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### IMMIGRATION IN AN AGING SOCIETY: DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND THE ROLE OF FOREIGN RESIDENTS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

### YAŞLANAN BİR TOPLUMDA GÖÇ: DEMOGRAFİK DÖNÜŞÜMLER VE GÜNÜMÜZ JAPONYA’SINDA YABANCILARIN ROLÜ

Elif Sercen NURCAN\*

#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving role of foreign residents in Japan against the backdrop of demographic decline and economic transformation. As the foreign population surpassed 3.7 million in 2024, immigration has shifted from a peripheral concern to a critical pillar of Japan’s policy response to labor shortages and an aging society. The study asks two central questions: What demographic patterns and institutional structures define the current landscape of foreign residency in Japan, and how do these differ from the experiences of other aging societies? To address these questions, the paper employs a qualitative analysis of government statistics, recent legal reforms, and a wide range of scholarly literature. It traces changes in visa categories, demographic patterns, and institutional frameworks over the last two decades, highlighting the growing contributions of foreign workers and international students to the Japanese economy and society. At the same time, it identifies persistent barriers to integration, including limited access to public services, visa overstays, and discriminatory narratives that continue to influence policymaking. Despite new initiatives such as the Specified Skilled Worker visa, J-FIND program, and Highly Skilled Professional schemes, Japan’s immigration regime remains fragmented. The paper argues that foreign residents are no longer marginal actors but central to Japan’s long-term sustainability. Its originality lies in positioning Japan’s demographic crisis within a comparative context while stressing the importance of inclusive citizenship policies for shaping a more equitable future.

**Keywords:** *Immigration Policy, Foreign Workforce, Aging Society, Integration Challenges, Japan Demographics*

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## ÖZ

Bu makale, Japonya'daki yabancı ikamet sahiplerinin değişen rolünü, demografik gerileme ve ekonomik dönüşüm bağlamında incelemektedir. 2024 yılı itibarıyla yabancı nüfusun 3,7 milyonu aşmasıyla birlikte, göç olgusu marjinal bir konu olmaktan çıkarak, Japonya'nın yaşlanan toplum ve işgücü açığına yönelik politikasının temel dayanaklarından biri haline gelmiştir. Çalışma şu sorulara odaklanmaktadır: Japonya'daki yabancı ikamet düzenini belirleyen demografik eğilimler ve kurumsal yapılar nelerdir, ve bu durum diğer yaşlanan toplumların deneyimlerinden hangi yönleriyle farklıdır? Bu soruları yanıtlamak için devlet istatistikleri, güncel yasal reformlar ve akademik literatürün nitel analizi kullanılmaktadır. Son yirmi yıldaki vize kategorilerindeki değişimler, demografik örüntüler ve kurumsal çerçeveler takip edilerek, yabancı işçiler ile uluslararası öğrencilerin Japon ekonomisine ve toplumuna artan katkıları vurgulanmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, kamu hizmetlerine sınırlı erişim, vize aşmaları ve ayrımcı söylemler gibi kalıcı bütünleşme engelleri de ortaya konulmaktadır. "Belirli Nitelikli İşçi" vizesi, J-FIND programı ve "Yüksek Nitelikli Profesyonel" düzenlemeleri gibi reform adımlarına rağmen, Japonya'nın göç rejimi hâlâ parçalı bir yapı göstermektedir. Makale, yabancı ikamet sahiplerinin artık marjinal aktörler değil, Japonya'nın gelecekteki sürdürülebilirliği açısından merkezi bir konuma sahip olduklarını ileri sürmektedir. Bu yönüyle çalışma, Japonya'nın demografik krizini karşılaştırmalı bir çerçevede ele alarak, kapsayıcı vatandaşlık politikalarının adil bir gelecek için önemini vurgulaması bakımından özgün katkı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Göç Politikası, Yabancı İşgücü, Yaşlanan Toplum, Uyum Zorlukları, Japonya Demografisi*

## Introduction

Japan is undergoing a profound demographic shift marked by a declining birthrate and a rapidly aging population. With the fastest rate of aging and one of the lowest fertility rates among advanced economies, Japan represents an extreme case of demographic decline. In response, immigration has emerged as one of the key policy tools for addressing labor shortages and sustaining economic vitality. At the end of 2024, the foreign resident population, consisting of immigrants and long-term residents born and raised in Japan who hold "Special Permanent Resident" status, surpassed 3.7 million. This figure equals approximately one in every 31 residents. This phenomenon signals a significant transformation in a country long associated with ethnic homogeneity and restrictive immigration policies. Alongside this significant increase, social perceptions regarding foreign residents are also beginning to change.

Japan's case is distinctive for several reasons. Unlike Germany and Italy, which have incorporated large-scale labor migration into broader integration frameworks, or South Korea, which is facing similar demographic pressures but remains cautious about immigration, Japan's approach is shaped by its unique citizenship model based on *jus sanguinis*, highly restrictive naturalization procedures, and a political discourse that continues to emphasize cultural homogeneity. Refugee acceptance remains extremely limited, while reliance on temporary and student visas highlights the fragmented and short-term orientation of immigration policy. These factors make Japan both comparable to and

different from other aging societies, providing a critical case for examining how a country with strong cultural and institutional constraints adapts to demographic necessity.

The following central questions are the focus of this study: What demographic patterns and legal structures define the current landscape of foreign residency in Japan? Moreover, what social challenges have emerged as a result of these developments? To address these questions, the study first examines recent changes in population trends, visa categories, institutional structures, and legal frameworks. It then explores the economic and social functions foreign residents perform within Japanese society, while also identifying persistent barriers to integration, equitable access, and recognition. Despite policy reforms, such as the new skilled worker visa schemes and revisions to refugee procedures, significant challenges remain, including visa overstays, low post-graduation retention of international students, and limited access to essential services.

This paper argues that the presence of foreign residents is no longer a marginal issue in Japan's policy landscape. It has become central to the nation's demographic and economic sustainability. By situating Japan within the broader comparative literature on immigration in aging societies while emphasizing the unique institutional and cultural conditions that shape its policies, this study offers an original contribution. It provides a comprehensive account of how Japan is navigating the transition from a historically homogeneous society toward a more pluralistic and globally integrated future, and it identifies the distinctive features that set Japan apart from other cases of demographic decline.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design that combines secondary data analysis with policy and legal document review. To clarify further, this study does not use primary fieldwork, interviews, or econometric modeling. Instead, it offers an evidence-based synthesis of current developments in Japanese immigration policy, supported by interpretive analysis. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of both quantitative trends and qualitative shifts in governance and societal attitudes.

