

CHAPTER

9

Social Mobility and Labor Migration under Recession

Exploring Generational Differences among Japanese Migrants in China

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Introduction

There is a bias toward the youth in the literature on labor migration experience in a post-economic crisis context. By positioning young adults as one of the hardest hit population groups, scholars have frequently examined the relationship between youth un(der)employment, motivations for migration, and future aspirations (Salamońska and Czeranowska 2019; Van Mol 2016). Studies on highly skilled youth in Southern Europe have found that increased motivations for emigration are not only associated with economic factors but also dissatisfaction with their quality of life under a recession, and poor future prospects (Bartolini, Gropas, and Triandafyllidou 2017; Domínguez-Mujica, Díaz-Hernández, and Parreño-Castellano 2016). Cross-national comparisons have revealed that patterns of the labor market incorporation and experiences of migration vary significantly, depending on the local context (Cairns 2017; Mendoza 2018). Notwithstanding their diverse findings, these studies share a broader and ongoing concern about the precarious youth (migrant) labor in times of uncertainty, and the

widening wealth gap (Heggli, Haukanes, and Tjomsland 2013; McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2009).

Compared to the youth, the migration of the older generations is rarely studied through the lens of labor mobility, even though economic recessions equally affect their working lives. Following years of relative stability of Fordist employment, older generations of workers in many industrialized economies were hit with the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its aftermath in midlife. This has brought into sharp focus numerous disadvantages that older workers, as a marginalized group, face under an economic recession (Bank 2009; O’Loughlin, Humpel, and Kendig 2010; Solem 2012; Vickerstaff 2010). The extent to which they experience career interruptions, unemployment, and increased anxiety about their and their children’s economic security and well-being in the future are dependent on their socioeconomic and institutional positions (Dingemans, Henkens, and Van Solinge 2016; McDaniel, Gazso, and Um 2013; Visser et al. 2016). While some scholars advocate for increased labor market participation by providing better training to older workers (Hancock 2006), others point out that reducing their access to employment or “productive work” to a question of skills and dispositions ignores the gendered and classed nature of cultural capital accumulation (Bowman et al. 2017; Loretto and Vickerstaff 2015). However, questions of older workers’ employment under an economic crisis have rarely been researched explicitly in relation to labor migration.

In recent years, more scholars have highlighted the value of transnational perspectives for studies of aging (Horn and Swepe 2015). Ciobanu and Hunter (2017) contemplate the potential mutual benefits between the “mobilities paradigm” in the social sciences and the study of older migrants. Commonly, studies divide geographically mobile older people into (former) migrant workers who have “aged in place” and non-labor migrants who move in old age for family or lifestyle reasons. For example, Warnes et al. (2004) separate older international migrants in Europe into European and non-European labor migrants, and family- or amenity-oriented retirement migrants. Benson (2011), Benson and O’Reilly (2009), and Oliver (2008) spotlight retirees as “lifestyle migrants” who move abroad in search of a better quality of life. Common concerns regarding “migrants who age in place” include their social and economic integration and well-being, including in retirement, and their care needs (Blakemore 1999; Steinbach 2018; Ramos and Martins 2020). For those who move in old age, their geographical mobility is frequently examined as part of transnational householding (Bolzman, Kaeser, and Christe 2017; Toyota 2006) or the outsourcing of aged care to institutions abroad where wages are cheaper (Horn, Schweppe, and Bender 2015; Schwiter, Brüttsch, and Pratt 2020). Retirement and “amenity-seeking” migration have been debated as an opportunity to seek

leisure, new lifestyles and identities, volunteer work, or affordable social care (Botterill 2017; Haas 2013; Thang, Sone, and Toyota 2012; Toyota and Xiang 2012). It is noteworthy that these approaches to studying older migrants collectively reflect and further promote a dominant conceptual divide between workers and non-workers (Huete, Mantecón, and Estévez 2013).

What remains under-researched is people who engage in labor migration in later life. In particular, the experiences of aging workers during trying economic times have not been adequately discussed in relation to labor migration. How does the experience of recession impact on the patterns of career trajectories and geographical mobility among different generations of migrants? How does their geographical mobility as transnational labor migrants intersect with their social mobility?

