How Ethnic Minorities Experience Social Mobility in Japan:

An Ethnographic Study of Peruvian Migrants*

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Abstract

This paper examines how foreign migrants achieve, and do not achieve, upward social mobility in Japan by looking at the interplay between ethnicity and class amongst Peruvian migrants of Japanese and non-Japanese descent. Both groups began to migrate to Japan in large numbers in the early 1990s and have largely engaged in manual work. Yet, those Peruvians who have achieved upward socioeconomic mobility tend to be of non-Japanese decent, although non-Japanese Peruvians, on average, tend to come from poorer class backgrounds in Peru. How does ethnicity matter to the mobility patterns of migrants from different class backgrounds? Do ethnic minorities of different class origins have different chances of, and strategies for, climbing up the socio-economic ladder? An answer lies in the way migrants exploit, and can exploit, “ethnic” resources, or resources associated with Peruvian and Latin American cultures, such as owning a Peruvian restaurant and playing Latin American music. These resources, I found, are typically utilized more fully by non-Japanese Peruvians, both because they represent cultural “authenticity” better in the eyes of the Japanese public and because these resources are more readily available to poorer Peruvians in Peru. Middle-class migrants, including many Japanese-Peruvians, typically aspire to achieve upward mobility through education and skills, rather than through “ethnic” resources.
INTRODUCTION

Studies on social class in Japan have paid little attention to foreign migrants’ mobility patterns. Whether this is due to lack of data or to the small, and thus negligible, number of foreign residents (estimated at 1.5% of Japan’s total population\(^1\)), it has reinforced the tendency to focus exclusively on individuals’ achieved status (e.g. education and skill levels) rather than ascribed status, such as ethnic and national origins. This lack of attention may have reinforced the widespread notion that Japan is a credential-oriented society, at least in comparison to other industrial—above all, more ethnically heterogeneous and stratified—societies.

An examination of foreign migrants’ mobility patterns, though rarely brought up in a society regarded as homogenous, is nonetheless critical. It is critical, not simply because the number of foreign residents has steadily increased over the last decades, and is expected to increase further in the near future (Kim and Inazuki 2000). More importantly, the extent to which foreign migrants achieve upward socio-economic mobility, as well as who does and how they do it, poses a critical question of how ethnic, in addition to class, backgrounds matter in mobility patterns. Ultimately, this question is a test to assess the degree of Japan’s openness: where the boundary lies between those who have and do not have access to upward mobility, and how fluid class boundaries are in Japan.

Numerous studies have documented the marginal status of recent foreign migrants (e.g. Kajita 1998; Komai 1997) and point out various discriminatory forces that persistently exclude ethnic minorities from the mainstream labor market (e.g. Kim 2003; Okano 1997). Yet none of them addressed whether minorities’ mobility chances were
limited due to their ethnicity or if their chances hinged upon other factors such as class. How does ethnicity matter to the mobility patterns of migrants from different class backgrounds? Do ethnic minorities of different class origins have different chances of, and strategies for, climbing up the socio-economic ladder? This paper examines how foreign migrants achieve, and do not achieve, upward social mobility, who does, and why, by looking at the interplay between ethnicity and class. By so doing, this study draws some implications about Japan’s class structure and boundaries.

Here I focus on Peruvian migrants because of their diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. Peruvians began to migrate to Japan in large numbers in response to the revised immigration law of 1990 that allowed Japanese descendants (Nikkeijin) to enter and work in Japan. The policy was justified on the premise that Japanese descendants would assimilate more smoothly than other foreigners due to their “shared blood and culture” (Ministry of Justice 1990).

This ethnic focus was also motivated by class. Because of the predominantly middle-class backgrounds of Nikkeijin, Japanese officials hoped that their stay in Japan would be temporary. Due to their relatively high educational credentials, officials believed, they were more likely to return than low-skilled laborers with lower levels of human capital. Warned by the seemingly incessant flows of migrants coming in from poorer and larger neighboring countries (such as China), an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed, “Asians might end up staying in Japan, but Nikkeijin will return to their home countries when their economic situations improve. Most Nikkeijin lead good lives there anyway” (Ministry of Justice 1990: 13). While lower-skilled laborers might cause social
disorder by committing crimes and causing friction, Nikkeijin’s high educational attainment, together with their shared descent, was believed to facilitate their smooth adaptation in Japan.

Thus, Peruvian migrants were officially brought in as “ethnic kin” together with other South Americans. Unlike other South American migrants, however, Peruvians were more ethnically mixed. According to a 1992 JICA study, 30% of Japanese-Peruvian respondents reported to be of “mixed descent” as opposed to only 10% of their Brazilian counterparts. This was not necessarily due to their higher intermarriage rate in Peru (about 60% of Japanese-Peruvians in Lima were estimated to be endogamous (see Morimoto 1991)). Racially-mixed Japanese-Peruvians simply migrated to Japan in greater proportion than other South Americans. And so did other Peruvians of non-Japanese descent. Some of those non-descendants entered the country as spouses of Nikkeijin or on fraudulent documents, while others entered as tourists (and overstayed) before Japan abolished the visa waiver program with Peru in 1994. Today, close to half of all Peruvians residing in Japan, officially at 55,000 in 2004, are estimated to be of non-Japanese descent (according to remittance companies). Many of these non-Japanese Peruvians, as described later, hailed from lower socio-economic backgrounds than Japanese descendants (of racially “unmixed” backgrounds). In sum, the variance in Peruvian migrants’ ethnic and class backgrounds allows us to examine their effects on social mobility.

