

## TO LEAVE, TO RETURN

My story of immigrant Japan is more centered on the experience of settling because the main subjects of my study are people who have stayed. With a few exceptions, most participants lived in Japan at the time of the interviews. People who leave, however, make up the majority of foreigners who have migrated to Japan. As the previous chapter illustrates, to stay requires continuous efforts in finding affiliations and changing one's visa status. Hundreds of thousands of people arrive in Japan every year on visas that grant them the opportunity to stay for durations ranging from six months to three years. Yet

only three million in total have remained. Some of them left the country because they chose to; others had to leave because they lost the means to stay on. Wherever I go—China, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, Germany, or the United States—I meet people who have lived in Japan for a substantial period of time before leaving. In this chapter, I tell their tales.

The insights that build the discussion of this chapter derive from a range of sources. In the summer of 2007, I researched Chinese migrants who returned to China, for which I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-five returnees in Shanghai and Beijing. In addition, I followed up with some of the Chinese informants who assisted my investigation in the early 2000s and had since departed. Over the past two decades, I have also had chance encounters with former Japan-bound migrants in different countries, resulting in unexpected opportunities to collect more interview data. Finally, to stay or to leave is a topic we have discussed extensively with our informants in Japan when inquiring about their plans. The prospect of leaving Japan, either to go to a third country or to return to their home country, is an idea lurking in the back of the minds of most immigrants who are currently staying in Japan. As discussed, Japan is not considered an immigrant destination, and many aspects of this country (including its national discourses as well as institutional arrangements) remain uncompromisingly ethno-nationalistic. As a result, at least initially, migrating to Japan means a temporary sojourn. Leaving seems to be a distinct future possibility, if not an imminent decision to make. For some, it is a crutch to lean on when they feel frustrated with aspects of life in Japan or are nostalgic or restless. This chapter, therefore, investigates their thoughts about leaving as well.

### The Migration Regime and Precarious Sojourns

Migratory trajectories are contingent on instrumental and emotional conditions. While all immigrants invariably treat Japan as a temporary destination initially, some people stay on when they find stable jobs, establish families, and grow attached to the place. However, not everyone who finds work, falls in love, or marries in Japan remains in this country. The reasons to leave Japan can be simple or complex. The simplest reason for leaving is that the migrant has lost the means—especially the legal status—to stay. Those who fail to find a proper institution, such as a school, a company, or a marriage that gives them the legal ability to remain in Japan, automatically lose their residency status. “Leaving” is a possible outcome when the migration trajectory is riddled with uncertainty. Because of such legal contingency, among the people we interviewed, the possibility of leaving—either to return to the home country or to go to another country—seems, as their narratives suggest, to have always lingered in their minds. One Chinese immigrant talked about his mental preparation whenever he was going through different status transitions. “I was telling myself, ‘If I couldn’t go on to the college, I would leave. If I couldn’t get

a job, I would leave.’ ” He managed to enter a college and later on found a job. When we spoke with him he had stable employment and was prepared to apply for permanent residency. Nevertheless, he still thought leaving was a possible outcome.

Japanese policies dictate who can stay and who cannot. The population that has the least agency in choosing to stay or leave is the technical interns. They are brought in to fulfill particular labor tasks, and there is no potential for their geographic and social mobilities within Japan. Their visas are terminal. Most of them can stay for a maximum of three

<sup>2</sup>

years. If they want to be in Japan, they have to reenter with a different type of visa.

The exiting of students involves more complicated mechanisms. Between 1984 and 2017, 1,454,963 individuals entered

<sup>3</sup>

Japan on student visas. Over 12 percent (178,864) of them obtained work-related visas in Japan. Even after taking into consideration that many of the recently arrived students were still in school (324,245 in June 2018), and that some students might have married Japanese nationals or become dependents of other long-term immigrants, it is clear that the majority of the students who entered Japan left sometime after their study period ended. Although these students might have exited for a range of different reasons, a substantial number of them did so because they could not continue to stay. This is because, as explained in chapter 2, international education, especially language education, has been used as a de facto channel for labor import.

As observed, many Chinese students who arrived in the late 1980s to mid-1990s came with the sole purpose of making quick cash instead of pursuing an education (Liu-Farrer 2011a). They devoted their entire time in Japan to working various low-wage jobs to maximize economic gains. Since the visa sponsorship of a school, firm, or spouse is the premise for

<sup>4</sup>

staying legally in Japan, many become irregular migrants after losing their student status. Losing legal status means exiting sometime in the future, if not immediately. Before 2003, Japan showed a relative laissez-faire attitude toward undocumented migrants. A number of early Chinese students who overstayed their visas worked and lived in Japan for over a decade before finally being deported. The situation changed after 2003 when the Japanese government launched annual campaigns to curb the number of irregular migrants. The police roam the streets and ambush train stations. As an East Asian, I have been stopped by the police three times for an ID check. The newly streamlined immigration control and management system that went into effect on July 9, 2012, has made the situation more precarious for immigrants to stay in Japan irregularly. As a result, almost all the undocumented Chinese people whom I befriended during my research in the early 2000s had left Japan. Some turned themselves in voluntarily to avoid the increasing levels of stress from having to dodge the police. Others were discovered and deported. Most current irregular migrants usually confine their activities to small local areas to minimize the risk of exposure.

