

Unwrapping Migration Decisions: The Case of Non-retiree, Non-expatriate Japanese Migrants in Thailand

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Abstract

As of 2023, Thailand is home to over 72,000 Japanese people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), among whom are working-age Japanese individuals, whose migrating decisions are voluntary, and whose presence and stories are overshadowed by dispatched expatriates or retirees. Addressing this gap, this research explores cases of relatively young Japanese people who voluntarily chose to migrate to and currently work in Thailand, with a particularly focus on the mechanisms underlying their migration and migrating decision. Aiming to explore the complexity and dynamics within the commonly simplified, taken-for-granted reasonings for migration to Thailand, this research pays attention to the forms of capital these migrants hold, while analyzing their transferability and mobilizability. Drawing from the narratives of 11 Japanese migrants in Bangkok, this research finds that while their migration trajectories might be perceived as downward, with some of their living conditions seeming disadvantageous, the realities as narrated by migrants highlight that they have positive experiences living in Thailand, which lead them to construct certain understandings towards lifestyles in Thailand, and thus influence their migrating decisions. Nevertheless, their experiences and understandings are mediated by the forms of capital they hold, such as their “surface-level” ties, limited Thai language skills, and being “Japanese”, which are transferred and mobilized with them through their migration. By unfolding another layer underlying and influencing migrants’ experiences, this research argues for understanding the “ease” of living in Thailand as emerging from the intersection between who migrants are and what the conditions present in Thailand.

Keywords: Japanese migrants, Japanese migrants in Thailand, capital

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Introduction

It's been exactly one year since I moved to Thailand. I first came to Thailand when I was about 19, as a tourist. I immediately thought, 'I really like it here.' Since then, I've returned to visit about five or six times, and I've always wanted to live here. (Sho, 30)

Recalling the beginning of his current journey in Thailand, Sho is among the 72,000 Japanese residents in Thailand as of October 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Having ranked, for the past few years, among the top countries with the highest number of Japanese populations abroad, as well as with the highest number of Japanese companies overseas, Thailand has been home to a wide range of Japanese people, both those dispatched by Japanese corporates in Japan to be positioned in their Thai offices, and those whose migration is more of their own wills, such as locally hired workers, entrepreneurs, students, retirees, or those unemployed. Sho belongs to this latter group of voluntary migrants;¹ he was not dispatched by his former employer in Japan but decided, on his own, to leave his job completely to seek opportunities to live and work in Thailand. Despite the lower salary and lower position than his previous job, which implies more of a downward, rather than an advancement, for his career path, Sho still chose to start his journey in Thailand, while firmly sharing, in retrospect, that he has had no regrets about this decision so far, and he has truly enjoyed his present lifestyle in Thailand.

Sho is unlikely to be an exclusive case. While the current statistical data is inadequate to provide the exact figures,² an existing literature (Niwa, 2018) and the growing presence of recruiting agencies, online media, and influencers point to an increasing trend of Japanese individuals, just like Sho, who voluntarily choose to become self-initiated expatriates; migrate to Thailand in their working ages, and work as locally hired staffs in Thailand. Having said that, the vague, blanket label of "Japanese workers" used in their residency status, and the distinctions that only become visible through close engagement and conversations with them, despite several distinct elements in their lifestyles, means that Japanese individuals like Sho remain rather unrepresented in the current picture of the Japanese community in Thailand. This is not to mention the more visible and notable presence of other communities, such as those of retirees and expatriates' wives, as well as the infrastructure that exclusively supports their migrations, compared with a group of migrants like Sho, whose numbers remain uncertain and whose communities remain less structured.

Moreover, when we turn into scholarly spheres, the stories of Sho and other relatively young voluntary migrants in Thailand also remain hardly discussed. Generally speaking, Japanese migrants in Thailand is not an unfamiliar trend, nor an uncommon subject of academic studies. Indeed, several scholarly works have explored this population over the past decades, capturing the narratives of age groups ranging from youths (Ono, 2016), working-age migrants (Niwa, 2018; Sukhawan, 2018), to later-life migrants (Duangkaew, 2015; Hongsraragon et al., 2015; Shibuya, 2023; Thang et al., 2012). These studies revolve around several themes, from the

¹ While, arguably, it is unlikely for any migrations to be completely voluntary, voluntary migration here refers to the situation "...when migrants knowingly and willingly decide to leave their country and are able to enter another with the approval of the authorities." (International Organization for Migration, n.d.).

