

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

A Filmmaker's Experience on Leaving Japan

Asia Dialogues

Kyoko Gasha, Devin T. Stewart

Transcript

DEVIN STEWART: Hi, I'm Devin Stewart here at Carnegie Council in New York City. I'm with Kyoko Gasha. She is an anchor and senior producer at Thomson Reuters here in New York City.

She is also a filmmaker. She has made two films and is working on a third. Her first film is called *Mothers' Way, Daughters' Choice*. It's about Japanese women who have left Japan and have remade their lives here in New York City. Today we would like to talk to Kyoko about that film.

Kyoko, what inspired you to make such a film?

KYOKO GASHA: In order to talk about that I have to first tell you why I left Japan. I was working for a network TV station in Japan, and my working hours were really hectic. I sometimes had to work at 9:00 in the morning and I would not leave until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. I came home and bathed and then I woke up to take my daughter to kindergarten. I started to think, "Is this the life I really want to live?"

When I got an offer from Reuters, I decided to take the job and came to America, to New York, with my daughter. Then [September 11](#) happened. I arrived here in April 2001 and September 11 was less than six months later.

One of the reasons I decided to come to America was that I wanted to make an independent film. However, because of September 11, I had to postpone that dream for a while. Luckily, I had a job at Reuters so it was easier for me to—how should I say?—calm my spirit to tackle the recovery from 9/11. So, I am very thankful for that.

It took maybe four years for me to recover from the disaster—I had to move seven times—and then finally my mind was set to start an independent film.

DEVIN STEWART: This is the same film that you ended up making, the one about leaving?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes. When you make an documentary film, you really have to love the theme. Otherwise many, many filmmakers give up the idea in the middle of it. So when talking among filmmakers, we agree that it's actually a miracle that one movie can be completed. There are many obstacles, cost issues, and also you can get very confused as to what the theme of the film is.

I think my theme of this film at first was guilt. Was it a good decision for me to leave my own country to achieve my goals in New York, and am I doing too much for me and my daughter? One of the reasons that I came here was for my daughter. I thought, "She is a woman, and if she speaks many languages, and if she is more exposed to Western culture, maybe she will have a better future."

DEVIN STEWART: So the sense of guilt was toward your daughter?

KYOKO GASHA: Toward my daughter, yes. Was I putting too much pressure on her to achieve my goals?

DEVIN STEWART: I see.

KYOKO GASHA: I think I was very confused about my decision, too. Was it a good decision for me to leave such a good job in Japan to be here, and now I am, in a way, in a mess because of the unexpected event? So, in order to organize my mind, I wanted to do something. I actually thought about writing a book first. I talked to my friend who was visiting from Japan, and she said, "But you've been a filmmaker at a TV station in Japan. Why don't you make a film or video instead of a book?"

I said, "Yeah, that's a good idea," and I started filming.

DEVIN STEWART: Let's go back a little bit. What drove you to want to come to New York and make the film? Tell me a little bit about the environment, the pressures you felt, the long working hours. And is this something that is pretty common in Japan?

KYOKO GASHA: It was very common in Japan, yes. The Japanese people still work long hours.

But in my case, what was very unique was that I was also a young mother. In the 21st century, now, there are so many working mothers, even at TV stations. But in my time, I was one of the pioneers to be a reporter and also a mother. I didn't know how to balance that in Japan. I am a workaholic, a very serious worker, so I wanted to do both very nicely. Then there was a crash inside of me—the motherhood and also the work.

I actually asked the company to move me to a less demanding section, which I realized was a bad decision.

DEVIN STEWART: That was in Tokyo?

KYOKO GASHA: That was in Tokyo.

So when I got the offer from Reuters, I jumped on it and I came. But after I came, I thought, "It is going to be a very easy solution for me to balance my life and work." However, because of September 11, the scenario totally was not the case that I thought when I was in Japan.

But because I recovered from the 9/11 disaster, I think I got stronger, and I really found out that I wanted to start making films for me and for the world to talk about issues in Japan that I felt, and then what we could do about it. I also wanted to solve this guilt that I had toward my daughter, and also maybe toward me, leaving such a good country and good company.

DEVIN STEWART: So the film was a way for you to atone for the guilt toward your daughter?

