



I poured milk into a cup that had been used for tea...

At first, so many things were a mystery to me...even leaving my home was scary. For example, my daughter, who was born in my home country, had had her ears pierced at a beauty salon when she was little before we came here. This led to unwanted attention. One day, while I was waiting in line at the supermarket cashier, a customer behind us looked at my daughter's ear, touched it, looked at it again, which I found confusing. I thought, *really?*... How was a pierced ear such a strange sight?

Some time later, when my daughter had found friends, there was moment that, even today, I still can't forget. In Japan, for example when children get together (for playtime), everyone has their own drinking cup. Everyone had just been drinking tea, and one of the children had wanted to drink milk. The mother had brought out a milk pack, and it was placed there. Thinking I would pour milk for the child, I poured it into the same cup, the one used for drinking tea.

Well, based on the child's wide-eyed and puzzled reaction, I realized I had done something strange. The child's mother also noticed and poured the milk into a new cup. As the cup had been empty, pouring a drink into it would be a fine thing to do in my country. No one would care about such a thing over there. *Oh...* I thought, *things are different here*. I remember that to this day.



I wanted to express my feelings at the hospital, but I couldn't speak Japanese

One day, my daughter suddenly had her first ever asthma attack. It was a very cold, rainy day when it happened, and as I didn't know what was wrong, I rushed her to the hospital. The doctors and nurses at the hospital told me many things in Japanese, but I couldn't understand anything they said. There was this nurse who was trying to insert an intravenous drip. It didn't work the first time, and she couldn't do it properly the second time either. It took her three attempts to put a drip into my daughter's arm! There I was, holding my crying daughter, thinking, *what are you doing!* I really wanted to say something to the nurse. *Why are you so bad? Why did you make my little child suffer?* I found being in that situation to be so unbearable. Then I felt this heavy thought inside my head, *You must learn Japanese!* After such an episode, I knew I had to learn Japanese. I thought that if I didn't want my daughter to suffer in this way again, I had no choice but to learn Japanese. At the time, I didn't care that it was a hospital, and started crying. My husband and I cried too much. And the nurse who was together with us said to me, who was sitting on the bed with my child, *o-kaasan, detete (Please get out of the way!)*. That was the beginning; it was the start of me learning Japanese.



I walked for many hours before I finally arrived home

When I came to Japan, my child was still small, so we rarely went anywhere. Not knowing or understanding anything, and lacking confidence with the trains, I didn't ride trains much. I easily got motion sickness on the bus, which made it no good as well. Instead, I travelled around by bicycle, and it became my means of transport. I learned one part of town like the back of my hand. People would say, "Wow! You go all those places on a bike?" But I had a child and spare time. After we would go to my husband's company, I would ride the bike all around the place looking around.

But let me tell you about the time I got myself into trouble. It happened when I went to my friend's place one day. You see, to get to my friend's place, I had no choice but to take public transport. So, first I got on a bus from my home to station A. Then, I took a train to station B, where I changed trains again to go to station C, where my friend's place was. That bit was fine, but when going home, I returned to station A and caught a bus from there. Okay so far, but as I could not read the Japanese on the busses, I got on the wrong bus! The bus started taking me back toward station B, so, I pressed the button somewhere along the way. I said, "I made a mistake! I'm getting off." I held my three-year-old child in my arms and got off the bus. After I walked some, I realized that I couldn't walk any more like this, so I put my child on my back. I was also carrying lots of things, so it was awful! As I had no idea when a bus would come, I started walking. I would sometimes look behind me to see if a bus was coming, but no bus came. In the end, we did make it home, but not until many, many hours later.



I want to learn kanji

I study kanji on my own. I used to try reading the passing signboards when going somewhere by car. By doing this, I gradually learned them. Little by little, I remember that this shape means this, and that shape means that. Also, I learn with karaoke. On the karaoke monitor, I look at the lyrics written in Japanese, and learn them as I sing the same song over, and over. If I don't know how to read a kanji character, I ask someone.

