Japanese Lifestyle Migration/Tourism in Southeast Asia

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This paper aims to explore an emerging form of lifestyle migration/tourism in which participants no longer simply travel but stay for extended periods, or even live out their lives in foreign destinations. Long-stay tourism and international retirement migration have become popular lifestyle choices amongst Japanese retirees, who view Southeast Asian countries as preferable destinations for both economic and geographic reasons. Meanwhile, so-called "sotokomori" have emerged as another pattern amongst Japanese tourists who stay in destinations as a strategy for survival. "Sotokomori" is a Japanese term which means someone who withdraws from society by moving outside of Japan. By juxtaposing long-stay and "sotokomori" tourists, this paper argues that what we call tourism is no longer merely a pattern of leisure activities, but can be described as a life-long strategy for survival. Receiving countries welcome foreigners for long-term stays, but they also attract budget tourists who bring issues with them from home.

Key words: lifestyle migration/tourism, long-stay tourism, international retirement migration, sotokomori, Southeast Asia

With the economic expansion in Japan under the continuing globalization of the world economy, the late 1980s and the 1990s witnessed an increase in the numbers of Japanese expatriates, tourists, and students overseas. Because of the growing strength of Japanese yen and the affluence of the society, Japanese people began to reside abroad by choice. Nowadays, growing numbers of Japanese go abroad for a certain period of time to live or migrate but continue to move without settling down in one place permanently. According to the Japanese Ministry of Justice (MOJ), more than 17 million Japanese traveled overseas in 2007 while only about 5 million did so in 1985.¹ This shows that in two decades the number of Japanese tourists traveling abroad has increased more than three-fold. Furthermore, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the number of Japanese nationals overseas has been increasing and has surpassed one million since 2005. This figure encompasses both permanent residents ("ejirushi"), who constitute 31.1 percent of the total number of Japanese national overseas, and expatriates who reside abroad for longer than three months.


("chōkōtaizaisha"). In the category of expatriates who reside abroad for longer than three months, some people voluntarily reside abroad while others are sent by their employer/company or the government of Japan. MOFA figures for expatriates include people such as expatriate workers (government officials, corporate workers, and journalists) and their families, entrepreneurs, those with professional skills (such as artists), researchers, students, and tourists.

Since the 1990s, many Japanese companies have sought to decrease the number of employees assigned to foreign postings in order to localize both employment and management structure. After recession hit Japan with the crash of the bubble economy in 1991, some companies began to believe that it is too costly to post workers overseas, especially those accompanied by their families, and to pay allowances for them as well as other related benefits. Under such conditions, that Japanese companies have tended to replace costly posted staffs with local employees, including locally employed Japanese, is one of the background factors for the expansion of Japanese working abroad.

In this paper, I examine Japanese lifestyle migrants/tourists who voluntarily reside in Southeast Asian countries. By looking at new trends in Japanese outbound tourism, long-stay tourism and "sotokomori," this paper aims to explore an emerging phenomenon in Japanese outbound travel in which tourists no longer simply travel, but stay for extended periods of time or even live out their lives in foreign destinations.

**Lifestyle Migration/Tourism**

"Lifestyle migrants" is a term used by SATO Machiko (2001) in her book *Farewell to Nippon: Japanese Lifestyle Migrants in Australia*. This book examined the mobility of Japanese migrants who settled down in Australia seeking a change in their lifestyles. She described such contemporary Japanese overseas settlers as "lifestyle migrants," a term which means those who desire to improve their quality of life in various spheres (SATO 2001: 2). SATO contrasted these new "lifestyle migrants" to "economic migrants" for whom economic factors were the primary motivation for migration, as was common amongst Japanese who emigrated to countries such as Brazil and the U.S. as laborers. Furthermore, examining cases of Europeans' mobility within Europe, Karen O'REILLY and Michaela BENSON define lifestyle migration as "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life" (O'REILLY and BENSON 2009: 2).

Additionally, lifestyle migration also challenges the theory of modern tourism. American anthropologist Valene SMITH defines a tourist as "a temporarily leisureed person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change" (SMITH

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1989: 1). According to SMITH’s definition, tourists travel to places where they can enjoy an extraordinary space and time away from their everyday lives, to which they will return. However, this definition is no longer accurate as contemporary tourists do not always return to their everyday lives but in many cases remain away. With this pattern of lifestyle tourism, the boundaries between tourism and migration have become blurred (cf. WILLIAMS and HALL 2000; WILLIAMS, KING, WARNES and PATTERSON 2000).

