

Alyssa Powell

Dr. Dustin Wright

JAPN311-02_FA-20

14 December 2020

Title: Seeking Stability: The Migrant Experience within Japan's Hosting Industry

Introduction: Migrant Workers in the Host Club Industry

This paper focuses on the hierarchy of race and class among the Japanese society, and how it pushes migrant workers into precarious work such as within the hosting industry.

Becoming a host or hostess is one of the many lines of work under the term *mizu shobai*, or the water trade. This term stems from the precariousness of the work, as its stability can change as easily as flowing water. These lines of service work often do not offer full time positions, benefits, labor contracts, or residence licenses for migrant workers (Aoyama, 263). Therefore, these jobs are typically undesired by a society motivated by capitalism and merit.

Furthermore, *mizu shobai* is negatively perceived as work that “is viewed as a muddy, dirty, way to earn a living” (Henson, 61). This is due to the relation to prostitution, which is illegal in Japan. However, *mizu shobai* entertainment and other aspects of the *fuzoku*, or the sex industry of Japan are acceptable due to loopholes in the Prostitution Prevention Law of 1957 (Hongo). Places that offer services similar to prostitution, such as soaplands, are able to operate under a registration of a different name, and the pretense that they offer *consensual* sexual services with an acquaintance rather than an unspecified person. Other places such as strip clubs, love hotels, and host clubs are not illegal and can operate as most of them do not offer vaginal

intercourse, as interpreted in the 1957 law, and instead opt for massage services or other non-penetratory sexual acts (Hongo).

Many people who migrate to the sex-oriented entertainment centers of Japan, otherwise known as red light districts, seek work in these areas due to struggles with poverty due to social unacceptance. These lines of work are welcoming places for those with low income, little education, and generational poverty due to socioeconomic background and/or racial background (Mahdavi). Additionally, many find that these lines of work provide a sense of belonging in a society that discriminates against them and renders agency among those who feel they have lost their confidence and abilities (ibid). Due to generational poverty, many migrant Japanese workers seek financial stability and a sense of agency within precarious work such as in the host and hostess club industries.

Methodology:

While researching the migrant experience in the Japanese hosting industry, I utilized various forms of media ranging from novels, academic articles, and videos. One particular piece of media that inspired this paper was Jake Clenell's *The Great Happiness Space: Tale of an Osaka Love Thief*. This documentary focused on the dual realities hosts face in their work as well as the effects taken on their physical and mental health, relationships, and self satisfaction. The documentary provided interviews with the hosts and customers of Rakkyo Cafe. Through the observation of the hosts' double-lifestyles led by white lies and feigned affection, the documentary comes to a consensus that host club work is often not as luxurious as it is made out to be, and is costly and emotionally grueling for hosts and clients alike. Anne Allison's *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* likewise

emphasizes the ethical, cultural, and social rituals of sex work and gender related work in Japan. Within these rituals and social constructs, Allison observes the lives of hosts and hostesses such as their family and home lifestyles, relationships and bonding, and feminine and masculine roles in society. Anne Allison's *Precarious Japan* and Pardis Mahdavi's *Seduction and the Self: Movements through Precarity, Race and Sexuality in Japanese Host Clubs* inspired me to narrow my focus onto how precarious work such as hosting is sought out through the lens of non-white migrant workers. Mahdavi's article introduces interviews from those of migrant descent who work in the host and hostess clubs of Japan. Therefore, I utilized many of those interviews to develop my topic and look into the reality of migrant workers' experiences.

Literature Review: Generational Poverty and Migration Towards Hosting

Through analyzing recent works on the topics of precarity, poverty, and host clubs, research surfaced regarding the motivation behind migrant workers seeking so-called 'precarious work' and how this recurring instance of migrant workers in *mizu shobai* entertainment is caused by generational poverty.

