

From Asahi to Abucay: The Video Archive Project

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Introduction: The beginning

Between 1985 and 1986, nine women from Abucay town in Bataan, a province in the Philippines, came to Asahi town in Yamagata, Japan through an official matchmaking scheme between these two towns. Asahi town officials pursued this “international marriage” as a practical means to cope with the rising number of single men in their 40s and the town’s depopulation. As soon as Filipino women arrived in Asahi, they were dubbed as “farming village brides” and scrutinized by media. Many network TV and newspaper journalists flocked to this small town of Asahi and broadcast this news all across Japan.

What was the story behind these women’s coming to Japan? How did their families in the Philippines view these “international marriages” and Japanese society?

It has been almost thirty years since then so the stories are gradually being forgotten. As their children have grown up, their lives have changed drastically. In my API project of recording their oral history with video and building an archive (to be made available online in the future), I do not intend to draw conclusions, but to preserve the layered stories of identities. Though “international marriages” have become a phenomenon, it remains the reality of some individuals.

It was in 2002 when I first met Victoria Seino and her family, namely, her husband Tsuyoshi and her daughters Sachi and Rika, in Asahi. Victoria was one of the first two Filipinas who came from Abucay. With Itamoto Yoko¹ who had known Victoria and Tsuyoshi ever since they got married in 1985, we started to film the family. I did not know anybody but Yoko knew all nine Filipinas from the time they arrived in Asahi. The interviewed film footage is quite telling of the matchmaking from Victoria’s side and ultimately led me to Abucay. One of the first interviews we conducted with Victoria was in Asahi in 2003, with Itamoto.

I didn’t know what the wife’s role was here [in Japan]. I was like a-year-old baby. Under such circumstance, it was hard. I had to wake up early [to do house chores] and can you imagine when it’s really cold? [...] I couldn’t say these things out loud, of course. I was only 17 years old. I met Tsuyoshi in September, and after a few meetings with him and some others, we had our wedding on September 22nd in Abucay church, and came to Asahi on September 30th. [In Abucay] we dined in a restaurant and after a couple of days, Tsuyoshi flew back to Japan and made his decision. I declined at first because I was afraid. I didn’t know anything about him. Can you marry someone you have only known for four days? I was a community college student back then. My teachers encouraged me to study and opposed this marriage. They said I didn’t have to go abroad as I can make it in the Philippines. Everyone connected Japan with money. [...] In reality, my father had already passed away, my mother was sick with diabetes. I kind of blame the matchmaker and people involved with all the sweet talk. They told me that I can send 20,000 to 30,000 yen back home [monthly]. I was told that I didn’t have to do anything at the house. They told me that all I needed to do was stay at home. So, for my family, I can sacrifice myself, I thought. I wanted to help. Once I came to Japan, I learned that everything was a lie. They said those things so that I would decide to marry. I felt stupid.

Victoria learned Japanese from her mother-in-law and took on the role of caretaker for her bed-ridden father-in-law. Taking care of their aging

parents-in-law was one of the roles that wives were expected to do in Japan, especially in the rural parts. Tsuyoshi remembers the time when she first came to Japan.

We couldn't communicate at all you know. We would be sitting across each other with a dictionary in the middle, and we would stay mostly silent. [...] It must have been hard for her too. She took care of my father from bathing to changing diapers. [...] You know, Wakai-san, marriage is really, really hard. You might not know it yet, but no matter whom you marry, it is hard. You are single so you might not understand this, but I can tell you that for sure.

Victoria and Tsuyoshi's perspectives gave me a fresh look at the so-called international marriage. There are so many reasons that their marriage is hard, and I can say, maybe even harder than others because of the cultural differences. But one thing is certain. Two people creating a family by marrying each other is hard. There are different expectations and there are misunderstandings. I am not trying to say that the matchmakers were completely honest with Victoria and Tsuyoshi. However, there were significant differences in "why" Asahi men and Abucay women married.

With regard to the marriages of the nine couples, one could say that it was their choice and at the same time, it was a "chance encounter" that led them to start their own families in Asahi. There were numerous reasons that led them to where they are now as I have heard from interviews; but, in the end, marriage can be considered as yet another "chance encounter", and they decided to pursue that "chance". Life is a gamble; even the small decisions are, in the sense that there is no telling what the outcome or outcomes are of a decision and/or an accumulation of decisions.

