

Migration Industry in Asia: Implications for Japan*

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Abstract

This study seeks to develop a broader academic understanding of the migration industry by viewing it as one of the actors involved in international migration. Presently, limited attention has been paid to the issue of the migration industry in Japan. This study defines the migration industry, identifies its recognition in the literature, and provides a theoretical analysis. It also highlights the implications for Japan, should it reconsider updating its foreign worker policy in light of the current trend of international migration.

1. Introduction

Issues of international migration have been researched economically, politically, socially, and geographically. The movement of people is not an isolated phenomenon and is caused by globalization and new patterns of international relations, movements of commodities, capital, and ideas and vice versa (Haas et al., 2020).

Population expansion and economic development have been observed in Asia. Despite a noticeable income gap in the region, South and Southeast Asia have been rapidly incorporated into global migration systems. While low-skilled citizens from South and Southeast Asia are increasingly finding their way to the Gulf region, skilled citizens are dispersed throughout Asia, as well as to North America, Australia, and Europe (Haas et al., 2020).

Considerable research on international migration has focused on the relationship between the locations of sending countries and receiving countries. Castles et al. (2014) suggested that migration is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a deeply interconnected aspect of the global economy. The issue of people movement is

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discussed as an element of the globalization of economics, which structurally depends on foreign labor (Sassen, 1988). Although the movement of goods and services, capital, and ideas increases the number of potential migrants, these global interchanges are facilitated by improved transport and the proliferation of print and electronic media (Castles et al., 2014). Furthermore, much is known about why migrants leave home and what happens to them upon arrival at the receiving country, whilst considerably less is known about the forms of infrastructure that condition their mobility (Lindquist et al., 2012). Hugo (2006) focused on the infrastructure of the migration industry. He suggested that one of the key elements overlooked in international migration is the large group of recruiters, agents, subagents, travel providers, and document providers, among others, through whom much of the international movement is facilitated (2006: 156). While the study of the migration industry has received extensive attention and various findings have been obtained, the issue of what unites the sending and receiving sides remains relatively understudied (Baas, 2020).

Acknowledging the literature, this study highlights research involving the migration industry and recognizes it as an existing knowledge gap, specifically concerning Japan. However, one study conducted by Korekawa (2020) suggests that Japan is already situated in a space where the labor movement is more active than ever within Asia and where the global economy is advancing and economic growth is occurring. He posits that Japan's policies for accepting foreign workers should be considered from an international perspective regarding international labor force mobility. Conventional studies have focused either on the dualism of whether Japan should accept immigrants or on the moral argument that employers should not treat foreign trainees as disposable workers (Korekawa, 2020).

From a peak of 2,993,000 in 2019, the number of foreigners residing in Japan declined for two consecutive years due to border restrictions for COVID-19. However, in 2022, according to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, the number of foreign residents increased by 7.3% to 2,962,000 compared with the previous year. The proportion of foreign residents to the total population in Japan remains relatively constant at approximately 3%. Currently, Japan has the second largest population of foreign residents as a proportion of its total population among Asian countries. As the birth rate declines and the population ages, the share of foreign residents in the total population will continue to increase. Moreover, in 2022, Japan introduced a new policy to attract more foreign workers who want to

work in the country for extended periods¹.

However, as previously noted, the Japanese government has ignored the facts and nuances of this issue and has primarily focused on how foreign residents and immigrant workers are controlled, as opposed to recognizing relevant stakeholders and the connecting factors between employers and potential migrant workers. Therefore, considering how infrastructure affects migration to Japan is crucial. In an aging population with a shrinking workforce, incorporating foreign laborers could be crucial for sustaining economic stability, particularly during periods of economic development. Furthermore, what insights and factors Japan considers in terms of immigration policy should be discussed. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the organization of international migration and the actors controlling the stream of migration. It focuses on recent migration as a lens through which to theorize the intertwinement of non-state actors, who aim to provide diverse services pertaining to migration and suggests that Japan incorporate new perspectives into its policies. Focusing on migration industries helps us further understand the current state of the international migration landscape.

In the next section, the definition of the migration industry is explored. Section 3 focuses on the theoretical view of brokers as actors in the migration industry, whereas Section 4 discusses Japan and its role in the migration industry in Asia. Section 5 presents discussions and areas of interest for future research.

2. Defining the migration industry

Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen (2013) suggest that the concept of the “migration industry” was first introduced in academic writing in the 1970s. Since then, researchers have developed various conceptualizations of the industry regarding its actors, the services they provide, or their legal status. Referring to the work of Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen (2013), the transformation of the concept can be understood by categorizing the stages of development.

