Refusing to grow up?
Self-reflexivity and changing self-views of mobile Japanese youth in Japan and Europe

Susanne Klien, Hokkaido University

“I think I have changed considerably. I view my own life from different perspectives, it is extreme...and it is great fun to have a proper dinner with my mates. Before, I stayed at my office until late at night, ate takeaway bento boxes from the convenience store, like dog food. My life quality is better in many ways now.” This is a statement by a 28-year-old male migrant originally from Chiba Prefecture, who was a stressed out company employee working 18 hours a day and is now a freelance social entrepreneur in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture.

This ethnographic paper discusses the daily lives, experiences and narratives of Japanese individuals between 20 and 40 who have migrated either within Japan or to the European Union, mostly Germany, in order to pursue distinctly alternative lifestyles that emphasize self-realization. No matter whether we examine aspiring Japanese contemporary artists in Berlin in their 30s or social entrepreneurs in their late 20s in Tohoku, these individuals predominantly pursue lifestyles that do not involve conventional employment in the sense of being a full-fledged member of (adult) society (shakaitajin). The paper aims to examine the changes individuals experienced as a result of their relocation, their social life, how migrants adjusted to their new environment, self-perception before and after their move, how they earn a livelihood, how they relate to society and how they describe their mid and long-term plans. Interviewees will be asked both about what they perceive as the pros and cons of their relocation.

Through the comparison of Japanese individuals from a broad variety of professional backgrounds in different cultural contexts, the paper aims to scrutinize how ‘Japanese identities’ are negotiated in different regional or national contexts, but also deconstruct images of allegedly ‘Japanese’ reflexivity and proposes an approach sensitive to the coexistence of culturally heterogeneous elements in the narratives of Japanese individuals.

The impact of ethnographer’s feelings in the field, i.e. the setting, research question and interviewees, have been neglected so far. In this vein, this paper aims to examine the relationship between the researcher and researched in ethnographic studies and explores the interplay between the investigator who is herself a Eurasian cross-cultural migrant and mobile youth in the urban and rural continuum or individuals crossing nations. The author having herself lived in Germany for several years and been faced with the situation of integrating into communities in the Japanese countryside for fieldwork intends to focus on the link between reflexivity and self-reflexivity: How do the ethnographer’s inherent personal attitudes to his or her interviewees, their lifestyles and values shape the emerging anthropological knowledge? Ultimately, this study is based on the assumption that the production process of ethnographies is by their interpretative nature as much about the study of others as well as about individual reflexivity.

Second, it showcases the emergence of lifestyles that unite work and leisure in novel ways that often include “living in a manner that involves living for oneself” (jibun wo ikashite ikiru)(Nishimura 2009) spanning regions and even continents.

Nishimura, Y. Jibun wo ikashite ikiru [Living for oneself], Tokyo: Basilico 2009.

キーワード Migrants, urban-rural, mobility, youth, alternative lifestyle, self-realization, self-reflexivity