The scope of lifestyle migration/tourism is diverse. Studying abroad for leisure purposes is a category that includes language-leaning and so-called “yūgaku.” “Yū” means to play and “gaku” means to study, and so “yūgaku” thus means to stay abroad to learn something such as a foreign language or dancing, purely for pleasure. The working holiday visa system is a useful tool for lifestyle migrants/tourists to acquire the permission required to stay abroad with a legal status for a period longer than that offered by a tourist visa.

According to Jozsef BOROCZ (1996), tourists are “leisure migrants.” Despite being a broad term, “leisure migrants” is useful in explaining the flow of people who travel abroad voluntarily and sojourn for the purpose of seeking change in their lives. In addition to lifestyle migrants, the term lifestyle tourists can also be employed for such people, because those who so sojourn are not always “tourists” but “stay” abroad using a “tourist visa.” Before describing two contemporary types of Japanese lifestyle migrants/tourists in Southeast Asia—long-stay tourists and sotokomori—I will explain some of the distinctive features of Japanese tourism to Southeast Asia.

**Japanese Tourism to Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asian countries have been attracting Japanese tourists en masse since the 1980s. In the Japanese tourist market, Southeast Asian countries (sometimes comprehensively referred to as Asia) are often described as being “ankintan” or “ankindan” destinations. “An” means cheap, “kin” means geographically close, “tan” means short stay holidaymaking (in particular when compared to other destinations such as North America and Europe which take much longer to reach), and “dan” means warm weather. All of these factors contribute to the popularity of Southeast Asian/Asian destinations in the minds of Japanese.

These four attributes have become especially appealing to Japanese tourists since the onset of Japan’s economic downturn in the early 1990s. According to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, Southeast and East Asian destinations constituted more than 50 percent of all destinations for Japanese outbound tourists in 2005, with ASEAN countries accounting for some 16.4 percent. The Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) reported that Southeast Asian destinations amounted to 17.5 percent of the market share for Japanese overseas tourism, the second largest market following the East Asian region (JTB 2009: 16).

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In addition to Hawaii’s 2009 drop of 10.5 percent below 2008, there is no end in sight to the steady decline in the number of Japanese tourist visits to “Western” destinations (including Australia) that began in the late 1990s. On the other hand, Asian destinations such as Macao and Malaysia have seen significant growth in tourist numbers. Although Hawaii has been the most popular destination for Japanese tourists for the last 12 years (ibid.: 61), the number of Japanese tourists’ visiting Thailand has almost reached the number of those visiting Hawaii (ibid.: 9).

Japanese tourism to Southeast Asia began in the 20th century and can be thought to have originally been associated with Japanese imperialism. With the expansion of the Japanese Empire in the first half of 20th century, colonial tourism developed in which people visited the sites of the military exploits of the Japanese Empire (YAMASHITA 2009: 189). Southeast Asia was geo-politically significant for the Japanese Empire and was often described as Japan’s “lifeline.” In a study of international retirement migration in Europe, Allan WILLIAMS (1997) argues that the specific attraction of southern Europe is closely associated with its role as “northern Europe’s pleasure periphery.” It is therefore noteworthy that structural factors associated with the political-economic north-south relationship and/as colonial legacy contribute to current Japanese tourism to Southeast Asia/Asia, where the region can be seen as part of Japan’s pleasure periphery. Furthermore, this historical context also contributes to the current nostalgic gaze of Japanese toward Southeast Asia and to the Japanese perception of Southeast Asia as a “paradise” and “healing spot.”

Meanwhile, Southeast Asian/Asian countries are keen to receive foreign tourists who stay long term. Host countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan have begun providing a special kind of visa in order to attract middle- and upper-class foreigners for long-term stays or retirement, defined as those who do not intend to work in their chosen destinations. Furthermore, the renewal of tourist visas in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia is relatively loose and can be done at the border of neighboring countries. Tourists are able to extend their stays easily by repeating a “visa run” made possible by the geographic layout of Indochina. Such tourists are able to remain by renewing their tourist visas without ever obtaining any other special visa for long-stay. Thus, Southeast Asian countries have become host countries to backpackers and sojourners who remain for extended periods whilst holding tourist visas.

