

## **Ambiguous Concepts and Unintended Consequences: Rethinking Skilled Migration in View of Chinese Migrants' Economic Outcomes in Japan**

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### **Summary**

Immigration policy makers tend to have preexisting notions about categories such as “international students” and “skilled” or “unskilled” migrants. They often design and implement immigration policies according to the observable labor shortage at any given time. There are two caveats in this approach. First, these common-sense categories adopted in immigration policy making are in reality highly ambiguous concepts. Such ambiguity leads to unintended policy consequences. Second, migration trends evolve in an interaction between individual migrant characteristics and socio-institutional contexts; it is impossible for national policies to dictate the outcomes of migration. Increasingly globalized and market-driven economic processes render it futile or even counterproductive for national governments to control who they want and who they do not want. This paper uses the migration outcomes of Chinese migrants in Japan to substantiate these arguments. First, it shows the diversity of international students as a category of migrants as well as the blurred boundary between skilled and unskilled labor. It describes the context-specific nature of “skills” and the development of real skills from “unskilled” labor. Second, the economic and social practices of Chinese migrants in Japan, through their niche occupations in Japanese firms’ transnational business, their entrepreneurship, and their cross-border living arrangements all indicate that immigrants, skilled or not, contribute to the Japanese economy and Japanese sociocultural life in ways that are not foreseen or prescribed in immigration policies.

**Keywords:** Japan, migration, Chinese students, skilled labor, unskilled labor

### **1. Introduction**

Many countries are currently competing with each other for skilled foreign workers. With a declining productive labor force due to a low fertility rate and an aging population, Japan is also in need of manpower. Although importing foreign labor is a controversial topic, recruiting skilled labor is not.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese government is

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<sup>1</sup> Unskilled and semi-skilled labor is brought in through side doors, mostly in the category of trainees—a practice vehemently criticized by academics and labor-rights agencies.

trying hard to attract highly skilled foreign workers and improving the work environment in order to retain such workers (Tsukasaki 2008; Murata 2010; Akashi 2010). This paper casts doubts on the classification of labor in terms of “skilled” and “unskilled” and argues that such selective and differentiating immigration policies are largely irrelevant and may even be counterproductive. First, it is difficult to define who the skilled workers actually are and what skills are actually “desirable,” and second, the immigration of skilled workers without having an accommodative institutional framework to place and incorporate them in may lead to a waste of talent and deskilling. Third, migration trends evolve in an interaction between individual migrant characteristics and socio-institutional contexts; it is impossible for national policies to dictate the outcomes of migration. Finally, increasingly globalized and market-driven economic processes have created new opportunity structures that render it futile or even counterproductive for national governments to control who they want and who they do not want. Even the classic simple laborers—the undesirable migrants—can be potentially important actors in the transnational economy.

This paper uses the migration outcomes of Chinese migrants in Japan, especially student migrants, to illustrate these arguments. Chinese student migrants in Japan are a diverse population. They demonstrate the blurred boundary between skilled and unskilled labor. Because of their diversity, in recent years they have brought hopes, concerns, and occasional dismay to Japanese society and immigration policy makers. The discussion often centers on the quality of the students from China. The concerns are frequently related to their labor practices. The dismay, understandably, comes from the fact that so many of these students overstay their visas. I have argued elsewhere, however, that international students are *de facto* labor migrants (Liu-Farrer 2009, 2011a). Their economic practices on the Japanese labor market show the context-specific nature of “skills” and the development of real skills from “unskilled” labor. Moreover, the economic and social practices of Chinese migrants in Japan, through their niche occupations in Japanese firms’ transnational business, their entrepreneurship, and their cross-border living arrangements, indicate that immigrants, skilled or not, contribute to the Japanese economy and Japanese sociocultural life in ways that are not foreseen or prescribed in immigration policies.

## **2. Examining the Migration of “Skilled” Labor: An Ambiguous Concept with Unintended Outcomes**

There seems to be a consensus that the world has entered the knowledge economy in which education and research are the pillars while information and communications technology is the foundation. In order to maintain a technological edge in a globalized economy, industrialized countries’ immigration policies are often oriented toward recruiting people who are able to contribute to these sectors. However, in practice, how does one define skills and skilled migrants? In general,

researchers have treated all tertiary-educated migrants as among the skilled (Adams 2003; Carrington and Detragiache 1998; Docquier and Marfouk 2004, 2006; Dumont and Lemaître 2004). Occupations or jobs currently or previously held by the migrant workers are also treated as an indicator of acquired skills. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses the term *Human Resources in Science and Technology* (HRST) to encompass a wide range of skills in disciplines including the physical and life sciences, engineering, the social sciences, health, education, and business (Auriol and Sexton 2002). In common sense, engineers, IT workers, or other specialists with tertiary education and above are skilled labor migrants. Some countries have extended the concept of skilled labor to include middle-level professionals such as nurses and cooks when the demands in these professions rise domestically.

Nevertheless, the question of whether or not international students are skilled labor migrants still remains.<sup>2</sup> If skilled labor is defined in terms of a worker possessing a tertiary education, then the majority of international students would not actually qualify for it. Moreover, international students are often recruited for a plethora of political, economic, and cultural initiatives, from producing international peace and supplementing the shrinking domestic student pool to enriching campus life. They are not usually included in the discussion of labor migration in the literature on the subject. Are they necessarily the skilled labor migrants of the future?

