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The annual statistics of Thai population entries into and exits from Japan listed by the Japanese Immigration Bureau reveal a long tradition of Thai female migration to Japan with its start in the early 1980s. About the end of that decade the issue of this migration was brought to public attention through some sensational reports in mass media on trafficking in Thai women to Japan. Since then the issues of trafficking in women for prostitution and female migrant workers have been the topic of media reports and academic studies. Very often pictures of disadvantaged, exploited women are presented, so that they appear as permanent victims. This is so because migration is often looked at as if it were a phenomenon that ends with the entry into the receiving country. But migration is a dynamic process that lasts longer, can produce consequential events, and has an open end. The findings of previous studies on Thai immigrants in Japan (Ruenkaew, 2002, 2004) support this notion and indicate that the roles and the situation of women change over time and over certain circumstances. Additionally, the connection between migration and marriage has been neglected by conventional migration studies (see the discussion in Piper and Roces, 2003). Marriage is a decisive factor that can change the status and situation of the women from illegal to legal migrants (Ruenkaew, 2002).

In this chapter I explore various forms of female migration from Thailand to Japan. Taking into account the dynamic aspect of migration processes, I discuss the development of roles and situations of women within their life-courses with particular attention paid to the connection between migration and marriage. Thai women here are regarded as human beings and as social actors capable of taking responsibility for their own conduct.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Japan in 2001 and 2008 (Ruenkaew, 2002, 2009). The data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with thirty-eight Thai women in

Aichi, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, Mie, Tochigi, Saitama, and Tokyo prefectures. In addition, information was collected through observation in Thai food stores and restaurants as well as in the Thai embassy and through interviews with NGO staff and Thai counselors. The term, “Thai migrant women in Japan” as used here refers to those Thais whom I interviewed. All names cited in this chapter are pseudonyms.

**Female Thai migrants in Japan**

Legal labor migration from Thailand to Japan began about the end of the 1970s. Along with this kind of labor migration, the illegal recruitment of Thai labor, especially that of women for prostitution, began in 1981 (Rawiwong and Patanasri, 1997: 26). There are no exact statistics on the size of the Thai population in Japan. There are official data on the numbers of Thais entering and exiting Japan, Thai overstayers, and registered Thais. The number of Thais living in Japan is estimated from these figures.

The statistics gathered by the Japanese Ministry of Justice indicate that the number of Thai new entrants increased steadily from 1980 to 1989. In 1991, when the economic boom in Japan reached its peak, the number of Thais entering Japan exceeded 100,000, but within the next five years it sharply declined by nearly half. From 1980 to 1987 the number of males slightly exceeded females, but from 1988 females were the majority. On average, female migrants stay longer than their male counterparts (Ruenkaew, 2004: 37). Information from NGOs and the Thai embassy hint at a number of unlawful entries that do not appear in these statistics. The number of Thais entering Japan thus must be higher than official statistics show.

The data show that the number of Thai new entrants exceeds those leaving the country. Some Thai entrants gain permanent residence permits and some become overstayers. The data from the Japanese Ministry of Justice and from the Thailand Overseas Employment Administration Office in Tokyo show that more women than men overstayed the visa.

Figure 1 shows that the numbers of Thai overstayers peaked from 1993 to 1995 and then gradually declined. In 2008 less than 10,000 Thais overstayed their visa. However, this does not mean
that the size of the Thai population in Japan has decreased. Since 1990 there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of Thai women registered in Japan.

Figure 1: Thai overstayers in Japan


Japanese immigration law requires migrants staying in Japan for over 90 days to register with the local government. This includes immigrants without legal status though only few do. The majority of registered migrants are those holding legal status. In 2007 the number of Thais registered was 41,384, including 11,230 men and 30,154 women. The true number, including those unregistered and without legal status, will be higher.

Similarly the number of Thais registered as spouses of Japanese nationals and those who obtain permanent residence permits has increased regularly since 1990. Taking into account that (1) the number of Thai women registered in Japan is two to three times higher than that of men (see figure 2), (2) approximately 78 percent of intermarriages in Japan are a Japanese man and foreign woman (Suzuki, 2003: 170), and (3) over the ten years from 1990 to 2000
intermarriages between Thai women and Japanese men have increased rapidly (see figure 3), the conclusion can be drawn that the majority of Thai women living in Japan have married Japanese men. Labor migration of Thai women to Japan has assumed a character of marriage migration. Obviously, labor migration of Thai women to Japan initiates marriage migration.

