



Small Centre Conversations: Immigration and Settlement Beyond the Megacity in Japan

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THE SMALL CENTRES CONVERSATIONS

On September 20th, 2024, the Small Centre Conversations: Immigration and Settlement Beyond the Megacity in Japan workshop was generously hosted by the Japanese Cultural Association of Manitoba (JCAM) in Winnipeg, MB. The workshop was organized and facilitated by the Migration in Remote and Rural Areas (MIRRA) Network and the Rural Development Institute (RDI). This workshop was made possible by contributions from the Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO), and the University of Winnipeg - including the East Asian Languages and Cultures Program.

This MIRRA Network Research and Policy brief captures proceedings from the day, and situates it within contemporary discussions on immigration to small centres in Japan. This workshop and this following document are intended to be the next step in a multi-year collaboration plan with Japanese and Canadian researchers. The ultimate goal for this collaboration is to develop international comparative research on contemporary small centre immigration in both Canada and Japan.

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JAPANESE CULTURAL
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This iteration of the Small Centre Conversations series was designed to elicit conversations amongst scholars, policy makers, and community practitioners, including members of newcomer serving communities and settlement service provider organizations (SPOs), in Canada and Japan. It brought together experts on migration and community economic development practices, as well as scholars and community members with an interest in contemporary social and political debates in Japan. The themes and discussions of the day were timely for our Japanese participants and audience members, as amidst pressing demographic realities – including a rapidly ageing society and a significant anticipated decline in Japan’s national population – Japan is experiencing an important national debate on the country’s relationship with immigration.





Indeed, Japan boasts some of the world's most dynamic urban economies in major metropolitan centers like Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka – each of which attracting foreigners to work and live therein. However, presenters showcased a different reality in Japan. That is, they discussed realities of smaller Japanese centres and rural and remote areas, many of which are increasingly considering strategies to attract and retain foreign born workers for community sustainability and economic vitality. We were interested in exploring how those enacting such strategies make their communities more welcoming for newcomers. As well as identifying what roles the various levels of government in Japan play in facilitating immigration to smaller centres and rural and remote areas.

This event built on our collaboration towards understanding the 'welcoming communities' paradigm for newcomer attraction, retention, and inclusion, as well as its applicability in a Japanese context. In the Canadian context, welcoming communities signify an objective, and concrete suite of initiatives formulated by the Canadian government and a multitude of civil society actors. These civil society actors include migration and community economic development researchers, as well as settlement personnel. Decades in the making, the 'welcoming communities' paradigm has emerged as a central concept for local migration governance, capturing how Canadian communities can better serve the needs and aspirations of newcomers. It is simultaneously national (through funding, frameworks, action plans), provincial, and local in nature. These actors at all levels develop place-based initiatives with organizations, newcomers, and established community members to create inclusive spaces and programming to facilitate settlement and integration (see Guo & Guo, 2016; Silvius & Boddy, 2023). Moreover, the notion of welcoming communities codifies and enshrines the expectation that a range of government and non-government actors participate more actively in the settlement and integration of newcomers by creating a welcoming environment. It is of particular significance to smaller centres and regions outside of major metropolitan centers who are seeking to increase their share of Canada's newcomer arrivals for their local labour market, business succession, and general economic needs (see for example, Depner & Teixeira, 2012; Helps et al., 2021; Walton-Roberts et al., 2019).

In Japan, *tabunka-kyōsei* (multicultural co-existence) has served as a central concept for municipalities to retain and integrate foreign-born workers. It is therefore of significance to Japanese municipalities looking to fulfill local labour market needs as part of their local economic development and internationalization strategies (Tokuda et al., 2023; Green, 2021). *Tabunka-kyōsei* is one component of an emerging national debate in Japan, regarding the place of increased immigration to address present and future demographic realities, as an ageing population and population decline produce instability in Japanese labour markets (Clark et al. 2010). The effects of these demographic changes are likely to disproportionately effect smaller centres and regions outside of Japan's major metropolitan centres. With this context in mind, the invited presenters, respondents, and audience members engaged in presentations, discussions, and inter-cultural learning on newcomer settlement initiatives in Japanese and Canadian small centres.



