

Southeast Asia in Japan's Spiritual Market: The Sacralization of Exoticism

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Abstrak

From the migrant care-workers arriving in Japan from the Philippines and Indonesia to support the depleted social support system for the large population of the elderly (Ogawa 2012) to the increasing number of retiring Japanese embarking on long-stay tourism in Malaysia (Ono 2015), the Japanese image of Southeast Asia as an exotic destination offering cheap labor in return for official development assistance seems to be fading away. Yet these changes are not necessarily reflected in the way contemporary Japanese, especially those who belong to the global, “spiritual-but not-religious” (Fuller 2001) population, think of and “consume” Southeast Asia in their daily lives. Using three case-studies, spiritual tours, Thai massage, and an NGO founded by a Japanese spiritual therapist, this paper argues that in Japan's large spiritual market, which targets people seeking alternative ways to express their religiosity, the old-fashioned colonial exoticism of Southeast Asian narratives were integrated in a totalizing discourse, in which Japan remains the exceptional outlier (Tanaka 1993), a country still claimed to be “advanced” both spiritually and economically.