

THE DREAM OF JAPAN: REPRESENTATIONS AND MIGRATION EXPERIENCES AMONG FORMER INDONESIAN MIGRANT YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Japan is one of the top five destinations for young Indonesians seeking employment abroad. Its reputation as a developed country offering high wages, safety, and better living standards has encouraged many Indonesian youths to pursue work opportunities in Japan. This study aims to examine the representations of Japan which are constructed among Indonesian migrant workers and how these representations relate to their lived experiences of working in Japan. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with five former Indonesian migrant workers who had returned to Indonesia. The findings show that many participants initially viewed Japan as a place that could provide financial security, social prestige, and a better future. However, their experiences revealed difficult working conditions, economic pressures, and challenges in achieving long-term financial stability. Despite these experiences, several participants still expressed a desire to return to Japan due to limited economic opportunities in Indonesia. This study argues that representations of Japan are shaped not only through media and migration-related institutions but also through socio-economic conditions that position overseas migration as an attractive pathway for upward mobility among Indonesian youth.

Keywords: Indonesian migrant workers, Japan, migration, representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of Indonesians living and working in Japan continues to rise year after year under various residency statuses (Japan Ministry of Justice, 2023). According to data from the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 49% of all Indonesians working in Japan are technical intern trainees (Pranasari & Iskandar, 2022). Labor migration has become one of the major forms of cooperation between the Indonesian and Japanese governments, and the trend is steadily increasing (Fitria, 2025). The sector employing the largest number of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan is caregiving, who are typically placed in nursing homes (BP2MI, 2025). In addition, there are other sectors that also employ large numbers of Indonesian migrant

workers, namely manufacturing, agriculture, and construction (OECD, 2024). These data reflect the growing number of young Indonesians seeking employment opportunities in Japan.

Previous studies on Indonesian migrant workers in Japan have primarily focused on cultural adaptation and demographic issues. Studies by Srimulyani & Lim (2024) and Lestari & Filia (2025) highlight the adaptation of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan, particularly Muslim Indonesian migrant workers. The study by Srimulyani & Lim (2024) highlights the importance of maintaining good relations between employees and the company to address cultural challenges (Srimulyani & Lim, 2024). Lestari & Filia (2025), which focused on Muslim Indonesian female migrant workers in Japan, specifically regarding prayer times and the wearing of the hijab. According to this study, proficiency in the Japanese language and culture enables Indonesian migrant workers to negotiate the wearing of the hijab in the workplace, although prayer practices remain constrained by workplace schedule (Lestari & Filia, 2025).

Several studies have examined the factors motivating Indonesian migrant workers to seek employment in Japan. Iskandar et al. explain the factors motivating Indonesian migrant workers to go to Japan, including Japan's aging society, economic motivations, and a fascination with Japanese culture among Indonesian youth (Iskandar, 2020; Pranasari & Iskandar, 2022; Santoso & Iskandar, 2021; Yasmin & Iskandar, 2023). Japan's aging population and labor shortages create employment opportunities and higher wages that attract Indonesian youth. In addition, there are migrant workers who are driven by a passion for Japanese culture. Among the previous studies, none have specifically addressed the misperceptions the idealized perceptions young job seekers have of Japan and the realities they encounter there.

Most Indonesian migrant workers are high school or vocational school graduates who work in various sectors (BP2MI, 2025; Pranasari & Iskandar, 2022). The TITP (Technical Intern Training Program) has served as the primary gateway for the majority of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan. Nearly half of Indonesians in Japan entered through the TITP scheme (Pranasari & Iskandar, 2022). Economic reasons are typically the main factor behind the decision to work in Japan. Japan's image in the media as a modern and advanced nation attracts young Indonesian migrant workers seeking a better life, both economically and socially (Pranasari & Iskandar, 2022). This study aims to examine young people's perceptions of Japan and the misinterpretations that occur, leading many young migrant workers to perceive difficult working conditions as an unavoidable part of achieving economic mobility.

The main argument of this study is that there is a misperception among young Indonesian job seekers regarding work in Japan. Working in Japan is often portrayed as a marker of social and economic status. Many prospective Indonesian migrant workers are strongly influenced by media narratives emphasizing high salaries and success in Japan. Problems arise when the idealized portrayals presented in the media clash with the often exploitative reality on the ground. As a result, there is a disconnect between expectations and the reality experienced while in Japan.

