

RESEARCH ARTICLE

International population mobility and linguistic capital formation: Comparative evidence on transnational migration decisions in China and Japan

Yumi Yoshida*

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba-shi, Chiba, Japan

Abstract

East Asia faces divergent demographic challenges: Japan confronts acute population aging with an old-age dependency ratio exceeding 50%, while China experiences accelerating labor force contraction. International population mobility serves as a key mechanism for cross-border demographic redistribution. Pre-migration linguistic capital formation, shaped through differentiated language education, influences the selectivity and composition of bilateral flows. This study provides a carefully executed descriptive, pathway-based comparison of how distinct migration pathways are associated with divergent patterns of migrant selectivity, demographic composition, and settlement outcomes between China and Japan. Integrating bilateral migration statistics (2019–2025) and qualitative narratives, the research analyzes two pathways: education-led migration (academic track) and Japan's Specified Skilled Worker program (vocational track). These pathways generate systematically differentiated populations. Academic-track migrants are younger (mean age 19.8), predominantly female (55.2%), and exhibit a high propensity to settle (68.4% five-year retention). Vocational-track migrants are older (mean age 26.8), predominantly male (71.8%), and display circular migration patterns (48.7% return within three years). Linguistic capital accumulated pre-migration functions as an institutional gatekeeping mechanism contributing to these demographic differences. Through this interpretive framework, the study illustrates how migration pathway design shapes the demographic and settlement trajectories of international migrants, highlighting the importance of institutionally embedded linguistic capital formation for demographic sustainability in aging East Asian societies.

***Corresponding author:**Yumi Yoshida
(3235159@kuis.ac.jp)

Citation: Yoshida, Y. (2026). International population mobility and linguistic capital formation: Comparative evidence on transnational migration decisions in China and Japan. *International Journal of Population Studies*. 12(5):026070031.
<https://doi.org/10.36922/IJPS026070031>

Received: February 11, 2026**Revised:** April 14, 2026**Accepted:** April 20, 2026**Published online:** June 9, 2026

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, permitting distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Publisher's Note: AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Keywords: International population mobility; Linguistic capital formation; Migration selectivity; China–Japan migration; Demographic outcomes

1. Introduction

The demographic landscape of East Asia is undergoing a profound structural transformation. Japan's total fertility rate has persisted below 1.3 since 2020, while its old-age dependency ratio is projected to exceed 50% by 2030 (López Blanco, 2025). Concurrently, China is experiencing an accelerating demographic transition, with its working-age population (aged 15–64) declining by approximately four million annually

since 2022 (Lim, 2024; Tsegay, 2023). Within this context, international population mobility has emerged as a critical mechanism for cross-border human capital redistribution, reshaping the demographic balance between labor-surplus and labor-deficient societies (Bello, 2023; Zhao *et al.*, 2023). However, existing migration demography has predominantly focused on economic determinants, wage differentials, and employment opportunities, while underestimating the role of pre-migration institutional factors in shaping the volume, selectivity, and demographic composition of population flows (Adger *et al.*, 2024).

Embedded within state migration systems, the process of differentiated linguistic capital formation merits particular attention. Language proficiency requirements function as entry thresholds that filter prospective migrants, while differentiated language education pathways channel individuals toward distinct migration trajectories (Peltokorpi & Xie, 2025). The process of acquiring destination-country language competence prior to departure represents a critical phase in which future migrant populations are demographically pre-sorted, by age, socioeconomic background, and regional origin, before crossing national boundaries (Ovchinnikova *et al.*, 2023). In this sense, pre-migration linguistic preparation operates not merely as a personal asset, but as an institutional gatekeeping technology.

To clarify the conceptual boundaries of this study, we draw on Bourdieusian terminology and operationalize it in the migration context. In this paper, “linguistic capital” is not treated as a monolithic concept but is analyzed through three distinct dimensions: institutionalized certification, functional competence, and positional advantage (Bourdieu, 2011). In practice, state migration regimes operationalize linguistic capital primarily through institutionalized certification and the temporal investment (preparation time) required to attain it. These dimensions vary starkly across the two migration regimes examined here. The academic track demands high levels of institutionalized certification and extended temporal investment, which translates into substantial positional advantage (access to higher education, professional employment, and permanent settlement). Conversely, the vocational track (the Specified Skilled Worker [SSW] program) requires minimal institutionalized certification, focusing instead on basic functional competence sufficient for manual labor. Consequently, it yields only a limited positional advantage, funneling migrants into secondary-sector jobs and resulting in circular migration outcomes.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon three streams of scholarship. At the macro level, classical migration theories, from Ravenstein’s laws to Lee’s push–

pull model, conceptualize population movement as a response to spatial inequalities in economic opportunity (Xu, 2024). Zelinsky’s mobility transition theory further posits that migration patterns evolve alongside demographic and economic development stages (Bai *et al.*, 2024). At the meso level, recent scholarship has recognized that language-based entry requirements serve as selection mechanisms that shape the demographic composition of migrants (Tan, Li, *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, the role of language requirements as filters for migrant selection, as well as the fundamental demographic differences between student migrants and labor migrants, are already well documented in the literature. However, a critical gap persists: existing research predominantly treats language proficiency as an individual-level human capital variable or a post-migration integration tool, often viewing language requirements as static barriers (Bilecen, 2024; Tan, Lo, *et al.*, 2024). This paper explicitly advances our understanding beyond what is already known by shifting the analytical focus to the pre-migration institutional level. Using the highly institutionalized China–Japan corridor as a comparative case, we demonstrate how this demographic and occupational segmentation is structurally pre-determined in the country of origin through dynamic, state-embedded linguistic capital formation pathways. By framing linguistic preparation as a gatekeeping technology rather than merely a personal asset, this reframing explains how state migration regimes actively construct differentiated populations before they even cross borders.

