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Labor Market Inequalities among Mixed-Race Populations in East Asia: Comparative Analysis of China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore

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Abstract. The growing mixed-race population in East Asia has drawn more attention to issues related to race, identity and sense of belonging. In this region, the concept of ethnic homogeneity and nationalist imagination has deeply influenced the population's understanding. This demographic transformation presents an urgent need to re-examine the dynamics of labor market inequality from the perspective of hybridity. While global scholarship has thoroughly researched racial and ethnic disparities in the context of western world, the structural disadvantages experienced by mixed-race individuals in East Asia remain insufficiently investigated. This study investigates how mixed-race populations in China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore face inequality in four key dimensions: wage gaps, employment opportunities, occupational distribution, and leadership representation. Following the theoretical frameworks of cultural hybridity and racial stratification, the research adopts a comparative case study methodology, integrating secondary literature, survey data, and recent policy analyses to uncover the institutional and cultural mechanisms that sustain inequality. Findings from the research demonstrate shared patterns of marginalization even under different countries' situations. Although the government has taken actions to promote diversity and inclusiveness, these mechanisms have prevented the social and economic mobility of mixed-race individuals to a large extent. The study concludes that only regarding mixed-race identity as a social and economic advantage (rather than a deviation from the convention) can promote a more equitable and truly inclusive labor market in East Asia. This study calls on the government, employers and society to prevent the multiculturalism from staying in a superficial form and view it as the core of the region's future development. In this way, multiculturalism can be considered better and incorporated into policies.

Keywords: Mixed-Race Labor Market Inequality, Cultural Hybridity, Racial Stratification, East Asia, Employment Opportunities and Wage Gap

1. Introduction

In recent decades, East Asia has undergone a profound demographic transformation driven by cross-border migration, transnational marriages, and the globalization of labor markets. These processes

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have produced a steadily growing population of mixed-race individuals who challenge the region's long-standing ideals of ethnic homogeneity [1]. Historically, China's dominant Han identity, Korea's and Japan's monoethnic national narratives, and Singapore's state-managed multiculturalism have all reinforced the notion of cohesive national belonging [2]. Yet the rise of mixed-race populations complicates these assumptions, exposing tensions between nationalist ideologies and the lived realities of increasingly plural societies. Labor markets represent one of the most visible arenas where such tensions manifest. Globally, racial and ethnic minorities continue to face systemic disadvantages in employment, including wage disparities, occupational segregation, and barriers to leadership [3]. However, within East Asia, the experiences of mixed-race individuals remain insufficiently studied. Despite emerging evidence of their struggles with stereotyping, identity marginalization, and institutional exclusion, scholarly attention has largely focused on either immigrant workers or broader racialized populations, overlooking the particular position of mixed-race individuals in the region's evolving labor hierarchies.

This study addresses an urgent gap in both theory and policy. Theoretically, it expands the field of race and labor market research by introducing hybridity as a central analytical lens through which to understand inequality in East Asian contexts. It moves beyond Western-centric models of multiculturalism and identity capital, situating hybridity within societies that have historically been invested in ethnic purity and national coherence. Practically, the research addresses a pressing policy challenge: as East Asian economies increasingly rely on immigration and transnational labor flows to sustain growth, understanding the exclusionary mechanisms that affect mixed-race individuals becomes crucial. Addressing these inequalities is not only a matter of social justice but also of sustainable development and genuine inclusion—beyond the rhetoric of tokenistic multiculturalism [4]. The study explores how mixed-race individuals in East Asia experience structural inequalities in labor markets. Adopting a comparative case study approach, The study examines four countries: China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore, because each of them shows a distinct kind of political economy, racial ideology, and demographic pattern. The research mainly focus on secondary statistical data and policy analysis to identify something in common and differences across contexts. The analysis is developed based on two theoretical frameworks: cultural hybridity theory, which demonstrates how racial mixing disrupts established boundaries of identity and belonging, and racial stratification theory, which reveals how systemic hierarchies decide labor opportunities and constrain mobility. This study pursues three main goals: 1) to explore how factors such as wage disparity, employment opportunities, occupational distribution, and access to leadership positions affect the experiences of mixed-race individuals in the labor market among China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore; 2) to analyze the mechanisms of inequality through the lenses of cultural hybridity and racial stratification; 3) to generate comparative understanding that can contribute to equitable and inclusive labor policies in East Asia.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies on labor market inequalities

Globally, there is a substantial amount of research about the existence of labor market inequalities for different racial and ethnic groups. These disparities commonly appear as wage gaps, unequal access to employment opportunities, occupational segregation, and obstacles to leadership positions. Scholars generally believe that inequality is not the result of individual choices or abilities, but stems from the structural exclusion of different races and the institutional racial discrimination that existed for a long time within the broader economic structure [5].In North America and Europe,

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large-scale quantitative studies consistently demonstrate enduring racial wage gaps: African American, Hispanic, and immigrant workers tend to earn significantly less than their white counterparts. Minority groups usually work in jobs such as service, care, and manual labor, while they remain underrepresented in professional and managerial positions [6]. Moreover, the so-called 'glass ceiling' effect prevents minority professionals from promoting to senior leadership levels despite they have got enough achievements.

