

International Retirement Migration in Thailand

From the Perspective of Welfare and Social Participation

Emi Yoshida
Department of Sociology
Kyoto University

1. Introduction

The Japanese population has aged rapidly. According to the government statistics (Cabinet Office 2015), the ageing rate has already reached 26% and been estimated to be 39.9% in 2060. The move of population in the context of globalization has offered a new possibility of solving the social problems brought by ageing. Japan, the most aged society in the world, is a great need for migrant labors to take care of its ageing citizens. How to absorb the foreign workers into the Japanese society has raised serious concerns among the public. There has also emerged a huge amount of literature on this issue. However, there are not just the inflows of young people into Japan from abroad. Japanese elders also move to other countries after retirement. This is called “International Retirement Migration (IRM)”, and is not new in the world. As early as 1970s, such migration has become popular among English and German elders, who chose to move to the Mediterranean regions after their retirement (King et al. 2000). In Japan, IRM is usually called “Longstay”, which first appeared in the 1990s. Coming to the 2000s, IRM has gradually become popular among Japanese elders. The stories of these elders doing IRM were widely reported on newspapers and TV. Various guidebooks on IRM were published. Supporting organizations such as Longstay Foundation were established, organizing weekly seminars to introduce IRM to elders in big cities. The Japanese older people mainly move to Southeast Asia and Oceania. According to the statistics in 2014, Malaysia and Thailand are the two most popular destinations.

The popularity of IRM in Japan suggests a vigorous debate on how to live one’s later life. For elders, IRM provides a new option of later life, not only in terms of enjoying social welfare, but also realizing self-values. For the whole Japanese society, elders’ active participation in destination societies also helps to establish a better image of Japan in the world. Using Thailand as an example, this paper aims to shed some light on the following two questions: 1) what factors motivate and enable Japanese elders to migrate and how these factors are related; 2) how Japanese elders participate in local society in receiving countries. For the former, the current studies either simply identify the possible factors or present them in a quantitative way, but do not establish connections between different factors. For the latter, the existing literature mainly focuses on the elders’ lives in receiving countries but never looks further into the impact that elders’ social participation may bring onto Japan.

2. Method

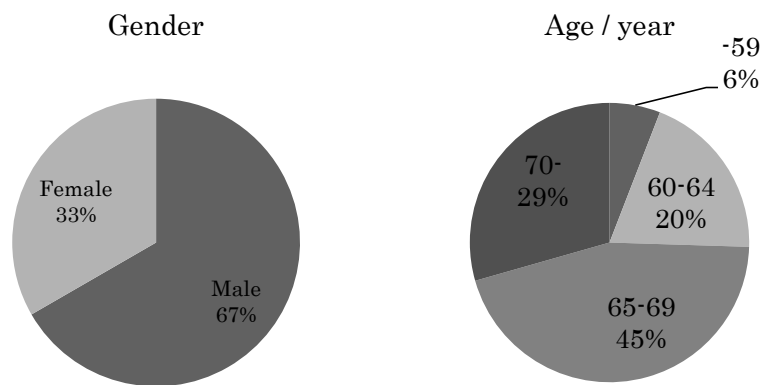
I use both first-hand and second-hand data for this paper. The first-hand data mainly comes from my own fieldwork in Thailand in March and August 2015. By snowballing sampling, I conducted in-depth interviews with 34 respondents. The statistics, as the main secondary material, are from three important reports. They not only provide background information but also complement my qualitative analysis in many ways.

3. Results

3-1. What Factors Motivate and Enable Japanese Elders to Migrate and How These Factors Are Related

Before answering this question, it is better to review the general conditions of the elders doing IRM such as “Who migrate?”, “For what purpose?”, “How?” should be revealed by using the previous quantitative researches (Takahashi 2005, Maekawa 2011, Society for the Study of Care and Support in ChiangMai 2013). Based on the previous reports, I summarize the characteristics of people doing IRM as follows.

