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〈Article〉

Immigrant Japan: the reality of immigration in a “no-immigration” country

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At the press conference on February 9, 2024, after Prime Minister Kishida announced the government's decision to abolish the Technical Internship and Training Program (TITP) and create the new Training for Employment System (*Ikusei shūrō seido*)[1], the Minister of Justice Ryuji Koizumi remarked: “It is a system that aims to cultivate foreign talent and keep them in Japan as much as possible. I think, in a sense, this system opens up the country.”[2] Through this system, the government anticipates an increase in potential permanent residents. Consequently, to ensure an unproblematic transition into long-term and permanent residency, the system will require migrant workers to pay for social security and various insurance programs in Japan. In a way, this statement about “opening up the country,” as well as the anticipation for permanent settlement, represents a breakthrough in the Japanese government's discourses on immigration. Less than five years ago, when then Prime Minister Abe announced the introduction of the Specified Skilled Worker visa to allow the entry of manual and service workers, he emphatically added: “It is not an immigration policy that will increase the permanent residents.”

As a researcher studying Japan's immigration and policy development for over two decades, I believe Japan opened its doors to immigration decades ago and has already become an immigrant country. Taking contents from the book *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society* (Liu-Farrer 2020), this article explains why this is the case and how millions of immigrants' lives unfold in this de facto immigrant country that is still reluctant to admit to the immigration reality. It also points out the urgency for Japan to reexamine its ethnonationalist self-understanding and the foreigner-Japanese identity binary.

1. Japan as an ethnonationalist immigrant country

Japan has been an immigration destination since the 1980s when Japan's booming economy started to feel a labor crunch. *De facto* labor migration started when significant numbers of entertainers and international students entered in the 1980s to take on service and manufacturing jobs. Abundant work opportunities attracted tens of thousands of short-term visitors from visa-exemption countries such as Bangladesh and Iran to Japan. Many overstayed and became undocumented migrant workers. The revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICRRA) in 1989 drastically changed migrant admissions procedures and added new visa categories eligible for resident status. In 2012, Japan created the Highly Skilled Professional visa and became one of the most liberal states in its policies for granting permanent residency to highly skilled migrants. With the passing of the 2018 Immigration Reform Act, individuals were allowed to work in Japan as manual workers. In other words, over the past three decades, Japan has opened its door wider and wider. With the recent slogan of “making Japan the chosen country (*Nihon ga erabareru kuni ni naru*),” it is clear that foreign migrants are not only allowed but also encouraged to come to Japan to work and to study.

Despite the broadening channels of migration, why do both the Japanese government and people hesitate to accept the discourse of immigration and the reality of its

[1] In Japanese, the system is called 育成就労制度. There is no official English translation yet.
[2] The original Japanese is「外国人材を育成し，できるだけ日本にいてほしいという，ある意味，国を開いた制度だと思う．調整が難しい点もあったが，制度を運用して問題がある場合は，適切に対応することが必要だ．今後も議論しながら，みんなで育成就労制度を育てていきたい」，Ryuji Koizumi https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240209/k10014353231000.html

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transformation into an immigrant society? I believe this hesitation has to do with Japan's ethno-nationalist self-identity and the widespread myth surrounding its monoethnic nationhood, on the one hand, and the conventional, albeit anachronistic, definition of "immigrant country" and the difficulty for people to associate an immigrant country with an ethno-nationalist one, on the other.

2. Japan's ethnonationalism and the foreigner-Japanese identity binary

Ethno-nationalism, a superimposition of nationalism (a political program) onto ethnicity—a "readily definable way of expressing a real sense of group identity" (Hobsbawm and Kertzer 1992, 4, cited in Liu-Farrer 2020) underpins Japan's resistance to immigration. After the defeat in WWII and the loss of its colonies, Japan revived the discourse that its nationhood is founded on the ideology of common descent, with racial purity and cultural homogeneity at its center (Befu 2001). These ethno-nationalist discourses, through the promotion of public intellectuals and Japanese businesses, became deeply entrenched in the postwar Japanese social consciousness (Yoshino 1992). The expanding presence of foreigners in the country since the 1980s and the many (localized) efforts to integrate them do not necessarily challenge these fundamental beliefs about Japan's national character. Instead, programs aiming to incorporate immigrants, such as those under the directives of multicultural coexistence (*tabunka kyōsē*), do not refute but instead help reinforce an essentialized Japanese identity and culture (Burgess 2012; Tai 2007), creating a Japanese-foreigner identity binary.