Institutional mechanisms also made inequality reach beyond recruitment. Audit studies and field experiments have shown that discriminatory recruitment practices do exist. Sometimes, employers are even unconsciously or intentionally inclined towards job applicants with dominant racial characteristics or specific physical features [7]. Workplace cultures often perpetuate exclusion through symbolic marginalization, microaggressions, and biased performance evaluations [8]. These patterns suggest that inequality not only occur at the entry stage in job hunting market but throughout their entire career trajectory. Globally, governments have sought to address such inequalities through anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, and diversity management initiatives. However, scholars have criticized these measures, as they believe that the implementation of these measures is not balanced and the application is too superficial. They also point out that they might repeat the pattern of the hierarchical system under the guise of "elite management" [9]. This criticism is highly applicable in the East Asian region. This is because in this area, it seems that people are promoted based on their professional capabilities, but in reality, deeper forms of racial discrimination and exclusion still exist.

2.2. Labor market inequality in East Asia

In East Asia, research on labor market inequality has largely focused on migrant workers, particularly those from Southeast Asia, while the experiences of mixed-race populations remain underexplored. Yet the growing number of individuals of mixed heritage provides a critical lens for understanding how inclusion and exclusion operate within the region's rapidly transforming social and economic structures [9]. In China, mixed-race populations have increased through cross-border marriages, the return of overseas Chinese, and the settlement of foreign professionals in major cities. Existing studies, though limited, reveal contradictory perceptions: individuals with Western ancestry are often perceived as cosmopolitan and advantaged in English-related professions, whereas those of African or South Asian descent face persistent discrimination [10], reflecting how racial hierarchies intertwine with global imaginaries of modernity and whiteness. In South Korea, mixed-race populations have similarly emerged through international marriages, yet their children often encounter bullying and exclusion in schools, leading to disadvantages in higher education and subsequent employment [11]. Despite government programs promoting multicultural families, stereotypes surrounding linguistic or cultural deficiencies and subtle exclusionary practices in elite workplaces continue to restrict social mobility. Singapore presents a seemingly different case, with its state-led multiculturalism and official celebration of diversity positioning mixed-race individuals as symbols of cosmopolitan modernity. However, the rigid CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) classification system fails to capture the complexity of mixed identities, resulting in statistical invisibility and institutional bias [12]. While some individuals benefit from perceived linguistic or cultural capital, others remain marginalized by implicit prejudice—revealing the tension between state-managed multiculturalism and everyday inequality. In Japan, a deeply ingrained monoethnic ideology continues to cast mixed-race individuals as perpetual outsiders, regardless of citizenship status [13]. This enduring ethno-nationalism and racial essentialism shape workplace hierarchies and

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everyday interactions, reinforcing exclusion not only in recruitment but across the entire professional experience.

2.3. Research gap and contribution

Existing literature demonstrates that while East Asian societies vary in their racial ideologies and policy frameworks, they share a structural tendency to privilege ethnonational belonging over hybridity. However, comparative research systematically examining how mixed-race individuals experience labor market inequality across the region remains scarce. This study fills that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of mixed-race populations in China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore, focusing on four analytical dimensions: wage disparities, employment opportunities, occupational distribution, and leadership representation. Through this lens, it explores how identity negotiation, institutional racism, and policy regimes interact to shape socioeconomic trajectories. The comparative design reveals both shared mechanisms of marginalization and country-specific variations, providing a more nuanced and regionally grounded understanding of labor market inequality in contemporary East Asia.