This study addresses this gap by examining the Sino–Japanese migration corridor, a demographically significant bilateral exchange characterized by asymmetric population dynamics. As of 2025, Chinese nationals constitute Japan’s largest foreign-born population at approximately 820,000 residents, contributing substantially to labor force replenishment in an aging society (Li, Lo, Lu, Tan, *et al.*, 2023; Wong & Guo, 2023). This population is internally differentiated by migration pathway: education-led migrants (younger, higher female proportion, long-term settlement orientation) versus labor-led migrants (older, higher male proportion, circular migration pattern) (Xu *et al.*, 2023). These demographic distinctions are rooted in differentiated processes of linguistic capital formation that occur prior to departure, with significant implications for Japan’s population sustainability and China’s human capital outflows (Barnett & Nam, 2024; Sprenger, 2024).

Instead of establishing definitive causal mechanisms, this study develops an interpretive framework proposing that language education is associated with transnational migration trajectories through three interconnected processes. Building upon and departing from existing

literature, we conceptualize these processes as follows: (i) a selection process, where language proficiency thresholds filter potential migrants by age, socioeconomic background, and regional origin. While prior work acknowledges language as a filter (Ovchinnikova *et al.*, 2023), we advance this by showing how the temporal and financial costs of language acquisition act as institutional gatekeepers that stratify migrants during the preparation phase; (ii) a channeling process, where differentiated language requirements direct individuals toward distinct pathways (education mobility versus employment mobility). Although existing literature often explains dual pathways through administrative visa categories (Tan, Li, *et al.*, 2023), we demonstrate that they are actively pre-structured by origin-country language entry thresholds; and (iii) an outcome process, where accumulated linguistic capital helps shape post-migration settlement intentions and demographic contributions. Moving beyond the familiar conclusion that better language skills lead to better integration outcomes (López Blanco, 2025), this study reinterprets the outcome process through an institutional lens, illustrating how long-term demographic trajectories are largely pre-determined by the initial linguistic pathway. These processes collectively offer plausible explanations for how language education contributes to the systematic differentiation of migrant populations.

The primary objective of this case study is to provide a carefully executed descriptive, pathway-based comparison of how migration pathway differentiation, structured through divergent language education systems, is associated with distinct patterns of migrant selectivity, demographic composition, and incorporation outcomes. Specifically, the study examines three key dimensions of this phenomenon:

- Observation 1: Migration pathway type, structured through differentiated linguistic capital formation processes, is strongly associated with the distinct demographic profiles of migrant populations, including age structure, sex ratio, and socioeconomic origin.
- Observation 2: Accumulated linguistic capital levels are closely associated with post-migration settlement patterns, including retention rates, occupational mobility, and family formation.
- Observation 3: Institutionalized language requirements exert a “selection effect” on population flows, stratifying migrants by socioeconomic background and contributing to divergent long-term demographic outcomes.

Employing a comparative case study methodology, this research synthesizes bilateral migration statistics from

Chinese and Japanese government sources (2019–2025), demographic profile data, and qualitative narratives collected from social media platforms. The study enriches the existing migration demography literature by demonstrating that linguistic capital formation serves as a critical pre-migration institutional process that shapes the demographic selectivity and settlement trajectories of international migrant populations. The findings offer policy implications for both sending and receiving societies seeking to optimize demographic returns from international population mobility.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Data sources

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative migration and demographic statistics with qualitative institutional and narrative analysis. Data were drawn from multiple sources spanning the period 2019–2025 to capture contemporary trends in China–Japan population mobility.

Quantitative data on bilateral migration flows and migrant demographic profiles were compiled from official government statistics. For the Japanese context, the primary sources included the Immigration Services Agency of Japan’s Statistics on Foreign Residents, which provided annual counts of Chinese nationals disaggregated by visa category, age cohort, sex, and residence status (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024). The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s Report on the Employment Situation of Foreign Workers provided data on the occupational distribution across industry sectors (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025). The Ministry of Justice’s residence status transition records provided indicators of settlement patterns, including rates of permanent residency acquisition and visa category changes.

In the Chinese context, data were sourced from the Ministry of Education’s annual reports on Chinese students studying abroad, disaggregated by destination country (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2024). Provincial-level enrollment statistics provided origin-region distribution data. Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) registration and pass-rate statistics were utilized as proxy indicators of linguistic capital accumulation across the two pathways (Maniglio, 2023).

Qualitative data comprised two components. First, institutional policy documents, including Japan’s Basic Plan for Immigration Control and the 2019 amendments to SSW, were collected from both governments. Second, migration narratives were extracted from Chinese social

media platforms (Xiaohongshu, Zhihu). To capture these subjective encounters, we employed a purposive sampling strategy. We conducted keyword searches and selected 120 posts (2023–2025) in which individuals explicitly detailed their language-preparation costs, track selection, and future plans. These posts were coded for thematic analysis focusing on migration decision-making processes, settlement intentions, and demographic considerations. As noted, the qualitative component was intended primarily to serve as a complementary illustration rather than a standalone analytical proof. While quantitative statistics established macro-structural patterns, these narratives analytically revealed the subjective experiences of navigating institutional barriers. Recognizing inherent social media biases, we did not treat these narratives as demographically representative. Instead, they were triangulated with official statistics to reveal the micro-level mechanisms of how migrants internally rationalized their linguistic investments under different track constraints.

