Stories of North American Nikkei living in Japan

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Reference Data:
Noguchi, M. G. (2006). Stories of North American Nikkei living in Japan. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper explores the impact ethnic background has on the identities North American Nikkei negotiate in Japan and on their acquisition of the Japanese language. In a survey of 17 North Americans of Japanese descent who have lived in Japan for over ten years, approximately half of the participants viewed themselves as Japanese Americans or Canadians, or as North Americans, but they found Japanese do not see them this way. Instead, they are often positioned as Japanese. While nine of the participants are comfortable being positioned as Japanese some or most of the time, three always try to position themselves as North American *Nikkei* and another four reported that they assert North American identity when it is convenient or they are uncomfortable with Japanese expectations—especially in terms of gender roles. Most of the participants appeared to have stopped studying Japanese. Possible reasons for this are suggested and implications for language teaching are considered.

本論文は、日本に長期滞在している日系アメリカ人／カナダ人のアイデンティティ形成と日本語習得課程において、日系人であることがどのような影響を及ぼすかを研究する。１０年以上日本に滞在しているアメリカとカナダ生まれの日系人のアンケート調査によると、１７人の回答者のおよそ半分は、自分は日系アメリカ／カナダ人、あるいはアメリカ／カナダ人であると考えているが、日本人には日本人であるとよく見られている。回答者のうち９人は、たいていの場合、あるいは時々、日本人に見られることに対して、不愉快には感じていないとする。しかし、３人はいつも自分が日系アメリカ／カナダ人であることを主張する。他の４人は、便利な時や、日本社会においての常識として見られる行動—特に女性に対するジェンダー・ロールなど—に縛られたくない時に、自分はアメリカ／カナダ人であることを主張する。回答者のほとんどは、日本語の勉強—特に日本語の読み書き—を断念していることがうかがえる。その理由を考え、第二言語習得—特にJSL—に示唆するものは何かを検討する。

The desire to fit into the target culture may be one of the strongest motivators for second language learning. However, in a country like Japan, with its high levels of apparent homogeneity, not only in terms of culture but also phenotype, North Americans of European or African descent may feel that their physical conspicuousness creates a powerful barrier to integration into Japanese society. To them, it may seem that North Americans of Japanese descent must have an easier time fitting into Japanese society and must therefore have higher levels of motivation and success in learning the Japanese language.

This paper seeks to examine the validity of such assumptions by exploring the impact ethnic background has on the identities Nikkei North Americans negotiate in Japan, and by extension, on their acquisition of the Japanese language. It is based on a survey of 17 Nikkei (people of Japanese descent) from Canada and the United States, including Hawaii, who have lived in Japan on a long-term basis. The survey was originally conducted to investigate the phenomenon of reverse migration and asked respondents about their experiences growing up as Nikkei in North America, what brought them to Japan in the first place, and how they view themselves and their children after years of residence in Japan (Noguchi, 2005). The current paper focuses on only a small part of the data collected in that survey, analyzing the interplay between the participants' English and Japanese language competencies and the multiple identities they negotiate in Japan, and considering the implications of these findings for theories of language teaching and learning.

Theoretical framework

My analysis of the survey data is based on a postructuralist view of identity as described in Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001). In this view, identities are seen as multiple, changing and in need of negotiation. Even ethnic identity may not be fixed. Rather, "self-ascription shifts from context to context" (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 251). For example, Irish people may distinguish themselves from the English when talking to other people from the UK, but may assert a British identity when dealing with Americans.

In postructuralist theory, *interactive positioning* is the way people use language to ascribe certain identities to others in a conversation, while *reflective positioning* is the act of asserting chosen identities for oneself (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 249). For example, at a dinner party, the hostess may use language that makes a visitor feel like an honored guest, while the visitor herself may try to negotiate a position as a friend or member of the family.

Reflective positioning may be contested, with individuals finding "themselves in a perpetual tension between self-chosen identities and others' attempts to position them differently" (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 249). A well-known example of this type of tension is the dissonance between professional golfer Tiger Woods' efforts to assert a multi-racial identity as a *Caublasian* (combination Caucasian, Black, and Asian) and his late father's insistence that he was African American.