At a symposium[3] held in August 2022, where various stakeholders gathered to discuss how to make Japan the country of choice for foreign workers, Hamamatsu-city Mayor Suzuki recommended that Japan set up a department for foreigners (gaikokujin chō 外国人庁). Hamamatsu City is one of the pioneers in making progressive policies to incorporate immigrants. However, after giving a presentation pleading with the government to open the door wider to foreigners and have more national-level support for integrating immigrants, the mayor still slipped into this essentialist identity binary. This ethnonationalist national self-understanding and the persistent existence of a Japanese-foreigner identity binary interferes with immigrants' integration into Japanese society.

3. Immigration beyond settler countries

The other reason that Japan does not consider itself an immigrant country is because of the understanding of an immigrant country in the image of a settler country such as the US or Australia. These countries have so-called immigration visas for individuals and families to apply for long-term settlement. The Japanese government insists that it does not have an immigration policy that allows "immigrants." However, Japan defines immigrants as those who enter the border with the right of permanent residency[4]. As all migration researchers know, immigration is a pragmatic journey. Initial legal categories do not define individuals' intentions, let alone outcomes. In a world with increased mobility, this distinction between categories is unstable. The majority of permanent residents in Japan are former students and skilled workers. Likewise, official immigration status does not necessarily make one a settler (Baas 2006; Liu-Farrer 2016). Even in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many migrants arrived, stayed, and then returned home.

Because of such indeterminacy in the processes and trajectories of migration, the term "immigrant country" should simply refer to any country "that provides foreign nationals multiple legal channels to enter and legal paths and institutional frameworks for permanent settlement (Liu-Farrer 2020: 8)." To define a country such as Japan as an immigrant country suggests that in an age of globalization, patterns of migration have fundamentally changed and that the experiences of migrants in the traditional settler countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia no longer represent the majority of the migration phenomena taking

[3] The symposium「『選ばれる国』になるために—共生社会実現へのアジェンダ」—To become "the country of choice"—the Agenda for realizing a society of co-existence was held on August 10 2022, co-organized by Keidanren, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Japan Center for International Exchange, attended by the Minister as well as officials from Ministry of Justice, leaders from Keidanren, JICA, Japan Center for International Exchange, and the mayor of Hamamatsu-city.

[4] "「移民」とは，入国の時点でいわゆる永住権を有する者であり，就労目的の在留資格による受入れは「移民」には当たらない．"「共生の時代」に向けた外国人労働者受入れの基本的考え方（2016）自由民主党政務調査会労働力確保に関する特命委員会資料．https://jimin.jp-east-2.storage.api.nifcloud.com/pdf/news/policy/132325_1.pdf

place in the world. With its strong cultural and ethnic national identity, Japan represents the type of ethnonationalist immigration destination emerging in many parts of the world.

4. Mobility and belonging in an ethnonationalist Japan

Despite the no-immigration narrative, due to the broadening channels of border entry, the population of foreign residents in Japan has tripled from one million in 1990 to over 3.2 million in 2023 (Figure 1). Moreover, in 2023, out of the 3.2 million foreign nationals, over 40% were either permanent residents or special permanent residents. On top of that, half a million immigrants have become naturalized Japanese citizens since 1980. Their presence has begun to transform Japanese society. Nonetheless, tensions exist between the reality of immigration and Japan's social, cultural, and institutional response to immigrants.

