

9-1-2557

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Hongsrnagon, Prathurng; Koyama, Naoyuki; Suwatthigul, Pimpaporn; and Veeravongs, Suriya (2557) "Japanese International Retirees' Mobility/Migration (IRM): A Case Study of Phuket, Thailand," *Journal of Demography*. Vol. 30: Iss. 2, Article 3.

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## **Japanese International Retirees' Mobility/Migration (IRM): A Case Study of Phuket, Thailand**

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### **Introduction**

The “aging of society” has become a global trend in countries such as Japan due to declines in birth and mortality rate (Ogawa and Retherford, 1997). Such declines substantially changed Japan’s retirement policy during the 1970s and 1980s (Clark and Ogawa, 1992). Mandatory retirement has become an integral component of the Japanese system of industrial relations (Hill, 1995); the mean age of mandatory retirement in Japan is approximately 58 years (Clark and Ogawa, 1992). Pension payments account for roughly 60 per cent of the income of elderly households (Horlacher and MacKellar, 2003, p. 113, cited in Jones, 2008). Major pension reforms in Japan in 1986

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involved highly publicized cutbacks in social security benefits, which resulted in significant shifts in family care arrangements for elderly members. (Ogawa and Retherford, 1997; Retherford, Ogawa, and Sakamoto, 1996, cited in Ogawa and Retherford, 1997). These changing circumstances in family life created increased geographic mobility which contributed to the growth of “intimacy at a distance” (Ogawa and Retherford, 1997).

Japanese international retirees’ mobility/migration (IRM) has become more popular in recent years and related fields of interest have emerged, including expatriate residency, residential tourism, long-stay tourism, and international second homes (Koch-Schulte, 2008). IRM is defined as “*Highly selective migration process which redistributes [retired] individuals – and their concomitant incomes, expenditures, health and care needs – across international boundaries*” (Williams, King and Warnes, 1997, cited in Koch-Schulte, 2008, p. 23). Thailand is one of the major destinations of Japanese long-term stayers, ranking second in popularity after Malaysia in Asian countries (Fukahori, Baba, Hioki, Monkong, Intarasombat, and Malathum, 2010, cited Longstay Foundation, 2007). Thailand government policies welcome overseas foreign retirees to visit Thailand in order to strengthen the

country's revenues and to search for alternatives to mainstream mass tourists. As for the immigration law, Japanese IRM in Thailand are eligible for a variety of visas: general tourist visa (with monthly renewal); 'o' type visa, retiree visa, and long stay visa (all with annual renewal); and prestige elite visa for every 5-year renewal. Regarding property law, Japanese IRM can purchase only condominiums but not houses whose ownership cannot be transferred to the beneficiaries. For the use of medical care in Thailand, Japanese IRM can pre-pay and reimburse the cost according to their insurance schemes. Most of Japanese IRM tend to gather with their national acquaintances for some local tour, short-flight traveling, or assisting local Japanese clubs. It is well known that Chiang Mai province in northern Thailand has been active for long-stay tourism assisted by the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce and the Thailand-Japan Longstay Association in Chiang Mai, with about 3,000 Japanese long-stayers in the community

(<http://www.bangkokpost.com/business/economics/232522/chiang-mai-hopes-for-a-long-stay-life-preserver>).

Phuket province, the site of the present research study, is an island with an international profile located in the Andaman Sea in

southern Thailand. Following a situational analysis of Phuket's competitive advantage, the province is capable of positioning itself as the destination for long-term tourism with an emphasis on repeated visitors (Pisut Technology, 2009, p. a-16, appendix a, cited Bureau of Thailand National Economics and Social Development Board or NESDB). Currently, there are approximately 500 Japanese who stay in Phuket (an interview with an officer of the Phuket Japanese Association, Phuket, 2010) with a low level of networking. It is important for Phuket to learn about its Japanese IRM needs and requirements in order to achieve the desired market position.

The relevant literature on IRM/long-term stay in Thailand has been focused mostly in Chiang Mai (Hongsrnagon, 2006; Fukahori, et al., 2010). A high level of social activities, such as social participation, volunteer work, traditional cultural activities, and a strong sense of attachment to a neighborhood seem to be key features for elderly Japanese (Morita, Takano, Nakamura, Kizuki, and Seino, 2010, p. 544). Howard (2008) believed that a better understanding of retirees' backgrounds, their experiences in Thailand, and their needs and requirements provided a valuable case study as a research resource on IRM in Thailand. Phuket is no exception in this regard.

