

## Understanding Acculturation Strategies Through Intergroup Social Interaction: A Case Study of Thai Workers in Japan

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### ABSTRACT

Most studies of Thai workers in Japan are oriented towards low-skilled groups of workers. Unlike low-skilled workers, highly skilled migrant workers experience intense social interaction with Japanese colleagues, resulting in dynamics and degrees of intergroup relationships and acculturation process. This article therefore identifies acculturation strategies dominant among highly skilled Thai workers in Japanese working societies through the lens of intergroup contacts. It also explores the intergroup social interactions between Thai and Japanese people in workplaces and uncovers the effects of intergroup contact on the acculturation process. Narratives from interviews with 12 highly skilled Thai workers led to three findings. First, integration is predominantly identified as the most advantageous acculturation strategy. Second, positive intergroup social contact prevails on the condition that Thai workers strictly follow the norms and values in the workplaces, particularly behaviors which demonstrate a sense of selflessness. Finally, positive social contact between highly skilled Thai workers and Japanese people facilitates the integration process of highly skilled Thai workers. Based on the findings, some implications are discussed.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of the very few studies that have investigated the living conditions of migrants in Japan through social contacts.

## 1. Introduction

This study explores the acculturation strategies applied by highly skilled Thai workers in Japan and investigates the patterns of intergroup social contact by analyzing 12 life story narratives constructed through life-line drawing. Whereas previous studies mostly conceptualized acculturation in relation to psychological well-being, this research applies intergroup contact theory to illuminate sociocultural perspectives of acculturation. With an emphasis on the interactive version of acculturation, highly skilled workers are selected as participants for two main reasons: first, most of the previous research on Thai migrant workers in Japan focused on low-skilled Thai

workers and the legislative and social issues they faced (Sellek, 1996; Ruenkaew, 2002; Aoyama, 2009); the experiences of highly skilled Thai workers are largely underexplored. This is a potential research gap because several studies indicated that foreign workers in Japan can be vulnerable to discrimination and injustice at work regardless of their skill levels (Hawthorne, 1997; Meek, 2004; Madziva et al., 2014; Rajendra, 2017; Acharya & Shah., 2020). Second, previous research has illuminated the significant role played by social status in fostering interactions in cross-cultural encounters (Allport et al., 1954; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993). As highly skilled Thai workers are likely to have relatively well-developed skills, expertise, and language proficiency, frequent, they are likely to develop frequent social interactions with Japanese people (compared with low skilled workers), research into their experiences can shed new light on the sociocultural aspects of acculturation e. Therefore, they can be considered a suitable group of research participants when intergroup contact theory is applied.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that globally, the number of economic migrants had reached 169 million in 2019, a dramatic increase from 150 million in 2015 (ILO, 2023). This growing trend is reflected in the steady rise in remittances over the past ten years, from \$126 billion in 2000 to \$702 billion in 2020 (International Organization for Migration, n.d). As opposed to refugees, who unwillingly have to leave their home countries due to well-founded fears, economic migrants voluntarily move to other countries purely for economic reasons (UNHCR, n.d.). The most common trend of movement is from a developing country to an industrial one (World Bank, 2015). Economic migrants can be classified and categorized according to their skills and expertise. ILO (2023) defines "highly skilled labour" as "... generally characterized by advanced education (college and higher), possession of knowledge and skills to perform complicated tasks, ability to adapt quickly to technology changes, and creative application of knowledge and skills acquired through training in their work".

In recent years, the number of economic migrants accepted into Japan has also been on the rise, largely due to a decline in the Japanese working-age population. In particular, the number of immigrants on a long-term or permanent basis has been steadily increasing. In 2018, up to 115,000 immigrants arrived in Japan (a 15.8% rise from the previous year), with labour migrants making up half of the total (OECD, 2020). Amidst the diverse populations of economic migrants in Japan, growing number of Thai migrant workers can be seen in recent years. Department of Employment of Thailand (2020) reported the figure of 20,365 Thai economic migrants in Japan in 2019. Out of the total number, 13,505 entered the country with legal work permit, whereas 6,360 were identified as illegal workers.

Despite this steady increase and the economic contribution of migrant workers in Japan, the group-oriented social norm among Japanese people generates a sense of ethno-national prioritization and classification which is likely to provoke social challenges for foreigners (Neuliep et al., 2001; Morita, 2015; Tian, 2019). Acculturation strategies, therefore, have become imperative to foster peaceful coexistence between foreigners and Japanese people. Due to the steady increase of migrant populations in Japan, it is necessary to study how migrants try to acculturate into Japanese society and improve interpersonal relationship with Japanese people.

In relation to migration studies, acculturation is commonly conceptualized in relation to the attempts of acculturating individuals to affiliate into dominant or ethnic culture.

Scholars initially assumed the assimilative approach to be the most advantageous way for migrants to be incorporated into the host society (Schwartz et al., 2010; Berry, 2019; Choy et al., 2021). However, migrant studies which focus on the psychological well-being of migrants argue that the assimilative approach may take a toll on the cultural identity of people on the move, posing negative impacts on their mental health and dignity (Krause & Goldenhar, 1992; Young, 1996; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Roccas et al., 2000). In this regard, an integrative approach has been proposed as the most adaptive means of acculturation which is associated with better sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Berry, 2019; Choy et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2010). When the discussions on acculturation have been expanded from individual to intergroup level, scholars increasingly emphasize the sociocultural outcomes of acculturation, which concerns relationships between migrants and host members (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Ndengeyigoma et al., 2014). The emergence of this scholarly debate indicates the necessity to study acculturation in terms of intergroup interaction as well as individual well-being. Therefore, more studies on the social aspect can be instructive to unpack acculturation, which is highly relevant in migration studies.

