

## An Aging Society and Migration to Asia and Oceania

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## **An Aging Society and Migration to Asia and Oceania**

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, I deal with several facets of retirement migration from Japan to countries overseas. Since the start of the new millennium, information about Japanese who prefer to live overseas after retirement has gradually increased. This is possibly the result of the coming mass retirement of the “baby-boomers,” born between 1947 and 1949.

I shall not refer to specific cases based on field research, however. Instead, I shall try to put this newly emerged flow of people into context, in order to open up a route for anthropological discussion. I shall also describe the design of a research project on retirement migration to be carried out by a team of anthropologists.

Retirement migration, at first sight, looks like a rather narrow theme, a pinpoint offering little room for anthropological discussion. Even though retirement migration is still in its initial phase, and it is as yet unclear how the number of people staying overseas for longer periods than the usual tour duration will develop into a society-wide matter of interest, it is a highly complex issue that offers the opportunity to reexamine the relations between people, aging, family, values, living space, labor and exchange. This final concept of “exchange” offers the key for locating this research project in the context of anthropological discussion.

To start with, retirement migration can be defined as a move or change of living space in the life-cycle, viewed from an individual’s point of view. On the other hand, it forms a part of the system of exchanging labor, which inevitably includes the exchange of goods, wealth, and space. Retirement migration seems to offer us a new perspective in migration studies, which have too often been occupied with the flow of labor. Although the number of people living overseas after their retirement is still limited, as we will see, retirement migration is basically defined as consumption, in striking contrast with labor migration, which is intended for the production of wealth.

### **Project Outline**

The target of the present research project is Japanese elderly and/or retirement migrants overseas. At least in Japan, this project is the first attempt to research into retirement migration, a phenomenon that is just beginning in Japan. It will cover four research domains:

- 1) government policies on retirement migration;
- 2) the long-stay business;

- 3) individuals' life strategies; and
- 4) responses from the receiving societies.

Through research in these domains, the project team will discuss the contexts in which retirement migration should be located and will reconsider the perspective of migration studies in terms of the exchange of people, wealth and services. This research is also expected to reveal several aspects of the rapidly aging society in Japan, such as the validity of migration policy and growing economic gaps between social strata. It also illuminates matters such as changing values among Japanese and the growth of transborder lifestyles.

## Research Methods

I use the terms “long stay” and “retirement migration” interchangeably, because the retirement migration we are discussing is not a one-way emigration but really migration. There are few statistics on the specific issue of retirement migration, because it is very difficult to grasp how many people have migrated overseas after retirement. Officially, those who stay less overseas for less than three months have no obligation to report to the Japanese embassy or consulate in their country of destination, and many people do not report to the embassy even if they stay for longer periods. The number must be estimated from a range of indirect sources such as emigration and outbound tourists, or general enquiries on life planning after retirement.

Government policies are presented in policy papers issued by several semi-governmental agents. A more realistic image may be constructed, however, by carrying out interviews with “long stayers” on the ground and with those who are involved in the long stay business. Field research is being carried out at the following “long stay” destinations:

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Malaysia:    | Penang, Cameron Highland, Kota Kinabalu |
| Thailand:    | Chiang Mai, Bangkok                     |
| Indonesia:   | Bali, Jakarta                           |
| Australia:   | Sydney, Melbourne                       |
| New Zealand: | Auckland                                |
| USA:         | Los Angeles, Hawaii                     |
| Japan:       | Okinawa                                 |
| Micronesia:  | Palau, Guam                             |
| Europe:      | Spain                                   |

These places are popular destinations for tourism as well as for “long stay” migrants. Their popularity is based on their attractiveness as tourist destinations owing to factors such as climate, scenery and safety, but also on other factors such as cost of living, visa exemption, and other measures for encouraging immigration.

