Review Essay: Policy, Society, and Immigrants in Japan

Imin to nihon shakai: dēta de yomitoku jittai to shōraizō. (Immigrants and Japanese society: Realities and a vision for the future as seen through data), by Nagayoshi Kikuko. Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2020, 304 pp., ￥900 plus tax (ISBN 978-4121025807)

Help (Not) Wanted: Immigration Politics in Japan, by Michael Strausz. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019. 214 pp., $32.95 (ISBN 978-1438475523)

Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-Nationalist Society, by Gracia Liu-Farrer. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020, 276 pp., $39.95 (ISBN 978-1501748622)

Immigrant Incorporation in East Asian Democracies, by Erin Aeran Chung. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 270 pp., $34.99 (ISBN 978-1107616967)

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Where is immigration to Japan headed? Is the country likely to make major changes in its policy approach that ease options for settlement? Can conditions for immigrants improve to encourage greater social inclusion? The books here consider themes that affect immigrants in Japan: political leaders' views on immigration policy, cross-national realities of immigration and integration, the marginalizing character of policies, and society's response to immigrants. The economic motivations behind increased immigration aside, considering how social incorporation of immigrants is already occurring should shed light on future prospects.

Use of the term "immigration" reflects a recent but unmistakable rhetorical shift in Japan despite the government's decades-long claim that it does not have an immigration policy. Confusion over its meaning has muddled policy debate. Most of the books here adopt the term "immigrant" (*imin*) to refer to foreign residents in Japan, unlike in the early 1990s, when the term *foreign worker* (*gaikokujin rōdōsha*) prevailed on bookstore shelves. The frame of *immigrant* broadens attention to foreign residents indefinitely in Japan and not necessarily

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temporary workers. The attendant discussions place a strong emphasis on access to equal treatment, inherent problems with current policies, societal resistance, and current experiences and possible futures for immigrants in Japan.

The books here give needed nuance to the concept of immigration, as their publication between 2019 and 2020 coincided with public debates over immigration. Legal definitions of immigrant are not fully consistent across countries: in Canada an immigrant is either a permanent resident or a naturalized citizen, but in the United States an immigrant is defined ambiguously as a lawful resident who is "not admitted under a nonimmigrant category" (Government of Canada 2022, United States Department of Homeland Security 2022). In Diet deliberations in 2018 concerning the new Specified Skilled Worker Program (SSW) to allow entry for low- and medium-skilled employment, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō indicated repeatedly that the SSW program was not an "immigration policy." In Abe's usage, "immigration policy" would include entry by foreigners and their family members with the intent to reside permanently (Takaya and Higuchi 2019: 8, Shūgiin 2018). Despite political resistance to the term, "immigrant" (*imin*) or "immigration policy" (*imin seisaku*) was used approximately 50 times in the plenary meeting of the House of Representatives deliberating these changes. Most of the authors here stress that immigrants are already in Japan, and all address obstacles to immigration in politics, policy, and society.

The Context of Increased Migration

Japan's population trends and labor shortage conditions are closely linked to discussions of immigration. As Japan's population declined in the 2010s, the number of foreign residents steadily increased. The number of Japanese citizens in Japan declined by 1.6 million between 2010 and 2019, and the number of foreign residents increased by slightly over 900,000

(Sōmushō 2021, Japan Immigration Services Agency 2020, 27, Part 1). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, businesses were increasingly short-handed across sectors, with small firms and the care industry facing special challenges. Annual surveys of members of Japan's Chambers of Commerce and Industry, which represent small firms, revealed that those experiencing labor shortages rose from one-half of members in 2015 to two-thirds by 2019. Of those reporting shortages in 2019, 58% were already employing or considering employing foreign workers (Nihon-Tokyo shōkō kaigisho 2019, 2-3, 21). In the care services industry, 65% of employers responding to a large annual survey in 2019 reported staff shortages, up from 50% in 2010 (Kaigo rōdō antei sentā 2011, 3, Kaigo rōdō antei sentā 2020, 46).

