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Author(s)	Endo, Ken
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Towards a Transnational Intimate Sphere?

— 'Care Deficit' and Global Householding in East Asia —

Ken Endo

Summary:

This paper deals with an acute problem in many of aging societies: the growing population of elderly is not proportionally matched by the increasing number of care takers, causing the so-called 'care deficit'. Intriguingly, a relatively weak welfare regime tends to open up its labour market in care sector, resulting in the increase of foreign care workers, mostly female, which in turn leads to a significant social transformation of 'household'. Here, globalization stops being the sole property of finance or environment, well penetrating into the most intimate sphere. Based on the cases in East Asia, this paper analyzes the backgrounds, the present state, and problems associated with this phenomenon coined as 'global householding'.

Key words:

Household, globalization, aging, care, immigration

1. Introduction: The global householding

One may perhaps have heard news recently about an elderly person who died quietly, all alone, without anyone knowing about it. In the background is a phenomenon that is occurring for the first time in history. The number of

single-member households in Japan has recently exceeded one in four. As we shall later see, a variety of factors are involved, including the low birthrate, an aging population, late marriages and urbanization.

This phenomenon is not unique to Japan. South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the (coastal) areas of China are all showing the same trend. Alongside the process of globalization, investment – and people with it – is converging on (coastal) urban regions, and soon, in more or less identical housing units, households consisting of childless professionals (the so-called DINKS, Double Income No Kids) or families with one child are being reproduced on a large scale. I do not mean this is some “unhealthy” future trend that a government minister might lecture about. It is right in front of us, the result of a series of processes. Inexorably stealing up on us is an aging society in which the balance among the generations has collapsed and a population structure in the form of an inverse pyramid is being created. Attention immediately tends to turn to the pension system, but what is interesting here is that, hand in hand with these processes, care in the broad sense of the word, nursing, child-rearing and housekeeping, is beginning to cross borders and be provided globally.

This paper will focus on the household in a global age. The concept of household is far broader than that of blood-related families and reflects a new dynamic in the private sphere; its range encompasses maids, nurses, nannies, and “au pair” (students who serve as household help) from overseas, as well as international adoptions and international marriages. When we turn our attention to this area, globalization ceases to be merely a matter of money or technology. As globalization penetrates an intimate sphere like the household, though mediated by the market and close to it, it entails different problems than finance and technology in that it involves the actual movement of people. In what follows, I will examine global householding, which at first glance seems remote from globalization but which is proceeding inseparably with it.

2. Who will look after the elderly?

(1) The ongoing baby bust and demographic aging

As is well known, the workforce population in Japan began to decline in 1995 and the population as a whole in 2005. In 2050 it is estimated that 42 percent of the population will be 65 or over, and one in three will be 80 or over. The situation is similar in other industrialized parts of East Asia. In South Korea, 33 percent of the population will be 65 or over by 2050. The forecast for Taiwan is more or less the same.

The rapid rise of populations with many old people and few children will force the governments and societies of these countries to confront many problems. Will the pension system survive? What should be done about the birth rate? How will the labor force be maintained? Yet, above all, the question of who will provide care for the elderly, and in what way, is likely to become an increasingly serious issue as the population engaged in productive labor shrinks.

(2) Gender or nation?

One answer would be to put an end to sexual inequality and have men and women share the burden of housework and other “shadow work,” including the care of the elderly. According to a survey on cleaning conducted by the University of Maryland, since the feminist revolution (1965-1995), men’s share of the housework increased 240 percent, but men spend a mere 1.7 hours or so a week at it, whereas, even though women’s share has gone down seven percent, they still spend 6.7 hours per week, and thus an imbalance remains (Ehrenreich 2003, p. 89). There is no doubt that it will be important to bring shadow work out into the open, recognize its existence, and bear it, and the increasingly heavy burden of elder care, equally. Doing so will not only have a positive impact on the participation of women in the labor market and on career formation but will also contribute to the dignity of women and the elderly (and the liberation of men).

The above discussion is predicated on the premise that looking after the

elderly belongs to the private sphere, namely the household. Yet there may well be another orientation, in which public agencies such as the government should mobilize national resources and assume responsibility for the care of the nation's old people. In this case, typically, the state would pay back the contribution they made to their country by investing money in and providing assistance to the elderly such as building facilities for them to live in, etc., and/or giving preferential tax and other treatment to businesses, groups or individuals involved in their care.

