

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

English-Speaking Japanese Women's Reasons for Staying in or Leaving Japan

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Abstract

This critical ethnographic paper focuses on the lived experiences of English-speaking Japanese women to describe their reasons for staying in or leaving Japan. I approached 19 women to learn how their personal experiences shape new knowledge about a marginalised group of Japanese women: those who speak English. The data was analysed from three frameworks: (1) the Japanese economic/business situation, (2) society and culture, and (3) family and romance. The findings showed that these women's desires to stay in or leave Japan are not as simple as previous studies have suggested, foregrounding the desire in the discourses of internationalisation; it is more complex and not necessarily binary. Furthermore, the English language was highlighted as crucial in the process for its relevance in the acts of physical movement and personal transformations.

Keywords: Japanese women, English learning, mobility, desire, staying in or leaving Japan

Introduction

English-speaking Japanese women are getting much scholarly attention in studies discussing Japan and the West as two worlds that are spatially, temporally, and ideologically separated. When combined with the discourse of mobility and its potentially 'usual' understanding of the differentiation between 'us' and 'them', it is hard to see these women as anything but a collective category of heterosexual Occidentalists. This paper aims to explore the lived experiences of 19 English-speaking Japanese women to point out how these are invaluable in reaching new knowledge on their desire to stay in or leave Japan. In that sense, the paper looks into the relevant trajectories of their decision-making processes to see how their desires develop. In these narratives, the English language is emphasised as one of the crucial actors in

the process, for not only is it relevant in the acts of physical movement, but it also affects personal transformations.

As for the paper's organisation, I first shed light on the relevant studies focusing on the theme of Japanese women's mobility. Secondly, I discuss the conceptual framework of escapism as a relevant background behind these narratives. The focus is shifted away from solely discussing the actual discourses of physical movement; it is argued that the topic is more complex and multifaceted. Thirdly, the critical ethnographic approach is suggested as an adequate method for this study. Lastly, the data resulting from on-site and digital fieldwork is analysed and allocated to relevant themes.

Studies of Japanese Women's Escapism

The scholarly discussions of the past 30 years significantly focus on the English-learning ideology in Japan. These studies particularly emphasise its gendered aspect (i.e., they prioritise the narratives of Japanese women who have participated in internationalist campaigns [*kokusaika* 国際化,¹ *ryūgaku* 留学,² or working holiday] and have manifested any form of longing to go to desired locations [the US, the UK, and Australia] and live better lives than they do in Japan).

In this respect, it becomes evident that these internationalist narratives are foregrounded on a specific dichotomic mode of thinking, differentiating between Japan and the West.³ As Ryuko Kubota observes:

On the one hand, researchers often characterize Japanese culture as traditional, homogeneous, and group oriented with a strong emphasis on harmony. They argue that because group goals override individual interests, the Japanese underemphasize self-expression and creativity. On the other hand, researchers characterize U.S. culture and Western culture in general using such labels as individualism, self-expression, and critical thinking.⁴

This imagery is corroborated by the structuralist understanding of the relationship between Japan and the West as constituted by classical Orientalist

¹ Internationalisation.

² Study abroad.

³ Košinaga 2021.

⁴ Kubota 1999: 11–12.

thought.⁵ In this binary way of perceiving the world, apart from the major distinction between East and West, the dichotomies can also represent civilised–uncivilised, progressive–backward (bound to tradition), masculine–feminine, and so on. Then, Japan gets articulated as the traditionalistic and group-oriented Other of the West. At the same time, the West emerges as an individualistic, critically oriented, and desirable cultural space to which one strives to escape.

Furthermore, Kubota asserts that the othering of Japan does not only occur through the evident Orientalist discourse; it also happens through the very process of the internalisation of the Orientalist gaze resulting in self-Orientalisation.⁶ In that case, the English-language ideology in Japan is quite an interesting phenomenon to observe. Not only does it constitute an ‘idealised’ image of Western culture and language, but it also inspires another, possibly resistant way of thinking that tries to define the other side of this dichotomy, the Japanese linguistic and cultural identity.