Another example of tension between reflective and interactive positioning—one closer to the topic of this paper—can be seen in the story of Japanese-American Susan Matoba Adler. Adler (1998) grew up in the Midwest viewing herself as very American, but as she got older, she found the Caucasian men she dated referred to her as their "'oriental' girlfriend". Later, colleagues at the educational institutions where she taught identified her "as one of a small group of professors of color" (p. 2). At one point in her life, people in a town where there were many Asian "war brides" asked her how she learned to speak English so well (p. 4). In her story, we can see the power of phenotype (ethnicity of physical characteristics) in interactive positioning—a phenomenon that we will see again in the stories of North American Nikkei living in Japan.

Cultural knowledge—in the sense of knowing how to act in culturally important situations—has also been shown to be important in interactive positioning (Hensel, 1996, as cited in Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 251). One of the most powerful aspects of cultural knowledge in terms of positioning may well be proficiency in the language of the ethnic group with which the individual is seeking to identify. In fact, in their studies of Japanese returnees, Kanno (2003) and Yoshida (2000) suggest that Japanese language proficiency, and in particular, Japanese literacy, is closely associated with feelings of *Japanese-ness* in terms of acceptance of Japanese identity for oneself and others.

Because language is such an important element of ethnic identity, language choice is also seen as an *act of identity*. Choice of language, in turn, may be affected by a number of different factors, including the range of identities open to the individual and the value placed on the different languages (Pavlenko, 2001). Moreover, the amount of time and energy invested in second language acquisition may also be affected by the range of identities opened to the individual (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 319). In fact, McKay and Wong (1996) found that teenage Chinese immigrants in the U.S. sometimes stopped learning English in order to preserve positive images of themselves, since they had other identities from which to choose (as cited in Kanno, 2003, p. 4).

Previous research

Little research has been conducted on North Americans of Japanese descent living in Japan, but two previous studies may offer some clues on issues involved in their negotiation of identities.

Kanno's (2003) longitudinal study of the identity development of four Japanese *kikoku shijo* (returnees) while they were living in Canada and after their return to Japan found that the participants began with a polarized *either-or* view of their identity—that is, they felt that they had to be either Japanese or Canadian. However, after they settled back into life in Japan, they learned that they could embrace both of their languages and cultures and still fit in socially, picking and choosing desirable parts of each culture and asserting different identities according to the situation.

The introduction to Dorrine Kondo's (1990) study, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses in a Japanese Workplace,* offers more direct insights into the lives of North American Nikkei in Japan. A Japanese-American Kondo was given access to Japanese homes and workplaces to carry out her research because of her heritage, based on the assumption that she would *act Japanese*. When she succeeded, all was fine, but when she made linguistic or cultural mistakes, she was met with expressions of "bewilderment, incredulity, embarrassment, even anger, at having to deal with this odd person who looked Japanese and therefore human, but who must be retarded, deranged, or—equally undesirable in Japanese eyes—Chinese or Korean" (p. 11). This dissonance was stressful for both Kondo and those around her. Nonetheless, her Japanese host family and coworkers did not rethink their positioning of her, preferring to treat her as a Japanese—"sometimes an incomplete or unconventional Japanese, but a Japanese nonetheless" (p. 13). In fact, when Kondo tried to position herself as an American, her efforts were often ignored. She reports that, "in order to reconstitute myself as an American researcher, I

felt I had to extricate myself from the conspiracy to rewrite my identity as Japanese" (Kondo, 1990, p. 17).

While Kondo's study obviously offers insight into the identity negotiation of North American Nikkei living in Japan, Kondo herself did not live in Japan for long. The purpose of the current study is to determine if residence in Japan on a far longer-term basis results in differences in the identities negotiated by North American Nikkei and their motivation to learn Japanese.

Methodology

To explore the phenomenon of return migration by North Americans of Japanese descent, I developed a questionnaire and distributed it by email in late 2004 to North American *Nikkei* who had been living in Japan for more than three years. The questionnaire is reproduced in the Appendix. A report focusing on the participants' return journeys has already been published (Noguchi, 2005). The present paper explores the identity negotiation data collected in the survey more fully, in particular examining its relationship to the data on the participants' Japanese language acquisition.

