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Transnational Cultural Capital and Career Mobility among Vocational High School Graduates in Japanese Companies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Japanese-related cultural capital shapes the career mobility of vocational high school graduates employed in Japanese companies in Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative research design. Prior to the main fieldwork, a preliminary organizational survey was conducted to identify companies willing to participate and to recruit suitable interview participants. The primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected employees working at Japanese companies in the KIIC area of West Java. The interview data were analyzed thematically using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, field, and symbolic capital as analytical lenses. The findings reveal that internship experience in Japan serves as transnational cultural capital, enabling workers to acquire workplace dispositions, Japanese-language proficiency, and familiarity with Japanese organizational practices. Furthermore, JLPT certification operates as institutionalized cultural capital that legitimizes these competencies and facilitates their conversion into symbolic recognition, career advancement, and economic opportunities. The study also shows that unequal access to internship opportunities and Japanese language certification contributes to differentiated career trajectories among employees. These findings highlight the importance of expanding equitable access to Japanese-related cultural capital through vocational education and stronger collaboration between vocational schools and Japanese companies to promote more inclusive career mobility.

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■ INTRODUCTION

The world of work is an arena that demands employees possess both hard and soft skills. There are five core competencies that individuals must possess to support their quality of life, both socially and professionally. They are culture, connections, comparisons, and communities, which are listed in The World Readiness Standard (ACTFL, 2021). This study aims to analyze the cultural capital of vocational high school graduates and their careers within Japanese companies. Cultural capital is the result of a long socialization process that shapes an individual's habitus. Habitus refers to a set of dispositions embedded within an individual, formed by social experiences and sustained life conditions (Bourdieu, 1984). A habitus aligned with Japanese cultural values facilitates an individual's adaptation in their work.

In Indonesia, Japanese companies represent a significant sector offering substantial opportunities for the workforce. With over 1,700 companies and 95% of their workforce being Indonesian (Barus, 2020), Japanese companies also act as agents for the reproduction of specific cultural capital, including Japanese proficiency. Mastering the five ACTFL competencies, combined with Japanese skills, can constitute a form of accumulated cultural capital that provides symbolic and material advantages. Currently, Japan is one of the largest investors in Indonesia, with investment reaching US$3.56 billion, or approximately IDR 55 trillion (Kementerian PANRB, 2023). West Java has the highest concentration of Japanese projects, reflecting the accumulation of economic capital from Japanese investments (KBRI Tokyo, 2024). This condition creates a field that merges Japanese companies' needs for skilled workers with the local education system as the provider.

Several studies have discussed the issue of Japanese and cultural competencies as capital. Prabowo et al. (2022) examined the

sustainability of habitus agents and capital among trainees (kenshuusei and jisshuusei) (Prabowo et al., 2022). Working abroad after high school is a chosen path because it is advantageous (The World Bank, 2017). Returning trainees bring cultural capital that shapes their careers, often transitioning into roles such as translators, company staff, or training and recruitment agents (Iskandar, 2020). Working in Japan serves as a strategy for life improvement and skill acquisition. At the same time, Japan's depopulation-driven labor shortages expand opportunities for migrant workers (Pradipta & Kusumasari, 2021), including those from Indonesia. The specific-skilled worker (tokutei ginou) system, initiated by the Japanese government, opens doors for migrant workers while also addressing Japan's human resource crisis (Iskandar, 2020). Working in Japan after high school has become a rational choice for youth (Santoso & Iskandar, 2021). Several companies strive to provide training on Japanese work culture, especially for staff who have not interned in Japan (Prasetya et al., 2024).

Rismorlita et al. (2021) examined the relevance of stakeholder needs to the curriculum of the Japanese Education Program. The results indicated that the curriculum was suitable for stakeholder needs (Rismorlita et al., 2021). More generally, studies on the competence of Japanese-speaking staff were conducted by Setiana et al. (2019). They examined the relationship between hard skills and soft skills of Japanese program graduates working in Japanese companies (Setiana et al., 2019). The Japanese curriculum at vocational schools is generally basic Japanese at the A1 level of the Japan Foundation Standard or equivalent to the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) N5 (Yoshikawa & Pangerapan, 2020). This indicates that the graduates' Japanese skills, as a form of cultural capital, are limited. Previous studies have shown that Japanese language proficiency and workplace communication skills are essential for effective integration and career development in Japanese companies. This is particularly true for positions involving coordination with Japanese expatriates (Xie & Peltokorpi, 2025). In addition to language proficiency, familiarity with Japanese workplace norms, organizational culture, and work ethics is also recognized as an important competency that facilitates collaboration and knowledge transfer in Japanese companies (Morita, 2022; Nguyen & Pham, 2021).