1. On Marriage: Asahi

It was in April 1985 when then mayor Kobayashi initiated the matchmaking project. On July 5th, Tsuyoshi and other Asahi men went to Bataan and

met prospective brides after seeing their photos gathered by Mr. Yasutomi (Tomi-san) who owned a shrimp business in Abucay. Four couples were matched that year. The matchmaking process took time off the following year during the EDSA revolution, but by the end of September, there were nine couples matched.

Mr. Sugai was one of the Asahi town officials who worked closely with the Asahi mayor and covered all the logistics such as gathering and bringing single men to Abucay, and back to Asahi as married men. In an interview we did with him in 2005, Sugai expressed his conviction in moving this matchmaking project forward.

Despite being a public servant, excluding those who chose to stay single, I wanted to help those men who wanted to get married. This was my stance as a person regardless of my job. Some parents fiercely opposed the idea of their sons marrying Filipinas or non-Japanese nationals. But when I knew that their sons desperately wanted to get married, I tried my best to convince and persuade their parents. Nationality should not be an issue if their sons came on board with this matchmaking project. I was quite persistent. [...] Naturally there were issues relating pretty much to everything, from money to relationship problems with the in-laws. I would talk with them one by one so as to fulfill these single men's wish. [...] On the other hand, there's no denying the "population issue". Unless people from outside of Asahi moved here and produced children, thus contributing to the population increase, the town would literally vanish. Majority of the town population were elderly and the young were leaving town once they graduated from high school.

In the big wave of municipal mergers across Japan in the 1990s, Asahi had attempted to merge with the adjacent city more than once, but ended up not doing so. For a small town of around 8,000 residents decreasing yearly, Asahi was only one of many Japanese rural farming towns facing

depopulation. This was why even though this matchmaking created much controversy—such as criticisms from feminists that this was human trafficking run by a local government—these individual men who sought wives from the Philippines were not criticized per se as they symbolized the problems underlying Japanese society.

On August 7, 2005 Asahi town organized a gathering called “20th anniversary—Japan / Philippines International Marriage Party” at the Asahi town hall. They invited all nine families; however, two families did not attend as they were afraid that they might have to face the media like they did before. People involved in the matchmaking, namely, the town officials and staff, were there along with Itamoto, my video camera, and me. This was the first time for the Filipino-Japanese children present at the party to know in detail how their parents met and married. Members of media were invited as well, but neither TV cameras nor reporters covered this event. With mixed emotions, Tsuyoshi told me how this was the complete opposite of how media had flocked to the town in the late 1980s. Media had long lost interest in the Asahi-Abucay matchmaking project.

Nonetheless, it was a celebratory occasion where families got together in a reunion-like party. However, I was struck by the attitude of public officials present. One town official said to the Filipinas to “have one or more babies as you are all still young.” It was said jokingly and everyone laughed; but if he were facing Japanese couples, he would not have said it even jokingly. It made me realize the implication of this “international marriage” and was a stark reminder of why Asahi town had organized the matchmaking.

In 2013, Asahi’s current mayor contemplated the idea of starting a similar matchmaking project as he had won the election on the platform of increasing the population to 10,000. Though the number is unrealistic as there really was no particular plan to meet such a number, he had won because of this campaign promise. He is now trying to meet the target he set by repeating the same strategy that Asahi had deployed some twenty years ago. Itamoto is being consulted on this matter, and her stance is that the town, as a municipality

and public entity, should not get involved in the matchmaking, let alone use “international marriage” as an easy fix to meet the goal. Many towns across Japan are also trying to find ways to increase their population, but there is no simple and easy way to accomplish this. Creating local jobs is crucial in many cases as one of the biggest reasons for depopulation is the young people’s leaving their hometowns to seek jobs elsewhere.

And this is what is happening in Asahi as well. The children of the nine couples are leaving Asahi for studies and work. Some couples are contemplating on retiring in Abucay, not Asahi. Vicky is temporarily living in Abucay, leaving Tsuyoshi in Asahi, Sachi in Yamagata City and Rika in Saitama City.