## **Rapid Aging of Japanese Society**

The rapid aging of Japanese society has been caused by the country's low birth rate and longevity. It is anticipated that the rapid aging of Japanese society will affect it in several respects: firstly, a shortage of labor in general and talent in particular because of lack of competition; secondly, the need to expand the system of caring for elderly people; and thirdly, the possible bankruptcy of pension funds as a result of the imbalance between the increasing number of recipients and decreasing number of payers-in. The mass retirement of the "baby-boomers" born in the years between 1947 and 1949 will accelerate the process.

The exodus of seniors from Japan has been at least partly due to economic factors. Uncertainty regarding the future of pension funds is impelling people to seek a less expensive lifestyle after retirement. Retirees, however, although very cost-conscious in general, are also conscious of benefits. The flow of elderly people also reflects changes in values and life styles.

## **Contexts of Retirement Migration Studies**

In Europe and North America, studies on retirement migration had already begun several decades ago. In countries in these regions, life after retirement has been regarded as important, possibly because of the longevity and wealth available for it. Compared with these societies, society is aging much more rapidly in Japan, and studies of the aging of society have just begun. More stress should be placed on cultural aspects when dealing with retirement migration in Japan. In Europe and North America, many studies have been done by sociologists, and it is possible that adaptation to different cultures has not been noticed. In the case of North America, migration tends to take place within national borders, while in Europe it takes place across national borders but within the boundaries of the EU.

The project members for the present study are anthropologists who have long been involved in research into migration in Southeast Asia and Oceania. The involvement of anthropologists is appropriate because the project will inevitably encompass cultural aspects, requiring a good knowledge of the societies of destination.

## **Government Policies**

The present rapidly aging society has long been predicted, owing to the decreasing birth rate and the extension of average life expectancy. Concerns for the increasing numbers of elderly people and their care were also expressed in government papers several decades ago. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) launched the "Silver Columbia Plan" as early as 1986.

The ministry organized a study group, inviting people from related business sectors. The underlying factors were economic growth and the intention to invest in land overseas. The plan sketched out the construction of Japanese old people's homes overseas.

This plan, devised more from the investors' point of view, was not welcomed by the countries targeted as the main destinations because it was considered to amount to the export of old people. As its ridiculous name shows, the aim of the plan was to urge old people to "migrate" and settle overseas. Nor was this plan welcomed by Japanese retirees. They were reluctant to move to a foreign environment and spend their final days there. In 1987, soon after the initial plan was launched, the ministry shifted the emphasis of the study group to "spending free time overseas," putting more stress on leisure time rather than directly emphasizing elderly people. In 1992 the Long Stay Foundation was established, which started to survey the feasibility of "long stays." Since then, the foundation's activities have included issuing several reports on a number of destinations, providing practical information, holding campaigning seminars in cooperation with tourist information offices of foreign governments, and creating a certification system for "Long Stay Advisors."

The use of the expression "Long Stay" now meant that movement took the form of tourism rather than immigration, spending an active period overseas after retirement rather than moving to a final home.

## **Migration from Japan**

Japan has been known as a relatively closed country in terms of its labor market. The number of foreigners registered in Japan has been growing every year, and exceeded two million at the end of 2005 (Immigration office 2006: 29). This number includes employees, trainees and students who work in Japan legally. In the same year, about 200,000 were arrested for overstaying their visas, presumably for the purpose of illegal employment. Despite the fact that only foreigners who are to be employed as particular kinds of specialists are allowed to work in Japan, while manual laborers from foreign countries are excluded from the Japanese job market, there is a constant demand for low-paid labor, and as a consequence it is no longer surprising to see foreigners working on construction sites and in restaurants.

On the other hand, even though a considerable number of Japanese work outside Japan, they are not regarded as migrant or export labor. Most of them are working for overseas affiliates or partners of Japanese-owned companies. They are not defined as migrant workers, because they are employees of Japanese firms that send them overseas for a short-term period.

Japan was once a country of origin for mass emigration. Japanese began to emigrate as early as 1868, right after the "opening of Japan" initiated by the Meiji government. They became contract agricultural laborers in Hawaii, North America, and South

America. This “transportation” of poor peasants was abandoned in the 1970s, by which time the Japanese economy had matured.