Once in Japan, the majority of Peruvians, along with other South Americans, were incorporated into the marginal sector of the Japanese labor market. Thus, regardless of their descent and class origins, they took up manual factory construction work, at least
initially. Little has changed since then, although some have achieved upward mobility. Curiously, the successful were mostly Peruvians of non-Japanese descent from more modest economic backgrounds. Why so, and how did they achieve it?

Generally, there are two ways for immigrants to “make it” in the host society (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). One is by way of educational attainment. The other is through independent entrepreneurship, for which an ethnic community is often a prerequisite. Ethnic communities provide information, credit, and clientele for businesses. This is how early Japanese immigrants in Lima, or the ancestors of Japanese-Peruvian migrants in Japan today, succeeded by amassing capital through rotating credit associations. And so too did Korean residents in Japan who relied on independent businesses in attaining socio-economic success (Kim 2003).

For the majority of Peruvians, as well as other recent migrants, however, neither human capital nor ethnic networks have enabled them to achieve the same degree of upward mobility. Even though many arrived in Japan with relatively high levels of education (according to various surveys, 30-40% of Peruvians in Japan received some type of higher education in Peru), they have been unable to utilize their skills as a means to move up the occupational ladder. Some acquired white-collar and professional jobs after completing their graduate training in Japan, but the number of Peruvians who do so is so miniscule that “you can count them with your fingers” (Peruvian Consulate official in Tokyo); according to the consulate official, only 3 Peruvians came to Japan in 2004 to pursue a graduate education with scholarships from the Japanese Ministry of Education, and during the year before, only 103 Peruvians, in total, were in Japan under student visas
(Ministry of Justice 2004). At the same time, ethnic communities have not readily been available, either, because of their relatively small population and short immigration history in Japan.

Thus, those who have achieved social mobility have done so via another alternative, namely, by utilizing ethnic resources. Ethnic resources, or cultural resources associated with Peru and Latin America (e.g., the Spanish language, Latin dance and music), I argue, are a critical strategy for foreign migrants’ upward social mobility. I elaborate below on how some Peruvian migrants used ethnic resources, paying attention to their ethnic and class backgrounds.iv

**Peruvian Migrants’ Class Position in Japan**

Officially incorporated as “ethnic kin,” Peruvian migrants were, in reality, laborers, filling in labor shortages as “temporary” contract workers often mediated through brokers. In 2003, the majority (over 90%) of Peruvian workers I surveyed (See Footnote 5) were still doing similar type of work. According to the 2000 Japanese census, 88% of Peruvians surveyed (19,771 in total) reported that they engaged in manual labor, whereas only 1% held professional, technical, and managerial jobs. Their lack of mobility was primarily attributable to the nature of their work—dead-end jobs that were unstable, vulnerable, hard, and replaceable.

Their jobs were unstable, first and foremost, because they worked under contracts of usually 3 or 6 months. Contract workers were susceptible to economic cycles; in times of recession, bonuses were cut, as were hours of overtime work. They were also vulnerable to government policies. The increase in the Japanese consumption tax from 3%
to 5% in April 1997, for instance, affected many Peruvian workers. Before April, Fernando Guibu, an auto manufacturing worker, worked “like mad”: “Now our production level is high because people (consumers) are buying a lot before the tax goes up.” After April, his work was significantly reduced as predicted. Since the availability of overtime work was unpredictable, migrants felt compelled to work whenever work was available: “If I said no (to overtime work),” Fernando feared, “no more extra work would be offered or my contract would not be renewed.” Workers lived day by day without knowing what would happen next.

Migrants often worked long hours fundamentally because of the payment method. According to my survey conducted in 2003, about 90% of Peruvian workers reported that they were paid by the hour. That was why extra hours of work (zangyo) were so important to them. Extra hours not only paid more; they also mattered as a status symbol. Luis Kuwata explained: “If you have more zangyo, your status goes up, because that means that you earn more.” The hourly payment method also compelled migrants to work even when they were sick. Carlos Shimoda, 40, the father of a daughter, said his greatest concern was his health. “Honestly, my work is hard. I have to carry heavy truck parts all day long. I wonder how long my body will last. And if I get sick, what will happen to my family?” Indeed, the number of hours put in, or their mere physical presence in the factory, was the primary determinant of their wages.

Gender also mattered, as women ubiquitously earned less than men. In the factory where I worked in 1997, men were paid 1,300 yen per hour compared to only 900 yen for women. Although employers justified the gap through job differentiation, in reality, men
and women often engaged in the same work, as I observed in several factories. As Tsuda et al. (2003) demonstrated, achieved status, such as levels of education and skill, language proficiency, and legal status and length of stay in the host society, mattered little in determining foreign migrants’ wages in Japan. Consequently, Peruvian migrants often put up with long hours of work.

Their work was hard. In a way, hard work meant physical pain. Some jobs were dangerous involving poisonous chemicals, while others required precision, such as checking computer chips. Carrying 23-kg computer monitors, for instance, Carlos Motobu hurt his fingers. His fingers shook so much during the first week of work that he could not even hold a pen. Overall, the work was hard, fundamentally and ironically because it was simple. My job on an assembly line was so simple as to cut scotch tape and put it around computer monitors, but the line moved so fast that the task had to be completed in 15 seconds and the procedure was repeated 240 times in 60 minutes. By 5pm, I normally would have repeated the task 1,920 times. After a week, my fingers indeed began to shake, to the extent that I could not hold a cup. Carlos consoled me: “Once you become roboticized (become a robot), you’ll get used to the work and even to the pain itself,” he laughed. “Robotization” was the term Peruvians frequently used to describe their work, as were expressions, such as “working as if we had never worked in our entire lives” and “working like donkeys.” Middle-class Peruvians of Japanese descent also used an expression, “working like cholos or indios,” referring to Peruvians of Indian descent who tend to occupy lower rungs in the Peruvian class hierarchy.
Being simple and mechanical, their jobs were also impersonal and replaceable; such simplicity made absentees easily replaceable. What counted was the quantity of labor (the number of hours worked or the number of products completed), rather than the quality of workers. Unlike native workers, Peruvians got paid the same amount regardless of their skills, education, and age. And they knew their jobs were dead-ends with little prospect for promotion. Nora Uchida observed the difference between Japanese and foreign workers in her TV assembly factory; while Japanese got promoted and earned more as they stayed longer in the factory, foreigners’ pay stayed the same. Consequently, Peruvian workers had little attachment to their work and workplace.