Figure 1. Dr. Art Miki providing opening remarks for the Small Centres Conversations Event



WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS

Don Boddy, the Small Centre Support Manager from MANSO, served as the event moderator. He began the event by welcoming attendees and urging the audience members to consider contemporary Canadian immigration practices in the context of immigration and colonization's impact on Indigenous communities. He was followed by Winnipeg resident, Dr. Art Miki - a former President of the National Association of Japanese Canadians, a member of the Order of Canada, and a member of the Order of Manitoba. Dr. Miki was a central figure to seeking and obtaining redress for Japanese Canadians who faced displacement, dispossession, and internment during World War II. He highlighted the historical context of Japanese immigration in Canada, including widespread discrimination experienced by Canadians of Japanese descent, and stressed the importance of cultivating a welcoming attitude towards new immigrants. Dr. Miki was followed by Minister Tokuro Furuya (Figure 2), the Deputy Head of Mission of the Embassy of Japan in Canada. Minister Tokuro Furuya provided his insights on Japan's labour shortages and the need for more open immigration policies - noting the shift in public attitudes towards foreign born workers.



Figure 2. Minister Tokuro Furuya providing opening remarks for the Small Centres Conversations Event

Following these valuable introductions, Japanese scholars Drs. Tsuyoshi Tokuda (Otani University, Kyoto), Junichiro Koji (Hokkaido University of Education, Hakodate) and Yuko Nikaido (Notre Dame Seishin University, Okayama) presented research findings on the state of immigration policy in Japan, with a focus on smaller centres and remote regions. They offered a macroscopic analysis of the current state of Japanese community-based and regional immigration strategies, the national framework within which these occur, and provided illustrative examples from places like the prefectures of Hokkaido, Ehime, and Shimane.

Presentation 1: Difficulties of Welcoming Immigrants into Rural Japan

Provided By Dr. Tsuyoshi Tokuda

Joining the event via zoom (at approximately 4:00 am in his time time), Dr. Tokuda offered his presentation, "Difficulties of Welcoming Immigrants into Rural Japan." He discussed the demographic shifts in rural Japan, attributing the growing number of newcomers to the country's population decline and labor shortages. As well, noted a significant rise in arrivals of newcomers from countries in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the need for comprehensive immigration policy to support these new residents. Dr. Tokuda highlighted the challenges rural areas face in preparing to accommodate the increasing influx of temporary foreign workers, using Niihama City in Ehime Prefecture as an example. He compared Japan's immigration policy to that of Canada, pointing out Japan's lack of a comprehensive approach and contrasting it with Canada's system of shared responsibility. Dr. Tokuda concluded by stressing the need for more competitive strategies to attract international newcomers to rural areas – especially in light of the severe population decline anticipated in many Japanese communities by mid-21st century.

In response to Dr. Tokuda's presentation, Dr. Yoko Yoshida (Western University) discussed the similarities and differences between immigration programs in Japan and Canada. In Japan, foreign residents in rural areas



are typically not permanent residents, whereas urban regions host a mix of economically established permanent residents and foreign technical interns. Dr. Yoshida highlighted Japan's approach to multicultural coexistence, which mainly revolves around the temporary residence of foreign workers. This contrasts the Canadian model that emphasizes permanent residency and citizenship for many newcomers. In Japan, companies manage temporary foreign workers, while in Canada, immigration services and programs are handled at both the provincial and federal levels, with shared responsibilities and decision-making. The concept of multicultural coexistence in Japan remains underdeveloped due to the status of foreign workers. Furthermore, temporary foreign workers in Japan often lack opportunities to interact with local residents and integrate well into communities.