In the first stage of conceptualization, researchers focused on actors in terms of the illegal or informal arena. The concept “commerce of migration” was first

¹ Technical Intern is the category of resident status with the second largest number of individuals in the labor force after Humanities/International Services in Japan.

presented by Harney (1977), referring to the activities of “intermediaries” who offer services to migrants to make a profit. Salt and Stein (1997) presented the concept of international migration as “a global business.” They viewed the migration business as a system of institutionalized networks, including a set of institutions, agents, and individuals, all seeking to generate commercial gains. By focusing on the agencies of intermediaries, Harney (1977) introduced private lawyers, travel agents, recruiters, fixers, and brokers, who sustain links with origin and destination countries.

In the second stage, a broader approach was attempted. Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen (2013) argued that Hernández-León (2005) was a pioneer who introduced not only illegal/informal activities but also legal/formal activities in the arena of migration industries, such as governments, employers, migrants and their networks, and advocacy organizations. However, after these empirical studies, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen argued that topics such as human trafficking in one direction and the flow of remittances in the other direction do not fully consider the sophistication of the migration industry, its structure and agents, and its contribution to different stages of the social processes of international migration (2013: 5). Therefore, the structure and agent, and the contribution to different stages of the social processes of international migration influence the migration industry. Regarding remittances, financial institutions have become part of the migration industry. For example, banks and other financial companies have established special transfer facilities for remittances (Haas et al., 2020). As Haas et al. (2020) suggested, the term “migration industry” has been contested owing to its negative connotations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized the rapid expansion of the international “migration industry,” including the phenomena of human smuggling and trafficking, as a significant challenge since the early 1990s (UNHCR, 2008). In this respect, Lindquist et al. (2012) focused on migrant brokers as “black boxes” in the form of profit-oriented infrastructure, which makes the movement of people possible by facilitating recruitment and documentation in Asia. By contrast, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen (2013) and Surak (2018) claimed that even NGOs and non-state actors that assist people movement without generating profit have become crucial actors in the migration industry in response to the demand of protecting migrants from exploitation by illegal actors. Regardless of whether the activity is illegal/informal or legal/formal, migration industry actors establish a space for

outsourcing migration management (Surak, 2018: 2).

An alternative concept is “migration intermediaries” (Haas et al., 2020). As key actors that drive migration within and across borders, Agunias (2009) introduced intermediaries as those who recruit and guide migrants and match employers and workers, recognizing that intermediaries could include criminals undertaking activities, such as smuggling and trafficking, Agunias concluded that legitimate intermediaries provide migrants with the opportunity to move and pursue a life of meaning—the very essence of human development (2009: 6). Furthermore, he proposed five groups of such agents: social networks, private recruitment agencies and their chain of sub-agents, quasi-intermediaries, smugglers, and traffickers. Khan (2019) also considers the role of intermediaries by analyzing network governance in Australian migration. Khan sees intermediaries as meso-level actors between macro-level forces of the state, and the micro-level agency of their clients that negotiate their legitimacy and hierarchy in a stigmatized profession in relation to other actors in the network (2019: 6).

Martin (2017) clarifies the role of recruiters in mediating the movement of migrant workers. Martin (2017: 15) describes recruiters as “merchants of labor” and defines their role as the key intermediaries that connect workers in one country with employers in another; they are the glue of the international labor market. Matching workers with jobs is costly for both job seekers and employers. Several low-skilled workers experience difficulty finding jobs in developed countries on their own because of resource constraints, such as foreign language skills. Employers in developed countries also struggle to find workers who meet their requirements from abroad, where the and qualification systems differ. Thus, recruiters primarily serve to functionally mediate information asymmetry between workers and employers. Focusing on the worker-paid migration costs in Korea, Kuwait, Spain, and Malaysia, Martin (2017: 53) found a significant variation in the costs between migration corridors², as well as in the costs of items, such as passports, medical tests, and prepare-to-depart services.

2 For example, the average cost was US\$ 1,525 in Korea, US\$ 1,900 in Kuwait, US\$ 530 in Spain, and US\$ 1,375 in Malaysia. According to Korekawa (2020), the worker-paid cost in Vietnam ranged from 450,000–600,000 yen, which is equivalent to US\$ 3,500–4,600.

