

**Nepali Migration to Japan:
from the ‘Vulnerable Invisible’ to the ‘Precarious Visible’**

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Nepali labour migration to Japan is relatively recent, beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the post-pandemic years of the 2020s. It comprises two distinct waves of arrivals, two contrasting visa statuses, and three different sub-groups of migrants and their particular work activities. The three Nepali sub-groups are: (1) visa-overstayers employed in the manufacturing industry; (2) students working in Japan’s service industry while enrolled in language and vocational schools; and (3) cooks employed in Indo-Nepali restaurants and accompanied by their dependants. The first sub-group of visa-overstayers arrived in the mid-1980s and left by the late 2000s. The second and third sub-groups—students and cooks—entered around the same period of the mid-2000s and have continued arriving into the present period of the early 2020s. A close examination of each group’s migration and work experiences in Japan reveals certain patterns in common. First, the three Nepali groups developed their own migration systems (De Haas, Castles & Miller 2020), utilizing social networks and intermediaries that facilitated migration to Japan (Hernández-León 2013). Second, each group has worked in industries characterized by labour shortages and inferior working conditions. Third, a combination of informal migration systems and employment in labour-short industries has allowed for exploitative labour practices by both employers and intermediaries.

These common migration experiences of the different Nepali sub-groups point to both Japanese government immigration policies designed to benefit Japan’s economy, but also Nepali

migrants' determination to take maximum advantage of their migration opportunity. Over the past 40 years this tug of war between a reluctant state and aspiring migrants has resulted in the emergence of a thriving South Asian immigrant population that is halfway towards building a semi-permanent community in Japan (Yamanaka 2021). However, the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly blocked the Nepali pathway leading from "sojourner to settler," causing devastating impacts to this immigrant population (Tanaka 2020, Kharel 2021).

Based on a survey of the existing literature, this case study of Nepali labour migration to Japan analyses the experiences of migrants comprising the three abovementioned sub-groups—visa-overstayers, students, and cooks with families—focusing on each one's migration systems, labour activities, and community formation. The study first discusses the historical and structural backgrounds of the two countries involved, Japan as a country of immigration and Nepal as a country of emigration. It then shifts to an analysis of each sub-group's migration journey.

How Does the Covid-19 Pandemic Affect the Psychological Well-being of Chinese Immigrants in Japan?

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Keywords: Psychological Well-being, Transnationalism, Integration of Immigration

1. Introduction

International migration has been linked to a wide range of health outcomes. As Miller (2019) pointed out that migration as a process of resettlement and acculturation is very stressful, and it can often impact the mental health of migrants negatively. On the other hand, mental health became a major concern during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the impact on the immigrants' psychological well-being has still been neglected. Previous studies indicated that two key aspects affect immigrants' psychological well-being: integration in the host societies and transnational ties to the origin countries (Chitose, 2022). Better integration may improve immigrants' psychological well-being (Lou, 2005). Transnational movements and regular meetings with family and friends in the country of origin also provide stable emotional support for immigrants. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the transnational movement of Chinese immigrants was highly restricted. This paper aims to learn how keeping transnational ties may influence immigrants' psychological well-being.

2. Literature review

Assimilation theory occupies an important role in previous studies dealing with the psychological well-being of immigrants. Poor integration into the host societies can lead to poor mental health (Lou, 2005). The classic "linear assimilation theory" proposed that the length of stay in the host country facilitates immigrant integration. In addition, the "segmented assimilation theory" showed that the host society's linguistic ability and perception of discrimination may influence the integration of immigrants (Portes et al., 2005).

On the other hand, transnationalism theory has become increasingly important in migration studies in recent years (Portes et al., 1999; Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt et al., 2007). Transnationalism is about living across borders while maintaining ties to one's home country (returning to one's home country, sending money to one's family in one's home country, investing in one's home country, and maintaining dual residency).

Therefore, both integration and transnationalism theories are effective to elucidate the psychological well-being of Chinese immigrants in Japan during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Method

Data for this paper were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The overall sample consists of 10 first-generation Chinese immigrants living in Japan who came before the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviewees were recruited within the researcher's network of friends and acquaintances or introduced by them as snow sampling. All interview materials are treated anonymously and confidentially, and all the names that appear in this article are pseudonymous.

4. Findings

After analyzing the data, two patterns can be found.

Psychological well-being badly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic

Statements from 6 interviewees reveal that many Chinese immigrants who keep transnational ties with their origin country cannot only gain emotional support, but the more important thing is they also gain financial resources. Many of them engaged in industries highly related to China, international business, and Chinese-oriented services for example. Transnational ties can boost economic opportunities for some immigrants, and once those ties were cut off by emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, their unstable economic status may cause a rapid decline in psychological well-being.

No influence or better psychological well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

The other 4 interviewees mentioned that transnationalism weakened with their shifting in the focus of life from China to Japan. The commonality between them is no frequent transnational movements even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese immigrants' psychological well-being in Japan. Results show that the Covid-19 pandemic has the opposite impact on the psychological well-being of different Chinese immigrant groups, this may be mediated by the possibility of accessing unique economic resources translated by transnationalism. This result means transnationalism may help immigrants economically integrate into the host society. However, those who frequently go back to their home country may gain great emotional support. Therefore, transnationalism has limited benefits to the psychological well-being of Chinese immigrants, only those who are highly attached to an original country can gain benefits from such transnational ties.

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Why does Japan not have an immigration policy? Explaining past policy choices from the perspective of historical institutionalism.

