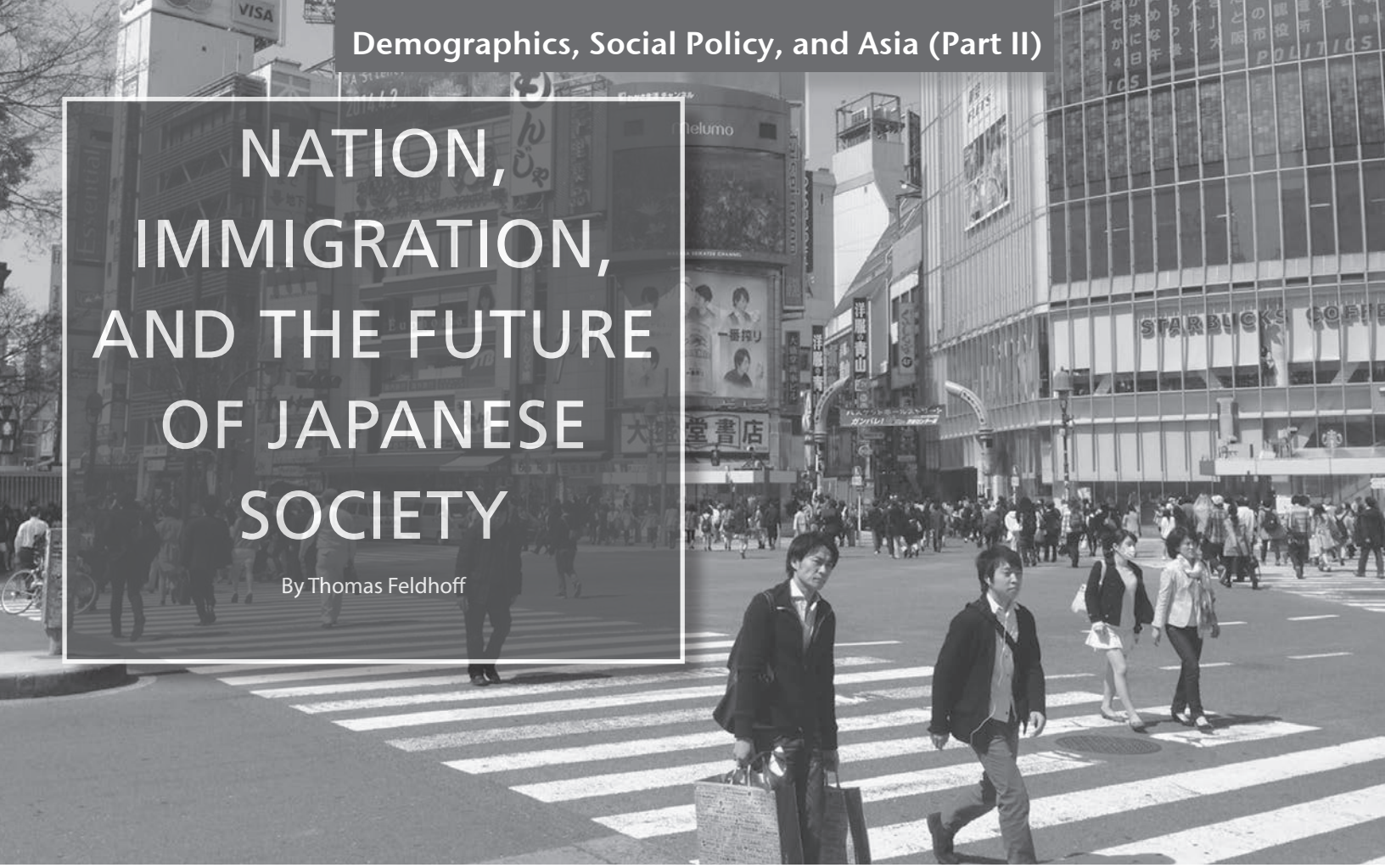
NATION, IMMIGRATION, AND THE FUTURE OF JAPANESE SOCIETY

By Thomas Feldhoff



Will Shibuya crossing in Tokyo, Japan's busiest intersection today, become much less lively and vibrant by 2065? Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

