



BOOK REVIEW

***IMMIGRANT JAPAN: MOBILITY AND BELONGING IN AN
ETHNO-NATIONALIST SOCIETY***

Gracia Liu-Farrer. 2020. *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-Nationalist Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 276 pages.

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INTRODUCTION

Gracia Liu-Farrer's *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-Nationalist Society* is an intellectually stimulating invitation to rethink the traditional definition of immigrant country in an age of global mobility. The book provides the readers with rich qualitative data and narratives to understand how immigration takes place in an immigrant society that emerged out of an ethno-nationalist one.

Liu-Farrer observes that there is hesitation in accepting the discourse of immigration in Japan even though more and more immigrants are coming to the country. She notes that the hesitation links to at least

two factors. First is Japan's ethno-nationalist self-identity and the myth of monoethnic nation, and second is the definition of an immigrant country that makes it difficult for people to associate an ethno-nationalist country with an immigrant one. She argues that resistance toward immigration in Japan reflects the country's struggle with its ethno-nationalist self-identity and this ethno-nationalist discourse is seen as a primary reason for Japan's reluctance toward immigration (p. 4).

Despite such hesitation and resistance exist, Japan has gradually become an immigrant country accepting not only migrant workers but also immigrants of diverse backgrounds. By taking into account

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such contradiction, this book elaborates how the immigration process unfolds in Japan –an ethno-nationalist country that is not associated with immigration–, how the process differs from the ones in traditional immigrant societies, and how it possibly affects the way we define an immigrant country.

Drawn from over two hundred interview data with immigrants in Japan from diverse backgrounds since the early 2000s, Liu-Farrer investigates how these people make mobility decisions, why they choose to stay in Japan, and what kinds of relationships they are able to establish with and within the Japanese society. Taking the context of Japan as an ethno-nationalist society, she argues that in order to understand the way immigration takes place in a non-traditional immigrant country, it is vital to understand how immigrants develop a sense of belonging to the country and how it affects their mobility as well as the way they see their relationship with it (p. 13-17).

In addition, the discussions of mobility and belonging, as the title suggests, serve as the central inquiries of the book. It leads to the book's thesis that their sense of belonging strongly influences the migration decisions and practices of immigrants in ethno-nationalist Japan, and that locating belonging, as both an emotional construct and a political discourse, could help to understand immigrants' locations in Japanese society and their understanding of their relationship with Japan and its people.

MIGRATION INTO ETHNO-NATIONALIST JAPAN

Unlike other migration literature that choose to focus only on part of the processes of migration or those that select particular groups (e.g., Debnár, 2016; Hof, 2018; Liu-Farrer, 2011; Tsuda, 2009), in *Immigrant Japan*, Liu-Farrer details how the whole immigration process unfolds in Japan through the narratives of immigrants of different backgrounds. She organizes the book in chronological order following the standard migration practices, from the decision to migrate, migration and settlement process, the dilemma of whether to stay or leave, to the story of the children of immigrants, with one separate chapter introduction and conclusion.

In the Introduction, the author gives the study's significance: why it is essential to study immigrants in Japan and their mobility decision. It also elaborates the concepts used, including ethno-nationalism, belonging, and mobility, and how they give a framework to the study. This chapter first familiarizes the readers with the historical and political context of why most people do not associate Japan with an "immigrant country", while it has become one. It further links such context with the way immigration has been taking place in Japan and the idea of Japan as an ethno-nationalist nation. This chapter, furthermore, provides information on the methodological choice of the study.

Chapter One departs from a fundamental question of why people come to Japan. It highlights the image of Japan as the land of opportunities shared by the im-

migrants. The opportunities could be in the form of escaping from the reality of home countries or welcoming better economic and life qualities provided by Japan's relatively high standard of living. Liu-Farrer argues that factors attracting people to come to Japan could not necessarily be separated between cultural fascination and career opportunities (pp. 38-39), that they should be seen as complementary to each other.