Some time ago, I decided to learn Japanese, and I thought I should also learn kanji, because I wanted to be able to write. I enrolled in a Japanese class, but when it started, I realized that the other students were all beginners. We were only covering basic material, and I was bored. I also had to travel a long distance to get to the class, which meant it took up a lot of my time. I decided to quit the class. But although I had quit, I still really wanted to learn kanji, so I started studying by myself by writing down the kanji from my mobile phone. I sometimes didn't know the correct stroke order, so I just wrote them as best I could. Also, for example, I didn't understand the kanji on forms sent from the city office that needed to be filled in, so I would wait for my husband to come home so that he could help me. Later, with the childcare center documentation, there were lots of kanji I didn't understand. The words that had hiragana written for them were okay, but they were full of kanji and so I asked my husband how to pronounce the words, and if I didn't understand, I would get him to read it slowly for me.



He wanted to talk more with his cousins

My son can't speak my country's language now. But he understands a little as I speak it at home. In the summer holidays, the whole family went back home to my country. While we were there, my mother spoke to my son in our language, "You want to eat dinner?" And my son answered in our language, "Yes, I want to eat." I think my mother was very pleased when he said that. My husband can't really speak much, but he understands a little. I said to him, "Daddy understands Mummy's language too!" To that, my son replied, "Okay, then I'll try too." Now, it seems my son wants to learn more of my country's language so that he can talk with his cousins living over there.



I held onto the city newsletter for three years

I volunteer as an interpreter. This all started because I had seen an advertisement calling for interpreter volunteers in a city newsletter while I was at the city office registering for things like my pension when I first came to Japan. I kept hold of this newsletter for three years. In my third year in Japan, I went to the local International Exchange Association and registered to volunteer as an interpreter.

Nine months later, I got a phone call and work started. I volunteered at elementary schools interpreting for mothers from the same country as me at gatherings and parent-teacher interviews. After I interpreted, I would go home and look up things in my textbooks and think, *it would have been better to say this*, and *oh, that's what it meant*, but I also thought the work was fun. I was asked, "Why not be a volunteer for language classes teaching your native language?" and I started volunteering for that as well. I am busy and don't have much time, but I think it is important to teach the children our country's language.



I turned into someone who loves cooking

When my daughter was about two years old, I thought it was time she would want to have a friend. I started to worry about it, and after thinking about what kind of activities Japanese children like, I decided on cooking. Everyone likes homemade food. I found some very cheap bananas, and I thought a money-saving idea would be to make juice with a juicer. When the children came to our home to play, I made juices for them, and they really enjoyed it.

My husband doesn't eat the food of my country, so I spent a lot of effort watching cooking shows on television. At times when neighbors gave me food, it was Japanese curry and stew. Thinking Japanese people must like to eat this type of food, I figured I should learn how to cook it. My eyes always lit up when I had a chance to observe what Japanese eat. My husband made the dinner on Sundays. He would make things like meat sauce, spaghetti, and meat patties. This led me to make meat patties when children came to our house to play, and they all really enjoyed them. So, I originally just wanted to save money, but before I knew it, I had turned into a person who loves cooking, and people would praise me on how delicious it was. When my child started going to elementary school, I started working in a family restaurant where I worked in the kitchen. Around that time, I met a lady who was a former high school teacher, and she ended up introducing me to my current job. When I said that I was working in a family restaurant, she asked me what I did before I came to Japan. I told her how I used to look after children at a church before I came to Japan. She suggested that I should continue with my cooking work for a few years and get my cook's license. When I said that I can't write, but I can read a little, she said, "You certainly should go for it!" and told me how to study for Japanese proficiency exams. I quit the family restaurant and worked in the kitchen of a new workplace that the lady had introduced me to. Then after working there for five years, I became a licensed cook.