3. Review of the theoretical analysis of brokers

The theory of international trade has been applied in the literature on the economic analysis of brokers. In the 1970s, immigrant smuggling rings called “brokers” garnered new concern because of their vigorous illegal activities. Brokers were defined as players who illegally maximize their profit by extracting brokerage commissions for smuggling would-be emigrants into countries where backdoor entries of unskilled workers are forbidden. Simultaneously, Japan had to address the illegal activities of Snakehead, a suggested smuggling broker based in China. Bhagwati and Hansen (1973) applied the theory of international trade to formulate models of smuggling in an open economy. This theory was further developed by Bhagwati and Srinivasan (1974), Sheikh (1974), Kemp (1976), and Pitt (1981). The primary concern of the aforementioned studies was the impact of smuggling activities on national welfare. By incorporating Martin and Panagariya’s (1984) model, which focused on an enforcement policy to ban illegal activities, Hiraiwa (2003) suggested that a more vigorous enforcement policy would negatively impact both the sending and receiving countries in terms of their national welfare.

This idea is in line with Ethier’s (1986), of a negative notion relating to the increase in the level of enforcement to tackle illegal activities of crossing borders owing to costs and wage rates applied to illegal works (Kondoh, 2017). Therefore, from a theoretical economics analysis, we suggest that whatever we call migration industries or migration intermediaries, illegal activities may adversely impact national welfare. By contrast, whether international migration in the form of legal/formal movement in both sending and receiving countries positively impacts national welfare depends on the special properties caused by the movement of people from developing to developed countries. Kondoh (2017) successfully summarized such properties as: unemployment in the host country, length of stay that differs from a guest worker to a permanent resident, remittances, and diversity of immigrant skill level. Thus, the results of these studies regarding national welfare vary owing to the conditions under which an analytical framework is introduced.

Regardless of the outcomes of these theoretical analyses, illegal border-crossing activities will not improve the economic welfare of a receiving country. In recent years, international migration has been growing both quantitatively and qualitatively. The number of international migrants has robustly increased over the past two decades, despite the COVID-19 pandemic causing disruptions to

migration flows in 2020 (UNDESA, 2020). In terms of laborers, migrant workers constitute 4.9% of the labor force of host countries globally (ILO, 2021).

Numerous developed countries are facing an aging and declining working-age population. Specifically, owing to these factors, Japan is expected to witness rapid demographic changes and will require additional labor in the coming years. The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) in Japan forecasts that its current 120 million population will decrease to less than 90 million by 2065, and the aging rate will increase to over 38% (MHLW, 2023). The impact on the labor force will be significant; particularly, the care sector faces severe labor shortages. The healthcare sector will require 391.2 million workers by 2049, nearly 60 million more than the 334 million in 2018 (Kato, 2022). Therefore, an identified need exists for foreign workers. If they can be managed without compromising national welfare, the role of the migration industry and its actors, such as brokers, should not be considered an illegal industry but managed as a regular industry.

4. Japan and the migration industry in Asia

Although research has focused on the rapid increase in Japan's foreign population in the 1990s, few studies positioned it as an international population shift and investigated its medium- to long-term effects (Korekawa, 2020). As Korekawa (2020) suggested, migration studies in Japan have typically focused on demographic changes as a Japan-specific experience. However, if we examine the geographical space of Asia, the international demographic shift is a wider regional experience. While Japan's policy denies permanent residency for unskilled work, the country has seen an influx of thousands of unskilled workers, including Japanese-descendant Brazilians and trainees from other Asian countries, under the technical intern visa. As shown in Table 1, the increase in foreign residents in recent years in Japan has come primarily from Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Nepal. In 2022, the number of foreign residents from Indonesia increased by 39.0% compared with the previous year. These foreign residents primarily include trainee workers in industries that are not typically dominated by Japanese employees, such as agriculture, fisheries, and construction.

Parallel to the rapid global development of economic integration in trade and investment in Asia is the expansion of international and intraregional movement of people in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia (Hiraiwa, 2019). Asia is the origin of

Table 1 Foreign residents by nationality in Japan (2012–2022)