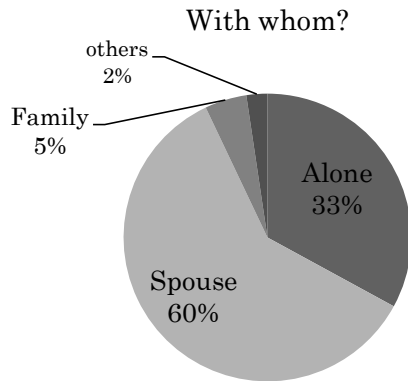
Who migrate? They tend to be men in their 60s. The figure presented here is from the research in 2013 in Chiang Mai, and is close to the ones in 2005 in Bangkok and Chiang Mai and 2011 in Chiang Mai.



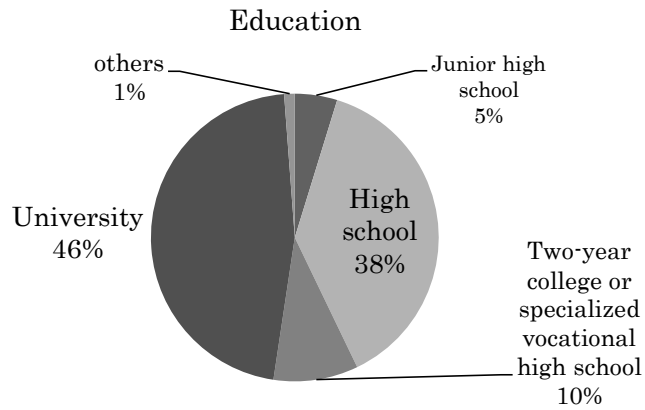
[Figure 1: The research in 2013]

The Majority are married couples, and the male to female ratio shows that people who come as singles are mostly men (Figure 2). Figure 3 and 4 indicate their educational background and occupation before retirement. Half of them have a university degree and 42% were managers, which suggests a higher chance of well-educated successful people migrate. Figure 5 shows that most people still have a living base in Japan. However, people who try to settle permanently outside Japan should not be overlooked. The high percentage of multiple overseas experience in Figure 6

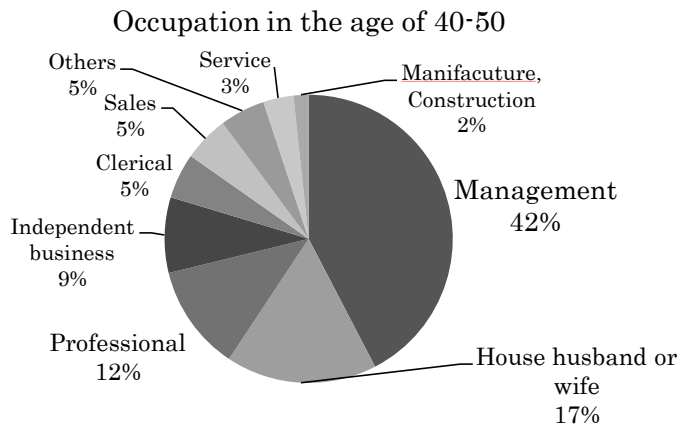
acknowledges the value of prior experiences in IRM.



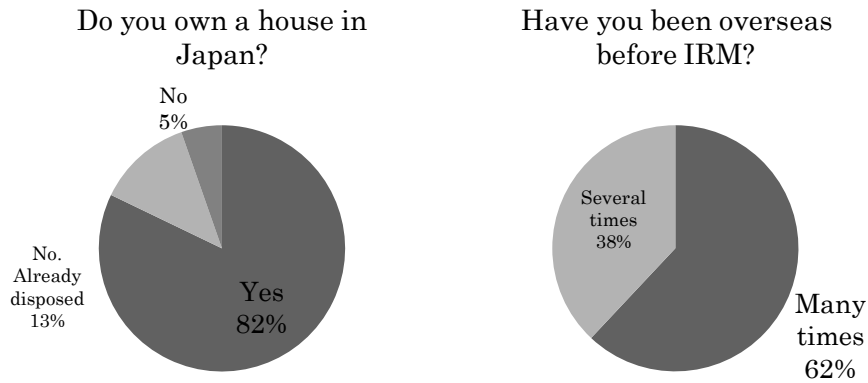
[Figure 2: The research in 2005]



