

Transnational Workspace on International Flights : Japanese Flight Attendants on Non-Japanese Airlines

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INTRODUCTION

This is an anthropological study that focuses on flight attendants working for “H Airlines” of country H in continental Western Europe.

Airplanes are “non-places” (Augé 1995) between one country and another. At the same time, they are spaces of the service industry. Passengers purchase air transportation as a service and become an airline’s guests. Flight attendants direct their “sacred journey” (Graburn 1989) by servicing and supporting passengers to ensure a safe and comfortable trip. Their workspace is a unique transnational and multicultural space in which passengers have a variety of cultural backgrounds (nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and religions), purposes for travel, ages, and occupations.

In this paper, I will analyze flight attendants’ work and explain their perspectives in light of anthropological studies on transnational work. I will first discuss the study of work and the concept of transborder, then explain my field research, including airspace culture and workspace culture and especially their communication in service.

My main research sites are H Airlines flights between Japan and country H. I was employed by H Airline as a flight attendant and conducted fieldwork from April 2002 to March 2007. This research was permitted by H Airlines management for my own study purposes and was not controlled in any way by the company.

WORK AND TRANSBORDER

The anthropological study of industrial workspace began with the Hawthorne studies¹⁾ (1924–1932). As Clyde Kluckhohn (1944) mentioned in his book *Mirror for Man*, the field was initially active mainly in the United States. Herbert Applebaum had earlier pointed out that the study of organizations is in itself a kind of community study because people must rely on each other at work and compensate their performance in the company (Applebaum 1984).

In Japan, the anthropological study of work has gained momentum with the development of the “Anthropological Study of Administration” at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Nakamaki introduced the concepts of “JOMIN”²⁾ and “SHAEN”³⁾ in order to study organizations as communities. The goal of the Anthropology of Administration in Japan is

to observe JOMIN's everyday activities in the workplace in order to study the rationality, logic, and decision-making of a company.

The concept of "Transborder Studies" developed by anthropologist Hiroshi Shoji is used to explain various phenomena transcending national borders under the nation-state order and legal system (Shoji 2009). It is also related to the concepts of "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1990) and "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989).

In my own research, I try to explain flight attendants' work practices as those of today's ordinary JOMIN and the transnational SHAEN network in a multinational, multiracial, multicultural environment.

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS ON "H" AIRLINE

A national flag carrier, H is a commercial airline and the flagship of the H aviation group, which consists of more than 400 companies with a total of about 119,000 employees. The employees at H Airline's headquarters come from various cultural backgrounds due to the demography of country H, whose population is 19% immigrants. Of H airline's employees, 34.5% work outside of Country H. People with different mother tongues, particularly those from Asian and Arab countries, are actively employed as "welcoming agents" who are expected to mediate between the company and its customers.

The airline's 14,000 flight attendants are from over 50 different countries, and a significant number commute from outside of country H. Unlike office workers, a crew's roster is irregular and their duty times much shorter. Employees' ticket fares are also covered by the company. These working conditions promote transnational work from distant places.

There is a special group called "Regional Flight Attendants" who work under contracts different from those of most company employees. Most come from Asia (Japan, Thailand, India, Korea, China, etc.) and are divided by ethnicity. Some are based in country H, while others live in their own countries. They are employed especially to ensure smooth communication between people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Managers emphasize that regional flight attendants' mother tongues and cultural backgrounds are equally important for their work. They must be practitioners of their own culture, not just understand the language. This means that H Airline places great value on flight attendants' manners, attitudes, and customs.

JAPANESE FLIGHT ATTENDANTS ON "H" AIRLINE

H Airline began flying to Japan in 1961 during a period of high economic growth in Japan, and it employed two Japanese flight attendants at that time. These were required to wear Japanese *kimono* as a uniform on their flights (Yagai 1987).

At first, the "exhibition of Japanese culture" in in-flight transborder spaces was the main role of Japanese regional flight attendants. But with the advancement of the mass transportation era, they became an efficient manpower source pushed by phenomena driving the processes of globalization; the rapid expansion of air transport networks, the development of technology, increasing numbers of transnational travelers, and more.

The “culture broker”⁴⁾ who supports cross-cultural services has become necessary to both customers and airlines. Communication problems between Japanese passengers and European flight attendants are caused not only by language barriers but also by cultural differences in concepts of service.