Presentation 2: Survival Strategies for Small Municipality in Socially and Geographically Disadvantaged Areas by Recruiting Workers from Abroad Provided By Dr. Yuko Nikaido

In her presentation, "Survival Strategies for Small Municipality in Socially and Geographically Disadvantaged Areas by Recruiting Workers from Abroad: A Case Study of Mimasaka City, Okayama Prefecture, Japan," Dr. Nikaido discussed Japan's labor shortages due to its declining birth rate and aging population. She also provided insights into the challenges that depopulated areas face in providing adequate social resources for foreign workers. Through the presentation, she indicated how the Japanese Technical Intern Training Program attracts young workers from various countries, with Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, China and Myanmar being the primary countries engaging in the program. She outlined that employment of technical intern trainees has expanded rapidly, specifically in municipalities that are facing depopulation. These depopulated areas lack social resources, such as systems and human resources, to support the daily lives of foreign residents. Through this lack of support, communities are not well-prepared in advance to accept or welcome foreign workers. Moreover, while one of the stated premises of the program is for technical interns to return to their countries of origin and contribute to economic development with skills developed while in Japan, she argued that the program's objective is ultimately to secure labour in Japan.



Figure 3. Dr. Yuko Nikaido (right) accompanied by Akiko Fuchisawa (left) in Presentation 2 of the Small Centres Event

Dr. Nikaido stressed that in the absence of national-level immigration policies, Japanese municipalities feel compelled to develop their own practices to address local labour market needs through immigration. One such municipality is Mimasaka City in Okayama Prefecture. Mimasaka City has faced depopulation, with a drastic change from 38,430 residents in 1980, to 25,939 in 2020. The municipality has responded to this by intensifying its efforts to recruit Vietnamese technical interns. As a result, the foreign born population of Mimasaka City has increased from 189 in 2013 to 592 in 2023, with the majority of the latter being Vietnamese.



In response to this presentation, Dr. Jill Bucklaschuk provided insight into patterns of immigration in smaller Manitoba centres such as Morden and Winkler. These municipalities have turned to immigration to address their labour market needs for several years. She also spoke of the experience of the town of Neepawa, which had faced a population decline until it began recruiting foreign workers through the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) Program in 2008. As a result, the number of immigrants in Neepawa increased from 165 before 2011 to 2,060 between 2011 and 2020—an increase of 12.5 times.

Dr. Bucklaschuk emphasized the importance of not only providing support for newcomers, but also creating a welcoming environment that encourages them to stay in the community. While the TFW Program in Manitoba focuses on temporary residency, the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) offers a pathway for individuals to transition to permanent residency. As Manitoba faces its own unique challenges, such as limited language support and a lack of available housing for newcomers, multi-sector collaboration to address these issues is vital. Dr. Bucklaschuk also raised a question about the legal opportunities for foreign workers to settle permanently in Japan and the intentions of those coming there. In response, Dr. Nikaido explained that Japan's program allows foreign workers to stay for a maximum of five years, after which they must return to their home countries unless they qualify for a specialized skilled worker visa. This policy structure underscores the barriers in securing immigrant settlement within community.

Presentation 3: Hokkaido, Land of Welcoming Communities To-Be?: Opportunities and Challenges

Provided By Dr. Junichiro Koji

As the final presenter of the day, Dr. Junichiro Koji shared his presentation, “Hokkaido, Land of Welcoming Communities To-Be?: Opportunities and Challenges.” He discussed the challenges and opportunities related to immigration in the prefecture of Hokkaido, Japan. He began by acknowledging that Hokkaido is the traditional land of the Ainu people, then began to explore the region's demographic trends – noting that its population is projected to shrink from 5.1 million in 2023 to 3.8 million by 2050 due to the aging populations. While the goal of attracting 57,000 foreign residents by 2027 has already been exceeded (over 60,000 foreign residents were recorded as of July 2024), Dr. Koji pointed out that retaining these workers remains challenging, particularly in rural areas, due to lower wages and limited mobility.