This chapter examines the experiences of both aging and younger skilled Japanese migrants in China to consider the impact of an economic downturn on the patterns of social and geographical mobility from a comparative perspective. Japan experienced a severe, large-scale market crash in the early 1990s when the asset bubble burst. Nearly three decades on, the national economy continues to stagnate, and it can be said that the “post”-crisis period is ongoing (Chiavacci and Hommerich 2017; Funabashi and Kushner 2015). In my study, the older migrant group came of age as the national economy surged, and were middle-aged when the recession hit, while the younger group completed their education and entered the labor market after the recession had begun. My findings show that the working conditions under a recession were a major factor that motivated both groups to initiate their migration, but the timing of the recession had a significant influence on each cohort’s experience of the labor market, social mobility, and subsequently, labor migration. Viewing labor migration as part of a migrant’s broader career trajectory helps elucidate the effect of a recession on geographical mobility and its entanglement with social mobility (see Fresnoza-Flot in this volume). A generational perspective is fruitful because it demonstrates that changing life course patterns are shaped historically and institutionally.

Methods and Data

This research is part of larger ethnographic studies that examined two groups of skilled Japanese migrants in the north-eastern Chinese city of Dalian. The findings discussed in this chapter are based on the fieldwork I conducted between 2012 and 2017. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were carried out with thirty-nine younger migrants (sixteen females, twenty-three

males) and twenty-two older migrants (all males). They all held renewable visas that allowed them to live and work in Dalian as skilled professionals. In 2012, just under 6,000 Japanese nationals were residing in Dalian as long-term residents (MOFA 2012). In 2015, there were 838 Japanese men in their sixties or over living in the city (MOFA 2016). There is no officially available figure for the kind of skilled migrants interviewed for this study. However, during interviews in 2012, Japanese consulate staff and labor recruiters estimated that up to a couple of thousand Japanese men and women in their twenties to forties belonged to this category, and that the gender ratio among this group was fairly equal. Therefore, my data on the younger migrant group is slightly skewed towards the males than the overall population. In contrast, older skilled Japanese migrants are extremely male-dominated, and therefore my data on this group is representative of the general population. As discussed in a later section, the male domination of this migration stems from the fact that lifelong career opportunities as skilled corporate workers have long been closed to most women in Japan, even after the Equal Employment Opportunity Law came into effect in 1986. The only older female corporate worker I met during my repeated visits to Dalian had initially arrived in the city as the spouse of a company transferee, and later studied Japanese language teaching before landing a trainer job for a locally based outsourcing firm. Her experience contrasts with the older migrants in my study, who all found a job in the city due to a lifetime of working in the same industry.

The younger migrants were aged between twenty-four and forty-four at the time of the interview, and the most common age on arrival was twenty-five. Apart from two single mothers with a young child, all were childless at the time. The median length of stay in the destination was four years, but ranged from two to nine years. Approximately two-thirds had a four-year university degree, slightly under a quarter had a vocational college certificate, and two had a master's degree. Both genders were well-represented among college and university graduates in my data. In the older group, the median age on arrival was sixty. The median period of residence was six years; it ranged from two to thirteen years, although the exact length was difficult to calculate because some of these migrants had taken frequent business trips to the destination city or been stationed there before they eventually migrated to it. Most men were married to a Japanese woman at the time of their arrival, but one was single and three were divorced. Except for one divorcee, all had grown-up children, whom they left behind in Japan together with their wife. Only one man migrated with his wife.

I conducted interviews in public places such as cafes and fast-food outlets, and sometimes at the interviewee's workplace or home. As part of

participant observation, I visited research participants at both work and home, and joined them at eateries and parks during social outings. All interview excerpts have been translated from Japanese by the author, and the names attributed are pseudonyms.

Below, I will first explain both migrant groups' positions in the local labor market, and their roles in the Chinese city's economy. While both groups emigrated in order to access an employment opportunity rare in the home country, their differential roles in the workplace and occupational statuses stemmed from the patterns of social mobility distinctive to each generation.

