

# **Filipina Encounters with Japan: Diverse Stories from a Pangasinan Barangay**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses upon the unfolding lives of Overseas Performing Artists (OPAs) and Japanese wives. Their detailed and revealing stories of their experiences, each stretching over several years, are based on interviews in Japan and in the Philippines between 1994 and the present. Information on their earlier lives was provided by household census data as well as observations concerning the women and their families conducted during four decades of research in a large migrant-exporting barangay in Pangasinan. Initially, the paper places the migrants within a global context in which they developed. In the past three decades their barangay exported over 250 Overseas Filipino Workers or permanent migrants to 17 countries. The first migrant to Japan arrived in 1983. Others are still leaving for subsequent six month tours. Next, the paper examines the significant changes in recruitment, circumstances of work, Japan's situation, and that of the Philippines which have taken place over the decades. The core of the paper presents portraits of each of the Filipinas and the wider context within which they chose to become OPAs or wives of Japanese. It describes their life stories before, during, and after their stays in Japan. Similarities as well as differences among their personalities and strategies in dealing with the challenges of their work are compared as well as readjustments in their lives and their responses to the duality of cultural demands. This section ends with the present outcomes for each of the women, their marriages and children, and relations with their natal families. Finally, the paper asks, "What can we infer from these stories?" It concludes by arguing that this small but intensively studied sample of Filipina lives may put to question certain long-held and over-generalized beliefs about Filipina OPAs in Japan.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a paper about the Filipina Diaspora to Japan in microfocus. It concerns the stories of ten Overseas Performing Artists (OPAs or “entertainers”) from barangay Sisya in Pangasinan whose lives, and those of their families, which have been dramatically changed by their experiences in Japan. The literature concerning the diaspora of Filipinas to Japan of OPAs and wives of Japanese continues to grow. The main focus of the literature on Filipina OPAs has often been about what they do while they work in Japan (Fuwa 1999). Our research focus is to examine the wider context of the lives of women who have worked or married in Japan, between 1984 and 2004. Our principal objective here is to let those OPAs speak about their experiences. Most of the existing studies on OPAs are based on structured surveys, questionnaires, brief interviews, and a few personal accounts, and have been carried out in Manila. In contrast, as part of a longitudinal (43 year) study of sociocultural and economic change in the large barangay, we have collected a rich body of census and ethnographic data. These data have enabled us to investigate a variety of research questions in great depth concerning the changing lives and familial strategies of village households. One research topic that we have pursued intensively since the 1970s is that of mounting internal and international migration (Anderson 1975, Fuwa 1999). In the 1980 a few young women had migrated to Japan for work as OPAs. We began to follow the lives of these women closely as their numbers and their tours in Japan grew in the 1990s. Our knowledge of their backgrounds and their households provided a rare opportunity to contextualize their depictions of their lives in Japan and at home. We (mainly Fuwa) have for a decade collected personal accounts from them and their families. Their stories have provided us with rich data of unusual quality and depth. Although the sample is small, it is balanced by Anderson's (1997, 1999, and 2000), large and diverse sample Filipina OPAs and wives of Japanese in Japan since 1995, as well as careful reading of the literature. The paper first describes briefly the national and local economic circumstances in the Philippines and Japan since 1972, that induced the huge Filipino overseas migration. It then presents a brief description of the large barangay of Sisya and its people, focusing specially on its long history of out-migration as a strategy for survival, greater economic security, and higher social status. Next the paper turns, very cursorily, to the acceleration and diversification of Sisya international migration. The major section of the paper describes the lives of the women from Sisya who have worked or now live in Japan. Finally, the summary and conclusions discuss some of the similarities and variations in the Sisya sample.

## THE FAILED PHILIPPINE ECONOMY AND THE SURGE OF MIGRATION

The rapidly growing Philippine population (by 3.1 percent annually from 1965 to 1974) raised labor force growth at an annual rate of 2.8 percent, limited job opportunities, and increased rural to

urban internal migration dramatically. Women outnumbered men in this migration. The capital intensive (as opposed to labor intensive) pattern of Philippine industrialization from the 1950s through the 1970s spurred unemployment of an educated and relatively skilled labor force. Thus, unemployment reached double digits in 1983 and increased to 12.6 percent in 1985. Underemployment stood at 36.4 percent in 1984. Many fewer good jobs existed for women than for men in the labor force. In 1986, over a third of all Filipinas were agricultural workers and about one-fourth were sales workers. Average earnings of an employed Filipina in service, production, and agriculture work was less than two-fifths that of an employed Filipino. This occurring despite the higher representation of Filipinas in academic degree. Under these conditions, overseas employment became a major solution to serious domestic unemployment. From 0.2 percent of the total labor force in 1975, it grew to 2.4 percent in 1994, a tenfold increase (National Statistics Office). Sisya is no exception. Its population has grown threefold since 1960, and numerous Sisya men and women joined the Overseas Filipino workforce during in the late 1970s. After 1984, the highest proportion was women working in Southeast Asia, some of them in Taiwan and Korea, and a few in Japan.

#### THE GROWING GLOBAL DIASPORA OF SISYANOS

Overseas workers from Sisya to Europe and Saudi Arabia began in the 1960s. Higher numbers of Sisya household members had migrated to Hawaii, Guam (11), mainland U S (3), and Canada (2) in our 1971 census. The 1976 census documented a second Sisya woman in California, another in Canada, and four more in Europe. By 1981 the number of Sisyanos abroad totaled 44, the biggest increases being in the Middle East (16), Europe (10) and Southeast Asia (3). Moreover, the 1994 census recorded a remarkable explosion of out-migrants. Those in the U S mainland jumped to 35, (19 in Hawaii and Guam and one in Palau), to 22 in Europe, to 74 in the Middle East, to 50 in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia, and 11 in Japan, for a total of 212. Of the 479 households in Sisya in 1994, 133 (28 percent) of them received support from family members working abroad. The growth of OFWs seems to have tapered off after the 1990s; based on our 2001 census, there were 235 OFWs from 602 households with a largely similar distribution across destination countries as found in 1994. Fuwa (1997:4) summarizes the international migration trends since 1971 as: greater geographical diversity in destinations, increasing feminization of migrants, higher participation by lower status Sisyanos, and an increase in the participation of off-springs as compared with household heads.

