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Reintegration into Thai society of Thai female returnees with children from Japan

Yuko Kato

A large number of women from northern Thailand have been motivated to work in the entertainment industry in Japan. Some of them later were arrested and deported to Thailand, while others returned voluntarily. These returnees faced many problems such as a lack of job opportunities (Caouette and Saito, 1999) and discrimination from their previous village communities (Yosida, 2004). The reintegration process for women with children may differ from that for other female migrants who do not have the added burden of an extra child to support. This chapter explores how Thai female returnees, particularly those with children, reintegrate into the community of origin and how their experiences in Japan affect their reintegration process.

The chapter is based on interviews with seven female returnees from Japan, documents provided by SEPOM (Self Empowerment Program of Migrant Women, an NGO supporting female returnees from Japan and their children in Chiang Rai province) and the Japanese immigration bureau, and interviews with key informants such as the director and two staff of SEPOM, the former Thai ambassador in Japan, and school teachers in Chiang Rai province.

Thai female returnees and their migration to Japan

The women interviewed in this study were born and grew up in different districts of Chiang Rai province. All of them came from poor farming families or those that have to struggle with poverty. Most of the returnees finished primary education or had no education. Only one completed a high school education. Prior to the migration to Japan some of them earned their livelihood from employment in factories in Bangkok, or small trade, while two women had worked in prostitution. At the time of interview the women were between 36 and 44 years old. At the time of emigration to Japan they were much younger, between 20 and 28.

The duration of their stay in Japan varied from two to six years.

All of the interviewees cited economic problems and poverty as their reason to migrate to work in order to seek a better income for their family. Additionally, migration was motivated by the desire to repay their parents for raising them. They decided to migrate to work in Japan because the country is known to have better economic condition and higher income. Most of the women entered Japan illegally through the facilitation of brokers. Only one woman immigrated legally through the assistance of her sister who owned a snack bar in Japan.

Arriving in Japan most of the women had to work as hostesses in a snack bar and to provide sexual services for customers. They described how they suffered from the severe working conditions in Japan. They were put in debt bondage of between 2,000,000 to 3,500,000 yen. While working to pay off this debt, they received no wages, had no freedom to move alone, worked long hours, and suffered violence from customers. Since they were illegal migrants, they did not have access to social services such as health. Only one woman entered Japan as a “bride” and was introduced by her sister to a Japanese man on arrival in Japan. Some time later she also worked in a snack bar.

Most of them found a partner in Japan. Many of them met him at the snack bar, while others were introduced by an acquaintance or relative. Only one woman married her partner afterwards. All the women gained different experience according to their situation. Mii succeeded in gaining a prominent position as a snack bar employee, and gained the recognition of her customers. Pui learned Japanese and enjoyed working in Japan. Nam worked as an unskilled laborer after leaving the snack bar, changing jobs often. Wipa, Mari, and Rose were vulnerable economically and socially. Most of them stopped working after they found a Japanese partner.

Return process

According to Cassarino (2004) there are two approaches to examining return migration: the neo-classical approach and the New Economic Labor Migration (NELM) approach. In the neo-classical approach, return migration is viewed as the outcome of a failed migration experience which did not bring the expected
benefits. By contrast, the NELM approach regards the return migration as part of the migration project—the part which occurs once the migrants achieve their objectives in the destination countries. These two approaches can be applied in the case of all the interviewees of the study.

For all of the women in this study, their return can be regarded as a “voluntary return”, based on the voluntary decision of the individual (IOM, 2005). None was arrested or deported by the authorities. However, their return was not always without some material coercion. Pregnancy and childbirth was the primary reason for most of their decisions to return. Since medical fees and living costs in Japan are expensive for those who do not have national insurance, it was almost impossible to deliver and bring up a child in Japan without support from a Japanese partner. Additionally, the living conditions as illegal migrants and the failure or success of migration were secondary factors that affected their decision.

