SADAKO SAWAMURA'S *MY ASAKUSA* : A JAPANESE AND AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Sadako Sawamura, now in her eighties, has long been a popular figure in Japan, both as an actress and as an essay writer. *My Asakusa*, the second of ten prose collections, won the 1977 Japan Essayists' Club Award. Sawamura-san was born in Asakusa, Tokyo, in 1908, and lived there for twenty-two years. The biographical sketches collected into *My Asakusa* recount Sawamura-san's coming of age in the Tokyo of the Taisho era (1912-1926) and the first few years of the Showa era. Readers learn of her family and the life they shared as well as the ordinary life of Asakusa residents during a tumultuous period. On the larger scale, Japan saw World War I (1914-1918), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Great Depression beginning in 1920, the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923), the Promulgation of the Common Election Law, and the notorious Maintenance of Public Order Act in 1925. On a more intimate scale, these years also added flavor to life in Asakusa with the opening of the Asakusa Opera (1914) and the beginning of the domestic film industry with the formation of the Nikkatsu Movie Company in 1912 and the Shochiku Cinema Company in 1920.

In such a comprehensive portrait, where does a small book of reminiscences fit ? The details of any broad work enhance the whole, and only by understanding the parts can the whole make sense. *My Asakusa* is a highly personal account of the life of one individual, but the influences on that life are universal — place, members of the community, and family. Asakusa and Shitamachi life might be seen as a microcosm of Japan during Sawamura-san's formative years. This detail of the larger portrait, then, creates a memorable impression of the era and of the Japanese people. *My Asakusa* has already demonstrated a strong appeal to Japanese readers. And with its translation into English, its audience will increase. The two discussions below of its past and potential future appeal are personal rather than objective perspectives. Although both examine some of

the same subjects – picturesque locale, ordinary life in a time gone by, family relationships, the role of women, community values, vivid characters – the differing angles of vision reveal that the appeal of *My Asakusa* is both in the ideal community it creates and in the individual character it reveals. But both perspectives arrive at the same focal point: *My Asakusa* attracts readers because it is universal.

PART I – THE CHARMS OF SADAKO SAWAMURA'S *MY ASAKUSA*

Yasuhiro Kawamura

My Asakusa, Sadako Sawamura's collection of reminiscent stories, is a charming work, and I would like to introduce the charms which motivated me to undertake an English translation with Professor Stafford. The people in the stories are all wonderful, and though life today has many more material advantages than this earlier time, these characters remind us that some of their appeal is missing in our contemporary world.

The world of almost 80 years ago was different than today. This was a time when men dominated women and women could not vote. When judged by contemporary norms, the condition of women and some of men's behaviors toward them which are described in the book will be frowned at and questioned. For instance, readers may not be lenient about Sawamura-san's father's flirtations with geisha. It's unthinkable now that, at the marriage of Sawamura-san's father and mother, his geisha friend should send him a carving knife concealed in her wedding gift. We would object to Chieko-san, the master of the two-stringed *koto* later, enduring her husband's affairs without complaint. Yet in those days, as Mattsan the Nio says, the habits of "drinking, gambling and spending money on a prostitute" was considered to be part of a man, the habits to be connived at as long as he did not fail to support his family. We would be displeased to learn that in Sawamura-san's household, only father had *sashimi* or that only elder brother attended kindergarten. When catered dishes were ordered, only men were counted, so it was the child Sawamura's great pleasure to accompany her father on his visit to the family temple on equinox days and, as a purification rite on the way home, to be treated to a full portion of pork cutlet in a restaurant. At the Sanja Festival girls were not allowed to touch the portable shrine, while today they carry it together with young men.