Figure 2: Registered Thai migrants in Japan

Source: Japan Immigration Association, 1980-2007

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Figure 3: Thai-Japanese intermarriage

Socio-economic background of Thai migrant women in Japan

Most Thai migrants in Japan have a rural background. The majority come from the northeast, mainly Udon Thani, and northern regions of Thailand including Chiang Rai. Fieldwork data from 2008, however, shows that women from the central and southern regions, especially from tourist areas, have joined the migration as well.

With regard to the occupation of the women prior to the emigration, two main groups can be distinguished: women engaged in prostitution including those working in massage parlors; and women in various occupations such as traders, cooks, laborers in manufacturing, singers, employees in business companies and department stores, teachers, as well as self-employed. A few had just completed their education but not yet entered the labor market. Most of the women are divorced, separated, or widowed. The majority have children.

On grounds of their marital status and occupation prior to migration, they can be classified into three groups: *single mothers* who are the sole breadwinner and responsible for their children’s
livelihood; prostitutes; and young single women affected by relative economic deprivation searching for economic and social advancement who consider migration as the only means of access to the things they desire.

Most of the prostitutes had completed only compulsory elementary school. Two had completed secondary school. The single women are the most well educated. Twelve of them had completed vocational education, senior high school, or university, whilst three others had passed elementary education and one had completed secondary school. The majority of the single mothers have elementary education while four had passed secondary school and three had higher education from senior high school to university.

At the time of the interview the women were aged between 24 and 67 years with an average of 39.6 years. Upon immigration to Japan the majority of them were between 19 and 23 years, but a few older migrants pushed the average to 27.5 years. The oldest single mother had entered Japan at the age of 53, and the youngest at 14. Women in all age groups join transnational labor migration to Japan. Their first step in the migratory process, from rural to urban in Thailand, took place when they were much younger, between 14 and 20 years (15.9 years on average). There was a long stretch of time between their first movement from their places of origin and their immigration to Japan.

Most of the women from rural areas had a history of internal migration within Thailand. Some had prior experience as transnational labor migrants. Mawika was a laborer in Saudi-Arabia. Patama worked in the sex industry in Hong Kong and Malaysia. In my recent studies (Ruenkaew, 1998, 2002), I found that transnational labor migration is mainly a continuation of internal migration and a long stepwise and open-ended process. Transnational labor migration to Japan seems to be a temporary phase of a longer migratory process. Some women who were deported back to Thailand managed to return to Japan, often through marriage migration.

Workers or brides: The venues of migration

Thai women interviewed in 2001 and 2008 migrated to Japan mainly for work or for marriage, including family unification with
their husbands. These women entered Japan through various channels.

**Workers**

Twenty-six women wanted to work in Japan, overwhelmingly in the expectation of economic improvement. Eighteen of them became commercial sex workers (CSWs), whilst the other eight got a job in manufacturing or in restaurants. Among the CSWs, eight were single mothers, five were single women, and five were prostitutes. All of the prostitutes worked as CSWs in Japan. The women working in prostitution in Japan consider that they went voluntarily, as Poranee recounted:

> I myself went to ‘Boss’, an agent sending women for prostitution in Japan, I asked him to bring me to Japan.... He asked whether I know what the women are going to do there. I said, I know. The women are going to be sold to work under debt.

By contrast, many women of the single mothers and single women were deceived into working in prostitution. They had no idea of the work they were going to do until they were brought to snack bars to work as snack hostesses. Mala came to Japan in 1988 and was told that she would work in a restaurant washing dishes. Malinee who migrated in 2002 was promised a job selling drinks in a snack bar. In November 2008 more than thirty Thai women were arrested during a raid on snack bars in Tochigi Prefecture.¹ Many of them shared Malinee’s plight. Women being seduced to take part in labor migration to Japan and upon arrival being compelled into sex work is thus an ongoing phenomenon.

