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The Filipinos’ Culture of Multi-step Migration and Their Retention as Careworkers in Japan

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Introduction

The objectives of this presentation are two-fold. First, it attempts to explain the international migration behavior of Filipino workers¹, with special consideration on the Filipinos’ “culture of migration.” Second, based on such behavior, we then examine whether the Filipino candidate² careworkers under the Philippines-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) will stay (be retained) in the Japanese labor market. In this presentation, we focus on Filipino careworkers, since such oc-

cupation has been gaining more relevance in the light of aging host societies.

After a long period of tedious negotiations, Japan and the Philippines finally signed JPEPA in September, 2009. It took effect in December the following year. One of the main agendas was regarding the acceptance of Filipino nurses and careworkers in Japan. Such issue received enormous attention not only among academic researchers but also administrators and workers in elderly care and nursing institutions, government agencies and other stakeholders³ – which had wide and varied

¹ In the Philippines, those who mainly work in elderly care services are officially called “caregivers,” while in Japan, they are called “careworkers.” This kind of profession did not exist in the Philippines until the 1990s as Filipino families take on the responsibility of taking care of their elderly members. However, with the increase in the number of potential receiving countries having aging population, the Philippines’ Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) created the “caregiver course” curriculum in late 1990s and imposed an accreditation system. Today, there are more than 1000 caregiver and related courses being offered in the country.

² Those who came under JPEPA are called “candidate careworkers” until the time they pass the National Licensure Examination.

³ The stakeholders in the issue are government agencies (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Ministry of Justice Immigration Bureau), labor unions, professional organizations (ex. Japan Nurses Association), business groups (ex. *Keidanren*) among others. Initially, those who were in favor of their acceptance cited the serious labor shortage; while those who were against it were arguing about the negative impact of their acceptance on the wages and working conditions of the Japanese careworkers, the difficulties in bridging gaps in communications and caregiving skills, and also human rights issues.

views either in favor or against the scheme. Even without gaining national consensus, the agreement was ratified and the first batch of candidate careworkers and nurses came in May, 2009. Later on, issues on the working and living conditions of these foreign workers and their adaptability in the Japanese workplace have gained greater concern and became the focus of national debates.

Based on the EPA scheme, the quota for Filipino careworkers was set to 600 persons in the first 2 years of its implementation. However, in 2009, only 190 came as trainees in institutions, while 27 came as students. In the following year, 72 and 10 arrived respectively, with a total number of 299 persons (see Table 1) for the first 2 years. Moreover, of those who came in 2009, 18 (about 10% of the batch) have already terminated their contract and left Japan. These figures suggest that there are flaws in the scheme that had prevented its full implementation.

Reports and articles about the scheme and suggestions on how to improve it have been widely published

(see for example, Carlos (2008), Carlos (2010), Takeno and Sato (2010) and Kobe University (2010)). The problems cited in these articles can be summarized into three main groups as follows:

The first group involves the problems in the provisions of the recruitment, deployment and employment itself, such as residence status,⁴ education and training system (contents and period of study of Japanese language and technical vocabulary), and matching problems (screening of applicants and sharing of information about the worker and the institution).

The second group involves difficulties on intercultural communication, not mainly between the foreign careworker and the elderly resident, but more often between him/her and his/her Japanese coworkers. These problems are considered to be a result not only of lack of Japanese language proficiency, but also (and more so) the lack of understanding of each other's culture. These problems in the workplace are aggravated by the fact that the caregiving profession still lacks international standard (unlike in nursing) so that some of the skills

Table 1. Filipino Candidate Careworkers in Japan under EPA (as of April 20, 2011)

No. of EPA candidate careworkers	No. of arrivals	No. of stayers	No. of those who have left
2009 (Batch 1) (no. of students)	217 (27)	199	18
2010 (Batch 2) (no. of students)	82 (10)	82	0
Total (for 2 years) (no. of students)	299 (37)	281	18

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

⁴ In the current scheme, the Filipino candidate careworkers are initially given a 4-year visa, which will be renewed subject to his/her passing of the National Licensure Examination that can only be taken once after 3 years of training. The foreign worker will be repatriated if he/she fails to pass such examination.

and practices are based on culture.⁵

Thirdly, the heavy burden imposed on the receiving institution by the scheme, in terms of financial expenses, education and training and management, that are perceived to be not compensated enough by its expected returns (in terms of the foreign worker's retention and contribution in alleviating labor shortage), has also prevented many institutions to avail of the scheme.

