

# Japanese migrants in London: a 'transient community'



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**The spread of new restaurants and food shops with exotic produce in many cities is not simply related to growing tourist activity. There are increasing numbers of new international migrants arriving in many urban centres, setting up communities of settlers who stay for a few years before their job takes them on to a new place. Amongst the most rapidly growing group in London in recent years have been the Japanese, who have made their mark on a number of residential neighbourhoods within the city.**

## Introduction

Changes in the organisation of the global economy have created a series of new flows and transformed the nature of others. Manufactured products that were never previously traded internationally are now available uniformly across large parts of the globe – the international distribution of several premier makes of beer is an obvious example. International financial transfers have multiplied in importance, with the rise of multina-

tional and transnational ownership of enterprises creating complex systems of investment and transactional networks across international borders. The internet and modern systems of telecommunications have played a role in enhancing flows of knowledge and information.

This article discusses one further aspect of these evolving global flows – that of the movement of new groups of people whose activities are related to the globalisation of economic systems. To some extent these new flows of migrants have been neglected. Instead attention has been focused on the sources and destinations of foreign direct investment (FDI), on issues concerned with the impact of such flows on regional and national economies, and on the complex structures of multinational enterprises. However, these processes associated with globalisation need people for their successful operation, and many of these people need to be migratory in order to play their role.

Economies and nations of different types around the world are affected by these trends in somewhat different ways. In more economically peripheral areas of the world the new migratory flows are

more limited in extent than in the core regions. Capital cities and other major centres based on growth sectors experience more migratory impact than do rural regions and areas of industrial decline. This article concentrates on migratory outcomes in one major global city – London. Nevertheless certain aspects of change taking place there are also present in other national capitals throughout Europe, and to some extent in many smaller cities as well.

## Who are the movers in the new global economy?

Undoubtedly a significant proportion of all migration today continues to consist of the poor and needy seeking some form of economic advancement in a new place. Castles and Miller (1993) have called the current period 'The Age of Migration' and have placed emphasis on the pressures in various source regions of the world for the creation of outward migration streams. The commentator on issues of globalisation, Saskia Sassen, has recently turned her attention to international migratory flows (Sassen 1999), but her emphasis remains strongly on 'tradi-

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tional' patterns of labour migration and the ways in which these are being maintained and enhanced by new forces.

However, examination of contemporary migration flows affecting a number of developed world countries suggests that a high proportion of immigration (and emigration) now involves exchanges between countries with similar levels of economic development. In addition, it is notable that such migration flows tend towards zero net balances whereby large numbers of migrants in one direction are compensated by equally large numbers in the opposite direction. Thus, to take the single year 1997, Germany saw nearly 400 000 international movements involving other EU countries but this created a net gain of only 10 000 residents in Germany. In the Netherlands exchanges with the rest of the EU amounted to nearly 63 000 people, but with a net gain of only 3 500: for Finland the figures were just under 12 000 migrants yielding a net loss of less than 1 000. It should also be added that these migratory exchanges with the rest of the EU amounted to over a quarter of all migration for Germany, over a third for the Netherlands, and over half for Finland (Conseil de l'Europe 1998).

In a situation where much international migration involves exchanges between countries with similar levels of economic and social development, who are the migrants? From the great empirical diversity of individual motivations and reasons, a number of broad groups of migrants can be distinguished (Glebe and White 2001).

- Those who manage foreign direct investment and the interests of multinational and transnational enterprises through the implementation, co-ordination and control of regional and local strategies.
- Those whose functions lie specifically within the financial and producer services sectors and who thus provide crucial resourcing and specialist advice to multinational enterprises.
- Those who are involved in educational and training activities which result in the creation (either for the individuals concerned or at a wider scale) of further momentum towards globalisation (for example through foreign language training, the development of international transferable skills, or the acquisition of specialist knowledge or experience to be utilised elsewhere).
- Those who service the culturally-specific demands of the earlier categories – for example through the provision of restaurants, religious services, or education.
- Those who travel as dependants of the previous categories.

It must be acknowledged that, in addition to those who fall into this categorisation, there will be other movers with their own reasons for mobility, often related to personal, social, cultural or environmental goals, and which do not relate directly to the globalisation processes discussed earlier in this article.