Despite a labor shortage, particularly for unskilled labor, Japan has no explicit policy to receive foreign labor. There are no official overseas labor contracts between Thailand and Japan. For most of the CSWs and workers, their entry to Japan is facilitated by brokers who work together with transnational organized criminal syndicates in many countries, such as Japanese *yakuza* and the Chinese Snake Heads (Chunjitkaruna, 2000; HRW, 2000). The operations of the international criminal networks is very complex, typically involving much more than the women were aware of (Caouette and Saito, 1999: 38). This may explain why women who have relatives already working in Japan or even have migrated there several times earlier

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still use brokers to organize their move and end up being tricked into prostitution.

The women glean information on economic opportunities in Japan from relatives, friends, or other acquaintances who later introduce them to the brokers. These brokers then make arrangements for the women’s travel and job placement, obtaining the necessary documents including visa, contacting job brokers in Japan, and organizing the trip. When the women arrive in Japan, job brokers receive them and deliver them to employers. The migration procedure, methods, and routes the brokers employ are various. They are well documented elsewhere (for example, Caouette and Saito, 1999; HRW, 2000; Ruenkaew, 2002).

Another channel is the so-called entertainer’s visa, a hidden mode of recruitment for transnational prostitution. This visa is designated for “activities to engage in theatrical performance, musical performance, sports or any other show business” (Komai, 1995: 73). Brokers claim that Thai recruits will be performing traditional Thai dancing in karaoke shops, restaurants, or snack bars, yet in actuality their destination is the sex and entertainment industry. Many graduates of the College of Dramatic Arts have been lured into this migration. They were promised work performing Thai traditional dances in a restaurant or snack bar but in reality were pressurized to provide sexual service to clients as well. The wage for dancers is relatively low and insufficient for the cost of living in Japan.\(^2\)

The CSWs are not charged a fee for the travel arrangements but told that will be in debt upon arrival in Japan, and the amount of debt is grossly misrepresented. This debt, known among the women as tact,\(^3\) is the price the bar owner pays to the brokers. For those entering Japan in the mid and late 1980s, the tact was between 1.8 and 2.5 million yen. In the early 1990s, the figure was 3 million to 4 million yen. Patama came to Japan in 2001 and had to pay 4.5 million.

The way brokers organize travel for other women is quite similar to that for the CSWs. One difference is that the fee for all arrangements has to be paid before departure. At the time of interview it was about 250,000 baht (about 700,000 yen). Very often brokers recruiting women for the sex business also recruit for
job placement in manufacturing. Mora's migration was organized by a broker who had already recruited four of her relatives as sex workers in snack bars in Nagano.

In the early 1980s Japan issued a new category of residence permit for "trainees" to allow people from other Asian countries to undergo training in Japan in corporations with more than twenty employees. Since the beginning of the 1990s, companies with less than twenty workers are also permitted to host trainees (Behaghel and Vogt, 2006: 128). The corporations arrange recruitment through their branch offices in the sending countries or through organizations established by the Japanese government such as the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization or the governmental organs themselves. This scheme was introduced to mitigate the pressure from business associations of small and medium enterprises facing severe shortage of unskilled laborers. In Suzuki's opinion, such training programs are a way to circumvent the restrictions on labor migration (Suzuki, 2001: 65–6). According to Rawiwong and Patanasri (1997: 26), Thais have migrated under the status of "trainees" from the beginning of the 1980s. From 1990 to 1998, about 5,000 to 6,000 Thai trainees entered Japan annually (Suzuki, 2001: 66), but from 2000 the number decreased to 3,000 to 4,000, and in 2006 the number was 3,910 (Minister of Justice, 2001–2007). The number of Thais registered as "trainees" is much smaller. From 1997 to 2003 it was between 1,000 and 1,500 and since 2004 it has increased annually to reach 2,583 in 2007 (Japan Immigration Association, 2001–2007). Many trainees complete only a short period of training and then overstay their visa and remain as undocumented workers.

