

A “Community of Comothers”: How Friendships with Expatriate Mothers Create Intercultural Understanding

Meredith Stephens

Many mothers ... feel part of a community of comothers whose warmth and support is rarely equalled in other working relationships.

—Sara Ruddick 343

As an Australian expatriate mother in Japan, I formed friendships not only with Japanese mothers but also with Chinese, British, Kenyan, American, Canadian, Argentinian, Filipina, and Russian mothers. The experience of raising children in a foreign country created a bond with these mothers that transcended cultural differences. This connects to Lynn O’Brien Hallstein’s experiences as an expatriate mother in Switzerland when she explains how her expatriate friendships were a source of sustenance and cultural diversity. Similarly, Erika de Jong Watanabe, an expatriate mother in Japan, expresses her gratitude to the community of foreign women and their children that she belonged to. This chapter explores my friendships with other mothers that may not have been created so quickly if we had

been in our own countries with our extended family support systems. Now that our children have grown, many of us remain firm friends, despite the original reason for our friendship no longer being so compelling.

My entry into motherhood coincided with the time when my spouse found a teaching contract in Japan. He relocated before me, and I followed him once the doctor had given me the all clear to travel when my daughter Eloise was eight weeks old. This happened at one of the most vulnerable times in my life—the timing of the birth of my first child coincided with separation from friends and family.

Once I arrived in Japan with Eloise, the first friendships I formed were with Japanese mothers in the neighbourhood. They helped me navigate the Japanese medical system, took me shopping, and taught me to make Japanese baby food by boiling rice until it turned into a thick soup known as *okayu*. They taught me things such as how to make Japanese dishes, such as fried rice and Japanese-style pizza. They were very thoughtful, buying baby clothes for Eloise or leaving freshly baked bread at my door. They shared their language with me and in so doing invited me to use the Japanese language skills I had worked so hard over many years at school and university to achieve. More than two decades later—well after our children have grown—they continue to share their precious, endlessly challenging language with me.

These Japanese mothers helped me adjust to life in Japan, but there were other mothers—expatriate mothers—who also served an important role in my adjustment. The expatriate mothers enhanced my ability to adapt to the demands of childrearing in Japan because of our shared position as outsiders. Unlike Japanese mothers, most expatriate mothers have been uprooted from the usual support of mothers, sisters, and those of their partners. Expatriate mothers in Japan must navigate health and education systems in Japanese, and the accompanying language shift entails a cultural shift. A new language embodies different values and assumptions, cross-cultural differences that must be negotiated by expatriate mothers from all backgrounds. Accordingly, expatriate mothers tend to educate each other about the health and education systems, and these shared concerns of mothers override cultural differences. As Rachel Epp Buller states, “I idealistically believe that any two mothers might find some common experience through which to discourse” (186), and as Sara Ruddick argues,

compellingly, "Many mothers, whatever their work in the public world, feel part of a community of comothers whose warmth and support is rarely equalled in other working relationships" (344).

In this discussion, "community" refers to a group of people with shared interests and goals, who meet in person to offer and receive support. Sherry Turkle explains that the literal meaning of community is "to give among each other" (238). She stresses the real-life nature of community as opposed to the virtual world: "Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways" (239). Similarly, Susan Pinker stresses the importance of physical proximity in building relationships, elucidating the power of face-to-face social contact in real-time in her exposition of *The Village Effect*. She argues that social bonds are just as transformative as breakthroughs in diet, exercise, and pharmaceutical drugs, highlighting the power of close contact with others, particularly with women.

Belonging to such a community may even transcend cultural belonging because the needs of the present are so compelling. The reality of caring for children in the present time and space in the host culture is a powerful force in the formation of a community. One such learning community in Japan is an English-language circle for English-speaking children attending public Japanese preschools and elementary schools, which has evolved into a cooperative learning circle (Thompson). Parents took turns teaching their subject areas to the children in the community. An expatriate community of comothers in Japan also appeared in Suzanne Kamata's fiction. One of her short stories ("Polishing the Halo") featured a group of expatriate comothers who met at the Foreign Wives Club and who offered the protagonist support when she disclosed to them that her young daughter was deaf.

