Expression of Filipino Cultural Identity by Selected Caregiving Assistants in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to gain insight into the experiences of Filipino nurses working abroad in Japan. As a small-scale exploratory study, it consists of in-depth interviews with three Filipino nurses who now work in Japan in the same field. Unlike previous studies addressing migrant nurses in Japan, this study focuses on the element of cultural identity assertion rather than work in relation to migration policy or socioeconomics, or about specific aspects of work relationships or language usage. This study found that contrary to some previous research on Filipino identity in Japan, the informants of this study did assert their identity in various ways, such as in cooking Filipino foods, being more emotionally-connected to patients as a nurse, and insisting on more gender-equal relationship dynamics that reflect Filipino society. This is an area ripe for future research

since the social aspects of medical practice are starkly different between Japan and the Philippines; investigation of how Filipinos navigate these differences should be addressed in diasporic studies. This study also makes use of an indigenous methodology, pagtatanong-tanong, an interviewing style devised by scholars of Sikolohiyang Pilipino and Pilipinolohiya. The research also raises the point that analysis of various socioeconomic levels of Filipino migrant workers is needed to make a more holistic understanding of how Filipinos assert or do not assert their Filipino identity abroad.

Keywords: Philippines, Japan, Nursing, Migration, Identity, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Migration of healthcare workers is linked with the globalization process which increases the cross-border movements of capital commodities, information and people. Japan in particular has responded to this economic and social trend in some ways that diverge from the rest of Northeast Asia and Singapore, out of necessity because of rapidly changing demographics. In a sense, Japan has taken more extensive measures to try to address the looming economic consequences of the developing demographic crisis. The bilateral agreement between the Philippines and Japan led to the first crop of Filipino care workers arriving in Japan in 2009. That is, this was the beginning of employment of foreign workers in the medical and care fields on a larger scale. Regardless of the agreement, the primary concern in hospitals and among Japanese workers is the language and cultural barrier, but also the nursing skills and professionalism of the foreign workers (Ogawa, 2012, 570-571). This agreement came out of negotiations between the two countries; at first, the Philippines wanted Japan to accept domestic helper, nannies, nurses, and care workers. This was a problem because Japan's immigration policy only permits the entry of "skilled" workers, so only the nurses and certified care workers qualified. Lobbying by stakeholders is what kept the care workers on the list of skilled workers (Ogawa, 2012, 575). What constitutes "skilled work" remains a constant policy debate, both among policy makers and stakeholders. In Japan, at least, it seems that there is an agreement that this kind of work is particularly specialized and important to the economy. It should be noted that many Japanese professional groups are against the entry of foreign healthcare and care giving workers. The Japanese Nursing Association (JNA), for example, was against the entry of migrants over concerns about their effects on the domestic labor market, as well as deterioration of the working conditions and undermining of the professionalism of Japanese nurses. In fact, at the behest of JNA lobbying, the economic agreement included the condition that foreign care workers must pass the national licensure examination within four years, and if they fail, then they must leave Japan (Ogawa, 2012, 577-578). There is a concern about the professionalism and abilities of the foreign healthcare workers in Japan that are from Southeast Asia.

This concern from Japanese healthcare workers seems to be rooted more in prejudice than the reality of medical education. In the Philippines' case, professional nurses are university graduates and must pass licensure examinations in their own country. Medical workers in the Philippines, at least doctors and nurses, are certainly qualified on an educational level to work in other countries. Regardless, the Japanese policy means that foreign medical and care workers can only work in highly regulated institutions that can double as their training ground until they pass the examination or leave. They are always in teams with Japanese co-workers and are allowed time to study Japanese language, even with help from professional teachers. This is very different than in other countries in Northeast Asia (Ogawa, 2012, 577-578). For example, in Taiwan, the situation is nearly the opposite, where foreign workers are only employed in the private household setting and are often discouraged from learning Mandarin Chinese or Taiwanese Hokkien Chinese, and they cannot obtain any professional certifications. The reasoning for language and cultural exclusion is that employers can control their workers easier if there is a lack of understanding (Ogawa, 2018). Taiwan, then, as opposed to Japan, is fairly unregulated with foreign care workers, and offers no pathway to career advancement. In Japan, these provisions extend to family as, after passing examinations, visas can be extended indefinitely, permanent residency is possible, and family reunion is allowed (Ogawa, 2018).

