

## THE DILEMMA OF DUAL HERITAGE: NATIONALITY SELECTION AMONG JAPANESE-SINGAPOREAN MULTINATIONAL CHILDREN

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**Abstract:** In this study, we examined which significant factors influence the nationality choice of Japanese children who are also multinational backgrounds. With 3.5 out of every 100 couples being intermarried; the number of multinational children is steadily increasing. A significant number of Japanese multinational children have expressed concern about their nationality due to Japan's concept of the one-person-one-nationality law. However, there is a limited number of research that have investigated nationality choices and their ensuing impact. To address this gap, this study applies a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with individuals who had already selected their nationality in which we focused on (1) language influences, (2) environmental factors, and (3) family impacts. The survey led to the following findings: (1) the language spoken at home had a stronger influence on nationality choice; (2) although the environment and upbringing had no direct relation to nationality choice, they did have an impact on the individual's identity formation; and (3) the mother's perspectives on nationality selection and the father's role as both husband and father in the home has had an impact. It is vital to realise that there are instances in which Japanese who have other roots but live in Japan and speak Japanese struggle to establish a Japanese identity and to consider how those people may develop a Japanese identity.

Keywords: nationality selection, identity formation, multinational children, parent-child relationships, Japanese society

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### INTRODUCTION

In this study, we sought to clarify what ideas Japanese children born to Japanese and Singaporean parents have about choosing their nationality as well as what social factors influence their choice of nationality by interviewing children who had chosen their nationality. Under Japan's amended Nationality Act 1985 (Ministry of Justice [MOJ], 2025), children with dual nationality—both Japanese and foreign—must select one nationality by the age of twenty-two. Furthermore, in 2022, the legislature lowered the age for selecting nationality from twenty to eighteen in accordance with an amendment to the law. As a result, children under eighteen with dual nationality must now choose one nationality by the age of twenty.

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It has been almost five decades since the legislature passed the first nationality act in 1985 (MOJ, 2025), and three years since the modification of the nationality selection age in 2022. Meanwhile, the number of intermarried couples and their children has grown considerably. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, as of 2024, 17,685 marriages involved at least one foreign national, accounting for 3.5 percent of the 504,930 marriages recorded that year (Japan Statistics Portal, Mar 29, 2024). This is more than double the 12,181 intermarriages (1.7%) out of 735,850 in 1985, when the nationality selection law was first adopted. As the frequency of intermarriages has increased, so has the number of children born to Japanese and foreign parents. While Japan continues to require individuals to choose their citizenship and has even lowered the age, other countries are moving in the opposite direction. Due to declining birth rates, aging populations, and talent shortages, many countries that previously adhered to a single-nationality system, such as Germany (Winter et al., 2015), South Korea (Sun, 2019) and the Philippines (Okamura, 2003), are now shifting their policies to allow dual nationality.

Despite facing similar challenges such as low birth rates, shortages in skilled labour, and an aging population, Japan remains committed to its policy of one nationality per person. This continued adherence to a strict nationality system is becoming a serious concern for many Japanese and foreign families and could develop into a significant social issue. Another concern is that nationality is an important aspect of a person's identity (Croe, 2023). Establishing one's identity requires an understanding of one's nationality and origins. Multinational children are constantly under pressure to choose their future nationality. Being obliged to select either Japanese or another nationality by the age of twenty can substantially affect the identity formation of these Japanese children.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the increasing number of intermarriages, there is scant research on the nationality choices of children born to Japanese and foreign parents. In a prior study, Ueki (1991) surveyed factors influencing the nationality choices of multinational children with American and Japanese parents following the 1985 amendment to the Nationality Law. The findings revealed no significant relationship between a child's gender and nationality selection. However, mother tongue and place of residence had a significant impact on multinational children's nationality choices. Language ability influenced their nationality decisions, with a notable result showing that even if children resided in Japan, they were more likely to select American citizenship if their mother was an American national.