Wipa and Nam returned because they miscalculated the cost of migration and were not able to reap the benefits of higher earnings. As Wipa only worked at the snack bar and was exploited by the owner of the bar, she was not able to save money as expected. Moreover, in line with the neo-classical argument that return migration occurs when human capital is not rewarded as expected, Wipa and Nam were not able to gain productive or useful skills which they would be able to utilize after return. Their migration was a failure socially and economically since they were not able to achieve any migration goals.

On the other hand, NELM approach can be applied for Mii, Pui, and Rose. These three women found a Japanese partner who provided financial support, and they were able to save some amount of money. They wanted to stay longer in Japan had they not become pregnant. They were able to achieve their migration objective meaning economic improvement. Although pregnancy motivated them to return, the migration experience was successful for them.

Other possible factors affecting the return decisions of migrants are governmental support for voluntary return, assistance from sending and receiving countries which is important for the reintegration process, and employment prospects in the country of
origin (IOM, 2005). However, according to the interviewees, there was no support offered by either government, and no returnees of this study had employment prospects when they made a decision to return.

The reaction of a Japanese partner was another factor affecting the return decision. Many women reported that their Japanese partner did not want to take responsibility for them. The partner of one wanted her to return to Thailand to deliver the child, while the partner of another wanted her to have the child but did not want to marry her.

Since all the women in this study were illegal workers, they were not able to go back to Thailand by legal procedures. There were two types of returns. Either they reported to the Japanese immigration bureau directly, or they went to the Thai embassy for help. All were asked to pay the return air ticket by themselves. Except for Wipa, the Japanese partner bought the air ticket. Wipa went to the Thai embassy asking for help and was sent to a shelter in Japan. She had to wait three months at the shelter before she could leave. No interviewees were detained but most of them were interrogated by immigration officers.

**Process of reintegration into the community of origin**

Integrating migrants back from their destination country to their country of origin is part of the migration cycle (Arowolo, 2000). Reintegration refers to “a re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a migrant into the society of his/her country of origin” (IOM, 2004). Reintegration takes place in communities at the local level and has both social and economic aspects.

Factors facilitating reintegration include job opportunities, support from NGOs, family and community relations, and individual feeling.

*Economic reintegration*

Employment opportunities are one of the most important aspects to successful reintegration as they provide means of livelihood. If they cannot secure employment, returnees might choose to re-migrate.
Job opportunity and occupation shift

If the migrants are able to gain human capital in Japan, they may be able to secure a better or more remunerative job than what they did before their migration.

None of the interviewees worked immediately on return since they were pregnant or had a small child. Most of them did not work for a few years and lived off their Japanese partners, their savings from Japan, or their family in Thailand.

Among seven interviewees, only two respondents went back to work in the agricultural sector in which they were engaged prior their migration. Table 1 below shows the occupation shifts of the seven interviewees.

Table 1: Occupation shift of the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family job</th>
<th>Job before Japan</th>
<th>Job in Japan</th>
<th>Job after return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noi</td>
<td>farming laborer in Bangkok, house wife</td>
<td>entertainer</td>
<td>none, relied on remittances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mii</td>
<td>father migrant to Middle East seller in Bangkok</td>
<td>entertainer</td>
<td>owned a small shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam</td>
<td>farming massage shop in Bangkok</td>
<td>entertainer, factory laborer</td>
<td>accessory factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipa</td>
<td>farming laborer in Bangkok</td>
<td>entertainer</td>
<td>farming, but migrated to Taiwan twice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pui</td>
<td>farming seller in Bangkok, married to Thai but divorced</td>
<td>entertainer, service jobs</td>
<td>working at a guest house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mari</td>
<td>farming food seller in Bangkok</td>
<td>entertainer</td>
<td>farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>farming entertainer in Hat Yai</td>
<td>entertainer</td>
<td>none, relied on remittances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

Nam, Mii, and Pui shifted occupation. Nam started to work at an accessory factory; Mii started her own small business in her
home village; and Pui started to work at a guest house where the majority of guests are Japanese tourists.

