

Craving Jobs? Revisiting Labor and Educational Migration from Uzbekistan to Japan and South Korea

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This paper focuses on the emerging patterns of educational mobility and unskilled labor migration from Uzbekistan to Japan and South Korea. Labor migration and educational mobility are becoming the next “horizon” in the expanded relationship between East and Central Asia, powered by several factors, including the efforts by Japan and South Korea to build “original” people-oriented policy engagements with the region and the demand from Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan, to provide more labor opportunities to their young and growing populations. This paper presents the initial findings of a pilot survey that explores and occasionally compares the experiences of Uzbek migrants to Japan and South Korea, using datasets of face-to-face interviews related to various aspects of life in Japan and South Korea. The interviews were conducted face to face and online (Telegram, Skype, etc.) with 66 migrants and Japanese language school students (whom this paper treats as labor migrants masquerading as students) in Japan from November 2019 to January 2020 as well as online with 30 laborers and students in South Korea from August to September 2020.

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1. Introduction

For Japanese and South Korean policy officials, the Central Asian region was little navigated prior to the Soviet collapse, and their relations with states in the region began only with the independence of these states from the Soviet Union. In thirty years of development since independence, the Japanese and South Korean agenda of cooperation with Central Asian countries has been framed by diplomatic initiatives (the Central Asia + Japan forum of 2004 and the South Korea + Central Asia forum of 2017, etc.), official development assistance (ODA), or Japanese and South Korean corporate penetration of Central Asian markets (Dadabaev 2020). Both Japan and South Korea struggled with the issue of how to integrate the Central Asian region into their foreign policies. As demonstrated below, these countries faced the task of making engagement with Central Asian states effective and visible to the Central Asian public. They also struggled with the dilemma of how to reflect their national identities in their policy engagements with Central Asian counterparts and how to differentiate their Japanese/South Korean “self” from Chinese or Russian “others” (Dadabaev 2019a; Rakhimov, 2018).

One approach embraced by both Japan and South Korea consisted of launching initiatives to reach out not only to Central Asian political leaders and corporate professionals (as is often seen in Chinese and Russian regional policy engagement) but also to the general public, which is not often spoken for by political elites (Dadabaev 2016, 2019b). Japanese and South Korean approaches also differed.

This paper, therefore, raises the following questions to compare Japanese and South Korean policies in Central Asia and to provide insights into new trends in such policies: What are the foreign policy engagements of Japan and South Korea in Central Asia? How do they relate to the intensifying educational mobility and labor migration from Central Asia (Uzbekistan) to Japan and South Korea? By answering these two questions, this paper aims to discuss in detail the social factors that play important roles in localizing foreign policy engagements and narrating them in terms easily understood by the public.

In narrowing its focus, this paper sheds light on the phenomenon of educational mobility and unskilled labor migration from Uzbekistan to Japan and South Korea, and it attempts to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of this process. This focus is predicated on the fact that Uzbekistan is the largest source of educational mobility and labor migration in the Central Asian region. While the Central Asian states

of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are well-known sources of migrant workers to Russia and other labor markets, Uzbekistan stands out both in terms of its population, which makes it the largest and the most significant country in the region, and the overall number of migrant workers seeking jobs abroad. Of Uzbekistan's population of 33 million, 10% work abroad (Kuchins 2015, 3). The largest migration destinations are Russia, Kazakhstan, the UAE, and Turkey, followed by South Korea (Seitz 2019) and, in recent years, Japan. Uzbek migrants and students traditionally opted to travel to Russia and neighboring countries due to linguistic similarities and ease of communication. Cases of aggressive discrimination by Russians against Asians in general, and Central Asians and Uzbeks in particular, often including verbal insults and physical abuse, have turned Uzbek migrants toward alternate destinations. In this sense, Japan and South Korea represent new frontiers for migrants who are actively exploiting these new labor markets.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a pilot survey that explores and occasionally compares the experiences of Uzbek migrants in Japan and in South Korea, using datasets of face-to-face interviews involving fifteen questions related to various aspects of Japanese and South Korean life. The interviews were conducted face to face and online (Telegram, Skype, etc.) with 66 migrants and language school students (whom this paper treats as labor migrants who also study) in Japan from November 2019 to January 2020 and online with 30 laborers and students in South Korea from August to September 2020 (see appendixes 1 and 2). Once recorded, these conversations were then transcribed and thematically analyzed. The imbalance in the numbers of interviewed students was due to limitations associated with accessing students in South Korea from Japan as well as the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which made networking with potential respondents difficult. Despite these limitations, these two datasets represent a valuable source of information utilized for this study.

A few limitations of the study deserve mention. The authors used snow-ball sampling in an attempt to locate and interview respondents. This study attempted to locate respondents according to the nature of their migration experience, according to the category of their residency permit, mainly students and employment permit holders. This focus and the difficulties of building rapport with migrants, some of whom were involved in semi-legal labor, produced a sample that was not necessarily representative in respect to gender, age, or profession. The outcomes of the interviews were not only analyzed thematically but also checked against intentional misrepresentation or unintentional errors by cross-referencing with published material or job-related posts on social media (primarily the Telegram channels of students and labor migrants in South Korea and Japan) which exist in great numbers and provide certain details of the employment conditions offered to Uzbek migrants. In addition, due to the limited number of respondents, this inquiry does not provide the precise percentage breakdowns

of responses, which the authors consider to be inadequate. On the contrary, the authors seek to present a snapshot of the multiplicity of migrant experiences and types of activities, as mentioned by respondents. At the same time, the authors limited the scope of material in this paper by not including quotations from interviews, due to word count limitations, which can be remedied by referring to alternative papers (Dadabaev and Akhmedova 2021, accepted, forthcoming) which include detailed extracts from interviews and quotations. Despite the deficiencies dictated by the nature of the above-described subject matter, this paper presents the results from a pilot comparative inquiry into Uzbek migration to South Korea and Japan, contributing to the literature on Central Asian migration.

2. Japanese and South Korean Central Asian Engagements and their Limits

For both Japan and South Korea, the independence of Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, was an unexpected event for which their foreign policies were poorly prepared. Both of these countries had little, if any, interaction with this region during the Soviet era due to the limitations imposed by the Soviet government. In addition to the restricted communication with the Soviet administration, the landlocked geographic status of the Central Asian states, and the lack of transportation infrastructure (railroads, highways, direct flights, etc.) independent of Russia, limited ties from Central Asia to Japan and South Korea. The absence of common geographic borders between both Japan and South Korea and the Central Asian states further complicated the establishment of dynamic relations.

