

Hiromi Clyne  
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Dr. Roland Werner

## The Trends of Japanese Expatriation since the Early 1990s

Hiromi Clyne  
San Diego State University

**Keywords:** Japanese immigrants; Japanese expatriates; assimilation; isolation; aspiration; dilemma; social class; socioeconomic status; gender inequality.

**Abstract:** During most of the 1900s, the majority of Japanese expatriates were permanent immigrants. In more recent decades, however, temporary residents such as students and tourists have become visible Japanese expatriates. Since Japan became one of the world economic core countries in the late 1980s, an increasing number of Japanese have been seen all over the world. By using articles from sociological journals and Internet resources from various organizations, this research discusses which pull and push factors are causing current Japanese expatriate trends. The research focuses on a specific group, analyzing the reasons that young females have become the majority of Japanese students and temporary residents abroad and how modernized Japanese society, which has still maintained its traditional social norms significantly affects this trend.

## **Introduction:**

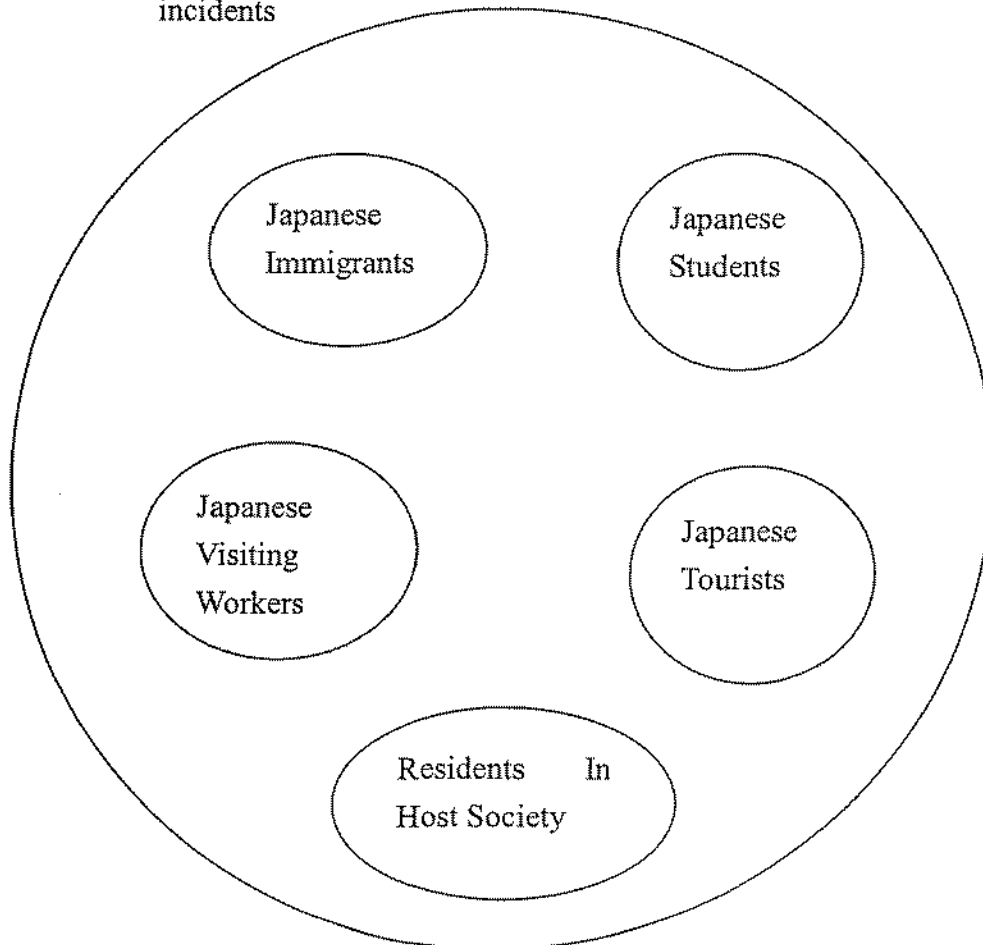
It is well known that competitive Japanese companies have been established throughout the world in various industries. With each new industry in which Japanese companies participate, and with each new company that is established in foreign markets, Japanese executives and their families settle in the local community. But it is not only large numbers of Japanese business persons that have been seen throughout the world since the Japanese economic success of the 1980s; temporary visitors such as tourists, students, and other residents have also become more visible than before in various cities (Kelsky 2000; Shani 2001). It is important for both Japanese and non-Japanese who are interested in the Japanese business markets or its culture to understand Japanese expatriation trends. In addition, it is also beneficial for marketing and academic purposes to obtain a deeper knowledge about the changing nature of Japanese cultural characteristics.

