

Chinese and Vietnamese Interns/Trainees in Japan: A Comparative Study of Migration Experiences and Outcomes

Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Dr. Kaxton Siu

1. Aim

This paper compares migration experiences and outcomes of one of the rapidly increasing but vulnerable workforce in Japan, susceptible to serious assault and exploitation – Chinese and Vietnamese foreign interns/trainees. To the literature of educationally channeled international labour migration, this study goes beyond the “brain drain” and “side door for unskilled labour” debate, and contributes to the literature to have a more integrated framework to understand international labour migration under two-tier global migration regime and regional restructuring of labour markets in Asia. From a comparative perspective, it investigates: a) the complexities of international labour export and import using China and Vietnam as the sending countries, and Japan, the recipient; b) the perception and migration experiences of Chinese and Vietnamese interns and trainees in Japan; c) the reasons underlying the differences.

2. Data & Methods

To examine the migration experiences and career outcomes of Chinese and Vietnamese interns/trainees, this research conducted in-depth interviews with 20 trainees/interns of opposite sexes aged from 17 to 35 who participated in Japan’s Industrial Training and Technical Internship Program, alongside interviewing other state and non-state stakeholders in the two countries.

3. Results

We found that, for similarities, both China and Vietnam are governed by one-party socialist states with state-controlled trade unions, and have similar levels of economic development. Yet, they differ in how local contexts and government administrations implement regulations regarding labour protection, labour export, vocational training, labour export recruitment agencies/intermediates. Significantly, while the regulatory body of labour export in China is the Ministry of Commerce, the one in Vietnam is the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs—a fact underlying different attitudes in protecting foreign workers in Japan. While sizable proportion of rural-to-urban Chinese migrant workers live in factory dormitories, most Vietnamese migrant workers live outside the factories. This accommodation difference shapes Chinese and Vietnamese foreign interns/trainees’ expectations in their working and living conditions when they are in Japan. Besides, the two countries’ manufacturing industries differ in their positions in the global production chain. While China’s manufacturing industries has been losing its edge due to rising labour costs, Vietnam’s has been gaining due to its lower labour costs.

4. Conclusion

By comparing the two countries’ manufacturing industries and their connections with the labor export policies, we found that the development level of home country significantly affect the cost evaluation of individuals/agents, and the costs and benefits of having “overseas” training for foreign interns/trainees’ later career development in their home country. The findings of this study enable Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese governments, as well as other global agencies (e.g. ILO and UN) to assess the effectiveness of their respective labour import/export policies and Japan’s new regulations on the situation of foreign interns/trainees.

Reference

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