In addition to the geographic distance of the region from Japan and South Korea, the Central Asian region differs significantly from Japan and South Korea in terms of language, culture, and religious beliefs, hindering intercultural connections. Japanese foreign policy often treats the Central Asian region as the origin of Japanese Buddhism and emphasizes common features, such as a similar worldview and the role played by Japanese prisoners of war who were appreciated for their work in Uzbekistan in the aftermath of WWII (Dadabaev 2013, 2016). While these facts are powerful elements in a narrative justifying Japan's presence in Central Asia, they have not significantly assisted Japanese efforts to meet its future practical goals and strategy in the region (Uyama 2003). Similarly, although the Korean diaspora has been instrumental in creating a narrative for the need for South Korea to engage with the region and to help those sharing the same Korean roots, it has become apparent in the process that Central Asian Koreans differ from their counterparts in South Korea in terms of culture, language, and worldview, limiting the efficient use of human resources represented by the significant number

of ethnic Koreans in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Dadabaev 2019a, 138-154). Therefore, both Japan and South Korea confront the problem of how to integrate the Central Asian engagement into their respective identities and foreign policy.

Japan has approached this problem through various schemes. One of Japan's first high-level initiatives, the 1996 Obuchi mission to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, consisted of Member of Parliament (and later Prime Minister) Obuchi, and other politicians. Obuchi reported to P.M. Hashimoto of the need to engage with Central Asia and the Caucasus as a new "frontier" to expand Japan's presence into the post-Soviet space and beyond. The mission resulted in P.M. Hashimoto's 1997 Eurasian/Silk Road Diplomacy speech, in which he envisioned creating a net of interdependence between Russia, China, and the Central Asian states through active Japanese corporate and governmental support (Hashimoto 1997). This vision, to a great extent reflected Japan's global influence and international identity as the second most economically powerful country in the world (Murashkin 2015). P.M. Hashimoto's vision was not implemented, however, due to the short-lived administrations of P.M. Obuchi (1998-1999) and P.M. Mori (1999-2000). P.M. Koizumi's administration (2001-2006) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2002), next sought to engage the region through F.M. Kawaguchi's 2004 announcement establishing the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue Forum, a set of annual inter-ministerial and high-level talks to support Central Asian regional integration, consolidating their position in the face of growing Chinese and Russian pressure. P.M. Koizumi was also the first Japanese P.M. to visit Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in August of 2006. Japan's initiatives in the region intensified again when F.M. Taro Aso (who later became P.M. and is currently Deputy P.M.) announced the 2006 Arc of Freedom doctrine and Prosperity doctrine, which attempted to conceptualize the Central Asian region as part of an arc that stretched to the Middle East (Aso 2006). However, poor practical implementation of the doctrine did not generate aggressive corporate or public participation. Only with P.M. Abe's second administration (2013-2019) did Japan adopt a more dynamic foreign policy towards Central Asia, with P.M. Abe 2015 visit to all five regional states and offer of various infrastructure projects as alternatives to Chinese projects, which could be linked to internationally high-quality Japanese infrastructure standards (Abe 2015). These initiatives succeeded in cementing Japan's position as a major regional ODA provider and created in the region one of the most favorable environments for ODA, as consistently evidenced through a range of social surveys.

South Korea's government has also attempted to construct a narrative for its Central Asian presence in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The South Korean presence in Central Asia has been championed by South Korean corporations, differentiating the country's regional engagement from that of Japan's, which was spearheaded by governmental initiatives. In the 1990s, South Korean corporations (Daewoo, Daewoo Unitel, Kabool Textile, etc.) were among the first to build industrial

plants in the region. Additionally, the presence of the Korean diaspora offered a comparative advantage for South Korean penetration into Central Asian markets and justified the country's presence in such a distant region to South Korean taxpayers, which also differentiates South Korea from Japan. As stated above, however, the diaspora's role was limited by the divergent identity that diaspora members developed during their lives in the Central Asian region.

Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) initiated the first governmental initiative through the resource and corporate-focused Comprehensive Central Asian Initiative (2006), which attempted to link Central Asian resources with South Korean technology. The Korea + Central Asia forum followed, and in 2017 was institutionalized into a type of international organization (Secretariat of Korea-Central Asia Forum, <https://www.centralasia-korea.org/web/pages/gc51269b.do>). Other South Korean outreach toward the Central Asian region includes the Lee administration's New Asia Diplomacy and New Silk Road Policy (2008-2012) and the Park administration's (2013-2017) Eurasia Initiative proposal of 2013 (Day, Dong-Ching, 2017).¹ The most recent initiative to affect the region is the Moon administration's New Northern Policy (2018-present) (cf. the New Northern Policy (https://www.bukbang.go.kr/bukbang_en/)). Through these schemes, South Korea has attempted to construct a proper narrative for its policies in the Central Asian region.

While the aforementioned Japanese and South Korean initiatives significantly furthered Central Asian nationhood, development, and the decolonization of regional infrastructure by offering alternatives to Chinese and Russian projects, they prioritized the needs of Central Asian governments with little direct impact on the local general public.

To increase the visibility and accessibility of engagement to the general public, the two countries established Japanese and Korean centers throughout the region to provide language education and extend diverse educational opportunities to Central Asian youth. The minimal employment opportunities available to those who mastered the Japanese or Korean languages limited the effectiveness of these centers, however.

To address this issue, Japan and South Korea concluded labor migration agreements with Uzbekistan. South Korea has been a forerunner in this respect. After adopting a law on foreign migration, South Korea entered into negotiations with Uzbekistan and in 2006 signed an agreement for government-controlled migration, which set a quota of approximately 3,000 workers per year (3,400 workers out of 90,000 applicants as of 2019).

The government of Uzbekistan preselects migrants through labor migration-

¹ For the New Northeast Policy; see the Korean Institute of Economic Policy (<http://www.kiep.go.kr/eng/index.do>)

centers specifically created for this purpose, which train workers in basic language skills and send them to preselected employers in South Korea. Uzbekistan's 13 "Ishga Markhamat" (Welcome to Work) service centers located throughout the country conclude agreements with prospective applicants concerning potential foreign employment in Japan, South Korea (as well as Turkey, Russia and more) and provide three months of training to up to 20,000 trainees per year. Training courses include the appropriate foreign language for the destination, as well as professional training (welding for instance). These centers also provide microcredit loans to those planning overseas work to cover travel and initial expenses, protecting against predatory lending schemes, in which overseas lenders extend credit at exorbitant interest rates to migrant Uzbek workers, demanding repayment from their salaries. The Uzbek government funds such microcredit loans. Those dispatched through the centers are considered self-employed, and if they pay taxes, are eligible for social benefits and a pension upon retirement age (Ministry of Employment and Labor of Uzbekistan 2020).

This scheme enables the Uzbek government to exert a degree of control over migration flows and offers the migrants some protection in Russia, Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere. Japan has followed this model and established a training center in Uzbekistan, announcing its willingness to accept Uzbek workers to Japan as foreign workers under *Tokutei Ginou* or Specified Skilled Worker system or alternatively as technical interns (*Ginou Jissbusei*) permitted to engage in extra work outside of their on-the-job training sessions.