Being locked in such jobs, Peruvians, together with other South American Nikkeijin, have become labeled as casual and marginal laborers as “dekasegui” workers (temporary workers) in Japan. The government-run NIKKEIS employment agency, established to support their ethnic kin (and officially ceasing to exist in 2004), treated Nikkeijin as blue-collar manual workers. The agency’s numerous multilingual pamphlets, published for the purpose of “promoting Nikkeijin’s smooth adaptation in Japan,” automatically labeled Nikkeijin as “dekasegui,” constantly depicting them as blue-collar workers wearing uniforms, helmets, and boots. These publications explained in detail how to deal with heavy machines and how to cope with work in “dangerous” places. In the process of their incorporation into Japanese society, South Americans became synonymous with “Dekasegui workers.” Such typification helps confine groups to low-wage menial labor (“foreigners’ work,” “Mexicans’ work”) (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). And so, it reinforced
Peruvian migrants’ class position in Japan, making it difficult for them to climb up the socio-economic ladder.

**Reasons for Immobility**

Most Peruvian migrants have continued to withstand such work condition partly because of lack of alternatives. While employers commonly attributed Peruvian migrants’ occupational immobility to their lack of Japanese language proficiency, there were, in reality, few skilled or white-collar jobs available. Jobs advertised for Nikkeijin, either at the government-run job recruitment agency NIKKEIS or in the Spanish weekly newspaper International Press were almost always blue-collar menial jobs; though they were often gender-specific, these jobs did not require skills, education, or knowledge of the Japanese language. Out of 2,415 jobs advertised during 1993 at NIKKEIS, virtually all were unskilled jobs in manufacturing (52.9%) or in construction (27.2%). More recently in 2004, the only jobs that “welcomed” or “permitted” foreigners at the public employment office in municipalities with high concentrations of Nikkeijin (e.g. Hamamatsu) were still confined to construction and manufacturing.

Peruvian migrants’ occupational immobility also stemmed from their own motives. Most of them, regardless of their ethnic and class origins, migrated to Japan for economic reasons; factory jobs in Japan simply paid more than white-collar jobs in Peru. With the money earned in Japan, migrants aspired to start a business in Peru (23%), support their family (21%), save money in general (18%), or build a house in their country (17%) (survey conducted by NIKKEIS 1994). Ethnic or cultural reasons were secondary. So, Japanese-Peruvians, many of whom traced their origins to Okinawa, did not settle there;
instead, they went to mainland Japan where wages were higher. Ishi (1997) pointed out that Japan might have been a convenient destination for Japanese descendants who were able to use cultural reasons to justify, or hide, their true (economic) motives for migration. While their migration was officially induced by ethnic ties, migrants themselves saw this as an opportunity to make extra money.

So long as their moves were driven by economic motives, they found it convenient to work through labor brokers. This was because indirect employment yielded higher real wages. *Nikkeijin’s* overall average earnings of 336,600 yen were significantly higher than the average monthly wages of direct employment, 200,000-240,000 yen after benefits were deducted (NIKKEIS 1994; Koyo Kaihatsu Center 1991). Thus, they continued to work in unstable and vulnerable conditions, because these jobs paid well. *Nikkeijin* workers, on average, earned more than native workers of comparable ages. In 1990, South American males earned 336,000 yen per month (and 204,400 yen for women), compared to the average monthly wage of 179,000 yen for Japanese male university graduates (typically 22-23 years old) in white-collar positions in 1991. It was almost comparable to the overall average monthly wage of all Japanese workers: 345,000 yen.

Peruvians earned relatively high wages, partly because they did not, or opted not to, pay for benefits. According to my survey in 2003, only 25% of Peruvian households surveyed reported that their social security payments were deducted from their salaries; none of them were provided health insurance by their employers (67% subscribed to the national health insurance plan on their own). They earned well, also because they tended to work long hours and night shifts. “Foreigners work harder,” said many Peruvian as well
as Japanese employers. Surely, they wanted to earn as much and as quickly as possible before returning home. But they also had to work hard because of vulnerable status. Every day they punched a time card in and out, and after all, their pay was based on each and every hour of actual work. The type of Peruvian migrants engage in—manufacturing, construction, and heavy industry—also paid more than white-collar (e.g. secretarial, administrative) jobs, as the former were harder to attract workers. Ironically, therefore, there was little incentive to move out of unstable work conditions.