By analyzing which push and pull factors have caused the trends in Japanese expatriation from the early 1990s to current times, this research illustrates the relationship among Japanese economic power, traditional society, young Japanese, and females in Japanese society.

The social system of this report includes the environment of Japanese expatriates at home and abroad, including both the forces that cause them to travel abroad and those that cause them difficulties once there. The elements of this system consist of Japanese permanent immigrants, visiting workers, tourists, students, and other temporary residents in various host societies (see Figure 1). The boundary of this model

**Figure 1: Social Systems Model for Japanese Expatriates**

- ❖ Social System: Environment of Japanese Expatriates
- ❖ Elements: Japanese immigrants, visiting workers, students, tourists, and residents in host society
- ❖ System Boundary: Japanese men and women who emigrate from Japan to their new society, the age between 15 to 65, and working to middle class
  
- ❖ Relationships:
  - Internal – race discrimination, competition, connection, bond, isolation, and social network
  - External – economic status of Japan in the world, the opportunity cap in Japan, Japanese culture, immigration laws in host countries, and political incidents



is working and middle class Japanese men and women aged 15 to 65 who permanently or temporarily emigrate from Japan to new societies. The internal relationships among these elements are race discrimination, competition, connection, bond, isolation, and social network. The external relationships are economic status of Japan in the world, the opportunity cap in Japan, Japanese culture, immigration laws in host countries, and international and domestic political incidents.

The following articles are cited in the reference page; however, they are not used in this research paper, (Adelman and Stewart 2003), (Kashiwazaki 2002), (Keo, Wen and Yung-May Tsai 1986), (Lo and Gerald 2001), (Shih 2002), and (Shneider 2001).

**Method:**

Secondary sources are used to present this paper. Most resources are current scholarly journal articles that I found through a library search engine under the category entitled “sociofile” at San Diego State University. Additionally, I used Internet articles that were published by universities, organizations, research companies, and the government, and also were found through the “Google” search engine by using keywords for my research. In order to find trustworthy sources, I tried to eliminate “.com” websites because there would be a high possibility that information in those websites would not be reliable. In addition, in those types of articles individual opinions tend to be represented rather than objective ones.

**Results:**

This research discusses which pull and push factors have affected Japanese expatriate trends from the early 1990s to the current; additionally, it analyzes the relationship between young Japanese females (who have become the majority of Japanese students and temporary residents abroad) and modernized Japanese society, which has still maintained certain traditional social norms.

In the early 1900s, the aspirations of the majority of Japanese sojourners and immigrants were focused mainly on simple economic successes in host countries (Takami 1998; Tsuda 2001; Nishioka 1999). The objectives of current Japanese expatriates (excluding visiting workers), in contrast, are more likely related to aspects of the oppressive Japanese society such as the traditional Japanese culture and unique social structure. These aspects of Japanese culture especially affect women and persons who have strong ambitions of career, academic, or personal objectives, and they serve as push factors motivating the immigration of the affected groups outside of Japan. A study by Kelsky found a "...broad zeitgeist in which young single woman ironically use the considerable economic resources they command as participants (however marginal) in the Japanese national economy to dislodge themselves from that economy, and the national project it supports, and seek alternative education, work, and lifestyle opportunities abroad" (2000).

The State/Process Dynamic Model of Japanese expatriates depicts how Japanese are inspired to leave Japan for other countries and how they complete the transition by eventually settling in their host society or deciding to return to Japan (see