These government-run schemes have come under fire for a variety of shortcomings. The Uzbek press recently reported nepotism, corruption, and an absence of proper criteria in the South Korean selection of Uzbek candidates. Selection is currently conducted through a random lottery drawing. The Japanese program is only available each year to hundreds of migrants (as opposed to thousands in South Korea) and in reality, channels poorly paid foreign labor to Japan, where Uzbek trainees are denied proper treatment as workers. Uzbek migrant worker rights in Japan are not protected and their stay is heavily regulated. So, in numerous instances, students have disappeared upon arrival in Japan to join the illegal workforce.

The result is the recent trend, described below, in which educational and labor migration from Central Asia to East Asia has expanded through channels, such as language schools, outside of government control. While such institutes in Japan and South Korea claim to be dedicated to language learning, in reality, they help create a scenario in which students work 12 or more hours per day at several jobs, with language studies relegated to a part-time exercise.

3. Conceptualizing Educational and Labor Migration as the New “Horizon”

Several studies focus on the phenomenon of international migration from Central Asia. Some emphasize the government role in facilitating migration flows (Bisson 2016; Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019, 235-249; Abashin 2016); however, numerous factors facilitate and motivate migrants to travel abroad in search of opportunities (Gel'man 2004). For instance, much research discusses in detail the migration of Russian-speakers to Russia at the outset of the Soviet collapse (Korobkov 2007). Other studies do not connect these flows to interstate relations, but place migration within global flows of migrants influenced by transnational processes (cf. Laruelle 2013; Bartolomeo et al. 2014; Kakhkharov 2020 et. al). These works facilitate bilateral observation and enable comparison of the migration experience of Central Asian states from both regional and gender perspectives (Portes et al. 1999; Abashin 2013; Petesch and Demarchi 2015; Tatarko, A., Berry, J. W., & Choi, K. 2020).

Scholars have focused on a variety of causal forces that shape migration flows, terming them push and pull factors (for Uzbekistan migration to Russia see Urinboyev 2016), including ethnic preferences (e.g., Kim 2014), demographic pressures and social networks (Turaeva 2013, 2014), economic factors (Kakhkharov 2020 et. al; Kadirova 2015; Hiwatari 2016; Virkkunen 2017; Seitz 2019), ecological factors, and administrative factors such as endemic corruption or limited mobility imposed through domestic controls (Reeves 2012; Laruelle 2013; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014). Other studies compare Uzbek student experiences in Germany and Japan and offer insight into the social remittances they produce (Radjabov 2017). In addition to the above factors, other research discusses the role of local connections, not between states but between localities within states, known as trans-local migration (Levitt 2001; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2016; Urinboyev 2016, 28).

The concepts of “home” and “return” feature significantly in many studies narrating the motivations of Uzbek migrants in Russia and elsewhere (Abashin 2015; Urinboyev 2016). They measure their journey abroad not purely by the amount of wealth accumulated, but more importantly, by the positive evaluation and appreciation they receive at home, defined as their close circle of family members (Carling and Erdal 2014). Their sense of community both at home and abroad is increasingly maintained through virtual social networking tools (Urinboyev 2017; Christensen 2012) such as Telegram, as detailed below.

To a great extent, the experiences and narratives of student-migrants seeking gainful employment in Japan and South Korea reflect the factors mentioned above and are closely related to push and pull factors. This study also emphasizes structural problems arising from poor institutionalization of official migration channels, which

results in alternative tracks of labor market penetration. The lack of official labor migration channels and the poor organization of this process combine to accelerate student-masqueraded labor mobility. In addition to the limited number of available migration openings from Uzbekistan to Japan and South Korea, the arbitrary and frequently opaque candidate selection process further lowers the degree of trust in the official process, forcing individuals to seek alternative migration channels. (see Figure 1 below)

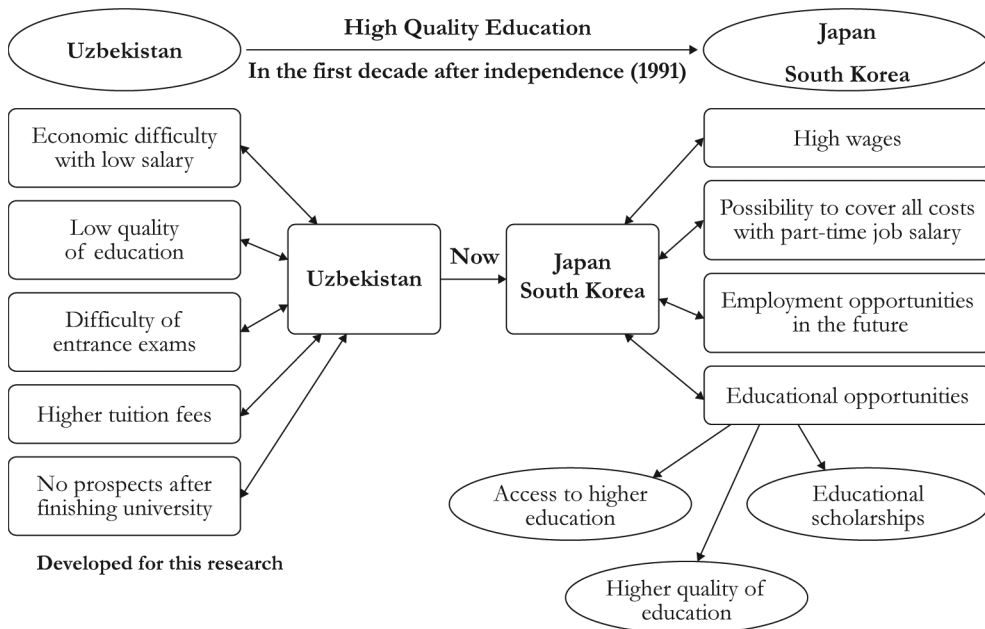


Figure 1. Factors influencing Uzbek migration to Japan and South Korea

4. From Central Asia to East Asia: Uzbekistan’s Dynamics

4.1. Japanese Dynamics

While Chinese, Iranian, Vietnamese and Brazilian migrants sought employment opportunities, taking advantage of Japan’s period of rapid economic growth (1955-1975), Uzbek migrants slowly entered the Japanese employment and educational market largely after Japan’s economic downturn. The economic slump influenced their understanding of the niches available to them in Japan and is the period for this study of Uzbeks sojourning in Japan. Several factors shape the dynamics of Uzbek labor

migration to Japan and South Korea.

