

# Identity Formation of the Children with Japanese Fathers and Filipino Mothers

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## Introduction

From the latter half of the 1980s to the mid-2000s Japan experienced an “intermarriage boom,” which was soon followed by a fairly significant number of children born to these unions. Children born of Japanese fathers and Filipino mothers were especially common, with 5,488 children born in 1995, when the figures were first made available through the Vital Statistics of Japan. This accounted for 41.0% of the children born of Japanese fathers and foreign mothers that year, and 27.1% of children born to intermarried couples overall. This marked the beginning of a prolonged “Filipino-Japanese baby boom” lasting until 2007, during which time close to 5,000 children were born every year. These children are now coming of age in Japan.

Among these children of intermarried couples raised in cross-cultural households, some embraced both cultural traditions, while others chose a monocultural path despite exposure to two cultural traditions as they grew up. What factors are involved in shaping the identity of these children? We might expect children of intermarried couples to form multiple identities since parents of biracial children have been urged to acknowledge the differences and to facilitate the formation of a sense of pride in their children's "doubly rich" heritage (Kerwin, et al., 1993), but how does identify formation actually occur in Filipino-Japanese children residing in Japan?

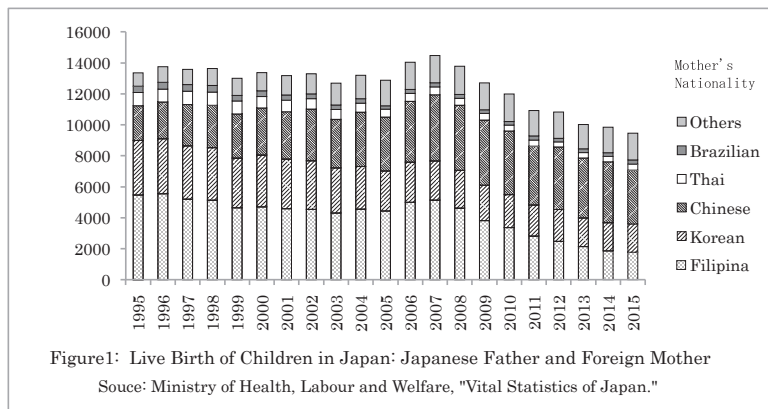
This study addresses this question through participant observation and an interview survey of Filipino-Japanese children and their parents focusing on three factors affecting identity formation: school environment, home environment, and physical appearance of the child. The study also considers how these factors are related to the race, class, and gender of the minority parents.

Although we have been hearing that Japan is building a multicultural society for some time now, does Japan really provides an environment in which Filipino-Japanese children can form multiple identities? The purpose of this study is to squarely address that question.

### Children of Intermarried Couples Viewed from a Statistical Perspective

The number of intermarriages between Japanese men and Filipino women steadily increased from 1992, when the figures were first made available through the Vital Statistics of Japan. However, 2006 marked the peak in the number of intermarriages; thereafter, the numbers have declined.<sup>1</sup> A key factor contributing to this decline is that in 2006, the Ministry of Justice tightened its requirements for issuing “entertainment visas.” Because the majority of Filipino women entering the country with “entertainment visas” as singers or dancers actually ended up working as hostesses at the many Philippine pubs scattered around the country. Essentially, Philippine pubs are drinking establishments where Filipino hostesses chat and flirt with the mostly male Japanese clientele while encouraging them to drink and have a good time. Since hostess is not recognized as a legitimate residency status in Japan, the vast majority of these women enter Japan on an entertainment visa, and work illegally.

In 2004, a record number of 137,820 foreigners entered Japan on entertainment visas. Of these, 60 percent (82,741) were Filipino. In 2007, however, the number of Filipinos had plummeted to 5,595, and the total number of persons entering the country on entertainment visas decreased to 42,098 (Ministry of Justice, 2004, 2007). Because most of these were women, the sharp drop in the number of Filipino women coming to Japan also resulted in a decrease in the number of intermarriages between Filipino women and Japanese men. Similarly, the number of children born to intermarried couples between Japanese men and Filipino women peaked in 2007 and fell off sharply thereafter, as shown in Figure 1. Between 1995<sup>2</sup> and 2007, approximately 5,000 children were born every year of intermarried couples between a Japanese father and a Filipino mother. This time marked the era of the “Filipino-Japanese baby boom.”



