

# When ‘West’ Meets ‘East’: Acculturative Strategies in International Marriage

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## Abstract

International marriages are becoming more prevalent in Japan, and there has long been interest in the experiences of people who move into cultures fundamentally different to that in which they were born and raised. Guided by concepts of acculturation and personal agency, this qualitative study explores the experiences of ‘western’ wives married to Japanese men, who represent a minority among marriage compositions. While the group is highly heterogeneous, we identify challenges that are common across their shared experience of international marriage, and a strong personal agency to apply the breadth of acculturative strategies available to them for negotiating these challenges, applying them with strong personal agency and considered judiciousness.

**Key words** : Japan, acculturation, international marriage, qualitative, lived experiences

## Introduction

The number of international marriages in Japan has increased significantly over the past 50 years. In 2015, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW, 2017b) identified 20,976 marriages between a Japanese national and a non-Japanese national, although the total is expected to be much higher when considering that some cross-cultural marriages are conducted abroad and may not be registered domestically. According to this most recent national data, cross-cultural marriages now make up 3.3% of all marriages in Japan, compared to less than half of one percent of marriages fifty years ago, indicating a shift not only in marriage practices, but also an increasing presence of international couples in Japanese society.

Cross-cultural relationships and particularly marriage has at times been met with resistance in Japan. The country’s past isolationist policies and “history of racial superiority, racial purity myths, and xenophobia” resulted in the framing of marriage with non-Japanese nationals as largely taboo (Ritter, 2015, p.408). Because marriage has strong implications for a family’s social status within a community, cross-cultural marriage can be met with opposition from parents and family members. Indeed, even today perceived racial, ethnic and status hierarchies greatly affect the relationship choices of young Asian people (Ritter, 2015). Nevertheless, political discourse espousing the benefits of engaging in international economies for national pros-

perity, and a need to address declining birth rates, “may be resulting in more liberal attitudes toward international and interracial marriages” (Ritter, 2015, p.408).

Research has suggested that marriage between two people of different cultural backgrounds “may generate more marital distress and life challenges” than might otherwise be experienced (Kim, Park, Kim, & Kim, 2017, p.1097). The challenges are likely to be amplified in cases where the spouses come from two highly divergent cultures, and there is considerable research interest in marriages between people from diverse backgrounds. For example, in a study of couples with one Chinese spouse and one American spouse, challenges included “communicating without a shared language in which both were equally fluent, the difficulties of living in his home country, and dealing with certain areas of cultural difference” (Rosenblatt & Stewart, 2004, p.43). In an analysis of a series of blogs written by Japanese women married to American men, Kawano (2015, p.2) reveals that “social networking, the division of house chores, and extended family relationships are the most frequent areas of struggles among interracial couples.” In a review of the research on ‘Westerner and non-Westerner relationships,’ language and communication, attitudes toward marriage, individual traits and behaviors, support of the family, societal views, gender roles, managing of the household finances, and child-rearing, were all shown to play a role in marital satisfaction (Skowroński, Othman, Siang, Han, Yang, & Waszyńska, 2014).

International couples in Japan are more than twice as likely to be composed of a Japanese husband and a non-Japanese wife than the other way around (MHLW, 2017b). Approximately 80% of Japanese men in international marriages are married to a person from another Asian country, namely China (38.7%), Philippines (20.7%), South Korea and North Korea (15.3%), and Thailand (6.35%). This is contrasted with Japanese women, who are likely to have partners from South Korea and North Korea (25.4%), followed by the United States (18.3%), and (China 12.1%). Marriages between Japanese men and women from countries outside of Asia are particularly rare, with only one per cent of women in international marriages coming from the United States, and less than half of one percent from the United Kingdom (MHLW, 2017b).