As discussed in Chapter One, the desire to move to Japan is accommodated by the set of migration infrastructures that allow people to come to Japan. Chapter Two discusses all these different infrastructures, actors, and channels that facilitate or hamper people's mobility to Japan, particularly institutional and personal ties, business, technology, policies, and brokers. These different actors have all shaped distinct channels of immigration into Japan for various types of people. The discussion of these migration infrastructures, as Liu-Farrer argues, demonstrates not only all the channels that facilitate the people's mobility into Japan but also how such channels shape the major immigrant groups in Japan. In addition, it illustrates many of the channels are part of the emerging global network of mobility.

Furthermore, in regards to migration infrastructures, the patterns of migration into Japan demonstrate several key characteristics that help facilitate the mobility of a diverse group of people to Japan (p. 60-61), i.e. (1) geographic proximity and historical links with its neighboring countries, (2) Japan's reluctance to accept unskilled foreign

labor and its ethno-nationalist mentality resulting in ethnic return migration, (3) the changes in the traditional household system following its economic growth resulting in migration the immigration of hundreds of thousands of foreign women from mainly East and Southeast Asian countries, (4) the existence of business that profits from brokering people's mobilities, and (5) Japan's educational institutions and labor markets that are connected globally.

Chapter Three discusses various types of immigrants' labor market engagements. Liu-Farrer categorizes the immigrants' positions in Japan's labor market in two dimensions: the structural differentiations and business orientations (p. 62). The former could be segmented into primary and secondary, while the latter could be labeled as national, global, and ethnic. She argues that the immigrants' economic locations in contemporary Japan are much more diverse and found in both the primary and the secondary labor markets. Furthermore, in both labor markets, the immigrants also occupy positions that allow them to make use of their ethnic or national backgrounds and deal with transnational business. The narratives of immigrants' engagement in Japan's labor market discussed in this chapter indicate that immigrants in Japan occupy diverse roles in the Japanese economy, from less-skilled to highly skilled workers, and it possible for them to gain socioeconomic mobility (pp. 82). In addition, the work in Japan reveals that they increasingly play a role in not only Japan's but also the global economy.

The following two chapters specifically focus on the people's decision-making process and dilemma regarding their life in Japan. Chapter Four elaborates the stories of immigrants who have chosen to stay and the different factors involved in their decision to do so. The narratives reveal that migrants' migratory trajectories are best categorized as pragmatic as their mobility decision are influenced by economic opportunities, emotional states, and life stages. While Chapter Four focuses on immigrants who intended to stay, Chapter Five discusses the narratives of those who decided to leave. The narratives indicate that all the factors influential in shaping the mobility change along with one's life course and experience as well as their emotional journey and economic stability.

In Chapter Six, Liu-Farrer presents various interpretations on home and belonging shared by immigrants in Japan. Several factors that affect their ability to foster a sense of belonging in Japan are discussed, i.e., intimate relationships, degrees of acculturation, meta cultural narratives, and racial and ethnic characteristics. Liu-Farrer argues that patterned differences might exist between different generations of immigrants, and among people with different national, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, she suggests that several factors affect immigrants' emotional relationship with Japan and their belonging to the country, for example, national background, class, race and ethnicity, and cultural competencies, particularly Japanese language skills. All these factors and how

they affect immigrants' relationship with Japan, as Liu-Farrer suggests, are crucial and might be found similarly or differently in other receiving societies.

Following their settlement in Japan, many migrants start a family and raise children in the country. The narratives on how the migrant parents raise these children and the children's identity journeys are described in the following two chapters. Chapter Seven mainly discusses the children's educational experiences and strategies and all the factors that influence them. Liu-Farrer observes that the immigrant parents' educational strategies have to do with their mobility goals and aim for better educational outcomes for the children. Such strategies, furthermore, reflect parents' uncertain future mobility and consequently a desire to keep options flexible for their children. Chapter Eight, adding on the previous one, particularly highlights the identity journeys of the children of immigrants in Japan. It elaborates the children's strategies in coping with the realities they faced when growing up and living in Japan. The way they face problems, particularly bullying and social isolation, is additionally illustrated in this chapter.