For many migrants, accessibility to decent and socially accepted or desired jobs within a very competitive workforce is slim, resulting in an overwhelming amount of migrant workers engaging in "'3K" *kitanai, kiken, kitsui* (or 3D, i.e., dirty, dangerous, and physically demanding) jobs at construction sites and factories" as well as in entertainment industries (Nobue). Discrimination against migrant workers is common due to the potential inabilities of migrant workers to speak Japanese and/or English, have educational degrees, or have prior work experience. Additionally, discrimination among migrant workers exists due to stigmatization of

them being viewed “as either victims of trafficking or criminal offenders, i.e. as social outcasts either way” (Aoyama, 264).

In “Thai Migrant Sexworkers: from Modernisation to Globalisation” Kaoru Aoyama acknowledges that although these generalizations of migrants are made out to be positive as to fight against sex traffickers easily taking advantage of migrants, these types of views put migrants in a position where they will always be the lower tier of society, constantly coddled and viewed as unworthy of maintaining their own agency and social status (Ibid). Furthermore, Aoyama explains how migrant workers face a disadvantage within the Japanese workforce by having to struggle with the precariousness of entertainment work alongside often not having valid documentation to work or live in Japan, causing “the danger of being exploited and exposed to violence in the industry” to potentially increase (Ibid). From this vulnerability to society and the workforce, migrant workers are often manipulated resulting in a loss of independence and self-confidence.

Kristy Henson’s dissertation “For \$1,000 I’ll love you too: an understanding of Japanese hosts and host clubs” provides insight to how Japanese society and “Japanese-ness” itself affects the workers in the hosting industry: “ In Japanese society people believe there is a place for you, this is known as *honbun*. Identity depends on the group in which you associate yourself” (Henson). In saying this, Henson explains that compared to countries such as the United States, Japanese society is much less based on individualism and much rather is based upon collectivism. Due to this collectivist culture, Japanese workers face a dilemma of having their workplace define them, which comes as a particularly difficult issue to migrant workers who must take on these formerly mentioned “3K” roles.

In the article “Filipino Boxers and Hosts in Japan: The Feminization of Male Labor and Transnational Class Subjection” author Suzuki Nobue looks into the two most stereotyped jobs of Filipino migrants in Japan: boxers and entertainers. In relation to collectivism within Japanese society, Nobue analyzes the criticism Filipino workers face on why they migrate to Japan in the first place: “Another shared emphasis recurrently found in the discourses on Filipino women and men entertainers is reference to poverty in the Philippines” (Nobue). Nobue further asserts that although the Philippines is a generally poor place, money is not always the motivating factor for migrating to Japan or other countries for work. This article considers not only generational poverty as a factor for migration, but also an escape from social constraints and issues related to family and relationships as contributing factors.

Research Findings: How the Hosting Industry Develops Assertion and a “Sense of Belonging”
within Migrant Workers

A pattern observed in multiple sources of literature and recent news concerning migrant work within Japanese host and hostess clubs is that despite the precariousness of the work, these lines of work support and uplift both clients and workers mentally and financially. This pattern develops from the environment of host and hostess clubs, where customers come to have a good time and seek affection and advice in turn for copious amounts of money. Many of the regular clientele at these clubs are often people who are red light district workers themselves (Clenell). Similar to those working in the hosting industry, these clients also have emotionally and physically tolling jobs; therefore, “some hostesses go to the clubs because they want to receive the same pampering they offer their clients” (Henson). As a result of the service provided by the

hosts and hostesses, many of the clients dub this space as a place of “‘acceptance', 'belonging' and 'home'” (Mahdavi.)

Migrant male labor has especially been made to become a gender-based issue. This is due to the comparison of visual-kei and “feminized” host club workers to the everyday and hypermasculinized Japanese “salary-man.” This view encapsulates the “men should be manly” viewpoint and that men who are “respectful of women, attentive to their own appearances and 'gentlemanly’” are effeminate and therefore outcast from society (Mahdavi). Host workers of migrant descent argue that this view of host work becoming feminized is an outdated and ultimately patriarchal view. Moreover, hosts justify their views by explaining that the host clubs are one of the only places where they feel they are not feminized or judged negatively on appearance (ibid).

