



The Current Situation and Challenges of Foreign Workers (and broadly, “Migrants”) in Japan

Liu Yiluan



The Current Situation and Challenges of Foreign Workers (and broadly, “Migrants”) in Japan

Liu Yiluan

1 Introduction	3
2 Current Situation and Recent Trends of Foreign Workers in Japan	4
2-1 The Number and Composition of Foreign Workers in Japan	4
2-2. Framework of Policies on Foreign Workers in Japan	5
2-2-1. The Residence Status System and Its Framework	5
2-2-2. The Acceptance Perspective as a “Non-immigration” Model	7
2-3 The Course of Institutional Reforms	8
3. Major Issues Concerning Foreign Workers in Japan	9
3-1. Wage Disparity and the Difficulty of Rights Protection	9
3-1-1. Wage Disparity	9
3-1-2. Difficulty in the Protection of Rights	9
3-2. Mismatches in Residential and Living Infrastructure	10
3-2-2. Access to Administrative Services and the Like	10
3-2-3. Insufficient Development of Japanese Language, Education, and Living Support Infrastructure	11
3-3. Discrimination, Prejudice, and Racism	11
3-4. Abuse of the Technical Intern Training Program and the Promotion of Illegal Employment	12
3-5. Difficulties in Settlement, Family Reunion, and Long-term Integration	13
4. The Concrete Manifestation of Issues Regarding Foreigners: Observations from Specific Cases	15
4-1. The Rise of Political Parties Advocating Exclusion of Foreigners	15

4-2. The Issue of Kurdish Exclusion in Saitama Prefecture	16
4-3. Evaluation by the International Community	17
5. Personal Views on Solutions to Issues Concerning Foreign Workers in Japan	18
5-1. Reform of the Residence Status System	18
5-2. Establishment of an Acceptance Framework	19
5-3. Making “Multicultural and Human Rights Education” Mandatory at the Compulsory Education Level	20
6. Overview of Immigration and Foreign Worker Issues in the United States	21
6-1. Historical Background	21
6-2. Institutional Framework	21
6-3. Policy Characteristics	22
7. Comparative Analysis between Japan and the United States	23
7-1. Differences in Immigration Policy Philosophy and Historical Development	23
7-2. Permanent Residency and Citizenship vs. Guest Worker Model	24
7-3. Structures of Rights Protection, Discrimination, and Prejudice	24
7-4. Differences in Immigrants’ Countries of Origin	25
8. Implications and Challenges Derived from the Comparison: Lessons for Japan	25
9. Conclusion	27

1 Introduction

My father is a Chinese national who has lived in Japan and operated a business for more than twenty years. Initially, he entered Japan on a work visa, later changed his status to that of a permanent resident, and is currently applying for naturalization. However, the process has not been an easy one, and he has personally experienced the difficulty that foreigners face in obtaining citizenship in Japan.

Furthermore, while running his business within Japan, my father has also pointed out the issues surrounding foreign workers that Japan faces. In Japanese society, declining birthrates and an aging population have advanced, and the shortage of labor has become increasingly serious. In this context, how Japan accepts, utilizes, and coexists with foreign workers is an unavoidable issue in constructing a sustainable society and economy.

Nevertheless, Japan has historically refrained from defining itself as an “immigration nation.” In accepting foreigners, it has operated under restrictive and limited categories such as “international students,” “technical intern trainees,” and “foreign workers with residence status.”

However, in recent years, as mentioned above, along with reforms in the foreign residence system and changes in actual conditions triggered by labor shortages, issues and debates concerning foreign workers have become more acute. The influence of such matters has grown to the extent that foreigner-related policies have become one of the key points of contention even in national elections, making their political impact impossible to ignore.

Therefore, in this paper, I will first organize the current systems and actual conditions, clarify the specific issues faced by foreign workers in Japan, and then present my own views toward possible solutions. In addition, from my perspective as a foreign resident in the United States, I would like to attempt a comparative examination by referring to the realities and discussions found within American society.

2 Current Situation and Recent Trends of Foreign Workers in Japan

2-1 The Number and Composition of Foreign Workers in Japan

According to the Survey on Employment Status of Foreign Nationals (Reiwa 6 [2024]) conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, there are approximately 1.82 million foreign workers in Japan as of 2024, marking an increase from about 1.6 million in the previous year.

By industry, the manufacturing sector has the largest number of foreign workers, at approximately 560,000 (accounting for about 30.7% of the total). It is followed by services (not elsewhere classified) with about 320,000 (17.6%), wholesale and retail trade with about 190,000 (10.6%), and construction with about 150,000 (8.4%). Together, these top four industries account for roughly two-thirds of all foreign workers in Japan.

