

Singing an Immigrant Song for a Child or
Becoming the Father of a Baby Who Is Gonna Crawl:
Internet Cafes and the Statuses of “Migrants” in Japan and Hong Kong

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「親密圏と公共圏の再編成をめざすアジア拠点」

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1. Introduction: The Aims of This Paper¹

In Japan, the word “Internet Cafe” has been related to a lot of social problems since around 2004. The quintessential example is the phrase “Net Cafe² Nanmin” (literally Net Cafe Refugees, hereafter referred as “NCNs”). This phrase designates people who have no choice but to live in or frequently stay overnight at Net Cafes because of their unstable working conditions leading to poverty. The “Net Cafe” has been used to represent the problem of poverty in contemporary Japan through the intermediary of the word “Nanmin”.

One of the aims of this paper is to clarify the current status of “migrants” in Japan by exemplifying the situation of NCNs in Tokyo. Another is to seek a pathway to a solution to the problems of NCNs, and what is more, those of migrants all over the world.

To accomplish these aims, firstly I will describe the characteristics of the Net Cafe, and the social and financial situations of NCNs and problems facing them. Secondly I will critically analyze the difficulties in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs. Thirdly I will focus on the concept of hospitality in seeking a pathway to a solution to the above problem. Finally, as examples of the practice of hospitality, I will introduce two scenes which I encountered in Internet Cafes in Hong Kong.

2. The Characteristics of the Net Cafe

The Internet Cafe can be defined as a shop which provides a personal computer (hereafter referred to as a “PC”) and Internet access at relatively low cost. However, Internet Cafes also offer other services in accordance with their customers’ needs.

In terms of the combination of services, there is nothing better available than what is provided in Net Cafes. For example, almost all Net Cafes are basically open 24 hours a day, every day of the year and offer not only soft drinks but also some amenity goods for free. Every Net Cafe without exception has public flush lavatories. Some of them have shower rooms which customers can use at no or a minimal charge from JPY 300 to JPY 500 (USD 3.73 to USD 6.12³).

Not a few Net Cafes have a lot of comics, magazines and newspapers freely available to read. Conversely, in almost every Japanese Manga Cafe⁴ customers can enjoy PC rental services and Internet access as well as the extra services mentioned above. So, it is difficult to distinguish Net Cafes from Manga Cafes in contemporary Japan.

In fact, when the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (hereafter referred to as “MHLW”) conducted a survey on the current status of NCNs in 2007, it treated the combined number of Net Cafes and Manga Cafes as “the total number of Net Cafes” and this figure was 3,246 (MHLW, 2007, p. 1). According to Japan’s Yellow Pages, the total number of Net Cafes is 2,745 at present (April 28,

2012) and approximately 13.52% of them are in Tokyo (NTT Directory Services Company, 2012).

The most significant service in Japanese Net Cafes is the “private booth”. Most of the floor area of Net Cafes is segmented into approximately 1.5 m² personal cubicles with 1.5m high walls with swinging or sliding doors, each equipped with a PC, TV, and reclining chair or flat mattress. It is difficult to know precisely the average proportion of booths with computers and open-plan computer areas. However, it is obvious that the people who are envisaged as the main customers of Net Cafes are users of booths. In fact, there is a lot of advertising for a wide variety and number of “private rooms (booths)” on Net Cafe websites. On the other hand, it is very rare for there to be private booths in Internet cafes in the rest of the world.

We can trace the origin of this kind of Net Cafe relatively easily by referring to newspaper articles and a book from around 2000. For example, an owner said in a newspaper article that what his shop offers is personal space to use media such as manga, video games, and the Internet⁵. Senichi Tanaka, one Net Cafe owner who introduced private booths into his shop in 1998, describes his job as being “to lease comfortable spaces to customers” in his business book, titled *Amyuzumento Kakumei, Intanetto/Manga Kissa wo Hatsumeishita no ha Watashi Desu (Amusement Revolution, I am the one who invented the Internet/Manga Cafe)* (Tanaka, 2003).

In this book, Tanaka discusses the difference between his shops and existing Internet/Manga Cafes from the viewpoint of the way of providing services. The fundamental concept of his shop was “space where customers can read Manga without restraint” (Tanaka, 2003, p. 21). According to him, he found from a customer survey on manga cafes was that the real need is not to enjoy good coffee with reading Manga but to read Manga comfortably while having just average coffee (Tanaka, 2003, p. 20). Tanaka regarded the existing Manga Cafes as ‘coffee shops with Manga’, and he also saw the existing Internet Cafes as coffee shops with personal computers and internet access services (Tanaka, 2003, p. 23).

