

Networks in Transition: Migration Decisions in the Life Course of Highly Skilled Chinese in Japan

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Summary

In recent years, Japan has increased its efforts to recruit highly qualified Chinese migrants; on the other side of that coin, China has also made efforts to bring its highly qualified emigrants back home. These students and workers fulfill important functions connecting the two countries economically, culturally and academically. Yet, it is not clear how migrants decide where and when to move. This paper focuses on individual decision-making processes and analyzes the importance of family responsibilities, social and professional networks, and career planning in a life-course framework.

Keywords: Japan, China, circular migration, highly skilled, students, life course, decision-making processes

1. Introduction

Circular migration of the highly skilled represents everything for which advocates of globalization argue (Cervantes and Guellec 2002). Highly qualified migrants, including both workers and students, connect markets and countries and help advance technology and develop economies. They are imagined to be able to work anywhere in the world and are sought after by global companies. How to keep highly skilled employees happy and productive in a company is an expanding area of research in economics (Wühr 2011; Enaux 2011). Creating policies to attract the highly qualified is an issue for most governments, not only those of industrialized nations (Cervantes and Guellec 2002; SRI 2008: 2). National regulations in sending and receiving countries—including emigration and immigration policies, legal restrictions in the research sector, and educational and economic policies—create the larger migration context. One complicating factor in this seemingly win-win scenario of highly skilled circular migration is that human capital,¹ if defined as excellence or knowledge in a certain field (for example technology), *cannot* be

¹ The concept of human capital (Becker 1964) says that persons invest in their own human capital in order to increase their productivity and their income. Human capital includes education and practical and work experience. Those who invest a lot in their own human capital are thought to be more productive and they tend to receive higher incomes (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2007: 303).