By category of residence status, those under specialized or technical fields constitute 38.9%, those based on status or relationship (such as spouses or permanent residents) account for 27.6%, and those under the technical intern training program comprise 20.2%.

Meanwhile, according to media reports such as the article stating that “one out of every 29 workers in Japan is a foreign national” (※1), it can be observed that public awareness of the growing ratio of foreign workers has been steadily spreading throughout Japanese society.

In addition, it has been reported (※2) that local governments are increasingly engaging in the establishment of personnel exchange frameworks through international exchange agreements (MOUs) with overseas local governments and universities, and are actively recruiting foreign human resources.

※1 Asahi Shimbun, August 19, Reiwa 7 (2025)

※2 JICA “Research Study toward the Realization of a Society Coexisting with Foreign Nationals in 2030/2040 — Updated Forecast on Supply and Demand of Foreign Workers.”

※3 News Everyday, March 21, Reiwa 7 (2025)

This trend has been particularly prominent in regional municipalities outside the three major metropolitan areas (Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya) since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, a study by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has projected that by the year 2040, there may be a gap of approximately one million workers between the level of labor required and the available number of foreign workers (※3).

Thus, in order to sustain Japanese society in the future, the acceptance and utilization of foreign workers will unavoidably need to be expanded on a considerable scale.

2-2. Framework of Policies on Foreign Workers in Japan

2-2-1. The Residence Status System and Its Framework

Japan's policy toward foreign workers has fundamentally been constructed under the government's principle of "not adopting an immigration policy." Within this framework, foreign nationals are permitted to work only within limited scopes as defined under the residence status system. The primary legal foundation for this system is the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (hereinafter referred to as the Immigration Control Act), which stipulates the types of activities permitted for each category of residence status.

The residence statuses available to foreign workers include the following categories:

- (1) So-called "highly skilled professionals," such as advanced specialists, researchers, and engineers;
- (2) Residence statuses for specialized activities such as professors, artists, religious workers, and journalists;

※1 Asahi Shimbun, August 19, Reiwa 7 (2025)

※2 JICA "Research Study toward the Realization of a Society Coexisting with Foreign Nationals in 2030/2040 — Updated Forecast on Supply and Demand of Foreign Workers."

※3 News Everyday, March 21, Reiwa 7 (2025)

(3) Statuses not primarily intended for employment but which allow limited work activities within certain boundaries, such as students and technical intern trainees;

and (4) Statuses based on personal relationship or status, such as permanent residents or spouses of Japanese nationals, which permit employment.

Particularly noteworthy from the perspective of labor supply and demand are the “Specified Skilled Worker” status, which was introduced in recent years, and the conventional “Technical Intern Training” status. These have been designed partly as systems for accepting foreign workers in industries suffering from labor shortages.

From the perspective of this residence status framework, it can be said that Japan has been relatively proactive in accepting highly skilled professionals, while the door to unskilled or simple labor remains strictly limited. For instance, although the Technical Intern Training Program in practice functions as a source of low-wage labor (and, as will be discussed later, has been subject to international criticism in this regard), it is officially presented as a scheme for “technology transfer to developing countries.”

Similarly, the Specified Skilled Worker (i) status is limited to 14 sectors, including nursing care, construction, and agriculture. The maximum period of stay is five years, and accompanying family members are not permitted. This demonstrates the emphasis placed on its nature as a temporary labor supplement.

Thus, while the design of the system officially maintains that it is “not an immigration policy,” in practice it cannot be denied that a significant number of foreign nationals now play a vital role in sustaining the foundation of Japanese society.

※1 Asahi Shimbun, August 19, Reiwa 7 (2025)

※2 JICA “Research Study toward the Realization of a Society Coexisting with Foreign Nationals in 2030/2040 — Updated Forecast on Supply and Demand of Foreign Workers.”

※3 News Everyday, March 21, Reiwa 7 (2025)

2-2-2. The Acceptance Perspective as a “Non-immigration” Model

The Japanese government has long maintained an attitude of advancing the acceptance of foreign nationals not as a step toward becoming an “immigration nation,” but rather from the standpoint of “coexistence” and “temporary and supplementary labor supply.”

This stance is considered to stem from the following background factors:

- Anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia prevalent among the public;
- A strong sense of cultural, linguistic, and national homogeneity;
- Concerns about burdens on the social security and welfare systems;
- The limited capacity of local governments and communities to accommodate newcomers;
- The long-standing absence of an immigration policy and the underdevelopment of institutional design.