People move from country to country for many different reasons, including “labor migration,” study, and marriage. The movement that is the focus of this paper is that known as “long stay,” which is already a registered trade phrase, exclusively used by the Long Stay Foundation which promotes business projects related to “long stays.” Here, “long stay” means overseas residence for at least several months, far longer than the regular 5–7-day package tours, that is related to retirement and elderly people. Figure 1 shows the number of Japanese nationals who emigrated during the period 1955–2005. Figure 2 shows male/female emigration of Japanese by age group.

### **Long Stay Business**

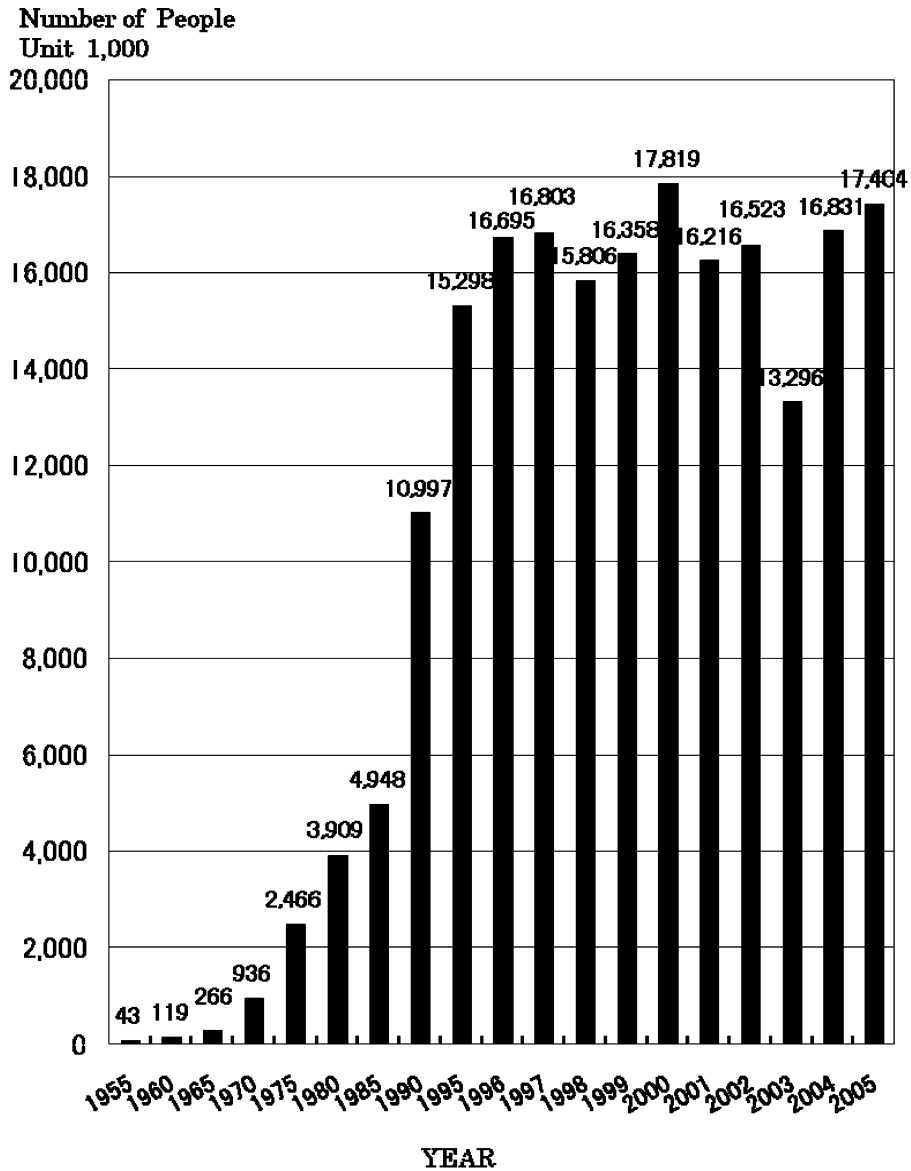
As was its predecessor, the “Silver Columbia Plan,” the concept of “long stay” was initiated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, rather than by either the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, which is responsible for pension funds and elderly peoples’ lives, or the Ministry of Land and Transportation, which supervises the tourist business. This suggests that “long stay” is promoted more by business sectors such as developers and real estate brokers than by the conventional tourist industry, which profits from transportation and hotels.