The OECD (2001: 93) treats student mobility as “a potential flow of qualified workers, either in the course of their studies or through subsequent recruitment [...]. Student flows represent a form of migration of qualified labor and also a precursor of subsequent migrations, mainly of HRST.” Australian immigration law explicitly links international student mobility with skilled migration, and encourages students to stay in Australia by giving them qualification points for permanent residency (Ziguras and Law 2006). However, in Japan (and increasingly in Korea as well) they are a much more controversial migrant group. Although affirming the importance to recruit foreign students, the Japanese government, as well as the general public, has been concerned with the so-called “quality” of foreign students, especially students from China. Many policy initiatives have to do with controlling the quality of international students.<sup>3</sup>

In the following section, I will show that student migration—especially from countries with fewer economic resources—is a process that involves different actors in different contexts who do not always fulfill the intended “potential.” Most international students do not fit neatly into the categories of scientific and technological labor, which are the ones typically intended for “skilled” migrants.

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<sup>2</sup> Addressing the brain-drain charge, Beine, Docquier and Rapoport (2007) have pointed out that the question of whether a migrant’s education was acquired in the home or host country is still valid.

<sup>3</sup> See Asano (2004) and Yonezawa (2008), among many others.

Yet they do have various skills of their own and contribute to economic and social life in the host country as well.

Aside from the definitional ambiguity, there are other factors that make the whole concept of skilled migration ambiguous and selective policy making counterproductive. Two nagging issues here are whether there really is a shortage of skilled workers domestically (such as IT specialists) and—presuming there is—whether such skilled work could not be done outside the country. Biao Xiang (2007) followed Indian IT workers in their search for jobs in different countries and noted that while a country might be announcing a shortage of IT labor, many Indian IT workers at the same time were being “benched” out of employment. Numerous high-tech parks have emerged around the world. Their business is often programming for and servicing projects that are thousands of miles away. One executive from a world-leading high-tech company mentioned that their Indian subsidiary hired tens of thousands of employees, while their U.S. headquarters had only a few thousand of them. This shows that the nature of such an industry and the technology it possesses allows long-distance outsourcing of skills. The globalized “rule of codes,” as Aneesh Aneesh (2006) points out, allows for a “virtual migration;” labor and skills can migrate without people actually having to be mobile.

The other related point of concern is that active recruitment of skilled labor does not necessarily lead to its effective utilization. Because of language difficulties in some countries, inadequate institutional frameworks, or an unaccommodating labor market, skilled migrants can be underemployed and sometimes even marginalized in the host economy. Deskillling and skill mismatch occur frequently. Nana Oishi (2012) shows that despite the Japanese government’s relaxed policies on recruiting skilled labor migrants, there is a limited labor market demand for foreign talents in Japan. Japanese firms are ill-equipped to accommodate foreign workers linguistically and organizationally. At the end of the day, even Master and Ph.D. students in science and technology majors may have difficulty finding employment at Japanese firms. Across the Pacific, Canada has encouraged skilled labor immigration over the last few decades. A large number of professional and technical workers from China qualify and apply for immigration. However, upon entry, they realize how difficult it actually is to find appropriate employment. Many highly educated women are forced to take up low-skilled manual labor or to become housewives (Man 2007). Many men return to China or Hong Kong to work, leaving their children and wives in Canada and creating split households (Waters 2002). During my fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Japan, I have encountered several male Chinese IT workers who possessed a Canadian resident status but were living in Japan by themselves while their families were over in Vancouver. The numerous grocery stores on the street corners of New York City illustrate a typical immigrant story. The owners are often well-educated Korean immigrants and are unable to

practice the professions they were actually trained for because of language difficulties (Min 1984).

It is widely acknowledged that many migrants in the “simple labor” category are, in fact, well-educated people in their own society. They migrate for economic reasons. The economic imperatives overwhelm their intention to pursue a professional career. Many of the Brazilian *nikkei* migrants in Japan who work in manufacturing have had a college education in Brazil and were professional workers before moving to Japan.<sup>4</sup> Once they are recruited for work in the manufacturing sector and become manual laborers, they gradually lose their original skills. When Japan implemented the repatriation program after the Lehman Shock in late 2008, some *nikkeijin* returned to Brazil, only to find that it was difficult for them to fit back into the rapidly developing economy there due to their long years of manual labor; they had become “deskilled” over the course of time.

These unpredictable outcomes of skilled migration and the complex reality of migration inevitably press the question about the validity of selective migration policies—policies that single out certain migrants as skilled and desirable while others are deemed unskilled and therefore less desirable. I contend that the governments who implement a selective migration policy based on the ambiguous concept of skills lack vision. They also lack the basic understanding of migration processes, the agency of the migrants, and economic mechanisms in an age of globalization. In the following section, I aim to show the ambiguity of the concept of skilled migration with the case of Chinese student migrants in Japan. I show that the skills that are most needed in the host society may not be scientific or technical ones at all sometimes. Instead, pertinent cultural and social skills are crucial for developing a seemingly purely technical business. Such cultural and social skills are often cultivated in the migration process instead of being learned in the classroom. Rigid immigration regimes tend to discount immigrants’ potentially creative roles in the host country.

### **3. Chinese Student Migrants—Diverse Populations and Diverse Skills**

Is student migration skilled migration? What kinds of skills are required? These conceptual ambiguities are manifested among Chinese students in Japan. Since 1978, 400,000 Chinese people have entered Japan either as language students or as university students. If language students are included, Japan currently has more post-secondary Chinese international students than any other country. On Japanese university campuses, two-thirds of the international students are currently from China. Over the decades, thousands of Chinese students have graduated from

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<sup>4</sup> The Brazilian *nikkei* migrants are ethnic Japanese Brazilians who have been recruited to work in Japan since the 1980s.

