

**Essay**  
**by**  
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Before this summer, my racial identity had never come into question. Living in the United States, a country dominated by Caucasian males, I naturally stood apart. But I was always proud of my slightly darker skin, my jet-black hair and my Asian facial features. I was proud of my Japanese league basketball team, my part-time job in San Francisco's Japantown, and my family. These characteristics and activities were what defined me as a minority individual. These characteristics made me stand out in the myriad of predominately white faces in predominately white schools. And this summer, after an essay and an interview, I was awarded a scholarship to travel to Japan and home-stay for three weeks as a cultural ambassador.

As I'm sure you can imagine, I became obsessed with my coming trip to Japan and the wonderful homecoming it would be for me. Thanks to the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Organization, I made my way across the Pacific Ocean for the very first time. Anxious and excited, I landed in Tokyo and stepped off the plane into a thick humidity that reminded me of an overcrowded sauna. I must admit, I had secretly expected to find a throng of people waiting at the gate, fervently waving "Welcome Home" banners, with the sound of royal trumpets blowing in the background. Instead, I was greeted by an immense wave of heat accompanied by the low hum of a vacuum cleaner. Speaking very poor Japanese and struggling to breathe the sticky air, I barely made it through customs in time to catch my connecting flight from Tokyo to Osaka; not quite the homecoming I had in mind.

Whenever I left home, I would explore Osaka city with cameras in hand, taking both Polaroid's and black and white pictures. I was awed by the sites that I saw, yet simultaneously and secretly frightened by how dreadfully foreign everything felt. Every time I explored the city, inevitably people would engage me in conversations in Japanese, of which I understood very little. In an apologetic voice I would respond: "Eigo de hanashite mo iidesu ka?" (Are you able to speak English?). Upon hearing this, most people laughed at me, shook their heads and walked away. A searing sense of shame would sink into my stomach. Surrounded by people of my race, I stood out just as much as I did back home.

On certain occasions, I was asked to attend formal functions with the Osaka branch of the Sister City Organization. Although everybody was cordial and friendly, at times I could not help but feel like an outsider. At such dinners, I was constantly surrounded by people who did not accept me as Japanese. For these Japanese businessmen, my mannerisms and speech were far too American for them to consider me one of their own. In their eyes, and increasingly in my own, I was no longer Japanese. It was an amazing, frightening paradox to experience firsthand.

In America, being Japanese was an essential part of my identity; it was what separated me from my peers. But here in Japan, I was suddenly only an American with black hair, unaccepted in the culture of my ancestors. Although I was not accepted by the business elite of Japan, my host families were extremely welcoming. By going to children's festivals and eating dinner together every night, I became a member of a true Japanese family for three weeks.

Although I have never felt more American than I did in Japan, upon returning home, I have never felt more proud of my Japanese heritage. I learned more about my Japanese identity in three weeks than I had in my previous 17 years. Because of my experience in Japan, activities have taken on a much more spiritual meaning for me, and I have become increasingly interested in the lives of my ancestors both in Japan and in America. You, (SF-Osaka Organization) have given me the opportunity to experience life both as a Japanese-American and as a true Japanese, and this has increased my self-awareness and my cultural consciousness ten-fold. For the rest of my life, I will be in your debt. Thank you.