Previous studies have also highlighted a persistent gap between vocational training and industry expectations, particularly in practical communication skills, workplace readiness, and employer-required competencies (Isnainun et al., 2025; Yamada & Otchia, 2022). Sunarsih et al. (2025) highlight the importance of employee performance, which is also determined by output quality, so employees must work effectively and efficiently (Sunarsih et al., 2025). Unlike previous studies, this paper discusses how Japanese-related cultural capital shapes the career mobility of vocational high school graduates employed in Japanese companies. Specifically, it explores how different forms of cultural capital are accumulated, recognized, and converted into career advancement within Japanese corporate settings. The research was conducted in the KIIC (Karawang International Industrial City) area, West Java, where approximately 75% of tenant companies are Japanese-owned (KIIC, 2024), making it an appropriate site for examining how Japanese corporate practices shape employees' career trajectories. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How is Japanese-related cultural capital accumulated, recognized, and converted into career mobility among vocational high school graduates employed by Japanese companies?

■ METHOD

Research Subjects

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Japanese-related cultural capital is accumulated, recognized, and converted into career mobility among vocational high school graduates employed in Japanese companies located in KIIC. Prior to the main data collection, an online organizational screening questionnaire was distributed to HR (Human Resources) representatives of Japanese companies at KIIC. The questionnaire served exclusively as a field-access instrument to identify companies willing to participate and to obtain recommendations for employees who met the criteria. It collected only organizational information (e.g., company identity and willingness to participate). It did not collect employee-level research data, such as demographic characteristics, Japanese-language proficiency, internship experience, or length of employment. The questionnaire was not treated as a research instrument. Therefore, its responses were neither included in the study data nor analyzed in the Results section.

Due to demanding work schedules at Japanese manufacturing companies, not all recommended employees were available for interviews. In several cases, HR representatives recommended other employees from the same company who met the criteria and voluntarily

agreed to participate. The study involved five participants selected through purposive sampling because they possessed rich experiential knowledge relevant to the research, including different occupational positions, internship experiences, and Japanese language proficiency. Data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Given the study's narrative qualitative design, the aim was not statistical representation but an understanding of how Japanese-related cultural capital was accumulated, recognized, and converted into career mobility. Therefore, five information-rich participants were considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation for this study.

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Japanese-related cultural capital is accumulated, recognized, and converted into career mobility among vocational high school graduates working in Japanese companies. The study adopted an interpretive approach to understand participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attached to Japanese-language competence, internship experiences, workplace practices, and career development. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, field, and symbolic capital served as the primary analytical framework for interpreting participants' experiences and explaining how Japanese-related competencies functioned as valuable resources within Japanese corporate settings.

Data Collection

The primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with five employees selected through purposive sampling. Participants were vocational high school graduates employed in Japanese companies who represented different educational and occupational backgrounds, experiences, and levels of Japanese language proficiency. Owing to the demanding work schedules within Japanese manufacturing companies, not all recommended employees were available to participate in interviews. In several cases, HR representatives recommended other employees from the same company who fulfilled the study criteria and were willing to participate. Three interviews were conducted during working hours with the company's permission and lasted approximately 30 minutes, while two were conducted outside working hours, allowing for more extensive discussion. The interviews explored participants' educational backgrounds, internship experiences, Japanese language learning, career trajectories, workplace practices, and perceptions of the value of Japanese-related competencies in Japanese companies.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted iteratively by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, identifying meaningful codes, grouping similar codes into categories, and developing broader themes that addressed the research questions. Throughout the analytical process, Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, field, and symbolic capital were used as sensitizing theoretical concepts for interpreting participants' narratives rather than as predetermined coding categories. The analysis focused on understanding how Japanese-related cultural capital was accumulated, recognized within Japanese companies, and converted into symbolic recognition, career advancement, and economic opportunities.

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim in Indonesian. Analysis was conducted using the original Indonesian transcripts to preserve participants' meanings, cultural expressions, and contextual nuances during the coding process. After the analysis was completed, selected quotations were translated into English for publication purposes. To minimize meaning loss during translation, the translated quotations were cross-checked against the original Indonesian transcripts to ensure semantic equivalence and to retain the intended meaning of participants' narratives.

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original accounts. Second, emerging themes were developed through constant comparison of participants' narratives to ensure the consistency and credibility of the interpretation. Third, participants' identities and company information were anonymized using participant codes (e.g., AS, RJ, and SA) and by removing identifying details from transcripts and reporting, thereby protecting confidentiality and reducing potential workplace risks.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

KIIC is one of the largest industrial estates in West Java and hosts approximately 160 tenant companies, the majority of which are Japanese-owned or Japanese-affiliated firms. As a major industrial hub, KIIC employs

a substantial number of local workers, including vocational high school graduates whose daily work is shaped by Japanese corporate practices and management systems. This study focuses on five participants employed in Japanese companies within KIIC. Although all participants share a similar educational background as vocational high school graduates, they occupy different positions within the organizational hierarchy, ranging from operator to interpreter.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the interview participants and reveals several recurring patterns relevant to this study. These characteristics illustrate how internship experience, Japanese language proficiency, and occupational position are interconnected in participants' career trajectories. As shown in Table 1, a notable pattern emerges regarding the relationship between internship experience in Japan and Japanese language proficiency. Participants who had attained JLPT certification had previously completed internships in Japan, whereas those without overseas internship experience generally held no language proficiency certificate. The only exception was AR, who had completed an internship program in Japan but did not obtain JLPT certification because of limited time to prepare for the examination.