Only Pui could apply a skill (Japanese language) which she learned in Japan. Her experience in Japan helped her to gain this employment, thus she gained some social capital in Japan. Moreover, she still receives remittances from her Japanese partner of 50,000 yen every two months. She also had a child with her Thai ex-husband. As the salary in the guest house is not high enough to bring up two children, she would be economically vulnerable were the Japanese partner to stop sending remittances. The other returnees were not able to make use of their Japanese language skill because of lack of appropriate opportunities in their living environments.

Mii established a small stationery shop by investing her savings and remittances from her Japanese partner, and had run it for eleven years. She seems to have acquired the business skill and confidence as a result of her experience as an entertainer in a snack bar in Japan. Her Japanese partner still sends her as much as 100,000 yen whenever she requests. However, since he is old and hospitalized now, it is uncertain whether he can keep on sending her money.

Nam used to work at a massage parlor in Bangkok before going to Japan where she worked as an entertainer and factory employee. After her return, she started to work at an accessory factory and was not able to make use of any new skill. As Macaranas (2004) has argued, female migrants in vulnerable occupations rarely gain valuable experience during migration. Also, Nam was educated only to fourth grade, which limited her employment opportunities. Nam's factory job was far from her home and demanded long working hours. Her health suffered. She had a disabled daughter and encountered financial difficulty in sending her to school. SEPOM provided assistance.

In sum, job opportunities for returnees were limited, and few could make use of any skill gained during migration.

Second migration

According to Asis (2001: 63), those who re-migrate have certain common characteristics:
they were poor prior to migration (i.e. poorer compared to the others); they worked as entertainers; and they were economically vulnerable upon their return.

Wipa fits this description. She failed to achieve her goal on her first migration. Upon her return, there were only farming jobs available for someone with her poor education level. Within four months, she re-migrated to Taiwan, leaving her children behind in someone else’s care. In Wipa’s case, her failure on the first migration not only prompted her return but tended to make that return a second failure, prompting her to migrate again.

Financial support from Japanese partners

Most interviewees received financial assistance from their Japanese partners, at least in the early period of their return to Thailand. This financial support played a vital role in the women’s reintegration as they were pregnant or in the early stages of child-bearing, and thus unable to work. This financial support helped them avoid debt or the pressure to re-migrate.

In most cases, they would phone their partners in Japan asking for money. Mii said her husband sent remittances of 100,000 yen whenever she called. Pui said that her partner sent 50,000 yen every two months, which was not enough for her. These sums were mostly used for the expense of bringing up children. These women did not work while enjoying this support, and most hoped that their Japanese partners would continue to send money.

However, some of the women lost contact with their Japanese partners for various reasons. Mari had no means of communication from her village, while Nam’s ex-partner went bankrupt in the Japanese recession. Others received smaller amounts over time, and the communication with the ex-partners declined. Noi, who was legally married, had not received a phone call from her husband for eight years. Those still receiving support were concerned that it might stop and felt pressure to maintain the link to their ex-partner for this reason.

In summary, although the remittances sent by Japanese partners did help the women reintegrate in the early stages, problems arose after their partners stopped or reduced the amount. Some returnees were then forced to seek employment which was difficult given
their educational qualifications. While receiving remittances from
their partner, women tended to stop working and just rely on the
remittances. This dependency could be viewed as a negative point,
since long absence from the labor market could be a limitation
when they seek employment again.

Social reintegration: social and cultural change

The social aspect can be a crucial factor in the reintegration
process since returnees have to adjust their lives into their home
society. The migration experience changed their psychical or
psychological outlook to some extent. This section examines how
family and community relationships, as well as the migration
experience, affect reintegration.

Family relations

Family relations play an important role in the reintegration
process. Returnees experience difficulties such as family disruption
due to the long absence from their family. Family acceptance is the
first step when reintegrating into their home society.

