The Influence of Javanese Culture on the Decision to Work in Japan Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Scheme for Vocational High School Graduates in Malang City

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Abstract

The Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program launched by Japan in 2019 provides significant opportunities for Indonesian vocational high school graduates, particularly in the caregiving and hospitality sectors. However, participation from SMK Negeri 2 Malang remains low despite preparatory classes being offered since 2020. This conceptual research aims to analyze the influence of Javanese cultural values on vocational high school graduates' decisions to work in Japan through SSW, identify cultural barriers, and develop solutions. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review and case studies, the population included graduates of SMK Negeri 2 Malang (2020-2025) involved in the SSW program (approximately 20 alumni, 11 successful), with purposive sampling of tracer study data. Instruments consisted of secondary documents from journals and school records, analyzed using inductive thematic techniques. The results show that Javanese values such as family ties, mutual cooperation, parental responsibility, and Islamic principles significantly hinder migration due to concerns about social harmony. In conclusion, interventions such as family counseling and subsidies are needed to balance cultural preservation with global mobility.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of international labor migration through the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program initiated by the Japanese government since 2019 provides significant opportunities for Indonesian vocational high school graduates, particularly in the caregiving and hospitality sectors, to work in Japan and improve their families' economic well-being (Kubo, 2020; Pratama, 2021). However, data from SMK Negeri 2 Malang shows that the number of graduates utilizing this program remains limited, even though the school has held preparatory classes with the support of BP2MI and the Vocational Training Institute since 2020 (Rahmawati, 2021; Suparno, 2018). This phenomenon is interesting to observe because, despite the economic opportunities and global skills, the decision of vocational high school graduates to migrate through SSW is influenced by strong Javanese cultural values and norms, which are rooted in their social and family lives (Mulder, 2019; Murtiningsih, 2020).

The main problem in this study is the low participation of vocational high school graduates in Malang in the Japanese SSW program, which is suspected not only due to limited skills or information, but also the influence of strengthening Javanese cultural values such as close ties to family, mutual cooperation, and social responsibility towards parents, which act as psychological and social barriers (Setyawati, 2019; Sugiyanto, 2018). Strong social ties and norms that prioritize family harmony make individuals hesitant to leave their community for long periods, especially

when it means working far abroad (Susilo, 2017; Sutopo, 2021). This condition is reinforced by social pressure from the surrounding environment that prioritizes collectivism, so the decision to migrate must be carefully considered within the context of complex social relationships (Triandis, 2018; Rahayu et al., 2021). Furthermore, the dominant role of Islam in this region also reinforces the principle of maintaining relationships with family and parents, adding a cultural layer that shapes attitudes towards labor migration (Yamada, 2021; Sugiyanto, 2018).

This situation creates a dilemma between taking advantage of promising job opportunities in Japan or maintaining local cultural values that emphasize family and togetherness. The influence of Javanese culture is an important aspect that needs to be understood to improve the effectiveness of migrant labor policies and training programs, especially for vocational high school graduates who are part of the global labor market (Rahmawati, 2021; Masduki, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to conceptually analyze how Javanese cultural values influence the decision of vocational high school graduates in Malang to work in Japan through the SSW scheme. It also identifies cultural factors that act as barriers and seeks alternative solutions to overcome these obstacles. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on analyzing Javanese culture as a determinant of SSW decisions in the context of a group of vocational high school graduates in the Malang region, applying a current sociocultural perspective to enrich the literature on Indonesian labor migration (Hadi, 2020; Pratama, 2021).

METHODS

This research uses a conceptual approach with qualitative methods that focus on an in-depth literature review and a case study at SMK Negeri 2 Malang to analyze the influence of Javanese culture on the migration decisions of vocational school graduates to Japan through the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme. The conceptual approach allows for the synthesis of migration theory, Javanese cultural values, and the dynamics of individual decision-making in the context of vocational education, as explained by Sugiyono (2021) who emphasizes triangulation of literature data sources to build a strong analytical framework in post-positivist qualitative research. This method aligns with Creswell and Creswell (2023) who recommend a qualitative design for the exploration of complex socio-cultural phenomena such as the influence of Javanese collective norms on global job mobility, by integrating key references such as Mulder (2019), Murtiningsih (2020), and Sutopo (2021) to support the conceptual analysis.

The research instruments were secondary documents from journals, books, and tracer study data from SMK Negeri 2 Malang in 2025. The data analysis technique adopted a qualitative inductive model through data collection, reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. This technique follows the principles of thematic analysis from Emzir (2022) which emphasizes iterative coding to identify cultural patterns such as mutual cooperation and family responsibilities from sources such as Setyawati (2019) and Sugiyanto (2018), and Sudaryono (2021) who emphasizes validity through literature triangulation in qualitative studies of vocational education. The analysis focused on migration theory (Hugo, 2016; Kubo, 2020), Javanese cultural theory (Susilo, 2017; Triandis, 2018), and the concept of socio-cultural influences on individual decisions (Rahayu et al., 2015; Yamada, 2021), with an emphasis on credibility through cross-checking between recent references.

