



The Future of Japanese Society from the Perspective of Foreign Residents
— A Way towards a Multiethnic Society (Summary)

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(1) Background

Since coming to Japan in 2012, I have experienced many facets of this country, ranging widely from interacting with lawyers, professors, business owners and social activists to residing in one of Japan's poorest districts. I have always tried to explore cultures different from my own in order to understand their nature and reality.

After moving from Nagoya to Osaka, I enrolled in the graduate school of Osaka City University, where I received my MA in Sociology. The subject of my thesis was the lives of foreign residents in an impoverished area of Osaka (hereafter "N District"). From the perspective of social capital, I illustrated how foreign residents in this area perceived their neighborhood and viewed Japanese society.

I will present my personal analyses of issues in this article, but what is more important is developing the awareness of the Japanese themselves, who account for more than 98% of our population. I prefer to live in Japan rather than my own country, and I truly hope to see this country grow and prosper.

(2) Demographic diversity: The current situation in N District

N District is known as a major hiring point for day-laborers and as an impoverished residential area for a variety of socially vulnerable people. Not only is it ranked at the top in social aging, unemployment, and other negative criteria, but also the life expectancies for both male and female residents are the shortest in Japan, according to a 2010 study by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. In addition, N District is ostracized and avoided by society in general: it is widely perceived as "frightening", "dangerous" and "rough".

As of December 2015, Japan had 2,232,189 registered foreign residents, representing 1.7% of its population. Among Osaka City's 24 wards, N District has one of the largest foreign populations, following Ikuno Ward, known for its Tsuruhashi Korean Town, and highly internationalized Naka

Ward. N District has had a large Korean population since before World War II, and since 2013, there has been a large inflow from other Asian countries, increasing its foreign Asian population by 400%. This rapid influx is changing the district's demographic into a multiethnic community.

(3) Why is Osaka City's foreign population concentrated in N District?

The key to this phenomenon can be found in the character of N District and the increasing number of Japanese language school students who reside there.

Worldwide, foreign and immigrant populations tend to gather in inner cities. Inner cities generally suffer high poverty rates but offer public housing and cheap apartments, and they are often located near manual labor and other blue-collar workplaces.

As a consequence of language barriers, job shortages and lack of community ties, foreigners tend to be at a disadvantage, and they must focus solely on economic necessities. Newcomers with no reliable Japanese network must depend on relatives or compatriots here. Affordable housing which does not require complicated Japanese real estate procedures such as cosigning, deposits and key money is more accessible to foreigners. Supported by job opportunities and the convenience of daily life in the area, such as low prices, a central location, and a transportation network, N District is an attractive, rational choice for foreign residents.

(4) Relationships with regional communities

The core of my fieldwork consisted of interview (life history) research on 31 foreigners currently or formerly living in N District. The subjects, from 12 countries, had a wide diversity of backgrounds—permanent residents, students, migrant workers from developing countries, Nigerian refugees fleeing persecution, missionaries, entrepreneurs, welfare recipients, illegal immigrants—and represented various ages, periods of stay, jobs, family compositions and resident statuses.

Social capital generally refers to networks of individuals or groups with shared norms, values and understandings that aid mutual cooperation: it manifests the significance of close human relationships.

As these relationships develop, the sense of mutual trust and equality that grows on both sides enhances cooperation, efficiency and activity, and this results in improvement of quality of life and social relationships for all residents. Close cooperation with Japanese at personal and social levels creates strong positive impacts on the lives of foreign residents.

My study revealed that only approximately one-third of the 31 subjects had friendly relationships with Japanese. One reason was the existence of strong ethnic networks: foreigners who belong to

these networks remain in their own communities, and their interactions with Japanese do not evolve beyond the level of organized occasions or events. Another reason was language ability: none of those with low Japanese language skills had full-time employment, and their future in Japan remained uncertain as their visa expiration approached.

Enjoying close relationships with Japanese citizens helps foreigners access important resources and encourages them to remain longer in Japan. It expands their opportunities and networks, and it increases their upward social mobility.