First, the study relies on publicly available statistics from official government sources, including the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, the Statistics Bureau of Japan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO). These sources provide comprehensive data on the number of foreign residents, their visa statuses, nationalities, geographic distribution, retention rates, and remittance flows. Time-series data is compiled to trace long-term trends, particularly from 2012 to 2024. The compiled demographic data is then used to construct an updated image of immigration in Japan.

Second, the study analyzes key legal and institutional changes related to immigration. This includes the 2024 amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, the introduction of new visa frameworks such as the Specified Skilled Worker, J-FIND, and Highly Skilled Professional programs, and operational revisions in areas like refugee recognition, driver's license conversion, and national health insurance participation. These

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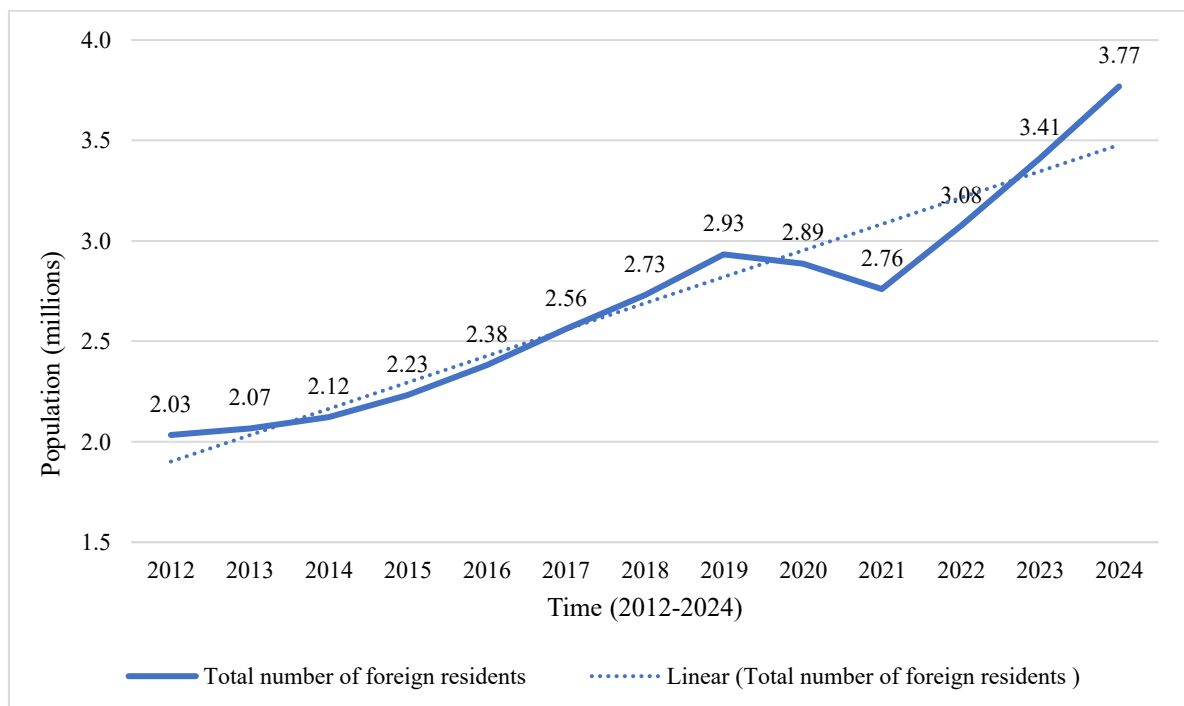
changes are interlinked with the key demographic changes and societal issues surrounding immigration.

Third, academic literature on immigration, labor markets, integration, and public perception is reviewed to contextualize the empirical findings. Authors such as Douglass and Roberts (1999), Liu-Farrer (2022), and Kumagai (2024) provide theoretical grounding and comparative perspectives. This step is crucial in situating the current conditions within the long-term outlook of immigration in Japan.

### General Demographic Trends in the Foreign Resident Population in Japan

The post-COVID-19 pandemic increase in the foreign population in Japan is rapid in contrast to previous years (Chart 1). This trend can be attributed to several interrelated factors, including demographic changes, policy shifts, and economic needs. As Japan faces a declining and aging population, the necessity for foreign labor has become increasingly evident (Oliver, 2023). This situation has prompted changes in immigration policies, allowing for a greater influx of foreign workers.

Chart 1: Total Foreign Resident Population in Japan Between 2012 and 2024



Source: Compiled from the sources by the author (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024b, 2025b).

Japan's foreign resident population reached a record high of 3,768,977 individuals in 2024, marking a 10.5% increase (+357,985) compared to 2023 (Table 1). Currently, foreign

nationals make up approximately one in every 31 residents (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025b; Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2025a). This growth is primarily attributed to industrial demand and regional labor shortages (Hennings & Mintz, 2018; Langley, 2025; Lu, 2025; Mahmood, 1996; R. Zhang & McCornac, 2022). Altogether, the sustained increase in the foreign resident population is signaling a gradual yet notable demographic shift in a country historically characterized by ethnic homogeneity and relative insularity.

Table 1: Total Population of Foreign Residents as of December in Each Year

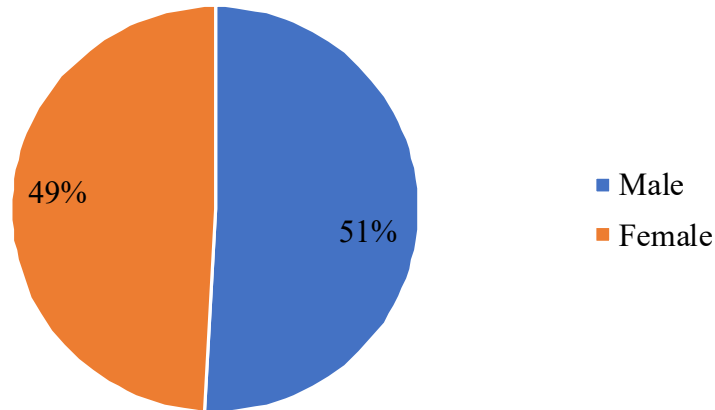
Year	Number of People	Change from Previous Year (%)
2012	2,033,656	-2.16
2013	2,066,445	+1.61
2014	2,121,831	+2.68
2015	2,232,189	+5.20
2016	2,382,822	+6.75
2017	2,561,848	+7.51
2018	2,731,093	+6.61
2019	2,933,137	+7.40
2020	2,887,116	-1.57
2021	2,760,635	-4.38
2022	3,075,213	+11.40
2023	3,410,992	+10.92
2024	3,768,977	+10.50

Source: Compiled from the sources by the author (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025a, 2025b; Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2025b).

