to study graph theory with Frank Harary, it was in the best tradition of Meiji scholars seeking knowledge throughout the world.

Jin Akiyama is a romantic figure. His meteoric rise to stardom is the stuff legends are made of. In 1972, he joined the faculty of the prestigious medical school Nippon Ika (the Japanese respect mathematics and insist that all medical doctors be thoroughly trained in logical thinking) and he also took on a part-time teaching job at the Sundai Preparatory School. At Sundai, students could choose the teacher whose courses they wanted to attend and teachers were paid by the number of students attending their courses. Jin's charisma, his infectious energy, and his penchant for the outrageous (he made the *risqué* condom problem a standard part of his syllabus) quickly made him the most popular mathematics teacher. Soon he was assigned Sundai's biggest lecture room, an auditorium that held 450 people (those sitting in the back rows had to use binoculars) and his lectures in this room were simultaneously followed by students in Sundai's satellite campuses all over Japan via closed-circuit television. This alone would have been enough to make Jin a wealthy man.

But there was more. Preparatory schools train students for university entrance examinations, which are regarded as the most important hurdle in the path of superlative education. At Sundai Yobikō, one of the oldest and the best of these schools, Jin taught some 5000 students every year. Most of them were good students, who later formed the *crème de la crème* of Japanese society. This alone would have been enough to make Jin famous.

But there was more still. In 1991, just before the end of his twenty-year Sundai stint, Jin got affiliated with Japan's national public broadcasting organization NHK and in that single year produced for them 30 television shows dealing with mathematics. Audience rating of this program was very high, and so Jin's career at NHK continued for the next twelve years. In this program, he performed as a lecturer and edited its textbooks that were sold all over Japan. So Jin became a TV star and his name became a household word.

The summer of 1979. A gray misty Tōkyō morning and ravens cawing overhead as we were returning home after yet another night of debauchery, "I want Chinese noodles," announced Jin and off we went in search of a ramen stand. When I woke up later, I marvelled at his wisdom, full of gratitude for this cushion against hangover. "Look, Vašek, your father," Jin cried out one of these mornings and pointed to a homeless man sleeping in a cardboard box. He must have liked this theme because, gradually, revel by revel, he developed it into a comedian's routine. "Come speak to your father, Vašek. Why aren't you speaking to him? Are you ashamed of your father? You are making him so sad!" But once he suddenly changed his monologue. "Look, here is my father," he exclaimed when we saw another homeless man sitting on the sidewalk. "He has no money, my father, and he is worried. Don't worry about money, my father! I will make much money, because I am a great educationalist!" Later on, I wondered: did Jin have his brilliant Sundai/NHK career all mapped out at that moment? James Clavell's *Shōgun* came out in 1975. Finding parallels between its archetype of the sophisticated strategist Yoshi Toranaga and the real Jin Akiyama may have been pardonable.

On the rare occasions when I feel a pang of jealousy over my brother's success, I like to reassure myself that I have not had the same opportunity: where else would you find society that holds mathematics in high esteem and the highly competitive system of university entrance examinations with its attendant preparatory schools? Only in Japan, I say when I try to comfort myself. But that excuse is flimsy: who knows what fireworks Jin would come up with in a different environment.

Once Jin took me to the taping of a television game show. The two

teams — red against white, of course — were deployed in two buses and the buses were suspended above water from large cranes. Penalty for incorrect answers consisted of lowering the bus below the water level and the TV cameras faithfully recorded the contestants' struggle till the last string of air bubbles rising to the surface before reprieve was granted and the dripping vehicle slowly cranked up again. Celebrities formed the panel of judges: Jin Akiyama, a bantamweight boxing champion, a *tanka* poet, two charming porn actresses. *Only in Japan*. Eat your heart out, NBC.

Having a celebrity oichan means having his face confront one from TV commercials for Tokyo Gas and from posters advertising Suntory Premium Malt's. Several times I answered a question in a Tōkyō bar and told the stranger that I was not staying in a hotel, I was staying in a friend's apartment. This information elicited no response to speak of, but the atmosphere changed dramatically if I revealed the friend's name. "What? Are you trying to tell me that you know Akiyama? Who do you think you are kidding?" The Japanese, too, can be quite direct when confronted with obvious delusions of grandeur.

Once a magnificent mamasan closed her shop for the night and, as is the mamasans' wont, took me to another drinking establishment. Which was presided over by a vigorous granny dispensing wisdom to her clientele, mainly young girls coming there for advice on their love lives. My memory of faces is atrocious: as a child, I was often scolded by my parents for failing to greet our neighbours, whom I simply did not recognize. My memory of faces is atrocious, but something kept tugging at it after I returned to Jin's Nishi Eifuku that night. Something kept tugging at it until I gave in and went back to observe the granny some more. "Excuse me, but didn't you run an open-air snack bar near Yasukuni dōri just behind Kabukichō?" I asked eventually and she said yes, she did. "But," I continued flabbergasted, Alice in Wonderland once again, "your eyesight was very bad then, wasn't it?" and she confirmed this, too, and went on to tell me how, at the age of 70, she got fed up with her current way of life, and so she divorced her husband, got a cataract surgery, and moved her business here.

That night, soaking in Jin's ofuro, I meditated on what Japan really teaches us. Zest for life. Joyous energy. Not falling pompously for trite clichés.



Jin Akiyama gave me Japan, that moveable feast, and he gave me his friendship. Thank you, Oichan. Thank you, Jin. Thank you for these precious permanent presents.