In terms of research into nursing and nurse assisting by foreigners in Japan, the focus is on elder care and care workers. The two Ogawa pieces above touch on medical professionals some, but more so in the context of policy-making. Elsewhere, research on the workers and their work specifically tend to focus on those who specialize in care work for the elderly, rather than those who work in hospitals. For example, in Lee (2010), the discussion is centered on how the aging society and shrinking population of working adults, and especially the changing economic roles of women have led to changes in how the elderly are cared for. Peng (2012) focuses on the social and economic policy reforms in Japan and South Korea, so again a more policy-oriented approach. Numerous other papers on the topic of care focus primarily on either the policy approach or on the elder care aspect. Two areas that seem to be lacking are medical care workers, such as those in hospitals, and an anthropological angle rather than a political-economical angle. A notable previous study that addressed a topic in the realm of cultural

acclimation is by Lieba Faier, entitled *Intimate Encounters: Filipina Women and the Remaking of Rural Japan*. There are a couple things that are directly related to my study. Firstly, there are many mentions in the book of the preconceptions many Japanese have towards Filipino women. The women were mostly entertainers who then married Japanese men. In Central Kiso, these women are often initially disparaged as prostitutes and foreign, before sometimes becoming relatively accepted over time, if they, in the eyes of residents, have conformed to Japanese society in certain ways (Faier, 2009, 138-139). Secondly, the situation at home. Here, some Filipino interviewees discuss how they felt they were essentially being treated like children by their husband's family, in that they were forced to do things the Japanese way, whether it was cooking, serving, or eating. They felt as though they were being taught by the in-laws in how to be proper. Cooking Filipino food for family was off-limits, eating food with the hands, as is traditional in the Philippines, was off-limits, and there was an aspect of being a "maid" for people. These things were of course in stark contrast to life in the Philippines. The only time the Filipino wives could "be Filipino" was in their bedroom alone (Faier, 2009, 159-161).

These sorts of experiences do in fact pop up in my interviewees, however, I have also come across a dynamic between husband and wife of give and take. That is, while Faier's study focuses on how Filipino women have adapted and changed their behaviors to become more Japanese, she discusses less about the opposite situation of Japanese spouses changing to accommodate their Filipino partner. Conversely, a more recent example of research that analyzes interpersonal relations of Filipino nurses in Japan is by Nagaya et al 2024. In this work, the authors investigate how Japanese language ability affects the self-confidence and interpersonal relationships of Filipino nurses. More specifically it is analyzing the effects on self-confidence and relations in the work space, both with patients and coworkers (Nagaya et al 2024). This research discusses the role of language acquisition in the process of perceiving oneself as adequate in the work space, and how others perceive Filipinos based on their knowledge of Japanese. This is an important area of research that does touch on some similar themes to the themes presented below, but it also has a much narrower focus, being specific to language and mostly work place relations. One of the things that my research wants to address is how non-work relationships are navigated and how these are related to work relationships. There is also an emphasis in my

work in how Filipino conceptualizations of relationships and care affect both their work and their home life. Some brief examples from the interviews follow. One informant in particular spoke of "teaching her husband" on how to love a woman and do his fair share of labor, which is a role reversal from the situations described above. These topics end up thematically related to my informants' experiences at their respective hospitals because there was an element of them needing to navigate differences in the culture surrounding care work and medical practice. Specifically, a theme emerged where Filipino nursing assistants were considered *too attentive* to the emotional needs of their patients, where in Japanese practice care is more transactional in a pursuit of what is viewed as professionalism. This brings to mind Ledivina Cariño's discussion on how to think about Filipino ethics. There, in short terms, she discusses how the interpersonal relationship tends to be more important to most Filipinos than their relationship with arbitrary rules (Cariño 1997).

Considering these points brought up in the interviews and some cultural notes on Filipino ethics, I argue in this paper that my informants made a point of asserting themselves culturally in both the workplace, as care workers, and in the home, as wives. This assertion of culture stems from a desire to maintain their identity as Filipinos while living in a very different environment. There is a strong divergence in culture between Japan and the Philippines, and in these conversations it seems that it was important for my Filipino informants to hold on to their sense of self via their identity and apply their identity to their work and home lives. The culture and ethics they were raised in in the Philippines are clearly important enough to these informants to be a point of contention or compromise in both their home life and at work. Hospital work is fundamentally different than entertainment work, so understanding the differences in how Filipinos with this background make their way in Japan is important to the study of diasporas in that there is consideration for divergent socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The divergence in my informants' views in comparison to, for example, Faier, actually points to another possible point of future research in examining divergent views among Filipinos of varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Methodology