For these reasons, even in terms of policy structure, Japan has adopted a model that accepts foreign nationals as “temporary workers” or “specialized skilled labor” while imposing restrictions on further settlement or family integration.

2-3 The Course of Institutional Reforms

For a long time, Japan’s policy on foreign workers was primarily structured around the acceptance of only “highly skilled professionals.”

However, the institutional reform of 2018 marked a turning point. The 2018 reform introduced residence statuses for low- and medium-skilled workers (such as the Specified Skilled Worker category), thereby signaling a move toward expanding the scope of acceptance (※5).

Nevertheless, this reform was not positioned as an “immigration policy.” Rather, it was structured in a manner that continues to restrain long-term settlement through measures such as limits on the maximum period of stay and restrictions on family accompaniment.

In this respect, a critical view has emerged describing Japan’s approach as a “stealth immigration policy,” meaning that although not explicitly stated, it effectively serves to expand the acceptance of immigrants in practice. At the same time, discussions have been advancing toward establishing new systems—such as the proposed “Training and Employment Development System” (ikusei shūrō seido)—to facilitate the longer-term retention and integration of foreign workers.

Based on these institutional developments, the next section will examine the specific issues found within Japan’s foreign labor policy.

※5 Dam break in Japan’s immigration policy: the 2018 reform in a long-term perspective

※6 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Survey on Employment Status of Foreign Nationals, Reiwa 6 (2024)

3. Major Issues Concerning Foreign Workers in Japan

As discussed above, Japan's policy on foreign workers has long fluctuated between the political principle of "not adopting an immigration policy" and the socio-economic reality that "Japan cannot avoid relying on foreign labor due to labor shortages."

In the following sections, this paper will examine, one by one, the major challenges that have been pointed out in relation to Japan's foreign worker policy.

3-1. Wage Disparity and the Difficulty of Rights Protection

3-1-1. Wage Disparity

It has frequently been reported that foreign workers are often employed at lower wages than their Japanese counterparts. According to the Basic Survey on Wage Structure (Reiwa 6 [2024]), the regularly paid cash salary amount for Japanese workers averages 329,700 yen per month (for both genders, all educational backgrounds, and all age groups). In contrast, for foreign workers, the figure for ordinary employees is 274,900 yen—approximately 83% of that of Japanese workers. For technical intern trainees, the amount is around 210,000 yen, indicating a significant gap compared with Japanese workers (※6).

3-1-2. Difficulty in the Protection of Rights

Even when foreign workers attempt to improve their working conditions or assert their rights, they often face handicaps in terms of language, customs, institutional knowledge, and negotiation power. The fact that many workers lack the capacity to understand Japan's legal system on their own, together with the absence of an institutional framework specifically designed to safeguard the rights of foreign workers, makes the protection of their rights even more difficult.

※5 Dam break in Japan's immigration policy: the 2018 reform in a long-term perspective

※6 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Survey on Employment Status of Foreign Nationals, Reiwa 6 (2024)

In addition, factors related to residence status—such as renewal conditions, occupational restrictions, and limitations on changing jobs—serve as deterrents to asserting one’s rights. For instance, there is the risk that working outside the scope of the permitted occupation may be regarded as an illegal act, or that a high number of job changes may be negatively evaluated at the time of visa renewal.

In short, multiple intertwined factors—such as disparities in wages and treatment, differences in bargaining power, and restrictions on occupational mobility—combine to place foreign workers in relatively disadvantageous conditions compared with Japanese workers.

3-2. Mismatches in Residential and Living Infrastructure

Even when foreign nationals obtain permission to reside in Japan as workers, they often encounter various frictions and challenges in their daily lives.

3-2-1. Housing Problems

Foreign workers often face various issues when entering into rental contracts, such as being required to provide a joint guarantor or to pay high deposits and key money (shikikin and reikin). Some are even denied contracts altogether due to their limited proficiency in Japanese or their lack of domestic credit history. As a result, there are cases in which foreign nationals are forced to accept substandard living conditions or to reside in small, crowded shared housing. In some instances, individuals from the same home country have no choice but to live together in shared arrangements.

3-2-2. Access to Administrative Services and the Like

In Japan, administrative services such as resident registration, taxation, pensions, and social insurance, as well as essential private services such as bank account opening, are often conducted mainly in Japanese, both in terms of procedures and information provision. This language-centered structure makes it difficult for foreign nationals to understand or complete these processes, thereby creating barriers to accessing such services.

Moreover, although foreigners in Japan are legally required to enroll in the national health insurance system and have the right to use it, there are cases where, due to incomplete documentation or a lack

of understanding on the part of medical staff, they are unable to use their health insurance and are consequently forced to bear high out-of-pocket medical costs. Even when they can use the insurance, many medical institutions still lack adequate systems for interpretation services, guidance on medical procedures, or multicultural accommodation.

