

***Care, Social (Re)production and Global Labour Migrations:  
Filipino Care Workers in Japan<sup>1</sup>***

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**Hironori Onuki (NORI)**

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, York University  
Graduate Associate, York Centre for Asian Research, York University

4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3

Telephone: 1-416-736-5265 (reception); fax: 1-416-736-5686

E-mail: [nori\\_o@yorku.ca](mailto:nori_o@yorku.ca)

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— Working Draft —

**This paper is a work in progress, and so I appreciate all your comments. Also, since this is a working draft, please do not cite from this paper without my permission.**

Under the condition that the labour force is shrinking, foreign workers have begun to support Japanese society. Expectations, hopes...and tragedies, surrounding the “work” that is based upon Asian immigrant labour-power. Japan cannot stop depending on other Asians.

Shimotsuke Shimbun<sup>2</sup>

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)<sup>3</sup> concluded by the Japanese and the Philippine governments on September 9, 2006, was described in the Japanese media as “[a] new step toward opening Japan’s labour market”.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Japan’s previous free trade treaties with Singapore, Mexico and Malaysia, the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) mainly concerns tariff reduction to facilitate bilateral exchanges of goods and services.<sup>5</sup> Yet, its distinctive feature is its facilitation of the movement of “natural persons”—more specifically, if ratified,<sup>6</sup> the JPEPA will allow for the Philippines to send up to 400 nurses and 600 “care”<sup>7</sup> workers to Japan over a period of two years.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the government of Japan has signed a similar EPA with Indonesia, which includes the same clause, permitting Indonesian nurses and care workers to work in Japan.<sup>9</sup> Further, it is currently discussing the possibility for the reception of Thai care workers through the recently ratified EPA with Thailand.<sup>10</sup> Given Japan’s strict immigration regulation over the entry of the so-called “unskilled” workers, such deregulations of the inflows of “foreign” labour to Japan is remarkable, especially in terms of care workers whose professional states has not yet been verified in Japanese labour market.<sup>11</sup> The proposed inflow of immigrant care workers to the Japanese labour market has accelerated heated debates over how to cope with the acute demand for elder care in the context of an historically unprecedented expansion of the aging population. These concerns are further expounded by a range of demographic changes that have led to a dramatic shrinking of the Japanese labour-force.

In this respect, this essay endeavours to explore the contradictions and tensions—“expectations, hopes...and [possible] tragedies”—generated by the migration of Filipino care workers to Japan and to contribute to an understanding of the growing links between relations of social reproduction in Japan and the Philippines. It will do so by addressing the following questions: First, how far and in what ways has neo-liberal restructuring of the global political economy contributed to the *marketization* and *transnationalization* of relations of social reproduction? Second, how far and in what ways does the constitution of the international division of reproductive labour<sup>12</sup> promote and/or constrain the (re)formation of identity and political subjectivity among transnational migrant care workers?

Among diverse ways to conceptualize “social reproduction,” Isabella Bakker identifies three main aspects: (a) the biological reproduction of the species; (b) the reproduction of the labour force; and, (c) the reproduction of provisioning and caring needs.<sup>13</sup> Further, another crucial component of social reproduction should be underlined, *i.e.*, the reproduction of the systems that form and maintain the relations and processes of production and social reproduction *as a whole* over time.<sup>14</sup> In other words, processes of social reproduction not only “occur in a global framework...[but] also necessarily involves sets of local practices rooted in particular communities.”<sup>15</sup> Built upon this conceptualization of social reproduction, this essay will elucidate the ways in which the transnational migration of care workers is the outcome of the contradictory interactions between the global expansion of capitalist social relations of production and the need for modern nation-states to ensure the continued (re)production of both productive and reproductive labourers. In doing so, I will argue that the deployment of Filipino and other “foreign” care workers in Japan through the EPAs that regard care labour as a commodity contribute to a hierarchical regime of social reproduction based along the lines of gender,

nationality, class, ethnicity and/or “races.”

More specifically, the first section of this paper highlights the recent ontological and epistemological contributions of feminist historical materialists in theorizing the complex interconnections *between* neo-liberal transformations in the processes of social (re)production *and* the transnationalization of commodified care labour. It is followed by an investigation that conceptualizes the JPEPA as a new constitutional moment in the *longue durée* of primitive accumulation, illuminating the consequences of the shift towards neo-liberal governance for social reproduction, particularly for global care labour migration. The next section then attempts to bring attention to some of the prospective experiences of Filipino care workers in Japan through exposing the ways in which “new” social spaces have been created for the everyday lives of these workers. This paper is fundamentally underpinned by the assumption that the structured practices of global labour migration *not only* participate in and depend on *but also* contest and negotiate the neo-liberal re-configuration of capitalist relations of production and social reproduction.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is largely drawn from the ethnographic research that I conducted from February to August 2007 in Japan and the Philippines, including interviews with students in Filipino caregiving schools, licensed Filipino care-helpers residing in Japan, state officials, business groups and NGOs.