In fact, almost all early newspaper articles on Net Cafes in Japan (from 1995 to around 1999) report that customers asked the shop managers how to use personal computers and the Internet, and furthermore, they communicated directly with each other. So we can assume that most Net Cafes had no private booths in this period.

In the above circumstances, Tanaka refined his concept of the Internet/Manga Cafe. He realized that even if a huge number of Manga can be prepared, it is difficult to distinguish the services in his shops from those in the existing Manga Cafes (Tanaka, 2003, p. 21). Finally, “by extending the pleasures of ‘reading Manga’” to other amusements, he tried to create “space where customers can do anything they want in a better environment” (Tanaka, 2003, p. 21). In 2000, one newspaper article reported that a shop started to offer various media and relaxation tools with private booths for customers who cannot access personal space at their home or office⁶⁷.

From these owners’ commentary on their jobs, Net Cafes mainly offer private space with a PC

and internet access. So, fees for a private booth, which usually costs from JPY 200 to JPY 500 per hour from around 2004, are relatively higher than fees for Internet Cafes in other countries.

3. The Current Status of NCNs

According to the MHLW report in 2007, 7.8% of customers who have ever stayed all night at net cafes are homeless people. This category includes people who have no home and stay overnight at net cafes more than 3 times per week. This can be used as a broad definition of NCNs⁸. The number of these people can be estimated at approximately 5,400.

More than 90% of NCNs are male. More than 50% are in unstable working conditions and most of them are temporary dispatch workers at various kinds of workplaces. The percentage of NCNs who have finished vocational professional schools, junior or technical college, or university is less than 10% in Tokyo (MHLW, 2007).

Accommodation other than net cafes which is commonly used by NCNs in Tokyo is as follows (in descending order from first to fifth, with multiple answers allowed except when “only using Net Cafes and Manga Cafes for accommodation”): the streets, including parks, riverbanks, roadsides and public facilities such as railway stations etc. (29.5%); fast food restaurants (23.7%); saunas (23.2 %); capsule hotels (16.1 %); their friends’ houses (7.6 %) (MHLW, 2007, p. 22).

This indicates that NCNs have two partially incompatible criteria for selection of their accommodation: cost and relaxing in solitude, and we can guess their choices are some variations of compromise between these criteria. For instance, the first two choices obviously prioritize cost over relaxing in solitude. Furthermore, the fees of saunas and capsule hotels are relatively higher than those of net cafes. However each of these has some advantages in terms of comfort and facilities. In this sense, we may be able to regard private booths in Net Cafes as the ideal accommodation for these people which fulfils both criteria to a large degree.

It is also possible that there are a number of homeless people who use Net Cafes for accommodation occasionally. For example, Makoto Yuasa argues that the estimated total number of NCNs should be higher because the MHLW survey only counts the number of customers who have no home and stay at a Net Cafe more than 3 times per week as NCN, so homeless people who have no choice but to stay overnight at a Net Cafe less than 2 times per week are eliminated from the total (Yuasa, 2007).

We can also describe the terrible situation which NCNs confront by referring to other data from the same report. For instance, the average income of NCNs in Tokyo is JPY 107,000 per month (MHLW, 2007: 37), so they would have difficulty even to afford to live in private booths in Net Cafes. However, the most crucial problem is their isolation. The MHLW reported that the percentage of NCNs who had no one to talk about their problems was 42.2% in Tokyo (MHLW, 2007, p. 41).

For those who had someone, the person they could talk to was as follows (in descending order, with multiple answers): friend (29.0%); acquaintance (13.8%); sibling (8.9%); other⁹ (7.1%); parent (2.7%); co-worker (0.9%) (MHLW, 2007, p. 41). This data shows that NCNs don't/can't ask their relatives for help and are mutually isolated as Net Cafes are segmented by private booths.

Their isolation also becomes a barrier to realizing more social inclusion for NCNs. There have been a lot of discussions in terms of social inclusion and it is difficult to summarize all of them. Here, I define the term "social inclusion for NCNs" as "to offer someone a place where he/she is allowed to stay and is able to call for others' help in a society" by referring to some previous studies (Abe, 2011; Iwata, 2007, 2008; Mizushima, 2007; Yuasa 2008). The reason why their isolation is an obstacle to social inclusion is they tend to see their terrible situation as their own fault, not as the result of exclusion from company, family, public welfare and education (Mizushima, 2007, p. 74-6; Yuasa, 2008), and they try to improve their life all alone.

