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# Shaped by Two Worlds: A Journey of Identity and Belonging

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As a Japanese person born and raised abroad for over half of my life, my entire childhood was an intercultural experience of navigating between cultures. I often found myself caught in two worlds, never quite able to blend seamlessly into one environment without erasing parts of myself that belonged to another. Reflecting now, I see that what once felt like confusion and displacement were, in fact, the very experiences that shaped my identity. They taught me not only how to adapt to unfamiliar environments but also how to appreciate differences and eventually embrace the complexity of my identity.

This realization, however, only came after spending my childhood in discomfort and confusion. As a child, moments that might have seemed small to others, whether it was bringing a Japanese-style lunch to school, speaking Japanese with a slightly foreign accent, or standing out for habits I did not even realize were unusual, quickly marked me as an outsider. Childhood experiences like these often filled me with embarrassment, yet they became powerful lessons about identity, belonging, and the beauty of difference, and ultimately shaped the way I see myself in the world.

Being the only Asian child in my school growing up meant that I stood out in subtle but powerful ways. Lunchtime with my classmates became a daily reminder that I was different. I still remember sitting at the lunch table, opening my Hello Kitty-themed lunchbox to reveal rice balls wrapped in seaweed, a neatly rolled egg omelet, fried chicken, and a few pieces of edamame. To me, this was a normal packed lunchbox prepared by my mother, who had woken up early to ensure I had a nutritious meal. But to my classmates, it was something alien, especially compared to the simple sandwiches and fruits they had.

“Eww, what is that black stuff on your rice?” someone would ask, pointing at my lunch with a wrinkled nose as though they had never seen seaweed before. Within seconds, I would find myself surrounded by curious eyes and pointing fingers. I would feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment, and I would rush to finish my food, desperate for the attention to pass elsewhere. Before long, I became known as the “girl who ate black stuff with rice.”

Frustrated, I came home one day and begged my mother to stop packing Japanese food for my lunches. That weekend, my parents took me to the store, and I eagerly picked out the same pink, foldable Tupperware lunchbox that all my classmates carried. From then on, I requested ham and cheese wraps, grapes, cucumber sticks, cheese, and a carton of orange juice, exactly like everyone else. For the next decade, I carried that

lunch with satisfaction, successfully erasing any trace of my Hello Kitty lunchbox and the Japanese bento culture it represented. For a while, I felt like I finally belonged.

However, while the new lunchbox may have brought my childhood self a sense of relief, it also marked the beginning of my gradual distance from my Japanese identity. After spending years abroad erasing differences that set me apart from everyone else, I found myself increasingly detached from my roots.

Soon after, I returned to Japan, believing that this time I would fit in effortlessly without having to conceal myself. After all, I looked Japanese, held a Japanese passport, and spoke the language, so surely, I thought, I would finally belong without question. Instead, I was faced with the unsettling realization that I was once again different.

From my first week of school, classmates immediately noticed differences in me that I had never considered before. “Why does your Japanese sound foreign?” they asked. My pronunciation, shaped by years of speaking English rather than Japanese, carried subtle accents that made me stand out. Each time I spoke, I felt a rush of self-consciousness, worrying that my pronunciation would be ridiculed, as the constant questions of “Are you really Japanese?” echoed in my mind. Simple interactions became tests of my identity, questioning not only how I spoke but also who I was in this environment, and even my pronunciation had become a marker of difference.

Even small details of daily life set me apart and became sources of embarrassment. After using the bathroom one day, I returned without drying my hands, only to notice the puzzled looks from the girls around me, who all carried cute pouches with tissues and hand towels. “You don’t have a hand towel?” one asked, tilting her head in surprise. I mumbled an excuse about forgetting it at home, though the truth was that I had never owned one. Growing up abroad, I had been accustomed to hand dryers at school, and no one cared if I came out shaking my wet hands. In Japan, however, this instantly marked me as “different”, as though I had missed some unspoken rule that everyone else seemed to know.

Something as seemingly ordinary as stationery also revealed that I was an outsider. While the girls around me carefully unpacked their matching pencils, each capped and decorated with characters, I opened my pencil case to reveal the Sharpies that I had brought from abroad. Immediately, it drew curious stares. “What is that? Can I try it?” they asked, as though I had pulled out something alien. I laughed along with them, trying to appear at ease, but inside I felt a deep sense of humiliation. The pencils that should have been tools for learning had become another marker of difference, making it a symbol of how out of sync I was in Japanese society.

