

The Japanese Government and Immigration: A Duality of Policy in Media and Government Documents

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The Japanese government implemented what can be perceived as a short-term fix for the lack of available workforce by easing immigration restrictions and supporting a rapid influx of international workers at a level never seen by the country. To better understand the reality and prioritization of immigration in Japan, this paper will compare documents released by governmental agencies with written newspaper articles directed towards domestic and international audiences. This comparison will expose and highlight the dissonance in perspectives concerning the effectiveness of Japan's immigration policy. Through examining Japan's domestic newspapers and policies and outward-facing media, including governmental agencies' documents aimed at international audiences, this dissonance emerges to reveal a cacophony of competing views over the current stage of immigration policy. Moreover, this comparison unveils how Japan walks a tightrope of fluctuating communication strategies to showcase effective immigration, such as assimilation and diversification, while enacting policies that support the use of immigration for economic purposes merely for short-term support, and how that dissonance is bleeding into the perceptions of media.

Prioritization vs Reality

In today's modern society, countries worldwide find themselves grappling with new social, economic, and political issues. As time continues to progress, so do the world's societies and the problems they face. These shifts have caused changes in various industries, government bodies, and societal structures. Understanding the reasoning for these changes and the effects these changes have in the societies they are formed in is critical to how responses will be

developed by inside and outside members. This formulation of responses provides a lens into the current priorities of a nation and society given a set parameter of values and people's realities. Therefore, to contribute to the goal of better understanding the state of prioritization of immigration in Japan, this paper will assess domestic newspapers and governmental agencies' outward-facing documents aimed at an international audience to underscore a disparity of dissonance and alignment in the communication of Japan's immigration policy.

Among the other leading developed countries in the Asia-pacific, no other country has seen a more drastic decline in their workforce than Japan.¹ Because of a declining birth rate and an aging population, Japan needs to and has already implemented actions to address this declining workforce issue. The Japanese government has implemented what can be perceived as a short-term fix for the lack of available workforce by easing immigration restrictions and supporting a rapid influx of international workers at a level never seen by the country.² This influx of foreign workers brings about structural changes in Japan's culture and society, which could have lasting effects on the country. Due to Japan's traditionally isolationistic history, this continuous influx of foreign workers can create conflict among people with varying values and beliefs about how Japan's country should look and operate. Foreign nationals will also formulate opinions based on policy decisions and available information. Then, the question is how the reasonings and responses to and effects of Japan's immigration policies are being conveyed to the public? The first interaction with information about these policies for both people abroad and within Japan is received from newspapers and governmental agencies. Critical insights into the values being prioritized can be derived from the primary source's rhetoric choices, availability of information, and areas they focused on. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to take the competing values derived from Japan's domestic newspapers and governmental agencies' outward-facing documents and compare them with an overview of current secondary researchers' understandings. Through this comparison, the following scheme is obtained surrounding Japan's immigration policy: a greater understanding of the perspectives of international and domestic media, insight into how the government is presenting information, the experience of people affected by the policies, and advice for policies moving forward.

1 Toshihiko Hara, *A Shrinking Society Post-Demographic Transition in Japan* (Springer Japan, 2015).

2 Ibid.

Literature Review

Further insight into the reasoning behind the increased need for migrant workers can be gained from Toshikiko Hara's 2015 book: *A Shrinking Society: Post-Demographic Transition in Japan*. Hara's book investigated Japan's decreasing population, which is considered the main driver behind new immigration policies. Arguing that all Asian countries face this change in their population because of "demographic transition caused by a feedback loop between increasing longevity and decreasing fertility," Hara explained that Japan faces this decrease of population faster than any other country.³ Utilizing statistical analysis from governmental organizations, Hara argued that the increasing life expectancy and declining fertility rate played into the perceived cost-benefit imbalance held by Japanese women.⁴ However, this transfer from the costs of reproductive child-bearing and rearing has now shifted to the cost for elderly care, without the input from a younger generation. Hara suggested that for Japan to combat these challenges, they must "face corresponding policy challenges and have new systems to take responsibility."⁵ Hara's book is fundamental to the research surrounding Japan's immigration because it shows why immigration policy is changing now and why migrant workers are being considered a necessary supplement to the workforce. This notion also adds context for the rationale that underlies government policy decisions and what one should expect to be expressed in national agencies' outward-facing documentation.