But why don't/can't they try to help each other? As an answer to this question, I pointed out in a previous paper that the customers of Net Cafes internalize the hidden norm that, "you can do anything you want except disturb others" (Hirata, 2011b, p. 45). If this norm is shared by all customers of Net Cafes including NCNs, they would hardly be able to do anything because they cannot tell what behavior may disturb others¹⁰.

In fact, the air of Net Cafes is in general filled with near-total silence. According to my informants, one of the most problematic behaviours in Net Cafes is to make noise. We guess that the reason why they think so is that noise is one of the few behaviors which can disturb others in a private booth where people are prevented from seeing each other. In this situation, it is reasonable to imagine that to ask someone for help could become a problematic behavior.

In the following sections, I will discuss two considerable difficulties in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs. In addition, I will try to show that these difficulties have common features with achieving more social inclusion for migrants all over the world. In this sense, I will treat NCNs as a type of migrants

4. Which Category Do NCNs Belong to: 'Refugees' or Economic Migrants?

Before we consider the difficulties in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs, it is worth noting that NCNs don't belong to the category of refugee in the conventional sense. Refugees are distinguished by a number of factors: one general meaning is 'a person who has difficulty leading their normal life because of disasters or war'; the more specific meaning is 'a person who is forced to leave their own country to escape from ethnic, religious, or political persecution'. According to the traditional distinction, we may be able to term the former as "displaced persons" and the latter as "political refugees". As we saw in previous sections, NCNs cannot have a normal life for economic

reasons and are forced to live in Net Cafes because they cannot get stable jobs or receive social welfare. So, they are closer to “domestic economic migrants” than refugees¹¹.

Additionally, the word ‘refugee’ and their existence seem to be unfamiliar to most Japanese in the first place. According to the statistical data offered by the Ministry of Justice, very few people have been recognized as refugees in Japan. The total number of applicants for refugee status in 2008 was 1599, in 2009 it was 1388 and in 2010 was it 1202, and the number of these people who were given official refugee status was only 57 in 2008, 30 in 2009 and 39 in 2010 (Ministry of Justice, 2011, pp. 58-9).

On the other hand, it seems that the phrase “NCN” and what it means has become widely accepted in Japan. In fact, it was nominated in Japan’s Keyword of the Year contest in 2007 and placed in the top 10. How can we explain these phenomena? A probable answer is that contemporary media like TV or the Internet have broadcasted images of refugees in foreign countries and Japanese can easily relate them to people who seem to be NCNs.

In actuality, the phrase “NCN” was first used in a TV program. Hiroaki Mizushima, a foreign correspondent, documentary producer, and the creator of this phrase, says the reason he used the term Nanmin to describe these people is that both existing refugees and NCNs had the same kind of “eyes with “solitariness” abandoned by their government¹² (Mizushima, 2007, p. 5). So we have to consider that many Japanese find essential commonalities between existing refugees and NCNs at some abstract level.

So, in the eyes of Japanese people, NCNs belong to both the category of refugees and that of economic migrants and they seem to have a dual aspect. In other words, they are unidentified abandoned people, and at the same time are engaged in economic activities although in unstable employment conditions.

5. Two Perspectives on Refugee-like Economic Migrants

One of the difficulties in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs is that two partly incompatible perspectives are inevitably generated. One perspective focuses on keeping the place into which refugee-like economic migrants gather, such as Net Cafes, secure. Another perspective pays attention to providing a basis of secure lives to people who have no choice but to become anonymous and to come to Net Cafes, such as NCNs¹³.

For example, the Metropolitan Police Department (hereafter “MPD”) recently enacted an ordinance regulating the operation of Internet terminals in “private rooms”, obliging customers to show ID, and the MPD defined a “private room (booth)” as “a space which one cannot easily look inside” (MPD, 2010b) and “a space where anonymous users can easily commit crimes” (MPD, 2010a).

It is worth remarking that the crimes which the MPD imagines are illegal economic activities which anonymity allows people to commit easily. The crime which the MPD takes as the very first example is “to discover someone’s ID and password to gain illegal access to his/her web bank account by use of a key logger program” (MPD, 2012). Additionally, Net Cafes have fulfilled the role of shelters for runaways, including young people, who have suffered from or witnessed domestic violence (Mizushima, 2007; Kuroba, 2010). One of the purposes of the ordinance is preventing such young people from becoming victims or perpetrators of crimes (MPD, 2010a).