Appearance, too, became a site of difference and a constant reminder that I was again different. Most of the girls at school had perfectly trimmed bangs, curled at just the right angle, a beauty standard I had never been accustomed to. My long ponytail stood out in contrast, drawing attention in ways that made me feel self-conscious. “Why don’t you have bangs?” was a question I received often, posed as if it were an unwritten requirement for fitting in. Beyond hairstyles, this reflected a broader cultural expectation;

to conform not only in behavior and language, but also in appearance.

None of these were necessarily acts of cruelty, but small moments that constantly reminded me of my differences. On their own, they might have seemed harmless, but together they created an invisible wall that separated me from everyone else. Each day, I was reminded that even in the country I had always thought of as home, I did not fully belong, even among people who shared my nationality. Abroad, I had spent years hiding my Japanese background to fit in. Yet, back in Japan, I found myself doing the opposite, concealing the past years I had spent creating whilst living abroad, desperately trying to erase them to belong.

Soon after, I left Japan again to pursue further studies abroad. There, the familiar question returned: “Where are you from?” For years, I had dreaded this question. By nationality, I was Japanese, but my upbringing abroad had shaped my language, habits, and perspective in ways that made me feel detached from that label. Each time I hesitated, searching for the right words, I worried that my explanation would highlight my differences and set me apart from those around me. The question that seemed so simple carried weight because it demanded a summary of a lifetime of multicultural experiences in just a few words. It reminded me of the tension I had felt growing up; the struggle to belong without erasing parts of myself.

Yet, something shifted during this chapter of my life. When I began to answer honestly, saying that I was Japanese but born and raised abroad, people responded with fascination rather than judgement. They praised me for my trilingual skills and admired the richness of my experiences from a young age. For the first time, I realized that my differences were not weaknesses to hide, but strengths to value.

I also met others whose backgrounds were just as complex as mine; friends who had never lived in their passport country, friends who held dual citizenship, friends who said they felt at home in multiple places at once. Our shared stories of navigating identity and our sense of belonging became conversation starters that blossomed into deep friendships. In them, I saw reflections of myself, and I realized that it had been okay all along to feel different. They carried their complex backgrounds with pride, unconcerned with whether they fit the standards society had set. It took me two decades, and the experience of living between two very different societies, to recognize that true belonging is not about erasing difference but about embracing it.

To my surprise, many of my new friends also spoke with admiration about Japan. They shared stories of their travels, reminiscing about Japanese vending machines, bidet toilets, and the food. Some showed me their manga collections; others raved about the sushi they ate in Japan. Listening to them, I was stunned. The same country I had once hidden from others was a country of fascination, and I was surrounded by many people who spoke of Japan as their favorite travel destination. I also saw the same pattern repeated on my social media feeds, filled with videos admiring the very kinds of lunches I tried so hard to conceal as a child; cute, nutritious bento boxes with rice balls, fried chicken, and vegetables. Tourists now travel to Japan to buy rice balls and Japanese

bento lunches from convenience stores, turning what once brought me shame into a global trend I now watch with quiet pride, bringing joy to my inner child. For the first time, I could say with pride that I was from Japan. But along with pride came regret, for all the years I had been too embarrassed to claim my culture.

Gradually, I learned to reinterpret my past. Looking back now, I see how each stage of my life was a lesson in identity. My childhood lunchbox taught me that cultural symbols may have left me to feel isolated in the moment, yet they hold the power to become sources of pride. My teenage years in Japan revealed the complexity of reverse culture shock; the disorienting feeling of being an outsider in the very country I thought was my home. My university years abroad introduced me to other third culture kids, and it was through them that I finally understood that difference is not something shameful, but a gift. Each of these chapters of my life, whether painful or affirming, wove together the story of my identity. My experiences taught me that identity is not fixed but shaped by experiences and layered by the intersections of cultures that have influenced me. It means I can belong to more than one world, even if there was once a time when I felt I belonged to none.

If I could speak to my younger self, the confused little girl who rushed to finish her rice balls before classmates could comment, I would tell her that being different is not something to fear. One day, the very things she hides will become the source of her greatest pride. I would want her to know that fitting in is not the same as belonging, and the true sense of belonging will only come when she no longer feels the need to erase the qualities that make her unique.

Ultimately, my intercultural journey has taught me that belonging is not about meeting certain societal standards or conforming to a single culture but about embracing complexity. It is about recognizing that our differences are not obstacles but opportunities to connect, to learn, and to grow. I now see myself as someone who carries the strength to view the world through multiple perspectives, making it a privilege that allows me to build bridges across cultures. In embracing every part of my journey, the discomfort, the mistakes, and the pride, I have come to realize that true belonging is not found in any one place, but in the confidence to be whole wherever I stand.