With a crude divorce rate (per 1,000 population) of 1.70, compared to 4.8 in Russia and 3.2 in the United States, Japan has a relatively low divorce rate (Statistics Bureau, 2018). Although a crude divorce rate for cross-cultural couples in Japan is not available, raw numbers give us some insights into the trends in cases involving foreign spouses. In 2016, there were 216,798 divorces registered in Japan, of which 12,945 (5.97%) involved international marriages (MHLW, 2017a). This constitutes around six per cent of all divorces in that year, despite cross-cultural marriages currently constituting around three per cent of all marriages. While there are problems with making solid conclusions from this particular data, the difference does suggest that the cases of divorce may be higher for cross-cultural couples, and other research of such couples in Japan support this (Htwe, 2012). Among cross-cultural couples who divorced

in 2016, more than three quarters involved couples with a Japanese husband and a foreign wife, and only one quarter involved couples with a foreign husband and a Japanese wife (MHLW, 2017a), indicating specific challenges for foreign women in cross-cultural relationships, and investigation into these challenges is warranted and timely.

This study focuses specifically on the experiences of by a group of women living in Japan and married to Japanese men, who hail from countries in western Europe, Northern America, and Oceania that can be broadly defined as ‘western.’ Although our application of the ill-defined east-west binary is done with caution and understanding that such concepts are fluid and far from mutually exclusive, there are general differences in sociocultural norms that have been known to challenge the success of some cross-cultural relationships. So-called ‘western’ cultures are often defined as individualistic in their patterns of thinking and behavior, valuing the uniqueness of each individual’s characteristics (Carducci, 2012). On the other hand, ‘eastern’ cultures tend to be seen as more collectivist in nature, placing higher value on group identity and harmony (Benet-Martínez & Oishi, 2008). Research has shown a strong parallel between individualistic and collectivist cultures, and their approaches to communication (Adair & Brett, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1988). People from individualistic cultures tend to value low-context communication, where communication is more explicit and direct; those from collectivist cultures tend to prefer high-context communication which relies more heavily on context (Tili & Barker, 2015). This means that people raised in individualistic and collectivist cultures may express emotions (Batja, 2001) and deal with conflict in different ways (Cai & Fink, 2002).

Our study focuses specifically on the challenges of ‘western’ wives in Japan for several reasons, firstly due to the aforementioned divergent sociocultural contexts in which they and their partners were raised. Secondly, the marriage composition of western female partner and Japanese male partner is under-represented in the research literature. Thirdly, studies that do involve western women married to Japanese men, and other representations such as in works of fiction, have at times been accused of being superficial and inaccurate (Nagatomo, 2016), and thus there is a need to redress this with participant-centered studies. Finally, as Japan opens its doors to more migration in order to address some of the problems associated with its rapidly aging population (Nakata, 2018), it is important to understand the ways in which different migrants navigate their way through Japanese culture in order to facilitate effective support structures.

## Conceptual Framework

In this study we view participants’ experiences through the lens of Acculturation Theory (Berry & Sam, 1997). Acculturation is a process of “changes in an individual’s ‘cultural patterns’ (i.e., practices, values, identities) resulting from sustained firsthand intercultural contact

and subsequently affecting the individual's psychological well-being and social functioning" (Ward & Geeraert, 2016, p.98). Acculturation theory posits that when individuals engage deeply with a culture other than their own, as in through cross-cultural marriage, they adopt one or more of four coping strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and/or marginalization (Berry, 1997). Assimilation occurs when an individual adopts the new culture over their own, whereas integration involves a person adopting a new culture while still maintaining their own. In separation, an individual rejects the new culture and preserves their own culture, and marginalization occurs when someone rejects both the new culture and their own culture.

The acculturative strategies that people use are complex, they overlap and change over time and in different situations (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2003). The strategies may serve to bring comfort, allowing people to better "fit" into the new culture. They may also have an adverse impact, causing so-called acculturative stress that can have serious impacts on people's mental health and well-being (Romero & Piña-Watson, 2017). Berry (2005, p.697) finds that those who adopt integration strategies "experience less stress and achieve better adaptations than those pursuing marginalization; the outcomes for those pursuing assimilation and separation experience intermediate levels of stress and adaptation." Although integration appears to produce the best outcomes for individuals living in new cultures, it requires substantial negotiation, in this case most directly with a marriage partner. To further complicate the issue, it is commonly assumed, though not always agreed upon, that the foreign spouse will fully assimilate to the dominant culture (Osanami, Irastorza, & Song, 2016), an assumption that can prove a barrier to successful integration.