However, since the media broadcasted that the MPD was considering introducing this ordinance, not only supporters of NCNs but also some ordinary people have rebutted it. For example, one denounced the unclear evidence on which the ordinance was based. Another argued that it makes it more difficult for NCNs to live because they don’t have a fixed address to get ID. Of course it is difficult for young people who have suffered from or witnessed domestic violence to approach their home area even if they need to get their ID.

The MPD treats Net Cafes as places which are full of unidentified persons and regards some of them as people who are engaged in illegal economic activities and the other of them as people who may become victims of crimes. So the MPD distinguishes identifiable persons who can’t easily commit crime from unidentified persons who may have inclination to inflict harm on others. In other words, the MPD makes an issue of persons who are unidentified and engaged in economic activities from the viewpoint of security, including NCNs, and tries to protect “good” persons from “bad” persons. This perspective is the same as has been directed towards people whom we call refugee-like economic migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2008, p. 328).

On the other hand, people who support NCNs have taken part in social action to prepare the necessary infrastructure for these people and to redress social disparities. Their actions are the same as those of international humanitarian refugee assistance groups like the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in raising refugee-like economic migrants’ position in the countries where they are living (International Organization for Migration, 2008, p. 328).

It is difficult to reconcile the two perspectives because if the MPD tries to keep Net Cafes secure, it inevitably excludes NCNs who need a secure environment more than anyone else, and if the supporters of NCNs try to provide a basis of secure lives to NCNs, first they have to identify each NCN as a safe person for the others. Actually, in the petition to the Tokyo Metropolitan Public Safety Commission, etc., the NPO Moyai, which is one of the biggest NPO groups for contemporary homeless people, asked “to include “Hello Work” (public employment security office) registration cards or special IDs¹⁴” and “not to oblige clientele (victims of domestic violence and persons in need who don’t have a fixed address) to show ID” (NPO Moyai, 2010).

However, what we have to consider here is that even if the MPD forces customers of Net Cafes to show their ID and supporters try to expand the means of identification, the concern about

security will never disappear as long as NCNs are refugee-like economic migrants, that is, they are unidentified and engaged in economic activities. For instance, their submitted personal IDs themselves can be viewed with suspicion of being false by a person with skeptical eyes. While the supporters of NCNs may be able to criticize these eyes as discriminatory, they can't completely reject the aim to protect "good" persons from "bad" persons.

To make matters worse, however, this suspicious view of refugee-like economic migrants traps them in the friction between these two perspectives on security. In fact, problems like this have been repeated in relation to of this kind of people all over the world. For example, in the case of the recent mass movement of Zimbabweans to Southern Africa, a lot of people couldn't get enough support for their lives because of a "false distinction between economic and forced migration" (Forced Migration Studies Programme, 2009, p. 37).

6. The Smell in a Net Cafe

Another difficulty in realizing more social inclusion is related to the hidden norm in Net Cafes, that is "you can do anything you want except disturb others." The question which we have to ask here is as follows: What kind of behaviour seems to disturb others in Net Cafes?

To explain what I mean, I'd like to introduce a poster in a Net Cafe which can be seen as both service advertising and a warning notice. It stated "Please tell shop assistants if there is a bad smell from the next room. We will offer you another room soon." The likely cause of bad smells is people who couldn't take a bath or shower or wash clothes for a long time because they do not have enough money to do so.

This example reveals friction which is difficult to see as a cultural conflict, a moral problem and discrimination against some people. It can be called "friction among people who are just trying to live." We can include in this type of friction concerns about security expressed on a personal level against a person who seems to be suspicious but is just trying to live. In this sense, what I am exploring here is a micro level analysis of the difficulty in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs or refugee-like economic migrants.

It is very hard to reconcile the above friction because it is based on the fact that someone who is just living necessarily more or less interferes with someone else who is just living. So if we protect one person's position, at the same time we suppress another's. If we try to realize more social inclusion by giving respect to both of them, one reasonable solution is what shop assistants in that Net Cafe did, that is to say, separating one from another.

However, does this separation deserve the name of social inclusion, or does it rather promote more social exclusion? This "gentle" segregation in Net Cafes is driven by such a principle but there is also much more severe segregation of refugee-like economic migrants all over the world. All the

more, this kind of separation is not a solution but a postponement of finding a solution. So even if refugee-like economic migrants are in a society, the very fact that they are just trying to live in that society makes them try not to bother other people in order to keep their social relations, but the effect of this can be to further separate them.

