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Ambiguous Concepts and Unintended Consequences: Rethinking Skilled Migration Policies from the Case of Chinese Student Migrants in Japan[1]

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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 commonsense 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 Japanese economy and Japanese socio-cultural life in ways that are not foreseen or prescribed in immigration policies.

Countries are competing 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.[2] The Japanese government is 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 about the classification of skilled and unskilled labor and argues that such selective and differentiating immigration policies are largely irrelevant and could be counterproductive. First, it has been difficult to define who the skilled workers are and of what the desirable skills consist. Second, the immigration of skilled workers without an accommodative institutional framework to place and incorporate these workers might lead to a waste of talent and deskilling. Third, migration trends evolve in an interaction between

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2 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.

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 visa overstaying has occurred among these students. However, I have argued 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 socio-cultural life in ways that are not foreseen or prescribed in immigration policies.

Examining the "Skilled" Labor Migration: Ambiguous Concept, Unwarranted 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 (Carrington and Detragiache 1998; Adams 2003; Docquier and Marfouk 2004, 2006; Dumont and Lemaitre 2004). Occupations or jobs currently or previously held by the migrant workers are also treated as an indicator of acquired skills. OECD uses the term *HRST—Human Resources in Science and Technology*—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 middle level professionals such as nurses and cooks when the demands in these professions rise domestically.

But there remains the question whether international students are skilled labor migrants.[3] If skilled labor is defined by possessing tertiary education, the majority of international students would not qualify. 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 usually not in the discussion of labor migration literature. Are they necessarily future skilled labor migrants?

OECD 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* (2002)". 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 the quality control of international students.[4]

I will show in the following section that migration, especially that from countries of less economic resources and even that of cross-border education, is a process that involves different actors in different contexts that does not always fulfill the intended "potential". Most international students do not necessarily grow to fit into the categories of scientific and technological labor—the typical "skilled migrants" as intended. Yet, they have their skills, and contribute to the economic and social life in the host country.

Aside from the definitional ambiguity, there are other factors that make the whole concept of skilled migration ambiguous and the selective policy making counterproductive. One nagging issue is that it is questionable whether these skilled workers—such as IT workers— are in real shortage domestically and whether such skilled work could be done outside of the country. Xiang Biao (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 several tens of thousand employees while their US head quarter had only several thousands. It shows that the nature of such industry and the technology they possess allows long distance outsourcing of skills. The globalized "rule of codes", as Aneesh (2006) points out, allows for a "virtual migration". Labor and skills

[3] To address the brain drain charge, Beine *et al.* (2007) point out that there is still the question whether education was acquired in the home or the host country.

[4] See Asano (2004), Yonezawa (2008) among many others.

can migrate without people's actual mobility.

The other related point of concern is that active recruitment of skilled labor does not necessarily translate to its effective utilization. Because of language difficulty in some countries, inadequate institutional frameworks or an unaccommodating labor market, skilled migrants are underemployed and sometimes marginalized in the host economy. Deskilling and skill mismatch occur frequently. Oishi (2012) shows that despite the Japanese government's relaxed policies regarding recruiting skilled labor migrants, there is a limited labor market demand for foreign talents in Japan. Japanese firms are ill equipped linguistically and organizationally to accommodate foreign workers. In the end, even masters and PhDs in science and technology majors have difficulty finding employment in Japanese firms. Across the Pacific, over the past decades, Canada has encouraged skilled labor migration into Canada. A large number of Chinese professional and technical workers qualify and apply for immigration. However, upon entry, they realize the difficulty in finding 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 held Canadian resident status but were working in Japan alone, leaving their family members 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. Due to language difficulties, they were not able to practice the professions they had been trained in (Min 1984).

It is well 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 professional careers. Many Brazilian *nikkei* migrants in Japan working in manufacturing have had college education in Brazil and were professional workers.[5] Once they are recruited to 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 is difficult for them to fit back into the now rapidly developing economy in Brazil due to the long years of manual labor. They have been deskilled.

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 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.

[5] Brazilian *Nikkei* Japanese here refers to ethnic Japanese Brazilians who have been recruited to work in Japan since 1980s.

I show that sometimes the skills that are most needed in the host society might not be scientific and technical. Instead, pertinent cultural and social skills are crucial for developing a seemingly only 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.