Today's classroom maps, globes, and atlases show the boundaries of all sovereign states across the world. These boundaries establish the territories of states and define the homelands of nations. However, combining the political institution of the state with the cultural attributes of a nation is a nineteenth-century European political invention that came to dominate world politics in the twentieth century.[1] British historian Eric Hobsbawm pointed to the fact that "history" has always been an important instrument for the formation of modern nation-states, providing narratives of coincidence for myth and reality.[2] "Invented traditions" emerged from the attribution of particular importance to special occasions in order to trace the continuities of national history to the myths of origin. Centenary celebrations, the worshipping of heroes or deified men, and traditional ceremonies are important memorial rituals used to express national unity and address the "nation-state community" as a whole.

Historical insights that shape contemporary understandings of the nation-state are an important starting point to examine how people, ideas, and practices come together to define Japan's narrative on immigration. This article aims to provide a basic understanding of the historical foundations of nationalism in contemporary Japan and the way the narrative of an "ethnically homogenous nation" has helped frame attitudes toward foreigners. While increasing immigration has been widely discussed as a potential strategy to combat population decline elsewhere, immigration and nationality laws have been very restrictive in Japan. The focus here is not on the complex details of currently operating Japanese legal frameworks but rather on the current state of Japan and future issues. By means of data analysis, I paint the overall picture of immigration, including recent developments amidst changing demographics. In the final section, I discuss needs and prospects for building a new consensus for Japan's narratives on immigration and the nation-state.

Foundations of the Modern Nation-State

Japan was the first "nonwhite/non-European" country to make an impact on modern world politics—after the end of more than 250 years of seclusion during the Tokugawa or Edo period (1603–1868). The new Meiji government sought to integrate all Japanese into a nation, along with implementing rapid modernization, industrialization, and militarization policies. Meiji leaders portrayed ancient mythology as a genuine part of Japan's history with ideas such as all Japanese were a family, the emperor-headed ruling structure, and the unbroken lineage of the imperial family.[3] The emperor was attributed godlike status as a descendant of *Amaterasu-ōmikami*, the Sun Goddess, and considered the father of all Japanese. According to the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon-shoki*), the mythical first Emperor Jimmu ascended to the throne in the year 660 BCE. From 1872 to 1948, February 11th was a public holiday commemorating his enthronement and the foundation of the Japanese Empire (*Kigen-setsu,* Empire Day). The creation of such national histories forms part of what political scientist Benedict Anderson labeled "imagined communities."[4] In fact, the Japanese were originally not a homogenous culture but a mixture of different peoples. The creation of a centralized, bureaucratic state was associated with mass education, advocating the idea of an "ethnic nation."

The Meiji ideology of *kokutai*, Japan's unique "national polity," contends that the solidarity of the Japanese is rooted in the "natural bonds of blood."[5] This concept of the Japanese nation as a kinship community is based on a system of family registrations transmitting membership through parentage, thus excluding membership for foreigners. The foundations for the narrative of an ethnically homogenous national community were laid, and central state power and authority effectively bolstered. Eventually, this politically and ideologically driven movement led to the rise of ultranationalist leaders, who advocated the idea to develop the Japan-led

