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GLOBALIZING CENTRAL ASIAN HUMAN RESOURCES AND SOFT POWER OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

This paper explores the impact of globalization on the career development of students from Central Asian countries who choose Japanese studies majors and the position of Japan in the process of their career decision-making. We examine the choices and possibilities of human resource development and higher education exchange in the two regions. The data for this study were collected between September 2016 and February 2017 in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Osaka (Japan). We interviewed several participants through video chat as well. In particular, the image of Japan among students in Central Asian countries, the reasons Central Asian students choose to acquire Japanese studies majors; and, the impact of studying in Japan on their careers. We will analyze these points from Japan's soft power perspective. We posit that Japan's soft power has strengthened in Central Asian countries over recent years and led to the popularity of Japanese studies majors and receiving education in Japan among university students. As the relationship between Japan and Central Asian countries develop, it is important to explore career opportunities and issues Japanese studies students face.

Key words: international students, Central Asia, human resources, Japan, soft power.

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Орталық Азия адам ресурстарының жаһандануы және жапондық білім берудің жұмсақ күші

Бұл жұмыста жапонтану мамандығын таңдаған Орталық Азия елдерінің студенттерінің мансаптық өсуіне жаһандандудың әсері мен мансаптық шешімдерді қабылдау процесінде Жапонияның ұстанымы қарастырылады. Біз екі аймақта адам ресурстарын дамыту мен жоғары білім алмасудың таңдауы мен мүмкіндіктерін қарастырамыз. Бұл мақалада Орталық Азия аймағынан – Қазақстан, Өзбекстан және Қырғызстан студенттеріне арналған. Бұл зерттеудің деректері 2016 жылдың қыркүйегінен 2017 жылдың ақпанына дейін Алматыда (Қазақстан) және Осакада (Жапония) жиналды. Біз бірнеше қатысушылардан бейне сұхбат арқылы сұхбат алдық. Зерттеуге қатысушылардың жеке өмірін қорғау үшін біз оларға бүркеншік аттарды қолданамыз. Атап айтқанда, Орталық Азия елдеріндегі студенттер арасындағы Жапонияның бейнесі; Ортаазиялық студенттердің жапонтану мамандығын таңдаудағы себептері; және Жапонияда оқудың олардың мансапқа әсері. Біз бұл тармақтарды Жапонияның жұмсақ күші тұрғысынан талдаймыз. Біз Жапонияның жұмсақ күші соңғы жылдары Орталық Азия елдерінде күшейіп, жапонтану мамандықтарының танымалдылығына және университет студенттері арасында Жапонияда білім алуға әкелді деп есептейміз. Жапония мен Орталық Азия елдерінің қарым-қатынасы дамып келе жатқандықтан, мамандық бойынша мүмкіндіктер мен студенттердің жапонтану мәселелерін зерттеу маңызды.

Түйін сөздер: шетелдік студенттер, Орталық Азия, адам ресурстары, Жапония, жұмсақ күш.

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Глобализация человеческих ресурсов Центральной Азии и мягкая сила японского образования

Цель данной статьи – сосредоточить внимание на развитии карьеры студентов из стран Центральной Азии в эпоху глобализации и выявить роль Японии в этом процессе, а также выявить приемлемый путь и возможность глобального развития человеческих ресурсов и высшего образования. Авторы данной работы рассмотрят в частности, (1) текущие дипломатические, экономические и культурные отношения между Японией и странами Центральной Азии, (2) имидж Японии в странах Центральной Азии и (3) влияние обучения за границей в Японии на карьеру студентов из стран Центральной Азии. Отдельного внимания заслуживает рассмотрение этих вопросов с точки зрения «мягкой силы» Японии. Данные для этого исследования были собраны в период с сентября 2016 года по февраль 2017 года в Алматы (Казахстан) и Осаке (Япония).

Таким образом, в этом исследовании было получено, что мягкая сила японской культуры и языка сильна в странах Центральной Азии, что стимулирует их к получению образования в Японии. По мере углубления отношений между Японией и странами Центральной Азии ожидается, что выгоды от получения образования в Японии возрастут.

Ключевые слова: иностранные студенты, Центральная Азия, человеческие ресурсы, Япония, мягкая сила

Introduction

Japanese studies gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s as Japan emerged among leading global political and economic powers. Rapid economic growth, technological innovations, social reforms, and more importantly, the synergy of Western-style democracy combined with Asian/Japanese culture attracted researchers worldwide to pay close attention to Japan and its society (Babb, 2015). As a result, from the mid-1980s, Japanese language and Japanese studies majors were established as independent disciplines/departments in major universities worldwide.