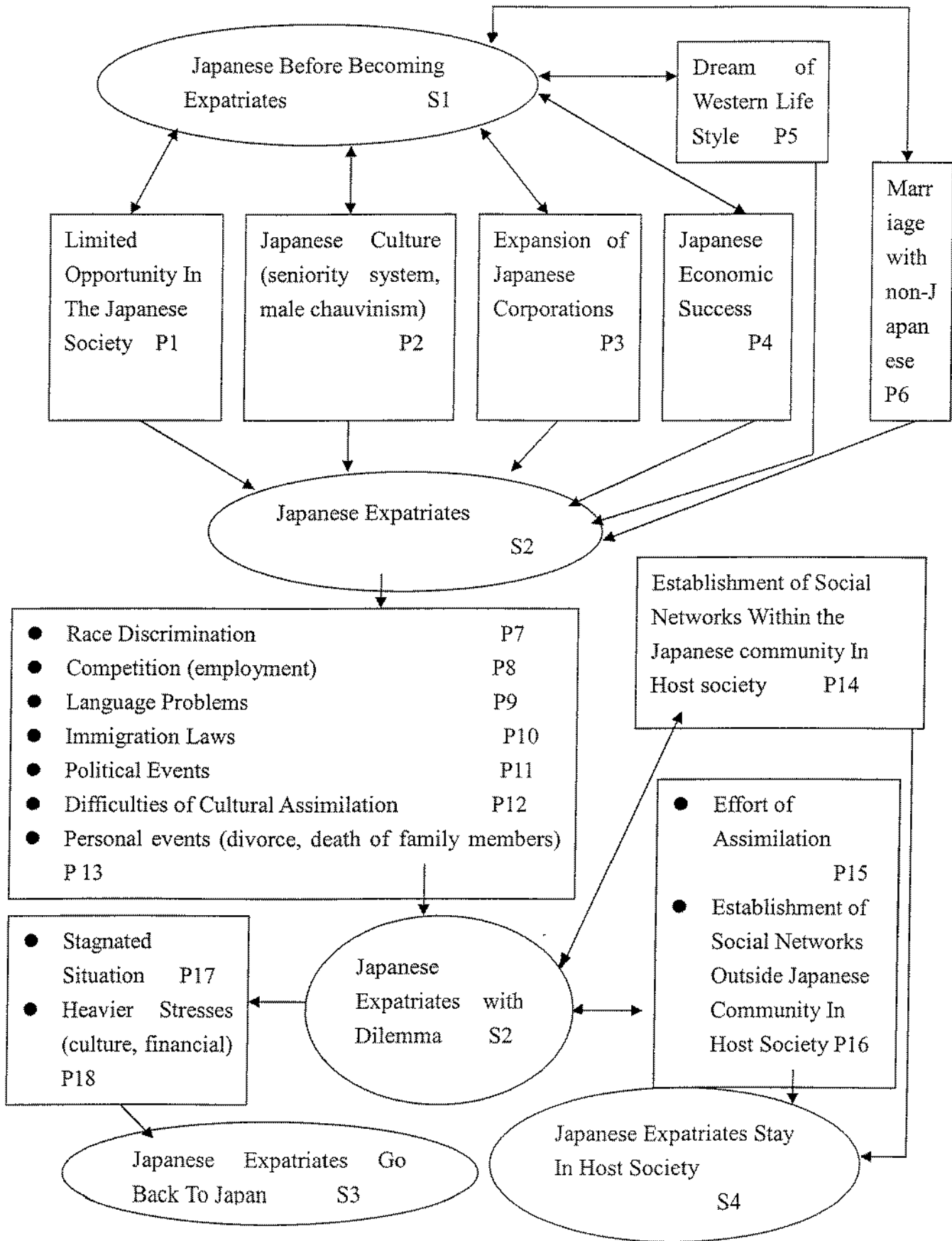
Figure 2). The first five processes that make Japanese become expatriates often work in conjunction with each other to cause expatriation.

The first factor is the limited career opportunity in Japanese society for certain types of people. Although promotion systems of Japanese corporations have been changing for the last decade, a merit-less seniority system and gender inequality still strongly controls salary, promotion, and benefits. Therefore, ambitious and rational young people cannot contribute enough of their skills at the workplace: if they do manage to make a contribution, they cannot be rewarded any benefit for having done so. The resulting frustrations lead many to convince themselves to depart Japan and pursue their potential opportunities in new societies (Kelsky 2000).

The second factor is the unique Japanese culture. Even if Japanese culture has recently become much more westernized, male chauvinism is still the center of the Japanese social structure in business and private settings (Kelsky 2000). Thus, the majority of women who are highly educated and capable workers have struggled to find opportunities in Japanese society. They often give up making a great effort in their home society and decide to try their chances abroad. According to the article by Kelsky, "in the middle 1990s, almost 80 percent of Japanese study abroad students were women." (2000).

The third factor causing expatriation is the expansion of Japanese corporations. Workers visiting other countries must often leave Japan because of their companies' orders that cannot be rejected. Therefore, some of them are forced to join a new society without having sufficient psychological preparation.

Figure 2: State/Process Dynamic Model of Japanese Expatriates



The fourth factor, Japanese economic success, has been a fundamental process for all Japanese expatriates. On a micro level, it provides Japanese people with the resources necessary for them to make the trip abroad and to settle once they are there. More importantly, on a macro level, Japanese economic success also makes Japanese individuals attractive to foreign countries, which court their attention and market lifestyles to them. Japanese students overseas are a lucrative market for educational institutions (Shani 2001).

The fifth factor is the simple Japanese dream of a western life style. This factor alone encourages many Japanese to try living or visiting outside of Japan. Temporary residents and tourists relate mostly to this factor.