High turn-over, another consequence of engaging in vulnerable jobs, also made it hard to move up the socio-economic ladder. According to a 1991 study, almost half (49%) of Nikkeijin workers surveyed had changed jobs once, while 25% had changed twice, and 21%, three times (Koyo Kaihatsu Center 1991). The 40 Peruvian household heads I surveyed in 2003 had held 4.5 jobs, on average, with most staying with a job for 2-3 years. In most cases (68%), workers changed jobs on their own initiative rather than by an act of their employers (26%) (JICA 1992). They often did so in search of better-paying jobs or jobs with more hours of extra hours of work (i.e., better pay). In a way, slim prospects for promotion led to high turn-over. Another factor was Peruvian migrants’ motive, or what the Spanish weekly International Press called “dekasegui mentality,” to earn, save, and go home. Since they wanted to earn the maximum amount of money before returning home, they frequently changed jobs, constantly switching for better-paying ones. Meanwhile, employers regarded their high turn-over as lack of loyalty to the workplace or lack of “proper” work ethnic (cultural deficiency), thereby justifying their continuous status as temporary dispensable workers.
“Dekasegui mentality,” indeed, remained strong among Peruvian migrants. After 15 years of staying in the country, many had no clear future plans and, despite their prolonged stay, continued to talk about “going back to Peru one day.” According to a survey conducted by Kajita and his colleagues (1998), only 2% of Nikkeijin responded that they intended to stay in Japan, while 37% were indecisive about their future plans. The same survey also showed that very few had career ambitions or objectives other than “to save money” (38%) and “to enjoy life” (17%) (Kajita 1998). Luis Kuwata, a Peruvian migrant, said his primary objective was “to live well (vivir bien)” which he meant as “life without work.” Jorge Garcia also aspired to “make as much money as possible now so that I can relax in Peru later.” Others justified their hard work by seeing it as a sheer means to “have fun on weekends” (i.e., going to Latin discos and partying etc.) (Ishi 1997).

Migrants originally migrated to Japan with various dreams and aspirations. As they prolonged their stay in Japan (and away from Peru), however, they increasingly found it difficult to realize these objectives. Over time, then, their “objectives” became more general and ambiguous with fewer concrete plans. These dispositions, themselves a result of their newly placed class position in Japan, reinforced and self-justified migrants’ class immobility.

Due to the nature of their work and persistent sojourning mentality, the migrants’ Japanese language command has not significantly improved over time. According to the 2004 survey conducted by the International Press (1/1/05), only 10% respondents claimed to “understand and speak Japanese well enough” and 40% “did not understand or speak it.” Moreover, the smattering of Japanese acquired were often limited to a work vocabulary
(e.g. zangyo for overtime work, hancho for group leaders, and yakin for night work) and a few words used daily (e.g. densha for trains, apato for apartments).

Most Peruvians were not so keen to learn the language, because they perceived no incentives at work and had no intention of staying in Japan for long. Some said they were simply too busy with work to dedicate themselves to language learning. Although free language courses were widely available at local municipalities (in addition, some language courses were subsidized by the government through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for Nikkeijin), most Peruvians did not bother to attend them (Kajita 1998). Kazu Yamashiro, a Peruvian migrant, explained, “You can live in Japan (without learning the language), because all the signs are written in roman characters. Prices are clearly shown and tagged and restaurants have visual displays of menus, so it’s not like Peru where you have to negotiate the price, from taxi fares to apples in the street market.”  Negative experiences in Japan were another disincentive for learning Japanese. Isabel Kanai expressed it most directly, “The Japanese treat us horribly. So why should I study their language and even try to make friends with such people?” Lack of prospects for job mobility also deprived them of a motive to learn the language. Some also perceived it more convenient not to speak, or to pretend that they do not speak the language so long as they remained vulnerable, dispensable workers. According to Yoshi Shiroma, “Because (Japanese) factory people are hard-headed and their way of doing work it not always efficient, it’s better if you pretend that you don’t understand them and work your own way.”
As reflected in their lack of Japanese language command, Peruvians’ social interactions with Japanese remained limited. The language barrier was a cause, as well as consequence, of limited interactions with the Japanese. According to a 1992 study by JICA, half of Peruvian Nikkeijin surveyed reported to have few Japanese friends. Their interactions, moreover, were mostly limited to the workplace. As I observed in several factories, conversations at work rarely exceeded the minimum level of job instructions and daily greetings. During lunch hours and breaks, Peruvians (and other South Americans) almost always ate separately and sat apart from the Japanese. Since Peruvians were employed through a distinct system apart from native workers, job segregation contributed to isolation. Also, the impersonal and mechanical nature of work required no communication; highly segregated jobs, such as fast-moving assembly line work, limited interaction with other workers.

While the nature of their work perpetuated their sojourning orientation, this tendency, in turn, reinforced their marginal status as “temporary” contract workers. Due to their high turn-over, employers preferred to continue hiring Peruvians as temporary workers. So long as they remained “temporary,” there was little incentive to learn the language. And even if they mastered the language, migrants reasoned, there was little prospect for upward mobility as contract labor migrants. In sum, their vulnerable class position deprived them of a sense of motivation and career aspirations. And this made it further difficult for migrants to move up the socio-economic ladder.

Lack of Entrepreneurship Opportunities
Another obstacle to social mobility was limited entrepreneurship opportunities. While the number of Peruvian businesses (grocery stores, video rentals, newspapers, restaurants) has increased over time, there were only about 80 Peruvian-owned businesses as of 2005 (according to the International Press and the Peruvian Consulate). According to the 2000 Japanese census, the rate of self-employment among Peruvians was less than 1%. Catering to a small clientele of fellow Peruvians, many of these businesses have had difficulty sustaining themselves. Moreover, running such (small-scale) businesses did not always yield as high and stable wages as factory work, according to many Peruvians interviewed. Due to their limited Japanese language command and social interaction with the Japanese, Peruvian migrants generally found it difficult to penetrate the mainstream labor market.

