

The Changing Face of Local Government: Foreign Residents as Local and Prefectural Government Employees in Japan

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As Japan grapples with rapid population aging it has slowly opened its borders to foreign workers. Gradually shifting from a highly homogeneous society with a very small foreign population, the contingent of foreign workers in Japan has grown both in size and diversity in terms of nationality and the jobs they engage in. Many local governments faced with large influxes of foreign workers are seeing greater demand for public services from a population that is more ethnically and linguistically diverse than ever before. As these demographic trends accelerate, it is unclear whether local governments have the human capital to provide necessary services and support immigrant incorporation. While the Japanese national government is mainly concerned with recruiting foreign workers, questions of how best to assist and ultimately integrate the foreign population are typically left to local governments. Confronting shifting demographics, local governments are forced to adapt and change, especially those experiencing relatively large influxes of foreign workers. This presentation will examine local government adaptations aimed at assisting and integrating foreign residents in Japan, focusing specifically on the hiring of foreign workers in local government.

Literatures on immigrant integration, incorporation and multiculturalism in Japan form the scientific background of this study. As discussed in a recent review in the *Annual Review of Political Science*, scholars of policy and immigrant integration are responding to the growing number of refugees and migrants moving to developed democracies (Fouka 2024). Although scholars of migration in the United States have examined the factors associated with immigrants being underrepresented in the public sector (Lewis, et al., 2014), this issue has yet to be addressed in the literature on the incorporation of foreign residents in Japan. This is an important gap in the research that reflects the rapidly growing foreign resident population of the country, as well as government attempts to integrate and incorporate Japan's growing immigrant community (Kashiwazaki, 2013; Liu-Farrer, 2020).

The circumstances that led to this research have emerged from the public debate in Japan over the policies that allow foreign nationals to be hired as government employees and the needs of local governments. For more than 70 years, Japan has said that while citizens can become public employees, foreigners cannot. However, in 1996 the Minister of Home Affairs stated that it was up to cities to determine which government jobs foreign nationals can hold. As the number of foreign residents in local areas has increased, there has been a trend towards policies relaxing citizenship requirements for public sector jobs. Local governments may benefit from access to workers who possess the specialized skills to provide public services for an increasingly diverse population. Foreign nationals may also benefit from being better served by government workers who speak the same language and who may be more familiar with their problems. Additionally, reducing the barrier to hiring non-nationals may incentivize behaviors among those foreign nationals seeking to find a job in the public sector, like improving language proficiency and learning business norms.

Still, some Japanese natives oppose the employment of foreign nationals because they worry about their allegiances and that they may one day be given voting rights. Meanwhile, others support relaxing the ban on hiring non-citizens because they perceive them as an unfair and unnecessary hardship for those foreign workers who might contribute to Japanese society. The debate is complicated by the growing shortage of labor in some areas and the increasing salience of immigration as a contentious political issue. Local governments need human resources with multilingual skills to work in multicultural cooperation departments and facilitate communication between newcomers and schools. They also need foreign residents to help alleviate labor shortages, such as those faced by volunteer firefighters (*shobodan*), who are classified as municipal employees.

Although some municipalities and prefectures have relaxed prohibitions toward hiring foreign nationals, little detailed information is available, especially in English, regarding their motivations in doing so. We also do not know how many cities are hiring foreign workers, what type of work they are employed to do, and their effects on the provision of public services and the workers themselves. This project consequently aims to improve our understanding of municipal foreign worker employment, presenting data gathered from a variety of municipal, prefectural, and national resources, and supplemented with interviews of local government practitioners in

select locations. This JAMPS presentation will show our preliminary findings.

References

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