NCNs are typical examples of this kind of people, especially female NCNs. According to Mizushima's report, most female NCNs make themselves presentable when they go outside the Net Cafe (Mizushima, 2007, p. 56). He guesses the reason why they do so is "if they don't make up, they can't get a job, and if they don't keep themselves clean, they get suspicious looks from their colleagues at work" (Mizushima, 2007, p. 56).

However some of them don't have enough money to afford cosmetics, so some female NCNs go to drugstores or beauty counters of department stores to make up by use of testers before heading off to work (Mizushima, 2007, p. 56). Another female NCN, who is only 18 years old, always carries a bottle of perfume which she bought for JPY 500 at a discount shop. She uses it to cover her strong body odor when she doesn't have enough money or time to take a shower. But even if she is in this miserable situation, she tries to improve her life all alone (Mizushima, 2007, pp. 60-6).

7. How Should We Seek a Pathway to a Solution?

The above two difficulties, 1) the friction between the two perspectives on the 'security' of refugee-like economic migrants, 2) the friction among refugee-like economic migrants and between them and other people, can't be solved just by the reconstruction of our regime through which we can offer NCNs certain things they need such as a stable job, an apartment, etc. To explain why, let us now critically examine how many supporters of NCNs rebut the ideology of "self-responsibility" in contemporary Japan while discussing the need for new regime.

"Self-responsibility", here, means that 'people have to be responsible for their immediate situation'. In this way of thinking, NCNs haven't endeavored to help themselves enough, and they must have been able to take some measures to prevent themselves from falling into their current situation, such as saving money, searching for more stable jobs, etc. Of course the message we can hear in this ideology is "we (non-NCNs) are not responsible for the current situation of NCNs or improving their lives". So this ideology discourages people from getting involved in the friction between refugee-like economic migrants and between them and society. Additionally, it empowers the perspective which focuses on keeping places secure by trying to exclude dangers because this is a perspective which tries to protect "good" persons from "bad" persons, and people holding this perspective regard themselves as "good" persons and refugee-like economic migrants as "bad" persons who have failed to be self-responsible.

Against the ideology of self-responsibility, supporters of NCNs have introduced evidence

which explains why NCNs have begun to stay in Net Cafes and how they have been excluded from companies, family, public welfare and education. Moreover, Yuasa explains that if NCNs “internalize the viewpoint of the ideology of self-responsibility ...they cannot protect their dignity and they are cornered to the point where they never respect themselves”. He describes this situation as “exclusion from self (self-alienation)” (Yuasa, 2008, p. 61).

We can understand that this is similar to the situation of the 18 year old girl who we saw above. Yuasa also describes it as a “situation without recourse” (Yuasa, 2008). The word “recourse”, which Yuasa calls “*tame*¹⁵” in his book, and which is derived from Amartya Sen’s “capability”, means something which “plays the role of a shock absorber from the outside and a resource for generating power” to do something (Yuasa, 2008, p. 78). The primary example of recourse is the role of money, and Yuasa also includes intangibles such as a good relationship with parents in it. According to him, we need “mental recourse” which “enables us to be confident about ourselves, to do something and to respect ourselves” (Yuasa, 2008, p. 79) to prevent us from collapsing in self-alienation.

However, what we should notice is that people who embrace the ideology of self-responsibility actually have relatively limited recourse, because if they had enough recourse, they would not need to rely on this ideology¹⁶. In the case of the friction in terms of smell, for example, people who really need to ask shop assistants to change their rooms are those who have no choice but to use this Net Cafe, on the other hand, people who have enough recourse such as money don’t have to stay and use the Net Cafe in the first place.

If this is true, our challenge is not only to criticize people and societies that embrace the ideology of self-responsibility as a difficulty in realizing more social inclusion for NCNs but also to consider a way of making a sphere where both refugee-like economic migrants and people who believe in self-responsibility live together without friction. However, how do we seek it? In the following section, I will introduce the concept of “hospitality” as a pathway to a solution and discuss why this concept solves our difficulties¹⁷.

8. Brief Remarks on the Concept of Hospitality

I owe the concept of hospitality to Jacques Derrida’s short commentary (Derrida, 1997). In this commentary, he discusses the relationship between “villes-refuges” (cities of refugees) and hospitality by deconstructing Immanuel Kant’s study on perpetual peace. He argues that universal hospitality must be based on not only the right to visit to everywhere but also the right to be a guest everywhere (Derrida, 1997). This means everyone under the concept of hospitality has to treat others not just as visitors but also as people who can stay unconditionally. So the concept of hospitality offers us an image of universal social inclusion.