The participants in this study include friends and colleagues as well as other North American Nikkei who were contacted by friends or learned of my survey from postings I made on two Internet bulletin boards dealing with bilingualism in Japan. Thus, this is a convenience sample, with the limitations inherent in this type of data.

Seventeen people who fit my criterion of having been born in Canada or the U.S. (including Hawaii), having Japanese ancestry on both sides of their family and having lived in Japan for more than three years completed the questionnaire. The respondents, in addition to being balanced in terms of gender—nine females and eight males—represented a variety of types of Japanese North Americans in terms of the place in which they were raised and the timing of their parents' or ancestors' immigration to North America. Thirteen are U.S. citizens and four are Canadians. Eight are *Sansei* (third-generation Nikkei) whose families immigrated before World War II, six have a *Sansei* or *Nisei* (second-generation) father and a mother who was born in Japan, and three are "*shin Nisei*" whose families came to North America well after the end of the War.

The average age of the participants was 46; the average length of residence in Japan was 18.6 years. Actually, only one had lived in Japan for less than ten years, so it is safe to say that the respondents had settled in Japan on a long-term basis. Nonetheless, 14 of the 17 reported that they had not come to Japan with the intension of putting down roots here. One of the participants had moved back to the U.S. and another said he might move back in the future, but the rest gave no indication of plans to leave Japan.

The participants' experiences and feelings about their ethnic background while they were growing up varied greatly, depending upon their generation, the community in which they grew up, and their personality. Four had experienced overt discrimination and another eight mentioned discomfort based their perception of being different from those around them. However, none of the participants seemed to have come to Japan because they felt alienated from North American culture and society. It appears that they were drawn to Japan to explore their

cultural "roots" rather than having been pushed out of the nation of their birth.

Two things that many of the participants had in common were that they arrived in Japan when they were in their twenties (12) or early thirties (3) and that they now have a Japanese spouse (10 of the 12 who are married). It should be noted that both of these things are also true of many North Americans of European descent who have become long-term residents of Japan.

The participants' self-reported Japanese language skills when they arrived in Japan ranged from "virtually none" to highly proficient. One participant grew up in a family where members communicated in Japanese and classified herself as "near native". Similarly, there was a range in the understanding of Japanese culture claimed by the participants. In response to the question on how well they understood Japanese culture before they came to Japan, two *Sansei* who grew up in the continental U.S. with English as their home language responded "not that well". A number of the other participants reported that they knew a lot about Japanese culture before coming, although several qualified this because of the datedness of their knowledge and the difference between superficial knowledge and deeper cultural knowledge. Alice (pseudonym, as are all other names used in this paper), explained the second problem in a bit more depth:

> I thought I had a pretty good handle on it until I got here. ... after living here for a while, I realized that I actually knew very little about Japan and its culture. I had always heard or studied about consensus decision-making, *nemawashi* and the pressure to conform, but I never really knew what it meant until I got married, started working professionally and really got settled into life here. The whole socialization process here is a different can of worms! …. The sheer amount of conformity required to live peacefully in school and neighborhood communities astounds me to this day. …. I suppose coming to Japan has made me realize just how American I really am.

Here, we can see tensions between the participants' pre-arrival beliefs about their ethnic identity and understanding of Japanese culture and their actual cultural orientation. We can also imagine how this gap might lead to problems in dealing with people in Japan, since Japanese people might expect that people who look Japanese, speak Japanese and have experienced a certain amount of Japanese culture while growing up would conform to Japanese cultural norms most of the time.

Results

Having outlined the participants' background and knowledge of Japanese language and culture prior to their arrival in Japan, I will go on to present their answers to survey questions that deal directly with their current language ability and the identities they negotiate.

Current Japanese language ability

When asked to rate their spoken Japanese proficiency, all of the respondents said they could at least handle daily conversation, while two said they had passed the 2-*kyu*

(second highest proficiency level) test of Japanese, and six said they were fluent or "near native". Reading and writing seemed to be more problematic, however. Eight of the participants indicated that they were reading and writing at the lower elementary school grade levels, seven said they could handle daily writing tasks and read simple materials, and two of the women with Japanese spouses noted that they asked their husbands for help when they needed to write something. Only two of the participants claimed much proficiency, and one of them qualified it. Judy, the participant who classified herself as "near native" in terms of her speaking ability upon arrival in Japan, noted, "Currently, I can write letters and emails with the help of handbooks, but it's not an easy undertaking." Moreover, four participants reported that their literacy skills had actually deteriorated over time.

