

## **Ambiguous Concepts and Unintended Consequences: Rethinking Skilled Migration in View of Chinese Migrants' Economic Outcomes in Japan**

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### **Summary**

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 common-sense 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 the Japanese economy and Japanese sociocultural life in ways that are not foreseen or prescribed in immigration policies.

**Keywords:** Japan, migration, Chinese students, skilled labor, unskilled labor

### **1. Introduction**

Many countries are currently competing with each other 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.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese government is

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<sup>1</sup> 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.