The adoption and efficacy of acculturative strategies is bound within socioeconomic and cultural contexts that will influence an individual's behaviors. In some cases, socioeconomic status may constrain an individuals' agency to adopt certain strategies in response to challenges born from cultural differences. For example, women who migrate in order to marry may "become situated in social and cultural contexts to which they either have to adhere or find ways of compromising with the prevailing social norms" (Tao, 2014). How agency is manifested is also culturally dependent. So, while many women across the world "are more than ever at the center of their own lives and reflexively constructing a 'life of one's own'" (Visanich, 2018, p.1), cultural context, and the proximal individuals that belong to that culture, may constrain a person's ability to have agency, although it is also the case that valuing of collective harmony does not necessarily preclude expression of personal agency (Akkuş, Postmes, & Stroebe, 2017). The status of an individual within their new country will also invariably influence their experience. In a study of social markers of acceptance of migrants in Japan, Komisarof (2012) found lower expectations of adherence to social and linguistic norms from 'high-status' immigrants.

Thus, in this study we use concepts of acculturation and personal agency to explore cultural differences and responses to those differences by women in international marriages in Ja-

pan, within their socially-situated, contextualized realities. The authors are guided in their exploration by the following broad research questions :

RQ1. What common challenges do women report in their marriages to Japanese men?

RQ2. What acculturative strategies and personal agency are evident in response to these challenges?

## Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, which is seen as ideal for better understanding not only an individual's experiences, but how they make sense of those experiences as central agents within the study (McAlpine, 2016, p.34). At the heart of narrative inquiry are participants' retelling off their stories, which "is far from unusual in everyday conversation and it is apparently no more unusual for interviewees to respond to questions with narratives if they are given some room to speak" (Mishler, 1986, p.69). This approach to interviewing is particularly important in cross-cultural research, because the conscious stories told by participants often rest upon unconscious and culturally-bound elements of their own behaviors and experiences (Freeman, 2002).

Interview protocols were developed for the purpose of this study with consideration of the broad research questions and informed by suggestions during the pilot phase. The interviews were conducted in person by the first author. Interviews began with several questions to determine personal background information about each participant. Next, participants were presented with a series of open-ended and purposely broad questions designed to elicit personal stories from their lived experiences (Kumar, 2011). The interview protocol consisted of eight questions :

- How did you come to meet and marry your husband?
- What language/s do you use in your everyday lives, and when?
- What aspects of Japanese culture do you bring to your married life?
- What aspects of your own culture do you bring to your married life?
- What are the most positive things about being married to someone from a different culture?
- What are the most challenging things about being married to someone from a different culture?
- How do you approach important decisions in your marriage?
- How do you deal with conflicts in your marriage?

While it was expected that each participant would have a unique situation that will impact their experiences, we sought participants with some commonalities. Thus, for this study we sought self-identified women who were born and raised outside of Japan (while we did not fur-

ther exclude any participants, all of those who ultimately participated in the study were from 'western' countries and this informed our subsequent data analysis). Participants were also chosen who spoke English as a first or strong second language. While this linguistic requirement was also necessary to facilitate data collection, the main reason for this inclusion was because English-speaker migrants tend to have a higher status among Japanese than non-English speakers (Komisarof, Leong, Tang, 2020). We sought those who were living in Japan and married to a man who was born and raised in Japan. Because there tends to be a honeymoon period of one to two years (Qari, 2014), we sought women who had been married for at least three years, and we also applied this minimum time constraint for the number of years living in Japan. Volunteer participants were sought using network sampling beginning with the membership of an international women's association, and all consented to be part of the study.