3-2-3. Insufficient Development of Japanese Language, Education, and Living Support Infrastructure

Many foreign residents face difficulties not only in the workplace but also in daily life aspects such as their children's school education, administrative procedures, participation in local communities, and career advancement through improvement of Japanese language proficiency.

Particularly concerning the education of children of foreign workers, it has been pointed out that, under current law, the national government has no legal obligation to provide education for them. In practical terms as well, linguistic barriers and cultural differences often lead to learning difficulties, delays in building friendships, and insufficient support systems on the part of educational institutions. Consequently, adequate educational environments are not always provided for these children.

3-3. Discrimination, Prejudice, and Racism

In addition to institutional issues surrounding foreign workers and immigrants, the risks of prejudice, discrimination, and xenophobia in the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions are also frequently pointed out.

For instance, in areas of law enforcement such as police questioning and residence-status verification, there exists a reality in which differences in “appearance” or “country of origin” result in unequal treatment (※7).

※7 lemonde 2025.10.8 「**Foreigners increasingly targeted by racial profiling in Japan**」

Furthermore, in the media and in online discourse, stereotypical and prejudiced claims—such as “foreigners are more likely to commit crimes” or “foreigners are draining Japan’s social security system”—are widely circulated.

The consequences of such discourse cannot be ignored, as they exert a tangible influence on society. Indeed, in the 2025 House of Councillors election, policies toward foreign nationals became a major point of contention, and political parties advocating exclusion of foreigners gained a substantial amount of public support.

As for discriminatory speech directed toward foreigners (so-called hate speech), the Act on the Promotion of Efforts to Eliminate Unjust Discriminatory Speech and Behavior against Persons Originating from Outside Japan (commonly referred to as the Hate Speech Elimination Act) has been enacted. However, since the law does not include penal provisions, its effectiveness in practice remains limited.

3-4. Abuse of the Technical Intern Training Program and the Promotion of Illegal Employment

Another problem is that the rigidity of Japan’s foreign residence system has, in effect, facilitated illegal employment and exploitative use of the system itself. In particular, the flaws of the Technical Intern Training Program have been repeatedly pointed out by foreign governments and human rights organizations.

The Technical Intern Training Program was originally designed as a scheme for technology transfer and international cooperation toward developing countries. However, in reality, it has often been used as a means of importing cheap labor. In practice, numerous cases have been reported in which technical intern trainees have been subjected to excessively long working hours, non-payment of wages, and violations of overtime regulations.

Moreover, the existence of high intermediary fees and security deposits demanded by brokers or sending organizations in the trainees' home countries has placed trainees in economic bondage. The oversight functions of supervising organizations have not been fully effective, and administrative monitoring has also been limited, resulting in a continuing number of disappearance cases among trainees.

According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan's "Report on the Situation of Missing Technical Intern Trainees" (published December, Reiwa 6 [2024]), a total of 40,607 trainees went missing between Reiwa 1 (2019) and Reiwa 5 (2023), with approximately 25 percent of them remaining unaccounted for.

Behind these disappearances lies the involvement of malicious brokers who encourage such acts. Consequently, missing trainees often fall into illegal residence status and are compelled to work in unauthorized occupations.

3-5. Difficulties in Settlement, Family Reunion, and Long-term Integration

As discussed thus far, Japan's policy toward accepting foreign nationals is fundamentally structured as a "labor-supplementation framework" and is not designed on the premise of long-term settlement or family integration. This has become a significant barrier for foreign workers.

For instance, in many categories of residence status—such as Specified Skilled Worker and Technical Intern Trainee—accompanying family members are either not permitted or are only permitted under highly restrictive conditions. Such limitations deprive foreign nationals of the incentive to live in Japan with a sense of long-term stability and security.

In addition, the requirements for obtaining permanent residency or a long-term resident visa in Japan are extremely strict and set at a high threshold. Consequently, it is difficult for foreign workers to

develop migration models that allow them to reside in Japan over an extended period and to establish roots within local communities.

Thus, Japan's system for accepting foreign nationals may be characterized as a "non-permanent-resident model," in which foreigners are treated primarily as a highly mobile labor force. This structural characteristic creates an environment in which foreign workers find it difficult to plan for their future with peace of mind, to develop a sense of belonging or aspiration for settlement, and to pursue career development in a stable manner.。

4. The Concrete Manifestation of Issues Regarding Foreigners: Observations from Specific Cases

In this section, I will examine how issues related to foreigners in Japan have materialized in concrete form, based on several recent examples.