Rather than representing a coincidental association, this pattern suggests that internship experience provided opportunities for sustained language use and immersion in Japanese workplace environments. This enabled participants to accumulate linguistic competence beyond formal classroom learning. From Bourdieu's perspective, these experiences contributed to the acquisition of embodied cultural capital. This capital later became institutionalized through JLPT certification and subsequently recognized within Japanese companies as a valuable occupational resource.

The findings are organized into three interrelated themes that correspond to the research questions. *The first section* examines how internship experience functions as a form of transnational cultural capital by acquiring workplace dispositions and professional practices. *The second section* discusses the role of JLPT certification as institutionalized cultural capital that legitimizes employees' competencies within Japanese companies. *The final section* explores how these forms of capital are differentially recognized and converted into symbolic recognition, career mobility, and economic opportunities, while also highlighting the unequal conditions under which workers accumulate legitimate cultural capital.

Japanese Internship Experience As Transnational Cultural Capital

The findings reveal that internship experience in Japan functions not merely as work experience. It also functions as cultural capital within Japanese companies. Although all participants possessed similar formal educational qualifications, they occupied different positions within the company hierarchy, ranging from operator to interpreter. This indicates that educational credentials alone do not determine career trajectories. Instead, additional forms of capital acquired outside formal schooling play a crucial role in shaping career opportunities.

In Japanese companies, vocational high school graduates commonly begin their careers as operators. Interviews with participants suggest that operators rarely use Japanese language in their daily work because communication with Japanese expatriates is generally mediated through Indonesian leaders, supervisors, or interpreters. Operational manuals and work instructions are also typically provided in Indonesian. As participant AR explained:

Kalo operator nggak pernah ngomong bahasa Jepang. Mereka nggak ketemu sama orang

Table 1. Research participant data

Participant	Position	Length of service	JLPT	Vocational major	Internship
AN	Operator	8 months	N3	Light vehicle engineering	Yes
SA	Leader	7 years	None	Machining	No.
AR	Leader	4 years	None	Mechanical engineering	Yes
AS	Interpreter and engineering staff	4 years	N2	Automotive engineering	Yes
RJ	Interpreter	1 year	N2	Chemical industry	Yes

Jepang langsung. Semua instruksi atau manual juga sudah dalam bahasa Indonesia. Kalo ada masalah, operator konsultasinya ke leader, ya orang Indonesia, jadi ya pakai bahasa Indonesia. (AR, 2024)

Operators never speak Japanese. They don't meet Japanese directly. All instructions and manuals are already available in Indonesian. If there is a problem, operators consult their leader, who is also Indonesian. (AR, 2024)

This finding suggests that Japanese language proficiency is not the primary factor explaining career differentiation among vocational high school graduates. Rather, what appears to be highly valued is prior exposure to Japanese work environments and familiarity with Japanese corporate culture.

Participants AS and RJ, who currently work as interpreters, had both completed three-year internship programs in Japan before joining Japanese companies in Indonesia. Their internship experiences provided them with technical competencies, Japanese-language proficiency, and a practical understanding of workplace norms and expectations. Reflecting on the value of this experience, one participant emphasized that vocational high school graduates should first work in Japan. Internships gave work experience and also an understanding of Japanese workplace culture, including practices such as 5S and hourensou. 5S is an abbreviation of *Seiri* (sort or removing unnecessary items from the workspace), *Seiton* (set in order), *Seiso* (shine or clean the work area and equipment regularly), *Seiketsu* (standardize or create consistent rules, checklists, and procedures), and *Shitsuke* (sustain, or build a culture of self-discipline by auditing and continually practicing these habits). 5S has become an established social practice in Japanese companies (Ohmori, 2024). *Hourensou* is an abbreviation of *houkoku-renraku-soudan. Houkoku* means to report, *renraku* means to inform, and *soudan* means to discuss or consult. A Japanese company applies *hourensou* in implementing work (Sundawa & Marion, 2022).

These practices are not merely procedural knowledge but workplace dispositions that become internalized through prolonged participation in Japanese organizational settings. In Bourdieu's terms, such dispositions constitute embodied cultural capital because they are acquired through socialization and repeated practice rather than through formal instruction alone (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike human capital, which primarily refers to technical knowledge and occupational skills, embodied cultural capital encompasses durable ways of thinking, communicating, and behaving that enable employees to meet Japanese managers' expectations and adapt more effectively to Japanese corporate culture.