2. On Marriage: Abucay

By the end of my API fellowship, I had interviewed over twenty people in Abucay and filmed over 50 hours worth of interviews. Interviewees in Abucay can be categorized into three groups. The first would be those with whom I had the most extensive interviews: Victoria’s siblings and their families: Victoria’s older brothers, younger brother, older sister, and their spouses. The second group would consist of the family members of other Filipinas who went to Asahi and those involved in the matchmaking: the matchmaker, the former mayor, the driver of the mayor, and the parents and the siblings of the Filipinas. And third would be the people living in Abucay who were able to give me their perspectives on Japan. These were the Filipinas who worked in Japan as “entertainers” in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the children of the two Japanese men from Kyushu who had migrated to Abucay in the 1920s.

Abucay is a small town about the same size as Asahi. What struck me the most was how some people in the town are grossly rich, while some are very poor. The rich have big houses in expensive subdivisions that resemble those in the movies. The poor live in wooden houses along the fishponds and rice fields where they work as laborers, alongside migrant workers from outside Luzon such as Negros and Mindanao. But for the locals, the magnitude of the divide between the

poor and the rich is determined by how many family members are working abroad and how many years they have worked there. (This excludes a few powerful political families.)

Iling was the one who had picked the Filipinas and convinced their parents to go to Asahi. She was the Abucay counterpart of Sugai and a close friend of Tomi-san. Tomi-san was contacted by the Asahi officials through an office set-up in Tokyo just for this matchmaking project. She was reluctant to be the matchmaker, initially, because if something were to happen to the brides, it would be her responsibility. It was also only after a year of Tomi-san's convincing that Iling finally decided to do this with a clear objective. She wanted these Filipinas to become the ticket of their family members to work in Japan. She picked women mainly from among her extended family because she knew them and it was easier for the parents to trust that their daughters would be in good hands with Iling.

Iling's older brother's daughter Ellen was one of the first two who married Asahi men (along with Victoria). I had interviewed her before in Asahi, and met her again in Abucay when she went back for Christmas. In the Asahi interview in 2005, she told us that when she came to Japan she was 17 years old.

When I got married, I felt like... well, not Cinderella, but Snow White. It was like, when I woke up, I was there. [...] I guess I was just young. If I were in my twenties I wouldn't have gotten married. [...] My aunt and uncle were matchmaking. My grandmother, aunts, everyone talked me into this. I wasn't sure what to think. What they told me was different too. There was no marriage at first. By the time I realized it, the wedding and everything else had been arranged. I had no idea. Actually my mother and father were not agreeable to this. My grandmother, on my mother's side, was against it too. It was my father's parents who were strongly pursuing this. My mother's and father's families had different opinions. They'd say "She's still

young and we don't know them."
That's what I had heard.

I interviewed her parents at their home in Abucay in 2013. They were quite surprised about the matchmaking when Ellen's aunt Iling approached. This is how Ellen's father remembers that time:

My mother-in-law said the Japanese would come here to meet us. We didn't think much. It was okay for them to come with Tomi-san. [...] Toshikazu brought a cake. Ellen said she liked him. I asked her if she was not afraid to marry him. I told her Japan is far [from the Philippines]. We told her we were afraid but she was not. She said she's willing and he is kind. So we let her. After getting married it was time for them to go to Japan. My mother-in-law said someone should accompany her to Japan so that we would know that her situation was okay. Ellen's aunt went. After a week in Japan she called us. She said everyone was kind and there was nothing to worry about. That's when we felt relieved. [...] We agreed because our daughter wanted it. We didn't fear for her because my sister went with Ellen. When we went there later, it was okay. Everything was exactly as my sister told us. Everything was okay.

In the end, they were okay if Ellen was, and matters were decided quite fast. Ellen's parents have since traveled to Japan seven times, each time staying from three to six months, working in Asahi. Ellen's mother would work in a factory, while her father would work in the apple field of Ellen's husband.

