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〈論文〉

Between Privilege and Disadvantage: Western Middling Migrants' Outsider Treatment in Japanese Companies

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on migration has started to move away from a dualistic perspective of low-skilled and disadvantaged migrations on the one hand and what has been dubbed privileged migrations on the other hand. This paper focuses on such middling migrations by examining the case of young Western middling migrants in Japan. Westerners oftentimes get classified as highly-skilled while, in reality, they mostly rely on their foreign language skill and cultural knowledge. Although they can utilize their otherness to avoid uncomfortable situations, they are also at risk of becoming excluded and experiencing outsider treatment in the workplace. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with young Western middling migrants about their experience working in Japanese companies, I outline their struggles to fit into existing workplace hierarchies and to be seen as full and competent members of the group. Outsider treatment leads to decreased job satisfaction, frustration, and mental-health issues. This contributes to their decision to quit their job and to consider re-migration. Future policy needs to address workplace integration and skill development opportunities for foreign employees.

Keywords: Middling migration, privileged migration, migrant integration, migrants in Japan, outsider treatment

1. Introduction

Classic migration theories tend to describe migration as driven by market forces and economic inequalities (see Massey et al. 1998). These ideas have been expanded upon through acknowledging the importance of migrant networks and social capital (e.g. Haug 2008). While these investigations usually focus on low-skilled labor migration from the Global South and East to the North and West, some scholars have shifted their gaze to so-called “privileged migration” (e.g. Lundström 2014). This creates a dualistic perspective in the research focused on low-skilled labor, victimhood, and the formation of ethnic communities on one hand, and highly-skilled professionals, global elites, and cosmopolitanism on the other. In recent years, studies have started to focus on what Conradson and Latham (2005) call “middling migrants”, middling between the extremes of transnational elite and refugee from the developed world. Robertson and Roberts (2022) describe middling migration as “migrant mobility that is enabled through economic resources and education and imagined through

middle-class identities or aspirations, yet simultaneously configured by the relative re-positionings and shiftings of privilege and marginalization” (p. 3). Thus, middling migrants can be characterized as the “in-betweens” in terms of class and privilege.

While the focus on middling migration shows a break from dualistic perspectives in migration studies, the greater part of the scholarship on the phenomenon (e.g. Rutten & Verstappen 2013) seems to still concentrate on the movement from less affluent regions to what has been termed “the West”. Although there have been endeavors to reexamine the common representation of migrants moving from the West to the East as elites (e.g. Debnár 2016), the idea of Westerners as middling migrants has so far been underexplored. I contribute to this growing scholarship by examining the case of Western middling migrants in Japan.

Despite its decreasing labor force, Japan stays reluctant towards immigration. While they “walk a path of pragmatic utilization of ‘transnational human resources’”, at the same time, foreign-born workers are viewed as a temporary workforce and not as migrants that could “become a part of a new Japanese society” (Vogt 2007: 243). Even though immigration policies were introduced to attract high-skilled professionals, the lack of integration policies makes it difficult to keep them around (Oishi 2012). There seems to be a gap between policy output and policy outcome: While labor migration is supposed to be only for high-skilled and temporary workers, side doors are created for low-skill long-term migrants (Vogt 2014: 578). This two-sided approach to immigration contributes to a “bifurcated visa structure” that reinforces racial hierarchies between immigrants in Japan with Westerners on one side, and non-Westerners on the other side of the spectrum (Iwata & Nemoto 2018). This does not mean though, that Westerners can unconditionally benefit from privileged treatment. Following, I will discuss what it means to be a Westerner in Japan, how perceptions of skill and privilege do not always align with reality, and how “otherness” can be detrimental. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with Western middling migrants about their experiences with work and life in Japan, I argue that their middling position leads to receiving outsider treatment. This causes stress, frustration, and job dissatisfaction which in turn increases the risk of them to consider quitting their job and in some cases re-migrating.