The newly independent states of Central Asia (C.A.)—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—established after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, followed the global trend in their interest toward Japan. As diplomatic ties between Japan and the C.A. countries were established in 1992, the two regions engaged in economic and political cooperation and promoted Japanese knowledge and culture. “There are several areas of special interest to Japan in its relations with Central Asia, including cooperation in education, economic development of the region, political reforms, as well as energy resources” (Rakhimov, 2014:77-78). Japan is the first country “that applied the Silk Road notion to its diplomatic initiatives in C.A.,” appealing to the connectivity and revival of the Silk Road.... “[It] has since solidified its presence in C.A. and contributed

significantly to regional development through its Official Development Assistance” (Dadabaev, 2019: 2). Several phases characterize Japanese foreign policy in Central Asia: from 1991 to 1996 – assistance and support to the newly independent states; from 1997 to 2003 – “Silk Road Diplomacy” aimed to build trust, foster economic cooperation, and build peace through nuclear non-proliferation and fostering stability; from 2004 – “Central Asia plus Japan Dialogue” furthering Japanese involvement in the strengthening of peace, region’s economic foundations, intraregional cooperation, maintenance of good international relations and cooperation with Japan (Walton, 2010). The new turn of these initiatives started in 2015 with the visit of Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Central Asia. “Japan aims to boost its educational and humanitarian involvement in this region to support both its ‘Cool Japan’ policy and its broader soft-power construction in this region” (Dadabaev, 2018: 2).

Another move to strengthen the ties with Japan was establishing Japanese studies majors in leading universities in Central Asian countries. Several universities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan teach the Japanese language, history, and culture. These are Bishkek State University named after K. Karasaeva (1996), Kyrgyz National University named after J. Balasagun (1995), Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (1992), Uzbekistan State World Language University (1992), University of World Economy

and Diplomacy (2008); Tajik State Institute of Languages named after S. Ulugzod (1992), Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (1992), Ablai Khan Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages (1995), L. Gumilev Eurasian National University (1996). These universities annually enroll about 500 students to Japanese studies majors, who potentially become human resources that can contribute to the promotion of economic, cultural, and social projects between the two regions.

There is also an increased presence of nationals from Japan in C.A. and Central Asians in Japan. However, their numbers are significantly imbalanced. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021), there are about five hundred Japanese nationals in C.A. who live, work, or study there long-term (Tajikistan – 40, Uzbekistan – 138, Kyrgyz Republic – 140, Kazakhstan – 171). In contrast, about 5,000 nationals from Central Asian countries (Uzbekistani – 3,627, Kazakhstani – 465, Kyrgyzstani – 553, Tajikistani – 203 as of 2020) are mid- or long-term foreign residents in Japan (E-Stat, 2021). According to Nurgaliev and Shaymergenov (2007), Japan's relatively insignificant participation in Central Asian countries' affairs results from its geographical distance, absence of security interests and low-level involvement in the regional security processes, cultural remoteness and the low prevalence of the Japanese language in the Central Asian region. Furthermore, "the task of 'defining' the importance and place of the CA region for Japan has been and remains one of Japan's greatest challenges. . . The vague status of the CA region for Japanese foreign policy is notably neither treated as a part of Japan's Asia policy nor conceptualized as a region of its own" (Dadabaev, 2019: 9). As a result, despite the geographic scale of the Central Asian region, its natural resources, historical importance, and rich potential for scientific, economic, and cultural cooperation, the ties with Japan still have room for growth.

The purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the career development of students from Central Asian countries and the position of Japan in the process of their career decision-making. We examine the choices and perspectives of human resource development

and higher education exchange between Japan and C.A. countries. In particular, we discuss (1) the image of Japan among students in Central Asian countries, (2) the reasons Central Asian students choose to acquire Japanese studies majors, and (3) the impact of studying in Japan on their careers. In our analysis, we pay particular attention to the idea of Japan's soft power and its impact on students' choices of Japanese studies majors.

The idea of Japan's soft power originates in the dichotomy of hard power vs. soft power introduced by Nye (2004). "Power is the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments, or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want" (Nye, 2004: 2). In this way, soft power is "a country's ability to achieve its goals by attracting rather than coercing others.... [T]o gain international support is to have cultural and political values and foreign policies that other countries see as legitimate and having moral authority" (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008: xvii). In recent years, Japan has played a major role in the world in terms of soft power. According to McGray (2002), Japan is now a cultural superpower with a significant influence on pop music, consumer electronics, anime, food culture, and so forth.