In this respect, intergroup contact theory, which concerns the impact of frequency and quality of intergroup interaction on intergroup relationships, is considered strongly related with acculturation processes. This study thus adopts intergroup contact theory to explore the social and interactive perspective of acculturation.

### 1.1. Research Objectives and Research Questions

Drawing from qualitative interviews with twelve highly skilled Thai migrant workers in Japan, the principle aim of this research is to uncover the acculturation strategies of highly skilled Thai workers in Hiroshima, Japan, in association with intergroup social interaction theory. The study has three objectives. The first is to investigate the acculturation process of highly skilled Thai migrant workers in the workplace. Another is to explore the attempts of Thai migrant workers to develop social contact with Japanese colleagues. Finally, this study explores the effects of intergroup social interaction on acculturation outcomes. Accordingly, three research questions were formulated for this study:

- i. What acculturation strategies prevail among Thai workers in Japanese working society?
- ii. How do Thai workers develop intergroup contacts with Japanese colleagues in the workplace?
- iii. How do intergroup social interactions in Japanese workplaces influence the acculturation strategies of Thai workers?

## 2. Literature Review

According to Redfield (1936, p.110), "*acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups*". Acculturation is, therefore, closely related to migration, especially in terms of identity negotiation and the degree to which they affiliate with the attribute of a particular culture (Padilla, 1980). The orthodox version of acculturation was perceived as the attempt of acculturating individuals to adjust and affiliate themselves into dominant groups (Schwartz et al., 2010; Berry, 2019; Choy et al., 2021). In this sense, acculturation was conceptualized as having assimilative qualities. However, largely influenced by the

discourse of cultural diversity, scholars interested in acculturation in migration studies have paid more attention to the maintenance of original culture among migrants in host countries. The contemporary version of acculturation, therefore, incorporates the biculturalism theory, which refers to the phenomena when individuals are acculturated in both original and new cultures without rejecting one cultural identity for another (Schwartz et al., 2010; Berry, 2019; Guler & Berman, 2019; Choy et al., 2021).

One of the most famous acculturation models was developed by Berry (2019), who proposed four methods to classify acculturative strategies, namely integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization. Each approach concerns the degrees to which individuals affiliate themselves with dominant and original cultures. Berry's (2019) acculturation model has provoked interest among researchers interested in exploring acculturation in terms of psychological outcomes. For instance, many studies highlighted a positive association between acculturation to the host culture and decreasing level of the likelihood to mental health (e.g., anxiety, psychological distress, and depression). Moreover, a positive correlation between life satisfaction and self-esteem are also discussed among several scholars (Keles et al., 2016; Shisana & Celentano, 1985). In addition, Nguyen and Benet-Martínez (2013) found a reciprocal connection between biculturalism and positive psychological well-being, as well as sociocultural management. In the same study, the researchers underscored the adverse outcome of acculturation among individuals oriented to only one culture.

Some scholars have explored acculturation in terms of cross-cultural social contact (Arends-Toth & Vijver, 2006; Bornstein, 2017; Georgas & Papastylianou, 2021). As postulated by Sam and Berry (2010), acculturation is a bidirectional process that depends on individual and social factors. Following the explanations given by sociological theorists, it can be assumed that social contact can be another vital trigger to the dynamics of cultural adaptation. For instance, Lechner (1998) postulated that social institutions function as instigators for the interchange and maintenance of cultural patterns.

Intergroup contact, especially in cross-cultural encounters, can be challenging and depends on several factors. Allport et al. (1954) emphasized that societal norms have an immense impact on intergroup contact. Interestingly, the impacts of social contacts on intergroup relationships vary across the literature. A dominant contact theory argues that positive contact between ingroup and outgroup members diminishes the sense of discrimination, intergroup bias, and threat perceptions (Pettigrew, 1998; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Wagner et al., 2003). However, there have been many cases where prejudice between groups remains robust despite prolonged and frequent social contact (Scacco & Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2020).

Within the conceptualization of acculturation, most studies adopted the psychological approach of acculturation to understand the mental health of migrants. Previous scholars have noted that acculturation can be multidimensional, but there is a scarcity of studies which emphasize intergroup social contacts in the process of acculturation. Therefore, this research has been conducted to unpack acculturation under the sociocultural dimension through the lens of contact theory. Whereas the effects of intergroup contacts on the quality of intergroup relationships remain disputable, an array of research indicates that intergroup attitudes change according to the degree of interaction. Considering the interrelationship between improved or worsening relationships and the degrees of the ingroup's willingness to incorporate outgroup

members, the link between intergroup contact and acculturation remains underexplored.

During the post-war period, the arrival of migrants in Japan with foreign cultures and beliefs has triggered many socio-geographical, cultural, and legal changes in Japanese society. For example, many studies raised issues about how foreigners are often blamed for the deterioration of Japanese traditions and the social order due to their lack of understanding of Japanese norms and cultures, resulting in social discrimination (Yamawaki, 2003; Gilmour et al., 2020; Tsuda, 2022). Other visible changes include new migration policies implemented by local governments to foster mutual understanding between Japanese and non-Japanese. To illustrate, local governments in some cities enthusiastically advocate integration programs for foreign residents, including international exchange activities, counseling services to combat everyday-life problems, provision of public information in different languages, and Japanese language classes. Despite the absence of a consistent policy agenda for migrants at a national level, gradual positive changes can be seen in the local context (Pak, 2015; Oishi, 2021).

