

BY ALASTAIR GALE AND RIVER DAVIS | SEPT 11, 2019

## The Great Immigration Experiment: Can a Country Let People in Without Stirring Backlash?

One of the world's most closed countries, Japan, needs workers but worries about social and political turmoil



Chinese factory workers at Japan's Nagasaki Industry Co. BENJAMIN PARKS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**Y**OKOHAMA, Japan—Filipino nurse Candy Alovera has one shot at a life in Japan. She and her partner must learn Japanese and pass a tough nursing examination on the first try.

If they succeed, they will be able to bring their 7-year-old son from the Philippines and work at jobs that pay five times what they earned back home. If not, they will have to leave.

While such policies would qualify as tough in many Western nations, in Japan they represent an opening up. One of the world's most immigration-resistant countries is trying to attract workers needed for jobs ranging from apple picking to airport baggage handling.

To do that, Japan is imposing strict rules in an effort to head off the kind of social and political turmoil that migration has brought to the U.S. and Europe. In many cases, foreign workers in Japan can't bring family members and can't stay longer than five years. Most programs require Japanese-language proficiency. Only in the most labor-starved industries can foreigners secure a path to permanent residency—and the government can cut off the flow if the shortage eases.

"It's hard to leave our son, but it's all for him actually," said the Filipino nurse, Ms. Alovera, who is allowed to work in Japan for three years while she prepares for the test.

Japan's experiment, which some business leaders and human-

rights groups say is too restrictive, is a test of whether a country can bring in foreign workers without sparking the kind of populist backlash that has turned immigration into a divisive issue in the U.S., Germany, Italy, the U.K. and other countries.



Filipino nurse Candy Alovera is allowed to work in Japan for three years while she learns Japanese and studies for a tough nursing examination. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

As Japan debated opening up, some politicians and newspaper editorials warned that it needed to avoid the instability seen in the West.

"It would be a disaster if we ended up with the same problems as the U.S. and Europe because we don't have a proper immigration policy," Yuichiro Tamaki, the leader of opposition Democratic Party for the People, said late last year as policy makers put together plans to allow in more foreigners.

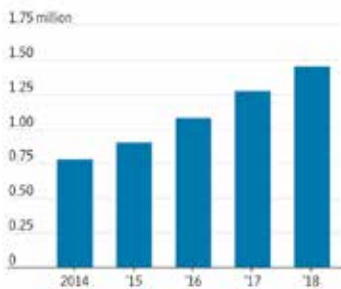
**The Great Immigration Experiment: Can a Country Let People in Without Stirring Backlash?**

In the past four years, the number of foreign workers in Japan has nearly doubled to 1.46 million, and a new visa system promises to accelerate the influx. At the same time, the country’s political system is as stable as it has been in decades. The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in power for nearly seven years, easily scored a victory in July’s parliamentary elections, where immigration was hardly discussed.

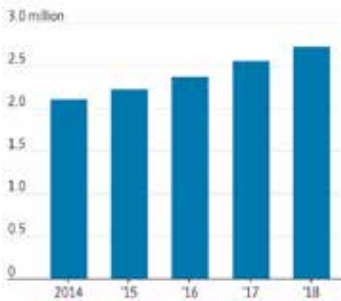
**Opening Up**

Numbers of foreign workers and residents have risen as Japan tries to attract needed workers.

**Foreign workers\***



**Foreign residents\***



\*Levels measured in October of each year. \*Levels measured in December of each year. Sources: Japan Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (workers), Japan Ministry of Justice (residents)

burdening Japan’s financially strained public health-care program. Supporters of the program who say they need more workers have been equally vocal.

For centuries, Japan has stayed mostly closed to immigrants because of fears they would trigger unrest. Consequently, it never experienced the waves of post-World War II migration that brought large non-native populations to many Western countries. As an island nation, it has natural advantages in controlling its borders.

Mr. Abe, with the tacit consent of opposition parties, has made an economic argument for welcoming overseas workers. He has said they would boost the economy and fill

“Even though foreign workers have a negative image, there haven’t been any dissenting voices in the ruling party,” said Mr. Abe’s top aide, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, in an interview. “In my view, that shows how real the labor shortage problem is.”