I wanted our home to be a place where children could come and go

When I was raising my son, I sometimes felt sorry for him. He didn't have friends, and friends are most important when you're a child. Feeling I must do something, I suggested to moms that their children could play with mine while they went shopping. I remember the Japanese that I used at that time. I had written, "Come and play here. Come and play together," and "Why not leave your children with us?" I told everyone as best I could. The first people I contacted thought I was a bit strange in the head and brushed me off. I wondered what to do. One idea that came to me: when it comes to cleaning, Japanese only cleaned their own homes, and not the shared space of the apartment or street. So, I thought what I could do, and decided to put all my effort into cleaning. Below our home was a tiny park, and I started keeping that park looking neat and tidy. After six months or so, people, even neighbors, started spreading the word about what I was doing, and I completely opened up my home, so the children could do as they please, a little like after-school childcare. However, I didn't do it because I wanted to run a childcare center. I did it because I felt so sorry that my son didn't have anyone to talk with. After all, it's such an important part of childhood to have friends to talk with. If a child is confined, they stop thinking and become scared of everything. I think children must be given the opportunity to quarrel and play with others.



I'm not used to Japanese tastes

The number-one thing that I've found most difficult to get used to in Japan is the meals. I just couldn't eat them. I grew up with dinners having a savory, salt-and-pepper taste, so I find that Japanese cooking tastes too sweet.

Unable to eat Japanese cooking, I made my own meals for breakfast and such, doing everything myself.

Sometimes, I would make dumplings, and other times tempura. The whole family ate together, and we worked out a system for who would wash the dishes. I washed them in the morning; my mother-in-law, at night. When I went shopping, someone would take me as I couldn't drive. After my son was born, I went for my one-month checkup, and the nurse was really worried about me. I was thin, and my blood pressure was low. "Are you managing okay? You're a mother with a baby boy now. In your current condition, you might collapse!" she told me. Since my son had been born, I was having to get up in the middle of the night. I truly hadn't had enough sleep, and every day, I was so sleepy. But sleepy or not, there were many things that had to be done, and I had to do them. The nurse had told me to eat everything because I was so thin. She had a point, so that's what I decided to do. I had a baby now, so it was important for me to be willing to eat everything and build up some strength. Since that time, I have tried to eat various food. Well...up until then, I thought that I didn't like sweet things. I had found pumpkin to be particularly sweet. But, for the sake of my child, I ate it again and again. And as I ate pumpkin more and more, it surprisingly started tasting delicious.

Having grown used to Japanese tastes, I don't mind them now. When I go home to my country, I really want to eat my country's cooking. When I do eat it, I feel nostalgic. These days, I don't find that kind of food delicious anymore, but it is still a reminder of long ago.



It's rude if you don't use respectful language!

Being a language of honorifics and expressions of respect, Japanese requires the speaker to be careful about using honorifics. When putting all this into practice, it can be quite a challenge to decide what times to use honorifics, and with whom they should be used. I think native Japanese are able to decide easily, as if they just need to flick a switch, but foreigners need a bit of time to sort it all out. Foreigners often tend to speak rudely, such as speaking in one's peer language to people who should be looked up to. However, Japanese listeners are very nice about this, and say, *it's okay, it's okay* to such faux pas.

I have been wanting to get on better with the Japanese people I have got to know through the class and the teacher has even said to me, "Maybe you can teach me some Chinese later." You see, I am also working as an assistant in the Chinese class at the same place. I am starting to feel my Japanese is developing. I can communicate with the people around me, and I feel that I had discovered something I like. However, out of the blue, the school staff cautioned me on how I was communicating with the senior-aged adults. Apparently, because there were many students in the class in the prime of their life, it is rude not to use respectful language. This was in the Chinese class, where I had just assumed it was okay to speak in plain Japanese. After all, the class isn't a proper formal class. It was more like a club gathering. This was when I first learned that we had to use respectful language when there were older people present. But still even now, I can't use it properly. Speaking polite Japanese is difficult.



I like to tell people how things are with me

I got my driving license when my daughter was one year old. We had moved to a new house, and I had decided to go to driving school. My mother-in-law recommended that I get a license as it would be inconvenient without one, and she even offered to look after my daughter while I was at driving school. But I thought it was no good for her just to be with the family all the time, so I took her to the child-minding service at the driving school.

After getting my driver's license, my freedom of movement was so much greater.

