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Japanese Labour Migrants in Germany: The Role of Migration Industries

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how and when Japanese labour migrants use the offers of various migration industry actors in their migration to Germany. The ways in which Japanese university-educated migrants utilise services vary considerably depending on their entry channel, point in the migratory trajectory, migrant capital, and migratory goals. This paper places the individual and their interaction with migration infrastructure and industries at the centre of the analysis. It therefore addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on an empirically under-researched case, while simultaneously expanding the perspective to move beyond the role of migration industries in the early stages of migration to their role throughout the migratory trajectory. Based on qualitative data collected from migrants, migration industry actors, and experts on Japanese migrants in Germany, this explorative study sheds light on the interplay between agency and structure, as well as on the role of migration infrastructure and industry throughout the trajectories of different types of migrants.

1 | Introduction

The current discourse on migration in Germany happens between two extremes; political parties seek to outbid each other in their tough stance on immigration, often mainly referring to the entry of refugees. The attention is placed, in part, on migration brokers channelling migrants into the EU and NGOs providing humanitarian aid to those whose lives are at risk throughout the process. At the other end of the spectrum stands a concern about Germany's economic competitive ability given stagnating growth and demographic decline, to which the immigration of highly skilled workers could be the cure (BMWE 2025). The national but also regional governments try to attract international conglomerates to Germany by giving incentives for start-up companies and revising the entry procedures for skilled workers in 2020 to battle the skilled labour shortage (Tkotzyk 2024a, 21). The two debates are rarely connected, and the role migration industries play in channelling and retaining skilled migrants in Germany remains overlooked, constituting a gap.

Despite the common view that the Japanese community in Germany consists mainly of male expatriates and their families residing in Düsseldorf for a limited amount of time, the data tell a different story. In 2022, a third of all Japanese nationals in Germany held permanent residency, of whom 76% were women (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Among those with temporary residence titles, 12.4% held student visas, 40.6% held working visas and 39.2% held family visas (ibid.). In fact, the Japanese population in Germany is relatively diverse and, as a result, has varied needs (cf. Tkotzyk 2024b), as this paper will demonstrate. This qualitative study maps how and when different types of Japanese labour migrants in Germany use offers from migration industry actors throughout their migratory trajectories and finds differences by migration motivation, legal status, financial means, migrant capital, and to some degree also gender. At the centre stand two contrasting groups: expatriate workers on company assignment and persons on working-holiday visas as one example of self-initiated labour migrants. The paper thereby narrows a gap in the literature on the role of migration industry

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involvement throughout the migratory trajectory of Japanese 'skilled' migrants in Germany.

2 | Theoretical Framework: The Role of Migration Infrastructure and Migration Industry in Migratory Trajectories

In seeking to explain where international migrants go, and why and when they move on, academic research has often focused on macro-, meso- or micro-level factors in isolation and from singular disciplines. To bridge this divide, Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S143) propose examining migration infrastructure:

Migration is determined neither by autonomous markets, policy logic, nor according to individual migrant agency, but is rather constituted by a multitude of activities, practices, and technologies that must be considered in specific contexts. Migration infrastructure provides a framework that offers analytical order to these activities without assigning them to pre-given categories.

What constitutes migration infrastructure remains somewhat contested, and definitions can be broad. For example, Cranston and Duplan identify multinational companies, universities, but also visa policies as infrastructures together shaping 'who can migrate and for how long' (Cranston and Duplan 2023, 332). Düvell and Preiss (2022, 85) conceptualise migration infrastructure to include the following:

(a) regular and irregular actors and structure; (b) state, quasi-state and non-state actors; (c) commercial and non-commercial actors and structures; and (d) material, architectural, technical and digital infrastructures. [...] Finally, the concept covers (e) practices of and experiences with these infrastructures.

Migration infrastructure research 'employs a materialist perspective on migration', focusing on the meso-level (Bastide and Yeoh 2025, 5). Most literature on migration infrastructure focuses solely on its role in the initial stages of migration, the channelling of migrants and the early stages of being in a new place (see Meeus et al. 2019 for a notable exception). Yet, migration is a process, not an event (Kley 2011). After initial relocation (post-action), 'migration' is not over, instead, migrants may start building a life and display settling practices, or reconsider their locational choices, resulting in moving back or on (Achenbach 2017). Research on migration industries has both included the infrastructure depicted above, and additionally analysed the role of various actors in facilitating not only initial mobility but also settlement and onward migration (Faist 2014, 42; Cranston et al. 2018, 543; Della Puppa et al. 2024, 43). Yet, the research on the role of migration industries on settlement remains fragmented (for an overview see Della Puppa et al. 2024, 48–50), and definitions opaque. Spaan and Hillmann (2013, 69) explain that migration industry actors may be narrowly defined

as brokers of illegal border-crossings and irregular work, but also widely to include

inter alia recruitment and travel agencies, government training centers, educational institutions, medical services, advertisers, migration brokers, document suppliers/forgers, notaries, usurers and migrant non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In addition to these commercial and state actors, formal and informal institutions and NGOs, social contacts of (potential) migrants form part of migration industry actors that together shape mobility aspirations and migratory trajectories (ibid., 69–70). There is significant overlap between actors covered in migration infrastructures and migration industries literature; the main difference concerns not only the timing but also the function. Infrastructures analyse the means of mobility, facilitating and shaping how migrants move (ibid., 5). The public sector, consisting of but not limited to government agencies shaping the migration experience, largely belongs to infrastructures, yet, has also been partially examined through a migration industry lens. Private companies clearly constitute part of migration infrastructure (Cranston and Duplan 2023), yet also belong to migration industries for their commercial interest in moving employees, interacting with other actors from the migration industries to facilitate said mobility.¹ The research on migration industries remains an emerging field, and the consensus now is that the various actors cannot be neatly positioned into 'clearly demarcated and static sub-domains' (Cranston et al. 2018, 550); instead, they interact and overlap, together influencing individuals' migration experiences.²