Relative to jobs available in the Philippines those abroad are reasonably available and better paid. This is particularly true with respect to Japan, even with its decade long economic downturn. By 1986 the ratio between Japan's GNP and that of the Philippines was 13.74 to 1 (Hebert 1996:6). In

Japan, Filipinos found incomparable wage differentials. Between 1975 and 1990 Filipinos accounted for about 125,000 or 18 percent of documented foreign workers in Japan (Mori 1991). Japan's economic boom, declining birthrate, shortage of younger workers, aging population and rejection of menial jobs created labor shortages in small scale manufacturing, construction, and some services (Nagayama 1996:249-51). Since then an average of 66,500 new or returning Filipino contract workers, mostly OPAs entered Japan annually. Perhaps one-third of that number entered without documents or were overstaying. By 1999 documented Filipinos surpassed 144,000. Eighty-five percent of these were Filipinas, including 60,455 OPAs and 54,004 spouses and children of Japanese (Ministry of Justice 2000). Undocumented or overstaying Filipinos numbered about 40,000 (POEA 2002). Despite Japan's weaker economy, Filipino documented entrants reached 186,262 in January 2002, 132,155 were women (Ministry of Justice 2002). Wives of Japanese numbered 65,647 of them. A few thousand more were "trainees", house helpers or caretakers, or students. An estimated 36,000 undocumented and 30,000 visa overstayers remained despite an increasing threat of deportation. Japan's Filipino diaspora is increasingly feminine, young, and highly occupation or role-specific (i.e. OPA or wife).

#### SISYANAS IN JAPAN

Six of the eleven women from Sisya who migrated to Japan as Overseas Performance Artists (OPAs) did so during the 1980s. The first went in 1983, a second in 1986, two in 1987 and two (and a wife) in 1989. Two more and a bride of a Japanese followed in the 1990s. After 2000 one more OPA and one victimized bride went to Japan. Among the Sisya women were three sets of sisters. One of these are first cousins of two other migrants to Japan. All six are from sitio Ilocandia. Another set of sisters are the first cousins of an OPA from sitio West. One of these sisters is the sister-in-law of one of the migrants from Ilocandia. The third set of sisters, from sitio East, are unrelated to the aforementioned but are neighbors of the most recent OPA. The final migrant, a bride from sitio Center, ended up briefly and involuntarily as an OPA.

There seem to be three distinct groups among the Sisya OPAs: one in Ilocandia and Center (including Maria, Christine, Erlinda, and Elizabeth), another in East (Julita, Virginia and Julia) and the Sisya West group (of Margarita, Myra, and Francisca). The Center and Ilocandia group and the East group knew each somewhat because they of the same age cohort and went to school together. The West group existed separately from the others until Margarita married Elizabeth's brother after they both had made trips to Japan independently. Interestingly, too, families of the Sisya OPAs have no connection with earlier international migrants (i.e. the Hawaiianos of the 1920s or 1930s or those to Europe or Asia in the 1970s). Most of them were the first in their families to go abroad. Perhaps this is

because the OPAs tended to come from lower social strata than most OFWs.

Finally, while there had been no new OPA from Sisya after the mid-1990s until 2001, we have heard over the last several years about stories and rumors of other young ladies who were eager to work as OPAs. Some must have actually applied but were not successful, and others apparently gave up before taking an audition. In one such case, the father of the lady is a long-time village councilman thus is from a relatively high social status, unlike in other cases. His daughter, attractive and with light complexion, however, was perhaps "too shy" for an OPA. This seems to suggest that becoming an OPA has become an attractive option for a larger number of young women, but that the attributes for success requires the combination of traits; physical features, personality traits and plain courage.

In the rest of this section we focus on the stories of eight (out of eleven) women who migrated from Sisya to Japan as OPAs, in chronological order. Six of those women migrated during the 1980s. The first went in 1983 a second in 1986, two in 1987 and two (and a wife) in 1989.

#### *Julita and Virginia*

Julita is the second of seven children. She was born in 1967 in Manila. Her father (Jaime) worked as a taxi driver in Manila who later became a family driver. He moved the family to Sisya East in 1970 remaining all but a week-end a month in Manila. Relatively well off by local standards the household used saved cash income to mortgage 1.5 hectares of land which was farmed by a tenant. Moreover, their eldest daughter attended the private high school in town. However, when Jaime died suddenly of a heart attack in 1981 at age 42 the lives of family members changed dramatically. In order to provide for the children's education in 1982 Jaime's only inherited land was sold for P20,000 to a former OFW in Saudi Arabia. The decline in family economic security was striking. About two years later Julita, then 16, having just graduated from high school heard about work in Japan as an OPA. Julita was among the better educated and the highest status of the Sisya OPAs, and one of the youngest. Very attractive, talented, and gregarious, Julita easily passed the basic qualifications. She worked as an OPA for almost six years (1983 to 1989). During her stay she seemed to have spent a considerable amount of money. According to her mother, however, she did not bring much money back to her family. At one point toward the end of her contract a Japanese proposed marriage and when she left, he promised to come to Sisya for their wedding. However, after the passage of a few months he wrote to call it off. This experience deeply disillusioned Julita about Japan and Japanese men. She chose not to return to Japan. Later on she married a Filipino seaman and has raised a family of several girls and one boy in Manila. Her family responsibilities have not seriously curtailed her own entrepreneurial activities. She runs a transportation business (owning a taxi and a van) and has other sideline businesses. Occasionally she recruits a "talent" (an

OPA candidate) for a 'promotions' company which trains and arranges employment for OPAs in Japan.