One important aspect of the impact of the movement just described is the relative size of the different groups in the categorisa-

tion, and the number of different enterprises controlling those moving in the first two categories. Where a small number of major enterprises is involved similarities in processes may emerge: where there are a large number of enterprises involved more diversity is likely to occur.

## The Japanese in London

In the context of the ideas introduced so far, the arrival of Japanese migrants in London provides an interesting case study of the impact of new migration in a global city. The choice of group and city can be justified in a number of ways. Firstly, there has been relatively little history of significant Japanese migration to Europe before the 1970s. Earlier Japanese migration streams had been concentrated, since the period of the Meiji restoration (1868), in the Americas, and particularly in Brazil, Peru, the USA and Canada. The arrival of Japanese migrants in London (and Düsseldorf, Paris, Brussels and other major European destinations) occurred in connection with Japanese foreign direct investment, but in a context of little existing community infrastructure. The effects of a new global migration flow are therefore particularly clear to distinguish.

A second justification for the study of the Japanese in London relates to the fact that the city houses the biggest Japanese group in Europe. The 1991 British census recorded 28 000 Japan-born residents of Greater London – considerably more than the 9 000 recorded in the Ile-de-France region (greater Paris) in 1990, or the

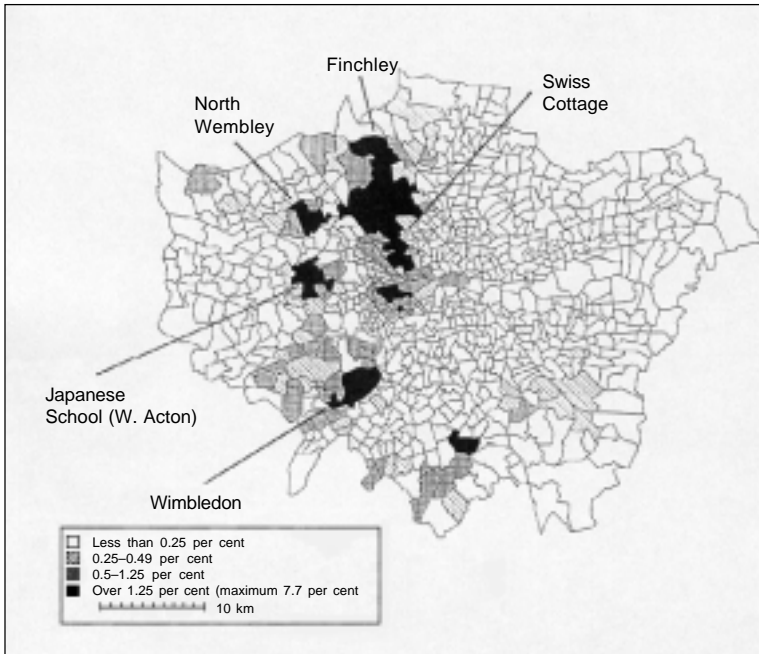


Figure 1: The Japan-born as a percent of residential population, London wards (with the City of London as one unit), 1991.

Source: *Census of Population, unpublished local base statistics.*

7 000 living in Düsseldorf in the mid 1990s (Glebe et al. 1999).

A third point of interest in the Japanese in London lies in the fact that during the inter-censal period between 1981 and 1991 the number of Japanese residents grew faster than any other foreign-born group. Growth has been reduced during the 1990s, partly as a result of the faltering of Japan's own economic prospects, but the Japanese presence in London remains a relatively new and vibrant one.

The major thrust of the second part of this article is to uncover the processes whereby the creation of Japanese 'neighbourhoods' in London has occurred. Unfortunately the data on which a full description of such neighbourhoods can be based are currently somewhat historic, relating as they do

to the results of the 1991 population census. The results of the census taken in April 2001 will not be fully available until 2003. Nevertheless, checks made using the addresses of Japanese-surnamed households in the current telephone directory suggest that the residential geography of the Japanese in London has not changed significantly during the last decade. As will shortly be seen, there are good reasons for this apparently high level of inertia.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the Japan-born population of Greater London in April 1991. A number of simple observations can be made from the map. Firstly, almost the whole of the eastern side of the city is devoid of any significant Japanese presence. This reflects similar absences among mi-

grants from other developed world origins (White 1998), despite the fact that many areas within the eastern side of Greater London have similar housing and social class characteristics to the west in which such migrants (including the Japanese) are concentrated.