Students from Southeast and South Asian countries also see the incomes from part-time jobs as an attractive aspect of an education in Japan. Due to their preoccupation with part-time work, however, as well as the difficulty in mastering the Japanese language—especially as they do not possess the linguistic affinity that Chinese students enjoy—many of them struggle to achieve educational mobility. Most of those who manage to continue their education do so in vocational training schools. In 2015, three-quarters of the Vietnamese students who completed language education entered vocational schools (Nisshinkyo 2017). Many of the vocational training schools rely on foreign students’ tuition to survive, but the education they offer is either not up to standard or not in the right vocation to enable these students to find employment in Japan.

Some students enrolled themselves in vocational training schools just to extend their student visa. Upon his graduation from a language school, Sang, a Vietnamese student, enrolled in a vocational school that specializes in accounting in order to prolong his stay in Japan. After six months, he dropped out of the school. He had no interest in accounting to begin with. Since he had already obtained the student visa, he would just focus on earning money until his visa expired.

Despite plans to leave upon the expiration of their visa, some do not leave immediately. Since around 2014, there has been an increase among Nepalese, Vietnamese, and Sri Lankan students who overstay their visas (MOJ 2017b). Some irregular migrants as well as those who are facing losing their legal status have discovered that a refugee application can be a strategy to prolong their stay. Japan has a notoriously long process of refugee recognition and low status issuance. From 2008 to 2017, out of 56,976 asylum seekers, the Japanese government granted only 229 individuals refugee status (MOJ 2017b). However, according to Japanese law, if the asylum seeker enters Japan with a proper visa, such as a student, technical intern, or tourist visa, the applicant is allowed to work in Japan six months after the date of application. A rejected applicant is eligible to appeal. Most applicants do not wait six months before starting to work. Moreover, it took on average 9.9 months for the first decision, and 23.4 months for the decision on the appealed cases (Komatsu 2018). This lengthy, drawn-out process for asylum seekers grants people the eligibility to work, which effectively creates a loophole for labor migrants to extend their sojourn in Japan.

Eventually, however, these migrants have to leave, even though during the course of staying in Japan some might have

changed their mind about the purpose of their migration and developed relationships and attachments to this country. Japan is not known for granting amnesty. Undocumented immigrants, including those who have lived in the country for over a decade, have stable employment, and are married with children born in Japan, are almost always forced to leave when

5

discovered.

The precariousness is not limited to language students who failed to attain educational mobility. As a professor at a graduate school in one of Japan's top private universities, I have over the years been able to observe the job-search process of hundreds of bright, well-educated, and multilingual foreign graduates. While many have successfully embarked on careers in Japan, with a substantial number of them realizing their aspirations by landing positions in elite corporations or institutions, some have returned to their home country or journeyed to another country. A number of them left because they failed to find satisfactory jobs despite their desire to stay.

Institutional visa sponsorship underscores the precarity of the migration journey. One wrong step—a bad career decision or a failed marriage—could terminate one's legal stay in the country. It should be stressed that this happens not only to migrants from developing countries who require a visa to enter Japan, but also to those from countries with relatively free mobility. In our sample, one Canadian engineer had already lost his visa by the time we interviewed him because, after working in Japan for eight years, he decided to be a freelancer. Although he was still taking on projects, he was in fact staying in Japan without documents. A British engineer whose multinational firm was pulling out of Japan was also facing an expiring visa. He needed to find another job within six months in the same category as his previous jobs. The job market for IT workers was tough after the Lehman Shock, and he was distressed by the fact that he could not even resort to teaching English without leaving the country and reapplying for a visa in a different category.

In addition to the stress of this precarious legal situation, many individuals migrate and strive to survive on their own in a strange foreign land. Sometimes this migratory experience takes an emotional toll and is too much to bear. Amy, a Chinese woman I met in Shanghai in 2007, graduated from a two-year English program in China and worked at a multinational firm for two years before migrating to Japan. She enrolled in a Japanese language program in 1998. At the time she was twenty-three years old. Upon completing the language program, instead of trying to enter the university, she found a job in a small recruiting firm run by Americans. The company, however, closed less than a year after she started the position. Through the introduction of friends, she entered a small Japanese investment company working as an administrative assistant for an American manager. Ultimately the job did not work out because she could not get along with the boss. Through the classified magazine *Japan Towns*, she found her third job in marketing. She recruited students for a for-profit university overseas. Receiving her full salary required meeting a quota and bringing in enough fee-paying students. She felt the company was a scam and quit. After searching for several months, she found her fourth job with a Japanese securities company. She worked in the human resources department, where she recruited and interviewed people, and assisted foreign employees with their visa applications. As a young woman in a typical Japanese company, Amy was the person who answered phones, opened doors, poured tea for everybody, and washed teacups and ashtrays. "All the other women before me did that. You can't really avoid it, can you?" She did what she was expected to do. However, not long into the job, she found herself having to endure "uncomfortable situations." As she explained: "The manager started asking me out. I said no to dinner at night, but he found excuses asking me out for lunch. Single women always run into this type of thing." She had already changed jobs four times in four years. Since she had not been able to save much money over the years, she also worked as a waitress at an American diner on the weekends. Not only was work stressful, but her life at home was not easy. She was living with a roommate who, out of unrequited love, had been crying at night for a long time. To make the situation worse, a boyfriend Amy had met through church borrowed money from her and disappeared. Through church friends, part of the money was returned, but she was devastated. She recounted her decision to return to China: "I decided to return because I had had enough. The catalyst was that it was enough. I started to have trouble sleeping, waking up at two or three in the morning crying. I thought this was not right. [I] was afraid that I was going to have a nervous breakdown. I was 29. I had nobody to talk to but a roommate that tortured me every day and a boyfriend who robbed me. How could I live such a life." Six years after she left China, she went back, nearly broken. When I talked to her in Shanghai, she had been back for three years, working at a big advertising firm and had just married. She was content with her life. She smiled, "I went a full circle after an eventful journey."