Oh-Jung Kwon's 2018 comparison study titled, *The diverging paths of skilled immigration in Singapore, Japan, and Korea: policy priorities and external labor market for skilled foreign workers*, highlighted the different approaches and results of high-income Asian countries have experienced concerning their immigration policies. Kwon's study supports the idea that all three countries use what he called the "Typical Asian model of labor immigration."⁶ This model considers the amount of temporary employment in the country and compares it to the restrictions on the permanent settlement

3 Ibid., 65.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 63.

6 Oh-Jung Kwon, "The Diverging Paths of Skilled Immigration in Singapore, Japan and Korea: Policy Priorities and External Labor Market for Skilled Foreign Workers," *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 57, no. 4 (March 2018): 437, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12173>.

of immigrants in the country.⁷ However, in his research, Kwon observed that Singapore deviated from this model by implementing “institutionalized qualification-centered employment practices and greater access to permanent membership for skilled foreigners.”⁸ Singapore’s success from this deviation helps support Kwon’s findings that giving foreign workers accreditation and removing as many restraints on them as possible allows the migrant workers to integrate at a faster and more substantial level.⁹ This adds critical context to the policy decisions of Japan in the greater Asian country collective. Taking this insight into the comparison of governmental agencies outward facing documentation and media’s newspapers, a sharper image of Japan’s current immigration trajectory could be viewed as wavering between the typical immigration model and the integration model closer to that of Singapore.

Ayako Komine’s 2018 work, titled *A Closed Immigration Country: Revisiting Japan as a Negative Case*, argued that there are discrepancies between the Japanese government’s rhetoric in their communicated immigration rationale and priorities of actual immigration policies which is reflected in immigration patterns.¹⁰ Traditionally, Japan has been stereotyped as a country closed off to immigration, favoring only high-skilled labor. Komine agrees that the Japanese point-based approach to immigration may have contributed to this stereotype.¹¹ Through quantitative analysis of Japan’s immigration output, Komine found that “skilled economic migrants and co-ethnic migrants have greater access to rights than low-skilled economic migrants.”¹² This data supports the general stereotype of Japan favoring high-skilled migrant workers over low-skilled migrant workers. However, Komine’s research finding also supports a conflicting notion that the country is more open to low-skilled economic migrants. Identifying that while high-skilled migrant workers have more rights based on government policies, the government is currently allowing a higher influx of low-skilled migrant workers into the country while still

7 Ibid., 418-444.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ayako Komine, “A Closed Immigration Country: Revisiting Japan as a Negative Case,” *International Migration* 56, no. 5 (December 2018): 106-122, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12383>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

prioritizing rights for high-skilled workers.¹³ Komine's work is essential to note because it reveals that the formal stance on the issue is different from what is taking place in the country. The differences expressed in the formal favoritism of high-skilled labor versus the actual high influx of low-skilled workers supports the need for further inspection of the dissonance and alignment of Japanese immigration policies and the information available to the public.

The 2017 study by James F. Hollifield and Michael Orlando Sharpe analyzed Japan as a so-called emerging migration state.¹⁴ Their study's goal was to highlight that as a country's national security and development becomes more dependent on migration, their society undergoes transformation relevant to the four dimensions of governance.¹⁵ These dimensions balance security, markets, rights, and culture, and finding a balance between all four can continue to be a difficult challenge.¹⁶ As one might assume, everything is a give and take; and as a nation moves in one direction, they move away from another. Their study added support to this notion and argued that the way migration is governed directly affects the country's political backlash and economic success.¹⁷ With this in mind, they proposed that Japan will "become trapped in a liberal paradox, needing to be economically open and politically closed for decades to come."¹⁸ Hollifield and Sharpe's work is critical to note for our purposes because it shows the importance of how the governance of migration can directly affect the country's domestic reaction and economic success. The rationale underlying immigration policies versus what is communicated by the media and the government hinges on satisfying progress in the economy and alleviating domestic reaction. This dynamic underpins the balancing act between the communication of policies and the policies themselves. Just as public perceptions and societal acceptance are dependent on this balancing act, our understandings over Japan's immigration policies are shaped by this interaction of political and economic priorities. Their work also highlighted that Japan is primed for societal change and has already

13 Ibid.

14 James F. Hollifield and Michael Orlando Sharpe, "Japan as an 'Emerging Migration State,'" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 17, no. 3 (January 2017): pp. 371-400, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcx013>.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 394.

undergone profound immigration changes, laying out an angle for our research to investigate the perception of newspapers and government agencies on immigration changes and how these changes are being addressed publicly.

