



Harajuku Intersection, Tokyo. PC: Raita Futo.

Redefining 'Labour' Migration from a Sino-Japanese Perspective

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Increasing numbers of students, workers, and tourists around the world are challenging how we define labour migration. In particular, Japan was an early adopter of policies that have blurred the lines between migration and other forms of human mobility. As the largest non-Japanese group living and working in Japan, the experiences of Chinese people represent an important part of how we understand international labour migration in East Asia today. This essay reflects on ethnographic research conducted with young Chinese in Tokyo.

When I first studied Chinese in Beijing in 2003, I encountered a young man among a network of Chinese, Japanese, and English-speaking friends who would meet up in the park near Houhai when the weather was nice enough to drink outside. Xiaowu (a pseudonym) had just returned from two years of study in Japan, and I was impressed by his ability to switch between Japanese and Chinese in our conversations. He was one among many of the friends I made at that time, all of whom lived their lives moving

back and forth between China and Japan. From Japanese friends studying and working in China, to Chinese transmigrants and students, it was clear that the Sino-Japanese context was increasingly connected by everyday people.

During our conversations about Xiaowu's time in Japan, there were often pregnant pauses around the question of 'work', suggesting difficulties he faced that were uncomfortable to put into words. Despite his linguistic talents, his main job in Japan had been in a furniture recycling and refurbishment factory, working long hours sanding back the cracked lacquer on old tables and chairs. He had also done a variety of 'odd jobs' and alluded to an abusive manager as part of the reason he returned to China. He also explained on one occasion that his jobs were legally ambiguous because of the hours he worked.

Xiaowu's experiences piqued my interest and resonated with many of the stories I collected over two periods of fieldwork among young Chinese people in northwest Tokyo between 2009–11 and 2014–16. The stories of the young people I met and the Sino-Japanese labour migration context suggest the increasingly blurred distinction between labour migration and other forms of human mobility, and the rise of student-worker mobility as a stand-in for other local labour demands around the world.

Discomfort with 'Labour' and 'Migration' in Japan

Until very recently, the Japanese Government had repeatedly and explicitly rejected the notion of having an 'immigration policy', implementing relatively complicated workarounds for specific kinds of labour migration. As Glenda Roberts (2018) notes, the term *imin* (移民, 'immigrant') has remained taboo in political debates, despite repeated calls to explicitly address the issue by Japanese scholars, activists, and think tanks. In December 2018, the Japanese Diet passed a series of reforms that signified a new

step in Japan's approach to migration. The reforms outlined visa categories that would allow industries to import 'low-skilled' labour designated as 'specified skilled workers' to work in menial jobs such as construction, cleaning, and basic services. Now that Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has stepped down from office, these reforms are likely to be some of the more dramatic legacies of his wider economic initiatives, as they were designed to allow Japanese industries to address shortfalls in labour. However, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 mean it is still difficult to tell what the impact will be, as the new immigration rules only came into effect in April 2019. For now, to understand the context of Chinese labour migration to Japan, it is important to look back at the legacy of Japan's discomfort around the issue of migration in national political debates.

The historical reticence to discuss migration has often been bolstered by the perception among many powerful stakeholders that Japan is a nation made up of a single homogeneous ethnicity (Befu 2001) and is not an 'immigrant country' (Liu-Farrer 2020a). Compared with some other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, this perception may seem correct at first glance. For example, roughly 2 per cent of Japan's population held non-Japanese nationalities in 2017, compared with approximately 9 per cent in the United Kingdom. However, within major urban centres in Japan, these figures are less stark, with more than 10 per cent of residents in many of the major wards in Tokyo (such as Toshima and Shinjuku) holding non-Japanese citizenship. Furthermore, these figures relate to citizenship rather than ethnicity or other intersectional identities, and few researchers would suggest that Japan is 'homogeneous'.

