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Home is where hardship is for Japanese returnees

Settling in poses myriad problems for those back from abroad

BY [VANESSA MITCHELL](#)

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Before preparing to move overseas for the first time, it's common to be warned about the effects of culture shock.

Very few people however, are prepared for a similar experience when they return to their home country.

While people of every race are likely to experience some kind of reverse culture shock upon repatriation, Japanese people may have a harder time than those who grew up in a multicultural society in the West, believes one expert.

According to Dr. Takeshi Tamura, an assistant professor at Tokyo Gakugei University and therapist specializing in cases of reverse culture shock, "this is because Japanese people tend to think they are unanimous and that if they want to be a member of the culture, then they have to be the same."

"Countries such as America and Europe consist of people from very diverse cultures and so they tend to assume that they are different to each other," he said.

Hiroko, a Tokyo office worker who lived in Lebanon, Turkey and Austria as child, was miserable upon her return to Japan at aged just 10.

"My classmates were so mean to me because I didn't have the same traditional upbringing as them and my Japanese pronunciation was different to theirs.

"When I read from a textbook aloud in class the other children would laugh at me," she said.

It is thought that school-age children feel the effects of reverse culture shock the worst, not only during efforts at adjustment but also through the effects of bullying from teachers and fellow students alike.

"Many English teachers in Japan can't speak English fluently.

“Often teachers might not like returnee children who speak English better than they do,” said Dr. Tamura.

For movie director Takamasa Mieno, who spent most of his childhood years in Hong Kong and China, it was a kind of Catch-22 situation.

When he lived in China, he often got into fights with Chinese kids, who labeled him a “Jap.” However, upon his return to Japan he didn’t feel like he belonged here either.

“Japanese society is very closed because everybody grows up together,” says Takamasa.

“I felt like I was from the outside.”

Dr. Tamura agrees that returning from abroad can cause a sense of isolation and a feeling that you are not accepted.

In some cases this is manifest through physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches or rashes. In more severe cases, it can have a profound psychological effect.

“People who have experienced a feeling of isolation tend to always feel nervous about the way other people look at them, which can sometimes lead to depression or a feeling of crisis,” he said.

While many returnees feel lonely or bored, in artist Kentaro Yamada’s case he experienced a loss of identity.

“My identity is really screwed up as I don’t have any role models in my society to look up to, someone who has experienced what I have experienced.

“Sometimes you start to wonder if you are the only one feeling puzzled,” he said.

Although returnees to Japan, as elsewhere, are desperate to share their experiences in foreign climes, friends and family aren’t always that interested in listening.

That’s why so many returnees seek out foreign friends or develop new friendships with people who have had similar experiences to their own.

Shigeru Kawachi, a systems engineer, says that when he returned to Japan he wasn’t able to maintain friendships with those of a more conservative bent.

As another systems engineer, Kota Namaki, puts it: “the frog in the well does not know the ocean.”

Living abroad often has one of two effects upon those who return to Japan.

On one hand, some become more nationalistic or right wing, while others become more critical of the status quo in their own country.

In the case of Shigeru Hirabayashi, the CEO of an import/export company, he became very proud of his national heritage.

Tatsulow, a musician and record label manager, felt a mixture of both.

“I became nationalistic in the U.K. but I became critical of Japanese society after I came back,” he says.

Akiko Konno, a Tokyo bicycle messenger, was more outspoken.

“In Japan, it seems that maintaining the status quo is more important than being critical of the fact that you don’t have to be critical in Japan,” she said.

But critical up their return were Asako Sumi, a booking agent, and Mai Makino, a student, who were both unimpressed by fellow Japanese people’s manners.

Train manners were a big bug bear for Asako, who moans, “Japanese people have a spirit where they always put themselves before others.”

But while Japanese trains can be traumatic for returnee and resident alike, Yoshio Shirai, a chauffeur, found himself extremely uncomfortable with how “mabushi” everything in Tokyo was.

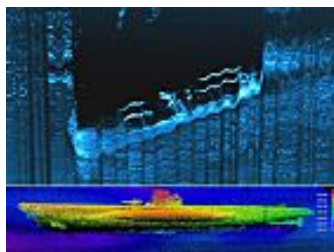
When asked about the biggest changes which occurred while away, most people interviewed discussed “kogaryu” fashion, Louis Vuitton bags and the predominance of Starbucks and keitais.

A big surprise for many, however, was feeling unable to speak Japanese fluently when they returned home.

While some people complained of confusing the two languages, others talked of words or expressions which they couldn’t find a substitute for in Japanese.

One, suggested by Midori, an office worker, was “I miss you.”

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