

Rethinking the “Disappearance” of Vietnamese Technical Interns: From the Perspective of Migratory Agency

Jotaro Kato, Meiji Gakuin University

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Introduction and Research Background

Japan's Technical Internship Training Program, introduced in 1993, was designed to transfer skills to developing countries. However, a significant issue has emerged: the “disappearance” of technical interns, particularly from Vietnam. Japanese authorities and media have portrayed the phenomenon of technical interns leaving their positions as a severe issue with the term “disappearance” (*shissou*). This study investigates why Vietnamese technical interns “disappear,” why they return to Vietnam, and how they perceive their migration experience post-return.

Previous Studies and Analytical Framework

Existing research highlights systemic failures in the technical internship program, such as debt accumulation and exploitative labor conditions (Sunai 2019, Kato 2022). Changing perspective from these, this study employs the concept of “migratory agency,” drawing on de Haas’s (2021) work on migration capabilities and aspirations. Migratory agency refers to an individual’s capacity to shape their own migration experience despite structural constraints. Though Triandafyllidou (2019) have applied the concept of agency to irregular migration, there are few studies that apply it to irregular migrants.

Research Methodology

The study focuses on two cases: Anh (a woman) and Phi (a man), both of whom had come to Japan and later returned to Vietnam. The research, based on multi-sited fieldwork in Japan and Vietnam from December 2017 to February 2025, combines semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and social media communication.

Case Studies: Anh and Phi

Anh’s Migration Journey and Return to Vietnam

Anh, a 38-year-old woman from Thai Binh Province, arrived in Japan in 2012 as a technical intern in the sewing industry. Initially, she planned to pay off her debts within one year, but due to low wages, she struggled financially. In 2015, she “disappeared” to continue working in Japan after her visa expired. She later applied for refugee status but was detained and then provisionally released. Fearful of re-detention, she stopped reporting to immigration authorities and worked at a tavern in Tokyo using a forged residence card.

Anh decided to return to Vietnam in 2020 due to changes in payroll regulations that made her irregular status riskier and concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. After returning, she attempted to run a clothing store but faced financial difficulties, including being deceived by a neighbor who borrowed money and never repaid it. She eventually turned to TikTok and farming for income. She has worked for her elderly parents and her twin brother, who has a disability, through Japan and Vietnam.

Phi’s Migration Journey and Return to Vietnam

Phi, a 41-year-old man from Hanoi, had an extensive work history before moving to Japan in 2015 as a technical intern in furniture manufacturing. Dissatisfied with the attitude of employer and low wages, he changed companies and later overstayed his visa to work illegally in construction. His initial migration costs were high (approximately 1.86 million JPY), and he felt the technical internship program did not provide the financial benefits he had expected.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Phi lost his job and struggled to survive, moving between acquaintances’ homes before living in parks and under bridges. He eventually sought shelter at Vietnamese Temple in Saitama, where he received support until his return to Vietnam in October 2020.

Upon returning, Phi initially faced job instability but later reentered the construction industry,

working as a site supervisor. He repaid his debts by working multiple jobs and now manages six construction sites. Despite his hardships in Japan, he believes his experience there strengthened him. He avoids discussing his struggles with his family to protect them from distress.

Discussion

Anh and Phi's narratives reveal that technical interns' act independently in response to structural challenges. Their "disappearance" was not due to malice but rather strategic decisions for financial survival, challenging the conventional view that sees them as criminals or victims.

Economic pressure and debt played a major role in their decisions. Upon arriving in Japan, both had significant debts and lower-than-expected earnings. Anh wanted to support her family, particularly her disabled twin brothers, while Phi sought to recover migration costs despite poor working conditions. Their actions were survival strategies rather than simple "disappearances." Their stories highlight the need to rethink how these individuals are perceived and how the system impacts their lives.

Conclusion

This study challenges the negative framing of "disappeared" technical interns by demonstrating their migratory agency. While structural reforms in the internship program are necessary, it is equally important to recognize these migrants as active agents navigating complex socio-economic landscapes.

By reframing the discussion around migratory agency, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of irregular migration in Japan and calls for policies that acknowledge and support migrants rather than criminalizing them.

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