The reason these perceptions are important to the question of Chinese labour migration is that they inform the idea that these forms of human mobility are somehow exceptional or merely temporary, which in turn shapes the expectations around the role of non-Japanese workers in Japan. To be 'foreign' in Japan

has typically meant being a temporary and expendable source of labour. Despite the vision of Japan as a closed society, however, the rate of transnational mobility to and from countries such as China has increased exponentially since the 1980s, with the number of registered Chinese citizens in Japan growing more than tenfold between 1985 and 2017. By the end of 2019, there were more than 800,000 Chinese citizens living and working in Japan, which made them the largest registered group of non-Japanese people. These figures do not include naturalised Japanese citizens of Chinese descent, and it has not included people from Taiwan since 2012. All together, it is estimated that there are more than one million Chinese-speaking people living and working in Japan today.

Education, Work, and Migration

Stories such as Xiaowu's show that issues related to labour migration to Japan are entangled with other supposedly separate kinds of human mobility. In my own research among young mobile Chinese who work within Ikebukuro, a popular hub of nightlife and Chinese businesses in northwest Tokyo, the relationship between study and labour migration was particularly apparent. In 2010, I lived in a small private dormitory in Ikebukuro—originally hoping to better understand the debates surrounding a proposal to have an area north of the main train station renamed 'Tokyo Chinatown'. My interest in the Chinatown proposal also provided me with a unique position to better understand how questions of labour, study, and migration intersected in this one small locale.

Coinciding with China's Reform and Opening Up policies, in the 1980s, Japan pivoted towards increased internationalisation (国際化, *kokusaika*), with the introduction of new migration policies and goals to promote Japan through international study. As Gracia

Liu-Farrer (2011, 2020a; Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019) has argued, from this period, different policies converged to create a system where educational migration has acted as a proxy form of labour migration. That is, many educational programs have been introduced to cover issues within Japan's domestic labour market. Alongside other schemes, such as a program that granted special rights to people of Japanese descent 日系 (*Nikkei*), these various proxy labour migration approaches suggest that Japanese legislators like to imagine that the flow of labour from overseas can be turned on and off like a tap. The 'faucet logic' of this approach was most stark in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis when, after fears that Japanese citizens might lose their jobs, a scheme was introduced that paid Brazilian *Nikkei* migrants nearly US\$4,000 to return to Brazil, with the caveat that they could not come back to Japan permanently. The program was later amended to restrict their return only after a period of three years. The dream of controlling the flow of labour migration is similarly embedded in programs that, at face value, are promoted primarily as opportunities to learn in Japan.

Perhaps the most notorious of these educationally channelled labour regimes are the 'trainee' and 'technical intern' programs that have been used to fill gaps in Japan's labour market or foster diplomatic relations with regions in neighbouring countries. Until recently, Chinese workers made up the largest portion of trainees in Japan, but recent increases in new migrant groups, such as Vietnamese, have changed these circumstances quickly. Much of Japan's seaside aquaculture, for example, depends on the seasonal work of trainee labourers who help process and package abalone, crabs, and kelp for domestic consumers. Similarly, exchange programs between China, Japan, and countries throughout Southeast Asia have long provided the care workers necessary to fill gaps in the aged care sector in Japan. Many of these trainee programs depend on companies based in China and, indeed, many of the people who help run

these brokering schemes were themselves once students in Japan (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Occasionally these brokered trainee schemes have been found to be highly exploitative, while some of the most intense discussions of ‘the problem with foreigners’ in Japan are often spurred by occasions where trainee workers are alleged to have broken the law. An extreme case occurred in Hiroshima in 2013, where the pressures many Chinese trainees face were brought to light after a 30-year-old Chinese worker allegedly killed his employer (Nikkei 2013).