With reference to the aforementioned queries, it is necessary to bring the question of gender into this discussion to see what ensues if more specific cultural groups are addressed in the context of the dichotomy in question, such as a cultural group of Japanese women. Karen Kelsky’s work on this topic, which explores the circumstances behind Japanese women’s discourses of mobility in more detail, is quite prominent.⁷ Kelsky situates her argumentation in the context of erotically driven desire, particularly discussing Japanese women’s role as the consumers or fetishisers of the Western lifestyle and men.⁸

What is important to emphasise in this form of desire is that, as Kelsky also asserts, these narratives of the international are not inherent in Japanese

⁵ Edward Said (1978) defines Orientalism as a vital part of the Eurocentric discourse that not only describes the East in the service of and according to the interests of the Western capitalist agenda of modernisation but, at the same time, also articulates a set of ‘common sense’ beliefs and stereotypes concerning the people in the Orient. Consequently, the Other is reduced to their very tradition and, in the internalisation of the Orientalist gaze, to the lack of agency in general. For instance, in her work ‘In the Feminine Guise: A Trap of Reverse Orientalism,’ Chizuko Ueno argues that Orientalism is yet another name for the discourse of the power of capitalist expansion, which by default constructs the other as inferior. As such, it must be at the same time feminised in terms of gender relations of power—both at work to legitimise the colonizer’s alleged mission to ‘civilise’ and ‘protect.’ She illustrates her claim by equating women with the land itself, because, according to her, “‘woman’ is another name given to a land to be conquered’ (1997, 4).

⁶ 1999.

⁷ Kelsky 2001.

⁸ Košinaga 2021: 408.

women; they are culturally embedded and discursively articulated. She posits that Japanese women are often ‘interpellated’ into subjects desiring the West. In this way, their desire for the West (and English) become situated at the intersection of the power relations between Japan and the West. According to Kelsky:

Women’s fantasies of escape are inextricably bound up with prior fantasies of (in both senses) the Western Other, so that the *direction*, if not the degree, of women’s outward trajectories are to a large extent determined before they ever leave home. At the same time, this interpellation is not simply a crude effect of a global culture industry. Rather, women’s subject position as internationalized, cosmopolitan, or flexible is itself dependent on and derivative of a larger Eurocentric discourse of modernity and progress that [...] has become a mode for the absorption of mobile, elite, global subjects into a now shared, multicultural imaginary emanating from the West.⁹

We see here that, no matter how transformative, Japanese women’s desire for the West is collective; it does not indicate any individualistic trend. Thus, through interpellation, internationalism constitutes Japanese women who learn English as a monolithic category that can be situated under an umbrella term of Occidental heterosexuals who lack any personal sense of desire.

The studies following Kelsky¹⁰ can be equally addressed as mainly focusing on the Occidental aspect or Japanese women’s desire for the West. However, this way of perceiving a cultural group is problematic for not adequately challenging the very dichotomy between Japan and the West, as well as for enabling a set of universal beliefs about Japanese women that have the potential to grow into stereotypes.

Conceptual Background

To run away from tradition can be interpreted as a form of desire to leave home (*uchi* 内) and represents a logic of doing away with the dominant ideology of conformism and seeking better life opportunities outside Japan. As Joy Hendry argues,¹¹ *uchi* and its counterpart *soto* 外 are concepts that can possibly be translated as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. These are also addressed as

⁹ Kelsky 2001: Kindle Location 237.

¹⁰ Bailey 2006; Piller and Takahashi 2006; Takahashi 2013; Nonaka 2018.

¹¹ Hendry 2003.

‘parallel words’ that can refer to the members of one’s household and those outside, who do not belong there (e.g., from school, work, external communities, etc.). These two concepts are highly connected with the notions of cleanliness and dirt, where the *uchi* stands for the clean space inside one’s home, while the *soto* stands for the dirty world outside.¹²

Moreover, *uchi* and *soto* are taught to kids early and are eventually internalised.¹³ As such, they appear formative of the social relations in Japanese society and reappear from situation to situation. Then, if looked at from a more symbolic point of view, these two concepts are pretty significant in their connotations of creating a dichotomy between Japan and the West and the very complexity of the desire to leave or stay in Japan. This trend can be interpreted as a form of Occidental longing¹⁴ and is often a theme of the studies mentioned above that explore Japanese women’s desire for the West through the discourses of escapism, though framing it differently via the contexts of *kokusaika* or *ryūgaku*.

