

“I Thought I Could Do More. Well, Actually I Did More, Didn’t I?”:

Why Many Japanese Women Have Gone Abroad for Extended Periods.

Susan K. Burton*

Abstract

This article takes one interview from a long-term oral history survey and attempts to answer the question, why do so many Japanese women go abroad for extended periods?

The Japanese Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry recently reported that one reason for the decline in the female population in Japan – the first since record-keeping began in the 1950’s – was that many woman have “gone overseas for extended periods”¹⁾. Media reports wondered why.

As part of my research into expatriate communities around the world, I have spent more than ten years interviewing many Japanese women who have left their home country and settled in the United Kingdom. Data from these interviews has been utilised in various articles on gendered travel, study abroad and expatriatism²⁾. This time I have chosen to answer the media’s question by selecting a single case study and telling the story of one woman who travelled to England during the bubble boom of the 1980’s and did not return. I would like to use Rimika Toyoda’s [pseudonym] recorded interview to allow her to tell her own story, one that offers a personal explanation of why Japanese women leave Japan in such large numbers.

At the time of interview, Rimika was a single, female academic at a university in England. Her Tokyoite family consisted of her mother, a full-time housewife, her father, a copywriter, and one younger sister who was a programmer. Rimika grew up in a suburb of Tokyo, in an area which consisted of both private and social housing, and at her state school she mixed with classmates from different social groups. But her parents lived on the ‘good’ side of town, were middle-class and had educational expectations – her father in particular - for their daughter.

* 准教授／Oral History/Social History

Most of my friends, I don't know why, they all went to junior [two-year] college rather than universities and then I said to my father, "Maybe I should take the entrance exam of junior college too" and he said, "No, no, no, no, it doesn't mean anything, junior college education. Because I'm going to pay, you should go to the four-year university".

Taking her father's advice, Rimika took the entrance examination for a high-ranking private women's college and was accepted into the International Cultural Studies faculty.

I went for four years. And I was quite bored there. I didn't like the people there basically. And lots of people are so [private women's college], they're so serious, too intense and too industrious and I basically wanted to enjoy my university life as ordinary Japanese universities are because, in those days, my life was revolving around skiing ... I just didn't really like it and then, like I said, people were too serious and they all talked about, "Oh, maybe we should study abroad. We should take these exams and then get this scholarship and do some exchange".

Since the days of the bubble era, it has been popular for young Japanese people from middle-class families to go abroad, either on a group graduation trip or for further study. Rimika, however, did not see herself as a particularly serious student at that time.

...I never thought about studying abroad or going abroad apart making a trip or something. And then in the fourth year we all had to find a job and the Japanese economy in the '80's was just climbing up so it was quite easy to get a job, so I got a job ...

Rimika got a job in a manufacturing company where she stayed for three and a half years, first in publicity, then in production control.

The whole point is that in the '80's, in the middle of the bubble economy, we all had to work so hard, we had to work until so late every day and we all had to go into the office on Saturdays and Sundays as well, and then for that I got some extra payment. So I saved quite a lot but I didn't have time to spend ... And I thought work was so hard and I worked so hard until 12 o'clock every night, Saturdays and Sundays, and look at me, I haven't gained anything. I haven't learned anything ... For the first two and a half years it was a good challenge but after that I established my own system of working so I was quite efficient after that.

... I started to think I wanted to study one more time because, like I said, I didn't study much in my own university which was fine ... now I thought maybe it's time for me to do serious studies. That was good because that was my own will, right? No-one forces me but I want to do it. So that's why I was just ... started thinking about studying again.

During our interview, Rimika often expressed the view that she had not been a particularly serious student in her university days and that, when she did think about studying again, the idea came to her of her 'own will'. But this is not true, because Rimika was a well-educated, middle-class woman living in an era of high economic growth. And so were her friends.

...because I had this circle of friends from my university time ... And then one of them decided, she quit her job after a year and then started going to this American university [in Tokyo] ... and then after a year she finally got [TOEIC] 500 or something so she went to [university in the USA]... The following summer, a year later, another friend of mine from the same circle suddenly she said, "You know, I'm going to Italy". What! And she was studying opera, and then [she said], "I think I need to study opera singing so I'm going to Milan". Really? Wow, fantastic. "Can I come and visit you?" "Of course". So I went to visit her two or three times. ... And then another one, actually she was studying abroad during her university time, I think she was in Oxford. And I thought, "She did that too. Maybe I could do that". And I think that kind of triggered me because we were so close and the three of them did it. I was the only person who didn't do it. So maybe I should do it. So where shall I go? Without thinking what I wanted to study. Yeah, maybe England because I had been to England twice, once was a part of my European tour... So I thought, "Mm, maybe in England I can survive".

It can be argued that far from deciding of her 'own will' she and her friends were in fact following a trend. She even admits this. Why were these women so adventurous? Firstly, it should be noted that Rimika is talking about the 1980's, the years of the bubble boom. During this time, travelling abroad and studying abroad became possible, particularly for the new middle-classes, people with money and ambition.

... the fact is they passed the entrance exams and they got into these colleges and universities so they had a certain background, we had something in common. Maybe middle class? And parents are quite willing to pay for the education, that kind of family, you know? So probably that's why my friends had an opportunity to go abroad, not only going abroad, study abroad for years.

