

Industrial Trainees from China and Vietnam in Japan: An Entry Point into the Key Issues of International Labour Migration and Skill Transfer

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Abstract

Since 2016, Japan's foreign workforce has exceeded 1 million, twenty percent of whom are so-called technical interns. A great majority of these foreign workers and interns come from China and Vietnam. Previous studies have shown that foreign workers and interns have diversified migration experiences and outcomes. But no systematic research has yet used a comparative perspective to examine the relationship between this rapidly expanding international labour migration and skill transfers. Nor are there any studies systemically comparing the changing roles of the Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese states in recruitment, placement and monitoring of trainees/interns. This paper identifies the similarities and differences in the international trainee migration systems of the two dyads (China-Japan and Vietnam-Japan), and isolates the factors that engender different patterns of migration experiences, skill enhancement and outcomes. Specifically, it explores the roles and impacts of the market and state, and also closely examines the impacts on the young trainee participants. Through on-site interviewing, a comparative study has been carried out of Chinese interns from Hangzhou, and Vietnamese interns from Ho Chi Minh City who both received their internship training in Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan. Demographically, while Chinese interns were young upper middle-class vocational school graduates aged under 23, Vietnamese interns were older workers aged above 23. Despite having similar socialist backgrounds, the Chinese and Vietnamese states has different incentives and labor export policies in sending out industrial interns to Japan. Particularly, while the Chinese government involved heavily in intern recruitment process, the Vietnamese government let private intermediate agents to recruit interns. This led to Vietnamese interns having to pay very high service charge to private intermediate agents, and usually their wages earned in Japan were not enough to repay loans borrowed before their departure. Many of the Vietnamese industrial interns turned into illegal workers in Japan. Comparatively, Chinese interns received better legal protections in the recruitment and placement process. However, interviewed Chinese interns complained that they did not have much skill enhancement throughout their 3-year internship. It suggests that some of the interns sent to Japan are actually being used as cheap labour, and very few skill transfers between China/Vietnam and Japan are undergoing.