

'(Re)Constructing Identity: International Marriage Migrants as Potential Agents of Social Change in a Globalising Japan'

CHRIS BURGESS

ABSTRACT

There is a critical debate taking place in Japan concerning the issue of migration. In particular, Japan, as the epitome of the global ageing/childless society, is having to address the issue of permanent migration. However, the link between permanent settlement and new types of societies emerging within the context of global transformation has received little attention in the migration literature. Moreover, international migration research, with its traditional focus on economic types of studies, has typically neglected issues of settlement and (cultural/societal) transformation. One reason for this may be the lack of an appropriate mechanism for conceptualising potential change. Agency, a central notion in any discussion of change from below, is often framed in a Foucauldian influenced metaphor of resistance/domination that is more useful in explaining reproduction than the transformative potential of human agents. In this paper, I put the notion of resistance under erasure [Stoler, 1986 #1112]. Using James Scott's alternative idea of 'everyday' resistance as a point of departure and drawing on recent work in migration research, I show how notions of strategic activity, social capital, and social networks/resources can provide a better understanding of the dialectic between the individual and the social, between the human agency of individuals and the social practices of communities. The result is a much more convincing mechanism of change, one that is better able to conceive of the international migrant as a complex social being exercising agency to gain access to, transform, and create social networks, social resources, and identities. I support my argument with data from a small sample of international marriage migrants gathered during a six-month period of fieldwork in Northeast Japan. The data shows these migrants pursuing long-term strategies of identity (re)construction and self/societal transformation supported by a calculated conformity. In a Japan which may well have reached a critical mass in terms of the switch to multiculturalism, this paper takes a crucial first step towards understanding the potential of migrants as agents of social change, transforming Japan and Japanese identity.