However, the findings suggest that internship experience in Japan extends beyond embodied cultural capital. The value of the experience derives from its transnational character. Working and living in Japan enables individuals to acquire cultural resources recognized as legitimate and desirable in Japanese corporate environments. Participants who had worked in Japan were often perceived as possessing superior discipline, a stronger work ethic, and greater adaptability to Japanese management systems. Japanese companies see these as the dominant capital in career mobility because they prioritize loyalty and work ethic (Ono, 2018). Consequently, internship experience became a marker of distinction, differentiating them from employees who had never worked abroad.

The significance of this distinction is evident in the career trajectories of participants. Despite sharing the same educational background, former interns held positions with greater authority and responsibility. Their overseas experience was often regarded as evidence that they had already internalized Japanese workplace values and therefore required less organizational adaptation. In this sense, internship experience functions as a form of transnational cultural capital that enhances an individual's position.

This pattern can be understood by examining how internship experiences shaped participants' workplace dispositions during their prolonged engagement with Japanese organizational practices. This process can be seen as a gradual internalization of workplace dispositions acquired through prolonged participation in Japanese organizational settings. During their internships, participants repeatedly engaged in everyday practices such as 5S and hourensou (reporting, informing, and consulting), which shaped how they communicated, coordinated tasks, and responded to supervisors' expectations. These practices became embodied through repeated enactment in daily work rather than through formal classroom instruction. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the internship functioned as a process of workplace resocialization in which participants developed context-specific dispositions that were subsequently recognized and valued within Japanese companies. This interpretation remains consistent with Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital, while also acknowledging Lahire's argument that individuals may acquire multiple

dispositions across different social contexts without necessarily replacing previously acquired dispositions (Lahire, 2003).

The importance of these workplace dispositions is evident in participants' descriptions of Japanese companies' expectations. Former interns consistently emphasized that adapting to Japanese workplaces required more than technical competence. It also involved learning collective work values, maintaining discipline, practicing 5S and hourensou, and respecting organizational hierarchy. Former interns often emphasized the importance of discipline, attention to detail, and organizational harmony (Akbar M et al., 2024; Ando, 2021; Watanabe et al., 2024). As AS stated, *"Semuanya tuh teratur banget memang ya, beda. Lebih, kalau perusahaan Jepang itu lebih ditekankan ya kayak 5S, hourensou, ya."* (Everything is indeed very organized; it is different. In Japanese companies, there is more emphasis on concepts like 5S and *hourensou"*). These values had become embodied through practical experience. Staff used to internalize Japanese work culture, learning collective values, hierarchy, and adapting to long working hours. This enabled them to meet the behavioral expectations of Japanese employers.

Takaoka (2025) notes that many traditional Japanese companies expect overtime, with a 2016 government survey revealing that 25% require 80 hours of overtime. In Japan, leaving before superiors is considered impolite, and staying late is often seen as a sign of dedication, which can affect an employee's position (Takaoka, 2025). These inherent, *embodied* values then become a habit they carry when they return to Indonesia. It becomes an asset inherent in former intern employees, inseparable, as it is obtained through experience in Japanese work. As Bourdieu argues, embodied cultural capital cannot be transferred instantly because it requires a long process of investment and socialization. Consequently, former interns possessed forms of cultural capital that were difficult for other employees to replicate through short-term training only.

At the same time, the findings reveal that internship experience contributes to the construction of a hierarchy among workers. Former interns are often regarded as more competent and more suitable for promotion than employees who have not worked in Japanese workplaces. Such perceptions create a distinction between workers who possess internationally acquired cultural capital and those whose experiences remain local. As a result, overseas experience becomes a source of symbolic legitimacy that influences recruitment, placement, and promotion decisions. While previous studies have shown that multinational companies generally value international work experience as an indicator of career success and employability (Suutari et al., 2017), such advantages are typically interpreted in terms of human capital. The present findings suggest a more specific mechanism within Japanese companies. Internship experience in Japan is valued not merely because it represents overseas work experience. It also signifies familiarity with Japanese workplace norms, communication practices, and organizational expectations. Consequently, the hierarchy observed in this study reflects the unequal recognition of Japanese-related cultural capital. This capital functions as a source of symbolic legitimacy within the Japanese companies.

This hierarchy illustrates how Japanese companies define and reward particular forms of capital. Within the corporate field, cultural resources associated with Japan are treated as more valuable than equivalent local experiences (Tan & Umemoto, 2021). Consequently, internship experience is transformed into a form of legitimate capital that can be converted into social advantages, career opportunities, and eventually economic rewards. Japanese internship programs function as training mechanisms and as institutions that produce and legitimize specific forms of cultural capital.

