# Far from Home – Transcultural Encounter, Migration and Tourism                    Peter Ackermann

1. "Transcultural encounter" (together with the probably more common "intercultural encounter") have been important concepts for Japan's national orientation since the 1970s. I am here particularly thinking of the age that began with the Jumbo Jet, that is, of the possibilities for quick and cheap movement into and out of Japan. However, with migration and global intermarriage trans-*cultural* or inter-*cultural* have become blurred concepts, and 'culture', as well as for instance also 'nation', are now nearly indefinably complex notions.

The traditional Japanese approach, as we found it in school books, was the call to develop a feeling of friendship for other cultures and respect their habitual patterns of life. But what are "other cultures"? All too often, "other cultures" are understood to be other countries: Germany, China, Brazil and so on.

To me, that is too simple. After all, we don't encounter countries, we encounter people. Let us think about what that means.
I. A person's identity radiates from specific use and register of language, tinge of voice, or bodily and facial movement. However, this does not necessarily pass on factual information. It just tells you "this is me, take that!" So what do we do with this information? We need to be reminded that communication is a process of guessing what other people might mean. But what they mean is rooted in debates going on around them, e.g. what to fight for, whom to criticise, or how to interpret misfortune. Transcultural encounter (or also: Meeting Japan) is thus a difficult process of guesswork and inference, and not a matter of knowing about food, religion or festivals.

II. A person's identity is rooted in, or at least closely linked to, self-esteem. Self-esteem is belief, a belief in what one should do and be in life. Often, such a belief has been structured by religion (i.e. by notions about a world order, about a god, about death, or about the role of ancestors). In almost every society such beliefs have been subject to social sanctions, i.e. you were reprimanded for wrong beliefs and praised for proper beliefs, and this has nothing to do with religion, but with order. Transcultural encounter therefore means encounter with people whose self-esteem is based on sanctioned ideas of order that can appear totally irrational to the outsider.

III. Transcultural encounter is shaped by concrete generations involved. Obsessions, fears, hopes, visions and happiness keep on leaving their imprint in a different mix. In times of rapid change, therefore, as in post-war Japan, inter-generational misunderstanding is a given fact. Transcultural encounter (or also: Meeting Japan) therefore means meeting people caught up in inter-generational conflict.

IV. What, then, is "national" culture? Certainly, specific signals may indicate that I have been formed by a specific national society that shares these norms, e.g. getting angry about disrespect for elders, or about a lack of work ethics. But it is rare that the society which has formed me is identical with a nation (or state, or country). The nation-state, in fact, is often seen as the enemy. It imposes rules I detest, it takes taxes I hate to pay, or it cares for its own officials, but not for me. Many nation-states (also Japan), however, seek to instil the concept of a national culture through their institutions. For this they emphasize a common history and a common destiny. However, there is no such thing as a national culture stable enough to serve us as a solid point of reference in transcultural encounters.

V. In modern societies most individuals carry within them conflicting emotions, e.g. when mother and father have come from very different family, regional, or language backgrounds. Conflicting emotions always make encounter complex and difficult.

Transcultural encounter is thus not just people from one country meeting people from another country. What we can say is that transcultural encounter happens when a person moves or has moved from one place to another and then stayed there through the phases of culture shock, coping and adaptation.

2. In Japan transcultural encounter appears unspectacular in the light of migration on a global scale. Nevertheless, also in Japan it has led to strain, conflict and dramatic friction e.g. between spouses and in parent-child relationships. Today, migration (*jinkô idô*) in Japan as a rule follows the pattern "periphery to centre", "periphery to Tokyo".

Of the 20 largest cities in Japan (apart from Tokyo itself) 5 are in the immediate neighbourhood of Tokyo, namely Chiba, Yokohama, Kawasaki, Saitama City and Sagamihara City. Together, this is a huge concentration of around 30 million people forming roughly a quarter of Japan's entire population. Moreover, in the Tokyo area we find not only the national government but two thirds of Japan's major companies and over 40 % of Japan's students. The next largest concentration of population is the Ôsaka – Kyôto – Kôbe

area, together with "merely" 5, 7 million people.

By contrast, of Japan's 1718 communities remaining (in 2018) after the municipal mergers of the past decade a full 896 may well disappear by 2040 due to departure from the area and the lack of women of childbearing age. Discussing these facts, Masuda Hiroya's book *Chihô Shômetsu* (Demise of the Regions) of August 2014 has aroused an enormous echo (Masuda Hiroya: *Chihô Shômetsu*, Tokyo: Chûô Kôron Shinsho no.2282, 2014). I will here follow his thoughts and arguments.

