

# The Multi-Ethnic Identity Paradox: Towards a Fluid Notion of Being ‘Haafu’<sup>1</sup>

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Whether the label is ‘haafu’ (half) or ‘daburu’ (double), the portrayal of multi-ethnic identity in Japanese contexts is steeped in duality. While recognizing the inevitability of such binary connotations, this paper aims to reconceptualize notions of being *haafu* as a fluid, adaptable and accomplished form of multi-ethnic identity. Based on focus group discussions with twelve multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers, the qualitative analysis depicts the multi-ethnic paradox not in terms of two distinct oppositions, but as co-existent, dynamic facets of an individual's complete view of self. Several ways in which multi-ethnic Japanese experience “discursive positioning” (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999) emerged from the discussions, including being simultaneously viewed as privileged and marginalized, and being ethnified as Japanese or non-Japanese or as a cultural expert or a novice.

## マルチエスニック・アイデンティティに潜められるパラドックスの再検討

### ー 流動性のある概念の提供へ

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呼び名は「ハーフ」であろうが「ダブル」であろうが、日本におけるマルチエスニックの人々のアイデンティティは、とかく二元的なものとしてとらえられがちである。本論文は、その様な二元的なニュアンスの必然性を認めながらも、「ハーフ」の概念を再検討し、これを流動性や柔軟性のある、環境に依存した多民族アイデンティティとして描く事を目標にする。12人のマルチエスニック日本人青年とのグループ面接調査法に基づいた質的な分析により、マルチエスニック・アイデンティティのパラドックスを、2つのはっきりした対比としてではなく、個人の自己イメージの中に共存する、変化に富む様々な面として描きだされた。ディスカッションから特に浮かび出たことは、マルチエスニック日本人が談話の中にポジショニング（固定したアイデンティティを押し付けられること：Harre & van Langenhove, 1999）をされる傾向である。そのポジショニングの傾向には、エリートであると同時に社会の周縁に存在するものとして見られたり、民族的に日本人もしくは非日本人であるとみなされたり、あるいは文化に関する専門家であるかもしくは（特に日本文化に関する）初心者として見られたりすることが含まれる。

FIGURE 1: Self-Portrait Drawn by a Multi-Ethnic Japanese Teenager



## OVERVIEW

Although not necessarily a confusing matter for many multi-ethnic people themselves, multi-ethnicity seems to be something of a paradox to many people who meet so-called 'half-Japanese' people. How can a person be both Japanese and non-Japanese?

While such comments may at first appear naïve and possibly even disparaging, if we consider that a paradox consists – by definition – of two co-existing qualities that superficially appear to be contradictory, yet on deeper consideration express a genuine reality, then perhaps this is in fact an appropriate way to begin to consider the notion of multi-ethnic identity within Japanese contexts. In exploring this paradox further, this paper aims to reconceptualize the notion of '*haafu*' (half) as a fluid, dynamic understanding of the multi-ethnic self.

## RESEARCH INTO DISCOURSE AND SITUATED ETHNIC IDENTITY

The past ten years have seen a growing interest in the multi-ethnic experience, including worthwhile academic studies (Greene, 2002; Luke & Luke, 1998; Nakashima, 1992; Nakashima, 2001; Parker & Song, 2001; Zack, 1995), self-help books (Jackson Nakazawa, 2003; Tatum, 1999) and personal narratives (Arboleda, 1998; O'Hearn, 1998; Fukuyama, 1999; Gaskins, 1999; Williams, 1992)<sup>2</sup>. However, until now there have only been a limited number of studies specifically on growing up multi-ethnic in Japan. Early studies, which dealt mainly with Amerasian children of American defense personnel, found that multi-ethnic Japanese people must deal with definitions of self as either marginal or multicultural, or indeed, assert both marginality and multiculturality at the same time as part of a healthy multi-ethnic identity (Burkhardt, 1983; Murphy-Shigematsu, 1997, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 1989). Recently other researchers have also started to focus on multi-ethnic Japanese teens whose non-Japanese parents are not from U.S. army backgrounds. For example, Greer (2003) and Kamada (2003) explore some ways in which multi-ethnic Japanese identities are discursively asserted and negotiated in everyday interaction.

Psychological models have traditionally theorized identity as innate and relatively stable, assuming that individuals will consistently link their affiliation with one social group and that their 'racial'/ethnic/cultural view of self will remain constant across time and contexts, unless they meet with an "identity crisis" (Erikson, 1968). Such approaches locate the sense of self clearly within the individual, defining 'racial' identity as "a sense of group or collective identity with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1993).

However, this view can be problematic for multi-ethnic people. An increasing number of researchers are beginning to question fixed notions of identity, not only for multi-ethnic people, but also for ethnic and social identities in general. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) work on "acts of identity" signaled the shift from conventional psychological approaches to ethnographically-informed investigations of identity in interaction. In this view, identity is co-constructed through communication with others, and does not pre-exist its expression in language.

