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Filipino Migrations to Japan: From Surrogate Americans to Feminized Workers

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Introduction

Since the late 1970s, the migration of Filipinos to Japan has been largely discussed in the light of the movement of female entertainers and their subsequent residence as wives and mothers of Japanese nationals. Such discussions reflect certain of the realities of Filipinos' experiences in Japan. However, when we adopt longer historical and gender perspectives, the influx of Filipinos into Japan begins to illuminate other important dimensions of Filipino-Japanese relations.

This paper discusses Filipino migrations to Japan from the early 1900s to the present. For nearly 100 years, human movements between the two nation-states have been directly or indirectly influenced by the dominance of the Western powers, notably that of the US. Also lying behind these migratory flows have been Japanese struggles to achieve and sustain the status, first of a "civilized" country and, later, that of a superpower in the global order. Drawing on the experiences of different groups of Filipino entertainers, I trace this history and show the importance of the transformation of relations of power. Such changes have, over time, occurred in tandem with the shifting relative statuses of the two nations. Early Filipino entertainers introduced jazz and boxing to the Japanese and served as their models. Recent migrants have been stereotyped as women "sex workers" and "victims of trafficking" or boxers who are "losers." Since the signing of the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) in 2006, it is expected that Filipino migrants in the future will include many engaged in "emotional labor" such as nurses and caregivers. Filipinos already in Japan, many of whom formerly worked as entertainers, have already begun to enter this sector of the workforce.

In this paper, I contend that Filipino migrations to Japan have shifted from the movement of highly respected professional entertainers, who became surrogates for the Americans, to that of "feminized" workers. The idea of the "feminization" of both male and female Filipino entertainers explored here is that they are rhetorically constructed as having "feminine" attributes of weakness, inferiority, moral degradation, caring, adaptability, and subservience. Indeed, Adachi Mariko (2005) has recently argued that contemporary global capitalism revolves around people's desires for other people to assume roles of slaves and servants. These subjected people are characterized by their governability and malleability. The massive global movements of capital have made it necessary to bring cheap labor from the global South into the sweatshops and service

sectors of the global North. In this process, all these low paid foreign workers are expected to demonstrate “feminine” characteristics. In the case of Filipino workers, those who have replaced the earlier entertainers and sportsmen, who were highly regarded, are engaged instead in the emotional labor of pleasing and caring for Japanese. While recent batches of Filipino migrants are symbolically “feminized” in these terms, the Japanese, meanwhile, can display the “masculine” characteristics and privileges of strength, economic mobility, and being cared for. The feminization of these workers is thus a way for contemporary Japanese to exercise their power over Filipino labor and the Philippines. As I will show below, however, such power relations are not always so fixed, nor are “feminized” people always women. I will first describe the Filipino entertainers who served as models for the Japanese at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Musical Entertainers

The Philippines [in the 1930s] was under US colonization and so jazz was directly imported there. The Filipinos were weak readers of musical notes, but their musical sense and performance techniques were fantastic. They demonstrated these to us and we can say that they are the parents who fostered Japanese jazzmen (Hattori Ryoichi 1993: 72).

The Gay Quintet was swinging well as just what one would expect (*sasuga ni yoku swing shiteita*). ... Conde’s clarinet, Francisco Kiko’s piano, and the guitar joining them, I was absolutely stunned (*omowazu unatte shimatta*) (George Kawaguchi 1993a: 36).

From the early 1900s, many Filipinos have contributed to the development of the Japanese entertainment world, especially in the areas of jazz and boxing. This section first looks at Filipino jazzmen and their enrichment of this musical genre in Japan. This is followed by the case of a Filipino nightclub singer, and others.