All the women in this study bore children of Japanese men. Some gave birth in Thailand and others in Japan. When the
returnees arrived back in Thailand they could not anticipate the
reunion with their families. Most of the interviewees and their
children in this study were accepted by their family members,
because the family had received economic support from their
Japanese partners, or from their saving.

In the case of Wipa, however, her migration to Japan had not
been an economic success which made her family resentful about
her return. As Wipa was not well accepted by her family, she felt
miserable:

The family problem increased after I came back from Japan. My
sister owed new debts. Even though I worked very hard, my
family did not understand me.

Mari married a Thai man three years after her return. With this
marriage, she was able to reintegrate into her local community. The
attitude towards her and her child was positive and this new
husband treated her child, born with her Japanese partner, as his
own daughter. Mari also gave birth to another child with her new husband and this probably helped both her and her child to integrate in the community.

The presence of children helped facilitate the women's reintegration into Thai society since their children's happiness was their first priority. Mii decided to teach Japanese to her child and paid for extra Japanese classes. By putting her child into the Japanese classes, Mii was able to increase educational opportunities for her child and this also helped integrate Mii with other members of the community who were doing the same for their children.

Although some of the interviewees spoke positively about reintegrating with a child, others highlighted that there was an extra economic burden to the reintegration process. Nam, Wipa, and Mari received scholarships from SEPOM, otherwise they would not be able to send their children to school.

Community relations

Relationships with people in the community are an important factor to secure the women's social reintegration. Returnees have to adjust themselves back into the traditional society.

Traditional culture is changing. Singhanetra-Renard (1992) argues that there is now greater inequality between the rich and the poor than in the past. Influence in the village is now founded on money and contracts, not on charisma or kinship.

Exchange labour (farm family helping each other out during busy agricultural periods) and even religious obligations can now be fulfilled by monetary payments instead of the traditional personal services. (p. 202)

The wealth of migrants of returned migrants invites respect, but those who fail to live up to expectations tend to be stigmatized or excluded from society.

Community acceptance was easier if the returnees came back with money. Some interviewees highlighted that they re integrated into the communities with respect if they were married and still received remittance. Others complained that certain members of the community gossiped about their time in Japan. Three out of the seven woman felt that the community had gossiped about them, but on different topics (see table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community relation before migration</th>
<th>Marriage status to Japanese men after return</th>
<th>Remittances from Japanese partner</th>
<th>Reaction by community after return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noi</td>
<td>legally married</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mii</td>
<td>legally married</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
<td>early remittances, but no more</td>
<td>normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipa</td>
<td>looked down on by neighbors because of poverty</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pui</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mari</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
<td>early remittances, but not anymore</td>
<td>gossiped about by neighbors because of jealousy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>looked down on by neighbors because of poverty</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wipa felt that her community gossiped about her lack of financial gains, her failure to receive remittance from her Japanese partner, and the fact she returned with a child but not with the child’s father. Wipa believed the gossip arose because her family came from a poor background.

Rose felt she was a target of gossip because she returned to Thailand with a child born out of wedlock, because she came from a poor family, and because it was known she used to work as an entertainer in Hat Yai as her family had not been able to afford to
send her for even primary education.

Mari felt she was a victim of gossip due to envy. The people in her community were jealous that she was able to travel to a foreign country. Mari noted that the gossiping died down after she took an active role in community-based activities, which helped to integrate her as a member of the community. She also felt that being active in the community had positive effects for her own education as it has allowed her to undertake classes to gain her 12th grade.

Wipa may have had bad relations with the community before her migration and hence easily became a victim of gossip on her return, whatever her experience in Japan.

The important point is that the villages respect monetary achievement. Entertainers were not stigmatized if they made an economic contribution to the community. For instance, those who were legally married did not mention their problems with the community and argued that they were considered to be successful migrants. Mii felt that she had gained some respect and influence in her community because she had a Japanese husband and her own business. Returnees who had legal marriage status were more likely to be accepted by their local community. According to the director of SEPOM, women who went to Japan were expected to provide financial support to their villages. Women who returned with large remittances were more successful in gaining community respect than those who returned with nothing. Noi said:

Many Thai women migrated to Japan, so the job they had while in Japan is not a major problem when returning to Thailand any more. It is very common to migrate to Japan as an entertainer. There are still many women who are waiting to go to Japan.