...they are from the middle class background. Could be more because ALL my friends, I'm not exaggerating this, ALL my friends, one way or another, went abroad.

These travel and study abroad booms were largely gendered phenomena, as it was only women who had the time and the money to take frequent holidays or extended trips. Unlike men, women were generally not expected to do overtime or to save for marriage. Rimika and her friends were members of what came to be known as the Hanako generation, young women who looked to the magazine of that name to tell them where were the cool places to visit and what were the upwardly mobile products to buy. By 1990, at the height of the bubble economy, Japanese female travellers abroad outnumbered men by 2:1, and almost 80% of study abroad students were women (Kelsky 2001:2). Even after more than 10 years in recession, women in the 20-29 year age group go abroad in considerably greater numbers than men: in 2009, for example, 1,698,846 women left Japan but only 938,308 men.

When men go abroad, it tends to be because they are posted there by their companies. I asked Rimika why she didn't try to be posted abroad with her company. After all, it was a multinational.

... actually [my] company, they actually sent women abroad to Europe or somewhere or America, they actually did it but the ratio is really ...you know, they usually send men, maybe they send 100 and maybe 2 women.

We suspected when we were there, because I had this friend, she was one year senior to me but we became friends and she has such a cynical view about everything and she said, "You know I think this is an advertisement". "Do you think so?" "Yeah. They want to say [name of company] is a company which can send women abroad. I think that's it". And I said to her, "Eriko-san, I think you're right". And she said, "Of course I'm right. GOT to be like that".

Their suspicions were later confirmed when, years later, on a trip home, Rimika met up with her former colleague who still worked at the company, who said,

"You know what? We don't send women any more. The bubble economy burst so we don't have money. Now we have to cut every budget and we can't even take women. You see? Because when the economy was good, the company had to advertise itself as a very progressive, liberal company and then the economy Pshht! just went down and then they had to protect themselves and

now they are saying they can’t hire women. Typical, isn’t it?” And then she said, “It is horrible to say this I know but as a company we have to survive”. And she said to me “When female students contact them, they say on the phone, “Oh, sorry, the places have already been filled. We are recruiting only 10 people this year but they have been filled”. When a male student rings, they say “Yeah, send us an application form or CV”. So it’s still a kind of male chauvinistic attitude, isn’t it? But we all have to survive in that provided context, I suppose. Like I said, I’m not really into gender issues so I’m not going to stand up and do something, I just really accept it.

Like many other adventurous Japanese women, she did accept it. She accepted that it wasn’t going to change and left the country.

Although the Equal Employment Opportunity Law came into force in 1986, it was still the case that women were considered to be temporary presences in the workplace, office flowers hired as decoration and to perform light clerical duties for a few years until they married. They were largely excluded from the career track and gains made at this time could be viewed as tokenism in the face of international criticism. Consequently, when Rimika felt the need to copy her friends and go abroad, she felt little compunction in quitting.

Because women ... we don’t have anything to lose in a company because our chance of being promoted is remote but men, being there, they got promoted automatically.

Throughout our interview, Rimika played down her hard work and her academic achievements. It was also only in passing that she mentioned that she had taken several European holidays to visit her friends, both before and after graduation. She also downplayed the amount of studying she did after work; she enrolled at a language school to improve her English and, in her final year as an undergraduate, having already secured her *naitei* (promise of a job), she took a business English course at a language school where she studied with three women and eight men. It was through this course that she came to understand just how different men’s lives were in Japan.

They are funny because they’re elites. My [male] friends are all elites so they are all sent abroad by their companies.

At a class reunion held soon after she had made her decision to quit and go abroad this exchange took place:

I said “Look, I have decided to quit my job and then I’m going to England to study for two years and then that one, that [male Tokyo University graduate], said, “Oh, Ri-chan, that’s bullshit. You know if you really want to go abroad, I can introduce any of my friends, colleagues from my bank because they are, within three years, going abroad and we all don’t want to go abroad on our own. Because we will be very lonely”. Cowards, aren’t they? And then [he said], “So we need a wife. So I can introduce you to anyone. Just tell me who you like”. And then I said to him in front of everyone, “You know what? You are such a nasty person”.

Rimika quit her job, came to England, did an English course, then a postgraduate diploma in sociology, then an MA. She returned to Japan for a time and worked for a cram school while applying unsuccessfully for jobs. When a friend decided to do a PhD, so did Rimika. She received a scholarship from the British Council which enabled her to do her PhD at a British university. She now works in the British academic system and has not returned to Japan to live.

CONCLUSION

Rimika’s story is similar to many stories I have heard from Japanese women in England, and representative of their shared experiences. These are the experiences of bright, middle-class, highly-educated women who are eager to fulfil their potential and are signposted by their gendered culture into going abroad en masse to find it. Japan was and remains a male-dominated society and, now that the bubble has burst and Japan has suffered more than a decade of recession, realizing their full potential outside of the home has become even more difficult for young women. Although the number of young Japanese men going abroad long-term has decreased, the number of women leaving continues to increase. It is not so difficult for women to leave a society which does not seem to value their high levels of education and experience.

But it’s for certain that I wanted to do something else a little more difficult. I was very arrogant I must say. I thought I could more. Well, actually I did more, didn’t I? I mean, I was just a company employee with a university first degree and then I achieved a PhD, so that’s something.

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