Chapter 2 indicated what overseas transfer might mean to a male professional in terms of his career progression, but how does the experience of overseas transfer affect his wife? This chapter shows how a husband’s overseas transfer to the UK provides women with the opportunity to view Japan from ‘the outside’, causing them to reassess certain aspects of their own culture. At the same time, however, it leads to a heightened sense of their own Japanese identity and to the development of a group of women who, appreciating the positive and negative aspects of both countries, learn to adapt their behaviour accordingly and to navigate skilfully between the two.

APPRECIATION OF THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE UK AS HOST COUNTRY

The idea that one can understand one’s own culture by stepping outside its boundaries is not, of course, new (Cohen 1985: 69). According to my informants, a temporary residence in the UK leads to the development of an appreciation of both the positive and negative aspects of the host country, which in turn leads to a heightened awareness of home.

Some of the positive aspects of the UK as a location which are appreciated by Japanese women have already been mentioned in Chapter 4. These attractions included the British countryside and gardens, English tea and other British traditions that are highly respected in Japan. Informants also said that on returning to Japan they would miss
their gardens with squirrels, foxes and flowers, and ‘going for weekend drives to visit old cities in beautiful rolling countryside’. In a sense an ideal image of the UK is held onto which turns into a feeling of *natsukashisa* (nostalgia) that makes women want to return to visit the UK after their repatriation.

As also indicated in Chapter 4, much that is related to the UK is fashionable in Japan, which puts women who experience it first hand in a privileged position. Consider for example the ‘street cred’ of the group of informants now repatriated, whose husbands’ company was sponsor of the Manchester United football team. They regularly attended matches, met and were photographed with players, including David Beckham. Following the World Cup in Japan in 2002, Beckham was so popular in Japan that he is unable to go out onto the Tokyo streets alone without being mobbed by fans. He and his wife were said to be Japan’s highest paid foreign advertising icons, earning at least £10 million by lending their names to six firms (*The Times*, Wednesday, 18 June 2003).

There are of course also negative aspects of life in the UK, some of which come as a shock to Japanese women. Not least of these is customer service, or rather lack of it. For anyone who has spent any length of time in Japan, where customers are greeted at the entrance to shops and restaurants, and where the customer most definitely comes first, it is not difficult to understand how it feels to encounter blunt, off-hand or even rude service in Britain. It seems that this is particularly bad in the capital, where there tends to be less of a personal relationship between customer and, say, a shop assistant or waiter. Japanese women who have sought maintenance work on their property have experienced first hand the difficulty of getting a good job done, that is if they can even find someone to do it, and if they turn up when and where they say they will. Similarly informants were amazed that they had to go and collect their car from the garage themselves after repair, when in Japan the garage would typically both collect and return it. British commuters frequently lament the lack of punctuality in train services, but this is a particular shock to anyone coming from Japan where trains run like clockwork. What is more, apparent resignation to the fact by the British public was incomprehensible to my Japanese informants.

One informant was clearly disillusioned with London life and complained of the pollution and lack of manners amongst its people. Another spoke of the litter on the streets and the lack of basic customer service. She also said that she felt that some British people