The interview data were analyzed manually using a Content Analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, beginning with familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, before producing the final report. The authors were interested in identifying themes that were salient, and this required a theme to be recurring across all of the participants (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002), regardless of the otherwise heterogeneous nature of the sample group. The development of themes was a result of numerous reviews of the codes by both researchers in order to identify common patterns across the dataset and to organize them in a meaningful way according to our specific research questions. In the qualitative tradition we report the results and discussion together, bringing in illustrative direct quotes from the participants, and relevant literature in order to help make sense of them.

## Results and Discussion

To begin, we introduce the participants of the study, a group of twelve women with a variety of personal and marital attributes. Table 1 provides an overview of these characteristics providing some contextualization, noting that more in-depth or individualized detail is not provided in order to prevent deductive disclosure, as the target population is relatively small and conspicuous (Kaiser, 2009).

In response to the first research question regarding common challenges, the analysis showed three themes that were independently raised and discussed by all participants regardless of their different experiences and circumstances, meeting our criteria for salience. The recurrence across our participants with vastly different lengths of marriage suggests that the challenges do not dissipate with time, or indeed with shared experience abroad. The challenges relate to a) a lack of a strong mutual language, b) differences in styles of communication, c)

Table 1. *Characteristics of participants, n=12*

Characteristic	In sample	Characteristic	In sample
Age group		Region of birth	
30-39	3	Europe	4
40-49	1	North America	5
50-59	5	Oceania	3
60-69	1		
70+	2		
Years of marriage		Years in Japan	
1-5	2	1-5	0
6-10	2	6-10	2
11-15	0	11-15	2
16-20	0	16-20	1
21-25	3	21-25	2
26-30	2	26-30	0
30-35	1	30-35	2
36-40	0	36-40	0
41-45	2	41-45	3
Children <sup>1</sup>		Experience living in Japan before meeting husband	
Yes - minor	7	Yes	11
Yes - adult	5	No	1
No	2		
Experience living outside Japan as a couple		Husband has experience living outside Japan	
Yes	3	Yes	5
No	9	No	7

<sup>1</sup>Two participants had both minor and adult children

competing expectations of gender roles, and d) lack of full acceptance within society. The following explores each of the challenges and reports the acculturative strategies and personal agency evident through the participants' narratives.

### **Lack of a Mutually Strong Language**

While the Japanese proficiency level of the participants varied, they all have a sufficient level of language ability that enables them to communicate in their workplaces and communi-

ties. For husbands, the level of proficiency of their partners' native languages ranged anywhere from quite limited to very proficient. Thus, while the participants noted they were able to communicate with their partner in at least one language, there were limits, to varying degrees, to the breadth and depth of what could be communicated without a mutual native language.

*I find it frustrating that I still can't fully express myself, or we misunderstand each other a lot.*

The choice of which language to use in a given situation is influenced by a large number of variables including the language skills of the interlocutors and the social context in which the communication occurs (Dumanig, 2010). Among our participants, there is a clear tendency toward integration through the mixing of the languages of both partners to facilitate understanding.

*It's a real mishmash, like even in the one sentence we'll throw in the other language ... 'cause we kind of know what the other knows and doesn't know. It's just a mix of what the topic suits or who's less tired.*

This 'mishmash' is known as code-switching, which refers to the use of two or more languages or language varieties within the context of a single conversation (Scotton & Ury, 2009). Code-switching is extremely common among bilingual couples, who may alternate between their native languages in order to better express the messages they are trying to convey or to align themselves with one another. In a study of bilingual families, code-switching was found to be "a deliberate act that has helped the family members relate to each other and it also acted as a cohesive device to hold the family together" (Dumanig, David, & Shanmuganathan, 2013, p. 590).

The accommodation of each other's language into daily communication, for example through language choice and code-switching, is seen as a way of building solidarity, as efforts are made to change styles of speech to meet the needs of their partner (Giles & Powesland, 1975). As suggested by the quote above, this is dependent on an intimate understanding of the other's skills and knowledge in their non-native language. This was seen clearly through the story shared by one participant, whose husband was required to live in another city for several years due to their work.

