

Geographical Distributions, Internal Migration and the Impacts on Local Population Dynamics of Foreign Population in Japan: Pre- and Post-Pandemic Patterns

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Background

The sharp decline in international migration flows under the COVID-19 pandemic led to short-term declines in the stock levels of foreign residents in Japan. In addition, there have been significant changes in the composition of the country's foreign residents by fundamental immigrant characteristics such as nationality and residential status. With the acceleration of ageing and shrinking of the country's total population, foreign residents have increased their shares in internal migration within the country, particularly in the non-metropolitan areas. The pandemic-related changes in the number and composition of foreign residents are expected to have impacts on internal migration patterns of foreign residents, and consequently on local population dynamics. Despite the growing roles in the country's population dynamics, particularly at the local level, there is little evidence of changing patterns in geographical distributions and internal migration of foreign residents and their impacts. This paper examines the impacts of COVID-19 on the geographical distributions and internal migration patterns of foreign populations in Japan, highlighting regional differences in the changes and continuities from pre- to post-pandemic periods and their impacts on local population dynamics.

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Data and Methods

The period covered by the analysis is six years from January 2018 to December 2023, with the first two years from January 2018 to December 2019 being referred to as the “*pre-pandemic period*”, the period from January 2020 to December 2021 as the “*pandemic period*”, and the period from January 2022 to December 2023 as the “*recovery period*”. Municipality-level data from the Resident Registration System and the Immigration Statistics, as well as the latest Census results, are used to examine regional differences in the changes and continuities from pre- to post-pandemic periods and their impacts on local population dynamics. Findings are also compared with those of the local Japanese to further identify the demographic impacts and to examine their (dis)continuities in the post-pandemic period.

Results

The main findings are summarised as follows.

Firstly, the impacts of the entry restrictions in response to the pandemic, particularly aimed at controlling new arrivals, are observed to be more significant in non-metropolitan regions. These regions had experienced unprecedented growth in inflows of foreign residents during the pre-pandemic period, mainly due to significant increases in increases young migrants, mostly from other Asian countries under the visa categories of “student” and “trainee (**Figure 1**). The impact is relatively limited in some suburban areas outside the inner metropolitan that had become a new destination for “long-term settlers” during the pre-pandemic period.

The proportion of foreign residents in the country’s total internal migrants, which kept increasing in the 2010s, temporarily dropped in 2020-2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. In 2002, however, the share in inter-prefectural and inter-municipal movements both recovered rapidly to the pre-pandemic level (**Figure 2**).

Among those with a net migration gain in the pre-pandemic period, the proportion of municipalities that tuned into a net migration loss is 20 per cent, for both foreign and

Japanese residents. Over 35 per cent of the municipalities that recorded a net migration loss of foreign residents in the pre-pandemic period experienced a net migration gain in the pandemic period, while the proportion is 13 per cent for the Japanese. The municipalities in the suburban areas and non-metropolitan regions tend to keep net migration inflows of foreign residents. In contrast, the inner-city areas of metropolitan regions and the local capital areas of non-metropolitan regions remain the major destinations of Japanese migrants.

With regard to the continuity of the new migration patterns of foreign residents, over 60 per cent of the municipalities having turned into a net migration gain in the pandemic period kept the same trend in the recovery period (2022-23). These municipalities are observed mainly in suburban areas of the metropolitan regions.

Discussion and Implications

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on internal migration are more significant for foreign residents, whose number and composition drastically changed due to the short-term shrink in international migration inflows. The decline in migration of foreign residents is mostly attributed to reduced movements within the metropolitan areas, which accounted for nearly 70 per cent of movements of foreigners within the country. Despite the overall shrink in migration during the pandemic period, the municipalities located in the suburban areas of the metropolitan regions kept a net gain of foreign residents. These results imply that, compared to the inner-city areas, the impact of the COVID-19 on internal migration of foreign residents are relatively limited in the suburban areas. As for the (dis)continuity of the new trends observed in the pandemic period and its impacts on local population dynamics, further investigations are needed to take into account the rapid recovery of international migration inflows and their regional variations.