As of December 2024, the foreign resident population in Japan exhibits a nearly equal gender distribution, with males and females represented in comparable proportions (Chart 2). This balanced demographic profile challenges common stereotypes that portray foreign residents as predominantly male labor migrants and highlights the diverse makeup of Japan's migrant population. While 30 individuals identified as "Other" gender were

recorded in the dataset, they were excluded from the visual representation to maintain clarity in the chart.

Chart 2: Gender Distribution of Foreign Residents as of December 2024



Source: Graph created by the author (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025b).

In terms of country of origin, foreign residents in Japan mostly hail from Asian countries. The largest groups by nationality include residents from China (844,187), Vietnam (600,348), and South Korea (411,043) (Table 2). All of these nationalities saw year-on-year increases. As of December 2024, the largest groups of foreign residents in Japan hail from China, Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, and Brazil. Among the top 10 foreign resident nationalities with the highest population, the US is the only non-Asian country. This fact can be attributed to the US military population settled across the country, with the highest concentration in Okinawa.

Table 2: Top 10 Foreign Resident Nationalities with the Highest Population as of December 2024

Rank	Nationality	Population	Change from 2023	Share of the Total	Change from 2023
1	China	873,286	+51,448	23.17%	+6.26%
2	Vietnam	634,361	+69,335	16.83%	+12.27%
3	South Korea	409,238	-918	10.86%	-0.22%
4	Philippines	341,518	+19,472	9.06%	+6.05%
5	Brazil	233,043	+56,707	6.18%	+32.16%
6	Nepal	211,907	+67	5.62%	+0.03%
7	Indonesia	199,824	+50,723	5.30%	+34.02%
8	Myanmar	134,574	+48,028	3.57%	+55.49%
9	Taiwan	70,147	+5,484	1.86%	+8.48%
10	United States	66,111	+2,703	1.75%	+4.26%

Source: Compiled from the sources by the author (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024c, 2025b).

There are several enduring patterns regarding the regional distribution of foreign residents across urban centers and rural areas. The highest concentration of foreign residents is in Tokyo, accounting for nearly 20% of the total. The official statistics show that Tokyo continues to attract foreign residents employed as sales and service workers and professionals rather than as factory workers (Matsumoto, 2015). Tokyo is followed by Osaka, Aichi, Kanagawa, and Saitama (Table 3). While these urban centers host the most enormous absolute numbers, several rural prefectures have witnessed notable proportional increases in foreign residents, driven primarily by labor demands in agriculture, fisheries, and caregiving sectors. In these regions, foreign workers are essential in sustaining small-scale farms and vital local services, underscoring their growing significance to Japan's regional economies.

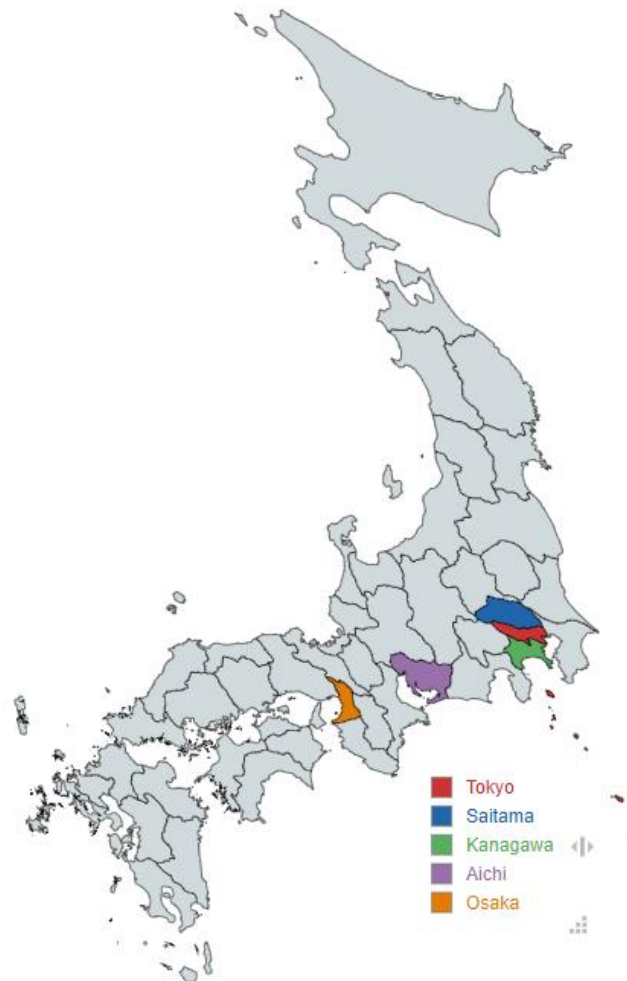
Table 3: Top 5 Prefectures with the Most Foreign Residents as of December 2024

Rank	Prefecture	Population	Change from the Previous Year	Share of the Total
1	Tokyo	738,946	+11.39%	19.61%
2	Osaka	333,564	+10.64%	8.85%
3	Aichi	331,733	+6.72%	8.80%
4	Kanagawa	292,450	+9.32%	7.76%
5	Saitama	262,382	+11.8%	6.96%

Source: (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024c, 2025b)

As of December 2024, foreign residents in Japan are heavily concentrated in specific metropolitan regions, as illustrated in Map 1. Tokyo hosts the most significant number of foreign residents, reflecting its role as the country's political, economic, and cultural center. It is followed by Osaka, Aichi, Kanagawa, and Saitama prefectures that similarly offer employment opportunities, international infrastructure, and more developed support systems for non-Japanese residents. Notably, these areas are all located in or around the Kanto and Kansai regions, indicating an intense geographic concentration of foreign populations in Japan's major urban and industrial corridors.

Map 1: Locations of the Top 5 Prefectures with the Most Foreign Residents as of December 2024\*



\*The Ryukyu Islands and the Islands of Tokyo are not shown.

Source: Created by the author (Map Chart, 2025).