A second observation from Figure 1 is that the Japan-born population is distributed in a series of disconnected clusters and sectors, and that in certain cases these incorporate both inner city and suburban zones. Thus, for example, the northern sector of Japanese concentrations, indicated on Figure 1 running from the district named Swiss Cottage out to Finchley, incorporates apartment housing at its inner edge but with spacious detached houses in extensive gardens further to the north. In general, the tendency of the Japan-born to inhabit districts with such varied housing types is distinctive from all other developed-world migrants who tend towards concentration in apartment districts of inner West London. Nevertheless, the census characterisation of the districts of Japanese concentration, whether towards the inner city or the suburbs, shows that they are only present in areas of high quality housing.

A final observation related to the distribution of the Japan-born (Figure 1) is that their levels of residential concentration are relatively high. Whilst they formed only about 0.25% of the total residential population of Greater London, they accounted for 7.7% of the population of one census ward in North Wembley, and their overall level of residential separation from the general population (as measured

through the statistical index of segregation) was as high as occurred amongst the Bangladeshi population – the most segregated of the traditional migrant communities.

### **Housing a transient population**

Japanese migration to London throughout the period since the early 1970s has taken place within a context of increasing Japanese investment in the UK (Glebe et al. 1999), and against the backdrop of the particular characteristics of the Japanese company system and its organisation of the migration of its workers. Patterns of Japanese foreign direct investment have evolved through time, both in terms of countries of destination and in terms of economic sectors. However, a relatively constant feature has been the way in which the movement of associated personnel has been regarded as a necessary but short-term phenomenon (Watanabe 1993). The standard length of stay abroad of Japanese personnel has almost certainly lengthened in many destination cities during the 1990s, but the modal length of stay remains around 3 years. Certain movers, particularly those associated with new projects, may be sent to a particular site for a few months, whilst at the other end of the time scale regional managers who have developed a specialist cultural understanding of business operations in a particular market may be maintained on a posting for 5 years or more. Overall, however, Japanese personnel flows (and associated flows of dependants) are

characterised by their transient nature. Thus the maintenance of a community of any particular size involves, over the years, considerable gross migration flows, and the composition of the community is unstable with a high rate of population turnover.

Local housing markets in destination cities offer only a limited number of opportunities for the accommodation of such migrant flows (White 1988). Owner occupation is not an option for a transitory population, whilst access to the public or co-operative housing sectors is generally prohibited: in most cities such housing has never been envisaged as being available to well-paid transitory migrants. That leaves the privately rented housing sector. This sector in many cities is comprised of accommodation of highly variable age, quality and rent level. In Greater London as a whole the 1991 census recorded less than 15% of housing as being in the private rented sector. A considerable proportion of such housing lay in poorer districts of the city and was unsuitable for an affluent group of migrants. In these circumstances there has been a need in London for the establishment of an organisational structure to fit newly-arriving Japanese migrants into the limited amount of 'appropriate' privately-rented housing available.

One possible solution to this problem might be the purchase by Japanese companies of housing for their personnel, with incoming migrants being fitted straightforwardly into the spaces made vacant by those departing for elsewhere or returning to Japan. In the German city of Düsseldorf, where a

much higher proportion of the city's residents are anyway housed in the privately-rented sector, it has been more common for Japanese companies to act in this way. However, a recent survey by Glebe (2001) found that less than 20% of Japanese households were accommodated in this way. In London companies were becoming active in housing purchase for their personnel in the late 1970s and 1980s, but the fall in property prices at the end of the latter decade led them to withdraw from this activity and progressively to sell off the properties they had acquired.

Instead in London, from the early 1980s onwards, the evolution of the Japanese community has been facilitated by the creation of a specific housing sub-market in which the Japanese companies have no economic stake – but which is highly inter-dependent with their interests and cultures. In this way the companies do not take any financial risk in the housing of their employees, but benefit from a system that works to their specifications.