The study population included graduates of SMK Negeri 2 Malang in 2020-2025 who participated in the SSW preparation program (around 20 alumni successfully migrated, with 11 in the caregiver and hospitality sectors based on the 2025 tracer study), as well as the Javanese cultural

community in Malang as a broader social context. The sample was purposive through an in-depth case study of tracer study data and relevant literature, in accordance with Sugiyono (2021) for conceptual research that does not require random sampling but rather thematic representation, supported by Rahmawati (2021), Suwandi (2021), and Pratama (2021) who discussed the vocational readiness of SMK graduates in global markets such as Japan.

The research procedure began with a systematic literature search from databases such as Google Scholar regarding Javanese culture, SSW migration, and vocational education. Secondary data collection from SMK Negeri 2 Malang was followed by iterative thematic analysis to construct a conceptual model of cultural influence. This process followed Creswell and Creswell's (2023) path of philosophical exploration, literature review, theory development, and ethical reflection. The integration of instruments such as the analytical guidelines from Emzir (2022) and Sudaryono (2021) ensured coherence between the local case study (Hadi, 2020; Masduki, 2020; Suparno, 2018) and the global framework of labor migration. Validation was carried out through the transferability of the findings to similar contexts in East Java, resulting in actionable solution recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Family Values in Javanese Culture

Javanese culture highly values strong family values, which are reflected in various aspects of social life, including important decisions such as working abroad. One important value in Javanese culture is togetherness and harmony within the family. The family is seen as the primary social unit, and important decisions are usually made with consideration of their impact on all family members. Individual decision-making tends to be avoided by Javanese people if it is perceived as affecting the family balance. Working abroad, such as in Japan, is often perceived as disrupting this harmony, particularly due to the physical distance from family members.

In a study of Javanese family values, Sutopo (2021) emphasized that physical proximity to family members is a crucial aspect of Javanese social structure. In general, in Java, people tend to live in close communities with their extended families, with houses adjacent to each other. This creates such strong bonds between family members that working abroad is perceived as emotionally and psychologically disruptive.

2. Mutual Cooperation and Social Interests

Gotong Royong (mutual cooperation) is a Javanese cultural value, where people support and help each other in all aspects of life. People in Malang generally believe that vocational high school graduates who work abroad will miss out on opportunities to participate in important social activities. Gotong Royong not only reflects social cooperation but also binds individuals to their communities. This makes the decision to work remotely difficult.

According to Sugiyanto (2018), the concept of mutual cooperation, or mutual assistance within a community, is a core value held dear by Javanese society. Leaving a community for an extended period can sever this strong social support. Many potential workers are reluctant to work abroad for fear of losing their social networks back home. This also reflects the importance of community support in the daily lives of Javanese people.

3. Responsibility Towards Parents and Intergenerational Relations

Vocational high school graduates in East Java often feel a significant responsibility to care for and support their parents. Javanese social norms emphasize the obligation for children to live close

to their parents, especially if they are elderly. This can hinder the decision to work in Japan, where the distance and time spent away from family can be emotionally taxing.

According to Setyawati (2019), Javanese families adhere to a strong hierarchical principle, where family decisions often rest with parents or older family members. Children are expected to obey their parents' wishes, especially regarding matters related to their future, including employment. Therefore, family support is crucial in the decision-making process, often making parents hesitant to let their children go even when there are promising financial and career opportunities abroad. In line with what Murtiningsing (2020) stated, who studied the decisions of migrant workers from Java, he found that the responsibility of caring for parents and maintaining a household is often the main reason someone is reluctant to work abroad. In Javanese culture, caring for parents is a very important moral and social responsibility, and leaving the family for an extended period is considered irresponsible in the eyes of society.

4. The Influence of Religion on Labor Migration

The majority of Javanese people practice Islam, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining relationships with parents and family. Working away from home is often considered less than ideal, especially if parents require special care.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Javanese cultural values, particularly family ties, mutual cooperation, responsibility towards parents, and the influence of Islam, significantly hindered the decision of SMK Negeri 2 Malang graduates to work in Japan through the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme, despite economic and training opportunities being available since 2020. Key findings point to a dilemma between long-term financial benefits and the loss of social-family harmony, where Javanese collectivist norms make international migration perceived as disruptive to emotional and community balance, as supported by data from the 2025 tracer study that recorded only 11 successful alumni out of dozens of prospective participants (Sutopo, 2021; Setyawati, 2019; Sugiyanto, 2018). Practical implications include recommendations for SMKs to improve family socialization, psychological counseling, partnerships with Japanese companies, mental training, and cost subsidies, to optimize graduate participation in the global job market without sacrificing local cultural values (Rahmawati, 2021; Pratama, 2021).

However, the limitations of this research lie in its conceptual approach based on a literature review and a single case study at SMK Negeri 2 Malang, which did not involve direct interviews with graduates or parents for deeper empirical validation. Therefore, the findings are exploratory and require quantitative testing in the broader East Java region. Suggestions for further research include a mixed-methods design with surveys and focus group discussions to statistically measure the intensity of cultural influences, as well as cross-regional comparisons to generalize Javanese cultural factors on SSW migration (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Sugiyono, 2021). This approach will enrich the BP2MI policy in accommodating the cultural dimensions of Indonesian labor migration.

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