Lack of cohesive ethnic community was a cause (and consequence) of limited entrepreneurship opportunities. Although a number of Peruvian associations have emerged over time, most of them have failed due to lack of unity or financial difficulties. (A major association failed in the early 1990s, because its leader reportedly took the money and fled to Okinawa. Another one failed, according to some witnesses, after members, being drunk at a party, ended up destroying the furniture and carpet during in a public locale.) Moreover, Kajita (1998) documented relatively little reliance on community resources among Nikkeijin workers, other than occasional visits to ethnic grocery stores and video rental stores; most of those he surveyed reported that they seldom went to ethnic restaurants on a regular basis and did not attend religious services (in Spanish or Portuguese) at all.
One reason for this lack of community was Peruvian migrants’ “temporary” status reinforced by their sojourning mentality. Their high rotation and geographical mobility in search of better-paying jobs was also attributable to this, as was their heavy reliance on brokers. Relying on brokers meant that places of work and residence were determined by brokers rather than by personal networks; this implied discontinuity of ties cultivated in Peru, such as village and regional ties that often served as an important basis for building immigrant communities (Tanno and Higuchi 1999). Moreover, most Peruvian migrants were incorporated into a specific sector of the Japanese labor market to engage in specific kinds of work. This type of work-specific migration hindered the possibility of building community institutions.

Another reason had to do with the nature of their work and dispositions developed as a result of their vulnerable class position in Japan. Trying to put in as much time as possible to work, migrants rarely had time and energy to devote to community activities. Many also saw little need for a community. Eduardo Oshiro, who failed in leading associations, commented: “In Peru, Nikkei Peruvians live comfortable lives, but here (in Japan) they are just laborers. Nikkei here are different from Nikkei in Peru. They are stressed and selfish. They don’t bother to help one another. Nikkei here only think of work and work, so they have no mentality for mutual help.” Lack of solidarity stems, once again, from their vulnerability (and their vulnerable class position) in Japan.

**Ethnic and Class Cleavages**

Internal cleavages also hindered unity among Peruvian migrants in Japan. Particularly noticeable was a cleavage along lines of descent, namely between Peruvians of
Japanese descent and non-Japanese-Peruvians. The difference originated in Peru where Japanese immigrants and their descendants have maintained a tight-knit community with a distinct identity (Takenaka 2003b). The cohesive Japanese community in Lima was defined both in terms of ethnicity and class; core participants were mostly middle-class Japanese-Peruvians, while poorer Japanese descendants, who tended to be racially mixed, often felt excluded because of racial differences or fees required in participating in community activities. Antonio Sasaki, a quarter Japanese who came to Japan to work, said: “The colonia (the Japanese community in Lima) didn’t let me in, because I don’t have slanted eyes. I had to go with a Nikkei friend (to participate in their activities). Nikkei always stared at you and examined you, just as Japanese treat foreigners (in Japan). It is a closed community.”

Once in Japan, these differences have further increased due to two class-related factors. One had to do with a difference in class origins in Peru; compared to the predominantly middle-class origins of Japanese-Peruvians (particularly of racially “unmixed” backgrounds), other Peruvians tended to come from more modest economic backgrounds. This was particularly so, as more non-Japanese Peruvians in greater economic need (rather than middle-class professionals) migrated to Japan by falsifying documents. According to my survey results, 55% of Japanese-Peruvians previously held white-collar occupations in Peru, whereas only 25% of non-Japanese Peruvians did. Perceptions of class differences were also widespread among Peruvians, fueled undoubtedly by publicized crimes committed by some Peruvians (of non-Japanese descent). Most recently, Manuel Torres Yake, who entered Japan on fraudulent documents as Juan
Carlos Pizarro Yagi, was reported to have murdered a 7-year-old Japanese girl in Hiroshima in December 2005. “Peruvians (of non-Japanese descent) in Japan are mostly from lower classes and commit crimes,” said Oscar Murata, himself a Japanese descendant, “I cannot accept such low-level Peruvians as criminals, though I have no trouble accepting high-level Peruvians.” The fact that many non-Japanese Peruvians entered Japan illegally or on fraudulent documents further reinforced the perception of class differences. Rafo Saito said, “Peruvians are canny. They are even more so here in Japan. Look how they came to Japan (illegally) even without shame. And when it comes to crime, they are so crafty, excellent robbers. Japanese are not used to that, because they trust everyone too much. So, Peruvians take advantage of that.” Isabel Kanai also murmured: “Peruvians in Japan are so bad. I wonder how so many chulos and even negritos (mestizo and black Peruvians) managed to sneak into Japan.”

Class heightened the cleavage also because all Peruvians were placed in the same class position in Japan despite their class differences back in Peru. Antonio Yamada, a second-generation Japanese-Peruvian, explained: “Of course, we were shocked that the Japanese treat us as gaijin (foreigner), but, after all, that’s what we are. But what really bothers us is … the Japanese don’t distinguish between Nikkei and Peruvians.” “It’s shocking,” reiterated Keiko Shimabukuro, “because in Peru, we looked down on (poorer) Peruvians and discriminated against them. But here in Japan, we are treated the same.” While (middle-class) Japanese-Peruvians were disturbed, poorer Peruvians were “amazed,” as Lucho López, a former street vendor from Lima, put it: “It’s amazing that I do the same work here as Nikkei. In Peru, Nikkei live like kings, you know?” Coming from modest
economic backgrounds, Lucho, staying illegally in Japan, was delighted that he worked alongside Nikkei. Being lumped together with “lower-class” Peruvians, Japanese descendants, then, consciously tried to distinguish themselves from them by using ethnic and legal differences.