1) Labor market positioning

According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW)'s data from October 2023, Japan employed over 2 million foreigners, nearly two-thirds of the total foreign population. Counting part-time workers among international students, it is particularly notable that almost 100% of Vietnamese nationals are in Japan's labor market. While over a quarter (595,904, 29.1%) of foreigners were in status categories of professional and skilled workers, including 138,518 specified skilled workers (SSW), 20% (412,501) of them were technical interns.

Immigrants occupy diverse economic positions in Japan. They are on both the secondary labor market—the type of employment that does not provide long-term career advancement and job security, and the primary labor market—the kind of employment associated with regular employment (*seiki koyō*) in Japan. Although most foreign workers are filling labor shortages, research has also pointed out that many work in occupations and businesses that utilize their multilingual and multicultural skills and have transnational and global reach. In other words, they are helping Japan globalize its economy by building bridges with their sending countries (Liu-Farrer 2011, 2020).

2) Finding belonging

Over the decades of migration inflow, millions of immigrants now call Japan home. Japan's rejection of immigration and the persisting ideology of ethnonationalism hinder immigrants from feeling attached to Japan as a nation. However, it does not mean that immigrants

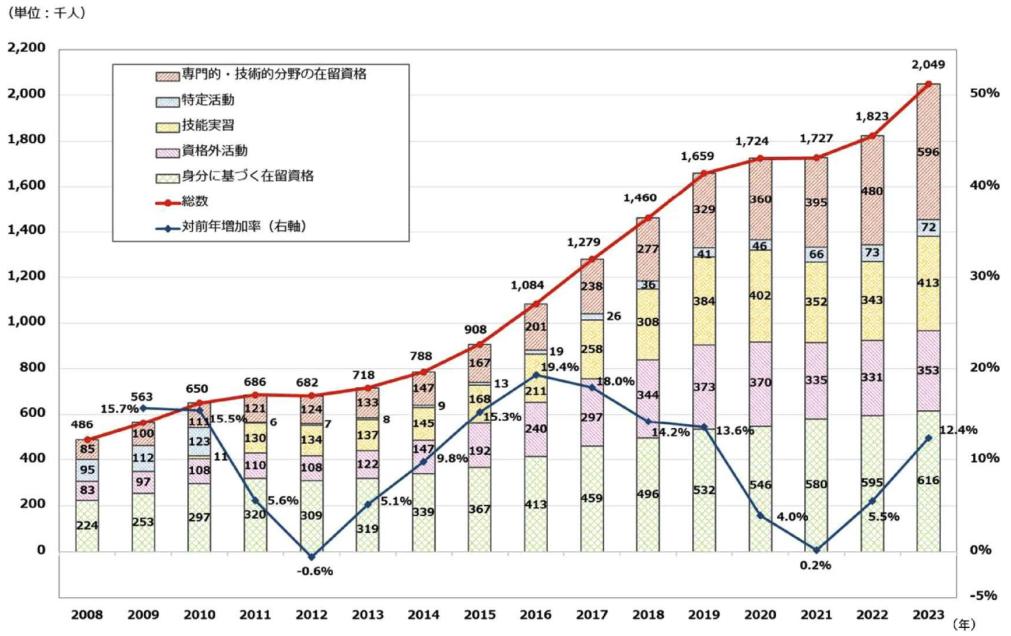

Figure 1 The employment of foreigners in Japan (Oct. 2023) (MHLW)[5]

[5]「外国人雇用状況」の届出状況まとめ【本文】（令和５年10月末時点）. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11655000/001195787.pdf

have nowhere to attach their sense of belonging. My study identifies several types of narratives of home and belonging:

(1) Being at home in Japan

This "at-homeness" is often expressed by people who have lived in Japan for a long time with stable jobs and social networks. They feel at home in Japan because of the familiarity and because they interpret their belonging as a personal journey. For example, Sven, a thirty-one-year-old Swedish man, who graduated from a Japanese university and had worked in Japan for several years, explained:

> I usually say 'I go to Sweden' and 'I go home to Japan.' This is where I have my life. This is where I have my networks. This is where I have my job. Uh . . . I haven't lived in Sweden since high school, so basically my entire time as a . . . you know, grown-up, has been in Japan. To me, Tokyo is my home. Like Japan is my home. Mainly because that's where I have my life. (Liu-Farrer 2020: 129)

(2) Homeland belonging

Immigrants who express this type of belonging are often either less culturally and socially integrated into Japan or carry with them strong cultural nationalist narratives about their own countries as well as of Japan. This orientation is particularly strong among Chinese and Korean immigrants. For example, Chinese migrants often quote the classic saying, "falling leaves return to the roots".

