

A Global Catalyst

In the gloomy cabin of the airplane, I was tormented by extreme nervousness. “How will I get through this three-week homestay?” My head was filled with the stories I’d read recently about other Asian people’s negative experiences abroad.

No sooner had we arrived than the glare of the sun was shining on our Canadian host families. Suddenly, a man wearing a blue shirt came running over calling my name. “Hi, Tetsu! I finally found you.” It was my host father. On our way home, I felt extremely uncomfortable in the awkward situation. My fatigue after the flight and the tension of meeting someone new hindered conversation with him. Finally, his first question broke the silence. “Hey, where are you from? How is life in your country?” His eager eyes and attitude showed me his tolerance and generosity. I overcame my hesitation and said “Actually, I’m not Japanese, but I was brought up in Japan. My father is Chinese, and my mother is Korean. So, I have had some linguistic and identification problems in Japan, but my life there is fulfilling and...” Before my next words, he immediately interjected, “Wow! So do you speak four languages: English, Japanese, Chinese and Korean?” I nodded. “That’s amazing! You’re so multicultural! I think that someday you’ll be a diplomat.” His admiration

was unexpected and his words cleared away the fog of my worries. I realized that I had been susceptible to social media stories about national biases. I had read that a lot of people overseas blamed all Asians for COVID-19 and I was braced for intolerance in Canada.

Before this trip, I had been struggling with my two national identities: Chinese and Korean. It was the biggest anxiety in my life. Living in Japan makes things even more complex. I've often seen examples in the morning news of the volatile relationship between these three nations – historical problems such as the territorial disputes as well as economic matters. Sometimes in the morning, the first thing I hear isn't my parents' warm greeting but harsh criticism of China and Korea on the TV. Every time I heard such news my heart dropped. At school in Japan, I worried about how my friends view me, and even when I visited China and Korea, I felt people were suspicious of my mixed heritage. To make things worse, due to COVID-19, discrimination against Asian people seemed to be fierce around the world. I thought there was no country where I could bare my complicated background freely. My host father was the first person to change that.

The day after I arrived, my Canadian host father suggested we take a stroll. As we walked, I thanked him for his cheerful words in the car and explained how I had been afraid of going abroad. I told him “The world might be prejudiced, but you’re generous and fair.” He thought I was flattering him and didn’t think what he had said was special, but it was to me. We talked more about the cultural differences and similarities between our countries. At the end he smiled, “You’ve made me realize how gullible I was. From now on I’ll trust life experience over social media stories.” I felt great accomplishment for rectifying his misunderstandings about Asian nations.

My host father taught me that I should be proud of my diverse family history and the unique view of the world that having three home countries gives me. Also, I learned how hard it is to have an understanding free from media influence. At the same time, I realized how fair my Japanese friends have been, how unique my background is, and how blessed I am. I am convinced that any discord between nations can be relieved by communication, acceptance and learning that we all have similar values. From now on my life’s duty is to be a global catalyst and bring people together. [650 words]