In the 1990s the aviation industry entered a critical situation that persists even today, but overseas travel continued to grow. In the early 1990s, H Airline doubled the number of Japanese regional flight attendants on its Japan routes and opened an H City base for the new hires. Many other airlines made similar decisions around that time. As a result, the number of foreign residential Japanese flight attendants increased rapidly. The job supply matched the demand for flight attendants largely due to the state of Japan’s labor market. The 1990s were a “lost decade” when young people had difficulty finding jobs. The base transfer by airlines definitely affected the Japanese labor market, turning it in a more transnational and transborder direction.

Country H’s legal system concerning pensions and insurance policies for foreign workers is well established. Workers’ rights and life security there are perhaps even more reliable than they are in Japan. Under these circumstances, years of continuous employment have grown and commuter marriages have proliferated. Taking advantage of substantial work-sharing and holiday systems, many employees go to country H to work when they have to, much like a seasonal migrant.

I found only a few flight attendants with a clear and strong desire either to return to Japan or to immigrate to another country. Most say, “I will make the decision when I have to.” Choose a country in which to live seems like an insignificant matter to them. This reminds me of Harvey’s concept of “time and space compression,” which commonly applies to flight attendants’ lifestyles in transborder work conditions.

AIRSPACE CULTURE

“Trans” is a key word for transborder studies. An airplane is a space in which people from different places, of different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, religions, and so on, gather. Together they create a temporary public culture that disappears when the airplane arrives at its destination. At the same time, the aircraft is a business space.

Giddens describes the cultural experience of globalization with the concept of “disembodying” (Giddens 1990), referring to “the separation of space from place” and defining the place as “local.” French anthropologist Augé discusses the hypothesis that supermodernity produces non-places (Augé 1995). Tomlinson argues that air travel is like a time capsule, an experience of an independent time-system space without feelings of high-speed movement (Tomlinson 2000).

In-flight culture is also governed by international rules. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN), confirms the sovereignty of territorial airspace in their Article⁵⁾. Each aircraft has a nationality, and its cabin space is generally subject to the laws of the country in which it was registered. Thus the laws of the country in which an airport is located cannot always be applied to aircraft there.

The airline industry developed rapidly until the end of the 20th century. The majority of passengers on H Airlines in the 1990s were not of H's nationality. This fact made H Airline more culturally aware, and its management initiated a periodical survey of cross-cultural passenger service. This was also an important preparatory stage for H Airline's privatization during aviation liberalization.

SERVICE COMMUNICATION

Emotional Labor is a concept introduced by American sociologist Hochschild (Hochschild 1983), who analyzed the mechanism of emotional engagement in service communication using Stanilavski's⁶⁾ dramatics theory. She explained that airlines used to treat flight attendants' emotional resources as "gifts" (Mauss 1967) to the organization's community. Later, however, they became "rituals" (Turner 1996).

Hochschild's concept was discussed in light of theatricalism, but service is rather like *Commedia dell'arte*⁷⁾. Actors enter some scenario in which they must play certain roles; however, they decide the concrete lines and actions creatively and independently. Like actors in *Commedia dell'arte*, each flight attendant decides how to act in a given situation by considering and responding to signals from passengers.

Flight attendants sometimes say "duty" instead of "service." "Duty" usually means carrying out all aspects of service according to the company manual. "Duty" should be provided equally to all passengers, while "service" is supposed to be arranged, personalized, and customized with care.

"Duty" and "service" could be reworded as "labor" and "opera" in Latin. "Labor" means work enforced by others, while "opera" means work for creative pleasure. Flight attendants enjoy figuring out a passenger's specific needs: paying attention to cultural diversity is also performing "opera."

Analyzing the results of my participant observation, I have made the following two models for service work.

The "LOVI Model (Four-Quadrant Model)" shows that work lies along "labor-opera" and "visible-invisible" continua (Figure 1).

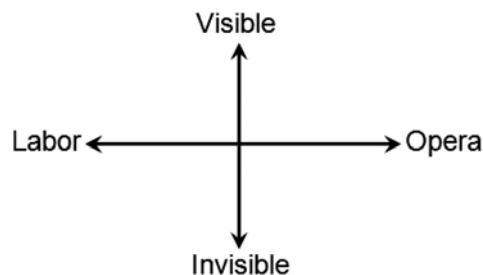


Figure 1 LOVI Model (Four-Quadrant Model)

The “Service Value Model (ABCDE Model)” classifies the contents of in-flight service work into five categories: appearance, behavior, communication, display, and emergency (Figure 2).