4-1. The Rise of Political Parties Advocating Exclusion of Foreigners

In the House of Councillors election held in July 2025, foreign policy toward non-Japanese residents attracted unprecedented public attention as one of the central points of contention. Several political parties espousing exclusionary stances toward foreigners emerged, among which the Sanseitō (Political Party of Participation) significantly increased its representation, winning 14 seats in this election and bringing its total, including previously held seats, to 15 seats.

The party advocated slogans such as “Japanese First” and “Opposition to Excessive Acceptance of Foreigners,” taking a relatively hard-line exclusionary tone throughout its campaign. It can thus be said that such rhetoric resonated with and gained the support of a certain portion of the Japanese electorate.

Moreover, in response to this trend, not only Sanseitō but also other political parties began addressing foreigner-related policies more strongly. Major parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Komeito, and the Japan Innovation Party (Ishin no Kai) started emphasizing stricter approaches in their election pledges and public communications, proposing policies such as “Zero Illegal Foreigners,” “Tightened Rules for Foreign Driver’s License Conversions,” and “Restrictions on Real Estate Purchases by Foreigners.”

Such developments suggest a potential shift in the traditional stance of Japanese politics, in which “foreigner-related policies have not conventionally become major electoral issues.” At the same time, these trends carry the risk of nurturing seeds of xenophobia within Japanese society. Some

※8 Tokyo Shimbun, March 6, Reiwa 7 (2025)

※9 . Asahi Shimbun, November 21, Reiwa 6 (2024)

※10 Yomiuri Shimbun, August 4, Reiwa 7 (2025)

commentators have also pointed out that this movement bears resemblance to the rise of exclusionary and populist trends previously observed in Europe.

4-2. The Issue of Kurdish Exclusion in Saitama Prefecture

In Kawaguchi City and Warabi City, both located in Saitama Prefecture, many Kurdish residents of Turkish nationality reside. In recent years, however, discriminatory remarks such as “Kurds are criminals” and “Kurds should get out of Japan” have increasingly appeared, particularly on social media platforms (※8).

One of the factors behind this phenomenon is the existence of a certain number of Kurds who have applied for refugee status multiple times or who are residing irregularly through provisional release and similar statuses. As a result, this situation has created the misleading impression that all Kurds in Japan are residing illegally, even though many are lawfully staying with proper residence status.

Against this backdrop, Kurdish organizations such as the Japan Kurdish Cultural Association filed a petition for a provisional injunction seeking to suspend demonstrations organized against Kurds, citing defamation and related grounds. The Saitama District Court granted this request (※9).

Conversely, the Governor of Saitama Prefecture submitted a written request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs calling for a temporary suspension of the mutual visa exemption agreement with Turkey. Thus, the issue has expanded beyond the level of mere disputes among residents, developing into a matter that involves both the judiciary and administrative authorities (※10).

※8 Tokyo Shimbun, March 6, Reiwa 7 (2025)

※9 . Asahi Shimbun, November 21, Reiwa 6 (2024)

※10 Yomiuri Shimbun, August 4, Reiwa 7 (2025)

4-3. Evaluation by the International Community

As exclusionary discourse has continued to spread within Japan, criticism from the international community regarding Japan's foreign labor environment has also been intensifying.

In the 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) published by the U.S. Department of State, Japan was criticized for having insufficient countermeasures concerning the working conditions of foreign nationals. Previous reports had repeatedly pointed out that participants in Japan's Technical Intern Training Program were being subjected to forced labor. The latest report similarly noted that the Japanese government has been reluctant to actively recognize victims under this program.

While acknowledging that Japan is making efforts to combat human trafficking—such as through the planned introduction of a new system, “Training and Employment Development Program (Ikusei Shūrō),” which is to replace the Technical Intern Training Program in April 2027—the report nevertheless concluded that Japan “does not fully meet the minimum standards.”

5. Personal Views on Solutions to Issues Concerning Foreign Workers in Japan

Based on the challenges discussed above, I would like to present my personal views on possible approaches to resolving these issues.

5-1. Reform of the Residence Status System

As discussed earlier, Japan's residence status system contains a structural distortion arising from its attempt to maintain the stance of "not adopting an immigration policy," while simultaneously trying to address the practical reality that the country "cannot avoid depending on foreign workers due to labor shortages."

To resolve such distortions, Japan should straightforwardly recognize residence statuses based on employment-type categories.

This should not take the form of a distorted system bound by nominal justifications, as seen in the Technical Intern Training Program. Instead, it must be a framework under which the rules are clear and the operation of the system is transparent—for the benefit of foreign nationals who use it, the companies that accept them, and the Japanese citizens surrounding both.