Takeda (2005) examined factors influencing the nationality choices of children born to Japanese and foreign parents residing in Japan approximately ten years after Ueki's (1991) survey. Takeda (2005) investigated Ueki's (1991) questions and additionally explored parents' impressions of their partner's ethnic background, relationship with ethnic groups, and social integration using a quantitative approach. The statistics showed that a child's gender, Japanese as a mother tongue, and place of residence had no influence on nationality decisions. However, Takeda (2005) found that cultural inheritance, such as language fluency within families, parents' cultural awareness of their respective countries, and visits to extended family overseas, impacted the identity and nationality choices of multinational children. Both Ueki and Takeda concluded that parent-child relationships, fluency in the mother tongue or language spoken at home, and respectful attitudes between spouses towards ethnicity, culture and their respective countries had a substantial impact on children's nationality choices.

Researchers have studied identity formation among Asian multinational children. In a study conducted through interviews with Japanese Korean married couples, Yang (2019) found that confidence in one’s roots is closely associated with the establishment of a child’s identity. Using the case of children from Japanese and Indonesian parents, Suzuki (2011) demonstrated that the variables influencing identity development include not only language and upbringing but also the child’s physical characteristics and the parent’s place of origin. Kudo (2020) studied the effect of transnationalism on the identity formation of Pakistani and Japanese parents’ children. The results showed that participants who felt alienated from and different in their parents’ societies tended to reevaluate their identities during adolescence.

However, although these studies have discussed in detail individual children’s identity formation, they have not mentioned how the relationship between multinational children and their parents and the environment surrounding the children influence the children’s choice of nationality. Earlier studies on the implications of nationality choices for Japanese multinational children primarily focused on children of Japanese and Western parents. There were few studies on the factors influencing nationality selection among multinational children with Asian parents, even though they make up the vast majority of multinational families in Japan (above 69.4% as of 2022; Japan Statistics Portal, 2024).

Erikson (1959) proposed that identity is a form of self-recognition that helps individuals distinguish themselves from others. Identity, which encompasses an individual’s nationality, can be broadly divided into social identity and personal identity. The establishment of self-identity is achieved by aligning one’s self-perception with these two identities. As presented in Table 1, personal identity often overlaps with several aspects of social identity such as nationality, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic class, which are typically synonymous with self-identification and social identification.

**Table 1: Identity Areas and Types**

<p><b>Personal Identity</b> Personal identity is a feeling of self that people build throughout their lives. Personal identity is a combination of how you see yourself and how others see you. Personal identity includes:</p>		<p><b>Social Identity</b> Social identity is defined as a person’s membership in a social group. A person’s social identity is made up of common categories such as:</p>
Personality		Race
Tastes	Nationality	Age
Achievements	Gender	(Dis)ability
Values	Ethnicity	Religion
Culture	Social Class	Sexual Orientation
Social Status		

Identity involves recognizing who one is and expressing oneself. This identity is inherently imprinted with otherness, meaning that individuals affirm their sense of self through interactions with others. During the socialisation process, a person learns the rules and value systems of the group, community, and culture to which they belong, thereby developing a sense of belonging within that group. In this process, if Japanese multinational children perceive themselves as Japanese (personal identity) but Japanese society does not fully recognize them as such (social identity), their self-identification as Japanese may be negatively affected.

In accordance with Japanese law, a person holding Japanese nationality is considered a ‘Japanese citizen’. However, in practice, the concept of being ‘Japanese’ differs significantly from how ordinary Japanese people perceive it. Suzuki (2018) argued that common Japanese people recognise someone as Japanese only if three components—nationality, culture, and roots—are all aligned. This disparity between legal definitions and societal perceptions creates confusion for multinational children who grow up in Japan and speak Japanese as their mother tongue. Coming from multicultural families, these children experience unique challenges that influence their identity formation.