### **Methodology**

There have been many previous multivariate analysis-based studies using census data in the U.S. regarding the identity of children born to intermarried couples (*e.g.*, Saenz et al., 1995; Xie and Goyette, 1997; Qian, 2004; Brunnsma, 2005). For the first time in the 2000 Census, Americans were able to mark two or more racial categories to classify their race. This change, in part, was a response to the growing number of children born to intermarried couples. The advantage of analyzing census data is the ability to gauge the relative scope and scale of the phenomena and the key issues. On the other hand, the disadvantage is the inability to drill down and analyze the statements of each subject, which is likely to make us overlook interesting patterns of racial identification (Brunnsma, 2005: 1134). Since the Japanese census contains no questions related to identity, I conducted a qualitative analysis in this study.

I engaged in participant observation and conducted interview survey on Sundays from June 2016 to April 2017 at Filipino food potluck luncheons held after Mass by the Filipino wives in a meeting room adjacent to a Catholic Church in Nagoya. I interviewed a total of 33 people including 19 Filipino-Japanese children and their Filipino mothers and Japanese fathers. The mothers had married Japanese men whom they had met while working as hostesses at Philippine pubs around Nagoya. The Filipino-Japanese children were from 7 to 27 years old, while the parents ranged in age from their 30s to 50s. Some families skipped Mass and just came for the luncheon, so at least some of the subjects were not strict Catholics. The luncheon get-togethers provided an opportunity to relieve the stress of everyday life while socializing and exchanging information in Filipino (Tagalog).

### **Identity Formation**

Saens et al. (1995) suggested that there are three factors shaping the identity of children of intermarried couples: structural-level, parent-level, and child-level factors. Structural-level factors refer to the size of the minority group and the ethnic diversity in the area that will likely define the parameters within which the ethnic identities of children born to intermarried couples are formed. Parent-level factors focus on the crucial role that parents play in passing on culture and in shaping the ethnic identification of children. Child-level factors are the degree to which the child is exposed to the culture of the minority parent. In this study, by applying these theories, I adopt an analytical framework: “school environment” as a venue of secondary socialization, “home environment” as a venue of primary socialization, and the “physical appearance of the child.”

### *School Environment*

The school environment can impact the resulting ethnic identity formation either directly or through processes such as nonfamilial ethnic socialization from peers and teachers, and discrimination experiences (Gonzales-Backen, 2013: 101-102). There is a hierarchy of values inherent in the social image of “advanced nations vs. developing nations,” “international elite vs. foreign laborer,” and “Western culture vs. non-Western culture” (Sekiguchi, 2003: 93). This hierarchy appears in the form of discriminatory treatment of children with Filipino mothers and Japanese fathers. Often referred to as *haafu*<sup>3</sup> (from the English, half) and *gaijin* (foreigner), children of intermarried couples in Japan are sometimes subjected to discrimination based on atypical names and physical appearance. Education for assimilation, a characteristic of the Japanese school culture, hinders the multicultural education of children of ethnic minorities. Japanese schools have an atmosphere where it is better to be like everyone else.

These attitudes are clearly reflected in the comments of Linda<sup>4</sup>, a Filipino mother in her fifties:

My daughter (21 years old) Yukari tried to avoid being seen with me all through her school years from sixth grade until her third year in high school. The boys constantly teased her at elementary school calling her *haafu* and *gaijin*, so she became embarrassed of her Filipino mother. When I would go to the school for classroom visitations, Yukari wouldn't look at me and she would pretend that she didn't know me. I cannot begin to tell you how lonely this made me feel. I didn't say anything to Yukari, but I shared my feelings with my husband. Finally, when she was in her last year of high school, my husband berated Yukari; told her just how disrespectful and hurtful her behavior was toward me (her mother). Yukari broke down in tears, and things began to change after that.

No one would assume Yukari is a Filipino-Japanese at first glance. Despite being raised as Japanese at home, she was called *haafu* and *gaijin* and was a target of teasing at school. Looking back over those years at school, Yukari said “I felt conflicted, not knowing if I was Japanese or what nationality I was.” She experienced identity crisis, and of course this coincided with the usual rebellious teen years. Now that she is 21, Yukari has gotten beyond her youthful tribulations. Today she says with a smile, “I'm Japanese. I was raised as Japanese, and I only think of myself as a Japanese person. I don't think of my mom as being a particular nationality. She's just my Mom.”

In Japanese society and Japanese schools, where there is a strong awareness of Japan as a

monocultural society, the different culture brought in by the Filipino mothers tends to be seen as unnecessary and is given little recognition (Saruhashi, 2009). Referring to the biethnic socialization spectrum, the level of acceptance/rejection experienced by the participants is a likely contributor to their phase of ethnic identity development (Marbury, 2011: 38).

