

Chapter 7

Job Hunting Experiences of Bicultural Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this chapter is the Japanese job application process from the perspective of half-Japanese university students. The chapter first introduces the reader to the Japanese labor market and the topic of biculturals in general and hāfu (half-Japanese) in Japan in particular. The main part of the chapter is an empiric study consisting of interviews with five half-Japanese students in various stages of the process of finding a job after graduation. In addition to possessing multiple language skills, biculturals benefit from a broader cultural perspective, which might be assumed to be an advantage when seeking a job. However, hāfu are often viewed as outsiders wherever they go due to their being different. This chapter aims to show the difficulties hāfu encounter as well as the benefits from which they profit.

INTRODUCTION

The Japanese workforce is often perceived as a homogenous hive; this is especially true for the *sararii man*¹, the office workers dressed in business suits who all look the same at first glance. The image of the obedient, overworked Japanese salary man, a robot without a trace of individuality, is a popular cliché. However, if they indeed were

all the same, if they all had the same character, talents and qualifications, Japanese companies would not be particularly selective when choosing new personnel. The recruiting process in Japan requires several months and is designed to ensure that the new colleague will fit into the company and feel comfortable there. In part, this careful selection is due to some characteristics of the Japanese labor market which have gained worldwide attention. These include lifelong employment and the seniority principle concerning promotions

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and salary increases. But only a part of the Japanese workforce – approximately 30% – benefits from these conditions, namely male employees of medium and large scale companies under the age of 55 and civil servants (Ernst, 1986, p. 323).

Most university graduates hope to obtain such an employment. The characteristics of the Japanese labor market mentioned above influence both the students' job-seeking as well as the companies' recruiting activities, as both parties act on the assumption that the new recruit will spend the better part of her or his life in the chosen firm. Job hunting experiences of Japanese students have received much attention inside and outside of Japan. Especially in the past couple of years, the focus of the discussion has shifted towards Japan's declining economy and its negative influence on the labor market situation for university graduates. In the book, *Shinsotsu mugyō* ("Unemployment of University Graduates"), Ōkubo Yukio², head of the Works Institute (the outsourced research division of the Japanese marketing and personnel consultancy Recruit) discusses the question why fewer and fewer university graduates are able to secure employment. Job market entry is an important issue for companies as well. The master's thesis *Arbeitssuche japanischer Universitätsabsolventen. Kriterien für den erfolgreichen Karriereestieg* (Job-seeking of Japanese university graduates. Criteria for successful career entry) written by Petra Röska at the University of Vienna in 2004 includes the viewpoint of the firms. The first part of Andrea Tonn's book *Personalsuche in Japan* (Personnel Recruitment in Japan) named "Rekrutierung von Universitätsabsolventen in Japan" (Recruiting of university graduates in Japan) from 1997 focuses entirely on one firm's point of view.

The most important criterion when selecting new personnel is the university from which the applicant has graduated. The higher the university's prestige, the higher the chances are to be hired by a renowned firm. The area of study is of comparatively little importance. Whatever the

prospect employee needs to know for their work they will learn on the job.

Apart from the applicant's school, there is naturally other criteria which will have an influence on career entry. Personal traits like the capacity for teamwork can be a crucial factor. Many Japanese students join a *bukatsu*, a university sports club like the *kyūdo* club to learn to be and prove they are a team player. Language skills have also gained in importance. Japanese with a bicultural background supposedly have a vital and distinct advantage in this area as most of them are raised in a bilingual household. But does a bicultural background offer only benefits or can it also prove to be a disadvantage in Japan? One can assume that biculturalism is a major asset in an international environment. However, in a Japanese company it could be that a bicultural is viewed as an outsider due to her or his socialization outside of Japan, thus leading to problems when seeking employment.

There are several definitions of biculturalism. One criterion might be one's parents' ancestry or even a person's self-image. Biculturals can be immigrants, exchange students or expatriates, or simply individuals who label themselves as bicultural (e.g., British-Japanese). In a stricter sense of the term, a bicultural person is someone who has internalized and maintained two cultures. Both cultures guide a person's thoughts and actions (Kiesel, 2010, p. 4). In this chapter, a bicultural shall be defined as a person who has both a Japanese and a non-Japanese parent.

The subject of biculturalism is a topic that has received a lot of attention especially in the United States – also with regard to Asia and Japan – in the form of *Mixed Race Studies*. Accordingly, there is a great amount of published material, but for the most part the focus lies on people with mixed ancestry living in the USA. In Japan, the issue seems not to have drawn a lot of attention so far. There are some groups which have been formed to take part in relevant events like the Hapa³ Japan Conference or the Nagoya Conference on Multiculturalism. One of these groups publishes

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