1.1 The Westerner in Japan

“Westerner” is often used to describe anybody from the West (as seen from Japan) or somebody from the “Western World” or Occident (usually understood as Europe, North America and parts of Oceania), which implies a hierarchical relationship between the West and the East. After opening its borders in 1853, Japan was faced with a choice: Become a subject to colonization, or “catch up” and become an equal to the Western powers. One method employed at the time to push towards modernization was to hire foreign professionals. These so-called *oyatoi gaikokujin* were brought in mostly from the West to assist with the creation of a modern Japanese society (Debnár 2016). It was not only technical knowledge, though, that was imported, but also Western ideas of race which Japan adapted into its own understanding (Yamashiro 2013). Theories at the time

linked race with the developmental level of civilizations putting White Caucasians at the top of the hierarchy. The exposure to this Eurocentric racial ideology paired with the need to distinguish itself from the colonized parts of Asia contributed to the creation of the idea of a Japanese race that stood in opposition to the White Western and the Asian race (Kawai 2015). Despite this, Japan was not able to fully shake the feeling of inferiority towards the West (Russell 2017). This history is a cornerstone of the perception of Westerners in Japan. Although “Westerner” nowadays does not explicitly exclude any given race or ethnicity, there still exists a conflation of Western-ness and Whiteness.

1.2 The myth of “high skill”

During the 1980s, Japan introduced policies to attract overseas talent at a grand scale such as the “100,000 by 2000 plan” which aimed to increase the number of international students (Horie 2002). Following, Japan became one of the most popular student exchange destinations in Asia which led to further policy expansions (Ota 2018). This also attracted students from the West. For instance, student migration became a common pathway to Japan for Europeans (Debnár 2016). What further contributed to this pulling force was the start of the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program. The program was conceived as a way to facilitate internationalization by hiring foreigners from mostly English-speaking countries as assistant language teachers or international relations coordinators. While its effectiveness in promoting internationalization has been questioned (e.g. McConnell 2000), it nonetheless has become a fixture for attracting global talent as evidenced by the annual career fair organized to connect JETs (program participants) with Japanese firms. Considering the connection of Westerners with higher education and their role in the JET-program, it seems that developing an image as highly educated or skilled would only come naturally.

Indeed, many Westerners enter the country as “highly-skilled” professionals although this classification has been disputed. The working visa most commonly held by Europeans for instance, *Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services*, is more strongly linked with English language ability than with specific technical or scientific skills (Debnár 2016: 87). Their image as global elites or privileged Whites has also been called into question. Some scholars point out that the privileged position ascribed to them due to persisting ideas of white superiority has its limitations concerning labor market access (Lan 2011; Debnár 2016), career development (Hof 2018, 2020b) and integration (Miladinović 2020). Nonetheless, foreigners identified as Western seem to experience more preferential treatment compared to other migrant populations. Foreign looks of Caucasians can act as an excuse for their lack of Japanese language ability or knowledge of customs (Iwata & Nemoto 2018) and accepting preferential treatment and using it to one’s advantage (“playing the *gaijin* or foreigner card”) can be a valid strategy in some situations (Komisarof 2012). There are also downsides to this perceived otherness: Being singled out as “cultural role models” that are “not being valued for what they can contribute, but rather for the symbolism of their race and ethnicity” can lead to frustration and cause them to

give up on integration (Miladinović 2020: 98). This singling out can also be seen in the higher educational sector. For instance, non-Asian university faculty oftentimes gets reduced to a token for internationalization and diversity, but otherwise gets poorly integrated (Brown 2018). Overall, Hof (2020b) finds that white privilege functions less as employable capital but rather holds a symbolic value as a form of embodied capital. Whiteness, while often positively perceived in social life, does not give advantages in a work setting and “the disconnect between the desirability of whiteness in society and in the workplace stir [sic] feelings of unfair treatment and allows migrants to interpret stagnating career development or the infeasibility of securing permanent legal status as a result of racial discrimination” (Hof 2020b: 16). Anachronistic Japanese corporate practices discourage especially women and foreigners from building careers, and the focus on keeping up internal harmony hinders workplace diversity and makes it difficult for them to fit in (Liu-Farrer & Hof 2018). Furthermore, the one-size-fits-all approach to job training and in-house careers puts foreigners, who went through socialization mostly outside of Japan, in a disadvantaged position (Hof & Tseng 2021).

