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‘Becoming a ‘Japanese woman’ in Australia: Gendered Negotiations in Practising International Marriages’

Keywords

migration, international marriage, Japanese women, gender

Abstract

In recent decades, there have been increasing numbers of Japanese women residing in Australia as permanent residents. Embarking on an international marriage with an Australian national or a permanent resident, either before or after crossing national boundaries, is one of significant aspects of this migratory pattern. This pattern is part of a global trend in Japanese women’s international relocation, particularly to so-called ‘Western’ countries. There is an accumulation of studies analysing this trend from various angles, specifically focusing on its gendered aspects.

In my doctoral study, I analyse experiences of sixteen Japanese women in international marriages aged between twenty-four and forty-three who had migrated to Australia from the late 1990s by using oral history research methods. In the study, I capture these individuals’ lives before and after experiencing migration and international marriage as a continuous path. Oral history accounts of my interviewees reveal that they stepped into cross-cultural settings as individuals carrying socio-historically and culturally constructed gendered ideologies and identities. That is, their cross-cultural experiences have been firmly embedded in their lives in Japan where they had been socialised as a ‘Japanese woman’. In accounting their practices of international marriage and migration, my interviewees often referred to gender ideologies they had learnt in their past in Japan, and explained their understandings of gender as a product of their cross-cultural experiences. It is thus one of my main aims in my doctoral study to analyse the women’s transnationally continuous processes of configuring and reconfiguring gendered selves.

In this paper, I will show some individuals’ practices of gender roles in international marriage, and examine their transnationally continuous processes of learning, interpreting, and practicing gender ideas by drawing on oral history accounts I collected for my doctoral study. To clearly exhibit the continuing nature of their gendered identity politics beyond national boundaries, I will particularly focus on some aspects of their lives. First, I will look at the women’s performances of a ‘bride’ as a daughter of a Japanese family in negotiating with their parents when they embarked their international marriages. I will then focus on their ways of constructing their marital relationships as a Japanese wife in Australia with a non-Japanese husband. By examining individuals’ processes of learning and practicing gender ideas, I will highlight their subjective interventions in crafting their own sense of ‘Japanese woman’. In the processes of becoming a ‘Japanese woman’ in international marriages, these individuals have negotiated with, and mediated between, different sets of gender ideologies. Their inclusive gendered identity politics have related Japan, Australia and/or their

husbands' origin. I will argue that practising gender in international marriage and migration settings can be seen as an act of connecting two or more dispersed social spaces. It is hoped to show that such transnational connectedness created by the individuals' practices of gender indicates a potential of pushing the boundaries of rigid gender ideologies.

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ITOH Mayuko is a PhD Candidate at School of Historical Studies, and Research Associate at Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne. She will receive her doctorate in History from the University of Melbourne in August 2014. Her recent publications include: "Japanese Migrant Women's Transnational Gendered Identity Politics in International Marriages in Australia," *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* (July, 2014); and "Dream Chasers: Japanese Migrant Women in International Marriages and their Experiences in the Hierarchy of Languages," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (December, 2012). Her current research interests are in the field of contemporary history of Japan and oral history including Japanese women's gendered identity politics in experiencing child bearing/rearing.