KYOKO GASHA: At first.

DEVIN STEWART: At first?

KYOKO GASHA: At first, I started interviewing all these people who I met during my recovery from September 11. During the recovery I met so many wonderful Japanese women, and I got very curious as a journalist why all these people decided to leave their own country to achieve their goals.

DEVIN STEWART: This is specifically about Japanese women leaving?

KYOKO GASHA: At first. I interviewed so many people.

Also guilt was one of the themes. I asked some people. Some people said, "No, I have no guilt. It was my decision. It is okay for me to achieve my goals here." Other people said, "Yes, I had a divorce in Japan and I felt ashamed. So maybe it was guilt to escape from that, and I came." By interviewing all these people, I said, "It is okay to feel guilt. It is actually your decision. Let us go beyond the guilt and then achieve what you want to achieve."

DEVIN STEWART: Are you sort of illustrating a phenomenon here? Living in New York City, I've seen many capable women coming to New York, and New York City benefits from that—professionals, creative people. Japanese women who are stressed out by the working conditions in Tokyo coming to New York—is that a thing, is that a phenomenon?

KYOKO GASHA: I don't think you can say phenomenon yet. As we know, New York City is not an easy place to live. Many people try, and some people do succeed and other people do not, so I don't really call it an easy solution or phenomenon yet. But there are people I do see who decided to face the challenges of living in New York. The success or failure is up to her.

DEVIN STEWART: You profiled several characters in your film. Was it about six or so?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes.

DEVIN STEWART: And they were very likeable characters. Do you want to talk about a couple of them that stand out?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes. Everybody stands out. I actually interviewed many more people and those are the people who made the cut for the film. So that's good.

What was most interesting was that I decided to interview them in both languages, in Japanese and in English.

DEVIN STEWART: Why did you do that?

KYOKO GASHA: The answers were totally different.

DEVIN STEWART: Different answers from the interviewees?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes.

DEVIN STEWART: In what way?

KYOKO GASHA: There was an M&A lawyer, a merger and acquisition lawyer. I asked her this particular question in Japanese and English. The question was: Why do you think you are very successful in corporate America coming from a very traditional Japanese family?

Her answer in Japanese was "I don't know." Her answer in English was 30 minutes.

KYOKO GASHA: So people feel more comfortable speaking in English?

KYOKO GASHA: I think so, especially talking about their achievement.

DEVIN STEWART: Is this because English is a foreign language for them?

KYOKO GASHA: No. Because English is a more expressive language and it is okay to express more about you or about the environment. In Japanese you have to read between the lines so that less is more sometimes. And if you say too much, especially for women—we were in the last generation, the quieter girls are better children, and we have that somewhat ingrained into our body.

I think sometimes, especially, even for me, at the assessment season at the company, sometimes you have to put on the Western mask to really self-promote. Sometimes we do feel very uncomfortable promoting ourselves.

DEVIN STEWART: It sounds like the Japanese language has some intrinsic effect on gender relations in Japan and it also translates, in a way, to the relations between people even when they travel.

KYOKO GASHA: Even in emails.

DEVIN STEWART: Even in email?

KYOKO GASHA: Right. I think you have to write pretty long emails in Japanese to be polite.

DEVIN STEWART: What are you saying in that long email?

KYOKO GASHA: You have to start with a greeting, then you have to say what you really like to do, and then you have to thank at the end.

In English, when you are really busy and you really want to get to the point of the business, two lines and three lines are allowed. But in Japan maybe it is too abrupt. So I have to be very careful with who I am dealing with. If it is American people, short is okay, but for Japanese people it should be longer.

DEVIN STEWART: [Rakuten](#) was recently in the news. It has been several years that the Japanese company Rakuten has adopted English as the official corporate language. Do you think that the use of English language in daily life in Japan can change behaviors or change attitudes?

KYOKO GASHA: I don't know, because I have never been to Rakuten, I don't know how they are using English.

But I think the language also has a culture. If you don't understand the culture, the brief email can be very rude. So you really have to understand the background of each language to really use the language effectively.

DEVIN STEWART: What are some of the other things that you have learned from making that movie, from looking at the characters in it?