## The Compounded Impulses: Career, Emotions, and Identity

The American programmer George, who appeared in the previous chapter, studied and worked in Japan for eight years before leaving in 2007. After asking why he stayed for that long after his initial entrepreneurial plans evaporated, I inquired about his decision to leave Japan in 2007. He was employed in a famous Japanese company then and had just started work on a new project. I was given a lengthy explanation:

It was going really slow. It wasn't starting. So, I was writing some tools, but I was not really on a team. I wasn't talking to anybody because the team hadn't started yet. There was nothing to do. So, after a year, I was like "OK, I'm here to learn and I'm getting zero conversation at work. This isn't working out." So, then I tried to find a job but it was hard at that time. There was a transition between X2 and X3 [system names]. It was kind of ridiculous. People were like "we're not gonna hire you if you don't have X3 work experience." And I was like "I don't know shit about X3. How can I? It hasn't started it!" But that's the kind of stupid stuff you get from companies sometimes.... And in the end, I was forty-one and I was like.... So this industry pays really poorly in Japan, very poorly. And I won't say what I get paid but I will say I tripled my salary going home. *Sanbai*. Not just some per cent, like 10 per cent or 50 per cent. Three Xs. OK, that's a huge difference in salary.... So the point is I was making pretty poor money here. And so at some point it was just like "OK I can't do this anymore." It's just like I work all day. I'll never own a house. I'll never have a wife. She won't want some poor husband. I was living like a student at 41. I had a tiny little studio. Sleeping on the floor. I guess sleeping on the floor is kind of normal for some people in Japan. But I remember inviting a girl over once that I met at some event. I invited her right after the party and I don't—I mean I'm just reading into it—but I could basically tell on her face when she saw the place, she was like: "Not interested. This guy is not successful." Right? I mean, you know in some sense it's okay. I doubt that I wanted that kind of girl anyway but at the same time it made me feel bad because my life in America was much more ... was much higher level I think. That's the way I can put it. It is like a progression. You're in school; you're in the dorms; you move out ... and you sleep at an apartment with roommates and eventually you might get a place without roommates and at some point you get married. That's the progression. Do you know what I mean? That was the progression in America but when I came to Japan it fell back down to a *gakus* [student] lifestyle. So that was a big reason why I left. Another big reason was that, um, when you're at a Japanese company you don't feel ... if you're not fluent (in Japanese), you don't feel like being part of it. You don't. I talk to my teammates, the ones who are sitting close to me, but the ones who are two cubicles away, I rarely talk to. And I don't read the company emails, the newsletters, the news that flow through where you see what's going on ... no, it's too much work. So you still don't feel like part of anything. So that was another reason to go back. The other one is that at Company G [his previous employer] we had a very strong team spirit, you know. Everybody was working late so we would go out for dinner late at night and then we crunch together because we would work until around 11:30. I don't like crunching but I like the team spirit. But at S-Corp, on my team there was very little team spirit. And we never did anything social once the whole time as a team, never drinking, not anything, no *nomikai*. ... And actually the project director apologized for not being more productive in having any social activities. But the point being, that was another reason why I left. I went home, I would be working with some of my best friends from the States and I would get all those benefits again. Anyway, I don't know if I answered your question.

George's story shows that when legal status is not an issue, the decision to leave can result from complex impulses. First, migration is both an economic project and a personal journey. George was frustrated with the workplace he ended up in. Insufficient economic rewards, his not being able to acquire knowledge and skills on the job, his marginal position in the organization, and workplace social relationships summed up his discontent. Such outcomes of migration are tied to one's sense of personal worth and status—and in George's case, similar to that of many other men, also to his masculinity. What really mattered to George, in the end, was that, because of his corporate experience, he viewed his migration as a failure and as a life-course regression. Second, although migrants' mobility decisions are frequently packaged in a narrative of career choices, the affective aspect of their migration experiences manifests as a compelling driving force. As shown in the previous chapter, emotional ties—be they romantic, familial, or communal—bond people to places. In the absence of these ties, migrants are propelled to look elsewhere for emotional bonds, which, in turn, makes it easier to entertain the idea of leaving.

## Corporate Japan's Global Talent Dilemma

Migration is commonly an economic project, and work justifies one's stay in the country. Entering the primary labor market is used as a benchmark of an immigrant's successful economic incorporation. Yet, Japanese firms have not adapted themselves to the changing labor force and have difficulty in retaining foreign employees. Some scholars attribute this failure to firms' human resource management continuing to be organized around a logic of an internal labor market supplied by a predominantly domestic labor force in which employees are hired from the bottom rank and trained to develop a career within the firm (Waldenberger 2016). Although firms recruit so-called "global human resources," what they actually wish is that these foreign employees will be assimilated into Japanese corporate environment and eventually become Japanese corporate men. The skill specificities and career expectations of international migrants have yet to become a factor that has

any influence on managerial practices. As a result, many foreign employees find it hard to continue a career in Japanese firms.