Despite some social changes caused by the influx of migrants, the homogeneity of Japan ignites the social expectation for migrants to comply with social norms which can be a catalyst of acculturative stress (Iida, 2002; Tian, 2019; Park et al., 2022). Therefore, scholars have raised concerns over challenging living conditions for foreigners in Japan. At the everyday life level, the exclusionary practices against ethnic minorities caused by cultural and linguistic disparities have been pointed out as an inconspicuous form of discrimination (Froese, 2010; Kim, 2011). In the professional domain, many scholarly works disclosed varying precarious situations experienced by migrant workers in Japan. To illustrate, Holbrow and Nagayoshi (2016) argued that female migrant workers were relatively prone to underpayment and gender inequality. Some scholars have identified the sense of isolation and alienation as consequences of social exclusion, which may lead to mental disorders such as a sense of emptiness, self-discontinuity, and suicidal ideation (Otsuka & Anamizu, 2019).

Thai workers can be prone to a similar experience, although research about Thai migrants in Japan is still rather limited. Among studies about Thai migrants in Japan, the trend of discussion is inclined toward the issues facing low-skilled and illegal migrants such as sex workers, particularly around legal systems and structural problems (Sellek, 1996; Ruenkaew, 2002; Aoyama, 2009; Kalapong, 2023). Low-skilled migrant workers are commonly perceived as a secondary class in Japanese society, which results in a low likelihood of proximate intergroup contacts and perceived vulnerability to social challenges (Neuliep et al., 2001; Morita, 2015; Tian, 2019). In this sense, the studies into the acculturation process among low-skilled workers are not extensive due to limited intergroup social interaction.

Despite a scarcity of studies about Thai workers in Japan, there is an increasing number of studies on the living conditions and acculturation process of Thai migrants in other countries. For instance, many have tried to decipher the effects on gender ideologies and identities during the integration process. Applying the feminist perspective as an analytical lens, scholars explored the subjectivity and agency of womanhood through the marriage migration trajectory (Fresnoza-Flot, 2021; Zhang, 2021). Some studies also pinpointed the acculturation approaches taken by migrants with diverse sexual orientations. For instance, Kitiarsa (2008) illustrated the strategic shift from homosexual to heterosexual identity expression as a survival strategy for Thai migrants

in Singapore. Apart from research on identity development and negotiation, another array of literature focuses on the living structure and acculturative approach of Thai migrants. Some examples include the formation of community (Ruenkaew, 2002; Tan, 2018), the impact of religion on their sense of cultural and ethnic belonging (Kalapong, 2023), and how Thai workers enhance their sense of solidarity to battle the sense of isolation (Smutkupt & Kitiarsa, 1999).

Remarkable findings from previous studies illustrate different forms of hardship for international migrants in Japan. Whereas these studies point out the existence and consequence of problems, relatively little is known about the coping mechanisms of migrants and how they tackle these issues. Thus, more studies incorporating discussions about the intergroup relationship between Japanese and non-Japanese can broaden our understanding about the lived experiences of those migrants. As Japan is generally perceived as a homogenous society with a strong sense of group and national identity (Machimura, 2000; Yamanaka, 2003; Yamamura, 2009; Pak, 2015), this ideology contradicts Western societies which have narratives and social norms of cultural diversity and inclusiveness. Several migrant studies have considered Western countries' level of cultural diversity as a moderator of acculturation (Grosfoguel, 1997; Vedder et al., 2007). Their studies suggest that countries with solid narratives of cultural diversity are likely to support migrants to become oriented to the local and national cultures. Given the relative cultural homogeneity of Japan (compared with many Western countries), and the impact of current migration flows into the country on its society, make it an interesting case study which can expand understanding and discussion in this field.

The acculturation of highly skilled workers is an emerging topic of study because these workers are likely to have more profound social interactions with the Japanese co-workers due to their expertise, communication skills, and education. Moreover, a small number of studies point out that highly skilled migrant workers also experience social discrimination and need to strategize their acculturation mechanisms to survive in Japanese society (Madziva et al., 2014; Rajendra, 2017). Thus, their coping mechanisms over social hardship are also worth exploring. Research about Thai migrants in identity and acculturation studies have been conducted. However, the former has been circumscribed within the notion of gendered identity, rather than cultural identity. In addition, the latter predetermines the sense of separation among Thai workers from locals at the outset, thereby neglecting social contact theory. Since social interactions in cross-cultural encounters have not been sufficiently deliberated, further analysis into the social contacts between Thai migrants and the local people is required. This will help us to understand sociocultural perspectives of acculturation.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1. Life-story narratives**

To explore the dynamics of acculturation and intergroup social interaction processes, a research tool that assists participants to generate their life-story narratives openly and freely is prerequisite. For this reason, this research follows the participatory design of qualitative research and encourages participants to construct their narratives regarding their migration experience in Japan through life-line drawings

Life-story narratives illustrated by life-line drawings were originally utilized for psychotherapeutic purposes, but were later widely adapted for scholarly analyses, especially in studies related to identity development (Giele & Elder, 1998; Lieblich et al., 1998; Hammack & Toolis, 2006). Whereas the direct function of life-line drawing is to trace identity development and construction, especially in traumatic life events, it also encourages participants' agencies and self-reflection. In the case of migrants, the narratives are also expected to accompany stories about acculturation and intergroup social interaction. Based on the symbolic interactionism perspective, identity construction stems from daily social interaction over a certain period of time (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Similarly, the migratory experience conceptualized through the acculturation strategies and intergroup social interaction shapes the development of migrants' identities.

In terms of implementing life-line drawings, the participants were instructed to draw the life-lines visualizing several stages of their life-course in relation to their emotions. They were also requested to include the events associated with turning points in their narratives, in so far as they felt comfortable sharing. The life-lines were later used as visual plots to guide the narrative constructions.