Dr. Koji noted that Hokkaido has been able to retain foreign workers under the Technical Intern Training Program and its closed, employer-tied work permit. However, while the program facilitates a degree of retention of foreign workers in a community, as it is ‘prone to different kinds of human rights abuses and severely criticized both internally and internationally.’ He captured the situation succinctly:

“Responding to these criticisms and keeping Japan's competitiveness in international labour market, the Japanese government decided to end the controversial program and replace it by a new program starting in 2027 and allowing workers to change their employers more easily. This change makes stakeholders in Hokkaido nervous due to possible bigger ‘flight risks.’”

- Dr. Junichiro Koji



In his presentation, Dr. Koji discussed various municipalities in Southern Hokkaido, outlining the initiatives they have undertaken and the challenges they face in supporting foreign workers. He emphasized the importance of intergovernmental collaboration and increased resources to create a more welcoming environment. Key recommendations included launching a campaign to promote Hokkaido in the international labor market, developing programs to encourage the long-term settlement of foreign residents, enhancing multilingual information services, and expanding opportunities for Japanese language learning. Additionally, Dr. Koji highlighted the need for stronger stakeholder networks and financial incentives to attract and retain foreign workers. Dr. Koji concluded by suggesting that continued research and collaboration between Japan and Canada could enhance rural immigration policies and better support foreign residents.

In response to Dr. Koji's presentation, Dr. Jeffrey Newmark (University of Winnipeg) offered some reflections on the city of Haboro, in Hokkaido – his Japanese *furusato* (hometown) in which he lived for some time. In the Northwest Hokkaido, Haboro has declined from a peak population of 32,095 in 1969 to 5,996 as of August, 2024. The decline was precipitated by the end of coal mining in 1970 and the discontinuation of the railroad in 1987. These events, alongside the ageing population, have contributed to this depopulation. Haboro has launched a series of attempts at mitigating population decline, with mixed success. This includes a strategy established in 2020 focusing on creating a vibrant town through industrial development, one in which people father and to which they are attracted. Recently, efforts such as attracting workers from larger centres, such as Tokyo, and increasing the recruitment of foreign workers in the fishing industry have had some success – but there is still work to be done in ensuring these strategies put in place foster the growth of immigrant settlement.



Figure 4. Don Boddy (left) gifting Dr. Junichiro Koji with an “Every Child Matters” shirt as a thank you for attending the Newcomer Welcome Dinner, hosted by the Friendship Centre in Portage la Prairie (held September 19, 2024).



Figure 5. Dr. Junichiro Koji presenting his research on welcoming communities in Hokkaido, Japan



CONCLUDING REMARKS & NEXT STEPS

The presentations, responses and discussions presented an opportunity for speakers and attendees to develop a mutual understanding of immigration processes, local immigration governance and policy implementation, and community responses beyond major centres in Japan, Canada and elsewhere.

This workshop showcased the Japan-focused immigration research of three presenting Japanese researchers. By sharing these insights with Manitoban, Canadian and Japanese audiences, we were able to promote mutual learning and discussion on the challenges faced by smaller centers. However, it was also designed to promote discussions and enable comparative research and thinking on the present and future of immigration governance in Japan, Canada, and beyond.

This event was consistent with the objectives of the MIRRA Network and RDI to develop capacity for international comparative research on immigration governance and policy implementation in small centres and remote regions. There is specific interest in continuing to explore, examine, compare, and contrast conceptions such as 'Welcoming Communities' and *tabunka-kyōsei*.

While the depth, scope, and particularities may differ, small centres and rural areas in Japan and Canada face similar challenges in addressing their labour market needs amidst declining or stagnating populations. Especially when these small centres are in competition with larger centres that have more capacity and infrastructure to support newcomers. Our suggestion is that successful small centre immigration strategies will be those that address community needs; are attendant to the rights, needs and aspirations of newcomers; fully engage Indigenous communities, populations, and nations; and are cognizant of the economic development needs of newcomers' home countries and communities.



Figure 6. Entrance to the Japanese Cultural Association of Manitoba Inc.

For more information, make sure to visit the [Migration in Remote and Rural Areas Network Website](#), or connect with Dr. Ray Silvius (University of Winnipeg) at r.silvius@uwinnipeg.ca



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