

Why is Immigration Policy in Japan failing? An Economic and Cultural Overview

1. Introduction

1. Problem: demographic decline + labour shortages
2. Puzzle: reforms keep happening, but “immigration country” is still denied
3. Your framework: economic vs cultural variables
4. Your thesis + roadmap
5. Success and failure indicators

2. Background: postwar paradigm

ideology + institutional design.
End with: “this sets constraints on later reforms.”

3. 1990 reform

Despite official denial, Japan has been an immigration country since the late 1980s. The first migrants to enter Japan were Indochinese refugees in 1975. The Immigration and Refugee Recognition Actⁱ was enacted in 1982 as a result. The arrival of these newcomers was followed by two waves: female entertainers and undocumented migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea and Iran.

By the late 1980s, labour market shortages made the government look for solutions. In 1990, non-Japanese of Japanese descent (nikkeijin) were allowed to live and work in Japan on long-term visas that were renewable every 3 years. This exemplifies the Japanese ethnic homogeneity discourse as it prioritises ethnic Japanese migrants. The second solution to address the labour shortage was the TITP to help foreigners from specific developing countries gain technical skills. The former was seen as a failure due to integration problems, and the latter was criticized as a guest worker program with human right issues. The establishment of these two side-doors is an example again, of the restrictive view on immigration and the settlement rooted discourse of homogeneity.

Over the last five decades, four immigration policy debates, shaped by four competing frames, led to the formal controlled opening of 2018. The first frame is Identity and cultural self-definition, based on ethnic homogeneity (tan’itsu minzoku) and ethnonationalism. The latter is commonly identified as the ideological ground of Japan’s immigration policy, and the preferential treatment of the nikkeijin. The general perspective of ethnonationalism is defined by ethnic homogeneity. Although ethnic homogeneity has made Japan a unique case, it is also a central argument in its economic success story, with the absence of ethnic tensions. Immigration seen as culturally disruptive. This

vision is partially based on the example of European failure to limit social disruptions. This line of thought was strong amongst conservatives but weak in public opinion surveys.

The growth frame evaluates immigration impact on economic growth, productivity and social cohesion and has been reinterpreted over time. It accepts highly qualified workers and rejects lower-qualified ones based on welfare risks.

It is the dominant frame in uniting the conservative establishment and the population. After the second world war, Japan shifted from trying to become a military hegemony to focus on economic growth (Yoshida doctrine) through state guidance and the continuity of industrial policy. In the 1960s, Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda introduced the principle of shared growth which effectively made growth a power tool for achieving general wellbeing and social cohesion. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became guarantors of economic growth. The social contract of shared growth is crucial as it influences immigration policy much more than ethnic nationalism and has led to Japan's dual and restrictive approach. Highly qualified workers are believed to contribute to economic growth, raise productivity and generate employment, whereas lower-qualified foreign workers are said to deteriorate working conditions and even affect other lower-qualified Japanese workers, consequently, undermining the social contract of shared growth.

The security frame links immigration to crime, public disorder and loss of control. It is Institutionally attached to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and police. Lastly, the international standing frame, captures Japan's responsibility as an advanced economy.

Looking at the ISA and the Immigration Control policies (AC), we can explain these changes in immigration policy based on Japan's effort to balance four drivers: The economic driver, the social driver, the security driver and the rights driver.

The first driver is linked to market demand of foreign workers to address labour shortages, the second in related to culture and the maintenance of a homogenous society and values such as "Japanese-ness". The third is the wish of the government to sustain law and order and the fourth is the protection of human rights of migrants and refugees. The first driver normally trumps the rest although it is sometimes intercepted by the culture driver or the security driver. This is no different to the analysis of the 2018 reform, same factors affect decision making, however in this section, the role of the ISA and AC will be analysed as well as the different foreign worker categories classified by residence status.

The first debate happened in the late 1960s to the early 1970s triggered by acute labour shortages at the end of a high-growth period. Japan had reached the exhaustion of surplus labour and was confronted with the need to introduce a guest worker program or expand intern schemes. The growth frame was dominant and there were two opposing arguments. The small and medium enterprises (SMEs), employees' associations and productivity-oriented elites saw foreign interns and guest workers as controllable solutions. However, the labour unions, the ministry of Labour and new left movements feared labour deterioration and labour exploitation. The debate ended abruptly due to the 1973 oil shock and the sudden end of labour shortages. Therefore, no institutional or policy reforms were achieved.