(3) Liminal, hybridized, and layered belonging

After living in Japan for a long time, many immigrants experience a form of in-betweenness. Some feel they have incorporated cultural elements and social relationships from both countries into their life, and can no longer define themselves in national terms.

(4) De-placed belonging

There are immigrants who do not see the need to anchor themselves in a geographic place. Many migrants were attached to their families or relationships and found belonging there. As one Filipino migrant, Calvin, explained, ". . . as a family [we] stay together, and eat together, and sleep together . . . so that's the home. That's the ideal of the home (Liu-Farrer 2020: 135)."

What is clear from immigrants' narratives about belonging is that many migrants have managed to find emotional anchors somewhere in Japan, be it a social group, the self, the family, or a local community. Japan, however, remains a social environment and a context of cultural practices. In some cases, they are represented by the specific communities these practices are embedded. A sense of "feeling at home" in Japan is not necessarily translated to a sense of belonging to Japan the nation or the society in general. This is because belonging entails acceptance by the party one claims to belong to—people should regard you as one of them. Immigrants often do not feel that Japanese society accepts them. Using Sven's words, it was "also a question of how comfortable Japanese people are with me, so in that sense I feel that Japanese people usually regard me . . . primarily as a foreigner and secondary as a person, so to speak (Liu-Farrer 2020: 130)".

5. The identity of immigrant children: the tension between immigration and ethnonationalism

What ethnonationalism interferes the most is the possibility for immigrants to claim an integration with the Japanese national identity, even among the second generation. In 2023, over 270 thousand children under 15 live in Japan as foreign residents. The distinction between 'us', the Japanese, and 'them', the foreigners, percolates in migrant children. In general, immigrant children have difficulty in claiming Japanese identity, even among those who were born in Japan. Instead of considering themselves as Japanese, three common identities emerge:

1) The passer: This type refers to those who are phenotypically resembling Japanese, and try to pass as Japanese.
2) The acculturated "gaijin": These are immigrant children who are identified by others as foreigners because of their appearance. However, they are most familiar with Japan and Japanese culture.
3) The global individual: Those children who have enjoyed more international or transnational educational opportunities might see themselves as above the national identity framing.

At the same time, although hesitating in identifying themselves as Japanese, it is evident that children of immigrants are linguistically and culturally fully functional in Japanese society. Most of them feel the most familiar with Japanese society. Nonetheless, the lack of identification with Japan increases a sense of alienation, prompting many of them to think it is natural to entertain the idea of living outside Japan.

6. Conclusion

Post-war Japan has come a long way to become a *de facto* immigrant country. With the demographic crisis, it has no choice but to open its door wider to immigration. Although the Japanese government is reluctant to call itself an immigration country on the grounds that it does not have a policy allowing foreigners to enter Japan as permanent residents, this paper argues that it is merely a definition game. Japan is an immigrant country with millions of immigrants living in this society, and its demographic, social, and cultural landscape has been transformed. Nonetheless, the ethnonationalism ideology that has been entrenched in post-war Japan has delayed the speed of immigration in post-war Japan and prevented Japan from admitting to the immigration reality. This ideology also makes Japan less prepared institutionally and culturally to accept increased numbers of immigrants. Moreover, it has fostered a Japanese-foreigner identity binary, forcing immigrants and their children to struggle with their belonging and identity. At this crucial moment of demographic and social turning point, an immigrant Japan needs to accept its immigration reality and rethink what Japan is made of and what Japaneseness means in this transformation.

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