

Multicultural Coexistence in Japan

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I arrived in Tokyo on September 8, 2013. This was my first long-term trip overseas. As I am a government staff of the Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, going abroad has been very difficult. At Narita Airport, I waited for my friend who lives in Tokyo and who was supposed to come and meet me at the airport. While waiting, I encountered one young Japanese man, who helped me and gave me some coins that I could use to make a phone call. But I could not call my friend because I did not know how to make a domestic call without using country code in Japan. Later, I met my friend and showed my gratitude to the Japanese man who helped me. This was my first experience in Tokyo and I was impressed by the kindness of Japanese people to strangers. Nowadays, the world is changing with the globalization; however, I believe that we human beings still need to help each other and rely on and respect each other.

During the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2013, I acquired a lot of knowledge about other fellows' cultures, traditions, and their opinions about the ALFP 2013's main theme, "The Future of Asia, the World and Humanity after Development and Growth." Moreover, I learned about various topics and themes concerning Asian countries, including Japanese culture, current situations of the economy, and political issues, through seminars and visits that had been arranged by the ALFP program.

As I am an anthropologist, I would like to study and focus on people and their cultures, traditions, customs, beliefs, and social contacts with each other. I discussed my experience with ethnic communities in Myanmar as well as our country's natural disasters and man-made disasters during the change from dictatorship to democracy.

From my experience in the ALFP, I would like to extend my study to the multicultural coexistence of Japanese people with other migrant people like Chinese, Korean, Brazilians, Filipina, and Myanmar in Japan and the way they try to adapt cultural change and other social, economic, political, and religious changes.

There are four major transnational migrant groups in Japan. In 2008, Chinese were the largest group of foreign residents in Japan numbering 655,377. The second largest group (and the largest until 2006) was of residents from Korea numbering 589,239. The third largest group, Brazilians (primarily *Nikkei* or Japanese Brazilians), numbered 312,582; most of them had moved to Japan with the enactment of the 1990 immigration law which admitted them as unskilled laborers. The fourth were 210,617 Filipino residents. In contrast to the group of residents from China who are mostly new comers consisting of students studying at universities and language schools and industrial and technical trainees, Korean residents include approximately 400,000 *Zainichi Kankoku-Chosenjin* (Korean-origin residents) whose presence in Japan was originally a result of colonial labor migration. About 80% of Filipinos living in

Japan are women, many of whom have entered Japan on “entertainer visas” and worked largely in the entertainment sector, such as nightclubs.¹

Multicultural coexistence in Japan has been, however, analyzed rather critically, especially concerning the lack of clear governmental policy toward Japan's multicultural future at the national level. On the other hand, the transnational realities in certain local communities go beyond the Japanese nation-state.

Okubo district of Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, is one example where foreign residents are concentrated. As of January 2010, there were 418,116 foreign residents registered in Tokyo, and in Shinjuku-ku alone, the rate of foreign residents reached 11% of Shinjuku's total population (317,742), with residents from Korea and China making up of 73% of the foreign population. If the number of foreign residents continues to grow and reaches 10 million, the rate of foreign residents in Japan will most likely be as high as 11% by 2050—the same ratio of foreign residents we have seen in Shinjuku-ku today.²

As far as international marriages are concerned, there are over 100,000 couples of Japanese men and Filipina women who married between 1989 and 2007. One problem involving these Japanese-Filipina marriages is the status of the children, especially those born out of wedlock. There are now over 200,000 Japanese-Filipino children.³ They want to live as “ordinary Japanese” and share hopes for the future of Japanese society. "Living together in one world" is the reality for everyone in this globalized world. Therefore, learning about different communities, gaining mutual understanding for one another, and facilitating cultural adaptation are important challenges for anthropologist.

During the ALFP, I interviewed several Myanmar (Burmese) people who live in Takadanobaba in Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo. According to the interview, nowadays, about 8,700 Myanmar nationals live in Japan—around Tokyo and Nagoya area. Half of them are refugees and about 3,400 are children. Approximately 2,000 people from Myanmar obtain Special Status Permit like visa. In Takadanobaba, 1,000 Myanmar nationals reside in the area and run traditional Myanmar restaurants, stores, and other ethnic restaurants, such as Shan and Kachin restaurants. In December 1996, a Japanese nongovernmental organization (NGO) named People's Forum on Burma was established in order to support refugees from Myanmar, who had been suffering a lot, and to help promote democratization of their country. With over 200 members, People's Forum on Burma cooperated with people of Myanmar and engaged in human rights activities and demonstrations. In 2007, about 2,000 to 3,000 Myanmar nationals and Japanese joined a democratic movement and walked together to the Myanmar Embassy.

