



A Japanese-Korean-American family: diversity at home

“Japan is a homogenous country.”

Have you ever heard this before? It’s what I was told when I first came to Japan more than twenty-five years ago. I didn’t know any Japanese, but I was taught the phrase *shimaguni konjo*, or “island country mentality.” I was told that because Japan was an archipelago in the middle of the ocean far removed from other cultures, it was difficult for Japanese to understand different kinds of people. 5

I was only seventeen when I first came to Japan, so I have to admit that I believed what I was told. I stayed with Japanese host families and studied Japanese. Almost all the people I saw on the street looked Japanese, so it certainly seemed homogenous at first. But many years later I know Japan has diversity! 10

Before we start discussing details, let’s take a look at what the word “diversity” means. I hear it a lot when I go back to visit my family in California. California is on the West Coast of the 15

United States, so there are communities of people from most countries of Asia as well as from Mexico and Central and South America. I wish I could say that, along with Caucasians and African-Americans, all of these different cultures lived peacefully together, but that is not always the case. Some people are reluctant to accept so many different languages, cultures and skin colors, while others say “Embrace the diversity!” They say having many different kinds of people means having a more lively and interesting place to live. The word “diversity” is almost always used in a positive way.

I got my first hint that not all Japanese were the same when I was engaged to marry a Japanese man. It turned out that his grandparents lived in the US in the early years of the twentieth century. He had aunts and uncles living in Japan who were also US citizens. At the school where I taught, I had students with Korean and Chinese names. They looked like all the other students and they spoke perfect Japanese, but they had ancestry that was not Japanese. Now there are people who have come to Japan from other countries to study or work. Many of these people are of Japanese ancestry, so they have Japanese names and Japanese features but many do not speak the language and are unfamiliar with Japanese culture.

There are also more and more children of mixed heritage. One parent is Japanese and the other is not—that describes the children of both of the authors of this book. And there are the indigenous peoples of Japan, the Ainu and the Okinawans, both of whom have rich cultures that are different from traditional Japanese culture. There is much that we can learn from them.

In short, there are many different types of people living here. Some have Japanese nationality, some have Japanese ancestry,

and some speak Japanese, some have a combination of these characteristics, and others have none of them, but they all live here and are a part of Japanese society.

Then there are people who have Japanese ancestry. They were born and raised in Japan by Japanese parents, but there is something about them that makes them somehow different from what we usually think of as mainstream society. Let's think of a few examples. People with physical disabilities are one. In this book you will read about a woman whose husband can neither see nor hear. You'll also learn about a young girl who cannot move her arms or legs. There are people in wheelchairs, or who walk with difficulty and need assistance from others, and even people who are confined to their beds. They have different viewpoints that add to the diversity of Japanese society as a whole. They can teach us new things about what it means to live.

Finally there is diversity that is more difficult to spot. People who have lifestyles that are different: a father or mother



Mural on a California church that serves four different ethnic communities

raising children as a single parent, Japanese people who have returned to this country after living in other countries, and people who do not lead their lives on the same time scale as others. When these people lead their lives in their own way we learn that
5 there are different ways to do things. Their examples open up possibilities for the rest of us.

So I feel concerned when I see people hesitate to follow their dreams because they are afraid it will make them seem somehow different and they won't fit into Japanese society. I
10 want to say, "It's good to be different! When you make use of the part of you that is different, it makes the lives of everyone richer. It makes Japan an even better place to live." I hope that after you read this book you will agree.

EXERCISES

A. *If a statement is true write T, and if it is false write F.*

1. Diversity means different cultures always live together peacefully.
2. Some people have Japanese names and Japanese features but are unfamiliar with the Japanese language and culture.
3. People with different viewpoints can add to the diversity of Japanese society.
4. Japanese society today is made up of many kinds of people.
5. The writer says "it's good to be different."

B. *Fill in the missing words.*

disabilities	ancestry	lifestyles	mixed heritage
reluctant	spot		

1. Sometimes, people can be _____ to accept others who are different.
2. There are some people from other countries with Japanese _____.
3. We can learn different ways to do things from Japanese with different _____.
4. Sometimes diversity is difficult to _____.
5. In Japan, some children of _____ have one parent who is Japanese and the other is not.

C. Choose the best answer.

1. How is the word “diversity” almost always used in the US?
 - a. In a positive way
 - b. In a lively way
 - c. In a negative way
2. Where did the writer’s fiancé’s grandparents live in the early part of the 20th century?
 - a. Korea
 - b. China
 - c. The United States
3. Which indigenous peoples of Japan have rich cultures that are different from traditional Japanese culture?
 - a. Children of single parents
 - b. Children of mixed heritage
 - c. The Ainu and the Okinawans