2.2. Construction of descriptive indicators and data comparability

To ensure empirical transparency, it is necessary to clarify how the precise descriptive estimates presented in the results and tables were constructed across multiple sources. First, basic demographic indicators were extracted directly from the cross-tabulated Statistics on Foreign Residents from Japan's Immigration Services Agency. Second, longitudinal settlement indicators, such as the 68.4% five-year retention rate for academic migrants and the 48.7% return rate for vocational migrants, were calculated from Japan's Ministry of Justice residence-status transition records. Specifically, "retention" was operationalized by tracking the percentage of initial entry cohorts who renewed their visas or transitioned to long-term employment/permanent residency within a 3–5-year window. Third, estimates regarding the financial costs and temporal investments of pre-migration linguistic preparation were synthesized from Chinese Ministry of Education reports and language institute market data, and subsequently triangulated with self-reported expenditures from our qualitative social media sample.

To address comparability between bilateral data, we harmonized Chinese outflow and Japanese inflow statistics by strictly aligning administrative categories. The "academic track" aligns Japan's "Student" (*Ryūgaku*) visa category with China's "Study Abroad" records, while the "vocational track" aligns Japan's "Specified Skilled Worker" (*Tokutei Ginō*) category with China's corresponding labor export data. Minor discrepancies in annual reporting cycles were standardized to the calendar year to ensure accurate cross-source comparisons. This data integration

strategy ensures that the descriptive indicators robustly reflect the demographic realities across both regimes.

2.3. Case selection and comparative design

The study adopted a comparative case study design, examining two distinct migration pathways representing the primary channels of China–Japan population movement. These pathways were selected because they exhibited contrasting processes of linguistic capital formation and produced demographically differentiated migrant populations (Hayashi, 2026).

Case A (academic-track migration): This pathway comprised Chinese students pursuing higher education in Japan following extended domestic language preparation. The linguistic capital formation process spanned 2–3 years and targeted advanced proficiency (JLPT N2/N1). Demographically, this cohort was characterized by a younger age at migration (mean 19.8 years), near gender parity with a slight female predominance (55.2%), and predominantly urban middle-class origins in coastal provinces. The pathway was associated with long-term settlement intentions.

Case B (vocational-track migration): This pathway encompassed labor migrants entering through the SSW program. The linguistic capital formation process was compressed to 6–12 months, targeting functional proficiency (JLPT N4/N3). Demographically, this cohort exhibited older age at migration (mean 26.8 years), pronounced male predominance (71.8%), and disproportionate origins from lower-income inland provinces. The pathway was associated with circular migration intentions. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile and pathway characteristics.

2.4. Analytical framework

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, as a descriptive study, the demographic trend analysis identified temporal patterns in migration flows disaggregated through visa category, age cohort, and sex composition, revealing structural shifts in both the scale and demographic profile of China–Japan mobility over time (Higuchi, 2025). Second, selectivity analysis examined how linguistic capital formation processes operated as population-selection mechanisms, comparing the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of migrants entering through each pathway and assessing how educational trajectories shaped migrant composition. Third, outcome analysis examined post-migration demographic patterns, including occupational distribution, retention rates, family formation, and return migration, thereby capturing longer-term settlement trajectories and mobility outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2025).

Table 1. Demographic profile and linguistic capital formation by migration pathway (2019–2025)

Dimension	Academic track	Vocational track
Migration flow		
Estimated annual flow	80,000–120,000	50,000–70,000
Primary source regions	Coastal (Shandong, Liaoning, Jiangsu)	Inland (Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan)
Demographic profile		
Mean age at migration	19.8 years	26.8 years
Age range (80% of cohort)	18–23 years	23–38 years
Sex ratio (male:female)	45:55	72:28
Marital status (% single)	97.5%	58.3%
Socioeconomic selectivity		
Urban hukou origin (%)	76.8%	34.2%
Parental education (% college+)	62.4%	18.7%
Pre-migration investment (CNY)	80,000–150,000	20,000–45,000
Pathway characteristics		
Linguistic capital formation duration	24–36 months	6–12 months
Skill threshold (JLPT)	N2/N1	N4/N3
Intended stay > 5 years (%)	74.2%	35.8%

Source: Compiled from Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Education of China, JLPT registration data, and the qualitative social media sample (2019–2025).

Abbreviation: JLPT: Japanese-Language Proficiency Test.

Unlike studies based on predictive modeling, this analytical framework prioritized the descriptive mapping of demographic trends and selection effects within the specific China–Japan context. This design enabled triangulation between macro-level population statistics, meso-level selection mechanisms rooted in linguistic capital formation, and micro-level migration decision-making processes, providing a more comprehensive framework for interpreting the demographic dynamics of China–Japan migration.

3. Results

This section presents the empirical findings in three sections: macro-level trends in bilateral population mobility and demographic composition, comparative analysis of pathway-specific selectivity structured through linguistic capital formation, and post-migration demographic outcomes.

