

CHAPTER 6

Synopsis of Panel Discussion, Voices of *Kakehashi*

Hiroko Noro and Tadanobu Suzuki



Sanjo bashi, Kyoto

CHAPTER 6

The main objective of the panel discussion was to “listen” to the voices of the panelists who had lived across languages and cultures. The background of the panelists varied quite widely, from a fourth generation Japanese Canadian to an American whose parents were former Christian missionaries to Japan. Despite the differences in their background, they seemed to have shared perceptions and experiences as “intercultural” beings, in other words, *Kakehashi*. This chapter aims to represent the shared perceptions and experiences being *Kakehashi* among the panelists.

The panelists and the chair for the panel were as follows:

Chika Buston

Born in Kyoto, Japan and raised in Burnaby, exposed to three languages (mainly English, Japanese, and French), actively involved in diverse community organizations, ranging from Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens Association, Tonari gumi, Powell Street Festival, to various music festivals. She attended a local Japanese language school in her childhood.

Rei Miyasaka

Born in Niiza, Saitama; raised in Greater Vancouver from age four, bilingual (Japanese and English), editor and translator for the Japanese community journal, The Fraser, translator for the US anime/drama site Crunchyroll, conductor of the SFU Orchestra

Susan Murakami

Born in Vancouver, BC and raised in Richmond, her parents belonged and helped to build the Steveston Buddhist Temple which exposed to her Japanese heritage; she taught English in Japan for two years.

Matthew Pomeroy

Born in Shinyurigaoka, Kawasaki, Kanagawa prefecture Japan, raised in Victoria from age three, exposed to Japanese Language and culture from his mother as well as a local heritage Japanese

language school, welsh culture from his grandmother, Anglo-Canadian culture from his father and Franco-Canadian culture and language from his schooling.

Margaret Ritchie

Born in Tokyo, Japan to Christian missionaries who continued to live and work in Japan for 35 years, since 1978 has been living and working in Vancouver with her family, taught English in Japan and Japanese at all levels in the public school system.

Chair: Naoko Takei

Instructor, Simon Fraser University

The panelists were asked to answer the following questions prior to the symposium.

Questions about your background

1. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
2. What language(s) and culture(s) were (are) you exposed to?
3. Please tell us about your schooling experiences.
4. Please tell us about your affiliation, ranging from occupation to community organizations.

Questions about your thoughts /perceptions on your intercultural experiences

5. Please tell us about the challenges regarding your intercultural experiences.
6. Please tell us about the rewards regarding your intercultural experiences.
7. Please tell us about the most memorable intercultural experience.
8. What kind of advice would you like to give to the people (Canada or Worldwide) who are bridging between cultures and languages?
9. If you chose a metaphor for encapsulating your intercultural/transcultural experiences, what would it be?

Summary of the panel discussion

Each panelist was asked to tell the audience about his/her personal challenges and rewards. The synopsis attempts to highlight some of the recurrent and shared themes discussed at the panel.

The themes that resonate among the panelists are: 1) issues related to identity ranging from other people's perception to self-identification process; and 2) in-between-ness. In order to protect the panelists' privacy, the following summary does not identify each panelist.

Issues related to identity

One of the panelists stated that strangers sometimes ask her the following question: "Where are you from?" In spite of the fact that she was born and raised in Canada, some people still ask such a question. Another panelist who has a mixed background recounts her experience. The bulk of her challenges are due to being half Japanese and half Euro-Canadian. She struggled with identity issues for the better part of her life. Issues arose out of the notion that what constitutes culture associated with her father versus culture associated with her mother. Her sister looks more European, while the panelist looks more Asian. The difference between her sister and herself in terms of appearance could cause some people's treatment or perception of the sisters. She related her experience to a notion of stigmatization. Her illustration of stigmatization is very interesting. She compared it to being like Mrs. Potato Head. People express their ideas about her appearance with the following statements. "You look like this way." "You look like that way." "Who are you?" Such statements and questions were least welcome, but she came to learn to be patient and cognizant of such behaviors by others about her appearance.