¹ Shinji Yamashita, “Japan in 2015: An Anthropological Imagination of Japan's Future through the Dreams of Filipina Migrants,” *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 12 (2011): 3-25, CiNii, <<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110009436703>>, 6-7.

² Ibid., 11-12.

³ Ibid., 14-15.

Nowadays, these groups include about 30,000 people. There are four activities carried out by People's Forum on Burma. These are: democratic activity,⁴ refugee application for parliament, refugee charity event, and signature campaign to save or protect human life. People's Forum on Burma also publishes newsletters named *Aling-Yaung* and delivers them to its members four times a year. A copy of the newsletters can be purchased by non-members at 300 yen. Nowadays, the organization supports 400 people financially.

Some of the Myanmar refugees who live in Tokyo and whom I interviewed have difficulty adapting to life in Japan. The most difficult issues they have faced have to do with language (barrier), food, culture, religion, and low income—as they can only get part-time jobs and also change their jobs frequently. But they said that compared with Korean people, they are more familiar and close with the natives in Myanmar and have helped the country more. They work mainly in restaurants, hotels, and construction sites and their minimum income is US\$ 2,000 per month. These difficulties are nearly the same for other foreign migrant workers in Japan.

Currently, many Asian countries face natural disasters and man-made disasters every year. We need to learn and find a way to tackle problems surrounding these disasters together as it is the best coping strategy for us. Moreover, every Asian country should try to achieve development and growth in accordance with the changes taking place in the world. During the ALFP, we were able to share our experiences and other countries' good examples for development. I felt that the aim of the program and the general theme were appropriate for us the fellows.

Through our discussion paper presentations, we were able to share our countries' conflicts and problems and tried to analyze them. We discussed and learned about crisis of communities (for example Muslims in Malaysia, Bingalis called Rohinjas by others, Mindanado, Pakistan) and the age of politicized (ethnic/ religious) identity, as well as new types of political and business leadership, social media and new forms of citizen participation, global trends and social movements in Japan. By participating in these discussions, my perspective became wider in a global context. We need to promote sustainable development and face the challenges of political and economic competitions and learn how to control our quality of life without relying heavily on other countries.

For the seminar “Japanese Culture Lost and Found” by Mr. Alex Kerr (writer/ collector of Japanese art), I would like to comment that it was a relevant seminar to learn about history of tourism in Japan from a writer and collector of Japanese art who has both outsider and insider's view. Mr. Kerr explained about the demographic eclipse in small villages in Japan and also shared some examples of how things like signs and telephone wires can destroy scenery.

⁴ For instance, Myanmar refugees return to Myanmar (Burma) and they would like to reduce the huge amount of tax that people there have to pay.

Moreover, he discussed about issues of heritage and environmental preservation in Japan and then told the story of Chiiori, a 300-year-old house in Iya on the island of Shikoku, which he and a group of friends succeeded in restoring with the combination of Japanese tradition and modernization. In his opinion, the combination of tradition and modernization is true modernization. Yet, keeping a balance between tradition and modernization is difficult. Moreover, agriculture, forestry, and fishing business, which used to be the main source of income in rural areas, are on the decline and tourism business is a new source of income for these areas. According to Mr. Kerr, most popular tourism in Japan is package tours through which the tourists can enjoy traditional customs and food.

Myanmar is also promoting tourism business now. Compared with last two years, tourism in Myanmar is booming and we need to prepare small regional tourism. Our big problem is how to arrange enough accommodation for the tourists. Our country has various types of tourism, including historical tourism, cultural tourism, ethnic tourism, and recreational tourism. I believe that the experience of developed countries and modern technology should be shared. Furthermore, I would like to learn more deeply about other countries' tourism business and government policy concerning the issues of national cultural heritage and environmental preservation.