3. Theoretical frameworks

The theory of integration is helpful for understanding how mixed-race populations live in the complex interactions of multiple cultures and dominant social norms. The core of this theory is the "third space" concept proposed by Homi Bhabha. This concept proposes that identity is formed in an intermediate zone between opposing races and cultures, breaking down the opposition between different cultures. Within this space, individuals get deeper understanding of cultural meanings, elements from diverse traditions, and constructions of identities in society and economy. In the labor market, people of mixed ethnicity often possess what scholars call "identity capital". This capital is a special kind of value composed of cultural knowledge, language skills, and symbolic value. It can enhance employability in a globalized and multicultural environment [14]. However, this process is not inherently emancipatory; rather, it reflects how individuals must continuously perform and adapt to the expectations from dominant institutions. While cultural integration theory attaches importance to hybridity and negotiation, the racial stratification framework underscores the structural inequality. This perspective states that racial and ethnic hierarchies are rooted within policies, organizational practices, and social norms, producing differential access to economic resources and career opportunities for people with different races[15]. In East Asia, such stratification is visible in recruitment, occupational segregation, unequal educational outcomes, and the accessibility of leadership positions. These mechanisms not only make hierarchies exist continuously, but also reveal how racial boundaries persist even under narratives of meritocracy and multiculturalism.

Overall, these two frameworks provide a complementary analytical foundation: cultural integration theory explains how mixed-race individuals construct and perform identities within hybrid social spaces, while racial stratification theory exposes the structural constraints that limit these negotiations. Their intersection enables this study to analyze how identity, culture, and institutional power interact to generate labor market inequalities across East Asia.

4. Analytical framework

This study adopts a comparative case study method to investigate the labor market inequalities experienced by mixed-race individuals in East Asia. By selecting four countries: China, South

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Korea, Japan, and Singapore, the study can how social, political, and economic contexts in East Asia shape and construct racialized identities. Cases included in this study contain relatively homogenous societies such as South Korea and Japan and multi-ethnic and stratified societies like China and Singapore, allowing for a detailed comparison of how those cases generate inequalities in Job market based on various conditions and cultural ideologies.

The analysis is developed from four interrelated dimensions in order to better explain the mechanisms of inequality within labor markets. First, wage gaps serve as a quantitative indicator of economic disparity, revealing how differences in payment persist even when the conditions of educational background, experience, and occupational situation are controlled. Second, employment opportunities reflect access to different sectors and the barriers mixed-race individuals encounter during recruitment, particularly in high-status or culturally sensitive professions. Third, occupational distribution find patterns of concentration in specific job types, from service and manual labor to managerial and professional roles, highlighting how stereotypes and cultural recognition affect individuals' job types. Finally, leadership opportunities examine mixed-raced individuals' access to supervisory or executive positions and symbolic and structural barriers such as Japan's "foreigner ceiling" or Singapore's "meritocracy paradox". Hence, these dimensions provide comprehensive aspects for analyzing how cultural recognition, institutional arrangements, and racial hierarchies shape inequalities for mixed-race populations in East Asian labor markets.

5. Case study

5.1. Wage gap

Significant wage disparities exist between mixed-race individuals and their single-ethnicity counterparts across China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan, revealing the economic inequality caused by cultural capital and racial stratification. In China, wage gaps can clearly show hierarchical patterns. Reports indicate that in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the average salary of Eurasian professionals is 15–25% higher than that of their Han counterparts [16]. This disparity is especially obvious in industries emphasizing public image, like marketing and customer relations where aesthetic preferences and cultural symbolism heavily play important role. In South Korea, the wage gap is both affected by race and regional origin. A study finds that in urban job market, the earnings of mixed-race employees are 12–18% lower than those of monoethnic peers, reflecting deep-rooted social prejudice [17]. Singapore presents a paradox between policy and reality. While meritocratic principles can ensure equal payment for equal performance to some extent, data from the Department of Statistics indicates that non-mainstream ethnic employees still earn 7–12% less than majority-group peers in equivalent jobs, particularly in customer-facing fields such as finance, law, and public service. In Japan, wage inequities exist strongly even when education and experience are almost the same; mixed-race employees in job market earn 10–20% less on average than monoethnic Japanese workers [18]. Together, these cases indicate how aestheticized forms of cultural capital, racial hierarchy, and institutional bias promote structural wage inequality.

5.2. Employment opportunities

Across all four countries, mixed-race individuals face hidden barriers to employment embedded within informal recruitment networks, relational gatekeeping, and organizational norms of "cultural fit." In China, employment outcomes vary sharply by racial background: while Eurasian candidates often secure positions in international schools, foreign enterprises, and bilingual service sectors,

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those of African or South Asian descent face systematic exclusion in both public and private domains [19]. Such discrimination is often implicit, reinforced through informal hiring networks dominated by the Han majority. In South Korea, citizenship does not guarantee belonging. Mixed-race individuals are frequently perceived as perpetual outsiders, a phenomenon of “foreignization” that restricts entry into prestigious professions despite state integration programs [20]. Singapore reflects a tension between symbolic multiculturalism and structural constraint. While its cosmopolitan image benefits mixed-race individuals in globalized industries, rigid racial quotas and state preferences in government-linked enterprises continue to limit opportunities [21]. Japan exhibits perhaps the most persistent exclusionary dynamics: recruitment advertisements implicitly favor monoethnic applicants, while reliance on homogeneous social networks further marginalizes mixed-race job seekers [22]. Even so, those in international corporations or metropolitan regions have relatively better prospects, illustrating a spatial and sectoral segmentation of opportunity [23].