Finally, the sixth push factor motivating expatriation is the marriage of Japanese persons (usually women) with non-Japanese. It is mostly long-term Japanese immigrants that relate to this factor.

In order to understand Japanese expatriation trends since the early 1990s, this research focuses on analyzing how Japanese traditional social norms and culture impact on young Japanese female expatriates, who make up a significant part of those trends. It also examines how the recent youth employment industry in Japan relates to the trends. Therefore, only process numbers one through three (the push factors) and four and five (the pull factors) in the State/Process Dynamic Model of Japanese Expatriates, are discussed in this research.

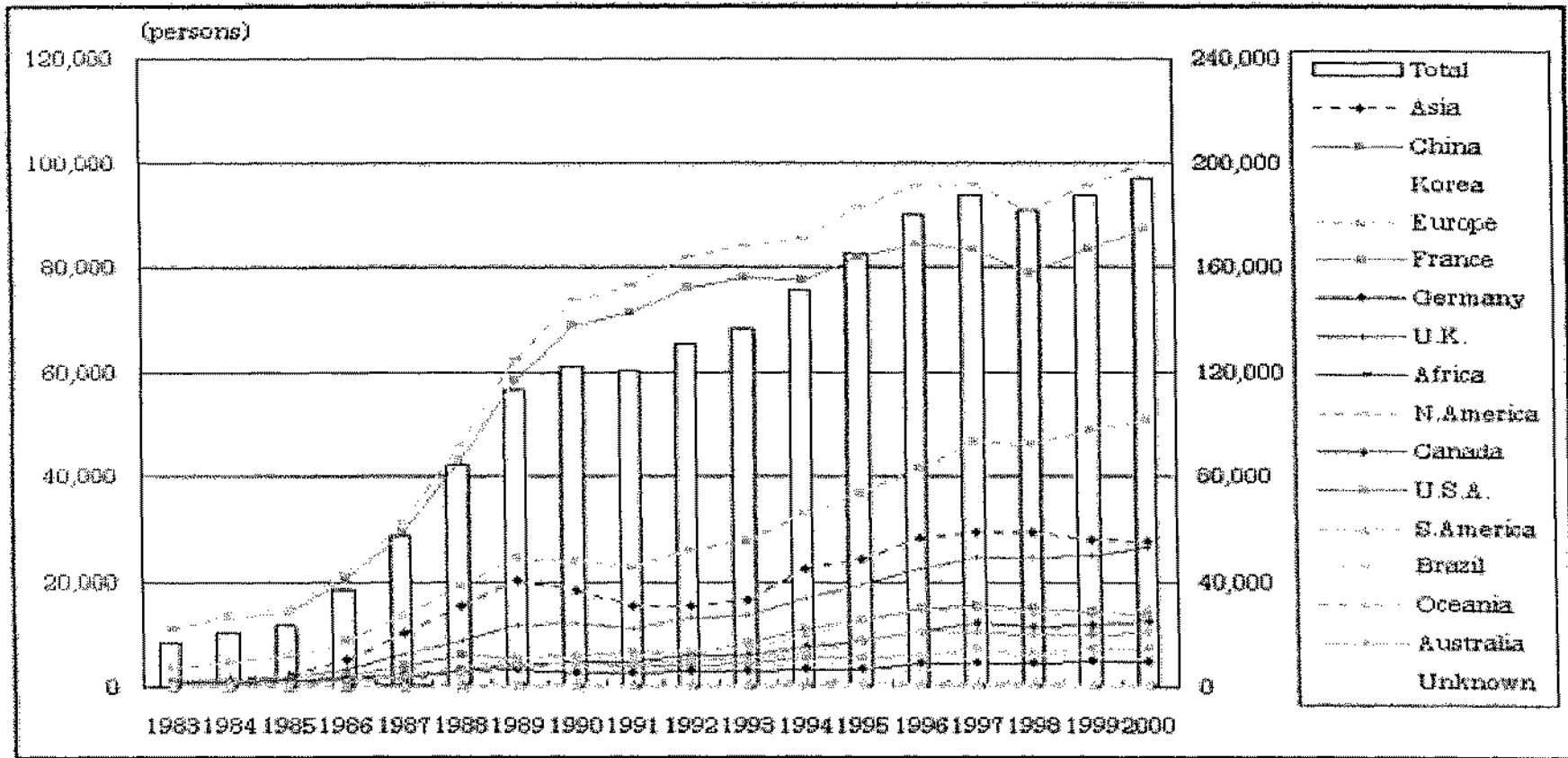
According to the Japan Information Network (2002), the number of Japanese living abroad almost doubled within the 15-year period from 1986 to 2001. While



permanent residents increased 16 percent during those 15 years, long-staying Japanese became more than double. The dramatic growth of long-stay Japanese can be most clearly seen from 1989 to 1991, which was during the Japanese bubble economy period. The economic condition in Japan significantly affected the number of Japanese that decided to travel abroad. Even after the bubble economy passed, fundamental economic strength continued to support the increase in the number of Japanese expatriates. The number of Japanese living overseas for three months or longer has been steadily increasing and reached its highest number, 874,000, in 2002 (Tanikawa 2003). Among recent Japanese expatriates, there are two groups that significantly contribute to raise the number of Japanese abroad; the first group is composed of students, and the second is composed of non-professional sojourners who work in low-paid jobs (Tanikawa 2003).

