

Cross-border Lives: Exploring the Transnational Mobility Between Romania and Japan

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Проучване на транснационалната мобилност между Румъния и Япония

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The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Авторите нямат известен конфликт на интереси, който да разкриват.

Кореспонденцията относно тази статия трябва да бъде адресирана до проф. д-р Ацуши Такеда, Колеж по социални науки, Университет Рицумейкан, Киото, Япония, имейл: atakeda1@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

Abstract

This paper examines transnational mobility between Romania and Japan by focusing on Japanese people in Romania and Romanian people in Japan. Through an analysis of these two groups, it highlights a mobility nexus that has received limited scholarly attention. Mobility between the two countries reflects their economic, political, and social conditions and demonstrates how these factors shape cross-border movement. Based on a pilot interview with a Japanese student in Romania, this paper explores how the participant experiences life in Romania and what these experiences mean in a broader social context. The participant's settlement experience also informs our understanding of race and ethnicity in a globalizing world, particularly how Japanese migrants are positioned as Asians within predominantly Western social environments. This pilot study provides preliminary insight into the experiences of Japanese nationals in Romania and serves as a foundation for a larger-scale study. In addition to the pilot interview, this study also analyzes videos posted on two YouTube channels run by Japanese residents in Romania. The analysis of these videos offers additional insight into how Japanese migrants narrate their experiences of mobility, settlement, and everyday life in Romania.

Keywords: transnational mobility, Romania-Japan migration, educational mobility, Japanese migrants in Europe, Romanian migrants in Japan

Резюме

Статията разглежда транснационалната мобилност между Румъния и Япония, като се фокусира върху японците в Румъния и румънците в Япония. Чрез анализ на тези две групи се подчертава връзката между мобилността, която е получила ограничено научно внимание. Мобилността между двете страни отразява техните икономически, политически и социални условия и демонстрира как тези фактори формират трансграничното движение. Базирана на пилотно интервю с японски студент в Румъния, тази статия изследва как участникът преживява живота в Румъния и какво означават тези преживявания в по-широк социален контекст. Опитът на участника с установяването също така информира нашето разбиране за расата и етническата принадлежност в един глобализиращ се свят, по-специално как японските мигранти са позиционирани като азиатци в предимно западна социална среда. Това пилотно проучване предоставя предварителна информация за опита на японските граждани в Румъния и служи като основа за по-мощно проучване. В допълнение към пилотното интервю, това проучване анализира и видеоклипове, публикувани в два YouTube

канала, управлявани от японски жители в Румъния. Анализът на тези видеоклипове предлага допълнителна информация за това как японските мигранти разказват за своя опит с мобилността, установяването и ежедневието си в Румъния.

Ключови думи: транснационална мобилност, миграция Румъния-Япония, образователна мобилност, японски мигранти в Европа, румънски мигранти в Япония

ARTICLE INFO:**Original Article****Received: 17, 06.2026****Revised: 30, 06.2026****Accepted: 10, 07.2026**

Cross-border lives: Exploring the transnational mobility between Romania and Japan**Introduction**

Post-World War II connections between Romania and Japan have largely operated at the macro-level, particularly through economic relations. The international expansion of Japanese corporations during Japan's bubble economy in the 1980s established a global presence, which was also reflected in Romania. The entry of Japanese companies into Romania began in 1965, when Mitsui & Co. opened a branch office in Bucharest (JETRO, 2021). Since then, additional Japanese companies have established operations in the country, and as of 2025, 113 Japanese corporations operate in Romania (Japan External Trade Organization, 2021).

Concerning the transnational flow of people between the two countries, the expansion of Japanese corporations has facilitated the mobility of Japanese expatriates and their family members to Romania. Many of these Japanese nationals return to Japan after completing their overseas assignments, resulting in a relatively fluid diasporic community. Although the number of Japanese residents in Romania remains limited (378 people) compared to major European cities such as Paris or London (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), the existence of a *Nihonjin-kai* (Japanese Association) in Romania nevertheless highlights the presence of an organized Japanese community in the country.