As Paul Hansen and Blai Guarné argue,¹⁵ there is a proclivity to understand escapism in connection with the geographical movement of people, potentially resulting in the constitution of multicultural identities. This does not necessarily have to be the case. They posit that ‘one cannot simply assume that a change of location indexes a shift in identity’.¹⁶ Instead, what is needed is to focus on the actual movement per se, which does not need to be foregrounded in any physical activity; the movement can also come from within. It is also a matter of affect, or as Hansen and Guarné discuss, ‘moving and being moved’.¹⁷ With that said, this idea should be elaborated further in the narratives of English-speaking Japanese women’s hinging on their decision-making processes of whether they should leave or stay in Japan.

Method

A critical ethnographic approach was the most feasible method to address these queries. For this paper, I draw on digital and on-site fieldwork conducted with 19 Japanese women aged between 24 and 45. The data were

¹² Hendry 2003: 47.

¹³ Ibid.: 49.

¹⁴ Kelsky 2001.

¹⁵ Hansen and Guarné 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid. 2018: 03.

¹⁷ Hansen and Guarné 2018: 03.

collected between December 2018 and July 2022 by conducting interviews via Skype, meeting in person, or correspondence. The interviews lasted one to two hours, and the ethical issues were also addressed; everyone was asked for permission before recording the interviews and whether they wanted to use their names or nicknames.

The findings were rather divided; it was discovered that these women not only expressed the desire to leave Japan but also prominently spoke of staying in the country. For that reason, the data were analysed from three standpoints. First, I observed the economic/business framework and Japanese women's streams of thought in that context. Then, I focused on the socio-cultural aspect and everything it entails. Lastly, the individual reasons for staying/leaving were listed as well. Each of these trajectories attests to the multiplicitous understanding of English-speaking Japanese women's discourses of movement and the relevance of the gender dimension.

Traditionality of Japanese Business Culture and What to Do with It

Narratives of Leaving Japan

Among the interviews analysed, the prominent topic that associates English-speaking Japanese women with the desire to leave Japan was attributed to the country's business culture. Many of the women I interviewed saw some problems in the business world of Japan and sought solutions to deal with it. Some problems they observed were the overtly traditional way of working in Japan, insufficient promotion opportunities, and overworking.

Even from a young age, Jun sought opportunities to do things differently, especially with the help of the English language. However, she was forced to find her own way because of the difficulties she encountered, and going to America was part of the solution. As she said, 'I wanted to change my life'.¹⁸ Finally, she succeeded in following her desire, moved to the countryside, and found a job online where she uses both English and Japanese. She even enrolled in an American online college (which is relatively uncommon in Japan) sometime later. Via the mastery of the English language and accommodation to the 'different' lifestyle, Jun managed to do away with the traditional expectations regarding business culture in Japan, and she also succeeded in finding her desired employment.

¹⁸ Jun 2019: December 08.

In a similar vein, Atsuko's narrative can be seen as a way of diverging from the traditional Japanese business style. She also worked online using English and Japanese but identified herself as a Hula dance instructor.

Hawaiian stuff is very popular in Japan, so I started dancing. Then, I moved to New York, and I kept dancing. Finally, I moved to San Diego, also with dancing [...].

Jelena: How did you choose hula dance? What inspired you?

Atsuko: There was a movie, *Hula Girl*, and I just fell in love with it. After that, I decided to start a business.¹⁹

Atsuko does see Hawaiian culture as similar to Japanese, so one can quickly adapt, but she still conveys a level of difference and 'insubordination' against the actual business tradition of Japan. The relevance of the English language in Atsuko's narrative is undeniable, for it helps her accommodate another culture after moving and inspires an inner transformation to seek the profession she deems fitting.