Stemming from gender related anxieties host industry workers face, many workers also face the stigmatization of being racialized and discriminated against in society and the general workforce. In one interview conducted by Pardis Mahdavi, Kiyoshi, age 21, explained that his mother was a hostess worker in Japan and returned to the Philippines after being deported. At a young age, Kiyoshi was used to gain Japanese citizenship for both himself and his mother for work and schooling, but found struggles in Japan among not having Japanese language skills and looking *hafu*, or only half Japanese. Due to marginalization because of generational poverty and the precarious economy of Japan, Kiyoshi dropped out of school and sought several informal jobs to provide for himself. Kiyoshi eventually found work at a host club and “articulated sentiments of finding belonging and relief from a life lived 'on the edge’”

Similarly, another of Mahdavi’s interviewees, Kiko aged 23, struggled with intergenerational marginalization and unacceptance from both Japanese communities and

Filipino communities in Japan for either being “too foreign” or “too Japanese.” Kiko’s Filipina mother, similar to Kiyoshi’s, was a former hostess worker. After Kiko worked the socially undesirable McDonald’s fast food job, she found her true self in the hosting industry after visiting with a friend one night. However, when announcing her new job to her mother, she was kicked out of their shared apartment. Without regrets though, Kiko recalled that at the hostess club she “felt like she had entered a world where 'things made sense', and she was eager to remain in this world” (Mahdavi).

Kiyoshi and Kiko’s stories resonated with many of Mahdavi’s Filipino-Japanese and *hafu* interviewees, especially taking note of the inter-generational host/hostess work from migrant mother to son/daughter. For workers of migrant descent, the host clubs become places where their ‘foreignness’ is accepted and a sense of belonging as well as agency is restored.

These hosts and hostess clubs are described to be designed in order to “draw in many suffering from feelings of precarity” (Mahdavi). Therefore, the luxurious and welcoming atmosphere the host and hostess clubs provide are necessary for society to counteract the effects of widespread precarity and hopelessness in Japan.

Overall, migrant workers are drawn into the hosting industry due to its accessibility, acceptance, and promises of fortune. Although the latter aspect is often developed through a host or hostess’s own actions and accommodations towards clients, the promise of an invigorating and youthful atmosphere as well as a place where the host or hostess has ‘control’ provides hope and affirmation within such a serious society.

Works Cited:

- Allison, Anne. *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2009.
- Allison, Anne. "Precarious Japan." *Duke University Press*,
www.dukeupress.edu/Precarious-Japan/.
- Aoyama, Koaru. "Thai Migrant Sexworkers: from Modernisation to Globalisation" *Chapter 10: Women Cross-Border Migrants Working in the Sex Industry in Japan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Clennell, Jake, director. *The Great Happiness Space: Tale of an Osaka Love Thief*. 22 Jan. 2006,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=42oDQ4biOaY.
- Henson, Kristy D., "For \$1,000 I'll love you too: an understanding of Japanese hosts and host clubs" (2013). Theses, Dissertations and Capstones. Paper 940.
- Hongo, Jun. "Law Bends over Backward to Allow 'Fuzoku'." *The Japan Times*,
www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/05/27/reference/law-bends-over-backward-to-allow-fuzoku/.
- Mahdavi, Pardis. "Seduction and the Self: Movements through Precarity, Race and Sexuality in Japanese Host Clubs." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 1–13. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/13691058.2017.1319499.
- Nobue, Suzuki, and Sachi Takahata. "Filipino Boxers and Hosts in Japan: The Feminization of Male Labor and Transnational Class Subjection." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2 Apr. 2007.
- Takeyama, Akiko. *Staged Seduction: Selling Dreams in a Tokyo Host Club*. Stanford University Press, 2016.