This is also evident after their return. Although aware of the harshness of the experience, former Indonesian migrant workers find themselves continue to perceive migration to Japan as a rational and desirable option despite difficult experiences. They do not view their internships in Japan as forms of exploitation, but rather as a “rational solution.” This misinterpretation is not merely a matter of ignorance, but rather the result of biased information that is further reinforced by limited economic opportunities in Indonesia. This study is expected to contribute to research on culture and youth, particularly in relation to Indonesia-Japan relations, and to provide insight into working in Japan for prospective Indonesian migrant workers in the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Representation of Japan

Previous studies have examined how Japan is represented through migration policies, media discourse, and cultural narratives that shape perceptions of the country among migrant workers. Lafontaine (2022), analyzes NHK programs such as “Cool Japan” and “Home Sweet Tokyo”. She argues that Japanese media construct selective representations of foreigners and multiculturalism that reinforce cultural nationalism while simultaneously projecting Japan as globally attractive (Lafontaine, 2022). Similarly, Nakajima (2021) discusses how re-imagining Japan emerges through the experiences of border-crossing youths, highlighting the role of mobility and intercultural encounters in reshaping perceptions of Japan (Nakajima, 2021). In migration studies, Sigona et al. (2021) demonstrate how migration infrastructures in Japan shape migrants’ experiences and mobility pathways through legal and institutional systems (Sigona et al., 2021). Koido (2021) further argues that Japan’s neoliberal labor transformation has expanded transnational labor mobility while simultaneously producing fragmented migrant experiences and precarious labor conditions (Koido, 2021). These studies suggest that representations of Japan are not formed solely through media images, but are also reinforced through migration systems, institutions, and transnational labor structures.

Several studies have also explored how migrants and foreign workers perceive Japanese society and working environments. Orsini and Magnier-Watanabe (2022) examine perceptions of cultural diversity in Japanese workplaces and reveal the tensions between multicultural ideals and everyday workplace realities (Orsini & Magnier-Watanabe, 2022). Park et al. (2022) explore Japanese views on intercultural relations and reveal how migrants are positioned in larger discourses of national identity and cultural identity (Park et al., 2022). In another study, Woo (2021) analyzes Japanese perceptions toward different categories of migrants and shows that social perceptions of migrants vary depending on their social and occupational status (Woo, 2021). Lan (2022) and Liu and Wang (2022) research suggests that migrant labor regimes in Japan frequently lead to unequal labor relations and exploitative working conditions, particularly for foreign workers in caregiving and industrial sectors (Lan, 2022; Liu & Wang, 2022). While previous studies have discussed migration systems, labor conditions, and cultural representation in Japan, limited attention has been given to how former Indonesian migrant youth themselves construct and negotiate representations of Japan after directly experiencing the realities of migrant labor.

2.2 Japan as a destination for work

Japan has become an international destination for work due to a demographic crisis resulting from a shortage of working-age labor in various strategic sectors (Thuzar et al., 2025; Ulfa & Munajar, 2026). In response to this situation, the Japanese government has developed labor migration policies through the TITP (Technical Intern Training Program) and SSW (Specified Skilled Worker) schemes, which structurally create job opportunities for foreign workers to ensure the sustainability of the national economy (Thuzar et al., 2025). This scheme opens up job opportunities for foreign workers and plays a crucial role in maintaining the sustainability of the national economy. Its implementation strengthens Japan's position as a leading international destination for immigrants.

Japan's status as a leading destination for immigrants is a result of a combination of strong structural and economic factors, particularly the demographic crisis that involves a growing elderly population and a declining productive workforce (Hayakawa, 2022). This has prompted Japan to open up job opportunities for foreign immigrants, particularly in the elderly care, manufacturing, agriculture, and construction sectors. Government policies such as the TITP and SSW provide clearer legal pathways for foreign workers to enter and work in Japan (Brooks, 2024; Yoshida, 2020). In addition to the high labor demand, economic stability, a relatively secure wage system, and an organized work environment have strengthened Japan's appeal as a destination for immigrants (M Haddad, 2020). These factors shape the perception of Japan as a country offering economic opportunities and job security, although the reality of work on the ground is often more complex than the initial perceptions of prospective immigrants (M Haddad, 2020).