Villagers are interested in the wealth of the returnee, not how it was earned. As Singhanetra-Renard (1992) argued, the values of the village have been changed by consumerism and capitalism.

Phongpaichit (1982) pointed out that people in some northern villages that sent many entertainers to the cities regard these women as a respectable daughter if they are successful in bringing back money. Her research was conducted in the early 1980s, and villagers already thought that entertainment work was not so bad as long as it brought an economic contribution. Most of the women in this study returned to Thailand between 1993 and 2000 when
the attitude towards entertainers had become even more open, facilitating their reintegration.

If returnees fail to bring back sufficient wealth, they face stigmatization, as Wipa did.

**Individual feeling**

The level of integration into Japanese society had some influence on the migrant's individual feelings after return. Some migrants changed their value towards money and were no longer satisfied with the income they could earn in the country of origin.

Some returnees wanted to go back to Japan and others did not. The difference depends on the success or failure of their experience in Japan.

Mii hoped to go back to Japan because she was able to earn substantial money there, but was obstructed because her husband was sick and hospitalized. Similarly, Pui would like to work in Japan again, but Nam and Wipa commented that they disliked Japanese people.

Mii and Pui held a positive view about going back to Japan because they had integrated well into Japanese society and gained self-confidence. Mii became popular at the bar, and Pui obtained enough Japanese language skills to gain employment. They were accepted in Japanese social circles and became part of Japanese families. Other returnees felt that their experiences in Japan were not all bad and expressed some admiration for Japanese society and people. Rose would like to return to Japan to be close to her boyfriend.

Mii, who established a small shop and still receives a large amount of remittances, asked SEPOM to provide a scholarship for her child, even though she could afford to provide it herself. She also expressed disdain towards returnees who had been unable to make large financial gains:

Some women could not save money in Japan. I don’t know why they could not do that.

Pui also said that she wanted more money from her Japanese partner. She received 50,000 yen every two month but felt that was not enough to cover her living expenses.
Mii and Pui seemed to have absorbed Japanese lifestyle and held fonder memories of Japan than the other interviewees. They reintegrated well because they still received financial support from their partners.

Those who succeed in Japan gain confidence and are more active to reintegrate into their home society. They are proud of their achievement as successful migrants.

Support from NGOs

According to Perry (2003) reintegration assistance such as financial support or vocational training can facilitate returnees’ successful reintegration. The women in this study did not receive any reintegration support from government in Japan or Thailand. SEPOM, which was established in 2001, after their return, subsequently provided financial and social support.

SEPOM was first introduced to the interviewees as an organization conducting a survey on women returned from Japan and offering advice and financial support. Its staff members were also returnees from Japan. SEPOM offers scholarships and Japanese language classes to returnees’ children and provides training program for employment. Even though this support appeared only after the women had already returned, reintegration assistance such as financial support is helpful at any stage of the reintegration process.

The level of reintegration

How successful was the returnees’ integration, economic and social? Did they gain productive and sustainable employment, and were they able to integrated well into their families and the larger local community?

Reintegration is affected by the success or failure of the migration experience and particularly by the degree of the migrants’ integration into the host society.

The level of integration into Japanese society can be classified into three—fully integrated, some problems with integration, and problems with integration—based on factors such as language ability, employment, and social interaction.

Mii is a good example of someone who became fully integrated.
She enjoyed working at the snack bar, learned Japanese language, and married a Japanese husband. After return to Thailand she established a small shop. The money she gained through remittance helped her to open her own business. She fulfilled the expectation of her family and the people in the community with a huge economic contribution. Mii acknowledged that she was considered a rich and influential person in her community. Mii integrated well into Japanese society which both helped her to achieve her migration objective and facilitated her reintegration.