Suzuki (2018) identified several factors that influence identity formation among Japanese multinational children in Japanese society. First is their place of residence and age, which varies from six to fifteen years old. After the age of fifteen, children tend to identify their previous country as their own. Second, whether Japanese society perceives their parents’ countries or cultures as reputable. Third, the gender of the Japanese parent. Fourth, external characteristics such as body features, facial features, and skin and hair colour, which affect their integration into Japanese society. Fifth, familial circumstances, whether positive or negative, and the parental educational background.

We developed our survey in response to previous studies, which revealed that the factors influencing Japanese multinational children’s choice of nationality and the formation of the identity underlying those choices are closely related to how foreign parents and their children integrate into Japan’s monocultural society. This integration is shaped by language fluency, upbringing environment and parental values.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this study, we focus on personal stories of respondents about their upbringing and how this has influenced their decisions on nationality. How do people decide their nationality based on their upbringing, mother tongue, and familial relationships? These are immeasurable factors that cannot be effectively examined through quantitative research (Farnsworth, 2019). Nationality choices are often shaped by deeply personal experiences, making it difficult to capture them through numbers alone.

Therefore, we employed a qualitative research approach, relying on individuals’ direct experiences to better understand how identity and nationality are formed. This method allows researchers to explore topics related to human experiences and social phenomena in depth (Sharique et al, 2019). Unlike quantitative research which focuses on measurable trends, qualitative research enables us to examine the emotions, values, and social contexts that shape person’s sense of belonging. This ultimately helped the research present a more nuanced understanding of how multinational individuals navigate their identities.

Participants were recruited through the Japan-Singapore Association’s website and a blogger who has both Japanese and Singaporean parents. Table 2 presents the list of participants in this research. Participants in the study used pseudonyms instead of real names so as to preserve their privacy and anonymity. A total of five individuals—three men and two women of Japanese and Singaporean descent—took part in the study. Each participant had already made their decision regarding citizenship and has established their residence either in Japan or Singapore. Data collection took place between July and September 2021. Due to time constraints, we adopted a cross-sectional approach, where all participants were interviewed online at a time that was convenient for them. The participants were located across the entire island of Singapore and various regions in Japan.

**Table 2: List of Participants**

Name*	Ken	Taro	Ichiro	Mika	Keiko
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female
<b>Age</b>	30 <	< 30	<30	<30	30 <
<b>Nationality</b>	Japan	Japan	Singapore	Singapore	Singapore
<b>Mother Tongue</b>	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese
<b>Language Spoken at Home</b>	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese/ English	Japanese/ English	Japanese/ English/ Chinese
<b>Mother's Nationality/ Ethnicity</b>	Singapore/ Chinese	Japanese	Singapore/ Chinese	Singapore/ Chinese	Singapore/ Chinese
<b>Father's Nationality/ Ethnicity</b>	Japanese	Singapore/ Chinese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese
<b>Country of Birth</b>	Singapore	Japan	Singapore	Singapore	Singapore
<b>Education (Age 6-15)</b>	Japan	Japan	Japan	Japan	Japan/ Singapore
<b>Academic Qualifications</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	Polytechnic
<b>Occupation</b>	Working for Japanese Company	Law Student in Japanese University	Working for Global Company	Working for Japanese Company	Working for Japanese Company
<b>Current Place of Residence</b>	Singapore	Japan	Japan	Singapore	Singapore
<b>Living Style</b>	Living Alone	Mother and Grandparents	Living Alone	Mother	Spouse and Children

\* The names are all pseudonyms.

## **LANGUAGE INFLUENCES NATIONALITY SELECTION, ALTHOUGH NOT ALWAYS THE MOTHER TONGUE**

Based on the findings of this study, the mother tongue has little influence on nationality choices. Although all participants' mother tongues are Japanese, Ichiro, Mika and Keiko chose to become Singaporean. That said, language itself does have the power to influence nationality choice; a person's use of language is linked to their personality and other defining qualities. Language use and social identity, ethnicity and culture should not be treated separately (Marui, 2012). Multinational children commonly speak two languages, which they learn from both parents (Markowska-Manista et al, 2020). They frequently grow up in a multilingual environment where family members use the home language to communicate with each other, while Japanese is used in school and public settings. Because multinational children have the ability to connect with more than one culture by speaking multiple languages, they are more likely to develop a strong awareness of their roots.