Rationale for Selecting Media and Government Documents for Comparison

With so much variety in conversation and angles that can be taken in a vast topic such as immigration, to gain any form of insight, we will need to narrow the scope of selecting media and documents by identifying common themes. For this comparison study, we will compare documents released by governmental agencies with newspaper articles directed towards international and domestic audiences. These articles and documents cover similar topics regarding the effectiveness of immigration, such as policy, rights, and rationale, and possess a comparable written communication style.

The choice of using governmental agencies' outward-facing documents is because they are the most prolific direct source of information for the general population concerning immigration policies and issues. Since these documents come directly from the governmental agencies themselves, they reveal how the Japanese government frames the immigration issue and what rationale they are trying to communicate to the public. This gives us a better understanding of the government's perception and the reasoning behind the reactionary stances the public can take.

Written forms of outward-facing documentation of the governmental agencies will be used because they tend to be the most used method of disseminating information to the public from the government regarding immigration. The use of written communication methods also means that the government tends to release translated versions to allow more accessibility to international and domestic audiences, something essential to identifying the disparities in perception, progress, and prioritization. For this comparison, we will use the four most prominent and most influential agencies regarding immigration in Japan: The Japanese Ministry of Health, Immigration Services, International Affairs Division, and The Ministry of Justice. From each agency, the most recent and updated releases of outward-facing documentation concerning immigration topics in Japan, such as policies, rights, data, and rationale, will be chosen.

The rationale behind using newspapers for this comparison with governmental agencies' written documents is rooted in its foundation as

a primary source of information for the general population. As technology advanced, these newspapers adapted and are now fully available online. This online presence has allowed ease of access for the domestic population and the international community and continues to be one of the most dominant news sources for both. The newspaper's written communication method is also the closest to that of the governmental agencies in the form of press releases and outward-facing style. By utilizing newspapers written articles and governmental agencies written releases, we do not have to account for other variables in the presentation of information inherent in visual media. Instead, we can immediately focus on the express rationale of policies, projected measurements of progress, and perceptions of topics in the government's writing to that of the written media.

Since some governmental agencies' documents are directed toward domestic Japanese audiences and the international migrant audience worldwide, prominent newspapers must be used for their proliferation both internationally and in Japan. To match this selection of four prominent governmental agencies, articles from four prominent international newspapers will be chosen. All of them will be internationally focused, but two of them will have a stronger focus on the national Japanese demographic, including The Japan Times and The Asahi Shimbun, while the other two will have a more robust international demographic focus with the use of National Public Radio (NPR) and The Guardian. However, articles from all four news sources will be chosen based on their coverage of similar topics to that of the governmental agencies' outward-facing documentation concerning the effective of immigration.

Comparison

Comparing all the sources selected, a significant difference amongst the news sources becomes immediately evident regarding the news articles predominantly concerned with the international demographic, compared to the articles targeting the Japanese audience. While articles from all four address similar topics of immigration policies and implementation to that of the governmental agencies, there is a preferred differing explanation method of gauging the effectiveness of immigration policies in both the international and Japanese media sources. The selected articles from the predominantly international audience-focused newspapers, including The Guardian and NPR, fixated on the experiences of migrant workers coming

to work in Japan as indicators of effective immigration.¹⁹ In contrast, the articles from national newspapers with a more robust Japanese audience focus, including *The Asahi Shimbun* and *The Japan Times*, focused on explaining the reasoning behind immigration and adaptation.²⁰ This difference in focus highlights a significant disparity in projected ideas on immigration directed towards international and domestic audiences.