For this project, the aim was to be small and qualitatively-focused. The purpose is to understand a growing phenomenon in-depth. Additionally, with the logistical limitations, it was difficult to find large amounts of participants for a study such as this. Similarly, due to logistics, the interviews for this ethnography were conducted online. Because of time constraints and availability of participants, I conducted one interview with each of my participants, each interview being around 45 minutes. There were three participants who answered my outreaches, all of which work currently as nursing assistants at hospitals. This was then supplemented as needed with further text conversations via the Line app, which is the major messaging app in Japan. The shift to texting was due to the schedule constraints of the participants. They lead very busy lives in their careers and home lives, so followups were easier for them via usage of a messaging app. Some of the discussions were basic points such as marital and child status, educational background, reasons for going to Japan and working in nursing, plans for the future in regard to the Philippines, experiences with government, and experiences at work. These were not meant to direct the conversation, rather to create an anchor for discussion in case there was a stall in the conversation. Essentially, there is a general plan in mind, but little direction and an emphasis on getting the interviewees to open up and express themselves (Bernard, 2006, 211-212). However, the style that I used while interviewing was more specific to Filipino culture, as it made for a more relaxed environment for the interviewees. This indigenous social science research method is called pagtatanong-tanong. The meaning in colloquial Tagalog is "asking questions", but as an indigenous research methodology it carries a more specific meaning. There are four major characteristics to pagtatanong-tanong: 1. it is participatory in nature, in that the structure of the interaction itself in terms of direction and time management is in part decided by the informant or interviewee 2. the researcher and the informant are equal in status, and both parties will engage in asking questions 3. it conforms to existing group norms and 4. it is integrated with other indigenous research methods (Pe-Pua, 2018, 507).

When engaging with the interviewees, this is the true format of the discussion. The direction of the discussion, and as a result the research itself, was in large part pushed by my informants. I had the list of ideas from above,

but as it turned out in the discussions, there always ended up being a particular direction that the informants wanted to focus on, and less interest in the others, resulting in my research taking the shape of what the informants found important about their experiences. In addition to this, the informants also liked to ask me questions about my background and my interest in their lives. This usually centered on personal questions as well as questions about my Tagalog-speaking history and why I study the Philippines. This sort of interaction serves to equalize the researcher and the informant and makes for a closer and easier discussion, and cultural conformity. An additional aspect to pagtatanong-tanong is an element of storytelling, characterized by casualness in tone despite the seriousness of the intention (Pe-Pua, 2019, 11). This is also a large element of the discussions documented here, in that there was much swapping of opinions on topics and lots of storytelling. Language itself is very important, and in a method such as this, it is also necessary to use the native languages of the informants or at least a language of comfort. This was very explicit in the case of these interviews, as all the informants asked to conduct the discussions in Tagalog for comfort and ease of interaction and communication. To this end, all the interviews were conducted in Tagalog and will be translated by me into English for this paper.

In the case of a foreign researcher such as myself, the fluent use of Tagalog and my knowledge of the Philippines helped establish a closer relationship by way of providing a topic of discussion, resulting in what was hopefully closer to what is called pakikipagpalagayang-loob, or "being in rapport/understanding", which entails a level of mutual trust (Pe-Pua, 2018, 509-514). This cultivation of a closer relationship was also done through interactions on Line before and after the interviews, conducted as well in Tagalog; this resulted in two of my informants calling me their friend and in one case inviting me to visit their household in the future. This is really the kind of relationship that is desirable in pagtatanong-tanong, and in this case resulted in great insights into lifestyle.

The Interviews

Becoming Acclimated to a Different Culture

My first informant lives and works in Yokohama at a hospital. She was very enthusiastic about participating in the study and has also contributed information about her life and work via messages on Line. She is a vlogger, maintaining a channel on YouTube that mostly discusses her work experiences in her hospital. She is 49 years old and married a Japanese man 21 years ago now. She has two kids, ages 20 and 17.