The critique of Japanese business culture also appeared in an interview with Irena, a Japanese-Serbian participant. Reflecting on the fragments of her life in Japan, she said that she landed her first job there in a leading Japanese international company, which initially felt surreal. However, as the company is notorious for its treatment of employees, Irena felt the need to reconsider her options.

I went to London because I was overworked. But going back to Serbia would feel like a failure. Nevertheless, in London, I also met my husband, and he did have the plan to return to Japan. So, as it was intense to keep the visa in the U.K., I decided I needed another break and accepted to return to Japan.²⁰

As she implied, Serbia did sound like a failure for economic reasons; it would feel like a step back. So, even though 'escaping' a Japanese company allowed her to expand her horizons and see past Japanese business culture, Irena decided to return. However, even in Japan, she is still not on board with the nuances of Japanese business etiquette, which she challenges daily.

Being abroad felt great because there were no constraints. In Japan, an invisible chain guides you on how to behave. So, I feel like a disrupter, I am

¹⁹ Atsuko 2019: November 25.

²⁰ Irena 2022: June 17.

always bothered by homogeneity, and I always need to ask WHY? But no one knows the answer. People tell me, ‘it’s the rule,’ *shikatanai*.²¹

As for Ai, her narrative very much coincides with the previous stories, especially in sharing a significant desire to leave Japan. When asked about what she wanted to do in the future, Ai said:

I want to go out of Japan, hopefully permanently.

Jelena: Where would you like to go?

Ai: I want to get permanent residence in Canada in the future. I have been here in Japan for a long time, more than 28 years, and I think it’s enough time in one country, so it’s time to go out.

Jelena: Do you think it would be easier to find a job in Canada than in Japan?

Ai: I don’t think so. I love web design right now, and I want to get some special skills to work abroad to find a job there. But unfortunately, western countries are difficult when it comes to a job for foreigners. If you speak English in Japan, you can get a job easily. You can stand out. But speaking and being able to speak English abroad is very normal; everyone can do that. So, I need something special to find a job there.²²

We see that no matter how challenging life abroad is, Ai is unyielding in her plan, for she sees more opportunities elsewhere than in Japan.

Narratives of Staying in Japan

On the other hand, it is also necessary to acknowledge the existence of the rather oppositional trend among these women. Then, with an emphasis on the monetary possibilities in Japan in mind, it was also observed that some of the participants I interviewed refused to leave the business environment in Japan (i.e., the reasons they found Japan safe or economically desirable).

Yasuko has significant international experience, especially in terms of her employment. However, when asked about her future plans, she said she did not intend to leave Japan for the time being.

Even at the age of thirty, this is my first time working in Japan. And Tokyo is really a tough city, so I believe I can get good work experience there. But

²¹ It cannot be helped.

²² Ai 2019: November 29.

I don't disagree with working overseas one day again, in some years. We will see.²³

I heard an almost identical story from Reiko, who has been immersed in the international world from age five when she lived in Australia for a time. While earning a master's degree in Japan, she also spent a year in Singapore on an exchange program. Moreover, she also got a second master's degree from a university in the United Kingdom. Currently, Reiko enjoys her work, especially flattering her language qualifications. As she explains:

I want to stay in Japan, but I also want to live abroad. Because of the nature of my job, I might get posted somewhere else, and that is partly what I want. I like learning about other countries, especially about how people live differently.

Jelena: Do you think living abroad would make you happier?

Reiko: Happier? That is a difficult question. Let's see, living abroad is very inspiring because there are so many things to learn. That is also why I joined my organization, to be able to go somewhere else, to another country, and learn more about that country. That is the job, and I think doing that as a job is a remarkable thing.²⁴

So, even though she desires to live in a place other than Japan, Reiko stays at her organisation precisely for the reasons mentioned, to live her desires.

In the interview with Chiaki, there was a different reason to stay in Japan. As she works online, she is technically not tied to any specific location, but making independent films in her free time gives her a valuable motive to stay.

