

COMMUNITY



Japanese are Japanese and foreigners are foreigners, and never the twain shall meet? In many aspects of daily life in this country, there is one way for the Japanese and another for the rest of us. Like it or not, that's just how it is. At least foreigners know where we stand.

However, bicultural individuals — the children of one Japanese and one foreign parent — may find that life isn't quite that simple.

Although they were born, raised and educated in Japan, and as Japanese citizens are entitled to all the legal privileges that entails, society sometimes marginalizes them in ways that their foreign parents may not have anticipated. Japanese television shows and commercials might be full of cute "half" young adults, but back in the real world, being a bit "different" isn't always such a good thing when you are trying to make your way in this country.

Hiroki — not his real name — is a university student. Having recently moved out of the family home and into his own apartment, he was relieved when he was accepted for a part-time position at a branch of Sukiya, a national *gyūdon* (beef on rice) restaurant chain.

The son of an American mother and Japanese father, he has both a Japanese and a Western name. "My family and some of my close friends use my Western name, but these days I usually go by my Japanese one," he says. "I applied for the job with my Japanese name, but since my bank account has both names on it — like my passport — I thought it was best to write my whole name in the section about account details."

From past experience, Hiroki knew that banks could be very particular about names, so he thought he was doing his employers a favor by giving his full name. Little did he know that this simple action would lead to major headaches.

The restaurant chain, which employs thousands of young people as part-time employees, runs a training center for new recruits. When someone noticed the name "John" in *katakana* script on the paperwork, it raised a red flag.

"They asked if I was Japanese. I assured them I was, but then they said I needed to prove it, so I was told to get a copy of my *jūminhyō* [residence certificate]."

Although somewhat surprised that his verbal assurance about his citizenship wasn't good enough, Hiroki needed the job, so he complied with the request. He dropped by the branch where he was slated to work and, after discussing his shifts, handed the document to the manager and thought nothing more about it.

The next day a call came from Sukiya's training center, asking if Hiroki realized there was a mistake on his *jūminhyō*, because his gender was listed as female. "I told them there was no mistake. I explained that I'm transgender and have been living as a male since high school. However, unless you have total reconstructive surgery, you can't change your sex on the *koseki* [family registry] or the *jūminhyō*."

Then the bombshell was dropped. Another call came from a manager, informing him "regretfully" that they were unable to offer him a job under the present circumstances. Naturally, this came as a shock, and Hiroki wanted to know the reason. "They basically told me that because my *jūminhyō* lists me as 'female,' they have to hire me 'as a woman.' I was asked if I would be OK with being called a female at work, and of course I was like, 'No, it's not OK.' "

His parents were shocked and angry when they heard about the affair. "They discriminated against our son twice," says his mother. "First for asking him to prove his citizenship, and then by making a huge issue of his gender."

Hiroki's father called the training center. "I wanted a proper explanation of why they wouldn't hire my son. To cut a long story short, they told me it was based on the way their hiring system is set up — if the ID says a person is female, that is how they are listed in the company's computer system, regardless of having lived successfully and happily as a male for several years. It was apparently too difficult for them to accommodate someone like my son." The manager's assurance that the company was not discriminating against Hiroki because he was transgender rang hollow.

Taking a pragmatic approach, Hiroki resigned himself to looking for a different job, but his parents are still upset about the unfairness of the whole situation. "If it hadn't been for the fact that he had a *katakana* name, they would never have asked to see his *jūminhyō* and he'd still have a job!" says his mother indignantly. "Not that I want my son working for that company now!" Upon hearing the story, many of the family's friends and acquaintances have vowed to boycott the chain.

So what does the company have to say? An executive in Sukiya's public relations department agreed to be interviewed.

“Basically, any potential employee with a katakana element in their name is flagged and asked to prove their nationality. This is because we hire a lot of foreigners, many of them students,” said the representative. “Employment laws have tightened up and the company has to be very careful to ensure that non-Japanese staff can legally work in this country.” The rule also applies to Japanese married to foreign nationals and using a non-Japanese last name, and Japanese with “trendy” katakana first names, regardless of citizenship or outward appearance.

As for the issue of gender when hiring, the representative says company policy needs to be reviewed. “I believe this is the first case we’ve had with a potential transgender employee,” he notes. However, since most employees are not required to furnish a *jūminhyō* to “prove” anything, the spokesman admits there is probably no way to tell if someone is transgender or not.

“Our company is proud of our record of offering employment to many foreign people around Japan and we definitely do not wish to discriminate against anyone, Japanese or non-Japanese, men or women. I hope we can use this opportunity to re-examine our hiring system and improve things.”