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Keywords: Immigration Policy, Japan, Policy Analysis

Abstract:

“The government is not considering the adoption of a so-called immigration policy” (National Diet Library 2018). The late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe uttered these words in Japan’s National Diet on October 28th, 2018, ironically whilst outlining his government’s new plan to significantly increase foreign labor through the Specified Skilled Worker system. Indeed, the maintenance of the principle of non-immigration has been a staple of rhetoric from policymakers throughout Japan’s post-war era. This is despite the fact that about 3 million foreigners live in Japan today, many of which would fit a traditional definition of the word immigrant. From colonial era immigrants (*zainichi korean*) to the resettlement of co-ethnics (*nikkeijin*) and other recent newcomer migration, many foreigners now call Japan their permanent home. Naturally, this has led to several immigrant communities, such as in Hamamatsu, Kawasaki, or Osaka.

Why then does Japan maintain that it does not have an immigration policy? Many scholars have attempted to give answers to this query over the years. Burgess (2020) relates it to the “myth of homogeneity” that permeates Japanese society, which, as Kondo (2009) writes, has been present in policy documents since at least 1980. Song suggests that it is part of a delicate balance by the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition, which fears backlash from their more nationalist base of support (Song 2020). On the other hand, Roberts outlines that the avoidance of the “i-word” relates to the government’s desire to maintain a selective immigration control policy (Roberts 2018). All of these are sound arguments that help explain Japan’s maintenance of the principle of non-immigration. However, I would argue that they do not explain the *specific* policy choices, and their reasoning, taken by policymakers. To understand those, a historical approach is needed, and I have chosen historical institutionalism as a framework to outline my attempt at answering the titular question.

Figure 1. Explaining the Policymaking Process Using Historical Institutionalism.

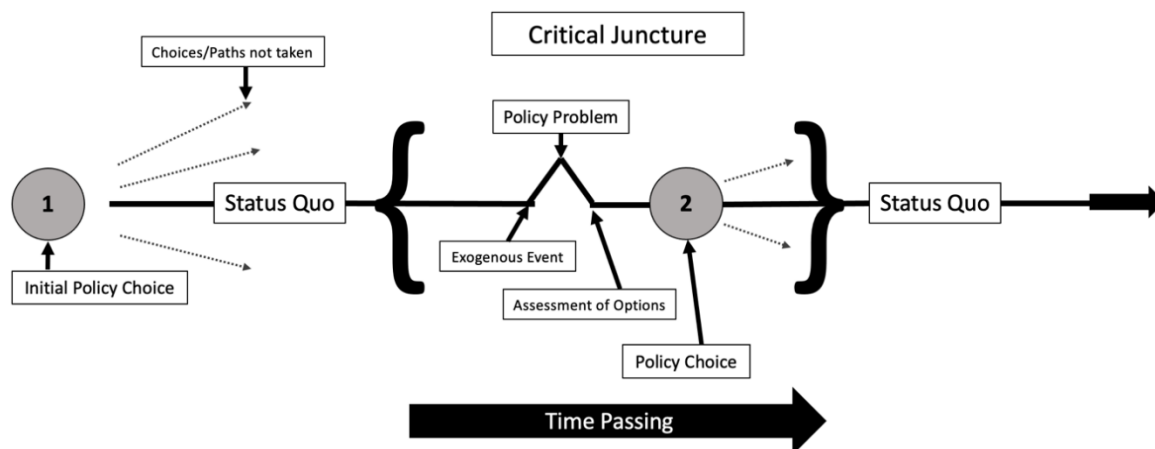


Figure created by author.

I identify the establishment of the so-called “1990 system” as the crucial moment in post-war Japanese immigration policymaking and seek to explain the policymaking process that led to its establishment using historical institutionalism. Under historical institutionalism, policymaking can be broken down into a process in which the original policy (“status quo”) is challenged by a shock to the system (“exogenous event”), forcing policymakers to come up with new solutions (a “policy problem” followed by an “assessment of options”),

eventually leading to new policy (“policy choice”) and thus a new status quo. This process is known as the “critical juncture” (see Figure 1).

I propose that the events surrounding the creation of the 1990 system constitutes such a critical juncture. Using the framework I outlined above, I will discuss first the post-war status quo that held until the 1980s, which was eventually challenged by the exogenous shock that the rapid unregulated influx of foreign workers represented. Presented with the so-called “foreign worker problem,” policymakers and influencers assessed their options, resulting in the *sakoku ka kaikoku ka* (to be an open or closed country) debate. I outline the specific arguments of politicians, bureaucrats, and industry organizations during this time using more than 100 primary source documents, including policy whitepapers, Diet recordings, and interviews recorded by journalists and academics. The result of this debate was the establishment of the 1990 system, which I argue did not sufficiently settle the *sakoku ka kaikoku ka* question and thus resulted in the institutionalization of the non-immigration principle based on the belief that admitting lower skilled foreign workers constitutes an immigration policy. With the post-1990 status quo established; I move on to explain how the “paths not taken” in 1990 have resulted in policy stasis on the issue of immigration in Japan. Specifically, I will outline how the refusal to implement a national immigration policy has led to an institutionalized system of “foreign worker acceptance” with numerous contradictions, in which *de jure* visa status oftentimes does not align with *de facto* employment status. In the conclusion to my presentation, I will focus specifically on outlining the (oftentimes insufficient) policy outcomes for foreigners that this system of “institutionalized non-immigration” creates.

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