² In the statistical data currently available, such as the Annual Report of Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas, the number of migrants in categories such as age groups, gender, or industrial sectors is identified. Nevertheless, ambiguity still lies within these figures, since they do not specify whether the migrants in each sector are the expatriates dispatched by Japanese corporations, or are those voluntary migrants involved in those sectors as locally hired staff, or even entrepreneurs. This means that, with the available statistics so far, it is rather impossible to specify the exact numbers of migrants based on their employment types.

underlying drivers or factors that motivate migration itself to the migrants' experience in the host country, particularly the challenges and processes involved in social integration and adaptation. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has extensively focused on later-life migrants, such as retirement migrants or long-stay tourists, making the existing knowledge of Japanese communities in Thailand predominantly drawn from narratives of only one demographic group, overlooking the diversity within such communities.

At the same time, while existing works do shed lights on factors migrants generally state as pushing or pulling them towards their migration, such as low cost of living, freedom, convenience, or warm climate (Duangkaew, 2015; Hongsrnagon et al., 2015; Ono, 2016; Shibuya, 2023), most of these factors are rather taken as they are, or even for granted. The complexity and dynamics within such factors – how they are socially constructed, as much as individually experienced, negotiated, and evolved over time – are usually overlooked, yet subsumed under simplified reasonings.

This study, therefore, aims to tackle these gaps and present the lived realities of people like Sho, whose voices have not been much heard, nor narratives much acknowledged, and develop a more nuanced understanding of their migration process. Specifically, it explores the question of what mechanisms underlie the migration of working-age individuals like Sho, with a seemingly stable career and lifestyle in Japan, who decide to withdraw from such lifestyles in Japan to start a new journey in Thailand. It seeks to answer such questions by looking beyond what migrants themselves initially state as their reasons behind their decision, as well as the simplified explanation of their motivations, into their whole migration trajectories, including their experiences in the destination communities.

Theoretical Framework

To break down migrants' narratives to analyze factors in the structures that shape their decision, this study draws from Bourdieu's framework of capital, which discusses capitals in different forms – economic, cultural, and social – while mentioning the symbolic functions – symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). While convertibility lies among the key aspects in Bourdieu's discussions of these forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, as cited in Wahlbeck & Fortelius, 2019), Wahlbeck (2018) drawing from works of Faist (2000) and Anthias (2007), further suggests an aspect of transferability – how resources could move across transnational borders – as distinct from mobilizability – how those resources may or may not hold similar values once transferred to different contexts.

Through this framework, this paper argues that migrants' decisions, both to move and to stay, are informed by their positive migration experiences, which are shaped by the forms of capital that migrants possess and are both transferred and mobilized with them across a transnational context. Through migration, certain forms of capital held by migrants are both transferred and mobilized with them in ways that generate favorable, even privileged, conditions shaping migrants' experiences in Thailand. Interpreting Thailand through these experiences, migrants then construct specific understandings of the country – their own versions of the realities of living in Thailand – which, in turn, encourage and reinforce their decision to migrate. Such understandings, though often labelled collectively as Thailand being “easy to live in”, are, indeed, not simply characteristics of Thailand that are universally and equally experienceable, but rather features that become observable precisely because of the forms of capital migrants hold and develop.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed in this study, with data being gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in the form of life history, then later analyzed through thematic analysis. Bangkok is the main study site for this research, given its high concentration of both Japanese populations and Japanese enterprises (Japan External Trade Organization, 2025). Four selection criteria were considered when recruiting the participants: a) having a Japanese nationality, b) currently working as a locally hired staff or owning businesses in Thailand, c) having stayed in Thailand for at least a year and intending to continue their residence, and d) having not yet reached retirement age. Based on such criteria, 11 Japanese migrants, five women and six men, with an age range of 29 to 45, all living in Bangkok, were interviewed. All the interviews were conducted wholly in Japanese by the researcher between May and June 2024, with follow-up interviews for some participants in September 2024. The table below outlines the basic demographics of the participants, with all the names being pseudonyms. With participants' consents, all interviews were voice-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

Table 1
Profile of Basic Demographics of Migrants

Name	Gender	Age	Length of Stay (years)	Marital Status	Current address	Current Job
Hitoshi	Male	45	7	Single	Asoke	Accountant
Yuka	Female	41	6	Single	On Nut	Employee at Japanese automotive company
Riho	Female	38	1.5	Married to Japanese (2 Children)	Ekkamai	Insurance broker
Takeru	Male	40	11	Married to Thai (1 Children)	Asoke	Running an audit firm
Sho	Male	30	1	Thai partner	On Nut	Employee at a recruiting agent
Tomoka	Female	29	5	Single	Chit Lom	Employee at Japanese company
Mao	Female	31	2.5	Single	Phaya Thai	Employee at Japanese company
Yuto	Male	34	6	Married to Thai	Plern Jit	Consultant
Takuma	Male	40	1.5	Single	Makkasan	Employee at Japanese Logistic company
Kenshin	Male	35	5	Single	Sam Yan	Employee at Japanese company
Kaede	Female	34	4	Thai partner	Prom Pong	Employee at Japanese Kindergarten