Existing literature both on migration infrastructures and industries focuses on structures and institutions and pays limited attention to individual agency. Yet, to solve the puzzle of why some individuals—under otherwise comparable circumstances—choose to stay while others move on, it is essential to analyse human mobility through a humanising framework (Fresnoza-Flot 2024). In fact, migrants may strategically use different services provided by migration industries in addition to individual networks to devise and realise migration plans pre- and post-migration (Della Puppa et al. 2024, 51). In their seminal paper on the interplay of migration trajectories and industries, Spaan and Hillmann (2013, 71) explain that migrants' aspirations for further mobility or settlement and their interactions with actors from the migration industries depend in part on 'an interplay between culture, gender, legal status, class and (negotiating) power'. Over time, migrants invest in their migrant capital, 'meaning informal resources, such as knowledge of the field and access to resources and networks' (Spaan and Hillmann 2013, 66). Spaan and Hillmann highlight how structural differences influence uses of migration industry services and individual experiences of migration over time. This paper expands on this view by examining how infrastructures shape mobility trajectories, and when and how which migrants interact with actors from the migration industries, thereby placing individual experiences at the centre of the analysis in relation to migration industries. By mapping migrants' use of services offered by migration industries, the paper refines our understanding of the

interrelatedness of migration infrastructure and industries, on the reproduction of privilege in migration, and differences by nationality, class, gender, or skills in relying on said services. It consequently contributes to current literature by empirically addressing an under-researched case of privileged North–North migrants.

3 | Methodology

For this paper, the roles of migration infrastructure and migration industry actors in the experiences of Japanese expatriate workers and working-holiday makers in Germany are analysed. Neither of these two groups of migrants is a typical case generally covered in the literature on self-initiated labour migration, which is in part due to the departure already being built into the entry channel; working-holiday visas only enable a legal stay as a working-holiday maker of 1 year, while expatriates on company assignment are required to move on or back after a few years of stay. Yet, several study participants used the working-holiday visa as a comparatively generous means of enabling the migrant to find employment that could sponsor a working visa. Expatriates, while usually complying with company requirements, can be considered skilled workers in Germany for several years, and some do become self-initiated immigrants in Germany instead of moving again on expatriate assignment (cf. Tkotzyk 2024b).

The data base for this study comprises semi-structured interviews with 15 experts, conducted between August 2023 and July 2024, and 19 migrants, interviewed between September 2023 and May 2024; follow-up interviews with selected informants from both groups were conducted up to August 2025. Ethical clearance was acquired from the AspirE project's coordinating institution.³ Selected experts also participated in three focus group discussions on Japanese migration to Germany. Experts were active in different parts of Germany in legal (3), cultural or artistic (9) and economic (6) services, though three held overlapping roles, working across both economic (2) or legal (1) and cultural sectors. Further information can be found in the appendix.

In addition, the paper draws from a selection from the data set of semi-structured interviews (40 total). The analysed sample contains 19 migrants, three of whom entered Germany as expatriate workers (2f/1 m, age range 27–36) and 16 who at one point held a working-holiday visa for a variety of purposes (12f/4 m, age range 21–31 at time of entry; age range 21–45 at time of interview). Of these 19 respondents, eight migrants participated in a mapping of their social networks and four submitted video diaries over the course of 1 year.⁴ All but one 21-year-old working-holiday maker held at least a bachelor's degree. Lengths of stay differed between a few weeks and almost two decades. At the time of the interviews, one female expatriate worker had switched to a local contract in Germany with the same Japanese employer, one female and one male expatriate worker were to return to Japan soon after participation in the study. All three were skilled employees in large Japanese companies, but not yet members of senior management, thereby complementing expert commentary that focused largely on senior management expatriates. The group of working-holiday visa holders is quite diverse; only two entered Germany with the intention to return after a year of

experiencing life in Germany. The other 14 have used the visa in a strategic way with the intention of changing their working-holiday visas to working, spousal, apprentice or student visas: three women entered Germany with the intention of learning a Germany-specific skill that they hoped to integrate into their professional lives in Japan, two men are athletes trying to build an international career. The remaining nine migrants used the working-holiday visa to prepare for long-term stays in Germany to find stable employment (6 women), to find the right place to study (1 woman) or an apprenticeship (*Ausbildung*, 1 woman), or to be with a spouse who migrated to learn a Germany-specific skill (1 man). These previous working-holiday makers now hold working or training visas, permanent residency, or a family visa.

For the purposes of this paper, the different types of data (triangulation of interview data from (a) experts and from (b) migrants including also network maps and video diaries, with (c) literature) were analysed thematically in close discursive reading to identify patterns of migration industry–migrant interactions as well as differences and similarities within them. The appendix lists data limitations and addresses issues related to researcher positionality.

4 | Japanese Labour Migrants' Involvement With Migration Infrastructure and Industries

This section explores the roles of migration infrastructure and industries in Japanese labour migration into various places in Germany. Section 4.1 begins by examining the regulatory level due to its foundational role in structuring all subsequent migrant experiences, presenting national immigration policies that shape the migration of Japanese nationals to Germany, followed by regional variations in how a Japanese presence is received and regulated. It thereby addresses migration infrastructure that shapes migratory trajectories in the form of migration policies regulating duration of legal stay and activities, and in the form of multinational companies channelling employees into specific places in Germany. Section 4.2 then presents the interplay of these migration infrastructures and migration industry actors as well as individual migrants' use of services offered by the migration industries. It differentiates not only by the two migration channels, but also by the point in the migratory trajectory for using various services.