Foreign workers are generally frustrated by the slow career progression typical of Japanese firms. *Ishi no ue nimo sannen* (Being on the cold stone for three years) is a proverb many Japanese people use to describe their corporate career experiences. It means that if one perseveres through initial adversity, one will eventually succeed. In the cold stone period, young employees often have very little responsibility. They are asked to do tedious end tasks in order to become familiar with the company's business operations from the bottom up and accumulate company-specific skills. However, such career process and skill formation are unfitting for migrants who do not usually plan to stay in Japan permanently to begin with, and let alone dedicate their careers to one Japanese company. Rather, they often consider each job as a learning experience with hopes of acquiring some transferable human capital to further their career. Moreover, given that in-house careers are built over a long stretch of time, employees' achievements are not immediately rewarded with promotion. Foreign employees are frustrated when their contributions are not given recognition in the form of an economic reward. Mark, a young Australian man who graduated from a Japanese college, enjoyed his work. But he felt there was no opportunity for growth. "No matter how hard I worked, my salary was the same. I increased the sales by 300% and they just patted me on the back: 'Well done, Mark. Well done.' It's like, okay, I'm done. I want to be recognized for my hard work, which is why I looked for something else."

Because they are expected to develop their career within the firm, employees in Japanese firms do not have enough career autonomy. Decisions regarding the placement and rotation of employees are made by department managers and human resources personnel. Employees are asked to fill out questionnaires and list their preferences, but they often have little control over where they will end up. As a consequence, people land in positions that do not fit their skills or preferences and at times the placement decisions seem completely irrational. For example, recruited as "global talent," many foreign employees imagine working positions in which they can utilize their linguistic and cultural skills in global businesses. Though most of those who are in nontechnical professions are placed in overseas sales or marketing departments and some thought is put into matching their linguistic skills with those of the clients or branches they communicate with, there are incidences in which the workplaces they are assigned to do not correspond to their cultural skills. Among our interviewees, one European woman who spoke four European languages was placed in the China team and had to enlist Chinese colleagues' help in communicating with Chinese suppliers. Many firms recruit foreign employees as generic talent. As one human resource manager of a Kansai manufacturer proudly told us, "We don't ask the new recruits about their nationalities. That's the rule. There is no category of nationality in our personnel data file." While some foreign employees rise to the challenge to meet expectations, others feel handicapped working in environments where some of their skills are rendered insignificant.

Moreover, the insulated internal labor market cultivates a particular set of organizational and cultural practices that are increasingly seen as oppressive. Japanese salarymen instituted a particular model of corporate behavior. In order to "fit in" and demonstrate loyalty, company employees have to be willing to work overtime, resulting in long, unproductive work hours. After-hours drinking is another cultural practice that some foreign employees feel burdened by. The pecking order and gender roles people play at the dinner table irked many foreign employees, especially women. Yet, they also understand that not participating in these gatherings accentuates their outsider status.

In addition, the intraorganizational harmony that sustains the internal labor market suppresses and weakens mechanisms to curb abusive behavior. There are no guidelines about how the informal on-the-job training should be carried out. When employees are subjected to their supervisors' or coworkers' abusive behavior or microaggressions, there are no adequate disciplinary solutions to resolve the conflicts. Human relations play an important role in one's career advancement in an internal labor market because managers are promoted to their position rather than hired from the outside. A new recruit is often hushed, and the offender's behavior is excused. At one focus group with foreign women working in Japanese firms, we asked if they would report instances of harassment to the human resource managers. They all shook their heads. Japanese firms are "*uwasa shakai*" (gossipy worlds), they explained. If they complained, the information would likely circulate back to the offender and cause further retaliation.

In the end, though human resource managers emphasize the equal treatment of foreigners who are employed in the same categories as Japanese employees, practices centering on in-house careers are, in fact, discriminatory. On the one hand, as illustrated above, the high expectations for assimilation naturally penalize the cultures that do not fit, and thereby discriminate against individuals who have different expectations for workplace relations and professional life. Some respondents even believe harassment or microaggressions are deliberate, considering them a built-in selection process to weed out those who are deemed "unfit." On the other hand, as Waldenberger (2016) explains, the continuity of an in-house career pattern is contingent on labor market segmentation. To support the long-term stability of in-house careers, companies employ nonregular (*hiseiki*) workers to absorb business fluctuations as well as staff that have no demands for future careers. In Japanese firms, the traditional career segregation takes place along gender lines. Women are the buffer as well as the

sacrifice for sustaining this system. In the early periods of global talent employment, as I have observed among Chinese immigrants in Japan, foreign workers were also placed in niche positions or in temporary categories, both by employers' design and by employees' desire (Liu-Farrer 2011b). Yet, such niche positions usually do not lead to long-term career progression within the firm (Holbrow and Nagayoshi 2016). As a consequence of such practices, among the corporate leadership there is scarcely any diversity. This homogeneity that lacks both women and foreign managers sends a strong signal to foreign workers that corporate Japan is not a place to build a career. While there is the option to work for non-Japanese firms in Japan, as some informants do, it is not an option that is available or appeals to all. Therefore, many choose to exit the Japanese labor market.