Iling's cousin Eva was one of twelve brothers and sisters. She was the eleventh, and her closest brother Celso had convinced her to "take this opportunity so that we can all go to Japan to work." He recalled:

I wanted Eva to be happy. She was reluctant to go at first, but we convinced her to take the chance. I said to her that even if there is no love in the beginning, love will

follow. We [siblings] were not expecting anything from her, like being sent money from Japan. We wanted the opportunity to go work in Japan. [...] We are hard working people so if we can work, we did not have to rely on our sister or her Japanese husband. [...] Look at us now. We are all doing okay, more than okay.

Eva's younger brother Junior went to Japan to work at a factory after Eva had gone and Celso had followed. Her older sisters and their husbands also went to Japan to work in various places near Tokyo for a period of three to six months each.

Sonya is Eva's niece though they are of the same generation. Sonya is the eldest sister of six siblings. She had been supporting her siblings after graduating from high school by working in a factory in the nearby town of Mariveles, as her parents' earnings were not enough. In an interview we did in Asahi in July 2006, she recalled the first time she came to Asahi. Though Sonya still supports her siblings from time to time, her attitude about the past differs from Victoria's.

I never knew what the matchmaking was about until I started to understand the Japanese language. I couldn't speak a word. We are all "challengers", you see. If it works, great. If it doesn't, too bad. [...] I worked in a factory. Sugai-san introduced me to the company because I wanted to work until I had my first child. Through the workplace, I started to learn Japanese and made friends.

It was in April 2013 when I met with Sonya again in Abucay. Her father had passed away and that was when she came back. Sonya's mother, who is one of the few parents who are still alive although she is the eldest of the nine mothers, said:

Tomi-san acted as a translator between the Japanese and the Filipinos. I said it would be hard to marry a non-Filipino. [...] It was hard for me to decide at that time. We disagreed at first. Also we didn't want to be far apart from each other and in

separate countries at that. I emphasized that Sonya was working in Mariveles, but Hiromu continued to court her. Hiromu would pay Sonya the amount equivalent to what she was earning. Hiromu asked Sonya to stop working in Mariveles. [...] I said it's hard because they cannot communicate with each other. Sonya said it's how you relate to each other; so, regardless of nationality, if we can relate to each other, we can have a good life.

Sonya is the only one who has adopted a Japanese name: Yuko. She even jokes about her Yamagata accent when her son tells her to speak more "normal Japanese".

I speak like my mother-in-law and I won't try to fix it. Why should I fix it now? I was always agreeing with people when I didn't understand the language. But now I could say to my son that I know better. I've been here so long. I'll stick with my Yamagata way of speaking. [...] I can't change it now.

Tomi-san and the Abucay mayor back then, Maxima de la Fuente, were the public faces of the Abucay-Asahi matchmaking; but the person who took on the responsibility of matching the couples, arranging the necessary documents, marrying them off at Abucay church, and sending them to Japan, was Iling. Naturally, Iling and her husband were invited to Asahi along with the mayor (and her driver/assistant Julie). However, they declined the invitation as Iling and her husband were not in good terms with the De la Fuente family and did not want to travel together with them. Moreover, Iling's husband was planning to run against the mayor in the upcoming election, so the antagonism between them was growing even stronger and eventually cost her husband's life. Subsequently, Iling remarried. Along with her new husband, a Filipino US Navy veteran, she moved to the US in 1990. She returns to Abucay once every two years, and luckily enough, she happened to be in Abucay when I was there. In Abucay, Iling had continued to undertake matchmaking projects on her own

with Tomi-san's Japanese connection, matching a total of 30 couples before her husband got killed. Iling's sister took over the matchmaking project and continued doing it for some time.

3. Japanese presence in Abucay: The 1920s, the Pacific War, the 1980s, and beyond

Parents of the nine Filipinas belonged to a generation that had experienced the Pacific war and the Japanese occupation first hand. Therefore, most of them have since been deceased, except for the parents of Ellen, Noemi, and Sonya. In the process of interviewing them, I learned of their experiences during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945, and came to understand their sentiments when their daughters were going to marry Japanese men.

