

Educational Trajectories and Decision-Making in Japanese Cross-Border Families across East and Southeast Asia

Research Overview

This paper examines how Japanese cross-border families in East and Southeast Asia construct children's educational trajectories through decisions about language education, school choice, and parental roles. Drawing on a comparative multi-sited project, it argues that education in such families is not merely pedagogical but a strategic practice through which belonging, mobility, and future possibilities are negotiated.

Purpose of Study

This study explores how intermarried families involving a Japanese parent and residing in South Korea, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore make educational decisions under different social, institutional, and linguistic conditions. Existing scholarship on international marriage in Asia has often focused on women's migration into host societies. In the Japanese context, such research has also tended to frame Japan primarily as a receiving society that needs to improve multicultural integration. By contrast, this project shifts attention to Japanese outward mobility and to the educational lives of families formed across borders. It also seeks to move beyond the mother-centered bias of previous research by incorporating the perspectives and practices of both Japanese and non-Japanese spouses.

To examine these issues, the study focuses on three recurring aspects of family practice: heritage transmission, social integration, and migration strategy. These are analyzed through four interrelated perspectives used in this study: capital, spatiality, optionality, and well-being. The paper shows how educational decisions serve not only children's schooling but also broader family projects concerning mobility, identity, and quality of life.

Research Methods

The analysis is based on semi-structured life-story interviews conducted between 2020 and 2023 in six locations: South Korea, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore. The dataset consists of 73 interviewees, including 40 Japanese spouses and 33 local spouses. Interviews covered educational and occupational backgrounds, migration histories, language ideologies, school choices, childrearing practices, and future plans for children. The research design combined face-to-face and online interviews and adopted a reflexive, collaborative approach. The analysis was strengthened through reflexive practice and peer debriefing within a multinational research team.

Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the study adopts a comparative qualitative approach to clarify the meanings that parents attach to education and the ways they organize their children's trajectories.

Results and Discussion

The findings suggest that educational choices in Japanese cross-border families are best understood as future-making practices. Across all six sites, parents repeatedly addressed the relationship among Japanese, the local language, and English, but the meanings assigned to these languages varied considerably. Japanese was widely valued as a medium of heritage transmission and as a way of preserving future pathways connected to Japan. Local languages were generally associated with adaptation, schooling, and social belonging in the place of residence, though their importance varied across contexts. English was recognized everywhere as an important resource, but its meaning differed by site: in the Philippines it was often associated with mobility and international opportunity, in Thailand with educational access and social advancement, in Taiwan with competitive educational capital, and in Singapore with less differentiation because it was already embedded in the public system.

School choice emerged as another key arena in which families negotiated values and futures. Local schools often symbolized trust in local society and commitment to integration. Japanese schools and supplementary schools functioned as spaces for maintaining Japanese language, networks, and the possibility of future relocation to Japan. English-medium or international schools were frequently imagined as routes to global skills, though their feasibility depended heavily on cost, geography, and access. Thus, school choice was not simply a technical educational decision but a symbolic and strategic act through which families positioned themselves between the host society, Japan, and possible third-country futures.

Parents' aspirations were always mediated by practical constraints and their own assessments of what was feasible and desirable. Economic resources, proximity to schools, supplementary education, institutional rules, parental work schedules, and the

differing value of languages all shaped what families could realistically do. In this context, many families pursued optionality: the effort to keep multiple future pathways open for children under conditions of uncertainty. At the same time, these strategies were evaluated through the lens of well-being. Parents asked not only what would maximize educational advantage but also what kind of life would be sustainable and acceptable for both children and adults.

Overall, education in cross-border families can be understood as a field where capital, spatiality, optionality, and well-being intersect. Although these four dimensions are not unique to cross-border families and may also be observed in non-intermarried families, they become especially visible here because educational decisions are made across multiple linguistic, institutional, and national frameworks. In this sense, cross-border families offer a particularly illuminating case for understanding educational decision-making more broadly.

Keywords

cross-border families; educational decision-making; language education; school choice; optionality