The domestic newspaper articles sought to explain and justify why immigration is happening. They accomplish explaining reasons behind immigration by attributing statistical data to the workforce drop in Japan and talking to economists like Mitsuhiro Fukao.²¹ The *Japan Times* article, *Looking Overseas to Solve Japan's Labor Shortage*, covers how the economic effects of international workers affect Japanese organizations, and the economist Mitsuhiro Fukao states that:

Employers are put off by the high cost of hiring non-Japanese. Legally, companies must pay them the same wages they give Japanese workers. After paying insurance, pension, training, overseas flights, dormitory and recruitment expenses, it is often cheaper to hire a nonregular Japanese worker than a foreign citizen.²²

However, by talking about the effect immigration has on the economy and speaking about immigrants as if they are currently an economic burden on Japanese companies, the conversation about immigration is primarily economical in nature. The *Asahi Shimbun* article titled, *Foreign Population*

19 Justin McCurry, "The Changing Face of Japan: Labour Shortage Opens Doors to Immigrant Workers," *The Guardian*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/09/the-changing-face-of-japan-labour-shortage-opens-doors-to-immigrant-workers>; Anthony Kuhn and Chie Kobayashi, "As Japan Tries Out Immigration, Migrant Workers Complain Of Exploitation," *NPR*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/15/683224099/as-japan-tries-out-immigration-migrant-workers-complain-of-exploitation>.

20 Richard Solomon, "Looking Overseas to Solve Japan's Labor Shortage," *The Japan Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/11/08/commentary/japan-commentary/looking-overseas-solve-japans-labor-shortage/>; *The Asahi Shimbun*, "Foreign Population in Japan Reaches Record 2.93 Million at End of December," *The Asahi Shimbun*, March 30, 2020, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13256541>.

21 Solomon, "Looking Overseas."

22 Ibid.

in Japan Reaches Record 2.93 Million at End of December, follows a similar approach by only referring to the data related to the number of people coming to Japan, staying in Japan, overstaying their visa, and where they came from.²³ Like the ones present in *The Japan Times*, the conversation focuses on economy and numbers to gauge effectiveness.

This perspective aimed at the domestic audience presents immigration as if they are trying to sell the audience on the need for immigration by presenting a rationale for its implementation economically. When presented this way, it implies that immigration is something negative, and that the audience needs to be convinced of its benefits and necessity through economic gains and statistical rationale. However, this use of gauging immigration's effectiveness primarily through economic reasoning guides a funneled perspective to the domestic audience on what immigration and migrant workers are for and their role in society.

In contrast, when discussing the same policies and implementation strategies, the international media is more focused on diving into the experience of how it is being implemented from the viewpoint of immigrant workers as gauges of effectiveness. NPR's article titled, *As Japan Tries Out Immigration; Migrant Workers Complain of Exploitation*, they interview immigrant workers in Japan who are very critical of foreign workers' treatment under the old and new immigration policies and initiatives. One of the interviews stated that "We were deceived," referring to what they expected to be able to do in the country based on the communication from the government compared to the jobs they were given.²⁴ Such comments even referred to worker exploitation and abuse through the employment of working on radiation cleaning without proper equipment for migrant workers.²⁵

It makes sense that the international media is looking towards the experiences of migrants since the international demographic are the possible migrants in question. So, with this demographic being the concerned party, it becomes intuitive for the international community to be more concerned with the reality of being a migrant worker in Japan. Using gauges of economic benefits for the government framing the need for immigration does not have the same persuasion or effect on the international audience as it

23 *The Asahi Shimbun*, "Foreign Population in Japan."

24 Kuhn and Kobayashi, "As Japan Tries Out Immigration."

25 *Ibid.*

could on the domestic one. The article titled, *The Changing Face of Japan: Labour Shortage Opens Doors to Immigrant Workers* by The Guardian, highlights this perspective even further by calling on the government to take responsibility for a plan to let foreign workers and Japanese citizens work together and “feel secure.”²⁶ This perspective is not about fixing the economy of Japan, but instead, sets up effective immigration for people coming to Japan and joining not only the workforce but also the country and society.

Between the diverging media perceptions of immigration, the dissonance between perspectives concerning the long-term goal of immigration in Japan is muddled. On one hand, for the media targeting the national Japanese demographic, the newspapers frame that immigration is necessary to support the dwindling workforce and strengthen the economy. At the same time, the sources of the International-focused media are more concerned with immigrant workers’ experiences in Japan and their ability to assimilate into society. The disparity in perceiving immigration through progress by assimilation into Japanese society and the prioritization of economic means to fix a problem could simply be based on what the media thinks would be best for each demographic market. However, this dissonance in how to view the progress of immigration and its long-term goals is not simply an issue created by the media, but one possibly birthed from the government’s communication of policies themselves.