The findings therefore suggest that internship experience in Japan should be understood not simply as skill acquisition, but as the accumulation of transnational cultural capital. Through prolonged exposure to Japanese workplace culture, former interns acquire embodied dispositions that align with Japanese companies' expectations. These dispositions are subsequently recognized as legitimate and valuable within the corporate field. It is enabling individuals to gain symbolic recognition and enhanced career mobility upon returning to Indonesia.

Japanese Language Certificate As Institutionalized Cultural Capital

Japanese-language proficiency is widely regarded as an important asset for employees at Japanese companies. Consequently, many educational institutions and training providers promote Japanese language learning as a pathway to employment opportunities. However, the findings of this study indicate that the value of Japanese language proficiency extends beyond its practical communicative function. Within Japanese companies in Indonesia, the Japanese Language Proficiency

Test serves as a form of institutionalized cultural capital formally recognized in the workplace. At the same time, the certification carries symbolic value by indicating that an employee possesses the competencies and dispositions associated with Japanese corporate culture.

All participants reported that they had never formally studied Japanese during their vocational high school education. Four participants acquired Japanese language skills during internship programs in Japan, while one participant learned independently through workplace interactions, mobile applications, and online resources. These findings suggest that participants' Japanese language competence was developed primarily outside formal educational institutions.

The participants also demonstrated varying levels of Japanese language proficiency. Participants AS and RJ, who currently work as interpreters, possessed JLPT N2 certification. Participant AN had JLPT N3 certification despite currently working as an operator due to his relatively short employment period. In contrast, participant SA occupied a leadership position despite not holding any JLPT certification. These findings indicate that Japanese language certification alone does not automatically determine occupational status. Instead, certification interacts with other forms of capital, including work experience, organizational tenure, and internship experience in Japan.

Interestingly, interviews revealed that Japanese language use among operators is generally limited. Participant AR explained that operators rarely communicate directly with Japanese expatriates, as communication is mediated by Indonesian leaders and supervisors. Workplace manuals, instructions, and operational procedures are typically provided in Indonesian. Similar observations were expressed by participants AS and RJ, who noted that interpreters are specifically employed to bridge communication between Indonesian workers and Japanese expatriates. This finding raises an important question: *if Japanese language skills are rarely required for many operational tasks, why does JLPT certification remain highly valued within Japanese companies?*

The answer lies in the symbolic value attached to certification. JLPT certification functions as institutionalized cultural capital because it provides officially recognized evidence of language proficiency. However, its significance extends beyond linguistic competence. Within the corporate field, JLPT certification serves as a symbolic marker of dedication, perseverance, and readiness to function in Japanese organizational environments. Employees who possess JLPT N2 or N1 certification are often perceived as having invested considerable effort in acquiring Japanese language skills and, by extension, in understanding Japanese culture and communication practices.

The experiences of participants AS and RJ illustrate this process. Their JLPT N2 certification, combined with internship experience in Japan, enabled them to access interpreter positions despite sharing the same formal educational background as other participants. In these cases, certification did not merely validate language ability. It contributed to the perception that they were culturally compatible with Japanese managerial expectations. Thus, JLPT certification became a source of symbolic legitimacy that distinguished them from other employees.

The symbolic value of JLPT certification is further reinforced through organizational reward systems. Participants reported that employees with higher-level JLPT certifications often receive additional allowances and are considered for positions with greater responsibility. Such rewards demonstrate that companies recognize certification not simply as evidence of language proficiency but as a desirable form of capital that reflects alignment with corporate values and expectations (Bhar & Chua, 2025; Karhunen et al., 2023).

This process illustrates the conversion of institutionalized cultural capital into symbolic capital. The certification itself represents institutionalized cultural capital because it is formally recognized by legitimate institutions. However, within the field of Japanese companies, the certification acquires additional symbolic value through collective recognition. It becomes a credential that signifies competence, commitment, and "Japan-readiness". As a result, employees who possess JLPT certification often enjoy greater opportunities for social recognition and career advancement.

The findings also reveal how language functions as an instrument of legitimacy within the workplace. While Japanese language skills may not always be necessary for everyday operational communication, JLPT certification remains an important mechanism through which companies identify and differentiate workers. Participant AS and RJ explained that vocational high school graduates who had completed internships in Japan and obtained JLPT N2 were unlikely to remain in operator positions. Companies recognized both their

language proficiency and overseas experience when making recruitment and placement decisions. Furthermore, this certification provides direct economic incentives. For instance, holding a JLPT certificate at N3 or above typically entitles a worker to a monthly language allowance of Rp 700,000 to Rp 1,000,000 (AS and RJ). This account illustrates how language certification functions as evidence of linguistic competence and as an institutionalized form of cultural capital that facilitates access to higher-status positions and greater economic opportunities. Consequently, JLPT certification contributes to the construction of organizational hierarchies by determining which forms of cultural capital are recognized as legitimate and worthy of reward.