Regarding the Romanian presence in Japan, there are 2,329 Romanian residents in the country (Government of Japan, 2025). The establishment of a Romanian Orthodox church in Tokyo further demonstrates the formation of a settled Romanian community in Japan. Romanian migrants in Japan also possess diverse backgrounds, including students, academics, and professionals. Notably, this migration nexus appears to be feminized, as the number of Romanian migrant women exceeds that of men (Silasi, Pirtea, & Simina, 2010). If Romanian migration decisions were based solely on conventional economic motivations, other European destinations would likely be preferred over Japan. This suggests that migration to Japan is also shaped by non-economic factors such as Japanese language education. The Japan Foundation's 2021 survey reports that there are 1,892 Japanese language learners in Romania, including learners in non-formal educational settings (Japan Foundation, 2023). Japanese language education also provides opportunities for Romanian students to engage with Japanese culture and society, thereby fostering various forms of mobility, including tourism, study abroad, and longer-term migration to Japan.

Being abroad: the case of Romanian and Japanese

Studies on Japan in the European context have tended to emphasize historical and cultural dimensions, such as religion—particularly Buddhism (Borup, 2021)—and, more recently, Japanese popular culture. Existing studies concerning Romania and Japan have primarily focused on economic ties (Veith, 2020), while more recent research has highlighted the growing influence of Japanese popular culture, particularly anime, in Romania (Pelea, 2014).

Scholarship on the mobility of Japanese people has expanded over the past few decades. Geographically, existing studies have examined Japanese migration to North America (Kawakami, 2009), Oceania (Ichimoto, 2004), and Asia (Ono, 2015). In contrast, research on Japanese mobility to Europe remains relatively limited (Klien, 2020). Although there is some scholarship concerning Japanese mobility to Europe, much of it focuses on historical rather than contemporary migration experiences (Leysen & Verhaeghe, 2023). As a result, contemporary Japanese mobility to Europe remains a relatively marginal topic within academic studies. This is even more evident in the case of Japanese mobility to Romania, which has received very limited scholarly attention.

It has been argued that mobility should be understood in relation to factors such as nationality, social class, occupation, and ethnicity, as these shape individuals' capacities for movement and settlement (D'Andrea, 2007). These factors are further influenced by macro-level factors such as economic and political conditions. The mobility of Japanese nationals to Romania mainly consists of expatriates and students. Their mobility can therefore be understood as a form of privileged mobility, in which nationality and financial resources function as advantages within global mobility regimes. Nevertheless, despite their relatively privileged socioeconomic status, Japanese migrants' position as Asians in a European context places them in a racialized minority position (Robertson & Roberts, 2022). The case of Japanese migrants in Romania thus highlights the complexities and contradictions embedded in privileged mobility.

Romanian migration has predominantly been discussed within a European context, as the majority of Romanian migrants have moved to other European countries. Studies on Romanian migration after 1989 can be organized from a historical perspective into several distinct stages: the period 1990-2001, the analysis of migration for work that was characterized by circularity and/or the fact that it was temporary and irregular (Sandu, 2006); 2002-2006: studies of the pre-accession period to the European Union, which was

characterized by the establishment of important and compact communities of Romanians in Italy and Spain (Sandu, 2010; Sandu, 2021; Anghel, 2013), 2006-present: studies that were focused on post-EU accession mobility, interested in the analysis of formal work, of temporary or long-term settlement in other European countries, on re-routing to countries less affected by the 2008-2011 crisis (Germany, United Kingdom, Scandinavian countries) (Sandu, 2021; Anghel, 2024). The main themes of these analyses were numerous, among which the following stand out: “the new European peasantry” and labor force segmentation (Sandu, 2006, Sandu, 2010); “the care chain” and gender migration (Magyari-Vincze, 2006); transnationalism and “e-diaspora” (Diminescu, 2009); brain drain vs. brain circulation (Anghel, 2013; Anghel, 2024); Children of Migrants (Șerban & Braziené, 2021).