### **1. Demographics by Residency Status of Foreigners in Japan**

In terms of residency status, permanent residents make up the largest group, followed by technical intern trainees and those under the "Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services" category (Table 4). Mid-to-long-term residents exclude short stays (less than 3 months), diplomatic/public mission holders, and some "specified activities" such as digital nomads or embassy staff.

Table 4: Top 10 Foreign Residence Statuses with the Highest Number of Holders as of December 2024

Rank	Residence Status	Population	Change from 2023	Share of the Total
1	Permanent Resident	918,116	+2.98%	24.36%
2	Technical Intern Training	456,595	+12.86%	12.11%
3	Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services	418,706	+15.55%	11.11%
4	Student	402,134	+17.97%	10.67%
5	Dependent (Family Stays)	305,598	+14.88%	8.11%
6	Specified Skilled Worker	284,466	+36.46%	7.55%
7	Special Permanent Resident	274,023	-2.56%	7.27%
8	Long-Term Resident	223,411	+3.02%	5.93%
9	Spouse or Child of a Japanese National	150,896	+1.63%	4.00%
10	Designated Activities	95,508	+29.46%	2.53%

Source: (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024c; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023b)

The “Permanent Resident” (永住者 *ejū-sha*) visa is granted by the Minister of Justice to individuals who have received official permission to reside in Japan permanently. This status allows for an unlimited stay without the need to renew a visa and fewer restrictions on employment or activities compared to other visa types. Applicants typically must demonstrate long-term residence, good conduct, and financial stability. However, this category does not include “Special Permanent Residents”, such as many Koreans and Taiwanese who settled in Japan before and during World War II, who fall under a different legal provision.

The “Technical Intern Training Program” (技能実習 *ginō jisshū*) represents the second most common visa category among foreign residents in Japan, highlighting its significant role in the country’s foreign labor framework. Designed to facilitate skill transfer from Japan to developing countries, the program allows foreign nationals to engage in structured

on-the-job training over a period of up to five years. With three progressive stages that permit longer stays and more advanced tasks, the program supports Japan's labor-intensive industries while offering foreign trainees a pathway to acquire specialized skills under strict oversight (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025e). The residence status has three levels.

The third most common visa among foreign residents is the "Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services" (技術・人文知識・国際業務 *gijutsu jinbun chishiki kokusai gyōmu*). This visa is for foreign nationals working in fields that require specialized knowledge in natural sciences, humanities, or international culture. Typical professions include engineers, interpreters, designers, language teachers, and marketing specialists. This visa excludes those covered under other categories, such as professor, artist, legal/accounting, or caregiver. The residence period can be 5, 3, or 1 year, or 3 months, depending on the individual case.

The "Student" (留学 *ryūgaku*) visa applies to individuals enrolled in Japanese educational institutions ranging from universities and vocational schools to elementary and junior high schools, including special needs and miscellaneous schools. The Minister of Justice determines the permitted length of stay, which can be up to 4 years and 3 months. This visa is commonly held by university and language school students. The "Dependent" (家族滞在 *kazoku taizai*) visa is for spouses and children of foreign residents legally living in Japan under specific work or study visa categories. Dependents are allowed to stay in Japan for a period set by the Minister of Justice, up to a maximum of 5 years. Both the "Student" and the "Dependent" visa holders can gain permission to work part-time, which is granted upon application.

The sixth most common visa type is the "Specified Skilled Worker" (特定技能 *tokutei ginō*). This visa type was split into two categories in 2018 (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2018). Type No.1 is for foreign nationals employed in designated sectors that face a lack of workers, such as caregiving, construction, agriculture, or food services. The work must require a certain level of knowledge or experience, and the visa is based on a direct employment contract with a Japanese company. The permitted stay is up to 1 year at a time, renewable, with a maximum of 5 years, but without family accompaniment. Type No.2 is for workers with more advanced skills in designated fields such as construction or shipbuilding. This status allows longer-term residence (6 months, 1 year, or 3 years) and can be renewed without a time limit. It also permits the worker to bring family members to Japan.

The "Special Permanent Residents" (特別永住者 *tokubetsu eijū-sha*) are mostly the descendants of former colonial-era Koreans and Taiwanese. These residents hold a unique residency status under a special immigration law created in 1991. This law was made for individuals, mainly Koreans and Taiwanese, who lost Japanese nationality after World War II (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2012; LSR Consulting, 2025). During Japan's colonial era, Koreans and Taiwanese were considered Japanese citizens, and many settled

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in Japan. After Japan's defeat and the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, they lost their nationality but were allowed to remain as "Special Permanent Residents". This status, granted without strict income or conduct requirements, offers greater stability than regular permanent residency. Spouses and children can also qualify through specific applications made at city offices, with approval from the Minister of Justice.

The "Long-Term Resident" (定住者 *teijū-sha*) visa is a special residence status granted by the Minister of Justice to individuals who face unique circumstances that justify their extended stay in Japan. This category includes groups such as third-country resettled refugees who have been displaced by conflicts or persecution, third-generation Japanese descendants (such as descendants of Japanese emigrants who have lost Japanese nationality but seek to live in Japan), and remaining Japanese in China who have historical ties to Japan but do not qualify for other visa categories. The Long-Term Resident visa is flexible in terms of duration, with periods of stay granted for up to 5 years, 3 years, 1 year, or 6 months, depending on the individual's situation. The Minister of Justice can also designate a specific period of stay as deemed appropriate, but it cannot exceed five years. This visa allows holders to engage in activities generally permitted under their previous status. It is intended to provide stability for those who have long-term ties to Japan but do not fit standard immigration categories.

The "Spouse or Child of Japanese National" (日本人の配偶者等 *Nihonjin no haigūshana-do*) visa is designed for family members of Japanese citizens, including legally married spouses, children, and specially adopted children. This visa facilitates family unity by allowing these dependents to live, work, and study in Japan without many of the restrictions that apply to other visa holders. The length of the visa can vary, with renewals commonly granted for 5 years, 3 years, 1 year, or 6 months, depending on the available options. This visa type typically permits the holder to engage in both employment and educational activities, supporting their integration and stability within Japanese society. It is one of the more accessible pathways for foreigners with close family ties to Japanese nationals to reside in Japan long-term.