Wipa is an example of someone with problems over integration into Japanese society because of her working environment. She could not learn enough Japanese language, her employment conditions were not good, and she had no interaction with local society. She was not able to achieve her migration objective, and her situation after return is still problematic. She was not well accepted by her family and the community. Sometimes she stays at an NGO's office in order to be away from the village. She was unable to find productive and sustainable employment and had to rely on SEPOM for scholarships to send her children to school. Wipa felt that her situation had even become worse as she recently was subjected to gossip by her community. Even though she had been back for thirteen years, she still felt that she has not reintegrated into village society.

Violence and exploitation in the destination country can have a large negative impact on reintegration. Violence undercuts self-esteem and leaves indelible scars on the heart which remain even after migrants return to their home community. The passage of time does not help women who were subjected to violence to successfully reintegrate back into society.

The conditions that put these women at risk of violence are out of their control and difficult to avoid. They were sent to the snack bar without any choice. The key factor which has influenced women's reintegration is the working condition in the destination country, particularly the level of earning and the exposure to violence.

Success or failure of reintegration

The economic contribution is the most important factor
facilitating successful reintegration. A woman who brings back money, or continues to receive remittance, or is able to start a sustainable business commands strong acceptance. Conversely, women who come back with little savings, have no support from remittance, and fail to find sustainable employment are perceived to have failed in the migration project and face difficulty reintegrating with the community. People's reactions to returnees depend on their economic contribution, not on the type of work they do before, during, or after migration.

According to Macaranas (2004), support from NGOs also helps the women to reintegrate. In this study, financial assistance, vocational training, and counseling provided by SEPOM helped women overcome some social and economic constraints. But this support is limited due to the lack of budget. SEPOM provides vocational training but cannot solve fundamental problems of employment opportunities. Counseling may be insufficient to restore returnees' damaged self-esteem.

Most of the women in this study gained little or no social capital from migration as they worked in the entertainment sector. Many were vulnerable to exploitation and violence which left lasting consequences. Chantavanich (2001: 262) argued that most women are economically empowered while they are working abroad because they can earn a higher income, yet they are socially vulnerable because they sometimes experience exploitation, physical violence, or sexual harassment. The women in this study who entered Japan illegally were both economically and socially vulnerable. Entertainment work offers little opportunity for empowerment (Chen, 2006). Several had a Japanese partner who helped them to adapt to Japanese society but did little to give them empowerment.

Chantavanich (2001: 263) also argued that female returnees were economically vulnerable because their income was lower than when they were abroad. A similar case was observed in this study. The women were economically vulnerable because there were not enough jobs offered in their villages and some women depended on remittances from Japan.

The experience in the destination country affected their reintegration in varying degrees. Those who had faced exploitation
in Japan tended to have difficulty reintegrating into their society. Since the motive of migration is mainly economic, the achievement of migrants is determined by the wealth gained.

**Conclusion**

This study examined socio-economic factors that help or hinder the reintegration of Thai female returnees into their community of origin. A number of environmental and social factors contributed to the success or failure of reintegration including the living conditions endured in Japan, the financial success or failure of their migration, and the social capital they brought back with them.

A key reason why women returning with children but no husband are accepted by their home community is the remittances they receive from their Japanese partners. This financial support assists women to take a first step of resettlement, to survive without securing employment and relying on family handouts, and to reintegrate into their community of origin. The remittances even enable the women to provide economic contribution to the community. The economic assistance from the Japanese partners, however, can lead to long absence from the labor market which could be a limitation on seeking new employment. Women tend to stop working while receiving remittances from their partner.

Women who had worked in the entertainment industry do not have problems of acceptance as long as their migration was an economic success. Those who married a Japanese husband were more respected and accepted by the community. Those who failed to make any economic contribution were more likely to be stigmatized by the people in the community. The economic contribution is the key factor determining how smoothly they can reintegrate into the community of origin.

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