Women were placed in a lower position than men, and few kinds of work were open to women to facilitate their independence. Girls were customarily trained in such "women's accomplishments" as music, for instance, playing the *shamisen* and *nagauta* singing; even poor families paid tuition for their girls to learn these arts. If her husband died or deserted her, Sawamura-san reasons, these skills were necessary for a daughter's security. We see women in the stories who make their living by sewing and teaching the

craft. Being a seamstress or a geisha was practically the only way for a woman to be independent of a man; even then a geisha customarily had a patron. O-Yuki-san, a show manager's young mistress from Akita, reveals her innermost heart, saying "a girl is a human too. She is not a dog or a cat to be sold or bought. I have had enough of it." But, after the show manager dies, she is forced to continue as a geisha in Kyushu. Her cry protests against the male-dominated world. In Sawamura-san's youth, the old form of the geisha system and licensed prostitution were practiced, as in Yoshiwara, the licensed quarters adjacent to Asakusa. In "Platinum Carp" and "The Tale of the Manseian Noodle Shop," the author's eyes toward these people are warm.

Even good-natured men, such as Mattsan the Nio, reflect the deeply rooted feeling that a woman's happiness lay in a good husband. He admonishes Sawamura-san to give up high school because, as he says, "A woman boasting of her schooling has no charm. Polish your beauty and find a good husband." Although in her time this kind of male-centered thinking was dominant, readers should not be blinded to other charming qualities that make the book so enjoyable.

Sawamura-san's mother cuts a brilliant figure all through the book — loving, practical, and strong. She was not educated. When Sawamura-san was born, her husband, whose dream was to bring up his children as kabuki actors, was not eager to consider the child's name. Unable to write, her mother consulted Gen-san the fortuneteller, who chose the name Teiko. Mother pleads her ignorance and lack of education when Sawamura-san asked her why, in feudal times, as she saw in kabuki, loving mothers sacrificed their children for their lords. The young Sawamura's desire for knowledge and understanding inspired her to attend high school and finally college.

As a mother, Sadako's mother was superb. Her simple cooking was full of love for her children, and the dishes she prepared with inexpensive ingredients pleased their palates. Her pickles were excellent, and she loved making them. She had a sound philosophy of life. Asked about the family's ancestors, she replies to her daughter, "How many golden kettles our ancestors had is none of our business. It doesn't matter who our ancestors were. What matters is that, because of them, you and I exist now." Mother was generous to her children. On a stormy day she allowed her sons to play sword fighting in the house, even though they broke *shoji* screens and *fusuma* doors, because she believed that too many "don'ts" warp the healthy growth of children. It is pleasant to read of the beautiful scene the next day when unexpected flowers bloomed on *fusuma* and *shoji*, patches mother cut from different colors of paper. Mother is a good educator. She punished her elder son severely when he stole five yen from the family altar ("The Incident at the Cheap Candy Shop") and contradicted her husband — a rarity — when he spoke ill of the neighbor who reported him.

Mother's strength is evident in many episodes. When banks went broke and

Sawamura-san's parents lost their savings which they had accumulated by cutting down expenses, father cried, but mother did not. She suppressed her tears and prepared meals for her family. Her motto was "A girl must not cry because...she will be late cooking meals." It was mother, who, at the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake, first helped her children escape to Ueno Park and then dragged her shaking husband to the precincts of the Kannon Temple. She dug out burnt miso and meat from the shop ruins and cooked them to feed her husband. Father realized that without his wife, his life would not go smoothly. She was the prop of the household though the father earned them bread. Yet she did not push herself but kept her place and paid due respect to her husband. She loved him, as we see on the anniversary of his death when she said that if he had lived a little longer, she could have served him delicacies. At this one time, she shed tears, a rare thing for a woman who had never been seen to cry before in whatever difficulties.

Sawamura-san's mother embodied virtues of permanent value. She was always concerned for others and willing to help. Mother was one of the *dobucho-sans*, so called after Banzuin *Cho*bei, a historical figure, who helped townsfolk. *Dobu* (ditch) was added because women of her type were busily engaged, rattling wooden ditch covers as they went about. When, while playing with Sawamura-san and her brother, the baker's daughter Shiro-chan lost the money collected from her clientele, mother ruled that, for the time being in her household, lunches for her and the children would be buns. She did so in order to patronize Shiro-chan's shop and thus encourage her. The girl made extra efforts to cut into a new market and thereby obtained a profitable contract with a movie theater. The mother gave advice on child raising to her neighbor, a young wife with three children. She uttered a memorable line when the public bathhouse owner's wife came to inquire after her, as she was laid up with the erysipelas she had contracted from a sweet flag bath. To the wife who apologized, the mother said, "Don't mind it. A germ has no name tag. I may have contracted the germ from the ditch I cleaned that morning" (which was not true). She cut down expenses in daily living, but was generous to people who worked for her husband in the Miyato Theater, such as Kazuhei-san, an attendant for a leading actor, and Tome-san the costumer. And her husband pretended not to see.