Policy changes under Prime Minister Abe encouraged increased foreign migrants' employment. Changes included short-term emergency measures to lengthen the stay of construction and ship-building workers in the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP); the 2016 revamping of the TITP, which included a new system of supervisory organizations; adding care work to the TITP; and a new visa for care workers with Japanese certification. The Specified Skilled Worker Program, designed to meet labor demand in fourteen labor-short occupations, allowed workers to obtain an employment visa by either successfully completing a specified term in the TITP or passing industry-specific skills and language tests. For a subset of occupations (at the time only three), workers might obtain a second rank after a total of five years, making them eligible to renew visas indefinitely and, if certain conditions were met, being accompanied by immediate family members (Milly 2020). Independent of this policy change, the national government began to subsidize local "one-stop centers" to support foreign residents.

Diverse foreign residents have helped to partially meet labor demand, whether they are in Japan with employment, study, or status visas. Status visas are given to long-term residents,

permanent residents, and spouses and children of Japanese citizens and permanent residents, without limitations on work or other activities. At the end of 2019, about half (51%) of foreign residents had status visas, and the remaining 49% were residents with visas for work or study or were dependents (Japan Immigration Services Agency 2020, 30). An annual survey of employers conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) in October 2020 found that 1.72 million foreign residents were working, with 20% in professional or skilled jobs, 23% as technical trainees, 19% as international students, and 30% holding status visas (Kōseirōdōshō 2021, Data tables).

The four books here reflect the transition in Japan from a discourse focused on "foreign labor" to one on "immigration." They consider possible future directions of Japan's policies and its inclusion of immigrants in society, while recognizing past experiences and ongoing policy debates. Strausz focuses on the continuities and marginal shifts in rhetoric among elites that hew to the status quo with respect to admitting temporary foreign labor. Nagayoshi starts by stressing that immigrants are already in Japan. She employs Japanese and international research findings to address and clarify claims made on both sides of the contemporary policy debate. Chung's use of cross-national comparison within East Asia underscores the distinctiveness of Japan's context of immigrant incorporation and provides nuance that counters surface assessments of East Asian cases as exclusionary. Liu-Farrer demonstrates that immigrants are already in Japan, revealing what that means through their eyes and how they create a place for themselves. The four works, taken together, advance scholarly and policy understandings of Japan as a country of immigration but recognize the incorporation process remains ongoing and spread across generations.

Starting from Established Rhetoric

Strausz's analysis of elite leaders' rhetoric provides a historically-informed perspective that highlights the why and the how of Japan's restrictive system, but does not take on the social dimensions of how immigrants' inclusion may be occurring. The work helps to explain why so few foreigners reside in Japan. Inspired by political science scholarship on the impact of political elites and interest group leaders, Strausz asks why countries accept large numbers of foreign residents. He also clarifies his terms starting out, by distinguishing "immigrants" from "foreign laborers" as reflected in Japanese terminologies (*imin* versus *gaikokujin rōdōsha)* and by indicating that the former refers to someone who "has left some kind of home behind and is thus looking for a new place to live" (1). Although this definition does not include Abe's emphasis on intent to settle at the time of entry, settlement is at its core, and foreign workers also often "become long-term or permanent residents, or even citizens" (2).

Strausz draws on secondary scholarship, archival research, interviews with elites, and opinion and election data to trace the evolution of discourses of restrictive immigration. Beginning from a prewar discourse of heterogeneity, the account moves to a postwar focus on ethnic homogeneity and separatism that tolerated the Korean community. Challenges to this perspective, often legal, evolved over the 1960s to 1980s, leading to what Strausz characterizes as a debate over assimilation. This debate had optimistic and pessimistic proponents, but both perspectives were negative toward the idea that "significant numbers of foreign nationals have a legitimate claim to residency and membership in Japan" (58).

After 1990, policies changed to respond to demand for foreign labor but remained embedded in a restrictive discourse. Those political elites who attempted to encourage a large-scale policy change in the 2000s either subsequently moderated their positions or lost elections. In the end, Strausz concludes that "the loudest reformist voices among Japanese elites are

pushing for programs that would look more like Switzerland's guest-worker program—where foreigners are workers but not members—than Germany's—where large numbers of foreigners ended up becoming citizens, thereby changing the nature of what it means to be German in a significant way" (141). Even so, Strausz comments that "backlash…is not inevitable" if large-scale immigration occurs, recognizing studies that find support for social contact theory (150).

