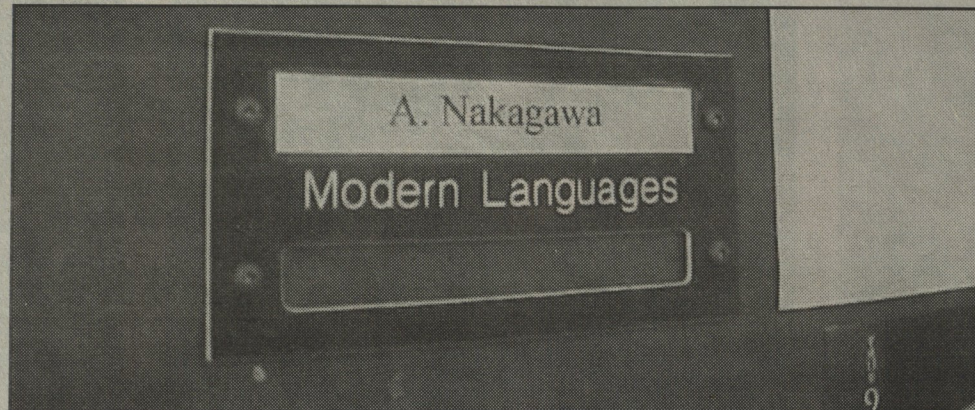


As Is

Featuring Ayuko Nakagawa

by Erin FAGAN

TIME: October 20th, 12:30 p.m.
 LOCATION: Formosa House Cafe, University Avenue.
 ACTIVITY: drinking bubble tea, and snacking on Taiwanese dumplings and vegetarian sushi.
 COMRADES: (among others who need not be named) David Neatby and his professor of Introductory Japanese at UPEI's Modern Languages department, Ayuko Nakagawa.



COMRADES: as before
 ACTIVITY: rummaging and patching together costumes

Ayuko's eyes were wide upon seeing such a huge selection of masks, wigs, accessories, and clothing of every description, and helped us to find the things we needed (I credit her for finding my fishnet stockings). There were extremely hyperactive children darting about the aisles, and both parents and employees looked exasperated.

The week passed by. David recommended that I interview professor Nakagawa, and then I became inspired to treat her to a mandatory Halloween event. And so we found ourselves . . .

TIME: 6:30 p.m., October 27th.
 LOCATION: the Steele Building amphitheatre.
 ACTIVITY: waiting, about an hour or so, for our turn in the UPEI Music Society's Annual Haunted House.
 COMRADES: Sobia Ali, Jennifer Galle, and Akuyo .

I was so glad that we had arranged to meet a half-hour before the thing started, because there were already about a hundred people in line when we got there (mostly hyper children and exasperated parents). The stage of the Steele amphitheatre was now a twisted coil of people, all kept in line by yellow police tape. Behind us, within fifteen minutes, there were about ten times as many people waiting. Yet another profitable fund-raiser underway for the Music Society.

As it happens, this portion of the "interview" with Ayuko was coincidental and entirely unplanned. But I have chosen to recreate the events of that day anyway (there is a connection).

David Neatby, a current Introductory Japanese student, had just taken his professor, Ayuko Nakagawa, on a short historical tour of downtown Charlottetown. They just happened to stop in at Formosa while we were there, and we all squeezed into a small space to partake of the delicious food (I refuse to apologize for this blatant product endorsement). Ayuko was intrigued with the Taiwanese tea room for its blend of Chinese and Japanese elements in the food and decor. I also got approval for my chop-stick skills.

Because my group was about to go to a thrift shop to get Halloween costumes for a party, the discussion naturally fell on this topic. Ayuko wanted to know more about this unusual cultural holiday, which is not celebrated in Japan. Luckily, there was one Religious Studies major and one occult enthusiast to answer all kinds of questions about why it is celebrated, and why people dress up, predominantly, like scary creatures and demand candy from strangers.

There are few things more fascinating than the scrutiny of your own cultural quirks through the inquiring eyes of another. And so, from there . . .

TIME: approximately 1:30 - 3:00 p.m., same day
 LOCATION: Value Village at what was probably the busiest hour of the day

We talked about Halloween, spirituality, and culture. Ayuko, in fact, asked us to explain the difference between American culture and Canadian culture. We did our best to field the question, circling around "melting pot" and "mosaic" stereotypes, and the obvious factor of size. I found it personally awkward, even scary, to contemplate the relative closeness of the two cultures. It was noted, though, that Chinese and Japanese cultures also get confused in this part of the world.

Akuyo mentioned this interesting explanation of the Japanese fascination for Canada: next to our neighbour, we are "mysterious." Since US culture is so prevalent and loud in Japan, most people feel they know enough about it without actually having to go there. But so little is known about Canada, relatively speaking, that it is intriguing and attractive for people to explore.

We finally got to the elevator "portal" of the haunted house. As usual, I rediscovered what a jumpy person I can be when the right atmosphere is created. The four of us sped through, holding on tight and screaming at everything. I wonder now if Akuyo had expected anything like that while waiting in line.

After I had finished complaining about being sprayed in the face with cold water, we all jumped into our cars and went for some authentic Canadian cuisine at . . .

LOCATION: The Lone Star restaurant.
 ACTIVITY: involved fajitas, nachos, gua-

camole and gossip.

There are few things as "PEI" as running into people you know virtually everywhere. Akuyo discovered an example of this when she ran into one of her students and another Japanese exchange student in the restaurant. Having grown up in a place as large as Tokyo, this is a phenomenon for professor Nakagawa.

"It's heaven for me, as a city girl," Akuyo explained. With the central island of Japan being about 87% mountain, the large population is "very tight and close."

"This island's very similar to Hokkaido (the northern-most island of Japan), with lots of nature and friendly people," she noted.

Akuyo has been on the Island since late August, and is contracted to teach Japanese at UPEI for the next two years. It was a great stroke of luck which has found her on the mecca of Prince Edward Island.

"This is my chance, so I'm very lucky," she says.

Akuyo had applied to the Japanese Foundation for International Internships, but didn't know where she would be placed until the last minute. Her first choice was Canada, and she had visited Vancouver three years ago as a conference volunteer, but she may have ended up anywhere in the world. Prince Edward Island has long been a top choice for most Japanese women, so it was a wonderful discovery to be placed here after all.

When the tortilla chips and salsa were set before us, Akuyo dipped in and mentioned that she had been to Mexico once before as well. The shirt she was wearing, actually, was from one of her stops in Mexico, and she described her scooba-diving hobby. Akuyo has also recently walked from Charlottetown to Mount Stewart along the Confederation Trail, an all-day adventure.

"Everything is fields and plateaus and red soil. But I'm a bit