
Cultural Fusion and Returnees: A Conceptual Exploration

Midori SHIKANO

Abstract

The attempt of this paper is two-fold: the first attempt was a conceptual exploration with respect to the notions and terminologies used for theorizing the identities of children growing up cross-culturally. Major research was reviewed to understand frameworks used for examining the complexity of the cultural and social identities of returnees in the context of Japan. It offered an overview of various concepts presented by different terminologies, such as Third Culture Kids (TCK) (Pollock & van Reken, 1999; Pollock, van Reken, & Pollock, 2017), Global Nomads (McCaig, 1994), and *Kaigaishijo* and *Kikokushijo* (Overseas Children and Returnees). Then, it attempted to discuss the findings of early narrative inquiries on *kikokushijo*, which mostly focused on re-entry struggles and issues at school, and the more recent narrative inquiries which would presumably project Japan's recent societal change toward inclusive multiculturalism. The final discussion section provided the three key issues to further research.

Introduction

Relocation to a new culture significantly impacts a person's self and cultural identity (Kayama & Yamakawa, 2020). Especially for children and adolescents, relocating to a new cultural and linguistic community at an earlier age is a greater impact, while the relocation is not by their choice but by the parent's life choice or career path decisions such as business transfer. With globalization, human mobility has accelerated. Since the 1970s and 1980s, with

the country's growing economic power, many Japanese businesspeople have been "dispatched" to work in overseas branches or subsidiaries, where they typically accompanied their spouse and children. This has caused an uptick in the number of Japanese children growing cross-culturally between the two (or more) countries. The number of children living abroad (*kaigaishijo*) constantly increased to reach 76,000 in 2014, with most of which being concentrated in Asia and North America. The number of repatriated children, or returnees (*kikokushijo*), increased to exceed 13,000 in 1992 and has constantly been around 10,000 each year until 2019, then down to roughly 7,000 in 2020 and 6,000 in 2021, according to the School Basic Survey (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2022).

Returnees have long drawn scholars' interest and have often been discussed in the context of whether they are misfits to home society or they are the emerging privileged elites with cultural potential. Earlier works revealed the re-entry struggles that returning families and children faced, or a problematic, traumatic reunion with the home culture (Osawa, 1986; White, 1992). For example, while being at school in their own homeland, returnees felt disadvantaged because of the difficulties they faced in readjusting to the school environment. However, other later studies argued that, after successfully assimilating into the home culture, the children would display potential such as foreign language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, and a wide view of global affairs, which would eventually support their future trajectory (Hoshino, 1988; Goodman, 1990). Having acquired English and intercultural competence, returnees have often been "perceived as privileged and as a valuable resource for globalization (Sueda, 2019, p. 51)."

Meanwhile, Japanese society has moved toward inclusive multiculturalism accepting ethnic, social, and cultural diversity in recent years (Hirataka & Kimura, 2017). Then, how does Japan's recent societal change influence the situation of the returnees? This paper, therefore, attempts to find an answer to this question. The attempt of this explorative paper is two-fold: firstly, it attempts a conceptual exploration with respect to the notions and terminologies used in the research about children growing up cross-culturally; secondly, it compares the early narrative inquiries on *kikokushijo* which mostly focused on re-entry struggles and issues at school, and the recent narrative inquiries

conducted during/after the societal move toward Japan's multiculturalism.

Growing up Between Two Cultures and Languages

TCK

Children growing up cross-culturally are not new, and they are not few (Pollock, van Reken, & Pollock, 2017). They have been researched in various contexts to date and are labeled with different terminologies (de Waal, 2021, p. 117).

In the 1960s, in their study of American expatriate communities in India, Ruth Hill Useem and John Useem originated the term "Third Culture Kids (TCK)" (Useem & Useem, 1967), defined as children who accompany their parents to move into another culture (Cottrell, n.d.; de Waal, 2021). Ruth Hill Useem's experience going to India with her family and being relocated back to the US with their own TCK children led to her coining the term. Later, Pollock & van Reken (1999) redefined the term TCK as "those who have spent a significant part of their developmental years outside the parents' culture(s) (p. 15)." The notion of TCK was then characterized in that "the sense of belonging is in relationship to other children of similar cultural backgrounds while the elements from both cultures are assimilated into their life experience (Pollock, van Reken, & Pollock, 2017, p. 29)." Other labels reflecting where their parent(s) worked were also given to those children: Army Brats, Missionary Kids, Biz Kids, Diplo Brats (diplomats), and Oil Kids (petroleum companies) (Useem and Downie 1976, in Lijadi, 2019).