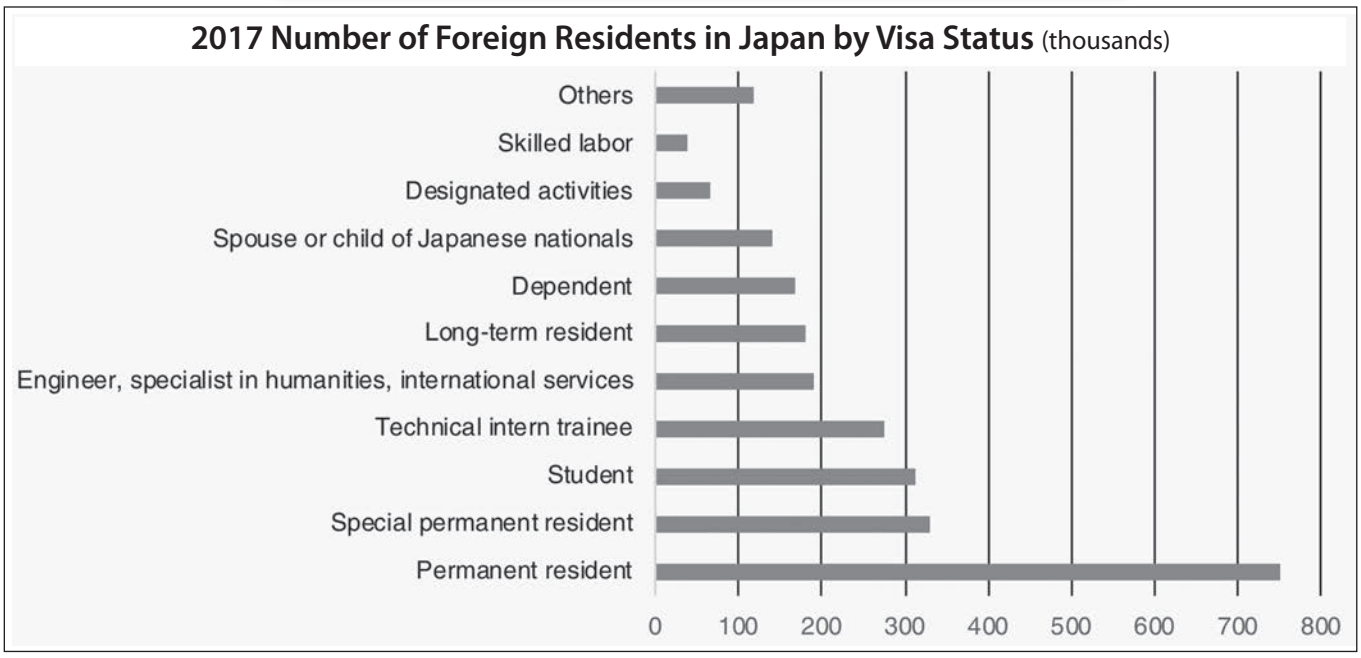


Figure 1: Japan's foreign residents by visa status, 2017. Source: Designed by the author, based on data derived from the Ministry of Justice at https://tinyurl.com/y89kxr47.

Dai-tōa kyōei-ken (Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere) in the 1930s. Japanese supremacist thinking was certainly based on a false sense of national hubris and cultural superiority.

Despite the defeat of Japan in the Asia–Pacific War and Emperor Hirohito's declaration to give up once and for all any claims to being a sacred ruler in 1946, the emperor–family–nation ideology remained widely intact. Empire Day was reestablished as National Foundation Day (*Kenkoku-kinenbi*) in 1966. It has remained a symbolic representation of the spirit of national unity and traditions. Moreover, ideas of the cultural and behavioral distinctiveness of Japan as an island nation are widely contemplated in the so-called *Nihonjin-ron*, which literally means "discourses concerning the Japanese." This discourse refers to the "true" essence of what it means to be Japanese, and it is still being reproduced and transmitted into modern identity politics.[6]

Ultimately, any collective identity formation based on history and culture is linked to techniques of inclusion and exclusion; this is a double-edged sword in that although these techniques work as an integrative or centripetal force helping foster the ideology of unity, they foster discrimination against "outsiders" and bear potential for conflict and isolation. For our understanding, historian of modern Japan and Korea Tessa Morris-Suzuki highlights that restrictive immigration policies not only reflect the deep-seated cultural peculiarities of an island nation, but to a large extent, they were products of Cold War politics in order to protect Japan from Communist infiltration by immigrants from other parts of Asia.[7]

In any case, the social consequences are long-lasting. While nationalism is part of everyday life in all societies, a 2006 United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNHCHR) report concluded that there are racism, discrimination, and xenophobia in Japan. The UNHCHR report found that creating a multiethnic and multicultural society will only be possible if Japan fundamentally changes its attitude toward foreigners.[8] According to the results of a March 2017 national survey conducted by Japan's Ministry of Justice (MOJ), some 30 percent of foreign residents have experienced discriminatory language from Japanese in the past five years.[9] The MOJ effort, the first-ever national government survey on discrimination against foreigners, indicated that many respondents from China and South Korea were subject to abusive language.