Needless to say, the first solution approaches the problem from the perspective of gender, the second from the nation state. In fact, though, it may be doubted whether either solution will work. If we look at neighboring countries in East Asia, trends there seem to be pointing toward a completely different direction, namely global householding. As globalization facilitates the movement of people, women are crossing borders to act as maids and care providers, and this is dramatically changing the landscape of the household. Let us examine this scenario.

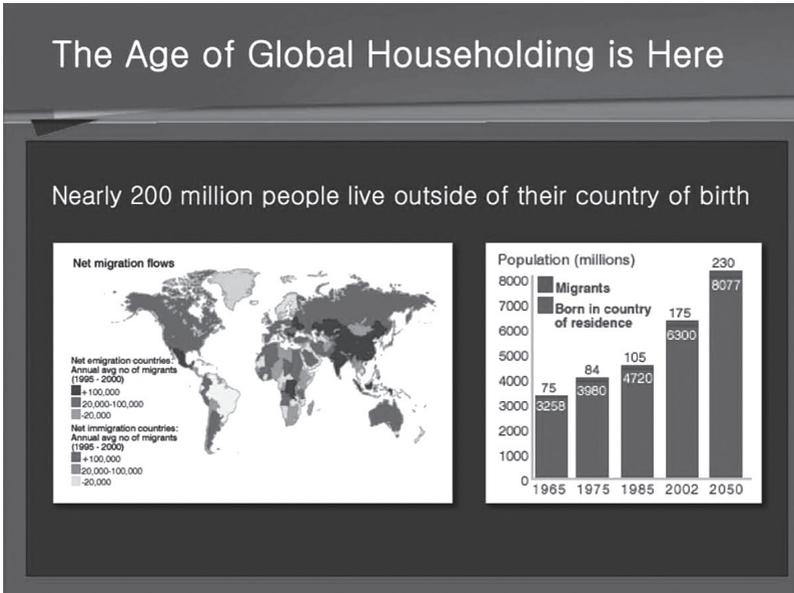
3. The global household: Actual conditions in East Asia

(1) The global movement of people and the feminization of migration

According to statistics, as of the year 2000 more than 175 million people were living in countries other than their place of birth (twice the number 30 years ago and 1.5 times that of ten years ago); by 2050 this figure is forecast to rise to 230 million (e.g. United Nations Population Division 2002; Martin and Widgden 2002).

What is behind this phenomenon, needless to say, is globalization. Globalization has generally made it easy for people to cross borders by reducing the cost of moving. But that is not all. Globalization and its sister phenomenon, internal urbanization, have concentrated economic activity on (coastal) urban areas and induced people to move there. People who once flocked to urban areas will readily cross national borders in search of better opportunities. In that sense, it is a mistake both theoretically and empirically

Chart 1
The global movement of people



(source: Douglass 2006a)

to distinguish between internal and international migration (e.g. Sassen 1991, Morita 1994).

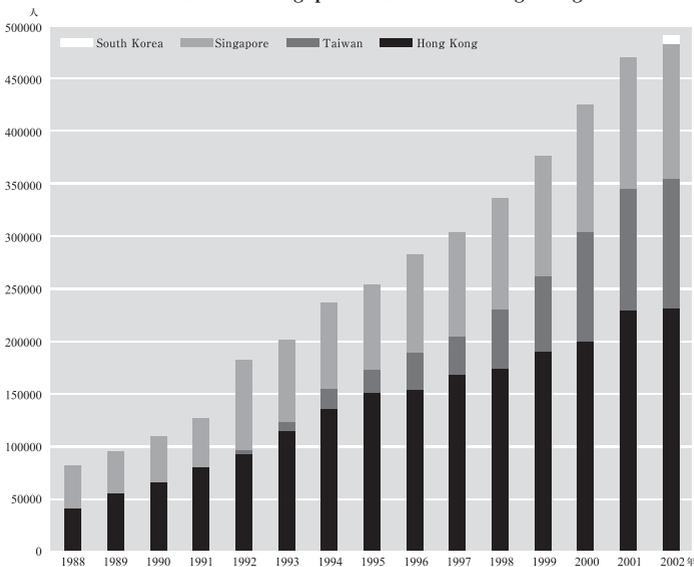
A global trend that has attracted attention recently is the so-called “feminization of migration.” In the past, a migrant in most cases meant a male manual laborer. Yet in recent years women are becoming the main agent of migration. Take France, for example. In 1946 women born in Algeria or Morocco made up less than three percent of the immigrants residing in France; by 1990 they accounted for more than 40 percent. Eighty-four percent of all Sri Lankan emigrants to the Middle East are women (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, pp. 5-6). Behind this trend is the rise in demand for domestic help and care services in the industrialized world and in rapidly developing economies.