3.3 Young people aspiring to work in Japan

Young migrant workers in Japan often perceive Japan as a country with high salaries and safe working conditions. This perception is generally formed through information from recruitment agencies and the media, which does not fully reflect actual working conditions (Uezato et al., 2024). However, empirical studies reveal different reality. Migrant workers often face high physical and mental workloads due to stringent productivity demands (Efendi et al., 2022). This situation contributes to stress and mental health disorders among migrant workers in Japan, which are often overlooked in popular narratives about the economic benefits of working in the country (Uezato et al., 2024). Therefore, these findings suggest that positive perceptions of working in Japan need to be critically examined, drawing on empirical evidence, to provide prospective workers with a more realistic understanding.

The primary motivations for young job seekers to Japan are economic factors, along with a desire to gain international work experience that can enhance immigrant competitiveness (Okamoto, 2021). In addition to economic motives, young job seekers are also motivated by the desire to gain international work experience, professional skills, and improve their social status (Efendi et al., 2022). This suggests that Japan's immigration policy strengthens migration

motivation by providing clearer and more legal employment pathways, albeit contractual and temporary (Widarahesty, 2024).

3. METHODS

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach to understand how Indonesian migrant workers interpret their work experiences in Japan. The data taken from the narratives of the subjective experiences of former Indonesian migrant workers. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through a search of relevant digital content on the websites and social media. This secondary data served as the basis for analysis to map how the narrative of prosperity and the idealized image of Japan are institutionally produced. The integration of these data sources aimed to dissect the promises in official information with the reality in Japan.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five informants, former Indonesian migrant workers who participated in the TITP program in Japan between 2015 and 2025. This period was chosen based on the consideration that during this phase, the narrative of Japan as a safe, orderly, and economically promising work destination was well established and widely circulated, both through labor sending institutions, the media, and migrant workers' social networks. All informants were from Yogyakarta and dispatched through LPK/SO (Sending Organizations). The same domicile was used to ensure uniformity of the initial sociocultural context. The sampling technique used was purposive snowball sampling. This technique is relevant because work migration experiences to Japan are often constructed and shared within interconnected social networks.

Interview data were analyzed thematically using a coding process to identify recurring patterns of meaning. The analysis began with interview transcriptions. Next, the transcriptions were reread and initial codes were assigned. Each code was then grouped into themes. The final stage was the interpretation of the themes in relation to the research's conceptual framework. This analysis focused on the tension between idealized narratives about Japan and problematic work experiences, and how informants rationalized or normalized these experiences to maintain the image of Japan as a better work destination.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Representation of Japan and solution to the problems of life

The findings suggest that many young Indonesian choose to work in Japan due to limited access to stable and decent employment opportunities in Indonesia. Several informants described difficulties in obtaining jobs after graduation, leading them to rely on informal work, including employment as motorcycle ride-hailing drivers (*ojek online*). In addition to unemployment, low wages in Indonesia (such as the Yogyakarta minimum wage) are considered disproportionate to the cost of living and workload. As a result, working in Japan is constructed as a rational solution and the only way to improve their standard of living and receive financial rewards for their hard work (see Table 1).

Table 1. Challenges and Japan as solutions

Thematic descriptions	No.	Interview narratives	Informant
Unable to find a permanent job in Indonesia	1	After graduating, I tried to find a job but couldn't, so I worked as a ride-hailing driver for about a year.	B, 2026
	2	I then talked with a neighbor, and we thought, why not just look for work abroad together, and we both wanted to go to Japan.	
	3	I'm still looking for a job now. I'm waiting for an interview call from a training center.	
	4	I went to Japan and get a job, I can save money. Because it is hard to find a job in Indonesia.	D, 2026
	5	When I came back last year, I was actually thinking about going back to Japan right away.	G, 2026
Income in Indonesia is insufficient and does not match one's skills	6	Back then, I was really underpaid; even though it was the minimum wage in Yogyakarta, it was barely enough to get by. It might have been enough to support myself, but it was still underpaid.	P, 2025
	7	My mother also worked abroad, as a domestic worker. She was in the United Arab Emirates. I got to know that working abroad is different from working in Indonesia—our hard work is more worthwhile and more appreciated there.	P, 2025
	8	It's been tough making ends meet here for the past three years—I've just been scraping by. It's really hard to live on the minimum wage in Yogyakarta. The problem is that a monthly minimum wage of IDR 1.8 million simply isn't enough.	G, 2026
	9	I could succeed because I went to Japan.	T, 2025

The main problem was the difficulty of finding a job with a sufficient salary, as shown in Table 1. Interviews with informants revealed that they had tried to find work but had not yet finding one with a sufficient salary. The informants viewed leaving for Japan as a solution to this problem. The interview data revealed two main themes: the inability of young people to find permanent employment in Indonesia and the income they earned was still insufficient to cover living expenses or not commensurate with their abilities. Ultimately, they decided to work in Japan. In addition, there are also external factors such as media exposure that campaigns for working in Japan by state and private institutions, as in the following table.