Compared to the massive corpus of research focused on Romanian migration flows to Western Europe (Italy, Spain, Germany, Great Britain), the analyses dedicated to Romanian migration to Asia are extremely limited in number. In addition, they are highly specific in terms of thematic area. This is justified by the fact that the vast majority of the approximately 5.7 million Romanian citizens living abroad are in OECD countries, approximately 90% living in Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2022). Once again, even with this limitation as regards the number of research devoted to these geographical and social issues, it is possible to identify a historical evolution of studies dedicated to Romanian migration to Asian countries, as follows: the pioneers after World War II, when the research focused on the relationship between states – for example, Romania and China – with an emphasis on documenting the first Romanian students sent to China after World War II to study Chinese (Sava, 2022). These document their difficulties with teaching methods and their ultimate success, producing key figures in Romanian diplomacy and sinology, such as Anna Eva and Romulus Ioan Budura; post-1990 migration scholarship mainly consists of case studies carried out according to the authors’ interests. For example, a major study (Buja, 2023) explores how couples negotiate deep-rooted cultural differences, religious beliefs (Christianity vs. Confucianism), social values (individualism vs. collectivism), and expectations of equality within Romanian-Korean families. At a more general level, Lan’s (2022) research analyzes Eastern European migrants in China, contrasting their “whiteness” and status with other migrant groups from the United States, Canada and Australia.

Concerning Romanian migration to Japan, comparative studies of Central and Eastern European migrants in the UK and Japan - although not specifically focused on Romanians - highlight how Eastern Europeans’ whiteness can be positively interpreted in Japan and may

provide certain social advantages (Drnovšek Zorko & Debnár, 2021). Such studies demonstrate that whiteness is neither fixed nor universal, but rather shaped by nationality, language, class, and other intersecting social factors. Moreover, being categorized as white may allow migrants to partially circumvent dominant migration discourses that often frame non-white migrants negatively (Robertson & Roberts, 2022). At the same time, the privileged status associated with whiteness in Japan is not absolute and appears to be shifting. As Hof (2021) argues, whiteness does not necessarily translate into actionable social or economic capital in all contexts. In this regard, intersectionality theory provides a useful framework for understanding how race, nationality, class, gender, and language intersect to shape the experiences of white migrants in Japan (Crenshaw, 1989).

Despite these emerging discussions, there remains a significant gap in scholarship concerning mobility between Romania and Japan. Both migrant groups tend to remain relatively invisible within their respective host societies. Japanese expatriates in Romania are often socially invisible due to the small size and fluid nature of the community, as well as their position as a so-called “model minority” - a group commonly perceived as highly educated, economically successful, and socially unproblematic - which attracts limited media or public attention. Similarly, despite representing a notable proportion of European migrants in Japan, Romanian migrants are rarely discussed in Japanese media or public discourse. Instead, they are often subsumed under broader categories such as “Eastern Europeans” or simply “Europeans,” which obscures the visibility and specificity of their presence and experiences.

This research explores the mobility nexus between Romania and Japan, a topic that remains underexamined. Drawing on a pilot interview with a Japanese graduate student living in Romania, this paper examines his everyday experiences and situates them within a broader social context. In addition to the pilot interview, this study analyzes videos posted on two YouTube channels run by Japanese residents in Romania. These videos supplement the interview data by providing additional perspectives on how Japanese migrants experience, interpret, and represent everyday life, cultural difference, and social integration in Romania.

Methodology

To understand the complexities of the experiences of both groups, a qualitative approach is particularly suitable, as it enables the researcher to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of the subjects themselves (Creswell, 2013). As a pilot study, we interviewed a Japanese graduate student in Romania. The interview was conducted face-to-face in January

2026 and lasted approximately two hours. The interviewee consented to the recording of the responses and, in addition, provided additional information in writing by email during February 2026.

The additional data set included the qualitative analysis of videos posted on two YouTube channels (TheJapanGuy; Tai - from Japan). The selection of the two video channels was random, the main criteria used in their choice being the fact that they belong to Japanese citizens and that they present aspects of everyday life in Romania. Video content was monitored from March to May 2026.