In contrast to Ken, who grew up in Japanese society and spoke only Japanese, Keiko, who became a Singaporean, shared that her mother sent her to international kindergarten and took her to multicultural events. While growing up in Japan, Keiko communicated with her mother in English and Chinese from childhood. She is grateful to her Singaporean mother for teaching her English and allowing her to grow up in a cosmopolitan environment. Furthermore, the fact that they spoke English with their mothers, a language with high social status in Japanese society, contributed to their inheritance of their mothers' cultural identity. The more that Japanese society recognises and values the culture and language of the foreign parent's country, the more encouraged children feel to speak it and the easier it becomes to continue learning it (Baek, 2015).

Not only Keiko but also Ichiro and Mika, who also had Singaporean mothers, chose to become Singaporeans. Like Keiko, Ichiro and Mika spoke English with their mothers, visited Singapore frequently and had several opportunities to spend time with their mothers' families. As Kim (2021) stated, a strong relationship exists between a child's cultural identity and their fluency in the language with which they identify. The relationship is further strengthened when children interact with their parents in their native languages. Communication with their mothers and their extended families in their mother's native language likely played a role in shaping their identity as Singaporean alongside their Japanese heritage.

## **THE ENVIRONMENT INDIRECTLY INFLUENCES NATIONALITY SELECTION**

Otherness imprints the formation of identity in the sense that we affirm ourselves through others. Therefore, school, where we spend a large part of our day, has a great influence on the development of children's identity. This is especially true for junior and senior high school students, and how they spend their time determines their future career paths (Abbasi, 2016). Identity formation during this period is deeply connected to friendships with friends, and through interactions with friends, one forms one's own identity (Hasanah & Supardi, 2020). All participants except Keiko were educated in Japanese from primary school until university. Ken, Taro and Ichiro looked back on their school life and talked about how they integrated into Japanese society and lived their lives trying not to get into trouble because of their foreign roots. Ken discussed the significance of names, stating, 'I had a Japanese name, so everyone around me assumed I was Japanese. But my sister had a slightly foreign-sounding name, so it appeared that school life was challenging'. Unfortunately, discrimination exists in Japanese schools and society. Therefore, by adopting Japanese names, children with foreign roots often concealed their origins and safeguarded themselves so that their schoolmates and others would not discover their parents' origins. A name is a solid noun and the most effective instrument for identifying and recognising someone. Names are among the things that had to be kept hidden (Tsujiimoto, 2011). The participants in this study had English as well as Japanese names but, even if they selected Singaporean nationality, they used Japanese ones as participant. To avoid the risk of feeling alienated or bullied, Taro chose to attend an international school where schoolmates have similar situations to him, within the Japanese educational system. Ichiro safeguarded himself by attending a high-achieving high school, which reduced his chances of being bullied. According to Sanada (2022), children with excellent academic competence are less likely to be bullied.

Belonging to a school or group does not necessarily lead to a psychological sense of belonging (Asai, 2011). However, in many cases, schools play an important role in establishing a sense of belonging or knowing who and where the person is (Reay, 2010). Multinational children encounter significantly more obstacles in Japanese society than lone Japanese children do simply

because they have foreign roots. When Keiko was in her second year of secondary school, her mother sent her and her younger brother to Singapore because of her brother's tough school environment. Ken, Taro and Ichiro assimilated into Japanese society by joining societies that were inclined to embrace them and concealing their foreign roots. Ken and Taro each said, 'I am Japanese'. Being recognised as Japanese by those around them as well as belonging to a society that embraced them may have helped them build their Japanese identity in Japanese society. Ken and Taro identified as Japanese and selected Japanese nationality before they had to fulfil their national service [NS] obligations. Nonetheless, Ichiro was convinced that he had found his place in Singapore during his NS, so he chose to be Singaporean.

