

From Labor Shortage to Skill Challenges in the Age of Mobility: The Case of the Japanese Construction Industry

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ABSTRACT:

Since the 2000s, Japan has suffered from a population decline which has brought about a sense of crisis regarding future labor shortages, particularly in the construction industry. Launching an urgent guest worker program in 2015, the construction industry is one of the sectors prioritized in the 2018 revised Immigration Control Act to increase the number of foreign workers. In this presentation, I will explain how the structure of the construction industry has changed in response to new migration policies and how labor restructuring has occurred in the Japanese construction industry, with an emphasis on skill development. Firstly, I will explain the structural conditions of the industry that led to the labor shortage by highlighting the pre-modern nature of industrial relations in the Japanese construction industry. Secondly, I argue that current national development policies—such as those concerning the 2020 Tokyo Olympics—ostensibly promote a temporary migration system, while establishing a long-term transnational recruitment and skill formation system abroad. Thirdly, I will discuss the nature of the transnational labor market in relation to the construction sector. Finally, I assert that there is a gap between the logic for determining migration policy and the industrial restructuring process and point out the inconsistencies of labor policies as well as policies for skills development.