### *Virginia*

Julita's sister, Virginia, followed her example to work in Japan. The 5th child (3rd daughter) in the family, Virginia, after graduating from Sisy high school went to Manila to enroll in college. She lived with Julita. Lacking money, she dropped out after a year at age 17. Virginia recalls that she and Julita were not getting along well at the time. About the same time, friends who had worked as OPAs told her about how much "fun" it was to go to Japan. Realizing that no good job opportunities existed in the Philippines, she was "convinced" to apply. Virginia made her 1st trip as an OPA in December 1989 at age 18. Her initial monthly salary was US\$350, the standard level for beginners. Significantly, her contract was arranged by the same recruiting agent, herself a former OPA and aunt of three other Sisy women. The work place where Virginia was assigned, in a west coast prefecture, happened to have many customers among *yakuza* gangsters. According to her, while she was never victimized by them, she witnessed fights in the bar among different *yakuza* factions while she was on duty. Consequently, Virginia and her colleagues' contract was terminated one month early, due to this chaotic situation. She had to return home. Understandably, this experience left her with negative impression of Japan. She did not seek another contract as an OPA. Instead she returned to school, pursuing computer training. Within a year after her first trip to Japan, however, her friends again "convinced her" to resume her OPA career. Virginia returned for the second time in January 1991 with a US\$700 monthly salary. Subsequently, she followed the typical six-month cycle. Her monthly salary for her third contract was US\$850 and US\$1,000 for her fourth. During her second to fourth trips Virginia returned to the same *o-mise* and obtained her contract directly (i. e., without using a recruiting agency and saving air fares) which further increased her salary. Unlike her elder sister Julita, Virginia saved her supplementary income (such as food allowances and tips) besides sending monthly remittances (between US\$200 and US\$400) to her mother and siblings. When she is in the Philippines she usually stays with Julita in Manila, helping her manage the taxi business. As of 2004, while Virginia had not been back to Japan for three years, she said she was still willing to continue working as an OPA. Indeed, she was recently offered a contract with monthly salary of US\$1,000, but she declined it because she thought that the salary level was "too low." According to her niece, at age 34, Virginia said that it is becoming increasingly difficult for her to pass an audition and is becoming "too old" for work as an OPA.

Based on our 1994 census, there were six members in her household then: Julita's and Virginia's mother and five children. The first daughter (working in Taiwan as a domestic) and Julita

were married. Having their own households they did not send any money to their mother. Their 26 year old brother worked as a tricycle owner-driver with an estimated annual income of P25,000. Virginia, then age 22, earned estimated gross income of US\$ 7,800 (P195,000). Meanwhile, the second son, age 23, was working in Saudi Arabia as a waiter with estimated annual gross income of US\$4,800 (P120,000). With Virginia's remittances, the total family income was P81,800, making it the 69th highest among the 479 households in income distribution in Sisya, of which roughly 57% came from Virginia. Without her contribution, the household income ranking would have dropped to 207th. Where did Virginia's earnings go? After Virginia's second trip to Japan in 1991 and nearly ten years after the sale of her late father's small, inherited land, the family expanded their residential lot by purchasing a next-door lot. In addition, they renovated and enlarged their house. The estimated value of their house in 1994 was roughly P150,000. They had most of the household electric appliances such as a refrigerator, stereo components, two TV sets and a VCR. Her house was filled with the gift items she received from her customers including two stereo radio cassette recorders and numerous (20 or 30) stuffed animals. After Virginia's third trip in 1993, the motorcycle with a side car ("tricycle") was purchased for P75,000 (US\$3,000). In addition, the family had two children whose education Virginia's earnings were paying for: one at collage (age 20) and the other at high school (age 13). In addition, in 1997, Virginia's mother purchased the immediately adjacent lot and began construction of a large two story concrete house. As of our 2004 visit, the new house almost completed.

Virginia's mother is very proud of her daughter. Virginia realizes that many villagers are envious of her family and suspicious about her work in Japan. She does not seem to care about the others' perceptions of her, however. Virginia certainly understands the potential dangers involved in Japan, having heard of a tragic case of forced prostitution, OPAs who committed suicide, and the dangers of *yakuza* activity. Despite these potential dangers she feels that she is in control of her actions in Japan. She is not interested (nor is she particularly averse to) marrying a Japanese eventually, but does not consider marrying a Japanese man as an attractive option. Indeed, after her second trip a young Japanese man followed her to Sisya in order to propose marriage. She did not feel ready for marriage and thus she declined the offer. Based on her observations of her friends married to Japanese, Japanese men were seldom faithful to their wives, are always seeking younger Filipinas, and express no affection (*lumbing*) to their girlfriends or wives. In her view, her work as an OPA was the best overseas economic opportunity available to her.

### *Maria*

Maria was the second migrant to Japan in 1986. She was born in 1969 (the 6th among 14

children and the 2nd daughter) of Renato, then a tricycle driver from another municipality in Pangasinan. Her mother, Rita, is a native of Sisya. By the time Maria was born the entire family had moved to Sisya after disposing of a half hectare of farm land that Renato inherited from his father. Renato, a high school graduate, drove a tricycle and later became a tenant farmer. Rita earned supplemental income by growing and selling vegetables and taking laundry from neighbors. One of Maria's elementary school teachers recalled Maria's school performance as "below average", that she was rather untidy in appearance, and that the family had difficulties providing her with enough cash to buy snacks at school. After her third year at high school, Maria went to Manila where she worked as a sales lady. There she learned about the opportunity of working as an OPA in Japan from one of her relatives (her cousin Christine's aunt), a former OPA herself. About three months later she applied at the same Manila based agency that had recruited her cousin Christine's aunt. While she admits that she enjoyed dancing since she was very young, her main motivation for applying as OPA was economic. Without doubt, this cousin's aunt cum recruiter informed Maria about what she was getting into, coached her about how to behave and what to avoid, and described Japan and the Japanese. Too, having lived and worked in Manila, Maria had been exposed to an urban environment. While her parents were very worried about their daughter's new adventure, they did not object in the end. Waiting for about one year following her application, Maria made her first trip to Japan in 1986 at age 17. Since then, Maria repeated the typical cycle of a six-month contract in Japan followed by six months in the Philippines. As of 1994 she had gone to Japan nine times and made four more tours by 2000. During her third trip in 1988, a customer became enamored with her. He was reportedly a 32 year old general manager of a car dealership in Western Japan. Eventually they had a child, to whom she gave birth in the Philippines. According to Maria, the man had promised to marry her but the marriage had been delayed because the man kept telling her that there was still some "problems" to be cleared. After the birth of their daughter in early 1994, the man started sending regular income support to the family, for about a year, then stopped. In 2000, a Japanese NGO specializing in assisting Filipino-Japanese children, in response to Maria's request, contacted the father (her former boyfriend) and convinced him to resume sending support to Maria for her daughter's education. He has sent monthly remittances of Yen 30,000 to Yen 40,000 since early 2001.