## **Methodology**

The study used the qualitative method of focus group discussion (FGD) as an exploratory phase (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999, p. 201) for a case study among the Japanese participants. Approval for conducting the study (ethical protocol number 039.1/53) from the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, was obtained and the study was conducted in 2010 and 2011. Despite the constraints imposed by the low season for Japanese IRM during the period of this study, yet through the cooperation of the Phuket Japanese Association, convenience sampling was used. It is noteworthy that due to its non-random sampling, convenience sampling, though being the easiest to recruit, fast and economic means of data collection and commonly applied when qualitative methods (e.g. focus groups and interviews) are used to collect data for exploratory work, its strong constraints are on the representativeness and being hard to replicate and to extrapolate of the findings (Kelley, Clark, Brown, and Sitzia, 2003, p.264). The participants were Japanese males and females 50 years and older who were members of the Japanese Association in Phuket, Japanese golf tourists in Phuket, and other Japanese nationals, who responded to the

same set of open-ended questions initiated by the FGD group moderator (see appendix). The venues and the dates for the FGD sessions were suggested by the participants themselves and it took approximately two hours to conduct each FGD session. NK (the second author-a native Japanese-see footnote), who has lived in Phuket since 2004 pursuing his academic career, had proper hands-on training for FGD; he was the moderator for the three FGDs conducted in the Japanese language. He subsequently served as the translator (from Japanese into written Thai for the research team's further analysis). The principal investigator (PH) acted as an observer focusing on non-verbal communication and interaction between participants. All FGDs were audio-taped and transcribed for qualitative content analysis (in the Thai language) through manual coding (Hilber, Hull, Preston-Whyte, Bagnol, Smit, Wacharasin, and Widyantoro, 2010). First drafts with results were sent to the participants for agreement on content and comprehension only. This participant-checking process led to only a few interpretative comments and these were added or corrected in the draft after discussion and agreement with the moderator.

## Results

FGDs with 16 Japanese IRM in Phuket could be categorized into three groups labeled as long-term stayers, short-term stayers, and pre-IRM. Personal details with anonymity, voiced concerns about life in Phuket, as well as possible preferred social activities with elderly Thais were elaborated as follows:

### *First group - Japanese IRM who moved away from Japan*

This first FGD session consisted of 4 Japanese males (respondents 1, 2, 3, and 4) aged 59, 60, 63, and 74 years respectively. Respondent 1 retired at 45, married his wife in Phuket (now separated), and earned his living from house rental charges in Phuket. He liked to be the link for Japanese people in the area. Respondent 2 retired at the age of 53 and moved to Phuket with his Thai wife. He now owns a small business exporting seafood to Japan; he liked to associate with foreigners in Phuket. Respondent 3 lived on his public pension benefits, had been residing in Phuket for 7 years, and traveled back to Japan once a year. Respondent 4 used to live in Bangkok; he had lived in Phuket for one year, and seemed to have the least information about Phuket. The four respondents believed that foreigners in Phuket paid more for such things as golf membership



fees and private hospital charges, but generally were satisfied with life in Phuket due to its being easier, better, less stressful, and slower paced than life in Japan.

**Respondent 1:** Everything is so expensive in Japan that we needed to be concerned with every single matter so it became very stressful. This makes Japanese (people) get ill easily. Living in Phuket is less stressful and our health gets better. This is the best thing ever about living here compared to living in Japan.

The Japanese should expand their networks with Thais so as to be able to get some help in times of need.

**Respondent 2:** We are not here for a temporary stay so we'd better know our neighbors and their kids.

Safety concerns seemed to be predominant in the respondents' mode of thought:

**Respondent 1:** It would be useful if we could have a kind of 'one-stop service center' in Phuket to screen visitors and, at the same time, reduce cheating among retirees themselves.

The Japanese interviewees expressed the wish to share some activities with elderly Thais, but said they were dependent on the invitation of Thais.

**Respondent 1:** I would say about 90 percent of the Japanese here would like to do so (having some social activities with elderly Thais). But only putting out an announcement for the customary activities in town is not enough. We need to be verbally invited too. We are not brave enough to just be out there and join the group. Japanese are normally too shy.

The participants' suggestion for *possible social activities* included providing Thais with Japanese food, playing golf, playing Japanese chess, fishing, maintaining the neighborhood, writing songs, and learning more about Thai herbal medicine. In particular, the Japanese participants would like to attend Thai weddings and funerals.

**Respondent 1:** It is useful to learn how Thais go about funeral events. It is so much more expensive the Japanese way.