In addition to the domestic demand for jobs in Uzbekistan, one of the most important factors to consider is the host country's policy with respect to migration practices, as exemplified in this paper by Japan and South Korea. Due to cultural differences and its geographic location, Japan is not historically considered migrant-friendly. Foreigners comprise just 2% of Japan's overall population of 127 million (OECD 2018). Chinese (389,117) constitute the largest foreign ethnic group in the Japanese labor market, accounting for 26.6% of foreign workers, followed by Vietnamese (316,840), accounting for 21.7% of foreign workers, and Filipinos (164,006), accounting for 11.2% of foreign workers (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2019). The fastest-growing migrant worker groups are the Vietnamese (31.9%), Indonesians (21.7%), and Nepalese (18.0%). While these data do not demonstrate a significant presence of the Uzbek workforce in the Japanese labor market, the data on Uzbek citizens residing in Japan registered a 200-fold increase, from as few as 20 in 1994 to 3,951 in 2018. Regarding educational mobility, data show that the number of Uzbeks seeking educational opportunities under student visas increased from only 101 students in 2000 to 2,366 in 2018, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Increasing Number of Uzbek Immigrants to Japan

Year	Total	Dip	Off	Pro	Art	Jou	HSP	I/BM	Res	Ins	Eng	SH/IS	lc/T	Ent	S/L	TIT	CA	TV	Stu	Tra	Dep	PR	DA	S/Ch	JNS	ChP	LTR	WAS	TR	Oth
1994	20			2					1			1							6		9				1					
1995	22			2								1					1		7	3	7			1						
1996	29			2					1			1						1	1	10	2	10			1					
1997	47			3					1		1	1						3	27	2	7				2					
1998	80			1					2					1				3	1	55	3	11			2				1	
1999	103			2					2					1				2	4	63	3	23			3					
2000	184			5					4			1	1	15				3	33	81	3	27			8					
2001	201			4					2		1	4	1	1				3	30	101	7	32			10		2	1		2
2002	262			7					2		1	8	1	12	3			2	24	122	11	45	1	4	14		3			2
2003	341			6	1				1		3	20	1	19	5			3	34	137	12	65	3	6	18		3	2		2
2004	376			6					2		3	29	2	23	1			3	41	157	9	55	5	3	27		4	1		5
2005	495			5		1		2	2	2	5	42	2	51	1			1	48	172	30	69	6	3	40	2	6			5
2006	527			5	1	1		2	1	6	52	3	12	1				5	33	219	18	92	11	5	43	2	9	9		9
2007	620			6		1			3		8	72	2	6	1			2	28	275	9	112	14	7	52	2	12	4		4
2008	655			8		1			2		2	8	87	2	6	1		10	19	264	8	130	15	8	63	2	12	3		4
2009	727			8		1			3		2	7	108	2	6	1		11	21	251	6	180	22	9	64	2	15	6		2
2010	832			8		1			3		4	13	123	2	4	1		8	11	286	4	232	35	6	63	3	15	8		2
2011	840			9	1	1			2	1	4	17	151	2	3	2		5	7	256	4	228	47	15	60	5	18	1		1
2012	1060	33	16	9		1			3	1	2	17	167	1	3	1		5	67	284	6	276	55	13	70	8	22			
2013	1197	26	14	11	1	1			4	1	2	19	176	3	2	1		9	50	352	1	340	74	14	63	10	23			
2014	1415	23	14	11	1	1			5		2	19	181	4	2	1		4	43	477	2	386	86	38	69	15	31			
2015	1599	24	12	11	2	1	2		8	1	2	212	4	2	1			7	59	583	2	404	115	27	68	14	38			
2016	1986	25	9	10		1	3	9	1	2	233	3		2				9	76	868	2	427	164	24	68	12	38			
2017	3068	26	14	10				10	9	1	2	280	3	1	1	17	4	106	1759	3	468	200	33	73	12	36				
2018	3951	26	16	9				12	13	1	2	395	4	2	3	9	4	136	2366	3	547	226	49	72	15	41				

Legend:	S/L: Skilled Labor	HSP: Highly Skilled Professional	Stu: Student	DA: Designated Activities
Dip: Diplomat	Ent: Entertainer	lc/T: Intra-company Transferee	Tra: Trainee	S/ChP: Spouse or Child of Permanent Resident
Off: Official	Ins: Instructor	I/BM: Investor/Business Manager	Dep: Dependent	LTR: Spouse or Child of Permanent Resident
Pro: Professor	Eng: Engineer	TIT: Technical Intern Training	PR: Permanent Resident	WASR: Without Acquiring Status of Residence
Art: Artist	CA: Cultural Activities	CA: Cultural Activities	TR: Temporary Refuge	SH/IS: Specialist in Humanities/International Services
Jou: Journalist	TV: Temporary Visitor	TV: Temporary Visitor	Oth: Others	S/ChN: Spouse or Child of Japanese National
Res: Researcher				

(Source) Ministry of Justice of Japan, http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html (compiled by authors using Zairyu Gaikokujin Toukei reports from 1996 to 2018)

In interviews conducted with 66 language school students to clarify the purpose of their stay in Japan, the overwhelming majority (approximately 60 students) named access to educational opportunities. While some revealed that they sought official travel channels to work in Japan, they also acknowledged that gaining such employment was more complicated and difficult than opportunities provided through educational mobility. Once enrolled in language schools, they utilized the opportunities made available to them through the permission for part-time jobs (*shikakugai katsudo kyokasho*) issued by the immigration office. Regarding information channels, the majority of respondents replied that their choice was greatly influenced by family members, those sharing common origins (city, village, etc.) or their community (religious, professional, social).

When surveyed about the financial resources required for enrollment in Japan, the majority claimed to have borrowed money from family members or acquaintances (Figure 2).

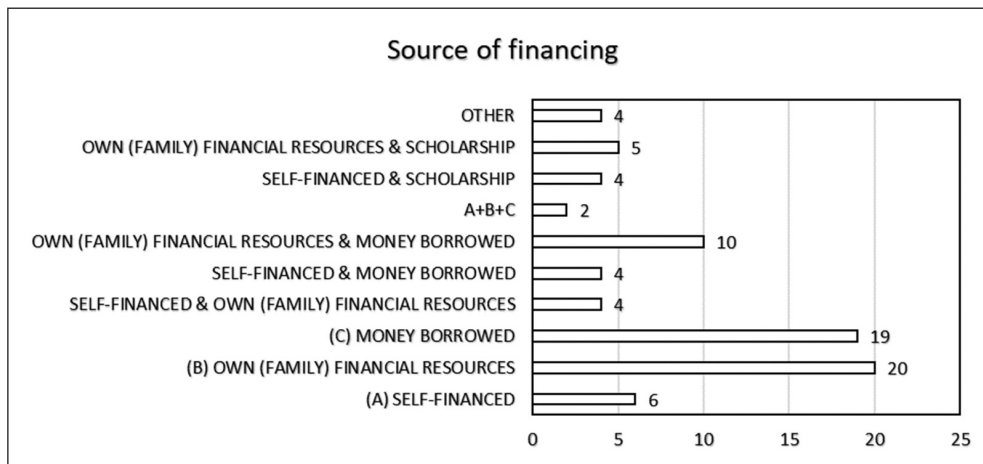


Figure 2. Sources of Finance for Trips (Japanese sample)

When asked about how important it was for them to work while studying in Japan and remit generated income back to Uzbekistan, the majority of those enrolled in Japanese language schools replied that it was very important or relatively important, indicating that the purpose of their enrollment in educational institutions was in part if not solely to benefit from access to the Japanese labor market (Figure 3).