Post-structuralist analytical approaches such as Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001) and Discursive Social Psychology (Potter, 1997, 1998; Potter & Wetherall, 1987) began to look at how people give accounts of events by drawing on various speech repertoires and how they are able to

foreground and background elements of their identities to position themselves and others by what they say (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). According to such post-structuralist inquiry, identities are not predetermined, but rather, negotiated through interaction (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2001). These approaches tend to view Discourse with a capital “D”, meaning that, by and through what they say, multi-ethnic people can draw on a range of broader sociopolitical discourses that in turn allow them to shape and assert their identities (Gee, 1999; Norton, 2000). Socially determined ideologies such as the “Discourse of Multiracial Chic” in the U.S. (Williams-Leon & Nakashima, 2001), or the “Discourse of Homogeneity” in Japan (Kamada, 2003) not only influence the way that multi-ethnic Japanese people see themselves, but can also be claimed or contested to “challenge traditional racial logic and popular identity politics” (Wallace, 2004).

At the same time, socio-pragmatic micro-analytic approaches, such as Conversation Analysis, view discourse (with a small “d”), to mean any sequence of utterances which is used to perform some social action (Schiffrin, 1994). In everyday talk, identities are indexed, occasioned and accomplished through interaction and can in turn be used as tools to facilitate ongoing communication (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Social constructs like ethnicity and ‘race’ are neither predetermined nor immutable (Bailey, 2002; Lo, 1999), and broader socio-political discourses only become relevant for the ethnomethodological analyst to the extent that they are demonstrably utilized as resources in the ongoing talk by the speakers themselves (Widdicombe, 1998).

The present study will draw on elements of both these research traditions in analyzing the way that multi-ethnic Japanese identities are contextually accomplished through and by language. In line with the above assumptions, I will adopt Bucholtz and Halls’ (2005) deliberately broad definition of identity as “the social positioning of self and other” (2005, p. 586). By referring to identity as a discursive “accomplishment” (Day, 1998; Firth, 1996; Zimmerman, 1998), I mean to firmly locate social interaction as the site at which identity is performed, negotiated and co-constructed, and to counter the widely held perception that identity is primarily an immutable and internal state. As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) note, membership in a particular category group “is ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored) in local places and at certain times, and it does these things as part of the interactional work that constitutes peoples lives” (1998, p. 2). We may well have internalized, private thoughts about who we are, but it is only through interaction that our social identities become relevant to others. In other words, identity is either reaffirmed or accomplished anew in each and every conversation we have with other people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is part of an ongoing hybrid ethnographic/ethnomethodological investigation into bilingual interaction and identity in an international school in Hokkaido, Japan (Greer, 2001, 2003). The wider study involved researcher observations, collected over a period of two years, including video recordings of natural conversations, document analysis, interviews and focus group discussions. It aims to document ways in which multi-ethnic identity is made relevant in everyday conversation, including codeswitching and membership categorization. The present paper is based mainly on data collected

during the focus group sessions and primarily documents how the participants reported their experience of identity. In the wider study, this data is used to complement ethnomethodological analysis of identity performance in natural interaction.

## Participants

The key consultants were multi-ethnic Japanese (MEJ) teenagers between the ages of 15 and 18. The majority of those in focus groups 1 and 2 had a Japanese mother and an American father and reported that Japanese was their stronger language, though most were also fluent in English and spoke a mix of both languages at home.

A third focus group session was held with students who did not at first appear to fit Japanese society's traditional notions of '*haafu*', but who, for various reasons, I came to consider as 'multi-ethnic Japanese' nonetheless. Like the other groups, each had one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent, but they faced additional challenges in trying to assert their 'half-Japanese' identity. May's<sup>3</sup> father was North Korean, so she appeared no different from other Japanese people and did not speak English at home. Likewise, Gino's father was Asian, although he had been raised in Germany and Gino himself was born in Italy and raised largely in France. On the other hand, Anja's father was third generation Japanese but of Russian descent, which meant that although she held Japanese citizenship by birth, other people often identified her as 'Caucasian' or '*gaijin*'. I felt justified in including such people in the study due to the fact that each had a Japanese and a non-Japanese parent, and my initial decision to refer to the participants as "multi-ethnic Japanese" instead of '*haafu*' seemed particularly warranted with regard to this group.

For a brief summary of the participants' backgrounds based on information reported by the students in a simple personal history survey, see Table 1 on the following page. Two other focus groups were also carried out (a) with the participants' teachers and (b) with a group of non-Japanese students at the school in order to compare the multi-ethnic Japanese experience of life in the international school with that of other groups, as well as to explore several other issues that are touched on in the wider study. Data from these two groups is not included in the present analysis. The main aim of these data sessions was to confirm and strengthen findings based on the naturalistic observation data I collected in the wider study. I was interested first and foremost in how the students perform various aspects of their identities in everyday conversations, but the data sessions were intended to give the students an opportunity to comment more directly on the way they saw themselves as multi-ethnic Japanese people and how their bilingualism related to their construction of self.