*We started off neither of us knowing each other's language very well, but we kind of made our own couple's language, which families do right, we understood each other, probably nobody else could... But then he went away and when he came back he was speaking 'normal' Japanese again, more colloquial Japanese not tailored for me to understand anymore, and it was really, really difficult.*

Thus, mutual understanding appears to be strengthened when there is a mutual effort toward accommodation. However, language choices are also highly context-specific. For example, there is a preference of language use in different types of communication. Participants preferred to use the stronger mutual language to facilitate the exchange of nuanced meaning, particularly when communication could lead to conflict. This is particularly sage as language plays a central role in the escalation or resolution of conflict (Taylor, 2014), which is a complex process in one's own language, let alone a second language. While most women reporting using one language or the other, one shared a distinct choice to take a truly bilingual approach to engaging in 'dangerous' conversations.

*When we were having a discussion about something very important, I discovered very quickly this was dangerous, so for very serious discussions I would use English, and he would use Japanese, and amazingly enough we avoided conflicts.*

While integration was the dominant strategy identified through the narratives, there was a clear separation from the dominant language among women with children. There was a strong desire expressed by participants to expose their children to their native language, and to facilitate this, boundaries were set about what language was to be spoken where and to whom, although there were challenges enforcing such barriers.

*The idea is that inside our home is English only, that's the idea it's not really what happens in reality, for example when [husband's] mother comes to stay they speak Japanese and then they won't speak English to me for a while after, but the idea is that in the home we all speak English.*

The insistence by women in the study of certain language choices in certain situations is evidence of a high level of personal agency. This refutes the common expectation that bilingual couples adopt the dominant language. In these cases, two or more languages serve as potentially vital resources to draw upon in order to negotiate shared understanding.

### **Differences in Communication Styles**

The second theme is closely related to the previous theme, and concerns differences in styles of communication. There is a clear disparity between the low-context styles of communication of the participants, and the high-context styles of their Japanese partners. While accounting for individual differences, people from low-context cultures such as the countries of our participants tend to rely on direct communication, whereas those from high-context cultures such as Japan are more likely to depend on indirect communication, using contextual and non-

verbal cues (Tili & Barker, 2015). This is nicely explained by one woman, who had been married and living in Japan for more than 30 years, who likened the communication style of her husband to a 'mosquito coil,' an insect-repelling coiled incense stick that is lit from the outside and burns slowly around in a spiral until it eventually reaches the center where it burns out.

*We start out here and we keep going around in circles and you're waiting and waiting and waiting until you get to the point. I, on the other hand, think in the western way ... I start out with my opinion and then I go to support it. My husband finds this incredibly straightforward.*

The negotiation of communication styles is complex because it represents "an uncontrolled dimension of interpersonal communication operating at the level of the unconscious," with "neither side aware of this level of communication" (Abrahamson & Moran, 2017). Thus, if the successful exchange of meaning is to involve aspects of both cultures, as in the case of language, it needs a mutual understanding not only of the language itself, but the ways in which each partner communicates, as a reflection of their unique cultural contexts. Integration is facilitated gradually over time, as partners adjust in order to develop a modified style of communication, that can facilitate smoother interactions.

*I can't tell what he's saying unless he says it. He's expecting that I understand all these hidden things ... and it's not because I'm an idiot or that I'm being ignorant, it's just the way that we are brought up and the way that we learn to communicate ... We've had to negotiate different ways, the way we speak. I know I've toned down the way I speak, so that it doesn't seem too emotional ... and he knows that I can't tell what he's saying unless he says it.*

As in the case of language, conflicts are a key time when cultural differences are likely to be exacerbated (Ting-Toomey & Barker, 2015). Communication style differences were particularly evident in times of conflict, with participants sharing stories that provide examples of the conflict avoidance behaviors seen in studies of intragroup conflict between Japanese and American students (Murayama et al., 2015).