Considered together, the participants' evaluations of their Japanese language proficiency before arrival and at the time of the survey suggest that most worked on their language skills after they arrived, but then at some point, stopped studying Japanese. Comments gathered at the JALT2005 Conference itself confirmed that several of the respondents as well as one other North American Nikkei who lives in Japan had decided to stop studying Japanese at some point.

Helpfulness of ethnic background

One of the survey questions asked if the participants' ethnic background was helpful in getting used to Japan. While nine participants responded "yes", four noted that it was not as helpful as they expected. Sarah wrote:

> I thought living in Japan would be easy because I was no longer the visible minority, but I soon found out that being the invisible minority is almost as bad. I blended in but I certainly didn't feel comfortable.

Ken noticed a difference that made him feel "more American than Japanese." He found:

> The culture gap between native Japanese people and me was much larger than the gap between American friends and me.

Another three of the participants reported the kind of expectations that Kondo (1990, see above) described.

Life and identities in Japan

One of the survey questions probed the degree of comfort the respondents feel living in Japan. Five of the participants wrote that they feel "very" or "quite" comfortable. Two reported that they are more comfortable than they might have been if they had stayed in America. Shizuko explained: "It is nice to look like everyone else, to be able to blend in." Another five answered that they were comfortable, but then added some kind of qualifier—with four of them mentioning *language difficulties*. Thus, we can see that while phenotype and ethnic background helped ease the participants' entry into Japanese society, the participants nonetheless found the Japanese language to be a challenge.

In response to the question "How would you describe your ethnic identity now?" the most common answer, given by seven of the participants, was "Japanese American" or "Japanese Canadian". Only one participant completely

emphasized his North American identity in answering this question. Another reported that she had moved away from an *either-or* approach to a *both-and* identity, much like the returnees in Kanno's (2003) study. Two other participants avoided choosing altogether. Doris, in fact, made a point of this, stating, "I feel blessed that I have two cultural heritages and don't want to get hung up with labels."

Interestingly, six of the participants gave detailed explanations of how their identities change—confirming the poststructuralist notion of multiple identities. These answers will be reported in the next section.

Positioning and identity negotiation

The most common reply to the question on how they were positioned by Japanese people—given by eight of the participants—was that different people position them in different ways. Linda's answer, reproduced here, is typical of this kind of response.

> With those whom I interact in Japanese, most would probably say I was Japanese, and sometimes they have remarked to that effect since I cook Japanese food and follow many of the customs. With my Japanese colleagues, I am the native speaker, so that seems to override everything else. I can usually "pass" when speaking with store clerks. Students who meet me for the first time wrestle with my identity and unabashedly ask if I am *Half*.

It is interesting to note that two of the respondents echoed Kondo's (1990) experience and answered simply "Japanese", while another seven mentioned that they were sometimes positioned as Japanese, as Linda did in the above response. Three participants, including Linda, explicitly stated that they were viewed as English experts, while a number of others hinted that this was the case. It should be noted that language ability and use are important factors in these positionings.

Several other common themes emerged in the responses to this question. Four of the participants mentioned that they were positioned as "outsiders". Judy's response is typical of this viewpoint:

> One thing that will probably take a long time to dissolve, is the outsider-insider barrier. Nisei and Sansei are placed on the outsider side of the fence. Genetic origins are not enough to overcome the cultural and linguistic hurdles.

For Caucasian North Americans who may think Nikkei have an easier time living in Japan, Shizuko's answer to this question may prove enlightening:

> I feel strangely like I lose out on the advantages of being a true gaijin in that perhaps the Japanese feel that I am not 100% foreigner because my coloring is not blue/blond or whatever. I feel this especially when applying for jobs. So, I feel they view me as sort of a distant relative, not completely unrelated, but not 100% one of them.

Another common answer to this question, given by five of the participants (including Linda in the above response), was that Japanese people had asked them if they were "half" (a term used to indicate people born of one Japanese and one foreign parent). Five respondents also wrote that they thought some people viewed them as "strange", or "strange Japanese".