Earlier, after breaking up with the man, Maria married a Filipino seaman in 1999. They began living in Manila. They have a daughter together. Meanwhile, Maria's first daughter has been raised by her parents in Sisya. She does not seem comfortable with her step-father and step-sister. Maria, who calls her almost every week, says that she has been begging to see more of her and wants to meet her father. Maria's seaman husband spends much of his time aboard ship. When he was shipboard,



she worked in four locations in Japan between 1995 and 2000. Between 2000 and 2003 Maria did not return to Japan and appeared to have given up her career. Yet, she obtained another contract from January to July 2003 at age 34, and recently again passed an audition as of March 2004! According to her, her husband is not pleased to see her continue to work in Japan mainly because, while he is away about 10 months of the year, their daughter is left without a parent (she is taken care of by his relatives). Despite this, Maria still seems determined to continue her remunerative career as long possible.

With each new contract Maria's salary was raised as she accumulated experience. She earned a monthly salary of US\$1,150 during her contract in 1994. Assuming that the first month's salary was spent for necessary expenses (such as clothes) and another for plane ticket, her salary amounted to a four month total of US\$4,600 (or P115,000, @P25=US\$ as of 1994). Contrast this with Renato's 50% share as a tenant farmer of the gross farm income (before deducting farm expenses from rice and corn on his one hectare plot) was P15,200. Thus, Maria's six month contract provided more than seven times the income of her father. Since his farm expenses are roughly one third of gross income, his net farm income was about P10,000. So Maria actually earned more than ten times her father's annual income in just 6 months! In addition, during 1994 when Maria gave birth to her daughter, the baby's father sent remittances regularly for the purpose of child support; they amounted to at least US\$1,000 (P25,000) to US\$2,000 (P50,000). Therefore, in 1994, the total family income was around P145,000 to P200,000, making Maria's (and her boyfriend's) contribution about 97 percent of the family income! This annual income ranked the family at 17th of Sisya's 479 households in income distribution. Without their contributions, the family would have ranked 381st.

Finally, where did all this money go? Daily expenses included (estimates by Maria, annual amounts in parentheses): food expenditure (P24,000) , her daughter's formula milk (P18,000), electricity (P6,000), one house maid (P6,000), and one baby-sitter (P6,000) or a total of P60,000 annually. Perhaps she spent a portion of the income on her daughter's clothes and toys. At that time the family had one student in collage, two in high school, and one in elementary school. Prior to Maria's trips to Japan, the level of her siblings' schooling was low. Among Maria's five elder siblings one had a vocational training. All the others were elementary school graduates. In contrast, among her younger siblings, one completed high school and four others are still in school at various levels including college. However, the most visible sign of Maria's earnings, is the house lot and the house purchased in 1991. The residential lot cost P45,000 (US\$1,800 @US\$1=P25 as of 1994). The spacious two story house (by local standards) cost an estimated P350,000 (US\$14,000). Its major furnishings include, in addition to couch, tables, chairs, aparador's, beds and a baby crib, most major

household electric appliances (a TV set, refrigerator, a VCR, a VCR, a stereo, and electric fans). Moreover, in 1996, Maria purchased one hectare of first-class rice land plus a lot and house in Cavite in 1999. Without her earnings, such a level of material well-being would have been unimaginable. In addition, the family also bought agricultural machinery such as a hand tractor and a water pump. After her former Japanese boyfriend resumed his monthly support for Maria's first daughter in 2001, Maria started to build savings intended for her daughter's future college education. Currently, she gives about 3,000 to 5,000 pesos (Yen 30,000) to her parents for the daughter's current expenses and puts much of the rest into a college plan at a bank. Since she is under Maria's parents' care in Sisya while Maria lives in Manila with her new family, however, this arrangement appears to have created a subtle conflict of interest between Maria and her parents. She did not immediately reveal to them the resumption of payments from her former boyfriend fearing that her parents might waste money on current expenses at the expense of her future needs. Her parents, on their part, seemed to feel that they were entitled to the child support for their grand daughter since they were the ones taking care of her and to suspect that Maria might be withholding money for herself and her new family. Overall, Renato and his wife are happy that Maria became an OPA in Japan. Maria is proud of her contribution to the household over the past 18 years. Still, she once remarked that she would rather not let her younger sisters become OPAs. Moreover, a constant concern (whether she is in Japan or in Manila) is her first daughter, particularly her future and her growing fixation about her father. She has a strong desire to communicate with him and see him. As of 2004, She has sent at least two letters addressed to her father, through the NGO (JFC), but he had never responded. As of this writing, Maria is seeking to obtain legal recognition (*ninchi*) of her first daughter by her father, through JFC and its volunteer lawyers. Once his legal recognition is issued, it would become feasible for the daughter to obtain a visitor visa to travel to Japan.