First, I will describe four of my expatriate mother friends from Canada, China, the United States, and Kenya and explain how they helped me understand not only Japanese culture but also their cultures. Second, I will discuss how my expatriate friends helped me make decisions about how to either conform to local expectations of mothers and mothering or to maintain aspects of the many and varied Western models of mothering. Three of the four mothers in this discussion are academics, and the fourth is the spouse of an academic.

How the Friendships Formed

Marie-Christine. One of my first friendships with another expatriate mother was with Marie-Christine, a Québécoise married to Taro and mother to their son, Tomo. Marie-Christine and I were the only full-time Western women on the university campus and shared the unusual features of brown hair, pale skin, and pale eyes. It is unlikely that we would be mistaken for each other in a Western country, but in Japan, these shared features were different enough from the rest of the population that some local people could not distinguish between us. Once I was publicly upbraided by a member of the clerical staff for not filling in a form correctly, and I confronted her for mistaking me for Marie-Christine. (I later regretted not having had the discretion and quick thinking to assume Marie-Christine's identity and apologise for the presumed error.) Our children attended different schools and did not have the opportunity to play together, but Marie-Christine and I often shared the tribulations of navigating our children's high school entrance exams as well as being the only Western parents of children in our children's respective schools.

As foreign mothers, we were unable to conform to all of the demands made on us by the schools (see also Kamata, "An Introduction"; Ogasahara; Jones-Nakanishi; Stigger). We could privately commiserate at the consequences of our intercultural incompetence, although I must stress that Marie-Christine in no way conformed to my slapdash approach to food preparation for children's obento lunches (see Stephens). There were many ways in which both of us struggled to conform to unfamiliar expectations. I find some comfort, if not justification, for this in Nel Noddings' explanation of the role of caring: "The commitment to caring invokes a duty to promote skepticism and noninstitutional affiliation" (103). We looked out for our children's interests in ways that cannot be expected of an institution, such as a school. Japanese schools may have as many as forty in a class, and like any other institution, there is a myriad of rules and regulations. As outsiders, there were unfamiliar rules (such as strict rules forbidding hair dyeing), and when we were perplexed as to how to support our children in conforming to these rules, we could consult each other.

Nearly twenty years later, our children have left home and now attend university, but we still maintain our friendship from each end of the island and exchange photographs and updates of our dogs on social

media. Our professional relationship has also thrived, and recently we presented together at an international congress on second language reading in Tokyo. We have been able to support each other as friends and professionals over the twenty years, and this friendship sprung from a shared position of being Western mothers of bilingual toddlers in rural Japan.

Zhi-Zhi. Once I had mastered the intricacies of daily life in Japan, I was able to help other foreign newcomers. The first mother I was able to help was a Chinese scholar at the university, who had come to Japan to research classical Chinese documents housed in Japanese libraries. My daughters were several years older than her toddler. I knew where the childcare centres were and had insider information, such as the fact that mothers have to provide futons for their child's daily nap. I did the rounds of the daycare centres with Zhi-Zhi but because of our ethnic appearances, the staff at each daycare centre thought that she was the local and I was the foreigner. Contrary to appearances, I was the Japanese speaker, and it took a while for the staff to realize that I was interpreting for her, not vice versa. This comic routine helped forge our friendship. I was later able to pass on to her baby goods that my children had grown out of. In turn, she invited my daughters and me to the best Chinese restaurant in town, staffed by resident Chinese. I was able to learn more about her research area than otherwise because of the time we spent together, resulting from the bond created by motherhood. I had made my first friend from mainland China, forged through our shared experience of expatriate mothering.

Suzanne. My hometown Adelaide, in the south of Australia, is geographically isolated, not only within Australia but also globally. An unanticipated bonus of relocating to Japan was the opportunity to make connections with expatriates from distant regions of the anglosphere. One of these friendships was with the US writer Suzanne Kamata, whose reputation had preceded her. I was delighted to learn about her from another Australian expatriate mother, who told me that a prize-winning author of fiction was living in the same city on our small island Shikoku. When I first met Suzanne, she had just published her first novel, *Losing Kei*, and over the years, I witnessed her publish a succession of novels, including *Gadget Girl*, *Screaming Divas*, *The Mermaids of Lake Michigan*, *Indigo Girl*, and the travel memoir *A Girls'*

