

The Grass is Always Greener? Unpacking Uzbek Migration to Japan, edited by Timur Dadabaev, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, vi + 209 pp., £109.99 (hbk), ISBN 9789811625695

During my doctoral fieldwork in 2022, I resided in a mahalla adjacent to the Japanese Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Throughout this time, my attention was regularly drawn to a continuous queue comprised mainly of young Uzbek individuals, predominantly men, waiting outside the embassy, often clutching a stack of visa application documents. Their sombre yet somehow eager expressions piqued my curiosity about their motivations for aspiring to migrate to Japan. This scene was especially intriguing given the prevailing migration patterns from Uzbekistan to Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan and many Western countries.

This edited collection by Timur Dadabaev serves as an invaluable source, offering a foundational and comprehensive exploration of the geopolitical contexts, underlying rationales and varied experiences of Uzbek migrants in Japan. This work also highlights the emerging trend of educational migration in Central Asia, which has received less scholarly attention than labour migration within Central Asian studies. Moreover, it enriches our understanding of the lesser-known but increasing migration dynamics of Central Asian migrants in East Asia, a region with growing influence in Eurasia.

The volume delves deeply into Japan's foreign policy engagement in Central Asia and examines the experiences of Uzbek migrants, who primarily access the Japanese job market through educational avenues, particularly language schools. These migrants often see these schools as one of the swiftest and most accessible means to gain education and generate income outside of Uzbekistan, leading to 65-fold surge of enrolments from Uzbekistan in Japanese-language schools from 2010 to 2018 (155).

Uzbek university students in Japan form a small but also rapidly increasing segment of the migrant community, numbering 292 university undergraduates in 2018, up from 25 in 2004 (62). Experiences of Uzbek migrants are substantially influenced by their perceived 'religious and identity-related differences' (3) in the migration destinations, which often pose challenges related to economic hardship, discrimination and cultural assimilation. These cultural and social challenges can lead them to perceive their stay in East Asia as temporary sojourns, referred to as *musofir* in Uzbek – an Islamic term indicating wanderers in unknown lands. These experiences often closely intersect with policy, gender, ethnicity and religion, (re)shaping sojourning experiences and potential future trajectories of Uzbek migrants in Japan.

The opening chapter by Dadabaev lays the foundation for the collection by establishing a policy context for the subsequent chapters on Uzbek migration to Japan, explaining the emergence of burgeoning bilateral collaboration between Japan and Uzbekistan, particularly after Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This collaboration has facilitated educational mobility and labour migration from Uzbekistan to Japan in recent years. Chapter 2 by Dadabaev and Soipov examines how East Asian countries, especially Japan and South Korea, offer educational opportunities and labour migration routes to Uzbek migrants. These routes reshape migration dynamics in Uzbekistan, impacting Uzbek migrants' choices, entry routes, resources employed while entering Japan and South Korea, and their employment in East Asia, contributing to their perception of migration in Japan as a temporary 'sojourn'. Chapter 3 by Dadabaev, Sonoda and Soipov analyses qualitative and quantitative data to explore why some Uzbek migrants opt for Japan over other destinations. This choice is driven by the opportunity to send regular remittances back home and by family or regional

social networks. The latter inform potential migrants about migration opportunities and job openings in Japan (33) and provide essential psychological support to migrants (53).

Chapter 4 by Dadabaev and Akhmedova revisits the concept of sojourning in migration studies, arguing that this socially constructed notion undergoes frequent discursive shifts, and is entangled with ethnic, gender and religious identities, which are elaborated in subsequent chapters. The discourse of sojourning thus distinguishes Uzbek migrants in Japan from migrants seeking permanent residency and intersects with their identity formation within the post-Soviet social-cultural context (7). Chapters 5 and 6 by Akhmedova explore this intersection of migration with gender, sexuality, religion and ethnicity, converging under the notion of *O'zbekchilik* (Uzbekness). This notion significantly shapes the choices, journeys, temporary stays and decisions of Uzbek migrants as they strive to maintain their Uzbek identity within predominantly mono-ethnic Japanese environments. Focusing on the relative minority of female Uzbek migrants, Akhmedova reveals their navigation through patriarchal gender norms and societal expectations. For instance, their parents' marital demands 'may turn sojourner women into reluctant returnees, although they may return to their host country after fulfilling their parents' expectations if their partner shares their interest in migration' (133). Additionally, religion and ethnicity play vital roles in shaping the continual reconstruction of migrants' identities as sojourners or *musofir* in comparison to *Nihonjinron* (Japaneseness) throughout their migration experiences. Chapter 7 by Soipov revisits the experiences of Uzbek students utilizing educational opportunities, especially language school education, to enter Japan and its labour market. It analyses students' reliance on support from family, community and educational migration facilitators. Tracing the evolution of Japanese language schools in Uzbekistan, the final chapter by Soipov offers a concluding review of migration decision-making literature,

highlighting how educational migration serves as a conduit for various labour migration avenues.

This edited collection not only makes a significant contribution to studies of migration in Central Asia and beyond but also lays the groundwork for further exploration of relevant questions in the field. For example, a more comprehensive ethnographic documentation and analysis of the roles played by social institutions, such as the nation-state, religion and family, is crucial to unravel the dynamic narratives of their migration experiences in Japan as temporary sojourns. As Imamova (2020) mentioned, ‘Uzbekistan, is already trying to find new and additional appeals to attract these specialists to return.’ Thus, following his inauguration, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev met with a cluster of Uzbeks in New York City in September 2017, extending an invitation for them to engage in work opportunities in Uzbekistan (Eraliev 2019). Moreover, comparative research on Uzbek migration discourse in Japan, distinguishing between language school and university students, along with comparisons to Western migration, could enhance our understanding of Uzbek migration to East Asia. For instance, some view Japan as a pathway to future migration to countries like the United States and Australia, aiming for permanent residency in the latter countries. Future studies could delve deeper into nuanced daily experiences in relation to gender, sexuality, class, citizenship, changing perceptions of education, especially oliy ta’lim (higher education), and the emotional contours of Uzbek migrants, unravelling how these factors intersect with each other and influence their changing narratives between returning, sojourning and permanent residency.

References

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