KYOKO GASHA: I think the theme was universal. That was what I learned. This film is shown in Africa, in Europe, and all over Asia too. It was just one example about Japanese people coming to New York. That was a very simple film at first. I have made a very small pilot version of *Mothers' Way, Daughters' Choice* first. It's called *Going Beyond Japan*.

Every woman that I interviewed talked about their mothers, how their mother's life was different from their life.

DEVIN STEWART: All these interviewees are women too?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes. For this film, because I am a woman, I decided to focus the interviews on all women. That was maybe one of the things that I decided when I started making the film: only women and interview in two languages.

I really didn't have to ask about the mothers. But they kept talking about, "My mother had a very traditional life. They wanted to go abroad, but in her time it was very difficult. But in my time I can do this. So maybe I am doing this for my mother," some people said. Some of it was very interesting.

In that first film, *Going Beyond Japan*, I was not in the film—I am the journalist, I am the filmmaker, I am behind the camera. That film went into the Asian American International Film Festival in New York as a work in progress. In that theater I showed it to American people, European people, and of course Japanese people. The audience reaction was, "We really want to see more of the backbone of the film, and in this film you have to be in it, you have to be the storyteller."

I didn't want to at first, but I kind of had to be in the film. And then, because I decided to be in the film, I decided to also put my mother and my daughter in the film. So it became a three-generation film. My mother is very traditional and my daughter is almost American, brought up here.

DEVIN STEWART: Tell me a little bit more about these universal themes that you have identified.

KYOKO GASHA: Even American people coming from the countryside or a small town to New York face the same challenges that Japanese women are facing. That was why this film was shown in many places and then got the awards, the audience awards and the [Front Page Award](#). All these judges are saying, "Kyoko, you made a film about Japanese, but actually this is not a film about Japan or Japanese women only. This is a universal theme." It is not even only about women. All these people decided to come out from the comfort zone to try to achieve what they wanted to achieve. So I think that's why this film is talking to so many people.

DEVIN STEWART: So they broke out of their comfort zone. They came mostly, I guess, to New York. What were the consequences? What did they learn? What were their experiences when they came to New York?

KYOKO GASHA: I think they really tried to find their own talent, what is their mission, what is their calling. If the mission or calling is here in New York, this is the easier city to achieve it, they will stay.

When they realize, "Oh, maybe New York is not the answer," those people decided to go back to their original place, or maybe other cities to achieve.

But for me as a filmmaker, New York is one of the easiest cities for me to make a film because there are so many independent filmmakers and wonderful editors in many languages. So it is very much motivating and helpful for me to make a film in New York.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you want to tell us a little bit about what some of the characters in your film talked about in terms—beyond guilt—about, for example, the norms and the cultures of the two different cities? You have compared Tokyo versus New York City. What are the differences and what are the similarities between the two working environments?

KYOKO GASHA: There is a woman, who is pretty tall as a Japanese person. She had been harassed in a Japanese train many times, especially when she worked late and maybe she had to

go out at night and she was on the last train. In Japan, the subway doesn't run 24 hours; there is always the last train at midnight or a little bit after midnight. There are many, many drunken guys on the train. They say, "You are too tall, you cannot marry." It happens many times, being tall, you are not in a standard size in Japan, you are the target for harassment.

If you are outspoken, you are also the target for harassment. I didn't really realize that until I was in the workforce after graduating from my university. My university was pretty much a co-ed school and very good at promoting women, so I never felt an inferiority complex because of my gender. But once in the workplace, I was so straightforward. At a conference they said, "If you have any opinions, please raise your hand." I did have an opinion, so I raised my hand, and everybody was in shock: "Why is this young woman just fresh out of college raising her hand and trying to express her opinion?"

DEVIN STEWART: And then they called you "alien" in your workplace?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes. One of my bosses was willing to be in my film *Mothers' Way, Daughters' Choice*. I asked him who I was. And he said, "You were like an alien."

In the broadcast news department, they didn't have almost any female reporters. There were only two out of maybe 100 reporters, and I was the third one. But I was coming from a Western culture because I was an exchange student by that time two times, once in college and once in high school. So maybe some of my mannerisms were very much Western. He called it *batākusai*, "You smell like butter"—instead of soy sauce, maybe? So I was this very butter-smelling young woman who tried to express her opinions. It was a shock to them at first. But because it was so shocking, after my year, it was very, very easy for other women to then be accepted at the broadcast section. I was like a litmus paper: "If you can tolerate Kyoko, you can tolerate anybody else."

