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Chapter 15

‘Life could not be better since I left Japan!’

Transnational mobility of Japanese individuals to Europe and the Post-Fordist Quest for Subjective Well-being outside Japan

Susanne Klien

‘I really am a (male) housewife’. (Ore, hontō ni shufu dakara.) (M, 38)

‘Wanting to leave something behind in a meaningless life...’ (Nanka nokoshitai, muimi na jinsei ni ha.) (M, 38)

‘I think I would have died if I had stayed in Japan’. (Nihon ni zutto itara shinun ja nai ka to omotte.) (F, 47)

These are three statements from interviews conducted with Japanese expatriates in Europe between 2015 and 2017. The Lehman Shock, the Great East Japan Earthquake and increasingly precarious labour regimes have resulted in rising numbers of Japanese individuals questioning conventional forms of corporate working and living (Nishimura 2009; Klien 2015, 2016). This ethnographic study explores the motives of Japanese individuals in their thirties and forties who have relocated to Europe for non-economic reasons. Generally defined as ‘lifestyle migrants’ (Benson and O’Reilly 2009), they tend to opt for self-created work in the creative sector. The chapter aims to examine the changes individuals experienced as a result of their relocation, their social life and sense of belonging, and their mid- and long-term plans.

Data was compiled from over twenty semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted in Austria, Germany and Portugal between December 2015 and September 2017. The empirical data presented here shows that motives are diverse, but Japanese migrants tend to relocate for reasons of self-growth, inspiration and change. Lifestyle migrants generally aspire to non-normative life courses; however, their narratives indicate that resistance to mainstream values features side by side with the perpetuation of societal norms. On the one hand, interviewees express high satisfaction with their daily lives. Yet, having eschewed or relinquished stable careers in lifelong employment and familial engagement, they also mention their sense of liminality, precariousness, disengagement and pressure to turn their

lives overseas into a success.

So how are these individual trajectories relevant in a larger context? The theme of this volume is ‘new frontiers’ in Japanese Studies. I argue that in order to extend Japan’s relevance beyond area studies, transcending its geographical boundaries is an option of vital importance. Classical scholarship in Japanese studies has always been concerned with bounded entities both in a geographical and other senses – just think of John Embree’s analysis of *Suye Mura* (1939) or Ruth Benedict’s seminal study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) on the ‘national character’ of the Japanese. They perpetuated bounded entities, otherness, ‘national essence’. More recently, however, scholarship that includes Japan but also transcends it has gained significant traction. Lieba Faier’s (2009) fascinating ethnography of Filipina women in rural Japan, Kurotani Sawa’s (2005) study of Japanese corporate wives in the United States, Mitch Sedgwick’s (2007) ethnography of Japanese corporate employees living in France, Suzuki Ayako’s (2015) ethnography of male Japanese expatriates in Ireland and Shiori Shakuto’s (2017) research into Japanese retirees in Malaysia are some examples.

Jennifer Robertson has previously pointed out that anthropologists ‘in general do not regard Japan as a geographical “prestige zone”; that is, unlike Bali or Morocco or the Andes, or Oaxaca, Mexico – they do not regard Japan as a cultural area of choice and theoretical cachet’ (2005, p. 4). Given this history of anthropological disinterest in Japan as a field, I propose to shift more attention to communities with ‘porous and often-contested boundaries’ (Sedgwick 2017, p. 66) such as Japanese expatriate networks. Sedgwick observes that ‘anthropology has splintered, as have forms of fieldwork: There is little agreement as to what now constitutes a proper site for anthropological research’. (Sedgwick 2017, p. 65). I propose to perceive this methodological vacuum as a positive momentum to rethink the overall thrust of Japanese Studies.