Global Nomads

A "Global Nomad" is another terminology for children growing cross-culturally, coined by McCaig (1994), who was a TCK herself. According to the Longman English dictionary (<https://www.ldoceonline.com>), the word "nomad" generally means "a member of a tribe that travels from place to place instead of living in one place all the time, usually in order to find grass for their animals." Extending its dictionary meaning, the standard definition of a global nomad is "a person of any age or nationality who has lived a significant part of his or her developmental years in one or more countries outside his or her

passport country because of the parent's occupation (McCaig, 1994).” Global nomads are not forever on the move, but they are location-independent.

McCaig (1994) emphasizes positive connotations of the term especially about the children's global vision, as described in her introspective narrative in *Foreign Service Journal*. For global nomads like her and many others who had had a childhood abroad, their upbringing in overseas countries contributed to the development of their global awareness. On that note, the children's social privilege is also explicitly depicted. See the following:

These children often live a privileged lifestyle, with exotic vacations, servants, large homes and private schooling, but the long-term benefits of this upbringing are unique and more far-reaching. In an era when global vision is imperative, where skills in intercultural communication, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy, and the ability to manage diversity are critical, global nomads are probably better equipped than others (McCaig, 1994, reappeared in Douglas, 2013).

Looking at the words *privileged, exotic vacations, servants, large homes, and private schooling*, one may make an inference from this statement that the original concept of global nomads comes from occidental privilege rather than global.

Schaetti (n.d.) summarized seven key issues of global nomads and TCK. First, once someone becomes a global nomad, he or she will always be. The childhood and adolescent experiences of overseas sojourn will continue to influence them throughout their life. Second, global nomads are of all nationalities, although many of the research studies emphasize US expatriates. Third, what determines the significance of their experience is up to the person's personal interpretation. Fourth, developmental years can mean the time between birth and adolescence, when the fundamental sense of 'self' develops. Fifth, the type of sponsoring organization determines how often they move. So, diplomatic and business children may be multi-movers whereas missionary children may stay in one host country for a longer time. Sixth, the term of a passport country is more realistic than the parents' home country.

Often, nomad children are of dual nationality holding two passports. Lastly, parents' occupations are typically international business, diplomacy, military, missionary, and international education. With these key issues, TCK and global nomads were used interchangeably.

As we have discussed in this section, the original concepts of global nomads or TCK were about the children of parents who belonged to the privileged elite layer of the society and therefore the children themselves were able to appreciate good life and education in the host country. The time when these terminologies were coined was a time of lower labor mobility, compared to the later times of Japan's expansion in the global economy after the 1970s and the recent worldwide accelerated human mobility in the era of globalization. It, therefore, requires us to have more context-specific frameworks when discussing the mobility of Japanese business people transferred by their companies or migrant workers seeking better employment opportunities and secure life in more developed countries.

Kikokushijo

In the context of Japan, in the 1970s and 1980s, many corporations began to dispatch their employees abroad. The children growing up cross-culturally by moving to an overseas country are called "*Kaigaishijo* (children living overseas)" and, after repatriation to their homeland, they are called "*Kikokushijo* (returnees)", or "*Kikoku Jidou/Seito* (returned students)" (Sato & Nakanishi, 1991). Returnees are legally defined as "students who had lived abroad due to the parent's overseas transfer, etc. for one year or over and returned within the school year between April 1st and March 31st" in the School Basic Survey by the MEXT. They are characterized as children of Japanese expatriate businesspeople who return to Japan after living overseas for an extended period of time (Kanno, 2003).

Podolsky (2004) compared the concepts of TCK and *kaigai/kikokushijo*, which had not quite theoretically been intertwined before, and then identified that the TCK field tended to use individuals as the unit of research whereas *kaigai/kikokushijo* field took a more societal approach. To date, there have been a number of research studies since *kikokushijo* became a social phenomenon in Japan. There were times when their reintegration struggles

were reported as social issues, particularly at schools.

Cultural Fusion and Identities

Identities

The concept of identity was originated by Erikson in the 1950s. A person's identity can be the 'self' identity or the collective identity (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). 'Self' identity, or *personal identity*, is a subjective concept about how the person sees himself or herself as different from others (Erickson, 2017). Collective identities include *social identity* and *cultural identity*. Cultural identity is an important part of someone's identity and worldview which is constructed through collective knowledge (Chen, 2014), which includes traditions, heritage, ethnicity, nationality, language, religious beliefs, history, and norms of a particular culture, whereas social identity is about a person's membership: how someone identifies themselves in relation to others according to what they have in common with the members of the group or community they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979 in McLeod, 2019; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Social identity is something people create together as a group and the groups give people a sense of belonging. Therefore, it also makes us "divide the world into 'them' and 'us' (McLeod, 2019)." According to Erickson (2017), childhood is an important period of children's socialization process, especially when their *social identity* is formed.