In the following section, two types of Japanese lifestyle migrants/tourists in Southeast Asia will be discussed. Long-stay tourists and sotokomori are described in order to explore the notion that lifestyle migration/tourism is not only motivated by leisure but is also as a serious life strategy.
Long-stay Tourism

Known in Japanese as “rongusutei,” long-stay tourism is a recent trend in Japanese outbound tourism in which people stay overseas for a relatively long period of time. It was introduced as a new style of Japanese overseas travel in 1992, along with the establishment of the Long Stay Foundation, a public interest corporation. The Long Stay Foundation defines rongusutei as “a style of staying abroad for a relatively long time in order to experience the life and culture in the place of destination and contribute to the local society while leaving economic resources in Japan” (LONG STAY FOUNDATION 2002). While in conventional international tourism people visit several sites over a short period of time, long-stay tourists aim not at “sightseeing” but at “staying” and experiencing “life” in their chosen destinations (ONO 2008).

Long-stay tourism has been commercialized and commoditized not only as a leisure activity but also as a retirement choice, and it has become an accepted form of Japanese international retirement migration. Japan faces critical issues relating to its aging society, coupled with a low birthrate. The sustainability of the current pension system is one such fundamental issue for Japanese people in and above middle age. Socio-economic factors are of primary concern for many Japanese retirees in choosing Southeast Asia as a long-stay destination.

It is in this context that, by taking advantage of retirement/long-stay visas issued by receiving countries, Southeast Asian destinations have become a popular lifestyle choice amongst Japanese retirees. Japanese retirees view Southeast Asian countries as preferable destinations in which to spend their retirement years for both economic and geographic reasons. A survey by the Long Stay Foundation shows the growing popularity of Asian countries for long-stay tourism—with Malaysia as the most desired destination, and including Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia—and also foresees their potential for further growth as “cheap, near, warm” destinations (LONG STAY FOUNDATION 2008).

In addition to socio-economic factors, socio-cultural factors are also significant incentives for long-stay tourists. Various handbooks and guidebooks on long-stay tourism and its destinations have been published since the introduction of long-stay tourism in Japan. These books often use “nenkin” (retirement pensions) and “ikigai” —which Gordon MATHEWS (1996) defines as “what makes life worth living” or the meaning of life—as two major keywords in their titles or text. For example, Shumi to Ikigai no Tame no Kaigai Sutei no Susume (Recommendations of Staying Abroad for Hobbies and Ikigai) is a handbook published in 2007 about making retirement life meaningful with a sense of ikigai achieved through long-stay tourism. Furthermore, the Long Stay Foundation claims that retirees choose long-stay tourism as an activity in their “second life” in which they seek their (new) ikigai (LONG STAY FOUNDATION 2008: 6). By moving to Southeast Asia after retirement, Japanese retirees hope to enjoy more leisure activities at less expense and to gradually prepare for old age. Long-stay tourism is

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4 The word rongusutei is a registered trademark of the Long Stay Foundation which was established in 1992 as a public interest corporation authorized by the former Ministry of International Trade and Industry.
therefore a life strategy for those who seek a better quality of life and a sense of financial sustainability in their retired lives (ONO 2008).

Below, I present two case studies of Japanese long-stay tourists and retirement migrants in Malaysia based on data collected during fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from August 2006 to January 2009.5

**Golfing as ikigai after retirement:** Golfing is one of the attractions of Malaysian tourism, as can be seen in a variety of pamphlets published by Tourism Malaysia, including “Your Golfing Paradise.” According to this pamphlet, there are about 190 golf courses in Malaysia, which Japanese long-stay tourists and retirement migrants enjoy daily.

Mr. Tanaka and his wife moved to Kuala Lumpur in 2005 after his retirement. Mr. Tanaka’s purpose in moving to Malaysia was to enjoy golfing every day. However, his wife was reluctant to move to Malaysia, and he had to persuade her by promising to live in a luxury hotel residence and have breakfast at the hotel buffet every day so that she could be free from domestic work such as cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking breakfast. Mr. Tanaka said that he plans to stay in Malaysia as long as he can play golf. If he becomes sick or too old to play golf, he will return to Japan immediately.