Therefore, the significance of JLPT certification cannot be understood solely in terms of communicative ability. Rather, it operates as both institutionalized and symbolic capital. By providing formal recognition of linguistic competence while signaling cultural compatibility, JLPT certification serves as an important mechanism through which employees accumulate legitimacy, gain recognition, and pursue upward career mobility.

The findings also indicate that Japanese-related cultural capital was accumulated through multiple pathways. While JLPT certification represented an important form of institutionalized cultural capital, participants also accumulated embodied cultural capital through internship experiences, workplace discipline, organizational knowledge, and a strong willingness to learn. Participant SA, who did not possess JLPT certification, attained a leadership position after seven years of employment by accumulating embodied forms of cultural capital, including extensive workplace experience, organizational knowledge, and a strong willingness to learn. Unlike interpreter positions, which required formal proficiency in Japanese, leadership roles appeared to place greater value on practical competence, discipline, and the ability to coordinate work teams. This finding suggests that different forms of Japanese-related cultural capital are recognized differently depending on organizational roles and workplace expectations.

Accumulating Legitimate Capital In An Unequal Corporate Field

Career advancement within Japanese companies is strongly influenced by employees' ability to accumulate forms of capital that are recognized as legitimate. These forms of capital include Japanese language proficiency, JLPT certification, familiarity with Japanese workplace culture, and overseas internship experience. However, the accumulation of such capital is not equally accessible to all workers. Rather, it is shaped by structural conditions that create unequal opportunities for employees to acquire the resources necessary for career mobility.

Several participants described various strategies to improve their position within the company. While internship experience in Japan represented the most direct pathway for acquiring Japanese-related cultural capital, participants without such experience actively sought alternative forms of accumulation. For example, participant SA had neither participated in an internship program in Japan nor obtained JLPT certification. Nevertheless, he invested considerable effort in learning Japanese independently through language-learning apps and YouTube videos to communicate more effectively with Japanese expatriates and enhance his career prospects. His experience illustrates that Japanese-related cultural capital can also be accumulated through self-directed learning. However, this pathway may require greater individual effort and may not carry the same symbolic value as overseas internship experience.

While SA's experience illustrates an effective strategy for developing Japanese-language proficiency, this finding should be interpreted as an individual narrative rather than as evidence of a broader pattern among vocational graduates. Future studies involving a larger sample could examine the prevalence of similar learning strategies across different organizational contexts. Taken together, the findings indicate that participants followed multiple pathways in accumulating Japanese-related cultural capital. Regardless of how this capital was acquired, its conversion into career mobility depended on organizational recognition. Employees accumulate specific forms of capital because these resources have already been established as valuable and legitimate within Japanese corporate environments. In other words, workers are not merely pursuing skills. They are attempting to acquire forms of capital that the field rewards. This process is illustrated in the figure below.

This process reveals the operation of symbolic power within the workplace. Japanese companies define which competencies are considered valuable and which are not. Employees with internship experience automatically possess transnational cultural capital. Those who have Japanese language proficiency through transnational cultural capital will be recognized as more suitable for

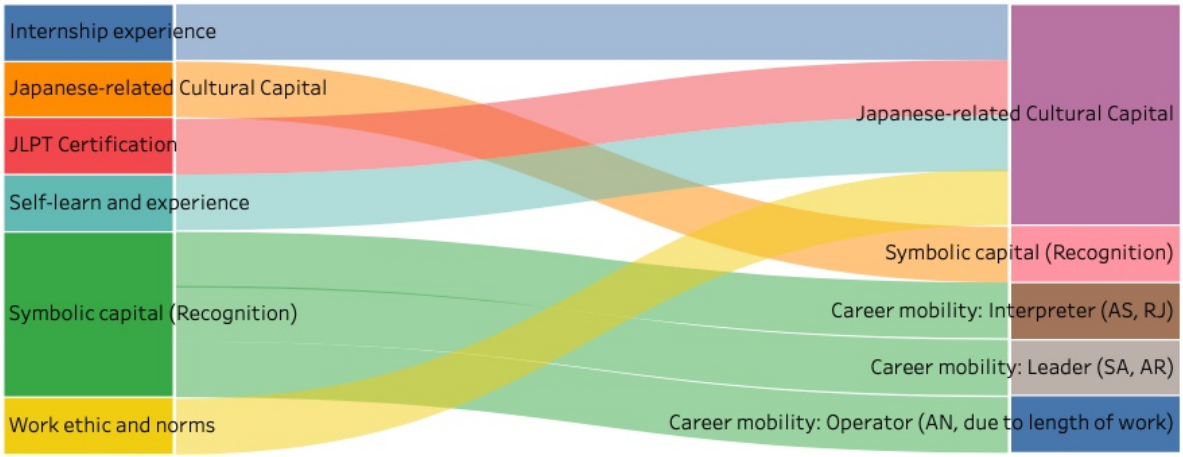


Figure 1. Conversion of capital into career mobility

positions involving leadership, communication, or coordination with expatriates. This is called symbolic capital and will influence their career mobility. However, the findings also showed that career mobility was not achieved through a single pathway. While internship experience and JLPT represented important forms of institutionalized cultural capital, participant SA demonstrated an alternative pathway. Despite lacking internship experience in Japan or JLPT certification, SA secured a leadership position by gradually accumulating workplace experience, organizational knowledge, and a strong willingness to learn Japanese independently. These embodied forms of Japanese-related cultural capital were also recognized by the company and converted into symbolic capital, leading to career advancement. Consequently, workers continually invest time, money, and effort to acquire these forms of capital to improve their position within the organizational hierarchy. These findings align with participant AS's statement,

