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# Planning for a successful return home: Transnational habitus and education strategies among Japanese expatriate mothers in Los Angeles

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## Abstract

Based on ethnographic research of Japanese expatriate families in Los Angeles, this article explores how Japanese expatriate mothers, in dealing with globalization and transnational migration, develop transnational habitus and education strategies. These mothers attempt to assure their children's successful reintegration into the competitive Japanese education system that is increasingly concerned with raising globally oriented, cosmopolitan Japanese children. Drawing on a transnational perspective, this case study illustrates how the global economy increasingly offers chances to live abroad, which in turn offer opportunities for families to cultivate their children's academic proficiency, transnational competencies, and various cultural skills. Yet, this article also reveals a cost of such activities, namely the emotional burdens of the mothers, which derive from their increasing engagement in intensive mothering and identity management in a transnational social field. The findings suggest the importance of studying the intersections between globalization and women's construction of race, ethnicity, gender, and emotion by focusing on their embeddedness in multiple sociocultural contexts.

## Keywords

Education strategies, globalization, Japanese mothers, multiple sociocultural contexts, transnational habitus, transnationalism

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## Introduction

The growth of the global economy has fostered an increase in transnational corporations operating in different countries and sustaining transnational networks. *Kaigaichūzai*, the practice of temporarily sending employees to work abroad, has been an increasingly widespread strategy among Japanese corporations competing in the global economy since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Stemming from this shift in economic conditions, there is a growing demand for workers with ‘transnational competence’<sup>2</sup> who can be deployed to participate effectively in the increasingly global workplace (Koehn and Rosenau, 2002: 106). In recent years, both the Japanese government and private companies have begun stressing the need to raise ‘global talent’, which has significantly impacted education policies and practices. Compulsory English classes now begin in elementary school rather than middle school; other components of ‘transnational competence’, such as a cosmopolitan worldview, intercultural communication skills, and cultural creativity are all emphasized in the national curriculum. While Japanese language and academic skills are still required for Japanese students, transnational competence is becoming more important. In response to the demands of the global economy, today’s Japanese education seems to be concerned with forming a ‘strategic cosmopolitan’: an individual who is motivated ‘by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts’ (Mitchell, 2003: 388).

How do such global economic forces, represented as transnational corporate activities and growing educational demands for workers with transnational competence, influence people’s everyday lives? Using Japanese expatriate families in Los Angeles (LA) as a case in point, this article explores the intersections between the economic demands of globalization and the ongoing production of culture, identity, and emotion at the local level. A transnational perspective, which focuses on migrants’ sustained and multi-stranded ties between their societies of origin and settlement (Basch et al., 1994), becomes a useful analytical lens. Transnationalism is a key manifestation of globalization and focuses on local practices of individuals and groups that are anchored in nation-states while also transcending national boundaries (Vertovec, 2009). Drawing on this perspective, I highlight the mothers’ engagement in their transnational education strategies, specifically their childrearing practices that purportedly cultivate children’s various competencies through creating a ‘transnational social field’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). In doing so, I reveal how economic globalization shapes expatriate mothers’ education strategies and what consequences these strategies have on the mothers’ identities and emotions, a topic not fully addressed in previous studies of globalization and transnationalism.

## Transnationalism, education, and identification

In response to the uncertain conditions of globalization, parents in advanced countries are increasingly engaging in transnational education strategies that involve accumulating cultural capital, such as English proficiency and a cosmopolitan outlook that would enhance their socioeconomic positioning in the global economy. Studies have revealed that Asian professionals are engaging in new transnational family configurations, in which family members are dispersed across national borders (Foner, 2009). These

include 'astronaut families' in which the mother and the child settle in a Western society for the sake of the child's education, while the father returns to the home country to work (Ho and Bedford, 2008; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2002; Yeoh et al., 2005), and 'parachute kids' who are sent to these countries to study by themselves while parents remain in the home country and provide the children with financial support (Zhou, 1998).

Expatriates, on the other hand, are not education-driven migrants; rather, the whole family is compelled to migrate by the imperatives of corporations competing in the global economy. What makes their experiences unique is that the expatriate families are destined to return to their home country from the outset; therefore they must develop transnational education strategies that will enable their children to succeed academically in the host country, as well as successfully reintegrate into the home country's education system upon return. Studies of Japanese expatriate families in the US have shown that although parents send their children to local schools to improve their children's English, parents fear that their children will become over-assimilated and experience a corresponding loss of Japanese-ness (Minoura, 1984).<sup>3</sup> Other Asian middle-class families, on the other hand, are increasingly interested in undertaking 'Western' education as a means of achieving upward mobility for the family, without much consideration for maintaining native language proficiency or adherence to curricula in the home country (Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Waters, 2002). Considering this difference, this study reveals the ways in which Japanese expatriate mothers, under global economic and educational pressures, strive to raise cosmopolitan Japanese children through concerted efforts to nurture both national and transnational competencies *simultaneously*.