Results

Thai Partner, COVID-19, Work Contract: Critical Moments in Life and Migrating Decisions

29-year-old Tomoka was the only person among the 11 who had no prior work experience in Japan but came straight to Thailand shortly after her bachelor's degree. During her undergraduate years, Tomoka went to study abroad in Australia, where she started a relationship with a Thai man. With little interest in doing job-hunting or working in Japan, she considered this relationship also as an opportunity to build her career abroad, so during her senior year, she started preparing for moving to Thailand without engaging in Japan's traditional job-hunting process. Upon her graduation, she eventually moved to Bangkok and started her first career as a locally hired staff member in a Japanese company. Tomoka broke up with her Thai partner a few years later, yet decided to remain in Thailand.

Tomoka's profile shares similar features with those of Takeru, Yuto, and Kaede; all of them were, or still have been, with a Thai partner at the time of migration, while suggesting this factor in their narratives as primarily influencing their decisions to choose, return, or continue staying in Thailand. Nevertheless, while the fact that they were with their Thai partners, or other conditions mentioned by other migrants, such as the outbreak of COVID-19 or the end of their former work contracts, may be acknowledged as a critical moment in their lives leading to their decision to leave Japan for Thailand, these moments are unlikely to be the sole reason. Rather, they are more of the most noticeable triggers recognized by migrants – “the tip of the iceberg” (Benson, 2012, p. 10). It may account for the specific timing of the move, yet not the whole move itself. Therefore, to better understand what underlies their migrating patterns, a more careful look at migrants' narratives on the whole course of their migration, the patterns or themes that emerged in their narratives beyond what they said about their decisions alone, is necessary.

“My salary has decreased, but despite that, the costs are low, so I still have money left.”: Economic Capitals Despite Lower Income

All migrants' narratives about their lifestyles in Thailand concentrate on how their qualities of life have been improved, not only in terms of a more work-life balance, but also in regard to a more convenient, comfortable, even luxurious lifestyles they have come to afford. Many of the migrants comment on how metropolitan Bangkok is, with well-established infrastructures that make their life convenient. Most of them are now living comfortably in full-service, spacious condominiums or serviced apartments in central Bangkok, while enjoying their time outside of work hanging out around the city and frequently eating out. These are lifestyles that they could not easily imagine themselves living back in Japan, not only because of their work-life imbalance but also because of the costs such a lifestyle would entail.

All these experiences have led migrants to construct an understanding of Thailand as a country with a low cost of living, at least relatively to what they had experienced in Japan. Nevertheless, Thailand, and Bangkok in particular, is unlikely to be considered as affordable in such a way by all the people living there, sometimes not even by the locals. What the narratives of Japanese migrants reflect, indeed, is the purchasing power they hold – the economic capital which migrants gradually accumulated, which becomes repositioned and rather amplified through their moves, not necessarily in terms of its amount, but more in terms of what it allows them to afford.

In Thailand, the minimum wage for locally hired Japanese workers is set at 50,000 baht, or approximately 220,000 yen, according to the law (Japan External Trade Organization, 2024). While this amount itself may appear modest in Japan and is, in most cases, relatively lower than what they used to earn in Japan, this amount is comparatively higher than the locals in Bangkok, whose average standard salary is approximately 39,000 baht, or around 190,000 yen³ (National Statistical Office, 2024). More importantly, this economic capital allows them to easily afford and sustain lifestyles they aspire to – living comfortably with work-life balance yet still having purchasing power, which ultimately contributes to their positive view of Thailand. While most migrants are aware of their increased purchasing power, they do not necessarily interpret it, or at least verbally frame it as such, as being significantly higher, nor as a defining feature of their own position; instead, they tend to generalize their situations more as characteristics of Thailand itself.

“With the Japanese communities, I don’t want to get involved, actually.”: Loose Social Ties and Specific Social Capital

When asked about what they like most about Thailand, many clearly expressed that it is the Thai people. Not only describing Thai people as kind, friendly, and having an interesting sense of humor, but several migrants also found the interaction with Thai people less stressful than the ones with Japanese people which were their default back in Japan. Consequently, once they move to Thailand, many express their hesitancy to be attached, and thus how they choose not to involve much with well-established Japanese networks or communities in Thailand. Rather, they are more connected with a small group of Japanese friends, as well as some local Thais and foreigners. These ties they develop with other individuals in Thailand are more informal, loose rather than tight, and even shallow rather than deep, given their limited Thai and English language skills.