It must be noted, however, that many of the problems identified so far have been largely based on the perspective of the Japanese stakeholders. Thus, the solutions suggested had also been from their perspective and often implied that the scheme could be improved and the workers retained if only the Japan-side problems could have been addressed. This presentation takes the position that such is not the case. We argue that they may not stay in Japan for long and we shall show this below by bringing up the Filipino worker's perspective – their culture of migration - most specially their multi-step international migration behavior pattern. By considering this perspective, which up to now had only been minimally cited in the literature, we gain more understanding and better insights regarding more effective ways to address the serious problem of labor shortage in Japan in the long-run.

1. The Filipinos' "Culture of Migration" – The Multi-step International Migration Pattern

Before we focus our discussion on the multi-step international migration pattern, we first explain the Filipinos' "culture of migration." The Filipinos' "culture of migration" can be defined as a culture in which there is

a strong propensity to work and live overseas and a weak feeling of uneasiness and resentment towards migration to another country. In the Philippines, the perennial wide gap between the rich and the poor has resulted in many Filipinos considering working overseas as the only way to economically and socially move upwards. Some of the observed expressions of such culture are (1) having about 10% of its population living overseas, (2) considering working abroad as the dream of young and old Filipinos alike, (3) having a government that considers overseas deployment as an economic strategy and actively promoting it, with the nation supporting it. Also, in this country, international migration has developed and grown into one prominent service industry in the country, comprising of universities and vocational institutions offering courses that are in demand overseas, recruitment agencies, banks and other remittance centers – all under the regular monitoring and regulation of government agencies such as the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) and the Technical Skills Development Authority (TESDA) for education and training, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) for recruiters and the Central Bank of the Philippines for remittance agents. (For details on the international migration industry for Filipino nurses, please refer to Carlos and Sato (2008).)

One emerging trend in the "culture of migration" that this presentation would like to focus on is the strong tendency for migrant workers to move from one transit country (the stepping stone) to the next until he/she reaches the final destination. We call this the multi-step international migration pattern, which is different from those that had been widely studied and reported, i.e., sin-

⁵ Some examples identified were the differences in the extent of assistance to the elderly vis-à-vis promoting independence of the elderly; and also the "ideal" water temperature during bathing (Carlos, 2010).

gular migration (movement from the origin to the final destination such as the case of permanent emigrants) and circular migration (return migration between one origin country and one destination such as the Nikkei Brazilians). In the case of multi-step migration, the number of transit countries until one reaches the final destination, and where the final destination will be, are not predetermined. Rather, they are decided during the migration process.

Here, we only discuss about the migrant during his working life. It is noteworthy, however, to look into the migration pattern of these workers in their entire life, particularly after retirement. This becomes relevant for Filipinos, whose first wave of migration was 40 years ago. Soon, many of them will retire, and determining whether they will return to the Philippines or stay in the last destination will be important especially in the light of drawing policies regarding their welfare and elderly care.

Figure 1 shows the three patterns mentioned above. Singular migration is depicted at the top of the figure as a one-way arrow, like for example, migration of Filipinos as live-in careworkers from the Philippines to

Canada. The bottom of Figure 1 shows the circular migration as in the case of Filipino Nikkeijin workers moving between the Philippines and Japan. In the middle of Figure 1, we can see the multi-step international migration pattern, with several transit destinations and one final destination. Based on a series of field studies in the Philippines (2008~2010), Singapore (2009~2010), United Kingdom (2008), United Arab Emirates - Dubai (2009) and U.S.A. (2008), we found out that for Filipino caregivers, the preferred transit points are Singapore, Israel, UAE and UK. On the other hand, most Filipinos surveyed mentioned the United States and Canada as their most desired final destinations.

2. Ambiguous and Unpredictable (“Whimsical”) Policies of Receiving Countries and Multi-step International Migration

Why do Filipino careworkers behave in such multi-step international migration fashion? The first reason derives from the way international migration is generally determined. International migration is most often demand-led, with the policies of the receiving countries

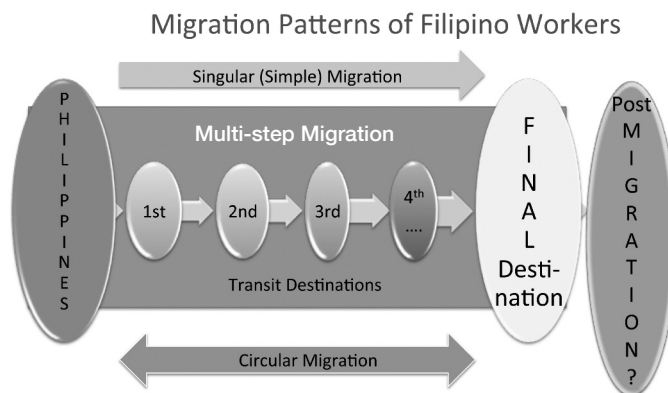


Figure 1. Patterns of International Labor Migration

Source: Author's compilation based on field studies.