At some point, Sonya's mother, a girl during the war, had hid in the mountains and later inside a *bangka* (boat) floating in the sea, only to return home with her family house razed to the ground (along with most of the other houses in Abucay) after the Japanese left. Obviously, Tomi-san and the Asahi mayor and officials (majority of whom had experienced the war first-hand or were born during the war) were "acknowledging" the Filipinos' sentiments toward the Japanese. Parents were told that their daughters' would-be-husbands had never been Japanese soldiers and, therefore, there was nothing to worry about. It was such an absurd statement. They could not have been soldiers as they were born after the war. I am sure that their fathers had all been soldiers, like my grandfathers, and so were most able-bodied Japanese men at the time. Would I possibly feel assured by such a statement?

Of course, all of the people I interviewed said that the war itself was to blame, not the people who fought in the war. And this is very much understandable, as they have families in Japan and are looking at a Japanese person (me) asking about the Japanese. But I have started to see a couple of interesting factors at play here.

One is the widespread notion that "It wasn't the Japanese who were bad, it was the Koreans." I heard this a lot not only in Abucay, but in many other places that I visited in the Philippines. Koreans were most vicious and they were easy to tell apart as they wore shoes different from those worn by the Japanese, or so

I was told multiple times. I tried to explain every time I encountered this statement that, first of all, Koreans were part of the Japanese Imperial Army and its related personnel as Korea was colonized by Japan. Secondly, if they had been more vicious, it could have been that the Koreans at the bottom of the military ranks were ordered to do things that their superior Japanese soldiers would rather not do.

Another factor at play is that in Abucay, there were two Japanese men from the island of Kyushu who had migrated together as fishermen in the 1920s: Takata and Maki, who were considered the "good Japanese". They both got married to Filipinas and had children long before the Pacific War. According to Takata's eldest son, his father was respected by the Japanese occupying force and was able to stop the execution of 32 men at the Abucay town plaza by convincing them that these men were not guerillas. (The then nine-year-old son acted as messenger between his father and the Japanese military commander.) Although his father had retreated to the mountains along with other Japanese soldiers in 1945 and died there from malaria, years later, he was officially honored by the town for this incident.

The most immediate factor at play is the still very much active presence of the New People's Army (NPA). They were very much active in the mountains of Bataan in the 1980s. Many of the families I interviewed have had one or more family members killed by the NPAs. This guerilla warfare continues to affect the people today and more directly than its predecessor, the Pacific War. For one and most importantly, soldiers fighting under the NPA and those under the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are all Filipinos. and many of them are neighbors and/or relatives, making them enemies and allies at the same time. According to some of the former NPA soldiers that I interviewed (but not on camera), there have been many shoot-to-kill murders ordered by the Sparrow unit of the NPA and by the AFP as well. Several shootings have taken place along the streets of Abucay, especially in the 1980s. The top Bataan commander of the NPA (who lived in Abucay and was a relative of the mayor) was assassinated when Maxima de la Fuente, who had close ties with the Marcos regime and was protected heavily by the military, was in office. In the 1990s, her successor and son Enteng

de la Fuente, after much political manipulation, announced Abucay to be the first town in Bataan to be “NPA free.” Previous to this, amidst the political turmoil and armed struggles, many people from both sides had been killed.

Julie recalls the time when one of the Asahi matchmaking Tokyo office staff and then Asahi mayor Kobayashi came to Abucay in 1983, to look for their fathers’ bones, their fathers having died in one of the mountains of Bataan during the war. The presence of many Buddhist statues across Bataan can be ascribed to the fact that many Japanese soldiers and Filipinos had died in the mountains. At the time that several Japanese were visiting Bataan to find their relatives’ or comrades’ bones in the 1980s, there were many recruiters from Manila in search of young Filipinas to work in Japan as “entertainers”. People have come to associate the “Japanese” with the Yakuza, who were behind the “entertainment” business and figured in the news considerably. In fact, Ellen’s parents thought of the Yakuza first when approached by Iling on the Asahi matchmaking. Had they been approached by someone who was not a relative, they would have declined because of their fear of the Yakuza.

When he was a mayor, Enteng was invited to Asahi along with the mothers of Filipinas there after they settled down. This trip was organized partly because there were rumors that these nine Filipinas were working as “entertainers” in Japan. Family members kept close contact with their daughters in Asahi, so they knew they were not working as “entertainers”; but people were talking about this behind their backs. Sonya’s mother remembers it clearly.