3.1. Macro-level trends in China–Japan population mobility

Analysis of bilateral migration statistics revealed substantial structural shifts in both the volume and demographic composition of Chinese nationals residing in Japan over the 2019–2025 period. According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, the total registered

Chinese population increased from approximately 778,000 in 2020 to an estimated 823,000 by mid-2025, representing a compound annual growth rate of 1.1% (Mohsin, 2025). Although this overall increase appeared relatively modest, the aggregate figure concealed substantial internal compositional changes across migration categories, age groups, and regional origins.

Figure 1 illustrates the divergent trajectories of the two primary migration pathways. The academic-track migration flow experienced a sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), dropping from 124,000 new enrollments in 2019 to 38,000 in 2021, before gradually recovering to 95,000 by 2024. This contraction reflected not only border restrictions and institutional disruptions but also the temporary suspension of educational mobility as a key channel of cross-border movement. In contrast, the vocational-track migration flow under the SSW program expanded continuously, rising from 3,200 Chinese nationals in 2020 to an estimated 58,000 by 2025. This pattern indicates the growing institutional importance of labor-migration channels in Japan's response to sector-specific labor shortages.

Geographic origin analysis revealed further differentiation between the two pathways. Academic-track migrants predominantly originated from coastal provinces,

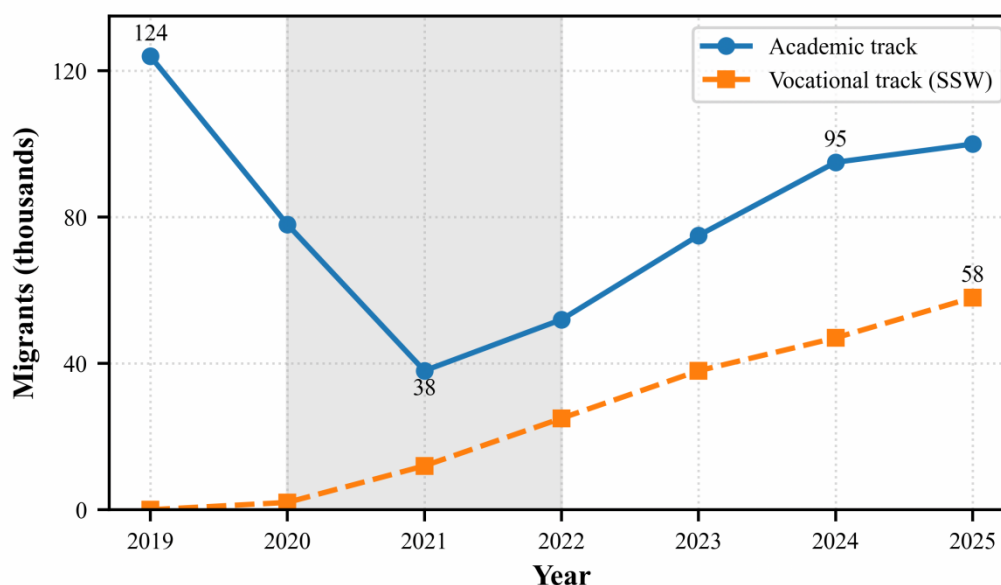


Figure 1. Trends in Chinese migration to Japan by pathway (2019–2025)
Abbreviation: SSW: Specified Skilled Worker.

especially Shandong (18% of Examination for Japanese University candidates), Liaoning (14%), and Jiangsu (11%). These regions generally possess stronger educational resources, greater household capacity to finance overseas study, and broader access to preparatory language training. In contrast, SSW migrants disproportionately originated from inland provinces; Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangxi collectively account for over 35% of SSW migrants, regions characterized by lower per-capita gross domestic product and more limited access to extended language education infrastructure (Foreman-Peck & Zhou, 2025). This contrast suggests that migration pathway design interacts closely with regional inequality in educational opportunity and linguistic capital formation.

The two pathways also produced markedly differentiated migrant populations. Age distribution analysis showed that academic-track migrants were concentrated in the 18–22 cohort (78.3%), with a mean age of 19.8 years, representing a distinctly youth-dominated flow. Vocational-track migrants displayed a broader age distribution, with the modal cohort aged 25–34 years (52.1%) and substantial representation in the 35–44 age group (23.4%), yielding a mean age of 26.8 years (Liu-Farrer, 2023). These differences indicate that the academic pathway is closely associated with the life-course transition into higher education, whereas the vocational pathway is more closely tied to labor-market entry and mid-early career mobility.

Sex composition diverged significantly across the two

pathways. The academic track showed a slight female predominance (55.2%), consistent with broader global patterns of female educational advantage in transnational study mobility. The vocational track, in contrast, exhibited pronounced male predominance (71.8%), reflecting the gendered structure of SSW-designated sectors, many of which were concentrated in physically demanding or industrial occupations.

Marital status further differentiated the two migrant populations. Academic-track migrants were overwhelmingly single (97.5%), reinforcing their concentration in an early life-course stage characterized by educational transition and limited household responsibilities. Vocational-track migrants showed greater heterogeneity: 58.3% were single, while 41.7% were married, often with spouses or children remaining in China (Yu & Xu, 2024). This pattern suggests that vocational migration is more frequently embedded in transnational household strategies, in which migration serves as a mechanism for income generation rather than immediate family relocation or permanent settlement.

3.2. Pathway-specific selectivity and linguistic capital formation

The two migration pathways served as population selection mechanisms, with linguistic capital formation processes operating as the key sorting variable. This section analyzes how differentiated language education structures produce

demographically stratified migrant cohorts, drawing on the pathway characteristics summarized in Table 1.