Comparing the information from the news sources with the governmental agencies’ documentation, it becomes apparent that the government also tends to take a similar approach of different gauges of focus when communicating information targeting the domestic audience to that of the international audience. Japan wants to appease both the domestic audience and the international audience, with both demographics having access to the governmental agencies’ outward-facing documentation. However, while looking at the analysis of their policies through the literature review, the government of Japan’s immigration perspective closely aligns with the effectiveness gauge based on economic priority seen in the Japanese demographic-focused newspapers. However, despite this prioritization based on economic means of labor immigration in the policies, their communication strategies targeting the international community focus on immigrant workers’ assimilation and their role in growing the diversification of Japanese society.

26 McCurry, “The Changing Face of Japan.”

The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare wrote a piece titled, *For Foreign National Wishing to Work in Japan*, where they outlined who are allowed to work, what to do when looking for a job, Japanese labor laws, insurance offerings, reporting companies, and mandatory notifications.²⁷ This 47-page document outlines necessary information that immigrant workers need to know if they wish to come to Japan. However, the most noteworthy point of this document is that it includes information on immigrants' labor rights, how to report companies that violate these rights, and steps employers must take if they plan to hire foreign workers in their company.²⁸ This type of attention to laws to protect the immigrant workers is significant and will directly appeal to the long-term immigration perspective that the international media was using. This is further supported by information from the Immigration Service Agency of Japan article titled, *A Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals*. Here they speak about promoting acceptance of foreign nationals, support of foreign residents, and new resident management systems.²⁹

By outlining all these services, these government bodies address specifically what the international media was asking for Japan to do by framing immigration not merely as a temporary economic solution, but through assimilation and the long-term diversification of the Japanese society. However, the government's policies are still directed at supporting the perspective of the migrant worker as temporary economic solutions. The services they mention are all short-term quality of life improvements directed towards labor rights and information related to working life, instead of any long-term considerations for other societal aspects for long-term assimilation.³⁰ Given the dissonance between the priorities in government publications and the actual actions of policies, the government is actively creating information to attract immigrants while continuing to justify their policies as a temporary measure of influx to meet economic needs. With few

27 Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, *For Foreign Nationals Wishing to Work in Japan*, (Hello Work) Public Employment Security Offices, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakujouhou-11650000-Shokugyouanteikyokuhakenyukiroudoutaisaku/bu/0000055573.pdf>.

28 Ibid.

29 Immigration Service Agency of Japan, *Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals (Revised) Outline*, <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/english/keiziban/pdf/200317-measures-detailed.pdf>.

30 Ibid.

expressed policies or government incentives for long-term integration, the publication's voice is speaking of immigration on a progressive note, while their policies are following merely an economical solution. This divergence then bleeds into a competing cacophony of views found in international and domestic-focused new sources evaluating immigration effectiveness based on different aspects of the government's immigration plans.

Conclusion

In both the international and domestic newspapers and the governmental documentation directed towards the public, they talk about how this use of labor immigration will benefit Japan's economy in the long run. However, dissonance starts to form in conflicting perspectives of how one is supposed to judge its effectiveness. The domestic-focused newspapers and Japanese policies show a strong focus on gauging immigration's effectiveness on financial results. Simultaneously, the international-focused media and Japanese governmental agencies' outward-facing documentation view the importance of seeing immigration as more than just a financial solution and find value in the assimilation of immigrants. This dissonance in perspective has created uncertainty for the country in the direction of long-term policy and the lack thereof. No reliable information or passed legislation activity shows substantial progress, leaving Japan walking a tight rope of saying it wants immigration while enacting policies that support the use of immigration for economic purposes and not effective assimilation.

Suppose Japan continues to enact policies directed towards only absolute financial gains and ones not considering assimilation indicative of the Traditional Asian Model of immigration. They will not be able to maintain the current expressed message towards the international community promising support of permanent immigration. On the other hand, suppose the Japanese government does intend to open their country more regarding assimilation and diversification of their society. In that case, they must target the domestic audience with the same type of communication strategies targeted at foreign workers found in the governmental agencies' documents. If no action is taken, both Japanese citizens and foreign workers could end up viewing Japan's immigration strategy and policies as a failure. This will stifle economic progress and successful immigration. A clear message about long-term strategies that targets both international and domestic demographics with the same message about the real intention of the policies is necessary for any progress to be made.