The elite rhetoric and opinions identified in Strausz's book are consistent with the critical perspectives of an edited volume by Takaya and Higuchi, who contend that policy makers purposely adopted restrictive migration policies and practices designed to prevent settlement but economically benefit Japan (Takaya and Higuchi 2019). Both books reveal, from different perspectives, how resistance to immigration and immigrants became internalized in policies and society. Whereas Takaya and Higuchi begin with the position that foreign workers are part of the immigrant population already in Japan, Strausz's approach in the main limits the discussion to the economic motive of obtaining foreign labor for possibly expanding immigration, leaving it to other scholarship to examine the subtleties of the social and policy changes for migrants and immigrants already in Japan.

A Scholarly Mapping of the Issues

Nagayoshi Kikuko's work addresses elements of Japan's immigration policy debate by surveying scholarship and empirical data to consider the possible societal effects of policy choices. Targeting a general audience, the book is both rigorous and accessible: an English version of the book could benefit an even wider audience. For Nagayoshi, "immigrants" are not only those entering the country with the intent to settle permanently. Given contemporary patterns of mobility across borders and the ease of transportation and communication, she

includes as immigrants, in addition to permanent residents, those who move to another country or who temporarily leave the country of their birth (4).

This pragmatic book gives readers a multi-dimensional map for considering the policy questions Japan faces and the ramifications for Japanese citizens and immigrants of potential decisions. Nagayoshi systematically evaluates claims made by both sides of the immigration policy debate, drawing on cross-national and Japanese research to establish a shared foundation of knowledge for discussing the issues (2-3). The book particularly addresses competing perspectives on the economic and social impacts of receiving immigrants. Will immigrants lead to worsened economic conditions? Will immigrants contribute to Japan's economic growth? What impact may immigrants have on Japan's system of social security? Will immigrants lead to an increase in crime? How will immigrants influence local society? What impacts do crimes against immigrants—specifically hate crimes—have, and how can these be assessed? For each topic, Nagayoshi reviews key literature and data, highlighting what is known, what is not known, and the contingencies involved.

Chapter Five in Nagayoshi's book considers the long-term prospects for socioeconomic inclusion and national belonging of immigrants. The author portrays socioeconomic inclusion and potential marginalization as a function of the interaction of social class, the second generation's educational achievement, and that group's relationship to an ethnic community. Her discussion of national belonging, which overlaps with perspectives of Liu-Farrer and Chung, suggests that changes in the understanding of belonging may occur through social diversity stemming from increased numbers of immigrants. Citing findings from Germany, Nagayoshi stresses that the distinction between civic national identity and an ethnonational identity is not fixed, but that policy changes can facilitate a tilting of the balance from one to the other (252-

254**).** But policy is only one piece of the issue, as Nagayoshi's review of cross-national studies based on social contact theory, together with findings from Japan, acknowledges that social class and other factors intervene to influence the effects of social contact. Despite contingent outcomes, Nagayoshi stresses that a transformation of identities and attitudes does not have to result in backlash but requires a long time to take place.

Comparative Theories and the Voices of Immigrants

With the book by Nagayoshi having given a broad but deep perspective on immigration and its effects, the books by Chung and Liu-Farrer address the social acceptance of immigrants and immigrants' own thought processes concerning settlement from different angles. They reveal how immigrants counter the treatment they receive from policy and society with affirmative efforts to construct their immigrant identities. These books reveal the complicated and individual processes of making sense of one's position in Japan despite boundaries imposed by societal definitions of what it is to "be Japanese." Both works have the potential to influence conceptual understandings outside of East Asia concerning how ethnonationalism influences identity and belonging. Both books give voice to immigrants and both engage the duality of inclusion and exclusion and the difference between belonging and identity encountered by immigrants. They make it clear that acquiring Japanese nationality or permanent residency is not the same as "being Japanese."