In summary, Westerners find themselves in a position of contradictions. On the one hand, they are viewed as highly-skilled (and thus “welcome”), and can benefit from their Whiteness or otherness. On the other hand, they are easily singled out, their skills are often limited to foreign language proficiency, and they might lack the nuanced cultural and social knowledge gained by going through socialization in Japan. This negatively affects their ability to fit in the Japanese workplace and makes them easy targets for exclusionism and outsider treatment.

2. Data and methodology

The data for this study was collected through qualitative interviews conducted throughout 2020 and 2021. I selected informants through snowball-sampling by recruiting the help of acquaintances to introduce me to foreigners living in Japan, and further posted requests for participation in various groups on Facebook. The recruitment focused on young Westerners in their 20s and 30s and I further limited the selection to those who had experience working full-time in Japan (except JETs who usually only work 35 hours per week), and had been living there for at least two years. This data was supplemented by follow-ups with almost all of the participants and informal conversations that were recorded in the form of notes and memos. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all exchange was conducted online through video calls or in written form. The interviews were conducted in English and German, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by myself. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and company names and geographical details were obscured in order to protect their privacy.

The interviews were conducted in an open, semi-structured fashion. I opened by asking participants to walk me through an average work day. The following inquiries included questions about the work environment,

human relationships in and outside the workplace, coping with stress and problems at work, and how they spent their free time. The transcribed interviews and notes were analyzed following a grounded theory approach. Of the 13 European and US citizens interviewed, 2 were excluded for the sake of this analysis since their migration pathway and specific circumstances put them in an outlier position compared to other participants identified as middling migrants. All of the remaining 11 participants (Tab. 1) mentioned a prior interest in Japan as one of the factors that led to their migration.

Table 1. Study participants' characteristics at the time of the first interview.

Name	Age (Gender)	Nationality	Education	Employment
Markus	24 (M)	Austria	bachelor	full-time
James	23 (M)	UK	bachelor	full-time
Bastian	29 (M)	Germany	bachelor	full-time†
Hanna	27 (F)	Hungary	master's	full-time
Anika	26 (F)	Belgium	master's	full-time
Lukas	26 (M)	Germany	bachelor	JET
Emma	35 (F)	Germany	master's	JET
Robert	27 (M)	US	bachelor	full-time†
Marie	27 (F)	Germany	bachelor	JET
Kathrin	27 (F)	Germany	HS	unemployed
Erika	36 (F)	Germany	master's	full-time

F:female, M:male, HS:high school, LG:local government, † :former JET.

Most held university degrees (except Kathrin who had quit her bachelor's in favor of a full-time position) with most of them in Japan-related fields such as Japanese or East-Asia studies, and furthermore reported a high level of Japanese language proficiency. The majority had prior exchange experience in Japan and since virtually all of them had moved soon after graduation, most did not have any or only limited work experience outside of Japan. Except Kathrin and the JETs, all lived in a metropolitan area at the time of the interview and were employed in medium to large sized companies. All informants could further be described as White or Caucasian. This was not by design but was most likely a result of limitations in my personal resources and circumstances at the time preventing recruitment outside of social networks.

These participants can be described as middling in three ways: Firstly, despite coming to Japan on a specialist visa, their young age and status as fresh graduates without work experience means that they are in reality closer to Japanese graduates about to enter the job market rather than highly-skilled professionals.