This virtue, concern for others, is a distinct feature of the book. It is not limited to *dobucho-san*, but is exemplified by many characters. Aunt Piggy, the owner of the cheap candy shop, from whom elder brother bought out the *atemuki* lottery with the stolen five-yen note, suspected the nature of the money and reported it to mother. We smile when she first returns the note and then on second thought takes it back, saying she would take the original cost and return the change. Roku-san the stall keeper declined to sell "a chowder" of rice-flour pastry to the child Sawamura because he feared the day's sultry weather was not good for eating it and advised her to get something else, — as it turned out, something cheaper. Roku-san sacrificed his profit for the children's health. Don't we need this kind

of thinking today? After the defeat in the last war, the Japanese were too eager to crawl out of the bottom of misery and were often forgetful of the true qualities of a rich life. Can true happiness exist when we forget concern for others? Concern for others makes society a good place to live.

In the story "Mattress Making," a greengrocer's wife, out of pity, buys a mattress from an old woman with two to sell. When her husband becomes angry about the unnecessary purchase, she comes to mother to ask if she can take it. The wife finds that mother has already purchased, out of pity, the other mattress. The two women laugh, how warm and healthy a laugh! Hurrah for Asakusa women! "Sending off the Souls of the Dead" portrays the solidarity among the wives of Shitamachi, which led them to share anything, even embers from the priest's torch, considered to be a charm. Sawamura-san observes in *Dobucho-san,*

> In Asakusa of those days life did not go smoothly without such mutual help. There were no men of great wealth or influence, only good-natured common people without power who lived huddled together, so to speak, so we needed someone busy in the affairs of others.

Such concern for others sometimes results in meddlesomeness, as is illustrated by Matt-san the Nio. His goodwill is sincere but can be a nuisance. This defect is modified by the individualism of contemporary society, but extreme individualism is as bad as meddlesomeness. Some golden medium should be struck.

Sawamura-san's father was manager of the Miyatoza, a kabuki theater. In "Father and Western Clothes," we learn he was a handsome man, more handsome than an ordinary actor. In "*Gokuraku-Tonbo,* Happy-Go-Lucky Fellow," he is described as frank, like a true Edoite, with personal charms that made him likable. When he offered his daily morning prayer at the family altar, he never asked for anything greedy, such as a millionaire husband for his daughter. But Father enjoyed the full privileges of a male-dominated society. He bought dolls for the Boy's Festival for his sons, but not for his daughter at the Girl's Festival. At a Ground Cherry Fair, he pointed to a beautiful ex-geisha and saddened child Sadako by saying that she used to be his woman. Though he had his way in everything as the lord of the household, he acknowledged his wife's strength and depended on her, the common way the household is run in many families, even today: a husband receives due respect as the supporter of the family, but the practical business of running a household is left to his wife and her role is duly acknowledged and respected. Father can be said to be a pampered big child, but the household is an example of a basically healthy family.

Many features of the life of ordinary people in Asakusa, as described in this book, spice our appreciation and make us smile, like the practice of *Koromogae,* Change of Garments for the Season, a custom then strictly followed which refreshes our daily life,

like pepper. Sawamura-san's grandma from Takasaki is a charming figure, whose response to a banana vendor's bargain sale is enjoyable, as is his talk. In "*Konnichi-sama* (Today's Sun), three women, including Sawamura-san, talk about their diligent work habits and their youthful looks. As long as they are healthy and can work, they feel guilty if they are idle. They humorously say they have had calisthenics exercises unconsciously by believing in *Konnichi-sama*. Sawamura-san also refers to the conversation of wives about a broad bean vendor, whose close-fitting trousers and livery coat are thoroughly mended. They say his wife must be keen on him; otherwise she would not have been so attentive to his work clothes. Sawamura-san says Asakusa wives longed for a happy couple, particularly an affectionate husband. We see here the heart of a faithful woman and their concept of happiness.