### 3.2. Participants

To study the dynamics and quality of intergroup social interaction between Japanese people and Thai migrant workers, highly skilled Thai migrant workers were selected as research participants. A key assumption in this study was that such workers were likely to be more socially engaged in Japanese society due to their economic and social status than other types of workers. Another assumption was that acculturation and intergroup social interactions are time-consuming processes. The period of stay was therefore another important recruitment criteria. Since language proficiency is positively correlated with communicative competence (Spolsky, 1989; Canale, 1987; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018), the level of Japanese language skills, from beginner to advanced, was also taken into account as a socio-demographic attribute. Other variables include gender, age, and marital status.

Data collection took place between July 2021 and February 2023. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the twelve respondents were asked to participate in online interviews using the Zoom application. Seven participants are female, and five are male, with ages ranging from 25-34 years old. Other recruitment criteria include their professional status as highly skilled workers and period of stay in Japan for at one year at minimum. The participants are employed in the engineering, food industry, and academic fields. Regarding Japanese proficiency, eleven are at the intermediate to advanced level, while one participant has limited Japanese communication skills. All graduated with master's or doctoral degrees. The sociodemographic variables of the research participants are shown in the Table 1. As data collection and data analysis were carried out simultaneously, some follow-up interviews were arranged to clarify some concepts.

Table 1: Sociodemographic variables of research participants

No.	Genders	Ages	Work industries	Marital statuses	Periods of stay in Japan	Japanese proficiency <sup>1</sup>
1	Female	26	Product developer in food industry	Single	6 years	Advanced
2	Female	25	Engineer in an automotive company	Single	3 years	Intermediate
3	Female	25	Engineer in an IT company	Single	2 years	Intermediate
4	Female	27	Product developer in food industry	Single	1 year	Advanced
5	Female	34	Research assistant in a university	Single	3 years	Beginner
6	Female	27	Engineer in an automotive company	Single	5 years	Intermediate
7	Female	26	Engineer in an IT company	Single	3 years	Intermediate
8	Male	26	Engineer in an automotive company	Single	5 years	Intermediate
9	Male	33	Engineer in an IT company	Single	5 years	Intermediate
10	Male	25	Engineer in an IT company	Single	2 years	Intermediate
11	Male	28	Engineer in an IT company	Single	2 years	Intermediate
12	Male	30	Product developer in food industry	Single	4 years	Intermediate

### 3.3. Data collection

The interview procedure followed a participatory design. First, the author received permission from the Research Ethics Review Board, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University to conduct the research. Next, the participants were recruited. During the recruitment process, the explanation about the background of research, especially regarding research objectives and methodology was carried out. The participants were also informed of their right to skip uncomfortable questions or discontinue the interview at any time. The interviews were conducted only after the participants gave their written consent (using Google form). All the names shown in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

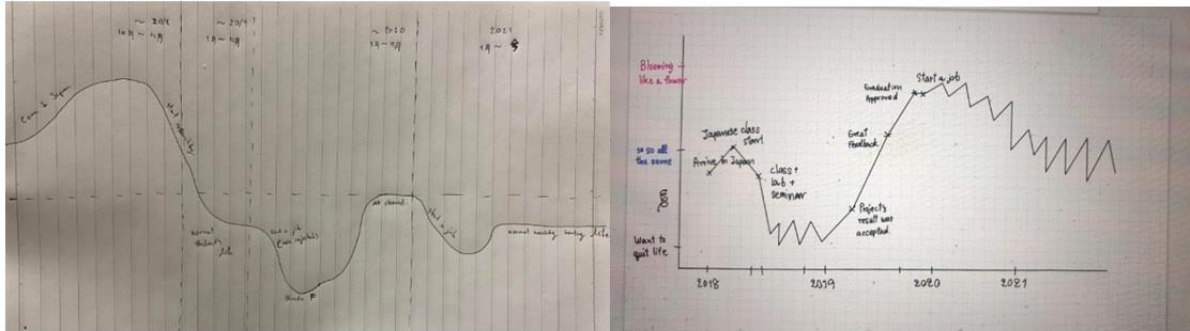
Inspired by the work of [Park \(2019\)](#), narrative analysis was used as the methodology in this study. After confirming their consents, the participants were asked to create life-lines that depict several stages of their life-course (see [Figure 1](#)). There were no any strict rules for life-lines creation, because the purpose of this activity is for the participants to have visual plots to guide their narratives. Therefore, the design and creation of the life-line were based on each participant's logic. They were, however, encouraged to identify impactful events and turning points in their life-lines. Even

<sup>1</sup> Japanese proficiency is generally measured by participants' JLPT test (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) or other formal tests. The N2 – N1 indicate advanced levels, while N3 indicates an intermediate level. As some participants had not taken any Japanese proficiency tests, they were asked to self-evaluate their Japanese levels and give reasons for their evaluation.



though the focus is on their lived experience as migrant workers, they were asked to draw the life-line starting from the first day they arrived in Japan, as the pre-employment experience theoretically has impact on the acculturation process (Fulton et al., 2016). The participants narrated their life-stories according to their self-created life-lines. With their permission, the narratives were recorded for data analysis.

Figure 1: Samples of life-line drawings by Thai workers



### 3. 4. Data Analysis

The participants’ narratives were transcribed and translated from Thai into English. The English transcription was analyzed using thematic coding analysis by MAXQDA software. The resulting thematic codes were organized into family codes to track the prevailing patterns and trends of the narratives.