Secondly, what distinguishes them from local graduates (foreign language skill, cultural knowledge and phenotypical appearance) might give them the edge in some situations, but at the same time, they lack the support networks local Japanese have. They also did not go through socialization in the host society, therefore not possessing the same nuanced cultural understanding. Lastly, while many plan to stay in Japan and try to settle permanently, they are oftentimes treated like visitors and expected to leave eventually. Getting permanent residency can be difficult and many rely on their employer for their visa (and in some cases also housing) which further binds them to their job. They are therefore in a liminal position between low and high skill, disadvantage and privilege, and temporality and permanence.

3. Findings

Spending most of the day surrounded by colleagues and can be a taxing. The workplace environment is not only shaped by the hierarchies within it and the general company culture, but also by the opinions and aspirations of the people working there. Trouble with superiors, high pressure to perform, and a crumbling work-life balance are common examples of what many employees struggle with. This is even more so felt by those who stick out. Immigrants do not only suffer the stress that is usually associated with a busy work life, but also the stress of having to acculturate to a new cultural environment (van Tonder & Soontiens 2013).

3.1 Struggling to fit in

I was bullied 5 ½ years long, typical Japanese work environment. That one colleague from France was basically bullied out because he dared negotiating a better contract with our boss, with much higher pay than me or my Japanese colleagues. They messed him up so much [...] I started to cry seeing how they treated him. The work environment really sucked. (Erika)

As one would expect, all informants had at some point struggled with long working hours, abusive superiors or bureaucratic issues. What I want to focus on though, are the unique issues that set them apart from their Japanese coworkers who, in some cases, can become the source of conflict as Erika's experience exemplifies. At the time of our interview, she had already worked in several Japanese companies before finding a job at a German firm. She explained that while she used to be on good terms with her superiors, she always struggled to fit into the "pecking order". Especially her female colleagues would pick on her because she did not "grovel before the boss" and did not show her senior coworkers enough respect. As she put it: "Why should I treat you with respect? We are colleagues." James too felt strongly about this: "I've worked here for a year, we basically have the same amount of experience but I still have to speak to them in a way that I think is just proportionally too [sic] polite than it should be. And there's nothing I can do about that. And I really

hate that.” Both Erika and James struggled with the seniority-based hierarchy that is typical for most Japanese institutions from schools to the office. Both grew up and went through socialization in a context where such hierarchies are not unheard of but often not as pronounced. “It feels somewhat stiff to me just because you always address people by their last name and that a gap [in age] of just one, two years makes the difference. I honestly believe that only people of the same age talk normally to each other, not in *keigo*”, is how Emma put it. These hierarchies are often not just seen as an annoyance, but can create “...a climate in which foreign employees [see] few chances to nurture collegial friendship” (Hof & Tseng 2021: 10). Indeed, most informants found it difficult to connect with their Japanese coworkers despite being able to speak the language and having some understanding of Japanese cultural practices and customs. This can cause further stress, frustration and resentment:

I was struggling a lot because when I was a new guy there, I wanted friends obviously. But since no one talked with me, I felt angry and sad, because why? In Europe, when someone enters a company, it's obvious that the people working there ask questions about them, right? Like everyone wants to get to know the new person, but here, nobody gave a shit about me. (Hanna)

Hanna worked as an interpreter for a public transport firm. The content of her work changed to that of basic information desk clerk though once Japan closed its borders due to the pandemic. She was not only exhausted from the changing work shifts, but also felt isolated at work and at home. Especially her Japanese colleagues did not seem to be interested in interaction. “Most of the time we're just by ourselves, foreigners”, she explained. “They just simply don't give a shit about us foreigner people. They treat us like, I don't know, complete outsiders.” Hanna felt angry with her Japanese colleagues and her company. While she did have a small network of friends consisting mostly of other foreigners, she felt isolated from the Japanese who she actually wanted to connect with. “Japanese people are so hard to talk with, they have this very strong wall” (Hanna), “I have this feeling that the Japanese easily say things [e.g. an invitation to spend time together] that they don't actually want to follow up on” (Marie), and “real friendliness and politeness is something you rarely find in Japanese companies” (Markus) are just a few examples of how others described this experience. On the one hand, they were under pressure to assimilate into these hierarchical structures, which most begrudgingly did. On the other hand, they also felt that they were excluded and not shown the same kind of respect and behavior that was expected from them.