Masuda points out that immigration (and emigration) are becoming a matter of course in most societies with dwindling childbirth rates, and "unless also Japan pursues a policy of receiving persons from outside, the drop in birth rate cannot be covered" (p.8). However, Masuda continues, "this is an unrealistic idea. In order to make up for the low birth rate it would be necessary to receive immigrants on a scale that would turn Japan into a multi-ethnic nation (*taminzoku kokka*), and it is unthinkable that the Japanese people would approve of such a policy". (p.92)

Migration in Japan thus is mainly a question of the regions versus the Tokyo area. Can we speak of transcultural encounter in this case?

In a sense, yes. Let us look at internet sites dealing with the practical and emotional aspects of internal migration within Japan. Negative reactions towards Tokyo include abhorrence of the crowded streets, shops and trains, of the rhythm and speed of life, living expenses, but particularly of the breakdown of family life. The husband spends long hours commuting, is busy at his office, and has no time for his family. Moreover, with the absence of other family members nearby the wife is often left alone to care for the children. By contrast, children's essays from the regions frequently portray intensive interaction among family members and very affective ties if one member needs to leave.

The reaction by some inhabitants of Tokyo to negative feelings about their city can be severe, e.g. "If you don't like it here, then get out", or "As an inhabitant of Tokyo I will not let myself be insulted". Usually, however, those who have lived in Tokyo for long point to the numerous parks and possibilities to enjoy nature in the nearby hills.

Persons from the densely populated Kyôto-Ôsaka-Kôbe area, which has distinct language and communication patterns of its own, often see Tokyo as an uncomfortable place with a

lack of intimacy more suitable for well-to-do business men.

The majority of opinions about life in Tokyo, however, are not at all negative. The great variety of people in Tokyo gives many a feeling of freedom from being observed; many enjoy Tokyo society with its polite disinterest. Also, freedom from control by parents and relatives is very highly esteemed. Another aspect of Tokyo which evokes strong positive feelings are the vigour of the city and the many incentives and options it provides.

The regions, on the other hand, easily appear dull, with few good preparatory schools for the children, very complicated personal relationships, very few opportunities for women to work, and in not a few cases the burden of snow clearing.

One topic that should be looked at carefully is financial debt. Many families in the regions take up considerable loans to enable their children to get higher education in Tokyo. But then the children will not return to the regions, and the parents are left with the financial debts und unfulfilled expectations of the moral duties of their offspring.

The clash of generations in Japan is considerable. After all, the obligation to return the favour of parents and elders is crucial for anybody brought up in the regions. However, Tokyo can make this impossible, with long working hours and the stress of commuting, tight living space and the general vigour and attractions of life in the city.

Moreover, Japan's development since the 1990s has created an almost unbridgeable economic divide between Tokyo and the regions, as the regions were the first to suffer reductions of public services, bankruptcies and the collapse of shops and infrastructure. With this came the loss of full-time jobs and an intolerable level of insecurity in a society used to loyalty and long-term obligations. Tokyo has certainly not been spared, but, unlike in the regions, the size of the city still provides options and hope.

Thus Tokyo continues to be Japan's magnet, but this merely hides the unfolding drama of Japan's depopulation. Whereas the regions lose their young generation to Tokyo and are left with women beyond child-bearing age, families in Tokyo have few children. Interestingly, Masuda (p.34, p.170) maintains that in 2010 90 % of unmarried women wished to marry, and married couples thought an average of 2, 42 children per family ideal. Actually, however, the average in Tokyo is a mere 1, 13 children, showing that contrary to many a family's wish only a minimum of children is born.

Let me here take a quick glance specifically at the situation in Hokkaidô, an island which has seen huge waves of both immigration and emigration: In 1920 Hokkaidô had 2, 3 million inhabitants. In 1950 this figure had almost doubled. In 1998 a peak was reached with 5, 7 million. But now the figures are dwindling. In fact, the situation is dramatic, as soon 40 % of Hokkaidô's population will be concentrated in Sapporo, leaving the Hokkaidô regions to decay. In turn, Sapporo is losing especially its young female population to Tokyo, while having to put up with an influx of aged persons seeking medical and old-age care.

Looking at communities hit by the demise of coal mining in Hokkaidô, the figures appear even more staggering: Yûbari had around 108'000 inhabitants in 1960, but now has only 13'000; by 2040 there may be merely 4000 left. Ashibetsu had around 43'000 inhabitants in 1970, and now has only around 16'000.

Where did all these people go to? How have they made new lives in the places they went to? What happens to their families when they or their children almost inevitably end up in Tokyo? How do their assumptions about life in Japan, and thus also about economy, politics and political participation change through emigration to Sapporo or to Tokyo? How do mixed marriages cope – often enough we witness conflict if one partner is from Tokyo and the other from the regions. And: For whom is transcultural encounter with people from outside Japan easier, for those in Tokyo who are happy with what the big city has to offer, or for those in the regions who may be more willing to seek challenge?