The second debate started in the late 1980s till early 1990s due to a rapid increase in irregular migration. Most of these foreign workers are active in job fields not included in immigration law for working visas and came to Japan through three well-established side doors for lower-qualified workers: foreign students, foreign interns and foreigners of Japanese descent (nikkeijin). The core question was whether Japan should accept "simple workers" (lower-qualified). In the Identity frame, immigration is seen as a threat to ethnic homogeneity, which is later explained with the idea that nikkeijin are the "safe" ethnic solution. The growth frame was dichotomic, with the SMEs pushing for opening and large firms and the Ministry of Labour (MOL) resisting. The security frame started to play an important role in the debate as the police categorized foreigners as crime risks. The narrative of losing control also became strong. Lastly, the international standing frame placed Japan as a liberal democratic growing economy that should act as other advanced economies and support Asia.

The outcome of this debate was the 1990 Immigration Law reform which had no front door opening but the expansion of the side doors explained above. The structural contradiction between policy and practice becomes more apparent.

The third debate begins in the early 2000s and it's the most proactive, policy-driven debate. It is brought by demographic forecasts predicting population decline. The main concern is whether immigration can sustain Japan's future economy and population. However, none of the proposals were implemented. The growth frame viewed immigration as a necessity for economic survival and was backed by the SMEs and large business federations (Keindaren). The security frame saw foreigners as a public safety threat and gained momentum due to the 2001 terrorist attack that spread moral panic over crime. The identity frame indirectly reinforced security narratives.

The outcomes were policy deadlock, the strengthening of border controls and the reduction of irregular migrants.

The culmination debate was triggered by severe labour shortages, aging population and a failure of all side-door mechanisms during the mid 2010s to 2018. The key characteristics were an extremely intense public debate and one central proposal that was adopted immediately, the 2018 reform.

4. 2000s: consolidation/contradictions

Your key line: “Japan increased reliance without acknowledging settlement.” Bring in data on trainees + industries if possible (OECD is good here).

5. 2018: controlled opening WHAT CHANGED AND WHY?

The 2018 reform can be considered a “dam break”, as it represents a shift from a long-standing policy standstill to a comprehensive reform, brought by a declining security counterargument and the centralization of political decision-making.

Nevertheless, others suggest the reform was the continuity of Japan’s “no-immigration” principle due to an ethno-nationalistic discourse that has acted as a consistent barrier for social integration.

The increase in foreign workers from 0.49M in 2008 to 1.08M in 2016 prompted the Abe administration to address this gradual change into a rapid change in 2018.

The Prime Minister instructed the chief cabinet secretary (NAME) and the Minister of Justice that the government should set up a system for professional and foreign nationals, with the conditions of placing an upper limit on the period of stay and that family members should not accompany them, so it would not be considered a permanent immigration policy. Power centralization mattered. The reform was driven by the PMs office (Kantei). This top-down approach explains why 2018 succeeded where earlier debates failed.

The question is how did the government justify a reform that contradicted years of official policy? Some say the labour market outcomes were the main reason, that the economic driver was the one that put pressure and called for change. However, there is a political and institutional explanation too. Takaya suggests that the Abe administration relied on discursive framing and the explicit denial of “immigration” to legitimise the 2018 reform within institutional constraints.

Meaning that, instead of signalling an ideological shift, the reform was portrayed consistent with Japan’s long standing “non immigration principle”.

The first argument supporting this statement is that Japan has relied on a side-door system, with the *nikkeijin*, the TITP, foreign students and economic partnership agreements (EPAs), to address labour shortages without becoming a country of immigration. This created *de facto* immigration, but the word was never explicitly used. The 2018 reform, with the creation of the Specialised Skilled Worker Program (SSWP) marked a milestone in immigration policy because it institutionalised the side doors. This does not imply an ideological breakthrough, simply a political one and from the moment it was implemented, it was clearly stated that it was not an immigration policy.