In regard to how her and her husband decided to raise their kids, at the start they were in an international school:

> "nung starting nila yung mga prep, kindergarten ganyan, sa international school ko sila pinasok. Tapos elementary na, pinsaok ko sila sa Japanese school kasi napansin ko na mas mahirap ang aralan ng kanji ng Japanese kaysa sa English. Tapos isa pa, Japanese citizen sila dapat alam nila and wika ng nationality nila…" ("back when they were starting, as in prep, kindergarten, etc, I entered them into an international school. After elementary though, I entered them into a Japanese school because in my experiences, studying Japanese kanji is harder than studying English. And one more thing, they are Japanese citizens, so and so they should know the language of their nationality…")

This first quote right at the beginning of the interview is already getting at a major theme in the discussion, and that is language. What is clear from this is that there is a feeling based on her own experiences that learning not just spoken Japanese, but written Japanese too, is extremely important. In fact, this topic is returned to later in the interview when discussing her career aspirations. She cannot advance and become a registered nurse (RN) because the exams are only given in written Japanese, which she is basically illiterate in. This is actually problematic for her since she actually is a registered nurse in the Philippines. When asked about her educational background:

> "ano ko, bachelor of science ako sa nursing, tapos nag-take din ako agad ng board[...]registered nurse ako sa Pilipinas," which translates to "what was I? I did a bachelor of science in nursing, then I also immediately took the board exam, so I am a registered nurse in the Philippines." When I asked the followup of if there was any carryover to Japan, she had this to say: "actually, nung nag-part-time job pa lang ako, nung under agency sa Japan. Plain housewife muna ako, tas nung lumaki ang mga kids ko, inisipin ko magtrabaho, tapos inisipin ko parang caregiver na lang o parang tagapaglinis, para lamakalabas na magtrabaho more earnings ganyan. Timing nakita ko ang agency na nagsasabi tumatanggap sila ng mga assistant nurses at caregivers," ("actually, before, I was just working in a part-time job, when I was under an agency in Japan. I was a plain housewife first, then when the kids grew up [not out of the house though, just old enough to not need a carer], I thought about working. Then, I was thinking like a caregiver, or a custodian because working outside the house is more earnings, etc. At that time, I happened to see an agency that said they are taking in assistant nurses and caregivers.")

She went on to say that she felt good when she was placed in a hospital environment since the agency was also taking people without university degrees and qualifications. Eventually she moved into full-time work directly at the hospital, which entailed getting a form 137, background checks, and others in order to become an assistant nurse.[2] She said these requirements were stringent because this was an important university hospital that was very serious about medicine. On this note, she said that it was easy for her to get a visa and become a permanent resident because she was married to a Japanese man and had a very nice background, but she did still encounter some difficulties with the Japanese government in the realm of being a foreign worker. She mentioned specifically that Japan is far tighter in policing the paying of taxes, as well as being higher taxes, as compared to the Philippines, where you kind of get away with not paying. She said there are lots of

questions if you do not follow the rules in Japan, but the salary is much higher. Some important stuff are in the area of cultural differences:

> "[...]siguro may gusto mag-try na i-bully ako pero hindi ko sila binigyan ang chance. In-offer ko kasi kaibitan ng mga Pilipino, yung hardworking pinakita ko sa kanila. Tinanggap ako nila. Ang makikita mo lang dito na nahirapan lang ako sa umpisa kasi very strict sila, meron talaga silang rule. Eh alam mo naman tayong sa mga Pilipino wala tayong rule. "pwede na yan" "kaya na yan!" Hindi, sa kanila almost perfect. Tapos yung mga, ang swerte ko lang kasi yung mga nagtuturo sa akin. Yung mga superior ko, talagamng stricto, mababait, actually hindi sila mabait nung una. Naging mabait na lang sila kasi nakita nilang naghahardwork ako, tapos sumusunod ako sa mga sinasabi nila. Medyo nakakalimutan yung iba, pero hindi ka naman lumalabag sa rules nila. Kaya lang talagang hanggang dito lang level ko, sa umpisa pa lang kasi diba? Pero ngayon pwede na ako makipagsabayan, it takes time lang talaga," ("Maybe there was someone that wanted to try to bully me [at work, in response to a question about difficulties at work], but I did not give them the chance. I offered the kindness of Filipinos, I showed the hardworking nature to them. They received me. The thing you will see here is that I had difficulties at first because they are very strict, they really have a lot of rules! Eh, you know us Filipinos, we don't have any rules. 'You're able to do that!', 'you can do that!' No, you cannot be like that, for them you need to be almost perfect. I am just a lucky one because of my mentors. My superiors are really strict, they are kind too, though actually they were not kind at first. They became nice because they were able to see that I am hardworking, and I follow what they say to do. Sometimes I would forget the given task, but you also cannot not really follow their rules. That's why until that point my level was just my level at first, right? But now I can keep up, it really just takes time.")

