Qualitative Research: Social Factors and Japanese Language Learning In A *Mura*

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Since the early 1980s, a large number of Filipina women have married into rural Japanese households. For reasons of economic security, these women are willing to make enormous sacrifices to learn, not only a new language, but also the cultural mores of traditional Japanese society. The proposed research will use this context to test a theory which suggests acculturation as the primary causal variable in second language acquisition (SLA). Besides investigating how Filipina wives acquire spontaneous Japanese language, this study will look at how their perception of the social contexts of a rural community affects their acculturation efforts. Personal interviews, field observations, and village documents will be used to analyze the influence of social context on the SLA activities of Filipina wives in a small village on Japan's Shikoku Island.

１５年前からアジアから過疎地農村へ日本男性の花嫁が迎えられるようになった。日本文化と社会への同化が日本語習得にどのように影響があるのか、そして社会的にそして精神的な問題を抱えながら生活するフィリピン女性を現地滞在をしながら移民者の立場から見た論文である。

The Research Question and Approach

Findings, implication, and conclusion from a study that examination of foreign (Filipina) wives' perceptions of rural Japanese social customs and the effects of those perceptions on acculturation are presented here. To understand the linguistic and social development processes which foreign brides must learn and follow in order to successfully assimilate into Japanese society, the study is designed to discuss and analyze the following issues:

1) What is *ie* system?
2) Why did *Mura* (a rural Japanese village) residents feel the need to establish an international marriage program?
3) What were the Filipinas motives for marrying outside of their culture, especially to Japanese men?
4) How did the seven Filipina brides perceive the arranged marriage program and rural social contexts they moved into?
5) How did/do those perceptions social contexts affects learning Japanese language and culture norms? This study may be considered unique since, unlike the United States, the number of legal immigrants accepted into Japan is very small, and formal language instruction in support of immigrants is nearly nonexistent.

Social factors affecting adult SLA and acculturation
Conceptual framework

Acculturation and language learning in a new society are interdependent and inseparable processes. Acculturation, which demands communication skills as a medium (Kim, 1977) requires mastery of a broad range of dimensions, including language, customs, and value system. Kim (1977) has further stated that acculturation entails a pattern of perceptions and acculturation is accepted and expected by others in a society. The culture of a host society that influences the way of we think and the way we express ourselves verbally and non verbally.

Previous research has indicated that adult immigrants face stressful and painful experienced in their new societies due to the difficulties of separating from their own culture and language and the consequent forced adaptation to new cultural norms. From the very first moment of arrival in their host country, immigrant musts interact with people from a broad range of social strata in what initially to them a foreign tongue. The process of adaptation requires the gradual internalization of both the language and the new cultural value system, but to many immigrants it appears that language acquisition plays a more important acculturation role at first.

My present study has been designed to test my own argument that for adult non-native speakers, motivation

for learning a second language (SL) must be understood within the context of successful or unsuccessful social interaction with native speakers. In order to understand the linguistic and social development processes of foreign brides wishing to assimilate into Japanese society, it is critical to answer this primary research question for this study will be: How do foreign wives perceive the very special social contexts in question (rural Japan), and how do those perceptions affect their language learning success?

What is the Japanese ie system?

The concept of creating a village-to-village relationship for the purpose of exchanging brides is rooted in the ideology of the *ie* system (family system), which was first developed during Japan's *Meiji* period. In English, the word *ie* is translated into as either "household" or "family", but Nakane (1974) has more precisely defined the *ie* system as consisting of social groups "constructed on the basis of an established frame of residence and, often, of management organization." It is foundation upon which all Japanese social structure has historically been based, although today it is losing its grip on social interactions outside of isolated rural areas.

Under this system, the eldest son of any family will most likely continue to live in the same house in which he was born. This usually means that the son and his wife must share their home with two other generations. The exalted position of being the eldest son carries with it important responsibilities, primarily the obligation to take care of aging parents. Younger brothers and sisters must establish their own households, but, until recently, most of them chose to remain close enough to the parental home to give the impression of an extended family living in the same village.

Values associated with the *ie* system have been supported politically in Japan since its establishment. Prior to the Meiji period (mid-19th century), the Tokugawa Shogun government was forced to give up a 250-year-old feudal system under pressure from Western countries wanting to establish favorable trade relationships. During the Meiji restoration (otherwise referred to as a "Revolution in Japan's World View"), the government wrote a constitution and reformed a large number of institutions based on Western principles. Despite the strong foreign influence, Japanese officials did their best to emphasize indigenous values. The homogeneity and belief in cultural self-superiority allowed for the creation of a stratified social system, which included *community, village, town, city,* and *nation* — with each considered a separate "family unit."