4.1 | Migration Infrastructure: National Policies and Regional Variations

At the national level, immigration policies shape the migration of Japanese nationals into Germany. As early as the 1950s, it was possible for Japanese white-collar expatriate workers, sent by their companies to German subsidiaries, to reside in Germany for several years (Tkotzyk 2024a, 15). In 2000, Germany and Japan introduced a reciprocal working-holiday arrangement, allowing individuals aged 18 to 30 to live and work in the other country for up to 1 year (MOFA 2024). In line with broader efforts to retain (skilled) workers, switching between visa categories was eased—for example, enabling transitions from working-holiday to working visas. Japanese nationals belong to a group of privileged passport holders for whom simplified regulations

apply, including visa-free entry and relaxed requirements for the entry of spouses. It is important to note, however, that visa-free entry does not authorise employment; migrants must obtain a residence title permitting professional activities (beyond brief business visits).⁵ These comparatively open immigration policies for skilled and family migrants are designed to facilitate the longer-term stay of migrants who are considered economically beneficial to the country (cf. Montag 2001; Tkotzyk 2024a).

While the national level provides the framework for migration into Germany, local specificities also influence both mobility into and decisions to remain within particular regions. A brief historical background is necessary to understand the geographical distribution of Japanese companies in Germany and, by extension, the availability of Japanese networks and services. In the 1950s, various Japanese companies expressed interest in cooperating with Germany, both to facilitate trade and to acquire tools and steel for Japan's post-war reconstruction and the modernisation of its production. Prior to the war, Japanese companies had been most active in Berlin and Hamburg (Plett 2023, 9; Tkotzyk 2024b, 125, 146). Yet, in line with industrial policy directives issued by Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Japanese companies relocated to Düsseldorf for its strong connections to heavy industry (Plett 2023, 196; Tkotzyk 2024b, 126), as the city served as the administrative centre for industrial activity in the Ruhr Area. Consequently, Japanese wholesale houses withdrew from Hamburg in favour of Düsseldorf and its surrounding areas. Institutions such as JETRO, the Bank of Japan, and other organisations also established a presence in this emerging hub for Japanese businesses in Germany (Plett 2023, 197; Tkotzyk 2024b, 126). Under the pressure of the resident Japanese business community and their companies, an increasing number of services for expatriates and their families became available (Plett 2023, 199). Despite push-back from regional economic circles and the local business community in some industries (Jäger 2017, 23), the city fairly quickly embraced the growing Japanese community as part of its city marketing strategy and integrated support for the Japanese presence into its broader economic development plan.⁶

Glebe et al. (1999, 435) found that each region in Germany typically hosts specific industries: Frankfurt is the banking capital; Hamburg and Düsseldorf have developed as trade centres (albeit not to the same degree); and Munich is more diversified, accommodating both technological and cultural sectors.⁷ Berlin—once a centre of Japanese activity prior to the war—lost prominence due to its isolated position in divided post-war Germany. Despite this diverse portfolio of Japanese engagement across Germany, there are very few in-depth studies of Japanese communities outside Düsseldorf (see Tkotzyk 2024b for a notable exception).

In conclusion, beyond national-level regulations, financial and administrative support at the local level has increasingly influenced the attraction and retention of Japanese businesses and communities. This remains true today: whether parent companies seeking to establish European subsidiaries or start-up entrepreneurs determining where best to locate their operations, decision makers assess not only economic, geographical and legal infrastructure, but also factors such as access to potential employees, favourable taxation systems and incentives offered by national or local governments.

4.2 | Labour Migrants' Use of Migration Industry Services

This section examines which migrant groups use which services offered by migration industry actors throughout their migratory trajectories, examining expatriates first and working-holiday entrants second. The two groups of labour migrants differ not only in terms of financial, emotional, cultural and social resources, but they also access different services provided by migration industry actors and in different ways, as the following will show.

In the early stages of migration, all migrants need to carry out similar actions in preparation of their time abroad, ranging from the legal level of visa applications to the administrative level of applying for healthcare, finding adequate insurance and opening bank accounts. Finding housing and securing an income works differently for the two groups of labour migrants examined below, and the frequency and timing of moving and switching jobs may also differ. Several types of services are used throughout migration, ranging from information gathered through social media and networks to the use of professional services such as relocation agencies or lawyers, provided by universities or companies and NGOs. In the later stages of migration, depending on migrants' resources and, again, the goals of migration, migrants will re-evaluate their own and their family's educational or employment choices, their financial investments (e.g., pensions), and social engagements. In the following, we start with the interplay of migration infrastructure and industries in expatriate workers' assignments in Germany, and then move on to self-initiated labour migrants.

4.2.1 | Expatriate Workers and the Interplay Between Migration Infrastructure and Industry

For expatriate workers—and their families—the company is the primary determinant of whether, where and when to relocate. The company forms part of migration infrastructure (Cranston and Duplan 2023, 332), channelling the migrant into a specific place in Germany. In this endeavour 'to move their employees globally', multinational corporations pay for services by migration industry actors; therefore, it is the company that is the customer and not the migrants themselves (Cranston 2018, 628). The interplay between the company as part of infrastructure and migration industry actors is therefore decisive for the how—or the comfort—of expatriates' relocations. On the infrastructural level, the mechanisms through which placements occur vary by company: in some cases, more junior employees may express interest in working abroad and submit a list of preferred locations; in most cases, however, employees have limited influence over their assignment:

So, when people come for work, then I think they have little decision power, in my experience: the company is already here, the company needs someone, this person fits and could not (laughs) escape, so the person matches the position and then needs to do the job for 3 to 6 years.