(2) The internationalization and feminization of care services in East Asia

This trend is particularly noticeable in East Asia. According to Asato Wako (2005 [1], pp. 132-133), who has done considerable empirical research in this area, at present some 530,000 foreign domestic helpers and care providers are employed in the newly industrializing economies (NIES) of Asia: 150,000 in Singapore, 240,000 in Hong Kong, 130,000 in Taiwan and 10,000 in South Korea (according to Mike Douglass (2006), there are another 240,000 in Malaysia). Almost all of these workers are women engaged in housework and care services including nursing. This type of migrant workers has soared since the late 1980s, keeping pace with the economic development of the Asian NIES.

One thing that needs to be stated clearly about this phenomenon is that the governments of the host countries played a leading role in promoting the

Chart 2
Changes in the number of foreign domestic helpers and care providers in the Asian NIES
South Korea / Singapore / Taiwan / Hong Kong



Note: legal residents only; compiled from government documents in the countries cited (source: Asato 2005 [1], p. 133)

introduction of these women migrants. Beginning with Hong Kong in 1974, Singapore in 1979, Taiwan in 1992, and South Korea in 2002, one after the other, have done an about-face, signed bilateral agreements with sending countries and started accepting women from the developing world. Behind this policy change is the fact that the high growth rate has made maintaining a work force a serious problem. In order to make efficient use of the local female population, it is thought necessary to bring in women from developing countries, readily employed as domestic helpers and care providers at relatively low cost, thereby reducing the physical and emotional burdens of housework, child-rearing and care services in the households of their employers. In view of the need, as Asato has pointed out, this is a “government-made market” for domestic helpers and care providers.

As a result, one in seven households in Singapore has a foreign female live-in worker, and two-thirds of them regard this sort of domestic help as something they could not do without (Lam, Yeoh and Huang 2006). In Taiwan, half of the 260,000 people certified as critically requiring care services are accompanied by foreign care providers (Asato 2005 [2]). In these countries foreign women migrant workers form part of the landscape in households and institutional settings, and this picture has not changed after the region experienced an economic slow down or were buffeted by the Asian financial crisis. As the participation of women in society has become taken for granted and the population has aged, foreign domestic help can be said to be here to stay.

(3) International marriages

Women from less developed countries cross borders not only as workers but as brides with the expectation that they will assume the burden of housework and care services. In Taiwan two out of seven newly married couples are the result of international marriages. In particular, the number of international marriages involving Vietnamese has been on the rise recently (in the past three years 80,000 Vietnamese women have married Taiwanese men). As a result, one in seven or eight babies in Taiwan have a foreign-born mother. In South Korea, too, as of 2005, 13.6 percent of all marriages are international

and, most notably, in parts of the country where there is a dearth of marriageable women, nearly 40 percent are international arranged marriages. It is estimated that two million children of mixed origin will be born in Korea by 2020. It might be recalled in passing that also in Japan, Philippine brides (the so-called Japayuki-san) in farming villages in Yamagata Prefecture and other parts of the Tohoku made the news in the 1980s; since then there has been a slow but steady increase in international marriages primarily in urban areas; by 2002 they added up to 30,000 couples and accounted for five percent of the total number of marriages. (Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, Debora Spar (2006) discusses the global market for international adoptions.) It will probably be necessary to consider carefully the long-term impact such marriages will have (Douglass 2006a and 2006b).

(4) Internal conditions in the sending countries

Let us turn our attention to the countries sending care providers. Those cited as the main sending countries are the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, China and Sri Lanka.

The largest of these is the Philippines. In fact, migrant workers from that country amount to around five million people, the equivalent of one tenth of the entire working population. Two-thirds of these are women, almost all of whom are employed as domestic helpers or caregivers. Remittances sent back from the countries where these migrant workers reside are said to support 34 to 54 percent of the entire population (Parreñas 2003, p. 39). This money is equal to about ten percent of the Philippines' GDP.