### *Home Environment*

Family is an important source of ethnic and racial identification because cultural values and traditions are first learned and carried out at home (Xie and Goyette, 1997: 553), and parents often play an important role in the formation of their children's racial identities. Intermarried couples can instill a certain racial identity in their children by choosing the culture in which to raise their children. Here I will take a closer look at how the home environment shapes the identities of Filipino-Japanese children from three perspectives: passing on mother's language, passing on mother's religion, and the parents' educational philosophy.

#### *Passing on Mother's Language*

Language use can play a significant role in the racial identification of biracial children. Language use by biracial children, however, may not necessarily be a cause of racial identification, but more of a consequence (Xie and Goyette, 1997: 552-553). The official languages of the Philippines are Filipino (Tagalog) and English, but most of the mothers in this study speak one or another of the many local dialects and languages that are spoken throughout the Philippines. However, none of the mothers had any desire to pass on their local language to their offspring, and rather than Tagalog, most were keen that their children learn to speak English. The parents believe in the effect of language prestige<sup>5</sup>, and thus believe that the acquisition of English will help their children attain a higher social status in the future.

The typical pattern in the households surveyed was for the mothers to homeschool their children in English when they were young, but these plans rarely went smoothly and the language lessons were quickly abandoned. Monica in her fifties is a case in point. She tried to teach her daughter Sayuri (19 years old) English by always speaking to her in English when Sayuri was in kindergarten. Sayuri hated these lessons, and eventually Monica gave up. To this day, Sayuri's English is subpar.

One of the other mothers, Diana in her 40s wanted to send her first daughter, Yuna (13 years old), to the international school kindergarten. But her Japanese mother-in-law who lived with the family adamantly opposed the plan to send Yuna to the international school kindergarten and to speak English at home because the mother-in-law did not understand English. However, circumstances had changed six years later when the second child came along, son Yoji (7 years

old). “By this time,” Diana explains, “my Japanese had improved and I had become more assertive. I was able to stand up to my mother-in-law. I made sure that Yoji went to the international school kindergarten, and he and I freely conversed in English around the house.” Husband Hiroshi in his 40s added that “it was my wife's dream that the children would learn to speak English, and she was determined that Yoji would attend the international school kindergarten. As I knew this, I didn't object or interfere.” However, when it came time for Yoji to enter elementary school, Diana and Hiroshi enrolled their son in a regular public elementary school. They took this decision because Yoji did not seem to have any friends in the neighborhood, which left him isolated and cut off.

As soon as Yoji entered elementary school, he abruptly stopped speaking English at home. According to his older sister Yuna, Yoji could differentiate English from Japanese, and speak whichever was appropriate in different settings. For example, during the summer vacation he stayed with his relatives in the Philippines and spoke English with his cousins, but upon returning to Japan, he reverted to Japanese among his friends and never uttered a word of English. This can probably be attributed to peer pressure. Yoji thus proved very adept at code switching, and could alternate between Japanese and English depending on where he was and to whom he was talking.

Sending children to international schools entails high cost. It was only households such as Diana's that had the wherewithal and an understanding husband that could afford to send their children to the international school. Other families in the survey were clearly well aware of Diana's special circumstances: “Diana's husband has a good income, and that is why they were able to send their children to the international school.” In most instances, the mother took on the role of instructor to teach the son or daughter English, but it was almost impossible to impose a teacher-student relationship between mother and child.

At the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum was Laura in her 50s. Laura and her Japanese husband divorced in 1993 when their children were three- and one-year olds. Afterwards, Laura and her children lived in a shelter for ten years. “I worked from sunrise until the wee hours of the night. I didn't have time to even think about teaching my children Tagalog or English.”

Passing on the mother's language thus varied from family to family, and the financial circumstances and understanding of family members clearly affected the children's opportunity to pursue language learning.

### *Passing on Mother's Religion*

All of the Filipino mothers surveyed for this study were Catholics, and many of the fathers converted to Catholicism when they married their wives. For the most part, this was a pro forma

conversion, and the men attended Mass only very rarely. The Japanese husbands came with their families to Church at Christmas and Easter, but in this case they accompanied their Filipino wives and children as a family event and not out of religious conviction. The children were all baptized as infants, but some continued to identify with Catholicism while others did not. Joy in her 50s, and her two daughters remained committed Catholics:

Passing on one's religion involves transmission of the Christian spirit, and nothing is more important. Attending church with my two daughters—Takako age 27 and Tomoko age 23—and my grandchildren is my greatest pleasure, and I feel a sense of joy to attend Mass with my two daughters by my side. Far more than language or anything else, it is my religious convictions and Christian spirit that I would bequeath to my daughters.