In "The Red Clog Thongs," I see the good order of society adhered to in her days. Some unknown young man who fell in love with the adolescent Sawamura-san inserts his love letters at her door and, under the pagoda every evening for a week, waits for her, holding her clogs of red thongs as a sign. But when he realizes that his love for her is unrequited, he stops bothering her and returns the clogs. He retreats with good grace. This unknown young man is one of the good people I like in the essays.

Another is Nikichi-san the carpenter, who marries O-Suga-san, four years older than he. She was late marrying because she took care of her young brothers after their parents died. O-Suga-san awkwardly tries to hide her real age, so Nikichi-san proposes to call her a wife of the cat's year. Of course, in the *junishi* system of naming the year of one's birth, there is no cat's year. How humorously warm and clever a way for dispelling her fear!

Sawamura-san's rendering of the people around her is sharp. "The District around Hanayashiki (Flower Estate)" contains an incident unique to the prewar period: a stall keeper selling portraits of the Emperor and Empress is severely scolded by a soldier for carelessly exposing their Majesties' faces. The author captures the sentiment of indentured youth when she lets Ken-chan say on an apprentices' holiday (July 15-16), "After seeing a movie at the Fuji Theater, I see the train movie at the Luna Park." The Luna Park was a third-class coach, featuring a monotonous movie in which two rails running through fields were projected on the screen. The audience watched it sitting in seats that rocked sideways. Ken-chan says he feels as if he were traveling home to see his mother in distant Akita. "I have a little cry," he says, sticking out his tongue a bit as if ashamed of his confession. The author has a vivid memory of her classmate O-Teru-chan, studying to become a *nagauta* teacher. One youngster, whom young Sawamura-san was helping in his studies, was not eager to attend school. He liked the *shamisen* better. O-Teru-chan said, "Let him be a *shamisen* teacher if he likes the *shamisen*. Everybody does not have to go to high school." Tutor Sawamura-san recognized that O-Teru-chan had grown more mature than she. The contemporary education-minded mother should listen

to O-Teru-chan!

I have enumerated at random the features of the stories enjoyable to me. If I describe my impressions of the stories in one sentence, that would be "I like everybody that appears in the stories, and every one of the stories has a heart." What Sawamura-san sees as valuable and cherishes in her memories appeals to me and, I believe, to many readers today. Sawamura-san wrote what is in many people's hearts but waits for somebody to present in writing.

The stories reveal the author, an Asakusa girl and her values. As in "Asakusa Girl," when she defied the road repair laborers who made fun of her and protested vehemently in spite of herself, she is a determined girl with strong beliefs. She does not philosophize her thinking. She just states her cherished reminiscences of the simple daily life of Asakusa. The reader can breathe in the same world with her, deriving the joy of living in it. Her pithy and often witty and humorous style makes her work all the more enjoyable. Here lies the charm of *My Asakusa.*

Sawamura-san deserved the 25th Japan Essayists' Club Prize for this work. Professor Stafford and I hope that our translation, making her work available to English readers, retains the charm of her style.

PART II – *MY ASAKUSA*: THE EMERGENCE OF PERSONALITY

Norman E. Stafford

For the Japanese, *My Asakusa* may be a confirmation of long-cherished values which they believe, rightly or wrongly, are overshadowed by materialism in the modern industrial giant that Japan has become. As a portrait of working-class life in the Taisho and early Showa eras, Sawamura-san's reminiscences are also a reminder of the essence of Japanese society – the character of its people, their customs, and their relations with one another. But first and foremost, *My Asakusa* is a glimpse into the life of a remarkable and fascinating woman – the success story of a person who overcame poverty and sexism to become an educated, articulate, and respected figure in modern Japan. For the Japanese, then, *My Asakusa* may be in miniature both an explanation of the present and a model for the future.