I have about five Japanese friends that I keep in touch with regularly and about ten Thai friends, and that’s about it. I’d say that’s enough, and I don’t feel like I want to have more Japanese friends than that. (Hitoshi, 45)

Despite being seemingly disadvantaged, given the loss of safety nets or networks these migrants might otherwise have access to through engagement with formal Japanese associations – more conventional forms of social capital – this particular type of loose tie is still preferred by migrants. Indeed, it is through this specific form of social capital that they are able to view relationships in Thailand positively, as more relaxed and less stressful. Loose, informal ties to the social groups imply a loose sense of belonging – the sense of being outsiders to both inter- and intra-ethnic communities – yet, at the same time, they entail fewer expectations and less pressure to conform to the norms of such groups. This position enables migrants to balance their engagement with both inter- and intra-ethnic communities more freely and selectively. Also, such superficial engagement comes with less potential for problematic human relations to develop, something that several migrants struggled with back in Japan.

³ This is the average monthly household income of residents in Bangkok and its peripheries, namely Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Samut Prakan provinces, as of 2023 (National Statistical Office, 2024). However, the national average monthly income per household is only 29,030 baht, or around 140,000 yen (National Statistical Office, 2024).

“Even without speaking much, you can still live here just fine.”: Inability to Speak Thai as a Barrier and a Buffer

Most of the migrants in this study self-affirmed that they had only limited Thai skills; while they can navigate their daily lives using simple Thai expressions, it remains challenging for most of them to engage fully in conversations in Thai, and some are unable to read the Thai alphabet. Nevertheless, as presented in Yuka’s narratives below, this is unlikely to be a significant disadvantage in their lives in Thailand, while pointing out that there is no need to be fluent in Thai to live in Thailand.

There’s also something nice about not understanding the conversations happening around me. In Japan, I could understand everything happening around me, every conversation... But here in Thailand, since I only understand a little Thai, I don’t catch most of what’s being said around me. And Thai people are generally cheerful and smiling. (Yuka, 41)

While reflecting on how their limited Thai skills create some language barriers, this narrative portrayed how migrants view such barriers rather positively, making it function more as a protective barrier that allows them not only to selectively engage with locals but also to navigate the situations around them more freely, since they may not fully comprehend their surroundings. Correspondingly, they are also less likely to pick up on negative social cues, judgments, or criticisms that could be directed at them, allowing them to avoid – or perhaps misinterpret – challenging situations. Their inability to speak Thai, therefore, is their particular cultural capital which acts as a barrier and a buffer, blocking and protecting migrants. This leads them to form and maintain their positive perceptions towards Thailand and Thai people, and their understandings, again, that life in Thailand is less stressful and easier to live in than in Japan.

In a good way, Thai people don’t really care. Well, maybe it’s just me not understanding it, but when I was in Japan, I was always so conscious of other people’s eyes on me. (Yuka, 41)

“...or maybe it’s just because we’re Japanese.”: Being “Japanese” as Symbolic Capitals

(In Thailand) In my daily life, for example, when I’m walking around town, I don’t feel any pressure at all, which is great. For example, in Japan, when you’re outside, if you don’t pay attention to your appearance, you can feel people looking at you, checking you out, wondering if your clothes are embarrassing or if you’re okay. But in Bangkok, everyone is really free, and I think that’s great. (Takuma, 40)

As reflected in Takuma’s narratives above, a sense of non-judgmental norms, and the feeling that they can freely navigate their lifestyles without feeling pressure from others in Thailand, are also the aspects migrants enjoy through their migration. Mao (31), Tomoka (29), and Yuka (41) also express that back in Japan, they were much more conscious of how others might judge their behaviors or appearance, sharing the episodes when they decided on what to wear based on their surroundings rather than their true feelings. However, upon migrating to Thailand, they do not sense such pressure anymore, suggesting how they feel that Thai people do not pay much attention on these aspects of others, especially given the diversity they observe in Thailand.

While it remains debatable whether these experiences are the result of being Japanese in particular, or being a foreigner in general, still the narratives suggest how being Japanese allows migrants to face less pressure to conform to local social norms or expectations, the ones that Thai nationals may place on or be judgmental towards one another. Combined with their moderate ties and their language barrier and buffer, this symbolic capital of being Japanese makes migrants exempted from Thai local customs or social norms, resulting in their freedom to navigate situations, and thus their interpretation of Thailand, again, as a relaxed, less stressful, and easy-to-live-in country.

