

DETERMINING FACTORS FOR AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF JAPANESE LIFESTYLE MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK, THAILAND: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

This qualitative case study aimed to find out the determining factors for and social integration of Japanese lifestyle migrants in Bangkok, Thailand. Two sessions of in-depth interview with 10 Japanese lifestyle migrants in Bangkok (8 males & 2 females) were conducted with informed consent in mid-November 2012, by a female bilingual (Japanese-Thai) interpreter at a Japanese language school & cultural center in downtown Bangkok. Employing content analysis through verbatim transcription from an interpretation from Japanese language into Thai language, the results indicated that financial security, property market investment, and “transnational habitation” (*jukunenriju* or physically separate living of Japanese couple but still legally committed) were the determining factors among the participants. Almost none of them used Thai language with the local people in their daily social activities. Participants preferred to do volunteer work as honorable “technical consultants” for interested Thai manufacturers. As global consumers, participants an “advisory” body in Japanese language (for advice-giving on issues such as visa renewal, accommodation, and banking), both for themselves and for their new colleagues. From the perspective of humane (lifestyle) migration, social integration should always be in focus. These findings supplement the limited available literature regarding Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migration.

Keywords: Japanese, Lifestyle migration, Thailand

Received June 2014; Accepted August 2014

INTRODUCTION

Mobility has become an evocative key word for the twenty-first century and a powerful discourse that creates its own effects and contexts. The concept of mobilities encompasses both the large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information across the world, including the local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space and the travel of material things within everyday life [1].

The concept of lifestyle migration is referred to “relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places, which for various reasons, signify for the people in migration something loosely defined as

quality of life [2, 3]. Lifestyle migration should be understood as one step within a wider lifestyle trajectory directed towards the gradual achievement of a better way of life [3-5]. Lifestyle migration includes migration, study abroad, and diasporic networking [6, 7]. It is a social phenomenon affecting an increasing number of sending and receiving countries with a distinction from other forms of migration in its primary motivation: lifestyle. Lifestyle migration has been considered under many other terms: international retirement migration (IRM), amenity-seeking migration, residential tourism, (international) counter-urbanisation, but as Benson & O’Reilly [3] argued, none of these conceptualizations has fully captured the complexity of the phenomenon.

Thailand has been one of the most attracting destinations for Japanese lifestyle migrants. In

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Cite this article as:

Hongsrnagon P, Panriansaen R, Prabsangob K, Muadchaithong C. Determining factors for and social integration of Japanese lifestyle migrants in Bangkok, Thailand: a case study. *J Health Res.* 2015; 29(1): 71-8.

Table 1 Details of the participants in the first in-depth interview session

Participants with their duration of stay	Socio-demographic background	Revenue source(s)	Visa type	Other motivating /demotivating factors for their stay
M1 with 16-year stay	bachelor's degree, married (with transnational habitation), retired, and used to work in Ayudhaya province, northern Bangkok	NPS, EPS, and own personal savings	retiree visa with an annual renewal	flight convenience; probably leaving Bangkok once getting ill
M2 with 2.5-year stay	bachelor's degree, married (with transnational habitation), retired, and used to work for a company in Japan	NPS, EPS, and own personal savings	retiree visa with an annual renewal	medical technology advancement and similar mentality between Japanese and Thais; probably leaving Bangkok once deciding to live elsewhere
M3 with 1-year stay	bachelor's degree, married with a Thai from northeastern part of the country, and retired. He used to work for a Japanese tour agency in Japan. Now he rent a condominium at the rate of 8,000 baht/month	NPS and EPS	retiree visa with an annual renewal	a variety of tourist spots available
M4 with 4-year stay	high school, married (with transnational habitation), and retired. He used to work for a company in China, and now had his own condominium located in downtown Bangkok	NPS and EPS	tourist visa with a monthly renewal	good & long-term relationship between Japan and Thailand; leaving Bangkok in case of changing a place of stay
F1 with 6-year stay	vocational school, a housewife by occupation. She and her husband rent a 38,000 baht-per-month condominium for the sake of convenience	own personal savings	senior long stay visa with an annual renewal	full-of-space accommodation in Bangkok compared to that in Chiangmai (northern Thailand); leaving Bangkok depending on health in the next 10 years

Note: National Pension Scheme (NPS) is provided by the Japanese government to their citizens who do not have a work or those who are freelance. Employee Pension Scheme (EPS) is provided for those who used to work for a private company.