### **The specificities of the Japanese housing system in London**

The discussion that follows is based on a number of sources, including interviews with a number of estate agents and postal questionnaires administered to Japanese residents throughout London. The aim of the research was to uncover the processes by which newly-arriving Japanese migrants are absorbed into London's

housing market, and to seek to understand the distinctive distribution of the Japanese population identified in Figure 1. The high level of residential segregation of the Japanese is shown to be related to the segregated housing market to which they have access.

Questionnaire respondents indicated that they were offered relatively little information about London before being sent on a posting there: levels of cultural preparation were generally low (although most already had reasonable English-language skills prior to moving). The decision to send an employee to London could be taken quickly, and almost all moves were internal to the company concerned – jobs in London were not publicly advertised (or even advertised locally within a firm). On arrival in London the employee (almost invariably a male) was housed in company lodgings or a hotel (generally a hotel owned by a Japanese chain) and was encouraged to search for housing immediately.

The crucial pivot of this housing search process lies in the specialist Japanese estate agencies that now exist in London. By 1999 there were 15 separate agencies operating in the city, some with multiple offices such that the total number of outlets stood at 26. Although two agencies have started to make use of the internet to disseminate information, the bulk of their marketing activities takes place via booklets of available property. This system is more to the liking of the Japanese companies. Each week the bigger agencies distribute lists of properties available to rent to up to 500 companies, along with certain other outlets such as Japanese restaurants. The

lists are generally organised by districts of London. Employing companies, in distributing these lists to staff newly-arrived from Japan, are able to give strong guidance on which areas of London they want their staff to restrict their housing search to. The power of the companies in this can be shown in the fact that during the early 1990s several of the agencies tried to 'pioneer' the south-eastern suburbs of London as a suitable area for their activities – noting the good quality of the (limited) rental property available, and the relatively good rail links to the central business district (the City of London). The companies declined to endorse this development and as a result the agencies quickly decided to pull out of the area and try another district (East Putney in west London) which received company support and was successful.

The companies' requirements for the location of their staff are generally that they should have good access to a rail or Underground, with a direct link to the place of employment. This was one reason why the agents failed to develop a market in south-east London – because a change from surface train to Underground was needed to gain access to the City. Companies are also keen that their employees live in areas in which other Japanese are present, arguing that this helps to smooth the integration of family members (who customarily arrive in London only after the primary migrant has determined on a property). Access to specific Japanese facilities is not in itself a crucial issue for newly arriving migrants. Few respondents to the questionnaire indicated that such access was important to

them in their choice of property. However, the importance of living in an area where there are other Japanese present ensures access to many facilities since in such districts threshold populations exist for the maintenance of Japanese food shops and so on. In practice the estate agencies also play a vital role in supporting their clients beyond the initial choice of property: they act as advice centres about wider aspects of life in London and can in some cases be called upon in emergencies.

It might be envisaged that the location of the Japanese school would be a crucial attraction for migrant families, but questionnaire responses showed this not to be the case. As shown in Figure 1, the school is currently in West Acton in an area of Japanese concentration. However, a network of school buses supplies the school with pupils from all the main Japanese neighbourhoods of the city: the incentive is thus to live close to one of these school bus routes (themselves determined by demand) rather than close to the school. The presence of specialist Japanese food shops is arguably becoming less of a locational anchor as time goes on: several British supermarket chains now have Japanese food counters catering as much for non-Japanese as for Japanese clientele. Within West London, in particular, few locations are more than 3 km from the availability of sushi.

More than the characteristics of the district of residence, Japanese respondents indicated the overriding importance of the characteristics of individual properties in their search for a place to live. Par-



in practice this really only refers to London's Heathrow, less than 12 km away. In total the details given in Figure 2 are aimed at demonstrating that there will be no difficulty in finding Japanese tenants for the property: the aim here is first to find a landlord to purchase it.

### **The Japanese 'community': stability or transience?**

The issue of the emergence of a Japanese 'community' in London is a complex one. Two rather different perspectives can be suggested, related first to location and secondly to composition. In terms of location, it is clear that certain districts of London, particularly on the western side of the city, have become associated with the presence of Japanese residents and with certain elements of infrastructure to support them. They have certain characteristics of 'ethnoscapes'. There has been little change in the location of such areas of Japanese concentration over the last 20 years or more, with the growth of Japanese numbers in London being generally accommodated within districts that were singled out by their presence right from the start. Only a few districts have been successfully 'pioneered' as new locations for Japanese settlement over the last decade.