Table 2. Representations of working abroad in media narratives



Figure 1: one of the posts on the Instagram account @bp2mi_ri on 29 Juni 2022

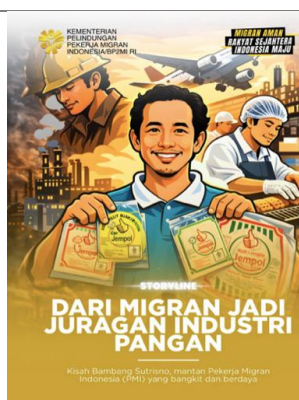


Figure 2: one of the posts on the Instagram account @kemenp2mi on 18 Januari 2026



Inilah program pelatihan yang dirancang khusus untuk persiapan magang ke Jepang. Tahapannya dimulai dari pelatihan dasar, seleksi wawancara user, persiapan pra pemberangkatan, hingga bimbingan selama pelaksanaan pemagangan di Jepang.

Pemagangan Jepang selama 1 atau 3 tahun ini bertujuan untuk transfer keterampilan teknologi, sehingga peserta dapat menggunakan keterampilan dan pengalaman yang didapat dari Jepang untuk membangun kemajuan Indonesia.

Figure 3: Homepage of the LPK Jogja Kenshuu Sentaa website
Source: <https://lpkjogja.com>

Figure 1 is a screenshot from the Instagram account @bp2mi_ri, posted on June 29, 2022. BP2MI (the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency) is a government agency that oversees Indonesian migrant workers. The post reads “Berangkat Migran, Pulang Juragan” means “Leave as a migrant worker, return as a boss”. This tagline followed by the explanation that the state will not ignore migrant workers because constitutional mandate is to provide employment for its people. Migrant workers are one of the productive sectors and the second-largest contributor to the country’s foreign exchange earnings and BP2MI told that they are serious about this commitment to upholding the dignity and status of Indonesian migrant workers. From this narrative, two key points can be drawn. First, becoming a migrant worker is a path to wealth (becoming a boss). Second, the state has an obligation to provide employment for its citizens, and through the BP2MI, the state fulfills this obligation by sending its citizens abroad to work as migrant workers.

Figure 2 is a screenshot from the Instagram account @kemenp2mi posted on January 18, 2026. KemenP2MI (the Ministry of Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers) is the successor to BP2MI. In October 2024, BP2MI was reorganized into KemenP2MI. As in the caption for Figure 1, the post from the @kemenp2mi Instagram account also conveys a similar message: that becoming migrant worker offers opportunities to improve one’s economic situation. This is illustrated by the use of the word “juragan” in both posts. Both images from this government agency convey to their audiences that working abroad will make Indonesian migrant workers wealthy (become “juragan”).

Figure 3 is a screenshot from the website of one of the LPK (training center) in Yogyakarta. The page states "Achieve Your Dreams in Japan," and below it is a brief description of the LPK. The description reads, "This is a training program specifically designed to prepare for internships in Japan. The stages begin with basic training, user interview selection, pre-departure preparation, and guidance during the internship in Japan. This one or three-year Japanese internship aims to transfer technological skills, allowing participants to use the skills and experience gained in Japan to build Indonesia's progress." The description reveals that the LPK offers a preparatory internship program in Japan for one- or three-year contracts. Furthermore, the screenshot explains the program's goal: the transfer of technological skills, which are expected to be utilized in Indonesia after returning home.

These three screenshots from state and private institutions demonstrate that they all encourage young people to work abroad. Each institution promises substantial profits and benefits for Indonesian migrant workers abroad. This narrative of prosperity is presented using persuasive terms, such as "boss," "the nation's spirit of uplifting the dignity and status of migrant workers," and "achieving dreams." Thus, working abroad is seen as a solution to domestic employment problems. However, the optimistic narratives promoted by state and private institutions stand in stark contrast to the lived experiences of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan.

