

Looking at lifestyle and cultural-oriented migration from West to East: The case of Western potters in Japan

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1. Aim

Departing from a transdisciplinary approach to the social sciences and the field of Japanese studies, I look at the global trajectories of mobility of Western ceramic artists to Japan in the last fifty years, focusing on their lifestyle and cultural orientations. I will discuss issues such as nationality, gender, visa limitations, and motivations for migration, highlighting the role of imagination, myth, and cultural narratives, partly disseminated through the international networks of the Japanese government and institutions, in the process.

2. Data & Methods

This presentation is based on semi-structured and unstructured qualitative interviews, written questionnaires, and ethnographic fieldwork with a total of forty Westerners who arrived in Japan between the 1960s and 2015, divided into four main periods that correspond to distinct historical and social backgrounds. Despite their different motivations (travel, work, study, and personal reasons such as marriage), they all ended up practicing ceramics in the country, with some establishing in Japan permanently, thus blending mobility into migration.

3. Results

Marked by lifestyle orientations and cultural aspirations, the potters' trajectories shed light on an often overlooked aspect of transnational migration in the contemporary world. Going beyond the dichotomy between low-skilled and high-skilled migrants, their stories highlight the role of a search for self-realization, a sense of adventure and a quest for radically different experiences through the culture of "Other" in migration and mobility today, which are often overlooked. Furthermore, their trajectories shed light on the international networks responsible for the dissemination of Japanese culture abroad in the postwar period, while also discussing the Japanese legal immigration system, which doesn't often accommodate these type of migrants.

4. Conclusion

While these Westerners might represent an insignificant portion of migration to Japan, their trajectories highlight important aspects of global mobility and international migration today, its increased diversity and complexity. The blurring of boundaries is represented in their stories in which mobility is blended into migration through the experience of international travel, short-term plans, and improvisation, for the majority did not come to the country with the goal of establishing in the country permanently, despite the majority having done so. Thus, regardless of their heterogeneity, the trajectories of Western potters in Japan reflect a different face of migration beyond economic motivations.