I argue that to accomplish this goal, parents acquire a 'transnational habitus' – a double consciousness or dual orientation that simultaneously imagines, perceives, and analyzes aspects of life both 'here' and 'there' (Guarnizo, 1997; Vertovec, 2009). The concept of transnational habitus follows Bourdieu's (1977) definition of habitus as a set of durable dispositions or a cognitive structure that guides people's practices. Mahler and Pessar (2001: 447) argue that 'much of what people actually do transnationally is foregrounded by imagining, planning, and strategizing; these must be valued and factored into people's agency'. In this sense, transnational habitus is a 'cultural tool-kit' (Swidler, 1986) that individuals build and utilize to navigate transnational social fields; thus, it affects how they manage 'simultaneity' of connection to the host society and to the homeland (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Studies have revealed that migrant mothers draw on individual and collective memories of the homeland to create new cultural dispositions, which can be considered a transnational habitus. Such schemas result in childrearing strategies that enable their children to adapt to American society without losing their ethnic culture and identities (Rudrappa, 2002). My deeper investigation of transnational habitus will explain how the Japanese migrant mothers experience globalization on the cognitive level and how, in their everyday practices of childrearing, they deal with global economic forces, particularly the pressure to produce cosmopolitan Japanese children.

Focusing on transnational habitus and education strategy, I also attempt to show how the global economic forces intersect with the formation of mothers' identities and emotions in a transnational social field.<sup>4</sup> Studies of migrant mothers reveal that they struggle with significant emotional stress that derives from raising children in the host society. For example, Liamputtong (2006) asserts that these women bear double identities as a

mother and as an immigrant, and must embody the gap between ideologies of motherhood and actual mothering practices. What is particularly interesting about transnational mothers is that they put their feet in both the society of origin and the host society, and thus are surrounded by competing practices and discourses about ideal motherhood. The past literature on highly educated transnational mothers does not fully address this point, although burdens of increasing responsibilities and duties of childrearing are emphasized (Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Ong, 1999). These studies show that transnational experiences are highly gendered and women have to negotiate gender identity in a transnational social field. A number of empirical studies have also shown that individuals living in a transnational social field have more control over the meaning of their race and ethnicity; however, their identity practices are also constrained by racial structures in both the country of origin and settlement (Kibria, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005). Koehn and Rosenau (2002: 112) argue that 'transnational actors must be flexible and skilled at managing multiple counterpart identities' in order to cross and engage in different cultural contexts that simultaneously exist in their everyday lives. This article illuminates the ways in which the mothers manage to engage in 'skillful identity management' for the sake of raising cosmopolitan children.

Studies of transnational businessmen and professionals have stressed that their wealth, cosmopolitan perspective, and cross-border activities secure their 'elite' status in the host society (Beaverstock, 2005). However, it should be noted that although 'transnational elites' are often depicted as 'frequent flyers' who are indifferent to the local politics, recent studies 'move beyond assumptions of hyper-mobility and cosmopolitan sophistication to portray them as embodied bearers of culture, ethnicity, class or gender' (Yeoh and Huang, 2011: 682). Studying Western expatriates in Shanghai, Farrer (2010: 1225) finds the long-time expatriates 'form an ideal of a culturally cosmopolitan, locally integrated and economically contributing global/urban citizen, conveniently eliding the nation-state', although few actually live up to this ideal due to gender and racial barriers in the host society. In line with this study, it is necessary to consider the ways in which expatriate mothers grapple with structural constraints in transnational social spaces as they purport to raise cosmopolitan Japanese children, and how these struggles influence their emotional states and ongoing identity management.

## Methodology

The study is based on 15 months of fieldwork during 2006 and 2007 in a Japanese transnational community located in South Bay of LA. I collected observational and interview data on 51 children, aged 8 to 13 years old, and 45 Japanese mothers (who have at least one child in this age-range. This included 8 mothers and 14 children who identified themselves as *ejū*, permanent residents of the US who migrated within the last decade. The *ejū* mothers and children were included as a control group to highlight the uniqueness of the transnational experiences of expatriate families. Of the 37 expatriate (*chūzai*) mothers I interviewed,<sup>5</sup> the average length of stay in the US at the time of the first interview was 2 years and 4 months. All the women were living with their respective husbands, and the husbands worked for Japanese companies or the government. About one-third of the mothers had a part-time job in Japan before arriving in LA,

but none of them were working in LA.<sup>6</sup> A majority of them were well-educated, having completed at least two years of college education.

