

“Japanese” children with “Thai” mothers

The identity of Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children in Japan

Kayoko Ishii

Associate Professor

Nagoya University of Commerce and Business

kayoko007kayoko007@m6.dion.ne.jp

Introduction

This article analyzes the way in which Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children identify themselves in the context of ethnicity. The proportion of mixed-ethnic children has been rising in Japan for the last 20 years and at this point, a section of this population is now about to enter the Japanese job and marriage markets. However, despite this rapid increase in the multiracial population, there are only a few known pieces of research examining the ethnic identity of those belonging to this group in Japan. Thus, this study aims to shed light on the dimensions of the ethnic identity of mixed-ethnic children residing in Japan.

The number as well as percentage of multiracial children has dramatically increased in the last 20 years in Japan, as observed also in its neighboring countries. However, in Asian countries, the volume of research that deals with mixed-ethnic children is not as large as that in Western countries, such as the United States or Australia, which have large migrant societies. Can existing discussions on mixed-ethnic children—derived from Western countries where the majority of the population is *white*—be adopted in the context of East Asian countries that were formerly *monoethnic* societies and have a *nonwhite* majority?

To highlight this point, this study needs to investigate how Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children identify themselves. The target area includes the *Tokai* region, Nagoya city and four prefectures located in the surrounding area. These areas account for more than 2,000 registered Thai nationals. Although currently there are no statistics indicating the visa category under which Thai migrants in these areas are registered, national statistics report the obvious tendency: most Thai migrants hold spouse visa or temporary visas that are usually granted to migrants who live in Japan as spouses of Japanese nationals or guardians of Japanese nationals. Thus, the biggest segment of Thai migrants is considered to be specifically foreign women who are married to or mothers of Japanese nationals.

Background

To better understand this contemporary increase in the number of mixed-ethnic children in Japan, some background information needs to be provided. Both the number and the rate of interracial marriages have increased in Japan since the 1980s, as seen in the graph in Figure 1. Today, one out

of every 20 newly registered marriages is an interracial marriage. This phenomenon of increasing interracial marriages cannot be attributed only to the increase in the opportunities to meet foreign nationals owing to *globalization*.

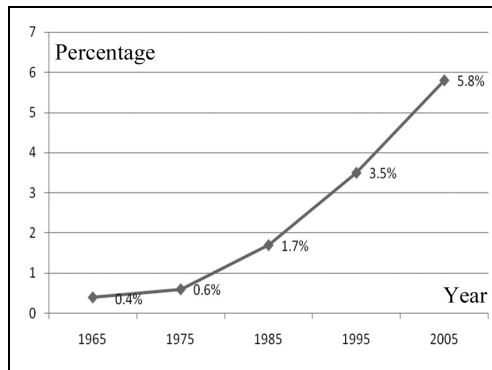


Figure 1: Percentage of intermarriages from among all newly registered marriages in Japan

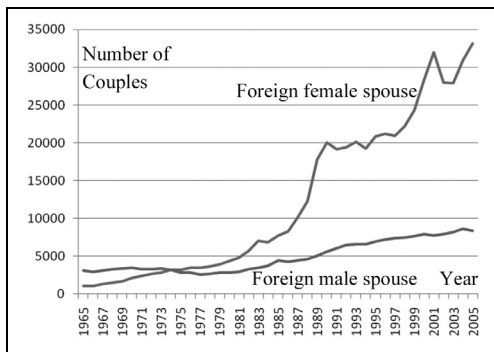


Figure 2: Number of newly registered intermarriages in Japan highlighting the gender of the foreign spouse

If the increase in interracial marriages were to merely reflect the increased opportunities to meet foreigners, then the number of foreign male and female spouses should have been equivalent. This is considering the fact that there is not much difference in the proportion of male and female Japanese nationals going abroad and that of foreign nationals coming to Japan. However, as shown in Figure 2, the increase of interracial marriages between Japanese and foreign nationals since the 1980s has shown an obvious increase in the number of foreign female spouses, whereas

the numbers of foreign male spouses has not increased much. Currently, the number of foreign female spouses is more than four times that of foreign male spouses in Japan. What does this increase of interracial families signify? When we analyze the ratio of male and female foreign spouses, the number of foreign female spouses is nearly three times that of foreign male spouses. In other words, interracial marriages do show a gender-biased trend in Japan.