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 as either 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 international students are from China. Over the decades, thousands of Chinese students have graduated from Japanese higher education and found professional employment in the Japanese labor market, contributing skilled labor to the Japanese economy. However, the Chinese student population as well as the skills they offer does not necessarily make them fit the image of typical "skilled migrants". Yet, they do contribute important skills to the Japanese economy. In this section, I would like to introduce the diversity of both the Chinese student body and the potential skills they offer to the host society.

The diversity of Chinese students

Among the nearly 400,000 Chinese people who have entered Japan as students in the recent decades, tens of thousands of them have obtained PhDs 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, among the Chinese visa-overstayers, 40 percent of them were former students (MOJ 2008b). 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 of potential "highly skilled" as well as "unskilled" migration. (I put them in quotation marks because I am questioning such concepts.) As many other countries, Japan issues conditional part-time work permits to international students. Practically all Chinese students in Japan work on low-wage jobs during their school years. Since over half of international students in Japan's higher educational institutions have no funding, as the student survey reports of the Japan Student Support 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 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, this work permission has inevitably motivated a large number of people without an interest in academia to join in 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 in the late 1980s and early 1990s were purely economically motivated. In Shanghai, where most early language students were from, studying in Japan was once called "*pa fen*" (raking coins). Studying was a front while making money was the real motivation and actual practice. The same applied to early Fujian student immigrants. Fujian immigrants mostly obtained their student visas through "snakeheads."[6] Many among the first groups of students from Fujian in late 1980s and early 1990s forged their educational credentials. Some of these students never 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. In the early 1990s, some scholars had already pointed out that the language school was just a front facilitating the entry of people in search of work (Morita and Sassen 1994). One returned visa language student in Shanghai said:

> What was it like? At that time, it was so easy to go there. Many language schools newly opened. Wouldn't they want students? They would ask you: 'Do you have relatives, friends and coworkers who want to come to Japan? I will give you money for every person you bring out.' 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, July 28, 2007)

This kind of economically motivated student migration 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 youth in inland towns make going to Japan an attractive economic opportunity. Although with the more stringent control over visa-overstaying, students are less likely to become visa-overstayers, because of the diverse academic backgrounds of students, many Chinese students enroll in dead-end specialist training schools and private colleges that recruited them only for tuition payment. Many of these Chinese students have little hope to find professional employment in Japan. Therefore, making cash becomes the primary goal of staying in Japan. At Waseda University, my home institution, I teach intellectually driven and ambitious Chinese students who graduated from elite Chinese universities. At the same time, I have met Chinese students in language schools and *senmon gakkō* (specialist training schools) who are working 70 hours a week in order to make enough cash to take back in case they cannot ad-

[6] Sneakhead is a slang referring to migration brokers. It is commonly used to describe a person who facilitates clandestine migration. But among the Fujian people, it is sometimes used to refer to all migration brokers.

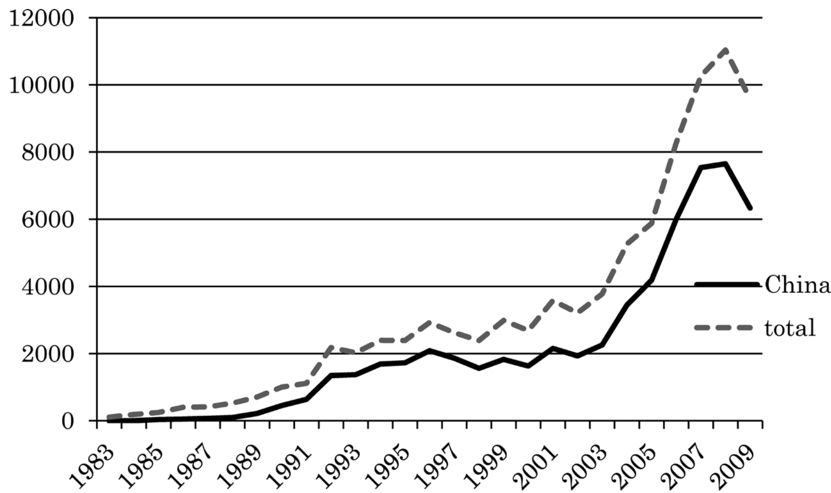
vance to college.