3.2 Infantilization

Foreigners often get infantilized, you often lose your last name and for me as a German, that is really uncomfortable. There is also polite speech in German. I want to be addressed by my last name if that is the

general norm [...] At my old job for JET, it was always first name, even on a first meeting [...] I want to be on a level of mutual respect. (Bastian)

Bastian moved to Japan after graduating from university in 2017 and started his working life as a JET coordinator at the city hall of a rural community. For him, it seemed like a good step to start his career although. He got tasked with support in organizing various events aimed at promoting international learning and exchange. This included smaller activities such as cooking workshops in the mornings. Bastian was disappointed with the scope and lack of effectiveness of these activities and wanted to improve them. He had prior experience in event management which he put to use to come up with several proposals. It did not work out most of the time, though: “My project ideas never had full support by colleagues, they wanted to stick to their ways. I had a female *senpai*, she was very arrogant, always like ‘Foreigners know nothing about Japan’ or ‘This is Japan and not Germany, we do it this way because this is Japan’.” While he managed to get one project implemented to great success, it did not change how others viewed his efforts. He became frustrated with the constant resistance and decided to not extend his time in the JET-program and instead found a job in a Japanese company at a job fair.

Bastian’s story is not unusual. The majority of the former and current JETs interviewed shared similar experiences of not being treated as adults and feeling excluded in their work environment. This does not only result in reduced job satisfaction but also increasing frustration and disillusionment. Emma: “I sometimes feel that I’m not actually in Japan, that I’m missing out on the real Japan.” Despite them being brought to Japan to work towards the goals of the program (internationalization and promotion of exchange) many feel like a mere bystander. Marie: “Me and my [foreign] colleagues often have this issue that we are sometimes automatically excluded... And this happens at work as well as in private life [...] And I believe [...] that it’s with good intentions [...] but in such situations, I just feel excluded.” This situation was not unique to those in the JET-program but was shared by most informants. While not everybody took issue with being called by their first name (some actually preferred it), all of them saw their infantilization as an issue. What mattered to them was to be accepted and treated as a full member of the team – not like an outsider or a child: “I don’t want to say that I’m smart. But I’m not stupid” (Anika), “I wonder if that [being treated differently] means that we’re not real employees” (Emma).

3.3 Okyaku-sama atsukai and tokenization

I always feel that it doesn’t matter how long I’ve been living in Japan, which is more than four years in total, and even though I got to a high language proficiency level for a foreigner, for somebody who wasn’t born and raised in Japan, that I nonetheless am always perceived as a foreigner and [...] that I am more like some kind of guest. (Lukas)

Lukas described what has been dubbed *okyaku-sama atsukai* or guest treatment. While there are some benefits, mainly being more easily forgiven language mistakes or social faux pas (Komisarof 2012: 188), it also gets frustrating for those who are trying to be accepted as full members. Lukas lamented that whenever he got to know new people “the first question is always where you are from, even when you do the whole greeting in perfect Japanese. I could’ve been born and grown up here, but it’s always immediately assumed that I am not a Japanese citizen.” While it is not a question born out of malicious intent, it nonetheless was hurtful to Lukas who saw Japan as his home. It is also not what one would expect to be asked in a professional setting. Anika shared a similar experience of being treated as a guest or temporary resident: “When I meet people here, they often ask me ‘How long do you think you will work in Japan?’ I get this question so much, even from my boss now because they expect me to leave.” While, in some cases, this might incentivize employers to put extra effort into keeping their foreign employees, it can also lead to them being seen as expandable and replaceable. It is sometimes not the individual that is needed, but just any foreigner.