It is well known that rapid Japanese economic growth started during the late 1980s. Figure 3 illustrates that the number of Japanese students overseas dramatically increased during this period, between 1988 and 1989. Japanese economic growth, as a pull factor, directly impacted on the number of Japanese students overseas. This situation created significant market value in the education and training industry of Japanese students for educational institutions both in Japan and throughout the world. Many Japanese study English in private classes even after they finish formal schooling (all Japanese students study in school). This suggests what high potential the education and training market in Japan has. This phenomenon also results in the trend of Japanese studying abroad for long and short terms depending on the characteristics of the

Figure 3: Students Overseas 1983 - 2000



Source: Statistics on Japanese and non-Japanese Legal Migrants, 2002  
 The Judicial System and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Justice (Mar 2001)

Source: Japan Information Network. 20002. "Japanese Students Overseas 1983 - 2000." Retrieved November 8, 2003  
 (<http://www.jinjapan.org/stat/stats/16EDU62.html>).

particular student. For instance, approximately 100,000 Japanese depart to English speaking countries as full-time students each year (Trade Partners UK N.d.). Among popular destinations, the United States is the trendiest country for them, and the United Kingdom and Canada follow.

Among the many courses Japanese students can choose, English language training is the most common course for short-term students, who are mostly young women. This fact clarifies that eagerness of learning English is obviously a main push factor for Japanese students to leave the country, even if other factors could be involved. Additionally, the recent educational trend for short-term Japanese students is English training combined with cultural and vocational activities and/or tourism abroad (Trade Partners UK N.d.).

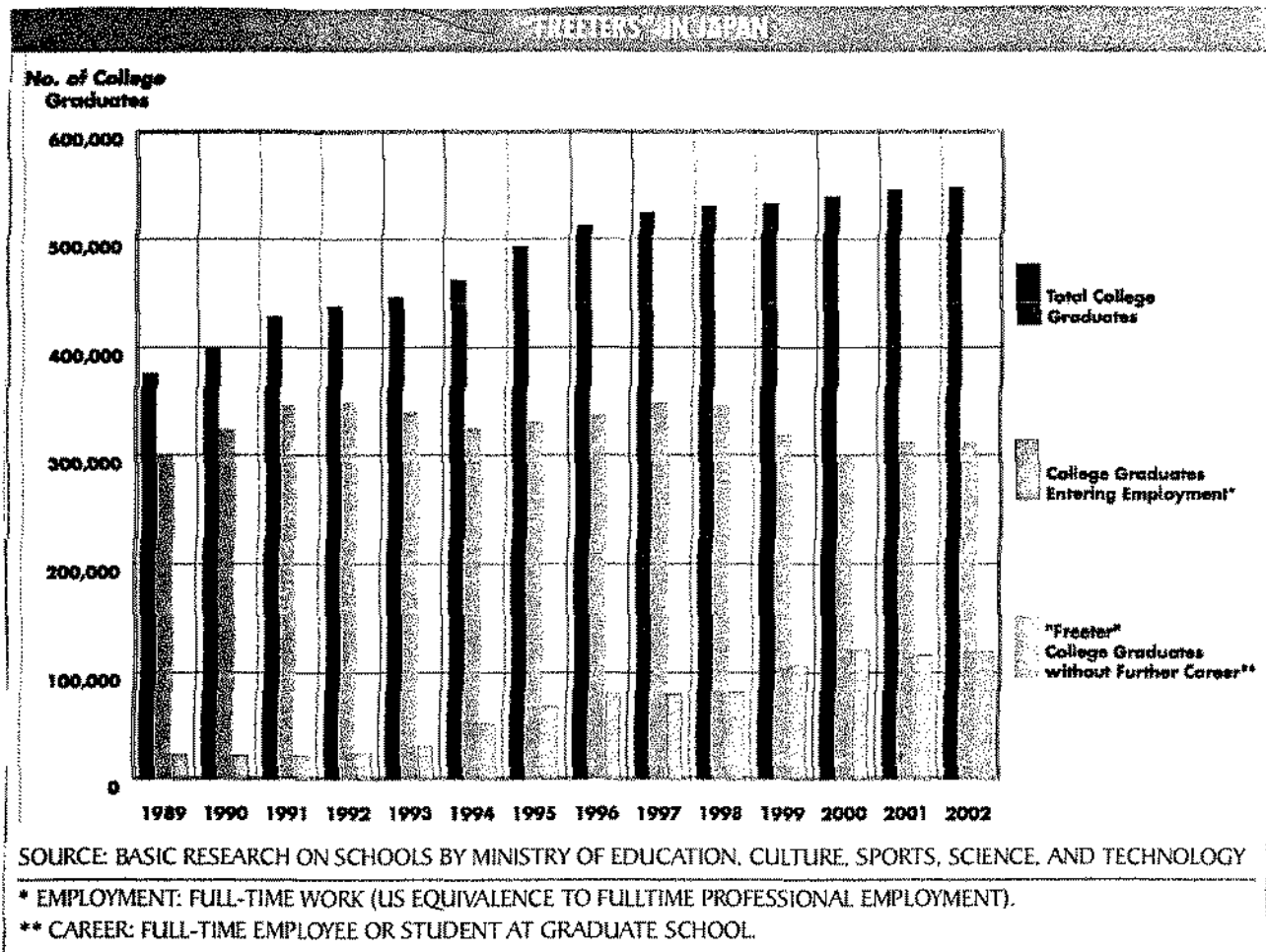
Although many Japanese students leave for foreign countries with academic aspirations, they often meet difficulties to assimilate with the mainstream of native speakers due to a big disparity in educational background and inadequate language skills (Shani 2001; Trice and Jacqui 1993). Being isolated from the main body of local students is a bitter experience for Japanese students, but this experience encourages them to improve their language skills. Therefore, the gap in educational background provides not only difficulties to Japanese students, but also generates some positive effects. In addition, it gives a chance for personal development. For instance, one Japanese student, a former French teacher in Japan, says, "This (foreign study) experience has given me habit to output what is studied, while my past study has been always just input, and it also made me think about what I want to do/study specifically"