Bangkok alone, it is estimated that Japanese lifestyle migrants may total up to 30,000 [8, 9] spotting around several sites, for instance, Sukhumvit Road (Sukhumvit 33/1 in particular), Ekamai, Lad Prao, Soi Aree (Paholyothin Road), and Bangna.

In order to understand more about Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migration so as to add the thickness to the scant relevant literature, this micro research was aimed to find out the determining factors for and the social integration of Japanese lifestyle migrants in Bangkok, Thailand.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study used the qualitative method of an in-depth interview as an exploratory phase for a case study with the Japanese participants. Approval for ethical protocol number 171.1/54 from the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, was obtained and the study

was conducted in mid-November 2012. Due to operation time constraints however with the cooperation from a Japanese language school and cultural center in Bangkok, purposively selected key informants were employed. The participants were Japanese males and females of 60 years and older who were school members. The venue was the activity room of the school itself and it took 2 days to conduct two sessions led by a female bilingual (Japanese-Thai) interpreter recommended by the school. The interpreter was a Bangkokian with Japanese-Thai family background, and was skillful in conducting in-depth interviews. Through the question guidelines, the simultaneous interpretation (from Japanese language into Thai language) was tape-recorded for the research team's further analysis. The principal investigator (PH) served as an observer focusing on non-verbal communication and interactions among participants, and between participants and the interpreter and vice versa. All tape-recorded

Table 2 Details of the participants in the second in-depth interview session

Participants with their duration of stay	Socio-demographic background	Revenue source (s)	Visa type	Other motivating/demotivating factors for their stay
M5 with 10-year stay	bachelor's degree, divorced and remained single. He used to work as an officer for a company in Japan and as an officer for Japanese company in Thailand. He rent a 5,000 baht-per-month condominium and was well acquainted with M6 and M8 as a coordinator for the Long Stay Japanese Association in Bangkok	NPS and own personal savings	senior long stay visa with an annual renewal	flight convenience; probably leaving Bangkok once ill
M6 with 16-year stay	bachelor's degree and single. Currently, he worked as a consultant engineer for a Japanese company in Thailand. He rent a 12,000 baht-per-month condominium	NPS and EPS	'O' type visa with an annual renewal	dreaming of living overseas before finally returning home; Bangkok as Southeast Asia flight hub
M7 with 22-year stay	bachelor's degree, married with a Thai. He used to visit Thailand in 1967. As for his work, he used to be a company's officer in Japan. Presently, he worked part-time (3 hours a week) as an hourly paid Japanese/English teacher at a private university in Bangkok. He planned to settle here for good	NPS and EPS	alien certificate with permanent visa	preference of Bangkok to Chiangmai or Phuket (southern Thailand)
M8 with 12-year stay	bachelor's degree, divorced and considered himself single. He used to be an officer of a company in Japan	NPS and EPS	elite visa with a 5-year renewal	-
F2 with 3-year stay	high school, divorced and remained single. She worked as a freelance for leatherware art and design. Her organization rent for her a 15,000 baht-per-month condominium	NPS	annual-renewal work permit	leaving Bangkok depending on health situation

Note: National Pension Scheme (NPS) is provided by the Japanese government to those who do not have a work or those who are freelance. Employee Pension Scheme (EPS) is provided for those who used to work for a private company.

interpretation was transcribed for qualitative content analysis through manual coding [10]. At session end of each day, the participants were briefed on the discussed content aiming for an agreement on content and comprehension only. This participant checking required minimum addition/correction.

RESULTS

In-depth interviews with 10 Japanese lifestyle migrants in two sessions could be categorized into three determining factors: financial security, property market investment, and transnational habitation (physically separate living of Japanese

couple but still legally committed), with no social integration with the locality, as follows:

The first session consisted of 4 Japanese males (M1, M2, M3, M4) aged 66, 64, 66, and 72 respectively, and one Japanese female (F1) aged 70. Details as shown in Table 1.