This study reveals a significant gap between the idealized representation of Japan and the reality faced by Indonesian migrant workers. The main findings indicate that young people are

driven to Japan due to the failure to find permanent employment and a decent income domestically. Japan is constructed as a solution to poverty and a shortcut to higher social status, referred to in media narratives as "juragan" or "boss". However, real experiences in Japan demonstrate systematic discrepancies, ranging from the burden of salary deductions by placement agencies to heavier workloads. Despite facing exploitative realities, workers tend to normalize and internalize these bitter experiences for the sake of economic achievement. Essentially, working in Japan is seen as the only rational option to break the cycle of economic hardship in Indonesia, even though it comes at the cost of social and psychological vulnerability in the destination country.

This finding integrates Stuart Hall's theory of representation, where the image of Japan as a developed and disciplined nation is not simply a depiction of reality, but rather a production of meaning that shapes one's worldview (Hall, 1997). The media and state apparatus act as ideological instruments that naturalize the meaning of "success" through migration, thereby closing off critical space to potential risks. Media narratives can shape public opinion and perceptions of migration, both directly and indirectly (Pagogna & Sakdapolrak, 2022). This aligns with the concept of pull factors in international migration, where economic opportunities and higher wages are the primary magnets for workers from Southeast Asia. Data integration shows that the TITP program, formally aimed at technology transfer, often distorts in practice into a system of providing cheap labor. Thus, the reliance on the narrative of Japanese technological superiority reinforces the weak bargaining position of Indonesian migrant workers as skill recipients, positioning Japan in a superior hierarchy within the employment relationship.

4.2 Japan as an ideal country to work

The research data presents a contradiction between idealized perceptions and the harsh reality in Japan. Initially, informants viewed Japan as a developed country with discipline and order, and a higher "rank" or prestige than working in a local factory. This motivation was reinforced by social media content that showcased the good side of work in Japan. However, the data, as shown in Table 3, revealed a reality of verbal abuse from superiors, communication barriers that led to conflict, and discriminatory practices where migrant workers' hard work was often not fairly recognized by companies.

Table 3. Perceptions of Japan as an ideal place to work

Thematic descriptions	No.	Interview narratives	Informant
Japan is seen as a more attractive destination for work	1	It's more interesting in Japan than in factories in Indonesia, isn't it?	T, 2025
	2	I was able to succeed because I went to Japan.	T, 2025
	3	Well, I guess it's different when you go to Japan yourself and have your own position there.	T, 2025
	4	The people here view that Japan is better than other countries where there's a lot of bad news.	T, 2025

Thematic descriptions	No.	Interview narratives	Informant
The image of Japan as a developed country with high wages	5	The wages in Japan are higher. ... Some of my friends have to pay off their parents' debts. Others have to think about their future and save money.	B, 2026
	6	Well, from what I've read, Japan is a developed, orderly, and disciplined country, and the wages there are high...	D, 2026
Japan's image as an amazing country to visit	7	Subarashii. Yes, it was subarashii. It was great..	G, 2026
	8	Ever since I started watching Jerome Poline's vlogs—seeing him travel to all these different places—it's really been a source of inspiration for me.	
The discomfort and violences in the workplace	9	Like, in the beginning, we were expected to help out with the work, but we didn't understand all the instructions, and that often led to verbal abuse.	P, 2025
	10	Well, in Japan, if you're looking for an easy ride, you won't find it. There are plenty of challenges there.	G, 2026
	11	There's plenty of conflict at work.	G, 2026
	12	I still feel unsatisfied, and I'm disappointed.	G, 2026

Table 3 presents a thematic description of young people's views of Japan, which they perceive as a comfortable country. Four themes categorized: (1) Japan is more attractive as a work destination; (2) Japan's image as a developed country with high wages; (3) Japan's image as an amazing country to visit; and (4) violence at work. The first theme is explained by informants' opinions that working in Japan is more interesting and carries a higher status. The second theme is seen through informants' views of Japan as a developed country that offers high-paying jobs. The third theme is expressed through the word "subarashii," meaning "amazing" and the fourth theme is demonstrated by informants' discomfort when facing verbal abuse. This discomfort represents an unexpected disappointment, as they previously assumed working in Japan would be comfortable and smooth.