**Respondent 3:** Nearly a million baht in the Japanese way, I suppose.

The Phuket Japanese Association has a reasonably low profile and the participants suggested the formation of small social networks with formal registration of Japanese members' data, for instance, mobility and complaints, including death. Moreover, when asked, the participants did not agree with the proposal to establish a Japanese village in Phuket as they believed that foreigners should attempt to relate to Thais and should live simply in Phuket.

***Second group - Japanese IRM who divided their time between Japan and Thailand***

The second FGD session had six participants (2 couples and 2 males). **Mr. A**, a widower aged 75 with some physical problem, moved to Phuket after the tsunami in the Andaman Sea in 2004. In the past seven years he has stayed in Phuket for 2-3 months each year to avoid the harsh winters in Japan. **Mr. and Mrs. B**, aged 75 and 71 respectively, visited Phuket in early 2009. Mr. B worked as a salaried worker in Japan and retired at the age of 62. The couple may consider living permanently in Japan. **Mr. C**, aged 72, has learned some Thai language from his golf caddy and has relatives who live permanently in Phuket. His wife returned to Japan after a bicycle accident, but he stays in Phuket during the Japanese winter. **Mr. and Mrs. D**, aged 71

and 66 respectively, were golf tourists who traveled between Tokyo and Phuket. Mr. D had worked as a salaried worker; he has a relative in Phuket, and normally visits Phuket in the period from December to March and from June to August.

The participants believed that Thai people respect the elderly and take good care of them at home which is better than the current practice in Japan. The problems they faced on a daily basis were fear of stray dogs, being over charged for public transport and accommodation, and undisciplined Thai drivers/riders. They were disappointed with the services they received from local authorities and required some language assistance at banks and at the Immigration Bureau. They also suggested English-language magazines for foreigners in Phuket.

While in Phuket, some participants played golf three times a week and watched television and/or Japanese movies. Though wanting to be involved in activities with elderly Thais, they did not know where to go and how to get started. Basically, they believed in the importance of local language skills.

**Mrs. D:** I feel it's a pity not being able to talk to Thais. At times, I also feel frustrated.

The participants wanted to use their leisure time effectively.

**Mrs. B:** In Malaysia's Cameron Island, the district and local Japanese Association open Japanese courses to the public, including the teaching of Japanese dance. We should be able to do that here.

The participants' suggestions for *possible social activities* with elderly Thais included cooking and fruit carving, handicrafts (well-known Japanese paper-folding), light sports, traditional custom activities (Japanese tea ceremony, kimono dressing, yukata dressing, and Thai massage), volunteer work, and stories on Buddhist ways of practice and temple visits. Important highlights were food and cuisine.

**Mrs. B:** Cooking food needs only raw materials to get started, even though we know no Thai language.

**Mrs. D:** Cooking food should help in building up relationships easily.

### ***Japanese pre-retirement IRM group***

The third FGD session was composed of six Japanese in their early fifties (2 couples, 1 single male, and 1 married female). **Mr. One**, aged 55, was single, liked diving, had just retired, and considered moving to Phuket at the end of the year with the intention of investing

in an accommodation in Phuket following his Thai friend's advice.

**Mr. and Mrs. Two**, aged 54 and early fifties respectively, lived in Phuket for three and a half years. Mr. Two worked in a salaried position and planned to live in Phuket upon retirement. He liked outdoor activities, such as boating, fishing, and snorkeling. Mrs. Two was a dog trainer and spent most of her time at home with her dogs. The couple considered going back to Japan ultimately. **Mr. and Mrs. Three**, aged 53, were previously owners of a coffee house in Japan and had lived in Phuket for two and a half years. Mrs. Three was a trainer of dachshund dogs and had a relative in Phuket. Mr. Three liked fishing. Both considered going back to Japan after living in Phuket for a period of time. **Mrs. Four**, aged 53, had lived in Phuket for three and a half years while her husband was still working in Japan. She used to own a shop in Japan and as a sportsperson, she liked fishing, playing basketball, and boating. She returned to Japan from time to time and had recently arrived back in Phuket. She retained an address in Japan but might consider staying permanently in Phuket in her old age.

The participants believed that Phuket had a low cost of living, pleasant marine environment, warm climate, generous people, easy

lifestyle, and was a safe place. Again, the participants were fearful about stray dogs and undisciplined Thai drivers/riders. They believed that knowing Thai people would help them a great deal, especially when they were in need of extra help. The participants wanted easier visa extension arrangements and, as they spent more time outdoors than the other two groups, voiced concern about the degradation of the environment in Phuket.