Lastly, the "Designated Activities" (特定活動 *tokutei katsudō*) visa is a highly flexible status granted for individually approved cases by the Minister of Justice (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025d). It covers diverse activities not addressed by other visa categories, including working holiday participants, EPA-based nursing candidates, interns, athletes, diplomats' domestic workers, and family members of highly skilled professionals. It also applies to graduates seeking jobs, startup founders under the J-Find program, "fourth-generation Japanese descendants" (日系四世 *Nikkei shise*), digital nomads, and individuals in transitional situations such as job changes or training. The permitted duration varies from case to case, ranging from 3 months to a maximum of 5 years.

An important addition to this list is the "Highly Skilled Professional" visa. It was created in 2015 and is awarded to a minimal number of residents (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023a). The creation of this visa

aimed to attract foreign professionals who can contribute to the country's economic and academic advancement. The "Highly Skilled Professional" visa offers a fast-track pathway and enhanced benefits to individuals with proven expertise in areas such as research, business management, and specialized fields. After a period of residence, visa holders may transition to a more flexible and longer-term version that permits engagement in a broader range of professional activities. While the number of recipients remains small, these individuals are viewed as valuable assets for Japan's innovation and growth. In response to increasing global mobility and interest in Japan, a new visa for digital nomads was launched in 2024. Although its long-term impact remains to be seen, the move signals a gradual shift toward a more diversified and strategic approach to immigration.

## **2. Demographics of Labor and Educational Contributions by the Foreign Residents in Japan**

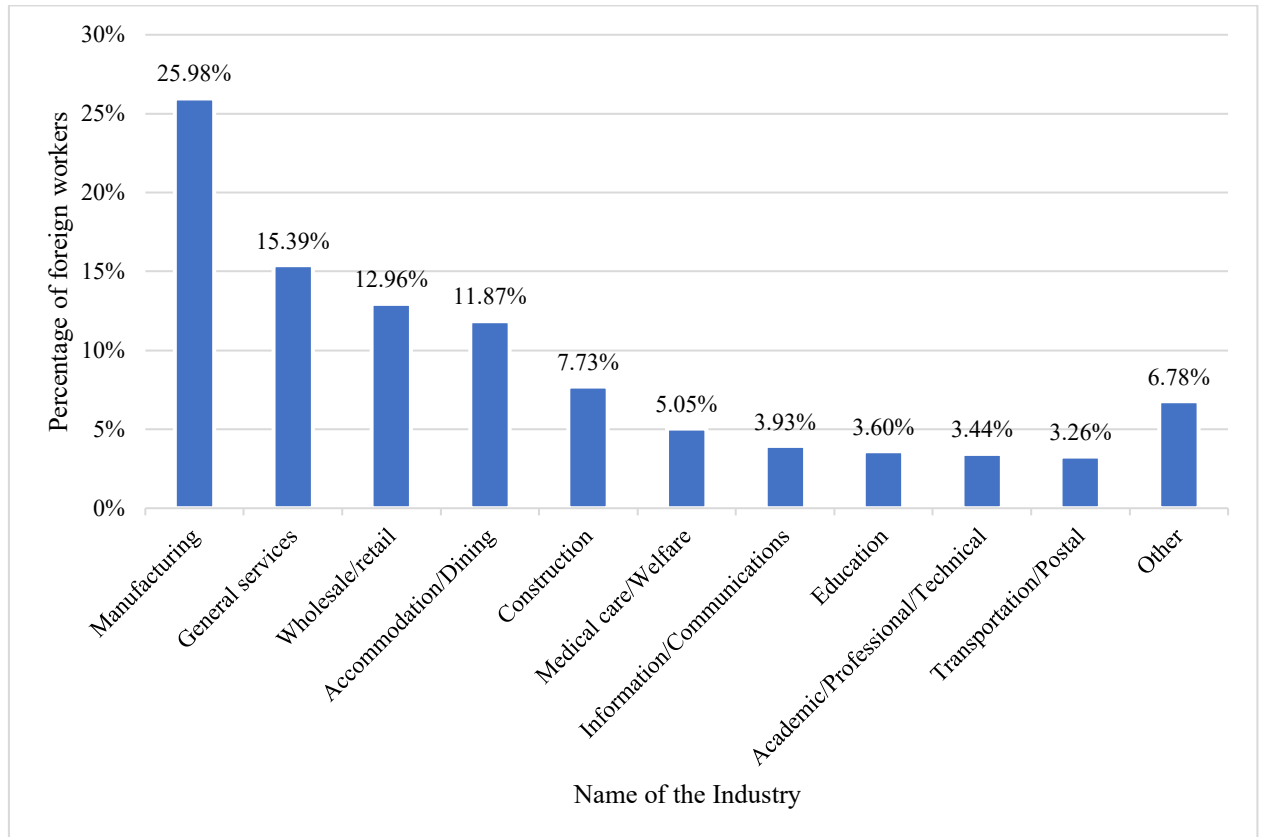
The rapid increase in Japan's foreign population during the Heisei era (1989-2019) was mainly driven by the 1989 Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, which initiated labor migration, and subsequent policy amendments that formally admitted foreign manual labor, tripling the foreign resident population (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025c; Liu-Farrer, 2022). The "Immigration Services Agency" was established in 2018 as an external bureau of the Ministry of Justice, with the Commissioner of the Immigration Services Agency as its head. The mission of the Immigration Services Agency was set to ensure fair immigration and residence control and to assist the Cabinet in matters concerning important policies related to the mission above. With the same provision, the Regional Immigration Bureaus were established as regional branch bureaus of the Immigration Services Agency (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2018).

By October 2024, foreign workers will reach a total of 2,302,587 people, filling labor gaps (Japan Ministry of Health, 2025a). The rapid increase in Japan's foreign population is driven by labor shortages in key industries, government initiatives to attract foreign workers, and the steady growth of the foreign-born population, particularly in response to the declining and aging domestic workforce (Hennings & Mintz, 2018). In doing so, foreign residents contribute to addressing the challenges of an aging society in Japan (Kumagai, 2024; Oliver, 2023).

Each nationality brings distinct contributions to Japan's labor market and society. Chinese residents are spread across a variety of visa categories, including business, family reunification, and education. In contrast, Vietnamese and Nepalese nationals are primarily concentrated in blue-collar sectors and technical intern training programs, reflecting their significant roles in Japan's manufacturing, construction, and agriculture industries. Foreign labor has become essential in several key sectors, including construction, agriculture, fisheries, hospitality, caregiving, and food services. In the healthcare and eldercare fields, female workers, particularly from the Philippines and Indonesia, play a crucial role (JAIF,

2022; Langley, 2025; Liu-Farrer, 2022). Meanwhile, male workers from Vietnam, Nepal, and Myanmar are heavily represented in construction and logistics.