In Indonesia as well, in the five years from 1989, 650,000 people went abroad to work; in the five years from 1995, that figure was 1.46 million. The most recent country to promote the sending of its workers abroad is Vietnam. Its government planned to send a million of its citizens overseas by 2010. And in fact, the numbers of the Vietnamese workers who have gone to Taiwan alone during the three-year period between 2001 and 2004 are rising rapidly from nearly 5,000 to 72,000 (Asato 2006 [3]).

The reason governments make it a national policy to promote the export

of workers should be that, from the government's perspective, doing so is a quick and effective way to hold down unemployment at home and acquire foreign currency. In fact, the remittance of Filipinos living abroad does more than make up for the Philippines' trade deficit. Not surprisingly, sending countries are competing with one another. One thing not to be overlooked is that, faced with competition, the government of a sending country may not necessarily be diligent about protecting its own workers. This is a serious matter since domestic help and care providers in the closed environment of a household or care facility are in a vulnerable position (Asato 2005 [1]). Also, the probability is high that the government of a host country may take advantage of the sending country in diplomatic discussions or foreign trade talks by hinting that it might switch to workers from another country. In fact, Taiwan has played just this sort of card and negotiated conditions favorable to itself with the Philippines in regard to opening up and increasing air routes and with Thailand in regard to the visit of prominent political figures (see Akashi 2006).

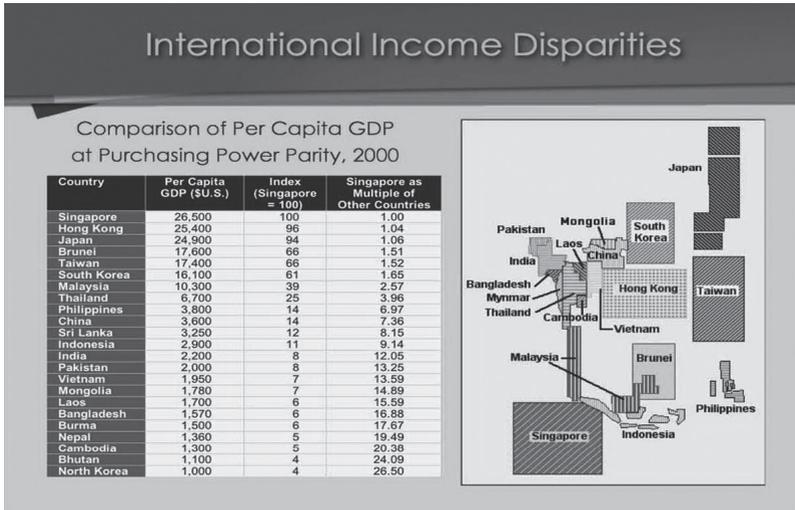
From the migrant worker's perspective, on the other hand, global householding is a means of survival and an opportunity for upward social mobility. As we shall discuss shortly, remittances have become the most stable source of income for their families back home. In many cases, the money is used to invest in the next generation, in the form of education, etc.

(5) Remittances and the North-South gap

The underlying cause of these migrant workers is, of course, the economic disparity between the North and the South (see chart 3). At the personal level, the salary of a Filipina employed as a live-in caregiver in Hong Kong, for example, is fifteen times higher than what she would earn as an elementary school teacher in the Philippines (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, p. 8). At the national level, as we have already said, international migration is being prescribed to deal with a wide range of problems from improving the balance of payments to controlling unemployment.