The second session consisted of 4 Japanese males (M5, M6, M7, M8) aged 69, 68, 77, and 65, respectively, and one Japanese female (F2) aged 72. Details as shown in Table 2.

First determining factor for Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migrants – financial security

Balancing one's own income and expenditures,

and having a life full of amenity in Bangkok, seemed to be the first determining factor for the participants, as following quotations indicated:

M2: *“For me, living in Bangkok has several competitive advantages: safety, stable political situation, good economy, and importantly, lower tax rates compared to that in Japan.”*

M3: *“With the equal amount of money, I cannot live like this if I choose to stay in Japan.”*

M5: *“With the amount of money I have, living in Bangkok gives me a comfortable life.”*

M6: *“Staying here allows me a financial security since I can find a good balance for my income and my expenditures.”*

M8: *“I have not yet decided when to go home as I am still in the capacity of balancing my spending in Bangkok, a mood of which is totally impossible in Japan.”*

Second determining factor for Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migrants – property market investment

The second determining factor seemed to fall into the category of property market investment. **M1** bought a condominium without specifically stating its location. **M4** purchased a condominium in financial-district of Bangkok. For **M7**, he decided to buy a condominium back 18 years ago without any information that it could not be transferred to his offspring. And **M8** bought a condominium with a space of 130 square meters for a rent of 40,000 baht per month while he himself stayed with his ‘gig’ (a slang in Thai language which means not a wife and not a steady girlfriend) at her condominium.

Third determining factor for Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migrants - transnational habitation

Being different from Western lifestyle migration, transnational habitation seems to be a norm among the Japanese. This cultural trend indicated itself behaviorally and conceptually as follows:

M1 stayed 11 months in Bangkok and spent 1 month in Japan to visit his wife.

“I used to frequently fly back and forth between Thailand and Japan since I was working in Ayudhaya province with an auto manufacturer. I consider my married life still working out fine up to now.”

M2 stayed 10 months in Bangkok and spent 2 months in Japan to visit his wife who was still working as a volunteer. His wife planned to join him after her retirement.

M4: *“I usually stay in Bangkok for 9 months, then fly home to visit my wife and family for 3 months. My wife still works as a volunteer.”*

M5: *“Among Japanese, the popularity of transnational habitation does not mean anything more than an agreement that one partner (mostly husband) can live overseas while the other partner (mostly wife) remains living in Japan. This transnational habitation should not be over-stated as they are too non-sense an issue to be discussed.”*

M6: *“Transnational habitation should only mean allowing an opportunity for each marital partner to choose where to live as one wishes. It has no implication, whatsoever, that the marriage fails.”*

Social integration among Bangkok-based Japanese lifestyle migrants

Almost no participant used Thai language in their daily interactions. They normally used English with the non-Japanese. Following quotations indicated this point:

M1: *“I normally use English with others and use Japanese with my Japanese folks.”*

M2: *“English with others and Japanese with my friends.”*

M3: *“My Thai is extremely limited.”*

M4: *“I used English throughout 10 years of working in China. I also do not speak Thai.”*

F1: *“My daily life requires no Thai speaking.”*

M5: *“Only Japanese and English.”*

M6: *“I use English both at work and in my daily life”*

M7: *“I always speak Japanese with my wife.”*

M8: *“My ‘gig’ cannot speak Japanese, so I use a little Thai with her.”*

F2: *“I found Thai language very difficult to learn.”*

Finally, the participants proposed that in order to keep their ‘know-how’ updated, Thai government might consider having them as honorable ‘technical consultant’, a volunteer work for interested Thai manufacturers. As global consumers, the participants claimed that it was not convenient for them upon their banking transaction, accommodation rent/purchase, and visa renewal. They, therefore, would like to have an ‘advisory’ body in Japanese language for these legal issues [11].