Questions like "where are you from?" prompted the aforementioned panelist to journey to Japan. She also took a Japanese course during her undergraduate days at UBC. After graduating from Education in 1986, she set off on a journey to Japan hoping to find a place where she could belong. After living in Japan for two years, although she loved her life in Japan, she realized she could not relate to Japanese people entirely and share their value system simply because she was not Japanese. It dawned on her that she is Canadian. The journey to Japan brought her full circle. Only after leaving Canada and returning to Richmond after two years in Japan, she knew, this was her home. The metaphor she chose to encapsulate her experience was that of a Pacific salmon, born in the clear waters of the Adams River. Salmon are strong and skilled, and stay focused to make their way from the river back to the ocean. With strength and perseverance, salmon swim upstream to find their birthplace.

She also touched on another challenge of being Japanese-Canadian. A bigger challenge was to come to terms with the Japanese-Canadian internment during the war. A few years ago, in her hometown of Steveston, while driving her

son to work along the main street she noticed a bicycle shop. Her grandfather used to own and run his barbershop at the exact spot where this bicycle shop is now located. She told him that her grandfather started the barbershop in 1938. He worked hard and saved all of his money to be able to buy the building. Back then he charged maybe 5 cents per haircut. Finally, he saved \$2,000 for the building. The Canadian government confiscated his building just because he was of Japanese descent. What the government did to the Japanese people, to her community, to her ancestors, was a lifelong struggle for her.

Another panelist shared his experience about his appearance. He is half Japanese and half European. His classmates at the elementary school in Victoria were predominantly of European origin. He was always asked where he was from. He never reflected on that question and to him it was never a negative thing to be asked. When he was five or six years old, during his stay in Japan, he had a rude awakening. He attended school in Japan for two months during the summer. He was still thinking that he was Japanese, because at the school in Canada he was regarded as Japanese. When he was in Japan he asked his Japanese friends, "Do you see me more as Japanese or Canadian?" They answered, "Canadian, of course," and "You are such a foreigner." That answer blew his mind. After that, his sense of identity changed. He feels now that it does not really matter what people think of him because of his self-confidence.

In-between-ness

The second theme of "in-between-ness" needs some clarification. We would like to use the concept of "in-between-ness" popularized by Ted Aoki. Aoki was a renowned scholar and educator of curriculum studies who, as a Japanese Canadian, lived between two cultures and languages. Described by Smith (2003) as "the master of in-between"(p. xv), Aoki's main concern was the rejection of binary approaches that he considered divisive to the extent that binaries force us to choose between "this" or "that" and result in a social structure based on insider vs. outsider delineations. Drawing from the explanation presented by Aoki and his disciples, "in-betweenness" can be understood as closely related to our concept of *Kakehashi*; a bridge is neither here nor there, but at the same time it is here and there as it exists in between two points of contact. This bridge concept can also be closely related to the notion of "the third space," as described by Homi Bhabha (1994), where identity negotiation takes place through projecting an outlook in which one sees and identifies with the perspective of others.

One panelist expressed this in-between-ness very clearly as follows: "I am not really tied up with what's Canadian and what's Japanese."

“In-between-ness” has both positive and negative sides. To one of the panelists, it was a major negative aspect being between two cultures when she was young. When she was 20 years old, she did feel negative aspects of being between cultures, but her experience was very different from anyone else on the panel. She lived in Japan for the first 17 years of her life. Let us listen to her voices about her life between two cultures:

Growing up blond and blue-eyed in Japan is not necessarily the best thing in one’s own development; there’s way too much attention, and you start to think you are someone really special all the time. As a result, you don’t mature as quickly as others, because no one tells you when you are doing something wrong and corrects you. So you are just allowed to proceed like a barbarian. So it probably took me a lot longer to grow up and mature than other people.