With the increase in the number of interracial marriages, the number of mixed-ethnic children has also increased. As Figure 3 indicates, in the year 2005, the number of newly registered mixed-ethnic children in Japan was 22,173 persons accounting for 2.1% of all registered births (1,062,530) [SID-MHLW 2005:130].

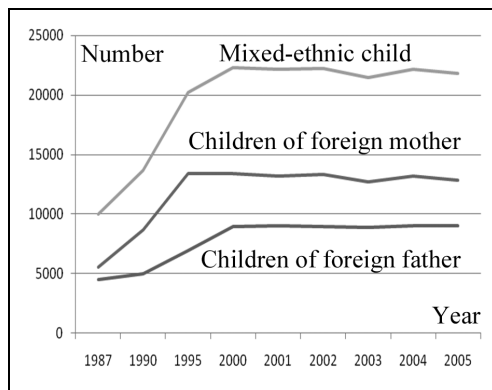
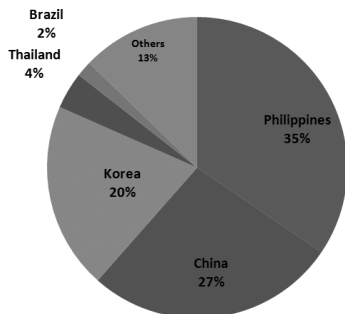


Figure 3: Number of newly registered mixed-ethnic children in Japan

Increase of Mothers from surrounding countries

Figure 4: Percentage of foreign mothers in Japan by nationality



Source: 人口動態統計

When we examine the ethnicity of foreign mothers in Japan, we find that most foreign mothers come from the surrounding Asian countries. Although there are no formal statistics indicating the ethnicity of foreign mothers in Japan, we can estimate their ethnicity by analyzing the formal statistical records of the nationality of foreign mothers. According to the Vital Statistics of Japan, an official source for statistics on the shifting Japanese demography, nearly 90% of mothers come from the following five countries: (1) Philippines (35%), (2) China (27%), (3) Korea (20%), (4) Thailand (4%), and (5) Brazil (2%). As for Korea and China, there is no distinction in these statistics between *old comers* and *newcomers*. Nonetheless, it could be inferred that most foreign mothers are nationals of the surrounding Asian countries.

Sociological Perspectives and Discussions on the Identity of Mixed-ethnic Children

To date, there have been numerous studies on the ethnic identity of mixed-ethnic children. One theory states that mixed-ethnic children tend to identify themselves with the ethnicity of the majority group. Another theory states that mixed-ethnic children tend to have a trans-ethnic identity that does not conform to a single existing ethnic category, but falls into a new category that transcends these individual ethnic groups. Both theories share a common feature—they study countries with a large migrant population whose dominant ethnic group was *white*.

Most studies try to determine whether half-*white* children shall be assimilated into the *white* ethnic group or whether half-white children blur implicit ethnic borders and pose a threat to the privileges of the *white* population. However, Japan and its surrounding countries do not share the same social

circumstances as other countries. First, Japan is not socially regarded as migrant based country¹ in comparison to countries in which research has been conducted, for example, the United States or Australia. Second, the majority ethnic group in Japan is not white; similar to most countries in the world. In such countries, are theories and discussions from previous research appropriate? There is no known research on the ethnic identity of mixed-ethnic children, the number of which is now on the rise in East Asian countries, formerly *monoethnic* countries with *nonwhite* mainstream populations. Thus, this study investigates this point.

Research Objective

As mentioned above, until recently, there has apparently been no known research curalysing the ethnic identity of mixed-ethnic children in countries that are believed to be monoethnic countries and whose dominant population is *nonwhite*. This study adds to current research on the ethnic identity of mixed-ethnic children by shedding light on the ethnic identity of these children in Japan, formerly a *monoethnic* country with the majority of the population being *nonwhite* and of Japanese ethnicity. With this research objective, two main questions were analyzed.

1. How do Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children identify themselves?
2. To what extent are these children influenced by their parents' respective cultures?