This transnational angle in researching Japanese settlers abroad helps to transcend and simultaneously re-sharpen the focus on Japan. Such a perspective contextualises Japan in a wider, i.e. global, context and helps us to analyse universal issues including theoretical concerns that dislocate it from sedentary and essentialist discourse frequently found in area studies. Bruno Latour (2005, p. 204) argues, ‘No place dominates enough to be global and no place is self-contained enough to be local’. Circulation, mobility and locality are not

necessarily dichotomies. Drawing on Latour, Anna Tsing and Deirdre McKay I would like to propose a deterritorialised understanding of place/Japan. Both Latour (2005) and Tsing (2005) did not distinguish between the global and the local. Importantly, Doreen Massey (1994, p. 4) indicated that localities include ‘relations which stretch beyond the global as part of what constitutes the local’. McKay (2006, p. 201) argued for an ongoing importance of locality in a sense of being ‘place-based, without being place-bound’. All this leads us to an understanding of the field as no longer spatially defined (Sedgwick 2007, 2017) and an understanding of fields/Japan as interconnected rather than something to be approached as a discrete entity, as argued by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992, p. 6). Coining the concept of multi-sited ethnography, George Marcus (1995, p.1) called for an end to ‘the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space’. In so doing he paved the way for contemporary transnational ethnographic research.

Aihwa Ong (2006, p. 121) states that mobilities have ‘become a new code word for grasping the global’ and the novel lifestyles that have emerged. In Japan, this lifestyle change is happening both through mobility from Japan to countries abroad and urban to rural relocation. These individuals predominantly pursue lifestyles that do not involve conventional employment (*tsutomenai to iu ikikata*, Mori 2011) in the sense of being a full-fledged member of (adult) society (*shakaijin*). By comparing Japanese individuals from diverse professional backgrounds in different cultural contexts, this chapter aims to scrutinise how ‘Japanese identities’ are negotiated in expatriate contexts. The narratives introduced in this paper are based on fieldwork conducted in March 2016 in Berlin, Vienna (March-November 2016) and Lisbon (September 2017). I will now introduce three individual narratives of Japanese expatriates and follow up with a discussion.

CASE 1: The ‘professional unemployed’ and personal fulfilment

Aki, 38 years old and originally from Tokyo, is a close friend of one of my best Japanese friends when I was living in Berlin back in the early 2000s so we have known each other for many years. He moved to Berlin in 2007. He was attracted to the city because he got the impression that it was a place that is still under construction and Berlin’s ongoing change would be an

incentive for him to change. In Tokyo, he got the sense that the city lacked inspiration because it was already complete. When he first went to Berlin, there was a party in a shared flat every single night so one could always get free food – ‘the ideal socialist life’ as he comments with a laugh.

Aki has his own record label, makes his own music (house) and works as a DJ in Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London and other places in Europe. Having studied contemporary music at university in Tokyo, he worked as a company employee for a private TV station. However, he dropped out after two years as he was confident that he would have a successful career and felt that the long-term challenge was insufficient. With a smile he observes that ‘If I had stayed in Japan, I would probably have married a girl I met at a matchmaking party (*gōkon*), work as a salaryman and have two kids now.’ Instead, he shares a flat in a former East-Berlin district, is single and does not work except for occasional jobs as a DJ. Only recently has he managed to make a living as a DJ. He gets his clothes from his friends in Tokyo because he does not want to spend money on anything but records. He also says that he has never bought any furniture, all pieces in his flat are recycled items. Half of his friends are Japanese, half are German.

He describes himself as ‘a professional unemployed’ (*pro no mushoku*) who enjoys spending extended hours at home, shopping consciously for discounted food and preparing various meals, like a housewife. Aki says he is 100% satisfied with his life, only wishing he had more money. From Monday to Wednesday he is mostly free, reads books and manga, cooks, goes to clubs and makes his own tracks in his studio. As a corporate employee in Japan, he was only sleeping some three to four hours per night and typically catching up on sleep during the weekend. Now he sleeps ten hours every night during the week when he does not work behind the turntables.