## **FAMILY IMPACT ON NATIONALITY SELECTION**

The family is the first society for people, and parental voices have a big influence on children's identity formation; thus, it is essential to analyse how mothers and fathers are involved in their children's education (Ishi-Kuntz, 2009). A good relationship between parents has a positive impact on children's development. During his interview, Ichiro said that his parents constantly argued when he was a child due to a cultural gap, miscommunication and his father's absences from home. Taro's parents lived apart. Although most participants said that their parents were not on bad terms, their Japanese fathers were often absent from home due to long working hours.

In this study, parents and children did not share a common language at home, except for Ken. All participants communicated with their Singaporean parents in either English or Chinese while they spoke Japanese with their Japanese parents. Furthermore, Japanese fathers often had limited English proficiency and relied on their wives' limited Japanese, which restricted parental communication. Due to Japan's long working hours, Japanese fathers were frequently absent from home, leaving foreign mothers responsible for childcare. Communication and marital satisfaction are directly linked to emotional and semantic mutual understanding (Shi, 2010). As a result of their husband's frequent absences and limited communication, the responsibility for their children's education fell largely on mothers. In such circumstances, Singaporean mothers instilled their own culture in their children through traditions such as celebrating Chinese New Year and preparing traditional foods regularly.

Ichiro maintained that his father was often absent from home, remains an invisible at home and had no influence on his choice of nationality. Ichiro said, '*I chose Singapore, because it is my mother's country*'. Adolescent sons' relationships with their fathers are critical for identity formation, and fathers of teenage boys' act as role models with whom they identify when constructing their identity (Murao, 1999). Comparing oneself to one's father in many characteristics such as ability and personality is a crucial part of teenage self-awareness (Ohira et al, 1990). However, it is impossible to deny that Ichiro, whose father is frequently absent, and Taro, whose parents separated, and he lives with his mother and her family, may have had insufficient identity formation with their fathers as role models.

Mika and Keiko chose to be Singaporeans largely based on their mothers' counsel. Mika's parents had a positive relationship and shared values, including respect for each other's cultures and countries. She did not mention the challenging circumstances in Japanese society. However, Mika revealed that when she started secondary school, her mother began to encourage her to choose a Singaporean: '*My mother pushed me so hard to become a Singaporean that when I was in upper secondary, I was confused about who I was*'.

In the end, Mika decided to become a Singaporean. In contrast, Keiko, the only exception because she was not educated in Japanese from primary school until university, transferred to a

school in Singapore at the age of fourteen and continued her education there until she was twenty. She struggled to pick between the two nationalities, but when she eventually decided on Singaporean, she sought advice from her Singaporean mother, who provided the necessary push. Mother-daughter relationships are particularly special. As Usita (2001) stated, cultural attitudes and practices are often passed down from mothers to daughters in immigrant families. Both mothers and daughters realise the importance of interdependence in Asian society, and this awareness influences how they demonstrate it in their interactions. For a girl, her mother is the first woman she meets and the first role model for her. As a result, a daughter often looks to her mother as a role model and predictor of her life's outcomes. If a woman respects her mother and considers her reliable, her self-image as a 'good daughter' enhances her own self-affirmation and self-esteem. Self-esteem depends, in part, upon other people's perceptions of oneself—in this case, one's mother's opinion (Owaga et al, 2011).

## DISCUSSION

Given the study's short duration and small sample size, along with the wide range of variables impacting nationality choices, the findings may not be generalisable. As a consequence, future research ought to confirm these findings on a broader scale.