5.3. Occupational distribution

Patterns of occupational distribution reveal that mixed-race employees across East Asia are disproportionately concentrated in sectors valuing language proficiency and transnational cultural capital—such as education, tourism, and multinational corporations—while being underrepresented in traditional industries, manufacturing, and state institutions. In China, this polarization mirrors broader divisions between globalized urban sectors and domestically oriented ones [24]. In South Korea, the imbalance is particularly acute: mixed-race individuals are overrepresented in hospitality and entertainment but scarce in finance, technology, and civil service [25], suggesting that social hierarchies assign differential value to cultural fluency versus perceived “localness.” Singapore’s occupational pattern reflects a similar dualism. Mixed-race employees thrive in global business, creative industries, and English-dominant workplaces, yet remain underrepresented in traditional sectors marked by rigid ethnic representation [26]. Japan’s dual structure further underscores symbolic inclusion without structural parity: mixed-race individuals are visible in media, education, and multinational corporations but largely excluded from domestic enterprises, bureaucracy, and elite professions [23]. Across contexts, this uneven distribution exposes how mixed-race identity is both commodified and constrained, valued for symbolic diversity yet confined within specific occupational niches.

5.4. Leadership opportunities

In terms of leadership and promotion, mixed race employees are generally affected by the "ceiling effect", which means that promotion is hindered by culture and systems. In China, although mixed race employees can hold junior or intermediate positions, their promotion to management is often negatively influenced by the Han dominated social network and organizational "fit" concept [27]. In this way, even with high qualifications, this group of people will face a "cultural ceiling", and their identity traits will subtly make them appear unsuitable for holding power. In South Korea, this exclusion is particularly pronounced. Although mixed race professionals possess considerable abilities and qualifications, they are rarely promoted to senior positions due to the emphasis on loyalty and national cohesion in corporate culture [28]. The case of Singapore also reveals how elitist ideals and hierarchical outcomes coexist: although some mixed race employees can be promoted to leadership positions, their representation in the executive level is still disproportionate to their qualifications [21]. In this context, elite connections and cultural capital are often valued more than individual abilities. In Japan, the phenomenon of "foreign ceiling" also exists in

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international enterprises; Promotion depends more on adherence to implicit cultural norms rather than abilities themselves. These dynamics collectively indicate that the interweaving of race, culture, and organizational practices creates persistent inequality in occupational mobility in East Asia.

6. Discussion

6.1. Factors contributing to inequalities

In the labor market of East Asia, the inequalities faced by people of mixed ethnicity can be understood from two perspectives: the theory of racial stratification and the theory of cultural integration. These two theoretical perspectives jointly reveal how institutional arrangements, cultural concepts, and global economic forces have an integrating effect, thereby bringing special opportunities and limitations to those with multiple cultural identities.

The first set of factors are structural and institutional. The theory of racial stratification holds that racial hierarchies are embedded in national policies, organizational practices, and daily life, influencing the possibility of accessing economic and social resources. In East Asia, this structural bias is manifested in recruitment, promotion, and job types. Those who belong to the mainstream ethnic or racial category often have an advantage. For example, in South Korea, mixed-race individuals, even if they are citizens, are often socially classified as "foreigners," which limits their opportunities to enter high-status or public sector positions. This exclusion phenomenon is also reinforced by informal recommendation mechanisms - based on networking recruitment methods, which are beneficial to those with a common cultural background and social capital among decision-makers. This interwoven formal and informal structure maintains a racially-colored labor order, which maintains "elitism" while exacerbating inequality.

The second dimension where inequality exists is cultural concepts and stereotypes. In this dimension, cultural integration and social biases have a contradictory interaction. Theoretically, integration implies that flexibility, creativity, and the ability to cross cultural boundaries are actually quite high. However, in the real world, these traits often lead to suspicion and unfair treatment in homogeneous societies. The stereotype of "not truly local" affects the assessment of candidates' qualifications for job opportunities, regardless of their professional abilities. Gradually, the evaluation of the abilities and sense of belonging of mixed-race groups will also be affected. For example, in Japan, mixed-race employees often encounter the so-called "foreigner ceiling". This "ceiling" symbolizes an invisible barrier that prevents them from advancing to management positions. At the same time, people with Western ancestry may benefit from the positive advantages brought by globalist traits and fluent English skills, but these advantages still depend on the market value assessment of Western traits by specific industries. Therefore, mixed-race identity is like a double-edged sword: in the field of globalization, it may become cultural capital; but when emphasizing the unity of the nation and ethnicity, it may be regarded as a disadvantage.