Guide to the Islands. The pivotal moment for me was when I was invited to her creative writing workshop. Until meeting her, my writing had been confined to second language pedagogy, childhood bilingualism, and comparative education. Suzanne introduced me to the topic of expatriate motherhood, and this provided me with a channel to reflect upon and to express my experience of spending many years as a mother living on Shikoku. Not only that, but Suzanne also has an intense commitment to writing. None of my other friends or acquaintances had expressed a passion like this, and after observing Suzanne, I permitted myself to commit to writing. Suzanne had edited an anthology about expatriate motherhood, for which she provides the following rationale in her introduction: “Instead of thinking back to my own childhood or looking to the Japanese mothers around me for guidelines, I often feel the urge to consult with other mothers raising their children across cultures. Thus, this book was born” (“Introduction” 4). Suzanne’s anthology provides stories of expatriate mothers around the globe. Although I was unable to cast as widely as Suzanne in search of global voices, I was able to connect with expatriate mothers from around the globe on our small island.

Imogen. When my younger daughter Annika started middle school, I assumed that she would be the only foreign student. I was surprised and delighted to learn that there was a girl from Kenya in her class. The common experience of being foreigners was the impetus for them to reach out to each other, and they soon became best friends. Annika was English-Japanese bilingual whereas her Kenyan friend, Louise, was multilingual: Louise was proficient in English and Japanese and understood both Kikuyu and Swahili. Annika and Louise were both speakers of English and Japanese, and both of them had two foreign parents. Louise’s Japanese was so advanced that she would converse with her Kenyan mother, Imogen, in Japanese. Imogen’s Japanese was also impeccable, and she was accepted as a Japanese speaker in the local community. After Annika and Louise became friends, I developed a friendship with Imogen. Imogen was more than ten years younger than me and came from a distant culture, but the shared experience of being foreign mothers on the island of Shikoku enabled us to forge a bond. Imogen and her partner were the first expatriates from an African nation in our city, but others were to follow. They formed friendships with members of the African diaspora, and I found myself

in the happy position of being invited to African parties in Japan. I learned firsthand about their views on colonization and its legacy, about their many languages and cultures.

Our views on education differed. Imogen adhered closely to local norms in her mothering, so Louise had a strict study routine to enable her to succeed in the competitive round of examinations to enter a well-regarded high school. Because of her proficient Japanese, Imogen was more in tune with the views of Japanese mothers, and the value she placed on disciplined preparation paid off when Louise gained entry to a prestigious high school. I remained a skeptic, not to say a rebel, regarding the correlation between hours of study and academic success, and so I sent Annika to tennis lessons after school rather than cram school. As could be predicted from our parenting strategies, our daughters' educational outcomes differed. Louise maintained her work ethic throughout high school and earned a scholarship to a university in Tokyo. In contrast, my attitude towards homework did not equip Annika for success in the Japanese educational system, and she transferred to the Australian system in Year Eleven. Louise is at university in Tokyo, and Annika at university in Australia, but Imogen and I have maintained our friendship. The shared experience of expatriate motherhood in rural Japan was the impetus for friendship and cultural exchange with someone of different age and from a distant culture.

How the Community of Comothers Creates Intercultural Understanding

Epp Buller discusses the resentment many mothers feel at being judged: "Mothering is such a highly charged relational context, where one can feel judged over private decisions about breastfeeding, diapering, childcare, discipline, sleeping arrangements, and so on" (186). I will now explain how my expatriate friends helped me make my own decisions about issues such as these, particularly when I chose to conform to Japanese cultural expectations and reject my own, and vice versa. Each of the private decisions mentioned by Epp Buller varies cross-culturally and also within cultures. My friends in the community of comothers demonstrated how they balanced the expectations of the society with those of their own culture. As a result, I am in the unusual position of having raised children according to Western customs in

some aspects and Japanese tradition in others. My interactions with expatriate comothers informed my choices about breastfeeding, sleeping arrangements, education, cultural capital (fostering the language of the home), extracurricular activities, public bathing, and making local Japanese friends.