#### *Christine*

Christine, a first cousin of Maria, was born in 1972 as the first (of five) children of Isco, a tenant farmer with a half hectare of *bancag* (non-irrigated land). She first went to Japan as an OPA in 1987, when she was 15, the youngest of the Sisya group. Like Maria, Christine quit school before graduating from high school. At age 14 she left Sisya for Manila. She stayed there with her aunt who moved subsequently with her to Angeles City. Christine's aunt, who as previously noted, was herself an OPA in Japan, was married to a Japanese "promoter" who visited once a month. Christine also heard about working in Japan, from friends. What most impressed her at the time was their description of Tokyo Disneyland. "It sounded like a lot of fun to go to Japan!". she recalled. She applied for the job through her aunt's recruiting agency, and made her first trip in 1987. Attractive,

talented, charming, self-assured, yet *mahinhin*, Christine was well suited for her work. Her parents though worried about their daughter's trip to an unknown country, but did not object. As of 1994, Christine had completed 6 trips to Japan. Her monthly salary during her 6th, in 1993, was US\$950. By 1998 the total trips were 9. Assuming the use of two month salary for necessary expenses (clothes and a plane ticket), Christine had earned an estimated disposable annual income of roughly US\$ 3,800 (P95,000) in 1994. Isco's annual income from his half hectare planted with mango and eggplant was reported as P24,400. He was able to retain the entire amount, having mortgaged the land from the owner in exchange for P6,000 (US\$240). Without Christine's cash earnings it would have been impossible for a tenant to loan cash to his landowner.

Even so, Christine's impact as an OPA was not as impressive as Maria's. The family house remains like any other tenant farmer's; being 8 by 12 meters with one bedroom and one living room. It is constructed with hollow blocks and plywood. Like most tenant farmers, Isco does not own his house lot. Still, appliances such as a TV, a VCR, and a karaoke machine are notable. Where did Christine's money go? According to her parents, Christine's household support was limited compared to her earnings. Her contribution to household income in 1993 was perhaps roughly US\$500. Still that salary was about four times her father's gross farm income, making her support roughly half of her father's gross revenue. The family's income at about P36,900, ranking it 198th from the top in the village income distribution. Without Christine's contribution, it would have ranked 275th among the 479 families. What became of the rest of her earnings then? Christine purchased some lovely dresses in Japan, each costing about US\$300, that hang in a small closet in the house. Other than that, it appears that most of her earning was spent on personal wants as well as on "party" expenses for her relatives and, (early on) "friends" when she returned home.

Christine's main reason for working in Japan was the lack of economic opportunities in the Philippines. "If I had a choice, I would rather not work as a "talent" [a cultural dancer], but there was nothing worthwhile to do in the Philippines." On her first trip she said, "I was so frightened", but a Japanese who became a regular customer was "very thoughtful and kind" to her which reassured her. On later tours Christine had other such genuine Japanese friends. She also spoke of the intense competition among women in the o-mise for "regular" customers whose drinks provide its profits. Her work places included the four largest cities in Japan as well as smaller cities but she preferred Tokyo. When she was once placed in southern Japan, her boss was a member of a *yakuza* family who she said was very nice (*mabait siya*) who protected her and her multi-ethnic colleagues against his rough underlings. Concerning her Japanese customers; she said that while typically they were punctual, generous (e. g., in giving tips and gifts), kept promises, and helpful in time of need. But she also

observed that many were unfaithful ("they want many girls"), not at all demonstrative or loving (*lambing*), "very quick with their hands", and revealed their real selves when they were drunk. At one point Christine had a Japanese boyfriend whom she lived with. This man, in an effort to get her to return to Japan, gave her many gifts (e. g., TV, rings, a "bag of money"). She declined his offer and told us repeatedly that, "I would never marry a Japanese and live in Japan!" She said she would rather live in Sisy. Christine retired permanently from her OPA career in 1997, marrying a Filipino man and settled down in Angeles, Pampanga.

#### *Erlinda and Dalia*

Erlinda and Dalia, also cousins of Maria and Christine's, were born in 1968 and 1977 respectively as the 6th (of 13) and 10th children (2nd and 3rd daughters), of Domingo. Until he passed away in 1988 at age 55, Domingo had been a tenant farmer for most of his life. He tilled a half hectare in the early 1960s, nearly 3 hectares in the early 1970s, and one hectare in the mid 1970s. Besides farming, he had once worked at a mine located near Baguio. After graduating from high school, Erlinda went to Manila and worked at her aunt's bakery. After about two years, she applied for the 'entertainer' position (again through the same agency as Maria's and Christine's). Erlinda's main reason for applying to become an OPA was to repay the family's debts. About a year before Erlinda's first trip to Japan, her father had fallen ill (asthma) and was hospitalized, incurring a family debt of P8,000 from a bank. Domingo objected to Erlinda's decision, but despite his strong objections, Erlinda made her first trip to Japan in December 1987 at age 20. According to the mother (in 1994), during her first trip to Japan, Erlinda contributed at least P30,000 (US\$1,200) to her family, enabling them to repay the debt. Sadly, Domingo died in April 1988 before Erlinda's return. His funeral expenses amounted to P5,000 (US\$200). In 1989 Erlinda went to Japan a second time (at US\$450/ month). Her mother remembers that she contributed about P6,000 monthly.

During this trip, Erlinda met a Japanese man about her age and they decided to marry. After completing her contract, weddings were held both in Sisy and in Japan. Once in Japan, she still kept sending about P6,000 (US\$240) to P8,000 (US\$320) every other month (i.e. roughly P42,000 (US\$1,680) annually). As of 1994 in Sisy her 25 year old brother was sharecropping 0.6 hectare with annual gross income of P8,500. Thus, 83% of family support came from Erlinda's family in Japan. With the total household income of P50,500 (P42,000 from Erlinda plus P8,500 farm income) the family ranked 127th among Sisy's 479 households in 1994. Without Erlinda's remittances it would have dropped to 461th. In 1999 Erlinda bought a tricycle for family business in Sisy for 86,000 pesos. It has been 13 years since Erlinda married and settled down in Japan. They have three children. Erlinda stopped working as an OPA but 4 or 5 years ago began working at a food

processing factory. According to her, since that time her husband became increasingly controlling, jealous, and sometimes even abusive relatively more recently. He resented, for example, Erlinda's meetings with Filipino female friends at their homes for karaoke, though he regularly gambles and goes to bars with his friends. At one point in 2002, Erlinda ran away and hid at a friend's house in a nearby city for a few days after having a violent argument with her husband. When she returned, her husband apologized and, with the mediation of his cousin, agreed to allow Erlinda to go out with her friends "once a week." As of this writing (2004), their marriage seems to have stabilized somewhat.