(Shani 2001). Shani provides another example, observing about a Japanese postgraduate student in London, “Although Mariko admits to feeling comfortable among people speaking the same language, she doesn’t see national identity as very important as I used to and finds herself in disagreement with other Japanese students in seminars” (2001). Thus, studying at foreign schools and living in different countries causes them to change and expand their perspectives about a wide range of matters, which perspectives were initially constructed in the socially isolated country of Japan.

Japanese postgraduate students studying abroad tend to have a clear vision for their academic achievement and future career; in contrast, Japanese students studying English and other cultural or vocational topics do not have such clear vision for their study at foreign schools. Often times, these types of student do not even know what they want to do, so they depart to foreign countries only with the purpose of finding themselves and their life direction.

This phenomenon relates to the new recruiting systems of Japanese companies, which are based on economic globalization and the stagnated Japanese economy. Figure 4 illustrates how the number of “Freeters” in Japan has grown during the last 14 years. “Freeter” is a Japanese word coined in 1987. It originally was meant to describe independent young people who pursue their individual dreams such as becoming a musician, artist, actor, business owner, etc., by financially supporting themselves as part-time workers. “Freeter” was used to depict positive and energetic young people. However, it now tends to be used to portray negative and lazy people: “freeter” now represents dependent, unmarried, young people who rely financially on their parents by

Figure 4: "Freeters" in Japan



Source: Toyoda, Yoshihiro. 2002. "Changes in Attitudes Toward Work Among Japan's Young Generation." *Japan Economic Currents*, November (26). Retrieved November 8, 2003 (<http://www.kkc-usa.org/index.cfm/1414/2416>).

living with them while only working in minimum pay part-time jobs (Toyoda 2002). The recent creation of a large number of freeters is related to the new recruiting system for Japanese companies. In the past, Japanese companies hired numerous new college graduates and provided their own training to these new employees. Now, companies hire only a small number of new graduates and they seek to employ people who have a clear vision for their career and who can quickly reply regarding what they can contribute to revitalize these companies. Notwithstanding this revised focus in recruiting, the majority of Japanese students do not know what they want to do after graduation and have no future career plans.

The combination of this new recruiting system and the students' unclear desires and opportunities for their careers has significantly increased the unemployment rate for this group of people in Japan. According to a study by Curtin, "...the March 2003 unemployment statistics show that youth unemployment (people aged 15 to 24) stood at a massive 13.4 %. This was the highest unemployment rate since recording such data began back in 1953" (2003). This poor employment market further discourages young Japanese to seek career opportunities, and if they do try hard, they most often can choose only low-paid or part-time jobs as an employment option after graduation from school.