(Frankfurt business expert, 12 July 2024)

As the statement illustrates, decision-making power over the location and length of stay does not necessarily lie with the migrant; it is usually determined by the employer. In some cases, employees may request an extension, but this is not guaranteed. Cranston outlines a ‘life cycle’ of expatriate migration in the corporate context, consisting of ‘selection, preparation, relocation, adjustment, performance and repatriation’ (Cranston 2018, 631). This temporal lens is echoed in this section, however, we place the interactions of the individual expatriate with migration industry actors at the centre of our analysis, thereby highlighting different levels of agency in expatriates’ mobility decisions.

4.2.1.1 | Early Stages of Migration: The Expatriate Package Deal. In a first step, this section examines the involvement of actors from the migration industries in the relocation process of senior employees, who usually receive a full-package deal for relocation, while mid-level or junior staff often only profit from more basic support. Once the decision to relocate top-level staff is made, various migration industry actors become involved: In-house or hired external lawyers assist with registering the local company director in the commercial register, frequently manage work permit applications, and may coordinate with relevant government agencies (Düsseldorf lawyer, 28 September 2023; Frankfurt lawyers, 05 and 06 October 2023). Company-hired relocation services organise the international move and assist with securing rental accommodation. On the ground, the subsidiary may order local staff to help in administrative issues such as opening bank accounts and finalising health insurance (Frankfurt business expert, 12 July 2024). The efficiency and smoothness of the relocation and work start depend heavily on local bureaucracy and the company’s preparatory efforts—particularly in regard to work permits. Japanese nationals are typically permitted to work in nearly any job without extensive scrutiny (§26 Beschäftigungsverordnung). Yet, the duration and complexity of acquiring the work permit vary significantly depending on the region and the responsible official. In Düsseldorf, where officials are accustomed to handling Japanese contracts, approval is granted almost automatically. In other locations, however, authorities may conduct more in-depth investigations, leading to longer processing times (Düsseldorf lawyer, 28 September 2023; Frankfurt lawyer, 05 October 2023). Company size and career level of the expatriate also play a role in the support offered to them (Hamburg cultural exchange expert, 04 August 2025), with larger firms—and associated larger budgets—and more senior professionals receiving more support than junior professionals or in smaller companies. Facilitation with visa applications, provisions for health care and financial assistance for the move are always given, yet support during the early stages of adjusting to life in Germany—finding housing, help with accessing medical care—differ greatly. One male employee who moved to Germany on company assignment after working in Japan for 12 years explained that he had to secure his own housing, but simply moved into his predecessor’s apartment after staying in a hotel during the transition period.

Up to this point, this paper fed into the now debunked narrative of skilled workers moving largely as male, single individuals (see also Kofman and Raghuram 2006; Cranston and Tan 2023). However, while the majority of Japanese expatriates in Germany is male, the expatriate system is undergoing change. While among the minority of women on expatriate assignment the

majority was single (Ben-Ari and Vanessa 2013), the expectation—and structural prerequisite—for the top-level expatriation system to function has long been that a male expatriate worker relocates with his family (NRW cultural exchange expert, 09 October 2023). This is based on the assumption that the wife is able to move freely, that is, if the wife was not employed or quit her job to enable the family’s transnational but also transregional mobility (Fujita 2021, 166). In these cases, the accompanying wife cares for both the husband and the children, who are expected to continue their schooling abroad. Within the framework of migration industries, the availability of Japanese-level schooling is therefore essential for companies aiming to offer attractive working conditions for international assignments. However, Japanese society is undergoing gradual change. The traditional ‘heteronormative marital contract’ or the ‘corporate gender contract’ as Goldstein-Gidoni (2019) describes it, is slowly losing its normative power. Increasingly, families are rejecting the conventional division of labour between a career-oriented husband and a care-giving housewife, in part for economic reasons. The number of dual-income households is rising (Schad-Seifert 2021). These couples often seek alternative arrangements (cf. Vyletalova (2026) on dual-career couples in Geneva): for instance, both spouses may aim to be placed overseas in the same city, or the accompanying spouse may seek local employment or freelance work—although this is sometimes explicitly prohibited by the expatriate worker’s employer (focus group discussion, 25 November 2024). In other cases, for career or family reasons, one spouse may relocate to Germany alone. These changes in international work and family arrangements challenge current depictions of the Japanese expatriate system, but also of skilled family migration in which usually one partner is considered a ‘trailing spouse’ (Wadhwa 2025; Yeoh et al. 2000), diversifying our view on transnational family arrangements in skilled migration. Another notable shift in Japanese society is the rising number of men and women who remain unmarried (Schad-Seifert 2019), resulting in a growing proportion of single individuals—both male and female—relocating abroad (NRW cultural exchange expert, 09 October 2023). All three mid-career expatriates interviewed for this study fit the trend in that all of them relocated as singles. While the two women did not discuss marriage plans at all, the male expatriate actively and successfully searched for a partner while in Japan on holiday (*konkatsu*), conforming to gender roles in Japan that see a married salaryman as the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Cook 2020).