Japanese higher education and found professional employment on the Japanese labor market, thereby contributing skilled labor to the Japanese economy. However, the Chinese student population and the skills they offer do not necessarily match the typical image of “skilled migrants.” They do contribute important skills to the Japanese economy, though. In this section, I would like to outline the diversity of both the Chinese student body and the potential skills they offer to the host society.

### 3.1 The Diversity of Chinese Students

Among the nearly 400,000 Chinese people who have entered Japan as students in recent decades, there are tens of thousands who have obtained Ph.D. and Master degrees from Japanese universities. Japanese firms have also employed many thousands of them. In a way, it seems that Chinese student migrants fit the image of potential highly skilled migrants. Yet in 2007, for example, 40 percent of the Chinese visa overstayers were former students (MOJ 2008a). In other words, many undocumented migrants are former students as well.

This diversity in a way shows that international education is but another channel of labor migration for potentially “highly skilled” as well as “unskilled” migration. (I have put these terms in quotation marks because I am questioning such concepts.) As in many other countries, Japan issues conditional part-time work permits to international students. Practically all Chinese students in Japan work in low-wage jobs during their school years. This is due to the fact that over half of the international students in Japan’s higher-education institutions have little or no funding of their own, as the student survey reports of the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) show (2012). The opportunity to work made it possible for resource-poor students from developing countries to come to Japan to study. In a way, as Shin’ichi Asano (2004) points out and I will argue later as well, it is an advantage of Japan’s international education regime. But at the same time, the permission to work has inevitably motivated a large number of people without any interest in academia to join the student migration.

This pattern was particularly salient from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s in the student migration from China to Japan. Many language student migrants were purely economically motivated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Shanghai, where most early language students were from, studying in Japan was once called “*pa fen*” (raking coins). Studying was merely a front, while making money was the real motivation—and actual practice. The same applied to early student immigrants from the Chinese province of Fujian. These immigrants mostly obtained their student visas through “snakeheads.”<sup>5</sup> Many migrants who were among the first groups of

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<sup>5</sup> A “snakehead” is a slang expression referring to a “migration broker;” it is commonly used to describe a person who facilitates clandestine migration. Among people from Fujian, however, it is sometimes used to refer to any kind of migration broker.

students from this region of China forged their educational credentials in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some of these “students” never actually entered a classroom in Japan. It is reported that at one point 60 percent of language students overstayed their visas (Noro 2002).

The profit-driven language schools facilitated such a cash-motivated international education. After 1984, with relaxed criteria for language student visas, language academies multiplied. By the early 1990s, some scholars had already pointed out that language schools were sometimes just a front facilitating the entry of foreigners in search of work (Morita and Sassen 1994). One language student who returned to China told me the following:

What was it like? At that time, it was so easy to go there. Many language schools had just opened. Wouldn't they want students? They would ask you: 'Do you have any relatives, friends, or coworkers who want to come to Japan? We'll give you some money for every person you bring out here.' There was almost no visa rejection. The person who helped me go out took out about 500 students! We were mostly Shanghai people. We all ended up in three or four language schools. Why did we want to go? We went to make money!

(Interview with the author, 2007/07/28)

This kind of economically motivated student migration still persists. International education has become institutionalized in China, and education brokers have reached every corner of the country. The regional economic disparity and the difficulty of finding jobs for relatively educated urban youths in inland towns make going to Japan an attractive economic proposition. Students are less likely to become visa overstayers now due to more stringent monitoring of their stays by the Japanese authorities. However, many Chinese students enroll for courses at dead-end specialist training schools and private colleges, which only accept them because of the tuition fees they pay. Many of these Chinese students have little chance of ever finding any professional employment in Japan. Consequently, earning money gradually becomes their primary reason for staying in Japan. At Waseda University, my home institution, I teach ambitious, intellectually driven Chinese students who have graduated from elite Chinese universities. At the same time, I have met Chinese students in language schools and *senmon gakkō* (specialist training schools) who work 70 hours a week in order to make enough cash to take back with them to China in case they are unable to go on to college.

Nevertheless, those Chinese migrants for whom education is just a door via which they can enter Japan in order to make money are only a minority. Since 2003, in particular, when the Japanese government began to be more stringent toward students overstaying their visas or otherwise abusing them, overstaying one's visa is an outcome that Chinese students desperately avoid. The majority of Chinese students do actually follow the typical educational trajectory from language school to higher education and eventually graduate and then obtain employment. Many of them enter second- or third-tier private universities, however, majoring in

humanities or social science. The reason for this is that such universities have relatively lax admission criteria. As I have described elsewhere (Liu-Farrer 2011a), the excessive amount of time Chinese students devote to part-time jobs makes it practically impossible for them to prepare adequately for academic examinations. Having been out of high school for several years, they have also lost some of the academic knowledge typically possessed by high-school students. In some circumstances, students are enrolled at a university with little testing done beforehand. One interviewee I spoke to enrolled at a newly built university a year after arriving in Japan. She mentioned that it was not really her own choice; she was recommended to the school.