Both Takako and Tomoko attended church with their mother every Sunday since early childhood, and after Mass took part in the Bible study class for children. Tomoko recalls that when she and her sister were little, “Mom used to insist that we accompany her to church, but now I really enjoy going because it gives me a chance to meet up with childhood friends.” Through church activities, the older folks serve as role models for younger people. Tomoko went on to say, “I can't come to church every week because of my job, but when I was in high school I used to love coming to church to look after the younger kids.” On the other hand, many of the Filipino-Japanese children who were regularly brought to church by their mothers stopped coming about the time they got to junior high school, or only come to church at Christmas and Easter for family events.

### *Parents' Educational Philosophy*

Parents play a significant role in shaping the identity of their children. Racial identities instilled by parents provide a solid foundation that shapes the future identities of multiracial individuals (Qian, 2004: 747). Determined to raise his daughter Yukari as Japanese from the moment she was born, Yasushi in his 50s commented:

I have noticed that many children of Filipino mothers have piercings from a very young age, but I wouldn't think of letting Yukari get a piercing. I also settled on a name—Yukari—that was absolutely and unmistakably Japanese. If you give your child a name that reveals he or she is *haafu*, the risk of he or she being targeted for teasing and bullying at school is higher. We raised Yukari as Japanese, and I firmly believe this will be conducive to her happiness in life.

One might get the impression from these comments that Yukari's father is authoritarian and pushy, but such is not the case. As a participant observer, I could see that Yukari's father was very respectful of his wife's character. At the same time, he was determined that his daughter would pass in society as mainstream Japanese because he felt that this was the best life strategy for getting along in Japanese society. All the children covered by this survey had typical Japanese first names. This was a deliberate choice by the parents who were concerned that their children might be targeted for bullying at school. Given the notions of the racial hierarchy in the country, coupled with the recognition of how unequally resources and opportunities are distributed in the country, the parents appear to begin early in moving their children away from minority identification to more "neutral" and "unmarked" categories of existence. Parents' racial designation of their mixed-race children could illuminate a good deal about their styles of parenting, their understanding of the racial structure in the country and how it is linked to power and privilege. The racial identification process may be parental "risk assessment," as parents hope to minimize risks that their mixed sons and daughters will face barriers to opportunity and social stigma in the future (Brunnsma, 2005: 1150-1151).

On the other hand, Yukari's mother, Linda, confided:

When I think of passing on Philippine culture to Yukari, I don't want her to forget she is a Catholic. However, I don't expect Yukari to take Philippine citizenship. Why would she take citizenship of a country that is impoverished and in constant turmoil? It's good that she has Japanese citizenship, and I'm sure she will be much happier here in Japan. The fact that Yukari is growing up Japanese makes me feel a bit lonely, but I think Yukari will be happier living as Japanese.

Linda has a strong desire to return to the Philippines in her elder years, and she has retained her Philippine citizenship. However, she wants her daughter to live in Japan as Japanese. Behind Yukari's declaration, "I am Japanese" cited earlier in the "School Environment" section, is the fact that this clearly reflects the intent of both her parents that Yukari was raised as Japanese.

### *Physical Appearance of the Child*

Physical appearance is theorized to be a predictor of ethnic identity via nonfamilial ethnic socialization and discrimination (Gonzales-Backen, 2013: 103). Ethnic and racial identities shift over time and across a variety of situations. It is said that ethnicity can be seen as "situational"; that is, the contexts in which an individual acts affect how the individual defines herself or himself and how the individual is defined by others (Xie and Goyette, 1997: 549; O'Hearn,



1998).

In Japan, the myth of racial homogeneity is deeply rooted. Since there is a strong awareness of Japan as a highly homogeneity country, people with a different nationality are generally seen as being of a different ethnicity and culture as well (Takeshita, 2016: 175). There is an unspoken expectation in Japanese society that a person who says “I am Japanese” should have the unique physical characteristics of the Japanese (Wagatsuma and Yoneyama, 1967). A child of an intermarried couple with Japanese nationality who is born and raised in Japan is considered by the society to be a non-Japanese if he or she does not look Japanese. Japan, as a cultural context, tends to be a fairly closed one that is wary of anyone who is different, and being biethnic is an anomaly (Oikawa and Yoshida, 2007: 637, 650). Although things have been changing, there is still awareness of Japan as a homogeneous country, where people with different physical appearance are generally seen as being of a different nationality.