However, Watanabe and McConnell (2008) argue that the field of education, which is another crucial factor in soft power, has not managed to contribute effectively to Japan's soft power. As Yonezawa (2008) points out, the United States is the major global power in the field of higher education not only because of its hard and soft power but also due to the prevalence of the English language and high quality of educational programs. In contrast, while Japanese higher education is popular in the East Asian region, "Japanese academics and students are aware that they are not at the global center, and they feel the necessity to further internationalize Japanese higher education to improve linkages with the global community" (Yonezawa, 2008: 55). Indeed, the United States ranks first among the countries that accept international students, reaching 740,482 international students, while Japan is seventh and has received only 150,617 international students (Unipage, 2012). For

students who wish to receive overseas degrees or have experience studying abroad, receiving an education in English is one of the factors that make the U.S. an attractive destination. In contrast, one of the major requirements for obtaining higher education in Japan is speaking the Japanese language. In addition, while Japanese university education gained an international reputation for producing “a trainable and talented workforce,” it is not “an example of quality in teaching and learning” (Dore, 1997 cited in Yonezawa, 2008: 55). This was a backdrop that coincided with the growing global competition for human resources. Previously, Japan has been a primary study destination among Asian students; however, in recent years, additional destinations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and China, began actively attracting Asian students (Altbach & McGill Peterson, 2008).

When it comes to Central Asian countries, Nurgaliev and Shaymergenov (2007) point out that Japan has sufficient possibilities in C.A. due to its broad financial options to invest in energy, transportation, and communication projects. Moreover, “Japan is considered as an alternative to the Chinese and Russian projects, offering smaller CA states some alternatives to the countries feared for their potential for political and economic exploitation and domination” (Dadabaev, 2019: 3). Furthermore, Japan’s “correct and diplomatic position regarding political reforms is conducive to building favorable relations with the Central Asian countries” (Nurgaliev and Shaymergenov, 2007: 131). And, its positive image as a peace-loving power helps build trust for bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Nurgaliev and Shaymergenov, 2007). In this paper, we present the results of interviews with fifteen international students from Central Asia who have experience studying in Japanese universities. Specifically, we consider the ideas and images of students from Central Asian countries regarding Japanese culture, research, and language. We also examine the potential of Japanese education as a soft power in students’ career development and the advantages and disadvantages of studying in Japan.

Research methodology

This paper focuses on students from the Central Asian region—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

and Kyrgyzstan. According to the statistical data of Japan’s Ministry of Justice (2016), the number of students from Central Asia residing in Japan has been gradually increasing. We can see the following trends: Kyrgyzstan – from 120 students in 2006 to 384 in 2016; Kazakhstan – from 142 students to 323; and Uzbekistan – from 527 students to 1,632 in the same period (Figure 1). The participants are former students from Central Asian countries who have experience studying in Japanese universities for more than six months. Ten persons from Kazakhstan, three from Uzbekistan, and two from Kyrgyzstan (see Table 1); ten of the participants were women, and five were men. Five of the participants currently either continue their education in Japanese higher education institutions or are employed in Japan.

To collect information from a diverse group of participants, we contacted varied sources to receive introductions. Firstly, since both authors are former students of the Japanese and Korean Studies Department of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, we recruited research participants with the cooperation of the instructors and professors who currently teach at the department. We then contacted other participants using snowballing methods. As for participants from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, we were introduced to some of them by contacting interpreters who cooperated with us at the Japan Study Abroad Fair hosted by the Japan Centers (JICA) in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is important to acknowledge that most of our participants came from Japanese studies majors despite our efforts to interview participants from varied educational backgrounds.

The data for this study were collected between September 2016 and February 2017 in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Osaka (Japan). We interviewed several participants through video chat as well. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-60 minutes each. As Russian is a common language in Central Asian countries, all interviews were conducted in Russian. We asked participants basic information about them (age, educational background, work experience), their interest in Japan and its culture, Japanese language knowledge, their experience of studying in Japan, and their life after studying there. To protect the privacy of the research participants, we refer to them using pseudonyms.



