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Opening Japan's Immigration Door and the Filipino Women

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One phenomenon that has emerged throughout the world is the feminization of migration, with the Philippines regarded as one of the top sending countries. This paper looks at the factors which resulted in an increasing presence and permanent settlement of Filipino women in Japan, which is considered the last among industrialized countries to maintain a closed-door policy to migrants.

Three factors could account for the emergence of such a gender-specific migration of Filipino women: the opening of the market for nurses in the United States following the abolition of the U.S. Immigration Quota of 1965; the opening of the Middle East labor market in 1973 not only to male workers but also to women in house-bound jobs such as domestic helpers and child-care providers; and lastly, the bifurcated effects of the global recession in the early 1980s which saw the return of Filipino workers to their homeland and the ensuing high unemployment rates¹ that pressured the Philippine government to look for alternative labor markets.

It was at this point that a "new breed" of Filipino women migrants in great numbers emerged: domestic helpers destined for Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Europe; mail order brides to Australia and Europe; and entertainers bound for one particular destination: Japan.

Of the total number of Filipinos leaving for abroad in 1998, more than half were composed of women. Of the total number of Filipinos going to Japan, women accounted for 68%.² Between the period of 1980 to 1985, the majority of tourist entrants to Japan were

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Filipino women who virtually paved the way for the later entry of male migrants to Japan in the late 1980s.

Opening the Migratory Door

Despite the influx of a huge number of Filipino women to Japan, this issue has merely warranted passing references, as exemplified by Yamanaka's comments that was published in brackets:³

(Interestingly, while women formed the first wave of Japan's guest workers in the late 1970s, it was only after men began to arrive in large numbers in the mid-1980s that the foreign worker problem rose to prominence.)

This uneasiness in dealing with Filipino women migrants in Japan could be attributed to the fact that they came to the country under a very specific work category of "entertainment" -- a word which unfortunately has become a euphemism for prostitution. While male migrants have no difficulty in being classified as *dekasegi rodosha*, scholars and researchers are uncomfortable in including women who work in a very vague sector such as the entertainment industry due to the conventional image of the migrant worker as a male occupying the lowest rungs of the labor market.

In an effort at categorization, Japan's Ministry of Justice listed several types of work undertaken by migrant women from the period of 1980-1990: "hostesses, prostitutes, waitresses, service and entertainment industry workers."⁴ How each is different is not clarified and even the current immigration laws have remained ambiguous.

Even among western scholars, this awkwardness in dealing with women migrants is evident. For example, in a desperate attempt to understand the phenomenon of Filipino women entering specifically Japan's entertainment industry, Wayne Cornelius, a comparative immigration scholar in the United States, attributed it to the closed market for domestic helpers.⁵

In Japan, the labor market for maids, in-home providers of child care, and housekeepers is limited mainly to foreign professionals

and diplomats who are temporarily posted there. *This is a major reason why so many female immigrants from Asian countries have been forced into Japan's "entertainment" sector*; in other countries many of them would be working as live-in maids.

(Italics supplied)

Another reason why it is difficult to comfortably qualify entertainers as workers is the question of how to quantify "entertaining" as labor, for example, in terms of minimum wage. Despite the fact that "more than half of all foreign workers are classified as entertainers and entertainment is also the (visa) category that has increased most markedly in recent years,"⁶ giving value to their work is simply a difficult thing to do. In addition, how much income the entertainment industry generates remains very sketchy; and it is only recently that efforts to "guesstimate" tangible economic contributions of these women are being made.⁷

Birth of the Japayuki-san

Historically, Filipino migration to Japan is a very recent phenomenon. The first ever formal migration of Filipino women to Japan was during the immediate postwar period when a handful were repatriated to different parts of Japan together with their Japanese spouses and children.⁸ Others came in much later as spouses of workers and entertainers in the U.S. military installations like in Okinawa, or helpers working in as domestic helpers working in diplomatic missions and homes of executives of foreign corporations located in large cities.⁹

No significant migratory movement occurred between these two countries until after the 1972 ratification of the Philippine-Japan Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation which was drafted in conjunction with the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951. It was signed in 1960, ratified by the Japanese government in 1961. However, it remained shelved for more than a decade in the Philippine Senate mainly due to lingering anti-Japanese sentiments.

In 1972, Martial Law was declared by President Ferdinand. E. Marcos and with it,

the Philippine Senate and Congress were closed down. Marcos then in the next year ratified the Treaty, which formally removed major restrictions on travel, trade, and investments to the Philippines.