The families in this study lived on the outskirts of a transnational Japanese community, which houses the headquarters of major Japanese automotive companies, and various Japanese-owned shopping centers, restaurants, stores, and educational institutions. Twenty minutes away from the commercial hub by car, they were clustered in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the US, indicating they were extremely privileged in terms of social class. The families deliberately chose to live in this neighborhood due to the neighborhood's safe environment and reputation for good schools. Indeed, the school district had one of the highest-rated performance scores in California and nationwide. Regarding the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhood, 70% of the residents were Caucasians, followed by Asians (23%), Hispanics (5%), and African Americans (2%). Historically, the majority of the residents were affluent Caucasians, but increasing numbers of wealthy Asians seeking good schools have been moving into the neighborhood during the past decades. All the mothers in this study sent their children to one of the three local schools, where Asians comprise about half of the student body, and a significant number of Japanese students were enrolled. These three schools showed the highest performance scores nationwide. Due to the distinctive privileged social class of the families and the high-achieving educational context of the local American neighborhood, the findings of this study may not be transferable to expatriate families living in other parts of the US. Rather, this case study shows the possibilities and limits of transnational education strategies conducted by the privileged transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2001).

## Developing transnational habitus under globalization

*Kaigaichūzai* is an unpredictable event that requires families to abruptly alter their life plans, including children's education trajectories. Mothers in particular seem to see both the risks and benefits in living abroad with their children, reflecting the contradictory attitudes toward 'returnee children (*kikokushijo*)' in Japan (Nukaga and Tsuneyoshi, 2010). On one hand, there are concerns that *kikokushijo* face severe readjustment problems due to their Westernization, loss of Japanese language proficiency, and the diminishment of Japanese cultural attitudes and behaviors (White, 1992). On the other hand, proficiency in foreign language (especially English) and Western cultural experience have been perceived as 'international assets' that are valuable in Japan's globalizing economic workforce (Rohlen, 1983).

Deeply concerned with their children's education, the mothers develop a transnational habitus that enables them to take advantage of the expatriate experience. Such a transnational habitus entails: (1) imagining and planning that transcends Japan/US borders, (2) comparing Japan and the US, and (3) willingness to engage with both Japanese and American culture and society. The following interview excerpt illustrates how mothers simultaneously worry about children's educational survival upon returning, and their adaptation to their local American school:

I am very much concerned about whether my child can successfully adapt to a school when we return. Our life here is very important and I want my child to do well at school here. But people

who've been here for a while tell us to put effort in studying Japanese as well. We have to pursue two things simultaneously.

Spending her second year in LA, this mother lamented the pressure to succeed in the local schools, where teacher expectations are extremely high, in addition to the pressure to be prepared for re-entry into the equally competitive Japanese educational context. Although many *ejū* mothers were often critical of the extent to which the expatriate mothers 'look back' to Japan while living in the US, the expatriate mothers saw the need to imagine and plan for educational trajectories that link their children's American and Japanese school experiences. Simultaneously looking forward in the US and 'looking back' to Japan would help ensure their children succeed in the US and readapt to the increasingly globally oriented Japanese education system.

Transnational habitus is not something that the mothers possessed as a matter of fact; rather, it is a recent product of socialization in a transnational social field, and is driven by globalization. The first stage of developing transnational habitus is the preparation period in Japan. Funded by the government and transnational companies that send Japanese workers overseas, Japan Overseas Educational Services (JOES) offer various training and consultation programs for expatriate mothers and children. With strong recommendations from their respective companies, about two-thirds of the expatriate mothers in this study participated in JOES programs, which offer updated information about school systems abroad, as well as the use of special slots in Japanese schools for the returnees.<sup>7</sup> This, in addition to information obtained through internet and books, addressed mothers' concerns about their children's education. Thus, by the time the mothers arrived in LA, they had developed a general idea about the settlement and return trajectory and became capable of simultaneously imagining, comparing, and planning their children's educational experience 'here' and 'there'.

The second stage of constructing transnational habitus occurs as families become members of LA's Japanese community. The Japanese community in South Bay has taken on transnational characteristics due to a continuing influx of *chūzai* and *ejū* Japanese residents who maintain strong ties to Japan (Machimura, 2003). They exchange and share information concerning Japanese society and the host society. Furthermore, commercial institutions, media, and Japanese supplementary schools provide detailed and up-to-date knowledge about education 'here' and 'back there' and thus enhance the transnational habitus of the mothers. This suggests that this community is not necessarily an encapsulated entity isolated from the host society as it has been depicted in previous studies (Goodman et al., 2003). LA's Japanese community, constituting a transnational social field, enabled the expatriate mothers to maintain and develop a transnational habitus, through which they started to build and enact strategies concerned with their children's educational experiences 'here' and 'there'.