(GLF: *How did you choose to enroll in this university?*) I didn't choose. Because I came to Japan in April, and the entrance exams were in October. So for me, there were only six months. I had no time, and no time to prepare. Because I came to Japan in April, I had to work first (*dagong*: do odd jobs), and then I had to get accustomed to life here, because everything was new for me. It would be three or four months [before I could start studying]. So, talking about taking the college entrance exam, I had no time to prepare [for it]. Time was tight. So, that school had an offer to our school, our school teacher wrote a recommendation letter for everybody. Like that, this university wanted us, so we went. [I] had no preparation at all.  
(Interview with the author, 2011/06/20)

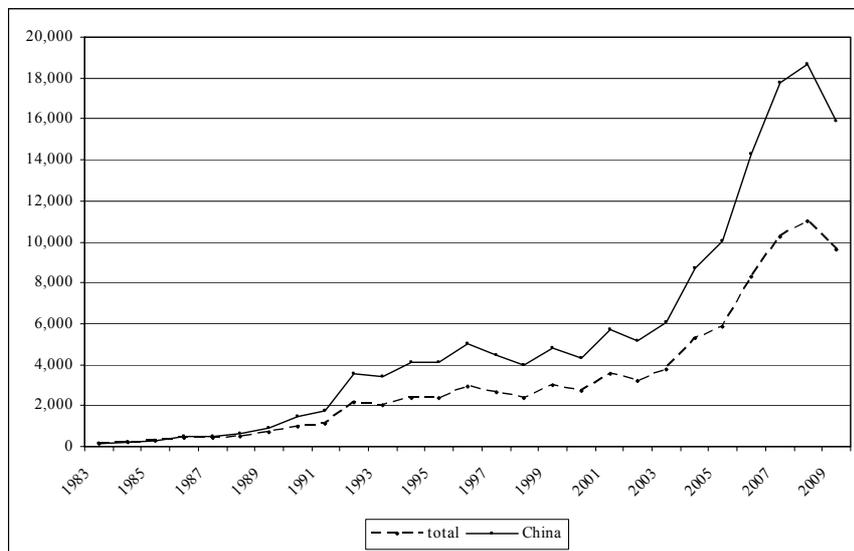
This kind of student diversity—the emergence of undocumented migrants and enrollment at low-ranking universities, majoring in arts (*bunkei*)—feeds the narrative of the “poor quality” of Chinese students in Japan. This quality issue has been a nagging concern in discourse on the mobility of Japan's international students and a worrisome phenomenon for Japanese policy makers (Terakura 2009). Much discussion has been devoted to enhancing student quality. Not only the visa-overstaying phenomenon is targeted for elimination, but college students majoring in humanities or social science still do not match the image of highly skilled labor. The underlying meaning of enhancing student quality is to attract more post-graduate-level students, especially students of science and technology.

Such diversity among Chinese students in Japan shows the complexity of skilled migration policy making. International higher education, as designed, is supposed to be a channel for skilled labor migration, or at least a way to produce highly skilled labor. However, the outcomes are often unexpected, as has been shown here. I would like to argue that this might be an unwarranted concern. In an age of economic globalization, the skills that are most needed within the host society might not be technical. Students who are not enrolled in science or technology programs can still contribute to the host society in important ways. Moreover, I have evidence that even undocumented migrants working in seemingly unskilled jobs can still produce useful skilled labor—if the legal institution allows.

### 3.2 Chinese Students’ Labor-Market Outcomes in Japan

What kinds of skills are Chinese students contributing to the Japanese economy? The majority of skilled workers in Japan come from China (MOJ 2010a).<sup>6</sup> Some of them were directly recruited from China, but a good number of them are former students. For the past decade, several thousand Chinese students have managed to obtain employment visas in Japan every year (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Chinese Students Who Have Obtained Employment Visas in Japan (1983–2009)**



Source: The data from 2000 to 2009 for this figure has been taken from MOJ (2004: table 4, 2010b: table 4). The data from 1984 to 1999 has been cited from Jin Wang (2001: 385).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ 2010a: 25), by the end of 2009, the number of foreign residents who had registered in Japan as legal workers in one of the 14 employment categories was 212,896. Most of these people were categorized as “specialists in humanities/international services” (69,395), “engineers” (50,493), “intra-company transferees” (16,786), and “skilled labor” (29,030). The MOJ defines the previous three categories as foreign employees, considering them to be highly skilled professionals and technical experts. Foreign nationals in the last category, “skilled labor,” were mostly *chefs de cuisine*. In all four of these employment categories, the most numerous foreign workers were the Chinese. In 2009, 34,210 specialists in humanities and international services (49 percent of the total), 27,166 engineers (54 percent of the total), and 16,786 intra-company transferees (38 percent of total) were Chinese. As for the skilled laborers, 15,595, or 54 percent, were Chinese. The “skilled labor” categories do not capture the presence of so-called skilled Chinese immigrants in Japan by any means. A large number of skilled and formally employed Chinese migrants have applied for naturalization or permanent residency in the past two decades, making these two categories of Chinese immigrants amount to over a third of the total Chinese resident population in Japan.