4.2.1.2 | Living in Germany: Career-Oriented and Work-Life Balance. As we have shown above, expatriates’ mobility on higher levels of seniority is largely shaped by migration industry actors, with little evidence of self-initiated preparation. When it comes to the following phases in the expatriate life cycle, namely adjustment and performance, as well as return or retention (see Cranston 2018, 631), levels of agency differ by family status, seniority, and language skill. Over the phases of adjustment and performance during the designated time abroad, we find that expatriate workers’ attitudes towards life in Germany evolve. One expert observed that during the first year, expatriates often live in a bubble, having little contact with the local population and working long hours. They rely on services provided by migration industry agents such as social, cultural, and professional events targeting the Japanese community. In the second year, however, a shift often occurs:

With many expatriates, no matter whether they have come here on their own volition or not, I have experienced that they continue the Japanese working styles during their first year [in Germany], and from the second year they work like Germans. And then they get to this point, ‘well, actually... this can be done without overtime. I could actually take my holidays’. And then they do.

(Frankfurt business expert, 12 July 2024)

Whether this shift also affects their use of migration industry offers depends on a number of inter-related factors; expatriates moving with their families tend to remain in Japan-centric networks largely consisting of Japanese residing in Germany temporarily, as the migrants in the sample and several experts agreed. This might be motivated by the wish to create minimal disruption to the children's education that targets a reintegration into the Japanese schooling system. To which degree expatriates seek ‘local’ contacts also depends on the location (Hamburg cultural exchange expert, 04 August 2025); Düsseldorf offers an extensive portfolio of Japan-centric activities, while other places lack opportunities for community engagement, resulting in higher levels of online engagement or of more diverse networks (cf. Tkotzyk 2024b). In bigger cities, expatriates without German language skills—who constitute the majority—have more opportunities to expand their networks with English, while in Düsseldorf they can rely on Japanese (Düsseldorf business expert, 05 December 2023). Due to a lack of language and cultural skills, but also time, motivation and opportunities to mingle with locals, a sense of distance often persists between expatriates and the local population, resulting in a lack of belonging (Frankfurt business expert, 12 July 2024). Expatriates therefore tend to continue to use offers from the migration industries in the forms of Japanese schools, free-time and business networking opportunities, enjoying new lifestyles yet continuing to prepare for relocation for business purposes.

Single—and, importantly, also more junior—expatriate workers interviewed for this study, however, reported that this shift in working-styles motivated them to invest further into their network with locals. The consequences of this shift in mindset and social behaviour differ. Anecdotal evidence from the larger study suggests that in addition to family status, gender also plays a role: despite enjoying higher work–life balance in Germany, men seem to envision better upward career mobility in Japan. The majority of women in the sample seek ways to stay in Germany; one expatriate changed to a local contract for the promise of higher work–life balance and better upward career mobility despite the pay cut and public as opposed to private insurance that came with the switch.

In conclusion, we observed that expatriates may exert some agency over the duration of stay—since in some cases it is possible to extend or shorten the assignment—and, in certain situations, over their subsequent mobility decisions. Yet, most experts suggest that while expatriates appreciate the greater sense of freedom they experience abroad, they ultimately accept repatriation as an inevitable part of the assignment (NRW cultural exchange expert, 21 August 2023). The company then remains the channelling institution of migration infrastructure that places

the expatriate—and potentially their family—into a new place, whether Japan or elsewhere, offering help through paid services. Throughout their migratory trajectories among expatriate workers, consumption of migration industry offers differ by family status, seniority, and language skill; to which degree they differ by gender remains inconclusive due to data limitations.

4.2.2 | Working-Holiday Makers as Self-Initiated Labour Migrants

The group of self-initiated Japanese labour migrants in Germany is very diverse and ranges from working-holiday makers to entrepreneurs, artists, and employees. Their ways into Germany differ greatly; some use working-holiday or tourist visas as stepping stones to securing employment or training—for example, former students seeking a way back in. This section will focus solely on Japanese working-holiday makers.

The previous section has looked into expatriates, for whom the companies were the primary target of migration industry actors to sell their services; in the case of individual migrants of different language skills and familiarity with German administration, budgets and access may be very different throughout their migratory trajectory. In fact, one expert from Hamburg explains that the needs differ strongly between various groups of labour migrants: those without German language skills or knowledge of German regulations regularly rely on their NGO for help with medical translations—while companies would pay a fee for the same services for their expatriate workers—but also with

apartment rental issues, for example. Or consultations, legal consultations, disputes, problems with the landlord or also contracts of all sorts and obligations. Liability for what you have and what you don't know. Pensions.

(Hamburg cultural exchange expert, 23 October 2023)

Notably, these services fall into Spaan and Hillmann's (2013, 69) categorisation of migration industries.

Working-holiday makers form a highly diverse group, despite the prevailing image of lifestyle migrants taking a gap year to pursue adventure—an image that applied to only two participants in the present study, of whom one has since returned and built a life in Germany. The majority of study participants used the working-holiday visa as an entry channel for longer-term stays in Germany and fell into three broad categories: athletes, who are taken as an example of migrants without Germany-specific knowledge using agents for their entries; future entrepreneurs investing in Germany-specific expertise; and migrants who had previously been to Germany and now use the visa to search for long-term employment. The role of migration industry actors in shaping their experience varied significantly depending on their intended length of stay and individual goals.

The first group—athletes—relied on migration industry actors in the form of sports managers, who facilitated team placements and assisted in securing housing. These migrants had limited influence over where they were placed, instead following market

dynamics and the networks of their sports management. They usually had little knowledge of Germany other than that it had more promising programmes and better infrastructure to support athletes to turn professional than other countries including Japan. Once in Germany, they had help from NGOs in navigating German bureaucracy of insurance and bank matters as well as housing. After arrival, many needed to work part-time (as their sports salaries were not high enough to make a living) and relied on Japan-specific networks or websites. Whether young, single athletes remained abroad or moved back after their working-holiday visa expired depended largely on their ability to secure contracts in order to make a living and to obtain a visa. This group uses formal migration industry actors the most, that is, agents who facilitate placements and administrative issues, albeit on a much lower level than for expatriates (or players in higher leagues).

