

An Experience of an Ex-Child with a Cross-Cultural Background

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I was 6 years old, in my first grade of elementary school, when I was yelled at by my classmate for the first time in my life, "If you are a Korean, go back to Korea!"

Before entering elementary school, my parents were called to school and advised/ordered to make me use my "Japanese name" instead of using "Kim", which was written on the application forms of the entrance examination and admission. It was an "educational consideration" so that I would not need to go through bullying or painful experiences at school, they said. They meant that I would not be bullied if nobody noticed that I'm Korean, since Japanese and Korean people are "indistinguishable" in appearance.

However, my parents were always telling me that, "It's not embarrassing to be a Korean. There is no need to hide yourself," so I was introducing myself by saying, "I'm Korean." Therefore, everyone at school knew that I was Korean, despite the educational considerations on the school's side. And now I can understand that I was experiencing discrimination to some extent, as the teachers had worried.

When I was a university student, there were very few foreigners in Japan other than Koreans. Therefore, just because I was a third-generation Korean in Japan, I was interviewed by students writing their theses or by the media.

In retrospect, it's unclear and regretful why I did it, but I was saying that, "I myself have no experience of being discriminated against," during my university

years, as if the memories of being discriminated were completely lost, whether old and new.

When I entered junior high school, my shoebox name label was torn into pieces every day for the first four weeks. When I was in high school, one of the teachers said to me face-to-face, "Koreans living in Japan are originally low-level people. But you could luckily get a good education in Japan and become closer to a Japanese person now. You should cut your connections with the Korean community, so that you can keep your good level."

When I became a student and looked for a room, the real estate agent, who had made a provisional contract, called me afterwards and said, "I'm not able to lend a room to you because the owner says no foreigners are acceptable."

In my first part-time job interview, I was asked, "Don't you have a Japanese name?" They said, "This job has an important component of dealing with customers directly, so we can't use a staff member named Kim. You should understand this, shouldn't you?" and I was not hired. When I left a different part-time job and submitted a resignation notice, the employer yelled at me, "You Korean! Do you give evil for good although I gave mercy and hired a poor Korean?"

Although I had been taught at schools that "Japan is a great democratic country and everyone is equal", I had to give my fingerprints at a ward office when I turned 16 and received no election notices even after becoming 20. As I grew up, I became to understand that I had never been included in the "everyone" that I was taught about in school. I was a transparent child. I might have been a transparent child at school.

There was discrimination in Japan at that time, personally and institutionally, and I myself experienced not a small amount of this. But, I was saying, "I myself have no experience of being discriminated against." I had never concealed myself as being a Korean in Japan, but I seemed to rarely express the real experiences or honest feelings of being Korean.

Did I want to resist those who have decided what they will write from the beginning as "Miserable Koreans who are still discriminated in Japan?" Did I want to feel like only I am not that, even if the whole "Korean in Japan" is a poor discriminated people?

Or, internalizing the discrimination, "being discriminated" became too usual and I did not even notice it? Believing that Japanese people would feel uncomfortable and hate Koreans once listening to our discrimination experiences, did I swallow the words just to not be hated by an interviewer in sitting in front of me?

Didn't I have enough strength to accept myself properly as "a person who has long been discriminated against" or "a person who is still being discriminated"? There was no one around me who could tell me that "You can cry" or "You can get angry". Since I was not confident that I could survive without being hated in this country when I express my true feelings, was it the only way for me to pretend that "I myself have no experience of being discriminated against" in order to support myself at the time?

The experience was that what I expressed with huge courage that was not understood or rejected caused me to swallow my words and true feelings more and more.

I feel so guilty that I might have made those interviewers at that time write "lies" in their theses and articles. And at the same time, how sinful I was if the words I answered them with might have been used conveniently as if "no discrimination exists any more in the 3rd generation." I deeply regret my weakness.

Problems that could not be solved in childhood might not be disappear just because time has passed. They seem to have stayed deep in mind without being solved.

A long time has passed since then. And now in Japan, people with diverse backgrounds, culturally and linguistically, are increasing more and more. Second or even third generations of each new community have also been born and are living together in this Japanese society. But unfortunately, it seems like those children are still facing and suffering from the same or similar problems that I experienced a long time ago.

Do children and young people who are suffering from various types of discrimination now have a place to express their true feelings? Do they have any personal connections who they can trust and feel safe to speak to honestly?

And there may be also a lot of ex-children who have not confronted with their own painful experiences or expressed their true feelings, and have even given up finding a way of saying, "I am already a good adult." Is it only me who thinks that adults are also seeking such a place?