After all, Chinese migrants for whom education just provides a channel for entering Japan to make money are a minority. Particularly after 2003 when the Japanese government began more stringent control over visa overstaying and visa abuse, becoming visa-overstayers is an outcome desperately avoided by Chinese students. The majority of Chinese students do follow the typical educational trajectory from language school to the higher education and eventually graduation and employment. However, the majority of them entered second and third tier private universities, majoring in humanities and social science. The reason for that are the relatively relaxed admission criteria of those universities. As I described in my book (Liu-Farrer 2011a), the excessive amount of time Chinese students devoted to part-time jobs made it nearly impossible for them to have adequate preparation for academic examination. Being 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 into a university with little testing process. One interviewee enrolled into a newly built university a year after arriving in Japan. She mentioned that it was not really her 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 coming to Japan in April, I had to work (*dagong:* working on odd jobs) first, and then I had to get accustomed to life here, because for me everything was new. It would take three or four months. So, talking about taking the college entrance exam, I had no time to prepare. 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, 06/20/2011)

This kind of student diversity—the emergence of undocumented migrants and the enrollment into low-ranking universities majoring in "arts (*bunkei*)" feeds to the narrative of "poor quality" of Chinese students in Japan. This quality issue has been a nagging concern in Japan's international student mobility discourses and a worrisome phenomenon for the Japanese policy makers (Terakura 2009). Much discussion has been devoted to enhancing student quality. Not only the visa-overstaying phenomenon is targeted to be eliminated. College students in humanities and social science still do not meet the image of highly skilled labor. The underlying meaning of enhancing student quality means to attract more post-graduate level students, especially students in 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, as shown, are often



Source: The data for this figure is compiled with annual data published by Japan Ministry of Justice. The data from 1984 to 1999 was cited from Wang (2001:385).

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

unexpected. 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 in science or technology can still contribute to the host society in important ways. Moreover, I have evidence that even undocumented migrants working at seemingly unskilled jobs can still produce useful and skilled labor, if the legal institution allows.

Chinese Students' Labor Market Outcomes in Japan

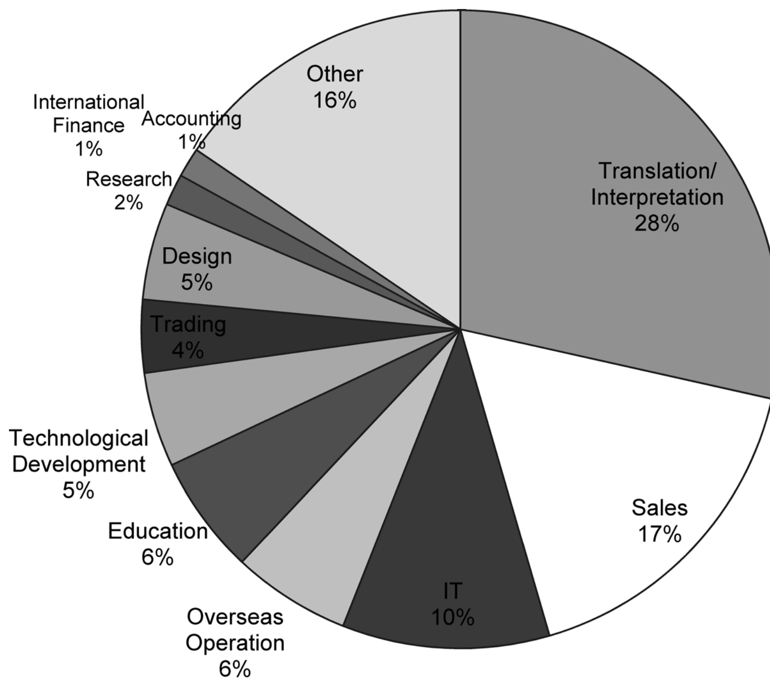
What kinds of skills are Chinese students contributing to the Japanese economy? The majority of skilled workers in Japan came from China (MOJ 2010c).[7] Some of them were directly imported from China, but a good number of them are former students. For the past decade, every year, several thousand Chinese students managed to obtain employment visas in Japan (see Figure 1).