Information from NGOs and from the interviews reveals that the migration of many trainees is also facilitated by brokers. Within my sample Marin, a single mother and factory worker from Udon Thani, wanted to follow the footsteps of her sister who works in Nagano under the status of "trainee." The sister told Marin to contact a broker who organized a three-year visa under a training contract with a company in Japan and then organized the travel. Marin paid 250,000 baht for all the arrangement. The broker accompanied Marin and fifteen other trainees to Tokyo. Upon arrival they were brought to some place in the environs of Tokyo
where some company or factory owners were waiting to select from the migrants. The trainees could not negotiate where they wanted to work and how much wages they would earn. An owner of an agricultural enterprise took Marin to be his employee. It was not the company with which Marin signed the contract. “Such contract serves only for visa application. It was a forged firm” (Marin). Marin and the other trainees were deceived about the terms of work. They were promised a certain job but it turned out that they were given no choice over their occupation, employer, or work conditions. Such recruitment amounts to human trafficking. However, Marin was luckier than four other Thai migrants who paid a broker to arrange trainee visas but in fact were brought in on tourist visas. At the time of interview their visa was due to expire within one month. The employer could not alter their visa into the trainee category so they faced the prospect of becoming undocumented migrant workers.

Another legal channel is a shugakusei visa for students admitted to Japanese language schools. In 1984 the authorities relaxed restrictions on foreign students and allowed them to work (Behaghel and Vogt, 2006: 127). The category of shugakusei is given to people who come to study in schools other than the institutions of higher education specified in the School Education Law (higher than two-years junior colleges), or vocational and special schools (Komai, 1995: 54). People entering the country with this status are permitted to work twenty hours a week to finance their studies and cost of living (Behaghel and Vogt, 2006: 127). As such it became a convenient channel for illegal labor migrants who attend classes scarcely or not at all. There are schools that provide a pro forma enrollment against payment but offer no classes (Behaghel and Vogt, 2006: 127). Many companies have set up language schools to put the “students” to work in their premises (Komai, 1995: 56). Because of the abuse of this provision, from May 1989 students of language schools have to provide evidence that they have attended at least 70 percent of the tuition time in order to obtain a visa extension (Behaghel and Vogt, 2006: 127). The number of Thais entering Japan as shugakusei increased from 338 in 2000 to 752 in 2006 (Minister of Justice, 2001–2007), and the number of Thais registered in the shugakusei category rose from

Within my sample Wanna and Wanni were attracted by an advertisement in a Thai daily newspaper for a Japanese language school promising “you can get a part-time job in Japan while you study” (Komai, 1995: 55). Wanni contacted the broker who organized the admission certificate, an important document for visa application, and the trip for a fee of 80,000 baht (230,000 yen). Three months later Wanna followed Wanni’s footsteps and with her assistance become a covert migrant worker in Japan. Weena also applied to go to Japan in the status of shugakusei but her trip was organized by her sister, Wipa, who came to Japan in 1983 as a bride. These three women belong to the group of single women with relatively high education, ranging from vocational training to university. Those applying for a shugakusei visa must have completed a certain level of education.

Brokers exert a strong degree of control over the recruitment and employment of Thai migrant workers, and are often guilty of exploitation and fraud. They utilize all methods left open by the immigration regulations, such as “trainees” and shugakusei, to bring workers into Japan. However, frequently the labor migration is initiated and sponsored by relatives already working in Japan who have experience in organizing documents and facilitating the entry. Waree’s travel was organized by her mother who had worked in an izakaya restaurant for three years. Mak and Mee went to Japan as contract workers to be cooks in a Thai restaurant belonging to Mee’s daughter who facilitated the trip.

Brides

Within my sample, twelve women entered Japan with the status of brides or spouses of Japanese men. They belong to three groups, namely single mothers (3), single women (8) and prostitutes (1). They migrated to Japan to marry their Japanese fiancé or to unite with their Japanese husband. But an expectation of economic betterment is often behind the willingness to marry and leave Thailand, as Wimala reported:

I have worked in a department store for four to five years. I could only see my mother working in the rice field and then being
indebted. I worked in Bangkok but my income was not enough to help her. I have thought that through marriage to a Japanese, I might get some dowry which I could give her to pay back the debt.