Guidebooks for “long stay” are displayed in bookshops in major Japanese cities as a separate genre from other tourist guidebooks, and there are several periodicals specializing in “long stay.” The term “long stay” appears almost daily in newspapers and TV programs. These media introduce or provide information on life overseas after retirement. Looking to the mass retirement of baby-boomers in a few years, a wide variety of businesses have been pursuing a range of business opportunities.

These publications offer practical information on subjects such as visas, regulation for working, banking, buying and selling cars, acquiring houses, and even how to look after houses in Japan while the owners are away on a “long stay.” They unanimously praise the pleasant nature of a second life in Malaysia, for instance, with plenty of time and good value for the money. Currently the most heavily promoted country is Malaysia, with “seminars” held several times a year that stress its safety, good food, and relatively low language barrier.

### **Response of Receiving Societies**

As described above, the initial attempt to create overseas settlements for elderly people received a cold reception from the countries of destination. The shift from immigration to “long stay,” however, has generally been welcomed by foreign governments, which often offer special treatment for elderly “visitors” who are not supposed to earn any



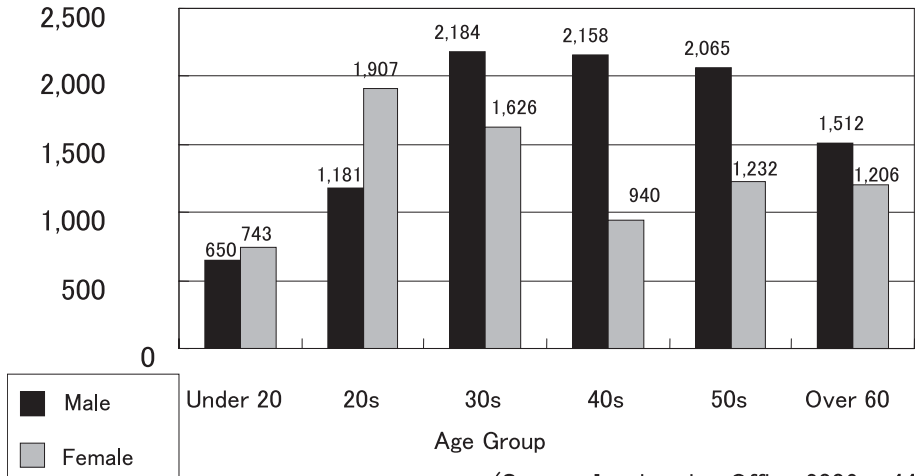
(Source: Immigration Office 2006, p.43)

**Figure 1** Number of Emigrating Japanese Nationals

money but rather to consume local products. Several countries offer visa extensions under certain conditions, such as depositing a certain amount of money in a local bank.