Therefore, the concept of discursive institutionalization (DI) could explain the shift and how the deadlock was overcome. The key discourses were namely, framing the reform as “not an immigration policy” which effectively reassured conservatives, helped in maintaining Japanese-ness and avoided the comparison to other European “failure” narratives. The second was choosing the proper language, instead of the word migrant, using “Foreign human resource” which framed them as an economic asset, not a threat and appealed to competitiveness not multiculturalism.

At the end of 2018, the full scheme was announced together with the bill to revise the Immigration Control and Refugee Act (ICRRA) to reflect policy changes. This proposal was approved by the Diet and its implementation started as soon as April 2019.

The 2018 revisions to Japan’s “Immigration” Control Act, introduced two new visa categories and a quota system for blue-collar workers. It also created the Immigration Service Agency (ISA) in charge of Japan’s admission and integration policy. This was the first time, after the post-war period that Japan formally institutionalized the admission of low-skilled labour, which had previously been managed through side-doors, such as the *nikkeijin* visas, the Technical Inter Training Program (TITP) or foreign students working part-time.

Type one visas targeted lower-skilled workers across 14 different sectors, and it’s characterized by limited stay, no family reunification and strict monitoring. It largely formalized the TITP rather than replacing it, which represents the continuity aspect of the reform. The Type two had higher skill requirements and theoretically allowed family reunification and was renewable indefinitely, however, in practice eligibility was restricted and implementation delayed.

The 2018 reform did not reflect a societal consensus or a normative shift toward immigration, but rather a politically managed redefinition of the concept achieved through discursive institutionalization and centralised decision making. However, the labour market conditions did push for the Abe administration to rapidly adopt the reform and was one of the main reasons the LDP used persuasive language to work around the normative framework.

6. 2020s: TITP replacement + integration debate DID IT WORK?

It has been made clear that Japan has restrictive immigration policies and that skilled labour is welcome, but unskilled workers are not. However, with labour shortages the Abe administration did what it could to attract foreign workers. In 2014 the Japan revitalization Strategy made it clear that the government wanted highly skilled foreign professionals however, the tipping point was the “Growth Strategy 2018” that announced the creation of the status of residence for specified skilled workers (SSWs) across 14 different industries.

The ISA is limited by the Cabinet and Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Historically, policy making in Japan was based on a bottom-up approach where each Ministry would submit proposals to the cabinet for approval. However, with the Abe government, a top-down approach was implemented. Therefore, the ISA's task is to operationalize high-level policies, specifically those related to the immigration inspection of foreigners, the management of foreigner's residences, the deportation of undesirable foreigners and the refugee status determination. Foreigners can be admitted to Japan after obtaining one of the statuses of residence. The AC is to provide advice on immigration control and management of the status of residence to the MOJ.

The main tool the ISA has is the status of residency system, which, classifies foreign nationals that are acceptable and set the conditions of their stay. Incentives are given to those seen worthy by the ISA and disincentives to the less fortunate that are not deemed desirable in the eyes of the ISA.

The first category is the Highly Skilled Professionals (HSP). People that belong to this category can bring family and enjoy longer periods of stay. However, in 2020, they accounted for 1.5% of all foreign workers. This is due to the unattractiveness of the Japanese labour market. Things such as medical care, housing and primary education are not competitive compared to global standards. There is also a language barrier, as English is not widely spoken. In addition, the employment system is designed to keep foreigners out. Companies recruit employees generally in April, after graduation, and they train them as generalists rather than specialists because they expect them to stay in the company for a very long time as salary comes with seniority (years in the company) not skills acquired. For a HSP, this format is not attractive because they expect short-term benefits due to their limited stay in the country. Therefore, the way the Japanese labour market works does not incentives HSP. Even if the ISA can issue permanent residency in less than a year, it does not compensate for the lack of attractiveness.

Refugees can enter the HSP status if they have high qualification (i.e. university degree) and experience, and if approved, would receive a preferential HSP status that would then lead to a permanent residence status.

Once again, there are ways in which foreign workers can obtain a permanent residency, but they must demonstrate certain capabilities and even then, the labour market is not competitive. Which demonstrates that the new system reproduces failure indicators, meaning, it does not properly address the labour shortage problem, and it does not make Japan a country of immigrants.