Specifically, first, job changes and transfers should be permitted flexibly. This would help prevent problems such as disappearances, confinement, and exploitation.

In addition, it is necessary to establish a stepwise career pathway under which foreign workers, meeting certain criteria (such as skill evaluation, Japanese-language proficiency, and years of service), can extend their stay and eventually advance toward permanent residence. At the same time, granting broader permission for family accompaniment would serve as a major incentive for foreign workers and contribute to workforce retention.

Furthermore, Japan should ensure the full application of the Labor Standards Act to foreign workers, and impose penalties—such as fines or public disclosure—on violating companies. At the same time, the government should strengthen its supervisory and investigative capabilities, and enhance victim protection through measures such as introducing an anonymous reporting system. These reforms would help deter moral hazards among companies accepting foreign labor.

While protecting the rights of foreign workers, it is equally important to clearly define certain obligations for them. Beyond compliance with the residence status system itself, obligations should include the payment of taxes and social insurance premiums, and the duty to report any changes in address or workplace. For violators, strict measures—including deportation—should be applied.

By maintaining such clear rules—acceptance premised on strict compliance with laws and regulations—it would be possible to alleviate public anxieties about “deterioration of public security” and “disruption of social order,” thereby increasing overall public tolerance for accepting foreign workers.

5-2. Establishment of an Acceptance Framework

It is necessary to address not only the labor environment but also other aspects of daily life, education for foreign workers’ children, and measures against discrimination and prejudice toward foreigners.

In Japan, while the Immigration Services Agency supervises the residence statuses of foreign nationals, responsibility for matters such as living conditions and education falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), as in the case of Japanese nationals. However, due to the vertically segmented nature of Japan’s administrative structure, accountability remains unclear—particularly in matters related to support for foreign residents.

Therefore, establishing a new government ministry or agency that centrally oversees support for foreign residents—including living assistance, Japanese language education, employment, housing and medical support, and anti-discrimination measures—could contribute to resolving these issues. The Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) system may serve as a useful reference model.

Such an institution would not only clarify where responsibility lies but also make it easier for foreign nationals to access administrative services through a unified point of contact. Furthermore, by centrally managing, aggregating, and analyzing data related to the residence, employment, and education status of foreign nationals in Japan, the government could more effectively reflect these findings in future policy decisions.

In addition to central government efforts, support at the level of local municipalities, where foreign residents actually live, is indispensable. It is therefore important for the government to allocate sufficient budgets to local governments that play a central role in promoting coexistence between Japanese and foreign residents, thereby facilitating infrastructure development, human resource acquisition, and the establishment of local support systems.

5-3. Making “Multicultural and Human Rights Education” Mandatory at the Compulsory Education Level

Alongside educational support for children of foreign residents, it is also necessary to promote a change in consciousness among Japanese citizens on the receiving side. Although the number of foreign children and the diversity of resident communities in Japan are increasing, education aimed at fostering multicultural understanding among Japanese children remains almost nonexistent.

For example, in Germany, where the proportion of immigrants is high, integration education (Integrationsunterricht)—which includes human rights and multicultural education—has been made compulsory. In Canada as well, multicultural education and human rights education are mandatory

subjects in primary and secondary education, systematically linked with the Canadian Citizenship Act and immigration and citizenship policies to promote comprehensive understanding of multiculturalism.

In this way, by learning about diversity and the concept of coexistence during childhood and adolescence, it becomes possible to prevent the fixation of prejudice and discrimination and to cultivate behavioral norms that emphasize respect for differences and cooperative participation in society. As a result, it can be said that the overall social receptiveness toward foreigners would increase.

6. Overview of Immigration and Foreign Worker Issues in the United States

Here, I will shift the focus to the United States and examine issues related to immigration and foreign workers there.

6-1. Historical Background

Since its founding, the United States has been a nation of immigrants, accepting a large number of immigrants and foreign workers from a wide variety of sending countries. Beginning in the nineteenth century, during the period of the Industrial Revolution, the U.S. accepted a massive influx of labor migrants from Europe and China to address labor shortages. Subsequently, immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Asian countries have also entered the country in large numbers.

Thus, the acceptance of immigrants in the United States is deeply embedded in its social structure, combining economic demand with the ideal of international freedom of movement.

6-2. Institutional Framework

The United States employs a visa system for foreign workers that is flexible and based on ability and market principles. The main categories are as follows:

H-1B Visa (Specialized Occupations): A visa for highly skilled professionals in fields such as IT, healthcare, and engineering. Applicants must possess at least a university degree or equivalent professional experience. The visa allows a stay of up to six years and provides a pathway to permanent residency (green card).