Aki seems happy because he lives a life that he has chosen for himself and his work matches his interest. In Japan, DJing is not a recognised professional activity, but Berlin has many DJs covering a panoply of musical genres. When I ask him about his long-term purpose in life, he says that he wants to keep on moving around in Europe as he does presently. He observes that he thinks he has not changed much, but is thinking more carefully about what environment he chooses to be active in. According to Aki, in order to grow he feels that it is

most important to be in an environment where he can compete with like-minded peers in a fair manner. As for risk, he posits that he has a persistent sense of insecurity and restlessness, but considers the risk involved in his lifestyle as the other side of the coin of having opted for the life he likes to live. While Aki's trajectory runs contrary to conventional postwar aspirations in Japan to notions such as safety through affiliation and rooted place that constitute 'a sedentarist metaphysics' to borrow Lisa Malkki's (1992) term, his everyday life such as his pronounced domesticity seems highly sedentary, implying the coexistence of sedentary and nomadic lifestyle features in one and the same individual trajectory. This finding is also commensurate with Kurotani's notion of 'dwelling while travelling' (2005, p. 152), which she developed in her ethnography of Japanese corporate wives in the US. Aki's narrative also suggests that Berlin offers the chance to pursue more diverse lifestyles than in Japan – a finding that also featured in other interviews with LGBT Japanese expatriates. He describes Japan as rigidly normative with regard to gender as a country that continues to be based on the male breadwinner model. His narrative and lifestyle indicate a yearning to overcome this normatively prescribed gender role of males focused on work and females supporting males in the domestic sphere: after all, he jokes about himself being a male housewife; he shares his flat with a male, is not married and does not have any offspring.

CASE 2: 'Wanting to leave something behind in a meaningless life'

Rei is an emerging conceptual artist with an elite background. I meet up with Rei in his wife's café in Neukoelln, an area that has turned from a shabby district with a considerable share of Turkish residents in South Berlin to the embodiment of hipsterdom within a few years due to the massive influx of creative migrants from across the world – an area that may now qualify as what Sassen (1998, p. xxxiii) referred to as an 'urban glamour zone'. Several years ago, I visited Rei's studio with a common friend. Now 38, he has had a fast-paced career since that time: several solo shows, residencies and group exhibitions in top international galleries and triennials. I ask him about his reasons for staying in Berlin for so long. He replies that he is originally from West Japan and if he had stayed there he would not have any incentive to move on and grow as an artist. He uses the term '*miyako-ochi*' (having to leave the capital to live in the countryside due to professional failure). We talk about the pervasive centrality of Tokyo in

Japan's power relations that determine artist careers. He remarks that if he had chosen to remain in Japan, his career would not have evolved in the way it has. When I joke that he has really moved on career-wise using the word '*shusse*' (literally: moving out into the world), he shakes his head saying that he is really at the bottom of society and realised so when he met up with his former schoolmates who all have stable incomes as corporate workers. When they heard about his professional activities as an artist, the only comment they had about his lifestyle was 'You are doing art? Can you make a living from that?' Rei's deliberations tinged with jealousy about the stable livelihood and disinterest in this lifestyle illustrate the concomitant elements of relations and disengagement.

He wishes he could have a factory style studio, and his dream would be to have assistants working for him and to show works at representative art fairs. When I ask about his parents' reactions to his living abroad for so many years he says that they do not understand the meaning of his relocation. He sarcastically claims that he has already died for them and the dog they keep has the same name as him. Rei observes that the next couple of years are going to show whether he is going to make it as an artist. Interestingly, he states that those people not making it on the market end up in university and in Japan. He would like to return to Japan (after all, he has so many friends there) but if he manages to carve out a successful career as an artist for himself, he will not go back to Japan. On the contrary, he says that he is reluctant to reside in the same place. He says that living in Berlin allows him to make the works he really wants to, something that would have been impossible in Japan. He observes that he would have made certain works catered to certain people.

Rei presents himself as the sore thumb sticking out in Japan's harmonised society. Yet he concedes that he is maintaining relations with the Japanese university he graduated from. Still, he turned down an offer as a temporary lecturer as he preferred to stay in Berlin. If he does not manage to assert himself as an artist, he needs to rely on this network. He adds 'If I do not manage to be successful, it's going to be dreadful, in that case, there is no other option but die' (interview on 5 March 2016). He also mentions that his failure would be a major hassle for his family.

