

Special Issue I: The Demographic Trend of Foreign Nationals in Japan (Part 1)

Introduction

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Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this special issue is to be published. The unprecedented restriction on the free movement in Japan and the world have affected people's lives, for the short term definitely, and possibly in the coming years. Some would say this pandemic is the turning point of human history.

Before the COVID-19, Japan was implementing a radical shift in immigration policies. One can see the change through overviews of the *Honebuto*, the annual primary policy framework decided by the Cabinet titled "Basic Policies for the Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform". When this policy framework re-started in 2013, the migration issue was only for highly-skilled professionals. Then, it expanded to international students in 2014, researchers in 2016, and the "specified skilled workers" in 2018. As for the social integration of migrants, the first relevant mention appeared in 2014, where the development of a favorable environment for highly-skilled professionals and international students was highlighted. It was followed by the development of the educational environment for foreign children and employment support for international students in 2016. Since 2018, this "environmental development" became one itemized chapter in the policy, entailing the adoption of "Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals" by the relevant ministries.

Another prominent item in the policy concerning international migration is the target to attract 20 million foreign tourists. This target, being achieved so quickly before the term set in 2020, was raised to 40 million in 2016. The rapid increase of foreign tourists also contributed to a better tourism infrastructure and health care system. Increasing migrants was not the option at the beginning, to stop the Tokyo monopolization and disappearance of small municipalities. However, experiencing positive effects of foreign tourists and residents in the rural, depopulating area, the 2019 *Honebuto* policy started to value the role of foreign residents for revitalizing the local economy.

In the post-COVID-19 era, would these policies be safely resumed? Due to the anticipated resurgence of infections, international travel would be limited at least for a few years, which will certainly affect the number of foreign tourists. So far, according to the provisional report of Immigration Control Statistics, the entries of foreign nationals in March 2020 were 217,671, one-fifth of the previous month, and 8% of March 2019. If the situation continues until the end of the year, the annual entries would be 4 million, which is the same level as in the 1990s, and only one-tenth of what was targeted in the *Honebuto* policy.

As for the mid to long-term foreign residents, the national level statistics are not yet published, but the number of registered foreigners in Tokyo prefecture decreased in April 2020. International students supposed to arrive in April might not be able to enter Japan, some of the foreign

residents returned home, or more mobile foreign residents moved out of Tokyo to other prefectures within Japan. So far, the reasons are not certain, but we will know when there will be further information. Back in 2009 through 2012, the number of mid to long-term foreign residents decreased due to the global financial crisis and the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, during the same period, the number of permanent foreign residents was never affected and kept on increasing. Considering the steady population decrease and labour shortage at present, the increase of foreign residents would be a stable, long-term trend. Still, in the short run, the COVID-19 will affect the mobility of people.

We have experienced how the daily life, which we took for granted, was so easily discontinued. It gave us time to reflect on what is truly necessary and essential in our lives. Fortunately this time, the deaths caused by COVID-19 was relatively small in Japan compared to Western countries but the limitation on daily life affected economy and social life tremendously. On the other hand, IT usage such as telework and online meetings saw a dramatic increase, which would continue even after the pandemic. These phenomena would necessarily change the way people move. This special issue on "The Demographic Trend of Foreign Nationals in Japan" was elaborated during the pre-COVID-19 era, but it will be followed by researches adapted to the post-COVID-19 age.

National Institute of Population and Social Security Research has been working on the international migration issues since the time of its predecessor, the Institute of Population Problems. For example, a book on international migration was compiled in 1993 based on the discussion made in the Advisory Council on Population Problems. The Institute organized annual seminars titled "Population Decline and Immigration Policies: Japan's Choice" in 2003 and "New Trends in International Migration - Towards a Japanese Model" in 2013. In 2019, the general budget project "Survey on Emigration Pressure in Asia" was conducted and continued this year. Other than these activities, many researchers in the Institute have been conducting researches on international migration. This special issue is the result of such endeavor. It is planned to cover this number and the next.