Breastfeeding. One area in which cultural differences emerged was the choice of whether to supplement breastmilk with formula as well as the timing of weaning a baby. Having had my babies in Australia, I was urged to exclusively breastfeed. Upon arrival in Japan, I was told my baby was underweight and was urged to supplement her diet with formula. This was before the days of the ease of electronic communications, and I had no support from my mother or sisters or those of my spouse. After the birth of Annika, I was relieved to make an expatriate friend whose baby was three months younger than mine. My friend confidently breastfed her baby well beyond the years when Japanese mothers breastfed theirs, and her confidence in this decision inspired me to breastfeed Annika if she wanted to.

Sleeping arrangements. My Japanese friends slept alongside their babies and other children, and their partners slept alone in another room. When I returned on visits to Australia, health professionals urged against cosleeping. The method of helping babies to sleep away from their mothers was called “controlled crying,” in which the mother would allow the baby to cry in her room for progressively longer periods before going in her room to comfort her. Allowing my baby to cry and refraining from comforting her went against my instincts, but the health professionals in Australia, and my spouse’s mother, were insistent that I persist with this. They reassured me that eventually my baby would give up crying and learn to sleep on her own. However, she refused to do this, and it was unbearable to listen to her pleas for comfort. The Japanese habit of having the baby sleep alongside the mother in her baby futon felt instinctively right. Meanwhile, in Japan, an expatriate comother had adopted the Japanese habit of having her baby sleep in her room while her partner slept in a separate room. In the end, I found a compromise and spent the next ten years sleeping in the parents’ room and moving over to the children’s room whenever I heard a cry. I used to boast to my friends at my martyrdom at not having had unbroken sleep for ten years. Perhaps my partner’s mother

had been right.

Education. The first educational choice concerned kindergarten. My expatriate friends and I would spend hours debating the merits and demerits of each kindergarten. Kindergarten is spread over three years in Japan, between ages three and six. The many private kindergartens are based on varying educational philosophies. One kindergarten was Montessori based, in which classes consist of mixed age groups. Children wore a navy-blue serge uniform, and mothers had to provide a smock. Another kindergarten stressed the value of free play in natural surroundings, and children were allowed to soil their clothes. Without the discussion in English with my expatriate friends, I would have been ill equipped to make an informed choice or to critically consider the philosophical underpinnings of each kindergarten.

The next choice to be deliberated was to find a primary school. As our children were visibly identified as being different and as we were living on a sparsely populated island, they would attract attention from others. The size of the school was important; in a large school, there would be more people looking at them and making comments about them. An expatriate friend considered that a small primary school would be best because the smaller community would acclimatize themselves to our foreign children and perhaps forget their foreignness. Upon relocation to a city at the other end of Shikoku, I followed my expatriate friend’s advice and enrolled my child in the smallest school within walking distance. This decision proved to be astute. Annika was tall for her age, and fair, and her appearance was so different from the Japanese children that I could easily identify her from a distance. The school was in the inner city, in a town in which the centre had been hollowed out: Younger families had built houses in the suburbs, known as “the doughnut phenomenon.” The inner-city school was so small that there was only one class for each grade, consisting of only about twenty students each. My expatriate friend’s advice proved to be right. The Japanese children quickly became friends with my daughter and, I believe, came to see past her foreignness.

Cultural capital. Anna Kurokcycka-Shultz refers to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital to explain how mothers transmit skills to their children in the interests of upward mobility. She identifies the home language as a form of cultural capital that mothers can confer on their

children by interacting with them exclusively in that language. I shared the desire to foster the home language and culture with expatriate comothers. This shared value served to strengthen our friendship as we compared our choice of the languages we used to address our children.