As a result, Japanese investments flourished with the accompanying influx of Japanese businessmen and technicians, and the expansion of a service-related industry catering exclusively to the Japanese markets. By 1975, tourist arrivals to the Philippines was mainly comprised of groups of men, which came to be infamously known as "sex tours."¹⁰

Protest actions within Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and other Asian countries were mounted by feminist, religious and other non-governmental organizations against these sex tours, specifically during the Southeast Asian visit of Japanese Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki. These mass actions were successful in drawing world-wide attention to this issue, but ironically the result had a more far-reaching complication: it signaled the birth of the *Japayuki-san*.¹²

Instead of Japanese men going to the Philippines, Filipino women started to be treated as commodities bound for Japan. From a minuscule number in 1978, Filipino women entering under tourist visas to Japan expanded to 9,125 in 1982, ballooning to 40,000 in 1988.¹⁴

News about Filipino women recruited as entertainers but ending up in prostitution houses started to be covered widely in the Japanese media by 1979. Thus, the entertainment industry became synonymous with a state-sanctioned and state-organized prostitution industry that up to the present, the term entertainer and "*Japayuki-san*" alternately came to possess a derogatory connotation almost exclusively for women from developing countries, in particular, the Filipino women in Japan.

Role of the Government

There are many reasons that could account for an individual's decision to cross borders: a perceived lack of opportunities in the native land, and the readiness of the would-be migrant, family and community to accept the risks involved.

Another cause that could be pinpointed is the pervasive culture of materialism and the constant search for the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. However, what makes or breaks the actual physical move lies not upon the individual but how governments on the two ends of the migratory flow act react.

As has been earlier discussed, the one particular event that cracked open the hitherto "closed" migratory doors between Japan and the Philippines was the latter's ratification of the RP-Japan Treaty in 1973, which initiated the flow of Japanese financial capital, manpower and tourism to the country. The ensuing demand for Filipino entertainers in Japan certainly did not grow out of an existing, exigent economic needs in Japan, or from the presence of an abundant supply in the Philippines. This situation was a by-product and artificial creation of Japan's bubble economy.

Another crucial factor was the transformation of the Philippine government as *de facto* labor contractor of its people, when it instituted the export of labor as its cornerstone for economic policies. Governmental services were streamlined, permitting "going abroad" for even very young women. This is evidenced by the formation of regulatory agencies such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) which oversees the training and issuing of certificates attesting to the qualification of women entertainers.

At the same time that the Philippines was in a flurry of providing a state-sanctioned exit of its women, Japan was slow in stemming the tide of their massive entry. Despite the fact that young Filipino women were coming in droves as tourists to a country considered as one of the most prohibitive destinations in the world, Japan reacted by merely checking these bogus tourists' "show money" to prove financial capability in supporting their trip. The only explanation that would be offered as to why stringent entry requirements were not imposed at this point in Japan is that it was still at the early stages of fostering a good diplomatic relationship with the Philippines. Thus, any move on part of the Japanese government to prevent the entry of Filipinos could then be deemed "unfriendly."

Ultimately, what proved to be Japan's Achilles heel was of its own making: its 1951 immigration laws. They were designed primarily to define the status of resident Koreans and Chinese who were legally considered *de facto* citizens of Japan until the end

of World War II. Left unrepealed, Japan's legal system and bureaucratic machineries simply did not possess the ways and means to control the massive entry of a new layer of migrants that began in the early 1980s.

The Japanese government finally sought to recover its bearing by revising its immigration laws in 1990 -- a full decade after Filipino women started to enter Japan in large numbers. The revisions included twenty-four new categories, ironically among them, an "entertainer visa" category which then formalized and legally recognized the entry of entertainers, primarily women. By this time, however, the character of Filipino migration had already begun to change from temporary to permanent.

Kokusai Kekkon and Permanent Settlement

It has been shown in many studies that women more than men, have the propensity to settle in the place of migration through marriage and extended family ties.¹⁴ This is true especially in the case of Filipino migration to Japan because the "seed migrants" were women. The shift from temporary to permanent settlement could be construed simply as natural course of events.

The perpetuating nature of the Filipino women migration to Japan was not predicted in early migration studies for two reasons: first, much of the focus of research has been on male labor migrants whose presence from a policy point of view is temporary in nature and dependent upon the demands of the Japanese economy. Second, Japan has always prided itself with its stringent resident requirements even for long-term Korean and Chinese residents. Permanent settlement is officially discouraged, as could be gleaned from a statement by the Ministry of Justice:¹⁵

The immigration law does not provide conditions for the acceptance of immigrants... we have no provision for granting permanent residency at the time of initial entry... as much possible [we try to] prevent foreigners in general from staying long or settling down.

The evidence of longer presence of newcomer women migrants became evident by

the mid-1980s when official statistics showed an overwhelming number of those staying beyond the period set by their visas.¹⁶ In just a short span of less than ten years since Filipino women started to pour into the Japan, what was initially thought of as a temporary settlement became increasingly permanent, primarily through what is now popularly referred to as *kokusai kekkon* (international marriages).