The second category is for Specified Skilled workers (SSWs) and it is placed between the HSP and the Technical intern Trainees (TITIs). The selection is based on merits and educational requirements are no set. There are two categories: The first is renewable every four months, six month or a year for up to a total of five years. They cannot bring family members which is a clear distinction and after five years, if they qualify, they can apply for the second category, that does allow for family reunification. This was heavily supported by the Ac as it brought transparency in the management of foreign workers, as they were workers, and not students or trainees. Nonetheless, this system had several problems. At first, the idea was to allow the companies, and individual workers to negotiate the terms of employment based on merits. However, the governments of the sending countries requested to be involved in the process of selection which eventually led to Japan and eight sending countries to draw bilateral contracts concerning the system's operations. The SSW is becoming more complex and bureaucratic. For instance, a quarterly status report must be submitted to the ISA. Furthermore, the cost is as high or even more, than that of employing a Japanese worker. It has been criticised that it not only resembles the TITP but also prolongs it. This is because in March 2020, the ISA allowed the TITIs to sit for a language and technical test to qualify for the SSWs. The result was that 80% of the SSWs are former TITIs. The two systems are attached to one and other. Which means, the SSW system does not replace the TITP, but in fact, strengthens it.

→ Include Data: Uptake vs quota data for SSW: Planned intake numbers vs actual SSW entrants – ISA annual reports + Takizawa

Helps with evaluation: failure indicator

The TITIs started in 1993, for the purpose of training young people in developing countries and transferring technologies. However, with worsening conditions in the labour market, this program has become a de facto system for recruiting unskilled workers from Asian countries for designated industry sectors such as textiles, clothing, construction and nursing care. The wages are not high which means Japanese workers are not attracted to the sectors and suffer chronic labour shortages. This system has even been categorised as slave labour and has been criticised by domestic rights advocates as a cover for companies to import cheap labour. The government in November 2016, improved the program, however the system was not abolished because the

business sector benefits greatly from it. Therefore, economic consideration overrules human rights in this case.

Foreign students are the fourth category, and several problems have been identified. First, foreign students are allowed to work up to 28 hours, which is unheard of. During holidays, they are allowed to work full time. This system benefits companies as student salaries are kept low. Therefore, many foreign students in Japan are indeed workers. The lack of transparent labour migration policy has damaged its credibility, similarly to the TITP. The ISA has taken measures such as granting student visas only if student attendance is strictly satisfied.

Lastly, permanent residence. The number of permanent residents in Japan has almost doubled from 492,000 in 2008 to 801,000 in 2021. However, the ISA does not grant permanent residency upon arrival, and foreigners must obtain some status of residence and spend several years in the country as it is granted in a step-by-step basis. The only exception is for the HSPs, they can get it in under a year but it's not really an incentive, as the labour market conditions are not attractive. There's a gap between Japanese perceptions of permanent residency and foreigners. The first treasure it and believe it should not be given up easily; the latter are not as eager to obtain it.

Several comprehensive measures were implemented such as measures to improve the environment of foreign workers that transformed the role of the ISA from control to control and support foreign human resources. However, these measures were met with measures to maintain security and prevent illegal entry and stay. This is a recurring strategy, the Japanese government institutionalise of widen a side door, but at the same time implement a mechanism that controls or limits entry to ensure security and social aspects are not compromised.

→ 2024 amendment sources (OECDE)
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/11/international-migration-outlook-2025_355ae9fd/full-report/japan_ccc89a8d.html?

JIL discussion.
Then evaluate: does the new system solve your “failure indicators” or reproduce them?

7. Comparative reflection: Germany

Keep it structured:

- Admission logic: points/pathways, job-seeking options, credential recognition (contrast with Japan's employer-driven strictness)

- Settlement logic: integration expectations and clearer long-term pathways
Cite official Germany sources.

8. Conclusion

Do 3 things:

1. Answer the RQ clearly
2. Show the mechanism: *economic need → constrained cultural framing → policy design → limited outcomes*
3. “Future prospects”: what would have to change (rights, mobility, pathways, local integration support)

¹ It's important to note a clear distinction between highly qualified and lower-qualified workers. This is based on Japan's Immigration and Refugee Recognition Act, which specifies job fields for which foreign workers can get a working visa.

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