Of course universal hospitality is an idealistic concept. However, according to Derrida, the

reason why it seems idealistic is not that no one can realize it in factual form but that it always and already exists in some limited forms such as the acceptance of refugees by “government” or “personal” acceptance of others and it can be envisaged only through these kinds of incomplete examples (Derrida & Dufourmantell, 1997).

This is the first reason why I treat the concept of hospitality as a pathway to a solution to our difficulties because, from this perspective, we can regard existing social relations, including societies in which self-responsibility is embraced, as an incomplete example of universal hospitality. That is to say, we can positively ask why people don’t deserve universal hospitality and how these societies should be changed toward creating it.

It is worth noting that the practice of hospitality makes all concerned exchange positions with each other. For example, someone can be a host in a place only after another person arrives at there as a guest. Thus the fact that someone is a host is owing to the existence of another person who is being a guest. In this sense, a host has no choice but to exist when recognized as such by a guest, in other words they are the guest of a guest, which is to say the guest is hosting the host. On the other hand, someone becomes a guest when viewed as such by someone who is going to be a host. Then, the place opened in this way to the practice of hospitality belongs not only to the host but also to the guest.

Additionally, let us see Koichiro Kokubun’s definitions of hospitality and tolerance in his study on the notion of hospitality in Pierre Klossowski’s book *Les Lois de L'hospitalité (The Laws of Hospitality)* which is one source of Derrida’s concept of hospitality. Kokubun defines hospitality as a practice in which “both host and guest exchange positions with each other by accepting the other person” and at the same time, he also defines tolerance as a practice in which “someone accepts another person patiently without complaint by maintaining their existing self-identity and position” (Kokubun, 2002, p. 44).

We should note that this definition of tolerance explains what happens in the friction among people who are just living. That is to say, these people patiently accept each other without any complaint about it. In this sense, “gentle” segregation is one reasonable practice of tolerance. Furthermore, the ideology of self-responsibility plays a role of maintaining the existing positions of all concerned in the midst of this friction. This is important because the reason why people keep away from refugee-like economic migrants and the friction between them by relying on that ideology is to protect their existing social/economic positions. Equally, the reason why refugee-like economic migrants sometimes accept this ideology, for example the 18 year old girl who we saw above, is that this is the only way to keep their social/economic relations, in other words to maintain their social/economic positions in their society.

Kokubun also explains the commonality and difference between the practices of hospitality and tolerance. He says that there is no difference between the two practices in terms of accepting

anyone, the only difference is the way this acceptance is achieved, that is, whether all parties exchange their positions with each other or not (Kokubun, 2002, p. 44). From this, Kokubun concludes that the practice where someone accepts another person without exchanging their positions with each other inevitably leads to a tolerant relationship which has the possibility of becoming the trigger of future friction (Kokubun, 2002, p. 44).

So, when we try to realize more social inclusion for NCNs, what we should consider is how NCNs can also acquire the positions of all others concerned with Net Cafes, and at the same time, how all concerned with Net Cafes can occupy not only their own positions but also the positions of NCNs and others. Then, Net Cafes change their form, their role, and their meaning.

9. Internet Cafes and the Current Status of Refugee-like Economic Migrants in Hong Kong

Theoretically, I think the aim of this paper to think about a pathway to a solution of the problems of NCNs has been accomplished above. Now, I will introduce Internet Cafes in Hong Kong and two scenes which I encountered in my field survey there as examples of the practice of hospitality.

First of all, I should note that there are many Internet Cafes in East and Southeast Asian countries. They are important infrastructure for people who cannot afford enough money to maintain their own PCs and Internet access. This understanding can be applied to Hong Kong because it has opened its doors to many immigrants from all over the world, especially from South and Southeast Asia.

According to statistical data offered by the Hong Kong government in 2011, 46.81% of migrants in Hong Kong are from Indonesia and the Philippines and the total number of them is 272,484 (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). Almost all of them are female (96.41%) and work as domestic workers or domestic helpers (hereafter referred as “DW/DH”) (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). These DW/DHs are usually two-year contracted workers and must return to their home country when their contract expires.

So some main customers of Internet Cafes in Hong Kong are these economic migrants. For example, the most concentrated area of Internet cafes in Hong Kong is the 0.15 km² centered around MTR Tsim Sha Tsui station in Kowloon, which many migrants pass through. There are 8 Internet Cafes in this area and their fees are from HKD 10 to HKD 15 (USD 1.29 to USD 1.93) per hour.