**Mr. One:** Phuket used to have a beautiful sea but it is getting more and more dirty now. There is a lot of construction going on around the island, including on the hillside. Phuket will lose its customers in the long run. The Thai government should take good care of the island's environmental surroundings.

**Mr. Three:** Everywhere is filled with garbage; what a pity.

Their suggestions for *possible social activities* with Thais included basic activities which did not require long-term language training, such as preparing food (barbequing meals and fruit carving), playing sports (basketball and Thai boxing), engaging in Thai music and dance, fishing, snorkeling, ceramic-making, and visiting temples. Also included was the psychological training of dogs.

## Discussion

After 2007, the “lump” generation (the 7 million “baby boomers” born between 1947 and 1949 and known in Japanese as *dankai no sedai*) began to retire (Yamashita, 2008). Many countries in South-East Asia responded well to this phenomenon. For example, Malaysia offered its MM2H program (Malaysia My Second Home); Indonesia “Care Resort” in Bali; The Philippines government, “Barrier Free” residential facilities; and Thailand, medical tourism with the provision of special kinds of retirement visas for foreign long-term stayers and foreign pensioners (Ono, 2008).

For IRM, mobility shares elements of both tourism and migration. Among Japanese retirees, the affluent chose the best place to live after traveling to various countries, while low-income earners moved directly to South-East Asia out of economic need (Toyota, Boecker, and Guild, 2006). Retirees felt that they wanted a high level of cultural flexibility and contemplated living in local neighborhoods, instead of living in an enclave-type retirement complex which offered little contact with the locals, such as British retirement migration to parts of the Mediterranean (King, et al., 2000 cited in Jones, 2008). The participants in FGD 1, those who had moved away from Japan,



wanted to expand their networks by becoming involved with Thais while living simply in Phuket. As long-term Japanese IRM living permanently in Phuket, they were concerned about the final stages of life and funerals. Japanese funerals are expensive events, costing 2-3 million Japanese yen (US\$ 1 = about 80 yen). This charge covers the cost of employing a private company to prepare the body and decorative the coffin, transport, rental of crematorium, cremation, food, priest's prayers, as well as the cost of the priest giving the name of the dead person (an option). In addition, one may want to purchase a lot in a graveyard, with extra charger for long-term.

For short-term Japanese IRM who divided their time between Japan and Thailand (FGD Group 2), the relationship of psychosocial conditions to the enhancement of health and reduction in the risks of mortality in the later stages of life attracts growing attention (Shirai, Iso, Fukuda, Toyoda, Takatorige, and Tatara, 2006; p.2). Shirai et al. (2006) presented the notion of "*ikigai*" (subjective well-being) – a feeling that life is worth living – that may represent prognostic factors for longevity and healthy aging in the later stages of life. These are related to life-satisfaction, self-esteem, morale, and happiness, as well as an evaluation of the meaning of one's life. After retirement from

work, the pursuit of an alternative *ikigai* becomes an important goal to consolidate one's self in retired life. With a better living environment, nicer climate, lower cost of living, and *ikigai*, elderly Japanese can enjoy a more active and more satisfying quality of life in retirement. The concept of *ikigai* can be an important supportive element for health among the elderly, not only for those who are frail but also for those who wish to maintain or promote their health and life in accordance with the concept of successful aging (Shirai et al., 2006).

As found with British expatriate retirees, language barriers can limit retirees' participation in social and cultural activities so that "large numbers of immigrants are excluded by impenetrable 'language walls' from all but superficial engagement with the host communities," and these language walls usually lead to "enclavism" within the expatriate community (King, Warnes, and Williams, 1998, p. 105, cited in Banks, 2004,).

A related study found that individual well-being among expatriate retirees is highly associated with fluency in the local language (Warners et al., 1999, cited in Banks, 2004). The participants in FDG 2 also wanted therefore to open a Japanese-language class for Thais by themselves, similar to Malaysia's Cameron Island where the

district and the Japanese Association joined hands in opening such a course to the interested public for the Japanese-language and Japanese traditional dance (see also Ono, 2008).