Chart 3: Foreign Worker Distribution by Industry as of October 2024



Source: Compiled by the author (Japan Ministry of Health, 2025a).

In 2024, Japan hosted over 280,000 international students. However, only 33% remained in the country after graduation, with many choosing to return home or relocate elsewhere due to language barriers, wage disparities, or challenges related to social integration. This relatively low retention rate raises important questions about Japan's long-term talent strategy and its capacity to support the integration of foreign graduates.

Nevertheless, the current retention rate represents a significant improvement from two decades ago, which rose from just 19.7% in 2004. This upward trend is the result of deliberate policy changes by the Japanese government aimed at encouraging international graduates to stay. One such measure was the introduction of the "Designated Activities" visa, which allows graduates to remain in Japan for up to one year (renewable once) while seeking employment (JASSO Study in Japan, 2025). More recently, the launch of the J-FIND visa has provided top university graduates the opportunity to remain without a sponsor, catering mainly to those pursuing entrepreneurial or independent career paths (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2023).

Financial support mechanisms have also expanded. The Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) now offers cash stipends, subsidized housing, and tuition reductions through national and institutional scholarship programs. These efforts reflect a growing recognition that foreign talent is essential to mitigating the effects of Japan's shrinking labor force, and that effective retention strategies must begin well before graduation. Still, as the retention data suggests, progress remains incremental, shaped by ongoing cultural, economic, and institutional challenges.

Remittances are a significant part of how the Japanese economy becomes internationally linked. Japan ranks among the world's top ten remittance-sending countries. In 2023 alone, foreign workers in Japan sent over 700 billion yen (approximately 4.47 billion USD) to their home countries, which is equivalent to around 8.8% of Japan's defense budget for fiscal year 2024. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Nepal were the primary recipients of these remittances, underscoring how Japan's domestic labor market is increasingly intertwined with broader patterns of regional development across Asia.

Foreign residents bring along cultural interactions and new perspectives into their communities. Ethnic businesses are increasingly reshaping Japan's urban and suburban landscapes. From kebab stands to Chinese supermarkets in Yokohama, which provide a livelihood to the largest Chinatown in Asia. These are examples of how foreign communities are contributing to a more diverse culinary and retail environment. Local shopping streets and convenience stores are beginning to reflect a broader range of cultural preferences. However, this transformation is uneven across regions, with some communities welcoming these changes and others responding with apprehension or resistance (Kage et al., 2018; Matsubayashi & Yamatani, 2022; Tomiura et al., 2017).

## **Societal Issues Regarding Foreign Residents in Japan**

Major issues faced by foreign residents have shown persistent trends over the past 30 years (Douglass & Roberts, 1999; Mahmood, 1996). The perception of foreigners in Japan is complex and multifaceted, reflecting both positive and negative aspects. While there is a growing acceptance of foreigners, particularly in urban areas, challenges such as discrimination and cultural misunderstandings persist.

### **1. Visa Overstays and the Solution Process**

The majority of foreign workers adhere to their visa conditions; however, the number of visa overstays reached approximately 80,000 individuals (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024b). Vietnamese nationals account for a disproportionately high share of these cases, a trend often linked to exploitative labor conditions, significant debt burdens, and systemic issues within the Technical Intern Training Program. Another significant visa-related problem stems from the Turkish citizenry of Kurdish ethnicity (Miyoshi, 2025). Overstaying after taking advantage of the visa exemption agreement between Turkey and

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Japan, illegal employment in demolition work, and criminal activities in certain areas, such as the Kawaguchi area in Saitama Prefecture, are evident in Japanese media as well as the National Diet (Japan House of Councillors, 2024; Miyoshi, 2025; Saitama Shimbun, 2023; Sankei Shimbun, 2025a, 2025b).

The main law concerning visa types underwent a significant amendment in 2024 (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024a, 2025c). The amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act primarily aimed to ensure the protection of individuals who genuinely need it, address issues related to people avoiding deportation, and resolve various problems associated with immigration detention. A key change was the establishment of a "complementary protection" system. This targets individuals who are not covered by the Refugee Convention but still face significant danger, such as those fleeing from armed conflict. From now on, these individuals will be granted stable residence status and receive institutional support. The law also reformed the Special Permission for Residence system. It clarified the application process, specified the factors to be considered, and introduced a requirement to inform applicants when their requests are denied. In addition, this procedure was separated from the refugee recognition process to improve clarity and efficiency (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024a).

Although not a legal amendment, operational revisions have been made to the refugee recognition system. These include offering protection to individuals in refugee-like situations, improving the interview process by considering the applicant's emotional condition, enhancing information on countries of origin, and boosting the training of refugee examiners. Criteria for determining refugee status have been clarified, and even third-time or later applications will have their deportation suspended if substantial supporting evidence is submitted. An important change is the introduction of exceptions to the automatic suspension of deportation during the refugee application process. These exceptions apply to individuals who apply for the third time or more, have served a prison sentence of over three years, or are suspected of terrorism-related activities (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024a).

To address the issue of individuals who are challenging to deport, including those from countries that refuse to accept them or who interfere with deportation procedures, new deportation orders with penalties have been introduced. These orders aim to encourage voluntary return. In support of this, the re-entry ban period for those who leave voluntarily, even after being apprehended, will be shortened from five years to one year. The amendment also introduces alternatives to detention. Under this system, individuals may undergo immigration procedures without being detained, provided a guarantor supervises them. Whether a person is detained or supervised will be decided on a case-by-case basis, considering the risk of escape and the potential personal burden of detention. Supervision includes reporting duties, and in some cases, a security bond may be required. A mandatory review of detention necessity will be conducted every three months. Improvements to the detention environment have also been included. Detainees will receive health checkups every three months, and part-time medical staff will be allowed to work (relaxing previous

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restrictions on holding multiple jobs). Rules are set for the use of forced medical treatment, such as in hunger strike cases, and the conditions for using physical restraint are clearly defined. Human rights training for staff will also be implemented. Other revisions include measures to ensure that medical grounds for provisional release are judged based on a doctor's opinion. The collection of digital evidence is now permitted (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024a).

