

Foreign Labor Employment in Japanese Agriculture

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Introduction

The Japanese agricultural sector is heavily dependent on foreign labor due to a severe shortage of labor and an aging population. To compensate for domestic labor shortages, Japan has been accepting foreign unskilled workers mainly through two channels: the Technical Intern Training (TIT) program and the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program. In 2023, 51,423 foreign workers were employed in the agriculture and forestry sector, which is equivalent to 2.8% of the total workforce employed in this sector (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, MIAC). In areas where labor-intensive and highly profitable horticulture and livestock farming are prevalent, the dependence on foreign labor is even higher (MIAC, *2020 National Census*).

Japan's TIT program has long been criticized both domestically and internationally as a policy of accepting foreigners "from the side door." Through the establishment of the SSW program by the revised Immigration Control Act of 2019, Japan has finally begun accepting workers "from the front door" based on intergovernmental agreements. Furthermore, in 2027, the TIT program is scheduled to be abolished and a new system will begin. This study aims to scrutinize the actual situation of employment in the Japanese agriculture sector to derive policy implications.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, the institutional background and an overview of the overall picture of agricultural employment are described based on official statistics. Second, the role of Migration Intermediary Organizations (MIOs) and the skill development of migrant workers are discussed using previous studies and interview surveys of horticultural farming areas in the northern Kanto region, targeting domestic MIOs, agricultural producers, and foreign workers. Although MIOs exist both in sending and receiving countries, this study limits the discussion to domestic organizations, including supervisory organizations for TIT and support organizations for SSW in Japan. Finally, policy implications derived from the case study are summarized.

1. Foreigner Employment in Agriculture

Overview

As a premise for the discussion in this study, it is important to point out two characteristics of employment in agriculture that distinguish it from other industries such as manufacturing. First, agriculture has large seasonal fluctuations in annual labor demand. Second, agriculture is generally a family business in Asia, and its operations differ from those of the manufacturing industry, which has a high degree of division of labor. In Japan, hired workers often work together with Japanese managers and their families, engaging in various tasks—from production to marketing [Horiguchi (堀口) 2017, 27]. Due to the abovementioned characteristics, farmers employ temporary workers only during periods of high workload or adopt strategies to diversify the crops to reduce the fluctuation of seasonal workload throughout the year.

Japanese agriculture has traditionally been dominated by small-scale family farms, but according to the Agricultural Census, the number of agricultural entities has decreased by 46% from 2005 to 2020. However, the concentration of arable land in the hands of large, full-time farmers and agricultural enterprises and corporations, known as “leader farmers,” is increasing. This is because these leader farmers play a leading role in Japanese agriculture and have a high potential for long-term foreign employment, which is the focus of this study.

In Japan, many small-scale operations have traditionally relied solely on family labor, but according to the *2020 Census of Agriculture and Forestry* by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, more than 20% of regular agricultural employment in Japan is foreigners. Regionally, agricultural labor employment is concentrated in Hokkaido and some horticultural production areas such as Ibaraki and Gunma (MIAC, *2020 National Census*), where the average scale of business is comparatively large.

Institutional Features and Issues

Here, the details and differences between the TIT and SSW programs in the agricultural sector are presented. The purpose of the TIT program is to provide practical training, and there are no requirements for Japanese language ability or skills at the time of arrival in Japan. Selection is based on document screening and interviews by the supervising and host organizations. The maximum period of stay is 5 years, but the type of business or the place of training cannot be changed during the stay.

In contrast, the purpose of the SSW is employment. Newcomers are required to have a certain

level of skills and Japanese language proficiency, or those who have successfully completed the category No.2 of the TIT program can shift to the SSW program without having to take Japanese language or technical examinations. The period of stay under this program is more flexible than that of the technical internship, and the work content is broader than that of the TIT program, allowing for more flexible use of the labor force, such as the ability to engage in not only agricultural work itself but also related incidental work, including food production and processing, transportation, sales, and snow removal in the winter. SSWs can also stay for a maximum of 5 years and choose their workplace.

As already mentioned, due to the large seasonal fluctuations in workload in agriculture, the system of year-round employment in principle has been a bottleneck in the employment of foreign nationals. Farmers have responded to the restrictions of the foreigner acceptance system by changing their business operations.

2. Case Study

To understand the situation of foreign employment in agriculture, the author conducted an interview survey in 2022–2023 with agricultural corporations, foreign workers, and MIOs in two villages in the northern Kanto region, where horticulture has flourished. The research sample (villages) is highland vegetable growing areas, mainly targeting the Tokyo metropolitan market. In the research areas, there are more large and specialized farmers than the national average. This study is based on previous studies and case studies (please refer to the author's forthcoming paper for a detailed discussion of the case study).

MIOs

Referring to Gunji (軍司) [2017], domestic MIOs in Japan can be roughly classified into two—Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives' (hereinafter JAs) affiliated and business associations. The former is the oldest type, in which JAs provide foreign workers to farmers in their jurisdiction. As a JA is a community-based organization, it offers detailed services to farmers at a lower cost, with a lower hurdle to join even for small farmers. However, their ability to monitor farmers may be low.

In contrast, the latter type is newly established by large-scale farmers and other farmers who have little relationship with JAs. Because they emphasize the quality of agricultural products that the member farmers sell to them and labor management compliance, participant farmers face higher barriers to joining and stricter penalties for violating their terms and conditions.

Agricultural Corporations and Foreign Workers

Based on the interview survey, the author first introduced an overview of foreign employment in the surveyed corporations and its impact on the scale and contents of management, including the types of crops produced, labor employment, and variation of business. Second, the author revealed the working conditions of foreign workers, including job descriptions, wages, benefits, and training opportunities. Third, based on interviews with foreign workers, the author discussed their backgrounds and what they feel they have learned from working in Japan. As Yoshimitsu and Hotta (吉満・堀田) [2022] pointed out, in recent years, young workers in Asian countries are interested not only in wages but also in career development via working in developed countries.

3. Conclusions

This study analyzed the role of MIOs, changes in farm management due to the employment of foreigners, and human resource development through employment. The two policy implications derived from the study are as follows. First, the function and transparency of MIOs need to be strengthened. Second, to make the Japanese labor market attractive for young workers in developing countries in the long term, it is necessary to create a system that not only raises wages but also considers the provision of career advancement opportunities.

References

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