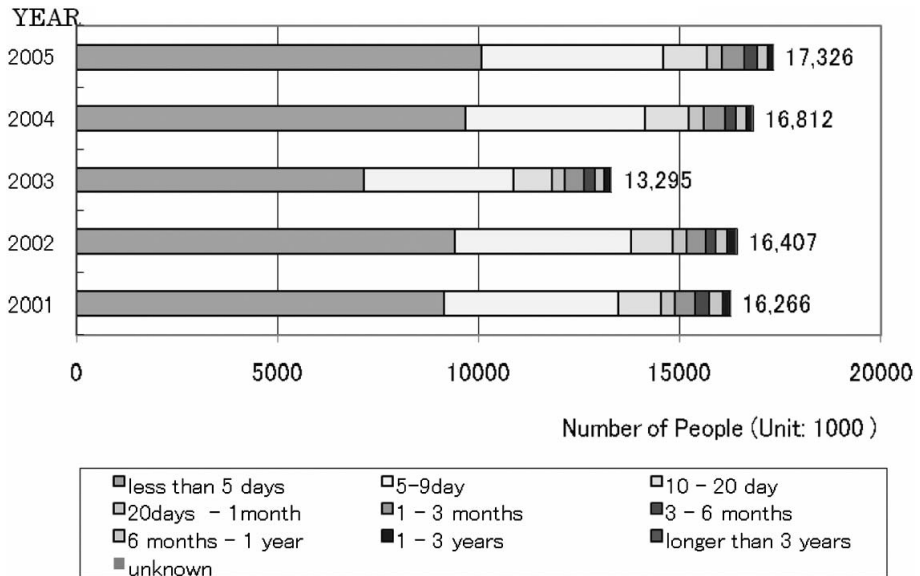
Those promoting the image of the “long stay” business always include friendly “locals.” Yet case studies show that many Japanese temporary residents tend to live

Emigration (Unit: 1,000)



(Source: Immigration Office 2006, p.44)

**Figure 2** Male/Female Emigration of Japanese According to Age Groups



(Source: Immigration Office 2006, p43)

**Figure 3** Length of Stay Overseas

within their own circle of Japanese friends. The fact that playing golf is their most popular activity may contribute to this.

The situation in the Philippines and Thailand is very different from that of other



**Table 1** Length of Stay Overseas

| YEAR                | 2001       | 2002       | 2003       | 2004       | 2005       |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Total               | 16,265,593 | 16,407,343 | 13,295,311 | 16,812,090 | 17,326,149 |
| Less than 5 days    | 9,133,155  | 9,397,393  | 7,145,185  | 9,672,889  | 10,073,918 |
| 5–9 days            | 4,336,524  | 4,396,070  | 3,721,358  | 4,460,530  | 4,503,407  |
| 10–20 day           | 1,061,930  | 1,037,690  | 951,577    | 1,088,365  | 1,101,697  |
| 20 days–1 month     | 350,822    | 339,936    | 336,171    | 376,796    | 381,627    |
| 1–3 months          | 511,570    | 468,822    | 466,750    | 520,877    | 553,187    |
| 3–6 months          | 331,104    | 257,269    | 263,883    | 287,444    | 305,489    |
| 6 months–1 year     | 357,510    | 280,493    | 248,805    | 255,730    | 264,511    |
| 1–3 years           | 167,701    | 209,566    | 139,349    | 123,208    | 119,516    |
| Longer than 3 years | 10,116     | 13,166     | 15,982     | 19,889     | 16,357     |
| unknown             | 5,161      | 6,938      | 6,251      | 6,362      | 6,440      |

Source: Immigration Office 2006: 43

countries. In these countries, there are considerable numbers of single males among the long stayers.

## Transnational Moves

The image of the Japanese as a stay-at-home people is becoming a thing of the past. Several decades ago, few people thought of living overseas after retirement. Now, however, more and more elderly Japanese are tending to cross national borders, a trend to which increased travel and overseas working experience during the earlier part of their lives is contributing. It is rare for Japanese retirees to embark on a long stay overseas for the first time without having had previous experience of travel abroad.

Any population movement has a socio-cultural background as well as socio-cultural impact. Compared with western countries, where people have long-term experience of handling and observing life as a pensioner, Japanese have been prepared neither for a second life nor for its significance from the anthropological perspective. The aging of Japanese society is, however, proceeding more rapidly than that of most of western countries, and Asian countries will follow this trend in the near future.

