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Accepting Differences

The first foreign country I ever set foot in was Hong Kong. Things there were very different from Japan. Anyway, it seemed that everything there was really intense. Cantonese people speak with loud voices and are noisy. You can see pig trotters and ducks hanging all over town. Taxi and bus drivers also drive aggressively. I could write down a whole list of things that surprised me and that I found difficult to understand. But now I feel differently about those first bad impressions. Cantonese people are full of energy. It's a bustling city with a dynamic atmosphere. Having lived there for four-and-a-half years, I now think of Hong Kong as a wonderful place. I think my feelings changed because I became aware of "cultural differences."

I was able to understand those differences through the many daily discoveries and experiences that left a deep impression on me. Since I went to a Japanese school, I don't speak any English or Cantonese. But even so, I recall that really great feeling when I managed to get something across to someone even with my broken English or Cantonese. Some of the school functions we had, for example, were cultural exchange events. At first, everyone was shy, but after a while, we somehow got closer and became friends even though we didn't speak the same language. I have many more small memories like that. Even the smallest form of mutual exchange made me happy.

Having come back to Japan, I feel blessed for being able to have had such experiences. Japanese people don't recognize differences that much and tend to discriminate against things that are even a little different. That is why I want lots of people to experience the pleasure of accepting each other's differences through mutual exchange.

When people learn to accept others, they can develop an affinity for things they did not know or even things they hated before. I think that is what international cultural exchange should be about.