What is the international marriage program?

The research village, which I will call *Mura*, is located in central Shikoku Island, has long been famous as one of three villages perched alongside a very steep

mountain slope. *Mura* is isolated; it is served by a single narrow road, which runs up from the valley below. This remoteness is a primary reason why its population dropped from 6,504 in 1960 to only 3,027 in 1985. Another reason for this dramatic decline is the lack of job opportunities, such that any young person who is not in a position to inherit property is likely to move permanently to a large city for employment. The result is a 12-to-1 ratio of single men to single woman aged 20-40 in the village (*Mura*-dayori, 1987).

What are the Filipinas motives for marriage? :

Since young Japanese women value economic security, most prefer marrying salaried workers to farmers (Mitsuoka, 1988). Not only does farming lack financial stability, it also entails a great deal of hard physical labor. In addition, the relationship between young wives and mothers-in-law tends to be the most difficult in rural families, as the former is traditionally expected to bear the brunt of housework without expectations of independent economic reward or freedom. Therefore, many Japanese mothers discourage their daughters from marrying farmers or anyone else from rural areas and instead encourage them to get good education so that they can marry more sophisticated husbands. For many Filipino women, marriage into a Japanese family appears to be a wise tradeoff: economic security and social mobility for themselves and their children in return for leaving their home country.

Methods and sample
Instrument

The subject village, *Mura*, has long been famous as one of the country's three most remote mountain villages. I first became interested in this study after watching a Japanese television documentary on the issue of foreign brides for rural Japanese men. At the time I first contacted the three Filipina participants, they are very visible in all of the Japanese media, but interests has died down somewhat since then.

Participants

The seven Filipina subjects in this study were selected for four reasons:

1) they are all native speakers of Tagalog with English as their second language;
2) according to information supplied to local officials by an international marriage agency, none of the seven women had any formal training in Japanese prior to moving to *Shikoku*;
3) all seven are married to men residing in central *Shikoku*;
4) all were between the ages of 20 and 25 upon first arrival in Japan.

This final factor is considered important because of the large number of studies showing age to be a major SLA determinant (Lenneberg, 1967; Buring, 1981).

Approach analysis

Throughout the project, data analysis is guided by the study's primary goals:

1) understanding social interaction between the Filipina subjects and rural Japanese residents;

2) describing the influence of the *ie* system on the Filipina wives' perceptions of rural social contexts; and

3) discerning how the subjects' perceptions of social interactions affect their ability to learn the Japanese language.

Successful completion of this study requires both individual case analyses and larger ethnographic analyses in order to accurately describe my field observations and explain how they support or refute my primary hypothesis. Individual case analyses are required in order to understand the position of the Filipina individuals as well as their actions within the research setting. Since each of the seven subjects have an individual explanation for their success/failure to assimilate into the community and to learn the intricate details of Japanese language and culture, separate case analyses are necessary in order to shed light on the most important unique aspects of the explanations for individual actions and behavior within shared contexts (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Ethnographic analysis is required in order to describe the relationship between cultural symbols and meaning as perceived by project informants. As described by Spladly (1980), cultural knowledge, based on a system of symbols and language, is the primary means by which a particular society's cultural meanings are encoded. Specifically, the learning of the Japanese language by foreign wives in a rural area is the means by which they also acquire cultural knowledge. A primary goal of this research is to discover and analyze those specific factors, which allow for the understanding of Japanese rural cultural knowledge by the Filipina (outsider) wives.

Extensive field notes help facilitate my data analysis, which also includes the study of village documents in order to present an historical background to community life in the community. As with all research projects of this size and scope, how I organize and reduce the massive body of data in order to identify important relationships among various socio-cultural and linguistic factors will determine the study's success.

To accomplish this task, code analysis will primarily be conducted in terms of those factors presented in Table 1. According to that table, the relationship between communication skills and perception will be mapped according to specific time periods in the lives of the Filipina wives. *Oral language ability* refers to their

perception of oral communication skills, which have improved since their arrival at *Mura*, and *perception* refers to changes in understanding/attitudes from their first day in Japan to the present. Analysis of the latter is crucial to this study's success, since it is directly associated with the success or failure of the women to learn the language of their adopted country.

Table 1: *Impact of Perception and Communication*

	Marriage Program	Culture & Tradition	Family Life
Perception			
Language Ability			

Finally, I will codify data collected on the international marriage program which first brought these women to the village, data collected on the village's demographic history, community observations, and media reports in order to trace the cultural influences on the wives' perceptions of Japanese social relationships. Again, analyses of these particular data are able to raise a proposition so far — that positive and negative perceptions and attitudes towards community life, and individual social, emotional, and psychological variables directly affect language acquisition success.

