In January 1981, I visited Kyoto for the first time and went immediately to see the historic Nishijin weaving district. At that time, I had no intention of carrying out research in Nishijin. Having written about family and work in the textile industry in New England, my main purpose was to see the weaving enterprises and work processes and to talk with some of the weavers. With the help of an interpreter, I visited several highly skilled weavers who were operating traditional handlooms [tebata] in the Nishijin Textile Center [Nishijin Ori Kaikan], which is run by the Nishijin Textile Industrial Association [Nishijin Ori Kōgyō Kumiai]. I was startled when some of the older weavers said, “Mine is the last generation to weave on traditional handlooms.” Shocked by this revelation, I wanted to examine the Nishijin situation in depth and find out why these highly skilled craftspeople had a sense of impending doom. My own research as an American social historian focused on the relationship between the family and work in a declining textile industry in New England (Hareven 1978, 1982). The visit to Nishijin evoked many memories and images of a decade of interviewing the former workers of the Amoskeag Mills and their children. The Amoskeag workers and the Nishijin craftspeople had a great deal in common. They shared a strong attachment to their work and to the high quality and fame of their product. In both Amoskeag and Nishijin, the workers developed

This chapter has been adapted from my article, “From Amoskeag to Nishijin: Reflections on Life History Interviewing in Two Cultures,” which was published in International Annual of Oral History for 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History, ed. Ronald J. Grele (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992).
a deep loyalty to the companies for whom they worked and strongly identified with their products. Both the American and the Japanese workers experienced a sense of loss and betrayal as the world of work in which they had invested their best years was crumbling before their eyes, leaving them stranded. I wanted to understand what Nishijin’s weavers were experiencing in a comparative context, and I was determined to return and research the situation.

Nishijin textiles are nationally famous for obi, the sash worn over the kimono, which has become a cultural property of Japan. An essential component of the kimono costume, the Nishijin obi is an elaborate piece of craftsmanship. It is worn only for highly festive rituals, such as weddings, special celebrations, flower arrangement, tea ceremonies, the Noh and Kabuki plays, and traditional Japanese dance. While both men’s and women’s kimono require obi, Nishijin obi is worn almost entirely by women, except for Noh players and Kabuki actors. In addition to being used in the fashioning of obi, the artistic Nishijin textiles are also used to make brides’ wedding coats [uchi-kake], garments for the crown prince's adulthood ceremony, and tapestries for wall hangings, traditional screens, and, more recently, table covers. Nishijin obi is made from a brocade in which colorful silk, gold, and silver threads are interwoven. The specific characteristic of this textile is that the silk threads are dyed prior to the weaving [saki-zome]. The brilliant weavings are textured, with some of the motifs raised in relief [mon-ori]. The sculptured texture of a Nishijin brocade, which resembles embroidery, is a product of the complex weaving of colorful threads, rather than dyeing or painting on a monochromatic cloth.

Nishijin designs incorporate the traditional symbols of Japanese culture, especially those related to the scenery around Kyoto, including this historic city’s temples and festivals. The motifs and colors of the obi also harmonize with the seasons. The designs and colors are adjusted to each ceremonial occasion on which the obi is worn and to the season of the year. They display maple leaves and chrysanthemums in autumn; snow-covered pagodas and plum blossoms in winter; and cherry blossoms, irises, and peonies in spring. Mr. Yamaguchi, one of Nishijin’s most artistic manufacturers who reproduces paintings depicting The Tale of Genji in weavings observed: “Most of the weaving techniques in the world converge in the weaving techniques of Nishijin. I wanted to use those techniques, as much as possible, to their utmost perfection. . . .” Design and weaving take place in the historic Nishijin district, close to the center of Kyoto, where the production of this textile has become a way of life (see maps 3 and 4).
This chapter discusses my interview experiences in Nishijin as they emerged and developed in the context of my changing relationship with the Nishijin people. Under a fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, I returned to Kyoto in fall 1982 and spent three months interviewing manufacturers and weavers in Nishijin. My first contacts were with manufacturers [orimoto], to whom I was introduced by colleagues at Doshisha University, and with several demonstration weavers in the Nishijin Textile Center. The first people I interviewed
introduced me to their fellow manufacturers, weavers, relatives, and friends. Pursuing prospective people who would agree to be interviewed through these networks, I was fortunate to have access to an increasing number of weavers and manufacturers. These people were engaged in various forms of production of Nishijin obi, using handloom or powerloom weaving. I interviewed weavers working in small factories as well as in household production. In the beginning, I interviewed individuals.
Whenever a person had a spouse or another relative who was also a weaver, I interviewed that person as well. Sometimes I conducted the additional interview in tandem with the original person, and other times I interviewed the people separately (see appendix on interview method).

Some of my questions, which were derived from my research on the Amoskeag Mills, surprised the Japanese weavers whom I interviewed. Assuming that my questions were based on privileged inside information in Nishijin, they asked me: “How do you know to ask these questions?” I showed them my book, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City*. Looking at the historic photographs in the book, the Nishijin weavers were struck by the similarities between their work situation and that of fellow textile workers in distant America, even though the Amoskeag Mills had been the world’s largest textile factory and produced commercial cloth on mechanical looms. They were also impressed by the differences between their traditional, small-scale enterprises and the giant textile factories in the United States.

