



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2018

**Buchbesprechung von Miloš Debnár, Migration, Whiteness, and Cosmopolitanism:
Europeans in Japan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)**

Chiavacci, David

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591417000316>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-158765>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Chiavacci, David (2018). Buchbesprechung von Miloš Debnár, Migration, Whiteness, and Cosmopolitanism: Europeans in Japan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 15(1):142-144.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591417000316>

Migration, Whiteness, and Cosmopolitanism: Europeans in Japan. By Miloš Debnár.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. xii + 235.

ISBN 10: 1137565268; ISBN 13: 978-113756526 (Ebook: 978-1137561497).

David Chiavacci

Miloš Debnár's qualitative study about first-generation European immigrants is a highly welcome contribution to the available research on Japan as a new immigration country. Since the late 1980s, Japan has a steady and significant inflow of new immigrants, except for a temporary drop in the years after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. These inflows of foreign workers, students, marriage partners etc. have been accompanied by a stream of social science publications by Japanese and non-Japanese researchers. However, while among these so-called newcomers (in contrast to the oldcomers during the colonial period and their descendants) Asian immigrants and ethnic Japanese return migrants (*nikkeijin*) have been widely studied, new immigration movements from the West and white migrants are not an important focus and have hardly been included in this growing body of research.¹ In fact, we know much more through available research about Western immigrants in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) than of white immigrants in contemporary Japan. Hence, Debnár's book is an important contribution that fills a gap in our understanding of Japan's new immigration. Moreover, his goal is also to contribute through his analysis to the research and conceptualization of white or Western migrants in general. These migrants are often assumed to be a highly privileged group, and winners of globalization with a cosmopolitan worldview, but Debnár aims to deconstruct this simple image of a transnational elite from the West. His study is in line with a number of recent publications that have started to empirically address questions of privileges and disadvantages of white people in Asia.²

His study is based on fifty-seven in-depth life-story interviews with European immigrants in Japan conducted in two rounds in 2008/2009 and 2011/2012, which he then analyzed using

grounded theory approaches. The large majority of about 85 percent of his interviewees were residing in Japan for more than five years. About 70 percent of them were living in the Kansai region. His book consists of three parts and seven chapters. After an introduction, in which he outlines the goals and main argument of the book as well as briefly discusses his data and method, the first part is divided into two chapters: on the migration history and on the migration process. In the second chapter, Debnár first introduces briefly the new immigration movements to Japan and the history of European migration to Japan in the modern era, including its increase since the late 1980s. Subsequently, he discusses in detail the available visa statistics for European immigrants and identifies different types of European immigrants through a cluster analysis. His analysis demonstrates that current European immigrants in Japan cannot be classified in any dual model like highly-qualified specialists versus sex workers or West European immigrants versus East European immigrants, but shows a much more multifaceted variety. In the third chapter, he further explores this diversity among European immigrants by discussing the factors explaining the increase in European immigrants in Japan since the late 1980s. According to his analysis of the qualitative interview data, a complex interplay of structural changes and individual motives played an important role in the rise of this highly complex migration flow.

The second part of the book is also based on the collected interview data and consists of two chapters; on the integration of the European newcomers and on the question of their white privileges in Japan. In chapter 4, Debnár identifies certain forms of cultural capital and especially English language proficiency as factors that benefit European immigrants in Japan in everyday life and increase their job opportunities. However, by focusing on the gender dimension, he also shows that not all European immigrants benefit to the same degree from this cultural capital. In other words, privileges due to whiteness have limits and are highly context-related in Japan. These limits are further analyzed in chapter 5. It shows that European immigrants are sometimes forced into certain niches in the labor market, which they are not able to exit and so restrains their careers.

The third part addresses the question of the cosmopolitanism of European migrants in Japan. The analysis of the interview data in chapter 6 focuses on the migrants' social networks, everyday life

and identity. The author identifies a cosmopolitan orientation among the European immigrants by forming the closest networks with people in similar immigration circumstances independent of their origin or ethnicity. However, Debnár stresses that this orientation is less due to their belonging to a transnational elite than a strategy helping them to integrate in Japan. In the conclusion, the main findings are summarized and their implications for further research discussed.

Overall, Debnár presents to us a fine and well-thought-out qualitative study on European immigrants in contemporary Japan, and successfully questions many superfluous images of white migration to Japan and other countries outside the West. Still, as with all publications, it also has its limitations. The study focuses primarily on European migrants in the Kansai region. The reader is left wondering if a stronger consideration of European residents in Tokyo, as Japan's economic and political center and one of the leading global cities, might have altered the findings. Moreover, by taking into account further academic discourses and elaborating some of the factors more strongly based on the available literature, an even more nuanced discussion of some of the issues addressed in the book should have been possible. For example, we have a very rich literature discussing whiteness and its meanings in Japan since the seminal work by Hiroshi Wagatsuma,³ which is in part mentioned and quoted in the book, but in my view somehow rather superfluously incorporated into the analysis. Also, a more in-depth discussion of recent changes in the labor market, of new social inequalities or of gender issues in Japan would surely have benefited the analysis of the sampled interview data. In general, the discussion of European migrants' experiences is well balanced and addresses bright as well as dark aspects, but "Japan" remains in the study somehow monolithic and underdeveloped regarding its own diversity and recent dynamic change processes. Finally, one could also have raised the question of whether and how the inflow of European immigrants and Japanese people's exposure to them change mainstream society,⁴ but the implications of Western immigration in Japan remain completely unaddressed in the book.

Still, Debnár's book is surely the best-available study on current Western migration to Japan. It raises many important issues in migration research about Japan and beyond. As such, it can only

Book Review in: *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 15 (1): 142-144.

be hoped that it finds a large readership. The reviewer will surely include chapters of it in his future reading lists in courses on contemporary Japan as a new immigration country.