This is important to note because, recently, international migration policies have been the subject of increasing debate in Japan in the wake of the country's demographic crisis. The debate is highly political, as it questions the need to deal with an aging and declining population by increasing immigration, as well as the rights that foreign individuals have to live in countries outside where they were born.[10] Certainly, societies naturally need to sustain themselves by means of a steadily changing membership. But demographer Geoffrey McNicoll argues that a society can maintain its sense of identity even in the face of fairly rapid membership turnover.[11] Therefore, immigration could help any nation facing the challenge of decline. The arrival of new members of a society ideally creates a more cosmopolitan and less parochial society.

Demographic Change: Possible Solutions?

The current processes of demographic aging and population decline will reach into all facets of Japanese contemporary life, and that makes policy responses very complex. By 2065, the total population is expected to be eighty-eight million, a 30 percent decline from the 127 million people living in Japan in 2015.[12] Most importantly, as the share of the working population is relatively small and quickly declining, the economy faces a heavy burden. A fundamental overhaul of the labor market and social welfare programs, in particular the pension, medical, and nursing care systems, is inevitable. A critical question is what are the best policy options are to stabilize the population size.

The two most common policy options cited are those aimed at increasing fertility or increasing immigration. As demographic movements are generational and rooted largely in socioeconomic factors, a quick turnaround in substantial birthrate increases and natural growth is not expected. Even if the government pursued a successful policy that managed to considerably increase the fertility of the average Japanese woman, it would still take roughly twenty years for these additional children to complete their educations and enter the labor market. In fact, programs encouraging people to have more children have repeatedly failed in the past. Moreover, government intervention to raise the fertility rate is unpopular in Japan due to lingering memories of such efforts before and during World War II. As a consequence, the number of children fourteen years or less in Japan fell for the thirty-seventh consecutive year to a record low in 2018.

The second factor that could radically alter population projections is the influx of greater numbers of immigrants. A 2000 United Nations Population Division study addressed whether "replacement migration" could be a solution to population decline and aging in eight low-fertility