Over a twelve-year period, I returned to Kyoto each year and spent three to four summer months and periodically two winter months, as well as a sabbatical year in 1986–87, conducting interviews in Nishijin. Over these years, I repeatedly interviewed some of the same people and their relatives, as well as new people I met. I interviewed a total of 200 people, including 110 women and 90 men. Early in the interview process, I discovered that over one half of Nishijin *obi* were woven in the cottages of farmers and fishermen in the Tango Peninsula, on the Japan Sea, about three hours from Kyoto City by train. Hence, in 1983, with the help of local community leaders, I also started interviewing the cottage weavers in Tango, in order to compare their experiences with those of the urban artisans in Kyoto.

The interviews, which lasted two to three hours each, were typically open-ended, following free-form questions that I posed as the conversation progressed. I conducted all of the interviews with the help of interpreters, and I recorded the entire interviews and conversations in their entirety with the permission of the people interviewed.1

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1. In all cases, I was accompanied by an interpreter who translated the conversation back and forth. In order not to hamper the smooth flow of the conversation, I asked the interpreter to translate lengthy replies in summary only. I recorded the entire interview. Each tape was subsequently translated and transcribed by other interpreters in its entirety. This provided an additional check on the translation during the interview. To assure accuracy of translation, colleagues at Doshisha University and at other universities in western Japan checked the tapes.
friendships with the Nishijin people grew, the interviews gained greater depth. In addition to answering my questions about their family histories and work relations and about their sense of themselves as craftspeople [shokumin], the people interviewed talked about their deep concerns over Nishijin’s impending decline. The formal sessions extended into longer social occasions that often continued in the weavers’ homes late into the night.

“What’s My Life to You?”
Like the former workers in the Amoskeag Mills, Nishijin weavers were initially puzzled as to why I should want to interview them about their lives and families rather than talk to more “famous” and “important” people. Similar to the Amoskeag workers, the Nishijin weavers initially felt that their lives were of no relevance for understanding the historical process. In both Manchester, New Hampshire in the 1970s and Nishijin in the 1980s, the people I approached graciously agreed to participate in the interviews, even though they were initially skeptical of their centrality to the history of their industry and communities. In both cases, their acceptance of the interview was guided by their work ethic. Many of them independently said, “If it is really necessary, I will help you do your job.”

Work ethic and attachment to their craft served as important bridges with the people I interviewed, both in Nishijin and in Amoskeag. In my initial encounters with Nishijin weavers, my questions focused on their work. In most cases, during the first visit I asked weavers to describe their work process while they were sitting at their looms. After several visits, as I was asking weaver after weaver to describe his or her work, my interpreter asked me with irritation: “Dr. Hareven, why are you asking this woman to describe what she is doing? The other weavers already told you all about it.” I had to point out to him that once weavers became immersed in sharing the intricacies of their work, their self-consciousness and shyness about the interview disappeared. The strong relationship between the weaver, the loom, and the textile product took over, just as it had in the Amoskeag interviews.

In Nishijin, weavers described their work with a sense of immediacy because weaving still formed the focus of their daily existence. The former Amoskeag workers, on the other hand, had not done any weaving for forty years. Yet they became animated when asked to describe their past work. Even frail, elderly men and women got up from their chairs
and demonstrated, as if they were operating machinery. In both Nishijin and Amoskeag, the relationship of these men and women to the weaving process and to their product had become a central mark of their identities. “Textile language” served as a powerful means of communication.

As the interviews progressed, the Nishijin weavers and manufacturers gradually became absorbed in the interview process and began to share information about their lives with frankness. This was partly in response to my deep interest in the details of their life histories and their past and present experiences. Most of them had never before been in close quarters with a westerner; they had not even been in an interview situation with a Japanese person. My regular return visits to see the people I was interviewing each year, or several times a year, increased their confidence in my deep commitment to seeing them again and to continuing to explore their situation. In the fall of 1982, the night before my departure from Kyoto after my first round of interviews, Mr. Fujiwara, a weaver who had spoken to me openly at great length, urged me: “Now be sure to return to Kyoto soon, because you are taking part of our lives with you.”

Another major reason for the Nishijin weavers’ increasing responsiveness derived from anger and frustration over the decline of their industry. Nishijin was in the midst of a depression following the so-called Oil Shock. At the time I was interviewing these weavers, they were feeling a deep sense of betrayal by their employers, for whom they and their ancestors had worked loyally for generations. The Nishijin weavers saw these interviews as an opportunity to discuss the meaning of the crises and discontinuities they were experiencing in their work lives with a foreigner who was deeply interested in their lives, as well as with each other.

Weaving Relationships

When I started to interview in Nishijin, I approached weavers primarily in their workplaces—the Nishijin Textile Center and small factories—during their lunch and tea breaks or after work. I was introduced to various manufacturers by officials of the Nishijin Textile Industrial Association. I visited the manufacturers’ offices and, after I interviewed the manufacturers, they usually introduced me to the weavers working for them. Initially I talked to the weavers in small groups. I then made appointments with individual weavers for separate interviews. I made it
a point, however, to meet other weavers directly and individually, in case my being introduced by the manufacturer carried certain biases or was intimidating.