Marriage migration opens up a chance to nurture dreams and hopes. Wanla needed support to produce artworks, while Wiman wanted to escape from her social situation and begin a better life. Wipa considered marriage as an opportunity for carrier improvement. For the group of prostitutes, marriage to a Japanese means a chance to withdraw from prostitution and start a new life. Additionally children, their well-being, and prospects are important factors that influence migration decisions of single mothers. Matsi reported:

When he asked me to marry him, I did not yet love him. But as I saw that he was anxious about my son, about his future, I accepted his marriage proposal. He was financially established, so I thought, he could take good care of my child.

Women opting for international marriage had opportunities for contact with foreigners such as by working in foreign enterprises or in tourist areas. Within my sample, four women met their Japanese husband-to-be in their working places in Thailand: Weelee in a hotel where she was a receptionist; Praeo in a bar beer in Phuket; Wimala in a restaurant where she served as a waitress; and Matsi in a Japanese company. The intermarriage between Thai women and Japanese men occurs because of chance and availability which are factors associated with intercultural marriage (Char, 1977: 34–7). Weelee and Praeo lived as a couple with their Japanese husbands and started their own businesses. Weelee opened a restaurant and café in Bangkok, while Praeo ran a bar beer in Phuket. After a few years Weelee gave birth to a son and decided to move to Japan. She believed that Japan would provide a better prospect for her child. Praeo’s family set off for Japan after their business failed. Matsi married her husband one year after becoming acquainted with him. Together with her son she followed him to Japan six months later. She wanted her son to complete his elementary school first.

Frequently intermarriage is initiated by friends or relatives of the women. Mayura knew her husband-to-be through the
introduction of a friend who herself is a Thai marriage migrant. A Japanese friend who wanted to help Wanla to come to Japan to fulfill her dream of being an artist played the role of matchmaker by introducing Wanla to one of her acquaintances so that she might marry him to get a residence permit and leave him afterwards. Wanla set conditions for marriage that her husband-to-be must give her the opportunity to produce art works and regularly remit money for the livelihood of her parents. The man agreed and still keeps his promise. At the time of interview, Wanla had lived with him more than ten years. Unlike the other women who met their husbands-to-be in Thailand, Wipa got to know her husband during a business tour in Japan. He was a friend of Wipa’s brother who was asked to take care of her.

Three women in my sample utilized international marriage agencies to find their Japanese husband-to-be. In Japan the business of arranging international marriage involving women from other Asian countries began in the late 1970s and expanded in the mid-1980s (Nakamatsu, 2003: 184). The arrangement of international marriage has been carried out both by profit-oriented international marriage agencies and by some local governments such as that of Asahi town in Yamagata prefecture, which was the first to organize intermarriage between Filipino women and Japanese men (Sellek, 2001: 180). The growth of such arranged marriages has its origin in the depopulation and sexual imbalance in some rural areas of Japan, and a trend for Japanese women to postpone marriage (Ishii, 1996: 152; Sellek, 2001: 176, 184). According to Nakamatsu, Japanese marriage agencies work in cooperation with counterparts overseas. Their services range from assisting male clients to select women from their catalogs, organizing introductions and marriage ceremonies overseas, to assisting in the preparation of immigration documents (Nakamatsu, 2003: 184–5). Such international marriages involving Filipinas have been documented since 1985 and are now common (Sellek, 2001: 180), but among Thai women are relatively unknown and hardly documented. In Thailand it is mainly marriages between Western, particularly European, men and Thai women that are associated with international commercial bureaus. The women are labeled “mail-order brides.” In the literature this phenomenon is considered as a kind of trafficking in
women. Asian women in arranged marriages with Japanese men are also labeled as "mail-order-brides." In my sample, however, the women view this simply as marriage and family formation with the promise of socioeconomic stability. It is not known when exactly the commercial arrangement of international marriages between Thai women and Japanese men started in Thailand. However, the women I interviewed reported that it existed by 1992 (the year of Wirat's arrival in Japan). In 2004 (when Marasri arrived) it was flourishing. The women learned about this arrangement mainly from their acquaintances or relatives who worked as recruiters for agencies or had utilized such services themselves. Marasri was introduced to the marriage bureau by Wirat, her younger sister, while Wiyada was approached by a colleague who acted for an agency. According to Wiyada, the marriage agency asked the women to complete a form describing their personality and to give one photo as well as her address. One month later Wiyada received a contact from the agency informing her that a Japanese man was interested. Like other women Wiyada did not have to pay anything because the husband-to-be had to cover all the costs for introduction, visa application, travel, and the marriage ceremony. Wiyada's husband was charged 5,000,000 yen for all services.