The second group—future entrepreneurs—typically came to Germany to acquire country-specific expertise in areas such as education, industrial products, or food. They either engaged in self-directed study or sought employment in relevant industries. In all cases within the sample, these individuals extended their stay by switching to working or training visas. In choosing where to go, they relied on personal networks, proximity to relevant business hubs, or lifestyle preferences. Notably, these entrepreneurs aimed to build businesses in Japan. Many relied on social media and NGOs in navigating German bureaucracy of health insurance, banking, and housing. Especially for housing, those without German language skills used Japanese-language websites and often moved into shared housing with other Japanese citizens. Many initially mainly relied on Japan-specific networks (whether online or physically), yet with improving language skills started feeling more comfortable in the German environment despite troubles forming deeper friendships. In contrast to the expatriate workers who also initially have the firm intention of returning to Japan, these future entrepreneurs depend on understanding a Germany-specific issue deeply, raising their motivation to learn German and immerse themselves in the culture. Despite their short-term intention of only acquiring enough knowledge to build a business at home, they extended their stays. This is due to a number of factors, such as the extensive preparatory work necessary to actually get the business off the ground in Japan, including saving enough money (which many explain is easier to do in Germany than Japan due to the current weakness of the Yen), preparing networks and documents, and renting a space in Japan. They therefore in their return migration rely on ‘migration’ infrastructure and industries in Japan. On the other hand, circumstances in Germany delay plans: some found German partners and needed time to undertake the necessary steps for the partner to move with them; others took longer to learn German and therefore also to acquire the product-specific skills.

The third group of working-holiday makers used the visa strategically outside of its officially intended purpose. These participants, all women, were former students in Germany seeking a way to return. Many invested the time given by the working-holiday visa not to travel and work in different businesses, but instead elevated their German skills and applied for jobs throughout the country. Most initially chose Berlin for lifestyle reasons or selected other urban centres where they had previously lived, driven by nostalgia,

friendship networks, familiarity, and personal preferences. As this group has German skills and previous experience in navigating German bureaucracy, they relied less on NGOs and more on their individual networks in setting up bank accounts, health insurance and housing—relying on a mix of German and Japanese websites to find (shared) apartments. Their use of migration industry offers differs strongly from the other two groups and is highly individualised. Most successfully found employment after 1 year, yet, some chose to apply for further education to extend their stays or for visa purposes. Once they began working or undertaking formal training, they typically applied across the country, in a manner similar to recent graduates. A few relocated to regions that match their professional profiles (e.g., banking in Frankfurt), while the others found their first job in Düsseldorf, drawn by the strong presence of Japanese businesses. These companies often provide a more accessible first point of employment than others, particularly for early-career professionals. Many express that the German hiring system lacks transparency; they better understand the Japanese hiring system and how to market their skills to Japanese businesses. However, over time, they seek employment in international or German businesses for better work–life balance and skill development, using their German language skills and networks. These workers often make a point of seeking out friendships outside of the Japanese community, yet, once they have children some seek to re-engage with the Japanese community (Japanese schools, kindergartens or sports) to strengthen their children’s understanding of Japanese culture. Others express difficulty in making German friends or missing Japanese culture after a while and seek out offers by Japanese NGOs in their free time.

Per definition, the working-holiday visa forms part of migration infrastructure; yet different actors from the migration industries, such as agents or NGOs, but also social contacts, are decisive for migrants’ decisions of where to settle and for how long. For the group of athletes, similarly to expatriate workers, migration industry actors provide services ranging from visa applications to employment or training, housing, and administrative help. The other two groups are more agentic, investing heavily in their migrant capital (Spaan and Hillmann 2013, 66), and becoming familiar with German culture, products, administration, and language. In part due to a lack of financial capital to invest in paid services in their early migration process on the one hand, and higher social and cultural capital that they use to access information about administrative issues on the other, these migrants show vastly different patterns of engagement with migration industry actors. The two more agentic groups differ in their temporal outlook and migration goals in Germany; while the former seek to eventually capitalise upon their time in Germany and their Germany-specific skills outside of Germany, the others seek to settle. As do expatriate workers, many develop a preference for working styles in Germany over Japan, which is one important aspect in staying aspirations. Their involvement with the migration industries changes over the life course and the migratory trajectory.

5 | Discussion

This study on Japanese labour migrants in Germany aimed at narrowing the research gap on the role of migration industry actors and individual agency of the migrants in their pre- and

post-relocation migration experiences. Rather than explaining why migrants stay or move on, it explored which types of migrants access which migration industry offers and why. It thereby sought to broaden the attention from only the early stages of migration to also include post-action stages when migrants re-evaluate their locational decisions, prepare return or onward migration or display settling practices.

5.1 | Reproduction of Privilege

For Japanese labour migrants in Germany, migration infrastructure included companies channelling migrants into specific regions within Germany, both as expatriate workers on company assignment and as workers on local contracts especially in the early career phase in Germany. Analysis shows that Japanese companies reproduce privilege in migration; they equip expatriate workers with attractive payment and support structures, for which they rely on migration industry actors, while treating Japanese workers on local contracts differently in terms of salaries, health insurance and support structures. While this is not surprising given different levels of seniority and availability of resources, the effect is the reproduction of privilege or inequality. Importantly, this is not skill-based, as becomes clear by the downgrading of expatriate workers moving into local contracts. Therefore, this study adds to the current literature (Cranston and Duplan 2023) in its focus on the ongoing reproduction of privilege and inequalities in employment practices post-relocation by globalised companies.