Filipinos began their exposure to European classical music during the Spanish colonial period (1571–1898). As soon as the Americans replaced the Spaniards and colonized the Philippines at the beginning of the twentieth century, Filipinos began playing jazz, which had just been born in New Orleans. Meanwhile, since the beginning of the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japanese had imported Western lifestyles and popular culture on a massive scale in order to “civilize,” (i.e., “Westernize”) the nation and to avoid colonization by the Western powers. Against this background, it was the Filipinos who served to “civilize” and “Westernize” the Japanese in the fields of jazz and boxing. By the early 1920s, the Oriental Hotel in Kobe housed the Manila (Philippine) Jazz Band to entertain foreign dignitaries. Several Japanese musicians have asserted that the first jazz they ever heard was performed by Filipino bands in Kobe. Filipino jazz musicians of the time served as models; as an early Japanese saxophonist, Maeno Kozo has attested, he tried to learn the art of “faking” from Filipino jazzmen, but it took quite

sometime to develop the skill (Omori 1986: 149). In this musical context, Filipinos were respected as “outstanding” performers (Omori 1986: 135–6).

Although the Japanese recognized the Filipinos’ musical talent, it was the Conde brothers and a few other Filipino jazzmen whom Japanese jazz lovers admired most throughout the twentieth century (Saito 1983). The oldest Conde brother, Vidi, first performed Dixieland jazz in 1922. In the 1930s, he was the best sax player in Japan, characterized by his dandy fashions, flamboyant conducting, and rhythmical music (Saito 1983: 108). The youngest Conde brother, Raymond, came to Japan in 1934 and played the kind of music accepted by Japan’s military government during the war years. After the war, in 1947 Raymond formed the Gay Quartet and later the Gay Septet. Their performances in 1950 sparked off the first jazz boom in postwar Japan. The drummer George Kawaguchi (1993b) observed that the word “explode” perfectly described their popularity. In April 1951, the Gay Septet won seven first places in 14 categories in the first popularity poll organized by the magazine *Swing Journal* (Kawaguchi 1993b). Prior to the rise of the Gay Septet, jazz was music to dance to; however, the Gay Septet’s performances transformed it into music to listen to. Raymond fostered a number of Japanese jazz musicians who eventually also rose to stardom, including George Kawaguchi, Nancy Umeki, Ono Mitsuru, Hiraoka Seiji, and Martha Miyake. In 1987, Raymond was honored with the Third Jazz Vocalist Contest Special Award and in 1998, a medal of merit awarded by the Japan Council of Performers’ Organizations.¹⁾ A year after his death, in September 2004, several distinguished Japanese jazz musicians commemorated Raymond’s contribution to music at the annual Yokohama Jazz Promenade.

During the 1940s and 1950s, being able to sing in English and Spanish enabled Filipinos to become the main group of Asians performing in Japan’s postwar entertainment scene (Yu-Jose 2002). The best-known Filipino singer during this time was Bimbo Danao, who came to Japan in 1952 and was a main performer at a high-class nightclub, Latin Quarter in Akasaka, famous for its stage shows. Danao suggested that the club feature topless dancers, and other clubs and cabarets nationwide soon adopted this practice (Yu-Jose 2002: 59). Danao was chosen as one of the most popular singers by music magazines for several years during this period (Yu-Jose 2002: 59–60).

In the 1970s, Danao was succeeded by numerous Filipino bands playing not only jazz but also rock and roll. There were several thousand Filipino entertainers entering the market during this period, with annual numbers steadily increasing. Early Filipino bands dominated the clubs on and around the US bases, and especially those in Okinawa, until Japanese musicians began to take up jazz and rock music in larger numbers. These Filipino performers were soon found at nightclubs and discos in Japan’s urban centers, where they remained until the arrival of cheaper recorded music in the 1970s. These mostly male musicians also gradually gave way to a set of female entertainers from the 1970s, to whom I shall return later.

Athletic Entertainers²⁾

Japanese fans at the match between Noda Toru and Fighting Yaba rooted for Noda by crying, “Get away! Get away!” (*nigero! nigero!*). Yaba couldn’t but stand upright in the middle of the ring, as Noda circled around Yaba to avoid his powerful punches. When the bell ended the battle and Noda wasn’t knocked out, the aficionados shouted, “Banzai! Banzai!” (Gunji 1976: 127).