		2012	2015	2018	2022	share in 2022 (%)
	China	652,595	665,847	764,720	744,551	25.1
	Korea	530,048	457,772	449,634	412,340	13.9
ASEAN	Brunei D.	41	57	61	46	—
	Cambodia	2,862	6,111	12,174	18,356	0.6
	Indonesia	25,532	35,910	56,346	83,169	2.8
	Lao PDR	2,521	2,592	2,842	3,106	0.1
	Malaysia	7,848	8,738	10,368	10,561	0.4
	Myanmar	8,046	13,737	26,546	47,965	1.6
	Philippines	202,985	229,595	271,289	291,066	9.8
	Singapore	2,136	2,501	3,042	3,116	0.1
	Thailand	40,133	45,379	52,323	54,618	1.8
	Vietnam	52,367	146,956	330,835	476,346	16.1
	ASEAN Total	344,471	491,576	76,826	988,349	33.4
	Brazil	190,609	173,437	201,865	207,081	7.0
	Peru	49,255	47,721	48,362	48,564	1.6
	Others	266,678	395,836	500,686	561,084	18.9
	Total	2,033,656	2,232,189	2,731,093	2,961,969	100.0

Source: Ministry of Justice

over 40% of the world’s international migrants, over half of whom reside in various countries in Asia (United Nations, 2020). Furthermore, intraregional migration within Southeast Asia is particularly notable (Asis & Piper, 2008). The region comprises some of the largest labor surplus countries and has experienced dynamic growth in the past few years, leading to the emergence of new patterns and more complex flows of migration (Hugo 2005). Therefore, Japan’s experience of the influx of foreign residents should be understood within a framework of international and intraregional migration, and not as an exceptional phenomenon caused by distortions of demographic change or the Japanese immigration policy. The Japanese immigration policy has a multilayered structure, interconnections, and linkages across the Asian “space,” which is critical compared with the policies of various other countries (UN, 2017). Japan is an important destination³ for workers

3 According to Gallup’s (2021) World Poll on adults’ desire to move to another country, based on interviews with nearly 127,000 adults in 122 countries, Japan is ranked 8th among the top 10 countries. The percentage of those who desire to move to Japan increased from 1% in 2011 to 3% in 2021.

from Southeast Asia, corresponding to its extensive involvement in trade and investment. Hence, new and comprehensive approaches are needed to ensure the adequate management of actors, such as firms, sectors, and even the government (Hiraiwa, 2019).

A recent study by Baas (2020) focused on Asia and provides an understanding of the migration industry across the region. The study contributes to the literature by conducting empirical research and interviews in terms of migration industry functions on a day-to-day basis in Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Middle East. Surak (2018) focuses on net migrant-receiving countries in East Asia—Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—that have adopted guest-worker programs as an immigration policy.

Figure 1 shows international migration by regional corridors in 2020. It highlights the increasing interconnection between regions in Asia, even between distant regions. Among other regions, population expansion and economic development have been observed in Asia. Although the regional income gap is still large, South and Southeast Asia have been rapidly incorporated into global

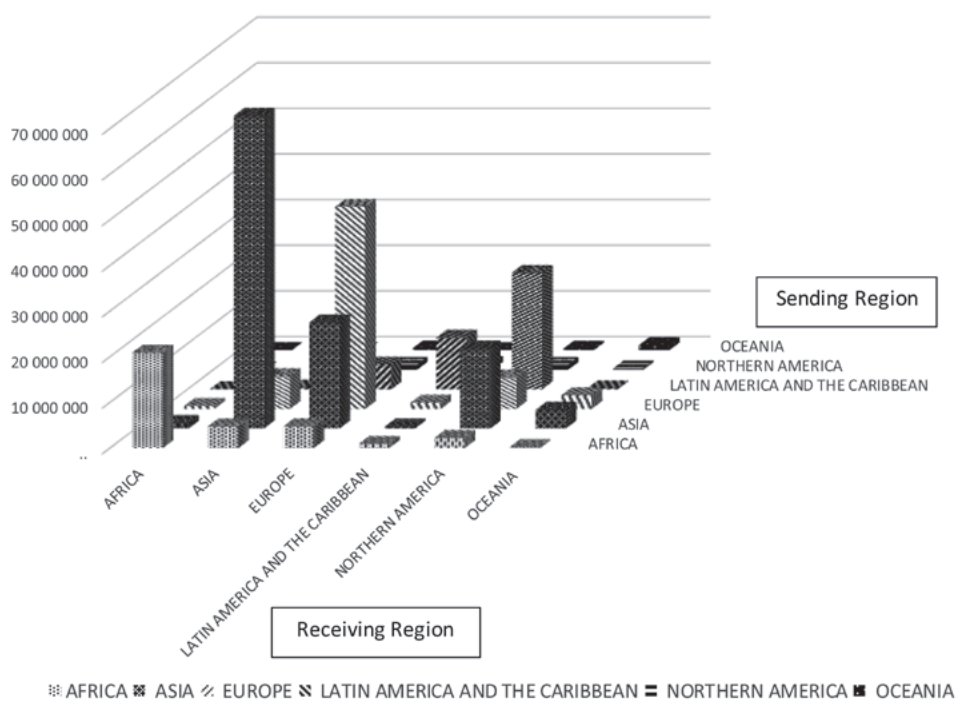


Figure 1 International migration by regional corridors in 2020
Source: UNDSA 2020