Findings and discussion

The data indicates personal perception of social contexts affects the seven Filipinas' acculturation process. According to Pierce (1993), adult immigrants are more likely to acquire a target language (TL) when the host society is perceived as holding positive attitudes towards immigrants and immigrations. In this study, the process of language learning and acculturation, socio-historical variables is the most crucial for seven Filipina wives. (Tollefson, 1991) The seven Filipinas, perception of international marriage program which is part of the policy of *ie* system (family system) affects positively and negatively affects individual attitudes toward the community.

The personal motivation for the arranged marriage program of the seven were found to be very strongly due to economic reasons. In fact, the Filipina subjects were all highly motivated to learn Japanese. One important factor which seems to be equal for all seven women was their positive perception of acceptance and encouragement from the local community in the beginning acculturation process because the community went out of its way to help them acquire both Japanese language and cultural skills. For example, the seven women attended special Japanese language and cooking classes and additional seminars were sponsored by the community for the purpose of facilitating language learning. In addition, their family members emotionally

and socially supported them to be acculturated quickly. For example, all seven husbands attended Japanese classes weekly in support of their wives' effort. While they may not have married into as wealthy situations as they might have wished, their social and economic positions were also definitely promoted by their arranged marriages, and all seven were able to send money back to their original families.

However, in the process of language learning and acculturation, socio-historical variables affected all seven Filipina wives a great deal, as Tollefson claimed. It appears that family reputation is extremely important in Japanese society, especially in rural community. A failed marriage is viewed as tarnishing a family's name—a failure on their part. In the case of these seven marriages, the "community" was made much larger via the attention paid by people in the community, as well as in villages in other area of Japan, who were interested in seeing if these marriages could endure. It appears that the entire rural community into which these women married and her family members feel pressure to preserve its reputation that is a sense of responsibility which stems from the *ie* system - by making sure the marriages succeed. As a result, the community has provided help in organizing marriage ceremonies, language and cooking classes, cultural orientation assistance, and family counseling. Community officials even went as far as to inspect the medical and personal histories of both the Japanese men and Filipina women before approving the marriages. In terms of community support, the Filipina brides have had ample opportunities to assimilate into their new society and to learn TL.

At the time of our interview, Lisa, Anna, Vicky, Mary, Cathy, and Teresa had all lived in the community for at least eight years. Although Anna appears to be the most successful with language skills and assimilating and accommodating the culture, she feels that she is not allowed to be herself. She never really became a part of a community and Filipina wives still feel treated as outsiders, no matter how hard they work. According to a wife in a community in another area in Japan, she had been patient to learn the tradition of the community and women are supposed to be quiet in public. In Lisa's situation, her Japanese skills have not been as successful as Anna. She is the most isolated of the seven women in terms of family life and interaction with native speakers. Lisa seems to have no choice but to separate from her husband, which also stems from her family reputation in the community. Her feelings of powerless, fear, and anxiety may have served to retard rather than promote her language learning effort. Mary feels that her family members watch her steps every day and her language skill is at an initial stage. Vicky worked at a snack bar after her divorce, but she is happy because she holds a permanent visa.

These inter-cultural marriages face at least three major problems: discrepancies between marital expectations, difficulties encountered in cultural adaptation, and lack of communication due to either cultural contrasts or linguistic abilities. The Japanese *ie* system fully expect new brides to immediately behave as traditional women are expected. In return, Filipina women not only want economic security for themselves and their children, they also want their husband to provide money to send back to their families in the Philippines. These cultural and linguistic differences in expectations are important factors in this study. As more and more single men in rural Japan need to go far outside their communities to find acceptable marriage partners for continuing their family lines, the number of marriages between Filipina women and rural Japanese men has increased sharply. The most crucial problems will arise when Filipina wives feel homeless in both countries and continuously feel low-self-esteem, leading them to leave their families in Japan, and when children of inter-cultural marriages begin to attend school and face discrimination for the first time.

Conclusion

The data seems to indicate the *ie* system positively and negatively affects Filipina wives' perception of *Mura*, though not conclusively. Clearly, additional research is required in order to draw a longer observation of the relationship between the acculturation process and the social context. The two possible explanations for the results of this study are the short observation period was insufficient for providing good linguistic development and acculturation data; and the interview questions may not have been sufficiently sophisticated for determining individual levels of the perception of acculturation. The information gathered from the interviews, observations, and village documents, however, did provide useful clues as to social context that did affect acculturation and the SLA process.

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