This was most clearly manifested in the labels they used for other Peruvians: “Peruvian” or “native Peruvian,” in addition to “bambas,” “truchas,” “chichas,” “ilegals,” or “false Nikkei,” all in reference to their illegal status, in distinction from “descendants” or “Nikkei.” To further clarify the boundaries, the terms “real Peruvian,” “pure Peruvian,” “authentic Peruvian,” and “Peruvian-Peruvian” were also used, as opposed to “real Nikkei,” “pure Nikkei,” and “Nikkei-Nikkei” (Takenaka 2003a). In an article headlined, “False Nikkei, A Problem For Our Community,” Lima’s Nikkei community newspaper, Peru Shimpo (February 4, 1990), expressed its concern over how (non-Japanese) Peruvians, including “terrorists and criminals,” might ruin “our prestigious Nikkei community achieved through years of our hard work and honesty” (Takenaka 2003a). In this way, “non-Nikkei” were often blamed for having hurt the image of the entire Peruvian population in Japan.

Then, distinct values were attached to these labels. According to Takashi Iha, a Japanese descendant, “bambas” were more dishonest, loud, and party-loving who drink a lot and always end up fighting, as opposed to Nikkei who were more reserved, quiet, and respectful. Many, like Yoshi Higa, who grew up with close ties to Lima’s Japanese community, attributed the difference to their distinct upbringing: “Our customs are
naturally different. We ate Japanese food at home. And our values are different—there was more emphasis on honesty, responsibility, and hard work.”

Consequently, these two groups moved around different social circles. According to Adolfo Sasaki, a quarter Japanese-Peruvian, most of those who hung out at Latinos discos and bars in Roppongi (Tokyo’s night life district) to “look for Japanese girls” were “pure Peruvians”; Nikkei, he said, just stay at home watching TV. Also, Peruvian restaurants were disproportionately filled by non-Japanese Peruvians, as were public events, such as parties, religious services, and a Peruvian procession (held in Kanagawa in 1997). Sometimes, Japanese-Peruvians deliberately excluded other Peruvians from their social activities. Hiro Matsumoto, a Japanese-Peruvian, told me a number of times not to bring “Peruvians” or “not real (or 100%) Nikkei” to his salsa dance classes, because, he said, they always confused classes with parties (he let only Nikkei and Japanese in). In the end, Japanese-Peruvians often expressed more comfort with fellow “Nikkei” due to “more trust.” Compared to “Peruvians who come to Japan by abusing documents,” Nikkei were more trustworthy, they said, because “we know that Nikkei have certain educational levels. We were brought up with certain (read, middle-class) values” (Jaime Iha).

Then, these differences were reinforced by legal privileges associated with ethnicity. Since Japan’s immigration policy accorded privileges only to Japanese descendants, this set an ethnic hierarchy, raising the status of Nikkei over that of other Peruvians. Ethnically-privileged Japanese-Peruvians, then, used ethnicity as a strategy to make known the internal differences fueled by class, which were largely unnoticed by the larger Japanese public. In this process, prior class differences have taken on ethnic
embodiment in Japan, while prior ethnic divisions increased through class strategies.
Altogether, this has resulted in reinforcing cleavages, instead of forging unity, among Peruvian migrants in Japan, thereby hindering yet another means to move out of manual factory jobs.

**Ethnicity as a Class Resource: Who has made it and how?**

While most Peruvian migrants remained a marginal work force, a few have moved out of unstable, unskilled dispensable jobs. Over the course of their stay in Japan, some were able to earn higher income, acquire more security by purchasing homes or obtaining social benefits, or else, pursue a career they wanted. Many made it by way of venturing into independent business. In most cases, they succeeded by exploiting “ethnic” resources—e.g., teaching Spanish, teaching soccer and Latin dances, and cooking Peruvian dishes. Daniel Días, a former professional soccer player in Peru, became economically successful (with a self-reported monthly income of $12,000) by establishing a soccer school for Japanese children. He purchased a 5-room apartment in Tokyo’s fashionable district where he lives with his Japanese wife and two Japanese-born children. Rafael Rodriguez launched a career as a musician, his long-term dream, playing traditional Peruvian and Latin music in a band for Latin American and Japanese audiences. Pedro Sánchez succeeded in running an upscale Peruvian restaurant, in the name of “authentic Peruvian cuisine,” catering mostly to affluent urban Japanese consumers. Utilizing various “ethnic” resources, they were able to penetrate into the mainstream Japanese market in one way or another.
Curiously, most of these Peruvians were of non-Japanese descent who were allegedly less familiar with, and more distant from, Japanese culture than Japanese descendants, and accordingly, were not granted privileged legal status like Japanese-Peruvians. Labor statistics of foreigners (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2004) show a similar trend; while 90% of all South American employees in the manufacturing sector were Japanese descendants (i.e. Nikkeijin), Nikkejin constituted only 68%, 74%, and 23% in restaurant and food related businesses, retail, and education, respectively. Thus, 77% of those South Americans engaged in education (as teachers and researchers etc.), for instance, were of non-Japanese descent.

Contrary to common expectations, non-Japanese-Peruvians, in general, were better integrated into Japanese society than Peruvians of Japanese descent (Takenaka 2003a). According to marriage statistics registered at the Peruvian embassy in Tokyo, as of 1997, non-Japanese Peruvians married Japanese partners in greater proportion (75%; or 100 out of 133 marriages involving Peruvians without Japanese surnames) than Japanese-Peruvians (31%, or 119 out of 382 marriages involving Peruvians with a Japanese surname). Likewise, among 40 Japanese-Peruvians and 20 non-Japanese Peruvians I interviewed during 1996-1997, a greater percentage of non-Japanese-Peruvians had Japanese spouses or partners (though non-Japanese Peruvians tended to be single or separated from their spouses in Peru due to their illegal status in Japan; and their illegal status might have encouraged them to marry a Japanese to legalize their status). Out of 40 Peruvian household heads more recently surveyed, 5 Peruvians married to Japanese natives were either non-Japanese-Peruvian or those of mixed backgrounds who had just one Japanese
grandparent. Japanese-Peruvians of unmixed racial background (i.e. racially “pure”) Japanese descendants) were proportionately least likely to marry Japanese natives.