H-2A / H-2B Visas (Seasonal and Temporary Workers): H-2A is for agricultural laborers, and H-2B is for temporary non-agricultural laborers. Recruitment is conducted by individual employers, and the period of stay is generally from several months to about one year.

L, O, and E Visas: L visas are for intracompany transferees, O visas for individuals with extraordinary ability in the arts or sciences, and E visas for investors and traders.

These categories allow flexible mobility for highly skilled professionals and executives, contributing to global corporations' ability to secure talent.

6-3. Policy Characteristics

The policy on foreign workers in the United States is designed with a conscious balance between economic needs and social integration. As mentioned above, the U.S. maintains a multi-layered visa system that accommodates a wide range of occupations and skill levels—from highly skilled professionals to temporary and seasonal workers. The number of visas issued is adjusted in accordance with the supply and demand conditions of the labor market.

Moreover, in the United States, institutional pathways are established for foreign workers to obtain permanent residency or citizenship, thereby promoting their participation not merely as short-term laborers but as members of society. Programs such as ESL (English as a Second Language) courses, civic education, and community exchange programs are incorporated into public policy, forming a structure that facilitates the social and everyday-life integration of workers.

7. Comparative Analysis between Japan and the United States

In this section, I will contrast Japan's issues regarding foreign workers with those of immigration in the United States, analyzing the respective strengths and challenges of each.

7-1. Differences in Immigration Policy Philosophy and Historical Development

The United States has historically developed as an immigrant nation. Its vast territory, demand for labor, and long-standing culture of accepting immigrants since its founding have cultivated a social norm of viewing immigrants as integral members of the nation and society. Although exclusionist forces do exist, U.S. immigration policy has been conducted under a perspective that respects a certain degree of cultural diversity.

In contrast, Japan has long lacked the self-recognition of being a country that accepts immigrants. Japanese society tends to value unity and commonality over diversity, operating under the premise that citizens share the same cultural framework and values. In Japan, there is a strong expectation that foreigners will assimilate into Japanese language and culture, rather than being encouraged to maintain or express their own cultural differences. Phrases such as “Foreigners should blend into Japan” or “Foreigners should learn Japanese quickly” reflect this assimilationist sentiment deeply ingrained in the public consciousness.

These historical and cultural differences have resulted in diverging approaches to immigration policy and societal receptiveness toward immigrants. Consequently, Japan has been slow to introduce immigration policies, and its institutional design remains highly restrictive.

Naturally, the United States also faces challenges such as illegal immigration and ideological conflicts between pro- and anti-immigration factions. However, these issues have often become explicit political debates in the U.S., leading to repeated legislative reforms—such as the Comprehensive Immigration Reform bills of the 2000s—which have sought political solutions to various immigration-related problems.

In contrast, in Japan, immigration and foreign labor issues have rarely become subjects of political contention, and as a result, very little systemic reform has taken place.

7-2. Permanent Residency and Citizenship vs. Guest Worker Model

In the United States, institutional frameworks are established to enable immigrants to obtain permanent residency and citizenship, and political participation and citizenship acquisition are regarded as normal components of policy design.

By contrast, in Japan, the threshold for acquiring citizenship (i.e., naturalization as a Japanese national) remains extremely high. Policies promoting long-term residence through residence statuses are limited, and there is no clear policy framework encouraging settlement or civic participation by immigrants.

Japan's foreign labor policy continues to reflect the "Guest Worker Model," in which foreign laborers are subject to numerous restrictions—such as limitations on the length of stay, family accompaniment, and job changes—thus treating foreign workers as a disposable labor force rather than as members of society.

7-3. Structures of Rights Protection, Discrimination, and Prejudice

In the United States, through the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution, the civil rights movement, and the evolution of case law, a relatively developed legal framework for prohibiting discrimination and guaranteeing rights for immigrants, foreigners, and people of color has been established. Nevertheless, in practice, significant inadequacies and persistent racial discrimination remain.

Immigration issues in the United States are closely intertwined with ethnic and racial issues. Discriminatory structures affecting Asian, Hispanic, and African immigrants are entangled with problems of police violence, civil rights disparities, and social stratification. Discrimination arises not only from immigrant status itself but also from multiple intersecting factors such as race, skin color, and ethnicity.

In Japan, although the Constitution guarantees equality under the law and prohibits racial discrimination, and while certain human rights protections apply to foreigners, the right to hold public office and voting rights are not extended to non-citizens.