In terms of age and life-course selection, the two pathways targeted distinct life-course stages with divergent demographic implications. Academic-track linguistic capital formation commenced during senior high school (ages 15–17), capturing individuals at educational transitions. As Table 1 indicates, 80% of this cohort were aged 18–23, with a mean age at migration of 19.8 years. The extended 2–3-year investment in language acquisition selected for younger migrants characterized by high adaptability, extended residual working life, and orientation toward long-term destination-country integration. Vocational-track linguistic capital formation, compressed into 6–12 months, recruited individuals already established in the labor force. This cohort displayed a broader and older age distribution (80% aged 23–38 years, mean age 26.8), selecting migrants with shorter time horizons and, as the 58.3% single rate suggested, substantial proportions with established family obligations in China.

For socioeconomic selection, divergent investment requirements in linguistic capital formation produced socioeconomically stratified migrant pools. Academic-track preparation costs (CNY 80,000–150,000) effectively restricted access to middle-class urban families: 76.8% hold urban hukou, and 62.4% have college-educated parents (Li, Lo, & Lu, 2024). Vocational-track costs (CNY 20,000–45,000) were borne by lower-income populations with limited access to elite educational infrastructure: only 34.2% hold urban hukou, and merely 18.7% have college-educated parents (Shakuto, 2025). These differentiated processes of linguistic capital formation reproduced domestic socioeconomic stratification in the international migration arena.

In gendered selection, sex-ratio differentials across pathways reflected gendered structures in both educational access and destination-country labor demand. The academic track exhibited slight female predominance (55% female), consistent with women's higher educational attainment and aspirations for professional careers abroad. The vocational track showed pronounced male predominance (72% male), reflecting the gendered occupational composition of SSW-designated sectors, including construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. These gendered streams carried implications for family formation patterns and demographic composition of settled migrant communities (Kraly *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, in the context of language education and migration decision-making, qualitative narratives revealed how language education shaped individual migration decisions through two mechanisms (Karki, 2025). First,

threshold selection: language proficiency requirements determined eligibility for each pathway. Academic-track aspirants reported: “I invested two years in reaching N1 level because that was the minimum for my target university,” indicating that language ability directly determined migration feasibility. Second, pathway channeling: accumulated linguistic capital channeled individuals into differentiated mobility trajectories. Those with higher proficiency chose education-led migration: “My N1 opened the door to graduate school and a professional career in Japan.” Those with limited proficiency opted for labor-led migration: “I only needed N4, so I took that faster route to start earning.”

These decision patterns produced divergent demographic outcomes. Academic-track respondents articulated settlement orientations: “My Japanese ability allows me to imagine building a life here,” consistent with 74.2% intending long-term stay. Vocational-track respondents emphasized return intentions: “My limited Japanese means I will always be an outsider,” aligning with 48.7% return migration within three years.

3.3. Post-migration demographic outcomes

Analysis of post-migration outcomes revealed systematic differences in occupational attainment, settlement patterns, and demographic behavior between the two cohorts. Table 2 summarizes occupational distribution.

Table 2. Occupational distribution via migration pathway

Occupational category	Academic track	Vocational track
Professional/technical	42.3%	4.8%
Managerial	8.7%	0.6%
Clerical/administrative	23.1%	2.3%
Service sector	14.2%	38.7%
Manufacturing/construction	6.4%	41.2%
Nursing care	2.1%	9.8%

The data demonstrated pronounced occupational bifurcation. Academic-track migrants with higher linguistic capital were concentrated in professional and managerial positions (51.0% combined), while vocational-track migrants with limited linguistic capital were concentrated in service (38.7%) and manufacturing (41.2%) sectors. Table 3 presents post-migration demographic outcomes.

Settlement patterns revealed fundamental divergence. Academic-track migrants exhibited high retention (68.4%), substantial acquisition of permanent residency (24.3%), and meaningful family formation (18.7%), indicating long-

Table 3. Post-migration demographic outcomes via different pathways

Outcome indicator	Academic track	Vocational track
5-year retention rate	68.4%	32.6%
Permanent residency (%)	24.3%	6.8%
Family formation in Japan (%)	18.7%	8.2%
Marriage to a Japanese resident (%)	12.4%	4.1%
Return migration < 3 years (%)	14.2%	48.7%
Regular remittance (%)	34.5%	78.3%

term demographic presence. Vocational-track migrants displayed lower retention (32.6%), minimal permanent settlement (6.8%), and high return rates (48.7%), indicating circular migration with limited demographic contribution to the destination society.

Narrative analysis showed the subjective dimensions. Academic-track migrants expressed settlement aspirations linked to their linguistic capital: “My Japanese ability allows me to imagine a future here, career, family, everything.” Vocational-track migrants emphasized temporality: “I will work three to five years, save money, then return to my family in China.”

4. Discussion

This section interprets the findings within migration theory and population studies, discussing the analytical utility of this interpretive framework in understanding pathway-specific selectivity and the role of linguistic capital formation in shaping demographic outcomes.

4.1. Theoretical implications: Revisiting classical migration frameworks

While the familiar conclusion that “better language skills lead to better migration outcomes” is well established, this study advances migration literature by explicitly demonstrating the institutional logic behind this phenomenon. The findings necessitate a critical reassessment of classical migration theories that have traditionally prioritized economic variables.