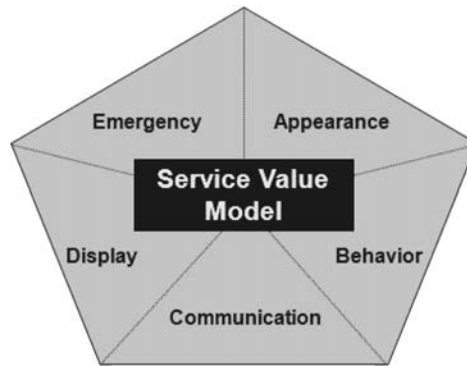


Figure 2 Service Value Model (ABCDE Model)

It should be noted that the “Service Value Model (ABCDE Model)” and the “LOVI Model (Four-Quadrant Model)” can be overlaid on each other and also applied to any other common face-to-face service work.

To welcome a stranger coming from outside the community was a matter of cross-cultural communication in the past, a universal value shared by all human beings. Today, service has become an industry, but “the principle of offering” (Umesao 1963) is still a universal concept. It is used in exchange theory to explain the value of offerings. The actual price of an offering is determined by the social status of and relations between monks and temple supporters, not by the economic logic of the production-consumption dichotomy.

For the co-creation of service value, “service literacy” is a common understanding between guests and service providers.

CONCLUSION

Welcoming guests is a universal act for all humankind. Face-to-face interaction in service has existed since the establishment of a monetary economy. However, its value is estimated like that of any factory product and determined by the monetary market. Even Hochschild’s theory of Emotional Labor is based on the classic labor theory of value. Umesao called this “the spurious goods” when he discussed “the information industry” in the 1960s, and I follow his interpretation today.

In an airplane, people bring in different cultures and give diversity to an airspace culture with an unstable temporary norm. Travelers’ experiences during international flight form rites of passage between work and work, and Graburn called this process a “sacred journey”.

Flight attendants try to respond as quickly as possible to each passenger's demands, trying to read signals and codes of behavior while avoiding stereotypes in service practice and to "trans" or bridge cultural gaps.

These practices differ from those in typical face-to-face services; they are unconventional responses that involve reading each customer's mind just like in improvisational theater. Flight attendants' workspace has a peculiar norm quite different from that of everyday life.

Transnational work experience keeps Japanese flight attendants at a physical and mental distance from Japan and Japanese culture and helps them "trans" stereotypes in their lives. Their service on H Airlines does not involve too many Japanese mannerisms, but neither does it conform strictly to a corporate mold, and as cultural brokers they try to exhibit model Japanese service over the transborder. This kind of work experience is removed from the general economic logic of the production-consumption dichotomy. It is in a non-place, a sacred space with an independent time-system created by supermodernity. It is one scene of an "ethnoscape" presenting today's JOMIN undergoing a process of diversification as corporate employees in the era of globalization.

NOTES

- 1) This refers to the study of a Western Electric factory outside Chicago conducted by a Harvard University research group during the years 1924–1932.
- 2) JOMIN is a concept first proposed by Japanese folklorist Kunio Yanagida. He saw "jomin" as the ethnic culture bearers who carry on their tradition without any written documents. Jomin are "nameless," ordinary (Japanese) citizens.
- 3) With modernization, various city functions and traffic infrastructure have been developed. This caused a separation of living space from workspace and a separation of functionality, too. As a result, people now find many opportunities to form relationships in various associations. Anthropologist Toshinao Yoneyama called this kind of relationship "SHAEN" (sodality/associational relationship), considering it an "indispensable element to unify human society" (Yoneyama 2006).
- 4) In Valene Smith's classic book *Anthropology of Tourism*, anthropologists point out some of the conflicts between local/host culture holders who accept tourists and guest/tourist culture holders who come and go. They see the person who understands both cultures as a broker whose intermediary role is very important for tourism (Nuñez and Lett 1977: 266–277). This person is a supporter and coordinator who can smooth the sightseeing experiences of guests, preventing conflicts with the host culture that can be caused by cultural gaps. Thus the role is much more than that of a translator or interpreter. Dennison Nash calls such people "culture brokers" (Nash 1977: 45).
- 5) International Civil Aviation Organization, 2006. Convention on International Civil Aviation Doc 7300/9 Ninth Edition.
- 6) Stanilavski Constantin. 1965 *An Actor Prepares*. Tr. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books.
- 7) Commedia dell'arte is an improvisational form of comedy. It developed in Italy in the 15th century. Commedia dell'arte is characterized by the use of masks with a singular costume representing each character's role. The theatrical improvisation is based on sketches or scenes.

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