I was not at first invited into the weavers’ homes, and I did not dare request to visit them at home. In Japan, the separation between “inside” and “outside” is strict, and I respected this boundary. As my relationships with various weavers developed over several interview sessions, I inquired about visiting them in their homes to interview them at greater length and to meet their families. I first asked two demonstration weavers from the Nishijin Textile Center—Mrs. Fujiwara and Mrs. Shibagaki—whether I could visit their homes and interview their husbands and parents. Mrs. Shibagaki immediately invited me to her home, which was located in a middle-class area with relatively small modern houses, in a recently developed district northwest of Nishijin, near Ryoanji Temple. Mr. and Mrs. Shibagaki used their home as a residence only, since Mrs. Shibagaki was working as a highly skilled demonstration weaver on a traditional handloom at the Nishijin Textile Center and her husband was a highly skilled handloom weaver making brocade in a high-class handloom weaving factory. Mrs. Shibagaki also invited Mr. Matsushita, a native of Kyushu, to the interview. Mr. Matsushita, a younger weaver who worked with Mrs. Shibagaki’s husband, was one of the outspoken, energetic leaders of his factory’s company union and of the Greater Nishijin Textile Labor Union [Nishijin Ori Rōdō Kumiai].

While we huddled around the low table at which Mrs. Shibagaki usually entertained (even though she had a Western dining table and high-back chairs), she served refreshments and dinner. Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita talked about the grave situation in Nishijin and about its impact on the factory where they worked. As the evening progressed, they expressed their bitterness and sense of betrayal over Nishijin’s impending decline in production. Mr. Matsushita, who had migrated as a young man from his native town in Kyushu to work in Nishijin, was free of the web of formality that enmeshed Kyoto natives and spoke his mind frankly and passionately. Both Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita complained about the weakness of the Greater Nishijin Textile Labor Union and its inadequacy in protecting the weavers’ interests.

2. The Nishijin Ori Rōdō Kumiai—the Greater Nishijin Textile Labor Union—consisted of members who worked in small factories, as well as cottage weavers. Because of the difficulty in organizing cottage weavers, the union’s membership was small. Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita were the leaders of their company union, which was affiliated with the Greater Nishijin Textile Labor Union.
The next day, Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita arranged for me to visit the factory where they worked. When I arrived, I was received by the production manager, to whom I was introduced by Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita. The manager led me into the weaving room, where about thirty weavers were sitting at traditional handlooms in close proximity to each other. Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita were working side by side at their respective looms, each weaving a magnificent stretch of obi. Their style of weaving produced a figured brocade with a sculptured effect, called Ming tsuzure. The technique, which originally came from China, requires a great deal of physical strength. The weavers had to manipulate the wooden handlooms with their feet by putting pressure on the foot pedals in order to batch the warp threads according to the punch cards on the jacquard mechanism. I was surprised to see how physically demanding this job was, and how different Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita looked in their work pants with sweat pouring down their faces and bare chests.

Following my visit to the factory, Mr. Shibagaki and Mr. Matsushita scheduled a meeting with the general secretary and several other leading officials of the Greater Nishijin Textile Labor Union at their headquarters. After the meeting with the union officials, I again visited Mr. and Mrs. Shibagaki in their home, and Mr. Matsushita was also present. Mrs. Shibagaki was one of the very few women weavers in Nishijin who was an active union member. She participated in all of our meetings with the union members, and often brought up important questions and issues for discussion during the interviews. For the next meeting, in order to reciprocate and free Mrs. Shibagaki from the elaborate rituals of hospitality, I invited her, her husband, and Mr. Matsushita to dinner in the modest traditional inn where I was staying. Dinners are typically served in private dining rooms, where guests sit at low tables on the tatami floor. Dining in this traditional setting facilitated uninterrupted conversations with my guests and the interpreter. Mr. Matsushita’s wife did not work outside the home and, in typical Japanese fashion, she did not accompany him on social occasions.

Mrs. Shibagaki’s participation in public activities and the fact that she accompanied her husband to restaurants and various social events were

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3. The jacquard mechanism enables the weaver to manipulate the warp by batching its threads in accordance with the design pattern. The weaver pushes a pedal and then puts the shuttle through the opening in the warp made between these batched threads. The jacquard mechanism uses hundreds of punched cards for each obi. These punched cards were the precursors to the floppy disk now used by many manufacturers.
exceptional in Nishijin. Mrs. Shibagaki participated in these social activities in the company of male artisans and officials because she was a highly respected and skilled handloom weaver, holding the status of a professional in the Nishijin Textile Center. She was accustomed to public relations because hundreds of visitors surrounded her every day in the Textile Center, where she demonstrated and explained her technique to the public. In April 1990, when the Emperor and the Empress came to visit Nishijin, they closely observed Mrs. Shibagaki’s unique technique of tsuzure weaving and asked her questions about her work in front of national television cameras. Mrs. Shibagaki showed the imperial couple her fingernails, the ends of which are filed like saws, so she can pull the weft through the warp in this particular type of weaving. This encounter was immortalized in a photograph of Mrs. Shibagaki sitting at her loom while the Emperor and Empress were intently looking over her shoulder and were conversing with her.