I would like to point out the contrast between these answers and the participants' stated view of their own identity: Seven participants said that they viewed themselves as "Japanese American" or "Japanese Canadian", yet none seems to have been positioned as such by the Japanese they interact with.

In response to these positionings, the participants take a range of approaches in trying to negotiate identities that are comfortable to them. Two noted that they allow themselves to be viewed as Japanese, and another six said that they allow themselves to be viewed as Japanese in some cases. Presumably, this is a way for the participants to just get on with life, or, as one of them later told me, to "not always have to explain myself".

However, three of the participants did not seem to want to accept such positioning. They emphasized that they *always* tell people that they are Japanese American. Barbara added that this is "to enable them to 'place' me". Tim explained his strategy at length in his additional comments at the end of the questionnaire:

> I just usually open most conversations by asking if they speak English and then continue the conversation in my broken Japanese. This gets you though the first barrier of a homogenous culture. Then they don't assume you know the hidden meanings in most phrases or words.

Four other participants said that they assert their North American identity in some cases, but not always. Lucy's answer was interesting because it hints that in her case, she asserts her American identity mostly in response to Japanese society's strong gender role expectations. She commented, "much of my identity is … wrapped up in being a woman in Japan". Barbara also mentioned asserting her American identity in the face of strict gender expectations:

> … by being thought of as "Japanese" it means their expectations of me are very high. I am expected to understand the correct behavior and appropriate responses of a well-bred Japanese woman—so I often disappoint or even shock these people. When I know I am being viewed this way, I often deliberately accentuate my "Americanness" so they won't hold up such impossible standards—it's a kind of protective strategy which should help both myself AND them.

Alice, the daughter of a Nisei father and Issei (immigrant) mother, also described selective assertion of her American identity:

> I … believe that I take on a Japanese identity when it is convenient, i.e., when I am in a situation where I don't care to be categorized—I only want to get on with the business at hand and not have to explain myself. An example of this would be when I am speaking to a neighbor very casually or attending a community meeting. I also become very "American" when convenient; e.g., when I don't want to join the PTA or other organization considered "voluntary", etc.—basically when I don't want to conform. I'm sure it sounds odd to have this sort of dual persona, but I believe many bilingual/bicultural individuals do this—just ask our kids! And it is probably more prevalent with those that look like the majority.

Alice's answer is reminiscent of the way Kondo (1990) began emphasizing differences between American and Japanese culture in order to resist having her identity "rewritten as Japanese". It also echoes the kind of identity the returnees in Kanno's (2003) study developed, with the freedom to pick and choose from various elements of both of their cultures.

Discussion

While most of the participants said they feel a fair degree of comfort in Japan, their answers suggested discomfort in two major areas. One was their perceived inability to conform to cultural expectations or their resistance to doing so, either because they find these expectations to be too restrictive or because they feel Japanese gender expectations are unacceptable. The participants' answers suggest that a common response to their discomfort was to position themselves as North Americans.

The other area of discomfort arose from language difficulties. Even the most fluent of the participants noted limitations in both their spoken and written Japanese language proficiency. It also appears that many of the respondents stopped learning Japanese, especially Japanese writing. Of course, it may be that as the participants aged and settled down, work and family demands made continued language learning difficult.

However, it is also possible that, like the Chinese immigrants in the McKay and Wong (1996) study cited by Kanno (2003), they stopped learning in order to preserve a positive self image—in this case, of native English speaking Westerners. I will label this the *cultural capital hypothesis*, reasoning that for the participants, there may be more cultural value in English expertise than in Japanese proficiency.

I think that it is also possible, however, that many of the participants gave up on pursuing high levels of Japanese proficiency because they did not want to live up to the expectation that fluent Japanese speakers embody all Japanese cultural values, including *self-restraint* and conformation to culturally engrained gender roles. I will call this the *cultural identity constraints* hypothesis. Interestingly, during the JALT2005 Conference, two North American *Nikkei* who heard my presentation came up to me and told me that they felt that this was true for them.

