

Abstract

“Who Aims for Japan? Economic Development, Migration, and Transnational Labor Market in Asia”

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Japan experienced a migration transition in the 1990s. Since then, the number of foreigners entering the country has surpassed that of Japanese citizens leaving (Korekawa 2018). As a result, the issuance of residence status for long-term residents has increased in both volume and variety. Japan hosts over 3 million foreigners from diverse backgrounds, accounting for 2.5 percent of its population in 2023. Moreover, recent population projections predict that the foreign population will likely continue growing over the next several decades, reaching 9.4 million by 2070, representing 11 percent of Japan's total population of 87 million (IPSS 2023). Since the 1990s, Japan has already integrated into the global migration movement due to rapid economic development in Asia, creating a “transnational labor market” that actively mobilizes the workforce within and across the region. However, Japan's immigration policy has thus far aimed to control its borders while regulating foreign labor based on skill and other criteria to maintain social homogeneity and protect the domestic workforce.

This presentation explores Japan's role as an advanced economy and immigrant society within Asia's emerging transnational labor market. This exploration is driven by the anticipated increase in the influx of workers from Asia due to its rapid economic development, which raises the pressing question: “Who aims for Japan, seeking opportunities in the country?” To achieve this goal, we first adopt the guidance of migration transition and aspirations-capabilities (A-C) theories that account for relationships between economic development and international migration (de Haas 2010). Then, we apply the transnational labor market theory, which views the labor market as the processes of social construction shaped by various actors, institutions, and power relations (Mense-Petermann 2020). By positioning Japan in Asia's regional development and growing labor market, we broaden the research scope beyond the nation-state and identify the institutional mechanisms through which migration is maintained between Japan and other Asian countries. For the analysis, we apply a variety of statistics made available from the national census and data published by international organizations. In the empirical analyses, we draw on results from a large-scale study conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security (IPSS 2022).

Results from this research indicate that Japan's success in labor migration depends on its capacity to attract the growing middle-class youth from the rapidly developing South and Southeast Asia. As Japan relaxes its immigration policies through semi-skilled visa options like the SSW scheme, which facilitates family reunification and permanent residency, Asia's expanding middle-class youth will likely seize these new opportunities. However, as their home countries continue to grow economically and face declining birth rates, wage disparities with Japan will lessen, reducing emigration. Meanwhile, Japan competes with other advanced nations for foreign labor. Although Japan's established migration infrastructures with Southeast Asian countries continue to connect migrant workers with employers in the short term, there is an urgent need for the Japanese government to develop comprehensive policies that integrate foreign workers into its public services and cultural landscape. (480 words)

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