I made an independent film last year, and I am going to send it to film festivals abroad. The film is about a local dance in Tokushima. It is a five-minute film about a girl from Tokyo who went to a local place in Japan and learned local dancing. This is very important because when someone comes to Japan, they often go to Tokyo and don't know about the local cultures. So I want to show them these cultures so that people from foreign countries would know about every part of Japan and not just Tokyo-based culture.²⁵

²³ Yasuko 2019: December 08.

²⁴ Reiko 2019: November 20.

²⁵ Chiaki 2019: December 06.

So, not only does Chiaki see the potential in staying in Japan, but she also sees an opportunity to share her views with other people with potentially similar views and desires to visit the country.

Therefore, this section discusses how desirable the Japanese business scene is for English-speaking Japanese women who participated in this study and how it inspired in them the desire to either leave or stay in the country. Regarding the matter of leaving Japan due to the business culture, many of these women blamed it on its emphasis on traditionality and the absence of opportunities to progress in accordance with one's capabilities. However, apart from simply leaving the problematic business environments behind and seeking fortune elsewhere, the women in this research also challenge the Japanese business ideology. They argue that the Japanese business ideology offers safety and global connectedness opportunities. Hence, by opting for non-traditional working methods, they show the potential to rethink the business culture by making 'different' professional choices.

Socio-Cultural Pressures

Narratives of Leaving Japan

Apart from the economic/business background of the desire to leave Japan, the society and culture (e.g., rules, collectivist thinking, unreasonable expectations, and gender inequality) were listed as other adequate reasons for leaving the country by my participants.

Risa always enjoyed learning English, so she even participated in an exchange program during high school and spent 10 months in Canada. The experience was indispensable, for it enabled her to see past Japan. Eventually, she decided to pursue her career in an international environment at university, leading her to the United Nations.

During my undergrad, I went to Senegal to do a two-month internship. It was the most incredible experience I had in my life. Senegal is a country completely different from where I come from, and the people are so nice. People I met in Canada were mostly from the Global North, so Senegal felt really different. I could also connect with people interested in the same study area. So, after graduation, I started working in human rights organizations, and ever since then, I have wanted to pursue a career in international organizations. That is why I decided to come to the U.K. to do my master's here.²⁶

²⁶ Risa 2022: June 13.

Risa's example matters here, for it somewhat contests the already familiar internationalist logic and the prevalence of western influence in Japan. Moreover, by opting for a different cultural setting, Risa manages to escape collectivism and pursue different opportunities.

A slightly different outlook on 'movement' from Japan (and its ideological system) can be detected in the interview with Yuko, who is currently in Japan, but with plentiful experience abroad, especially during her studies. From her youth, she has felt the need to do something different than others, something that would make her unique.

I was not good at sports like the other kids. But I knew that, and since I couldn't run or swim as fast, I wanted to prove that I could also be good at something. And English gave me that chance. So I started interacting with the ALTs, and that triggered my interest.²⁷

In Yuko's case, English turned out to be a perfect mediator for leaving an environment that she found unfitting and to which was problematic to assimilate.

Furthermore, and in connection with the problem brought forth by Yuko, it is relevant to mention that doing sports and staying fit in Japan is a prevalent issue; it is a matter of culture. So, I allocate the response to that ideology in the interviews with some of my participants, who particularly highlighted the insistence on and prioritisation of one's physical image in Japan. In that sense, these women's responses and their critiques of this culture can also be interpreted as abandoning the cultural expectations, for it negates the imposition of sameness through the ideals of fitness and beauty but also allows for a form of freedom, often disassociated with the narratives of a healthy lifestyle.

Haruna shared a story of her experience with the matters above; however, the cultural problematics were more conspicuous in her case, requiring a more 'aggressive' response. For instance, she has felt different from a very early age, especially regarding her looks.