What might be its interest to readers in other countries? I do not presume to speak for all foreigners or for all Americans. I speak only as an individual American. But I do think that *My Asakusa* will appeal to other Americans. The immediate attraction might be for the apparent differences American readers will perceive from their own country. Since its first contact with the West, Japan's real and perceived exoticism has influenced the American imagination. Koizumi Yakumo (Lafcadio Hearn) first intrigued America in the

late nineteenth century with his publication of Japan's folk tales, supernatural fiction, and observations on people and places. In the twentieth century, this interest has increased through a tragic war and, more happily, through an attraction to Japanese religion, architecture, art, literature, technology, and economic achievements.

American readers will note and enjoy learning of the differences between their country and Sawamura-san's as they appear in *My Asakusa.* But differences, real or imagined, seldom sustain interest. Ultimately, it seems to me, Americans will enjoy Sawamura-san's work because of the many similarities they perceive between the world she portrays and their own. At the present time, America is searching for permanent values, as is evidenced by former president Ronald Reagan, who evoked for Americans a world that never was, and by the desire of the radical "religious right" to eliminate the present political system and begin anew. Americans will find the social and family values of Sawamura-san's book a mirror image of ones they hold dear. They will be attracted by the portrait of an earlier time and place which — strange as it may seem — in key respects resembles the ethnic neighborhoods of their past. But most of all, Americans will be struck by the story of Sawamura herself. They will recognize in that story what is probably a universal theme, but what has been characterized as the "American Dream." Her story follows the pattern first set by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* (1771). Sawamura-san's is the story of a poor person who overcomes almost insurmountable odds to achieve success, respect, and even fame. Her rise from the streets of Asakusa and Shitamachi is as American in spirit as any tale of Horatio Alger.

Sawamura-san's account in *My Asakusa* is, of course, retrospective, and, as she implies in her "Postscript," she is well aware that hers is a success story. Asakusa is the locale, and each incident adds to the reader's understanding of the influences that made her the person she later became. Moreover, her memoirs possess a quality shared by all writers of autobiography: Sawamura-san is selective in the events she recounts and in her descriptions of them. The form she has chosen, a collection of essays, further contributes to her selectivity. Selectivity is not a limitation — all writers of autobiography have *a priori* purposes, even if unacknowledged to the writers themselves. What writers omit is often more revealing than what they include. Historians may differ with her interpretation of "facts," and even participants in the incidents that she recalls may have drawn different conclusions than she. But the incidents and details Sadako Sawamura has chosen to reveal, as well as those she has not included, provide a fascinating portrait of the places, people, events, and ideas that formed her character.

Throughout *My Asakusa*, Sawamura-san refers to herself as an "Asakusa girl," and specifically acknowledges that her "character as a Shitamachi woman was nurtured by [her] experiences on the back alleys of the Asakusa of [her] youth" ("Postscript"). This Asakusa was a stimulating — but certainly not an idyllic — environment for a young girl.

Its focal point, the Sensoji Temple, provided much of the excitement and, for American readers, the exotic quality of these recollections. The numerous festivals – some with fireworks and parades; most with crowds of vendors, actors, geishas, housewives, and excited children – provide a happy backdrop for the poignant and sometimes tragic events which took place. This tableau might be a fitting symbol for Sawamura-san's account of her early days: behind all the actions on center stage – whether as trivial as a shopkeeper's welcoming gawking but penniless children to his shop or witnessing her mother change her *marumage* coiffure because "its role [was] over" – Sawamura-san portrays an essentially happy community supported by a common spiritual foundation. The fact that many might find this setting too optimistic for the drama is itself revealing. Although Shitamachi life may, in actual fact, have been a bitter struggle for many, Sawamura-san's vision of her formative years is emotionally healthy and satisfying. She recognizes the ugliness she sometimes encounters, but places it in a larger perspective, one that delights in the beauty of a great performance while acknowledging the occasional flaw.

The folk beliefs were often as influential on Asakusa as their theology. In "Needles Stuck in Bean Curd," Sawamura-san recalls how Shitamachi women accounted for every needle they used in their sewing. In a yearly festival, they offered a prayer for the broken needles that had served them so well by offering them in a piece of tofu. The attention to detail and the gratitude for small pleasures implied in this episode are indicative of the qualities Sawamura-san values.