Yu Lin, a Chinese woman, did not search for a job upon graduating from a Japanese university because of the gendered career practices she witnessed while interning at a Japanese city office. Yu Lin recalled that she was given exact instructions by the women office workers, from how to serve tea to what tone to use when writing an email. Most of them worked on administrative tasks. "Just chores," Yu Lin remarked. Over time, these women married and left. The situation repeated itself. "It might have improved in recent years, but gender discrimination is pretty serious in Japan. Girls would not get the chance to work independently or be given a mission." Yu Lin evaluated the situation and felt it would be hard for her as a woman—especially as a foreign woman—to pursue a meaningful career in Japan. So she left. When I interviewed her in 2007, she was working as a human resource manager at a Japanese firm's Shanghai branch. She felt she had made the right decision to return to China especially because some of her friends who remained in Japan had given up their career paths. She attributed this to an environment that "did not encourage them to pursue" their aspirations.

## The Missing Emotional Anchor

Mobility, even if ostensibly career related or economically induced, always involves reasons outside of the realm of employment. George left partly because he had not been able to establish a stable romantic relationship in Japan at the age of forty-one. The desire for intimate attachment factored significantly in his decision to leave Japan. As discussed in the previous chapter, emotional ties—either romantic, familial, or communal—bond people to the place. Their absence makes the idea of leaving easier to conceive. George attributed his inability to establish an intimate relationship to his meager income and small apartment, illustrating the intersection of career and personal life.

The role of emotional ties in one's settlement decision shows more saliently in George's narrative of his later decision to leave the United States again. After leaving Japan, George worked for a big high-tech company in California for the next five years, earning several times the income he had earned at Japanese firms. By the time we met for coffee in Tokyo, however, George had quit his job in the United States even though it was very lucrative. He was proud of his experience working for that high-tech company, but his personal life had not progressed as he had hoped and he remained single. Thus, his home country did not make him feel emotionally anchored. So, he decided to hit the road again.

George presented a rare case of a Western man for whom the decision to leave had to do with the failure to secure a romantic relationship in Japan. The opposite is often true. Global migration creates racialized sexual fields in many global cities in Asia. In Asian cities, white males often enjoy a sexual advantage while white women are marginalized (Farrer and Dale 2013). Statistically, as shown in chapter 2, the majority of North American and European migrants in Japan are male, and a substantial number of them stayed because they married Japanese nationals. In comparison, international marriages between Japanese women and men from other Asian developing countries are a fraction of those between Japanese men and Asian women.

Both in Japan and in China, I have encountered younger Chinese men who either wanted to return or had already returned to China because they needed a life partner and sometimes also a supportive social environment. Jing, a young man from Inner Mongolia, explained that he decided to go back to China primarily out of a desire to start a family (*chenggejia*). Jing went to Japan in 1998. After completing his studies, he went on to work in small towns as an engineer for a company that was a famous manufacturer of car parts. He had to work long hours. Due to heavy traffic, the commute consumed hours of his time. He usually left at 7 a.m. and returned at 11 p.m. He earned a decent income, but he did not have a girlfriend nor any time to look for one. In addition, he argued with his neighbor over a parking space. This stressful lifestyle, compounded with the lack of an intimate relationship and a "home," resulted in an intense feeling of loneliness. Before he went to Japan, he had always been surrounded by friends. It was only after he had arrived in Japan that he came to understand how solitude (*gudu*) and loneliness (*jimo*) felt. "It was such an unbearable feeling.... Because a person, after all, from the day he is born, needs to communicate with people on a daily basis. Everyday, if there is something unpleasant you can talk to your friends, your loved ones. [But in Japan] I sometimes did not dare to talk. Because if you talked [about unpleasant experiences] with parents, they couldn't help you but they would worry.... I thought I had better go back to China." Jing decided to look for opportunities to return to China. He was soon recruited by a Japanese company that was starting a manufacturing branch in Shanghai. At the time of our conversation in China, he was in an in-between situation. He was considered an employee dispatched by the company in Japan and maintained an engineer visa in Japan, but he was offered a local salary. He was no longer paying into the Japanese social security. Jing was not entirely satisfied with his job in China, but he did not regret his

decision to go back. Soon after he returned to China, his friend's wife introduced him to a friend of hers. He had been married for a year when we met. In terms of money, he shrugged, "As long as it is enough to live off of."

Marriages and relationships are often the ties that pull people away, too. While a number of immigrants marry Japanese nationals and stay in Japan, many others enter relationships with other immigrants. Their future mobility, then, becomes dependent on the relationship and family concerns. If one party decides to leave, the other usually follows. One Chinese man had a good professional job at a major Japanese company, but because his wife wanted to stay in academia after she finished a doctoral program, they decided to go back together. We also met an East European woman who married an Australian, and a Korean woman who fell in love with a Chinese Canadian. They, respectively, left for Australia and Canada when their husbands decided to return.

In summary, to leave Japan is a decision driven by compounded motives. Migration is an economic project with affective consequences. Material well-being is a necessary condition, but emotions also drive people's mobility decisions. Corporate Japan is not yet socially and institutionally prepared to receive immigrants. Its rigid career structure and organizational practices frustrate immigrants. Moreover, intimacy is central to one's sense of well-being. Migration is a lonely experiment. The pursuit of an intimate relationship and the need for an emotional anchor are therefore powerful drives in one's mobility decision.