Here we see the development of a large theme among those interviewed, which is the cultural difference that must be grappled with. She discusses how in the Philippines at work you have a lot of time to waste, but in Japan that is frowned upon. There are many rules about behavior that must be observed as a worker. She mentions later on in the interview how, for example, she cannot really use her phone at work without getting into trouble, which of course is very different from the Philippines, where even nurses can be observed doing this behavior at times. During our interview, my she liked talking at length about the struggles of interpersonal relationships as a Filipino in Japan, because not only did this affect work experiences, but her relationship with her husband too:

> "[...]kaya lang dito kasi sa Japan automatic pag may bahay ka as a wife, magsisilbi ka sa asawa mo. Di katulad sa pinas, ganon diba? Nagsisilbi din ang lalaki sa bahay ganon. Nung nagstart kami, ang asawa ko talaga pagsisilbihan mo, pagdating sa trabaho paghahandaan mo ng pagkain. Hindi lang ako katulad ng mga iba, katulad ng mom ko, na naghahanda pa ng isusuot pagkaligo, hindi ako ganun. Basta pagkain, pagdating niya malinis ang bahay, malinis ang mga anak ko, ganun lang. Wala naman siyang ano, yung stricto na ikaw babae ka, dito ka sa likod, merong ganun eh. Umpisa pa lang kasi nung sa husband ko, starting pa lang kami sinabi ko na sa kanya na ayokong naglalakad nang nauuna siya. Kailangan sabay kami. Hindi pwedeng mauuna siya kasi iiwanan ko siya, aalis ako. Tsaka ano, yung mga Hapon, ang nakita ko na lang, ayun ang good thing. Ang swerte ko lang yung asawa ko nakakapag adjust, pero kung maririnig mo yung kwento ng mga kaibigan kong pilipino rito na nakapagasawa ng Japan, medyo mahigpit, katulad ng kunwari nakatira sila sa mga in-laws nila talagang pagsisilbihan mo pati mga in-laws. Ako wala kasi kaming dalwa lang , kami lang ng mga pamilya ko wala akong pinagsilbihan na in laws, tapos ang wala wala akong masyadong inadjust. Yun lang kasi ang mga lalaking hapon, hindi sila romantic, hindi sila nag-ii love you, hindi sila naggaganyan. Hindi sila masyadong clingy hindi sila

masyadong malambing, pero natuturuan. Nagaadjust sila, nagaadjust din ako, kaya marunong narin gumawa ng ngayon pagkadating ko siya na nagluluto siya na naglalaba, bumaliktad na ang mundo. Naglilinis na din siya," ("So, here in Japan, it is automatic when you as a wife have a house, you will serve your husband. This is not like in the Philippines, right? In the Philippines, the man also serves the house like this. Back when we started our relationship, I served my husband: for when he was arriving at work, I was preparing his food. But I am not like other women, I am not like my mom where I still am preparing what he wears after showering, I am not like that. Just food, on his arrival the house is clean, the kids are clean, only like that. He doesn't really have...he is not very strict [about these gender norms], not like asking me to walk behind him or anything like that. This is because at the start with my husband, when we were still just starting, I told him 'I don't want to walk with you before me. We need to be side by side. You can't be ahead of me, because I will leave you behind, I will leave.' And, well, the Japanese that I just noticed, that behavior is a good thing. I am just lucky that my husband is able to adjust, but if you hear the stories of my Filipino friends here that were able to marry a Japanese man, they are a little strict, like for example they live with their in-laws and really serve the in-laws. For me, we didn't have in in-laws to deal with, it was just us two. So I had no in-laws to serve, and I did not have much to adjust to. I did need to adjust to the fact that Japanese men are not romantic, they don't say 'I love you', they don't do it like that. They aren't too clingy, they aren't too touchy-feely, but you can teach them. They adjust, I also adjust, so we know how to make it so that now when I arrive, he cooks, he does laundry, the situations have reversed. He also cleans.")

