

Improving Japan's Image in Southeast Asia

By Rodolfo SEVERINO



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In my first article for *Japan SPOTLIGHT* (Sept.-Oct. 2010), I dwelt on two milestones in the relations between Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One was the enunciation of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, which set the foundations for those relations ever since. The other was the Plaza Accord of 1985, which impelled Japanese companies to set up production chains in Southeast Asia, planted the seeds of the region's industrialization and encouraged the integration of the regional economy. I also touched on Japan's development assistance to Southeast Asia as a tool in support of its economic policies, including cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

In a second article (Nov.-Dec. 2011), I raised the question of why Southeast Asia looked on Japan as a stagnant or even declining power despite its continuing largesse and presence. I hazarded some educated guesses but suggested a survey that would elicit some answers based on empirical data rather than conjecture and anecdotal observation.

In this third one, I will make some observations and suggestions on how Japan could improve the perceptions of Southeast Asians about Japan, centering on the participation of Southeast Asians in Japan's economic and social life.

Many Southeast Asians look at the Japanese economy as protectionist in nature, sucking in raw materials from Japan's southern neighbors, denuding their forests, despoiling their environment, erecting barriers to manufactured imports from Southeast Asia and selling industrial products to markets to the south. This is, at best, a distorted view, but it is a prevalent one. Even if it has ever been true, it is an exaggerated one. In any case, the picture has considerably changed, and Japan should cast light on the distortion and forcefully emphasize the change, citing facts and figures.

Related to this is the Southeast Asian perception of Japan as a closed society that resists the entry of foreign workers even if the economy needs them, emphasizes the "foreignness" of foreigners and makes stark the differences between Japanese and foreigners. I understand that this perceived quality of Japanese society has changed substantially over the years. If so, Japan should, again, point out this change to the world, particularly to Southeast Asians, supporting their contentions with facts and figures.

There is the prevailing image of Japanese tourists as predominantly men traveling alone in search of sex and/or brides. This image persists, even if the Japanese tourist's profile has changed and more families and women now venture out of Japan to savor the more wholesome attractions of Southeast Asia. This change, too, needs to be pointed out.

And then there is the lingering memory of the Imperial Japanese Army's atrocities in its three-year occupation of Southeast Asia. This memory lingers not only among the older generation, which directly experienced contact with the Japanese military. It is also

perpetuated among younger people through history books and stories shared orally with them. Coupled with this is the view that Japan has not come to terms with the legacy of the Pacific War, providing grist for the mill of Japan-bashing in the region.

Beyond straightening out misconceptions – if they are, indeed, misconceptions – practical measures are called for to improve the experience of Southeast Asians living in Japan and to make the improvements better known throughout Southeast Asia. This is important because, for countries with large numbers of their nationals living in Japan, the experience of these residents is a big factor in their population's perception of Japan.

I will cite some examples from the experience of Filipinos living in Japan since that is the Southeast Asian experience that I, who am from the Philippines, know best, although it is probably similar to that of others.

According to the Philippine embassy in Tokyo, Filipinos make up the fourth largest foreign community in Japan after the Chinese, the Koreans and the Brazilians. Presumably by official count, 309,000 Filipinos live in Japan, of whom 69%, or 213,210, are permanent residents or holders of long-term resident visas, including those who hold spouse or dependent visas and Filipinos of Japanese ancestry.

In addition, there are those who are classified as "transients" or "temporary migrants," including domestic workers, "entertainers" and engineers. The Filipino community in Japan is slowly changing its character to one consisting of persons resident in the country permanently or for the long term, including Filipino families or Filipino-Japanese ones.

In view of this, Filipinos in Japan face two principal challenges. One is the specific problem of Japanese men's Filipino wives who are either widowed or divorced before they acquire permanent visas. The other is one of assimilation and integration into Japanese society, of which language is a principal element.

According to an officer of the Philippine embassy, a spouse visa is normally issued to a Filipino spouse of a Japanese national (with proof that they have been living together). The visa has to be renewed annually. After three years, a three-year long-term visa is usually accorded the spouse, also renewable and also requiring proof of cohabitation. Usually after 10 years of residency in Japan, sometimes after only six years, the foreign spouse is issued a permanent visa, the renewal of which does not need proof of cohabitation.

A problem arises when the Filipino spouse is widowed or divorced before she receives a permanent visa. She would then be liable to deportation once her current visa expires. Because of this, some spouses would be under pressure to remarry for the sake of their visa status. However, a widowed or divorced spouse can derive a permanent or long-term visa from her minor child if she

has one who is officially recognized as a Japanese national.

Children of Filipino women fathered by Japanese nationals, both legitimate and, since 2008, illegitimate, are entitled to Japanese nationality if the father recognizes the child as his before or, again since 2008, after the birth of the child and enters him or her in his family registry.