I feel that these results—while tentative due to the small scale of the study and the limitations of the methodology employed—may have some implications for language teaching. If the need to assert the cultural capital of "native speaker of English" is the reason why the participants gave up on their Japanese language studies, there may not be much JSL teachers can do to encourage them to keep studying Japanese. However, if the reason lies in North American cultural norms of individual freedom and gender equality that the Nikkei in this study do not wish to abandon, it would be helpful for JSL teachers to show them ways to assert their cultural identities and values in Japanese.

To my knowledge, language classes traditionally try to help learners assimilate to the target culture. Perhaps it is time for a new paradigm that would allow learners to negotiate identities that reflect the values of other cultural norms.

Conclusions

The answers to my questionnaire from 17 North American Nikkei who have lived in Japan for more than ten years paint a far more complex picture of their language learning and acculturation experiences than might initially be anticipated. While approximately half of the participants view themselves as Japanese Americans/Canadians or simply North Americans, they find that they are not seen in this way by the Japanese with whom they interact. Instead, they often find themselves positioned as Japanese or "half." Although nine of the participants were comfortable being positioned as Japanese some or most of the time, three said they always try to position themselves as North American Nikkei and another four reported that they assert North American identity when it is convenient or they are uncomfortable with Japanese cultural expectations.

The participants in general felt a fair degree of comfort in Japan, but their responses suggested some discomfort in terms of cultural expectations, particularly gender roles, as well as language difficulties. It appears that many of the respondents stopped learning Japanese, especially Japanese writing.

This survey relied on a small convenience sample, so the results need to be confirmed in a more systematic study. It would be worthwhile to explore why these seemingly ideally suited language learners did not pursue native levels of Japanese literacy proficiency. It may also be helpful to consider possible changes in foreign language teaching approaches to allow learners to negotiate identities that reflect their own cultural norms.

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Appendix. Questionnaire for North Americans of Japanese descent who are long-term residents of Japan

This questionnaire is designed to investigate the identity, background and language use of Japanese-Americans and Japanese-Canadians who have been living in Japan for three years or longer. Information provided on this questionnaire will be used solely for research purposes and care will be taken to protect the privacy of all respondents. Your cooperation in filling it in and/or passing it on to others would be greatly appreciated.

Personal information

Nationality:

Age:

Sex:

Generation (Nisei? Sansei?):

Number of: Older brothers _____ Older sisters ____
Younger brothers ___ Younger sisters ___

Number of years of residence in Japan:

If married, is your spouse Japanese?

If you have children, please explain what kind of schools they have gone/are going to (e.g., Japanese public schools, international schools, schools in North America, etc.)

Family background

When did your mother's family arrive in North America?

When did your father's family arrive in North America?

Did either of your parents ever return to Japan to live or go to school (permanently or termporarily)? If yes, please explain who and when.

Did any of your Japanese relatives ever visit your family in North America? If yes, please explain who and when.

What language(s) did your parents speak to each other?

What language(s) did your parents speak to you and your brothers and sisters?

Main questions

1. Why did you come to Japan?

2. How long were you intending to stay when you arrived in Japan?

3. How much Japanese (language) did you know when you arrived in Japan?

4. How well do you speak Japanese now?

5. How well do you read and write Japanese now?

6. How well did you understand Japanese culture before you came to Japan?

7. If you have a family in Japan, what language(s) do you use with each member of the family?

8. How did you feel about your family background/ethnicity when you were a child?

9. How did you feel about your family background/ethnicity when you were a teenager?

10. Were you ever uncomfortable about your family background/ethnicity when you lived in North America? If yes, please explain when and why you felt this way in as much detail as possible.

11. How did you feel about your family background/ethnicity after you came to Japan?

12. How comfortable would you say you are living in Japan?

13. How would you describe your ethnic identity now? Do you think of yourself as Japanese, American/Canadian, Japanese-American/Canadian, as something in between, or do you take on different identities at different times and in different situations?

14. How do you think Japanese people view your ethnic identity now? (Please be as specific as possible if different types of people view you in different ways.)

15. If you have children, what kind of an identity would you like them to have?

16. If you have children, please explain how they view their own ethnicity.

17. If you have children, please explain how the Japanese people they interact with view them.

18. If you have children, how well do they speak English?

Please write anything else you would like to share about your experience living in Japan. Thank you for your cooperation.