[Figure 3: The research in 2005]

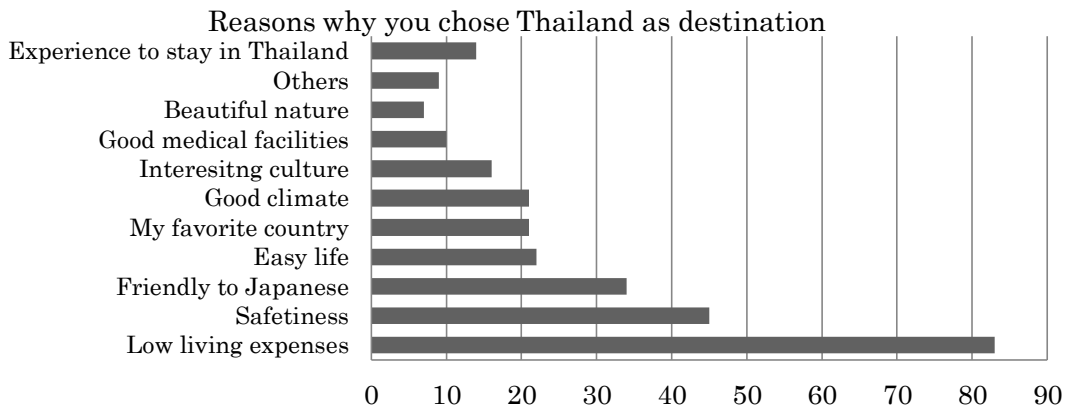


[Figure 4: The research in 2013]

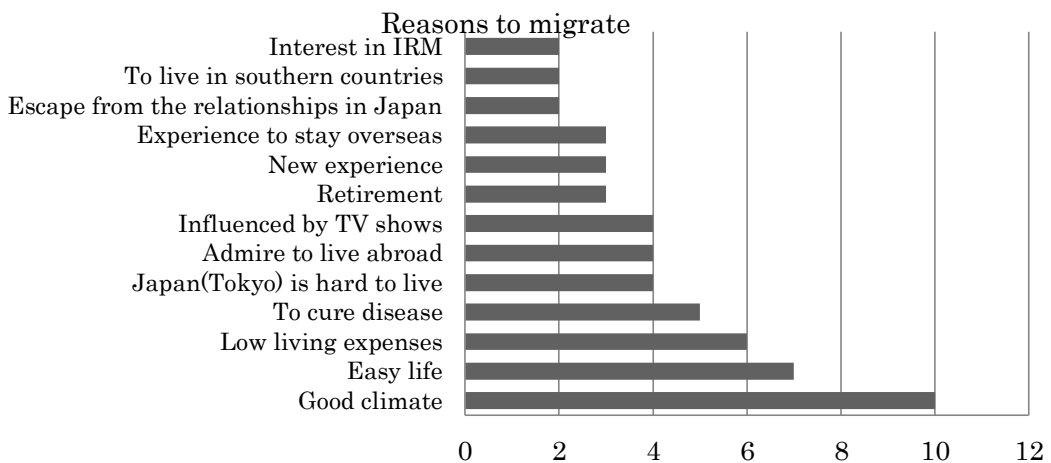


[Figure 5: The research in 2011] [Figure6: The research in 2013]

For what purpose? Figure 7 tells the reasons to select Thailand as the destination. The low prices and easy lives are the most attractive to respondents. Figure 8 lists the main purpose of IRM, such as good climate, freedom, living expenses, and the disease.