DISCUSSION

The picture of global flows of people, capitals, commodities, practices, and ideas, has accelerated and complicated contemporary life in an unprecedented way markedly since the 1980s. This is particular true for the rise of ‘north-south’ lifestyle migration [4, 12, 13] caused by longer longevity, declining fertility rate, and foreign immigration among world industrialized countries [14]. While European and North American retirees tend to migrate to southern European countries, the Caribbean Islands, and Mexico, in Asia, on the other hand, a part of Japanese retirees prefers to move to Australia and New Zealand, and the other part to Southeast Asian countries (including Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia) due mainly to economic reasons [13]. Jones [15] found that, at present, elder Japanese in middle class are facing with the decrease in real income after their retirement. As such, moving to Thailand becomes a means for the participants’ financial security. It is predicted that by living transnationally, migrants could overcome the poverty and powerlessness to which capitalism relegated them [16].

Lifestyle migration could be considered as a form of privileged travel and movement which, Amit [17] argued, is characterized more by the middle classes than by the very affluent or the very poor. Such movement is inspired by a range of

material and historical conditions, including, changes to the structures governing migration, e.g., immigration policies and the freedom of movement policies [18]. The hierarchically ranked status of sending nations is often reflected in the status of its diaspora [19] as a country’s rank within the world geopolitical order can strongly influence how its emigrants are received [16]. The participants, under the official agreement between Japan, as the sending country, and Thailand, as the receiving country, were provided with retiree visa, senior long stay visa, and/or elite visa during the period of their retirement stay in Thailand.

Mobility nowadays is a crucial dimension of unequal power relations. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship [20-22]. ‘Differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age, and class, ranging from the local to the global’ [23]. The fact that the participants had their income from the National Pension Scheme, Employee Pension Scheme, and many of them, their own personal savings, not only facilitated their trip and their long-term stay overseas, but also their capability to invest in destination’s property market. Equipped with their bachelor’s degree education and their white-collar work background, the participants were in a better position to pursue their interests of ‘being at home abroad.’ Transnational lifestyle migrants often seek to access resources in more than one place, and shuttle between continents, in a state of ‘lived simultaneity’ [24, 25].

Mobility is centrally involved in tourism and migration patterns which produce a more distant family life. The human body and the home are transformed, and people are likely to be ‘on the move’. Changes caused by movement thus transform the nature, scale and temporalities of family [1]. The participants considered ‘transnational habitation’ in Japanese culture as a norm [13]. Being away from home for, or more than, 75% of the time in a year (11 months for **M1**, 10 months for **M2**, and 9 months for **M4**) is deemed acceptable in Japanese tradition. In patriarchal culture, Japanese men are breadwinner and women’s space is much home-bound. By not being in the public space, Japanese women/housewives prefer to gather among their own acquaintances. This is far different from Western women who prefer the socialization process due to different social structures [26-27].

Discussion on no social integration among the participants deserves an elaboration. Glick Schiller [28] differentiated between “ways of being” or the actual social relations and practices that individual

engages in, and the “ways of belonging,” those practices that signal or enact an identity demonstrating a conscious connection to a particular group [16, 29]. Research proposes that migrants be understood as forming part of two or more dynamically intertwined worlds [30, 31]. Migrants often interact and identify with multiple nation states and/or communities, and that their practices contribute to the development of transnational communities [31, 32], or a new type of social formations within a transnational social space [31, 33]. Transnational social spaces consist of combinations of social and symbolic ties and their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organization that cut across the borders of at least two national states – sustained and continued pluri-local transactions crossing state borders. If transnational communities conceive of themselves as diasporas connected to a nation-building projects, they usually portray themselves as ethnically homogenous entities – a *Volk* based more on common cultural heritage than subjective predispositions of citizens toward a state and a constitution [34] (emphasis in original). The participants, though half of which had 2-digit years of stay in Bangkok and Thailand (ten years for **M5**; twelve for **M8**; sixteen both for **M1** and **M6**; and twenty-two years for **M7**), never used Thai language in their daily activities. They either used Japanese in their family and with their Japanese acquaintances or used English in work environment, but never Thai language. As an explicit norm, Japanese lifestyle migrants tend to cluster in their own clans, shop in Japanese stores/department stores, attend Japanese restaurants, cook Japanese food, as well as spend their leisure time with their Japanese networks/associations. This seems to be their ‘inner society,’ be they in Bangkok, Chiangmai, or Phuket – the main places of their stay in Thailand. A lack of meaningful interactions with the locality may result in a demand for an ‘advisory’ body in Japanese language for the participants’ legal issues.