## Transnational education strategies and intensive mothering

Interviews and observations suggest that the mothers aimed to raise cosmopolitan Japanese children with multiple competencies and skills, who are able to successfully re-enter the



Japanese context in the near future, and who are able to live productively in America or any other foreign country upon reaching adulthood. They attempted to do so by utilizing the resources available in the host society and the Japanese transnational community. Mothers stressed the importance of the following aims in particular: (1) maintaining Japanese language and academic standards, (2) mastering English, (3) broadening worldviews and acquiring sociability, (4) flexible identity management, and (5) cultivating various cultural skills (i.e. music, art, sports). While the first aim is concerned with competence in living in Japanese society, the other aims concern transnational competence that is highly valued in the contemporary educational system and labor market in Japan and worldwide.

The following comments by an expatriate mother, who had been in LA for three years, indicate her interest in cultivating multiple skills that she considered necessary for her children's successful future:

I think it's important for my children to read and write English, and also think in English. The local school curriculum is very good. It will help them broaden their worldview and master English vocabularies. I also need to make sure that they can read and write Japanese. If they can do both, I would be very glad. . . . Some schools in Japan only evaluate students' English skills in exams, but many others also look at Japanese skills, so studying Japanese is unavoidable. I'm not only talking about entrance exams. I'm trying to figure out what is really necessary for my children's future. It has been trial and error for the past year.

While mothers viewed Japanese language and subjects as essential for children to readapt to Japanese society, they also considered English proficiency as important for their children's futures. Furthermore, in Japanese society, self-presentation skills, cross-cultural experiences, and broad worldviews are often regarded as 'international assets' that the returnee children are expected to possess, and they have become critical criteria to be assessed in returnees' entrance exam interviews (Nukaga and Tsuneyoshi, 2010). With this knowledge, mothers emphasized the importance of encouraging children to 'experience as many things as possible' while living in LA, so that they would have skills that regular Japanese children lack the opportunities to acquire. Furthermore, mothers stressed not only the acquisition of transnational competencies for the sake of entrance exams in Japan, but also to increase their opportunities to succeed in a globalizing world. Another mother stated:

It is possible that we might go abroad again for my husband's job. Even if that is not the case, I would be happy if my children wished to study abroad in the future. I just hope that they will see the world from a broad perspective and make decisions about their own careers.

In this sense, the expatriate mothers' expectations are aligned with the 'strategic cosmopolitan' (Mitchell, 2003). Mothers hoped their children would accumulate the cultural capital necessary to survive and compete in Japan or anywhere else the children may live.

The complex goals of transnational education strategies required mothers to engage in intensive mothering. Although intensive mothering has been depicted as a feature of American middle-class families (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003), a similar ideology has also been proliferating in Japan since the late 1960s (Hirota, 1999). Middle-class mothers are



especially keen on devoting themselves to caring for every aspect of their children's life and development (Honda, 2008). Japanese mothers in this study also strived to live up to this ideology, discovering that transnational life demands combining two cultures and thus leads to even more intensive mothering than usual.

Intensive mothering consisted of three types of activities. First, *managing* required selecting and coordinating children's educational and leisure activities, as well as providing the necessary transportation. The mothers relied heavily on extracurricular activities in both the Japanese and American community to address different goals. Out of 51 expatriate children, 86% ( $N = 44$ ) went to English private school or had an English tutor after school; 92% ( $N = 47$ ) went to Japanese supplementary and/or cram schools in the neighborhood; 65% ( $N = 33$ ) had music or sports lessons. The mothers carefully assessed the suitability of the activities for their children and attempted to create a well-balanced schedule to cultivate various skills in a limited timeframe. Second, *monitoring* involved checking and supervising children's routines and assignments, as well as urging children to carry them out properly and on time. The mothers' involvement in monitoring intensified as they moved to LA because they perceived that their children's schedules became overwhelmingly complex and hectic. Third, *tutoring* involved teaching their children and helping them with school homework. The huge amount of homework given by high-achieving local schools and children's poor English skills compelled the mothers to help their children with their homework so that the children would not fail.

Everyday childrearing responsibilities usually fell on the shoulders of the mothers, and not on the fathers. Some fathers, however, were able to spend more time with their children while in the US than they did while living in Japan. Many of them helped children with homework and school activities upon occasion because they usually had better English skills than the mothers. Still, a majority of the mothers complained that their husbands made significantly fewer contributions to childcare than they did. They insisted that they could not rely on their husbands, who frequently went on business trips. While the fathers were the ultimate decision-makers for important issues, they often became an invisible authoritative figure for the mothers and children. As Kurotani (2005) argues, married men and their employers expect expatriate wives/mothers to focus on reproductive labor so that the men can fully engage in transnational work.

