

Between Experience and Strategy: Legal Status, Naturalization, and Belonging among Second-Generation Migrants and International Students of Chinese Origin in Japan

1. Research Overview

This study examines how Chinese migrants in Japan—particularly second-generation individuals and international students—interpret and navigate legal status, including permanent residency and naturalization. It finds that while the former view naturalization through lived experiences and constraints, the latter approach it instrumentally, revealing divergent meanings of citizenship and integration.

2. Introduction

Japan is widely regarded as a de facto immigration country. By June 2025, foreign residents reached 3.95 million, nearly double the 2012 figure (Immigration Services Agency, 2025). Chinese residents grew from about 640,000 in 2013 to over 900,000 (900,738) in 2025, accounting for roughly 23% of all foreign residents. Despite slower growth than Vietnamese and Nepalese populations, they remain the largest group (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Over 330,000 hold permanent residency, indicating significant long-term settlement.

In this context, denizen rights offer a useful framework. Denizens are foreign nationals with permanent residency (Hammar, 1990). While integration is often seen as a linear process—from temporary resident to denizen to citizen—in reality, many remain long-term denizens due to slow naturalization. At the same time, migration studies have shifted from traditional citizenship laws to civic integration measures, such as language and civic tests, raising debates over inclusion versus exclusion.

Compared to Europe's relatively fluid boundary between citizens and denizens, Japan maintains a stricter institutional divide. This raises the question of how Chinese migrants navigate the path from temporary residency to denizen status and ultimately to citizenship.

3. Research Purpose and Methodology

There remains a notable lack of comparative research that examines differences across migration trajectories within the Chinese population in Japan, particularly between the second generation and international students. Existing studies tend to treat “Chinese migrants” as a homogeneous category, overlooking how distinct life courses shape divergent orientations toward legal status. Moreover, prior research has often emphasized questions of identity and belonging, while paying insufficient attention to legal status as an institutional and strategic resource embedded in everyday practices and constraints. As a result, the ways in which nationality, permanent residency, and naturalization are interpreted, negotiated, and mobilized across different migrant groups remain underexplored.

Addressing these gaps, this study poses the following research questions.

RQ1: How do second-generation migrants and international students construct meanings of nationality, permanent residency, and naturalization in relation to their lived experiences?

RQ2: What differences and similarities exist between these two groups in their interpretations of legal status?

RQ3: How is legal status associated with perceptions of social inclusion, and to what extent do these associations differ between the two groups?

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with second-generation Chinese migrants in Japan and Chinese international students who remain in Japan after graduation for medium- to long-term residents living long-term in Japan. The analysis employed the Modified Grounded Theory Approach, using open coding.

4.Results and Discussions

For second-generation migrants, naturalization is a complex and often ambivalent process shaped by lived experiences in Japanese society. While it offers practical benefits—such as mobility, employment opportunities, and legal security—it is also influenced by experiences of discrimination, bureaucratic constraints, and subtle forms of exclusion. In this sense, naturalization is not only a strategy for upward mobility but also a response and adjustment to past disadvantages. However, acquiring Japanese nationality does not necessarily lead to a transformation of identity, as many clearly distinguish between legal status and self-identification. Decisions about naturalization also involve multiple trade-offs. Retaining Chinese nationality provides tangible benefits, including hukou, property ownership, and future life options in China. For some, choosing not to naturalize reflects an effort to assign meaning to past experiences, suggesting that legal status can also function as a symbolic and emotional resource.

In contrast, international students adopt a more instrumental and future-oriented approach to legal status. Their considerations focus on career stability, access to housing and financial systems, and long-term life planning. Naturalization is rarely viewed as necessary and is often considered only under specific circumstances, such as marriage. Moreover, strong identification with China, along with expectations of possible return, reinforces their reluctance toward naturalization. Even when disadvantages of Chinese nationality are recognized, these are evaluated pragmatically rather than emotionally.

Overall, legal status is experienced and interpreted differently across groups. For the second generation, it is embedded in lived experiences and carries emotional and historical significance; for international students, it is primarily a strategic option shaped by future expectations. These findings challenge the assumption that naturalization uniformly signifies successful integration, showing instead that its meaning varies across migration trajectories and experiential contexts.

Reference

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