Despite his long expatriate career, Rei frequently refers to Japanese society during our interview and engages with his German surroundings to a limited extent, yet aspires to a

global career as a contemporary artist. His narrative is clearly split between radical depreciation of Japanese conventions and behaviour that seems deeply ingrained with Japanese norms. On the one hand his narrative is permeated by an aspiration to transcend Japan in everyday life and with regard to his career. Yet, he admits with a chuckle that one of his happiest moments is eating sushi at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Berlin with his family every other Sunday. And finally, his family follows the classic Japanese model of father as male breadwinner and mother in a supporting role as his wife graduated from the same art university, but renounced her career as an artist. Yet, they differ from the prototype as Rei's wife has pursued her entrepreneurial ambitions by starting a café with a French friend.

CASE 3: 'I think I would have died if I had stayed in Japan'

Mai is an acquaintance of a German friend of mine and I have met her before our interview, if briefly. Born in 1975, Mai grew up in Roppongi, Tokyo. Her grandparents were Chinese immigrants from the Shanghai area. From our first encounter, I get a sense of her mental strength and spirit of resistance that has resulted from her multilayered identity. Her main incentive to move to Germany was to do arts. She had initially wanted to go to London or New York but figured out that she did not have the funds to live there. After finishing her undergraduate studies at a fine art university in Tokyo and half a year of study exchange at Duesseldorf Art Academy she decided to relocate to Germany. In retrospect, after her move to Germany she did not really face any difficulties when settling in as people say clearly what they think and she gets a sense of what people drive at. She has always felt ill at ease with what she calls 'Eastern communication', concluding rather radically that she thinks 'she would have died had she chosen to remain in Japan'. When she goes back to Japan now, she feels surveilled and pressured to adapt in various ways.

As a result of her move to Berlin she can focus on making art. She mentions that her art would not be well received in Japan. There would be little relevance or impact. She implies that the social criticism embodied in her work is simply not well received in Japan and that is why there is no point for her to be active as an artist in her home country. After moving to Germany and coming back to Japan for short periods, she noticed how androcentric Japanese society was. Her life clearly revolves around art; she concedes that artists tend to be self-centred.

Coming from an affluent family, she has bought her own flat in Berlin and intends to spend the rest of her life there, although she concedes that being perceived as the eternal foreigner is challenging at times. Yet, when I invite her to come along to a gathering of long-term Japanese residents living in Berlin on the anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, she vehemently declines, adding that she does not wish to join any social networks of Japanese expatriates in her chosen place of residence. Clearly, she wishes to avoid any contact with other Japanese living in Berlin.

DISCUSSION

Even if my interlocutors differ in their motivations, careers and quotidian routines, there are some recurring features that can be teased out from their diverse trajectories. First, these individuals in their thirties and early forties are completely immersed in their work, which matches their interest. Even if Aki does not work for half of the week, the work he does is music-related, hence personally inspirational. He has evidently made a conscious lifestyle choice with all the risks this choice entails. Rei clearly has been taking a high-risk gamble to become a contemporary artist in the global scene and is completely immersed in his career. He cannot think of any disadvantages resulting from his move abroad. For Mai, there seems no viable alternative to pursuing her career as an artist in Germany due to the specificity of her artworks. Second, all the narratives of my interlocutors are characterised by a lack of long-term planning, but high satisfaction with their present life due to self-determination in the way they spend their time. Third, most migrants refer to a heightened sense of self-responsibility related to their aspiration to assert themselves in the global arena. Evidently, this drive to be a global player inevitably entails high pressure, but results in a more distinct vision and drive. This in turn translates into a greater sense of independence with regard to less concern about what others think. Many settlers also broached differences in communication, with more open and egalitarian exchange being mentioned as common in Germany versus a lack of straightforward communication in Japan seen as a drawback by all interviewees. Rather than self-search stories (Kato 2010, 2015), these young expatriate Japanese have relocated to do what they want. These narratives and trajectories show that ‘mobility has become ordinary in the emerging global order’ (Robins 2000, p. 196).