The reasons for this stability in the location of the community clearly lie in the nature of the Japanese migration regime, and in the influence of two significant sets of institutions – the employing companies and the estate agents. Together these have created a situa-

tion in which the incoming Japanese company employee is given sufficient information on which to base a housing choice, but in a very constrained manner. Clearly this serves a number of interests. Skilled Japanese migrants settle in London in a way that is highly satisfactory to the majority of them: whilst they have complaints about London life (for example about unreliable public transport, and about certain aspects of British behaviour) they are happy with their accommodation and their neighbourhoods. The companies are assured that their employees can find accommodation quickly, and that such housing is in accord with the wishes of the companies for their workers and in areas that the companies approve of. Part of that approval would appear to be satisfaction that employees live in an environment within which the maintenance of Japanese networks and ways of life are possible. Japanese company migrants to London are held within a Japanese social milieu. (The significance of this can be seen in findings from other parts of the research – where those who decide to remove themselves from the company migration regime and stay in London almost always move out of the areas of Japanese company and estate agency surveillance and establish residence in less 'Japanese' districts via the services of the 'normal' housing market.) The final interest group served by the institutional system consists of the Japanese estate agencies who are assured of the continuing viability of their businesses, given the essential facilitating role they play in allowing

rapid international interchanges of personnel to take place within the Japanese business sector.

However, this picture of the stability of the location of the Japanese 'community' in London is incomplete without some discussion of the very high rate of change in the composition of the group. With a mean length of stay in London of less than 5 years, individuals and households do not have the time or chance to develop local roots. The 'community' is in a state of constant flux. Nevertheless, there is a relatively high degree of homogeneity in its membership within particular residential zones of the city. In the suburban areas, in particular, most households consist of a male executive educated to university level with a wife and one or more children. The age structures are relatively limited in range, and employment histories have much in common. Intensive efforts are made to integrate newly arriving migrants, particularly the non-working wives for whom the Japanese Women's Association in Great Britain (and other similar organisations) provides handbooks, meetings, and networks of introductions to others. Almost all respondents to the questionnaire (both male and female) indicated that their primary friendship group consisted of other Japanese, often involving active membership of Japanese clubs and associations. Contacts with wider London society were relatively infrequent amongst company mover households. The London Japanese community was therefore of considerable importance as a resource for migrants.

Clearly the Japanese in London do not demonstrate certain of the 'normal' attributes of 'community' such as compositional stability. On the other hand they have similar experiences, similar interests, relative homogeneity, and similar perceived needs. Community links are important in preventing social fragmentation, and in preserving Japanese ways of life.

## Discussion

Whilst it can be claimed that the Japanese in London constitute an extreme case, many of the features of their settlement and activities in the city are probably replicated elsewhere by skilled migrant groups moving within the structures of global economic systems. Company-determined transfers across international space have been well documented in British and American firms, particularly in

the financial services sectors (Beaverstock 1994). Cities elsewhere in Europe have seen the establishment of skilled migrant communities in much the same way as London. Freund's (2000) work in Frankfurt am Main is particularly interesting because he compares the settlement of several nationalities including Americans, British, Dutch, Austrians and French as well as Japanese.

Increasing globalisation towards the end of the twentieth century set off major new migration flows that demonstrate a strong element of 'circulation' between states and regions with relatively similar levels of economic development. In the past (for example the early post-war period) the expectation of much international migration was that it would be temporary with migrants returning 'home' after a few years away: in reality such return movement was almost always much less than expect-

ed. With the new flows of the high skilled temporary movement is for many exactly that – movement which is reversed, or superseded by further movement, within a very few years. In the past international movement commonly represented a break in an individual's or household's economic trajectory, leading to a new way of life based on a new activity. For many international movers today migration simply changes the location within which employment and way of life occur, but without a drastic alteration in either of these elements. The new circumstances of international migration are then paralleled by new processes of settlement by international migrants within their destinations, and by the emergence of new aspects to the economic, demographic, social and cultural composition and operation of the areas affected.

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