(5) Perception of their neighborhood and Japanese society

While N District has always been a target of discrimination and prejudice, how does it appear in the eyes of foreigners who live there? Surprisingly, three-fourths of my 31 interviewees, regardless of nationality, job or age, emphasized its benefits and showed me how comfortably they live there.

(6) The future of foreign residents

While N District is an attractive neighborhood for foreigners who have difficulty participating in Japanese society, this diverse demographic itself cannot be a solution to this regional problem because of their tenuous relationship with Japanese society and their rapid turnover. [Even if the foreign population grows in the future in both large cities and smaller regional communities across Japan, it will likely maintain a constant turnover unless they become permanent residents.](#)

Today, only 30% of international students who seek work in Japan obtain employment. The support of government, private organizations and NGOs has not been able to reach them because of language barriers and inadequate publicity.

[Organizations to support permanent residency will play a significant role in regions with high foreign populations \(5% or higher\).](#) Regional development focusing on language, job and legal support for foreign residents is an example of a personal networking effort. Ideally, this should be led by municipalities, but private and grassroots involvement will also be essential.

The Japanese government is in fact allocating considerable funds to universities to raise the employment rate of exchange students. Special zones for foreign workers and easing of regulations on foreign residence status are included on the administrative agenda. There are also NPOs supporting foreign residents. I myself run an NPO, “Global Aichi”, in Nagoya to support international students and Japanese companies in finding common ground.

[Foreign residents are potentially a valuable solution to our labor shortage, but Japanese social systems and mindsets need to be adjusted to achieve this goal.](#) As a fortunate foreigner whose life has changed profoundly through acceptance by this country, I sincerely hope that more foreigners

will become permanent residents and live in harmony with their Japanese hosts.

* * See the full text (Japanese): <https://goo.gl/MEqmb9> * *

Voices of foreign residents in N District:

“I like this place. It is close to Namba, and there’s a great train network and so many convenience stores and supermarkets. People are kind. Everybody is. It is safe and convenient. There are a lot of nice shops, too.”

“A lot of Japanese told me, ‘N District is dangerous. It’s a rough neighborhood.’ In my country, you cannot approach a rough neighborhood so easily. This is a quiet place and people are nice. It is not dangerous.”

“We foreigners have various hurdles in Japanese society. There are not enough support systems from the government and communities. We have to help each other to survive.”

Proposals by Elliot Conti:

- Foreigners are a source of cultural diversity and innovation. We should build relationships among Japanese and foreigners, not only in N District but also throughout the country as depopulation progresses.
- Support for foreigners upon arrival based on a system to encourage permanent residency would considerably encourage longer stays.
- Examples of proposed support include: a guaranteed opportunity for public language education, enhanced employment support (especially for international students, who can potentially become highly-skilled workers), simpler and more transparent residential status procedures, and elimination of employment discrimination
- It is necessary to reduce the distance between Japanese and foreign residents. Municipalities, support organizations and NPOs will play important roles.
- Municipalities should promote networking of foreign residents and regional communities to develop mutual understanding through activities such as Japanese language classes, cultural exchange events, international cooking and other craft classes, community study groups, and consulting services. There are many overseas examples of such networking efforts.

Author profile:

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Born in 1990 in Ohio, USA, Conti entered Denison University in Ohio in 2008, pursuing East Asian studies and history. In January 2011, he first visited Japan as a foreign exchange student at Nanzan University in Nagoya and studied there until the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11th. He returned to Japan in October 2012 after graduation and lived in Nagoya for one and half years. In April 2014, he enrolled in the Department of Human Behavioral Sciences in Osaka City University Graduate School and obtained his MA in March 2017.

He became involved in the founding of Global Aichi in Nagoya and currently serves as its Managing Director.

Global Aichi connects foreigners and Japanese organizations through activities including:

(For international students)

- Free Japanese language education
- Employment support

(For companies)

- Seminars
- Support for internationalization

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Elliot Conti with Professor Noriko Ijichi of the Department of Human Behavioral Science. Conti is holding his certificate for “Best Thesis”. The photo was taken in March 2017 after his graduation ceremony.