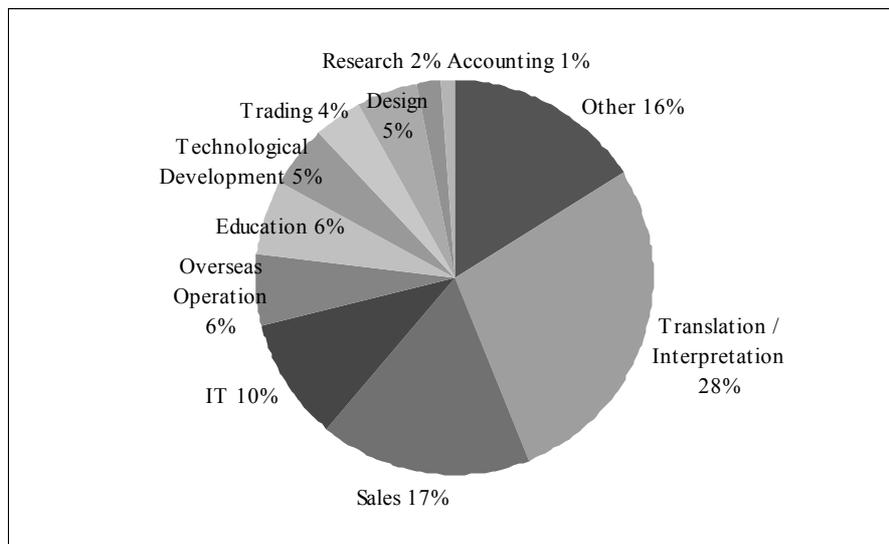
The directly recruited skilled laborers and those who are or were once students are of a different type. The technical workers, in the category of “engineers,” are usually directly recruited from Chinese university campuses by Japanese firms, or through intra-firm transfer, or by IT firms who contract software engineers on a project basis. Every year, the number of engineers entering Japan for the first time can usually be measured in thousands. Those who are in the category of “specialists in humanities/international services,” on the other hand, are mostly former students. The number of Chinese migrants who go to Japan and can be categorized as “specialists in humanities/international services” is only a few hundred. At the aggregate level, however, the latter has surpassed the former. On the other hand, three-quarters of the nearly 50,000 Chinese students who have obtained employment visas in Japan in the past couple of decades were put in the category of “specialists in humanities/international services.” In comparison, fewer than 20 percent of the applicants obtained engineer’s visas. The majority of Chinese students who are in the category of “specialists in humanities and international services” are employed in Japanese firms and work in marketing and sales occupations in small Japanese firms (Liu-Farrer 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

Above all, this pattern of economic outcomes reflects the characteristics of Chinese students. As mentioned earlier, Chinese students overwhelmingly majored in humanities and social science, whose natural outlets are marketing and sales occupations. On the other hand, the pattern shows the demand for different types of skills in the host economy—both technical and cultural. Chinese students choose to study humanities partly because they realize that their earlier cohorts successfully entered the Japanese labor market this way, so there is an obvious demand for their skills. Moreover, technical skills can be imported directly from foreign countries, while cultural skills need to be acquired through extended exposure to the host society. For that reason, international students are considered particularly desirable in Australia—because of their familiarity with the cultural and social environment of the host country, gained by going through the education system there (Ziguras and Law 2006). However, Chinese students’ employment outcomes in Japan indicate a new labor-market development under the conditions of economic globalization. They show that the host society has increased its demand for skills produced in the context of the migration process itself.

Let us look at Chinese student migrants’ employment patterns now. The category of visa designated as “specialist in humanities/international services” is reserved for foreigners who “have the particular knowledge and cultural competence of a foreign country” (MOJ 2008b). In the case of Chinese students, it means Chinese linguistic skills and cultural competence. It is evident that Chinese students are predominantly employed by Japanese firms to fill positions focusing on transnational economic relations with China. The MOJ’s student employment data shows that, in 2009, the demand for foreign students was highest in four occupational categories: translation/interpretation (*honyaku, tsūyaku*)—28.5 percent, sales/marketing

(*hanbai, eigyō*)—17 percent, information technology (*jōhō shori*)—10.5 percent, and overseas operations (*kaigai gyōmu*)—6 percent. Except for information technology, the other three categories clearly require multilingual skills or a multicultural background. Over half of the foreign graduates in 2009 were hired partly because of their linguistic and cultural skills (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Occupations of International Student Migrants Granted Employment Visas in 2009**



Source: MOJ (2010b)

Chinese students’ tendency to occupy positions in corporate Japan’s transnational business operations is primarily a result of the increasingly close economic relationship between Japan and China in the past two decades. China has become the most important production site and one of the largest consumer markets for Japanese businesses. China’s role as Japan’s business partner is increasingly prominent. Japan is the largest foreign investor in China and the number one importer of Chinese workers. China has surpassed the US to become Japan’s largest trading partner. Not only do big conglomerates have most of their production done in China and aim at selling a big portion of their products there, but numerous medium-sized and small Japanese firms are also active players in the transnational economy between Japan and China (some are even desperate ones). In 2007, Shanghai alone had 4,828 Japanese corporate branches (Sasatani 2007). In such a context, Chinese students educated in Japan with the linguistic and cultural knowledge of China became sought-after resources hired to deal with businesses in China.

However, the making of the transnational niche labor market is not solely a result of Japanese firms' corporate strategies. Chinese students also see their career opportunities lying in the transnational economy and regard themselves as the bridging agents of the Japanese and Chinese economies. As one interviewee commented:

Japan is not an open society. [...] Because it is an island country, I am not saying that it excludes people, but if it is something they can solve within themselves, they will keep it within the group. If you are a foreigner, you have to find your own niche (*dingwei*), and develop within your niche [...]. So, as a Chinese, you do the business related to China. If you are European, you do business with Europe. I personally don't think Japanese firms are a suitable environment for foreigners to develop careers. But Japanese firms have strong incentives to go abroad. Foreigners' opportunities lie here. (Interview with the author, 2007/08/12)

Once employed, Chinese students actively help expand the cross-border economy and consequently carve out a territory in the firm they work for as well as expanding the labor-market demand for Chinese students. One informant, a law-school graduate, reported that he was initially hired for his legal expertise and English ability. When he started his career at a Japanese technology marketing firm, he became an advisor working in the field of intellectual property. For the first few years, he mostly traveled to Europe and North America. In the late 1990s, he reminded his boss about the potential market for patented technologies in China. Very soon, as the only Chinese person in a company of 50 employees, he found himself immersed in the transnational business activities being conducted between Japan and mainland China, and the company had to hire more Chinese workers to lighten his workload.