During a fight with her employer, Kathrin was told, that a new foreigner would be starting out soon. “It was just the way I was told this. I just thought, oh well so you don’t need your current foreigner anymore? That’s when I decided that this was the last straw”, as she described what led to her quitting. Kathrin came to Japan as an exchange student. During her stay, she participated in an excursion where she got to know her future employer who was the organizer of the trip. The initial plan was for Kathrin to conduct tours in rural Japan but when the borders closed to foreign tourists, all activities planned got cancelled. To keep his company afloat, her boss opened a restaurant instead. His employees, including office workers and bus drivers, were split between catering in the restaurant and working on the fields he owned. Some quit out of dissatisfaction with these sudden changes. Kathrin started work in the restaurant even though she asked to be put in charge of working the fields since she hated catering. Her employer would not budge though and she soon found out the motive behind it:

Without asking me first [...] he used my picture for the front page of the newspaper. One day, television, NHK also suddenly showed up and I had to act as his little puppet. All of it really pissed me off, I really hated being used like this, being that token foreigner. (Kathrin)

Kathrin had become something like a mascot for the restaurant, what she and other informants called a “token foreigner”. Tokens are people “who are hired, admitted or appointed to a group because of their difference from other members, perhaps to serve as ‘proof’ that the group does not discriminate against such people” or “someone who meets all of the formal requirements for entrance into a group but does not possess the ‘auxiliary characteristics’ (especially race, sex and ethnicity) that are expected of persons in that position” (Zimmer 1988: 65). This outsider status can lead to decreased job satisfaction, job-related depression

(Kimmel & Gormley 2003), and various other negative outcomes (see Watkins et al. 2018). What *okyaku-sama atsukai* and tokenization share is the reduction of members of the outsider group to their otherness. As Simmel (1950) puts it: “This non-common element is once more nothing individual, but merely the strangeness of origin, which is or could be common to many strangers. For this reason, strangers are not really conceived as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type” (p. 3). Or in the words of Creighton (1995: 155): “...for the most part, Japanese remain ignorant of the people within the *gaijin* packaging.” Although it is mostly associated with negative consequences for members of minority groups, Western middling migrants can also draw some benefits due to their unique position.

3.4 Outsider Privileges

Today I went to our company’s group exhibition. I did notice that none of the customers would come and talk to me. They’d always talk to somebody else. I was actually thrilled that this happened because I didn’t want to talk to them, I was not interested. (James)

Many Westerners struggle to fit into their workplace. While this is their reality, it cannot be said that all of it is the Japanese colleagues’ or the company’s fault. Moreover, although they might experience some mistreatment, they also have certain privileges. James, for instance, had completed a student exchange in Japan and moved there right after graduation where he started to work and was put in charge of translations and contact with suppliers in Europe. He was not trusted with dealing with Japanese clients and in general held a special position. While his abusive boss would reprimand employees in front of everyone during regular meetings, James never got targeted: “The meeting is just me sitting there whilst he shouts at people and then he comes to me and I say ‘Oh I got nothing to report’ and he says ‘Okay, next person’”. James would refuse to do any overtime and be the first to leave despite most of his Japanese colleagues staying past hours. “I really honestly don’t [do] overtime every day. I leave at six. Because I don’t want to. And I’m using the foreign person card.” While he too had the occasional weekend shift, James refused to come in early or to do overtime on weekdays. He spent his breaks outside the company building and did not think much about work outside of working hours, something that might not fare well for most Japanese employees. James could get away with it because he was essential for his company as the only English-speaker.

