

Work experience and skill construction of international workers in and through Japanese SMEs

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to explore how skills of international workers are constructed from employment in Japanese small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and how that affects the career and mobility of international workers. In Japan, there are two types of international workers employed in SMEs. The first one is guest worker from Asian developing countries, namely technical intern (TI), who arrives and works in Japanese firms on a temporary work contract. Technical interns are often regarded as low-skilled and low-status by the public and academia. Another one is self-initiated expatriate (SIE), who are often skilled, well-educated and usually take up white-collar jobs. Drawing on social construction of skill theory from migration studies, this paper investigates the work experiences of low-status guest workers (TI) and SIEs in Japanese SMEs, and the role of SMEs in shaping skills and impacting their career development.

This study is designed and developed on ‘social construction of skill’ theory from migration literature. The research questions are two-fold: (1) how careers of TIs and SIEs have changed through the employment in Japanese SME? (2) how SMEs impact upon skill construction of TIs and SIEs in Japan? Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with international workers (TIs and SIEs) who have work experiences in Japanese SMEs, as well as managers of SMEs. By examining the career trajectories of SIEs and TIs in Japan through a qualitative exploratory study, I found Japanese SMEs are important actors in career development of international workers by recognizing, cultivating, ascribing and limiting/denying skills of both low-skilled (TI) and skilled (SIE) migrant workers. What’s more, different patterns are revealed between these two types of international workers. While career paths of SIEs were open to more choices and diverse, by laws and regulations, TIs need to return home after three to five years. Instead of sending TIs back home when their fixed-terms finish, a few number of SMEs in Japan are promoting graduated technical interns to full-time employees by offering them specified-skilled visa or hiring them in international subsidiaries. The managers of SMEs in Japan and intermediary labor agency are key actors in social construction of migrant workers’ skills and are found shaping the skill recognitions of low-skilled migrant workers (in this case, TIs). This study particularly highlights the role of SMEs in shaping the mobility and careers of international workers by providing empirical insights from SIEs and low status guest workers in Japanese SMEs. It accounts for the recent mobility patterns of international workers in Japan, and therefore shed lights on the complex social dynamics that affect international careers.