Trainee schemes and national policies are important structural elements that shape the Sino-Japanese labour migration context, but they were rarely an issue with which I had to deal in my own fieldwork. Labour migration to Japan, although shaped by national policies, also appears to be very much localised in unique ways. Trainee-program brokers mostly work directly with local companies and regions in Japan, facilitating movements from a province in northeast China, for example, to Tochigi prefecture in Japan. Within my Tokyo field site, Ikebukuro, these schemes were all but absent because they often catered to rural and semi-urban parts of Japan, where different kinds of labour were in demand. Save for a few old hands I met who had previously worked as technical interns before going back to China and then years later returning on a different visa, the more common stories I came across were similar to Xiaowu’s: they had studied at a local educational institution while working within a system that implicitly tolerates legally ‘grey’ work arrangements even if explicitly regulating against them.

Japan was one of the first countries to introduce the right to work long hours while enrolled at an educational institution. For example, from the mid-1990s it was relatively easy to acquire a two-year visa to study in a local language school and work up to 28 hours a week in approved industries. Regulating this arrangement has been difficult. Employers can often hide the actual hours their employees work, and cash-in-hand jobs are a popular

way to fill short gaps in specific jobs. Indeed, over the past three decades there have been intermittent crackdowns and checks on ‘fake’ language schools that facilitated clandestine jobs in industries such as construction and waste management.

In 2010, I lived in a dormitory on the fifth floor of a commercial building shared with a group of Chinese students. My dormmates would work in jobs sourced through many of the local entrepreneurs operating out of Ikebukuro while studying in local language schools. At that time, an online company run by a naturalised Chinese man provided a vital advertising service for these arrangements. My dormmate Xiaochen (a pseudonym) was a 19-year-old woman from Fujian who, having not done very well in high school, decided to ‘try again’ by first studying Japanese and then applying to enter a small Japanese university. She worked very hard to support herself out of fear of being a burden to her family. In particular, Xiaochen had a knack for finding last-minute cash in manual jobs that made up for surges in demand among local Japanese businesses. From packing pamphlets at a printer during important events to helping prepare bento for convenience stores during seasonal festivals, Xiaochen engaged in an array of odd jobs similar to those mentioned by Xiaowu. On one occasion, she tried a cash-in-hand shift at a ‘girls bar’, where women encourage clients to drink more by playing games and chatting with them. A very slight woman and under the legal drinking age in Japan, Xiaochen struggled to keep up with clients on her trial shift and did not return.

From Student to Labour Migrant and Entrepreneur

While educational visas were often the main entry channel for the young people I met, many of them had transitioned on to other visas by the

mid-2010s. In 1989, Japan introduced a series of ‘skilled worker’ employment visas under labels such as ‘engineer’, ‘investor’, ‘professor’, and a general category of ‘skilled worker’ (*gino*), most of whom until 2013 were Chinese chefs, although they have recently been overtaken by chefs from Nepal (Kharel 2016). These visas have played an important role in facilitating the long-term settlement of Chinese in Japan, and often provide opportunities to transition from study to other kinds of work. In particular, while many of the young mobile Chinese with whom I worked in Japan returned to China, study and work were also a common pathway to staying longer in Japan. Ehmet (a pseudonym), a man in his late twenties from Xinjiang, had first studied sound engineering in a technical college in northern Japan, before graduating and signing up to a labour recruitment agency in Tokyo. The agency provided workers for local construction projects, and Ehmet would often spend his days doing a wide variety of menial tasks. He said he liked doing roadwork (修路) the most, as the managers of those teams were fun to work with. However, while Ehmet worked as a labourer during the day, he also played guitar and sang in several Chinese-owned bars at night. A talented guitarist who could perform Uyghur folk music, flamenco, and popular covers, his cash-in-hand work was technically illegal. Nonetheless, it was an important source of income, allowed him to imagine a future beyond construction work, and appeared to be common practice among nightlife businesses.

Many of the entrepreneurs with whom I spoke in Ikebukuro had studied in Japan before working for a Japanese company and then eventually building the capital to start their own business. In turn, they would employ new students as they arrived in Japan or would connect them to Japanese businesses that might have work for students in neighbouring areas.