In the Indonesian social context, working in Japan has symbolic value that goes far beyond mere material gain; it is seen as achieving a higher "rank" or social status than working in a local factory. Culturally, remittances sent by migrant workers are driven not only by economic motives but also by a moral-altruistic responsibility as children to improve family dignity, such as building a house for their parents. This phenomenon positions migration as a crucial strategy for allocating family income amidst low domestic wage standards. However, on the other hand, Indonesian migrant workers often face discrimination and socio-cultural stress in Japan. They are often viewed as "unskilled" workers. This context demonstrates a cultural paradox: migration provides legitimacy for success, but simultaneously produces identity vulnerability and mental stress in the highly competitive and rigid Japanese work environment.

The results of this study reinforce previous research by Irawati and Iskandar (2022), which stated that Indonesian migrant workers through the TITP pathway often face severe work pressure and systemic discrimination. Similar to the findings of Budianto and Widarahesty (2024), this study confirms that the significant financial burden imposed by brokers or *kumiai* is often unanticipated by workers prior to departure. While studies by Srimulyani & Lim (2024) and Lestari & Filia (2025) focused more on cultural and religious adaptation, this study adds a

new dimension by highlighting how media representations systematically obscure the reality of exploitation. This comparison shows consistency in migrant workers' vulnerabilities, but this study places greater emphasis on the internalization of exploitation by Indonesian migrant workers themselves as a perceived normalized form of life struggle. This distinguishes it from previous studies, which tended to view Indonesian migrant workers as merely passive victims, while here they are seen actively normalizing it for long-term goals.

4.3 Japan as a potential source of wealth

Capital accumulation is a primary motive and form of social responsibility for Indonesian migrant workers. Working in Japan allows them to accumulate funds for long-term investments, such as building a house for their parents, buy a house or a land, and paying off family debts. Regular monthly remittances demonstrate their filial piety towards their parents and grandparents. Despite the risk of exploitation, owning these material assets serves as a legitimacy for their success, reinforcing the collective misinterpretation that internships are a shortcut to economic security (see Table 4).

Table 4. Efforts to raise capital by working in Japan

Thematic descriptions	No.	Interview narratives	Informant
Working in Japan as a way to support family and save for the future needs	1	When I was there (in Japan), my parents bought a house... they took out a bank loan, and I've been making the payments.	T, 2025
	2	Thank God I was able to go to Japan, so I could build a house for my mother. When I came back from Japan.. I didn't have to stay with others anymore.	P, 2025
	3	Going to Japan, getting a job, and being able to save. Yes, because finding work in Indonesia is hard.	B, 2026
	4	Yes, I was able to save. When I came back, I've already bought a house in Cebongan (Yogyakarta).	B, 2026
Working in Japan as a way to fulfill my social responsibilities	5	Yes, I save money—I always save. But I'm not saving for myself; it's more for my family's needs.	G, 2026
	6	I usually send money for my parents. Every month, I send a few million rupiah to my grandparents and to my mother.	G, 2026
	7	I used my own money and my parents help me (to cover the costs of going to Japan). Then, during the first year, I focused on paying off all my debts. It wasn't until the second and third years that I started to save.	G, 2026
	8	I send money to my mom, but the amount isn't fixed.	B, 2026
	9	It's not fixed (amount)—sometimes I send money. Usually, it's once a year when there was a tax deduction.	D, 2026
	10	At first, I used my salary to pay off the debt, which had been secured using our land certificate as collateral (to cover the costs of going to Japan).	P, 2025

Table 4 presents data on efforts to accumulate capital by working in Japan. There are two themes: (1) working in Japan as a means of fulfilling needs and investment; and (2) working in Japan as a means of fulfilling social responsibility. These data demonstrate that working in

Japan provides workers with opportunities for capital accumulation. Informants reported that migration enables them to save money, acquire assets such as land and housing, and fulfill their familial responsibilities, particularly toward their parents. The accumulation of capital, therefore, should not be understood merely as an economic outcome of migration. Rather, it plays an important role in sustaining a dominant interpretation of migration success that influences how workers make sense of hardship, sacrifice, and exploitation. In this sense, accumulated capital functions as an economic resource and also as a symbolic resource that reinforces the legitimacy of migration to Japan. The visibility of material success helps reproduce a dominant narrative in which the benefits of migration are emphasized, while the costs and hardships experienced by workers are pushed to the margins.