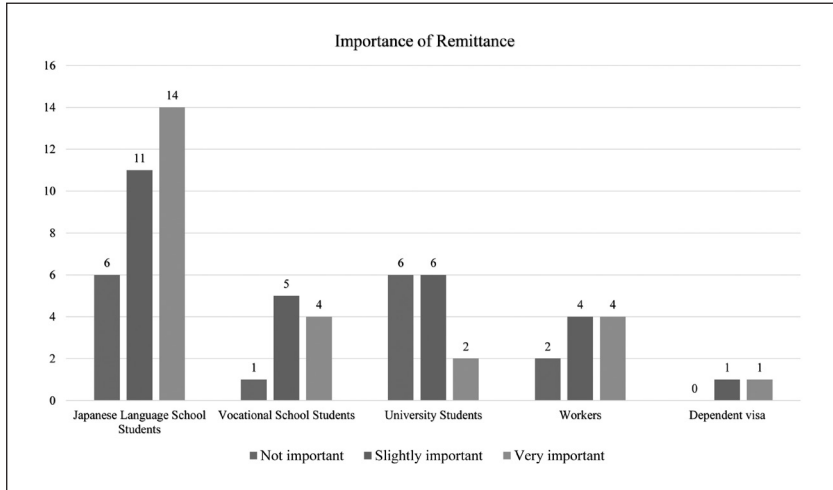


Figure 3. The Importance of Remittances to Uzbek Migrants (Japanese sample)

Similarly, the number of respondents indicating that they remitted financial resources from Japan was the highest among language school students, while those in the other categories were inclined to minimize the importance of financial remittances (Figure 4).

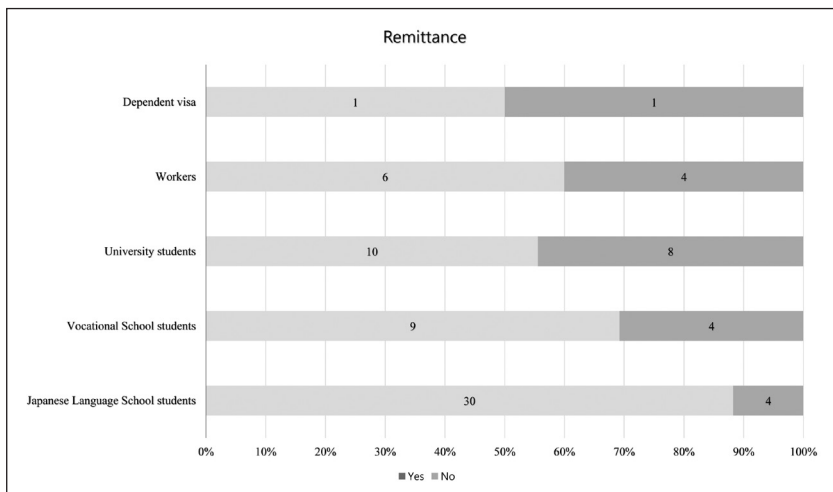


Figure 4. Who Remits the Most? (Japanese sample)

With respect to the prospect of a long stay or settlement in Japan, all of the respondents indicated that they did not intend to settle down or naturalize. Most defined the timeframe of their stay in Japan as approximately 3-5 years to build a financial foundation for their lives back in Uzbekistan. The topic of returning and building their career back in Uzbekistan featured prominently in our conversations, and most respondents saw the value of their stay and work in Japan in relation to expected professional development and business opportunities back in Uzbekistan and not in Japan. When asked why they choose to “return” instead of building careers in Japan, some indicated a desire for further education in Japan, but they were inclined to indicate an eventual desire to return. These answers were closely connected to issues of identity (cf. Main and Sandoval 2015). The greatest reasons they cited for return to Uzbekistan were not rejection from Japanese society, but rather the distance from family and community, worldview (Uzbekchillik, or Uzbekness), and a strong longing for religious community and Islam, which Japanese society accommodates slightly, if at all.

4.2. South Korean Dynamics

The data for South Korea demonstrates a slightly different trend. First, the number of Uzbeks in South Korea is six times greater than in Japan due to the robust official labor migration channel established from Uzbekistan to South Korea in 2006. As a result, in 2019, the number of Uzbek residents in South Korea reached 25,961, as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. Uzbek Citizens in South Korea

Nationality	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Uzbekistan	14,246	16,151	18,486	18,818	25,961

Source: Commission for Statistics of Korea, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>

In comparative perspective, Uzbek migrants are among the largest groups of incoming foreigners, ranking as the 5th largest group of foreign residents in South Korea (see Table 3). This includes Uzbek Koreans who “returned” to or migrated to South Korea from Uzbekistan for business, work, or study.

Table 3. International Migrants: Persons Continuously Residing in South Korea over 90 days

By Nationality	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
Total	372,935	402,203	452,657	495,079	438,220
China	177,001	165,494	156,848	169,336	138,653
Vietnam	30,244	40,099	47,964	55,992	61,344
United States	22,741	21,771	19,848	21,171	20,839
Thailand	20,122	28,457	71,506	80,349	53,290
Uzbekistan	14,246	16,151	18,486	18,818	25,961
Philippines	9,867	9,530	8,988	10,053	9,149
Cambodia	9,564	10,248	9,523	8,710	9,917

Source: Commission for Statistics of Korea, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>

Uzbeks are also the largest migrating group among the former Soviet states to settle in South Korea, followed by citizens from Russia and Kazakhstan, which both also host large Korean diasporas, as shown in table 4 below.

Table 4. Residents of South Korea by Citizenship (selected country of the FSU)

By Nationality	2020. 03	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
Kazakhstan	178	3,534	7,711	13,356	15,724	12,469
Kyrgyzstan	53	1,385	1,759	1,688	1,898	1,622
Tajikistan	29	119	161	219	199	217
Turkmenistan	1	13	35	41	143	237
Uzbekistan	527	14,246	16,151	18,486	18,818	25,961
Georgia	1	16	12	16	19	23
Russia (Federation)	506	6,784	15,025	18,638	18,726	17,983
Ukraine	74	968	1,240	1,298	1,362	1,199

Source: Commission for Statistics of Korea, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>

Uzbek citizen migration to South Korea is double-layered, including the ‘return’ to Korea by members of the Uzbek Korean diaspora, and in recent years, very high numbers of ethnically non-Korean Uzbeks for purposes of labor and education. As seen in the table on residency permits, overseas Koreans represent the largest group of Uzbeks in South Korea, followed by those in the unskilled employment and visiting/joining family category and those indicating education-related goals in South Korea (Table 5).