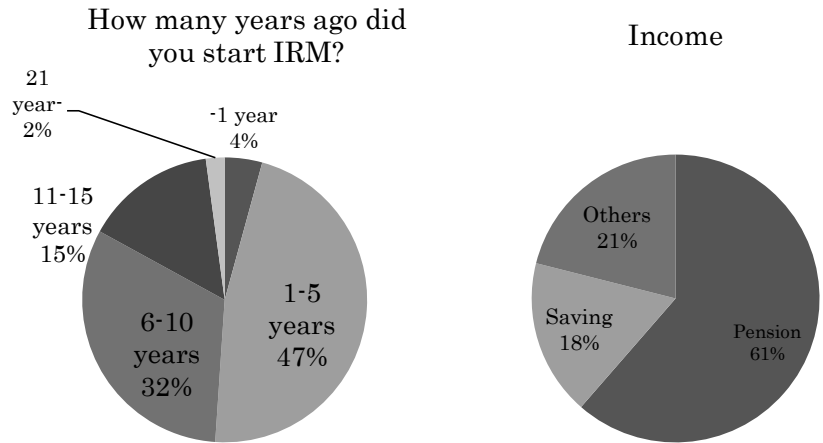


[Figure 7: The research in 2005]

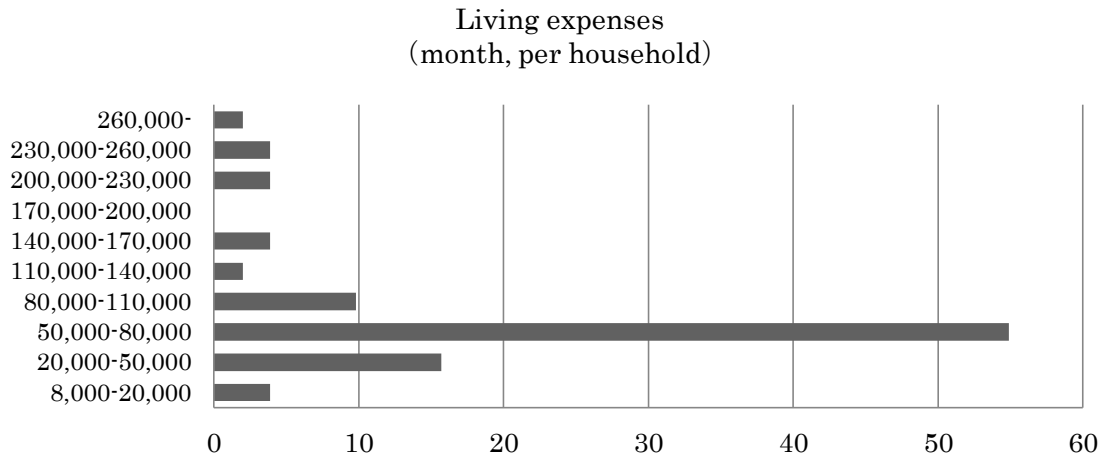


[Figure 8: The research in 2011]

How do they live in Thailand? Figure 9 shows that nearly a half of people live for more than five years even if they keep a base in Japan. Most people are living on pensions and savings (Figure 10). For living expenses, considering the fact that many are couples or alone, it is not so cheap, and dispersed (Figure 11).



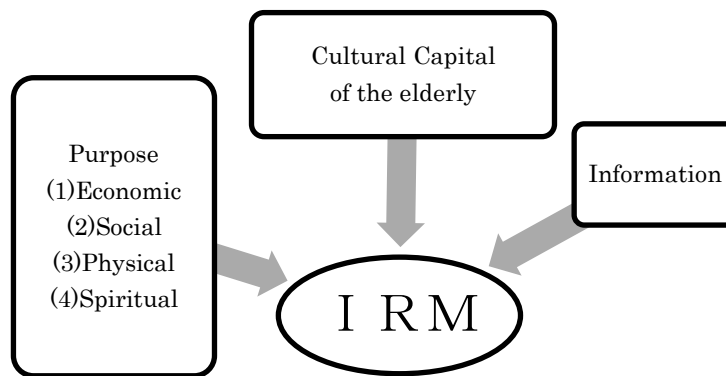
[Figure 9: The research in 2013] [Figure 10: The research in 2011]



[Figure 11: The research in 2011]

As we can see above, these data, although useful, cannot illustrate the real mechanisms of why people migrate. To understand what factors motivate and enable people to migrate, we need to further look into their experiences. 14 people, half from Bangkok, six from Chiang Mai, one from Pattaya provided their stories. There were two couples, so I will introduce twelve people below.

