

Navigating Barriers: Refugee Policies and Asylum Dynamics in East Asia  
Shalini S. Matharage  
Northeastern University  
Department of Political Science

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Japan, South Korea, and China have been long recognized as the economic powerhouses of Asia. However, this role has not aligned with their international commitments towards accepting asylum seekers. While their financial capabilities suggest an ability to support asylum seekers, their refugee policies remain restrictive, with acceptance rates significantly lower than economically comparable countries in the West (Dean & Nagashima, 2007; Rich et al., 2021; Liu & Yang, 2024). In 2023, Japan, South Korea, and China had only recognized 2%, 0.37%, and 19% of asylum applications respectively (UNHCR, 2024). China's higher acceptance rate is only influenced by a restrictive procedure that often does not allow most asylum seekers to apply for refugee status in the first place (Song, 2018). East Asian nations also often engage in "checkbook diplomacy" in refugee management, providing financial aid for international humanitarian efforts rather than actively accepting and resettling this vulnerable population within their borders (Dean & Nagashima, 2007; Song, 2018).

Historically, all three nations have avoided high-level acceptance of refugees in pursuit of national interests. The Indo-Chinese crisis in the 1970s marked Japan and China's first major encounter with refugees (Kalicki, 2019; Guofu & Yang, 2024). While South Korea has had a special law on the protection of defectors from North Korea since 1962, they only first recognized refugees from other countries in the late 1990s (Yoo, 2020).

With pressure from the international community, all three countries ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention from the 1980s to the 1990s (United Nations, 2024). While Japan (1982) and Korea (2013) incorporated refugee law into their domestic legislation, China remains dependent on international agencies, specifically the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the only domestic legislation applicable for refugee issues is the Exit and Entry Administration Law (2012) (Yamagami, 1995; Liu, 2019; Yoo, 2020).

Scholars cite security concerns, homogeneity, and nationalists' sentiments as contributing factors to this long-running reluctance to refugee acceptance among the three East Asian nations. National policies and public opinions often reflect the idea of "othering," where ethnic boundaries are maintained (Lee, 2018; Song, 2018a; Dasgupta, 2021). Japan, for instance, often indicates increased hostility towards outgroups, including refugees, due to perceived threats (Ullah et al., 2023). As for South Korea, islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiments have fueled further resistance (Sheikh, 2021). Similarly, China's public opinion on refugees is divided, with substantial resistance to settlement due to concerns about financial and social stability (Song, 2018). Paradoxically, all three nations are aging populations with low birth rates and labor shortages, challenges that could be improved by accepting immigrants and refugees (Park, 2020; Luo et al., 2021).

While Japan, South Korea, and China have maintained low refugee acceptance rates, the number of asylum seekers has not decreased over the last two decades. From 2000 to 2023, over 280,000 asylum seekers applied for refugee status to the three nations. Even when excluding spikes from specific refugee crises, including the Syrian refugee crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian war, the numbers have been steadily rising (UNHCR, 2024).

While many studies have investigated the policy changes among the East Asian nations over the years, surprisingly very few studies have looked into the factors behind both low acceptance rates and constant attraction of asylum seekers into the three nations. Thus, this study is an attempt to understand two questions:

1. What unique factors drive asylum seekers to Japan, South Korea and China, and what criteria do they take into consideration when making their decision?

2. What are the main determinants and decision-making procedures that affect or govern whether East Asian nations will recognize refugees?

Using the data from the UNHCR refugee data finder, World Bank, and multiple other data sources, this paper will use a regression analysis to model the number of refugee applications, the proportion of asylum applications among the three countries, and their acceptance rates, using three different regression methods. Specifically, fixed-effect ordinary least squares regression will be used to analyze the absolute attractions to each of the three East Asian nations by modeling the annual total refugee applications from each origin country from 2000 to 2023. Next, a logistic regression will be used to evaluate the relative attractiveness of each country by modeling the proportion of applications among the three nations. Finally, a beta regression will be used to model refugee acceptance rates in each country. In addition to traditional variables like GDP and geographical proximity, the models will include explanatory variables on relevant law changes and application procedures to evaluate how policy affects refugee attraction and acceptance. The estimation results will be analyzed to shed new light on asylum dynamics in East Asia.

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