Bicultural Identity or Cultural Hybrids

Individuals who have grown up cross-culturally can be described as having bi- or multi-cultural identities. They have "internalized more than one culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005, p. 1016)" and "the two internalized cultures take turns in guiding their thoughts and feelings (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000, p. 710)." Benet-Martínez & Haritatos (2005) states that the way the bicultural identities or hybrid identities are organized may be complex, but most traditional acculturation studies cannot explain it well because it treats identities as a uniform construct (p. 1019).

As to the bicultural identity or hybrid identity, Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-

Martínez (2000) and Benet-Martínez & Haritatos (2005) have introduced a new approach to culture and cognition. In particular, Benet-Martínez & Haritatos (2005) examined the simulated experiences of bicultural individuals (people who have internalized two cultures) in a series of experiments. They discussed “how the approach illuminates (a) when cultural constructs are potent drivers of behavior and (b) how bicultural individuals may control the cognitive effects of culture (p. 709).”

Cultural identity is a self-definition of how someone perceives them in relation to the social and cultural system in which they live (Minoura,1984). To understand the social construction of identities, Fuller (2012) adopted five principles of “identity in interaction” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003): the *emergence principle*, the *positionality principle*, the *indexicality principle*, the *relationality principle*, and the *partialness principle*. Firstly, the emergence principle sets the idea that “identity emerges from social interactions” (p. 11) and that the membership identity of a speaker is socially constructed. Secondly, the positionality principle is the idea that a speaker identifies himself as to where he is positioned in a macro-level demographic category such as nationality, gender, ethnic group, culturally specific category, language, or friendship category (p. 11). The indexicality principle is the indexing social identities: overt mention of an identity; implicatures and presuppositions on identity positions; display of evaluative and epistemic orientations to the discourse and interlocutors; and the identity emerging by using language varieties ideologically associated with groups (p. 11). The fourth principle, the relationality principle, states that speakers use the language to produce commonalities or differences, or seek authenticity through the mastery of the language, or through explicit reference to the membership. The final partialness principle outlines the constantly shifting nature of identities.

Cultural fusion

In terms of how someone establishes his/her identity, a person is a multifaceted being, and so everyone may have a long list of identities or labels. For example, in an award-winning book titled *I'm Yellow, White, and a Little Blue: The Real British Secondary School Days* (Brady, 2019), there is a thought-provoking anecdote about identities and how cultures are fused. Brady

describes her conversation with the principal of her son's school: She asks what the principal thinks about their school motto "Promoting British Values", pointing out that the recommended identity for the British has shifted from English to British and then from British to European in the past several decades. Therefore, she suggests the school should promote European Values. Then, the principal answers, "Why should we choose just one, British or European? [...] These days, many schools promote European Values and so our school goes with British Values, just to keep the valance (extracted from p. 63, translation mine)." The principal continues, "I'm English, British, and European, having multiple identities. It's not just one. It is long, but I must say I have English, British, and European values. [...] The recent social atmosphere forcing us to choose one value is getting stronger and it makes things worse." She says, "My son may end up having an even longer list of identities: He is Irish, Japanese, British, European, Asian, and so on." Then, the principal answers, "I know, right? But think about it. No one has only one identity (extracted from pp. 64–65, translation mine)." She further argues that social division may be something that occurs when someone forces others to choose one identity and impose it on them, and condescendingly chooses another identity that puts him in a hierarchically upper position. This story is quite an insightful observation of hers.

Here is another insightful view on bi(multi)-cultural identities. Some argue that the notion of acculturation does not fully explain migrant people's experience. So, Croucher & Kramer (2017) proposed an alternative theoretical framework for acculturation, named *Cultural Fusion*. It theorizes how newcomers acculturate into the dominant culture and maintain the aspects of their own minority heritage culture, while the dominant host culture also fuses aspects of the newcomer's culture into the dominant culture to create a fused intercultural identity (Croucher, & Kramer, 2016). Unlike the one-way directionality of acculturation that is often imposed upon newcomers, this applies a two-way directionality as to how cultures are fused.