With the assistance of the MAXQDA software, the thematic content analysis was utilized through deductive coding (Bengtsson, 2016). Relevant excerpts were categorized and classified into codes and categories, which were later organized under predetermined themes of acculturation and intergroup social interaction. The samples are shown in the Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of thematic content analysis

Participants	Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
Nussaba	I tried to be a member of the Japanese community, speak like them, dress like them, and go everywhere with them.	Try to imitate/ follow Japanese norms	Accept Japanese culture	Assimilation	Acculturation
	Come to think of it, I think I just tried to convince myself that I was more Japanese than Thai	Prefer Japanese over Thai culture	Abandon Thai culture		
Thanawat	I intentionally mimic their gesture because I believe it	Try to imitate/ follow	Accept Japanese culture	Integration	Acculturation

	would help me blend in well... I enjoy socializing with Thais and hardly have that (Japanese expression)	Japanese norms Socialize with Thai people	Accept Thai culture		
Ekkapap	I feel like [Japanese culture] is a positive change that made me become a better person without losing my identity as a Thai	Balance between Japanese and Thai culture	Accept both Japanese and Thai cultures	Integration	Acculturation
Thanakorn	Some elders in the company prefer talking to me to other international workers. I think they feel comfortable because I'm always polite and respect seniors.	Welcoming attitude from Japanese colleagues	Social acceptance after social adaptation	Positive intergroup social interaction	Intergroup social interaction
Kannika	...I tried to actively listen to people, and not expose much about my personal issues. I think Japanese people care so much about the feelings of the other person. I think I get along with them when I follow this trait.	Welcoming attitude from Japanese colleagues	Social acceptance after social adaptation	Positive intergroup social interaction	Intergroup social interaction

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Narrative analysis of acculturation strategies

Based on their narratives, all twelve participants appear to be immersed in both Thai and Japanese cultures, which can be defined by an integrative approach. Despite similarity in the approach, some differences regarding patterns of integration can be identified and classified under three themes.

#### 4.1.1. Paradigm shift from assimilation to integration

A few participants demonstrated similar concerted endeavours to bear linguistic, social, and cultural resemblance with Japanese people to gain social acceptance. In many cases, this sense of acculturation can also signify the suppression of Thai culture. The

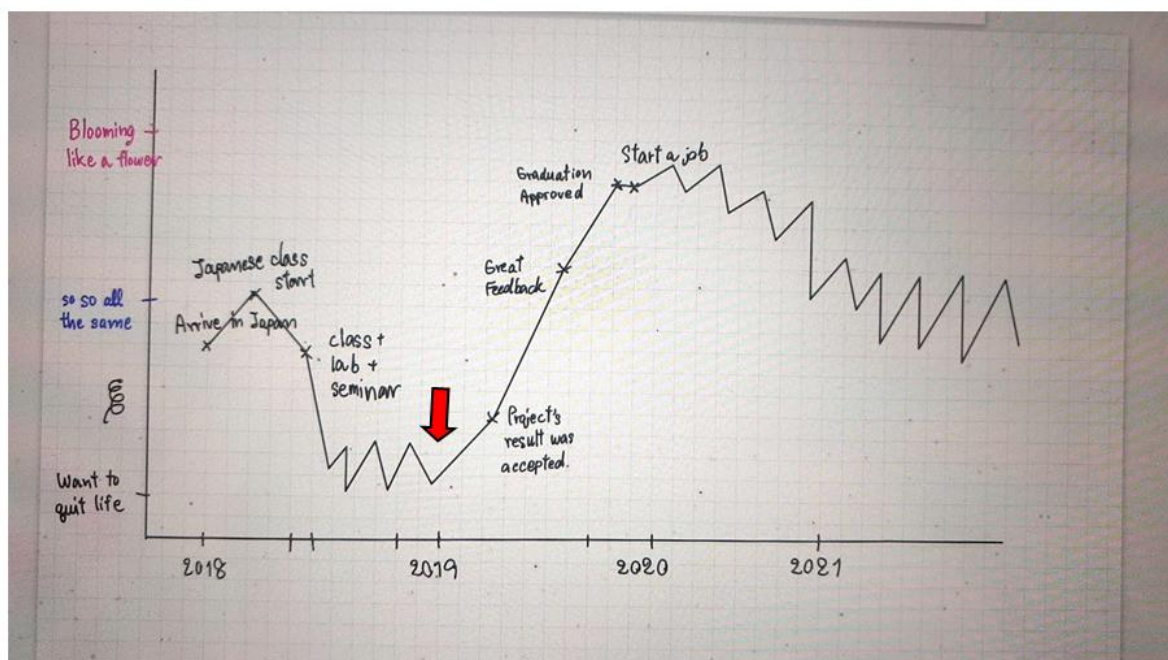
acceptance of the host culture on the one hand, and abandonment of the home culture on the other, signifies assimilative acculturation strategy.

*"I tried to be a member of the Japanese community, speak like them, dress like them, and go everywhere with them. I believe it would help me blend in well with society. But finally, I felt like it was just not my place. I will never be like them"* (Nussaba, 2022).

*"I felt like I didn't think much about Thainess and even regarded some Thai characteristics as unorganized and unpleasant. Come to think of it, I think I just tried to convince myself that I was more Japanese than Thai... I realized later that being Japanese is not that special, and I can never be one of them"* (Nussaba, follow-up interview, 2023).

