



Rethinking Japan's Immigration Policy

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This is an English summary of the book "Rethinking Japan's Immigration Policy", the Japanese title "日本が議論すべき外国人政策 —海外の経験から何を学ぶ—"

1) First, regarding foreigner policy, in the West, the direction has changed significantly over the past ten years. As many Western countries see their fertility rates fall to around 1.5, concerns about labor shortages have intensified. For this reason, they still need foreign workers. At the same time, many people believe that foreigners are taking their jobs, and this has led to the rise of far-right parties. As a result, countries have become less willing to accept large numbers of foreign workers. Instead, they have been moving to limit acceptance to the types of workers they consider necessary for their own national interests. So compared with the past, countries are becoming more selective in their acceptance of immigrants and foreign workers.

2) The United States was originally a country tolerant of immigration, but in recent years it has shifted toward curtailment. Foreigners have become scapegoats for public dissatisfaction, and this dissatisfaction was one factor in bringing President Donald Trump to power. In the United States, the issue of immigration has become increasingly complex because of the concept of birthright citizenship, which has created a peculiar situation whereby, when illegal immigrants have children, the parents are in the country unlawfully while their children are bona fide U.S. citizens.

3) Europe was a source of emigrants before World War II, but during the postwar reconstruction period, it shifted to being a destination for immigrants. Later, when their economies slumped after the oil crises, European countries halted the acceptance of foreign workers, but the number of foreign residents continued to increase. One of the reasons was that they brought family members over to join them. Given such circumstances, European countries have been pursuing policies aimed at social integration, while shifting to new approaches such as preferential treatment for high-skill immigrants.

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4) The United States has long accepted large numbers of international students at its universities, but with universities being viewed as excessively liberal, the authorities have begun tightening controls on them. As a result, a growing number of researchers are keen to leave U.S. universities. Europe has been making some effort to attract them. In contrast, such moves have yet to gain momentum in Japan.

5) Canada and Australia maintained immigration policies based on race for many years. However, after the war, in response to changes in their economic structures and in the international environment, both countries switched the basis of selection from race to skills. The two countries have long been regarded as models for immigration policy, and two key reasons for this have been identified: having a clear national strategy and reviewing policies flexibly in line with the times.

Even so, in recent years, concerns about soaring housing prices and increasing pressure on public services have shifted public opinion, with calls growing for greater caution in the acceptance of immigrants.

6) Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan has always been a highly populated country. The combination of a small land area and a large population had been a source of concern, and Japan sent many people overseas as emigrants. In parallel with the country sending people abroad, attitudes toward practices such as abortion also became more accepting. There was even "eugenic protection," i.e., forced sterilization of certain groups. In the early 1970s, partly in response to events such as the first oil crisis, Japan pushed forward with population-control measures. In other words, until the 1970s, population control was national policy, and the idea of wanting to accept foreign workers from abroad is actually only something that has emerged over the past fifty years or so. Moreover, population-control measures were mainly driven by the government. In short, today's low birthrate is the result of policies that Japan itself chose to implement, and it can be said that those policies worked too effectively.

7) Population forecasts are relatively accurate compared with other types of forecasts, but over spans of several decades, discrepancies can arise. People's lifestyles and attitudes also change. In that sense, it is dangerous to accept large numbers of foreign workers too easily. The fact is that Japan has historically viewed itself as a country with a small land area and a large population, and this phase of struggling with labor shortages only began relatively recently. If Japan allows itself to get swept along by the current labor shortage and accepts foreign workers without limits, it may end up with the opposite problem, i.e., an excessively large population.

8) Japan faced labor shortages during its period of high economic growth. However, it managed to cope without accepting immigrants. It did this through modernization and streamlining. It is somewhat premature to assume that Japan cannot achieve growth without accepting large numbers of foreign workers. In fact, research shows that the key determinants of economic growth are not population or the rate of population change, but the capital–labor ratio, i.e., how much capital stock there is for each worker, and total factor productivity (TFP). It is important to accept foreign workers gradually and only in areas where they are needed.

9) From an economic perspective, accepting foreigners has certain positive effects. However, these effects stem from downward pressure on wages, which may result in income being transferred from local workers to business owners. There is also a danger of the culture and social systems of the receiving country becoming heavily influenced by those of the sending countries. Such cultural implications cannot be ignored. Furthermore, if a country accepts large numbers of immigrants from a single country, those immigrants may form concentrated communities and fail to integrate into the local society. One reason many immigrants in New York have integrated is that no single ethnic group is overwhelmingly dominant there.

10) About four million foreigners already live in Japan. And many individuals are already helping to make Japan stronger. Social integration policies that also take such people into account are necessary. In Japan, the official line is that there are no immigrants, and foreigner policy remains inadequate. As pointed out in this book, three things are missing: a clear direction, a "control tower," and statistics. Correcting these deficiencies is the first priority.

11) In Japan, measures for multicultural coexistence are already being actively advanced in prefectures and municipalities where many foreign workers reside. At the same time, there is wide variation across different local governments. Given that each local government has limited resources, it is crucial that details of initiatives are effectively shared. It is also important for the national government to support these local efforts.

12) The business community wants foreign workers as a means of dealing with labor shortages, while some activists advocate accepting foreigners for ideological reasons. On the other hand, people who have little contact with foreign workers show feelings of resistance due to a vague sense of anxiety. Of course, if foreign workers are accepted in a way that is suited to Japan, there is potential for win-win relationships between Japanese people and foreigners. To that end, it is important that acceptance is handled in a carefully controlled manner.

13) Discussions surrounding foreigner policy must not be reduced to the narrow focus of foreigner policy alone. It is vital to also consider population and productivity issues, as well as cultural factors. In other words, discussions need to be approached from a comprehensive policy perspective. To ensure that this happens, it will be important to further strengthen the "control tower" established within the Cabinet Secretariat and to enact a basic law.

14) Ultimately, an appropriate foreigner policy will be one that clearly defines the number of people to be admitted and the scope of their occupations, and accepts foreigners within those limits. This also means that Japanese-language proficiency levels are important. In addition, it is essential to create an environment in which foreigners in Japan can live with peace of mind. Foreigners who find Japan comfortable will also value Japan. If we show respect for their cultures and personalities, that will likewise give them reasons to love Japan.

15) Naturally, it is also important to take Japanese public sentiment into account. Policies that appear to favor foreigners should be avoided. While respecting the cultures of their countries of origin, effort should also be made to prevent the emergence of geographical areas where the Japanese language is not understood or Japanese law does not function. Furthermore, Japan should enable foreigners who have the ability and motivation to adapt to Japan to thrive here. Meanwhile, it will also be important to deal strictly with violations such as illegal overstaying.

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Reference

- Tomohisa Ishikawa, Shumpei Goto (2026) “Rethinking Japan’s Immigration Policy”（石川智久、後藤俊平＜2026＞;「日本が議論すべき外国人政策：海外の経験から何を学ぶか」、金融財政事情研究会）