## Home Calling

Some immigrants leave Japan because of the call from home, literally and figuratively. In our sample, the pull back to the home country has the strongest impact on younger Chinese migrants. Most of the Chinese migrants born after 1980, called the post-80 generation (*80 hou*) in China, were an only child. These young people receive their parents' and grandparents' total devotion. In 2011 and 2012, I conducted a study for which I interviewed Chinese undergraduate and graduate students

7

enrolled in a second-tier private university in Japan. There I noticed a significant difference between the younger generation of Chinese students and earlier cohorts of student migrants who arrived in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s and realized that rapid social changes had occurred in China. The early cohorts of students mostly relied on borrowed money or savings to finance their migration (Liu-Farrer 2011a). Having arrived in Japan with only several thousand yen, they immediately started working part-time jobs. Most of the post-80 generation, on the other hand, arrived with their parents paying for the first year of tuition and several months of living expenses. Though students still took on part-time jobs, they did so largely to supplement their living expenses. Unlike the students who arrived earlier, very few students we interviewed remitted money to their parents. In fact, the opposite was true. Family members in China often continued paying at least a portion of the tuition.

The parents willing to provide financial support were not necessarily wealthy. The majority of the parents were school teachers, medical doctors, and state employees. Some might have above-average salaries in China, but not on the level of Japanese incomes. Out of devotion, parents were willing to pay for their children's expenses. Yet, such devotion also functions as an economic and emotional investment. Students must take into consideration the expectation of return in both a financial and a literal sense when making decisions regarding their own futures. Contrary to the common characterization of only children being spoiled "little emperors," increasingly the young Chinese are employing a discourse of filial piety. The parents often hoped their children would return home. Many Chinese students obeyed their parents' wish and returned to China to look for jobs even though they themselves sometimes hoped to stay.

A woman student, Dan Zhou, changed her academic major after entering a Japanese university because of family pressure. She originally chose to study law and aspired to attain a law degree and work for a law firm afterward. Dan Zhou's Japanese professor offered encouragement, telling her that few other foreign students, besides her, were able to keep up with the curriculum. But her parents opposed the plan of her staying in Japan upon graduation. They also worried that a law degree from Japan would make it difficult for her to find a job in China. "They said that my making such a career decision ... was like ... marrying out a daughter at the age of 19 when I came abroad and never to return. My mother was crying at home ... so I agreed." Not liking economics or management, majors of study her father advised her to pursue, she chose Japanese literature.

The family may also possess social connections (or power) in the home country that can help students find employment. Even though they might have considered looking for opportunities in Japan, after evaluating their (in)ability to compete in the Japanese market, the more privileged students did not hesitate to return to China. Wang Sheng, a second-year MA student from Xi'an, liked the lifestyle in Japan and had originally planned to stay after graduation. But he felt that a degree from the second-tier university where he was studying would not allow him to compete with first-tier university graduates and gain employment in a prestigious firm in Japan. He decided to return to China, where he could immediately enter the company his father was working at. "I could get hired with my eyes closed.... And the company will definitely grow in 10 years, and then they will let me be a branch or department head."

The call from home can also be the lure of opportunities in the home country. Most immigrants in Japan come from less developed countries in Asia. However, several of these countries have been experiencing rapid development, tempting those who had left to pursue a better life abroad to now return. On the one hand, economic development in the home country creates a wide range of opportunities. On the other hand, witnessing their old peers riding the rising economic tide and getting more and more prosperous makes many immigrants ponder their mobility choices. Many Chinese migrants returned in the late 1990s and early 2000s because of the temptation of China's economic progress.

Among the early migrants from China, the impulse to leave China had to do with the country's poverty and the belief that one's situation could be improved through emigration. Emigration was so positively valued that the desire to leave China resulted in a "going abroad fever." Those who could leave tended to have more social and cultural resources. The crossing of borders, however, strips people of their former social status. The resumption of a student life in one's late twenties and thirties and labor-intensive part-time jobs challenge migrants' sense of self-worth. Moreover, the entry into corporate Japan starts from the bottom. These migrants, at the time of their graduating from degree programs, were much older than their Japanese counterparts but had to be treated as entry-level recruits. Their previous work experience was discounted, if not completely ignored. Not surprisingly, therefore, within a short period of time many abandoned these career tracks. Some consciously chose contract employment or small and medium-size firms in order to be able to either have more cash income or assume more significant roles, especially in transnational companies that conduct business in China. Witnessing China's rising, many Chinese immigrants were anxious about missing out on opportunities back home. Taking advantage of their work experiences in Japanese firms, especially their roles in transnational businesses, Chinese immigrants looked for positions as representatives or managers of Japanese firms' China branches. While a small number of them were able to maintain a Japanese salary, most returned as pseudoexpats; they received a comparatively high local salary but were not given expatriate packages (Liu-Farrer 2011a).

Since they had experience working in transnational businesses as well as a comprehension of Japan's needs, some attempted entrepreneurial endeavors. Among the twenty-five returned people I interviewed in China in 2007, six people—five men and one woman—started their own businesses. Xiao Yan, the woman entrepreneur, was initially sent over by her Japanese employer to start a project, which she had proposed, in China. When the project failed to develop, the company abandoned the plan and called her back. She, in turn, left the company and stayed on in China with the intent of opening her own business because she believed in the potential of that particular project.

In the 2010s, it is the Vietnamese migrants who are tempted by their own country's economic development. Enterprising Vietnamese migrants have been entering the study-abroad industry. The owner of a major Japanese language school in Hanoi that I visited in the winter of 2018 was a former student migrant to Japan. Vietnamese returnees are also important players in facilitating transnational labor mobility. Since Japan faces a severe shortage of care workers, former migrants partnered with Japanese providers and initiated programs to send Vietnamese youth to Japan to be trained to work in care facilities.