I took my daughter to public play centers, and other various childcare center playground open days. I met other moms and made more friends. While visiting a playground open day, I used to mention to the childcare teachers, "I'm from China, so I don't understand Japanese that well." Immediately the teachers would start teaching me various things. There are all types of people; there are some Chinese who don't like telling the people around them they are Chinese. But I always wanted to let people know how things are with me. I was equally open with my life when at the maternity club that my obstetrician clinic had held. I always tell people straight away about my own circumstances. I think it's good to do this as it leaves a deeper impression on people, and they can end up responding more positively. I put my daughter into kindergarten before she turned four. I put her in early because, coming from China, I didn't have many family or friends, and my daughter didn't have any playmates around her age. There were two children who lived close by, and we walked together nearly every day. I spoke with their mothers, and they taught me how to say various things in Japanese.



My son was the reason I decided to get naturalized

The reason I decided I should get naturalized was my son. It's a long time ago now, but I remember seeing on television every now and then something about foreign children having problems with bullying. Being a foreigner myself, when I went and got my driver's license once, for example, they told me I must bring my Certificate of Alien Registration, and I would often forget to bring it. When I forgot it, I was told I have to come back again to get it. When I went to the embassy of my country, I forgot my Residence Card and I ended up having to make a second trip to Tokyo. All this is really difficult, and when my child grows up and applies for a job, the company might say that your mother is a foreigner, so we need a copy of the family register, and the certificate of residence, when normally just one sheet of paper is okay. To prevent such an ordeal for my son, I thought getting naturalized would make things better in the future, so that's why I decided to get naturalized.

When I was getting naturalized, my parents were not opposed to it at all. They were like, "That's a good idea, you go ahead and do that." I guess that was because there are so many things to worry about when living in a foreign country. If you are a foreigner, you will be treated like a foreigner. Though, I don't know whether that is the case in Japan. If anything, I think it might be the foreigners receiving the more favorable treatment. Yes, really. When all the family needed documents at a city office, I would receive them faster than Japanese people. From my parents' perspective, however, I can understand how they were worried. As a foreigner living in a foreign country, if something happened, I would be dealt with as a foreigner. So, when I told them I had decided to get naturalized, they were overjoyed and said, "Yes, go ahead and do it. After all, your child is Japanese, and your husband is Japanese too. It would be better for the family to be all one nationality. We support you." At first, I was worried about getting naturalized. But when neither my father nor my mother was worried, and told me, "We would both feel much more at ease if you did. You are all a family now. You're a proper family, so you should all be the same nationality."

If you ask me whether I was sad getting naturalized, I'd say I couldn't bear the thought of my child being at a disadvantage. I wasn't exactly sad, but I still didn't want to tell my Chinese

friends and relatives getting naturalized. I told my parents and siblings the truth, but among my siblings, my elder sister was against the idea. She said things like, "If you get naturalized, you won't be able to come home anymore!" However, what she was really wanting to say was, *we are of the same blood, so one day you should come back*. My parents supported my decision, but if I told my friends and other relatives, they would look at me disapprovingly as if to say, she must have changed in some way. I didn't want people to ask me if I didn't like my own country, so I decided not to tell my friends. So I never say, "I'm naturalized now, so I'm Japanese." I never say that.



To have pride of place of origin

I married a Japanese man whom I met while travelling and that brought me to Japan. The biggest worry at the time was the Japanese language. Of course, I also had trouble in daily life and in my relationships with people...

A year after we married, my son was born. As I thought it important, I spoke to him in my mother tongue. My son has been speaking both Japanese and a foreign language since he was an infant. As a result, he has been quick to learn other foreign languages. Outside the home, however, we sometimes were met with disapproving eyes.

Speaking a foreign language — or being a foreigner for that matter — is nothing to be ashamed of. As we were not doing anything wrong, we continued until gradually, it became natural to us. I still recommend to newly arrived foreign mothers that they should pass on their mother tongue to their children, and, of course, that they should have pride in where they come from.

Through my son, I was able to make many Japanese friends.

However, it was difficult for me when visiting a park for the first time or on other such occasions. As soon as I started speaking, it became clear I was a foreigner, and sometimes I was immediately excluded. When that happened, it was very disappointing. But not giving up, I tried my hardest to connect with Japanese people. I knew that in order to live in Japan from now on, it was important that I made Japanese friends. After living here for a long time, I have discovered there are many wonderful Japanese people. Therefore, rather than always waiting for friends, I go looking for them.