**TABLE 1: Focus Group Participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Years at International School	Mother's Nationality	Father's Nationality	Stronger Language	Language(s) Spoken at Home
<b>Focus Group 1</b>						
Mick	17	4	Japanese	U.S.A.	Japanese	Japanese & English
BJ	16	12	Japanese	U.S.A.	English	Japanese & English
Nina	17	5	Japanese	U.K.	Japanese	Japanese & English
Kate	17	13	Japanese	U.S.A.	Japanese	Japanese
Mia	16	7	U.S.A	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese & English
<b>Focus Group 2</b>						
Peter	15	3	Japanese	U.K.	Japanese	Japanese & English
Ulianni	17	1	Japanese	U.S.A. (MEJ*)	Japanese	Japanese
Leah	16	10	Japanese	U.S.A. (MEJ*)	Japanese	Japanese & English
Sean	15	3	Japanese	Canadian	Japanese	Japanese & English
<b>Focus Group 3</b>						
May	17	12	Japanese	North Korean	Japanese	Japanese & Korean
Gino	16	10 (at various international schools in Japan and France)	Japanese	Vietnamese & German	French	Japanese, French & English
Anja	17	12	U.S.A.	Japanese (of Russian descent)	English	Japanese & English

**NOTE:** MEJ = Multi-ethnic Japanese

### Research Questions

The focus group discussions sought to consider the following three questions.

- \* In what way do the participants see themselves as Japanese and/or non-Japanese?
- \* In their experiences, how do other people perceive multi-ethnic Japanese?
- \* What part does language play in shaping their multi-ethnic identities?

## Data Collection

Although I had initially planned to conduct the sessions by asking a detailed list of questions, after trial in a pilot study it was determined that this caused the sessions to become more like a group interview, with the facilitator controlling the discussion. Instead it was decided to use the discussion facilitation device shown in Figure 2. Before the conversation began, participants were requested to select from two opposing statements on the device. Then, they were given two colored cards that corresponded to each of the binary oppositions and were instructed to use these to display their answer as they discussed their individual rationales for each choice. It was found that this procedure encouraged more talk among the participants themselves and reduced the role of the researcher in leading discussion.

**FIGURE 2: Discussion Facilitation Device**

*Check one box (yellow or green) for each pair of statements. There are no correct answers.*

Yellow		Green	
People are shocked when they find out my father/mother is not Japanese.			Most people I meet don't have any particular reaction when I tell them I'm 'haafu'.
Most Japanese people think I'm the same as them.			Most Japanese people think I'm different from them.
I really don't mind where or when I speak English.			There are times and places I prefer not to speak English.
I can't imagine living with just one language.			I would still feel the same if I couldn't speak Japanese.
Using <i>Champon</i> doesn't mean anything in particular to me.			Using <i>Champon</i> helps to show others who I am.
I see myself as Japanese.			I don't see myself as Japanese.

When filling out the discussion facilitation device, the participants often seemed to experience difficulty in selecting just one polarized statement. Most were able to empathize with both positions and, as outlined in the analysis below, preferred to adopt a middle ground that accommodated a situated understanding of how they saw themselves. The study is not concerned with which of the answers was selected and makes no attempt to quantify the results. Its findings instead are qualitative, based on the participants' reasons behind their choices, and the discussions about multi-ethnic identity that arose from this tool.

Each group discussion lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and the conversations were transcribed, coded for content and analyzed according to a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

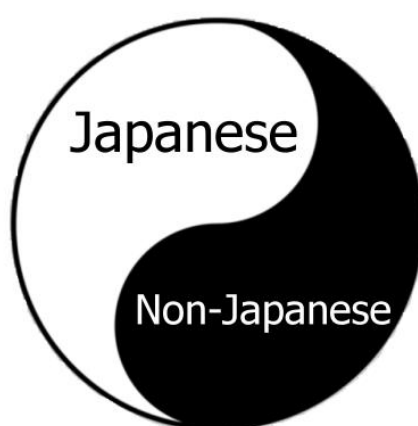
## RECONCEPTUALIZING ‘HAAFU’

Throughout these discussions, the participants frequently related their experiences with the multi-ethnic paradox as they found it both in Japan and abroad. Complementary oppositions manifest themselves in various aspects of the participants’ lives. Their access to English means they are at once both privileged and marginalized within Japanese society. Their appearance is often interpreted as ‘Western’ in Japan, but ‘Asian’ when they travel to their non-Japanese parent’s home country. The very fact that they have two passports is often thought to be inconsistent with common perceptions of Japanese nationality. Yet the participants themselves routinely reported that they felt alternatively (and / or simultaneously) Japanese and non-Japanese.