Pokoknya, lulusan SMA atau SMK itu ke Jepang dulu. Kalo bisa ke Jepang dulu. Soalnya, habis dari Jepang itu punya N2, nggak jadi operator. Orang Jepang pasti liat, oh, dia ini pernah magang, dia N2 di office, atau jadi interpreter. (AS, 2024).

My advice is that high school or vocational school graduates should go to Japan first, if they can. After returning from Japan, you will have the JLPT N2, and you will not remain in an operator position. Japanese employers will think, 'Oh, this person has internship experience in Japan and holds N2,' so they are more likely to place them in office-based positions or interpreter roles. (AS, 2024)

Participant AS's statement illustrates how Japanese-related credentials are perceived as valuable forms of capital. For AS, internship experience in Japan and JLPT N2 certification are not only additional qualifications but strategic resources that significantly influence occupational outcomes. The statement suggests a widely held belief that individuals with these credentials are more likely to secure office-based positions or interpreter roles than to remain in operator-level jobs. This perception reflects the strong symbolic value attached to Japanese-related competencies in Japanese companies.

More importantly, the statement demonstrates how workers themselves internalize the field's logic. Rather than questioning why Japanese internship experience and language certification are privileged, employees often accept them as legitimate pathways to career advancement. This reflects the recognition of particular forms of capital as legitimate and worthy of investment. As workers increasingly perceive internship experience in Japan and JLPT certification as prerequisites for upward mobility, they adapt their aspirations and strategies accordingly. Consequently, the corporate field not only rewards Japanese-related cultural capital but also shapes employees' understanding of what constitutes professional success, thereby contributing to the reproduction of workplace hierarchies and unequal opportunities.

However, access to legitimate cultural capital was not equally distributed among participants. Opportunities to undertake overseas internships and obtain Japanese-language certification depended not only on individual motivation but also on access to institutional resources. Consequently, some participants were better positioned than others to accumulate forms of Japanese-related cultural capital that were subsequently recognized and rewarded within Japanese

companies. This pattern reflects the reproduction of inequality, whereby existing advantages facilitate the acquisition of further advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The experiences of former interns illustrate this dynamic. Internships in Japan provide participants with opportunities to acquire technical competencies, language skills, professional networks, and familiarity with Japanese workplace culture. These multiple resources can later be converted into advantages in recruitment and promotion processes. Workers who lack access to such opportunities must rely on alternative strategies, such as self-study or informal workplace learning, which often require considerably more time and effort to achieve comparable outcomes.

Differences in institutional opportunities shaped participants' ability to accumulate valuable credentials and experiences. Four participants gained internship experience through vocational schools or institutional partnerships. In contrast, SA lacked access to this pathway and instead developed Japanese-related competencies through workplace learning after entering a Japanese company. This finding suggests that the accumulation of cultural capital depends not only on individual motivation but also on institutional opportunities that are unevenly distributed. Participants also described challenges in obtaining Japanese language certification while working. Preparing for the JLPT required balancing full-time work with independent study, and certification was generally pursued through personal initiative rather than employer-sponsored programs. Consequently, opportunities to accumulate institutionalized cultural capital were shaped by both workplace conditions and access to learning resources.

Beyond unequal access to cultural capital, participants' narratives also revealed a broader structural asymmetry within Japanese companies in Indonesia. Several participants noted that communication with Japanese expatriates often requires Indonesian employees to improve their Japanese language skills. In practice, workers frequently bear the responsibility of adapting to the linguistic and cultural expectations of expatriates. Although Indonesian regulations encourage foreign workers to learn Indonesian, participants' experiences suggest that the burden of adaptation often falls disproportionately on local employees, as participant AN stated,

Kalo bisa bahasa Jepang sih lebih baik ya, lebih diperhatikan… Mungkin kalo masuknya ke perusahaan manufaktur atau otomotif ya (harus) ngerti hafalan kayak kotoba-kotoba tentang peralatan gitu... soalnya sering kejadian itu disuruh ambil apa kitanya ambil apa.. orang Jepangnya kan kesel itu.. (AN, 2024)