Peruvians of non-Japanese descent also tended to acquire a better command of the Japanese language over time. In the survey I conducted, non-Japanese-Peruvians scored the highest on a self-reported scale of Japanese language ability, while that of unmixed Japanese descendants was the lowest. According to a Japanese language teacher employed by JICA, non-Japanese descendants often had an extra incentive to learn the language because “Japanese is a completely foreign language to them”; Japanese descendants, on the other hand, see it as the language of their parents or grandparents and “do not try to learn as hard.” Some Japanese descendants were also discouraged from learning the language, because they felt ashamed not to be able to speak and comprehend the language proficiently (despite their descent), and also found it more convenient not to speak it, because Japanese natives often regarded them as culturally deficient. When Hiro Matsumoto asked Japanese passers-by for directions, they simply pointed out to signs, he said, assuming that he could read Japanese. “The Japanese treat you as an idiot, if you have a Japanese face but don’t speak or read Japanese,” he despaired. To avoid this type of confusion (and insult), Japanese-Peruvians often preferred to use their Peruvian first names in Japan, even if they went by their Japanese names in Peru.

Moreover, non-Japanese Peruvians, overall, were less isolated from the mainstream Japanese society. In my survey, Peruvians of non-Japanese descent reported to use the Japanese language more frequently at home, work, and in their neighborhood and interact more frequently with Japanese natives. Indeed, non-Japanese Peruvians without legal
papers tended to establish more contact with Japanese natives through aid agencies and religious and volunteer organizations, compared to Japanese-Peruvians who tended to interact amongst themselves through their own social activities. Non-Japanese Peruvians were more likely to rely on these aid organizations, partly because of their greater need for assistance due to their often illegal, and generally more vulnerable, status. They were also the ones who frequented Latino discos and bars more often—key sites of interaction with Japanese, especially with Japanese women. (Most of those non-Japanese Peruvians married to Japanese natives reported to have met their future spouses at Latino discos and parties, or else, through volunteer and community activities.)

Furthermore, non-Japanese Peruvians, who generally came from more modest economic backgrounds, were more likely to be satisfied with the life (and money) in Japan than Japanese descendants who were “shocked” about their downward mobility and treatment by the Japanese as gaijin (foreigner) despite their descent and prior identity as Japanese. Subsequently, non-Japanese Peruvians were less likely than Japanese descendants to go back to Peru frequently or re-migrate (or aspire to re-migrate) to another country, although obviously their illegal status limited their international movements. Paradoxically, non-Japanese Peruvians were, in a way, more “settled” in Japan than Japanese descendants who were expected to assimilate more smoothly because of their shared descent (Yamamoto 1999; Igarashi 2000).

In sum, while Japanese-Peruvians were more concerned about restoring their status by focusing on their prior class backgrounds in Peru, other Peruvians were more forward-looking. It is generally harder for middle-class migrants to “move up” the economic ladder
than those who start from lower class positions. Faced with barriers to move up the socio-economic ladder, ethnically Japanese, middle-class Peruvians found it easier to remain “temporary” workers with a sojourning mentality and derive their satisfaction purely in monetary and material terms instead of occupational status. Other Peruvians, in the meantime, tended to be more content and have a clear set of long-terms goals. Also, non-Japanese Peruvians were able to exploit “ethnic” resources better than Japanese-Peruvians for two reasons.

First, being perceived to be more different from the native Japanese population, non-Japanese-Peruvians were in a better position to utilize their ethnic resources vis-à-vis the Japanese. In the eyes of the average Japanese, it would probably appear more credible if a Cuzqueño, a native of Cuzco, prepared “authentic” Peruvian food than a Japanese-looking Peruvian. Thus, compared to Japanese-Peruvians, who often suffered from a dilemma of feeling, and being treated as, neither completely Japanese nor completely foreign, Peruvians of non-Japanese descent tended to exploit their “ethnic” resources better and more fully.

Second, their ethnic resources were class-specific resources. The kinds of cultural resources Peruvian migrants used—e.g., playing soccer, dancing, playing Latino music, and being a Peruvian chef-- were often associated with lower classes in Peru; they were certainly not the type of careers typically aspired by members of the middle-class, such as doctors, engineers, and lawyers. (This is akin to Japanese-Brazilians in Japan who were mostly from middle-class backgrounds in Brazil and were unfamiliar with “working-class” cultural practices, such as dancing samba [See Tsuda 2003; Roth 2002].) While Japanese-
Peruvians of middle-class origins were disillusioned with abrupt downward mobility and their inability to “make it” through their skills and education (that is how middle-class people typically expect to achieve upward mobility), poorer Peruvian migrants availed themselves more of ethnic resources.

In their comparative study to the U.S., Tsuda et al. (2003) report that levels of human capital (i.e., education and skills) matter little in determining foreign migrants’ wages in Japan. That is, regardless of their education, skills, and experience, foreign migrants are relegated to marginal class positions. In a society where human capital matters little, middle-class Japanese-Peruvians were deprived of both class and ethnic resources. Meanwhile, poorer Peruvians, generally more content with their class situation in Japan, had an extra incentive to use available resources. Armed with fewer class (alternative) resources, they also had little hesitation to use “lower-class” ethnic resources to “make it” in Japan.