Labor Migration to a Transnational Ethnic Niche

The Japanese migrants in this study had migrated to the Chinese city of Dalian as skilled workers. This section explains the importance of its trade relationship with Japan for its economic development, and the Japanese skilled migrants' place in the city's transnational economy.

My Japanese migrant interviewees were heavily concentrated in Dalian's key sectors: manufacturing and Information Technology. Dalian has been a key manufacturing base for China's economic development plan since the opening up of the national economy to foreign investment. The Dalian Development Area (DDA) was the first Economic and Technological Development Zone in the country, and it grew exponentially by attracting foreign capital, most notably from Japan (Seki 2000: 16–17). More recently, the city has become one of the twenty-one service outsourcing model cities in China, and the Dalian High-tech Industrial Zone (DHZ) has been celebrated as one of the most successful special economic zones focusing on service outsourcing (Zheng, Willcocks, and Yang 2010). Both zones represent numerous leading Japanese firms, which have significantly contributed to the host city's rapid growth as a regional economic hub. Knowledge and technology transfer from Japan has been instrumental in strengthening key industries such as digital outsourcing and electrical equipment and electronics manufacturing (Seki 2000: 49).

The Dalian-Japan trade ties in these and other key industries have created a demand for Japanese labor to facilitate and strengthen business relationships between the two countries. Chinese firms in Dalian hire Japanese migrants to accelerate knowledge transfer and develop domestic talent. These skilled migrants possess not only occupational expertise but also linguistic and embodied cultural knowledge; and as native-born workers, they are accustomed to the Japanese business conventions. Barring a few exceptions, both groups of migrants were monolingual and exclusively used the

Japanese language in the workplace. The Japanese ethnic niche in Dalian played a key role in regional economic development, and became embedded in global production chains.

While migration motivations are always complex, both groups stressed that their choice to migrate was a way of dealing with the stagnation or stalled upward mobility in the Japanese labor market under a prolonged recession. Following the economic crisis of the early 1990s, job security has weakened, precarious forms of employment have expanded, unemployment and suicide rates have increased, and rates of marriage and reproduction have declined (Allison 2012; Gordon 2015; Piotrowski, Kalleberg, and Rindfuss 2015). Jobs in an ethnic niche in Dalian, in comparison, provided a chance to create a favorable lifestyle with a better work-life balance without chronic overtime work or long commutes,¹ a higher salary level relative to the average local population, and the better living conditions this afforded them. Besides, the Japanese migrants enjoyed their status in China of being highly skilled foreign talent, as well as the excitement of being part of a burgeoning economy. These location-specific benefits were sufficient to offset the drawbacks, such as a substantially reduced salary compared to their previous job in Japan, and the provincial status of the host city. Unlike high-profile global cities such as London, New York, and Shanghai, where migrants become invested in their creative and entrepreneurial aspirations (Farrer 2020; Fujita 2009; Sooudi 2014), Dalian was virtually unknown among the young Japanese in my study, and the older migrants' wives and adult children frequently declared that the city lacked sufficient appeal to warrant a visit compared to other Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. My previous writing on the younger migrant group examined the intersection of economic, social, and cultural factors that motivated and shaped their migration experience in gendered ways (Kawashima 2018, 2020). By contrast, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the labor market issues in an economic downturn, with particular interest in a comparison between career trajectories of the older and younger migrant groups.

Despite both holding the role as a native-born Japanese expert in their respective workplaces, the two groups had a different occupational status. All the older migrants found work in their career fields as seasoned professionals, and the majority were formerly connected to large and reputable firms. For the local Chinese enterprises who hired them, their cultural and social capital help expand their business, develop the local workforce, and gain status and credentials in the eyes of their Japanese client firms. To compensate for the significantly lower salaries than they used to receive in Japan, the Chinese firms offered subsidized or free apartment accommodation, return flights to Japan at regular intervals, an interpreter, and even a

chauffeur for those who worked at factories in isolated areas. Those aged over sixty were ineligible for the skill work visa. Usually, their employers arranged a Foreign Expert Certificate (a 'Z' visa) so that the aging workers could work, for example, as foreign technical experts in advisory roles at a local firm.

