

## Commentary : Japan in Global Circulation : Transnational Migration and Multicultural Politics

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**Commentary**  
**Japan in Global Circulation:**  
**Transnational Migration and Multicultural Politics**

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総評

グローバルな循環のなかの日本: 国際移動と多文化の政治学

グレンダ・S・ロバーツ

**Commentary on the Panel Papers**

I would like to thank Professors Shinji Yamashita and Blai Guarné for asking me to discuss this great set of papers on the multicultural politics of identity and difference in the contexts of transnational migration. Japan was rather a late-starter in in-migration in the postwar years, unlike many countries in Western Europe as well as traditional countries of immigration such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But for various reasons that I cannot note here due to time constraints, Japan began to see many newcomer migrant populations from the mid-1980s, from South America as well as the rest of Asia and beyond. Although the current population of registered foreigners does not yet reach two percent of the population, it has grown prodigiously and those who have naturalized are not counted in official government statistics. The papers assembled here are testimony to this new transnational, highly variegated, migration.

One thing we can see from the papers taken together is that they attest to the fragility of transnational migration, whereby economic crisis leads to unemployment and repatriation, or where immigration control policy and subsequent visa restrictions ironically enable employers and brokers to exploit workers: the market for the labor exists, but gets warped or pushed underground. Children are subject to bullying or teasing about their ancestry, there is difficulty in supporting the non-Japanese languages and cultures in the current Japanese environment, and so on. Hence the importance of a kind of archeology of immigration policy—through trac-

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ing the history of what went into the making of a particular regulation or structure we may learn more about the hidden mechanisms of power.

In the first paper, Masako Kudo addresses the main questions posed by the panel in a detailed and elegant analysis of the Pakistani-Japanese couples' use of religio-cultural resources in global circulation. This is the kind of paper where one suspects that each paragraph has a much longer story behind it that is about to be published as a book. The ethnographic description of the case of the Naem family is fascinating. They are truly utilizing a global network of Muslims that is also partly a global family network to fulfill their goals. But beyond that, this is an account of Japanese women, converts to Islam, who study a global version of the faith in order to challenge their husband's versions, which they view as more parochial. How the power relationships between husbands and wives are negotiated is an important topic delineated by Kudo and on which I urge her to publish further.

Moving on to Uchio Taichi's paper, when I read this I was reminded of Takayuki Tsuda's (2003) work on *Nikkei* Brazilians and *Nikkei* Americans in Japan, and the advantages given the latter due to the privilege of international hierarchical order in Japan. Uchio, however, is looking especially at the level of coping behavior of Filipino Japanese children when they meet with discrimination. From this paper we learn that *hāfu* (half) are not created equal. Being half-Filipino ranks lower than being half-American in the hierarchy of race and nations in Japanese society. But being half-anything in a Japanese elementary or junior high school might rank higher than being wholly other, as my child was. At one point he only wanted to be accompanied in public by one of us, because, we later learned, he could pass as *hāfu* if he were seen with only one of us, his Caucasian parents. Belongingness is what he yearned for, and it is surely also what all children yearn for. Uchio's paper painfully relates the lengths to which Japanese Filipino Children go to be recognized. People change their eye color, announce their parents' professions, mention distant Spanish relatives from the colonial legacy of the Philippines, or English ability, to claim their legitimacy. *Hāfu* are not merely *hāfu*, but they go to great lengths to elaborate their identities: they are an eighth this, a quarter that, with many other features and characteristics that prove their worthiness to belong. It is extremely interesting that one's colonial and post-colonial heritage could be used to one's advantage, and while the comparison is not exactly parallel, it reminds me of some Hong Kong Chinese subjective identities vis-à-vis Mainland Chinese (Newendorp 2008). Such micro-politics of self-representation can only be discovered through careful ethnographic work, of which there is ample evidence in this paper.

Haeng-ja Chung's paper is a welcome reminder that there is a lot of work to be done in unpacking Japan's "entertainer visa" in order to clearly lay out who is benefiting, how, and why. As she notes, most entertainers themselves are not benefiting. Why was the law written as it is? What exactly is the history of this visa category, and how has it changed across time? We know that loophole visas are

typical in Japan. Another such visa is the “trainee and technical interns visa,” which was used by employer groups all over Japan to bring in unskilled labor on as little as 300 yen per hour wages, since there was no *legal* way to bring them in to work in those sorts of jobs. Due largely to NGO efforts in recent years, the government has come under considerable pressure to improve the conditions of trainees. Since 2010, this category of visa holders is now covered by the Labor Standards Law and the minimum wage laws, although official voices suggesting that the trainee and technical intern visa be scrapped entirely and a bona fide guest worker system of some kind be established have diminished since these two major areas have been addressed. With the entertainer visa, what businesses received were foreign hostesses, whom they could not hire straightforwardly since a hostess would not be considered as a skilled worker. And these women coming to Japan on “entertainer visas” were called *Japayuki-san* in reference to the Japanese *karayuki-san*, who left the shores of Japan for the brothels of Southeast Asia in the latter nineteenth century (Itoh 1992). Just as not all entertainers are hostesses, not all hostesses are sex workers, but the entertainer visa has been used handily by the water trades, as Chung’s paper clearly illustrates, with the workers left with only a fraction of their hard-earned wages, and in some cases, being required to pick up their customers’ tabs if the customer failed to pay.