In addition to relationships and economic opportunities, another factor pulling people back to the home country is a form of emotional attachment to the place of origin. Alistair Thomson describes this as resembling "homesickness" and as a longing "for people and places" and "ways of life" in the home country as well as "not feeling at home" in the destination country (2005, 118). It is a dynamic that is equally about both the "remembered and imagined home" and life in the "here and now" (224). Many immigrants feel marginalized; they are foreigners in a strange land. Some of them, from the start, considered migration a life trajectory and their stay in Japan a sojourn. They usually look forward to the day their mission—children successfully entering college, the purchase of land in the home country, the retirement of Japanese spouses—will be accomplished. That is partly the reason most immigrants reject the idea of naturalizing. Instead, they pay into the pension system and buy houses in their home country. Whether they will actually return is often unclear. The idea of returning can offer comfort and a narrative for people to rationalize their migration.

There are also those who have culturally adapted and attained gainful employment but, nevertheless, long to return owing to a nagging sense of constraint and nonbelonging, as in the case of Zhang Tian. After spending fifteen years in Japan, Zhang Tian went back to China in 2005 when his son turned two. He worked in the transnational business between Japan and China in a prestigious trading firm and was a valued employee in the company. He emphasized that he adapted very well to Japanese society and never experienced discrimination inside or outside the workplace. Yet, he did not feel entirely at home. When work was not going well, "home" would present itself as a luring retreat (*tuilu*) from his stressful immigrant life. Moreover, after he married and had a child, he started to worry about his son's education. Zhang Tian thought an elite private education in Japan cost too much. At the same time, he did not want his son to be educated in a public school. He and his wife believed that teachers in public school did not take charge and that the parents of children in public school were irresponsible. They considered China a better option for their son's education. They bought an apartment in Shanghai and started looking for an opportunity to be sent back to China. After much negotiation, he returned to China as a pseudoexpat to manage his company's Shanghai office for reduced pay.



## The Globally Mobile

In some countries, the culture of migration is such that people with skills are expected to emigrate for greener pastures. In a globalized labor market, because certain skill sets are valued, there are also abundant opportunities for people to emigrate. Calvin, the thirty-seven-year-old Filipino engineer that appeared in chapter 1, had been laid off by a Japanese electronics company several months before our interview and was living off unemployment. Calvin had earned a degree in electronic engineering in the Philippines and worked for a company that manufactured computer parts. He had arrived in Tokyo eight years ago as the dependent of his wife, Marian. Marian worked in an embassy as a clerk. She initially came to Japan as a tourist to visit her aunt, who was a domestic worker for an embassy employee. During her stay, through the Filipino church community she learned of an opening at an embassy and landed the job. Calvin arrived in Japan the next year. He first worked as a bartender in Ginza for eleven months, and then he found a part-time job on an assembly line packing and cleaning electronic parts. Several months later he realized that one of the products he was assembling had come from his former company in the Philippines. With the director, he discussed his qualifications and applied for a quality engineer position. As he explained, “This is my expertise. I know how to process. I know what’s the problem.” He was offered the job. Unfortunately, the company ran into major financial troubles and had to downsize. Calvin thought he would be able to keep his job because the factory in the Philippines was still running, but he was unexpectedly let go. For the next several months he went to Hello Work—the official Japanese Employment Agency—regularly, to job hunt. It proved difficult. For his previous position he did not need to use Japanese often because he was communicating with overseas manufacturers. But his lack of Japanese language proficiency presented a major obstacle in finding the next job.

Before coming to Japan, Calvin and his wife had tried to apply for the skilled worker visa to enter Canada. They abandoned that plan when they found the opportunity to relocate to Japan. After being laid off and experiencing difficulty finding a new position, he again entertained this idea. This time he prepared the necessary documents and submitted the application. He was hoping to receive the results within a year.

Calvin had had other experience abroad before coming to Japan. He had worked in Thailand for eleven months. He found Bangkok much more developed than Manila and explained that he would not mind working there again. But if he succeeded in his immigration application to Canada, he would choose Canada. There he would apply for citizenship and sponsor his brother’s visa. His wife Marian had helped several of her siblings and cousins in the Philippines migrate to Japan, where most of them worked as domestic helpers for embassy workers. If the Canadian dream came true, he had an agreement with his wife that, because of the limited resources they would have, each would help one sibling enter the country.

Calvin’s family migration strategy is representative of the culture of migration in the Philippines (Asis 2006). People go to countries that offer a “good living.” Once the good living turns out to be less satisfying, migrants move again. Calvin’s migratory plan also shows that in a globalized economy, certain skill sets allow individuals to be employable globally. In our study, we find that some jobs are less and less place bound. In Singapore in the winter of 2015, I met an Australian business consultant, Justin, who had just relocated after living in Japan for over ten years. He was a communications coach and worked independently. He said during the decade he worked in Japan, the market for English coaching had not sufficiently developed. In Singapore, however, the demand for his services had increased. He pointed out that much of his business had moved online. He offered more classes on the internet than in a physical location. Some of his clients were in the Gulf area. He explained: “Singapore is a good place for me to take care of the entire Eastern Hemisphere.”

Similarly, Jason Kim, a Korean investment banker who graduated from a top Japanese university, also perceived his own career as geographically mobile. To our question, “In the future, like when you are fifty or sixty, where do you see yourself living?” He answered, “I am not particular [*kodawatte iru*] about countries. Japan, Korea, America, Australia are all okay. It will depend on in which place I can do my job the best. That would be the basis for my decision.”