By comparison, the majority of the younger migrants worked in customer service roles, answering calls from Japanese users of digital or computer products such as virus software and industrial printers. While some were able to negotiate a better salary based on their prior industry experience in Japan, most were hired into entry-level positions, and became embedded in the lower echelons of the IT industry. Hence, the two groups of migrants in my study fulfilled distinctive roles in the global production chain, even as they all contributed to the development of the transnational economy between China and Japan, and the trade relationship between these two countries.

The difference between the two groups of migrants in terms of occupational types, remunerations, and positions in the workplace hierarchy stems from not only their age difference but also the different patterns of career trajectories that developed in the contrasting social, economic, and organizational contexts. The onset of the recession in the early 1990s hit the two groups at different points in their life course, and this had a lasting impact on their career development. In the next section, I will trace the older Japanese migrants' transitions from education to employment and subsequent career progression, to "retirement" in Japan.

Career Trajectories of Older Japanese Migrants between the 1960s and the 2010s

Education-Employment Transitions during the Economic Growth Era

The older migrants came of age when the Japanese national economy was growing rapidly. They completed formal education in the 1960s or 1970s, when manufacturing was thriving, labor supply was in shortage, and access to education was becoming more egalitarian (Brinton and Ikemura 2008). As stated earlier, the majority of these men completed a four-year university course, despite many coming from a modest family background. They overwhelmingly majored in technological fields such as electrical or mechanical engineering, and engineering management. The remaining commonly attended reputable industrial high schools at a time when the number of such schools and enrolled students was peaking (between 1965 and 1970), which served to meet the growing demand for labor in manufacturing and other key sectors (Sasaki 2000: 21–22). All the interviewees,

including the high school leavers, made a smooth transition to full-time permanent employment, most commonly in positions related to producing goods such as computer hardware, home appliances, automobile parts, and mechanical equipment. The majority were hired by a large and reputable firm that was an ancillary company or a subsidiary in the conglomerate (*keiretsu*) system. Takafumi's reflection on his earlier years illustrates the positive impact of the expanding economy on career opportunities for male workers in the past. After graduating from university as an economics major, he joined a trading company in his native northern Japan and gained wide-ranging experience by being stationed at various affiliated companies. By his thirties, Takafumi was in charge of merchandising for home electronics and car accessory retailers, at a time when consumer spending had been soaring, and domestic manufacturing of consumer goods had taken over the imported goods (Gordon 2012). He commented: "It was a good time. Targets for sales and inventory turnovers were easy to meet, and I got a bonus every time I cleared a target, which was often."

The older migrants in my study were beneficiaries of the highly institutionalized, gendered, and rigidly age-based sequencing of career progression, which was the norm in this high-growth era (Kelly and White 2006; Brinton and Ikemura 2008; Gordon 2017). As young males, they followed the normative path to adulthood by becoming incorporated into the system of what is often referred to as Japanese-style management. Its key features include a seniority-based system of wages and promotions (*nenkō joretsu*) and long-term employment, or so-called lifetime employment (*shūshin koyō*). It echoes the American "baby boomer" generation's experience of Fordism in the postwar period, which is associated with job security, the gendered division of labor in the household, and increased welfare provision (McCormick 2007; Neilson and Rossiter 2005).² Men were routinely hired as permanent workers on the "management track" (*sōgōshoku*), which offered training, promotion, wages, and decision-making power that increased over time. The older men in my study certainly enjoyed these benefits. Teruyoshi completed a five-year industrial education at a prestigious national institute of technology and then found employment at a reputable machine tools manufacturer at the age of twenty, as did all his schoolfriends. He married when he was twenty-eight and had the first child at thirty, followed by two more children in the next few years. His promotion raised his salary and funded the purchase of a family home and the children's education.

Female workers in the same historical period were largely excluded from career advancement due to their routine assignment to the female-dominated general clerical track (*ippanshoku*). This track denied workers access to training and promotion, and therefore to pay increases and managerial

positions. The two-track system has directly caused the gender pay gap in Japan (Zacharias-Walsh 2016). Thus, the relatively uniform manner in which male corporate workers in the postwar era met typical milestones of middle-class adulthood, including marriage, breadwinning, fathering children, and homeownership, was made possible at the expense of women's economic independence. The older migrants in my study benefited from the meteoric rise in the national economy led by manufacturing in the Golden Sixties and beyond. They enjoyed upward social mobility as part of the "new middle class" (Vogel 1963), when it was a real possibility for a larger segment of male-headed households than today, including those from working-class backgrounds (Gordon 2017; Kelly 1993).