## Construction of the 'compliant children'

How did the children perceive their mothers' heavy involvement in their lives and the education strategies they created? Interview data indicate that the children were unhappy about their overscheduled after-school time and complained that they were too busy. Also, mothers often voiced concern about children's lack of motivation to study the Japanese language and subjects; motivation continued to decrease the longer they stayed in the US. However, mothers were usually able to persuade their children to participate in organized activities, and described their children as *sunao* (obedient) because they generally complied with the rules and decisions that their parents made. The following conversation by two fourth-grade girls suggests their compliance with parental expectations:

- Natsuki:* My mom applied for summer school without asking me, so I can't go back to Japan. And my dad is very strict too.
- Haruka:* My dad is also strict.
- Natsuki:* My dad and mom are probably stricter. They already made up my summer schedule and I have so many things to do here.
- Haruka:* I'm not going back to Japan just for fun! My mom told me that I have to work on *kanji* [Chinese characters] while I stay there. (*turning to me*) You know, *kanji* is kind of interesting.

This excerpt suggests that the girls had a strong respect for their parents. How was this sense of respect and compliance generated among children? A mother, in her third year in LA, told me how she managed to persuade her son to work on *kanji* and homework:

I told him, 'If you are returning to Japan as a Japanese person, you will definitely have hard time not knowing how to read and write *kanji*. If you hate studying *kanji*, you can stay here in the US without us. We are going back.' He said he wanted to return with us. He doesn't want to be left alone. So I told him, 'Then do your homework properly.'

This excerpt suggests that the children's compliance with their parents' requests is based on the strong mother-child bond generated through intensive mothering. Describing their ties with their children, they frequently noted that in LA, parent and child are 'glued together'. Such a strong mother-child bond is also a result of the local LA environment where parents always need to transport their children by car. Children were not capable of walking to stores or park by themselves as they used to in Japan. This made them highly dependent on their parents. Coleman (1988: 111) referred to this kind of strong tie as 'social capital', which 'depends on the physical presence of adults and on the attention given by adults to the child'. Despite children's complaints, it seems that mothers could encourage children's involvement in transnational education strategies through mobilizing the mother-child bond.

## Construction of the 'good Japanese mothers' and emotional struggles

While it appears that mothers were successful in raising cosmopolitan children to some extent, the intensive mothering associated with the transnational education strategies had significant impact upon the mothers' identifications and emotions. In the following section, I discuss how these women constructed and strived to live up to the discourse of 'good Japanese mothers', while struggling to negotiate the racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries that are reinforced in their local and transnational contexts.

### *Devotion to motherhood*

In interviews, many mothers noted the mounting pressure to diligently manage their children's education. A mother who had been in LA for three years spoke of the

competitive pressure from Japanese mothers around her and how it became an emotional burden:

Here, children have so many things to do, and because they cannot manage everything, parents need to be good at taking charge. Mothers living in this community are well-educated and they are very concerned about their children's education. When I first came here, I felt really pressured. I didn't say this to my kids, but I felt this pressure inside me as I saw other Japanese mothers making huge efforts for their children while putting smiles on their faces.

The mothers were particularly intent on presenting a 'diligent (*majime*)' and 'humble (*kenkyo*)' image of themselves through actively engaging in volunteer work at local American schools. This self-presentation can be interpreted as a strategy to protect their social status and self-esteem from racial discrimination in the host society. It is also a strategy to keep up a good reputation in the Japanese community. Since tightly knit networks in ethnic communities function as the moral ground that sanction members' misbehavior (Zhou and Bankston, 1998), the mothers felt obliged to conform to the image of 'good Japanese mothers' by devoting themselves to intensive mothering.

As noted above, intensive mothering has been a feature of the Japanese middle-class families since the 1960s (Hirota, 1999). However, the expatriate mothers claimed that the quality and quantity of the childrearing labor intensified after they came to LA. They realized that they had to combine Japanese and American mothering and thus engage in more intensive mothering to address various goals and activities. Becoming a member of a minority group, they also felt more pressure to be the 'good Japanese' in the host society. Under these circumstances, many of them felt that their freedom had been severely restricted. Some claimed that they were sacrificing their own careers and interests for their children. These mothers also showed interest in the cross-cultural experience, but said that they had too little leisure time to engage in it.

### *Frustrations with 'ideal motherhoods'*

Mothers were also troubled by conflicting discourses and expectations about the 'good mother' in both American and Japanese contexts. Transnational habitus worked to their detriment in this case: mothers lacked confidence in being a 'good mother' because they felt that they were not living up to either American or Japanese ideals of motherhood.

Despite their efforts, mothers still felt that they were not doing enough for their children, especially with regard to American schooling. For instance, a key component of American middle-class parenting is involvement and even intervention in school (Lareau, 2003). The mothers expressed shock in finding out the intensity of parental involvement required by the local American school, which entailed volunteering in the classroom, cafeteria, library, and at various school events in addition to helping their children with their homework. They also had difficulty communicating with school authorities, another important component of American middle-class parenting (Lareau, 2003). The Japanese mothers did not have sufficient English and communication skills to successfully advocate for their children. The mothers blamed themselves for not being able to communicate well with their children's teachers, especially when their children got into trouble.