When I was in school, I was called to the head teacher's office many times because they thought I was curling my hair. I was also bullied in primary school for my hair. I hated my entire physical appearance because it made me stand out. And even if I tried extremely carefully to behave like everybody else, it didn't really work because I looked different. But then I was 16, and I went to America. The people in America saw me as the person I was;

²⁷ Yuko 2022: June 09.

they told me that I had beautiful hair. And then I thought, you know what, I'm not going to straighten my hair anymore; I spent so much money and time straightening my own curly hair.²⁸

Adding to this narrative of the problem of sameness, Risa's story can be interpreted similarly. As discussed, when she returned from her exchange program, she felt a similar problem in public. Risa said,

I gained 10 kilos in Canada, but it didn't feel like that. When I returned to Japan and was on a train, for example, wearing a uniform, I saw how skinny people were. I felt that I looked different. There was no pressure, just the feeling of difference. Some people also commented on my looks, which is quite ordinary in Japan, but I just laughed at it. What is important, I didn't care. Being in Canada changed my mind and my perspective.²⁹

Thus, based on these two examples, it can be inferred that no matter how hard it felt at the time, the feeling changed drastically once both Haruna and Risa found themselves outside Japan's homogeneity. They learned not to be harsh on themselves just because they did not look the same.

Apart from the ideology of sameness, gender ideology is another interesting case to observe for providing these women space to see Japanese society and culture more critically and even abandon it. To illustrate, Momoko spent two years in the US because of her mother's research work, where she even attended elementary school. However, back in Japan, matters got complicated when she enrolled in the local high school.

I became depressed. I went to my mum and told her I wanted to go to America. You know, my mother is super supportive, or more likely, she pushes me to follow my dreams and go abroad. [...] Now, she is working as a public servant at a research institute. She went all the way in her career but was still discriminated against because she was a woman. There is no future for women in Japan, and that is why my mother encouraged me to go abroad.³⁰

This story also tells a lot about how it feels to be a woman in modern day Japan and how hard that can be for highly educated and marginalised individuals. According to Momoko, there are many expectations with which women in Japan must deal.

²⁸ Haruna 2022: June 16.

²⁹ Risa 2022: June 13.

³⁰ Momoko 2022: June 07.

To corroborate her position, she shared yet another, possibly more provocative story, for it even attracted significant international media attention and criticism concerning the treatment of women in Japanese academia. Momoko said,

I also wanted to go to medical school. You heard about that scandal,³¹ and at the time, I applied to those universities. I have no idea what happened; I am sure I didn't get enough points. After eight years, I was already in France; I found out about that.

Jelena: Could you complain to someone about that?

Momoko: I complained to my mum about it. [...] I was not so active in the topic, so I didn't file a lawsuit. I contacted lawyers first, and my mother went to meetings. I guess they were gathering people to file a lawsuit. But I didn't follow. It was so intense that it broke my heart.³²

Then, when asked about her plans to return to Japan after completing her studies, I got a sound 'no' as an answer.

In a similar vein, Midori is an academic who additionally discussed the unfavourable position of women in Japanese academia and how Japanese academia itself is still very much a masculine space by stating:

When I was abroad, I felt I was very brave and could do many things myself. However, In Japan, people gather, and the feeling is collective. There are too many rules which I cannot understand. For instance, at the university I work at [...], the rules are quite traditional, so I want to leave. There is no freedom for women there [...].

I know I cannot find the exact same job elsewhere, and my colleagues are also at the top level. Plus, I like the students too. But, at the end of the day, I do have many male colleagues, and in an environment like that, a female somehow gets squeezed out.³³

Furthermore, apart from being an academic, Midori is also a mother. From that perspective, Midori discussed another set of issues felt upon her recent return to Japan from her work abroad.

Many university colleagues and professors say it is risky for any university to hire a woman. When on a job interview, there are always questions if I plan to have a child or already have one. That is not even allowed. They do

³¹ Wheeler 2018.

³² Momoko 2022: June 07.

³³ Midori 2019: November 30.

offer you an option not to answer the question, but I can't do that. Also, many universities in Japan supposedly want to promote equality and hire more women, but in reality, it is not the case. Hired women can't have maternity leave, and those women who have children also experience difficulties.³⁴

In that sense, it appears that the situation is very difficult for working mothers in Japan, and it is no surprise a reason as such can be listed as relevant in these narratives of leaving Japan.

