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Japanese Local Governments Facing the Reality of Immigration

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Introduction

This paper presents the results of a survey conducted on Japanese municipal governments regarding their attitudes and policies towards foreign residents. While assimilation and exclusion were historically the only approaches the Japanese authorities took in handling immigrants (mostly Korean former colonials), the reality of ever-increasing immigration heralds the task of integration. [1] A national government is generally the ultimate decision-maker when it comes to immigration policy, including matters of integration. Yet most pressure to perform better is framed in terms of immigration *control*. The Japanese government, following European examples, perceives control and integration as the two pillars of its immigration policy, but the latter task needs more local involvement than the former. Therefore it is meaningful to focus on local-level immigration policy, which inevitably focuses more attention on immigrant integration.

When a substantial number of foreigners begin to live within the same local boundary, municipal governments are expected to address any problems. They must turn to higher-level administrators for policy guidelines and budget provision, but decisions at the national level may or may not suit particular localities. Public opinion is created from people's local experiences, which local administration must respond to. It is also local administration that immigrants most frequently encounter as a state agent of their host country. In Japan the idea of democracy is also tested at the local level in the debate concerning the voting rights of 'foreigners'. Taking all the above into account, the purpose of the survey was to gauge how municipal governments (*shi-cho-son*, that is, cities, towns and villages) perceive immigrants under their jurisdiction.

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A teacher teaches a student from Brazil how to say "cheek" in Japanese
in a special classroom established for foreign children.
Komatsu City, Ishikawa Prefecture, 2005.

Providing information in the foreign residents' own language is a first step to responding to their needs. It is hardly sufficient as an administrative service in itself, but at least it can be argued that if foreign residents can access the most basic information on education, housing, health care, etc. in their own language, they can convey to local administrators their particular needs. Therefore, two of the six questions in the survey were about non-Japanese language services.

Another focus of the survey was to gauge the extent to which foreign residents are perceived as 'citizens'. Although foreign residents by definition do not hold the nationality of the host country, they already have partial citizenship (Marshall and Bottomore, 1993; Soysal, 1994.) Especially, those with regular visa status sometimes claim the rights to be heard as residents as well as taxpayers. [2] Civic activities are also not limited to legal citizens (nationals): foreign residents sometimes participate or even take initiatives in civic activities, such as supporting non-Japanese speaking children's education, helping victims of domestic violence, providing voluntary translation services for hospital patients, etc. In this regard, the definition of citizenship is not tied to that of nationality.

Survey of municipal governments

The survey was conducted in February and March 2006. A questionnaire was dispatched to 2049 municipalities and there were 1413 valid responses. [3] The questionnaire consisted of 6 questions. The first question asked whether there was a designated section handling issues relating to foreign residents. There were 295 affirmative answers. The names varied among municipalities, but popular keywords emerged; 104 of them included the term *kokusai* (international), within which *kokusai koryu* (international exchange) was used in 57 cases. Another popular term was *shimin* (citizens), used in 64 cases. Also 18 offices had *jinken* (human rights) in their names, suggesting that immigrant issues are also human rights issues. It was also interesting to see from their titles that 10 offices were also set up to handle gender issues. Some answered that different sections took responsibility for foreign residents depending on specific needs (health care, education, pension, etc.).

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Some small-scale municipalities with small numbers of foreign residents provided services through the section that handles alien registration (such as *cho-min ka,* Town-People Division or *ju-min ka*, Residents Division).

The second question asked how the administrative offices distribute information to foreign residents and in what language. Respondents were given multiple choices. In terms of language, 1038 municipalities use Japanese, 650 use English, 385 use Chinese, 281 use Portuguese, 239 use Korean, 166 use Spanish, 73 use Filipino, and 34 municipalities use Thai; in terms of how the information is delivered, 348 municipalities produce and distribute guidebooks for general information on the locality; 253 provide a general information website; 772 produce and distribute leaflets on garbage collection; 453 hand out whatever information they provide at the time of alien registration; and 541 municipalities leave information materials at the counter to be taken freely.