Walking to elementary school in the group of children he walks with, my son was told by an older child: "Your mom's a foreigner!" Coming to my support, my son replied: "Yeah, she's a foreigner... But she's a nice person." That was heartwarming to hear. Until my son entered elementary school, I was a full-time housewife and full-time mother. After he started school, I found I had a few spare hours in my day, and deciding to study Japanese, I took advantage of the various Japanese classes being held throughout the region. At my busiest, I went to eight separate places each week. I really learned a lot. While doing this, I also participated in

international exchange activities.

No matter how much I studied, I found Japanese was difficult. I endeavor to read, understand and remember the lyrics of Japanese songs, and I listen to the radio as much as possible.

After studying Japanese for a while, I decided to sit the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. I realized then that although the community Japanese language classes taught basic Japanese for daily conversation, the lessons did not prepare you for an exam. I think that is how it should be. I therefore undertook further study at a university open college. Thanks to the teachers and the students who helped me, I was able to pass the Level 1 Japanese Language Proficiency Test. I was overjoyed, and I am full of gratitude toward many people, even today.

Later, I participated in as many as four Japanese language speech contests for foreigners held at various places. The first time was a good experience. I received a special prize from the judging committee the second time, the committee chairperson's prize on the third occasion, and the first prize on the fourth occasion at a city-wide speech contest. I feel deep gratitude toward my family and many people who helped me achieve this.

Currently, I am performing eight different activities and jobs in Japan, including being an origami instructor.



Is learning Japanese about being able to speak eloquent and correct Japanese?

What I want to say to foreigners living in Japan is don't try to just "fit in." Just because you come to Japan, it doesn't mean you have to fit in to Japanese society to bring out your best. Rather, I think that if there were more foreigners approaching Japanese study in a different direction, society might be an easier place to live. Everyone's got their own strengths. So, surely, bringing out such strengths must be the better way.

As I see it, because you're not Japanese, you're probably studying Japanese today in order to become Japanese. But that's not how it should be. What I'm trying to say is that it is fine to speak Japanese as someone not Japanese. It's only natural that doing so is going to cause some discomfort and odd looks from Japanese society, but hey, you're a foreigner after all. Be who you are, and be proud of it. And if you have to struggle a bit more in Japanese society, well, what's wrong with that? If you are happy with what you say, then I think that is all that matters.

When it comes to one's values, people tend not to stray far from their core beliefs. If one is firm about one's beliefs, then no matter what people say, I think they will find it difficult to change your values because you believe what you are thinking is correct. In my case, when I first came to Japan and threw myself into learning Japanese, there was a strong feeling inside that made me want to become Japanese and speak the language like a Japanese person. So, when I was speaking Japanese, I would try to work on my intonation and the like in order to speak as if I were a native speaker. I think I put too much thought into trying to do that. In contrast, when I instead totally accept that I'm not Japanese, speaking the language becomes much more enjoyable. I think this is because for a long time, I had been putting too much pressure on myself by trying to say everything perfectly.

In conversations, I ask whether there is anything wrong with saying it my way...after all, they got the gist of what I was saying. Sometimes I even think my way of saying it was even better. Then, there are always times when the Japanese listeners accept what you say...what could be better an opportunity for further, mutual exchange of language than that?

When I keep this in mind during conversations, I remember I'm a foreigner and I chose to learn Japanese to use it in my life. Then, it no longer seems as important to learn Japanese

that perfectly. I think that if both the Japanese teachers and learners both realized that, then language learning would be a lot more fun.



More than the language, the Japanese procedures, systems and institutions themselves are not understood

My Experience with Helping the War-Displaced Japanese who were Left in China

Since 2008, it has been my job to support and counsel war-displaced Japanese who were left in China in the aftermath of World War II. This work targets only the first generation of the war-displaced Japanese left in China. My role is to help make their daily lives and interactions with society a comfortable experience. Currently I support four households in City A two days a week, ten households in City B two days a week and 22 households in City C once a week. I would like to explain the current nature of this support.