To find answers to these two questions, there is a need to address the most important question: is Japan moving toward a multi-ethnic country with this increase in the proportion of foreign mothers. In other words, the purpose of this study is to verify whether a mere increase in the population of mixed-ethnic children blurs ethnic boundaries or promotes a mutual understanding of ethnic groups.

Methodology and Data

My study is based primarily on interviews and participant observation. Participant observation was held between the years 2002 to 2007 (5 years), at first primarily by participating in activities of Thai female migrant support groups in the area, but later extending to communication with the people surrounding them. Participant observation sessions were chiefly conducted with two female migrants' groups (whose members accounted for more than 60 of the target children), and four interracial families (comprising intermarried couples and their mixed-ethnic children) were also analyzed. From time to time, informal interviews were held with the subjects of the participant observation sessions held during the last three years. The research target group was Japanese-Thai intermarried couples, their families, and their children. Mothers were main contact person. In the process of forming friendships with these mothers, I was introduced to and began to observe and interact with their children as well. Both, the interviews and participating observation sessions were held in Nagoya city and its surrounding area in

¹ However, there is much academic research which contradicts this social norm.

Japan.

There are no formal statistics or reports that mention the registration of Japanese-Thai children before the year 1994. In 1995, 851 children were registered as of Japanese-Thai ethnicity. Since then, an average of 600-700 children have been registered as Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children (MHLW 2004). There are also no reliable statistics to report the number of Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children in the Nagoya area. However, calculating the portion of registered Thai migrants in the target area from the complete Thai migrant population in the country, there may be approximately 500-1,500 Thai-Japanese mixed-ethnic children in the target area.

Results

The following were the results found from the participant observation and informal interviews. First, from among the mixed-ethnic children, the Japanese-Thai children, seemed to have a tendency to reject their Thai identity. The childrens' comments were as follows.:

"I feel sorry for my mother who is Thai." [An 8-year-old boy]

"Since I was a child, the fact that my mother is Thai has often been a source of irritation for me. She cannot understand things (for instance, the role of a mother in school activities and other things) like other mothers do. She cannot even understand Japanese!" [18-year-old girl]

From the above comments made by the mixed-ethnic children, these children seem to identify themselves as being Japanese, while at the same time identifying their mothers as being Thai. They seem to like to distinguish themselves from their mothers and never represent themselves as belonging to two nations. A very important point to note is that no children, including those over 18 years, characterized their experiences and suffering as an ethnic identity problem. All of them seem to confidently define themselves as being Japanese without any hesitation. One of the likely reasons for this trend could be because most of the Japanese-Thai children I met in the target area have Japanese features. Moreover, most Thai spouses had the appearance of a Chinese-descendant Thai. The reasons for this phenomenon need to be separately investigated in further research. It can be said, however, that sharing the same features as the majority enable the mixed-ethnic children to identify themselves as Japanese.

However, why do these mixed-ethnic children only choose to identify with a single ethnic identity? Many works on this topic have discussed the existence of multi-ethnic identities that do not conform to any existing ethnic category, but fall into a new category that transcends these single ethnic groups. Sometimes, this is regarded as national identity, and sometimes it is considered multi-ethnicity. Prior researches pointed out that mixed-ethnic children tend to have such a multi-ethnic identity. Therefore, why is there a tendency for most Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children to not accept their multi-ethnic

identity?² This point is elaborated in the next section.

Concealment of the Mother's Ethnicity

In the same time, some Thai-Japanese mixed ethnic children tend to conceal their mother's ethnicity to school mates or newly met persons. Despite this, Thai mothers, on the other hand, do not appear to have this impression and believe that their children are happy with their family. It is sometimes important to interpret the behavior of target persons and not merely accept what they say to us. We need to interpret the nuances of their words based on their behavior and the behavior of the people around them. A grandmother of a mixed-ethnic child said the following.