Elderly people have the choice of domestic migration. Living in the countryside also attracts retirees. There are no particular destinations for retirement migration within Japan, with the notable exception of Okinawa; this is actually “overseas” in terms of distance and cultural differences, although there are no differences in laws and regulations.

## Changing Values: From Stay-at-homer to Migrant

As described above, the choice to live overseas would probably never occur to someone who had no experience of living or traveling abroad. Compared with several decades ago, it is now difficult to find people who have never been abroad. Most Japanese have stayed outside Japan for some period, for work, study, or travel. It is understandable that living abroad is an easily acceptable idea if it is explained as an extended version of travel. Many people, after enjoying several package tours offered by the tourist industry, are dissatisfied with the typical tight schedule and too many places visited of the typical package tour, and dream of staying longer in their favorite places.

At the same time, people with experience of life abroad often feel that their life in Japan is too busy and burdensome, requiring too many commitments. Once they find out about other ways of life, it is easy for them to move in that direction. They thus seek freedom they think they can enjoy only outside Japan.

Retirement requires a change in people's ways of thinking, especially for hard workers. In advertisement and in guidebook, "long stayers" all too often confess that they wanted to spend more time with their spouses, because while they were working they never had enough time for staying at home or going out to enjoy themselves. Now, they say, they are rebuilding their relationships.

A gap does exist between men and women. Women who are housewives have no wish to continue doing the housework as usual after their husbands' retirement, and are looking for more freedom. Rebuilding relationships also includes greater participation of husbands in housekeeping tasks.

There is a considerable disparity in the amount of disposable wealth people have after retirement, and this is reflected in the choice of destination. Hawaii, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand are popular but expensive destinations, while Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines are chosen mainly for economic reasons, although many people do find Asian culture attractive.

One of the important results of the shift from emigration to long stay is that long stayers can move from one place to another. A significant number of people have already lived in several places after retirement. Even after purchasing a house in one place, the owners can stay somewhere else while renting out their property. A market for purchase and rental of resort houses already exists in Japan. At the low end, however, long stayers tend to stay in one place.

The idea of settling permanently overseas is not as fully accepted as it was in the 1980s, because most retirees do not want to die in a foreign environment. On the other hand, the concept of "long stay" is more acceptable because it implies that they will eventually face their final moments in a familiar environment, together with their families.

The number of people move within Japan is far greater than those who stay over-

seas long-term, although I do not currently have any data on domestic retirement migration at my disposal. Then the question may arise, why I chose to study retirement migration overseas rather than within Japan, even though it is still a minor phenomenon. Retirement migration in Japan should not be overlooked, because it may reflect the change of Japanese life style, the change from life confined in Japan to life open to the overseas.

## **Migration: Exchanges of Space and Labor**

This project to study retirement migration is intended to describe the current situation of Japanese elderly migration overseas and will present a possible perspective that locates this human flow in the system of global exchanges of time, space and labor. Although the number of people moving overseas after their retirement is still limited and such moves are greatly dependent on the economic situation and foreign exchange rates, this type of migration is rather different from the labor migration on which most studies have focused.

In this context, an important factor is care services for elderly people. Nurses and care-givers are to be exempt from Japanese immigration regulations, and care homes with Japanese-speaking staff are now being constructed in Asian countries.

Taking these factors into consideration, we can view retirement migration as a domain where exchanges of different kinds, such as money, services, property, and space (environment), take place. It should be noted that the exchanges involved in migration take place over time and space. In this context, we are able to discuss issues of migrant workers and long stayers on the same basis. In fact many “long stayers” were once “migrant workers,” because many of them prefer to stay in countries where they had previously worked in Japanese-owned companies. Even if Japanese businessmen who are working overseas seldom think of themselves as “migrant workers,” there is no reason to exclude them from our discussion of labor migration. Although migrant workers and long stayers look quite different, both are concerned with the shifting relationships between life and living space, exchange of money and services through time and space, often within a single person. Both of them represent *Homo mobilis*, human beings on the move throughout their lives.

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