

Book Review

The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move to A Lot Like the Ones They Left

Author: Garrett Jones

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Reviewed by Aldric Hama

“The apple rarely falls far from the tree.”

--Proverb

There needs to be more serious examination of Japanese foreign immigration and its effects on Japanese society, more than media highlights of individual immigrants and editorials on the joys of multiculturalism. It seems that both establishment politicians and populists do not have a clear immigration policy for Japan. Thoughtful examination however leads to moral panic: the [Japanese are so racist](#)! In fact, as George Mason University professor of economics Garrett Jones observes, the mainstream media and leftist activists “treat doubts about diversity as puzzling if not obviously immoral.” (p. 84)

Every country has a right to territorial integrity and to preserve its cultural inheritance. Foreign as well as domestic tourists unconsciously acknowledge these facts by spending a lot of money to [see and experience Japanese culture, unique and unlike anything else on earth](#). Indeed, [a record number of overseas visitors](#) came to “racist” Japan during the first half of 2025.

Big businesses as well as leftist activists everywhere have their reasons for mass, unrestricted foreign immigration but a key shared assumption is that immigrants [will readily adopt the local culture and values and seamlessly assimilate](#). Fans of mass immigration believe that one can change one’s culture and values as easily as one changes a pair of jeans. Thus, the thinking goes, in the end there will be [no friction between natives and](#) immigrants.

Is this fundamental belief correct, that immigrants will speedily assimilate to an alien culture and adopt values foreign to them? In the long-term, what happens to countries that are ethnically and culturally diverse?

Jones addresses questions that are not given the full consideration that they deserve. According to Jones, the answer to the first question is expect migrants and their descendants to hold onto their ancestral values and cultural practices for a very long time; there is no absolutely complete assimilation. In parallel, expect that immigrant values and culture to latch onto the natives, with gradual but inevitable change to native culture over

time. Finally, over the long-term greater ethnic and cultural diversity could lead to weakening community trust, unraveling of social cohesion and social conflict.

Jones digs into large sets of American ([the General Social Survey](#)) and international (the [World Values Survey](#)) surveys that document national opinions, beliefs and values over time. Jones examines assimilation by comparing values and attitudes of hyphenated Americans to those in the ancestral homeland. For example, Jones asks, “Are Swedish Americans a lot like Swedes? Are Italian Americans a lot like Italians?” (p. 26)

Interestingly, values persist across generations, up until, on average, the first generation’s great-grandchildren. Jones looks at values that are “critical ingredient[s] in the nation’s prosperity recipe” (p. 31), such as trust. First, he finds that American ethnics have differing levels of trust which match those of their country-of-origin. Furthermore, “people from high-trust societies pass on about half of their high-trust attitude to their descendants, and people from low-trust societies pass on about half of their low trust attitudes.” (p. 14) A number of other “ingredients” crucial to national prosperity, such as frugality, transfer and persist to subsequent generations as well.

While Jones suggests values crucial for national prosperity, such as trust and frugality, tend to be sticky, it appears that unwelcomed values expressed in some ethnic groups are as sticky.

So, immigration policy would be to find potential immigrants with “good” values--but one will need to really think about what “good” values are. For example, Jones points out that countries with strong family values, on average, tend to have lower wages and higher unemployment rates. Jones suggests a reason for this: “When you want to stick close to family that means you can’t search far and wide for the best job.” (p. 23). Jones points out that strong family values are associated with other values, such as the importance of “job security” and support for the government to intervene in the economy and to solve social problems (p. 24) Such values likely shape the political outlook of immigrants, which, in turn will influence how they vote.

At the same time, Jones points out that discernable changes to native culture over time. Jones illustrates this by noting American evolution in food tastes. Italian immigrants adapted their homeland recipes to American tastes (using more meat for example). Look carefully, however, Jones says—while Italian immigrants have changed their recipes to suit American tastes, they are still Italian recipes and will remain so forever. Those with Italian ancestry in America is around 6% the population (p. 17), but Italian cuisine is [the most popular ethnic cuisine in the US](#).

Jones calls the cultural interaction between natives and immigrants the “Spaghetti Theory of Cultural Change”: native culture and values affect immigrant culture and values in observable ways and the same is true of the reverse. Those considering importing

culturally distinct immigrants with values differing from the natives should think carefully, of a potential “spaghetti effect” on native culture and values.

Indeed, Jones spends much effort showing readers what distinguishes each country from each other. People, especially the tiny fraction who are innovators, and their history of technological innovation, are a significant predictor of national wealth, more so than, for example, geographical location. Jones shows a significant association between history of innovation recorded since the 1500 AD and income per person. European and East Asian countries, including Japan, wherein historical and modern innovations have occurred, tend to show greater income per capita than, for example, African and South American countries. The presence of significant numbers of innovators in Europe and East Asia, compared to other regions of the world also suggests fundamental differences in cognitive ability and cultural values as well. (Jones further explores the importance of national intellectual strength to national well-being in his previous book, [*The Hive Mind*](#).)

Social conflict within multicultural countries, particularly with minorities who dominate the national economy through ethnic networks and cozy financial and political ties to the government have been extensively documented by [Yale Law School professor Amy Chua](#).

The story of ethnic Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia could be viewed a precautionary tale of what happens when what Chua calls “market dominant minorities” completely dominate, to the exclusion of the native majority, a free market society. Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia rapidly evolved from simple merchants and agriculturists to billionaire owners of national and multinational business empires by parlaying their business acumen and ethnic ties and acting as the native government’s checkbook.

In modern Indonesian history, the response to festering economic inequality and political disillusionment is periodic majority rioting against minority Chinese-Indonesians. The most gruesome anti-Chinese riot occurred in 1998, resulting in rape of Chinese women and girls, murder and extensive looting. In Malaysia, the last major outburst of anti-Chinese violence was in 1969. Since then, racial quotas have been implemented to boost participation of Malays in education, the economy and government, while capping advancement of the Chinese-Malay minority.

Given Japan’s projected demographics, highly skilled, highly educated people, whether through immigration or increased Japanese births, will be needed to maintain Japan’s high standard of living and high level of technical innovation. While selective immigration could be a plus, its effects on national values and culture are not entirely clear. Japanese policy makers should be asking the same questions posted by Jones: do today’s immigrants match Japanese values and culture and what will their descendants’ imprint on Japanese values and culture look like? Will tourists in the future still want to visit Japan?