This discouragement in seeking job opportunities is more problematic for young females in Japan because serious gender inequality still remains even though Japanese society has become partly westernized. It has long been well known by students of Japanese culture that Japanese society is male dominated and that women

have a difficult time climbing the corporate ladder. Women who are equally qualified as men do not receive a promotion while their less qualified male colleagues easily climb the ladder. Figure 5 is a table that shows the percentage of women in managerial positions from 1984 to 2001. This table provides evidence of an opportunity cap for female workers. There is no more telling proof of this double standard in Japanese society than the statistics regarding Japanese women in managerial positions. This table illustrates that women in managerial positions at Japanese companies are very rare, and have been for the past 17 years. It also shows that even from 1984 to 2001 women in managerial positions remained below five percent of the total, and in some categories even declined in percentage. This shows that, if anything, the situation is only getting worse for ambitious, talented females who want successful careers; additionally, it suggests why so many females are traveling abroad for other opportunities.

While gender inequality remains a career obstacle for female workers, another type of conflict based on different educational attainment presents a different type of obstacle. One study explains how the current status pyramid structure in the typical Japanese workplace has become more complicated than before: In the past there were simple understandings between male and female workers about the ranking system in Japanese companies (Curtin 2003). In Japanese companies rank was determined based on age, gender, educational background, and years of service. Women were always basically equal among themselves not only because they were women, but also because they had the same level of education, which was always lower than that of men. However, since more females have completed a four-year university education rather

Figure 5: Women in Managerial Positions 1984 - 2001

## Women in Managerial Positions (1984-2001)

(ten persons)

	Directors			Section Managers		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1984	27,221	26,934	287	67,107	66,092	1,015
1985	26,705	26,430	275	67,947	66,873	1,074
1986	27,591	27,281	310	68,240	67,055	1,185
1987	28,551	28,196	355	69,058	67,841	1,217
1988	30,502	30,209	293	74,042	72,532	1,509
1989	33,398	32,977	421	78,335	76,761	1,574
1990	35,649	35,240	409	82,281	80,623	1,658
1991	38,561	38,112	449	89,451	87,353	2,098
1992	39,735	39,073	662	92,214	89,507	2,706
1993	39,396	38,774	622	89,309	87,066	2,243
1994	38,070	37,535	535	84,968	82,755	2,213
1995	39,926	39,389	537	88,916	86,468	2,448
1996	36,732	36,214	518	89,984	87,192	2,792
1997	39,508	38,622	886	90,338	86,979	3,359
1998	38,776	38,002	774	89,476	86,646	2,830
1999	38,861	38,046	815	91,336	88,267	3,069
2000	37,725	36,887	838	88,087	84,573	3,514
2001	38,241	37,540	701	85,653	82,529	3,124

Source: Basic Survey on Wage Structure Statistics and Information Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (May 2002)

Source: Japan Information Network. 2002 "Women in Managerial Positions 1984-2001." Retrieved November 8, 2003 (<http://www.jinjapan.org/stat/stats/16EDU62.html>).



(ten persons)

	Chiefs			Non Managerial		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1984	68,488	65,730	2,758	1,083,782	691,017	392,765
1985	75,656	72,723	2,933	1,102,311	709,769	392,542
1986	72,732	69,950	2,782	1,080,110	692,632	387,478
1987	72,768	69,477	3,291	1,073,481	691,990	381,491
1988	78,969	75,344	3,624	1,157,417	740,288	417,129
1989	78,367	74,792	3,576	1,154,073	735,999	418,074
1990	80,964	76,947	4,017	1,182,929	759,820	423,109
1991	82,897	77,797	5,101	1,242,213	789,086	453,127
1992	83,834	78,267	5,567	1,221,881	767,604	454,277
1993	88,294	81,839	6,455	1,220,633	766,148	454,485
1994	79,099	74,043	5,056	1,169,454	741,138	428,315
1995	78,510	72,799	5,711	1,224,180	777,994	446,186
1996	84,451	78,293	6,159	1,181,760	753,746	428,014
1997	84,932	78,312	6,621	1,175,547	753,522	422,025
1998	84,187	77,409	6,778	1,173,835	757,059	416,776
1999	85,669	78,669	7,000	1,135,329	732,670	402,659
2000	80,390	73,853	6,537	1,141,792	746,536	395,256
2001	80,067	73,418	6,649	1,085,119	712,948	372,171

Source: Basic Survey on Wage Structure Statistics and Information Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (May 2002)