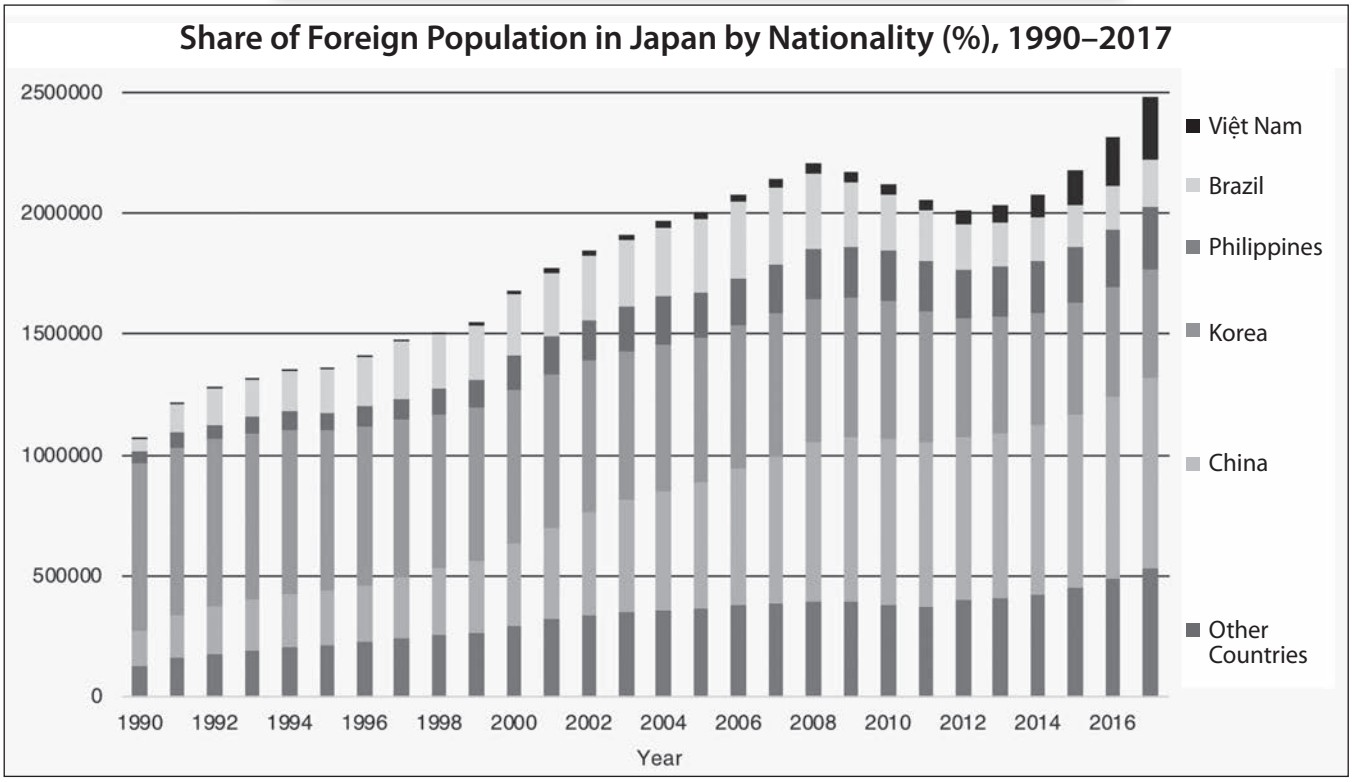


Figure 2: Japan's registered foreigners by main nationalities, 1990–2017. Figures for China are for the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) combined, and figures for Korea are for North and South Korea combined until 2011, and for South Korea only from 2012. The graph is shaded in six different sections representing Việt Nam at the top through "Other Countries" at the bottom. Source: Designed by the author, based on data derived from the Ministry of Justice at https://tinyurl.com/y7e4y5g4 and the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research at https://tinyurl.com/y86a5ldk.

countries and what structural effects it might have for the period 1995–2050.[13] Replacement migration refers to the international migration that would be needed to offset declines in the size of population, declines in the population of working-age people, or counteract the overall aging of a population. Under the assumption that Japan wishes to keep its total population at the same number attained in 1995, the country would need seventeen million net immigrants up to the year 2050. By that year, immigrants and their descendants would total 22.5 million and comprise nearly 18 percent of the total population. Similarly, about 30 percent of the population would need to be composed of immigrants and their descendants by 2050, if the country wishes to maintain the size of its working-age population at 1995 total population levels. In absolute terms, Japan would need 33.5 million immigrants from 1995 through 2050. In terms of current immigration figures, these are unrealistically high figures, which show that the contributions of immigration to solving Japan's demographic crisis are minimal. However, many sectors of the economy already depend on foreign workers.

Immigration Policy and Changing Realities

For decades, the possibility of expanded immigration has been virtually taboo in Japanese policy. Political pressures from national groups and widespread public unease about receiving more foreigners are part of the reason. The self-image of an ethnically homogenous country and the associated psychological barriers to alienation are high in Japan, and accordingly, its immigration law has remained very restrictive. Based on the 1952 Immigration Control and Refugee Act, which intended to discourage long-term settlement of foreign workers, Japan is officially permitting only highly qualified foreign workers in some professional fields and family-based visas.

The immigration system permits a variety of working visas (depicted in Figure 1; e.g., highly skilled professional, business manager, professor or researcher), nonworking visas (e.g., student, trainee, dependent), and family-related visas (e.g., permanent resident, spouse, or child of Japanese nationals). In fact, Japan has been experiencing a continuous inflow of low-skilled foreign workers since the late 1980s, when the government initiated active recruitment of foreign students, most of them working part time in the low-skill service sector, and expanded the foreign trainee program for small and medium enterprises in need of short-term workers. In addition, Japanese emigrants and their descendants up to the third generation (the so-called *Nikkeijin*, mainly from Brazil and Peru) were granted renewable working visas. The government assumed these groups would be able to easily assimilate into society because of their Japanese descent. But many remained profoundly alienated from society, experienced discrimination, and were relegated to low-paid, insecure jobs.