Chung, while recognizing that ethnonationalism is visible in East Asian democracies, tries to resolve some of the tensions over restrictiveness in admissions and methods of inclusion found in these countries. Chung's analysis stresses the inclusive dimensions of Japan's policies and local politics together with their limits, addressing the conditions of temporary migrants, permanent residents, and citizenship (for those who choose to naturalize). The comparison of

Japan with Taiwan and South Korea considers the differences in how and why migrants, including those with a temporary status, are incorporated socially, politically, and legally in East Asia. The explanation for why the countries vary rests on different legacies of civil society engagement tied to advocacy for migrants.

Chung's account questions scholarly portrayals of East Asian countries as exclusionary due to "descent-based citizenship policies, difficult naturalization and permanent residency requirements, limited non-citizen rights, and no representation of foreign residents in the public sphere" (14). Although she accepts the exclusionary characterization of Japanese policies as to the number of foreign residents, she rejects dichotomous arguments in Western scholarship that position East Asian countries as "exclusionary" and liberal democracies in Europe and North America as "inclusionary" (15). Instead, for East Asia, Chung identifies variations based on residence status (including different temporary statuses) that affect access to rights. In Japan, she stresses that social rights are almost the same for long-term residents as for Japanese citizens and that access to political rights is also more generous than in "some industrial democracies with more liberal immigration and citizenship policies" (16).

The three-country comparison of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan leads Chung to suggest that East Asian countries have developed a different *version* of multiculturalism than found in western liberal democracies. Varied "civic legacies" of political advocacy across these countries have influenced the extent of rights for migrants. In Japan, locally-based activism resulted in migrants' increased protections, access to social policies, and some political rights. Residence status, she stresses, determines the extent of formal incorporation, understood as access to rights. Even so, Chung recognizes that formal rights are different from ethnocultural identity, as revealed by six nationality-specific focus groups of immigrants in Japan alone, who voiced their

own perspectives on being incorporated as immigrants. These illustrate that ethnocultural identity and how immigrants are treated influence foreign residents' assessment of whether to obtain permanent residency or naturalize. Ethnocultural differences matter: as one respondent said, "I can't be Tanaka" (86, 130).

Liu-Farrar makes the subjective experiences and voices of immigrants the centerpiece, including the attendant challenges faced by bicultural children. She, too, maintains that immigrants are already in Japan, despite Japanese insistence on not having an immigration policy. Much like Nagayoshi, Liu-Farrer disputes the narrow definition of immigration as entry with the intent to settle, calling it "anachronistic" and no longer applicable in a globalized and mobile world. She defines immigrants as "individuals who enter Japan with the intention to settle, who have attained permanent legal residency, or who have stayed in the country beyond the initially designated activities but with no immediate plan to leave" (12).

Asking how policies and society respond to immigrants and how immigrants and their children create a space for themselves in Japanese society, the book reveals micro-level processes of social incorporation and identity formation to which Nagayoshi alludes broadly in her final chapters. In examining how the policy and societal environments shape identity and belonging, Liu-Farrer contrasts belonging in some respects with identifying as Japanese. As do the other authors, Liu-Farrer considers the obstacles that policies pose for immigrants, but she views them through the eyes of the almost 100 immigrants interviewed to consider how membership and identity are constructed. Interviewees' experiences and pragmatic choices illustrate the tensions experienced by immigrants in a country that claims to have no immigration policy.

Liu-Farrer engages the tensions between ethnonationalism and immigrants' lives in Japan by conceptually distinguishing between belonging and identity. Defining ethnonationalism as "a super-imposition of nationalism (a political program) onto identity" (4), she prepares readers for the subtle difference between belonging and Japanese identity. Liu-Farrer characterizes Japan's immigrant society as including "discursive denial of immigration," "anachronistic institutional practices," "pragmatism in immigration and the settlement process," and a coupling of "national belonging" with "impossible national identity" (9-10). She further suggests that this combination of traits may be applicable to other countries where ethnonationalistic identities are strong.

