

## “New Connections: ‘Translocal Policy Assemblages’ in the Governance of Labor Migration to Japan”

Yunchen Tian  
Saint Martin’s University

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Japan’s Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) was introduced in 1993, formalizing the business practice of accepting foreign workers as ‘trainees’ while utilizing strict mechanisms to ensure the control and timely rotation of workers to prevent permanent settlement. By the end of the 2000s, the de-facto guestworker regime had surpassed visa overstayers, *Nikkeijin* co-ethnics, and student visa holders to become the largest of Japan’s unofficial ‘backdoors’ of labor migration (Komai 1995; Tian 2018; Liu-Farrer 2020). Despite criticisms and call for drastic reform or abolishment of the regime, the policies have only seen slow, incremental change at the national level. Explanations have focused on the role of public sentiments (Davison and Peng 2021; Green 2017), elite lawmakers’ opinions (Strausz 2019), anxieties of avoiding a nationalist backlash (Higuchi 2024), as well as discourse within bureaucratic spaces (Vogt 2013; Wakisaka 2023) which all constrain the potential for a top-down rethinking of Japan’s immigration regime.

In contrast to gradualism at the national-level, the past decade has seen a surge of diverse forms of intervention by subnational-level actors. Municipal governments have introduced a wide range of policy initiatives from subsidizing employers of foreign workers to sponsoring structured activities such as cultural exchange activities, language classes, and sports leagues to facilitate a level of inclusion and engagement while extending control over migrants’ private time (Tian 2022). Recent empirical findings showing that Japanese prefectures and municipalities with greatly varying institutional capacities have become transnational actors themselves by directly establishing relations and signing cooperation agreements with government ministries, educational institutions, subnational authorities, and private sector labor brokers in sending countries such as Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia raise many questions. How, and why, are local governments and private actors creating direct connections with peers in sending countries? How does this affect our understanding of migration governance in Japan, a highly centralized state where the national bureaucracy plays a leading role?

I argue that these developments are an invitation to reap theoretical rewards by unpacking how the growing importance of translocal linkages in opening and sustaining new migration pathways, impacting recruitment practices, and devolving power and responsibility for migration governance over a wider range of actors. In doing so, this piece will contribute to the migration governance literature by breaking it out of hierarchical frameworks and invite a focus towards the proliferation of ‘disaggregated’ and contingent relations. To do so, I draw upon the expanding field of border studies, particularly with its newer moves towards understanding borders are not only tools of restricting migration and mobility, but rather tools of channeling, shaping, and regulating mobility. In turn, this piece seeks to contribute empirically rich insights into how borders are formed, re-formed, and spatialized through contingent and dynamic interactions between previously disconnected actors to be utilized for functions of differential inclusion/exclusion or filtration of migrant populations.

Introducing the concept of ‘translocal policy assemblages’ (TLPAs), I will argue that far from a loss of state control or sovereignty, increasing complexity in migration governance and TLPAs not only increases the capacity to recruit, train, and manage greater numbers of inbound labor migrants to Japan, but also extends pre-existing and introduces new forms of borders and bordering practices. These borders and bordering practices include both those that have specific, declared goals of exclusion, separation, or differentiation, as well as others which have these effects despite differing stated intentions. In short, between a trade-off of ‘numbers versus rights’, the answer can be both, but with more borders.

I illustrate the usefulness of TLPAs to help us understand the increasingly disaggregated logics of migration governance in Japan by applying the analytical framework towards the recent introduction of the Specified Skills Worker (SSW) visa, a potential successor policy to the TITP. I suggest that thinking of the SSW as a TLPA is helpful in approaching even this national-level policy from a perspective that de-centers the state, allowing for greater insights into the challenges and potentials of the policy. At the same time, this case is a useful theory-building tool to expand upon and illustrate notions central to the TLPA concept, of which I focus on a few: 1) building upon Balibar’s notion of the *polysemy* of borders, I propose attention towards an ongoing reorientation away from restrictions to ‘positive’ borders offers incentives such as longer contracts or even permanent residency conditional upon meeting increasingly complex and often obscure sets of requirements such as positive evaluations and examinations, 2) blocked pathways as a result of mismatches between

documentary categories between agencies, which also reveals the tenuous process through which TLPAs have to be ‘made to cohere’ (Li 2007, 264), and 3) the increasing *translocality* of connections between agents to support ‘skilling’ and credentialing programs, which bestow the formal qualifications and certifications needed for bureaucratic logics to differentiate between generic ‘labor migrants’ and suitable SSW and TITP workers.

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