Returnees

Returnees' Narratives in Research

With some conceptual exploration of the children growing up cross-culturally, this section reviews narrative inquiries on Japanese returnees. It first offers a brief overview of earlier works. Children who grow up or have grown up between two cultures and languages are thought to experience the process of group and individual changes in culture and behavior that result from intercultural contact (Berry, 2019). From the 1980s up to date, an abundance of research studies focused on these young children and adolescents' struggles caused by such changes. Whether the returnees are the misfits to the society or an emerging elite class of cultural potential used to be the focus of earlier discussion in the field. However, Japan's societal change toward inclusive multilingualism accepting more migrating populations from overseas may affect the positionality of the returnees as well. With these purposes in mind, a review of more recent narrative inquiries on Japanese returnees will follow.

Osawa's (1986) non-fiction was a report about her own experience as a parent of three children who moved from New York back to Japan after six years of sojourn. Her book was one of the first books that raised the issue of bullying and discrimination against returnee children from both peers and teachers at Japanese schools. Teachers were not only helpless in stopping the peer harassment but also engaged in bullying by devaluating the son's authentic English proficiency and openness to speak up. As to the re-entry process, White (1988) investigated returnees' identity and re-entry experiences, concluding that the presence of understanding friends was an easing factor, returnees found themselves off track for academic success for being a minority in Japan, and their re-entry trajectory was different among the participant students. Kidder (1992 in Shimomura, 2014) identified "un-Japaneseness" in the returnee college students' behavioral changes, physical changes in hair and clothing, non-verbal communication styles or facial expressions, and interpersonal styles, which may end up with "style mismatch" and generate bullying or discrimination in job hunting. The returnee college students of his study also showed high intercultural sensitivity to adjust to the

inward-looking Japanese society, while they were more expressive in English. Kidder stated that returnees may recognize such problems but were unwilling to give up their identity. Kanno (2003) is also one of the pioneering studies of narrative inquiry that examined the linguistic and cultural identities of Japanese returnees who lived in North America and returned to Japan, with the major findings that the returnees' cross-cultural experiences were the opportunities for personal growth, different communication styles generated bullying and harassment, and their bicultural identity supported their life during and after their expatriation. The factors shaping and transforming their identities over time were the differences in educational institutions between host and home countries, societal recognition or devaluation of bilingualism, and students' maturation. Besides, a deficiency in the Japanese language was considered synonymous with a deficiency in being Japanese (p. 18). Returnees were then regarded as misfits who were unwilling or unable to conform to Japanese norms of behavior and "had been regarded as a 'problem,' a walking contradiction who looked Japanese but did not behave Japanese" (Kanno, 2003, p. 18). Japanese language and behavior were major identifiers of being Japanese or non-Japanese (Leung, 2021).

Returnees' narratives in recent research

In this section, findings from the more recent narrative or qualitative interview studies are reviewed. Among them, there is a study that identified the Japanese returnees and Coda (Hearing children of deaf adults) as two bilingual and bicultural minority groups, yet invisible in Japanese society, claiming that the two groups experienced "marginalization" from their peers (Lovely & Ando, 2018). In their research, six Japanese returnees who had lived in the US in their childhood for some time ranging from eight months to seven years offered narrative data, from which their experiences of marginalization by and separation from their peers were indicated (p. 145). Budianto (2020) is another attempt to uncover the hidden voices of returnees. He conducted life-story interviews with three returnee students (Ken, Hana, and Shin) in English and Japanese, which were then analyzed by using the part/whole analysis of Sueda (2019). The returnees' life stories revealed the degree of inclusiveness or non-inclusiveness of contemporary Japanese society.

Leung (2021) is a case study that examined language, culture, and identity from a sociolinguistic perspective, which presented the challenges that a Japanese returnee student experienced after his re-entry to the Japanese education system. The study concluded that “language acts as a marker of identity [and] so is culture” and that “failure to conform to societal norms by asserting one’s identity through a host country’s language and culture will most likely result in marginalization from the group (p. 33).” It turned out that, although English is a foreign language highly promoted in Japanese classrooms under government policies and incentives, very few public schools in Japan can accommodate the needs of these highly motivated and fluent English-speaking children. Pointing out the reasons for the schools’ failure and unwillingness to nurture returnees’ global potential (lack of resources, incompetent teachers, and budgetary constraints) (p. 35), Leung (2021) further emphasized the need for more opportunities to help returnees not give up their potential at school. With that note, Goodman (1990) had, quite a while ago, claimed returnees were gradually receiving acceptance and prestige as future human resources (global *jinzai*). To add another, Ford’s (2009) study showed similar findings. He explored the experiences of five Japanese returnees through their retrospective life stories, from which four themes emerged: *group orientation*; *bullying and victimization*; *identity issues*; and *modes of classroom interaction* (p. 68).