Nussaba's case reflects an attempt to be like a Japanese at the expense of her own identity. Several months of consecutive assimilation into Japanese culture shapes the sense of disconnection from Thai culture. Even though she succeeded in making many Japanese friends, the sense of group belonging was still fragile. As visualized by her life-line drawing, there is an area where the line drops steadily before it drastically rises as pointed out by an arrow. The turning point stems from the paradigm shift from an assimilation to an integration approach. It illustrates that integration is more effective in terms of adaptation (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: Nussaba's life-line



#### 4.1.2. Orientation towards Thai and Japanese cultures, depending on the situation

Interestingly, some interviewees strategically their "enable" Thai and Japanese cultural identities, depending on the situation. Some said that when they are at work, they gradually observe and imitate Japanese traits and identity to adapt to their surroundings. However, they tend to switch to Japanese "mode" only when they are at work. Some participants further elaborated that Thai traits may be deemed

inappropriate and should be avoided in the workplace, such as being late, using mobile phones at work, and having lunch in groups. However, these expressions are enabled under their role identity at work, which does not intersect with their personal identity outside the professional domain.

*“People would exclaim “Hiss” when they change their movement...for example, after two hours of sitting position, they would say “Hiss” before standing up. Gradually, I intentionally mimic their gesture because I believe it would help me blend in well. However, I would do so only when I am at work. After work, I enjoy socializing with Thais and hardly have that expression” (Thanawat, 2022).*

*“I have noticed that Japanese people nod several times to show their support and agreement in the conversation. When I talk to them, I feel like I should repeatedly nod, too, to show that I really pay attention to what my colleagues are saying. Sometimes, I feel like I nod until my neck hurts, but since everybody does so, I feel obligated to do the same” (Supreeya, 2022).*

*“I am not a very punctual person but aware of how Japanese people are serious about time, especially at work. I can be on time when I’m at work, but I would say I become less strict when I have meetings with friends” (Chatree, 2022).*

*“I think I have become more independent. It’s quite usual for Thai people to have lunch with friends during breaks at schools or workplaces. Sometimes, my colleagues went ahead to have lunch without me, so I was worried whether they disliked me. I realize later that it’s quite common to have lunch alone so I do the same these days” (Kannika, 2023).*

As the respondents activate Japanese traits and avoid Thai traits at work for the purpose of adaptation, it indicates that acculturation strategies can be fluid and flexible, and that individuals have the ability to control the implementation to the extent that it does not harm their cultural identity. For example, in [Figure 3](#), the interviewee mastered the ability to switch between the two approaches in 2021, which stabilized their psychological well-being (represented by the plateauing of the line in the drawing, indicated by the arrow).

#### *4.1.3. Consistent integration in association with positive self-image*

Some participants who had a positive attitude toward Japanese culture before arrival in Japan similarly expressed appreciation toward Japanese ways of life. They are proud to be a better version of themselves and regard Japanese culture as playing an essential role in contributing to who they currently are.

*“Japanese people always behave well, so when I do something against the social norm, people around me sometimes remind me about dos and don’ts...I think I gradually develop the mindset of selflessness from living in Japan... I feel like it is a positive change that made me become a better person without losing my identity as a Thai” (Ekkapap, 2022).*

The narrative accompanies the point where the life-line rockets (see Figure 4). The participant also highlighted "having a new social group" as a major event that largely influences his life-line dynamic. He was delighted that he could successfully internalize Japanese norms, not only because he enjoyed the sense of inclusivity in the Japanese community but also because he believed he had become a better person. Most importantly, the sense of self-improvement following the personalization of Japanese behavior does not harm his Thai cultural identity.