While Sensoji Temple is the center of the Asakusa community, the shops that surround it also contributed to the formation of Sawamura-san's character. Her opening essay, "Good Luck Tangerines," demonstrates a sense of community that pervades her book. A greengrocer's wife tells Teibo (the nickname for Sadako) of special tangerines that would be suitable for the young girl's family. The fruit was inexpensive because it was partially decayed. Yet Teibo's mother was happy to receive it and recognized the shopkeeper's thoughtfulness. Sawamura-san, in commenting on the transaction, attributes a noble motive to the shopkeeper and a grateful attitude to her mother. This characteristic is part of the charm of Sawamura-san's personality. But she is not naive. In other essays, she acknowledges marital infidelities, character flaws (even in the best of her characterizations, her mother), selfishness, and ignorance, But when given a choice of motivation or attitude, she invariably chooses the most positive alternative.

Other aspects of her surroundings certainly gave her ample reason to choose the darker options. Asakusa joined the Yoshiwara district, the gay quarters, which housed geishas, courtesans, prostitutes, theater people, and which offered countless opportunities to exhibit the worst of human behavior. One such subject, injustice to women, occurs frequently in *My Asakusa*. Sawamura-san observed her own father's

flirtations and implied infidelities. She saw women forced into degrading lives. "Girl from Akita" recounts the story of a young geisha who vows not to be treated like a dog, but when she writes from Kyushu that she is doing well, she implies that she has had to return to her life as a mistress or as a geisha. In "Platinum Carp," Sawamura's brother has an affair with a geisha and then ignores her. The problem is resolved with the woman's probable death in the Great Earthquake of 1923, a resolution which underscores her brother's culpability. Although she is recalling an earlier time when society accepted the double standard between men and women, the fact that Sawamura-san remembers so many incidents of injustice to women, portrays them vividly, and clearly suffers when they affect those dearest to her indicates the powerful influence they had upon her character.

Many of Sawamura-san's essays recounting injustices affecting women, however, have positive conclusions. Her women overcame the many obstacles their gender placed before them in Japanese society. One such essay, the longest in the book, "The Tale of the Manseian Noodle Shop," could be expanded into a novel about a woman's triumphs over numerous obstacles while always maintaining a positive attitude. Other stories of women are implicitly juxtaposed to Sawamura-san's own success. Although these women reach their goals, the goals themselves are frequently low, suggesting the lack of opportunity available to women in earlier times.

Other essays recount failures, not only of women, but of men as well. Some are humorous, such as the "Cherry-Blossom Time" actor. A shy man by nature, he was unsuited to acting and could only perform well when he was drunk. Because he was not unhappy in this situation, his story is merely that of an interesting character. But this account also indicates the problems actors faced. In the concluding essay of her collection, "Crazy About Acting," Sawamura-san tells of her younger brother who she believed had great talent but never really fulfilled his potential. The essays depicting failure often reveal strength of character, Sawamura-san's compassion, and highlight the possibilities for failure that Sawamura-san herself overcame.

The community also provided many of the influences that enabled Sawamura-san to "come of age," to become a mature woman. As is often the case, some are humorous. Readers should delight in "Hei-san at the Miso Shop," where Teibo's mother sends her to the miso shop because the young clerk gives the daughter larger portions than he does the mother. In her adolescent modesty, Teibo hides her pleasure at the attention she receives and secretly relishes. However, her nervousness causes her to slip and expose her undergarments to the clerk and his laughing friends. Hers is a mortification that most have experienced, regardless of their birthplace.

In a poignant coming-of-age essay, "Public Bath," Teibo learns from a sophisticated stranger how to apply the white powder which accompanies her first Shimada coiffure,

the style that symbolizes that she is of marriageable age. Her modesty, inexperience, and finally her gratitude are apparent at the outset of her maturity. When she later confronts several workmen who were rude to her and scolds them for their behavior, she shocks not only the workmen and her mother, but also herself. After the senior member of the work crew acknowledges the validity of her comments and apologizes, Teibo is proud, but her mother is just relieved that all turned out well. Sawamura-san uses this incident to illustrate the moral fiber of Asakusa women and to suggest a willingness to defy even her mother when she is certain of her position – or enraged enough to do so. These contrasting essays suggest the complex person that emerges from the Shitamachi environment.