While the mothers felt that they were ‘not doing enough’ for their children with regard to American ideals of motherhood, they felt they were doing too much for them considering Japanese ideals of motherhood. Although the ‘compliant child’ did what s/he was told, mothers worried that their children were too dependent on them, and that they were not becoming increasingly independent, as they should be. They stated that their children always waited for their parents to give instructions and showed little self-motivation – a crucial characteristic that the mothers hoped their children would acquire. A mother who had been in LA for 18 months pointed to this dilemma:

- Researcher:* Do you spend more time taking care of your children now compared to your life in Japan?
- Ms Miyagawa:* Absolutely. It’s the same as taking care of a newborn baby. You need to make sure that the kids can carry out their schedules by attending to their mental state and health condition. In Japan, kids at this age are independent from their parents, but here I always need to support them. I have to take care of everything even though kids their age should be doing things on their own in Japan. Otherwise, they cannot carry out the schedule. In that sense, I worry that they are too dependent on us. I’m concerned about the return to Japan. They might still be psychologically immature then.

Such emphasis on children’s ‘independence’ may reflect the current Japanese education policy that emphasizes children’s autonomy under the slogan ‘zest for living (*ikiru chikara*)’, which started as a backlash against Japan’s excessively standardized education system (Tsuneyoshi, 2004). Assuming that children who were raised in Japan would be more mature and independent from their parents, the mothers feared that dependent attitudes among their children would have negative impacts on their lives after returning to Japan.

Considering the conflicting discourses of ideal motherhoods in Japan and the US, and the potential for intensive mothering to negatively impact children’s ability to readapt to life in Japan, exacerbated the mothers’ anxieties of not being a ‘good mother’. Realization of the many ways they could ‘fail’ as mothers, even while trying their hardest to be a ‘good mother’ was unbearable to them. Indeed, there were a few mothers whose children had difficulty with both adapting to American school and studying Japanese. These mothers blamed themselves for their children’s failures and suffered from a deep lack of self-esteem.

### *Limited flexibility in ethnic identity management*

As Koehn and Rosenau (2002) suggest, flexible ethnic identity management is a necessary skill to navigate the various cultural contexts which compose a transnational life. The mothers in this study also realized that they had to manage their ethnic identity to successfully implement their education strategies. They understood that membership in the Japanese community provided them with necessary resources to raise cosmopolitan children (e.g. information about education in America and Japan). At the same time,

however, they also spoke of the necessity to participate in activities outside the Japanese community so that their children could develop English language skills and have more opportunities to interact with non-Japanese children. Such flexibility would also help the mothers to cope with the stress of intensive mothering. The mothers believed that interacting with Americans in English would give them a sense of empowerment since such opportunities are highly valued and scarce in Japan.

Despite their hopes to engage in such ethnic identity management, the majority of the mothers failed to do so because of the dynamic interplay between ethnic categorization by insiders and outsiders of the Japanese community (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). With regard to the internal categorization, the Japanese community constructed a norm that constrained the mothers' flexible transgression of ethnic boundaries. For instance, several mothers, who were highly motivated to pursue their own interests, went to a local community school to study English but kept it a secret from the Japanese community. They feared criticism from other Japanese mothers. Through making childrearing their first priority, Japanese women themselves played a role in maintaining ethnic and moral boundaries.

The local American context also constrained identity management among the mothers, the majority of whom lacked English and other cultural skills to gain membership in the local American community. The mothers' efforts to disengage with the Japanese community and instead to participate in the local American community usually failed as they faced ethnic boundaries created by mainstream Americans. One mother, who had been in LA for three months, was frustrated by her lack of productive interactions with local Americans:

There are too many Japanese here. I'm worried whether or not my children and I can learn English. I rather wish there were no Japanese around. I know this is a rude thing to say, but I want to be immersed in an English environment. When I go to the school office, I make efforts to explain things in poor English. But then the American teachers say they will bring someone who can understand Japanese. I feel I'm being alienated. I go to school to volunteer but they put Japanese people together in a group. My world gets very small. I have nothing else to do other than focusing on childrearing. It doesn't have a good influence on my children either. My children's world gets very small too. If *oyako* [parent and child] just interact with Japanese people, what's the significance of living here?

As the above excerpt suggests, crossing racial and ethnic boundaries was difficult because Americans constantly categorized them as Japanese. But the longer they remained in the US, the easier such crossings became. Several mothers, who had been in LA for more than three years, said that, thanks to their children, who had integrated into the local context faster than they themselves were able to, they had had opportunities to engage with American teachers and mothers at homes and parties. This 'role reversal' (Foner, 2009) partly helped the mothers' integration into the host society. Even so, the mothers often sensed discriminatory attitudes and racial stereotypes from Caucasian Americans and said that their interactions felt superficial.

