Japanese Husbands of Russian Female Migrants in Japan
On Issues of Cosmopolitanism and Multiculturalism

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While a considerable amount of research exists on married female migrants in Japan, information on the demographics of their Japanese husbands is relatively scarce. The exception is the Japanese husbands of the foreign (mostly Asian) women who migrate to Japan to join their newly acquired families in rural areas as part of the agricultural workforce. These men, to whom farms have been passed down through succession, are usually described in the narrative used to attract inbound female marriage migrants, where an image of rural population gender imbalance is created. In these narratives, Japanese husbands are often portrayed as carrying traditional views on gender roles (Suzuki 2003).

However, this describes only one broad category of Japanese husbands of foreign women. There are variable reasons for female migrants settling in Japan. These women arrive from a variety of destinations and may only marry local men after an extended stay in the country. Determining their motives for migration and marriage becomes increasingly difficult as the interpretations of these women change with time. The residential status of these women also changes according to their occupations, length of stay, and marriage. Given these considerations, it is doubtful that a specific group of Japanese men exists from which they choose their husbands. Nevertheless, in a country with a declining marriage rate, the demographic background, lifestyles, and societal views of these men are of interest.

This presentation uses two sets of data obtained as a result of mixed methods. First, information on husbands from the narratives of fifty Russian female migrants (RFMs), settled in urban regions in Japan, is used (interviewed in 2010-2011). Participant observation was facilitated as I met many of these men in person while interviewing their wives. I also interviewed three men directly. Second, this study utilizes an analysis of posts by RFMs on a targeted online community over a period of six months, with the content relating to Japanese men in general and their husbands in particular.

The purpose of the presentation is two-fold. Foremost, the characteristics of the Japanese husbands of the interviewed RFMs in terms of their age, occupations, and language proficiency are discussed. For example, 22% of men are familiar with the Russian language to a varying degree.

A total of 24% of the couples initially met abroad, mainly in Russia. Focusing on the family background of these men aided in revealing that many grew up in a single-parent household, a finding that poses a series of questions regarding the level of acceptance of international marriage among the so-called conventional families in Japan.

Furthermore, using both sets of data, I discuss whether the international experience of these men, their choice of a European wife, and the way the power relations play out in the family are a product or a cause of their “cosmopolitan” qualities. To do this, as far as the data allow, I look at various aspects of the daily routine of couples, such as their choice of language, observed holidays, division of labor, and attitudes to work and leisure. Most of the women describe their husbands as being “different from the other Japanese,” emphasizing their progressive attitudes. However, despite the fact that many of the men have indeed lived abroad, their attitudes and everyday practices indicate that they choose to portray an image of “cosmopolitanism,” while retaining traditional Japanese-oriented values with regard to family and their expectations towards their spouses.

Finally, albeit the fact that the married migrants have been said to be the potential agents of multiculturalism in Japan (Burgess 2010), I argue that their husbands actively work against their potential to establish their multicultural identities in the society. The Japanese husbands of the RFMs, each to their own degree, mediate the efforts of their wives to positively identify themselves as “different”; thus, determining the ability of these women to exercise the customs associated with their ethno-cultural capital.

References


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