Another set of Filipino entertainers who enjoyed a high reputation from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century were boxers, though their roles in the sport changed dramatically from the 1970s.

Filipinos first learned to box when the Americans introduced the sport at the beginning of American colonial rule in 1898 as part of the processes of “civilizing” the “natives” (España-Maram 2006: 74). In Japan, US-trained Watanabe Yujiro organized the first professional boxing event in 1922. Thus, although boxing actually originated in Europe, for the Japanese during the first half of the twentieth century it was more closely associated with America, with the Filipinos as mediators. In 1924, several Filipino pugilists were invited to Japan for the first Japanese-Filipino bouts, but Japanese fighters were no match for the Filipino boxers, as described above.

Until the 1970s, Japanese fighters vainly aspired to world titles, and were left admiring the fighting skills of the Filipino boxers from a country in which the sport was more highly developed (Jojima 2003: 73–78). Some of the best-known early Filipino boxers included Joe Eagle, Baby Gustillo (“*Gosutero*”), and Flash Elorde.

Eagle came to Japan in the mid-1930s and his “divine techniques” (*kamiwaza*), deadly punches, and perfect defense surprised his audiences. In 1937, he defeated Japanese Featherweight Asian champion Piston Horiguchi, who had enjoyed a lengthy run of fifty-three wins with no losses or draws. Like Eagle, Gustillo adopted Japan and through the wartime years was regarded as a “god” (*kamisama*) on the Japanese boxing scene. Fighting against Japanese boxers during the war was difficult for Gustillo, however, as he was associated with the Americans. After the war, he enjoyed renewed prestige as a member of the victorious allies. He held the Japanese Featherweight title from its inauguration in 1950 to 1952, making a record five consecutive championship defenses. Elorde fought 116 bouts between 1951 and 1971, of which 43 were against Japanese opponents, 30 of whom he defeated (Takahata 2000).

The 1970s saw a decline in the popularity of boxing. As Japan’s economy rose and that of the Philippines sank in the 1980s, however, Filipino fighters began entering Japan again. Despite the stunning victories of a small number of Filipino title holders, the majority fought quite differently. What characterized this period of boxing history was the Filipinos’ low success rate. For example, in 1998, Filipinos participated in 100 matches in Japan but won only seven (Boxing Magazine 1999: 56). Curiously, the more they lost, the more often they were invited to Japan (Takahata 2000).

In the world of professional sports, fixing frequently occurs (Wacquant 1998). Until the mid-1970s, there were Japanese who accepted the role of being beaten, but as the overall economic standing of the Japanese rose, their number declined. Unlike the USA, where many men disadvantaged by race, class or immigrant status continued to make a living in boxing, the Japanese filled their athletic labor shortage by looking abroad. The vast majority of Filipino boxers from the 1980s have come on short-term entertainer visas and are paid by the number and lengths of bouts (Takahata 2000). When there are no fights, they cannot earn an income. Thus, if they wish to secure a number of bouts to fight in, they have to adapt to market conditions in the ring. When the Japanese expect foreigners to lose, that is what the majority of the foreign boxers have done. In international sports competitions the glory of one athlete becomes the national pride of all and so, by “defeating” their Asian/foreign opponents, Japanese boxers and their audiences celebrate together enhanced national and masculine pride. Designed in this way, the Filipinos emerge as “weak” and therefore “feminine” in the process. Conversely, Japanese men can strengthen their masculine identities through the “victories” of their champions.

Women Entertainers

Filipinas are a “convenient public toilet,” which is “a reality of Southeast Asian women in Japan” (Yamatani 1985: 194).