Constrained by the external forces of the local American and Japanese communities, the mothers suggested that they had to 'keep a reasonable distance' from other Japanese and 'swim well', suggesting careful presentation of the self and emotion work in the

community. While not being able to become a member of the local American community and fully access its resources, the mothers' uneasiness toward their 'sticky' Japanese identification increased. A mother who pointed out this in-between status described the expatriate experience as a 'lonely business'. This sense of 'liminality' (Huang et al., 2008) in general, and their sense of failure in traversing racial and ethnic boundaries for the sake of their children and themselves, were sources of emotional pain among the expatriate mothers.

## Conclusion

By focusing on education as a way to accumulate capital, this article has shown the intersections between global economic forces and the culture, emotions, and identifications of expatriate Japanese mothers. Like other Asians of the 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair, 2001), Japanese expatriate families in the study developed transnational education strategies for their children in response to being transferred abroad by their companies competing in the global economy. Their education strategies resemble those of other Asian elite and middle-class mothers, who utilize international experiences to enhance the family's upward mobility and make concerted efforts to accumulate cultural capital in developing their children's transnational competence (Ho and Bedford, 2005; Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2002; Zhou, 1998). However, the Japanese mothers are unique in that they strive to foster both transnational competence (English, cosmopolitan worldview, sociability, and flexibility) and competence to function within the Japanese society – particularly proficiency in Japanese language and other Japanese academic subjects. Raising cosmopolitan Japanese children became the education goal as the mothers believed that such children would not only survive the competitive educational system in Japan, but would also have more opportunities for success in the ever-globalizing workplace in Japan and elsewhere. Thus, being attentive to both Japanese and American cultures and social structures, they constructed and engaged in a new mode of transnational mothering practice that mixes elements of both American and Japanese middle-class childrearing.

The development of such transnational habitus and education strategies required structural support from the Japanese government and companies, which share the goal of raising cosmopolitan Japanese children. Such support, however, by no means suggests that the mothers' childrearing experience was easy. On the contrary, this study emphasizes that the global economic forces place huge cultural and emotional burdens on the mothers who aim to raise cosmopolitan children. In line with the studies that depict the challenges and emotional costs among Asian transnational middle-class mothers (Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2002), I found that the transnational education strategies among the Japanese mothers required intensive mothering. Yet, what was particularly difficult for these women was that they had to accept the image and role as the 'good Japanese mother', while also conforming to the American norms of good mothering. Their attempts to traverse the cultural boundaries and interact with both Americans and the Japanese community were challenged by the tendency of American teachers and parents to group Japanese mothers and children together, and by the exclusive tight-knit networks in the Japanese community. The mothers coped with



these situations by managing identity – distancing themselves from both Japanese and Americans and negotiating the role of a ‘good mother’. Their careful presentation of a ‘good Japanese mother’ and a sense of liminality (Huang et al., 2008) associated with such practice suggest how the global economic forces manifest in the everyday cultural, emotional, and social lives of transnational women.

While experiences such as being stationed abroad offer rich opportunities for the families seeking to gain cultural capital through children’s education, as Favell et al. (2006) insist, we should be wary of perspectives that frame globalization and transnationalism as simply liberating and empowering. The children in this study showed compliance toward their mothers’ education strategy and thus may become cosmopolitan Japanese. Yet, this seemingly ‘successful’ venture to gain cultural capital is not without risks and challenges. Although Beaverstock (2005) finds that transnational professionals engage in cross-border activities and cosmopolitan lifestyle while achieving successful integration into the host society, his study subjects were mostly male. This study, in contrast, highlights the ways in which the global economic forces that influence people’s lives are gendered, as the burdens of implementing transnational education strategies to ensure academic survival of the Japanese family fall mostly on the mothers, while the fathers work for Japan’s survival in the global economy. As Pessar and Mahler (2003) propose, I suggest that women’s perspectives and everyday practices should be given more attention to highlight how globalization, through promoting families’ inventions of transnational education strategies, intersects with their economic, cultural, social, and psychological characteristics.

Furthermore, we should pay attention to the characteristics of the multiple contexts in which women’s culture, emotions, and identifications evolve. Studies show that transnational migrants are anchored in complex and contradictory sets of cultural practices in their everyday lives (Yeoh and Huang, 2011). In this study, I have shown that the expatriate mothers forge and sustain multi-stranded ties to different geographical sites, which are both real and imagined. Like many other transnational migrants, most of what they do is located in the host society and thus they are subject to assimilative pressure (Kristvo, 2001); yet, given their status as expatriates destined to return to a home country, they never fail to ‘look back’ toward their home country. The mothers developed perspectives and practices to negotiate multiple contexts: Japanese labor market conditions and educational systems, the Japanese community in Los Angeles, and the local American context are all affected by globalization but maintain different cultural norms. The mothers’ embeddedness in multiple social and cultural contexts enabled them to implement transnational education strategies, forced them to engage in intensive mothering and strategic identity management, but also gave rise to deep emotional struggles. Taking this embeddedness into account, we are in a better position to understand divergent processes and outcomes of the intersections between globalization, transnational education strategies, and women’s identifications and emotions.