I will examine two of the subjects whose identities have been shaped in diametrically opposed ways in response to society’s perception of their ethnicity based solely on physical appearance. First there is 15-year-old Erika, who is quite obviously the daughter of an intermarried couple. When asked about her ethnicity, Erika confidently replies, “I am *haafu*, half Filipino and half Japanese.” Still a third-year middle school student, Erika is mature beyond her years, strikingly beautiful, and proud of her Filipino-Japanese heritage. When interviewed, she noted:

At elementary school I hated it when the boys teased me by calling me *haafu*, *haafu*. But then when I got into junior high, things suddenly turned around and people started envying me for being *haafu*. Now I am perfectly happy to be *haafu*.

Erika does not speak a word of Tagalog or English. Nor has she adopted any aspects of Philippine culture into her daily life, although she does visit the Philippines every other year or so with her family. However, her physical appearance continues to have an effect on shaping a dual identity as Japanese and Filipino. Based solely on her physical appearance, Erika is regarded positively and even with a tinge of envy by the people around her.

The next case is 13-year-old Yuna who is Filipino-Japanese and looks like a typical Japanese girl. She commented:

I take after my father. Since I have a distinctly Japanese face, I can only think of myself as a Japanese person. My younger brother takes after our mother and has a Filipino face, so no one can really tell that we are brother and sister.

Society tends to label the children of Filipino-Japanese intermarried couples in either positive or negative terms based on their physical appearance, and this labeling influences the identities and experiences these individuals have in Japanese society.

### Conclusion

Many Filipino-Japanese children and their parents attempt to pass as majority members of society if they have a Japanese name and look Japanese. Indeed, some individuals flatly claim “I am Japanese” though they appear to be Filipino-Japanese. Rather than seeking to enjoy the benefits of a bicultural environment, these children attempt to pass in society because they have been strongly influenced to do so through primary socialization at home and secondary socialization at school.

In Japan, children grow up in a school culture where it is better to be like everyone else. In this context, if your name sounds a little odd or you look different from the other students, you are vulnerable to teasing and bullying. Children quickly learn at school that it’s in their best interest to pass as mainstream Japanese. Then on the home front, children learn the same message from their parents who commonly encourage their sons and daughters to pass themselves off as Japanese to avoid prejudice and discrimination. As a result, most of the children covered in this study are monocultural and identify themselves as Japanese rather than enjoy their “doubly rich” heritage.

One significant background consideration is that Filipino mothers have faced the burden of a double minority, namely Southeast Asian origin and female gender. Furthermore, they are from a relatively lower-class status and lack human capital. These factors make it difficult for them to pass on Filipino identity to their children. It has been suggested that mothers represent the most important vehicles in the transmission of culture since they generally spend a larger portion of their time with the children compared to their husbands (Saens et al., 1995: 178). In Japan, however, the patrilineal line is still strong, and the father is often dominant in establishing a cultural environment at home. Moreover, the race, class, and gender of the minority parent cannot be overlooked as factors that influence the identity formation of their children. It is apparent that Filipino-Japanese children try to pass in order to minimize their exposure to prejudice and discrimination.

But there is a case of Takako (27 years old). She is the oldest child of Filipino and Japanese parents covered by the survey. She was also the only respondent who was married (her husband is Filipino), and the only subject who spoke Tagalog. She says, “I am *triple*: Dad is Japanese and Mom is Filipino, so that means I am Japanese, Filipino, and *haafu*. I get to enjoy three times the life experiences of others, and I have three distinct circles of friends.” Actually, there are not so

many individuals like Takako in Japan who keep multiple identities. While still a work in progress, Japan is making some headway in building a multicultural society in which Filipino-Japanese children can take pride in their dual heritage and multiple identities. Creating a society that respect mutual differences is a challenge that faces all of Japan today.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The total number of intermarriages in Japan has been declining. For a detailed discussion of the factors, see Takeshita (2016).
- <sup>2</sup> The number of children born of intermarried couples was first made available through the Vital Statistics of Japan.
- <sup>3</sup> Children of intermarried couples in Japan are referred by a variety of terms—*kokusai-ji* (international child), *daburu* (double), *haafu* (half), etc.—but since the 1970s, *haafu* has emerged as the most common designation. Since the word *haafu* derives from English half, scholars have been reluctant to use this term.
- <sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use pseudonyms for all subjects.
- <sup>5</sup> Language prestige is a relative rating which is invested with the political, economic, and social power of the groups who speak that language.

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