With the exception of the people who have been overseas and continue to stay without specific reasons, the purposes of IRM are classified into four categories: (1) economic, (2) social, (3) physical and (4) spiritual purposes (Figure 12). To protect the primacy of interviewees, I use A.B.C.... to refer them.



[Figure 12: Mechanism of IRM]

First of all, the exception applies to three interviewees. All of these three were working overseas.

A: “I was working in Thailand, and I have no reason to go back to Japan.”

B: “I’m divorced and now I have no place to live in Japan. So I cannot live somewhere else but here in Thailand.”

C “I own a house in Japan. However that has been empty for 10 years, and it is difficult to live there.”

Second, (1) economic purposes. Three interviewees said that the living expenses are high in Japan, so they can lead a richer life in Thailand.

D: “The foremost reason to move to Thailand is the low living expenses.”

E: “One of the main reasons is the low cost of living.”

F: “I thought it is difficult to live in Japan because of the high living expenses. I retired in my 50s. However, if I want to live in Japan after retirement, I would work until 65 years old.”

Third, (2) social purposes. This applies to three interviewees. G’s situation is a typical case of elders who moved in order to live with their son who works in Thailand and married a Thai. H’s case is very special in which the husband uses IRM as a reward to the wife. I’s case reflects another common situation in Japan where many people want to escape the office politics. Thailand is a land of hope in this sense.

G: “My husband said that it is good to be with my son in case we need help. We can take care of our grandchild in Thailand when my son and his wife are working. To live with my family is the major reason.”

H: “When I was working in Singapore, my wife couldn’t come with me because our children were at high school. At that time my wife had a hard time taking care of children alone since teenage is a difficult age. So I wanted to thank my wife in this way.”, “My wife wants to go to many places and do many things.”

I: “I wanted to enjoy my second-life which has nothing to do with my former company. In Thailand

I got friends who think in the same way as me.”

Forth, (3) physical purposes. There are also three interviewees. J’s wife has half-body paralyzed and thus has a hard life in winter so they moved to Thailand with their daughter as a helper for rehabilitation. K’s wife also has a nerve disease which can be better cared in a warmer place. Despite without a chronic disease, L came to Thailand for a warm winter.

J: “My wife had a brain bleeding and has half-body paralyzed. Since it is cold in Japan, it is better to move to a warmer place for rehabilitation. We chose Thailand because I once worked here and knew it well.”

K: “My wife has a nerve disease, so winter is hard. We prefer to stay in a warm place after retirement.”

L: “Because I feel bad in cold places.”

Finally, (4) spiritual purposes. This is deeply related to the meaning of life. Three interviewees prefer to stay overseas because they want to pursue the meaning of life in an environment that is completely different from Japan.

M: “When I was around 55 years old, my nephew and my best friend died of cancer. So, I think I should quit the job now and start to lead a life for myself.”

N: “First, since I have a MBA degree from a university in London, I would like to start my own business in Thailand. Second, I can speak English, French and Thai, among which I want to improve Thai first. Third, I tend to stay overseas as long as my health allows.”

O: “I would like to live in an environment with new values.”, “Thailand is different from Japan. Thai people are easygoing, while Japanese people are strict.”

Besides, the overseas experience plays a role when these elders decide to migrate. Everyone I interviewed had many international experiences such as working overseas or traveling abroad. H stated that “if I have not lived abroad before, I would never have thought about living in a foreign country after retirement”. H is not the only case. These experiences as cultural capitals are largely related to the decision of migration.

3-2. How Japanese Elders Participate in Local Society in Receiving Countries

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Japanese older people in Thailand, who were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling. The field site was mostly Chiang Mai, one main destination for IRM. Although I admit there might be some deficits with my sampling methods, it is necessary to target people who are actively participating in the society and who have a good knowledge of IRM in Thailand. I categorize elders’ social participation as four types: (1) Jobs, (2) Volunteer work for Thai society, (3) Mutual aid, (4) Recreational activities, which are the typical activities I found in the field. (1) refers to the employment of the elders, (2) counts volunteer work for other people, (3) includes volunteer work for their own Japanese community, and (4) contains