This culture clash seems to be rooted in major gender dynamic differences between the Philippines and Japan. Where Japan is one of the

least gender-equal countries in the world, and the society often operates on a framework where wives live with the in-laws and do all the housework, the Philippines is not gender differentiated to that level. In precolonial times, the Philippines was very gender-equal, with women always being involved in major roles in society as spiritual and social leaders, but also equal in some lesser known areas such as sexual freedom and bilateral inheritance (Rodriguez, 2022). However, what is not discussed as much is how this culture of equality was not affected as much by colonialism as one would think. Despite 300 years of Spanish colonialism and 50 more years of American colonialism that targeted women, the Philippines still generally ranks as one of the most gender-equal societies in the world in terms of measurable economic and political statistics (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2023).[3] Of particular interest is how the Philippines has one of the highest percentages of women in management positions in the world. As of 2019 the International Labour Organization found that more than half of all management positions in the country were held by women, and 43% of executive positions were held by women, both near the highest in the world (as cited in McCarthy, 2021). That is, unlike in Japanese society, women in the Philippines have better opportunity and better career aspirations, and are not generally treated as interlopers in a man's world. In Japan, women not only struggle to get a high status in their careers, but are still expected to take care of the household on top of all the work; they also struggle to maintain full-time employment (Dalton 2017). My informant discussed how she really did not want to be like Japanese women, where she walked behind her husband and only tended to his needs, or the needs of his parents as is custom in Japanese marriages. She would have a career too and he would be expected to share the childcare and cleaning and cooking duties, as she was used to in the Philippines. If he did not adjust his views on gender norms, she would leave him. She humorously says that she basically fixed his behavior and his perspective, and that she was lucky that he was willing to change.

This cultural difference is important to examine when discussing the lives of Filipino workers in Japan because it affects the workplace too. My informant's discussions with her husband and her setting of boundaries in regard to division of labor has allowed her to make a stable career for herself. Rather than being only a part-time worker, she has been able to be a full-time worker in a hospital, and she is respected by her Japanese coworkers. The

home life interactions, then, have a profound affect on the workplace, and vice versa.

Prejudices About Filipinos

This relationship situation with husbands was echoed by my second informant, who has been in Japan married to her husband for 37 years now. She is 59 years old and now has grandchildren. She lives and works in Hiroshima. She also brings another dynamic to the struggles of Filipinos in Japan, and that is racism and prejudice. When asked if she had any experiences before, her response was (this quote is broken up due to my followups, but also addresses my question about her family and racism):

> "Oo! Kasi talaga ang mga Japanese is ano parang mababa talaga ang tingin nila sa mga Pilipino. May ganun talaga[...]minsan sinasabi nila hinde, pero mafefeel mo naman minsan may mga tingin...tinitignan ka nila from head to toe[...]nung nakapagasawa kami, against akin ang mga in-laws, ayaw nila ang mga Pilipino. Talagang nung umpisa, I always cry." ("Yes, there was! Really, Japanese are sort of...they have a very low opinion of Filipinos[...] It is really like that[…]sometimes they say that no, that is not the case, but you can feel sometimes that they have thoughts...they look at you from head to toe[…]back when my husband and I first got married, my in-laws were against me, they did not like Filipinos. It was really bad at first, I always cried.")

This racism and prejudice from the family and work is probably related to the sorts of preconceptions Japanese have of Filipinos, as Faier described in her work. This quote came out of a natural discussion about the differences in work culture in Japan versus the Philippines. She had said that for the Japanese, the speed of work was more important ("mas malinis ang mga Pilipino, para sa Japanese mabilis mabilis"; Filipinos are cleaner in their care work whereas the Japanese are all about doing things quickly), and that the Japanese workers in a sense lacked feeling or soul compared to her. This led to me asking about prejudices the Japanese people in her life may have, and that prompted the response I had included above. This quote touched on

an area that my first informant avoided discussing in our interview, but she went on to say that over time the prejudice has gotten better. Where at the beginning of her time in Japan, the prejudice was more open and common, it has decreased significantly as she has gotten older. Perhaps this is indicative of change over time. A 2019 study found that about 41% of Japanese people feel that migrant workers threaten the country's culture and heritage which, while high, is significantly lower than some other countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia (68%), Thailand (58%), and Singapore (53%). The majority of Japanese respondents also felt that migrant workers should have a path to citizenship, should be able to marry local citizens, and should be able to bring their children with them when migrating, nearly all of which were significantly higher than the same countries listed above (International Labour Organization, 2019, 26-27).