Erlinda's migration to Japan led not only to steady remittances for her family. It also provided a stepping stone for migration of her siblings. In April 1994, with her payment of P20,000 (for plane ticket and travel documents), one of Erlinda's younger brothers went to Japan as a tourist. He subsequently found a job (illegally) as a construction laborer with Erlinda's husband's assistance.

#### *Dalia*

Moreover, Erlinda's sister, Dalia, married a Japanese man at the initiative of her mother and sister. When Erlinda and her husband visited Sisya briefly in 1999, they brought a friend of the husband who was interested in marrying a Filipina. He liked Dalia immediately upon meeting her, but at age 22 (and he around 40), she was not interested in marrying him. Determined, Erlinda and her mother pressured Dalia to marry him. Although Dalia remained reluctant, and often cried at the thought of it, the wedding was scheduled a few months later. Though Dalia resisted, the wedding was held in June 1999. When Dalia first went to Japan after the wedding, she initially lived with her sister in order to learn the language. Though working and residing at the distant restaurant of her husband's boss for much of 2002, she has subsequently lived with her husband and his parents. Despite her initial reluctance, Dalia appears to have adjusted to her new life in Japan extremely well, and appeared to be quite happy at the time of our interview in April 2004. Erlinda once remarked that Dalia and her husband "developed love" after they married to the extent that she "envied them" (*urayamashii*). Dalia now works at a noodle factory near her residence.

#### *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth was born in 1970 as the first (of 6) child of Mariano, a small owner-tenant farmer. After graduating from high school, she attended a collage. After one year, due to the lack of money to continue her studies, she decided to apply for the OPA job in Japan through the same agent as the previously mentioned women. While her father initially objected the idea of her going to Japan, she was able to convince him by telling him her plan to go to Japan just once, save enough money to continue her studies and return. She made that first trip to Japan in February 1989 at age 19. Despite her earlier plan, Elizabeth went back to Japan for a second

time in 1990. Her explanation was that she liked her life there and was able manage Japanese customers behavior, so she decided to go back "just one more time." At the top of her agenda was to re-visit Tokyo Disneyland. After her six month contract expired, however, she did not return but remained there illegally. Around this time, Elizabeth found a Filipino 'boyfriend,' who had come to Japan as a student but was working (illegally) in the construction sector. Subsequently, she became pregnant. This "accident" forced her to abandon her earlier hope to complete her college education. Nearing the delivery date, Elizabeth surrendered herself and returning to the Philippines delivering a baby boy at home in August 1991. Furthermore, another factor that changed her initial plan and influenced her return to Japan was the 1990 earthquake in Baguio which destroyed the family home. To rebuild it and support her siblings required her to continue working in Japan even after delivering her son. Based on our 1994 census, Mariano's gross farm income from his 0.8 hectare land totaled P15,000. When Elizabeth was worked in Japan as an OPA, she earned at least more than 6 times her father's income.

With her son already five years old, Elizabeth succeeded in going back to Japan in 1996 and again in 1998 again working as an OPA. During the latter trip, she met, through friends, an another Filipino, Lito, a grandson of an affluent Pampango landowner who had entered Japan as a TNT. On her next (1999) trip to Japan, Elizabeth escaped from her assigned club with one of her co-workers one month after her arrival. Elizabeth and Lito have resided in eastern Japan since then. She found employment at a small factory in Tokyo, and then, after three months, at a food processing factory but quit after over one year in 2001 due to serious allergic reactions. Returning to work at a toy factory her health improved, but late in 2003 chemicals used there forced her to quit again. Meanwhile, after brief employments with a computer manufacturer and a steel yard, Lito worked for a small painting company from 2000 to 2003. Though much trust by his employer, he decided leave the company at the end of 2003 after his salary payment became irregular. He has become a maintenance man of a large apartment complex.

Back in Sisya, Mariano has become totally dependent on Elizabeth's and Lito's earnings for his house completion, a purchased car, and most needs of his family. Over more than a decade, Elizabeth contributed enormously to Mariano's productive (e. g. working capital for farming, tricycle) and non-productive (e. g. house, car) assets. In a 2001 interview, In the meantime, their lives in Japan have become economically comfortable but not extravagant. After 15 years of family support Elizabeth expressed to us with pride but also frustration. Specifically, she has been disappointed with her siblings, who despite her admonitions to use her

contributions to improve themselves, have remained totally dependent on her. A common complaint of Filipinas working in Japan is that relatives believe that money is easy to come by and that a large portion of their "vast" earnings should be shared with them.

### *Perla*

Perla was born in 1976 as the 5th (2nd daughter) of 8 children of Aurora and Saturnino. Her family is an established landowning families in Sisya. Saturnino has been an owner farmer throughout his adult life. The family lives along Sisya's street in a relatively modest house situated on a sizable lot (125 sqm). Perla's unexpected ordeal began at age 22 with a casual conversation with Asa, an old friend from Sisya who was helping his aunt. The aunt and her Japanese husband had a business involving arranging marriages between Japanese men and Filipino women for a (sizable) fee. One of their clients, Hiroshi, had paid the couple 1,000,000 yen to meet and marry a Filipina. His prearranged bride-to-be, it turned out, had a boyfriend and wasn't ready to marry. With the couple under pressure to find substitute candidates for Hiroshi, Asa asked Perla, "would you be interested to marry a Japanese guy?" Perla took it as a joke and replied, "Where is he? Show me." Asa took Perla to Manila where his aunt informally introduced Perla to Hiroshi. Hiroshi, age 52 at the time, immediately liked Perla while Perla was not at all prepared for this. After much persuasion by Asa and her aunt, Perla finally agreed to marry him. When Perla's spousal visa for Japan was approved in 2000, Hiroshi came to visit Perla's family in Sisya to accompany her to Japan. However, when he arrived in Manila, a certain Mr. Yamada (also married to a Filipina and working for Asa's aunt) told Hiroshi that Perla's father was hospitalized and the family needed cash. Hiroshi, without knowing the situation and unable to speak Filipino or English, gave the cash he had brought for Perla's airfare to Japan to Perla's family. Now out of cash, Hiroshi returned to Japan alone with the understanding that he would remit Perla's airfare once he arrived in Japan and that Mr. Yamada would bring her to Japan.