From a slightly different perspective, remittances may be regarded as

Chart 3
International income disparities

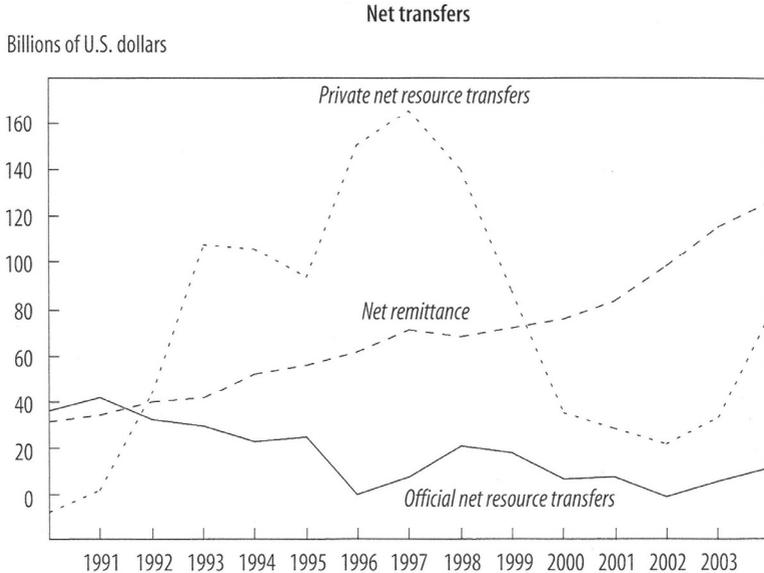


(source: Douglass 2006a)

working to moderate disparities between the North and the South (Kapur and McHale 2005, ch. 8). As is well known, official development assistance (ODA) has been drifting downward since the 1990s, and there is to be no dramatic improvement. In addition, since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, there has been an increasing awareness of the fragility of foreign direct investment (FDI), which for a while had been made so much of. As of 2004 remittances amounted to \$125.8 billion worldwide, far exceeding the \$78.6 billion in ODA from the 22 richest donor countries (see also chart 4). As discussed above, at the country level, remittances account for ten percent of the GDP in the Philippines and other developing countries. Considering that these remittances get to people living in developing countries more securely in times of crisis and more directly (in the sense that they do not go through a middleman), then, for the family and the country on the receiving end, remittances can be said to be the major factor contributing to their sustained development.

This does not mean, of course, that migrant remittances are a panacea

Chart 4
Migrant Remittances



(source: Kapur and McHale 2005, p. 136)

for the North-South gap. On the one hand, they may not be directed to production and investment in the developing countries; on the other, the economy in those countries may get into the habit of relying too heavily on them. In an age of economic crisis and ODA fatigue, however, remittances to the sending country from migrant workers in host countries serve as “private development aid (PDA)”, constituting an important factor in development.

4. Mid- and long-term problems facing the globalization of households

What sort of mid- and long-term problems are facing the global householding that is evolving in this way? In what follows I will try to set forth a few problem areas for both the sending and receiving countries.

(1) Care Drain

The biggest problem for the sending countries is the so-called care drain (Hochschild 2003, p. 27). The feminization of migration in the domestic help and care services, in many cases, actually involves mothers in the sending countries leaving home to work elsewhere. It must not be forgotten that while women are providing care to children and older persons in households in the rich countries, this is producing large numbers of children unable to receive their own mother's care in the developing world.

As to what impact this has on children whose mother is absent, so much research exists that it is difficult to summarize it (for an useful example, see Parreñas 2001, ch. 5). The impact varies greatly, depending on economic circumstances and the nature of the extended family, especially care by a grandmother and the role of the father. According to Parreñas, who studied cases in the Philippines, out of 30 families whose mothers were working overseas, only four had stay-at-home fathers (Parreñas 2003, p. 49). It is not hard to imagine that children not cared for by other relatives would face many problems.

There has subsequently been no lack of politicians loudly critical of the care drain. President Ramos of the Philippines (1992-98) vigorously promoted sending care providers abroad but tried to limit them to unmarried women.

And yet, when it comes to the question of whether mothers should be prohibited altogether from going abroad to work for that reason, both pros and cons have to be considered. The positive effect of remittances has already been mentioned; if, for example, these monies were to dry up, the likelihood is high that school expenses for girls would be the first to cut (Kapur and McHale 2005, p. 148). More attention may instead need to be given to the fact that many fathers make no contribution either to household finances or to their children's care.

In other areas as well, one may well be concerned that the care drain leads to a breakdown in nursing and care giving services in the sending country (see, for example, Ishi 2007). To be sure, the drain of nurses and other care providers is serious in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where it has

led to a significant breakdown in the health system. This cannot be said unequivocally of all places, however, as it depends on the country or the region. In the case of countries like the Philippines and Vietnam that make it a national policy to train and send care workers abroad, no such systemic breakdown has occurred. What can be concluded from the above is that, although the care drain is a serious problem for sending countries, it is rash to focus on that issue alone when debating the pros and cons of sending mothers abroad.

(2) How do we combat discrimination?