largely determining the volume and nature of migration. With the worsening of the economy and serious problems regarding social integration of migrants, regulations on migration have not only been stricter in recent years. They have also shown a tendency to be revised unpredictably and frequently. Such policies at the “whims” or “dictates” of the receiving country have largely prevented the smooth and immediate migration of workers to the most desired destination. In response to such kinds of policies, many Filipino careworkers go to “where they can definitely be deployed easily” at the time when the decision is made, although this is not necessarily their final destination. Then, while in the current destination, they decide on the next one. Certainly, with the “whimsical” nature of receiving countries’ labor migration policies, it is difficult for the migrant worker to decide on his labor migration “route” while in the Philippines.

Figure 2, which shows the number of newly-deployed caregivers to main receiving countries from the period 2001 to 2009, provides some evidence on the “whimsical” policies of receiving countries. We notice the “spikes,” representing the abrupt changes in the number of Filipino caregivers deployed. For example, Canada’s intake of Filipino careworkers was reduced to half from 2007 to 2008. While Taiwan took in 14,000 careworkers from the Philippines at its peak, the number has also gone down to half in the past 5 years. Certainly, this is not caused by the shortage of Filipino caregivers who are ready to take up the job, but by the unpredictable opening and closing of doors to foreign caregivers in these receiving countries.

The ambiguous and unpredictable migration and deployment policies of potential destination countries for Filipino nurses have also affected the migration of Filipino careworkers.⁷ With the extreme difficulty in

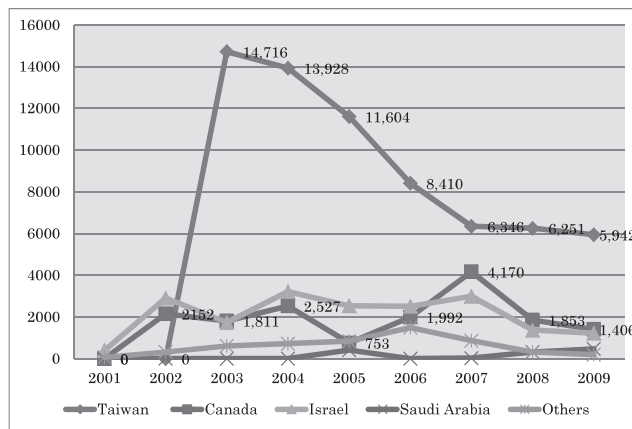


Figure 2 Number of Newly Deployed Filipino Caregivers Per Main Destination (2001-2009)

Source: “2009 Overseas Employment Statistics” p. 24 Philippine Overseas Employment Administration Website Date accessed: June 15, 2011. (http://www.poea.gov.ph/stats/2009_OFW%20Statistics.pdf)

⁷ For example, the United States implements the retrogression policy in which working visas are rationed annually based on nationality and profession. Under this policy, applications for and granting of such visas are at the discretion of the US government. In the case of UK, it actively recruited Filipino nurses in the early 2000s. The number of newly-deployed nurses reached its peak in 2005, but dived to almost zero in the following years (Carlos and Sato, 2010).

leaving the Philippines as a nurse because of these policies, many nursing graduates choose to migrate initially as a careworker. After obtaining experience and a nursing license, he/she then plans and leaves for the next destination. Singapore also has a policy of accepting Filipinos as a caregiver first, then allowing him/her to train and take the Singapore Nursing Licensure examination. With such policy, many Philippine-licensed nurses leave the Philippines for Singapore and then proceed to UK, UAE and Australia.

3. Resource Accumulation and the Multi-step International Migration

One of the more recent trends in the migration of Filipino careworkers is the increasing number of potential destinations, which reflects the increasing number of aging societies. Given this trend, how do Filipino careworkers decide on where to go and at what stage of his/her multi-step migration?

First, while still in the Philippines, the “whimsical” migration policies of many receiving countries (as mentioned above) put great limits to the choices for destination of the Filipino careworker, more so to the best desired destination. Thus, there is a tendency for him/her to go first to where it is the “easiest” to go; specifically based on the following criteria of the destination: (1) the time required from lodging the application to deployment is short; (2) the cost of deployment is cheap; (3) the deployment process/procedure is simple; and (4) the requirements are easy to comply with (for example, there are destinations that do not put so much weight on working experience and valid license, making it easier for fresh graduates to apply). For example, in 2010, it is perceived that given the current policies, it would take 4-5 years to wait for deployment to Canada or the US, but only a few months in Singapore or Japan under EPA.