How the tightening up on the “entertainer visa” in the ensuing years since the post-2004 crackdown has affected Korean migrant women’s strategies to come to Japan to work as hostesses is a question that remains for further research, but as Chung suggests, the demand remains, and it is likely that women are arriving on other types of visas. What is unlikely to change anytime soon, in my view, is the determination on the part of the government to continue to restrict entrance of “unskilled labor.” Although currently the government has created a scheme to attract the highly skilled (Oishi 2012), and while student migrants who stay after graduation to work in Japan also lead to a *de facto* skilled-migration flow (Liu-Farrer 2012), there is no immigration program that *directly* addresses labor shortages in labor categories that are deemed to be “un-skilled,” nor is there any discussion of it as a possibility (Roberts 2012). Hence one could predict that the situation Chung analyzes in these pages will continue for some time to come, as will the conflation in the mind of the public of foreign “entertainers” and “hostesses” with trafficked sex-workers.

Finally, Koji Sasaki’s work on the recession and the breakdown of the *dekasse-gui* system is a finely crafted paper that gives us an up to date account of how the global financial crisis affected Japan’s Brazilian community, which had heretofore been growing with each year since the migration flow took off in 1990. I particularly appreciate his archeology of the disaster, in his relating the artifacts that people left behind in their apartment buildings when they hurriedly returned to Brazil: “piles of furniture and house garbage were left everywhere.” Those who do not live

in Japan may not understand, but it is very difficult to move house since one is obliged to arrange for the legal disposal of one's oversized goods. Even starting a month in advance, this might be a daunting task, one which I can attest would require excellent Japanese skills, and furthermore, it also could be quite expensive, another reason that explains why the apartments were left in the manner shown in the pictures of Sasaki's paper. It is a poignant reminder of the difficulties these people faced in repatriation. Newspapers went bust, ethnic schools lost many pupils, and some young people turned to the water trades, which were apparently still hiring, for work. (This connects to the Chung paper in that the people of Japanese descent are the only migrants who may enter Japan to work in any job, skilled or unskilled. They do not need an "entertainer visa" to work as hosts or hostesses). Ironically the one business that thrived was the moving documentation business. In the conclusion, Sasaki mentions that while some Brazilians may return to Japan in the coming years, it will not be the same for them because language acquisition is being increasingly called for in government policy regarding foreigners, but also because the Brazilians themselves have come to appreciate how important language is to their own survival. Moreover, the earthquake and nuclear disaster of March 2011 may have further dampened a desire to return. It will be important to continue to follow this group of immigrants to understand the interplay of migrant reception, global economic conditions, broker networks, and the social capital networks of the *Nikkei* Brazilians themselves.

Returning to the first paper, it is interesting to note that Kudo's concluding comments are echoed in all the papers. All the migrants we have heard of in this panel struggle at some point to overcome marginality in transnational space, and this is indeed an ongoing struggle. A fair just world is a distant dream that migrants and their families actively and creatively struggle to achieve. I hope that anthropology, with its keen appreciation for people's everyday strategies and motivations, will continue to produce excellent scholarship such as this so that we all will be more aware of and sensitive to the everyday realities of peoples living in our midst.

## Postscript

The AAA panel at which the papers in this volume were originally given was in 2010, already almost five years ago as I write. There have been some notable developments in Japan's immigration control policy since that time, although I shall refer readers to my 2012 publication for a synopsis of those. Suffice it to say that the policy of Japan in regard to immigration is, as Guarné and Yamashita stated in their preface to this volume, *not* an immigration policy but an immigration *control* policy, and it remains so in 2014. This is despite the recent proposals on the part of the Abe administration to bring in foreigners to Japan on short-term contracts in order to fill the shortfall in workers in the construction field to carry out the building

projects of the 2020 Olympics and the re-building of the affected areas in Tohoku after the Great East Japan Earthquake as well as an overhaul and possible expansion of the Technical Intern and Trainee Program (Tanaka and Kobayashi 2014). So, one might ask, “Can we have transnationalism occurring when Japan lacks an immigration policy and does not consider herself a country of immigration?” The answer is “Yes, certainly we can and we do,” because despite the intention of policy to date, the people crossing the borders themselves do often find ways to live and work in Japan, as well as to relocate transnationally or to go back and forth as they please, through such means as student migration, securing permanent residency, and marriage with a Japanese national, or by taking Japanese nationality (Liu-Farrer 2012). Return, including forced return, is another important part of this mobility (Xiang, Yeoh and Toyota eds. 2013). There is no state-level multiculturalism policy, but there is certainly an increasing multicultural landscape in parts of Japan, identified by Tsuneyoshi (2013) as “diversity points,” a landscape that is bound to grow as Japan’s population shrinks and labor shortages grow in this aging, low-birthrate society.

Over the past two decades and more, due to the lack of state level immigration policy, it has been left largely to the local governments to figure out how to assist new resident populations in their daily lives (Tsuda 2006). If new categories for status of residency are opened or if current strict regulations against the importation of “unskilled” labor are relaxed or modified, it will undoubtedly act as a catalyst for foreign migrants. No matter their visa category or status of residence, they will act as people are wont—stay or leave or travel back and forth—as well as they can manage it. This will be regardless of the intent of the policy to keep migrants under control, and regardless of the state’s continuing stance that Japan is not a country of immigration. As anthropologists it will be up to us to follow these policies as well as their outcomes, by looking carefully at how people on the ground—the migrants, the public, the politicians, and the bureaucrats alike—strategize, assess their opportunities, and act under changing regimes of global circulation.

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