Neoclassical migration theory posits that population movements are driven by wage differentials and cost-benefit calculations. While it provides a baseline explanation of the general direction of China–Japan flows, this framework is less equipped to account for internal differentiation. The results demonstrate that individuals with comparable economic motivations experience divergent demographic outcomes: one achieving professional employment and settlement, the

other confined to temporary labor, depending on their pre-migration linguistic capital formation pathway (Massey, 2023). Aligned with institutionalist migration theory and Bourdieusian capital frameworks, the result suggests that linguistic capital accumulation functions as an intervening variable mediating the translation of economic motivation into differentiated demographic trajectories.

Dual labor market theory provides a useful framework for interpreting occupational bifurcation. The results align with this framework by showing that levels of linguistic capital operate as sorting mechanisms associated not only with sector placement but also settlement trajectories (Shi, 2024). Academic-track migrants with higher linguistic capital gain primary-sector employment with greater retention and settlement (Zhang & Wang, 2024). Vocational-track migrants with limited linguistic capital are channeled into secondary-sector positions, resulting in circular migration patterns. Moving beyond the familiar conclusion that “better language skills lead to better jobs,” the findings highlight that segmentation is institutionally pre-determined through differentiated structures of linguistic capital formation in the origin country (Turnbull, 2026). Framing linguistic preparation not merely as a personal asset, but as a gatekeeping technology embedded in state migration systems provides a more nuanced understanding of this segmentation.

Mobility transition theory contextualizes these flows within demographic development patterns. Japan, as a post-transitional aging society, has shifted toward immigration-dependent labor force replenishment. However, the current emphasis on vocational-track expansion is associated with migrant populations with limited linguistic capital and corresponding limited settlement propensity, providing labor without demographic replenishment. Academic-track migration, characterized by deeper linguistic capital formation, correlates with younger migrants with higher settlement potential but remains numerically constrained (Ortiga, 2023).

4.2. Linguistic capital as an institutional gatekeeper in migration selection

The findings, within our interpretive framework, illustrate how linguistic capital formation operates as a process contributing to systematic population selectivity with cumulative demographic consequences.

In age and life-course selection, the temporal structure of linguistic capital formation is strongly associated with migrant age profiles. Extended academic-track preparation (2–3 years) typically captures individuals at ages 18–22, a window of high adaptability translating into higher retention (68.4%) and family formation (18.7%). Compressed vocational-track preparation (6–12 months) primarily recruits individuals from ages 25–38, with established obligations exhibiting circular migration (48.7% return). Japan's emphasis on vocational-track expansion thus provides labor supply but limited demographic contribution.

In terms of socioeconomic selection, the cost structure of linguistic capital formation contributes to a stratified migrant pool, reproducing domestic inequalities internationally (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2025). Academic-track access (CNY 80,000–150,000) is restricted to middle-class urban families achieving favorable outcomes. Vocational-track entry (CNY 20,000–45,000) from lower-income populations channeled into temporary migration. Linguistic capital thus functions as a stratifying institutional gatekeeper: those with greater pre-migration investment in institutionalized certification achieve greater positional advantage (long-term settlement and upward mobility), while those with limited investment, equipped primarily with basic functional competence for manual labor, are confined to circular labor migration.

Lastly, in sex-ratio differentiation, the female-majority academic track (55.2%) versus the male-majority vocational track (71.8%) reflects gendered access to opportunities for linguistic capital formation and gendered destination-country labor demand. These patterns help shape the demographic composition of settled migrant communities.

4.3. Implications for demographic policy

For Japan, the current study highlights that while the SSW program effectively alleviates immediate labor shortages, it creates a “revolving door” of migration. These migrants are characterized by limited linguistic capital and circular intentions, providing short-term labor without substantial demographic replenishment (Yang, 2025). From the perspective of demographic sustainability, Japan's policy requires recalibration to: (i) prioritize the academic-track as a stable channel for long-term demographic incorporation;

(ii) subsidize post-arrival linguistic development for vocational migrants to enhance retention; and (iii) lower institutional barriers to family accompaniment to foster settlement propensity.

For China, the findings suggest that favorable migration outcomes are disproportionately accessible to the urban middle class, who have the resources to pursue extended linguistic capital formation. This observation indicates that the benefits of migration are becoming increasingly stratified through pre-migration institutional requirements. To address this, policy attention should focus on: (i) democratizing access to quality language education to narrow the transnational opportunity gap; (ii) monitoring the demographic selectivity of outflows to mitigate regional brain drain; and (iii) creating frameworks to leverage return migration for the development of less-privileged inland provinces.

5. Conclusion

The current study has offered a carefully executed descriptive examination of the demographic dimensions of international population mobility between China and Japan, with particular attention to how linguistic capital formation shapes migrant selectivity and settlement outcomes. By comparing academic-track and vocational-track migration pathways, the study demonstrates that differentiated language education structures function as institutional gatekeeping technologies, contributing to demographically distinct migrant streams with divergent long-term trajectories and uneven contributions to demographic sustainability.

Three principal findings emerge. First, the type of migration pathway, structured by differentiated processes of linguistic capital formation, distinctly characterizes migrant demographic profiles (Observation 1). Academic-track migration, requiring extended language investment, selects younger, more female, and more urban-origin migrants with stronger settlement orientations. Vocational-track migration, requiring minimal linguistic capital, selects older, more male, and more rural-origin populations with more circular intentions. Second, levels of linguistic capital are closely associated with post-migration demographic outcomes (Observation 2). Higher linguistic capital (academic track) is associated with greater retention (68.4%), permanent residency (24.3%), and family formation (18.7%). Lower linguistic capital (vocational track) is associated with pronounced return migration (48.7%) and more limited settlement prospects. Third, institutionalized language requirements exert selection effects on population flows (Observation 3), stratifying migrants by socioeconomic background and

contributing to divergent demographic outcomes in the destination society over time.