## The River of Many Returns

Leaving Japan does not necessarily mean a permanent resettling back in the home country or relocating elsewhere. One of the reasons immigrants desire permanent residency status is because it allows them the opportunity to move in either direction. In reality, Japan is not an easy place to leave. Many immigrants, after living in Japan for some time, become accustomed to the social environment and cultural practices and often compare the environment with other places, which leads to a longing to return to Japan. For others, the home they long for might have become estranged, and the greener pastures they fantasize do not always materialize. Japan, then, once again attracts them. Permanent residency therefore functions as a hedge against both the risk and regret of leaving Japan.

When I saw Zhang Tian in 2007 in Shanghai, he was regretting his decision to return. Reflecting on his earlier complaint of “living under another person’s roof” and the “rash decision to return,” he said: “You see, whichever house you are in, you are under the roof. Roofs are all the same. It is in your own head that this is another person’s roof. It is your

overthinking, including getting Japanese nationality. Is it really that difficult? It is just a passport. You treat it too seriously. ... I couldn't stand it anymore [in Japan]. Every time, I would think, 'if this doesn't work out I will go back to China. I don't have to be here suffering in Japan.' Always this kind of mentality. It gets stronger and stronger... You thought of returning as inevitable, something you might as well do when you were still young." His return to China did not turn out to be what he had imagined. Zhang Tian was a northerner. Shanghai was not really his home either. He ran into all sorts of unpleasant experiences. The kinds of services he took for granted in Japan were nowhere to be found in China. His work was no less stressful. The living environment was worse than he experienced when visiting on business. On those occasions he stayed in five-star hotels and got around by taxi. As he put it, "It is a completely different experience of home when you have to fight yourself onto the jam-packed train to work every day." Luckily, his entire family had permanent residency. He was still paying his pension and social security in Japan. According to him, the door was still "half open" and he could potentially return to Japan.

Many Nikkei Brazilians, after leaving Japan, could not find desirable employment in Brazil and continued this circular migration pattern, shuttling between Japan and Brazil hoping to find more suitable opportunities (Sasaki 2013; LeBaron von Baeyer 2015). Roberto left Japan after several years of working on an assembly line. Using the money he saved, he managed to finish college in Brazil and returned as a graduate student. He returned with his wife, who accepted the repatriation money from the Japanese government in 2009 to return to Brazil. Legally she would not have been able to come back to work in Japan within five years after receiving the repatriation package. She came back because she was a spouse to Roberto.

George, the American, also returned to Japan, and that was why I was able to meet with him in 2015. While still looking for his life partner, he thought either Tokyo or Osaka would be the best place to start his business. He decided on Tokyo because he had more like-minded friends in the city than anywhere else. Moreover, Tokyo shaped his lifestyle expectations. While working at the high-tech company in the United States, he had already spent at least several months every year in Japan, working out of the multinational firm's Tokyo office. He missed the twenty-four-hour convenience stores on every street corner, the Starbucks that were open till 4 a.m., efficient public transportation, and the feeling of safety.

Some former trainees and technical interns have also returned. Although there have been reports of egregious labor and human rights violations in Japan's notorious technical training and technical intern system, some have had reasonable experiences and become fond of Japan. A few of them have managed to come back as students or by marrying the partners they fell in love with during their "internship." Sometimes, one's history of being a technical intern brands a person as less desirable as a long-term immigrant. One former Vietnamese trainee obtained only a student visa after several tries. Nonetheless, he ultimately succeeded in coming back to Japan.

If the former migrants themselves do not come back, their children do. Many younger Chinese students in Japan are second-generation Japan migrants. In the interviews with study-abroad agencies in Vietnam, too, we learned that it was often the parents who brought their children in to inquire about educational opportunities in Japan. Some of these parents had studied and worked in Japan themselves. As the administrator from one agency explained, Vietnamese parents wanted their children to go to Japan because they believed their children could receive a good education, which ultimately could grant them good job prospects given the growing presence of Japanese businesses in Vietnam. Moreover, from their own migration experiences, they believed that their children could learn good discipline and manners in Japan.

## Mobility as an Institutional, Instrumental, and Intimate Outcome

The Japanese government, like governments all over the world, tries to control the cross-border flows of people with the aim of keeping those desirable human resources in the country and discouraging low-wage laborers from staying. That is the reason that immigration policies in various countries often contain the words "immigration control." Ironically, the effort to control is very costly and often ineffective. This chapter, together with the previous one, stresses the contingency and fickleness of migratory trajectories. While migration regimes might be somewhat effective, mobility outcomes are by no means determined by selective policies or legal measures. Rather, institutional conditions, instrumental incentives, and emotional states are closely intertwined and often mutually influential in shaping individual mobility directions. Moreover, the significance of these different components changes along with one's life course and experiences. Consequently, neither staying nor leaving indicates a final act. Some respondents—for example, George (who appears in both chapters)—stayed for longer than they initially planned, left when they felt emotionally compelled to, and then returned, because of a range of instrumental considerations, lifestyle expectations, and affective impulses. The reasons for leaving and staying are complicated. Migration might start as an economic project, but it always has immediate affective consequences. Similarly, in order to be sustained, an emotional journey will need a material foundation. The changing significance of these different needs is what drives mobility or settlement decisions.