I would like to stress that the supply of Chinese students of humanities and social-science majors graduating from second- or third-tier universities also contributes to Japan's trade with China immensely. The main anchor of the Japanese economy is small and medium-sized firms, and the majority of international students, including the Chinese ones, are employed by these firms. On the one hand, this is because small Japanese firms have been facing a labor shortage for some time. Most newly graduated Japanese students aim at posts in big corporations, hoping for job stability and a larger field for future career development. As a result, there were twice as many job aspirants for large firms as there were vacancies, while small and medium-sized firms had 2.5 times as many jobs as job aspirants (*Nihon Rōdō Nenkan* 2004). Chinese students therefore supply small businesses with much-needed manpower. On the other hand, with a large number of bilingual, Japanese-educated foreign students in the labor force, many small and medium-size firms which have never had any foreign employees before are now hiring Chinese students and plan to seek business opportunities in China.

Moreover, Chinese student migrants who have been employed in Japanese firms demonstrate a strong tendency to work as entrepreneurs. The majority of the

businesses they set up are transnational; in fact, they often extend the business their former employers were in. Although mostly small, these transnational enterprises are important actors that link up the economies of Japan and China (Liu Farrer 2007).

To sum up, in Japan, the majority of Chinese students have majored in humanities or social science. They supply most of the skilled labor falling under the category of “specialists in humanities/international services.” In reality, they are frequently employed by small and medium-sized Japanese firms to deal with or develop business with China. And the skills utilized are more often than not their linguistic ones—Chinese, Japanese, and sometimes English and Korean (as in the case of ethnic Korean students)—and cultural skills, namely their understanding of Japanese society and its work ethic. In the following section, I would like to show that most of these skills are not learnt from schools. In fact, they are produced in the course of the migration process itself.

### **3.3 Producing Skills in the Migration Process**

Crammed in the same trains as Japanese people, rushing along the same sidewalks as they do, and working at restaurants and bars mostly serving Japanese customers, Chinese students who work as well as study (or only work, as the case may be) are immediately exposed to Japanese culture and lifestyle. It is no exaggeration to say that international education in Japan is a process of cultural immersion for Chinese students. Educational credentials obtained through schooling are important, but they only make up one source of human capital. The migration process itself—to make a living, survive in a new environment, and learn to adapt to the host society—is an even more important source of skills for Chinese students. In particular, part-time, low-wage labor—a necessary means for them to survive in Japan—becomes an important space for linguistic and cultural training. Through working in low-wage jobs, Chinese students pick up the language, become familiar with Japanese cultural practices, and gain an understanding of Japanese society. Their experiences outside of the campus—the physical hardship encountered at work, the humiliation of being low-status part-time workers, the knowledge about Japanese work culture, and the frustration with many social conflicts and cultural clashes—become important cultural assets that allow them to be able to live and work in Japan in the long term while internalizing social rules and values.

#### **3.3.1 Mastering the Language**

Most Chinese students in Japan I have encountered picked up Japanese quickly. In order to enter Japanese universities, Chinese students all take the top-level Japanese Proficiency Test (*Nihongo Nōryoku Shiken, ikkyū*). If they come to Japan in April, they have up to two years to prepare for this test. Many Chinese students come in the fall and have only a year and a half to prepare for this test as well as the college

entrance exam. However, compared to the formal language training they obtained at school, Chinese student migrants believe their Japanese would not have improved as quickly as it did if they had not spent time working in Japan as well. The need to survive can lead to linguistic miracles. A young female interviewee from Beijing found a waitressing job a month and a half after she landed in Japan when she hardly knew how to say numbers correctly in Japanese. In order to hold onto that job, she managed to recite the entire menu of 105 items in Japanese within days and improved her Japanese to conversational level within a couple of months (see Liu-Farrer 2011a for a detailed account of the story).

Japanese employers and coworkers also assist Chinese students' language learning. Duan Yaozhong, the publisher and editor of the *Japan Overseas Chinese News*, expressed his gratitude to the owner of the restaurant he worked at, whose name was Sugiyama. When the business was not busy, he would practice Japanese with his boss, who would correct his pronunciation. Whenever he had difficulty expressing himself in spoken Japanese, they communicated by writing down Chinese characters. As Duan reminisced, "I worked at Sugiyama's shop for a whole year. When I began, I could only say a couple of greetings. When I left, I could write short essays in Japanese" (Duan 1998: 362).