So what do these narratives tell us about the relevance of the much debated notion of culture? Migrants certainly refer strongly to their past which has been shaped by their cultural environment. All three migrants connote Japan in negative terms, depicting Japanese culture as constraining. Aki observes that he would have ended up as a salaryman with a conventional lifestyle had he remained in Japan. His statement that he aims to compete fairly with his peers suggests that social relations in Japan make self-development through conflict and discussion difficult; Rei presents himself as the sore thumb sticking out, referring to Japan as a context that embodies comfort, but leads to a lack of inspiration and self-development due to lack of competition; Mai even says that she would have died if she had remained. Yet, their daily routines and trajectories suggest a post-cultural identity as these individuals seeking to achieve professional recognition beyond Japan identify more strongly with global activities that could be situated almost anywhere in the world. None of these migrants have plans to go back to Japan, stating that even if they miss their friends and family, their professional ambitions are higher on their agenda and they feel that Japan does not offer a stimulating environment for them.

These narratives suggest that just as Gupta and Ferguson observed previously, ‘actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 10). In reality, the ‘Japan’ Aki is talking about refers to downtown Tokyo (*shitamachi*), while Rei refers to his hometown Hiroshima when talking about his ‘Japan’ and Mai to uptown Roppongi in Tokyo. Even ‘Tokyo’ means totally different things to my interlocutors. So on the one hand, ‘imagined communities’, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s (1983) paradigm, continue to exert excessive power; yet most of my interviewees engage in activities that have little relation to Japan and are contextualised in a setting that has little to do with Japan.

Second, the study showcases the emergence of lifestyles that unite work and leisure in novel ways (Klien 2015) that often include ‘living in a manner that involves living for oneself’ (*jibun wo ikashite ikiru*) (Nishimura 2009) spanning regions and continents. Pursuing a career that is not only financially sustainable but also personally fulfilling is without any doubt a worthwhile enterprise. However, the entrepreneurial undertakings of the individuals described above show that their efforts for personal fulfilment are based on well-reflected acts

of choice. As Rose (1992, p. 142) argued, the self of individuals means ‘to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfilment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as matters of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice’. And not surprisingly, the self is intricately entangled in its social surroundings.

What strikes me as worth noting is the fact that some migrants have mastered the German language and are well integrated with local communities (like Aki and Mai) while others make little effort to engage with their German surrounding beyond the minimum extent necessary (Rei). Aspiring to a career in the global art scene does not necessarily involve day-to-day dealings with the German environment, as shown in the case of Rei. Beyond the fact that migrants mention mostly negative aspects of Japanese society they prefer to avoid by having little contact with other Japanese expats, culture seems to have little impact or relevance in their everyday lives. Interestingly, while some Japanese expatriates continue to refer to Japanese social relations (like Rei and Mai), they do not explicitly refer to their Japanese identity in their professional work as they aim for careers in the global nexus. Clifford has argued that ‘mobility is always a supplement; roots always preceded routes’ (Clifford 1997, p. 3).

Whereas the migrants presented in this study show that practices of displacement are constitutive of cultural meanings in the sense that, yes, culture as the production and circulation of meaning has certainly shaped these individuals previously, their present lives and activities seem to have emancipated themselves from the paradigm of culture. Previous studies of Japanese expatriates have claimed that ‘there is a particular way for Japanese to live in NYC, including the kinds of work to find, places to live, things to do, means of striving and connecting, and techniques for representing one’s experiences back home’ (Kanzaki 2014, p. 53). Yet the interviewees depicted above and others I encountered during fieldwork in Berlin deviated from such patterns of homogeneity as migrants in Berlin tended to be excessively individualist, radically devoted to pursuing what they regarded as useful and strategic for the pursuit of careers in the global arena and altogether disinterested in what others thought of them.