The directly imported skilled laborers and those arising from students are of different type. The technical workers, in the category of "engineers", are usually directly recruited from Chinese university

[7] According to Ministry of Justice (2010c, p. 25), by the end of 2009, the number of foreign residents who registered in Japan as legal workers in one of the 14 employment categories was 212,896. Among them, most were in the categories of "specialist in humanities/international services" (69,395), "engineer (50,493)", "intra-company transferee" (16,786) and "skilled labor" (29,030). The Ministry of Justice defines the previous three categories as foreign employees, considering them as highly skilled professionals and technical experts. Foreign nationals in the last category, "skilled labor", were mostly chefs of foreign cuisine. In all these four employment categories, the most numerous were the Chinese. In 2009, 34,210 specialists in humanities and international services (49% of the total), 27,166 engineers (54% of the total) and 16,786 intra-company transferees (38% of total) were Chinese. Among skilled laborers, 15,595, or 54%, were Chinese. The skilled labor categories do not nearly capture the presence of so-called skilled Chinese immigrants in Japan. 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.

campuses by Japanese firms, or through intra-firm transfer, or by IT firms who contract Software engineers on project-basis. Every year, the numbers of newly entered engineers are usually in thousands. Those who are in the category of "specialist in humanities/international services", on the other hand, are mostly former students. The annual new entry of Chinese migrants in the category of "specialist in humanities/international services" is merely in hundreds. At the aggregate level, however, the latter surpassed the former. On the other hand, among the nearly 50,000 Chinese students who have obtained employment visas in Japan in the past couple of decades, three quarters of them have been in the category of "specialist in humanities/international services". In comparison, less than 20% of them obtained engineer visas. The majority of Chinese students who are in the category of "specialist in humanities and international services" is employed in Japanese firms, working in marketing and sales types of occupations in small Japanese firms (Liu-Farrer 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

This pattern of economic outcomes first reflects the characteristics of Chinese students. As mentioned earlier, Chinese students overwhelmingly majored in humanity and social science in which marketing and sales types of occupations are natural outlets. On the other hand, it shows the demand for different types of skills —both technical and cultural— in the host economy. Chinese students choose to study humanities partly because they see that the earlier cohorts successfully made their entry into Japanese labor market. There is an obvious demand for their skills. Moreover, technical skills



Source: MOJ 2010b

Figure 2. Occupations of International Student Migrants Granted Employment Visas 2009

can be imported directly from foreign countries while the cultural skills need to be acquired through an extended exposure in the host society. For that reason, in Australia, international students are considered particularly desirable because of their familiarity with the cultural and social environment in the host country by going through the education system there (Ziguras and Law 2006). However, Chinese students' employment outcomes in Japan signal a new labor market development under the conditions of economic globalization. It shows that the host society has increased demand for skills produced in the migration process itself.

Let's first look at Chinese student migrants' employment patterns. The category of visa "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 the positions in transnational economic relations with China. The Ministry of Justice's student employment data has shown that, in 2009, demands for foreign students in four occupational categories were the highest: translation/interpretation (*honyaku, tsūyaku*)—28.5 percent, sales/marketing (*hanbai, eigyō*)—17 percent, information technology (*jōhō shori*)—10.5percent, and overseas operations (*kaigai gyōmu*)—6percent. Except for information technology the other three categories clearly require multilingual skills or multi-cultural background. Over half of the foreign graduates in 2009 were hired partly because of their linguistic and cultural skills (Figure 2).

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 trade partner. Not only do big conglomerates have most of their production done in China and want to sell a big portion of their products in China, numerous medium and small Japanese firms are also active, to some degree desperate, players in the transnational economy between Japan and China. 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 a territory in the firm they work for as well as expand 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 was an advisor working in the field of intellectual property. For the first several years he traveled mostly 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 the company of 50 employees, he found himself immersed in the transnational businesses 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 many Chinese students of humanities and social science majors graduating from second or third tier universities also contribute to the Japanese businesses with China immensely. The main anchor of the Japanese economy is small and medium sized firms. The majority of international students, Chinese among them, are employed by these small and medium sized firms. On the one hand, this is because Japanese small firms have been facing labor shortage. Most newly graduated Japanese students aim at big corporations, hoping for job stability and a larger field for future career development. As a result, for large firms, there were twice as many job aspirants as vacancies while small and medium firms had 2.5 times as many jobs as job aspirants (*Nihon Rōdō Nenkan* 2004). Chinese students therefore supply small firms with much-needed labor power. On the other hand, with a large number of bilingual and Japan-educated foreign students in the labor force, many small and medium firms which have never had foreign employees now hire 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 for entrepreneurship. And the majority of the businesses they set up are transnational, often extending the business their former employers were in. Although mostly small, these transnational enterprises are important actors linking the economies of Japan and China (Liu-Farrer 2007).