During all of our meetings with Mrs. Shibagaki’s colleagues, her husband, and her parents-in-law, she was always recognized by her fellow weavers and relatives as my primary contact. She arranged the appointments and was present at all of the interviews with her friends, associates, and relatives. When I requested to interview her husband’s parents (both of whom were retired weavers, still working part-time), she first arranged a meeting with them in her home. After I became acquainted with the older couple, she finally agreed to bring me to their modest house, despite their recurring protests that their house was too small.

Unlike their son and daughter-in-law, the older Shibagaki couple lived in a tiny Nishijin house facing the wall of the Kitano Shrine, a major shrine in the western part of Kyoto on the edge of Nishijin. The house was a typical Nishijin weaver’s residence. These narrow wooden houses are nicknamed unagi-no-ne-doko, the “sleeping place of the eel,” because of their long, tunnel-like shape. Mrs. Shibagaki and her husband joined us at the interview in the older couple’s house. In order to keep the flow of my conversation with her parents-in-law uninterrupted, Mrs. Shibagaki served tea, refreshments, and evening snacks. Moving back and forth between the small cooking alcove and the sitting area where we were talking, Mrs. Shibagaki helped clarify my questions or jog the memories of her parents-in-law.

In contrast to Mrs. Shibagaki, Mrs. Fujiwara, also a highly skilled demonstration weaver who worked side by side with Mrs. Shibagaki in the Nishijin Textile Center, was initially reluctant to let me visit her home. She brought Noriko, her nineteen-year-old daughter who was studying English, to participate in my interviews of her, which I con-
ducted in the employees’ cafeteria at the Nishijin Textile Center. During these early interviews, Mrs. Fujiwara and her daughter sketched a complicated portrait of Mrs. Fujiwara’s husband, a highly skilled handloom weaver who worked in one of the famous Nishijin weaving factories. Mrs. Fujiwara and her daughter eagerly described Mr. Fujiwara in affectionate but critical language. Mrs. Fujiwara criticized her husband’s unstable career as a weaver, since he had been forced numerous times to change the manufacturer for whom he worked. She told us that he was repeatedly penalized for his efforts to organize a company union and for criticizing his employers’ working conditions and labor relations.

I asked Mrs. Fujiwara if I could visit her home and meet her husband and her father, who was a retired weaver but was still working secretly [yami]. Mrs. Fujiwara tried to avoid my request in various ways by using a great deal of indirect language. A week later, I once again brought up the question of visiting Mrs. Fujiwara’s house. Mrs. Fujiwara said that she was too embarrassed for me to see her small, old, wooden house. I impressed upon her how people in the United States value old houses. I showed her a picture of the interior of my house, a restored three-decker in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After seeing the photograph, Mrs. Fujiwara agreed to the visit.

Unlike Mrs. Shibagaki’s middle-class home, Mrs. Fujiwara’s house was a small, narrow, wooden structure in the northwestern section of Nishijin, near Daitokuji Temple. The manufacturers built many of these houses as an investment in the 1920s, when they expanded the Nishijin weaving district by constructing new weavers’ cottages and enticing workers to move there. Mr. Nishitani, Mrs. Fujiwara’s father, made that move with his parents when he was still in grade school. He continued to live and weave in the same cottage into his old age. Mrs. Fujiwara was born and grew up in that house, and later returned to live there with her husband and children. Normally the oldest son would continue to reside with his parents and bring his wife into the parental household; in Mr. Nishitani’s case, however, the movements and transitions of his children were more complicated. The Fujiwara family’s house was indeed tiny. It was so small that when five of us sat around the kotatsu [the low sunken table with a foot-warming heater underneath], there was no room for anyone to pass through the room to the outdoor toilet.

During our first visit, my interpreter and I talked with Mrs. Fujiwara,

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4. Officially retired weavers continued to work “secretly” in their own homes for specific manufacturers. The arrangement is illegal because of income tax and social security regulations.
her daughter (Noriko), and her father (Mr. Nishitani). Her husband was nowhere in sight. Mrs. Fujiwara said with a tolerant smile that her husband was playing *pachinko* or mah-jongg with his friends, as was usual for him at that time of night. Mr. Nishitani, a highly skilled handloom weaver in his seventies, told us his life story with modesty but without hesitation. During the long evening, we sat comfortably with our feet under the *kotatsu* while Mrs. Fujiwara served various Japanese teas, sweets, and fruit. She occasionally interfered with her father’s narrative, clarified old-fashioned concepts, or corrected the chronology. Mr. Nishitani talked primarily about Nishijin in the old days and about his life as a weaver. He did not yet touch on his family’s history, so we were at first unaware of Mrs. Fujiwara’s resentment of her father’s earlier liaison with a *geisha* and his “betrayal” of her mother. We learned in a subsequent interview that shortly after the death of Mrs. Fujiwara’s mother, Mr. Nishitani married the *geisha* with whom he had had a long affair. On the following visit to Mrs. Fujiwara’s house, we also met her son, who worked as a low-ranking manager at McDonald’s, and his wife, who was a stewardess for Japan Air Lines. The son’s wife was fluent in English. The young couple resided separately from the parents. We had not yet met Mrs. Fujiwara’s husband.