I also never felt part of either culture when I was still young, although I don’t feel like that any longer as an adult. But you don’t feel part of either culture because you haven’t gone down deeply enough into either culture. My Japanese wasn’t good enough because I was sent to a boarding school, so I missed my parents and felt there were large psychological holes since I came home only on a weekend every few months. I think there was always a sense of anxiety for not fitting in anywhere, and that leads to developing a defense mechanism, like you don’t care anymore; you don’t fit in, so it doesn’t matter. Then you either feel anxious or you start to look down on the culture. I found when I was in Japan, I thought, well, I’ll be glad when I finally get to the United States and fit in with my real culture. But then when I once got back to the United States, where my parents are from, I looked down on everyone in the U.S., because they weren’t like in Japan. It was very hard to appreciate the U.S. with their positive things because all I see now was how good Japan was. It took me a long time to work that through. But like all of the other panelists, Vancouver is an ideal place for me, too, because everyone else doesn’t fit in anywhere else. Not fitting in anywhere is the norm here in Vancouver.

I felt I was cut off from my early childhood in Japan, because I suddenly moved here in my teens. So there was a clear separation; and for a long time, I couldn’t blend the two. Because I couldn’t keep up with the relationships in Japan, there was always a sense

of grief. Then in my early 20's, I started to wonder if I could ever find a mate who could understand where I'm from."

The same panelist now appreciates her intercultural background. Because she lives between the cultures, her deepest friendships are with other people who are primarily from other cultures. Her closest friend at her church (not a Japanese church) is a Japanese woman. Her close colleagues are other Japanese teachers. They can understand each other better than any other colleagues regardless of how long they had taught together. The capacity for deeper friendship across the cultures is the sweetest reward for her. Deep friendship was a theme shared by all the panelists in the context of "in-between-ness."

Let's turn to the language issue. One panelist emphasized that the largest reward to him is his ability to speak Japanese without extensively studying the language. Learning kanji had to come later, but the grammar and pronunciation, especially nuances of such words as *senpai* (superiors) and *kôhai* (subordinates), all of that came to him naturally, compared to other learners who had to learn these words later in their lives. Another panelist pointed out that a great reward to be in-between languages is to have access to two bridges, that is to say, access to two vocabularies to express two ways of thinking. As he explained what was going on in his mind, "I'm translating back and forth in my mind, it happens a lot. It gives me certain breadth. Ideas that come naturally in one language may not be quite natural in the other language. For example, in Japanese there's no word for "critical thinking," well, it's a loan word and the concept is not really in their education system. Another type of vocabulary that is hard to translate is the vocabulary related to emotions. Certain cultural-emotional words that don't exist in English exist in Japanese. For example, *amae*, or *amaeru* in Japanese, is "making yourself dependent," which is hard to translate and explain in English."

One panelist addressed a reward to living between cultures from the perspective of choice. In other words, he is able to pick and choose some elements from various cultures accessible to him. He chose Kendo, Japanese traditional martial art. He told us about his fascination of Kendo as follows: "I must say, my kendo is a positive experience. With it I learned bushidô ideology but also it was a very intimate way of learning traditional Japanese culture. It is very beautiful to learn mannerisms, structure and disciplines of bushidô and apply it to any other culture, Japanese or non-Japanese. I apply it to studies and exercise, to do things in a proper way. These things are not possible if it was not for my *Kakehashi* experience."

To sum up this chapter, we would like to highlight the statement made by one of the panelists as follows: "The more I see myself in juxtaposition with my family,

the more I reflect myself and question about myself.” This statement is exactly what Homi Bhaba defines “the third space.” The panel discussion highlighted the central tenets of intercultural identity development as follows: an individual’s openness and elasticity that enables “projecting an outlook in which one sees and identifies with others’ perspectives” (Kim, 1994, 10), a striving for “the third place” (Lo Bianco, 1999) that enables us to negotiate a dialogue despite different creeds, traditions, or cultures, and an intercultural identity formation as only being possible through “lived communication”, in other words, language.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *Location of culture*. London /New York: Routledge.
- Kim, Y. Y. (1994). Beyond cultural identity. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 4(1), 1-25.
- Lo Blanco, J., Liddicoat, A. J., & Crozet, C. (1999). *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education*. Melbourne: The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.
- Smith, D. G. (2003). Preface: Thoughts on living In-Between. In E. Hasebe-Ludt & W. Hurren (Eds.), *Curriculum intertext: Place/Language/Pedagogy* (pp. xv-xvii). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.