In a survey of 27 countries by the Pew Research Center last year, Japan was the only nation in which those wanting immigration to rise outnumbered those who thought it should decline.

Nonetheless, fast-tracked plans to bring in more foreign workers have stirred some concern about large numbers of foreigners failing to integrate into society and

jobs that Japanese people often don’t want.

The policy isn’t about recasting Japan as a nation of immigrants or fulfilling any obligation to accept people from war-torn nations. Immigration authorities say they granted residency to only 82 refugees last year, less than 1% of those applying—a statistic that prompted objections from some foreign groups but relatively little discussion at home.

Japan’s population has been shrinking for a decade, and nearly three in 10 people are 65 or older. Last year, the number of Japanese living in Japan fell by around 430,000, roughly the population of Oakland, Calif., contributing to the greatest scarcity of job applicants in more than 40 years.

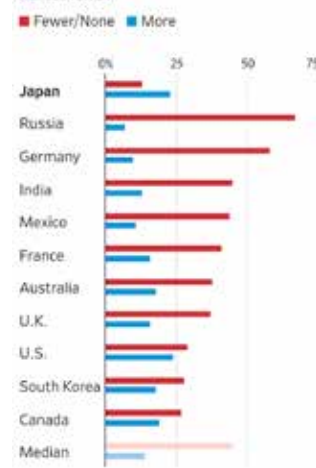
Convenience stores previously open 24 hours are now closing before midnight, parcel companies are limiting delivery hours because they can’t find drivers and the nation’s military is running short of new soldiers.

Japan experimented with immigration once before, but in a limited way that highlighted its ambivalence toward foreigners. At the peak of the bubble economy years in 1990, it began offering residency to descendants of Japanese who had emigrated to Latin America to work on coffee plantations in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thousands of immigrants from Brazil, Peru and other countries took factory jobs. Then, when Japan’s exports slumped and unemployment surged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the government offered them cash payments to return to Latin America.

**Public Support**

In a survey of 27 nations, Japan was the only one in which those who said they wanted more immigrants outnumbered those who wanted fewer.



Source: Pew Research Center (2018)

When the economy recovered, some employers muddled through by using a system dating back to the 1990s that allows foreigners to work as interns for three or five years.

Mr. Abe told a group of economic officials and business leaders he “no intention of implementing a so-called immigration policy,” meaning he didn’t envision setting a target for permanent admissions of immigrants. Instead, he said, the point was “to aid sectors of the economy in real need

**The Great Immigration Experiment: Can a Country Let People in Without Stirring Backlash?**

by accepting foreign workers for limited stays and without their family members.”

It turned out to be harder than Mr. Abe thought to crack open the door so cautiously. When the Japanese press reported that the government was limiting the new visa program to five industries, “suddenly there were calls of ‘We’re in trouble, too! We’re in trouble, too!’ from other businesses,” recalled Mr. Suga, Mr. Abe’s aide and an architect of the program. The scope of the program was set at 14 industries.

Legislation was rushed through Parliament, and the program took effect in April. Japan expects to use the program to admit around 340,000 foreign workers in lower-skilled positions over the next five years.

There has been some confusion and frustration among local authorities and businesses about how the program will work and who is eligible.

Nagasaki Industry Co., a metalwork company in the city of Nagoya, has depended on foreigners who were permitted to work under the older internship system. The work they do is considered too highly skilled to fall into one of the categories of the new visa program.



Top: Yoji Nagasaki, president of Nagasaki Industry Co., wants more flexibility shown to foreign workers. Above: Wang Kan, a 28-year-old factory worker from the Inner Mongolia region of China.  
PHOTO: BENJAMIN PARKS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

Company president Yoji Nagasaki wants more flexibility shown to foreign workers. “It’d be a dire situation without them,” he said.

Cao Jingshuai, from Dalian in northern China, is on his second placement as an intern at the company and has a two-year visa through 2020. “Of course, I would like to stay longer,” he said, in Chinese, during a break from welding. “I make good money here.”

In the city of Settsu, near Osaka, the local government is in a standoff with people opposed to the construction of a training center for Vietnamese and Indonesian workers in a residential area. Posters and banners around the proposed construction site display slogans such as: “The center threatens the safety of our children.”

The proposed facility would provide a month of language and other training for around 60 workers before they move on to jobs elsewhere.