Data compiled by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare since 1965 showed that the early pattern was for Japanese women to marry western men, as exemplified by the approximately 50,000 "war brides" in the period immediately following the American occupation of Japan.¹⁷ Korean and Chinese women accounted for the bulk of foreign spouses to Japanese men.¹⁸ In 1992, a total of 25,862 international marriages were recorded, or a three-fold increase compared to the 1982 figures. What is astonishing is that for the first time, Filipino women emerged as the third top partner to Japanese men. By 1993, they started to dominate the category of foreign spouse when it was reported that 32% of all recorded intermarriages were between Japanese men and Filipino women.¹⁹

In 1995, the Philippine Commission on Filipino Overseas announced that 5,500 marriages were contracted between Japanese men and Filipino women, and that "the obvious increase was due to the large number of Filipino women working in Japan."²⁰ The Japanese Embassy in Manila reported that as of January 30, 1995, there were 5,370 applications for marriage between Japanese men and Filipino women in the Philippines for the year 1994 alone.²¹

On the other hand, entertainer visas issued for the same period, were the lowest since the revision of Japan's immigration law in 1989. The Philippine Congress' Special Committee on Overseas Workers also announced that only 15,000 Filipino women left for Japan as entertainers, down 40% of the 1995 figure of 25,000.²² Japan's Ministry of Justice also remarked that "the 'entertainer' category visa showed a remarkable decreasing ratio... by over 50%."²³

Currently, one in thirty marriages in Japan are those contracted between Japanese men and foreign women. This is a phenomenon that is usually juxtaposed with the changes occurring within Japanese society particularly aging, low birth rate and the growing

number of Japanese women shelving plans to marry. In addition to the myriad of unresolved problems confronting the first layer migrants -- the ethnic Koreans and Chinese, the ramification of the burgeoning presence of Filipino women as well as Latinos of Japanese ancestry will further add pressure for a reassessment of issues such as homogeneity, ethnicity, citizenship and identity.

How Japan will expedite the resolution of these issues will be the main determinant of how far it intends to put more meat into its much heralded internationalization thrust. It is now imperative for social scientists that more interdisciplinary and ethnographic investigations be conducted regarding the long-term impact of migration as it presents a veritable laboratory for social change in the context of the Japanese society.

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5. Wayne A. Cornelius, "Japan: The Illusion of Immigration Control," in Cornelius, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 383.
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9. Seki Suzuki, "Okinawa no firippin-jin," *Journal of Legal Studies*, Okinawa: Ryukyu University, No. 57, 1996, p. 20. Also see Tatsuya Chiba, "Asian and South American Migrants in Japan," *Prime* No. 3 (Tokyo: International Peace Research Institute, Meiji Gakuin University, 1994), p. 64.
10. Ruby Palma Beltran and Aurora Javate De Dios, eds., *Filipino Women Overseas Contract Workers: At What Cost?* (Manila: Goodwill Trading Co., Inc., 1992), p. 42.
11. *Asahi Shimbun*, "Suzuki-shusho firippin iri: netsu retsu kangei, omote dake," and "Baishun kaigi

- shukai*," March 8, 1981. To coincide with Suzuki's state visit, an international conference attended by more than 1,000 participants were held to protest against sex tours by Japanese men.
12. This term was coined by a Japanese journalist to show the parallelism between the Filipino women "bound for Japan" and the Japanese women "bound for China" who were sold to brothels in China, Korea and Southeast Asia at the turn of the 20th century. See Tito Valiente, "Those who Go to Japan," in *Solidaridad II*, 1987, p. 38.
 13. Japan Immigration Association, *Statistics on Resident Foreigners* (Tokyo: Nyukan Kyokai, 1992), p. 15.
 14. Gina Bujis, ed., *Migrant Woman: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities* (Washington, D. C.: Berg, 1993), p. 12.
 15. Entry Control Status Group, Immigration Bureau, ed., *Nyukan-ho Q & A* (Tokyo: Ministry of Justice, 1994), p. 4.
 16. Visa restrictions imposed a maximum stay of 3 months with a possible extention of another 3 months (in many cases, even shorter), which was too short to recover costs such as brokers fees, airfare while at the same time, maintain families in the Philippines.
 17. Fumiteru Nitta, "Kokusai Kekkon: Trends in Intercultural Marriage in Japan," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (Vol. 12, 1988), p. 208; See also Bok-Lim Kim, "Asian Wives of US Servicemen: Women in Shadows," *Amerasia Journal*, Vol. 4 (1977), p. 99.
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