While only 206 municipalities stated clearly that they did not have any foreign language service, a further 631 stated that they used only Japanese to provide information to foreign residents. 401 said that they provided information on garbage collection in languages other than Japanese and 176 declared that they had some kind of multilingual service for information other than garbage collection.

Although the question specified the provision of garbage collection information as the most likely task that municipal governments may address using multiple languages, some cities indicated that this was not the case. In Osaka prefecture, for example, 12 cities answered that they provided multi-lingual services in areas other than garbage collection, and 3 among them specified health care and public education as the areas where information was distributed in foreign languages. Garbage collection is based on locally specific rules, thus municipal governments cannot rely on higher-level administrators, whereas health care and education are under the jurisdiction of the prefecture. Consequentially, it is not always certain whether such information on health care and education is prepared by municipal governments. For example, municipal administrations distribute foreign language *boshi-techo* (a medical record book for pregnant women and their babies) prepared by the prefecture.

The third question asked whether they offer regular consultation services for foreign residents and, if they do, in what language or languages. 236 municipalities provide such services; 146 municipalities provide them in Japanese, 147 in English, 93 in Chinese, 78 in Portuguese, 58 in Spanish, 33 in Korean, 18 in Filipino and 11 in Thai.

The fourth question asked whether there was an advisory organization that communicated the opinions of foreign residents to the municipal administration. 43 municipalities gave positive answers in addition to 50 municipalities that

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acknowledged a 'voluntary civic organization' with which the administration has regular contact. Furthermore, 14 municipalities planned to set up a system by which the voices of foreign residents could be heard. The rest gave negative answers; but nine of them said their administrative offices had other types of contact with foreign residents.

The fifth question was about wider civic activities by foreign residents. It asked whether the administration had a list of civic groups, including NPOs, and whether there was any group, or groups, in which foreign residents actively participated. 345 municipalities confirmed that they had such a list, and 121 municipalities were aware of groups in which foreign residents played active roles. Among the multiple choices indicating area of activity, education was most popular (33 municipalities), whereas cultural exchange (expressed variously, but characterized by frequent inclusion of the word 'exchange', *koryu*) was named in the 'other' category as activities carried out by foreign residents (31 municipalities).

The last 'question' was an invitation to write freely regarding the municipality's foreign residents. There were 455 comments, which varied from those expressing serious concern about a shortage of resources to those which stated that no problems existed. A popular concern was over language and communication, although this may have reflected a bias arising from earlier questions on language. Municipalities in the Hokuriku and Tokai regions which either recently experienced a large-scale earthquake or have long been aware of the inevitable occurrence of earthquakes, indicated their need for a communication system by which non-Japanese residents can access information in times of emergency.

General Observations – Diversity of Tasks

The survey confirmed that the attitudes of municipalities vary widely across Japan. A large majority of the municipalities, especially smaller towns and villages in rural areas, have no, or very few, foreign residents, thus there is no issue of 'immigrant integration'; but there are also rural municipalities that are seriously concerned with the very small minority of foreign residents. Typical problems occur in the case of foreign women, who tend to be isolated in rural areas. Married to Japanese husbands, they often become solely responsible for home maintenance, children's education and care-giving for the husband's parents - all on top of facing language and cultural barriers (Satake and Da-anoy, 2006). Although concerned about such problems, those municipal governments still find it difficult to tackle them, mainly due to a lack of human resources and budget. On the other hand, municipalities with a relatively large proportion of foreign residents have been active in handling the problems associated with them. Even among such municipalities, however, tasks vary. Foreign residents themselves are not of just one kind. They may be

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newcomers and have difficulty in getting very basic information for living, or they may have been in Japan for generations, and thus without any language or cultural adjustment problems. While many newcomers work in small-scale industries and suffer from lack of health insurance coverage, an increasing number of white-collar foreign business people live in big cities. In some municipalities, the majority of foreign residents are students.