Figure 3: Thanawat's life-line

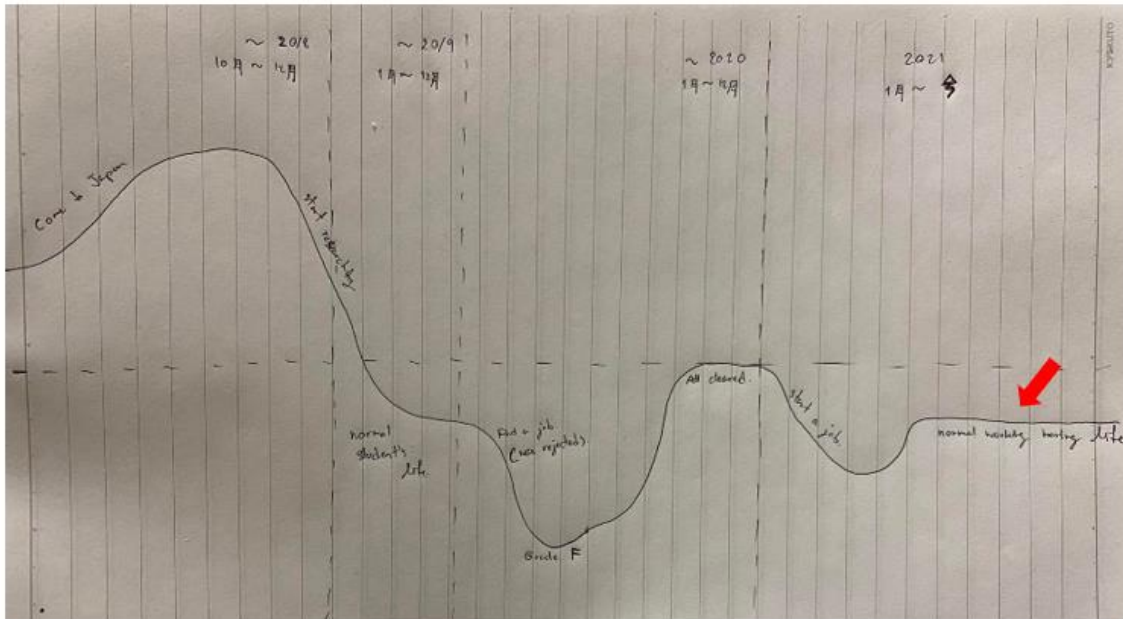
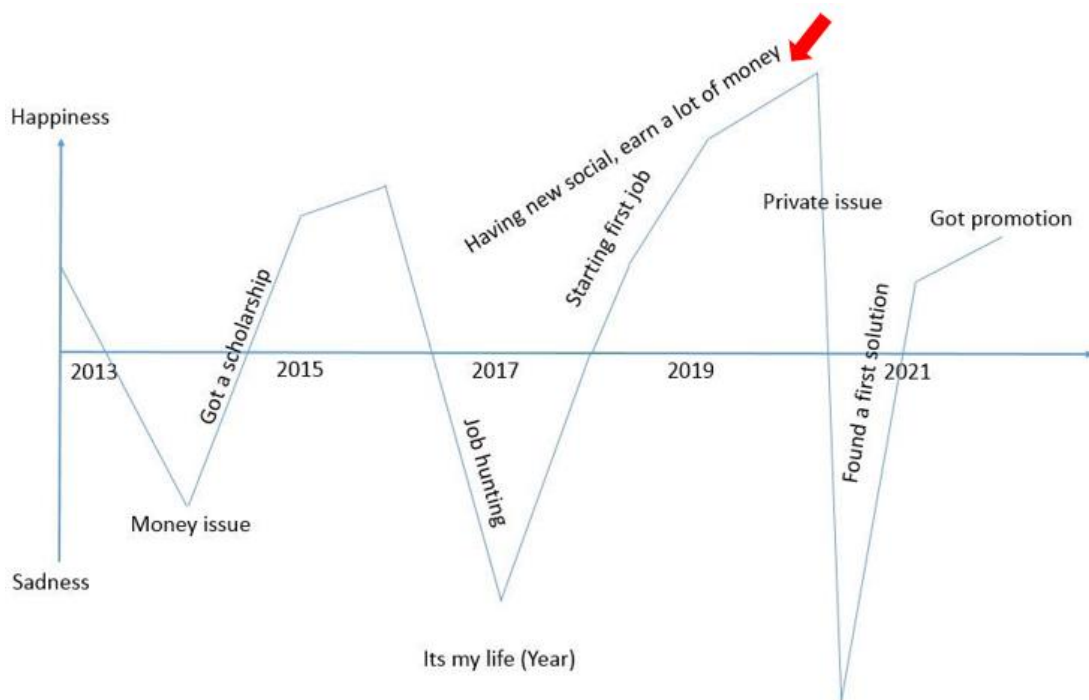


Figure 4: Ekkapap's life-line



## 4.2. Narrative on intergroup social interaction

Overall, the respondents from this study referred to having positive relationships and being met by a welcoming attitude from their Japanese colleagues. Such attitude results in several forms of interactions ranging from professional to personal levels. Some examples include respect for opinions at work, work-related support, chitchatting during the break, playing sports, getting in touch through SNS, sharing personal concerns, hanging out after work, and having dinner with colleagues' families. Only two participants reported that they felt detached from Japanese colleagues, which may have reflected the nature of their work that did not require much interaction. None of the participants mentioned discriminatory attitudes or violence in the workplace.

Apart from the outcome of interaction, it is essential to identify the factors nurturing this positive intergroup relationship. According to the interviews, this healthy relationship stems from the fact that the participants were willing to and successful at following the prevailing norms in the workplace. The finding aligns with another study suggesting successful integration of foreigners in Japan due to the personalization of Japanese norms and values (Kamolkhantibowon, 2018). Also in line with previous research (Roccas & Schwartz, 1993), cultural similarity also supports positive intergroup contact in this study.

*"Some elders in the company prefer talking to me compared to other international workers, I think they feel comfortable because I'm always polite and respect seniors, while other foreign workers do not genuinely concern about seniority. I find this behaviour natural and even pre-existing as Thailand also has the culture of respecting elders" (Thanakorn, 2022).*

*"I went shopping with my Japanese colleagues on the weekend and sometimes played bowling after work... I tried to actively listen to people, and not expose much about my personal issues. I think Japanese people care so much about the feelings of the other person. I think I get along with them when I follow this trait" (Kannika, 2023).*

*"People seem to like it when I try to imitate their gestures. When it became more natural, they jokingly told me that I have finally become Japanese" (Thanawat, 2022).*

The statements above reaffirm the success of intergroup contacts thanks to the participants' attempts to meet the social expectations of Japanese people. In contrast to previous literature pinpointing discrimination in the Japanese workplace (Kim, 2011; Otsuka & Anamizu, 2019), the effort to follow norms and values in the workplace plays a crucial role in safeguarding participants from workplace discrimination. Such an effort, as a result, does not only anchor the participants to integration but also defends them from exclusionary processes.

It can be suggested that societal norms and values in the workplace in this study are culture induced. According to a selection of research, the sense of selflessness signifies Japanese norms and values. For instance, the unique sense of selflessness among Japanese people can be characterized by apologetic gesture (Smith, 1961), prioritization of group cohesion (Kamolkhantibowon, 2018), and collectivism (Takamatsu, 2021),

Participants in this study specified the proper use of language, punctuality, seniority, and support for majority opinions as the prevailing norms in their workplace, which is in line with the sense of selflessness.

*“Punctuality is the most important value in my workplace. If I cannot finish work as promised, even a few minutes late, I get serious complaints”* (Theerapap, 2021).

*“My senior was very supportive when I newly joined the company. He also paid much respect to his seniors even though he had worked for many years. I kind of appreciated this practice. Recently, there was some new staff whom I needed to look after. I intend to treat my junior the same way my seniors treated me. I think it's a good tradition that keeps the working environment livable”* (Issara, 2022).