Regardless, as my first informant said, there was a certain amount of acceptance in the workplace and at home that developed after she showed her work ethic and diligence. Something to note here is how both of my interviewees have identified for me how they differ from Japanese nurses, and how they continue to do things how they think they should be done. That is not to say that they ignore instructions from their boss, but rather that they have certain ideas about the amount of emotionality that is included in hospital work, and how they do not shy away from forming bonds with patients and putting more emotional attention into their work. There is a detached element to what is considered professional in Japan in medical care work, and this is something that my informants find disagreeable to an extent and that they push back on in terms of their work habits. Ultimately, my second informant now in some ways identifies with Japan more than the Philippines. When I asked her if she had plans on ever moving back to the Philippines, she said no because she really does not have much family in the Philippines anymore. Her husband is Japanese, her kids are born and raised in Japan, and now she has Japanese-born grandchildren too. In a sense, her family has become Japanese over time, and her relationship with the Philippines has declined. However, this did not change how she navigated her relationships at work and home; in these cases, she brought her own culture into the fold while adjusting.

Mutual Respect and Understanding of Culture

My third informant had the most disparate discussion regarding some of the topics from earlier. I suspect this could be in part because of her age. She is only at the beginning of her 30s, thus for my study there were three different generations represented. She has lived and worked in Japan since 2017, as a nursing assistant as well. Unlike the first two informants, she actually met her husband after starting work in Japan. This is not to say that she was more or less qualified to work, she actually directly stated that she was a beneficiary of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the Philippines. The EPA with the Philippines allow for more relaxed movement of "natural persons" in skilled labor, of which nurse assisting is considered a skilled labor (Vogt and Holdgrun 2012, 84). She was already a registered nurse in the Philippines before migrating, so like the other two informants, technically she took a position demotion in terms of label. In terms of her marriage, she elaborated that her marriage is actually a common law marriage, and that she still uses her Filipino surname. She made it clear that she had her own visa so it was actually much easier for her to get married than for someone who required a marriage visa. She could still work while dating, rather than needing to wait and deal with a ton of paperwork in order to get a job. She said that essentially her marriage worked the same way marriage does for regular people in Japan, since she already had her own visa. True to what the literature says about family reunification in Japan, this informant had a child previously in the Philippines to a Filipino man, but with her work visa she was able to bring her child to Japan eventually. Now her Filipino child is growing up in Japan and being raised by her and her Japanese spouse. This informant was actually quite focused on the administrative aspects of Japan. She said there were no fees to get into her work program, unlike those associated with Western countries, and this was attractive to her since her salary as a nurse in the Philippines was low. Unlike the first two informants, this one actually did seem to have a plan to return to the Philippines when she is older; she said that she even bought a house in the Philippines to go back to with her husband and kid. Part of the reason she said she wanted to was because her savings working in Japan would be much stronger in retirement in the Philippines because Japan's currency is stronger. Unlike my second informant, this informant said that she did not really encounter prejudice in the workplace, and said that as long as you show your skillfulness you will be well-received. This agrees to an extent with the experience of my

first informant, as does her observation that Filipino nursing assistants are much more emotionally connected to the patients than their Japanese coworkers. The dynamic with the husband was strikingly different though, perhaps hinting at a personal experience in line with the statistics I stated earlier in the paper:

> "[…] dito kasi sa Japan talaga mga lalaki kasi ang pinaka-number one sa kanila, ayun katulad sinabi mo. Sa Pilipinas kasi babae ang nasusunod di ba. Dito kasi sa Japan is mostly mga lalaki talaga. Pero, sa amin ng Japanese husband ko is equal naman kami[…]." ("[...]here in Japan the men are the number one group, like what you said. In the Philippines though, it is the woman who is obeyed, right? Here in Japan though, it is mostly men really. However, for me and my Japanese husband, were are pretty equal[…].")

She goes on to say that mutual respect of culture is very important to both of them, so she respects his culture and he respects hers. She does not find it difficult because her husband is very kind and he understands that she grew up differently than him. In terms of household work, she enjoys cleaning the home, and her husband does the laundry. She prefers to cook though because she thinks Japanese food is too bland. So unlike the wives in Faier's study, my informant insists on cooking Japanese food that has Filipino flavor sensibilities or even Filipino food because she needs the food to be flavorful. A big change from the first informant is that her husband actually wants her to have her own career, and she never had to tell him that she would be doing her own work. As hinted at earlier, this may have something to do with changing views on foreigners among younger generations in Japan. Her husband is clearly more open to having a truly shared cultural experience.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate the ways in which Filipino nursing assistants in Japan navigate cultural differences and retain a Filipino identity while being intimately involved in Japan through work, marriage, and family. Through these interviewees and their direction of the conversations, particular themes emerged as being most important to them. The topic that was brought