Chung and Liu-Farrer address similar themes, but Chung is more focused on the comparative political context of immigrant construction and Liu-Farrer on the social and psychological dimensions. Concerning the position of children, Chung considers the challenge that migrant women married to East Asian men and their "bicultural offspring" pose to "nationhood, race, ethnicity, and citizenship" (161), and how this challenge has produced systemic changes, such as revisions of nationality laws. Liu-Farrer exposes individuals' diverse searches for identity, viewing identity formation in immigrants' children as an ongoing process. As children grow up, learn Japanese, make their way through the Japanese school system, and find employment, they also find ways to define themselves in relation to Japanese society and their parents' countries of origin. Through personal accounts, Liu-Farrer demonstrates that adult children have developed varied strategies for identifying their strengths, reconciling negative experiences with positive ones, and positioning themselves in relation to Japan.

Both Liu-Farrer and Chung have used the Japanese case to improve on the inadequacies of theoretical work on East Asia, ethnonationalism, and citizenship developed largely in terms of

Western liberal democracies. Whereas Chung ends up proposing that East Asian democracies manifest a particular form of multiculturalism, albeit based on differences in residence status, Liu-Farrer suggests that a distinctive mode of combining belonging and ethnonational identity found in Japan may apply to other countries that also struggle to reconcile ethnonationalist tendencies with universal rights. The works by both authors merit reading by specialists of other parts of the world for their theoretical insights.

Concluding Thoughts

As a set, these volumes look backward to the past and forward to the future. Those focused on the past highlight established policy approaches; those that open doors to the future address current experiences of immigrants, international comparisons, and mobility in a globalized world. They represent efforts to provide updated scholarship that goes beyond one-dimensional portrayals of Japanese migration policies and immigration to Japan by bringing nuance and texture to the discussion of processes of social change and immigrants' lives.

Restrictive politics of the past have set the direction for possible changes by entrenching beliefs about the likely effects of immigration in public attitudes and have led to policies that fail to ensure rights or integration. Even with some political support for enhancing protections, the following obstacles exist: prevalent reasoning that focuses on the economic benefits of immigrants to the neglect of considering them as humans bringing social and cultural contributions; the existence of vested economic interests that have grown up around the Technical Intern Training Program and that resist changes that would incur costs; the already apparent creation of a class of marginalized foreign workers; general lack of investment in policies that would aid integration and social mobility; and widespread beliefs about the negative effects of immigration.

What do these volumes have to say about the potential for constructive changes in policy or the social acceptance of immigrants? The challenge of building political support for major changes that would both enable more immigration *and* ensure more rights and protections remains largely implicit in these volumes but core to future debates and developments. Strausz indicates that the most likely outcome supported by elites and business members will be a continuation of the status quo of admitting mainly temporary workers, even if the system accepts more of them. Chung's findings concerning the role of activism in stimulating policy changes are more focused on past developments than today's, making us wonder how local engagement today might lead to nationwide changes. Even if policy change occurs, the long-term prospects for immigrants to acquire Japanese *identity* remain unclear. Nagayoshi reflects on how this might occur even though Chung and Liu-Farrer indicate that currently this is not a straightforward process. Further, changes in world political conditions during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate that sudden and unanticipated pivotal changes—whether border-closings or mass refugee flows—may undercut the applicability of existing knowledge or trends and heighten unpredictability as to political leadership, policies, and how societies everywhere will incorporate immigrants.

Despite the cautionary perspectives here, discussion that uses the terms immigration and immigrants is a start. Immigrants are present in Japan and their presence needs to be recognized in current policy debates. Repeated efforts to clarify the meaning of immigration as a concept and in its social context are now needed as a part of Japan's policy debates and scholarly discourse. Introducing the many dimensions of immigration and immigrants' lives in crisp and easily understood ways that reach the general public is also critical. Even without changes to immigration policies, Japanese society will undoubtedly continue to change, but unforeseen

events may have a dramatic impact on both Japan's labor market and students and workers wishing to migrate to Japan. As immigration policies evolve, decision-makers will make choices that could make Japan an attractive destination for immigrants to build a future with their families, or they may maintain immigration policies that limit residence in ways that curb rights and incorporation, relying on foreign residents to hold up the Japanese economy. They may opt to expand inclusive and supportive policies that might produce a change in social fabric and practices. Or their changes could end up a mix of inclusion and restrictiveness, driven partly by short-term expediency, and producing uncertain but faltering incorporation for newer members of society.

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