Impacts of the Recession on the Experience of Retirement in Japan

The baby boomer and adjacent generations benefited from expanding career opportunities in these good economic times, and the normative gender roles supported their successes in the public domain of employment. However, the older migrants in this study left Japan, where it was difficult to continue working in their career field with the same level of remuneration and authority. Key structural factors are at play. First, firms in Japan routinely and systematically demote non-executive members in their mid-to-late-fifties by stripping them of their manager status and significantly reducing their salaries. This is called "retirement from a managerial post" (*yakushoku teinen*), and is designed to reduce labor costs in exchange for keeping permanent employees in the workforce until retirement. This practice became widespread as firms sought to manage the increased cost pressure due to the staged extension of the mandatory retirement age from fifty-five to sixty in the 1980s and 1990s (Oka and Kimura 2003: 602–3; Osako 1988). It is not uncommon for workers who have been "retired" from managerial posts to be given menial tasks outside the area of expertise, or else pressured to resign "voluntarily" (Berggren 1995: 65; Yamada and Higo 2011: 163). Second, the mandatory retirement age is very much the norm in Japan, and chances to extend one's career employment beyond this age with the same working conditions are hard to come by. In most cases, retirement-age workers are re-employed on a renewable contract or shifted to subsidiaries or client firms (Clarke et al. 2015; Yamada and Higo 2011).³ Under these institutional measures, all but a select few spend the twilight of their careers in a reduced capacity and on a reduced salary. Osako (1988) aptly called this "downward mobility as a form of phased retirement in Japan."

In my data, Hidehiko was the only interviewee who could extend permanent full-time employment beyond the mandatory retirement age. For two

years, he continued to work for his career employer, a large electronics manufacturer, as a trainer for junior staff, until he chose to work for a China-based company as a general manager of its Japan Business Department. For most other interviewed migrants, the institutional practice of enforced demotion curtailed their ability to end their lifelong employment on a high note. Kentaro was fifty-two years old when he was instructed to “retire” from his managerial post at the headquarters of a major electronics company, and to move to a smaller client firm as a rank-and-file software developer. In the new workplace, he felt marginalized as an outsider, and found the tasks unstimulating. He recalled this time as follows: “I wanted to stay where I was, but my manager was pushing for my resignation. I took the position and clung to it for eight years until I retired at sixty.”

All the aging interviewees wished to continue working beyond the age of sixty. Approximately half took early retirement to seek a more rewarding work environment before they aged further. In these cases, an early retirement package was a bonus that softened the financial risk of jumping ship. Those without higher education credentials are more likely to face obstacles to desirable pathways to eventual retirement because they are underrepresented among higher-level managerial posts (Clarke et al. 2015). This tendency was also observed among the interviewed migrants. Shunsuke was already discontented that his job title “assistant manager” did not reflect his responsibility, and that he was barred from a higher status because he did not have a university degree. At fifty-five years old, he was transferred to a small affiliated company as its “president.” There, he became answerable to his former subordinate at the headquarters, and his salary decreased to the level of a starting salary for a university graduate. Shunsuke found this humiliating: “No matter how skilled, those older than fifty-five are treated as a burden in Japan.” Three months into this new role, he embarked on a job search in Asia and eventually found a factory manager job in Dalian, where an acquaintance was working. This example shows that, to the men who wished to continue working in old age, labor migration presented an alternative to an anticlimax to their lifelong career in Japan.