Several times, Sawamura-san suggests that her character was formed by Asakusa and the community. But the majority of her essays are devoted to one aspect of that community, her family – her mother, father, two brothers, and, briefly mentioned, one sister. They too were influenced by the milieu and in that sense are part of the total which comprises the Asakusa from which her character developed. These people were the greatest influences on her character. And clearly the most positive influence was that of her mother. Her acts demonstrated her devotion to the family and her concern for others. The fact that she was a person of action also partially accounts for the success of many of Sawamura-san's essays. The mother's actions are dramatized, and readers can visualize them and draw their own conclusions about Mother, not just from Sawamura-san's comments about them. Those comments reveal more about the character of Sawamura-san than they do about the mother she loved and would hesitate to criticize. Her mother never asked her daughter to do tasks that she herself would not do; she showed her how to cook, to sew, to deal with other people with fairness and compassion. Her wisdom is apparent in her many conversations with Teibo. Mother is never condescending, and her observations are all the more penetrating because she does not reveal her feelings frequently. But she is also wise when she remains silent as her sons play roughly indoors on a rainy day and tear the *fusuma* and *shoji*. She knew when to speak and when not to. She even rebuked Father when he criticized a neighbor who reported their son's misbehavior. Essays on these subjects display much of the charm of Sawamura-san's style.

But, in her ability to deal with Father's infidelity and insensitivity, Mother also reveals great strength of character. I find "Mother's *Marumage* Coiffure" the most moving essay of the collection. Sawamura-san never reveals the precise reason for her mother's conclusion that she no longer needed to maintain Father's interest in her appearance. Perhaps Mother never told her. But readers can imagine the depths of Mother's pain. Like her mother, Sawamura-san knows when to say nothing.

Father is, of course, the second major person of influence in *My Asakusa*. As has been

suggested, many of his influences were negative. He hurt mother, he was pampered, he was insensitive, he was vain. He showed favoritism to his sons over Teibo. He was a product of his time, but that can't excuse all his flaws. Initially, I found little of interest in him. His daughter's love for him despite his flaws reveals more about her than him. But he is more than a means for revealing his daughter's strength and for illustrating a negative stereotype. His wife loved him, and his children, even Teibo, respected him. He did provide for his family. He played with his children and was concerned for their well-being. He too is a complex personality, and Sawamura-san's response to him and her attempts to understand him contribute to the appeal of her essays and ultimately to the strength of her character.

Sawamura-san's siblings also provided strong influences on her, both negative and positive. The boys were aware of the favoritism their father showed them, and they took advantage of their status as males in a male-dominated society. But most of the essays in which they appear reflect their reciprocal concern. Generally, her relationship with her brothers underscores the essentially happy family life she enjoyed. The story of her sister offers a stark reminder that this may not have been the case, that Sadako Sawamura's life could have been very different. Her sister is mentioned in two places in the entire book, and then only in passing. In the "Postscript," Sawamura-san thanks her sister for her help in recalling incidents. And in another essay, Sawamura-san mentions that her sister had been adopted by their aunt. *My Asakusa* does not provide these reasons, and exploring them here is inappropriate. Suffice it to say, the practice of adoption so that the children could be of help to the adoptive family was common in Japan in the past. This minor feature in *My Asakusa* reveals how precarious Sawamura-san's life was. As it is, hers is a great success story, a Japanese version of the "American Dream." The brief mention of her sister is a reminder that the dream might not have occurred.

The phrase "two perspectives" in this title suggests a problem: How can *two* perspectives result in *one* conclusion? In one sense, they cannot. But the two perspectives presented are not intended to produce a unified effect. The essay, as a whole, is intended to be suggestive. It is an introduction to a work that has yet to be read in English by the general public, much less discussed in any critical forum. The two perspectives do, however, suggest not merely that Sadako Sawamura's essays might appeal to a Japanese and an American audience. They also suggest that the work has universal appeal, that, in fact, *My Asakusa* appeals to people, regardless of nationality.