up most was their navigation of cultural differences. In the workplace, this often involved clashing views on what professionalism is. Japanese nurses expected quick work and were not as attached to the patients; much of the focus of their instruction to Filipino nurses revolves around on efficiency and professionalism in the sense of doing only exactly what is prescribed. This was a point of cultural clash for my informants, as they too were educated in nursing prior to moving to Japan, thus were in that sense equally qualified. However, the Filipinos' sense of professionalism differed greatly from the Japanese view. My informants enjoy giving extra attention to their patients and developing a relationship of sorts. They view that creating an emotional connection is a part of their job, not just the cold efficiency of the Japanese nurses (in the view of my informants). Additionally, there was a work-life balance issue that the informants discussed at length. That is, certain expectations exist for Filipinos who marry Japanese men as they did, and that includes doing the bulk of housework and childcare. This is not something the nurses were used to because in their experiences in the Philippines, these tasks are more equally divided. In the case of my informants, they worked out these differences with their spouses by having discussions about their intentions of having careers of their own, and thus needing housework to be more equal. In one instance, an informant proudly stated how she had "taught" her husband how to be in a relationship with a Filipino woman, and that she would not be "second" to her husband. This is an important aspect of work to investigate because in Japan the unequal expectations for marriage, household labor, and childcare are important reasons why women in Japan find career development and advancement to be difficult. My Filipino informants discussed how cultural differences were overcome, and that is also as a result how they have carved nice careers for themselves in the medical field. One issue also brought up in interviews is the intense prejudice Filipinos face, at home and in the workplace. This prejudice was overcome oftentimes by showing how knowledgeable and diligent they were in their work. At home, in-laws eventually seemed to accept the informants over time.

There is also a divergence from previous studies done on the cultural navigation of entertainment workers in Japan. Where those wives felt the constant need to suppress most things they associate with Filipino identity, my informants asserted themselves in various ways. This adds another dimension to diaspora studies, since these women have different educational

backgrounds and career aspirations, and indeed reasons for even being in Japan. They also enjoy engaging with Filipinos despite living outside the Philippines. This is another pronounced contrast to studies on entertainers. The change in regard to discussing publicly work and life is especially true of my first informant. She is a vlogger and often discusses her work and life in her videos. Something apparent in the videos is how she is very much self-consciously Filipino in these videos. Her videos are always from the perspective of a "Filipino working as a nurse in Japan" and subjects similar to this. In a way, she has taken on a role of reporting on Japanese society to Filipinos as a Filipino. These videos are a way to hold on to her identity, as were her discussions with her husband about work-home balance. My third informant is also a vlogger who discusses life as a nurse in Japan; this seems to be a decently popular type of vlogging because many Filipinos in the Philippines are interested in the lifestyles of the diaspora. It seems in this case as well that my informant's spouse is quite supportive in her career endeavors. She also had little interest in abandoning the Philippines and seemed to still have a strong desire to live there again at some point. She even insists on having Filipino flavors in the food she cooks because she refuses to eat "bland" Japanese food everyday. This is a big kind of cultural establishment abroad. Faier's work, cited toward the beginning of this paper, often focused on how Filipino women changed to fit into Japan, but I think it is interesting and important to hear from Filipino women about how they incorporated their culture into their work and life whenever possible. This divergence in qualitative outcomes also highlights another possible route for future research on Filipino migrant workers in Japan: sampling in larger numbers from a more heterogeneous group of Filipino workers in terms of socioeconomic background and educational attainment.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In many cases I am quoting directly from the interview in Tagalog and then translating, but in most others I am simply giving an approximated paraphrasing in English of what was said originally in Tagalog, without every relevant Tagalog quote attached.

[2] Form 137 is a form visa applicants from the Philippines need to fill out if they are applying for a multiple entry visa. It concerns the applicant's school records.

[3] An interesting discussion on the unsuccessful nature of the attempted subordination of women by the Spanish and Christian doctrine can be found in *Colonial Manila, 1909-1912: Three Dutch Travel Accounts*, edited by Otto Van Den Muijzenberg. It is observed there that women in the Philippines appeared to be more or less equal with men even after the 300 years of Spanish influence. In the yearly WEF studies, the Philippines has fluctuated from 7th in the world in 2016 to 16th in 2023.

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