The merit of choosing the destination where it is “easiest” to go is not only due to it imposing the least burden (in terms of time and money) to the worker, but also because in this destination, he/she can accumulate “resources” that are necessary or of advantage in moving to the next destination. First, since the salary for careworkers is generally higher in any destination than in the Philippines, he/she can save part of it to pay for the migration expenses (airfare, recruitment fees, settlement cost) to the next destination. Second, by working in the destination, he/she can gain the necessary experience and training, and perhaps obtain the required license to work in the next destination.

Moreover, working in one destination rather than wait in the Philippines affords the worker to get more and better information about other potential destinations. With the Filipino network in the destination, he/she can obtain job and recruitment information easily. More importantly, many recruitment agencies have chosen to be based in a destination rather than in the Philippines, providing greater access to jobs in other destinations. For example, we can find agencies and their branches in Singapore and Hong Kong that recruit Filipino caregivers and nurses to Canada and Australia. Being based in one destination country rather than in the Philippines is also advantageous for the agencies because by doing so, they can recruit Filipinos who have, to some extent, already been screened and who possess international experience or a license. Moreover, these agencies are not subjected to the strict monitoring and regulation of Philippine agencies.

In choosing the transit and final destinations, Filipino careworkers also put heavy weight on the possibility of obtaining nationality or naturalization. This is because naturalization will not only allow him/her to enjoy the same treatment as the locals (in terms of work and welfare privileges) but will also enable him/her to

petition the family. He/she prefers to obtain nationality of some destinations because it will be beneficial in moving to the next destination. This is because in many destinations, working conditions (salary, career development) differ depending on the foreign worker's nationality. For example, a Filipino live-in caregiver in Canada can take up its citizenship, then go the United States as a Canadian and work there as a caregiver.

In this way, the Filipino careworker moves from one destination to another – and the next question is - until when does he do so, and where will his final destination be? We found out from surveys in the Philippines, UK, UAE (Dubai), Singapore and the US that the US, Australia and Canada are the most highly preferred final destinations. Among the reasons given were (1) easy living (salary commensurate to cost of living, English language used in daily living, familiarity with culture); (2) provisions for family reintegration and naturalization; and (3) career development opportunities based on one's capability and not race or color. Easy living means, for example, in Canada and Australia, family of migrants are even provided with support programs such as job training, English language courses and job placement. Granting of nationality to family members also guarantees the future of the next generation, in terms of work, welfare, and other benefits. By career development, we mean opportunity not only for promotions within the carework profession but also job switching to nursing.

4. Retention of Filipino Careworkers in Japan

Based on the discussions above, we now ask the most vital question for Japan: will foreign (Filipino) careworkers stay, even after passing the national licensure exam and beyond the initial 4-year contract under EPA?

Undoubtedly, Japan will be chosen as one of the destinations. In fact, during the first recruitment in 2009, there were about 5,000 applicants, reflecting this country's popularity among Filipino careworkers. Based on survey of successful applicants, they chose Japan as a destination for 2 main reasons: (1) The recruitment was based on a government-to-government agreement. It would be a good opportunity for them to leave the country because the cost they had to bear was small, the processing time was short and their rights and welfare would be protected by the government. This implies that indeed, they put weight on the current and temporary policy of the receiving country. (2) They had the perceptions that Japanese care institutions offered high salary and high level of care skills. Therefore, they could save money and accumulate skills.

However, if we consider the multi-step international migration behavior pattern of Filipino careworkers, we can infer that most probably, they would not stay long in this country. The reasons are two-fold. On the side of Japan, problems regarding the system and in the workplace "push" the foreign worker to look for the next destination. Moreover, there are also the "pull" factors such as better working and living conditions in other preferred destinations such as the USA, UK and Australia, specially in terms of availability of migrant workers' programs such as family reintegration and naturalization. We can say that for Filipino careworkers, Japan can be more of an initial transit destination rather than the final one. In the years to come, Japan could not even be chosen as a transit destination unless amendments to the current system and changes in the way foreign workers are treated in the workplace are implemented.

How can the Japanese government and those on the ground deal with the current issues and concerns regarding the retention of foreign careworkers? Undoubtedly,

taking a national consensus as to how this country will receive and treat foreign workers in general holds the key in answering our question. For without such, it will be difficult to gain support on the ground and among the Japanese, thus making any efforts through EPAs less productive and less effective.

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