We heard a rumor that our daughter was dancing in Japan [...] to pay back the money the Japanese supposedly gave us. That was the rumor here and why the mayor in Japan invited us mothers to see for ourselves.

The speech that Ex-mayor Enteng gave in Asahi during this trip—that this matchmaking “helped the Asahi town for its lack of brides and helped the Filipinas in Abucay for enabling their family members to come to Japan to

work” could have well addressed the people back home rather than the Japanese audience and media.

Conclusion

The Japanese media has often assumed that these Filipinas came to Japan for the money and so put them under constant scrutiny. Was it a “success”? Are they “happy”?

To me, this is another absurd notion because how can “success” or “happiness” be measured? And to apply this notion only to the couples of “international marriages” is unfair; it explains why many Filipinas felt the pressure when they started to live in Japan. There were numerous reasons behind and expectations, as well, in light of these nine couples’ marriages—as there are of any other marriage. These couples cannot be categorized in a group nor their union measured in simple words such as “success” or “happiness”. Life is too complicated to fit into those words.

Ellen’s mother was reluctant to talk to me at first, because of the interview she and her husband had given to a Japanese broadcaster after Ellen got married. Their house in Abucay was under renovation at the time, and the Japanese broadcaster falsely assumed and said in the piece that “Ellen’s husband paid for the house”. Ellen and her mother still hold grudges over this and I cannot blame them. Over and over again, the Japanese media have portrayed such matchmaking in terms of money—how the Japanese yen have made the family of the Filipina bride rich back home.

I have become close to the Seino family especially Sachi, who is the main protagonist of the film. She is working in Yamagata now, and has mixed feelings about her extended families in Abucay. One of the reasons is that they have been relying on Victoria for so long and Sachi feels that they have been exploiting her mother financially. However, for Victoria, it is “natural” to support her siblings because they do not have jobs to support their own families in Abucay. Now the situation has changed. Victoria has been living in Abucay for the past year and is expecting Sachi and Rika to support Victoria and her siblings in Abucay. There is a big gap in this “expectation” between Victoria and her daughters, as there was

between Victoria and Tsuyoshi on the idea of marriage.

I set out on my voyage believing in “chance-encounter” as a philosophy of life, if you will. I am who I am because of numerous chance-encounters and I do not believe that there are “wrong decisions” in life.

There are times when I ponder upon the what-ifs. After meeting Filipinas who have crossed the ocean to start a family in Japan and after talking with their family members, I have started to understand that “marriage” is not something that is not meant to be. It is a means of survival and hope. Interviews I did are part of these women’s life history—not data—and it is important to continue recording their histories as their lives continue to evolve.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Seino family, Narag family, De Guzman family, Fernandez family, Siongco family, Renosa family, Santos family, Angelina Lucas, Enteng de la Fuente, Herna Sombilion, Christine Watanabe, Itamoto Yoko, Kimoto Kimiko, Fujioka Asako, Yano Kazuyuki, Sorimachi Mariko

The people of Abucay; the people of Asahi; IPC, Ateneo de Manila; API office, the Philippines; API office, Japan; The Nippon Foundation; Dante Perez; Alma Quinto; Rox Lee and his family; Nick Deocampo; Rosalie Zerrudo; Arneo Mardoquio; Kuntum Melati; Nana Buxani; Patporn Phoothong; and Susanna George

every step of the way. I want to film Sachi before it is too late.” I knew instantly that this would become an important project for me for years to come, and this is the genesis of this archive project.

ⁱ Itamoto Yoko is my collaborator in this film that we have been shooting since 2003. She has long been involved in the issue of the so-called *yome-busoku* (literal translation is lack of brides) in Japanese farming villages up north. As the then-head of a marriage counseling firm and a gender equality expert, she has been witnessing the realities of “international marriage” since the 1980s. Yoko frequently visits the family, as she does not want to be another outsider, criticizing them. It was something that became close to her heart and she has since visited Abucay many times. When Victoria’s daughter Sachi was 11 years old, she uttered to her mother in the presence of Yoko, “Why did you marry dad?” Innocently enough, Victoria managed to evade the question and moved on to another subject. This stuck in Yoko’s mind until Sachi entered high school, which was when I met Yoko in Ireland: “I have always wished that my eyes were a camera lens, recording