

Why Does More Labor Migration Not Occur under the Japanese “Guestworker” Program? An Insight from the Seafood Processing Industry

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The Foreign Trainee/Technical Intern Program (hereafter, FTTIP) is one important factor that explains the growth of migrant workers in the Japanese labor market during the last two decades. While this program officially aims at the overseas development assistance, many previous research and journalistic accounts have suggested the role of this program as a de facto guestworker program that offers migrant workers for businesses that struggle to attract native-born workers (e.g. Kamibayashi 2002; Suzuki 2006).

The food processing industry, particularly its seafood processing sector, is one notable industry that employs migrants through the use of the FTTIP. In 2013, the seafood processing industry is reported to have over 13,000 migrants in total (JMAFF 2015), which, in the country with less than 2 percent of the migrant population, amounts to 7.1 percent of the total labor force of this industry. The use of migrants of the seafood processing industry may pose little surprise. This industry has traditionally employed female “part-time” workers as the source of low-paid production workforce. Yet, the aging of existing workers, coupled with the growth of service industries, has recently made it difficult to secure native-born workers, which led this industry to the employment of migrants (Kase 2005; Watanabe et al. 2006).

Whereas the seafood processing industry may be more dependent on migrants as compared with other industries, however, another important fact is that even in this industry, the vast majority of the workforce (over 90 percent) is still native-born workers. This leads to the following question: If job characteristics of this industry including low-wage and low-skilled work create labor shortage of native-born workers, why do more seafood processing businesses not suffer from such shortage and, consequently, why does more labor migration not occur? This presentation explores this issue. By so doing, it seeks to gain the fuller understanding on the way that labor migration plays out at the low-skilled labor market in Japan.

For the purpose of revealing this issue, this presentation looks at the case of Town A, located in the western part of Japan. Perhaps the demand for migrants varies by localities, in which the shortage of native-born workers is concentrated where the seafood processing industry stands as a major local industry, employing a large share of the local workforce. Yet not all such localities show a particularly high dependence on migrants, including Town A, where the seafood processing is a principal local economic activity with a relatively low level of migrants. Thus, analyzing the case of this town offers an important insight for the question that this presentation addresses.

Based on the results from the interview research with local seafood processors and seafood processing cooperative associations, this presentation suggests two

interrelated mechanisms through which the local seafood processing industry operates without generating the demand for migrants. The first concerns the local character of production and the type of the workforce that it necessitates. In parallel with the national trend, the local seafood processing has recently been in the process of the consistent decline. In the case of this town, the declining product demand and downsizing of the local industry has forced many seafood processors to operate in an unstable way, with the production volume fluctuating on the daily and seasonal basis. This local character of production mandates the flexible use of workforce, which includes daily work cuts as well as seasonal layoffs of workers. Whereas local employers presume that migrants (technical interns) would work hard, or even harder than native-born workers, they regard employing native-born workers (female “part-timers”) as being more suitable, since it makes it easier for employers to make an arbitrary and flexible work arrangement for their operation.

The second involves an implicit agreement that seafood processors have with their workers. While playing the role of the convenient workforce, native-born workers are not entirely vulnerable. Being aware of performing that role, these workers also make demands, which in many cases involve the rearrangement of their work schedule including work absence for family issues. Employers accept it when it happens, since failing to do so may result in the turnover of existing workers. The existence of this agreement, albeit implicit, accounts for why the local seafood processing industry secures native-born workers despite its low pay and flexible use of these workers.

An implication of these findings is that, within the seafood processing industry, the larger demand for migrants may originate from a more industrialized system of production with a consistent production volume, since such a production system makes the introduction of migrants more suitable in the regulatory framework of the FTTP, while making the securement of native-born workers more difficult. This would account for why more labor migration does not occur in this industry.

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