Therefore, it can be argued that obedience to organizational norms and values by highly skilled Thai migrant workers facilitates positive social contacts with Japanese colleagues. Additionally, the social norms in the workplaces where the participants are employed share common Japanese social values, especially the sense of selflessness.

## 5. Discussion

Drawing on participants' narratives, two unique characteristics of participants in this study explain why they could successfully develop positive social contacts, which led to an integrative approach to acculturation. First, their social status as highly skilled migrants places them in a working environment with daily interactions. Second, with the absence of financial distress, they can prioritize the exploration of Japanese culture over economic activities. The enthusiasm to explore Japanese culture also positively correlates with the willingness to adjust to the culture-induced norm in the workplace, accelerating integration.

Interestingly, the extent to which Thai workers tried to satisfy the social expectations in the workplace may affect their self-determination as Thai people. According to this logic, affiliation with Japanese culture is likely to take a toll on their Thai cultural identity, which means they are prone to be assimilated rather than acculturated. Some previous research on the changes in ethnic identity of immigrants in Europe in relation to the dynamics of labor market also reported a similar outcome (Bisin et al., 2011). However, Thai workers in this study can willingly follow Japanese norms in their workplaces on the one hand and accept both host and home cultures on the other. This study shows that the attempt to adjust to the dominant culture does not necessarily trigger an assimilative approach to acculturation.

Among the limited studies about highly skilled migrant workers, two contrasting points can be drawn. First, many studies suggest that social status and professional backgrounds can foster positive relationships across cultural groups. Second, migrant workers can be victims of social exclusion and discrimination regardless of their levels of skills. Applying social contact theory underutilized in other studies, the findings from this research can bridge discussion between two streaks of literature. The willingness of participants to follow organizational norms influenced by “Japaneseness” results in a positive relationship. Then, the positive relationship facilitates the integration process and may limit their exposure to social discrimination. This indicates that apart from

social status, the degrees to which acculturating individuals can follow social norms in the host society play a vital role in the development of positive intergroup relationships.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the acculturation strategies that Thai migrants apply to live and work in Japanese societies. It also investigated the quality and supportive factors of intergroup social interactions in the workplace.

The narratives of the 12 Thai migrants working in different industries revealed that the most effective acculturation strategy of these migrants was to integrate into the workplaces. Three main patterns of strategies were found in this study. First, some participants shifted from assimilation to integration as the latter was more socially and mentally appealing.

Second, depending on the situation, they strategically switched between Thai and Japanese cultures. The acts of imitating Japanese behaviors and following organizational norms were associated with better sociocultural and psychological adaptations at work. However, participants also agreed that the maintenance of Thai culture and engagement in the Thai community can safeguard their psychological well-being. Therefore, they affiliated into Thai culture in the everyday-life domain and generate a sense of pride as a Thai.

Finally, they consistently applied an integration approach and appreciated Japanese culture as a way of self-enrichment. Interestingly, the unique attribute of these participants was their pre-existing positive image of Japan and relatively well-developed familiarity with Japanese culture. While the orientation into Japanese culture positively impacted their self-esteem and fostered healthy relationships with Japanese people, they did not perceive the detrimental effect on their identity as Thai people. In contrast, they considered the commonality between the two cultures, which facilitated the integration process.

The analysis of the narratives from this study depicts Japanese people as having a friendly attitude towards foreigners in the workplace. Such an attitude led to the positive social contact between highly skilled Thai migrant workers and Japanese coworkers. A primary factor contributing to the intimate intergroup relationship is the participants' attempts to adjust and follow the prevailing norms in the workplace, influenced by the value of selflessness embedded in Japanese culture. This sense of selflessness can refer to the situations when participants prioritize group harmony and cohesion over individual needs which have been widely accepted as a significant social norm and value in Japan (Smith, 1961; Kamolkhantibowon, 2018; Takamatsu, 2021).

Finally, this research reveals that sociocultural and psychological adaptation stem from two factors. First, highly skilled Thai workers were smoothly incorporated into Japanese society largely because they personalize Japanese norms in the workplace. Second, Thai workers can safeguard their psychological well-being and sociocultural management due largely to the maintenance of Thai culture. The orientation into both Thai and Japanese cultures indicates integration approach of acculturation. Therefore, this research highlights the positive correlation between positive social contact and integrative approach of acculturation.



This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size and commonality of participants' sociodemographic characteristics make it difficult to generalize the findings. In addition, the voices of Japanese people are lacking as the interviews were only conducted with Thai employees. Future research is recommended which expands the sample size and diversity of participants, including migrant workers from other cultures and nationalities.

Whereas acculturation study has been predominantly posited in psychological discipline, this study is one of the very few studies that have investigated the living conditions of migrants in Japan through social contacts. This theoretical lens can open up a research avenue for future scholars to explore the sociocultural aspect of migration acculturation.

The combination of acculturation and contact theories is in accordance with the statements of [Sam and Berry \(2010\)](#), suggesting that acculturation is triggered by both choices of acculturating individuals and prevailing attitudes of host members toward immigrants influencing patterns of interaction. Considering that acculturation strategies and patterns of social interaction are interrelated, this holistic perspective can be applied for future research regarding cross-cultural or intergroup relationships in multicultural societies.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This research has been conducted under the permission and supervision of Research Ethics Review Board, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University. The researcher took into careful consideration ethical issues and performed the research procedures involving human participants according to the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. The interviews were conducted only after the participants gave their written consent (using Google form). All the names shown in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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