5.2 | Migration Infrastructure Influences Migratory Trajectories

Migration policies are used differently by the diverse migrant groups in Germany, and they result in different engagement of migration industry actors. The first point can be illustrated by the various uses of the working-holiday visa that provides easy access to the German labour market for a limited amount of time and can be used as a stepping stone to longer stays on training, working, or also family visas by migrants of various interests. The second point relates to the fact that expatriates could enter Germany visa-free but require a work permit to begin business activities. This is one reason migration industry actors such as lawyers continue to make profitable business out of Japanese expatriate migration, acting as intermediaries between German immigration administration and international business.

Migration infrastructure determines trajectories also in the sense that migration policies equip the migrants with different legal lengths of stay. Paired with differences in financial means and access to support structures, this impacts psychological security. The majority of expatriates remain in their visa category and know potential problems will be handled by their companies or paid migration industry actors, assured that their visas and livelihood are secured. Their lack of agency in deciding about when and where they will move is juxtaposed with comfort and convenience concerning administrative issues. By contrast, those on working-holiday visas are under differing amounts of stress to secure the subsequent visa; they often use savings or take out loans until they earn enough on their

German contracts to make a living. Given a comparative lack of financial means, they invest time to research the relevant information and rely on NGOs or social contacts to navigate German bureaucracy. After 1 year at the latest, they need to have secured a working or training visa to be able to stay abroad. This connects to Spaan and Hillmann's (2013, 71) findings that 'legal status, class and (negotiating) power' influence interactions with migration industry actors. What this paper adds is a focus on the emotional perspective that forms part of Fresnoza-Flot's (2024) humanising framework; while we can understand from the data that emotions affect migration experiences, the results of this for further mobility and engagement with migration industry actors remain to be researched further.

5.3 | Differences in Uses of Migration Industry Offers Over Time and by Goals and Capital

There is variance in how labour migrants use the various offers by the migration industries, as this differs by language skill, migrant and social but also financial capital, and length of intended stay as well as point in the migratory trajectory. Early in their migration process, athletes rely on their agents for placement and on the migration industry actors these agents hire for visas, housing, and any administrative issue—similar to expatriates. The budget is much lower, and the services bought are much less comprehensive. The knowledge of Germany and German language is similarly limited, and the choice of place is usually not well-informed. However, over time the use of migration industry offers differs; by playing in German teams, often housing with Japanese flatmates and working part-time in Japanese businesses, these athletes can often quickly draw upon social contacts to help with any migration-related issue they encounter without paying a fee. The second group within the working-holiday group are future entrepreneurs in Japan. They have limited intentions of staying in Germany; yet, a higher interest in acquiring Germany-specific skills including the language. Upon arrival, they usually rely on their own research in social media, governmental and non-governmental online information in Japanese and other languages, and social contacts to decide on a location and appropriate visa to fulfil their goals. At the beginning of their stays, most lack German language skills, yet possess a high motivation to learn. They rely on free information provided online, through social contacts, and NGOs, not on paid services, to start their lives abroad. The third group differs from all the above by their strong intention of remaining abroad, previous migration experience in Germany, and language skills. Their use of migration industry offers is the lowest; instead, they rely on their own multiple-language research skills, migrant capital and social networks to help realise their relocation. They often aim to build their social circle outside of Japan-specific networks; yet, especially in the beginning of their careers, find employment in Japanese businesses for easier access. On a career level, they seek to leave these Japan-specific businesses; on a social level, they over time often re-engage with migration industry offers such as Japanese schools or networking opportunities if they start families or just miss aspects of Japan after being abroad for a while.

While all migrants need to engage with German bureaucracy and different forms of administration at the beginning

of their stays, the frequency and intensity of interacting with the migration industry offers changes over time. The patterns emerging from this explorative study are that expatriates and athletes rely heavily on paid services initially. Those relocating with families tend to remain in Japan-specific networks, while those relocating as singles seek to diversify their social contacts. This is not a pattern of labour migrants of any status with families; instead, there are differences between those who seek to remain in Germany and those who seek to return. Among those intending to settle, whether their children enter Japanese schools depends on parents' attitudes, and there is no unified pattern.

5.4 | Summary

While this paper has been able to confirm findings from previous research conducted in different cultural settings, for example, on the reproduction of privilege (Cranston and Duplan 2023) and the importance of legal status and class (Spaan and Hillmann 2013), the study also adds to our understanding of the impact of migration industries and differing experiences over migratory trajectories for various migrant groups. It highlighted the necessity to investigate differences in migration industry uses by different migrant groups and how this differs by migrant capital and goals of migration. It additionally mapped the inter-relatedness of migration infrastructure and migration industry actors in structuring migration experiences throughout the migratory trajectory.

6 | Conclusion

This paper analysed Japanese labour migrants' use of migration infrastructure and industries over their migration to Germany. It addressed a research gap both on an empirical level but also within the migration industries literature on differences between migrant groups' uses of migration industry offers and how the uses vary additionally over the migratory trajectory. We found that different groups of migrants utilise these infrastructures to varying degrees, depending on their goals, financial means, stage in the migratory trajectory, and current life circumstances. While regulatory systems shape immigration processes for all, they also serve to reproduce privilege. Regional variations in enforcement and the availability of support structures—such as employment opportunities or Japanese-language assistance—continue to strengthen the attractiveness of certain regions in Germany for further Japanese investment. By contrast, the migration of highly educated Japanese nationals outside the expatriate system is generally characterised by a high degree of individualisation. Depending on their migratory goals, these migrants engage with migration industry actors to a lesser extent. For all migrants, their acceptance of offers depends not only on language skills but also on the point in the migratory and personal trajectory, for example, the presence of family and attitude towards Japan.