## **2. Foreign Driver's Licenses: Policy Gaps and Reform Proposals**

As Japan experiences a rise in the number of foreign residents and visitors using its roadways, the issue of how overseas driver's licenses are handled has come under increasing scrutiny. Recent policy discussions have focused on the adequacy of existing procedures for license conversion, amid concerns over road safety, regulatory loopholes, and inconsistent testing standards. The National Police Agency is considering revisions to the current procedures by which foreign nationals convert their overseas driver's licenses into Japanese licenses. Concerns have been raised that the current process may lack sufficient rigor, potentially leading to an increase in traffic accidents involving foreign drivers, including cases of driving under the influence and on the wrong side of the road.

Foreign nationals possessing an international driver's license are permitted to drive in Japan for up to one year. However, individuals from countries that do not issue such licenses that include as China, Vietnam, and Brazil, which are not signatories to the Geneva Convention on Road Traffic, are required to pass both a written examination and a practical driving test in order to obtain a Japanese driver's license (Japan National Police Agency, 2025; Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, 2025).

The written examination currently comprises ten questions, with a passing score set at seven. This has led to criticism that the assessment may not adequately measure applicants' comprehension of Japanese traffic regulations. Authorities have also identified procedural loopholes, including instances where applicants holding short-term tourist visas list hotels or other temporary accommodations as their registered addresses when applying for a license (Speed, 2025). The National Police Agency intends to require applicants to submit official resident registration documentation and to increase the difficulty level of both the written and practical examinations.

## **3. National Health Care Program Contributions and Proposed Solutions**

Foreign nationals residing in Japan for a period exceeding three months are required to enroll in the "national health insurance program" (国民健康保険, *kokumin kenkō hoken*) (Japan Ministry of Health, 2025b). Those employed full-time by companies in Japan are covered under their employer's health insurance system, which extends to their family members. However, individuals not in full-time employment, such as exchange students, may be unaware of the requirement to join the national health insurance program. Under

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existing procedures, invoices are sent by mail following enrollment, yet some foreign residents do not complete payment. A growing volume of unpaid premiums for the national health care system has been attributed to foreign residents in Japan, resulting in local governments having to utilize public funds to offset the shortfall.

The lack of properly assessed data has become a key part of this issue. The foreigners' unpaid share is unknown, but surveys show lower payment rates than those of the Japanese. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare involving 150 municipalities from April to December 2024 revealed that only 63% of foreign residents obligated to pay premiums had done so, in contrast to an overall payment rate of 93% that includes Japanese citizens (NHK, 2025; Speed, 2025). During a parliamentary session in May 2025, opposition legislator Hirofumi Yanagase of Nippon Ishin no Kai cited data from Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward, where households headed by foreign residents paid 870 million yen out of 2 billion in assessed premiums in a single year, leaving 1.1 billion yen unpaid. Extrapolating from this, he estimated that unpaid premiums by foreign residents could exceed 400 billion yen annually on a national scale. However, this figure is based on misinformation spreading online, including a false claim speculative in nature that foreign residents' unpaid health insurance totals 400 billion yen annually. The actual total unpaid national health insurance in 2024, including the Japanese citizens, was 145.7 billion yen. In addition, foreigners account for only 1.39% of total national health insurance medical spending (NHK, 2025).

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party has proposed requiring newly registered foreign residents to pay a predetermined portion of annual premiums when registering for residency at local government offices. This proposal was submitted to Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba on June 2, 2025. The proposal also advocates for more transparent communication regarding premium obligations during the visa application process, noting that many foreign nationals come from countries without public insurance systems and may not be familiar with Japan's requirements. Another identified structural issue is that newly arriving foreign nationals are initially recorded as having zero income for the preceding year, resulting in extremely low premiums for the first year and contributing to a structural deficit within the insurance system.

#### **4. Citizenship, Criminal Profiling, and Combating Prejudice**

Japan's citizenship system is firmly rooted in the principle of "jus sanguinis" (citizenship by descent), where nationality is primarily inherited through parental lineage rather than place of birth. Codified first in the 1899 Nationality Law, which was shaped by Meiji-era nation-state formation efforts, this legal framework continues to define the boundaries of belonging in Japan (Government of Japan, 1950; Kashiwazaki, 1998). Unlike countries that employ "jus soli", such as the United States, Japan's adherence to jus sanguinis reflects a historical emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and a culturally defined notion of nationhood. As a result, even individuals born and raised in Japan, such as many Zainichi Koreans and

Taiwanese, whose ancestors were brought to Japan during the colonial era, are not granted Japanese citizenship automatically and must undergo a formal naturalization process to be recognized as nationals. This exclusion is not merely legal but also symbolic, reinforcing the idea of Japan as a mono-ethnic society (Tarumoto, 2003; Woo, 2022). The legacy of *jus sanguinis* has significant implications for residence status today, particularly for long-term non-citizens who remain subject to immigration controls and differentiated visa categories despite deep-rooted ties to Japanese society.

An increasing number of foreign nationals are choosing to acquire Japanese citizenship through the naturalization process rather than applying for permanent residency, mainly due to the comparatively less stringent requirements under current legislation. In Japan, naturalization requires a minimum of five years of residency, whereas permanent residency necessitates ten years (Government of Japan, 1950). Additionally, the background check for naturalization typically includes only one year of tax and insurance payment records, compared to the five years of tax and two years of insurance history required for permanent residency applications. Justice Minister Keisuke Suzuki acknowledged this discrepancy in a May 2025 parliamentary session, stating that it would be "clearly inappropriate" for naturalization to present a less rigorous pathway than permanent residency. He further commented that "both pathways should involve strict evaluations" and indicated that the government would examine the legal framework to ensure consistency. Legislator Yanagase of Nippon Ishin, who brought the issue to attention, argued that the current system lacks coherence and called for legislative reform. He stated, "Naturalization grants voting rights and access to one of the world's most powerful passports. It should not come with lighter requirements than permanent residency" (Speed, 2025).

While Japan's foreign resident population has grown more diverse and embedded in social and economic life, its legal and social integration remains incomplete. Foreign residents may access limited social rights, such as healthcare or education, but not through an inclusive model of citizenship. Instead, it is the unintended outcome of Japan's engagement with international norms (Tarumoto, 2003). This access is often functional rather than normative, serving market or diplomatic needs rather than expressing a commitment to equality. Claims for fuller inclusion are typically interpreted within the framework of bilateral diplomacy and postwar legacies, not universal rights. Naturalization remains discretionary, reinforcing a hierarchical distinction between nationals and non-nationals.

