

## Interview with Keiko Ikeda

Interviewed by Rand Hartsell, March 6, 2008

Keiko Ikeda might not appear to fit the "South Park" demographic, as a middle-aged Japanese scholar. Ikeda, Professor of Anthropology and Dean of the [Graduate School of American Studies at Doshisha University](#) in Kyoto, Japan, is nevertheless about to introduce a video clip of the juvenile foul-mouthed animated miscreants to a group of students and academics assembled in the Anthropology Department at the University of Illinois on a sunny March afternoon. The episode in question, "Chinpokomon," is about a fad that has engulfed South Park and has captivated its children. The parents are mystified by and anxious about their children's attraction to Japanese pop culture.



Ikeda's own effort to demystify the phenomenon of Japanese "gross national cool" (to use Douglas McGray's term) resulted in the DVD *On Another Playground: Japanese Popular Culture in America*, a video of a conference that explored the immense popularity of Japanese culture in the United States (and beyond), hosted by the American Studies program at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. The DVD has just been released by the [Media Production Group \(MPG\)](#) and is distributed by the [Asian Educational Media Service \(AEMS\)](#).

The video focuses on three lectures at the conference on cuteness (Hello Kitty), cuisine (sushi) and sports (baseball) — aspects of Japanese pop culture that are iconic for many

Americans. Christine Yano of the University of Hawai'i- Manoa , gives a lecture entitled, "Hello Kitty: The Marketing and Consumption of Japanese Culture." Theodore Bestor, from Harvard University , delivers a lecture called "Sushi, and the Western Imagination of Japan." William Kelly, of Yale University , lectures on baseball: "Nomo, Ichiro, Matsui: Japan Enters the Major Leagues."

What becomes apparent after showing the vignette from "South Park" to an appreciative audience is Ikeda's conviction that video can be integral to the development of a stronger understanding of how globalization affects cultures and the movement of culture.

"I apprenticed, so to speak, in the 1980s with a program called *Cinema Eye*, and learned how to edit film and sound—all that stuff—spending countless hours in the editing room. I got to direct two programs for *Cinema Eye*. Basically they did ethnography, but on video. I hadn't thought about the possibility of ethnography and video, but I thought, 'Why not?'"

Ikeda's 1984 video ethnography *Japanese Fighting Festival* about the Nada fighting festival in Himeji, Japan, received several awards, including an honor at the American Film Festival in New York.

Ikeda first met MPG founder David Plath (who serves as associate producer and editor for *On Another Playground* ) in the late 1970s, when he hired her as principal interviewer for research Plath was conducting in Japan. She also supervised his research assistants. The association with Plath, a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, would lead her to this campus to explore ethnography where she eventually enrolled in graduate studies in anthropology.

"I studied sociology as an undergraduate student in Japan. But there were no stand-alone anthropology programs in Japan; it's considered part of sociology. So I came to Urbana [to the University of Illinois ] as a non-degree student to see what anthropology was all about."

Ikeda's research culminated in her doctoral thesis on high school reunions. The dissertation became the basis for *A Room Full of Mirrors: High School Reunions in Middle America* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

Ikeda served as associate producer for the MPG film *Makiko's New World* (1999), which won the Silver Prize at the Asahi Newspaper and Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Competition of Films and Videos on Japan. Some of Ikeda's students appeared in the dramatizations in the film, which is based on Kazuko Smith's 1995 translation of *Makiko's Diary: A Merchant Wife in 1910 Kyoto* (Stanford University Press, 1995).

Her experience with video production, and an interest in how the ethnography and globalization intersect, allowed Ikeda to see the contexts for a project like *On Another Playground*.

"The popularity of Japanese culture in the United States makes you aware of the social power of globalization. The *South Park* video that I showed touches on the anxiety some Americans, perhaps parents especially, have about Japanese pop culture."

Christine Yano's lecture in *On Another Playground* examines the Hello Kitty phenomenon in the United States, and the ways American culture has claimed Hello Kitty as its own, reinvented or reinterpreted and even repackaged "Kitty."

*On Another Playground* also allowed Ikeda to explore the context of the blurring of disciplinary boundaries. "By showing the conference on a DVD, I think it allows us to see something of an inverted ethnography, or an inverted anthropology." *On Another Playground* presents footage of a "Japan in America" exhibit that ran concurrently with the conference. Japanese attendees could look at exhibits of Americanized versions of Japanese pop culture. "When Japanese see a California roll for the first time, they say



'Wow! What is this?'" Ted Bestor's presentation takes the audience on a tour of the evolution of the popularity of sushi in America, and its place in American culture as not just an exotic food, but also as an example of globalization.

"The DVD also illustrates the context of how teaching and learning changes," said Ikeda. "Everyone has a computer now, and laptops are for many students an extension of themselves, a part of them." To emphasize her point, Ikeda hugs a sleek small black laptop. "Students go everywhere with them, and they have come to expect to be able to watch something instantaneously while they are learning."


"Having the conference on DVD gives people a chance to become familiar with scholars," Ikeda said. "It humanizes scholars to be able to watch Chris Yano's talk about Hello Kitty or see Ted Bestor dancing around to a jingle at the podium. Being able to watch Bill Kelly's talk is to see that he is an artisan of ideas."

(On using the DVD: *On Another Playground* has a menu that permits the user to navigate to separate segments. An instructor might show a lecture in its entirety, or show segments that can augment more traditional classroom lecture and discussion. Note that Christine Yano's lecture on Hello Kitty includes sexual references that may not be considered appropriate for all viewers.)


**Rand Hartsell** studied political science at Davidson College. He enjoys sushi and baseball. After viewing *On Another Playground*, he reports to have a greater appreciation for Hello Kitty. He is a freelance writer living in Champaign, Illinois.

**How to purchase:** *On Another Playground: Japanese Popular Culture in America* is available from the [Asian Educational Media Service](#) and [amazon.com](#) for \$60.

*Last updated July 7, 2008*

 SITE SEARCH

 SITE MAP

 EMAIL



Asian Educational Media Service

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue MC-025  
Urbana, Illinois 61801

Phone: (217) 333-9597  
[aems@illinois.edu](mailto:aems@illinois.edu)