The most important fact here is that these migrants also have refugee-like characteristics like NCNs. The reason why we can see them as refugee-like economic migrants is that they cannot get stable jobs in their home countries. For example, the percentage of working people in the Philippines who answered that they worked more than 40 hours per week in the past few weeks was 60.99% in 2006, 62.11% in 2007, 63.52% in 2008, 61.45% in 2009 (Bureau of Labor and Employment

Statistics, 2011). In addition, it sometimes happens that even people who work more than 40 hours per week aren't paid the minimum wage declared by the Philippines government.

So, Filipinos who can go abroad try to seek good workplaces in foreign countries to provide their children with opportunities for education or to improve their life in their home country. Moreover, the Philippines government has encouraged Filipinos to work abroad by admiring overseas Filipino workers as "New Economic Heroes". However, the social welfare system including development of legal systems both in Hong Kong and the Philippines was not enough for them to work safely (Guzman, 2003).

Perhaps the fastest way to understand the financial situation of these migrants is to look at their income and how they spend money. For example, focusing on female migrants who work as DW/DHs, the minimum allowable wage declared by the Hong Kong government in 2008 was fixed at HKD 3,580 per month (Hirata, 2011b, p. 46). The average wage of the 9 informants who agreed to tell me their wages is also approximately HKD 3,600 per month.

In Hong Kong, they are at least provided with a room for taking rest, board, and health insurance by their employers. So if their average income may seem low by comparison to that of NCNs. However, what we should take into account is that these migrants have to pay a lot of money, equivalent to 7 months of their income, to their agent for intermediary charges. In addition, they send about two-thirds of their wages to their families back in their home areas.

10. Conclusion: Immigrant Song for a Child and the Father of a Baby Who Is Gonna Crawl

However, the atmosphere of Internet Cafes in Hong Kong where these migrants come together is quite different from Net Cafes. They enjoy using Facebook, Yahoo Messenger, and Skype to communicate with their family members, lovers, and friends left in their home countries at open-plan computer workstations.

On Sundays or holidays, these Internet Cafes are noisier than Net Cafes, but no one complains about it, even if a migrant woman sings "We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" and plays it on the recorder for her child via Skype at the beginning of January. I encountered this scene in the middle of an interview survey in an Internet Cafe, and I and my informant had no choice but to stop talking to each other with a smile. We can say that and my informant existed not only as an interviewer and an informant but also as the audience in this scene. On the other hand, the migrant woman who cared for her child via Skype was also a singer for me and my informant.

In another Internet Cafe, a female customer from Indonesia came in with a baby in a stroller. She told me "my friend has left this baby in my hands until she finishes her job. I came here because I couldn't find any other good places to sit down." However, the baby released the fasteners of his stroller and started crawling on the floor. She brought him back and fastened him to the stroller, but

he released them and crawled again. This scene was repeated several times and she had to stand up from her chair every time. Finally, she was at a loss about how to stop him.

Then, the owner of this Internet Cafe, who is an African man, picked up the baby in his big arms and sat him down in a chair in front of a personal computer. The owner also set a big headset on the baby's ears and tried to search for something to watch on YouTube. I asked him what he was trying to show the baby and he answered "cartoon movies of Thomas & Friends!" So I helped him to find them on YouTube, because they are sometimes deleted because of copyright infringement. At last, we successfully got the baby to sit still.

Are these two scenes too idealistic or too contingent to be realized in other places especially in Net Cafes in Japan? I would answer yes they are, however at the same time, I think we have to ask: Why don't these situations seem to happen in other places and how can we realize these kinds of situations in other places?

For example, unlike Internet Cafes in Hong Kong, private booths in Net Cafes not only separate the personal computers but also the concrete personal relationships between people who might otherwise be able to practice hospitality. However, even if we just removed the physical divisions, the scenery of Net Cafes would remain the same because the psychological barrier to communication between people is higher and thicker than merely the walls of private booths.

In this sense, we should not just try to make Net Cafes simply clean, comfortable and safe, because these are not the only necessary factors for achieving more social inclusion for NCNs, in fact they can sometimes be unnecessary or a hindrance. For example, the two Internet Cafes which I introduced above were relatively dirty and uncomfortable for using a PC, and it is difficult to say that they were in a safe area of Hong Kong. What we should reconfirm here is that universal hospitality always and already exists in some limited forms. So the practices of hospitality also take shape in a different form in each place, each society and each country,

Therefore, we have to ask what are the conditions of hospitality/tolerance in Net Cafes, that is to say, do all parties in Net Cafes exchange their positions with each other or not. And if we seek the possibility that all the parties in the problem of Net Cafes have not only one position but also gain other positions in the process of accepting the other person, we can imagine several ways, for example, some problems of Net Cafes might be able to be solved by employing NCNs as live-in official staff in Net Cafes.