I finally met Mr. Fujiwara two days before my return to the United States. I visited the Fujiwara house in the late afternoon. It was Mrs. Fujiwara’s day off, and she suggested that it would be a good time to interview her father. At about 5:30 p.m., she interrupted the interview and asked the interpreter and me to stay for dinner. She said that since she was not working that day, she had a chance to prepare *suki-yaki*, a special luxury beef dish served to guests or during celebrations. By then I had been sufficiently briefed by Japanese friends to know that while visiting someone’s house in Kyoto in the afternoon, one should refuse a spontaneous invitation to stay for dinner. I was warned that such invitations were made only out of politeness and were not meant to be sincere; if one accepted them, it would be considered improper. I declined the invitation. Mrs. Fujiwara insisted, however, that we stay, because her husband had instructed her to ask me to stay for the evening. He also requested that she summon him from the *pachinko* parlor if I agreed to stay. I accepted the invitation.

Mr. Fujiwara arrived at 6:00 p.m., after his daughter fetched him from the *pachinko* parlor. He told me that upon realizing that this was my last visit to his house during this trip, he wanted to be sure to have a chance to talk with me. He wanted me to “understand Nishijin the
way it really is," from his perspective. He said solemnly that he had never had a conversation with a foreigner before, and certainly not with a professor from a “famous” university. Sitting at the *kotatsu* with his wife and daughter, Mr. Fujiwara told his story for three hours without interruption. He told me what “Nishijin was really about.” He recounted in great detail his employment history, his frequent job changes, and the various conflicts preceding each encounter that led to his being fired again and again. His wife and daughter were listening attentively—his daughter with amusement and his wife with a bantering that masked her anger and frustration. In the course of the evening, it gradually became clear that Mr. Fujiwara’s story was intended as much for the benefit of his wife and daughter as for me. He definitely hoped to receive affirmation from me.

Mr. Fujiwara’s career was atypical for Nishijin because he changed employers numerous times. As one of the most outspoken weavers in Nishijin, he was frequently fired because he spoke his mind to the manufacturer or because he insisted on the rights of the union. He had also been blacklisted several times and was able to obtain employment again only because of the manufacturer’s recognition of his exceptional skills. During this period of labor surplus in Nishijin, he became more subdued, but he still spoke his mind despite his wife’s anxiety that he might lose his job again:

The employer does not like what I say, and I feel that I am discriminated against by him. The way of thinking in Nishijin is old. The manufacturers speak about fairness, but we have our own pride as *shokunin* [craftsmen]. When they pay so little and take our jobs away, we feel that they do not appreciate our skill. . . . Where I work, the union amounts to almost nothing. Everything is the way the *oyakata* [antiquated paternalistic term for manufacturer] says. . . . They prevent us from having a union.

As Mr. Fujiwara was reciting his bitter account, Mrs. Fujiwara burst angrily into the conversation: “How many times do you think that you will continue to change jobs? Remember! This is not America!” Mr. Fujiwara turned to me and said: “You know me by now. Can you imagine me not speaking my mind?”

During my subsequent visits to Kyoto twice a year, I often visited

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5. Mrs. Fujiwara’s comparison with labor turnover in America was prompted by my earlier statement that in the United States it was common for workers to change jobs and employers.
Mr. and Mrs. Fujiwara’s home and continued my conversations with them, their daughter, and Mr. Nishitani. Following that first evening of self-revelation, Mr. Fujiwara was always present at the interviews. The Fujiwara family and I developed a mutual understanding about the tensions surrounding Mr. Fujiwara’s “disorderly” career and his continuing determination to speak his mind to his employers. His wife frequently teased him about his repeated job changes. She always referred contemptuously to his obsessions with pachinko and mah-jongg, which at times led him to skip or interrupt his work. The entire family joked about it, and I had become part of the family’s private joking circle.

Unlike the Shibagaki and Fujiwara families, whom I met on my own, I was introduced to another key couple, Mr. and Mrs. Konishi, by the manufacturer who employed them. At my request, the manufacturer took me to a weaver’s cottage in Nishijin during work hours. He said that he chose Mr. and Mrs. Konishi because of the high quality of their weaving and because of their typical Nishijin house. He escorted me to a small wooden house situated on a narrow lane off Nishijin’s main thoroughfare, where Mr. and Mrs. Konishi both worked and lived. When we entered, husband and wife were working in the small weaving shed, which was the first space as one entered the house. They were each sitting at a wooden handloom, weaving. Following the manufacturer’s introduction, I asked Mr. and Mrs. Konishi a question about their weaving. I was surprised that Mrs. Konishi replied before her husband had a chance to do so. Later, as I continued to interview in Nishijin, I noticed again and again that Nishijin women weavers were outspoken and shared the conversation equally with their husbands. The manufacturer left and we continued to talk with Mr. and Mrs. Konishi for about an hour. I then made an appointment for a future interview.