Interestingly, some migrants do recognize these aspects, such as Yuto in his comment below. Nevertheless, they tend not to take this negatively, yet referring to it more as a matter of fact and as something that makes their current lives less stressful.

Well, I guess it's probably because I'm Japanese, a foreigner, but...I feel like I don't have to worry so much about what others think of me, and that makes life so much easier. Even in my daily life in Japan, I'd find myself unconsciously thinking, 'I have to act this way' or 'I need to behave like that.' But here, I don't really have to think about those things. Whether that's a good thing or not, I'm not sure, but it's just so freeing. It really is much easier. (Yuto, 34)

Discussion

Beyond Turning Points, Beneath the Positive Understandings

Through their narratives, Japanese migrants have shared the realities of being a non-later-life, non-expatriate in Thailand – lifestyles which may seem disadvantaged due to comparatively decreased salary, distance from both inter- and intra-ethnic communities, inability to communicate in Thai, and being a non-native. Nevertheless, all these features, as appeared in their narratives and discussed thus far, are the forms of capital that migrants hold and embrace, which are both transferred and mobilized with migrants throughout their migration. It is through these capitals that migrants were able to pursue the lifestyles they aspire to, as well as constructing their understandings of what livings in Thailand would be like. Their experiences and understandings – their versions of realities as mediated by their capitals – also led them to the thoughts that it is easier, even more fulfilling, to live in Thailand than in Japan – that it would be better for them, in their own terms of what “good life” means, to stay in Thailand than to go back to Japan. Therefore, once triggered by the turning points in their lives, these Japanese individuals were able to make their decision to migrate, including to stay, in Thailand.

Such a mechanism of decision making unfolds another layer behind migrants' collectively constructed perceptions of Thailand as a country where they can live easily and enjoy – the very perceptions that push them towards their decision to migrate to Thailand. Thailand itself, as a destination country, is not inherently “easy” to live in for all migrants; it has, indeed, become “easy” to live in for these young Japanese voluntary migrants because of the capitals they hold with them, either embodied or developed upon migration, which are transferred and mobilized with migrants across transnational borders. This means that features such as “easy”, “low cost of living”, or “less stressful” are unlikely to simply be characteristics of Thailand. Rather, they are something that emerge through the intersection between who migrants are – what they have in relations to those involved in their migration – and what the situations and conditions are in Thailand.

Conclusion

Attempting to shed light on working-age Japanese migrants in Thailand who chose to move to Thailand by their own will, and to look beyond the simplified, taken-for-granted reasonings surrounding migration to Thailand among Japanese migrants, this study looks beyond what migrants themselves claim as their reasons to migrate – mostly turning points in their lives. By analyzing migrants' narratives about their entire journeys, both pre- and post-relocation, while paying attention to the forms of capital that they hold and how these capitals are transferred and mobilized, this study not only highlights the positive experiences migrants have living in Thailand, which lead to their positive understandings of Thailand, hence their migrating decision, but also reveals another layer worth taking into account when interpreting their experiences. Migrants' versions of the realities of living in Thailand – from the low cost of living to the more freedom, less pressure to conform – are unlikely to be universal, nor is Thailand itself, as a destination country, be inherently “easy” to live in for all. Thailand, in general, and Bangkok in particular, has become “easy” to live in for this particular group of migrants because of the specific qualities – the capitals – migrants hold with them. While these capitals may not carry any particular meanings in some settings, within the contexts of their moves from Japan to Thailand, these capitals have been revalued and generated conditions that benefits migrants in their destination societies.

The analysis in this study, therefore, extends the discussions of migration drivers by looking beyond migrants' own stated reasons and by approaching their decision-making more critically, taking what migrants state not simply as they are, but as a product mediated by the qualities migrants hold, which shape both what and how they experience. While this study may not directly contribute to theoretical discussions surrounding the framework it draws from, its significance still lies in its empirical contribution to existing knowledge of Japanese communities in Thailand, as well as in its thorough exploration and critical interpretation of the sense of “ease” in living in Thailand, suggesting the particular meanings surrounding and, more importantly, the conditions behind such expression.

Future research would benefit from further exploring the mechanisms behind the functions of these capitals. In other words, there are still many unanswered questions about, for instance, why some of migrants' capitals lead to positive experiences rather than to discrimination or marginalization, or why being “Japanese” comes with relatively positive connotations in Thai society, or whether it is a matter of being “Japanese” in particular, or being a “foreigner” in general.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors.

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