Figure 1 – Annual trends in the number of international students from Central Asia (2006-2016)

(Source: Ministry of Justice Statistics on Foreign Residents (formerly Registered Foreigners Statistics) Statistics Table)

Table 1 – Research Participants

	Name	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Current Country of Residence	Participation in Study Programs in Japan
1	Murat	26	Male	Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT)
2	Tahir	26	Male	Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT)
3	Zakir	22	Male	Uzbekistan	Japan	Undergraduate Students Program (MEXT)
4	Jyldyz	34	Female	Kyrgyzstan	Japan	(1) Teacher Training Students Program (MEXT) (2) Research Students Program (MEXT)
5	Aida	24	Female	Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyzstan	Japanese Studies Student (MEXT) *Planning to study in Japan as a research student (MEXT)
6	Natasha	30	Female	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Research Students Program (MEXT)
7	Nurbol	31	Male	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT)
8	Elmira	36	Female	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	(1) Cultural Exchange Program (MOFA) (2) Japanese Language Teachers' Training Program (Japan Foundation) *As a Japanese language instructor participates in multiple short-term programs
9	Zamira	41	Female	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Japanese Language Teachers' Training Program (Japan Foundation) *As a Japanese language instructor participates in multiple short-term programs
10	Assel	26	Female	Kazakhstan	Japan	(1) Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT) (2) Research Students Program (MEXT)
11	Botagoz	39	Female	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT)
12	Saniya	35	Female	Kazakhstan	Japan	(1) Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT) (2) Research Students Program (MEXT)
13	Ainura	34	Female	Kazakhstan	Japan	(1) Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT) (2) Research Students Program (MEXT)
14	Nazym	34	Female	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Privately funded student (Master's Program)
15	Erik	38	Male	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Japanese Studies Students Program (MEXT)

Survey results

Education in Japan vs. Education in the United States. One of the central questions of our survey was the reason students chose Japanese studies and Japanese language major. To compare Japan's soft power with the American one, we asked all participants about their views on American education, education in the English language, and the decision-making process they underwent when choosing their university major. Only two participants talked about having an interest in studying in English and education in the United States. Moreover, for those interested in studying in the U.S., the primary reason for such interest originated in the soft power of the "America" rather than the attractiveness of the American education system or the quality of education. For example, Asselaimed to study international relations as her university major to continue her education and career in the U.S. in the future. However, she did not receive enough points and was enrolled in her second choice major – the Faculty of Oriental Studies. Explaining the reasons why she was interested in studying in the U.S., Assel said: "It is because it's the United States," referring to the political, economic, and cultural strength of the country.

Another participant – Aida – studied in a high school specializing in the English language. According to Aida, her classmates dreamt of studying in the U.S., so she felt that she was also interested in studying there. Eventually, she was selected for a one-year high school exchange program in the United States but was unable to study there due to the circumstances of the American host family. Therefore, she decided to continue with her English education at the university. But, as Aida explained,

My mother asked why I wanted to continue learning English. She said: "You already studied English at school, right? . . . What about other languages?" And she recommended the Japanese language. I resisted and was crying every day as I was going to the university. I didn't want to study the Japanese language, and I hated university. I decided that I would receive bad grades during my freshman year and drop out of school. However, our Japanese teacher was so enthusiastic . . . She inspired me, and I fell in love with the language [Japanese].

Aida kept describing her Japanese language teacher, saying that what she liked the most about her was that the teacher had good manners and was very polite. Gradually Aida became interested in Japanese and decided to continue her studies. She

also grew to enjoy calligraphy, saying, "The *hiragana* syllabary is very interesting and looks like anime drawings." When we asked why Aida's mother insisted on her learning Japanese, Aida explained that her mother was fascinated with Japanese popular culture after watching a movie called "*Rashōmon*" and reading Japanese novels that were translated into Russian. Thus, according to Aida, the mother decided long before Aida went to the university that at least one of her three children should study the Japanese language.

Education in Japan as a choice. In contrast, some participants were interested in the Japanese language from when they were in junior high school, so they decided to continue their studies by majoring in Japanese. For instance, when Elmira was a junior high school student, she learned about the Japanese language department at Kazakh National University. She consulted with her homeroom teacher about continuing her education there. "My teacher said that judging from my personality, she could see me being able to master the Japanese language." Furthermore, "I didn't think about learning English. . . . Few people could speak Japanese back then, and 'Japanese History and Language' major was very rare." And so, Elmira decided to learn Japanese at the university. Another participant, Nurbol, explained: "When we are children, we all dream of our future professions, right? Some children want to become astronauts, while others, like me, want to study the Japanese language."