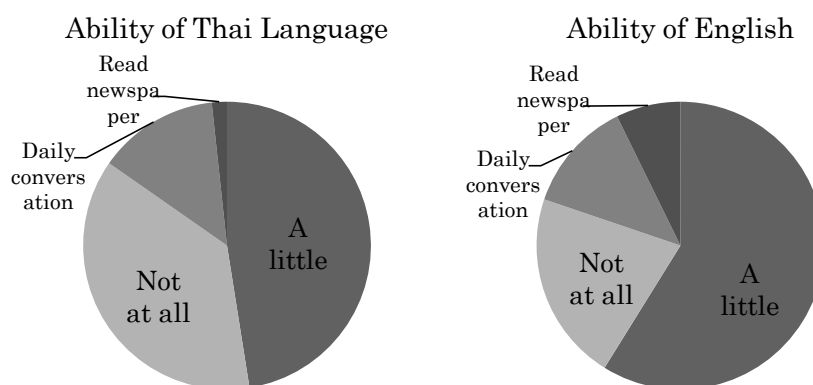
volunteer work for themselves to enjoy hobbies. To protect the privacy of the respondents, P, Q, R... are used to mention these individuals.

(1) Jobs

Only two interviewees had a job in Thailand. Both were freelance professionals and retired early in Japan. Their cases are special; few Japanese elders work in Thailand after retirement since the retirement visa which most of the elders hold doesn't allow them to work. Another reason is that they come to Thailand not to work. The Japanese older generation was working hard before retirement, so they tend to enjoy their second-lives after retirement.

(2) Volunteer Work for the Thai society

In my interviews, 17 people mentioned they had volunteering experiences for the Thai society. However, it is not common among the Japanese older people in Thailand. Only a few people do it frequently and many do occasionally such as once or twice a year. The two Japanese Associations that aim to facilitate Japanese older people into participation does not truly improve the situation. However, many people indeed expressed their willingness to contribute to the Thai society. One interviewee mentioned "We want to do something to Thai society to show our gratitude since Thailand allows us to live even though we are foreigners." Then, what prevents them from doing so? Visa constraint is the major obstacle. To avoid Thai people being replaced from jobs, the Thai government only gives these Japanese elders retirement visa, in general. Their current visa status makes it difficult to work within Thailand even for free. They must be very careful when they try to do something to the Thai society. Another reason is that many Japanese older people speak neither Thai nor English (Figure 13).



[Figure 13: The research in 2011]

The good thing is that some people overcome the barriers and manage to do some volunteer work without depriving the working opportunities of Thai people. My interviewees shared their experiences with me.

P is the member of a Chiang Mai-based Japanese association which organizes volunteers to assist Thai teachers to teach Japanese in public schools. He has devoted enthusiastically to the volunteer work. He goes to several schools every weekday and on weekends he usually attend seminars on volunteering, while every night he teaches Thai students Japanese through Skype.

Q is in his 80s and has 13-year experience teaching *Soroban*, a Japanese traditional way of calculating, in Thailand. Besides three-day teaching in schools, he also teaches in the office of one Japanese association on Sunday. His teaching has been well acknowledged by the Thai government and schools.

R has lived in Thailand for more than ten years with her husband after retirement. She offers great help to several Thai students of Rajabhat University in Chiang Mai, who are ethnic minorities from rural areas. Every weekend four students come to her house and learn skills of cooking, sewing, and cleaning and so on so that they will better adapt to the society.

S, in his 50s, is a volunteer tourist policeman. He came to Chiang Mai after his early retirement with his wife and child. He works every week as a policeman for foreigners. His main job is to translate English or Japanese to Thai when foreign tourists come to report. Another interviewee also does the same job in Chiang Rai.

There are also collaboration projects between Japanese retirees and Chiang Mai University where many students major in Japanese-language. Chiang Mai University invites the retirees to teach Japanese cultures. Now around ten Japanese older people are teaching courses on Japanese cultures, including *Sado* (Japanese tea ceremony), *Shodo* (Calligraphy) and *Ikebana* (Japanese flower arrangement).