Another seminar that was relevant was the seminar on the role of lawyers in Japan and the activities of Human Rights Now by Ms. Ito Kazuko (Attorney/ Secretary General, Human Rights Now). We the fellows were able to learn about the role of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) and the activities of Human Rights Now from an active female lawyer's point of view. In particular, Ms. Ito explained in detail about the function and activities of the JFBA, security law, women's right, and introduction of *saiban-in* (lay judge) system in Japan. Observing the current gender ratio of lawyers in the bar association, promotion of gender equality and facilitation of women's active participation in the decision making process of the JFBA is necessary.

Ms. Ito's seminar and the follow-up discussions were very useful as they extended to an Asian and global context. Myanmar is now changing from dictatorship to democracy and our people need to know about human rights education. Through Ms. Ito, I got new information about Peace Law Academy, which conducts a two-year human rights education course for Myanmar youths near Thai-Myanmar border with the help of local civil society groups. Over 80% of the graduate students go back to work in Myanmar. The new human rights association founded in Myanmar under Human Rights Now supports these graduates with financial issues and introduces them to donors' foundations. In the process, Human Rights Now gives advice and shares their experiences with their counterpart in Myanmar. Furthermore, Human Rights Now is organizing wider human rights education activities for Myanmar youths in the coming months. All data gathered from these activities are useful for me and other developing countries like

Myanmar. I also support Ms. Ito's idea that "we need to get universal human rights and equal human rights for local communities and no more top-down system."

Another interesting seminar was a seminar on homeless issues in Japan by Ms. Sano Miku (Tokyo Office General Manager, The Big Issue Japan). Ms. Sano explained the history of their magazine, the *Big Issue*, and their network around the world, as well as the way they help homeless people and the role of their registered members in Japan. She also explained how homeless is defined in Japan and basic reasons for why people become homeless and the government support for them. Through their business and support system, the Big Issue helps homeless people get out of their situation and rebuild their lives. As of 2012, among 1,451 homeless registered with the Big Issue, 163 people were able to get a job and an apartment. By selling the *Big Issue* magazines, not only can they earn income, but they can also connect with their customers and thus feel more connected to society, which is important for them.

In this seminar, we learned how the members of the Big Issue treat homeless people in Japan. They try to help and support the homeless as much as they can. It is good for society. Also, they try to reduce the stigma attached to homeless people and promote mutual understanding between the homeless and others. Compared to my country, the number of homeless people in Japan is very low and the program the Big Issue does can give good lessons for us. Although the background of homeless people in Myanmar is not the same as that of Japan's, we can get new ideas and find ways to solve problems concerning homeless people.

Another seminar I found interesting was a seminar by Professor Ohashi Masaaki (ALFP 1999 Fellow/ Chairperson, Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation). It was a great seminar to learn about the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and how government, NGOs, NPOs and people in Japan responded—from a very active NGO person with an insider's point of view. Professor Ohashi first explained the definitions of NGOs and NPOs in Japan and how to operate NGOs and expand their activities. He then presented facts relating to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear accident, including the number of the deaths by age and sex, situation of the affected areas, and government mechanism for relief and rehabilitation. Furthermore, he mentioned the roles and tasks of Social Welfare Councils and Disaster Volunteer Centers and their future challenges.

In time of disasters, we have governments and NGOs and other international organizations' support. Because of the climatic change and environmental change, global warming is occurring around the world and every country needs to prevent natural disasters. We need to share other countries' coping strategies and suggestions and at the same time learn their past lessons.

From this seminar, I learned the function of NGOs and their significant roles. Information from government to the people is important, and trust for the government is also needed at the time of disaster. The job of NGOs is to search the immediate needs of the affected people and look after the situation and the link between the people and government. Therefore,

NGO-government connection needs to be strengthened. Through this approach, I hope we can prepare for disasters in future.

Another seminar was about City of Nanto, Toyama Prefecture, by Mr. Imai Ryoji (Tourist Ambassador of Nanto City). It was great to learn about the life of people in Nanto City, their culture, craft, and places including Gokayama (a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site), Johana (a town that is prospered with silk industry and craftsmanship, as well as with songs and dances on festival days), and Inami (a town where a new generation of artists pursue local wood-sculpting traditions).