Anika was just like James the only English speaker in her office. She was put in charge of production management, a job she hated. Her working hours were long and the stress got to a point where she complained to her superior: “I really didn’t like it. I told my manager and [...] I think they were also afraid that I might go back home or just quit the company.” In the end, she got transferred to a position more suited to her own preferences and skillset. The company could not afford to lose her because “they needed people that speak [English] and are able to communicate with abroad.” Similar to James, Anika was aware of her special

privileges but she also felt that it was unfair towards other employees: "I don't really think it should be that way. But I also had this advantage because when I didn't know anything people would be like 'Oh yeah she's not Japanese', so it's an excuse." Most of the JETs interviewed had similar experiences. Colleagues and superiors alike would overlook their mistakes or take over tasks for them. And while some of felt bad about it and wanted to take on more responsibilities, some would enjoy their privilege. Even Lukas, who had complained about being treated like a guest or tourist, seemed content with his position: "I actually enjoy being a foreigner in Japan. I don't know if I would want to live in Japan if I was Japanese."

Another privilege shows in the pathways they used to find employment. None of them (except for Anika) went through the time intensive hiring process that their Japanese peers had to go through. Three of them got employed through JET (Lukas, Emma, and Marie); two former JETs (Bastian and Robert) got recruited at a job fair organized exclusively for JETs; two got their job at a job fair in Europe (James and Markus); and three got their jobs through coincidence or a luck (Kathrin, Hanna and Erika). This is in contrast to their non-Western young university-educated peers. The job searching process for Chinese student migrants for instance resembles more that of native Japanese (Liu-Farrer 2011). For most young graduates, this involves applying to multiple companies, going through interviews, group discussions and tests, often over the course of several months. This does not mean that my informants did not have to earn their position, but the process was less extensive for them. They were able to take a shortcut. Special treatment, be it to the benefit or detriment of Westerners, becomes a "chicken or the egg" problem: Are Westerners treated differently because they can and do rely on certain privileges? Or do they exploit these privileges as a reaction to being treated differently? Untangling this issue is beyond the scope of this case study but we can shed some light on the consequences of this situation.

4. Consequences

The most apparent effect this kind of outsider treatment can have, is a negative impact on the well-being and mental health of individuals. Of the 11 participants, 8 reported cases of increased feelings of frustration, powerlessness, anger, or loneliness as related to experiences of being isolated or treated differently. These feelings were a reaction to a realization that they might just be there to fulfill some sort of unofficial "internationalization quota" (Bastian), or simply "not viewed as real employees" (Emma). Many questioned their worth and why they had come to Japan in the first place. Although some found ways to cope with these feelings by focusing on experiences outside their work life or by finding better employment, for some they contributed to long-term mental health struggles. Kathrin found herself unable to go back to work because of the distress it would cause her and instead became a full-time housewife, and went into therapy. Others (Markus and Robert) spiraled into alcoholism. Some of the JETs expressed that they would not extend their contracts and rather leave the country or look for employment in non-Japanese companies.

One could argue that fitting in at work and building strong relationships with coworkers is not the be-all and end-all of a fulfilling life. While this might hold true for some, the work place is especially important for immigrants. Work not only constitutes a major part of adult life, but also plays a central role in advancing the acculturation of immigrants (van Tonder & Soontiens 2013). Immigrants also cannot rely on their friend and family networks since those are often left behind. This is of course the case for all who move to a new country, regardless of origin and destination. What distinguishes Westerners from, for instance, Chinese or Korean immigrants that might be able to take advantage of existing networks and communities, is that Westerners lack a cohesive and well rooted community. While their number has significantly grown over the last two decades, they still only amount to a small percentage of the overall foreign population, and are made up by many different nationalities and ethnicities. Although there might be feelings of solidarity, the foreign community is not necessarily as Erika described it “like a family” for everybody. Emma, for example, felt like an outsider in the Western community in her region. She described a cultural gap since most of them were born and raised in the United States. What is perceived as the Western community is a highly heterogenic group and while there is a shared “Western experience” (Komisarof 2012), this is not enough to serve as the backbone of a community. The lack of community further reinforces the temporality of Western immigrants. One informant put this painful truth into words: “Everyone leaves... And it’s very difficult to manage that because you wonder at what time will you leave also.”