Tabunka-kyosei, literally 'multicultural co-existence', repeatedly appeared in the free comments section of the survey. The term's meaning is better understood as 'multicultural community building', although it comes under criticism for its vagueness despite frequent usage. [4] *Somu-sho* (the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Post and Telecommunications) released a report in March 2006 entitled '*Tabunka kyosei suisin puroguramu no teigen*' (Proposal to Pursue a Program for Multicutural Co-existence). This report is supposed to be the cornerstone of immigrant integration policy at the national level. It seems that multiculturalism has been officially adopted as part of immigrant integration policy; but it is hard to deny that Japanese society imposes strong pressure to assimilate on any member within its territory, including foreign residents. For example, one comment in the survey said 'Foreign residents have their own networks along nationality lines, and some of them do not feel it necessary to assimilate into Japanese society. On the other hand, Japanese society is still trapped in a Western-at-top hierarchy, with racial bias remaining. As a result, it seems very difficult to achieve complete co-existence.'

As mentioned above, pressure to assimilate is particularly strong for foreign wives, especially for those who comprise a major group within a small minority of foreigners in rural areas such as Tohoku and Shikoku. Another comment in the survey also revealed such pressure, as the respondent expressed his/her sympathy towards 'brides-from-abroad' since they were pressured to 'Do in Rome as the Romans do'. Because the size of administrative bodies, reflected in budgets and resources, tends to be smaller in such areas, local administration faces difficulties in supporting them. Also noteworthy is the fact that the comments in the survey often referred to a lack of language problems with the foreign residents as those foreign wives had Japanese family. As far as the administration was concerned, any official information could be communicated to foreign individuals via family members.

Gaikoku-jin shuju toshi kaigi (Convention for Cities and Towns with Concentrations of Foreign Residents), established in 2001, is comprised of cities and towns that have a considerable proportion and number of newly-arrived foreign residents (particularly Brazilians). Member cities are spread over six prefectures, two of which, Aichi and Shizuoka, are among the 10 biggest prefectures in terms of foreign population. While these cities focus on

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their mainly newcomer Brazilian and Peruvian populations [5], there are other cities with a large number of foreign residents of more diverse backgrounds. For example, in Tokyo's Shinjuku-ward, the largest group, Koreans, make up 40.3%, and the second largest group, Chinese, 32.9%. In Yokohama-city and Kawasaki-city, both in Kanagawa prefecture, there are 71,000 and 29,000 registered foreigners respectively. Kanagawa is the prefecture with the fourth biggest foreign population, but no cities in Kanagawa participate in the *Gaikoku-jin shuju toshi kaigi*. Kanagawa also has a large number of so-called old-comers: 14.8% of the foreign residents in Kanagawa have a special permanent resident visa (Homu-sho, 2006). It seems that the *Gaikoku-jin shuju toshi kaigi*'s focus on Latin American immigrants does not match the situation in Kanagawa or Tokyo even though those areas also have many new-comers.

With this diversity of immigrants and of areas in which they live, each municipality faces a wide range of tasks. On the one hand, some localities with a relatively large number and proportion of foreign residents have launched various programs to support their specific needs. It was reported that the *Somu-sho* is to subsidize municipalities with programs for foreign residents (*Asahi Shinbun*, 8 March 2007). The recipient municipalities are those that have experienced a sudden increase in number of foreign residents. Mayors and city officials of *Gaikoku-jin shuju toshi kaigi* have been claiming that they had reached the limit of their capacity to handle the problems their foreign residents face. These cities, instead of turning to their respective prefectures, have requested help from the national government. On the other hand, there are localities where the number and proportion of foreign residents are not high, yet which anticipate a considerable increase. Since their concentration of foreign residents is relatively low, it is more difficult for such municipalities to provide services efficiently and effectively.

Since most of the municipal governments feel a responsibility to respond to the needs of foreign residents in parity with those of Japanese residents, it is possible to conclude that foreign residents are considered 'citizens' in the eyes of municipal governments. Some municipal governments specifically state that foreign residents are not guests but full-members of the community as much as Japanese residents. However, the vast majority of the municipalities do not have any organized channel to hear the voices of foreign residents, which in turn keeps them 'invisible' to the administration as well as to the legislature at the local level. Civic activities by foreign residents are not acknowledged as much as are those by Japanese residents. Consequently, the actions of governments do not measure up to their claims that foreign residents are full 'citizens' of the community.