*I find it really difficult that if I raise my voice, he shuts down, so he'll go off and hang on to it all day, whereas I find that if I can let it out quickly, and get over it quickly then I'm done with whatever it was, whereas if I approach it that way, he harbors those feelings for longer.*

Many of the women expressed a desire to talk through problems in order to resolve them quickly and directly, although their partners prefer to take themselves out of the immediate situation and to avoid confrontation, a phenomenon that has frustrated Chinese wives of Japanese men (Lan, 2015).

*I usually say very directly what I don't like, and then my husband usually retreats to his room.*

Thus, even for couples who have negotiated a common and effective way of communicating, they may revert to their own cultural norms in times of conflict.

*I know I've done something wrong when he doesn't talk to me for two or three days, but then he gets over it (laughs), and sometimes I never know what I've done.*

This was a point of frustration for some participants, who noted that a conflict may pass over time without any form of apparent resolution. In this sense, applying agency to insist upon their preferred styles of communication may indeed result in further conflict (Black & Mendenhall, 1993), and it appears that with time the women choose not to engage in the conflict as they might normally, in order to resolve it more harmoniously.

### **Gender Role Expectations**

Although progressive attitudes toward gender and family roles, Japan is still often considered a patriarchal society, particularly compared to the birth countries of our participants (North 2009). There can be strong expectations that a husband commit his life to his job and contribute to his family economically, while the wife stays at home and takes responsibility of the household and child-rearing. While it might be expected that this is a mindset stronger in the older generation, a recent study found that these values were still strong in many young people in Japan, including young women (Meiji Yasuda Institute of Life and Wellness, 2016). We can see evidence of this with one of our younger couples, with traditional ways of thinking related to their home upbringing, rather than their generation.

*He is so Japanese ... he brings that to our marriage. He brings a very, very traditional upbringing and background to our marriage ... and as much as he tries to understand [why I'm not content to be a housewife], I just think that in some ways he can't, he literally does not know how to understand.*

Many of the women in this study expressed their disapproval of the rigid notions of gender in

traditionally patriarchal Japan, espousing more liberal and flexible attitudes toward family roles. Nevertheless, most women said that they take on the majority of the household and/or child-rearing responsibilities, most while also working. This assimilation toward the traditional Japanese value system is explained as a matter of practicality, because Japanese society does not easily facilitate an alternative :

*Due to his working conditions and my working conditions it just ended up that I'm at home and I do the cooking, I do the cleaning, and I do the shopping and the money management for the most part, and take care of most of the child-rearing duties, mostly because he's not physically there to do so because Japanese work culture means that he's away until quite late... Someone's gotta do it.*

It is through intercultural relationships that traditional norms may be challenged (Lou, Lalonde, & Wong, 2015) , although in this study there was only one clear example of this. In this case, the Japanese husband stays at home and takes on the majority of the household duties, while the wife works full-time. Cases like this in Japan are extremely rare. While Japan has one of the world's most generous paternity leave entitlements, only about 3% of fathers take up this option (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). This indicates that significant social pressure, rather than financial considerations, influence decisions, and indeed news has covered cases where male employees have been penalized for taking legally-entitled paternity leave (Rich, 2019). Thus, this case is not only atypical within our sample, but within Japanese society more broadly.

*It might not be so common in the west but still it's absolutely not Japanese for the mum to go to work and the dad to be at home, and that was the best choice for us. But that's only been possible I think because we are not a 'usual' couple, so I think that gave us a little bit of leeway to break the rules.*

This is a clear separation from dominant cultural norms, and the participant herself felt that this was only possible due to her position as an outsider, although she also talked about the influence of her husband's experiences in her home country, where they spent their early married life and where their children were born and initially raised. Thus, it may stand to reason that Japanese men who have had exposure to different cultures may be more willing and able to incorporate different cultural values more readily, but this is not so straightforward. The social pressures to align to traditional values may be too intense. This was the case for one couple who lived in the United States for a number of years, during which time they adopted a largely western lifestyle :

*... But then when we moved [back to Japan], the first months were okay ... maybe it's different now, but everyone was telling him, your wife is a foreigner, so she is stronger than you, she is bullying you around ... and slowly, he changed.*

Traditional attitudes toward gender and family roles generally mean that long working hours for men are an accepted reality. It consequently means that the time that husbands can spend together with their families can be very limited. This is a key frustration for many of our participants.