"I am so busy *being a mother* to my grand children. ****(Her grand daughter)**** always asks me to accompany her to school instead of ****(the girl's Thai mother)**** "

[Grandmother of a 7-year-old Japanese-Thai girl]

What does this statement mean? The 7-year-old mixed-ethnic girl is trying to hide her Thai mother from her schoolmates, and prefers if her Japanese grandmother represents her mother in front of her classmates or the mothers of her classmates. Usually, Thai mothers say that this is for the sake of convenience because mothers are required to speak and read in Japanese at school activities. While it is true that the language problem plays a role, do grandmothers take their place only for convenience in the case of a language problem? Here is another example. A mixed-ethnic girl about 10 or 11 years of age, participated in a Thai dance at a Thai festival in the target area; when I asked why she did not invite her schoolmates to see her performance, she answered as follows:

"Because then they'll know that my mother is Thai." [10 or 11-year-old Japanese-Thai girl]

When I replied saying, "What is wrong with that? Your mother is such a beautiful, gentle, kind and nice lady," the girl said nothing. In other words, she did not understand my question as to why she concealed the fact that her mother is Thai. This young Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic girl believed that being Thai is something to be concealed. She was brought up with the idea that her mother's ethnicity should be automatically concealed. Thus, the inherent *problem* faced by children is not language, but the ethnicity of their mothers.

Another obvious point seen among older mixed-ethnic children is the emphasis on the Chinese descendancy of their Thai mothers. One Japanese-Thai girl publicly described her mother as follows.

"My mother is a person of Chinese descent, from Thailand." [21-year-old girl]

² I know of only one Thai mother who raised her child as a Japanese-Thai multi-ethnic child; however, since she declined to be part of this research, I do not consider her case in this study out of respect for her wishes.

The important aspect to note here is that this girl did not introduce herself as a “Japanese-Thai” mixed-ethnic person, but referred to her mother instead. In other words, she described herself as being Japanese and her mother as non-Japanese. There seems to be a gap between this girl and her mother in this representation. Second, she did not describe her mother saying “my mother is Thai”; instead, she depicted her mother with the words “my mother is a person of Chinese descent” and “from Thailand.” She described her mother's ethnicity as Chinese while, in fact her mother “comes from” Thailand. In this way, the girl seems to like to openly display her mother's foreigner-ness in public, but she still refuses to divulge her mother's Thai origin and her own mixed-ethnicity. This seems to come from her ethnic image that Chinese ethnicity is more similar to Japanese than Thai ethnicity. Her mother is a third generation Chinese, but is a Thai national, has lived in Thailand since her birth, and her mother tongue is also Thai. This mixed-ethnic ... had never been to China neither did she have any interest in China. It is only the ethnic image that influences her to describe her mother the way she did. What do these descriptions of ethnic identities indicate? The following section will further analyze this point.

Analysis

There are two points to be analyzed. The first is why do multi-ethnic children identify themselves as having a single ethnic identity—namely, Japanese—and not as being multi-ethnic? With regard to the children in this study, none of them was raised in a bilingual environment of Japanese and Thai. Most of them were not taught the Thai language at all, and they even speak in Japanese with their Thai mothers. In addition, most of them hardly had any opportunity to learn about their Thai culture. On visits to their mother's family in Thailand, they are regarded as “Japanese children.” Many of these children have formally registered Japanese names. Although their mothers register their Thai names in Japan, only a few children use their Thai names; sometimes, most of the children do not even know their Thai names. Such children cannot make direct conversation with their Thai grand parents or their cousins. The second point that will be analyzed is why these children are raised in this manner.

First, there seems to be a tendency in a Japanese family to regard Thai mothers as different from Japanese mothers, yet as persons who should assimilate the Japanese way of life. In the case of *Western* mothers with mixed-ethnic children, the members of the Japanese families, including the mother-in-law and close relations, learn the language of the foreigner (only if the woman is English or French). However, in the case of Thai mothers, the mother is expected to learn Japanese. Only a few husbands try to learn the Thai language, if they have a Thai daughter-in-law or a Thai wife. Under such circumstances, Thai mothers appear to be sidelined as people who can not be proper mothers/wives within a family. This could be the reason why some children tend to display the perception in the 8-year-old boy's statement, “I feel sorry for my mother who is Thai.” These children have not been raised according to the Thai lifestyle or in Thai traditions (as opposed to other cultures). Moreover, they are not even raised to acknowledge themselves as being Japanese-Thai or multi-ethnic people.

Second, as for the Thai mothers in the target group, they seem to have a tendency of accepting

the values of the dominant ethnic group. Furthermore, many Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children I observed lived with their paternal grandparents, and therefore, it is likely that grandparents have a substantial influence on their social skills and ethnic image.