Table 5. Types of Residence Permits Received by Uzbek citizens in South Korea

Qualification of Stay	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
Total	14,246	16,151	18,486	18,818	25,961
Short-term Visitors	1,328	1,321	1,334	1,154	1,343
Short-term Employment	2	-	3	-	-
Job Seeking	6	3	1	11	42
Study	343	535	1,130	1,687	2,727
Industrial Trainees	220	208	282	193	98
General Trainees	313	676	1,778	2,100	1,746
Trade and Business	2	2	2	1	5
Professors	1	-	-	1	2
Unskilled Employment	3,329	2,719	2,783	2,355	3,359
Visiting/Joining Family	232	1,371	2,134	2,107	3,144
Residence	15	23	36	31	132
Overseas Koreans	1,260	1,907	2,087	2,129	3,516
Marriage Immigration	264	251	221	224	461
Visiting & Employment	6,525	6,877	6,498	6,538	8,574

Source: Commission for Statistics of Korea, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>

Similar to the case of Japan, where respondents tended to settle around major industrial cities such as Tokyo (and surrounding areas such as Kanagawa, Chiba, Saitama and Ibaraki), Osaka, and Nagoya, Uzbek migrants prefer to settle in large Korean industrial cities and economic zones with high economic potential such as Seoul, Busan, and Chungcheongnam-do, as detailed in table 6 below.

Table 6. Main Areas of Residence of Uzbek citizens in South Korea

Administrative District (Si, Gun, Gu) (1) 2013	
Gross Total	30,699
Seoul	1,480
Busan	1,313
Daegu	881
Incheon	1,494
Gwangju	730
Daejeon	272
Ulsan	729
Sejong-si	107
Gyeonggi-do	9,901
Gangwon-do	252
Chungcheongbuk-do	1,655
Chungcheongnam-do	2,414
Jeollabuk-do	908
Jeollanam-do	964
Gyeongsangbuk-do	1,748
Gyeongsangnam-do	5,789
Jeju-do	62

Source: Commission for Statistics of Korea, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>

These results also demonstrate that their residence in South Korea is tightly connected to employment opportunities and the availability of jobs that provide for their social security and income for family members who depend on their remittances back to Uzbekistan.

5. Migrant Perceptions of South Korea and Japan

Comparing the two countries, we note that there are several similarities and differences in the way migrants treat their sojourn to Japan and South Korea. Regarding similarities, the vast majority of Uzbek student-migrants in our survey indicated that they considered their stays in Japan and South Korea to be temporary, having little desire to settle for the long or medium-term or to seek permanent residence. While the lack of opportunity to permanently settle and their visa term (long vs. short) may have predetermined

their answer, respondents in both Japan and South Korea cited cultural differences and incompatible religious differences as well as the worldview regarding attitudes towards the family and elderly as the main reasons for not desiring a longer stay. In this sense, our sample supports the findings of similar studies showing that temporary Uzbek migrants in Japan and South Korea do not regard their current legal “status to be the most detrimental factor in their decision to permanently settle or ‘return home’” (Dadabaev and Akhmedova 2021, forthcoming).

The overwhelming majority of respondents provided a projected three to five year timeframe for their stay in both countries, reflecting the amount of time in which they would be able to repay debt incurred for travel expenses to Japan/South Korea and build the financial and social capital to enable solidifying their standing back in Uzbekistan.

Among the factors significantly influencing the respondents’ choices to stay or leave, family/community ties in Uzbekistan and religion (Islam) played the greatest roles in their decisions to return. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were fully satisfied with their lives in Japan/South Korea and therefore did not link their desire to return to Uzbekistan to dissatisfaction with their current host countries. Rather, they did not see these two aspects as mutually exclusive.

Because they lived their lives within Uzbek communes (sharing apartments with like-minded fellow citizens), they did not detach their existence in Japan/South Korea from their life in a social space of “Uzbekness,” maintaining purely functional interaction with host country local communities. They interacted with the host society barricaded behind an Uzbek identity and the ideal of a “*musofir*” (a wanderer in unknown lands). In their own words, their current lives are defined by their attachment to ethnic Uzbekness (*Uzbekchilik*) or by Islamic religious interpretations of their stay as that of a wanderer or *musofir* in search, not only of financial reward, but also of life experience, wisdom, and justice.

In such a self-rationalized structure, the eventual “return home” is the point in their judgment where they have reaped the fruits from their current life in the host society. Upon their return, the majority hope to either utilize their experience as know-how in Uzbek society (in line with the social remittance concept; see Levitt 2001b; Radjabov 2017) or enhance social standing in their communities (Rugot and Usmanalieva 2011).

One feature common to Uzbeks in Japan and South Korea is that they view their current opportunity as one they were forced to take, due to a lack of alternatives back home, whether due to a failed national university entrance examination, lack of education funds, or limited work prospects and low salary. Some respondents also indicated that they decided to travel to Japan or South Korea when they saw an opportunity to both study and work to save for their future return home. Importantly, those considering options for educational mobility or labor migration outside of Uzbekistan viewed Japan and South Korea as a viable alternative to traveling to Russia, where Uzbeks

are dominant in the foreign labor market but face tremendous discrimination and psychological and physical abuse.

Most respondents indicated in their narratives that although they appreciated the opportunities offered by their sojourn to Japan and South Korea, they had to overcome challenges primarily related to self-identity and the purpose of travel. They were prepared to accept and deal with logistical limitations and daily problems in these countries because their current stay offered them the opportunity to “stand on their feet” and establish lives back home. In addition, most interviewees discussed their sojourn as part of a maturation process, an increasing appreciation for their own society, and, importantly, “religion.”

Studies of migrants in Russia and elsewhere have already raised the issue of the increasing religiosity among migrants due to the migration experience, as religious beliefs provide a proper framing for most migrants, soothing their perceived difficulties in host societies.

In the case of Japan and South Korea, the respondents overwhelmingly emphasized that religious attachments helped them internalize and explain experiences to others. Although many indicated that they were part of a religious community, they still preferred a religious community in their own country comprised of close family members rather than migrant strangers.

This result also corresponds to the respondents’ high satisfaction with their stay in host societies. They have the opportunity to see and learn new things to which they would not be exposed to back home, while any difficulties faced in the host society are considered temporary and transient.

The greatest advantage from their stay for respondents in both Japan and South Korea was the short-term economic benefit of capital accumulation. Respondents linked this capital to the pursuit back in Uzbekistan of goals which the overwhelming majority interpreted as the opportunity to launch their own business rather than as purely financial gain.

Many indicated that they hoped to use knowledge of the social and economic institutions, schemes and enterprises in Japan and South Korea, ‘copying’ or ‘modifying’ them to fit society in Uzbekistan.