A stereotypical view of the notion of ‘*haafu*’ depicts a half-Japanese person as somehow being split evenly between their two cultures, which may even lead multi-ethnic people to see themselves that way, as evidenced by the self-portrait at the start of this paper (Figure 1). However, the narratives of the participants in my study revealed instead the experience of being ‘*haafu*’ as one which was fluid, shifting and context-reliant, more akin to stirring cream into coffee than it was to placing facets of their identity into two distinct boxes. These symbiotic dualities harmonize within a whole person who is competent in not just half of his or her cultures, but in both. At the same time, he or she is aware that this balance frequently shifts back and forth according to context and can create a third distinctive culture which typifies the experience of living in and between two worlds.

Inspired by Wenger’s work on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), I began to conceptualize this apparent inconsistency in terms of the well-known Taoist<sup>4</sup> yin yang symbol (Figure 3), whereby two entities are separate and flexible, yet interlock to create a unified whole.

**FIGURE 3: A Reconceptualization of ‘*Haafu*’ to a Fluid Notion of Multi-Ethnicity**



The swirling shape of the yin yang design symbolizes the idea that the extremes are in constant motion and not necessarily in readily discernible balance, while the two smaller circles inside the black and white swirls remind the viewer that nothing is always completely yin or yang, and that elements of

each can be apparent within something that is seemingly opposite. Together these two differing elements constitute a balanced whole.

In this paper I will draw on these notions to theorize multi-ethnic identity in terms of such coexistent opposites. Rather than depicting multi-ethnic Japanese people as either Japanese or non-Japanese on some linear continuum, or as two discrete categories, the yin yang notion permits us to see identity as both contradictory and complementary. Building on this metaphor, my analysis will explore some of the fluid dualities and complementary mutualisms that are part of the multi-ethnic Japanese experience.

### **Being Both Japanese and Non-Japanese**

At the most fundamental level, Figure 3 attempts to depict the way in which the participants described their ethnic identity during our discussions. They were reluctant to identify themselves as Japanese, at least in the sense that most people commonly understand 'Japanese-ness'. To the participants, ethnicity involved at least some mention of all their constituent ethnicities, but this did not prevent them from seeing themselves as both fully Japanese as well as non-Japanese to varying extents. As Anja summed up, "*Datte*, [But] I'm more than just Japanese" (FG3:28)<sup>5</sup>.

Most viewed the possession of multiple world views as unproblematic to their own definition of what it meant to be Japanese. The members in Gino's focus group saw nothing remarkable when he asserted, "I'm Japanese and I can talk Japanese so no one cares—just I can talk French and English and I have a different culture. That's all." (FG3:4). Yet to most Japanese people, having a different culture (or even a different language) ordinarily excludes a person from being Japanese, at least in the typical sense. While social or national myths of homogeneity dictate to most Japanese that they are monocultural (Miller, 1982; Noguchi, 2001), at the international school where the study was carried out, the vast majority of students who identified themselves as Japanese did so with some proviso. Nina, for example, while recognizing her dual heritage in many different ways, felt more Japanese when she was overseas, such as when she spent a year in Britain while her father, a university professor, was on sabbatical in 2001. Reflecting on her experiences abroad, she said, "In the future *dokka tatoeba London e ittara tabun watashi wa nihonjin*" [In the future, if I go someplace like London I'll probably be Japanese] (FG2:35).

Some, however, felt that their Japanese ancestry was unavoidable and had no hesitation in embracing it as their own. BJ maintained that since he was born in Japan and had only ever lived in Japan, it was natural that he thought of himself as Japanese. Kate, on the other hand, placed emphasis on her physical appearance and language proficiency as her main motivations for viewing herself as Japanese. She resembles her Japanese mother more than her American father, and as she declared in the focus group, she "look(s) the most Japanese" of the multi-ethnic students in her session. In addition, Kate only speaks Japanese at home, and the fact that her parents are divorced probably results in fewer non-Japanese influences on her outside of school hours. She reported that, apart from her school friends, she also associates with a range of Japanese friends from other schools. These may account for some of the reasons she comes to the conclusion, "*watashi wa Nihonjin*" [I am Japanese] (FG2:35).

Still others preferred to avoid any attempts to have them categorize themselves in terms of pre-

existing macro-social categories. May saw herself as “everything”, and maintained that the focus group session was the first time she had actually thought about this issue. In response to comments on his Japanese appearance by members in his group, Mick claimed he was “a totally new species” (FG1:9). I suspect that he had probably used this comment before in other situations where the topics of ‘race’, ethnicity and culture had forced him to reflect on his heritage.

Like Mick, many of the participants had a rehearsed repertoire of responses to call upon in such situations. Mick’s responses were intentionally evasive, perhaps indicating a reluctance to talk about ‘race’. In fact, the comment above occurred in a sequence where he had stated that others are shocked when they discover he is Japanese. Personally I found this surprising, since I considered his features more Japanese and others in the group seemed to judge him in the same way. His peers maintained at the time that he was just trying to be seen as an American. This conversation highlighted the notion that identities are not only claimed by individuals, but also rejected and bestowed by those around them.