If you can speak Japanese, it's definitely better because you will get more attention. If you work in a manufacturing or automotive company, you need to know the Japanese vocabulary used for tools and equipment. Quite often, someone asks us to bring a particular item, but we end up bringing the wrong thing. The Japanese staff gets frustrated when that happens. (AN, 2024)

This asymmetry contributes to the perception that Japanese-related competencies constitute the most valuable forms of capital within Japanese companies operating in Indonesia. Employees therefore develop strategies to acquire Japanese language proficiency, JLPT certification, and internship experience in Japan, not necessarily because these competencies are intrinsically superior. They are institutionally rewarded and recognized as legitimate within the corporate field. As participant AN explained, workers who can communicate in Japanese tend to receive greater attention and face fewer communication barriers in manufacturing settings, where misunderstandings regarding equipment and work instructions may create workplace tensions.

Interestingly, this situation exists despite Indonesian regulations that emphasize the use of Indonesian in the workplace. Law No. 24 of 2009 mandates the use of Indonesian in both public and private institutions, implying that foreign workers should also develop competence in the Indonesian language (Krishandini, 2023). Although subsequent regulations, including Minister of Manpower Regulation No. 16/2015 and Presidential Regulation No. 20/2018, relaxed language requirements for foreign workers to support investment, companies remain responsible for facilitating Indonesian-language training through BIPA programs (Sitepu, 2018). Nevertheless, previous studies have noted that insufficient Indonesian language proficiency among foreign workers may create communication problems and workplace conflicts (Maryanto, 2022).

The present findings, however, indicate that many Japanese companies also rely on a complementary strategy by encouraging, or implicitly expecting, Indonesian employees to acquire Japanese language competence. Rather than suggesting that expatriates do not learn Indonesian, the findings highlight that Japanese language proficiency among local employees is

particularly valued as a practical means of facilitating workplace communication. Consequently, Japanese language proficiency, JLPT certification, and internship experience become forms of legitimate capital that provide access to recognition, promotion, and career mobility.

This process reflects broader power relations that determine which forms of knowledge, experience, and competence are valued within the workplace. The accumulation of Japanese-related cultural capital should therefore not be understood solely as an individual achievement. Rather, it is shaped by institutional structures that privilege particular forms of capital while marginalizing others. As a result, career mobility in Japanese companies is influenced not only by individual effort but also by unequal access to resources such as overseas internships, language training, and certification opportunities. While these resources create pathways for upward mobility, they also contribute to the reproduction of workplace hierarchies by privileging employees with greater access to culturally valued forms of capital.

■ CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that career mobility in Japanese companies is shaped by the accumulation, recognition, and conversion of Japanese-related cultural capital. Internship experience in Japan enables employees to acquire workplace dispositions, cultural knowledge, and professional practices that function as embodied cultural capital. On the other hand, Japanese language proficiency and JLPT certification serve as institutionalized cultural capital that legitimizes these competencies. Within Japanese companies, these forms of cultural capital are recognized as valuable organizational resources and are subsequently converted into symbolic recognition, access to higher occupational positions, and economic opportunities.

The findings further suggest that internship experience in Japan functions as an important form of Japanese-related cultural capital. Beyond providing technical skills and language competence, it enables individuals to acquire workplace dispositions, cultural knowledge, and professional practices that are highly valued within Japanese companies. These embodied competencies are subsequently reinforced through institutionalized cultural capital, particularly JLPT certification, which together facilitate symbolic recognition, career advancement, and economic opportunities. However, access to internship experience and Japanese-language certification was not equally distributed, resulting in unequal opportunities to accumulate Japanese-related cultural capital. These findings indicate that Japanese companies recognize and reward competencies associated with Japanese workplace culture, thereby contributing to differentiated career trajectories among employees.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that vocational schools could play a more active role in broadening students' access to Japanese-related cultural capital before graduation. In addition to strengthening Japanese language instruction, schools may consider integrating workplace communication practices such as 5S and hourensou, while expanding partnerships with Japanese companies to increase opportunities for workplace exposure and internship participation. Such initiatives may help reduce unequal access to valuable forms of cultural capital and better prepare graduates for employment in Japanese companies. This study is limited by its qualitative design and the small number of interview participants drawn from Japanese companies located in the KIIC area. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of all Japanese companies in Indonesia.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on data from five participants working in Japanese at KIIC. Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, the relatively small number of participants may not capture the full diversity of career trajectories and organizational contexts among vocational graduates employed in Japanese companies across Indonesia. Nevertheless, the participants were purposively selected because they represented different occupational positions, internship experiences, and Japanese language competencies, enabling the study to identify information-rich cases and recurring patterns relevant to the research questions. Future studies could involve participants from different industrial regions and company sectors to examine whether similar patterns of cultural capital conversion emerge across broader organizational settings. Despite these limitations, the study provides empirical evidence that Japanese-related cultural capital is accumulated and converted through multiple pathways, with its value shaped by the organizational field in which it is recognized.

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