Many respondents indicated that theoretically, such behaviors could be interpreted as an attempt to socially remit practices that can potentially not only enhance the standing of these individuals but also contribute to the soft and hard power potentials of Japan and South Korea in the region since migrants sojourns offer channels for the transfer of business practices and work ethic and provide an opportunity for migrants to accumulate the capital needed to launch enterprises back in Uzbekistan.

In addition to the similarities between Japan and South Korea in the eyes of migrants, there are also striking differences in their perceptions of these societies. The

first difference relates to the channels of travel to these two East Asian countries. In the case of Japan, educational mobility, most commonly in the form of Japanese language training, is the most popular means for labor migrants (see Table 7).

Table 7. Expenses for Educational Opportunities and Part-time Job Search in Japan

Fee Types	Approximate Monetary Amount
Fees charged by Japanese language schools in Japan	
Tuition fee for the first year	US\$ 6,300-7,300 (depends on the Japanese language school and its location in Japan)
Apartment rent per month	US\$ 200-670 (depends on the location and number of people sharing a room)
Fees charged by education agencies/brokers in Uzbekistan	
Language training fee in Uzbekistan	US\$ (price depends on the school and its location in Uzbekistan); even after a student obtains a visa, he/she is required to continue studying the Japanese language until his/her departure to Japan or be responsible for paying fees for the period
Processing fee for services such as preparing documents, preparing for online interviews, assisting with translation in the online interview, finding a Japanese school in Japan, paying the visa fee	US\$ 500-1,500 (depends on the agency and individual broker); if a visa is not obtained, \$300 will be retained by the agency, and the rest will be returned to the student
Airfare (one-way or two-way ticket from Uzbekistan to Japan); students' personal responsibility	US\$ 300-720
Assistance in finding part-time jobs through people who work as brokers and live in Japan; students' personal responsibility	US\$ 50-285 (Uzbek students in Japan are divided into three groups: Most students find part-time jobs with the assistance of their friends or relatives or by themselves; the second group of students finds part-time jobs by paying approximately \$50-\$200 to Uzbek brokers; the third group of students finds part-time jobs by paying individual Uzbek brokers in Japan approximately \$285 plus an additional 10% of their daily salary); this group of students usually uses this service in the first six months after coming to Japan (usually Japanese language school students)

Compiled by authors from interviews of 66 students/migrants in Japan.

Students enroll in Japanese language schools in Uzbekistan, gain a certain level of proficiency, and then apply for Japanese language training in Japan, which can last from 6 months to several years, depending on the desire of the student. As indicated above, such enrollment requires a significant amount of initial investment, which these migrants borrow from family members, friends, or “brokers” who facilitate their travel to Japan. In the majority of cases, such migrants attempt to stay in Japan for several years until they accumulate enough resources to repay their debt and build the foundation of financial stability back home. Some of these individuals travel to Japan several times, enrolling in various language schools or progressing to professional training schools and, sometimes, undergraduate programs. The main reason for the popularity of this migration channel is the limited opportunities offered by Japan for direct and official labor migration (hundreds annually rather than thousands as in the case of South Korea, see Figure 5).

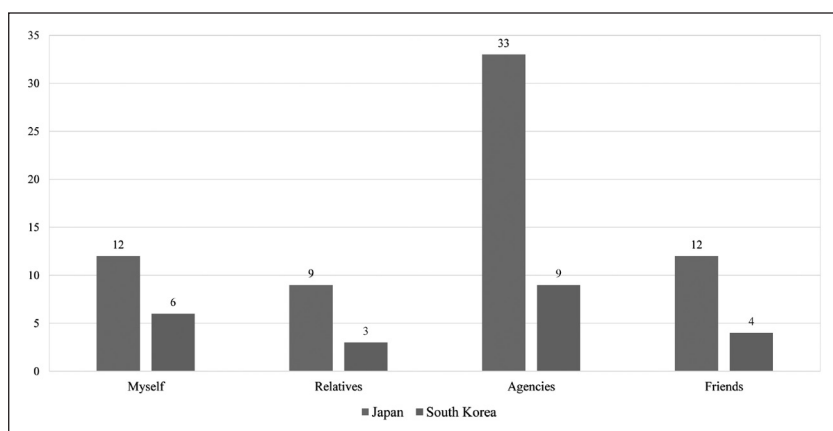


Figure 5. Source of Assistance for Processing & Preparing Admission Documents

In recent years, the number of foreign laborers directly employed from abroad, including Uzbekistan have increased in elderly care, agriculture, and certain types of manual labor (such as cargo companies). The government strictly regulates these new areas of labor migration, however, requiring that applicants possess a certain level of language proficiency and particular skills. For instance, in the area of caretaking, applicants must pass a state Japanese language examination a few years after arrival to qualify for a license and a longer stay, limiting opportunities for applicants interested in travel to Japan.

In the case of South Korea, direct migration practices are more widespread, with the Uzbek Ministry of Labor establishing a special agency for labor migration responsible for facilitating the travel of such migrants to Japan and their protection.

South Korea offers several thousand (approximately 3,000) spots per year to Uzbek citizens. Those unable to use this opportunity then exploit the option of educational mobility for the purpose of labor migration (Table 8).

Table 8. Comparison of Expenses for Educational Opportunities and Part-time Job Search in Japan and South Korea

Fee Types	Japan	South Korea
	Approximate Monetary Amount	Approximate Monetary Amount
Tuition fee for the first year (it is also possible to pay every six months)	US\$ 6,300-7,300 (depends on the Japanese language school and its location in Japan)	Nearly US\$ 4,000 for Korean language school Approximately US\$ 6,000 for university
Apartment rent per month	US\$ 200-670 (depends on the location and number of people sharing a room)	Nearly US\$ 4,000 for Korean language school Approximately US\$ 6,000 for university
Fees charged by education agencies/brokers in Uzbekistan		
Language training fee in Uzbekistan	US\$ (price depends on the school and its location in Uzbekistan); even after a student obtains a visa, the student is required to continue studying the Japanese language until his/her departure to Japan or be responsible for paying fees for the period	SUM 120,000-200,000 (price depends on the school and its location in Uzbekistan); it is also required to finish a 6-month course in some language programs
Processing fee for services	US\$ 500-1,500 (depends on the agency and individual broker); if a visa is not obtained, \$300 will be retained by the agency, and the rest will be returned to the student; such services include preparing documents, preparing for online interviews, assisting with translation in the online interview, finding a Japanese school in Japan, paying the visa fee	US\$ 100-500 (depends on the agency and individual broker); such services includes preparing documents, checking for mistakes in the documents, bringing and submitting them to educational institutions in South Korea
Airfare	US\$ 300-720 (one-way or two-way ticket from Uzbekistan to Japan); students' personal responsibility	US\$ 300-500 (one-way ticket from Uzbekistan to South Korea); students' personal responsibility

Assistance in finding part-time jobs; students personal responsibility	US\$ 50-285 (Uzbek students in Japan are divided into three groups: Most students find part-time jobs with the assistance of their friends or relatives or by themselves; the second group of students finds part-time jobs by paying approximately \$50-\$200; the third group of students finds part-time jobs by paying individual Uzbek brokers in Japan approximately \$285 and 10% of daily salary); this group of students typically uses such services in the first six months after coming to Japan and are considered Japanese language school students	Uzbek students in South Korea are also divided into three groups: Most students find part-time jobs with the assistance of Korean brokers/agencies by paying 10% of their daily salary; the second group of students finds part-time jobs through their friends or relatives or by themselves; the third group of students finds part-time jobs by paying approximately a \$70-\$90 one-time fee until the agency finds suitable work for them
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Compiled by authors from interviews

The process of controlling and licensing language school students in South Korea puts additional pressure on students to properly attend their studies. Schools must approve documents required for students to receive a work permit and confirm that their grades are high enough to allow for part-time work.