**Early retirement and retirement migration:** Mr. Egi chose to live in Malaysia for economic reasons. He retired early and needed to survive until his pension started to be paid. When he first thought about quitting his stressful job, he began searching for a place to live with a lower cost of living. However, his wife did not go along his decision and he so moved to Malaysia alone. He had meals twice a day, having bread and coffee in the morning and eating at local open-door restaurant in the evening. When he felt he needed cheering up, he would occasionally go to a steakhouse. He said that his hobby was sitting at a street-side coffee shop reading the local newspaper to learn English and watching people come and go. He also spent many hours online checking the stock market because he is making money through the stock exchange. However, when the U.S. economy went down in 2008, he lost two thirds of his savings as he had invested his retirement funds in stocks. He eventually decided to go back to Tokyo, where he has a house and where his wife had remained.

Long-stay tourism and retirement migration to Malaysia range from luxury seeking to financially driven types, but the low cost of living extends the quality of life for people of various economic strata.

**Sotokomori: Social Withdrawal Abroad**

*Sotokomori* has emerged as another pattern of lifestyle migration/tourism amongst Japanese who stay in foreign destinations long term as a survival strategy. *Sotokomori* is a pattern in which tourists prolong their stays abroad by renewing their tourist visas multiple times while limiting their daily expenses by residing in budget hostels or guesthouses in

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5 Names used in all case studies are pseudonyms.
backpacker towns such as Kaosan Road in Bangkok. These tourists are generally not formally engaged in economic activities in local society and remain abroad until their savings are exhausted, at which point they return to Japan to work and save up money for their next trip.

*Sotokomori* is a neologism created by journalists, which means social withdrawal or being a social withdrawer who lives abroad. "Soto" means outside or foreign and "komori," derived from the verb "komoru," means withdrawal. *Sotokomori* was coined in contrast to the popular term "hikikomori" (internal withdrawal), which is a Japanese term referring to the phenomenon of reclusive individuals who withdraw from social life in general and are reluctant to participate or maintain interpersonal contacts in their everyday lives, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement. Together with NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), *hikikomori* is one of the contemporary social problems surrounding the education and employment of Japanese youth. According to SHIMOKAWA (2008: 17), *sotokomori* refers to people who do not withdraw in Japan but who instead chose to do so in foreign destinations as tourists who do not do anything or travel anywhere once they have reached their chosen foreign destinations.

However, *sotokomori* also has roots in backpacker tourism, in which tourists stay in foreign destinations for long periods of time. Backpacker tourism became a new form of tourism among Japanese travelers in the late 1980s when, owing to Japanese economic growth and the appreciation of the Japanese yen, outbound tourism became popular and diversified from package tours to more individualized forms of tourism. Some backpacker tourists choose to stay in budget hotels in cities like Bangkok without any particular goals for their visits, and as a result they do not travel around much. Among such backpackers there emerged those who began to work informally, for example working for guesthouses to take care of other Japanese tourists. Such backpackers, who can be viewed as the predecessors of the *sotomokori* tourists referred to here, have also been called "has-been" backpackers or "sunken" Japanese tourists—who remain in their chosen destinations just as sunken ships stay in the deep sea and do not move.

*Sotokomori* has become a way of life and was introduced by *sotokomori* handbooks. For example in *Sotokomori no Susume: Kaigai Nohohon Seikatsu* (Recommendations to Sotokomori: Carefree Living Abroad), YASUDA Makoto (2008), who lived such a lifestyle in Bangkok, writes about his own experience as a Thai-base *sotokomori*. YASUDA left Japan for Bangkok without any other purpose than to live at the same standard of living as he did in Japan. He identified his pattern as that of an "authentic" *sotokomori*. While he lived in Japan, he worked for a company and also made money by trading shares on the stock exchange. YASUDA wanted to make his living only by trading stocks but his profits were not sufficient to survive in Japan, so he moved to Thailand where he could live on far less money (YASUDA 2008).

The two case studies below are based on interviews I conducted among young Japanese migrants and tourists in Bangkok, Thailand between March 2003 and November 2006.
From Backpacker to sotokomori: Takeshi is in his forties and began this kind of lifestyle more than ten years ago. Takeshi stays in Bangkok for six to eight months of every year, and when his funds run out he returns to Japan to work and save money for his next stay in Bangkok. He says that he works in Japan for as short a time as possible in order to stay in Bangkok for as long as possible. He openly refers to himself as sotokomori, which he has internalized as his identity because he regards himself as one of the pioneers of this lifestyle.