Transnational Mobility as Cultural and Social Capital in Globalizing Asia

What helped the aging men find professional employment in Dalian despite their stalled labor market mobility in Japan was their experience in working abroad and the transnational professional network they cultivated. By the time they were middle managers, all but one had a role that required working closely with firms abroad, taking long and frequent overseas business trips, or being transferred to subsidiaries in foreign cities. For example, Akihiko worked as a software developer, and his first employer, an ancillary

company in a Japanese multinational conglomerate, collaborated with a computer research institute in Tianjin in the 1980s. Following this first overseas assignment, he regularly worked in Beijing and other major Chinese cities to collaborate with local IT engineers. These networks became integral to his decision to leave his first employer at the age of fifty-six and work for a small IT firm in Dalian, where his expertise was highly valued and he could have greater autonomy and control over the business.

Half of the older migrants had the experience of being stationed in Asia for multiple years. This was against the backdrop of the changing political economy in Asia. By the mid-1980s, Japan's national economy had become the second-largest in the world after the United States, and Japan-based business headquarters dispatched managers to oversee relocations of production sites to East and South East Asia. Those interviewees engaged in employer-initiated overseas transfers in order to set up and/or manage new factory operations to produce goods such as car parts, machine tools, and video cassette recorders. This experience of managing a foreign workforce turned out to be highly useful in their post-retirement work in Dalian. Their former colleagues, clients, and acquaintances were equally transnationally mobile, and circulated among Asian cities such as Shenzhen, Beijing, Penang, and Ho Chi Minh City. The Japanese IT sector had seen increased collaborations with overseas production sites due to globalization since the 1960s. Men such as Kentaro, Hiroki, and Hidehiko all recalled intensively studying English as young employees to read untranslated materials, attend overseas conferences, and collaborate with foreign engineers based in the United States.

As former full-time permanent members of corporations who had established a lifelong career in thriving occupational fields, the older migrants had two major advantages that the younger group did not. One was that they possessed skills and technical knowledge that would aid technology transfer from Japan to Chinese firms. The other was transnational professional ties that became an effective source of recruitment information. Such institutional forms of cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) had been accumulated over the preceding decades, thanks to the men's status as core members of firms at a time when Japanese businesses were rapidly globalizing. The older migrants had long been part of the transnational Japanese business networks that later became an effective recruitment source. Over two-thirds of them found employment in Dalian because a former client or colleague had put them in contact with their new employer or had approached them with a job offer. Others registered with recruitment agencies and were quickly matched with jobs in China.

In summary, the older migrants in my study benefited from being the core workforce of corporate Japan during its economic ascension. It provided

them with a stable income to support their family, skill training, assistance with gaining professional qualifications, and management experience. When they were posted in overseas locations, they gained knowledge of global production, international trade, and diverse business cultures. As permanent full-time employees at corporations, they monopolized the kind of opportunities and protections from which part-timers, contractors, and other precarious workers were excluded. By fully utilizing such cultural and social capital, they opened up a pathway to career employment abroad, not only to earn an income but also to enjoy the last years of working as valued professionals. Their transnational career trajectories differ significantly from those of younger Japanese migrants, shown in the next section, due to the timing of the economic downturn and the associated social and cultural changes in education and in labor market practices.

Career Trajectories of Younger Japanese Migrants

The younger group of migrants in my study all transitioned from education to employment between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. They entered a dual labor market where the growing labor casualization produced a greater proportion of insecurely employed youth, and the lasting negative impacts of such marginalization on future career prospects intensified under the recession (Genda and Kurosawa 2001; Altonji, Kahn, and Speer 2016; Liu, Salvanes, and Sørensen 2016). This was a time when the large majority of high school graduates in Japan progressed to higher education (MEXT 2015). All but one of the younger migrants interviewed proceeded to tertiary education after high school. As in the majority of the general youth population in Japan, they tended to attend low- to mid-ranked private institutions, or to choose fields of study with high acceptance rates. A few others attended a vocational training school to learn skills such as bookkeeping, art, music, and languages, while a small minority dropped out of tertiary education. When these young people made their transition to the labor market, they found their tertiary education was insufficient for them to secure quality employment.

