



Being Part of Transformation from “Old Japan” to “New Japan”? White-Collar migrants in Corporate Japan



01 November 2023, 14:15 pm - 15:45 pm

Zurichbergstrasse 4, CH-8032 Zürich (Room 314)

Guest Lecture by Prof. Yen-Fen Tseng

Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University

In response to recent shifts in the global economy, the Japanese business sector has applied pressure on the government to relax immigration policies, facilitating the admission of more skilled white-collar foreign workers. These immigration reforms are considered pivotal in Corporate Japan's pursuit to internationalize their talent pool, signifying a potential shift away from the insular approach of a traditional "Old Japan," to a more progressive "New Japan" that values diversity and embraces foreign practices. Japan's current skilled migration program is deeply ingrained in the country's corporate personnel practices, reflecting an institutional alignment that prioritizes the hiring of new graduates. This alignment has significantly contributed to Japan's ability to attract a substantial number of foreign college-educated workers in a relatively short span. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Japan's skilled migration policy in attracting educated foreigners does not necessarily translate into their long-term retention, mainly due to the distinctiveness of Japan's employment practices.

This lecture focuses on the employment system as a pivotal factor in understanding the migration experiences of skilled foreign workers. Drawing from my research on Taiwanese white-collar migrant workers in Japan (2016-2018), this presentation unveils findings concerning their encounters within Japanese workplaces and how these experiences influence their adaptation outcomes and settlement decisions. The migrants in my study hold regular positions in career-track roles within large and reputable firms. However, they encounter limited opportunities to enhance their core skills within the Japanese corporate environment. Many of them do not aspire to develop firm-specific skills or pursue in-house careers, as typically offered by the Japanese-style employment system, and hence plan to leave Japan in the near future. This lecture will delve into several implications of these findings. Firstly, as many foreign workers envision significantly different prospects for skill development and career advancement compared to the traditional pathways, to retain them, it is crucial to design different employment tracks for these newcomers. Secondly, the limitations of the Japanese employment system raise concerns not only for foreign workers but also for native-born employees. In the ever-evolving landscape of the knowledge economy, Japanese approaches to employee training are hampered by the assumption that companies possess a standard set of skills for their employees to acquire, which, in turn, diminishes the incentive for proactive learning on the part of workers.