Takeshi used to work for a trading company in Japan. After he traveled abroad for the first time, he changed his workplace to one where he could take longer vacations and he became a repeater backpacker tourist to destinations in Asia. Takeshi said that Japan is not a fun place to be because everyone is always busy and no one has time to simply have fun. On the other hand, in the various backpacker towns he visits he can always meet people to enjoy life with. Moreover, while Takeshi felt alienated when he was doing nothing in particular in Japan, he did not feel any guilt when he was traveling abroad as a "tourist." He said that (the status of being) a tourist is a form of "citizenship" entitled to a lifestyle of doing nothing in foreign destinations. Once he experienced life as a "sunken" tourist, he felt it ridiculous to work hard every single day in Japan. Even though he has to work very hard in Japan for a concentrated period of time in order to save enough money to return to his sotokomori existence in Bangkok, he can endure it as he has a clear goal in mind. He said, "[As in The Ant and the Grasshopper] the grasshopper, who makes fun of the 'hardworking' ant, could not survive in Japan, but he could survive in Thailand without working hard (like the ant) because there is no 'winter' there [that needs to be prepared for]." Takeshi also said that he was not interested in getting married.

From student to sotokomori: Hiro moved to Bangkok in 2003 at the age of 31 after traveling there on holiday several times. He studied the Thai language at a language school in Bangkok for four months and enjoyed doing nothing in particular until he had used up all of his savings. Hiro left school and began selling pirated football uniforms, which were the kind of souvenirs sold on the streets of Bangkok, through the Internet from his apartment in Bangkok, where he lived with his Thai girlfriend. He said, "I went back to Japan for a while. One day I was standing at a train station in the morning rush hour. I saw Japanese salarymen who wear suits and ties rushing to their work. I felt as if I were a 'dame ningen' (loser). But, having said that, I do admire Japanese salarymen. I wouldn't be able to live like that anymore."

Conclusion

There is no reliable data available about the number of Japanese retirees and long-stay tourists living in Malaysia or about the number of Japanese sojourners or sotokomori in Thailand. However, these kinds of Japanese expatriates are becoming increasingly visible in

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6 Interviews with Takeshi were conducted, together with SHIMOAWA Yuji, in Bangkok in August 2006.
foreign destinations. These people are lifestyle migrants/tourists.

Using SATO's (2001) notion of lifestyle migration, I have examined how lifestyle migrants/tourists to Southeast Asian countries are essentially seeking places where they will be able to live out their desired lifestyles. By juxtaposing long-stay and sotokomori tourists, I have argued that what we call tourism is no longer merely a pattern of leisure activities, but is now also a way of life and a life-long, if tentative, strategy for survival. These people are lifestyle migrants, who sometimes work informally and sometimes simply reside abroad. Receiving countries have implemented tourism policies that welcome middle-class foreigners for long-term stays. However, these same policies also attract budget tourists who bring various issues from home with them and for whom travel is a way of life. Lifestyle migrants/tourists include not only those seeking leisure but also individuals carrying backpacks or suitcases filled to the brim with their lives' issues. The two types of lifestyle migration/tourism discussed above are both stylized forms of mobility, whereby the stylization of migration has been created through various media, including guidebooks. Moreover, both groups are generally not engaged in formal wage labor in their chosen destination societies.

YAMASHITA Shinji (2009) argues that contemporary Southeast Asia has become a sort of receptacle for socio-cultural "refugees" (see also SUGIMOTO 1993) escaping the stresses of Japanese society in the name of seeking a tourist "paradise." As lifestyle migration/tourism destinations, Southeast Asian countries have become a receiving arena to which Japanese people travel for extended periods in search of solutions to their problems. The more people live transnationally, the more social issues become trans-border issues, which in turn are solvable transnationally. Social refugees and dropouts are social phenomena in which each individual involved is tactically seeking to solve their issues elsewhere, even though such solutions do not necessarily change their lives fundamentally but only tentatively. However, this kind of mobility, enabled by north-south relations within the Asian region, gives individuals opportunities to take full advantage of and to realize their chosen lifestyle strategies in ways which would not be possible had they remained in Japan.

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