*He was working always on weekends and national holidays, so I wasn't happy with that balance ... So, we had a very Japanese-style, always working, not much family time.*

As another participant explained, the frustrations and challenges of being in a cross-cultural marriage often lie not with the partner, but the societal structures and values in which the couple exists.

*I hate the work culture of Japan, everybody works too long, nobody spends time with their family ... I don't like that bit of Japanese culture. That's the problem. There's nothing wrong with [my husband] ... But, because we live in Japan, there's all those things about work culture, long school days, homework on holidays, all those sort of things that I don't like ... but I will make myself insane attempting to change things. I mean some things you have to cut a few corners or do things your way.*

This quote is particularly interesting, as it shows the complex struggles involved in the tug-of-war of negotiations between two competing sets of values, that of the individual and that of the dominant society. On the one hand there may be reluctant assimilation regarding some aspects of cultures with one woman advising that it's important to know 'when to give in and when to fight for something that's important'. This 'fighting', or separation from cultural norms, and mirrored in the first theme, is particularly present where children are concerned.

*When [my son] was very little we used to go [to my home country] for about a month and a half, and then you know, Japanese schools they don't allow you [to be away from school], but I would fight with the teachers and go for at least a month, because it was more important than anything else for me, that he stayed there and he got to practice his [language].*

The adoption of separation as an acculturative strategy is interesting, because the theory

posits that integration is the most psychologically and socioculturally adaptive approach (Berry, 2005). It is the case, however, that the participants in this sample use the strategy sparingly, with full awareness of the repercussions, and may balance it with acceptance of other aspects of the culture that they may not necessarily align with their own values. This can be seen as showing compromise, which is one way in which cross-cultural couples have been known to construct marital satisfaction (Cheung, 2005).

### Summary and Limitations

This qualitative narrative inquiry study has identified the challenges common to a small and heterogeneous group of western women, who share the relatively uncommon characteristic of being married to a Japanese man. The study was informed by theories of acculturation and personal agency to investigate how these challenges are dealt with, as reported by the participants. The study found that regardless of their differences, all participants were challenged in their marriage by the lack of a strong mutual language, differences in communication styles, and competing expectations about gender roles. Integration was a common strategy applied, incorporating elements of their own culture and that of their husband, in order to overcome some of the challenges faced. However, participants wielded personal agency to insist on the adoption of their own cultural values particularly in cases involving children, and at other times assimilated to the dominant culture, even if it may have been a compromise to their own values, particularly when broader societal pressures outside of the marriage were at play. The ability to make these choices may be related to the fact that, for the most part, the women in this study had spent time in Japan independently before meeting their husbands, did not enter Japan for the purpose of marriage, and this may contribute to their strong agency within their marriage.

The study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the size of the sample is small, and although this was done within the framework of our qualitative research design, it means that the findings cannot be generalized to wider populations. The participants in the study are very different ages, come from countries that can be considered socially and culturally different, and have different experiences of marriage, and this variation will inevitably impact their experiences within marriage. While we have provided some details to acknowledge this impact, to protect the identities of participants who are a very small minority population within Japan and thus potentially easily identifiable, it was important to conceal individual contextual details. We have attempted to counter concerns about the heterogeneity of the sample by including only themes that are common to all groups, but there is certainly merit in investigating of each of the different populations within their own unique situation, whether it generational, cultural, etc., as well as those who have not been included in this study. Finally,

this study focuses on international marriage from the subjective perspectives of the wife. The experiences and perspectives of Japanese husbands are also of importance, and this is an area for future research.

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