While Gino’s eclectic attitude to ethnic identity took form in his simple summary, “I’m both. I’m all” (FG3: 32), there were also several occasions where he discursively portrayed himself as different from ‘normal’ Japanese by invoking we/they dichotomies in which he positioned himself as non-Japanese. His use of the third person plural pronoun “they” included statements such as “they don’t know how to say *la* or *ra*” (in reference to Japanese pronunciation, FG3:8) or “they don’t have originality” (in reference to Japanese collectivism, FG3:18). On the other hand, when Gino used “we” it was more often to cast himself as a student of the international school, such as in the following statement; “The problem of international school *tte sore da yo ne* [is that, isn’t it?] We must learn English but we talk as you like in... Japanese” (FG3:14). Such use of pronouns provides evidence that Gino saw himself as non-Japanese even if he was not fully aware that he was making these distinctions.

Some of the participants were adamant that they were not Japanese. Ulianni made the following claim: “My Japanese is good but I don’t feel Japanese”. Brought up in a rural Hokkaido town, Ulianni had only been attending the international school for about a year. Her father is ‘half-Japanese’ and she has many friends and relatives in Hawaii, but until the 11th grade she attended a conventional Japanese high school. For this reason, her bilingualism was perhaps the least balanced of the group and she still attended ESL classes even in the 12th grade. Even so, in her previous school her accent during English classes was sufficiently competent for her to be singled out from her Japanese peers. Her teacher cast her in the lead role of the school’s English play, but this only meant that her differences were made even more public and she was ostracized [*ijimerareta*] by her schoolmates to the point that she refused to go to class [*toko kyohi*], hiding instead in the bike racks or the toilet.

Leah and Peter both related similar incidents they had been through at Japanese public schools. Although international school environments are not immune to episodes of peer intimidation, such attacks are less likely to be based on language proficiency or ‘foreign’ appearance, since bilingualism and multi-ethnic experiences are far more common among students in these institutions. Ulianni reported that she felt more accepted in the international school since she no longer stood out as being different.

Some participants reported that their personal habits and idiosyncrasies were responsible for making them feel either Japanese or ‘foreign’. Anja, for example, said, “I walk Japanese.” She had obviously noticed, or been told, that she didn’t walk in the same way as Americans. Although she didn’t expand on her comment any further in our discussion, the laughter Anja’s comment provoked from the others seemed to bear witness to some affinity with this type of experience. Generally speaking, Japanese teenage girls tend to remain “child-like” for longer than teenagers in Western countries. Sometimes this is manifested in the way they walk. A heavy, flat-footed gait is one way for Japanese girls to express the feminine quality of *kawairashisa* [cuteness]. Besides making a pun on the more commonly heard comment “I talk Japanese”, by bringing up the fact that she “walks Japanese”, Anja was recognizing that she has internalized particular cultural traits that distinguish her from her non-Japanese heritage, despite the fact that her physical appearance is no different from that of many white Americans.

## Ethnification

A recurring theme to emerge from the focus group data was what Day (1998) has termed *ethnification*, or “ethnic identity as a situated accomplishment of interlocutors” (1998, p. 151). The participants reported a variety of ways that their ethnicity was made relevant in and through everyday talk. When others made reference to linguistic and cultural differences, they often discursively positioned (Bucholtz, 1999; Harre & van Langenhove, 1999) multi-ethnic Japanese people as ‘privileged’ or ‘marginalized’, as well as cultural ‘experts’ or ‘novices’.

Even when multi-ethnic people are comfortable with their own sense of self, the opinions of those around them are an undeniable influence in challenging those identities. In the focus groups, the participants reported that ethnification and ascriptions from others were often at odds with the way they viewed themselves, causing them to rethink and reshape their identities. The ways in which their appearance and behavior were interpreted meant they were routinely ethnified as either Japanese or non-Japanese, which in turn left them feeling both privileged and marginalized. Nina expressed this facet of the multi-ethnic paradox in the following way:

*Dakara* for me, I’m just human, but for other people I’m different. I’m half. *Watashi, watashi haafu na no mitai no janakute, watashi wa watashi da kedo, mawari ni wa chigau to iu no wa* my concept of half.  
(Nina, FG2: 18)

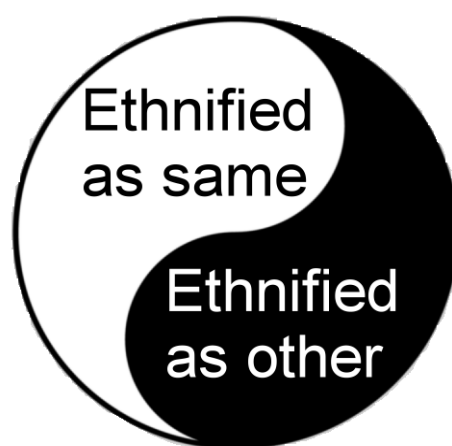
*Like* for me, I’m just human, but for other people I’m different. I’m half. *It’s not like I go around saying I’m half. I’m just me. But to those around me I’m different. That’s my concept of half.*

Being positioned as ‘*haafu*’ has much in common with being positioned as ‘*gaijin*’ [‘foreigner’]. In both cases, the speaker is ethnifying someone as ‘other’ by dwelling on physical or cultural differences. Implicit in such ethnification is the comparison to the ethnifier’s own culture or ethnicity, which serves to re-confirm his or her own normalcy, a phenomenon that has been widely described in the post-colonial and cultural studies literature as “othering” (Ang, 1994; Bammer, 1994).