These findings contribute to migration demography by illustrating, through this interpretive framework, how linguistic capital formation functions as a critical pre-migration institutional process shaping migrant selectivity. Differentiated investment in language acquisition prior to departure pre-sorts populations by age, class, and gender, with consequences that persist through settlement and integration phases. This qualitative and descriptive insight extends classical migration frameworks by framing linguistic preparation not merely as a personal asset, but as a gatekeeping technology embedded in state migration systems that translates individual migration decisions into demographically patterned population flows.

There are limitations in the current study, including reliance on aggregate statistics, which constrains individual-level inference, and a qualitative sample with limited representativeness. Specifically, narratives sourced from social media platforms carry inherent selection and self-presentation biases; their analytical role here is to illuminate subjective institutional experiences rather than establish causal proofs. Crucially, lacking individual-level longitudinal data or multivariate analysis, this descriptive study cannot fully disentangle the isolated effect of pre-migration linguistic preparation from other pathway-specific variables, such as visa regulations, contractual constraints, or life-course timing. Rather than claiming strict causality, this study treats linguistic capital as a core component of an interconnected institutional bundle that collectively structures migration trajectories. Furthermore, given that the China–Japan corridor is highly institutionalized and linguistically bounded, the specific mechanisms observed may manifest differently in less regulated migration regimes. Nevertheless, the interpretive framework developed here holds broader analytical value for other managed migration systems. Specifically, it can be fruitfully applied to analyze other linguistically structured corridors, such as care-worker migration from Southeast Asia to East Asia or skilled-labor migration to European countries, where language certification similarly functions as a structural filter pre-sorting migrants and shaping their settlement trajectories. Future research should employ longitudinal designs that track migrants from linguistic capital formation through settlement to precisely capture dynamic relationships among language acquisition, migration decisions, and demographic outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important policy insights. For aging destination societies such as Japan, international population mobility can help address labor shortages, but demographic sustainability requires

greater attention to the institutionally embedded processes of linguistic capital formation that shape both migration selection and long-term settlement outcomes. Therefore, optimizing demographic returns necessitates policies that support extended access to language education, post-arrival linguistic development, and pathways from temporary labor migration to permanent settlement. Effective management of population mobility requires recognizing that language education systems serve as critical institutional gatekeeping mechanisms that shape the demographic characteristics, age structure, settlement propensity, and family-formation potential of international migrant populations.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study is based on publicly available secondary data and anonymized social media posts.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

The datasets analyzed in the current study are available from publicly accessible sources, including the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/policies/statistics/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html), the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (https://hudong.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/xxgk/neirong/tongji/jytj_lxsj/), and JLPT statistics (<https://www.jlpt.jp/e/statistics/archive.html>).

References

- Adger, W. N., Fransen, S., Safra de Campos, R., & Clark, W. C. (2024). Migration and sustainable development. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(3), e2206193121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2206193121>
- Bai, Q., Nam, B. H., & English, A. S. (2024). Acculturation and linguistic ideology in the context of global student mobility:

- A cross-cultural ethnography of anglophone international students in China. *Educational Review*, 76(6), 1620-1647.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2285253>
- Barnett, G. A., & Nam, Y. (2024). A network analysis of international migration: Longitudinal trends and antecedent factors predicting migration. *Global Networks*, 24(2), e12455.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12455>
- Bello, V. (2023). Introduction—The Spiralling of the Securitisation of Migration in the EU: From the Management of a ‘Crisis’ to a Governance of Human Mobility? In *The Spiralling of the Securitisation of Migration in the European Union* (pp. 1-18). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003366782-1>
- Bilecen, B. (2024). Linguistic capital and social inequalities: Experiences of international Chinese students in Germany. *Population, Space and Place*, 30(1), e2725.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2725>
- Bourdieu, P. (2011). The forms of capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (1986) (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.
- Foreman-Peck, J., & Zhou, P. (2025). Migration and the National Economy. In *Applied Economics in Globalised Economies: Problems and Policies* (pp. 305-329). Springer Science and Business Media LLC.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-85621-1_11
- Hayashi, R. (2026). Migration: The Most Effective Population Policy? In *Demographic Change and Policy Responses: The Case of Japan* (pp. 45-67). Springer Science and Business Media LLC.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0460-6_3
- Higuchi, N. (2025). Migration Ethics in East Asia. In *Handbook of Migration Ethics* (pp. 33-48). Springer Science and Business Media LLC.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-89877-8_3
- Immigration Services Agency of Japan. (2024). *Statistics on foreign residents*. Ministry of Justice. Available from: https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/policies/statistics/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html [Last accessed on March 11, 2026].
- Karki, S. (2025). Nepali Students In Japanese Language Schools: Investigating Motivations And Experiences Of Educational Mobility. *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, 63-76.
<https://doi.org/10.14425/jice.2025.14.2.0913>
- Kim, B. C., LL, L., Do, N. H., & Lee, S. H. (2025). Declining fertility rates and stratified reproduction among women in East Asia: what can we learn from the cases of China, Japan and South Korea? *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2025.2600310>
- Kraly, E. P., Menjívar, C., & E. Reed, H. (2024). International migration review at 60: Evolving and emerging models of international migration research. *International Migration Review*, 58(4), 1619-1644.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183241274751>
- Li, W., Lo, L., & Lu, Y. (2024). Introduction: The intellectual migration analytics. In *Intellectual Migration* (pp. 1-21). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003532934-1>
- Li, W., Lo, L., Lu, Y., Tan, Y., & Lu, Z. (2023). Intellectual migration: considering China. In *New Theoretical Dialogues on Migration in China* (pp. 149-169). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003364054-9>
- Lim, L. (2024). Defining migrants: Invisibilities, im/mobilities, integration. *AILA Review*, 37(1), 10-34.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.24007.lim>
- Liu-Farrer, G. (2023). The logics of staying for highly skilled Asian migrants in Japan. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 32(1), 105-128.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01171968231168137>
- López Blanco, J. D. (2025). Do languages open doors? A theoretical model of linguistic capital and (im) mobility and its application in Spanish youth migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(3), 565-582.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2024.2359676>
- Maniglio, F. (2023). Migration in knowledge aging societies. Differentiating labor force and discriminating people. *Critique*, 51(1), 37-49.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2023.2238447>
- Massey, D. S. (2023). The shape of things to come: international migration in the twenty-first century. In *Migration and integration in a post-pandemic world: Socioeconomic opportunities and challenges* (pp. 29-81). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19153-4_2
- Minbaeva, D., Narula, R., Phene, A., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2025). Beyond global mobility: how human capital shapes the MNE in the 21st century. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 56(2), 136-150.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-024-00755-x>
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2024). Statistical report on Chinese students studying abroad. Available from: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/ [Last accessed on March 11, 2026].
- Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. (2025). *Summary of the Notification Status of Foreign Employment as of the End of October 2024*. Available from: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_50256.html [Last accessed on March 11, 2026].

- Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services Agency of Japan. (2024). *Statistics on foreign residents in Japan*. [Last accessed on March 11, 2026]. <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/policies/statistics/>
- Mohsin, L. (2025). Uncharted Frontiers: Migration, Diasporas, and Security in East Asia. In *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia* (pp. 1-19). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8001-7_20-1
- Ortiga, Y. Y. (2023). Student mobility, employability, and unlikely education destinations in Asia. In *International Handbook on Education Development in the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 907-921). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2327-1_65-1
- Ovchinnikova, E., Mol, C. V., & Jones, E. (2023). The role of language proximity in shaping international student mobility flows. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 21(4), 563-574.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2070132>
- Peltokorpi, V., & Xie, J. (2025). When little things make a big difference: A Bourdieusian perspective on skilled migrants' linguistic, social, and economic capital in multinational corporations. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 56(2), 203-229.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-023-00598-y>
- Shakuto, S. (2025). From aspiration to crisis management: rethinking education migration with Japanese migrants in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2025.2594863>
- Shi, T. (2024). Translocating trajectories, transnational mobilities: The cross-border migration and livelihoods of hmong in the tri-state area between China, Vietnam, and Laos. *China Perspectives*, (138), 21-31.
<https://doi.org/10.4000/12fwf>
- Sprenger, E. (2024). What makes us move, what makes us stay: the role of language and culture in intra-EU mobility. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 25(4), 1825-1855.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3953129>
- Tan, Y., Li, W., & Tsuda, T. (2023). Cross-border im/mobility of skilled migrants from the US to China: a capital-mobility framework. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(13), 3327-3347.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2022.2075839>
- Tan, Y., Lo, L., Li, W., & Pang, G. (2024). Intellectual capital and student mobility. In *Intellectual Migration* (pp. 65-85). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003532934-4>
- Tsegay, S. M. (2023). International migration: Definition, causes and effects. *Genealogy*, 7(3), 61.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7030061>
- Turnbull, C. (2026). Migration literacy and commercial intermediaries: the debt financed labour migrations of Chinese working-class tradesmen in boomtime Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2026.2630306>
- Wong, L. L., & Guo, S. (2023). Brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation: emerging trends and patterns of Chinese transnational talent mobility. *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 19(1), 1-33.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/17932548-12341477>
- Xu, W. (2024). International students' linguistic entrepreneurship: motivation, 'Chinese fever' and the neoliberal burden. *Research Papers in Education*, 39(6), 918-935.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2023.2248613>
- Xu, W., Stahl, G., & Cheng, H. (2023). The promise of Chinese: African international students and linguistic capital in Chinese higher education. *Language and Education*, 37(4), 516-528.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2022.2074797>
- Yang, W. (2025). From "disposable labour" to "desirable citizen": Chinese migrant worker-turned-marriage migrants negotiating citizenship pathways in Singapore. In *Migration and Citizenship pathways in/beyond Asia* (pp. 141-158). Informa UK Limited.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003662471-9>
- Yu, W., & Xu, W. (2024). Language ideologies and linguistic entrepreneurship in inter-Asian mobility: Voices from international students at Chinese universities. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 25(2), 193-211.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2023.2240483>
- Zhang, Q., & Wang, X. (2024). The globalization-migration nexus across China's internal and international human movements. *Handbook of Migration and Globalisation*, 215-233.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800887657.00023>
- Zhao, X., Akbaritabar, A., Kashyap, R., & Zagheni, E. (2023). A gender perspective on the global migration of scholars. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(10), e2214664120.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2214664120>