As a point of reflection, patterns of migrants’ assimilation, acculturation, and integration within a society vary depending on the country and context of departure, immigrant characteristics, immigrant enclave capacity, and the political, social, and economic context of the homeland and the destination [35] for a summary of the latest developments and theoretical debates concerning immigrant assimilation) [16]. For example, Buller & Hoggart [36] argued that a majority of Britons in Spain live a life that separate themselves from the native population by language (language barriers)

and by enclave living – the lives that create a ‘little England in the sun’ [2]. Benson & O’Reilly [5] described the Britons living in Spain that:

“They move to a community where they do not need the language...They can probably order a couple of things in the supermarket, and that is about all.”

This emphasizes that lifestyle migrants in Spain do not need to have any contact with the local population in order to live there. They tend to prefer to live in an English ‘ghetto’. Life in Spain appeals to a certain kind of Britons who do not want the hassle of having to learn Spanish and integrate. Indeed, Spain has also flourished on the income from tourism because of their extensive service provision for English-speakers [5, 37]. These lifestyle migrants may not be aware that the difference between tourists and lifestyle migrants is that tourists only have a superficial experience of life within a destination, the lifestyle migrants, on the other hand, have unique knowledge of how to live within the destination [5, 38, 39]. In this aspect, Thailand may face similar situation if the gaps of social non-integration between lifestyle migrants and the locals keep widening. A careful observation is required since the ASEAN and ASEAN +3 (including China, Japan, and South Korea) are approaching in time. With existing visa types for the retirees, and perhaps more accommodating future policy changes for the ASEAN as a whole, the social non-integration may become an issue of attentive focus.

Finally, Toyota, Boecker, & Guild [13] found that self-actualization and the creation of *ikigai* in the form of volunteer work among Japanese is a means to live one’s retirement life with a sense of satisfaction [40, 41]. Past research suggested that efforts to encourage the elderly to volunteer and to make volunteering easier for elder persons should continue [41]. The participants’ proposal to serve as honorable ‘technical consultant’ for the interested Thai manufacturers can well signify their white collar background with the ‘know-how’ of manufacturing technicality. The fact that there are a vast number of Thai manufacturers’ joint ventures with Japanese partners makes this offer legitimate.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

This study has a number of limitations that require consideration. Firstly, the research method needs to be examined. Qualitative research is often deemed to have lower reliability compared with experimental one. However, it has strong face

validity, especially when it includes an observational component that enables the researcher to compare verbal statements with actual practice [42]. Secondly, the small sample size with purposively selected key informants for in-depth interviews needs to be taken into consideration. Due to operation time constraints, the researchers were able to conduct only two in-depth interview sessions with a total of 10 participants. However, since the main goal of this study was not to have conclusions that could be generalized but to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, it means that care must be taken in the interpretation of the results and in the transference of conclusions to other contexts. Thirdly, it is beyond the scope of the current study to investigate the response of other relevant stakeholders regarding Japanese lifestyle migration, both from public and private sectors, such as tour agency, food shop/restaurant; accommodation sector; hospital and health care provider; representatives from Japanese Association and/or Japanese Foundation. It is recommended that further studies examine this issue.

Nevertheless, it is believed that the current study has made some contribution in providing more information in identifying the determining factors for and the social integration of Japanese lifestyle migrants in Bangkok.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary globalization has an impact on individual mobility and lifestyle migration. Though globalization continues to flow beyond control, scholars should shift their focus from an emphasis on place (place of origin and place of destination) to mobility, to people movements, and to people having cross-border livelihoods. Scholars should also perceive lifestyle migration as an ongoing learning in order to truly appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Appreciation extends to all 10 Japanese participants in the study. The research was funded by Thailand Ministry of Tourism and Sports for the budget year 2012.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interests to be declared.

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