Other participants were less determined on the languages to study. For instance, Zamira explained that despite having a clear idea of which faculty she wanted to study – the Faculty of Oriental Studies, she did not have any preferences regarding the major language. "I thought that I should probably choose Chinese," but then Zamira learned about the newly opened Japanese Language Department (established in 1992) and decided to study Japanese. As for the English language and studying in the U.S., Zamira pointed that she studied French as a foreign language at her secondary school. However, when she entered the university, there were no French language classes provided, and everybody was required to take English language classes instead. Furthermore, due to the shortage of English instructors, there was no division between those who were beginners in English and those who have studied it at school. As a result, the classes were conducted to fit students already familiar with the basics and speak some English. It was hard to learn the language in such an environment and become interested in it for Zamira.

As she pointed out, she did not even have a thought of studying in the United States.

Japanese Universities vs. Universities in Central Asia. Research participants expressed an opinion that the educational environment of Japanese universities is crafted to fit the interests of students, is highly specialized and modernized, and allows close communication between lecturers and students, which is harder to find in Central Asian universities. The freedom of choice in terms of courses that students have in Japanese universities was highly praised by participants, pointing to the fact that it let them concentrate on subjects they were interested in learning. For example, Natasha explained:

I studied in Japan as a graduate student, but undergraduate students in our lab participated in sports clubs, circles, and various extracurricular activities. . . . They practiced playing musical instruments, chorusing, and dancing on campus. I thought it was exciting. There are no such opportunities in Kazakhstan. We don't even have circles. Our students [in Kazakhstan] have to study, but they don't know what they study. They essentially take subjects that they are told to learn, not what they want to study. There were many choices in Japan in terms of what was interesting for me and what I liked. . . . You can also decide on your schedule. I didn't work part-time, but it was nice to think of the timetable at my convenience.

The same point was also discussed by Assel from Kazakhstan, who pointed out a high level of expertise at Japanese universities. She mentioned that she could acquire a wide range of superficial knowledge in Kazakhstan, but she could learn things deeper in Japan. Students from Kyrgyzstan – Jyldyz and Aida – also supported that Japanese universities are more modernized and deliver more advanced knowledge and skills than Kyrgyz universities.

In addition, participants expressed a high level of satisfaction concerning the communication with faculty members in Japan, where they had opportunities to learn subjects deeper by interacting with their professors and exchanging opinions during seminars. For example, Natasha emphasized that “When it comes to the course contents, . . . at our university [a university in Kazakhstan], [lecturers] teach plainly and according to textbooks. Japanese lecturers are engaged in their research, they spend a lot of time with students. . . so they eventually understand what the students are interested in and what they want to study.”

Japanese Language as a Prerequisite for Studying in Japan. Finally, as we mentioned above, one of the necessary conditions for receiving higher

education in Japan is the knowledge of the Japanese language. All the participants, who studied in Japan as undergraduates, were originally from Japanese studies departments and could speak Japanese before going to Japan. In particular, it was revealed that participants from Uzbekistan had learned Japanese from the secondary education stage. Among them was Tahir, who attended a Japanese circle for three years from the age of twelve. Another participant, Jyldyz from Kyrgyzstan, learned Japanese as a second foreign language in high school. Nine out of fifteen participants have visited Japan as “Japanese Studies Students” (Nikken Students) sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of the Japanese Government (MEXT). This Program aims at students who have reached the Japanese Language Proficiency Test Level 2 (JLPT) and higher. Thus, it is clear that students who aspire to study in exchange programs at Japanese universities are expected to have a high level of Japanese language proficiency to receive such a scholarship.

Discussion

Throughout our fieldwork, we explored the image of Japan and Japanese studies in Central Asia. Few trends are important for our discussion. Firstly, the cases introduced reveal that the career choices of Central Asian students were influenced by the soft power of the United States and Japan. In the case of Japan, there was an image of “enthusiastic” and “hardworking” people, so-called “corporate Japan” image that was popularized in the Soviet discourse of Japan’s economic miracle in the 1970s and 1980s. This led many students who considered that their personalities suited the image of Japan represented in the public discourse to become interested in learning about its culture and language. Another reason for choosing the Japanese studies major was the timing of earning a university degree. As it was in Zamira’s case, she entered university immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At this time, Kazakhstan was not established as an independent state and was only starting its diplomatic relations with other countries and opening up to Western culture and education. It was the time when studying abroad was not considered an educational path for students due to its inaccessibility. This might have led some students to choose majors that seemed rare and new rather than popular.