Many of the Filipino girls who come to [work in the sex industry in] Japan have been working in bars or brothels in the Philippines. ... These women don’t come to Japan of their own will. ... [They] are victims of international trafficking in women (Matsui 1997: 136–137).

In the 1970s, another set of entertainers began coming to Japan.³⁾ This time, women dominated the emerging flow and came to be known as “*Japayuki*” (Japan-bound) entertainers. These entertainers were popularly considered sex workers. In the early phase of their migration, many Filipinas did indeed work as call girls, sexy dancers (ironically following a tradition established by Bimbo Danao), strippers, or on-stage prostitutes (Yamatani 1985). However, from the 1980s Filipina workers increasingly served as bar hostesses, where commercialized sex was not necessarily part of their job. Indeed, one of the most upsetting questions male customers ask Filipina entertainers is their “price.” For the most part, the job of these women is primarily to provide light conversation and create an atmosphere in which men can unwind and forget the hassle, frustration, and misery of work and home.

Despite the largely social functions Filipina entertainers perform, their position in Japan has come to be represented in two different ways: as victims of exploitation, and as opportunists (see Suzuki 2002). Casual observers have tended to consider Filipinas as the latter, but others have argued that these women are trying to fulfill “traditional”

obligations towards their families by working abroad, no matter what the working conditions. In either case, the motivation of Filipina nightworkers is often reduced to a desire to leave the poverty of a Third World country.

Many writers about these women workers have, however, presumed that they are victims in need of rescue from multiple forms of oppression, based on class, gender, and nationality. Such research has commonly relied on the statistics on deported workers, as well as on reports from women's shelters and from advocates for women "trafficked" and "forced" to provide sex and sexual services in Japan's night industries. They have uncritically used sources that only partially represent the workers' experiences and are therefore methodologically problematic. Today, it is recognized in anthropological writings that knowledge will inevitably be partial. Most scholars, however, have not seriously examined the partiality of the data they use, nor have they recognized the importance of such critiques (Ballescás 1992; Suzuki 2007a).

Systemic female oppression and the problems that arise from it are, of course, important, and these advocates may be sincerely concerned about the workers' welfare. Yet, their goals are often defined by their political agendas (e.g., anti-prostitution activism, xenophobic nationalism, imperialist feminism, and so on), and they have often given attention primarily to the illegal aspects of entertainers' work and its consequences, such as the "abandonment" of both these women and their children by Japanese men. The illegal aspects have often been closely linked to the operations of the *yakuza*, especially in relation to recruitment through deception, forced prostitution, and trafficking, all businesses generating trillions of yen. Although the experiences of some women nightworkers are genuinely horrendous, sensationalized stories involving sex, lies, and violence also circulate in the public sphere, and work to stir up people's curiosity and fear simultaneously.

Today, the view of Filipinas as victims of trafficking has increasingly gained currency in the global discourse, especially within the United Nations and the USA after the 9.11 terrorist attacks of 2001. Both the USA and UN state that they want to prevent international terrorists and criminal syndicates from raising money through human trafficking. In 2004, the US government listed Japan in its *Trafficking in Persons Report* as one of the countries requiring surveillance due to the large number of foreign women entertainers there (US-DOS 2005: 132). For the Japanese government, which, among other things, had been working to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a weakness in measures for the protection of human rights such as the prevention of trafficking risked undermining its efforts to increase Japan's global political and military, that is masculine presence. In this context, therefore, the advocates' discourse of Filipina entertainers as victims of trafficking dovetailed nicely with the Japanese government's desire to achieve its own goals.

The US report problematically identified the entertainers, and by extension other Filipina residents of Japan working as entertainers, as sex workers trafficked illegally.

Some of my Filipina informants vehemently argue against this essentialization, saying “Why do we have to be disparaged like that even in the Americans’ report?” By characterizing all Filipina entertainers in this way in the name of “preventing women from being trafficked,” the new regulations have left these entertainers and other Filipinas already living in Japan with the stigma of being both “sex workers” and “helpless women.” Meanwhile, Japan has also been able to protect its national boundaries and the postwar fiction of “ethnic homogeneity” from immigration and further ethnic mixing, making it more difficult for Japanese men and Filipinas to meet and reproduce children.