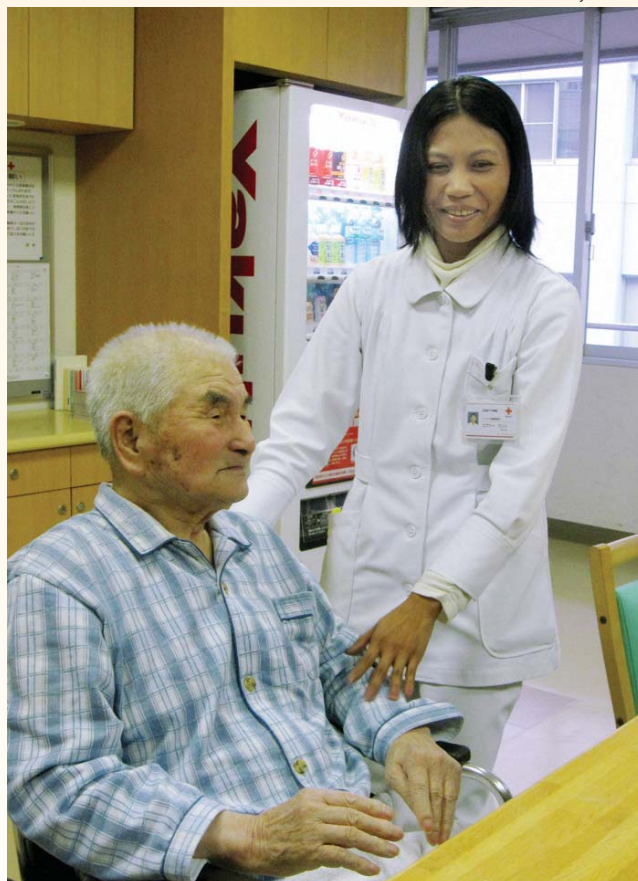
Proficiency in the Japanese language is important for foreigners living in Japan, particularly those with children. Language proficiency is vital for “parenting,” including the ability to help children with their studies. It can also open doors to more job opportunities. Obviously, it is essential for the foreigner’s assimilation or integration into Japanese society.

The Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement, signed in 2006 by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and ratified by the Philippines in 2008, offers a leading illustration of the importance of language for foreigners seeking to live and work in Japan. It has the usual provisions on goods and services trade and investments. However, that agreement also provides for the free movement of businesspeople and professionals between the two countries. Specifically, it allows Filipinos to stay and work in Japan as nurses or care workers, among other professionals. In order to qualify as such, the nurse or care worker not only has to have the appropriate Philippine academic credentials and work experience but has to undergo six months of training in Japan, including learning the Japanese language (but with the possibility of partial or total exemption upon proof of language proficiency), go through on-the-job training in a Japanese hospital or care-giving facility, and pass, after up to three tries, the Japanese national examinations that are conducted in the Japanese language.

It is easy to comprehend the importance placed on language skills for such workers. Complete understanding between the nurse or care worker and the patient is quite literally a matter of life and death. However, Temario Rivera, a former professor of political science at the University of the Philippines and later a professor of international relations at International Christian University in Tokyo, points out that “the competence in the Japanese language that is expected to be mastered in a short period of time for work purposes and passing the national examinations is a daunting prospect.”

“One of the long-term benefits that could be gained by the health workers lies in the skill training and transfer of technology during their work period,” Rivera acknowledges. “However, given the difficulty they face in mastering the Japanese language and passing the national examinations, there is an uncertain prospect for the health workers for a fairly stable and reasonably long work stint in Japan.”

Domingo Siazon, a Philippine ambassador to Japan until recently, speaks Japanese fluently. “One of the most serious problems faced by children of Japanese and foreigners (especially when the mother



A Philippine woman who has passed Japan’s tough national nursing exam attends to a resident at a nursing home in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo.

is the foreigner) is the difficulty of mastering the Japanese language,” he observed “off hand” in a private communication. “When the mother is the foreigner and does not put much effort into mastering Japanese, she is unable to assist the children in their studies, which are generally done in Japanese. As a result, the children of mixed marriages when settling in Japan face difficulties in school, resulting generally in lowered expectations or eventual dropouts. Some ward offices in Tokyo are providing special measures to assist these children and even foreigners to learn Japanese. The embassy has encouraged Filipinas married to Japanese to try and master *kanji* (Chinese characters) up to at least the grade-six level or better still up to the ninth-grade level.”

What he means is that on the side of foreigners as well as Japanese, efforts must be undertaken to make sure that foreigners residing in Japan fit and integrate themselves into Japanese society, including their own, part-Japanese families. An important, although by no means only, part of this is acquiring mastery of and fluency in the Japanese language. This would help reduce the potential for misunderstanding and friction between Japanese and foreigners wherever their lives intersect. **JS**

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