Over the 2000–2015 period, Japan accepted a total inflow of 5.36 million foreigners, according to data provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).[14] These absolute figures indicate that Japan already is a country of immigration. Forced to confront the ever-worsening labor shortage these days, *The Japan Times* reports that "Japan's politicians and bureaucrats are clearly much less inclined to quibble over the downsides to [low-skilled] immigration."[15]

Crossing of Geographical Boundaries: Recent Immigration to Japan

Data analysis illustrates that the absolute number of foreign residents in Japan has continued to grow over the past five years, recovering from declines in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters (Figure 2). While the government maintains the position that Japan is not open to mass immigration, according to OECD data, Japan admitted the inflow of 391,160 foreign residents in 2015, placing it fourth overall among advanced economies, behind Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom.[16] This includes foreigners who hold a valid visa, intend to stay in Japan for more than ninety days, and are recorded in population registers, so temporary visitors and reentries are excluded. According to Japanese government figures, the number of legal foreign residents in Japan reached a record high 2.562 million as of the end of 2017, or 2 percent of the total population.[17]

	2012	2017	2012–2017 (% of change)
Chinese	675,370	787,614	+16.62
South Koreans	489,431	450,663	-7.92
Filipinos	202,985	260,553	+28.36
Brazilians	190,609	191,362	+0.40
Vietnamese	52,367	262,405	+401.09
TOTAL	**2,033,656**	**2,561,848**	**+25.97**

Table 1: Main groups of foreign residents by nationalities in 2012 and 2017. Source: Author's compilation and calculations, based on data derived from the Ministry of Justice at https://tinyurl.com/8d64r8n and https://tinyurl.com/y7e4y5g4.

Above-average concentrations of foreign population are typically found in large metropolitan areas and big cities (e.g., 21 percent in Tokyo Prefecture), which are certainly attractive destinations for working immigrants. Recently, figures increased sharply for those immigrants with legal residence status (permanent and long-term residents) who held working visas designated for highly skilled foreign professionals. In addition, large proportions of foreign nationals are staying and working under nonworking visas, most importantly student, trainee, and technical internship visas (Figure 2). The spatial distribution of immigrants has an important implication with regard to Japan's urban–rural disparities: as rural areas are most severely affected by depopulation and aging issues, it should not be expected that increasing immigration would primarily contribute to regional revitalization efforts.

When it comes to nationalities, Japan is becoming more diverse. Traditionally, Chinese constituted the largest group of residents, followed by Koreans, Filipinos, and Brazilians. The figures also include the so-called *zainichi* population, the Japanese name for former colonial subjects living in Japan, primarily from the Korean peninsula, who lost their Japanese nationality following World War II, and their descendants. Zainichi refers to the majority of first-, second-, and third-generation Koreans living in Japan under the "special permanent resident's status" (Figure 2) while maintaining Korean nationality.

However, the face of immigration has been changing more rapidly during the past five years (Table 1). Overall, the reasons foreigners are choosing to reside in Japan and the range of their nationalities are diversifying, especially among Asian nationalities. The Vietnamese population grew rapidly to 262,404 by the end of 2017, making them now the third-largest nationality.[18] This can be attributed to a growing number of students and technical intern trainees, and the result of Japanese companies increasingly investing in Việt Nam. The government has also implemented several recruitment schemes targeted at workers in specific sectors, clearly focusing on "desirable" immigrants.

Citizenship in Japan, or How to "Become Japanese"

There are major differences between countries in how immigrants are defined. The OECD notes that some countries have traditionally focused on producing data on foreign residents (European countries, Japan, and Korea), while others refer to the foreign-born (settlement countries, e.g., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States). This difference in focus relates, in part, to the nature and history of immigration systems, and legislation on citizenship and naturalization. In Japan, the foreign population consists of people born abroad who still have the nationality of their home country; this may also include second- and third-generation foreigners born in Japan.