What does this imply for Japan and its companies? It should be in their interest to keep foreign employees. Having part of the work force change regularly is not only a waste of resources, but also detrimental to building an efficient work environment. Companies ideally would adjust to accommodate for foreign employees’ needs. An example is the firm Bastian joined after JET. They would not treat foreigners differently but rather try to set them to tasks where they could make use of their language ability. It is difficult to find the right balance between equity and equality, though. Being too accommodating can incite tension between foreign and Japanese employees as was the case for Erika. Being too forgiving like in James’s case might reward playing the system and using the *gaijin* card as an easy out. This is of course not a one-way street. Komisarof (2012) cautions that “it is not just up to Japan, or any host nation, to make itself a perfect place for its foreign-born inhabitants” and that “it is also critical that Westerners approach intercultural relations with positive attitudes” (p. 237). Policy aiming to reduce turnover of middling and highly-skilled professionals needs to incentivize companies to improve integration, and open up opportunities for foreign-born employees to utilize and further develop their skills. The goal should be to turn them from being outsiders that have to rely on their English proficiency or Western looks to fully integrated members of the group.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the case of Western middling migrants in Japan and the issues they face trying to fit in the workplace. Young Westerners coming to Japan in recent years are oftentimes described as highly-skilled and privileged while in reality, they often lack professional experience and qualifications. Although they can make use of different pathways into employment compared to their Japanese counterparts and their Western looks help them avoid or get out of uncomfortable situations, these privileges are limited and have their own downsides. Many struggle to fit into existing workplace hierarchies and to connect with Japanese coworkers, and are faced with infantilization, guest treatment, and tokenization. This outsider treatment has negative consequences for individuals including increased stress, lowered job satisfaction, and second-guessing their life abroad which can result in a decision to quit or leave the country. The resulting loss of human resources does not only affect companies but also becomes a cultural loss for the whole society. Japan cannot survive in isolation in a world where everything is connected through interdependent global networks. In an ideal setting, young foreign talent would become a key actor in connecting Japan with the rest of the world. Policy needs to target workplace integration of foreigners and provide opportunity for further skill development if Japan wants to keep global talent around.

This research contributes to contemporary migration scholarship by examining the still understudied case of middling migration from the West to the East. The findings link stress and job dissatisfaction of middling migrants with the treatment they experience due to their place between privilege and disadvantage. Although limited in the number of participants, comparable findings should also emerge on a larger scale. Due to the limited sample, clear distinctions between the effects of Whiteness and Western-ness could not be drawn. While the two can become conflated in Japan, future studies should include participants of other ethnic or racial backgrounds to untangle the relationship between whiteness, privilege and foreign looks. Furthermore, including the perspective of employers would not only paint a more nuanced picture and help better explain what leads to Westerners experiencing outsider treatment, but could also give hints for better workplace integration strategies.

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特権と不利の狭間で——日本における西洋人「ミドリング・マイグラント」の部外者扱い

アイヒホルツァー・シュテファン

要旨

近年の移民研究は、低スキルで不利な移民と特権的移民という二元的な視点から離れつつある。本稿は、日本における若年西洋人「ミドリング・マイグラント」の事例を検討し、中間的な立場にある彼らに焦点を当てる。西洋人はしばしばハイスキルとみなされるものの、実際に彼らは外国語能力と文化知識に頼っていることが多い。職場では、彼らは他者性を活かして不快な状況を避けることができる一方で、部外者扱いされ排除される懸念もある。筆者は、若年西洋人ミドリング・マイグラントとの日本企業での職場経験についての質的インタビューに基づいて、彼らのヒエラルキーへの適応とグループメンバーとして認識される過程における葛藤を概説する。部外者扱いは仕事の満足度の低下、フラストレーション、そして精神的問題をもたらす。これが彼らの離職と再度の国際移住を決定する要因になる。今後の政策として、外国人従業員の職場統合とスキル開発の機会を提供する必要があると考えられる。

キーワード：ミドリング・マイグラント、特権的移民、移民統合、在日移民、部外者扱い