Limitations of the study concern limited information on gendered differences and a comparatively small sample that allowed mapping of patterns but needs further investigation. While the triangulation of information from experts, migrants

and existing research and policy documents enabled a bird's eye perspective on the use of migration industry offers across Japanese labour migrants in Germany, intra-group differences and also patterns of uses of migration industry offers by other types of migrants such as entrepreneurs, students and family migrants are yet missing. Future research should address these remaining research gaps and further inquire on the use of migration industry offers throughout both the life course and the migratory trajectory; preferably integrating perspectives on gender, class and skill differences.

7 | Policy Implications

The policy implications arising from this research primarily concern the local level. Comparable applications for work permits can take significantly different amounts of time—and may even yield different outcomes—across various German regions. To improve legal certainty, bureaucratic procedures should be streamlined, relevant information should be standardised and made available in English in addition to German.

Author Contributions

Ruth Achenbach: data collection, analysis, writing. Vanessa Ludwigs Tkotzyk: data collection, proofreading.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Peer Review

For transparency, the peer review documents associated with this article are available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70156>.

Endnotes

¹Bastide and Yeoh (2025, 3) argue that the actors from the migration industries are characterised by economic interest in their brokering activities as a differentiating criterion for inclusion in this analytical category. Our analysis complicates this, as a humanising approach revealed uses of (services by) different actors both as infrastructures and industries, for example, in the case of multinational corporations.

²This is further complicated by the literature on brokerage, which connects the two strands of literature on migration industries and

- infrastructures, overlapping with both conceptualisations (Bastide and Yeoh 2025).
- ³ AspirE focuses on the onward and return migration aspirations of Asian migrants in Europe and is funded by the EU.
- ⁴ 9 expert, 10 participant interviews, 5 social network maps and videos from 3 participants were collected by the first author, the remaining material by the second. The latter moderated the jointly organised focus group discussions. Materials were transcribed and pseudonymised by the second author and research assistants. Analysis and framing for this paper were carried out by the first author.
- ⁵ While Japanese nationals are permitted to work in any occupation in Germany, three interlocutors encountered visa difficulties when local authorities refused to permit them to work or continue their education in their intended fields.
- ⁶ Generally, most academic research has focused on Düsseldorf and expatriates, yet, Kitabayashi (2006) showcases the diversity in Düsseldorf beyond this group.
- ⁷ Hamburg hosts 5%, Berlin 10%, Hessen 17% of the Japanese population in Germany, while NRW is home for 30% (Bavaria, which is not analysed in this paper, hosts another 17%, Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Düsseldorf alone hosts a comparable number of Japanese nationals as Bavaria.
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Appendix A

Expert interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min (with one conducted in written form) and were held in German and English, with occasional code-switching to Japanese. All citations in this paper have been translated. The project's interview guide was adapted to the German context. The researchers adopted purposive sampling to select participants and approached the experts directly or through referrals from their networks. The experts were guaranteed anonymity, and as the community is small, only aggregate data can be shared to preserve anonymity. 9 of the experts were socialised predominantly in Japan, the remaining 6 in Germany. 5 experts were interviewed on their honorary engagement in the Japanese-German community, for the remaining 10 this engagement constituted the majority of their professional tasks. Reflecting, to some extent, the distribution of Japanese communities in Germany, experts were recruited from North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW, 7), Frankfurt (4), Hamburg (3), and Berlin (1). From the group of Japanese migrants, interlocutors for this study were recruited from the largest Japanese communities in Germany, rural areas in Germany (East and South), and urban areas in NRW. Interview languages were Japanese, German and English. Among the group working holiday makers, several groups are excluded in this paper: those looking for adventure and working in various places and usually low-paid industries throughout their stays, and the specific group of restaurant workers. While one person in the sample did enter Germany as a restaurant worker with a working holiday visa, she was a former student in Germany and, in sharp contrast to the reality for many restaurant workers (NRW cultural exchange expert, 09 October 2023), did not find her employment condition exploitative.

The researchers' positionalities as white German women appeared to influence the interviews: some Japanese experts were cautious in expressing criticism of Germans and Germany, while some German participants framed the conversation in terms of 'us' versus a Japanese 'other'. For expert interviews, we could make out a difference in the focus group discussions when the conversations took place in German, English or Japanese and the resulting levels of openness in conversation with peers, thereby somewhat alleviating the above-mentioned limitations. In the case of the interviews with migrants, this effect could be somewhat softened by repeated meetings for half of the participants that increased rapport and trust, leading to more detailed explanations of perceptions of facilitators and hindrances to living a satisfied life in Germany. Data limitations concern the small sample and potentially biased portrayal on the part of the experts; for the first instance, in the case of expatriates, a triangulation between expert interview data, literature and migrant interview data narrows the gap. The sample for working holiday makers is larger, yet the diversity in their sample can only give preliminary insights into the diversity of migrants using this visa. However, we were able to observe similarities in migration industry uses among the other sample participants not featured in this paper (family migrants, students, entrepreneurs); therefore we argue that the presented patterns were sufficiently based in the overall data. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to substantiate the findings on a larger scale. For the second limitation, we are referring to the limited insights of experts beyond their targeted area of expertise; concretely, lawyers involved with facilitating the migration of experts by default will highlight their role in the process and have limited insights into smaller companies' expatriate relocation processes. However, the interviews with other experts active in, for example, medical translations or housing, were used to gather further insights into different practices.