<sup>2</sup> “Asia Myakuryu 1: Kaigoshi wo Mezasu Yo-ji no Hana [The Pulsating Flow in Asia 1: The Mother with Four Children who Aim to Become a Care Worker],” *Shimotsuke Shinbun*, May 21, 2007: 5.

<sup>3</sup> The “Economic Partnership Agreement” (EPA) has been differentiated from the similar term “Free Trade Agreement.” According to the popularly used definition, while the FTA refers to the regulations to smooth the exchanges of goods and services between certain countries or among a region, the EPA is the treaty to decide the rules for the trades of not only goods and services but also those of intellectual properties and migrant labour-power as well as investment (“EPA tte Nanno koto?” [What is the EPA], *Asahi Shinbun*, January 17, 2007: 29). Here, what is crucial to highlight is that the EPA recognizes the movements of humanity as the “object,” *i.e.*, the resources to promote profits under the free trade regime.

<sup>4</sup> “Nippi Kyotei: Rodo Kaikoku he Aratana Ippo” [The Japan-Philippine Agreement: A New Step toward Opening Japan’s Labour Market, *Asahi Shinbun*, September 26, 2006: 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), “Agreement between Japan and the Republic of the Philippines for an Economic Partnership,” (September 2006); available from: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/philippine/epa0609/main.pdf>; accessed on May 3, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> While Japanese Congress ratified JPEPA in December 2006, the agreement is still under the debate in the Philippine Congress due to several concerns, including the controversy over the “tariff reduction of wastes,” which may promote Japanese companies to export toxic waste. For this issue, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs exchanged letters to verify that both sides would observe the law that prohibits the disposal of toxic waste. Yet, as Nobue Suzuki points out, “[t]here is still a strong suspicion (and hence opposition) that corrupt government officials would not abide by the law.” Nobue Suzuki, “Carework and Migration: Japanese Perspectives on the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 16, 3 (2007): 359, note 1. 357-381

<sup>7</sup> “What is considered socially acceptable for care work,” as Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton point out, will vary in different time and space. Nicola Yeates regards the concept of “care” as dealing with various tasks and activities to endorse the personal health and welfare of people who are not able or inclined to fulfil the needs of those activities by themselves. Furthermore, she underlines the dualism inherent in “care”—that is, physical labour “caring for”) and emotional labour (“caring about”). Following these discussions, while this essay primarily focuses on “elder care” in Japan, it will use the notion of “care” by taking its complexity into account. Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, “Introduction: Social Reproduction and Feminist Political Economy,” in *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*, eds. Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton (Montreal, Kingston, London, and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006): 3-4; and, Nicola Yeates, “Global Care Chains: Critical Reflections and Lines of Enquiry,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, 3 (September 2004): 369-91.

<sup>8</sup> “Filipinjin Kangoshi ra: Ni nen de Sen nin Ukeire Housin” [Filipino nurses etc: The Principle for Accepting 1000 persons in 2 years], *Asahi Shinbun*, September 12, 2006: 3.

<sup>9</sup> MOFA, “Agreement between Japan and the Republic of Indonesia for an Economic Partnership,” (August 2007); available from: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/indonesia/epa0708/agreement.pdf>; accessed on May 3, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> MOFA, “Agreement between Japan and the Kingdom of Thailand for an Economic Partnership,” (April 2007); available from: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/thailand/epa0704/agreement.pdf>; accessed on May 3, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Won-sok Son, “Kango-Kaigo Buya no Gaikokuji Ukeire Seisaku to sono Kadai [The Policy for Receiving Foreign Nurses and Care Workers and its Issues],” in *Ibunka kan Kaigo to Tabunka Kyousei: Dare ga Kaigo wo Ninaunoka [Eldercare in a Multicultural Society: Who Shoulder Eldercare?]*, eds. Chizuko Kawamura and Won-sok Son (Tokyo: Akashi, 2007): 78-9 **72-115**; and, Hiroshi Takagi, “Gaikokujin Kaigo Rodosya Ukeire no Tenbou to Kadai—“Syuhin” ka suru Kaigo Rodo [The Prospects and Challenges of the Reception of Foreign Care Workers—The “Commodification” of Care Labour],” *Rissyo Syakai Fukushi Kenkyu [Rissyo Social Welfare Study]* 7, 2 (2006): 55-62.

<sup>12</sup> Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); and, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “The International Division of Reproductive Labor: Paid Domestic Work and Globalization,” in *Critical Globalization Studies*, eds. Richard P. Appelbaum and William I. Robinson (New York and London: Routledge, 2005): 237-47.

<sup>13</sup> Isabella Bakker, “Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy,” *New Political Economy* 12, 4 (December 2007): 541 **541-56**; and, “Neo-liberal Governance and the Reprivatization of Social

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Reproduction: Social Provisioning and Shifting Gender Orders,” in *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy*, eds. Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 66-82.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*, trans. Frank Bryant (London: Allison & Busby, [1973] 1976). Also, see, Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris and Kate Young,

“Conceptualizing Women,” *Critique of Anthropology* 9/10, 3 (1977): 101-30.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Gill and Isabella Bakker, “New Constitutionalism and the Social Reproduction of Caring Institutions,” *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 27 (2006): 41. 35-57