To be more precise, full citizenship, or "nationality," defines formal membership in a state. Three main principles govern the attribution of citizenship at birth: (1) *jus soli* ("the right of soil," i.e., citizenship is attributed by birthplace); (2) *jus sanguinis* ("the right of blood," i.e., citizenship is transmitted through parentage); (3) a combination of both, *jus domicili*

("citizenship by residence," i.e., citizenship is granted on the basis of long periods of residence rather than origin). As Japan follows jus sanguinis, based on the citizenship criteria established in the first Nationality Law of 1899, nationality is conferred based on bloodline, not place of birth. This is the reason why even the Japan-born zainichi population is included as foreign nationals in government statistics on foreign residents. The granting of citizenship is a prerogative of the national government, and the procedure is characterized by relatively strict rules and a number of legal restrictions imposed on naturalized persons. Dual citizenship is not permitted.[19]

In principle, naturalization is thus possible if criteria are satisfied. But the question remains whether access to formal citizenship through naturalization is seen as a means or the ultimate goal of the integration process. As naturalization figures in Japan are very low and long-term residents in Japan acquire permanent residency rather than citizenship, the granting of social and political rights independent of status might be part of an inclusive integration agenda.

Conclusion

Historical context provides background that gives Japanese attitudes toward foreigners some meaning, but we must be aware of the constructed nature of history and the way it is used to maintain the status quo or promote a political agenda. Despite regular media reporting on the increasing numbers and changing composition of Japan's foreign population, there has not been much political and public debate about the challenges to emerge from a silently increasing number of immigrants. This is not surprising insofar as the focus of Japan's immigration policy has been on controlling its foreign population. But the government's official policy stands in unresolved contradiction to the reality of increasing dependence on foreign labor. At least discriminatory employment practices in unskilled labor in particular, such as illegally low pay, unpaid wages, excessively long work hours, workplace violence, and harassment, have become liable to prosecution.

Migration can be interpreted as a reflection of economic, social, and environmental change, and as "a valuable lens through which to understand social change."[20] What challenges are the Japanese facing as a rapidly aging and declining society? At any rate, immigration cannot mitigate Japan's problem of population losses for the time being. Younger immigrants of reproductive age can only make small contributions in compensating for low birthrates of the native population. This also implies that long-overdue reforms of the social welfare systems should not be postponed any longer. However, in the short term, as migrants carry with them skills and can gain knowledge and practical experience, they help meet the need for both an educated and relatively uneducated workforce in many sectors of the economy. Increased immigration may end up creating feelings of rejection and increasing xenophobic reactions among the native population, even more so if the government continues to lack an active policy to integrate foreigners into society.

To fully seize the opportunities of migration, Japan needs a new narrative on migration, which also implies a new narrative on the nation-state, taking into account contemporary cross-border mobilities. The end of the Cold War and processes of globalization have challenged conventional conceptions of territorial entities. Instead of the traditional, static view of states and identities, Japanese politics and its public should eventually acknowledge their socially constructed, fluid, and contingent nature. Nations and nationalism are not "naturally given," and they seem far from disappearing, but "nationalism is above all a political practice."[21] What this implies is that national identities must be renegotiated and reconfigured as more and more peoples, ideas, and practices are arriving. Above all, the complexity of immigration and integration challenges requires an integrated approach that allows for diverse and inclusive strategies. ■

ADDITIONAL TEACHING RESOURCES

Marco Antonsich, "Nation and Nationalism", in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew et al. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 97–310.

David Chiavacci, "Migration and Integration Patterns of New Immigrants in Japan: Diverse Structures of Inequality" in *Social Inequality in Post-Growth Japan: Transformation during Economic and Demographic Stagnation*, eds. David Chiavacci and Carola Hommerich (London: Routledge, 2016), 233–249. (*Routledge Contemporary Japan series*).

David Green, "As Its Population Ages, Japan Quietly Turns to Immigration," *Migration Information Source,* March 28, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/y7z2ptao.

NOTES

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20. Holdsworth et al., *Population and Society*, 97.
21. Flint and Taylor, 166.

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