

It ain't easy being a bilingual girl

This bilingual thing ... they say that it's a both curse and a blessing. *Watakushigotode kyōshukudesuga* (私事で恐縮ですが, A thousand pardons for having the gall to talk about myself), but I think of it more like a stigma. It's not the same for millenials — they were born and raised in a kinder and more lenient Japan, whereas us old-timer *eigo-tsukai* (英語使い, English-speakers) have had it tough since day one.

Being a Japanese teenager trying to survive in last century's school system was tough enough, but a Japanese teenager who had spent a chunk of time in the United States and must survive in the *ikiuma no me wo nuku* (生き馬の目を抜く, the equivalent of gouging out the eyes of a horse) environment of a public school classroom — perhaps the term *chō kibishii* (超きびしい, extremely severe) will fit the bill.

Recently, I was told that *kikoku* (キコク, returnees, or kids who have spent time overseas) was now a neutral word, and even has positive connotations. Back in the 20th century, a returnee was considered different, weird, *wakaranai* (わからない, incomprehensible). To be able to speak a foreign language *ryūchō ni* (流暢に, fluently) while being Japanese at one and the same time just wasn't cool. In fact it was closer to being yucky.

It was tougher for boys. My brothers learned very quickly that scoring 100 in English earned no respect and kept girls (the pretty, fun ones especially) away. What counted was stuff like getting the *regulā* (レギュラー, starting member) slot in the *yakyūbu* (野球部, baseball team), or owning one's very own *baiku* (バイク, motorcycle) and letting it rip on some *bōsōzoku* (暴走族, motorcycle gang) strip in Chiba or Shonan. Failing in both, my brothers decided to delete their entire pasts and pretend they couldn't speak a single word of English. The ploy worked. In a few months their facial expressions and body language had completely changed. If the school had given out awards for assimilation, my brothers would have taken home every one.

For girls, the big obstacle to assimilation was our penchant for freedom and having a good time. Now of course, *tanoshimukoto* (楽しむこと, enjoying oneself) is a phrase bandied about by everyone from *shōgakusei* (小学生, grade schoolers) to *daijin* (大臣, Cabinet ministers). But 30 years ago anyone who behaved too freely and got around was under suspicion. A real Japanese was supposed to *kurō* (苦勞, suffer), don't ask why. As a *kikoku jyoshi* (キコク女子, returnee girl), I just didn't get it. And by the time

the office memo about the suffering thing came around, it was too late.

I was a *henna yatsu* (変なやつ, bizaare one) who could give a *gaijin* (外人, foreigner) directions in English but was clueless in every other aspect of Japanese life. I couldn't even do *rajio taisō* (ラジオ体操, radio exercises) without bumbling up the sequence and was convinced that *chōrei* (朝礼, morning roll call and lecture) was an invention of the Spanish Inquisition imported to Japan to make us feel like miserable bugs to be crushed under the shoe of the *kōchōsensei* (校長先生, high-school principal).

For the record, a *kikoku's* social life wasn't all that great either. *Taidoga dekai* (態度がでかい, having a big attitude) is one of the banes of the *kikoku's* overall image, and for this reason the really nice, well-bred kids tended to stay away. One day in ninth grade my best friend gave me a letter to call off the friendship; her mother thought I was contaminating her daughter and any further relations would damage her chances of succeeding at *kōkō jyuken* (高校受験, high school entrance exams). It was the first time I fully understood that being different in Japan came with a certain price tag. Very literally, one couldn't have one's cake and eat it too.

Interestingly, being a *hāfu* (ハーフ, half Japanese) has never had the same stigma of being a *kikoku*. A *hāfu* was the coolest thing a *nihonjin* (日本人, Japanese person) could be. Just witness the number of mixed-race *idoru* (アイドル, idols) and *tarento* (タレント, celebrities) crowding the media (my favorite is Anna Tsuchiya). In college, some of my girlfriends would say that marrying a *gaijin* was the surest, quickest way to social success and adorable children. Ayako, who practiced exactly what she preached, gave birth to three adorable *hāfu* children and said: "*Kodomo ni ichiban ii mirai wo ageta*" (「子供に一番いい未来をあげた」 "I gave the best possible future to my kids"). As soon as they were old enough, she enrolled them in a *tarento ējenshī* (talent agency) specializing in mixed-race kids. One of them now appears in a detergent commercial.

The *kikoku*, on the other hand, often wind up leaving the country. There's at least one kid in every returnee family who refuses to fit in and flees as soon as s/he can get their hands on a plane ticket.

In our own family, we secretly pined to be *jyun-japa* (純ジャパ). In *kikoku*-speak that's "purebred Japanese," or someone completely uncontaminated.

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