

Blai Guarné and Paul Hansen, eds., *Escaping Japan: Reflections on Estrangement and Exile in the Twenty-First Century*

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How can we understand different forms of complexity, uniqueness, and weirdness of Japanese identity and notions of Japaneseness today? This is still an ongoing question to be explored by interdisciplinary researchers. In this regard, the nine authors in this volume did a fine job of providing a fresh view of understanding contemporary Japanese identity, belonging, and Japaneseness, which is consistently dominated and sustained by both a strong belief in homogeneity and criticism against it (e.g., a multiethnic-multicultural Japan).

Instead of addressing this dichotomy, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, and dissolving the gap between them, the authors alternatively attempt to point out the necessity of reimagining contemporary Japan through an intriguing analytical lens of “escape.” By using the concept of “escape,” the contributors are trying to transcend common debates on Japanese identity and Japaneseness and revisit somewhat different cultural spaces, which can be characterized as blurred, vague, and indefinite dimensional spaces, and which are often disregarded in dominant accounts of Japan and Japanese identity. After a reflexive introductory chapter on the concept of “escape,” which is contextually represented as a form of “estrangement” and “exile,” the following nine chapters explore the lived reality and experiences of Japanese escapees in unique cultural spaces, being located inside and outside of contemporary Japanese society.

Through vivid and lively ethnographic accounts, the first three chapters examine escapees from normative masculinity. In chapter 2, Patrick W. Galbraith explores customers at a maid café in Akihabara with a focus on regular male customers, who comprise the vast majority of visitors to such cafés. They are escapees who live in exile, seeking alternative intimacy and masculinity, and are enjoying personal affective needs in maid cafés as a newly imagined and established space, thus escaping from repro-

ductive responsibilities (e.g., family and success) amid harsh changes in everyday life.

Paul Christensen, in chapter 3, applies the idea of “escape” to practices of alcohol consumption in the context of masculine gender norms and reveals a new tension between dominant masculine identity around alcohol consumption and an attempt to escape from the social pressure among Japanese men to go drinking. By conducting ethnographic interviews with members of sobriety groups (*Danshukai*) across Tokyo, he illustrates another group of escapees who seek to escape a past in which they deconstructed themselves physically through excessive alcohol use, and who challenge the typical social drinking custom among Japanese men as a long-established masculine norm in Japanese society.

In chapter 4, Hirofumi Katsuno explores the development of humanoid robotics becoming an intensive site of dreaming in contemporary Japan with a particular focus on the engagement of amateur male robot builders, who have been increasing since the 2000s. For robot builders, robot-building as a leisure activity helps to free them from the deprivation they feel in the real world, in which they experience corporate and institutional constraints and anxiety. They attempt a techno-nostalgic escape by which masculine identities are reestablished in playing with technology in a space of fantasy, and they may fulfill their *otoko no roman* (male-romanticism) that lies between fantasy-cyberworld and reality.

Chapter 5 turns our eyes to “narratives of escape.” Through assessing the biographic narratives of popular author Haruki Murakami, Daniel White interrogates Murakami’s escapism. Murakami has long sought to distance and escape himself from the pressure and conditions that create an insularity of Japanese national identity that is critical to Japanese nationalism. The author mainly discusses a conflict between Murakami’s own narratives and status in a cosmopolitan form and Japan’s promotion and use of soft power and nation-branding strategies, which aim to enhance the rhetoric of nationalism through its cultural production including literature.

The second half of the volume, chapters 6–8, discusses issues of physical escape. In chapter 6, Blai Guarné deals with an intriguing topic of “escaping the past through language and memory” by using ethnographic sketches from Tachikawa on the outskirts of Tokyo. Through the voice of Hama-chan, Guarné’s interlocutor who regards the city as his *furusato* (hometown), the chapter explains how the city has undertaken urban development by erasing its old image as a US military base town and at the same time by constructing new images of the future in the town through re-urbanization. Guarné reveals how personal and collective memory are constantly remodeled, reshaped, and adjusted through reflexive processes, such as remembrance and oblivion.

Chapter 7 examines a closer example of physical escape: the escape of Ainu people from Hokkaido to urban areas around Tokyo. Through observation of novel cultural and language practices among younger Ainu who move to urban Kanto, Kylie Martin uncovers the possibility of creating a new indigenized Ainu hybridity. In the case of the diasporic Ainu’s “escape” from their traditional Hokkaido homelands, their movement has positively facilitated the emergence of a new urban identity through cultural performance arts, including new musical genres that combine traditional Ainu music with modern music genres, such as hip hop, rap, and rock music. While escape from the traditional homeland can be seen a form of resistance by the younger generation from traditional ways of being Ainu, the author describes this in a positive way and suggests that the emergence of the younger Ainu generation as agents of cultural and

socio-linguistic change may positively provide new opportunities for Ainu to maintain their indigeneity in the present and future.

In contrast to chapter 7, chapter 8 explores an in-migration story to Hokkaido as Paul Hansen and his informants have chosen to move to the rural Tokachi region in Hokkaido. Hansen situates Hokkaido, and Tokachi in particular, as a historic place of exile and escape. Through his vivid ethnographic fieldwork with his key informants, named “Kyoto’s assemblage,” Hansen discusses his personal experience of escaping to Hokkaido in the context of escaping typical Japan, seeking a way out of hegemonic and normative social expectations.

In the last two chapters, readers have an opportunity to consider the idea of escape in the context of transnational migratory flows through tourism and retired Japanese migrants. In chapter 9, Chien-Yuan Chen copes with the paradoxes found in Japanese tourism practices in Taiwan. Often promoted as “a destination of escape,” Taiwan has continuously made efforts to create and reinvent the sense of familiarity (a sense of safety and reliability) to attract Japanese tourists, particularly targeting Japanese female office workers (OL). As Chen discusses, in the process of this representational endeavor, nostalgic imaginings associated with Taiwan’s past under Japanese colonial rule have been suppressed and selective, and a dark side of nostalgia has been purposefully concealed. Hence, Chen shows that the nostalgic imaginings of Japanese tourists escaping to Taiwan have been shaped by their version of the past, not by their host’s. Japanese tourists come to experience commercialized and romanticized versions of historical familiarity and tourism imaginings while overlooking the pains of Taiwan’s colonial past.

In chapter 10, Mayumi Ono explores the retirement migration of elderly Japanese to Malaysia, which Ono calls the “late escape.” Although the Malaysian government has affected their decision to migrate, it is nonetheless a rational decision and financial strategy to prepare for their life in old age after retirement, escaping from social constraints and *shigarami* (the commitments and engagements) that exist in Japan. However, as the author has found through examining Japanese retirement communities established in Kuala Lumpur, ironically Japanese retirees recreate new social constraints and conflicts with other members of their communities in Malaysia, which reproduces the same conditions that compelled them to leave Japan to escape to Malaysia.

In chapter 11, a concluding chapter, four additional commentators provide their own views on the idea of escape and discuss the future of the anthropology of Japan.

This book contains fascinating ideas, insightful perspectives, and new and unconventional accounts of contemporary changes in Japanese identity. Notwithstanding a large amount of academic jargon, which may distract readers unfamiliar with sociological and anthropological terminology, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into contemporary Japanese society. In so doing, readers obtain a deeper understanding of Japan beyond what is commonly tangible and visible. This volume is recommended to not only students and scholars interested in Japanese society but also those interested in the sociological and anthropological understanding of contemporary meanings of Japanese identity and Japaneseness.

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