This study's findings suggest that, as in previous studies, language influences nationality choice not only in terms of mother tongue but also in terms of the language used at home. Because three participants chose Singaporean despite living and being educated in Japan, we argue that school life and the environment in which they grew up did not necessarily directly influence all participants' nationality choice. However, the environment had an impact on identity development belonging to Japanese society. Parents' attitudes about each other's countries and cultures significantly impact their children's choice of nationality. With the exception of Ken, who was unable to receive enough of his Singaporean mother's cultural inheritance because she had passed away, all participants who had Singaporean mothers and received language acquisition, cultural inheritance and intercultural experiences from their mothers chose Singaporean nationality. In contrast, Taro, who has a Japanese mother and is fully integrated into Japanese society, selected to be a Japanese. Like Ueki's (1991) study, this study also shows that children tend to choose their mother's nationality without place of residence and education background. The reason for this is that children may have gained confidence, which is vital for their identity, as an outcome of communicating with their mothers in English, a respected language in Japanese society. This helped to develop their identity formation as a Singaporean, as an outcome of speaking with their mother in English, a valued language in Japanese society. Japan has a strongly monocultural education system, making it challenging for intermarried parents to successfully raise their children in a dual culture and teach them more than one language (Shikita, 2013). English is viewed as advantageous because it offers 'prestige in Japanese society' (Golovina et al., 2022, p. 6). This makes it easier for parents to teach the language. Children form Singaporean identities by integrating into their mothers' cultures, customs, and families through the use of privileged English.

Previous studies on nationality selection have concentrated on groups with one Japanese parent and one Western parent. However, in this study we focused on multinational children with Asian and Japanese parents, the most common type of international marriage in Japan. We investigated the difficulties of integrating into Japanese society for multinational children with Asian roots as well as the relationships between their parents and between parents and children. Asian mothers and daughters frequently rely on one another and maintain tight connections. Respecting one's mother's perspective and affirming oneself promotes self-esteem. Mika and



Keiko were also inclined to respect their mother's opinion. In contrast, when they establish themselves, teenaged boys feel pressure to overcome their fathers' influence while maintaining their own identity. When forming identity, the father serves as a role model to identify with (Muraio, 1990). Comparing oneself to one's father across various dimensions, such as ability and personality, is a crucial part of self-identification for adolescents. However, if there is a physical or emotional separation from the father, this identification may be incomplete. Taro and Ichiro may have struggled to fit in with their father's identity as a Japanese or Singaporean. While they did not inherit a strong sense of identity from their fathers, Taro had formed his identity as a Japanese by spending time with his mother's family and integrating into Japanese society. Meanwhile, Ichiro had reconsidered his identity by asking 'Who am I?' during adolescence and deciding he was Singaporean.

The development of identity in connection with choosing one's nationality necessitates the alignment of social identity and self-identification. To some extent, whether directly or indirectly, despite being Japanese, participants faced a mismatch between their social identity and self-identity and experienced feelings of otherness and alienation in Japanese society. The intricate intertwining of their experiences of exclusion from Japanese society, their advantages regarding being able to speak English as the prestige in Japanese society, and their ties with their parents all had a significant impact on their identity formation and nationality choice. The exclusionary atmosphere felt by multinational Japanese children in Japanese society, which is due to the slight discrepancy between the Japanese people's image of 'Japanese' and multinational children, has a negative impact on the formation of their Japanese identity. Japan is steadily becoming more multicultural; it is vital to move away from the framework that assumes the nation-state's homogeneity and create a new model of Japanese that takes into consideration the diversity of identity development among young people with different roots.

## CONCLUSION

The number of Japanese multinational children continues to grow each year, and Japan's nationality law, which requires individuals to choose their nationality at the age of twenty, significantly impacts the identity formation of these children while also posing serious challenges for their families. To better understand the factors influencing nationality choices, we interviewed multinational children about their experiences. Our findings suggest that language, cultural inheritance from foreign parents, and interactions with extended family members positively influence children's nationality choices. In Japanese society, being Japanese is often defined by three key factors: speaking Japanese as a mother tongue, practicing Japanese culture, and being of Japanese descent. However, Japanese multinational children often encounter unnecessary barriers to assimilation due to their mixed heritage. These difficulties in adapting to Japanese society, influence their identity construction. Additionally, the relationship between parents, as well as parent-child dynamics, plays a significant role in nationality decision. Our recommendation is that future works following this could explore parent-child relationships in intermarried families more extensively, as well as to investigate the connection between multinational children's identities and their choice of nationality.

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