

Passive Followers? Decisions of Japanese Expatriate Wives

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Introduction

Japanese women are popularly viewed as passive, selfless and dedicated completely to their husbands and families. Japanese expatriate wives seem to fit this picture. However, studies show that women are undergoing a quiet revolution in Japan. Life is becoming more diverse, and women are emphasizing their individuality in career, marriage and meanings in life. How are these changes affecting Japanese housewives in Hong Kong? Are Japanese housewives really so passive?

In this paper, I will discuss the decision-making processes of Japanese women whose husbands have been confronted with an overseas relocation to Hong Kong. I want to address the debates in Japanese women studies, considering to what extent they are constrained by structurally embedded sex roles, and to what degrees they are enjoying and manipulating their privileges.

To provide an up-to-date ethnography of Japanese expatriate wives in Hong Kong, I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 expatriate wives in Hong Kong and 9 former expatriate wives who have subsequently returned to Japan. Since they treated me as one of their friends, I was also invited to some casual gatherings, and hence participant observation has also been a major source of information. I also collected data from guidebooks, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet.

Who Made the Decision?

Literature on skilled labour migration in Japan, discussing a “trailing spouse syndrome” (Yeoh and Khoo 1998: 117) that assumes women follow their husbands to be relocated within or outside Japan. Japanese women are either underrepresented in the literature or are “subsumed as passive followers and dependents of their husbands” (Thang et al. 2002).

In my informants’ casual narratives, they described themselves as followers of their husbands. It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that they are constrained by their roles as wives and mothers. But when I asked: “Who made the decision to come?” 7 of them said it was a decision of the whole family [husband and wife] and the other 15 said, “It was the order from the company.” We face another temptation to jump to the conclusion that women need to sacrifice for their husband’s careers.

However, according to the statistics in 2004 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan, there are 317,000 single postings in Japan. This shows that when relocating the worker, the wives of the workers may not need to move together with the worker. What does it mean to be “ordered from the company?” How can the company

order their workers' wives?

Order from the Company?

In my interview with Mrs. Nakamura (who is in her 40s and has no children), she told me it was the "order from the company" that force her to come to Hong Kong two years ago.

We didn't choose to leave Japan. Men cannot refuse the order from the company, and the main duty of a wife is to help and look after her husband. So my husband just followed the company's order and I just followed my husband. I felt that we had no choice. It was just the order of the company.

The above answer shows the ideology of a middle-class family that the husband is a white-collar worker devoted to the company and the wife is a fulltime homemaker and caregiver. This ideology coincides with the reason of their migration.

However, on another occasion, I found that the above description cannot represent the whole picture of the decision making process. She shared with me by chance:

I was the first expatriate family member to come. Since my husband works mostly on the mainland, I was given three choices: stay in Japan, stay in Shenzhen where my husband works, or stay in Hong Kong while my husband only comes home on weekends. I chose to stay in Hong Kong.

We can see that in fact, she was given the choice of whether to come to Hong Kong or to stay in Japan. When asked why she came to Hong Kong, her first impression was that she was ordered by the company. But when she recalled her experience, she acknowledged the fact that she participated in the process of decision-making.

Perhaps because most of my informants felt the migration decision was due to practical concerns such as family finance and safety, few thought it was their choice or decision, and just regarded it as "the order from the compan."

Considerations for Stay/Move

Realizing that "the order from the company" may disguise the decision-making process, I paid special attention to my informants' considerations in explaining their decisions to stay or move.

Family finance is one of their concerns. In Japan, many companies offer very attractive overseas allowances to relocate their workers. Recognizing the fact that most married women have part-time jobs in Japan but are unlikely to have paid work in Hong Kong, some companies give allowances as high as twice what the wife could earn in Japan. Some informants even jokingly told me, "I live in poverty (*binbō* 貧乏) in Japan while in luxury (*zeitaku* 贅沢) in Hong Kong."