Some marriage migrants and migrant worker women became matchmakers acting for Japanese marriage agencies or for their own profit. Their task was to recruit prospective brides, often providing assistance with visa application as well. Their recruits were mostly women in their network of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Wimala was introduced to her husband-to-be by a relative who was initially a migrant worker and later married a Japanese, while Wiman was approached by a colleague whose friend searched for women interested in intermarriage with Japanese. Wimala described the procedure:

We exchanged photos, I sent mine to that sister [the matchmaker], and she gave it to him and sent his to me. I did not have to choose. It was only one man. That sister said he was a good man.... She also organized the visa application.

There is another kind of intermarriage described as disguised, sham, or fictitious (Sellek, 2001: 178). Some dramatic cases have appeared in the Japanese press since 1990, mostly involving foreign
hostesses and Japanese men (Herbert, 1996: 36–7). During my first field study in 2001 there was no evidence for such intermarriages. They were unknown to or undocumented by help shelters. During my second field study, however, I found some Thai women had misused marriage with a Japanese for the purpose of obtaining a residence permit to work legally. In one case reported by a Thai counselor, the woman was having difficulty locating her mock husband when she needed him for extending her visa.\(^6\) Thai women in sham marriages usually enter Japan with tourist visas. In Japan they contact a Thai broker who finds them a Japanese marriage candidate.

**Wives and workers: lives after immigration**

Upon arrival in Japan, the interviewees accepted a new role and career pattern. Twenty-six women became migrant workers, eighteen worked as hostesses (commercial sex workers) in snack bars, three as helpers and waitresses in restaurants, two as unskilled workers in factories, and three in various jobs that were open to language school students. Twelve women lived as spouses of Japanese. Thus in their migration process the women obtained two main roles, workers and wives, sometimes switching between them.

**From workers to wives**

The CSWs that I interviewed entered Japan between 1984 and 2002, but mostly over 1989 to 1992, the golden era for Thai sex workers to earn a lot of money in a very short time. Upon arrival they were brought to snack bars for employment as snack hostesses. They had to work there to repay the debt, very often under coercive conditions, such as physical violence or threats to be resold to another bar which would mean an increase in debt. Bar owners used such threats to prevent women from escaping before the debt was fully paid. The eleven women in my sample took between one month and nearly one year to pay off this debt. After this period they were relatively free and could choose which clients they took or which days they worked. Most of them continued their work in the same snack bar for a while and then moved elsewhere. Some later married one of their clients.

Prao, Mukdee, Mawika, Watana, Malinee, and Mala were
released from their debt bondage early because a client paid the balance in return for them becoming his mistress. The women working in this milieu call this *tat tact* (cut the contract). As Malinee reported:

> I did not know what *tat tact* is. Mama told me that I did not have debt any more, as a client who was fond of me had paid it off, and so I had to be his mistress.

All but three of these women married the client who paid off their debt. The three lived a few years with the man and then separated. Mala met her Japanese husband sometime later in another snack bar, while the other two live as de facto couples, Watana with a Japanese and Malinee with a Thai migrant worker who held no legal status. So she could not obtain legal status. Among the women I interviewed only Wande, with help from a client, could manage to escape from a snack bar and return to Thailand. That client followed her and proposed marriage. Wande then re-migrated to Japan as a bride.

In the period after repaying their debt, Warunee and Poranee also lived as de facto wives without a marriage certificate. At the time of interview, Warunee had lived with a married businessman as his mistress for nearly ten years. Without a marriage certificate she cannot obtain a legal residence permit. Poranee and Watana, though they did not have a marriage certificate either, could manage to get a legal residence permit as mothers of Japanese children. This is another channel for obtaining a legal status, but in such cases the Japanese father must apply for acknowledgement of paternity before the child is born.