Life isn’t always easy in the business world, either. When people first meet Stephen, they assume he is Japanese. Having spent much of his life in this country, he is perfectly at home with the culture and takes after his Japanese mother in appearance, so there is nothing to make him stand out from the crowd.

However, as soon as he hands over his name card and people notice he has katakana for both his first and last name — inherited from his Canadian father — the walls go up.

“My name throws people because it isn’t what they expected — it doesn’t ‘go’ with my face,” explains the sales executive, now in his 40s. “Doing business in this country is about connections and traditions, and sometimes Japanese people aren’t willing to give me a chance based on my name. They tend to think I’m not here for the long haul, and that I will be going back ‘home’ sooner or later. They don’t realize that home for me is here!”

Parents of bicultural children often think long and hard about whether to bestow a name from the non-Japanese partner’s culture on their children. Along with the joy and pride of passing on a name or names that reflect the child’s twin heritages comes the concern that it might cause inconvenience, embarrassment or even discrimination down the line.

Alison, an Australian mother of two, decided to go with Japanese first names only. Since her children use their father’s surname, their names can be written totally in *kanji*, blending in with the majority.

“My kids stick out enough as it, so I didn’t want to make things any harder for them,” she says. “I’d heard some stories from other mums of ‘half’ kids with middle names. Every time the kid goes to a new school, the teachers insist on reading out both names, because it’s listed on their official records. For a kid trying to fit into a new environment, it’s just one more hassle they don’t need.”

In some cases, however, having a non-Japanese name may actually be desirable for bicultural children. Germany, for example, has guidelines for parents when naming their babies, including the stipulation that it should be easy to distinguish the child’s sex. A name such as Kim would not be accepted by officials as a first name.

Birgitta and her husband chose the name Shunya for their son, who was born in Japan, but couldn’t be sure that this would be acceptable when they applied for the child’s German passport.

“If we lived in Germany, we could just go to the local town office and sit down with an official, and they

would decide if the name was OK. But since we were here in Japan and the passport was handled back in Germany, we didn't want to run any risks — (so) we added a German middle name to be on the safe side," she says.

Hair can be another bone of contention. In this day and age, when there are arguably more young Japanese people with dyed hair than without, it may seem odd that naturally lighter hair could be a problem. However, many schools still maintain strict "no dyeing" policies, without making allowances for students who came by their hair color naturally.

When Trina's daughter entered a private junior high school, she was piqued to receive a letter asking parents of students with naturally curly or brown hair to indicate this in an official statement. Such students were then subject to a teacher "inspection" to ensure their hair was naturally not straight and black.

Moreover, the school also has a student committee whose job is to promote and police school rules amongst their peers. The final straw came when her daughter reported there was a hand-drawn poster by the student committee on the stairs that asked, "Your hair isn't brown, is it?"

Trina and her husband found this stance rather incongruous for a school that promotes its study-abroad program, and arranged to meet with the teachers. However, while the teachers listened respectfully to the couple, they did not agree that the policy caused unnecessary grief for bicultural students, insisting there was no discrimination behind the move. "But they did at least apologize to our daughter for hurting her feelings over the poster, and it was taken down," Trina says.

Hair was also an issue for Yuta, a bicultural high school student, when he applied for a part-time job at a traditional Japanese pub. All employees must follow a strict code that includes no dyed hair, with no allowances made for someone whose hair happened to be naturally brown.

"They said they would only hire him if Yuta dyed his hair black, and he was ready to do it. He wanted the job," says his mother. "Luckily, his older sister talked him out of it. We knew his high school might go along with him having black hair — he would fit in with everyone else then — but even if he quit the job, he'd then be stuck dyeing his hair all the way until graduation. We knew the school wouldn't accept a two-tone look while his natural hair color was growing in again."

While Yuta is looking at other employment options, his mother raises an interesting point. With the exception of his lighter hair color, her son "looks" Japanese and she thinks this worked against him. "At first glance, my kid looks like a Japanese with dyed hair. If he definitely looked more 'half,' then people wouldn't expect his hair to be pure black. I suspect that the *izakaya* wouldn't have given him such a hard time in that case."

With one in every 20 marriages in Japan now involving one foreign partner, there will be an increasing number of bicultural adults entering society, and there is a growing need for Japanese society to review the way it deals with them.

Let's leave the last word to Hiroki, who has the following message for the restaurant chain that wouldn't hire him: "I want Sukiya to realize that there are all kinds of people in Japan. Having policies is fine, but they need to be flexible enough to change them as needed. Being open to change is very important for the future."

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