The second factor is the care of family members. In Japan, family care is considered the responsibility of women, and many women derive fulfilment and satisfaction from the domestic domain. Caring for family members is the best public reason for their migration decision. According to my informants, the education system in Japan is highly competitive and demanding, and it is considered bad to spend time away from it when children are in high school. The role conflict between being a mother in Japan and being

a wife in Hong Kong gives women some leeway to negotiate their priorities.

The third factor is a sense of security. Many believe that Japan is the safest place in the world, and are worried that life overseas might be dangerous. Since most informants believe Hong Kong has the best public security after Japan in Asia, their resistance to Hong Kong is much less than to other Asian countries or cities in Mainland China where crimes are believed to be more serious and frequent.

Selfless Explanation: Ideology of Supportive Wife

An interesting thing to note is that many take it for granted that wives would accompany their husbands to be relocated to Hong Kong. Only when I asked them about the detailed process did they tell me there were other options.

But if the migration decision process is so complex and ambiguous, why do almost all informants claim to be following their husbands? Why do they tend to say they are “followers” instead of “comers?”

The ideology of “supportive family members” may be one reason. Mrs. Ueno, one of the 7 informants applied to come to Hong Kong yet said she came only to follow her husband explained:

Although it may not be a standard that everyone should follow, Japanese still believe that the husband should be the breadwinner and the wife should be devoted to the family. Whenever Japanese talk about [Japanese] expatriates, we are always talking about male expatriate workers sent by their companies. Women are family members of the transferees and we are supposed to be supportive of the expatriates.

She echoed what Mrs. Nakamura said about her migration as the “order from the company.” This middle-class ideology of husband-earner and wife-supporter still lingers in many women’s mind, although it might not reveal the reality in Japan.

Selfless Explanation: Promoting a Sense of Camaraderie

Another reason for this selfless explanation may be to promote a sense of camaraderie. Take the story of Mrs. Watanabe for example. She had travelled to over 15 countries in Asia Pacific and America, and it was she who urged her husband to apply for the relocation to Hong Kong. She was very happy and proud of her migration decision during our interview. However, in a casual gathering of expatriate wives,

Someone in the gathering said: “Well, we came to Hong Kong because of the husband’s relocation.”

Mrs. Watanabe answered: “Yes, it’s just the order of the company and we have no control! We’re just the family of expatriates, and we just follow our husbands.”

Although Mrs. Watanabe was not lying on either occasion, obviously she had a very different focus and standpoint in the two ways of describing the reason for her relocation. She knew clearly that she had choices and freedom over her arrival, but chose not to focus on this freedom that not every expatriate wife enjoys. She had chosen to unite herself with other expatriate wives with the focus of “following one’s husband.”

Conclusion: Strategic Use of “Passive Follower”

After examining the complexity of the decision-making process of my informants, and exploring their different narratives in various situations, I suggest that women are using the notion of “passive follower” strategically.

During most situations, my informants tend to identify themselves as followers of their husbands. Yet, under the presentation of “it’s all for my husband’s career,” there are more reasons and stories behind the scenes. Because they did not take the initiative to migrate, they believe they’re only reacting to the company’s relocation order.

With the widespread practice of single postings, Japanese wives are not necessarily tied to their husbands. Many look forward to the relocation, as they believed it is the best chance they could enjoy a short overseas experience with very good support. Also, some took their stay in Hong Kong as a short break from work. The financial burden in Japan put pressure on them and some wanted to try the luxurious lifestyle of a fulltime housewife.

For some of my informants, the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” ideology coincides with their personal interest in overseas adventure. Yet, when questioned, they tended to frame their rationale in a selfless discourse, which promotes the image that women are unselfish and need to sacrifice for the good of the family.

This strategy allows them to conform to the dominant domestic ideal and give them a sense of camaraderie; while at the same time allows them to enjoy the corporate expatriate support to pursue their personal overseas adventure.

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