Source: Japan Information Network. 2002 "Women in Managerial Positions 1984-2001." Retrieved November 8, 2003 (<http://www.jin-japan.org/stat/stats/16EDU62.html>).

than simply a two-year junior college degree, the relationship among female workers in companies has become problematic. Recently, junior college female graduates start working when they are twenty years old, while four-year college graduates begin their career when they reach around twenty-two or three. If a Japanese company used only length of service and fair judgment of employee skill as key elements to set salaries and positions, in many cases junior college graduates could receive better salaries and positions than four-year graduates could receive. Yet, in reality many large companies pay higher salaries and provide better positions to four-year college graduates based on educational attainment rather than business skills or length of time with the company. This fact makes junior college graduates have a dilemma with their career because there are few opportunities to get promoted in such companies even if they are capable workers. Furthermore, once they have begun working it is almost impossible to go back to school and then return to the same company in a similar position.

According to data collected by the Japan Association of Travel Agents, females in their 20's make up the largest portion of Japanese overseas visitors (2002). Additionally, a study by Trade Partners UK found that among Japanese students abroad, "the largest demographic group is single women in their 20's" (N.d.). This data confirms that, compared to other age groups, females in their 20's are the most active in seeking experience and education in different societies. It also confirms that people in this group tend to be more willing to spend money in order to have unusual experiences, improve their skills, and fulfill self-satisfaction in foreign countries.

In addition to gender inequality at the Japanese workplace as a push factor,

other studies suggest additional push factors to explain why females in their 20's have become the majority of foreign students and tourists in the last decade (Katz and Curtin 2003). A study by Katz and Curtin found a "...growing gap between rising educational opportunities for women and the lack of employment opportunities commensurate with that education"(2003). These findings imply that more females have educational opportunities, but their career opportunities in Japan are limited so that they tend to continue further academic attainment in foreign schools.

Furthermore, while many traditional social norms remain, the modernized Japanese notion about marriage opens an avenue for females to pursue their desires and aspirations in different countries. For instance, the modernized Japanese notion of marriage no longer places heavy pressure on females to get married and give birth due to their age, as women of previous generations faced. Changing perspectives of traditional gender roles and rising educational opportunities for women have resulted in later marriage and births. Which factors, in turn, encourage young females to pursue their aspirations in different countries, rather than succumbing to marriage pressure that used to come from parents, relatives, co-workers, bosses, and even neighbors.

### **Conclusion:**

Based on the secondary research, it can be concluded that Japanese economic power in the world since the late 1980s has been a fundamental pull factor for current Japanese expatriates. This primary factor has had a direct result on the recent trend of Japanese expatriation in the global society.

Japanese expatriation trends since the 1990s also reflect the relationship

between young Japanese females, their opportunity cap, and the educational system in Japanese society. While gender equality has improved at Japanese educational institutions, inequality still blocks career opportunities for females in the workplace. The more they pursue to be rewarded equally with their male colleagues, the greater the dilemmas they need to struggle with inside the organization. Gender inequality in the workplace is clearly a significant push factor for young female expatriation. The recent tendencies of late marriage and birth are also factors which increase the number of Japanese females traveling abroad, they can serve as pull factors because social pressure about marriage age is not a heavy burden for young females like it was for females of previous generations.

Besides general stagnation of the Japanese economy since 1992, the new recruiting systems in Japanese companies and unclear career plans of young people have contributed to a sharp increase in the youth unemployment rate. New graduates who have financial resources depart to foreign societies to find themselves and the direction that they will follow. Even if they knew what they wanted, their goals would likely be more difficult to accomplish in Japanese society because that society is not yet ready to accept the individuality they can find elsewhere. Additionally, it is an easy decision for young people to leave their country in order to avoid being ashamed from not doing anything particular with their lives. Studying abroad is always a reasonable excuse for them.

In conclusion, Japanese expatriation trends since the 1990s are affected by both push and pull factors. Certain aspects of the Japanese social environment seem to be

negative influences, such as gender inequality in the workplace, the career opportunity cap for females, high levels of youth unemployment, and the lack of vision and job opportunities for new graduates. At the same time, there are positive factors such as fundamental Japanese economic strength and the lowering of social pressure on young females about marriage and birth. Finally, Japanese economic status in the global economy has provided unprecedented opportunities to young Japanese who then leave their restrictive society with the hope of using this very status to their advantage. All of this is reflected in the large number of young Japanese females that are currently living in foreign countries throughout the world.

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**Appendix:**

The author is a full time student at San Diego State University earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. She emigrated from Japan to the United States in 2001 due to marriage with an American citizen. The author is interested in pursuing analysis of the trends of Japanese expatriation because they are impacted by problems in the fundamental social structure of Japan.