“I’m not opposed to immigration, but Japan is an island nation. For hundreds of years, it’s been the same people,” said Yoshio Hashimoto, who heads a group opposed to the training center. “With 10 or so people, crime probably wouldn’t rise. But make this 100 people or 200 people, and of course the risk of crime will rise.”

To ease such tensions, the new visa program requires candidates to prove a basic level of Japanese-language ability. English and other languages aren’t widely spoken in Japan.

The language requirement is important to foster acceptance of foreign workers and discourage cultural enclaves that could trigger a backlash, said Junko Yagasaki, a law professor at Meiji University in Tokyo who studies immigration.

“The best scenario is that foreign workers want to live in Japan for a long period of time and want to be a member of Japanese society, which means that they speak the language and follow Japanese ways,” Ms. Yagasaki said. “I think Japanese people would accept them quite well, unlike the stereotypical idea that Japanese are exclusive and insular-minded.”

The program allows the government to dial back immigration if there is a recession or technological shift that eliminates the need for foreign help. Economists at Mitsubishi Research Institute, a think tank, forecast that Japan’s labor shortage will peak at around two million people next year and gradually fall back to zero around 2028 because of expected advances in robotics and artificial intelligence.



**The Great Immigration Experiment: Can a Country Let People in Without Stirring Backlash?**

For now, foreign workers enjoy something of a seller's market, with Japan competing against other relatively affluent Asian nations that also have worker shortages. South Korea issues around 45,000 visas each year for workers from countries such as Pakistan and Nepal to take positions in manufacturing, fisheries and other sectors. Draft legislation in Taiwan aims to attract foreigners to fill labor shortages in areas including nursing.

Mitsuru Nishigaki runs a school in Yangon, Myanmar, that teaches Japanese and introduces students in the Southeast Asian country to employers in Japan. Currently 45 of its students are scheduled to work for a restaurant chain under the new visa program starting next year.

Mr. Nishigaki said some locals seeking work overseas favor the Korean system, which provides a government guarantee of employment, unlike Japan, and typically costs less in fees to brokers. Japan, however, is seen as providing better training for skills that will be useful once workers return to Myanmar, he said.

Conditions for foreign workers at Japanese companies came under scrutiny last year after a Vietnamese intern at a painting company died by suicide and left a note saying he faced extreme bullying and violence at his workplace. A probe by the Justice Ministry found that 9,052 foreign interns fled their jobs last year, around 2% of the total number, alleging unjust treatment such as unpaid wages. The ministry also said that 171 interns died while in the program between 2012 and 2017, of which 17 were suicides.

Japanese officials say they are working to improve inspections of businesses that hire foreign workers under the new visa program.

Ms. Alovera, the 32-year-old nurse from the Philippines, first thought about working in Japan after visiting her elder sister, who was living in the country.

Life now for Ms. Alovera means attending class from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., six days a week, in a rundown warehouse area of the port city of Yokohama, where she is drilled in the Japanese language and learns local rules such as how to throw out her trash.

At night, she goes back to her dormitory room in a converted hotel with stained walls and musty smells. She studies for hours more, sometimes listening to Japanese news programs on the radio built into the headboard of her bed. She has tacked papers with Japanese characters on the wall, along with a photo of her 7-year-old son, who lives with her partner's mother in the Philippines.

After six months of training, she will be assigned to an elderly-care home in a rural area. Her partner, whom she plans to marry, also is in the program and will be based at another facility an hour away.

In the Philippines, where she was a nurse for five years, she earned \$287 a month. In Japan, she said, she will be paid five times as much.

If either Ms. Alovera or her partner pass a nursing-care examination in Japanese in three years, they can get residency in Japan and bring their son. There is a small chance of an extension if they both fail, but they likely would have to leave.

Recently, the couple had a scare when the boy came down with a fever. They worried it was dengue fever after a classmate had died from the disease. It was hard to concentrate on her studies, said Ms. Alovera.



If Ms. Alovera passes a nursing-care examination in Japanese in three years, she can get residency in Japan and bring her son.  
PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Ms. Alovera's phone shows a photo of her son, who for now is still living in the Philippines.  
PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Sometimes I think I want to go home," she said. "The reason I want to go home is family, but the reason I came here in the first place was family."