The following section discusses the major themes that emerged from the data analysis. This research draws on materials in English, Japanese, and Romanian, and therefore adopts a multilingual research approach. During the writing process, AI (ChatGPT) was used to improve the clarity of the English.

Educational mobility between Romania and Japan

Concerning Japanese students' educational mobility, they have traditionally chosen English-speaking countries as their study abroad destinations because English is widely taught from primary school through university, and English proficiency is strongly associated with future career opportunities. Popular destinations for Japanese students include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (JASSO, 2025). However, other foreign languages have also gained popularity and generated educational mobility. Korean, for example, has attracted interest due to the global spread of Korean popular culture, leading to an increasing number of Korean language learners in Japan and study-abroad mobility to Korea (Takeda, 2020).

Regarding European destinations, France is also popular alongside the UK, as French is commonly taught at Japanese universities. In contrast, Romania has not been a popular destination because opportunities to study the Romanian language in Japan remain limited in both formal and informal educational settings. Despite this situation, the participant in this pilot study chose Romania as his study abroad destination. Considering this context, the participant's decision to study in Romania is an unusual case. He wanted to study a less commonly taught language as an undergraduate student. While looking through a course syllabus, he came across the Romanian language by chance and subsequently enrolled in the course. Through his studies, he developed an interest in Romanian society, culture, and history, which eventually led him to undertake study abroad in Romania. This case suggests that individual cultural interests and linguistic curiosity can generate alternative forms of

transnational mobility beyond mainstream educational mobility patterns. It is important to note that educational mobility is not necessarily temporary; previous studies have shown that study abroad experiences can eventually lead to longer-term migration. In this sense, education-induced mobility may function as a precursor to more permanent forms of transnational mobility, namely migration (Joseph, 2016).

Living in a foreign country can be challenging, particularly when there are significant cultural differences, as in the case of Romania and Japan. The interviewee in this study reported encountering negative experiences in Romania, and the way he was treated by some Romanians generated feelings of discomfort and exclusion. His negative experiences included being shouted at, having people spit near his feet, and being looked at with hostility. What he experienced can be understood as microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 72). They are often subtle and covert forms of insult. Perpetrators are often unaware that their actions may be perceived as offensive. Consequently, microaggressions can emerge in everyday interactions, such as criticizing someone's language ability, as experienced by the participant. However, these experiences should be situated within the broader framework of “everyday racism,” which emphasizes that racism routinely occurs in daily life rather than only through extreme acts or formal discrimination (Essed, 1991). Such incidents are embedded within social structures grounded in racial hierarchy and exclusion. This perspective highlights the structural nature of racism in everyday interactions.

Concerning interpersonal relationships, he was approached by women in Romania who were interested in Asian culture, both in person and through social media. Nonetheless, he came to realize that some of these women approached him because they were seeking an Asian boyfriend. While this may be regarded as a positive form of attention, it can also be understood as a form of benevolent othering based on racial stereotypes. He was approached not as an individual but as a racialized subject, namely an Asian man. Such othering is rooted in racial and ethnic fetishization. Similar dynamics have been observed among Asian women (Zheng, 2016); however, relatively little research has examined comparable experiences among Asian men. Asian masculinity has historically not been positioned as an ideal within dominant dating hierarchies. The global spread of Korean popular culture, however, has contributed to more positive and idealized images of Asian men and Asian masculinity (Takeda, 2011), thereby contributing to the fetishization of Asian men.

Despite these negative experiences, the participant felt that he had received considerable support from Romanian people. In everyday life, he was generally treated kindly by local residents and gradually developed a sense of belonging to Romania. When he returns to Japan and encounters news about Europe, he often thinks about Romania even when the news is unrelated to the country. This illustrates a form of transnational consciousness toward Romania; although physically absent, he continues to maintain a subjective connection to the country (Vertovec, 1999).