Mr. and Mrs. Konishi were frank from the outset, even though we had been introduced by the manufacturer. Throughout our nine-year relationship, they never hesitated to criticize their manufacturer or the policies he followed in trying to curtail production at the expense of the weavers. They were among the most vocal and insightful critics of their manufacturer and the Nishijin system in general. Following our first conversation in their weaving shed, I visited Mr. and Mrs. Konishi on repeated evenings in their narrow sitting room. Husband and wife always spoke in tandem, taking turns to finish each other’s sentences. They spoke about Nishijin with passion, but also had enough detachment to joke about it occasionally. They also humorously recounted various episodes in their personal lives, especially those concerning their courtship.
Their marriage was one of love, unlike the typical arranged marriages of their age group. They remained close to each other in a way that I rarely observed among Japanese couples their age. Mr. Konishi did not go out drinking with his friends. He and his wife usually spent their evenings and Sundays together as a couple or with their children. Their closeness was also reflected in their interactions with each other during the interviews, in their comfortable style of discourse, and in their affectionate bantering. Only Mrs. Konishi, however, served the tea and refreshments.

During my repeated visits to the Nishijin weavers’ houses, a “culture” of the interview clearly emerged. This culture was expressed in the assumptions that Mr. and Mrs. Konishi, the Fujiwara family, and other weavers I interviewed had about my involvement with their lives. After my second visit to Nishijin, they expected me to follow a regular pattern: to arrive once or twice a year (depending on whether I was able to come during my winter holidays) and to visit them. They never demanded it, but in the fashion of many other Japanese communications, they conveyed their wishes implicitly. My regular return visits to Kyoto provided the continuity in our relationships. The weavers and their family members began to count on these visits as a kind of affirmation of our relationships. In short, we had become partners in a mutual process of creation that assumed a life of its own.

Some of the people I was close to, such as the Fujiwara, Shibagaki, and Konishi families, began to take it for granted that I would be staying until late in the evenings. Each time when I felt it would be polite to pack up the tape recorder and leave, they encouraged me to stay, saying, “We have not told you yet about” this or that. They also became accustomed to my interview style—using the tape recorder and communicating with them through interpreters. My late sessions definitely stretched Japanese hospitality codes, but my hosts encouraged me and seemed to enjoy the conversations. It became important for them to affirm the routines that we shared in the interview: “You always do this,” or, “We always do this together.” An emphasis on such interview routines became significant to them as an established custom, a kind of signal that all was going well. One time when I was preparing to leave at 10:00 p.m. because I had to make an overseas call, Mrs. Fujiwara asked if something was wrong. She said, “You always leave after 11:00 p.m.”

My partnership with the people in Nishijin extended beyond the exciting experiences and rituals of the interviews. As time went on, the
Nishijin weavers and manufacturers developed a real understanding of the issues I was interested in and began to supply me, of their own initiative, with new information in areas related to our conversational themes. Since employment conditions and work relations in Nishijin were changing rapidly as the depression in its industry progressed, each time I visited, the people I interviewed offered me updates about developments in Nishijin, as well as in their own lives. They also saved newspaper clippings and reports for me. As our ties deepened, they began to treat me as a distant relative. While I was in Kyoto, some of them included me in wedding celebrations and in funerals. They reported illnesses and deaths, marriages and births, and other personal or family events in the New Year’s cards they sent to me in America. The people I interviewed closely in Nishijin were as much interested in me and in my interpreters as I was in them. They usually asked me questions indirectly, through the interpreter, because they were too shy to ask me personal questions directly. I showed them pictures of my house, family, and work environment in Massachusetts. I also frequently brought them gifts that were representative of American crafts and folk art, or of American scenes related to textiles.

By coincidence, I discovered an additional significant tie that helped cement our relationships: I was the same age as Mrs. Shibagaki, Mrs. Fujiwara, and Mrs. Konishi. In Japan, “same age” evokes a much stronger bond than it would in western society. It implies a capacity for empathy and mutual understanding on a level that Japanese people would not expect from those even one year older or younger than themselves. “Same age” was particularly helpful in my development of a relationship with this group of Nishijin weavers, because they were still working and were therefore more self-conscious and concerned with their privacy than the older generation, who were more accessible and eager to talk about the past. The sense of closeness that derived from being the same age helped me gain access to and win the trust of the middle-aged weavers. In Manchester, New Hampshire, the life stages of the people interviewed also considerably affected the degrees of their openness to the interviewer. However, the exact ages of the people interviewed did not carry such significance.

Even though I was close in age to those particular Nishijin people, I represented to them, especially to the women, a very different model of work and personal life—one that, in their culture, was characteristic of men. The women weavers exaggerated what they considered to be major accomplishments in my career: to be a university professor, an author
of several books, and a world traveler. They juxtaposed these to their own careers. When some of them characterized their careers as inferior to mine, I reminded them that my work had required far less training time than the nine years expected to complete an apprenticeship as a Nishijin weaver. I also pointed out that the products of my work were more modest than theirs. I did not make products that were used as hangings in temples and public buildings or worn by the Crown Prince in his adulthood ceremony.