However, somewhat paradoxically, common references to their homeland and

Japanese norms were pervasive. On the one hand, they proudly discuss their decision to leave Japan. On the other hand, the majority of Japanese settlers keep looking back to their home country by referring to it in multiple ways, be it by regularly visiting Japanese restaurants in their new places of residence, by returning to Japan once in a while, by reading Japanese manga regularly, or by interacting with Japanese friends in their new residences and/or back in Japan. The trajectories of migrants featured in this chapter indicate a fuzzy confluence of nomadism and rootedness, adaptation and resistance, blending in and opting out. Their narratives are permeated with a mix of social engagement and dislocation, vibrant aspiration and inherent resignation. Some have made grand decisions to turn themselves into successful artists, and they are without doubt making their utmost to make their dreams happen. Yet, some concede that they cannot help thinking about a scenario in which they should not be successful. All three migrants equal their new home with a better life, more meaningful career and self-growth.

All in all, narratives and participant observation confirm Elliott's and Urry's argument that 'living a mobile life is, to be sure, a mixed blessing' (2010, p. x). The yearning for a better, professionally more challenging and personally more meaningful life concurs with a persistent sense of risk and the fear of failure. Oral narratives and quotidian practices of my expatriate collaborators suggest an uneasy coexistence of relief and aspiration about the new life with less social constraints and various pressures, including the ambition to succeed, financial issues and the pressure of being constantly stigmatised as the foreigner, to name but a few. The ways Japanese expatriates cope with these pressures vary: some denigrate anything related to Japan, some celebrate their regular familial outings to Japanese restaurants, some seem to engage in unnuanced representations of Japan and their second homes as binaries, with Japan being their last-resort option. Yet, ironically, their narratives indicate a multilayered enmeshment of multiple cultural contexts.

This raises the question whether the time has finally come to critically rethink the clichéd idea of a bounded 'Japanese culture,' notions of certain patterns of behaviour and stereotypes and the concomitant essentialist fetishisation of difference. Traphagan (2013, p. 23) has poignantly observed that:

In one sense, there is no such thing as 'Japanese culture'; but there is a sense in which many Japanese people, under certain circumstances, tend to interpret their

surroundings in similar ways and construct their worlds on the basis of assumptions about what is natural and normal behavior.

However, the three migrants discussed in this chapter illustrate that ‘Japan’ is a minimal vector tying these individuals together. Coming from highly diverse sociocultural backgrounds and places in Japan, these expatriates ultimately harbour totally different notions of Japan. Home for Aki is densely populated Akihabara in the north part of Tokyo, which is now known for its spreading maid cafes. Mai comes from a posh southern district of the Japanese capital whereas Rei is from western Japan, but has pursued his studies in Tokyo. Their motives are vastly different as well, although they all are aspiring to self-employment in the creative sector.

I would like to close this chapter by arguing that these trajectories can be seen as critical junctures to epistemologically approach Japan differently, i.e. by sharpening the ethnographic focus on Japan through a departure from its perception as a bounded geographical entity. Yijiang Zhong (2017, p. 113) has described Japanese Studies - the ‘studies of Japan both outside and within Japan’ – as ‘a possibility of the formation of a consciousness and mode of knowledge that go beyond the horizon of the nation, which is a potential likely to be realised in the practice of an emerging global academia’.

I would like to reiterate the call for a fresh transnational and cosmopolitan ethnographic lens on Japan by dislocating Japanese Studies from its lingering – and in my eyes anachronistic - fixation with national boundaries as ontological disciplinary core and convert rituals of essentialist Othering into practices of universal relevance beyond the discipline of area studies. Freeman (2014, p. 10) brilliantly argues that ‘The anthropologist is primed to observe and explain what is different, but she is less well trained to interpret phenomena that look and sound familiar. The challenge before us is to resist the numbness and unease that emerges from apparent similitude’. This discomfort, evidently, also holds true for area specialists: claiming difference used to be the ultimate goal rather than unearthing similarities. This is why binaries continue to be prevalent to this very day. The research of communities that are porous in multiple ways may offer the urgently needed push for area experts engaging in the study of Japan towards the systemic analysis of similitude, be it apparent or real.

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