Mr. Imai's seminar was useful to us the fellows as Nanto City was where we were visiting for our field trip as part of the ALFP program. We needed to know its historical background, people's way of living, and rules for the visitors, such as no smoking, no littering, and respecting the privacy of the people there. Myanmar also has a lot of cultural heritage and some of them are applying for as the World Cultural Heritage site in UNESCO. Therefore, it is important to learn about how the Japanese maintain their culture and tradition for generations and how to coexist with nature.

In addition, I would like to study more the policy of local administration in Nanto, especially concerning their education, and how to adjust their local income and daily expenses, and future programs for promoting the public interest through their way of life as an eco-village and also programs for taking care of elderly persons. I am also interested in learning about exchange programs on world cultural heritages with other Southeast Asian countries.

Another interesting seminar I attended during the ALFP was a seminar titled "Forty Years of Japanese Feminism" by Professor Ueno Chizuko (Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo). It was great to learn about the history of Japanese Feminism and women's status in Japan according to the global ranking of 2011 by famous Japanese feminist's point of view. In this seminar, Professor Ueno explained about female politicians in the Lower House and the Cabinet, as well as female governors and politicians at the local level using graphs and data. The ratio of Japanese female politicians is the lowest level in the world. According to Professor Ueno, Japanese feminists prefer to gain gender equality in their professional carriers and marriage. She discussed if the policy makers would like to solve the problem of population decrease in Japan, they need to pay more attention to the opportunities for women, such as giving full-time jobs and less working hours.

In Myanmar, "the status of women... is unique. Traditionally, women have enjoyed equal rights with men in all crucial areas such as education, health, employment, social and political activities. As women represent more than half the population of the nation, the active participation of the womenfolk is vital in the State's endeavors to build a developed nation. Therefore, the national policies and programs for the advancement of women both in urban and rural areas, especially in the border areas have been given priority to enable the State to utilize

the full strength of women.”⁵ Moreover, the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs is strong. If we can share our experiences with women from other Asian countries, we will be able to elaborate on the meaning of gender equal rights and human rights in Asian, global context. In addition, I would like to learn more about employment status for women in Japan, gender equal policies, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO), neo-nationalism, Women's Action Network (WAN) and their activities, and the response and voices of other Japanese women.

Another seminar was “Energy and Nuclear Energy Policy after March 11” by Mr. Suzuki Tatsujiro (Vice Chairman, Japan Atomic Energy Commission). Mr. Suzuki explained the issues and challenges of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC) and also shared his personal reflections on the Fukushima accident and current status of the Fukushima Dai-ichi site. After discussion, I understood the importance of restoring public trust in nuclear safety and energy policy. I also gathered that society needs to think about how it can go without being dependent on nuclear power at the soonest possible time, and this will help mobilize all possible resources to enable zero operation of nuclear power plants in the 2030s.

According to Mr. Suzuki, if the government wants to get public confidence, it would need to establish a forum where the local public and stakeholders can share information to improve the transparency of policy making process and thus enhance public confidence. After March 11, nuclear energy issue is not only about safety impact but also about health and social impact.

People in Fukushima do not know how long they have to live away from their homes or move to another place. So, how to restore their life again and how to ensure their welfare is a very important issue now. All these information and lessons from March 11 are valuable for us because we need to know about nuclear energy while climate change is becoming a global issue. Furthermore, I would like to learn more about green energy development policy, as well as the Japanese government's investment plan for solar and wind power and the possibility of building new transmission line of electricity in the future.

The high point of the ALFP program for me was sharing knowledge and experiences regarding existing problems not only with other ALFP fellows but also with counterparts in Japan, such as professors, scholars, students, and Japanese people whom we met or visited during the program. I learned their various impacts.

To sum up, through the ALFP, I acquired much knowledge that will support my research and my future carriers. In the future, I would like to make a plan to give lectures and seminars in my university for other fellows, including those from past years, and share the experiences we had during our ALFP programs. Particularly, I would like to invite them to give

⁵ “Women, Men and Families in Myanmar,” *Facts and Details*,
<http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5c/entry-3042.html>.

suggestions concerning ethnic conflicts in Myanmar and discuss how we can cope with the challenges we face, create a harmony, and carry out a political reform for democracy. I believe that multicultural coexistence in Japan has helped enlighten the fundamental way to cope with ethnic communities' conflicts and communal problems in Myanmar, and deepening of mutual understanding among people of different ethnicities and communities can support national unity of Myanmar based on the motto, "living together in one world," in this globalized world.