

I made a new friend at a cram school last year. When she learned that I came from another country, she was really happy. She said, "Wow, that's amazing! You're my first international friend! I'm so glad!"

However, little did I know that our friendship would face a tough challenge. In the days that followed I noticed she started avoiding me, and I couldn't understand why. One day, with a serious look on her face, she told me her mother was upset because she had become friends with a girl from China.

She tried to talk to her mother about it, saying, "She's my first international friend, and she's really nice. Why is it not okay just because she's from China?" But her mother said, "We don't know much about China, and it's different from Japan in many ways. So maybe it's better not to get too close. We can't predict what might happen."

My friend couldn't accept her mother's decision and she told me "Countries, people, and politics are separate things. I think my mom has wrong ideas because she hasn't met you yet. I'll keep trying to change her mind." We looked at each other with tears in our eyes. Her honesty surprised me, and I was grateful that I had such a good friend.

I came to Japan when I was six years old, and with the help of my teachers and friends, I learned Japanese and started to enjoy my new school and life here. But this time, I felt I had to face some unfair judgments.

Looking back, I realized I had learned a way to protect myself without even realizing it. That is, to be the same. I tried hard to speak Japanese without a foreign accent and to act just like everyone else. Honestly, I've wished countless times people couldn't tell I'm from a different country. But no matter how much I try, there are things I cannot change. I have to admit I'm different. I just want to be myself, not someone else. I hope to make more friends who appreciate these differences.

More and more people from other countries are living here. Including me, there are almost 3 million foreigners in Japan now. You not only might find foreigners in Asakusa or Kamakura, but also at work, at school, or even in your neighborhood.

Yes, it can be hard to live with people from different cultures. But diversity brings opportunities, strengths, and synergies. Globalization is taking place everywhere on this planet where we live. More and more people are moving across borders.

Children crossing borders are facing various difficulties with languages, studies and everyday life. I can't fully express these complex feelings with my words, but I will continue to share our stories as best I can. And I truly believe that our special experiences can help us live together in peace and harmony.

Finally, I want to end my speech with my favorite poem by Misuzu Kaneko: "The bell and the bird and I – We're all different, and that's just fine."

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Children Crossing Borders