The deeper significance of this finding is the phenomena of a cycle of misinterpretation collectively maintained by various stakeholders, from government institutions to private institutions like the LPK. The use of persuasive language such as "achieve your dreams" and "be a boss" serves as a framing mechanism that mitigates the uncertainty of risks (Kollias et al., 2025). The disappointment that arises from verbal abuse or salary discrepancies is ultimately compensated by material success, such as a house. These asset ownerships serve as "silent evidence" of success, obscuring the narrative of suffering in Japan. This interpretation suggests that exploitation is no longer perceived as pure oppression, but rather as a "price" that must be paid for vertical mobility. Psychologically, the desire to return to Japan despite experiencing the harsh realities indicates that economic dependence has overcome the trauma of negative work experiences. This finding aligns with studies on circular migration, which show that challenging work experiences do not automatically halt the cycle of re-migration, as material success and family economic demands remain dominant considerations in migrant workers' decision-making (Setijaningrum et al., 2023).

Based on these findings, a comprehensive evaluation of labor deployment programs, particularly the TITP program, is needed to prevent them from simply providing cheap labor in hazardous sectors, which often referred to as the 3Ks: *kitsui* (hard), *kiken* (dangerous), and *kitanai* (dirty). The government and relevant institutions need to provide more transparent education regarding potential wage cuts and work environment risks, rather than simply highlighting a biased narrative of success. Furthermore, it is crucial for the Indonesian LPK to improve language skills and understanding of workers' rights for prospective Indonesian migrant workers to minimize verbal abuse caused by communication barriers. Another recommendation is the creation of more viable domestic employment opportunities so that migration to Japan becomes a voluntary choice for self-development, rather than an escape from economic necessity. The implications of this study emphasize that without policy interventions that protect the economic sovereignty of Indonesian migrant workers after their return, they will remain trapped in a recurring cycle of migration with no guarantee of long-term solutions.

As a closing reflection, the reality of working in Japan for young Indonesians is complex and cannot be viewed in a simple way. Japan offers real opportunities for capital accumulation and social status elevation that are difficult to achieve in Indonesia. On the other hand, there is

a high price to pay such as loss of economic sovereignty and exposure to exploitative labor practices. This paradox is evident when physical assets like houses become symbols of success, while their owners may harbor undisclosed trauma from verbal abuse or discrimination. This is not simply misinformation, but rather a systematic construction involving power and the media to normalize migration as a solution to life's problems. Ultimately, the struggles of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan reflect the tenacity and vulnerability of Indonesian youth in facing global employment challenges.

5. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION

This research consolidates findings regarding the normalization of systematic exploitation disguised as a narrative of economic prosperity. The most important finding reveals that although Indonesian migrant workers face verbal abuse, discrimination, and significant wage cuts by intermediaries, they tend to internalize these sufferings as part of the normal "struggle for life". This paradox is exacerbated by the role of state apparatus and private institutions that aggressively promote the promise of becoming "bosses" through persuasive language, which in reality traps young people in a system of cheap labor providers under the guise of technology transfer. Consequently, material success such as ownership of physical assets in their homeland often serves as "silent evidence" that obscures the loss of economic sovereignty and the psychological trauma experienced in Japan.

This research's unique contribution lies in its ability to dissect how representations of Japan are structurally produced to fill domestic job vacancies. This study makes a theoretical contribution to cultural and migration studies by uncovering the power relations in the production of meaning, where Japan is positioned as the superior subject wielding technology while Indonesian migrant workers are positioned as vulnerable recipients. By exploring the subjective experiences of former migrants, this study goes beyond conventional population statistics to understand why the exploitative cycle of migration continues to repeat. These findings confirm that migration to Japan is not simply geographic mobility, but rather a social identity construction riddled with distorted information.

This study acknowledges the limitations of its limited informant base of five former migrant workers, which means the resulting narratives are highly contextual and may not represent the diversity of experiences in other employment sectors. This limitation opens up opportunities for further research to examine the long-term psychological impact of internalizing such exploitation and the effectiveness of post-return protection policies, which have been neglected by protection organizations or the state. The future of Indonesia-Japan migration demands a paradigm shift from merely transporting labor commodities to protecting full human dignity. Indeed, no prosperity is worth celebrating if it must be redeemed by oppression, perceived as normal within a misleading utopian narrative.

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