By the same token, however, multi-ethnic Japanese people are also by definition Japanese and are not always consistently positioned as ‘other’ by those around them. In many ways they have undergone

typical Japanese upbringings, and those who know them often treat them no differently from other Japanese in most contexts. In this sense, they have the potential to be ethnified as either ‘same’ or ‘other’, again in a manner that is constantly shifting according to discursive context, as illustrated in Figure 4.

**FIGURE 4: Ways of Being Ethnified**



Phenotypical appearance played a major role in determining the way others reacted to the participants in first contact situations. Those participants who took after their foreign parent reported that they were more often treated as non-Japanese, making it difficult for them to assert a Japanese identity. Mia maintained that many people mistook her for a ‘*gaijin*’ when they first met her, saying, “people are always shocked when they find out that ... my father is Japanese. They think I’m completely European. Or Spanish or American” (FG2: 4).

Nina was also regularly judged as foreign due to her appearance:

I get mistaken for any culture, actually, except black or Indian. I was on a Japanese train and a Spanish person talked to me in Spanish. I was at the airport, (and) a French person talks to me in French and I just get so many nationalities talking to me. On the one hand it seems like I don’t fit into any culture’s face, but on the other hand, ... everybody thinks I’m like that. (Nina, FG1: 28)

Here again, Nina seems to be recognizing that the multi-ethnic paradox helps define and reveal her dual heritage.

For those who looked more like their Japanese parent, the reaction from Japanese people was less extreme. Kate, whose physical appearance is almost indistinguishable from many mainstream Japanese, summed it up in the word “*yappari*”, a word that is used when a prior supposition is discovered to be true. She reported that the reaction from Japanese “is not so much like ... a shock, but more like ah, *I thought so*” [*Betsu ni, nanka*, it’s not so much like a shock, *to iu ka, ah yappari*] (FG2:6). The participants maintained that not everyone they met was astonished to learn that they were ‘*haafu*’,

but they did report a range of reactions. Whether extreme or not, “there’s nobody who has no particular reaction. They always have some kind of reaction” (Nina, FG2:6).

However, in some ways multi-ethnic Japanese from ‘biracial’ families were the easiest for others to fathom. Those who were not visibly ambiguous reported the most intense reactions from the Japanese people around them. Anja, who does not appear ‘Asian’ at all, regularly met with a shocked reaction when she told others she was Japanese. In fact, since Gino was a fairly recent arrival at the school, the focus group session was the first time he heard that Anja was Japanese. This led to a brief discussion of her family history, including how her (Russian) grandfather was born on the ship on the way to Japan and how her ‘Caucasian’ father had only Japanese citizenship. Her pat response to people who don’t consider her Japanese was, “Believe me, I am. I have papers” (FG3:2, 3). Contested claims to ethnicity are a frequent occurrence among second and third generation minorities in multicultural societies like Australia or Canada, but in Japan, a white Japanese person is so rare as to necessitate a declaration of possession of credentials in order to placate the inquisitor. In Anja’s case, despite a face to the contrary, her proof of ID would be a passport, not an alien registration card. In Japan, nationality is often misconstrued as equivalent to ethnicity, and it is worthy to note that Anja saw the need to evoke nationality in this case in order to justify her claim to ethnicity<sup>6</sup>.

May found herself on the other side of the same coin. With a Japanese mother and a (North) Korean father, she was able to pass freely as Japanese, revealing aspects of her multi-ethnic identity according to her own agenda. In most daily situations this meant that her interaction outside the school was no different than any other Japanese person. As May put it, in a convenience store she was totally Japanese (FG3:13). It was generally only to close friends that she chose to reveal her father’s ethnic heritage, at which time the disbelief from Japanese people could be as intense as it was with Anja. However, in an international school where hyphenated ethnicities abound, being Japanese-Korean was not as problematic as it may have been in a conventional Japanese school. Although outside the scope of the present study, multi-ethnic Japanese of Asian heritage clearly face an additional set of challenges as an invisible minority.

The participants also noted that ethnification often depended on which country they happened to be in at the time. In Japan all white foreigners were typically seen, at least initially, as American, which meant that multi-ethnic Japanese like Nina and Peter, who identified themselves as British-Japanese, were forced to contest the assumptions people made about them. On the other hand, when they were in the UK, people tended to focus on their Asian features. In Nina’s words,

so we’re not Japanese here, we’re Americans, but when you went to England everybody was like, “There’s like no European blood in you guys. You’re so Japanese, so Chinese.” (Nina, FG1:24)

Thus, multi-ethnic Japanese people whose appearance is ambiguous in terms of prevailing ‘racial’ stereotypes may find that members of the dominant social group in whatever country they find themselves tend to focus on those features that are least like them.