Two main factors contributed to their worsened employment situation, despite their tertiary education. One was labor casualization in the expanding service sector. In the context of growing global competition, outsourcing and other trends have hollowed out the manufacturing sector, significantly reducing secure manufacturing jobs within the country. By the 2000s, wholesale and retail sectors employed more people than all of the manufacturing combined (Gordon 2017: 20). Much of the demand for labor was for a heavily casualized workforce comprised of youth and

women. Since the mid-1980s, the young casual labor force has more than doubled (MHLW 2013: 183–84), and encroached into the long-protected male workforce during the deepening recession in the 2000s (Statistics Bureau 2008). Among the younger interviewees, half had experienced casual or temporary work at least once before migrating to China. Every single one of those who had completed high school, vocational college, or a two-year university course had had a low-wage customer service occupation at one point in their career trajectories, such as retail assistant or fast-food restaurant manager. Even some four-year university graduates found themselves in such jobs. The migrants' education-to-employment transitions reflect the broader trend in Japan's post-crisis economy: mass tertiary education frequently produces labor for the low-wage service sector, and that labor casualization, which has long been the norm for women, has increasingly targeted young men during the recession (Brinton and Ikemura 2008).

The other contributing factor was the deterioration in working conditions, which reduced retention rates. The downsizing of the permanent workforce by neoliberal "reforms" has not only reduced job security and welfare privileges but also intensified mismatches between employers and employees (Genda, Kuroda, and Ohta 2015; Kambayashi and Kato 2017). The younger interviewees frequently complained about enforced overtime without pay, stress-related health problems, and putting the needs of the employer and clients above their own. While half of the younger interviewees successfully gained permanent employment as fresh graduates, they all left their first career job within three years. They are part of the 30 percent of all fresh university graduates in Japan who have done the same since 1995 (Nakajima 2015: 57; also see Ohta 2010: 520–24). This is despite the high cultural value attached to perseverance, commitment, and resolve (Matanle 2006: 248), and the resulting stigma attached to those who resign "prematurely." Concerned about the compromised prospects for future job applications, Yoshitaka mulled over for a year whether or not to leave his first career job in the agricultural machinery industry ("I knew I shouldn't quit"). As a graduate jobseeker, he hoped to find secure employment in an urban area. However, the competitive job market meant he had to settle with a medium enterprise in a rural area. Due to long working hours and an unglamorous working environment, his doubt about his future there grew, and he lasted a total of only two years before migrating to Dalian. Others like Masayuki struggled to find a position in his field of electrical engineering in Japan after resigning from his first job "too soon."

In the past, the Japanese-style management rewarded long-serving employees with stability, skill formation, subsidized housing costs, and other perks of "welfare corporatism" (Dore 1973). This significantly expanded the middle classes. As Gordon (2015: 95) concludes, "postwar Japan circa the

1960s through 1990s was far more egalitarian than it is today.” Despite the diverse education-employment transition patterns, their migration in their twenties and thirties was a turning point in their life courses. They felt the need to disrupt the status quo (Kawashima 2018) because a sense of alienation, fatigue, boredom, and disengagement dominated their pre-migration work experience. The labor migration presented them with a novel chance to work for a large corporation without the need for foreign language skills or specific expertise, and to (re)launch a white-collar career (Kawashima 2020).

Unlike the older migrants interviewed, the younger group did not have prior experience of employment abroad or transnational connections. They usually found opportunities through job advertisements on digital media platforms or via a recruitment agent, and went through a formal application process. As an interview quote below reveals, the novel job opening in Dalian was an attractive alternative to staying in Japan: “I’d had enough of my previous job [as a recruitment agent] and wanted to try a new line of work. But at my age, there weren’t a lot of choices. I was curious about working abroad, and thought this job offer [from Dalian] gave me the last chance to do that” (Akina, thirty years old at the time of departure).

Without exception, the young migrants explained that this was the only overseas position they could apply for without either foreign language proficiency or sought-after industry experience. Their prior exposure to foreign environments was largely limited to short-term tourism or higher education study, which one-third of all the migrants had experienced at private colleges in North America or universities in Asia, for between one month and four years. In the context of the commodification of international youth mobility, such as study abroad (Liu-Farrer 2011) and new forms of tourism (Beech 2018; Simpson 2005), the young Japanese primarily engaged with their overseas experience as consumers. By their own account, such experience was not considered relevant to their employment in China, and it did not add to their credentials.