With regard to the first generation of war-displaced Japanese left in China, even the returnees who can speak a little Japanese are illiterate as they did not go to school in China. The reason they didn't go to school was because after the defeat, many of them had to be left behind in rural villages in China and they didn't go to school for economic reasons. On one occasion, a client had gone to the hospital. The client's name was called, and they were asked to go to this and that window for various different medical tests. Despite actually hearing their name being called, the client had not gone. When I asked: "Why didn't you go?" the client replied: "I cannot read the signs on the windows. I don't know which window to go to." That day, I accompanied two returnees at the hospital, and interpreting for both was an immense task.

When forms had to be submitted, they could not read them. However, half of the first generation cannot speak Japanese either. We had to take all the forms to the city office and fill them in together, asking questions throughout. It is not only language either. My clients do not understand the processes and systems and are simply unable to comprehend the administrative procedures in Japan. They have to submit many forms each year: income statements, statements of residence, water utility bills, NHK broadcast receiving fee bills, etc. Dealing with such things is an immense task for the first generation. As for counseling regarding daily life worries, I use the waiting time at hospitals to ask about such issues. As many of my clients live an isolated existence in their homes, many actually brood over problems by themselves and they have some serious dilemmas.

I would also like to discuss the second generation of war-displaced Japanese who are not

targeted by any measures. I have counseled on labor problems, and there are difficult issues they have had to deal with. In one case, a person lost three fingers on their right hand as it had been caught in a machine. The company took the person to the hospital in a private car instead of calling an ambulance. After treatment, the person's employment was terminated with a 700,000 yen payment. After seeking help from the labor union of a Japanese acquaintance, the matter went to court, and the person finally received a compensation payment of 250 million yen. The second generation cannot read contracts, or more to the point, they do not read them. For many of these people, it is their first time to see the contract when they are suddenly dismissed. Although I think the situation in China today has changed, it is normal to work without any contract. From my personal experience, I studied for three years to be a pharmacist. After graduating, I worked in a hospital for five years as a pharmacist but never during that time can I recall seeing a contract.

On the topic of pensions and old age, the period of pension contribution is much shorter than for the ordinary Japanese. Many work in part-time employment. In particular, those of the second generation in their forties and fifties who came to Japan face the difficulty of having to supplement their own living costs even when receiving the national pension. As for the first generation's future needs for old-age nursing care, the average age of the war orphans is 70. As they do not understand Japanese, there would be hardly any aged care facilities that they could enter. If second generation family members do not obtain carer certification and perform the role of carer, this problem facing the first generation cannot be resolved, and time is running out for a solution.

As for the third and fourth generations, the returnees who have entered the Tokyo public school system are receiving 120 hours of Japanese language instruction. They can enter school classrooms with interpreters to study. However, many returnees do not know about this system. The year before last, there were 12 returnees studying at City A's international association's Japanese language class. In order to counsel three of those who were third generation returnees regarding the high-school academic path, I went with their parents and an interpreter to the junior high school many times to seek advice on the matter. Without understanding Japanese, parents are unable to understand even small matters sent by the school in notices. However, thanks to the system, one boy, who still attends the Japanese language class today, has been admitted into high school A, which was his first choice.

I came to Japan at my own expense, summoned here as a returnee family member. On the seventh day after arriving, I started work at a cleaning company on 650 yen/hour wages. At first I had no time to study Japanese, but afterwards, I went to volunteer-run Japanese language

classes in four different places each week while still continuing my work. Now, in addition to assisting war-displaced Japanese who were left in China I help organize cultural exchange activities for returnees through food and song at community centers and the like.

As mentioned above, there are many hardships, but when a problem is resolved and I see the smiling faces of returnees, it is both a happy and an encouraging moment. I therefore find this work rewarding, despite its difficulties.

In conclusion, what I have mentioned above is but a small part of the whole. I continue to search here and there for opportunities where I can be involved in activities to help returnees become more assimilated in Japanese society by meeting their needs. I think the challenge is to create communities that facilitate the wishes of people. I would be so happy to see people living in the community helping with support activities in the future.