### 3.3.2 Learning about Japanese Work Culture

Both school and the part-time workplace teach Chinese students about Japanese culture—the Japanese work ethic, lifestyle, and social rules. Working shoulder by shoulder with ordinary Japanese people, having constant frictions over small cultural differences, Chinese students learn more about Japanese work styles from their part-time jobs than in their school classes. One interviewee described her experience of learning about Japanese work culture as follows:

Before I started this part-time job, my friend told me: 'Working for a Japanese place, you have to remember two things—not to work too fast, and not to stop working.' I am a fast-paced person and like finishing a job very fast. But the Japanese boss wasn't happy. He thought, 'Why do I have to pay for her time standing there?' So I learned to waste time doing things slowly. He was happy as long as I was working. But then I thought of the issue from the boss's standpoint and understood his feelings. Only when one started working, would one understand Japanese society. I felt that I learned a lot from those jobs. So I think working part-time (*dagong*) is a necessary experience. (Interview with the author, 2002/01/29)

I frequently heard Chinese students complain about rude treatment by their bosses in their part-time jobs. Physically exhausted and emotionally distressed, some students interpreted this as a form of discrimination against the Chinese. However, like it or not, many also understood this treatment to be part of Japanese work culture, unpleasant as it was. One of my informants took this opportunity to overcome his own snobbery and pride. He is now an artist and entrepreneur—the owner of a design company. He arrived in Japan in 1985 at the age of 27. He once told me a story about his first dishwashing job (Liu 1998: 607). His supervisor was an old

Japanese lady who could not read very much and had been washing dishes at the same restaurant for the last 30 years. She bossed him around and constantly criticized him. When he was about to protest, a young Japanese man joined the dishwashing team. He worked diligently and always said “yes” to the old lady’s criticisms. The Chinese student thought he must have just come out of prison and was in desperate need of a job. By chance, he heard from other coworkers that this young man was a Ph.D. student from Waseda University whose father was a CEO at a prestigious company in Japan. Once, crammed in the subway together on the way home, Liu asked him why he was willing to work at the dishwashing job “like a slave.” He answered sincerely, “When I look at you, I feel embarrassed. You wash dishes ten hours a day, and I only do it for four hours. My parents have already paid for my tuition. I want to work to have my own pocket money.” My informant asked him if he couldn’t find any better job. The Japanese smiled and said, “I won’t be washing dishes all my life. But I’m doing it now, so I want to do it well.” Liu was deeply moved by these words.<sup>7</sup>

Although my Chinese respondents sometimes grumbled about Japanese workers’ constant bowing to their bosses, the persnickety work rules, and the strict workplace hierarchy, almost all of them marveled at Japanese people’s dedication to work (*jingye jingshen*). By the time they had finished their formal education in Japan, Chinese students already had ample first-hand experience of Japan’s working culture.

The above cases show that Chinese students can acquire many necessary skills from their part-time jobs, most of which entail low-wage labor. Such seemingly “unskilled” labor helps Chinese students gain important cultural and linguistic skills. This is where a rigid legal and institutional framework that has been established to ensure skilled migration can actually be counterproductive, for it fails to recognize the ways that important “basic” skills and knowledge can be developed over time, thereby helping migrants to play more of an active role in the host society and contribute to it as citizens.

#### **4. Institutional Rigidity of Selective Migration and Its Counterproductive Tendency**

Migration outcomes are achieved through the interactive process that migrants experience abroad in socioeconomic and institutional contexts. Many migration outcomes are not planned or expected. Migrants from developing countries, be they students or low-wage workers, go abroad in the hope of pursuing a better future, economically or professionally. There are students who can be described as “fake,” having no intention of pursuing any educational goals, as in the early cohorts of students from Shanghai and Fujian. Most students find it hard to name their specific

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<sup>7</sup> This story also appears in Liu-Farrer (2011a).

reasons. Many young people feel the desire to leave home and experience the world. Migration has practically become a rite of passage in some areas of China (Liu-Farrer 2008). In Masumi Oka and Hiromi Fukada's 1995 study, one language school official pointed out that only a minority of the students at his school were truly pursuing academic intentions; the majority of them merely regarded education as a convenient way of settling in Japan. However, 80 percent of the Chinese language students did express their inclination to go on to higher education in Japan, and most actually did so as well. Sometimes, a student's loss of educational status is not intended. Yet the rigid legal framework that is currently in place in Japan prevents them from regaining it. I would now like to argue that such institutional rigidity is counterproductive and shall illustrate this by means of two real cases.

I once described the visa-overstaying phenomenon among Fujian students, attributing it to the influence of negative social capital and lack of institutional resources (Liu-Farrer 2008). I pointed out that many of those undocumented migrants were good students at home, and studying in Japan was part of their life plan. However, the pressure of excessive debts and lack of support caused them to overstay their student visas. Once they became undocumented, there was no possibility of going back to school again. In the 2008 article, I mentioned the case of a young man who could not find a part-time job when he arrived in Tokyo to attend a specialist training school after spending two years in Okinawa attending a language school. After being jobless for four months, he nearly starved to death. He had to quit his school because he owed it tuition fees. He was eventually rescued by the Chinese Catholic Center. However, he was no longer able to pursue his educational aim. He had initially had a great deal of hope about going to college in Japan. Regarding that experience, he said:

I was hoping to come [here] to study something. I didn't imagine I would end up like this. Even now, my teachers at home still think I'm at college here. It's regrettable that it has come to this.

*(GLF: Were you a good student at home?)* I was not particularly good academically, but I was a good person; I was the class president all the way from junior high to the last year of high school. I was also a member of the student government. Teachers liked me. And the people in my village all thought highly of me. But you know, because I was thought of so highly, I had a tough time getting back on my feet again after a hard fall.

*(GLF: A hard fall?)* I didn't get into a college. It was a big blow [...]. I couldn't get over it.