The pre-IRM participants (FGD Group 3) were undecided about whether to live in Phuket permanently or to spend their old-old age in Japan after a period of retirement in Phuket. As they spent much time involved in outdoor activities, they saw the negative changes in Phuket's environmental surroundings, a product of the island as a mainstream tourist destination for decades. In fact, for the past 25 years, Phuket's major economic development plan has relied solely on the tourism sector for economic income generation. Starting off with some 800,000 tourists in 1986, Phuket now receives 5-8 million tourists annually (Pisut Technology Co. Ltd., 2009, p. 4-3). Phuket has suffered multiple types of degradation and deterioration due to lack of appropriate direction and control of mass tourism growth through overdevelopment of the area. According to the report by Pisut Technology Co., Ltd. (2009, p. 4-13), indicators for physical problems of Phuket are inclusive of the followings: the proper land use of tourism (in terms of people density per area, room per area, building height, building pattern); the adequacy of water supply (in terms of

liter per person, amount of raw water per tourist and per resident); the ability for garbage management (in terms of amount of garbage per person, amount of garbage picking-up, and getting rid of the garbage); the ability to treat waste water (in terms of amount of waste water, numbers of system for waste water treatment, amount of treated waste water). On the other hand, the indicators for environmental problems of Phuket include water quality (in terms of BOD, DO, Faeco Coliform), forests and wild animals (in terms of forest; area of wild animals); coral reef (coral reef's wealth), and erosion of land and beach (in terms of rate of erosion, slope, width of the beach). Public concerns demonstrate that excessive consumption of natural resources in Phuket has harmed the island and has placed Phuket in a dangerous situation.

Possible preferred social activities with elderly This highlighted food and cuisine and volunteer work. Food activities, by nature, require low-cost operation and minimum language proficiency. Nowadays, there is a strong desire for "real food" that tastes good and comes from a real place. This is especially true for the alternative "slow food movement" which is about real food, regional identity, and is ethical, natural, and honest (Yeoman, Brass, and McMahon-Beattie,

2007, p. 1135). On the other hand, the popularity of volunteer roles among the participants in the current study corresponds to the statement made by Toyota, Boecker, and Guild (2006) who found that some migrant pensioners work as volunteers in the host society which not only keeps them healthy but also helps integrate their ethnic communities (including non-pensioners) into mainstream society. Volunteering creates opportunities for societal engagement, mutual exchange, and personal growth. Self-actualization and the creation of *ikigai* in the form of volunteer work is a means to live one's "second life" with a sense of satisfaction (Long Stay Foundation, 2005, p. 18, cited in Ono, 2008). Past research suggested that efforts to encourage elderly person to volunteer and to make volunteering easier for elderly persons should continue (Willigen, 2000).

### **Some limitations of the study**

This study has a number of limitations that require consideration. First, the research method needs to be examined. Qualitative research is often deemed to have lower reliability compared with experimental research. Yet it has strong face validity, especially when it includes an observational component that enables the researcher to compare verbal statements with actual practice (Pope,

van Royen, and Baker, 2002). Qualitative methods have their special strengths not only in the discovery and generation of hypotheses, but also in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the ideas and views of a person (Schilling, 2006). Qualitative designs are the first step to analyze a topic and can be followed by quantitative approaches (Schilling, 2006, p. 35). Second, the small sample size, with convenience sampling for FGD sessions, needs to be considered owing to the constraints on its representativeness, being hard to replicate and to extrapolate of the findings. As the usual period of arrival by a group of Japanese IRM in Phuket was every three months, the researchers were able to conduct only three FGD sessions during the study period with a total of 16 participants due to low numbers of Japanese visitors to Thailand caused by the 11 March 2011 disaster phenomena in Japan (both tsunami & big earthquake plus the leakage from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant). Yet, since the main goal of this study was not to generate conclusions that could be generalized but to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, this means that care must be taken in the interpretation of the results and in the transference of conclusions to other contexts. Third, it is beyond the scope of the current study to investigate the response of elderly Thais with regard to preferred social activities by

Japanese IRM, as well as an investigation on the impact of long-term Japanese IRM regarding economics, society, and the medical service infrastructure in Thailand. It is recommended that further studies examine these issues.

Nevertheless, it is believed that the current study could identify some anecdotal samples of Japanese IRM in Phuket. Howard (2008) stated that characteristics of IRM in Thailand are difficult to find due to the lack of a local database. The participants' concerns voiced through these 16 participants deserve attention from local authorities for possible needs catering. In addition, learning that the Japanese participants are interested in and attentive to having social activities with elderly Thais in Phuket provide an insight for the management bureau in Thailand. Organized schemes will certainly increase in number and sophistication in the future (Jones, 2008).

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Chulalongkorn University for funding the research under this project (CU-CLUSTER-Aging- 1-28-53) regarding "Community for healthy aging research projects - Intervention/programmes for maintaining independence and promoting social participation." Special thanks are due to the Phuket Immigration

Bureau, Phuket Japanese Association, and all Japanese FGD participants in Phuket. Thanks also to Bob Tremayne for his English-language assistance. It should also be mentioned that the authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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