In the case of Japan, students do not feel similar pressure because Japan's immigration service entrusts the task of monitoring student performance to the schools and issues part-time work permits without review of student performance or attendance. The majority of employers require documentation from migrant workers, however, and are frequently reluctant to offer jobs with work hours exceeding the standard defined in labor laws. Students thus attempt to efficiently "maximize" use of time in Japan by landing part-time employment in different places with shifts that do not overlap. This arrangement undermines efficient learning, and many fall asleep while attending school. However, our respondents named financial gain through part-time employment as a higher priority than academic gain.

In regards to job finding, migrants to Japan largely use an informal network consisting of their fellow citizens through the Telegram social networking platform. As soon as they arrived in Japan all respondents went online, using Telegram to get connected and for professional networking to find jobs.

In the case of South Korea, our respondents indicated various means to find jobs, including signing direct contracts with employers before arriving in South Korea, paying

official agencies, or unofficial “brokers” who publicize their services on Telegram, and relying on networks of friends. Thus, compared to Japan, more options appear available in South Korea to find jobs with relative ease.

Interestingly, many posts in South Korea advertise jobs with room and board, while in Japan, jobs advertised with lodging are nonexistent. In this sense, the labor market structure forces those coming from Uzbekistan to Japan to share lodging and food costs and obtain psychological security through communal living. The earlier arrivals to Japan include former student-migrants and labor migrants who have set up enterprises with services targeting the student and labor migrant community, providing money transfer services from Japan or offering assistance in document preparation for arrival to Japan. Such services function as an underground banking system, arranging transfers over the phone from Japan to various cities in Uzbekistan. Migrants typically bring money to an office in Japan. The amount to be disbursed is transmitted over the phone to the remitting service agent in Uzbekistan, and within a matter of minutes, the migrant’s relative receives the amount from money pooled in Uzbekistan for this purpose. No documentation is registered, and the transaction represents an information remittance practice.

In the case of South Korea, however, similar remittances are just one available option for migrants. Other alternatives include sending money through numerous businessmen who travel to South Korea for wholesale purchases or remittance through travelers who frequent South Korea on regular flights offered by Asiana Airlines and Korean Air. In addition to financial remittance, migrants often exploit South Korea’s role as a source of major industrial products, electronics, and clothing for the Uzbek market, sending these products to generate income and facilitate or launch the trading businesses of relatives and acquaintances back home in Uzbekistan.

In contrast, the high prices and foreign origin of merchandise in Japan prevent the country from serving as a source of products to be sent home. Outside of occasional Uzbekistan Airways flights during the tourist season, Uzbekistan and Japan also lack direct flight connections. Japan then, is financially rewarding for those able to enter the labor market and remit funds to family members back home.

Regarding the institutional environment, respondents found that job searches in South Korea were easier than those in Japan for several reasons. First, compared to Japan, migrants generally encountered a more tolerant attitude towards the foreign workforce in South Korea, where employers openly search for foreigners through agencies or various labor markets. In Japan, our respondents reported mostly informal job searches conducted through a network of like-minded Uzbek travelers and the absence of official placement agencies targeting foreign workers.

Strict workplace rules in Japan prohibit continuous, multi-hour shifts in the same job, forcing respondents to seek shifts at several different workplaces to maximize

profits. Those in South Korea, however, indicated that they could work beyond the legally allowed limit in the same workplace if they so desired, and many reported that their employers would arrange their residence and even provide food. Such arrangements are rare, if nonexistent, in Japan, leaving respondents solely responsible for housing arrangements. The only exception is the Japanese government-run professional trainee scheme which regulates and controls trainees' private lives, including their place of residence. Finally, the two countries' student work regulations differ. In Japan, students are allowed to work part-time 28 hours per week during their studies and 40 hours per week during their vacations. Students apply and receive work permits from the immigration authorities, who entrust educational institutions with control of the study-work balance. Our respondents report that South Korean immigration authorities regulate more strictly the issuance of student work permits, first verifying enrollment along with student academic grades and attendance.

A few individuals in the Japanese sample had also experienced labor migration to Russia and South Korea. They disclosed that they had accumulated initial funds through seasonal work in Russia for travel to South Korea and Japan. Discrimination faced in Russia led them to pursue a job in East Asia.

In comparing South Korea and Japan, they felt that South Korea provided an easier environment in which to find a job. They considered the Japanese working environment to be more demanding and precise than in South Korea, where, depending on the kind of job, employers often did not as scrupulously control work output. Some felt, though, that the more demanding Japanese work environment offered long term benefits through discipline that was internalized by the respondents as part of a journey for wisdom and experience, as explained above.

6. Conclusions

This paper arrives at several conclusions based on our pilot survey in Japan and South Korea. First, labor migration and educational mobility are becoming the next "horizon" in the expanded relationship between East and Central Asia.

Migration is powered by several factors, including the efforts by Japan and South Korea to pursue 'original' people-oriented regional policy engagement, and demands for labor opportunities from Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan, for their young and growing populations.

Second, the mobility initiatives which sent Uzbek students and laborers to Japan and South Korea have both positive and negative aspects, some of which pose a worrisome trend and may impede future cooperation. In particular, endemic corruption and the scarcity of jobs available through official labor migration from Uzbekistan to Japan and

South Korea have led Uzbek students to increasingly abuse educational opportunities, which have been turned into a pipeline for unofficial labor migration.

Third, although educational mobility has prominently featured in labor migration in East Asia (particularly from China, Vietnam, and the Philippines to Japan and South Korea), the movement of Uzbeks to Japan and South Korea demonstrates that this trend has expanded beyond East to Central Asia.

Fourth, while increasing numbers of Uzbeks seek to engage in such educational/labor mobility, little evidence suggests that they consider migration a “side door” to permanent settlement or integration into Japanese and South Korean society, as most opt to return home in the short and medium-term.

Fifth, most regard their stay as a short sojourn due to religious and identity-related differences. They define their journey along the lines of *musofirs*, or religious wanderers, seeking opportunities, wisdom, and experience to be used to solidify their social identity and standing back in their own society.

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