Other volunteer works include repairing instruments, fund-raising for school building for an ethnic minority group, teaching painting and so on. Despite many options available, many people choose work related to Japanese cultures. Why do they do volunteer activities? All of them answered that they want to give back to the Thai society which gives them a new home. Meanwhile many people who have not participated in such activities also expressed their interest, due to the problems mentioned above, they have not got the opportunity to practice.

(3) Mutual aid

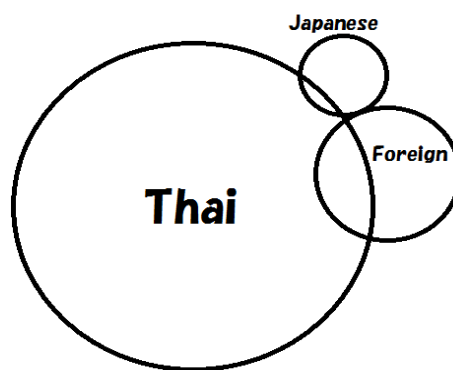
Mutual aid within Japanese communities is active and highly developed since people need to cooperate to live in a foreign country. There are four groups of mutual aid in Chiang Mai. Three of them are big ones. Group A, the biggest association with 155 members (April 2014), promotes the idea of happy life in Thailand. Group B, the second biggest with more than 100 members (January 2013), focuses on helping each other and making contribution to the Thai society. Group C gathers around 50 people who would like to stay in Thailand as a permanent resident. It circulates information of transferring to permanent residents and provides a venue for mutual communication. The smallest one is a study group on long-term care, whose members study how to get long-term

care in Thailand when necessary. Although these groups vary in forms and purposes, they share the idea of mutual aid, in which members exchange information or discuss problems about visa, currency, hospital, housing, food and so on. Group A even holds i-Pad learning school or Thai language school for its members.

Some elders do not join any group but they can still gather together and exchange information. There is a club, despite informal, functioning as an association connecting people who do not belong to any groups. Indeed, very few Japanese people live apart from such Japanese communities.

(4) Recreational activities

The fourth type is mainly recreational activities, but active and well developed. There are many groups where people can play sports and games, learn, and gather and talk. Golf is especially popular. The above-mentioned Group A often organizes golfing activities. Chiang Mai is an important base for such recreational activities. Many people who have a lot of free time are able to gather and enjoy the life together.



[Figure 14: Society in Thailand]

(1)-(4) can be summarized as the picture above. For Japanese older people in Chiang Mai, there are Thai society, Japanese society, and foreign society. Most people stay in the Japanese society, mainly due to the language barrier. In addition, they rarely interact with foreign society. Almost none of the 20 interviewees have communicated with foreign people other than Thai. This is very different from retirees of other nationalities staying in Thailand, who frequently interact with people from other countries.

4. Conclusion

"How to live one's later-life" has been important not only for the elderly themselves but also for the Japanese society as it grows older. IRM functions not only as one of the options to live an active life for the elderly but also the way to design and create lives by themselves. IRM is one strategy of overcoming the lack of welfare such as the economic, social, physical, and spiritual challenges. IRM has enabled elders to take initiatives in designing their lives. In Japan there are still

many challenges to practice it. Even though elders can decide how to live, the options are limited. For instance, even though many seniors want to do volunteering, little volunteer work is available which their skills can be fully used. Employment of the elderly does not process smoothly, either.

As for social participation, although elders doing IRM may hope to get more involved in the receiving countries, there are many structural barriers ahead, for example, visa constraints in Thailand. In addition, older people themselves have limitations to participate in local societies, in this case, they cannot speak Thai. One or two charity activities a year are possible and common in fact but cannot satisfy their eager to do more regular volunteer activities.

Some people may argue IRM has a negative effect on Japanese economy since domestic consumption declines in Japan as more people move out. However, we should not ignore the fact that many of these elders enjoy a healthy living in Thailand. Moreover, when they participate in the Thai society, such international volunteerism has helped Japan to establish a good image in the world.

In the future, IRM in Malaysia will be done since it is one of the most popular destinations and has a different social system. Besides, its official language English is more familiar to Japanese people. Therefore, the situation of IRM in Malaysia may provide us with new insight especially in terms of social participation in receiving countries.

