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Adapting the “Intercultural City” in Japan: Encounter of *Tabunka Kyosei* and Interculturalism

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Introduction

In the House of Councilors election, held in July 2025, immigration policy became a major campaign issue for the first time in Japan’s national election history. Until then, immigration had been discussed only at the margins, often in specialist circles or local politics. However, in this election, a newly formed political party, *Sanseito*, emphasizing a “Japanese First” slogan, gained notable support. Meanwhile, the long-standing ruling LDP and other conservative parties reacted by incorporating stricter policies on foreigners in their campaign pledges. This was a watershed moment, as an issue long peripheral in Japan’s national politics entered the mainstream agenda for the first time.

Immediately after the election, an annual conference of the National Governors’ Association, representing all the 47 prefectures, was held in Aomori. The Association issued a very different message. They rejected exclusivism and xenophobia and reaffirmed the vision of “*Tabunka Kyosei* Shakai” or an Intercultural and Cohesive Society. Furthermore, they proposed creating a “Basic Law for *Tabunka Kyosei*” and establishing a dedicated “Agency for *Tabunka Kyosei*,” policies that would elevate integration to a national priority. This assertive stance is notable given that many governors have in fact close ties to the LDP.

There are two main reasons behind the Association's unified position. First, governors recognize that foreign workers are vital for local economies, particularly amidst acute labor shortages in agriculture, caregiving, and manufacturing. Their stance may show that governors are prioritizing economic realities over national party politics. Second, Japan’s migrant integration policy historically took shape from the bottom up, led by municipalities and prefectures rather than the central government. One such example is the *tabunka kyosei* policy, which originated at the local level and was adopted by almost all prefectures in the last 20 years.

Japan’s demographics show why foreign workers are essential. In 2008, the population was 128 million. By 2070, it is expected to drop to 87 million. The working-age population will also drop to nearly half, from 87 million in 1995 to 45 million in 2070. The aging rate is set to rise from 29% in 2020 to 39% in 2070. Almost 4 in every 10 people will be over 65 years old. It is even estimated that 40% of all the municipalities could disappear by 2040. The famous entrepreneur Elon Musk stated in May 2022, “Japan will eventually cease to exist.” A provocative way to point to a very real trend.

On the other hand, the number of foreign residents in Japan is increasing. The number increased until 2008, rose again after 2013, and has been increasing again since 2021. As of December 2024, there are 3.77 million foreign residents, making up 3% of the total population. They come from diverse countries, including China, Viet Nam, South Korea, the Philippines, Nepal, Brazil, Indonesia, Myanmar, Taiwan, and the U.S. It's also notable that 40% of them are long-term residents.

In 2023, a government think tank made an estimate that foreign residents would make up 10.8% of the population in 2070, which was a big surprise to many. But, last July, soon after the election, Justice Minister said that foreign residents could reach 10% by 2040, given the recent rapid increase of foreign residents.

Given this demographic crisis, the Japanese government has taken action. In December 2018, the Immigration Act was revised to admit low-skilled foreign workers for the first time. A set of comprehensive measures to integrate foreign workers was also adopted. In April 2019, the Immigration Services Agency was set up at the Ministry of Justice in order to play a coordinating role in government policies on foreign residents.

Three Keywords of Migrant Integration Policy in Japan

In South Korea, there has been strong national leadership since the mid-2000s. The Basic Act on the Treatment of Foreigners (2007) and the Multicultural Families Support Act (2008) established a standardized system of support for foreign residents. Systemic Korean language courses are available to foreign residents throughout the country. Local centers provide not just Korean language training, but also counseling, and job assistance, with central funding ensuring uniform service quality across the country.

In Japan, local initiatives often led to central policy frameworks, and there are three keywords that symbolize Japan's approach. First, *Tabunka Kyosei* or Intercultural Cohesion. Before the encounter with the Intercultural Cities Programme, it was translated as "multicultural coexistence," which I think is a wrong translation, used only in Japan. *Tabunka* means many cultures, and *Kyosei* means living together. This term became a keyword for local migrant policy in Japan. It was used by NGOs, supporting foreign victims at Kobe-Awaji Earthquake in 1995. Then used by cities in the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications organized an advisory committee on *tabunka kyosei* in 2005. I was the chair of the committee. Based on the report of the committee, the Ministry made the Plan for *Tabunka Kyosei* at the Local Level in 2006. The plan is built on three pillars: communication support, livelihood support, and community-building. It became a model for *tabunka kyosei* policy of local governments. Now it is adopted by almost all prefectures and major cities.

Second, *Yasashii Nihongo* or simple and considerate Japanese. The term itself reflects a unique concept, as "yasashii" has a dual meaning of both "easy" (linguistic simplicity) and "kind" or "caring" (consideration for others). This concept originated after the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake as a means of transmitting disaster information. In the 2000s, it was also used for conveying daily life information by local governments and NGOs. In 2020, the Immigration Services Agency and the Agency for Cultural Affairs organized an

advisory committee and issued the national guidelines for written Japanese. I was also the chair of the committee.

Third, *Gaikokujin Shujutoshi Kaigi* or the Council of Municipalities with Large Foreign Populations. This council was founded in 2001 at the initiative of Hamamatsu City. It started with 13 members, grew to 29 and currently consists of 10 members.

The council holds an annual conference for policy dialogue between mayors and high-ranking officials of the related ministries. The next conference is to be held in Soja City, Okayama this November. It has influenced central policy making, such as the reform of resident register system. It's probably the world's oldest city network for migrant inclusion.