At the societal level, this limited legal inclusion is mirrored by persistent barriers to social acceptance. Despite increasing diversity among migrants, full integration into society remains incomplete (Iwata & Nemoto, 2018). While many natives show openness to immigration, there remains a significant portion of the population that harbors reservations, often influenced by preexisting biases, fears of economic competition, and cultural dilution (Kage et al., 2018; Matsubayashi & Yamatani, 2022; Tomiura et al., 2017; J. Zhang, 2015). This duality highlights the ongoing challenges in shaping a cohesive immigration policy in Japan.

The negative discourse surrounding foreign residents in Japan is not a new phenomenon. The colonial era saw the racialization of Koreans as inherently criminal, with terms like “futei senjin” (不逞鮮人), which means "criminal Korean," used to justify surveillance and exclusion, framing them as subjects needing control (Matthews, 2017; Park, 2017). A notable example of how long-term foreign residents, particularly Zainichi Koreans and Taiwanese, have been stigmatized in Japan’s public discourse occurred in 2000, when Tokyo Governor Shintarō Ishihara used the derogatory term “sangokujin” (三国人), which is a phrase historically used to describe individuals from former Japanese colonies, especially Korea and Taiwan. Taking place during a speech at a Ground Self-Defense Force ceremony, Ishihara warned that “atrocious crimes” had been repeatedly committed by “sangokujin” and unauthorized foreigners, and suggested they might riot in the event of a natural disaster (Jiji Press, 2025). Although his comments were later softened amid media and international criticism, the episode revealed the persistence of nationalist sentiment and the tendency to conflate legal status, ethnicity, and criminality in Japanese political rhetoric.

Currently, public sentiment is shaped by disinformation amplified on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram. Specific anonymous influencers and politicians are key sources of this misinformation, often linked to anti-immigrant or foreign-skeptic agendas (NHK, 2025). Simultaneously, organized incidents involving the theft of livestock, agricultural goods, copper wiring, and luxury vehicles have generated public concern. While such crimes are sometimes linked to foreign actors, they are also associated with domestic criminal networks. Nonetheless, the visibility of these events has fueled generalized suspicion, particularly among segments of the Japanese public unaccustomed to multicultural environments (Ekaterina, 2017; Yamamoto, 2010). Even in the absence of definitive statistics, the perception of increased crime linked to foreign residents continues to influence public opinion.

Although statistical data show that foreign residents commit crimes at relatively low rates, media and political discourse often amplify isolated incidents while downplaying others. In 2023, the most common violations involving foreign nationals included theft, visa overstays, and unauthorized employment. A high-profile lawsuit filed in January 2024 challenging police profiling practices sparked national debate, highlighting concerns over the disproportionate targeting of Southeast Asian and African individuals. As Tarumoto suggests, without a deliberate effort to reconceptualize foreign residents as rights-bearing members of society, Japan’s integration framework will continue to reproduce legal, social, and symbolic exclusion, even as reliance on foreign labor deepens.

## 5. Social Friction and Special Cases

Beyond crime, social tensions are also emerging in the context of tourism and foreign property ownership. Instances of tourists disrupting local life, such as causing congestion or littering near scenic sites like Mt. Fuji or the Shibuya Scramble, have drawn public

frustration. In Okinawa, local discontent has intensified in response to reports of Chinese nationals purchasing land near military installations. This concern has led to formal policy changes, including legal restrictions on foreign ownership of land within specified distances of designated "sensitive areas."

Cultural friction is also evident among socio-economic elites. At exclusive venues such as the Tokyo American Club, long-standing members have raised concerns about etiquette and noise associated with newly admitted foreign members, particularly those from mainland China (Langley, 2025). In rural areas, rumors about foreign purchases of land near freshwater sources, particularly by Chinese buyers, have sparked anxiety, despite the legal and logistical challenges of such acquisitions. Even when lacking a factual basis, these urban legends contribute to public unease and complicate the integration of foreign residents.

## **Conclusion**

Japan's foreign resident population has grown significantly in recent years, signaling a shift from a historically homogeneous society toward a more diverse and internationally engaged nation. This study has demonstrated that immigration is no longer a peripheral issue but has become increasingly central to Japan's demographic resilience and economic sustainability. Foreign residents today fill crucial labor gaps in sectors ranging from manufacturing and agriculture to caregiving and services, contribute to regional revitalization by sustaining depopulated communities, participate in higher education as students and researchers, and bring cultural diversity to Japanese society. The evolving institutional framework, marked by reforms such as expanded visa categories, revisions to refugee procedures, and new oversight mechanisms, reflects Japan's attempt to adapt to demographic pressures while balancing national security and social cohesion.

At the same time, enduring challenges remain evident. Prominent issues include visa overstays, limited access to essential services, difficulties in transitioning from temporary to permanent residency, and restrictive citizenship laws that maintain barriers to full integration. These legal and institutional hurdles are reinforced by societal dynamics, including persistent discriminatory narratives, stereotyping, and politically charged rhetoric that shape public opinion. Such factors slow the progress of integration and reinforce the perception of foreign residents as outsiders rather than as equal stakeholders.

Japan's case is distinctive when compared to other aging societies. Unlike Germany, which has built integration frameworks around labor migration and asylum, or South Korea, which faces similar demographic pressures but continues to pursue highly selective immigration, Japan's approach reflects the tension between its pacifist, consensus-driven governance model and its historically restrictive stance on citizenship and identity. This duality makes Japan an important case study for understanding how advanced economies with unique historical and cultural contexts attempt to reconcile demographic necessity with social conservatism.

Moving forward, several policy directions emerge from this analysis. First, Japan should strengthen pathways from temporary visas to long-term residency, ensuring that foreign residents can establish stable lives and contribute more fully to society. Second, greater investment in language education, cultural orientation, and support services would facilitate integration and reduce social friction. Third, reforms to citizenship law, including more transparent and more accessible naturalization processes, would signal Japan's commitment to inclusivity and recognize foreign residents as long-term contributors. Finally, promoting accurate media reporting and fostering public dialogue around diversity could help dismantle entrenched stereotypes and encourage broader social acceptance.

Lastly, recognizing foreign residents not as temporary labor but as integral members of society is essential if Japan is to sustain its economic vitality, uphold its international responsibilities, and foster a more pluralistic and resilient future. The trajectory of immigration policy in Japan will not only determine the well-being of millions of foreign residents but also significantly impact the country's overall societal structure. However, it will also shape the nation's capacity to navigate demographic decline, maintain global competitiveness, and redefine its identity in the twenty-first century.

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