Perla's fate, however, had taken a tragic turn after Yamada entered the picture. While he did accompany Perla from Manila to Narita, he maliciously had informed Hiroshi of a wrong arrival date (so that Hiroshi was not able to meet Perla at the airport) and took Perla instead to his own residence in Japan and made her work as a housekeeper. According to Perla, during this time, Yamada tried unsuccessfully to rape her. Shortly after this incident, Yamada "sold" her to a club to work as a hostess. Hiroshi, on his part, had searched in vain for Perla in Japan, while she was enduring her ordeal. Perla worked, with pay, as a hostess for several months but then, totally dispirited, returned to the Philippines with assistance from her Filipina co-workers.

When she arrived in Manila, one of those co-workers asked Perla to entrust her passport and spousal visa temporarily under her care. Unfortunately, Perla did; perhaps understandably, Perla had trusted that co-worker, who assisted her to return to the Philippines after months of ordeal in Japan. Unsurprisingly, the former co-worker subsequently vanished with Perla's passport, a document of extremely high economic value. It turned out, of course, that Perla's identity was then used by someone else to enter Japan. Once it was used by another person, it became impossible for Japanese immigration to issue Perla another visa. Thus, she was now unable to enter Japan to join her husband.

In spite of the legal obstacle caused by the criminal act of Mr. Yamada, Hiroshi continued to expend considerable effort to bring Perla to Japan as his wife including: several visits to Perla and her family in Sisya, the effort to bring the case to Japanese immigration and police authorities. Unluckily, the position of Immigration was that as long as there was a person with Perla's identity in Japan they would be unable to issue another visa to her. The only option for Perla to obtain another visa was for her to become pregnant by Hiroshi. During our interview with both of them in March 2001, she appeared amenable to this idea but Hiroshi was reluctant since his plan at that point was that Perla would work (at a factory) in Japan to accumulate significant savings before having a child. Hiroshi had planned to build a nice house for her family in Sisya. In addition, Hiroshi appeared still troubled by his doubts about what really happened to Perla in Japan; above all, was the attempted rape by Yamada really unsuccessful?, and why would she ever turn over her passport to another person?

After this interview with the couple in 2001, the situation seems to have reached a stalemate with no prospect of obtaining a new visa.

Our interview with Perla in June 2003 revealed that Japanese immigration had refused to re-issue a visa, and consequently Perla and Hiroshi had given up the fight. He had sent her a divorce paper for her signature. Initially, she had demanded some money before signing it but Hiroshi did not give any definitive response. Around this time, she was introduced by friends to "Ambassador Suzuki," the 'Honorary' Consul General of Japan, to act as a mediator. After all, Perla signed the divorce paper in December 2003; she told Consul Suzuki that she just wanted closure to the entire painful matter and did not need any money any more. Despite her the 7 year long ordeal, Perla still appeared interested in marrying a Japanese. There seems to be a good possibility that Consul Suzuki would introduce another candidate for her Japanese husband. Perla told us also that she did not want to marry a Filipino because they were "abusive and irresponsible." She added that her father was "very strict" and men in the village were also



“afraid to approach her.”

In sharp contrast with the preceding cases, Perla worked for only a few months, involuntarily, as an OPA during her tragic stay in Japan. Her seven year ordeal brought her and her family much sorrow and little economic gain. Yet, she and her family appear still to have expectations that she might eventually marry a Japanese man. Before Hiroshi reluctantly asked for a divorce, Perla's parents still approved of the idea of her marriage to Hiroshi (who had promised them a large house in Sisya). Apparently, their high hopes of a marriage between Perla and a Japanese man still have not diminished.

### *Julia*

All of the OPAs from Sisya described so far had made their initial trips to Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. There was no new OPA from Sisya until 2001. Julia was born the first of 8 children of Anna and Julius in 1980. Julius has been a tenant farmer. Julia had received a Department of Science and Technology scholarship at University of Baguio for a 3 year computer course. After finishing the course, she was initially an intern in Tarlac, but her subsequent work was not directly related to her computer course. Julia worked as a cashier at a shopping mall in Tarlac for over one year. About this time her mother saw an advertisement on TV concerning recruitment for OPAs and urged Julia to apply. Indeed, she and her younger sister, May, both took an audition and both passed. The parents told us that while they were not concerned about the idea of Julia working in Japan they wanted May to finish her engineering degree at collage first. Accordingly, Julia went to Japan as an OPA in November 2001. She made her 2nd trip (with monthly salary of US\$400) in November 2002, and another trip (at US\$500 per month) in December 2003. During her 2nd trip a Japanese customer (much older than herself) proposed marriage to her. According to Julia, she also liked him but declined when she discovered that he was married.