The Role of Interpreters

The interpreters’ lives and social status were also topics of great interest to the people interviewed. Nishijin people are very selective about whom they let into their homes. Even though I had been accepted into their homes, they wanted to know about the Japanese interpreters. They were interested in their backgrounds, what they were doing, and how we had met. These questions were never posed as conditions for admittance; rather, they were asked during casual conversations when tea or coffee was served. The people we interviewed had enormous admiration for any Japanese person who was fluent in English, as most of my interpreters were (or at least appeared to be to my Japanese hosts). Being fluent in a foreign language was considered to be a sign of exceptional talent. Some of the people I interviewed wanted to know how and where the interpreters had been able to learn English because they wanted to find similar instruction for their own children.

The interpreters were indispensable to my interaction with the Nishijin people. Since my interpreters were not from Nishijin, I familiarized them in advance with the Japanese terms related to textiles, weaving, and the organization of production in Nishijin. I instructed them to use these terms in Japanese rather than run the risk of mistranslation. When the interpreters were unfamiliar with a new term, they often asked the person interviewed to clarify their statements related to Nishijin modes of production before they translated for me. In addition to translating, some interpreters acted as my cultural guides. They taught me, for example, how to bow and greet people, where to sit in a room, and what special words to say when served food or drink. Early on, one interpreter, an undergraduate student majoring in English literature who had studied in an American university, taught me the significance of extended farewells. When leaving someone’s house, it is customary for the
host or hostess to stand outside the front door and to keep bowing as long as the departing guest is visible. After my first visit to Mr. and Mrs. Konishi’s house, I said my goodbyes and left at 11:00 P.M. As I started walking down the narrow lane, the interpreter kept prodding me, “Dr. Hareven, turn around and bow!” I turned around and saw Mr. and Mrs. Konishi still standing in front of their house. I bowed, walked, turned around, and bowed again. The lane was long, and the strap of my bag containing the tape recorder, camera, and books cut into my shoulder each time I bowed. As we reached the turn to the main cross street, I looked back and could still see my hosts standing in front of their house. Once more, the interpreter urged, “Dr. Hareven, bow again!”

The interpreters also facilitated communication by refining or adjusting the tone of questions that they felt might be perceived as intrusive or offensive. Most of these questions related to conditions of poverty and insecurity in the past, and to kin assistance. While I was grateful for this refinement of my questions, I requested that the interpreters not change the meaning or contents of my questions. I asked them to tell me whenever they perceived a problem in translating a question. On some occasions, my middle-class women interpreters tried to shield me from asking questions they considered too intrusive. After I became close to the Nishijin people and asked these questions again and again, I found that none of the people I interviewed was offended by my questions. The problem resulted from the interpreters’ middle-class propriety, rather than from the people interviewed. I had encountered a similar situation when interviewing former workers in the Amoskeag Mills. The young Franco-American man who helped me with the French-language interviews, a Manchester, New Hampshire, native, found it difficult to ask women who were the age of his grandmother questions about birth control. Actually, many of the older women he interviewed about this issue were outspoken and eager to share their memories about how they had managed the Catholic Church’s prohibition of birth control.

While my interpreters in Kyoto were educating me in the intricacies of Japanese manners and customs, I also had to teach some of them to overcome their class and cultural biases. My first interpreter in 1982, an undergraduate student, had studied for two years in a southern university in the United States and was fluent in English. The son of an upper-class Kyoto family, he was extremely conservative in his attitudes and seemed untouched by his American experience. When he accompanied me in Nishijin, I was unaware of his biases. After several interview ses-
sions, he said to me with surprise: “Dr. Hareven, I could have never imagined that Nishijin *shokunin* [craftspeople] would be so articulate and so refined!”

Another interpreter was a middle-aged woman who had lived the sheltered existence of an affluent, suburban housewife. She was shocked when she saw the living conditions of the Nishijin weavers, especially the close overlapping of work space and living space. She was also indignant about the stories that Mrs. Fujiwara told about her father’s affair with a *geisha*. She insisted that in her circles “such things would never happen!” Whenever I discovered such biases in an interpreter, I did not bring that person into Nishijin again. Over time, I was able to find sensitive interpreters who became personally interested in the ways of life and people of Nishijin. These interpreters appreciated the opportunity to discover an important dimension of Kyoto’s life, one with which they had not been familiar. They subsequently continued to maintain ties with the people whom we interviewed by accompanying me to various events in Nishijin, such as festivals and exhibitions.

I deliberately avoided employing interpreters who were from Nishijin, because of the strong atmosphere of conformity within the Nishijin village [mura]. Many of the Nishijin people themselves viewed Nishijin as a narrow village. I was concerned that the people interviewed might consider my bringing Nishijin natives or residents as interpreters as an intrusion into their privacy. Also, if an interpreter knew too much about Nishijin, the people interviewed would take for granted a great deal of the information about Nishijin life and would fail to explain in detail. This happened in Manchester, where the people interviewed described their world in great detail to someone from outside the community, but the same people responded to an interview assistant from Manchester by saying: “You know, my dear, what this is about. Why do I need to repeat it?” (Hareven 1978, 1982).