Similar to the group of CSWs, the women in my sample who entered Japan as workers or covert workers (*shugakusei*) met their Japanese husbands sometime later during their work. Mora worked in a medium-sized factory. After a while she noticed that a Japanese colleague was fond of her. They then decided to stay together as a de facto couple. After five years stay as an illegal migrant worker, Mora was arrested together with forty other Thais working in the same factory. They were then deported to Thailand. After fourteen months, her Japanese partner arranged for Mora to return to Japan as a bride. Waree worked in an *izakaya* restaurant for two years.
and changed to a snack bar with karaoke. Here she got to know a regular customer and married him three years later. Wanna, a former shugakusei, also reported “I met my husband in a restaurant where I worked. That was before I completed the language school.”

For some women I interviewed, obtaining legal status is an important motive for marrying a Japanese man.

I lived with him as his mistress. He was still married at that time. After some time his wife got to know about me. She asked for a divorce. After that, he came and told me that now he was divorced. He had only a divorce certificate, a car, and a house, and he asked whether I would marry him. It was not easy to make a decision. I called my mother for her advice. She said, have pity on him, girl, do not hurt him. I decided to marry him. And in fact I had a problem with immigration. The immigration police came to check very often. I decide to marry him, because after marriage I could get a visa. (Patama)

I stayed here for six or seven years, and then returned to Thailand after the completion of my study. After a year I came to Japan again with a tourist visa. This time I had to marry him because there was no way out for me. If I wanted to live and work here I had to ask for his help. I had to rely on him. I was in an impasse. (Wanna)

Obviously, marriage can serve the purpose of gaining a residence permit which allows them to work legally.

As many of the women were initially illegal workers, either in the sex industry or in other areas, they did not possess any official documents. Therefore, they had to surrender themselves to the immigration police to return to Thailand in order to apply for a passport and documents needed for marriage. They then traveled to Japan again as brides.

As I decided to marry him, I had to surrender myself to the immigration police and return to Thailand. My husband organized everything necessary in Japan and then he sent me an invitation to come to Japan again as his bride. It did not take a long time, only two to three months. (Waree)

From wives to workers

Among twelve women who initially entered Japan as spouses, at
the time of interview five women remained housewives, while the other seven had found employment. There are some factors that support or impede the chance of participation in the labor market. The most decisive factors are children and language skills. Mayura, Wiman, Matsi, and Wiyada have young children and preferred to stay at home to take care of them. By contrast, Marasri would like to be in employment but could not gain any job because of her poor Japanese. Wirat started to search for employment after her children grew up. She found a job in a factory producing spare parts for cars. Besides taking care of her children, Wirat spent time learning the language.

Many Thai women lived with their parents-in-law and were expected to play the traditional role of a Japanese daughter-in-law, remaining home and taking the housework burden from their mother-in-law. Such tasks left them little free time and hindered their participation in the labor market. The door to the world beyond the family's realm opened after separation from their husbands.

In the house of my parents-in-law, my father-in-law was the household manager. He did everything. We had to live according to Japanese tradition. I could not go out but had to work to do everything. The factory where I work produces car spare parts. As I was in the shelter, they told me to think what I wanted to do. Now my parents-in-law ask me to return to their house. My husband also would like me to go back to him. But I do not want to go because living with him there I was not free. I felt like I was put in a house of detention. (Weelee)

After years of marriage, some of the women who initially entered the country as spouses were divorced and became the sole breadwinners for their children. This situation drove them to search for employment.

I was divorced two years ago. My two children live with me.... My elder daughter could not attain high school. She has a part-time job. The second one wants to continue her study in a high school. I have to work. I have to take many jobs, as translator, as waitress in a restaurant and also as a cashier in a mini supermarket. I have to do it to get money for the livelihood of my children. (Wipa)
Women who no longer have the burden of child raising, or who are free from household duties (as a traditional Japanese daughter-in-law), or who become separated or divorced, and who are equipped with language skills, can develop from spouse to transnational worker.

Many of the women who initially immigrated as illegal sex or other workers, or in the guise of a *shugakusei*, subsequently married. Some left work to assume the role of a housewife caring for their small children, while others still pursued their working carrier. Some former CSWs like Patama and Malai continued working in a snack bar, but only selling drinks, while others found work in different areas. Prao became a factory worker. Mukdee established a textile business. Mora moved from food manufacturing to a noodle factory. The three former *shugakusei* also remained in employment after marriage. Wanna started her own Thai restaurant. Wanni worked for a Thai newspaper and in Wanna's restaurant in the evening. During their life courses, women can have various roles as wife, worker, and mother as well. They may move from one role to another or hold different roles at the same time. Wirat lives with her husband and their two children while also working in a factory.