3. Masuda in his book *Chihô Shômetsu* presents ideas on how to deal with internal migration and the collapse of regional communities. His ideas follow classical patterns: Attract new medium-size companies, provide better opportunities for higher education, diversify the tax system in favour of the regions, and intensify marketing region-specific products and attractions. Masuda calls for better conditions for young families, better life–work balance, and better child-care institutions, and here he sees regional medium-sized cities as best capable of reconciling work and family interests. I wonder how far all this will work. To succeed, what is going to counteract the aura of Tokyo as a place of protective anonymity, vigour, elegance and hope?

4. Among the proposals put forth by Masuda to change the tide of emigration we find, as mentioned, the call to make better use of what a region specifically has to offer. For some time already Japan has been developing optimistic visions of regional tourism, in fact, it calls

itself a major tourist country.

However, Japanese may be conscious of places of historical interest, but do the regions otherwise have much to offer that suits demand? Travelling through Japan makes you painfully aware of the dark sides of tourist projects – rusting theme parks, monstrous resort hotels, unappetizing hot-springs and lonely museums. As Japan does not have a culture of taking long family holidays which would enable interesting regions to be enjoyed and explored, regional attractions often remain with little return on high investment.

Certainly tourism can support agricultural efforts, it can stimulate revitalization of local customs, it can stimulate innovation for instance in the IT sector indispensable to survive in nationwide competition, it can stimulate quality improvement, and it can stimulate some international encounter. Owners of outstanding regional buildings may find themselves invited to Paris or Berlin as part of worldwide networks to preserve local heritage.

In view of debates in my native Switzerland I am, however, surprised how rare critical stances are concerning tourism as an industry that fosters anything but encounter, let alone transcultural encounter.

For one thing tourism is a monoculture, and it is easy to become a loser in the fierce competition to stay attractive in a country of almost brutally severe Japanese customers. Who will then cover the debts incurred? Also, the essence of tourism is not human encounter, but making money. Where money is in focus, efficiency is called for and thus cheap labour. Who is going to do the dirty work? In small establishments perhaps the owners themselves – but for how long? Will the next generation take over? In larger establishments we can see, perhaps in a more discreet form than elsewhere in the world, the effects of badly payed and often unqualified personnel. Badly payed personnel tends to be kept backstage, intensifying the social divide within a local community. Moreover, working for tourism may painfully dismantle a person's self-esteem: No longer is rural family background a value, what counts is achievement and income, something that is beyond reach for many and can be felt as an insult.

As mentioned, financial investment in tourist development needs to be high, involving government and private investors. This can result in disregard for the interests of the local population who may become apathetic, even resentful, especially towards those in their own community seen to be pocketing sums of money. This in turn can accelerate destruction of

nature in the interests of building further amenities for tourist use.

Finally, congestion through tourism is inevitable, as most tourists arrive by car or in buses and have little time for personal interaction. Moreover, tourists do not and cannot know the local rituals of personal interaction in regional contexts. And, to make things worse, it is well known that persons often behave in an uninhibited way outside their own social confines, leading to a tense atmosphere that destroys positive feelings of the local inhabitants towards their region, no matter how attractive it may be.

Let me recapitulate my main points.

1. Transcultural encounter (or also: Meeting Japan) is a difficult process of guesswork and inference, and not just a matter of knowing about food, religion or festivals. We need to think about structures of communication, about self-esteem and emotional orientation towards an imagined world order. Moreover, we need to acknowledge hybridity which makes each individual a case of conflicting inner values. On the other hand, the equation of culture with nation (country, state) should be rejected, unless we can clearly prove the effects of nation-wide values imparted through educational processes.

2. Transcultural encounter in Japan, where the notion of a multi-ethnic nation is unthinkable, is mainly the result of migration. Japan has seen periods of moving from centre to periphery, but at present the movement from periphery to centre is so dramatic that – in combination with low birth rate – large parts of Japan will disappear from the population map.

3. What about efforts to reverse the direction of migration, from centre to periphery? The ideas commonly put forward do not really convince me in the face of the high value attached to all that Tokyo stands for, and to the visible decay of infrastructure and therefore of employment opportunities in many smaller towns and communities.

4. This finally led me to the topic of tourism, which is seen as one possibility of bringing employment back to the periphery. However, tourism today is almost always mass tourism, and I was surprised how the social and psychological aspects of tourism in the periphery seem to be ignored. Tourism is certainly not the context for transcultural encounter in the way we might like it to be. But then, tourism is only a side-show in Japan's battle with periphery to Tokyo migration.

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