(Interview with the author, 2004/11/07)

While being interviewed, he asked me if it were possible for him to go to school again. Japanese immigration law does not allow that, I had to tell him regretfully,

unless he managed to legalize his status again.<sup>8</sup> Many other young people from Fujian who were in a similar situation asked me the same question.

The second case I shall describe here illustrates the diversity of skills and the creative processes of skill creation and application, as well as the counter-productiveness of having a selective and rigid migration regime.

During my field research among Fujian immigrants in the mid-2000s, I became acquainted with a young man who had arrived in Japan as a language student at a technical high school in a small Japanese town along with 27 other students from Fujian. He left the school after one semester because he was unable to work outside the campus and the one-million-yen<sup>9</sup> tuition fee was out of the question unless he could get a part-time job and work long hours. He went to Tokyo and soon lost his legal status. In the eight years he was in Japan, he had a series of jobs. The one he had the longest was at Tsukiji Fish Market. He got up at 3 a.m. every day to ride to work with his boss, a small seafood retailer. The job was hard and required various skills. He worked hard and learned the skills that were required. Most importantly, with his optimistic personality and social intelligence, he established a good personal relationship with his employer. In fact, the relationship developed to such a degree that he adopted his boss’s family name publically and practically lived next door to the family. From the boss and from daily observation and communication with small business people in the labyrinth of Tsukiji Market, he learned how to do business in Japan. He also learned to speak fluent Japanese. Later on he went to work at a retail store in Ueno’s Ameyoko-chō and was able to achieve high monthly sales there.

Falling in love with a Chinese trainee, he turned himself in to the authorities and subsequently followed his girlfriend (who later became his wife) back to a booming town in Eastern China. There, he found himself a job at a Chinese textile factory that had business deals with Japanese customers. With his Japanese language skills and his understanding of small Japanese businesses, he became active in connecting with Japanese clients. Unfortunately, because he had formerly been an illegal migrant, he was not allowed to re-enter Japan in the five years immediately after his return to China. As a result, he was not able to make any business trips to Japan, not even to attend trade fairs. This caused problems at work. At the time of conducting a follow-up interview, I found he was trying to change his name and birthplace in order to hide his status—a risky and illicit practice yet again.

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<sup>8</sup> The only way to do this is through marriage—a desperate solution adopted by some undocumented migrants, but usually not by young former students.

<sup>9</sup> This equals roughly 10,000 euros.

## 5. Conclusion

Facing an aging population and low fertility, and the pressure of competition in a globalized knowledge economy, governments hope to attract foreign talents and to increase the amount of skilled human resources available in their countries. This is an understandable desire. However, migration policies based on such an intention do not really work. Several reasons account for the difficulty of a selective migration regime, from the ambiguity of the notion of “skilled migrants” and the insufficient knowledge of skilled labor demand to the lack of an institutional framework to incorporate skilled migrants from abroad. Such selective policy making has much to do with the lack of a sound understanding of the dynamics of international migration, namely the interactive process of migrants’ agency and their socioeconomic and institutional contexts.

This paper has used the case of Chinese students in Japan to show the complexity of policy making on skilled migration and the unpredictability of migration outcomes. Most policy makers treat international higher education as a viable channel for skilled migration. Indeed, over the nearly three decades since the onset of contemporary student migration to Japan, almost 60,000 Chinese students have become so-called “highly skilled laborers” and entered the Japanese labor market (that is by 2009). However, as Figure 2 shows, only a minority of these students fall into the category of “scientific and technical professionals.”

Nonetheless, this paper shows that the student migrants without any “scientific and technical skills” are very active in Japan’s economy. They supply necessary human resources for small and medium-sized firms that have been experiencing a shortage of manpower. Moreover, by utilizing their linguistic and cultural skills, they are helping the Japanese economy globalize by acting as bridges between the Japanese and Chinese economies. The paper emphasizes that these linguistic and cultural skills are not necessarily acquired through school education. Chinese students’ language skills are often honed in their seemingly unskilled part-time jobs in Japan’s low-wage labor market. Through such jobs, they gain a necessary cultural understanding of Japanese society. In a way, these cases demonstrate the blurred boundary between skilled and unskilled labor. To a large extent, this depends on the context of its utilization.

Moreover, this paper stresses that migration is an interactive process. One needs to bear in mind that international migration, be it highly skilled or low skilled, but especially that from a sending region with fewer socioeconomic resources, tends to be economically driven. The practical reason for all migration from the Global South to the North is to better one’s economic situation. This hope is likely to encompass all migrant practices and dictate their strategies. If necessary, immigrants are likely to abandon their original plans. This explains the visa-overstaying phenomenon among the Chinese students and the deskilling situation among many

other migrants who ended up in the low-wage, low-skill sector even though they might have been professionals with a tertiary education background at home.

It is therefore a critical question whether it is conducive to a country’s economy and general well-being to enforce a selective migration regime. The two cases of undocumented students that I have outlined here illustrate the counterproductive tendency of a rigid migration institution. Also, I argue that it defeats the purpose for a country like Japan, which aims at creating a harmonious and multicultural society, by differentiating between skilled and unskilled migrants. As Nana Oishi’s (2012) article points out, Japan’s lack of attractiveness in the eyes of skilled migrants has much to do with its rigid institutional arrangements. A selective migration regime implies the unwillingness of a country to embrace heterogeneity. It reinforces a country’s image of inflexibility and conservativeness. So by rejecting so-called “unskilled” labor, a country by no means attracts “skilled” labor.

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