Discrimination and prejudice against foreigners in Japan are primarily based on country of origin rather than race or skin color—though this may partly be because most immigrants and foreign residents in Japan have historically come from other Asian countries. In particular, discriminatory attitudes toward Koreans and Chinese have deep historical and cultural roots and are sometimes linked with exclusionary and nationalist rhetoric.

7-4. Differences in Immigrants' Countries of Origin

Immigrants and foreign workers in the United States come from a wide variety of regions—including Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Their languages, cultural backgrounds, and migration motivations are highly diverse.

In Japan, by contrast, many workers come from China, given the geographical proximity, and in recent years, migration from Southeast Asia (such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Nepal), South Asia, and regions outside Asia has been increasing. However, Japan's overall immigrant composition remains far less diverse than that of the United States. Moreover, economic motivations—particularly the search for employment opportunities—tend to be the dominant reason for migration to Japan.

8. Implications and Challenges Derived from the Comparison: Lessons for Japan

Based on the comparative analysis between Japan and the United States concerning immigration and foreign labor issues, I would like to offer my personal observations on how Japan can make its foreign labor (immigration) policies more effective and sustainable.

First, as the United States has long accepted immigrants as members of society through legal and institutional frameworks, Japan should likewise move—gradually and in stages—from a system premised merely on “acceptance as labor power” toward a future-oriented system as a “nation of coexistence and immigration.” However, such a transition requires the enhancement of social receptivity and thus demands long-term, strategically planned policy reform.

In the United States, immigrants who meet certain conditions are eligible to obtain citizenship and thereby gain the rights to hold public office, to be elected, and to vote. In Japan as well, although within certain limits, it would be desirable to establish systems that enable long-term residents and foreign workers to participate in local policy decision-making as members of their respective communities.

No matter how strong the demand for labor may be, a system that allows foreign workers to be treated unfairly cannot be sustainable. Therefore, Japan must strengthen measures such as the strict prohibition of discrimination, expansion of legal remedies, and protection of whistleblowers.

Furthermore, for the sustainable acceptance and stabilization of foreign residents, not only institutional reform but also a transformation in the consciousness of society and individual citizens is indispensable. Educational initiatives and media engagement should be strategically designed to foster intercultural understanding and empathy.

9. Conclusion

This paper has examined the issues surrounding foreign workers in Japan from multiple perspectives, including institutional frameworks, social conditions, and public attitudes. The analysis has revealed a structural contradiction within Japanese society: while maintaining the official stance that “Japan is not an immigration nation,” in practice it has come to rely heavily on foreign labor. This contradiction manifests itself in the complexity of residence status systems, insufficient protection of foreign workers’ rights, and the persistence of social prejudice.

At the same time, given the deepening labor shortages caused by declining birthrates and population aging, Japan now faces a turning point where it must begin to accept foreigners not as temporary laborers but as members of society.

What is required in Japan going forward is the establishment of a comprehensive framework that promotes long-term settlement and family integration, guarantees opportunities for career development, and enhances rights protection for foreign residents.

In addition to institutional reform, a transformation in public consciousness is essential. It is necessary to deepen understanding of historical and cultural diversity through education and the media, and to reduce the prejudices and fixed ideas that persist among Japanese citizens. Only through such efforts can an environment be created in which each foreign worker is accepted as a genuine member of society.

Through efforts on both the institutional and attitudinal fronts, building an environment where foreigners can live safely and comfortably within local communities will become a crucial task for contemporary Japanese society.

Currently, I am residing in the United States as an international student. In this multiethnic society, differences in language, culture, and values often generate friction. Yet, I have also witnessed numerous moments where people of diverse backgrounds engage in dialogue, respecting each other’s experiences while jointly shaping their society. Through these experiences, I have come to realize that diversity is not merely a challenge but a resource that strengthens society.

Japanese society, too, should not find value solely in maintaining homogeneity, but should instead evolve toward embracing diversity and constructing a new common foundation.

To achieve this, it is most crucial first to institutionalize education that fosters intercultural understanding and the capacity for dialogue within the educational sphere. On that basis, governments and corporations should establish systems that enable foreigners to participate not merely as workers to be employed but as contributors to local communities.

Above all, Japanese society as a whole must begin to envision a new self-image—not as “Japan with foreigners,” but as “a Japan where people of diverse backgrounds live together.”

The issue of foreign workers is not merely a matter of labor policy or international cooperation. It raises a fundamental question for the Japanese people—“What is Japan?” and “Who constitutes Japanese society?” Facing this question earnestly will serve as the true first step toward a society of coexistence and will guide Japan toward becoming a more open and inclusive nation in the future.