

Embracing Diversity

By Sagang Chung



Author Sagang Chung

“Where are you from?” can be a simple question to answer. But for a Third Culture Kid (TCK) — someone who has spent a significant part of his or her development years outside the parents’ culture — it can be a daunting one. TCKs frequently build relationships with all of their cultures, while not having full ownership of any. “I feel like every time someone asks me where I’m from, I’m obligated to hide all the places I used to live in, firstly because it takes so long to explain and secondly, especially in Japan, I feel that not many people have been abroad and so I don’t feel the need to flaunt my background,” said Selina Welsh, 22, a senior at Keio University who was born in London and lived there for eight years, then moved to Singapore for four years, and after that lived in Chicago for three years. “I also would like to consider myself English and Japanese, but a part of me isn’t sure because I haven’t lived in England since I was eight, and I feel distant from the country, whereas I’ve only lived in Japan for five years. Maybe having trouble answering the question ‘Where am I from?’ is really all about insecurities of me not knowing where I belong.”

In today’s world, the realities of culture, identity, and like-mindedness are changing. It is getting harder and harder to make assumptions about a person’s background based just on what we see, especially in Japan. “The population is growing so much, but at the same time I believe that there are so many confused kids that are going through what we did, that don’t understand the pain of losing something intangible,” Ms. Welsh said. “There should definitely be

more awareness raised on the subject of TCKs, not just for the kids but also for the parents to understand their own children on a personal level.”

TCKs are becoming even more common in Japan, and it is no surprise. With current globalization and Japan’s positive attitude towards being more open to the international community — be it cultural exchange, trade, or business — there is bound to be an increase in the number of expatriate children being sent abroad. “*Kikokushijo* is used commonly in Japan,” said Sayuri Shinohara, 22, a senior at Keio University. “But the term TCK is not known here and actually having people understand the meaning/concept of it may take time. I feel that with ongoing globalization, people are starting to understand that it is actually not language ability that is going to be the most useful when working abroad or just simply living in today’s world, but more the ability to understand different values and seeing things from different perspectives, which I feel that TCKs excel in.” Shinohara was born to Japanese parents in Tokyo, then grew up in London, then moved back to Japan when she was eight, before moving to Hong Kong right after where she attended elementary and junior high school.

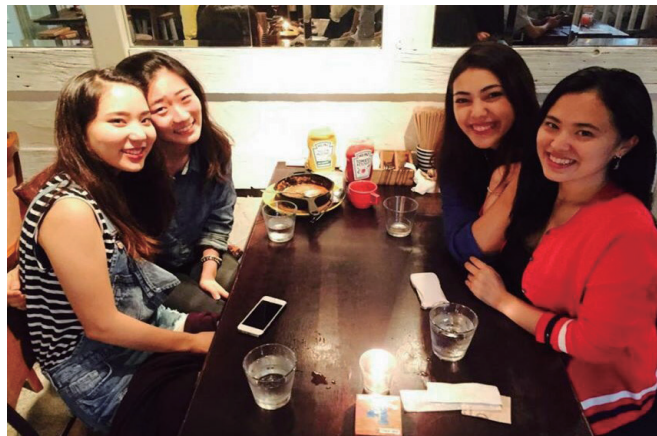
Classically, Japan is known to lean towards homogeneity, with a particular desire to keep the country relatively “Japanese”. In the eyes of the Japanese public, the children needed to be “saved” — they needed to be reintegrated back into Japanese culture. The languages they learned overseas, the ideas, norms, and values they became

Photos: Author



Selina Welsh (far right) and friends

Photos: Author



Sayuri Shinohara (right) and friends

accustomed to during their time abroad were seen as “unfit” for children if they were to reintegrate back into Japanese society. “It was more of when I had to adapt to Japanese life in the dorms in my high school in New York. I hated it so much”, said Ms. Welsh. “Apart from the few friends I had made, I really had a hard time blending in, especially because not only was I not Japanese culturally, I was a half-Japanese as well. It took me a long time to understand everyone’s jokes, and why I had to talk politely to some kid that was only a year older than me. I had a hard time understanding why it was such a bad thing to be talking English, and people used to call me ‘gaijin’ (foreigner) in my first year. I remember finally blending in and making really good friends, but then we all went back to Japan after graduating and I really got depressed. It was hard for me to watch all my high school friends going back to where they used to live, and hanging out with childhood friends, whereas I had absolutely none.”

As for Ms. Shinohara, when she came back to Japan at the age of 16, she was in the midst of figuring out her own identity as a person. “I felt that without knowing where I belonged, I would never be complete as a human being,” she said. “I attended a private girls’ school that was famous for their *kikokushijo* education system and joined English classes and Japanese, in order to catch up with the classes along with my other *kikokushijo* friends, but I always felt like something was wrong. I then noticed that I had *come* to Japan, not come *back* (*kikoku*), and the fact that I am fully Japanese made me even more confused. I suddenly wasn’t a foreigner anymore and was expected to be one of the many native Japanese people. I made friends quickly and everyone thought I was completely adjusted to the new environment but it honestly was the hardest time of my life not being able to express the difficulties I was experiencing because I myself didn’t even know what they were.”

Within Japanese youth, TCKs may be a different batch of kids subject to the pros and cons of being “different” in one way or another — but as Japan learns to interact globally, perhaps the dilemmas these kids face when returning to their motherland won’t make them feel pressured to “fit in”. Instead they may be able to live in an environment where they can embrace the idea that being diverse is a good thing. “I honestly don’t really know whether I’ve formed my own cultural identity or not,” said Ms. Shinohara, smiling. “I feel like it’s more of my identity as a person that has been formed and I’ve realized that having a particular place you can call home or knowing where you are from doesn’t really determine who you are. I don’t think I’d be the same person if I hadn’t been brought up as a TCK and it is probably 100% true that your cultural experience affects your identity largely.”

As for Ms. Welsh, she believes it is important to have both kinds of people. “In order to preserve a country’s culture there need to be the

Creative Commons. Some Rights Reserved. Photo by whitehouse.gov



President Barack Obama is a famous TCK. Born in Hawaii, his mother was American and his father Kenyan. After their divorce his mother married an Indonesian man, and they lived in Indonesia for a while. Obama returned to live with his maternal grandparents when he was in grade five. Overall he has three different backgrounds: the United States, Indonesia and Kenya.

local people who understand how the country has been and the morals and whatnot,” she said. “At the same time it is important for TCKs to bring a new perspective to the countries in order to share globalization. I don’t necessarily think that TCKs are the prototype citizens of the future, but I feel that there is a lot more that can be brought to the table because of their existence and growing population.”

Although answering the question “Where are you from?” can be difficult for TCKs, they are able to answer where home is and what home means to them. “When I hear the term ‘home’, I always picture England in my head. Every time I go back to England, I always get this ‘free’ feeling that’s quite hard to put into words. I definitely do feel like I’ve come back home when I’m in England. After all, I think that to me, home is where I get to be with my family,” said Ms. Shinohara.

As for Ms. Welsh, “Honestly, at the moment, my home is the apartment I live in with my mother in Tokyo. My home is also the house that I visit two or three times a year in Singapore where my father lives. Maybe it’s my Japanese grandparents’ house in Shizuoka. It doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s a permanent home. Basically what I am trying to say is, home is where I feel the most comfortable at a certain moment of time and I feel like it will always be like that, no matter where I am, or who I am with.”

JS

Sagang Chung is a 4th year student at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus (SFC). She is Japanese and Korean. She was born in Japan but lived in the United States for 17 years. She herself is also a TCK in Japan.