When participants discussed the Japanese studies education in their home countries, they referred to it

as “superficial.” One of the possible reasons for the superficial level of teaching about Japan in Central Asia is that many universities there, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, established Japanese studies departments only after gaining independence in the 1990s. Therefore, few researchers have specialized knowledge in Japanese studies, and most of the lecturers teach their subjects based on publications about Japan in the Russian language. In recent years, the relationship between Japan and Central Asian countries has been developing, along with the growth of the internet, which should lead to changes and the deepening of knowledge in the field within Central Asian universities.

Furthermore, despite the global popularity of American higher education, some of our participants pointed to the high quality of Japanese education that attracted them. However, despite it being detailed and valuable in terms of gained knowledge, it is constructed for the Japanese labor market. One of the often-mentioned disadvantages related to the experience of studying in Japan and/or studying in a Japanese studies department is the prospective career choice. Participants of the study noted the difference in knowledge received at Japanese university education and the requirements of recruiters/companies. Universities in Central Asia and European and North American universities deliver programs that allow students to apply their knowledge at the workplace. For instance, if a student specializes in law at a university, they will be expected to work in law-related fields after their graduation. This logic can be applied to many other humanities majors. In contrast, most humanities students in Japan choose companies of their interests and receive on-the-job training when they start their careers at companies.

Moreover, when it comes to graduates of the Japanese studies and Japanese language departments in Central Asian countries, their choices are limited to Japan-related work in their home countries. Thus, Japanese university education is advantageous for further employment in Japan. However, if students return to their home country, their career choices become limited to Japan-related career opportunities. For example, Natasha obtained her master's degree in education from a Japanese university, and after returning to Kazakhstan, she was hired to work for a Japanese company branch there. As her work involved a lot of administrative tasks, she had to continue for another Master's Program in a local university to study management and accounting.

The next disadvantage mentioned by participants was the lack of Japan-related work in Central Asia and its gendered bias as many Japanese companies tended to hire female employees. After graduating from a university in Kazakhstan, Nurbol found a job that required English and Turkish languages rather than Japanese. He pointed out, “The disadvantage is that many Japanese companies operating in Kazakhstan have branch offices in Europe. So, the job requires English language knowledge. If there is a small office that includes two-three Japanese staff persons, they tend to hire a female secretary, and they don't need men [who can speak the Japanese language].” As a result, Nurbol worked for a translation company to use his Japanese language and planned to acquire another major, which he could use in addition to Japanese knowledge.

Finally, Japanese language students turned to be well trained in terms of language education. However, if they planned to utilize their language knowledge in their professional path, they had to receive another major in addition to the language knowledge. Furthermore, since the business relationship between Central Asian countries and Japan has been relatively limited, the career options for students specializing in Japanese studies tend to be narrow without acquiring another major and/or receiving further education in a Japanese university.

Conclusion

The interview data presented in this paper show the impact of Japan's soft power in Central Asian countries, which leads to the popularity of Japanese culture and language education. As the relationship between Japan and Central Asia deepens, the benefits of receiving education in Japan are expected to increase. Still, at present, students who have studied in Japan are mainly employed at translation companies or travel agencies. In particular, in the case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there were many female students in the Japanese language departments, and many of the survey participants were female. One reason for such gender imbalances is future career opportunities, which discourage male students from studying Japanese studies majors.

We see the lack of access to resources and available networks as the biggest impediments to academic and scientific/industry collaborations between Japan and the Central Asian countries, which leads to a lack of knowledge and few mutual research explorations. Furthermore, despite the popularity of Japanese studies and Japanese language

majors in Central Asia, they tend to be heavily focused on language and linguistics. Such bias is both a cause and a result of the lack of specialists to deliver up-to-date knowledge and research focused on Japanese society, culture, science, and other subjects in universities there. On the other hand, the lack of networks with Central Asian researchers and universities makes it harder for (young) Japanese researchers to approach the region's topics and conduct their empirical research in Central Asia. As a result, there are mostly no publications in Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and even Russian languages in Central Asia about Japan and a limited number of publications on Central Asia in Japanese or English languages by Japanese researchers.

Moreover, the lack of experienced researchers on Japan and research collaborations with Japanese academics makes it harder to promote graduate degrees in Japanese studies majors in Central

Asian universities. The overwhelming focus on the Japanese language without specialists and lecturers providing any other skills besides language leads to scarce employment opportunities for their graduates, requiring them to acquire other professions and academic degrees after graduating from Japanese studies majors. This is essentially a "waste" of skilled resources, as many students eventually do not relate their careers to Japan and the Japanese language, preventing the deepening of ties between the Central Asian region and Japan.

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