References

- Cabinet Office (Government of Japan). (2015). Annual Report on the Aging Society: 2015.
- Hieda, N., Stapa, S. H., Amzah, N., & Talaibek, M. (2012). Validity of Malaysia My Second Home Programme Policy: from the Lens of Japanese Participants, *Journal for Regional Policy Studies*, Vol. 4, pp. 35-46. (in Japanese)
- Hieda, N., Stapa, S. H., Amzah, N., & Talaibek, M. (2013). Intercultural Contact among Japanese Citizens Adopting Malaysia as a Second Home, *Kokusai Nihon Kenkyu*, Vol. 5, pp. 25-40. (in Japanese)
- Hongsranagon, P. (2005). Advisory Facilities for Long-Stay Japanese Senior Travellers in Chiangmai, *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 8(2), pp.58-66.
- Ishii, W. (2007). A Japanese IRM Action: Rise of Retirement Migration and Long Stay Business, *Social Information*, Vol. 16(2), pp. 67-71. (in Japanese)
- Katagiri, K. (2012). *Taishoku Senior to Shakaisanka*. University of Tokyo Press.
- Kawara, M. (2010). Adaptive Strategy of Japanese Senior Long-term Stayers and Local Community Responses in Chiangmai, *The Journal of Thai Studies*, Vol. 10, pp. 35-55. (in Japanese)
- King, R., Warnes, T. & Williams, A. (2000). *Sunset Lives: British Retirement Migration to the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Berg.
- Kon, S. (2008). Development of Resorts for Retired Japanese in the Philippines, *The Bulletin of*

- Jissen Women's Junior College, Vol. 29, pp. 203-217. (in Japanese)
- Kon, S. (2009). A Study of Longstay: Prospect of Founding a Senior-resort in the Island Alabat, Philippine, The Bulletin of Jissen Women's Junior College, Vol. 30, pp. 133-142. (in Japanese)
- Kubo, T., Ishikawa, Y. (2004). Searching for "Paradise": Japanese International Retirement Migration, Japanese Journal of Human Geography, Vol. 56(3), pp. 296-309. (in Japanese)
- Maeda, N. (2006). Active Ageing no Shakaigaku. Mineruva Shobo.
- Maekawa, S. (2011). Chiang Mai heno Kokusaidou ni kansuru CLL Chosa Hokokusho. (N=60 in Chiang Mai) (in Japanese)
- Nakaoji, Y., & Hayashi, Y. (2009). Thoughts on the Taiwan Long Stay Trend, Meio University Sogo Kenkyujo, Vol. 15, pp. 53-39. (in Japanese)
- Ono, M. (2012). Searching for Care: International Retirement Migration and Medical Tourism in Malaysia among Elderly Japanese, Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies, Vol. 18, pp. 253-267. (in Japanese)
- Ono, M. (2013). An Anthropological Study of Japanese International Retirement Migration to Malaysia. Doctor Thesis in Tokyo University. (in Japanese)
- Senzaki, K. (2007). Seasonal Migration from Japan to Hawaii: An Analysis of the New Lifestyle of Japanese Retirees, Minzoku Bunka Kenkyu, Vol. 8, pp. 71-104. (in Japanese)
- Society for the Study of Care and Support in ChiangMai. (2013). Kita Thai Zaijusha no Kaigokanren Chosa Hokokusho (II). (N=50 in Chiang Mai) (in Japanese)
- Takahashi, Y. (2005). Thai ni okeru Longstay Nihonjin ni kansuru Kenyu: Bangkok to Chiang Mai no Genchichosa wo fumaete. Master Thesis in Waseda University. (N=85 in Bangkok and Chiang Mai) (in Japanese)
- Takeuchi, M. (2012). Living Abroad After Retirement: A Discussion on the Psychological Aspects of Japanese Long-Term Stayers in Thailand, Multicultural Relations, Vol. 9, pp. 3-19. (in Japanese)
- Thang, L. L., Sone, S., & Toyota, M. (2012). Freedom Found? The Later-life Transnational Migration of Japanese Women to Western Australia and Thailand, Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, Vol. 21(2), pp. 239-262.