A study about overseas students (*kaigaishijo*) by Kayama & Yamakawa (2020) provides useful insights into the factors affecting children’s cultural adaptation, which also applies to returnees. It is a study on temporarily resident Japanese children in the US, who have not yet returned to Japan but would possibly become returnees in the future. They examined the impact of relocation and acculturation on Japanese children temporarily residing in the US, based on their parents’ interviews, and reported that language barriers and the differences in school systems had affected the children’s self and identity. For example, the children felt a sense of inferiority and took some protection strategies, while participating in non-language activities such as sports helped build friendships. Returnees’ strategies for self-protection and positioning in a peer group are also suggested in other research in cultural studies (Shibuya, 2001 to name one). Shibuya thoroughly described the

differences returnees found with Japanese peers and what significance they gave to the differences.

Discussion

So far, we have first attempted a conceptual exploration with reference to the notions and terminologies about children growing up cross-culturally. Coined labels such as TCK, global nomads, overseas children (*kaigaishijo*) and returnees (*kikokushijo*), bicultural identities, or cultural hybrids, army brats, biz kids, missionary kids, diplo brats, and oil kids have been suggested by scholars to explain the social phenomena around these children. Previous sections also reviewed earlier and recent inquiries on Japanese returnees. This section discusses the three key issues: (1) similarities and differences between various terminologies for children growing-up cross-culturally; (2) the social meaning and directionality for their overseas sojourn (i.e., executive tasks and missions or migrating labor seeking a secure life; a small group of the privileged to a large-scale global human mobility due to globalization); (3) unchanged struggles about re-entry challenges as revealed in inquiries.

The children growing up cross-culturally had often been discussed in comparison to the notions of TCK and Global Nomads, besides cultural hybrids and bicultural identities. However, the notions of *kikokushijo* returnees (also a legal term), TCK, and global nomads are similar in some ways and different in other ways. Their argument on the cultural hybrid process can be comparable, but the children's context should carefully be distinguished. At the time when the terms TCK and global nomads were coined, by Useem and Useem (1967) and McCaig (1994) respectively, the number of children who were relocated overseas to accompany their parents was just about to increase, and not many yet. It has been reported that they were also the children of diplomats, missionaries, or executive businesspeople, for example. It would be fair to say those children were from more established families that possessed highly valued social and cultural capital. Cultural capital such as skills, abilities, qualifications, and education can be inherited by such children, and their childhood abroad gives an impact on their identity development. It can be said that the earlier concepts of the terminology explained the bi-cultural

phenomena well in the scope of elite bilingualism or biculturalism. When extending this concept to the workers' families seeking employment or a better life in a securer environment, the directionality of mobility between developed/developing economies may not be the same. Therefore, one may need careful distinction. The idea of global nomads by McCaig (1994) included quite positive connotations about the children, shedding light on the people's location-independence through their adjustment to new cultures. Some descriptions of nomad experiences, however, were rather occidental than global. The directionality of their relocation between the two different social domains should be carefully examined.

Next, by reviewing studies on Japanese returnees at earlier times, it was suggested that the returnee children suffered from bullying, re-integration struggles, and maladaptation at schools. Whether they were expatriates in their homeland or emerging elites with high global competence had also been discussed. The present writer was hoping that Japan's societal shift toward Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DIE) might have positively affected the situations of returnees. However, it did not seem to always be the case. While some studies have identified the educational system gaps and cultural orientation of the society as affecting factors, there are some unchanged aspects in the returnees' environment. To be concrete, malfunctions of education, incompetent teachers, lack of resources at school, as well as the children's direct experiences of different education systems were pointed out (Kayama & Yamanaka, 2020; Leung, 2021). Yet, how and why is it difficult for returnees, as it literally means, to return to the place where they used to belong? This remains to be an important research theme.

Having said that, it is also reported that returnees display global competence potential, language proficiency as well as intercultural sensitivity, and can be highly expected global human resources as Goodman (1990) pointed out. Other research on global nomads has also reported that positive future trajectory, where they show potential global citizenship and global-oriented aspiration. This can be said to be the biggest difference in the findings between global nomads research and returnees research.

Final Remarks

“We will return to Japan someday.” This can be a very strong game-maker phrase for families relocated abroad. They will be repatriated someday and it is not the family who makes the decision in most cases. This fact may make the parents and children live a dual life of two directionalities: to help the children adjust to the new language, new environment, and new school system with different curriculums; and, to well prepare the children to go back home so that they will not be disadvantaged in the academic ladder back home. Parental support in the host country was suggested to be quite important for the children’s and family’s meaningful life in a new culture, but “to which direction” is also a difficult question for them.

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Midori SHIKANO

DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1967.tb00567.x

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