**Figure 1. Changes in stock of foreign residents by municipality:
January 2020 to January 2022**

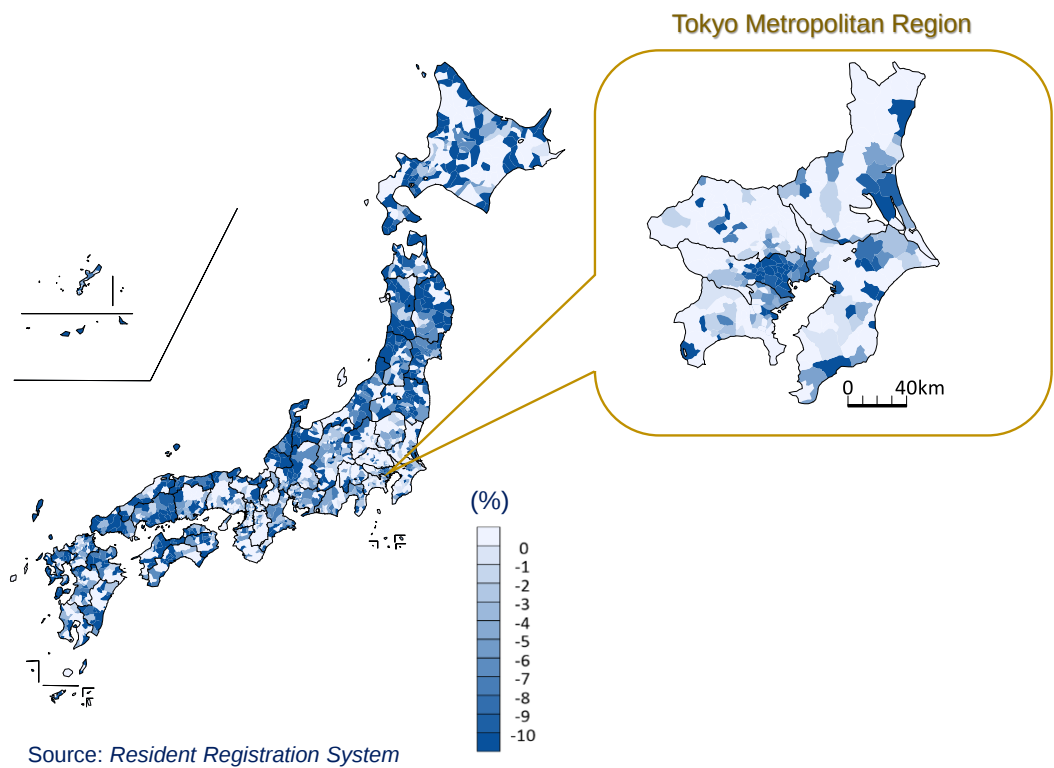
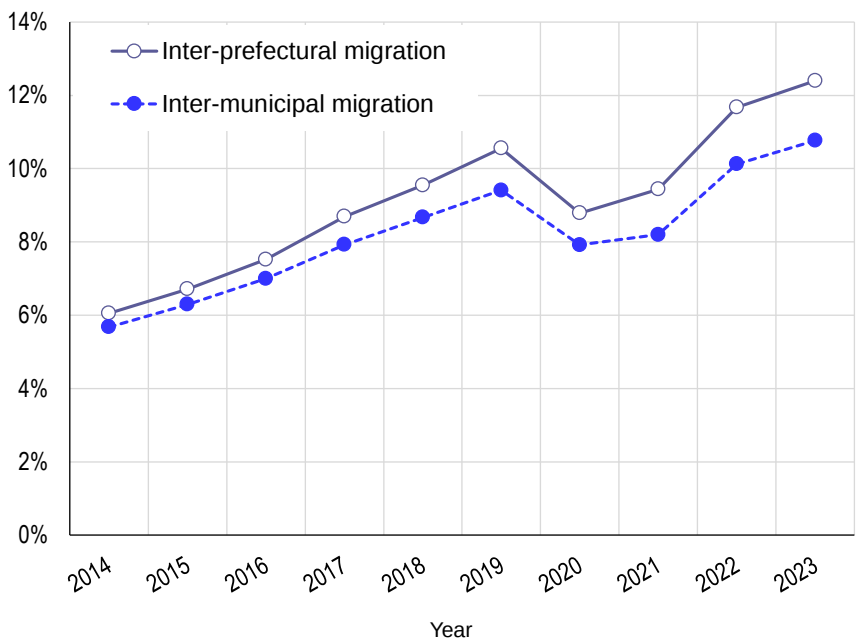


Figure 2. Proportion of Foreign Residents in Internal Migration



Source: Resident Registration System