Extracurricular activities. Another form of cultural capital involved our choices of extracurricular activities for our children. Japanese mothering shares many of the features described by Linda Rose Ennis (*Intensive Mothering*), such as putting the children's needs before the mother's and doing the children's laundry and lunches. The exception is chauffeuring children because Japanese children tend to walk or cycle to school and extracurricular activities by themselves. The mother does bear responsibility for her children's educational outcomes. As Ennis explains: "One of the best ways to be an intensive mother is by introducing and involving one's child in many extra-curricular activities, even if one can't afford to do so or even if one is physically and emotionally drained" ("Epilogue" 334). In Japan, many primary-school children attend supplementary classes in academic subjects, such as maths, Japanese, and English as well as traditional subjects, such as calligraphy and abacus. Many learn the piano or violin, sports such as swimming, basketball, and tennis, and ballet. O'Brien Hallstein rightly observes that "The intensive ideology works to regulate women by demanding impossible-for-most-women-to-meet standards of mothering" (107). I compared myself to Japanese mothers, who prioritized enrolling their children in supplementary education in academic subjects. Although I worried about my children falling behind in maths and Japanese, I could not bring myself to have them continue to study academic subjects at the end of the long school day. As a Westerner, the importance of rest and the temporal boundaries between work and play were too deeply ingrained for me to subscribe to local norms. I considered that participating in extra classes of maths and Japanese after school may even be counterproductive. Maybe too much time devoted to academic study would result in resistance and apathy.

One expatriate friend enrolled her daughter in none of these supplementary classes, and I drew inspiration from her to resist following the norm. However, another expatriate friend subscribed to local norms and had her daughter attend supplementary classes and would not let her play during the time allocated for homework. As I witnessed

these varying attitudes, I was able to make my own decision according to my values. Although not much of a sportswoman or dancer myself, I performed my type of peculiar intensive mothering by enrolling Eloise and Annika in physical activities such as swimming, ballet, tennis, volleyball, and basketball. In my idealism, I considered the study to be pursued because of its intrinsic interest, not because of the need to compete with others in entrance examinations. The model provided by another expatriate mother gave me the confidence to affirm my choice.

Public bathing. It took me ten years to develop the courage to enter a spa, known as an *onsen* in Japanese. A British mother would regularly invite me to join her family in the weekly bathing ritual, but I was too embarrassed to countenance it, and instead, my daughters would join her family. She kept entreating me to join her, suggesting it would be the perfect way to help me relax. Finally, years after hearing about the pleasures of the *onsen*, I ventured in. My initial fears were allayed; none of the other bathers gave me the slightest attention. I was able to regularly enjoy carbonated baths, aloe baths, walking baths, outdoor baths, muddy baths, baths to lie down in and watch television from, pulsating electric baths, jet baths, tub baths for a sole person, and cold baths, for years to come. My British friend and I could never overcome our cultural inhibitions to enter the public bath at the same time, but after observing our daughters adapt to and enjoy this cultural practice, I bravely decided to embrace it in the company of my daughters and eventually other comothers.

Making Japanese friends. My expatriate friends each had their circles of Japanese friends, and our friendship circles widened when we met our friends' friends at social gatherings. It can be difficult for a sole Westerner to make Japanese friends when their child attends kindergarten. Erika de Jong explains that the first friends she made in Japan were not other mothers at the kindergarten but rather other foreign women outside of this circle. She states that she does not have any Japanese friends and feels alone at school events, as Japanese mothers will not talk to her. I was saved from this aloneness, at least some of the time, by a British friend introducing me to Japanese mothers at my daughter's kindergarten. This provided an entrée into a circle of Japanese mothers at the kindergarten, and we could regularly visit one another's houses, climb to the summit of the castle on the

mountain together, go out dancing, and go out for lunch or dinner. Annika had more Japanese playmates, and I could leave her at these friends' houses when I was busy.

Conclusions

Some friendships with expatriate comothers were forged because of our daughters' friendships. Others were forged because of the shared experience of being mothers of children in an unfamiliar educational system. These friendships not only were a source of pleasure and solace but also enhanced my understanding of how to be a mother. I was placed in a culture of intensive mothering that was different from the Western model of intensive mothering. The friendships with expatriate comothers provided a counterweight to the model provided by both my own culture and Japanese norms. They gave me the freedom, confidence, and empowerment to make my own choices regarding childrearing.

Since our children have become independent, we maintain our friendships from a considerable distance, comparing notes on our empty nests and children's universities. There was a shared core of the experience of motherhood that transcended our cultural differences, and beyond this core, there were indeed cultural differences. Besides making close friends and becoming an empowered mother, I also developed an understanding of the lived experience, history, geography, and education systems of both near and distant cultures.

Note: Pseudonyms have been used for family and friends, other than the writer Suzanne Kamata.

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