In the final chapter, the Conclusion, Liu-Farrer revisits several central issues that characterize immigrant experiences in Japan and discusses the future of Japan as an immigrant society. She argues that the future of Japanese society "depends heavily on how Japan incorporates immigrants and also on how it deals with several challenges, particularly the fundamental assumptions

concerning Japanese nationhood and the increasingly versatile and uncertain global population mobilities” (p. 208). The chapter concludes with several notes on the opportunities and challenges of Japan as an immigrant country.

BELONGING AND RELIGION IN MIGRATORY CONTEXT

In Japan’s context, where a resistance toward immigration and robust discourse of Japaneseness exist, locating belonging, as suggested by the author, is helpful to comprehend immigrants’ migration experience and their location in Japanese society. As [Antonsich \(2010\)](#) argues, belonging is a personal feeling of being “at home” in a place; locating belonging means understanding immigrants’ narratives of home, homeland, and how they perceive their relationships with the places. Locating belonging, therefore, also means taking into account all the factors that shape their attachment to a place and the way they perceive it as home.

Based on the analysis of immigrants’ narratives on home and belonging, Liu-Farrer points out several variables that have influences on belonging, for example, national background, social relationships, cultural background, socioeconomic class and positions, race and ethnicity, and cultural competencies, including language skill (Chapter Six). Although the narratives on immigrants’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds have been presented and discussed clearly, the analysis of how the immigrants’ cultural background affects how they develop a

sense of belonging could have been supplemented by a discussion on their religion. The book would have benefited from further discussion of how religion contributes to shaping their migration experiences.

There have been several studies that examine the relation of religion and immigrants’ migration experience in Japan: how migration and settlement in Japan have influenced immigrants’ religious identity, belief, and practices and how they affect and shape the migration experience in Japan ([e.g., Kudo 2009b, 2009a; LeMay 2018; Onishi and Murphy-Shigematsu 2003](#)). Taking into account religious belief in ethno-nationalist Japan’s immigration context is important for the following reasons. First, religious belief and practices might shape immigrants’ mobility and their relationship with the hosting society, as demonstrated in the case of Japanese women married to Pakistani Muslim husbands ([Kudo, 2009b](#)). However, religious practices might additionally change during the migration journey in Japan and along with the assimilation process into Japanese society, for example in the case of Filipino Japanese children ([LeMay, 2018](#)). Second, mainstream Japanese tend to associate the adoption of religious practices with “foreign” and see it to contradict with the “Japanese homogeneity” ([Kudo, 2009a](#)), and that makes the discourse of immigrants’ religious practice intertwined with the discourse of Japanese identity rooted in their ethno-nationalist self-identity.

Several discussion on how immigrants’ religious belief and practices

have influenced (or not) their migratory experience in “secular” Japan and the way they see the country as home would help the readers to get a more complete picture of how immigrants of different backgrounds develop a sense of belonging to Japan. How and to what extent their religion affects how these people position themselves in receiving society could provide an alternative way to locate their belonging to it.

CONCLUSION

Overall, *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-Nationalist Society* is a must-read for those interested in international migration studies, area studies, and particularly those who study Japan and contemporary Japanese society. Through the analysis of narratives of belonging and mobility, Liu-Farrer has demonstrated how international migration occurs in non-traditional receiving countries, challenged the traditional definition of an immigrant country, and offered a promise of future Japan as an immigrant country. As she suggests, “If Japan can shed its monoethnic and monocultural national identity and reform the outmoded institutions that reinforce such an identity, it could even emerge as one of the most attractive destinations for migrants (p. 22)”, it is not impossible for Japan to become one in the near future. The book presents an essential addition to the literature on Japanese studies, area studies, and international migration and mobilities in Japan and beyond. It reveals that micro-level individual narratives on mobility and be-

longing could pave the way to understanding transnationalism and connectivity at a larger scale as well as socio-cultural change taking place in a particular area. The book, finally, contributes to broadening the concept of an immigrant country, particularly in the age of global mobility.

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