There is also a typical opinion expressed by Thai mothers, as described below.

My mother-in-law was happy when I met her for the first time saying, "I am a lucky old woman not to have a spoiled, impudent young Japanese woman, but a daughter-in-law from Thailand, a country where people understand the meaning of patience, like it used to be in Japan earlier." [30-year-old Thai mother, married to a Japanese man for 2 years]

Viewed from this aspect, the words of this Japanese mother-in-law are based on quite a biased ethnic image in describing Thailand as being similar to the Japan of the past. However, some Thai mothers replicate this biased ethnic image themselves. Although it is unconsciously displayed, they accept their mother-in-law's ethnic bias with delight. In such circumstances, in their endeavor to be "good daughters-in-law," they are likely to reproduce this biased ethnic image. If these mixed-ethnic children are raised by such Japanese grandparents and families who are unconscious of their bias toward a particular ethnicity and by mothers who do not protest against, and thereby inevitably become the more *inferior* ethnic group, then the more they endeavor to become *good family members*, the more uncomfortable will their children be with the truth about their Thai-ethnic or their multi-ethnic identity.

In other words, Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children tend to be raised as the dominant family culture both by the Thai mother and the Japanese family. Mixed-ethnic children tend to be raised in the dominant culture both by Thai mothers and Japanese family. As a result, this diverse ethnic background of mixed-ethnic children is concealed or sometimes even rejected. However, not all mixed-ethnic children are brought up in this way. When considering Japanese-*Western* mixed-ethnic children, they are usually given *Western* names and they express their foreign mother's/father's ethnicity in public. Self conflict concerning their own ethnic identity is often reported by Japanese-*Western* mixed-ethnic children upon reaching their teens; however, this is not often found in Japanese-Thai children who are brought up thoroughly as Japanese.

Underlying this phenomenon, there seems to be an obvious ethnic notion and ethnic balance of power surrounding Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children. With regard to the target families in my research, most of the older generation of the Japanese families regarded the ethnic category as being either Japanese or foreign. They did not have a notion of a multi-ethnic category. Most of the older generation regarded Thai mothers and Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children as compensation for their Japanese family members. Hence, there is no doubt that they do not have the concept of an ethnic category of multi-ethnicity. Due to such an ethnic balance of power, none of them even introduced the possibility of a multi-ethnic identity. As such, these children tend to reject their Thai identity and instead ethnically identify themselves as being Japanese.

Discussion and Recommendation

The above results and analysis suggest that Japanese-Thai mixed-ethnic children tend to reject their Thai origins and represent themselves as having only a single identity, namely, Japanese. Even if the number of mixed-ethnic children increases in Japan, if the situation is as described above continues, then such an increase would not promote a multi-ethnic understanding of Japanese society. Japan needs to promote a social system to encourage the acceptance of this multi-ethnic population because it must accept foreign labor entering the country and face inevitable outcomes such as rapid demographic change and an aging society. Considering the current trend, the following points are recommended in the interest of promoting a multi-ethnic society in Japan.

- (1) Local governments should promote campaigns to change the local residents' perception that “Globalization represents not only *Westernization* but also the modification of Japanese communities by themselves, in order to work toward enhancing the current society to the level of a multi-ethnic population.”
- (2) Local schools should shift their educational policy of “global education.” They should no longer merely hire *English native teachers*, but bring to light the culture of all the *foreign* residents in the area, regardless of whether they are *Westerners*.
- (3) In local schools, children should be made aware that foreign residents (including spouse visa residents) are an important part of the Japanese community, industry, economy, and society.

To sum up, [1] children should be made aware about Japan's strong ties with its neighboring Asian countries from an early stage, and [2] during education, the meaning of “cosmopolitanism” should be revised from a concept that exclusively represents *Westernization* to one having multiple dimensions and values. As the demography of Japan rapidly changes to an aging society, the absorption of migrant labor is inevitable. This implies that Japan must compete with other countries at the global level in acquiring foreign workers. Unless the Japanese government prioritizes the construction of a social system that is attractive to competent foreign workers and supports them, Japan might fail to acquire the requisite migrant workers, which might mean that the economic/social situation of the country could deteriorate.

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