Narratives of Staying in Japan

On another note, not everyone felt the same regarding leaving Japan. There were also those women who expressed their desire to stay, not for financial reasons but mainly for the hope of social change and because they were of the opinion that the circumstances are getting better for women in Japan.

For instance, as Jun's narrative previously illustrated her desire to put the traditional Japanese business culture behind her, it also emphasised the relevance of her online job, enabling her to have more free time for her interests. So, Jun is involved in activism and campaigns aiming to improve gender-related issues on the local level. When asked whether she plans to stay in the country, she said,

I want to stay in Japan to contribute to the Japanese social system. I am trying to improve many things on the local level, and for that reason, I am also closely working with the government.³⁵

In Naoko's case, who spent many years in the US, where she also attended high school, her decision to stay in Japan is very much related to the aspect of safety that Japanese culture provides.

I really liked the States, but because of the situations we see on the news every day, I think the States is different from what I saw or felt almost 20 years ago. It is maybe more dangerous and backward, especially regarding the working environment. For example, house income has declined to the lowest in the past ten years. So, what I see is that living there is really getting worse.³⁶

³⁴ Midori 2022: June 14.

³⁵ Jun 2019: December 08.

³⁶ Naoko 2019: December 09.

As for Eri, she told me her work is fulfilling, though there is always space for development, especially in English language use. Interestingly, in her interview, she was quite positive that Japanese society is changing for the better.

Ten or twenty years ago, men were the stars of Japanese dramas. But recently, all movies and dramas show women's success stories. All that changed because Japanese women joined the work market. Before, it was terrible; women would start working, get married, get children, and just like that, they would become housewives. It was usual. Now, that is not really the case; more and more women go out and work. They got power and are not as shy as they used to be.³⁷

Lastly, in the case of Yuka K., a similar discussion on her plans to stay in Japan can be detected, especially when culturally motivated by the love of Japanese cuisine and the privileges the Japanese language offers those speaking it.

A year ago, I wanted to go and live abroad, like in Canada. I wanted to go to Canada to live and work. But now, I have changed my mind, and I want to work in Japan because I like Japanese food, and if I want to go to Canada, I can go there just to travel. But working in Japan is much easier to make money because I can use my mother tongue. But, when it comes to working in English, it's very hard to understand, and so that's why I want to stay in Japan and work in Japan.³⁸

As can be seen in all these four narratives, these women either work individually on the improvement of the social circumstances for Japanese women, they are comparatively observing Japan with the West (assessing each good and bad point), or they are reminiscing on how past unfavourable representations of women in Japan have finally come to pass. Each of these trajectories matters, for they call for these women's involvement and participation in the Japanese public scene, simultaneously inspiring them to stay there and contribute in any way.

In sum, as seen from this section, the problematic gendered society and a collectivising culture apparently sparked many desires to leave everything behind or turn a critical gaze against the very problems. Not only did these women feel 'called out' for their appearance, but they also saw how challenging Japan is for women in academia and working mothers. Even so, despite some of them leaving the country and institutions because they felt

³⁷ Eri 2019: December 14.

³⁸ Yuka K. 2019: November 23.

mistreated for being women, others decided to believe in the improvement of the system or eventually decided to challenge the norms internally.

Family, Romance, and Japan

Narratives of Leaving Japan

The personal narratives of mobility are also essential, for these provided me with nuances about English-speaking Japanese women and the versatility of the backgrounds that prompted their decisions to leave or stay in Japan.

In that regard, Atsuko, who is currently living in the US, where she moved for her husband's job, told me how they met.

My husband is American. But, I met him in Japan, where he first worked as an English teacher. As I was always interested in studying English, I somehow started attending the English conversation school, where I attended classes for some years. Then, he came to this school as a new teacher. As time passed, we started talking more and realized we had similar interests, so he sent me an email.

Jelena: Is it usual for teachers to date students? Even ALTs?

Atsuko: I don't think they allow that, but it happens sometimes. My husband actually asked his manager if it was okay to be with me.³⁹

A story as such can be easily interpreted as romantically driven, where one's reason for leaving is tightly connected with their partner's choices.