These keywords symbolize Japan's bottom-up approach. *Tabunka Kyosei* emerged from local NGOs and later used by cities and was adopted by the national government. *Yasashii Nihongo*, born from a local disaster response, became a nationwide communication tool. *Gaikokujin Shujutoshi Kaigi* is a prime example of local governments uniting to influence national policies.

Adaptation process of the “Intercultural City” in Japan

The historical process of Japan's encounter with and adaptation of the “Intercultural City” can be divided into two phases: 2009-2013 and 2014-2024, that is, the phase of the initial encounters and the mayors' summits and the phase of Hamamatsu's membership and initiatives.

In 2009, the Japan Foundation, an affiliated organization for cultural exchange of the Foreign Ministry of Japan, started sending a group of Japanese local officials and experts to Europe, and invited a group of European local officials and experts to Japan. I was one of the experts sent to Europe in 2010 and after the visit, I became convinced that Japan's *tabunka kyosei* policy had a lot to learn from the intercultural approach. I suggested to the Japan Foundation that we hold a summit of Japanese and European mayors as well as Korean mayors. I was aware that Korea was ahead of Japan in promoting migrant integration at that time, so we thought Asia-Europe summit was a good idea.

The first summit was hosted by the Japan Foundation and the Council of Europe in Tokyo in January 2012 and three mayors or vice mayors respectively from Japan, Korea and Europe attended. The second summit was held in Hamamatsu in October 2012, and the third one was held in Ansan, yes, here, in October 2013.

The second phase runs from 2014 to 2024. In April 2015, *Gaikokujin Shujutoshi Kaigi* revised its regulations to include a clause to regard diversity as a resource for urban development. 2016 marked the 20th anniversary of Japan's observer status at the Council of Europe. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to send Mr. Suzuki, the then-mayor of Hamamatsu, and myself to the World Forum for Democracy, held annually by the Council of Europe. At the forum, we discussed our *tabunka kyosei* initiatives. This prompted the Council of Europe to request Hamamatsu City to join the Intercultural Cities Network, which it did the following year in 2017.

A symposium commemorating the membership was held in Hamamatsu in October 2017, and an online intercultural city seminar was also held in Tokyo in December 2018 with Japanese local government officials and Australian ICC member cities. In October 2019, an Intercity Cooperation Summit was held in Hamamatsu, where the mayor of Botkyrka, Sweden, and the deputy mayor of Ballarat, Australia, participated in the conference and held discussions with the mayor of Hamamatsu. Furthermore, in 2021, marking the 25th anniversary of Japan's observer status at the Council of Europe, two online intercultural city seminars were held, and the Council of Europe published a booklet in both Japanese and English titled "An Introduction to the Intercultural City for Local Governments in Japan." Furthermore, in October 2024, an international conference on intercultural city was held again in Hamamatsu, with the participation of the mayor of Ansan and the deputy mayor of Wrocław, Poland.

In August of this year, Shizuoka Prefecture became the second Japanese local government to join the ICC. This was realized mainly because Mr. Suzuki, who served as mayor of Hamamatsu and was the only Japanese member of the ICC, was elected as the governor of Shizuoka Prefecture in May 2024. I explained to Governor Suzuki that the ICC started as a city network, but that the significance of intercultural policies had been advocated at the regional and national levels, and that a network of regional governments was formed in Europe in 2020.

Among the local governments in Japan, Hamamatsu stands out in terms of adopting the intercultural approach in promoting *tabunka kyosei* policies. Hamamatsu City emphasizes diversity advantage as well as interaction among different groups. The city has adopted a policy plan called the "intercultural city vision" three times. Those which use the term of "intercultural cohesion" rather than "multicultural coexistence," which I believe is a wrong translation, for *tabunka kyosei*, include Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Gunma Prefectural Government, Setagaya City in Tokyo, Shizuoka City in Shizuoka Prefecture and Matsudo City in Chiba Prefecture. In short, those which have been promoting the intercultural perspective in Japan are Hamamatsu City, Japan Foundation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now Shizuoka Prefecture.

Challenges

The first challenge is the reorganization of *Gaikokujin Shujutoshi Kaigi*. Around 2010, the council's membership grew to 29, but it has since declined to 10. It would be desirable to reorganize it into a national network, incorporating interculturalism. Relaunching the Council as the Japan Council of Intercultural Cities may be a good idea.

The second challenge is fostering awareness of *tabunka kyosei* among the ordinary people in Japan. As mentioned above, public opinion following the House of Councillors election has been rather negative on *tabunka kyosei*. The business leaders have been silent on the contribution of migrant workers to the local economy and the need for *tabunka kyosei*. Political leaders, including governors and mayors throughout the country, should call on business organizations to contribute more to gain support from citizens for *tabunka kyosei*. They should also ask the media to provide accurate information to counter misinformation and

disinformation and serve as a platform for calm and rational discussion on *tabunka kyosei* to facilitate consensus building.

The third challenge is to build an international network with intercultural cities in South Korea and Australia. Currently there are four ICC members in South Korea, three in Australia, and two in Japan. Physical distance may make exchange with European cities difficult in reality, but holding meetings among the three countries would be much easier. Support for the Intercultural City initiative may vary within each city. A Japan–Korea–Australia intercultural network can boost the initiative’s credibility and public support. In this regard, support from the Japan Foundation, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would be desirable to strengthen ties among the cities and regions in those three countries.

Lastly, a law to promote *tabunka kyosei* is necessary. An organization dedicated to promoting *tabunka kyosei* is also necessary. It should be in charge of integration courses, like those in South Korea.