Notes:

[1] In the Japanese context, assimilation means pressure from the state and the

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society on individuals to act according to pre-defined standards in terms of language, mannerisms and behavior. Extreme examples can be found in the colonial period when the state forced Japanese names and language to Korean and Taiwanees colonial subjects. Exclusion means legal and social handicaps that burden individuals, such as discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, race, etc. For example, lack of legislation to tackle racism and xenophobia allows widespread discriminatory customs. Integration involves partial, if not full, membership of individuals.

[2] It has been suggested that 'more rights' for regular migrants correlates to further marginalization of irregular migrants by Petrice Flowers and other participants at the ISA Workshop, 'Emerging Trends in Asian Migration', February 27, 2007, Chicago. The survey asked municipalities how they deal with their 'residents', and so implicitly excluded irregular migrants. Issues of irregular migrants and municipal governments are left to further study.

[3] Due to the large number of mergers, the total number of municipalities has been further decreased and will be 1804 by the end of March 2007.

[4] The translation as 'multicultural community building' was recommended by Keizo Yamawaki at the Symposium: Issues Surrounding Foreign Residents in Japan: International Experiences in Migrant Integration and Challenges Facing Japan, held on March 9, 2007, at U Thant International Conference Hall 3rd floor, UN House, Tokyo. For criticism of overuse of the term, see *Oshu oyobi Hokubei Kakkoku ni okeru gaikokujin no zairyu kanri no jitsujo ni kansuru chosa hokokusho* (Reports on Immigration Control in Europe and North America), February 2006, p. 3, footnote 1.

[5] Although still the majority of its foreign residents are Brazilians, the mayor of Toyota-city pointed out that there are increasing varieties of nationalities among the foreign residents within the city, and suggested the necessity to respond to such demographic transformation. At the Symposium: Issues Surrounding Foreign Residents in Japan: International Experiences in Migrant Integration and Challenges Facing Japan, held on March 9, 2007 at U Thant International Conference Hall 3rd floor, UN House, Tokyo.

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Appendix: Survey Results

Question 1: Is there a section that handles issues related to foreign residents?

Number of Affirmative Answers: 295

Typical names of the section: *kokusai-koryu* (international exchange) 57

Question 2: How does the administration distribute information to foreign residents?

Language Service	Japanese	1038	Portuguese	281	Other	41
	English	650	Spanish	166	(including Indonesian, Vietnamese, Russian, French and German)	
	Chinese	385	Filipino	73		
	Korean	239	Thai	34		

How does the administration provide such information?

Produces and distributes guidebooks for general information in the locality	348
Provides general information on website	253
Produces and distributes leaflets on garbage collection	772
Hands out whatever information they provide at the time of alien registration	453
Leaves information materials at the counter to be taken freely	541
Other	67

Question 3: Does the administration offer a regular consultation service for foreign residents?

Number of Affirmative Answers: 236

Language	Japanese	146	Portuguese	78	Other	13
	English	147	Spanish	58		
	Chinese	93	Filipino	18		
	Korean	33	Thai	11		

Question 4: Is there an organization that communicates with municipal administration in order to funnel opinions of foreign residents?

Number of Affirmative Answers: 99

Type of Organization among Affirmative Answers	With Official Advisory Status	All Members Are Foreigners	10
		Half Foreign, Half Japanese Members	8
		Others	15
	Voluntary Organization		50
	Considering Set-up of an Organization		14
	Others		10
Negative Answer Yet Specifying a System for Collective Communication			9

Some cities have more than one organization with which the municipal administration communicates; therefore the total number of these organizations is greater than what the affirmative answers might indicate.

Question 5: Is there a list of civic groups including NPOs within the jurisdiction?

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Number of Affirmative Answers: 345

In the list, is there a group in which foreign residents play active roles?

Number of Affirmative Answers: 121

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