migration systems, with lower-skilled citizens increasingly finding their way to the Gulf region (Haas et al, 2020). This movement is partly facilitated by technological revolutions that have reduced communication and travel costs over distance. The migration industry is essential in the regional movement, and Japan has already become a receiving country in the flow of international migration.

5. Discussions and future research

In April 2019, the Japanese government introduced a new immigration system that allowed companies to hire foreigners with specified skills by creating a new status of residence: “Specified Skilled Worker.” This policy was developed in response to criticism of accepting technical intern trainees under the status of “Trainee.” The Trainee policy was introduced in 1981 to transfer Japanese technology to developing countries. However, violations of regulations of working times and payment and harsh living conditions highlighted the fact that trainees work as cheap unskilled laborers in industries where employers are unable to recruit Japanese workers. Trainees typically work in the agriculture, fisheries, and construction industries. Japan is positioned as a major destination within a region with visible expansionary pressures and an ample labor supply chain. Thus, Japan should address moral issues, such as human rights, and prevent violation of laws by protecting laborers. However, prospective migrants seek higher wages and better jobs and lives by maximizing their utilities, considering the opportunity cost of not working while engaged in the job search; thus, a theoretical analysis of economics is employed in the analytical framework. The opportunity cost for employers is not having a job position filled (Martin, 2017). As such, in the international labor market, non-state players, such as employers, prospective immigrants, and recruiters, who form the backbone of the labor market, behave to maximize its utility and benefit. However, there is a strong tendency to focus on distortions in Japan’s immigration policies to view them as deviations from orthodox and authentic policies. This situation has hindered the study of the influx of international migrants as a separate phenomenon while referring to standard immigration research (Korekawa, 2020). Therefore, Japan must move away from the debate of whether to accept immigrants and instead explore the introduction of an open system that provides information to sending countries as a partner and actor in migration industries. Japan must acknowledge its role as a significant

actor in the international labor migration stream, and not as a passive receiving country where the moral issues of employers of unskilled foreign workers are the main debate. The study of the migration industry through the global perspective is necessary to tackle immigration policies.

Regarding future studies, as few studies have considered the issue of the migration industry in the literature on international migration, we should define and analyze Japan's active migration industry. One possible topic for future studies is a framework for receiving technical intern which represents the largest group of foreign laborers in Japan and would be considered a migration industry. The Japan International Trainee & Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization (JITCO) and the Organization for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) are formal actors under the Japanese government. Following Khan (2019), who views intermediaries as meso-level actors between macro-level forces of the state and the micro-level agency of their clients that negotiate their legitimacy and hierarchy, both organizations are considered macro-level forces as well as micro-level agencies.

In 1991, JITCO was established as an incorporated foundation and was the only official organization that provided comprehensive service and guidance in the program of receiving trainees, from acceptance to post-return follow-up. Moreover, it included support and advice to related institutions, organizations, companies, and trainees. Therefore, JITCO was officially expected to be responsible for providing lateral assistance to ensure the system's successful operation. However, it has received severe criticism for being a service support organization dependent on membership fees from recipient organizations and companies, and for not effectively dealing with frequent incidents of misconduct, even in the case of suspected violations of laws and regulations by the recipient companies, such as abuse and nonpayment of wages (Takaya, 2008). In response to such criticism, OTIT was established in 2017 for the proper implementation of the intern training system and the protection of trainees. Firms and companies that want to accept trainees must obtain certification from OTIT. Thus, OTIT serves as the government's point of contact to negotiate with counterparts in the sending country; in most cases, the counterpart is the country's Ministry of Labor. According to this study, various stakeholders must be involved in government-to-government negotiations. The migration industry will intervene in the actual process of securing transportation and providing information, such as labor contracts and social insurance in Japan. Rather than tightening regulations or

demanding naïve morality for management, Japan must identify the stakeholders in the migration industry, reduce information asymmetries during international labor migration, and promote transparency in migration processes.

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