**Conclusion**

Although Peruvian migration to Japan was officially triggered by ethnic ties, class played a significant role in shaping the experiences of Peruvian migrants. Nikkei and non-Nikkei Peruvians, regardless of their descent and economic backgrounds, were placed in the same class position within the Japanese class structure as manual casual laborers. In an attempt to regain status, Japanese descendants (particularly middle-class, racially unmixed Japanese-Peruvians) consciously tried to distinguish themselves from “lower-class” Peruvians on the basis of their class differences back in Peru. They did so by asserting their identity as “Nikkei” that is neither completely Japanese nor completely Peruvian.
Meanwhile, non-Japanese Peruvians steadily made efforts to adjust their legal status or simply learn to survive in a society where they completely felt foreign and vulnerable. While they were largely viewed as ethnically and culturally different in Japan, it was this difference that they often utilized as a resource and a strategy to move out of their vulnerable position as manual, unstable, and often illegal, laborers.

What does this tell us about the role of ethnicity in Japan’s class structure? Much research on ethnic minorities has reported disadvantages associated with ethnic minority status in Japan; ethnic minorities are perpetually confined to the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy due to their ethnic or cultural difference, implying rigid boundaries between Japanese and non-Japanese. My study, however, has shown that ethnic “difference,” or what is perceived to be different, plays double roles for minorities’ social mobility. It is not simply a source of discrimination and a barrier to upward mobility; ethnic difference can also serve as a strategy to penetrate, and succeed in, the mainstream Japanese society. This is indeed reflected in Japan’s immigration policy that gives privileges to foreigners with “skills not possessed by Japanese nationals” (Ministry of Justice 2002). A disproportionate number of “skilled” foreign migrants, therefore, have been admitted under categories, such as “international educators” (e.g., foreign language teachers), “special skilled workers” (e.g. foreign cooks), and “cultural entertainers and ambassadors” (Many end up working as bar hostesses and dancers.).

The ability, as well as the need, to use ethnic resources, however, depends on one’s class backgrounds. Thus, foreign migrants of different class backgrounds use different mobility strategies. Middle-class migrants often try to move up by using globally
transferable human capital (e.g., IT knowledge, management skills), whereas for less-skilled migrants, ethnic resources may suit them better. Ethnic resources may particularly be useful for those migrants who do not have access to large ethnic communities and ethnic entrepreneurship opportunities.

Generational succession may also be a crucial mechanism for foreign migrants’ upward mobility. It remains to be seen whether their children, raised and educated in Japan, will be able to experience upward mobility through education, credentials, and skills like Japanese natives. Thus far, studies on these children have painted a grim picture, noting high school drop-out rates (15-30% of school-aged foreign children are reported not to be in school, depending on municipalities) and very low rates of college attendance. According to the 2000 Japanese census, out of 1,755 Peruvians of ages 15-19, only 731, or 42%, were in school on a full-time basis; among Peruvians of ages 20-24, the equivalent rate was only 3%. Perhaps, then, their children, or even their children, would be able to compete in the mainstream market on the basis of individual merit and credentials. Until that day comes, utilizing ethnic and cultural resources may remain a crucial way for Peruvian migrants to move beyond manual contract labor, unless cohesive and sizable ethnic communities become established to provide them with entrepreneur opportunities.
References


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1 The figure includes the number of long-term Korean residents who have been in Japan for generations yet have remained ‘foreign’ in legal terms. Excluding those long-term residents, the percentage of more recent foreign migrants is about 1% of Japan’s total population (Ministry of Justice 2005).

2 This has to do with their greater economic incentives, as poor Japanese descendants in Peru tended to be racially mixed (based on my fieldwork in Peru). The greater proportion of non-Japanese descendants among Peruvians relative to other South Americans is attributable, in part, to the lax manner in which old population records were kept in Peru’s rural areas. These records were reported to be bought and sold more frequently in Peru than in other South American countries. In order to gain entry to Japan as Japanese descendants, prospective migrants must present a number of documents demonstrating their ties to their Japanese ancestors. According to official estimates in 2004, there were 7,300 undocumented Peruvians as opposed to 4,700 undocumented Brazilians.

3 Social mobility refers here to occupational changes, and particularly to changes from manual work to other types of work. For the majority of Peruvians who initially take up manual factory jobs, moving out of such jobs is a vital step toward upward mobility. Even though most Peruvians initially migrated to Japan for the strict purpose of earning and saving money, many, especially those of middle-class origins, regard their jobs degrading, and wish to “succeed” in Japan. “Success,” to them, means “abandoning the factory” (Peruvian migrants), either by establishing independent businesses or moving on to jobs where they can exercise what they were trained.

4 The findings reported in this paper are based on the study I conducted on Peruvian migrants in Japan during 1996-1998 and 2003-2004. During the first period, I conducted extensive field work on Peruvian migrants’ daily and community activities, including
participant-observation in a factory. I also interviewed over 80 Peruvian migrants (1996-1997, 2003-2004) and conducted a survey among 40 Peruvian households in the Tokyo metropolitan area (in 2003-2004). The survey yielded life histories of 128 individuals (household members), and the data were collected on a non-random basis in collaboration with the Latin American Migration Project and Alvaro del Castillo. Personal names used in this paper are all pseudonyms.

A majority of Japanese descendants in Peru are members of the middle to upper-middle classes, measured by occupation, education, and places of residence (i.e., neighborhoods) (e.g. Morimoto 1991) in a largely poor country.

It is unclear, however, whether those Peruvians who entered Japan on forged documents used their real or forged Japanese surname.