In the wake of the curtailment of legal entry of entertainers, many aspiring entertainers currently seem to have gone underground in order to work in Japan, by forging documents, marrying Japanese, or any other method they can think of.⁴ Hence, up to this point the labor of the majority of Filipinas has not fully enjoyed recognition or integration with Japan’s job market. These women have been weakened through these mechanisms of economic disempowerment. The question, therefore, is how Filipinos resident in Japan can remedy their own situations.

Caregivers

Before, I took care of *ojisan* (middle-aged men) [at bars]. Now, I take care of *ojiisan* (old men) and *obaasan* (old women) (Filipina former-entertainer-turned-care helper).

Even if I still work on the night [shift], now, I can say with confidence that I’m a helper! Even Mrs. X [who is known as the *kenpeitai* (military police), patrolling local Filipinos’ “illegal” behaviors] congratulates me for that! (Filipina former-entertainer-turned-care helper; original emphasis).

As of the end of 2005, the Filipinos composed the fourth largest foreign population in Japan (187,261), and the proportion of registered Filipinos who were women was 84 percent (MOJ 2006). A large number of these women used to work as entertainers, and some have begun working as careworkers in aging Japan. Carework is not a form of entertainment, but the carework performed by Filipinos follows on from the influx of entertainers. The quotes above attest to the fact that Filipina entertainers-turned-caregivers themselves feel the continuity between the two occupations. Both rely on the emotional labor of a group of people who are stigmatized and disadvantaged by their racial, ethnic, class, national, and sexual otherness. In this context, the JPEPA was signed in 2006 and if it is ratified by the Philippine Senate, skilled caregivers will start working in Japan. Learning about this new movement, many Filipinas in Japan have begun to see new possibilities for establishing themselves as socially recognized workers in the field of caregiving. They also think that becoming caregiving “helpers” (*herupaa*) is one way for them to overcome their stigmatized identities.

Prefecture-certified *herupaa* are nonetheless ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy

in the field of care. The Japanese government intends to upgrade the skills and knowledge of careworkers by making the careworkers' license (*kaigo fukushishi*) issued by the national government the minimum qualification for all careworkers in Japan (for details, see Suzuki 2007b). Despite the low status and the possibility of losing their jobs, a burgeoning number of Filipinas in major Japanese cities are taking up work as *herupaa*. As of August 2007, 900 Filipina/os in Japan are estimated to have acquired Level Two (*nikyu*) *herupaa* certificates. A small number of licensed *herupaa* are men. Among them is a male medical doctor I met in the Tokai region, who came from the Philippines to figure out how he could become a caregiver in Japan. These *herupaa* have formed two associations in the Tokyo and Nagoya areas in order to circulate information, improve their skills and knowledge, and negotiate to overcome discrimination in the workplace.

In the context of promoting work opportunities for Filipinos in Japan, there has been a curious rhetoric used by both Japanese promoters of Filipino *herupaa* and the *herupaa* themselves: “the Filipinos are suited to caring.” Both parties commonly emphasize Filipinos’ “strong family orientation,” “respect for the elderly,” and the fact that they grew up “in an extended family with small children and old folk.” Although the promoters of Filipino *herupaa* are not homogenous, and although many of them mean well, this rhetorical construction of “the Filipino careworker” reflects strong marketing interests. Local Filipinos, too, mobilize this rhetoric; however, they are in the position of a stigmatized minority group in the labor market. Hence, the use of this rhetoric derives from the different positions of these two groups in the social-economic structure. In either case, however, such rhetoric potentially dovetails Filipinos with the emerging global and national reorganization of caring labor, which is feminized through low pay, low security, low career mobility, and other undesirable working conditions. It also points to their supposed ability to care for others in the family, to which Japanese women have been ideologically and institutionally restricted and thus severely disadvantaged in the Japanese economy. The “Filipino careworkers,” whether women or men, are thus expected to perform their jobs and demonstrate their “innate” ability to accommodation and compliance (see Ito *et al.* 2005).