Julia said that her main reason for going to Japan was because she was unable to find a good permanent job in the Philippines. She well understands that work as an OPA is not permanent, being unable to continue in the job after a certain age, but said that working in Japan was only a "stepping stone." One optimistic idea that Francisca has is eventually to go to the US, if she can find permanent work there. She also revealed that she would also not mind marrying a Japanese man as a means of securing the right to work and remain in Japan. When Julia came back from her first trip to Japan the family purchased a carabao worth 18,000 pesos. With her salary during her 2nd trip, they purchased (on installment) a piece of land (400 sqm) in the neighborhood of their residence worth 140,000 pesos. Julia's earnings have also been used for her siblings' educational expenses. As of 2004, however, their family house was the same small bamboo and nipa structure that they lived

before Julia went to Japan. Unlike all the other cases of OPAs no renovation had been made. According to the mother, Julia is a very caring daughter who takes good care of younger siblings. Returning to her younger sister May, as of our interview in March 2004, she was finishing her engineering degree. While she is still interested in working in Japan, she intended to search for a job in engineering but was not clear what kinds of job that might be. According to her, if she cannot find a "good job" then she will go to Japan to work as an OPA. Indeed, she seemed very interested to visit and experience life in Japan by working there. According to May, perhaps not surprisingly, one of her younger sisters is also interested in working in Japan.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To sum up our stories, there are a number of commonalities among Sisya OPAs. These include that:

1. None of the Sisya OPAs engaged in prostitution. None worked in the Philippine "hospitality" industry. None were misled by the agencies that placed them. None were uninformed or grossly misinformed about the work. They all understood what they were undertaking and made their decision on their own (although Perla's case is debatable).
2. All of them entered Japan with valid visa (although two had "overstayed"). None were trafficked or subject to violence, rape or forced prostitution as is often claimed in the literature (IOM 1997). All had regular days off (if only a few days per month), were relatively free to come and go, and were able to avoid or deal with potentially serious problems, though two witnessed abuse of others. None used drugs as often attributed to OPAs.
3. All of our OPAs have shown remarkable adaptability (e. g., in language learning, diet, and lifeways) to the entirely foreign circumstances. They accommodated well to the difficulties and challenges they faced.
4. All Sisya OPAs made more than one trip to Japan after their initial 6 month stay in Japan. The total number of their tours to date of all of them is 52!
5. All received similar starting salaries at \$350 per month (two received \$450), rising up to US\$1,000 or U\$1,200 per month as they accumulated experiences. Each of their six month salaries easily equaled ten times their family's annual income.
6. The OPA's all came from relatively low social status families. Most fathers are tenant farmers or marginally employed. OPA's parents schooling was typically low.
7. Most of the OPAs were of early birth order and had younger siblings for whom they were expected to provide educational support. Most had previously experience in urban life, such as working as a sales lady in Manila or elsewhere. All share certain physical and personality traits that

are applicable to their job; they are slim, of light complexion, well proportioned, and quite attractive by Japanese standards. Most are also amiable, genial, sunny, talkative, and enjoyable to be around.

8. All the Sisya OPAs, and their families, realized tremendous economic/financial gains from working in Japan (though their contribution to households varies).

9. Sometimes depicted as "usually...disoriented and dislocated" (Beltran et. al. 1996:24) and having difficulty reintegrating on their return, no OPA experienced these, though they did face some stigmatization.

At the same time, there are also notable variations among our OPAs such as:

1. The immediate reasons for applying for an OPA job, were two. In five cases, the decision was prompted by a family crisis, such as the death of father or separation or abandonment by a husband. For others, there was the clear recognition that few economic opportunities existed for them in the Philippines compared with that in Japan. Too, they felt obliged to provide economic support for families.

2. Their educational backgrounds vary. The majority are high school graduates or late dropouts. A few had begun higher education before meeting economic difficulties. One was a college graduate who was awarded a government scholarship.

3. Though salary levels were basically uniform for all "talents", there was significant variation in the amounts of monetary contributions made to their parents' households. The share of the OPA's incomes to their households ranged from about 10% to 70%.

4. The use of their incomes by their households also differed. While most households spent at least some of those incomes on house renovation and household appliances, some households used more income for productive purposes (e. g., starting a sari sari store, a tricycle business, agricultural land or machinery, and education) while others used more on consumption or non-productive assets (house or a house lot).

5. Two in our OPA sample either married a Japanese or had a child with one while three others had relationships with Filipino men (and two had a child) while in Japan. And, four others (one after ending a relationship with a Japanese man) married Filipino men in the Philippines. Two of those who have Filipino husbands ended their OPA career while two others continued their careers even after marriage.

6. Although all made more than one trip to Japan, two of them ended their career relatively soon in their early 20s and settled down in the Philippines. In contrast, four others, two of whom made a come-back after a long interval, seem determined to continue the career as long as they can. While initial motivation for becoming an OPA is invariably economic, once they gained familiarity with the

job and became accustomed to life and environment in Japan, they seem to become attached to living and working in Japan which make them want to return to Japan. The extent to which they develop such attachments, however, differs among the OPAs.

It is also important to appreciate that there have been significant changes surrounding the OPA activity over the last decade. More recent developments on the Japanese side include: a decade long recession experienced by the Japanese economy, expanding Filipino local networks in various parts of Japan (Anderson 2000), the tighter enforcement of Japanese immigration laws, and the advance in tele-communications (esp. cell phone) that has made it much easier to stay in touch with families in the Philippines as well as with Filipino culture via cable or satellite TV. Above all, the recession in Japan has begun finally to reduce the number of jobs available for OPAs, created increasing pressures on OPAs to bring in customers (typically by placing frequent phone calls before business hours), reduced salaries, and finally, the greater possibility of premature contract termination. At the same time, notable changes have taken place on the Philippine side as well. For long time OPAs, the dependency of (adult) family members in the Philippines for their livelihood has continued to increase. The rapid spread of cell phone availability and the depreciation of the Peso against the US dollar have made working abroad even more attractive than before.

In conclusion, we're not arguing that the work of Filipina OPAs is desirable, nor do we deny the potential dangers and tremendous sacrifices made by the OPAs involved, or (the relatively small number of) tragic cases. We argue, however, that our information confirms that, despite its crude circumstances, the work of OPAs is not necessarily immoral, demeaning, or improper work. It has benefited their families and has opened their lives. Yet, their voices and the stories also confirm that they have faced dilemmas and created difficulties as well.

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