There is no denying that a central part of global householding is the commodification of housework and care giving through the medium of the marketplace as well as the feminization and internationalization of domestic help and care providers. Yet it cannot be said that there is no warmth in the multinational households formed in this way; rather, by many accounts, there are documented cases in which care in the true sense of the word is being provided.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we can close our eyes to the fact that the feminization and internationalization of household help and care providers cause the entrenchment of a gender-based division of labor or the consolidation of defined job categories for foreigners (in particular, the ones that natives do not want to do). These may well lead to the reproduction of gender and racial discrimination, posing problems hard to deal with in the host countries.

No one has a magic remedy for the problem of dual discrimination. At the very least, though, the first step must entail the recognition of the importance of housework and care giving and the respect for the persons doing them. The main reason for bringing in women from other countries in the first place is to fill the local deficit for care and household help. Doing so is also apt to lead to an easing in the battle between both sexes in rich countries. (The change in the gender division of labor in the United States in regard to cleaning between the 1960s and the 1990s, mentioned in the first

section of this paper, is said to have leveled off in the mid 1980s. Towards the same time, the substantial number of women from developing countries were brought in to do housework and take care of children.) If this was indeed the case, it must probably be even more necessary to respect the women from developing countries being brought in.

This will prove very difficult, to say the least. At the same time as progress in gender equality, including the participation of women in society, is incomplete in the home country, any progress in this area is accompanied by — if not presupposes — bringing in women from developing countries and raises a new form of discrimination to be tackled, not least between women. Thus, if women from developing countries are brought in to do housework and provide care services, government policy must pursue gender equality and the social acceptance of foreign women simultaneously. This will require considerable determination.

(3) What sort of people are needed and where?—gender imbalance in China and East Asian migrations

Finally, the problem of a different nature may well be posed. Discussion in Japan has often tended to raise the narrow question of how to control the entry of foreigners as the demand for care services steadily rises. If we look at the present situation (or future prospects) in East Asia, however, quite a different question is apt to arise.

According to well-known statistics of the 2005 Chinese national census, there are 120 boys below the age of five in China for every 100 girls. Though no such a dramatic difference, this abnormal sex ratio in the birth data has continued for the past 20 years and has surely to do with the government's one-child policy and a gender ideology that gives priority to boys. This is no doubt a tragedy in itself, but it is necessary to bear in mind that it is taking place in the largest country, with nearly one quarter of the world's population. To put it more concretely, there is a likelihood that China will one day find itself in a situation in which 23-30 million marriageable aged men may have trouble finding brides in the same age cohort (Gu 2007).

If this scale of deficit cannot be made up for by women in adjacent cohorts or by the migration of women from inland areas, it is likely to put increasing pressure on population migration in East Asia. In view of this possibility, marriage to foreign women has already been suggested as a potential 'solution' (Attane 2006). If it is assumed that the present gender discrimination and division of labor between the sexes will continue, coupled with the declining birth rate and the rapidly aging population in China's coastal region, it is also likely to lead to the introduction of foreign care workers, i.e. women from developing countries. The globalization of households seems likely to continue in this way.

This scenario is built on a number of premises, admittedly, and it is altogether possible that it may not turn out as predicted. To begin with, even at the level of collecting the data on which these assumptions are made, it is likely that, under the influence of the one-child policy, the births of girls have been hidden (there are also reports that many girls are adopted and taken abroad to the United States and elsewhere). Or we may end up with a different result, if the traditional view of marriage and the family in China changes. If even a part of China's coastal areas is however to opt for the Hong Kong and Taiwan model and move in the direction of global householding, care providers in East Asia are apt to become the object of competition among host countries vying to acquire them. This is undoubtedly structurally different from the labor-dumping competition among sending countries, as referred to earlier. Likewise, the debate in Japan over limiting the admission of care providers may also be forced to undergo considerable modification. The issue may well change from how to keep migrant workers out to how to obtain them. In any event, we will probably have to keep an eye on trends in East Asia and the world as a whole and pay close attention to what sort of people will be needed and where.

This paper is based on my article (chap. 5) in Ken Endo ed., *The Frontiers of Global Governance: Between the Present and the Past* (Toshindo, 2008) (遠藤乾編『グローバル・ガバナンスの最前線』東信堂、2008年).

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- "Global Householding: A Comparison among High-Income Economies of East Asia." Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan. 7-8 February 2006.
- "Global Migration and the Household in East Asia." Pai Chai University, Seoul, Korea. 2-3 February 2007