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## Notes

1. In 2009, there were 758,248 Japanese ‘long-term residents’ in LA, defined as those who reside overseas for more than three months but do not possess permanent residency. The number includes expatriate businessmen and their families. LA ranked third following Shanghai and New York, in terms of the number of long-term Japanese residents, but ranked first when Japanese ‘permanent residents’ were included (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).
2. Koehn and Rosenau (2002) conceptualize ‘transnational competence’ as consisting of a set of analytic, emotional, creative/imaginative, and behavioral skills that enable individuals to negotiate access to resources in the global economy.
3. Japanese expatriates in Asian countries send their children to Japanese school or international school since they see no benefit in sending them to a local school (Nukaga and Tsuneyoshi, 2010).
4. In this article, I understand identity from a constructionist approach, which highlights its volitional and situational nature. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) propose to use the term *identification* instead of *identity* to perceive it not as a reified entity but as a *process* in which people make sense of themselves by deploying social categories.
5. All the interviews were originally conducted in Japanese.
6. Even though visa status does not prohibit these women from working in the US, their husband’s Japanese companies discourage them to do so based on the gendered idea that women’s duty is to support the husband at home (Kurotani, 2005).
7. Since the 1970s, returnee children’s re-entry routes to Japanese schools have been institutionalized (Nukaga and Tsuneyoshi, 2010). If eligible for special slots, students are exempt from standard exams and instead take exams that place emphasis on English and interviews, although each school has different assessment criteria and eligibility requirements. A majority of the mothers in this study said that they wanted to make use of the special slots if possible, knowing that their children would have better chances of entering a prestigious school.

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## Author biography

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## Résumé

Sur la base d'études ethnographiques de familles japonaises expatriées à Los Angeles, cet article étudie comment les mères japonaises expatriées qui sont confrontées à la mondialisation et aux migrations transnationales, développent des stratégies éducatives et des *habitus* transnationaux. Ces mères essaient d'assurer la réussite de la réintégration de leurs enfants dans un système

éducatif japonais compétitif qui met de plus en plus l'accent sur la formation d'enfants japonais cosmopolites et tournés vers le monde global. À partir d'une perspective transnationale, cette étude de cas illustre comment l'économie mondialisée offre de plus en plus de possibilités de vivre à l'étranger, lesquelles, à leur tour, offrent aux familles des opportunités pour développer les aptitudes scolaires de leurs enfants, leurs compétences au niveau transnational ainsi que différents savoir-faire en matière culturelle. Cependant, cet article révèle également le coût de tels engagements, à savoir la charge émotionnelle supportée par les mères, qui découle de leur implication croissante dans un rôle maternel intensif et une gestion de l'identité dans un contexte social transnational. Les résultats laissent entrevoir l'importance d'une étude des points d'intersection entre mondialisation et processus de construction par les femmes de la race, de l'appartenance ethnique, du genre et de l'émotion, en mettant en évidence leur enracinement dans des contextes socio-culturels multiples.

Mots-clés: contextes socio-culturels multiples, *habitus* transnationaux, mères japonaises, mondialisation, stratégies éducatives, transnationalisme

## Resumen

Este artículo explora como las madres japonesas emigradas desarrollan *habitus* transnacionales y estrategias educativas al enfrentarse con la globalización y las migraciones transnacionales, basándose en un estudio etnográfico de las familias japonesas emigrantes en Los Ángeles. Estas madres intentan asegurar la reintegración exitosa de sus hijos en el competitivo sistema educativo japonés que está cada vez más preocupado por la educación de niños japoneses cosmopolitas y con orientación global. Utilizando una perspectiva internacional, este estudio de caso ilustra cómo la economía global ofrece crecientes posibilidades de vivir en el extranjero, lo que a su vez proporciona oportunidades a las familias para cultivar el desempeño académico de sus hijos, las competencias transnacionales y varias destrezas culturales. Sin embargo, este artículo también revela un coste de tales actividades, las cargas emocionales de las madres, que son consecuencia de su mayor compromiso con la maternidad y la gestión de identidades en un entorno social transnacional. Los hallazgos sugieren la importancia del estudio de las intersecciones entre la globalización y la construcción femenina de la raza, la etnicidad, el género y la emoción, poniendo de manifiesto su incrustamiento en contextos socioculturales múltiples.

Palabras clave: Contextos socioculturales múltiples, estrategias educativas, globalización, *habitus* transnacionales, madres japonesas, transnationalismo