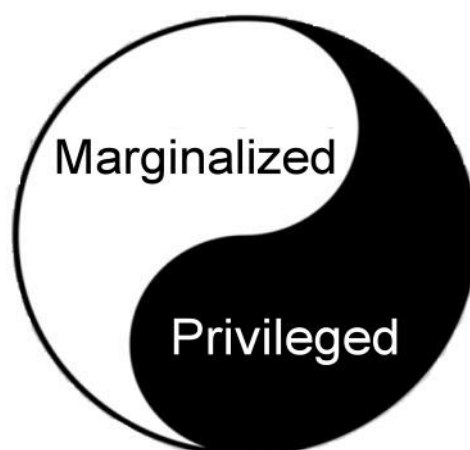
Perhaps because they were more familiar with Japanese social mores, the focus groups reported that the ethnification that they faced in Western countries was worse than the way they were treated in Japan. It irritated them that non-Japanese people think all Asians look the same and they marveled at the stupidity of people who don't understand the difference between Chinese and Japanese (FG1:26). Nina reported,

One student in England said, "Now I understand the difference between Japanese and Chinese. Chinese people have thin eyes and you have big eyes; therefore, Japanese people must have big eyes." (Nina, FG1:25)

Such comparisons were particularly hurtful when expressed as racial epithets such as 'Chinkie' (Greer, 2003), but Nina and Peter saw any attempt to ethnify them as Chinese as offensive, partly for its ignorance and partly because Chinese are a marginalized minority in Japan with whom the participants do not regularly identify.

This leads to another clear difference between ethnification in Japan and Britain. As Nina noted, "When we were in England we were called... Chinkies, but over here we're Americans. Basically the Japanese people think foreign equals American" (FG1:23). The difference between being categorized as 'Chinkie' or 'American' is immense. Essentially, outside Japan the participants' multi-ethnicity often meant they were looked down on, whereas in Japan it was seen as a mark of privilege, even if it put them into a marginalized group (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5: Ethnification as Both Marginalization and Privilege**



The participants reported that language was also used for ethnification. Although all of the participants were bilingual to varying degrees, they frequently reported that others used such linguistic competence to position them as different. Competence in the English language provides multi-ethnic Japanese with access to privileges outside the realm of most Japanese people's experience, but it also denotes them as being different from 'normal' Japanese.

Nina voiced this aspect of the paradox with “*Haafu, ii na~*” [A *haafu*? I’m so jealous], a phrase she seems to have heard many times throughout her life. On the surface, such an utterance implies a sense of mild envy, but it also makes relevant the difference between the speaker and the recipient. Many of the participants resented being typified as worldly or authoritative, especially when they hadn’t lived outside Japan or completely mastered English.

At the same time, the participants reported that Japanese people often discursively positioned them by ascribing non-Japanese or novice attributes, assuming they do not have normal Japanese cultural proficiencies. Reproduced below is an impromptu tongue-in-cheek performance<sup>7</sup> which Nina gave during her group’s discussion, apparently designed as a compilation of a variety of ethnic positionings heard from Japanese people throughout her life and demonstrating her awareness that people were treating her as non-Japanese.

*Natto taberu no? Aa erai ne.*  
*Ohashi tsukaeru no? Aa!*  
*Sushi oishii desu ka?*  
*Foku wo yoi shimasu ka?*  
(Nina, FG2:7)

Oh you eat natto<sup>8</sup>? What a good girl!  
And you can use chopsticks? Wow!  
Do you like the taste of sushi?  
Can I get you a fork?

Nina infers that this is quoted speech from a Japanese source by presenting it in that language. The comment is both polite and condescending, including polite speech (*ohashi, yoi shimasu ka*) that indicates social distance between the speaker and Nina (as the recipient) in combination with expressions of social asymmetry like *erai ne* that depict the recipient as childlike.

Iino (1996) terms such discursive ethnification as “Gaijinization”. He notes that the proficient use of chopsticks or the ability to eat *natto* (the very things that Nina lists in her depiction) are “Japanese identity markers” (1996, p. 235) and are invoked as a means of reaffirming cultural identity. Because Nina is Japanese, she has access to such cultural codes and knows that they are generally applied only to foreigners. She realizes that when they are being applied to her, it likewise casts her as non-Japanese. Such ascriptions will be familiar to any non-Japanese who has lived in Japan more than a year, but when they are directed at multi-ethnic Japanese it means that they are being treated with the same ‘novice’ status Japanese reserve for outsiders. At the same time they are being praised, multi-ethnic Japanese are aware that being ascribed non-Japanese attributes is ultimately discursively marginalizing them.