I became close friends with people such as Dayuan, who had lived in Japan since the early 2000s. Originally from a city in northeast China, he had enrolled in a local technical college,

where he studied business while working in a small factory north of Tokyo, where he would shave pork carcasses before they went to be butchered in the city. Dayuan’s family, although not wealthy, was nonetheless well educated for their generation and held stable jobs. He had a fairly relaxed upbringing, was not used to this kind of physical labour, and found the experience incredibly frustrating. It was this moment of learning to ‘eat bitterness’ (吃苦), he said, that would later spur him to want to make a lot of money. After graduating, Dayuan worked for a major electronics retailer and used his connections with the company to organise some small trade deals between his hometown and the store in Japan. In addition, he privately sold items from his employer to friends and acquaintances using online contacts and the local postal service—a practice often called ‘sale by proxy’ (代购). He now holds permanent residency and runs several businesses that employ Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese students. In contrast to what his visa status might imply, Dayuan spends more time than ever travelling back and forth between China and Japan, his permanent visa status affording greater mobility than the temporary visas he once held.

While many local entrepreneurs in places like Ikebukuro facilitate recruitment into local Japanese businesses or employ students for cash-in-hand jobs, there are also exploitative practices that pit former labour migrants against those trying to transition from study to work. Indeed, on one occasion, one of my participants explained a scheme where students hoping to extend their time in Japan could pay money into other businesses and apply for ‘investor’ visa status. If they did not have the capital upfront, they could take it as a loan and then work off their debt through the supporting business. The system potentially left people open to highly exploitative situations where young graduates became indentured labourers in small businesses. However, other than this tale passed on by a friend, I was never able to determine how widespread the practice was. Stories such as these, however,

alluded to the unequal power relationships possible within these illegal, and legally ‘grey’, arrangements. Such stories suggested students often faced significant hardships while serving as ‘proxy labour’, but those who were about to transition from one visa to another were the ones in most danger of exploitation.

What Next?

From working long hours to working in sectors not deemed appropriate for those on a student visa, students have often filled many of the precarious gaps within Japan’s labour market. At the same time, ‘educational’ arrangements such as trainee schemes and internships have provided cheap labour for a variety of industries in Japan. Japan pioneered these approaches to labour migration largely because of its discomfort around presenting itself as a desirable immigration destination. Yet, the experiences of young Chinese in Japan in many ways reflect wider trends in international Chinese student mobilities and their relationship to precarious work (Martin 2020; Xu 2020). While these patterns are notable elsewhere, Japan continues to be a popular destination for young Chinese students and is one of the first destinations for many young Chinese looking to work overseas.

While countries such as Africa are increasingly drawing Chinese labour to new parts of the world, Japan’s proximity to China and its educationally framed migration schemes make it a popular first choice for many young Chinese urbanites, particularly those who cannot afford to go to places such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. These trends seem likely to continue (Liu-Farrer 2020b) and the visa policy reforms in Japan suggest we will see more temporary low-skilled labour imported into Japan soon. Prior to the disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were serious concerns that construction industries would not be able to complete major refurbishments across Tokyo

before the (now delayed) 2020 Olympics. At the same time, the bigger narrative surrounding these reforms was that they would partially address economic concerns about Japan’s ageing and shrinking workforce. With Japan having one of the world’s oldest populations and a declining birth rate, the question of labour has weighed heavily in many political debates over the past two decades.

The majority of the Chinese with whom I have worked in Japan are choosing to stay. After transitioning through a variety of different visa schemes, many are now applying for permanent resident status. Furthermore, they are slowly engaging more with the question of the rights of non-Japanese workers in Japan and consolidating their identities as transmigrants between China and Japan. What this means for labour migration remains to be seen, as unfortunately those who have obtained more stable legal rights appear also to be the ones who are brokering new forms of labour migration between the two countries. The question remains how migrant labour will be treated in the years to come, but there are glimmers of hope within these new developments. ■

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