This way of thinking can also be applied to various kinds of problems of refugee-like economic migrants. And, in the process, we can envisage that Net Cafes and our society itself could become a place of hospitality in which we can realize more social inclusion.

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Notes

¹ This paper contains material under the theme of this research from two of my published papers (Hirata, 2011a; 2011b).

² Generally speaking, Internet Cafes are called “Net Cafes” in Japan. So, unless otherwise noted, I refer to “Internet Cafes in Japan” as “Net Cafes” in this paper.

³ All exchange rates in this paper are as of 28, April, 2012.

⁴ In Japan, Manga Cafes (Comics Cafes) are widely known as a kind of coffee house with a lot of Manga which are available to read freely. However, as I mentioned above, recently many Manga Cafes offer PC rental service, internet access, and other services which are also provided in most Net Cafes.

⁵ Asahi Shinbun (Fukushima), 18, Nov., 1999.

⁶ Yomiuri Shinbun (An evening paper in the Western part of Japan), 22, Dec., 2000.

⁷ In 2002, a newspaper article reported that a person who is an unemployed drifter was arrested because of leaving a Manga Cafe without paying for the fee for using a private booth and food (Asahi Shinbun (Hokkaido), 28, Sep., 2002). According to this article, he stayed there for 32 hours and took some foods, however, he said he had little money in the first place and had only 105 JPY when he was found by a police officer. We can guess he is one of the earliest figures of NCNs and people including NCNs were using these private booths as alternative accommodation from around 2002.

⁸ This definition includes various employment statuses: permanent employees, freelance professionals, temporary workers, and unemployed people whether seeking work or not among NCNs. A narrower definition of NCN only includes temporary workers. This paper uses NCN in the former sense because people who have no address easily fall into unstable working conditions.

⁹ For example, this category includes ward office or welfare office staff (MHLW, 2007, p. 41).

¹⁰ Tatsuru Uchida wonders why NCNs don't do something like share an apartment with someone (Uchida, 2008, p. 223). The background of his question is that people who don't have fixed addresses are placed at a severe disadvantage in Japan. Because such people have little chance to get regular employment, and they are forced to work part-time jobs, they cannot save enough money to rent a room, for example to pay lease deposits, or to have health insurance (Iwata, 2007, 2008; Mizushima, 2007; Yuasa, 2008). My conclusion here is an answer to Uchida's question.

¹¹ In actuality, some NCNs are migrants to large cities from other parts of Japan, others may not have travelled significant distances, but they are all migrants in the sense of having left their home and having no permanent home but only temporary places to stay

¹² So the phrase NCN is derived from very personal experience, and Mizushima himself is astonished that it has become a buzzword in Japan (Mizushima, 2007, p. 2)

¹³ Both these perspectives focus on ‘security’, but the first kind of security involves measures to exclude factors which are perceived as dangerous from places such as Net Cafes, while the second kind of security of living requires opening these places up so that people such as NCNs can access them and gain help within them without barriers. Inevitably, these perspectives are conflicting, however, both may claim to benefit NCNs as users of Net Cafes,

¹⁴ It was suggested that these special IDs would be published by welfare offices, the council of social welfare, or NPOs designated by Tokyo metropolitan government (NPO Moyai, 2010) but they were

not admitted officially and had not actually been issued at the moment when this petition was presented.

¹⁵ Yuasa said that the word “*tame*” is derived from the word “Tameike (Reservoir)” (Yuasa, 2008, p. 78).

¹⁶ Regarding this, Takeshi Ikuta discusses the similarity between homeless people and the young men who attack them without reasonable reason (Ikuta, 2005). Referring to an interview with a male university student, Ikuta focuses on one of the reasons why this young male attacked homeless people that he regarded them as worthless people who haven’t endeavored to do anything. Of course this reason is completely absurd, however, Ikuta guesses that this young man had always been told a similar message in his home or school (e.g. “if you don’t try hard to do something, you will become a worthless person!”) and he had no choice but to accept this value to keep his own place in his home or his school. If so, this young person would have few mental recourses.

¹⁷ Jennie Germann Molz and Sarah Gibson have also edited a book which focuses on the relation between the problem of migration or refugees and the concept of hospitality (Molz & Gibson, 2007). Judith Still’s book (Still, 2011) is a good introduction to Jacques Derrida’s thoughts on hospitality.

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