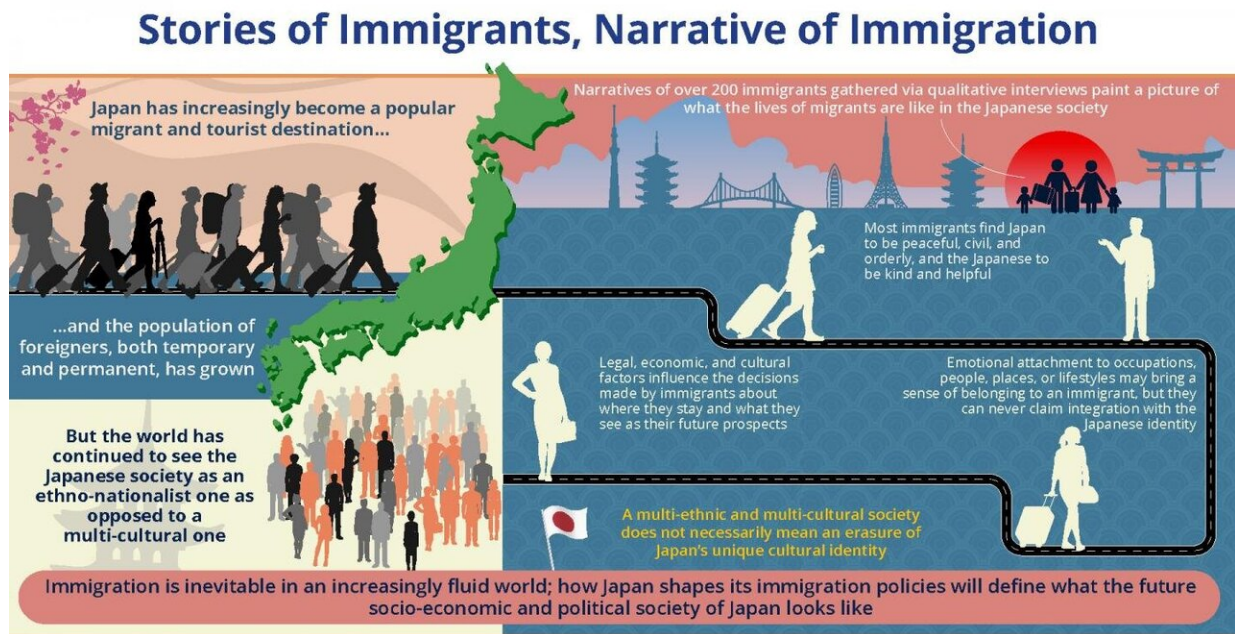


Immigrant Japan: understanding modern Japan through the lives and minds of migrants

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Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging In an Ethno-nationalist Society
 Gracia Liu-Farrer (2020) | Cornell University Press

 WASEDA University

Interviews of over 200 migrants in Japan to gain an insight of what life is like for immigrants in the Japanese society Credit: Waseda University

Japan has increasingly become a popular travel and migrant destination because of its unique culture and diverse economic opportunities. In the three decades between 1980 and 2019, the population of foreign

residents in Japan has nearly quadrupled. "Immigrants are but two percent of Japan's population, yet their presence is transforming Japanese society," says Dr. Gracia Liu-Farrer, Professor at the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Japan, and author of the book *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society*.

This transformation of Japanese society is not smooth, however, and tensions exist between migrants and Japan's social, cultural, and institutional response to them. These tensions surface in the [immigration policies](#) and opportunities available to migrant children, among other social markers. Consequently, Japan, as a country, largely continues to be seen as ethno-national rather than multi-cultural by both its people and the world, and the realities of immigration and immigrant life remain poorly understood.

Immigrant Japan presents the stories of over two hundred immigrants in Japan from various walks of life. These stories present a ground-level qualitative picture of why immigration is happening in the country, what the different patterns of migration are, and what challenges immigrants face in terms of resources, socio-political statuses, and belonging. The book is the immigrant community's story of what life is like in an environment where "otherness" is salient and where ethno-nationalist discourse fosters a reluctance towards immigration.

The stories, when seen through the lens of sociological, geographical, and psychological theories, reveal a number of features of immigration into Japan. For instance, one finds that while tourists are attracted to the unique traditional and modern cultures of the country, the reinforcement of these same things makes it difficult for long-term migrants to feel a sense of belonging in society. Nonetheless, most foreigners are happy with the kindness and helpfulness of Japanese individuals and the orderly, peaceful, and civil nature of Japanese society. Based on their

specific socio-cultural and economic experiences, immigrants also develop emotional attachments to their lives in the country and these, along with other factors, play a role in determining where they move within and beyond the country. But regardless of how much belonging they feel in their immediate social settings, they can never claim an integration with the Japanese national identity, even over the long term.

This [national identity](#) is presented as impenetrable: the language difficult, the culture almost only inheritable. And the welcome extended to foreigners comes with the clause that "an invisible wall will always exist between 'us' and 'them,'" as Dr. Farrer puts it. This distinction percolates to migrant children as well. "The Japanese national educational system, especially at the elementary and secondary levels, is ill-designed for integrating immigrant children. Its monocultural institutional logic often alienates and marginalizes children of immigrants," Dr. Farrer remarks.

Yet, as the stories in the book show, Japanese culture is not impenetrable. It is part of what draws people to Japan. And in an increasingly globalizing world where immigration is inevitable, the way migrant children are integrated into the society forms a large part of the basis of the shape that future Japanese society will take.

Understanding Japan from the perspective of immigrants can, therefore, provide insight into ways in which they contribute to the well-being of Japanese society, its economic prosperity, and cultural preservation, while revealing ways in which their experiences can be improved so that they are able to contribute better.

Further, the stories of these immigrants in Japan could resonate with many countries globally. In a world of increasing mobility, Japan, as an immigrant destination whose policies and frameworks require sorting, is not an anomaly. Most countries are becoming potential immigration

destinations and Japan's tendency to "ethnicize" nationhood is reflected in events such as Brexit and the anti-immigration discourses in North America. In Dr. Farrer's words, the stories in Immigrant Japan of "how [immigrants](#) make decisions regarding mobility and settlement in Japan and what kinds of relationships they are able to establish within and with the host [society](#), provide insights into new patterns of immigration and integration in other 'non-immigrant' immigrant countries."

More information: Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society: www.degruyter.com/view/title/569016

Provided by Waseda University

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