The third key factor is economic globalization, which simultaneously expands and redefines the pattern of inequality. Globalization promotes the demand for employees with cross-cultural capabilities, multilingual abilities, and global perspectives - these traits are often associated with mixed-race individuals. For example, in Singapore, the expansion of the service economy and creative industries provides inclusiveness of language and cultural differences. However, these benefits are not evenly distributed. In those "local characteristics" still being core areas - such as civil servants, education, or official media - the same mixed-race identity may be regarded as cultural bias rather than added value. Therefore, although globalization ostensibly promotes diversity, its impact is influenced by the labor structure and cultural hierarchy of each country,

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causing mixed-race individuals to face constantly changing evaluation standards for their identity value in the market. In this sense, inequality not only stems from institutional exclusion but also from the unstable evaluation standards imposed on the phenomenon of mixed-race itself.

6.2. Policy and practice implications

Addressing these entrenched inequalities requires both structural reform and cultural transformation. Governments should move beyond declarative commitments to equality and instead implement comprehensive anti-discrimination frameworks that explicitly include mixed-race individuals. This involves not only legal prohibitions against overt exclusion in recruitment, promotion, and compensation but also mechanisms to identify and penalize subtler forms of bias embedded in workplace culture. Transparent reporting systems, anonymous recruitment procedures, and diversity audits could serve as practical instruments to ensure accountability. At the organizational level, workplace diversity initiatives must reconceptualize cultural hybridity as a form of professional strength rather than a mark of difference. Employers should actively cultivate environments where mixed-race employees are valued for their cross-cultural insight, multilingual skills, and adaptability —traits that are increasingly vital in globalized industries. Training programs and leadership pipelines should be designed to counteract the "foreigner ceiling" effect by ensuring equal access to advancement opportunities.

Policy design should also move away from rigid racial classification systems that inadvertently exclude or marginalize mixed-race populations. Singapore's experience demonstrates both the inclusivity potential and the limitations of multiethnic frameworks: while racial representation is institutionalized, the binary or categorical nature of these systems often fails to capture hybrid identities. Policymakers must therefore adopt flexible frameworks that acknowledge overlapping racial and cultural identities, ensuring that social programs and employment data reflect the growing complexity of population structures. Finally, public awareness and cultural transformation are indispensable. Legal and institutional reforms cannot succeed without parallel shifts in social consciousness. Education systems, media representation, and community initiatives should play proactive roles in deconstructing stereotypes and normalizing hybridity as an integral part of national identity. Promoting narratives of mixed-race success and belonging can gradually erode the symbolic boundaries that sustain exclusion. By fostering empathy and understanding, societies can move toward a more inclusive vision of citizenship—one that values hybridity not as an anomaly, but as a manifestation of global interconnection.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the labor market experiences of mixed-race individuals across four East Asian countries—China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan—focusing on four dimensions: wage gaps, employment opportunities, occupational distribution, and leadership prospects. The findings reveal that, despite contextual differences, mixed-race individuals consistently face structural disadvantages. Institutional hierarchies, culturally biased recruitment and promotion practices, and societal perceptions systematically constrain their career development. Even in Singapore, where multiculturalism is officially promoted, implicit exclusion persists: certain mixed-race individuals benefit from language proficiency and cross-cultural competencies, yet these advantages depend heavily on societal recognition, leaving structural barriers largely intact. Country-specific patterns further illustrate these dynamics: in China, globalization has created opportunities in international industries, but structural exclusion remains; in South Korea, educational stratification and urban-

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rural divides restrict access to high-status employment; in Singapore, elite networks coexist with subtle biases; and in Japan, the "foreigner ceiling" limits advancement regardless of qualifications.

These findings demonstrate their broader effects for the regulation of the labor market and social inclusiveness in the East Asian region. They emphasize the need to view cultural diversity as a potential capital and a marginalized factor, and point out the necessity of addressing structural inequalities through legal, organizational, and cultural intervention measures. Policy reforms, fair educational support, inclusive business practices, and public acceptance of multiculturalism can all work together to eliminate stereotypes and promote a more equitable and friendly employment environment. Future research should delve deeper into the long-term effects of globalization, inclusive policies for cultural diversity, and changing cultural perceptions on the socioeconomic trajectories of mixed-race populations' life, in order to provide guidance for creating truly fair labor markets in this region.

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