Understandings and misunderstandings of Romanian peculiarities

As in the case of the interviewee, one of the vloggers included in the analysis is a student in Romania. This is stated in several short videos posted on his channel (The_JapanGuy, 2025, December 12) and from his self-presentation in which he states that he had lived in Japan (in Osaka) then moved to Bucharest. This change was made with the aim of bringing Japan to Romania, as he declared. In his videos, he seeks to explore the cultural differences, mentalities and opportunities between the two worlds. The video materials posted are short, some being presented in English, others in Romanian or even in Japanese. The style is minimalist, the author declaring himself a follower of this trend and as being passionate about the Dark Academy aesthetic. The tone is light, playful, emphasizing short, impactful information related to everyday life. The video “Outfit...” (The JapanGuy, 2026, March 26) emphasizes the cultural differences in intergroup relations with regards to everyday fashion in the two countries - with examples told in Romanian and Japanese. Another short video in Romanian (The JapanGuy, 2026, April 16) presents the culinary differences between Romania and Japan, emphasizing the culinary particularities of Romania (mici, low prices for fruits and vegetables) and the gastronomic and economic differences of Romania compared to Japan.

We could say that aspects related to gastronomy are a common element used by Japanese people who discuss Romania on YouTube. They also appear in the case of the second vlogger included in the analysis – Tai Romania - who is located not in Bucharest but in Constanța. The vlogger describes himself as “Tai – from Japan/ Polyglot/ Lover of sarmale”, and he presents information in Romanian being permanently accompanied by a cat. This time we are dealing with more elaborate video materials, in which we encounter true confessions related to everyday life in Romania. Thus, in a video regarding the best Romanian food for a Japanese person, we are reminded of Romanian hospitality. The vlogger described, as such, some visits to friends’ homes where he was always invited to dinner and he could

refuse to eat everything (Tai_Romania, 2023, July 17). Although he does not delve into or problematize cultural aspects, as was the case with the interviewed respondent, this vlogger discusses those cultural elements that remain inexplicable to a foreigner who decides to move to Romania. The example he chose – namely, mămăligă, a traditional Romanian dish (Tai_Romania, 2023, July 19) – raises some questions that would deserve further research, namely: what are the elements that facilitate the complete assimilation of a foreign culture, how can we better explain the meanings associated with everyday objects to a person who does not have the ideological background specific to a peculiar culture.

Conclusion

This study explored transnational mobility between Romania and Japan, a topic that has received limited scholarly attention. While connections between the two countries have historically been shaped primarily by economic relations, contemporary transnational linkages have become increasingly diverse. The case of the Japanese resident in Romania examined in this study illustrates a form of education-induced mobility and highlights how individual linguistic and cultural interests can generate alternative mobility trajectories.

The interviewee's narrative demonstrates that he encountered both challenges and opportunities in Romania. Although he experienced exclusion and racialized encounters, he also developed a sense of belonging and transnational consciousness toward Romania. This case illustrates that the consequences of transnational mobility cannot be understood through a simple dichotomy of positive and negative experiences. Rather, migration trajectories are shaped by the coexistence of opportunities and constraints, inclusion and exclusion.

The online materials analyzed in this article do not offer the possibility to delve into aspects related to transnational migration between Romania and Japan. But, as we have shown previously, given the relatively impersonal nature of online presentations, they remain valuable in terms of adding information and opening up possible research directions in the case of interviews to be conducted.

The findings of this study also point to several directions for future research. In particular, further investigation is needed into how Romanian residents in Japan experience settlement, belonging, and integration, and how their experiences compare with those of Japanese residents in Romania. Such comparative research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of mobility between the two countries.

Finally, future studies should examine how transnational mobility between Romania and Japan shapes broader bilateral relations. Examining these mobility experiences may provide insights into how people-to-people connections contribute to contemporary relations between the two countries and deepen our understanding of the role of mobility in fostering transnational ties.

Declaration on Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that during the preparation of this manuscript, we used ChatGPT for improving the clarity of the English. After using this tool, we reviewed and edited the content, taking full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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