On the other hand, during my field observations at the international school, the multi-ethnic students were regularly called on by non-Japanese peers to explain aspects of Japanese culture and language. Undeniably the same was probably true in situations where Japanese speakers needed to know about the English language. Thus, their bilingual proficiency and bicultural knowledge allowed multi-ethnic Japanese to be viewed as situated ‘experts’ in certain contexts.

In this way, multi-ethnic Japanese are paradoxically positioned as novices to Japanese culture in some instances, but experts on both Japanese and Western (English) language and culture in others, as illustrated in Figure 6.

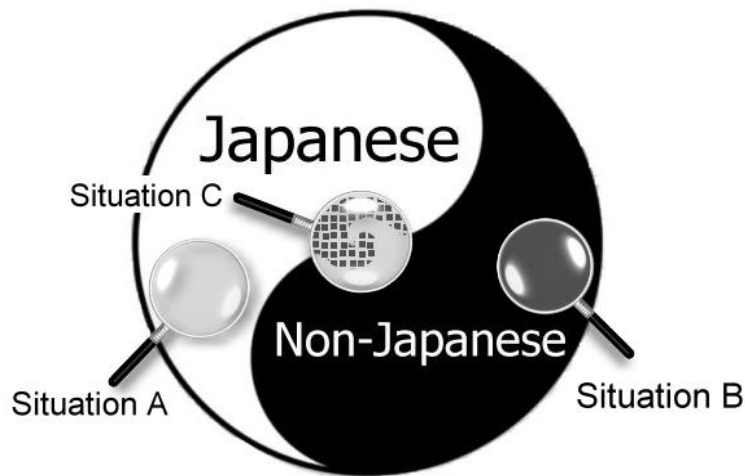
**FIGURE 6: The Paradox of Multic-Ethnic Expertise**



## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored the paradox of multi-ethnic identity in Japanese contexts. By positing a dynamic model of what it means to be '*haafu*', I have attempted to depict the effervescent form of ethnic identity that reveals the multi-ethnic Japanese experience. While my analysis does not deny the dualities inherent in such an experience, it also recognizes that the various aspects that make up identity are situated in everyday talk and mutually accomplished, assumed and ascribed through social interaction with others. It is hoped that this analysis will help readers and ultimately multi-ethnic Japanese themselves begin to reconceptualize the notion of '*haafu*' as one that is fluid, vibrant and yet complete.

**FIGURE 7: Ethnic Positioning in Three Different Discursive Situations**



A yin yang style metaphor has been applied in theorizing these dualities. As depicted in Figure 7, in any specific discursive context, multi-ethnic people may be considered (by themselves or those around them) to be either completely Japanese or completely non-Japanese (Situations A and B). There will also be discursive moments at the intermingled edges of ethnicity such as situation C, in which their multi-ethnic '*haafu*' identity is "the relevant thing" (Edwards, 1998) about them. Applying a magnifying glass to specific micro-contexts such as individual conversations can help reveal the interplay between ethnicities that go to make up the multi-ethnic experience. Adding this multitude of experiences together ultimately results in an individual ethnic identity which is simultaneously Japanese and non-Japanese, a seemingly paradoxical existence which suggests a third world view that is unique to multi-ethnic people. Finally, a significant part of the yin yang metaphor is the ring that encircles the constituent parts, indicating that the individual is not just 'half', but a complete whole. Being multi-ethnic is not an either/or choice but a both/and experience.

## NOTES

- \* This paper was originally presented in a colloquium at JALT 2004 and an abridged version was published in the conference proceedings.
- 1. Throughout this paper I will use single quotes to mark socially constructed categories such as '*haafu*' and 'race' as problematic. If the reader finds these irritating, I apologize. How much more irritating must it be for multi-ethnic people to have to these categories applied to them daily in an uncontested way?
- 2. See Greer (2001) for a more comprehensive review of the literature.
- 3. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants in order to protect their privacy.
- 4. My intention in using the yin yang symbol here is not to espouse any religious, political or philosophical agenda. I am employing it simply as a metaphor for theorizing multi-ethnic identity.
- 5. In this paper I will reference any of the participants' statements that I quote directly by listing the number of the focus group session and the page of the transcript in which the quote appears. FG3:28 therefore refers to Focus Group 3, page 28. The quotations have mainly been rendered in English, but italics indicate that the original utterance was in Japanese. In such cases the original can be found in brackets after the italicized segments.
- 6. I take nationality to refer to the country or countries where a person holds citizenship, while I understand ethnicity in terms of a person's social heritage. An ethnic group is one that (a) shares

- common origins, (b) claims a common history, (c) possesses a collective cultural identity and (d) feels a sense of distinct collective solidarity (Gatt, et al., 2001).
7. For convenience this quote has been rendered here as one utterance, but in the original transcript it is interspersed with laughter and short responses from the other participants.
  8. Fermented soybeans. *Natto* has a distinct odor and taste and is considered a typical Japanese food, despite the fact that many Japanese themselves dislike the taste. Non-Japanese who can eat *natto* are applauded for their feat of extreme acculturation.

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