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think there are other women like you who are breaking the barriers in Tokyo, who are setting a new path for women who have come after them to seize opportunity in the workplace?

KYOKO GASHA: I am sure.

Because of your question, there is another kind of guilt that I felt when I left Japan. After I left Japan and I was struggling from the recovery, one of my reporter friends who was a woman told me, "You should have stayed in Japan. You should have been the frontier to cultivate the workplace better for women." And I felt bad. Especially at that time I was very weak. I was struggling with the reason why I came to New York. But those struggles and that guilt actually went away also when I completed the film.

You can make your own paradise wherever you are. It doesn't have to be New York.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you see things changing in Japan?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes, of course.

DEVIN STEWART: In which way?

KYOKO GASHA: In my time, I said before, there were no female reporters with babies, with children. But now it's almost like a baby boom. Lots of women in the broadcasting department are having children—not only one child, second and third. So it is changing.

Also, the male reporters are accepting. Now, we find in the workplace that not only women reporters are responsible for raising the children, it's also guys. In my time it was very difficult for them to have a concept.

DEVIN STEWART: A concept of?

KYOKO GASHA: Of only women trying to raise kids and not the men.

DEVIN STEWART: So, you're saying in the past a woman might have a baby and then leave the workforce and then come back later, but nowadays it's okay, it's more acceptable?

KYOKO GASHA: I will say one thing. One of the times that I was making documentaries for this TV station, I had to leave at 3:00 a.m., but all the other guys had to stay until maybe 4:00 a.m. And one member of the team said, "You are very lucky to go home at 3:00 a.m. because you have a baby."

And I said, "Oh, I have to change the concept." I think none of us should work until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. It is not good for our bodies. We have to find a more effective way to work.

But it really hurt me—only one hour. I was not going home at 5:00 p.m.; I was going home at 3:00 a.m. But they were staying until 4:00 a.m. It was an ambivalent feeling.

I also understood where those criticisms were coming from. If I was a single woman and I had nothing to do with raising a child, maybe I would have felt the same way too. This interesting workaholic syndrome that I have in myself made it more difficult for me to accept motherhood. So it was a struggle for me.

DEVIN STEWART: It has been well-documented that Japan has an extreme case of long work hours compared to other countries around the world. In my interviews in Japan, having too many work hours is maybe the most common complaint among people who are seeking more gender equality, more choice, and more opportunity, frankly. Do you think that people in Japan have come to a point where they are saying, "We have to change the way we work"?

KYOKO GASHA: Yes, and I think it is happening. When I was working for the TV station, you can work any hours. I actually loved working long hours because I felt like if I worked longer, I can polish my editing even better and maybe I can write better scripts. Sometimes I do feel that way too, still.

Maybe Japanese people are more attention-to-detail kind of people. It's very interesting. But it is changing. Even my TV station where I used to work now has a limit to how many hours you can actually work. So they are trying to change.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think people will follow that limit on work hours, or will they just sort of say "Okay" but ignore it?

KYOKO GASHA: I think my former company is really changing. When I go back to Japan, I usually meet with them. They say, "The time has changed, Kyoko. We are not working like you were when you were here."

DEVIN STEWART: Before you leave, tell us what's next. What is your next big project?

KYOKO GASHA: For the independent film, I am making a film about Japan, Spain, and New York. It's a three-continent film about a 400-year-old story of a Samurai visiting Spain and its after-effect after 400 years.

DEVIN STEWART: This is a true story?

KYOKO GASHA: It is a true story. I only make documentaries.

DEVIN STEWART: I'm looking forward to that, Kyoko.

KYOKO GASHA: Thank you so much.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you.

Audio

Documentary filmmaker and TV journalist Kyoko Gasha discusses her film "Mothers' Way, Daughters' Choice," which is about Japanese women (like she herself) who remade their lives in New York City. She also talks about the difficulties facing working mothers in Japan, especially the long working hours, and how the culture is beginning to change.

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