**Marriage and migration**

Marriage is an event that leads to changes in situation and status. It demonstrates the connection between marriage and migration.

Among women who initially immigrated as legal, illegal, or covert workers, some later married to Thais or Japanese for various reasons. Marriage here can be seen as an event in one period of the life-course of women. But international marriage is also a result of international labor migration. By becoming a group in Japanese society, Thai migrant women have opportunities to meet candidates for marriage. This is true for all nationalities. Intermarriages between Japanese men and foreign women are on the increase, particularly with women from the Philippines, China, and Korea.

Labor migration can lead to marriage migration. Many illegal migrant workers have returned to Thailand to apply for documents needed for marriage registration. Their re-migration serves the purpose of marriage to Japanese, so it can be nothing other than
marriage migration. Furthermore, some former labor migrants who became spouses frequently work later as recruiters for marriage agencies. Lee (1966) argues that migration leads to further migration. Here labor migration induces marriage migration, and marriage migration can lead to labor migration as well. Marriage migrants like Wipa facilitated labor migration for their friends and relatives. Individual migrations are often links in a longer chain.

One motivation to marriage for Thai women in my sample is to obtain a residence permit. Some paid agents to organize sham marriages as a means to obtain a residence permit which would enable them to work legally. Migration as a legal pathway of immigration is also found among Thai women moving to Germany. I define it as marriage migration—a migration concerning or emerging by means of marriage (Ruenkaew, 2003: 52). The decisive mechanism shaping the immigration of Thai women into this specific form of marriage migration is the Japanese immigration law which stipulates exactly the types of immigrants entitled to stay and work in Japan. Given the barriers raised by immigration policy in destination countries, marriage has become a means of legal immigration coupled with the expectation of social and economic betterment.

Conclusion

For three decades Thai women have migrated to Japan through various channels mainly facilitated by brokers, some illegally as prostitutes or undocumented workers, some legally in the guise of language school students or trainees. The methods used by migration brokers amount to trafficking in persons. In addition, a number of women have taken part in marriage migration mostly organized by brokers or marriage agencies.

Migrant women may change their status from illegal workers to legal residents through marriage, or from wives or marriage migrants to international laborers. Many women maintain one role while they also gain another, such as sex workers who get married but continue to sell drinks in snack bars. These women can have various roles as wife, worker, and mother at the same time.

Some women have become migration facilitators, recruiting friends or relatives to work in Japan or to marry a Japanese man.
The migratory process is always dynamic as human beings have the potential to change. Categories such as migrant worker, sex worker, marriage migrant, or contract worker are not fixed. This aspect has been neglected in conventional migration studies, but needs to be studied so that Thai and Japanese policy makers may devise measures to support the women.

This paper has shown that marriage is closely intertwined with international migration. International labor migration can lead to marriage migration, and marriage migrants can later initiate labor migration. Moreover, many women misuse marriage as a vehicle to obtain a residence visa which provides the possibility to work in Japan. These findings support those of my former study on female migration from Thailand to Germany that marriage migration can be considered as a female-specific labor migration strategy (Ruenkaew, 2002, 2003).

Notes

1 Interview with the vice chairperson of a Thai volunteer network in Japan on 30 November 2008.

2 Interview with the coordinator of the Friends for Women in Aichi on 25 November 2008.

3 *Tact* is an abbreviation of the English word “contract” and means “entry into the country with contract,” in which there is an agreement on the sum of money the women has to pay for the travel arrangements.

4 Interview with the coordinator of the Friends for Women in Aichi on 25 November 2008.

5 See the critiques and discussion of Nakamatsu (2003).


7 See Char (1977: 34–7) and the discussion on migration’s venue as bride.

8 See for example the statistic of intermarriage in Ito (2005).
References


Ruenkaew, Pataya. 1998. *Heiratsmigration: zur Soziologie der Einwanderung thailändischer Frauen nach Deutschland* (Marriage migration: toward the sociology of the migration of Thai women to Germany), research report, Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld.