To sum up, in Japan, the majority of Chinese students have majored in humanities and social science. They supply the majority of the skilled labor in the category of "specialist 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 skills—Chinese, Japanese, and sometimes English and Korean (as in the case of ethnic Korean stu-

dents)—and cultural skills—their understanding of Japanese society and work ethic. In the following section, I would like to show that most of these skills at stake are not necessarily learnt from schools. In fact, they are produced in the migration process itself.

Producing Skills in the Migration Process

Crammed in the same trains and rushing on the same sidewalks with Japanese people and working at restaurants and bars serving mostly Japanese people, Chinese students, upon entering Japan, are immediately exposed to Japanese culture and lifestyles. It is not an exaggeration that international education in Japan, for the Chinese students, is a process of cultural immersion. Educational credentials obtained through schooling are important, but they make up only up one source of human capital. The migration process itself—to find a living and 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 master the language, learn Japanese cultural practices, and gain understanding of Japanese society. The experiences outside of the campus—the physical hardship on the jobs, 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 run, while internalizing many social rules and values.

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 education at the school, Chinese student migrants believe their Japanese would not have improved so quickly if they had not worked. The need to survive creates linguistic miracles. A young woman 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 2011 for a detailed account of the story).

Japanese bosses and coworkers also assist Chinese students' language learning. Duan Yaozhong, the publisher and editor of the *Japan Overseas Chinese News*, expressed his gratitude toward Mr. Sugiyama, the owner of the restaurant he worked at. When the business was not busy, he would practice Japanese with Mr. Sugiyama. Mr. Sugiyama would correct his pronunciation. When having difficulty expressing 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 speak a couple of greetings. When I left, I could write short essays in Japanese" (Duan 1998: 362).

Learning Japanese Work Culture

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

> 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 feeling. 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, January 29, 2002)

I frequently heard Chinese students complain about rude treatment by their bosses at part-time jobs. Physically exhausted and emotionally distressed, some students interpreted that as a form of discrimination against the Chinese. However, like it or not, many also understood this treatment to be a 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 and the owner of a design company. He arrived in Japan in 1985 at the age of 27. He told a story about his first dish-washing job (Liu 1998: 607). His supervisor was an old Japanese lady who could not read much and had been washing dishes at this restaurant for 30 years. She bossed him around and constantly criticized him. When he was going to protest, a Japanese young man joined the dish-washing team. He worked diligently and always said "yes" to the old lady's criticisms. He thought he must have been out of prison and desperately in need of a job. Accidentally, he heard from other coworkers that this young man was a PhD 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 "as a slave" at the dish washing job. He answered sincerely, "Compared to you I feel embarrassed. You wash dishes for ten hours every 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 if he couldn't find better jobs. He smiled and said, "I won't wash dishes all my life. But I am doing it now, so I want to do it

well." He was deeply moved.[8]

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

The above cases show that Chinese students acquire many necessary skills from part-time jobs, mostly low-wage labor. Such seemingly unskilled labor helps Chinese students gain important cultural and linguistic skills. Not fully recognizing the diversity of skills potentially contributive to the host society and the ways important skills are created and utilized, rigid legal and institutional framework established to ensure skilled migration can be counter-productive.

Institutional Rigidity of Selective Migration and Its Counter-productive Tendency

Migration outcomes are achieved through the interactive process of migrants and the socioeconomic and institutional contexts. Many migration outcomes are not intended. Migrants from the developing countries, be they students or low-wage labor, move in the hope to pursue a better future, economically or professional. There are students that can be described as "fake", having no intention to pursue education, as in the early cohorts of students from Shanghai and Fujian. For most students, it is hard to name their motivations. Many young people have the desire to leave home to experience the world. Migration has become a rite of passage in some areas of China (Liu-Farrer 2008). In Oka and Fukuda (1995)'s study, one language school official pointed out that among all students at his school, only a minority of them was truly pursuing academic intentions and the majority of them treated education merely as a convenient pathway to settle in Japan. However, 80 percent of the Chinese language students did express their inclination to advance to higher education in Japan, and most did. Sometimes, the students' loss of status is not intended. Yet, the rigid legal framework prevented them from regaining such status. Using two real cases below, I would like to argue that such institutional rigidity is counter-productive.