### Turning Points in the Relationship

An important turning point in my interview relationship with the Nishijin people occurred when my research became publicly known through newspaper interviews and the publication of some of my statements about Nishijin’s crisis. Beginning in 1985, the *Kyoto Shimbun* (Kyoto’s leading newspaper) and journals published by the Nishijin Textile Industrial Association and by the Kyoto municipal and prefectural gov-
ernments began to print articles about me and my research. In 1987, a local television station did a brief documentary film on my research and accompanied me to some of the weavers’ houses in Nishijin. The Nishijin people felt that I was becoming “famous” in Kyoto, and this meant a great deal to the people I interviewed. They were proud that the professor [sensei] with whom they had a close relationship was turning into a public figure. They also delighted in the publicity for Nishijin’s cause expressed in my articles in the popular press and in government publications.

When news reporters first approached me, I deliberated for some time before I agreed to be interviewed. I was concerned that my statements in the press might bias the sources for my study in two ways. First, once the Nishijin people knew my interpretation, they might cater their statements to fit my point of view. Second, I was concerned that my advocacy of the preservation of Nishijin’s architecture might antagonize the manufacturers who disagreed with me. On the other hand, I felt moved to give something back to the community that had been so helpful to me—a commitment historians, anthropologists, and sociologists who study communities often bear.

In the interviews for newspapers, I described the purpose of my research in Nishijin and the topics of concern. I did not share my scholarly interpretations, because my study was still in progress. I did, however, strongly advocate the need to save Nishijin’s traditional industry and the sources of livelihood of its artisans and manufacturers in the face of the crisis that threatened to engulf them. I emphasized the need to keep Nishijin weaving in its historic location, rather than permit it to become a “brain center” where obi are planned and designed but not woven. I also stressed the significance of saving Nishijin’s traditional architecture and streetscapes, which were in danger of being destroyed.

My advocacy attracted the attention of government officials on the municipal and prefectural levels. Some of them identified with my point of view but felt incapable of forging any major changes. They wanted to provide me with a forum for voicing my opinions, in the hope that my recommendations, coming from what they considered a well-qualified outsider, would have a better chance of attracting the attention of city planning officials and community members. Kyoto Prefecture’s magazine on labor economics invited me to write an article. When they published “The Nishijin Dilemma” in Japanese in 1985, it attracted a great deal of attention in government circles and in Nishijin (Hareven 1985). The weavers and other craftsmen who read it agreed with my
analysis and advocacy. While the Nishijin manufacturers with whom I was close generally agreed with my interpretation of the Nishijin crisis, some opposed my plea for the preservation of Nishijin’s architecture and streetscapes. They were afraid that my article might stimulate the municipal or prefectural government to issue preservation ordinances that would interfere with real estate development in Nishijin. They debated the preservation issue with me, but continued to be friendly and helpful in facilitating my research.

In November 1987, I was invited to give a lecture at the World Conference on Historic Cities, hosted by the mayor of Kyoto. In a lecture entitled “The Nishijin Problem in World Perspective,” I advocated for the preservation of Nishijin’s industry and streetscapes. I brought examples from many other parts of the world where such preservation projects were being accomplished, including India, Indonesia, Thailand, and the United States. I pointed out the irony in the fact that the techniques and designs of Nishijin weaving were first brought to Japan from China. Those techniques were later lost in China because of wars and revolutions. Paradoxically, they were currently being revived in China by Nishijin manufacturers with the cooperation of the Chinese government, while they were at risk of becoming extinct in Japan. Kyoto’s municipal government published the Japanese translation of my lecture in its economics journal. The Nishijin people began to read about themselves and about the struggles of their industry and community. As a result, Nishijin weavers, like the former workers in the Amoskeag Mills, began to see more clearly the links between their individual lives and the history that they had helped make. The publicity for my views about Nishijin did not alter the substance of my communications with the people I interviewed; rather, it deepened our relationship, as Nishijin people began to view me as a permanent friend and ally.

The opportunity to spend a whole sabbatical year in Kyoto in 1986–87 led to my immersion in Nishijin in a way that far exceeded my earlier two-to-three-month encounters. I was able to follow life in Nishijin over an entire year’s cycle, including its various festivals, fairs, and celebrations. At their invitation, I attended many of these events with Nishijin people. During that year, I also began to take Japanese-language classes at the YMCA in Kyoto. The lessons, combined with the opportunity for daily interaction in Japanese, enabled me to communicate in Japanese to a limited extent. I began to feel closer to the people with whom I had spoken previously only through interpreters. While I continued to conduct formal interviews with the help of interpreters, I could at
least have casual conversations in Japanese. I began to understand what Nishijin people were saying, and I was able to express my feelings to them in Japanese. Nishijin people were tolerant of my linguistic clumsiness and appreciated the sincerity of the feelings conveyed. Most important, my new limited language skills provided me with the ability to use certain characteristic terms that expressed gratitude or sympathy or that requested certain people to do things for which there are no real equivalent terms in English.

My relationship with the Nishijin people was transformed into a partnership and friendship that has grown over time. Of course, this affected the nature of the data gathered. When analyzing and interpreting the interview materials collected in Nishijin, I am conscious of the impact that the changes in my relationship with the community may have had on the nature of the evidence. This is true, however, of all research projects utilizing interviews and fieldwork. (See appendix.)