The self-reflexive moment

Japanese corporate expatriates in Guangzhou (広州) and the Sino-Japanese tensions in the East China Sea

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Since the beginning of modern times examinations of the Japanese national and cultural identities have tended to situate them against the omnipresent West, not least because of the influence of the Nihonjinron-inspired discourses that have repeatedly attempted to analyze, explain, and explore the alleged uniqueness of Japan and the Japanese people by contrasting them with the ways of life found in the US and Europe. Despite geographic and cultural proximity, as well as strong economic ties, Japan’s neighbors: China and South Korea, appear to play only a limited role in informing contemporary Japanese identity. Whether Asian countries will enter into Japan’s identity-defining equation in a more significant way in future still remains in question. This study attempts to shed some light on the possibility of a more Asia-minded identity to form in Japan facilitated by the globalization contexts of trade and information flows, notwithstanding the precarious reality underscored by historical tensions and mutual misapprehensions between countries in the region. It does so by examining the narratives of the Japanese corporate expatriates from Guangzhou centered on their identities and reactions to the 2012 outbreak of the anti-Japanese sentiment over the Sino-Japanese territorial disputes in the East China Sea.

Even though my informants tended to be more intent than their predecessors of the 1980s and 1990s on adopting cosmopolitan attitudes: learning foreign languages, taking up ‘Chinese’ hobbies such as tai chi, or socializing with people of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, they remained strongly embedded in their Japanese networks and in many ways lived in a social and cultural bubble. In Guangzhou, that is facilitated by the easy and affordable access to Japanese food and imported goods, Japanese-style services and, more crucially, Japanese-language entertainment and information, both that available locally and that consumed over the Internet. They remained safely wrapped in their Japanese identity, taking it for granted that in a couple of years they would return to Japan and plug back into the same life they had led prior to their Chinese posting, only with better foreign language skills and experience than their coworkers.

Against this background, the flaring of the Sino-Japanese tensions in 2012 served as a catalyst to make them acutely aware of what it means to be Japanese in China on the one hand, and what it means to be Japanese outside Japan on the other. The dramatized reporting by the Japanese media of the anti-Japanese protests and distraught family members in Japan urging my informants to return stood in contrast with the much less distressing experience on the ground.

The gap between what they saw on the Japanese news—by far the main source of information about the world affairs for the majority of my informants—and the reality of the events in Guangzhou made them realize that Japan was in fact much more distant than they had thought. It revealed biases and made them temporarily fall out of line with the supposedly shared norms.

An analogy can be drawn between the experience of my informants and that of (their) repatriee children, kikokushijo (repatriate children), who have been documented to undergo a process or re-acculturation upon their return to Japan, with one major difference: in order to reconcile their suddenly more precarious and much less clear-cut identity with the implicit understanding they would be returning to Japan on the completion of their posting, my informants were required to fall into line with the Japanese societal norms and biases while they were still in China.

The case of Japanese corporate expatriates in Guangzhou proves for the most part that the physical crossing of international borders does not necessarily entail the emergence of transnational identity, however, as returnees they can draw on their adaptability and cross-cultural experience back in Japan. Other Japanese migrant groups in China, such as students and locally hired workers, come up as more successful at developing long-standing transnational Asia-minded identities.

Sino-Japanese Tensions; Guangzhou; corporate expatriates; self-reflexivity; Japanese migrants