I once described the visa-overstaying phenomenon among the Fujian students, attributing that 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 becoming undocumented, there was no possibility to go back to school. In the 2008 article, I introduced a young man who could not find a part-time job when he arrived in Tokyo for a specialist training school after spending two years in Okinawa attending a language school. After being out of job for four months, he nearly starved to death. He had to quit school

[8] This story appears also in Gracia Liu-Farrer (2011a).

because he owed tuition. He was eventually rescued by the Chinese Catholic Center; however, he was no longer able to pursue schooling. He had had a lot of hope for going to college in Japan. Regarding that experience, he said,

> I was hoping to come to study something. I didn't imagine I would end up like this. Even now, my teachers at home still think I am in college here. It is 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 in the student government. Teachers liked me. And 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 did not get into a college. It was a big strike[…]. I could not get over it.
>
> (Interview with the author, 2004/11/07)

While being interviewed, he, and many young people from Fujian, asked me if it were possible for him to go to school again. Japanese immigration law does not allow that, I had to tell them regrettably, unless they managed to legalize their status.[9]

The diversity of skills and creative processes of skill creation and applications, as well as the counter-productiveness of a selective and rigid migration regime can be seen from the other case.

During my field research among the Fujian immigrants in the mid-2000s, I was acquainted with a young man whoarrived in Japan as a language student at a technical high school in a Japanese small town with 27 other Fujian students. He left the school after one semester because he was not able to work outside the campus and the 1 million yen tuition payment was out of question without long hours of part-time jobs. He went to Tokyo and soon lost his legal status. In the eight years he was in Japan, he worked on a series of jobs. The longest job was at Tsukiji Fish Market. He got up at 3 am to ride with his boss, a small seafood retailer, every day. The job was hard and required skills. He worked hard, and learned the necessary skills. Most importantly, with his optimistic personality and social intelligence, he established a good personal relationship with the boss. The relationship developed to a degree that he adopted his boss's family name publically and lived practically next door to his family. From the boss, as well as from daily observation and communications 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 Ameyokocho. He was able to achieve high monthly sales.

Falling in love with a Chinese trainee, he turned himself in and followed his girlfriend—later wife—back to a booming town in Eastern China. There, he found himself a job at a Chinese textile fac-

[9] The only way to do that is through marriage—a desperate solution adopted by some undocumented migrants, but usually not by young former students.

tory that had business deals with Japan. With his Japanese language skills and his understanding of small Japanese businesses he became active in the role of a liaison with Japanese clients. Unfortunately, because he was formerly an undocumented migrant, he was not allowed to re-enter Japan in the five years immediately after. As a result, he was not able to take business trips to Japan, not even for participating in trade fairs. It created problems at work and at the time of a follow-up interview, he was trying to change his name and birthplace in order to hide his status—a risky and illicit practice yet again.

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 skilled human resources in their countries. It 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 concept regarding "skilled migrants" and the insufficient knowledge of skilled labor demand to the lack of institutional framework to incorporate the skilled migrants. Such selective policy making has much to do with the lack of a good understanding of the dynamics of international migration, the interactive process of migrants' agency and their socioeconomic and institutional contexts.

This paper uses the case of Chinese students in Japan to show the complexity of the skilled migration policy making and the unpredictability of migration outcomes. Most policy makers treat international higher education as a viable channel for skilled migration. However, over the nearly three decades since the onset of contemporary student migration into Japan, among the nearly 60,000 Chinese students who have become so-called "highly skilled laborers" and entered the Japanese labor market by 2009 , as Figure 2 shows, only a minority falls into the category of "scientific and technical professionals".

However, this paper shows that the student migrants without "scientific and technical skills" are very active in Japan's economy. They supply necessary human resources for small and medium-sized firms who are in shortage of labor. Moreover, 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 former school learning. Chinese students' language skills are often honed at their seemingly unskilled part-time jobs in Japan's low-wage labor market. Through such jobs, they gain necessary cultural understanding of Japanese society. In a way, it demonstrates the blurred boundary between skilled and unskilled labor. To a large extent, it is depending 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, highly skilled or lowly skilled, especially that from a sending region with less 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 encom-

pass all migrant practices and dictate their strategies. When necessary, immigrants are likely to abandon their original plan. 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 at home they might have been professionals with tertiary education.

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 I show of two undocumented former students illustrate the counter-productive tendency of a rigid migration institution. Also, I argue that it defeats the purpose for a country like Japan which aims at creating a multi-cultural and harmonious society by differentiating skilled and unskilled categories. As Oishi's (2012) article points out, Japan's lack of attractiveness in the eyes of skilled migrants has a lot 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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