Without Chinese language proficiency or technical qualifications, the migrants in my study tended to remain in the lower strata of the workplace hierarchy (Kawashima 2018). The precarity of labor produces continuous mobility, which together gives rise to future uncertainty (Standing 2011; Allison 2012; Anagnost, Arai, and Ren 2013). As years went by, it was not uncommon for the younger Japanese migrants to develop a strong sense of being cornered into a marginal space in their workplace, especially for those in their mid-thirties and older (Kawashima 2018). Such stalled career mobility experience prompted an interest in further geographical mobility, either through return migration to Japan or onward migration to a third location (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the contrasting experience of labor migration in the younger and older groups of Japanese skilled corporate workers in the city of Dalian in north-east China. The comparative approach connects the related but largely separate scholarly discussions about precarious youth labor, aging workers, and labor migration under a recession. On the one hand, the ongoing effects of a long-term recession erode the middle-class privileges and marginalize both the young and the aging in the Japanese labor markets. On the other hand, the onset of the economic downturn in the 1990s hit the two generations at different life course stages, and this has had a lasting impact on the patterns of social mobility. Geographical mobility across national borders offered both groups an alternative to a deflationary economy and neoliberal labor control in Japan. However, their contrasting career mobilities before arriving in their destination society are crucial in understanding their different economic and occupational positions there.

The older generation built lifelong careers after successfully transitioning from education to employment in a more egalitarian social environment. Being permanent full-time male workers, they embodied the ideal citizen model of the time. As core members of reputable corporations, they accumulated sufficient cultural, social, and economic capital to access an ethnic niche in the global economy as highly skilled professionals. Their internationally mobile careers gave them valued industrial and managerial expertise and transnational business contacts that proved highly beneficial, even after (early) retirement in Japan. Their earlier ascendance in the domestic labor market was underpinned by the gendered labor management system prevalent in the postwar economic boom. This functioned as their springboard for further transnational career advancement through skilled labor migration. As a result, the older men reported high levels of satisfaction about continuing work and experiencing a growing economy once again, albeit this time in China.

By contrast, the younger generation began their adulthood in an era of austerity, and their education-employment transitions reflected the broader precarization of youth labor in Japan and other post-Fordist economies. This group's upward social mobility in Japan was limited, which was a catalyst for their migration to Dalian. Without technical expertise or managerial experience, their principal value for Chinese employers was their native tongue and their ability to provide services for the Japanese market in culturally appropriate ways. The limitation of their marketable skills, however, constrained their upward career mobility in the destination society.

Even as the individualization of society is said to allow considerable variations in life course patterns (see Shanahan 2000), normative life course milestones are still strongly associated with biological age in Japan. As in the industrialized West, middle-class ideals in Japan have conceptualized a successful life trajectory in terms of the linear progression from completing education and becoming a full-time wage earner to leaving the natal family home, getting married, and becoming a parent (Arnett 2001; Rosenberger 2007). This “transition regime” (Walther 2006) problematizes “disrupted” social mobility, the avoidance of which heavily depends on securing an income from full-time permanent employment. This makes upward mobility in the (internal) labor market particularly important. My investigation of the two migrant groups’ transnational career trajectories brought to the fore the tangled nature of geographical, life-course, and social mobilities.

One aspect that this study did not examine in depth was the influence of marital or civil status, nor the presence of children on career trajectories and migration decisions. Future research on the entanglement of labor and social class mobilities would benefit from the consideration of not only generational difference but also the gender and family dimensions of skilled migration.

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NOTES

1. Those interviewed typically worked from 8 AM to 4 PM, which corresponds to 9 AM to 5 PM in Japan time. They reported that working overtime was relatively rare, and where it occurred, it was mostly among those in leadership positions.
2. Scholars have debated the extent to which these two are similar—see, for example, Kato and Steven 1993, and Naruse 1991; for a history of a related anthropological debate on the Japanese management, see Hamada 2007.

3. Approximately one-third of the older migrants interviewed had left their employment in Japan before the law reform in 2004 that required firms to continue employing workers until the age of sixty-five if they wished to stay (Taguchi 2016). Under this law, some employees can extend their retirement age and therefore continue to work under the same conditions, while others are re-employed as contract workers.

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