Asuna, who is currently living in Germany, shared an almost identical story.

Before I went to the U.K., I had a temporary research job in Japan. But we had to move because of my husband's job. It felt very free, and I felt people didn't care about what I did. But they would still ask me why I quit my job or suggest I should continue working etc.

Jelena: How did you feel about these questions?

Asuna: I think the U.K. people don't know about Japanese culture. It is a normal thing for the Japanese. Or, I thought so at that time. Now I don't agree with it. This is wrong, but I want to think that things are maybe changing.⁴⁰

³⁹ Atsuko 2019: November 25.

⁴⁰ Asuna 2019: December 02.

So, even though she was unemployed at the time of our interview and living abroad for her partner's work, Asuna saw the need to change her conditions. Therefore, opting to follow one's partner can also be seen as an individually inspired move to leave a country. Moreover, what is important to add is that these narratives show that romantic desire is not only directed to the West, upon which the earlier discourses of Japanese women's mobility focused; it was found that the influence of tradition was also significant.

Narratives of Staying in Japan

With these individual reasons for leaving Japan in mind, it is also relevant to point out that there were also those women who decided to stay there based on their individual preferences. For instance, Yuka M., married to a Buddhist monk, lives and works in a temple.

My success and dream will be that I can translate about our temple into English using technical jargon! I would like many people from different countries to visit our temple. For that reason, I will learn about Buddhism in Japanese first, too. [...] Now I am not related to any community or activity which uses English. I am forgetting English, so I first need to get a chance to speak it.⁴¹

Yui's reason for staying in Japan is very intimate; despite her desires, she opts to stay for some inner peace.

I honestly really wanted to live abroad. But I have family here. My parents will live in Japan forever and be sad if I leave; they will miss me, and I don't want to see them miss me.⁴²

Another account also attests to this desire to stay in Japan. In Kaori's case, despite her extensive international experience and a great desire to travel and be engrossed in a foreign culture, there is something that draws her to Japan.

I have actually been dreaming about living abroad. I am already thirty, so I don't want to forget that. If I think about my future, I cannot do it. It would be possible if I could find a foreign boyfriend. I also don't think I can get a job somewhere abroad. So, I will just go abroad to enjoy my vacations. And I love Japan, and every time I go back from somewhere, I feel really relieved. I love Japanese food as well.⁴³

⁴¹ Yuka M. 2020: March 14.

⁴² Yui 2019: November 17.

⁴³ Kaori 2019: December 01.

So, despite the initially very strong desire to leave Japan, her personal motifs prevail and, in a way, inspire Kaori to think differently on matters of mobility, even reconsider the benefits of staying in her own country.

In summary, what can be inferred from this section is that the desire to leave Japan is also driven by a multiplicity of personal reasons. Whether traditional, romantic, or just liberating, these reasons give the women confidence to escape and grapple with whatever circumstances they encounter elsewhere. On the other hand, the narratives of staying were also abundant in individualistic experiences. They pointed out that no matter how problematic, Japan is still a relevant location for these women, either for family, food, or safety.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a broader understanding of English-speaking Japanese women's reasons for staying in or leaving Japan. Using ethnography as a method allowed me to understand and describe the complexity of their decisions through their lived experiences and highlight the role of the English language in the process. These narratives illustrate how their decisions to stay or leave did not solely hinge on the relationship between Japan and the West; the process was more profound and based on a serious consideration prior to making any definitive decision.

Their desire to stay in or leave Japan was observed through three different frameworks: the Japanese economic/business situation, society and culture, and the scope of family and romance. Through the examples, these trajectories pointed out how complex their desires are for providing much understanding behind these women's decisions to leave as well as justifications regarding their plans to stay in Japan.

The paper's main contribution can be that it grants a space for understanding Japanese women who speak English from a more nuanced standpoint. Instead of just thinking of these women as a monolithic category, the paper shows how these narratives paint a different picture and, when analysed through the perspective of movement, shows how it is difficult and almost impossible to stick with the 'old' ideas of internationalism as a means of Occidental longing.

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