Entering into the caring field while other remunerated employment opportunities are not easily available, some careworkers—both Filipinos and Japanese—may end up taking on heavy tasks and responsibilities. This is the situation in which carework is located today, and Filipino careworkers’ personal and social desires and/or economic necessities may be cast into these schemes. Given that they are defined differently in terms of nation, race, class, and morality, for Filipinos the discursive dovetailing may become an opportunity for exploitation unless it is well monitored. Conversely, precisely because many *herupaa* worked as entertainers before and are, through experience, well aware of the potential abuse and exploitation they may suffer in the labor market in a foreign country, their knowledge is important in the formation of associa-

tions to represent their personal and collective wishes and protect their rights. Given the presence of these associations, hopefully Filipino careworkers, as a feminized ethnic group working in the increasingly feminized labor market, can also make sure that equal pay and labor conditions for equal work must be observed.

Conclusion

Prior to Japan's rise to the status of superpower within the global economy, Filipino entertainers were people to be feared and admired as models in the fields of jazz and boxing from the early to the middle or late-twentieth century. Being colonial subjects of the USA, Filipinos were able to claim genealogical ties with America, from where they learned their musical and athletic skills. They also expressed generative ties by singing in English and performing American music. Although Japanese musicians and boxing enthusiasts occasionally revealed nationalist and racist attitudes towards Filipinos by naturalizing Filipinos' physical and sensual abilities and trivializing their intellectual abilities, as seen in Hattori Ryoichi's comment on Filipinos being "weak readers of musical notes," Filipinos as surrogate "Americans" nevertheless captivatd numerous Japanese as champions and performers.

However, from the 1970s, Filipino-Japanese relationships began to change. The influx of Filipina entertainers-cum-bar workers is an example *par excellence* of the effects of global capitalism creating a demand for submissive and subservient workers. Indeed, Filipinas are predominantly identified as victims of poverty and trafficking, underscoring their subordinate status. Thus, aside from their actual hostess jobs in the night businesses, their existence has been further feminized by the prevailing discourse. Although many studies of new migrants to Japan have employed the term "feminization" to discuss the work performed by biological females, what has not been fully explored is the fact that men too have been "feminized." The majority of Filipino boxers entering Japan since the 1980s have been expected to demonstrate their "inferior" skills and "weakness," while their lives abroad have come under increasing surveillance from the Japanese immigration authorities. Hence, Filipino men too are "feminized" in the sense that they are increasingly controlled and put in the position of serving local people and national "masculine" power.

Even though carework is not a form of entertainment, we have seen its continuity with entertainment nightwork in Japan. In the field of care, both Filipino women and men may be "feminized" more than Japanese careworkers, through the rhetoric that "Filipinos are suited for carework." Although they are organizing themselves to negotiate in the labor market, Filipina entertainers-turned-careworkers are multiply subjected to feminization in Japan's neoliberal capitalist labor market, which now desperately needs their labor in order to remain competitive in the global economy. Situating the migration of Filipinos to Japan within a longer historical context than has been done in previous

research thus clearly shows that the changing power differentials between these two nations over the past 100 years have transformed Filipino migrants in Japan from “surrogate Americans” to “feminized workers.”

Notes

- 1) Raymond also sang, making use of his ability to speak English.
- 2) This section is a slightly modified version of part of my previously published article (Suzuki 2007a).
- 3) For male entertainers or hosuto (“hosts”), see Suzuki (2007a).
- 4) The number of Filipinos married to Japanese jumped significantly from 8,397 in 2004 to 10,242 in 2005 (MHLW 2006).

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