Migrant workers in contemporary Japan: an institutional perspective on transnational employment.

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Abstract
Migrant Workers in Contemporary Japan is primarily concerned with changes in social institutions within the context of globalization and the implications of these changes for the lifestyles of people living and working in Japanese society.

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contemporary, japan, institutional, perspective, workers, transnational, migrant, employment

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Migrant Workers in Contemporary Japan is primarily concerned with changes in social institutions within the context of globalization and the implications of these changes for the lifestyles of people living and working in Japanese society. Kiyoto Tanno regards the essence of globalization as "the reintroduction of disparities" (xvi) to relationships in the most fundamental social institution, i.e., the division of labour. Globalization in this sense has not only dismantled Japan's mythical tradition that made the lifetime employment and seniority-based wages of regular workers the ideological norms, but has also promoted the rapid growth of irregular workers. Within this restructuring of the Japanese labour market, Tanno draws special attention to the formation of the "transnational employment system" (xiv) that brings in labour from beyond its national borders to meet its needs. He also emphasizes that it is crucial to carefully investigate the long-unexplored "fiction (lie) surrounding workers who cross national borders" (xxx). This refers to the Japanese state's official stance that does not recognize the existence of trans-border migrant workers engaged in so-called "unskilled" jobs because of its principal ban on the entry of these workers to Japan. With these frameworks coherently underpinning the arguments in the book, Tanno aims to disclose the economic and political logics driving the incorporation of transnational migrant workers—in particular, the Nikkeijin (Japanese descendants) mainly from Brazil who are able to work legally in Japan.
frameworks coherently underpinning the arguments in the book. Tanno aims to disclose the economic and political logics driving the incorporation of transnational migrant workers—in particular, the Nikkeijin (Japanese descendants) mainly from Brazil who are able to work legally in Japan—into Japan’s reorganized division of labour in an era of globalization.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 explores the ways in which the transnational employment system has been created. With a focus on peripheral, irregular work under short-term contracts, chapter 1 shows how Japan’s labour market reform, ushered by calls for deregulation, has shifted the role of migrant workers from simply contracts, chapter 1 shows how Japan’s labour market reform, ushered by calls for deregulation, has shifted the role of migrant workers from simply alleviating the shortages of low-skilled and low-wage labour to constituting part of the expanding insecure contract labour force. Chapter 2 describes the function of the brokers who recruit Nikkei migrant workers in Latin America and deploy them to Japan’s local labour markets, while chapter 3 demonstrates how the lifestyles of these migrant workers have been influenced by the increasing prevalence of service contracting companies that assemble flexible workforces as needed. In chapters 4 and 5, Tanno further unpacks the dynamics of the transnational employment system, highlighting the spread of stratification and diversification among migrant workers, mainly due to their ethnicity and legal status.

Part 2 of the book brings together a range of quantitative and qualitative data from primary research conducted by the author in order to empirically illustrate the development of the transnational employment system. For example, chapter 6 traces the historical inflows of the Nikkeijin as migrant workers to Japan and elucidates the ways in which the increasing demand for these workers has been derived from profound changes in the Japanese management of employment contracts. Chapter 7 offers a summary of the findings from a survey of manufacturing factories in Toyota City—most of which are related to the automobile industry—and following interviews with those who identified their experience of hiring migrant workers. It illuminates emerging differences among these firms in terms of their reliance on migrant workers according to their position within the hierarchically organized subcontracting structure (known as keiretsu, which is one of the key elements that characterize Japan’s industrial relations). Based on an ethnographic study of a service contracting company in Toyota City that distributes Nikkei/migrant workers to the factories, chapter 9 reveals specific labouring and living conditions imposed on these workers in Japanese society.

Finally, part 3 attempts to explore “the social foundation of [migrant] workers who straddle national borders” (xxxi), though it is not entirely clear how, exactly, the three chapters in this section are connected. Chapter 10 extends the analysis put forward in chapter 2 of the broker structure that sends the Nikkeijin from Brazil to Japan, delineating its linkage with the Japanese service-contracting companies and its transformation over time. Chapter 11 dwells on one particular court case concerning the system that grants special permission for unauthorized migrant workers to stay in Japan. Although the chapter sheds some light on the minimum requirements set by the state for unauthorized migrant workers to make their residence in Japanese society legitimate on a permanent basis, it creates a sudden disruption from the previous discussion of the transnational employment system with a central focus on the Nikkeijin. Chapter 12 examines genealogically the definition of Japanese nationality. It should be noted that this last chapter is not in the original Japanese version of the book, and the reason for its inclusion is not clarified anywhere in this English translation.

Migrant Workers in Contemporary Japan has much to contribute to the study of transnational labour migration to Japan. Of particular importance are Tanno’s efforts to combine various original sources in order to generate a more comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis for understanding the transnational employment system under conditions of globalization. However, while carefully disclosing the complexity of the transnational employment system, this book does not precisely explore the fiction surrounding cross-border migrant workers, which, in Tanno’s view, is another key framework that endorses its arguments. The link between a transnational employment system and the fictitious perception of migrant workers should have been more clearly articulated, possibly in part 3. Indeed, another salient question left unaddressed is: How far and in what ways does the specific study of Japan contribute to a growing body of literature regarding international labour migration and globalization? Despite these shortcomings, this book must be welcomed as an important resource for researchers, activists and policy makers who are interested in global labour migration and the politics of contemporary Japan.

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